
Outsourcing Repression
A Conversation with Lynette Ong

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Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China, Lynette Ong’s new book with Oxford University Press, provides an original and realistic analysis of the Chinese state’s control over society beyond the usual focus of the study of authoritarian states, such as on outright coercion or censorship. Her concept of ‘everyday state power’ sheds light on how the state’s control is typically experienced by ordinary citizens and illuminates the state’s repertoire for inducing citizens’ compliance with its top-down, sometimes drastic, policies. The ‘thugs-for-hire’ are an expedient extension of the state’s formal coercive capacity, while the political, social, and economic brokers constitute the state’s penetrative ‘infrastructural power’. While grounded in the study of China’s state-driven urbanisation, this book also opens new space for us to understand the sources of the Chinese state’s power more broadly, especially how it manages to mobilise the masses in the implementation of radical policies that are often highly intrusive and disruptive. As such, the book can also inform our understanding of the zero-Covid policy currently being enforced in Shanghai and other Chinese cities: besides outright coercion, the state also deploys ‘brokers’ with intimate knowledge of communities to ‘persuade’ the masses into compliance, often on an emotional basis. The book calls
for greater attention to the complexity of the interface between the state and society to decipher both the state’s capacity to govern and society’s capacity for resistance.

Hong Zhang: I am curious about your process of discovery. It seems you started with the realisation that the ‘thugs-for-hire’ had a distinct role to play, and later you also accounted for the less-violent actors—namely, the brokers who have been facilitating the state’s control over society. Could you share how you came to conceptualise these different groups, especially the thugs-for-hire, which is such an innovative idea as it somewhat challenges the conventional view of the state as having the legitimate monopoly on violence?

Lynette Ong: This book is a culmination of a decade of field research. On my first field trip in Anhui Province in 2011, I started trying to understand the political economy of urbanisation—a continuation of the theme from my last book, Prosper or Perish: Credit and Fiscal Systems in Rural China [Cornell University Press, 2012]. However, as I spoke to ordinary folks who were undergoing or had undergone land-grabbing and housing demolition, they were eager to share with me tales of harassment by local thugs and hoodlums. I felt compelled to learn more about it, and then switched the focus of my academic inquiry to repression or social control, from the original political economy focus. By outsourcing violence, the state has voluntarily ceded its legitimate monopoly of violence. This usually comes with severe consequences, such as excessive and undisciplined use of violence, and de-legitimisation of state authority. My book is a social science inquiry into how de-monopolising state control of violence can be done effectively, and how it helps the state to achieve what it wants without facing the worst of the consequences.

HZ: You argue that one of the major benefits for the state in hiring thugs is its plausible deniability. However, it seems obvious enough that these thugs are sent by local authorities to do the ‘dirty jobs’, and your interviewees also appear to have no doubt about who is behind the thugs. In this case, hiring thugs is highly risky for the state, as the illegitimate nature of the thuggish behaviour discredits the state. In fact, I wonder whether the principal-agent problem is not just between the state and the thugs-for-hire, but first and foremost also between the state and the local authorities: it is the anticipated lucrativeness of land redevelopment that incentivises local authorities to outsource violence and bypass formal procedures, despite the potential detriment to the state. In this sense, the root cause of such thug-hiring might be less about the fiscal deficit of the local governments, as you pointed to, and more about the lack of effective institutions to control the state’s local agents?

LO: If you were to trace the principal–agent chain to its starting point, yes, it goes back to the central government that delegates revenue collection and land and property development to local governments, and then local governments outsourcing repression to the thugs-for-hire and brokers I discuss in the book. However,
the nature of the first principal–agent relationship is quite distinct from the second. The first is about unfunded mandates (the central government mandating local authorities to do a lot more than their resources allow for), and the central government encouraging local officials to promote economic growth to the exclusion of almost everything else, even if they infringe on citizens’ rights and create governance problems. In essence, my book exposes the core of the problems with the ‘China Model of Development’—that is, that the state has been pursuing growth (in this case, urbanisation-driven growth) at the expense of citizens’ rights.

HZ: It became clear in recent years that a lot of collusion was taking place between local authorities and criminal groups, to the extent that President Xi Jinping had to launch the Saohei (扫黑, literally ‘Sweeping the Black’) campaign to purge them, which demonstrates the existence of the thugs-for-hire phenomenon you describe in the book. But is this campaign addressing the core of the problem?

LO: In some ways, Xi Jinping’s Saohei campaign vindicates my argument about the prevalence of thugs-for-hire in China [see Ong 2021]. When I first told Western scholars (and even Chinese scholars) about it, they would look at me in disbelief, suggesting I was out of my mind. ‘This is China after all, how could the strong Chinese Communist Party-State allow this to happen’, was the common reaction I received. A decade on, some of these thugs-for-hire or low-level violent actors had become more sophisticated and transformed into organised mafias. The Saohei campaign was aimed at rooting out all the ‘black society’ (黑社会) who collude with local officials and the police. Thugs-for-hire sit at the very bottom of those being targeted by the campaign because of the low level of violence they deploy, and their lack of organisation, and general impermanence.

However, I am sceptical about whether the Saohei campaign, despite the high degree of political prominence attached to it, will successfully root out the ‘black society’. As empirical evidence from historical China and elsewhere such as Taiwan has suggested, gangsters and mafias often seek shelter by turning themselves into legitimate private companies when times are bad. But they will stage a comeback when the environment becomes conducive for them to thrive again. In Taiwan, this transformation is quipped as ‘bleaching’ (漂白).

HZ: You identified three types of brokers: political, social, and economic. Political brokers, such as the cadres of urban residents’ committees (居委会) or ‘grid workers’ (网格员), are probably the most visible ones and therefore they receive the most attention from scholars and journalists. However, I find the social brokers most fascinating. According to your conceptualisation, social brokers are those who leverage their social capital derived from long-term community service or simply by virtue of their familiarity with the community
to persuade citizens on behalf of the state. These brokers include those who are not in any official position but are involved in community governance with the belief they are contributing to the public good. The most iconic image of social brokers may be the elders wearing red armbands patrolling communities. You implied a certain level of voluntarism among the social brokers, and yet you also pointed out that some of them were motivated by material rewards or by the desire for power and relevance. So, the question is: How are the social brokers usually activated? What is the institutional infrastructure for this type of ‘infrastructural power’?

LO: Volunteerism has historical roots in China. In the Maoist years, the state mobilised volunteers—or more commonly known as ‘activists’ (积极分子) at that time—with Maoist ideology. Maoism and its propagandised belief of ‘serving the people’ (为人民服务) were sufficient to mobilise volunteers to conduct a range of activities, including investing hard labour in paddy fields, and mobilising the communities to devote themselves to Maoist pursuits. Volunteerism in pursuit of perceived public interests still has some, but a lesser, degree of traction in Chinese society today. Local authorities still regularly mobilise volunteers, such as ‘Chaoyang Aunties’ (朝阳大妈), to patrol alleyways to sniff out thieves and suspicious people. But, in the context of housing demolition, where families’ most important asset—housing—is at stake, the state would need to give ‘carrots’ to incentivise the volunteers to get them to mobilise the masses. Ideology on its own is no longer sufficient. In Chapter Six, I gave the example of the Self-Reform Committees (自改委) pioneered by the Chengdu Government that decentralise demolition work to the community itself. Some selected families were given carrots in the form of early bird bonuses to sign consent papers. Once they successfully persuaded other families in the community to sign on, they would be rewarded further. These families were motivated by material rewards as well as volunteerism to the extent they believed the demolition and refurbishment of old neighbourhoods were good for the community.

HZ: The economic brokers, on the other hand, exploit the information asymmetry between the state and society. Examples of this group include professional demolition brokers, lawyers, and former court officials who know how to navigate the space and secure support from key officials, which they provide as a ‘service’ to citizens without such access. It seems their roles are quite ambivalent—not only can they be used to help the state ‘buy out’ recalcitrant citizens, but also they may assist with bribing officials to reap undue benefits for citizens. Is Xi Jinping’s anticorruption campaign reducing the space for economic brokers?

LO: The functions of economic brokers are facilitated by the suite of ‘services’ they offer, such as fake marriage certificates, to increase the entitlements for their clients. For instance, couples may get a divorce because two single individuals may end up getting higher compensation than a couple does. This is a well-known phenom-
enon; as I have been told, districts undergoing demolition typically see higher divorce rates than other neighbourhoods. Production of the certification will have to involve collusion with officials from different government agencies. In Chapter Six, I detailed how an economic broker—the so-called huangniu (黄牛)—had to secure the cooperation of at least six different parties or government agencies to pull off the scheme. Xi Jinping’s anticorruption campaign has no doubt made it more challenging for sophisticated corruption schemes to take place because each party involved is taking on increased risks of being caught and punished by the government.

HZ: You develop an interesting concept of persuasion, or emotional mobilisation, which is rooted in the Maoist tradition. A related debate has surrounded how we should understand the seemingly high support among Chinese citizens of the Party-State: are they ‘brain-washed’ (which implies that citizens’ minds could be changed if they were given different information) or do they fundamentally identify with the political system? With your insight on persuasion, how would you respond to that debate?

LO: I argue that persuasion works rather well in the empirical context I studied because it is underpinned by morality and lubricated by social capital. Social brokers invoke principles of morality—such as filial piety, sacrificing oneself for the family, and considering the interests of the larger community—to persuade the recalcitrant to give in. They also draw on their ‘thick relationship’ or years of neighbourly relations or friendship with the subjects to get them to consent to government demands. Thus, the recalcitrant in my studies were persuaded not necessarily because they believed in the state (though that’s how persuasion traditionally worked in the Maoist context). Rather, they bought into the moral obligations and were bounded by social capital with the community members with whom they share the common fate of demolition and relocation.

HZ: You make it clear in the book that the use of thugs-for-hire and various brokers is not limited to authoritarian regimes. Democracies similarly outsource violence, as seen in the US Government’s contracting with private security companies in counterterrorism and post-authoritarian South Korea’s hiring of professional eviction services. It can also be expected that democratic states employ political, social, and economic brokers in their interactions with citizens. It seems, ultimately, the distinction of regime type matters less for state behaviour, because they all try to do similar things—which sometimes becomes grounds for ‘whataboutist’ arguments—but you also show that the key difference is how much capacity civil society is allowed to grow as a counterbalance to the state. What are your thoughts on how we should understand such phenomena across regime types?

LO: Several factors are at work here. Even though democracies also outsource violence to nonstate actors to get ‘dirty jobs’ done, they will have to regularly face a free (or freer) media and civil society that
act as checks-and-balances against abusive behaviour that infringes citizens’ rights. The other important factor for thugs-for-hire to work effectively is state capacity. The state that hires thugs must be able to render the agents under tight control. Otherwise, agency problems, such as undisciplined use of violence, will become prevalent, with excessive violence resulting in severe casualties. When these problems happen, thugs-for-hire can backfire, denying the hiring authority plausible deniability. Worse still, it can create backlash. In Chapter Four, I present a few case studies from Zhengzhou and Kunming that demonstrate exactly this. In these rare instances, local leaders were punished by the party by being removed from their positions, usually in the name of taking bribes, but really for the excessive violence in demolition projects that were committed by violent agents they hired to get the job done.

I do not believe my arguments are a case of whataboutism. An analogy is all governments—democracies and nondemocracies alike—are guilty of human rights violations, but infringement of rights happens to varying degrees in different polities. And just because they also happen in a democracy, it does not make it right or justifiable. When the abuses of Abu Ghraib’s prisoners were exposed several years ago, the George W. Bush administration was under severe pressure to be made accountable for what they had done.

Meanwhile, for social brokers to function effectively, they should believe that what they do is contributing to society’s greater good. That is more culture-specific, though not necessarily exclusive to the Confucian traditions. It is also increasingly common that social brokers are mobilised by material incentives, in which case the fundamental belief of ‘serving the people’ becomes less relevant.

HZ: In the book, you briefly touch on how these mechanisms have been employed in China’s counter-Covid measures. When you were writing the book, it appeared that China was largely successful in its pandemic control, which your analysis of how brokers strengthen the state’s capacity in mass mobilisation helps to explain. Looking at the extreme lockdown measures and chaos in Shanghai and other Chinese cities from the vantage point of the northern spring of 2022, do you have any updates regarding how we should understand the strength or weakness of China’s state capacity?

LO: China’s Covid policies have been rather successful until the recent Shanghai lockdown, which is partly attributable to the high transmissibility of the Omicron variant that seemingly renders lockdown futile. Since the onset of the pandemic, social brokers or volunteers have played an outsized role in making the government’s lockdown policies work. Residents’ committees (which I include among the ‘political brokers’ mentioned above) with their limited manpower simply lack the capacity to cope with all the community’s needs like food delivery, Covid testing, caring for the elderly, etcetera. A range of volunteers have risen to the challenge. Those
who draw on their social capital—whom I call ‘social brokers’ in the book—to help their housing blocks bulk-buy food and other essential items have been keeping most of the Shanghainese fed over the past month of lockdown. Meanwhile, the brokers who are mobilised by the government to implement government policies have faced pushback. As I have argued, among all the different broker types, social brokers are the most effective at gaining compliance from the society. Shanghai’s lockdown experience has shown that social brokers or volunteers who exist in their purest form—that is, societal actors who are autonomous of the state—are really the ones helping the people fend off the worst of the crisis.

HZ: Your book draws on a decade of rich ethnographic research in China, and you end it on a sombre note, reflecting on the increasing difficulty of conducting fieldwork in China. Given this situation, do you have any advice to younger researchers looking to study Chinese politics?

LO: I believe China studies is undergoing a structural shift under Xi Jinping’s rule. Our primary data source—that is, the field—has been closed off, more or less. Covid has also exacerbated the lack of access to the field. Media in China and Hong Kong (which used to be a beacon of human rights studies in China) is increasingly censored. Robust research ultimately must rely on accurate data; if we don’t have data, how do we produce good research? Some scholars are increasingly reliant on open-sourced data. I think they remain open-sourced for a reason. In other words, we might be introducing systematic bias into our research in ways we are not aware of. It is a big question China scholars must grapple with—and a conversation for another occasion. ■