

RESEARCH

Open Access



Multi-channelled forceful intervention, frames and protest success—a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative study of 40 anti-demolition protests in China

Ronggui Huang^{1*} , Wen Zheng² and Yong Gui¹

* Correspondence:
rghuang@fudan.edu.cn
¹Department of Sociology, Fudan
University, 220 Handan Road,
Shanghai 200433, China
Full list of author information is
available at the end of the article

Abstract

Having incorporated the characteristics of Chinese politics, this article puts forward an exploratory analytic framework for understanding protest success and points out how political opportunities and protest frames can explain protest success. Political opportunities not only include direct intervention by the central government but also support from state-sponsored media and favourable policies and laws. This article uses the method of fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to compare 40 socially influential cases of anti-demolition protests in China. The results show that the co-presence of central government intervention and supportive reports from central state-sponsored media—which this study calls “multi-channelled forceful intervention”—is a sufficient condition for protest success. Further, “multi-channelled forceful intervention” depends on a favourable institutional environment and protestors’ strategic use of multiple frames. This article not only enriches the studies on protest results but also expands on the theory of political opportunity structures and the study of protest frames.

Keywords: Frame, Political Opportunity, Multi-channelled forceful intervention, Protest Success, Demolition

Research question

In recent years, research on protest has garnered increasing academic attention. Relevant studies include environmental and “Not-In-My-Back-Yard” protests (Sun and Zhao 2007), peasants’ protests (O’Brien and Li 2006; Ying 2007), workers’ protests (Cheng 2012; Tong 2006), homeowners’ protests (Chen 2010; Zhang 2005), and anti-demolition protests (Lü 2012). These studies have drawn on the insights of social movement theories to study the organization, mobilization, and strategy of various protests from the perspectives of resource mobilization, political opportunities, and framing strategies. Although these studies have enhanced our understanding of protest organization and mobilization, they have neglected the study of protest outcomes. Having reviewed studies on the outcomes and consequences of Chinese mass incidents, Tangbiao and Kong (2011) point out that Chinese scholarship of this topic is inadequate because it lacks clear research direction, analytic framework, and systematic

empirical investigation. Some researchers have suggested that studies of popular protests should shift their focus from “using what weapon” to “why a weapon is effective” (Huang 2011). In this light, the question of the present study is: in China, what are the factors that shape the success of protests?¹ Here success refers to achieving protestors’ intended goals.

By comparing cases of protests against residential demolition to acquire land, this article aims to provide a fairly systematic discussion about what factors can shape the success of socially influential protests in China. As of now, anti-demolition protests have become an archetypal phenomenon of China’s socio-economic transformation. Based on the statistics of civil rights activism-related posts from the *Tianya* online community in the “Annual Report on Social Mentality of China (2012–2013)”, forced demolition incidents have occupied 20.1 % of China’s online civil rights activism discourse. Among the letters the Chinese Ministry of Construction had received between January and August of 2002, 28 % were related to housing demolition; among batches of petitions, 70 % were about demolition problems; and among group petitions, 83.7 % were related to demolition (Zhao 2003). In China, residential demolition to acquire land is regarded as one of the “troika” mass incidents.² Given this background, investigating anti-demolition protests can deepen our understanding of the forces that drive successful protests in China.

We have collected, via media reports and the internet, 40 cases of anti-demolition protests (2003–2012). Our comparative analysis of these cases attempts to go beyond the characteristics of a particular protest and to reveal the conditions for the success of socially influential protests. Though comparative case studies do not possess the kind of generalizability manifested in statistical analyses, when compared to existing single case studies and small-N analyses (e.g. Zhang 2005; Yu 2012; Cai 2010), this study can deepen our understanding of the factors that shape protest success (Cress and Snow 2000). Specifically, this study attempts to make three contributions to existing studies of protests: (1) it tests, albeit in a preliminary way, how well the existing literature on social movements can explain protest success in China; (2) by incorporating characteristics of China’s political system and the theoretical insights provided by the existing studies of protests in China, it sums up the conditions for successful protests in an authoritarian state, while also pointing out the importance of political opportunities and protest frames; (3) it proposes and examines the influence of supportive reports from central state-sponsored media and favourable institutions on protest success so as to enhance our understanding of political opportunity structures in China.

Literature review and analytic perspective

Factors shaping protest success in Western and Chinese societies

Western literature has explained the outcomes of social movements from the perspectives of organizational features, protest tactics, frames, public opinion, and political opportunities (Amenta & Caren 2004; Giugni 1998). Specifically, the theory of resource mobilization emphasizes the importance of the organizational aspects of social movements. Gamson (1990, in Giugni 1998) points out that social movement organizations possessing the following features are likely to achieve success: single issue demands, the use of selective incentives, the use of disruptive strategies, and being bureaucratized, centralized, and unfactionalized. Research on the American Civil Rights Movement

shows that organizational density and tactical diversity influence policy outcomes, as measured by the annual federal budget for the Commission on Civil Rights (Olzak and Ryo 2007). Piven and Cloward (1979) state that disruptive tactics help increase the chance that the poor can launch a successful protest and that the so-called cadre organizations, rather than social movement organizations, play a major role in protests launched by the poor (Cloward and Piven 1984).

Having reanalyzed Gamson's data, Goldstone (1980) argues that political crisis is the key to the success of social movements. Follow-up studies also show that political opportunity structures are key to explaining social movement outcomes (Kitschelt 1986; McCammon et al. 2007; Rootes 2006). Yet, not all studies support the theory of political opportunity structures (Olzak and Ryo 2007). In addition, Burstein (1999), from the perspective of representative democracy, argues that public opinion is the foundation for understanding the working mechanism of political opportunities. Although one study has confirmed the importance of public opinion (Burstein and Linton 2002), scholarship in general has not come to a definite conclusion (Amenta et al. 2005; McCammon et al. 2007).

Framing strategies also influence protest outcomes. Cress and Snow's (2000) study on social movement organizations in the USA that focus on homelessness reveals the importance of frames: among the six causal paths to achieved outcomes, three paths simultaneously contain diagnostic and prognostic frames, while two paths contain prognostic frames. Similarly, frames are a crucial factor influencing the outcome of women's suffrage movement (McCammon 2001). Recent studies have developed the concept of discursive opportunity structures to explain the effects of frames: as for the US women jury movement, frames aligned with dominant legal discourses are more effective than others (McCammon et al. 2007).

Researchers have gradually come to understand the complex relationship between a protest and its outcomes (Cress and Snow 2000; Giugni 2007). The political mediation model contends that political environment is a mediating variable between protests and policy outcomes. If long-term structural political conditions are favourable, social movements per se can influence public policy; if short-term political opportunity structures are relatively favourable, low levels of movement mobilization can influence public policy; if short-term political opportunity structures are unfavourable, social movements must adopt assertive actions to influence public policy (Amenta et al. 2005).

The question of what factors shape protest outcomes has slowly gained attention from Chinese researchers. Studies on property owner protests show that key factors in rights-defending activism include the following: leadership from prominent rights activists, establishment of homeowners' committees, effective mobilization, well-chosen strategies, homeowners' rich social network resources, local government support, highlighting the legality of rights and interests, and the relatively weak power of real estate developers (Zhang 2005). Analysis of environmental protests shows that neither state nor society is monolithic; instead, the results of protest actions are determined by the configuration of contender alliances among different government departments, different levels of governments, mass media, and civil societies and their interactions with opposing alliances (Sun and Zhao 2007). Yu (2012) points out that the relationship between protesters and authorities is key to the success of protests; meanwhile, she stresses the importance of media reports and political opportunities. Cai (2010)

analyses the success and failure of protests from a cost-benefit perspective, pointing out that the cost of governments meeting protesters' demands, protesters' issue-linking strategies, social ties between protesters and high level authorities, the forcefulness of protests, and the absence of violence are crucial factors shaping protest outcomes. Overall, existing studies show that, due to the absence of movement organizations, activists and social ties play a vital role in China's popular protests, while appropriate strategies and political opportunities help protestors achieve success.

Analytic perspective

Although existing studies have enhanced our understanding of protest success, they have some limitations. To begin, political opportunities are derived not only from structural changes but also from the signals that political systems emit (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Studies of protests in China mostly emphasize the importance of higher-level government interventions (Cai 2010). This suggests that it is necessary to broaden the conception of political opportunity structures by contextually analysing and incorporating the characteristics of China's political system.

To understand protest success, one must consider the role of the state: no citizen is immune from the influence of the state given its penetration into every corner of the society; its monopoly over most resources, and that their redistribution deeply influences the structures of interests of all social classes; and that political power ultimately determines the status and structural position of each and every social group, and, through legislation, may co-opt or reject certain groups (Xie 2010, p. 4). In this way, not only are there large differences between different actors in terms of resources and influences but also the most powerful actors often reside within the political system. This is particularly evident in the politics of residential demolition and land acquisition. In 1997, the Chinese State Council announced "Notice on the Further Deepening Reform of Housing System and the Acceleration of Housing Construction", which clearly positioned real estate as one of the nation's pillar industries; from this point onwards, land development has become a major driving force in provincial economic development (Li and Fan 2013). Since the tax-sharing reform of 1994, land development and transfer have not only become a means for the local governments to consolidate their own power but have also become major sources of local finance (Hsing 2010; Zhou 2007). This provides the local governments with a strong motive to participate in activities of residential demolition and land acquisition. As land becomes increasingly valuable, the desire for residents affected by demolition to protect their own interests increases, which intensifies conflicts between demolition contractors and those affected by demolition. In a given demolition dispute, opponents of anti-demolition protesters often have the advantage in terms of resources, organization, and policy; without external support, protestors rarely achieve their desired outcomes. Furthermore, because anti-demolition protests are closely related to people's basic livelihoods, any mishandling of these cases may incur vast social influences and consequences; thus, the state tends to offer a balance in the game of clashing social forces to maintain social stability. The state's leading role means that the central government can become a balancing power in interest disputes among various social groups, and intervention from the central government is crucial to protest success.

Within a multi-layered and flexible political structure (Cai 2008), the central government conditionally grants the local governments the autonomy to respond to protests so that the majority of protests are contained at the local level; at the same time, the central government retains the power to restrain the local governments so that the central government selectively provides expressive outlets for social demands while maintaining state legitimacy and social stability. This article argues that the central government, the embodiment of the state, can shape protest results in at least three ways.

First, the central government can directly intervene in a protest and this determines the success or failure of that protest. Existing literature has provided ample discussion on this scenario (Cai 2010), and thus, we will not discuss it in detail.

Secondly, central state-sponsored media's supportive reports on protests often have an influence on the success of protests, which we see as a political opportunity that differs from direct intervention by the central government. The central government's direct intervention is mostly bureaucratic and organizational. However, central state-sponsored media can be regarded as both "public institutions" and "market entities" (Li 2003) and whose attitudes in news reports are to a certain degree independent of the central government. Based on our observations, the cases reported by central state-sponsored media were not always the ones that the central government chose to intervene in; on the other hand, just because the central government chooses to intervene in some cases does not mean that state-sponsored media will choose to report on them. This article argues that state-sponsored media, especially central-level media's supportive coverage of protests, can reflect state authorities' attitudes towards these protests—this is a public signal from state authorities. Although such signals are not a direct indication of a willingness to intervene, they help protestors discover political opportunities, thereby strengthening protestors' confidence and improving their ability to mobilize further support from the public. This dynamic may affect the local governments' responding strategies and central government's intervention paths, which eventually help protests achieve success. Noticeably, supportive reports from central-level state-sponsored media are more likely to reflect the relationship between actors within the political system and protestors than the relationship between the public and protestors. Therefore, supportive reports should be understood as political opportunities rather than social influences.

Thirdly, intervention by the central government is affected by changes in laws and regulations. Reviewing the course of change in the Chinese demolition system, "Urban Housing Units Demolition Management Regulations" of 2001 stipulates that "when demolishing houses meets with residents' protest, demolition must be done forcefully"; this stipulation has essentially strengthened the demolition policy of the local governments and land developers. Though various demolition policies have been constantly readjusted in the previous decade, the institutional environment for the aforementioned "double standard" continues to exist, and different actors (e.g. protestors and local governments) cite different legal rules to defend themselves. The constitutional amendment of 2004 and the Property Law of 2007 both make clear that Chinese citizens have rights to their private properties, and this marks an obvious improvement to the institutional environment for anti-demolition protests. Although property law is a higher-ranking law than is "Urban Housing Units Demolition Management Regulations", the

state had not systematically unified the laws and regulations pertinent to demolition until 2011. After the promulgation of “Regulations on the Expropriation and Compensation of Houses on State-owned Land” of 2011, the institutional environment regarding demolition significantly improved.

Given these changes in policies, regulations, and laws, the relationship between the institutional environment and popular protests deserves scholarly analysis. This article argues that not only can the institutional environment shape the manner of protest, it also shapes protest outcomes. Given that the legitimacy of protest is often a challenging issue (Ying 2007), favourable policies and laws strengthen a claim’s legitimacy and thus decrease the possibility that the local governments will take suppressive measures. If earlier protests lead to readjustments in laws and regulations (Cai 2010), such readjustments would signal that the central government wants the local governments to handle social conflicts appropriately; in this case, changes in laws and regulations represent the central government’s attitudes towards protesters and can be seen as “signals” of political opportunities. In addition, protest-supported demolition litigation brings pressure to the courts, which in turn pushes the courts to develop coping strategies to constrain the housing demolition authorities (He 2014). Because protesters in socially influential protests will try their utmost to utilize all possible opportunities and resources, significant changes in the institutional environment can provide new forms of resources, indicating the expansion of political opportunities.

Because the law can be understood and interpreted in multiple ways, its role in social contestation has been a controversial issue (McCann 2004). In the field of housing demolition, local governments tend to cite “Urban Housing Units Demolition Management Regulations” to support forced demolition, whereas anti-demolition protestors cite new laws and regulations that prohibit forced demolition. Readjustments in laws and regulations not only change the legal resources available to both local governments and anti-demolition protestors but also prompt different parties to have divergent interpretations about the applicability of laws and regulations. Within an “unstable” institutional environment, intervention from the central government once again becomes a key factor influencing protest results.

In addition to the aforementioned flexible political structure, the central government’s intervention in anti-demolition protests depends on the frames employed by protestors. The justification for financial compensation has been the core issue in many demolition and relocation disputes; given that every demolition operation involves different levels of compensation, ranging from a few hundreds of thousands yuan to a few millions yuan to a few tens of millions yuan, all of which are large numbers. In a sense, during the process of demolition and relocation there has been a conflict of interest between local governments and civilians—which can be regarded as important to interest redistribution. When handled inappropriately, demolition can cause massive societal impacts, even affecting social stability and state legitimacy. Since many anti-demolition protests focus on economic demands rather than ideological appeals, interventions by the central government bear little political risk. The fact that anti-demolition protests exert enormous impacts on Chinese society in turn give the central government incentives to intervene. Under such circumstances, when anti-demolition protestors use multiple frames to demonstrate the legitimacy of their actions and claims, and the employed frames are congruent or compatible with the central government’s ideology,

protestors are more likely to gain attention and successfully convince the central government to intervene.

Although protest frames have strong explanatory power regarding the success of social movements in the West (Cress and Snow 2000; McCammon et al. 2007; McCammon 2001), Chinese academia has not yet systematically examined whether frames can influence protest success—the few studies that do focus on protest frames have mainly concentrated on the relationship between frames and mobilization (Cheng 2012; Tong 2006; Xia 2014). Nevertheless, the existing literature provides valuable insights about the relationship between frames and protest success. Because protesters usually have explicit interest-based claims, the primary task of framing is to justify and legitimize these claims. For instance, worker protesters tend to use the discourse of socialist cultural traditions (Tong 2006), political appeals, and state policies and regulations (Cheng 2012) to defend their demands. Moreover, the visibility, legitimacy, and public resonance of protests to a large degree depend on the process of framing and discursive opportunity structures (McCammon et al. 2007). Based on the above discussion, we argue that frames may increase the chance of intervention from the central government by generating resonance between the state and protest demands, and this is more likely to occur when frames are derived from fundamental socio-political cultures. Consequently, frame resonance may open up new political opportunities for protesters.

As for anti-demolition protests, before a dispute enters the public view, protesters often use “weapons of the weak” to protest; after a dispute enters the public view and has gained attention from the media, however, the core position changes to highlight and criticize demolition policies (Lü 2012). Because China’s urban land development is facilitated by relatively comprehensive regulatory changes (Weinstein and Ren 2009), “rule violation” has become a forceful and resonant frame. Furthermore, there has been a fracture between constitution- and tradition-based property systems; specifically, the re-demarcation of properties that were built before the establishment of the modern property system, in the memories and historical records of property holders, was “exploitive” in nature, causing both cognitive and interest conflicts. Similarly, before the housing reform, housing property rights experienced major changes, resulting in some ownership claims being disputed (Zhou and Logan 1996). The resentment caused by the aforementioned historical legacies has prompted protesters to use a historical perspective to legitimize their demands through the discourses of collectivism and socialism (Hsing 2010; Shin 2013). Because China’s rural lands are owned collectively, peasants have come to think of the state as “parents”. This perception, together with the weighing of interests, livelihoods and village customs, as well as the “reason things out” approach common to village societies, determine peasants’ choices as they protest against land acquisition (Zhu 2011). Based on the literature and our own observations of anti-demolition protests, we suggest that “rule violation”, “the weak identity”, “socialism”, and “collectivism” are common frames deployed by anti-demolition protesters.

Based on the above discussion, this article contends that protest frames can influence protest success by affecting the probability of “state” intervention, whereas the political influence of protest frames to a large extent depends on the legal-political institution. Since existing research has rarely explained Chinese anti-demolition protests from the perspective of frames, this article does not directly put forward specific propositions in regard to the effects of frames; instead, we aim to reveal associational patterns between frames and protest success through cross-case comparison.

Research method

Data source and methods of data collection

The study consists of 40 anti-demolition protests that happened between 2003 and 2012. Anti-demolition protests were chosen as a study subject for the following reasons: anti-demolition contestation includes not only protests by village residents but also by urban residents; protesters come from multiple social classes, including but not limited to peasants, workers, marginal urbanites, and new urban middle class; and this diversity has led to a range of protest tactics.

We chose 2003 as the starting point for three reasons: firstly, 2003 is regarded as the year when new forms of protest began to emerge in the 21st century (Zhao 2012, p. 4); secondly, a landmark demolition event in China happened in 2003 (Zhu 2009); thirdly, in these 10 years, there had been a series of readjustments in laws and regulations in relation to demolition, and these changes provide an opportunity to investigate the relationship between institutional environment and protest success.

We identified the cases through media and internet reports, a method that has been widely used in studies of social movements in Western societies (Earl et al. 2004) and studies of protests in China (Cai 2010). Although case selection through media reports might lead to bias, it does not mean that we should completely abandon this method. Instead, we must contextually assess whether this method is better than others (Earl et al. 2004, p. 69). Considering that existing studies are primarily single case studies, cross-case comparison helps more systematically assess the explanatory conditions for protest success. In addition, the selection bias associated with this method has been empirically investigated in a previous study (McCarthy et al. 2008), which helps clarify potential bias and the generalizability of present findings. In fact, we do not attempt to reveal the conditions for all successful protests but merely aim to explain the success of socially influential protests. Moreover, consistent with the approach of qualitative comparison analysis (Rihoux and Lobe 2009), our case selection method helps improve the comparability of cases. Last but not least, as Chinese media has undergone marketization (Li and Liu 2009), the space for reporting controversial events has expanded (Stockmann 2010). Our interviews also show that Chinese media can report controversies through two channels: first, there is ample space for news reports before the authorities explicitly prohibit reporting protests; second, even if bans do exist in a province, the news agency can publish reports through affiliated agencies or partners in other provinces. Based on the above discussion, we argue that our data collection method is reasonable.

Our data collection procedure is as follows: (1) we used the keyword “demolition” to conduct a full-text search on “Chinese Core Newspapers Full-Text Data Base” from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (www.cnki.net) and retrieved 13,024 news reports; (2) we read through all the reports and filtered out cases which had been reported by at least two media outlets to be included in our dataset; (3) considering that a few protests were primarily exposed through the internet and had significant impacts on Chinese society but failed to receive mainstream media coverage, we synthesized information about these cases via mainstream web portals such as Sina.com.cn to supplement our database. All selected cases have the following features: the selected protests were caused by land acquisition for a public project or commercial development and

the core demand was demolition compensation; the targets of the protests were governments or developers; there were antagonistic relations between anti-demolition protesters and their opponents because solving the disputes would alter both sides' interests; and every selected protest involved more than two people. The coding of our cases was based on reading through relevant media reports and reviewing the second-hand literature and documents such as documented interview records, court pleadings (and rulings), banner slogans, pictures, open letters, texts from blogs/microblogs, and academic articles. Depending on information availability, the number of available documents for most cases ranged from ten to dozens, and the number for a few cases even reached hundreds. Our data collection process lasted more than 6 months, during which time we triangulated the information. Therefore, our data is both credible and valid.

The analytic technique: fuzzy-set qualitative comparison

Qualitative comparison analysis (QCA) is suitable for systematically comparing small to medium numbers of cases. This method uses a set-theoretic approach to establish the necessary and sufficient relationship between explanatory conditions and outcome variables. In the analysis of sufficient conditions, QCA can discover multiple conjectural causes of a particular result, which means that the occurrence of the result can be explained by different causes, while each cause is comprised of multiple explanatory conditions. In qualitative comparative analysis, capital letters indicate the presence of conditions, lowercase letters indicate the absence of conditions, operator “*” means co-presence, and operator “+” links two alternative causal paths. For instance, “A * b + B * c = Y” means that two paths lead to the presence of Y; the first path A * b means the presence of A and the absence of b, whereas the second path B * c means the presence of B and the absence of c.

In order to overcome the limitations of crisp-set qualitative comparison analysis, which requires that all variables be dichotomous, Ragin (2008) puts forward a fuzzy-set qualitative comparison analysis (fsQCA). This approach uses fuzzy-set scores to present the degree of membership in explanatory conditions and results. Because a fuzzy-set score can be any number between 0 and 1, it can avoid information loss in the process of data transformation and more accurately reflect the situations of the chosen cases. This approach has been utilized in studies of social movements (Amenta et al. 2005).

To proceed with fsQCA analysis, researchers must designate a coding scheme with qualitative anchors to assign fuzzy-set scores to cases and then evaluate the necessary or sufficient relations between explanatory conditions and results based on a consistency index. Consistency can be used to evaluate whether a particular condition or the combinations of conditions can be regarded as a sufficient or necessary condition of the result. If an explanatory condition (or combination of conditions) X is a sufficient condition of result Y , then the fuzzy-set score of X is consistently lower than or equal to the fuzzy-set score of Y ; and the corresponding consistency is measured as follows:

$$\text{Consistency } (X_i \leq Y_i) = \frac{\sum [\min(X_i, Y_i)]}{\sum X_i}$$

When the index is greater than 0.8, it roughly indicates that more than 80 % of the cases are consistent and X is a sufficient condition of Y . When consistency is satisfied, researchers can move on to calculate the coverage index:

$$\text{Consistency } (X_i \leq Y_i) = \frac{\sum [\min(X_i, Y_i)]}{\sum Y_i}$$

This index depicts the explanatory power of X for result Y .³ The greater the coverage, the greater the empirical explanatory power of X for Y . Similarly, we can calculate Consistency ($Y_i \leq X_i$) to evaluate whether X can be regarded as a necessary condition of Y . If the index is greater than 0.9, we regard X as a necessary condition.

When doing exploratory analysis, one could use the above indexes to assess the necessity and sufficiency of one explanatory condition. However, when analysing multiple conjectural causes, one needs to build truth tables based on consistency, which present the connections between the combinations of explanatory conditions and the outcome, and then use a Boolean minimization algorithm to simplify the truth tables so as to reveal the causal paths leading to the result (Ragin 2008).

In QCA, the numbers of combinations of explanatory conditions increase exponentially with the numbers of selected conditions, resulting in complicated causal paths that are difficult to interpret. The existing methodological literature recommends that one should clarify the causal mechanisms through which different conditions interact with each other to influence the outcome, and then choose the relevant conditions for QCA analysis (Amenta and Poulsen 1994). Given that existing studies on protests mainly focus on the effects of specific factors on protest results (the few exceptions are Amenta et al. 2005; Cress and Snow 2000), this article will first examine the explanatory conditions of each theory, and then proceed to evaluate the combinational effects of conditions of different theories.

Measures

Because the comparative method itself cannot provide a guideline for selecting explanatory conditions, researchers must choose these conditions based on existing theories (Caramani 2009, pp. 52–55). According to the existing literature, we focus on explanatory conditions such as political opportunities, resource mobilization, protest tactics, and protest frames. Although a protest's levels of social influence might shape protest success, we have chosen not to include it as an explanatory condition for two reasons. First, our case selection method implies that the levels of their social influence are similar, and they can be regarded as a constant. Second, a protest's levels of social influence to a large extent depend on media reports and the involvement of opinion leaders. Yet, most of the cases selected in this study have been reported by mainstream media, and new media reports (e.g. social media, internet) and the involvement of opinion leaders have been included as explanatory conditions to assess the theory of resource mobilization.

We adopted a six-value coding scheme.⁴ In order to reduce the subjectivity of the fuzzy-set score assignment, this study follows the credibility principle of qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014). Three authors discussed the rules of score assignment in detail, based on which we coded all cases, and further discussed discrepancies so as to achieve a consensus. It should be noted that some variables only had limited variance, and the actual fuzzy-set scores might not cover all six values.

In our study, the explained variable of protest success indicates the degree of achievement of protest demands, where “1” represents protest demands being fully met, “0.6” represents protest demands being met with substantial costs such as a “tragic victory”,

and “0” indicates failure. Descriptive analysis shows that 35 % of cases achieved success, 22.5 % were tragic victories, and 42.5 % failed.

Political opportunities are measured with three variables, namely central government intervention (CGOV), supportive reports from central state-sponsored media outlets (CME-DIA), and favourable institutional framework (OBOPP⁵). As for central government intervention, the fuzzy-set score 1 represents that the central government intervenes in protest events by making public announcements or deploying a state council appointed task force, issuing new policies and regulations, explicitly supporting anti-demolition protesters or punishing local governments; 0.6 represents the central government’s direct intervention in the events, but upholding a neutral stance; and 0 represents non-involvement. Among our cases, 32.5 % have a fuzzy-set score of 1, 5 % have a fuzzy-set score of 0.6, and 62.5 % have a fuzzy-set score of 0.

The fuzzy-set score assignment of supportive reports from central state-sponsored media has not only considered the levels of social influence of media outlets and their stances but also guaranteed that their reports appeared after protests had occurred and before protests had been settled. Here, 1 represents supportive reports from central state-sponsored media such as Xinhua News Agency Head Office, People’s Daily, CCTV, or Xinhua Daily Telegraph; 0.8 represents supportive reports from China Youth Daily, Procuratorate Daily, or Legal Daily; given that state-sponsored media reports can heighten the influence of protests and have a positive effect on conflict resolution, we used 0.6 to represent impartial reports from the above media outlets; and 0 represents the absence of reports from any of the above state-sponsored media outlets.

The variable favourable institutional framework represents the degree to which laws and regulations are conducive to protestors’ claim-making. This variable is used to assess whether the central government indirectly shapes protest success by amending laws and regulations and thus measures the expansion of political opportunity (Tarrow 2011). For this variable, 0 represents that the institutional framework is disadvantageous to protestors, who face forced demolition without effective lawful weapons to self-defend (2001–2004); 0.4 represents that private properties were recognized in principle but without specific protective ordinances (that is, from the fourth amendment to the Constitution in 2004 until the introduction of Property Law in 2007); 0.6 represents that the rights and interests of anti-demolition protestors have to some extent been safeguarded because the 2007 amendment to Urban Real Estate Administration Law has put forward the need to protect the legal rights and interests of those being relocated due to residential demolition and guarantees standard residential conditions after relocation (2007–2010); 0.8 represents a relatively favourable institutional framework with the abolishment of “Urban Housing Units Management Regulations”; 1 represents a favourable institutional framework (since January 2011) with the introduction of “Regulations on the Expropriation and Compensation of Houses on State-Owned Land”, which provides detailed ordinances regarding the standards for compensation and the legal responsibilities of demolition contractors.

Measures of resource mobilization include mobilization networks (Yu 2012; Zhang 2005), the support of opinion leaders, and the involvement of new media (Lü 2012). Mobilization networks measure how many social ties were mobilized by protestors to advance their demands. Here, 1 represents that protestors enjoyed great support from immediate family members and protest allies, 0.4 represents that protestors gained support from few family members, and 0 means that protestors fought without additional support. As for the

support of opinion leaders, 1 represents the involvement of opinion leaders and 0 means the absence of opinion leaders. As for the involvement of new media, 1 represents protests being reported by more than three national websites, causing linked interactions nationwide; 0.4 represents protests being reported by one or two national websites; and 0 represents the absence of national reports. It should be noted that this variable measures new media reports that were produced in tandem with the unfolding protests. Due to a lack of data availability, we did not measure protest size. Yet, this limitation is offset by the following elements: (1) mobilization networks can be seen as proxies for protest size and (2) the positive relationship between media reports and protest size (McCarthy et al. 2008) implies that the effect of the latter is partially controlled by the inclusion of the former.

Protest tactics include disruptive tactics, violence, and performance (Amenta and Caren 2004; Giugni 1998; Cai 2010; Huang 2011). Disruptive tactic refers to actions threatening public order/safety. Here, value 1 represents the occurrence of serious injuries and casualties; 0.8 represents using illegal home-made weaponry, which would jeopardize public order; 0.6 represents actions slightly upsetting public order; and 0 means actions with no disruption. Violence measures the violent nature of protest actions. In this variable, value 1 indicates extreme measures such as self-immolation; 0.8 means violent behaviour without casualties; 0.6 means the threat of violent acts; and 0 means the absence of violence. As for the performative tactic, 1 indicates that protestors actively publicized protests through dramatic acts and performance; 0.6 indicates protests being publicized by third parties through dramatic narratives or performance; and 0 indicates the absence of drama or performance.

Protest frames reflect protestors' discursive strategies to put forward their demands. Because frames might be developed by protestors alone or through discursive interactions between protestors, media, and the public, this study only measures whether a particular frame is used in relation to protest demands. As long as a frame is deployed, its value is 1, otherwise 0. Based on the examination of all selected cases, we have come up with four frames, namely "frame of the weak" (WEAK), "socialist frame" (SOCIALISM), "collectivist frame" (COLLECTIVISM), and "frame of rule violation" (RU_VIOLATION). WEAK emphasizes protestors' status of being weak in conflicts (Dong 2008); it highlights the image of a vulnerable group under powerful oppression. SOCIALISM derives from the relationship between CCP and the mass; protestors borrow symbols and values of socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics and bind together individual protests with the mission of socialist justice to gain legitimacy from the "holy" state as well as to discredit local governments. COLLECTIVISM derives from the way protestors understand the relationship between personal and collective interests and that between private and public interests; not only does COLLECTIVISM include using collectivist discourse to demonstrate the legitimacy of demands but it also includes protestors criticizing local governments for violating and twisting collectivist principles. RU_VIOLATION emphasizes specific laws and regulations in the realm of demolition, for instance, whether demolition planners applied to the court for forced demolition.

Analysis results

What factors can shape the success of protests?

This article first investigates the relationship between single explanatory conditions and protest success. Our results show (see Table 1) that consistencies of central government

Table 1 Analysis of the necessity and sufficiency of single factors

Explanatory conditions	Necessary consistency	Necessary coverage	Sufficient consistency	Sufficient coverage
Central government intervention	0.58	–	0.79	0.577
State-sponsored media support	0.70	–	0.78	0.701
Favourable institutional framework	0.81	–	0.60	–
Mobilization networks	0.82	–	0.66	–
New media involvement	1.00	0.538	0.54	–
Opinion leaders' involvement	0.28	–	0.49	–
Disruption strategy	0.15	–	0.41	–
Violence strategy	0.36	–	0.34	–
Performance strategy	0.82	–	0.60	–
WEAK	0.53	–	0.39	–
SOCIALISM	0.70	–	0.50	–
COLLECTIVISM	0.47	–	0.66	–
RU_VIOLATION	0.56	–	0.54	–

intervention, supportive reports by central state-sponsored media, and favourable institutional framework as necessary conditions are all below 0.9; therefore, they, on their own, cannot be regarded as necessary conditions of protest success. Consistencies of central government intervention and supportive reports by central state-sponsored media as sufficient conditions score 0.79 and 0.78, respectively, which are slightly lower than the 0.8 standard score and can be regarded as nearly sufficient conditions. Coverage of central government intervention and supportive reports by central state-sponsored media are 0.58 and 0.70, respectively. Comparison of these two values shows that the latter has a greater explanatory power for protest success than the former. The sufficient consistency of favourable institutional framework is 0.6, which suggests that it cannot be regarded as a sufficient condition for protest success. In sum, political opportunities have significant effects on protest success, but political opportunities alone cannot adequately explain the variation in protest success.

As for mobilization theory, mobilization networks and support from internet opinion leaders are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for protest success. The inter-linked reporting by new media can be regarded as a necessary condition for success of socially influential protests. Almost all successful protests have been reported by new media. Further analysis shows that new media reports are not a necessary condition for the failure of protests, which means that new media reports are not a “trivial” necessary condition. However, new media reports are not a sufficient condition for protest success. As for protest tactics, be it disruptive, violent, or performative, none can be regarded as a sufficient condition for protest success. Similarly, any single protest frame alone cannot be regarded as a sufficient condition for protest success.

Next, we assessed the explanatory power of each theory by treating the corresponding variables as a group of explanatory conditions. We constructed truth tables and proceeded to simplify the truth tables through Boolean minimization (Table 2). The analysis of the three variables of political opportunities reveals two causal paths to

Table 2 Opportunities, resources, strategies, frames, and protest success: results of fsQCA

Theory	Causal path	Consistency	Raw coverage	Unique coverage
Political opportunity	CGOV * CMEDIA	0.87	0.57	0.57
Resource mobilization	IS	–	–	–
Protest tactics	IS	–	–	–
Frames	F1: weak * SOCIALISM * COLLECTIVISM	1	0.26	0.26
	F2: SOCIALISM * COLLECTIVISM * ru_violation	1	0.16	0.05
	F3: WEAK * socialism * collectivism * RU_VIOLATION	1	0.05	0.05
	[solution]	1	0.36	0.36

Note: IS represents being insufficient to explain protest success, in which case consistency has no meaning, shown as “–”

protest success: (1) the co-presence of three conditions, which explains the majority of our cases and (2) the co-presence of central government intervention and supportive reports from central state-sponsored media. These two causal paths can be further simplified to “central government intervention * supportive reports from central state-sponsored media”. The sufficient consistency and coverage of this causal path are 0.87 and 0.57, respectively. The coverage indicates that among the successful protests, about 57 % of them can be explained by this path. This result shows that the theory of political opportunity structures can to a certain degree explain the success of anti-demolition protests.

The analysis of the three variables for resource mobilization shows that no combinations can explain protest success. Similarly, no combinations of the three variables related to protest tactics can be seen as sufficient conditions for protest success.

Combinations of four protest frames can to some degree explain protest success. fsQCA reveals three causal paths: (F1) “using SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM while not using WEAK”, (F2) “using SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM while not using RU_VIOLATION”, and (F3) “using WEAK and RU_VIOLATION while not using SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM”. Comparison of these paths shows that SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM tend to appear together but not show up with either WEAK or RU_VIOLATION at the same time. Comparison of the raw and unique coverages⁶ of the three paths shows that path F1 has the largest explanatory power whereas path F3 has the smallest explanatory power. This indicates that SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM play a significant role in anti-demolition protests. Although the three causal paths involving protest frames satisfy the sufficiency criterion, they only explain approximately 36 % of the successful cases (raw coverage is 0.36). Comparison shows that the explanatory power of frames is weaker than that of political opportunity structures (raw coverage is 0.57). One explanation might be that framing strategies influence protest success indirectly through changing the probability of a central government response to protests. This indirect working mechanism might have reduced the explanatory power of protest frames.

In sum, resource mobilization and protest tactics cannot adequately explain protest success; protest frames have a moderate explanatory power for protest success, while political opportunities have fairly strong explanatory power. Although existing studies have pointed out that political opportunities play a significant role in the success of

protests in China (e.g. Cai 2010), they mainly emphasize the importance of direct intervention from higher-level governments and have not differentiated modes of government intervention nor elaborated how different modes of intervention shape protest success. This article not only lends support to the importance of central government intervention but also shows that the explanatory power of supportive reports from central state-sponsored media is greater than that of the central government's direct intervention. In particular, the central intervention would have the most effective effect on protest success when it occurs through multiple institutionalized channels and is publicly endorsed by state-sponsored media. We call this "multi-channelled forceful intervention".

Assessment of the robustness of the causal paths to successful protests

Given that the results of fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis is sensitive to the assignment of fuzzy-set scores (Skaaning 2011), it is necessary to test the robustness of the analytical results.

Some may argue that a "tragic victory" should be regarded as failure because protestors have paid a huge price and thus be coded as 0.4 instead of 0.6. We recoded "tragic victory" as 0.4 and re-ran the above analysis, and the results were basically the same. In our single factor analysis, except for "new media involvement", no other factors on their own can be regarded as a necessary condition for protest success; and no factors can be regarded as a sufficient condition for protest success, with the sufficiency consistencies of "CGOV" and "CMEDIA" dropping to 0.72 and 0.71. This shows that it is harder to explain protest success when the standard of protest success is raised. We then reanalysed the explanatory power of each theory for protest success. The results show that resource mobilization and protest tactics cannot adequately explain success, whereas protest frames and political opportunities can to some extent explain success. As for protest frames, we found the same causal paths as in the previous analysis, but the raw coverage became 0.397. However, when raising the standard of protest success, the co-presence of "CGOV", "CMEDIA", and "OBOPP" is required to achieve protest success. This causal path explains approximately 46.5 % of the successful cases, which is larger than that of protest frames.

We also investigated how the assignment of fuzzy-set scores of CGOV and CMEDIA may influence the robustness of the findings. We recoded "central government intervention with a neutral stance" to 0.7 and re-ran the analysis, and the result remained basically the same. Similarly, we achieved the same conclusion even if we recoded the values of 0.4 and 0.6 in CMEDIA as 0.3 and 0.7, respectively.

Political opportunities as a variable

Because the central government does not intervene in all protests, studies of protest outcomes must answer the question of "under what circumstances will the central government intervene". However, this question has not been adequately explored by existing studies (Cai 2010, p. 5). Cai (2010) points out that the central government's intervention to some degree depends on the forcefulness of the protest, which is determined by protestors' resources and strategies. The present study further contends that framing strategies have a significant influence on the occurrence of the central government's multi-channelled forceful intervention.

This section uses fsQCA to investigate the effects of resource mobilization, protest tactics, and protest frames on the occurrence of multi-channelled intervention. Our results (Table 3) show that neither the three variables in relation to resource mobilization nor the three protest tactics can sufficiently explain the central government’s multi-channelled intervention. However, different combinations of protest frames can adequately explain the occurrence of the central government’s multi-channelled forceful intervention. The result of fsQCA reveals three causal paths. Causal path F1 is “using WEAK, SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM while not using RU_VIOLATION”, which explains about 8 % of the cases. Causal path F2 is “not using WEAK but using COLLECTIVISM and RU_VIOLATION”, which explains about 30 % of the cases. These two paths together explain about 38 % of the cases involving the central government’s multi-channelled intervention. This result confirms, in a preliminary way, our argument that protest frames are a key to understanding government intervention.

Previously, we argued that the numerous readjustments in laws and regulations during the past 10 years have expanded political opportunities for anti-demolition protesters. And descriptive analysis shows that about 60.1 % of the successful protests occurred within a favourable institutional framework. An institutional framework not only facilitates/constrains protestors’ mobilization efforts and choice of protest tactics and frames but it also influences the chance of central government’s responding strategies; therefore, we included “favourable institutional framework” (OBOPP) and four protest frames as explanatory conditions and re-ran the analysis. The result reveals four causal paths, including (IF1) “presence of OBOPP, using SOCIALISM and COLLECTIVISM, not using RU_VIOLATION”, (IF2) “presence of OBOPP, using SOCIALISM and RU_VIOLATION, but not using WEAK”, (IF3) “presence of OBOPP, using SOCIALISM and RU_VIOLATION, but not using WEAK”, and (IF4) “using COLLECTIVISM, SOCIALISM and RU_VIOLATION”. The overall coverage of this set of causal paths is 0.507, which indicates that more than half of the multi-channelled forceful intervention cases can be explained by frames and institutional framework. Further

Table 3 The conditions for “multi-channelled forceful intervention”

Theory	Causal path	Consistency	Raw coverage	Unique coverage
Resource mobilization	IS	–	–	–
Protest tactics	IS	–	–	–
Frames	F1: WEAK * SOCIALISM * COLLECTIVISM *ru_violation	1	0.08	0.08
	F2: weak * SOCIALISM * RU_VIOLATION	0.95	0.30	0.30
	[solution]	0.96	0.38	0.38
Institutional environment * frames	IF1: OBOPP * SOCIALISM * COLLECTIVISM * ru_violation	1	0.16	0.16
	IF2: OBOPP * weak * SOCIALISM * RU_VIOLATION	0.93	0.21	0.08
	IF3: OBOPP * weak * COLLECTIVISM * RU_VIOLATION	1	0.18	0.05
	IF4: weak * SOCIALISM * COLLECTIVISM * RU_VIOLATION	0.93	0.22	0.10
	[solution]	0.94	0.51	0.51

Note: IS represents being unable to form sufficient conditions such that consistency has no meaning, shown as “–”

examination shows that OBOPP is an ingredient of three paths, and the unique coverage of the causal path without OBOPP is very small. This means that multi-channelled forceful intervention from the central government mainly occurred in an institutional environment that favoured protestors. As for protest frames, some protests simultaneously use the discourses of COLLECTIVISM and SOCIALISM, which we call “traditional cultural frame” (IF1), while other protestors use the policy-based frame of RU_VIOLATION and culture-based frames, which we call “mixed frames” (IF2-IF4). The paths consisting of “mixed frames” explain 34.9 % of cases with multi-channelled intervention. It should be mentioned that although 65 % of the cases used the “WEAK” frame, the three “mixed frames” paths do not include “WEAK”, which indicates that the frame of “WEAK” has limited effect on protest success.

To elaborate the conjectural influence of institutional framework and protest frames on protest success, we will analyse an anti-demolition case in detail. In this case, a teacher who was to be relocated as a result of residential demolition was suspended from job without pay in 2010. From January 25 to 27, 2011, this case was reported by Eastern Morning Post, Xinhua Daily Telegraph, and People’s Court News. Among these reports, Xinhua Daily Telegraph pointed out that demolition of “Zhulian”⁷ style is not only an invasion of citizens’ civil rights but also a violation of laws (Shan 2011). On February 1, 2011, People’s Court News pointed out that this event was a covert forced demolition, which violated “Regulations on the Expropriation and Compensation of Houses on State-owned Land (draft)”—a bill that was passed on January 19, 2011; it also contended that such a covert forced demolition had caused tensions between cadres and those affected by the demolition, which had further created grievances among the masses (Wang 2011). At the same time, a new district management committee began investigating this event and later advised that the victim’s salary should be reinstated, an apology be issued, and self-criticism be conducted about the demolition. In relation to this case, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission and the Ministry of Supervision made an announcement in March 2011. The announcement demanded the strengthening of the supervision of demolition policies, as well as the curbing and correcting of demolition projects that were in violation of rules and regulations. This case shows that mass media are more likely to report anti-demolition protests from the perspective of the rule of law and their violation following the promulgation of new laws and regulations. It also confirms that the co-presence of the discourse of socialism such as cadre-mass relations and legal discourse (Lee 2000; Tong 2006). Similarly, a case in Jiangxi province clearly demonstrates the effects of protest frames. During an investigation by China Youth Daily, one staff member confidently bragged that “this kind of news regarding demolition incidents would never be publicly reported” (Tu 2008). Yet, when Legal Daily synthesized anti-demolition protestors’ discourse and raised questions about whether the local government should use political resources to service demolition for business development, whether threatening civil servants related to the demolished house units (see “Zhulian”) has any legal base, and the relationship between housing demolition regulations and property law, the local government swiftly responded to such questions (Chen and Li 2008).

Understanding factors that shape central government intervention

Why is using a particular set of protest frames within a particular institutional environment more likely to gain multi-channelled forceful intervention from the central

government? This sub-section, drawing from existing studies, will discuss the possible driving forces of central government's responses to anti-demolition protests from a macro perspective. Since 2003, "stability maintenance" has become a core issue in the governance of Chinese society, and this was strengthened between 2005 and 2008 to form an authoritarian regime where "protest bargaining" became an important way to absorb popular protests in a non-zero-sum manner (Lee and Zhang 2013). To a certain degree, maintaining stability has become the foundation by which the central government chooses to intervene in popular protests. We suggest that the drivers of the central government's decision to intervene in anti-demolition protests might lie in its pursuit of multiple and sometimes conflicting policy aims in relation to land use. On the one hand, it aims to improve the productivity of land use and promote economic growth without violating the principle of land being owned by the state; on the other hand, it is necessary to protect arable land and safeguard food security (Lin and Ho 2005). However, in the process of land and urban development, land transfer fees have become an important source of revenue for local governments. Driven by economic interests, it is not uncommon that local governments violate laws and regulations, which has not only caused anti-demolition protests and aggravated social conflicts but also influenced the policy aim of protecting arable land. The pursuit of arable land protection, social stability maintenance, and disciplining local governments provides drivers that encourage the central government to intervene.

A study has pointed out that political legitimacy is an important driver of central government intervention (Cai 2010). In the past 10 years, the state has endeavoured to regain political legitimacy, and its focus has shifted from economic performance and nationalism to political ideology and institution building (Holbig and Gilley 2010), elevating the significance of ideologies such as harmonious society, traditional culture, the building of institutions to support governance, and democracy with Chinese characteristics (e.g. rule by law). Against this background, the protest frames of socialism, collectivism, and rule violation are congruent with the political ideologies, traditional culture, and institution building which undergird the rebuilding of political legitimacy; this congruency has not only provided protestors the justification for mobilization and organization (Tong 2006) but also enhanced the legitimacy of their demands. The central government's inaction, in the face of legitimate demands, may negatively influence its political legitimacy. In line with this, the framing strategies described previously encourage intervention from the central government. In addition, political legitimacy building is also a driver for changing rules and regulations (Gilley 2008). Specifically, not only are readjustments of demolition policies a response from the central government to past protests (Cai 2010) but they can also be regarded as an effort by the central government to regain political legitimacy and maintain social stability. Situated in this political context, using the frame of rule violation is conducive to protest success. Lastly, using multiple protest frames that are compatible and congruent with the state's legitimacy building efforts can appeal to different central government departments and thus increase the effectiveness of framing strategies.

In sum, the central government's "multiple-channelled intervention" is key to the success of protests in China. Stability maintenance and the multiplicity of policy aims are the foundation for central intervention. The state's recent efforts to regain political legitimacy mean that protest frames play a crucial role in promoting central government

intervention. As demonstrated previously, protestors are more likely to gain “multi-channelled forceful intervention” from the central government when they utilize multiple “mixed frames” congruent with the state’s legitimacy building discourse.

Conclusion and discussion

This article takes anti-demolition protests as a case to explore what factors shape the success of socially influential protests. It compared 40 cases of anti-demolition protests that occurred in 2003–2012 through the method of fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis and found that the co-presence of central government direct intervention and supportive reports from central state-sponsored media is a sufficient condition for protest success. We call this mode of intervention “multi-channelled forceful intervention”. Although framing strategies have explanatory power for protest success, they are likely to indirectly influence protest success through increasing the central government’s “multi-channelled forceful intervention”. It found that the frames of SOCIALISM, COLLECTIVISM, and RU_VIOLATION are pertinent to protest success. In sum, political opportunity structures and framing theories have strong explanatory power for protest success in China.

Although the institutional environment is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for protest success, it does play an important part in shaping the success of protests: (1) the most successful protests occurred within an institutional framework favourable to protestors; (2) analysis shows that the co-presence of a favourable institutional framework and a “multi-channelled intervention” from the central government is required for protest success once it is defined by a stricter criterion; and (3) when institutional environment is favourable to protestors, framing strategies are more likely to increase the chance of central government intervention. These findings suggest that an institutional framework favourable to protesters should be regarded as a political opportunity structure. Meanwhile, it should be acknowledged that protestors may perceive and make use of political opportunities differently, and future studies need to investigate how “objective” political opportunities, protestors’ perception of opportunities, and their strategies to make use of opportunities jointly shape the protest results.

The importance of political opportunities, and central government interventions in particular, for protest success lends support to existing studies of protests (e.g. Cai 2010). Meanwhile, this study further elaborates the significance of the central government’s “multi-channelled intervention”. Specifically, direct intervention from the central government is merely one element of the causal path to protest success, and it is the co-presence of central government’s direct intervention and the support from central state-sponsored media that forms a sufficient condition for protest success. Comparing the explanatory power of the central government’s direct intervention and that of the open support from state-sponsored media shows that the two are roughly the same, with the latter’s sufficiency coverage slightly larger than that of the former. This finding is understandable. One potential explanation is that even if the central government directly intervenes in a protest, in absence of open media reports, it is difficult for protestors and the public to know the actual attitudes of the central government towards the protests and therefore difficult to effectively make use of the political opportunities afforded by higher levels of government. In contrast, when the central government openly supports a protest, protestors are more likely to fully take advantage of the

political opportunities afforded by the higher-level governments and more likely to gain support from the public so that protestors have more power to bargain with the local governments and eventually achieve success. In addition, the co-presence of the central government's direct intervention and supportive reports from state-sponsored media also implies the multiplicity of potential allies from within the polity, which is a key factor to successful protests. In line with the above discussion, it is possible to develop a typology to describe different modes of government intervention based on the intervention channels (e.g. single channel vs multiple channels) and whether intervention is public. And the "multiple-channelled intervention" studied in this paper is a particular mode of intervention that simultaneously occurs in multiple channels and is known to the public because of media coverage. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the above theoretical explanation needs further investigation.

Our study shows that there is no robust relationship between the occurrence of the central government's "multi-channelled intervention" and resource mobilization, as well as "multi-channelled intervention" and protest tactics. In contrast, meaningful relationships between protest frames and the occurrence of "multi-channelled intervention" are identified. Among the frames, COLLECTIVISM, SOCIALISM, and RU_VIOLATION play significant roles in anti-demolition protests, while the WEAK frame is not beneficial to protest success. We argue that, on the one hand, the authoritarian regime of stability maintenance and the multiplicity of policy aims in relation to land use is key to understanding the central government's multi-channelled forceful intervention in anti-demolition protests; and on the other hand, the central government's endeavour to regain political legitimacy to a certain degree affords political opportunities for successful protests. Protest frames congruent with the state's legitimacy building discourse not only legitimize protestors' claims but also increase the cost of central government inaction. Strategic use of such frames thus is able to gain supportive intervention from the central government. Our findings suggest that framing can not only mobilize potential participants by activating the public's resonance with the cause at stake (Amenta and Caren 2004) but also influence protest results by directly appealing to higher level governments and the central government in particular. The tremendous significance of ideology and legitimacy for authoritarian states make the latter working mechanism of framing strategies especially important. Of course, why governments are more likely to respond to particular frames needs further study.

Some may argue that because the selected cases span across 10 years, media reports about protests occurring at an early stage can influence the frames used in protests during later stages and thus indirectly shape the likelihood of success. If this argument holds, it implies systematic differences in frame prevalence between early and later stages. To test this inference, we used 2008 to demarcate our cases into two periodic groups and investigated whether there was a significant difference in the usage of protest frames. Analysis shows no systematic differences; hence, the previously mentioned argument is not supported. Moreover, is it possible that the occurrence and results of protests at the early stage influence the dynamics and results of protests at the latter stage? We think that such feedback effects do exist, with the most important being that the central government may adjust the rules and policies regarding demolition as a result of early anti-demolition protests; further, such adjustments may provide opportunities for protests at later stages. It is worth mentioning that such a feedback effect does not invalidate the conclusions of this study.

This article has some limitations. First, using media reports as data sources might lead to selection bias. It has been demonstrated that media coverage of popular protests is shaped by factors such as event type, issue involved, news agency, event size, and status of event sponsors (Earl et al. 2004; McCarthy et al. 2008). Given that the selected cases in this study are by and large socially influential ones, the findings of the present study are mainly generalized to high-profile and influential protests, and whether they can be generalized to more localized protests will require further investigation. Second, due to the limit of data availability, this article has not yet examined the roles of institutional protest tactics (e.g. litigation and petition writing) and news reports from local media. Finally, this study aims to explore what factors are conducive to successful protests by systematically comparing cases, which means that it has not scrutinized the dynamic mechanisms through which these factors lead to the success of protests by in-depth analysis of individual cases. Future studies can use in-depth interviews to explore how strategic interactions between protestors and governments shape protest outcomes. Specifically, probing how protestors and local governments perceive signals from the central government and act accordingly can further substantiate the thesis of “multi-channelled forceful intervention” in the present study.

Endnotes

¹For discussion on the conceptual difference between protest outcome and protest consequence, see Amenta and Caren 2004, Cress and Snow 2000, and Giugni 1998.

²<http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001048280/> accessed on April 27, 2014.

³If the consistency index is significantly lower than 0.8, then the coverage index has no practical meaning and there is no need to calculate it.

⁴In a six-value coding scheme, fuzzy-set scores can take values of 1, 0.8, 0.6, 0.4, 0.3, and 0. Among these values, 1 represents the presence of a condition, 0 represents the absence of a condition, and other values are in-between.

⁵“OBOPP” means objective opportunity.

⁶Roughly speaking, raw coverage measures the percentage of cases a particular path can explain. Yet some cases can be explained by multiple causal paths; thus, raw coverage cannot effectively reflect the explanatory power of one causal path after considering the other causal paths. Unlike raw coverage, unique coverage measures the percentage of cases that can only be explained by a particular causal path.

⁷ZhuLian refers to the way property developers and local governments threaten to terminate the employment of public officials found among anti-demolition protestors and/or those public officials who happen to be related to anti-demolition protestors—not only by asking them to sign a number of unreasonable relocation agreements, but also asking them to mobilize their relatives to sign a relocation agreement, or else they will be suspended without pay or transferred.

Authors' contributions

RH is primarily responsible for the manuscript; he participated in formulating the theoretical framework, data analysis, and manuscript writing and revision. YG participated in formulating the theoretical framework and research design. WZ collected and coded the dataset, described the cases, and participated in formulating the theoretical framework. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author details

¹Department of Sociology, Fudan University, 220 Handan Road, Shanghai 200433, China. ²School of Journalism, Fudan University, Shanghai, China.

Received: 12 July 2016 Accepted: 30 August 2016

Published online: 14 September 2016

References

- Amenta, E., and N. Caren. 2004. The legislative, organizational, and beneficiary consequences of state-oriented challengers. In *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, ed. D.A. Snow, S.A. Soule, and H. Kriesi, 461–488. Oxford: Blackwell Pub.
- Amenta, E., and J.D. Poulsen. 1994. Where to begin: A survey of five approaches to selecting independent variables for qualitative comparative analysis. *Sociological Methods and Research* 23(1): 22–53.
- Amenta, E., N. Caren, and S.J. Olasky. 2005. Age for leisure? Political mediation and the impact of the pension movement on US old-age policy. *American Sociological Review* 70(3): 516–538.
- Burstein, P. 1999. Social movements and public policy. In *How social movements matter*, ed. M. Giugni, D. McAdam, and C. Tilly, 3–21. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burstein, P., and A. Linton. 2002. The impact of political parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations on public policy. *Social Forces* 81(2): 380–408.
- Cai, Y. 2008. Power structure and regime resilience: contentious politics in China. *British Journal of Political Sciences* 38(3): 411–432.
- Cai. 2010. *Collective resistance in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Caramani, D. 2009. *Introduction to the comparative method with Boolean algebra*. LA: Sage.
- Chen, Peng. 2010. The rights struggle of contemporary Chinese owners. *Sociological Studies* 1: 1–30.
- Chen, Xiuqi, and Li Qing. 2008. Many legal questions about 'ZhuLian' demolition in FengCheng of JiangXi Province. *Legal Daily*. (January 15, 2008).
- Cheng, Xiuying. 2012. From political petition to legal logic: A discourse analysis of the politics of Chinese workers' protests. *Open Times* 1: 73–89.
- Cloward, A., and F. Piven. 1984. Disruption and organisation: A rejoinder [to William A. Gamson and Emilie Schmeidler]. *Theory and Society* 13(4): 587–599.
- Cress, M., and A. Snow. 2000. The outcomes of homeless mobilization: The influence of organization, disruption, political mediation, and framing. *American Journal of Sociology* 105(4): 1063–1104.
- Dong, Haijun. 2008. The weak identity as a weapon: The subaltern politics of the peasant resistance for rights. *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 4: 34–78.
- Earl, J., A. Martin, D. McCarthy, and A. Soule. 2004. The use of newspaper data in the study of collective action. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30: 65–80.
- Gilley, B. 2008. Legitimacy and institutional change: The case of China. *Comparative Political Studies* 41(30): 259–284.
- Giugni, M. 1998. Was it worth the effort? The outcomes and consequences of social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24(1): 371–393.
- Giugni, M. 2007. Useless protest? A time-series analysis of the policy outcomes of ecology, antinuclear, and peace movements in the United States, 1977–1995. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 12(1): 53–77.
- Goldstone, A. 1980. The weakness of organization: A new look at Gamson's 'the strategy of social protest'. *American Journal of Sociology* 85(5): 1017–1042.
- He, X. 2014. Maintaining stability by law: Protest-supported housing demolition litigation and social change in China. *Law and Social Inquiry* 39(4): 849–873.
- Holbig, H., and B. Gilley. 2010. Reclaiming legitimacy in China. *Politics and Policy* 38(3): 395–422.
- Hsing, Y. 2010. *The great urban transformation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huang, Zhenhui. 2011. Performative protest: Landscape, challenge and the mechanism of occurrence. *Open Time* 2: 71–84.
- Kitschelt, P. 1986. Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* 16(1): 57–85.
- Kuckartz, Udo. 2014. *Qualitative text analysis*. LA: Sage.
- Lee, C.K. 2000. The 'revenge of history': Collective memories and labor protests in North-Eastern China. *Ethnography* 1(2): 217–237.
- Lee, C.K., and Y. Zhang. 2013. The power of instability: Unravelling the micro-foundations of bargained authoritarianism in China. *American Journal of Sociology* 118(6): 1475–1508.
- Li, Liangrong. 2003. Discussion on the dual-track system of Chinese news media. *Modern Communication* 3: 1–4.
- Li, Guowu, and Yuan Fan. 2013. Land development within the growth of regional economy. *Journal of Central University of Finance & Economics* 5: 65–70.
- Li, L., and L. Liu. 2009. 30 years' reform of China's mass media. *Asia Europe Journal* 7(3–4): 405–415.
- Lin, G.C.S., and S.P.S. Ho. 2005. The state, land system, and land development processes in contemporary China. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95(2): 411–436.
- Lü, Dewen. 2012. Media mobilisation, demolition-resistant families and contentious politics: Reanalysis of the event of Yihuang. *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 3: 129–170.
- McCammon, H.J. 2001. Stirring up suffrage sentiment: The formation of the state woman suffrage organizations, 1866–1914. *Social Forces* 80(2): 449–480.
- McCammon, H.J., C.S. Muse, H.D. Newman, and T.M. Terrell. 2007. Movement framing and discursive opportunity structures. *American Sociological Review* 72(5): 725–749.
- McCann, M. 2004. Law and social movements. In *The Blackwell companion to law and society*, ed. A. Sarat, 506–522. Oxford: Blackwell Pub.
- McCarthy, J., L. Titarenko, C. McPhail, P. Rafail, and B. Augustyn. 2008. Assessing stability in the patterns of selection bias in newspaper coverage of protest during the transition from communism in Belarus. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 13(2): 127–146.

- Meyer, D.S., and D.C. Minkoff. 2004. Conceptualizing political opportunity. *Social Forces* 82(4): 1457–1492.
- O'Brien, K., and L. Li. 2006. *Rightful resistance in rural China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olzak, S., and E. Ryo. 2007. Organizational diversity, vitality and outcomes in the civil rights movement. *Social Forces* 85(4): 1561–1591.
- Piven, F.F., and R.A. Cloward. 1979. *Poor people's movements*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ragin, C. 2008. *Redesigning social inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rihoux, B., and B. Lobe. 2009. The case for qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). In *The SAGE handbook of case-based methods*, ed. David Byrne and Charles C. Ragin, 222–242. LA: Sage.
- Rootes, C. 2006. Explaining the outcomes of campaigns against waste incinerators in England. In *Community and ecology*, ed. A. McCright and T.N. Clark, 179–198. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Skaaning, S.E. 2011. Assessing the robustness of crisp-set and fuzzy-set QCA results. *Sociological Methods and Research* 40(2): 391–408.
- Shan, Shibing. 2011. Implicating officials in the process of demolition is anti-humanist and unethical. *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*. (January 6, 2011).
- Shin, H.B. 2013. The right to the city and critical reflections on China's property rights activism. *Antipode* 45(2): 1167–1189.
- Stockmann, D. 2010. Who believes propaganda? Media effects during the anti-Japanese protests in Beijing. *The China Quarterly* 202: 269–289.
- Sun, Y., and N. Zhao. 2007. Multifaceted state and fragmented society: dynamics of environmental movement in China. In *Discontented miracle: Growth, conflict, and institutional adaptations in China*, ed. D. Yang, 111–159. Singapore: World Scientific Publisher.
- Tangbiao, Xiao, and Weina Kong. 2011. The consequences of contemporary Chinese mass incidents. *Comparative Economic and Social Systems* 2: 190–198.
- Tarrow, S. 2011. *Power in movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tong, Xin. 2006. The continued socialist cultural tradition: An analysis of collective action of workers in a state-owned enterprise. *Sociological Studies* 1: 59–76.
- Tu, Chaohua. 2008. Investigating demolition 'ZhuLian' in FengCheng of JiangXi Province. *China Youth*. (October 1, 2008).
- Wang, Weijian. 2011. Demolition while doing 'ZhuLian', whose fault it is?. *People's Court News*. (January 27, 2011).
- Weinstein, L., and X. Ren. 2009. The changing right to the city: Urban renewal and housing rights in globalizing Shanghai and Mumbai. *City and Community* 8(4): 407–432.
- Xia, Ying. 2014. From the marginal to the mainstream: Collective action frames and cultural context. *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 1: 52–74.
- Xie, Yue. 2010. *The politics of protest*. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press.
- Ying, Xing. 2007. The grassroots mobilization and the mechanism of interest expression of the peasants group. *Sociological Studies* 1: 1–23.
- Yu, Zhiyuan. 2012. The factors shaping the outcomes of collective actions. *Sociological Studies* 3: 90–112.
- Zhang, Lei. 2005. Beijing house owners' rights protection movement: reasons of breakout and mobilization mechanism. *Sociological Studies* 6: 1–39.
- Zhao, Dingxin. 2012. *Lectures on social and political movements (second edition)*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Zhao, Ling. 2003. The 10-year tragicomedy of demolition. *Southern Weekend*. (September 4, 2003).
- Zhou, Feizhou. 2007. The role of government and farmers in land development and transfer. *Sociological Studies* 1: 1–34.
- Zhou, M., and J. Logan. 1996. Market transition and the commodification of housing in urban China. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 20(30): 400–421.
- Zhu, Xiaoyang. 2011. *A little village's tale: Topography and homeland 2003-2009*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Zhu, Tao. 2009. Iconic events of forceful demolition. *Finance and Economics* 12. (December 21, 2009). <http://misc.caijing.com.cn/chargeFullNews.jsp?id=110341593&time=2009-12-21&cl=106>. Accessed 27 Apr 2014.

Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen[®] journal and benefit from:

- Convenient online submission
- Rigorous peer review
- Immediate publication on acceptance
- Open access: articles freely available online
- High visibility within the field
- Retaining the copyright to your article

Submit your next manuscript at ► springeropen.com
