

Introduction

People do revolt; that is a fact. And that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it.

—Michel Foucault, “Useless to revolt?”

Occupy!

On September 28, 2014, a student protest against the restrictive suffrage for the Hong Kong chief executive election, which opposition groups criticized as depriving Hong Kong people of their democratic rights to elect their own leader, quickly took on a wider and more serious significance. After the police arrested student leaders and activists who attempted to seize hold of Civic Square, thousands of people swarmed onto the streets downtown, chanting “Release the students” and “We want true democracy.” The protestors resisted the police’s pepper spray with umbrellas, in the process creating a global media spectacle. Failing to disperse the recalcitrant crowd, the police fired teargas bombs at protestors. Incensed at the police response, protesters blocked the traffic arteries of the business districts of Hong Kong and Kowloon Islands. The occupied streets were transformed into a space of gathering resistance against state power and its apparatuses. This militant action created both partial anarchy and multiple points of resistance around the occupied zones. Some 200,000 participants turned out at the peak of the protest movement, and the confrontation lasted for an unexpectedly long period (79 days). The movement’s explosive intensity and magnitude surprised many, generating arguably the Chinese government’s most serious political crisis since the 1989 Tiananmen occupation.

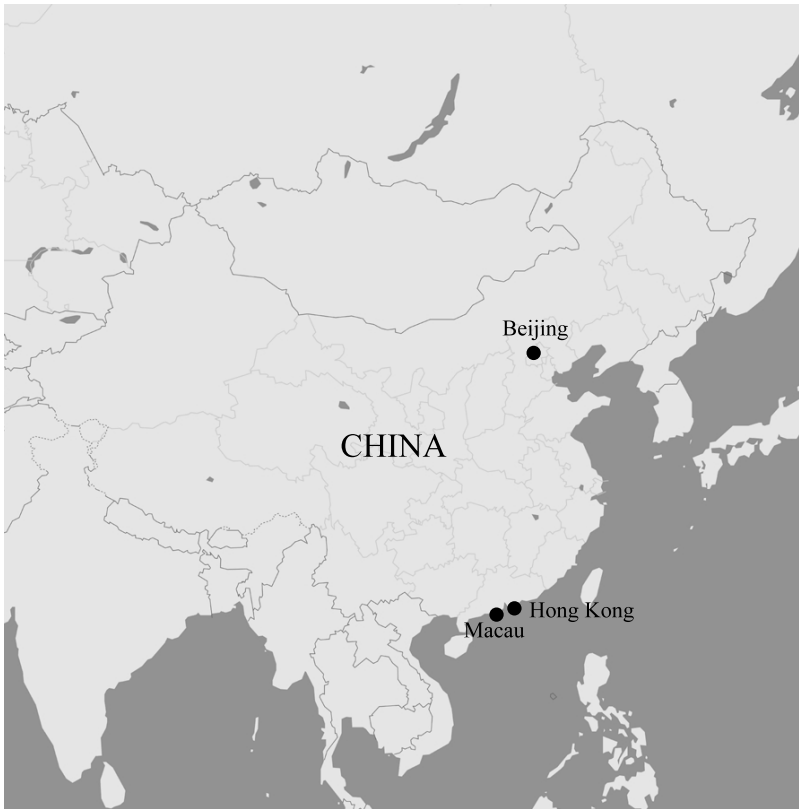


Figure I.1. Map of China. The map was created by the author via the software Mapbox.V4.3.0, www.mapbox.com.

In a context where political action is becoming more risky and tightly controlled, the physical occupation of public spaces, which has been characterized as an “easily replicable tactic” (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 44), has come to be seen as a defiant political act. In light of the political sequence that followed, physically occupying Hong Kong public spaces served to both undermine the political authority of the government, and to disrupt routine business and bureaucratic activity. The act of occupation, different in a myriad of ways from conventional protest tactics, demonstrated the resolve of protestors to force the state to respond to their demands. The unfolding of the “occupy” protest provides an example of how popular politics can

be expressed in a variety of unpredictable ways. If the ultimate aim of the occupation was to produce a response, the bodily, discursive, and creative dimensions of the political practices enacted during the process were successful.

It can be argued that this spectacular event opened up a new space for popular political activity. Yet what exactly are the deeper political and theoretical implications of these practices, the relations of power in which they are enacted, and the creative capacities and energies that were manifested? What, broadly speaking, was the meaning of occupation? I want to suggest that what happened in Hong Kong needs to be considered and understood beyond its local and spatial connotations, and should to be situated within the context of regimes of popular political activity broadly characteristic of China (a term that I will use to designate the political entities of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau). Contentious episodes of this kind are not uncommon in China. Today, with its rise to the status of a global economic power, China has been facing continuous political unrest since the crackdown on the Tiananmen protest movement in 1989. Demonstrations, rallies, strikes, and disturbances occur across the country on a daily basis, most of which are concerned with issues of local governance. The Hong Kong disturbance and the popular political activity in Macau are part of this dynamic. Despite their obvious differences in constituencies and demands, these actions imply a strong disaffection with various forms of political governance.

The recent protest movements and activities in China offer an opportunity for rethinking contemporary popular politics in that region. This wave of activism has drawn attention to what Judith Butler refers to as the performativity of political practices (Butler 2015), whereby people express their dissent by and through performances of collective discontent; and in consequence have raised a number of important questions about the possibility of popular democracy and sociopolitical change in China. Apart from occupation, what are the main forms of popular political activity? How are they performed? What are their conditions of constraint and possibility? How and to what extent do their practices challenge or reconfigure existing structures of power? More specifically, how do resource-poor people articulate what Chatterjee refers to as the “politics of the governed” (Chatterjee 2004)? These questions constitute the primary interests of this book, articulated in the form of an analysis of expressive forms of activism

through the analytical prism of “performative politics,” with the aim of developing an understanding of popular politics in the post-1989 era. It engages in a dialogue with Postcolonial Studies, the emerging field of Occupy movement studies, and China protest movement studies.

Postcolonial

The discipline of Postcolonial Studies is facing a peculiar impasse of a twofold nature. This has to do, first, with the field’s continued focus on “old” colonialism, leaving new forms of domination—for instance, as they operate under the guise of “globalization”—largely unquestioned and unexamined. What is missing from Postcolonial Studies is an appreciation of the historical continuity between past and present, in particular in terms of how the present conjuncture has been shaped by state-sponsored neoliberalism. If we want to adequately understand the political modernity of postcolonialism and the way it legitimizes power, it is necessary to pay attention to the actions of the people in negotiating political and discursive regimes. What are the forms of fundamental contradictions today? Why do people take to the streets to make contentious claims? What forms of dispossession do they resist? These questions are barely examined by postcolonial theorists. The absence of the problematization of the present has led to the failure to engage critically with the neocolonial structure of power and its antithesis. I share Dirlik’s (2007, 99) view that the postcolonial is important because of the relevance of colonialism to understanding the present. This book seeks to address this failure by shifting the analytical focus to the postcolonial present, and in situating its politics in the wider context of the demise of state socialism and the rise of neoliberalism.

The second problem lies in the field’s inability to analyze the concrete political practices that are directed against neoliberalism. Partly due to postcolonial theory’s emergence from the intellectual vacuum left empty by the decline of radical politics (Hallward 2001, xiv), the field has been characterized by a neglect of popular practices as an analytic category: while there has been a widespread emphasis on advancing the theoretical understanding of cultural difference, this has been at the expense of explaining “the real politics of the people” (Sethi 2011, 27). As Hallward (2001, xv) points out, there has been a privileging of “cultural, linguistic and rhetorical issues over social, historical and economic concerns” in Postcolonial Studies. As

a result, the people as a political category have never been taken as a unit of analysis, and the subaltern masses remain a voiceless object within postcolonial discourses. Although culture is occasionally viewed as site of anti-imperialist resistance (Ahmad 1992), questions of how such resistance is made possible, by whom and under what circumstances, remain largely unexplored. Ahmad's (1992) treatment of Third World discourse, for instance, fails to problematize the role of the state. Even though some scholars are concerned with oppressed groups (Dirlik 1997) and highlight the enunciations of the subaltern (Spivak 1988), there has been no concern as to how perpetuations of hegemonic constructions can be contested.

To follow from previous points, it can be argued that postcolonialism has also become "a statement of identity alone" (Chun 2012, 679), while the role of the state is mostly neglected. Under what circumstances, and in what ways, do voiceless subalterns act out and address the state? What are the possibilities for popular political activity and how do political actors push the boundaries of state tolerance? How do they come up with different strategies in order to exercise their rights and turn themselves into political subjects? Although some studies have paid attention to political practices, their analyses are largely focused on national-liberation movements, which are mainly expressed through the building of a new state (San Juan 1999), leaving other forms of activism unexamined. Although Subaltern Studies has provided insights into the notion of popular politics, the field has almost exclusively focused on the context of India and privileged traditional forms of practices. This book seeks to reconnect the postcolonial to politics by investigating the ways that the different kinds of struggle that "postcolonial" stands for (Young 2001) contribute to the development of popular politics in different postcolonial settings.

Occupy

If Postcolonial Studies neglects popular politics, the emerging field of Occupy Studies has left China largely unexamined. The field is filled with valuable empirical descriptions of the new tendencies manifested in recent protest movements across Europe, America, and North Africa, which are marked by the rejection of formal leadership structures and organizations.¹ With its strong interest in the collective capacity of

popular power in forging new democratic cultures, the field presents a range of creative practices and considers their implications for radical democracy. It should be noted, however, that most cases deal with entities that have multi-party structures and enjoy some freedom to organize and forge strategic alliances, and political practices tend to be read as autonomous from and opposed to the state, which is very different from what happens in the Chinese context. If there is any reference to China (for example, Mason 2013), it tends to be uniformly portrayed as an economic powerhouse that drives the global economy and nothing more than an outright repressive regime where any dissent is crushed, without any substantive analysis of its political forms. Moreover, the field's analytic efficacy is weakened by an uncritical enthusiasm for the potential of the movements to oppose the state, and of universalist presumptions about what popular politics looks like and could be.

Manuel Castells (2012), for example, makes the point that occupations—charged with the symbolic power of invading sites of official power—usually occur as an alternative expression of the will of citizens when “avenues of representation” are closed. However, this leaves unanswered the question of how local specificities of popular protest fit into the supposedly “global” approach of network society. According to Castells, the agency of social change is driven by the ways people appropriate global communication networks and create new spaces of autonomy. However, this juxtaposition of state power and network counter-power obscures the more complex interaction between regime trajectories and protestors. Although he briefly mentions Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement to illustrate the notion of networked activism, an analysis of its performative power is absent from his study.

Three issues are worth noting. First, although scholarship has presented an informative account of the multifarious practices of political activism, there has been a lack of adequate elaboration of the body and its performative force in concrete contexts. If public assembly and occupation is a highly embodied event drawing on an array of physical practices and performances, questions surrounding what the protesting body can do and its capacity to minimize precariousness remain unanswered. What is the political function of the body in creating and sustaining political action? How does the body enable protestors to reconfigure the notion of publicness and visibility? In a regime that maintains its rule by tightly controlling the political use

of bodies, it is theoretically and politically important to examine how the body shapes popular politics. Most existing studies have focused on urban contexts, without paying attention to the various ways migrant workers and landless villagers formulate distinctively different strategies of occupation in the face of a repressive and paternalistic state, which must be understood on their own terms.

In the past few years, some scholars have started to pay more attention to the performative dimension of embodied protest, and seek to explore the political significance of protesting bodies. In a pioneer study that addresses this issue, Abby Peterson (2002) argues that massive bodily presence constitutes the tangible sources of power during protests. Barbara Sutton's (2010) research on Argentinian gendered resistance shows that protest action demands intense bodily commitment and sacrifice. Judith Butler, whose recent work focuses on embodied resistance to the condition of precarity, argues that the persistence of the body may pose a challenge to the state, and addresses the hegemonic struggle over both the body and its "appearance" in public spaces (Butler 2011, 2015). These studies can offer insights into the embodied aspect of Occupy movements.

The explanatory power of the field of Occupy Studies is also weakened by a one-dimension characterization of political practices. The field's celebration of decentralized, "leaderless" movements, horizontal structures, and the refusal to engage with official politics runs the risk of romanticizing these tendencies and detaching them from actual contexts and constraints. Some studies have addressed the influence of anarchism and the rejection of representation as the core principle around which these movements are organized (Bray 2014). Yet every protest movement consists of different components and internal tensions, and how to accommodate them is always a political question. What are the conflicts that emerge from processes of occupation? How do occupiers negotiate differences? The field has generally avoided the central question of political representation and failed to explain why they succeed (or fail) to sustain the momentum. To take one example: Simon Tormey's (2015) study, with its enthusiastic celebration of "a politics without representatives," is unable to explain why some occupational protests cannot be sustained.

Another concern is more contextual: although public assembly and occupation have become global protest tactics that can be easily adopted to diverse contexts, the dynamic in China thus far seems

to have followed its own logic. By way of example, against the presumption that occupation is inherently antagonistic to the state, its manifestations in China have their own codes and logics that are locally grounded in its political tradition in which the state's political mediation remains crucial. And it has a distinctively different trajectory in which popular politics operates mainly within the boundaries of the established political system. In mainland China's limited political opportunity structure, where any organized mass protest is prohibited and frequently repressed, it is extremely difficult to forge broad-based coalitions and sustain political pressure. As a result, mass gathering tends to be transient and much less hostile to the state. The language Chinese people use and the social "experiments" they conduct are not so much expressions of "anti-representational" and "anti-party" politics; rather, most practices aim at engagement with the state in the hope of producing a positive response.

Protest in China

The third research area which this book deals with is the field of Chinese Protest Studies. Although the field has documented various kinds of collective political activities, the notion of action tends to be reified and objectified as a product of social or political structures, without acknowledging the autonomy and contingency of practices. Sociological theories and normative political perspectives have dominated this field, which is characterized by a tendency to reduce culturally infected practices to instrumental, self-interested, rationally motivated purposes and structural patterns, or side effects of the shift in institutional arrangements. Despite some treatments of cultural themes such as political beliefs (Chen 2008), rhetorical strategies (Lee 2007b), and political traditions (Wasserstrom and Perry 1994), the cultural dimensions remain obscured by an overly instrumentalist tendency. Too much emphasis is placed on causal explanations of protest outcomes and efficacies (Cai 2010), without appreciating the cultural construction and influence of protest. The lack of an appropriate appreciation of culture has led to an overly structuralist, and consistently one-sided, account of popular politics.

Studies drawing on social movement concepts such as political opportunity, framing, and mobilizing structures (for example, O'Brien 2008) have suffered from similar limitations: by focusing exclusively on

practices determined by preexisting structures, organizational patterns, and economic resources, they lose sight of a wide range of cultural activities, processes, and spaces that enable resource-poor people to create possibilities of agency. Many studies (Chen 2012; Perry and Goldman 2007) fail to pay attention to the creative forms of political expression that fall outside mainstream analytical frameworks. There is also insufficient consideration of people's creative capacities, in particular in terms of how existing norms, traditional cultures, and moral economies are reinvented. Goldman's (2005) study, which documents how the struggle for rights in mainland China has broadened out to include the disenfranchised masses of peasants and workers, is an example of this tendency. Its preoccupation with "rights consciousness," which is presumed to precede action (as Goldman claims, "this rights consciousness gradually *spread* to the population in general," p. 2; my emphasis), has led to an inability to analyze the diversity and performativity of rights practices through which people *become* rights-bearing subjects in ways that might deviate from state norms and articulate different politics.

This book addresses "the agency of the masses as creative and transformative force" (San Juan 1999, 228), which is not predetermined or presupposed but produced through expressive actions. People's actions can release a robust creativity through which to constitute themselves as political subjects and produce unpredictable outcomes. A cultural lens, I suggest, is crucial to understanding this political process. In recent years, with more studies incorporating a cultural perspective to study protest movement, there has been "a recognition of more fluid, situational, or transient forms of social movement resistance" (Buechler 2000, 179). If the aim of a protest is to craft messages, alter public perceptions, and prompt desired responses, the cultural dimension of meaning construction and identity performance cannot be taken for granted.² Rather than upholding the view that culture is a set of given, unchanged, and deeply held beliefs, a more nuanced understanding of Chinese protest movements needs to pay more attention to how culture is played out through practices (Reed 2005). A performative perspective conceptualizes protest as a site of cultural performances that address a variety of audiences who also produce meanings (Johnston 2009; Johnston and Klandermans 1995).

Cultural analysis has increasingly called attention to how various kinds of cultural forms—ranging from costume, object, art, and built environment to narrative, jokes, visual image, and music (Jasper

2014)—are improvised to construct the meaning of protest in creative ways (Johnston 2009). Protest movements are viewed as discursive constructions, which produce new meanings, symbols, identities, and relations (Edwards 2014; Buechler 2000; Johnston and Klandermans 1995). With protestors becoming cultural producers, their practices have constituted a distinctive terrain of popular politics as protest culture diffuses into society (Reed 2005). Reed argues that dramatic events can generate profound emotional and moral power beyond the control of protestors, and “offer some degree of symbolic challenge to the dominant order just by their existence outside normalized political activity” (Ibid. 307). Occupying public spaces, for instance, is a symbolic action that can contest normative meanings, evoke moral support, construct political identities, and produce various kinds of creative practices that challenge existing cultural codes. Traditional symbols and rituals can also be turned into radical acts of protest (Jasper 2014). In arguing that action is where contestation of meaning takes place, the book investigates how people create political codes, discourses and logics that need to be understood on their own terms.

A Narrative of Argument

In the past several years, there has been a dramatic rise of popular protests on a world scale, and China, as a rising economic power characterized by remarkable social inequalities and contradictions as a result of neoliberal policies, is no exception. Ever since the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989, people have continued to protest. And there has unfolded a distinctive political formation in which the state has sought to regain its legitimacy by channeling and neutralizing widespread popular discontents through a new legal regime. This dramatic turn to legality as a source of legitimacy has, probably beyond the Communist Party of China’s (hereafter CPC) anticipation, spawned widespread rights-based politics from below. Meanwhile, the central government has also tried to curb the revival of popular politics through selectively tolerating protest actions as a means to monitor local states. The proliferation of welfare and security provisions has given rise to new forms of governmentality without

substantive democracy. Corrupt practices of local governments—as crystallized in the predatory activities of development, the absence of accountability for vital decisions concerning people’s lives, and the general non-responsiveness to their grievances—have triggered widespread protests. Numerous precarious subjects—who experience massive privatization of natural resources, environmental pollution, lack of proper social security, and exploitative working conditions—act out and deploy various practices to demand favorable responses from upper-level authorities. Under the circumstances, where law enforcement remains ineffective in terms of protecting people, some rights need to be obtained through radical struggles to create opportunities for public appearance and contestation.

These practices, which mostly target the unacceptability of existing social or political arrangements, have created the spaces of popular political activity in China. Yet the conventional state vs. society framework is unable to explain the complex forms and spaces of these political struggles. Although popular protest has become familiar in the post-Tiananmen political landscape, the meaning of these practices and spaces is yet to be fully explored. Since the state has been seeking some degree of legitimacy from its populations to resolve the crisis caused by neoliberalism, methods of how to grab public attention and elicit upper-level intervention have become a central focus of popular democracy. Rather than viewing these practices as merely an instrumental means of carrying pre-constituted messages to the public, it is necessary to explore how they facilitate popular political activity and have “the potential to be an active source of agency” (Sethi 2011, 72). Significantly, people often make contentious claims in dramatic actions that others cannot ignore, or invent new forms of practices in the face of new opportunities. What are these forms, what is the politics they articulate, and how do they enable resource-poor people to constitute themselves as political subject? This book explores these questions by way of the analysis and evaluation of a series of empirical case studies in China. Contrary to traditional notions that reduce these practices to instrumental tools for achieving a goal, it will be argued that they constitute a form of “performative politics” characteristic of “the will not being governed like that” (Foucault 2007). In the face of censorship and repression, performative politics is usually precarious and transient, yet increasingly crucial to the development of popular democracy.

This book also argues that the idea of performative politics provides an alternative way to understand popular politics in China. The emphasis is on the practices, rather than an idea, of popular politics. Performative politics encompasses a constellation of expressive practices, spaces, and situations created by the people to contest governmentality. As this book illustrates, performative politics, which can be expressed through different forms of performativity (Butler 2015), mainly operates in the domain of visibility and intervenes in what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls the “realm of perception, visibility and audibility” in response to the non-acknowledgment of the voices of people. Simply put, performative politics reconfigures the conditions of what is to be seen, when, and by whom (Fabricant 2009), and thus reallocates the mode of appearance of grievances. Performative politics aims to elicit state intervention. By reconfiguring the visibility of grievances, performative politics has the potential to alter public perceptions and subvert the ways people are governed. A march demonstration intended to influence the public, the media, and government decisions is an instance of performative politics. A “spoofed image” that critiques official rhetoric and entails unpredictable responses can also be seen as fragments of performative politics. Such politics is performative in the sense that it aims to draw the attention of the state by creating a temporary space of *appearance* from which to make claims.

If the social order is founded on the distinctions of who can speak in the public sphere and who cannot, of who is visible and who is not (Rancière 2004), performative politics is about disturbing the distinctions and reshaping what should be recognized, what Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible,” which “produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done . . . ‘distribution’ . . . refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion.” The sensible “does not refer to what shows good sense or judgement but to what is . . . capable of being apprehended by the senses” (Rockhill 2004b, 85). Within such a reconfiguration: “Politics is a matter of subjects or, rather, modes of subjectification. By *subjectification* I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience” (Ranciere 2004, 35). As Karen Zivi summarizes it:

A performative perspective on rights moves us from an almost exclusive focus on questions about what rights *are* to a more careful consideration of what it is rights *do*; from a tendency to treat rights as things or instruments we use to bring about a particular end to a recognition that rights claiming is a complex linguistic activity, the outcomes of which are quite often beyond our complete control. A performative perspective on rights . . . moves us beyond concerns about the formal definitions of rights and allows us to take seriously rights claiming as a social and political practice. (Zivi 2012, 9; original italics)

Since performative politics always responds to specific modes of governmentality and entails differing outcomes, its manifestations are necessarily contextual and historically specific. How these occasions are acted out, what forms they take, what resources they use and what effects they generate depend entirely on how they take advantage of the specific condition of possibilities available to them. With China it is necessary to consider the role of the state and its enduring legacies. In China, control over the sensible—as clearly manifested in the prohibition of street protest and media censorship of public events—is the primary strategy for constructing a loyal and obedient subject. The state, which presupposes a division between the sayable and the unsayable, actively filters, classifies, and denies the sensory data considered politically threatening.

For this reason, methods of how to redistribute the sensible (such as increasing the possibility of public attention) have become a focus of struggle and crucial to the emergence of political subject (Rancière 2004; Davis 2010, 86). Although the Chinese state has continued to impose severe restrictions on self-organized politics of the people, the practices and rhetoric of socialism, traditional rituals and cultural values, official buildings, state norms and directives, as well as state-authorized media cultures, have all facilitated the development of Chinese performative politics in different ways. Paradoxically, people's agency is derived from the power regime that constitutes their subjectivity, and can sometimes bring about sweeping political turbulences. Since the reform era, the most spectacular expression of performative politics is probably the protest movement of 1989, which offered a highly visible and emotionally charged arena

for displaying a variety of counter-hegemonic practices and forced a process of political negotiation with the state (Zhao 2001). The rise of performative politics has prompted the state to develop new forms of governmentality, which in turn create a heterogeneous social space for nurturing new forms of performative politics.

Yet very few forms of performative politics, especially in the face of the tightening up after 1989, can produce the same level of affective intensity and influence as the Tiananmen protest did. In fact, there has been a dramatic shift in the concrete actors and demands over the last two decades. Like many instances in the postcolonial world, popular struggles in the post-Tiananmen era have tended to have a less overtly political agenda, and do not seek to hegemonize civil society or contest state power. Instead, most are aimed at socioeconomic rights, which inevitably involves a critique of governmentality. The political figure of democratic struggles has also shifted since 1989. The performative subjects identified by this book are no longer limited to the restricted segments of urban college students, intellectuals, and state-firm workers, as present during the mass protest in 1989, but encompass a wide variety of people who are living under increasingly precarious conditions and whose lives are increasingly subject to the intense processes of exploitation induced by neoliberalism. These vulnerable people—who are nominally designated as “citizens” entitled to a set of newly instituted legal rights—are de facto excluded from the state’s decision-making processes, and thus seek to claim their rights to subsistence, land, housing, political participation, education, and social security at multiple points of dissent. Most of these struggles are transitory and fragmented, and are marked by a lack of horizontal articulation among and across different groups.

Their locally grounded and culturally informed practices are the central focus of this book. The existing literature is predominantly limited to the verbal form of interaction with the state and other social sectors. Partha Chatterjee’s (2004) analysis of subaltern politics in India demonstrates that subaltern people are not merely the object of governmentality to be mobilized by the state, but are capable, resilient and strategic in organizing their politics. The outcome of their actions depends on their innovative practices of political mobilization. In China, since most struggles are concerned with citizenship rights granted by the state, there is a need to create a space from which to make contentious claims about these rights. The formulation of such

spaces, which is crucial to the development of popular democracy, is associated with nonverbal practices. Some scholars have suggested that practices of claim-making are crucial to democratic politics (Zivi 2012); however, there is a need to attest to a variety of expressive forms improvised from within the state-controlled space. This expressive aspect is ignored by Chatterjee's categorization of the politics of the governed. The practices presented in his study mainly center on the work of organization, mobilization, and negotiation with political parties, NGOs, and state authorities, which are specific to the context of India. In China and the mainland in particular, where any horizontal form of self-organization and popular mobilization is strictly monitored and forbidden by the state, people need to constitute themselves in other ways to attract the attention of government. Given that the Chinese state remains the only *de facto* source of political representation, people stage different kinds of expressive actions to generate immediate pressure on governmental authorities, after failing to make their voices heard via official channels of petitioning.

But the ways these actions create a space of politics are very different from the operation of political society in India. The regime's deep concern for legitimacy has encouraged the proliferation of performative politics that demands that the state live up to its political promises. In mainland China, the most common practice is to gather the masses and create disorderly scenes on the streets, which contributes to the formulation of spaces of appearance where people gather and interact (Butler 2015; Matynia 2009). The deployment of the body, which has been previously assumed to be insignificant in the study of Chinese politics, can provide a crucial source of agency, even though its performative condition is highly risky and temporary. Political actors take on a variety of expressive forms of contained, peaceful, or institutionalized actions to appear in public spaces, including mass petitioning,³ rallies, sit-ins, strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, and spectacular banners. These practices can produce eye-catching scenes.⁴ Occasionally, they disrupt existing patterns of bureaucratic and institutional activity, such as building "human walls" to paralyze public transportation, surrounding and breaking into government offices, erecting barricades, smashing police cars, occupying symbolic spaces, and lying down on rail tracks, in an attempt to generate more pressure on governmental authorities. Disruption of this kind can spread uncertainty and potentially facilitate the condition for desired

intervention. Most of these practices are characterized by actions carried out in concert in public spaces as a performative force to surprise, shock, and frighten, rather than to “rationally persuade” the state and the wider public. In response, the state seeking popular legitimation will be motivated to selectively compromise.

Although some of these direct actions can create dramatic tensions, they are usually swiftly crushed by local authorities. Therefore, the masses have to employ some other creative yet non-regime-threatening tactics that carry smaller risks. This requires a reinvention of strategies and spaces, and explains why there are so many creative and theatrical forms of practices that are diffused out into the wider space of public culture and address broader audiences. Some of these political forms have become central to the formulation of a culture of solidarity, while others nurture new norms of behavior in imaginative ways. Such a trajectory, however, requires an understanding of political practice as a distinct, locally grounded cultural phenomenon, as well as the enormous potentials and resources available in the heterogeneous social realm. What needs to be further emphasized is that the existing scholarship on China popular politics has privileged expressions through words or vocalization, focusing almost exclusively on words and narratives as carriers of popular voices, instead of the deployment of nonverbal, expressive forms, for consciousness-raising and mobilization. Failing to capture the complex cultural dynamics in a global new media setting, culture tends to be viewed as a monolithic, homogeneous, and unchanging system of belief embedded in an arguably reified notion of “tradition” (for example, Perry 2008a), rather than produced and circulated through the concrete practices of protestors, the media, and the broad spectrum of Internet users.

Studies of performative politics have pointed out the key cultural dimensions that are crucial to a performative analysis of popular political activity. Fabricant’s (2009) research identifies various forms of performative actions enacted by right-wing groups, including seizing government buildings and erecting roadblocks, as well as staging rituals and other spectacular events. She argues that these expressive practices, some of which are deeply embedded in local traditions, have powerful signifying functions that create a symbolic struggle over identity. Ziv’s (2010) study of an Israeli queer group demonstrates the way political activism is performed through a cluster of subversive practices to foster visibility, in particular via the use of stereotypes and provocative

bodily strategies to transgress hegemonic norms. In addition to these theatrical practices, the group attempts to make connections between different struggles as a means to repoliticize the political discourse of the public sphere. Some other studies have looked at the “carnivalistic” mode of political engagement in Poland (Matynia 2009), the creation of Arendtian spaces of appearance in Pakistan (Mustafa et al. 2013), as well as the theoretical implications of bodily practices and production of political spaces (Rose-Redwood and Glass 2014). All of these treatments are valuable in their illustration of the ways cultural practices can produce agency.

The cultural inventiveness and novelty of the performative practices in China is remarkable. The social realm of the everyday lifeworld offers rich strategic sources of cultural innovation embedded in local and global geographies: mundane objects, symbols, traditions, speeches, rituals, media products, or images layered with cultural meanings of communal identities can be used to make claims. Here, the symbolic restructuring of the meaning and subversive use of cultural artifacts plays out as a crucial means to perform popular politics. Some subcultural formations, even expressed in seemingly nonpolitical or overtly playful style, constitute performative transgression of official rhetoric and symbols by opening them up for subversive interpretations. Figurative forms of performativity such as satire, parody, or jokes, which perform oppositional identities as a mild form of dissent (Jasper 2014), can produce subversive forces through symbolic repetition, citation, and modification of dominant cultural codes. Performative conceptions of popular democracy can also be illustrated through various kinds of aesthetic practices, which often take on political valence and constitute a temporary site of intervention. Rather than being uniformly passive and powerless victims of dictatorship, the people are capable of constituting themselves as political subjects through performative practices. They can engage in struggles and contest political boundaries.

It is worth stressing that the nature and outcome of political struggles cannot be presupposed and predetermined. They are brought into being by contexts and their practices. Rather than merely being shaped by the sedimentation of daily conventions and repetition of rituals, creative practices can produce unpredictable outcomes and thus create forms of sociocultural and political agency. If practices of claim-making enable people to contest forms of their political subjectivity (Golder 2015, 137), the scholarship of Chinese politics has failed

to appreciate this process of subject-formation. Esherick and Wasserstrom's (1994) seminal study, which stands out as a path-breaking work on Chinese performative politics, situates the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration within the long tradition of what they call "political theater" in China, and examines the continuities from the imperial time to 1989. Despite their attention to various dramatic expressions, the focus is somewhat restricted to a limited range of institutionalized actors (such as the state, the party, students, and civil society organizations) and respective theatrical "stages," leaving little room for other kinds of engagement undertaken by disenfranchised groups such as workers and peasants. The cases explored by the authors seem more centralized, organized, and sustained in terms of their sites, leadership, and endurance, as well as more directed against the central authorities, than the contemporary dispersive form of popular democracy since 1989.

What needs to be emphasized is that popular political activity always needs to create a space to appear and perform. The space of popular politics does not preexist but needs to be brought into being through performative practices (Rose-Redwood and Glass 2014). Where, then, are the spatial locuses that enable people to appear? The rebalancing of center-local relations since the 1990s has reshaped the condition of appearance. As the spatiality of state power has become more decentralized, dispersed, and localized, popular struggle has scattered out, shifting toward specific localities, targets, and issues. Such a tendency is clearly manifested in the spreading of democratic struggles over such everyday spaces as urban streets, factories, schools, government buildings, and villages. There is no doubt that the Internet—in particular social media platforms—has now been employed as an indispensable means through which to perform popular democracy. As many cases demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the Internet has facilitated the fluidity and distribution of such performative power. The circulation of officially forbidden information, utterances, and visual images that convey moral judgments across social media plays a pivotal role in expanding the spatial boundaries of popular democracy and formulating oppositional identities. For example, the live streaming of a series of striking images of a protest scene can easily evoke powerful emotions among the crowds and gather mobilizing power from a broader base via social media networks.

Physical space remains crucial to the performances of popular politics, which are carried out through the spatial practice of assembling the politicized bodies in public spaces where people can make claims (Zivi 2012). In a political context where the right to appear in public is extremely restricted, the carving up of such a space is absolutely necessary. But such a space does not preexist the performative practices of the body that is vulnerable against state violence. As Butler makes clear, politics requires the appearance of the body, which lays claim to legal rights and the preservation of life through collective physical presence, and constitutes a performative action that enables the enactment of an embodied agency. “When people take to the streets together,” she writes, “they form something of a body politic” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 196). The protesting body also needs a space to perform, which is not pre-given but must be *transformed* and produced by action. Butler suggests that an action staged by collective bodies produces the “space of appearance,” which in turn offers a material condition for political engagement. Rather than a pre-given and fixed spatial location, the space of appearance is something that is always in process of becoming and taking place (p. 194).

In China generally but also in the mainland in particular, the body carries complex moral implications, so any unusual presence or performance of the body in public can evoke broad responses. To urge the government to uphold the stated rules and professed commitment to justice, protestors do not necessarily confront the authorities, but stage a variety of embodied acts to present their demands in legal and moral terms, in the hope of forcing conditions of intervention. It is often through scenes performed by vulnerable bodies that the public starts to pay attention. The outcome of these embodied actions depends mostly on the ability of protestors to mobilize moral support and elicit state intervention in their favor.

Paying attention to the performative potential of the body may help reorient the research field of Chinese politics and protest movements, which has been dominated by an emphasis on “consciousness” and the cognitive capacity to engage in contentious mobilization and interaction, instead of bodily possibilities. As Butler (2015) has argued, the performative body possesses political potentials and enacts a message when it lays claims to a certain space as public space. In China the performative body can do many different things and turn

any built environment into powerful political message. Petitioning governments, or disrupting ceremonies attended by government officials, signifies utterly different challenges to political authorities. Transient gatherings in villages prove the strength of people. Occupying a commercial district poses a symbolic questioning of the public character of urban space. Silent gatherings such as funerals signify an implicit sense of protest. A dramatic action staged by workers can shift the way their situations are seen and perceived, and open up the possibility of alternative interpretations.

The performativity of the body and space has never been taken seriously by the scholarship of Chinese politics. Although Esherick and Wasserstrom (1994), for instance, observe the ways official rituals and ceremonies are turned into what they call political theaters, their study does not explain how political agency can be made possible through performative bodily actions and spatial practices, and how the media transposes the body and widens the visibility. What is missing is a consideration of how the body “invents” its own stage on which to perform resistance. To take one example, in a context where mass assemblies are severely prohibited, the practice of occupation, an “easily replicable tactic” in the liberal context of the United States (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 44), can hardly be sustained. Rather than forming a movement-type of extended occupation, protestors usually take the form of transitory gathering, through which people turn government buildings, roads, corporate properties, and factories into temporary political theaters, which may last a few hours (such as mass meetings held to publicize central directives in the town center) or a few weeks (such as workers’ factory sieges), depending on not only bodily endurance but also on the opportunities available to them.

As the occupation of Tiananmen Square demonstrates, public space occupation can offer a site not only for displays of autonomy and defiance against the political class, but also for improvisational forms of self-organization and collective creation (Zhao 2001). As the recent manifestations of civil unrest in Hong Kong have illustrated, concerted bodily actions and encounters can create free, decentralized, ad hoc, and loosely connected spaces of encounter where like-minded individuals and affinity groups interact, build a sense of community, and conduct social experiments with prefigurative politics. The actions of occupation, some of which tend to focus on the organizational culture of internal processes along participatory lines, have