

Introduction

Popular resistance has become an important mode of political participation in China since the early 1990s. Various groups of people, including workers, peasants, and homeowners, have resorted to this mode of action to protect or pursue their interests.¹ Numerous contentious incidents have put serious pressure on the party-state. It is against this background that building a so-called harmonious society has recently become a top priority of the central party-state.² The collective acts of resistance have occurred not only because there have been widespread violations of citizens' rights but also because this mode of action helps citizens to defend or pursue their legitimate rights. As elsewhere, people stage collective resistance not simply because they want to send a signal of impatience or frustration but also because "they have some reason to think it will help their cause."³ In China, some protestors have been successful in their resistance,⁴ and, more importantly, their resistance has also led or contributed to changes in some unfavorable policies.

On the other hand, popular contention is by no means an easy or safe undertaking in China. In recent years, many participants in non-regime-threatening collective resistance have been detained, arrested, or imprisoned.⁵ For example, in a county in the Guangxi Autonomous Region, peasants from a village resisted a 2004 court ruling regarding ownership of a piece of land. In January 2005, the local government arrested twenty-seven peasant activists. When more than 200 villagers approached the local authorities demanding the release of the activists, they were accused of attacking state agencies, and about 110 were detained. Seventeen villagers were sentenced to jail terms of up to eight years, ten were sent to labor camps for

up to two years, and another eighty-two were released on bail after paying between 2,000 and 8,000 yuan.⁶ The limitations to popular resistance also lie in the fact that the government may refuse to adjust policies that disadvantage certain groups despite their grievances and resistance.

That authoritarian governments should use suppression to deal with disobedient citizens is not surprising: In democracies, politicians face the pressure of (re)election and therefore have to be cautious when using repressive tactics. They are, thus, more tolerant of nonviolent dissident behavior and may use a mix of concessions and repression to suppress such actions when necessary. In contrast, political leaders in authoritarian regimes, who are less concerned with election, rely more on repression to demonstrate the state's power and determination to protect the political system.⁷ In the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, for example, "legalized repression" was used to silence citizens.⁸ "By and large, popular resentment, though profound, did not manifest itself openly," Kecskemeti explains, as "protesting in public was not only prohibitively risky but also futile, since no potential alternative to the prevailing system was visible."⁹

This mixed picture of the outcome of popular resistance in China raises two important questions. Why do some instances of resistance succeed while others fail in this nondemocratic regime? When is popular resistance more likely to contribute to policy changes? This study aims to answer these questions and promote an understanding of the operation of the Chinese political system and of contentious politics in a nondemocratic setting. To explain why some actions succeed while others fail, we need to examine the mechanisms through which people staging resistance exercise influence or the factors that affect the outcomes of their actions. This study shows that both the government, which is responsible for dealing with popular resistance, and the resisters face constraints in their interactions with each other. The resisters' chance of success lies in their ability to exploit the constraints facing the government or to (re)shape the latter's cost-benefit calculations in a way that suppressing or ignoring an act of resistance is not a feasible or desirable option.

Protest Outcomes in China

As the ultimate end of collective action such as social movements is to bring about change, recent research on collective action has paid increasing attention to outcomes.¹⁰ Gamson suggests that the outcomes of social move-

ments or protests fall into two basic clusters, “one concerned with the fate of the challenging group as an organization and one with the distribution of new advantages to the group’s beneficiary.”¹¹ Subsequent research has expanded on Gamson’s work.¹² The current consensus is that the outcomes of collective action may take different forms, including political, economic, social, and cultural changes.¹³ Consequently, the outcomes of social protests can be divided into three categories: (1) the outcome of individual incidents of collective action; (2) the aggregate impact of collective action staged by members of a social group; and (3) the enduring or indirect effect of social protests. This book explores the factors that affect these three types of outcomes of popular contention in China.

Research on social movements or protests has pointed to the different factors that affect the effectiveness and outcomes. One is the political opportunity structure that determines whether social movements can rise or develop in the first place.¹⁴ A second group of factors is the power of a protesting group, which has to do with the protesting group’s solidarity, organizational bases, and resources.¹⁵ Collective action tactics are also found to influence the effectiveness of protests, especially among politically weak groups.¹⁶ Finally, the chance of success has much to do with the protesters’ demands, which determine the cost of making concessions on the part of the actor being targeted. For example, groups that intend to displace those in power or make broad changes in the political system are unlikely to succeed.¹⁷

All these findings shed important light on the outcomes of social protests in China by pointing to some of the basic conditions for successful action. But many of these findings are based on research on social movements in democracies. One factor that makes the handling of social protests in China different from that of many social movements in democracies is the role of the government. Social movements in democracies may not directly target the government or may not have a specific target at all. Governments in democracies are thus less sensitive to such actions if they do not seriously violate the law. Indeed, citizens in these regimes can even get permission for holding demonstrations. In contrast, governments in authoritarian regimes are much more sensitive to popular resistance. The occurrence of such incidents may signal problems with social control or the weakness of the government because such events are not supposed to occur in a regime where citizens are denied the right to disrupt the system.¹⁸

Authoritarian governments’ high sensitivity to popular resistance implies that they are more committed to the settlement of collective action

than are their counterparts in democracies. In research on the settlement of protests in democracies, the strategies used by the police are an important focus.¹⁹ In research on protests in China, more attention needs to be paid to the interactions between the governments and the protesters. This does not mean that the police in China do not play an important role in dealing with collective action.²⁰ However, the decision on how to handle collective incidents, especially large ones, is generally made by the government. For example, a survey of more than 1,000 police officers in Fujian province in 2005 showed that 80 percent reported that the ultimate decision on the settlement of collective incidents was made by the party committee and/or the government or their top leaders and not by the police.²¹ Therefore, protest outcomes in China are often directly affected or determined by the response of the government at the local or central level.

The Rationale behind Government Response in China

Research on the government's reaction to collective action in democracies reveals the following modes of response: tolerance, repression, concessions, or a combination of concessions and repression.²² However, this research has generally focused on one level of the government (e.g., the national level). In China, local governments rather than the central government have most frequently been targeted by protesters. This is the case because, first, local authorities may directly violate citizens' rights, distort the central government's policies, or fail to protect citizens' rights.²³ County, township, or city governments or their agencies are much more frequently sued by citizens than is the provincial or central government.²⁴ Second, the concentration of power implies the concentration of responsibility. Local authorities are targeted because they are responsible for daily governance and are believed to have the power and responsibility to address citizens' grievances.²⁵ Given the power of the local government, when competing groups fight against each other (businesses versus citizens, for example),²⁶ the outcome is largely determined by the government, which has decisive influence over the legal system and commerce at each level.

On the other hand, local governments in China are embedded in the political hierarchy topped by the central government. This political system grants local governments conditional autonomy: They have considerable autonomy in dealing with popular resistance while facing constraints imposed by the central government. Therefore, the chance of success depends

not only on the particular local governments that are targeted by protestors but also on the interaction between different levels of state authorities.

Many studies on popular resistance in China have shown that a favorable environment for protest in the Chinese context does not necessarily result from significant changes in the political system that create political opportunities.²⁷ Instead, opportunities for resistance in China normally arise from the divide between state authorities at different levels (i.e., the central versus the local). Given the political hierarchy, it has been commonly accepted that intervention from the central government or upper-level local governments is a crucial way of achieving successful resistance in China.²⁸ But what has been inadequately explored is under what circumstances such intervention is possible. In other words, why have some instances been subject to intervention while many others have not? Under what circumstances is successful resistance possible in the absence of intervention from above? Why has the government changed certain policies but not others, although both kinds of policy have caused grievances and resistance? Answering these questions requires a systematic examination of the constraints and power of the governments at different levels, in particular the costs of concessions incurred by the government in dealing with popular contention.

This book suggests that the governments at different levels may have different perceptions of costs and benefits in addressing citizens' resistance and that their perceptions shape their choice of the mode of response, thereby determining not only the opportunity for resistance but also the outcome. For analytical convenience, I divide the state authorities in China into the central government and local governments. Both levels of government may adopt one of the following modes of response to deal with popular resistance: (1) concessions (i.e., citizens' demands are met); (2) concessions with discipline (i.e., citizens' demands are met, but some or all participants are punished); (3) tolerance (i.e., citizens' demands are ignored, but the government also tolerates their resistance); and (4) repression (i.e., citizens' demands are ignored, and some or all participants are punished).

A crucial factor that makes the central government behave differently than local governments is its greater interest in protecting the regime's legitimacy.²⁹ Legitimacy is about the political system's worthiness to be recognized.³⁰ Given that the central government is more responsible for the operation of the political system or it largely represents the regime, it has a greater interest in protecting the regime's legitimacy. In contrast, local officials in

China are more concerned with policy implementation or task fulfillment (e.g., maintaining social stability) and local issues; thus, legitimacy is not their main concern.³¹ A simple comparison of the incentive structures faced by the two levels of government reveals that the central government's more serious concern about legitimacy helps to make it more tolerant than local governments of non-regime-threatening popular resistance.

The central and local governments incur two types of costs when concessions are made: (1) economic and/or political costs; and (2) signs of weakness (Table 1.1). Addressing citizens' complaints may require the expenditure of financial resources (economic costs). It may also require the government to correct its practices or policies or discipline state agents deemed responsible for the grievances or resistance (political costs). The cost of showing weakness is that making concessions may trigger more demands or actions. If the cost of showing weakness is considered to be the same for the two levels of government, then the central government incurs a smaller cost than the local government does when making concessions. First, when the central government intervenes in a dispute and makes concessions, it often requires the local government to address citizens' grievances with local financial resources. Thus, the local government has to shoulder the cost. Second, when malfeasant or irresponsible local officials are disciplined, the local government incurs a heavier loss because it relies more directly on these officials for local governance than the central government does. As far as the benefits are concerned, if stopping resistance is equally desirable to the two levels of government, the central government gains more because legitimacy is more important to the central government than to the local government.

In the case of repression, the two levels of government also incur two types of costs: (1) loss of legitimacy and (2) risk from repression (Table 1.1). Repressing citizens' resistance with legitimate claims damages the regime's legitimacy. For the reasons discussed above, the central government faces a higher cost from losing legitimacy than does the local government when repression is used.

The other type of cost incurred from repression is the risk arising from ineffective or failed repressive measures. For the central government, the risk is that ineffective repression leads to more serious or regime-threatening resistance. This possibility (or the risk) is rather small given the power of the central party-state in China. In contrast, the local government faces a more serious risk in repressing resistance. For one, ineffective repression may cause the escalation of resistance, which signals the local government's

TABLE I.I
Costs and Benefits in Concessions and Repression

	Benefits	Costs
Concessions	a. Stopping resistance b. Gaining legitimacy	a. Economic and/or political costs b. Signs of weakness
Repression	Deterring resistance	a. Loss of legitimacy b. Risks in repressive measures

SOURCE: Author's summary.

failure in maintaining social stability. For another, forceful repression that results in serious casualties will damage regime legitimacy.³² In either situation, the central government will intervene, and local officials may be punished. However, the local government will face a small cost from repression if it is able to use the modes of repression that carry little risk (given that legitimacy is not its main concern). Hence, when the risk from repression is low for both levels of government, the local government is more likely to use repression than is the central government.

Nonetheless, although the central government is more tolerant of citizens' resistance, its concessions are conditional. When the central government decides to make concessions to citizens, it often means that it will intervene in the conflict between citizens and the local government. This is likely when the central government feels pressure to stop the resistance and protect regime legitimacy. Conversely, the central government is very unlikely to intervene in disputes that are peaceful and small in scale simply because the pressure for intervention is small.

These conditions for the central government's intervention affect the local governments' responses. Local governments will use concessions or concessions with discipline to stop citizens' resistance quickly when facing intervention or a threat of intervention from the central government. However, in the absence of intervention or when the likelihood of intervention is negligibly small, local governments assume considerable autonomy in choosing the mode of response. Concessions will be difficult if (1) the local government faces high economic or political costs; and (2) partial concessions or tolerance results in persistent resistance that threatens social stability or the images of local leaders. In these circumstances, repression is a low-cost option.

The incentive structure faced by the two levels of government in China is crucial to our understanding of the outcomes of collective resistance. From the perspective of protesters or resisters, their chance of success, either in

individual instances of resistance or in the case of policy change, is jointly determined by the type of demand, which determines the costs of concessions incurred by the government, and the forcefulness of their resistance. Their ability to achieve successful resistance thus depends on whether they can effectively exploit the constraints faced by the two levels of government. In this book, I define the success or failure of citizen resistance in light of the goals claimed by the participants. An instance is seen as successful if the participants achieve their goal entirely or partly.

Seeking Success

It is not new to apply the cost-benefit approach to analyzing government responses to popular contention.³³ What needs to be stressed is that neither the cost nor the benefits to the government should be treated as fixed or predetermined. The government's perception of the cost and benefits is weighed against the power of the resisters or the forcefulness of their action. In China, although the citizens are generally weak in relation to the government, the nonmonolithic nature of the party-state implies that there does exist the political space for successful resistance. Therefore, the outcome of popular resistance should be viewed as the result of a dynamic interaction between the government and the protestors. This is crucial to understanding the resisters' chance of success because it points to the importance of strategies, resources, and other factors that affect the power of the participants. The dynamic interaction can also be understood as a process of creating or expanding opportunities for resistance. Political opportunities are found to affect the efficacy of social movements,³⁴ but the opportunities may not be predetermined. They can be created when protestors resort to certain modes of action or strategies.³⁵

In China, citizens' resistance is mostly directed at local governments; or at least it starts by targeting local governments. The incentive structure discussed above suggests that it is inaccurate to assume that local governments in China are always reluctant to make concessions if the cost of doing so is small. The difficulty of making concessions lies in those cases with high-cost demands. However, because the most serious constraint on local officials is that imposed by upper-level authorities, the citizens can stage successful action if they are able to make the local government eager to stop popular contention while preventing it from relying on suppression. A fundamental way of achieving this goal is to seek or threaten to seek favor-

able intervention from higher authorities. This is possible when participants are able to gain extra leverage over local officials, generate support from within the state, or stage powerful disruptive action to strengthen their intervention-seeking ability.

GAINING EXTRA LEVERAGE

In China, a protesting group can seek intervention from upper-level authorities, including the central government, through permitted channels (e.g., petitions) or noninstitutionalized action, such as protests. In using permitted channels, a group's intervention-seeking ability is affected by the timing of its action in the sense that, if an issue is high on the agenda of the central or provincial government, the window of opportunity is more accessible. But not all citizens' issues are high on the agenda of the central or provincial government. Moreover, citizen resistance may still be ignored even if an issue is of high importance. For example, when citizen complaints are numerous, the threshold for central or provincial government intervention is inevitably raised. Therefore, an important factor that affects a group's ability to seek intervention is whether it can find extra leverage over malfeasant or irresponsive local officials.

Resisters' extra leverage means extra constraints on local officials, which may make the local officials more responsive or accountable. In China, it is not uncommon for malfeasant or irresponsive local officials to be exempted by upper-level authorities despite citizens' complaints or resistance. This is because, in addition to the financial resources needed to address citizens' grievances, the disciplining of local state agencies or their officials is a sensitive political issue, and the political cost involved may deter upper-level authorities from doing so. As a result, many of the grievances sent by citizens through "rightful resistance" may simply be ignored by upper-level state authorities.³⁶ This is the fundamental reason why the violation of citizens' rights or the ignorance of citizens' injustices by state authorities has recurred in China despite the enactment of laws or regulations.

One method for the disgruntled to prevent upper-level authorities from ignoring lower-level agents' misconduct or irresponsiveness is to lower the political cost of discipline. Other things being equal, the upper-level authority is more willing to punish agents who have committed multiple acts of misconduct as opposed to those who have committed fewer. The authority is also more willing to punish those who have committed serious

misconduct. When possible, protesters can highlight the multiple acts of misconduct of local officials, their serious misconduct, or even their crimes (e.g., corruption), although some of the misconduct may not be the causes of the protesters' grievances. As a result, if local officials fail to address citizens' grievances or try to repress their demands, the citizens can reveal or threaten to reveal local officials' other types of malfeasance to upper-level authorities. This method of issue connection poses risks or threats to targeted officials because some of the reported misconduct may be seen as unacceptable by upper-level authorities, thereby triggering intervention. Consequently, those local officials who are worried about citizens' reporting on their misconduct may be more responsive to the citizens' grievances and even make concessions to silence them.

SEEKING SUPPORT FROM WITHIN THE STATE

A second way for resisters to achieve success in popular contention is to receive external support or to seek alliances in or outside the political system. Allies can provide resources and make the system more open to protest demands, thereby providing important aid to weak groups. Lipsky points out that the essence of political protest consists of activating third parties to participate in a controversy in ways that are favorable to the protest's goals.³⁷ As a matter of fact, gaining external support has been seen as a precondition for weak groups' success. Jenkins and Perrow argue: "When deprived groups do mobilize, it is due to the interjection of external resources . . . Success comes when there is a combination of sustained outside support and disunity and/or tolerance on the part of political elites."³⁸ This can be true for weak groups regardless of the political system.

In China, there may also be external support, such as media exposure, that provides significant help to the people in defense of their rights. Nevertheless, because the state controls political power and most political resources, seeking support from within the state is often necessary. This is also possible because the Chinese state is not monolithic, and there are differences not only between different levels of government but also between different state agencies at the same level. These differences imply that some state actors may be more receptive to the demands of the disgruntled than others will be. In other words, these differences may create latent opportunities for successful resistance, but participants have to activate such latent opportunities through effective means.