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Repression Backfires□

Tactical Radicalization and Protest Spectacle in Rural China

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Abstract

In spring 2005, villagers in Dongyang County, Zhejiang were unhappy. For four years, they had been complaining about pollution emitted by 13 factories located in the Zhuxi Chemical Park. But nothing had been done. So they set up a tent encampment to block delivery of supplies to the factories. At first, they employed restrained tactics, including going about daily life in the tents, badgering cadres sent to demobilize them, and kowtowing. After a harsh repression produced hundreds of injuries and left dozens of damaged vehicles and other evidence of police action strewn about, the tent-sitters switched to more radical tactics, including denouncing local leaders, carrying out mock funerals, interrogating factory owners, and ransacking homes of “traitors.” The authorities’ ill-considered and poorly-timed repression led to tactical escalation, helped draw thousands of people to the scene, and ultimately resulted in the chemical park being closed. This episode speaks to the “dissent-repression nexus” and suggests that repression can be counterproductive when it encourages protesters to ratchet up their tactics and a “protest spectacle” ensues. In today’s China, striking displays and theatrical performances, especially in the wake of a crackdown, can attract an audience, bring in financial support and even create a carnival-like atmosphere in which popular acclaim, the breakdown of social order and the inversion of power hierarchies grants protesters leverage and induces the authorities to make concessions.

Repression Backfires□

Tactical Radicalization and Protest Spectacle in Rural China

Students of contentious politics have long examined the “dissent-repression nexus” (Lichbach 1987; Davenport 2007), but their findings are all over the map. Some show that police suppression dampens protest (Hibbs 1973: 82-93; Tilly 1978; Olzak, Beasley and Olivier 2003; Williams 2005), while others argue it inspires dissent (White 1989; Francisco 1995, 2004; Almeida 2003; Hess and Martin 2006). Still others observe a more complicated pattern, with repression leading to more or less protest, depending on circumstances and timing.¹ No matter what they find, researchers tend to agree that using force to break up a demonstration, march, or sit-in is often a turning point that can shape the course contention takes (McAdam and Sewell 2001; Yang 2005; Hess and Martin 2006).

As a transformative event, repression not only affects how much protest occurs; it can also influence tactical choices (McAdam 1983; Lichbach 1987; Titarenko, McCarthy, McPhail and Augustyn 2001). Under the threat of police disruption, challengers sometimes adapt their approach and conduct underground mobilization in lieu of public action (Moore 1998; Chang 2008). They may also opt for more confrontational tactics, especially when forceful suppression is seen to be illegitimate and people come to believe that resorting to violence is justified (Opp and Roehl 1990: 524), or if they “come to see peaceful protest as futile” (White 1989: 1297; also Almeida 2003). But just how and when tactics are radicalized is not well understood. Compared to a number of studies that explore the effects of coercion on protest frequency, we know little about how repression

can “shift challengers from one tactic to another” (Davenport and Inman 2012: 624; for an exception, see Titarenko et al. 2001).

The existing literature also pays less attention than it might to how repression can sensitize the public by creating a “protest spectacle” (Kershaw 1997; McNeil 2001) packed with striking displays and dramatic performances. Repression enhances a spectacle in various ways. Among others, it may lead to more intense and theatrical confrontations. Police action also may leave evidence of coercion on the scene, such as tear gas shells and burned vehicles. Compelling performances with effective props on a site where an injustice occurred can sacralize a location and become an element of an ongoing show. Protest spectacle, especially in the wake of a harsh crackdown, can have great power. It may attract an audience, bring in financial support, and even create a carnival-like atmosphere (on protest and carnival, see Cohen 1982; Jackson 1988), in which popular acclaim and the breakdown of social order grants protesters extra leverage and induces the authorities to make concessions.

Drawing on an episode of an environmental activism in Zhejiang, China, we examine repression, tactical escalation and the power of spectacle. We show how restrained popular action, in this case erecting tents, first led to a measured response from the authorities that focused on persuasion. But within several weeks this changed. After people from other villages joined the tent-sitters, the encampment was broken up with overwhelming police force. The deployment of over 1,500 police officers and local cadres to suppress several dozen elderly protesters was considered excessive by the activists and the broader community, and produced additional mobilization and a noticeable radicalization of tactics. The tent-sitters ratcheted up the theatricality of their

actions and demonstrated considerable skill manipulating symbols. Evocative, subtle performances moved the audience and repeatedly wrong-footed the authorities. In particular, the display of evidence that undue force had been employed contributed to the spectacle and drew in onlookers and new participants from neighboring villages and even other counties. A carnival-like atmosphere ensued and the number of tents grew. People milled about the encampment for weeks and sellers of sesame cakes and iced desserts came to serve the crowd. With the hierarchies of everyday life on the verge of being inverted (Bakhtin 1968), county leaders felt great pressure to end the “chaos” (*luan*), and concessions soon followed.

To trace how repression affected the tent-sitters’ tactics and helped create a “protest spectacle,” the second author conducted three and one-half months of fieldwork in Huashui town, Zhejiang in 2007, two years after the encampment ended. She revisited the area in April 2008 to observe the first local elections after the protest. Altogether, she conducted 122 semi-structured interviews, with most arranged in a snowball fashion as one person put her in touch with the next. The interviewees ranged from ordinary villagers to protest leaders, village cadres, township cadres, and municipal officials. Taking advantage of her affiliation with a prominent newspaper, she enjoyed exceptionally good access to both local leaders and protesters. Her quasi-official capacity also made it possible to collect nearly one thousand pages of written materials, including petition letters, leaflets, and posters penned by villagers, work diaries and reports written by local officials, official regulations, meeting records, and an internal “Daily Report” (*Meiri Yibao*) that meticulously traced what happened each day.

Restrained Tactics

In early 2001 the Dongyang County government opened the Zhuxi Chemical Industrial Park in Huashui town, Zhejiang. Within a few years, the thirteen chemical, pesticide, dye and pharmaceutical factories housed in the park became notorious for the water and air pollution they emitted. As crops withered or died, and a suspicious number of birth defects and miscarriages occurred, residents of nearby villages became alarmed. Lawsuits and petition drives were launched and on two occasions activists traveled to Beijing to request that the chemical park be closed. On March 24, 2005, disgruntled residents of Huaxi No. 5 village, the most seriously affected site, stepped up their opposition by erecting a tent at the entrance to the park and beginning a round-the-clock vigil. Their hope was to block the delivery of supplies and to force the factories to shut down.

The tactics used at this point were quite restrained. Rather than mounting demonstrations or marches or other confrontational acts, the tent-sitters (mostly elderly women) just went about their lives (on the performance of everyday life as a form of protest, see Missingham 2002). They brought beds, quilts and cooking equipment to the tent, and spent their days eating, chatting and sleeping there. This was done at the behest of the leaders of the action (Deng and O'Brien 2014), one of whom told the protesters: “the only thing you have to do is sit in the tent. Don't touch people going into the factories or their cars. Don't break into the chemical park” (interview, protest leader, June 2007).² In these early days, contention was mainly symbolic: an attempt to create a measure of inconvenience that would demonstrate the villagers' frustration and persistence.

The first escalation occurred after the authorities dismantled the tent and the protesters rebuilt it – three times – and residents from ten other communities joined the action, with each village putting up its own tent. Over the next week, despite government efforts to remove the tents, the size of the encampment grew. The tent-sitters also altered their tactics. After the county leadership assembled a 60-member “work team” (*gongzuo zu*) to coax the protesters to leave the encampment (Deng and O’Brien 2013), people began to venture outside the tents to badger, pressure and challenge the “thought workers” sent to demobilize them.

“Badgering” (*fanrao*) involved irritating work team members in any number of ways. Tent-sitters would berate them for acting against villagers’ interests and insult them by calling them “traitors” (*pantu*). When they knew team members and felt able to push back against the thought work, they would nag them to leave the tent area or urge them to do their job less diligently. The atmosphere at the park entrance became very boisterous and heckling and jostling were common. As a report issued by the town government put it:

When county work team members and town cadres went to investigate the situation, the masses besieged them and bombarded them with ‘seven mouths and eight tongues’ (*qizui bashe*) [i.e. everyone taking at once]. When team members went to the encampment, they were often surrounded, with the masses pulling at their clothes and tugging on their arms. . . . This made it nearly impossible for them to open their mouths, let alone to explain and propagate relevant regulations and new polices. . . . Work team members even found it difficult to exit the tent area (Huashui Town Government 2005a).

One police officer confirmed how difficult it was to fulfill his assignments amid the badgering and the din: “There were always a handful of people buzzing around asking us to solve the pollution problem, no matter why we went to the encampment” (interview, police officer, June 2007).

Beyond pestering the work team, tent-sitters and the spectators they attracted were sometimes more aggressive. On several occasions, local leaders were pushed to the front of the crowd to speak and when the audience concluded that their remarks resembled “a dragonfly flitting along the surface of the water” (*qingting dianshui*), protesters and onlookers insisted that they not leave until they vowed to halt the pollution and gave a date for doing so (interview, village cadre, April 2007). One county official whose speech the crowd found especially wanting ended up fleeing the tent area and running into nearby fields with a gaggle of older women chasing after him shouting “wait, wait, the problem hasn’t been solved” (interview, police officer, June 2007).

As the authorities intensified their thought work, the tent-sitters’ tactics became less restrained. When work team members entered the encampment, elderly protesters often immediately donned white mourning robes and hats, lit incense, knelt down, and began kowtowing.³ While kowtowing, they would chant: “we beg you to save us” (*qiuqiu nimen, jiujiu women*). After they finished, they often scooped up a handful of dirt, placed it on the hood of an official’s car, and stuck incense in it. Sometimes they also pasted slips of white paper on government vehicles (interview, villager, May 2007; interview, village cadre, April 2007).

These actions mirrored funeral rituals, but were sufficiently ambiguous (on “polysemious” rituals, see Kertzer 1988: 11; Szerszynski 1999; Pfaff and Yang 2001)

that the tent-sitters could claim they were merely asking for help rather than threatening the cadres sent to demobilize them (interview, village cadre, June 2007). But the targets of this tactic saw it otherwise. A police officer who took part in the thought work said:

There were two meanings conveyed by their kowtowing. Superficially, they were begging you for assistance and treating you like a Buddha. However, according to Chinese culture, your “life will be shortened” (*zheshou*) if older women kneel down and kowtow to you, since we are too young to deserve that (interview, police officer, June 2007).

A town cadre who was on the work team also felt threatened. He explained: “Though they were chanting ‘we beg you to save us,’ their real meaning was ‘we wish you would die.’ Their kowtowing had malicious intent” (interview, town cadre, June 2007).

Although the protesters escalated the intensity of their tactics during the first three weeks of the encampment, their actions remained within the bounds of contemporary Chinese protest. As late as early April, while the tug of war between tent-sitters and local authorities was still developing, one official report concluded that “the masses’ protest is well organized, but their behavior is moderate and not excessive. The situation is still under control” (Huashui Town Government 2005a).

But this assessment would soon change. The number of spectators was mounting day by day. People from nearby villages frequently headed to the encampment, “to walk around and have a look” (interview, villager, May 2007). Some went to see what the commotion was about and to “join in the fun” (*cou renao*) (interview, villager, May 2007), but the majority came to show their support for the tent-sitters. Only a few days after the protest started, snack-sellers and kabob hawkers appeared to cater to the

onlookers (interview, town cadre, June 2007) and the area took on the feeling of a bustling, open-air market. According to an on-the-spot report filed by a government informant, crowd size surged at noon and then again in the evening after villagers' finished their day's work. "Going to the tent area" (*qu dapeng de difang*) became a leisure activity that drew hundreds from the surrounding area (interviews, villagers, May and June 2007). When the tent-sitters set off firecrackers or struck a gong, as they did whenever the work team appeared to undertake thought work, "people came from all directions, as if they were on the way to a theatre performance" (interview, protest leader, April 2007). By early April, a small, but effective spectacle had been created and the standoff was the best show for miles around. In the view of the party secretary of Huashui town, the site of the protest had become an entertainment center (interview, town cadre, July 2007).

Repression and Tactical Radicalization

From March 30 to April 9, despite the work team's efforts and the detention of several protest leaders, the size of the encampment continued to grow: by April 4 there were fifteen tents; by April 6 there were eighteen. Town and county officials began to fall under great pressure to prevent the appearance of new tents (interview, town cadre, July 2007). Owing to concerns that the tent-sitters were "replacing" (*qudai*) party leadership in some villages and that the international press might pick up the story, the county party secretary instructed that "no more tents be built" (interview, town cadre, June 2007).

Despite this order, the number of tents expanded from eighteen to about two dozen

and onlookers continued to stream into the area. County leaders, at this point, decided to turn to a more forceful approach. At about 3am on April 10, they sent in over 1,500 local cadres and public security personnel to put an end to the encampment. During their efforts to clear out the protesters, violence broke out and over 100 officials or police officers and more than 200 villagers were injured; sixty-eight government vehicles were also burned or damaged.

The “April 10th Incident” was considered excessive by many villagers for three reasons. First, the targets: it was unseemly for representatives of state power to use force on the elderly (Deng and O’Brien 2014). Second, word spread that over 3,000 armed police had been sent in, an outsized number to remove a couple dozen tents and suppress a handful of older protesters. Finally, the action was launched under the cover of darkness, like “Japanese devils [soldiers] who snuck into the village” (*riben guizi jincun*) during World War II and were beaten back by villagers (interview, protest leader, April 2007).

Seen by many to be overkill and underhanded, the “April 10th Incident” significantly altered the tone of the protest. Older activists immediately gathered up evidence of the repression and used it to decorate the protest site. They adorned their tents with scraps of police uniforms, batons, helmets, shields, knives, tear gas shells, and red armbands that the police had left behind when they hurried from the scene. These served as both trophies and tangible proof of state repression. Over the next few days, tent-sitters blew whistles periodically to draw spectators to the site and stirred up the audience with pep talks and slogans like “persistence leads to victory” and “the Center is coming down to help us” (interview, retired town cadre, May 2007). They also shifted

toward less restrained tactics, including denouncing local leaders, carrying out mock funerals, interrogating factory owners, and ransacking homes of those they deemed “traitors.”

Instead of merely badgering officials, protesters started to challenge and openly vilify them. The county party secretary who had approved the repression was called a “slaughterer of the masses” in a big-character poster. On a second poster hung in a prominent location near the encampment, he was condemned as a “devil in power” who had mobilized several thousand policemen to repress “grey-haired, dry-boned seniors” by shooting off tear gas shells and brandishing truncheons. Even more dramatically, the tent-sitters held a mock funeral for the county party secretary. On the morning of May 5, an urn with his snapshot on it was set up with burning incense in front of it. This ceremony attracted more than 10,000 spectators.⁴

The county mayor was also subject to abuse. A week after the “April 10th Incident,” he went to Huashui and convened a meeting with the tent-sitters to open lines of communication and dampen the passions that the suppression had inspired. The mayor delivered a speech and knelt in front of the crowd to demonstrate his remorse about the pollution and to apologize for the government’s overly forceful response to the encampment, but few paid him any attention (interview, county official, April 2007; interview, town cadre, July 2007; interview, villager, June 2007). In the midst of his talk, a villager, who had never made a public speech before, grabbed the microphone and said: “Since the ‘April 10th Incident,’ television and radio broadcasts have been replete with lies, confusing what is right and wrong. But the truth is that during the early morning of April 10, the police sneaked into our village to repress us ordinary people and we were

forced to fight back in self-defense.” At this point, the microphone was snatched out of his hands, but he retook it and continued: “If the police dare come back, no one will leave alive and no vehicle will be left intact” (interview, villager, June 2007). Over the following month, villagers often called work team members assigned to demobilize the protesters “dogs” and other derogatory names.

Before the “April 10th Incident,” few actions were directed at factories besides stopping the flow of supply trucks in and out of the park. After the police action, however, tent-sitters sought to disrupt the lives of factory owners and workers. Elderly tent-sitters took and ate box lunches sent to migrant laborers who lived in the park and claimed that anyone employed by the polluting factories deserved to be starved (interview, police officer, June 2007). Physical pressure was also employed. On April 25, the owner of one factory was hustled to the encampment and burned with incense. His wife was pushed into a tent and questioned for more than five hours. Her interrogators required that she write a “self-criticism” (*ziwo jiantao*) and admit that their factory produced toxic waste. She was also forced to promise to compensate villagers. Some older protesters pasted slips of white paper on factory gates, once again evoking funeral rituals. More than 2,000 onlookers watched the drama unfold that day (Huashui Town Government 2005b, 2005c).

Labeling a person a traitor is a common form of protest discipline in China. Those who cooperate with government, fail to act with the majority, or withdraw from collective action are often called traitors (Ying 2001: 410; Yu 2004: 54; O’Brien and Li, 2006: 105). Before the “April 10th Incident,” traitors were generally treated mildly. After the police suppression, however, those thought to have betrayed the cause were often denounced in

“big-character posters” (*dazibao*). For example, a village party secretary who had helped clear away some of the damaged cars became a target of criticism. In a leaflet entitled “A Letter to All Huaxi Villagers” he was called a “dog wagging its tail to please those above him” and a “lowbred, spineless coward.” He was said to be “more disgusting than a traitor, since he signed an ‘unequal treaty’ which humiliated villagers and made them lose power.”

Some collaborators were treated even more harshly. For example, on the afternoon of April 30, two people denounced as traitors in big-character posters for earning money from the factories by removing their toxic waste went to the encampment and quarreled with several tent-sitters. This enraged the protesters and others present. As a result, hundreds of people set out on a “search and confiscation” (*chaojia*) mission to find evidence that the men had benefited from their contracts with the factories (interview, villager, June 2007). The raid soon spiraled out of control, and searching turned into ransacking. At the homes of both men, furniture, appliances, and windows were broken or damaged (Huashui Town Government 2005b).

The evidence of repression and increasingly dramatic performances drew tens of thousands to the encampment. Beyond local people, spectators poured in from nearby counties, especially from April 10 to April 15, when burned-out vehicles and other signs of police action remained on the scene (interview, villager, May 2007). Huashui became a popular site for tourism and pilgrimages (Markus 2005). One taxi driver told a *Guardian* (UK) reporter who was on his way to cover the story: “Aren’t these villagers brave? They’re so tough. It’s unbelievable. Everybody wants to come and see this place. We really admire them” (Watts 2005). Another person the journalist spoke with, a

fashionable young woman from Yiwu County, said excitedly: “We came to take a look because many people have heard of the riot. This is really big news” (Watts 2005). So many onlookers flocked to Huashui that it became difficult to find a spot to park a car. Traffic at times came to a standstill, but visitors were so eager to see the encampment and the residue of the repression that some walked the full 18 km from Dongyang city to the chemical park (Lu 2005).

The Power of Spectacle

Vigil tents, dramatic performances, and evidence of suppression gave rise to a full-fledged protest spectacle in Huashui. The power of the display was partly a product of effective, increasingly radical tactics that drew more and more people to the site. But equally important, this long-running show was fueled by a blunder made by the county government. As the party secretary of Huashui town explained: “Our key problem was that many cars had been destroyed, which attracted too many people to visit. The incident was originally nothing, but it got ‘stir-fried’ (*chaozuo*). . . . If they had taken my advice to clean up all the vehicles damaged on the night of April 10, no trace would have been left” (interview, town cadre, July 2007).

Repression and the tactical escalation that followed brought newcomers to the encampment and empowered the tent-sitters in a number of ways. First, the spectacle helped people in the surrounding area learn about a protest that the state-run media was ignoring (on the media and dramatic protests, see McAdam 2000). Prior to the police action of April 10, there were no reports in the official press, even though over one hundred work team members had descended on the encampment and the number of tents

had grown from one to two dozen. Even with the news blackout, word that something was happening started to get around, however, as villagers from neighboring communities heard about the protest, passersby saw the tent-sitters blocking the park's entrance, and shoppers wandered through on market days. That the April 10 repression occurred on a market day and an annual fair took place from April 11-13 only heightened the number of onlookers on hand to watch the intensifying spectacle and become part of it. The scheduling of the police action was a serious miscalculation that boosted the audience, as a number of food sellers and early shoppers witnessed the repression and many other non-locals observed its immediate aftermath.

The growing spectacle also conveyed information about the protest from the tent-sitters' perspective and offered a counter-narrative to the official one.⁵ After the "April 10th Incident," some stories appeared in the state-run media, but almost all offered a strong defense of the repression.⁶ For example, on the second day after the injuries and destruction, there was a piece in *Dongyang Daily* entitled "Local officials were besieged by the masses when clearing illegally erected tents" (Shan 2005). Two days later, *Jinhua Daily* published a brief report headlined "The environmental claims of the masses were exploited by a handful of people with ulterior motives, and a mass incident took place in Huashui, Dongyang" (on managing popular backlash, see Hess and Martin 2006).

The spectacle and the ability of onlookers to observe the effects of the repression, hear from the tent-sitters, and soak up the heady atmosphere undercut the government's account of what had transpired. For example, after looking at the dozens of burned vehicles, one person who had read that many officials were injured while "helping" villagers solve their problems, sarcastically said: "Seeing this, I guess everyone here

understands how our government helps ordinary people: they came in the thousands, drove up in 60 to 70 vehicles, and carried knives, truncheons, and tear gas canisters” (Lu 2005). The tent-sitters recognized the power of the field of debris and tried their best to prevent the authorities from removing evidence of the repression. Three days after the police action one Huashui villager told a reporter: “We have to protect the scene and make sure more people realize the inconsistencies between what the government is saying and doing” (Chinaelections 2005).

The mounting spectacle also led many who flocked to the encampment to offer moral and monetary support. One observer described the scene the second day after the repression as follows: “Onlookers were shocked by the trophies that villagers had seized. They were taking pictures, reading every slogan, and going into tents to talk with older protesters. No one wanted to leave” (Lu 2005). Spectators provided more than sympathy and praise. An elderly female protester recalled: “One night when I kept vigil, a stranger came to our tent with candies, biscuits and money. He said to us: ‘You are suffering bitterness. Here is some food for you, in case you are hungry at night’” (interview, villager, May 2007). Visitors also made significant financial contributions to keep the protest going. Several donation boxes were set up in the encampment, with lit candles placed in front of them, to suggest the worthiness of making an offering. By the time the protest concluded, over 100,000 yuan (about US\$16,000) had been contributed (interview, village cadre, April 2007).

Finally, the crowd that the residue of repression attracted protected the tent-sitters and increased the likelihood that concessions would be made. Right after the “April 10th Incident,” the protesters and villagers who supported them were worried because they

had damaged over 50 vehicles and a number of cadres and police had been hurt (interview, village cadre, April 2007). At that time, “the whole town was trembling” (interview, town cadre, July 2007) and many expected more repression soon (Markus 2005). However, after they saw a flood of supporters arriving, their anxiety declined and they started to experience the joy of success. A victory celebration went on for nearly a week and the encampment and its environs took on the atmosphere of a festival. One commentator noted: “People were coming and going, the town was bustling with noise and excitement. . . . The shouts of street vendors were rising here and subsiding there. . . . Everybody was marveling at the scene” (Lu 2005). According to a county report, some villagers even called the national tourism bureau to organize trips for vacationers to spend the Labor Day holiday (May 1-7) in Huashui (Huashui Town Government 2005c).

As hierarchies began to invert, fear of the police sunk, villagers were emboldened, and the tent-sitters became local heroes. During the “April 10th Incident,” police officers fleeing the area had been forced to strip off their uniforms before they surrendered (interview, protest leader, June 2007). After that, police did not dare enter the encampment in uniform and had to wear plain clothes (interview, police officer, June 2007). Previously timid villagers seized microphones out of the hands of officials, denounced the local government, and challenged factory owners directly. When the factory owner who was interrogated by tent-sitters went to the police to complain about her treatment, she was told an investigation was impossible because “the villagers have great power” (interview, police officer, June 2007). As for the two traitors whose homes were damaged, the deputy party secretary of Dongyang County (2005) said in a widely-disseminated speech that although the ransacking was violent and should be treated

seriously, there was “no urgency” (*buji*) for the police to look into it. The party secretary of Huashui town summed up the shift in power relations that was taking place:

The social status of those people [the elderly tent-sitters] had been very low. . . . Then, suddenly they became heroes, with others providing them food and clothes. They were dancing on the [damaged] vehicles and making speeches every day. The protest was like the communist revolution, taking weak, grassroots power and turning it into a great force. During the protest, those people received support, acclaim, money and food. Their social status increased overnight (interview, town cadre, July 2007).

Out of fears that the situation was getting out of control, higher-level authorities decided to intervene (on intervention elsewhere in China, see O’Brien and Li 2006; Cai 2008a, 2008b). At the insistence of tent-sitters and the crowd they had drawn, and owing to pressure from superiors reaching all the way to Beijing, the Dongyang County leadership made a difficult decision. They accepted “complete defeat” (*chedi de shibai*) (interview, county official, June 2007) and announced that the chemical park would be shut down.

Conclusion

Hard repression often works. It can end an episode of contention and leave protesters feeling beaten and hopeless. But force may also be counterproductive, especially if it is thought to be excessive and information about its use is “communicated effectively to receptive audiences that are substantial enough that authorities must take their outrage into consideration” (Hess and Martin 2006: 251). “Repression can

sometimes turn the tables on a government, exposing its brutality and undermining its legitimacy while generating public sympathy for protesters” (Nepstad and Bob 2006: 15).

In Huashui, repression clearly backfired. An ill-considered and poorly-timed police action led to tactical escalation and left protesters with proof that undue force had been used. Burned-out cars, tear gas shells and dramatic performances drew thousands to the scene and generated financial support and acclaim for the tent-sitters. As protesters deployed ever-more radical tactics, officials at higher levels became concerned that social order was breaking down and power hierarchies were being upended. In response to prodding from above, county leaders acted to douse the spectacle. They decided to close the chemical park to quiet the protesters and put an end to the show.

The part that repression plays in tactical radicalization suggests that more research is needed into how tactics change over time. In Huashui, protesters first limited themselves to restrained acts that are par for the course in contemporary China. The suppression of April 10, however, established a “norm of violence” (Opp and Roehl 1990: 524) and more radical elements of the tactical repertoire were activated. Repression precipitated tactical change, and physical evidence of disproportionate force gave the tent-sitters striking props that made their performances more moving. This is a reminder that a tendency toward tactical escalation in China that has been associated with failure (O’Brien and Li 2006: 77, 80-81), defending one’s honor in the face of non-responsiveness (Kuang and Göbel 2013), and acclaim (or pressure) from followers (Li and O’Brien 2008), can also spring from policing mistakes and popular reactions that increase the dramaturgical power of a performance and draw onlookers to a spectacle that the authorities and protesters have jointly created.

Focusing on protest spectacle also tells us something about why some episodes of contention succeed and others do not. In China, it is often said that a “big disturbance creates a big solution, a small disturbance creates a small solution, and no disturbance creates no solution” (*danao da jie jue, xiaonao xiao jie jue, bunao bu jie jue*). Several quantitative analyses have confirmed that the number of protesters is strongly associated with concessions (Cai 2008a: 164, Cai 2010; Chen 2012: 182, 184; also O’Brien and Li 1995: 773-74). This study reminds us that size and “disturbance” are not merely a function of how many people take part (the Huashui tent-sitters seldom numbered over a hundred), but also how many people are watching. Spectators are as crucial as participants and dramatic tactics and ham-fisted repression are a reliable way to boost their numbers and extract concessions from leaders who are obsessed with social stability and fear a boisterous crowd viewing a show they cannot stage-manage.

In Huashui, the size of the spectacle led, in sequence, to repression and giving in. When tactics were still restrained and the number of onlookers comparatively few, forceful repression seemed a good bet to halt the protest. But when coercion failed to end the action, and then backfired as people came from far and wide to see what had transpired, a large and noisy crowd became a resource rather than a vulnerability for the protesters. A spectacle thus made suppression more likely when it was small, but made concessions more likely when it became large. The growing number of onlookers hamstrung the authorities and left them in a difficult position: use even more coercion to terminate the protest or find a way to pacify the tent-sitters. Even for a muscular authoritarian regime that could have swiftly dismantled the encampment and dispersed the crowd with devastating force, hordes of spectators cheering on the tent-sitters’ caused

pause. Although pollution is allowed to continue in many locations, in Huashui it was not.

¹NOTES

For an inverted-U relationship, see Muller and Weede (1990) and Opp (1994). For a lagged positive effect, see Mason and Krane (1989) and Rasler (1996). For the effects of different kinds of repression, see Earl and Soule (2010) and Koopmans (1997). For recent reviews, see Earl (2011) and Davenport and Inman (2012).

² Choosing restrained tactics had a history. When the chemical park opened in 2001, villagers were concerned about the pollution it would produce. They sought a “dialogue” (*duihua*) with the town party secretary, which ultimately led to the secretary being cursed, beaten and dragged to the site, where villagers made him walk a lap around the park barefoot. Windows and doors of three plants were smashed, and phones and computers in factory offices were vandalized or stolen. Following this incident, twelve villagers were tried for disturbing social order and ten spent from one to three years behind bars.

³ On kowtowing as a tactic elsewhere in China, see Wines (2011). On the symbolic meaning of wearing white and kneeling, see Chen (2009: 457, 459).

⁴ From a government informant’s daily report, which the informant gave to the second author.

⁵ On tactics and dramatic performances serving as “alternative media,” see Shepard (2010: 243) and Wilkinson (1970). For protest theatre creating a space to “bear witness” to state oppression, see Moser (2003). On counter-narratives, see Downing (2001: 45). On Chinese protesters in 1989 usurping rituals, capturing the public stage, and creating “political theater,” see (Esherick and Wasserstrom (1990: 840).

⁶ *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *The Times (London)*, and especially *The South China Morning Post* all picked up the story. But these reports could only be read by bilingual readers and thus did little to alert the public in China.

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