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*The Development of Grand Mediation and Its
Implications for China's Regime Resilience:
The Li Qin Mediation Office**

Ieong Meng U

Abstract

Grand Mediation (GM) is a new conflict management mechanism initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to cope with rapidly growing social conflicts and maintain social stability. This article examines how GM operates in an urban grassroots environment and discusses its advantages for managing social conflicts as reflected in a cases study: the Li Qin mediation office. It concludes that GM may improve the capacity of the local government to engage in conflict resolutions, which confers greater resilience on the authoritarian regime. However, this mechanism is sensitive to changing socio-economic conditions, and its sustainability requires further examination.

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1. Introduction

What contributes to China's remarkable regime resilience has been an ongoing debate in comparative politics. Political scientists have already examined various factors. Some of them try to seek answer from the reform in formal political institution setting (e.g., the National People's Congress, cadre evaluation system, political participation).¹ Others are interested in how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adapts to and cooperates with the emerging social elites (e.g., private entrepreneurs) and the so-called civil society.² Some scholars even argue that the regime resilience comes from the evolution and revolution legacies of the CCP.³ However, a vital dimension remains under discussion about previous studies. The underlying aspect concerns how the CCP copes with the mass grievances in a rapidly changing socioeconomic environment. An indicator of the mass grievances manifests in the number of petitions and mass incidents (群體事件 *qunti shijian*). People use protests, demonstrations, and sometimes disruptive behaviors like violence, transportation blocking, and public disruptions to draw the local government's attention to their demands.⁴ The triggers of mass grievances include but are not limited to local cadre misconducts, housing demolition, land expropriation, labor disputes, and environmental problems.⁵ According to various sources, the number of petitions with complaints at the county level or above increased from 4.8 million to 13.7 million between 1995 and 2004.⁶ Moreover, the number of mass incidents rose fivefold from 1993 to 2003, followed by the total cases exceeding 180,000 in 2010.⁷ Regarding these as part of the most serious social problems and challenges for the CCP in preserving social stability, scholars have inferred that these social unrests would undermine the regime legitimacy and eventually threaten the existing political order.⁸

This article attempts to fill in the blanks of the existing literatures by evaluating how the CCP responds to the rapidly increasing grassroots conflicts through a new conflict management mechanism, named the Grand Mediation (GM, 大調解 *datiaojie*). The case study of "Li Qin (LQ) mediation office" will demonstrate how this mechanism operates in practice and further analyze how GM may downplay people's use of petitions to enhance the efficiency in conflict resolution and consolidation of regime resilience. The article is arranged in five sections. Section 1 provides a general introduction of GM's background and the goals it intends to fulfill. Section 2 describes how GM operates in an urban

grassroots setting, based on the fieldwork I conducted with the LQ mediation office. Section 3 analyzes how the LQ mediation office plays a dual role as a “peacekeeper” and an “intermediary” in grassroots conflict resolution to illustrate its typical contribution to social stability. Section 4 discusses the factors that might affect GM’s efficiency and also its limitations in conflict resolution. Finally, the conclusion of the article argues that GM can be adopted to improve the adaptability of the regime; but the sustainability of this approach is conditional. It is thus important to attend to how changes in socioeconomic conditions might influence the efficiency of GM.

2. Conflict Resolution and the Development of Grand Mediation

Since it was implemented in April 2010 as the state policy,⁹ GM has been a mechanism for coordinating all relevant social and political actors of handling social conflict, which include the local administrative agencies, the legal system, the police, the petition department, and so on.¹⁰ The basic function of GM is to provide an alternative channel for ordinary people to pursue remedy rather than to appeal through collective actions so as to prevent the mass grievances from the grassroots level, which can minimize the potential challenges to the political order. In practice, GM operates under the leadership of the local party committee and is coordinated by the Comprehensive Social Management Committee (社會管理綜合治理委員會 *shehui guanli zonghe zhili weiyuanhui*) and implemented by the Comprehensive Social Management Center (CSMC) at various levels.¹¹

GM was intentionally launched under the dysfunction of existing conflict resolution channels: the legal system and the petition system. Theoretically, the legal system should be the ultimate dispute arbiter as it is the formal, procedural, and predictable conflict resolution channel.¹² However, the institutional settings create severe obstacles to the existing legal system as local courts are highly dependent on the financial resources provided by the corresponding level governments. At the same time, the same level party organs also control the appointment of judges.¹³ Within the political hierarchy, it will be difficult for the legal system to avoid political interventions in cases any local officials involve in administrative litigations or commercial cases that may affect the local economic development.¹⁴ For the CCP, law is but a governing tool for serving its purpose and direction. On the contrary, legal judgment

has to take account of the political and social consequences in trial. Once the judgment leads to social unrest such as “litigation related petition” (涉法上访 *shefa shangfang*), the local court might suffer blame even when the judgment is made according to law. Therefore, courts may refuse to accept politically sensitive cases such as land and labor disputes that they find themselves unable to handle.¹⁵ Liebman recently described that China has fallen into a “Law-Stability Paradox,” in which the progress of legal reform is stagnated due to the CCP’s uncertainty to the efficiency of legal procedures being used strategically to maintain social stability.¹⁶

Consequently, the petition system provides an alternative channel for conflict resolution. As mentioned above, a petition is regarded as an extralegal strategy for people to appeal through collective actions, which mutually serves both moral and political functions. Dimitrov described the state-society relationship behind such a complaint system with the term “proxy accountability,” which explicates “in communist societies citizens and government are bound by an implicit social contract. Under the terms of this contract, the government meets specific policy commitments to provide material goods and services, and in exchange citizens respond with loyalty and quiescence. Citizen complaints can provide information to the government concerning public perceptions about deficiencies in the fulfillment of the social contract. Citizens registered their discontent and demanded swift government action to address the problems. Failure to act would send signals to the people that the government had broken its commitments under the social contract. In turn, such a crisis of accountability would give citizens license to organize and protest against the government.”¹⁷ Therefore, the petition system is a symbol of government accountability and a fire alarm for the upper-level government to monitor mass grievances and grassroots cadre misconducts. According to Cai, collective petition is the most commonly used solution modes in dealing with conflicts between local government agencies and citizens.¹⁸ He further indicates that the underlying condition to successful collective petition is dependent on the number of participants. The more people who participate in the petition, the bigger the bargaining power and the stronger the pressure to be generated to the local government.¹⁹ In many cases, local governments struggle with how to respond. Since petition is both legally and morally legitimate, local governments have no authority to forbid people going to the streets.²⁰ On the other hand, social stability maintenance is the so-called one vote

veto (一票否決 *yipiao foujue*) item in cadre performance evaluation.²¹ Failing such evaluation may significantly lower the chance of future promotion for local officials.²² Suffering under pressure, local governments may be overly reliant on repressive means to put collective action under control, which not only tends to undermine the regime legitimacy but also leads to a vicious cycle of worsening social instability and petitions. Ultimately, this will cause the grievances to remain unresolved.²³

The purposes of GM are best understood in the following contexts. First, a new mechanism is needed under the present circumstance to enhance the efficiency of conflict resolution. When a single channel is not enough, a multichannel mechanism should be applied and directed toward the conflicts. Instead of creating new conflict resolution channels, GM is adopted to make use of the existing ones. The core of the mechanism is to establish internal connections among different local government agencies under the overall aegis of the local party committee. It enables GM to quickly mobilize resources from different departments to respond to social conflicts. Second, it involves the unique feature that GM emphasizes conflict prevention rather than conflict repression after the conflict outbreaks. It requires local government agencies to be actively engaged in detecting potential mass grievances at the grassroots level and to resolve them before they generate threats to the political order. Third, GM was created to serve the authoritarian rule even though it discourages the use of repression in mitigating social conflicts. Yet, no checks and balances on state authority are in place. These notions will be further illustrated in the next two sections with the case of the LQ mediation office to demonstrate GM's functions in practice.

3. Implementation of Grand Mediation: The Case of the LQ Mediation Office

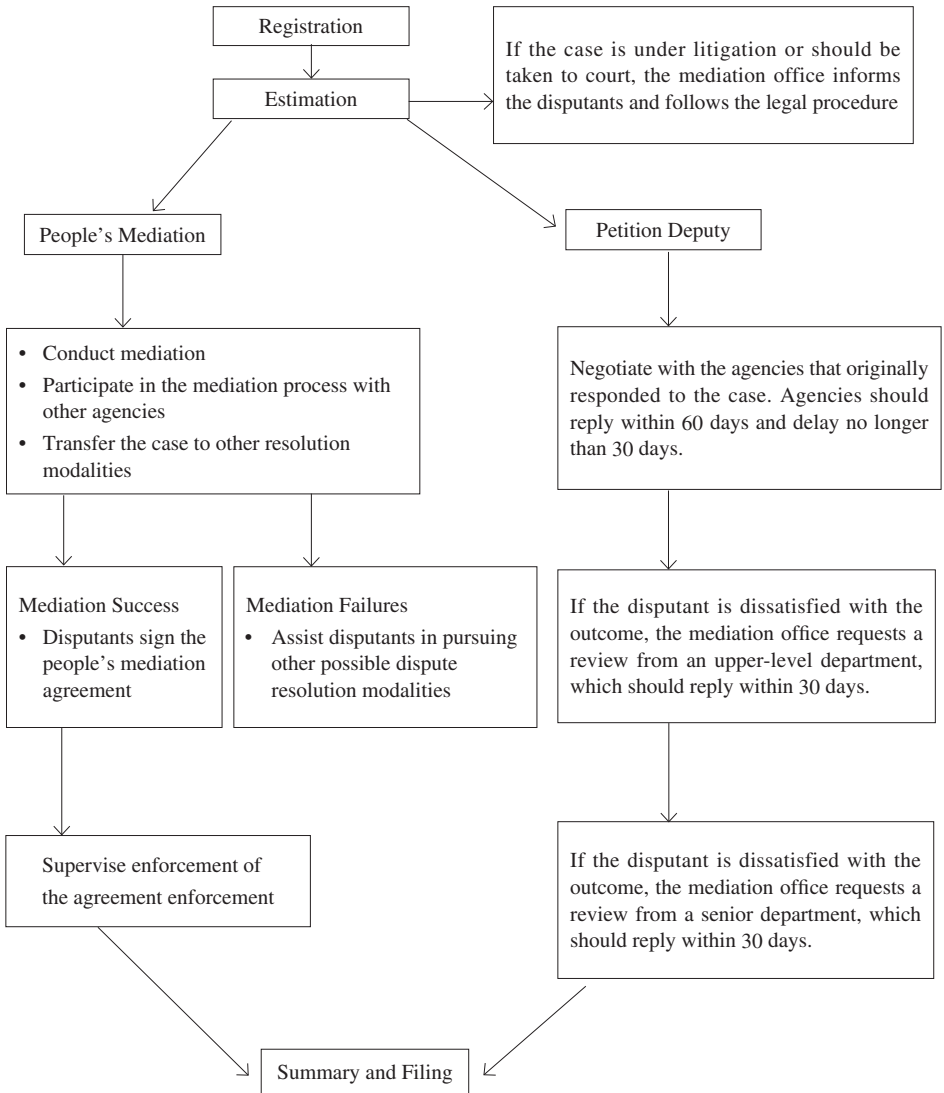
The LQ mediation office was founded in 2003.²⁴ It was registered as a private nonenterprise (民辦非企業 *minban feiqiye*) unit and contracted with the Shanghai Changning district government to provide conflict resolution services.²⁵ Its funding was provided by the district Civil Affairs Bureau to cover the expenditure of its staff salaries, water, electricity, and administrative fees. The mediation office could settle various types of disputes, including those involving family or neighbors, property, labor, and minor criminal case and for which the local governments required intervention. The LQ mediation office was selected as

the proxy of GM both for theoretical and practical reasons. It was true that the implementation approach of GM may vary due to different local socioeconomic conditions. Social organizations elsewhere may not serve the prominent position in GM as the LQ mediation office did in Shanghai. However, the structure and function of GM as described in section 2 are roughly the same within the state. Variations occur only in the number of entities that participate in the CSMC and which particular entity serves the major role in GM. Therefore, the representativeness of the LQ mediation office is less likely to be a problem if the research purpose was to figure out how GM is to be constructed and operated in the urban grassroots settings. The second reason is a more practical one. Since the local government sets social stability maintenance as its priority, it is somewhat “sensitive” to allow an “outsider” to meddle in and reveal the relevant information. Due to various constraints, the LQ mediation office was the only one that accepted my field survey. As I mentioned before, the mediation office was an example to illustrate how GM worked. It thus remains to be an ideal case to serve the purpose. In April 2013, I conducted a one-month field survey at the mediation office, where I had the opportunity to participate in the mediation process and conducted interviews with the office staff. These experiences allowed me to observe the implementation of GM at the grassroots level, the relationship between the LQ mediation office and the local government, and the roles that GM played in grassroots conflict resolution.

Figure 1 outlines the workflow of the resolution process, which begins upon the acceptance of a case by the mediation office. Depending on the situation, it is assigned to either one of two different procedures: people’s mediation (人民調解 *renmin tiaojie*) or the petition deputy (信訪代理 *xinfang daili*). Under the people’s mediation, the mediator assists both parties of the dispute to pursue a voluntary compromise. If the mediation is successful, the disputants are required to sign a legally binding agreement.²⁶ The mediation office also supervises the enforcement of the agreement. If the mediation fails, the mediator then provides assistance to the disputants as they pursue redress through other channels such as litigation or arbitration.²⁷ The petition deputy process requires one of the disputants to authorize the mediation office to act as his or her representative. The mediation office will then negotiate with the other party, which is usually either the corporation or the administration. Though the mediation office does not guarantee that the dispute

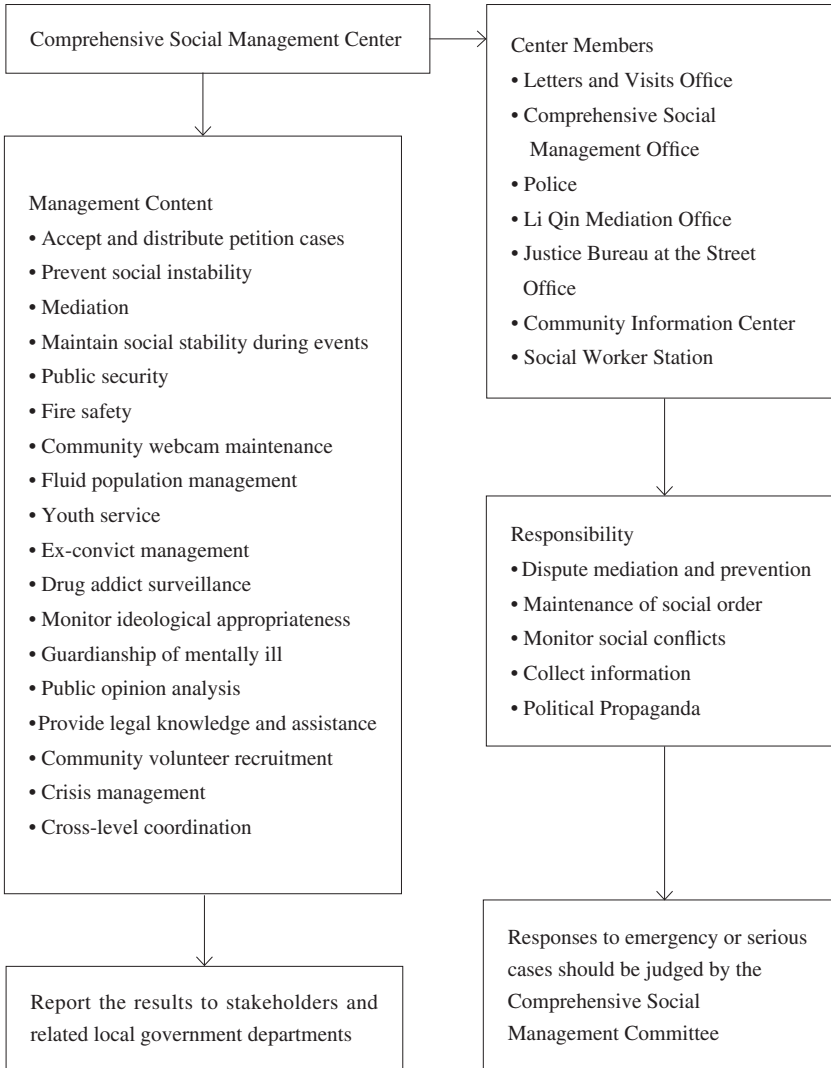
will be settled with certainty,²⁸ it ensures that disputants will receive replies via the petition deputy and receive further assistance if needed.

Figure 1: Workflow of the Li Qin Mediation Office



Following the launch of GM, a street-level CSMC was established in 2012, shortly before the LQ mediation office became incorporated into the center in March 2013. As Figure 2 indicates, the center performs a number of administrative functions related to the management of social conflicts, including accepting petitions, organizing police patrols, public security, and so on. Moreover, various local government agencies, such as the letters and visits office (信訪辦 *xinfangban*), police, and the Justice Bureau at the street office (街道司法所 *jiedao sifasuo*), are also involved in the process as center members. Because the center is under the leadership of the Comprehensive Social Management Committee, whose director is usually the vice secretary of the party committee at the corresponding level, it has the authority to coordinate all those vertical and horizontal administrative units to contribute to the process of GM. This significantly reduces the cost of interdepartmental coordination and enhances the local government's efficiency to respond to social conflicts. There are two channels from which LQ mediation could receive support from other entities in GM. The first one is through the CSMC. A part of the center's tasks requires one staff member of the LQ mediation office to be on duty to accept appeals and provide assistance to disputants around the clock. If the case is simple, a prompt solution is possibly made since the mediator can easily get support from other administrative units in the center. Complicated cases may require more time, and it is likely that the mediation may turn out to be unsuccessful. Under circumstances when mediations fail, the mediation office will assist the disputants to pursue other routes of resolution, such as lawsuits, as mentioned above. The responsibility of the mediator is to pacify disputants and de-escalate the grievance before it is transferred to other conflict resolution channels. An alternative channel for LQ mediation office to seek assistance is from the Justice Bureau of the street office. Although the establishment of GM connects different entities together, it is still under the supervision of the administrative hierarchy. When the conflict resolution requires different departments of the government to get involved, they may not act in concert with the LQ mediation office. As Lieberthal and Oksenberg described, the bureaucratic system in China is "fragmented" and operated under the logic of "Consensus Building."²⁹ Under such circumstances, the mediation office can reflect their difficulties to the street office through the Justice Bureau, which demands for coordination of higher bureaucracy level to facilitate the

Figure 2: The Structure of Comprehensive Social Management Center at Street Level



Source: Based on fieldwork data.

work to be done from above. Similarly, other center members can also seek assistants from LQ mediation office in GM. For instance, when a citizen calls the 110 police hotline, the police will ask for intervention and opinion of the LQ mediation office regarding the seriousness of the

case (e.g., minor physical injury) to assist pursuing settlement through mediation. The mediation office will then participate in the conflict resolution process from which the reconciliation is sought. Moreover, 13 subordinate mediation offices exist at the residential community level, on which many community volunteers provide support, usually as witnesses of the alleged conflicts of the community information gathering.³⁰ If they fail to handle the conflicts, LQ mediation office, as their supervisor, will take over the cases.³¹ Based on the information collected by the volunteers, the LQ mediation office is able to identify and resolve potential conflicts in the residential community or prevent them from escalating into collective actions on the street. Before the analysis goes further, it may be helpful to understand the relationship among CSMC, GM, and the LQ mediation office. As Figure 2 illustrates, CSMC is the terminal that includes all the tasks involving social stability maintenance at the grassroots level. Within the CSMC, GM is required to make typical use of mediation in conflict resolution out of its noncoercive nature for the purpose of social stability maintenance. Mediation can be conducted by different entities, for example, the people's courts conduct legal mediation, while administration departments conduct administrative mediation, and social organizations such as the LQ mediation office conducts people's mediation. Since there are no publicized statistics available, the exact number of the administrative mediations is unknown. For the other two types of mediation, the Law Yearbook indicates that people's mediation is more frequently used by people than the legal mediation.³² Therefore, empirical evidence supports that it is plausible to see the people's mediation as represented by the LQ mediation office in this article as the main component of GM. In short, the LQ mediation office is a subset of GM, while GM is a subset of the functions rendered by the CSMC in maintaining social stability.

4. Why Grand Mediation? The Dual Role of the LQ Mediation Office in Conflict Resolution

Although the LQ mediation office provides an alternative conflict resolution channel, one may wonder why this method was chosen and what benefits it could offer society. It is therefore important to ascertain why the local government has usually been the appeal target in social conflicts. Two reasons are normally related to this issue. First, in China urban residents are used to living under the work unit system (單位

danwei). In a planned economy, the work unit system served the functions of distributing the essential resources to people and providing the only institutional connection between the people and the government.³³ At the same time, it also served as the means for people to bargain with the government as well as the instrument for the CCP to conduct social control.³⁴ However, as the market economy transition continues to proceed, the work unit system has collapsed and been replaced by the market in resource distribution. What remains is that the government still manages a wide range of affairs, including family planning and residential permission, which are directly associated with people's daily lives. On the other hand, the bureaucratic system in China has a highly hierarchical and top-down structure, making the local governments become more susceptible to endure pressure from the upper as opposed to the people from below. This is why local officials tend to be unresponsive to the people. When people have difficulties in administrative conducts or as administrators fail to respond to public complaints, it can result in grievances. As a matter of fact, the application process for government permit has long been criticized for its inconvenience, lack of explicit procedure, and time-consuming review.³⁵ Second, under the "one vote veto" cadre performance evaluation, local government has to investigate all mass grievances that are likely to generate social instability, in spite of the fact that in some cases it may have no statutory responsibilities with it at all. This is why people involved in social conflicts have the incentive to appeal to the street to call for local government intervention.³⁶

The CCP has acknowledged the problems associated with the lack of responsiveness and accountability in local governance and has attempted to improve the situation by introducing new management approaches such as civic engagement and the purchase of services from grassroots nongovernmental social organizations to supplement public services.³⁷ This is why the local government is willing to support social organizations, such as the LQ mediation office, to alleviate the tensions it has to encounter directly out of social conflicts. Nevertheless, the CCP remains cautious about the rising civil society in that it might generate potential threats to the regime.³⁸ Two constraints are thus installed to ensure that the LQ mediation office can function only with the support of the local government and serve its needs in social stability maintenance. Namely, the office has to be sustained on the provision of essential resources from the local government; and it has also to be under

direct supervision of the Justice Bureau in the street office, which leads to a codependent relationship between them. On one hand, the LQ mediation office has to rely on the local government to survive. On the other hand, the mediation office holds three advantages in dealing with grassroots conflict resolution owing to its relationship with the government. First, the services provided by the LQ mediation office are both accessible and totally free of charge. Second, the staff members at the mediation office are supposed to be more familiar with the government policies, administrative procedures, and legal regulations than the ordinary citizens. Third, grassroots officials and corporations find it difficult to ignore requests from the mediation office due to its affiliation with the local government. These will be further illustrated below in the two cases encountered by the LQ mediation office.³⁹

In the first case, a female nonlocal resident intended to apply for Shanghai hukou (permanent resident eligibility). However, according to the regulations, she had to meet two requirements: (1) marry a resident who has had a Shanghai hukou for more than 10 years and (2) hold an agreement from a home owner in Shanghai who has a kinship relationship with the applicant.⁴⁰ Unfavorably, she met the first requirement but failed the second. As the house in question was owned by her mother-in-law who had passed away, she had to ask for the property management company for the change of house ownership to her husband in order to meet the second requirement. However, the property management company refused her request with the exceptional terms that the couple had to first demolish their long-standing but illegal addition to their apartment. But if the family did so, they would not have enough space to live in. Frustrated by the deadlock, the husband initially planned to start a petition. When the case came to the attention of the LQ mediation office, new negotiations with the property management company were restarted. Finally they reached an agreement, in which the property management company recognized the new homeowner but required that the couple move from the home when the building is expropriated by the local government in the future.

Another case involved misuse of public space for personal vehicle parking in a residential community. This was a dispute between a municipal-level liaison office in Shanghai (駐滬聯絡處 *zhuhu lianluo chu*) and its neighboring residents. Public criticism had arisen from time to time regarding the random parking of automobiles within the neighborhood, especially when done by the liaison office, which eventually

led to a burst of grievances at the end of 2012. More than 100 people deliberated to voice the problem to the district government through a collective petition. Before the petition was going to take place, the LQ mediation office was alert to get the message, and promised to help resolve the problem. When the leader of the liaison office was aware that he held the same administrative rank as the street office party secretary, he ignored and refused to accede to the request from a peer department. It was not until the LQ mediation office kept on persuading and obtaining support from the district government that the liaison office leader finally agreed to accept reconciliation and promise to find a new parking area outside the community after the Lunar New Year holiday of 2013.

Hence, two different roles of the LQ mediation office can be observed from the above examples in conflict resolution. One role is to serve as an “intermediary” between ordinary people and local government. With the assistance of the mediation office, mass grievances can be internalized and dissolved within the GM mechanism, which helps the local government to become more accessible and responsive to social conflicts. The other role is to serve as a “peacekeeper” in that the mediation office monitors potential social conflicts before they escalate into collective actions. Also, the majority of social conflicts are related to economic or social issues as opposed to sensitive political issues. Even when people threaten to resort to collective actions, they tend to resolve grievances rather than challenge the CCP’s fundamental authority.⁴¹ As a less contentious and more effective alternative, the LQ mediation office is more likely to be sought by the people when conflicts arise. GM yields a possible win-win outcome that not only prevents the local government from becoming the direct target of mass grievances but also helps people to reach compromises or acceptable solutions without facing the risks of petition or adopting repressive mechanisms.

5. The Foundations and Limitations of Grand Mediation in Conflict Resolution

As illustrated above, GM seems to be able to provide a comparatively ideal solution to grassroots social conflicts. However, as long as China continues to urbanize and transition into a market economy, the changing socioeconomic conditions may have a significant influence on people’s interpretation of the relationship between the state and the society. GM’s

ability to continuously mediate the conflicts between ordinary people and the authoritarian rule is subject to careful examination of the mechanism's foundations and limitations.

It is not difficult from the case study of LQ mediation office to notice that the precondition of GM's function first lies under the local party committee's capacities of interdepartmental coordination and resource mobilization. What GM requires to attain effective conflict management is the financial support and human resources provided by the local government, as well as the innovations on local policy to allow it to establish the connection within different administrations and social organizations outside the government to attain effective conflict management. In other words, the success of the LQ mediation office's case also depends on regional factors. Due to the huge regional differences within China, the efficiency of GM may vary significantly among cases across regions. Resolutions are more likely to be successful in more developed eastern coastal regions with abundant resources than less developed western areas because the former is more likely to afford the cost invested in the development of social organization such as the LQ mediation office and in recruiting professional mediators, who are supposed to have received higher level of education with adequate legal knowledge, in order to achieve the purpose of GM.⁴² Although the regional variation in GM is beyond the scope of this article, further study is needed to verify the judgment.

What is more fundamental to the success of GM is perhaps people's willingness to maintain the status quo. If the regime no longer wins the masses support, GM's function may be restricted to the delay of the collapse, but not a remedy of the declining legitimacy of the regime. Political trust is a common indicator to measure regime legitimacy. Since the early 1990s, scholars have consistently found a remarkably high level of trust in the Chinese central government.⁴³ Recent research has also found that political trust is primarily based on people's satisfaction with the regime's institutional performance in terms of economic growth and provision of public goods.⁴⁴ All these evidences confirm that even the material conditions have significantly improved since 1978. Ordinary people still seem to be more concerned about economic welfare that has a more direct impact on their daily lives than abstract political rights. Indubitably, the primary strategy of the CCP to survive must continue to center around the improvement on people's well-being.⁴⁵ Following the economic development, the increasing middle class is also likely to

generate a systematic influence on the existing political order. The middle class is considered to be a critical democratization catalyst or potential challenge to the authoritarian rule as they are likely to demand more constitutional constraints on state authority to ensure their personal property rights are protected and not violated.⁴⁶ Cases of resistance from urban homeowners seem to support this argument.⁴⁷ However, scholars still have found no evidence that the Chinese middle class harbors strong inclinations to replace the current regime. On the contrary, they seem to be more willing to compromise with the status quo upon which their welfare depends.⁴⁸

The capacity of the local party committee and the mass support of the regime represent the supply and demand sides of GM, respectively. The success of GM is rooted in the equilibrium that requires that both sides remain unchanged.

It should also be noted that GM is an adaptable response toward changing external environments, which intend to maintain the authoritarian rule. The capability to adapt has repeatedly been perceived as a key variable to explain why the communist system has not collapsed.⁴⁹ Adaptability can be defined as “the creation of a political system that is more responsive to the wants and needs of different sectors of society.”⁵⁰ To serve this purpose, the CCP demands feedback from the society so that its policies can be consistent with public opinion. However, the feedback mechanism considerably differs from that of a democratic regime, in which only a small number of social groups recognized by the state can participate in the exclusive channels of communication that influence the decision-making process. As Dickson describes, these feedback mechanisms are “cooptation” and “corporatism.” “Cooptation” refers to the absorption of new social elites, such as private entrepreneurs, to introduce new skills, experiences, and resources into the party. Entrepreneurs with positive connections to the government are more likely to defend their policy interests and influence government decisions. “Corporatism,” on the other hand, refers to the formation of connections with social organizations that collect information from society to generate political support from outside the party and provide suggestions for the decision-making process.⁵¹ In China, however, only one social organization is recognized by the state as the sole representative of interests for every social group (e.g., the All-China Federation of Industry & Commerce). These social organizations are the so-called peak associations that act as “transmission belts” that articulate interest

from below and mobilize and implement state policies at the local level.⁵² Then, what differentiates them from the GM? Table 1 presents a brief comparison of the three adaptive mechanisms and illustrates the limitations of GM in two ways.

Table 1: Comparison of Adaptive Mechanisms Used by the CCP

Mechanism	Target	Intentions	Limitations
Cooptation	Social elites	Absorbs new skills, experiences, and resources into the party.	The interests of ordinary citizens are excluded.
Corporatism	Peak social organizations	Collects public opinion from society, generates political support from outside the party, and offers suggestions for improving government decision making.	A top-down policy implementation mechanism rather than a bottom-up feedback channel for opinions.
Grand Mediation	Common citizens	Improves responsiveness to and capacity to manage social conflict through party coordination. Replaces coercion with prevention and “soft” control.	No institutional constraints on the CCP’s authority. Ordinary citizens are still excluded from the policy-making processes.

Source: The author.

First, unlike those of cooptation or corporatism, the target group of GM is neither the social elite nor peak association but ordinary people. GM is not used for public opinion input as the people are still excluded from participating in the decision-making process. Lack of institutional procedures to oppose any unwelcome policies may further mobilize people to express opinions by going to the streets. Take the case of the Xiamen Paraxylene Project in 2007 against environmental pollution as an example. Local people protested on the streets to request the suspension of the project and they were dissatisfied with the lack of public participation in the government decision-making process.⁵³ The Xiamen government eventually decided to compromise to prevent the escalation of protests. Similar cases repeatedly happened in the following years for the same reason.⁵⁴ Social conflicts related to specific policy issues will be on the increase in the future as people’s awareness of legal rights grows with economic development. Unfortunately, GM is unable to remedy this kind of mass grievance due to its lack of authority or influence to challenge or revise the decision made by the local government.

Second, unlike the legal system, GM has no compelling legal restraints on CCP's ruling authority. Because social conflicts are usually expected to be resolved within the political hierarchy rather than by legal procedures, there is no guarantee that legal rights will not be violated by the state even though GM intends to settle conflicts in a noncoercive manner. For the same reason, the number of social conflicts will not decline with the launch of GM. On the contrary, the priority in maintaining social stability and the advantages in conflict management brought by GM may further stagnate the legal reform progress, as observed by Liebman.⁵⁵ Therefore, GM may become a double-edged sword in the long term, which might generate a systemic crisis for the CCP if the continually increasing social conflicts overload the GM mechanism in the future.

6. Conclusion

As Nathan pointed out, authoritarian regimes are institutionally fragile because of their "weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralization of decision making and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms."⁵⁶ According to this perspective, the most valuable contribution of GM is its likelihood to partially pacify the tension between social stability and mass grievances, one of the most serious social problems in contemporary China. GM seeks to reduce petitions and mass incidents by providing a more efficient alternative approach to conflict resolution that can be supported, coordinated, and controlled by the party organ. This enables mass grievances to be settled with less coercive means. The case of the LQ mediation office demonstrates how it plays the dual role of being an "intermediary" and "peacekeeper" in conflict resolution to ensure that GM's goals can be realized at the grass-roots level. When compared with other adaptive mechanisms, GM devotes more attention toward the discontent of ordinary people. However, it cannot change the relationship between the state and the society, nor does it instantiate checks and balances on the CCP's authority. One may wonder how the local government can serve as the conflict mediator despite the fact that it is often perceived as the target of blame. This is possible only when people still believe that they can benefit from the current regime. Thus, the sustainability of GM is dependent upon the state's capacity to self-regulate as well as people's willingness to maintain the status quo. Although GM demonstrates a new

way of thinking about the management of social conflicts, which is likely to act as a temporary means, there is an urgent need for the reform on the legal and political systems to minimize the upsurge of social conflicts. Still, it is difficult to precisely predict the robustness of this mechanism given the rapidly changing external environment. Future research should examine how changes in socioeconomic conditions affect the functioning of this mechanism for a thorough evaluation of its contribution to regime resilience.

Notes

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9. See "Zhongyang zongzhiban: Shenru tuidong maodun jiufen dapaicha datiaojie gongzuo" (The Central Comprehensive and Control Committee: Further Promoting Grand Examination and Grand Mediation of Social Disputes), http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2010-04/28/content_1594555.htm, accessed 3 November 2014.
10. Jieren Hu, "Grand Mediation in China: Mechanism and Application," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (2011), pp. 1065–1089.
11. The Comprehensive Social Control Committee was established in 1991. It is a cross-level governmental network involved in the prevention of criminal activity and the maintenance of social stability. See "Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu jiaqiang shehui zhi'an zonghe zhili de jue ding" (The Party Central Committee and State Council: Decision on Promoting Comprehensive Social Control), <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66684/4494181.html>, accessed 3 November 2014. It was renamed the Comprehensive Social Management Committee in September 2011. "Zhuanjia jiedu: Zhongyang zongzhiwei weihe gengming" (Scholars:

- Why the Comprehensive and Control Committee Was Renamed), http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-09/27/c_122092192.htm, accessed 3 November 2014. However, it converted back to the original title in October 2014. See “Zhongyang shehui guanli zongzhiwei fuming wei shehui zhi’an zongzhiwei” (Comprehensive Social Management Committee Goes Back to Its Original Title), http://news.ifeng.com/a/20141010/42168590_0.shtml, accessed 3 November 2014. In order to keep the information consistent with the field work materials, this article is still titled “Comprehensive Social Management Committee.”
12. Richard E. Miller and Austin Sarat, “Grievances, Claims and Disputes: Assessing the Adversary Culture,” *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 15, Nos. 3/4 (1980–1981), pp. 525–566.
 13. Peerenboom Randall, *China’s Long March toward Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 298–330.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Benjamin L. Liebman, “Legal Reform: China’s Law-Stability Paradox,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 143, No. 2 (2014), pp. 96–109.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Martin K. Dimitrov, “Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes: The Role of Citizen Complaints in Bugaria and China,” in *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, edited by Martin K. Dimitrov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 276–302.
 18. Cai, “Social Conflicts and Modes of Action in China.”
 19. Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*, pp. 1–20.
 20. According to the state regulation, participants should not exceed five people in petition. Otherwise, it may consider as illegal assembly. See “Guowuyuan xinfang tiaoli” (State Council Regulation on Petition), http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2005-01/18/content_3583093.htm, accessed 3 November 2014. However, the bargain power is highly correlated with the participants. So sometimes, people use the so-called boundary spanning strategy to maximize the efficiency while avoiding breaking the regulation at the same time. See Kevin J. O’Brien, “Neither Transgressive nor Contained: Boundary-Spanning Contention in China,” *Mobilization*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2003), pp. 51–64.
 21. “One Vote Veto” is a strategy used to evaluate the performance of local governments. Policies are initially ordered and implemented in a top-down way in the bureaucratic system. They then are converted into measurable indicators and assigned to lower levels of government to be implemented. Local governments are required to sign responsibility agreements with the upper-level government. Some items such as economic growth, the maintenance of social stability, and family planning are more important than

- others. Thus, even if local governments meet the rest of the goals, if local officials fail to achieve the indicators set by their supervisor for the more important domains, they may still be considered for disqualification and suffered demotion or disciplinary action. Thomas Heberer and Rene Trappel, "Evaluation Processes, Local Cadres' Behaviour and Local Development Process," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 84 (2013), pp. 1048–1066; Hongbin Li and Li-An Zhou, "Political Turnover and Economic Performance: The Incentive Role of Personnel Control in China," *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 89 (2005), pp. 1743–1762; Susan Whiting, "The Cadre Evaluation System at the Grass Roots: The Paradox of Party Rule," in *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era*, edited by Barry Naughton and Dali Yang (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
22. Yongshun Cai and Lin Zhu, "Disciplining Local Officials in China: The Case of Conflict Management," *China Journal*, Vol. 70 (2013), pp. 98–119.
 23. Li, "Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside."
 24. The LQ mediation office, the first people's mediation office in Shanghai, was named after LQ, the founder of the mediation office and a skillful mediator who had served on the resident committee since 1988. The mediation office currently has five full-time staff members. They previously worked on the resident committee or were laid off from state corporations. Interview on 9 April 2013.
 25. Nongovernmental organizations can have three different forms in China: private nonenterprise, private foundations, and social organizations. See Thornton, "Advance of the Party."
 26. If one party refuses to fulfill the agreement, the counterpart has the right to pursue enforcement by filing lawsuit in the people's court. See "Zhonghua renming gongheguo renmin diaojie fa" (The People's Republic of China People's Mediation Law), http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinIn/2010-08/28/content_1593344.htm, accessed 3 November 2014.
 27. Assistance may include information about how to file a lawsuit, financing for part of the expense of litigation, and legal advice from volunteer lawyers. The type of assistance varies across cases. The types of assistance mentioned here are based on a case of property damage caused by a fire started during the field survey.
 28. The street office conducts annual performance evaluations of the mediation office, holding it to a mediation success rate of no less than 97% (if the two parties agree to engage in mediation); an absence of injuries, deaths, or inappropriate behaviors caused by mediation; and so on. Since its establishment, the mediation office has never failed to meet these standards. Interview on 26 April 2013.

29. Kenneth Lieberthal and Michael Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 22–27.
30. Volunteers are usually residents living in the community. According to Lu, Jianguo street, the location of the LQ mediation office, contains a total of 970 information collectors from the 13 resident communities who were registered at the mediation office in 2006; see Chunping Lu, *Zhuanxing qi renmin tiaojie jizhi shehuihua yunzuo* (The Operation of People's Mediation in Transition China) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2010), p. 87.
31. Resident community-level mediation offices are required to report the cases that handled or revealed by them to LQ mediation office within 24 hours. On the other hand, the LQ mediation office may be seen as the street-level people's mediation office. Interview on 9 April 2013.
32. For example, the total cases settled by people's mediation and legal mediation were 9.26 million and 3 million, respectively, in 2012. Correspondingly, the numbers were 8.93 million and 2.66 million in 2011, 8.41 million and 2.37 million in 2010, respectively.
33. David Bray, *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 1–15.
34. For the social control function, see Shizheng Feng, "Danweizhi yu jiti kangzheng" (Protest Mobilization under the *danwei* system in China), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociological Studies), No. 3 (2006), pp. 99–134. For detailed descriptions and strategies people used in the work unit system to defend self-interest, see Tianjian Shi, "Voting and Nonvoting in China: Voting Behavior in Plebiscitary and Limited-Choice Elections," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (1999), pp. 1115–1139; Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
35. It is not difficult to find relevant news reports, for example "Ruhe pojie Zhongguoshi banzhengnan" (How to Solve the Chinese-Style Dilemma in Apply Government Permit), http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2013-10/18/c_125553247.htm, accessed 3 November 2014; "Jiejue banzhengnan xianyao jiejue sanda wenti" (Three Problems Must Be Addressed in Government Permit Application), <http://news.cntv.cn/2013/10/19/ARTI1382186727259707.shtml>, accessed 3 November 2014.
36. Xin He, Luang Wang, and Yang Su, "Above the Roof, Beneath the Law: Perceived Justice behind Disruptive Tactics of Migrant Wage Claimants in China," *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2013), pp. 703–738; David Zweig, "To the Courts or to the Barricades: Can New Political Institutions Manage Rural Conflict?," in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, pp.

- 113–135; Yang Su and Xin He, “Street as Courtroom: State Accommodation of Labor Protest in South China,” *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2010), pp. 157–184.
37. Bennis Wai Yip So, “Civic Engagement in the Performance Evaluation of the Public Sector in China,” *Public Management Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2014), pp. 341–357; Jessica C. Teets, “Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 213 (2013), pp. 19–38.
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39. Interview on 8 April 2013.
40. See “Guanyu benshi toukaoli hukou qianyi ruogan shishi yijian” (The Regulation of Shanghai Hukou Removal), Shanghai Government Archives (2009) No. 70 and “Shanghai changzhi hukou guanli guiding” (The Regulation of Shanghai Hukou), <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node2314/node3124/node3199/node3201/userobject6ai1833.html>, accessed 3 November 2014.
41. Elizabeth J. Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?,” *China Journal*, Vol. 57 (2007), pp. 1–22.
42. Interview on 8 April 2013. Also see Wu Zhiming, ed., *Datiaojie: Yingdui shehuimaodun tuxian de dongfang jingyan* (Grand Mediation: The Orient Experience in Social Conflict Management) (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 2010), pp. 67–68.
43. Chen, *Popular Political Support in Urban China*; Li, “Political Trust in Rural China”; Tianjian Shi, “Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2001), pp. 401–419; Zhengxu Wang, “Explaining Regime Strength in China,” *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 4 (2006), pp. 21237.
44. Qing Yang and Wenfang Tang, “Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China: Culture, Mobilization or Performance,” *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2010), pp. 415–436; Tianguang Meng and Ming Yang, “Zhuanxingqi Zhongguo Xianji Zhengfu De Keguan Zhili Jixiao Yu Zhengzhi Xinren—Cong ‘Jingji Zengchang Hefaxing’ Dao ‘Gonggong Chanpin Hefaxing’” (Governance Performance and Political Trust in Transitional China: From “Economic Growth Legitimacy” to “Public Goods Legitimacy”), *Jingji shehui bijiao* (Comparative Economic & Social Systems), Vol. 4 (2012), pp. 122–135.

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50. Dickson, *Democratization in China and Taiwan*, p. 5.
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52. However, whether corporatism truly reflects and represents the public opinion is doubted by some scholars. For example, Unger and Chen argued that "harmony is the catchword of a corporatist system, regardless of whether this harmony is truly consensual or imposed from above. And it is very often a goal-oriented harmony, orchestrated to serve a national mission." See Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "Associations in a Bind: The Emergence of Political Corporatism," in *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces*, edited by Jonathan Unger (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), pp. 48–68.
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54. See the specific topics in *South China Morning Post*, <http://www.scmp.com/topics/paraxylene-px>, accessed 3 November 2014.
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