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## China's Disaffected Insiders

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# CHINA'S DISAFFECTED INSIDERS

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All political regimes depend on support. Even the most dictatorial leaders need at least a small coterie of followers and flatterers to prop up their rule and keep them from being deposed. In recent years, the Chinese government, despite the common belief that political reforms have stalled, has taken steps to increase its responsiveness to popular demands. Protesters gain concessions, even while their leaders are jailed.<sup>1</sup> Mayors and county leaders set up online portals, through which they deflect some requests but respond to others.<sup>2</sup> Deputies of the National People's Congress, China's legislature, represent their constituents, though few bills are voted down.<sup>3</sup> Even at a time when repression is on the rise, with rights lawyers being detained and Hong Kong booksellers kidnapped, a leadership known for its powerful but clumsy thumbs is growing fingers that allow it to gather information about discontent and to address certain grievances.<sup>4</sup>

Still, cracks are now showing in the foundation of rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and they are wide enough to have led some observers to think that the regime may be nearing its last days. Analysts who once spoke of "authoritarian resilience" now talk of "authoritarian impermanence."<sup>5</sup> Scholars who only a decade ago saw an impressive capacity for adaptation are concluding that the end of one-party rule may be in sight.<sup>6</sup> An exhausted economic-development strategy, growing debt, and mounting repression all suggest that the regime is brittle and that around-the-edges efforts to enhance responsiveness may not be sufficient to hold it together for much longer.

Is the regime durable or is it declining? There are many forceful briefs on both sides, and it is difficult to place regime strengths and

weaknesses side-by-side and decide when too much is enough. Let us therefore focus on a topic that has so far escaped close examination, but cannot help but be worrying to China's rulers: the presence of disaffected insiders. These are regime stalwarts who are coming to view themselves as victims rather than beneficiaries of CCP rule.

Here, I will focus on three groups of resentful and disillusioned insiders whom my collaborators and I have studied. Each set of people has taken part in a form of security work for the state. The first are street-level cops who took up a career that they thought would offer them prestige and authority, but who now feel frustrated, misled, and disrespected. The second are neglected former military officers. Formerly high-ranking insiders, they now find themselves reduced to pleading and protesting for medical benefits and pensions that they believe were unjustly taken from them. The third group comprises bullied cadres, teachers, hospital workers, and state-owned enterprise (SOE) employees who feel alienated, enraged, and helpless after being forced to participate in one of the regime's highly personal and unpleasant methods for quashing dissent.

None of these disaffected insiders are top elites in a position to unseat President Xi Jinping or to challenge the powerful at the grassroots. But when previously well-disposed individuals, especially those charged with bringing state power to bear on the citizenry, begin to feel that the system is not serving them well and has even betrayed them, their discontent bears watching and may be a sign that the regime is corroding from within.

### **Frustrated Cops**

China's street cops are unhappy.<sup>7</sup> In urban and rural areas alike, patrol officers and detectives grumble about low pay, long hours, and life on the bottom rung of one of the smaller (per capita) police forces in the world. Their complaints can frequently be traced to unmet expectations and an unrewarding career path. Young people often join the force with dreams of becoming brave law enforcers who will command respect on the streets, wear a sharp uniform, and maybe, if they are lucky, even fire a gun (ordinary police in China mostly just carry batons). These dreams are typically dashed once new recruits encounter the less-than-thrilling realities of the job. On one day, it may mean sitting in a parked patrol car for hour after mind-numbing hour with little to do. On another, it may mean having too much to do as calls come in unrelentingly, with each one (no matter how trivial) demanding a response, be it retrieving a local resident's forgotten computer password or stumbling around on a dark night trying to find someone's lost cow.

When officers reach the middle stage of their careers, grievances

shift to a lack of control at work. Many cops in their thirties or forties become disenchanted because they expected that they would receive more authority to go with their supervisory duties, and are frustrated that political appointees block changes that would ease officers' lives and make police stations function better. As officers reach their fifties, the targets of their complaints are often reforms designed to professionalize policing. Veteran cops struggle to keep up with new practices such as using computers on patrol, or if they are able to adapt, feel irritated by the assumption that they are too old to learn new methods.

The climate on the streets is also increasingly trying. Older cops remember a glorious past when they walked tall on the beat and carried real weight in the neighborhood. As many of them like to say, "In the 1980s, one officer could catch ten bad guys just by walking into a restaurant and yelling 'Halt!' These days it takes ten of us to catch one criminal." Younger cops complain that they have far less authority than they expected, with one Hebei Province detective saying, "I can tell someone on the street to stop, but they don't care. They just start arguing with me." A sense that deference to the police is dwindling leaves many officers feeling like traffic guards who wave their arms frantically but pointlessly as pedestrians, motorbikes, and cars careen down streets however they wish. With few officers allowed to carry weapons and recent reforms constraining interrogation methods, police commonly worry that they lack authority and are not feared or even respected.

Disgruntled cops find it hard to care about their work. Most do not think about how to do their jobs better and are too poorly trained and apathetic to work on boosting productivity or improving public order. They meet their arrest quotas, but seldom pursue complicated cases. Shirking duty and drinking at lunch are common. So are corruption and taking "gifts."

The Ministry of Public Security has sought to reduce discontent among its almost two-million officers in several ways. It has honored exemplary cops and started fitness programs that build the strength and stamina of the men and women on the force. It has taken on workplace stress and other psychological problems by setting up hotlines and offering counseling. But so long as officers labor under time, funding, and staffing constraints, and the Ministry continues to hike reporting requirements while expecting police to pay more attention to procedures and the law, frustrated cops are likely to remain frustrated.

Listening to officers' stories and learning about their low morale raises questions regarding the image of police as effective tools of a "security state"<sup>8</sup> who maintain law and order, efficiently conduct "stability maintenance" (*weiwen*) work, and stand ready to quash protests at every turn.<sup>9</sup> Their accounts show how coercive power can dissipate before it reaches the street, and also reveal fault lines in state-society

relations at precisely the point where lawful authority meets unlawful behavior.

## Neglected Military Officers

Many former military officers are bitter and angry.<sup>10</sup> Their discontent traces back to what happened when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) shrank from 4.1 million soldiers in 1985 to fewer than 2.4 million by 2012, as policy makers and senior commanders opted for a more modern and high-tech military with fewer troops wielding more lethal and sophisticated weapons. Some "military-transfer cadres" (*junjuan ganbu*) were reassigned to government offices, archives, and research institutions and have fared well. But hundreds of thousands of unlucky officers were given middle-management posts in factories, where they often found themselves answering to enterprise leaders who paid them little deference and refused to consider their rank and seniority when setting salaries. Then, in the 1990s and 2000s, many factories were privatized, modernized, or went bankrupt. Thirty-million employees lost their jobs. This reduction hit demobilized officers especially hard: After being laid off they often lost their cadre status, which had given them preferential access to housing and healthcare, to say nothing of larger pensions.

This experience of having been downsized twice—first from the military and then from industry—has spawned many grievances. Beyond complaints about benefits that are too small, decommissioned officers also feel unappreciated. They complain of a lack of respect from a society where few care about their valor and sacrifices, and from a regime that effusively praises veterans on Army Day and Party Day but is nowhere to be found when factories and local governments fail to give them their due. Ex-officers have all heard decades of propaganda about the PLA's contribution to ending their country's "century of humiliation." They expect to be held in esteem and looked after, or at least not to have their needs ignored. They believe that they should be treated better than other managers who also made sacrifices to help build the country but who cannot say that they shouldered a rifle or shed blood for China's sake.

Military-transfer cadres point out, often correctly, that they have been relegated to a position hardly better than that of ordinary laid-off workers. Some, including one group of retired officers in Yunnan Province, see themselves as "victims of reform" who are "treated like beggars." They are jealous of former comrades who managed to avoid ending up in factories, and they feel ignored and snubbed, left behind at a time when so many others have leapt ahead. They often blame grasping, corrupt officials for their situation and accuse them of embezzling funds designated for pensions and medical benefits. They object to unfair treatment, violations of their rights, and the low social status that is now their lot after a lifetime of commitment to the Party and the nation.

These grievances have produced petitions and protests. In January 2009, more than a thousand military-transfer cadres broke into the Shaanxi provincial-government compound and demanded that the governor discuss “unfair wages” with them. In 2010, a group claiming to represent twenty-thousand retired officers in Zhejiang Province posted an open letter charging that a fourth of all officers who had served since 1949 (the year the People’s Republic of China was founded) had been deprived of their rights. In 2011, the CCP found itself being called “imperious and despotic” and “a class of bigwigs” in a sarcastic “congratulatory message” that 23,000 ex-officers in Yunnan composed to mark the Party’s ninetieth birthday. In January 2012, six-hundred veterans in the city of Shenzhen (near Hong Kong) took to the streets shouting “Down with corrupt officials! Implement the National Retired Officers’ Policy! Protecting rights ensures stability!” In December 2013, dozens of ex-officers converged on the UN representative’s office in Beijing, joining others who derided the complaint offices maintained by the NPC, the Supreme Court, and the central government, respectively, as the “Blind Alley of Three Cheats.”

The biggest action to date came in 2012, when 162,000 military-transfer cadres used a mock lawsuit to criticize the labor minister while demanding the restoration of their cadre status and benefits. Like many episodes of veterans’ activism, this suit sought to shame the regime into treating ex-officers better. It also underscored the issue of dignity, with retired officers angered that the authorities answered their lawful petitions by branding them an illegal organization colluding with hostile foreign forces.

Protests by decommissioned officers are usually suppressed and their appeals brushed off. This has left many retired officers feeling marginalized and neglected. Most ex-officers are longtime CCP members, but their bonds to the state may be fraying. They pay dues but only attend the occasional Party meeting, and unlike the top PLA brass and active-duty military personnel who are subject to daily indoctrination and monitoring, their loyalty to the regime cannot be assumed. They are insiders who have come to feel like outsiders, or as one group of historically minded ex-officers put it, like out-of-favor imperial concubines who have been banished to the cold palace.

## **Bullied Demobilizers**

To reduce the use of force when faced with dissent, the regime has turned to using psychological coercion and people it has a hold over. In particular, local authorities now expect civil servants, teachers, hospital workers, and SOE employees to conduct “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo*) in order to “demobilize” family members who are defying the powers that be. These could be people engaging in public protest, or who refuse to go along when told to move out of their houses to clear the

way for a development project. “Relational repression”<sup>11</sup> almost always creates deep discontent among those who are dragooned into applying it. Being compelled to persuade a relative to give up an “inadvisable”

course of action can expose a person’s career and family life to intense and painful cross-pressures.

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***The story of disaffected insiders is one of presumed loyalists who skew conservative but who now feel mistreated, even abused.***

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Most “thought workers” feel torn between their responsibilities to the state and a desire to avoid alienating their loved ones. Almost always, these “demobilizers” are induced to throw themselves into relational repression by threats to their careers. Sanctions for failure can include warnings, pay stoppages, job loss, and even prosecution. For CCP members, “organizational treatment” (*zuzhi chuli*) and expulsion are possibilities. Because persuading a relative to abandon resistance often involves many conversations and much badgering, thought workers are sometimes away from their regular job for weeks or even months.

Thought workers are sandwiched between their family members and the state. Elected village cadres may find themselves being denounced, ostracized, and called traitors for defending the interests of higher levels. Under-committed or unpersuasive teachers are often accused by superiors of “lacking the ethics of a teacher,” failing to be thankful for the money put into their training, and being selfish rather than acting in the public interest. Reluctant government workers may be reminded that the “masses are watching” and that they must display “higher consciousness” and set an example for others to follow.

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Failure or a lackadaisical approach to relational repression can lead to many repercussions at work. This arises because responsibility for demobilization goes right to the top of a unit and the leaders of a bureau, factory, hospital, or school can be disciplined if one of their staff members cannot coax a relative to vacate a home or stop protesting. Collective punishment is also common. In Kaifeng City, hospitals that could not get effective thought work out of their employees faced a fine of 5,000 yuan (US\$800) for each failure. In Shandong Province, primary and middle schools had to pay 3,000 yuan per day if teachers did not induce their family members to vacate homes that were scheduled to be torn down as part of a huge redevelopment project. In 2008, all the employees of a primary school in Hunan Province were threatened with loss of their year-end bonuses. The headmaster told a teacher whose mother refused to hand over her home: “Don’t make all of us suffer with you. If you drag all of us into this, we’ll give you a failing performance evaluation at the end of the school year.”

Beyond the effects on one’s work life, cajoling relatives to stop pur-



suing a grievance invariably damages family relations. The browbeating unravels families, spurring divorces or a “severing of relations” (*duanjue guanxi*) between parents and children as a mutual-protection tactic. In one Hunan city, an official concluded that “implicating relatives has made Jiahe a terrible place: Relations between fathers and sons are strained, couples have broken up, and siblings have become enemies.” Emotional blackmail exacts a toll on any family and is especially uncomfortable for younger protest demobilizers who do not want to be taunted by their parents or called unfilial for urging them to desist.

In the face of heavy pressure from above and likely sanctions, many protest demobilizers cave in and do the thought work that they are assigned. They often say that they feel powerless to resist and see “no way out.” One cadre in Anhui Province explained why he submitted: “You can’t guess what organizational measures they’ll use, and you never have a say in the process. The only thing you can do is: Obey! Obey!” Even those who fight back or discover ways to avoid complying end up resentful.

Relying on kinship ties to put down resistance leaves many protest demobilizers livid and feeling abused. In Inner Mongolia in 2011, some cadres called their county government “despotic” when they were told that they had ten days to get relatives to give up their homes, or they would face the prospect of being fired themselves in fifteen. State employees not yet conscripted into relational repression know they could easily be next, a circumstance that has created “widespread panic” in some places. For most people, being made to act as a protest demobilizer is a horrible experience. In the short run, socializing repression extends the state’s reach and obviates the need to use the police or local toughs. But there is a cost. Both leaders and staffers of government bureaus, schools, hospitals, and SOEs throughout China have been left feeling alienated and victimized by “soft violence” and “unjust authority.”

### **An Authoritarian Vulnerability**

Disaffected police, disgruntled ex-officers, and anguished protest demobilizers do not pose a direct threat to Party rule. Cops, like low-level bureaucrats everywhere, grumble about their work, but they are situated within a hierarchy that gives them few chances to act on their grievances. Retired officers know how to organize and how to use weapons, but many are old and their protests are swiftly put down. Government employees compelled to suppress their relatives confess to feeling angry and helpless, but have little recourse if they wish to keep their jobs. Still, all is not well when insiders, especially those who are or have been involved in security work, feel mistreated and

victimized. These are people who should feel committed to state goals and act as a reservoir of CCP support. Yet their discontent suggests that instead of being among the regime's mainstays, they may be turning into one of its vulnerabilities.

Decommissioned officers are no longer on active duty and can only protest or plead for improved treatment. But the other two groups remain on the front lines of power and their allegiance to the state is essential.

This does not mean that frustrated cops will disobey orders or that bullied protest demobilizers will routinely defy their superiors, though some have fled the scene and refused to take part in relational repression. More often, disaffected insiders are inclined to confine themselves to "going through the motions." They will show up to quell a protest then sneak off to smoke in a nearby pavilion, or they will ignore their beat in favor of napping in their patrol car. It goes too far to equate such goldbricking with defecting from the regime or "breaking with the system," as one particularly irate demolition facilitator put it. But disillusionment and wavering commitment does raise questions about the political system's internal cohesiveness and the morale of the rank and file.

If those whose job it is to walk the line where state meets society do not believe that they are respected and properly treated, they may come to identify with the people whom they are charged with controlling as much as with the regime they serve. That at least one person from *each* of the three groups self-identified as a member of a "weak and vulnerable group" (*ruoshi qunti*), like the truly downtrodden,<sup>12</sup> suggests that some insiders may already have mixed loyalties.

Discontent in the trenches is a reminder that studies of authoritarian resilience or decline not only should consider challenges to the state that come from above or below, but also should explore the tensions within state ranks. The frustrations of China's disaffected insiders have little to do with elite splits, coups, or a crisis brought on by economic decline. Nor do they say much about the likelihood of a popular uprising or the support (or lack thereof) that entrepreneurs, intellectuals, ethnic minorities, workers, or peasants offer the regime.

Focusing on the groups examined here draws attention away from political rivals and popular responsiveness and toward a regime's internal integrity and how "its people" are faring. The story of disaffected insiders is one of presumed loyalists who skew conservative but who now feel mistreated, even abused. Their discontent leads to questions about distancing and state capacity and what happens when longtime backers come to believe that they are victims rather than beneficiaries of Party rule. Do disillusionment and a lack of full-throated support mean that the regime is alienating its natural constituency? What happens when some of the Party's most reliable cheerleaders stop cheering?

## NOTES

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

2. Greg Distelhorst and Yue Hou, "Ingroup Bias in Official Behavior: A National Field Experiment in China," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 2 (2014): 203–30; Jidong Chen, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu, "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China," *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (April 2016): 383–400.

3. Melanie Manion, *Information for Autocrats: Representation in Chinese Local Congresses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

4. On systems with "strong thumbs, no fingers," see Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics and Markets: The World's Political Economic Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). This image refers to the ability of centralized, nonmarket polities to do homogenous, repetitive activities well, but not to discriminate or adapt. On information gained from protest, see Peter L. Lorentzen, "Regularized Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 2 (2013): 127–58.

5. Andrew J. Nathan, "China Since Tiananmen: Authoritarian Impermanence," *Journal of Democracy* 20 (July 2009): 37–40; and Minxin Pei, "The Beginning of the End," *Washington Quarterly* 39 (Fall 2016): 131–42.

6. David Shambaugh, "Contemplating China's Future," *Washington Quarterly* 39 (Fall 2016): 121–30.

7. For more on street-level police in China, see Suzanne E. Scoggins and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Unhappy Police," *Asian Survey* 56 (March–April 2016): 225–42; also Suzanne E. Scoggins, "Policing China: Struggles of Capacity, Order, and Organization" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2016).

8. For this term, see Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, "The Rise of the Chinese Security State," *China Quarterly* 222 (June 2015): 339–59.

9. Note that this discussion focuses on ordinary cops (in China called the People's Police) and not SWAT teams, counterterrorist commandos, or other specialized security personnel such as those of the paramilitary People's Armed Police.

10. For more on the plight of veterans and their efforts to do something about it, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Neil J. Diamant, "Contentious Veterans: China's Retired Officers Speak Out," *Armed Forces and Society* 41 (July 2015): 563–81; Neil J. Diamant and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Veterans' Political Activism in China," *Modern China* 41 (May 2015): 278–312.

11. For more on relational repression and the cross-pressures that it breeds, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties and 'Harmonious Demolition,'" *China Journal* 74 (July 2015): 1–17; Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters," *China Quarterly* 215 (September 2013): 533–52; Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China," *China Review* 17 (June 2017): 179–202.

12. This term usually refers to disadvantaged populations, such as the poor, migrant workers, and peasants, as well as children and the disabled.