

Social Protest Under Hard Authoritarianism

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Despite increasing political control under Xi Jinping's leadership, collective action in China is not declining, though it is changing in various ways. Protests continue to be staged around issues related to the distribution of educational resources, housing, space, basic social protection, and the maintenance of market order. Compared with collective action under the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao leadership, recent collective action has a lower level of cross-sectoral support and makes fewer demands for widespread institutional reform. Other characteristics of these protests, however, are more alarming for the state, such as an increased capacity to mobilize and organize across localities and the mobilization of aggrieved groups with close ties to the regime. Although recent protests do not indicate that the regime is under threat, they do suggest some profound problems with the country's developmental model and the need for more efficient institutional channels to allow the various social groups to negotiate their interests and address their grievances.

The space for collective action has shrunk significantly under Xi Jinping's leadership since 2013. To contain civil society, the Chinese state has escalated censorship, surveillance, and ideological indoctrination, developing what political scientist Sebastian Heilmann calls "digital Leninism."¹ The Chinese state has also cracked down on and stigmatized key actors that formerly played a significant role in shaping public opinion and organizing collective action, particularly media professionals, the media, NGOs, lawyers, intellectuals, public opinion leaders, and activists.²

Under such circumstances, one might expect the waning of collective action, or so-called "mass incidents" as they are called in official Chinese discourse. Instead, if anything, collective action has increased in the two recent years, largely in response to the slowdown of the Chinese economy and the escalation of its sovereign debt.³ Recent public protests have been related to the unequal distribution of various social and economic goods—from education to housing, property, wages and work conditions, pensions and social security, financial investment, food and drug safety, land grabs, policing, the environment, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and equality of gender and sexuality.

In this article, I address the following: 1.) What issues have generated collective action in China during the past two years? 2.) How have such instances of collective action been organized? and 3.) What do these collective actions tell us about state-society relations in China today? In order to answer these questions, I draw on fieldwork in China as well as analyses of social media content and news reports from between 2015 and 2018.

Issues Generating Recent Collective Actions

Most instances of collective action during the last two years have been related to issues in the following three areas: access to education, the right to a basic livelihood, and market order. Other issues such as environmental problems and “land grabs” continue to exist but have not become more visible in the past two years and therefore are not discussed here.

Education

Protests demanding equal rights to education are on the rise given increasing concerns about class immobility, social inequality, and the perceived importance of education in China’s intensifying “class struggle.”⁴ Protests have focused on three issues, all relating to local government policies regarding education: 1.) education for the children of migrant workers; 2.) the privatization of education; and 3.) school district assignments.⁵

The education of migrant children has been a long-standing problem, but in recent years it has generated a growing number of protests.⁶ Many young parents who live in cities are second-generation migrant workers who grew up as “left-behind” children.⁷ Their own life experiences and positions in the labor market, as well as their awareness and observations of middle-class educations, lead them to highly value education as the key pathway to social mobility. These parents consider the quality of education in urban areas significantly superior to its counterpart in rural areas. Given limited resources, however, cities have regulated access to public schools through policies that tend to discriminate against families without local household registration status, housing property, or college-educated parents—all criteria that disadvantage migrant parents. As a result, even in cities with a less strict household registration policy, it remains difficult for the children of migrant workers to go to school. Given the increasing importance of education in the Chinese economy and the higher level of rights consciousness among younger migrant parents, education policies and regulations have become popular targets of collective action. Recent examples include:

- August 2017: Migrant workers and their children in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, protested the local government’s use of a point system to determine access to the public primary school. The system calculates a child’s points based on his or her parents’ level of education, housing ownership status, length of participation in social insurance, criminal record, and conformity with the one-child policy.⁸ Consequently, even migrant workers who have managed to purchase housing may be unable to send their children to school due to their own low levels of education.
- December 2017: Migrant workers in Yuyang, Shaanxi province, explicitly mobilized as migrant workers and members of the so-called “low-end population” to protest the local government’s policy of using parents’ participation in retirement insurance plans as a requirement for their children to attend primary school.⁹ After the protest, the Yuyang government announced that it would immediately end implementation of the policy and in 2019 it would replace it with a new policy.¹⁰

- July 2018: Migrant workers and their children in Shaodong, Hunan province, mobilized as peasants, peasant workers, and children of peasants to protest class-based discrimination—specifically, making housing ownership a criterion for access to public schools.¹¹ According to the Shaodong government, the policy, developed through a public hearing process, was necessary to decrease class size, as mandated by the central government.¹²

The second issue generating protests has been the privatization of education. In some cities, such as Leiyang, Hunan province, children who have been refused access to public education have been assigned by the local governments to private schools. Like the Shaodong government described above, the Leiyang government cited limited resources and the mandate of the central government to decrease class size. In September 2018, parents in Leiyang demanded their right to free public education and protested having to pay expensive tuition for private schools with terrible conditions. Criticizing the government's relationship with private schools, they argued that the government was acting to benefit the schools rather than the students.¹³ In other locales, for instance in Xi'an, parents protested more de facto forms of privatization—for example, offering children seats in public schools through payment of a “school choice” fee.

Parents also have protested the government's intervention in private school admissions. This has occurred in locales where the private elementary and middle schools are considered to be significantly superior to the public schools, given the government's limited investment in public education. In these localities, access to private schools has become highly competitive, whereas there are too few students in the public schools. To address the problem, some local governments intervene in the private school admissions process. From time to time, such regulatory measures have led to protests. In Liaocheng, Shandong province, for example, the local government in July 2018 announced that private schools could not require any form of exam in their admissions process and instead they had to use a lottery system to decide on admissions if there was an insufficient number of seats.¹⁴ Parents and school-aged children protested in front of the Liaocheng city government to criticize the policy, while also voicing criticism of the government's low level of expenditures for public education, which was fueling competition for access to private schools.

The third education-related issue that has inspired collective action is school district assignments. Parents protesting this issue are usually middle-class property owners with a local household registration status. Unlike the parents protesting in the first two instances, parents in this group tend to have a much higher expectation that the government will provide not only education but high-quality education. To facilitate this, middle-class parents often purchase expensive housing property situated, or potentially situated, in good school districts. Recognizing this, real-estate developers—who often have close ties with the local governments—highlight proximity to good districts in order to boost housing prices. Not surprisingly, government adjustments to or reassignments of school districts often trigger intense protests, particularly when they are combined with an unequal distribution of resources across schools and rocketing housing prices. During the last several years, protests contesting this issue have occurred in Beijing, Shenzhen, Xi'an, Hefei, Hangzhou, and Jiujiang.

Right to Livelihood

The second major focus of collective action in recent years has been the right to a basic livelihood. Some such protests have been triggered by the demolition of housing or of buildings that do not fully conform to certain regulations. Local governments in a number of cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Ji'nan, have escalated this practice.¹⁵ Usually the stated goal is to improve public safety, hygiene, and/or the city's image, but the reality often has more to do with controlling population size and composition, upgrading the industrial structure, or boosting real-estate values. Less well-off social groups are often direct or indirect targets of such regulatory measures. When the scale of implementation is large, such government actions may trigger protests demanding the right to a basic livelihood. Here, I give two recent examples.

In March 2016, the Shanghai government began to demolish two large marketplaces selling construction materials. Although the marketplaces were over ten years old, the government suddenly announced they were illegal.¹⁶ Thousands of small business owners and employees who worked in the marketplaces protested and demanded the right to a livelihood and to work, but they were unable to change the government plan. Most of these protesters did not have a Shanghai household registration status. When I did my fieldwork in Shanghai in 2017, interviewees complained that the demolition had deprived them of their work, homes, and life chances.

In November 2017, following a fire that took the lives of nineteen people, the Beijing government began to evict its “low-end population,” consisting mainly of migrants living in substandard housing on the city's periphery. The government cited public safety, but many criticized this move as infringing upon the people's right to a livelihood. Protesters argued that the government's real intention was to limit the migrant population and to replace the “low-end population” with a “high-end population.”¹⁷

In other cases, specific groups of workers have protested for the right to a livelihood and have demanded pensions, social security, or salaries. In June 2018, for example, truck drivers in several provinces, including Chongqing, Sichuan, Shanghai, Jiangxi, Shandong, Hubei, Guizhou, and Zhejiang, organized strikes to protest rising fuel costs, numerous government fines and levies, and cutthroat rates in the platform economy. The truck drivers argued they were being exploited both by businesses and by the government. Manbang, the corporation that operates and monopolizes the platform or app for truck drivers to take orders, was the focus of particular resentment when it made changes to the app, essentially forcing the drivers to compete with one another in terms of offering increasingly lower rates.¹⁸ Following the strikes, which took place in several cities and lasted for about three days, Manbang changed the design of the app.

Another group of workers—teachers—has protested primarily in economically less-developed areas. Teachers in Anhui, Hunan, Heilongjiang, and Henan, for example, organized to claim their rights to a livelihood, arguing that the local government did not distribute their salaries and benefits according to the contracts and relevant regulations. Some also requested to have the same level of wages and benefits as government officials, as stipulated by law. Income

inequalities across regions and various public sectors seem to have intensified the grievances among teachers.¹⁹

Strikingly, even groups with close ties to the government have mobilized to demand a basic livelihood. In March 2018, People's Liberation Army (PLA) veterans, for example, protested across the country for better pensions and social security. The State Council responded by establishing the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, but this proved to be insufficient.²⁰ Despite the risk of repression, PLA veterans from various provinces flooded to Beijing and gathered in front of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs in September 2018 to protest against the government. In particular, they criticized the central government for allocating responsibility to the local governments without substantively addressing the veterans' grievances.

Market Order

The third major focus of collective action in China in recent years has been the government's role in maintaining market order. Some groups have protested the government's inadequate regulation of the market, whereas others have criticized government regulations as unreasonable. Although these grievances appear to be contradictory, they reflect more profound and similar concerns about the problematic connection between business and government.

Included on the "side" protesting inadequate government regulations are parents whose children were given fake vaccines in 2018.²¹ In many ways, this recent scandal resembles the 2008 Sanlu milk scandal.²² In the milk incident, local governments were implicated. The fact that the CEO of Changchun Changsheng, the company that manufactured the fake vaccines, was a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Jilin Province and a representative of the Changchun Municipal People's Congress, came as little surprise to the Chinese public. Yet, despite widespread public criticism, the vaccine scandal triggered fewer protests than the 2008 milk scandal as the impact of the fake vaccines was less clear.

Another group protesting the state's inadequate regulations is peer-to-peer (P2P) investors. Since about 2014, P2P investments have led to a rising number of legal disputes and protests, particularly as P2P investors have become dissatisfied with addressing their disputes through institutional channels. Several conditions have spurred the growth of P2P lending. The first is the development of China's IT sector and, in particular, the platform economy. The second condition is the limited number of investment channels for individuals, a common complaint among urban, middle-class investors. The third condition is the difficulty for small and medium-sized private businesses to receive bank loans. In January 2017, there were about 2,388 P2P platforms in China, mostly concentrated in economically developed areas. Although in 2016 the government began to create a regulatory framework to control risks, many P2P platforms collapsed in 2018.²³ Believing collective action might help to recover their money, many investors chose to protest. Some even took their protests to Beijing when their grievances were not addressed locally. Investors argued that the government should be responsible for two reasons: first, in some cases, state-owned enterprises were the shareholders of certain P2P platforms, and; second, the government had failed to adequately regulate the lending platforms. Protesters compared the

amount of money and energy the government spent to suppress the protests to its inaction vis-à-vis the P2P platforms.

Still another group of protests have critiqued state regulation of the real-estate market for being unreasonable. In 2017, property owners in Shanghai staged demonstrations to protest regulations and law enforcement that undermined the value of their real-estate property. These protesters owned a particular kind of legally ambiguous “hybrid” property—commercial property used for residential purposes. The price of such hybrid property is lower than that of regular residential housing because those who reside in the former cannot obtain household registration status. The government did not restrict or police such residential use of commercial property until it launched a crackdown in 2017.²⁴ Middle-class owners condemned the government for maliciously infringing upon their property rights. Specifically, my interviewees argued that the government was trying to increase real estate prices and profits by restricting the supply of housing; it was also seeking to push out from Shanghai the relatively “low-end” middle-class populations in order to make the city more “high-end.” Despite escalating political control, in 2017 these property owners organized three demonstrations in one of the most prosperous areas of China. More than one thousand people participated in each demonstration. In the end, the Shanghai government compromised and changed its policy and regulations.

Organizational Characteristics of Recent Collective Actions

In certain ways, escalating political control under Xi Jinping’s leadership has changed the organization of collective action. The first relates to a particular group of actors. Under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, media professionals, the media, NGOs, lawyers, intellectuals, public opinion leaders, and activists played an important role in mediating the formation of public opinion and organizing collective action. But after the government’s crackdown on these actors, their influence decreased over time. With regard to the recent P2P collapse and the fake vaccine scandal, for example, few lawyers expressed a willingness to help the grievants with their legal disputes. Also, due to increased censorship, in recent years the domestic media have provided little coverage of protests. Instead, it has often been the grievants themselves who have used social media to disseminate information about their cases and their collective action. The time gap in censorship enables media outside of China to access such information and to cover it in their own news.

Second, in recent collective actions protesters have tended not to make broad claims about the rule of law writ large or about institutional reform. Instead, they have focused on individual grievances. This is related to the diminished role of intermediary actors, as described above, for it was often these actors who linked individual cases to broader institutions and reforms. The labor protests in Shenzhen in 2018 are an exception as students and workers demanded the right to organize a labor union.²⁵

Third, protests no longer receive much attention and support from people not directly involved in the grievance. In other words, there is less cross-sector support or collaboration. Again, this can be traced in part to the crackdown on intermediary actors. There are two notable exceptions. First, students from several universities went to Shenzhen to support recent labor protests there.

Second, the eviction of the “low-end population” in Beijing in 2017 garnered broad-based attention and criticism because the fire preceding the eviction had already attracted public attention. In addition, the large scale of the eviction meant that those who were evicted received support from a wide range of social groups. It should be noted, however, that even such widespread support failed to end the evictions by the Beijing government.

Therefore, it would seem that to a certain extent control of intermediary actors has contained the development of collective action, but some recent developments are still worrisome to the state. Due to social media, protesters now have the ability to coordinate protests across localities. Both PLA veterans and truck drivers, for example, were able to organize across multiple locales, traveling to support one another in the case of the veterans, and using their vehicles to disrupt traffic in the case of the drivers. Notably, unlike most other protesters, the participants in each of these groups share a salient collective identity. PLA veterans call one another comrades-in-arms (*zhanyou*); truck drivers call one another comrades-of-trucks (*kayou*). The communications among group members demonstrate a strong sense of community. Furthermore, given the level of state surveillance and censorship, the fact that these groups were able to organize protests across spatial boundaries within a short time is quite astonishing.

Collective actions staged by groups such PLA veterans and school teachers are likely to be alarming to the state, precisely because these groups have more knowledge about the regime. The fact that such “within-regime” groups are both experiencing and expressing disillusionment with the government suggests the weakening capacity of the state to maintain social cohesion.

The most unfortunate organizational change in recent protests has been the strategy of using the weakest or less resourceful groups to avoid state violence. In particular, in education-related protests parents put school-aged children or even babies in front of picket lines because it is considered less likely that the police will use violence against children. In cases of collective action organized by property owners, middle-class grievants who want to avoid risks have paid less well-off people to serve as “body doubles” in their demonstrations. In this way, “hard” authoritarianism’s wiliness to increase the use violence also influences the allocation of political risk.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite the Chinese government’s increasing political control since 2013, evidence suggests that collective action is not on the wane, at least not during the past two years. Most public protests have targeted issues related to distribution—of educational resources, housing, space, and basic social protection—or market regulation—either too much or too little. The protests alone do not indicate that the stability of the regime is under threat, but they do suggest some profound problems with China’s current developmental model and the need for improved institutional channels for different social groups to negotiate their interests and to address their grievances.

The current development model in China has two problems. First, to a large extent it recognizes a person’s value based purely on one’s economic value in the market, meaning that those without economic or human capital, including their children, have little opportunity to succeed. This is

not an insignificant problem. My analysis of national surveys in 2009 and 2014 shows that the percentage of respondents who agree that the current level of inequality between rich and poor has violated the principle of socialism swelled from 26 percent to 41 percent. Distribution will remain a significant issue in the years to come, and education will continue to be one of the major battlefields. Second, the current development model fails to produce and maintain stable and predictable market order. This, in turn, affects numerous social groups, who have to spend time and money to deal with such unpredictability and to attempt to secure themselves in various markets (e.g., the real-estate market or the education market).

The economic resources the Chinese government has spent trying to stabilize current state-society relations could have been used in a better way. The focus and form of recent protests reveal that many Chinese people have extremely low confidence in the country's legal and political institutions. As a result, they turn to extra-institutional channels to address the grievances and to increase the chances that the institutional channels will solve their problems. Such collective actions have led to huge government expenditures for security, repression, and surveillance, which then further undermine the people's trust in institutions and even radicalizes some of the grievants. As public debt continues to rise in many localities, at the same time that expectations about public expenditures (e.g., on education or social security) also increase, more efficient and less expensive institutions will be needed to improve state-society relations and to maintain order.

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Notes

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