



# SOCIAL UNREST IN CHINA

Christian Göbel  
Lynette H. Ong



This project is funded by  
The European Union



**Steinbeis**

A project implemented by  
Steinbeis GmbH & Co. KG für Technologietransfer

© Europe China Research and Advice Network, 2012

This publication may be reproduced for personal and educational use only.  
Commercial copying, hiring or lending of this publication is strictly prohibited.

Europe China Research and Advice Network  
10 St James's Square  
London SW1Y 4LE  
+44 (0) 20 7314 3659  
office@euecran.eu  
www.euecran.eu

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Foreword.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>1 The Changing Nature of Social Unrest .....</b>	<b>21</b>
1.1 The evidence for social unrest.....	21
1.2 Social unrest as a form of participation.....	23
1.3 The role of ICT .....	25
1.3.1 The risks of a knowledge-based autocracy.....	26
1.3.2 The social embeddedness of ICT .....	26
1.3.3 ICT and social unrest.....	27
1.4 Classifying social unrest.....	28
1.4.1 Geographical location.....	29
1.4.2 Motivations for protests.....	29
1.4.3 Strategies of protest .....	31
1.4.4 Degree of organisation .....	32
1.4.5 The homogeneity or heterogeneity of protest crowds .....	33
1.4.6 Ethnic protest .....	34
<b>2 Grievances Causing Social Unrest.....</b>	<b>36</b>
2.1 Social unrest and economic transformation .....	36
2.2 Immediate reasons.....	37
2.2.1 Land disputes.....	37
2.2.2 Environmental degradation.....	38
2.2.3 Labour conflicts .....	39
2.3 Institutional causes.....	40
2.3.1 Fiscal recentralisation.....	40
2.3.2 The cadre evaluation system.....	41
2.4 Institutional failure to address grievances .....	42
<b>3 The State’s Responses to Social Unrest .....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1 State actors and social unrest .....	44
3.1.1 The security apparatus .....	44
3.1.2 Local governments .....	47
3.1.3 Central and local government dynamics .....	48
3.1.4 Internet policing .....	52
3.1.5 Is there a ‘Wukan model’?.....	52
3.2 ‘Social management’ as a comprehensive strategy against unrest.....	54

3.2.1 Heightened indoctrination .....	54
3.2.2 Outsourcing social control.....	55
3.2.3 Improved public security.....	57
<b>4 Conclusions and Implications for EU Policy.....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.1 Conclusions .....	59
4.2 Implications for the European Union .....	62
4.3 Issues at stake .....	64

**Tables**

Table 1: Forms of political participation in China.....	24
Table 2: The costs and benefits of government actions against protests .....	49
Table 3: The state’s response and protest outcomes in 261 cases .....	50

**Figures**

Figure 1: The number of social unrest incidents vs economic growth rates, 1993–2005 .....	37
Figure 2: Public security outlays as a percentage of budget (%) vs Gross Regional Product (GRP) per capita (Rmb), 2010 .....	58

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments and constructive criticism provided by Kerry Brown, Lina Song and David Goodman for an earlier version of this report. All errors are those of the authors.

## Foreword

Following China's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the last decade has seen the country grow richer, but also more visibly contentious. The causes for this are complex, and the manifestations and ways of analysing it are varied. Some now say that China is a society in ferment, in which different national and provincial groups - from political, business and social elites downwards - are often at odds with one another over access to material and public goods, and influence over the way in which the country as a whole develops.

Christian Göbel and Lynette Ong's treatment of this complex subject is admirably succinct, focusing on the critical area of why the management of social unrest matters so much to China's rulers. From the centre outwards, their paper analyses what tools are used to manage social unrest, and what its future political significance might be. This is important for China, because its current leaders consider stability key for the country's future economic growth and cohesiveness, and for its journey towards the stated aim of becoming a middle income country by 2020.

This is, however, a treacherous path and there are many major political and economic decisions that will need to be made as China travels along it. There will be winners, and plenty of losers. It is critical that those who feel they are

getting a hard deal from this period of transition are given access to justice and the ability to find a voice within wider society. Methods of dealing with societal anger and resentment must be addressed in ways that do not allow these issues to boil over into violence.

According to official statistics, in 2011 the Chinese government spent more on internal security (USD 111 billion [EUR 90 billion]) than on national defence (USD 106 billion [EUR 86 billion]). The costs of the 'harmonious society', as current President Hu Jintao has called it, are high. Yet there are real questions over whether this current approach is sustainable. In this paper, Göbel and Ong show how local officials stand at the forefront of this modern battle, constantly aware of just how devastating unrest has been for China prior to 1949. Their one tool in this extraordinary modern internal war is growth – ensuring that more and more citizens are lifted up into relative forms of prosperity. But the costs of this growth in terms of inequality and environmental impact are high, and getting higher. The great question that this excellent paper raises is just how far the current system can go, and what the next steps might be. Looking at detailed case studies and a range of data drawn from field research undertaken in China, Göbel and Ong address one of the most critical issues of a country that is growing richer, stronger and more influential by the day, but which, at its heart, remains worryingly vulnerable to division, conflict and unrest.

**Kerry Brown**

**Team Leader, ECRAN**

August 2012

## Executive Summary

Social unrest in China has been increasing at an alarming rate. Few incidents of public demonstrations, disruptive action or riots occurred in the 1980s, but 8,700 'mass incidents' were recorded in 1993 alone. By 2005, their number had grown tenfold to 87,000, and estimates for the number of public protests in 2010 range between 180,000 and 230,000.

Social unrest in China has several striking characteristics, especially when compared with the Arab Spring:

- the increase in social unrest is not the result of an economic downturn;
- the increase in social unrest does not seem to have a negative impact on the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party's one-party rule; and
- despite rising unrest, the death toll of such activities is not increasing significantly.

As these facts show, the political impact of social unrest in China is not straightforward. Thus it deserves close attention and thorough analysis.

The main purpose of this study is to shed light on the nature of social unrest in China, the grievances that are at the heart of social unrest and the counterpolicies launched by the Chinese government and to discuss the implications for EU policy. The study is based on English- and Chinese-language



sources comprising official documents, newspaper reports, statistical yearbooks and scholarly publications as well as data and observations gathered in several weeks of fieldwork in Guangzhou (in February 2010), Shenzhen, Shenyang, Chongqing (in 2003 and 2004), Hefei (in December 2011) and Beijing.

The findings indicate that the rise of social unrest in China is not a sign of imminent regime collapse. Nevertheless, it bears risks that could severely disrupt China's social stability and thereby the interests of the European Union. The EU should pay close attention to three phenomena: acts of repression undermining human rights in China, decreasing legitimacy at home that may prompt China to overreact in regional and international disputes, and surveillance technologies produced in Europe that might be applied to suppress dissent in China.

### Why is social unrest increasing?

Comprehensive information about the size, regional distribution and aims of protests does not exist. Nevertheless, an analysis of the available data allows us to draw several conclusions regarding the nature of social unrest in China. In comparison with the protests of the Arab Spring, a number of important differences emerge:

- the scale of most protests in China is much smaller;
- protests are decentralised and localised;
- the protestors are usually a homogeneous group, such as peasants, taxi drivers, migrant workers or homeowners. Mobilisation across social groups, an important precondition for system-threatening collective action, is largely absent;
- protests are aimed at gaining redress for material grievances; and
- protestors stress that they abide by the laws, as they are eager to enlist the support of the media and higher-level governments.

By contrast to the Arab Spring, social unrest in China is not a sign of an impending regime change or even of a major legitimacy crisis. It should be seen instead as a form of participation. The increase of social unrest does not necessarily stem from a falling quality of life of the citizenry. Rather, it is probably the result of the inadequacy of formal channels of communication between the citizenry and the authorities, combined with enhanced

opportunities and falling costs of instigating or participating in social unrest. In particular, the increase of social unrest can be explained by four factors, which are related to the growth and spread of information and communications technology (ICT) in China:

1. the improved availability of information about issues at the heart of people's well-being;
2. the ability to learn from the success and failure of previous initiatives;
3. the improved ability of protestors to communicate grievances and strategies and to organise protest activities; and
4. the stagnation or even retrenchment of formal channels of participation that could relay popular discontent to the authorities in a more institutionalised and controllable fashion.

## **Classifying social unrest**

The official classification of social unrest activities is far from satisfactory because it is ideologically biased and conflates different forms of collective action. Also, the modernisation of Chinese society has led to a diversification of protest activities. Existing research demonstrates the need to classify popular unrest along more dimensions than is currently used by the government. A number of dimensions offer themselves for classifying unrest, with different forms of protest having different impacts on domestic stability:

### **a) Geographical location**

As a general rule, urban protests are more dangerous to the regime than rural protests because the former cannot be contained as easily, and news spreads faster.

### **b) Motivations for protest**

The majority of incidents tends to involve occupational groups protesting about unfair treatment or harm to their interests. Such protests tend to signal trust in the system rather than distrust of it. 'Anger-venting incidents', however, are of a different nature. They reflect deep-seated anger that has been brewing for some time and is vented when a seemingly minor incident occurs. Unrest of this kind does not question the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party but is more dangerous because it can easily spiral out of control. Most dangerous to

the regime are anti-system protests, which occur infrequently in the minority regions of China. The government tries to prevent these protests by repression.

### **c) Strategies of protest**

Orderly demonstrations, disruptive action and violence are the main forms of protest. Orderly demonstrations are less risky for protesters than the other two forms but are probably less likely to succeed.

### **d) Degree of organisation**

As a general rule, well-organised protests last longer than unorganised ones, and the tactical deployment of information and communications technologies can serve to surreptitiously coordinate protesters and to outsmart government censorship. It follows that the organisers of such activities are more difficult to detect, which means increased costs for the government to maintain stability.

### **e) The homogeneity or heterogeneity of protest crowds**

Homogeneous protest crowds, for example occupational or status groups, indicate that issue-specific grievances are at stake. These are usually easier to address than more abstract or broader demands such as democratisation or social justice. In addition, crackdowns against such groups are arguably more unlikely to lead to larger protests if the population at large does not identify with the protesters or their demands. Contrariwise, social unrest becomes dangerous if organisers are able to reach out beyond their core group and mobilise other social groups in a show of solidarity.

### **f) Ethnic protests**

Ethnic protests are comprehensive and organised; they involve separatist political agendas. Usually there is underlying dissent against another ethnic group that has been brewing for some time. Such demands carry explicit political messages.

## **Grievances causing social unrest**

Contrary to what might be expected, rising unrest is not directly correlated with economic growth rates. It arises from immediate reasons such as land disputes, environmental degradation, labour conflicts and ethnic strife. These reasons are rooted in the institutional structure of central–local government relations and the authoritarian nature of Chinese politics.

### **a) Land disputes**

Land disputes reportedly account for 65 per cent of all cases of social unrest in China. Their triggers are the illegal expropriation of land, inadequate compensation and forced land seizures.

### **b) Environmental degradation**

Affected villagers often gather to cause disturbance to polluting factories in order to gain attention from local government and the media. Some have successfully engaged the NGO community to help fight their cause. These protests reflect certain post-modern values of some citizens, which emerge only when society has reached a moderate degree of economic development. They should be differentiated from subsistence-based or environment-related resistance in the countryside.

### **c) Labour conflicts**

Most of these conflicts occur when migrant workers employed in factories in coastal cities demand higher wages and better working conditions or complain of wage arrears by employers.

### **d) Fiscal recentralisation**

Faced with a declining level of income, the central government introduced a fiscal recentralisation policy in 1994. It recentralised major sources of tax revenue while local governments' expenditure responsibilities were left largely unchanged. Local governments' imperative to augment their tax revenue explains why they are likely to engage in land expropriation or to condone factories and enterprises that violate environmental standards and labour laws.

### **e) The cadre evaluation system**

The Chinese Communist Party cadre evaluation system rewards local government officials for local economic and industrial development. Land development, with its concomitant real estate and construction activities, brings local government officials various taxes and other benefits highly valued by the evaluation system.

### **f) Institutional failure to address grievances**

Ordinary citizens face a range of hurdles in seeking justice through administrative litigation. There are legal restrictions on whom citizens can sue – any Party secretary or committee has legal immunity. Local authorities can also dissuade a court from accepting cases by various other means, such as forbidding it to accept lawsuits on politically sensitive issues, namely land

confiscation, forced evictions and excessive financial burdens. Once a case is successfully filed, the local Party secretary can often influence or intervene in court decisions. For example, local leaders can press a court to delay hearings until the plaintiffs voluntarily give up, as protracted cases can drain plaintiffs' financial resources, energy and time. Given the small odds of filing and winning a lawsuit, many citizens decide to take their grievances to the streets instead.

## The state's responses to social unrest

For most of the past 30 years since China entered the 'Reforms and Opening Up' period, the central government has reacted to social unrest in a rather uncoordinated and haphazard fashion. This changed with China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics. The event did not, as many expected, produce evolutionary pressures for more democracy and freedom. On the contrary, it served as a catalyst for improving local governments' ability to manage large crowds. Similarly, the layoffs during the 2010 financial crisis forced cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen to devise measures to prevent and contain mass uprisings. The experiences from these and other measures make up a nationwide, coordinated effort by the authorities to improve existing policies and to devise new ones in order to cope with the increasing number of popular protests.

The police have shifted their strategy from quelling demonstrations with force to a permissive strategy of 'containment and management'. They will now allow non-violent and low-key protests to be staged, and they maintain professional policing of protests so as to prevent them from getting out of control or turning violent. In line with this approach, the provision of local security has been decentralised. The CCP Central Committee passed a resolution for the improvement of public security in 2003 augmenting the quantity and quality of grassroots security organs and police sub-stations (*paichusuo*) at the village and neighbourhood level. As a result, the number of these organs grew from 37,978 in 1990 to 52,000 in 2004. A similar trend can be observed with armed police (*wujing*), whose number increased from 680,000 in 1978 to 1.43 million in 2004.

Higher-level authorities selectively intervene and punish local officials, especially when protests are large-scale and widespread or when local officials have used violence to suppress aggrieved citizens. The common denominator in these cases is their negative implications for political legitimacy, a big-picture

issue that is of much greater significance to the central government than to local government.

Since early 2011, the central government has been developing a programme called 'social management'. This is a coordinated effort to reduce social unrest and consists of four kinds of measure:

### **1) Alleviating inequality and hardships**

This measure continues a general trend started in the early 2000s, and the central government has reiterated its commitment to provide broader access to improved public services such as clean drinking water, education, medical treatment, low-income subsidies and old-age pensions. In addition, it vows to continue the fight against environmental degradation.

### **2) Heightened indoctrination**

Since 2008, Beijing has stepped up its efforts to influence public attitudes towards government at all levels by means of propaganda and indoctrination. The news media are under stricter control than before and have lost the little discretion they had to serve as watchdogs against government malfeasance. The government sees them instead as a means by which to guide public opinion.

### **3) Decentralisation of service provision**

Along with maintaining public security, the provision of public services is being decentralised. Notably, the central government wants local residents to become involved themselves, for example by joining activities organised at the neighbourhood level, engaging in apolitical social organisations and reporting dangers to public security to the authorities. Field research has shown, however, that people are not yet willing to cooperate in such schemes, mainly because they regard the avenues provided for participation as too restrained, and they are cynical about these apparent attempts at instrumentalisation. At the same time, local officials are reluctant to promote more participation because they fear 'chaos' and being reprimanded by the central government if participation rates are too low.

### **4) Improved public security**

The fourth measure is improved public security, for which government outlays have increased dramatically. Official documents make it clear that a potent security apparatus will be the centrepiece of its social management efforts. This applies to ensuring food, medical, and work place safety as well as the

prevention of social unrest. The emphasis on greater public security is reflected in increased outlays. In 1988, only two per cent of local budgets were allocated to public security, but the figure increased to 6.4 per cent in 2009. This budget is used not only for meeting expenditures on decentralising and increasing the local police force but also for technological upgrading. In particular, the Chinese government invests heavily in the creation of large-scale databases hosting personal data of the population. It also invests in the improvement of rapid response capacities at all levels. Risk groups are targeted first.

## Conclusions

What is the likely future trend of social unrest in China? Its frequency will increase in the future, for three reasons:

1. local officials, who are still subject to the revenue imperative noted above, are unlikely to change their behaviour of maximising income for organisational and personal gains;
2. the central government has both intentionally and unintentionally constrained access to existing institutional channels for venting anger and expressing grievances. As officials try hard to avoid instability in anticipation of a major leadership reshuffle in autumn 2012, they have intentionally stepped up censorship of what is voiced in the traditional media and on the Internet;
3. improved access to modern information and communications technology enables broad segments of the Chinese population to obtain and disperse information critical of the regime and also to better organise and coordinate protests.

However, these protests are unlikely to topple the regime because:

- growing protests may not signify the rise of 'rights consciousness', as Western observers have come to understand, but the assertion of 'economic rights' stemming from the state's ability to deliver prosperity and economic goods to society;
- the central authorities tend to intervene before an incident gets 'out of hand' and to punish local officials if it poses a threat to their political legitimacy; and

- the ability of the central and local governments to handle social unrest is steadily improving. They have invested in modernising police stations and training public security forces, and are purchasing state-of-the-art surveillance technology. Riot police are becoming increasingly skilled at crowd control, and even minor threats to stability are quickly responded to by large police deployments.

Unfortunately, repression has proven to be more expedient than intervention or co-optation. This leads us to conclude that a concurrent increase of social unrest and government repression will probably characterise the period up to the 18th Central Committee meeting and possibly beyond. The new leadership is not likely to take any risks soon after the transition, and might not see any reason to do so: the central and local governments in China do not usually change a strategy that is perceived as successful.

## Implications for the European Union

The European Union cannot afford to ignore rising social unrest in China because:

1. a growing military and public security sector might increase China's assertiveness and perhaps aggressiveness in regional and international politics;
2. knowledge about social unrest is important for the formulation of a common security policy towards China. A lack of knowledge prevents the formulation of such a position. It might enable the Chinese government to play off EU Member States against one another;
3. repression and a worsening human rights situation violate the fundamental values on which the EU is based. The Union needs to decide whether to base its policy on non-interference in the domestic affairs of another country or to promote human rights in China; and
4. technologies developed and exported by corporations in Member States are used to repress dissent in China.

Against this background, we make the following suggestions. The EU needs to:

- increase the level of information on China's social unrest, especially the impact of modern information and communications technology on state-society relations. To date, there is limited knowledge of how the



availability of ICT is affecting the character and duration of political autocracies, and China is not an exception to this. The EU would do well to allocate funding to projects addressing whether ICT increases or decreases authoritarian resilience in China and beyond;

- devote more resources to studying the interactions between China's domestic policy and foreign policy;
- develop standards as to where public security ends and repression begins. This task should involve politicians, scholars and members of non-governmental organisations. Alternatively, the EU could fund cross-disciplinary research involving specialists in ICT, autocratic governance, public administration, political theory and ethics. Trust-building would be enhanced if such activities included academics and politicians from China;
- if it chooses to promote human rights in China, it is important to develop a credible position with which Member States can identify – one that the Chinese government will not perceive as dogmatic and uninformed about the complicated realities in such a vast country;
- develop a position on whether or not export restrictions should be imposed on certain technologies or ensure that those technologies are not used in human rights violations; and
- develop strategies to counter domestic or regional instability and commit EU Member States to adhere to the chosen strategies.

## Introduction

Social unrest is on the rise in China. Few incidents of public demonstrations, disruptive action or riots occurred in the 1980s, but the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square marked a turning point. In 1993, there were already 8,700 'mass incidents' recorded. By 2005, the number had grown tenfold to 87,000. Unofficial data estimated by a researcher at Tsinghua University suggests that there were 180,000 incidents in 2010.<sup>1</sup> These figures could easily be interpreted as signs that the days of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule are numbered. However, the number of media outlets has proliferated since the 1990s; and with that, the incentive to report on eye-catching stories has increased. In comparing these incidents with the protests that toppled several authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring of 2011, a number of significant differences emerge:

- the scale of most protests in China is much smaller;
- protests are decentralised and localised;

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Orlik, 'Unrest on Rise as Economy Booms', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 September 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903703604576587070600504108.html> (accessed on 26 September 2011).

- protestors are usually a homogeneous group, such as peasants, taxi drivers, migrant workers or homeowners. Mobilisation across social groups, an important precondition for system-threatening collective action, is largely absent;
- protests are aimed at gaining redress for material grievances;
- protestors stress that they abide by the laws, as they are eager to enlist the support of the media and higher levels of government; and
- despite rising unrest, the death toll in such activities remains low.

Most important, few of these protests are aimed at toppling the regime, even though popular uprisings can do so, as evidenced in the Arab Spring. Interestingly, rising incidents of social unrest do not correlate with a decrease in the legitimacy of the CCP's one-party rule.<sup>2</sup> And although local officials are heavily criticised for their incompetence and corruption, few people are in favour of regime change. As these facts show, the political impact of social unrest in China is complex, and it deserves in-depth analysis and close attention.

If it is not a sign of an impending regime change or even of a major legitimacy crisis, what does social unrest in China signify? In this report, we argue that social unrest should be seen as a form of participation – as a means to communicate specific grievances in the hope that local government or the central authorities will address them. Two issues are at stake here: grievances and participation. Although scholars and politicians tend to focus on the former, the latter deserves equal attention. In fact, rising incidents of unrest might not be the result of mounting grievances but of changing forms of participation. Four factors related to the growth and dispersal of information and communications technology (ICT) in China are of particular relevance:

1. the improved availability of information about issues at the heart of people's well-being, such as food quality or environmental pollution;
2. the ability to learn from the success and failure of previous initiatives;
3. the improved ability of protestors to communicate grievances and strategies and to organise protest activities; and

---

<sup>2</sup> John James Kennedy, 'Maintaining Political Support for the Chinese Communist Party: The Influence of Education and the State-Controlled Media', *Political Studies*, vol. 57 (2009), pp. 517–36.

4. the stagnation or even retrenchment of formal channels of participation that relay popular discontent to the authorities in a more institutionalised and controllable fashion.

In simple terms, the increase in occurrences of social unrest does not necessarily stem from the declining quality of life of citizens. It is more likely to result from the inadequacy of formal channels of communication combined with greater opportunities for and the falling costs of instigating or participating in social unrest.

As we shall also show, this does not make social unrest innocuous. If the number of protests continues to rise, the perception that grievances are not being adequately addressed may translate into opposition to the regime. Even more likely is a scenario in which security forces overreact, protests spiral out of control, isolated protests link up with each other and large-scale riots are answered with massive repression. Realising these dangers, the Chinese government has begun to address the grievances underlying social unrest; and it is also investing considerable resources in improving its ability to control, repress and prevent unrest. In addition, some formal channels for communicating grievances are being improved.

The European Union needs to pay close attention to these developments. The increase in social unrest in China affects domestic stability, and acts of repression undermine human rights there. Decreasing legitimacy at home may prompt China to overreact in regional and international disputes. The EU must also carefully weigh its reactions to such developments, as the Chinese government is not likely to bend to external pressure and tends to become more repressive when faced with foreign interference in what it considers its domestic affairs.

This report sheds light on the forms, manifestations and root causes of social unrest and its role in China's political system. It also analyses the various strategies of the Chinese government for mitigating and countering protests. The first section examines the definition, forms, distribution and development of social unrest in China. The next section analyses the root causes of rising unrest. The third section discusses the responses of the Chinese government and the final section outlines the implications for EU policy.

# 1 The Changing Nature of Social Unrest

We observe that escalating incidents of social unrest do not indicate an impending collapse of one-party rule in China. They signify instead the desire of an increasingly complex society to take part in the allocation of political and material values. As formal channels of participation fail to meet this need, informal channels such as demonstrations, protests and riots are chosen. The rapid rise in the incidents of social unrest is not the result of mounting grievances but of the retrenchment of formal channels of participation together with improved access to ICT.

We shall begin with a brief discussion of the official definition of activities subsumed under the label ‘social unrest’ and of the available evidence of its rising occurrence. Social unrest should be seen not as a form of resistance but as a form of participation. First, we shall show that formal channels of participation are inadequate for expressing grievances to the regime’s political elites, which forces people to resort to informal or even illegal forms of participation. Then we shall demonstrate that the spread of ICT has rendered such forms of participation far less costly than in the past. Finally, we shall present a comprehensive classification of the forms of social unrest.

## 1.1 The evidence for social unrest

Social unrest is a sensitive subject in Chinese politics, which makes gathering evidence for it an arduous if not impossible task. This sensitivity is rooted at least partly in traditional philosophies of statecraft. Confucianism is still very influential even today, and some observers argue that the Chinese leadership is increasingly basing its claim to legitimacy on a Confucian world view. A central concept in Confucianism is the Mandate of Heaven, divine approval to rule over others. It commits the ruler to justice and morality and is withdrawn from despots and tyrants. In this world view, natural disasters and social unrest are seen as indicators that rulers are losing their divine mandate. Mencius, one of the most important philosophers of the Confucian school, extended this idea to justify the overthrow and even killing of tyrants. Thus Confucianism allows people to protest against despotism. Not incidentally, the Chinese characters for ‘revolution’ (*geming*) translate as ‘change of mandate’. Arguably, the passive component (social unrest as a sign of loss of mandate) and its active counterpart (overthrowing a tyrant) can reinforce each other, as large-scale social unrest might confirm people in their belief that their protests are justified

and even sanctioned by higher powers. As a consequence, the Chinese government puts great effort into controlling and framing information on popular unrest.

A lack of reliable and consistent data makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the size and regional distribution of social unrest. Until 2005, the Ministry of Public Security issued official annual figures on the number of incidents of social unrest. Even though these figures were probably biased downwards, they illustrate a clear rise of protest activities. Incidents of social unrest rose at an alarming rate, from 8,700 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005. No data were released for the first few years of the 2000s, and the Ministry of Public Security stopped issuing such data altogether after 2005. Informal estimates based on newspaper reports, hearsay and other unconfirmed sources suggest a further increase in occurrences of social unrest. An estimate by a Chinese scholar even suggests that there were 230,000 incidents in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

These figures hide more than they reveal. Varying definitions underlie this official data, which makes a comparison of trends over time a complicated task. During the 1990s, social unrest was officially classified under ‘mass incidents’ (*qunti shijian*). This was changed to ‘public order disturbances’ (*raoluan gonggong zhixu*) in the 2000s. The Chinese authorities have never properly defined what these terms mean. However, it appears that ‘mass incidents’ are defined with reference to the number of participants. According to the Jiangsu provincial government, ‘important mass incidents’ involve between 1,000 and 5,000 people and ‘extraordinary mass incidents’ include more than 5,000 participants. Following the same logic, incidents involving fewer than 1,000 people are also considered ‘mass incidents’; but they are just not ‘important’ or ‘extraordinary’. As for ‘public order disturbances’, the definition is characterised by the nature of the event rather than by the number of participants. It includes provocation or troublemaking, gambling, running underworld criminal organisations, obstruction of official business, mob fighting, delaying the delivery of mail, holding mass orgies, computer hacking, making and selling fake police uniforms, forging identity cards, burning national flags and corpse desecration.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Zhu Zhaogen, ‘Xunzhao Zhongguo zhenggai de “jin yaoshi”’ [Searching for the ‘Golden Key’ to China’s Political Reform], *Lianhe zaobao*, 14 October 2010, [http://source.takungpao.com/news/10/10/14/\\_IN-1314137.htm](http://source.takungpao.com/news/10/10/14/_IN-1314137.htm) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting discussion of the definitions, see by Roland Soong’s blog: <http://my.opera.com/PRC/blog/show.dml/581789> (accessed December 14, 2011).

Nor is there information about the regional distribution of these protests. Because a lack of available official data has led to reliance on media reports for information, the steep increase in the number of incidents since 2005 could be the result of more media reporting of social unrest than before. This could reflect the prevalence of commercially minded media vying for readership and the consequent efforts to investigate and report stories that were previously neglected. Also, the growth of ICT makes it easier for journalists to find out about such incidents and more difficult for the Ministry of Propaganda to keep them secret from the public.

## 1.2 Social unrest as a form of participation

What are the existing channels for Chinese citizens to participate in politics? Thomas Heberer distinguishes six forms of participation in China, which he classifies as legal, grey zone and illegal (see Table 1).<sup>5</sup> We shall not discuss each form of participation but shall analyse their suitability in expressing grievances to the authorities.

Most of the legal forms of participation mentioned here are aimed at influencing political programmes and are therefore not suitable for addressing specific grievances. This is especially the case for elections and most other forms of institutionalised participation. They are of limited appeal to protesters because they are spatially restricted and non-responsive (such as village elections and neighbourhood self-governance), very exclusive (such as most institutionalised forms of participation) or tightly regulated (such as the activities of registered social organisations). However, the mechanisms described here are not a one-way street: increased social unrest has prompted central and local authorities to improve some of these channels, but not enough so far to dissuade people from taking to the streets.

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Heberer, *Einführung in die politischen Systeme Ostasiens: VR China, Hongkong, Japan, Nordkorea, Südkorea, Taiwan* [Introduction to the Political Systems of East Asia: PR China, Hong Kong, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan] (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2008), p. 85.

Table 1: Forms of political participation in China

Legal	Grey zone	Illegal
<b>Citizen participation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elections at the village and neighbourhood level</li> </ul>	<b>Social networking</b> (Establish and employ close personal and social relationships) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clan networks</li> <li>• Nepotism</li> <li>• Patronage</li> <li>• Other kinds of informal relations</li> </ul>	<b>Popular resistance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illegal demonstrations</li> <li>• Strikes</li> <li>• Refusal to pay taxes</li> <li>• Foot-dragging</li> <li>• Forming clandestine organisations</li> </ul>
<b>Institution-orientated participation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership in CCP or other parties</li> <li>• Delegate in national or local legislatures or consultative conferences</li> <li>• Membership in mass organisations</li> <li>• Engaging in registered social organisations</li> </ul>	n.a.	<b>Political violence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence against property or persons</li> </ul>
<b>Problem-specific participation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letters to the editor</li> <li>• Visits and complaints</li> <li>• Contacting functionaries</li> <li>• Legal demonstrations</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Thomas Heberer, *Einführung in die politischen Systeme Ostasiens: VR China, Hongkong, Japan, Nordkorea, Südkorea, Taiwan* [Introduction to the Political Systems of East Asia: PR China, Hong Kong, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan] (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2008), p. 85.

Social networking, i.e. participating in politics through personal networks, is different, however. Although it is far more suitable for addressing specific grievances, it is problematic when political or material benefits accrue only to those who have invested in such a network. In other words, social networking is also very exclusive, but in a different way from participation in political parties or mass organisations.

The tools for problem-specific participation have received much attention in the literature, but their usefulness in overcoming grievances remains the subject of intense debate. This is especially true for ‘letters to the editor’ and legal demonstrations. Letters of complaint sent to newspapers are evaluated, bundled and presented to the authorities in unpublished compendiums, and they are often not printed for public consumption. Thus although they feed into political agenda-setting, they almost never lead to concrete action by the authorities. The usefulness of legal demonstrations is equally limited, simply



because it is almost impossible to gain a permit to demonstrate about the sensitive issues that most grievances represent. Contacting individual functionaries is just as futile, for similar reasons.

Analysts have devoted much attention to the system of 'letters and complaints' (*xinfang*). This enables citizens to file complaints, either in writing or as part of a visit to specialised complaint offices in central and local ministries.<sup>6</sup> As Carl F. Minzner points out, 'in the absence of open political and legal channels, petitioning is one of the main methods by which Chinese citizens challenge and participate in the official decisions that affect their lives'.<sup>7</sup> Thus scholars perceive the *xinfang* system as a means to empower disadvantaged groups, a 'safety valve' for political tension<sup>8</sup> and an 'alarm system' for the central authorities.<sup>9</sup> But as the authorities act upon only a small proportion of complaint letters filed, most petitioners favour personal visits to complaint offices rather than submitting written complaints. However, the increased influx of complaints to Beijing has led the central government to put a lid on this form of participation.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.3 The role of ICT

This section illustrates how improved access to ICT, such as instant text messaging and social networking websites, has helped protest leaders to obtain sensitive information, quickly mobilise people in all walks of life and gain media coverage for their actions. The Internet has also become a virtual space where contentious politics takes place. Incidents with sensational images can go viral and capture international media attention in a short time. ICT has become a

---

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Carl F Minzner, 'Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions', *Stanford Journal of International Law*, vol. 42 (2005), pp. 1-92 as well as Zhang Yonghe and Zhang Wei, *Lintong xinfang: Zhongguo jiceng xinfang wenti yanjiu baogao* [Letters and Complaints in Lintong: a Research Report on Letters and Petitions at China's Grassroots] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Minzner, 'Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions', p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Yongshun Cai, 'Managed Participation in China', *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 119, Number 3, 2004, pp. 425-451.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Lorentzen, 'Regularized Rioting: Informational Mechanisms in an Authoritarian State', paper presented at the Political Economics Student Conference at the National Bureau of Economic Research, 29 April 2005,

[http://www.stanford.edu/group/peg/Papers%20for%20call/lorentzen\\_pescfinal%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/peg/Papers%20for%20call/lorentzen_pescfinal%5B1%5D.pdf) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Lianjiang Li, Mingxing Liu and Kevin O'Brien, 'Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003–2006', *The China Quarterly*, 210 (2012), pp. 313-334.

medium for ‘netizens’ to air their grievances and to rally the public to stage physical protests. To a certain extent, it has become a form of check and balance against official misconduct. Also, topics discussed in the virtual forum may be picked up by print media and television, and this acts as a further check on official behaviour.

### 1.3.1 The risks of a knowledge-based autocracy

China’s gradual development towards a knowledge-based economy has direct and immediate consequences for the nature and frequency of social unrest. It confronts the government with a dilemma. On the one hand, as it draws much of its legitimacy from economic growth, becoming a knowledge-based economy is crucial to maintaining the country’s competitiveness in world markets. This transformation requires the political elites and the population at large to have improved access to all kinds of information. On the other hand, enhanced access to information can also undermine the legitimacy of an autocratic government such as China because it enables people to obtain and disperse sensitive information and to organise resistance against dictatorship.

ICT has grown rapidly in China. It accounted for only 38 per cent of China’s research and development (R&D) expenditure in high-technology industries in 1997, but now accounts for more than 60 per cent. In absolute terms, R&D expenditure on ICT has increased from Rmb 1.2 billion (EUR 150 million) to Rmb 48.7 billion (EUR 6 billion) in that period.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the central government is actively promoting popular access to ICT.<sup>12</sup> China has the largest number of Internet users and the largest mobile phone market in the world today.

### 1.3.2 The social embeddedness of ICT

As of June 2011, there were nearly 500 million Internet users in China. Fewer than five per cent of China’s population in 2002 went online but more than one-third do now, of which 65.5 per cent access the Internet through their mobile

---

<sup>11</sup> People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Science and Technology, *Zhongguo keji tongji shuju* [China Science and Technology Statistics] (various years), available at <http://www.sts.org.cn/sjkl/kjtjdt/index.htm> (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>12</sup> People’s Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guomin jingji he shehui fazhan si shierge wu nian guihua gangyao* (2011–2015) [12th Five-Year Guidelines for the National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China (2011–2015)], Xinhua News Agency, 16 March 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-03/16/c\\_121193916.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-03/16/c_121193916.htm) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

phone. Additionally, Internet use is no longer confined to young, male and educated residents of China's rich coastal provinces as it used to be. It has now reached all segments of the population.<sup>13</sup> This includes migrant workers, whose potential to spark social unrest is a matter of grave concern to the central government. As part of this development, Twitter-equivalent platforms such as Sina Weibo and QQ Weibo, which enable real-time sharing of texts, images and videos, have redefined the media landscape in China.

Microblogs (*weibo*) enjoy great popularity among ordinary citizens and also journalists, lawyers and advocacy activists. For instance, the number of people using microblogs has increased dramatically, from only 63 million in January 2011 to 195 million in July of that year.<sup>14</sup> Microblogs are an important channel for discussing controversial social issues, anger-venting about injustice, linking like-minded people and obtaining first-hand information on current events, protests and disasters that are not reported in the traditional media. This has limited the government's ability to control the flow of information about sensitive events. As it is very difficult for the propaganda authorities to prevent accounts of government malfeasance from leaking to the general public through microblogs, they are forced to also allow the conventional media to report on those events.

### 1.3.3 ICT and social unrest

Social media have not inspired political revolution in China or toppled the authoritarian regime as they have done in Arab countries, but they have been instrumental in creating awareness of the egregious behaviour of public officials. The widespread adoption of microblogs has helped to spread awareness of mass incidents caused by official misdemeanours that would otherwise have remained unknown and isolated. In some instances, public outrage against official misbehaviour has caused the government to take remedial action. The Internet is becoming a means of ensuring official accountability and enforcing the rule of law in that respect.

---

<sup>13</sup> China's Internet Network Information Center, 26th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (July 2010), <http://www.cnnic.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2010/8/24/93145.pdf> (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Tian Ying and Han Miao, 'New Media Elevates Traditional Media Stories', Xinhua News Agency 25 September 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/25/c\\_131159136.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/25/c_131159136.htm) (accessed on 17 January 2012).

In September 2010, three people in Jiangxi province set themselves on fire after forced evictions by the local government in order to make way for a public transportation project. When family members of the victims attempted to travel to Beijing to lodge a petition, they were obstructed at the airport in the provincial capital, Nanchang. Using their mobile phones, they petitioned journalists for help. The event then sparked a huge public outcry. Two local Party officials came under investigation and were subsequently removed from their position. The victims were also given financial compensation.<sup>15</sup> In another case, public criticism of the safety record of the much-publicised high-speed railway, particularly through the sharing of photos in social media, has prompted the authorities to reevaluate the ambitious project and scale it down.<sup>16</sup>

The Internet, particularly social media, has also become a means of rallying people for physical protest. In the Dalian and Xiamen cases against the construction of toxic chemical plants, calls for protest, mounted on Internet forums and communicated via microblog platforms, helped to mobilise a large number of demonstrators.<sup>17</sup> In early 2011, the Arab Spring-inspired 'jasmine revolution' in China was initiated by postings on microblogs such as Twitter and Boxun. It was severely clamped down on by the authorities before it caught fire.

## 1.4 Classifying social unrest

The official classification of social unrest activities is far from satisfactory because it conflates different forms of collective action. It is also ideologically biased. Moreover, the modernisation of Chinese society has led to the diversification of protest activities. Existing research demonstrates the need to classify popular protests along more dimensions than its current definition does. We suggest six dimensions: geographical location; motivations for protests; strategies of protest; degree of organisation; the homogeneity or heterogeneity of protest crowds; and ethnic protest.

---

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Colwell, 'Jiangxi Authorities Sacked After Nail House Self-Immolation Incident: Shanghaiist', *Shanghaiist*, 12 October 2010, [http://shanghaiist.com/2010/10/12/authorities\\_sacked\\_in\\_self-immolati.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2010/10/12/authorities_sacked_in_self-immolati.php) (accessed on 3 December 2011).

<sup>16</sup> David Bandurski, 'All Eyes on China's New High-Speed Rail – China Media Project', *China Media Project*, 13 July 2011, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/07/13/13764/> (accessed on 3 December 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Jiangtao Shi, 'The People have Spoken', *South China Morning Post*, 20 August 2011.

### 1.4.1 Geographical location

Protests in China have shifted from the countryside to the city. The issues at stake have diversified, and formal channels of communication have not kept up in allowing for the expression of grievances. In the 1990s, peasant resistance against excessive and illegal taxation by rural governments used to dominate the social unrest scene. After the rural tax reform in the 2000s, which abolished illegal rural taxes, the majority of protests were recorded in urban areas. Increasingly, urban residents are engaging in popular resistance in order to express their grievances about a range of issues affecting their livelihood, such as the expropriation of land and residential property for development, job losses from factory closures and also rising fuel prices, which have incited unrest among taxi drivers. Social resistance, which used to be staged by the underprivileged, such as retrenched workers and peasants, is now an increasingly common means of expression for the middle class too. The other causes of unrest, which will be discussed below, include environment-related disputes, labour disputes over owed wages and appalling working conditions, urban housing issues and conflicts related to ethnic groups. As a general rule, urban protests are more dangerous to the regime than rural protests because the former cannot be contained as easily and news spreads faster in urban areas.

### 1.4.2 Motivations for protests

On motivations driving public protests, there are protests seeking redress for grievances, anger-venting incidents and anti-system protests.<sup>18</sup> Examples of redress-seeking incidents include occupational groups such as farmers fighting to keep their land, untrained workers protesting against loss of jobs, taxi drivers resisting rising fuel prices, homeowners or students complaining of unfair treatment and migrant workers striking or even taking their own lives for higher wages and better working conditions.

Of increasing significance are ‘anger-venting incidents’, a term coined by the Chinese scholar and social critic Yu Jianrong. The term denotes incidents reflecting deep-seated anger that has been brewing for some time and is vented when seemingly minor incidents occur. Their participants, usually in excess of 10,000, have no relationship with the victims of the incidents. Modern

---

<sup>18</sup> Ying Xing, *‘Qi’ yu kangzheng zhengzhi. Dangdai Zhongguo xiangcun shehui wending wenti yanjiu* [Emotions and Contentious Politics in Rural China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011).

communication tools such as short text messaging and the Internet often aid the mobilisation of protestors. They sometimes engage in extremely violent behaviour, usually directed at local officials.<sup>19</sup>

In June 2008, as many as 30,000 people participated in a riot in Weng'an County in Guizhou province in which police cars were overturned and burned and the Public Security Bureau building was set on fire. The incident was triggered by an incident of no direct significance to the protestors. Weng'an is a mineral town. In exploiting mineral resources and building hydropower stations, thousands of residents had been adversely affected in the previous few years. The local authority had forced many to relocate, often without much consultation and with only minimum financial compensation. Underground criminal gangs, often in collaboration with local officials, were also prevalent and active in Weng'an. There was collusion between local Party leaders, mine owners and gang leaders in the running of mining businesses and in coercing local residents to comply with the government's instructions. Corruption was therefore rife. Local residents had clashed with the police and the local government prior to this incident. Public order was poor and the crime rate was high. Gangs had even penetrated the local schools and instigated gang-related violence.<sup>20</sup> Given this background, when a 16-year-old girl was sexually abused and killed by perpetrators allegedly connected with local officials and her uncle was subsequently beaten up for launching an investigation, as many as 30,000 Weng'an residents took to the streets, vandalising local government properties in their demand for justice.

The Weng'an incident was not an isolated case. In July 2008, more than 100 migrant workers stormed government buildings and destroyed police cars in a county in Guangdong province. The incident was triggered by the alleged abuse and murder of a migrant worker who was a taxi driver when he refused to pay Rmb 200 (EUR 25) 'protection money' to village officials.<sup>21</sup> And in December 2010, mourning for a boy in Zhangjiagang in Jiangsu province also turned violent. More than 1,000 people clashed with riot police when a five-year-old

---

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, 'An "Anger-Venting" Mass Incident Catches the Attention of China's Leadership', *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 26, 2 September 2008, <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/5673> (accessed on 17 January 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Buzhi Ding, 'Weng'an, bu'an de xiancheng' [Weng'an, an 'Unsafe' County Seat], *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 10 July 2008, <http://www.infzm.com/content/14365> (accessed on 14 December 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Fiona Tam, 'Hundreds Riot Over Suspicious Death of Taxi Driver', *South China Morning Post*, 19 July 2008.

died after an injection at a local hospital. The incident highlighted the tension and distrust between citizens and local hospitals and the local government apparatus at large and showed the public's sympathy with the victim.<sup>22</sup> A peculiar social phenomenon is the ability of these seemingly minor incidents to act as a force for mobilising thousands of people not directly involved in them to mount collective action. It reflects a deeply rooted feeling of injustice widely shared by many strata of Chinese society.

Although most protests against the system happen infrequently, they are the most dangerous to the regime. For instance, the 1989 student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, which started as protests against political corruption and favouritism, turned into calls to topple the Communist Party. Another example is the 'jasmine revolution' in 2011, which called for a democratic revolution in the wake of the Arab Spring. Most important in this category is ethnic unrest, discussed below (see 1.4.6).

### 1.4.3 Strategies of protest

The three major types of protest strategy are peaceful demonstration, disruptive action and violence. Each of these strategies serves different objectives. Peaceful demonstrations are less risky for protesters than the other two strategies but are probably less likely to succeed. One of the authors of this paper examined such demonstrations in the central business district of Guangzhou. Protest leaders repeatedly urged the participants to maintain public order, to refrain from destroying public property and not to disrupt traffic.<sup>23</sup>

Risk aversion is not the only reason why protestors often choose peaceful demonstrations. Protestors frequently seek the support of higher-level administrations and the media, but cannot enlist help if they are labelled a threat to public security. The participants of such protests tend to present their activities as lawful. They also see themselves as partners of the central government in reining in local abuses of power, fighting corruption and

---

<sup>22</sup> Pinghui Zhuang, 'Mourning for Boy Erupts Into Violence', *South China Morning Post*, 7 December 2010, <http://topics.scmp.com/news/china-news-watch/article/Mourning-for-boy-erupts-into-violence> (accessed on 26 November 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Field research conducted in Guangzhou, February 2010. See Xianwen Kuang and Christian Göbel, 'Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China', *The China Quarterly* (forthcoming, 2013).

strengthening the rule of law. Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li have termed this class of protest 'rightful resistance'.<sup>24</sup>

Disruptive action involves activities that disrupt daily life, such as blocking roads and thoroughfares. It often follows from unsuccessful petitioning or repression of peaceful demonstrations. Anger-venting protests can sometimes take the form of disruptive action. However, disruptive action can also be a strategy employed by occupational groups, such as bus or taxi drivers, who are well positioned to cause disorder. Examples include the large-scale strikes by taxi drivers in Chongqing and Sanya in November 2008.<sup>25</sup>

Violence against cars, buildings and even people is more often associated with anger-venting protests than disruptive action. Riots frequently happen in, but are not restricted to, minority provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang or in poor provinces such as Guizhou and Anhui. Often they are responses to events that spark moral outrage, for example the previously mentioned attempted cover-up of the rape of a teenage girl by a local government-related perpetrator.

#### 1.4.4 Degree of organisation

Another dimension of protest concerns how they are organised. In China, it is illegal to form an organisation without prior approval from the relevant authorities. Conviction as the organiser of a major demonstration can easily lead to a long prison sentence. In order to protect the organisers operating in the background, participants in protests often claim that their protest is spontaneous.

Given the popularisation of ICT, protest organisers can now learn from the success and failure of their own activities as well as those of others. As a general rule, well-organised protests are more sustainable than unorganised ones, and the tactical employment of ICT can serve to surreptitiously coordinate protesters and to outsmart government censorship. Organisers of such activities are therefore more difficult to detect, which increases the cost to the government of maintaining stability.

The demonstrations in Guangzhou described in 1.4.3. provide a good example of organisational learning in collective action. In one of the protests against

---

<sup>24</sup> Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-22.

<sup>25</sup> Ming'ai Zhang, 'Mass Unrests Shock China', *China.org.cn*, 1 December 2008, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/features/content\\_16880561.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/features/content_16880561.htm) (accessed on 16 January 2012).



irregularities in a redevelopment programme, protesters reacted to the arrest of some of their organisers by imposing a division of labour among themselves. For example, they took great care not to be seen at the protest site and delegated activities from behind the scenes. A division of labour was also imposed between men and women, old and young, employed and unemployed. We observed that it was predominantly elderly people, many of them women, who carried out the protests following an initial wave of arrests.<sup>26</sup> Young men are the principal wage earners, whom no family can afford to do without, whereas older people have less to lose, command some respect and are therefore less likely to be imprisoned. During this protest, an informal rule was imposed by which each family in the village had to send at least one representative to the demonstrations. Usually the burden fell on the women of the family, especially if they were unemployed and their children had left home.

External allies are another factor that influences the sustainability and, by extension, the impact of a protest on social stability. As mentioned above, lawful protests often seek the attention of the media, as the protestors know that the authorities are more likely to intervene in their favour if their grievances are reported in the press. Lawyers who boldly take up cases that motivate people to engage in further acts of social unrest are another popular ally. It is important to note here that protesters often do not welcome foreign support, because the government tends to interpret it as an attempt to undermine domestic order. The involvement of foreign actors can lead to unusually harsh jail sentences for protesters and thus needs to be undertaken with great care. Deep contextual knowledge, respect for Chinese counterparts and sensitivity to their particular situation are preconditions for this risky kind of intervention.

#### **1.4.5 The homogeneity or heterogeneity of protest crowds**

A further dimension of social unrest is the homogeneity or heterogeneity of protest crowds. Homogeneous protest crowds, such as occupational or status groups, indicate that issue-specific grievances are at stake. These are frequently easier to address than broader or more far-reaching demands such as for democratisation or social justice. Also, crackdowns on such groups are less likely to lead to larger protests if the population at large does not identify with the protesters or their demands. By contrast, social unrest may become

---

<sup>26</sup> See Kuang and Göbel, 'Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China'.

widespread if organisers are able to reach beyond their core group and mobilise other social groups for solidarity.

A good example is the riots in Wukan, a village in southern China where more than 3,000 villagers demonstrated against illegal land grabs in late September 2011. The local police responded with a massive show of force, triggering further demonstrations in the following months. In December 2011, four suspected organisers were incarcerated by the police.<sup>27</sup> The death in custody of one of the suspects outraged villagers, who helped to mobilise more supporters. The unrest gained in intensity and became a movement against corrupt relations between business and politics in the locality.<sup>28</sup>

The demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in 1989 provide another illustration of the potency of heterogeneous protest crowds. These demonstrations were initiated by students, and later were joined by workers and then members of all social groups. Such events are more likely to pose a threat to the regime's legitimacy than issue-specific unrest. The heterogenisation of protest crowds can lead to broader demands, which in turn can mobilise more followers. A tipping point is reached when protestors' demands go beyond specific issues and pose a threat to the regime's legitimacy.

#### 1.4.6 Ethnic protest

The ethnic dimension of social unrest deserves additional attention, even though the danger of ethnic protest to regime stability stems from two factors discussed above. They are that despite being united by their ethnicity, protest crowds encompass a wide array of social groups (heterogeneity) and that their protests are frequently aimed against the system. Uighur and Tibetan protesters routinely deplore the political supremacy of the Han Chinese and often demand independence from China. However, it would be wrong to conclude that separatism is always the root of such protests. Many Tibetans and Uighurs resent being disadvantaged vis-à-vis people of Han ethnicity, who enjoy a privileged status in minority regions. Han Chinese often regard minorities and their culture as inferior to their own culture. They tend to enjoy

---

<sup>27</sup> Michael Wines, 'Chinese Protesters Seek Return of Villager's Body', *New York Times*, 18 December 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/19/world/asia/wukan-protesters-seek-return-of-xue-jinbos-body.html> (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm Moore, 'Wukan Siege: First Crack in the Villagers' Resolve', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 December 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8959080/Wukan-siege-First-crack-in-the-villagers-resolve.html> (accessed on 16 January 2012).

better employment opportunities, not least because high wages are often an incentive for them to move to a place that they are not accustomed to. Thus ethnic grievances have an economic as well as a cultural component. Often, social unrest in minority regions starts with an anger-venting incident, a relatively small incident that can ignite a large-scale protest that reflects the Han versus ethnic minority tension.

Another type of ethnic protest, such as the widely publicised incidents in Lhasa in March 2008<sup>29</sup> and in Urumqi in July 2009<sup>30</sup>, is more comprehensive and organised and involves separatist political agendas. Nevertheless, during both types of unrest, there is usually an underlying protest against the other ethnic group that has been brewing for some time. In the latter type, the demands carry a more explicit political message.<sup>31</sup> It is difficult for the authorities to establish whether they are faced with an anger-venting or an anti-system protest, especially because the former often changes into the latter: well-organised separatist groups can use anger-venting protests as a vehicle to organise pro-independence activities, often aided by activists operating from abroad. In contrast to unrest in non-minority regions, protests in Tibetan, Uighur and Mongolian areas are seen by the regime as a serious challenge to its right to rule. Accordingly, the central government does not intervene in favour of the protesters. Unrest in minority areas is quelled swiftly and with a large show of force; activists are punished severely and the police presence is increased visibly.

---

<sup>29</sup> The protests by monks started in Lhasa, Tibet descended into rioting, burning, looting and killing in the Tibetan capital. The protests also spread to other Tibetan populated areas in Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu, and attacks on Chinese embassies worldwide. While the Chinese government accused the Dalai Lama of instigating the incidents, the Tibetan Spiritual Leader claimed that they reflected widespread discontentment against Han rule.

<sup>30</sup> The ethnic riots broke out on 5 July 2009 in Urumqi, Xinjiang resulted in clashes between the Uighurs, Han people and riot police, which resulted in hundreds of deaths, and a few thousands injuries.

<sup>31</sup> Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, 'Large-scale Mass Incidents and Government Responses in China', *International Journal of China Studies*, vol.1, no. 2 (2010), pp. 487–508.

## 2 Grievances Causing Social Unrest

The previous section has shown that the rising incidence of social unrest results from two interrelated developments: the restriction of formal channels for expressing grievances and improved and lower-cost access to modern communications technology. In this section, we examine the grievances that lie at the heart of social unrest. Contrary to popular belief, the rising incidence of unrest is not directly correlated with economic growth rates. It arises instead from land disputes, environmental degradation, labour conflicts and ethnic strife and is rooted in the institutional structure of central–local relations and the authoritarian nature of Chinese politics.

### 2.1 Social unrest and economic transformation

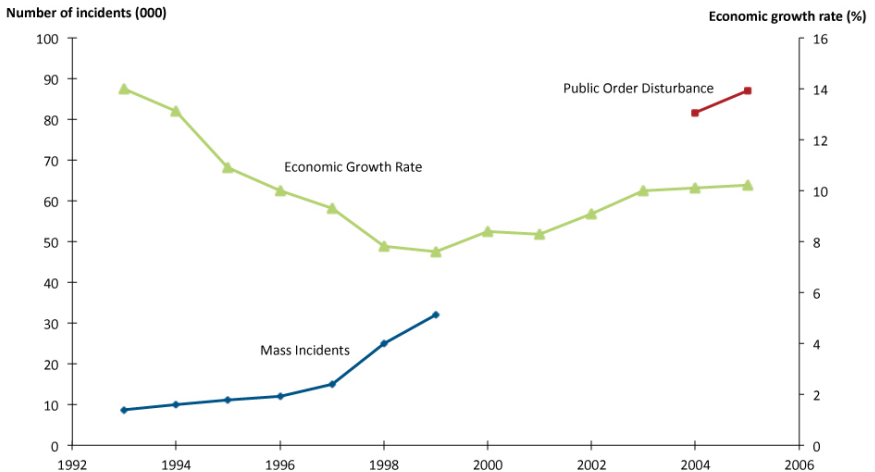
There is a popular belief that social unrest intensifies when growth slows down, that grievances accumulate and translate into social unrest. If this belief is correct, China will be able to keep the lid on unrest as long as it maintains its growth. However, we find no evidence of a direct relationship between growth and unrest. As this report will show, unrest is a function of increased incentives and opportunities for protest and of growing impatience from people who have not benefited from economic growth.<sup>32</sup> This implies that the government has to take measures in addition to maintaining economic growth in order to tackle social unrest.

Figure 1 suggests that the relationship between growth and unrest is not straightforward. During the 1990s, the economic growth rate and the number of incidents of unrest seemingly trended in opposite directions: while economic growth rates declined, the number of ‘mass incidents’ rose. But when the economy grew in the 2000s, the number of incidents also increased.

---

<sup>32</sup> This is consistent with the classic theoretical prediction in sociology about the timing of revolution and societal needs. See James Davies, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 27, no. 1 (1962), pp. 5–19.

Figure 1: The number of social unrest incidents vs economic growth rates, 1993–2005



Source: Ministry of Public Security, PRC, and China's Statistical Yearbook.

## 2.2 Immediate reasons

### 2.2.1 Land disputes

Land disputes are a primary cause of social unrest, and account for 65 per cent of all cases. In some instances, local governments expropriate land illegally, sometimes in collusion with real estate developers in order to avoid sharing land sale proceeds with higher-level governments. In other cases, they fail to consult with the citizens affected or force them to vacate their properties against their will. In most instances, the compensation offered by local governments to affected residents is minimal and is considered grossly inadequate. Worse still, there is an increasing trend that local governments are hiring local mafia to force villagers to comply with their demands and to carry out forced land expropriations and seizures.<sup>33</sup>

Land-related social unrest is happening in peri-urban and urban areas. In peri-urban areas, local officials expropriate farmland in order to transfer land-user rights from farmers to real estate developers or private individuals. These transfers happen mostly in urban fringes where there is a demand for urban

<sup>33</sup> Kathy Le Mons Walker, 'From Covert to Overt: Everyday Peasant Politics in China and the Implications for Transnational Agrarian Movements', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, no. 8 (2008), p. 473.

and/or industrial expansion, for which land is a requisite resource. In urban neighbourhoods, land disputes occur when local governments seek to tear down older residential areas in order to make way for profitable office space or expensive apartment complexes.

### 2.2.2 Environmental degradation

The environment is another leading cause of social unrest. Often for the reason of increasing their tax revenue, local governments acquiesce to hosting polluting factories or plants that violate environmental regulations. This results in the loss of crops, endangered livestock and serious public health concerns. There are estimated to be more than 450 'cancer villages' in China. This term describes villages with an extraordinarily high number of cancer patients where water contamination from local factories is often the leading cause of the disease.<sup>34</sup> Affected villagers often gather to cause disturbance at polluting factories and gain attention from local governments and the media.

Some villagers have successfully engaged the non-governmental organisation (NGO) community to help them advance their cause. Green Anhui, a student-founded environmental NGO, played an instrumental role in the success story of 'Qiugang', an Oscar-nominated documentary that depicted how a village of 2,000 people in the Huai River basin in Anhui province triumphantly forced the chemical factories that had been polluting their water sources and had caused many cancer-related deaths to shut down their operations. The green NGO advised villagers on evidence gathering and capturing media coverage in order to fight and eventually win their case.

Another type of environmental protest has less to do with a direct adverse environmental impact and more to do with the growing aspirations of the middle class. This type of protest happens in large cities, where the population has a high income level. In August 2011, some 12,000 people in Dalian, a coastal city in Liaoning province, took to the streets in protest against the city government's decision to host a chemical plant. They were worried that a leak in a storage tank could cause a disaster akin to the Fukushima disaster in

---

<sup>34</sup> Liu Lee, 'Made in China: Cancer Villages', *Environment Magazine*, March–April 2010, <http://www.environmentmagazine.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/March-April%202010/made-in-china-full.html> (accessed on 25 November 2011).

Japan.<sup>35</sup> This threat is not immediate, unlike the ‘cancer village’ incidents. In 2007, a similar protest took place in Xiamen, another affluent coastal city, in Fujian province. It involved close to 20,000 participants demonstrating against a petrochemical plant.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the residents’ concerns had as much to do with falling property prices as with the harmful environmental consequences of the plant’s construction. These protests reflect certain post-modern values of protestors, which emerge only when society has reached a certain post-subsistence level of economic development. They should be differentiated from subsistence- or survival-based resistance and from environment-related resistance in the countryside.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.2.3 Labour conflicts

Labour-related protests are also on the rise in China. Most of them involve migrant workers employed in factories in coastal cities who demand higher wages and better working conditions. Some of them also complain of wage arrears by employers. In the face of labour shortages, some employers, for example Foxconn and Honda, have responded by raising wage rates and improving working conditions.<sup>38</sup>

Labour protests organised by laid-off state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers were frequent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when those enterprises underwent restructuring and privatisation. As a result of this restructuring, many workers lost their job, once considered ‘iron rice bowls’ under the planned economy. In a knock-on effect, retrenched workers also lost their entitlements to medical care and pension benefits. These despairing workers were typically middle-aged or close to retirement and had difficulty in finding a new job. They had few options but to take to the streets. These protests were typically large-scale, involving hundreds or thousands of enterprise workers.

---

<sup>35</sup> Christina Larson, ‘The New Epicenter of China’s Discontent’, *Foreign Policy*, 23 August 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/23/the\\_new\\_epicenter\\_of\\_china\\_s\\_discontent?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/23/the_new_epicenter_of_china_s_discontent?page=full) (accessed on 25 November 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Edward Cody, ‘Text Messages Giving Voice to Chinese’, *Washington Post*, 28 June 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/27/AR2007062702962.html> (accessed on 17 January 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Tong and Lei, ‘Large-scale Mass Incidents and Government Responses in China’, pp.487-508.

<sup>38</sup> Rob Gifford, ‘Momentum Builds Behind Chinese Workers’ Protests’, *NPR*, 24 September 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130078240> (accessed on 25 November 2011).

## 2.3 Institutional causes

Most if not all of these social protests are directed at local governments rather than the central government. The motive for local officials' behaviour is their revenue imperative, created by economic and political institutions. Institutional incentives make it necessary for local officials to maximise revenue collection which comes at the expense of citizens. In order to finance targeted development projects, local officials do not stop short of illicit taxation.

### 2.3.1 Fiscal recentralisation

In the 1980s, China went through fiscal decentralisation, which empowered provincial and lower-level governments to collect and retain tax revenue. Sub-national governments were also made responsible for financing the provision of public goods and services to local residents. Faced with declining revenue levels, the central government introduced a fiscal recentralisation policy in 1994 called the 'tax-sharing system'. The policy recentralised major sources of tax revenue, for example value-added tax, to the central government while local governments' expenditure responsibilities were left largely unchanged. As a consequence of this reform, only 46 per cent of tax revenue now accrues to sub-national governments, even though they are responsible for 77 per cent of public expenditure. The World Bank has called China the most decentralised country of all in terms of expenditure responsibility,<sup>39</sup> and sub-national governments there are under systemic pressure to increase revenue collection in order to meet their expenditure obligations.

The imperative to augment revenue drives local governments to seek income growth by increasing extra-budgetary income and off-budget funds. This income is independent of the formal tax system and is not subject to sharing with higher-level governments. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a rise in arbitrary taxes, administrative fees and fines collected by townships, such as agriculture-related retained funds (*tiliu*) and fees (*tongchou*), township and village levies and various surcharges, fees and funds for education and other local infrastructure projects. While supplementing grassroots governments with

---

<sup>39</sup> World Bank, *National Development and Sub-national Finance – A Review of Provincial Expenditures* (Beijing, China: Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, East Asia and Pacific Region, The World Bank, 2002), pp. 27-47.



much-needed revenue, these fees and fines aggravated ‘peasant burdens’ and became a leading source of rural discontent.<sup>40</sup>

Revenue constraints in general impose institutional pressure on sub-national governments to attract real estate and construction developments, from which they can derive land-related income. Since the 1990s, land-related revenue has risen to become the single most important revenue source for sub-national authorities. This has given rise to the term ‘fiscalisation of land’ (*tudi caizheng*) in China, referring to the management of land resources by government authorities for the purpose of generating fiscal income.<sup>41</sup> This income includes budgetary revenues, such as taxes collected from manufacturing and services industries, as well as extra-budgetary revenues, namely land conveyance fees.

Local governments’ imperative to augment tax revenue also explains why they are likely to condone factories and enterprises that violate environmental standards and labour laws. This is particularly the case in a county or township where the company contributes the predominant share of the local government’s tax revenue. Closing down the factory that pollutes the drinking water source for local residents may be equivalent to cutting off the lifeline of local government.

### 2.3.2 The cadre evaluation system

The Communist Party cadre evaluation system, which rewards local government officials for local economic and industrial development and for tax revenue collection, is another major institutional reason for the surge in local government-initiated land transactions. Land development, with its concomitant real estate and construction activities, brings various taxes and other benefits greatly valued by the evaluation system to local government officials.

The cadre responsibility system was instituted by the CCP in the late 1980s as an instrument for the central leadership to exercise control over lower-level cadres. But not all cadres’ performance targets are created equal. They are divided into three categories, reflecting their significance in the eyes of the central government. One is ‘priority targets with veto power’ (*yipiao foujue*),

---

<sup>40</sup> Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation Without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> China Land Survey Planning Institute, ‘*Woguo xianxing caizheng tizhixia de tudi liyong*’ [The Use of Land in China’s Fiscal System], *Zhongguo tudi* [China Land], Vol. 7 (2006), pp. 4–7.

such as maintaining social order. However, achieving ‘priority targets’ does not guarantee career advancement: it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a successful career in the CCP. The other two categories are ‘hard targets’ (*ying zhibiao*) and ‘soft’ or ‘ordinary’ targets (*yiban zhibiao*). ‘Hard targets’ are quantifiable binding targets, such as tax renminbi collected or the local economic growth rate. ‘Soft targets’ are non-binding targets more difficult to measure and quantify, for example education and healthcare provision and cultural and social development. The ‘hard targets’ are the determining factors in leading cadres’ careers: those who score high on these binding targets are politically and financially rewarded; those with a dismal performance have stagnating careers and will receive no bonus. The ‘hard targets’ thus command far more attention and effort from cadres than do ‘soft targets’.

Besides fuelling local economic growth and bringing in fiscal income, land development is usually accompanied by mega-scale construction projects such as public squares, highways, railways, airports and economic development zones, which are highly visible ‘political accomplishments’ (*zhengji gongcheng*). From the perspective of cadre evaluation, these ostentatious physical achievements are much more likely to score points with political superiors than ‘softer’ accomplishments such as increased provision of basic education and healthcare, even though the latter may be more vital for a locale’s long-term development.

In effect, the fiscal and cadre evaluation systems reinforce each other in creating and sustaining the revenue imperative. Promoting local economic growth and augmenting fiscal revenue become *political* as well as *economic* necessities for local leaders. They need to meet these necessities not only to advance their political career but also to ensure the sheer economic survival and functioning of the local government.

## 2.4 Institutional failure to address grievances

The above analyses explain why local officials’ behaviour contributes to social unrest but they do not account for what happens when citizens have grievances. In line with our argument, Murray Scot Tanner, a long-time observer of social unrest in China, argues that ‘social protests arise when economic, social and political development produces new demands, but socialist democratic and legal institutions fail to keep up with this change. Frustration spills over into the streets when citizens either have not yet learned

how to voice their demands (e.g. they do not yet fully understand their legal rights) or the institutional avenues for voicing demands are “underdeveloped” or “clogged”.<sup>42</sup> This view echoes the contention of many Chinese analysts that social unrest erupts when citizens lack legitimate institutional channels through which to air their grievances and thus that they are forced to make themselves known through other means, for example illegal assemblies, marches and demonstrations.<sup>43</sup>

Growing awareness of rights, legal knowledge and assertiveness notwithstanding, Chinese citizens still face an uphill battle in filing lawsuits against government officials. Despite the promulgation of the Administrative Litigation Law in 1989, the analogy of throwing an egg against a stone (*yiluan jishi*) is often used to describe an act of suing the politically powerful. Ordinary citizens face a range of hurdles in seeking justice through administrative litigation. There are legal restrictions on whom citizens can sue and Party secretaries and committees have legal immunity. Separating the Party and the government is tricky; and local authorities can sometimes use this lack of separation between the Party and the state to deflect lawsuits.<sup>44</sup> Local authorities can also prevent the local court from accepting cases by other means, for instance by forbidding them to accept lawsuits on politically sensitive issues, namely land confiscation, forced evictions and excessive financial burdens. The fact that the Party secretary of a locality has power over the appointment and promotion of local judges suggests that their rulings are far from independent of the Party.

Once a case is successfully filed, the local Party secretary can often influence or intervene in court decisions. The fact that local judges are ranked lower than local Party leaders in the Party hierarchy does not help in warding off administrative interference. Local leaders can press the court to delay hearings until the plaintiffs voluntarily give up, as protracted cases can drain plaintiffs’ financial resources, energy and time. Even when a plaintiff has successfully won a lawsuit, court rulings can go unexecuted, as local officials can simply ignore

---

<sup>42</sup> Murray Scot Tanner, ‘Rethinking Law Enforcement and Society’, in Neil J. Diamant, Stanley B. Lubman and Kevin J. O’Brien (eds), *Engaging the Law: State, Society, and Possibilities for Justice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 203.

<sup>43</sup> Shengqian Zhang, *Shehui zhi’an shijian chuzhi* [Handling Social Order Incidents] (Beijing: People’s Public Security University Press, 2001), pp. 21–23.

<sup>44</sup> Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, ‘Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China’, in Diamant, Lubman and O’Brien (eds), *Engaging the Law*, pp. 31–53.

them. Filing a lawsuit against local governments deters some citizens for fear of retaliation.<sup>45</sup> Given the low odds of filing and winning a lawsuit, many citizens decide to take their grievances to the streets instead.

## 3 The State's Responses to Social Unrest

### 3.1 State actors and social unrest

To understand the state's responses to social unrest, it is necessary to discuss three relevant actors: the central government, local government and the security apparatus. The central and local governments have different goals and objectives, and thus they may respond differently to the same incident. Even though the police are accountable to the local Party committee and government, their respective objectives are not necessarily identical at all times.

For most of the past 30 years since China entered the 'Reforms and Opening Up' period, the three actors reacted to social unrest in an uncoordinated and haphazard fashion. This changed with China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics. The event did not, as many expected, produce evolutionary pressures for more democracy and freedom. On the contrary, it served as a catalyst for improving local governments' capabilities to manage large crowds. Similarly, the layoffs during the 2008 world financial crisis forced cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen to devise measures to prevent and contain mass uprisings. The experiences from these and other measures have informed a nationwide coordinated effort to improve existing policies and devise new ones.

#### 3.1.1 The security apparatus

Traditionally, Chinese policy analysts adopt the view that the role of security forces in a developing country whose priority is economic development is to contain protests and to prevent popular demands from overwhelming the state's ability to govern.<sup>46</sup> This policing is conducted by several kinds of police. The most important police force is the People's Armed Police (*wujing jingcha*, PAP), a paramilitary force subordinate to jointly the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Defence. The PAP is responsible mainly for China's domestic security, which includes quelling riots, maintaining law and order and

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Murray Scot Tanner, 'China Rethinks Unrest', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2004), p. 147.

responding to emergencies. Subordinate only to the Ministry of Public Security is the Public Security Service (*gong'an jingcha*), which is in charge of local policing, criminal investigation, counterterrorism and the control of residence. In recent years, these forces have been assisted by quasi-police forces hired by city governments (*chengguan*).

In the years immediately after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, the regime engaged in a strategy of quick suppression and/or quelling demonstrators with force. But as the number of 'mass incidents' grew over time, the authorities recognised that moderate levels of protest are inevitable and they adopted instead a 'permissive strategy of containment and management'.<sup>47</sup> This more sophisticated and nuanced strategy means that non-violent and low-key protests are now allowed to be staged while professional policing of protests is maintained in order to ensure that they do not get out of control or turn violent. Instead of pre-empting all protests like it used to do, the security apparatus now employs coercive forces selectively in cases of mob violence, looting or attacks on government property. Officers are encouraged not to make mass arrests when unrest occurs but to gather intelligence, intensify policing and quietly detain protest leaders when crowds have dispersed.

This strategy was followed up by new regulations on how the police should handle social unrest, issued by the Ministry of Public Security in December 2008. These measures can be summarised as follows:

- strengthen intelligence gathering and social monitoring so as to foresee potential unrest and to take action to pre-empt incidents;
- ensure that local police have primary loyalty to the local Party leadership, and local Party leaders have the authority to direct the police in handling unrest;
- secure key Party and government buildings, such as military offices, broadcast facilities and public squares against occupation by protesters;
- encourage the police to act as go-betweens between protestors and relevant government officials or managers;

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

- deploy police forces quickly to quell protests of a ‘sensitive’ nature, including those led by ‘evil cults’, but exercise restraint in dispatching police forces to confront protestors; and
- deploy policy forces to quell incidents according to the law if protests turn violent or if they pose a major political threat.<sup>48</sup>

In line with this approach, the provision of local security has been decentralised. The CCP Central Committee passed a resolution for the improvement of public security in 2003 that has resulted in an increase in the quantity and quality of grassroots security organs: police sub-stations (*paichusuo*) at the village and neighbourhood level.<sup>49</sup> Their number grew from 37,978 in 1990 to 52,000 in 2004. A similar trend can be observed of PAP forces, which increased from 680,000 in 1978 to 1.43 million in 2004.<sup>50</sup>

The role of the local security forces in handling popular protests is complex. Like all local agencies, they are subject to demands and orders from local Party and government leaders, on the one hand, and from their functional superior, the Ministry of Public Security, on the other hand. Local Party committees, however, are in charge of police budgets and the appointment of personnel, making them the more powerful of the two bosses. In addition, the police may become sympathetic to the cause of the protestors.

The security forces must walk a fine line between being too harsh or too soft on protestors.<sup>51</sup> They are sometimes caught in a ‘catch-22’ situation: they may be defying orders from local Party bosses if they refuse to take swift action against protestors, but they may suffer official punishment or popular revenge if they apply the force needed to restore order.

Another factor that influences policing is the quality of the security forces. As local governments are required to finance the larger part of their security expenditure from their own budget, the police tend to be ill-trained, especially

---

<sup>48</sup> Murray Scot Tanner, *Unrest in China and the Chinese State’s Institutional Responses*, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 25 February 2011, [http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2011hearings/written\\_testimonies/11\\_02\\_25\\_wrt/11\\_02\\_25\\_tanner\\_testimony.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2011hearings/written_testimonies/11_02_25_wrt/11_02_25_tanner_testimony.pdf) (accessed on 17 January 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Fan Peng and Yi Junjian, ‘*Difang fenquan, shehui fazhui yu guojia qiangzhi nengli zengzhang - jiyu gaige shiqi Zhongguo gong’an caizheng jingfei fazhan de shizheng fenxi*’ [Decentralization, Crime, and the Increase in the Law Enforcement of the Chinese Government], *Shijie jingji wenhui* [World Economic Papers], 2009, No. 2, pp. 99–120.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Murray Scot Tanner, *Unrest in China*.

in poor localities. By contrast, policing capabilities tend to be much better in wealthier places. In rich and poor localities alike, the *raison d'être* of the police is to maintain regime stability rather than to solve crimes. For this reason, the police are often regarded with suspicion by ordinary citizens. Given the renewed focus on maintaining stability (*weiwen*), officials tend to employ police units against protesters, petitioners and other groups that might prevent local administrations from meeting the rather strict stability targets prescribed from above. In addition, massive police forces are occasionally deployed in national and local 'strike hard' campaigns against drug trafficking, prostitution, gambling and organised crime.

### 3.1.2 Local governments

Drawing on media coverage of large-scale incidents (those involving more than 500 participants) from 2003 to 2009, Tong and Lei analyse local government responses to 248 cases of social unrest. The responses are classified into four categories: 'tolerance', 'accommodation', 'discipline of local officials' and 'application of force'.<sup>52</sup> Sixty per cent (152 of 248) of the cases were 'tolerated' by local governments. These were cases which did not specifically target the state and in which local officials typically tried not to get involved. These incidents included labour disputes with foreign companies, anti-Japan student demonstrations and student protests against school administration. Another 29 per cent (72 of 248) of cases were 'accommodated' by local government: protestors were usually given monetary compensation. These cases were more common in prosperous than in poorer locales, where local authorities could ill afford to provide compensation. Examples include protests by war veterans, land disputes and labour disputes with SOEs.

Local officials were disciplined by higher-level governments in eight per cent (20 of 248) of the cases considered. Each of those cases involved one of the following situations: 1) a large number of people had taken part in the protests; 2) the protestors had assaulted government institutions; 3) deaths and injuries had occurred; 4) the incident occurred on the eve of an important public event, e.g. the Olympic Games and National Day; and 5) the protest had evolved into a mass riot.<sup>53</sup> In these cases, local officials were seen to have mishandled the incidents, and discipline was deemed necessary to appease the public. Central or local government used force in only four per cent (10 of 248) of the cases.

<sup>52</sup> Tong and Lei, 'Large-scale Mass Incidents and Government Responses in China', pp.487-508.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503.

The preconditions for the application of force were the occurrence of 1) politically motivated protests, 2) attacks on police officers and 3) violent acts, such as killing, burning and looting. Ethnic riots, such as those in Lhasa and Urumqi in the late 2000s, also fall into this category that sees the use of force in cracking down on protestors.

### **3.1.3 Central and local government dynamics**

Various levels of government have different goals, objectives and constraints, and they face dissimilar costs and benefits in addressing citizens' protests. This may result in divergent action by the central government and local authorities in response to the same incident. Local governments, rather than the central authority, are most frequently the target of popular protest. As local authorities are tasked with implementing central government policies, they are in direct contact with the citizenry. Thus they are more likely to fail to protect or to directly violate citizens' rights. When a citizen's grievance arises, they are also the immediate authority with the power and responsibility to address it. The central authority does not take action in all cases. But when it does, it usually overrides local government actions.

To appreciate how central government and local government responses differ, it is important to understand the cost and benefit structure with respect to popular protests. Table 2 below, which details a framework developed by Yongshun Cai, lays out the costs and benefits that the levels of government face when they decide to make concessions or to engage in repression. Some costs and benefits are more relevant to local governments and others to the central authorities. The most important benefit is political legitimacy. This is far more important for the central authority than for local governments, as local officials are preoccupied with policy implementation and task fulfilment in the light of the cadre evaluation system described earlier. Maintenance of social stability, such as zero petitions to Beijing, is frequently featured as a 'priority target' with 'veto power' that local officials must meet. While local officials are concerned with the social stability of their jurisdiction, the central government has the bigger picture in mind: political legitimacy and its implications for the Party's grip on power.



Table 2: The costs and benefits of government actions against protests

	Benefits	Costs
<b>Concessions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stopping resistance</li> <li>• Gaining legitimacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic and/or political costs</li> <li>• Signs of weakness</li> </ul>
<b>Repression</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deterring resistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of legitimacy</li> <li>• Risks in repressive measures</li> </ul>

Source: Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 7.

When the central or local government makes a concession, it may have to incur economic costs, such as forfeiting tax revenue contributed by enterprises and realising lower economic growth or increasing compensation to landless farmers or pensioners. The central or local government may also incur political costs by sacking the officials responsible for dealing with the issues at stake and investing in the training and grooming of new officials. These costs are more commonly shouldered by local governments. Concessions may also be perceived as signs of weakness and thus invite more protest. Yet they may also offer some benefits: they help to end resistance and to bolster the state's legitimacy. However, these benefits are of value more to the central government than to local governments. Conversely, if the central or local government chooses to repress a protest, it may gain benefits by deterring resistance. On the other hand, it may lose legitimacy if the repressive measures backfire and ignite more resistance.

Cai extends this framework to analyse the conditions under which popular resistance is likely to succeed. The two determining factors are the government's 'cost of concession' and the 'forcefulness of action' by protestors, as shown in Table 3. An action's forcefulness is measured by the scale of protest (the number of participants involved), the scope and frequency of resistance and the extent of media coverage – the factors that may have adverse consequences for social stability and political legitimacy.<sup>54</sup> Protesters' actions are most likely to succeed when they are forceful; and the government incurs low costs when it concedes, i.e. when its actions are i) in the 'low cost/forceful' category. There were 17 'concessions' in the 22 cases in this category. Conversely, actions are most likely to fail when they are not forceful and the cost of concessions is high. There were 114 'repressions' in 129 cases in the 'high cost/not forceful' category.

<sup>54</sup> Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 180.

Table 3: The state's response and protest outcomes in 261 cases

Cost of concessions		Forcefulness of action	
		Forceful	Not forceful
Low	i) Concessions + discipline	17	10
	ii) Concessions	2	2
	iii) Repression	2	17
	iv) Tolerance	1	13
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>42</b>
High	i) Concessions + discipline	26	7
	ii) Concessions	12	2
	iii) Repression	24	114
	iv) Tolerance	6	6
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>129</b>

Source: Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*, p. 45

The risk of overgeneralisation notwithstanding, two types of citizens' actions frequently fall into this 'high cost/not forceful' category. The first type pertains to land grabs. When local governments expropriate farmland from peasants, the compensation they pay is frequently inadequate for landless peasants to find an alternative form of living. When farmers refuse to vacate their properties, forced eviction is common. Even though these cases happen frequently, they are isolated incidents and are scattered geographically. Few large-scale protests (more than 500 participants) are staged in response to land grabs. For these reasons, land grab cases are in general not a 'forceful' action, even though selected sensational cases, such as those involving victims' self-immolation, which attract media coverage, have bolstered their forcefulness. Moreover, the cost of concessions is high for local governments in view of the lucrative revenue from land sales.

The second type of protest to fall into the 'high cost/not forceful' category is in response to housing demolition. Residential houses are demolished on a widespread basis in order to clear land for development or urbanisation. Homeowners are frequently undercompensated by local governments in these cases. But like land grab cases, these incidents are isolated and geographically scattered and thus do not represent forceful actions generally. A small number of stubborn 'nail households' (*dingzihu*) - households who refuse to vacate their homes while others in the village or neighbourhood have done so - have attracted media attention. This has bolstered the forcefulness of their protest, and the homeowners have been able to win their fight.

This begs the question of why the Chinese state concedes when actions are not 'forceful'. In this circumstance, the government may sometimes concede and punish local officials – i and ii in the 'low cost/not forceful' category. And it may do so even when the cost of concessions is high – i and ii in the 'high cost/not forceful' category. These cases happen when higher-level governments, usually the provincial government or the central authorities, intervene or overturn decisions by local governments. Protests by retrenched SOE workers and peasants against excessive financial burdens are actions that typically fall into this category.

In the case of peasant protests against rural fees, such as exorbitant slaughter taxes, road construction fees, and birth control fines, the cost of concession is high, and incidents are typically widespread, involving violence and casualties at times. The elements that make these actions 'forceful' are corruption and violence, which are usually associated with the collecting of rural fees and exactions by local officials.

In 2004, the central government implemented the rural tax and fee reform in order to convert all non-transparent rural fees into a universal and predictable tax; and subsequently it abolished all taxes, including the agriculture tax. In that instance, its primary concern stemmed from peasant disenchantment with the use of tax collection by local officials for personal gains and with corruption and violence in the collection process. These cases of peasant protest were a source of anxiety for the central authorities because of their implications for social stability and political legitimacy. Had there been no intervention from above, local governments would have repressed them.

Protests by SOE workers have typically had favourable outcomes because their actions have been 'forceful' and also large-scale in view of the sheer size of most SOEs and the number of workers affected. They were also frequent and very widespread in the late 1990s and early 2000s. To appease the retrenched SOE workers, the government established various reemployment service centres in order to help them to find new jobs. By contrast, protests by retrenched workers from urban collective enterprises, which were relatively smaller firms, did not bring about substantial policy adjustments. Popular resistance by collective enterprise workers was typically smaller in scale and did not pose a threat to social stability. Those workers might later stage protests over insufficient social protection programmes, but their protests over

retrenchment did not attract substantial state attention, for the reasons articulated.

### 3.1.4 Internet policing

With the explosion in the number of Internet users in recent years, ‘mass online incidents’ have emerged in which netizens launch online anti-corruption campaigns and show public support for human rights activities and for the underprivileged victimised by government officials.<sup>55</sup> This raises the possibility of physical mass incidents spilling over into the virtual world and vice versa. With that in mind, the government has invested heavily in Internet policing.

The primary form of control is the restriction of access to Internet information by monitoring, regulation and licensing. Only government-sanctioned agencies and businesses are permitted to establish an Internet interconnecting network (*gugan wangluo*) and to issue licences to Internet service providers (ISPs). These networks are required to go through gateways that are subject to government control. All ISPs are also required to install filters so as to block content defined as ‘undesirable’ by the government. This content includes, among other things, information that is seditious to the state or socialism, subverts state power, incites ethnic hostility or disrupts the social order.<sup>56</sup> China has also established a special Internet police force, which developed from the establishment of a force in Anhui province in 2000.<sup>57</sup>

### 3.1.5 Is there a ‘Wukan model’?

In February 2012, a land grab in Wukan village in Guangdong province resulted in a ‘mass incident’. It was resolved by a higher-level government intervention that saw Wukan Party officials removed from office and a competitive village election held. The Wukan incident had both similarities and differences with hundreds of thousands of other land grab cases that happen in China every year. Since this incident, there has been debate over whether there is a ‘Wukan model’ and whether it is a harbinger of grassroots democracy in China.

We think that the Wukan incident is an exception rather than the rule. Villagers’ land was illegally taken by corrupt local officials, and they were offered very

---

<sup>55</sup> Justin Ren, ‘“Mass Incidents” in China’, *East Asia Forum*, 13 July 2011, available at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/07/13/mass-incidents-in-china/> (accessed on 9 March 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Anne Cheung, ‘The business of governance: China’s legislation on content regulation in cyberspace’, *International Law and Politics*, 38 (2006), pp. 1–38.

<sup>57</sup> Bin Liang and Hong Lu, ‘Internet Development, Censorship, and Cyber Crimes in China’, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2010), pp. 103–20.

little compensation in return. There was long-standing antagonism between the villagers and the local government, primarily over local officials' corrupt behaviour, and this is a familiar story throughout rural China. But the similarity stops there. The Wukan case involved a protracted confrontation that surfaced in September 2011, eventually mobilising around 20,000 villagers. There were violent and large-scale protests, which resulted in the death of a protest leader in police custody. Owing to its proximity to Hong Kong and to ties of language, Guangdong is not foreign to the Hong Kong media. The Wukan incident attracted extensive media coverage, from Western outlets as well as from Hong Kong. Unlike in most cases, which have been brutally suppressed by local governments and ignored by higher-level governments, the Guangdong government intervened to remove local officials from office and subject them to Party discipline. The provincial government also allowed a committee to be formed in order to supervise the competitive election of a village chief, whose nomination is usually a top-down process.

Two reasons make Wukan an exception.<sup>58</sup> And this case vindicates our earlier analysis regarding which protests are likely to succeed and which are not. First, large-scale protests that attract media attention shine the spotlight on the central government. Thus they win widespread public sympathy, which could potentially delegitimise the Communist Party's rule if it does not intervene. This rationale suggests that Party and higher-level authorities step in to stop the unacceptable behaviour of local officials not because they are concerned with the welfare of villagers but because failure to do so would incur immense cost for the Party's legitimacy to rule.

Second, the Guangdong provincial secretary, Wang Yang, has a reputation for being a liberal-minded reformer. More important, he is vying for a seat in the Politburo Standing Committee, China's most powerful inner political circle, when the central leadership is expected to change hands from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in autumn 2012. As in the way of Bo Xilai, when the flamboyant former mayor of Chongqing tried to score political points by launching various neo-Maoist socialist campaigns, jumping on the reform bandwagon, if it won the backing of top political leadership, could be a 'political achievement' (*zhengji*)

---

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Pond, 'How the Wukan Revolt Could Change Chinese Politics', *World Policy Blog*, 23 December 2011, available at <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2011/12/23/how-wukan-revolt-could-change-chinese-politics> (accessed on 8 March 2012).

too. These unique circumstances further differentiate Wukan from similar incidents.

Since Wukan, similar land grab cases have been suppressed by local governments. One case occurred in Panhe village in Zhejiang province, where villagers' protests resulted in a brutal crackdown by authorities.<sup>59</sup>

## 3.2 'Social management' as a comprehensive strategy against unrest

The preceding sections have illustrated one of our central claims: the local government's response to social unrest is subject to local variations and generally lacks coordination by the central government. A recent strategy aims to rectify this shortcoming. At the annual session of the National People's Congress in March 2011, the improvement of 'social management' (*shehui guanli*) was high on the agenda – it had already been articulated in a speech by President Hu Jintao in February 2011.<sup>60</sup> In that speech he specified eight measures to address 'social management'. They fall into four categories: alleviating inequality and social hardship; heightened indoctrination; decentralisation of service provision; and improving public security. In combination, these measures are aimed at removing the various sources of public grievances, improving popular attitudes towards the regime, outsourcing social control and keeping social unrest in check.

### 3.2.1 Heightened indoctrination

Since 2008, the central government has increased its measures to influence public attitudes towards it by means of propaganda and indoctrination. The news media is under stricter control than before and thus has lost the limited autonomy it previously had to serve as a watchdog against government malfeasance. The central government sees the media now as a means by which

---

<sup>59</sup> Tom Lasseter, 'Out of the public eye, China cracks down on another protesting village', *McClatchy Newspaper*, 26 February 2012, available at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/02/26/139983/out-of-the-public-eye-china-cracks.html> (accessed on 8 March 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Hu Jintao, 'Hu Jintao zai sheng bu ji zhuyao lingdao ganbu shehuiguanli ji qi chuangxin zhuanti yantaoban kai banshi shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua qiangdiao zhazhashishi tigao shehuiguanli kexuehua shuiping jianshe Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi shehui guanli tixi' [In his Important Opening Speech at the Meeting of the Leading Ministry-Level Provincial Cadres on the Issues of Social Management and Social Management Innovation, Hu Jintao Stresses [the need to] Diligently Improve the Scientific Level of Social Management [and to] Establish a Socialist Social Management System with Chinese Characteristics], *Renmin Ribao*, 20 February 2011, p. 1.

to guide public opinion. Concurrently it has stepped up its efforts to indoctrinate politicians and the general population through political education and propaganda campaigns. This applies not only to patriotic education in schools, for example, but also to larger government involvement in the field of culture. Thus the 12th Five-Year Programme envisions a larger role for the government in the production of popular entertainment such as films, literature and art.<sup>61</sup>

This theme was reiterated at the Sixth Plenum of the Seventeenth National Congress of the CCP, held in October 2011. The document passed at this meeting emphasises the importance of socialist culture for China's future economic, social and political development.<sup>62</sup> Among other steps, it calls for an intensification of propaganda work, improvements in cultural education and the production of modern and attractive cultural content. China's creative class is urged to devote more energy to developing domestic blockbusters and bestsellers that convey patriotic and nationalistic messages but also to creating Chinese-language equivalents of international social network technologies that are banned in China. At the same time, the document reaffirms the government's commitment to strengthen its control over the use of the Internet and other means of mass communication.

It is not just social groups that make use of ICT. The government uses communication technology to feel the pulse of public opinion, to promote government policies and to engage in interactions with the general public. By March 2011, microblogs were used by 1,708 official institutions and 720 officials. The police were at the forefront: 1,228 police organisations and 139 officers had microblog accounts.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.2.2 Outsourcing social control

It is not only the government but also society itself that ensures social control. Closely knit communities enforce social codes of conduct by reprimanding individuals – stigmatisation and threats of exclusion from the community can be

---

<sup>61</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, '12th Five-Year Guidelines'.

<sup>62</sup> *Zhonggong Zhongyang guanyu shenhua wenhua tizhi gaige tuidong shehuizhuyi wenhua dafazhan dafanrong ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding* [Decision by the Central Committee Regarding Several Questions Concerning the Deepening of Cultural System Reform and the Stimulation of a Developing and Flourishing Socialist Culture], *Xinhua She*, 25 October 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-10/25/c\\_122197737.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-10/25/c_122197737.htm) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>63</sup> 'Micro Blogs Popular Among Officials', *China.org.cn*, 25 April 2011, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-04/25/content\\_22431686.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-04/25/content_22431686.htm) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

very powerful control tools even when the government is not involved. In China, this social control was used in the work units (*danwei*), clearly defined spaces centred on a public enterprise, government agency, university or school, where individuals worked and lived in government-allocated housing. As a result of SOE closure and the emergence of a real-estate market in the late 1980s and 1990s, the *danwei* have now become largely defunct. In recent years, the central government has attempted to recreate such communities at the urban neighbourhood (*shequ*) level, and people are expected to contribute to the provision of social services and the maintenance of public security. Neighbourhood committees have become responsible for handing out welfare payments, caring for the old, keeping neighbourhoods clean and tidy and a host of other activities. Furthermore, the central government wants local residents themselves to become involved, for example by joining activities organised at the neighbourhood level, taking part in apolitical social organisations and reporting public security dangers to the authorities.

The idea behind these measures is to reduce the government's burden and also to reduce popular disapproval of government actions: when people become producers as well as consumers of public services, they tend to be less critical of the results. For this reason the formation of social organisations is encouraged, as long as they do not make political demands. Besides cutting costs, the tighter control and the cellularisation, and even isolation, of potential protesters is another welcome side-effect of this decentralisation of providing public services.

However, as Thomas Heberer and Christian Göbel have shown, people are generally unwilling to cooperate in these top-down efforts to build communities.<sup>64</sup> They regard the avenues provided for participation as too restrictive and are generally cynical about these apparent attempts at instrumentalisation. And for their part, local officials are reluctant to promote popular participation because they fear both 'chaos' and reprimand by the central government for low participation rates.<sup>65</sup> For similar reasons, promotion of philanthropic activities is hindered by a lack of popular engagement as well as by a lack of cooperation from local officials.<sup>66</sup> Yet it is erroneous to conclude

---

<sup>64</sup> Tomas Heberer and Christian Göbel, *The Politics of Community Building in Urban China* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Vivienne Shue, 'The Political Economy of Compassion: China's "Charity Supermarket" Saga', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 20, no. 72 (2011), pp. 751–72.



that urban community-building does not work at all. Research has shown that it works better in areas where traditional neighbourhoods are still largely intact, such as in the rust belt of the north-east, but less well in regions with heterogeneous and fluctuating populations, such as in the Pearl River Delta.

### 3.2.3 Improved public security

A final element is improved public security. Government outlays for public security have increased dramatically, and official documents make clear that a powerful security apparatus will be the centrepiece of the government's social management efforts. The measures discussed below suggest that the rationale of this effort is not to improve crime-fighting capabilities but to increase control over society in order to maintain political stability.

In 1988, only two per cent of local budgets were allocated to public security, but this figure had increased to 6.19 per cent by 2010.<sup>67</sup> However, there is a great deal of variation among local governments. Figure 2 contrasts economic development and public security outlays for all provincial governments. It shows that the provinces fall into three rough clusters: poor minority provinces with large public security budgets; rich coastal provinces with large outlays; and some provinces where the level of development and the relative size of the public security budget correlate. The variation is striking: Gansu province spent only 4.6 per cent of its budget on public security in 2010 but the corresponding figure for Guangdong was nearly 9 per cent.

This subnational budget is used for decentralising and augmenting the local police force, as well as for technological upgrading. In particular, the Chinese government has invested heavily in the creation of large-scale databases hosting the personal data of the population<sup>68</sup> and in the improvement of its rapid-response capacities at all levels. China Information Technology, a Chinese NASDAQ-listed company, is developing an ID card for migrant workers, who are deemed a 'risk' group. The card will store biographical and employment data of the worker and will be traceable via satellite.<sup>69</sup> Combining geographical positioning systems and geographical information systems, security departments will be able to monitor the movement of individuals in real time and intervene if members of this 'risk' group assemble in sensitive locations. It is no coincidence that the public security departments of rich cities in southern

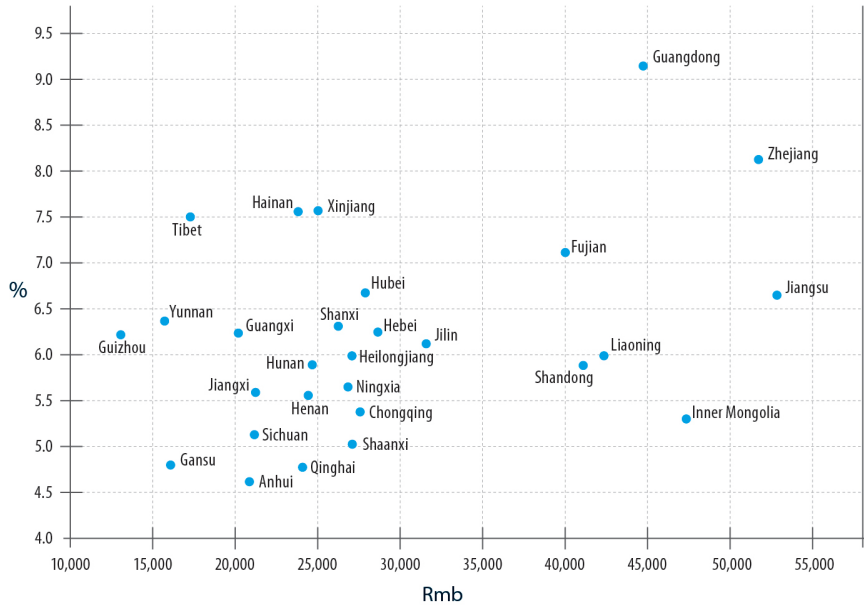
<sup>67</sup> Calculations based on China Statistical Yearbook, various years.

<sup>68</sup> Hu Jintao, 'Important Opening Speech'.

<sup>69</sup> [http://www.chinacnit.com/en/detail.php?article\\_id=908](http://www.chinacnit.com/en/detail.php?article_id=908) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

China are among the main customers.<sup>70</sup> Investments in high-technology surveillance systems largely explain the comparatively high public security expenditures of Guangdong province.

Figure 2: Public security outlays as a percentage of budget (%) vs Gross Regional Product (GRP) per capita (Rmb), 2010



Source: Calculated from China Statistical Yearbook 2011. GRP/capita for Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin is so high that if they were included in the graph, the other provinces would be compressed into an illegible cluster. GRP/capita and public security expenditures for the three cities are Beijing: Rmb 75,943 (EUR 9,529) / 6.66 per cent; Tianjin: Rmb 72,994 (EUR 9,159) / 6.17 per cent; and Shanghai: Rmb 76,074 (EUR 9,545) / 5.67 per cent.

International companies are also helping China to augment its surveillance apparatus. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* reports that CISCO Systems is helping to build a surveillance network of up to 500,000 public cameras in Chongqing. China now possesses the largest network of closed-circuit television cameras in the world, with more than 10 million cameras being installed in 2010 alone.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> [http://www.chinacnit.com/cn/page.php?column\\_id=286](http://www.chinacnit.com/cn/page.php?column_id=286) (accessed on 16 January 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Loretta Chao and Don Clark, 'Cisco Poised to Help China Keep an Eye on Its Citizens', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 July 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304778304576377141077267316.html> (accessed on 16 January 2012).

However, not all of the measures discussed here are applied in all places. Given the decentralised nature of the public security budget, the measures applied depend on the size of local governments' budget income and expenditure. Local public security architectures also vary considerably. In many well-off localities, social mobility and the influx of migrant workers have made social relations anonymous, but many poorer cities have retained a large number of traditional neighbourhoods. The former are more likely to employ modern surveillance technologies whereas the latter tend to rely on social 'technologies' such as co-production, i.e. participating in the creation of the public services that are consumed, volunteer informants and the promotion of self-discipline.<sup>72</sup>

## 4 Conclusions and Implications for EU Policy

This section consists of two sub-sections. The first puts social unrest in China in a broader context and summarises the key findings of the report. Our central argument is that social unrest will continue to grow but will not pose an immediate threat to the regime. Nevertheless, there is a danger that localised protests will escalate and that containing unrest will result in the intensification of repression.

Against this background, the second sub-section provides several arguments why the EU needs to take social unrest into consideration when formulating its China policies. We then make a few suggestions about how the EU should respond to it.

### 4.1 Conclusions

The probable future trend of social unrest in China is that it is likely to occur more frequently. Local officials, who are still subject to revenue imperatives, are unlikely to change their behaviour of maximising income for organisational and personal gain. There has been some debate among the central leadership about de-emphasising GDP growth in cadre evaluation, but it does not seem prepared as yet to compromise the pursuit of GDP growth for other social objectives.

Also, social unrest will grow unabated because the political and justice systems have failed to allow the aggrieved to redress their concerns. The central

---

<sup>72</sup> See Heberer and Göbel, *The Politics of Community Building in Urban China*, pp. 156-57.

government has restricted access to existing institutional channels for anger-venting and expressing grievances. As officials try to reduce instability in anticipation of the major leadership reshuffle in autumn 2012, censorship in the traditional media and the Internet has been intensified.

Furthermore, making local stability a key criterion in cadre evaluation provides an incentive for local officials to prevent people from using the letters and complaints system. This is an unintended outcome of central government policy. As formal institutional channels fail to allow distressed citizens to seek justice for their grievances, public demonstrations and protests become a venue for venting anger and gaining sympathy for their causes.

Finally, improved access to modern information and communications technology enables broad segments of the Chinese population not only to obtain and disperse information critical of the regime but also to better organise and coordinate protests. As a result, there are now greater incentives to air grievances outside legal channels while the costs of doing so have fallen.

In an authoritarian system where the feedback loop is ostensibly absent for the central authorities to check on local officials' behaviour, social unrest, frequently directed at local governments, acts as a warning sign of their egregious misconduct. But this does not necessarily mean that the central authorities will intervene in every case to appease the populace. The 'maintenance of social stability' is being featured as a 'priority target with veto power' in cadre evaluation, and reflects the central leadership's priority in building a 'harmonious' society. When the costs of concessions are high and protests are not forceful, they are more likely to be repressed. The prime examples are isolated and geographically scattered cases of agricultural land grabs, housing demolition and small-scale workers' protests. The other types of case likely to be repressed are ethnic riots that carry a separatist message and large-scale religious congregations. From the central government's perspective, the cost of concessions or non-repression is high because those types of protest are considered a threat to political legitimacy and the Party's grip on power.

It is noteworthy that an authoritarian regime's calculation of what constitutes a threat to legitimacy is fundamentally different from that of a democratic government. In a democracy, political power may be shared with ethnic minorities through a federal arrangement, and diversity of religious beliefs and affiliations is not regarded as perilous to the government's hold on power.

Moreover, higher-level authorities are most likely to intervene and punish local officials when protests are large-scale and widespread or when corruption or violence has been used by local officials to suppress aggrieved citizens. The common denominator in these cases is their negative implications for political legitimacy – a big-picture issue of much greater significance to the national government.

To what extent does growing social unrest pose a threat to the stability of the Chinese leadership? We take the view that in the age of modern technology, popular resistance has the potential to catch fire and become rife very quickly. This challenges the ability of the authorities to suppress public sentiment or to appease the aggrieved. The Chinese leadership is fully cognisant of this risk, which explains why it is spending more on maintaining domestic public security than on military defence. In 2010, the military defence budget was Rmb 533.3 billion (EUR 66.7 billion) while public security expenditures totalled Rmb 551.8 billion (EUR 69.1 billion).

Notwithstanding this, we maintain that escalating popular resistance is not capable of toppling the regime, for three reasons. First, more protests may not signify the rise of ‘rights consciousness’, as Western observers have come to understand. Elizabeth Perry of Harvard University once argued that Chinese conceptions of ‘rights’ are more akin to ‘economic rights’ – those of attaining subsistence (*shengcun*) and development (*fazhan*) – which are rooted in the thinking of the ancient philosopher Mencius.<sup>73</sup> As Perry notes, ‘when Deng Xiaoping initiated his reforms, in sharp contrast to Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, he talked not of *glasnost* (political openness) or of *perestroika* (restructuring) but of *xiaokang* (economic comfort).’<sup>74</sup> These ‘rights’ are of a different order from the Western concept of individual civil rights or civil liberty, which are more antithetical to the power of the state. Under the conception of ‘economic rights’, political legitimacy stems from the state’s ability to deliver prosperity and economic goods to society. In this respect, the political legitimacy of the Chinese state is more appropriately described as its ‘performance legitimacy’.

The second reason is the propensity of the central authorities to intervene before an incident gets out of hand. Earlier analysis suggests that the central

---

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, ‘Chinese Conceptions of “Rights”: From Mencius to Mao – and Now’, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2008), pp. 37–50.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

government or the provincial government will step in and punish local officials when incidents pose a threat to its political legitimacy. Based on this logic, concessions will be offered to protestors before the 'tipping point'.

Third, the ability of the central and local governments to handle social unrest is steadily improving. They have invested in modernising police stations, training public security forces and purchasing state-of-the-art surveillance technology. Riot police are becoming increasingly skilled at crowd control, and even minor threats to stability are quickly answered with massive police deployments. As a result, governments at all levels have become more technically sophisticated in recent years. Communication on the Internet and by mobile phone is strictly controlled in order to prevent the distribution of content considered detrimental to social stability. Also, critics of the regime and suspected ringleaders of anti-government activities are under permanent surveillance and are subject to arbitrary arrest.

Unfortunately, repression has proven to be more expedient than intervention or co-optation. For this reason, the period leading up to the 18th Central Party Committee meeting and possibly beyond will probably see a simultaneous increase in social unrest and government repression. The new leadership is unlikely to take any risk soon after the transition because a new administration does not usually change a successful strategy. In addition, increased budgetary allocations have created an inherent organisational interest in maintaining and possibly increasing the flow of monetary resources towards public security agencies. Similar to the military apparatus, a growing public security sector will seek to justify its existence by exaggerating threats and lobbying for increased repression.

## **4.2 Implications for the European Union**

There are three major reasons why the EU cannot afford to ignore rising social unrest in China. The first concerns the formulation of a China policy in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Although Europe has become an important actor in international politics, it has not yet developed a viable foreign policy towards China, the most important trading partner of several of its Member States. This absence of a policy is partly due to lack of information about the central determinants of Chinese and Asian stability and the interrelationship between the two. More resources must be devoted to studying the impact of China's growing military and public security sector on its

relations with its neighbours and of its assertive behaviour in Asian and international politics.

This lack of information on core China issues in a Common Foreign and Security Policy may allow China, which is far better informed about European affairs, to play the EU Member States against each other. This will undermine their unity. Also, this lack of understanding means that developments in China may catch the EU by surprise, and the EU will not be able to offer an appropriate reaction aside from its routine calls for China to adhere to human rights and to maintain stability in Asia. It follows that the EU must invest more resources in understanding the possible interactions between China's domestic and foreign policy, develop ways to counter domestic or regional instability, and commit its Member States to adhere to the resulting policy.

The second reason why the EU cannot afford to ignore rising unrest in China is that repression and the worsening human rights situation there violate the fundamental values on which the EU is based. Many citizens in its Member States hold the view that the EU is morally obliged to take a stance against human rights violations, and they are dissatisfied with the superficial and inconsistent reactions offered so far with respect to China. The EU needs to decide whether to base its policy on non-interference in a foreign country's domestic affairs or to promote human rights in China. If it chooses the latter approach, a credible position must be developed with which Member States can identify; one that the Chinese government will not perceive as being dogmatic or uninformed given the complex realities in the vast country. This also applies to support for groups involved in social unrest. If offered in the wrong way, such support might hurt relations between China and the EU while not helping the cause of these groups.

Third, as technologies developed and exported by corporations in its Member States are used to repress dissent, the EU might come to be perceived not just as remaining neutral on China's human rights violations but even as being an accomplice to it. This will pose a threat to the EU's legitimacy. A growing body of opinion is concerned with the role of private firms in providing autocratic governments with technologies that enable them to repress their citizens and to prevent dissent. In view of the alleged role of information and communications technology in the Arab Spring, this discussion has entered the mainstream. Public awareness is low so far, but an increase of awareness may require the EU to take a stand on this issue vis-à-vis China. Worse still, it may, as

suggested above, implicate it as an accomplice in human rights violations. Therefore the EU will need to develop a position on whether export restrictions should be imposed on certain technologies or on how to ensure that they are not used in human rights violations. However, this first requires drawing a conceptual line between the (legitimate) use of force to maintain public order, and the (illegitimate) violation of human rights. This issue is discussed further immediately below.

### 4.3 Issues at stake

The EU needs to be much better informed than it is now in order to take a position on China's social unrest and to formulate a policy to deal with the likely increase in both popular unrest and government repression.

Two further issues are important. The first concerns the political impact of China's progress towards a knowledge economy. How does the popularisation of ICT affect the relationship between state and society? What are the opportunities and risks of the popular availability of ICT? Do improved surveillance technologies mitigate or increase these risks? To date, there is limited knowledge of how the availability of ICT is affecting the character and duration of political autocracies,<sup>75</sup> and China is no exception. In order to better assess and to react to future developments in state–society relations, this issue deserves further research. The EU would do well to allocate funding to projects studying this question.

The second issue addresses the ethical dimension of surveillance and the prevention of social unrest. Specifically, standards need to be developed by scholars and politicians that indicate where public security ends and repression begins. Given the various characteristics of public unrest in China except for clear-cut cases, it is nearly impossible to assess whether a government action constitutes repression or is a response to legitimate concerns about public security. Interestingly this problem applies not only to China, as the debate about the need for regulating social media during the London riots in August 2011 has shown. The Chinese state media have applauded the British prime minister David Cameron's call to restrict social media and have welcomed

---

<sup>75</sup> Christian Göbel, 'The Innovation Dilemma and the Consolidation of Autocratic Regimes', paper prepared for presentation at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 1–4 September 2012.



efforts by Scotland Yard to enlist the support of BlackBerry's parent company Research in Motion in assisting the police to track down protesters. In effect, the Chinese media is accusing Western democratic governments of hypocrisy. According to an editorial in China's mouthpiece *The People's Daily*, 'The West have been talking about supporting internet freedom, and oppose other countries' government to control [these] kind of websites, now we can say they are tasting the bitter fruit [of their complacency] and they can't complain about it.'<sup>76</sup> This illustrates the difficulty of engaging in meaningful dialogue if EU Member States apply double standards in their relations with China.

The EU needs to develop a well-founded position on this issue. It can do so by funding cross-disciplinary research involving specialists in ICT, autocratic governance, public administration, political theory and ethics. By cooperating with academics and politicians from China, such joint research activities will facilitate trust-building and enhance understanding of each other's viewpoint. In addition, they can become a way to explore non-violent ways of addressing and preventing social unrest and other threats to domestic stability.

---

<sup>76</sup> Peter Foster, 'London Riots: China Raises Questions Over Safety of 2012 Olympic Games', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8690809/London-riots-China-raises-questions-over-safety-of-2012-Olympic-Games.html> (accessed 16 January 2012).



Consortium partners:



**Steinbeis**



**CHATHAM HOUSE**



**The University of  
Nottingham**



---

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author(s)  
and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of ECRAN or the European Union.