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**POPULAR CONTENTION AND ITS IMPACT IN RURAL CHINA
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POPULAR CONTENTION AND ITS IMPACT IN RURAL CHINA

Abstract:

Protest outcomes in rural China are typically an outgrowth of interaction between activists, sympathetic elites, targets and the wider public. Popular agitation first alerts concerned officials to poor policy implementation and may prompt them to take corrective steps. As a result of participating in contention certain activists feel empowered and become more likely to take part in future challenges, while others feel disillusioned and lapse into passivity. In the course of observing collective action, some onlookers are sensitized to protester's concerns and public opinion is affected. Without popular action, better implementation, biographical change, and effects on the public would not emerge, but nor would they without involvement from above. Studying the impact of protest in rural China thus sheds light on two issues that have long troubled students of contentious politics: 1) how to get a grip on indirect, mediated consequences, and 2) how to think about causality when change is a result both of popular action and openings provided by sympathetic elites.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Kevin J. O'Brien is a professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on theories of contentious politics and popular protest in rural China. He is the co-editor (with Neil J. Diamant and Stanley B. Lubman) of Engaging the Law in China: State, Society, and Possibilities for Justice (Stanford, 2005), and his latest articles have appeared in China Journal, China Quarterly, Comparative Politics, Mobilization, and Modern China.

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POPULAR CONTENTION AND ITS IMPACT IN RURAL CHINA

Gauging the impact of popular protest is notoriously difficult. Questions of causality and definition dog even the most careful attempts to link an episode or cycle of contention to a specific outcome (Amenta, Carruthers and Zylan, 1992, p. 310; della Porta and Diani, 1999, pp. 231-33; Giugni 1998, 1999; Kriesi et al., 1995, pp. 207-08). Grappling with all the factors that come together to produce social, political or personal change becomes only more complicated when the indirect effects of collective action are taken into account (Tilly, 1999). Given the many obstacles researchers face, it's no wonder that studies of both resistance and social movements have traditionally paid more attention to the origins and dynamics of contention than to its consequences (Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander, 1995, p. 276; Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 208; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1988; Scott, 1986).

But this is changing. After years of fitful progress, research on the impact of contentious politics is taking off. A number of important books, articles, and edited volumes have appeared over the past decade, many by scholars who study the effects of social movements (for reviews, see della Porta and Diani, 1999, chap. 9; Giugni, 1998; Tarrow, 1998, chap. 10). As the field matures, efforts have been made to identify a wide range of policy, procedural, cultural, and biographical impacts and to separate out short-term versus long-term consequences, direct versus indirect results, and intended versus unintended outcomes (Gamson, 1990; Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi et al., 1995; McAdam, 1989, 1999; Tarrow, 1998; Zolberg, 1972). Some thought has also gone into strategies for teasing out cause and effect, often through the use of counterfactuals and cross-national comparisons (Giugni, 1999; Banaszak, 1996; Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi et al., 1995).

One feature of the field has not changed much, however. To this point, most studies of the impact of popular contention have focused on advanced industrialized countries (Giugni, McAdam,

and Tilly, 1999; della Porta, 2002, pp. 288, 296). This is not surprising insofar as protesters often find a reasonably hospitable climate in democratic or democratizing societies. Compared with authoritarian settings, it is easier for the disgruntled to mobilize and express their grievances, and it is more likely that the authorities will tender a favorable response. Unlike closed polities, the right to protest also receives at least some protection in liberal democracies and changes in policy often occur for which a case can be made that public pressure played a significant role.

But does this mean that contention (short of revolution) has little effect outside the democratic world? That hardly seems likely. In authoritarian countries such as China, where popular input in policy making is limited and organized movements are typically crushed or pushed underground, we need to follow the lead of analysts (della Porta, 1999, p. 66; della Porta and Diani, 1999; Kriesi et al., 1995; McAdam, 1999) who look beyond quick policy or procedural victories and eschew simple notions of success and failure (Andrews, 2001; Amenta and Young, 1999; Einwohner, 1999, p. 59; Giugni, 1999; Tilly, 1999) while scanning for a range of possible impacts. These outcomes may be unforeseen and indirect, and they may be more associated with policy implementation, personal change, and an evolving political culture than with dramatic policy reversals or institutional breakthroughs.

A handful of studies of protest in the West have already examined how popular contention can affect implementation (Andrews, 2001; Giugni and Plassy, 1998, p. 82; Rochon and Mazmanian, 1993), the values of activists (Banaczak, 1996; McAdam, 1999; McCann, 1994; Rochon and Mazmanian, 1993), and the broader public (della Porta, 1999; Gamson, 1998; Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Kriesi et al. 1995, p. 211; Tarrow, 1998; Zolberg, 1972). There are particular advantages, however, of exploring these effects in contemporary rural China. For one, these are arguably the most prominent consequences of collective action in the Chinese countryside, not a sideshow to the main event. Second, they offer an opportunity to explore whether current

scholarship, largely derived from research in pluralist systems, applies in a non-democratic context. Third, they promise a fresh perspective on two issues that have long troubled students of contentious politics: 1) how to get a grip on indirect, mediated outcomes, and 2) how to think about causality when change is a result both of popular action and openings provided by sympathetic elites.

AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH TO OUTCOMES

Explaining the consequences of contention entails an effort to ascribe cause and effect. But when events are intertwined and many parties are involved, causal attribution becomes difficult. Among the methodological problems raised most often in the literature on protest outcomes, one pertaining to attribution stands out as especially nettlesome: if social forces and state actors both contribute to a result, how can we tell who is responsible for what? (della Porta and Diani, 1999, pp. 232-33; Giugni, 1999; xxiv; Kriesi et. al.,1995, pp. 207-08).

The most common advice offered is to head in two directions at once. On the one hand, efforts must be made to isolate the independent effects of contention (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan, 1992, p. 312; Giugni, 1999, p. xxiv; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1988, p. 727). We should try, in other words, to figure out what might have happened in the absence of popular pressure in order to disentangle the role of societal and state actors (della Porta and Diani, 1999, pp. 231-33; Giugni, 1999, p. xxiv; Kriesi et al, 1995, p. 207-08). To exclude the possibility that a change would have occurred anyway, and to avoid exaggerating the consequences of protest, it is necessary to control for other variables and to determine precisely what caused what.

A second thread in the literature, often present in the same studies that draw attention to independent effects, reflects a more interactive approach to attribution. Here, attention centers on the interplay between forces of change both inside and outside the state. Outcomes are understood to be the result of bargaining and extensive interaction between protesters, targets, and third parties

(Burstein, Einwohner, and Hollander, 1995; Einwohner, 1999, p. 58; Giugni, 1998, p. 389; Jenkins and Perrow, 1977; Lipsky, 1968). Causal mechanisms are recognized to be inherently complex, and effects arise from a swirl of activity as official allies, the media, and other interested onlookers respond to popular agitation, while also acting on their own. Multiple causal chains are at work simultaneously (Tilly, 1999, p. 268) and "no particular strategic element can be evaluated in isolation" (Burstein, Einwohner, and Hollander, 1995; quoted text in della Porta and Diani, 1999, p. 229). This conjunctural approach to attribution (Ragin, 1987) suggests that the task of the analyst is not so much to untangle the role of protesters and powerful allies as to trace how a confluence of mass and elite forces join to produce a given result (Giugni, 1998, p. 14; Tarrow, 1998, p. 162).

An interactive understanding of outcomes, which we will argue should be pursued wholeheartedly and without equivocation, reflects the simple truth that most consequences of contention are the result of negotiation between forces in society and forces within the state. Collective action is typically but one factor in a long chain of events — a factor that at times can play a crucial role as initiative shifts back and forth between actors inside and outside the government. Either-or questions about the impetus behind change thus spring from an unrealistic vision of what protest can accomplish directly (how often are consequences unmediated by the powers-that-be?) and threaten to impoverish our understanding of outcomes. Too much interest in apportioning credit inevitably lends a defensive cast to analysis of the effects of protest, as attention falls on whether contention has an impact rather than how it has an impact (for this distinction, see Andrews, 2001, p. 73)

A nuanced appreciation of the interplay of societal and state actors has long been present in research that employs the concept of "political opportunity structure" to examine the origins and dynamics of collective action. Studies of both the American civil rights movement (McAdam, 1982; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1988, p. 721) and women's movement (McCann, 1994), for

instance, have been highly attuned to divisions within the elite and to the importance of allies within officialdom. This attention to institutional activists, ideological allies, pragmatic intermediaries, and insiders who pursue outside goals is no less appropriate when studying outcomes (Jenkins and Perrow, 1977; Lipsky, 1968; McCammon et al., 2001; Santoro and McGuire, 1997; Tarrow, 1998, p. 163), where it is even more important to set aside overly society-focused predilections and to redirect our gaze away from those contesting power to their relationships with the powerful.

RESEARCH SETTING AND DATA

What follows is based on both interviews and archival materials. Key written sources we have relied on include: Chinese government reports detailing episodes of popular contention; central circulars on how to deal with rural unrest; accounts of “peasant leaders” and their actions by journalists and scholars; letters of complaint penned by aggrieved villagers; and western studies, including our own, of collective action in the Chinese countryside. In addition, we have drawn on interviews with several central officials and rural protesters in the provinces of Hebei, Henan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Shandong.

Our most important source, however, was a series of in-depth interviews with protest leaders and other villagers in Hengyang county, Hunan, most of which were conducted in January and March of 2003. Hunan, along with a number of other provinces in China’s central agricultural belt (see Bernstein and Lü, 2003), has been a hotbed of popular contention since the late 1980s. We chose to focus on rural Hengyang largely because a Chinese colleague had exceptionally good access to protest organizers there, and because collective action in this county has persisted for over a decade, despite a major crackdown in 1999. Sustained contention in Hengyang has gradually produced a corps of seasoned activists and a local population quite welcoming of their presence; in this way, it has brought into view a number of protest consequences that have gone largely unreported elsewhere.

Given the sensitivity of our topic, the selection of respondents was done quietly through personal networking. The first interviewee was one of the most well-known and highly-respected protest organizers in Hengyang county. He then introduced a number of his closest associates, who in snowball-fashion provided access to their associates. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, some at interviewees' homes, others in a small inn where Lianjiang Li and our Chinese colleague stayed, and still others at a private home where activists from a number of townships met to discuss establishing a county peasant association. During a number of the sessions, assorted villagers listened in, sometimes interjecting their own opinions. With the consent of the respondents, all interviews were recorded, and some (about 20 hours worth) were videotaped.

The interviews were semi-structured. Each one started with a set of background questions about a person's age, education, Party membership, political positions held (if any), family background, and out-of-the-ordinary experiences (e.g., having been in the army or an urban wage worker). Afterwards, respondents were guided to recount, in detail: 1) how they began participating in or organizing popular contention; 2) what specific actions they had taken and what had transpired; 3) what they had gained or lost from taking part; 4) how their family members and neighbors had reacted to their activism; 5) what they had learned about themselves, other villagers, and various levels of government. Near the end of each session, respondents were asked if they intended to participate in future protests and, if so, what topped their wish list. To explore new issues that arose during the course of the fieldwork, a number of activists were interviewed several times.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONTENTION

IMPROVED POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Much of the pioneering research on the impact of contentious politics focused on policy or institutional change (della Porta, 1999, p. 66; Guigni, 1999, pp. xxi-xxiii; McAdam, 1999, p. 119).

Although an occasional study delved into the relationship between protest and policy implementation (Andrews, 2001; Giugni and Passy, 1999; Rochon and Mazmanian, 1993), it has scarcely been a prominent theme, not least because agitating for scrupulous enforcement of existing commitments rarely possesses the drama associated with struggles to influence policy making, bring about structural reform, or topple a regime. Still, in a non-democratic country such as China, where direct impact on high-level politics is difficult, most popular resistance surrounds misimplementation of potentially beneficial measures that are already on the books, but which local officials have chosen to ignore (Bernstein and Lü, 2003; O'Brien, 2003).

Collective action in rural China affects policy implementation in a number of ways. Above all, it draws the attention of the central government to insubordination by local leaders and prompts them to take corrective steps. Like many sprawling, multi-level polities, the Chinese state is plagued by monitoring problems and information slippage between policy makers and street-level officials (O'Brien and Li, 1999; Wedeman, 2001; but cf. Edin, 2003). Central leaders in Beijing often find themselves in the dark when they seek to assess how well their programs have been executed because local power holders block the flow of any information that casts them in an unflattering light. As a result, the Center is often unable to detect breaches of its policies, let alone discipline its disloyal officials.

Popular protests against poor implementation can provide central authorities with crucial intelligence about policy violations and help it break through the host of “protective umbrellas” (*baohu san*) that local leaders use to fend off oversight. For many years, the Center has allowed ordinary citizens to report improprieties through “letters and visits offices” (Luehrmann, 2003; Thireau and Hua, 2003), the “reporting” (*jubao*) system, and people’s congresses (O'Brien, 1994). Much like the owners of trucking companies, who print 800 numbers on their rigs to encourage motorists to report reckless driving, distant policy makers can benefit from relying on affected third

parties to be their watchdogs. By permitting those who have the most information about cadre misbehavior (and the most to lose from misimplementation) to sound “fire alarms” (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984), central leaders can scale back costly top-down monitoring and bank on other methods to help identify their unprincipled agents. Noisy, public defiance is one of the more perilous but effective ways the Chinese leadership learns of official wrongdoing, and it can be particularly valuable when more institutionalized channels of participation are lacking or clogged.

Seen in this light, condoning contention in what might be called the zone of policy implementation is first and foremost a solution to a principal-agent problem: it has less to do with any newfound affection for pluralism and more to do with preventing officials from thwarting measures designed to rein them in. The Center sometimes tolerates such action in order to deter its wayward agents from “driving the people toward rebellion” (*guanbi minfan*). And when some redress is offered, it may serve to placate the discontented and reduce the likelihood of truly regime-threatening unrest while improving implementation and cadre oversight.

Over the last two decades, clashes between villagers and local officials have alerted Chinese leaders to a number of areas in which misimplementation is endemic, most notably 1) unwillingness of local cadres to revoke unapproved taxes and fees, 2) disregard of measures that bar corruption and use of excessive force, 3) manipulation of village elections, and 4) distortion of popular central policies (such as economic development) into harmful “local policies” (*tu zhengce*) that justify wasted investment and unauthorized extraction (Bernstein and Lü, 2003; Li and O’Brien, 1996; O’Brien and Li, 1999; Zhongyang, 2001)._

In addition to shining a spotlight on official misdeeds, popular resistance sometimes spurs the Center to intervene directly in the implementation process. A massive riot in Sichuan province in 1993, for instance, led the Central Committee and the State Council to issue an emergency notice that banned 42 fees which had been illegally levied by local governments (Bernstein and Lü, 2003).

Likewise, after a series of demonstrations in 2000 in Jiangxi province, the central government quickly sent in a team of investigators, which instructed county officials to slash unapproved fees by 24 million *yuan* (approximately US \$3 million) (Ding, 2001, pp. 433-34). In the wake of popular complaints, Beijing has also stepped in to ensure the conduct of honest grassroots elections. The Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA), which is responsible for enforcing the *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* (1987, revised 1998), has been drawn into dozens of disputes over mishandled balloting and its involvement has led to numerous elections being overturned (Howell, 1997; Li and O'Brien, 1996, 1999; Liu, 2000; O'Brien, 2003; O'Brien and Li, 2000; Shi, 1999). In one 1995 case, for example, after a county government turned a deaf ear to their complaints, a group of angry farmers from Hebei province traveled to the capital to protest a fraudulent vote. When an MoCA official responsible for carrying out the self-government program heard that the delegation was in his outer office, he shouted "bravo" (*tai haole*). Upon hearing their tale of local skullduggery, he immediately dispatched two staff members to look into their charges. In the course of a long investigation that ended with the election being annulled, MoCA officials appeared three times on China's most popular television program devoted to investigative journalism; in front of a national audience, they openly supported the farmers and warned other local officials to draw the appropriate conclusions (Author's observation, 1994; Ints. 1, 2).

Popular contention can improve policy implementation by mobilizing sympathetic and powerful advocates who have a stake in seeing that a policy is upheld. (Crusading reporters can be crucial allies, too, as increased editorial freedom and competitive pressures have given rise to a more market-oriented media, and exposés of official wrongdoing can generate huge audiences). At the same time, popular agitation can also rouse mid-level officials to act on their own. In recent years, collective action has led township and county leaders in some locations to discipline corrupt, derelict and abusive subordinates. For instance, after hundreds of villagers staged a boisterous

demonstration at a county compound in Sichuan province in 1998, county authorities promptly ordered the removal of nine corrupt village cadres, who were also made to return the funds they had misappropriated (Jiang and Yang, 1999). On a larger scale, in accord with the popular saying that “a big disturbance leads to a big solution, a small disturbance leads to a small solution, and no disturbance leads to no solution” (Gonganbu, 2001, p. 24; Zhonggong Sichuan, 2002, p. 30), widespread unrest can bring even more relief to a broader population. From July to September 1996, tens of thousands of villagers took part in a series of riots in Hunan province, during which angry protesters ransacked offices and homes of township cadres, and physically attacked officials who dared to stand in their way. In a desperate (and ultimately successful) attempt to restore order, the county government agreed to return more than 25 million *yuan* of unlawfully collected fees (Yang, 1999, p. 79; Yu, 2001, pp. 557-62).

Many of the effects of contention surrounding policy implementation are mediated and indirect (Tarrow, 1998, p. 174), in that villagers usually rely on others to do their bidding and because the specter of further unrest can provide ammunition for elite allies in their bureaucratic battles. In China’s cities, on several occasions (e.g. the protest movements of 1986 and 1989), civil disorder has weakened the position of high-level backers, or even contributed to their downfall. In the countryside, however, contention has more often provided leverage for reform-minded elites to outmaneuver their rivals when drawing up regulations that specify how national laws should be implemented. Reformers in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, for instance, repeatedly invoked the threat of rural unrest in their dispute with opponents in the Party’s Organization Department over enforcement of the *Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees*. For more than a decade, the Organization Department insisted that elected villagers’ committees had to be placed under the leadership of appointed Party branches (Int. 3; Liu, 2000; O’Brien and Li, 2000). It was only an upturn in rural defiance aimed at unpopular village party secretaries that tipped the balance in favor

of the MoCA view. In 2002 they finally persuaded the Organization Department to stop actively opposing a guideline which required that all future village Party secretaries demonstrate their popularity by putting themselves up before the citizenry and winning a villagers' committee election (Zhonggong Zhongyang, 2002).

Partly by drawing on the power of the central government, partly by generating pressure on their own, contentious villagers strive to ensure that popular policies are carried out. And sometimes they succeed. Illegal levies are rescinded, manipulated elections are overturned, and rogue officials are brought to heel. In these circumstances, it is not a question of insiders coming to accept outsider goals (Lipsky, 1968; Santoro and McGuire, 1997), or even outsiders becoming insiders. Instead we see reformist central officials who, for their own bureaucratic and personal reasons, share the goals of protesters from the outset (Tarrow, 1998, p. 88). These high-level advocates are not regime defectors, minority elites, or elites out of power who seize the role of tribune of the people (Tarrow, 1998, p. 79), but ranking members of the government who are disposed to champion popular demands, so long as they do not target certain off-limit central priorities (e.g. birth control). As part of a "sandwich strategy" (Fox, 1993) intended to hold their subordinates in line, they countenance certain kinds of protest and provide ad hoc entry to the implementation arena.

EFFECTS ON ACTIVISTS

Beyond its impact on policy implementation, collective action may also be a life-altering event (McAdam, 1989; McCann, 1994, p. 271; Tilly, 1999, p. 268; Zolberg, 1972). It can affect the "hearts, minds, and social identities" of participants by transforming their "understandings, commitments, and affiliations" (McCann, 1994, p. 230). For those who become leaders, in particular, protest can serve as a learning experience that makes them aware of new possibilities and often leaves them more inclined to take part in other popular action. In this way, contention is

sometimes a “watershed” in the life of activists, “a point in time around which their biographies can be seen in ‘before’ and ‘after’ terms” (McAdam, 1989, p. 758).

In China, collective action surrounding policy misimplementation has started to affect how people think and what they do. Activism has led some villagers to reconsider their relationship to authority, while posing new questions, encouraging innovative tactics, and spurring thoughts about political change. In some cases this has led to feelings of empowerment and a greater readiness to participate in more disruptive (and more direct) action, as “activism begets future activism” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 165). In other cases it has led to disillusionment and despair, especially when official procrastination, neglect, or repression saps the confidence of protesters that the Center will make good on its promises. In either situation, one of the more striking (and largely unexamined) consequences of collective action in China has been its spillover effects on the attitudes and life course of activists.

While merely participating in protest with like-minded persons can certainly have an impact, many individual-level consequences depend on how an episode turns out. Successful contention has perhaps the most straightforward effects. Success can take many forms and protesters often interpret victory broadly. Popular action, ideally, may lead to an official investigation and speedy redress of villagers’ grievances. Far more likely, activists may have to settle for prompting officials to “instruct” (*zhishi*) their underlings to acknowledge a problem and do their best to address it (Ints. 4, 5, 6). Villagers may even judge their efforts effective if they simply gain access to official documents that detail a beneficial measure and win permission to distribute them (Ints. 4, 6, 7, 8). When outcomes such as these materialize, participants tend to feel that the justness of their contention has been confirmed. For many, this may end their activism, and its main personal effect may be on the perceived legitimacy of the state, as they conclude “the Center is on our side and can still control its officials” (Int. 9; also Int. 10).

For others, however, success may increase their sensitivity to social injustice and inspire them to mount further challenges. Even tiny gains or small gestures (such as being told by a ranking official that “publicizing Party policies is protected by law”) (Int. 4; also Ints. 6, 7, 8) can be remarkably empowering. A few kind words may convince protesters of the vulnerability of their targets and lead them to conclude that the Center truly means what it says and is willing to act as a “guarantor against repression” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 88). Participants may then decide (rightly or wrongly) that the risks of contention are not overly high and the payoffs are likely to be large. Even if they are mistaken about their role in bringing about a change, such as villagers who were certain that their agitation led directly to the tax-for-fee reform (Ints. 8, 11, 12), activism can enhance a person’s willingness to question authority and enter into conflicts with the powerful. It can signal a growing assertiveness and cement a villager’s identity as a dedicated and confident activist.

In addition to boosting a person’s sense of efficacy, contention sometimes enhances the self-esteem of protesters and affects their goals in life. Actions such as holding a string of public meetings to “disseminate documents” (*xuanchuan wenjian*), may leave activists feeling proud, even like a “hero” (Duan et al., 2000), because they enjoy being looked up to and take satisfaction in having conveyed the people’s voice to higher levels (Ints. 4, 5, 6, 13; Li, 2000). One such man, who led a successful effort to reduce exorbitant school fees and was mobilizing his neighbors to challenge excessive irrigation charges, said he would stop organizing demonstrations only if township authorities draped him in a garland of flowers, put him in an open truck, and gave him a parade through every village in the township. (This was to restore his reputation after having been jailed for three years for spearheading resistance against illegal fees) (Int. 13). Some devoted activists have publicly announced that what they now sought was not wealth but rather dignity, honor, and posthumous fame (Duan et al., 2000; Ints. 4, 13). Quite a few so-called “peasant leaders” (*nongmin lingxiu*) we met in Hengyang claimed (rather grandiosely) that they now

considered it their mission in life to defend the interests of the Party and the people (Ints. 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14).

The effects of less than successful contention on the attitudes and behavior of activists is even more varied. For some, frustration diminishes their trust in the Center, or at least in its capacity to ensure that popular policies are carried out (Li, 2004). More than a few villagers who were interviewed said that the Center was a “clay Buddha” (*ni pusa*) that was unable to respond to the prayers of the faithful (Ints. 14, 15). Thoughts like this can lead to disenchantment and cynicism, and discourage activism when formerly feisty peasants conclude it is unwise to go looking for trouble. An activist from Hebei province, for example, was treated rudely at the State Council’s Letters and Visits Office in Beijing, and then saw seven of his fellow complainants detained when they returned home. After this dispiriting turn of events, he said he would never again seek to have corrupt officials ousted, because the Center was too distant and the protective network of local officials was too strong (Int. 16).

Defeat does not, however, cause all activists to lapse into despair and passivity. Some instead become disposed to pursue more disruptive acts in order to be noticed by officials at higher levels. Some protest leaders have concluded that since polite forms of contention, such as lodging complaints and filing administrative lawsuits, are ineffective, more attention-grabbing tactics (like blocking roads, sit-ins, or even riots) are needed to ratchet up the pressure on higher levels to intercede (Gonganbu, 2001; Zhonggong Hebei, 1999, p. 28; Zhonggong Sichuan, 2002; Zhongyang, 2001). These people often become unwilling to negotiate with targets who they believe “should not share the same sky” (Int. 7; on contention polarizing attitudes, see Tarrow, 1998, p. 165), and less tolerant of protesters who are less ardent than themselves. In popular action aimed at excessive exactions in Hengyang, as time went by and positions hardened, moderates who were ready to cooperate with local officials were mocked as traitors and ostracized (Ints. 17, 18).

Following high-level neglect or local repression, some particularly tenacious activists have become “professional complainants” (*shangfang zhuanyehu*) who visit higher-level governments again and again, or even station themselves permanently in Beijing (or provincial capitals). Often months or even years into an “activist career” (McAdam, 1989, p. 753), some camp out in what have come to be called “complainants’ villages” (*shangfang cun*), and scratch out a living by helping newcomers find cheap lodging or by directing them to relevant ministries. Not a few have abandoned their regular jobs, used up all their savings, and stand near the brink of financial ruin. A number of “old-hand complainants” (*shangfang laohu*) we encountered in Hunan province said that although it was their destiny to “bankrupt their family” (*baijia*), they did not regret their actions. On the contrary, they felt that neglect and repeated setbacks only confirmed how unworthy their lives had been before they stood up for their rights, and they vowed they would continue their struggle for a life with dignity (Ints. 4, 5, 6).

A decline (rather than total loss) of confidence in the Center’s ability to enforce its wishes has also encouraged some activists to develop a new understanding of what they can expect from the Center, what the Center needs from them, and what they can do to help the Center. They have decided that while they must continue to act in the name of the Party, they should not expect immediate intervention from high-ranking officials, and instead must take matters into their own hands (with whatever public support they can muster). This realization often signals a growing sense of agency and self-worth, insofar as such people feel that the Center not only welcomes their assistance, but is in dire need of it. This tactical escalation is also commonly accompanied by a heightening of emotions and a willingness to take greater risks or even consider martyrdom. Activists, at this stage, may know full well that open confrontation with local officialdom increases the likelihood of repression, and that the odds of success are poor, but still say things like “I will struggle on so long as the Communist Party is still in power and I am alive” (Int. 19) or “I am

prepared to die for the glorious course of defending the Party's leadership and the peoples' interests" (Int. 13).

When protesters reach this point, they no longer limit their contestation to sounding fire alarms, petitioning, and remonstrating; instead, they take on the more proactive role of guardian or even self-implementer of central policies — in other words, they try to put out the fires themselves. Typical acts include 1) demanding face-to-face meetings with local leaders to urge immediate reversal of their unlawful decisions; 2) publicizing central policies in order to mobilize popular resistance to local officials who violate them 3) confronting township staff who come to collect illegal fees and attempting to drive them off (Duan et al., 2000; Ints. 13, 17, 18; Yang, 1999, p. 79; Yu, 2001, pp. 548-49).

Less than successful contention can also give activists a new appreciation of the benefits of organization, while also contributing to the formation of a collective identity. Activists in Hunan province increasingly speak of a common cause and identify themselves as members of a larger community of aggrieved rural people (Ints. 5, 8, 19, 20, 21; Duan et al., 2000). As a result of trading stories and getting to know each other while lodging complaints at the municipal or provincial level, they have punctured the "cellularization" (Shue, 1988) of rural society. In so doing, they have sometimes come to recognize that they must join forces and organize for self-protection. In August 1999, for example, 87 peasant leaders from over a dozen townships in Hengyang gathered in the provincial capital to lodge a massive collective complaint (Ints. 4, 5, 6, 7, 20, 22). Activists from this county often travel to neighboring villages to publicize central documents and leadership speeches concerning unlawful fees, and by 2002 they had coordinated their effort to overturn excessive school fees by adopting a uniform letter of complaint (Duan et al., 2000; Ints. 4, 13; Yang, 1999, p. 79; Yu, 2001, pp. 548-49; Yu, 2003).

With the creation of informal networks, and even multi-township alliances, popular unrest in some places (e.g. rural Hunan, Sichuan, Jiangxi; on regional variation, see Bernstein and Lü, 2003) has begun to outgrow the boundaries of individual villages, and some activists have become committed movement entrepreneurs who devote considerable time to organizing one action after another. With a corps of “comrades” to fall back on, these people have developed a sense of solidarity and an appetite for contention. Their actions may signal the early stirrings of a subculture of frustrated, assertive risk-takers who both enjoy what they are doing (on the pleasures of protest, see Jasper, 1997, p. 220) and are capable of sustaining opposition (Bernstein and Lü, 2003, pp. 155-57; O’Brien, 2002; in another context, see McCann, 1994, p. 261).

Finally, disillusionment with the Center can generate demands for far-reaching change. In the 1980s and early 1990s, contentious villagers tended to focus on concrete issues such as excessive fees and rigged elections in their own village. More recently, the language of dissent has become broader and more charged, with activists, for instance, saying to fellow protesters from nearby villages: “We must stop being slaves! We must become masters! We must resist local officials who deprive us of our legal rights and ride roughshod over us” (Int. 4). To encourage local leaders to respect their demands, some rural people have called for “peasant associations” (*nonghui*) to be set up, and villagers in Hebei and Anhui have drawn up their own versions of a *Law of Peasant Associations*, with the two Hebei men submitting their draft and a petition to former Premier Zhu Rongji.

The most dramatic effect of total disenchantment with the Center is exemplified by the story of an activist from rural Henan province. After leading a number of unsuccessful protests against excessive levies, he left his village and became a migrant worker in Guangdong. But he spent most of his time courting media attention and overseas support for a “democratic revolution,” while writing essays explaining why China needs multiparty democracy. In November 2002, when the

16th Party Congress was in session, he attempted to organize a demonstration in Tiananmen Square opposing excessive taxation and lack of democracy (Personal Communication, 2002; Zhou, 2002, p. 2). A rural researcher based in Beijing wrote that young villagers like this man were not as exceptional as they might seem (Dang, 2002).

Rather than advocating the end of one-party rule, it is certainly more common for activists to be drawn into conventional politics, as yesterday's "peasant hero" becomes today's elected village cadre or local people's congress deputy (in another context, see Marwell et. al, 1987). Even after this occurs, however, they may not stop organizing popular action, and instead may continue to act as "complaint representatives" (*shangfang daibiao*) or "complaint chieftains" (*shangfang touzi*) who use their status and institutionalized authority to "broker" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001) community complaints or even lead village-wide resistance to unlawful policies made by officials at higher levels (Int. 23; Li, 2001).

IMPACTS ON THE PUBLIC

Collective action can also produce ripple effects in the community, especially on sympathetic spectators who have direct contact with activists (Rochon, 1997, pp. 150-51). It can alter the perceptions of mass publics and may lead to increased engagement in politics. As ideas formulated among a small coterie emerge as widely-held beliefs in larger populations, it can put new issues on the agenda and affect public opinion as a portion of the early risers' message "is distilled into common sense" (Tarrow, 1998, pp. 174-75; also Rochon, 1997; Zolberg, 1972, pp. 206). Contention, in this manner, can make the unthinkable thinkable (Gamson, 1998, p. 57) and create social and political pressure for change.

In China, mass action directed at misimplementation has "sensitized" (Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 211) interested onlookers to new goals and possibilities. It has done this both by intensifying the sentiments of certain villagers on the periphery of popular action and by influencing the thinking

and conduct of uninvolved community members whose interests the activists claim to champion. The main evidence that rural people are being politicized by contention is that some villagers have come to admire and even share the moral courage of protesters, and they are increasingly willing to participate in fund-raising or daring acts of defense when protesters are detained or face repression.

Popular challenges, above all, alert the public to beneficial central policies and to any discord that exists between the Center and local governments (Int. 24; Li, 2004; O'Brien and Li, 1995; Yu, 2001, p. 548). This often makes outside observers more aware of the vulnerability of local officials and lifts their hopes that the problem of policy misimplementation can be resolved with the Center's help and through activists who will not give up (Ints. 24, 25). That some protesters endanger themselves by taking the lead in opposing unlawful "local policies" also sends out a clear message that villagers must help themselves and cannot simply wait for the Center to fix their problems. Contention thus affects shared notions about how to protest (della Porta, 1999, pp. 66-67) and brings a portion of the "cognitive liberation" (McAdam, 1982, pp. 48-51) that activists have experienced to a wider audience (Ints. 24, 25, 26).

Changes in attitude are also accompanied by changes in behavior when anxious but sympathetic bystanders edge closer to the action. As their confidence in the activists' intentions and skill grows, members of the public sometimes begin by coming forward with donations. In order to lodge complaints at higher levels and publicize central policies, activists need money to cover their expenses. According to a number of our interviewees (Ints. 4, 5, 13), fund raising is most difficult at the outset, when many villagers doubt whether street protest will accomplish anything or fear that the activists will simply pocket their contributions. But as contention continues and activists prove themselves, public confidence and donations often grow. In Hengyang county, for instance, when township officials switched off the electricity to stop protesters from using a makeshift loudspeaker to publicize central policies in a crowded market, a villager who ran a nearby restaurant supplied the

activists with his diesel generator free of charge. Concerned community members also sometimes visit injured activists in the hospital and give them money for medicine or food. They also aid families of jailed protesters, either with direct financial support (Ints. 4, 13, 17, 28), or by doing work around their home, such as repairing a roof (Int. 27).

Successful contention (or more often a harsh crackdown) can bring in new recruits, too. In Hengyang, for instance, one villager was so furious when he witnessed township officials beating up an activist's wife that he helped organize subsequent protests. In his words: "I could not stand such brutality against good people who were trying to help people like myself. I also knew that the township was doing something that would not be tolerated by the Center" (Int. 29). Since the early 1990s, a number of riots have taken place in Hunan and Sichuan after county police or township officials sought to arrest well-liked peasant leaders by attempting to drag them out of their homes in the middle of the night (Duan et al., 2000; Jiang and Yang, 1999; Tan, 2000; Yu, 2001).

Short of rioting, previously uninvolved villagers sometimes take part in dramatic rescues after local officials arrest or harm protesters. In an incident in Hengyang in 2002, several activists drew a large crowd when they went to press a township schoolmaster to reduce fees. When the cornered principal gave a signal to his hired toughs to beat up the chief activist, an elderly bystander stood up and shielded him. He announced that he had no children or grandchildren who had to pay the excessive fees, but that in listening to the debate between the chief activist and the schoolmaster he had become convinced that the protesters were right and he would not stand to see the man hurt. He then turned to the school head and said: "If you want to have your men hit this man, they'll have to do it over my dead body!" (Int. 18; also Int. 7). Other onlookers became equally agitated and threw their support behind the activists, and the schoolmaster quickly backed off and agreed to reduce the fees.

At a minimum, members of the public often offer moral support to able activists and treat them like heroes. Instead of shying away from peasant leaders who have spent time in prison, for example, villagers may praise them and call for verdicts against wrongly-convicted “good men” (*da haoren*) to be reversed. In parts of Hunan, villagers now often extol activists as their protectors and offer them free meals when they stop by (Duan et al., 2000). One protest leader in Hengyang, who had enjoyed this largess, told us that villagers treated him better than they treated the township head – a man to whom villagers would no longer offer a cup of tea or even a seat (Int. 5).

Where protesters have a continuing presence, some people have begun to view them as community leaders. Villagers go to activists, for instance, rather than village cadres or township officials, when they have conflicts with local bullies (Ints. 4, 5, 6, 13). They also may vote for protest leaders in village elections, despite efforts by local officials to prevent such “scoundrels” (*lan zai*) from becoming candidates (Ints. 6, 17, 23). In places such as Hengyang, a culture of protest is emerging and activists have become recognized public figures who derive their power from acting in the name of the Center and their moral authority from taking personal risks for the benefit of other villagers.

CONCLUSION

Over thirty years ago, Michael Lipsky (1968, pp. 1146, 1153) pointed out that protest is a “highly indirect process” in which people other than activists and targets play crucial roles. He highlighted, in particular, the importance of reference publics and of drawing third parties into controversies in ways that served protest goals. More recently, Sidney Tarrow (1998, pp. 164, 171, 174) has also stressed that contention does not produce its major effects immediately or directly, but through ongoing interaction of protesters and conventional political forces and elites.

This paper has focused on the indirect effects of collective action in rural China and has treated protest outcomes as a byproduct of sustained interaction between activists, sympathetic

elites, targets and the wider public. Popular agitation first alerts concerned officials to poor policy implementation and may prompt them to take corrective steps. As a consequence of participating in contention some activists feel empowered and become more likely to take part in future challenges, while others feel disillusioned and lapse into passivity. In the course of witnessing or hearing about collective action, certain interested onlookers are sensitized to protester's concerns and public opinion is affected. Ideas about what is possible and how to protest evolve, and bystanders may become more likely to help with fund-raising, to rescue activists in trouble, or to join demonstrations when their champions are detained.

All of these outcomes are mediated by the powers-that-be and none arrive in the teeth of unified elite opposition; each is an outgrowth of a process in which social and state forces feel each other out and arrive at new understandings. Even for the most personal of consequences, such as those pertaining to self-change (Kiecolt, 2000), the state's hand in shaping the political opportunity structure is evident, whether it be through instituting grassroots elections, modifying the rural tax system, or counting on villagers to help monitor official misconduct. Sometimes the Center intentionally provides openings, for instance by granting rural people the right to reject unwarranted fees in the 1993 Agriculture Law (Art. 18); more often it sets the stage for contention by tolerating what it formerly refused to abide. Without collective action, better implementation, changes in activists' outlook and conduct, and effects on the wider public would not emerge, but nor would they appear without involvement from above. In each instance, popular pressure is one factor among many, and outcomes arise from a confluence of mass and elite forces. In such circumstances, it is unwise, as some social movement scholars are wont to do, to fix on isolating the independent effects of contention or disentangling the role of societal and state actors. For none of these effects does it pay to ask: "where does the initiative lie?"

In rural China, a realistic account of protest outcomes accords villagers a critical role, but acknowledges that it is highly circumscribed. Results of contention are the consequence of negotiation between many parties and the interplay of forces both inside and outside the state. This interaction is not so much the bargaining that Burstein, Einwohner, and Hollander (1995) and other social movement theorists often emphasize, as a testing process to see if certain gray zones can now be traversed. And whether they can or not, learning occurs and the next round of contention starts from a slightly different place.

Although this paper has underscored relatively small-scale changes in attitudes and behavior rather than dramatic policy effects or institutional breakthroughs, the outcomes examined here may also have long-term implications for state-society relations. For one, micro-level changes in values may presage a larger transformation in social identities. When villagers, for example, come to view state promises as a source of inclusion and entitlement, they are acting like citizens before they are citizens. Certain citizenship practices, in other words, are preceding the appearance of full citizenship as a secure, universally recognized status. In fact, as O'Brien (2001) has argued in a study on how popular agitation surrounding village elections can signal the development of rights consciousness, practice may be creating status, as local struggles begin in enclaves of tolerance, spread when conditions are auspicious, and possibly evolve into inclusion in the broader polity.

Struggling to make still-contested rights real can help pry open channels of participation, while drawing people into the zone of policy implementation alters routine politics and creates new loci of decision making. In the long term, ad hoc entry to the implementation arena may lead to more permanent access to the polity. Contention, and the many adjustments in state-society relations it precipitates, can place new issues on the agenda in a forceful and suggestive way (Tarrow, 1998, p. 175) and it may telescope the distance between the present and the future (Zolberg, 1972, p. 206).

At the same time, if the Center does not deliver on enough of its promises, this could give rise to further protest and violence (Int. 30; Yu, 2003), as the spearhead is pushed up. There is evidence of this already inasmuch as some villagers we have spoken with have concluded that “water far away cannot quench thirst nearby” (Int. 31) or, more ominously, “all crows under heaven are equally black” (Ints. 32, 33). That many rural residents still extend the benefit of the doubt to central authorities suggests that the regime retains a reserve of legitimacy. But popular faith in the beneficence of the Center will weaken if aggrieved villagers repeatedly fail to receive the protection and assistance they expect (Li, 2004).

This reminds us that, in order to highlight outcomes of contention that have emerged despite a generally unwelcoming opportunity structure, we have “selected on extreme cases of the dependent variable” (see Collier and Mahoney, 1996, p. 72). To discover if our findings are representative of broader trends in China would require a different research strategy which systematically explored contention that also led to repression (or, more benignly, lack of implementation). A next step, of particular import to Sinologists who may wish to find out whether our findings portend changes for China writ large, would be to give more attention to sources of variation. Researchers would need to speak with protest leaders and villagers in a range of locations to find out the extent to which popular contention has become a dynamic force elsewhere. Do regional differences exist and are the protest impacts outlined here more pronounced, for example, in China’s central grain belt, where Bernstein and Lü (2003) have argued cadre-peasant tensions are most acute. Is a similar dynamic at work in urban areas? Do tactics and the size of a protest matter? Does violence work, insofar as it “shocks” central authorities into responding and redefining their own interests? More broadly, how do the many potential intercessors at higher levels view popular action in various policy areas, and why do some choose to respond while others fail to?

Our most recent fieldwork suggests that trust in the Center is indeed waning. When rural activists turn to higher levels, what awaits them more often than not is disappointment. They may hope to find kindly representatives of a concerned Center, but instead are often received by long-faced, ill-tempered bureaucrats who brush them off, give them empty promises, or fob them off on others (Ints. 14, 15, 34, Zhang, 2002). If more and more villagers lose confidence in the state's capacity to control its agents, or come to doubt that central authorities truly want beneficial policies to be executed, this could engender cynicism and political passivity (Int. 16). But it could also generate pressure for far-reaching reforms, such as direct election of national leaders or even the end of one-party rule (Zhou, 2002). Long-time activists in parts of Hunan, for instance, continue to frame their claims in terms of policy implementation, but by "policy" they now mean constitutional principles, such as popular sovereignty and rule by law (Ints. 5, 35).

Whether contention in rural China leads to disenchantment, a more complete citizenship, or further reform, to do justice to protest outcomes it pays to steer clear of simple dichotomies like state versus society or us versus them, and to examine how specific parts of the state interact with (and provide opportunities for) particular social forces. This involves finding out why, for example, officials sometimes choose to champion protesters' demands and it implies homing in on institutional pressure points where elite unity crumbles or is exposed as a façade. Even authoritarian regimes are commonly composed of far-flung bureaucracies, and their multi-layered structure cannot help but disorganize the powerful and present opportunities for the disgruntled "to make the authorities work for them rather than against them." (Klandermans, 1997, p. 194). To detect some of the more significant consequences of collective action, we thus need to jettison a movement-centered approach to contention that has been much criticized (Jenkins and Klandermans, 1995, p. 3; McAdam, 1996, p. 355) but still persists, and pay more attention to the

inner workings of government and seemingly small changes in state-society relations. In particular, we need to explore the fissures that crease every state and the way that popular forces exploit them.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEWEE LIST

1. Official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing, 1995. 2. Official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing, 1995. 3. Senior researcher at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 1997. 4. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 5. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 6. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 7. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 8. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 9. Villager, Jiangxi, 1997. 10. Activist, Beijing, 1999. 11. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 12. Township official, Hunan, 2003. 13. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 14. Former activist, Hebei, 1997. 15. Activist, Beijing, 1999. 16. Former activist, Hebei, 1997. 17. Former activist, Hunan, 2003. 18. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 19. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 20. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 21. Villager, Hunan, 2003. 22. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 23. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 24. Villager, Hunan, 2003. 25. Villager, Hunan, 2003. 26. Activist's spouse, Hunan, 2003. 27. Activist, Hunan, 2003. 28. Activist's spouse, Hunan, 2003. 29. Former activist, Hunan, 2003. 30. Villager, Hunan, 2000. 31. Villager, Shandong, 1997. 32. Villager, Hebei, 1999. 33. Villager, Jiangxi, 2000. 34. Villager, Jiangsu, 2000. 35. Activist, Hunan, 2003.

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