Thinking Beyond Formal Institutions: Why Local Governments in China Tolerate Underground Protestant Churches

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Conformity with the Requirements for the degree of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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September 2011

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PhD, 2012

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ABSTRACT

That authoritarian regimes adopt various strategies of societal control to secure their resilience has been widely explored in comparative politics. The scholarship has emphasized regimes’ reliance upon tactics as diverse as cooptation, economic and social policy reforms, and multiparty elections. Yet, existing comparative studies have predominantly focused on formal institutions, largely ignoring authoritarian states’ resort to informal rules as effective governance and regime preservation strategies.

Local governments in China have tolerated underground Protestant churches, and in doing so, they have failed to enforce the central government’s policy of religious cooptation. This dissertation explores the reasons underlying local government tolerance of underground churches. I argue that accommodative informal institutions emerge out of a bargaining process involving agents (state and society) with a mutually compatible set of interests. Both parties need to reduce uncertainty about the other’s political intentions, and for that reason, they are likely to choose to cooperate strategically with one another.

On the one hand, local officials view policies of religious cooptation as ineffective to curb the expansion of underground religion, and as increasingly risky to enforce in a context where an extensive use of coercion could be subject to severe professional sanctions. On the other hand, underground pastors seek to maximize their autonomy under authoritarian constraints; to that extent, they have used informal compliance as a strategy to earn local government acceptance. Compliance manifests itself in four ways: openness to dialogue with local authorities, the proactive sharing of sensitive information about church affairs, gift-giving and -receiving, and the maintenance of a low profile in terms of church size and rhetoric. Strategic cooperation brings benefits to both parties. It provides local public security officials’ with a stable source of intelligence about the underground space, which is key to ensuring an effective management of religious affairs. Moreover, it allows underground churches to remain autonomous from the state and decreases risks that they face coercion. Yet, inasmuch as informal arrangements are self-enforcing and rule-bound, they ultimately serve regime interests by increasing the costs of political mobilization for the compliant clergy, and by accentuating divisions between the latter and politicized pastors.

Keywords: institutionalist approach; local governments; repression; informal cooperation; lenience; underground churches; authoritarian regime resilience; China
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have been able to write this dissertation without the precious feedback and support of many people and institutions. Jacques Bertrand, my supervisor, has been extremely supportive, and the comments he made on each of my manuscripts, including the dissertation, were always meticulously relevant and insightful. Like Jacques, Lucan A. Way and Joseph Wong showed much enthusiasm about my research very early on in my program. In addition to their invaluable feedback, they always made time for advice when I needed theoretical guidance. Under Jacques, Lucan and Joe’s supervision at the University of Toronto, I could not have been in better hands. I would also like to thank my external examiners, William J. Hurst and Andrew C. Mertha, for taking the time to read my dissertation, for their keen interest in my research, and for their constructive comments on my work.

Many individuals and institutions in Canada have facilitated my preparation for fieldwork and my research. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Fonds du Québec pour la recherche en Sciences sociales (FQRSC), and the Ontario Government Scholarships Program (OGS), for supporting my research at different points of my PhD program at the University of Toronto. I would also like to thank Ethnicity and Democratic Governance (EDG), the Dr. David Chu Program in Asia-Pacific Studies, and the University of Toronto’s School of Graduate Studies for granting me generous fellowships, which made a difference in how I was ultimately able to organize my fieldwork. Without the financial support of these programs, I would not have been able to spend as much time in the field. EDG also organized a workshop on field research for graduate students at Queen’s University, which I was fortunate enough to attend prior to my leaving for the field. Bruce Berman, Zsuzsa Csergo, Leslie Doucet, and Villia Jefremovas dedicated a considerable amount of time reading my proposal and giving me feedback, to make me more ethically and methodologically equipped for research. Without their invaluable help, I would have felt less prepared for the field.

At the University of Toronto, I would like to thank Carolynn Branton for her invaluable assistance throughout my PhD program. I would like to thank Amanda Wagner from Information Commons for helping me with the formatting of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Eileen Lam at the Asian Institute, for providing me with office space during the first years of my PhD program, including while I was writing my dissertation proposal. Her generosity was comforting at that very preliminary stage of my research.

In the US, I would like to thank Mark Shan for his confidence in my project, and for opening several important doors for me in the field.

On the other side of the world, my deepest thanks go to Sun Zhe and Daniel A. Bell, without whom I would not have been able to spend the 2009-2010 academic year at Tsinghua University. I am also thankful to Wang Shaoguang from the Department of Political Science at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, for his kind help in getting me an affiliation at CUHK during the few months I spent in Hong Kong prior to my field research. Eva Pils gave me the privilege to take part in some of her research projects while I was there, and I am grateful for her generosity and helpful advice. I keep fond
memories of the long discussions we had with Marina Svensson, about China and about doing research there, at a very early point in my fieldwork where it still wasn’t clear in my mind where I was heading.

I am grateful to Gao Qi, from the University Services Center at the University of Hong Kong, for his patience and assistance in helping me find my way through some of the media archives. I would like to thank the French Center for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC) for generously providing me with office space, and giving me the sense of feeling part of an academic community, while in Hong Kong.

I am indebted to Jean-Philippe Béjà, Daniel A. Bell, Yongshun Cai, Nanlai Cao, Kim Kwong Chan, Feng Chen, Victor C. Falkenheim, Bernie Frolic, Mary Gallagher, William J. Hurst, Li Lianjiang, Edward Schatz, Narendra Subramanian, Carsten T. Vala, Yuhua Wang, Jean-Paul Wiest, Keping Wu and David Zweig for their invaluable advice on my dissertation’s research project and useful tips for fieldwork. Special thanks go to Sébastien Billioud for sharing unpublished information about his research on Confucian education, which was useful for empirical comparison. I am also grateful to Charles Burton, David Ownby and Kimberley Ens Manning for their interest in and helpful comments on an earlier (or preliminary) draft of my dissertation.

Many people in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto made my experience as a PhD student, an exciting and an intellectually stimulating one. Many thanks to Kimberley Carter, Kristin Cavoukian, Cindy Chung, Sarah Eaton, Asya El-Meehy, Nikole Herriott, Kenneth Huynh, Kate Korycki, Alanna Krolikowski, Faith Pang, Mark Purdon, Debra Thompson, Arjun Tremblay, Clifton Vander Linden, Jenn Walner, and Xunming Wang for their friendship and support at various moments of my early years of the PhD program, and for our inspiring conversations.

There are people who made my life the most fulfilling throughout my writing, and these are the ones who took my mind off research after my long days of work in Montreal and elsewhere. My brother, Marcel-Édouard Reny, and my closest friends, whom I have known for over ten, if not twenty years - Judith Antoine-Bertrand, Annie Billington, Emilie Brown, Sylvie Charbonneau, Laure Corten, Sohini Guha, Chloé Latulippe, Françoise Montambeault, Eugénie Panitcherska, Dorothée Roy, Donald Walker - have been the greatest source of joy and support. I am grateful to Donald and Emilie for having read and revised the manuscript carefully prior to its submission. Françoise and Sohini, who are also political scientists, have been role models in all respects for me. Special thanks to Françoise for always making sure that I never miss fellowship application deadlines! I am profoundly indebted to Jean-François Huchet, for his help, friendship, curiosity and interest in what I did, and for his critical mind. Huhua Cao, has also been a faithful friend, if not an ‘uncle’ to me, and has helped me find work opportunities during my PhD program, when I needed them most. Finally, I thank my parents Marcel Reny, Lise-Charron Vial and Danielle Reny, my brother Marcel-Édouard, my sisters Émilie Labelle and Emmanuelle Dany, Grandmother Cécile and aunt Line for their patience, confidence and generosity throughout those long years of studies. They never stopped believing that what I was trying to accomplish was meaningful.
I owe my deepest gratitude to the many people in the house church community, and friends of underground Christians in Beijing, Sichuan, Shanghai, Hebei, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Henan, whose names I cannot mention, but who sacrificed their time and energy, and may have even compromised their safety, to help me conduct this research. Beyond it being the product of many months of fieldwork, thinking and writing, this dissertation was the fruit of my informants’ trust, patience, and hope for change. I owe this dissertation to them, more than anyone else.
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<tr>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aiguo</td>
<td>爱国</td>
<td>Patriotic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baijiu</td>
<td>白酒</td>
<td>Rice wine/white spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caijingbu</td>
<td>财经部</td>
<td>Finance department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuandaoren</td>
<td>传道人</td>
<td>Evangelist, preacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuan fuyin</td>
<td>传福音</td>
<td>Preach the Gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuanjiao</td>
<td>传教</td>
<td>Proselytize, evangelize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuantong wenhua</td>
<td>传统文化</td>
<td>Traditional culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dengji</td>
<td>登记</td>
<td>Register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dixia jiaohui</td>
<td>地下教会</td>
<td>Underground Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dongfang shandian</td>
<td>东方闪电</td>
<td>Eastern Lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fazhi</td>
<td>法治</td>
<td>Rule of law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fazhi Ribao</td>
<td>法制日报</td>
<td>Legal Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feifa</td>
<td>非法</td>
<td>Illegal (i.e. breaking the rules)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feifa juhui</td>
<td>非法聚会</td>
<td>Illegal gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fengsu xiguan</td>
<td>风俗习惯</td>
<td>Folk customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guanxi</td>
<td>关系</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gong’anju</td>
<td>公安局</td>
<td>Public Security Bureau (PSB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gongkai</td>
<td>公开</td>
<td>Open, making public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guojia anquan bu</td>
<td>国家安全部</td>
<td>Ministry of State Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guonei anquan baowei</td>
<td>内部安全保卫支队</td>
<td>Domestic Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhidui</td>
<td>国内安全保卫支队</td>
<td>Detachment (inside PSB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guojia zongjiao shiwu ju</td>
<td>国家宗教事务局</td>
<td>State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hexie</td>
<td>和谐</td>
<td>Harmonious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hongbao</td>
<td>红包</td>
<td>Red envelopes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hongse qiyejia</td>
<td>红色企业家</td>
<td>Red entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jiaowang de jihui</td>
<td>交往的机会</td>
<td>Opportunities for dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jiating jiaohui</td>
<td>家庭教会</td>
<td>House church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jidujiao</td>
<td>基督教</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jidujiao xuexiao</td>
<td>基督教学校</td>
<td>Christian school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jidutu</td>
<td>基督徒</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jingcha</td>
<td>警察</td>
<td>Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jinzhang</td>
<td>紧张</td>
<td>Tense (may also be used to refer to confrontational actors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jubao</td>
<td>举报</td>
<td>Report; denounce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juweihui</td>
<td>居委会</td>
<td>Neighborhood committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juweihui chengyuan</td>
<td>居委会成员</td>
<td>Neighborhood committee members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION:
LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO UNDERGROUND CHURCH EXPANSION IN CHINA

An authoritarian world without ambivalence seems to be an authoritarian illusion.
Andreas Schedler, 2009

When signed in January 1995 by Li Peng, Decree No. 145 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China was expected to slowly counter the growth of an illegal religious space for the practice of Christianity (jidujiao), which had been expanding at a rapid pace since the collapse of Mao’s rule and which the regime suspected might have outnumbered official Christian congregations (Xu, 1997). The purpose of that central government regulation was to enforce the registration of all churches with the Religious Affairs Bureau (zongjiaoju) and constrain them to operate under the umbrella of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (sanzi aiguo jiaohui).¹ Criteria for registration as a Three-Self church transcended the basic requirements for a religious group to be considered a congregation: church leaders were required to obey national law and regulations, show patriotism, and be committed to socialism.² In 1996, the Head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen, articulated the rationale underlying the registration of religious venues by stating that “[the] aim [was] not registration for its own sake, but...control over places for religious activities as well as over all religious activities themselves.”³ Local governments were encouraged to complete the registration campaign by the end of 1995, and were to benefit from bonuses if they reached the central government-imposed quotas for registration in their respective localities (Xu, 1997).

¹ Refusal to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement is the most important characteristic which differentiates underground churches from official ones. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement was founded in 1954, and along with the China Christian Council, constitutes the ‘lianghui’ [literally meaning ‘two organizations’], or the state-sanctioned Protestant church in China.
Central government regulations did not limit themselves to mandatory registration; they also imposed restrictions upon the geographical scope of religious activities outside the registered venue, the publication and distribution of religious materials, and local Christians’ relations with foreign individuals or organizations. These regulations were intended to create a political environment that was unviable for the practice of religion outside of state control.

Yet, the proliferation of underground Christianity has increased significantly since the beginning of the reform era, regardless of government attempts to tighten its grip on religious practice in the 1990s. Non-government sources’ evaluations estimate the underground Christian population as ranging between fifty and one-hundred million believers (Homer, 2010, p. 61). Among them, Li (2009) maintains that about 80% of Christians worship in ‘house’ churches.\(^4\) While the number was systematically denied by the Chinese government, the former director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (guojia zongjiao shiwu ju), Ye Xiaowen, estimated that Christians could have already reached 130 million in 2009 (Homer, 2010, p. 61). Similarly, other internal government sources maintain that official and underground Christians now represent 11% of the country’s population (Interview 79, April 2010)\(^5\). In contrast, official government data remain conservative, and estimate Christians to represent 1.8% of the Chinese

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\(^4\) The terms ‘underground church’ (dixia jiaohui) and ‘house church’ (jiating jiaohui) are used interchangeably in the context of this dissertation. Though the former has been contested among the Protestant clergy, in that it is considered as having a pejorative connotation and also tends to apply more to underground Catholic churches, I use it in this dissertation, for purposes of conceptual clarity. The term ‘house church’ does a poor job of capturing congregations’ lack of legal recognition by central government regulations. Throughout my field research, however, I used the term ‘house church’ to refer to unregistered or unrecognized congregations.

\(^5\) The official data from the Chinese government underestimate the Christian population. The recent and first official government-sponsored faith survey, which excludes data on underground churches, evaluated the number of Christians in Mainland China at 23 million in 2010, of whom 5.7 million are Catholics and 17.3 Protestants.
population, though they would account for 73% of the country’s religious believers (Interview ZA95477). Current statistics on Christianity are particularly striking when compared to earlier numbers. While there were fewer than one million Christians in 1949, the number had grown to between five and seven million in the 1980s, and by 1996, there were approximately 50 million.  

1. The Puzzle

This dissertation presents evidence suggesting that local governments have contributed to the development of underground churches in China, by tolerating unofficial spaces for the exercise of religious rights, which are not guaranteed by central government regulations on religious affairs. The illegal religious practices that local authorities have systematically and consciously ignored abound. Many local religious practices that breach regulations on the geographical scope of Gospel preaching (chuan fuyin) have not been subject to local government crackdowns. Church leaders wishing to proselytize outside the church usually need to apply to the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) for approval where the event is scheduled to be, at least thirty days ahead of time. However, while RAB and Public Security Bureau (gong’anju) officials may be expected by Beijing to enforce geographical restrictions pertaining to Gospel preaching for church leaders considered to be highly political (and followed closely by Beijing), the average preacher today travels in and out of his or her village, town or city to preach in other communities, without applying for government approval, and without being subject to local government scrutiny. In a similar

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6 Chao, Samuel (1996), ‘Hudson Taylor & Missions to China’ Christianity Today, October 1st.
vein, central regulations, which state that religious materials should only be distributed within registered religious circles and prohibit the possession and printing of Bibles that do not belong to Three-Self Patriotic Movement, are commonly unenforced. Unregistered bookshops and unofficial Christian publishers now abound in China’s urban areas and have been operating in conjunction with the Three-Self-controlled press. Yet, local authorities have not taken measures to shut them down. Among other illegal practices that officials have turned a blind eye to are the renting of commercial spaces for the purpose of running underground Christian schools (jidujiao xuexiao), the opening of non-state-controlled churches in apartment buildings, and in extreme cases, the construction of public infrastructure or buildings for non-state controlled churches.

While crackdowns upon some churches have occurred repeatedly in the past decade, they have remained sporadic and have obscured informal lenience in local government behavior. China Aid reports that in 2008, there were only 74 known cases of repression involving 319 church leaders, 764 arrested individuals, and 35 prison sentences (p. 5). In 2007, the association reported numbers that were even less significant, namely 60 crackdowns, involving 693 arrested individuals, and sixteen prison sentences (p. 5). Many county, township or district-level public security officers nonetheless choose not to use force against underground churches, in spite of their awareness of the latter’s existence.

In light of the local state’s frequent disregard of the law in other policy areas, officials’ lack of enforcement of regulations on religious affairs may not strike political scientists as surprising. Indeed, many studies of local politics in China have shown that policy practice
is not always consistent with central regulations, or the law. Expropriation of arable land is regularly conducted by local officials in the name of economic development, notwithstanding regulations prohibiting its seizure without state approval (Cai, 2003; Guo, 2001; So, 2007). Similarly, the central government’s environmental protection policies are continuously overlooked, as they are considered impediments to growth by local state agents and their business allies (Chan, 1995). Finally, the one-child policy has not been consistently implemented across localities, because allowing families to have more than one child has constituted a profitable source of personal enrichment for some local officials (White, 2010). Yet, local officials’ lax enforcement of regulations on religious affairs *prima facie* strikes one as puzzling for three reasons.

First, Christianity has historically been constructed by the Chinese state as a threat to Chinese identity and traditional values. Despite the changes in the Chinese government’s religious policy since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, regulations have always been designed to ensure that the sole entity with the legitimacy to control religion was the state. State control served multiple agendas, some of which changed over time. One of the purposes that has remained consistent over time is the prevention of foreign religious influence, and especially that of Western religions, from penetrating Chinese society\(^8\) - hence the Three-Self Church’s commitment to ‘self-governance, self-support and self-propagation.’ These principles required moving away from Western denominations of Protestantism, giving rise to an indigenous Christianity that would be rooted in Chinese traditional culture (Kindopp, 2004). Since the foreign

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\(^8\) This fear of Western religious penetration is notably translated into regulations such as the one prohibiting foreign missionary work in the country, and the local clergy’s need to ask the Religious Affairs Bureau for authorization to invite foreign pastors or preachers to religious events on Mainland Chinese soil (Spiegel, 2004).
occupation of China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian proselytism was equated with imperialism (though Christianity came to China numerous centuries prior to that occupation), and Christianity was intimately associated with Western values, which China openly opposed. Several informants stressed a saying dating from the Ming Dynasty which is still commonly used today: “one more Christian, one fewer Chinese” (duo yige jidutu, shao yige zhongguoren). Today, the Chinese state is not only facing the spread of a religion whose principles have been constructed in opposition to Chinese traditional values, but also that of an unusual Christian community, one that wants to practice religion outside the umbrella of the state. One would expect the Chinese state to use strong means to curb such development, but it has not.

Second, China has a recent history of government repression of underground religious groups and has been particularly concerned by their potential to organize themselves cross-regionally or cross-nationally (Perry, 2001). The Falun Gong had succeeded in penetrating Chinese society extensively in the 1990s, and though its expansion is now faster in urban areas than in rural ones, underground Christianity increasingly shows signs of such organizational capacity. Just like the Falun Gong infiltrated the Chinese Communist Party, today an increasing number of Party members have converted to Christianity.⁹ Based on a survey conducted among 3,196 CCP members in 2005, Yao (2007) estimated that 18.2% of China’s party members are Protestant, and 3% of them are also part of the Communist Youth League (CYL) (p. 175). Underground churches already have also approximately 300 networks of church leaders and congregants, spread out across several provinces (Homer, 2010, p. 62). Although

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⁹ According to Section 4 of Document 19, also called the Basic Standpoint and Policy on Religious Questions in China's Socialist Period, ‘CCP members are atheists who should resolutely and persistently propagate atheism.’ Section 9 adds that they cannot believe in any religion.
underground church communities tend not to interact with one another, the leaders of relatively large and influential congregations across the country’s urban areas jointly organize theological workshops and inform each other about local religious affairs. Moreover, like some Falun Gong members, a certain number of underground churches do not fear openly challenging the government. In the 1990s, the Falun Gong partly aroused concerns on the part of officials because it did not fear peacefully protesting state-controlled media misrepresentations of the group (Ownby, 2008). Similarly, in recent years, several highly influential underground churches have held Sunday services outdoors as a way of contesting their congregation’s forced eviction from worship spaces they had initially been able to rent. The central government launched a campaign to eliminate the Falun Gong in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but so far, it has shown no sign that it could adopt a similar approach to address the growing challenge of house church expansion.

Third, while authoritarian states are known for their selective use of repression (Pei, 2006; Linz, 2000), there are particular groups in society authoritarian regimes may be more concerned about and which they would likely use force against to control their expansion. Underground churches in China have reminded central government authorities of the potential risks involved in allowing a socially and a politically ‘autonomous’ church to grow in a non-liberal democratic setting (Chen, 1990). Catholic and Protestant churches have historically played a key role in the collapse of authoritarian regimes in several countries, including 1980s Poland, South Africa under Apartheid, and Kenya.

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10 In Poland, the Catholic Church was crucial to the emergence of the anti-Soviet Solidarity movement in 1980 (Smith, 1996).
11 Phiri (2001; 2000) examines the active role played by Desmond Tutu and the South African Council of Churches in the liberation of South Africa from Apartheid.
under Arap Moi. In the early 1990s, realizing that 70% of the country’s religious activities might operate outside government control, and in a post-Tian’anmen context where the Chinese Communist Party feared any pro-democratic threats, the government began to follow closely the causes of authoritarian and totalitarian regime collapse in the world (Shambaugh, 2008; Brady, 2008; Spiegel, 2004). Based on several conversations with government officials, Yang (2010) observed that the authorities had become paranoid about the role of foreign churches in the collapse of other regimes (p. 7). In 1990, China’s Prime Minister Li Peng “called for attacks on the underground churches” (Hunter and Chan, 1993; China News and Chuch Report, 1991). A decade later, following the government’s attempt to eliminate the Falun Gong, the former Head of China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), Ye Xiaowen, said that “religion had become a weapon in the hands of the dissidents for inciting the masses and creating political disturbances.” (Marsh, 2006, p. 113-114) He added that “religious leaders always manipulate and control believers to challenge political leaders.” (Marsh and Zhong, 2010, p. 36) Ye (2000) stressed his hope “to effect a gradual weakening of the influence of religion” (p. 5). According to Xu (1997), the transfer of the responsibility to investigate into religious developments from the RAB to the State Security Ministry in the 1990s, also suggested that underground religious practice constituted a source of concern to the authorities (p. 202). More recently, an informant reported that the United Front Work Department, an organization that operates directly under the umbrella of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee, had expressed to him their concerns that the

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12 In Kenya, the Anglican Church was active in challenging the one-party era. The National Council of Churches and the Kenya Episcopal Conference successfully worked together along with the Law Society of Kenya and some politicians to restore multi-party democracy (Githiga, 2001).
United States could use underground Christianity to peacefully overthrow the regime
(Interview ZA88474).

In the context of such state concerns, and following the granting of Liu Xiaobo’s
Nobel Peace Prize award in October 2010, the central government’s decision to stop 200
Protestant church representatives from taking part in the Lausanne Congress, a global
religious conference hosted by the city of Cape Town in South Africa,\textsuperscript{13} came as no
surprise. Beyond the history of involvement of Christianity in pro-democratic movements
around the world, the Chinese leadership has been very careful in restraining the growth
of independent groups in society like non-governmental organizations, especially in light
of the colored revolutions that led to the collapse of autocratic regimes in Ukraine,
Georgia and Kyrgyzstan (Fewsmith, 2008, p. 218). Underground churches are not only
religious groups holding a pro-democratic potential, but like NGOs, they claim to be
autonomous from the Chinese government. Despite the above concerns, few underground
churches are forcibly shut down by the government. Why does an authoritarian state
allow such a large illegal space to thrive?

2. LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING EXPLANATIONS

\textit{a. The International Approach}

Several factors in political science have been proposed, in an attempt to explain
authoritarian state responses to society. Keck and Sikkink (1998) emphasize the deterrent
impact that pressure from the international community may have on authoritarian states’
likelihood of using force against society: through transnational political advocacy,
globalization reduces state capabilities. Zheng and Fewsmith (2008) claim that one of the

\textsuperscript{13} South China Morning Post, ‘Beijing Bars Churches from Conference: Protestants Unable to Travel to
Cape Town’, 16 October 2010.
factors facilitating good governance in China is international pressure. Similarly, according to Chan (2004), China’s deepened integration into the global economy as a result of its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), created propitious conditions for religious groups in China to resort to the help of transnational networks to pressure the Chinese government not to use force against them. Moreover, because Christianity originally has roots in the West, the Chinese authorities would be extra careful not to create domestic conditions that would unnecessarily hinder their country’s diplomatic relations with Western countries, especially the US (Kindopp, 2004). An informant even suggested that the latter has a significant impact on the Chinese government’s relations with its Protestant community, to the extent that the former could not strike underground Protestants with the same force it had with the Falun Gong (Interview BL21473).

The assumption that international pressure would serve as a deterrent for authoritarian governments’ use of force against society, nevertheless, has its own limitations. First, it is unable to account for remaining cases of local and central government-sponsored crackdowns upon house churches. Explaining why most underground churches manage to avoid repression must also address why others are still subject to it. Second, in particular circumstances, political or international events that would have served as deterrents for state repression of underground Christianity, like a US President’s visit to China, facilitate local government crackdowns upon some congregations. Yang Fenggang, a sociologist from Purdue University, emphasizes the difficulty in predicting how China may respond to US expectations about religious
freedom by observing that “sometimes before a major US visit, Chinese authorities show goodwill and release someone. But [sometimes], it’s the opposite.”

Among scholars of the international approach, some have also argued that house churches’ linkages with foreign governments or foreign Christian groups may trigger strong responses from government authorities. Potter (2003) claims that affiliation with foreign organizations tends to be perceived by the authorities as a sign of ‘anti-motherland’ (p. 327). The author even adds that Catholicism has been considered a problematic religion for the CCP because of its longer history of missionary work in China and the Church’s allegiance to the Vatican (p. 330). The above argument also applied to the Soviet Union as far as human rights movements were concerned. Alexeyeva (1985), for instance, partly explains the intensification of the Soviet offensive against the Jewish emigration movement in the late 1970s as a result of its close ties “with international Jewish organizations and human rights defenders within the country [which] were intolerable to the authorities” (p. 191). This explanation, however, cannot account for why a wide range of compliant underground churches managed to avoid state repression in spite of their close ties to churches in the US, among other countries, and the financial support they received from foreign Christian organizations and governments. Rather, these informants all noticed a relaxation of local government’s behavior towards underground congregations in the past decade. The foreign connection argument, hence,

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remains unsatisfactory if one wishes to explain why and how church leaders manage to avoid government repression.

b. Local Government Officials and the Resource Scarcity Argument

The link between the salary of bureaucrats and how effectively they implement policy on the ground has been emphasized in the literature on political development and corruption across developing societies. Khan (2002) argues that “high wages for bureaucrats operate like efficiency wages.” (p. 12) Because the work of bureaucrats is hard to monitor, “efficiency wage(s) create an additional incentive for [proper] service delivery […]” (p. 12) Similarly, the scarcity of resources of local government officials in some parts of China could explain why they do not interfere in underground church activities: if house churches do not create trouble, the Public Security Bureau (PSB) will not bother because its officers are underpaid and understaffed. Moreover, seeking to eliminate underground churches may entail diverting resources that could otherwise be invested in the pursuit of profitable economic development and infrastructure-related projects. While the argument appears as plausible, it hits two realities which prompt us to question its relevance. First, a lax implementation of central government policies may not result from officials’ lack of motivation to work per se, but from calculations that enforcing formal rules may have hindering effects upon the stability of their locality. Informal mediation or lenience, in some circumstances, may constitute a more effective strategy to enforce compliance among the challengers of formal rules. Hence, underlying the choice to coerce or to tolerate may not so much be considerations pertaining to local state capacity (or resource-scarcity), but political calculations as to how to best avoid instability in a societal context.
that is continuously changing and progressively challenging some of the existing institutions.

Second, the choice not to repress by autocratic officials may be just as resource demanding as the use of repression. The literature on authoritarian state responses to contention seems to have assumed that repression is costly, not only for government legitimacy, but also in terms of finances and human resources. For instance, Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that few resources make coercive action less effective, suggesting that repression involves high costs for authorities. While this explanation may be true, it is built upon a misleading assumption, namely that state responses other than repression are less resource-consuming than the use of force itself. Yet, there are circumstances in which the choice not to repress does not entail ignoring a problem, but rather the development of new, subtler and perhaps more effective ways of tackling it, involving a considerable amount of time and resources from local governments. Officials’ choice not to repress is not so much related to the costs associated with repression, but to the higher likelihood that using alternative strategies of control may help secure particular objectives like effective intelligence-gathering (xinxi souji). If officials opt for the solutions that are resource-demanding, the explanatory potential of the local government resource scarcity argument has its own limits.

c. The Identity of Local Officials

Some analyses have suggested that political leaders’ identities are important in determining how they will respond to a given ethnic or religious group, regardless of that group’s legal status (Kindopp, 2004). Similarly, scholars I interviewed in China believed that Wenzhou officials were more tolerant of underground Christianity as a result of their
personal ties to Christianity: either they are Christian themselves, or their relatives are. In a similar vein, Huang and Yang (2005) claim to have found evidence that in some localities, biases in favor of Chinese traditional culture make local officials more accommodative of Buddhists and Daoists than Christians. In the village of Wuzhuang where Fuxi worship was revived as a practice of Chinese traditional culture (p. 57), local leaders said to be uncooperative with the state-controlled church. In the mid-1980s, when the Fuxi Temple Management Council members decided to impose a temple tax, local Christians opposed it (Huang and Yang, 2005 p. 58). Following the incident, the local village leader “intentionally and regularly turned on the loudspeakers on the roof of the village committee office when the church was holding a worship service” (Huang and Yang, 2005, p. 58).

While the above findings are revealing of insightful dynamics between underground churches and the authorities, their interpretation is based on the assumption that individuals’ ascriptive identities may determine their positions and actions vis-à-vis their own group as well as other communities. Ascriptive ties are assumed to make the repression of Christians, whether they are underground or not, difficult. Primordialist explanations have, however, long been discredited in the identity politics literature. In the context of an analysis on the reasons why ethnic parties succeed in India, Chandra (2004) argues that the term “‘ethnic group’ does not imply active participation in a common group identity” (p. 2-3). In her opinion, members of an ethnicity are primarily strategic actors who do not necessarily support the ethnic party representing their respective group if it does not have chances of being elected or represented after elections. Theoretically speaking, if ethnic parties in India can target the constituencies that are not members of
the ethnic group they claim to represent, Christian officials in China do not have to tolerate underground churches because they share the same faith. Furthermore, if they do so, it may be for reasons other than religious or identity-related ones. In fact, evidence suggests that some of the localities where the leadership is partly Christian were characterized by instances of repression towards underground Protestant churches in the past decades. In the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang, for instance, churches were the targets of crackdowns during the 1990s. Furthermore, following a visit to the area by Jiang Zemin in 2000, hundreds of underground congregations were shut down.

Generally, factors emphasizing the role of the international community, the scarcity of resources available to governments for governance, and the identity of local officials are bound to be limited to explain local state responses to society. They assume that political actors make decisions that are motivated by factors other than the actual societal challenge they face. In the context of this present analysis, these explanations are unable to capture the diversity of underground churches, and how each type may interact with political authority differently. The ways in which ‘illegal’ religious groups choose to resist the state may constitute a reliable indicator of how local authorities in charge of preserving stability are likely to respond to them.

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16 Existing analyses already suggest that the nature of resistance matters in attracting the interest of the central state in a contentious case, but have not always been able to clearly identify the circumstances in which certain forms of resistance do not trigger repression from the authorities. O’Brien and Li (2006) for instance see ‘rightful resistance’, a form of popular opposition to local government corrupt practices framed in a broader rhetoric of respect for the rule of law, as holding the potential to draw the attention of the central government to the noncompliance of local authorities, and encourage them to take rectifying steps. The authors however specify that while such lawful defiance may get favorable attention from central authorities, it does not stop local government officials from using force against rightful resisters. The concept hence remains limited in its ability to explain why local governments do not use force against groups like underground Protestant churches, which the regime labels as illegal and whose expansion is viewed as potentially threatening.
symbiosis between informal local government lenience and compliance by the challengers of formal rules may help refocus our attention upon the role of agency and the interests that motivate the actions and decisions of both parties.

3. Church Compliance and Local Government Lenience: An Institutionalist Account

Based on an institutionalist explanation, I argue that accommodative informal institutions emerge out of a bargaining process involving agents (state and society) with a mutually compatible set of interests. Each party needs to reduce uncertainty about the other’s political intentions. For that reason, both sides are likely to choose to strategically cooperate. On the one hand, underground church leaders seek to maximize their chances of being autonomous entities under authoritarian constraints. Compliance, in this context, serves as a means to earn local government acceptance and is manifested in four ways: openness to dialogue with local authorities, the proactive sharing of information about underground church affairs, accepting gifts from officials and giving them some on occasions, and maintaining a low profile in terms of church size and rhetoric. On the other hand, local government officials seek to maximize their chances of being promoted to a higher-level position, and to do so, they must ensure that certain central government targets are reached, including their locality’s political stability.

While central regulations on religious affairs imply that the local state is responsible for enforcing religious cooptation, the costs of doing so are high. First, underground churches are widespread and considered impossible to eradicate by local officials. Attempts to eliminate house churches would also divert coercive resources away from more pressing societal challenges that local officials are expected to overcome, and
which are progressively numerous and overburdening. Second, the professional risks involved in using force against society are increasingly high. While these conditions would normally discourage an extensive use of coercion by local officials against the underground clergy, in a context of uncertainty about underground church leaders’ political intentions [or absence thereof], local government lenience may involve significant costs of policy mismanagement, and ultimately, hinder local stability (or chances of reaching central government targets).

By helping identify the churches that are loyal to the regime and the ones that are not, compliance by the underground clergy helps reduce local government uncertainty as far as the intentions of house church leaders are concerned, and thus offers a solution to the implementation of an ineffective religious policy. Intelligence gathered by local governments about the underground Christian space helps the latter pursue a cost-effective strategy of selective coercion at the expense of the most politicized house churches, and a laissez-faire approach at the benefit of compliant congregations.

To sustain compliance by the underground clergy, and ensure the lowest levels of uncertainty possible about its intentions, local governments have had to develop informal procedures that accommodate some of the clergy’s needs and expectations. Once created, informal cooperation not only constrains both parties’ actions toward one another, but the institutions that shape their behavior are stabilized and reproduced over time.

4. Broader Theoretical Implications of the Analysis

This argument has three theoretical implications for our understanding of state-society relations in authoritarian regimes and the latter’s survival. First, it emphasizes the role of informal institutions as strategies for authoritarian regime survival. Most studies in the
literature to date have analyzed authoritarian resilience from a formal institutional perspective. The formal institutions autocratic leaders have enforced in an attempt to overcome societal challenges have been diverse. Some studies underscored performance legitimacy, including social and economic reforms aiming at redistribution, as an instrument for earning popular support (Park, 1991; Stubbs, 2011; Thayer, 2009). Others explored regimes’ divide-and-rule tactics within society (Perry, 2007; Nathan, 2003), as well as their import of ‘democratic’ institutions like political parties (Geddes, 2003), multiparty elections in post-Soviet states (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2002; Magaloni, 2008), and grassroots elections in China (O’Brien, 2000, Shi, 1999). The scholarship has also stressed authoritarian leaders’ effective combination of repression and cooptation to contain society (O’Donnell, 1973; Stepan, 1978; Collier and Collier, 1979). Furthermore, how representation (or the lack thereof) is assessed in autocratic settings has often been based on the degree of enforcement or violation of a set of formal features. While some authoritarian policies may appear as highly restrictive, judging the severity of formal institutions based on their content serves as a poor indicator of how much autonomy or freedom citizens benefit from, in their everyday lives.

Distinguishing formal and informal concessions in authoritarian regimes, may serve as a more grounded measurement of how much and how far citizens feel the impact of formal authoritarian policies. The study of informal rules has the advantage of uncovering subtle patterns of flexibility and adaptability to societal pressure by autocratic leaders, that formal institutions may obscure. Informal rules may be revealing of policy adjustments in a regime where no tangible sign of political reform is manifested.
Evidence in the dissertation suggests that informal institutions have given house church leaders access to a *de facto* autonomous space in exchange for their compliance with the informal rules of governance, by means of political loyalty, bribes and/or information. Consequently, by reducing the coercive effects of central regulations on religious affairs, local government lenience toward underground churches has created disincentives among the clergy to challenge formal rules publicly. Insofar as public visibility would compromise churches’ access to their informal space, the underground clergy has maintained a low profile. In discouraging mobilization, government lenience has discouraged formal institutional change. Furthermore, informal tolerance has accentuated divisions within the illegal Christian community, between the informally compliant groups and the ones choosing to maintain a firm position against the regime. Doing so has allowed the authorities to alienate regime opponents more effectively.

Second, and not unrelated to the first point, exploring the dynamics underlying local state actors’ tolerance of underground churches offers a more nuanced understanding of what policy ‘concessions’ under authoritarian constraints may entail, and moves away from analyses that have characterized them as means to extend the boundaries of what is cooptable. Many studies of authoritarian state-society relations have used the concept of ‘cooptation’ to describe different patterns of inclusion or policy concessions, in a way that discouraged further distinctions of the kinds of compromises that authoritarian state actors make with society, and the conditions under which autocratic regimes accommodate. For instance, in her study of the role of power-sharing institutions in furthering authoritarian rule, Magaloni’s (2008) dictator’s dilemma is based on the assumption that concessions are a tool for cooptation used by the dictator to gain the support of potential rebels (p. 6-
7). Similarly, Bueno de Mesquita (2003) contends that dictators coopt by making private transfers to a ‘minimum winning coalition’ drawn from a broader ‘selectorate’. Finally, Gandhi (2008) argues that to prevent rebellion and encourage cooperation, a dictatorship needs to make policy concessions to segments of the population, and for that purpose, uses nominally democratic institutions. Gandhi, however, claims that “as a forum through which dictators can make policy concessions, nominally democratic institutions are instruments of cooptation” (p. xviii). In the author’s study, concessions are not a type of authoritarian state response to society per se, but are part of a broader process of cooptation.

Cooptation is a useful concept insofar as the state successfully manages to integrate the opposition within government-controlled organizations. In some circumstances, nevertheless, a government may be confronted with an uncooptable informal opposition, like underground Protestant churches in Mainland China. In these circumstances, what other response options do officials have aside from coercion? Examining how local public security officers respond to a compliant underground clergy allows us to refocus our attention on forms of state-society interactions that not only transcend the concept of cooptation, but that are also intimately tied to informal institutions and practices as opposed to formal rules of state control.

Third, the argument in this dissertation moves away from the existing literature on decentralization in both democracies and autocracies, which has closely examined the relationship between policy gaps, or ensuing informal institutions, as well as the emergence of various forms of predation. While Treisman (2000) found that federalist countries are characterized by higher rates of corruption, Fisman and Gatti (2002) argued
that different kinds of decentralization may have distinctive effects on corruption and that larger federal transfers in the United States have been accompanied by greater tendencies toward the abuse of public office. In a study more specific to China, Pei (2006) maintains that gradual economic reform, which was accompanied by fiscal decentralization, made the central government lose control over its local agents, created opportunities for the reinforcement of power at the local level, and accelerated local corruption. The latter gave rise to conditions that were highly profitable for elites to pursue their rent-seeking interests at the expense of citizens’ needs and made the costs of pursuing political reforms higher.

In contrast, I explore how gaps between policy and practice\textsuperscript{17} not only serve central government interests, but also have positive implications for citizens’ informal exercise of unguaranteed rights in China’s autocracy.\textsuperscript{18} Insofar as local state agents and the underground clergy need to cooperate in order to reduce the uncertainty surrounding their decisions and ability to accomplish their goals, the informal rules that emerge out of their interactions provide these actors with mutual payoffs. The benefits church leaders collect from cooperating with officials are informal autonomy and reduced risks of government interference in their religious activities. As far as officials are concerned, the payoffs from tolerating house churches are a lower likelihood of house church mismanagement and an ability to enforce coercion upon the religious space only selectively, without risks that such a strategy politically destabilizes the locality. While

\textsuperscript{17} In theory, while the central government is responsible for determining religious policy, the local government’s task is to implement and enforce it. For instance, according to China’s 2004 national religious affairs regulations, the local authorities above the county (\textit{xian}) level are responsible for administering and managing religious organizations.

\textsuperscript{18} In a similar vein, Lauth (2004) claims that not all informal institutions have had a negative impact on democratic institutions.
unenforced regulations and discontinuities between central and local government policy have been considered signs of weak state capacity (Pei, 2006), evidence in this dissertation suggests that decentralization and its resulting opportunities for policy gaps allow local officials to develop informal strategies to monitor a religious space more effectively, than coercive formal institutions.

5. THE RESEARCH AND THE LOGIC

To arrive at an institutionalist understanding of the causal and constitutive mechanisms characterizing the interaction between compliant house church leaders and lenient local authorities, I relied upon an inductive, qualitative research methodology. The bulk of my dissertation is based upon 125 semi-structured and in-depth interviews, which I conducted in Mainland China between September 2009 and July 2010, as well as archival data (i.e. government documents, online information from blogs by officials), and insights from participant observation. In analyzing the theoretical implications of my data, I start from the premise that studying human interactions in their contextual rationality yields insight into causal patterns that are otherwise not easily discernable. Exploring the subtle arrangements characterizing the relationship between local governments and the underground Christian space, has proven to be highly revealing of the calculations local agents make in their attempts to simultaneously secure their self-interests and ensure authoritarian regime survival, in a context of growing societal pressure for accommodation, and institutional discontinuities.

This dissertation primarily seeks to explain the reasons why many underground churches in China have successfully managed to avoid local government repression. Chapter two introduces the national religious regulations of the People’s Republic of China. It explains the ways in which underground churches defy those rules, and how local governments commonly turn a blind eye to such policy breaches. Chapter three presents a theoretical framework that draws upon institutionalism to shed light on two mutually influential explanatory processes pertaining to underground church and local government relations. It fleshes out the rationality underlying underground church leaders’ inclination to comply with local state authority and the cost-benefit calculations that drive local public security actors towards lenience as far as compliant congregations are concerned. Chapter four empirically examines the distinctive ways in which compliance by house church leaders is manifested, how it shapes their attitude towards local government authority, and the causal mechanisms linking the latter with local government’s informal responses to underground churches.

Chapter five provides empirical evidence for why local public security officials tolerate underground churches, and explores the increasing costs that local officials perceive in using coercion against underground churches, as well as the benefits of adopting a lenient approach towards them.

An explanation of the causes and manifestations of local governments’ informal tolerance of underground churches offers an empirically grounded perspective on some of the subtle ways in which China’s political regime is surviving and developing. Chapter six, hence, articulates how local governments’ informal lenience toward underground
Christianity has contributed to authoritarian survival, by reducing the risks of regime opposition among the underground Christian community, and by accentuating divisions among the compliant and the politicized clergy.

The dissertation concludes with a discussion about the potential for generalizability of the theoretical framework, within and beyond the China case. In the Chinese context, the framework applies to entrepreneurs who owned large private companies in the 1980s and 1990s, when large-scale privatization remained illegal, and operated under the label of ‘managers of collective firms’, with the informal support of local governments (Tsai, 2008). The analysis also explores the applicability of the framework to what White (2010) calls the ‘dependent evaders’ of one-child policy in China, as well as folk culture groups in rural areas, whom the central government would consider superstitious heresies, but whom local officials choose to protect under the label of ‘normal’ religious groups (Chau, 2006).

The theoretical framework’s ability to travel across authoritarian country cases is also assessed through a consideration of the Syrian regime’s relations with Sunni leaders who seek to operate independently from the state, as well as the Iranian government’s ties with religious minorities considered illegal under the country’s Constitution, including the Bahais and former Muslims who converted to Christianity.
CHAPTER TWO: GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS AND COMPLIANT DEFIANCE BY THE UNDERGROUND CLERGY: THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

During the Maoist period, Chinese government officials anticipated that religion would disappear. The ones who said so died, and we, Christians, are still alive.
Church leader in Hebei, 2010

Laws like cobwebs entangle the weak, but are broken by the strong.
Solon c. 575 B.C.

Underground Protestant churches have quickly proliferated in the past fifteen years in China, especially in urban areas. According to Homer (2010), there are about two thousand such churches in Beijing, gathering a minimum of several hundred thousands of believers (p. 58). Similarly, an informant estimated that in each square kilometer of the capital city, there was at least one underground church (Interview BM95478). In Wenzhou, where ten to fifteen percent of the population is Christian (jidutu), and at least 43% attend services in unregistered churches, the number of house churches is estimated at a few thousands (Interview ZA97489). According to Homer (2010), “if congregations average two hundred members, there could be 500,000 [unregistered] churches’ in China (p. 62).

The rapid expansion of underground Christianity, is indicative of a fundamental gap between policy design by central government officials, and its implementation at the local level. While Chinese Law guarantees citizens’ freedom of religious belief, it puts significant restrictions upon the freedom of religious practice (Yang, 2008). These constraints on the practice of religion are: the mandatory registration of religious sites, restrictions on the geographical scope of religious activities outside the registered venue, limitations on the publication and the distribution of religious materials, as well as the

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19 According to the Wenzhou Municipality government, the city’s population was estimated at 7.56 million, by the end of 2006, based on information about household registrations (excluding the unregistered migrant population); see Foreign Affairs Office of Wenzhou City People’s Government (2009).
extent to which Mainland Chinese religious clerics (*mushi*) may cultivate relations with foreigners. Underground churches have chosen to defy these regulations, in the name of a separation between Church and State. In spite of that, local governments have not sought to strictly enforce most of the above national regulations in their respective localities. This chapter elaborates on the ways in which regulations have been disregarded by house churches, and unenforced by public security officials.

1. **The Mandatory Registration of Religious Sites**

The latest Regulations on Religious Affairs, adopted by the 57th Executive Meeting of the State Council on July 7th, 2004, and which became effective in 2005, originate from Decree No. 145 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, signed by Li Peng in January 1995. Like the latter decree, these regulations maintain that in order to be legally recognized as religious institutions, the latter must be registered as Three-Self churches (*sanzi jiaohui*) with the RAB,\(^{20}\) which is the government entity responsible for implementing religious regulations as well as supervising the TSPM, and the China Christian Council (CCC).\(^{21}\) Failure to register (*dengji*) with the relevant authorities makes a church and all of its activities, illegal (*feifa*). Regulations stress:

> No non-religious bodies or sites not for religious activities may organize or hold any religious activities.\(^{22}\)

\(^{20}\) What the latest regulations do, as opposed to Li Peng’s Decree 145, is to impose the same legal framework for all local governments. Prior to 2004, regulations on religious affairs varied from one locality to another. The 2005 regulations were an attempt to uniformize the application of the law.

\(^{21}\) The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council are both in charge of managing and supervising religious affairs, which include selecting or approving church leaders.\(^{21}\) TSPM churches should not be confused with the TSPM as an organization. The former are the churches that the latter supervises. The TSPM and the CCC are called the *lianghui*, or ‘two associations’, and for Hunter and Chan (1993), they are perfect examples of products of state co-optation (p. 62).

There were, and still are, standards to fulfill in order for a congregation to be registered as an officially recognized church. First, the congregation must have a fixed name and a meeting location, and a professional clergy trained in state-sponsored theological schools. Moreover, the church should gather regularly, rely upon a legitimate source of income, and have management personnel who respect the principles of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Second, applicants must obey national law, regulations and policies. Assessing church leaders’ obedience to national law is based on much less objective standards of judgement than assumed, and make certain churches that would prima facie conform with all of the above standards, vulnerable to rejection. Spiegel (2004) claims that this is particularly the case of large congregations, or those with a particularly influential and vocal leader (p. 47). Third, beyond conformity with the law, Document 19, namely the Basic Standpoint and Policy on Religious Questions in China's Socialist Period, requires that church leaders be committed to socialism, and that they be patriotic [aiguo]. The leadership fears that Protestant believers may eventually come to reject the Chinese Communist Party (Weng and Wang, 2002; Vala, 2009). To avoid such circumstances, the government, these past decades, has invested in the training of a young and supportive religious clergy that would successfully represent the Party’s interests (Weng and Wang, 2002). In support of the above regulation, President Hu Jintao, in his December 18th 2007 speech, stressed that religion and faith should be in harmony with support for the leaders of the Communist Party and the principles underlying the

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25 Today, while the majority of underground churches are small and composed of ten to fifty members, many are relatively large, and account for hundreds or even thousands of believers. In contrast, most TSPM churches (with the exception of neighborhood meeting points) are usually large enough that they can accommodate thousands of believers.
President Hu also stressed the need for religious work to conform with the principles of Marxism.

Reasons for underground churches’ breaches of the regulation on the registration of religious venues vary from one church to another. Most house church leaders, however, agree on the need for the church to be separated from the state. That belief affects how they view state-sanctioned churches. Some underground pastors (dixia mushi) have gone as far as comparing the state-sanctioned clergy to bureaucrats. A former leader of the lianghui in a central province, who left the TSPM for an underground church several years ago, made the following statement:

The pastors of official churches are pretty much government officials. They are not the kind to put faith in the first position, but are the kind to make the government’s interests, their number one command. (Interview BL28474)

Similarly, a church leader who also works as an academic in a university in Beijing portrayed the state-sanctioned church in the following terms: “through the TSPM the state speaks, through it the state acts.” (Interview ZA89474) Additionally, a preacher in Shanghai asserted that “the TSPM makes one read politics, it does not make one read the Bible (shengjing).” (Interview BL34474) To that, Wang (2009) added that “obedience to the authority of the TSPM [would] mean [a] violation of the teaching of the Bible.” (p. 80)

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27 Not all house churches are unregistered, but all of them are not registered with the Religious Affairs Bureau. The house churches that are registered have done so under the authority of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), not as churches per se, but under the name of a company. Many of the house churches that have sought to register as religious institutions under the MCA have nonetheless seen their application rejected.
According to a survey conducted by the Pushi Institute in 2008-2009, 57.9% of Protestants respondents believed that religious organizations should be in charge of their own affairs, as opposed to being supervised by the government. Moreover, 76.1% of Protestants thought believers should be responsible for the building of their own religious venue, rather than the government. Conversely, only 15.8% of them supported central government regulations on religious affairs.

Many members of the underground clergy would rather violate national regulations regarding the registration of religious sites, because being a ‘legal’ church would entail facing greater government intervention in its own affairs, like the supervision of church finances, charity work, and generally, the purposes for which it uses its funds (Spiegel, 2004, p. 48). Indeed, as far as finances are concerned, Article 36 of the 2004 National Regulations on Religious Affairs states that:

> A religious body or site for religious activities shall report to the religious affairs department of the people’s government at or above the county level of the place where it is located on its income and expenditure, and on the acceptance and use of donations as well.

Ironically, although their ‘underground’ status makes churches more vulnerable to arbitrary state intervention, being unregistered often comes with perceptions of reduced risks of being subjected to various forms of government supervision. Clandestinity thus becomes interpreted by those who embrace it, as a guarantee of stability against frequent interference from the state. That belief is also manifested in some underground pastors’

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understanding of the TSPM clergy as limited in the range of religious activities it can organize. As the leader of an underground congregation in Henan argued:

TSPM churches are unable to open religious training centers, they do not have the freedom to organize religious activities. We, underground churches, have all those freedoms. (Interview 108)

Similarly, the leader of a house church in Zhejiang suggested:

Registering means having to deal with the government and facing all kinds of pressures on a daily or on a weekly basis’ (Interview BL92478).

Operating outside state control hence constitutes a crucial precondition for the pursuit of church priorities, including that of proselytizing, in an attempt to attract new members\(^31\).

While national and local regulations about church registration impose severe restrictions upon religious practice on paper, in practice, they remain disregarded as far as the majority of underground Protestant churches are concerned. Regulations are violated in a varying set of ways. The most common way in which they are is in the mere existence of churches that are either fully unregistered (mei dengji de), and churches that are registered with organizations other than the ones dictated in national religious regulations, namely the RAB and the TSPM. House churches may have three kinds of irregular statuses. There are those that are unregistered or what Yang (2006) would call the ‘black’ churches;\(^32\) the ones that managed to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA); and the ones that are registered under the CCC exclusively (Interview BL48476). The ones that are registered with the MCA are usually so under the name of a company. Underground churches strategically choose to give their congregation a ‘legal status’ by registering the

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\(^31\) Yang (2010) also compares the ‘religious economy’ to the ‘material economy’, claiming that the former is ‘driven by the interactions of demand, supply, and regulation.’ (p. 3)

\(^32\) Yang (2006) distinguishes churches on the basis of their degree of legality. China is thus composed of “red, black and gray markets” for Christianity. The red churches are the officially permitted ones, the gray churches are the ones with an ambiguous legal status (i.e. registered but involved in illegal activities), and the black ones are the congregations whose status is illegal (i.e. unregistered).
rented or bought property that they use for services, under the name of a business that would be considered by the government as ‘legal’. The leader [lingxiu] of a congregation of over five thousand believers in Wenzhou, Zhejiang claimed to have done so for the 40 residential and commercial spaces he transformed into church meeting points. This method, which is usually supported by a few key officials in the local bureaucracy, is perceived by church leaders as a way of protecting themselves from unnecessary attention from higher authorities, and from potential accusations of being entirely ‘underground’. Moreover, according to several informants, registering the property (even without officially declaring the actual purposes that rented or bought property is to serve) suggests that house churches do not question the authority of the state per se, but the ways in which its authority is currently practiced. It thus protects them from being accused of discrediting the regime.33

Figure 1: Inside an Underground Church in Zhejiang

33 There are, however, circumstances in which the house churches seeking to register as a social organization with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), have been declined by the department, for lacking evidence that the TSPM approved such registration (Homer, 2010, p. 59). In those circumstances, the Ministry of Civil Affairs required that churches get approval from the Religious Affairs Bureau first. Hence, informal rules by the MCA are not consistently applied across churches and localities.
Although religious organizations that are not registered with the RAB are normally subject to closure, local governments do not actively seek to close them down. In fact, their lenience toward the underground clergy has translated into a considerable decline in state-led house church demolitions since the early 2000s. Between November and December 2001, more than 400 house churches were demolished or closed down by the PSB.\footnote{International Christian Concern, ‘Over 400 House Churches Destroyed in China’, 12 February 2001: http://www.persecution.org/2001/02/12/over-400-house-churches-destroyed-in-china/} In contrast, in 2006, China Aid reports that only 4 churches were destroyed, and 4 other ones, shut down.\footnote{In the early 2000s, crackdowns upon unregistered religious sites other than house churches, like Daoist and Buddhist temples and shrines, were also frequent. Between 1997 and 2003, Wenzhou municipality’s government closed down approximately two hundred such non-state sanctioned venues.} Between 1997 and 2003, eleven house churches were subject to a similar fate in Wenzhou,\footnote{Christian News Wire, 14 July 2007: ‘Three House Church Buildings in Zhejiang Facing Imminent Destruction by Government’, http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/926653652.html} where the local government is known today for being most tolerant of underground Christianity. Moreover, in most of the above cases, churches were closed down not because they were unregistered \textit{per se}, but because the local government expropriated the land on which they had been built, for reasons of infrastructure development. (Interview BL90478)

Beyond the large proportion of unregistered churches, some of which have fake company labels, some actual private or semi-privately owned companies ran by Christian bosses have an unregistered church or a chapel on their office compound. An informant stressed that many Wenzhou business owners open factories in provinces other than Zhejiang, including Sichuan and Yunnan, and build a church on their property, which holds services several times a week. One of the main purposes of doing business, apart from production and profit, is to proselytize (\textit{chuanjiao}) amongst employees and encourage them to build their own churches in their hometowns (Interview ZA88474). One such factory in
Wenzhou managed to convert one fourth of its 700 employees, during their contract there (Cao, 2010, p. 66). According to a pastor in Zhejiang, approximately thirty factories in Wenzhou managed to build a chapel inside their business compound (Interview BL92478). Some informants in the underground community keep emphasizing the irony of the system: “in some factories, chapels are set up next door to the Chinese Communist Party’s office!” (Interview BL92478).

When there is no church in the factory, Christian entrepreneurs occasionally invite evangelical groups to proselytize among their employees (Cao, 2010). Beyond evangelization, which often proves to be effective, Cristian teaching constitutes “a […] method of discipline and factory governance.” (Cao, 2010, p. 33) In some factories, the management may be required to attend a weekly Bible class to familiarize itself with the Christian faith (Cao, 2010, p. 34). Sometimes, for reasons pertaining to both legal restrictions and financial limitations, the entire office becomes a church after work hours. An informant from Shanghai claimed:

It is frequent in Shanghai to have people rent an office space for business and for church-related activities. During the day, people work in the office, and in weekday evenings and on weekends, the space is turned into a church where the Gospel is preached (Interview ZA88474).

Finally, regulations on the registration of religious sites are also violated in some cases where TSPM church venues are not only used by the official congregation for religious services, but also for the organization of religious activities by an underground congregation. This is particularly the case in a city like Wenzhou, where the leaders of large house congregations who are also influential business owners in the local

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37 According to Cao (2010), ‘workers often feel a strong urge to follow their Wenzhou employers’ faith. Some even convert to Christianity in a rather short period after entering Christian-led Wenzhou factories.’ (p. 33)
community use Three-Self church facilities to organize weekly services (Interview BL92478). It is also not uncommon in Wenzhou to find underground church leaders using official church spaces to organize weddings or theological conferences (Ibid). This phenomenon is also present among the underground Catholics in parts of China. In a fully Catholic village in Hebei where 75% of believers were underground and 25% official, both sides had been working hand-in-hand for over two years to build a common church venue, which they planned to use for weekly masses (Interview BL64476).

2. Restrictions on the Geographical Scope of Religious Activities

Church leaders are forbidden to preach the Gospel freely outside of the municipality in which their religious site is registered. If a member of the Protestant clergy wishes to proselytize outside his or her municipality, he or she must ask the relevant RAB in the latter area. Furthermore, if church leaders are to organize a collective religious event outside their site for religious activities, they must apply to the RAB where the event is scheduled to be, at least thirty days ahead of time.38 Collective religious meetings that are not approved by the local RAB are usually severely punished, if discovered by the local authorities. In its attempt to avoid potential instability caused by collective mobilization, the regime makes government approval a precondition to all group meetings across areas of society. Aware that there are some overt dissidents among house church leaders (although they constitute a minority of the clergy), the government particularly fears that Protestant gatherings could facilitate the spread of anti-regime sentiments, and encourage political mobilization. Several cases of government repression of underground Christians

in the past years were intimately linked to the illegal organization of religious workshops and conferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases of Repression</td>
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<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cases of Repression Related to Unapproved Religious Events</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
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Table 1: Cases of Repression Related to Unapproved Religious Events (Source: China Aid’s 2007, 2008 and 2009 Persecution Reports)

In 2007, among 60 cases of government repression\(^{39}\) of Christians, at least 13 of them were related to the unapproved organization of collective religious events. In 2008, among 74 instances of repression, at least eleven of them were related to such cause. In 2009, this number decreased to ten.

In spite of some crackdowns, reality however suggests that most preachers travel in and out of the village, town or city in which they are based to preach the Gospel on a regular basis without being subject to local government control. I once travelled with a pastor whose church is based in Zhejiang, and who occasionally was invited to lead a Sunday service in an underground church in Jiangsu, Hebei or Henan. These kinds of arrangements are commonplace in China, and though they are illegal, they are not stopped by the authorities. Local governments however may be compelled to enforce the geographical restrictions pertaining to Gospel preaching in cases of house church leaders considered to be highly political. This was particularly the case for a pastor from Sichuan whom in 2010, visited a city in Zhejiang, where he presented his latest book in a small Christian-owned library. Throughout his stay, he was followed by the PSB, and some of

\(^{39}\) Repression here is defined in Goldstein (1978)'s terms, namely the state’s use of or threat to use physical sanctions against an individual, a group or an organization, for the purpose of punishing the target and deterring particular beliefs or activities seen to be challenging regime or government interests. I use repression and coercion interchangeably in the context of this analysis.
the events he planned, including a dinner and his book presentation, were raided by the police *(jingcha)* and the RAB. Local PSB officers justified the need to interfere arguing that the guest pastor had not been permitted to travel outside of his city to preach the Gospel. The police might have however not bothered interfering had the pastor not published books and papers with compromising opinions about the political regime.

Beyond the geographical restrictions to religious practice, the latter should only take place within the confines of legally recognized sites for religious practice. Article 12 of national regulations states that:

> The collective religious activities of citizens shall, in general, be held at registered sites for religious activities (i.e. Buddhist monasteries, Taoist temples, mosques, churches and other fixed premises for religious activities).^{40}

In practice, nonetheless, and especially where relations between Three-Self and underground churches are peaceful, it is not uncommon that Three-Self (or official) pastors preach the Gospel in underground churches. During my visit to a city in the outskirts of Wenzhou, I interviewed the pastor of a Three-Self church in a lower class neighborhood area who proudly claimed to informally cooperate with the underground church ‘next door’ from his own TSPM church. Cooperation took the form of preaching during some Sunday services, and organizing collective fund-raising events (Interview BO79478).

### 3. LIMITATIONS ON THE PUBLICATION AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS MATERIALS

According to Article 21 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, religious publications and items should only be sold or distributed within the confines of designated sites for religious activities. Indeed, a church that is registered as a religious site with the RAB (or

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a Three-Self church) may “compile and publish reference publications to be circulated within religious circles.” Moreover, the authorities place restrictions upon the content and the quantity of religious materials originating outside of China. Article 12 of the Rules on the Administration of Religious Activities of Aliens states that:

It is prohibited to bring the following religious printed matter, religious audio-visual products and other articles into Chinese territory: (1) if the amount exceeds that for personal rational use, and they do not belong to the category stipulated in Article 11; (2) if the contents of these articles are detrimental to Chinese national security and public interests of Chinese society.

The first part of the statement entails that the possession of several Bibles that are not printed by the TSPM is illegal, including the ones originating from other countries or from independent Mainland Chinese presses. The second part of the statement implies that Bibles or any religious material that originate(s) from outside of state-controlled organizations inherently compromise(s) the stability and the interests of Chinese society.

In 2007, out of sixty reported cases of Christian repression in the country, at least eight of them were related to the illegal printing and/or distribution of religious material. In 2008 such related cases of coercion decreased to a minimum of 4 out of a total of 74. In 2009, at least one case out of 77 involved such a practice.

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<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases of Repression</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cases of Repression related to Bible smuggling and the illegal distribution of religious material</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
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Table 2: Instances of Repression as a Result of Bible Smuggling (Source: China Aid’s 2007, 2008 and 2009 Repression Reports)

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41 Ibid, p. 28.
In reality, however, unregistered bookshops and unofficial Christian presses have been operating in conjunction with Three-Self-controlled ones. Unregistered bookshops are often found inside or next door to an underground church. In several cases, local authorities are aware of the existence of these bookshops, and have not taken measures to shut them down. In fact, many of the church leaders in charge of these bookshops are on good terms with the local PSB. Among the many books that they sell is documentation that is unapproved by the RAB. That is particularly the case of a few large congregations in Beijing.

Additionally, some house churches have their own quarterly magazines which are freely accessible to the members of their congregations, and usually distributed to other house churches across large cities. Some of them even have a website onto which church leaders post information about their congregation’s activities, as well as press releases on various religious or political events. Though these churches’ materials are considered illegal according to national regulations, access to their website has not been banned by the authorities, and their publications are open to the public.

It is also not uncommon to see underground churches leave religious material in public or outside their unregistered religious venue. For instance, one of the employees of an underground church located in an apartment building in a residential neighborhood in Wenzhou said that he sometimes left introductory material on Christianity entitled “Jesus Is my Sheperd” in the building’s entrance. The purpose of that was to make the material accessible to everybody in the neighborhood with the hope of “attracting more sheep” (Interview BE93478). While this documentation would normally be seized by the

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43 Among the exceptions is Shouwang Church’s website, which was blocked by the authorities in April 2011.
authorities, public security officers whose office is located across the street from the building, have not attempted to discourage the church from sharing such religious materials with the rest of the community (Interview BE93478).

![Gospel Preaching Material Distributed During an Underground Christian Retreat in Rural Henan. This document is considered illegal by the Chinese government.](image)

Beyond restrictions upon the publication and distribution of religious materials, the 2005 regulations stress that national organizations exclusively have the right to establish religious schools, and that “no organization or individual may make use of religion to […] interfere with the educational system of the State.” Article 43 of the regulations also maintains that:

> Where […] an institute for religious education is established without approval, the religious affairs department shall ban such site or institute and confiscate the illegal gain.

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44 People’s Republic of China State Council Order No. 250, published by the State Council at the eighth ordinary session on September 25, 1998 (article 8).
Moreover, individuals under the age of 18 should not receive any kind of religious education. However, in the 1990s, many underground churches opened Sunday schools, with the purpose of familiarizing the children of believers, with core notions of the Bible. A member of the underground clergy in Zhejiang noticed that then, Sunday schools were a highly sensitive issue for the authorities. When they began to operate, the Wenzhou government frequently crackdowned upon them. Since the late 1990s, however, few such schools have been subject to government harassment (Interview BL24474). Hence, particular practices that were severely repressed in the 1990s, are becoming increasingly tolerated by local authorities.

On top of such courses, unauthorized primary and secondary Christian schools have been opening, especially in large cities. These institutions are different from Sunday schools insofar as they do not only seek to provide children with theological education,

47 This principle applies to all officially recognized religions in China. Some informants however claimed that unregistered Buddhist and Daoist schools were less prone to government crackdowns, and that there was an actual hierarchy in the level of threat perceived in the underground practice of religions. They argued that the practice of underground Islam in Xinjiang, Protestantism, and Catholicism were the most problematic for the regime. While Beijing views underground Islam in that part of Northwestern China as intimately linked to ethnic separatism, underground Catholicism cannot be dissociated from faithfulness to the Vatican, which the Party views as a competing source of authority. Beyond the threats that it poses the regime, which I discussed in the introduction, Protestantism also is a challenge to the government insofar as it emphasizes active proselytism, and has planted the seeds for large numbers of Christian believers in China.

48 Similarly, Koranic schools (also called madrassah) flourished in Xinjiang in the post-1978 era, but most of them were shut down by the local government when religious education was forbidden by Beijing in 1996 (Alles, 2003; Roberts, 2004), and very few have been left operating since the late 1990s. In other parts of the country, the Hui have opened private Arabic schools, which also offered religious education (Alles, 2003). In 2003, Alles claimed that Yunnan had about twelve such schools (p. 5). Confucian weekend schools have also opened in many parts of the country, although Confucianism per se is not considered a religion by the Chinese government.

49 The Chinese government prohibits religious education for individuals under the age of 18. While this policy is strictly enforced in various parts of the country, especially among Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang (Mackerras, 2001), it has been loosely implemented in various localities, as far as compliant underground churches are concerned.

50 Sunday schools, which aim at providing church members with biblical education, were legalized in China in the 1990s. Today, an increasing number of underground churches offer this service. Among a sample of 65 house churches in Beijing, 23 of them had set up Sunday schools for adults, and 34 of them for children (Liu, 2009). In Wenzhou, underground Sunday schools enroll over 30,000 students (Interview 23).
but also their purpose is to offer Christian families an alternative to the atheist, state-supported educational system. Though local government officials are aware of their existence, many of them manage to survive without having to close down. They usually register under the name of a company or a day-care center for children, often upon the informal approval of authorities. Some of them are even partly sponsored by the state-sanctioned church, which may facilitate their protection by the police. The main clientele for these schools are middle-class underground Christian families, some of whom also send their children to Bible summer camps either in China or in countries like the United States.

Figure 3: Underground Bible Camp for High School Students Organized in the Premise of a State-sanctioned Church in Hebei

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51 Similar underground confucian schools that seek to offer students an alternative to the atheist curriculum, exist in China. According to non-official sources, over 10,000 students could be attending these schools. Just like underground Protestant schools, these institutions usually survive as a result of their administration’s good relations with local authorities. In some localities, the fact that some cadres are fierce defenders of Confucianism helps these institutions emerge and survive. Local authorities may register the schools as daycare centers or nurseries. (Informal conversation with Sebastien Billioud in August 2011)
In addition to those, are theological centers aimed at training the future generations of pastors and preachers. Religious education is controlled by the Chinese State, and only twenty-three theological seminaries are found across the country. The limitations on the number of admissions each year and the restricted number of state-recognized seminaries across the country have had an impact on the available number of officially trained pastors. In Henan province, Lambert (2006) reports that five years ago, there were only 111 pastors for five million believers (p. 48, 233). In 2003, the TSPM in Heilongjiang province reported having only one pastor for every group of 17,600 believers (Vala, 2009, p. 97). On top of their space limitations, state-controlled seminaries are only accessible to members of the Three-Self Church, and in some rather exceptional cases, to members of house churches that are unregistered with the RAB but that belong to the CCC. An informant who has close connections with the TSPM in Zhejiang, indeed explained that the RAB would tolerate the ordination of non-TSPM pastors who exclusively belong to CCC churches provided that they sat in a certain number of TSPM-sponsored classes (Interview BL48476). In doing so, the government chooses not to alienate completely the unofficial churches that agree to have a foot in the system. Members of churches that are neither tied to the TSPM nor to the CCC, however, do not have access to officially recognized religious training institutions. As Vala (2009) explains, at the application stage, “the Religious Affairs Bureau rejects [candidates] who have been arrested or linked to unregistered church groups.” (p. 105) An informant made a similar observation,

52 Comparatively, in 1950, the Chinese Communist Party shut down forty-three seminaries when the Protestant community accounted for only two percent of what the official Protestant population is today (Vala, 2009, p. 103; Bays, 2003, p. 490).
53 These numbers do not include the underground Christian population.
suggesting that the local government does not agree to bend the rules for the underground churches that are unwilling to cooperate on an informal basis (Interview BL48476).

Consequently, several ‘black’ religious training centers open their doors to accommodate a part of the underground clergy. Aikman (2003) claimed that four of the main house church networks in China including Fangcheng, Tanghe, Anhui and Born Again run over two hundred underground seminaries across China (p. 129). The author also added that this estimate would be significantly smaller than the actual total number of underground seminaries in the country. An underground church leader in Wenzhou stressed that there are approximately 10,000 underground training centers run by the black church community in Mainland China (Interview BL48476). Fifteen of them would be in Wenzhou (Interview BL92478). In Beijing, there would be 46 such centers (Interview BO20473). Another informant who was involved in the establishment of a private Masters program in theology, claimed that theological education was not necessarily interpreted as highly sensitive on the part of local government officials. What mattered most was who opened the school (Interview BL21473).

Underground church leaders’ lack of access to state-controlled seminaries has important implications for their level of theological education and ability to be ordained as pastors. According to national regulations, without having completed four years of official seminary education, no preacher can be ordained. Article 27 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs articulates this principle in the following statement:
Religious personnel who are determined qualified as such by a religious body and reported for the record to the religious affairs department of the people’s government at or above the county level may engage in professional religious activities.54

Yet, the unregistered churches that have the financial resources manage to bypass the above restrictions by sending their religious personnel off to Hong Kong or foreign countries to have them ordained (Interview BL48476).

4. CLERGY RELATIONS WITH FOREIGNERS

Underground Christians’ relations with foreigners are a great source of concern for the government. I interviewed three church leaders who were taking part in an informal Bible workshop in rural Henan, during the summer 2010. I was asked by my hosts to duck my head down as we drove into the village where the event was taking place, to avoid getting unnecessary attention from other villagers. Once we got to the courtyard, my hosts kindly explained to me that it was better that I not walk outside the property during my stay, because if I, a foreigner, was noticed in the village, the information would most likely reach the local village chief, and my hosts would get in trouble.

Article 8 of the State Council’s “Rules for the Implementation of the Provisions on the Administration of Religious Activities of Aliens” in China state that religious exchanges between Mainland Chinese Christians and foreigners should always go through, and be approved by, the higher levels of the RAB bureaucracy:

The friendly contacts and cultural and academic exchanges of aliens with Chinese religious circles shall be conducted via Chinese religious bodies at or above the level of province, autonomous region or municipality directly under the Central Government55.

55 State Administration for Religious Affairs [guojia zongjiao shiwu ju], ‘Rules for the Implementation of the Provisions on the Administration of Religious Activities of Aliens within the Territory of the People’s Republic of China’ [‘zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingnei waiguoren zongjiao huodong guanli guiding
The fact that only these levels of the bureaucracy can approve international exchanges suggests the level of sensitivity of local churches’ relations with outside Christians. The table below summarizes the number of reported cases of repression involving house church relations with foreign Christians, in 2007, 2008 and 2009, compared to the total number of reported crackdowns each year. Cases of repression related to unapproved exchanges with foreign Christians decreased between 2007 and 2009. While in 2007, there were seven, only four were reported in 2008, and three in 2009.

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<th>Years</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cases of Repression</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cases of Repression related to church relations with foreigners</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 3: Instances of Repression as a Result of Church Linkages with Foreigners (Source: China Aid’s 2007, 2008 and 2009 Persecution Reports)

As far as education is concerned, Article 13 of the Rules on the Administration of Religious Activities of Aliens in China states that Chinese citizens who wish to be enrolled in theological training programs overseas should obtain permission from the national religious bodies to do so:

The enrollment of study abroad or capital provided to China by foreign organizations or individuals for the purpose of training religious personnel shall be accepted by Chinese national religious bodies on the basis of need, and the study abroad personnel shall be selected and dispatched by Chinese national religious bodies as a whole plan. Foreign organizations or individuals may not recruit students within Chinese territory for their study and training abroad as religious personnel without permission.

These regulations however hardly apply to churches that are not legally recognized by the state, because they do not operate under its umbrella. These include churches that are

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56 Cases predominantly refer to house churches’ unapproved dealings with foreigners, but they may occasionally involve Three-Self churches too.

57 Ibid, p. 85.
unregistered, or the ones that are either registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, or tied to the China Christian Council. Yet, it is increasingly common for underground church leaders, especially the ones based in China’s larger urban areas, to take part in international exchanges or activities with foreign Christians. In 2010, a delegation of twenty house church leaders from Beijing, Wenzhou, Shanghai and other cities, spent over a month in a church in the United States where they took theology courses. An informant who was part of the unofficial delegation informed the PSB that they were to take part in such a trip, prior to his departure (Interview BL19473). PSB officials were initially concerned about the trip and asked the informant what the purpose of going to the US was. The pastor reassured them that the objective of the trip was only faith-related. In the end, with the exception of a church leader in Anhui who was prohibited from going, all other pastors were able to travel as scheduled (Interview BL19473).

Some underground churches in China have also received significant financial aid from foreign Christian groups, like Caritas Foundation, as well as foreign governments. While most recipients of such funds have been churches with fewer resources in rural or remote areas, some large congregations in cities like Beijing have also been financially supported. A former TSPM pastor who now runs his own unregistered church, and who happened to remain in very good terms with local RAB officials, received 800,000 renminbi from three Christian organizations in the US, in 2009 (Interview BL19473). Some groups have also approvisioned congregations, with Bibles and other Christian educational materials, to encourage them to proselytize. Financial support of house churches by foreign groups is prohibited by the Chinese government. Yet, it remains a crucial factor underlying the emergence and sustainability of unregistered churches in
particular areas of the country. In a small town in Henan, I met the leader of an underground church that had been financially supported by Christian groups in Australia and Singapore (Interview BL30474). His congregation happened to be in very good terms with some leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic church in that town, who used their spare time to work for the underground community as volunteers. TSPM pastors were all aware of the church’s foreign financial support, but did not seem to view it as a problem. Among them, was a member of the local People’s Political Consultative Conference (zhengxie).

**Conclusion**

As explored in this chapter, the underground clergy’s defiance of formal rules is manifested in its contestation of four principles: the mandatory registration of religious sites, restrictions on the geographical scope of religious activities outside the registered venue, limitations on the publication and the distribution of religious materials, as well as the extent to which Mainland Chinese religious clerics may cultivate relations with foreigners. In spite of those acts of defiance, public security officials have in most circumstances, not actively sought to strictly and consistently enforce central government regulations on religious affairs. Defiance has nonetheless been accompanied by house church leaders’ willingness to informally comply with local authority, as a strategy for self-protection under authoritarian constraints. The following chapter proposes a framework that draws upon institutionalism to explain how compliance by the underground clergy has helped reduce incentives on the part of local officials, to mobilize resources to crackdown upon relevant churches.

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58 The zhengxie is a political advisory body which consists of delegates from various political organizations within the Party and the government, as well as from the business sector and patriotic associations. While the Conference is meant to represent the diversity of political, economic and societal interests, it nonetheless remains to a large extent controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.
That authoritarian regimes adopt various strategies of societal control to secure their resilience has been widely explored in the comparative literature. Scholars of authoritarianism have questioned conventional regime theory which posits that autocratic regimes are fragile due to their overreliance on repression, and overcentralization of decision-making, among other factors (Nathan, 2003). Their contributions have brought to light, forms of authoritarianism that differed significantly from totalitarian regimes. While the latter primarily sought to destroy diversity in society’s interests groups, or what Linz (2000) also calls “social pluralism” (p. 70), regime scholars have emphasized the importance of diversification in autocracies’ tactics for survival. Among them, is performance legitimacy, which Stubbs (2011) defined as “a government that provide(s) security, stability and prosperity.” (p. 154) Park (1991) adds that “facing the inherent problem of procedural legitimacy, authoritarian leadership often attempts to justify the system of rule in terms of its effectiveness in achieving certain collective goals.” (p. 744) Thayer (2009) similarly contends that the legitimacy of Vietnam’s single party regime lied in its ability to reduce poverty and ensure high growth rates. (p. 48) Conversely, Epstein (1984) sees a causal linkage between the economic difficulties encountered in bureaucratic authoritarian countries in 1980s Latin America, and an increasing political opposition. The author claims that failure in government performance contributes to authoritarian collapse.

Beyond economic and social policies aiming at redistribution and wealth generation, authoritarian regimes have used a ‘carrots and sticks’ approach to manage
society. Scholars like O’Donnell (1973), Linz (2000), Stepan (1978) and Hanson (2010) emphasize that authoritarian regime survival lies in governments’ effective use of cooptation to integrate parts of the opposition in the system, and repression to eliminate others. Reasons for cooptation have transcended the need to avoid rebellion (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007) and included the state’s reliance on the political and economic cooperation of key segments of the population (Robinson, 2000; Wantchekon, 2002). Okruhlik (1999) and Wintrobe (1998) add that dictatorships distribute resources to an elite selectorate to ensure their support. In the literature that is more specific to hybrid regimes, Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) as well as Gandhi (2008) argue that partisan legislatures help autocrats incorporate the opposition in the political system, which helps broaden the support for the regime, and extend their tenure.

Similarly, the study of Chinese politics has explored how adaptation and flexibility on the part of the CCP helped secure authoritarian regime resilience. Nathan (2003), for instance, argues that one of the factors underlying the CCP’s legitimacy is its “establishment of institutions for political participation and appeal.” (p. 7) Shambaugh (2008) claims that the survival of the regime could not have happened without the transformation of the CCP from a classic leninist party into a hybrid organization that had the capacity to adapt to growing societal challenges (p. 6). Similarly, Dickson (2000) emphasizes the diversification of the CCP’s interest representation as an important component of the regime’s effort to better adapt to society. Shambaugh (2009) and Chen (2010) bring to light the CCP’s policy adaptations following the societal challenges other

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59 Though Magaloni and Kricheli (2010, p. 126) have a broader understanding of what cooptation entails (i.e. as authoritarian leaders’ ability to provide ‘licenses, offices, and economic resources’ in exchange for loyalty), my understanding of the term is similar to that of Saward (1990). The author defines it as the formal incorporation of an individual or a group into government decision-making as an adviser, informant or colleague.
autocratic regimes have faced (i.e. the Solidarity Movement in the 1980s; recent colored revolutions). Finally, Yang (2003) underscores the Party’s successful adaptive measures to address some of the economic and social problems that arose in society during the first reform period, including corruption and socio-economic inequalities. In these studies, political quiescence on the part of the population did not simply result from the fear of being repressed per se, but from the political elite’s ability to satisfy popular material desires.

The literature that explores authoritarian regimes’ nimble tactics for survival has, no doubt, contributed to a better understanding of autocratic adaptation to society’s demands and challenges. Yet, it has predominantly focused on the structural features and outcomes of regime strategies of societal control, rather than the processes through which the latter were reached. An approach that recognizes the importance of agency and actors’ interests has the potential to move away from a top-down understanding of authoritarian state strategies of control of society (i.e. policy reforms, cooptation, repression), and explore how authoritarian survival tactics may emerge out of a bargaining process between state actors and societal groups.

Furthermore, the neglect of processes that led autocratic leaders to develop adaptive strategies for survival has produced studies that predominantly revolve around formal institutions. The lack of consideration of informal rules’ effect on authoritarian

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60 Among other arguments of that kind are Nathan (2003)’s analysis of the growing role of meritocracy in the promotion of elites as well as ‘the separation of [...] spheres of authority’ between political institutions (p. 11), and Way (2005)’s contention that ‘effective coercion and the capacity of leaders to keep their allies in line’ are crucial for authoritarian rule resilience. (p. 232)

61 Tsai’s work is an exception to predominant formal institutionalist analyses. The author explores local governments’ informal mechanisms of representation of large-scale private businesses in 1980s and 1990s China. Tsai (2008) maintains that the government’s capacity to implement ‘adaptive informal institutions’ helps state actors mitigate the effects of the regime’s increasingly dysfunctional formal rules (p. 208).
resilience\textsuperscript{62} is not unrelated to an assumption Helmke and Levitsky (2004) believe has pervaded the field of comparative politics, namely that “actors’ incentives and expectations are shaped primarily, if not exclusively, by formal rules.” (p. 725)\textsuperscript{63} While formal institutional features provide important clues as to the authoritarian nature and strategies of a regime, and facilitate the measurement of variance in regimes’ institutional characteristics, analyses that strive for empirical groundedness should also assess the degree to which formal institutions are enforced (Lauth, 2000). Where there is a considerable gap between policy design and practice, informal institutions are likely to be more indicative of how a political system operates, than the actual rules that are written in the state’s regulations.\textsuperscript{64}

Recent studies of state-society relations in China and beyond have drawn linkages between informal institutions and an eroding authoritarian state capacity.\textsuperscript{65} Assuming that information asymmetry leads the agent to engage in opportunistic behavior at the cost of the principal’s priorities (Miller, 2005), Pei (2006), Nee and Lian (1994) and Whiting

\textsuperscript{62} Donker (2010) makes a similar observation as far as the study of autocratic resilience in the Middle East is concerned, which he claims has overly focused on macro-political factors. (p. 436)

\textsuperscript{63} The lack of attention paid to informal institutions in the literature on authoritarianism is surprising as Schedler (2009b) argues that comparativists of autocratic regimes have entered a new institutionalist phase. For the author, old institutionalists in the literature exclusively analyzed ‘institutions of repression […] such as the party state, the military junta, the Gulag, the secret police, [and] the machinery of propaganda’ (Schedler, 2009b, p. 1), while new institutionalism is particularly interested in authoritarian regimes’ import of institutions of division of power known for being integrative parts of liberal democratic systems. Yet, old and new institutionalists in comparative politics partly differed in the ways in which they defined institutions. With the exception of most rational choice institutionalists, new institutionalists including North (1990), Thelen and Steinmo (1992) as well as March & Olsen (1989) saw institutions as incorporating both formal organization and informal rules and procedures that structure conduct.

\textsuperscript{64} This claim is not unrelated to several Africa scholars’ contention in the literature on patrimonialism, that African politics can largely be understood by reference to informal institutions, as opposed to formal ones (Jackson and Rosberg, 1984). Many such scholars however viewed informal politics as more significant than formal institutions in influencing political decisions. Some of them went as far as claiming that the African continent was ‘a place where formal institutional rules are largely irrelevant.’ (Posner and Young, 2007, p. 126) This is not the claim that I wish to make in this particular study of Chinese politics.

\textsuperscript{65} Pei (2006), however, argues that the rise of new forms of local corruption in China’s reform period have contributed to the country’s ‘trapped transition.’
(2004)’s principal-agent analyses explore how decentralization has created incentives among local officials, not to act on behalf of the central government.\(^{66}\) Similarly, in the Russian context, Gel’man (2004) defined the prevalence of informal institutions as “the unrule of law.” (p. 1022)

Other studies have also focused on the side effects of rule-bending upon the local population, and framed local governments’ interests in opposition to citizens’ expectations. O’Brien and Li (1999), for instance, suggest that local officials “have the discretion to implement policies in a selective manner, usually shunting popular policies aside.” (p. 175) Whether the policies they choose to disregard are exclusively the popular ones, however, cannot be assessed without a careful examination of local governance across policy areas.

As suggested in this dissertation, not all forms of formal rule-bending by local government departments hinder citizens’ interests and needs, and an authoritarian state’s capacity. The loose implementation of central regulations upon religious affairs has to some extent, informally benefited a large part of the underground Christian community. Ultimately, it has also helped increase the effectiveness of local governance, and contributed to regime resilience.

The study of informal institutions is important for authoritarian regime resilience for two reasons. First, accommodative informal institutions help mitigate the side effects of increasingly irrelevant formal institutions in a context where the standards for securing regime resilience are higher, as societal expectations grow and Chinese citizens have

\(^{66}\) When China launched its opening up policy, it made local cadres mainly responsible for the country’s economic development (Oi, 1999). As a result of larger fiscal and economic powers, levels of corruption grew dramatically among officials at the provincial and lower levels of the government hierarchy.
more information to be critical of their government. Developing informal rules to accommodate society allows local authorities to ‘extinguish fires’ provoked by the very sclerosis that results from the CCP’s reluctance to reform politically constraining formal institutions. Similarly, Lily L. Tsai (2007) contends that informal institutions in non-democratic regimes or systems undergoing a political transition give state actors a level of flexibility that the building of formal institutions to undertake the same functions would not procure.

Second, informal institutions help prevent formal institutional change, or political reforms. In an autocracy that is primarily concerned by its survival, the cost of informal institutional layering is lower than that of attempting to change the regulations that legitimize state control over society. Mahoney and Thelen (2010) emphasize that “processes of layering often take place when institutional challengers lack the capacity to actually change the original rules. […] They work within the existing system by adding new rules on top of or alongside old ones.” (p. 17)

Identifying the reasons why local governments tolerate the existence of most house churches in China involves paying particular heed to informal institutions, why and how they emerge, as well as how they become self-enforcing and are stabilized. Such a focus enables the investigator to explore the role of agency, state actors’ interests as well as the stakes that they perceive in containing society. Furthermore, it allows one to consider how society’s expectations and behavior may influence state actors’ incentives and perceptions about how to best protect the regime. I argue that informal institutions of tolerance emerge out of a bargaining process involving agents (state and society) with a mutually compatible set of interests. These procedures serve the purpose of “constrain[ing] and
enabl[ing] political behavior” (Levistky and Murillo, 2009), or like North (1990) would say, they are “humanly devised constraints that shape [social or political] interaction.” (p. 3) However, as Helmke and Levitsky (2004) emphasize, “whereas formal rules are created through official channels (such as executives and legislatures) […], informal rules are created, communicated, and enforced outside of public channels, and usually outside of the public eye.” (p. 731) Lauth (2004) adds that unlike formal institutions, informal procedures are usually unwritten. Insofar as they emerge out of a bargaining process, informal rules may also be tailored to the relevant actors involved, and hence vary from one locality to another.\footnote{Insofar as rules vary on the basis of the quality of churches’ relations with local authority, it may be more appropriate to talk about informal practices, as opposed to institutions.}

Although the approach explains formal institutional development predominantly in democratic contexts, rational choice institutionalism has made significant contributions on the role of strategic interaction. The approach postulates that state actors’ behavior is primarily driven by a strategic calculus, which is likely to be affected by their expectations about others’ (society) behavior (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Hence, informal concessions by one party may vary based on how loyal the other party is. Furthermore, institutions are self-enforcing, and make patterns of interaction between both sets of actors, more predictable. As Calvert (1995) claims, institutions take the form of rational action that is “conditioned on expectations about the behavior and reactions of others.” (p. 73-74). Once created, the institutions that constrain their decisions toward one another are also stabilized and reproduced over time. Informal institutions in this sense are characterized by a “tenacious survival ability” (North, 1990; Collins, 2002). Strategic interaction serves the same purpose as informal institutions do for North (1990), in that
they help reduce the transactions costs involved in cooperation\textsuperscript{68} that formal rules cannot diminish, by providing a structure by which actors involved create a certain order and minimalize uncertainty in exchange (p. 118).

Strategic interaction has been at the core of house church leaders’ relationship with key local government figures. The underground clergy has relied upon informal compliance as a means to better maintain its autonomy from the state. Compliance has also offered local governments a solution to increasingly irrelevant formal religious policies, by giving them the possibility to increase their information about the underground Christian space, and identify standards against which to categorize the churches that are loyal to the regime, and the ones that are not. In doing so, compliance has also helped local governments maximize the effectiveness of a selective policy of coercion vis-à-vis house churches.

Informal cooperation has brought benefits for local governance. Using coercion exclusively for politically contentious churches has enabled officials to mitigate the increasing political costs of force. Furthermore, lenience towards compliant congregations has enabled local governments to negotiate the boundaries of house churches’ informal space, and secure considerable advantages, including readier access to the underground religious space, intelligence-gathering opportunities, greater institutional flexibility (i.e. the discretion to use both formal and informal institutions to govern), and material benefits like access to bribes and rents.

The benefits from this informal cooperation are not unidirectional. As Williamson (1985) suggests, the bargaining party “is one who seeks both to give and receive ‘credible

\textsuperscript{68} North (1990) challenges Olson (1965) in that he sees collective action as possible in the presence of institutional constraints that create an incentive structures for such cooperation. How well institutions solve the problem of coordination however depends upon the motivation of players, the complexity of the environment, and players’ capacity to order the environment (North, 1990).
commitments.’” (p. 48-49) Informal cooperation has brought some advantages for the underground clergy. To sustain compliance among house churches, and ensure the lowest levels of uncertainty possible, local officials have been constrained to develop informal procedures to accommodate some of the clergy’s needs and expectations, that is their wish to operate as autonomous religious institutions. The latter rules have not been predetermined by local officials, but emerged out of repeated interaction and a bargaining process between actors with a compatible set of interests.

Yet, as explored in this dissertation, insofar as informal rules are built in a context where power and resources are unevenly allocated, they may also make winners and losers (knight, 1992). The informal institutions that emerge out of local government actors’ strategic interaction with particular societal groups may increase the latter’s informal autonomy, but ultimately, they allow the government to adapt to changes in society and contribute to authoritarian regime survival more effectively, than the strict enforcement of already existing formal institutions. If the informal institutions that allow the local state to tolerate the compliant underground clergy ultimately benefits the regime, what motivates strategic interaction for each party in the first place?

1. **THE MOTIVATIONS UNDERLYING COMPLIANCE**

House church leaders seek to create themselves a propitious environment in which to act as autonomous entities under authoritarian constraints. While most would rather be legally recognized as independent entities from the Chinese government, they nonetheless operate under authoritarian constraints and cannot obtain legal protection. Insofar as authoritarian survival depends upon the regime’s ability to control society and citizens’ political opinions, an organization that purposely chooses to organize outside the realm of
state control is likely to face pressures of cooptation by the authorities, and/or harassment for defying autocratic rule. Authoritarian regimes may make policy concessions to accommodate a political opposition, while simultaneously discouraging the existence of independent societal organizations. As Linz (2000) maintains, authoritarian regimes “often penetrate the life of the society, preventing, even forcibly the political expression of certain group interests [...] or shaping them by interventionist policies like those of corporatist regimes.” (p. 160) In the context of such structural constraints, church leaders’ second best option is to be informally tolerated by local authorities as underground entities. Pastors hence rely upon compliance as a means to earn the local government’s informal acceptance.

Autonomy, whether informal or official, is a crucial precondition for the existence of such congregations. House churches operate like private companies insofar as they need to be in a deregulated ‘religious market,’ to compete with other unregistered churches in their attempt to attract new believers, proselytize,⁶⁹ and in some cases, expand.⁷⁰ To that extent, they must ensure the security of the church, and the satisfaction of congregants. Doing so requires that they practice religion in a safe political environment, that is one in which risks of local government interference are low. Hence, although the underground clergy overtly opposes central government control over religion (i.e. cooptation), it also simultaneously manifests gestures of loyalty toward local

⁶⁹ The need to proselytize is particularly applicable to evangelical churches, that dedicate most of their activities to proselytism and missionary work, and which constitute the majority of underground churches in China. The fact that evangelical churches pay importance to proselytism does not mean that they have the ambition to expand. Some churches would rather stay small for political, resource-related or faith-based reasons. Some for instance believe that the faith of believers is likely to be ‘better’ if their church is smaller and believers regularly interact on a one-on-one basis with their pastor, than in large congregations.

⁷⁰ Similarly, Yang (2006) views underground evangelical churches as part of a broader ‘religious market’ in which each congregation ought to compete with others to grow and succeed. Starke and Finke (2000) define the religious economy as a ‘market of potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents, and the religious culture offered by the organization(s).’ (p. 193)
authorities, to maximize its chances that its unregistered congregation(s) be informally tolerated. The more compliant house church leaders are with local authority, the higher the chances that officials will tolerate them. The more space house churches have under conditions of strategic bargaining, the likelier they will further be compelled to comply with the local government’s informal rules.

Informal autonomy for underground churches is manifested in church leaders’ ability to conduct the internal affairs of the congregation (i.e. church budget management, leadership changes and elections, religious education, and external church affairs) without having to consult government authorities or the TSPM. Compliance is a strategic response to regime constraints by the underground clergy, to reduce risks of being coerced for rejecting state cooptation. It is not an act of submission to Party policy insofar as it does not result in churches’ incorporation under the umbrella of the state.\textsuperscript{71} Yet, informal autonomy does not come without constraints. Insofar as such a space is non-official, the clergy’s reluctance to cooperate with local authorities could (or not) have a detrimental effect on its capacity to maintain its autonomy. Hence, by informally cooperating with

\textsuperscript{71} If there are cases of co-optation in underground congregations, they take place upon an individual basis, and usually involve one or a few church members hired by the local public security bureau to keep an eye on internal church affairs, and report any events of interest.
local government officials, underground church leaders take part in setting the rules of the arrangement, but they are also restrained by the latter.

The symbolic and material gestures of compliance they resort to as a means to better ensure church preferences, are manifested in four ways: openness to dialogue, proactive intelligence-sharing, the maintenance of a low profile as far as church size and rhetoric are concerned, and the act of giving or receiving gifts. *Openness to dialogue* entails answering officials’ questions when they occasionally pay underground church leaders visits, or invite them to dinner. It may also be manifested when house church leaders simply do not bother censoring themselves during church services or meetings knowing that they might be watched. In such circumstances, particular church attendees may have been selectively coopted by the government or the Party to report back any subversive action by the church or the leadership. *Proactive information sharing* involves a deliberate attempt on the part of underground church leaders to brief local authorities in charge of security on a specific activity of the congregation which might be interpreted as potentially sensitive by the authorities. The latter type of activities would involve organizing underground church leader retreats, as well as engaging in activities with overseas churches in China or in a foreign country. Proactive information provision may also translate into providing local authorities with information about the identity of underground church congregants. This practice however usually requires the prior consent of congregants themselves. Furthermore, organizational openness [gongkaixing] involves a deliberate attempt by church leaders to make the internal affairs and activities of the church accessible to all, not just the authorities. This information is often transmitted on churches’ own websites, pamphlets or book publications. Information transparency goes
beyond regular reports on activities, and involves openly sharing information about the church leadership, their educational background, their theological positions, and so on. Compliant church leaders believe that the more they keep officials informed about the regular activities of their congregation, the less the latter will worry about whether their church loyal to the regime or not. For underground pastors, information sharing reduces the risks of unexpected government interference, and increases access to informal autonomy.

Keeping a low profile has also helped house churches avoid trouble with local government authorities. Some pastors have adopted a ‘small-church’ model, anticipating that local governments fear large congregations. The underground clergy has resorted to self-censorship and avoided communicating ideas that could be a source of political controversy for house churches. Gift-giving has taken the form of inviting officials in charge of religious affairs and security to dinner a few times each year, or to important Christian events, like Christmas parties. On these occasions, church leaders have also had to offer officials some gifts, to show their respect and to acknowledge their benevolence. Gift-receiving is the act of accepting occasional gifts from officials in exchange for cooperation. These gifts have a particular meaning insofar as they are offered during strategic political periods, when the authorities expect (potential) defiants not to openly challenge them, or organize activities which could cause social disturbance. The mere act of accepting gifts in such a context signifies a commitment by church leaders to remain most discreet in times of political sensitivity.

There are different layers of compliance among church leaders, and this variance is not unrelated to the size of a church, and its commitment to expand. Small churches are likely
to engage in the most minimal compliance, limiting themselves to being open to a
dialogue with the authorities, and keeping a low profile. They assume that by keeping
their congregation limited in numbers, they are unlikely to attract local government
attention. Only in circumstances where a small church aims to expand might the clergy
consider developing more proactive strategies for earning local officials’ approval. Larger
churches are likelier to catch government attention, and are also more inclined to invest a
considerable amount of resources into improving their relationship with relevant local
officials.

Additionally, the size and ambition of the church may influence how much interest
church leaders pay to studying and anticipating government behavior. The leadership of a
large congregation preoccupied by its survival, is likely to invest more time and effort into
showing its respect for and compliance with authorities in charge of local security than a
small church is. This is particularly true of church leaders who are aware of the regime’s
fear of an independent civil society and large-scale mobilization. Generally, higher levels
of compliance with local government authority are likelier to be manifested among the
leaders of underground churches whose stakes are more significant.

Beyond churches’ own experience with local authorities, underground church
networks and informal relations among state-sanctioned and underground pastors,
constitute two important channels through which the clergy may collect information about
the government. It is usually through them that church leaders are updated on cases of
government repression, the recent actions by pastors who are more political, or how the
congregations that are on good terms with the authorities manage to do so.\footnote{While it is true that the largest and most influential congregations are frequently the center of discussion among church networks, pastors may draw lessons learned from the experiences of churches of various sizes.}
2. The Rationality Behind Local Government Tolerance

Gestures of compliance by house church leaders, and their openness to negotiate the boundaries of their informal space with local authorities, have contributed to information asymmetries between central and local governments, and encouraged the latter to selectively monitor the underground Christian space. According to Waterman and Meier (1998), information asymmetry is the assumption that “agents [i.e. local governments] possess more information than their principals [i.e. central authorities].” (p. 183) While the principal preoccupied by the enforcement of religious regulations may view house churches exclusively from the perspective of their opposing cooptation (and the need to rectify that), local state agents are embedded in relationships of dialogue and mutual exchange with several members of the underground clergy, which prompt them to reconsider the implications of house churches’ lack of a legal status.

Local officials’ inclination to strategically bargain with church leaders is based on a perception of growing irrelevance of formal institutions (i.e. regulations on religious affairs), in their attempt to ensure political stability. As Helmke and Levistky (2004) emphasize, formal rules are often incomplete, or inadapted to changes in society:

While they set general parameters for behavior, […] they cannot cover all contingencies. Consequently, actors operating within a particular formal institutional context, such as bureaucracies and legislatures, develop norms and procedures that expedite their work or address problems not anticipated by formal rules. (p. 730)

From the perspective of public security officials, a strict enforcement of regulations on religious affairs upon house churches poses a policy implementation dilemma, for three reasons. First, insofar as local state agents must prioritize threats in their locality on the basis of their significance, in a context where the sources of societal instability are kinds. This is true insofar as networks embrace churches of different sizes, and whose experiences with local authorities also vary.
manifold, house churches may not be on the top of their list of ‘challenges to overcome.’

In an attempt to avoid criticisms from higher officials, national public security officers are primarily concerned about a potential misallocation of their coercive resources.

Second, formal rules as to the management of society are contradictory insofar as they do not all legitimize the use of coercion. While regulations on religious affairs seek to enforce cooptation (by force if necessary), the central government has pressed local governments to resort to repression with extreme caution. In such a context, coercion has become professionally risky. Officials who seek to maximize their chances of being promoted to a higher level position,\textsuperscript{73} increasingly avoid making the decision to repress by fear of being blamed of having mismanaged a problem, and facing sanctions.

Third, house churches in China are widespread. Their rise not only has occurred independently of past government attempts at enforcing regulations on religious affairs prohibiting uncoopted religion, but also, efforts to eliminate them all would involve a large amount of resources, with little guarantees that such an operation would bear fruits.

The above institutional constraints would normally serve as disincentives for an extensive use of coercion against house churches. However, in a context of uncertainty about the

\textsuperscript{73} Since the 1990s, to reduce risks that local agents not carry out Party interests, the central government reformed its Cadre Evaluation System [\textit{ganbu kaohe tixi}]. The latter is based on an ‘incentive mechanism that closely links payment and bonus to responsibilities, performance and contribution, and encourages innovation and creation.’\textsuperscript{73} To perform well, officials at the county, township and municipal government levels must obtain a high score in the cadre evaluation system. Accomplishments are based on their ability to secure political stability, prevent disruptive instances of collective protests, and ensure a limited number of petitions or letters of complaints by citizens, among other requirements. Public opinion polls, used to measure the level of popularity of leaders among the local population, are also important in the performance evaluation of officials (Guo, 2007). As Edin (2003) emphasizes, ‘evaluation scores may be downgraded if too many complaints are filed, or if complaints are not dealt with properly.’ (p. 43) Positive performance based on the above standards produce large payoffs, for officials. Conversely, leaders in localities where governments are unable to reach established targets in terms of economic development and political stability, are subject to significant income reductions. Whiting (2004) provides several such examples, including the case of a village in Shanghai’s suburbs, which between 1989 and 1991, had fallen from the third to the ninth position in terms of economic performance, and where the Party Secretary’s income had consequently decreased by several thousand yuan during that period (p. 111).
political intentions of the underground space, the risks of inaction are high. With limited information about house churches, local government lenience could encourage the unmonitored growth of a politically active faction among unregistered churches, which could eventually challenge the stability of the relevant locality. In circumstances of ‘free-riding’, public security officers could be accused of mismanagement, hindering central government targets, and consequently, face professional sanctions. Uncertainty may also favor coercion where the mere choice of rejecting cooptation by the underground clergy may be conflated with dissidence, in the absence of proper information about house church motives. Moreover, in conditions of limited information about house churches, there is always a risk that officials are unaware of the existence of organizations that are politically threatening to the regime. In this sense, repression may be used as a tool to gather information about groups about whom the local state is uncertain. Coercion under conditions of uncertainty, however, is costly, insofar as it may radicalize churches that initially were not politicized, and contribute to making the underground religious space more secretive (or less accessible to local state agents).

Graph 2: Local Government Risks Involved in Coercing or Tolerating House Churches Under Conditions of Political Uncertainty

Given the risks of both coercion and lenience in a context of limited information, public security officials may develop strategies to decrease the level of uncertainty about the
house church ‘challenge.’ On the other hand, the clergy who seeks to protect its unregistered congregation in an authoritarian setting, also needs to build itself a safe political environment. Church leaders’ dependency on local government officials for survival serves as an opportunity for state agents to better access the underground Christian space and decrease uncertainty. The conditions favoring both parties’ strategic interaction are summarized in the below graph:

Because both sides operate in a context where information about the other party is incomplete, they need informal rules to structure their interactions, and delineate the boundaries of their space for action. These rules are endogenous insofar as they emerge out of repeated interactions between local government officials and church leaders, and reflect their commitment to engage with one another. Once established, they provide both parties with socially transmitted information about their intentions and future actions.

Information provision is the main force that constrains local officials towards informally tolerating the underground Christian space. Inasmuch as cooperation is sustained, it provides public security officers with a context for a stable source of intelligence about the underground religious space. The more churches inform local officials of their potentially sensitive activities, and the more transparent their internal
organization and leadership are, the more irrelevant becomes cooptation, or government resort to harsh means of getting information out of such groups. Attempts at coopting house churches by force would involve risks of damaging the informal arrangements local governments have managed to secure with the clergy. The use of force would also compromise local officials’ access to intelligence about the underground space, which is key to ensuring the management of religious affairs.

While the utility of repression lies in its potential to create forceful conditions for opponents to release information that they would otherwise not provide the authorities with, its advantages for autocrats decrease significantly when opponents sacrifice information for the sake of surviving as autonomous entities in a politically constraining environment. Moreover, while compliance by the underground clergy increases officials’ chances of access to a certain, though undefined amount of information, repression does not necessarily result in effective intelligence-gathering. Insofar as it can lead to the shrinking or elimination of an illegal space, the use of force can also be accompanied by missed opportunities for intelligence gathering about that space.

Although information provision is the main force for compliance (or tolerance) in the informal arrangement, material, social and power-related incentives often develop to lend additional influence to already existing constraints on both parties’ behavior. Access to these benefits has also played a crucial role in the formation of government officials’ social expectations and beliefs about house churches, and changed perceptions of the risks involved in the existence of uncoopted religion. Informally tolerating underground churches has procured officials access to bribes and invitations to dinners, allowed them to earn credit for charity work that house churches have conducted on their behalf, and
helped them protect their relationships with the business sector, in areas where the underground clergy is composed of high profile business owners. These benefits are also indicative of house church leaders’ commitment not to break the informal arrangement. If they intended not to comply with informal institutions, they would not invest material resources into improving the quality of their dialogue with local authorities.

Finally, the informal arrangement between house churches and officials is beneficial because it gives the latter the opportunity to rely on a new set of alternative rules to govern compliant churches, without having to abandon already existing formal ones, as far as non-compliant churches are concerned. Heydemann (2007) emphasizes the leverage that exploit[ing] multiple sets of rules gives authoritarian regimes: “bounded adaptiveness […] is evident in the capacity of regimes to exploit and benefit from, rather than be fatally weakened by, the presence of multiple, often competing sets of ‘rules of the game.’” (p. 28)

Governance based upon both formal and informal institutions provides the authorities with greater room to maneuver. They have the discretion to judge which church can benefit from informal institutions, and which one must comply with formal rules. More specifically, this repertoire of rules allows the local authorities to tolerate underground churches while cracking down upon some of the most politically confrontational pastors and preachers, when necessary. Additionally, if compliant churches were to defect from their informal arrangement with local authorities, the latter could also return to a strict enforcement of religious policy. Such a policy reversal would remain legally uncontestable.
Hence, while the payoffs generated by both parties make cooperation, a mutually influencing and a self-enforcing process, and while strategic interaction can restructure incentives in a way that both parties have incentives to collaborate, the latter do not equally benefit from this informal arrangement. The next section explores how informal cooperation has contributed to authoritarian regime resilience, at the expense of formal institutional change.

3. **Informal Institutions and Authoritarian Resilience: The Limits of Principal-Agent Theory**

Moving away from principal-agent theory’s assumption that information asymmetry leads the agent to pursue its own interests at the cost of the principal’s, this analysis explores how local officials’ informal rules have helped them better monitor defiants of formal rules like the underground clergy, in a way that also serves authoritarian regime resilience.

In an autocratic regime that struggles to survive, the rules of the principal may ultimately be counter-productive in enabling agents to reach expected outcomes. This is the case insofar as the principal’s multiple guidelines may be contradictory. Moreover, formal institutions are often sticky, and transforming some might necessitate a change in the political system, which autocratic leaders are unwilling to make. Meanwhile, the nature of the societal challenges local state agents are expected to overcome keep evolving and getting more complex over time. Rather than attempting to enforce cooptation upon uncooptable segments of society in a context of growing popular demands and expectations, local state actors may develop alternative, softer rules to better
ensure compliance among these defiant groups. Creating opportunities for dialogue may ultimately result in information advantages that better serve local governance.

The accommodative informal rules and procedures they develop to do so, contribute to the resilience of the authoritarian regime, in three ways. First, they reduce incentives among defiants of formal rules to mobilize politically in favor of greater recognition. Informally accommodated defiants are unlikely to engage in political activities that seek to question the authority of the Communist Party, knowing that such an involvement would not only compromise their access to informal privileges, but also force local authorities to reduce their freedom. As Stern and Hassid (2012) suggest, “speculation surrounding a warning or punishment generates a set of imagined rules designed to prevent future clashes with the authority.” (p. 17) Unlike Thelen (2004)’s findings which suggest that “amendments […] can alter the overall trajectory of an institution’s development” (p. 35), informal lenience targeting underground churches has helped promote formal institutional status quo.\(^{74}\)

That the informal pact between compliant defiants and local state agents is self-enforcing does not mean that exogenous factors could not contribute to its breakdown. However, church leaders would abandon trading compliance with informal benefits, only if they were sure that they could obtain legal recognition as autonomous religious institutions. For one such condition to happen, church leaders would have to find themselves in a political conjuncture that makes the benefits of mobilizing for the legalization of house churches surpass the costs of breaking the informal pact with local state actors. O’Donnell

\(^{74}\) While Thelen (2004b) views ‘institutional survival [as] strongly laced with elements of institutional adaptation’ (p. 3), the latter in the author’s view consists of transforming formal institutions in a way that makes them more adapted to social, political and economic changes. In this sense, Thelen does not consider the possibility that formal institutional survival result from informal institutional adaptation.
and Schmitter (1986) as well as Tarrow (1994), argue that a favorable or an unfavorable political opportunity structure affects collective action insofar as it shapes societal actors’ expectations of success or failure. McAdam (1982) further emphasizes that as the structure of opportunity shifts to the benefit of challengers, the power gap between the latter and elites decreases, which in turn strengthens challengers’ leverage and chances of reaching their objectives through mobilization.

What the social movements literature has difficulty addressing, however, are the kinds of political opportunity structures that are likely to influence mobilization, the ones that are not, and the reasons why the same opportunity structures encourage some groups and discourage others to mobilize. As Gamson and Meyer (1996) emphasized, “the concept of political opportunity structure is […] in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment.” (p. 275) An institutionalist approach emphasizing the role of agency and actors’ interests may help shed light on the reasons why church leaders do not mobilize for greater political recognition. That the latter and local state actors are caught in an informal relationship of cooperation is likely to reduce the variety of political opportunities for which they are willing to compromise their informal status. Drawing upon information advantages about the failures of the Tian’anmen protests in 1989, house church leaders are risk-averse, and unlikely to see potential for change in opportunity structures that are characterized by a simple relaxation of policy or circumstances of pro-democracy mobilization. A political conjuncture in which the authoritarian regime could collapse, however, might encourage some to break their informal pact with local authorities.
Second, informal cooperation may accentuate the divisions among defiant groups, between the informally compliant ones and those who choose to maintain a firm position against the regime. That compliant defiants engage in a dialogue with authorities may shape non-compliant defiants’ opinions against and beliefs about the former. Those who are informally approved by local authorities may be labelled by the more politicized factions as ‘opportunistic.’ Disagreements over the proper ways of operating as ‘underground’ entities (i.e. with or without informal protection by the local government), can cause serious divisions amongst societal challengers. In this sense, informal rules of tolerance by officials may allow the authorities to better alienate regime opponents within the underground space, and limit the latter’s ability to influence other societal challengers against compliance.

Divisions amongst defiants enable the regime to control the creation of a mobilizing structure. For McCarthy and Zald (1973), such a structure provides an answer to Olson’s free rider problem. McCarthy and Zald believed that the most effective way to ensure a group’s potential for mobilization was through a professional movement organization able to gather and coordinate the necessary resources for that purpose. Divisions may also help prevent the emergence of common frames of regime contestation, or civil society autonomy. Beyond the importance of mobilizing structures for collective action in the context of favorable political opportunities, McAdam et al. (1997) emphasize the importance of common frames of contention (p. 157). The authors maintain that members of a group also “need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, by acting collectively, they can redress the problem.” (p. 157) Yet, grievances are unlikely to be a common point of reference for mobilization among
defiants, if local government officials build informal rules to mitigate the side effects of formal institutions.

Third, the ability to juggle with informal and formal rules increases the flexibility with which authorities govern their localities, and softens the coercive effects of authoritarian institutions upon society. Possibilities for discretionary power and latitude at the local level may result from political leaders’ decision to preserve formal institutions that are either filled with loopholes or unable to adapt to contextual changes. Power discretion, or the ability to selectively use informal rules as a substitute for formal ones, may help local governments in charge of implementing policy overcome the institutional impasse caused by the regime’s unwillingness to effect political reforms, in spite of growing societal pressures for change. Helmke and Levistky (2004) label these alternative procedures, “accommodating informal institutions.” They are created by the actors who “dislike outcomes generated by formal rules but are unable to change or openly violate [them].” (p. 729) Informal institutions increase power flexibility in the absence of formal institutional change, and give state actors the option to remain ambivalent on some policy matters, which they are unable to solve either temporarily or in the longer run. In other words, they help defer formal institutional change by limiting the costs of remaining ineffective policies upon society.

CONCLUSION

Cooperation between house church leaders and local government officials results from both parties’ needs to reduce the political uncertainty of the environment in which they

75 This challenges the broader applicability of Tsai (2008)’s argument, who contends that informal institutions contribute to regime resilience in that they have the potential to influence formal institutional reform.
operate. The informal arrangements secured between compliant churches and local authorities are self-enforcing for three reasons. First, both parties are better off under these informal rules than without them. On the one hand, underground church leaders seek to better guarantee their survival under authoritarian constraints and minimize risks of local government interference in their activities. On the other hand, to ensure that the management of house church affairs is the least costly possible for political stability, officials ought to know whose unregistered activities they can tolerate among the clergy, and whose they cannot. Second, informal behavior is rule bound. As Weingast (2002) put it, “each party agrees to change its behavior in exchange for the others’ simultaneously doing so.” (p. 682) Insofar as informal behavior is delimited by rules, violations must trigger external sanction. Third, unilateral defection would make the other party defect, and lead to a breakdown of the informal arrangement. While local government repression of compliant churches would likely lead the latter to become secretive in their activities, house churches’ political mobilization for greater formal rights would severely compromise its future access to informal autonomous space. Insofar as both parties’ mutual awareness of such a possibility has served as a deterrent for defection, it has also served authoritarian regime resilience. In shedding light on the above dynamics, an institutionalist approach that explores the rationality underlying actors’ choices proves to be a helpful tool for understanding how informal rules emerge and why they are maintained.

Yet, the comparative literature has criticized rational choice institutionalism for its limited usefulness in accounting for informal institutional politics in developing societies. Weyland (2002) stresses that in Latin American contexts where policies are often bent
and politics is more fluid, the overly formalistic theoretical approach is limited in its ability to explain policies and their effects (p. 66). That state actors have divergent preferences and motivations is a well known fact which has become common wisdom in political science (Levi, 2002). But unlike assumed in some rational choice institutionalist models (Weyland, 2002), political actors do not always negotiate their degree of compliance with formal rules out of an inclination to free-ride. Rather, they may do so because they believe that alternative informal rules are best suited to enforce the objectives underlying the central government’s formal rules. This may happen not only in settings where the principal builds an incentive system to ensure that local state actors are constrained to reach the former’s general targets, and where the agent’s performance is based on the success or failure of its decisions, but also where the strict implementation of formal rules is increasingly costly for that purpose, given the evolving nature of the challenges encountered in society, and the need to ensure authoritarian resilience.
CHAPTER 4:
THE SOURCES AND MANIFESTATIONS OF COMPLIANCE BY THE UNDERGROUND CLERGY

Authority lies not in an objectified body of laws or moral codes, but in subjective understandings of the meaning of leadership.
Lucian Pye, 1995

In a political setting that places considerable limits upon the autonomous practice of religion, a flourishing number of churches striving to be independent from the government have emerged. In spite of their clergy’s deliberate choice not to be registered with the government, and its embrace of the legal and political risks involved in making such a choice, house churches have nonetheless sought to reduce the level of uncertainty associated with their potential for survival and expansion, as religious institutions. They have tried to secure themselves access to a propitious environment in which they could better ensure the satisfaction of their congregants with church activities, and the safety of religious gatherings. Doing so required that they study closely the interests of their government, and develop strategies to earn their trust and respect. Based on empirical evidence, this chapter fleshes out the rationality underlying the underground clergy’s compliance with local government authority, and elaborates on the different ways in which compliance has taken shape.

1. THE MOTIVATIONS UNDERLYING UNDERGROUND CHURCHES’ COMPLIANCE

Underlying the existence of underground churches and their ability to expand are two preconditions: the satisfaction of members of the church with religious activities, which is intimately tied to the appeal and accessibility of the clergy, the quality of their sermons, and the ability of the church to offer congregants and their children theological training, like Sunday schools (Interview BL92478); and limited external or internal threats to the congregation’s security. The satisfaction of congregants is important for the church’s
survival, in two ways. First, it impacts the church’s financial resources and ability to keep its own employees and the religious organization functioning. A pastor in Zhejiang emphasized that members’ satisfaction with their church could be reflected in the size of donations they made to the congregation. Those donations not only helped remunerate church employees’ for their work, but it was also used to finance the weekly activities of congregants like Sunday lunches following the service, as well as larger events like Christmas and Easter celebrations (Interview BL92478).

Second, congregants’ sense of fulfillment in their own religious community affects the church’s ability to convert believers and attract new members, and hence, its own capacity to expand. The quality of preachers’ sermons, theological instruction during Sunday schools, and religious activities often constitutes an important topic of conversation amongst believers. These conversations sometimes even take place among extended circles of non-believers, including family members, friends and/or colleagues, with the purpose of “preaching the word of God” (chuan fuyin). As the employee of a large congregation in Beijing articulated:

> House churches need to be competitive in the sense that they have to preach the Gospel in effective and appealing ways for its believers to keep attending events. And like customers may help promote a company, house churches are known by others by word of mouth. (Interview BM72477)

Although not all pastors would agree with this analogy, some underground preachers have portrayed themselves as operating in a religious market where the political autonomy of congregations is a precondition for their ability to compete with other churches. A

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76 In contrast to this market-driven view of religion, some of the fundamentalist pastors in the underground community would argue that what is most important for a church is not so much its ability to compete with others for more believers, but its capacity to ensure a ‘high level quality of faith’ among its members, regardless of their number. Pastors who embrace this view have similarly claimed that there are advantages to coercion, arguing that it is in circumstances of state repression that the least committed believers leave
believer in a large congregation in Beijing once compared the differences between
underground and Three-Self [state-sanctioned] churches with the ones that characterize
privately-owned (POEs) from state-owned enterprises (SOEs):

House churches are like ‘spiritual companies,’ to the extent that they are not funded or controlled
by the state. If these churches are not good enough on the market, they will lose their customers. And just like POEs are more likely to be dynamic than
SOEs, churches need to be autonomous to preach the Gospel effectively to reap benefits and
face competition. (Interview BM72477)

Beyond its commitment to ensure the spiritual fulfillment of its believers, an underground
church leadership is preoccupied by its ability to secure a safe, autonomous environment
for religious practice among its members. Security is necessary to keep believers actively
involved in the religious community. It also gives a church greater room to maneuver as
far as Gospel-preaching is concerned. Unlike state-controlled pastors who are highly
limited in their ability to preach,77 most underground churches’ raison d’être is intimately
tied to the mission of converting more believers to Christianity. To be able to pursue this
objective, church leaders must find strategies to reduce risks of local government
interference in their activities, and decrease the unpredictability of the behavior of
officials in charge of public security.78 Many house churches believe that maintaining a
distant, yet respectful relationship with the local government, is the best way to pursue
their Gospel-preaching duties:

If the church lacks autonomy, and if it is subject to government coercion, it would not be able to
spread the word of God as effectively. A lot of underground church leaders in cities learned that
from experience, and know how to play the game with officials accordingly. (Interview BL92478)

the church, and the most committed ones stay. According to them, it is ironically in circumstances of
harshness that congregations are ‘purified’ (Interviews BL92478, ZA88474)
77 An official from the Three-Self church in Zhejiang once said, ‘the government respects religious practice,
but it does not promote it.’
78 See Appendix A for a detailed explanation of the different government departments involved in the
management of religious affairs.
Some pastors also view compliance as necessary to avoid putting their own congregants in a politically sensitive situation. A pastor in Zhejiang felt that the most important reason why he avoided being involved in politically sensitive activities or openly expressing his views about the regime was his duty to protect his congregants from any disturbance with the authorities. (Interview BL92478) Opportunities for dialogue or exchange (jiaowang de jihui) with the authorities may be created by officials themselves, in circumstances where they pay church leaders a visit. They may also be actively created by churches, if the clergy attempts to register the church property with a department other than the RAB.

In addition to church leaders’ sense of duty vis-à-vis their congregation’s safety, the underground clergy has invested considerable time in understanding the regime’s intentions. Underlying compliance is a political and legal awareness of the boundaries that the underground clergy can and cannot cross with local authorities. The pastor of a congregation of several hundreds of believers in Beijing emphasized the importance of being familiar with politics and the government.

We follow politics closely, government policies, and what each organization within the Party and the government apparatus in charge of religious affairs and other policy matters do. We pay particular attention to what their interests are, and the kinds of reforms they implement. (Interview BL18473)

A large group of urban pastors have learned from failed attempts by Chinese human rights movements or groups to pressure the state for change, in recent history. Several of them were even actively involved students in the Tian’anmen movement in 1989. They have carefully reflected upon the ways in which the Chinese government has responded to the Tian’anmen protests, the Falun Gong presence across China in 1999, and the multiple calls by the international community for the non-violation of fundamental human rights by the regime. Following 1989, in an attempt to rebuild the legitimacy of its rule among
many segments of the population, the Chinese government launched a propaganda campaign with strategies of various kinds, including the demonization of the United States and “selective anti-foreignism” in the media and educational curricula (Brady, 2008, p. 98). The objective of this campaign was to build support for autocratic rule by persuading the Chinese population that underlying international human rights discourses were actual attempts by the West, and the United States more particularly, at weakening China’s emerging power. Aware of the government’s propagandist efforts to frame human rights as ‘an imperialistic instrument by the West’, a preacher said:

If our church asks the government for human rights, it will not give them to us because it will assume that we are trying to cause trouble [meaning, defy its rule]. But if our church keeps asking for the right to worship God, it may be much easier to have our claims accommodated. (Interview BM72477)

The informant was suggesting that the narrower claim-making is, the less sensitive and politicized it becomes, and hence the less likely it might trigger a harsh response from the local government. Similarly, a pastor in Beijing observed that “if a church resorts to the help of lawyers to defend its own rights as a congregation, such a decision may not pose as much a problem to local authorities as if it were involved in rights defense (weiquan) to help protect other churches politically.” (Interview BL19473)

In addition to the above observations, members of the underground clergy have carefully reflected upon local government responses to house churches in China’s recent history, in different parts of the country. Access to information about crackdowns and other churches’ success stories has been facilitated by the existence and expansion of cross-provincial and cross-regional Christian fellowships, and efforts by underground pastors to build closer ties with other church leaders in various Chinese cities. In the past decade, pastors in Wenzhou for instance have built close relationships with some of their
fellow colleagues in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Suzhou, Hebei and Henan, some of whom are actively involved intellectuals. Other church leaders have taken the initiative to understand government motivations and priorities on their own. Exchanges of opinions and information in these networks helped pastors determine what to bargain for with local government officials, and how to do so in a way that does not compromise their security. A careful reflection upon government behavior and responses in particular religious circumstances has helped church leaders who defy existing central regulations on religious affairs, adopt a compliant attitude vis-à-vis the officials at the local level in charge of managing or monitoring churches.

2. Manifestations of Compliance

Compliance has been manifested in underground church leaders’ actions vis-à-vis political authority. Compliants view good relations with local state authority as necessary for the well functioning of their church, and are aware that the quality of guanxi79 comes in exchange for some level of cooperation. This acquiescence among underground preachers has been manifested in distinctive ways across churches situated in a grey area of society. It has involved openness to dialogue, and proactive information sharing, churches’ choice to remain low profile in public and in society, as well as gift-giving and gift-receiving.

a. Informal Government Monitoring and Church Openness to Dialogue

In several localities, church leaders have managed to build relationships of respect with local officials in charge of public security by inviting them to dinner or other events like

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79 Guanxi as a noun means ‘relation’ or ‘relationship,’ and is often used to describe connections, interpersonal relations or ‘particularistic ties’ (Jacobs, 1979; Gold et al., 2002).
banquets. These invitations have not exclusively come from the clergy, but often were initiated by officials in charge of security themselves. Many house church leaders confessed having been invited to discuss with officials from the Public Security Bureau or the Ministry of State Security once or a few times each year. By knowing which department in charge of security makes the invitation, experienced pastors may already anticipate the topics officials will want to discuss. A member of the underground clergy who frequently experienced detentions explained that:

If State Security department officials knock on your door to interrogate you, it is because they suspect you to have relations with foreign governments or foreign Christian groups. If they invite you to dinner, they expect that you tell them more about your foreign connections or someone else’s. These officials do not care about the content of your beliefs, all they care about is who you know and whom you organize religious activities with. If officers from the local police station wish to chat with a preacher, it usually is related to everyday neighborhood security or church visibility in that neighborhood. Local police officers also tend to pay closer attention to churches if neighbors file a complaint against them. (Interview BL21473)

An invitation to dinner or a banquet is more than a gesture meant to flatter the other party. It also constitutes an opportunity for discussing problems, addressing misunderstandings, and sharing information. For the authorities, the purpose of these dinner invitations is to chat with the underground clergy, clarify misinformation, and ‘catch up’ on some of the church’s recent activities. It also constitutes a good occasion for officials to better understand the thought processes of underground church leaders, their opinions about the regime, and their church management style. Conversely, for the underground church leadership, taking these opportunities for conversations constitutes a gesture on their part meant to make officials feel at ease with respect to their church’s existence in their locality. Preachers who accept invitations to dinner by officials believe that an open dialogue with the authorities in charge of public security is the best way to ensure that there are no misunderstandings about church intentions (Interview ZA88474). Yet, church
leaders’ agreement to answer officials’ questions does not necessarily imply full compliance. Some pastors stressed that they were at times confronted with questions which they refused to answer. These often required releasing personal information about other members of the house church community. In such circumstances, they pretended not to know the answers to the questions (Interview ZA88474).

Nevertheless, the belief in the benefit of dialogue is based upon a prior acknowledgement of the legitimacy of local state authority, and the assumption that house churches may survive more easily if local government officials facilitate that process. Like Gold et al. (2002), Yan (1996) and Pye (1992) suggest, the strategic and effective use of interpersonal relationships can give relevant parties face, that is to say power, legitimacy and prestige. The creation of informal opportunities for power and recognition may however complexify social relationships, and influence officials’ perceptions of duties. As Kipnis (1997) suggests, banqueting can be used to create relationships in ways that social or informal obligations take precedence over formal policies or the official position of the government. In a locality in Hebei where a government official claimed that underground churches and the authorities “treated each other very well,” a leader of the official church added that:

Members of the Official Church make jokes and sometimes complain about the fact that the local government’s relations with underground Christians is better than theirs! (Interview MS95477)

When asked how underground churches managed to be on such good terms with public security officials, he laughed and said: “bai jiu (rice wine)!" This reality was later confirmed by members of the underground clergy themselves.

Officials also gather information about underground churches in circumstances other than dinner invitations. Officers from the local PSB occasionally attend some churches’
Sunday services, and monitor the content of pastors’ sermons. The many preachers I interviewed did not seem bothered by their presence, or that of other potential government spies. The pastor of a congregation of over 700 believers in Beijing joked about the benefits of police officers’ attendance of church services, suggesting that it constituted an opportunity for them to “share the word of God” with the authorities:

When the police comes to monitor us, they usually attend our services and listen to us speak. It can only be good for them. (Interview BL18473)

This kind of flexibility on the part of churches helps reduce the level of uncertainty of the political environment in which underground churches operate. Some pastors in Beijing observed that the more they agreed to cooperate with public security officers when they paid them visits from time to time, the more they tolerated their attending church services, and the more they answered their questions, the less likely they would risk receiving further unpleasantly unexpected visits from them.

Similarly, several church leaders have stressed the benefits of being gongkai, or open. In some circumstances, the clergy could even trade information transparency for greater informal privileges. The pastor of a congregation of several hundreds of believers in Beijing claims that when the government asked him to make his church gongkai in 2007, he initially had some reservations. He told the relevant authorities he would agree to cooperate upon the condition that he rents a large commercial space for his church, and runs a Christian bookstore open to the public in that space. The government agreed, and his church has been occupying that new space since then. The pastor added that neither the PSB nor other potential departments interfered in any of his activities since 2007. In

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80 The term ‘gongkai’ means open to the public, but in this specific context, it refers to transparency vis-à-vis the authorities.

81 The bookstore does not exclusively sell government-approved publications.
this specific case, the informant’s commitment to making his church transparent to the Beijing municipal authorities was not an act of submission to political authority *per se*, and did not translate into the church’s cooptation and integration into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, but simply constituted a compromise for more informal autonomy.

This kind of mutual arrangement may guarantee unregistered churches a certain level of stability which they may not have otherwise. This is particularly relevant in light of the fact that their venue is not officially recognized as a proper location for religious practice. Underground churches continuously risk being forced out of the space they rent. Depending on how repressive the political context is in a particular locality, it is not unusual for the most vocal or visible house churches to move locations several times in a relatively short period of time. For instance, Shouwang Church had to change locations three times between October 2009 and February 2010. Another informant who belongs to a church in Beijing known for being politically vocal and for having members who have publicly challenged the regime, claimed that his congregation changed worshipping locations four times between 2004 and 2009. In this case, the local government had pressured the landlord to end their lease (Interview BM95478). Conversely, some of the congregants who managed to secure a worshipping location for several consecutive years without facing government pressure to move out of their space claim that good relationships between them, the landlord and key government officials facilitated church stability. In Shanghai, a believer explained that his church rented a space in the building of a relatively well known hotel company, which had been managed by relatives of the pastor. The church had benefited from that space without ever being bothered by the
authors because the hotel managers were close to some influential district government officials (Interview BM77477).

b. Proactive Sharing of Sensitive Information

Opportunities for information-sharing are not always initiated by the authorities themselves. In order to prevent getting a phone call from them, some pastors take the initiative to report to the relevant authorities, the activities which they know would attract the government’s attention. These would include going overseas on theological training, or organizing annual religious retreats amongst church leaders. According to an informant, taking the initiative to inform the relevant department of their plans before they find out on their own, can only suggest good intentions from the church. In some cases, pastors are even willing to turn down opportunities for theological exchanges with religious figures considered politically sensitive by the Chinese government, or restrain contact with the international community. Earlier in 2010, one of the twenty house church pastors who went to the United States on theological training said that during his trip, he declined invitations to meet with ‘sensitive’ people in the area of religious rights in order not to ‘annoy’ the Chinese authorities. Upon his return, the authorities asked him if he had met politically influential individuals. The informant confirmed that he had not (Interview ZA88474).

Some underground pastors might even share personal information about their own congregants with local authorities. After having been granted the privilege to rent a large space in a commercial building for his church services and headquarters, a pastor in Beijing offered to share with the PSB, the names of members of his congregation, upon their consent (Interview BL19473). More than one third of the congregation of three
hundred believers agreed to share their names with the PSB. According to the informant, none of these members had been bothered or contacted by municipal authorities. In the informant’s opinion, his willingness to share information with the government to the extent that it was possible was a sign of his good intentions vis-à-vis the regime.

In some circumstances, house church leaders were called upon by the government for help in identifying some of its domestic ‘religious enemies’, namely Christian sects. Among the many departments in charge of security, the Domestic Security Detachment (also called the ‘guobao’), a special division inside the PSB, is in charge of monitoring the content of religious beliefs, suspicious cults as well as heresies (Interview BL21473). In Beijing, an informant, in exchange for peace with the authorities, agreed to give guobao officials tips on how to differentiate heretical and superstitious groups, from the average evangelical Christian congregation. The pastors and evangelical scholars who were more eager to help, gathered materials detailing each Christian sects’ characteristics and developing strategies on how to identify them. While these manuals primarily served the purpose of protecting relevant congregations from the potential infiltration of heresies,82 some pastors openly shared the information with the authorities, expressing support for the government’s struggle against Christian cults. In a similar vein, the leader of a Christian fellowship in Shanghai maintained that “the government should encourage underground churches to serve as resources for the regime.” (Interview ZA89474) In other cases, however, information about Christian cults did not proactively originate from church leaders per se. The pastor of a large house church in Beijing claimed to have

82 The line between a house church and a Christian sect may be thin at times, especially in rural areas. Reasons for that included church leaders’ lack of Protestant theological training and the resurgence of local folk culture, which influence religious practice (Lambert, 2006).
received several phone calls from officials from the Domestic Security Detachment since 2002, asking him whether certain churches were Christian sects. (Interview BL19473)

Among the heretical groups the Chinese government has been fighting is the Eastern Lightning, one of the top religious sects on the government’s blacklist. Unlike the Three-Self Church, underground Protestant churches in rural areas are the primary targets of Christian cults. In Henan, the birthplace of the Eastern Lighting and also a well known province for its numerous religious cults, an underground preacher explained that Christian sects look for additional sheep among house church members, in part for safety-related reasons. The risks of being reported by underground believers are lower than those of being reported by the official church (Interview BL69477). In extreme cases, the Eastern Lighting has even kidnapped house church leaders. In June 2003, for instance, thirty-three of the top pastors of the China Gospel Fellowship were reported kidnapped by believers of the cult (Hattaway, 2003).

Many underground believers have expressed their fierce opposition to Christian sects. For instance, in Shanghai, one such Christian claimed that if a law on religious rights existed in China, “it should not legalize religious cults.” (Interview BM77477) Although many house churches confronted with heretical challenges choose not to report relevant groups or individuals to the police, and deal with the cases independently, there were nonetheless circumstances in which some pastors have asked for government help:

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83 Eastern Lightning (dongfang shandian) is a Christian cult which was created by Zhao Weishan in Henan, and according to which God has returned in the form of a Chinese female peasant. Zhao believes that God has given him the mission to overthrow the CCP, for the purpose of establishing the kingdom of God on earth (Kindopp, 2004, p. 140). The Eastern Lightning proselytizes mostly among Christian communities, and its main targets are non-state controlled churches (Interview BL69477). Chinese government reports state that the cult has now spread to twenty-two provinces, and has been able to convert over three hundred thousand individuals (Kindopp, 2004, p. 141).
If religious cult preachers persist in wanting to preach their message, and if house church members at last have no other solution, they may report them to the police and have them inspected. (Interview BL69477)

The above situation unfolded in the informant’s village near Lianyungang in the province of Jiangsu, in 2008, where Eastern Lighting preachers had persistently proselytized, targeting unregistered Protestants who did not have a deep knowledge of the content of the Bible, and who were thus unable to make the distinction between the Protestant religion and the words of cult preachers (Interview BL69477).

Overall, house church members’ personal testimonies on the Eastern Lighting’s attempts to proselytize have helped guobao officials understand more accurately some of the subtle strategies members of that sect have employed to attract new believers (i.e. showing gestures of extreme generosity and friendliness, helping targeted Christians with their house work and farming harvest, gradual attempts at correcting these Christians’ beliefs, etc.) (Interviews BL69477, ZA88474 and BL19473)

c. Gift-giving and Gift-receiving

Gift-giving and gift-receiving have been crucial means by which underground preachers have succeeded in securing their congregation’s informal autonomy from local authority. These acts, which are attempts to express one side’s expectations vis-à-vis the other, have structured and defined the nature of informal arrangements between relevant church leaders and officials. On the one hand, giving officials gifts have constituted attempts to (re)negotiate the boundaries of their informal space. In Hebei, the leader of a church claimed that little red envelopes (hongbao) on special occasions like Christmas and

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84 Red envelopes are offered as gifts during social and family events like weddings, funerals, and New Year’s. They symbolize good luck, and the amount of money that they contain is usually a reflection of how important the person who receives the gift is in one’s life.
Chinese New Year were gestures of respect towards political authority by underground churches, and were often welcome by local PSB officials. A rather progressive leader of the official church claimed that economic means can help change political ways of doing things as far as non-state controlled churches are concerned: “If a house church worship space lease is three-years-long, with money and gifts to the relevant local officials, it can become six-years-long.” (Interview ZA94475) In a similar vein, a high profile entrepreneur in Wenzhou who is also the leader of a large unregistered congregation stressed the benefits of treating officials: “We Christians make a lot of money, this is why we are well accepted.” (Informant MS96478)

Conversely, by accepting gifts from officials, the underground clergy commits to conforming with the rules attached to the gesture. The leader of a large congregation in Beijing explained that, occasionally, the State Security Department would offer him and other house church leaders, gifts. He emphasized that these gifts were given during strategic political periods or prior to international events, when the government needed to ensure that societal segments like underground churches remain low profile. The informant confessed having received gifts from the State Security Department, which is in charge of monitoring Chinese society’s potential relations with foreign governments and organizations, prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.85 (Interview BL19473)

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85 Some members of the underground clergy, nonetheless, remain opposed to the idea of receiving gifts from authorities in exchange for information. A pastor in Zhejiang, known for having connections among politically active intellectuals, once received a gift from a university professor, who was hoping to get information about his church. At that time, the informant was not aware that the professor was also an official from the Domestic Security Detachment. When he found out about the man’s genuine identity and the reason for his interest in his church, he refused to share any additional information with him.
d. Keeping a Low Profile: Church Size and Rhetoric

Underground churches whose leaders are compliant with political authority at the local level have maintained a low profile politically. Over the years, several of their leaders have studied closely the behavior of the various state departments involved in solving house church-related problems. This close analysis has enabled them to identify the kinds of actions in society which the authorities tend to fear the most, and has allowed them to be better equipped to avoid repression. They have noticed for instance that the churches that are more easily subject to crackdowns are those whose leaders are openly critical of the government, or the ones that are both openly challenging and of large size, or part of a broader network of churches or believers. Out of the 264 church leaders reported to have been subject to government repression in 2009, at least 117 of them had been under government radar for having publicly challenged the regime. Similarly, in 2008, out of 319 church leaders reported to have been harassed, arrested or detained, at least 126 of them had expressed negative views about the regime or openly defied government control.

A significant number of government crackdowns also targeted the leaders of large congregations, the heads of cross-regional Christian fellowship organizations, or the organizers of collective events involving many participants, like Christmas parties, Bible classes, Christian summer camps, and so on. In 2009, out of 77 reported crackdowns, at least 31 of them targeted large churches or large-scale Christian events (40%). In 2008, out of 74 reported instances of repression, at least 30 cases were associated with large groups or events (40.5%). In 2007, that number reached 19 (32%), for only 60 reported
crackdowns. Finally, in 2006, at least 29 crackdowns (63%) out of 46 reported cases were associated with large congregations or collective events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Reported Crackdowns</th>
<th>Large-Scale Collective Events</th>
<th>Percentage of Crackdowns on Collective Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Crackdowns targeting collective events, 2006-2009 (Source: China Aid annual reports)

In light of these numbers, and to avoid a similar fate, several church leaders have adopted either one or the two following strategies: first, a large number of pastors have strategically [or not] embraced a rhetoric about the regime that is apolitical. Second, many churches have chosen to remain small size, and/or avoid drawing public attention to their religious activities.

1. Church Leaders’ Rhetoric about the Regime

Compliance is manifested in the boundaries many underground church leaders set themselves vis-à-vis political authority, and that is visible in how they speak about the regime as well as the role they give (or choose not to give) their churches in society. Embracing a lawful rhetoric about the regime and political authority is part of a broader bargaining logic for church leaders who believe that if public security officials know them better and understand their intentions, they may feel less nervous about the existence of their church. In a setting where underground churches remain under the close scrutiny of local officials, the rhetoric church leaders chose to embrace means more than simple words of respect or praise toward the regime. It is not only manifested in church leaders’ interactions with authorities during occasional visits, but also affects the content of their sermons, whether or how the ideas and messages they communicate to believers are
politically tainted, and it impacts what the clergy may not speak of or do in the public sphere.

That church leaders embrace a lawful rhetoric about the regime also means drawing a line between their church from other societal groups that embrace a different perspective. Distinguishing themselves from earlier human rights movements that struggled for religious freedom, including the Falun Gong, some churches are careful in emphasizing that they have no political motivations, but wish to rely upon the help of the Chinese government to “better access God”. An informant stressed:

What we want is just to worship God. We are no political organization, we have no political motivations. We are different from earlier human rights movements that stressed religious freedom. Our issue is not between the church and the government, but it is between the church and God. We are asking the government to help facilitate churches’ access to God. (Interview BM72477)

In saying the above, the informant was making the statement that religious autonomy does not entail a rejection of the legitimacy of state authority or the regime per se. Rather, he viewed the government as having an important role to play in guaranteeing and protecting churches’ autonomy.

Similarly, compliant church leaders have drawn upon religious rhetoric, including the notion of human beings as ‘sinners’, to justify their contained behavior toward political authority. An informant in Beijing stressed that his church leadership refrained from being judgemental of the government. To him, that strategy was a precondition for his church’s ability to hold a peaceful and respectful dialogue with the municipal authorities. (Interview BM72477) Similarly, in the context of a conversation about church-state relations, an underground pastor stressed that human beings’ worst enemy was not an unjust government, but human beings’ own sins. Whether this rhetoric is representative or not of church leaders’ personal opinions about the regime may vary from
one individual to another. An informant in Henan suggested that embracing such a rhetoric was a strategy to avoid trouble with the authorities: “If you do not put on a show, the government may mislabel you.” (Interview MS90474)

If monitored, the pastors who make certain references to politics in their sermons might be reminded of the risks they take. An underground preacher was once invited to preach in a large church in Zhejiang for Christmas, in 1997. During his sermon, he questioned the use of a government slogan celebrating the retrocession of Hong Kong to Mainland China, which in his opinion appeared as exaggerated. While the slogan said “The whole world [or nation] celebrates Hong Kong’s return” (“xianggang huigui, putian tongqing”), the preacher maintained that only Jesus’ return to earth deserved to be celebrated by all.

The following day, a pastor from the host church paid him a visit and told him:

You know, you almost got us in trouble for your sermon last night. An officer from the local police station was attending the service, and he heard you speak about Hong Kong’s retrocession in those terms. He wanted to give you trouble. But he looked into your file and saw that you had no criminal record. So, he decided to forgive you. Next time you preach, make sure to stick to the content of the Bible and not talk politics. (Interview BL92478)

Regardless of how much church leaders believe in the rhetoric they embrace, whether they speak about the regime during their sermons, and how they do so, influences how politically sensitive local authorities judge the existence of their church. Because preachers have a considerable potential to influence the members of their religious community, those who are critical of the government are viewed as a potential threat to the regime. The government’s concern that house churches could peacefully overthrow the Party’s rule was particularly manifested in a meeting they had with experts on religion, in early 2010, during which high officials from the United Front Department asked as a first question, whether these churches were ‘anti-CCP’. (Interview ZA88474)
2. Self-Imposed Limits on Church Visibility

Beyond their choice to embrace an apolitical rhetoric about the regime, several church leaders have chosen to minimize their visibility in society as much as possible. They have for instance maintained a low profile by keeping their church gatherings small, especially in areas where crackdowns have mostly targeted large congregations (composed of either hundreds or thousands of members), or where the TSPM is influential. In Shanghai, for instance, where the headquarters of the TSPM are located, and where the latter has a strong influence, large underground congregations are unusual, and churches avoid organizing large-scale events which may catch public attention and which the government may not approve.

Among the exceptions is Wanbang Church, a congregation of over 1,200 believers, and one of China’s most influential urban house churches. In 2009, its leader was about to open the Fourth Annual Seminar of Chinese Urban House Church Pastors Fellowship in Shanghai, when officials from SARA requested that he cancel the event. The request was made the day prior to its launch, and the pastor refused to cancel it, claiming that participants had already arrived in Shanghai for the event. Officials threatened to use coercive measures if the seminar was not stopped. The conference nonetheless took place, but was moved to a different location. Following the event, the pastor of Wanbang Church found out that his landlord has been pressured by the Shanghai government to end the congregation’s lease (Interview ZA88474). Having observed that some recent cases of church crackdowns in the city had targeted higher profile and publicly visible congregations, most church leaders are even more so committed to avoiding getting the attention of the municipality government. Many members of the
house church community in and outside of Shanghai who followed the Wanbang Church incident, suggested that the government’s reaction was facilitated by the church’s aspirations to be more influential in society. And while the fact that Wanbang Church was a large congregation involved in organizing a high profile event amongst Chinese church leaders automatically placed it under government radar, the pastor’s refusal to comply with government orders to cancel the event served as a trigger for the government’s use of coercive measures against the church. Had the pastor cancelled the event, it would have been harder for the Shanghai government to forcefully evict the church from its rented property without justification.

Figure 4: House Church Located in a Residential Building and Hosting Approximately thirty believers.

Most Shanghainese house churches follow a ‘small group’ model and have no more than fifty members in each worship points. While renting or purchasing a property is increasingly unaffordable for many in the metropolis, what drives house churches to be
numerically less ambitious are perceptions of operating in a politically conservative environment, where the size of unregistered congregations may be taken seriously by the authorities, perhaps even more so than in other ‘more progressive’ areas of the country. A pastor in Shanghai stressed:

For the government, if you are the leader of a church that has 1,000 members or are part of a broader network of churches gathering tens of thousands of Christians, the police may follow all of your activities closely, and may also want to have dinner or tea with you to talk. Shanghai house churches organize themselves in small groups that do not surpass 40 to 50 members per meeting point. It is very helpful to avoid getting in trouble with the police. (Interview ZA89474)

Similarly, in Nanjing, the pastor of a large congregation claimed to have divided his church into more than ten meeting points, in which no more than 50 or 60 believers gathered for sermons. Nanjing being the headquarters of China’s most prestigious Protestant seminary, the informant, who was a former member of the lianghui, maintained that the small size of most underground church meeting points in the city was not unrelated to the strong influence of the Three-Self Protestant Church there. (Interview BO41475)

For some pastors, minimizing church visibility not only lies in the need to control the size of the church and its activities, but also in the necessity to limit its public attention, the breadth of the church’s mission in society, or the size of the audience it seeks to target. A preacher who gives weekly underground Bible classes in an apartment located in a residential neighborhood in Shanghai explained that prior to the launch of the 2010 Shanghai Expo, members of neighborhood committees (juweihui chengyuan) had been asked to be on their guards regarding potential public or private collective gatherings in their community (shequ). One time, as the informant was lecturing, someone knocked on

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86 Wenzhou is one such city.
the door, asking him to open. Neighborhood committee members walked in. They had noticed that several people had entered the same apartment unit within a short period of time, and asked what was happening in there. The informant replied that he was teaching students how to maintain a healthy diet. Inside the classroom, plastic fruits had been displayed on some shelves and tables from the first session of Bible classes onward, in anticipation that the apartment might be monitored by the neighborhood, and in order to give potential visitors the impression that it really was a nutrition class (Interview ZA88474). In hiding the real purpose of the gathering, the pastor was protecting his class from being reported back to the authorities by neighbors. Although he was breaking some rules, by avoiding making his affairs public, he nonetheless did the neighborhood police a favor. As some officials stressed, if undeclared religious activities are not reported back by neighbors (bei linju jubao), they usually do not intervene. However, when someone makes an official complaint about citizens “disrupting public order” (raoluan gonggong zhixu), the PSB would lose credit and risk facing serious consequences by their immediate superior if they ignored it. While neighborhood committees have been crucial channels through which the PSB has identified threats to social stablibility and criminal activities, the former have also reported activities like unregistered religious gatherings, which are often perceived as harmless by the police (Interview ZA88474).

Beyond close monitoring by neighborhood committee members, prior to significant international and political events, it is not unusual for underground church leaders to receive a visit from guobao officials. Several such pastors located in various parts of the country were asked whether they planned to take their families to the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, a month prior to its launch, and were kindly instructed not to
create opportunities to attract media attention. A local scholar estimated the number of such visits by guobao officials as high as a few thousand. As a result of such pressure, many underground pastors chose not to take their children to the World Expo, by fear of attracting unnecessary attention. (Interview BL92478)

Pastors’ commitment to minimizing public attention does not necessarily conflict with their mission to preach the Gospel and attract new members. A church may indeed pursue the latter and integrate new believers to its community while choosing to restrain its own presence or visibility in society. While the former implies mobilizing efforts for the expansion of the congregation in the private sphere, the latter entails church involvement in the public realm. Because the Chinese regime is concerned by the need to weaken any potential force in society that could challenge its establishment, and for that reason, has not legalized independent societal groups, local officials are compelled to pay close attention to the churches in the underground community that have the potential to influence not only their members, but also citizens at large. The leader of an influential congregation in Beijing, which has become a symbol of activism among underground Protestants in China, explained that his church was facing problems with the municipal authorities due to the scope and ambition of his congregation’s mission:

We want our church to have more influence on society. We want everybody to know our church, by using means of communication like our website and our magazine to diffuse our messages. We did not choose to do this ourselves, it is a mission that God has given us. But the fact that our church is moving to the public realm conflicts with the local government and the regime’s interests. It has thus become a state-society issue. (Interview BL17473)

Underlying Shouwang Church’s attempt to have its voice heard in Chinese society is its willingness to bring attention to the legal impasse house churches are facing in today’s China. The church’s higher profile has not only been manifested in the mission of
promoting religious freedom it has given itself, but also in the tactics it has used to do so. For instance, it has made public the content of its negotiations with the Beijing Municipality government regarding its demand for a legal status as an independent congregation. Detailed reports on the matter were published on the church’s website, as well as in its monthly magazine. The congregation has also accepted to speak with the foreign and Hong Kong media, and has used other Internet devices like Facebook to communicate with the rest of the world. Shouwang Church’s mission was interpreted by officials from Beijing’s PSB, as an attempt to diffuse a message in favor of political change among other Christians and Chinese citizens at large. They claimed that “everybody is aware of the new, prominent space this particular church wants to have in Chinese society. Its leaders want to be influential so that other churches imitate and follow their path.” (Interview BL50476)

Taking up the mission of promoting house church legalization has come with sanctions from the government, for the few churches like Shouwang that have done so. In 2009, the church was constrained to leave the commercial space it had been renting for some years. The church’s organization of a Sunday service in Haidian Park two weeks in a row also hindered its chance of accessing a space it subsequently purchased.
The Beijing municipal authorities have put high pressure upon the real estate company involved in the purchase transaction not to hand Shouwang Church leaders the keys to the space. As a result, the church was forced to rent a room in another building in Beijing for over a year, until early 2011, when the authorities once again pressured the landlord to end the lease. A government official who is well aware of Shouwang church’s situation, summarized the stakes involved for the government, if it allowed the church to access the property it had bought:

By refusing Shouwang’s access to the property it bought, the Chinese government’s loss can be calculated. But if it gives Shouwang the keys to the space, it will not longer be able to calculate and control its loss. (Interview BL50476)

The above statement not only brings attention to the risks in formally acknowledging or tolerating a church whose status is legally ambiguous, but it also emphasizes the government’s fears of allowing a congregation which it sees as holding the potential to be high profile and visible in society, to thrive. Not only would such a decision conflict with current regulations on religious affairs which prohibit unregistered churches from being able to operate as religious institutions, and thus be interpreted as a sign of inconsistency and incoherence in government policy, but it could also have spill-over effects on other
house churches who would take that opportunity to publicly pressure local governments for official recognition.

While Shouwang Church was unable to access its purchased property, many other large house churches in Beijing and across the country were able to buy their own worship space with the informal consent of local authorities. Had Shouwang not become a higher profile congregation these past years, the Beijing municipality government may not have imposed tighter limits upon its permissible space for religious activity. As an expert on house churches observed, “Shouwang has existed for over ten years and had not been constrained by the Beijing municipal authorities the way it has been since 2009-2010.” (Interview ZA85474) Insofar as informal arrangements between house churches and local authorities are rule bound, local governments may use sanctions as a way to ensure that the clergy does not modify the rules of the game.

3. Who in the Underground Clergy Is Compliant?

Particular kinds of church leaders are likely to comply with local government authority. These leaders are part of the young generation of pastors and preachers who today are in their thirties and fourties. Unlike the older generation of underground leaders who experienced detentions and were sent to labor camps for refusing to abandon their faith for a ‘communist ideal’ before and during the Cultural Revolution, younger pastors who were too young to feel the effects of the Maoist years upon religion, were raised in a China that was reforming and opening up. They began to occupy their pastoral functions in a political setting, which in spite of remaining instances of repression, was less coercive of religious practice, than it had been under Mao. This generational gap shaped their opinions of and interactions with political authority, and was also the source of inter-
generational conflicts within the clergy. While all generations agreed upon the principle of separation between church and state, the older generation of pastors opposed any church involvement in politics or relationship with political authority. That principle applied in practice literally meant a rejection of government registration and of any contact with the authorities. A pastor in Zhejiang stressed that:

Persecution for faith-related reasons during the Cultural Revolution have left relevant pastors fearful of the state. This fear has been translated in their attempts to avoid any interaction with political authority. (Informant BL92478)

Being underground for these church leaders transcends the simple desire to be religiously autonomous. Indeed, for this category of pastors, underlying the underground status, is a need to avoid the state. Most of these churches are what Yang (2006) calls ‘black congregations,’ which conduct their activities in secrecy (p. 97). Their church leaders are less inclined to censor themselves when they speak about political authority, and often their narratives about church-state relations are charged with references about the darkest periods of China’s history of church-state relations since 1949. In Zhejiang, a middle school teacher who in his spare time preached for a black church, and who had spent two years in jail for his faith during the Cultural Revolution, stressed that his church “did not want to have anything to do with the authorities.” (Interview BL82478) The informant had an unfavorable opinion of the government, which also influenced the subjects he raised in a discussion about church-state and state-society relations. By referring to the repression of Christians during and following the Cultural Revolution, and by emphasizing the irrationality of Party leaders’ decision to crackdown upon the Tian’anmen movement in June 1989, the preacher stressed that “sinners are not Christians, but Party leaders.” (Interview BL82478) The opinions of younger pastors about the government are often less historically charged and expressed with greater
caution. One of the leaders of a large congregation in Beijing spoke about Chinese leaders, in the following terms:

Following the Cultural Revolution, government leaders had already done a lot of soul-searching within themselves. The Cultural Revolution had dramatic consequences not only for society but for their family members, and they did not wish to reproduce history. (Interview BM72477)

Aside from their caution when they speak about the government, more members of the younger generation of pastors are open to dialogue or informal cooperation with the Three-Self church, than members of the older generation. While the latter tend to view all Three-Self pastors as agents of the regime, younger pastors are likelier to see the state-controlled clergy as diverse, and characterized by divergent opinions about the legitimacy of religious cooptation. In fact, many such young underground pastors were initially trained in Three-Self-controlled seminars, and attended the same theological programs as other TSPM pastors of their generation. Throughout my field research, some of my underground informants introduced me to several of their friends from the official church. One of them had attended the theological seminary with him, and since their graduation, the two had kept in touch (Interview BL92478). Occasionally, they worked jointly to organize religious events like workshops or theological retreats. The Three-Self pastor claims to have collaborated with other underground churches neighboring his congregation. He was invited to preach the Gospel during their Sunday service on several occasions (Interview BO79478).

Where the official and underground churches have informally cooperated, the local governments’ position towards unregistered churches seems to have also been more ambiguous. Localities characterized by such dynamics are also those where the TSPM is relatively weak. In Wenzhou, for instance, where the state-controlled church has little influence upon religious life, and where the line between the latter and underground
churches has become significantly blurred, very few underground church leaders have been bothered by the RAB or the PSB. Furthermore, where the TSPM depends upon the help of house churches to ensure the proper conduct of its own activities, it has often been more protective of the unregistered congregations. An underground pastor in Shandong is known for having cooperated extensively with the TSPM by providing the latter with educational staff and services, which it lacked. The house church also contributed to the state-sanctioned church’s resources by offering it educational goods and materials, and various other religious gifts from Korea and the US (Interview BL69477). The pastor was in such good terms with the local Three-Self Patriotic Movement that rumors said he was able to get his newly ordained pastors to open an independent church which would be recognized by local authorities in spite of not being registered under the TSPM. (Interview BL69477) In this case, being on good terms with the TSPM constituted a passport to access to informal privileges.

In other localities, however, underground churches were the target of government crackdown because the TSPM reported their activities as illicit. The Three-Self Protestant Church in some areas has served as a powerful vehicle for the transmission of information about ‘potentially problematic’ cases of underground churches. In cities like Hangzhou and Shanghai, the state-controlled church is powerful enough to serve that purpose.

**Conclusion**

Unlike several autocracies where the Protestant and Catholic churches “have contributed indispensable resources to the mobilization of disruptive political activism” for regime change (Smith, 1996), the majority of underground Protestant churches in China today do not seek to openly challenge the political establishment. Although they have defied
aspects of central government regulations, large numbers of underground pastors have strategically acknowledged the legitimacy of local government rule, in an attempt to secure propitious conditions for the survival (and in some cases, expansion) of their church. They have done that by means of informal bargains with relevant officials, which have brought mutual benefits to both parties. As the leader of an underground congregation in Henan claimed, “if house churches did not make concessions, they would probably not have the freedom they have today.”87 (Interview BL29474) Informal relationships with local officials has enabled churches that would normally be in the government’s radar (i.e. large congregations, those with ties to the US and other foreign Christian groups, etc), to win more space for religious activity. Among the compromises they made, compliant pastors have engaged in a struggle that is exclusively tied to the interests of underground Protestant churches, in anticipation that broader demands for human rights would not only fail, but also involve costly consequences for the pursuit of their activities. By embracing compliance as a strategy for survival, these house churches have distinguished themselves from and kept at arms length, a minority of politically active churches within the underground community which have openly resisted the regime, and which for that reason, were also easier targets of government crackdowns.

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87 Many church leaders, nonetheless, did not admit having made concessions with the authorities, but attributed their informal privileges to God. An informant said: “We never compromised with the authorities. What we have today, we have it thanks to God’s grace!” (Interview BL30474)
CHAPTER 5:
THE SOURCES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT LENIENCE TOWARD UNDERGROUND CHURCHES

Articulating the manifestations of compliance among the underground clergy is useful in pinpointing some of the incentives that influence local state responses to unregistered churches, but it ultimately remains limited to explain how and why public security officials choose not to use force against them. Doing so requires attention to the reasons why a strict enforcement of coercive policies on religious practice is too costly for local officials, and the various advantages that they perceive in informally tolerating compliant congregations. For public security officials, a strict enforcement of regulations on religious affairs upon house churches poses a policy implementation dilemma in two ways. First, house churches in China are widespread today, and strictly enforcing religious cooptation would not only most likely fail, but also entail diverting coercive resources away from solutions to other threats. Second, coercion is becoming increasingly professionally costly for local officials, given its risks of causing societal instability.

1. PRIORITIZING THREATS

Following Mao’s attempt to eliminate religious faith during the Cultural Revolution, and at the wake of China’s new opening up policy, the Chinese government never expected that underground religious groups would resurface in such large numbers, even if the government legalized and protected religious faith. (Interview MF89473) In 1979, the government assumed that the Christians who had been rehabilitated during Mao’s years would be willing to serve state interests, and could be used as agents in the Three-Self Patriotic Church (Interview BL48476). Today, however, unregistered churches are spreadout in large numbers, across China’s urban and rural areas. Their large numbers
pose significant challenges to a strict enforcement of religious cooptation insofar as repressing them would involve mobilizing high levels of coercive resources, without guarantees that repression would successfully eliminate autonomous churches. A bureau chief of the State Administration of Religious Affairs claimed that there are so many house churches in his locality that “controlling or shutting down each of them would make no sense” (Interview BO68477). Similarly, a member of the official clergy in Hebei argued that “government control of the average underground churches would be such a hassle, given their large numbers.” (Interview BL64476) On that point, Party agencies seem to agree with the government. A former United Front Department official stressed that “it would neither be realistic nor practical to even try to eliminate underground churches.” (Interview MF89473) He added that if there were only 10,000 underground believers in China, it would perhaps be easier to do so, but today, there are tens of millions of them, and the government can no longer afford to alienate these groups. Hence, rather than eradicating underground Christianity, officials have developed strategies to try to better control it. These observations are in line with a PSB officer’s claim that central government goals are often unachievable. The informant maintained:

My colleagues and I are expected to address so many challenges in our daily work, and often, the goals set by higher officials are impossible to reach. In these circumstances, bureaucrats at lower levels like us need to find ways of reaching targets using the means that are available to us. (Interview MS93476)

In saying so, the informant was suggesting that higher officials lacked information about the implications of certain policies at the grassroots level, and how far their goals could be achieved, as a result. This is the case insofar as officials from higher level departments, including the State Administration on Religious Affairs, lack a comprehensive understanding of all the policies local officials, like public security officers, are simultaneously expected to enforce. Strictly enforcing central regulations on religious
affairs would entail diverting resources away from solutions to more pressing problems in their locality. Local officials in charge of public security are constrained to mobilize resources for the short-term threats that are most likely to hinder their ability to reach central government targets, like political stability. A former United Front Work Department official maintained that:

Local governments today face so many challenges in Chinese society, [...] including a high frequency of collective protests. When they are given instructions to curb these political threats, they have to prioritize. (Interview MF89473)

Similarly, when asked why local governments would not eliminate underground churches, the informant stressed:

Military troops occupy Xinjiang and Tibet in their struggle against Tibetan nationalists and Islamic extremism as well as terrorism. How could local governments mobilize significant resources against underground Christians, given how peaceful the majority are? (Interview MF89473)

Hence, public security officers are constrained to filter out some of the instructions they receive, based on their perceptions of the level of urgency or threat associated with the problems they are expected to control. While the informant did not deny that the fast expansion of house churches posed a considerable challenge to the regime, he nonetheless emphasized local governments’ inclination to prioritize anti-regime targets rather than compliant ones, and short-term sources of instability over longer-term ones.

Examples of police officers who are instructed to detain or arrest church leaders, and choose not to, abound in Chinese society. Often times, officials deal with those cases differently from how they are instructed to do so, because they judge having been misinformed about the actual ‘threat.’ An informant in Beijing recalled a story in which police officers had been called upon by the RAB\textsuperscript{88} to arrest the leaders of a house church

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\textsuperscript{88} When public security officials are asked to arrest underground church leaders, they usually do so upon instructions by the local Religious Affairs Bureau (Hunter and Chan, 1993).
on the grounds of organizing an illegal gathering. When they first received those instructions, they assumed the worst, namely that they had been called upon to stop a collective protest that was highly disruptive of neighborhood stability. When the officers walked in the unregistered religious venue, they saw a group of believers who were quietly listening to a sermon, and wondered why they had been asked to arrest people there. Though the RAB had turned to them to interrupt the event, the service did not show signs of potential instability. They nonetheless took the leaders of the church to the police station, did a background check on their identity. They released them shortly after, when they found that they had no criminal record. In the months following that event, the RAB called them three more times, requesting that they interrogate and detain the church leaders. Each time they were instructed to do so, police officers would head to the venue, say hello, check that everything was in order, and leave, without taking further measures against the clergy. The lax approach with which they responded to instructions from RAB officials was indicative of their belief that harrassing the leaders of the church was a waste of time and resources. Officers said to have other priorities they needed to attend to, and that their responsibility was to fight and prevent genuine crimes. Aware that the church would unlikely disrupt public security, police officers nonetheless went back to the house church venue to avoid being blamed for not having followed instructions. They, however, chose to respond to the problem their own way, and avoid unnecessary detentions.

2. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RISKS TO THE USE OF COERCION

A chief inspector inside the PSB in Henan confessed that mobilizing the police to arrest individuals suspected of being involved in illegal activities, including religious ones, was increasingly difficult from a bureaucratic standpoint. It usually required approval by
higher authorities. The reason why that approval was necessary did not lie in the importance of ensuring policy consistency across the government hierarchy, but in the need for local officials to protect themselves, against potential accusations of “having done things wrong.” (Interview BO68477) According to some interviewed government officials in charge of public security, there are different ways in which the use of coercion may be condemned by higher authorities, or other local agencies. Coercion may intensify a societal problem, rather than solve it, insofar as it brings unnecessary public attention to it, and/or turn collective gatherings into public and disruptive demonstrations due to local governments’ arbitrary use of force. To incite local governments to use violence with restraint, the central government launched the ‘three preventive measures’ [sange shenyong] in 2008. These measures sought to ensure that police officers would avoid arbitrarily using weapons, and refrain from taking coercive actions against collective gatherings, that could accentuate their ‘disruptiveness.’ Combined with these preventive measures, the central government has encouraged local governments to handle social disputes through in-depth investigation, as well as mediation amongst involved parties.

Furthermore, when mishandled by a department, a social problem or a dispute may be severely critized inside the local bureaucracy. There are various ways in which a case may be mismanaged. One of them involves government officials using coercion that results in local and international media attention, during a critical political period. In October 2009, a few weeks prior to US President Obama’s visit to China, an official from the Beijing Municipality made the decision to force Shouwang Church out of the space it rented in the Zhongguancun area, in an attempt to deter the church from trying to get US

attention. Reliable sources suggest that that official wanted to ‘impress’ the higher authorities by showing his level of commitment to social stability prior to an important diplomatic visit (Interview ZA85474). That eviction pushed Shouwang church to organize a public service two weeks in a row in Beijing, and the events were widely reported in the world. The Beijing Municipality government’s move was not well received by some officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who believed that the incident took unnecessary proportions and, as a result, attracted worldwide attention (Interview ZA85474). In this case, coercion was criticized inside the government apparatus because it led to a result which was damaging for China’s international image.

Another way coercion may be highly criticized inside the bureaucracy is when it either targets individuals who have very good relations with influential bureaucrats or Party members, or when it runs the risk of being criticized by other officials for having been mismanaged. An informant claimed that because guanxi often overrule the rule of law in local governance, the risks in using coercion against particular individuals suspected of being involved in illegal activities, must be carefully assessed prior to its enforcement. Using coercion against those who may be well connected inside the bureaucracy, or in circumstances where actions may be condemned by well-established bureaucrats or Party members, comes with potentially severe professional consequences. An influential church leader from Sichuan visited Zhejiang in 2010, where he launched his latest book in a small bookstore. RAB officials interfered with the event, claiming it was illegal, but they did not have proper legal documentation in their possession to prove that the gathering was illicit. A government employee from the Tax Revenue Office who knew the guestspeaker personally through a common friend, and who attended the event,
took photos of the RAB officials. The latter nervously turned to him and asked what he was doing. The Tax Revenue official said: “I am from the Tax Revenue Office, you guys are from the Religious Affairs Bureau, we are both government employees.” In saying so, the informant was warning them that there was no need to report back what was going on, because if they did so, they would also be reported to the authorities for their clumsiness and lack of professionalism in managing the case. Surprised by the Tax Revenue official’s determination to report back the incident, the RAB officials left shortly after.

The chief investigator of a public security office in Henan confessed the little room to maneuver he had, when it came to using force against individuals or groups suspected of criminal activity, including potential church leaders, among others (Interview BO68477):

As long as there is no red document coming from the higher authorities, I can simply rest. I cannot just freely arrest individuals suspected of having committed a crime. There is always a possibility that these people have very good relations with some influential government officials. The informant suggested that unilaterally making the decision to coerce could be professionally risky. When a single individual or a department makes a decision, it may lack important information about the relevant case, and hence respond to the latter inadequately. The informant also implied that inadequate responses to a challenge may be riskier than simply ignoring it. Similarly, some academics specialized in church-state relations noticed that, in dealing with house church-related cases, local governments increasingly involve several departments, including the RAB, the PSB, the Ministry of State Security, the MCA, and the Fire Department. (Interviews ZA88474, BL54476) As a church leader emphasized, “several years ago, if the government wanted to crackdown upon a church, it would directly ask the police to intervene. But today, more and more
government departments are involved in the process of making such a decision.” (Interview BL54476)

As a result of their increasing pressure not to use coercion arbitrarily against society, public security officials are more and more self-contained with underground preachers, and this is notably manifested in how they justify the reasons for their visits and interrogations. A church leader in Beijing made the following observation:

> Officials stress that they cannot interfere with our freedom to practice religion, and that they are here because they simply want to better understand who we are, what we do, and what we believe. (Interview BL19473)

Similarly, several church leaders noticed a change in public security officials’ strategy to evict a house church from a rented property. While a decade ago, the police would directly show up to the premises and close the church down by force, today, the authorities use a third party to pressure churches to abandon their worshipping location. They usually do so by pressuring the landlord not to renew their lease. A typical such scenario was recalled by an informant: “Authorities usually tell the owner that by allowing these people (i.e. the church) to rent the property, he or she is hindering the safety of the community or breaching the laws of the nation.” (Interview ZA89474)

Due to fears of being blamed for having mismanaged a case, departments may attempt to rid themselves of the responsibility to solve house church-related problems, by mislabelling them. In 2010, a church in Wuhan was accused by the RAB of being part of

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90 This restraint on the part of local governments has not been exclusive to house churches, but has also been manifested in other spheres. Recent large-scale protests have triggered accommodative responses from local authorities. In August 2011, the local Communist Party chief in Dalian promised to shut down a petrochemical factory following a mobilization by tens of thousands of Chinese citizens demanding that it be relocated (Watts, 2011).

91 Depending on the nature of the landlord’s relationship with the tenant, he or she may not be aware that the space is rented for religious purposes.
an “evil cult” (xiejiao). When the PSB investigated the case, the head of the Domestic Security Detachment realized that the head of the RAB had wanted to make the case seem more serious than it actually was, because in those circumstances, he would not have to handle it. When asked why the local RAB would not want to be the one handling the dispute, the informant responded:

The more you are involved in solving the problem, the more you run the risk of making mistakes handling the case, and the more you risk being punished consequently. Involvement entails opportunities for making mistakes, and badly performing. (Interview BL21473)

In the end, the PSB found that there was no problem with the content of the house church community’s faith, and that it should not qualify as a cult; the responsibility to find a solution to the dispute was thus relegated to the RAB.

3. Navigating the Underground Christian Space in a Context of Uncertainty

Local officials’ concerns about the professional risks involved in using coercion, and the unachievable central government goal of enforcing religious cooptation, could serve as disincentives for an extensive use of force against house churches. Yet, in a context where they are uncertain about the underground clergy’s political intentions towards the authoritarian regime, and whether its beliefs are in line with Protestant theology or heretical, the risks involved in inaction remain high. Officials have identified circumstances in which tolerating house churches could be risky for the stability of their localities. Although he admitted that some churches are harmless, an adviser to the State Council claimed that certain unregistered congregations are involved in religious cult activities including the most extreme ones, like the collective killing of individuals. The

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92 When a religious group is officially labelled as an ‘evil cult,’ it is the Public Security Bureau’s Domestic Security Detachment [also named the ‘guobao’]’s responsibility to dismantle it.
informant maintained that those churches must be subject to close scrutiny by local governments (Interview ML88473):

A pastor like Wei\(^{93}\) does not pose the regime any problem, because he is theologically vigilant and politically cautious. But some initially peaceful churches evolve into heretical congregations that go out and kill individuals. That is unacceptable.

For that same reason, he added that “the local government needs to be well informed about house churches’ religious motives and activities.” (Interview ML88473) Moreover, in claiming that harmless churches can evolve into ‘harmful’ ones, the informant suggested that information gathered about a church leadership at a particular point of its existence might become entirely irrelevant over time; hence, the need to ensure a regular flow of information from churches to local public security officials.

Some informants have also emphasized the risk that house churches may be used as vehicles for public mobilization or political contestation. An official from the PSB in Shanghai confessed that what he and his colleagues were genuinely interested in, beyond “believers who committed real, serious crimes like the kidnapping of individuals,” are churches that seek to overthrow the regime, as they did under Ceausescu’s Romania (Interview BL39474). An RAB official in Henan stressed that “the local government cares about whether or not a house church will create civil disorder.” (Interview MS89474) He further added: “the important thing is that religious practice takes place within the confines of religious venues, not outside those boundaries.” (Interview MS89474) The official’s comment applied to both registered and unregistered churches, suggesting that religious practice even in illegally registered venues is tolerated, as long as it does not go outdoors or organize large-scale events that would risk attracting public attention. In a similar vein, a police officer in Zhejiang claimed that central government concerns did not

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\(^{93}\) The name of the pastor was changed to ensure his confidentiality.
lie in the existence of house churches per se, but in their capacity to come together as large organizations, and pressure for recognition: “what the central government fears are not house churches, but their capacity to organize cross-nationally.” (Interview ZA94475) Hence, the member of a local zhengxie in Henan maintained that “if an unregistered church is large, the local government will want to know more about it.” (Interview MS89474) It looks for similar clues among the churches or leaders that/who are part of a broader regional network of congregations. Though the strategy is fundamentally based on a selective implementation of religious regulations, paying closer attention to large underground churches and to the ones that belong to a broader Christian network allows public security officials to work on reaching the central government objective of controlling the expansion and influence of large-scale religious organizations operating outside the umbrella of the state.

Not unrelated to their capacity to organize as large organizations, a highly ranked Three-Self Church representative in Zhejiang claimed that some house churches can constitute a problem to local governments insofar as they are “close-minded.” In asking to define the meaning of the latter term, the informant insisted on the inability of some church leaders to communicate constructively with government officials, resulting from their inclination towards [human] rights defense (weiquan). (Interview BL86478) Similarly, the head of the local lianghui in a city in Zhejiang claimed that allowing house churches some space to operate in is acceptable, “but the ones whose political overtones are too provocative, and which are too high profile, must be severely controlled.” (Interview BO51476)
In light of those concerns, local government officials have focused on ensuring that the churches that deserve attention, are closely monitored, rather than strictly enforcing central regulations on religious affairs uniformly across all unregistered churches. They have paid particular heed to the churches whose features could compromise the interests of the regime – whether or not it is or could become a cult; the size of the unregistered organization; and a church leadership’s potential for political dissidence. What matters locally is not whether churches are registered, but whether they can interfere with local governments’ overall objective of achieving one of Beijing’s core targets, that is political stability. Similarly, a former United Front Work Department official maintained that “what local officials really care about is not the content of religious policy per se, but simply not to get in trouble with the central government.” For that, he pursued, “they must ensure that there are few instances of social conflict.” (Interview MF89473) In the process of solving disputes, whether they are related to house churches or not, the former official added that legislation was not always the most important matter to consider: “what matters most is the outcome of local government policy.” (Interview MF89473) In an attempt to illustrate this phenomenon, an informant recalled a famous Chinese saying: “at the top there is policy, at the bottom there are countermeasures” (Interview BL82478). Insofar as they remain committed to preserving political stability, public security officials still work towards the achievement of central government interests; they have nonetheless developed a more targeted approach to addressing the house church ‘challenge’.

To identify compliant church leaders, public security authorities have used intelligence-gathering as a way of better grasping how threatening that underground space is in all the
above respects. To access underground churches, public security officials have relied upon the help of various actors.

The RAB and the PSB have used state-sanctioned congregations and the CCC to gather information about house churches (Interview MS94477). A former leader of the lianghui, confirmed that official churches and the CCC are composed of state agents covered under the label of the official clergy. They receive two salaries, accordingly: the first one as pastors, and the second one, as secret police (Interview BL28474). Information-gathering has required mobilizing resources to take house church pastors out to dinner, and each year, the RAB reimburses the lianghui the costs involved in doing so (Interview BL28474). By the position that they occupy and the access that it gives them, state-sanctioned pastors are able to tell the government which house church has what kind of problems. In the name of Christian solidarity, they mobilize their efforts to build themselves good relations with unregistered churches of interest, and study their leaders closely. Because the political and denominational divide between underground and state-sanctioned churches today is less significant than it was a few decades earlier, the younger underground clergy is less likely to refuse to speak with TSPM pastors. Openness to dialogue by house church leaders may have facilitated the official clergy’s access to helpful information about underground Christianity.\footnote{It is worth noting, nevertheless, that house church pastors are not necessarily aware of who amongst the TSPM clergy is a spy, and who is not. This is particularly the case as the TSPM is increasingly politically diverse. It is compromised of both a clergy that strictly follows the line of the Party, and one that seeks to operate independently from it. In such a context, a TSPM spy may present him/herself as an independent preacher, to better access house church leaders.}

Although most house church leader would not refuse to speak with a state-sanctioned pastor today, there are nonetheless localities where relations between the underground church and the local TSPM are tense. There TSPM pastors may have had a
harder time collecting information about house churches. However, because the local state does not exclusively rely upon the TSPM to spy on unregistered congregations, tense relations between the TSPM and underground church leaders may not have necessarily impeded information collection about the latter.

Yet, while the state-sanctioned clergy has played a key role in the detentions of several members of the underground clergy in certain localities, TSPM involvement in monitoring house church affairs from afar have, in some circumstances, contributed to the building of good relations between the state-sanctioned and the unregistered clergy. A TSPM pastor in a part of China where relations between the two types of churches are harmonious, admitted bending rules in favor of the underground clergy: “We protect house churches. If they have not completed formalities, we just don’t bother forcing them to do so.” (Interview MS96478) Where relationships between house churches and Three-Self congregations are tense, conflict often results from the underground clergy’s rejection of the legitimacy of the TSPM, or personal tensions between the leaders of official and underground churches. An RAB official in Beijing stressed that the ability for underground Christianity to survive in some areas was not unrelated to its protection by the TSPM:

If we are willing to, house churches can exist. In some cases, our ability to agree to that may depend on house churches’ relations with the Three-Self church. If the TSPM does not like a house church, it may unite with the government to eliminate a church. No matter where you are, the nature of underground-official churches’ relationship is important. (Interview ZA89474)

Beyond the TSPM, public security officials have used the help of members of underground churches to report back information about its leaders, and the content of their sermons (Interview BL92478). It is said that influential churches in Beijing and Wanbang in Shanghai, all have several such minders. Finally, public security officials,
and RAB employees have themselves payed the underground clergy multiple visits, inquiring about their activities, opinions about the regime, and other church leaders (Interview ZA88474).

4. THE FRUITS OF LENIENCE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Because it is impractical and potentially costly for local governments to uniformly use coercion against all underground churches in a context of uncertainty about the space, they have used informal tolerance as a way to better access and categorize the unregistered clergy. They have seized house church leaders’ compliance as opportunities to reduce uncertainty, and better assess the implications of a targeted approach to the management of underground Christianity. Although the need to reduce uncertainty about the underground Christian space is the main force motivating local government tolerance in the informal arrangement, material, social and power-related benefits often develop to lend additional influence to already existing constraints on both church leaders and officials’ behavior. Access to these benefits has shaped officials’ expectations about house churches, and redefined their perceptions of risks involved in tolerating the unregistered clergy.

a. More Effective Intelligence-Gathering

Lenience increases opportunities for intelligence collection. An official in Hebei emphasized that informal arrangements between local authorities and the underground clergy bring mutual advantages for both parties. As far as public security officials are concerned, he said:

Good relationships between underground church leaders and local officials in charge of public security allow the authorities access to the informal space, which in the end, helps them grasp the
Some settings are more likely to be propitious to more effective information-gathering about underground Christianity. A member of the underground clergy in Hebei stressed the effectiveness of information-gathering in social settings that are informal:

> It is easier to have a pastor reveal information about his church during informal conversations. Usually, the more informal the setting is, the easier information can flow. (Interview BL64476)

Several informants confirmed that near the end of dinner parties, when hosts and guests had had a few drinks and the atmosphere was relieved of all tensions, was an easier time for confessions. In a similar vein, an official from the RAB in Zhejiang who claimed that colleagues have been frequently invited to banquets by the underground clergy, suggested that meeting church leaders in informal settings facilitated access to information, to the point of making the secret monitoring of their churches, irrelevant: “We don’t need spies to follow closely the activities of these churches, we can just directly talk to them.” (Interview ZA94475)

Conversely, the use of repression does not necessarily guarantee officials access to helpful information. A preacher, whom a decade ago experienced several detentions by the local police, the Domestic Security Detachment (guobao), and some Ministry of State Security officials, claimed that the clergy who was constantly harassed, and sometimes even tortured, knew what kind of information the authorities were looking for, and was less likely to speak out on those matters (Interview BL48476). Additionally, repression may make underground churches even more secretive and anonymous. Some interviewed officials noticed that when they attempted to close down house churches, the latter would
simply move locations in a city, and hide.\(^95\) (Interview ZA87474) Tracking down those churches would involve additional resources that public security officials could afford not to waste. That was particularly the case of a church in central China, which was forced to shut down after its leader was sent to labor camp, a few years ago. Shortly after his detention, the hundred members of the congregation decided to divide up into eleven small groups, and practiced secretly in some believers’ apartments. (Interview BL28474) Hence, failed attempts to shut down the church resulted in the multiplication of small meeting points spread out across the city, and insofar as the disaggregation of the community attracted new members, it also contributed to an increase in the number of believers in the congregation.

In several circumstances, intelligence-gathering not only gives officials privileged access to underground Christianity, but it also changes how they view and categorize that space. Some officials claimed that their ability to have a dialogue with some church leaders made them realize how harmless their congregations were (Interview ZA88474). One working for the police investigation department in Wenzhou saw no real difference between registered and several unregistered churches in his city, at least from a theological standpoint (Interview MS97478). Access to the underground space has also helped some police officers trivialize what it means to practice religion in an unregistered church (Interview ZA89474):

> When we want to sing, we just go to karaoke; when they [Christians] sing, they sing at home [i.e. in a house church]. Apart from the content of their songs, there isn’t much difference, and there isn’t any problem.

\(^95\) House churches may be called ‘underground’ to the extent that they are non-state-sanctioned, and hence, considered ‘illegal’ by the Chinese government. While they are unregistered, they may nonetheless remain fairly transparent about their existence, and seek not to hide, especially in areas where the local government is fairly tolerant of their existence. In Wenzhou, for instance, house churches located in commercial or residential buildings are easily recognizable by outsiders as one can usually find a cross on their front door.
If greater opportunities for intelligence-gathering helped public security authorities better realize which churches were politically ‘harmless,’ as far as local government priorities are concerned, it also helped them better grasp aspects of the politics that ideologically divide underground churches, and differentiate who among the clergy shows no sign of opposition to the regime (tizhinei), and who does (tizhiwai). Hence, in allowing such distinction to be made, information collection about the underground Christian space also helps public security authorities mobilize more selectively their coercive resources for political opponents, and in this sense, better cope with the political and social risks involved in extensively using repression. As an official emphasized, what public security officials are interested in are the churches that have the ability to constitute an anti-regime force in Chinese society (Interview MS92476).

b. Economic and Social Benefits

Informally tolerating the underground clergy can be economically profitable for government officials, for three reasons. First, tolerance can be ‘bought’ through bribes and rents. As an individual highly ranked in the lianghui in Wenzhou claimed, “if church leaders want more support, and if they have an entrepreneurial spirit, they may have to bribe officials, to get some level of protection.” (Interview BL86478) An official from the RAB observed that in Wenzhou, where local officials from various departments were involved in various kinds of economic arrangements with some large underground churches:

Church leaders tend to be involved in power struggles to please the authorities. One way in which they do so, is by regularly treating Religious Affairs Bureau officials to luxurious and decadent banquets. (Interview ZA94475)
While the confession was meant to portray underground church leaders unfavorably, and to condemn corrupt practices among them and the local state, it was nonetheless revealing of some of the payoffs local officials get, by paying unregistered congregations a blind eye.

Second, in certain localities where church leaders are economically influential, the absence of coercion helps protect economic arrangements between the local bureaucracy and the business sector. In a city like Wenzhou, many of the leaders of large congregations are rich entrepreneurs, and are used to interact with local government officials from various departments or agencies, on a regular basis, in the context of their daily economic transactions. In several cases, they are already in very good terms with them.96 A scholar studying underground Christianity in China said, “if you make good money and are the leader of an unregistered church, the government is likely to make your life as a preacher easier.” Economic influence can facilitate church leaders’ access to various kinds of informal benefits, smaller and less economically powerful churches may not have. Wenzhou Christian bosses have been able to build large church networks and avoid being regularly bothered by the RAB or the PSB. They have also managed to negotiate with local authorities, in exchange for a lucrative share of their profits, the building of churches inside their factories in various parts of China. While such a practice is illegal according to regulations on religious affairs, a local government official in

96 Cao (2010) suggests that Christian bosses in Wenzhou also rely upon bribery to ensure harmonious economic relations with local authorities. He adds that: ‘many are suspected of buying prostitutes to treat officials and business partners in responses to their requests.’ (p. 61).
Yunnan, in response to this problem, confidently said: “if Christians can contribute to the local GDP, we welcome them!” (Interview ZA88474)97

Third, in some localities, house church leaders are actively involved in charity projects, and contribute to relieving local authorities’ redistributive burden. In a city like Wenzhou, underground church leaders make individual donations to the RAB on an annual basis. Though these gestures are primarily meant to redistribute back to the needy, an official from the RAB claimed that there are nonetheless political expectations underlying some donations (Interview ZA94475). A house church in Tanghe County, Henan managed to gain respect from township officials because they actively took part in repairing local infrastructure like damaged roads, and their church financed the totality of the costs involved. (Interview BL29474) It also contributed to social development in the locality, by opening a nursing home for the elderly. (Ibid) In another rural county near Anyang, Henan, church leaders who were repeatedly arbitrarily fined up until six years ago for being “illegal religious organizations,” are now considered by the local government as helpful human resources for the reconstruction of roads (Interviews BL26474 and BL25474). In a similar vein, an official from the city management office in a town in Zhejiang stressed that the government had nothing against house churches. In fact, he added, many of them are actively involved in social or charity work in their relevant locality, and openly show their willingness to work with the government towards building a ‘civilized society.’ (Interview BM47476) Similarly, an official in the Three-

97 The economic advantages described in the above circumstances are specific to a particular group of Christians, who are not representative of the average church leadership in most urban areas. Many churches are in fact largely composed of migrant workers, with poor economic influence, or intellectuals and university students. But it is worth elaborating on, as it is very indicative of the important role underground Christianity plays in the economic equations of local government officials in particular localities, especially in Wenzhou.
Self Patriotic Movement in Beijing maintained that house church leaders now use social services and contributions to the community as a way of holding a dialogue with the authorities:

While in the past, there were times when the government would interfere during church services by sending in the police and congregations had no other choice than to evacuate the premises, today, some house churches use economic means to convince local authorities to tolerate them. If there is a street that needs reparation, or a school that requires renovations, house churches will take care of it. (Interview ZA89474)

5. **How Compliance by the Underground Clergy Facilitated Government Lenience**

In the 1990s, when Beijing realized how numerous unregistered churches were in Chinese society, the government did not know whether that expansion needed to be treated as a religious or as a political problem. A former official from the United Front Work Department maintained that “central authorities initially framed underground Christianity in political terms.” (Interview MF89473) Beijing understood the act of being underground as a one of resisting the regime. Yet, locally, underground churches showed no real signs of political involvement. As the informant stressed, “local governments realized the center had been wrong about most underground churches.” (Interview MF89473) Although, by their very choice of being underground, the clergy questions the legitimacy of central government regulations in a particular domain, their survival is intimately linked to an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of local state authority.\(^9^8\) For both the clergy and local governments, the fact that unregistered churches are defying central regulations on religious affairs does not question the power of the local state per se. The leader of an underground church in Henan, who managed to build a relationship of respect with the

\(^9^8\) In that respect, compliant defiants are different from rightful resisters, the latter of whom seek attention from the central government, in an attempt to condemn the policies and power abuses of local government officials.
local police, told an official from the guobao: “we don't mind being restrained [by you],
we don't mind your awareness of our existence and activities, but we will not integrate the
TSPM.” (Interview BL29474) In response to that statement, the official acknowledged the
pastor’s words, and said: “if you need anything, you come and look for me. If I need
anything from you, I will come and look for you.” (Ibid) In this particular situation, the
fact that the pastor refused to conform with formal regulations gave the official an
opportunity to establish his own rules, which he offered the church leader as an
alternative. The latter’s compliance with this informal arrangement was itself empowering
for the guobao official. In a similar vein, an RAB official drew a clear line between
conforming with central government policies pertaining to religious affairs, and churches’
ability to be loyal to the local government:

If church leaders overlook state policies, that is their problem. But if on top of that, they cannot
cooperate with the local government on any level, their ability to expand will be heavily restrained.
They need to conform with [local] government requests. (Interview MS89474)

Similarly, an academic in Shanghai emphasized the difference between being involved in
activities that are considered by authorities as weifa (breaking the law, often in a criminal
sense) and feifa (breaking the rules). If one is accused of being involved in the latter kind
of activities, this usually means that there is room for negotiation with local authorities; in
the former case, there is none. (Interview ZA87474)

Complying with local government demands is part of a broader game in which
officials need to be reminded of how powerful they are, whether they choose to strictly
implement regulations or not. While compliance by church leaders may contribute to
reinforcing their informal arrangements with local authorities, dismissing the latter’s
requests may come with sanctions. The leader of a congregation in Henan explained that a
few years ago, members of the clergy had rented a large space to organize various
gatherings during the Christmas holiday. The PSB warned them that they should not organize these activities, but they nonetheless went on with their plans. Consequently, PSB officials interrupted the events. Members of the clergy had a long talk with them, subsequently. The authorities brought to their attention the fact that they had not complied with their demand not to organize the event, and implored them to give them face ("gei wo mianzi, ba!"). Their reaction suggested that they had lost credit because the church had not respected their request. An official from the city management office in a town in Zhejiang stressed the importance of not losing face for some officials: "face symbolizes moral superiority, prestige and respect." (Interview BM47476)\textsuperscript{99} Another church leader in Beijing shared a similar story, which ended differently. A few years ago, he planned to organize a Christmas party and wished to invite 1,000 people. When RAB officials found out about the event, they suggested to him that a thousand guests would be too much, and asked him to reduce the size of the party to a maximum of 500 or 600 people. The informant, who was a former TSPM member and had remained on good terms with some Three-Self pastors and RAB staff, felt obliged to give the authorities face. The party was consequently not interrupted. (Interview BO20473)

\textsuperscript{99} Similarly, Yang (1989) suggests that face is about approbation, being ‘[acknowledged] by others in the context of particular relationships.’ (p. 42)
CHAPTER 6: INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS, CONTAINED POLITICAL OPPOSITION, AND REGIME SURVIVAL

*Power is most effective when it is least observable.*
Steven Lukes, 2004

Informal arrangements between local government officials and house church leaders have made both parties better off than in the absence of cooperation. On the one hand, they have enabled public security officers to better measure the implications of their decision to tolerate house churches, and control the potential side effects of selective coercion. On the other hand, in a setting that remains fundamentally authoritarian, cooperation has enabled underground churches to maximize their ability to manage their own religious affairs autonomously. Yet, insofar as cooperation is non-official, and involves actors with unequal powers, the informal arrangements secured by church leaders and local state agents have not generated equal benefits for both parties. As Knight (1992) emphasizes, because informal rules are built in a context where power and resources are unevenly allocated, they may also make winners and losers. Based on empirical evidence, this chapter explores how informal cooperation with underground church leaders has enabled local state agents to better ensure authoritarian regime resilience. First, it has increased underground Christians’ costs of opposing the enforcers of formal rules. If house churches publicly oppose the regime, they also risk losing the informal benefits or privileges granted by local government officials, which national regulations on religious practice do not guarantee. Second, informal tolerance has accentuated political divisions among underground churches, between the informally compliant churches and the ones that chose to maintain a firm position against the regime. Doing so has allowed the authorities to better alienate regime opponents. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the
low likelihood that changes in current regulations on religious affairs, or the legalization of house churches, become a central government strategy of regime preservation.

1. **Increased Risks of Formal Rule Opposition**

Underlying the informal arrangements secured between house church leaders and local government officials, are expectations that if either one of the parties defect, the other one will also stop cooperating. The compliant clergy’s restraints have notably been manifested in the latter’s constant preoccupation by the need not to offend local officials. Having studied closely some of the uncertainties of the political environment in which they operate, compliant church leaders know that certain actions on their part are more likely to compromise their informal arrangement with local authorities than others. Informal autonomy has come at a price, namely that of not engaging in any political activities that could compromise the regime, publicly challenging the boundaries of the informal arrangements, or mobilizing for legal recognition. Demands for house church legalization would entail asking for a separation between church and state, and as an expert on church-state relations maintained, the legalization of underground churches as independent religious institutions would coincide with the authoritarian regime’s rejection of its own interests, and how it conceives of state-society relations (Interview ZA88474). The informant specifically articulated that “if the government accommodates house churches, it would have to negate itself. That is hard to envisage.”

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100 This does not mean that leaders’ views on what may initially be perceived as conflicting with regime interests could not change overtime. As Tsai (2008) maintains, accumulated informal interaction between local officials and certain societal actors ‘may motivate political elites to change the original formal institutions.’ (p. 19) While large private enterprises were illegal in China prior to the late 1990s, in an attempt to further deepen its economic reforms, the central government legalized them. Whereas capitalists were still considered official Party enemies in 1978, in light of Jiang Zemin’s launch of the concept of ‘Three Represents,’ entrepreneurs were officially invited to join the CCP, starting in July 2001 (Tsai, 2008, p.44).
activism would increase the clergy’s risks of losing its informal privileges. Public contestation of the system and its rules may take various forms, including embracing a critical rhetoric about the regime, the publication of materials questioning its legitimacy, close connections with foreign human rights organizations, or the organization of public protests or demonstrations.

This strategic caution on the part of compliant house churches was manifested in how they responded to the public sermons organized by Wanbang and Shouwang churches in 2009. These events constituted opportunities for larger-scale mobilization among underground churches. Not only were they followed closely by international human rights groups, but they were also subject to close attention by the Mainland Chinese underground Protestant community through phone communications, emails and text-messaging. Some underground church preachers from various cities in China even made their way to Beijing and Shanghai to take part in these outdoor services as a way of showing support for the actions of all three churches. Yet, the events did not have spill-over effects elsewhere in the country. Support in the underground community was expressed exclusively on an individual basis.

When asked why other churches had not seized those opportunities to organize public sermons in their respective cities in support of Wanbang and Shouwang’s struggle, explanations varied. Some pastors claimed that different kinds of churches have different, yet equally important missions. Although they respected the more vocal churches, they

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101 While some congregations have more recently played an active role in furthering the legalization of house churches like Shouwang Church in Beijing, they nonetheless represent a minor proportion of the house church community. Moreover, among the underground clergy, a conservative evangelical faction sees significant benefits in operating in a context where house churches are not legalized. An informant claimed that ‘if the government legalized house churches today, churches would increasingly become secularized, and there would be less opportunities for Gospel-preaching.’ (Interview ZA88474)
did not see their congregations’ mission as oriented towards rights defense [weiquan], and believed it was best to leave this responsibility to churches like Shouwang and Wanbang. An informant stressed: “our church does not want to defend the political rights of Chinese citizens, our duty is to protect and promote our faith.” (Interview BO20473) Some pastors gave a pragmatic explanation for their lack of involvement, including their responsibility vis-à-vis the safety of their own congregation and congregants, and the risks of compromising their access to informal autonomy that activism would pose. Other, more fundamentalist churches, used theological rhetoric to justify their lack of political involvement, arguing that if political change was to occur, it should not be orchestrated by human beings, but result from “God’s will.” When asked whether one’s role as a citizen with particular political rights (or lack thereof) conflicted with one’s Christian faith, an informant responded:

For sure, Christians are citizens too, and they have the right to petition. If they wish to petition, let them do so. But as a pastor, I would encourage them to engage in another path, a more beautiful one, that of prayer. (Interview BL35474)

Similarly, an informant in Suzhou stressed that the government needs to be respected by house churches. He believed that contesting forced evictions by going off to the streets and blocking roads was an act of disrespect towards the authorities. (Interview MS91475)

Regardless of the reasons underlying inaction, most informants were convinced that political discretion was the safest way to ensure that house church-local government relations not be strained. When asked what she would do if local government policy with respect to house churches suddenly became highly coercive and underground congregations lost their ability to informally practice religion, a scholar who had been attending a house church in her home city rejected political activism as means of coping with injustice:
As a conservative Christian, I would not resort to radical means to negotiate with the government. I would hide and secretly keep practicing until circumstances got better, and avoid confrontation. Perhaps I am not creative enough. (Interview ZA92476)

This apoliticalness on the part of Christian believers is in part symptomatic of church leaders’ reluctance to talk politics during sermons. It is also surprising, given underground church leaders’ choice to operate outside the state’s control, and in light of the active role of Protestant and Catholic churches in pressuring authoritarian regimes for political change in various countries, at different points in world history. In Poland, the Catholic Church was crucial to the emergence of the anti-Soviet Solidarity movement in 1980 (Osa, 1996). In authoritarian Latin America, liberation-theology advocates engaged in a struggle against human rights abuses and for a more equitable redistribution of material resources to the poor (Smith, 1996, p. 9). In Kenya, the Anglican Church was politically active during the one-party era. The National Council of Churches and the Kenya Episcopal Conference successfully worked together along with the Law Society of Kenya and some politicians to restore multi-party democracy (Githiga, 2001). Sabar-Friedman (1997) explores more particularly the role of the Kenyan church between 1986 and 1992 in giving rise to a public discourse against state corruption and for democracy, and in organizing grassroots political activities prior to the first multi-party elections launched in 1992. In a similar vein, during Park Chung Hee’s rule in South Korea, both Protestant and Catholic Church leaders challenged the state by joining the pro-democracy movement in the 1970s (Chang, 1998). Finally, in the United States, the Black church constituted the

102 Certainly, the church was not always politically active in challenging authoritarian regimes. In some settings where it was deeply embedded in society, the church worked jointly with authoritarian governments to promote nation-building. In Communist Romania between 1947 and 1965, the state co-opted the clergy, allowed it to maintain strong influence upon society, and used the institutional channels of the Orthodox church to promote nationalism and secure political support (Leustean, 2009). Most such cases of cooperation however involved religious institutions that were officially recognized by the authoritarian government, not ones that were considered illegal, as in the case of house churches in Mainland China.
institutional core of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, providing the latter with a mass base, meeting places where mobilization strategies were planned, a clergy independent of white society highly successful at management and coordination, as well as financial resources which helped finance the protests of the oppressed (Morris, 1996, p. 29).

That most house churches in China today are apolitical by no means suggests that in future circumstances of widespread political protests in China, the underground clergy could not engage in political activism. However, the benefits of political mobilization would need to surpass the costs of breaking the rules of their informal arrangements with local state actors. Church leaders’ opinions about the importance of being politically low-key are intimately linked to assumption that attempts to destabilize the regime would fail. They have learned that in the absence of a political opportunity structure that increases chances of mobilization, like a strong Party that succeeds in overcoming elite divisions and a booming economy, protesting may involve high costs. Today, regardless of how critical of the regime they are in their private lives, compliant church leaders would most likely not risk taking part in instances of political mobilization if the chances of success are low. A pastor who explicitly said that the Chinese Communist Party is an illegal institution, also expressed the importance to keep a low profile, for the sake of preserving his own unregistered congregation. (Interview BL92478) Making the decision to engage in pro-democracy activism could have devastating consequences on the informal privileges they have been able to secure over the years. Contestation would not only be costly because of the dramatic consequences they would entail if protests failed, but would also involve the mobilization of significant resources to convince risk-averse or
pro-regime church goers to follow suit. Underground church leaders’ informal autonomy, has until now, made them unlikely public opponents of the regime. By informally tolerating house churches, local governments have created incentives against regime opposition among church leaders.

Insofar as they are secured in a context of clandestinity, house churches’ informal privileges and autonomy, by no means constitute(s) a first step toward the legalization of non-state controlled churches. In fact, inasmuch as the informal pact is maintained between both parties, it may, in the medium and long-run, help prevent the formal protection or the legalization of house churches. The informality of the pact helps sustain the ambiguity and insecurity of underground churches’ legal status. The leader of a large congregation in Beijing maintained:

> Because our church does not have a legal identity, a sustained and stable relationship with the government is hard to build. Our relationships with authorities are informal, and for that reason, they also have their limits. (Interview BL17473)

Informal cooperation with local state agents may reduce the immediate uncertainties in the political environment where the underground clergy operates, by decreasing risks of government crackdowns upon religious practice. It also serves as a temporary measure that widens the range of activities church leaders may engage in. Ultimately, however, it has no genuine impact on the potential for house churches to become legally autonomous organizations within society. As the leader of an influential church in Beijing claimed:

> These relationships in the end do not have much impact on the legal future of our church. They may allow us to continue practice our religion, but they will not influence our chances of being recognized as a legally autonomous group in society. (Interview BL17473)
2. **DIVIDING THE UNDERGROUND CHURCH COMMUNITY, AND ALIENATING POLITICAL DISSIDENTS**

Beyond the increased costs of political mobilization local government lenience has generated, the fact that house churches were able to benefit from informal arrangements with local authorities contributed to divisions among the underground clergy, between the informally accepted congregations and the ones that chose to maintain a firm position against the regime. In doing so, the regime has been able to alienate regime opponents more effectively.

Compliant churches have been criticized by politically active congregations for informally cooperating with the authoritarian establishment. The politically critical churches constitute a minority of underground congregations, and are for the most part, located in the country’s large cities including Beijing, Chengdu, and Shanghai. The leaders of these churches have been transparent about their opinions on the regime, some of whom have even published their pro-democratic thoughts in books and articles. Chen Shengshan, a church leader who openly published his political opinions, for instance, sees Christianity as going hand-in-hand with democracy, and believes that China should engage in the latter path:

> For this new China which we are now building, the institutional development of democracy and national revival of Christianity are two hard tasks which must be undertaken simultaneously.\(^{103}\)

Similarly, some church leaders have specifically emphasized the risks of political status quo, and the need for underground churches to take part in political action against the injustices of the regime:

> Indifference or taking an apolitical position actually supports the injustices of the status quo. [...] A Christian’s duty [therefore] is to engage in political deliberation and protest.\(^{104}\)

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\(^{104}\)
Some of these religious figures have had conflictual relationships with the local authorities, and have been subject to close scrutiny by the departments in charge of maintaining public security, like the Ministry of State Security. They also refuse to be on good terms with the authorities for the sake of benefiting from greater informal rights. An informant in Central China who recently experienced detention in a labor camp [laojiao] once said:

If a house church attempts to be on good terms with government officials to avoid coercion, I believe that is very inappropriate (Interview BL28474).

Similarly, the pastor of a relatively small house church in suburban Shanghai stressed that “to use interpersonal relations to secure a church’s survival is a pitiful way of attempting to survive.” (Interview BL35474) The most radical church leaders may also look down upon the compliant clergy for lacking genuine independence:

These pastors mock compliant churches and accuse them of not being brave enough to risk no contact with authorities. They think that compliant pastors are opportunists. (Interview WG96479)

In contrast, compliant pastors believe that their strength lies in their independence from both the government and the Three-Self Church, and the fact that they do not share the views of politically radical churches in the underground community (Interview BL92478).

I once accompanied a pastor to a dinner in Beijing which proved to be highly revealing of such ideological tensions among underground preachers. Our host was a preacher and a well-known intellectual in the community for his views against the regime. He spent the first hour of our meeting criticizing churches in the pastor’s home city, for being too spiritually and financially corrupt, and for their closeness to local power as well as the Three-Self Church. He also expressed his disappointment over the pastor’s help given to a

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pro-regime scholar who had come to visit his hometown on field research, the year earlier. In the eyes of the host, his guest had betrayed the interests of house churches by giving a scholar who expressed unfavorable views about the legalization of house churches, a helping hand. The atmosphere throughout the dinner was very tense, and the pastor whom I had accompanied decided to cut the conversation short, and leave half way through our meal. Our Beijing host and the pastor never exchanged words since then. The pastor later confessed with a touch of irony that he had “no interest in engaging in a dialogue with such a ‘close-minded’ individual, whom despite his pro-democratic stance, only listened to himself speak and could not care less about others’ opinions.” (Interview BL92478) This incident was subsequently shared amongst other church leaders, some of whom thought it constituted additional evidence that that Beijing preacher had been alienating himself from the rest of the underground clergy.

Relationships between compliant congregations and the most politically radical churches remain tense in some areas. An informant claimed that they usually are not in contact with one another (Interview WG96479). While I was in the field, I was instructed not to tell churches in the two camps whom I was interviewing, assuming that some of the compliant clergy might refuse to meet with me knowing I had been in touch with the most politically radical churches, and vice versa.

The divisions characterizing the underground Christian space call into question the very relevance of a “house church movement,” a concept that is used recurrently in the literature on religion in China. Cheng (2003) portrays house churches as “networked groups that exhibit characteristics of a social movement” (p. 17). Kindopp (2004) similarly views these congregations as a manifestation of “widespread resistance of the
majority of […] Protestants.” (p. 5) While house church leaders chose to avoid operating under the umbrella of the TSPM and the RAB, and to that extent, have also manifested open or covert defiance vis-à-vis central regulations on religious affairs, many of them remain profoundly divided over how to best ensure their survival. These divisions have also contributed to limiting possibilities for large-scale house church mobilization for political reforms, and in that sense, have served regime interests.

While the above divisions resulted from the underground clergy’s disagreements over political compliance, some tensions have also been more directly linked to attempts by local governments to limit the influence of the most politicized church leaders among the underground space. One way in which they have done so is by pressuring compliant pastors to refrain from engaging in any pastoral activities with politically sensitive church leaders. The strategies employed for that purpose have been diverse. When a pastor known for his pro-democratic views visited a city on the south eastern coast of China a few years back, not only were he and his hosts followed from the moment he stepped out of the airport to the moment he flew back to his hometown, but the pastor of a church whose congregants were offering the guest shelter throughout his stay, was reminded of the risks he had been taking in trying to accommodate a politically sensitive individual. One day, passed midnight, while the guest was still in town, the PSB paid the host pastor’s 75 years-old parents a visit to inform them that their son had been involved in accommodating “an enemy of the state,” and to tell them he should not be associated with that sort of individual. That kind of pressure is not necessarily effective in dividing up the underground community, but it may nonetheless deter compliant pastors from engaging in
a regular and sustained dialogue with political opponents to the regime. For example, since that visit, the two pastors have infrequently been in touch.

Another way in which local authorities have sought to prevent the building of solidarity linkages among underground churches is by preventing (or cracking down upon) religious meetings among church leaderships from taking place cross-regionally or nationally. As the former United Front Work Department official emphasized:

> The central government does not fear house churches on an individual basis per se, especially if they are not politicized. What it fears, however, is their capacity to organize cross-nationally. (Interview MF89473)

In early 2000, in Jilin, the PSB and the Higher People’s Court established guidelines according to which the organizers of large-scale organizational meetings, including religious ones, should be punished with three years of imprisonment and penalties of 10,000 yuan. These rules were similarly applied in all other Chinese provinces, and were to be effective throughout the decade. Subsequently, reported crackdowns upon house churches regularly targeted groups of pastors or house church associations. In December 2007, 270 pastors were detained by the PSB in Hedeng, Shandong for taking part in an “illegal religious gathering.” In January 2010, the Handan City RAB interfered with the activities of thirty church leaders who are also members of the Chinese House Church Alliance (zhongguo jiating jiaohui lianhehui). In a similar vein, in February 2009, the Wolong District PSB detained 60 church leaders for attending an “illegal seminar.” The financial and material resources used to organize the event were

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105 Jilin sheng gong’anting wenjian jilin sheng gaoji renminfayuan [Document of the Jilin Province Public Security Bureau, Jilin Province Higher People’s Court], “Guanyu yanlidaji feifa zuzhi de tongzhi” [“Notice on Severe Measures to Take Against Illegal Organizations”], 2002.
also confiscated.\footnote{108} Beyond such examples of crackdowns, the Chinese government has also tried to stop large-scale underground Christian alliances from operating cross-nationally. On November 28th, 2008, the Ministry of Civil Affairs made the official decision to ban the Chinese House Church Alliance led by Pastor Zhang Mingxuan. The statement by the Ministry of Civil Affairs said:

Upon investigation, without registration, the ‘Chinese House Church Alliance’ has undertaken activities in the name of a social organization without approval. In accordance with the provision of Article 35 of the Administrative Regulations for Registration of Social Groups, the Authority has decided to ban the ‘Chinese House Church Alliance.’\footnote{109}

Among other organizations whose activities have been subject to close scrutiny is the China Gospel Fellowship (\textit{zhonghua fuyin tuanqi}), also called Tanghe Fellowship,\footnote{110} based in Henan province. The cross-regional activities of the organization which was created in the 1980s, and known for having over two million members in Henan and in Anhui, among other provinces, are subject to local government crackdowns. On April 30th, 2009, public security officers raided a communion service in Xinye City, Henan organized by that group, and where preachers from various provinces were had also gathered.\footnote{111} By severely controlling the activities of unregistered cross-regional Christian organizations, the regime has so far succeeded in limiting the risks that politically active underground church leaders use such networks to build an encompassing mobilizing structure that might protest against the regime, and that might have created incentives for compliant churches to break their informal arrangements with local state actors. They

\footnote{110} Tanghe is a county in the prefectural city of Nanyang, in Henan province. It is where the China Gospel Fellowship originates from.
have done so by discouraging mobilization among compliant churches and exchanges between the compliant and politicized clergy, as well as closely monitoring the scope of the activities of existing house church networks. Under conditions of significant government pressure not to organize religious events with a political overtone, many cross-regional house churches alliances have been careful to limit their exchanges to faith-related matters.

3. POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE FORMAL INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Compliant church leaders’ commitment to remaining low profile and their reluctance to publicly rally behind politicized churches’ struggle for the legalization of house churches, have facilitated the regime’s task of preserving regulations on religious affairs, despite their increasing irrelevance. Because the majority of underground churches are not out on the streets protesting against such regulations, incentives for a change in the Chinese government’s religious policy are low. Whereas the preservation of institutions of religious cooptation have so far helped the regime survive, with the fast expansion of the underground church community across the country, could the need to preserve the regime not eventually lead the central government to legalize house churches?

Tsai reminds the reader that one “should not assume the deafness of dictatorships” (p. 213) and maintains that “the [informal] coping strategies of everyday actors […] may have unintended effects on formal institutions.” (p. 208) Put differently, “the repetition and diffusion of nonconsequentialist practices [shape] the landscape of [policies].” (p. 212) The author contends that the “adaptive informal institutions” developed by local officials to accommodate large private enterprises in the 1980s and early 1990s, when large-scale privatization remained illegal, influenced the central government’s decision to
legalize large companies subsequently. Tsai nonetheless says little about whether informal institutions in certain policy areas are more likely to influence formal institutional change in a way that supports autocratic regime resilience, than those in other areas.

Autocratic elites might be better off leaving certain institutions informal, than making them integrated components of official policies. This is particularly the case if autocrats anticipate that a hypothetic formalization of informal institutions would necessitate a change in political regime. In China, the dismantling of current regulations on religious affairs would call into question the very existence of the CCP’s existence, insofar as it would discredit the principle of cooptation. Legalizing non-state-sanctioned churches would mean allowing an independent civil society to flourish, and planting the seeds for the institutionalization of political contestation. Similarly, a former official from the United Front Work Department stressed that religious freedom and political liberalization go hand-in-hand:

> If the Party and the media are not free, how could religious practice be so? Up until China protects and guarantees the freedom of thought, the chances that house churches become legal religious entities remain slim. (Interview MF89473)

The informant further claimed that in the context of an authoritarian regime struggling to survive, certain reforms are too politically risky, and thus unthinkable:

> Reforms have been quicker in particular areas of the system than others. But any political reform that implies liberalizing the Party and politics are much harder to conceive of, since they would necessitate a change in the system. (Interview MF89473)

As Pye (1995) suggests, “the leadership appreciates too much the advantages of operating in the shadows of a closed system to want to bring their decision-making processes out into the open.” (p. 39) Hence, the informalization of particular adaptive procedures aimed to address societal expectations, helps the regime avoid the costs that the formalization of such rules would entail. Where the risks involved in formal institutional change are high,
alternative informal institutions offer local state agents a solution. They allow the government to calculate its loss, while formal accommodation would make it no longer able to control it. (Interview BL50476) Informal rules allow autocratic leaders to address the growing contradictions of the system, by keeping religious policies intact and the government’s official rhetoric about religion unchanged, while informally allowing compliant underground churches to operate, and reducing risks of political contestation among the clergy.

That regulations on religious affairs are kept as they are in no way entails that the central government could not soften its position towards house churches. Recent initiatives by the central government and Party agencies suggest a potential relaxation of their stance on underground Christianity. In November 2008, a conference on house churches was organized by a State Council-affiliated research institute in Beijing, and brought together Chinese scholars, unregistered preachers and policy-makers. That was the first time government officials had a serious conversation with relevant scholars and preachers about underground Protestant churches. For some of the participants, it suggested that central government agencies and the Party were finally acknowledging the significance of house churches in Chinese society (Interview ZA95477). Furthermore, in 2009, the central government allowed the conduct of a national survey on Christians in China, in which a section was dedicated to information-gathering about unregistered churches. Despite these positive developments, a Chinese scholar specialized in the study of underground Christianity nonetheless emphasized that one cannot overanalyze the meaning or implications of these moves by Beijing:

It would be too much of a stretch to assume that these events or decisions mean something in terms of future policy change towards unregistered churches. While some of these activities were
sponsored by the State Council, the individuals involved in those projects are primarily researchers (as opposed to policy-makers), and they seek to maintain a low profile about their interest in this issue. Hence, the organizers’ unwillingness to invite journalists to the 2008 conference. (Interview ZA95477)

The central government’s unwillingness to revisit its current regulations on religious affairs is notably manifested in its call for religious cooptation in the media. On January 24th, 2011, Xinhua published an article stating that the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) would “guide Protestants worshipping at unregistered churches into worshipping at government-sanctioned ones.”¹¹² The absence of any foreseeable formal institutional change in favor of house churches is also implied in the central government’s officially published statistics about unregistered Christianity. While Xinhua claims that seventy per cent of Protestant churches are state-sanctioned, non-official sources, including some government officials in charge of religious affairs, estimate that unregistered congregations constitute the majority of churches in China today. The government’s statistical under-estimation of the total number of underground churches is revealing of its struggle to protect the legitimacy of state-sanctioned institutions, in a political context where discrediting religious cooptation would correspond to negating authoritarianism.

**CONCLUSION**

Just like the increasing expansion of underground Christian spaces in China has not constituted a threat to the resilience of the regime, the existence of alternative informal rules to monitor the activities of underground churches at the local government level

cannot be interpreted as a sign of deteriorating central government capacity.\textsuperscript{113} Moreover, while many studies have provided rich evidence that local officials are opportunistic and behave in ways that are contradictory to higher level government interests (Pei, 2006; Whiting, 2004), evidence in this chapter suggests that by informally tolerating non-state-sanctioned churches, local officials have contributed to the survival of China’s authoritarian regime, by successfully containing pressures for change in the CCP’s current policy on religion. Informal tolerance has increased costs on the part of the compliant underground clergy to push for greater official rights. It has also cultivated political divisions between house church leaders, reducing their potential to form an encompassing mobilizing structure, a condition that may facilitate large-scale protest. While it has been argued that informal institutions may eventually contribute to endogenous formal institutional change, the central government has so far shown no real sign of future policy change toward house churches.

\textsuperscript{113} According to Edin (2003), central government capacity is ‘the capacity to monitor and control lower level agents.’ (p. 35)
CONCLUSION:  
THE STUDY OF COMPLIANCE AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS: CONCEPTUAL BENEFITS,  
EMPIRICAL GENERALIZATION AND LIMITATIONS

Local governments in China have tolerated the majority of underground churches, and in doing so, have allowed them to expand, despite most authoritarian regimes’ inclination to create conditions against an independent civil society. Informal cooperation between the two parties has resulted from both parties’ compatible interests, namely their need to reduce uncertainty about the other’s political intentions. Given their choice to be autonomous from the RAB, underground churches were constrained to develop political strategies to safeguard their own existence. They have studied local government interests closely, for the purpose of securing cooperative relations with key officials in their respective localities. Compliance has taken the form of church openness to dialogue (about the underground Christian space), proactive information sharing, gift-giving and -receiving, as well as the maintenance of a low profile in terms of church size and rhetoric. Conversely, compliance with local government authority has helped authorities solve a policy implementation dilemma as far as religious cooptation is concerned: that of navigating the underground Christian space by exclusively using force against the potentially politically destabilizing congregations, and mobilize coercive resources for societal problems that they consider more pressing, while ensuring that lenience towards house churches is the least costly possible.

By helping identify the churches that are loyal to the regime and the ones that are not, compliance by the underground clergy has helped reduce local government uncertainty, and offered a solution to the high risks of implementing coercive regulations on religious affairs. Information provision is the main force that constrains local officials
towards informally tolerating the compliant underground Christian space. Insofar as cooperation is sustained, it provides public security officers with a context for a stable source of intelligence about the underground religious space. The more churches are open to inform local officials of their potentially sensitive activities, and the more transparent their internal organization and leadership are, the more irrelevant becomes government resort to harsh means of getting information out of such groups, or cooptation.

Unlike O’Brien and Li (2006)’s “rightful resisters” who challenge local governance, seek central government attention to defend their rights, and use formal channels like the petitionning system to do so, compliant house church leaders choose to defy central government rules but avoid confrontation with local authorities, and find informal solutions to their needs, even if the latter entail bypassing the law. While rightful resisters see local officials as the very source of their injustices, for compliant defiants, they constitute an informal solution to their lack of a legal status.

Yet, while strategic interaction between local state actors and compliant churches is self-enforcing, it ultimately does not create equal benefits for both parties. The underground clergy gets more autonomy than it would without accommodative informal rules, but it nonetheless lacks a proper legal status which may protect it against any reversal of informal rules by local governments, or potential power abuses on the part of officials.

Moreover, inasmuch as informal cooperation between both parties is self-enforcing and rule-bound, it also contributes to the resilience of the regime in two ways: first, by increasing the costs of political mobilization on the part of the underground clergy; second, by accentuating divisions within the underground Christian space,
between compliant churches and the more politicized ones. Because strategic interaction
discourages compliant underground churches to unite and mobilize for greater legal
recognition, the accommodative informal institutions that result from bargaining help
cultivate institutional status quo. In this sense, compliant defiants differ from “rightful
resisters”, insofar as the latter hold greater potential to “place new issues on the agenda in
a forceful and suggestive way, and foster an environment that facilitate policy
innovations, institutional change, and readjustments in state-society relations.” (p. 123)

The study of accommodative informal institutions as analyzed in the context of this
dissertation, is important for our understanding of contemporary authoritarian regimes and
their relations with society, in two ways. First, the theoretical framework has potential for
broader applicability, within the Chinese context, and beyond. Second, the analysis
reveals that as their societal challenges keep growing and becoming more complex,
authoritarian leaders are constrained to bargain informally with society to ensure the
resilience of their rule.

1. The Broader Applicability of the Theoretical Framework

a. Generalizability Within the Chinese Context

The advantage of a study of strategic interaction and bargaining between local state actors
and societal defiants lies in its potential to explain why groups or individuals considered
‘illegal’ by a regime,\textsuperscript{114} are exempt from government punishment. It can flesh out how
they may interact with government authority, to reduce risks of survival uncertainty in the

114 While compliant defiance may also be manifested among unrecognized groups in democratic settings, it
is more likely to be used as a strategy for protection by informal actors in authoritarian settings, where being
illegal potentially involves higher stakes, like risks of harsher repression, and more political uncertainty, as
a result of government’s ability to use power spontaneously and arbitrarily.
political environment in which they operate. It may also help address why the government bends the rules for some segments of society, and not other ones. An analysis of strategic interaction and bargaining between local states and compliant defiants constitutes a conceptual starting point for a closer study of who the benders of formal institutions are, as well as how and why they substitute informal rules for formal ones. Compliant defiants may be religious or ethnonationalist minorities, or may represent other social or economic interests that are considered too politically risky to legalize by a government, for reasons of regime stability and resilience.

In China, the compliant defiants who managed to earn the informal acknowledgement of local governments are found in various spheres of society. Among examples other than underground churches, and which are worth noting, are entrepreneurs who owned large private companies in the 1980s and 1990s, before large-scale privatization was permitted, and who operated under the label of ‘managers of collective firms’, with the informal support of local governments (Tsai, 2008, p. 57). During the first decade following the launch of the government’s opening-up policy, private enterprises of more than eight employees were prohibited in China. Yet, despite constraints against the free market, several private businessowners who managed large companies labeled their business as ‘collective firms’, to evade high government taxes and get preferential access to credits (Brink, 2011). This act of hiding the genuine ownership structure of companies, also called the “red hat” phenomenon, was supported by local government officials.

By 1988, in the city of Wenzhou exclusively, privately owned companies covered under the label of collective firms, were estimated at 45,000 (Chen, 2007, p. 57). Strong ties between hundreds of thousands of individuals in the private sector and the
government grew out of these transactions, and also enabled the altering of formal institutions in favor of informal adaptive rules. Fiscal decentralization, along with higher pressures by local governments to develop their respective locality economically (Oi, 1999), created incentives for cadres to informally allow lucrative enterprises to exist, and contribute to bureaucratic revenues, “regardless of their true ownership status” (Tsai, 2008, p. 58). Tsai states that four out of five private companies were ‘acceptant’, in that they would act upon informal norms of compliance to improve their relations with government officials, by inviting them to luxurious banquets or providing free services to them.

Additionally, compliant business owners would accept most of the requirements by local authorities, for running their enterprise. Along with gestures meant to nurture their relations with local authorities, entrepreneurs remained rather apolitical, and refrained from using formal institutional channels to push for further liberalization (Tsai, 2008). Hence, while they defied the system by bending registration rules as far as their ownership status was concerned, most red entrepreneurs (hongse qiyejia) nonetheless manifested high levels of compliance vis-à-vis the local state’s informal rules, for reasons of profit and survival. Tsai (2008) believes that adaptive informal institutions protecting large-scale privatization were important factors in explaining the absence of a genuine pro-democratic force among the business sector in China.

Accommodative informal institutions at the local level have also been created in an attempt to adapt to the rapid resurgence of folk customs (fengsu xiguan) and traditional culture (chuantong wenhua), which the central government considers ‘illegal heresies’ for not properly falling into Daoism or Buddhism (Chau, 2006, p. 1; 211). In spite of
prohibitive central government laws, the relationship between the heads of folk temples and the local state is one of patron-clientelism: “officials support temples that pay them respect and tribute.” (Chau, 2006, p. 216) Compliance with local government rules often takes material or economic forms: during folk festivals, police officers are usually “paid for their service with money, free lodging, good food, cigarettes, and liquor.” (p. 217) Similarly, the temple heads give officials in charge of electricity a material gesture prior to the temple festival, to ensure that there are no accidental power cuts during the event (Chau, 2006, p. 218). In making such compliant gestures, the heads of folk temples seek to reduce risks of state interference in their temples’ affairs at a crucial period of the year where the temple could be subject to government harassment. Conversely, there are advantages for the local state in informally accepting the practice of folk customs. Folk temples, when they are pilgrimage centers, can significantly contribute to the development of the local economy and constitute great sources of revenue for the authorities (Tsai, 2002). Due to these economic benefits, informal government lenience has taken proportions beyond simple tolerance: ‘supersitious’ cult centers have been registered by the authorities as Daoist or Buddhist temples or regular sites for religious activities (zongjiao huo dong changa suo), in an attempt to protect them “against any possible future anti-superstition campaign coming from the central government.” (Chau, 2006, p. 217)

Finally, in China, township- and village-level leaders have made significant informal concessions to the “dependent evaders” of the one-child policy and forced sterilization practices since the 1980s (White, 2010). While “independent evaders” invoked the law and at times resorted to disruptive tactics of resistance, “dependent evaders” saw collusion
with local officials as the solution to avoiding coercive regulations. They relied upon “the silent aquiescence or active assistance of local officials,” (White, 2010, p. 179) in exchange for political loyalty. One of the informally accommodating ways cadres have responded to birth control resistance has been to “engag[e] in statistical fraud to hide excess births” (p. 182), and avoid enforcing sterilization on families with more than two children who had no son (p. 183). In some cases, aware that higher officials might visit their locality to assess whether policies were enforced properly, village leaders would advise the evaders of the birth control system to flee temporarily (p. 180). Because reporting to higher authorities that they had exceeded the birth quota in their locality would negatively affect their work evaluations and potential pay rise (p. 182), hiding and protecting households with more than one child had its advantages. Finally, informally accommodating the offending households helped local officials prevent these families’ resort to more disruptive means to resist regulations, and in that sense, protect the locality’s stability, and contribute to that of the regime.

b. Generalizability Beyond the China Case

An institutionalist account of informal cooperation between local authorities and legally unrecognized groups in society also has the potential to travel beyond the China case. It may apply to authoritarian state-society relations in the Middle East, where autocratic regimes have also been preoccupied by their own survival, and have bent formal institutions for the purpose of ensuring compliance among certain key segments of society.

115 In this sense, White (2010)’s ‘independent evaders’ resembled O’Brien and Li (2006)’s rightful resisters, and ‘dependent evaders’ adopted tactics that were similar to those of compliant defiants.
The authoritarian Ba’th Party in Syria, which represents the Alawite minority, has closely monitored the practice of Islam in the country and enforced a policy of religious cooptation across Muslim denominations, including the Sunni majority. The Party has nonetheless strategically implemented an ambiguous policy towards the leadership of Sunni Islam that seeks to operate outside the state-sanctioned Islamic institutions. The author provides examples of regime independent shaykhs who have had close connections with highly ranked officials in several of the government’s ministries and in the General Intelligence Services (Mukhbarat), and who managed to use these relationships to protect their ‘autonomous’ religious activities. For Donker (2010), informal rules between Syrian elites and independent Sunni leaders have helped promote regime stability insofar as they have provided the state with “better oversight of activities in the Sunni community” (p. 446), increased information flows between both sides, and helped better guarantee political loyalty among independent Sunni leaders. As Wedeen (1999) maintains, the struggle for regime survival in Syria has become one of strategically enforcing compliance, rather than seeking legitimacy. (p. 6)

Similarly, in Iran, the Bahais who account for 300,000 believers, and Christian converts, who represent approximately one million believers among the country’s population of 77 million, are considered illegal by the government. Although no studies have systematically analyzed the informal relationships between underground Persian churches or Bahai communities with local authorities, the Iran case features characteristics that are similar to China, suggesting that the local government may be

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117 Underground Persian churches are those involved in the conversion of Muslims into Christianity. While Iran legally protects Christian faith and allows Christian celebrations, it prohibits missionary work aiming at such conversions.
more lenient towards those groups, than official laws enable them to. Crackdowns on underground Christian converts and the Bahais are occasional, often prior to important religious or political events (Sanasarian, 2000). If repression is periodic, the usual absence of repression has yet to be accounted for.

Although not as decentralized as China, the Iranian bureaucracy relegates several policy responsibilities to local governments, and there have been gaps between policy design and implementation. Because local councils and mayors are accountable to citizens, local governance takes on a clientelistic character. Ethnic and religious diversity has been a crucial issue at stake in Iran’s local politics, and insofar as it entails considering constituents’ needs, decentralization has come to be perceived as necessary for maintaining national unity, even when it implies policy discontinuities between central and local governments (Tajbakhsh, 2000). As Sanasarian (2000) suggests, “state-minority relations have been localized […]” (p. 82) The author adds that how far local officials implement religious policy depends upon the personal relationship between the high-ranking clerics and the religious leadership of the community, as well as the local authorities’ overall attitude and willingness to adhere to the Center (Tehran) (p. 82).

Examples of rule-bending by local clerics, as far as religious policy is concerned, abound. Sanasarian (2000) claims that inside local government offices, there are ‘devout’ officials who work in their capacity to informally protect illegal religious groups and practices (p. 82; 161). He gives as an example, that of Muslim chiefs who protected Bahai households in their village against the Iranian state’s coercive policies (p. 161). Though such an analysis is beyond the scope of the dissertation, how far these clerics are able to secure informal arrangements with unrecognized religious groups, and the reasons why
they do so, deserves further exploration. Like the above Syrian case, the Iranian example is an empirical starting point for more comparative research about the effects of compliance by groups who defy central government rules. Intensive fieldwork would allow one to further elucidate the subtleties in these groups’ relations with local authorities.

2. The Role of Informal Institutions as Autocratic Regime Survival Tactics: Conceptual Benefits

Beyond the potential for broader applicability of the theoretical framework, an analysis of accommodative informal institutions moves away from comparative studies that exclusively focus on autocratic regimes’ use of formal concessions as survival tactics. This study assumes that formal institutions in certain circumstances are insufficient or incomplete to address and satisfy societal demands or expectations. For instance, while cooptation is a useful tool insofar as the state successfully manages to integrate the opposition within government-controlled organizations, authoritarian states are sometimes confronted with an uncooptable informal opposition, whose costs of suppression by means of repression are too high. In such circumstances, what other response options do officials have aside from coercion? Moving away from a top-down analysis of state adaptation to society, this study sheds light on the conditions under which autocratic leaders at the local level develop informal rules that allow societal defiants of formal rules, access to greater autonomy, in a way that does not compromise the effectiveness of local governance, but rather increases it. The analysis also explores how local state actors’ informal policy calculations are influenced by the behavior of the defiants of formal rules vis-à-vis their authority. In this sense, informal institutions are treated as emerging out of
a bargaining and self-enforcing process involving both local state actors and those in society who defy formal rules.

Accommodative informal institutions have the advantage of helping authoritarian governments mitigate the side effects of increasingly irrelevant formal institutions, in a context where the standards for securing regime resilience are higher. Now that citizens of most authoritarian countries can use information technologies on a daily basis, access foreign news, travel overseas, are confronted with liberal democratic values, and generally have more tools to be critical of their own government, authoritarian regimes are likely to depend upon new survival strategies to maintain a high level of popularity among the population, and limit political opposition. Similarly, Levitsky and Way (2002) maintain that full authoritarianism has become difficult to sustain in a post-Cold War context where western liberal democratic principles prevail, and in light of developments in media and communications technologies, as well as the growth of international networking aimed at promoting democracy and human rights. (p. 63)

In China, the informal politics of tolerance, or the ‘institutionalization of non-institutionalized accommodation’, is likely to become an increasingly important instrument used by the Chinese Communist Party, to protect its credibility, address popular grievances, and contain risks of pro-democratic mobilization. As non-institutionalized preferential gestures that take personalistic and subtle forms, informal institutions give state actors the possibility to enforce under-the-table rules which help secure informal loyalty on the part of the segments of the population that reject cooptation, without risks of being interpreted as weak or incoherent by Chinese public opinion. In doing so, informal institutions allow the state to expand society’s space while
remaining consistent in its authoritarian rhetoric, and without effecting formal institutional change.

Insofar as the use of accommodative informal institutions is based on the premise that particular groups are impossible to coopt, it may *prima facie* be interpreted as a sign that the regime is increasingly unable to contain the proliferation of autonomous spaces. Yet, underlying informal concessions is an adaptive strategy by the local state to maintain its leverage over uncooptable groups. Informal rules do not emerge from a lack of state capacity to enforce its policies, but they are deliberately developed by autocratic leaders as societal control strategies when they realize that the formal institutions that used to have some level of popular legitimacy, cannot enforce compliance anymore. While informal rules may be revealing of the increasing obsolescence of particular formal institutions, they nonetheless give autocratic leaders the opportunity to redefine and renegotiate their rule with certain key segments of the population, informally. Hence, that some formal institutions have lost their popular legitimacy or ability to be enforced in society constitutes an insufficient indicator of regime weakness, especially when state actors find alternative rules that are effective enough to enforce compliance upon the defiants of formal institutions. As Heydemann (2007) suggests, “institutional arrangements and related modes of informal governance […] combine to create incentives that favor the resolution of conflicts within the existing system of rule – if not for everyone, then for a sufficient number of actors – to permit the maintenance of the system.” (p. 36)
Acommodative informal rules in this study are not a sign of state weakness in light of an increasingly uncontrollable society, but one of cleverness and adaptive state capacity. These rules could not be implemented without significant amount of material and human resources to mobilize across government agencies, to monitor the informal space, and ensure that the non-official rules of the arrangement are respected. In this sense, the authoritarian regimes that rely upon accommodative informal rules as a strategy to ensure political stability cannot be compared to regimes where politics are predominantly informal because the state simply lacks the resources to control policy evasions. The latter take the form of personalistic informal rules, like clientelism, patrimonialism, corruption and clan politics, which result from deliberate attempts by self-interested officials to flout formal institutions. In such settings, informal institutions are there to facilitate the state’s non-fulfillment of its duties and evasion of responsibilities.

The Chinese state has become cleverer at finding strategies of survival over the past decades, and local state actors’ resort to informal rules as a means to appease popular demands and frustrations with current formal institutions is an example that well illustrates that reality. But until when can the regime rely upon its cleverness and adaptability to sustain itself? Moreover, as Slater (2010) highlights, regime durability ought not be conflated with its duration. To what extent might accommodative informal arrangements between the local state and segments of society like underground Protestant churches contribute to regime duration, as opposed to regime durability? Resilience, and increased flexibility in tackling both formal and informal institutions, does not imply regime immutability. Accommodative informal institutions which have proven to help enforce compliance in the medium-term could push the targets of informal concessions to
redefine the rules of their interaction with the state in the longer-run, and press for formal recognition. In this sense, informal tolerance may constitute a double-edged sword for the regime. The self-enforcing impact of strategic interaction upon uncooptable segments’ compliance with local authority could prove to be transitory.
APPENDIX A:
THE GOVERNMENT ACTORS IN CHARGE OF MANAGING RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

Several aspects of the internal functioning of the Chinese bureaucracy remain unaccessible to the researcher, and make the task of understanding the causes of Chinese government decisions to repress or to accommodate certain pockets of society even more so difficult. Shedding light on the different departments involved in the management of religious affairs, their level of influence, as well as their responsibilities may nonetheless provide the reader with important clues as to the sources of certain government decisions. Many organizations have been involved in the management of religious affairs in China since the early fifties, including some Party organs, state departments, as well as patriotic associations. Party organizations are the most influential ones in the system. Along with the Central Committee and the Politburo, they are the ones giving state organs guidelines as far as policy implementation is concerned. Among them, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) plays an important role in the implementation of religious policy, and the gathering of intelligence about religious matters for the purposes of advising the Party. It operates directly under the CPC Central Committee, and adjusts policy if need be, in response to instructions from the latter (Hunter and Chan, 1993). Just like SARA (or what used to be considered the Central RAB) follows the guidelines of the UFWD, the local RABs receive instructions from the local UFWDs (Hunter and Chan, 1993; Wenger, 2004).

SARA operates under the authority of the State Council, and is thus of lower status than the UFWD. Instead of formulating policy and regulations, it is responsible for the implementation of religious regulations. It is also in charge of supervising the TSPM and the CCC. As mentioned by Hunter and Chan (1993) and confirmed by some of my
informants in the field, working for the RAB is of limited prestige, and hence a rather unpopular appointment for cadres (p. 54). The rationale for such lack of prestige is intimately related to the fewer opportunities local officials have to receive bribes from ‘religious transactions’ than there would be if they worked for other departments (i.e. Ministries of finance, commerce, agriculture, railways, and so on). The RAB has a Central office, as well as provincial, municipal and county level offices.

The TSPM and the CCC are both in charge of managing and supervising religious affairs, which includes selecting or approving church leaders, though Document 19 clearly states that worship sites are under the administrative authority of the RAB. Together, they are called the lianghui, or ‘two associations,’ and for Hunter and Chan (1993), they are perfect examples of products of state co-optation (p. 62). These organizations, however, act as the professional leading units of registered churches, exclusively (Homer, 2010, p. 59). Underground churches are not subject to the TSPM’s rules, but the responsibility to monitor the latter is relegated to the PSB. Along with other heads of state-controlled associations and representatives of the business sector, the leaders of the lianghui all have a seat in the zhengxie, or the People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPCC - renmin zhengzhi xiehui huiyi), While the functions of the TSPM are more political and bureaucratic, those of the CCC are ecclesiastical (Hunter and Chan, 1993, p. 59). Some TSPM leaders also work for the CCC (p. 59). These two associations serve as information providers for the RAB.

The local PSB is in charge of addressing security-related problems associated with religious practice. Hunter and Chan (1993) claim that the police is involved in “arrests for illegal religious activities; surveillance; monitoring of foreign influence; arrests for

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ransom or extortion; and violent attacks on some ‘subversive’ groups” (p. 56). While it is true that the local PSB is usually called upon by the RAB to run regular checks on, interrogate, detain, and/or arrest relevant members of the Christian community, more than one department is involved in such matters. Disaggregating the bureaucracy in charge of security is a necessary empirical step to avoid simplifications in government responses to house churches. Who intervenes depends upon the reasons for intervention, and the sensitivity of the case. There are three kinds of officials who are likely to come and knock on a house church leader’s door if he or she is in trouble: the State Security department (guojia anquanju), the Domestic Security Detachment (guobao), and officers from the local police station (paichusuo). Depending on whether house church leaders or members are suspected of being supported by foreign governments or organizations, being part of an ‘evil cult’ or disrupting the daily activities of their community, the government officers they will have to deal with may vary.\textsuperscript{119} The below table summarizes each department’s major areas of concern and level of influence:

\textsuperscript{119} As an informant who was frequently subject to government repression explained: ‘Officials involved in ensuring state security also differ in terms of their available resources, and repression tactics. Those from the Ministry of State Security are the most economically powerful. As an informant suggested, one can recognize them by the type of cars they drive, the type of suits they wear, and the kinds of restaurants they take you to. They are also the most reluctant to show suspects their business cards. If they need to interrogate suspects, they usually cover their eyes and take them to remote, unknown areas to do so. The Domestic Security Detachment inside the Public Security Bureau has much less money than the Ministry of State Security. If its officials need to get you, they may arrive at your place around 10pm, but they will not bother you until you sleep. Like Ministry of State Security officials, officials from the Domestic Security Detachment are less likely to use violence to get information from you, but they will use psychological manipulation to get what they want. They can seem very vicious when they start interrogating, and then they tend to become nicer, if you cooperate. The key is to show willingness to cooperate, without revealing compromising information. But if you have never experienced such detention before, you might end up doing exactly what they want you to do. Officers from the local police station are the ones with fewer resources, and if they need or want to use force against suspects, they are likelier to use physical force.’ (Interview BL21473)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Reason for Intervention</th>
<th>Level of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Security Department</td>
<td>Suspected to be supported by foreign governments and/or Christian organizations</td>
<td>Highest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Security Detachment</td>
<td>Content of religious beliefs, suspicious cult or heresy</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local police station</td>
<td>Neighborhood complaint, RAB request for intervention regarding the lack of registration</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Chinese Security Departments’ Main Areas of Concern and Level of Influence

Evidence to support the above differentiation is found in Yang (2008)’s compilation of investigations of religious cases between January and December 2006. Out of 43 religious incidents across the country reported by Yang (2008, p. 40-50), at least 28 cases were handled by the local PSB.\(^{120}\) Reasons for police intervention in these cases varied and sometimes were manifold: in six cases, targets of repression were accused of disrupting public order or people’s lives and in twelve cases they were penalized for illegal assembly. In one case, church members were reported to have revealed state secrets, and in another one, they were detained for organizing illegal activities with foreigners. Finally, justifications for penalty were unclear in eight cases (Yang, 2008, p. 40-50). In three of the preceding, the targets of state control were accused of illegal religious beliefs, two of them were penalized for ‘illegal religious activities’ without specifying whether they were related to the content of Christians’ beliefs or other reasons, and in the sixth case, the justification for detention remains unclear to this day (Yang, 2008, p. 41).

\(^{120}\) Yang (2008) in fact claims that 38 of such cases are handled by the PSB (p. 25), but the author’s numbers do not reflect a distinction between the *guobao* and the local police station.
APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

Understanding the mutual expectations and the enforcement strategies that allow informal rules to be sustained, and which dictate behavior on the part of both the underground clergy and officials in charge of religious affairs and public security, necessitates deep knowledge of the community which operates under these institutions. Intensive and extensive fieldwork is an inevitable step for capturing how underground church leaders and local public security officials come to strategically cooperate. Schedler (2009b), however, warns researchers of the methodological challenge to the study of institutional manipulation in authoritarian settings. The author maintains that “[whereas] it is relatively easy to map the big institutional choices authoritarian rulers adopt, it is much more difficult to trace the strategies of institutional manipulation they pursue.” (p. 17)

Transcending the predominant focus on formal institutions, and more specifically, analyzing how and why these rules are bent in the daily lives of individuals or groups affected by them, requires methodological tools that are adapted to that.

To the extent that compliance by house church leaders takes subtle forms, and given the fact that “informal sanctioning mechanisms are often […] hidden, and even illegal” (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004, p. 733), tracing their everyday manifestations required methods that were contextually grounded. My use of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, gave me access to a whole new world of data that proved to be revealing of state-society dynamics that challenged formal institutions and regime rhetoric, best represented in the various local media and archival documents on China’s religious policy. As Bourdieu (1981) claimed, intensive qualitative research can help one deepen what is “politically scientifically thinkable” (p. 4). Although archives
and media data were helpful in identifying the Chinese government’s official policy on religious affairs, and that sense, supported elements of my argumentation, digging deeper than the actual policy on paper required methods that challenged conventional ways of gathering information. As Wedeen (2002) maintains, the impact of informal institutions on politics can only be properly studied through immersion. In this sense, Gerring (2001) was also right to argue that creative work in social science “requires a broad grounding in methodology” (p. xix). Each method employed in the context of this research had its own advantages.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in eight cities, including Beijing, Chengdu, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shijiazhuang, Suzhou, Zhengzhou, and Wenzhou. I interviewed 125 individuals, including the leaders of large, medium and small unregistered congregations, as well as churches that were registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. I also spoke with members of the state-controlled clergy, local government officials and police officers, scholars of state-society relations and of religion, lawyers, and Christian material publishers. In several cases, access to informants was facilitated by my contact with prior informants, and their extensive network of acquaintances, friends and colleagues. Interviews were helpful insofar as they helped clarify how the underground clergy was affected, or not, by existing regulations on religious affairs. How the clergy spoke about these rules, were revealing of how little formal rules mattered in their daily lives. These conversations created opportunities for longer exchanges about the alternative rules which they saw as more significant in their socio-political environment, and their relationship with local authority.
Interviews were crucial insofar as responses by informants were often filled with enlightening anecdotes, gossips or rumors about which church leaders were on good terms or not with the authorities, which ones were better off than others in the political system, and why, what kinds of opinions members of the underground clergy had about the regime, and so on. Aware that interview data are inherently subjective, and thus more subject to questioning, I was careful not to take for granted the validity of the stories I was told. Interviewing 125 individuals nonetheless gave me enough material to evaluate how much some stories were the product of false rumors or misunderstandings of underground church-state society relations, and how genuinely representative of the context other anecdotes were. To do so, I looked for confirmations of information validity across several unrelated informants, and paid particular heed to information consistency from one party to another, keeping in mind their varying interests and the limits of their ability to be transparent on some sensitive matters with a foreign researcher (i.e. underground clergy, the official church, some local government officials).

Informal conversations were an important supplement to semi-structured interviews, to the extent that they helped clarify some questions that were often touched upon superficially during the latter. They often took place in the car, from one interview location to another, or during lunch or dinner time, with the informants I did not have the opportunity to see on a regular basis. Beyond their casuality which often made informants feel at greater ease to talk about political topics, informal conversations with key informants who were present throughout my field research were particularly helpful in better understanding the politics and the conflicts characterizing the underground church community, which informants I formally interviewed for a few hours often chose not to
get into. They also helped uncover the ideological differences between different theological streams of the Protestant population in China, and the impact that such variations may have had upon house churches’ understanding of political authority, and how they view the separation of church and state.

Participant observation consisted of attending house church and official church services, underground Bible workshops, attending Christian events, and some dinners involving underground Christians and local bureaucrats. My ability to be a participant observer varied according to the time spent in each city, how well the church members I was interviewing knew me, how enthusiastic the relevant church leadership was about my research project, and the perceived risks on the part of informants in allowing me to take part in their activities. In some cities, I had the privilege to live with my informants and get to know them well on a personal basis.

It is often difficult to anticipate how helpful participant observation can be for a research project whose purpose is to understand the complexity of relations between the Chinese state and underground church leaders, especially when most of the researcher’s time is spent with the latter actors. Thinking back about my field work, participant observation was a crucial tool to help me understand the divisions among house church leaders in China, their opinions about the regime, and the different relationships they managed to build with state authorities. While interviews and informal conversations were the product of informants’ interaction with the investigator, participant observation allowed me to observe how underground church leaders interact with one another, and with other important actors, like the official clergy and local government officials. For instance, in Wenzhou, walking in and out of one of the underground churches’ office
space allowed me to observe that the police officers at the entrance of the church’s apartment building were aware of the existence of that unregistered church in the neighborhood, and could not care less about it. Several officers even saw me walk in and out of the building accompanied by the clergy, and never bothered inquiring about my presence. Witnessing these interactions was highly revealing of the boundaries between the ‘underground’ and the ‘overground’, and the type of relationships underground church leaders may have with different actors within the state apparatus.

The methods of analysis employed in this dissertation are not without their own limitations, however. First, to trace the effects of compliant defiance upon local government institutions, and identify patterns of informal institutional effects on compliance by the underground clergy, the analysis could have resorted to rigorous small-n comparisons. Small-n research indeed has the advantage of providing detailed case knowledge while also allowing for some degree of comparison. Constraints associated with doing research in an authoritarian regime, however, posed major obstacles to the realization of such a research design. In a political setting where interviewing informants on politically sensitive matters is difficult, one cannot control the amount of information that can be gathered from one locality to another. The amount of collected information across localities can easily be inconsistent, and render the task of comparing cases of underground church relations with local authorities in different cities, hard to achieve. Reasons for data inconsistency varied, but the essential one pertained to local collaborators’ level of awareness of the political context, its risks, and the implications of

121 Helmke and Levitsky (2004) emphasize the importance of small-n analyses in identifying patterns of informal institutional effects, […] formal-informal institutional interaction, […]’, without losing contextual sensitivity associated with case studies. (p. 734)
helping a foreign researcher access informants in the field. While in Henan, some of my collaborators were unfamiliar with the safety procedures to avoid public attention while hosting a researcher, in Zhejiang, my collaborators had already assisted local and foreign academics in their fieldwork. Despite the many boundaries set to my fieldwork in both settings, collaborators in Zhejiang created opportunities for my access to important local figures and reduced the potential sensitivity associated with these meetings. These opportunities were more easily available to me because they knew how to introduce me to influential informants, and through whom it was less sensitive to access them (i.e. common friends, well-respected colleagues or family members). In other words, they understood how politics is played, and the best way to bend rules without consequences.

The mere fact that positivist principles in qualitative research cannot always be rigorously enforced by the investigator in an authoritarian setting, due to data inconsistency from one case to another, however, does not mean that research leaves no room for legitimate findings. Indeed, the extensive use of qualitative and ethnographic methods can be helpful for the identification of patterns of state-society relations that remain unspoken of in the existing literature. Qualitative and ethnographic research, can thus serve the purpose of building new, relevant and enlightening concepts, in the context of an initial analysis, which can subsequently be tested across localities, societal groups, or countries, with adequate information. While data collected throughout my fieldwork allowed me to focus on the first step, that is conceptual building, further research would necessitate my building a small-n comparison of underground church relations with local authorities, across localities.
Second, and not unrelated to the first point, certain categories of informants, like state officials, remain hardly accessible in a political setting like China, without an already established network of informants. Yet, the puzzle underlying my dissertation, namely why local governments in China allow underground Protestant churches to thrive, \textit{prima facie} suggests that my main units of analysis are local state actors. While I managed to gain access to some of them in particular cities where relationships between underground and official churches were relatively peaceful, it was difficult to reach officials where they were either hostile to, or not communicating with, one another. Out of 125 informants, only fourteen of them were government officials or police officers, and ten were from the official clergy. Unbalanced interview samples may bias the content of one’s data, and lead to the overrepresentation of particular interests [i.e. the underground clergy], and the misrepresentation of other ones [i.e. local government officials]. Cautious researchers may nonetheless navigate these sample biases by remaining aware of what they can infer or not, given the limitations in the information they collected.

Despite challenges in gaining access to Chinese officials, comparativists can also find creative ways of gathering information about state actors’ behavior and its effects, when using units of analysis other than the government or the Party. In cases where I knew I could not gain access to local officials, I sought alternative ways of gathering information about their relationship with underground pastors. Interviewing the clergy helped identify the circumstances in which local governments are likely to use force against underground churches, why they often do not, which security department represses for what reason, and how the various strategies of government control may vary on the basis of the responsible department. In fact, using units of analysis other than state
actors gave me access to sensitive information that would most likely not have been openly shared by officials. Access to this information, however, does not mean that it is valid. Data originating from non-state sources may be simply rumors or distorted personal interpretations of state behavior. There are, nonetheless, ways of assessing whether individual interpretations are exaggerated or incorrect, including, for example, the confirmation of information validity by several unrelated informants, detailed reports of conversations with officials by the targets of repression, or the confirmation of data by witnesses of incidents of repression.
APPENDIX C:
LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1 – NGO representative, Hong Kong, 2009
2 – Human rights lawyer, Hong Kong, 2009
3 – NGO representative, Hong Kong, 2009
4 – NGO representative, Hong Kong, 2009
5 – Lawyer specialized in religious rights, Beijing, 2009
6 – Friend of Former Head of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), Beijing, 2009
7 – Academic, Zhejiang, 2009
8 – Academic, Beijing, 2009
9 – Lawyer specialized in defending religious activists, Beijing, 2009
10 – Academic specialized in the study of house churches, Beijing, 2009
11 – House church member, 2009
12 – Mainland Chinese journalist, 2009
13 – TSPM official, Beijing, 2009
14 – Human rights Lawyer, Beijing, 2009
15 – NGO representative, United States, 2010
16 – Government official, Beijing, 2010
17 – House church member, Beijing, 2010
18 – Foreign missionary, Beijing, 2010
19 – House church member, Beijing, 2010
20 – House church leader and intellectual, Beijing, 2010
21 – Christian Intellectual, Beijing, 2010
22 – House church employee, Zhejiang, 2010
23 – House church pastor, Zhejiang, 2010
24 – Three-Self Church preacher, Zhejiang, 2010
25 – Pastor and believers of a house church, Zhejiang, 2010
26 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
27 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
28 – Official from the local police office, Zhejiang, 2010
29 – Christian director of a private company, Zhejiang, 2010
30 – House church pastor, Zhejiang, 2010
31 – Christian director of a private company, Zhejiang, 2010
32 – House church leader, Zhejiang, 2010
33 – House church leader, Zhejiang, 2010
34 – Three-Self Church preacher, Zhejiang, 2010
35 – RAB official, Zhejiang, 2010
36 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
37 – Three-Self Church pastor, Zhejiang, 2010
38 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
39 – Independent Christian editor and house church leader, Shanghai, 2010
40 – House church pastor, Beijing, 2010
41 – Government official, Hebei, 2010
42 – Foreign missionary, Hebei, 2010
43 – Underground church leader, Hebei, 2010
44 – Instructor in a state-sanctioned theological seminary, Beijing, 2010
45 – House church member and journalist, Beijing, 2010
46 – House church leader, Henan, 2010
47 – Underground missionary, Henan, 2010
48 – Underground missionary, Henan, 2010
49 – Police officer, Henan, 2010
50 – Three-Self Church preacher, Henan, 2010
51 – Academic, Beijing, 2010
52 – Underground church member, Hebei, 2010
53 – Underground church member, Hebei, 2010
54 – Underground church elder, Hebei, 2010
55 – Underground priest, Hebei, 2010
56 – Underground church elder, Hebei, 2010
57 – Underground church elder, Hebei, 2010
58 – Government official, Shanghai, 2010
59 – Three-Self Church leader, Beijing, 2010
60 – Three-Self Church preacher, Beijing, 2010
61 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
62 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
63 – Academic, Hong Kong, 2010
64 – Police officer, Hebei, 2010
65 – Religious rights lawyer, Beijing, 2010
66 – Christian intellectual, Beijing, 2010
67 – House church leader, Beijing, 2010
68 – Academic, Beijing, 2010
69 – House church leader, Beijing, 2010
70 – House church leader, Beijing, 2010
71 – House church leader, Sichuan, 2010
72 – House church leader, Sichuan, 2010
73 – Foreign pastor, Sichuan, 2010
74 – Christian academic, Zhejiang, 2010
75 – Christian academic, Zhejiang, 2010
76 – Head of the Lianghui, Zhejiang, 2010
77 – House church leader, Zhejiang, 2010
78 – Underground priest, Zhejiang, 2010
79 – House church leader, Zhejiang, 2010
80 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
81 – Christian entrepreneur, Zhejiang, 2010
82 – Official from City Management Office, Zhejiang, 2010
83 – Two house church leaders, Zhejiang, 2010
84 – Underground preacher, Zhejiang, 2010
85 – House church leader, Zhejiang, 2010
86 – Government official, Jiangsu, 2010
87 – Owner of a Christian bookstore, Jiangsu, 2010
88 – Former leader of a local Lianghui, Jiangsu, 2010
89 – Christian academic, Jiangsu, 2010
90 – House church member, Shanghai, 2010
91 – House church leader, Shanghai, 2010
92 – Academic and house church leader, Beijing, 2010
93 – Academic and house church leader, Shanghai, 2010
94 – Academic, Shanghai, 2010
95 – House church pastor, Shanghai, 2010
96 – State-sanctioned pastor, Shanghai, 2010
97 – House church preacher, Shanghai, 2010
98 – House church pastor, Shanghai area, 2010
99 – House church preacher, Shanghai, 2010
100 – House church preacher, Shanghai, 2010
101 – Academic, Shanghai, 2010
102 – Academic and Lawyer, Beijing, 2010
103 – Three-Self Church pastor, Henan, 2010
104 – House church member, Zhejiang, 2010
105 – Member of a local People’s Political Consultative Conference, Henan, 2010
106 – RAB official, Henan, 2010
107 – House church leader, Henan, 2010
108 – House church leader, Henan, 2010
109 – House church leader, Henan, 2010
110 – Leaders of a regional network of house churches, Henan, 2010
111 – Underground preacher, rural Henan, 2010
112 – Underground preacher, rural Henan, 2010
113 – Expert on house churches, Hong Kong, 2010
114 – House church preacher, Hong Kong, 2010
115 – Former United Front Department official, Beijing, 2010
116 – House church pastor, Beijing, 2010
117 – House church preacher, Hebei, 2010
118 – Head of an underground Christian school, Beijing, 2010
119 – Adviser to the State Council, Beijing, 2010
120 – Former TSPM leader, Beijing, 2010
121 – House church pastor, Beijing, 2010
122 – House church pastor, Beijing, 2010
123 – House church elder, Beijing, 2010
124 – Academic, Beijing, 2010
125 – House church preacher, Henan, 2010
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