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Social accountability as social movement outcome: Protests in a Chinese city

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ABSTRACT

Social accountability is a concept that has been used much in development studies and democratic theory to study informal ways for civil society to achieve social change and hold governments accountable. Surprisingly, it has been far less used in social movement scholarship and we argue that social accountability, understood as a combination of answerability, legal claim attainment, and sanction, is a useful way to examine social movement outcomes in China. Social accountability directs the focus of research towards the target of protest and not only whether the protest resulted in policy changes or not. Based on field work in 2013–2015, this article examines four cases of social protests in the Chinese city of Hangzhou. In line with previous research we find that when citizen claims accord with government policies and protesters are well-organized, local authorities tend to accommodate the protesters’ claims. However, answerability and sanction do not always follow the same pattern. Answerability can be relatively high also when legal claims are unsuccessful. This means that cases that are commonly seen as unsuccessful protests because the legal demands were not accommodated may still result in partial social accountability. In addition to the presentation of original empirical findings, the study makes a theoretical contribution by linking the two research fields of social movement and social accountability, which will be of interest to a wider scholarly audience.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is commonly seen as the core aspect of democracy that distinguishes it from non-democracy. However, previous research has pointed out that elections in democracies can only hold public officials accountable to a limited extent (Manin, Przeworski, & Stokes, 1999). It is therefore important that we focus on other forms of accountability that can play a role between elections such as institutional oversight or horizontal accountability (O’Donnel, 2006). In new democracies formal accountability mechanisms are often weak but civil society and social movements can play an important role in putting pressure on the government. As a consequence, social accountability† is a concept that was developed to study politics in new democracies, for example in Latin America. Social accountability †is a non-electoral, yet vertical mechanism of control that rests on the actions of a multiple array...
of citizens’ associations and movements and on the media, actions that aim at exposing governmental wrongdoing, bringing new issues onto the public agenda, or activating the operation of horizontal agencies.’ (Smulowitz & Peruzzotti, 2000: 150). In this study, we use the concept social accountability to show that accountability is also applicable to the study of politics in an authoritarian context. The analytical framework we use to study social accountability takes into account three separate dimensions of accountability: answerability, legal claim attainment and sanction. Residents in the Chinese city of Hangzhou use both formal and informal mechanisms to demand answers and seek social justice from the local government. Our four cases of social protest result in a variety of different social accountability outcomes. In some cases, policy adjustments are made by authorities (legal claim attainment). At other times, the government recognizes protesters’ grievances (answerability), but no real policy changes are made. Sometimes the protests activate the Party state’s internal accountability mechanisms, which can result in negative sanctions for the responsible state official or government unit. Our study of social accountability contributes to prior research on social movement outcomes by focusing more on the consequences for the target of protest and its responses.

Social accountability in non-democratic settings

Social accountability is an established concept in development discourse and has been used to describe participatory budget processes, citizen monitoring of public and private sector performance, and grievance redress mechanisms (Fox, 2015). While social accountability mechanisms are important in democratic countries as a complement to elections, this concept is also relevant for the study of politics in non-democratic states. Grimes argues that societal accountability requires political competition, press freedom and government transparency. These dimensions are strongly associated with democracy and imply that societal accountability is unlikely to be successful in an authoritarian setting (Grimes, 2013). Newell also claims that societal accountability, in the way that Peruzzotti and Smulowitz use it, requires a state that ‘tolerates and accommodates such forms of protest and criticism; where a free media exists, willing and prepared to engage in critical exposé journalism; and an accessible and functioning legal system operates, able to back citizen claims against the state’ (Newell, 2006, p. 49). We agree that free media, a solid legal system and political competitiveness are important tools for social accountability, but we argue that in non-democratic settings there are other mechanisms with somewhat similar functions, at least locally. In China, social accountability is more likely to exist at the local level because local governments (in contrast to the central government) will take the blame for policy failures. This is done in order to avoid political instability and enhance regime legitimacy. Thus, central authorities will often tolerate social protests to some extent and use them as a monitoring device to improve local government performance and accountability (Tong & Lei, 2010, p. 504). While China lacks horizontal party competition that could produce sympathetic elites willing to support citizen right-claimers, support can instead be offered vertically from actors in the central government or horizontally when different state agencies engage in mutual competition (Chen, 2012, p. 190). Similarly, although China lacks freedom of the press, there is some space for national media units and the social media to expose local power abuses that local media outlets are typically not
allowed to report on. We do not claim that these mechanisms are nearly as effective as a
free media and political competition, but they open up for the possibility for at least
some social accountability to exist.

Traditional media, social media and civil society are important mechanisms for social
accountability. Political changes can have important consequences for the prospects for
using these mechanisms. The last years of Hu Jintao’s rule (2002–2012) and the early years
of Xi Jinping’s rule (from 2012) were a time when social media and the NGO sector played
an increasingly important role as bottom-up political pressure mechanisms. Micro-blogging
provided a counter hegemony to the official discourse and thus made it possible to
increase cadre accountability (Tong & Lei, 2013). An increasingly active NGO movement
has also entailed more organized forms of pressure on authorities (Teets, 2013). During
Xi’s regime, increased censorship over media and internet and new laws regulating NGOs
has changed the political opportunity structures for policy advocacy (Teets & Almén,
2018). The events described in the cases in this article took place between 2008–2014, and
were therefore not affected by the political changes under Xi’s rule.

Chinese politics has only recently been studied from the perspective of accountability
(Dowdle, 2006; Hsu, 2009; Ma, 2009; Tsai, 2007). Ma (2012) has offered an overview of
social accountability in China including both state-led and society-led versions. We
agree with Ma on the need for further research on social accountability in China, and
we argue that social accountability and social protest in China are strongly linked.
Social accountability should be seen as one possible outcome of social protest. This
connection is strengthened by the impact social protests have on the internal Party
cadre management system. Through this system, protests can directly affect the careers
of individual cadres. Although it is difficult to confirm which sanctions have been
applied in each individual case, we know from previous research that such sanctioning
mechanisms are diligently implemented. As Cai points out, local cadres must be
disciplined so that central leaders are able to uphold the legitimacy and authority of
the regime (Cai, 2015, p. 11). Thus, in order to understand social accountability in
China, we must start by looking at social protest. Using social accountability as an
analytical tool, we add to the understanding of social protest outcomes.

Outcomes of social protest

Social movement research has long been concerned with the consequences of social
protest (Amenta et al, 2010; Benford & Snow, 2000; Bosi, Giugni, & Uba, 2016; Ganz,
2000; Luders, 2010; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). A recent volume on
social movement outcomes argued strongly that future research on the consequences of
social movements should pay more attention to the targets of protest. It also suggested
that social movement outcomes should be thought of ‘in terms of responsiveness’ (Bosi
et al., 2016:15). Gamson’s early work pointed out the problem of defining movement
success. He separated outcomes into two clusters: Those focusing on the acceptance
of a challenging group by its antagonists, and those with a focus on whether the group
gained new advantages. By combining these two clusters he found four possible out-
comes of resolved challenges: full response, co-optation, preemption, and collapse
(Gamson, 1990:28–31). We think that the concept of social accountability, with its
specific focus on the target of protests, can contribute to this field of research.
Peruzzotti and Smulowitz (2006) do not clearly define a successful case of social accountability. In order to systematically study this issue, we adjust their model by defining the outcome variable of social accountability. Accountability is generally seen as a relationship between an agent and a principal. The agent is answerable towards the principal and can face sanctions. Hence, answerability and sanction are key dimensions of accountability (Schedler, 1999). We use Schedler’s definition of answerability, which states that ‘agents can be asked to inform about their decisions or explain their decisions’ (Schedler, 1999: 14). Sanction refers to whether agents suffer from some kind of punishment as a consequence for violating their duties. Since social accountability is also concerned with some kind of claim directed towards the government, we think that it is meaningful to also include legal claim attainment as a third dimension of social accountability. Legal claim attainment represents the extent to which policy outcomes correspond with the citizens’ legal claims. Here, the word ‘legal’ is used in a broad sense of the term. A particular law need not to be referred to during protests, but, in order to count as an instance of seeking accountability, the protesters must view the government as being responsible for handling the perceived social problem, and that failing to do so is a violation of its legal duties.

Before we turn to the operationalization of these concepts, we need to discuss how social accountability as an outcome of protests relates to earlier research on social movement outcomes. Returning to Gamson (1990), his use of acceptance and gaining new advantages is closely related to our use of answerability and legal claim attainment. However, the main concern in Gamson’s study, and in most social movement research, is not the consequences for the target of the movement but how the target’s response affects the outcome of the protest. Social accountability, in contrast, is also concerned with how a protest affects the agent itself. A protest that is met with a high degree of answerability from a local state agency tells us something important about that agency. This focus on the agent is most obvious in the third accountability dimension: sanction. Sanction is a core aspect of political accountability. But the sanctioning of public officials is not a specified part of Gamson’s framework. We agree with Bosi et al. (2016) that responsiveness is a useful concept when studying how a protest target affects outcomes. Responsiveness ‘refers to the aim of making governments accord with the preferences of the people’ (Mulgan, 2000, p. 566). However, the fact that government policy corresponds with protesters’ demands (legal claim attainment) is not really the same thing as a government agency giving justifications and explanations for its decisions (answerability). The framework for studying social accountability that we present here builds upon prior research in both the social movement field and the political accountability field. We argue that social accountability, focusing on answerability and sanction, adds important pieces of information about how protests can impact on government targets.

Collective action and social protest in China is a well-researched field (O’Brien & Li, 2006; O’Brien, 2008; Cai, 2010; Benney, 2013; Chen, 2012; Wu, 2013; Chen & Kang, 2016). Cai (2010) has done the most comprehensive study to explain why social protests succeed. Local governments tend to yield to protesters’ demands when there is a risk for intervention from higher-level authorities. Successful protest is therefore related to the forcefulness of citizens’ resistance and the costs involved for the government to yield to demands. This cost-benefit analysis of making concessions to citizens’ demands and the
option of meeting protests with repression is not unique. Peruzzotti and Smulowitz (2006, p. 350) find that successful social accountability mechanisms relate: ‘(1) to the mobilization and organization of uncoordinated public opinions, (2) to the interaction among different strategies and mechanisms of accountability, and (3) to the existence of institutions with the ability to enforce sanctions’. This fits with Cai’s (2010) findings that successful protest in China is related to internal party accountability mechanisms, and that a forceful social protest will often attract the intervention of higher-level authorities. Cai (2010, p. 8) defines successful collective resistance as when the goals of the participants are achieved, what we refer to as legal claim attainment. There is probably a strong link between a successful protest, which achieves the desired policy changes, and social accountability. A well-organized protest with strong media support could result in high levels of legal claim attainment, answerability and sanction. However, we can also imagine a situation where public officials are sanctioned because they failed to prevent the protest, or handled it badly, but without any policy changes taking place. In yet another scenario, a protest could result in policy adjustments (legal claim attainment), while the authorities at the same time refuse to recognize that the changes were caused by the protest (answerability). By adding the dimensions of answerability and sanction, we add nuance to the picture of different social protest outcomes in China.

**Operationalization of social accountability**

As mentioned, we divide social accountability into three dimensions: Answerability, legal claim attainment, and sanction. We specify protest outcomes as attaining these dimensions to *varying degrees* (high, partial or low) and in *different combinations*. Answerability is concerned with how much the government has answered to complaints, engaged in dialogues, and explained or justified its behavior. If complaints are met with complete silence or the authorities refuse to deal with the issue, it will be classified as low answerability. If the case is accepted in court, but the claim not recognized as legitimate, or if protesters receive a short but unsatisfactory explanation, it will be classified as partial answerability. If the government offers a full explanation and recognizes the protesters right to protest, it will be classified as high answerability. It is important to note that answerability does not necessarily mean that the government will concede to the protesters’ substantial demands. Legal claim attainment is concerned with how much substantial concessions, e.g., changes in government policy, that the protesters achieve in relation to their stated demands. Legal claim attainment is concerned with how much substantial concessions, e.g., changes in government policy, that the protesters achieve in relation to their stated demands. Sanction concerns the extent to which the target of accountability suffers negative sanctions, e.g., negative media attention or punishment from superior agencies. This includes officials receiving lower grades in public annual appraisals. It also includes the threat of sanctions, i.e., dissatisfaction or criticism that, if left unanswered, will result in negative sanctions. Since we know from prior research that negative media exposure has a direct effect on the CCP internal performance assessments, we will assume that the sanctioning mechanism is applied (Cai, 2015, p. 11). However, we will evaluate each media report based on the status of its publication and the contents of reporting before categorizing it as a low, partial or high sanction. If we find no evidence of sanctioning mechanisms being triggered, it is deemed as a low sanction. If some sanctioning mechanisms are activated, such as negative satisfaction ratings, it will be classified as a partial sanction. If
there is evidence of a strict punishment of a responsible public official, such as a demotion or official criticism, it will be categorized as high sanction.

We intend to answer the questions: In what circumstances are protests most likely to result in social accountability, and what forms does this accountability take? To study this issue, we have chosen four case-studies where citizens claim their rights and express demands to the local government in Hangzhou. In our analytical narrative, the starting points are actions where citizens claim their rights vis-à-vis the government ‘expressed mainly in a language of rights and legality’ (O’Donnel, 2006, p. 342). This is the beginning of a chain of events that is described in each case. We specify the outcomes of this interaction in terms of government accountability as follows: (A) answerability, (B) sanction, and (C) legal claim attainment.

**Formal and informal accountability mechanisms in China**

Chinese state officials are held accountable through the cadre responsibility system (Edin, 2003; Heberer & Trappel, 2013; Whiting, 2001). In the cadre responsibility system, local state officials are monitored and disciplined by their superiors to whom they are also accountable. Sanctions and rewards are given based on the fulfillment of policy targets such as economic growth, family planning and social stability. In this paper, the goal of social stability is especially important since we focus on the ability of social actors to trigger these sanctioning mechanisms. How local cadres handle social protest in their local community directly affects their career. Therefore, local politicians need to handle protests with care or face the risk of sanctions.

While the cadre responsibility system is the main accountability mechanism (within the party-state), there are other institutional arrangements that provide inputs affecting the fate of officials and state agencies. Since the late 1990s, Hangzhou’s government has developed methods to evaluate local government performance. Its comprehensive evaluation (zonghe kaoping) combines internal (bureaucratic) evaluation with external citizen satisfaction ratings to produce an annual appraisal of most government and Party departments at municipal and district levels. The evaluation results and a score are made public on the government webpage. Half of the score is based on a satisfaction survey of 15,000 participants covering different groups in society, including 9,000 randomly selected citizens. The score affects the yearly bonus of the staff and the leaders and is also connected to the cadre responsibility system. A department head that fails to receive the highest grade in the evaluation will not be eligible for promotion. A protest that gains enough media attention can affect the score enough for local cadres to take it very seriously.

Another channel for protesters is the legal system. China’s judicial system struggles with problems of corruption and politicization, but it does give citizens an opportunity to voice their concerns and to have their cases reviewed by a court. The right to sue the state according to the Administration Litigation Law has resulted in many cases where state authorities have had to change verdicts and compensate litigators (O’Brien & Li, 2004). Another effect is that court proceedings pressure the state to explain and justify its actions, and the implementation of policy decisions is delayed.

Citizens with grievances can also use the petitioning system (xinfang). This system is often used as a simple and inexpensive method in social protests. The law requires the
authorities to answer the petition, but there is usually little pressure to handle or solve the issue, although a lowering of the number of petitions is desirable from the standpoint of the authorities. Hence, few petitions are resolved. People’s Deputies to the local legislature have a formal authority to represent the interests of their constituency, and research has shown that more local people’s deputies are now taking their role as people’s representatives more seriously than before (Manion, 2015).

Finally, there is the role of media and social media. Media exposure can be a powerful tool for social accountability. Although media continues their reporting on social protest and social problems, propaganda departments remain in charge of what information will be reported and how it will be presented. Local media in Hangzhou are not particularly bold. Media reports on the protests in our case-studies were limited and they usually toed the official line. Despite these restrictions, before an instance of social protest becomes too sensitive, some official media reporting can be done, and especially when performed by neighboring provincial media outlets and the national news. The simple fact that social problems and protests are mentioned in official media, this entails that some government unit or public official is likely to suffer from negative attention and potentially face sanctions. In this sense, even within the narrow limits of censorship, official media also contribute to accountability mechanisms. Similarly, while social media are monitored and censored in China, they provide a channel for citizens to voice opinions, to organize and mobilize protests, and to spread information. Social media such as weibo (China’s version of twitter) and QQ (a web-based discussion forum) figured as important channels in all four protest cases. There are many examples of how public incidents reported on weibo have resulted in negative exposure of cadres, leading to different sanctions from the Party (Ma, 2012; Yang, 2009). In the last couple of years, weibo has been severely restricted, however, and it no longer plays the problem-exposing role it once did.

**Methods, case selection and sources**

Hangzhou municipality, Zhejiang province, is the site for our case-studies. Due to its quick socioeconomic development and progress in political reforms in recent decades, Hangzhou can be seen as a fairly benign case for the occurrence of social accountability as an outcome of citizen activism and protests. However, we are reluctant to see Hangzhou as being uniquely well-positioned to achieve social accountability, or to draw far-reaching conclusions on the likely situation in other parts of China based on our findings in Hangzhou. In this study, we do not aim to establish any statistical patterns that can be generalized to a larger universe of cities in China. Instead, our narrow objective is to explore the different versions, and possible patterns of social accountability that can be the outcome of social protests in an authoritarian political context. In this study, Hangzhou municipality constitutes that context, and the validity of our empirical findings may be limited to that universe. However, we argue that it is of great interest to detect variations of social accountability within that universe, and those findings should be of general interest to a wide range of scholars. Finally, we think that our analytical framework in studying these four cases can be effectively used in other parts of China, as well as in other authoritarian settings.

In order to find comparative cases of social protests in Hangzhou, we have limited our selection to cases that were initiated locally in four different urban districts,
excluding city-wide protests and rural areas. The protests took place over several years during the 2008–2014 period and the time spans generally overlap between the cases. However, there are some gaps between the earliest case (case 1) and the most recent one (case 4), and we cannot rule out that the difference in time can have had some effect on the events. For example, social media was far more developed in 2013 than in 2009. These four cases were selected from a larger number of protests in Hangzhou that we identified in the media and in conversations with local actors, such as Chinese academic colleagues and journalists. Our case selection was also motivated by our aim to attain some issue variation and to capture a broad representation of social protests in Hangzhou. Naturally, the four case-studies also vary to some extent in their social accountability outcomes, but we did not have this in mind originally, and we certainly did not select them on that basis.

Our data for the case studies consist of media reports, official documents, government and social media webpages, and a total of twenty interviews with government officials, protesters, NGOs, journalists, and researchers. Interviewees were contacted through snowball sampling in the sense that one interview often led to another, through personal contacts, acquaintance or just a general recommendation. As for official documents or reports, we collected them online and in printed form – either directly from the government or NGO offices – or as a complimentary copy from our interviewees. Generally speaking, it was quite difficult to gain access to internal government documents in printed form, but frequently we could get similar information verbally in interviews. Hence, the importance of our field notes and interviews. Since data collection on protest in China is restricted, we were unable to ensure that identical data, such as interviews with protesters, was collected in all four cases. In order to strengthen reliability of our findings, we tried to compensate as far as possible with other sources, such as media reports that covered the same story but from different viewpoints.

In the next sections we present four case-studies of social protest in Hangzhou. We introduce each case by a brief narrative, and we discuss the key actors and the channels used. This is followed by an analysis of the social accountability outcomes flowing from the social protests in each case.

**Case 1: home-owners protesting against factory pollution in gongshu district**

Our first case of social protest in Hangzhou, which took place in Gongshu district, represents a reasonably typical situation in today’s China: the contradiction between old and new styles of city planning which has given rise to citizen dissatisfaction about their living environment. Gongshu district covers both central and suburban parts of Hangzhou. Over the last decades its old chemical and manufacturing industries became surrounded by more commercial and residential areas. This was the joint outcome of urban growth and the choices of city planners. At the same time, citizen expectations for a healthy and pleasant residential situation have increased and especially in housing areas where home-owners buy their apartments at great expense. This was also the case in Gongshu where citizen protests emerged in 2008–09 and continued until 2011. The starting point were the environmental concerns expressed by a local home-owners’
association, and the conflict can be seen as a dilemma between 'old industries and new residential area' (lao chang, xin qu); a phrase commonly used by local cadres and other informants that we interviewed. In Gongshu, many factories operated according to old environmental standards, and the methods to mitigate pollution, noise levels and foul smells were not so stringent, and certainly did not meet the demands of the residents that recently had moved into the area. This problem was partly the result of a failure in city planning since housing developments had been completed without giving very much thought to the negative impact of nearby polluting industries.

Residents' protests against noise and air pollution in this area started in 2008, when most households had already moved into their newly-built apartments. While the protests were sporadic and unorganized in the beginning, the grievances were soon channeled through the home-owners' association and the local community branch office (yuanjia qiao shequ). This low-intensity conflict became heated in 2009 when citizen complaints and petitions caught media attention and were covered in a China Central TV talk show. By this time the district government and its environmental protection bureau (EPB) started to feel more pressure to respond to the situation in some way. Protest activities by local residents included a letter written to the Zhejiang provincial governor, telephone calls to government hotlines, and the creation of QQ discussion forums on the Internet. The local activists also staged protests in front of the district EPB office and disrupted its normal operations.

These open displays of citizen concern and street activity meant that pressure mounted on the district and city-level Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPBs) since they were receiving falling satisfaction ratings in the year-end evaluations. Thus, in 2009, the Gongshu district EPB decided to establish a 'resident–factory dialogue platform' (RFD) to handle complaints, conduct discussions, and if possible to find solutions. It seems that a key aim of this dialogue platform was to bring the conflicting parties together and reduce the tensions of the situation. Another reason was that local authorities wanted to remove the protests from the streets and the media lime-light which reflected badly on them.

The main participants of the RFD were representatives from the home-owners' association, the community branch office, the local EPB, and factory representatives. Initial meetings were very tense and disorganized due to a deep distrust between the different actors, and several encounters had to take place before any real dialogue could start. One EPB official recalled that at this stage the dialogue platform had the function of a 'punching-bag' or 'safety valve' for citizen discontent, and this was good enough as long as it put an end to the street protests, at least from the standpoint of district authorities. Gradually, the RFD meetings calmed down and turned into a series of 'negotiations' about noise levels and hours of factory operation, environmental standards, and the relocation of factories away from Gongshu.

In 2012, most of the polluting factories had moved away from Gongshu and the grounds for citizen complaints on environmental issues had been significantly reduced. It should be noted, however, that this industrial relocation was the original intention of Hangzhou city authorities, and it was mainly an issue of doing it sooner or later.

**Outcomes in terms of social accountability**

**Answerability (high):** The resident-factory dialogue platform, having some mediating or arbitration function, constitutes a form of answerability. Real negotiations took place
between the protesting citizens, factory management representatives, and the Gongshu EPB, although this dialogue platform did not have any formal decision-making power in the real sense of the word. **Sanctions (partial):** We know that the evaluation system works to some extent. High levels of citizen dissatisfaction in 2008–09 put significant pressures on district and city-level EPBs, and one official stated that ‘bad ratings are always very disturbing and negative for our agency’. **Legal claim attainment (high):** The factories moved away from Gongshu district, which was already decided in city plans. However, we could say that the residents’ request for recognition of their claims and concerns was met in the resident-factory dialogue platform.

**Case 2: home-owners demand government intervention to solve a land use conflict in Xiasha district**

In September 2012, a conflict erupted between residents and the real estate developer of the small community Jinshaxuefu in Xiasha district over the use of parking places. The district government showed little interest in handling the conflict, but when a local people’s deputy started to use her legislative authority to pursue the case it did have some effect.

The legal conflict in this case concerned the user rights of the parking spaces. The conflict is related to two different interpretations of what kind of residential area this is. The residents got their contract in 2008 and quickly noticed this problem. They have since then tried to get it clarified by the authorities. The authorities replied that they would solve the problem, but in practice sent the same inspectors to handle it each time. Residents claim that these officials only listen to the land developer’s side of the story. The conflict became worse in 2012 when the real estate developer decided to close the garage entrance and the main gate. This resulted in residents being forced to park on the road, and this created a traffic jam. The developer also used 60 guards, with the support of the street office. Eventually, the main gate was opened, but the garage remained closed so that residents were forced to park their cars outside the community gates. The residents also claimed that the land agent used his staff to harass them. Residents called the police but were told that nothing could be done unless someone gets hurt. The developer was eager to settle the conflict and in 2013 he sued the resident committee. The court ruled that the developer could not sell the parking places, but it did not rule in favor of the residents either. The issue was thus returned to a local government that showed little interest in making a decision.  

This was a low-level conflict involving a limited number of residents, issues related to material interests in addition to legal rights, and low disturbance levels. Hence, authorities had a lower incentive to solve the conflict. This created a lot of frustration among the residents, who used the mayor’s hotline, petitioned to Hangzhou’s mayor and the provincial government but to no avail. One of the residents knew that Mrs. Zhen was their elected people’s deputy and contacted her. Together with two other people’s deputies, she submitted a ‘suggestion’ (jianyi) to the Xiasha district government. The government was not pleased but Mrs. Zhen persisted. Seven months later, the government asked her to sign that the suggestion had been handled in a satisfactory way. She investigated the matter with the residents and concluded that nothing had been done so she refused to agree to this demand. Twice more she was asked to sign, and her refusal pressured the government which wanted to avoid being graded ‘very
unsatisfactory’ (*feichang bu manyi*). Finally, the government had a meeting with the residents and Mrs. Zhen agreed to sign the motion as ‘satisfied’. In 2013 Mrs. Zhen claimed that the conflict was solved. However, the residents claimed that it remained unsettled since no final decision was made. They wanted the status clarified in law and recognition of their rights.

**Outcome in terms of social accountability**

**Answerability (partial):** With pressure from the people’s deputy, the residents had a chance to meet with government representatives. However, the government did not agree that it was responsible for handling this dispute. **Sanction (partial):** Mrs. Zhen refused to sign the motion. This put pressure on the government since a motion which is ‘not satisfied’ could lead to a negative annual evaluation. There was no negative media reporting leading to any shaming of the government. **Legal claim attainment (partial):** The case and citizens’ complaints are still unresolved. While the court did not rule in favor of the real estate developer, neither did it support the residents.

**Case 3: residents protest against housing eviction in xiacheng district**

In 2009, residents in Baijingfangxiang community in Xiacheng district were upset when authorities put up posters stating that the area would be demolished. Residents claimed that the demolition was illegal and demanded an administrative review of the decision. The authorities and residents took turns putting up wall posters debating the issue and this resulted in a confrontation between the residents, the urban management bureau (*chengguanju*) and the police in May 2010. In confrontation with the police, an elderly woman suffered a heart attack and was taken to hospital. Residents organized a protest march demanding compensation for the injured woman, punishment for the responsible police officers, and a public apology. The district head later apologized for the police behavior and promised to investigate the case (*Rui & Chen, 2010*). One resident, historian and author Fu Guoyong, was particularly vocal in his own blog and *weibo* page where he protested the eviction very strongly. According to him no police officer was ever punished but two residents were arrested and held in administrative detention. We visited the district in 2013 and 2014, talked to some residents, including Mr. Fu, and studied the posters put up by both the residents and the authorities. Residents’ posters cited central policies and laws in the tradition of rightful resistance. Between 2013 and 2014 more sections of the community were demolished and in 2014 only one block of residential buildings remained. The residents managed to postpone part of the demolition by repeatedly appealing the decision to a local court. In the end, however, they could not stop the demolition.

Housing eviction is a sensitive issue in China and authorities are often concerned that a concession would create a precedent for other residents to follow. In addition, this conflict is complex since it involves several instances of right violations by the authorities. Several government agencies are involved, making it difficult to identify one specific agent to hold accountable. Initially, the residents reacted against the fact that they had not been consulted or informed about the demolition. Subsequently, residents pointed out many law violations such as illegal detention, police brutality, and procedural irregularities in relation to court
hearings. The legal claim was not to stop the demolition, but that authorities should respect their legal rights and talk with them. It also concerned the monetary compensation offered for housing eviction, which the residents deemed too low. Residents used different means to organize and mobilize resistance. Petitions were made both locally and to Beijing. Besides making use of the legal system, they were actively using the social media. However, in contrast to case 1 and 2, there was no home-owners association in Baijingfangxiang. This may have affected their possibility to organize and pursue the case collectively. In an interview in 2013, Mr. Fu explained that they tried to file one lawsuit for 200 households but that the authorities used legal technicalities to stop them. Instead, residents had to pursue their cases individually without a lawyer since nobody would take such a sensitive case. Fu concluded that the residents had no power whatsoever. However, the operations of the legal system were used to delay the demolition for five years. While officials can manipulate the system they cannot completely ignore the law. Instead, they have used dirty tricks such as fabricated documents, withholding information from residents, and legal technicalities. Still, the law constitutes a baseline that they have to relate to. In that sense, the judicial system has had a constraining effect.

Outcomes in terms of social accountability

Answerability (partial): As a concession to the angry residents and their protest march, the district head apologized for bad police behavior. An official apology like this is quite rare in China. However, one of the residents’ demands is to sit down and talk with the authorities. They were denied this possibility. Instead the cases were dealt with individually in court. Sanctions (low): Despite a promise by the district head, no public official has been officially punished. Since media reporting was limited, there were few reputational costs involved. Legal claim attainment (low): The residents managed to postpone the housing evictions and such delays were made possible through court proceedings. However, none of the residents’ demands were actually acknowledged.

Case 4: residents protest against garbage incineration plant in binjiang district

Binjiang is a suburban area which consisted of farmland until fifteen years ago. The residents in Binjiang have for a long time worried about the effects of a local waste incineration plant, Hangzhou Green Energy Waste Incineration (Hangzhou lüneng lajifenshouchang). They contacted the local Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) about foul smells from the plant and also expressed concerns about a large number of cancer cases detected in the nearby area. The construction of the garbage plant started in 2002 and normal operations started in 2004. Thus, the factory has been in place for ten years, but negative effects on environment and people’s health have only been evident in recent years. In the sub-district closest to the waste station, comprising 720 residents, they had experienced over 30 cancer cases and about ten new cases were detected each year. According to investigative journalists who had visited the area, higher incidence rates of cancer could be linked with the fact that villagers grow vegetables on garden plots in the nearby area.
With their rising discontent, Binjiang villagers in 2012 filed suggestions for inspections to the local government but did not receive any answers. They also demanded that the existing plant should be moved and that plans should be stopped for a second development stage of the plant. They then submitted a petition with a formal request for disclosure of data regarding the level of toxic particles in ground waters, the nearby river and the land. The local villagers also organized themselves, held meetings, and created an online forum for sharing ideas on this issue. In February 2013, a group of eight Binjiang people’s deputies, led by entrepreneur Zhang Fangxiang, submitted a formal suggestion to the Hangzhou Municipal People’s Congress asking for a relocation of the incineration plant. People’s congress suggestions require a swift response from the government and, although we have been unable to track down the reply from the government, we can assume that a formal reply was given. The activists also contacted local environmental NGOs asking for advice on how to press their demands vis-à-vis the government, and the NGO helped Binjiang residents to get in touch with environmental NGOs from other provinces. Local activists then tried to get the attention from the mass media, but in 2013 local media became reluctant to cover this story since it was seen as too politically sensitive. Meanwhile, the Binjiang activists were placed under strict surveillance by the security police, and warnings were given to journalists and NGOs to not become involved in this case.

Nevertheless, local activists managed to contact a Beijing-based NGO, Nature University, which helped them to submit a request for disclosure about factory operations and data on the emission of toxic particles. In May 2013, Nature University filed a request to the Hangzhou EPB, but it was rejected with the argument that such information contained sensitive technical details and business secrets. Next, the Nature University NGO engaged a Hangzhou-based lawyer, Mr. He Rongming, with experience of similar cases. They sued the Hangzhou EPB for not disclosing the data in line with the National Regulations on Information Disclosure. In June 2014, the court ruled in favor of the government. Despite this ruling, the government postponed plans to expand factory operations to a second stage.

By contacting the Beijing-based NGO, the stakes of the protest changed from a local issue to a question of national law and policy. As noted by Johnson (2013), popular resistance against incinerators in China often has the character of not-in-my-back-yard protests, and the preferred government tactic is to relocate the plant to a more sparsely populated area. The government might be able to satisfy some of the local residents in this way and thus avoid making more substantive concessions. However, the request for information disclosure has become a legal channel for advocacy actors, such as NGOs, to push for social and political change (Wang, 2016). In this case, the legal challenge failed but the government also failed in avoiding national media attention. Since we know that negative media attention counts as a negative factor in the cadre responsibility system, we consider this as a form of sanction.

**Outcomes in terms of social accountability**

**Answerability (partial):** The Hangzhou government was completely reluctant to enter into any dialogue with residents protesting against the Binjiang plant. This image is accentuated by the police tactics and harassment against activists, journalists and NGOs
involved in the case. However, the EPB probed citizen claims indirectly via talks with local NGOs standing in an ‘intermediary position’ to this conflict. Since the case was accepted in local courts, we interpret it as a sort of formal but weak version of answerability. **Sanction (partial):** The city government made clear efforts to limit media attention on this sensitive issue but national media published several critical reports, and this resulted in some negative media exposure for the EPB. **Legal claim attainment (low):** The formal request for information disclosure was lost in court and the factory remains in operation. Although the issue regarding the expansion of the factory remains unsettled, it can hardly be seen as a claim attainment.

**Discussion**

We started with the question: *In what circumstances are protests most likely to result in social accountability, and what form does this accountability take?* Looking at the four cases, we find that protests are most likely to result in social accountability when they are well-organized, when they manage to invoke external actors, and when their demands are in line with government policies.

In **Gongshu**, a contributing factor to the relatively high social accountability outcome was that protests were well-organized through the home-owners’ organization. Falling satisfaction ratings and the possibility of sanctions were threatening for the local EPB, and this pressured them to act. Finally, since factory relocation were in line with official policy, the concession cost for the government was low.

In **Xiasha**, residents also worked through the home-owners’ organization. In addition, they managed to engage an external actor – a people’s deputy – for their cause. However, the protest was small, non-violent and did not attract much media attention. This meant that disruption costs were low, and the stakes were not high enough to force the government to intervene on behalf of the residents. Demands were neither in conflict with nor in line with government policy.

Protesters in **Xiacheng** rented their apartments and did not have the mobilizing power of a home-owners’ organization. In the court proceedings the government managed to split the protesters, thus avoiding having to handle their cases collectively. Protests were intense and protesters used many different strategies. However, house eviction is a sensitive issue, and concession costs would be potentially high for the government.

Protests in **Binjiang** were relatively well-organized and large-scale. The local residents managed to elicit help from external actors, including a Beijing-based NGO, as well as national media and a lawyer who was willing to take on their case. However, household waste incineration is a prioritized policy for the government and a concession in this area would be very costly for the Hangzhou authorities.

Finally, formal accountability mechanisms were set in motion in all four cases, including the judicial system, people’s deputies, and the petition system. **Table 1** provides a summary of social accountability outcomes in the four cases.
Answerability, legal rights attainment, and sanctions

As we operationalized social accountability in three dimensions: answerability, sanction and legal claim attainment, we shall now discuss the results on each dimension. Legal claim attainment follows the pattern found in previous research on social protest (Cai, 2010; Luders, 2010). We agree with Cai that social protests in China are less likely to succeed when citizen demands run at cross-purposes with the policies of the state. However, when concession costs are low and disruption costs are high, the government may choose to accommodate protesters’ demands. Case 1 illustrates such outcomes. Here, concession costs are low, since citizen demands in such a case accord with government policy. Meanwhile, disruption costs are high. Hence, these protests can be considered successful in terms of legal rights attainment. Legal rights attainment in case 3 (housing evictions) was low since protests were small-scale and disruption costs were low. By contrast, the protests against the incineration plant (case 4) were large-scale and disruptive. The concession costs were high, and the local government refused to yield to the protesters’ demands. Indeed, the local government put a lot of effort into silencing this protest.

When we look at answerability, another pattern emerges. Answerability is relatively high in case 1. In cases 3 and 4 answerability is low, except for the initial apology made by the district head in case 3. However, both cases ended in court proceedings which required the authorities to formally answer the protesters’ claims. Due to the slow operation of the legal system, these protests also managed to postpone the implementation of public policy. Clearly, answerability is a dimension of social accountability that is easier to achieve (or for the government to offer). It can be used as a tool to reduce pressures for legal rights attainment and sanctions. However, answerability cannot be taken for granted; rather, it is an outcome of the pressures from the protesters.

The third dimension of social accountability is sanction, but it is difficult to examine due to the opaque nature of Chinese politics. Sanctioning mechanisms for government officials are strong (Cai, 2015) and closely linked to the Party’s cadre responsibility system. But unless officials are publicly disciplined, this information is difficult to obtain. Demands for sanctions were only a minor part of protesters’ claims. The limited information we found on sanctions or threats of sanctions are related to low satisfaction ratings. Interviewees in cases 1 and 2 mentioned how low public satisfaction ratings and an intervention of a people’s deputy pressured the authorities to behave pro-actively. We know from previous research that social protests will affect cadres’ careers negatively. However, these protests did not reach the level of street violence and media attention that warrants severe sanctioning.

One interesting finding concerns the role of courts and other mediating institutions. As we described above, three of the cases led to law-suits (cases 2–4). In addition, we

Table 1. Social accountability outcomes in the four cases.

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<th>Case</th>
<th>Social accountability outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answerability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gongshu – Pollution</td>
<td>High.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xiasha – Parking rights</td>
<td>Partial</td>
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<td>Xiacheng – Eviction</td>
<td>Partial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Binjiang – Waste Incineration</td>
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argue that in the case of the Gongshu protests the use of a resident-factory dialogue platform (RDF) was equivalent to the use of an arbitration committee, or filing the case to a court. In terms of social accountability, the legal system has several effects. First, by formalizing the case in a court, the protesters were able to ensure that the degree of answerability increased. This made it more difficult for the local government to ignore the protesters’ pleas or claims. Procedures of this kind necessarily generate an official answer. As a result, the implementation of state policy is postponed. In all cases where court proceedings took place, there was a limitation or slow-down of government policy. However, there was also a delay in concessions from the government vis-à-vis citizen demands.

Finally, we will argue that China’s versions of social accountability differ from social accountability in democratic settings. While answerability and legal rights attainment are at least partially attainable, the ability of citizens to directly sanction responsible local officials is low. Any sanctioning of officials must be processed through the cadre evaluation system. This is a part of China’s governance model of consultative authoritarianism (He and Thøgersen, 2010; Teets, 2013). Thus, conflict resolution between the local state and citizen groups is often based on a paternalistic dialogue where political authorities may officially admit to problems and show responsiveness, unless the citizen demands in question challenge vital economic interests in public policy. However, real decision-making power (sanctioning) remains in the hands of the Party. The element of social accountability that we call ‘sanction’ is thus derived from indirect mechanisms of citizen evaluations, satisfaction rates, media shaming, and disturbances such as social protests, which cast a negative image on the local government. However, these sanctioning opportunities are weak, and subject to constraints imposed by the local Party state. In conclusion, we propose to call this governance pattern party-managed social accountability.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the field, by offering empirical findings and theory development both in the fields of social accountability and social protest. First, we contribute to social accountability research. By adding the case of China, we show that the concept of social accountability is relevant also in one of the most authoritarian states in the world, and we demonstrate that the mechanisms leading to social accountability differ from those operating in other contexts. Specifically, we argue that the Communist Party has a key role in managing sanctioning mechanisms through its cadre management system. However, social protests and other mechanisms that put pressure on the local government are important parts of this dynamic. We propose to label the Chinese version of social accountability party-managed social accountability.

Second, by including the concept of social accountability, we add to the field of social movement studies. Accountability, both as a concept and as an empirical phenomenon, relates specifically to the target of protest. Studies on protest outcomes generally focus on whether protesters achieve their aim, such as some kind of policy change, what we here refer to as legal claim attainment. We add the dimensions of answerability and sanction, and recognize the more nuanced outcomes seen in many protests. Protests often involve both repression and concessions from the government, and thereby involve an element of social accountability. Each case differs in how this is expressed.
in terms of answerability, sanction and legal claim attainment. We argue that it is possible to study social accountability in cases of social protest that are traditionally seen as unsuccessful, and this is an important finding. If authorities engage in a dialogue and justify their behavior, this will show a high degree of answerability also in the cases where legal claim attainment is low.

Third, we contribute empirically to the study of social protest in China with four case studies of social protest. These show that legal claim attainment is more likely when protest demands are in line with official policies, confirming prior research regarding low concession costs. Answerability could be achieved also in cases where legal claim attainment was low. Therefore, the government might offer a degree of answerability, as a concession in order to reduce tensions, when compromises in terms of legal claim attainment are too costly. Our study also shows how the legal system can be used as a constraint on the government, because of how its slow operations can delay policy implementation. In China, answerability and legal claim attainment are the most obvious social accountability outcomes. Protests and low satisfaction ratings constitute social pressures that can result in sanctions as a part of the cadre management system.

Initially, we stated that Hangzhou has some benign pre-conditions for social accountability, such as its regular evaluations of government performance, many local NGOs, a prosperous socio-economic situation, and citizens willing to share their concerns in social media. Despite these circumstances, we do not claim that social protests in Hangzhou are more likely to have better outcomes in terms of social accountability than other parts of China. Nor can we draw any conclusions about the situation in other Chinese municipalities. On the other hand, that was not our objective, since our aim was to analyze different versions of social accountability resulting from social protests in an authoritarian political context. In that specific sense, our study can definitively be relevant for other parts of China. Moreover, our proposed strategy of studying social accountability as a multi-dimensional outcome of social protest could also be successfully applied to the analysis of other authoritarian systems where political participation is limited to varieties of social protest.

Notes
1. Sometimes the concept societal accountability is used instead of social accountability. We mainly use the term social accountability.
2. For previous studies of accountability in nondemocratic settings, see (Jayasura & Rodan, 2007; Rodan, 2009).
3. Interview with the head of Hangzhou city evaluation office, June 2009 and November 2013.
4. Hangzhou’s performance evaluation system has been described further in Almén (2018).
5. Interviews in Hangzhou (November 2013 and March 2014) with Hangzhou and Gongshou EPB officials.
6. Commodity housing residents in China have formed home-owners’ associations to protect their interests vis-à-vis real-estate management and the local community. See Tomba (2005).
7. Interviews in Hangzhou (November 2013 and March 2014) with Gongshou EPB officials and Dabeiqiao local neighborhood committee.
8. Interviews (March 2014) with Gongshou EPB officials, Dabeiqiao neighborhood committee, Dabeiqiao local homeowner association, and a representative from the Dabeiqiao Miles Industrial Corporation.
9. According to city planning, the relocation of polluting factories to nearby rural counties was already decided according to a five-year schedule, but it was a time-consuming process. Interview (March 2014) with Gongshu EPB and Dabeiqiao Miles Industrial Corporation.


11. Interview with Mrs Zhen October 2013.

12. See: http://www.weibo.com/p/1003061224623833/home?from=page_100306&mod=TAB&is_all=1#place.

13. Interview (March 2013 and Nov 2014) with residents.

14. Telephone interview (October 2013) with lawyer He Rongmin.

15. Interviews in Hangzhou (June 2013 and November 2013) with a local environmental NGO.


17. Interview in Hangzhou (June 2013) with local newspaper journalist.

18. Interview in Hangzhou (November 2013) with local environmental NGO.

19. Interviews in Beijing (Nov. 2014) and Hangzhou (June 2013, March 2015) with environmental NGOs.

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