human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

Movement-oriented labor organizations in an authoritarian regime: The case of China

human relations
2022, Vol. 75(7) 1354–1382

DOI: 10.1177/00187267211001433
journals.sagepub.com/home/hum
SAGE

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Abstract

How do labor organizations with a movement orientation arise in an authoritarian regime? How do they organize workers collectively in a repressive society? What movement roles do they play? What challenges do they face? To answer these questions, I use synthesized social movement theories to examine movement-oriented labor non-governmental organizations in China. Based on qualitative data collected through triangulated sources, I find that movement-oriented labor non-governmental organizations use political opportunities to promote one type of modular collective labor action, which consists of three tactics, namely the election of worker representatives, collective negotiation, and protest. They guide workers to build mobilizing and connective structures, formulate collective action frames, and amass movement resources. However, the movement roles of this type of labor non-governmental organization have weakened, owing to diminishing political opportunities caused by changes in government administration. This research contributes to our understanding of social movement theories, labor organizations in China, labor non-governmental organizations and worker centers generally, and state–society relations in non-democracies.

Keywords

China, framing process, labor organizations, political opportunities structure, resource mobilization, social movements

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, nationally-based labor non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) and worker centers have emerged as significant forces in labor movements in many parts of the world, including the United States (Hyde, 2005; Narro, 2005), the Philippines (McKay, 2006), Indonesia (Ford, 2003; Hadiz, 1997), Bangladesh (Marilyn, 2001), and China (Xu, 2013). Their rise is a result of trade unions' inability to organize migrant workers, the increasing prevalence of non-unionized and precarious jobs, government suppression of trade unions, and the dominance of state-controlled trade unions. LNGOs and worker centers in democratic regimes have been extensively studied, especially their contributions to the collective organizing of workers (Fine, 2006; Hyde, 2005; McKay, 2006). However, little is known about the LNGOs dedicated to the collective organizing of workers, or movement-oriented LNGOs (MLNGOs), in authoritarian societies. How do MLNGOs arise in an authoritarian regime? How do they organize workers collectively? What movement roles do they play in labor resistance? What constraints do they face? In this article, I answer these questions by drawing on the case of China. Based on Tarrow's (2011: 9) understanding of social movements as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities," I define MLNGOs as labor organizations that promote collective challenges by the workers to employers or the state in a sustained manner by establishing common purposes and solidarities. As explained in more detail below, MLNGOs are distinct from the party-led trade unions, which are manipulated by employers and the state, and from LNGOs focusing on individual rights and service provision.

Although authoritarian states exercise tight control over civil society (Albrecht, 2005; Heurlin, 2010; Wiktorowicz, 2000), civil society organizations, such as environmental groups, religious associations, human rights organizations, development agencies, philanthropic organizations, and student groups, have been able to develop strategies to survive and carry out policy advocacy (Ayana et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017; Spires, 2011). In some non-democracies, civil society has also played a key role in facilitating a transition to democracy (Arato, 1981; Clarke, 2014; Howard, 2002). However, the knowledge surrounding MLNGOs, a type of civil society organization, and their organization of workers in authoritarian regimes is limited. In Egypt, LNGOs served as an unexpected broker of mobilization in the 2011 uprising (Clarke, 2014), but research has not addressed whether and how they organized workers collectively. In China, MLNGOs have mobilized collective labor actions, but research has often assumed their movement nature a priori, as explicated later. MLNGO is a term coined by a Chinese labor lawyer (Duan, 2015) and then quickly taken up by scholars. However, it is often used intuitively, referring to labor organizations "committed to the advancement of workers' collective interests" (Chen and Yang, 2017: 155).

In this article, I solve the puzzle of why and in what ways MLNGOs are movement vehicles. I also shed light on MLNGOs' collective organizing of workers in an authoritarian context, contributing to the general study of LNGOs and worker centers and studies on state–society relations in non-democracies. Additionally, this article supplements the discussions of China's labor relations in *Human Relations* (e.g., the special issue

"Changing work, labour and employment relations in China," 2015), which only briefly touched on the subject of LNGOs (Chung, 2015; Friedman and Kuruvilla, 2015). Social movement theories offer an apt theoretical lens for examining MLNGOs because they explain "the origins, growth, decline, and outcomes of social movements" (Staggenborg, 2005: 754). They have inspired research on the collective challenges posed by contenders, mobilization, and organizing among movement participants, and the interactions between challengers and their opponents. In this article, I synthesize social movement theories to analytically examine the birth, operation, and decline of MLNGOs.

The principal argument of this article is that political opportunities structure and MLNGOs' agency to capitalize on favorable political conditions contributed to the emergence of MLNGOs during the Hu-Wen regime (under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiaobao, from 2003 to 2013). MLNGOs promoted one type of "modular collective action" among workers that was "easily transferrable from one setting or circumstance to another" (Tarrow, 2011: 41). MLNGO-facilitated modular actions consist of three tactics:[1] (i) election of worker representatives; (ii) collective negotiation with employers; and (iii) protest activities. To advance this type of modular action, MLNGOs help workers to develop mobilizing networks and connective structures, formulate collective action frames, and accrue resources for their campaigns. However, a change in government administration has led to diminishing political opportunities, which has had a grave impact on the sustainability of MLNGOs.

Labor organizations in South China

In China, workplace trade unions are subjected to employer manipulation (Friedman, 2014), and higher-level unions are part of the state corporatist structure (Chan, 2008). Although official trade unions sometimes act like labor organizations, their role as a state apparatus prevails whenever the two roles conflict (Chen, 2003). These unions may assist workers with individual disputes through legal channels, but their priority is to dampen workers' collective action. Dysfunctional trade unions created space for the growth of LNGOs that target internal migrant workers, an exploited social group that has increasingly staged contentious actions. LNGOs started to emerge in the country after the Zhili Toy Factory fire in 1993 and the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in China in 1995. Distinct from official trade unions, LNGOs are autonomous from employers and are not part of the state structure. They advocate for labor, rather than serving the need of employers and the state.

Since the 1990s, LNGOs have provided various services to workers, such as "offering legal aid, chasing up wage arrears, assisting workers suffering from industrial injuries or occupational diseases" (Chen and Yang, 2017: 156). Additionally, some LNGOs have used cultural activities, such as music, drama, and poetry, to attract workers (Xu, 2013). Some have tried to influence workplace arrangements through corporate social responsibility campaigns (Chan, 2013). Others have covertly coached individual or small groups of workers to take contentious actions (Fu, 2017a). A subset of LNGOs, MLNGOs started to emerge in 2010. They are labor organizations that involve themselves in workers' collective actions to promote workers' collective challenges to employers or the state by establishing common purposes and solidarities among them.

Table 1. Comparison of official trade unions, LNGOs, and MLNGOs.

	Official trade unions	LNGOs	MLNGOs
Relations with employers	Workplace unions manipulated by employers	Autonomous from employers	Promote workers' collective challenges to employers
Relations with the state	Higher-level unions controlled by the state; state agenda prioritized	Not part of the state structure	Not part of the state structure
Attitudes toward collective action	Aim to dampen collective labor actions	Seldom intervene in collective labor actions	Promote modular collective actions among workers
Attitudes toward individual disputes	May assist workers with individual disputes	Focus on individual rights and service provision	May still handle individual cases and offer services

As such, MLNGOs are distinct from LNGOs that are predominantly service oriented or individual rights focused. However, MLNGOs may still handle individual cases or offer services to workers. Table 1 provides a comparison of official trade unions, LNGOs, and MLNGOs.

Scholars have offered differing opinions of LNGOs. Among the optimists, LNGOs have been perceived in the following ways: as promoting labor rights and assisting workers in defending their rights (Chan, 2013; Chan and Hui, 2012; Xu, 2013); as helping to strengthen factories' compliance with labor laws (Chung, 2015); as coaching workers in "individualized forms of contentious action" (Fu, 2017b: 454) and disguised collective action (Fu, 2017a); and as having the potential to become agents of social change (Gransow and Zhu, 2016). Among the pessimists, LNGOs have been criticized for individualizing labor disputes and channeling them into legally sanctioned procedures (Chan and Siu, 2012; Friedman and Lee, 2010); for not stressing "worker solidarity but workers' individual legal rights" (Lee and Shen, 2009: 122); and for strengthening the party state's rule of law project (Friedman and Lee, 2010). LNGOs have been characterized as "anti-solidarity machines" (Lee and Shen, 2011: 173) and have been accused of not helping to nurture an independent labor movement (Franceschini, 2014). Scholars have also broached the possibility of a "welfarist incorporation" of LNGOs by the state (Howell, 2015).

However, since 2010, LNGOs in South China have increasingly transformed into MLNGOs and started to intervene in collective labor actions, such as strikes and collective bargaining. Some scholars have thus softened their earlier criticisms of LNGOs (e.g., Lee Ching Kwan—see Kuruvilla, 2018) or revised their positions (Franceschini, 2016). The emerging scholarship on MLNGOs can be divided into three groups. The first group of studies focuses on state–MLNGO relations. These studies explain the state regulation, control, and suppression of MLNGOs and the workers they assist. Their purpose is not to provide comprehensive elaborations on MLNGOs' work, although they

have touched upon the subject. Franceschini and Nesossi (2018) examined the changing repressive strategies of the state against MLNGOs under the current President, Xi Jinping, and their impact on MLNGO operations. Chen and Gallagher (2018) shed light on the political fixes the state uses to redirect workers assisted by MLNGOs toward atomizing legal procedures. This group of studies often refer to MLNGOs in ways that imply the existence of a priori, comprehensive, and consensus-proven understandings of their movement roles.

The second category of research on MLNGOs focuses on worker–MLNGO relations. Examining the types of power workers possess, Xu and Schmalz (2017) concluded that workers can generate societal power by allying themselves with MLNGOs and student activists. Li and Liu (2018) suggested that MLNGOs could resolve the collective action problems facing workers. As in the first group of studies, this research elaborated on some aspects of MLNGOs' work, but did not thoroughly assess the movement roles of MLNGOs. It also took the movement nature of these organizations as a priori.

The third group of studies has highlighted "the LNGO methodology" (Kuruvilla, 2018: 1021), namely, how MLNGOs work and mobilize workers collectively. Such studies have improved the understanding of these organizations by distinguishing them from service-oriented and individual-rights-focused LNGOs. However, these studies tend to be descriptive. They give accounts of the activities that MLNGOs organize rather than conduct theoretical investigations of their movement roles. Froissart (2018) detailed how MLNGOs support worker-led collective bargaining and thus transform workers into a political force. Chen and Yang (2017) explained how MLNGOs organize and mobilize workers and assist them in collective bargaining. Despite their being labelled as "movement-oriented," no attempts have been made to analyze MLNGOs using insight from social or labor movement theories.[2]

In brief, the emerging scholarship on MLNGOs assumes their movement nature a priori. In contrast, I examine the movement roles of MLNGOs from the social movement perspective, as explained in the following section.

Synthesized social movement theories

Four major schools of thought have shaped the development of social movement theories. First, the social-psychological approach, prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s, assumes the irrationality of crowds (Oliver and Johnston, 2000). It suggests that surges of grievance are crucial drivers of movements (Jenkins, 1983). This approach has since been criticized for neglecting the process of mobilization in movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977) and for not connecting collective behavior and politics (Tarrow, 2011), gradually losing its popularity. Second, the resource mobilization approach has become more influential since the 1970s (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). Criticizing the social-psychological perspective, it maintains that social movement actors are not irrational and that movements are not products of irrationality (Buechler, 1993). Proponents of this approach argue that "the formation and mobilization of movements depend on changes in resources, group organization, and opportunities for collective actions" (Jenkins, 1983: 528). They consider the kinds and amount of resources that movement

actors can utilize that are critical to the form, growth, impact, and outcomes of a movement (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Wolfson, 1996).

The third approach to researching social movements is the framing process perspective, which represents a cultural turn to this field of study (Benford and Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 2011). Having gained prominence in the 1980s, this approach gives weight to meaning construction, interpretation, and maintenance. It criticizes the resource mobilization approach for examining movements "only in organizational and political terms, and neglecting the problems of social construction" (Oliver and Johnston, 2000: 37) and for underexploring mobilizing grievances (Snow, 2004). This approach posits that frames render meanings to events, thus functioning to organize experiences, to render a sense of injustice, and to guide actions. It is key to movement participation that the frames held by individuals regarding their values, ideas, and interests are aligned with social movement organizations' ideologies, activities, and goals (Snow et al., 1986).

Distinct from the social-psychological, material, and cultural orientation emphasized by the previous three approaches, the fourth approach, the political opportunities structure perspective, adopts a political lens to investigate social movements. Focusing on how political opportunities and threats shape movements (Lipsky, 1968; McAdam, 1999; Tilly, 1978), it argues that changes in political settings may create perceived opportunities or constraints for movement actors and thus embolden or discourage assertive claim-making. It also contends that authorities' responses to movement actors serve as cognitive cues to other actors that the political system has become vulnerable or tougher to challengers.

Although the social-psychological approach has become less influential, the other three approaches remain important in the study of social movements. Over time, scholars have realized the intellectual benefits of synthesizing the three approaches. McAdam et al. (1996) noted the trend among movement scholars that highlights the intersection of political opportunities structure, framing processes, and mobilizing structures. They structured their edited volume to stress this intersection. Political opportunities structure and framing processes are explained above. Mobilizing structures refer to the "collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action" (McAdam et al., 1996: 3). The concept of mobilizing structures has a root in the resource mobilization approach, which emphasizes mobilizing participation and resources through organizational endeavors. Similarly, Tarrow (2011) advocated for a synthesized approach to examining movements. He maintained that contentious politics occur:

> . . .when threats are experienced, and opportunities are perceived, when the existence of available allies is demonstrated, and when the vulnerability of opponents is exposed. Contention crystallizes challengers into social movement when it taps into embedded social networks and connective structures and produces vivid collective actions frames and supportive identities able to sustain contention against powerful opponents. (Tarrow, 2011: 33)

My analysis of MLNGOs is grounded on a synthesized approach. Similar to McAdam et al. (1996) and Tarrow (2011), I explain the movement roles of MLNGOs by focusing on how they guide workers to build mobilizing networks and structures, develop

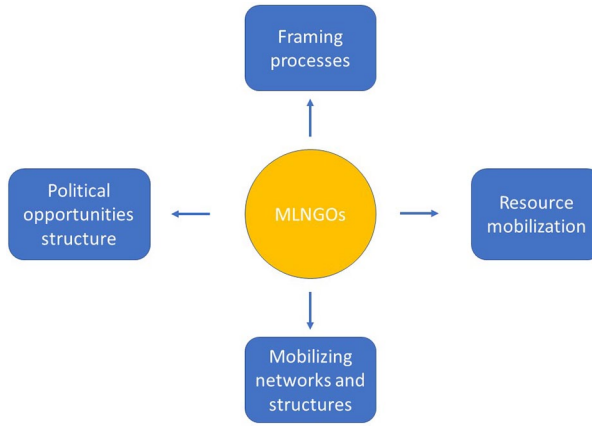

Figure 1. Synthesizing social movement theories to study MLNGOs.

collective action frames, and exploit political opportunities structure. However, the insights these scholars drew from the resource mobilization approach only concern mobilizing structures, meaning they missed out on other valuable elements of this approach. In their syntheses, the resource mobilization approach is reduced to networks and structures (i.e., social-organizational resources), but other types of resources are underplayed. According to Edwards and McCarthy (2004), in addition to social-organizational resources, material, human, cultural, and moral resources are key to movement building. Material resources include money, office space, and equipment, among other things. Human resources involve labor, skills, expertise, leadership, and experience. Cultural resources are cultural products, such as conceptual tools, specialized knowledge, tactical repertoires, information and advice, and technical and strategic support. Examples of moral resources include legitimacy, solidarity, and sympathy. They can be acquired through celebrity endorsements, statements of support for actions, and lobbying office holders. Integrating other types of resources highlighted by the resource mobilization perspective, in addition to mobilizing networks and structures, into the synthesized approach is vital to the analysis of MLNGOs. These types of resources are usually not readily available to workers seeking support from MLNGOs because they have meager wages, are low-skilled, have limited formal education, lack specialized knowledge, and do not have any movement experiences. Therefore, how MLNGOs help such workers to secure these types of resources is key to their campaigns and thus should not be disregarded. In view of this discussion, I use synthesized social movement theories to examine the emergence of MLNGOs, their movement roles, and the constraints they face from four angles: (i) political opportunities structure; (ii) mobilizing networks and connective structures; (iii) framing processes; and (iv) resource mobilization (Figure 1).

Additionally, I use the concept of modular collective action from social movement studies to examine MLNGOs (Tarrow, 2011: Chap. 2). Comparing two revolutions in France, Tarrow (2011) observed that the contentious actions of the French public

during the 1789 revolution included tearing down houses, burning tax registers, and assaulting tax collectors. This type of action was considered to be particular because it occurred on the immediate sites of offense and was restricted to directing attacks on the wrongdoers. During the 1848 revolution, the routine contentious actions changed to barricades, petitions, demonstrations, strikes, and public meetings. The new types of action were considered to be modular because they took place "in a variety of sites, on behalf of a variety of goals, and against a variety of targets" and "for a variety of purposes" (Tarrow, 2011: 38). This means these actions were readily adapted to different settings and were easily diffused across contenders. In the findings section, I explicate how MLNGOs propelled one type of modular collective action, which spread among the working-class challengers, by seizing political opportunities and assisting workers to build mobilizing networks and structures, formulate collective action frames, and amass movement resources.

Methods

Cases

I conducted my research in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) of South China, which has the highest concentration of labor organizations in China and has witnessed volatile labor relations and high levels of labor militancy (Pringle, 2018). Data collection occurred over the course of five periods: September 2012 to April 2013, October 2013 to December 2015, May to August 2016, May to July 2018, and May to June 2020.[3] Most previous studies on MLNGOs have focused on small numbers of cases, in contrast to the larger number of MLNGOs investigated in this article. During my fieldwork, I first mapped out which labor organizations suited my definition of MLNGOs, finding at least 13.[4] Although no official statistics on labor organizations are kept, scholars have estimated that there are approximately 40 to 100 LNGOs in China (Howell, 2015),[5] with 30 to 50 based in the PRD.[6] This means that approximately 26% to 43% of labor organizations in the PRD are MLNGOs. The 13 MLNGOs studied focused on rural migrant workers. Their staff members were either former workers or college graduates. They had no formal membership structure and did not charge dues. At the time of research, they largely relied on overseas funding, with some receiving small grants from local sources.

Data collection

To enhance the validity of the findings, I collected qualitative data through triangulated sources—in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary research (Creswell and Miller, 2000). After mapping out the 13 MLNGOs, I interviewed 36 of their staff members (Appendix I). I conducted multiple interviews with some participants over an eight-year period to collect more information in an iterative process of data analysis (see below) and to obtain updates on my MLNGO cases. The interviews aimed to address four key areas: (i) how MLNGOs arose; (ii) how they organized workers collectively; (iii) what movement roles they played; and (iv) what challenges they encountered. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 48 migrant workers connected to

seven MLNGOs to learn their perceptions of these organizations and how MLNGOs had handled their collective cases (Appendix II). These workers were employed in the electronics, toy, bicycle, footwear, golf, and sanitation industries. I also talked to 13 interviewees of various backgrounds to learn about the general MLNGO or LNGO landscape (Appendix III). Given its effectiveness in reaching interviewees with similar backgrounds, namely, staffers and workers connected to MLNGOs and LNGOs (Small, 2009), I used the snowball method to approach interviewees. I concluded my interviews until a point of saturation was reached (Small, 2009), meaning that the information my interviewees provided was able to answer to my research questions, had become overly recurrent, and had no contradictions or inconsistencies. The interviews were recorded, where permitted, and transcribed.

Between 2012 and 2015, I conducted intensive participant observation of MLNGOs (B), (C), and (I), based in three major cities in the PRD: Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Guangzhou, respectively. I also observed the activities of these three MLNGOs intermittently both before and after this period. I joined their meetings with workers involved in collective disputes, training for worker-leaders, staff meetings, retreat meetings, and events of other kinds. Furthermore, I observed the activities of MLNGOs (F) and (H) once and occasionally observed seminars and training for worker-activists that the MLNGOs co-organized. The aim of participant observation was to obtain information on the four key areas previously stated. Participant observation also facilitated my understanding of the group interaction and dynamics between MLNGOs and workers in a natural setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010), which might not be gleaned from interviews. It improved my understanding of the roles of MLNGOs in workers' resistance. During data collection, I regularly took and reviewed detailed observation and analytic notes (Silverman, 2013).

Furthermore, I conducted archival research, which "provide[s] information about the settings being studied, or about their wider contexts" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010: 122). I collected documents, leaflets, letters, reports, and online materials produced by MLNGOs. This provided background information on the MLNGOs being studied and the collective cases they handled. It also supplemented the interviews and participant observations I conducted to enhance the validity of the data.

Data analysis

My five research periods were spread over eight years. Data analysis was an iterative process conducted both during data collection and after each phase of research was over (Emerson et al., 2001). During data collection, I reviewed my fieldnotes regularly to ensure my interviews, participant observations, and archival research had effectively addressed the four focal areas. A close examination and reflection of the fieldwork materials during data collection also enabled me to modify the interview questions and research direction in a timely manner when warranted.

After completing one phase of data collection, I scrutinized the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents critically. Using the content analysis method (Krippendorff, 2012), I reviewed these materials to "achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole" regarding MLNGOs' emergence, organizing of workers, movement

roles, and challenges (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279). Based on my analytical framework, I created the codes I would use to tease out meaning from the data (King, 1998). These codes included framing, resources, network, organization, structures, mobilization, political opportunities, threat, and more. As the materials I collected were in Chinese, I translated the predetermined codes into Chinese. I then reread and coded the materials using the translated codes. Aware that some of the data might not "fall neatly inside a code" (Blair, 2015: 17), I reexamined the uncoded data to ensure that I did not leave out any key information. When warranted, I developed new codes to interpret the uncoded materials. For instance, agency was a new code I formulated to understand MLNGOs' response to political opportunities structure.

I examined the coding to form a deeper analysis of MLNGOs' movement roles. I discerned that my initial coding (related to framing, resources, network, organization, structures, mobilization, political opportunities, threat, agency, and more) pointed to the tactics used by MLNGOs in collective labor actions. Three tactics were identified: (i) the election of worker representatives, (ii) collective bargaining, and (iii) protest activities. The initial coding of the fieldwork materials produced tentative findings. Multiple access to the field sites allowed me to obtain more data to sharpen and refine my findings. Following several rounds of fieldwork, I endeavored to develop a central analytical concept to capture the movement roles of MLNGOs. I compared my findings with key social movement literature and found that the three tactics used by MLNGOs can be subsumed under the concept of modular collective action (Tarrow, 2011). Finally, to examine how MLNGO-promoted modular actions were distinct from labor resistance without MLNGO involvement, I re-read the fieldwork materials and compared my findings with the literature on labor struggles in China.

Findings

How did MLNGOs emerge?

MLNGOs emerged as a result of both changing political opportunities (i.e., the opening up of social space) and their agency (i.e., their proactivity in seizing and transforming political opportunities) during the Hu-Wen administration. Under this administration, the exploitation of migrant workers intensified and labor protests were commonplace (Lee, 2007). To cope with worsening social inequality and maintain political legitimacy, the Hu-Wen government enacted many social policies and labor laws, including the 2004 Provisions on Minimum Wages, the 2008 Labour Contract Law, and the 2011 Social Insurance Law. Compared with the periods governed by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, who prioritized industrialization and urbanization and strongly suppressed civil society, the Hu-Wen administration gave greater space to social organizations, resulting in a "prime period of civil society expansion" (Howell and Pringle, 2019: 234). For instance, the registration of some types of civil organizations was made easier in some areas at first, such as in Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, and then extended to other parts of the country (Howell, 2015). The Ministry of Civil Affairs started to sub-contract welfare services to NGOs, including labor organizations (Howell, 2015). In Guangdong, the government-initiated Federation of Social Service Organizations for Guangdong

Workers was established to offer incubation services to social organizations (Hui, 2020). Although the Hu-Wen regime was never completely friendly to labor organizations, its open authoritarianism created "new edges and spaces where gains for workers and activists could be made" (Howell and Pringle, 2019: 232). As such, political opportunities favorable to MLNGOs playing a movement role occurred. A labor lawyer who had handled many collective labor conflicts together with MLNGOs remarked:

> In many MLNGO-intervened collective disputes, the government could have made workers and MLNGOs bear the legal responsibilities, but they did not do that . . . the government did not put any pressure on me not to engage in workers' strikes . . . they talked to me asking me to cooperate, but they were not forceful. (Interview O1)

The government's tolerance of MLNGOs was rooted in the 2010 Honda workers' strike. This strike was unprecedented in the reform era for its duration (17 days long), scale (involving over 1800 workers), workers' demands (decent wage increases and workplace trade union reform), and organizing capability (having strike representatives and visible leaders; Chan and Hui, 2012). After several twists and turns, a legal scholar, together with the strike representatives, held negotiation meetings with the factory and successfully resolved the conflict. After the Honda strike, the Guangdong government became less hostile toward external actors that intervened in concerted labor actions (Interviews L27 and L34), because these actors coordinated loosely organized workers in wildcat actions and transformed uncontrollable protests into manageable negotiations (Interviews O1 and O2). By allowing MLNGOs to intervene in collective labor actions the government sought to channel these actions from "disruption" to "contained behavior" (Tarrow, 2011: 99).

As political opportunities may not be palpable to all actors (Tarrow, 2011: 163), in addition to the changing political environment, the birth of MLNGOs was a result of these organizations' agency in perceiving and seizing political opportunities. MLNGOs were emboldened by the Honda strikers, who acted as early risers "pry[ing] open institutional barriers through which the demands of other groups can pour" (Tarrow, 2011: 167). MLNGOs picked up on the positive signals connected to the changes in the political atmosphere. Immediately after the Honda strike was settled, MLNGO (F) organized staff training on how to engage in concerted labor actions. Subsequently, other MLNGOs also conducted staff training on intervention in strikes and collective negotiation, several of which I joined. I also participated in the retreat meetings of two MLNGOs in 2011, 2013, and 2015. During the meetings, the staff, board members, and worker-activists discussed what they ought to do in the face of escalating labor resistance and how they should engage with labor strikes. Ultimately, both MLNGOs determined that supporting labor collective struggles was one of their top priorities. An MLNGO activist commented:

> The increasing number of strikes in the PRD mean that if labor organizations do not want to become irrelevant to workers' resistance, they need to be more proactive. And it has become increasingly clear that it is politically possible to support workers' collective resistance. (Observation notes)

Building on changing political opportunities structure and their own agency, MLNGOs were able to advance one type of modular collective action that diffused among the workers they assisted. This type of action consists of three tactics, which are elaborated on in the following section.

What movement roles did MLNGOs play?

Tactic 1: Election of worker representatives. One of the three tactics of MLNGO-spurred modular collective action is the election of worker representatives. This tactic helps establish leadership, mobilizing networks, and connective structures among workers. Before elucidating this extra-union representational tactic, I first explain how MLNGOs would generally organize workers. MLNGOs would usually begin by engaging in labor collective resistance in reactive or proactive ways. When workers who had already been part of an MLNGO's contact network encountered workplace issues, they might reach out to the MLNGO staff for advice. Alternatively, workers outside the MLNGO's contact network who had grievances might approach the MLNGO upon the referral of friends or upon finding their information online or in print publications. MLNGOs might also proactively reach out to workers on strike after learning of their struggles from traditional or social media. MLNGO staff members might even travel to the scene of protests to talk to workers and identify worker-leaders or contact worker-activists through social media.

After gaining access to workers engaged in disputes, MLNGO staff would usually first meet up with a small number of motivated and outraged workers. In the meetings, they would encourage the workers to talk to other workers about the disputes and bring them to subsequent meetings. One MLNGO staffer explained:

> We will first organize a meeting with the workers [that we get in touch with] . . . We will discuss with them what the situation is and what they can do collectively . . . We will strongly encourage them to go talk to their co-workers and get them involved. (Interview L14)

One worker connected to MLNGO (K) remarked:

> At first, only seven workers, including me, went to meet with MLNGO (K) . . . After talking to its staff, we went back to the factory to spread the word and hand out its business cards among the workers . . . Chen from the hand-sewing department came to talk to us . . . He later helped us talk to other workers from his department. (Interview W33)

Furthermore, MLNGOs would often recommend that motivated workers map out the departments, divisions, and assembly lines in factories and reach out to other workers using that mapping. Such mapping helped facilitate internal communication and mobilize workers. Additionally, MLNGOs would advise workers to establish a branch-like organizational structure, with each of the innermost core workers (the first layer) tasked with communicating regularly with several active workers (the second layer) to disseminate updates and check on their situations. The worker-activists in the second layer would be responsible for periodic contact with other workers in the third layer. The communication mechanism would continue to branch out in this fashion. One worker remarked:

> In each floor of the factory, we had a representative . . . Jin was the representative from the second floor, Tang was from the third floor, and Wu was from the fourth floor . . . The representatives were responsible for communication with a certain number of workers . . . MLNGO (K) suggested [that we] do this . . . It made our communication more effective. (Interview W29)

After a critical number of workers had committed themselves to the campaign, MLNGOs would often guide workers to organize the extra-union election of worker representatives, who played leadership and mobilizing roles. This type of election fostered a culture of democracy and self-autonomy among workers, which contrasts with the undemocratic milieu of Chinese trade unions (Friedman, 2014). Worker representatives are responsible for negotiations with the company, for dealing with government officials, for overseeing solidarity funds, for internal communication and mobilization, and for social media publicity, among other tasks. MLNGO (K) intervened in a series of strikes breaking out in a footwear factory in Guangzhou between December 2014 and April 2015. Its staffer explained how elections were conducted in the factory: "There were more than 2000 workers in the factory. I asked the workers who came to see us to elect their own representatives in my presence. We also planned to help workers from different departments to elect their representatives" (Interview L30). Ultimately, the strikers elected 61 worker representatives, who then elected 13 negotiation representatives among themselves (Interviews L31 and W28–W39).

After two strikes and three rounds of negotiation between the workers' representatives and the management, the footwear factory acceded to paying the social insurance fees and housing fund arrears and to revealing its relocation plan to the workers. However, the factory did not enact the deal by the agreed deadline. The workers discovered that five of the 13 negotiation representatives had participated in clandestine meetings with the company and township government and had struck another deal with the management that was worse than the original agreement. In a meeting initiated by some worker representatives, the participants (approximately 100) elected another 19 worker representatives to replace the original ones. The workers staged another strike in April 2015 to protest the factory's failure to uphold the first agreement. The factory then acceded to paying all necessary compensation and to disclosing its relocation information (Interviews L31, L33, and W28–W39). This case illustrates how MLNGO-assisted workers built connective networks among themselves and established democratic and accountability mechanisms between themselves and their elected leaders. Owing to the effort of MLNGOs, the extra-union election of worker representatives has become more widespread in the PRD. Labor activists and scholars have coined the term "worker representation mechanism" (*gongren daibiao zhi*) to describe this new trend (Franceschini and Lin, 2019).

Tactic 2: Collective negotiation. The second tactic of MLNGO-propelled modular collective action is collective negotiation. The foundation of this tactic is shared ideas among workers regarding the attribution of blame, action mobilization, and solution identification. That is, the workers must believe that their employers cause their plight, perceive the collective power of workers as the key to resolving their disputes, and consider

collective bargaining to be an effective solution. To achieve this goal, MLNGOs guided workers to develop three types of collective action frames. The first is diagnostic framing, which identifies "the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 616). MLNGOs would usually attribute workers' plight to their employers and sometimes to government officials who do not properly implement the law. A staffer from MLNGO (K) who intervened in the footwear factory dispute mentioned earlier explained in his initial meetings with workers that it would be illegal for the factory to relocate to another city without paying workers severance, annual leave, social insurance, and other legal entitlements (Interviews L30, W29, and W33). He noted that his detailed explanation had alerted workers to their legal rights and the employer's consistent violation of those rights (Interview L30). As a result, they became fired up. In other words, this MLNGO staffer helped workers frame the factory as culpable by appealing to "injustice frames" (Gamson et al., 1982), which define employers' actions as unjust, and legitimate workers' resistance. A worker from the footwear factory expressed:

> Some people thought that as the boss fed us, we should have been grateful. I am thankful I have a job, but as the staffers [of MLNGOs (K)] suggested, what we have is not given by the boss, but is achieved through our own effort. There are so many enterprises out there and we could easily find another job . . . The factory has no excuse to take away our legal entitlement . . . if we are united, we can get it back. (Interview W36)

The injustice frames pointing at the boss enraged the workers and increased their chance of taking collective action.

Second, MLNGOs helped workers formulate motivational framing, which articulates a "rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 617). Their motivational framing is built around two notions: the ineffectiveness of legal channels and workers' collective power. Instead of directing workers toward atomizing legal channels, MLNGOs highlighted that resolving disputes through mediation, adjudication, or other legal means is time consuming and that workers' collective actions exert greater pressure on employers and the government. One staff member from MLNGO (K) remarked:

> Many workers do not have the supporting documents necessary to file legal cases; for those who do, it will take 1.5 to 2 years to finish all of the legal procedures. Instead of suggesting that they take the legal route, we tell them about the successful experiences of workers who have taken collective action. (Interview L30)

This MLNGO-facilitated motivational framing echoes workers' desire to swiftly retrieve the money employers owe them. Furthermore, "the heavy cost imposed on workers by the legal system has prompted them to experiment with organizing workers' collective struggles" (Li and Liu, 2018: 1083).

Third, MLNGOs helped workers formulate prognostic framing, which "articulate[s] an alternative set of arrangements" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 615) and defines preferred solutions to the problems identified. MLNGO-promoted prognostic framing advocates

collective bargaining between worker and management representatives as a solution to labor disputes. MLNGOs often encouraged workers to petition employers, requesting negotiations with them. For instance, a golf factory had not contributed to its workers' social insurance and housing funds before 2008, and after 2008 it only made partial contributions. With the support of MLNGO (D), in 2014 over 600 workers (out of approximately 2000) signed a petition to urge the factory to negotiate with them (Interviews L14 and W20). A worker-leader recalled, "We submitted the petition in March and the factory negotiated with us a few times, but there was not much progress. In July, we submitted another petition" (Interview W20). With the factory still not addressing the workers' concerns, they went on strike in July. Finally, the chief executive negotiated with the workers' representatives and committed to some corrective measures.

Collective bargaining prognostic framing rode the wave of broader legal-political changes. After the Honda workers' strike and the strike waves it triggered, the Chinese Communist Party branches or governments in 13 provinces issued documents promoting collective bargaining (Chan and Hui, 2014). In Guangdong and Shenzhen, the governments deliberated on legislation related to collective bargaining (Hui and Chan, 2016). In 2014, the Guangdong Provincial Regulations on the Collective Contract of Enterprises was passed. Taking advantage of the favorable political conditions, not only MLNGOs but also labor lawyers and scholars popularized collective bargaining prognostic framing. The website China Collective Bargaining Forum (*zhongguo jiti tanpan luntan*) was founded by a law firm in Shenzhen and several academic institutes.[7] It launched the journal *Collective Bargaining Research* (*jiti tanpan zhidu yanjiu*) to "show how collective bargaining could and should be the way forward for workers, management and government in China."[8] Furthermore, many academic conferences focused on collective bargaining. In one conference I joined, a scholar speaking to the audience stated, "Collective bargaining is not only a mechanism to resolve labor conflicts, it is part of the [social] system in democratic countries. We should promote collective bargaining from this perspective and stress its importance in political and economic reform."[9]

Building upon the interpretive function of these three collective action frames, MLNGOs would provide workers training in collective bargaining skills, which is a cultural resource, covering topics such as the procedures for collective bargaining, the obligations of the parties involved, the roles of worker representatives in negotiations, and bargaining strategies. MLNGOs often invited labor scholars, labor lawyers, or other workers with experience in collective negotiation to discuss these topics with workers engaged in collective disputes. MLNGOs would recommend that worker representatives arrange a division of labor during negotiations. For instance, one worker representative would be responsible for asking questions, one for taking notes, one for observing the reactions of management, and one for staging offensive moves. Some MLNGOs, such as MLNGO (B) and (H), organized mock collective bargaining for worker representatives, in which the staff members would play the role of the boss in a realistic manner. After the negotiation meetings, some MLNGOs, such as MLNGOs (B), (C), and (D), would evaluate the meetings with the worker representatives to facilitate future attempts.

The coaching by MLNGOs improved workers' negotiation skills, boosted their confidence, and sharpened their tactics. One worker commented,

> To be honest, if MLNGO (H) had not given us training in collective negotiation, I wouldn't have taken the initiative to talk to the managers and the factory head; I wouldn't have had the courage to negotiate with the top management. (Interview W24)

Another worker echoed, "I used to be an ordinary peasant-worker. What I have learned from MLNGO (H) has emboldened me to negotiate with the boss" (Interview W25). It should be noted that without any protests, employers may not feel the pressure to bargain with workers. This leads to the following discussion of the final tactic of MLNGO-promoted modular collective action.

Tactic 3: Protests. Collective negotiations were often coupled with workers' protests to compel employers to compromise. To facilitate protest activities, alongside guiding workers to formulate the three types of collective action frames explicated above, MLNGOs provided workers with several types of resources. In the stage-setting phase of actions, the MLNGOs offered workers material resources, such as arranging places for workers' meetings and suggesting that they establish a solidarity fund for their fight, to which workers contributed a small amount. This type of resource is crucial for workers, who are often materially underprivileged. Second, MLNGOs provided human resources by dedicating their staff, who act as organizers, to helping workers. The mobilizing networks and structures described earlier also helped workers to develop their human resources by recruiting workers to join the campaign. Furthermore, through MLNGO-guided elections of worker representatives, workers were able to build leadership, an important form of human resources. Third, MLNGOs prepared workers for actions through training activities, which are vehicles for delivering cultural resources, such as specialized knowledge, information and advice, and strategic and technical support. The training would usually be about labor laws, organizing and mobilizing skills, and collective bargaining. One staffer from MLNGO (H) revealed that it organized approximately one training session per week for the core workers involved in one collective dispute. She continued, "Altogether, we organized around 20 training sessions. In one session, more than 100 workers attended" (Interview L19).

In the action planning and execution phases, MLNGOs offered strategic advice and support, a form of cultural resources, by guiding workers to deliberate on and utilize their potential leverage over their opponents. Helping workers identify legal leverage was common. If employers breach labor laws, then workers have legal and moral grounds for action. Thus, the public would probably consider their actions as having legitimacy, a form of moral resource. In such cases, the core can more easily convince their peers of their employers' wrongdoing and persuade them to join the fight. In such cases, the government also often feels more obliged to pressure companies into righting their wrongs. If workers have both legal and extra-legal grievances, employers in violation of the law may also make concessions concerning the extra-legal issues (Interviews L12 and L19).

The second type of leverage involves disruptive actions, such as strikes and protests. MLNGOs often advised workers to strategically plan disruptive activities, such as during a firm's peak season. For instance, after consulting MLNGO (B), workers from a

bike-light factory staged a two-week strike-cum-occupation in 2015 to demand back payment of pension insurance fees (Interviews L3 and W1–W12). Their actions, targeted at halting production and the transportation of the finished goods, took place shortly before the company was to join a bike exposition. The company was so anxious that it solicited police aid to forcefully take the boxes of goods out of the factory and to end the strike. This illustrates that the disruption of factory production can exert immense pressure on employers.

The third type of leverage that workers have over employers concerns the relationship between global brands and local suppliers. Along the global supply chain, western brands are often sensitive about their corporate reputation. If their supplier factories in China violate labor laws or trample fundamental labor rights, brand image can be damaged. Thus, western brands may take remedial measures when pressured by labor groups and workers in China. For instance, workers from a supplier factory for Tokyo Disneyland in Shenzhen believed that their bosses intended to shut the factory down (Interviews W13–W19). In January 2015, they walked off the job to demand severance payments and back payments of pension insurance fees and housing funds. The dispute was not resolved after 18 days of intermittent striking. With the support of MLNGO (B), the workers sent a petition to the Walt Disney Company (Asia Pacific) urging its intervention. The staff of MLNGO (B) and the worker representatives met with Disney representatives twice and with its hired mediator three times. Ultimately, the supplier factory acceded to compensating the workers.

To pressure brands to fix the problems in their supplier factories, MLNGOs might resort to the "boomerang strategy" (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Zajak, 2017) to generate international support—a crucial form of moral resources. In December 2014, more than 900 workers from Artigas, an apparel supplier factory of the Japanese brand Uniqlo and the Hong Kong brand G2000, launched a strike to demand back payments of pension insurance fees (Interviews L12 and L13). MLNGO (D) helped workers to obtain backing from international groups. It contacted some labor groups in Hong Kong, which then pressured Uniqlo and G2000. The two companies requested a proper response from Artigas. G2000 stopped "placing new orders with Artigas [from] early January 2015 until the dispute [was] resolved."[10] In June 2015, after the company's furtive relocation plan was disclosed, the Artigas workers struck again and occupied the factory to demand proper compensation. With the intervention of MLNGO (D), labor groups from Hong Kong, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, and beyond protested in Uniqlo stores in July.[11]

In addition to analyzing potential forms of leverage, MLNGOs also helped workers assess potential challenges to their fight. Employer retribution and political pressure are two typical impediments. One MLNGO staff noted, "Employers often take videos and pictures of workers joining strikes . . . They may fire some of them later" (Interview L14). She added that the assault of strikers was also common. As shown by the bike-light factory strike described above, police forces are occasionally used to put down worker strikes. Based on the analysis of potential leverage and challenges ahead, MLNGOs discussed with workers what kinds of collective action might advance their interests and provided strategic and technical support to execute their action plans.

What constraints did MLNGOs face?

Despite their contribution to promoting one type of modular collective action, MLNGOs faced several limitations in playing a movement role. First, MLNGOs lacked social and political legitimacy, an important kind of moral resource. Owing to the suppressive political environment, the public knew little about MLNGOs and they could not easily gain workers' trust (Franceschini, 2014). In many cases in which MLNGOs had secured workers' trust and helped them organize collectively, the MLNGOs remained behind the scenes and did not join the negotiations between the workers' and companies' representatives. One MLNGO staffer commented, "If workers are going to bargain with their boss, they want somebody to go with them . . . but as LNGO staff I cannot do that" (Interview L16). Second, according to the social movement literature, turning authorities into sympathizers and garnering support from polity members are key moral resources (Lipsky, 1968; Tilly, 1978). However, owing to the suppressive atmosphere, MLNGOs could not provide workers with greater moral resources by influencing political and social elites. Third, in other countries, it is common for labor groups and trade unions to form alliances to generate sympathy for and solidarity with workers, which are types of moral resources (Fine, 2011). However, such an alliance is not likely to appear in China, and MLNGOs were unable to mobilize the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) because trade unions are controlled by the party state. Fourth, MLNGOs lacked the freedom to build federations or alliances among themselves because China's social organizations are prohibited from establishing regional branch offices.[12] Their formal coalescence was also unlikely to be tolerated owing to the government's concerns about social instability. This means cross-organizational mobilization could only be done covertly, if at all.

Fifth, MLNGOs' organizational features were unconducive to workers' long-term participation in MLNGOs and the labor movement. Although membership and volunteer systems are crucial types of connective structures (McCarthy and Wolfson, 1996), MLNGOs established a no membership system or loose volunteer systems to avoid political repercussions. The organizational structure of MLNGOs differs from that of trade unions in the West, which are comprised of and financed by worker-members, to whom the elected leaders are accountable (Hyman, 1975). In contrast, MLNGOs are external to workers, who do not have formal self-governing and decision-making power in the organizations, contribute to MLNGO income, or elect MLNGO staffers. Although a handful of workers continued to participate in MLNGOs' activities post-dispute, many became less active or unengaged. Sixth, MLNGOs lacked the ability to further assist workers to improve workplace relations post-disputes. After a strike, workers might lose the momentum to continually fight for improvements (Interviews W24–W26), worker-leaders might face employer retribution (Interviews W3, W6, and W7), and worker-leaders had limited capacity to further build workers' power in their workplaces (Interviews W20 and W21). MLNGOs could not easily resolve these issues, because they lacked an organizational base in workplaces. Employers perceived them as stirring up trouble and the government viewed workplace representation as the sole responsibility of the ACFTU.

In addition to these limitations, the challenges facing MLNGOs since Xi Jinping became the president in 2013 have increased. Under his "encapsulating authoritarianism" (Howell and Pringle, 2019), Xi repealed presidential term limits, centralized

political power in his hands, and closed down the social space for social organizations (Kuruvilla, 2018). This has all resulted in diminishing political opportunities for MLNGOs. The Xi regime has deployed three strategies to tighten control over civil society actors, including MLNGOs. The first strategy is financial sapping. In 2017, the government enacted the Law on the Management of Foreign Non-Government Organizations Activities, which stipulates that social organizations may receive financial support from overseas NGOs only if the latter are registered in China (meaning that they would be managed by both the police and a supervisory unit from the government). MLNGOs used to receive overseas funding, but they now have difficulty obtaining financial resources, as many of their foreign donors are not registered in the country.[13] This has affected their organizational survival, not to mention their movement roles.

The second control strategy used by the Xi government is welfarist incorporation (Howell, 2015), which was first implemented during the Hu-Wen era. The government sub-contracts services to the elderly, the disabled, youth, and more to non-profit organizations. It also sub-contracts welfare and educational services targeting workers to labor organizations that are deemed politically manageable. Since 2014, the Guangzhou government has sub-contracted public services through the venture philanthropy program (*gongyi touchuang*), involving a total expenditure of 1.24 billion yuan and over 800 projects as of 2020.[14] Similar programs can be found in Shanghai and other parts of the country (Jing and Gong, 2012). A former MLNGO staffer commented, "The venture philanthropy program is a means to control labor organizations . . . if you want to bid for government funding, the proposal and execution of your projects have to fit into their evaluation criteria and standards" (Interview O4). Through welfarist incorporation, the Xi administration has sought to restrict labor organizations to "acting as apolitical service providers rather than campaigners and organizers" (Howell and Pringle, 2019: 238).

For MLNGOs not converted by the welfarist incorporation strategy, the Xi government has used consolidated repression to deal with them (Fu and Distelhorst, 2018). In 2015, after arresting five feminist activists and over 200 rights lawyers and legal assistants, seven MLNGO activists from Guangdong were arrested in December.[15] Ultimately, three were given suspended prison terms and one given a jail term of 21 months. In 2018, the government repressed the Jasic workers' endeavor to build a workplace union, arresting the worker-leaders and over 50 supporters. In 2019, four MLNGO activists and the former editor of the Collective Bargaining Forum were arrested.[16] Two of them were sentenced to three years of imprisonment, with a four-year suspension. Three were sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment, with a two-year suspension. At the end of 2019 and in early 2020, a labor activist and two volunteers running a website to advocate for the rights of sanitation workers in Guangzhou were detained for 15 days.[17]

Political threats limit and demobilize social movements (Tarrow, 2011). Xi's repression has dealt a blow to the development of MLNGOs (Table 2 compares the movement roles of MLNGOs during the Hu-Wen and Xi administrations). Among the 36 MLNGO interviewees, eight have been arrested in the past few years. They have been under regular surveillance since their release. At the time of interview, one of them was required to report to the Judicial Bureau twice per week in person and twice on the phone and to submit a weekly written report. Additionally, a national security officer came to talk to him once a month and more frequently during politically sensitive periods (Interview

Table 2. MLNGOs' movement roles during the Hu-Wen and Xi administrations.

	2010–2015	Since 2015
Modular collective actions	Three tactics: Election of worker representatives; negotiation with employers; protests	MLNGO-facilitated modular collective actions not tolerated
Political opportunities structure	Expanding opportunity (during the Hu-Wen era)	Diminishing opportunity (after Xi consolidated his power)
	The state channeled disruption into contained behavior and tolerated social actors involved in collective labor actions	Obtaining foreign funding made difficult; labor organizations controlled through welfarist incorporation; repression of MLNGOs intensified
Mobilizing structures and networks	Mapping workplaces; building communication mechanisms; election of worker representatives	Declining movement roles
Framing	Diagnostic framing: Employers (and government officials) to be blamed Prognostic framing: Collective bargaining Motivational framing: Legal ineffectiveness and collective power	
Resource mobilization	Material, human, cultural, and moral resources to support protest activities	

L31). Another released MLNGO activist revealed that the police kept harassing workers and friends he contacted. The police had installed a video camera at the entrance of his residence to track his movement, and undercover police followed him closely during special political events. National security officers also requested to talk to him regularly (Interview L30, 2018). Owing to severe political surveillance and control, the MLNGO activists released could hardly continue to play a movement role and some MLNGOs have been forced to cease operations. Of the 13 MLNGO cases, at least four no longer function. MLNGOs not directly targeted by the government have still experienced the chilling effect of political repression. Many have decided to lay low and refrain from intervening in collective cases. To maintain organizational survival, some labor organizations have started to work with local governments and mass organizations in various projects (Interviews L26 and L27); some have restricted themselves to handling individual cases and service provision (Interviews L35 and L36); some have shifted their work emphasis to "community" (*shequ*), a term bearing no adversarial connotation (Interviews O3 and O10); and some have registered as social work organizations (*shegong jigou*), which are subject to strict government regulations and control (Interviews O4 and O12).

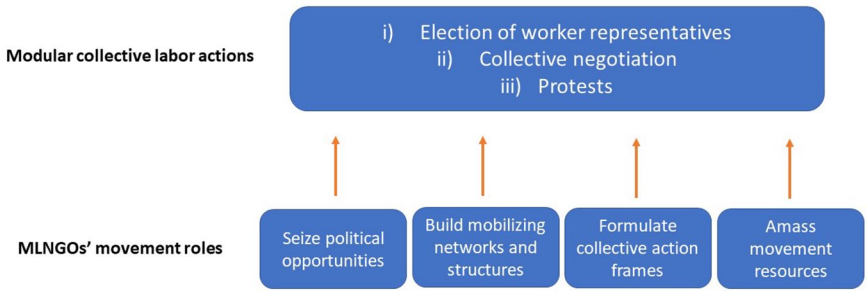

Figure 2. MLNGOs' movement roles in facilitating modular collective labor action.

Discussion and conclusion

Focusing on the case of China, I explore how MLNGOs in an authoritarian regime arise, how they organize workers collectively, what movement roles they play, and what challenges they face. I show that the birth of movement-oriented labor organizations is possible in a non-democracy, but hinges on the political opportunities structure and agency of MLNGOs to capitalize on favorable political conditions. I also examine the movement role of MLNGOs in spurring one type of modular collective labor action, consisting of three tactics, namely the election of worker representatives, collective negotiation, and protest (Figure 2). When political opportunities occurred (during the Hu-Wen regime), MLNGOs used the social space opened up by the state to engage in labor resistance. They encouraged workers to cultivate leadership and develop mobilizing networks and connective structures, all of which are crucial for movement mobilization (McAdam et al., 2001). This was achieved through the election of worker representatives and other methods, such as mapping-based mobilization and branch-like communication among workers. Elected worker representatives acted as "movement entrepreneurs" (McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977)—cadres, leaders, or organizers—who led the workers' campaigns. Mobilizing networks and structures helped turn not-yet-committed workers into adherents who identified with the campaign's goals or into constituents who were willing to offer resources to the campaign (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The intervention of MLNGOs transformed workers from discrete, unorganized entities into more organized and coherent unities with visible leadership.

Second, MLNGOs promoted collective bargaining by inspiring workers to develop collective action frames, which perform an interpretive function to "activate adherents, transform bystanders into supporters, exact concessions from targets, and demobilize antagonists" (Snow, 2004: 385). In the context of the changing legal and political environments related to collective negotiation during the Hu-Wen regime, with the help of MLNGOs, workers formulated a diagnostic frame that characterized their employers as culpable, a motivational frame that stressed the collective power of workers, and a prognostic frame that advocated collective negotiation as a solution to labor disputes. Furthermore, MLNGOs provided workers with training and advice on collective bargaining, which was a cultural resource. For instance, they arranged for people with

knowledge of collective bargaining to talk to workers in collective disputes, advised workers on the division of labor in negotiation meetings, and organized mock collective bargaining for, and reviewed negotiation meetings with, worker representatives.

Third, MLNGOs motivated workers to protest by equipping them with human, material, cultural, and moral resources in the stage-setting, action-planning, and action-execution phases. For instance, they provided workers with human resources by dedicating their staff to assisting workers. They also offered cultural resources by educating workers about labor laws, organizing and mobilizing skills, and collective bargaining, and by guiding workers to deliberate on their leverage over employers and to assess potential challenges to their campaigns. Migrant workers constitute an underprivileged group that lacks various types of resources. They are more likely to stage contentious actions when they acquire external resources from MLNGOs that "convince them that they can end injustices and find opportunities in which to use these resources" (Tarrow, 2011: 160).

MLNGO-spurred modular action is distinct from worker defiance without MLNGO intervention. Modular action is marked by coordination and organization achieved through worker representative election, mapping-based mobilization, and a branch-like communication strategy. It is also characterized by visible leadership actualized through the election of worker representatives and by formal conflict resolution attained through collective negotiations backed by protests. In contrast, workers' resistance without the support of MLNGOs had long been characterized by legal mobilization through the mediation, arbitration, and litigation systems at the individual level (Gallagher, 2017), or by uncoordinated, unorganized, and spontaneous group actions at the collective level (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Friedman and Lee, 2010). Without the engagement of MLNGOs, workers' collective defiance was expressed in the form of "strikes, road blockages, sit-ins and threatening suicide . . . factory occupations, riots and murder (of bosses)" without visible leadership (Friedman and Lee, 2010: 519). It usually ended with employers unilaterally adjusting pay or work conditions, without formal negotiations or a formal bilaterally agreed resolution (e.g., Chan and Pun, 2009). A comparison between workers' resistance with and without the intervention of MLNGOs sheds light on MLNGOs' contribution to the movement.

Distinguishing between movement emergence and movement development (McAdam et al., 1996) highlights that MLNGOs were more capable of organizing workers during the emergence of contentious actions (i.e., in the course of workers' collective disputes) than in the movement development phase (i.e., after disputes are settled). MLNGOs served as a short-term movement vehicle for labor resistance by coaching workers to take modular collective action at the time of disputes, but they could not play a mid-term or long-term movement role owing to challenges related to an authoritarian regime. To sustain a movement, contenders must "create a more enduring organizational structure" (McAdam et al., 1996: 13). However, workers could not form unions autonomous from the ACFTU, nor could MLNGOs provide them with an organizational platform that they owned post-dispute. In the foreseeable future, MLNGOs are unlikely to overcome their limitations, as the contraction of political opportunities under the Xi regime has led to the escalating repression of MLNGOs and labor activists. The movement role of MLNGOs has declined, if not been eliminated.

This article makes five contributions. First, at the theoretical level, I explicate that separating the idea of mobilizing structures from the resource mobilization approach when integrating social movement theories is inadequate (e.g., McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 2011). Other types of resources—material, human, cultural, and moral—are also critical to movement building and should be incorporated in synthesized social movement theories. I show that movement resources are often not readily available to working-class challengers in an authoritarian regime and that MLNGOs provided workers with various types of resources to build their campaigns. Synthesized social movement theories based on wider insights of the resource mobilization approach enable us to grapple with the movement roles of MLNGOs cogently.

Second, I add to research on labor organizations in China Studies. Scholars have started to pay attention to MLNGOs, but the term "MLNGO" has been used intuitively and lacks an analytical definition. Scholarly examination of how MLNGOs are movement-oriented or act as movement vehicles is also lacking (e.g., Chen and Gallagher, 2018; Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018). Using synthesized social movement theories, I define MLNGOs as labor organizations that promote workers' collective challenges to employers or the government in a sustained manner by establishing common purposes and solidarities. I also explicate how MLNGOs serve a movement role by propelling one type of modular collective labor action, which consists of three tactics, through seizing political opportunities to guide workers in establishing mobilizing networks and structures, formulating collective action frames, and amassing movement resources. These modular actions are significantly different from workers' resistance without MLNGO support.

Third, I contribute to the general study of LNGOs and worker centers, which has focused primarily on how these groups organize workers collectively in democratic regimes. For instance, studies have found that worker centers in the United States "have had some significant organizing and public policy success" (Fine, 2011: 627) and that LNGOs in the Philippines have contributed to "widespread union organizing" in special economic zones (McKay, 2006: 49). By conducting my research in an authoritarian setting, I demonstrate that when political opportunities arise, labor organizations can act as movement vehicles in repressive political and social environments. However, they face many challenges posed by an authoritarian political system, including a lack of legitimacy and difficulties in influencing political elites, in forging alliances with state-controlled trade unions or among themselves, and in sustaining workers' movement participation.

Fourth, I add to the understanding of state–society relations in non-democracies. Research has shown that civil society organizations under authoritarianism are able to survive and conduct policy advocacy (Ayana et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017; Spires, 2011). However, such research has mostly examined types of civil society organizations other than labor organizations, with the exception of a few studies on pre-democracy Indonesia and Egypt (Clarke, 2014; Ford, 2003), which do not address whether or how LNGOs organize workers collectively. Focusing on the field of labor, I show that variations between government administrations may exist and political conditions conducive to the collective organizing of workers may occur within the same authoritarian country. Movement-oriented labor organizations may exercise agency to exploit political opportunities to advance modular collective labor action.

Last, I lay the foundation for research on labor organizations in other authoritarian countries. For instance, Vietnam and Cambodia have a strong LNGO presence (Frost et al., 2002; Kolben, 2004), but little is known about whether or how they play a movement role. Further research on these countries would generate in-depth, comparable knowledge about the potential of movement-oriented labor organizations and the challenges they encounter in non-democracies. It would also help inform MLNGO activists in authoritarian countries about their strategies and tactics for advancing workers' rights.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Jude Howell and Tim Pringle for commenting on the first draft of the article. She is also indebted to John McCarthy and the three reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Career Development Award, Center for Global Studies, Penn State, and Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange RG003-A-17.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1 Tactics are defined as "forms of collective action publicly deployed . . . in service of a sustained campaign of claims making" (Larson, 2013: 866).
2 Informed by the social movement perspective, Fu (2017a) focused on the period during which LNGOs played a covert role in coaching workers to take disguised collective action. In contrast, I focus on MLNGOs that proactively and overtly intervened in workers' collective actions, a phenomenon that developed after 2010.
3 In May–June 2020 the interviews were conducted remotely.
4 Some of these organizations have since ceased operations owing to political suppression or other reasons.
5 Franceschini (2014) estimated that there are a few dozen LNGOs in China; Fu (2017a) suggested that there are 72.
6 Franceschini (2014) suggested that the PRD has 30–50 LNGOs. Chen and Yang (2017), Froissart (2018), and Xu (2013) estimated that the PRD has 51, 35, and 30–35 LNGOs, respectively.
7 http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/hire-6392.html. Accessed 17 May 2020.
8 https://clb.org.hk/content/promoting-concept-and-practice-collective-bargaining-china (accessed 17 May 2020).
9 This conference was organized by Remin University in September 2010. I also joined conferences related to collective bargaining organized by Hong Kong University in 2010, Sun-Yat-Sen University in 2012, Baptist University in 2012, and City University of Hong Kong in 2013, among others.

10 http://en.hkctu.org.hk/mainland-china/labour-news/responses-from-uniqlo-and-g2000-concerning-workers-strike-in-artigas-factor (accessed 13 January 2017).
11 http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/18246/uniqlo-labor-conditions-china (accessed 13 January 2017).
12 See the 1998 Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations, Article 19.
13 These organizations used to receive funding from, for example, Oxfam, China Labour Bulletin (a Hong Kong-based organization), as well as trade unions and foundations from the Global North. Because foreign funding is a politically sensitive issue in China, here I just mention examples of funders that were already made known. There are many studies on international NGOs'/donors' influence on domestic civil organizations (Lewis et al., 2020; Tvedt, 2002). For a critical discussion on the funding situation of labor NGOs and NGOs generally in China, see Chan (2018), Spires (2012), and Spires et al. (2014).
14 http://www.scf.org.cn/csjjh/n3421/n3424/n3427/u1ai264449.html (accessed 25 May 2020).
15 http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-details-accusations-against-detained-labor-activists-1450807379 (accessed 20 May 2020).
16 https://www.clb.org.hk/content/five-labour-activists-released-after-15-months-detention (accessed 20 May 2020).
17 https://clb.org.hk/content/labour-activist-chen-weixiang-released-detention (accessed 22 May 2020).

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