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Authoritarian Deliberation Revisited:

*What Does It Mean for Our Understanding of Democratic
Governance?*

Title of the paper

*Strong State, Smart Society:
How does the presentation strategy of social demands affect the
government response in China?*

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Strong State, Smart Society: How does the presentation strategy of social demands affect the government response in China?

Abstract:

When discussing the selective behaviors of the Chinese government to the social demands, scholars usually tend to focus on the government while largely neglecting the society. This, however, is insufficient because the potential political threat, one of the major constraints for the government when making the decision, is profoundly affected by the interactions between the society and the government. This article, by comparing what the society did in the “Para-xylene Project” in Xiamen and the “Poisonous Land” in Changzhou, tries to bring the society back to the discussion and argues that the government is more likely to favorably respond if the society presents its demands in a clear and self-constrained way.

Keywords: the State-Society Relations, the Selective Responses of the Chinese government, the Presentation Strategy of Social Demands

Over the past decades, there has been an ongoing debate around the state-society relations in China. Whether the Chinese government becomes more responsive has divided scholars into two major camps.¹ However, what is missing in the debate, as argued by its critique, is the explanation for the selectiveness of the government’s behaviors.² Instead of delineating the growing responsiveness, such selectiveness shows a more nuanced picture by revealing the logic of the Chinese government.³

Contrary to the research which mainly focuses on the government to explain the selectiveness, this article contributes to the existing research by bringing the society into the debate. Although many scholars have noticed that there is an emerging independent society in China,⁴ few researches have been conducted to scrutinize its impacts on governmental behaviors.

¹ See, for instance, Dali Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and Politics of Governance in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Minxin Pei, *China’s Trapped Transition: the Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006)

² James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China’s Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 41

³ Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

⁴ Jessica C. Teets, “Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China,” *The China Quarterly* 213: 19-39

Based on the theory of threat, this article argues that how the society presents its demands also profoundly affects the final strategy employed by the government. This is because political threat, one decisive factor of governmental behaviors,⁵ involves both material threat and perception. The material threat refers to “what the society asks for” while the perception deals with the information received by the government. The latter is seriously affected by the interactions between the government and the society and can distort the threat to a degree that it largely reshapes the outcomes.⁶ In other words, this article argues: instead of merely focusing on “what the society asks for,” we need also pay attention to “how the society asks” when analyzing the response of the government.

Acknowledging the significance of the society, our analysis proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I will discuss how my analysis bridges the gap of current research on the state-society relations in China and clarify the concepts of the presentation strategy of social demands and the governmental response. Secondly, I am going to introduce two cases, namely the “Poisonous Land” case in Changzhou in 2016 and the “Para-xylene Project” (hereafter, PX Project) case in Xiamen in 2007, to delineate the selectiveness of the government behaviors caused by different presentation strategies. Finally, besides reemphasizing the importance of “bring the society back,” I describe and explicate the limitations and the possible direction for further research.

Bring the Society Back: the State-Society Relations in China

As Perry articulated in 1994, the third generation of China specialists distinguish themselves from the old generations by rejecting the totalitarian model or various

⁵ Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, “Graduated Controls: The State-Society Relationship in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 34(1): 36-55

⁶ Knorr Klaus, “Threat Perception,” in Knorr Klaus, eds., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976)

brands of pluralism and embracing the state-society framework.⁷ This is largely because of China's reform in the post-Mao era. The previous state-socialist polity and political immobility were not compatible with the rapid economic reform and the privatization which empowered the individuals and undermined the government's monopoly of the power.⁸

Meanwhile, the Tiananmen Incident hinted at the ebb of the Communist ideology which was once the core of the legitimacy of the Chinese government. In response, the Communist Party has withdrawn to Chinese nationalism as a tool to legitimize its rules.⁹ This has greatly supported the state-society framework since it grants the society a more privileged status. As Christensen succinctly expressed, "Since the Chinese Communist Party is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese."¹⁰

Following the state-society framework, many scholars root their research in different fields and claim that the Chinese government has become more responsive to the demands of Chinese society. For instance, although the western-style lobby groups rarely exist in China, Shen points out that Chinese society affects the outcome of China's foreign policy by giving definitions to the nationalism and the outside world.¹¹ Similarly, Wright, Reilly and Tang dive into the public opinions and

⁷ Elizabeth J. Perry, "Trends in the Study of Chinese Politics: State-Society Relations," *The China Quarterly* 139: 704

⁸ Gordon White, *Riding the Tiger: The Politics of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Gordon White, Jude Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996)

⁹ Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (California: University of California Press, 2004); Yinan He, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ja Ian Chong, "Chinese nationalism reconsidered – or, a case for historicizing the study of Chinese politics," in Kate Xiao Zhou, Shelley Rigger, and Lynn T. White III, eds., *Democratization in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia?: Local and National Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 222

¹⁰ Thomas Christensen, "Chinese Realpolitik," *Foreign Affairs* 75(5): 37

¹¹ Simon Shen, "Popular Participation: Civil Society, Diverse Publics and Internet in Response to Chinese Diplomacy," in Shaun Berslin eds., *Handbook of China's international relations* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 37

articulate how they shape political outcomes in China.¹² Focusing on the social group or class, Teets and Kelliher reach similar conclusions.¹³ Yang, by scrutinizing the governmental reform, argues that the authoritarian regime in China has been transformed into a more responsive and attentive regime to the economic and social demands.¹⁴

Holding different understandings of the state-society relations in China, especially the character of the state, many scholars still believe that the Chinese government is “unable to overcome its absolutist origins, and its monopoly of political power will ultimately suffer some form of systemic paralysis or power transition.”¹⁵ More moderate in tone, Solinger argues that the reform conducted by the Chinese government blurred the boundary of state and society and has not yet led to a civil society as understood in the west.¹⁶ What is deeply buried in those suspicions is the uncertain answer to the question - “in a political system where there are no electoral costs to ignoring public opinion, why China’s authoritarian leaders would care much about public views?”¹⁷

Diving more deeply into the empirical evidence, some scholars are puzzled by the selectiveness of the Chinese government’s behaviors. For those scholars, both sides of the debate around the state-society relations in China capture part of the reality and miss the rest. However, what remains unanswered is how to explain the variations of

¹² Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-Society Relations in China’s Reform Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*.

¹³ Jessica C. Teets, “Let Many Civil Societies Bloom,” 30; Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979-1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)

¹⁴ Dali Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan*.

¹⁵ Qin Pang, “The ‘Two Lines Control Model’ in China’s State and Society Relations;” Minxin Pei, *China’s Trapped Transition*.

¹⁶ Dorothy J. Solinger, *China’s Transition from Socialism: Statist Legacies and Marketing Reforms* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993)

¹⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?,” *International Security* 37(4): 37

the Chinese government's behaviors. In other words, "why would an authoritarian state with the capacity to suppress public protests use this power only selectively?"¹⁸

To answer the question, Kang and Han emphasize the boundary set by the government that no politically motivated demand will be allowed.¹⁹ Besides the hard line, more scholars answer this question from the perspectives of the variation across bureaucratic interests,²⁰ the safety valve for public anger,²¹ the information gathering process regarding the public,²² the elites' disputes within the government,²³ and the negotiation strategy in the international arena.²⁴

Those explanations, to a large extent, cover the rationale behind the selective behaviors of the Chinese government. However, the Chinese government does not automatically have the completed information regarding the public. It also needs the society to directly report,²⁵ and acts accordingly. In this sense, the Chinese government cannot decide on the selectiveness by itself. How society raises its demands also possibly affects the information received and the attitude generated by the government and, therefore, changes the Chinese government response.

¹⁸ James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*, 41. Also see, for instance, David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes, and Efficacy," *The China Journal* 57: 25-58

¹⁹ Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, "Graduated Controls: The State-Society Relationship in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 34(1): 36-55

²⁰ Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla Clapp, and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1974), 11-25; Kenneth and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 151-160

²¹ Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen, "The Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Policy: Does 'Public Opinion' Matter?" in David M. Lampton eds., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978-2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 169

²² James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*, 42

²³ Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, "Introduction," in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), 12; Hidenori Ijiri, "Sino-Japanese Controversy since the 1972 Diplomatic Normalization," in Christopher Howe, eds., *China and Japan: History, Trends, and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 65

²⁴ Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*.

²⁵ As discussed by scholars, Chinese government has employed a sophisticated public information gathering system from the level of ministry to the very local level. This system also involves large part of unofficial staffs such as scholars who write inner circulated reports. However, besides this system, Chinese government also has the Letters and Calls department at every level, which directly receives self-reports from the society. At the same time, with the development of Internet in China, online posting, which mainly contains self-report information from the society, becomes another important information source for the Chinese government. See, James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*, 35-37, 220-226; Kate Xiao Zhou and Stephen Zierak, "How the internet is changing China," in Kate Xiao Zhou, Shelley Rigger, and Lynn T. White III, eds., *Democratization in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia?*, 245; State Bureau for Letters and Calls, <http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn> (access 2016-09-29)

Empirically, the Tiananmen Incident seemingly revealed such an understanding. Although the social demands never explicitly touched the fundamental problems such as the rule of the CCP, overly radical protests led by students made the Chinese reformers, especially Deng Xiaoping, believe that the whole regime was at risk.²⁶ In doing so, the unwise presentation of social demand exponentially amplified the political threat and largely led to the final repression of the Chinese government. This is because the amplified threat perceived by the government made it worry that any minor concession would trigger “de Tocqueville effect.”²⁷

Theoretically, the possible connection between the presentation strategy of social demands and the government’s behaviors is the result of perceived threat. As argued by scholars, the political threat is one of the major constraints when the Chinese government needs to choose the responsive strategy.²⁸ This factor, however, is not only about “what the society asks for” but also concerns “how the society asks”. Stemming from the question why the growing material power of certain country leads

²⁶ Although on the surface, the participants of Tiananmen Incident, students, called for democracy, government accountability as well as the freedom of the press and speech, many scholars still believe that the fundamental reason lies in the dissatisfaction caused by the reform from 1978. Particularly, the reform in 1988 loosened the control over the price. As a result, the increase of CPI in that year has reached 30%, although Chinese government tried to control. See, for instance, Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jeffrey T. Richelson and Michael L. Evans, “Tiananmen Square, 1989: The Declassified History,” The National Security Archive – The George Washington University, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/> (access 2016-10-10)

On the other hand, this argument also receives support by the escalation of the Tiananmen Incident. On April 15th, 1989, Hu Yaobang, the former General Secretary of CCP, passed away. This event triggered the mobilization of students. From April 18th, students went to the streets and called for democracy and so on. It is until June 4th when the Chinese government finally decided that it needed to crash down the student movement. If the demands of student really touched the fundamental problem as perceived by the government, such a crashing down should happen much earlier. See “1989,” People’s Net, <http://www.people.com.cn/item/20years/newfiles/c1120.html> (access 2016-10-10).

On the government side, although rarely explicitly claimed, an overly horrified governmental understanding has been revealed by many hints. For instance, Deng once claimed that if the Chinese could not go through the Tiananmen Incident, there would be chaotic situation which would ultimately lead to civil war. Xiaoping Deng, *Dengxiaoping Wenxuan (The Selective Essays of Deng Xiaoping)* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1993), 371

²⁷ “De Tocqueville Effect” refers to that “minor changes made by the regime reveal its illegitimacy but fail to fully address the causes of the illegitimacy, and so lead to greater demands for the elimination or transformation of the regime. Concessions may also increase perceptions of state weakness, making others believe that they can extract more from the regime.” See James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*, 40; Jack Goldstone and Charles Tilly, “Threat (and Opportunity): Popular Action and State Response in the Dynamics of Contentious Action,” in Ronald R. Aminzade et al., eds., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 188

²⁸ Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, “Graduated Controls.”

to the concurrent increase of perceived threat in some countries while not in others, scholars in international relations conclude that “threat” involves both material aspect and perception. Although the material aspect lays the foundation for threat, if the expansion of material capacity is perceived to be good, others may not feel threatened by this increasing power.²⁹ Such an understanding about the “threat” creates chances to connect different presentation strategies of social demands with the government response. Because the level of political threat is jointly decided by the content of the demand and the perception, different strategies of presentation play a role to amplify or reduce the threat by shaping the perception.

To sum up, since the presentation strategy of social demands seems to connect with the government response, both empirically and theoretically, it is reasonable for us to believe such a factor may be another resources for the selectiveness of the Chinese government’s behaviors.

Last, by the presentation strategy of social demands, it is limited to the answer to the question how the society delineates the demand. Divided along the line, namely whether the participants present the demand in a clear and concentrated way, we have “moderate movement” and “radical movement” in the eyes of the government. This is because any massive social movement posts political threat to the regime and has the potential to transform into the anti-government movement. Consequently, any form of social movement will be closely traced and treated seriously.³⁰ If the demand is presented in a confusing and unclear way, the government may not be able to

²⁹ Singer J. David, “Threat-Perception and the Armament-Tension Dilemma,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2: 90-105; Knorr Klaus, “Threat Perception,” in Knorr Klaus, eds., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976); Cohen Raymond, “Threat Perception in International Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly* 93: 93-107; Rubin Lawrence, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014)

³⁰ For instance, Jessica C. Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*.

accurately understand “what the society asks for.” This, under the condition when the government really worries about the “de Tocqueville effect,” can exponentially amplify the threat and let the government label the social movement as the radical and the political threat. On the contrary, if the society presents its demands concentratedly and depicts the boundary clearly, it allows very little space for the government to misinterpret the intention of society and therefore, reduces the threat perceived by the government, if the demand is harmless and non-political.

On the government side, as jointly decided by the requirement of legitimacy and the prevention of the “de Tocqueville effect,” the responses of the Chinese government to social demands vary from “repression with persuasion” to “acceptance with punishment.” The “repression with persuasion” refers to the governmental behavior that the government gives rejection with detailed explanation and evidence. The “acceptance with punishment,” on the other hand, indicates such a situation where the Chinese government accepts the social demands while sending the representative of the demands into jail in the name of law violation.³¹

**Different Strategies, Diverse Outcomes:
the “PX Project” in Xiamen and the “Poisonous Land” in Changzhou**

How can we specifically delineate the relationship between the presentation strategy of social demands and the government response in a situation where the presentation strategy is closely related to the content of the demand? To a large extent, we answer this question by selecting cases, of which the content mostly belongs to the same category.

In this regard, the “PX Project” in Xiamen and the “Poisonous Land” in

³¹ For instance, how the Chinese government dealt with the leaders in the Wukan Event in 2011.

Changezhou largely meet the requirement since what was required by both of them was non-political driven and mostly self-interested, although the demands apparently went against the interests of the government.

The “PX Project” was invested by *Tenglongfangjing*(腾龙芳烃) with the expected annual gross output of 80 billion RMB. To a large extent, this project was highly welcomed by the Xiamen government since it would help boost the economy which is one of the most important standards to evaluate the performance of local governments in China.³² However, many citizens are reluctant to have these projects implemented in their neighborhood. In as early as March 2007, Zhao Yufen, a specialist in the Chemistry and a professor of Xiamen University, submitted a proposal to the National People’s Political Consultative Conference (NPPCC), calling for the cancellation of the project since it was overly dangerous to locate such a factory in the dense population area.³³ Following Zhao’s proposal, many graffiti such as “ANTIPX” as well as a text message was pervasively circulated with the content that “Xianglu Group has invested PX project in Canghai District. PX is a very poisonous chemical. Once this project is finished, it means that a nuke is set up at Xiamen. We, the Xiamen people, will live in the nightmare of leukemia and deformed children. We want normal life and health! International Organizations stipulate that this kind of project should be located at a place where is least 100 kilometer away from cities. This PX Project, however, is only 16 kilometer away from us. For the

³² Liang Ce and Rachel Zeng Rui, “‘development’ as a means to an unknown end: Chinese National Identity in 2010,” in Ted Hopf and Bentley Allan, eds., *Making Identity Count: towards an intersubjective great power national identity database, 1810-2010* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63-82; Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*, 29-31

³³ Liangbin Xie, “Xiamen PX Shijian (the PX Event in Xiamen),” *China Newsweek* (June 2007): 17; Jianhua Xin, “Cong PX Shijian kan Xiamen Gongminzhengzhicanyu de Shixianchengdu (The Evaluation of the Public Participation in Politics from the PX Event in Xiamen),” *Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)* 24(8): 4

sake of our offspring, please resend this message to all your friends in Xiamen.”³⁴ In other words, the residents in Xiamen wanted to remove this project. Apparently, what the society asked for contradicts the government’s intention while this requirement did not contain political purpose.

Similar to the non-political driven and mostly self-interested case in Xiamen, the residents in Changzhou asked the government to relocate the middle school since they believed that it is the place where the school had been built on that caused the illness of their children.³⁵ On April 17th, 2016, China Central Television (CCTV) News Channel broadcasted a journalist report, entitled “*Bugai Jian de Xuexiao* (the school which should not have been built),” claiming that 493 students became ill after the relocation of the Changzhou Foreign Languages School (CFS). In some extreme cases, the students were diagnosed with leukemia or lymphoma. The cause of those illnesses, as reported by the parents, was the pollution of soil in the industrial land, which had been used by three chemistry factories to produce many poisonous products in illegal ways such as optionally leaking the toxic waste to the soil.³⁶ This journalist report signalled the departure point of a nationwide debate around the “Poisonous Land” case.

Before the broadcasting, the parents had a long history of fighting for the relocation of the school. In November 2014, some parents noticed that their children started to show some symptoms such as dizziness, nausea and vomissement. The

³⁴ Laingbin Xie, “Xiamen PX Shijian,” 18; Liping Peng, “Weijishijianxia Meijiechayi yiji Shouzhong Suqiu (The Differences among Mediums and the Requirements of the Audience under the Crisis),” *China public Security-Academy Edition* 3(1): 42

³⁵ Haiyan Zhou, “Huangjinggonghai Baodao: Shouhaizhe Xushi, Yichengshezhi yu Lixing Xieshang (The Report on the Environment Crisis: The Story of the Victims, Agenda Setting and the Rational Discussion),” *Shanghai Journalism Review* 399(5): 59

³⁶ Yangshi Xinwen (The CCTV News), “Changzhou Yizhongxue Qianzhilou 493ming Xuesheng Shentiyichang, Gebie Huanai (493 students of a middle school in Changzhou appears physical abnormality with some individuals diagnosed with cancer),” recited from People.cn, <http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0417/c360303-28162200.html> (access 2016/10/25)

parents asked the environment department of the Changzhou government to solve this problem. Accordingly, the environment department of the Changzhou government issued an order, requiring the construction company that was working on that land to temporarily suspend its works and come up with some solutions. When the company followed the order, the symptoms of ill students seemed to relieve.³⁷ In December 2015, however, the problem seemed to become even worse. In this breakout, the environment department did not take any new measures to punish the company. As before, it simply required the company to temporarily suspend its works and come up with new solutions. The parents, however, were not satisfied with the outcome. On January 8th, 2016, parents sent a letter to all related departments of the Changzhou government, asking whether it is the health of children more important than the development of the project.³⁸ The last straw came when more and more children started to show the hints for some serious diseases such as leukemia. On March 11th, 2016, the parents sent a medical examination result list to the CFS, claiming that 493 out of 641 samples appeared symptoms, for instance, the abnormal blood index or the decrease of leukocyte.³⁹ Apparently, the relocation as asked by the parents in the “Poisonous Land” case was mostly out of the concerns for the health of their children and, therefore, non-political driven and self-interested.

In general, since both the “PX Project” in Xiamen and the “Poisonous Land” in Changzhou merely deal with non-political and self-interested motivations, it is fair to

³⁷ Liping Liu and Bo Sun, “Changzhou Changlong ‘Dudi’ Xiufu Ivzao Tousu, Liangxuexiao Shenshou Qihai (The Rehabilitation of ‘Poisonous Land’ Repeatedly Receives Complaints in Changzhou, and Two schools Suffer),” Xinhua Net, recited from People.cn, <http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0419/c360307-28175859.html> (access 2016/10/24)

³⁸ Huajiang Qin, Gang Chen and Shaogong Yang, “Changzhou Guanfang Chengren ‘Dudi’ Xuexiao 133ming Xuesheng Tijian Yichang (The Changzhou Government Admits that the Medical Examination Results show the abnormal for 133 students),” Xinhua News, recited from People.cn, <http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0420/c360307-28182148-3.html> (access 2016/10/27)

³⁹ Huajiang Qin, Gang Chen and Shaogong Yang, “The Changzhou Government Admits that the Medical Examination Results show the abnormal for 133 students.”

claim that those two cases have high similarity in terms of “what the society asks for”. Consequently, by comparing how the society presents its demands in those two cases, we effectively disentangle the presentation strategy from the content and, hence, it becomes possible to specifically delineate the relationship between the presentation strategy of social demands and the government response.

Similar Demands, Different Outcomes

Although the “PX Project” in Xiamen and the “Poisonous Land” in Changzhou were driven by the similar demands, the responses of the local governments varied greatly. In the “PX Project,” the Xiamen government decided to suspend the construction of PX factory with the purpose for a further reinvestigation on May 30th, 2007, one day before the protests of Xiamen residents. After the “Peaceful Walk,” the name of protests given by the local residents in Xiamen, on the 1st and the 2nd of June, the Xiamen government decided to ask the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences (CRAES) to re-evaluate the potential risks of the “PX Project.” On the December 6th, Xiamen Net, the official news website of the Xiamen government, published the full result which was entitled as “*Xiamen Zhongdian Quyuan (Haicangnanbu Diqu) Gongneng Dingwei yu Kongjian Buju Huanjing Yingxiang Pingjia* (The Environmental Evaluation of the Functional Position and Spatial Distribution in the Key Districts of Xiamen – the Southern Part of Canghai District).” Instead of explicating its attitudes, CRAES concluded whether the “PX Project” should be cancelled depended on the Functional Position Plan of this area. In terms of the Functional Position, however, the Canghai District had problems since it had been designed to serve two conflicting aims, namely the Industrial Area and the Residential Area. Moreover, what was clarified was that even if the PX factory was established,

the environment problems would still be controllable and not as serious as many ordinary people believed.⁴⁰ Following this report, CRAES issued two explanations for the report as the response to the public concerns on December 13th and 19th. In the two explanations, CRAES repeated what it claimed in the report regarding the PX project and explained why the PX Project was safe in terms of security and environment standards.⁴¹ In spite of the favorable result from the CRAES, the Xiamen government decided to hold public hearings about the “PX Project” on the December 13th and 14th. During the hearings, 106 out of 107 citizen representatives stated their opinions with 71 percent people who believed the cancellation of the PX project was still necessary.⁴² Four days later, the Xiamen government decided to end the PX Project.⁴³

Contrary to the favorable result in the “PX Project” case in Xiamen, the Changzhou government appeared to be more resistant in holding the original decision in the “Poisonous Land” case. After the exposure on the CCTV, the Changzhou government as well as the Central Government responded very quickly with sending investigation teams on April 19th, 2016.⁴⁴ With 4-month-long effort, the official *Weibo* account of the Changzhou government, *Weichangzhou* (微常州), published the investigation result on August 26th. In the announcement, the investigation teams first

⁴⁰ CRAES, “Xiamen Zhongdian Quyu (Haicangnanbu Diqu) Gongneng Dingwei yu Kongjian Buju Huanjing Yingxiang Pingjia (The Environmental Evaluation of the Functional Position and Spatial Distribution in the Key Districts of Xiamen – the Southern Part of Canghai District),” Xiamen Net, recited from Fujian Forum, <http://bbs.66163.com/thread-205882-1-1.html> (access 2016/10/15)

⁴¹ China News, “Huangjingkexueyuan jiu Xiamen PX Xiangmu Zuochu Shuoming (CRAES Issued a explanation for the PX Project in Xiamen),” Chinanews, recited from Wangyi, <http://news.163.com/07/1213/13/3VJJBK750001124J.html> (access 2016/10/15); China News, “Zhongguohuanjingkexueyuan Huifu Xiamen PX Xiangmu Gongzhongyijian (Quanwen) (The Reply of CRAES to the Public Concerns on the PX Project in Xiamen – the Fulltext),” Chinanews, recited from Tecent, <http://news.qq.com/a/20071219/001811.htm> (access 2016/10/15)

⁴² Jianhua Xin, “The Evaluation of the Public Participation in Politics from the PX Event in Xiamen,” 4

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4

⁴⁴ Ting Luo, “Lianhe Diaochazu Fu Changzhou ‘Dudi’ Xuexiao Quyang (Joint Investigation Teams Went to the CFS),” *The Beijing News*, April 20th, 2016

criticized the company which had been working on the “Poisonous Land” for its improper behaviors and insufficient environment protection methods. In terms of the environment issues, the core in this controversial, the investigation teams supported the Changzhou government by pinpointing that there was no noticeable environmental abnormal in the CFS, according to the analysis result of nearly 700 samples, including soil, water and air from both within and outside the school. Moreover, the result questioned the medical examination result offered by the parents with the conclusion that the medical examination result of the residents in the neighborhood and the 2016 graduates of the CFS did not show any abnormal. Last, as the result of improper behaviors of the company and lack of sufficient regulation effort, many officials as well as the manager of the company were punished either by law or by the administration regulations.⁴⁵ As indicated by the result that the school was safe, the Changzhou government rejected the requirements of the parents, that is, the relocation of the school.

Although the social demands in two cases were relatively similar as previously discussed, the outcomes contradicted with each other with the “acceptance” in the Xiamen case and the “rejection” in the Changzhou one. Consequently, it becomes interesting to ask why such selective behaviors happened. In accordance with our hypothesis, one of the resources will be the presentation strategy of social demands.

The Society’s Presentation Strategies

In the “PX Project,” the presentation strategy of the society appeared to be very moderate. Once the requirement was heard by the government, the participants of the

⁴⁵ Changzhou Municipal Government’s Information Office, “Changzhouwaiguoyuxuexiao Shijian Diaocha Jieguo Tongbao (The investigation result of the CFS Event),” Weichangzhou, http://weibo.com/p/1001062616693703/home?is_all=1&stat_date=201608&page=2#_rnd1479968465433 (access 2016/11/1)

protests started to constrain themselves.

As it supported the existing research on the social mobilization issue in China,⁴⁶ the leaders of the “Peaceful Walk” did receive some punishments from the Xiamen government. One of the leaders, Wu Xian, admitted in an interview that he was arrested on the night of May 30th when he was discussing the details regarding the “Peaceful Walk” with other organizers online.⁴⁷ Similarly, on the night of June 1st, the first day of the “Peaceful Walk,” all channels of Xiamen TV, the local TV providers, repeatedly broadcasted one message with different forms, claiming that the “Walk” was illegal since it disturbed the public order and hindered the normal life and work of the ordinary.⁴⁸

Instead of continuing to radically protest its demands, the society in Xiamen changed its strategy and tried to cool down the sentiment of the participants by itself. On the night of June 2nd, the second and the final day of the “Peaceful Walk,” many participants reported that they received some messages from either the organizers or other participants. One edition of the message went as “Our attitude towards the PX Project has been clearly conveyed to the government. The work has been done and the life must go on. It becomes useless to continue to take such a radical way [it means protest] since people who possess other intentions may utilize it to substantially disturb the social order and our normal life. Let us wait and see how the government will deal with the core issue, the PX Project.”⁴⁹ Similarly, another one stated that “we

⁴⁶ For instance, by clarifying what content is most censored in China, King, Pan and Roberts conclude that the content which associates with high possibility of collective activities is the most likely one to receive the punishment, in this case the censorship. Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 326-343

⁴⁷ Xianghui Liu and Lina Zhou, “Lishi de Jianzheng: Xiamen PX shijian de Shimo (The witness of the History: the PX Event in Xiamen),” *China News Weekly* (December 2007): 53-54

⁴⁸ Laingbin Xie, “Xiamen PX Shijian,” 17

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 18

will never give up our hope for the ‘Green Mountain and Blue Sky’, however, let us keep it in a silent way: as long as you are against the PX Project, please tie up one yellow ribbon at any time and any place. It could be on your vehicle, your desk, or your bags. Let ANTIPX and Yellow Ribbon fly all over the city!”⁵⁰

In the *Xiaoyushequ* (小鱼社区), a popular online forum used by many Xiamen residents, many users claimed that they had received one email from the forum managers, asking them not to publish any content associated with the PX Project.⁵¹

Such moderate tone also revealed itself in the public hearings and the interviews with those who had been arrested. Li Yiqiang, another participant who had been arrested by the Xiamen Police for 55 days because of his active participation of the “Peaceful Walk”, said, “It was understandable that I was arrested since the ‘Peaceful Walk’ had not first applied to the Public Security Bureau which was the standard legal procedure.”⁵² On December 23rd when the journalists revisited Li, he highly praised what the Xiamen government did, especially the behavior of publishing the result that over 90 percent of the local residents disproved the PX Project.⁵³

Similarly, Wu Yumei, one organizer for the anti-PX movement in her community and was invited to attend the public hearings, reported the same moderateness during the hearings. She said although she was not an expert in this field, she could feel that many representatives were very “*Lihai* (great)” because they were very professional in discussing the topic by using much evidence as well as knowledge to fight against the government. When talking about herself, she said she preferred to discuss the issues from a narrower/personal angle, for instance, what made her choose Xiamen

⁵⁰ Laingbin Xie, “Xiamen PX Shijian,” 18

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 18

⁵² Xianghui Liu and Lina Zhou, “The witness of the History,” 54

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 55

rather than Guangzhou to live in.⁵⁴

Putting all those stories together, it is not hard to figure out that the Xiamen society presented its demand in a very clear and self-constrained way. By calling off further protests and cooling down the public sentiment once the demand was noticed by the Xiamen government, the local residents successfully avoided a situation where the Xiamen government worried that the society was asking more than the abolishment of the “PX Project.” Meanwhile, although facing harsh punishments from the government, those arrested “leaders” appeared to be very cooperative as they understood that it was them who had violated the law. In this way, the society delimited the boundary of their demand which would be in accordance with the current rules. In general, by self-constrained methods, the society in Xiamen successfully presented its demand in a very clear and politically harmless way and led the Xiamen government to change its attitude from the rejection to the acceptance.

Such a self-constrained and cooperative atmosphere, however, missed in the “Poisonous Land” case in Changzhou. When the health problem of the CFS students reemerged in the late 2015 and the parents submitted a list of 641 student medical examination results, the Changzhou government responded very quickly and, in order to clarify the situation, asked the related departments to offer the medical examination results of the CFS students. According to the data offered by the Changzhou Health and Family Planning Committee (CHFPC), all eight hospitals in the city had received 597 CFS students to do the medical examination from the January 11th to the February 29th. Among the students, 133 results indicated the abnormal of different levels. The most serious 4 cases were the abnormal number of white blood cells. To explain the

⁵⁴ Xianghui Liu and Lina Zhou, “The witness of the History,” 56

abnormal, the specialists came up with various reasons except the environment one.⁵⁵ For the lymphoma case, the CHFPC claimed that this student was diagnosed even before the point when the new CFS had been built on the current location according to the records. Consequently, it was improper to connect the disease with the problematic land.⁵⁶

When the CCTV News Channel brought the “Poisonous Land” issue to the front stage and triggered the nationwide debate, the different medical results, along with other behaviors of the parents, gave rise to rumors which started to blur the focus.

In interviewing, many parents reported that they had received special treatments, for instance, the doctors would suggested them to go to one specific hospital, once they clarified that their children were the students of the CFS. Also, when the parents were talking about the illness, they usually used the medical examination results from the hospital which belonged to another city,⁵⁷ which implied that the result from Changzhou hospitals might not be trustworthy since the government was capable of intervening. With the circulation of those stories, the content of some rumors started to associate with illegal behaviors of the Changzhou government. In one report, journalists explicitly stated that some parents noticed those parents who were the employees of the government or any associated unit changed their attitude after certain point.⁵⁸ More specifically, another report claimed that those parents who

⁵⁵ Changzhou Municipal Government’s Information Office, “Guanyu Yangshibaodao Fanying ‘Changwai’ Xiangguanqiangkuang de Shuoming (The Report on the CFS Event),” *Pengpai News*, recited from Guan Cha, http://www.guancha.cn/society/2016_04_18_357428_1.shtml (access 2016/11/24)

⁵⁶ “Yiwen Kantou Changzhou Dudi Shijian: Daodi Shuizai Sahuan (the “Poisonous Land” Case in Changzhou: Who is lying),” Sina, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/chanjing/sdbd/2016-04-20/doc-ixriqqv6364014.shtml> (access 2016/11/24)

⁵⁷ Liang Wang, “Changzhouwaiguoyuexiao jiazhang: Women Zhiyou Yige Haizi, Dubuqi (The Parents from the CFS: We Only Have One Child and Cannot Take the Risk),” People.cn, <http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0420/c360307-28188577.html> (access 2016/11/24)

⁵⁸ “Changzhou ‘Dudi’ Xuexiaoxueshengjiazhang: Bufen Xuexiao Jushou Ziji Haizi (Some Parents of the CFS students: Part of the School Rejected to Received My Child),” China Business News, recited from the Global Net, <http://china.huanqiu.com/article/2016-04/8815775.html> (access 2016/11/24)

changed their attitude were because the threat of the government. In this article, the journalists mentioned the threat to the job security or the personal security.⁵⁹ Concurrently, those parents also claimed that the government intended to use the "Bianzhi (编制)" to silence the teachers of the CFS since the attitudes of teachers also changed greatly.⁶⁰

The worst case came from "the letter of the CFS." On April 18th, the International Department of the CFS published one open letter to all teachers, parents and students. In this letter, the CFS claimed that it understood the worry of the parents and admitted there were some health problems. However, the content, which was submitted by the parents and broadcasted by the CCTV, exaggerated the problem, especially around the student who was diagnosed with lymphoma.⁶¹ Instead of rationally hearing what the related party said about its experience, the society soon dismissed this letter as an outcome under the government pressure which tried to hide the problem and distort the story.⁶²

To a large extent, we cannot neither prove nor disprove those arguments since both sides, namely the government and the society, did not offer much evidence. However, from the perspective of threat, they definitely amplified the threat associated with the requirement to the government.

⁵⁹ Haiyan Zhou, "The Report on the Environment Crisis," 59; "Duxiaoyuan' Jiazhang bei Jianggao: Buyao 'Reshi' Shangfang (The Parents of the CFS students were Threatened: Do not neither cause trouble nor Petition)," *The Beijing News*, April 20th, 2016

⁶⁰ "Some Parents of the CFS students"

⁶¹ "Changzhouwaiguoyuexiao Fa Gongkaixin: Yangshibaodao you 'Yingshang' (The Open Letter from the CFS: There Are Some Fatal Flaws in the CCTV Report)," *The Legal Daily*, recited from Sina, <http://edu.sina.com.cn/l/2016-04-19/doc-ixriqxx3000413.shtml> (access 2016/11/25); Ting Luo, "Joint Investigation Teams Went to the CFS;" In terms of the social response, see, for instance, "Changzhouwaiguoyuexiao Guojibu: Zhi Changwaiguojibu Jiazhang he Shisheng de yifeng Gongkaixin! (The International Department of the CFS: A Open Letter towards the Parents, Students and Teachers)," Hupu, <http://bbs.hupu.com/16034746.html> (access 2016/11/25); "Changwai Ziwo 'Cuilei', You Yingshang de jiuqing shi Shui? (The CFS tends to Touch the people, Who was the Problematic One?)," Sina, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2016-04-20/doc-ixriqzw7512323.shtml> (access 2016/11/25)

⁶² "Changzhou Dudi Shijian: Kepa de bushi Dudi, ershi Renxin (the "Poisonous Land" in Changzhou: It Was the Heart rather than the Poisonous Land that Horrified Us)," Sohu, <http://mt.sohu.com/20160421/n445382676.shtml> (access 2016/11/25)

Scrutinizing those reports and clarifying what they were asking, we can sense certain uncertainty here. Although the relocation of the CFS was still the major requirement of the parents on the surface, many other factors were added with more and more stories circulated. For instance, as mentioned above, when reporting the result, many parents tended to use the result from outside hospitals which implied that the Changzhou hospitals had been influenced by the government and lost their credibility. In some extreme cases, the reporters, utilizing those behaviors, directly and explicitly asked why this happened and answered by criticizing the whole political system.⁶³ No matter whether it was intentional or not,⁶⁴ in the eyes of the government, such statements hinted at many serious possibilities, and the boundary of the social demand hides itself in the dark. Accordingly, it might make the government think again about what the society really wanted and worry whether the concession in this case would lead to the “de Tocqueville effect” with high possibility.

By comparing what the protesters did in the “PX Project” and the “Poisonous Land,” we can construct a connection between the presentation strategy of social demands with the government response. If the society presents its demands in a very self-constrained and clear way, which reduces the possibility that the government will associate this requirement with other things, the requirement is more likely to receive the favorable government response. On the contrary, if the society presents its demand in a very ambiguous and confusing way, which amplifies the political threat since the government cannot clearly understand what the real demand is, the government is

⁶³ “The “Poisonous Land” in Changzhou.”

⁶⁴ As noticed in the interview with the parents, some parent did admit that they had never imagined that their demands would become such a nationwide hot topic, and the only thing they wanted is the relocation of the school. In this regard, the accusations of the local government may not be the original intention for those parents. See Ting Luo, “Joint Investigation Teams Went to the CFS.”

more likely to reject the demand.

Meanwhile, as indicated by the “PX Project,” this acceptance, however, does not necessarily mean the society will not bear any cost. Instead, this case supports the view that social mobilization is a sensitive and dangerous behavior in China.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the comparison between the “PX Project” and the “Poisonous Land” case reminds us of the limitation of such responsiveness. Instead of favorably responding to all non-political driven and harmless social demands, the Chinese government may reject those which the government can not clearly judge its intention. Such ambiguity, as discussed above, is largely the result of different presentation strategies of social demands.

Conclusion: Strong State, Smart Society

In this article, I argue when analyzing the selective behaviors of the Chinese government, instead of merely focusing on the government side, we should also pay attention to the society since “how the society asks” is equally important to “what the society asks for”. Theoretically, this is because one of the important constraints of the government, threat, is decided by the interactions of the government and the society. Empirically, I choose two cases with relatively similar contents of the demand, the “PX Project” in Xiamen and the “Poisonous Land” in Changzhou, to differentiate “how the society asks” from “what the society asks for.” By comparing the governments’ responses and the presentation strategies of social demands, this article finds out that if the social demand is presented clearly and self-constrainedly, the government is more likely to respond favorably. This is because the clarity and the

⁶⁵ Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” 326-343

self-constraint make it almost impossible for the government to associate the requirement with other potential threat and therefore, largely reduce the perceived political threat by the government. On the contrary, if the society presents its demands very radically and confusingly, there will be overly large space for the uncertainty, which allows the government to associate this demand with many serious political possibilities. Consequently, such a presentation strategy amplifies the perceived threat of the government and therefore, leads to the negative response as indicated in the “Poisonous Land” case. (See Table 1)

Table 1 Presentation Strategies of Social Demands and the Government Response

The Case	“What the Society Asks For”	“How the Society Asks”	The Government Response
The “PX Project”	The relocation of the PX Factory	Clear and Self-constrained	Acceptance with the Punishment
The “Poisonous Land”	The relocation of the CFS	Confusing and Unlimited	Rejection with the Persuasion

Admittedly, this argument may be challenged from various aspects. First and foremost, during the analyzing, the whole article uses the final response, positive or negative, to imply the perceived threat on the government side. This, however, is not the best way to deal with this problem. It will be much more creditable if the article can show the changing attitudes of the government throughout the official documents, for instance, the discussion records during certain meetings, or interviews with the local officials. Second, this article does not control the factor, namely the leadership style of the mayor. Theoretically, if the mayor is more open-minded, we can expect that the social demands are more likely to be accepted. However, if the leader is self-willed and rarely takes others’ suggestions, no matter how smart or silly the society is in terms of the presentation strategy, the final response is doomed to be negative.

To a certain extent, those challenges indeed pinpoint the problem of this article. However, it will not change the argument. In terms of the resources, the scholars have already proved that the political threat and the likelihood of positive governmental response is negatively correlated.⁶⁶ Accordingly, it seems to be proper to use the final response as the indicator of the perceived threat. Secondly, it is useless to deny the fact that the leadership style will profoundly affect the government response. However, as the Chinese government becomes more and more responsive to the society, we have to consider how many such self-willed leaders we may encounter. As indicated by the term, self-willed, those leaders appear to be slower, if not entirely impossible, to respond the social demands and therefore, the massive event becomes more likely to happen. According to the promotion standard as discussed by scholars,⁶⁷ the massive event usually associates with the social instability which contradicts the requirement of the central government. Consequently, those self-willed people are far less likely to be promoted as the mayor. In this regard, since the situation rarely happens, it seems to be fair to claim that such a factor does not challenge the conclusion of this article.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, "Graduated Controls."

⁶⁷ See, for instance, Jessica C. Teets, "Let Many Civil Societies Bloom."