

## Popular Protest in Contemporary China: A Comprehensive Approach

Popular protest has been frequent in post-1989 China. It has included activism by farmers, workers, and homeowners; environmental activism; nationalist protests; political activism; separatist unrest by Uighurs and Tibetans; and quasi-separatist activism in Hong Kong. These actions have drawn a great deal of scholarly attention, resulting in a rich body of research. However, nearly all focus only on a particular category of citizen collective action. Further, the few studies that examine protest more broadly were written before Xi Jinping assumed the Chinese Party-state's top posts in 2012, and do not include all of the types of contention listed above. This paper is the first to take a truly comprehensive approach that collectively examines the wide array of protests across China from the 1990s through the present. In so doing, it uncovers patterns that are not found in other studies. Specifically, the paper underscores how protest emergence and success have been impacted by: 1) divisions within the political leadership; 2) laws and official pronouncements; 3) the socioeconomic status and resources of the aggrieved; and 4) the nature of citizen complaints and actions. Based on these findings, the paper concludes with an assessment of their implications for the legitimacy and stability of Chinese Communist Party rule.

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## **Popular Protest in Contemporary China: A Comprehensive Approach**

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Popular protest has been frequent in post-1989 China. Although (as with many other aspects of China's political and economic system) reliable statistics are elusive, virtually all sources agree that the frequency of contentious collective action has been much higher from the turn of the millennium to the present than it was in the 1990s, and that it was much higher in the 1990s than it was in the 1980s. In 2005, the last year that the Chinese government published official statistics on "mass incidents," there were 87,000 such occurrences, as compared with roughly 5,000-10,000 per year in the early 1990s and fewer than 1,000 a year in the 1980s. Since 2005, various Chinese officials have provided verbal estimates, and some Chinese scholars and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have offered statistics based on their research. Drawing on these sources, for about the past decade, the number of yearly popular protests is estimated to have remained in the high tens-of-thousands, and according to some mainland Chinese scholars rose as high as 180,000 in 2010.<sup>1</sup>

These protests have included activism by farmers, workers, and homeowners; environmental activism; nationalist protests; political dissent; separatist unrest by Uighurs and Tibetans; and quasi-separatist activism in Hong Kong. Such actions have drawn a great deal of scholarly attention, resulting in a rich body of research. However, nearly all have focused only on a particular category of citizen collective action in post-Mao China. And the few that examine protest more broadly were undertaken before 2012, when Xi Jinping assumed the Chinese Party-state's top posts, and do not include all of the types of contention listed above. This paper is the first to take a truly comprehensive approach that collectively examines the wide spectrum of

protests across China from the 1990s through the present. In so doing, it uncovers patterns that are not found in other studies. Specifically, the paper underscores how protest emergence and success have been impacted by: 1) elite divisions; 2) laws and official pronouncements; 3) the socioeconomic status and resources of the aggrieved; and 4) the nature of citizen complaints and actions. Based on these findings, the paper also assesses their implications for the legitimacy and stability of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule.

### **Existing Scholarly Work**

As noted above, the multitudinous popular protests that have arisen in China since the 1990s have been the subject of numerous scholarly studies. Work on farmer activism focuses on protests against taxes (which were widespread in the 1990s) and rural land acquisition (prevalent from the turn of the millennium through the present).<sup>2</sup> Some also examine collective petitioning by farmers<sup>3</sup> and protest leadership in the countryside.<sup>4</sup> A number have undertaken more general assessments of rural protest,<sup>5</sup> including most notably O'Brien's path-breaking formulation of the concept of "rightful resistance:" citizens taking seriously constitutional provisions and laws that purport to protect citizen rights, and challenging regime authorities to make good on these legal claims.<sup>6</sup> Underlying such actions are perceived divisions within the political elite—in particular, the belief that higher-level authorities support beneficial laws that lower-level officials have violated.

Scholarly research on worker protest also has been plentiful. Much focuses on the massive public sector worker demonstrations that arose in the context of large-scale state-owned enterprise (SOE) privatization in the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium.<sup>7</sup> The other major strand examines labor unrest in China's burgeoning private sector.<sup>8</sup> A few

studies compare both.<sup>9</sup> These works highlight the different attitudes and structural positions of public and private sector workers, finding that the former have exhibited a more “communist” mentality of entitlement to formerly provided employment benefits and guarantees and have received more favorable treatment by central regime authorities, while the latter (mostly migrant workers from the countryside) have emphasized the violation of labor laws and have elicited far less central government attention.

Studies of homeowner protest—which has become more prominent since the turn of the new millennium—also have begun to proliferate.<sup>10</sup> Most generally conclude that the privileged position of urban homeowners (particularly those wealthy enough to live in the relatively luxurious gated communities that have sprung up over the past two decades) has given them a greater ability to successfully press their claims.

In addition to research on activism undertaken by specific demographic groups, scholars have examined protests that have emerged around more general issues—most notably, environmental protection, nationalism, and citizen “rights-protection.” Research on environmental activism—which increasingly has arisen since the mid-1990s, and since 2000 is estimated to have constituted roughly half of all large-scale “mass incidents” in China<sup>11</sup>—includes work on both rural and urban protests. This literature finds that environmental protests in urban areas tend to be more successful. In part, this is because urban residents have more resources and higher social status. Relatedly, urbanites are far more likely to utilize the Internet and social media, which have been found to be key in a number of urban-based environmental actions.<sup>12</sup>

Examinations of nationalist protests—such as those criticizing the U.S. in 1999, France and other Western countries in 2008, and Japan in 2005 and 2012—find that although they generally cohere with and support official rhetoric and practices, they are at base autonomous actions that also pose a potential threat to political authorities. At the same time, nationalist protests have been found to be successful in pressing for greater government attention to their concerns. Further, as with environmental protest, these studies emphasize the importance of the Internet in providing a platform for nationalist activism.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to all of the categories of protest noted thus far, activists calling for the defense of citizen rights (维权; *weiquan*) are much smaller in number, including a few thousand individuals—mostly lawyers. Studies of this type of activism describe the radicalization process that has occurred among some lawyers as they have been thwarted by political officials in their pursuit of justice for marginalized and mistreated citizens. Scholarly work also highlights the intense repression of most *weiquan* lawyers in recent years, noting the great contrast with national leaders' much more positive view and treatment of such lawyers prior to the political ascension of Xi Jinping.<sup>14</sup> The combination of these developments has moved many such lawyers away from their former belief that citizen rights can be protected by working within (rather than in opposition to) China's existing political system.

A similar process has transpired among many residents of China's Special Autonomous Region of Hong Kong. Scholarly work on protests undertaken by Hong Kong residents highlights the very different political context within these actions take place—a resource-rich quasi-democratic “hybrid regime” with a semi-independent judiciary, a relatively free mass media system, and an elected legislature—and that until 1997 was a British colony. These studies find

that Hong Kong residents increasingly question the legitimacy and propriety of CCP rule, and that political authorities have been cautious in their response.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, other groups that much longer have been part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) never have accepted its governance—namely, ethnic minority Uighur and Tibetan populations. Many—indeed perhaps most—members of these groups have chafed at Chinese rule from the time that their territory was forcibly annexed to China. Overt policies to repress their culture (including religious practice) and dilute their power within the “Autonomous Regions” of Xinjiang and Tibet through the encouragement of Han Chinese in-migration and domination in those areas has only fueled their outrage. The result has been a violent and highly conflictual dynamic that evidences none of the features of “rightful resistance” that have characterized the other protest types that have appeared in mainland China from the 1990s through the present.<sup>16</sup>

While the vast majority of scholarly work on popular protest in contemporary China has focused on one of the categories of activism listed above, a few have taken a broader approach. Tong and Lei examine the roughly 550 large-scale contentious collective actions that took place from 2003-2010. These include worker and farmer actions, environmental demonstrations, ethnic minority protests, and Internet-based contention. The authors' overall conclusion is that since 1989, the CCP-led governing regime has tolerated protests with no political agenda, and that have specific grievances and are peaceful. In turn, society has learned to compromise, avoiding attacking the central government and raising political demands.<sup>17</sup> Even more ambitiously, Chen utilizes case studies, interviews and approximately one thousand official records of collective petitions spanning the 1990s and early years of the new millennium. In a

manner similar to that undertaken in this paper, Chen looks for broad patterns in opportunity structures, protest behavior, and government responses. He concludes that contemporary China is characterized by “contentious authoritarianism,” wherein a strong authoritarian regime accommodates widespread and routinized collective protests.<sup>18</sup>

This paper expands on these more comprehensive works, including developments under the administration of Xi Jinping, who took the Party-state helm after these studies were undertaken. In addition, the paper examines a wider range of protests. To do so, it supplements the data uncovered in Tong and Lei, and Chen, with the wealth of information and insight found in the more focused studies referenced above. Synthesizing this work, the paper uncovers patterns, trends, and recent developments in protest emergence and success in China, looking in particular at the role of: 1) divisions within the political leadership; 2) laws and official pronouncements; 3) the socioeconomic status and resources of the aggrieved; and 4) the nature of citizen complaints and actions.

## **Elite Divisions**

### **Central Political Leaders**

Looking at the broad range of collective contention that has emerged in China from the 1990s through the present, a key variable affecting protest emergence and success is the presence or absence of disagreement among political elites with regard to activists’ behavior and goals. This variable can be disaggregated first into views held by central governing leaders. In the early post-Mao period, disagreement among top CCP elites regarding the scope and pace of economic and political reform facilitated the rise of several large-scale movements directed at central authorities. These include the Democracy Wall movement of 1978-1980, the student-

led demonstrations of the winter of 1986-1987, and the massive student-led protests of the spring of 1989. Conversely, from the early 1990s through the present, the absence of fundamental economic and political disagreement at the highest level of the CCP has left little opening for similarly large-scale political protest movements, and no such actions have occurred. Nonetheless, within this general context, top political elites have to varying degrees tolerated and even supported other kinds of protests.

### ***Jiang Zemin era***

Under Jiang Zemin (CCP General Secretary from 1989-2002), the stimulation of economic growth, particularly in China's Eastern and Southern regions, was the main priority of national political authorities.<sup>19</sup> During this period, serious material complaints arose among two groups: farmers in China's poor central and western regions suffering from what in their view were arbitrary, oppressive, and illegal taxes, fines and fees; and former state-owned enterprise workers (mainly concentrated in China's northeastern industrial belt) who were laid off and/or forced into early retirement in massive numbers in the late 1990s. Both groups engaged in what O'Brien terms "rightful resistance"—protesting their situation by highlighting how their plight violated the stated priority of the CCP to represent and protect the "working masses." Although at the local level many of these protesters were repressed and punished, central leaders responded to their general complaints—eradicating all rural taxes and fees, and providing supplemental payments and benefits to affected public sector workers. Although many farmers and former SOE workers continued to struggle economically, this action on the part of national authorities gave these groups reason to believe that central elites were "on their side." In a generally parallel fashion, in the late 1990s and early years of the 2000s urban homeowners



became restive. Some were relatively poor current and former SOE workers who faced demolition of their homes (typically in large Soviet-style apartment buildings or small dilapidated structures in traditional-style *hutongs*), while others were relatively wealthy and resource-rich owners of expensive homes in newly-built (and often gated) residential communities. While both used the language of central authorities to justify their actions, and both generally were viewed sympathetically by national political elites, the latter were much more successful in having their protest demands met.

Meanwhile, in 1997 Hong Kong was “returned” to China after roughly one hundred years of British rule. For the first five years following the handover, virtually no protests were directed toward the central PRC leadership. The only exception was an annual, often large-scale, gathering to commemorate the student-led mainland-based protests of the spring of 1989, which was tolerated by top CCP leaders. In Hong Kong during this period, PRC authorities allowed the political status quo to persist: civil liberties were respected, the judiciary was allowed to act independently, and the legislature continued to hold a critical mass of democratically-elected representatives and liberal democratic activists. Moreover, mainland CCP leaders did not meddle in Hong Kong affairs. At the same time, workers and other socio-economic sectors were both appeased and kept under political control through associations that were integrated into the political system.<sup>20</sup> Protests did occur during this time, but they generally focused on economic issues.<sup>21</sup>

During the Jiang administration, the situation was quite different for ethnic minority Uighurs (the vast majority of whom live in the PRC’s northwestern Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, which was forcibly annexed in 1949 after being governed in large part by the Eastern

Turkestan Republic from 1944-1949) and Tibetans (most of whom reside in the China's western Tibetan Autonomous Region, which was forcibly annexed in 1950). Toward these groups, central PRC authorities maintained a united and repressive stance. In Tibet, more than twenty large-scale protests calling for religious freedom and political independence were violently suppressed between 1987 and 1989. In March 1989 (over a month before the massive student-led protests centered in Beijing began), Chinese authorities declared martial law in Tibet. Demonstrations broke out again in early 1990, and were met with further arrests and jail terms.<sup>22</sup> In this highly repressive and constricted atmosphere, no further major protests emerged for nearly two decades.

The situation for Uighurs during this period differed somewhat from that of Tibetans due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of independent Central Asian states in the early 1990s. This not only instilled Uighurs with hope for the possibility of establishing an independent Eastern Turkestan, but also gave aggrieved Uighurs in China potential foreign allies and sources of support. Capitalizing on this new opportunity, between 1990 and 2001, "East Turkistan' forces inside and outside China" were involved in more than two hundred "bloody incidents," including "explosions, assassinations of government officials, poisoning, arson, attacking government buildings, riots and assaults."<sup>23</sup> Central CCP authorities were united in their view that such activities must be resolutely crushed. In 1996, they initiated a massive "Strike Hard" campaign against crime and portrayed "illegal religious activities and ethnic separatism as the two greatest threats to Xinjiang's stability."<sup>24</sup> This crackdown featured "mass roundups of Uighur suspects, quick trials (followed by quick executions), the breakup of dozens of organized cells and the seizure of their weapons."<sup>25</sup> Top PRC leaders also reacted by

cultivating positive diplomatic relations with the Central Asian states, and by the turn of the millennium had succeeded in diminishing foreign support for Uighur activism. In addition, the September 2001 attacks on the U.S. led U.S. government officials to seek greater cooperation with China on “counter-terrorism” efforts and to show less interest in supporting Uighur activism. In 2002, the United Nations Security Council added the “East Turkistan Islamic Movement” to its sanctioned list of terrorist groups.<sup>26</sup>

Like Uighur activism during this period, nationalistic protests were stimulated by international events. Yet unlike Uighur and Tibetan unrest, top CCP leaders evidenced a sympathetic view toward nationalist contention. The major example occurred in 1999, in response to the May 8 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by American military planes. Outraged, tens of thousands of students marched from their campuses (most not having received permission to do so from school authorities) in dozens of cities across China. Though most remained orderly and peaceful, in Beijing some threw chunks of concrete and ink bottles at the U.S. embassy and attacked American businesses, and in Chengdu the residence of the U.S. Consul-General was set on fire.<sup>27</sup> Initially, central government authorities signaled their support of the protests. Yet within a couple of days, government-affiliated media outlets reported that formal U.S. apologies had been made, and urged citizens to return to their normal duties; the protests ended shortly thereafter.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Hu Jintao era***

With the rise of Hu Jintao to the Party-state’s top posts (2002-2012), central leaders evidenced more tolerance of public expression and collective action on the part of Han Chinese residing in the mainland PRC. During this period new grievances emerged as a result of actions

undertaken by local-level elites, leading to further protests. Most evidenced the “rightful resistance” rhetoric of the farmer, former SOE worker, and urban homeowner protests of the Jiang era. In the first decade of the 2000s, farmer unrest rose in China’s more developed southeast, in response to a dramatic increase in illegal and unjust land acquisitions by local rural officials.<sup>29</sup> National authorities repeatedly ordered provincial and lower-level political leaders to cease such activities.<sup>30</sup> Among private sector workers, protests spiked in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and political authorities increasingly provided restive workers with financial compensation.<sup>31</sup> In 2010, private sector activism increased again. When reports emerged of worker suicides due to inhuman working conditions, Chinese government officials publicly criticized private sector employers, and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao called private sector factory workers “the mainstay of China’s industrial workforce,” telling them that “our society’s wealth [is a] distillation[] of your hard work and sweat. Your labor is glorious and should be respected by society at large.”<sup>32</sup> As in the later years of the Jiang administration, under Hu urban homeowners also engaged in widespread protests evidencing the “rightful resistance” mentality, with the well-off owners of homes in expensive new tracts finding notable success in achieving redress for their complaints. Indeed, in some cities they formed cross-community networks and organizations. Further, they have worked together to formulate and submit suggestions to government agencies, in a form of political lobbying that was accepted by regime authorities.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, the Hu Jintao years witnessed an upsurge of environmental activism—including rural contention related to the pollution and dam construction and urban activism in opposition to the construction of waste incinerators and chemical plants. Similar to homeowner

protest, environmental actions featured “rightful resistance” rhetoric, and generally received a sympathetic response from central authorities. At the same time, the more resource-rich urbanites that engaged in environmental contention were far more successful than were their poorer counterparts living in rural areas.

Meanwhile, during the Hu era a “rights defense” movement grew. In the early 2000s, some lawyers successfully represented aggrieved citizens in seemingly “unwinnable” cases concerning political corruption and abuse, and their victories were celebrated in official media outlets and honored by central government leaders. In some of these cases, the lawyers moved beyond simply representing their client and called for broader policy changes that subsequently were enacted.<sup>34</sup> These developments fueled stronger feelings of efficacy among both active rights-protection lawyers and lawyers that previously had steered clear of cases with a political angle. In turn, successful rights-protection lawyers gained the confidence to take on more difficult cases, and other lawyers began to move into rights-protection activities.<sup>35</sup> By the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, however, national elites had become concerned that right-protection activists were becoming a threat to the political system. In 2006, central authorities “urged the adoption of ‘forceful measures...against those who, under the pretext of rights-protection, carry out sabotage’” and “attack...our judicial system.” Subsequently, many well-known rights-protection activists were subjected to surveillance, harassment, threats, and physical violence. Some also were barred from practicing law, and/or jailed.

Regarding nationalist protest during this period, top CCP leaders evidenced the same cautious support that they did during the Jiang Zemin years. In 2005 and 2012, major protests arose against Japan, and in 2008, demonstrations targeted Western countries that criticized the

Chinese government's repression of protests in Tibet. In all three cases, central authorities tolerated or encouraged citizen activism, but also made it clear that it would not be allowed to persist beyond the limits permitted by the Party-state.

In contrast to the mainland-based activism discussed above, under the Hu administration central PRC leaders made strong moves to assert dominance over Hong Kong, but were largely rebuffed in their efforts as Hong Kong residents capitalized on the protection of civil rights and liberties in the territory. In 2002, Party-state elites directed Hong Kong's Chief Executive to create a new "subversion" law for the territory. In response, an opposition movement arose that included wide swaths of the Hong Kong population. In addition to numerous large-scale street rallies, elected officials within Hong Kong's legislature worked to block and/or change the bill. When it became clear that the law did not have the votes to gain approval in Hong Kong's legislature, discussion of the bill was postponed. Buoyed by this success, Hong Kongers also began to push for direct election of Hong Kong's Chief Executive and legislature.<sup>36</sup> CCP leaders on the mainland and pro-Beijing officials in Hong Kong attempted—through legal mechanisms—to assert greater control, and increasingly prosecuted the leaders of street protests.<sup>37</sup> The biggest subsequent demonstrations of this period occurred in 2012, in response to a proposed National Education curriculum for Hong Kong students. Opposition to the plan was led by high school students, but included a wide array of civic groups. Along with collecting roughly 100,000 signatures on a petition to revoke the proposal, citizens held marches, occupations, and sit-ins. Their efforts were successful; the curriculum plan was put on hold.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Xi Jinping era***

Under the current leadership of Xi Jinping (2012-?), China's national elites generally have evidenced a far less sympathetic attitude toward popular protest. Yet, they have been more tolerant of activism by some groups than others. The group that has been most severely targeted under Xi has been "rights protection" lawyers. From 2013 through the present, over five hundred of them have been detained and/or jailed. Some, such as female rights-protection activist Cao Shunli, have died in custody after being tortured. Indeed, it appears that Xi is determined to entirely "wipe out" rights-protection activism. As a result, the already tiny number of practicing rights-protection lawyers has shrunk to nearly zero.<sup>39</sup>

Under Xi, central authorities also have conveyed less tolerance for private sector worker protest. Since late 2014, private sector worker strikes and other acts of collective contention have increased as a significant slowdown in the Chinese economy has led many private employers to lay off workers, withhold their wages and benefits, or shut down entirely.<sup>40</sup> In their actions, workers have highlighted the illegal nature of employer practices.<sup>41</sup> However, much more than in the past, national leaders have condoned and even pressed for the arrest of labor activists, and have publicized their punishment.<sup>42</sup> In addition, in early 2016 some central Party-state officials publicly expressed the view that China's labor laws are overprotective of workers, and should be reconsidered.<sup>43</sup> Simultaneously, some political elites have pressured private employers to settle disputes through labor concessions.<sup>44</sup> Thus, as of the time of this writing, the overall attitude of top Party-state leaders toward private sector worker protest has become ambivalent and unclear.

In contrast, central authorities have continued to be relatively supportive of environmental activism, particularly on the part of well-resourced urbanites. Significant

environmental protests against incinerator and chemical plant construction in Jiangmen (2013), Maoming (2014), Heyuan (2015), and Shanghai (2015) have been tolerated by top CCP leaders, and most have been successful.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, central bodies have permitted criminal prosecution for pollution, including the possibility of the death penalty. Further, national leaders promulgated a new Environmental Protection Law in 2015, and shortly thereafter Premier Li Keqiang declared “war on pollution” and Xi Jinping stressed the importance of building an “ecological civilization.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, top political leaders have evidenced continued tolerance of and even support for activism on the part of well-to-do urban homeowners.

Regarding protest in Hong Kong, central CCP leaders in the Xi era have displayed the same stance as was evident under the Hu administration: a firm commitment to asserting control over the Special Autonomous Region, but simultaneous caution in using force given the more open and democratic political institutions that the PRC inherited in Hong Kong. Illustrating this combination of factors was the massive “Umbrella Movement” that arose in Hong Kong in 2014. These protests were sparked when central CCP leaders ruled that Hong Kong’s Chief Executive election of 2017 would not feature universal suffrage. For nearly eighty days, massive marches, demonstrations and occupations swept the territory, including Hong Kong residents from nearly all walks of life. Although there were some instances of violence on the part of local authorities and some protest leaders were arrested, in general the PRC leadership (and its political representatives in Hong Kong) refrained from responding. In the end, the protests waned without national or local CCP-affiliated leaders acceding to any of the activists’ demands. From 2015 through the time of this writing, tensions have been high in Hong Kong and the political environment unsettled.



Similarly, central PRC authorities under Xi have continued to be united in their firm commitment to repressing any activism on the part of Uighurs and Tibetans, and have ramped up their efforts to control members of these groups—including sweeping moves to repress religious and more general cultural practices. In this atmosphere, there have been no large-scale demonstrations by either group, but many small-scale acts of protest that have been violent in nature. In the case of Uighurs, these have taken the form of sporadic attacks on government officials and Han civilians. In the case of Tibetans, the main form of protest has been self-immolation.<sup>47</sup>

### **Divisions between Central and Local Leaders**

When national political leaders are united on a particular issue or with regard to the activities of a given group, if lower-level leaders behave in a way that violates this central-level stance, aggrieved citizens may perceive an opening for successful protest. Indeed, this has been a major source of “rightful resistance” in China. As further discussed below, this situation typically occurs when the central stance is enshrined in official laws, policies and pronouncements. Relatedly, since the late 1990s, officials from the local level through the provincial level have been reviewed annually according to their record of maintaining “social stability,” including numerical measures such as how many collective petitions are lodged with higher-level authorities, and how many popular “disturbances” occur within a particular jurisdiction. If officials fail to achieve the goals outlined in these criteria, the evaluation guidelines clearly state that this will result in dismissal. Conversely, promotions are to be given only to officials who meet or exceed these specific goals. Unfortunately, this reality often has led local officials to repress local protests and even use violence against protest leaders.

However, these evaluation criteria also has given aggrieved citizens leverage, as they know that if word of local unrest gets out, the local officials' reviews will be tarnished.<sup>48</sup> Divisions between central and lower-level leaders have facilitated protest emergence and success for mainland PRC-based farmers, workers, homeowners, and environmental activists. In contrast, nationalist and rights-protection activists, Uighurs and Tibetans, and Hong Kong residents, have not been able to capitalize on this type of division.

### **Divisions among Local Leaders**

Finally, China's myriad lower-level leaders have evidenced varied views in instances of protest in areas under their purview. Although generally speaking, lower-level officials make decisions with an eye to their evaluation in terms of economic growth and social stability, individual leaders have different preferences and values that lead to divergences in their response to protest. Especially with regard to farmer, worker, and environmental protests, in some cases local political officials have sympathized with and even have led protests, whereas in others they have responded with intransigence or repression. Further, political authorities at different levels and in different governmental bodies have varied perspectives deriving from their placement in the governing structure. This, too, has provided openings for protest. These divisions have been used most effectively by environmental activists, as myriad government entities and various levels have power over projects and issues that are related to the environment. In addition, divisions among political elites derive from the regime's decentralization and fragmentation. China's top leaders in the post-Mao period have allowed provincial and local leaders a great deal of autonomy so that they can experiment with

potential “best practices” in terms of economic, social, and political management. As a result, there is a vast amount of local variation in terms of what citizens are allowed to do.

Overall, in most cases, protests proceed and succeed when activists can capitalize on divisions among governing elites, and they are stymied and/or fail when political leaders are united. The most obvious case of the latter is protest on the part of Uighurs and Tibetans; for these groups, political authorities from the local level to the top have been in agreement that they must be strongly suppressed.

### **Laws and Official Pronouncements**

Another variable that has a significant impact on protest in China is whether or not an aggrieved group can point to laws, policies, or official rhetoric to press its case. As discussed previously, the existence of such is what enables “rightful resistance” to occur when lower-level leaders violate the prescriptions of by central authorities. In the case of farmers, workers, environmental activists, and homeowners, disgruntled citizens have capitalized on and benefited from this situation. Indeed, activists from these groups almost always have referenced the law (or other official documents and statements), and first have pressed their case via legal, institutionalized channels—typically by submitting a petition to official “letters and visits” offices. They also make a conscious effort to follow legal procedures. “Rights-protection” lawyers and Hong Kong residents also have been able to do so to a certain extent. However, in both cases central authorities have in recent years acted in opposition to prior statements and laws made by national leaders. As a result, these two groups no longer have able to successfully employ “rightful resistance.” In this sense, their situation has become akin to that of Uighurs and Tibetans: they cannot expect to call on sympathetic central elites to

support national laws and policies that support their cause. Indeed for these groups, national laws and practices are themselves the source of grievances.

### **Socioeconomic Status and Resources of the Aggrieved**

Another key variable affecting protest emergence and success is the socioeconomic status and concomitant resources of the aggrieved group. In general, protestors with more money, connections, education, and status have been the most successful, and the least likely to be subjected to violent treatment. This has been most notably the case with affluent urban homeowners, but also with relatively well-to-do environmental activists. In addition, these factors have worked to the benefit of protestors in Hong Kong. Conversely, groups with lower socioeconomic status and fewer resources—particularly farmers, private sector workers, Uighurs, and Tibetans, have had less protest success, and have been more likely to be met with forceful repression.

Related to socioeconomic status is access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). Between 1998 and 2016, Internet use went from virtually nil to roughly 53 percent of the mainland Chinese population, and about 75 percent of Hong Kong residents.<sup>49</sup> Further, as of late 2016 an estimated 95 percent of Chinese netizens accessed the Internet through mobile devices.<sup>50</sup> In terms of who uses the Internet most, age is a significant factor: as of 2014, 85 percent of mainland Chinese users were under the age of 45, and 62 percent were under the age of 35.<sup>51</sup> Also, as in most countries, Internet use increases with level of education, and is much more common in urban areas than in rural.<sup>52</sup> Relatedly, in order to use the Internet to aid in protest, it is important that users be literate—which again tracks with age, level of education, and urban residency. In the mainland PRC, wealthier urbanites that have engaged in

homeowner and/or environmental protest have been most advantaged by their use of ICTs.

ICTs also have been a key resource used by activists in Hong Kong, where the per capita income ranks among the wealthiest tier of countries worldwide.

ICTs have facilitated the dissemination of information, providing knowledge about relevant laws and policies that protestors can use to their advantage. In addition, ICTs allow citizens to circulate information about international and domestic developments that have fueled grievances (as in the case of nationalistic protests) and have provided information about successful protest tactics elsewhere (as in environmental, homeowner, and worker activism). In a number of cases (particularly affluent homeowner actions, environment-related protests, and protests in Hong Kong), activists have capitalized on contacts with media personnel as well as the profit orientation of media outlets to gain publicity for their cause. ICTs also have stimulated feelings of efficacy by making it easier to mobilize large numbers of people around common concerns. With the “cost” of networking made very low by social media and other electronic communication mechanisms, the perceived obstacles to rallying a crowd large enough to make an impact have all but disappeared. Yet, ICTs have been much more available to aggrieved citizens that are relatively educated and affluent, and live in cities. ICTs have been relatively unimportant in rural-based protests in the mainland PRC.

Under Xi Jinping, mainland-based Chinese citizens’ ability to use the ICTs to aid in their protests has constricted. In August 2013, Xi reportedly called on CCP cadres to “wage a war to win over public opinion” and “seize the ground of new media.”<sup>53</sup> Shortly thereafter, individuals with large microblog followings were subjected to deletions, locked accounts, arrests, and interrogations. In addition, central authorities closed popular “public accounts” that comment

on current events on WeChat.<sup>54</sup> Also in late 2013, China's top judicial officials announced that online speech would be subject to more severe and expansive considerations of what constitutes a "criminal offense," and that criminal defamation charges could result from postings deemed to threaten "public order" or "state interests." If a post is determined to be "false" or "defamatory," and is viewed more than 5,000 times or reposted more than 500 times, the user can be sentenced to up to three years in prison. In this context, hundreds of social media users have been detained and interrogated. Further, in early 2015, Party-state authorities began to successfully interfere with the "virtual private networks" (VPNs) that many users have relied on to circumvent "Great Firewall" blockages.<sup>55</sup> Thus, at present, in the mainland PRC it has become more difficult and risky for even advantaged socioeconomic groups to use ICTs to facilitate protest success.

### **Nature of Citizen Complaints and Actions**

The nature of the complaints raised by protesting Chinese citizens also influences their likelihood of success. Most of the grievances that have been expressed through collective contention have been material, involving the concrete interests of a particular group: wages and working conditions for private sector workers; layoffs and forced retirements for public sector workers; taxes and land acquisitions for farmers; property demolition and degradation for homeowners; and local environmental destruction. In these cases, protestors have focused only on their specific concerns and have not spread beyond their particular locale; they have not attempted to forge connections with other socio-economic groups or expand their protests to other locations. For some, however, the grievances motivating protest have involved general values that do not correlate with personal or group interests. This has been true of political

dissidents, rights-protection lawyers, some environmental activists, and protestors motivated by nationalism. In turn, these actions have included participants from a wider array of socio-economic groups. And in the case of nationalist activism, collective contention has spanned urban areas nationwide. For protestors in Hong Kong as well as Tibetans and Uighurs, grievances have been both material (e.g., economic changes due to mainland Han migration) and ideal (most importantly, democratic values and religious beliefs).

Although in the 1980s student-led demonstrators called for political changes at the national level, from 1990 through the present very few Chinese have publicly and collectively voiced such concerns. Instead, the vast majority have called for adherence to existing laws or other official policies, or have asked for policy or legal changes within the existing political system. Only political dissidents such as those who formed the China Democracy Party in 1998 those who signed “Charter 08” in 2008 have challenged the political dominance of the CCP and advocated for systemic political change. Apart from these mainland dissidents—whose numbers are tiny in comparison with the number of participants in other types of mainland PRC protests by predominantly Han Chinese—demands for fundamental political transformation have been voiced solely by Tibetans, Uighurs, and Hong Kong residents, all of whom have demanded greater self-determination and autonomy and have questioned the legitimacy of CCP control over the “autonomous” regions within which they live.

Government responses to protests have differed depending on the nature of citizen demands. When activists have asked for material redress, adherence to existing laws, or changes to policies, government officials—particularly at higher levels—have been more receptive, and protestors have been more likely to achieve their aims. However, even in these

cases, success typically has been only partial, and has come only after protracted efforts and local-level harassment, repression, and outright violence. Meanwhile, protestors that have demanded systemic political change that challenges CCP rule have met with official intransigence at best (as in Hong Kong, where the more democratic political structure limits the options of CCP authorities), but more often harsh and violent suppression (as with mainland political dissidents, Uighurs, Tibetans).

## **Conclusion**

By looking at the wide array of protest that has emerged in China since the 1990s, it is possible to see broad patterns. Most notably, protest emergence and success have been affected by: divisions among the ruling elite (within central leaders, between central and lower-level leaders, and among lower-level leaders); laws and official pronouncements; the status and resources of the protest groups; and the nature of the protestors' complaints and actions. From this emerges a spectrum, ranging from the most advantaged category of protest in China to the least, with urban homeowners being in the most favorable position, Uighurs and Tibetans in the least, and all other protest types falling somewhere in between. Under Xi Jinping, the most and least privileged groups on this spectrum have not experienced a significant shift in their position on this spectrum, while many of those in between have experienced a notable negative change.

With the exception of actions undertaken by rights-protection activists, Tibetans and Uighurs, the other types of mainland protests that have arisen from 1990 through the present have had a positive effect: they have led China's high-level leaders to adjust their policies and practices to address the concerns of the aggrieved. In this sense, popular contention has



improved governance in China and enhanced regime legitimacy. Indeed, this is why top political elites have behaved in this manner—they wish to stay in power, and they know that it is much easier and less costly to do so if the public is happy. At the same time, however, popular protest in China has had a negative effect: because citizens' struggle for redress often has involved violence and intense sacrifice on the part of participants, many have been left scarred and embittered by their experiences—even when they have been successful in achieving their aims. In turn, this has heightened their skepticism about and decreased their support for China's political system as a whole. In this sense, protest has become a dangerous game for regime leaders. Thus, even though thus far China's top leaders have been able to successfully "ride the tiger" of popular protest, doing so has brought instability and uncertainty to the relationship between citizens and political authorities.<sup>56</sup>

In this already precarious situation, actions undertaken since 2012 by Xi Jinping have threatened to move state-society relations in a more volatile direction. Perhaps most notably, the Xi administration's methodical and violent suppression of human rights lawyers has removed a key institutional mechanism that has been used by aggrieved citizens to seek redress, and that has enabled the regime to adjust policies that are failing the populace and causing discontent. Simultaneously, this repression is strangling and scaring off from the legal profession many of China's most talented public service-oriented lawyers. Similarly, heightened oppression of Uighur and Tibetan minorities has pushed them in a more radical direction, leading to more violent and vehemently separatist actions. Though far less aggressive, official moves to constrict freedom of assembly and expression in Hong Kong also have elicited more oppositional views among residents there. Further, although wealthy mainland Han

homeowners seem to have been able to continue to achieve some successes through activism under the Xi administration, the regime's attempts to stifle freedom of speech and inquiry via ICTs are likely to stymie even well-off citizens' ability to achieve gains in a relatively non-confrontational fashion.

If people in China become unable to express their concerns through either institutionalized means or non-institutionalized protests, then their dissatisfaction will have no outlet or remedy within China's present political system, and they may come to see the need for systemic political change. And because they are now well-practiced at engaging in mass collective contention, they may be more likely to act on that perceived need. Meanwhile, protests on the part of Hong Kong residents and Tibetan and Uighur ethnic minorities will threaten the stability of CCP rule in the regions in which they reside. China's CCP-dominated political system may have been able to contain and benefit from popular contention from 1990 through the present, but in doing so it may have sown the seeds of greater regime-threatening unrest. In this context, if Xi Jinping's moves scare citizens into keeping their grievances to themselves, Xi is more likely to water those seeds than to crush them.

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<sup>29</sup> China Land Resources Yearbook, various years, cited in Christopher Heurlin, *Responsive Authoritarianism*, 58. Between 2003 and 2005, official and scholarly reports estimate that farmers submitted 6-10 million collective petitions related to land disputes. In 2004 alone, 87 percent of known cases of rural disturbances reportedly arose from land disputes, and government sources reported nearly 47,000 cases of "illegal land activities" nationwide within only six months. A study published in 2012 found that land disputes constituted 65 percent of all social unrest in China (Christian Gobel and Lynette Ong, "Social Unrest in China," Europe China Research and Advice Network, 2012.

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