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The Society of Senior Citizens and Popular Protest in Rural Zhejiang

Societies of Senior Citizens (*laonian xiehui* 老年协会) in China are often thought to be non-political organizations mainly focused on community traditions and services for the elderly. And this picture has some truth in it. To keep their members busy and happy, many SSCs arrange trips, offer a place to chat, play games and study current events, hand out gifts during festivals, and provide financial assistance to members in need. Most Societies also pay attention to preserving local heritage and traditions. They often, for instance, compile lineage histories, organize events to commemorate ancestors, and host temple fairs.

SSCs can, however, be more political. Especially in better-off communities, SSCs have become involved in promoting economic growth by weighing in on land use decisions and development projects.¹ They have also gone beyond providing services to look out for the rights of the elderly, with some SSCs setting up “legal aid stations” (*falü yuanzhuzhan* 法律援助站) and “rights-protection teams” (*weiquan dui* 维权队).² Some societies have built on their experience mediating intra-family conflicts to take on community-wide issues,³ including disputes over land boundaries. In their role as political brokers, SSCs are playing a growing part in “social management” (*shehui guanli* 社会管理)⁴ and “maintaining stability” (*weiwen* 维稳).⁵

¹ Chen Xun, “Xiangcun shehui liliang heyi keneng? Jiyu Wenzhou laonian xiehui de yanjiu”, [How is Rural Social Power Possible? A Study on Societies of Senior Citizens in Wenzhou], *Zhongguo nongcun guancha* [China Rural Survey], No. 1 (2012), pp. 80-88.

² “Pengzhou shi laonianren xiehui jiji tansuo laonian weiquan gongzuo xin luzi” [Societies of Senior Citizens in Pengzhou City Explore New Ways to Protect Rights of the Elderly], 31 July 2012, available at <http://www.cdngo.gov.cn/articleread.asp?id=463>, accessed 12 September 2012.

³ “Xindu qu Xinmin zhen Jinniu cun laoxie tiaowehui de xinjian shi” [Fresh News on the Mediation Centre of the Society of Senior Citizens in Jinniu Village, Xinmin Town, Xindu District], 4 September 2012, available at <http://www.xdsf.gov.cn:808/showhq.asp?hqId=1912>, accessed 12 September 2012.

⁴ “Yituo laoxie chuangxin guanli” [Using Societies of Senior Citizens to Innovate in Social Management], 8 November 2011, available at <http://www.fjgzdj.gov.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsId=1063>, accessed 12 September 2012.

⁵ “Guanyu hezuo laoxie zai weiwen gongzuo de huibao” [Report on Work of the Cooperative Society of Senior Citizens in Maintaining Social Stability], 26 September 2011, available at

SSCs in some locations have also begun to tiptoe into collective action. In rural Jiangxi, Societies have called on villagers to challenge questionable expenditures by village committees and party branches.⁶ In Jinhua city, Zhejiang, they have frustrated attempts by local authorities to handpick an SSC leader.⁷ SSCs in Hunan and Shanxi have launched petition drives against officials who shortchanged retired workers on their pensions and health benefits and against an airline that failed to pay dividends on investments SSC members made.⁸ In Guangdong, Societies have led demonstrations against unlawful fees.⁹ SSCs in Fujian have staged protests when factories polluted farmland or water supplies and when land was requisitioned with inadequate compensation.¹⁰ For their actions, some SSC leaders have been detained¹¹ and Societies in parts of Zhejiang have been referred to as “important organizations impeding construction of a harmonious society”.¹²

<http://www.cdix.org/detail.asp?ID=399>, accessed 12 September 2012.

⁶ Xiao Tangbiao, “Nongcun jiceng zhili yu minzhu shijian zhong de zongzu wenti” [The Lineage Issue in Rural Grassroots Governance and Democratic Practice], *Ningbo dangxiao xuebao* [Journal of Ningbo Party School], No. 5 (2003), p. 17.

⁷ Ding Shisong, “Gaoqiao cun laonian xiehui xuanju fengbo” [An Electoral Incident Concerning the Society of Senior Citizens in Gaoqiao Village], *Jinhua ribao* [Jinhua Daily], 28 October 2005.

⁸ “Laonian xiehui huizhang weimin weiquan zaoyu laoyu zhizai” [A Society of Senior Citizens’ Director Jailed for Protecting the Rights of the People], 30 July 2011, available at <http://ts.voc.com.cn/question/view/54021.html>, accessed 12 September 2012; “Weiyang fayuan tuoshan jie jue Xihang gongsi laonian xiehui qunzhong jifang anjian” [Weiyang District Court Appropriately Resolved the Collective Petition Mounted by Members of the Xihang Company Society of Senior Citizens], 20 June 2011, available at <http://xawyqfy.chinacourt.org/public/detail.php?id=1085>, accessed 12 September 2012.

⁹ “Tanxun chuantong minjian zuzhi chaoshan laoren zu” [Exploring Senior Groups as Traditional Folk Organizations in Chaoshan], 19 March 2010, available at <http://news.163.com/10/0319/16/625E7NKG000146BD.html>, accessed 12 September 2012.

¹⁰ Gan Mantang and Zhang Xiaoting, “Chuantong shequ ziyuan dongyuan yu nongmin de you zuzhi kangzheng” [Mobilization of Traditional Community Resources and Farmers’ Organized Protest], *Liaodong xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Eastern Liaoning University], Vol. 12, No. 5 (2010), pp. 58-65; William Hurst, Mingxing Liu, Yongdong Liu and Ran Tao, “Reassessing Collective Petitioning in Rural China: Civic Engagement, Extra-State Violence, and Regional Variation”, *Comparative Politics*, forthcoming.

¹¹ “Chengjiang xian renmin fayuan dui ‘9.17 Xiaowan cunmin dulu quntixing shijian’ gongkai xuanpan” [A Public Trial in the Chengjiang County People’s Court over the “17 September Road-Blocking Collective Incident” in Xiaowan village], 12 April 2011, available at <http://www.yxzf.gov.cn/yxzf/jpal/2011/4/578090.shtml>, accessed 12 September 2012.

¹² “Nongcun laonian xiehui zheng chengwei yingxiang yiwu bu hexie de zhongyao zuzhi” [Rural Societies of Senior Citizens are Becoming Important Organizations Impeding Construction of a Harmonious Society in Yiwu], 8 February 2012, available at <http://www.yiwuoo.com/archiver/?tid-5925.html&page=1>, accessed 13 September 2012.

Elderly activism in China has received some attention,¹³ but few have considered who mobilizes older protesters and how the authorities react to seniors' organizations that promote protest.¹⁴ In this research report, we examine the role that SSCs in Huashui town, Zhejiang played in closing down a chemical park by addressing four questions: How did Huashui's SSCs bring older villagers together and deploy them for action? What factors enabled SSCs to mobilize protest? How did county and town officials attempt to rein in Societies that led contention? How successful were the authorities in checking the influence of Huashui's SSCs?

Opposition to the Zhuxi Chemical Park

Dongyang county is located in Jinhua municipality, Zhejiang about a two-hour drive from Hangzhou. Huashui is one of the less well-off towns in a prosperous region and is known for its plastic recycling. The Huashui town government oversees 18 "administrative villages" (*xingzheng cun* 行政村), most of which are further divided into "natural villages" (*ziran cun* 自然村). Huaxi, an administrative village whose SSC played a central role in the contention examined here, is composed of six natural villages, each of which has its own SSC.¹⁵

¹³ For examples, see Tianjian Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 219-20; William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's contentious pensioners", *The China Quarterly*, No. 170 (2002), pp. 345-60; William Hurst, *The Chinese Worker After Socialism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Xianwen Kuang and Christian Göbel, "Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China", *The China Quarterly*, forthcoming.

¹⁴ On the suppression of Falungong and its many older practitioners, see James W. Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China, 1999-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ As of 2010, Zhejiang had 28,213 SSCs, 98% of Zhejiang's administrative villages had an SSC, and 4.1 million older villagers were members of SSCs. See "Zhejiang sheng 2011 nian laonian renkou he laoling shiye tongji gongbao" [Statistical Bulletin on the Aging Population and Facilities and Programs for the Aged], 2 April 2011, available at http://llw.lishui.gov.cn/llgz/gzxx/t20110402_718037.htm, accessed 21 November 2012. Nationwide, nearly 44 million people were members of over 400,000 SSCs, and 60% of villages and 50% of urban communities had an SSC. See "Quanguo gongyou geji laonian xiehui 40 wan yu ge" [There are over 400,000 Societies of Senior Citizens in China]. *Renmin wang* [People's Daily Online], 25 November 2011, available at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/16391297.html>, accessed 21 November 2012.

In early 2001, Dongyang county opened the Zhuxi Chemical Industrial Park on land belonging to Huaxi and Huangshan villages, and announced it would relocate a pesticide factory there. From the outset, villagers opposed placing a plant notorious for its pollution in the park. On 20 October 2001, a group of Huaxi and Huangshan residents sought a “dialogue” (*duihua* 对话) with the town party secretary, which led to the secretary being cursed, beaten and dragged to the park, where he was made to walk a lap around the grounds barefoot. Windows and doors of three chemical plants were smashed, and phones and computers in factory offices were vandalized. Following this incident, twelve villagers were prosecuted for disturbing social order and ten were jailed for one to three years. This deterred additional protest for two and a half years and cleared the way for relocation of the pesticide plant and a large expansion of the park, which soon came to occupy 960 *mu* (about 64 hectares). At its peak, the park contained 13 factories, mainly producers of chemicals, pesticides, dye, and pharmaceuticals. Nearly all the factories generated a substantial amount of water and air pollution.

On 16 April 2004, Zhejiang province published a notice in *Zhejiang Daily* announcing that industrial parks that had not been lawfully established should be shut down. The Zhuxi park was on the list because the county had not followed the appropriate procedures to secure land for it. The activists jailed following the 2001 protest were encouraged by the announcement and decided to take the government and the polluters to court, but their efforts to pursue a lawsuit and a wave of petitioning that followed did not produce any redress.

On 24 March 2005, elderly residents of Huaxi No. 5 village, the most seriously affected site, turned to more confrontational tactics. They put up a tent at the entrance to the park and began a round-the-clock vigil. Their hope was to block delivery of

supplies, thereby forcing the factories to shut down. Huashui town officials and police dismantled the tent the next evening, but the protesters immediately erected a second one. Over the next 10 days, despite efforts to pull down the tents, the size of the encampment grew, as residents from about ten other villages joined the protest, with each village erecting its own tent. County leaders then turned to a more forceful approach. At about 3am on April 10th, the county leadership sent in over 1,500 local cadres and public security personnel to put an end to the encampment. During their efforts to clear out the protesters, violence broke out and over 100 officials or police officers and more than 200 villagers were injured; sixty-eight government vehicles were also burned or damaged. In the wake of the “April 10th Incident”, the protesters still refused to withdraw and the number of tents grew to about 30, representing 22 villages. Meanwhile, the violence had attracted media attention and higher levels of government, including Beijing, sent a team of investigators to look into the protest and the county’s response. Under mounting pressure from above and below, Dongyang county agreed to close 11 of the factories in the park, and on 20 May the protesters allowed their tents to be taken down.¹⁶

To understand how SSCs mobilized the tent-sitters, the first author did fieldwork in Huashui from 10 April to 28 July 2007. She revisited the area in April 2008 to observe the first village elections after the protest. Altogether, she conducted 122 semi-structured interviews, with most arranged in a snowball fashion as one person put her in touch with the next. The interviewees ranged from protest leaders to village cadres, township cadres, municipal officials, and ordinary villagers. Taking advantage

¹⁶ In places where protest did not occur, most of the industrial parks that the province ordered shut stayed open under a new name. In Huashui, many of the 11 closed factories were relocated outside the county. For example, the plant that produced the most pollution was moved to Nantong city, Jiangsu. See Fu Piyi and Zhang Ran, “Huanjing baohu shiguan qiye shengsi cunwang” [Environmental Protection is of Vital Importance for Corporations]. *Jingji cankao bao* [Economic Information Daily], 9 November 2007.

of her affiliation with a newspaper, she enjoyed exceptionally good access to both local leaders and protesters. Her quasi-official capacity also made it possible to collect nearly one thousand pages of written materials, including petition letters, leaflets, and posters penned by villagers, work diaries and reports written by local officials, official regulations, meeting records, and an internal “Daily Report” (*Meiri yibao* 日日报) that meticulously traced what happened each day.

Mobilizing Protesters

Huashui’s SSCs were the major player in the effort to close the factories. In June 2004, three of the activists who had been imprisoned for opposing relocation of the pesticide factory in 2001 sought to hire a Beijing law firm to sue the polluters and Dongyang county, but they were told that legal fees could reach 500,000 yuan. Lacking this sum, they turned to the SSC in Huaxi No. 5 village to secure donations from villagers. The SSC held two meetings to discuss the request, agreed to help, and promptly launched a fund-raising campaign. A government report described what happened next:

SSC members went door-to-door to solicit contributions. Each donation should be over five yuan. Now they have collected 40,000 to 50,000 yuan. Receipts were provided, which noted the amount of money contributed, who made the donation and who received it. The receipts also had an illegal seal affixed reading “Society of Senior Citizens in Huaxi No. 5 village”. However, they didn’t indicate the purpose for which the donation was sought.¹⁷

¹⁷ Huashui zhen zhengfu [Huashui town government], “Guanyu Huashui zhen Huaxi wucun jizi shangfang jiben qingkuang” [Report on Donation Collection for Petitions in Huaxi No. 5 Village, Huashui Town], 13 July 2004.

Despite a month of soliciting, the money raised amounted to far less than the 500,000 yuan needed. The activists thus could not afford to hire the Beijing law firm. Local lawyers were unwilling to take the case, so the three men, with the SSCs in Huaxi, Xishan and Huangshan behind them, changed their strategy. They started petitioning higher levels. Over the next year, several SSC members and a leader of the 2001 protests went to the prefecture and provincial capital numerous times to submit petitions. They even travelled to Beijing twice to ask the Centre to look into the pollution and the terms under which the land for the park had been requisitioned. Meanwhile, groups of SSC members were dispatched to Huashui town and Dongyang county to urge increased oversight of the factories. Yet another SSC member, on his own, sent hundreds of petitions to government offices from the county up to Beijing. All these efforts failed to produce the hoped-for results.

The Huaxi No. 5 SSC was especially active during the petition drive. According to the work diary of an SSC leader, it held meetings almost every day to discuss the environmental crisis and what to do about it. Sometimes, the SSC convened several times in a single day to study laws and regulations, elect petitioners' representatives, and craft strategies. The number of participants at these sessions ranged from several dozen to about 500. Attendees were mostly Huaxi No. 5 SSC members and a handful of younger villagers, sometimes joined by SSC activists from other villages.

As a second round of protests took shape in 2005, the Huaxi No. 5 SSC and Societies from other villages became even more involved in mobilization. The SSCs played five main roles. First, they drew up schedules for SSC members to staff the tents.¹⁸ A police officer from Huashui town said: "SSC activists campaigned door-to-

¹⁸ Interview with a retired town cadre and SSC leader, 31 May 2007; Interview with a protest leader, 23 June 2007.

door to call on older people to fight for their descendants against the toxic chemical factories. They discussed duty schedules with seniors during their door-to-door work”. SSC members also telephoned seniors to assign shifts and to make sure they appeared on time.¹⁹ Through the Societies’ efforts, vigil maintenance was tightly organized and tents were seldom left unmanned.²⁰

Second, SSCs offered compensation to villagers who stayed in the tents. One reason that the encampment persisted for two months is that activists received 5 yuan per night for tent-sitting.²¹ A Huashui town cadre believed that although villagers first erected the tents because they opposed the pollution, the length of the protest had much to do with the “salaries” (*gongzi* 工资) paid by SSCs. The compensation mainly came from contributions placed in “donation boxes” (*juankuan xiang* 捐款箱) that SSC members located around the encampment. Spectators from nearby Yiwu county were said to be especially generous, because they were more well-off and their drinking water was polluted by factories in the park.²² SSC members also went to the homes of prosperous villagers to solicit donations. They would say things such as: “We older people are suffering in the tents. At the very least, you could donate some money to buy tent-sitters fruit and drinks”.²³ During the protest, SSCs generated more than 100,000 yuan in donations.²⁴ All the money received was managed by an SSC member from Huaxi No. 2 village who served as the movement’s accountant.²⁵

Third, SSCs provided logistical support for tent-sitters. As a town cadre put it: “They were sitting there, with others sending them food, serving them, and giving

¹⁹ Interview with a village party secretary, 23 June 2007.

²⁰ Interview with a town cadre, 26 June 2007.

²¹ Interview with a deputy director of a town police station, 21 June 2007; Interview with a protest leader, 23 June 2007.

²² Interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007.

²³ Interview with a deputy director of a town police station, 21 June 2007.

²⁴ Interview with a village party secretary, 13 April 2007.

²⁵ Interview with a protest leader, 23 June 2007.

them money”.²⁶ The party secretary of Huashui commented, with an equal measure of disdain and frustration:

Why was the encampment sustained for so long? Because they [the tent-sitters] could get five yuan per night and they ate quite well. . . . Perhaps those old ladies had never eaten instant noodles before or had these tasty drinks. So they were quite happy camping there, regarding the tent area as a nursing home and an entertainment centre.

Fourth, SSC members applied pressure on elderly villagers who were reluctant to join the encampment. Throughout the protest, the local government sent cadres who knew or were related to the protesters to persuade them to stand down.²⁷ Some tent-sitters were “transformed” (*zhuanhua* 转化) and gave up protesting, but others continued “going on duty” (*zhiban* 值班) at the encampment. An officer from the Huashui police station explained:

When we learned that some older villagers were about to begin their shifts, we had to go do “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作) on them. We begged them not to go and told them that the local government was solving the environmental problem. Some older villagers said, “I have to go on duty. Otherwise I will be accused of being a traitor when I go to the senior centre to play mah-jongg.”²⁸ The activists will blame me for doing nothing and isolate me. Today is my time to sit in the tents and I have to go. But I promise not to say anything or to engage in other activities”.

²⁶ Interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007.

²⁷ Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 215 (2013), forthcoming.

²⁸ On ostracizing those who do not participate in protest, see Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Protest Leadership in Rural China”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 193 (2008), p. 7; Kuang and Göbel, “Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China”.

To all appearances, protesters occupied the tents voluntarily, but in fact it was hard to resist calls to participate. A retired town cadre and SSC leader even claimed that the Huaxi SCC drew up “regulations” (*guiding* 规范) describing how to punish those who failed to fulfil their duties.

Finally, SSCs drew nearby villages into the protest. SSCs in Huaxi, Huangshan and Xishan played a crucial role spurring participation of nearly two dozen neighbouring communities. Using a strategy that is sometimes called “bloc recruitment” or “mesomobilization”, SSCs in these three highly-polluted villages contacted members of Societies in less-affected areas and urged them to mobilize new activists.²⁹ If a person answered the call, SSC members from Huaxi, Huangshan or Xishan would help the recruit put up a tent, an action which sometimes attracted more participants from the new activist’s village.³⁰ People from several natural villages that lacked SSCs were much harder to mobilize.³¹ A Huashui town cadre said there were no residents of one village at the encampment, mainly because there was no SSC there.

In the end, most older villagers from Huaxi, Xishan and Huangshan were drawn into the effort, and many senior citizens from neighbouring communities also took part, either as participants or supporters. And almost all our interviewees, both officials and villagers, emphasized the contribution SSCs made to protest mobilization. A Huashui police officer called the Society “the commander-in-chief at the front”. A Huashui town cadre noted that “SSCs played the role of ‘charging

²⁹ Interview with a SSC leader, 24 May 2007. For more on “mesomobilization”, see Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht, “Mesomobilization: Organizing and Framing in Two Protest Campaigns in West Germany”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (1992), pp. 555-96. On “bloc recruitment”, see Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973). Both strategies involve protest leaders activating and coordinating existing groups.

³⁰ “Dongyang shi huashui zhen ‘4.10 shijian’ gongzuo jinzhan qingkuang” [Progress in the Work Situation Concerning the “April 10th Incident” in Huashui Town, Dongyang City], 26 April 2005.

³¹ About 50 natural villages in Huashui town did not take part in the protest, mainly because they were far away from the chemical park and their residents had fewer environmental grievances.

forward’” (*chongfeng xianzhen* 冲锋陷阵) and managing activities in the encampment. The party secretary of Huaxi No. 5 village, who sympathized with the tent-sitters and was ousted because he failed to convince them to stand down, gave full credit for closing the chemical park to “older people and their organizations”.

How SSCs Are Able to Mobilize Protest

In rural Zhejiang, SSCs are often significant actors owing to the resources they control.³² According to The Law for Protecting Senior Citizens’ Rights (1996), more developed villages may use the income stream from collectively-owned assets to fund pensions and other expenditures. Most communities in rural Zhejiang are reasonably well-off and village leaders often assign SSCs revenues from village fish ponds, forests, markets, buildings, and farmland. In Huaxi, the SSC has the right to operate the local market. By the mid-2000s, the SSC received about 130,000 yuan annually from leasing vegetable, fish, meat, and clothing stalls. After remitting 20,000 yuan to the Huaxi village committee and 7,000 yuan to the Department of Urban Management,³³ it still earned over 100,000 yuan in rental income every year. In Xishan, another village that produced a large number of tent-sitters, the bulk of the SSC’s income derived from membership fees paid by residents over the age of 55, donations from local entrepreneurs, and rent from 12 collectively-owned fish ponds.³⁴

SSCs in Huashui use these revenues, in part, to offer services to their members. At the time of the protests, the Huaxi Society was the best-funded and largest SSC in Huashui, with about 1,600 members.³⁵ It owned a spacious three-story building, which housed its offices and an entertainment centre. The centre had television sets

³² Interview with a village party secretary, 13 April 2007.

³³ Interview with a SSC leader, 16 April 2007.

³⁴ Interview with a retired town cadre and SSC leader, 25 April 2007.

³⁵ Interview with a SSC leader, 16 April 2007.

and DVD players, as well as numerous mah-jongg and poker tables. The Huaxi SSC also established study groups. Older villagers routinely came to the centre to read books and newspapers, and to discuss current affairs. Every spring the SSC organized trips to tourist sites. On holidays it gave its members small gifts, such as towels, cooking oil, and moon cakes. When elderly villagers fell ill, the SSC sent representatives to visit them. When members died, it dispatched staff with a funeral wreath to mourn them. Every year, to celebrate the birthday of the villagers' common ancestor, the SSC allotted 20,000 yuan to hire a theatre company to perform a series of Wu operas; the festivities surrounding this continued for three days and four nights.³⁶

In addition to robust finances, Huashui's SSCs enjoyed substantial autonomy. Compared to organizations such as the Women's Federation, the Communist Youth League and the Public Safety Committee, which were treated as departments of the village party committee,³⁷ Huashui's SSCs received little oversight prior to the 2005 protests. According to a Dongyang leader: "SSCs included all kinds of people. At that time, we [the county government] didn't pay enough attention to guiding them. They were expected to 'control themselves' (*ziji guan ziji* 自我管理)". The Principles of Grassroots Societies of Senior Citizens in Zhejiang (2004) gave village committees and party branches responsibility for supervising SSCs, but in practice village cadres rarely intervened in SSC affairs. Especially for Societies that had their own sources of income, SSCs were basically left on their own to draw up budgets, select activities, and choose leaders.³⁸

³⁶ Interview with a SSC leader, 16 April 2007.

³⁷ Interview with a county leader, 22 July 2007.

³⁸ Interview with a deputy director of a town police station, 21 June 2007.

Most Huashui SSCs also had strong leadership. More often than not, Societies in Huashui elected their own directors and deputy directors,³⁹ a practice which led to the selection of energetic and resourceful individuals who kept a close eye on villagers' interests. Retired cadres and workers were common choices, owing to their educational level, work experience, and social ties in the community. Such leaders, according to a Huashui police officer, possessed "prestige, a good head, and a clear mind" (*you weixin, you tounao, you silu* 有威信,有头脑,有思路). They typically "enjoyed mass support" (*you qunzhong jichu* 有群众基础) and were the sort of people others trusted.⁴⁰ Finally, retired cadres, in particular, were experienced at negotiating with political and economic elites and were willing to stand up to them if the community was being harmed.

Skilful SSC leadership eased the fears of protesters and encouraged others to join the encampment. Devising effective tactics, in particular, went a long way to keep the movement going and the authorities at bay. For example, Huaxi SSC leaders came up with the idea of having tent-sitters kowtow to local officials, police, and thought workers who approached the encampment. To encourage elderly protesters, often donning white mourning clothes and burning incense, to kowtow while chanting "we beg you to save us"⁴¹ was a powerful way to frighten off anyone who dared confront the tent-sitters, not least because it was threatening for younger people to be kowtowed to by the elderly.⁴² These tactics, and others like them, kept the authorities

³⁹ Interview with a town leader, 23 June 2007.

⁴⁰ Interview with a town leader, 23 June 2007.

⁴¹ Such tactics were most often deployed by female protesters. According to a number of interviewees, both male and female, elderly women took center stage in the encampment for two reasons. For one, older women are the weakest of the weak, which reduced the likelihood the authorities would use force against them. Second, it is culturally more acceptable (or at least not so humiliating) for elderly females to cry, kneel or kowtow to show their dissatisfaction.

⁴² Interview with a deputy director of a town police station, 21 June 2007; Interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007. Kowtowing, when done by the elderly to younger people, is thought by many to "cut a person's lifespan" (*zheshou* 折寿).

off balance and promoted mobilization by showing potential recruits that tent-sitting was safer and more effective than they might have thought.

SSCs also benefited from a large pool of people who were “biographically available”⁴³ to join the protest. At the time of the 2005 contention, about 20 percent of the village’s population were members of the Huaxi SSC. In Huaxi No. 5 village, according to the party secretary, very few seniors were not SSC members.⁴⁴ Older villagers generally had spare time and limited family responsibilities and were free to take part in tent-sitting.

SSC leaders also had fewer worries than leaders of other organizations about the safety of people they mobilized. A 2005 law that lays out penalties for disrupting public security grants those aged 70 and above certain privileges when protesting. Article 21 of the law stipulates that individuals over 70 years old can only be detained for the most serious disruptions of public order. According to a Dongyang county leader, Huaxi villagers knew this clause well and this was one reason why SSCs mobilized tent-sitters who were mostly in their 70s or 80s. Ironically, some protesters who were actually 69 years old thought they had reached 70 and thus faced detention.⁴⁵

Finally, the physical vulnerability of older protesters facilitated SSC mobilization. Although some older villagers were too feeble to protest, others could take advantage of the fact that it was unseemly for representatives of state power to use force on the elderly.⁴⁶ As one town cadre who participated in efforts to break up

⁴³ Doug McAdam, ‘Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer.’ *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (1986), pp. 64-90.

⁴⁴ In Zhejiang, 73% of older villagers were members of SSCs in 2010. See “‘Zhejiang sheng 2011 nian laonian renkou he laoling shiye tongji gongbao’”.

⁴⁵ In rural China, most people keep track of their “nominal age” (*xusui* 虚岁), which is one year older than their actual age. We do not have information on whether any 69-year old protesters were detained.

⁴⁶ This was especially true after the violence of 10 April 2005 led to injuries. Even before that, elderly protesters were not detained and the 1,500 cadres and public security officers dispatched to deal with several dozen elderly protesters were instructed to remove the tents but to avoid striking tent-sitters. On local authorities being in a “morally weak position” and fearing intervention from above if they use

the encampment put it: “Those older people could hit me, but I couldn’t hit them back”. The director of the Dongyang Public Security Bureau reportedly felt handcuffed when dealing with dozens of elderly tent-sitters and complained:

If I arrest those gray-haired 70-80 year-olds, how could I shoulder the responsibility? I cannot afford to feed them, since their eyesight is poor and they cannot work. The responsibility would be greater yet if one of them died during detention.

The vulnerability of the elderly made it more difficult to use force to end the encampment, which emboldened the early tent-sitters and helped draw in new recruits.

Strong finances, organizational autonomy, good leadership, and a deep pool of biographically-available, unafraid protesters all served SSC mobilization. As might be expected, however, the ability to manage a petition drive, turn out tent-sitters, and keep protesters at an encampment for nearly two months concerned local authorities greatly and led to efforts to check the influence of Huashui’s SSCs.

Efforts to Control Huashui’s SSCs

Local authorities had long planned to rein in Huashui’s SSCs. On 6 September 2004, according to the work diary of the Huashui party secretary, “Town leaders met and discussed how to prevent persistent petitioning by SSC activists in Huaxi No. 5 village”. On 4 March 2005, Huashui’s party secretary presented a report about SSC petitioning to county leaders, and a deputy director of the county people’s congress proposed reorganizing Dongyang’s SSCs. The deputy director recommended:

“Village-level SSCs should be shut down; towns should establish general assemblies

force on elderly protesters, see Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

of the elderly; seals from disbanded SSCs should be confiscated; ‘activity sites’ (*huodong changsuo* 活动场所) should be set up at the administrative village level and [SSC] activities in natural villages should cease”.⁴⁷ Five days later, in the midst of a wave of collective petitioning led by SSCs, the director of the Huashui people’s congress suggested: “For SSC petitioners, doing thought work is far from enough. Could harsher methods be used”?⁴⁸ On 22 May 2005, shortly after the encampment ended, a deputy party secretary of Dongyang county, at a meeting attended by town officials, village cadres, and SSC leaders, reminded listeners: “SSCs are mass organizations. They must be subject to party leadership”.⁴⁹ Two days later, the Huashui party secretary began a rectification of social organizations at the village level, with particular attention to SSCs.

Before the protests, there were almost no county-level regulations concerning SSCs and very few of them were registered with the Dongyang Bureau of Civil Affairs.⁵⁰ After local officials witnessed how adept SSCs were at mobilizing protesters, they decided to bring SSCs under tighter supervision by restructuring them and assigning them new superiors. A retired town cadre and SSC leader explained the thinking behind this: “The Dongyang county government has drawn lessons from the protests. They are afraid of SSCs becoming stronger. That’s why they reorganized them”.

In early 2006, the county initiated a comprehensive reform of SSCs. Town SSCs were established and registered with the county bureau of civil affairs. Town SSCs

⁴⁷ Record of an informal discussion attended by Huashui town and Dongyang county leaders on dealing with problems relating to the Huaxi chemical park, 4 March 2005.

⁴⁸ Record of a meeting on the environment attended by Huashui town and Dongyang county leaders, 9 March 2005.

⁴⁹ Work diary of an SSC leader, 2004.

⁵⁰ Nationally, only 12% of SSCs were registered with bureaus of civil affairs in 2006, and most of these were in cities. See Huan Qian and Yuan Xin, “Goujian hexie shehui guocheng zhong de jiceng laonian qunzhong zuzhi zuoyong yanjiu” [Research on the Role of Grassroots Mass Organizations of Senior Citizens in Building a Harmonious Society], *Renkou xuekan* [Population Journal], No. 157 (2006), pp. 24-28.

and a county “Committee of Senior Citizens” (*laoling wei* 老龄委) were granted supervisory responsibility over Societies in administrative villages. Town cadres were appointed directors of town SSCs and these organizations were made departments of town governments. SSCs in administrative villages became branches of town SSCs and were placed under their leadership. This meant that village committees and party branches were no longer in charge of village SSCs. Finally, SSCs in natural villages were converted into “small groups of the elderly” (*laonian xiaozu* 老年小组) and these groups and all SSC branches were prohibited from having their own seals.

In accord with these reforms, the Huashui town SSC was established on 31 July 2006. Its first director was a town deputy party secretary. The Huashui party secretary and town head served as honorary directors.⁵¹ A year later, a town leader explained that this SSC was established to “guide” (*yindao* 引导) SSC activities in villages. He said: “Most active SSC members are either retired cadres or workers. Most of them are capable. If they are well directed, they are very ‘tractable’ (*tinghua* 听话). Otherwise, they can be very stubborn”.

The Resilience of Huashui’s SSCs

The reorganization only had a limited effect.⁵² Most of our interviewees did not believe that local authorities gained much control over village-level SSCs as a result of the 2006 reforms. One retired town cadre and SSC leader even went so far as to say that the restructuring was a complete failure: “Nothing has changed! This approach is totally unrealistic, because the organizations are still there, whether they

⁵¹ Huashui zhen zhengfu [Huashui town government], “Guanyu choubai chengli Huashui zhen laonianren xiehui ji jianli choubai xiaozu de tongzhi” [Notice on Preparations to Establish the Huashui Town Society of Senior Citizens and the Preparatory Group], 12 July 2006.

⁵² Confiscating seals, which are symbols of organizational power, did hamstring village-level SSCs and make it more difficult for them to organize contention and give it an official imprimatur. Interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007.

are called ‘activity centres’ or ‘activity groups’. . . . They can still oppose the government”.

The reorganization changed little for three main reasons. First, local officials had come to depend on SSCs to assist and manage senior citizens and they needed SSCs to deliver services that the local government did not provide. So, though Societies in natural villages were instructed to shut down, none were actually closed. Second, the skill of SSCs in organizing contention made the authorities hesitant to cut off their funding out of fears it would trigger further protest. SSC revenues were left unaffected by the reorganization. As long as SSCs had their own funding sources, they retained considerable autonomy and an ability to intervene when community interests were at stake. Third, the reforms did not alter how village SSC leaders were chosen: they continued to be elected by SSC members.⁵³ The restructuring did not grant town SSCs the authority to appoint either directors or deputy directors of village SSCs and this left village Societies with substantial leeway to take on activities of their choosing.

Despite efforts to rein them in, Huashui’s SSCs have built on their successes mobilizing protest and have become more important players in local politics. They have taken on a bigger, more assertive role in village affairs, including approving development plans and land use decisions. SSCs have also kept a close watch on village factories and have even flexed their muscles in local elections.

After the closing of the chemical park, Huaxi’s SSCs became more actively engaged in village development projects. For example, in May 2007 several Yiwu county businessmen proposed turning an open lot belonging to Huaxi No. 5 village into a holiday resort. The village committee signed off on the plan, but the SSC opposed it. To block ground-breaking, SSC members went to the proposed site, put

⁵³ Interview with a town leader, 23 June 2007.

up a tent, and maintained a vigil for ten days.⁵⁴ This led the village committee to renegotiate the terms of the investment. Ultimately, a new contract was drawn up that provided the village with more benefits. SSC leaders, however, were still dissatisfied, because the village committee received the land rent from the Yiwu investors. An SSC leader complained: “The money should have been given to our SSC. We older people fought on the frontlines, but they [village cadres] reaped the benefits”. Since the 2005 protests, village cadres have shown greater respect for SSCs and have often sought their advice on development initiatives. And SSCs have seized the opportunity to provide input. One former party secretary from Huaxi No. 5 village claimed, most likely exaggerating somewhat: “Village projects can only be fulfilled now with SSC support. Without the SSC’s nod, nothing is possible”.

The Huaxi SSC also gained some say over what was to be done with the land the factories vacated. According to a protest leader, “SSCs ran the protests. What SSCs contributed should be repaid. So how to dispose of the land in the old chemical park should be decided by the SSC”. From 2005 to 2010, the county sought to place new plants on this site several times, but failed on every occasion, mainly because SSC members from Huaxi and Huangshan did not believe that the factories would be as environmentally friendly as the county claimed.⁵⁵

SSCs also closely monitored the environmental impact of two factories that survived the 2005 protests and were allowed to stay in their original location.⁵⁶ SSC

⁵⁴ Interview with a town leader, 25 June 2007.

⁵⁵ In December 2010, the authorities finally succeeded in placing several low-pollution, craft goods factories in the former chemical park, see “Chenji wunian Zhuxi gongyeyuan xian you renao qilai” [After a Five-Year Silence, Zhuxi Industrial Park Starts to Warm up], 15 December 2010, available at <http://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/05zjnews/system/2010/12/15/017164222.shtml>, accessed 19 August 2012.

⁵⁶ Although 11 factories were closed after the 2005 protests, two operated by local entrepreneurs survived. The Shunda Dye plant managed to stay open, mainly because the owner was a local entrepreneur who was highly respected by older villagers. Each year he also bought small gifts for all those aged 70 or over in Huashui town. The other factory that remained open was owned by villagers from Huaxi.

attention was so relentless that one of the factories, the Shunda Dye Corporation, submitted a report to the county complaining:

Since this May, the Senior Citizens' Society in Huaxi No. 5 village has been sending members to our company, checking and supervising. Sometimes it's two or three villagers, sometimes it's larger groups. We once received three delegations in a single day, with one of them exceeding 70 people.⁵⁷

Intense oversight frightened away several potential investors and reduced the number of local entrepreneurs willing to consider putting a factory on the site.⁵⁸

Assertive SSCs have also become a force in local elections. During county people's congress balloting in January 2007, SSC members campaigned for candidates who stood with them during the 2005 protests. In Huaxi, the village committee director was elected with strong backing from the village SSC. In a county election, a leader of the 2001 protests was encouraged by SSC members to stand as an independent candidate in Huangshan village. He later recounted how he decided to put his name in the ring: "Older folks asked me to run. They said I had been imprisoned for the people and therefore had made my contribution." Though the ex-protester did not win, he drained votes away from the party secretary of Huaxi village, a man who was disliked by most SSC members and a favourite of the local government. As a result, the party secretary failed to be elected, too.

Aware of the growing influence of Huashui's SSCs, many candidates in the 2008 village committee elections sought their endorsement and one even hired a former SSC director and a prominent tent-sitter to canvass for votes.⁵⁹ At the same

⁵⁷ Shunda yinran chang [The Shunda Dye Corporation], "Guanyu shengcun huanjing de qingkuang huibao" [Report on Our Living Environment], 28 August 2006.

⁵⁸ Interview with a retired town cadre and SSC leader, 25 April 2007.

⁵⁹ Interview with a protest leader, 24 April 2008.

time, candidates also tried to win over older voters by promising to assist SSCs and represent their members energetically. One candidate in Huangshan promised in an open letter: “I will try my best to solve the SSC’s difficulties and take good care of the elderly. In particular, I will work to increase SSC income and improve societal management. I will also draw on good practices from other places, providing living subsidies for older people and organizing their travel”.

Some Implications

How often do SSCs mobilize protest and are the achievements of Huashui’s Societies likely to be replicated elsewhere? As a case study, this research report is not well-suited to address these questions. Moreover, there are factors specific to Huashui that helped its SSCs overcome obstacles that may exist in other locations. Clan ties linked many protesters and eased coordination in villages where SSCs already played a large role in lineage activities. SSCs in Huashui also had big budgets, owing to Zhejiang’s booming private economy and local entrepreneurs who provided generous support for SSCs. Finally, efforts to rein in Huashui’s SSCs were ineffective. If village SSCs had been deprived of their funding and autonomy, their ability to mobilize contention and build on their victories would have been diminished. It is possible that the successes of Huashui’s SSCs may not be readily reproduced elsewhere.

Still, there is evidence that SSC-led protest is growing.⁶⁰ And there are reasons, beyond rising discontent and well-situated SSCs, that this trend may continue. For one, “mission drift” can be a mechanism by which SSCs become more significant.

⁶⁰ Hurst, Liu, Liu and Rao, “Reassessing Collective Petitioning in Rural China”; Chen, “Xiangcun shehui liliang heyi keneng”; “Luqiao qu jiceng laonian ren xiehui xianzhuang ji guanli duice” [The Current Situation of Grassroots SSCs in Luqiao District and Relevant Measures to Manage Them], 20 December 2006, available at <http://lqll.luqiao.gov.cn/InfoPub/ArticleView.aspx?ID=42016>, accessed 30 November 2012.

Protest often addresses widely-held grievances and, especially when it is successful, can empower SSCs in an environment where other non-state organizations are few and weak. Becoming a force that stands with the community against officials or companies that misbehave is undoubtedly a high risk strategy for organizational development, but not an unreasonable one.

Demographics also favour SSCs and offer them room to grow. As migration empties the countryside of younger men and women, SSCs are becoming a vehicle for the people who are left—the elderly—to participate in politics, even contentious politics.⁶¹ Compared with the young, who might depart at any time, the elderly have become the main stakeholders in many villages and the most dogged defenders of community interests.⁶² SSCs are well-placed to take on new roles when the younger men who typically dominate politics are absent. With numbers and resources behind them, SSCs can be a factor in local politics, especially if 1) local entrepreneurs back them, 2) they have former cadres leading them, and 3) lineage ties and respect for the elderly make it difficult to clamp down on them. As was evident in Huashui, SSCs may resist government pressure and efforts to depoliticize them, and it may not always be easy to re-route Societies back toward harmless service activities.⁶³

The events in Huashui also speak to our understanding of mobilizing structures and the potential for sustained protest organization. Governance in the countryside is

⁶¹ When SSCs grow in status and influence, are older men or women the main beneficiaries? Further research is needed to determine if SSCs are commonly patriarchal organizations led by men, which use women for protest, but do not allow them to benefit proportionately. Thanks to Tamara Jacka, 27 September 2012, for suggesting these questions. In Huashui, despite the prominent role women played in the encampment, SSCs were dominated by men, both before and after the 2005 protest.

⁶² SSCs may be more concerned with certain issues, especially land use and environmental degradation, partly because many left-behind, older villagers still depend on land for their livelihood, and partly because they have an ancestral connection to the land and recognize that soon enough they will be buried there.

⁶³ SSCs may also be turned to state purposes. See Mette Halskov Hansen, “Organising the Old: Senior Authority and the Political Significance of a Rural Chinese ‘Non-Governmental Organisation’”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (2007), pp. 1057-78. A recent survey also shows that while SSCs can mobilize protest, their “mediating capacity” also enables them to be deployed to contain and canalize activism. See Hurst, Liu, Liu and Rao, “Reassessing Collective Petitioning in Rural China”.

changing, and non-state organizations are playing a bigger role. The importance of groups such as SSCs in service provision, in particular, has made it difficult for the authorities to maintain a prohibition on horizontal mobilization, and failed crackdowns may become more common as organizations with similar structures and goals develop ties with each other and create an infrastructure for single and multi-village mobilization. Still, we need to learn much more about cross-community (and cross-organization) cooperation and how the authorities respond to it. How and how often do SSCs and other organizations communicate with each other? Why are some types of coordination permitted, while others are harshly repressed?

Finally, this study suggests an understanding of protest outcomes that goes beyond the success or failure of a given episode to examine long-term consequences for the organizations involved. Bringing time into the discussion reminds us that building protest capacity is a long game and that we must pay attention to legacies and organizational traces: the consequences of repeated challenges and responses that settle a matter at hand, but even more importantly change the terrain on which state-society relations unfold the next time grievances mount. An organizational perspective on outcomes suggests that the resolution of an episode of contention matters, but leaving an organization behind that can mobilize future protest is equally significant.