

The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement: an exploration of its development, impacts and further research

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Abstract

This paper examines the overseas Chinese democracy movement at a critical historical juncture. It reviews the trajectory of the exile political activism and debates its current state, followed by a balanced assessment of its impacts. The paper concludes with a tentative exploration of further theoretical and comparative research.

Keywords: Overseas Chinese democracy movement, dissident, exile politics, transnational social movements

Introduction

Overseas Chinese democracy movement (OCDM) consists of the networks, organizations and campaigns of those mainland Chinese dissidents, in exile mostly in the West, particularly in the United States (US), who advocate liberal democratic values, defined by multiple political parties, popular elections, free press and the rule of law, to systematically oppose the fundamental system of the party-state in China. It has been more than 30 years since Wang Bingzhang, a medical graduate of McGill University (Canada), initiated in New York in December 1983 the Chinese Alliance for Democracy (CAD), the first overseas political opposition organization of mainland Chinese background since 1949.

Although exile political activism is rare in the world today, it has long been an important mover and shaper of political life far beyond China. In modern times, from the Russian Bolshevik Revolution to East Timor's quest for statehood, plotters in exile contributed to major political transformations in many states. Also, those numerous professionals or literary activists who fled into exile in the US and Britain, to escape from fascist regimes in Europe (1930s) or due to expulsion by communist regimes in the Soviet bloc (during the Cold War), made great contributions to the world's understanding of totalitarian politics. In China's own neighbourhood, activists in exile became catalysts for major regime changes in many cases, such as: the Philippines, where the assassination of the former Senator Benigno Aquino in 1983 upon returning from his self-imposed exile led to a domino-style fall of the Marcos regime; South Korea, where the exiled opposition figure Kim Dae-jung eventually became President with the regime's democratization; Taiwan, whose democratization from the late 1980s was in no small way facilitated by exiled Taiwanese activists mobilizing the diaspora; as well as East Timor, where long-time exiles such as Ramos Horta played a pivotal role in building up the international momentum for his homeland's independence. In China, the Revolution of 1911 created Asia's first republic. Its leader Sun Yat-sen famously claimed "*huaqiao* (the overseas Chinese) are the mother of revolution", to acknowledge the fact that the republican and democratic campaign was waged and supported among the overseas Chinese diaspora communities under the leadership of experienced exiles like himself. In a

nutshell, the overseas Chinese democracy movement during China's reform era flows in the long historical river of exile politics, both Chinese and worldwide.

Considering its historic significance and enduring profile as China's only political opposition, the phenomenon of OCDM remains remarkably understudied by scholars. The 20th anniversary of the 1989 Beijing Tiananmen event, which motivated many to participate in OCDM, and the 30th anniversary of CAD (hence the movement), have served as catalysts for reflection from both observers and activists. While academic works present general assessment of the movement's trajectory, roles and challenges,¹ democracy veterans have published personal experiences and soul-searching memoirs with varying degrees of credibility.² This paper seeks to reach a more analytical assessment of the state of the movement at a critical juncture. It first reviews the trajectory of OCDM, followed by an assessment of its impacts. The paper concludes with an exploration of further research from theoretical and comparative perspectives.

Whither goes the overseas Chinese democracy movement?

Carrying the torch of the suppressed Democracy Wall Movement in Beijing (1978-79), CAD progressively built up its momentum among the Chinese students and migrants in the US. Its unprecedented nature ensured curiosity and excitement. It also offered encouragement and useful international contacts for many domestic pro-democracy activists who had gone underground.³ The organization ceased to dominate the movement from June 1989, when the outflow of Tiananmen students and intellectuals, and agitation caused by the Beijing crackdown, led to a climax of political activism in the Chinese diaspora communities worldwide. These new comers to the exile political scene founded the Federation for a Democratic China (FDC) in Paris in September 1989, which subsequently established

¹For example, Zhou discusses the periodization of OCDM and assesses its main functions and value. See Yicheng Zhou, "Ershi Nian Haiwai Zhongguo Zhengzhi Liuwang Yundong Gailan" [Survey of Chinese political movement in exile over the past 20 years], *Beijing Zhichun* [Beijing Spring], no.209 (October 2010): 76-89. Chen charts the historical evolution of the movement using interviews of the activists. See Jie Chen, *Transnational Civil Society in China: intrusion and impact* (London: Edward Elgar, 2012), 127-143. For earlier studies, see Baogang He, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 85-105; Jean-Philippe Beja, "The fly in the ointment? Chinese dissent and US-China relations," *The Pacific Review* 3 (2003): 439-453; and Andrew Nathan, "Historical Perspectives on Chinese Democracy: The Overseas Democracy Movement Today", in Roger Jeans (ed.), *Roads Not Taken: the struggle of opposition parties in twentieth-century China* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 313-327. Two scholars assess overseas democracy movement as part of the discussion of a broader topic in a chapter. See "Problems of Political Opposition in Inducing Democracy in China", in Xiaoqin Guo, *State and society in China's democratic transition: Confucianism, Leninism, and economic development* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 88-103; and "Transnational Activism Online", in Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: citizen activism online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 185-208.

²Mo Qi, *Wo de Minyun Lu: Xin Dao Shui Jin Chu Zuo Kan Yun Qi Shi* [My Path in the democracy movement: watching the cloud at the end of the water] (Hong Kong: Yu Heng, 2012). Qi was the President of Federation for Democratic China (FDC), 1999-2003. His memoirs is the most detailed account of FDC's history. Some former student leaders of the Tiananmen movement of 1989 such as Wang Dan, Chai Ling and Liu Gang have also published memoirs in recent years but they are not focused on their roles in OCDM. Their memoirs are comprehensive personal political histories.

³Juli Zhang, "China Spring and the Chinese Alliance for Democracy," *International Communication Gazette* 45 (1990): 3-17.

branches in 25 countries, boasting 3,000 members.⁴ CAD also expanded, reaching a similar number of members and setting up branches in dozens of countries well beyond North America by the end of 1989, while maintaining secret contact points inside China.⁵ By the early 1990s, there emerged a robust sphere of overseas Chinese dissident politics of global scale, penetrating Chinatowns and university campuses, and interacting with the Western governments, parliaments, international media and social groups. However, after a failed attempt in 1993 to merge FDC and CAD, the two organizations leading the global activism in networking, campaigns and lobbying at the time, the movement as a whole started to stagnate and decline in its visibility and influence, even though a raft of new organizations were formed, including the Federation of Democratic Alliance (FDA) which was meant to be the amalgamation of FDC and CAD but became an additional group due to disputes over the legitimacy of the amalgamation procedure. What made the whole scene of overseas opposition look more like a plate of loose sand was the quick formation of a kaleidoscope of exile political parties such as Liberal Democratic Party, Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party and Workers' Party. Even an Interim Government of China was established in Los Angeles.

Today many OCDM veterans and observers feel distressed. Chin Jin, a long-time dissident based in Sydney and former Vice-President of FDC, laments that OCDM all over the world has 100 followers at best.⁶ Another observer claims that although between 50 and 60 organizations are counted, the movement has no more than 200 activists.⁷ Xue Wei, a renowned CAD veteran based in New York and its president since 2011, tries to be more accurate claiming that an estimated total of 10,000 people joined the various organizations as members at one time or another over the years. Now, around 100 remain. Xue nonetheless argues that they are the hard-core elements in those organizations who can galvanize about 2,000 average dormant members worldwide, three quarters of whom are based in the US, if only for the most important annual event on the calendar: memorial service for the Tiananmen event.⁸ On the remaining membership of the CAD and FDC, always the two largest membership-based groups, Xue suggests a total of around 200 for the former, and Sheng Xue (based in Toronto and current FDC president) believes the latter still retains about 100 active members scattered across the Atlantic.⁹

The exile movement's momentum was not determined by the dissidents' lofty ideas and political sloganeering but by the broader Chinese and international circumstances and intra-movement dynamics, hence the downward trajectory as epitomized by the shrinking membership base. China's increasingly symbiotic relations with the West in many global financial and security issues tempered the latter's enthusiasm for democracy promotion targeting Beijing. China's rise as a global power and its prosperity has captivated and lured the overseas Chinese communities, thus reducing grassroots support for OCDM. The Western governments' decision in 1989-93 to grant permanent residence to Chinese citizens staying in their countries during the June 4 event already weakened the rank and file of OCDM groups since many Chinese students and visitors joined them mainly to secure residential status.

⁴ Qi, 48.

⁵ Zhou, 78.

⁶ Chin's email, 14 March 2013.

⁷ Lu Yi, "Liusi Ershier Nian Ji: Zhongguo Haiwai Minzhu Yundong Yi Si" [Commemorating the 22nd anniversary of the June 4 event: the overseas Chinese democracy movement is dead], 2 June 2011, <<http://china.dwnnews.com/news/2011-06-02/57771545.html>>

⁸ Xue's email, 24 March 2013.

⁹ Emails from Xue and Sheng, 26-27 September 2013.

Meanwhile, Taiwan, once a staunch ideological backer of the movement, markedly reduced its support since the late 1990s due to political de-Sinification and cross-straits rapprochement. Dwindling funding from Taiwanese and Western sources was also caused by their disillusionment with chronic infighting and factionalism within and between dissident organizations which split and nearly crippled the movement, and frustrated the merger attempt in 1993. Dissidents had different opinions over tactical issues such as whether the movement should work with reformist officials in Beijing, or whether they should boycott the Beijing Olympics, or whether it was ethical to raise money by assisting the numerous illegal Chinese migrants to gain the US political protection and residence. However, there was no dispute over fundamental political ideals between dissident organizations or individual activists. Hostilities were chiefly caused by clashing egos of activists, self-interests and allegations of corruption. Power struggle among the leading exiled activists was exacerbated by their once starry-eyed expectation of exciting opportunities in Beijing to materialize from regime change, either as part of global collapse of communist states or due to the death of the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping.¹⁰

On the occasions of the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen event and the 30th anniversary of the OCDM (based on CAD's founding in December 1983), sentiment gathered to reflect on the fate of the movement. There is no shortage of final judgement proclaiming the failure of the movement. One pundit asserts that OCDM has proven "not to be a through road" and has been "abandoned by history".¹¹ Zhu Jiaming, founding President of the Executive Council of FDA, now an economist at the University of Vienna, also points out what he has perceived as the terrible demise of OCDM against the backdrop of China's economic prosperity and development potentials.¹² Qi Mo, President of FDC (1998-2003), now the owner of a profitable newspaper in Frankfurt, sees the path of OCDM as becoming narrower, with fewer travellers than ever, and deprived of both money and moral glamour. His verdict is "no future" and "complete failure".¹³ Beijing's official media scathingly points out that those dissidents, marginalized overseas, must now "swallow their own bitter pills".¹⁴

Such doom and gloom verdict is not solidly grounded. In fact some of the unidentifiable doomsayers in the internet forums may well be hired guns to spread defeatism on those anniversary occasions. Justifications for such gravely negative verdicts contain some problematic premises. First, causing regime change or taking over the governance after regime change is implicitly set as a yardstick by which to measure OCDM's achievement. Thus the fact that the regime is still there – in fact thriving – then becomes the evidence that

¹⁰ For such euphoric sentiment, see Tiancheng Ma, "Duowei Zhuanfan Zhu Jiaming: 20 Nian Haiwai Minyun de Fenlie yu Shuailuo" [DWNews interviews Zhu Jiaming: split and decline of the overseas democracy movement over the 20 years], 25 May 2009, <<http://politics.dwnews.com/news/2009-05-25/4934135.html>>

¹¹ Lu.

¹² Ma.

¹³ Qi, 388, 391.

¹⁴ Chan Renping, "Haiwai minyun yao zi tun kuguo" [Overseas democracy movement must swallow its own bitter pills], *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global Times], 14 August 2013. For dissidents' reactions to such diatribe, see Zha Jianguo, "Haiwai minyun shi Zhongguo minzhu zhuanxing de zhongyao lilian" [Overseas democracy movement in an important force for China's democratic transformation], 17 August 2013, <<http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/pubvp/2013/08/201308171519.shtml#.UhDmOj-6W1d>>; and Chen Weijian, "Huan Shi nazhi minyun honggu zhi zhi" [Global Times knows nothing about democracy movement's great ambition], 18 August 2013, <<http://news.boxun.com/news/gb/pubvp/2013/08/201308180817.shtml#.UhIqWT-6W1c>>

the movement has become strategically failed. Chin compares the three-decade-long OCDM with what he deems as its “predecessors”, including the Russian October Revolution, Sun Yat-sen’s Revolution of 1911 and even Mao Zedong’s Communist revolution. That all these historical revolutions achieved the feat of establishing new regimes though arguably having spent less time than OCDM’s 30 years in existence so far makes the latter disappointing.¹⁵ This excessive, if not completely bizarre, expectation was first rooted in the over-optimistic assumption in the years following 1989 that the days of the Chinese party-state were numbered. In the breathless days of international sympathy and endless press coverage, one of the parallels often made was with Sun Yat-sen.¹⁶ Dissidents might be also heavily influenced in their own formative years by the Maoist propaganda of revolution leading to seizure of political power through periodical milestones. However, all these past revolutions were exactly what they were, namely violent struggles involving armies and wars. OCDM is merely a political opposition movement in exile which has never intended to engage in anything other than peaceful campaigns. To use those “victories” through armed revolution to judge political efficacy of civil society of today is nothing short of ridiculous. It is also fanciful to expect the Chinese dissidents overseas to copy the more recent success stories of dissident politics in Asia – in the cases of South Korea, Taiwan and East Timor, exiled dissidents not just returned home eventually and contributed to regime reconstruction, but also made themselves national level officials or simply heads of state in the new regimes. These are much smaller places and succumbed to the international or American pressure more easily.

Second, OCDM detractors typically criticize the movement for having made itself irrelevant by just talking, making no practical contributions to improve the wellbeing or livelihood of the Chinese people. Hu Ping, chief editor of *Beijing Spring* (BS), the flagship magazine of OCDM and predecessor of CAD, counter-argues that not even the exemplary dissidents like Václav Havel, who did not even have to operate in exile, were able to bring tangible benefit to their own people’s wellbeing since dissidents by definition are not part of the governing authorities. Hu postulates: just as power is the language of the powerful, language is the power of the powerless; what the powerless must do and can do is to “talk”, particularly when there is not even freedom of talking in their own home country. Thus communication and dissemination of liberal ideas was a distinct function of OCDM.¹⁷ In fact over the recent years some organizations in the movement have started to campaign for people’s livelihood within China by adopting tactics in support of the domestic rights defending (*weiquan*) movement in which ordinary citizens use the existing legal system to protect their private interests in very specific civil cases, in relation to forceful land acquisition, migrant workers’ conditions and pay, protection for AIDS victims, environmental damage, consumer rights, laid-off workers’ rights, and food contamination. While the protest movement of *weiquan* is different from political opposition, overseas democracy activists seek to help the *weiquan* participants to see the inherent linkage between protection of their immediate self-interest and liberal democratic ideals. Using internet and other communication technologies and bringing some participants out to the US, various dissident organizations have supported domestic activists with ideas,

¹⁵ Chin Jin, “The Chinese democracy movement and organizations”, 21 December 2012, <<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=14499&page=1>>

¹⁶ Nicholas D. Kristof, “China Dissidents Lose Sway in Exile”, *The New York Times*, 4 July 1990.

¹⁷ Chen Jun, “Jiu Haiwai Minyun Zhuanfan Hu Ping Xiansheng” [Interview of Hu Ping regarding overseas democracy movement], 4 January 2010, <<http://boxun.com/news/gb/intl/2010/01/201001042214.shtml>>

assisted their networking and coordination, and increased the cost of crackdown by publicizing their cases globally.¹⁸

Third, dwindling membership and profile is the most commonly used evidence to support the decline/failure thesis, yet this is convincing only to a point. A period of several years after the June 4 event, particularly 1989-93, is romanticised as the golden era of the OCDM, with surging membership and international exposure. Once measured against that, today's movement cannot but be berated as failure. However, few question whether the OCDM's dramatic strengthening due to the Tiananmen event was normal in the first place, and if it was just a one-off boom caused by an unexpected saga, whether it should be used as a benchmark for the subsequent movement. Acting as a lonely bunch, obstructed by factional infighting, appeared to be a common pattern in the world history of exile politics, except for some major cases of governments (as opposed to dissidents) in exile. In fact the OCDM seems to have gained new momentum in recent years, though this is not manifested in the development of the traditional membership-based organizations. For example, the OCDM has broadened transnational networking and cooperation with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Due to the Beijing Olympics, ethnic riots in Tibet (2008) and Xinjiang (2009), the jailing of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo (2010), and the 30th anniversary of the controversial "one child" policy (2010), transnational human rights and democracy movements have been further galvanized, with more campaigns and actors targeting China. This has provided new opportunities for the Chinese dissident organizations to build up transnational solidarity and amplify their voices. OCDM groups and advocacy INGOs complement each other in that generally the former enjoy more access to the on-the-ground information and can contribute intimate knowledge about the working of the Chinese politics and society, and the latter have developed more established global campaign networks and closer connections to the halls of political power and international media. Furthermore, more cosmopolitan and professional activists have emerged in the exile Chinese politics, generating new thinking and new types of organizations. Compared to traditional dissidents, who had already become established opposition figures with varying degrees of fame when first entering the exile scene (such as Democracy Wall veterans like Wei Jingsheng, Xu Wenli, Wang Xizhe, and the 1989 heroes from the Tiananmen Square such as Wu'er Kaixi, Wang Dan and Liu Gang), the new kind of OCDM leaders (such as Yang Jianli, President of Initiatives for China, based in Washington D.C., and Fu Xiqiu, President of China Aid Association, based in Midland, Texas) generally gained formal Western education, command better English, and enjoy more intimate connections to the mainstream political games in the West and Taiwan. As publicity-savvy and networking-oriented operators, these aspiring new activists have learnt the lesson from the fall of those unwieldy traditional membership-based organizations such as CAD, FDC and various political parties which boast grand and all-embracing platforms. Instead they have seen the virtue of establishing professional or lobbyist organizations with clearer and more realistic focuses to carry out their personal ideas.

Impacts of OCDM

One must be realistic in assessing the efficacy of the overseas democracy movement. What is needed is a broader perspective, to explore the OCDM's impacts overseas as well as in China, at both the state and societal level, while losing no sight of the wax and wane of the

¹⁸For overseas democracy activists' support for the campaign in China for the right to secure housing, see CK, "Hawaii Zhongguo Minyun Renshi Chuanban de 'Zhongguo Anju Wang' Kaitong" [The 'Chinese Right to Secure Housing Net' established by the overseas Chinese democracy activists is inaugurated], 31 March 2011, <<http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/anju-03312011112048.html>>

movement. Two ideas from the debates over transnational social movements (TSMs) are relevant to illuminate the contours and significance of the dissident movement (see the last section for a further exploration of the relevance of the theories of TSMs for conceptualizing OCDM). The first suggests that influence of transnational activist groups seeking to pursue their advocacy and reform attempts in a particular country is conditioned by the accessibility of its political opportunity structures. Specifically, effectiveness of transnational campaigns is determined by the degree of the targeted state's domination of the national socio-political scene, and the degree of its vulnerability to international pressure and norms.¹⁹ This captures the dilemma of the OCDM well. Compared to most authoritarian regimes China's is the least relaxed and accessible. Also, dissidents abroad are confronting a rising global power, on which many nations, including the traditional Western supporters of democracy, have come to depend for their own economic and security self-interests. Such an operational environment should make one realistic when judging the effects of the dissidents trying to cause fundamental political transformation in a state like this while being denied physical entry.

However, another idea from the TSMs debate, namely "world civic politics", opens up a new horizon in assessing the scope and impacts of transnational activism. It argues that the notion of political influence should be broadened so that in addition to their work on the policies of states, the impact of transnational social movements must be assessed from a different dimension, namely the attempt by activists to create or manipulate shifts in public opinion and shape the conduct of behaviour by working directly within and across national societies. By disseminating new ideas and information through awareness-raising programs towards the general public, enlivening public debates, and cooperating with and influencing other non-state actors, transnational activists attempt to lead the society to change independently of state policies. Though civic politics may eventually lead to a change in state policies, this may not be the goal or immediate objective of activists.²⁰ This broader perspective makes one more hopeful when assessing the impacts of the Chinese dissidents in exile. They do not seem to be able to change the Chinese state's political practices in fundamental ways, and have not always been able to influence foreign governments' policies towards China as much as they wish. However, they can be more effective in influencing international public opinion about crucial political and human rights issues in China, and shifting the sentiment of various legislative bodies such as the US Congress.

These perspectives appear to underscore the more positive analysis of the OCDM. Thus, when reflecting on the movement's trajectory over the 20 years after June 4, Zhou summarizes its overall valuable functions while acknowledging the movement's fall in effectiveness from its peak reached in the first half of 1990s. First, OCDM has influenced the international public opinion and various states' policies towards human rights in China, by lobbying foreign governments, giving testimonies at the parliamentary hearings and disseminating alternative information in the Western media. That some of the Western governments and parliaments still maintain critical approach to China at all shows die-hard OCDM activists in action.²¹ One salient example of OCDM successfully disseminating new ideas in the world regarding Chinese political repression is that due to the persistent

¹⁹ Thomas Risse-Kappen, ed., *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3-36.

²⁰ Paul Wapner, *Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1-16. Similar ideas are more elaborately presented under the concept of NGO cultural politics – see Paul Wapner, "Horizontal Politics: Transnational Environmental Activism and Global Cultural Change", *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May 2002, 37-62.

²¹ Zhou, 76-89.

campaigns by Harry Wu and his Laogai Research Foundation, the concept of *Laogai* (“reform through labour”, Chinese Gulag) has been firmly established in the international political vocabulary. Second, as a platform of free speech, OCDM has made it possible to systematically explore and publish on the ideological and historical issues banned in China due to political hype-sensitivity. Over the years conferences have been held, with attendants from China and those in exile, to reflect and debate on Anti-Rightist Campaign, Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen movement, issues of ethnic minorities and mainland-Taiwan relations, and democratic redesigning of the Chinese constitution. Just as the survivor “rightists” invoke counter-memory to contest the grand narrative of the state, the former Tiananmen students and intellectuals try to clear ideational hurdles for China’s democratization. Meanwhile, by using their own online media (such as *BS*, *Democratic China*, *China Weekly*, *New Century* and many thematic forums) and independent international Chinese language media and web sites (such as Radio Free Asia, and Voice of America), leading dissidents have influenced and interacted with viewers and listeners in China, who also use such outlets to publicize their views.²² These dissenting forums have become more valuable at a time when the Chinese government is achieving increasingly broad control of the overseas Chinese language media. One major example of OCDM facilitating a more balanced opinion of major political issues is the emerging of a more liberal and compassionate understanding of Tibet. Under the aegis of the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala (India), exile Tibetan activist groups and Chinese dissident organizations, Chinese-Tibetan friendship societies have mushroomed in the major cities of North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and a series of international Chinese-Tibetan dialogue conferences have been held over the recent years. This has given the dissidents and many overseas Chinese professionals and scholars great opportunities to acquire new knowledge of the changing identity and untold history of Tibetans.²³ Third, OCDM continues to act as the main international window for the persecuted domestic dissidents, regularly giving them informational and financial support. Those languishing in jail have their morale boosted once knowing that their families are able to manage with overseas money including international prize such as “democracy fighter award” from the Wei Jingsheng Foundation, thus enjoying a lower cost of resistance.²⁴ This is summarized vividly by Sun Liyong, a former police officer in Beijing who spent seven years in jail due to his role in Tiananmen movement and now heads the Sydney-based Support Network for the Persecuted in China, which provides financial support for the families of those jailed for their political and religious beliefs. Sun argues that cash aid to the families of those frontline dissidents helps the wives to see their jailed husbands, enables their children to go to school, and improves the quality of the prisoners’ meals. International humanitarian assistance makes the wives, children and parents of the jailed democracy fighters regard them as heroes, and makes the heroes feel that they are far from isolated.²⁵

He Baogang further postulates that the significance of overseas opposition organizations lies first of all in existing. The existence of the movement itself is a great pressure on the Chinese

²² Zhou, 76-89. In his work cited earlier, Nathan has pointed out the importance of the overseas democracy movement in laying the ideational groundwork for China’s political transformation.

²³ Based on the author’s observation and interviews at the various international Chinese-Tibetan dialogue conferences.

²⁴ Zhou, 76-89.

²⁵ Sun Liyong, “Jiuzhu Zhongguo de zhengzhifan jiushi tuidong Zhongguo minzhu jinbu” [Helping Chinese political prisoners is pushing forward China’s democracy and progress], 23 September 2014, <http://www.fdc64.org/index.php/2014-07-29-01-09-07/pro-democracy-movements/115-2014-09-23-sunliying>

government. After all, it is the only political opposition of China.²⁶ The never-ending demonization and character assassination of the leading political dissidents by unidentifiable figures online, and the government's ban on their entry into China (even Hong Kong), is arguably a testimony that activists have not become useless and hopeless. On the other hand, it must also be recognized that the overseas opposition plays only supporting roles in China's democratization. Major drivers for the country's move towards democracy come from within.

Further theoretical and comparative investigation: a tentative exploration

Rigorous analytical framework for the exile Chinese politics is yet to be constructed. It may be profitable to critically use and integrate two theoretical perspectives to illuminate the overseas Chinese democracy movement. One is transnational social movements. The other is diaspora studies. Ideas from these two fields can work together to conceptualize the movement, explain its wax and wane and shed light over its impacts.

The idea of transnational social movements (or transnational advocacy networks) denotes cross-border networking and advocacy by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists to achieve social or political change. They typically campaign on human rights, gender, environment, development and capitalist globalisation. Depending on specific campaigns, such contentious transnational political activities target states, or intergovernmental organizations (particularly the UN agencies), or other non-state sectors and the general public, or engage multiple targets. This sphere is dominated by INGOs which are headquartered mainly in the Western (especially American) capital cities but maintain branches or operate projects in many countries – for example, in the transnational human rights movement, leading groups include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House.

The literature of TSMs can help in analysing the OCDM because the latter is also a form of transnational political activism and it operates within the overall sphere of TSMs by collaborating with the leading human rights INGOs. Apart from campaigning across national borders in general (true that dissidents are barred from entering China, but neither can rights INGOs step into the country), major Chinese dissident organizations headquartered in the US also have branches in many countries and operate on similar political terrains as INGOs, including the UN agencies, the Western governments, parliaments, media and civil society at large. Thus, despite its obvious ethno-national flavour, the logics and workings of the overseas Chinese political opposition can be properly illuminated by some of the notions developed in the TSMs literature, such as those ideas which theorize the TSMs' fundamental activities and development patterns, and discuss the crucial factors determining the transnational activists' impact or effectiveness. Specifically one can borrow from the ideas regarding: tactics of transnational advocacy, roles of social activists or political entrepreneurs, political opportunity structures, and world civic politics.

Seeking social and political change largely by relying on persuasion, socialization and moral pressure, social movement organizations use a number of distinct tactics since civil society actors have neither governments' coercive political power nor business corporations' financial power. One is information politics, gathering and assembling information through extensive networks of grassroots-based organizations and dramatizing the information in order to promote an idea. Another is issue framing, creatively reinterpreting an existing or old problem

²⁶ He, 105.

in order to reshape popular understanding and stimulate the public or government to act. Issue framing can determine the appeal and sustainability of a movement. Other tactics include: using symbolic events, graphic images and even sensationalist language to justify a cause and strengthen the public support, trademarks of many INGOs; material pressure and/or moral shaming, for example linking the issue of human rights to bilateral state relations in more functional areas such as trade and military exchanges; and accountability politics, namely to hold government or multinational companies accountable for their declared policies or principles, through wide-ranging monitoring and information dissemination.²⁷ In many ways these depictions also summarize the staple activities of the Chinese dissidents well.

Tactics cannot work in isolation. The development of movements and the effectiveness of campaigns are also conditioned by broader factors. The significance of “actor characteristics” is emphasized in the debate over TSMs. Activists with effective transcultural communication and campaign skills, and dense exchanges and close solidarity between the various organizations, are among the enabling elements for the movements.²⁸ This argument is applicable to the OCDM. For example, over the years the trajectory of the movement had a lot to do with whether the most prominent roles were played by former beneficiaries of the party-state (such as Chen Yizhi, Wan Runnan), or Democracy Wall veterans, or the 1989 student heroes from the Tiananmen Square, or the emerging professional lobbyist-kind of activists who first came to the United States as unknown students but recreated themselves by commanding mainstream American political rules. As for the ideas of political opportunity structures and world civic politics, their relevance to the discussion of the environment, scope and impacts of the OCDM has been illuminated earlier.

Any treatment of the OCDM as similar to TSMs must be balanced by an awareness of the ethno-nationalist substance of the former. Chinese dissident organizations differ from those transnational human rights and democracy campaign groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Freedom House. These INGOs campaign for universalist values and are concerned with global issues, with multinational membership. China is merely part of their worldwide campaigns. These issue-oriented coalitions work on China not because they have special sentiment towards the country itself. On the other hand, the overseas Chinese dissident groups work exclusively on China, with membership being almost exclusively mainland Chinese, no matter how global their organizational chains and support networks are. The Chinese diaspora remain their key grassroots though younger dissidents have made progress beyond ethnic atmosphere in their organizational recruitment. The level and substance of political consciousness and organization within the diasporic communities of the mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong backgrounds affect the operation of dissidents fundamentally. In a way the overseas Chinese political opposition is a manifestation of diasporic sentiment towards a homeland and working towards its improvement, thus can be investigated usefully with the wisdom from the field of diaspora studies. Both dissidents and the broader diasporic communities display what Skrbis described as “long-distance nationalism”, a phenomenon developing in parallel to globalization among the migrant groups and across migrant generations.²⁹

²⁷ “Transnational Advocacy Networks in International Politics: Introduction”, in Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks In International Politics* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 16-25.

²⁸ Keck and Sikkink, 28-29.

²⁹ Zlatko Skrbis, *Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities* (Sydney: Ashgate, 1999), 1-10.

One central argument in the tradition of diaspora studies is that the formulation of diasporic political activism is shaped by three significant relationships: the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland; the relationship between the diaspora and the hostland; the relationship between different groups within the diaspora. As noted by Shuval, the homeland, hostland and connections within the diaspora need to be considered on a bifocal or trifocal level and form the principal components of diaspora theory.³⁰ Sheffer refers to the relationship between the homeland, diaspora and host societies as a complex triadic relationship.³¹ These discussions can contribute to a systematic analysis of the changing contexts in which exiled dissidents operate, as partly, if also loosely, manifested in the earlier discussion of the trajectory of the OCDM. In particular, one major challenge the overseas dissidents confront is the political transformation of the diaspora communities, where more and more groups have changed their attitude towards Beijing, from universal condemnation or shunning of the regime due to its political repression to embracing it for the sake of economic benefit or due to the success of its soft power campaigns in Chinatowns worldwide. This has also caused shifts in the dynamics of intra-diaspora politics, widening splits with the overseas Chinese communities and weakening key grassroots support for the OCDM. “*Huaqiao*” (the overseas Chinese) are no longer “the mother of revolution”, as Sun Yat-sen once proclaimed.

Further analytical light can be shed on the overseas Chinese opposition movement in terms of its development and efficacy by comparing and contrasting it to the more historical cases of exile political activism. Comparison can be most usefully made with two such cases. One is the activities of the exiled political and literary dissidents from the Soviet Union, China’s fellow party-state, featuring the roles of protagonists like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Another case is the democracy campaigns launched during the 1970s-80s by opposition figures in exile from Taiwan, which was then also an authoritarian Chinese state though with anti-communist ideology. Discussing the ways dissidents from these states tried to influence political development in their homelands, sway the host states’ policies towards the repressive regimes there, and deal with the factional/personal infighting among their own ranks, will place the OCDM in a broader perspective and sharpen its distinctive characteristics in the era of globalization and internet.

³⁰ Shuval, JT, “Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm”, *International Migration*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2000, 48-49.

³¹ Sheffer, G, “A New Field of Study: Modern Diasporas in International Politics”, in G. Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 1-15.