CONSTRUCTIVE CITIZENSHIP
IN URBAN CHINA

Introduction

Zhang Chengde had a problem. Or, rather, he noticed that other people had a problem. South of the Huafa New City apartment complex, people were jaywalking across a busy six-lane avenue to get to the bus stop on the other side, creating a danger for drivers and pedestrians alike. On 16 September 2019, Zhang navigated to the online Mayor’s Mailbox portal of his home city, Zhuhai, and wrote an open letter to the city government describing the situation. He proposed two solutions to reduce the risk of an accident: first, build a pedestrian overpass so that traffic can flow smoothly while pedestrians cross; and, second, build a fence or hedge on the avenue’s median strip to deter jaywalkers. Building a stop light and crosswalk, he concluded, was also possible, but not feasible given the volume of traffic.

In a democratic context, we might say that Zhang Chengde was a model of active citizenship: he identified a problem, contacted the mayor, and put forward his own informed, reasoned suggestions about how to reach a solution. Yet the growing literature on rights consciousness, legal consciousness, and contention would relegate him to the background. Zhang is not denouncing the government, much less calling for new rights and protections. He is not even calling on city leaders to enforce existing laws and regulations (O’Brien 1996). If Zhang Chengde were an outlier, one could dismiss his letter as an interesting detail in an otherwise contentious polity. But a close examination of other letters in the Mayor’s Mailbox system suggests that Zhang’s behaviour is at least as important as contentious opposition.

I term this type of behaviour ‘constructive citizenship’, and its practitioners ‘constructive citizens’. Three definitional characteristics separate constructive citizenship from subjecthood, on the one hand, and from contention, on the other. First, and most importantly, constructive citizens see the state–citizen relationship in positive-sum terms. Rather than fighting against the state to defend their rights or property, they pursue win-win outcomes, advocating for policy changes that benefit both the local leadership and the general public. Second, constructive citizens show a public-spirited concern for issues that transcend their immediate well-being: in other words, a civic consciousness. And, third, rather than resorting to threats or flattery, constructive citizens attempt to earn the support of government officials through rational persuasion. Implicitly, this latter aspect suggests a high sense of political efficacy, and a belief that the government should, or will, respond to citizen input.
In the chapter that follows, I first review the literature on citizenship, with a focus on the distinction between ‘active’ and ‘activist’ citizenship. Activist citizenship, encompassing rights consciousness and contention, has drawn more attention in studies of authoritarian politics, despite important work on the former. Next, I elaborate my definition of constructive citizenship, supporting it with evidence drawn from a sample of 200 citizen letters submitted to Chinese ‘Mayor’s Mailbox’ websites. While constructive citizenship may lack contention, it is distinct from subjecthood, positioning the writer as an empowered, active citizen. I then outline constructive citizenship’s relationship to other definitions of citizenship in the literature, and lay out its broader implications for regime stability.

State–citizen relations in the literature

Before establishing that constructive citizenship is citizenship, one must first establish what citizenship is. In T. H. Marshall’s (1950) foundational framework, governments grant civil, political, and social rights, and these top-down reforms create civil, political, and social citizenships. Other scholars have extended this framework by identifying different orderings and combinations of these rights categories (Mann 1987) and by documenting the erosion of social citizenship under neoliberal reform (Turner 2001).

Critics of Marshall’s framework argue that it compresses the population into a citizen–noncitizen dichotomy, neglects the agency of would-be citizens fighting for their rights, and too strongly identifies citizenship with the nation-state (Isin 2009; Isin and Nyers 2014; Weber 2008). Efforts to move beyond it have pushed in two similar but diverging directions, which Isin (2009) terms ‘active’ and ‘activist’. In this dichotomy, active citizens play out accepted roles and scripts in society, while activist citizens seek to contest and rewrite those scripts (Isin 2009; Isin and Engin 2014; Neveu 2014). Active citizenship can take the form of political participation (Brannan et al. 2006: 993; Callahan 1999; Callahan 2007: 1181), such as turning out at elections and attending town hall meetings. It also encompasses community volunteer work in which NGOs and family members take on welfare provision duties normally reserved for the state (Fuller, Kershaw, and Pulkingham 2008; Kearns 1995; Turner 2001). These opportunities and obligations are prescribed in a top-down manner, but active citizens embrace them out of a voluntary, bottom-up sense of consciousness or civic duty.

Activist citizenship also involves participation, but in this case the goal is to carve out new roles and redefine existing ones (Isin 2009; Isin and Nyers 2014). Immigrants and refugees who mobilize to demand fair treatment and new rights can thus be understood as ‘citizens’, even when they lack citizenship in the conventional sense of a passport and identity card (Rygiel 2014; Shindo 2014). Many scholars in this approach seek to place the margins at the centre, arguing that ‘the potential power of citizenship lies not here [among those with formal rights] but, rather, in the potential to move individuals to act and to disrupt the normal order of things. A sense of contestation, challenge, or resistance is central to the understanding of citizenship’ (Rygiel 2014: 41). In other words, the activist citizenship approach focuses on the ‘right to claim rights’ (Isin 2009: 371). For all their differences, however, ‘active’ and ‘activist’ definitions define citizens in terms of their behaviour and consciousness rather than their formal rights. A person who is given the right to vote but does not exercise it is not behaving as an active citizen.

Some scholars have applied active citizenship, or related concepts, to modernizing states in East Asia. Meiji Japan, late Joseon Korea (Moon 2014), and late Qing China (Guo 2014) all sought to mobilize their passive, traditional populations to resist colonial encroachment. Chinese reformer Liang Qichao excoriated the mentality of the closed-minded subject who
‘regards national affairs as none of his business, even [if] his motherland is in the abyss of humiliation and calamity, he is totally indifferent’ (quoted in Guo 2014: 368), and contrasted this with the citizen who ‘cares for his state and holds political affairs in high esteem’ (Guo 2014: 368).

In the post-war era, the same northeast Asian states mobilized their populations as ‘developmental citizens’ (Chang 2012, 2020; Moon, 2014; Yoon 2020). Developmental citizenship might be thought of as a weak form of social citizenship, which focuses on the right to become rich through one’s own efforts (Chang 2020). But the main emphasis is on obligations, particularly the obligation to work hard in the name of national economic development. While Mao’s Communist Party demanded a high level of class-based participation in political meetings (Townsend 1967), Deng Xiaoping embraced the developmentalist model to build support for economic reform (Chang 2020). Hu Jintao later passed on input opportunities and social responsibilities to NGOs and other neighbourhood organizations (Teets 2013; Xia and Guan 2017). The latter strategy forms an interesting parallel with UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s promotion of active citizenship, which likewise sought to offload welfare responsibilities onto volunteer organizations (Fuller et al. 2008; Kearns 1995). And over the course of the same period, local People’s Congress deputies placed growing importance on the task of bringing citizen complaints to higher leaders’ attention (O’Brien 1994; Truex 2016). Far from emerging naturally from subjecthood, active citizenship in China emerged from more than a century of elite mobilization and economic change.

Most literature on authoritarian citizenship, however, has approached it through the lens of activist citizenship. Case studies of protests against tree-felling in Hanoi (Gillespie and Nguyen 2019) and Palestinian demands for equal rights in Israel (Sa’idi 2015) have defined citizens as people who exercise claims to rights which they do not yet have. China scholars have shown a particularly strong interest in studying people who ‘[act] like citizens before they are citizens’ (O’Brien 2001: 425) by exercising and defending a right before the regime agrees to respect it. Writing 20 years later, Mobrand (2020: 952) describes a similar dynamic in the building of illicit schools for migrants’ children: ‘Demands are made not on the basis of acknowledged rights, nor to contest the allocation of rights, but through responses to situations that have arisen’. Indeed, Chinese migrant workers have drawn particular attention in their struggle for urban citizenship (Solinger 1999; Swider 2015; Yoon 2020), which parallels immigrants’ struggle for belonging elsewhere (Rygiel 2014). Echoes of the immigration-assimilation debate also run through the scholarship on China’s religious and ethnic minorities, who struggle to carve out new acceptable niches for religious activism and who appropriate the regime’s rhetoric to protest its policies (McCarthy 2013; Woodman 2017; Yang 2017; Yi 2016). Nor is this approach limited to the most marginalized circles of society. From the Democracy Wall in Beijing (Goldman 2002) to the Lennon Walls in Hong Kong (Wong and So 2020), scholars have understood good citizenship among Chinese intellectuals as opposition to the overreach of the Communist Party of China (CPC). And much of the literature on ‘rights consciousness’ (Li 2010; Lorentzen and Scoggins 2015), ‘rules consciousness’ (Li 2010; Perry 2009), and ‘legal citizenship’ (Distelhorst and Fu 2019; Gallagher 2017), though not always explicitly linked to the citizenship literature, revolves around a debate about whether the Chinese public is increasingly asserting itself in conflicts with the state, either to demand new rights or to protect existing ones.

My aim in this chapter is not to argue that activist citizenship is a flawed concept, much less that contentious activism does not exist in China. On the contrary, my findings mesh well with the notion that China, like any major polity, is heterogeneous in the way that residents view and experience it: there are both active and activist citizens among the country’s 1.4 billion people. But just as scholars of activist citizenship once claimed that their approach was neglected in the citizenship literature (Isin 2009), the literature on activist citizenship and associated concepts in
China risks overlooking a large domain of active citizenship – including that which I here term ‘constructive citizenship’.

**Methods and data**

I draw evidence of constructive citizenship from the Mayor’s Mailbox (shizhang xinxiang), an e-portal on Chinese local government websites, which allows users to submit a proposal, complaint, or inquiry. The local government then writes a reply, and posts the paired letters and replies in a list on the same website. From the late 1990s onward, a series of central directives urged county-, prefecture-, and province-level governments to set up official websites and solicit citizen input online (Chen et al. 2015). A number of empirical studies have drawn on the Mayor’s Mailbox system, either to submit simulated letters as a test of response rates (Chen et al. 2015; Distelhorst and Hou 2014, 2017) or to examine the content of actual letters in the public record (Distelhorst and Fu 2019).

To adequately capture regional variation in Mayor’s Mailbox letters, I randomly sampled 20 prefecture-level units² from across China,³ stratifying on GDP per capita to ensure that the sample is representative on level of development. This step ensures that the sample adequately represents China’s regional economic diversity: the richest unit in the sample, Zhuhai, is a full order of magnitude wealthier than the poorest, Linxia Autonomous Prefecture. For each sampled unit, I navigated to the local government website and sampled ten archived Mayor’s Mailbox letters from throughout 2019. The resulting 200 letters thus span a broad cross-section of Chinese society, from poor interior cities to wealthy coastal ones. Each sampled unit also contains a mix of urban and rural residents, as the administrative boundaries of Chinese cities extend far out into the suburbs and countryside. Thus, while I use the terms ‘prefecture-level’ and ‘city’ interchangeably in this chapter, the sampled letters come from villagers as well as urbanites.

**Unpacking the definition**

Constructive citizenship, as I define it, is a subtype of active citizenship. That is, all constructive citizens are active citizens, but not all active citizens are constructive citizens. By making this statement, I advance two claims. First, constructive citizenship is mostly performed through established institutional channels, and it does not fundamentally challenge the set of roles and rights recognized by the regime. Thus, it is not activist citizenship as Isin (2009) defines it. Second, constructive citizenship does entail voluntarily engaging in a political process with the goal of bettering one’s country or community. It satisfies the definition of active citizenship used by contemporary scholars (Callahan 2007; Turner 2001), and it meets Liang Qichao’s own aspirations for a politically conscious Chinese populace (Guo 2014). Thus, while it is not activist citizenship, it is still citizenship as opposed to subjecthood.

I also treat constructive citizenship as a performance. When posting a letter on the Mayor’s Mailbox, a citizen who does not privately see the state–society relationship in positive-sum terms might still frame their complaint in this way in the hopes of getting a more favourable response. If the performance is conducted well, genuine and falsified belief are indistinguishable to an observer. This caveat, however, does not undermine the value of the concept. All social behaviour is ultimately performative, and these performances ultimately constitute one’s sense of self (Goffman 1959). Furthermore, even if we understand ‘public transcripts’ (Scott 1990) as something that differs from ‘hidden’ ones, the former type is still important for understanding how people choose to engage with those in power (Distelhorst and Fu 2019). As O’Brien
Constructive citizenship in urban China

(2013) notes, there is a similar debate over the extent to which rightful resistance reflects genuine belief in pro-regime rhetoric or masks nascent anti-regime action, but the concept remains useful in the China field. Indeed, many scholars of citizenship treat performance as an integral component of the definition (Isin and Nyers 2014; Rygiel 2014), even when this performance is anti-establishment.

**Pareto optimization**

The key hallmark of constructive citizenship is that constructive citizens view the state–society relationship in positive-sum terms. In game-theoretic language, one might say that, rather than struggling to maximize their share of a fixed pool of resources claimed by the state, they aim to move the current pool of resources closer to the Pareto frontier, or even expand the frontier itself. In other words, constructive citizens look for Pareto improvements: solutions that allow both state and society to benefit, or that deliver benefits to one at no cost to the other. At a minimum, this means focusing on issue areas where it is possible to improve the well-being of the general public at a minimal cost to the state. A great deal of ‘low politics’ falls into this category: bus routes, road repairs, school testing schedules, and the like. In some cases, the citizen makes the low cost of helping the public explicit:

Here I would like to earnestly request that the government coordinate with the public transportation company to plan a bus stop next to the back gate of Houmingfeng neighborhood, so the masses can travel more conveniently. Or maybe the public transportation company can let residents of the surrounding area ride until they get to the back gate of Houmingfeng, because the Line 1 bus has to turn around behind the back gate of Houmingfeng neighborhood. Letting the passengers get off there won’t increase the burden on the government, and won’t increase running costs for the public transportation company. I hope the government and public transportation company can think over this proposal in the spirit of serving the masses and making things convenient for the masses.4

Constructive citizens may also go a step further by portraying their policy ideas as win-win solutions, explaining how local leaders can meet ideological and practical goals by following the citizen’s input. This may stem from a genuine public-spirited interest in forwarding national goals, or it may be a tactical effort to win over policymakers: economic growth, public safety, and cleanliness are weighted heavily on cadre evaluation forms (Ang 2016: 117–122).

In the wake of the warming weather, the people walking dogs in Liaohe Wetland Park are more and more numerous. However, when walking a dog without a leash, the dog will pee and poop wherever it wants, bark and bother the people and other uncivilized doglike behaviors, not only influencing the people’s everyday life and public safety, but also bringing along many social problems. To defend Panjin’s image as a National Civilized City, I ask that the public security forces and other departments adopt practical measures, to resolve this worry on the masses’ minds.5

I hope Mayor Chen can adequately increase our investment-promotion effort for large-scale monomer production. Neijiang’s traditional industries of steel and cement are already classified as lagging production capacity, they are no longer in keeping with the needs of new-age economic development… we should fight to obtain
supraprovincial land, capital, taxes, and so on, every kind of favorable policy, to increase investment attraction efforts to attract large-scale monomer production companies to settle in Neijiang. If industry is prospering, then Neijiang is prospering. That way Neijiang’s place in the province-wide industrial revitalization will be just around the corner!\[16\]

Before moving on, it is important to stress two key caveats about this aspect of the definition. First, with the metaphor of Pareto improvement, I am referring to an imagined scenario in which state and society are unitary actors or at least social aggregates. In some cases, a constructive citizen’s letter may request that the government take action against some individual in society: crack down on a fraudulent business, clean up a run-down neighbourhood, instruct a construction team to stop working at night. These solutions entail helping some citizens at a cost to others. Nor is the local state a unitary actor: a policy change that comes at minimal cost to the mayor might come at a larger cost to the construction bureau or a particular police station. Rather, by Pareto improvement, I mean that the citizen believes society as a whole will benefit from these changes, and the local government as a whole will benefit as well. Thus the goal is a win-win deal for state and society as aggregates, if not for all individuals within those aggregates.

Second, I define win-win improvement in terms of the citizen’s own belief about a better society, not in terms of any objective measure. To present an extreme example, the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward did more harm than good to Chinese society; yet many of the activists who drove these radical movements believed that they were fighting to usher in a better society. Indeed, the fact that activists later felt ‘cheated’ by Mao and the Gang of Four suggests that ‘many “blind followers” joined the Red Guards because they believed they were doing their civic duty for society’ (Shi 1997: 200). Thus, Red Guards who independently attacked class enemies out of a belief that society would benefit can be counted as constructive citizens. The definition does, however, leave out cynical regime agents who believe that popular needs must be sacrificed to further state goals. In the latter case, the citizen seeks not a Pareto improvement, but a change that increases the state’s share of a fixed resource pool.

Civic consciousness

A positive-sum outlook on state–society relations is necessary to establish an outlook as constructive, but it is not sufficient to establish it as citizenship. A politically withdrawn subject who trusts enlightened despots and educated technocrats to make the right decisions for him is not behaving as a constructive citizen, even if he believes that those decisions will benefit everyone. It is the following two characteristics – a public-spirited concern with improving the quality of governance, and a preference for reasoned persuasion – which establish constructive citizenship as participatory, that is, as citizenship.

Concern for local public affairs features prominently in the literature on active citizenship. Active citizens may directly engage in volunteer work to help others in their communities (Brannan et al. 2006; Kearns 1995). Concern for the well-being of one’s country also ranked high on the list of characteristics that late-Qing (Guo 2014) and late-Joseon (Moon 2014) reformers sought to inspire among their citizens. Across these diverse approaches, to be a citizen is to care about national or even just local affairs, and to advocate for changing or preserving policy in the interest of the greater good. Complaints about the city’s image and reputation are the easiest to distinguish as civic-minded, that is, as motivated by something beyond material self-interest:
Party Secretary Ma, I heard our city is currently vigorously pursuing a national-level designation as a healthy city, and indeed the city’s appearance has undergone great changes lately, the city is clean, the air is clean, but every time I ride Line 2 past People’s Park and the middle school entrance, everywhere there are cracked houses, construction trash, and some small slums. This affects the whole city’s image, it reduces the city’s appearance of good taste. I hope you can adopt measures to make it more beautiful.⁷

At Liuye Street No. 68 Unit 5, the sanitation situation at the entrance facing the alley is relatively bad, sewage is overflowing, garbage is piled up. Miscellaneous goods are piled up in the space between buildings, there is a fire safety risk, the ventilation fans in food and drink shops also directly open into the alley between buildings. In short, the health and safety situation is relatively bad, there is danger, I hope the relevant bureaus can help resolve it.⁸

The boundary between self-interest and public interest is not always so clear-cut. A citizen demanding a bus route to an isolated village might present his proposal as the collective concern of all villagers, but he no doubt stands to benefit personally from a more convenient commute. Likewise, a citizen who asks about how to draw money from a pension fund might be concerned only with her immediate family, but if the local authorities post their response publicly, it could help hundreds of other people navigate the same process. Changes in public policy often generate individual benefits, and individual constituency-service requests often generate public externalities. Citizens may also begin with a self-interested complaint, and come to see its broader implications over time (Li et al. 2012).

Yet it is still possible to draw a conceptual line between activism that is self-oriented and activism that is public-oriented. On the selfish side, Shi (1997) notes that work-unit politics often involve conflicts over finite resources: if a boss is allocating five new apartments among 50 workers, then every worker who successfully cajoles his boss into handing one over is denying that apartment to the co-worker who would have received it with impartial allocation. Thus, not all selfish activism generates positive spillovers for the rest of society. Furthermore, from a performative standpoint, what matters is that constructive citizens frame their request as something that would benefit society at large. Even if a mother is mainly concerned about her own child’s health, if she focuses her letter on how unlicensed food vendors can cause children in the entire preschool to get sick,⁹ she is behaving as a constructive citizen.

**Political efficacy**

The third trait that establishes constructive citizenship as active citizenship is a high sense of political efficacy. This is the most subtle feature of the concept, but also one of the most interesting. To see why, one need only contrast it with Distelhorst and Fu’s (2019) typology of performances. Subjects believe that they must praise and flatter their leaders in order to win their sympathy. Legal citizens believe that they must coerce the government into responding by invoking the rule of law and threatening legal action. And even socialist citizens, motivated by a reciprocal model of state–society obligations, present an implicit threat of protest or non-compliance if their demands are not met. As diverse as these approaches are, they are united by the belief that the government will only respond if coerced or cajoled into doing so.

A performer of constructive citizenship, by contrast, sets out to convince the authorities through reason and persuasion. In the stronger case, this means building an argument that
the local leadership can benefit by following through on the recommended policy – that is, making the Pareto benefits explicit. A new airport will not only reduce crowds and delays at the existing facility, but also better integrate the city into regional travel networks, boosting economic growth.\textsuperscript{10} Better integration of technology into the agricultural sector can raise productivity by helping sellers find buyers and monitor their crops.\textsuperscript{11} Given the importance of economic growth and crop yields in the cadre evaluation system, this makes the benefits to city leaders explicit. Alternatively, the writer might focus on explaining the society-side benefits: reduced stress for students, easier commuting for workers, sounder sleep for residents. In other cases, the complaint or proposal is left to stand for itself: it is enough to announce that a pothole exists, and the government will surely fix it. This is the case in the following letters, which are reproduced in their entirety:

Title: The flags outside the door of Huaxia Entertainment’s Zhongwei business hall are not hung properly.

Contents: The flag is the national emblem, I hope you can hang the flags properly.\textsuperscript{12}

Please start using a traffic light at the intersection of Cuibing Road and Cuiwei West Road.\textsuperscript{13}

The signal light at the intersection of Mudan Road and Songtanghe Road has been broken for some time now, the traffic light’s countdown doesn’t light up half the time, causing many tailgate accidents, would the relevant bureaus please check and repair it as fast as possible!\textsuperscript{14}

The implication in such short letters is that participatory institutions ‘work’, and local leaders will follow through on a suggestion as long as the citizen presents a reasonably solid case that it is a good idea. There is no need to grovel, protest, or threaten a lawsuit in order to get the gears turning. In short, a letter-writer’s decision to frame their letter in terms of constructive citizenship demonstrates a high sense of one’s own political efficacy, and a judgment that the government is likely to respond well to such framing. Just as a rise in performances of legal citizenship suggests an increase in legal literacy, a rise in performances of constructive citizenship suggests growing faith in state capacity and state responsiveness.

**Situating constructive citizenship in the conceptual landscape**

Figure 14.1 situates constructive citizenship within a hierarchy of concepts in the literature. This hierarchy is only indicative, not exhaustive. As I have argued above, constructive citizenship is a form of citizenship as opposed to subjecthood. More specifically, it is a sub-type of active citizenship. Yet it stands in contrast to many kinds of activist citizenship, in that constructive citizens work within permitted roles and scripts and even work to further policymakers’ goals.

As a form of active citizenship, constructive citizenship exists alongside developmental citizenship and reproductive citizenship, as well as other forms of citizen participation in the literature. At the same time, it is distinct from both of these concepts. Developmental citizenship shares a positive-sum view of the state–society relationship, but focuses on the citizen’s duty to directly engage in economic activity, that is, to pursue their own economic self-interest (Chang 2020), while reproductive citizenship focuses specifically on childbearing and child-rearing.
Constructive citizenship in urban China

Constructive citizenship is broader, and here covers the act of submitting complaints and proposals to local government authorities, which echoes widely accepted definitions of political participation (Brady 1999: 737; Callahan 2007: 1181; Shi 1997: 21–22). These differences, however, pale in comparison to the differences separating constructive citizenship from the citizenships on the other branch of the tree. It stands far apart from the two types of citizenship that Distelhorst and Fu (2019) document in their sample of Mayor’s Mailbox letters, i.e. legal and socialist (or reciprocal15) citizenship. It also contrasts with transgressive citizenship (Rygiel 2014), in that constructive citizens are challenging neither state-designated roles nor nation-state borders.

Constructive citizenship bears some resemblance to Tsai’s (2015) concept of constructive noncompliance. Indeed, most constructive non compliers believe that the local government is well-intentioned and will correct a policy if people signal a problem by ‘voting with their feet’ (Tsai 2015: 257–263). Yet constructive noncompliance is ultimately a method of participation, rather than a performance, and activist citizens could also use it to push for their own goals. Rightful resistance (O’Brien 1996, 2013) is another tactic that cuts across both branches of the citizenship tree. With respect to the national government, rightful resisters may be behaving as constructive citizens: they assert that the people would be better off if the central government’s laws are enforced, and they take up action with regard to both personal and public issues. Yet in protesting and petitioning against the local government, they often take on a more zero-sum approach. These cross-cutting strategies and conditional similarities are a useful reminder that all labels in the tree are ultimately ideal-types: any mix of types can exist in a society, and an individual citizen can always cross between performances or even blend them in a single act.

Finally, it is important to stress that constructive citizenship is not merely subjecthood by another name. In the Mayor’s Mailbox, performances of subjecthood typically entail presenting oneself as weak, humble, and lacking in expertise, while inviting the ‘master mayor’ (shizhang daren) to ‘take charge of us’ (gei women zuozhu) (Distelhorst and Fu 2019: 112). Similarly, Almond and Verba (1963: 19) define subjecthood as ‘an essentially passive relationship’ with only the most meagre participation in governance. Subjects, in this formulation, typically do not launch into a description of the advantages of monomer production over coal and steel in next-generation industrial policy. If anything, constructive citizens seem to take pride in providing information that they possess and the leadership lacks.16 Constructive citizens may be insufficiently contentious, largely uncritical, and tolerant of the status quo; but critical scholars have long said the same about active citizens in democracies (Weber 2008; Isin 2009).

Figure 14.1 A hierarchical typology of citizenship types

(199)
Conclusion: political stakes

If constructive citizenship is merely one concept among many, intersecting and interacting with other citizenships, what justifies its study? If it were uncommon, one would be justified in dismissing it as a mere curiosity. Yet a quantitative review of the 200 letters in the sample suggests that it is very widespread, at least among the set of letters submitted to Mayor’s Mailbox websites. About a third of all letters perform constructive citizenship, and the share rises to half when restricting the sample to proposals and complaints (Table 14.1). In both cases, this is about twice the frequency of letters performing legal citizenship, that is, those that invoke the rule of law or demand that the government provide a legal basis for its actions (Distelhorst and Fu 2019). Constructive citizens may self-select into the Mayor’s Mailbox, in the same way that activist citizens select into protesting, so these figures do not necessarily generalize to the entire Chinese population. But they do demonstrate the shortcomings of restricting one’s typology to activist forms of citizenship when coding a sample of Mayor’s Mailbox letters.

The frequency of constructive citizenship performances is also important because of what it says about China’s political culture. In Almond and Verba’s (1963) foundational typology, constructive citizenship resembles neither a subject nor a subject-participant political culture. The latter aptly describes participation in the Mao era, with its compulsory political reading groups and top-down mass campaigns (Townsend 1967). But constructive citizenship instead echoes a parochial-participant political culture, in which citizens work to improve public well-being in their local communities. Almond and Verba associate this political culture with healthy democracies. Indeed, many scholars of political science regard civic-minded local engagement as vital to democratic political life (Callahan 2007; Ekman and Amna 2012; Kweit and Kweit 1984; Putnam 1993; Turner 2001). The possible existence of a constructive, civic-minded political culture in China, and indeed its integration into formal government input institutions, is of no less theoretical interest than the persistence of various forms of contention.

To be clear, this is emphatically not an argument that the People’s Republic of China is currently democratic. Rather, it is an argument that certain political processes exist in democracies as well as autocracies. Conflating these two arguments was unproductive in the 1980s (Hahn 1988: 38) and it remains unproductive today (Mobrand 2020: 953). The constraints surrounding constructive citizenship under autocracy certainly distinguish it from a stable liberal democracy: while ‘low politics’ are open to public discussion, ‘high politics’ are not (Bialer 1980: 166–167). Outside of village and low-level People’s Congress elections, which are themselves skewed in favour of CPC-friendly candidates, Chinese citizens also lack the power to recall unresponsive politicians through a competitive vote. And censorship remains widespread, including in the Mayor’s Mailbox itself (Pan and Chen 2018).

Nor am I proposing that democratization is on the horizon. On the contrary, constructive citizenship may help reinforce the CPC’s ruling order. By default, authoritarian rulers operate in a low-information environment: because they censor political expression, they lack accurate information on public opinion, and therefore make unpopular policy decisions, responding to the resulting unrest with more censorship (Wintrobe 2001). After 1989, however, the
CPC made a concerted effort to set up ‘input institutions’ (Nathan 2003) through which citizens could express their views, promoted the creation of Mayor’s Mailbox portals to pressure underperforming agencies (Hartford 2005), and reformulated a ‘de-ideologized mass line’ (Korolev 2017) to actively solicit public opinion. These input institutions supply local policymakers with a steady stream of information on small, specific community issues. If there are many complaints about housing, the local government can promote new construction; if passengers suggest that a bus line be moved, the transportation corporation can move it. Constructive citizens are useful to the CPC because they provide exactly this kind of input: they bring minor problems to the local leadership’s attention and suggest solutions that allow the leadership to satisfy the people while meeting its own goals. Contentious citizen behaviour is also a source of information, but it is restricted to more urgent issues, skews in favour of negative signals, and has the potential to burn out of control or incubate anti-regime collective action (Fu 2018; Gallagher 2017; Lorentzen 2013). Constructive citizenship, by contrast, comes at a lower risk to the regime, and allows policymakers to nip an emerging problem in the bud before it becomes serious enough to provoke protests, lawsuits, or widespread noncompliance.

Yet constructive citizenship, too, may have its limits. First, there are signs that it may be more common among middle-class individuals. Middle-class urbanites who hold household registration (hukou) in their city of residence are both legally and normatively privileged by China’s citizenship system (Solinger 1999; Swider 2015; Woodman 2017; Yoon 2020). Members of China’s urban middle class are also disproportionate beneficiaries of CPC policies on state employment and apartment privatization (Nathan 2010: 10). Statistical analysis shows a weakly positive relationship between the frequency of constructive citizenship and a city’s level of development (Brown 2021), but an examination of within-city class differences provides stronger evidence. Many constructive citizens in the sample bring up issues that reflect middle-class priorities: piles of garbage ruining the scenery, 19 loud trucks barrelling down a quiet street, 20 the lack of swing sets at a local park. 21 In some cases, the letter-writer demands a policy change that would intrude on the well-being of a more marginalized group: extending a highway through a slum community, 22 arresting migrant workers who sell goods from roadside carts, 23 ending affirmative action for ethnic minorities. 24 As China reaches its deadline for becoming a ‘moderately prosperous society’ (xiaokang shehui), maintaining the support of the middle class is indeed important to regime stability. An independent middle class can be a critical player in creating pressure for democratization (Ansell and Samuels 2014), and by maintaining middle-class support, the CPC can reduce this pressure (Lu and Shi 2015). But relying on self-reported, voluntary input privileges people with greater resources and connections, and can lead decision-makers to follow outspoken minorities rather than silent majorities (Martin 2008).

More fundamentally, input institutions are only useful if citizens trust the regime enough to engage with them. Recall that the third element of the definition – a preference for reasoned persuasion over threats and appeasement – both implies and requires a high level of political efficacy. If constructive citizens are repeatedly turned back, and their faith in the government’s responsiveness falls, they may resort to more contentious strategies in pursuit of the same public-minded goals. Many in-person petitioners followed this trajectory (Gallagher 2006). Alternatively, they may withdraw from participation altogether. In communist Bulgaria, the number of citizen complaints plummeted between 1985 and 1989, in the leadup to the regime’s collapse (Dimitrov 2014: 286–287). The number of petitions in China also declined ahead of 1989, and showed signs of decline again after 2004 (Dimitrov 2015: 63–64). Indeed, the literature on citizen participation in Brezhnev’s Soviet Union (Bahry and Silver 1990; Bialer 1980; Hahn 1988) presents a number of uncanny similarities with the literature on Xi’s China, and
may help shed light on the question of whether citizen participation can survive under second-
generation authoritarian retrenchment.

Notes
1 To protect personal privacy, the names of private individuals, businesses, and addresses are
pseudonymized. Street names and landmarks, when not relevant to a personal address, are left in their
original form.
2 In 2015, the baseline year for demographic data in the sample, China had 321 prefecture-level units
outside of Xizang, Xinjiang, and Sansha (see note 3). This total is comprised of four municipalities,
283 prefecture-level cities, 25 ethnic autonomous prefectures, and nine other units. The sample is
comprised of 19 prefecture-level cities and one ethnic autonomous prefecture.
3 Xizang (Tibet), Xinjiang, and the Sansha Islands are excluded from the sample, in part due to
differences in local government structure and differing citizenship dynamics (Yang 2017; Yi 2016).
A strong case could be made for including these regions on grounds of intrinsic importance, but
this would require oversampling from these regions to compensate for their smaller population and
number of local governments, which is beyond the scope of this study.
6 Neijiang 8, submitted 13 May 2019.
8 Zhuhai 9, submitted 10 June 2019.
14 Bozhou 1, submitted 23 December 2019.
15 Distelhorst and Fu (2019: 114–116) label this type ‘socialist citizenship’ due to its Mao-era legacies, but
‘reciprocal citizenship’ better captures the key dynamic behind it: a threat to withdraw from the social
contract once the authorities have breached it. ‘Reciprocal citizenship’ also extends the concept’s scope
to non-post-socialist settings with similar reciprocal norms.
16 See Collins and Evans (2002) and Martin (2008) on the valorization of ‘ordinary people’ and ‘lay
expertise’ in Western democracies.
17 Most cities classify Mayor’s Mailbox letters as complaints (tousu), inquiries (zixun), or proposals (jianyi).
Where a sampled city did not use this scheme, the author coded letters manually. Inquiries, such as
questions about how to withdraw pension funds or when an upcoming train station would begin ser-
vice, involve weak or no citizenship performances.
18 Of course, whether such a political culture exists and whether it is widespread are two different
questions. China’s modernization has also fueled individualization (Yan 2009), which could under-
mine civic-mindedness.
20 Puyang 4, replied 3 September 2019.
22 Puyang 8, replied 13 June 2019.

References
Ansell, B. W. and Samuels, D. (2014) Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach,
New York: Cambridge University Press.
Constructive citizenship in urban China


Junius F. Brown


Constructive citizenship in urban China


