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# Neither Withdrawal nor Resistance: Adapting to Increased Repression in China

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# Neither Withdrawal nor Resistance: Adapting to Increased Repression in China

Abstract: As repression grows in China, some pastors, lawyers and NGOs are neither resisting it nor withdrawing from the public sphere, but instead are finding ways to adapt. Coping strategies include: being transparent about their activities and maintaining close communication with the authorities; cultivating allies in the government and giving credit to officials for their achievements; keeping the size of their organizations non-threatening and consenting to a heightened Party presence; staying a safe distance from red lines and focusing on less controversial issues; encouraging their constituents to accept compromises and government priorities; distancing themselves from activists who speak out against restrictions; shedding connections with foreign countries; and arguing that loyalty and moderation are the best means to make progress. The hope is that cooperation and exhibiting an understanding view of the Party's motives will preserve space to operate and suggest a path toward long-term co-existence. Accommodating pastors, lawyers and NGOs take the regime as a given and work with the state rather than against it. By doing so, they retain some agency, even as deepening authoritarianism blurs the line between accommodation and cooptation. Potentially restive professionals are directed away from activities and ways of thinking that the authorities do not like, and toward organizing themselves and acting in a manner that is deemed acceptable. They learn to avoid confrontation while they are steered to a safe place and rewarded (or at least tolerated) if they stay there.

Keywords: Protestants, lawyers, NGOs, adaptation, accommodating power, political control

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## Biographical Paragraph

Kevin J. O'Brien is the Jack M. Forcey Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His research for many years has focused on the disaffected and downtrodden in society, and the strategies they use to improve their situation, as well as the front-line cadres who make political control real.

Neither Withdrawal nor Resistance: Adapting to Increased Repression in China

Growing repression affects some groups more than others. But even among those hit hardest, a range of responses to political pressure exists. Withdrawal from the public sphere and a return to hearth and home, with a focus on inconspicuousness and private concerns, is one possibility. At the other end of the spectrum, some may choose to resist, however oppressive a regime becomes and however high the odds against them are. But there is also a third strategy: behavior that is neither withdrawal nor resistance that can be described with words such as collaboration and cooptation at one pole, and accommodation and adjusting nearer the other. These responses to screws tightening cannot rightly be considered opposition, but nor do they entail a departure from public life. They instead speak to a family of adaptations that can tell us much about the political agency of people in difficult circumstances—how they cope and pursue personal and group goals, as they seek to move forward while working within the increasingly confined environment they find themselves in.

This third reaction to political tightening is apparent in contemporary China. Over the last decade, repression has intensified and become more widespread (Fu and Distelhorst, 2018; Chen, Kai and Demes, forthcoming). Taking the professionals this article considers as examples, Protestant pastors at mega-churches, activist lawyers, and NGOs that promote human rights have all borne the brunt of Xi Jinping's muzzling of alternative voices and a renewed emphasis on political control. These "boundary-pushers" (Stern and O'Brien, 2012) have less space to operate than they had in the past, and denunciations, crackdowns and detentions are common. But for all those who are silenced by coercion, there are other pastors, lawyers and NGO

practitioners who modify their behavior or who have always situated themselves differently and are going about their careers while finding ways to elude the repression occurring around them. Some of these individuals do not even experience the limits of the Xi years and the pressure placed on their colleagues as repression (Doshay, 2021; Lee and O'Brien, 2021; Lee, 2021), but rather see them as manageable features of a "political opportunity structure" (Meyer, 2004) that the savvy (like themselves) can maneuver through to achieve their goals.

How are professionals in China coping with stepped-up coercion and adapting to hardening authoritarianism? What can we learn about political agency and the nature of accommodating power by exploring how some pastors, lawyers, and NGOs have discovered ways to live with an increasingly domineering state?

## Responses to Repression

There is a rich literature on coping with repression, worldwide and throughout history (Genovese, 1976; Gaventa, 1982; Moss, 2014; Finkel, 2017; Honari, 2018). During foreign occupation, political collapse or rule through terror, withdrawal is an option that many people adopt.[1] Hunkering down and simply trying to make it to the next day was evident among Parisians under Nazi rule (Rosbottom, 2014) and is common among populations that do not flee during a civil war (Sanz Sabido 2016) or try to wait out a brutal regime (Drakulic, 1992).

Opposition is a second response to repression. Resistance may be noisy, open, and public (O'Brien and Li, 2006) or quiet, disguised and anonymous (Scott, 1986). Whether overt or covert, it rests on a denial of the actions taken against oneself or one's group and a refusal to accept repression as tolerable or legitimate. Resistance may require much bravery or little, and

intentions can range from securing global justice (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, and Reiter, 2006) to filling one's stomach (Scott, 1986), but it always involves an oppositional stance and an unwillingness to accept the status quo without (public or hidden) comment.

Living with repression stems from a different set of impulses. It takes a regime as a given, and entails looking for nooks and crannies in which action and progress can still take place. It frequently involves cozying up to power and accepting the rules of the game, but then acting as if those rules still provide room to push one's agenda forward (cf. Scott, 1986). It above all is a coping strategy that works with rather than against state power, and does not admit defeat, nor the lack of options, however dire a situation becomes. Quite often, people living with repression are overly optimistic about the options they have or even delusional, but they are also hopeful, imagining that much can still be done within a repressive system, long after many others have given up or moved into opposition.

## Methods, Origins, Impetus

The origins of this study trace to 121 semi-structured interviews with Protestant pastors conducted by Sarah Lee in the course of her dissertation research and an article we published on "adapting in difficult circumstances" (Lee and O'Brien, 2021). The fieldwork took place in 6 cities from 2016 to 2019 and is supplemented with information drawn from journalists' accounts and other scholars who study Chinese Protestantism. The impetus for this paper was research by Lawrence Liu and Rachel Stern on "good lawyers" (Stern and Liu, 2020) and "state-adjacent professionals" (Liu and Stern, 2021) as well as Elizabeth Perry's (2020) examination of compliant academics.[2] Teaching these articles alongside Lee and O'Brien (2021) led to a natural

question: how well does our argument about pastor's accommodating power travel to other groups? Because the treatment of lawyers and NGOs is based on secondary sources, it is briefer and at best suggestive, compared to the detailed, lengthy consideration that Protestant pastors receive. No statements about frequencies or causality are advanced: this is a grouping exercise to see what goes with what and whether a common dynamic is at play. Systematic attention to variation and scope conditions awaits future research that I hope this article will inspire.

## Coping with Repression: Protestant Pastors

In recent years, Protestant pastors have had to deal with a host of repressive measures designed to keep them (and their congregations) in line (Potter, 2003; Madsen, 2020; Lee and O'Brien, 2021; Vala, 2022).[3] These include national regulations that "securitize religion" (Jing and Koesel, 2022) and bar minors from attending church services or getting religious education (Madsen, 2020), as well as local regulations that forbid brightly-colored crosses that stand out from their surroundings (Johnson, 2016; Doshay, 2021; for a dissenting view, see Cao, 2017). Ministers, especially in unregistered churches, also face measures, some old and some new, that remind them that they are always being watched. These can be as low-tech as sending in observers to monitor sermons (Lee and O'Brien, 2021) or as sophisticated as using digital surveillance to see who enters or leaves a church (Fifield, 2018). For the most outspoken pastors, their church may be raided or closed, and detention is always a possibility. Less obvious means are also used to make sure pastors think twice about expressing heterodox views or stray too far into politics (Reny, 2018). Local leaders may block their travel to participate in leadership seminars and conferences abroad (2018 Report), monitor online religious activities

(ChinaLawTranslate, 2017), or tap their phones (Lee and O'Brien, 2021). The authorities have also sought to undermine church finances by limiting overseas donations and prohibiting religious activities by foreign missionaries (State Administration of Religious Affairs, 2004: Article 20; ChinaLawTranslate, 2017: Article 57; Vala, 2022).

But some pastors are finding means to pursue God's work within these strictures, and to work with the government rather than against it. They are striving to make the best of a difficult situation in various ways. First, they pay close attention to the content of their sermons. From the pulpit, they eschew political or anti-government messages and instead focus on innocuous moral lessons or preach about God's Kingdom, the Resurrection and the afterlife.[4] They distinguish between suitable topics, such as love and filial piety, and worldly matters with which the Church should not concern itself, and say things like "Jesus lived in Rome and did not object to the government. Why should we do what Jesus himself did not do?"[5]

Second, these pastors are eager to demonstrate that their beliefs are compatible with deepening authoritarianism by dissociating themselves from activists who speak out against restrictions on religious belief and practice. They distance themselves from high-profile ministers who challenge the regime for its human rights violations or for impinging on religious freedom, and argue that pastors should not "do politics" 搞政治 and instead teach the Bible and stay away from social movements.[6]

Beyond steering clear of politics and religious activists, many pastors have an open-minded and sympathetic view of the Party's motives, and attribute increased repression to missteps they or their colleagues have made. One interviewee berated leaders of some

unregistered churches for their secrecy and argued that it inevitably led to suspicions. He also echoed the government line on maintaining close and regular contact with the authorities by saying: “It’s all a matter of communication. The government has no choice but to repress because churches keep hiding. If you’re faultless, don’t hide and don’t change your phone number! Talk to the government and they won’t be wary of you anymore.”[7] Some also claim tighter control of religion is understandable given the upsurge in the number of Protestants and the difficulties of ruling such a large and diverse country.[8] These ministers are more than willing to explain away repression as they rationalize harsher policies as a reasonable price to pay for national development.

Many pastors have actively shed connections with foreign countries that lead Protestant churches to be perceived as a security threat. To free their churches of outside influence and achieve self-sufficiency, they have stopped inviting foreign pastors to give sermons and are finding and training more domestic staff, so that Chinese congregants can take on positions once held by missionaries.[9] Others have significantly reduced (or eliminated) reliance on foreign donations.[10] These efforts have taken many churches closer to the Party ideal of being “self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.”

Such actions are more than a grudging response to regulations designed to reduce foreign influence. For many, they also appear to reflect a degree of buy-in to the larger Party project of Sinicizing Christianity and at least partial acceptance of the government’s right “to curate Christianity so that it more closely resembles the political priorities of those in power” (Jing and Koesel, 2022: 2-3). Many pastors express growing pride and determination to minister a purely Chinese church. One interviewee explained how Chinese and resilient Protestantism is

in this way: “Throughout the Cultural Revolution and years of persecution, Chinese churches survived without foreign missionaries, without Westerners, without being above ground, without a physical location, without anything. That’s the Chinese church I serve.”[11] Another went even further in defending the government’s efforts to make Protestantism more Chinese: “People are mistaken. Sinicization is not a problem at all. We’re Chinese, so we put up the Chinese flag. You Americans also put up the American flag in buildings. When we preach, it’s better to use Chinese folktales because we Chinese can relate to them better than to Western anecdotes.”[12] Not all pastors share this enthusiasm for Sinicization, and some undoubtedly bristle at the Party playing a large role in deciding what is authentically Chinese, but many argue it is time for Chinese churches to stand on their own as regards foreign influence, and that the era when overseas guidance and help was needed has run its course.

Adapting can also involve organizational change, in particular splitting congregations into groups as small as ten to twenty. It is a big decision to break up a church and requires a commitment to train additional leaders, find new locations for services, and coordinate schedules, but many pastors think it is worthwhile to reduce any perceived threat to social stability and diminish the likelihood they will be raided or shut down.[13] Pastors are not only decreasing the size of their congregations; they are also reducing their interaction with other churches, including refraining from building and taking part in cross-church networks.[14] Collaborating with other congregations on community projects or participating in a multi-church forum can draw unwanted attention from the authorities and may even be thwarted by the police.

Breaking up congregations and cutting ties to other churches are not just a reluctant response to repressive policies. Many pastors argue that big, highly-networked churches are unsuitable for China. They say that in contrast to large congregations that have multiple pastors, smaller congregations allow believers to have closer interactions and form deeper personal relationships with each other and the pastor. A minister in Chengdu explained, "worshipping in small groups is one of the advantages we have; people bond in ways that they can't in a big church."[15] Some pastors see value in not emulating colleagues who seek to increase the number of congregants and built churches with hundreds of pews, towering steeples, and huge sanctuaries. Several said that the cross-demolition campaign in Wenzhou was proof that God was reprimanding those who had gone astray by constructing grandiose buildings. Pastors who held his view often said that God had "blessed" 祝福 China with modest-sized churches. According to them, staying small and dispersed kept them safe, reduced the risk of permanent closure, and promoted the development of Chinese Christianity.

For some pastors, all these accommodations are an effort to hang on in the face of growing repression. They and their churches are in a deteriorating situation and they are doing what they must to survive. For most of the interviewees, however, there is also a larger purpose at work. Experiencing and figuring out how to adapt to repression is seen to be part of God's grand plan (Doshay, 2021; Lee, 2021). These pastors may be mistaken about their ability to dispel the threats the Party perceives, and may not be able to create much more space for their churches to function. But they do seem to believe that God is giving them a test that they must do everything they can to pass, and that in the end they will emerge stronger than before. Consider this arresting imagery:

"Christians in China are like the Israelites in Palestine. Just as God chastised the Israelites through Babylon, I believe the Chinese government is the whip in God's hands. When we go astray in our faith and when leaders fall, God purifies the church. God uses external forces to purify the church, separate out the wheat from the chaff. When churches get persecuted, chaff falls away. Because God continues to use the whip on us, Chinese churches continue to grow and build stronger faith. China's church will most definitely be used by God, and the government is just one of the tools in God's hands."[16]

This is not a purely instrumental rationalization that justifies why pastors and their churches have no choice but to live with the regime's policies. It is based on a worldview that accords both the government and believers a role in fulfilling God's design for Chinese Christianity. Like a musical put on by a Fujian Protestant Theological seminary in 2021, the message behind it is "that faithfulness to God and faithfulness to the Party go hand-in-hand, and that being a good Protestant also means supporting the CCP" (Jing and Koesel, 2022: 24). Out of necessity and sometimes belief, accommodating pastors are adjusting Protestant practice and the Sinicization of Christianity into their faith, and are aiming to show that they and their congregations can live with and, in fact, are being steeled by repression.

These ministers underscore their own agency and resist the idea that they are victims. Instead, they see themselves in a dance with the authorities, in which they must continually demonstrate that their churches are not a threat, despite the alternative belief system their faith represents, their long history of foreign ties, and the protests that sometimes break out when the authorities, for instance, demolish crosses or close a church. Without ever being able to prove they are innocent of all the charges leveled against them, they are striving to

demonstrate that there is not a contradiction between what the regime demands of them and what their flock needs: that conflict can be reduced and that they are not as threatening as they are often perceived to be.

## Coping with Repression: Lawyers and NGOs

1. Lawyers. Members of other groups are also finding ways to live with repression that bring to mind the coping strategies adopted by Protestant pastors. Consider the "good lawyers" whom Lawrence Liu and Rachel Stern profiled in two recent articles (Stern and Liu, 2020; Liu and Stern, 2021). These "state-adjacent professionals" hardly seem to be in the same line of work as the hundreds of human rights lawyers rounded up and detained in 2015 (Committee to Support Chinese Lawyers and the Leitner Center, 2015; Palmer, 2017, Fu, 2018), and who have found themselves under continuing pressure since (China Human Rights Defenders, 2021).[17] Instead of constraining state power or demanding that the authorities respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the winners of China's Outstanding Lawyer Award have carved out a space in public life that enables them to stay a safe distance from any "red lines." They help the government in its legal development project by serving as advisors, engaging in individual legal aid, and improving communication between officialdom and the citizenry. Like most other "politically-embedded lawyers" (Michelson, 2007), they work with the state rather than against it and seek to dispel fears about their independence and their possible role as protest organizers. They have little good to say about activist lawyers who use litigation as a tool of social change. Rather than "grandstanding" in court or pursuing legal fights on the streets or online, they favor "normal tactics" and "courteous, by-the-book courtroom

advocacy." They criticize human rights lawyers for using courts as a "personal stage" and decry their tactics as "illegal, excessive, irrational and destructive" (Stern and Liu, 2020; Liu and Stern, 2021).

Despite the growth of repression in recent years, these "partners in governance" are unlikely to bump up against 2016 regulations that narrowed the definition of appropriate behavior for lawyers, and which expressly forbade many protest tactics (e.g. organizing sit-ins, raising banners, shouting slogans, backing up cases with joint petitions or online groups). They are not the sort of lawyers who criticize a decision before it has been issued, interrupt court proceedings, or block the doors of government buildings. Instead, their political participation takes place through approved channels and focuses on comparatively small-bore legal issues, such as how to classify small-claims litigation or whether it is wise to establish an intellectual property court in a neighborhood with many high-tech enterprises. (Stern and Liu, 2020; Liu and Stern, 2021).

Good lawyers do not see a contradiction between what the regime expects of them and the needs of their clients. They help the authorities calm angry complainants and "solve thorny disputes" by locating relevant statutes and measures, explaining complex procedures, and evaluating the legality of government responses; then, more often than not, they advocate compromise or abandoning a claim that is not supported by the law. Like Protestant pastors who have learned to function in a repressive environment, they see themselves as serving their clients (or congregation) by collaborating with the Party and persuading them to accept government priorities. They express faith in China's long-term "trajectory," have decided that loyalty and moderation pay, and are "patient" and "optimistic" that step-by-step change is the

way to go and will succeed in the end. They are ready to give the regime the benefit of the doubt when criticisms are raised, and maintain that close ties to the government are desirable, both for themselves (and their careers) and the people they serve. (Stern and Liu, 2020; Liu and Stern, 2021). Where accommodating pastors argue that working with the authorities is necessary to achieve God's plan, good lawyers view cooperation with the government as a means to nudge legal development forward.

2. NGOs. Life for Chinese NGOs has become more difficult in recent years.[18] In 2009 the authorities issued new foreign exchange regulations and intensified tax checks (Zhu and Jun, 2022). By 2013, Document No. 9 had identified civil society promotion as one of the seven threats to Party rule (ChinaFile, 2013), and two years later the government called for enhanced Party-building and setting up Party branches in social organizations nationwide (Nie and Wu, 2022).[19] Although a 2016 Charity Law eased registration requirements and opened a path to public fundraising, it raised questions about whether advocacy counted as charity work, warned that organizations should not "violate social morality," and did little for grassroots NGOs faced with local authorities who would not recognize that they were a charity, or used registration as a pretext to control or suppress them. (Spires, 2020; also Li, 2021).[20] A few months later a law on managing overseas NGOs (2017) curtailed access to foreign funding for both international and domestic NGOs, and in so doing criminalized an important aspect of capacity building (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018; Zhu and Jun, 2022). By the early 2020s, observers were comparing the two laws to "tools of repression" (Spires, 2020: 584) in other authoritarian states "that are emblematic of a wider trend of shrinking or closing space for NGO activities worldwide" (literature review in Holbig and Lang, 2021: 3).

As with activist lawyers, the winter of 2015-16 was a particularly trying time for Chinese NGOs, with Guangdong authorities rounding up two dozen labor activists and charging five with gathering a crowd to disrupt public order or embezzlement (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018). Since then, NGOs that operate near the advocacy end of the spectrum have experienced heightened pressure, and even those who push for change in less political areas such as disability rights, animal rights, and access to rural education have been arrested and detained for picking quarrels, illegal business operations or subverting state power (Zhu and Jun, 2022). A number of NGOs that focused on constitutional protection or collective bargaining have been shut down. Repression of NGOs in the Xi era has generally become more legalistic, systematic and consistent: it is based less on threats and violence, and more on combining a measure of intimidation with more nuanced instruments like legal pressure, administrative burdens and funding restrictions (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018; Zhu and Jun, 2022).

Hard and soft repression have "raised the costs of collective action" (Tilly, 1978: 100) for Chinese NGOs. This has led some activists, in the labor field for example, to leave the sector or exile themselves, and has slowed recruitment efforts (Zhu and Jun, 2022). Other grassroots NGOs, however, have learned how to play the hand they have been dealt and to function in an increasingly repressive environment. Many coping strategies, such as cultivating allies in government agencies, steering clear of human rights advocates, giving credit to officials, and focusing on service delivery trace back at least as far as the turn of the century (Spires, 2011; Tam and Hasmath, 2015; Newland, 2018; Zhou, 2018; Farid and Li, 2021). Besides sharpening long-standing survival skills, NGOs are developing strategies to live with new restrictions, too. In response to the overseas NGO law, grassroots social organizations have reduced connections

with foreign countries and diversified their financial backing, relying on other (often less reliable) sources, such as social media and crowdfunding, as well as government contracts for projects and service delivery (Tsai and Wang, 2019; Nie and Wu, 2022).

Some NGOs have turned the Party-building campaign to their purposes, using it "to strengthen their political capital and demonstrate their political loyalty" (Nie and Wu, 2022: 52). These NGOs establish a Party branch in order to acquire resources and safeguard their discretion: collaborating with the Party to provide social services, while letting the government claim credit and even wearing Party badges to show their recognition of CCP leadership, is an acceptable price to pay for a more secure place in the political system (Nie and Wu, 2022).[21] In Shanghai, a closer relationship with the Party "densensitized" a "troublemaking" labor NGO that no longer faces as much monitoring or having its bank accounts closed and donations blocked (Xin and Huang, 2022: 440). The presence of a Party branch can facilitate acceptance by the government, and some NGO Party secretaries have come to appreciate the aims of their host organization or even set up an NGO themselves (Xin and Huang, 2022: 442).

As NGOs continually adapt, many have redirected and depoliticized their activities. For those working in "sensitive" areas, such as sex worker rights, NGOs have aligned their mission with state priorities, moving from a focus on rights-based advocacy and decriminalization to health care and therapy or portrayals of sex workers as vulnerable victims who are also responsible mothers and providers (Tian and Chuang, 2022). Most labor NGOs have retreated from collective bargaining and rights protection to the safer ground of legal mobilization of individual workers or have "reinvented themselves in the field of corporate social responsibility." Others still carry out collective bargaining, but pick their cases carefully, caution

workers about the risks of pursuing an action, and avoid promoting strikes in favor of cultural or training work (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 113, 127). Like accommodating pastors and good lawyers, these NGOs usually maintain close communication with the authorities. When workers approach them, they inform the government that workers have issued demands and sought assistance, and that the NGO as decided to become involved (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 117). Transparency seeks to demonstrate that there is "nothing to hide" and that an organization does not have "hostile intentions" (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022: 121).

In response to shifting red lines, some NGOs also make organizational adjustments, including changing their registration to for-profit status (Hildebrandt, 2016; Gåsemyr, 2017; Toepler et al., 2020). Much like unregistered Protestant churches, a grassroots NGO may reduce its size "to escape official pressure and scrutiny" (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 126) or going a step farther, resort to providing "atomized" services to clients on an individual basis (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018; Zhu and Jun, 2022).[22] Becoming more informal, smaller or commercial can create space and make an organization's work (and a degree of advocacy) less overt.

NGOs in Xi's China are constantly making "operational adjustments" that enhance their ability to navigate around "institutional hurdles" (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 126; Gåsemyr, 2017). When faced with repression, they look to how other NGOS are coping and engage in tactical innovation (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018; Gåsemyr, 2017). For some practitioners, pressure "reinforces their motivation" and can even have "a positive, inspiring effect" (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 124, 125). As with the other two groups, NGOs "have no other choice than to adjust," often by focusing on less sensitive activities, and accepting a

considerable degree of subordination to the authorities (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018: 129; Gåsemyr 2017). When they do this, and successfully cultivate ties in the government (Farid and Song, 2020), a measure of influence through "reciprocal engagement" and "modelling innovations" is possible (Newland, 2018; Farid, 2019; Farid and Li, 2021).

Like some pastors and lawyers, accommodating NGOs seek "conditional tolerance" by addressing the perception that they pose a political threat and by casting themselves as partners in governance (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022: 120-23; Dai and Spires, 2018). The goal of their "very mild" and "non-antagonistic" approach (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022: 122; Gåsemyr, 2017: 102; Toepler et al., 2020) is to lower risk, enhance resilience and preserve some agency in the face of growing repression. To accomplish this, they walk (or break down) the line between accommodating state power and cooptation, and adopt a more loyal orientation. Some legal and labor NGOS have moved "from being 'critical' to 'suggestive' to 'collaborative' to 'conducive' (or even 'cozying up')," and have become service providers or policy advisors and interpreters, rather than faultfinders (Zhu and Jun, 2022: 534). Although most anti-discrimination NGOs have halted operations, LGBT groups have become more active while downplaying social mobilization and extending their reach into counselling, social clubs, business parties and salons (Zhu and Jun, 2022). Today's NGOs "interact and they discuss, but they seldom challenge" (Gåsemyr, 2017: 102). Their relations with the state are "fluid and multi-directional" (Farid, 2019: 539) and the space in which they operate is shifting, not only closing (Toepler et al., 2020; Holbig and Lang, 2021).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Over 50 years ago, the economist Albert Hirschman (1970) introduced the idea of exit, voice and loyalty as options for individuals who are dissatisfied with the status quo. Members of the three groups examined in this article have largely opted for loyalty as a means to retain a toehold (or more) in an unpromising environment. They have found it both necessary and desirable to nestle close to power in order to pursue their personal and professional goals, and also to maintain a degree of voice. So long as they steer clear of anything understood as opposition, they need not exit, and their loyalty buys them a seat at the table in charting their profession's future.

But does adaptation work? Although pastors, lawyers, and NGOs have a modicum of agency, the box they are operating in has become smaller, and they have limited say over whether it shrinks further or takes another shape. Repression by definition constrains, and stepped-up repression constrains more. Accommodating professionals can always try to strike new deals, but the deeper authoritarianism becomes the more they risk sliding from cooperation in the service of joint ends to cooptation in the service of state-determined ends, some of which are plainly contrary to the goals and aspirations of their constituencies.

Still, at a time when political control is on the rise, adaptation remains the order of the day. Pastors, lawyers, and NGOs are developing new methods to demonstrate their trustworthiness while continuing to dip into the toolbox of proven means to cope with repression and show they are reliable, well-intentioned partners in governance. Many are transparent about their activities and maintain close communication with the authorities; cultivate allies in the government and give credit to officials for their achievements; keep the size of their organizations non-threatening and consent to a heightened Party presence; stay a

safe distance from red lines and focus on less controversial issues; encourage their members to accept compromises and government priorities; distance themselves from activists who speak out against restrictions; shed connections with foreign countries; and argue that loyalty and moderation are the best way to make progress. The hope is that exhibiting an understanding view of the Party's motives and working with the authorities will preserve space to operate and suggest a path toward long-term co-existence. Many contend that it is possible to navigate between the demands of the regime and the needs of their constituency, and that deference does not mean the end of all advocacy or other meaningful work. If cooperation reduces the Party's perception of threat, they will pursue it. Accommodating pastors, lawyers and NGOs adapt for strategic reasons and also seemingly sincere ones,[23] as they search for a Party-acceptable and distinctly Chinese place for religion, the law, and NGOs in today's China.[24] They, together with the government, are mutually constituting state-society relations, albeit as a junior and dependent partner in a relationship where the authorities hold most of the cards.

Many questions remain about coping with repression. The first concerns variation. This study has catalogued a set of similar adaptations by certain pastors, lawyers and NGOs. But accommodators make up only a portion of each profession, and those who resist or withdraw, or adjust in different ways, also merit attention. It would be useful to find out how many people adapt, withdraw or resist, and to explore variation within a profession, such as might be found among NGOs that focus on issues as different as labor, the environment, poverty relief, the disabled, and animal rights.[25] NGOs working in one policy area may also respond differently to repression, as Tian and Chuang (2022) found with sex worker NGOs that reconfigured their mission to conform with state priorities of control and surveillance, but in distinct ways. The

analysis might also be extended to other professionals, such as acquiescent intellectuals (Perry, 2020) or the critical journalists whom Jonathan Hassid (2016) and Maria Repnikova (2017) have studied. This would illuminate which adaptations are found across most professions, which only in some, and which are particular to a single group. Finally, it would be helpful to reach beyond professionals to learn how other segments of Chinese society are living with increased repression (or remain largely untouched by it).

There are conceptual questions to consider, too. For one, how much is adaptation a response to China's repressive environment, which is hardly new, and how much is it a response to specific acts of repression? The discussion of NGOs, for example, focused on modifications made by practitioners who commonly had a direct experience of repression and then changed their behavior, while the discussion of pastors and lawyers focused on individuals who typically had learned to cope with repression before the most recent upsurge in political control. This suggests the need for a broad understanding of responses to repression, which is both "eventful" (Sewell, 1996) and structural. In other words, it is necessary to explore what happens after the deployment of force or soft coercion and also how "everyday authoritarianism" (Davey and Koch, 2021) teaches people to accommodate power throughout a lifetime.

There are also conceptual questions about accommodating power and its relationship to more extreme forms of adaptation, such as collaboration and cooptation. Consider the word "collaboration," with its double meaning of 1) working with a person (as in writing an academic article) and, 2) actively cooperating with an occupying power, be it the Germans in Vichy France or the Japanese in China during World War II. But even collaboration in its frequently traitorous

and always subservient sense presents opportunities, however limited, to make choices and exercise agency (Sweets, 1994; Brook, 2006). Historians have returned to the same villages that provided the source material for the uber account of French collaboration during German occupation and found that while Marcel Ophul's documentary "The Sorrow and the Pity" (1969) effectively punctured the myth of widespread French resistance, it went too far in painting a picture of willing obedience and acquiescence (Sweets, 1994). This suggests that for people facing massive power imbalances, resistance (or not) may be the wrong starting point to understand their options, and is better replaced by increased attention to adaptation, coping skills and survival (Finkel, 2017). Living under high levels of coercion does not allow much to be done, but it allows some things to be done, especially if accommodating is not a one-way street, and the authorities find it useful to accommodate cooperative forces in society too.

Adaptation also offers another perspective on the term "cooptation," and suggests it may obscure as much as it clarifies. At one level, the pastors, lawyers and NGOs examined here are of course coopted, insomuch as they have been drawn into a state project to shape and tame their professions and cannot pursue goals that are oppositional. But if the analysis stops there, it sells them short. Like collaboration, cooptation does not put an end to all choice or preclude negotiating a price for one's subservience and complicity. A weak hand does not mean an unplayable hand, and a degree of interdependence, at a time when the state is seeking to penetrate society deeply, may make the authorities willing to compromise with those who are so willing to compromise.

This is why "accommodating power" seems like the best term to capture the adaptations chronicled in this article. Accommodation implies an unequal relationship and

more push (by the state) than pull (by society), but not the complete absence of pull. And where this particular type of adaptation leads hinges on how much accommodating the authorities are willing to undertake, and how far pastors, lawyers and NGOs are able to go. Although this study suggests that society is not a flattened totalitarian wasteland, opportunities to express dissatisfaction and negotiate have declined. Are professions associated with civil society on the way to being destroyed or changing shape so completely as to be unrecognizable? Or do they still have residual DNA, a "genetic stock" (Krasner, 1988), that, along with the agency retained by people in difficult circumstances, prevents pastors, lawyers and NGOs from becoming full-fledged arms of the state or withering away into irrelevance, and leaves them with a role to play as measured and "reasonable" voices for their constituencies?[26]

Adaptation, in all its forms, casts light on state power, in the same way that Stern and O'Brien's (2012) *state reflected in society* approach and their discussion of popular experiences with mixed signals clarified the limits of the permissible at the end of the Hu Jintao era. Under Xi Jinping, repression has deepened and strategies to preempt protest have been refined. The machinery of control is increasingly systematic, insidious and regulatory. By the time repression gets as far as detention and violence, or even heavy-handed persuasion and psychological coercion (O'Brien and Deng, 2017), control has performed poorly. The goal is to prevent and stamp out opposition, but even more to steer, early on if possible, later when necessary. Potentially restive groups are directed away from activities and ways of thinking that the regime does not like, and towards organizing themselves and operating in a manner that is acceptable to the authorities. Accommodating pastors, lawyers and NGOs learn to avoid a confrontational posture as they are steered to a safe place and rewarded (or at least tolerated)

if they stay there.[27] So long as members of society have some room to adapt to demands placed upon them, accommodating power will remain a significant part of Chinese political life.

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# NOTES

[1] For a powerful fictional account of withdrawal during South Africa's apartheid era, see Coetzee (1983).

[2] NGOs turned out to be more a well-researched group to examine than academics, though assessing how well the argument extends to intellectuals would be a natural next step.

[3] Many repressive practices and rules have been in place since Maoist times. The present era stands out for its increasingly specific regulations, strict enforcement, and the use of technology.

[4] The 2018 Five-Year Plan for promoting the Sinicization of Christianity goes further and "calls for the harmonization of Biblical teachings with the ideology of the party-state and for pastors to preach core socialist values from the pulpit" (Jing and Koesel, 2022: 21).

[5] Interview with a pastor, southwestern province, 2019. Also Reny (2018).

[6] Interview with a pastor, southwestern province, 2019. Also Doshay (2021).

[7] Interview with a pastor, southwestern province, 2019.

[8] Interview with a pastor, eastern province, 2019.

[9] Interview with a pastor, southwestern province, 2019.

[10] Interview with a pastor, northeastern province, 2018.

[11] Interview with a pastor, eastern province, 2017.

[12] Interview with a pastor, eastern province, 2019. Pastors in Beijing have also organized patriotic speech contests and book corners, as well as flag-raising ceremonies and efforts to have congregants sew the national flag (Jing and Koesel, 2022: 23). Flag-related activities may

be a good measure of the extent to which church leaders have accepted the Party's definition of Sinification, and their willingness to situate political ideology and reverence for the party-state at the center of religious life.

[13] Interview with a pastor, southwestern province, 2019. Interview with a pastor, northeastern province, 2018.

[14] Koesel (2013: 584) similarly found that churches were kept small and "self-contained, rather than being dependent on other units," and argued that this was done to protect the larger network of churches to which individual churches belonged.

[15] Interview with a pastor, southwestern province, 2019.

[16] Interview with a pastor, eastern province, 2019. See also (Doshay 2021) and (Lee 2021).

[17] Many efforts have been undertaken to classify Chinese lawyers. See, for example, Liu and Halliday (2011). Lawyers are a "variegated group" (Stern and Liu, 2020: 243) and "good lawyers" are only one slice of the whole. For a similar use of the word "good," in the context of local people's congress deputies, see Manion (2014).

[18] This discussion focuses on domestic, grassroots NGOs. On adaptation by international NGOs, see Noakes and Teets (2020) and Li and Farid (2022).

[19] Farid and Li (2021: 606-07) note that the requirement to establish Party branches has been problematic for smaller NGOs, some of which have no Party members on staff. In Shanghai, 70% of NGOs had set up Party branches by 2018, though more than 60% of these were joint branches shared by two or more NGOs, and some others were ad hoc bodies engaged in a limited range of activities (Xin and Huang, 2022: 434, 438-39).

[20] After focus groups with more than 50 grassroots NGO members, Spires (2020: 572) concluded that the Charity Law is largely viewed "as an extension of state efforts to contain and control grassroots civil society."

[21] Some NGOs resist party-building, for example, by setting up liaisons to meet the Party's minimum requirements but then fail to oversee their activities, or avoid Party-building entirely. (Nie and Wu, 2022).

[22] Networking across NGOs has become more dangerous and has declined in some highly sensitive areas, such as labor (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018), though it continues in other areas, such as cross-regional alliances of environmental NGOs, health NGOs, and disaster-relief NGOs (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022).

[23] It is difficult to gauge how much of adapting is a matter of grudging compliance, acceptance of the inevitable, or active consent. It is always challenging to assess a person's motivations, and some accommodators may be wearing a mask, or their faces may be growing to fit the mask (Scott, 1990). On problems determining whether behavior is sincere or strategic, see (O'Brien, 2013: 1057). One referee suggested that acts and expressions of support may also reflect an ambiguous view of the Party and a mixture of impulses including preference falsification, belief, performativity, and doing what can be done.

[24] Sinicization was a major theme for pastors, but is also seen among NGO practitioners, some of whom argue that the Western model of an oppositional civil society that criticizes the state, is, itself, a foreign import unsuited to China. These individuals appear to have internalized a narrative that China is creating a new type of nonprofit sector that works in concert with the authorities. In this telling, NGOs are not avoiding antagonizing the state but are learning to

operate in a more “socially wholesome” and characteristically Chinese fashion (Personal communication, May Farid, December 14, 2021).

[25] One of the journal’s referees noted that variation in the degree and form of adaptation may have been greater in the past, owing to factors such as source of funding (i.e. international or domestic) and whether an NGO’s main aim was incremental policy change or a thorough-going restructuring of the regime. This suggests that widespread and more uniform repression under Xi may be leading NGO coping strategies to converge as adaptation becomes the only game in town.

[26] Like Krasner (1988), this line of thinking follows Gould’s and Lewontin’s (1979) critique of the functionalism of the adaptationist paradigm in evolutionary theory. One historical example might be “artistic and musical workers” in Maoist China. Were they still artists and musicians or did their adaptation to the strictures of the time eventually turn them into something else?

[27] The social credit system has a similar function. It informs Chinese about safe and unsafe courses of action and suggests that repression is not arbitrary and can be minimized.