“Thugs-for-Hire”: State Coercion and “Everyday Repression” in China

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Abstract

This paper examines “thugs-for-hire” as a form of state coercion and everyday repression. Third-party violence is commonly deployed by the state to evict homeowners and to deal with petitioners and protestors in China. This study contributes to the state repression literature by elaborating the role of thugs and gangsters as a repressive measure. Violence is effective and efficient in implementing unpopular and illegal policies. Third-party violence as a form of privatized covert repression also allows the state to evade responsibility and to maintain a veneer of legitimacy. However, it comes at a cost to regime legitimacy and trust in government. Borrowed violence bolsters only the regime’s despotic power and makes no contribution to strengthen its infrastructural capacity to govern. It will ultimately weaken regime durability in China.

Keywords: “Thugs-for-hire”, thugs, coercion, violence, China.


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I. Introduction

In the height of the Occupy Central protests in Hong Kong in October 2014, where thousands of residents peacefully occupied the streets to demand universal suffrage, unidentified thugs and goons were deployed to dismantle barricades, tear down posters, and assault peaceful protestors. Rumors speculated that the thugs were hired by the pro-Beijing Hong Kong SAR government to intimidate protestors into giving up their activism. Some of the gangsters were reported to have links with the underground criminal groups or triads in Hong Kong, while others were hired from the neighboring Guangdong province in China.1

This incident parallels a pervasive phenomenon in mainland China—thugs and gangsters are regularly hired by the Chinese state to repress citizens and coerce them into complying with its policies. Thugs are recruited to evict homeowners in demolition projects and to dislodge farmers in urbanization and industrial developments. The state also regularly deploys third-party violence to intercept petitioners who try to lodge petitions with the central authority and threaten activists who take their grievances to the streets. The state co-opts the extralegal coercive force of the thugs when implementing unpopular and illegal policies and when taking repressive actions. These hired thugs are defined primarily by the use of violence in execution. This paper brings into focus the nature of the “thugs-for-hire”, their relationships with the state, and the implications of this relationship for state power and regime legitimacy.

This study contributes to the literature on state repression by augmenting the discussion of the use of thugs and gangsters as a repressive measure. Repression is action intended to raise the contender’s cost of collective action (Tilly 1978).ii Most studies of repression focus on overt actions carried out by agents connected with national political elites (Earl 2003). As Christian Davenport (2007) and Jennifer Earl (2003, 2011) have correctly noted, we currently know very little about covert repressive measures or the circumstances under which the state deploys them. This
paper argues that hired thugs are best perceived as a form of privatized covert violent repression. They offer the state a distinct advantage by allowing the state to evade responsibility and maintain a veneer of legitimacy—in the eyes of either higher authorities (within a multi-level government) or the international community. A wide variety of countries ranging from economically developed and underdeveloped states, autocracies and procedural democracies to those reliant upon external aids have relied upon privatized state violence to fight wars and carry out repressive actions (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013; Alvarez 2006; Kirschke 2000; Roessler 2005; Mazzei 2009).

A large number of scholarly works have investigated the question of regime durability of the Chinese Communist Party from various perspectives. These perspectives include political participation (Shi 1997), foreign direct investment (Gallagher 2002), co-optation of the middle class and private entrepreneurs (Dickson 2006; Tsai 2006), the role of people’s congresses (Manion 2008), cadre evaluation system and decentralized authoritarianism (Landry 2008), media and information control (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011), social mobilization perspectives (O’Brien and Li 2006; Lorentzen 2013), and coercive institutions (Cai 2008; Y. Wang 2014). This study joins this vast body of literature to explain how the Chinese Communist regime augments its coercive power by relying on violent extralegal third-party agents to carry out everyday (unpopular) policy implementation and repression. However, this paper diverges from the existing body of literature on the implication of the expanded coercive power. While privatized state violence may help the regime to coerce citizens into compliance and acquiescence in the short-term, this comes at a cost to regime legitimacy and trust in government. It is detrimental to regime durability in the long run.

The primary data in the paper were drawn from approximately 100 interviews conducted with villagers and residents affected by housing demolition and land expropriation in the provinces of Henan, Sichuan, Yunnan and Anhui over the period 2011-14. During a visit to the infamous “petition village” in Beijing in the summer of
2014, the authors spoke to petitioners who traveled from afar to channel their grievances through the official petition system. The paper also draws on Chinese-language scholarly literature and media reports as secondary evidence.

The paper is organized as follows. Section II situates “thugs-for-hire” in the context of the literature on organized criminals. These hired thugs, as agents of the state, are distinct from Gambetta’s Sicilian Mafiosi or Volkov’s “violent entrepreneurs” in Russia. Demand for the service of hired thugs is premised upon the efficiency and effectiveness of third-party violence. Section III engages the literature on state repression, particularly that regarding why some states choose privatized state violence as a repressive tool. Like engaging paramilitaries, militias and vigilantes to fight wars, hired thugs offer the advantage of reduced liability. States can strategically manipulate the argument of moral hazard, stemming from delegation of authority, to their advantage in order to avoid accountability for their actions. We show how this strategy has been similarly implemented by the local and central governments in China. In spite of that, covert state repression leads to falling legitimacy and trust in government. It necessitates further state deployment of third-party violence to execute policies and to repress, and therefore, it exacerbates existing state weakness. The last section concludes the study.

II. Violent Agents in Comparative Perspective

Who are these “thugs-for-hire”? What services do they provide? Why is there a demand for their service? How are they different from other criminal groups? This section sheds light on these fundamental identity questions by comparing the “thugs-for-hire” with similar violent agents and criminal groups.

“Thugs-for-hire” refer to ruffians, hooligans, thugs and gangsters, as well as legalized professionalized who render violence as a form of service for profit or in exchange for in-kind benefits. It is similar to the concept of “violent entrepreneurs” first coined by Volkov (2002a) to describe businesses that converted organized
force or violence into profit-making enterprises in Russia in the late 1980s and 1990s. However, thugs-for-hire in China are not entirely the same as Volkov’s “violent entrepreneurs”. As we will illustrate, they emerge from different needs, and they provide differentiated service.

The breakdown of the Soviet system eroded the rule of law and other institutions necessary for businesses to function in Yeltsin’s Russia. Political transition corroded the basic institutions for a market economy to function—namely, public security, contract enforcement, dispute settlement mechanisms, and transaction insurance, usually supplied by the police and the court system (Volkov 2002b). The “violent entrepreneurs” stepped in to supply businesses with protection and alternative mechanisms of settling disputes and enforcing contracts by coercive means. By providing krysha, a Russian concept denoting “roofs”, which lowered transaction costs and minimized operational risks, these entrepreneurs facilitated smooth running of businesses (Volkov 2002b). The idea dates back to Gambetta (1996), who attributes the emergence of the Sicilian mafia—a business provider of private protection—to low social trust and weak state institutions that were incapable of providing protection to the citizens. Russia’s transitional economy had similar formative conditions for mafias as the early capital Sicily (Varese 2001). Similar reasoning has been applied to the mafia group Yakuza in Japan (Hill 2006). The Mafiosi and “violent entrepreneurs” alike both came about to fill the institutional vacuum of weak states.

Organized crime can be divided into various types. Organized crime, an all-encompassing term for all crimes that are organized (Schelling 1984), is an organizational attempt to regulate and control the production and distribution of an illegal commodity or service (Varese 2010, 14). The Mafiosi is a particular type of organized crime, as it attempts to regulate and control one service: the supply of private protection (Gambetta 1996). The use of coercion and violence by the mafia is the key to establishing itself as a credible protector (Gambetta 1996, 40). Sometimes, in order to create a need for private protection, the mafia will first
deploy violent intimidation. The existence of violent threats will beget a demand for private protection.

“Thugs-for-hire” is also a subset of organized crime. However, these thugs are agents of the masters who pay for their services. The associations are based upon principal-agent relationships. Thugs, as agents, render services ranging from violent threats, harassment, and beatings to physical abuses and murders. The common denominator of these services is the use of coercive force in their execution. The scope of service is therefore broader than the provision of private protection offered by the Mafiosi. More importantly, because these thugs are agents of the paying masters, their activities are premised on meeting the objectives of their masters, rather than those of their own.

To be sure, this does not mean Mafiosi as depicted by Gambetta and Volkov do not exist in China. They do, and they indeed thrive in some regions. As Wang (2011) has documented, mafias in China help settle disputes, such as neighborhood quarrels, traffic accidents, and property disputes. They work like “shadow” police when police officials do not have the capabilities to handle the rising number of civil disputes. They also serve as a “shadow” judicial system when the courts fail to protect property rights and enforce contracts. Additionally, underground banks, gambling houses and other illegal establishments also use mafias to collect debts and to protect their businesses that fall outside the purview of the formal court and police institutions. Instead, this study focuses on the under-studied phenomenon of state-hired thugs.

**Efficiency and effectiveness of third-party violence**

Why do states prefer to engage hired thugs instead of their own coercive apparatus in execution? Mafias and all the violent agents alike are defined by the centrality of violence in their actions. The local state, as the buyer of such services in China, perceives value in violence as the most efficient and effective means of executing some actions. The state does not utilize violence all the time, but only in dealing with
certain citizen groups and in the execution of selected tasks. The state’s use of violence is common when citizens do not comply with illegal or unreasonable state directives or policies as well as in state repression of citizens’ actions. Simply put, violence is expedient in pushing through unpopular state policies and illegal directives and for repression purposes. Violence executed by third parties, from the buyer or state’s perspective, has the added advantage of accountability evasion. We will address the last point in the next section.

Hired thugs are most frequently recruited by the Chinese state to be involved in housing demolition and evictions, land expropriations, collection of taxes and illegal fees, and dealing with protestors and citizen activists. The 1994 fiscal recentralization significantly reduced local governments’ share of revenue, while keeping their share of expenditures unchanged. (Tsui and Wang 2004; Shue and Wong 2007). With skyrocketing land and real estate prices in the last two decades, land-sales revenue, which is not subject to sharing with the higher-level authorities, has become the major contributor to the revenue streams of local and municipal governments. Local governments are therefore strongly incentivized to expropriate land either to build industrial zones and commercial real estate or for infrastructure purposes. In recent years, local governments have also been feverishly clearing existing “urban villages” (chengzhongcun) or other “urban slums” to make way for new construction as land has become scarcer. Urban projects and real estate developments also generate revenue from business taxes paid by service industries, which is a tax largely exclusive to local governments (Tao 2014).

This strong revenue drive results in hasty government development policy actions and sometimes even illegal actions. Local governments face tight deadlines to complete urban development projects because the costs of resettling residents, interest from bank loans, and opportunity costs of unsold real estate properties increase over time. Citizens’ resistance to housing demolition and land expropriation is largely due to low or unreasonable monetary compensation. Others refuse to comply because of inferior resettlement housing, corruption and
embezzlement by officials, and procedural concerns, such as lack of notice or consultation over the eviction process. To successfully implement these projects, (forced) consent of the entire community is often required. An urban development project stalls if only a few families out of an entire village or neighborhood refuse to vacate their properties. Therefore, hired violence provides a swift and effective solution to the deadlocks. Other times, township or village officials may decide to expropriate farmland without higher-level approvals because they want to personally pocket a larger share of the proceeds. When illegal actions take place, officials are unable to produce official eviction notices, and their actions will encounter even fiercer resistance from villagers. Violence becomes an even more necessary means of effectuating acquiescence in these illicit cases.

There are always some intransigent households who refuse to comply regardless of the level of compensation or any wrongdoing of local officials. In any case, whether or not the intransigence is justified, the “nail households” (dingzihu) are particularly vexatious for local authorities. Deployment of strong-arm tactics and coercive forces are both efficient and effective in obtaining acquiesce. A prominent researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Yu Jianrong, has estimated that 90 percent all of demolition and relocation cases involve thug violence (Yu 2009).

Below is a description of some of the strong-arm tactics described by the villagers in Yunnan province with whom I conducted a focus group interview. The villagers have collectively resisted severe demolition pressure since 2010 (Villagers in Yunnan province 2012):

“The first measures taken (by the village authority) were cutting off water and electricity supplies to homes. Then, they sent thugs to spray paint our houses with intimidating words: ‘If you refuse to move, the house will be bulldozed while you are asleep!’, and ‘Those who don’t vacate, watch out for your safety!’” (Both threats were indeed carried
out. Some villagers found their homes being bulldozed in the middle of the night. Others were beaten up.)

“At night, they drove trucks through the paddies and farms, destroying our crops and vegetables, killed our poultry, and fed our dogs poison.”

“They set fire to my courtyard built with teak wood in the 19th century. Four generations of my family have lived in this traditional quadrangle home. My life was spared only because I wasn’t at home at the time”, said a 76-year old man who led the resistance against home demolition.

“Those of us who submitted a petition letter were particularly targeted. The eldest daughter of one of the petition organizers was badly beaten by a bunch of thugs when she returned from work one night. She was left unconscious and had to be hospitalized for a few weeks.”

In a village in Henan province where we have conducted field research, villagers who had similar violent encounters spoke of ruffians (xiaohunhun), who are usually unemployed youngsters, hired by the local government to “tear down houses” and “manhandle villagers”. The jobs they are hired to do require no specific skills, aside from physical strength and some boldness. Violence is used for the purpose of disrupting villagers’ businesses, such as “ransacking stores”, “tearing down billboards”, “looting businesses” and “intimidating customers with vulgar language”. When the residents’ income sources are severely disrupted, they often had no choice but to comply with the government’s demolition notice. The thugs do not hesitate to use force to deal with the “nail households” who stubbornly defend their homes or the organizers of the resistance. In this respect, third-party violence is an integral part of the local government’s repressive machinery.
The identities of these camouflage-donning thugs and government officials were far from distinct, as recounted by some of our informants. In some places, they called themselves “patrol officers” (xunfang renyuan). In other places, they were the “law enforcers” (zhifa renyuan) in charge of implementing the local authority’s demolition directives, but they carried no official pass. In any case, their camouflaged uniforms provide them with a pseudo-military or government security identity. Yet, on other occasions, they seemed to be more integrated with the formal government bureaucracies. The physical acts of demolishing houses are usually carried out by local governments’ “demolition teams” or “demolition offices”. The informants have reported that these teams or offices are made up of government officials or village cadres and hired thugs. While there was a division of labor between the two—the government or village officials provide leadership and local knowledge, while the thugs are in charge of executing the actions—it is not always easy for the informants to distinguish between them. This is not least because all of them identified themselves as part of the official demolition unit.

In China, a majority of these violent agents have criminal records that create obstacles to their acquiring proper jobs and being reintegrated into society. These thugs tend to be recruited from different villages or towns within the same regions. They are relatively familiar with the locales and speak local dialects, yet they have an escape route if they get into trouble. Outsiders also have an advantage of not being recognizable to the locals or subjects under attack, which is useful in blame shifting. The thugs are not particularly well educated, and they have not received any previous military or security training. Becoming a hired thug is therefore a means of making a living for these individuals. By way of contrast, those who joined the ranks of “violent entrepreneurs” in Russia were former police or state security officers, including ex-KGB officers, who were looking to diversify their income sources due to high inflation or retrenchment from the state system, as a result of the Soviet collapse (Volkov 2002b, 96-8). In short, violent agents in China are not as professionally trained as the retired state security officers in Russia.
Some infamous underground kingpins, such as Qiaosi in Harbin and Liu Yong in Shenyang, made their fortunes by offering hired thug services to state agents in demolition and eviction projects. Qiaosi was known as the “underground mayor” in the city of Harbin in northeast China. He began making money in the thugs-for-hire business in 1987, when the city underwent urban development and renewal. Working with various construction companies, they became government contractors in demolition projects. He would organize and send demolition teams to assist the Harbin municipal government in relocation works. The teams were made up of hooligans and ruffians who utilized violence to effectuate forceful evictions.

Qiaosi’s business establishment was so successful that it dominated nearly 80 percent of the demolition market in Harbin at that time. Thereafter, he grew his empire by branching out into construction, gambling, prostitution and other vices. However, it was with thugs-for-hire in demolition projects that his illegal empire sprouted (Zhang 2012). When Qiaosi was put on trial in the mid-2000s, he had nearly 100 accomplices, and more than 60 police officers who were alleged to have been involved in his ring were put under investigation.

Qiaosi’s success could be attributed to his ability to supply the void in market demand. In urban renewal projects, demolition and relocation works are outsourced to these “professional thugs” or “security companies” that employ the most effective means to produce desired outcome. The state cannot send uniformed government officials, including the police, to forcefully evict residents from their homes, but outsourcing it to third parties makes it practically feasible. Oftentimes, when a few “nail households” or stubborn shop owners refused to relocate, they can hold up the entire project, imposing significant costs in time and in financial terms. Therefore, outsourcing violence is also cost-effective because it raises project efficiency and lowers the costs of urban development for local governments. When job effectiveness and cost efficiency are prioritized ahead of the welfare of citizens, hired thugs become an area where genuine market demand exists.
Liu Yong in the city of Shenyang is another kingpin who had made his initial fortunes in thugs-for-hire services since the late 1980s. In 1999, when a drug store owner failed to obey an eviction order, Liu ordered thugs armed with lethal weapons to break into the dispensary, where they killed the duty manager and some of the employees. He had similarly deployed indiscriminate violence against other evictees. Lootings of properties, physical abuses and slaying of ordinary citizens were widely observed. When Liu was arrested in the late 1990s, the Jiayang Group, the company he founded, had ventured into legal businesses, such as clothing, food, entertainment, and real estate businesses. Liu was also an elected deputy of the People’s Congress in Shenyang municipality. ix

Other prominent Mafiosi figures include Haowei in Changchun, Zhou Qiang in Nanjing, and Wang Ping in Chongqing. x They tended to share a common characteristic in that they began their criminal activities with thugs-for-hire services in urban renewal projects. The rudimentary organizations, often consisting of a handful of armed fighters, thugs, or gangsters, then developed into full-scale criminal organizations with wide-ranging business interests, including arms smuggling, gambling and prostitution, and construction and real estate, spanning both legal and illegal realms. In criminal studies, scholars have identified a common pattern of hoodlums in China evolving from vagrants and hooligans to a criminal underworld through a process of continuous development. xi

Before the abolition of rural taxes and fees in the mid-2000s, local governments also engaged thugs to help to collect these exactions. Not dissimilar to cases of housing demolition and land expropriation, compliance was vexatious for local officials. The exactions were often arbitrarily imposed by grassroots governments—ranging from the agriculture tax and various agricultural surcharges to fines for violating the one-child policy, education surcharges, and mandatory contribution towards local infrastructure building—and could reach as high as 30-40 percent of a farm household’s total annual income (Kennedy 2002; Ong 2012). Accordingly, third-
party violence was deployed because of its efficiency and effectiveness in extracting compliance from the villagers.\textsuperscript{xii}

The above analysis illustrates the efficacy of borrowed violence in forcing \textit{compliance} when state policies are unpopular and its actions illegal. Separately, violence also serves as an extremely effective \textit{repressive} measure. Gangsters and private security companies are widely engaged by local governments to “intercept” and “retrieve” (\textit{jiefang}) petitioners who lodge complaints of local official malfeasance with the central authority in Beijing. The petition system, originating in the imperial times, allowed commoners wronged by local officials to seek intervention from the Imperial Court. In contemporary China, the rights to petition are constitutionally enshrined. Although the central government intends for the system to serve as a gauge for local misconduct, it also sets targets for local cadres to ensure that the number of petitions does not spin out of control (Li, Liu, and O’Brien 2012). Petition is a “veto target” (\textit{yipiao fujue}) in local cadre evaluation. Accordingly, if a petition were successfully lodged in Beijing, even if the probability of petitions yielding successful outcomes is extremely low, it would adversely affect the career prospects of local leaders.

Given the enormous pressure to quash petitions, local officials make all efforts to prevent citizens in their jurisdictions from taking their grievances to Beijing. This creates a demand for professional interceptors. While local governments could send their own officials to do the job, it may not be cost-effective, given transport and lodging expenses. Just as importantly, local officials do not know the city as well as the Beijing-based professionals do. Professionals can also be more effective in handling and dealing with aggrieved citizens. Accordingly, local governments outsource the work of “intercepting” and “retrieving” petitioners to Beijing-based private security personnel. The job of the “interceptors” is to deploy all necessary means to ensnare petitioners before they reach the central petition bureau where petitions are filed. These hired violent agents regularly assault petitioners, detain them illegally in “black jails” or “black houses”, and then haul them back to the
villages. There are also widespread reports of rapes and deaths of petitioners while in custody. xiii

The most highly publicized case of such private security companies is the infamous Anuyuanding security company. The Beijing-based security company was founded by Zhang Jun, a middle-school educated native of Hebei province. He decided to move Beijing in the 1990s in order to “make a living”. In the earlier years, he took on various odd jobs and had a difficult time in Beijing. Though Zhang was a leader of the people’s militia in the village, the security personnel he employed did not seem to have any military or security background. Their profiles were not significantly different from the unemployed hooligans, thugs and gangsters hired for demolition projects. The company made 8.6 million RMB in sales revenue in 2007. In the following year, the company established an “escort” department to provide security service to local governments for handling petitioners. Though it was only one of ten departments in the company, the “escort” business proved to be extremely lucrative and drove the company’s gross revenue up to 21 million RMB in 2008 (Lin and Zhang 2010).

The Beijing government engaged Anuyuanding to provide security protection for dignitaries during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. The company also won several awards from the Beijing Security Service trade association in recognition of its “service excellence” from 2007 to 2009. This may be an indication of the company’s scale among its peers rather than any formal recognition by the Beijing government. However, it is clear that its services traverse between legal and illegal areas.

The company was subject to criminal investigation in 2010 that led to Zhang’s conviction and imprisonment. This came about when a dozen petitioners from various parts of the country who had been abused and illegally detained collectively pleaded to the media to expose their ordeals. The company’s background and its abuse of petitioners became an intense subject of investigative journalism in the Chinese media. xiv
III. Everyday Repression: Privatized State Violence and the Principal-Agent Problem

Authoritarian regimes rely on a plethora of institutions to preserve its coercive power, including the military, the police, and the intelligence agencies (Bellin 2004, 2012). Borrowed violence augments the state’s coercive capacity to gain compliance with its directives and its ability to repress. However, it differs from the traditional coercive institutions that undergird authoritarian states in a few dimensions. First, a private agent as the actor is distinct from the state agents, such as the military and police, connected with political elites. Second, it is a covert as opposed to an overt form of coercion and repression. Following Earl’s definition, overt or observable forms of repression are intended to be known to the public, whereas covert or unobservable repression is intended to be hidden from the public eye (Earl 2003, 48). Common examples of covert coercive repressive measures include anonymous death threats and threatening phone calls to activists (Earl 2003, 50).

This study joins a growing body of literature that addresses why some states prefer using privatized violence as a repressive means. “Privatized state violence, as a subset of state violence, is coercion orchestrated by the state against real or perceived opponents but carried out by nonstate actors, such as vigilantes, paramilitaries, and militias, who are directly or indirectly supported by the government” (Roessler 2005, 209). Carey, Mitchell and Lowe (2013) uncover 281 relationships between the states and pro-government militias in the period 1981-2007 regardless of whether the states chose to formally acknowledge them. These relationships are present in economically undeveloped states, such as Sudan and Haiti, as well as in more developed states, such as South Africa and Chile. They can also be found in autocracies, such as Myanmar and Zimbabwe, and in procedural democracies, such as India and Turkey. This study contributes to the literature on privatized state violence showing that, in addition to paramilitaries and militias, the state can also engage thugs, gangsters and criminal groups to perpetuate violence.
While militia groups and paramilitaries are used to fight wars and for ethnic cleansing purposes, thugs and gangsters are hired to engage in the everyday politics of policy execution and overt repression.

Table 1 differentiates physical control of and purpose in the use of violence by “public” and “private” domains. The most legitimate use of violence is deployed by public agents, namely, the police and military, for the public purposes of protecting its borders or citizens. At the end of the spectrum is violence used by private entities, such as mafias, organized crime groups, and private militias, for the private purposes of decimating opponents and protecting their turf or commercial interests. The crossover between public and private purposes and the use of violence are the most contentious. The top right-hand quadrant represents the realm of privatized state violence, when the state engages thugs, paramilitaries, militia groups, or vigilantes to fulfill public objectives. The state’s engagement of private violent agents could take the form of providing weapons, personnel, logistics, intelligence, or financial sponsorship or refusing to quell violent and repressive activities of these groups (Roessler 2005, 209).

### Table 1. Public vs. Private Deployment of Violence & Purposes

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<tr>
<th>A. Physical Control</th>
<th>A1) Public</th>
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<td>B. Purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td>B1) Public</td>
<td>Police, military</td>
<td>State use of private agents, such as thugs, militias, and vigilantes to carry out violence for public purposes</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B2) Private</td>
<td>Public officials’ use of violence for private purposes</td>
<td>Mafias, organized crime groups</td>
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Source: Author’s analysis.

Why do some states prefer using private agents to execute violent repression and to fight wars? Existing studies point to the advantage of reduced liability of third-party violence. In a study of regimes’ use of militias in genocide, Alvarez (2006) argues
that “the first obvious benefit to relying on paramilitary group is deniability. The military and police forces of a nation are always overtly an official and recognizable branch of the state. There is no concealing the fact they are representatives of the government and their involvement in genocide makes clear the role of the government in the murder of the targeted population which those regimes are often at pain to conceal ...” (Alvarez 2006, 17) Typically, weak democracies and those countries reliant on foreign aid from democracies are more likely to engage in privatized state violence in order to maintain a veneer of legitimacy and accountability in the eyes of the donor countries (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). Studies have also found such evidence in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America (Mazzei 2009; Stanley 1996).

The present study differs from the existing literature in that it is local states, rather than national states, that use third parties to perpetuate violence. Notwithstanding that fact, a similar question could be asked of the rationale for privatized state violence by local states. We argue that local authorities in China are similarly concerned with maintaining a veneer of legitimacy—but in the eyes of the central government. The use of violence in housing demolition, land expropriation, and intercepting petitioners has never been formally sanctioned by the central authority, though it is unlawful, and its widespread use is widely known. Although the central government may be complicit by condoning the behavior of local officials, it falls far short of sanctioning local use of violence. To be sure, the State Council, China’s equivalent of a cabinet, issued a regulation in 2011 entitled “Regulations on the Expropriation of Houses on State-owned Land and Compensation” that prohibits forced evictions of any kind, including cutting off the utility supplies of occupiers, demolition by implication, and the use of brute force. However, this regulation is rarely observed and enforcement is non-existent. By the same token, private security and “black jails”, instead of local police or armed personnel, are used against petitioners because the rights of Chinese citizens to petition are recognized by the law and by the central government.
When caught red-handed, third-party agents allow local governments to shift responsibility more easily. In an urban village in Zhengzhou that we visited in 2014, the villagers resisting evictions had violently clashed with local government-linked personnel and thugs, which had resulted in the death of an elderly woman and scores of injuries. The violent clash was recorded by closed-circuit televisions privately installed by villagers. When the higher-up governments pressed for the culprits responsible for the casualties, the village authority claimed that the violent agents, who were not wearing official uniforms, were not part of its administration and were not on its payroll. Thus, with that, village leaders were able to shrug off responsibility. This is all too common in the thousands of housing demolition and land expropriation cases occurring across China every year. Amnesty International (2012) has documented dozens of demolition cases involving thuggish violence and human rights violations in extensive detail.

The fact that delegation of authority results in agency problems is well known in economics and political science (Spence and Zeckhauser 1971; Weingast and Moran 1983; Miller 2005). When private militias are engaged by the state as an agent for repression purposes, studies have found strong evidence of agent-centered human rights violations, such as excessive violence and sexual abuse of repressed citizens (Mitchell 2004; Bohara et al., n.d.; Alison Brysk 2014; Campbell and Brenner 2002). Indeed, hired thugs and security personnel in China could be and have been abusive to the repressed targets. Excesses in their behavior could be privately motivated in ways that go beyond the instruction of the principal. These agent-centered violations explain the routineness of excessive violence used against evictees and petitioners. It also sheds light on why sexual violence, an arguably unnecessary measure for intercepting petitioners, is common among captives of “black jails”.

However, the logic of delegation giving rise to moral hazard can be similarly applied to the principals (Miller 2005; Mitchell 2004; Poth and Selck 2009). Because governments who have working relationships with private militias are usually
punished by the international community, in the form of naming and shaming, withholding foreign aid, reducing trade relationships, or excluding from international organizations, claims of information asymmetry and divergence of objectives variance can become a strategic advantage—rather than a problem—for the principals (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014). Accordingly, local governments in China, the principal, may intentionally engage agents with penchants for violence and exercise *loose* control over them. Agents provide opportunities for the principals to shift the blame if and when higher-level authorities decide to press for responsibility.

The use of third-party agents in repression also allows the central government to deny culpability under the watchful eyes of the international community. In preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo, hundreds of thousands of residents in both cities were forcibly evicted from their homes to make way for construction. While the world’s spotlight was on China for “coming of age” as the host of these glamorous international events, thousands of citizens endured human rights violations. Housing rights advocates and other human rights activists were silenced through beatings, intimidation, and detention. Petitioners who tried to bring their grievances to the central petition bureau were violently rounded up and illegally detained at “black jails”. The Chinese government flatly denied the existence of “black jails” when questioned by a foreign correspondent in a press briefing in June 2009.

Privatized state violence and extralegal channels of detention enabled (local) state agents to carry out these egregious acts, while allowing the central state to avoid condemnation by the international community. The extralegal “black jails” emerged after the abolition of the official custody-and-repatriation centers (*shourong qiansong zhongxin*) in 2003, after a migrant worker infamously died while in custody. Before the closure, the official detention system was used to hold captive petitioners and dissidents, along with beggars and vagrants whom the authorities wanted to keep off the streets. The prevalence of “black jails” can also be
attributed to the “petition ranking system” introduced by the central government in 2004. This system, which ranked all provinces according to the number of “non-normal petition cases”, was intended to put pressure on local authorities to limit the number of petitioners from their jurisdictions. It was the central government that made petition cases a “veto target” in the cadre evaluation system. The system punished local officials who failed to maintain “social stability” by their failure to prevent disgruntled citizens from lodging complaints in Beijing. Extralegal violence and channels therefore serve the interests of both central and local authorities alike—they are effective repression tools but also allow the governments to dissociate themselves at the same time.

Notwithstanding that fact, state legitimacy and trust in government necessarily suffer as a consequence of covert violent repression. This is particularly the case for local officials who directly engage violent repression. During our numerous field visits to villages and communities that have endured violence ordered by the local government, we heard unflattering and debasing adjectives, such as “Communist thugs” (gongfei) and “bandits” (tufei), used to describe local officials. We were repeatedly told by the victims of local government violence that, “we would rather be lackeys for the Japanese, then be the subject of the local authorities.” In a country where the citizens had endured enormous humiliation and hardships under the Japanese colonization and where anti-Japanese sentiment still run high, the greater disdain and indignation for local officials is telling. Other informants told us that, “we would rather return to the Kuomintang rule!”

Existing literature suggests that local repression can also negatively affect the trust of the citizenry in the central government. Weakening trust in the center in turn induces further citizen activism and radical actions. Li (2008) argues that petitioning in Beijing becomes “a moment of truth” for those who have indeed participated in it. Citizens who have had experience channeling their grievances through the center-endorsed petitioning system “have seen through the central government’s duplicity (of sanctioning citizen’s lodging claims on the one hand, and
tacitly approving local government’s crackdowns on the other), as they became doubtful about the center when they suffered repression by local governments.”

Furthermore, owing to the covert nature of the repressive measures, the central government can fend off pressure from the media or citizenry that might otherwise compel it to give in to protestors’ demands. Distrust in the center’s commitment to uphold justice and the enduring local abuses tend to induce more confrontational and disruptive popular actions, such as street protests and riots, which pose further threats to social stability.

**IV. Conclusions**

This study introduces a new dimension to the literature on state repression—the use of thugs and gangsters as a form of privatized state violence. Under certain circumstances, states prefer using violence executed by hired thugs, instead of their own military or police officials, to execute policies and perform repressive actions. In China, alongside “relational repression”, monetary exchange for social stability, and a security state, “thugs-for-hire” is another instrument in the authoritarian state’s repressive toolkit. Under certain conditions, “thugs-for-hire” has proved to be the most efficient, effective and evasive repressive measure.

To be sure, authoritarian regimes are not the only states that utilize criminal groups for repressive purpose. Hybrid regimes have used similar strategies, such as the employment of vigilante sportsmen ‘skinheads’ or Titushky by Yanukovych’s Party of Regions to attack political opponents, journalists and activists. There are also historical precedents of the state’s use of gangsters to suppress oppositional movements in China. In recent history, the Kuomintang (KMT) instrumentally co-opted the Green Gang to brutally suppress Communist opponents in Shanghai in 1927 when its force was too weak to do so.

We contend that employing “thugs-for-hire” comes at a cost for the authoritarian regime in China—falling legitimacy and trust in both the local and central
governments for those who have been disenfranchised by the formal institutions. Third-party violent agents may have augmented the state’s coercive power, but they are not part of the state’s permanent infrastructure that governs its citizenry. In Michael Mann’s term, “thugs-for-hire” augments the state’s “despotic power”, as opposed to “infrastructural power” (Mann 1984). Slater and Fenner (2011) differentiates between coercive institutions that are disciplined, such as the military, and those that are undisciplined, such as random third-party violence. Disciplined coercive institutions are capable of deploying violence in a “controlled manner” that does not go beyond “specified targets and limits” (Slater and Fenner 2011, 20). They are part of the state’s infrastructural power that sustains authoritarian regime durability (Slater and Fenner 2011; Bellin 2004).

The military is a permanent institution, which undergirds the infrastructural power of authoritarian states. It is also part of the power configuration between the state and society. After the Tiananmen Incident, society can reasonably expect that whoever is in charge of the Central Military Commission holds the ultimate decision-making in deploying the coercive forces. This expectation makes for a durable and stable regime.

States have to rely on third-party violence because they are fundamentally weak: without co-opting the extralegal coercive forces of violent agents, they are incapable of executing everyday policy and repression. As John Lucas (1998) has argued, when autocrats face trade-offs between infrastructural and despotic powers, those in weak states tend to choose to persistently rely on their despotic power. Reliance on third-party random violence bolsters only the regime’s despotic power and contributes nothing to strengthening its infrastructural capacity to govern. Furthermore, when a weak state deploys extralegal coercive force to get its jobs done, the very act of doing so contributes to further weakness. Weak states beget weak states. When a state has lost its legitimacy in the entirety, it will have to resort to more and harsher repressive measures. It is a vicious cycle that weakens regime durability in the long run.
We do not rule out the state use of violence in a wide range of scenarios, but we believe it is most commonly used when dealing with these subjects.

Local governments here refer to county, township and village authorities. Unlike value-added tax and other formal taxes, land-sales revenues collected by these municipal and local governments are not subject to sharing with the central and provincial governments. For more details, see (Tao 2014).

The law states that county governments (a level above township, and two levels above village authorities) have the right to approve land expropriation projects because of the central government’s policy objective of protecting arable land areas for the purpose of food sufficiency. When land is expropriated illegally, grassroots officials can pocket a substantial proportion of the proceeds that would have otherwise gone to government coffers.

Yuanhuang Zhang, “Zhongguo you zuzhi fanzui de fazhan xianzhuang ji lifa wanshan duice” [Current development of China’s organized crime and measures for legislative improvement], Fazhi yanjiu, no. 2 (2012).

Township and village governments’ engagement of gangs in the collection of rural taxes and fees is documented in great detail in Chen (2010). See (Baifeng Chen 2010).

For examples of media reports on this, see (Jacobs 2009, 2012).

Lin and Zhang 2010; Long and Yang 2010.

Alvarez 2006.

State Council 2011.

See (Spence and Zeckhauser 1971; Weingast and Moran 1983; Miller 2005).

Campbell and Brenner 2002.

(Standing Their Ground: Thousands Face Violent Eviction in China 2012, 31).

(Standing Their Ground: Thousands Face Violent Eviction in China 2012, 146-7).

Perhaps it was no coincidence that two foreign journalists, Melissa Chan of Al Jazeera and Chris Buckley of Reuters, who investigated these extralegal detention centers, were expelled from the country and had their reporter permits revoked by Beijing. See (An Alleyway in Hell 2009; Al Jazeera 2012; R. Xia, n.d.).

We have heard this description in villages from Sichuan to Henan provinces. In Chinese, ninyuan dang ribenren de zougou, yebu yuanyi bei difang zhengfu guanzhi.

The Kuomintang (KMT) party ruled China during the Republican era before being defeated by the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao during the civil war.

Li’s survey results show that regardless of the petition outcome, petitioners who had been to Beijing were 31.2 percent less likely to agree that the center truly cared about farmers than those who had not, 40.8 percent less likely to agree that the center welcomed farmers to petition, and 46.5 percent less likely to agree that petitioning Beijing was very useful.
On the argument of the costs and benefits of repression and concessions within a multi-level government, see (Cai 2008).

See (Li 2008; X. Chen 2011).

(Deng and O’Brien 2013).

(Lee and Zhang 2013).

(Y. Wang and Minzner 2015).

(Levitsky and Way 2010).

(Kuzio 2014).