



Spontaneous cognitive liberation in the context of rights-defending actions: A case study of the evolution of homeowner activists' rights consciousness

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Abstract

Empirical studies on Chinese homeowners' activism regarding defending their rights focus mostly on either political opportunities or resource mobilization and often neglect the cognitive process of homeowner activists in developing their rights consciousness. This study attempts to use the perspective of framing and cognitive liberation to gain a nuanced understanding of activists' subjective cognition in their actions aimed at defending their rights. An analytic framework is proposed which examines two aspects of homeowners' rights consciousness: the referent of rights (property rights versus rights to self-governance) and the nature of rights (reactive versus proactive). Data were collected from Sina Weibo tweets posted by homeowner activists in the period 2011 to 2015. The results show that activists are universally aware of property rights and are increasingly proactive in seeking self-governance. Subsequent interviews of a group of activists revealed a spontaneous and interactive process of cognitive liberation

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that derives from both the first-hand experiences and the online discussions with fellow activists. Social media provide platforms upon which activists can exchange information, form networks, and learn from each other about common issues and obstacles and, thus, they promote collective consciousness and facilitate cognitive liberation. This suggests that future studies of activism regarding homeowners' defence of rights should shift from an event-centered case study approach to an issue-centered analysis of the grass-roots rights movement as a whole.

Keywords

Cognitive liberation, collective action, homeowner activism, framing, rights consciousness

Introduction

Due to the under-developed housing market in China, the rights of homeowners are vulnerable to infringement by developers and property management companies. This has led to a significant increase in collective rights-defending actions by homeowners in the past decade (Chen, 2006; Meng, 2007; Zhang, 2005; Zhu, 2011; Zou, 2005). Previous studies on homeowners' rights-defending activism in urban China largely focus on either political opportunities or resource mobilization and tend to neglect the subjective cognition of homeowner activists regarding contentious actions.¹ However, the macro political environment, organizations and resources are all external conditions for rights-defending actions; the cognitive liberation of the rights-defending activists regarding the issues at stake, as well as their willingness to change the status quo through collective actions, are the intermediary variables between political opportunities, resources and collective contentious actions. These cognitive variables, therefore, are key to understanding rights-defending mobilization. As pointed out by framing theory, social injustices or grievances are not merely objective reality but also a continuous process of meaning construction through which people become aware of problems and endeavor to change them (Benford and Snow, 2000).

In Western societies, social movement organizations (SMOs) frame social realities discursively in order to mobilize potential participants and supporters. As a result, Western literature tends to see framing as a strategic process (Benford, 1997; Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). However, when contentious actions are not organized by SMOs, it is more appropriate to conceptualize protesters' cognition of social issues and related demands as cognitive liberation (Futrell, 2003; Nepstad, 1997). Due to the underdevelopment of social organizations, collective rights-defending actions in China are less organized, and the framing process is spontaneous. In the early stages of rights-defending actions, activists are not fully conscious of the injustice; with the development of protest events and

discussions with other participants, rights activists gradually develop diagnostic frames (problem identification and attributions), and these frames will be changed or extended with the further development of protests, which in turn shapes the demands and aims of the collective rights-defending actions. In general, it is beneficial to synthesize the theories of framing and cognitive liberation in analyzing rights activists' cognition of social problems and related collective actions in urban China.

To date, few systematic studies have investigated how spontaneous cognitive liberation occurs (exceptions include Futrell, 2003; McAdam, 1999; Nepstad, 1997). This study argues that cognitive liberation is a gradual interactive process that is unlikely to be depicted by examining specific protest events. In order to effectively demonstrate rights activists' cognitive liberation process regarding a specific issue, the focus of empirical studies should shift from event-centered case analysis to issue-centered holistic analysis. The latter approach is conducive to examining how the connections and interactions among rights-defending events, as well as the communications between activists, shape activists' cognition of rights-defending actions and the issues at stake. It is worth mentioning that two factors play an important role in facilitating cognitive liberation. First, obstacles to rights-defending actions force activists to seek alternative solutions, and to link the immediate issue at stake with other relevant issues. Second, the rapid development of social media provides platforms for similar protest events to be connected and for rights activists to communicate. These connections and communications facilitate the formation of diagnostic frames which link the causes of social problems with institutions.

This study takes the evolution of homeowner activists' rights consciousness as a case example of the cognitive liberation process in the context of homeowners' rights-defending actions and has the following aims.

1. To examine homeowner activists' cognition of rights defense and the evolution thereof, with the intention of deepening our understanding of homeowners' rights-defending actions from the perspectives of framing and cognitive liberation;
2. To propose a two dimensional framework for analyzing cognitive liberation based on the characteristics of collective contentious actions in urban China; and
3. To explore the factors influencing cognitive liberation and the related formation mechanisms.

The structure of this article is as follows. The next section reviews existing theoretical explanations of homeowners' rights-defending actions and proposes the research questions and analytical framework based on the theories of framing and cognitive liberation. This is followed by an introduction to the research methods; and then a proposal for a typology of the rights consciousness of homeowner activists and a description of the distributions and trends of different types of

rights consciousness using data collected from Sina Weibo. The next section then provides an in-depth analysis of the cognitive liberation process of homeowner activists' rights consciousness using data from Sina Weibo and in-depth interviews; and the final section offers conclusions and discussion.

Literature review and analytical framework

Existing explanation (1): Political opportunity structure

The theory of political opportunity structure emphasizes the influences of macro political environments on social movements (Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1988). According to this perspective, the state is not unitary but, rather, is composed of multi-layered bureaucratic agencies in different sub-national units. This fragmented power structure provides protesters with political opportunities (O'Brien, 1996). Specifically, the central government pays close attention to the regime legitimacy and the working of the political system; local governments, in contrast, assign great significance to policy implementation and to the development of local economies. Such a gap in the administrative system provides political space for boundary-spanning contentious actions (Cai, 2008; O'Brien, 2003).

The theory of political opportunity structure has been widely used to explain homeowners' rights-defending actions in urban China. Previous studies have shown that homeowners advance their rights-defending actions by seeking the gaps between different levels of government or different governmental departments. The gaps within the administrative system, the gradually improved judicial system, and the increasingly open media system provide crucial political opportunities for homeowners to protest against local authorities (Chen, 2010; Yip et al., 2014). Due to the divergent interests between the judicial system and the administrative system, legal litigation, and administrative litigation in particular, offers homeowners important political opportunities (Huang, 2010). According to Zeng's (2009) study, traditional party papers, commercial newspapers, professional newspapers and trade newspapers have their own positions and political affiliations and exert various influences on the public understanding of social issues. It should be noted that most newspapers affiliated with the central government are not constrained by local governments and enjoy relative autonomy to expose the wrongdoings of local government officials.

Existing explanation (2): Resource mobilization

The theory of resource mobilization contends that the access and control of resources are the keys to understanding social movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Social movements rely on participation, and SMOs with rich resources are best equipped to bear the costs of collective actions in order to engage SMO members continuously (Pickvance, 1995: 201). The availability of resources and the ability to mobilize them are two essential elements in the resource mobilization model (Tilly, 1978: 78).

The theory of resource mobilization has been used to explain homeowner rights-defending activism in urban China. Due to the lack of professional SMOs, existing studies focus mainly on informal resources that can be mobilized by homeowner activists, especially social networks between activists and system elites. Shi and Cai (2006) found that the interpersonal relations between homeowners and government officials play an important role in homeowners' rights-defending actions. On the one hand, such social networks provide homeowners with important information, such as effective strategies and potential responses from the government, which allows rights-defending actions to develop in a manner that the government can tolerate. On the other hand, social networks also put pressure on the opponents of homeowner activists. With the development of rights-defending actions, homeowners gradually realize the importance of the resources within the establishment, and seeking election onto the Residents' Committee (RC) and the National People's Congress (NPC) are important ways for activists to obtain resources from within the establishment (Guan, 2010).

Framing and cognitive liberation: A neglected perspective

Theories of both political opportunity structure and resource mobilization emphasize the importance of objective conditions to rights-defending actions. However, rights-defending actions rely not only on external objective conditions but also on the subjective cognition of these conditions, especially activists' discontent with the status quo and their willingness to change it through collective actions. According to the theory of framing (Benford, 1997; Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986), social injustice, or people's grievance, is not necessarily objective. Activists need to become aware of problems through a process of interpretation, then try to make a change. The framing process assigns specific meanings to an event or the status quo, and thus facilitates the occurrence of collective actions.

In Western societies the main objective of framing is to unite various SMOs and to mobilize potential participants and supporters (Snow, 2004; Snow et al., 1986). There are three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Benford and Snow, 2000). Diagnostic framing identifies problems and assigns attributions; prognostic framing articulates solutions to the problems and strategies for carrying out plans; and motivational framing provides rationales for people to participate and urges people to take part in collective actions (Gamson, 1995). An implicit assumption in the Western literature is that SMOs are the primary actors of framing, and framing is thus regarded as a strategic process (Benford and Snow, 2000: 623).

However, contentious collective actions are not always organized by professional SMOs. In the absence of professional SMOs, the cognitive process of protesters on social problems evolves spontaneously, and this process should be conceived as cognitive liberation (Futrell, 2003; Nepstad, 1997). In the process of cognitive liberation, people gradually become conscious of an unjust situation and attempt to change it through collective actions (McAdam, 1999). Social

organizations are usually absent in collective rights-defending actions in China because of the underdevelopment of social organizations. This means that the cognitive process of protesters on specific problems is different from the framing process in Western social movements. A study by Thornton showed that protesters in China tend to use sarcastic, metonymic, and ambiguous discourse to frame contentious collective actions (Thornton, 2002). In light of this, this article argues that it is necessary to analyze activists' cognition of social issues by taking into consideration the characteristics of collective rights-defending actions in urban China.

When protesters in urban China articulate a frame, they have to consider not only the levels of appeal to the public and the mobilization capability, but also the degrees of tolerance by the government. They have to tread a delicate line between the demands of collective actions and the tolerance of the government in order to maintain the legitimacy of collective actions. In such circumstances a key aspect for analysis is whether a frame conforms to or transgresses the rights and rules set by the state. This aspect, to some extent, is closely related to the academic debate on rules consciousness and rights consciousness. Perry (2009) argued that contentious actions in China mainly reflect the rules consciousness of protesters. They advance their own claims by using the official discourse and symbols and so they do not challenge the legitimacy of existing rules. In contrast, Li (2010) contended that although rules consciousness plays a major role in contentious actions, it encourages protesters to challenge local authorities and weakens their trust in government officials, thus facilitating the emergence of rights consciousness. Protesters not only protect their rights enshrined in existing rules from infringement, but also seek to participate in the rule-making process in order to pursue rights transcending existing rules. In general, analyses of protest frames in China need to take into account the relationship between the frames and the rights enshrined in existing rules. We call the frames derived from existing rules and official discourse 'reactive frames,' and the frames that transcend (and/or aim to change) existing rules 'proactive frames.'

In addition, although most collective actions in urban China are driven by economic interests, whether or not the interest-based actions would be extended to the political domain is of great significance (Li J, 2009). If the spillover effect exists, even protesters who are initially concerned with specific material interests will relate their interest-oriented claims to other claims, and thus the nature of collective action changes accordingly. In terms of homeowner activism, if homeowners who defend their economic rights make further efforts to gain rights to self-governance for homeowner associations, especially the rights of association across neighborhoods or cities, then homeowner activism is likely to promote the development of civil societies (Yip and Jiang, 2011). In light of this, we argue here that it is necessary to make a distinction between economic frames and political frames. Empirically, these two types of frames are closely related to each other, but analytically there are nuanced distinctions. For instance, the legitimacy of economic frames is based on market transactions and economic

contracts, while the legitimacy of political frames is based on the rules of rights and their appropriateness. Political frames mainly address rules governing discussions, negotiations, influences, and controls among stakeholders. Furthermore, distinguishing economic frames from political frames helps us to understand better the implications of rights-defending actions for the development of civil societies in China.

Previous studies have shown that homeowner leaders play an important role in rights-defending actions (Cai and Sheng, 2013), and some activists attempt to establish horizontal associations among homeowner committees (HC) (Yip and Jiang, 2011; Zhang and Zhuang, 2008). Nevertheless, homeowner rights-defending actions have not yet evolved into organized movements across neighborhoods, due to the following constraints. First, neither consensus nor solidarity of communities have formed among activist leaders; second, until now, the establishment and operation of formal associations of homeowner committees (AHC) have been exceptional rather than normal;² and, third, both the organizational structure and the daily operation of many AHCs have been rudimentary. For these reasons it is more suitable to use the perspective of cognitive liberation to explain homeowner rights-defending actions in China. Based on the above analyses, the process of cognitive liberation implies not only that the cognition of homeowner activists on the importance of different frames temporally changes, but also that proactive and political frames become, albeit gradually, more and more salient. It is an empirical question, however, as to whether the cognitive liberation process actually occurs; and this will be answered by analyzing data from Sina Weibo.

There are few systematic studies examining how cognitive liberation occurs, especially how the ongoing process of spontaneous cognitive liberation takes place without the organization and coordination of SMOs. McAdam (1999) explained the cognitive liberation process from the perspective of political opportunity structure. He pointed out that changes in the government's attitudes toward social movements would be perceived by protesters as cognitive clues, leading to the awareness that the existing institutions have become fragile, and that they are able to successfully challenge the status quo. Nepstad (1997) interpreted the cognitive liberation process from the perspectives of culture and interpersonal relations. He showed that local churches and clergy in the USA serve as an intermediary organization through which Americans were made aware of and thus sympathize with the sufferings of people in Central America. This resulted in local peaceful demonstrations in the USA. Futrell's (2003) study on a 'Not-In-My-Backyard' (NIMBY) protest found that people's cognitive liberation initially originates from a sense of injustice, and such cognition becomes stronger with continuous information disclosure. Although Futrell's study correctly showed that cognitive liberation is an evolving and dynamic process, it only analyzed one case of dispute, and was thus unable to reveal in full the cognitive liberation process in relation to a specific contentious issue. We argue that the key to understanding the cognitive liberation process of participants in relation to a

contentious issue lies in the examination of the interaction effects of different contentious events concerning the same issue. Faced with similar obstacles, participants in various protests pursuing similar aims communicate and interact with one another, and such a process gradually shapes protesters' understanding of the issues at stake, eventually leading to cognitive liberation. Two social phenomena play important roles in such a process: the first is that the obstacles encountered in rights-defending actions push protesters to reflect on their situations, to seek alternative solutions, and to align their protest frames with other frames; and the second phenomenon is that social media platforms such as Sina Weibo relate similar protest events to one another, facilitating contacts and discussions among protesters (Huang and Sun, 2014). This helps protesters understand their situations from a broad perspective and enables them to develop diagnostic frames from a systemic perspective.

Based on the above discussions, the following sections will use homeowners' rights-defending activism as a case through which to explore the influencing factors and formation process of cognitive liberation.

Research methods

In the field of homeowners' rights-defending activism, activists' understanding of rights is an important dimension of subjective cognition. This study therefore takes the evolution of activists' rights consciousness as an example of the cognitive liberation process in the context of rights-defending collective actions. In this study, 'rights consciousness' mainly refers to that of homeowner activists and the members of homeowners' committees (HC), rather than that of homeowners in general. Here, the term 'homeowner activists' denotes homeowners who have been concerned with rights to self-governance and the association of HCs in particular, and leaders who have been active in homeowners' rights-defending actions for a long period of time. We focus on this specific group of homeowner activists for the following reasons. First, among the huge number of homeowners, only some homeowners from certain neighborhoods have participated in rights-defending actions. Second, homeowner activists who have been concerned with or participated in rights-defending actions for a long time are more likely to have rights consciousness, and their rights consciousness plays a leading role in the process of rights defense and homeowners' self-governance. Finally, although key leaders play a dominant role in the process of cognitive liberation, the social influence of a particular cognition depends largely on whether such a cognition resonates with active participants in rights-defending actions; therefore, it is necessary to include homeowner activists as study subjects.

This study attempts to illustrate the evolution and related dynamics of homeowner activists' rights consciousness by analyzing various sources of data. Specifically, we analyzed Sina Weibo tweets posted by homeowner activists to show the evolving trends of rights consciousness between 2011 and 2015. We conducted in-depth offline interviews to understand the evolving process of activists'

rights consciousness and its causes. All interviews were recorded and analyzed systematically with the aid of RQDA software.³

Sina Weibo was chosen as a data source because it is the most important microblogging platform in China. On this platform, users can follow other users and read the latter's tweets; and they can easily circulate information among their followers by retweeting. We collected all the tweets of one Weibo user in order to analyze the rights consciousness of homeowner activists.⁴ One possible shortcoming of this method is that a single Weibo user cannot represent all homeowner activists. The appropriateness of this method depends to a large degree, therefore, on whether researchers are able to identify a user who plays the role of information aggregation. Fortunately, some homeowner activists do not merely express their own opinions on Weibo, they also use Weibo as an information hub through which homeowners can circulate relevant information. In this case, their Weibo tweets can, to some extent, present the evolving trends of homeowner activists' rights consciousness.

Based on the above considerations, we collected all tweets posted by the Weibo user of the 'Homeowners' Committee Newsletter' (HCN) as the data for further analysis, for the following reasons. On the one hand, HCN is one of the most influential Weibo users in the field of homeowners' governance, an observation endorsed by homeowner activists and scholars; on the other hand, most tweets posted by HCN were retweets originally composed by other homeowner activists (retweets accounted for about 94%), and this suggests that the primary task of HCN is to spread the experience of homeowners' governance. In addition, among the retweets by HCN, most were originally posted by Weibo users from Beijing, Guangdong and Shanghai, where homeowner rights-defending actions are the most intense. The users who were frequently mentioned (through the function of '@') in HCNs' retweets are well-known homeowner activists. This implies that users who interact with each other on this platform can be seen as a (semi-)acquaintance community, thus lowering the probability of inconsistency between rights consciousness manifested in the tweets and the actual rights consciousness.

We collected and analyzed data as follows. First, we programmed a Python Web crawler to download all tweets posted by HCN between 2011 and 2015. Second, we randomly sampled 100 tweets from each year's tweets to obtain a training sample: we manually coded the sample according to the theoretical typology of rights consciousness proposed by this study. Third, we used the algorithm of supervised automatic content analysis to analyze all the tweets year by year (Hopkins and King, 2010), and thus estimated the proportions of tweets manifesting a particular type of rights consciousness for each year. It should be noted that some tweets reflected multiple types of rights consciousness that are compatible with one another; for instance, 'defending legal property rights' and 'carrying out homeowners' self-governance.' In addition, some tweets did not mention any type of rights consciousness. As a result the sum of the proportions of different types of rights consciousness was not always 100%.

Types of homeowner activists' rights consciousness and their evolution

A typology of rights consciousness

As mentioned previously, it is necessary to take into account the relations between homeowners' demands and existing state entitlements in analyzing protesters' cognitive liberation. This means that the nature of rights consciousness, especially the relationship between the rights demanded by protesters and existing rules and laws, is a key dimension in understanding homeowners' rights consciousness. According to the previous academic debate on the nature of homeowner activists' rights consciousness, such a dimension can be further classified into reactive rights consciousness derived from state rules and laws, and proactive rights consciousness transcending existing rights endowed by rules and laws. For instance, Zhuang's (2011) case study on homeowners' contentious actions in Guangzhou found that the demands mainly depended on the authority of high-ranking rules, which fell into the category of rule consciousness. On the other hand, according to the study by Yip and Jiang (2011), the formation of AHCs transgresses existing state rules, and it was an attempt made by civil society activists under an authoritarian regime to establish their own organizational infrastructure.

Although homeowner activists' actions to seek proactive rights can be regarded as exercising their political rights, this study focuses on homeowner activists' cognitions of different types of rights. It is necessary therefore to determine what 'rights consciousness' refers to, or the issue domains regulated by a family of laws and regulations. This dimension can be classified into property rights and political rights. 'Property rights' mainly refers to economic interests, and the relevant laws and regulations regulate the economic issues; 'political rights' mainly refers to self-governance of civil associations, and relevant laws and regulations regulate the boundaries of power and the limits of actions. Political rights are derived, to a certain extent, from property rights, but they have different implications for homeowner rights-defending actions. In the face of homeowner rights-defending actions, local governments tend to politicalize economic disputes, interpreting them as contestation for leadership with base-level governments and party organizations; and these discursive strategies have the potential to engage higher-ranking governments to intervene in such disputes (Gui and Ma, 2014). In other words, local governments have different degrees of tolerance for different kinds of issues. This requires classification of the referent of rights.

Previous studies have shown that housing property rights not only lay a material foundation for differentiated life chances (Pratt, 1982), but are also an important indicator of class status (Saunders, 1978). With the privatization and marketization of housing (Wang and Murie, 1996), rates of home ownership in Chinese cities have increased significantly (Ho and Kwong, 2002; Huang, 2004). Homeowners take action to protect the use values and exchange values of their house properties. At the same time, homeowner committees (HC) play an important role in organizing collective actions, protecting homeowners' rights, managing properties, and

community development (Read, 2003; Shi, 2010). Accordingly, HCs have been conceived as a civil association (Read, 2008). The self-governance of HCs, however, is constrained by both internal and external factors. First, the controversies within HC and the problematic principal-agent relations between HC and homeowners, the result of ineffective supervision, have led to an oligarchy of a few privileged homeowners and the exclusion of others, factions politics within HCs (Shi, 2010) as well as the phenomenon of ‘familiar strangers’ (He and Zhong, 2013). In addition, state intervention and other external intervention from developers and property management companies not only affect the performance of HCs (Read, 2008), but also lead to factionalizing within the HCs (Shi, 2010). Nevertheless, the cognition of local governments on these constraints differs from that of homeowner activists who seek to establish an association of HCs across neighborhoods or across cities. Local governments tend to attribute HCs’ lack of self-governance to internal factors such as faction politics, while activists tend to attribute this to external factors such as state intervention (Sun and Huang, 2014). This study attempts to explore the cognitive liberation process, in the context of rights-defending actions, by examining the rights consciousness of homeowner activists. The following sections therefore mainly examine the relationship between external constraints and HCs’ self-governance.

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes four types of rights consciousness (see Figure 1). ‘Protecting legal property rights’ refers to a type of

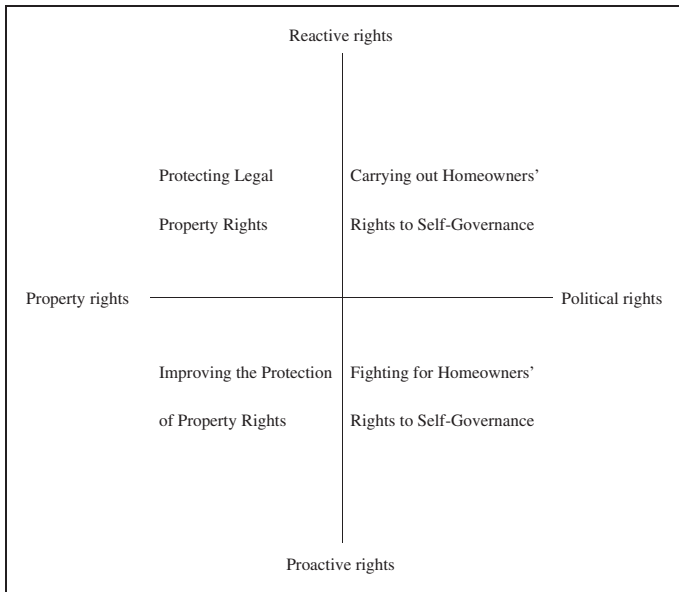


Figure 1. The typology of homeowners’ rights consciousness.

reactive rights consciousness based on existing laws and regulations, and its main demand is to protect the property rights guaranteed by existing laws and regulations from infringement by developers and property management companies. This type of rights consciousness refers to two aspects: (a) the rights to private properties, such as property ownership certificates and housing quality, and the rights to collective properties in the neighborhood, such as clubs and parking lots, both of which are usually in relation to developers; and (b) the rights related to property management services, including securities, cleaning, parking, and standards of administrative fees, which are usually in relation to property management companies.

'Carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance' refers to a type of reactive and political rights. Laws and regulations such as 'Property Management Regulations' stipulate that an HC is legally an autonomous organization that represents the collective interests of homeowners within a neighborhood and manages the operation of the neighborhood. Homeowners have the right to make decisions on property-related issues autonomously through their HC within a neighborhood. In reality, however, the establishment and operation of HCs are not only influenced by developers and property management companies, but are also subject to intervention and even control by local governments. It is thus difficult for homeowners to achieve self-governance. The referents of 'carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance' include HCs setting organizational goals, electing leaders, holding regular meetings, and making important decisions independently (Read, 2008).

'Improving the protection of property rights' refers to a type of proactive rights based on property rights. In the process of rights-defending actions, homeowner activists begin to realize that clear demarcation of property rights is the basis of protecting their interests. However, the unclear demarcation of property rights and infringement on property rights are not incidental but, rather, are derived from institutional obstacles associated with the underdevelopment of housing markets or the imperfection of laws and regulations. If homeowners do not actively participate in the rule-making process to improve relevant laws and regulations, their property rights cannot be enduringly protected. Correspondingly, homeowners are discussing, increasingly often, the limitations of institutions in relation to property rights protection and the ways to improve them. A few homeowners have even attended rule-making public hearings and written open letters to relevant government departments. Through these efforts they try to improve the legal system related to property rights protection. It should be noted, however, that homeowner activists' concerns are directly related to economic claims, regardless of the levels and forms of participation.

'Fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance' refers to a type of proactive and political rights. Collective rights-defending actions not only enhance trust and solidarity among homeowner activists, but also make activists aware of the importance of establishing associations of HCs across cities, regions, and even the entire country on rights-defending activism. City level AHCs established in recent years in

the process of rights-defending actions provide HCs with primary organizational infrastructure for further association. Such AHCs pool resources from individual HCs so as to forcefully confront resourceful developers and property management companies; equally, they can also lobby for favorable policies more effectively. Proactive rights to self-governance of homeowners have two aspects: (a) homeowner activists' attempts to establish AHCs; and (b) homeowner activists' attempts to change the existing policies and laws regulating homeowners' convention and homeowners' committees (HCs)—for instance, formal recognition of HCs as a legal entity. Although property rights and rights to self-governance cannot be entirely separated, activists' cognition of these two types of rights diverges under different external constraints, and the respective evolution trends also differ (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, homeowner activists' differentiated cognition of improving

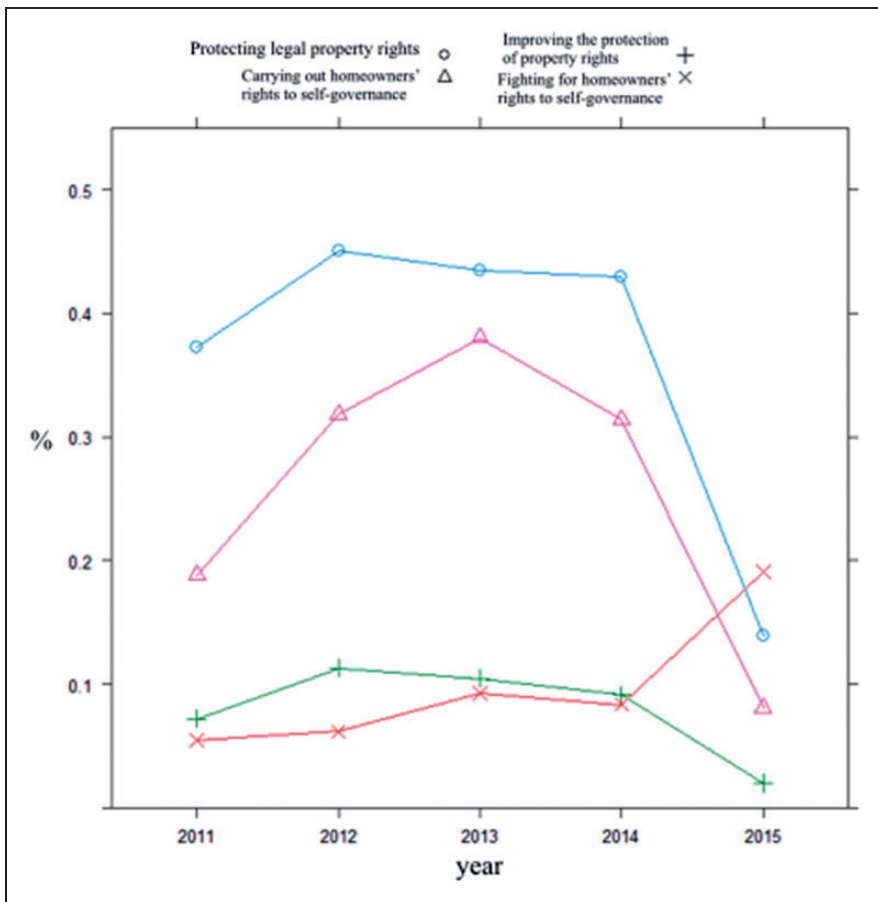


Figure 2. The evolution of homeowners' rights consciousness.

property rights protection, and of fighting for rights to self-governance, will not only influence their action strategies (interview 22 August 2015), but also directly affect our understanding of the nature of homeowners' actions. If homeowner activists only emphasize the importance of improving property rights protection, then their actions are likely to be limited to the domain of property rights protection (Li J, 2009). In contrast, if activists prioritize fighting for rights to self-governance, then their concerns for economic interests might extend to a broad public sphere, and thus create a breeding ground for civil society development.

The distribution and evolution of rights consciousness

By analyzing the tweets posted on Sina Weibo by homeowner activists, this study shows the trends of evolution of homeowners' rights consciousness (Figure 2). The results showed that 37% of the tweets posted in 2011 reflected the rights consciousness of protecting legal property rights, and this proportion rose to 45% in 2012 and remained stable in the following two years. However, the proportion dropped significantly, to 14%, in 2015. 19% of tweets posted in 2011 discussed 'carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance.' The proportion rose annually and reached 38% in 2013. It then gradually dropped to 8% in 2015. In 2011, 7% of the tweets discussed 'improving the protection of property rights.' This proportion rose to 11% in 2012, then dropped to 9% between 2013 and 2014 and dropped further, to 2%, in 2015. The trend of the rights consciousness of fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance is intriguing. In 2011, only 5% of the tweets manifested this type of rights consciousness. The corresponding proportion rose to 9% in 2013 and sharply increased to 19% in 2015.

Three intriguing patterns can be discerned by comparing the distribution and evolution of these four types of rights consciousness. First, except in 2015, the proportion of tweets mentioning reactive rights consciousness ('protecting legal property rights' and 'carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance') was much larger than that of the tweets reflecting proactive rights consciousness ('improving the protection of property rights' and 'fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance'). This suggests that reactive rights consciousness is more common than proactive rights consciousness. Homeowner activists mainly protect their rights and interests within the limits of state entitlement.

Second, the proportion of tweets mentioning protecting legal property rights was larger than the proportion of those carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance, while the proportion of tweets mentioning improving the protection of property rights was slightly larger than the proportion of those fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance (except in 2015). This suggests that when the nature of rights consciousness is the same, rights consciousness based on property rights is more common than that based on political rights.

Third, in the past two years, the proportions of tweets related to protecting legal property rights, carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance, and improving the protection of property rights, have been declining gradually. Meanwhile, the proportion of tweets reflecting fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance has been increasing, and in 2015 this proportion even surpassed the proportions of the other three types of rights consciousness. This might be related to the new trend of homeowners' rights-defending actions in recent years. The institutional environment related to property rights protection has improved as a result of homeowners' rights-defending actions in the past decade. The discussions on the self-governance of individual HCs have to some degree reached consensus, and homeowner activists are beginning to set a new goal of establishing AHCs that call for rights to self-governance beyond particular neighborhoods. In addition, the loosening state control on the social organization (e.g., a new registration system) and the formal establishment of a few AHCs also contribute, to some extent, to the growth of AHCs.

The process of homeowner activists' cognitive liberation and its dynamics

Due to the underdevelopment of social organizations, the cognitive liberation of homeowner activists in China is largely a spontaneous and interactive process. Actors faced with injustice develop diagnostic frames to identify problems and to assign attribution through personal experiences and discussions with others. Diagnostic frames do not remain unchanged, but alter or extend with the development of contentious actions and with further discussions and communications with peer activists. In terms of homeowner rights-defending actions, no professional rights-defending organizations beyond the neighborhood level represent homeowners' interests or speak for homeowners. Furthermore, homeowners from different neighborhoods face a variety of problems. Accordingly, the cognitive liberation of homeowners is a spontaneous process. In the early stages, homeowners' identification and attribution of the problems are relatively simple and straightforward, and their actions are oriented toward economic interests. The focus of disputes lies mainly in the demarcation of house ownership and the standards of property management services. In the process of rights-defending actions, homeowners' claims on property-based interests are suppressed by developers, property management companies, and local governments. This causes homeowners to begin to realize that an organization coordinating homeowners' collective actions is necessary for the rights-defending actions to succeed; and an HC is such a key organization. As the interconnections between different rights-defending issues increase, the gaining by HCs of rights to self-governance as civic associations has become a goal pursued by homeowner rights-defending actions. In addition, with the popularization of Sina Weibo and online communication, homeowners are becoming more and more conscious of the fact that the problems concerning housing property rights and homeowners' self-governance are not

idiosyncratic cases but, rather, are closely associated with the institutional environment. In order to solve these problems, it is critical for homeowners to build an alliance that represents their interests and is able to influence the rule-making process. We will now discuss homeowners' cognitive liberation and its dynamics with regard to protecting legal property rights, carrying out rights to self-governance, improving the protection of property rights, and fighting for rights to self-governance.

Protecting legal property rights

Homeowners' rights consciousness of property rights is derived from their identities as property owners. Since the late 1980s, urban residents have experienced the transition from being beneficiaries of welfare in relation to public housing to being consumers of commercial housing. They have gradually reached a consensus that 'those who pay own the house,' and property rights have also been formally recognized by laws and regulations. The 'Property Management Regulations' issued in 2007 clearly stipulate that 'property owners of housing are homeowners'; and the 'Real Right Law' issued in the same year further defines condominium ownership. Nevertheless, due to the lack of clarity in the regulations, developers usually own the property rights of shared facilities of neighborhoods and are allowed to sell or rent out these facilities provided that they do not include the floor area of each apartment they sell to homeowners. Meanwhile, the 'Property Management Regulations' stipulate that the functions of neighborhood facilities should not be changed and should first meet homeowners' needs for parking, leisure, and physical activities. The separation of ownership and use rights of shared space and facilities leads repeatedly to conflicts between homeowners and developers. For instance, a neighborhood Y was built by work unit P in 1997 to end the housing shortages of P's employees. Work unit P provided land, while its employees raised funds for construction costs. There are four high-rise residential buildings and an ancillary building in the neighborhood. The HC (Homeowners' Committee) office, RC (Residents' Committee) office, and homeowners' activity room are in the ancillary building. According to the vice chair of the HC, the document from the construction department clearly stated that this ancillary building was built with an investment from homeowners, so the property rights should belong to all homeowners (interview 5 July 2012). The ancillary building, however, was sold to a private company. This company first used the building as a printing and dyeing factory, and then as a place for Karaoke, which affected homeowners' lives. For three years, homeowners in neighborhood Y have been defending their rights through petitioning and litigation, and calling for media exposure. Finally, with mediation by the upper level government, the street office agreed to repurchase the property rights of the ancillary building from the private company to ensure that homeowners could use the building for free.

Housing property rights go hand in hand with rights to manage neighborhood space and properties. Homeowners require a safe, clean, orderly and beautiful

neighborhood environment according to their imagined view of an ideal lived space. When the property management services cannot meet these requirements, homeowners might be dissatisfied with the property management company. Homeowners' passive methods of resistance include refusing to pay property management fees. In some neighborhoods, the rate of homeowners' paying property management fees is lower than 15% (interview 26 September 2013). Aggressive methods of resistance include dismissing the property management company. For instance, the former property management company of neighborhood K was a subsidiary of the developer, which had a close relationship with the local government. Most employees of the company were recommended by the RC, which was eager to accomplish its re-employment task. The re-employed security and cleaning staff were regarded as irresponsible, in the homeowners' view, in performing their duties. They often drank beer and played cards during working hours, which led to homeowners' complaints. Homeowners, however, could do little about this because the property management company had a good relationship with the RC. The turning point came when a series of burglaries occurred in the neighborhood during one night. The security guard on duty that night was found gambling outside instead of doing his job. As a result, the homeowners decided to establish their own HC and to fire the property management company. They eventually succeeded, despite pressure from the street office and RC (interview 19 June 2012).

Owning housing properties means that homeowners have a large economic stake in the neighborhood. This means homeowners not only care about their property rights, but also pursue a safe and healthy living environment, avoiding the potential environmental and health risks created by polluting facilities (such as waste incineration plants, substations, and petroleum factories) inside or around the neighborhood (Guo and Chen, 2011; He, 2006; Johnson, 2010, 2013). For instance, in neighborhood X, while walking their dogs several homeowners found a cable used by relay stations for mobile communications, and found an antenna on the building's top floor. Concerned about the health risks produced by the radiation from the relay station, angry homeowners immediately set up an informal group. They negotiated with the RC and the property management company and asked them to remove all the relay stations. In the public rights-defending proposal released on the homeowners' forum, homeowners wrote the following statement:

According to news reports from both domestic and international media authorities, relay stations set up on buildings' top floors have resulted in the 'cancer building' in Beijing and the diagnoses of multiple brain tumors among the staff in an Australian company. Thus, we have every reason to believe that no matter how domestic standards explain it, this giant radiation project that runs through the greenbelt and constructs in the underground parking lot and the buildings' top floors in our neighborhood are very likely to harm to the health of the residents.⁵

The informal group organized various collective actions, including carrying banners, distributing leaflets, signing and submitting petitions, and mobilization via the Internet and the media. Their actions eventually drew the attention of the upper level government, which halted the construction of the relay stations in the neighborhood (interview 9 July 2009).

Carrying out rights to self-governance

Homeowners tend to be thwarted by developers and property management companies while defending their housing property rights. Thus, it is hard for homeowners to succeed in defending their rights merely by themselves. Homeowners are relatively weak compared to their opponents, who may be resourceful developers. More importantly, a single homeowner is unlikely to be qualified as a legal person, which makes it difficult for individual homeowners to negotiate with developers, to sign contracts with property management companies, and to file lawsuits. In such circumstances, homeowners realize that in order to defend their rights effectively, they must establish an officially recognized organization that represents their interests and mobilizes homeowners to participate in collective actions. In doing so, homeowners begin to assign more importance to the rights to self-governance, including the elections, rule-making, and decision making of HCs. Although HCs' rights to self-governance are often impeded by developers and property management companies, and are controlled by local governments out of concern for social stability, these pressures and impediments have activated homeowners' conscious comprehension of rights to self-governance.

First, HCs' rights to self-governance tend to be impeded by real estate interest groups such as developers and property management companies. Because of the sharp conflicts between developers, property management companies, and homeowners, and the fact that many property management companies are somehow affiliated with the developers, the first thing many HCs will do upon establishment is to dismiss the property management company. However, the attempt to dismiss the property management company often encounters—not unnaturally—strong opposition from the company. Companies' non-aggressive methods of opposition include ignoring the HC's decision, remaining in the neighborhood, and not allowing the newly hired property management company in. For instance, a tweet posted on Weibo said,

'Today, the homeowners of Rong Feng Garden neighborhood in Xicheng District in Beijing are angry. It has been six months since the HC reached its decision to fire the former property management company. The company, however, showed no sign of leaving the neighborhood, even though the government sent it a document urging it to leave. Additionally, a maintenance fund of over 3.3 million was found stolen. Homeowners gathered in the neighborhood, carrying banners saying 'evil property management company, get out of my place' and 'give me back my home.' They urged the property management company to move out as soon as possible (Weibo 3729618407939665).

In addition to these non-aggressive methods of opposition, property management companies may also use tougher methods involving violence to force homeowners to compromise. For instance,

I was beaten up by several unknown brawny men in front of my door in the evening, just because I promoted the establishment of our neighborhood's HC. I have come back home from the police station now. Thanks all my friends who messaged me on the Internet or called me by phone. Da Xing Qing Yuan Police Station said that my case would be transferred to the Da Xing Criminal Police. If they succeed in transferring my case, then it can be solved more efficiently. Until now, the property management company affiliated with China Resources Land Limited (Beijing) has not responded to this event. (Weibo 3412642972787515)

Second, local governments also intervene in and control homeowners' self-governance, out of concern regarding the negative influence of homeowners' rights-defending actions on social stability. The most common measure adopted by local governments is to control the elections and the filing procedures of HCs. In the controversy about property rights in neighborhood Y mentioned above, the property rights were still registered in the name of the street office, although homeowners could use the ancillary building without charge after years of rights-defending actions. Homeowner activists led by Mr L had been attempting to take back the property rights of that ancillary building; and the street office and RC thus regarded Mr L as a thorn in their collective flesh. During the re-election of the HC, the street office and RC used every means to exclude Mr L from the short list of candidates. Even though he was elected to the committee on election day by a large number of votes, the street office and RC denied the validity of the election as soon as they saw the result.⁶ Mr L said, with a sigh,

The street office can instruct us, and the party can lead us, but they can't change the nature of their power. What they exercise is public power, while this (the election of HC) is private power. The public power can instruct the private power to elect its HC, making the process fair and open. However, the public power should not act beyond its authority. It should not handpick the candidates on behalf of the mass, and overturn the results of the election. (interview 5 July 2012)

The supervision and control of HCs' rights to self-governance from the street office and RC have been questioned and opposed by homeowners. A homeowner argued on Weibo, from a legal perspective, that,

So many people would think that HCs that are not filed with the authorities are illegal. In fact, from the moment the election result comes out, an HC is legally established! HCs conform to a filing system rather than a registration system. (Weibo 3576569085376700)

Another homeowner stated, based on his own experience, that,

Dozens of my friends from the online forum and I went to the court trial held at Baohe District Court this morning. Teacher Nie, who lives in Guo Mao Apartment Neighborhood, accused the Wang Hu street office and the housing construction bureau of the district of refusing to put him in their records after he was elected a member of the HC, the reason being that his name was not on the property ownership certificate. This is an old problem, which impedes homeowners' active participation in public affairs in their neighborhoods. The street offices enforce the regulations so selectively that such activities are allowed by some street offices, but prohibited by others. (Weibo 3850049090463651)

These tweets indicate that homeowners' rights consciousness changes and extends with their rights-defending experiences, which demonstrates the interactive process of cognitive liberation.

Improving the protection of property rights

The development of homeowners' rights-defending actions, especially difficulties similar to those facing homeowners (e.g., disputes in relation to property rights and property management), encourages homeowners to communicate actively with one another and to share their experiences and lessons learned from the rights-defending process. In addition, the rapid growth of social media, especially Weibo, provides an excellent platform for homeowners to communicate with each other. An earlier study by Huang and Sun found that Weibo not only offers homeowners a fast and convenient channel for information circulation, but also facilitates the formation of Internet communities among homeowners across regions (Huang and Sun, 2014). Homeowners discuss their respective problems and gradually realize that disputes in relation to property rights and property management are not idiosyncratic cases but, rather, are closely associated with the entire housing market and the institutions of property management. The homeowners realize that in order to solve these problems they must take an active part in the policy-making process and work to influence and change the entire policy environment.

Homeowners' claims in relation to the proactive rights of improving the protection of property rights are mainly two-fold. First, homeowner activists question the legitimacy and rationality of existing laws and regulations, express their own opinions, and propose suggestions accordingly. For instance, some homeowners question the ownership demarcation of shared facilities in their neighborhoods.

#Property rights registration of the civil defense projects in Shanghai# (1) What levels are these documents in the legal hierarchy? (2) Do they conflict with the Real Right Law? (3) If they do, on which one will the courts base their judgements? The Real Right Law, or these regulations released before the Real Right Law? (4) The housing

has already been sold, but the developer has yet to register the transfer of the rights to use the land. In this case, can the developer and the government register the land of the neighborhood used as civil defense as the possession of the developer or other people? (Weibo 3613883224878333)

Some homeowners also seek to revise the arrangement and management of maintenance funds. For instance,

Homeowners do not care about the maintenance funds, because the funds are currently managed by the administrative agency rather than deposited in the public account of the neighborhood. Actually, every neighborhood should set up a special public account at the very beginning. All the neighborhood-related property management fees, maintenance funds, and public income should be deposited first in this account. All the relevant payments should be made with this account. The items of the account should be open and transparent. Any homeowner has the right to inspect, copy, and audit the public account! (Weibo 3495725914382655)

Second, based on their critiques of the legitimacy and rationality of existing laws and regulations, homeowner activists discuss further how to influence and change the institutional environment through collective actions. The most direct way is to express opinions and make suggestions when relevant laws and regulations are at the stage of seeking public opinions, as these two examples illustrate,

Construction companies infringe on consumers' rights and interests most seriously in selling housing and providing property management services. Such infringement can influence the lives of consumers. It means a lot to consumers that the Consumer Protection Act is going to clearly regulate the behaviors of construction companies. Today is the last day of the Revision Suggestions of the Consumer Protection Act Amendment (Draft) (forthcoming) seeking public opinions. Everyone, please give your opinions if you have any. (Weibo 3583954097092881)

Yesterday's executive meeting of the municipal government deliberated and approved the Interim Procedures of Property Management in Guangzhou. During the period when the Procedures were drafted and revised, dozens of HCs and hundreds of homeowners in Guangzhou jointly signed and petitioned to terminate the deposition procedure and asked the municipal People's Congress to make legislation on property management. (Weibo 3671797386165516)

Some activists also try to influence the institutions from within the establishment, such as the People's Congress, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and the courts, in order to influence and change the institutional environment:

How about the specific measures for implementation? What about we homeowners presenting proposals to the deputies of the People's Congress in different regions (and

these deputies are also homeowners)? This is my thought about the strategies of homeowners' promotion of legislation. (Weibo 653547776698475)

Can AHCs of different regions also adopt similar measures to improve the protection of homeowners' rights in legal cases, through collecting typical legal cases and communicating with the courts? (Weibo 3631401859396225)

Fighting for rights to self-governance

In the process of exercising their rights to self-governance, homeowner activists encountered obstructions from developers, property management companies and local governments. These obstructions have compelled homeowners to seek external allies, and to build city-level horizontal networks among homeowners' organizations (Yip and Jiang, 2011; Zhang and Zhuang, 2008). At present, no specialized laws and regulations regulate the forms of AHCs. Most AHCs' activities therefore exist in a 'gray zone,' relying largely on homeowner activists' self-censorship on a range of activities, and on their regular contacts with officials from the local governments at the base level. HCs are mass organizations formally recognized by the laws, and seeking HCs' self-governance can be seen as faithful enforcement of laws and regulations sanctioned by the state: in contrast, attempts to establish AHCs should be regarded as the proactive pursuit of rights beyond state entitlement. In other words, this is a cognitive liberation process in which rule consciousness transforms into rights consciousness.

The primary goal of establishing an AHC is to build a platform where different HCs can communicate, learn and help each other. Some homeowner activists are professionals, such as lawyers and managers of property management companies, and they are able to share knowledge on laws and property management through seminars and other activities. At the same time, the Internet is also a convenient platform for homeowners to exchange ideas, and HCs faced with difficulties can instantly obtain legal advice, first-hand experience, and specific solutions from other HCs on the Internet. As the president of the Xiaoshan AHC explained, 'Our thoughts are very simple, that is, HCs of every neighborhood unite together so that they can learn from and help each other, reduce the time of trial and error, and solve HCs' problems of managing the neighborhood and property management.'⁷

In addition, because an AHC has a close relationship with its HC members, the former provides the latter with substantial support. For instance, during the transition period when the old property management company quit and the new one had not yet arrived, neighborhood X in Xiaoshan was left unattended, and there was trash everywhere in the neighborhood. Under these circumstances, the Xiaoshan AHC called on its 32 neighborhood members to transfer one or two of their staff to neighborhood X, creating a temporary property management group. In this way, they eventually helped neighborhood X deal with its problems.⁸

Nevertheless, AHCs encounter various obstructions in their operations because they have not been officially recognized by the state. A convener of Guangzhou AHC mentioned in the interview that,

Before the AHC was founded, homeowners' organizations in Guangzhou developed with twists and turns. A notable example is that we organized a meeting in 2008, and at midnight I was called to go to a police station. Police officers immediately terminated our meeting to be held the next day. They said that we were holding an illegal activity and did not let us continue. There were 150–200 people with us at that time. With everything unclear, we relocated all the homeowners and HC chairs by three buses the next day...After that, I was confined for three hours...Since then, I have always been bearing in mind that we must set up a registered social organization. (interview 22 August 2015)

Under such circumstances, AHCs in different regions begin to try to gain legal identities in various ways, so that they can operate smoothly.

The significant contribution of the establishment of AHCs to homeowners' proactive rights to self-governance lies in the ability of the AHCs to formalize and unify, by means of discussion and negotiation, the norms and codes of conduct for HCs' management. Because HCs remain in an elementary phase in terms of organizational operation, financial management and the protection of rights of their neighborhoods, disagreement and controversies are likely to occur within the HCs, which makes it difficult to act forcefully in rights-defending actions. If codes of conduct can be established and are widely accepted, they will not only increase the management efficiency of HCs but also enhance homeowners' ability to negotiate with developers, property management companies, and local governments. As the convener of Shanghai AHC explained,

Nowadays, HCs tend to impress people as trouble makers, but a really good HC does not make trouble. Only when we form a homeowner dominated management mode according to our line of thoughts, can we substantially reduce the number of protests and disputes. (interview 25 August 2012)

The convener of Guangzhou AHC also mentioned in the interview that,

...last year, *Southern Metropolis Daily* asked us to hold a meeting on the deposit and appreciation of special maintenance funds. The meeting was held four times a year. Because of this, we kept cooperating with the *Daily*. Eventually, until this year, all the banks revealed to every neighborhood the details of their maintenance funds, including current amount, and the amount of interest. Our meetings contributed a lot to this progress. (interview 22 August 2015)

Conclusion and discussion

Most existing studies focus on the relationship between objective conditions, including political opportunity structure and resource mobilization, and homeowners' collective actions. However, to a large extent they neglect homeowners' cognitions and perceptions of the problems facing them. As McAdam (1999) pointed out in his critique and reflection on social movement theories, previous studies placed too much emphasis on the resources and strategies of social movements, and neglected broad social contexts and actors' cognitions and perceptions of the problems. In fact, homeowners' understanding of the issues at stake, such as property rights disputes, neighborhood conflicts, and homeowners' self-governance, changes during the process of collective rights-defending actions. This has led to diverse claims in relation to the contention on the part of homeowner activists. Exploration of the typology of rights consciousness underpinning homeowner activists' claims, and the evolution of different types of rights consciousness, therefore helps us understand better homeowners' collective actions.

Based on framing and cognitive liberation theories, this study uses rights consciousness as an example with which to examine homeowner activists' cognition and diagnoses of the problems facing them. It explores a typology of homeowners' rights consciousnesses and the evolution of different types of rights consciousness during the process of rights-defending actions. A two-by-two typology of homeowners' rights consciousnesses was constructed, according to two dimensions—the referent of rights consciousness (property rights vs. rights to self-governance), and the nature of rights consciousness (reactive vs. proactive). These four types include 'protecting legal property rights,' 'carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance,' 'improving the protection of property rights,' and 'fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance.'

Content analysis of Weibo revealed several findings of particular interest. First, the proportion of tweets related to protecting legal property rights was slightly higher than that of tweets mentioning enforcing homeowners' rights to self-governance. However, similar trends in relation to these two types of rights consciousness can be discerned, which suggests a close association between reactive rights consciousness based on property rights and rights consciousness based on political rights. Second, the proportion of tweets reflecting protecting legal property rights and carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance was much higher than that of tweets reflecting improving the protection of property rights and fighting for homeowners' rights to self-governance. This indicates that reactive rights consciousness is more common than proactive rights consciousness, and homeowner activists mainly defend their rights within the limits of existing rules and policies. It is worth noting, however, that the proactive protest frame in relation to homeowners' rights to self-governance has developed during recent years, and its salience has even surpassed that of other types of rights consciousness. One possible explanation for this is that rules regarding property rights protection have improved significantly, and activists have achieved a consensus regarding self-governance within a specific neighborhood because of the decade-long rights-defending

efforts. Attempts to build a lateral network of homeowner committees that seek rights to self-governance across neighborhoods have become a new trend. In addition, the loosening state control of social organizations (e.g., the establishment of a registration system), and the establishment of AHCs in a few cities also encourage the further development of AHCs.

Homeowners' cognitive liberation in relation to rights is a spontaneous and dynamic process. At first, homeowners have a hazy sense of unfairness, and they gradually develop diagnostic frames which identify problems and make attributions for such situations, based on personal experiences or discussions with other homeowners. Such diagnostic frames change or extend with the development of contentious collective actions, or with further in-depth discussions with peer activists. Protecting legal property rights is the fundamental type of rights consciousness, and it originated from the official recognition by the state of property rights, the collective property rights associated with condominium ownership, and the rights to decision-making and to participation in property management within neighborhoods. However, obstacles in homeowners' rights-defending actions posed by developers, property management companies, and even by local states, have gradually made activists aware of the importance of homeowner committees, as social organizations that represents homeowners' collective interests, for successful rights-defending actions. As a result, the rights consciousness of carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance is activated. The frame of protecting property rights begins to align with the frame of carrying out homeowners' rights to self-governance. With the popularization of Weibo and online communication in general, homeowners develop a holistic and comprehensive understanding of their situations and become more conscious of the fact that the difficulties encountered are closely related to the broad political and institutional environment. In order to fundamentally change the status quo, homeowners begin to advance their rights beyond the limits of existing laws and regulations; they also endeavor to build horizontal networks of HCs at the city level in hopes of influencing and changing the existing laws and regulations in relation to property management and/or rights to self-governance.

It is argued that this study contributes to clarifying the particularity of framing and cognitive liberation in China's socio-political context. According to the framing theory in a Western context, professional social movement organizations facilitate protesters' cognitive liberation by strategically providing interpretative frames. However, strategic framing efforts by SMOs are not always required for cognitive liberation (Futrell, 2003; Nepstad, 1997). In the absence of SMOs, cognitive liberation can be materialized as a result of protesters' first-hand experiences, learning process, or discussions with other protesters. This is of major significance for understanding contentious collective actions in urban China. Because social organizations are as yet underdeveloped, few collective actions are organized by them and, therefore, a strategic framing process rarely exists. In most cases the framing process occurs simultaneously with spontaneous cognitive liberation. In terms of homeowners' rights-defending actions, activists gradually gain knowledge of the

rights of homeowners in their attempts either to solve the problems regarding neighborhood governance or to defend their rights. In addition, such knowledge becomes clearer and more detailed and wide-ranging through online and offline discussions among activists. The Internet, as a new platform for information circulation, communication and mobilization (Huang and Sun, 2014; Huang and Yip, 2012; Yang, 2003), plays a crucial role in the development and evolution of homeowners' rights consciousness. The relationship between the development of Internet technologies and protesters' cognitive liberation merits further scrutiny.

Methodologically, it is difficult to study cognitive liberation by examining a particular protest event, because cognitive liberation is a relatively slow and dynamic process. We would argue that researchers should shift the focus from event-based framing to issue-based framing, and should analyze the inter-relations and interactions among a family of protest events pertaining to the same issue and examine the joint effects of such a family of events on activists' cognitive liberation. This approach will help us understand better the occurrence and process of cognitive liberation and the associated influencing factors. As noted here, communications and discussions about similar contentious issues help activists to develop diagnostic frames and to actively propose solutions from an institutional perspective, which in turn accelerates the process of cognitive liberation.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the analyses of homeowners' rights consciousness were mainly based on the tweets (re)posted by the Weibo user 'Homeowners' Committee Newsletter,' and it is acknowledged that this data source might be biased. The issue of how to collect and analyze representative online data merits further consideration. Second, homeowner activists' discussions on Weibo are diverse, including but not limited to solutions of neighborhood disputes, the self-governance of HCs, and policy advocacy. However, not all of these tweets are closely associated with a particular protest event. This study mainly focuses on different types of rights consciousness of urban homeowners embedded in these tweets, and it will be necessary for future studies to examine the co-evolution of cognitive liberation and collective contentious events. Third, HCs' rights to self-governance are constrained by both internal and external factors: this study only examines homeowner activists' cognition of external factors. Future studies should evaluate the relative effects of internal and external factors on activists' rights consciousness, as well as the co-evolution between activists' cognition of internal and external factors. Because of activists' divergent understandings of HCs' self-governance, the scrutiny of their cognition of internal and external factors will contribute to revealing the heterogeneity of and tensions within the community of homeowner activists.

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Notes

1. Generally speaking, only a few studies on collective actions in China pay attention to the framing strategies of protesters. These exceptions include work by Cheng (2012); Li XY (2009); Liu (2010) and Xia (2014).
2. According to our brief survey conducted in 2004, AHCs that have been formally registered include AHC of Tianjin, Governance & Community Institute of Southern China, AHC of Xiaoshan District, AHC of Shenyang, AHC of Yingkou, AHC of Qingzhou (in Weifang), AHC of Suqian, AHC of Wenzhou, and Homeowners' Representative Association of Shunde District.
3. <http://rqda.r-forge.r-project.org/>
4. Another way of acquiring relevant information is to search with keywords, such as 'homeowners' committee,' 'homeowner rights-defending actions,' and 'property management regulations.' In this way, multiple users can be included in the analysis. However, early exploratory analysis revealed the shortcomings of such a method. First, a maximum of 1000 tweets can be returned through a keyword search, and it is difficult for researchers to determine whether these tweets represent a random sample. Second, the resultant tweets were highly redundant and repetitive. Third, the method of keyword search did not provide researchers with users' information, and it was difficult to determine whether the tweets were posted by homeowners. Because of these shortcomings, we did not collect Weibo data using a keyword search.
5. <http://www.docin.com/p-10362982.html> (accessed on 18 April 2013).
6. Given that some of the homeowners no longer lived in the neighborhood, the RC suggested proxy voting via phone for the convenience of those homeowners; and the preparatory group agreed with this. However, when the voting results were revealed the secretary of the RC denied the validity of the proxy voting by phone and declared the election void.
7. http://jrzb.zjol.com.cn/html/2012-12/04/content_1891788.htm?div=-1 (accessed on 16 April 2013).
8. http://jrzb.zjol.com.cn/html/2012-12/04/content_1891788.htm?div=-1 (accessed on 16 April 2013).

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