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# China Since Tiananmen

## RURAL PROTEST

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China's farmers did not play a large part in the 1989 protests, except as a presumed backstop of support for the regime, which Deng Xiaoping saw fit to invoke on several occasions.<sup>1</sup> Since then, however, villagers have launched their share of the hundreds of "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*) that occur every day. Whether submitting respectful petitions detailing cadre corruption, mounting rightful resistance against illegal fees, or even engaging in violent clashes over land grabs, rural dwellers have shown a willingness to take stronger issue with the powerful than might have been expected in the repressive months following 4 June 1989.

This unrest has been triggered in part by a factor familiar to students of political contention: opportunity. Chinese villagers, like the aggrieved anywhere, respond to openings or perceived openings. At a time when the relaxation of official controls over political expression and activity has been fitful and uneven, rural folk have been among the biggest beneficiaries of loosening. Early in the reform period, the end of institutionalized "class struggle" and communes left villagers less fearful and less dependent on local leaders. More recently, marketization and increased mobility have afforded rural people more room in which to maneuver, while grassroots elections and legal reforms have provided both new abuses to protest and more safeguards against retaliation. Although many types of claims are still off-limits and Beijing remains unyielding in its hostility to Falun Gong believers, "separatists" in Tibet and Xinjiang, and anyone who would dare to organize a new political party, top leaders periodically signal that those grievances about which villagers care the most are indeed legitimate. These include concerns related to corruption, selective law enforcement, and people's livelihoods.

But political relaxation and socioeconomic change are not wholly

responsible for the upsurge in rural contention. Savvy “peasant leaders” (*nongmin lingxiu*) have been quick to seize opportunities, and in some instances have expanded the size of openings, helping to nudge once-forbidden types of claims into the realm of the acceptable. Chronic resistance is thus partly a product of decisions made by skilled protest organizers who know how to shape claims, mobilize followers, orchestrate acts of defiance, and (occasionally) mount actions that transcend the borders of a single community. In the face of long odds, these activists have regularly tested the truth of the saying, “A big disturbance produces a big result, a small disturbance produces a small result, and no disturbance produces no result.” While many have paid a price for their boldness—beatings, detention, and imprisonment remain common—others have continued to spearhead contention, often at the urging of community members who praise such protest leaders as “heroes” (*yingxiong*) if they persist, but decry them as “cowards” (*danxiaogui*) or even “traitors” (*pantu*) if they back down.<sup>2</sup>

How they are perceived by their followers and interested onlookers is critical for protest organizers. Popular support makes it easier to raise funds, aids recruitment, and can inspire villagers to act as bodyguards or engage in daring rescues when an activist is detained. In recent years, heavy-handed repression has sometimes backfired. Instead of isolating “troublemakers,” it has boosted their popularity and prestige. Although intimidation, beatings, fines, confiscation of valuables, and public humiliation can swiftly end an incident and demoralize those involved, suppression also provides evidence of the costs that activists are willing to pay, and displays their public-spiritedness. Even long jail sentences may not diminish their standing, but instead generate popular acclaim, as is evident when thousands turn out for the welcome-home ceremony of a paroled protest leader.<sup>3</sup>

Social recognition can steel an activist’s resolve and also lead to more spirited defiance. As time has passed, more activists have concluded that comparatively tame forms of contention, such as lodging complaints, are ineffective, and that forceful and attention-grabbing tactics (such as blocking a road or organizing a sit-in) are needed. Examples of confrontational tactics include outfitting pickup trucks with loudspeakers to publicize beneficial policies that have been ignored; demanding meetings with schoolmasters to press for the reversal of tuition hikes; and surrounding fee collectors as a prelude to driving them off. Whereas protest leaders in earlier years typically turned to higher-level officials in order to ask for help in cleaning up local misconduct, more are now willing to challenge powerholders directly and seek concessions on the spot.

Violence is also on the rise.<sup>4</sup> A number of clashes between farmers and local authorities have taken place recently over issues such as locating a power plant on village land, or refusing to allow the recall of a corrupt official. More than a few of these incidents have led to significant casualties

after armed police or local toughs arrived to repress the protesters. At the same time, Yu Jianrong, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has documented the spread of unplanned, “accidental” protests that rapidly take on a life of their own. These “anger-venting” flare-ups are

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often touched off by essentially random sparks. Rioting last summer by tens of thousands after a girl was found dead in Weng'an County, Guizhou Province, bespeaks the growth of “accumulated grievances” and “social despair” in some locations.<sup>5</sup> It also suggests that underlying tensions may only grow during the current economic downturn as millions of unemployed workers return to the countryside.

But is rural China about to explode? Not likely. Most contention remains weakly organized, and cooperation

across class lines is still rare—though involvement of public intellectuals and “rights-protection lawyers” (*weiquan lǚshi*) in rural protest has increased. Claims tend to be circumscribed and popular action is usually small-scale and local. Even taking into account developments such as calls to privatize farmland that swept Heilongjiang, Henan, and Inner Mongolia in 2008, wide-ranging demands and long-lasting leadership are the exception, and there are few signs of the solidarity, scope, and coordination that a sustained social movement would require. Rural protest plays a role in fending off extraction, deflecting predatory behavior, and sending unpopular cadres packing, but there is little evidence that it poses an imminent threat to the regime.

That the Communist Party hierarchy tolerates so much rural contention is a sign of the Party's confidence. As with the dash of accountability offered by village elections, permitting a dollop of dissent is an element of the regime's high-wire legitimization strategy, and it reflects faith that things can be kept in hand. The authorities still have enormous powers of repression at their disposal, and they can unleash disproportionate force if they conclude that core interests are at stake. Openings can be closed instantly and new “forbidden zones” declared (or old ones enforced). Should the center begin to treat farmers' grievances like those of Tibetans or Falun Gong supporters, we will know that the leadership is shaken and perhaps even that the regime is weakening. As in Poland following the suppression of Solidarity, lack of protest can sometimes be a better indicator of a tottering regime than a great deal of protest. In today's China, pressure is building, possibly faster than it can be released, and observing rural contention and how it is handled is a good way to see how solid—or how brittle—the political system may be.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Deng's speeches of 25 April and 16 June 1989: *Deng Xiaoping Nianpu, 1975–1997* [Chronicles of Deng Xiaoping, 1975–1997] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2004), 1273; and *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Vol. III, 1982–1992* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 301.

2. On the demographic background and characteristics of protest leaders, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88–90, 135–37.

3. In parts of Hunan Province in the late 1990s, the social standing of protest leaders exceeded that of grassroots officials. Many villagers extolled activists as their protectors and would offer them free meals or welcome them like close relatives when they visited. One protest leader in Hengyang County who had enjoyed this largesse said that he was treated better than the township head, a man to whom villagers would no longer offer a cup of tea or even a seat. Interview by Lianjiang Li, 2003. For more on repression and its effect on popular support, see Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," *China Quarterly* 193 (March 2008): 17–22.

4. Zhao Shukai, "Lishixing tiaozhan: Zhongguo nongcun de chongtu yu zhili," (A historical challenge: Conflicts and governance in rural China) in Ru Xin et al., eds., *2004 Nian: Zhongguo shehui xingshi yuce yu fenxi (2004: Forecasts and analyses of social trends in China)* (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2004), 212–23. On land disputes leading to violence and large-scale conflict as "more likely to erupt in rural versus urban areas," see Yu Jianrong, "Social Conflict in Rural China," *China Security* 3 (Spring 2007): 3, 7.

5. Yu Jianrong, "Emerging Trends in Violent Riots," *China Security* 4 (Summer 2008): 75–76.