

# Why Do the Chinese Popular Protests Not Progressively Lead to Regional Uproar? : The Cause of Non-Proliferating Chinese Resistances and Concession Strategy

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## Abstract

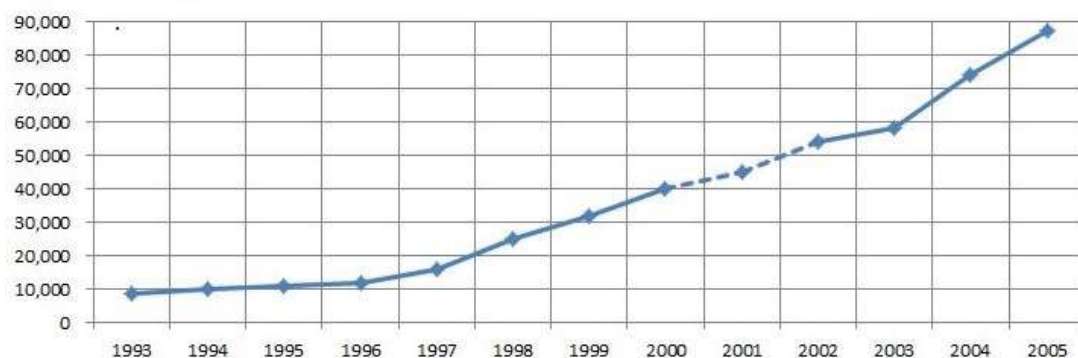
*The present study examines why local protests in China have not proliferated into nationwide protests, despite the rapid increase in local protests in terms of frequency, scope, and intensity. To research this phenomenon, observed only in China, this study investigates and analyzes public protest-related news articles, from the South China Morning Post from 2000 to 2016. The research reveals a three-point strategy adopted by the Chinese government to suppress protests: 1) the coercion strategy, 2) the central government's interference that strongly urges the employment of concession, and 3) the local government's implementation of concession prior to any interference from the central authority. This study demonstrates that the proliferation of mass protests is greatly hindered by the use of armed forces along with the concession strategy, derived from the economic and political interests of both central and local governments.*

**Keywords:** popular protest; collective resistance; coercion strategy; concession strategy; protest proliferation

## Introduction

Following the introduction of the neo-authoritarian regime and the Chinese reformations that have persisted since the 1990s, the number of popular protests in China has rapidly increased. As illustrated in Figure 1, in 1993, there were 8,700 public protests recorded in China. The majority of protest participants were laborers, peasants, and citizens. By 1999, the number of protests nearly tripled to 32,000. In the subsequent years, more incidents of protests have been reported, increasing to 54,000 in 2002; 58,000 in 2003; 74,000 in 2004; 87,000 in 2005; and exceeding 90,000 in 2006. Based on these data, protests in China have increased annually at an average rate of 17% during the past two decades.<sup>1)</sup>

<Figure 1> Number of Collective Protest Incidents in China, 1993-2005 (Data for 2001 are not available).



Source: Murray Scot Tanner, "Chinese Government Responses to Rising Social Unrest." *Rand* (2005); Lihua Chen, "Zhongguo quntixing shijian 10 nian zeng 6 bei." *Xinhua*, July 31, 2005b.

Chinese authorities categorize any public protest activity as a collective incident (*quntixingshijian*); if it involves more than 500 participants, it is categorized as a massive incident (*zhongda quntixingshijian*); and if it involves more than 1,000 participants, it is categorized as a mega-scale collective incident (*ttebie zhongda quntixingshijian*).<sup>2)</sup> This specific categorization of collective protests serves as a direct indication that the participants—ordinarily students, peasants, and laborers—have become more organized and effective in expressing

1) Chuanhe Zhang, "Wo guo quntixing shijian de zuixin fazhan taishi, chengyin ji duice yanjiu," *Shandong shehui kexue*, Vol 5 (2010), p. 42; Lihua Chen, "Zhongguo quntixing shijian 10 nian zeng 6 bei," *Xinhua*, July 31, 2005b; Murray Scot Tanner, "China Rethinks Unrest," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Issue 3 (January, 2010), p. 14; Xing Xu & Haifeng Wang, "Guanyu dangqian zhongguo quntixing shijian ji ge lilun wenti," *Xuexi yu shizhan*, Vol. 7 (2010), p. 69.

2) Niu Yan & Hai Lin, *Yufang yu chuzhi quntixing shijian dangzhengganbu duben* (Renminribao, 2009), pp. 7-9.

their needs than they had previously been. However, the protestors often resort to brute physical force; damaging local government buildings and public security offices. In response, the local authorities dispatch armed police forces with live ammunition, panzers, and heavy artillery units to suppress the protestors; this strategy has repeatedly led to catastrophic consequences for both parties.

In China, where public participation in politics is restricted, the citizens have also protested through laws, the media, and the petitioning system (*shangfang*). However, those means have been proven inadequate to satisfy the increasing public discontent. Because of the continuously proliferating discontent and insufficient means to alleviate their dissatisfaction, citizens opt, as a last resort, to employ an illegal and non-institutional method, the unauthorized act of popular resistance. Furthermore, China's traditionally maintained social framework, including its culture, heritage, and family lineage, has served effectively as a potent catalyst to facilitate the increase in public protest activities.<sup>3)</sup> Having analyzed the social conflicts in China, it is deduced that the citizens of China, when restricted to limited legal avenues for alleviating their social discontent, are often predisposed to illegal resistance activities, which typically generate increased social chaos. This is mainly because such protest methods enhance the validity and legitimacy of the protest if it develops into a more influential political action through proliferation.<sup>4)</sup> In other words, although illegitimate, collective protests in China provide a conduit with which the common citizens can express their needs.

Although China and other similarly constructed socialistic states have successfully maintained their authoritarian regimes for decades through a Repressive State Apparatus,<sup>5)</sup> there still exist grass-roots resistance activities that have, in the past, led to the realization of democracy. However, despite the presence of rapidly increasing mass incidents, the bottom-up resistance has yet to achieve regional, social, and hierarchical proliferation. Regardless of the high frequency of laborer and peasant-led collective protests, only a few of these protests possess the long-lasting social impact as did the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. In other words, the series of protests whose members belong mostly to the social class of laborer-peasant-intelligentsia have yet to successfully establish pan-regional and pan-class proliferation.<sup>6)</sup>

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3) Elizabeth J. Perry, "Rural Violence in Socialist China," *The China Quarterly*, vol. 103 (September, 1985), p. 439.

4) Yongshun Cai, *Grassroots political reform in contemporary China: Civil Resistance and Rule of Law in China* (Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 174-175.

5) Louis Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1971).

6) When city dwellers such as college students, intellectuals, and state-owned enterprise workers came to the streets to demand democratic political reforms in the early stages of Chinese reform, they were not interested in the political mobilization of rural populations. See Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 146.

Lipset's research embodies an economic-deterministic 'Modernization Theory,' theorizing that higher education levels, the growth of the middle-class, and urbanization, which follow the path forged by economic growth, serve as decisive factors promoting democracy.<sup>7)</sup> Moore and Rueschemeyer also share a common view that lucrative growth of socialistic economy likely leads to regime shift to democracy. Moore, especially, places great emphasis on the social role of the middle-class, whereas Rueschemeyer argues that the working class is the decisive driving force of regime change and capitalism.<sup>8)</sup> Based on a similar idea, Rowen suggests that China is likely to fully accomplish liberalization by 2025.<sup>9)</sup> However, compared to the Modernization Theory, the strengthening of the middle-class accompanied by swift economic growth and frequent popular resistance by the lower working class have not successfully triggered either democratization or proliferation of the protest activities. Therefore, it seems evident that the absence of long-lastingly, proliferating, and socio-politically linked political uproar, despite the high frequency of local protests among the lower social class in China, is an odd phenomenon.

On the other hand, the advancement of modern technology has opened new windows of opportunity for the resisters.<sup>10)</sup> Internet service has not only established a new niche for protest proliferation but has also greatly enhanced message-delivering capacity to remotely located areas that are geographically isolated. The implementation of modern broadcasting methods has eliminated the physical limitation of political discourse, and the absence of physical barriers further provides a new foundation for larger-scale and more structured demonstrations that encompass wider regions and social classes. Even so, none of the protests recorded since early 2000, appear to have proliferated to a pan-regional scale despite the leverage supplied by modern technology.

The high frequency of protests among the lower social class along with the highly common usage of mobile devices should have created a pathway through which the protestors could voice their political opinions to a third party. Few scattered protest efforts have accomplished significant protest-related objectives. Nevertheless, the particular protest phenomenon in China begs an important

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7) Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, Issue 1 (March, 1959), pp. 69-105.

8) Barrington Jr. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Beacon Press, 1966); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens & John D. Stephens, *Capitalist development and democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

9) Henry S. Rowen, "When will the Chinese people be free?" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 2007), pp. 38-52.

10) Guobin Yang, "Contention in Cyberspace," In *Popular Protest in China* eds. Kevin J. O'Brien (Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 133-136.

question: why have the current collective resistance efforts in China not pan-regionally proliferated despite the increasing episodes of frequent popular protests?

## Literature Review

Previous studies in China have mostly focused on the political system and regime change. However, such an academic approach is difficult to influence high-level politics such as political system change in China at this point.<sup>11)</sup> The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre certainly posed a significant threat to Chinese authorities. However, now, despite the number of occurrences, the collective protests have not proven threatening to the Chinese regime because most protests have pertained to low-level political matters, such as conflicts among different individual interests that ultimately emerge as collective resistances. In this context, four alternative hypotheses regarding the popular protests' failure to accomplish pan-regional proliferation are provided along with their limitations.

The first hypothesis argues that the absence of mass mobilization hinders the Chinese popular protests from proliferating. According to Wright, poorly organized collective resistance by student-centered organizations and the neglect of democratic procedures, explains the failure of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and China's subsequent democratic retreat.<sup>12)</sup> Perry emphasizes that the absence of well-established communication between the rural laboring class and intelligentsia—which was present during the communist revolution—ultimately caused the attempts at collective resistance to fail in the 1990s.<sup>13)</sup> However, the influx of advanced technology has adequately overcome the weakness of poor communication infrastructure, thereby unveiling the logical limitations in Wright's and Perry's approach. Furthermore, Chan's analytic research has revealed that although the intelligentsia, who are more highly educated, retain their political ideologies, they shifted their objectives from political accomplishments to strictly pragmatic and individual freedoms following China's explosive economic growth. This particular lifestyle change significantly hinders the participation of the

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11) Kevin J. O' Brien & Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, Cambridge (University Press, 2006), p. 99.

12) Teresa Wright, "State Repression and Student Protest in Contemporary China," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 157 (March 1999), pp. 142-172.

13) The Chinese Communist Revolution succeeded because the intellectuals and students had the leadership and organization to mobilize the peasants directly in the local area. However, the contemporary protest showed that for the organized social movements at the national and local level challenging the Chinese Communist Party, mobilization is limited. See Elizabeth J. Perry, "Permanent Rebellion? Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Protest," In *Popular Protest in China* eds. Kevin J. O'Brien (Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 205-206.

intelligentsia.<sup>14)</sup>

The second hypothesis claims that the Chinese police department preemptively prevents the popular protests from proliferating by fully utilizing its controlling power. In response to this particular proposal, Chen argues that the absence of proliferation is only natural in China because of the fundamental societal foundation. It is quite common in the West to establish a social framework to facilitate collective efforts in which social actors, the media, and members of society actively participate. However, China's restrictive censorship—often referred as coercion—poses a great challenge to the Western framework's applicability.<sup>15)</sup> On the other hand, Cai recognizes that coercion is of utmost importance when oppressing uncontrollable social disturbances if concession is improbable or social stability is threatened.<sup>16)</sup> In the mid-2000s, a series of thorough studies on this matter were conducted and published. These studies, which examined China's collective protests, involve analysis,<sup>17)</sup> classification,<sup>18)</sup> threat level,<sup>19)</sup> and controllability of collective protests.<sup>20)</sup> The proposition that the use of coercion, along with information and communication technology, has proven an effective political tool to suppress the protestors is dominant.<sup>21)</sup> Accordingly, the prevailing studies for counter-rioting measures, widely published by the communist party school and Public Safety journals, describe counter-measures to protest incidents, targeted single case studies,<sup>22)</sup> nullification

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14) Che-po Chan, "The Political Pragmatism of Chinese University Students." In *China and Democracy: Reconsidering the Prospects for a Democratic China*, eds. Suisheng Zhao (Routledge, 2000), pp. 207-232.

15) Feng Chen, "Worker Leaders and Framing Factory-based Resistance." In *Popular protest in China*, eds. Kevin J. O'Brien (Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 90.

16) Yongshun Cai, "Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China." *China Quarterly*, Vol. 193 (March, 2008a), pp. 24-42.

17) Shanyun Song & Ziyang Liu, "Guanyu dui dangqian quntixing shijian de zhuyao tedian he fazhan qushi ji ruhe youxiao kaizhan gongzuo de fenxi baogao," *Liaoning fazhi yanjiu*, Vol. 1 (2006), pp. 14-22; Wei Cui, "Dui quntixing shijian de fenxi," *Zhonggong shanxisheng zhijiguan dangxiao xuebao*, Vol. 1 (2010), pp. 54-55.

18) Xiaolin Ma, Peng Zhou, Zhiling Liu, "Dangqian wo guo quntixing tufa shijian de leixing, tedian ji duice," *Jiangdong luntan*, Vol. 2 (2010), pp. 38-44.

19) Jian Zhang, "Quntixing shijian Zhong de ruoshi qunti wenti yanjiu," *Lilunxuekan*, Vol. 1 (2010), pp. 94-97.

20) Ping He, "Xianjieduan quntixing tufa shijian de fazhan qushi ji yingdui celue," *Anhui guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao*, Vol. 3 (2010), pp. 18-21; Ya Li & Meiling Zhang, "Quntixing shijian de lixing chayi yu chuzhi de zhidu youhua," Shanghai chengshi guanli zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao, Vol. 19, No. 5 (2010), pp. 70-75; Zhangmin Ma, "Quntixing shijian jiqi yufang kongzhi: Yi hebeisheng weilie," *Weishi*, Vol. 8 (2010), pp. 160-163.

21) Qimeng Mao, "Wangluo quntixing shijian de tezheng yu duice," *Ningxia dangxiao xuebao*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (2010), pp. 91-93.

22) Shujun Lu, "Quntixing shijian wangluo jihua zuoyong chutan: Yi P shi zhengdi yinfa de quntixing shijian weilie," *Jiangsu*

of uproars,<sup>23)</sup> and preemptive prevention via public information espionage.<sup>24)</sup>

The third hypothesis suggests that the local authorities reconcile or compromise with the protestors when confronted with protestor demands, thereby dissolving mass collective efforts before pan-national proliferation takes root. That is, a collective resistance—which usually manifests in the form of rioting—serves as a conduit to publicly realize the protestors’ demands.<sup>25)</sup> According to opportunism, Chinese citizens are strongly predisposed to manipulate the local authorities through popular protests rather than promoting democracy.<sup>26)</sup> This opportunistic and shrewd intent is perhaps the chief reason for the absence of protest proliferation. Although seemingly reasonable, it seems that the local authorities may have overly simplified the underlying issue. Most of the rioting incidents, which are commonly caused by minor civil disputes, ultimately lead to the public’s demands for anti-corruption. If the protestors request more complicated demands that may threaten the legitimacy of the local authorities, the authorities are likely to fight the corruption that is present within the governing body. A failure to achieve a corruption-free local administrative body highly increases the feasibility of pan-national proliferation, thereby debunking the notion of reconciliation.

Lastly, the final hypothesis suggests that the Chinese unit (*danwei*) system restricts the pan-national spread of rioting incidents.<sup>27)</sup> However, there have been changes to the unit system through the political and social reformations that have introduced non-state-owned enterprises and privatization of properties. Judging by the current level of modernization level in China, the unit system is unlikely to exert its restrictive power over regional mass protests, although the aged unit system of education, industrialization, and agriculture still remains.

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*jingguan xueyuan xuebao*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2010), pp. 134-138.

23) Longbiao Zhong, "Wangshang quntixing shijian de tedian, shengcheng ji xiaojie," *Hunan xingzheng xueyuan xuebao*, Vol. 2 (2010), pp. 33-36.

24) Yongliang Guo, "Qingbaoxinxi zai quntixing shijian yufang he chuzhi Zhong de zuoyong," *Jingji xueyuan xuebao*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2008), pp. 56-57; Zhuhui Peng & Xinbin Gong, "Lun zai quntixing shijian zhili Zhong qingbao gongzuo de kaizhan," *Liaoning jingzhuan xuebao*, Vol. 59 (2010), pp. 50-53.

25) O’ Brien & Li, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," pp. 1-23.

26) Xi Chen, "Between Defiance and Obedience: Protest Opportunism in China," In *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, eds. Elizabeth J. Perry & Merle Goldman (Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 253-281.

27) Sebastian Heilmann, "The Social Context of Mobilization in China: Factions, Work Units, and Activists during the 1976 April Fifth Movement," *China Information*, Vol. 8, Issue 3 (December, 1993), p. 18; Elizabeth J. Perry, "Shanghai's strike wave of 1957," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 137 (March, 1994), pp. 1-27; Elizabeth J. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford University Press, 1995); Chen, "Worker Leaders and Framing Factory-based Resistance," pp. 88-107.

## Research Design and Data Sources

The purpose of this article is to formulate a differentiated proposition from the previously mentioned hypotheses. That is, in order to accurately evaluate the current pan-national non-proliferation of political activities in the form of popular protests, this study examines the concession strategy—a product of hierarchical dynamics between the central and local authorities, whose fundamental medium is a coercive strategy used to suppress public protests by ultimately discouraging the scattered collective resistances from pan-national escalation. This concession strategy is effective for a variety of reasons. First, the political environment of China became highly decentralized following the 1978 reformation. The decentralized relationship between the central and local governing bodies is believed to provide a logical ground from which to study the recent group-oriented protests in China. The peculiar political environment has generated divergent understandings between the central and local authorities. The central government cunningly manipulates the frequent public collective protests to strengthen its governance, while the local authorities exploit the incidents as an escape route from the interference of the central. These idiosyncratic hierarchical dynamics between the two governing bodies have established a mix of coercive and concession strategies that ultimately nullifies the scattered collective efforts—commonly manifested in the form of public rioting—from pan-national advancement.

In order to provide an adequate empirical analysis, field research methods such as interviews and surveys must be conducted. However, there are few reliable resources in China regarding such a sensitive social matter as mass rioting. Had there been accessible data, the credibility of the information is hardly guaranteed; thus, the risk of inaccuracy persists. Therefore, a thorough analysis of any accessible data with credibility is performed as required.

According to the article published in 2004, by the Ministry of Public Security of China, labor rights, government-involved land requisition, demolition and deportation, reformation of state-owned enterprises, and deportation compensation have been identified as the direct causes of collective protests.<sup>28)</sup> Given that most reported collective efforts that involve the members of working classes are non-political, the analysis has been limited to the general protests.<sup>29)</sup> The selected subjects of this article are laborers and peasants whose collective resistance efforts are well organized and influential enough to threaten the political authorities.<sup>30)</sup>

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28) Lihua Chen, “Quntixing shijian kaoyan zhongguo.” *Jinji guanli wenzhai* 16 (2005a), p. 30.

29) Xinmin Gao & Guihan Wu. *Lingdao ganbu yingdui quntixing shijian anli pingxuan* (Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 2011), p. 2.

30) Because peasants and laborers are relatively less dependent on the state, they are more open to political change. See Wright, “*Accepting Authoritarianism: State-society Relations in China’s Reform Era*,” p. 3.

The rioting activities executed by the peasants and working class have proven physically more violent and politically threatening. Moreover, the members of the working class, as praetorian guards in socialist states, supply the economic and political impetus.<sup>31)</sup> Naturally, any uproars from this particular social class have the capacity to provoke such a political impact that its influence cannot be neglected by either the central or senior authorities. Hence, collective resistance from the members of the working class—especially laborers and peasants—has been selected as the main target of analysis.

In order to maintain impartiality and accuracy, a few filters have been implemented for data collection. Given that the Chinese government categorizes a collective resistance of greater than 500 participants as a massive group-oriented incident, any reported events of greater than 500 participants have been selected.<sup>32)</sup> Other notions to be considered are 1) the use of coercion; 2) the potentiality of pan-continental proliferation—social classes, regional, and constructiveness of leadership are accounted—; 3) generally classified protests besides political protests; and 4) incidents with clearly identified beginnings and ends. The data were collected from the South China Morning Post, China's official news broadcaster, Sina News, and Hong-Kong's China Labor Bulletin from 2000 to 2016. Additionally, articles and interviews from the same period published by corresponding regional and foreign news media and the China National Knowledge Infrastructure-owned publications have heavily been scrutinized. However, there seem to be discrepancies among the sources.

Through data analysis, this study has found that the response of Chinese authorities to any collective resistance frequently involve 1) use of armed forces, 2) failed attempts of physical coercion and concession, and 3) concession only; and prior to 2000, the dispatch of armed forces was observed to be the governments only employed option. Stemming from this observation, the cases that included both coercion and concession strategies—as a response from the government—have been carefully separated to determine logically what hierarchical dynamics between the central and local governing bodies are present and which of the two strategies has consequently dissolved collective protests.

## **The Chinese Government's Response to Collective Resistances**

The most important question that needs to be answered is what prevents the Chinese citizens' collective resistances—normally in a form of protests—from achieving pan-national proliferation? The rioting activities in China have increased

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31) Barrington Moore Jr., *Authority and Inequality Under Capitalism and Socialism: USA, USSR and China* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 99.

32) Yan & Lin, *Yufang yu chuzhi quntixing shijian dangzhengganbu duben*, pp. 7-9.

to an incredible frequency. However, none of these riots have garnered nationwide support from the public in the absence of any social impact, and one could speculate that the mix of coercion and concession strategies by the Chinese authorities is chiefly responsible for this distinct phenomenon. One of the two strategies, the coercive strategy, arises from the dynamic relationship between the central and local governing bodies, whereas another strategy, the concession strategy, is generated by both the clash between the central's attempt to strengthen its grip on the local authorities in the highly decentralized political environment and the desperate struggle of the local governing bodies to maintain their autonomy by departing from the central's control.

The Chinese government categorizes each collective resistance effort according to the individual objectives of that effort—labeling them a protest (*kangzheng*), dispute (*jiufen*), or riot (*saoluan*). A protest is an action by individuals in society who hold little to no political power in society that expresses discontent to the ruling parties and corresponding institutions such as legislative and judicial branches. A dispute occurs when a discrepancy exists among the parties of equal ground. The participants—mostly from the working class—of a dispute usually fight for an economic gain, such as modification of labor regulations. A riot is a violent mass protesting event that does not designate what its targeted objectives are—as seen in the incidents of Lhasa's '3.14 riot' and 2009's Urumqi '7.5 riot'.<sup>33)</sup>

During the period between 2000 and 2016, 24 different reported cases of resistance efforts have carefully been filtered and selected by excluding any political collective efforts and implementing various measures of qualification.<sup>34)</sup> The list includes the following protests.

<Table 1> The List of Protests

March 1, 2002	Daqing Oilfield Workers' Protest
April 27, 2003	Tianjin SARS Patients Rejection
October 27, 2004	Hanyuan Protest
November 18, 2004	Chongqing Mass Protest
April 10, 2005	Zhejiang province Huashui Protest
June 27, 2005	Anhui province Chizou Protest

33) Cijiang Wang, *Chongtu yu zhili: Zhongguo quntixing shijian kaocha fenxi* (Renminchubanshe, 2013), pp. 146-147.

34) The outbreak of popular protests and the causes are easily grasped through media coverage. However, few protests can be seen from beginning to end involving more than 500 workers and farmers, given the central and local government dynamics.

December 6, 2005	Guangdong province Dongzhou Protest
January 9, 2006	Guangdong province Panlong Protest
January 16, 2006	Sichuan province Jianghua Protest
October 23, 2006	Jiangxi province Nanchang Student Protest
November 10, 2006	Sichuan province Guangan Protest
June 28, 2008	Guizhou province Wengan Protest
November 3, 2008	Chongqing Taxi Protest
November 6, 2008	Zhejiang province Shaoxing Protest
November 17, 2008	Gansu province Longnan Protest
July 23, 2009	Jilin province Tonghua Steel Protest
June 9, 2011	Guangdong province Xintang Peasant Workers' Protest
August 14, 2011	Liaoning province Dalian Chemical Factory Protest
September 21, 2011	Wukan Protest
October 26, 2011	Zhejiang province Zhili town Protest
November 20, 2011	Guangdong province Haimen Protest
July 1, 2012	Sichuan province Shifang anti-pollution Protest
July 26, 2012	Jiangsu province Qidong Protest
July 12, 2013	Guangdong province Jiangmen uranium plant Protest

As mentioned above, the three protest-suppressing responses by the Chinese government have been applied to evaluate each of the listed rioting incidents. Table 2 lists the number of times each strategy—involving coercion and concession—was used to suppress the incidents.

**<Table 2> The Chinese Government's Chosen Methods of Suppressing Protests**

Coercion	Concession by the Local	Concession after the Central Interference	Etc.	Total
12	6	4	2	24

Source: Data collection and analysis by the author

According to Table 2, the government employed a concession strategy in

approximately 39% of the incidents, demonstrating that China's means for suppressing massive collective resistance is largely concentrated on the use of coercion and concession. This raises another question: what are the required conditions to effectively implement the concession strategy besides the employment of coercion, which has proven to be an ineffective crowd control measure?

Since the 1978 economic reforms, the political environment of China has become highly decentralized. The use of coercion by the central government to interfere with suppressing collective resistance efforts has also been a potent political apparatus to effectively keep the local authorities, who are often deeply corrupt, in check. The central government's political elites have garnered the central's authority and legitimacy by sacrificing the lower working class to strengthen the Chinese authoritarian regime by organizing and arbitrating the corporal corruption network. Furthermore, China's public security apparatus, which has previously used physical force and coercion, has recently been minimally armed. However, the public security employees have been reequipped to more efficiently suppress the current trend of mass protests. The redevelopment of public security regulations and equipment has been largely responsible for the failure of pan-national proliferation—despite the explosively soaring frequency of collective resistance incidents—by sabotaging any possible pathway to proliferation. Should there be an outbreak of collective efforts in a remote rural region, the Chinese police department would immediately block every telecommunication means to prevent the spread of information, which would hamper the mobilization of additional protestors from nearby regions. After blocking communication lines, the government evaluates the cause of discontent that led to the riot. As soon as the source of dissatisfaction is identified, either a coercion or delay strategy is executed to effectively bring the incident to a halt, thereby disrupting any regional spread of the unrest and preventing pan-national proliferation.

Moreover, when faced with challenging demands from the protestors, the Chinese government resorts to the coercion strategy rather than opting to reconcile with the dissatisfied public. The required conditions for employing coercion are 1) the presence of a highly probable threat posed against the central government as the product of well-organized collective resistance efforts; 2) significant possibility of synergetic pan-national spread that may disturb regime security in China as the collective resistance coordinates with other anti-authoritarian regime activists; 3) acquisition of potent political leverage through a coalition of minimally influential collective efforts.<sup>35)</sup>

Although the use of coercion seems highly effective, such a forceful

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35) J. Craig Jenkins & Charles Perrow, "Insurgency of the powerless: Farmworker movements (1946-1972)," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (April, 1977), pp. 249-250.

implication may not only backfire—promoting the pan-national spread of an initially small-scale demonstration—but may also generate a lingering cost-benefit problem. According to the Ministry of Public Security (2000), the use of coercion when suppressing any public protest should be limited. A handful of specialists have noted that the constant use of coercion to dissolve protests without an immediate implementation of the newly devised strategy creates an atmosphere that makes it highly likely that frequent outbursts of mass public protests may soon grow beyond the government's control, especially in China's rapidly growing economy.<sup>36)</sup> Therefore, the concession strategy has conveniently been adopted instead. However, the Chinese authorities have clarified that the use of concessions will not entirely replace the use of coercion. Moreover, given that many small-scale public protests are controlled by the local authorities, there is no need in such situations for the central or provincial governments to intervene.<sup>37)</sup>

The early political opportunity structure theorists have argued that the use of coercion is widely effective for suppressing public protests. However, recent research has revealed that the traditional coercion strategy is likely to backfire without a profound understanding of the perplexing relationship between the government's response and the protestors who are progressively becoming more complicated. When an uproar from the lower working class of peasants occurs, there are different factors that may enhance repercussions following the use of coercion. First, the coercion strategy is likely to cause adverse consequences when authorized by the leader of a township or County-level city instead of the central authorities. Next, there is the conflict of interests among those spearheading the demonstrations and the town residents. In order to secure necessary financial power, protestors forcefully demand donations and food from the residents, actions with which the townspeople do not agree. In addition, if central authorities attempt to involve or recruit the intelligentsia to maintain social security, this may lead to undesired consequences.<sup>38)</sup>

Despite the probability of backfire, the use of the coercion strategy remains an important suppressive tool because neither the central nor the local authorities can always employ concession strategies. Given that China currently experiences frequent massive protests, the grave problem is the high possibility that multiple demonstration groups will establish alliances, thereby introducing even larger, multi-dimensional protests. Therefore, when a local governing branch faces a challenging circumstance in which a suppressive means is limited to coercion, it is an unspoken rule that the central authorities permit the use of physical force. Although ordinarily driven by self-interest for securing political benefits, there are

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36) Tanner, "China Rethinks Unrest," pp. 137-144.

37) Yongshun Cai, "Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, Issue 3 (July, 2008b), pp. 411-432.

38) O' Brien & Li, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," p. 22.

four specific circumstances in which an option to suppress potentially threatening protests is limited to the use of coercion instead of concession.

Notably, one circumstance under which political elites in China will, without any hint of hesitation, use coercion to suppress all collective protests is when the protest is likely to threaten the regime or negate the fundamental principles of communism.

Another circumstance in which coercion will be used is in the face of well-organized physical violence. The massive protest that took place in Guangdong province Shanwei on December 6, 2005, over a land compensation dispute is one such example. For the first five months of the dispute, the protest was peaceful, but it eventually turned into a structured act of violence in which protestors held local officials hostage. Armed police were dispatched to the site, and three protestors were killed.<sup>39)</sup>

The third notable trigger for a coercive response to a protest is the presence of any support from foreign sources. A distinguished example is the Daqing Petroleum Industry protest that was provoked by biased corporal benefits and forced unemployment in 2002.<sup>40)</sup> The Daqing protest was believed to have received both direct and indirect support from the International Labor Organization; in addition, the protestors independently established an unauthorized labor union.<sup>41)</sup> The central authorities were well aware not only that the demands posed by the protestors were quite overwhelming but also that the presence of foreign advocacy could threaten the Chinese authoritarian regime. As a result, the government responded to the incident with coercion.

Lastly, it is worth noting that Beijing employs coercion due to the significant risk of the spread of resistance efforts when protests establish a firm alliance with the third party whose political ideologies and violent tactics commonly stir the public as this increases the probability of pan-national proliferation of a collective resistance.<sup>42)</sup> An alliance forms among different demonstrating parties when the objectives of the parties are similar or when aligning with another the relationship established possesses the capacity for synergetic proliferation. If the two demonstrating groups lack common objectives, the third party serves as a mediator that can bridge the two parties together, thereby promoting a coalition.<sup>43)</sup>

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39) George Friedman, "The Shanwei Shootings and China's Situation," (2005) available at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/shanwei-shootings-and-chinas-situation> (accessed on Jan.10, 2017), pp. 1-2.

40) Trini Leung, "A Cry for Justice: The Voices of Chinese Workers," *Albert Shanker Institute* (2008), p. 8.

41) *China Labour Bulletin Press*, "China Labour Bulletin Press Release on Daqing Oilfield Workers' Protests," Mar 6, 2002; *China Labour Bulletin Press*, "Daqing workers continue their protest on Tieren Square on June 4," June 6, 2002.

42) Xinhua, "Jiedu liu zhong quanhui Jueding: Tuoshan chuli quntixing shijian," Dec. 8, 2006.

43) Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*

Although the coercion strategy still remains an important suppressive tool, there have been multiple incidents in which the concession strategies are more suitable. The following section discusses which notions and conditions have led to the application of concession.

### **The Concession Strategy from the Dynamics of the Central and Locals**

The dynamic clash of the central's attempt to strengthen its hold on local governments in the decentralized environment and the local authorities' desire to maintain autonomy has resulted in the concessive policy. The concession strategy is largely divided into two different modes: 1) the central's interference that strongly urges the use of concession and 2) the local government's implementation of concession prior to any interference from the central authority. Accompanied by the concessive policy, the suppressive ability of coercion is significantly enhanced. The effectiveness of the interchangeable use of the two strategies is confirmed as the pan-national proliferation of any protests has yet to take root.

What has given rise to the concession strategy? Prior to the political reforms, when centralization prevailed, the central government vertically directed any suppressive actions against the protests through coercion. After the reformation, which decentralized political power, the central government granted political-economic autonomy to local governing bodies.<sup>44)</sup> Thus, the right to control and suppress any collective resistance efforts has also been endowed to the local governments. Under the regime of Mao Zedong—before the reformation—the central political elites had vertically controlled the local branches, thereby further centralizing the political influence. However, the reformation, led by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, decentralized and re-distributed the political power to the local governing bodies just as the economy shifted from a managed economy to a market system. Although the highly decentralized political structure of China has dramatically weakened the central's political influence, the central authorities have reluctantly accepted the structural change because Deng Xiaoping prioritized economic growth. It seems only reasonable to have established the decentralized setting by guaranteeing more autonomy to the local branches in order to gain full support from the local authorities and maximize economic development in regions with tremendous growth potential.

However, collective protests provide the central government the perfect opportunity to strengthen its authority over the local governments in the highly

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(Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 192.

44) Jan S. Prybyla, "Who has the emperor's clothes?: Economic relationship between the central and local governments in mainland China," *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 32, Issue7 (1996), pp. 27-28.

decentralized political environment. The central authorities cleverly manipulate incidents of collective resistance as a political medium to regain control, while local branches attempt to minimize interference from the central body. This peculiar relationship between the central and local authorities has produced unique political dynamics that ultimately introduces concessive strategies. In the decentralized environment, the local governments—as the direct mediators and suppressors—have implemented the concession strategy when the use of coercion from the local police department has proven inadequate. Furthermore, the local authorities, by taking a moderate stance, have attempted to minimize any cost-ineffectiveness in the suppression of protests and chances of pan-national spread. In other words, the local governing bodies have sought to avoid not only the unnecessarily high cost of suppressing protests but also any potential backfiring from the suppression.

Coupled with the potential opportunities for interference, the decentralized political structure works to the central government's benefit as it helps the government avoid responsibility and criticism.<sup>45)</sup> Naturally, the protestors blame the local governments instead of the central authorities should the local authorities choose to recklessly control a riot. In the case of massive collective resistance, the central government is able to strengthen its grip on the local branches and boost its legitimacy of authority by interfering with the infamous corruption that runs rampant among the local authorities and by accepting the demands of the protestors. Therefore, the central government enables the local governments to employ the concessive strategies after significantly interfering with the local's suppressive methods and corruption. However, the locals may choose to implement the concession policy before any intrusion from the central government in order to maintain their governing autonomy and protect their wealth from illegal confiscation.

The concessive strategies were introduced after the political reformation in the late 1990s, as decentralization of power reached its pinnacle. The implementation of anti-corruption policies and reconstruction of the government's executive body have further solidified the foundation for the concession strategy. The significant changes in Chinese politics have provided opportunities not only for the central political elites to interfere with the local branches when a protest occurs but also for the local authorities to protect their privately owned properties. As this study's analysis concludes, frequent use of concessive strategies by the locals has been observed since 2000.

The introduction of concession is closely linked to the shift in the political elite's effort to establish a harmonious (*hexie*) society by strengthening the legitimacy of the current authoritarian regime after November 2002—Hu Jintao's

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45) Cai, "Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China," p. 430.

administration. Such political change has caused the communist party to adjust its response to protests. For instance, official terminology to describe a collective resistance incident has become neutral. The previously used “mobbing crowds (baotu)” and “illegal associations (feifajihui)”—that possess socially negative implications—have been replaced with more impartial terms like “mass incidents.” The newly introduced terminology directly reflects its profound depoliticization as well as the characteristics of frequently occurring mass incidents, which are unavoidable elements of life for Chinese people.<sup>46)</sup> Although there has not been an elaborate strategy to promote social reformation and infrastructural security, political attempts to widen legal channels for the protestors to voice their opinions have grown. As a result, the governing bodies have begun to adopt concessive strategies when dealing with protests, regardless of occasional threats posed by thoroughly organized collective resistance efforts.<sup>47)</sup>

Similarly, in 2005, the State Council of China requested that the local authorities carefully respond to any mass.<sup>48)</sup> Furthermore, in November 2008, Meng Jianzhu—China’s police chief—placed special emphasis on a cautious approach to suppressing any incidents of collective resistance efforts.<sup>49)</sup> His statement presents “3 careful uses (san ge shenyong)” which include the 1) careful use of police force (shenyong jingli), 2) careful use of arms (shenyong wuqi jingxie), and 3) careful use of coercion (shenyong qiangzhi cuoshi). That is, the use of arms by the police force is strictly limited when confronting violent protestors to avoid any physical destruction or damage.<sup>50)</sup>

It is not evident when the concessive strategies were officially introduced. However, the Chinese government’s changed attitude regarding mass incidents appeared and was acknowledged by the press around the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore, it seems only natural to conclude that the use of concession was made official in 2000.

The existence of both types of responses to collective resistance efforts generates another question: what are the required conditions for the local authorities to choose either coercion or concession? When a mass incident breaks out, the local governments initially respond with coercion under the supervision of the central government. As the suppression fails to effectively bring the incident

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46) Yang Su & Xin He, “Street as courtroom: State accommodation of labor protest in South China,” *Law & Society Review*, Vol 44, Issue 1 (March, 2010), p. 162.

47) Tanner, “China Rethinks Unrest,” pp. 149-150.

48) Guanyu jiji yufang he tuoshan chuzhi quntixing shijian de gongzuo yijian, January 29, 2005.

49) Xinhua, “Gonganbuzhang cheng chuzhi quntixing shijian yao shenyong jingxie.” Nov.3,2008; Beijing Times, “Gonganbuzhang zhuanwen cheng chuzhi quntixingshijian yao shenyong wuqi jingxie,” Nov. 4, 2008.

50) Yanqi Tong & Shaohua Lei, “Large-Scale Mass Incidents and Government Responses in China,” *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (October, 2010), p. 502.

under control, there are four categories of threats that can initiate the concessive strategy. The first is the presence of a high probability that the use of coercion will backfire and the incident may lead to pan-regional spread. The next one is a cost-benefit analysis in which the use of coercive methods imposes a greater cost than concession. The third is the existence of any casualties that may ultimately result in a political cost for the local authorities. The last is the central’s intervention urging the locals to enforce a concession when coercive means fails to resolve mass incidents.

<Table 3> Pro et Contra of the Local Governments’ Response to Mass Incidents

Response to Mass Incidents	Coercion	Concession
<b>Pros</b>	Prevention of additional incidents, Political cost	Avoidance of the central intervention
<b>Cons</b>	Dismissal of official when proliferation occurs, Legal punishment	Budget loss

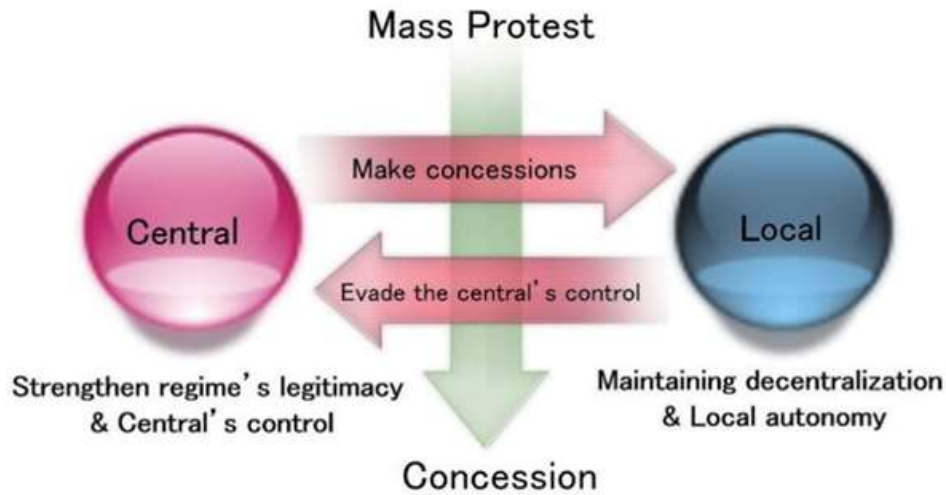
Source: Data collection and analysis by the author

As illustrated in Table 3, each pro and con has been categorized according to each type of governmental response to mass incidents. Careful analysis of the table reveals that adoption of concession—with the corresponding burden of allocated budget loss—through which the central’s intervention is avoided, is a more attractive and rational choice for the local governments than the implementation of coercion—with the possible assumption of full responsibility when the suppressive attempt fails. Moreover, the use of concession that provides a conduit for the local authorities to escape from the central’s grip seems more appealing than it has ever been because avoidance of the central’s intervention is directly affiliated with escaping from publicizing political corruption that is deeply rooted in Chinese politics. In other words, the introduction of concession is triggered and further promoted by the implementation of China’s anti-corruption policy in 2000.<sup>51)</sup>

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51) Jinyong Kim, “China’s Strengthening Anti-Corruption Competency and Changes in Countermeasures for Collective Protests,” *Asian cultural studies*, Vol. 30 (2013a), pp. 5-41.

<Figure 2> Hierarchical Dynamics between the Central and Local Governments



Source: Data collection and analysis by the author

As shown in Figure 2, the central government avoids direct conflict with the locals as the local authorities attempt to evade the central's control in the decentralized political environment. When challenged with mass protest incidents, the central government—through its right to inspect and make personnel changes—strengthens its authoritarian legitimacy by intervening in the corrupted local government's abuse of power and urging the local government to accept the terms proposed by the protestors. Also, the central government remains protected from any harms related to the failures of those suppressive attempts because the local governments possessing governing autonomy take full responsibility.<sup>52)</sup> Consequently, the central government's political elites maintain a decentralized local autonomy. On the other hand, the locals may assume a concessive stance towards protests prior to central government interventions in an attempt to retain their autonomy. For example, the local government's decision to take a concessive position stems from a thorough cost-benefit analysis when confronted with mass incidents (corruption, arbitrariness). In conclusion, both central and local governments manipulate mass incidents as a political medium for accomplishing their objectives—the central intending to strengthen its legitimacy with minimal risk and the local attempting to sustain regional autonomy.

<sup>52)</sup> Cai, "Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China," pp. 411 – 432.

## The Modes of the Central Intervention and Cases

As shown in Table 4, the modes of responses to protests have been categorized according to the scale shift of the central government. Scale shift occurs when the protestors—challenged by limiting factors—receive incentives from foreign states or international organizations and steer toward pan-national spread with the aim of accomplishing regime change. It also reflects a circumstance in which the rights of protestors are protected when the political elites dispatch use of armed forces. Scale shift encompasses both bottom-up and top-down political proliferation of mass incidents as protests continue to linger.<sup>53)</sup> Accordingly, the particular mode of scale shift of interest is bottom-up spread in which any locally occurring social disturbances proliferate to the central authorities. Therefore, as demonstrated in Table 4, any coercive implications and intervention from the central government are specified as 1) coercion, 2) the local’s concession prior to the central intervention, and 3) the local’s concession after the central intervention.

<Table 4> The Responding Modes According to Interventions of the Central Government

		The Central Intervention (Scale-Shift)	
		Present	Absent
Central vs. Local’s Interest (Accordance/Discordance) →	Coercion	X	①
	Concession	③	②

Source: Data collection and analysis by the author

China’s political reforms have established a politically and economically decentralized environment in which the central government constantly attempts to strengthen its political influence on the local government, while the local authorities try to maintain their governing autonomy and avoid central intervention. Both central and local authorities manipulate mass incidents as a political medium through which they can reap potential political advantages. This particular relationship between local and central governments resulted in the implementation of concession when faced with mass protests. However, any regime-threatening collective resistance effort of ① from Table 4 naturally establishes a consensus between the central and local governments, disregarding the hierarchical dynamics, as it ultimately leads to suppression under the central supervision. It is a generally accepted, unspoken rule that any use of coercion by the local governments is not supervised by the central. However, abuse of coercion or potentially threatening or unexpected mass incidents, which may result in a pan-national spread, triggers the central’s intervention. On the other hand, the

53) Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, p. 193.

local authorities choose ② to avoid central intervention and to successfully resolve mass incidents when there exists a disaccord of interests between the central and local governments. The selection of ③ seems rational because such a decision allows the local government to maintain their autonomy and prevents the assumption of any responsibilities from failed suppressive attempts. However, if the local’s suppressive attempts failed, the central intervention followed by an urged implementation of the concessive stance enhances and strengthens the central government’s legitimacy.

Based on this understanding of the local and central governments’ responses to protests, what are the guidelines that determine which method to choose when dealing with mass incidents? Who are the main actors that make such decisions? And what effects does the central intervention have in the suppressive strategy?

In order to carefully deduce possible answers to the posed questions, cycles of contention are applied to probe the potential effects of the central intervention when suppressing mass incidents. Although there exist discrepancies in specifics, the cycles of contention provide a generally divided chronological framework that facilitates accurate evaluation: 1) diffusion, 2) exhaustion, 3) radicalization and institutionalization, and 4) restabilization—repression and facilitation.<sup>54)</sup> In the following example, the lower working classes are targeted because the members of lower working classes are frequent actors in mass incidents in China. Lastly, three exemplary incidents involving violence and structured leadership that have failed to pan-nationally spread due to several limitations are selected in Table 5 as each incident clearly reflects the hierarchical dynamics between the central and local authorities.

**<Table 5> The Case and Corresponding Strategies to Collective Resistances**

① Coercion	② Concession prior to the central intervention	③ Concession after the central intervention
Daqing Laborers’ Protest	Tonghua Steel Laborers’ Protest	Hanyuan Peasants’ Protest

Source: Data collection and analysis by the author

The first example, the Daqing protest, was a large-scale, well-structured, three-month long protest that may have caused scale shift, prompting the central’s intervention. However, the local authorities did not hesitate to take a coercive stance against the incident. The involvement of a third-party in the Daqing protest canceled out the hierarchical dynamics between the central and local bodies, naturally leading to the continuation of coercion without the central’s intervention

54) Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, p. 198.

in the local's decision. The Tonghua Steel incident is a fine example of the local government implementing a concession without any mediation from the central government. The last incident, involving Hanyuan peasants, is a case in which scale shift is observed as the central's intervention strongly urged the local government to accommodate the protestors.<sup>55)</sup>

### **Why Have Popular Protests in China Failed to Pan-Nationally Spread?**

It can be now easily deduced how the local authorities respond to mass incidents as the required situational elements triggering either coercion or concession have been identified. When mass incidents occur, the Chinese authorities dictate that an assigned local leader must assume full responsibility for any failed attempts to suppress the protest.

The Chinese political elites (Provincial level people's government), when taking responsibility for a failed suppressive attempt, strictly observe that the assigned administrative personnel—of vertically structured departments and horizontally established management system (tiaokuaijiehe)—must fully assume overall responsibility for any failed attempts. That is, a person of local administrative charge and corresponding local political elites share responsibilities (shui zhuguan, shui fuze).<sup>56)</sup> However, this particular local-autonomous Chinese governing system indirectly forces the local authorities to take a concessive stance in protests and implement any possible suppressive means to avoid pan-national spread in order to escape from the burdening weight of responsibilities. Although concessive strategies accompanied with coercion have become the dominant response towards mass incidents following the 2000s, implementation of concession alone is hardly a silver bullet against every collective resistance effort. This causes the local governments to balance the weight of probable consequences of adopting coercion and concession strategies; concessive take strictly follows the initial implementation of coercion—dispatching the police department. That is, the employment of local police forces is first executed as either local or central authorities decide to choose a concessive strategy.

It has now been clarified that the initial coercion is ordinarily followed by concession as long as there exists a lingering conflict of interest that spurs the

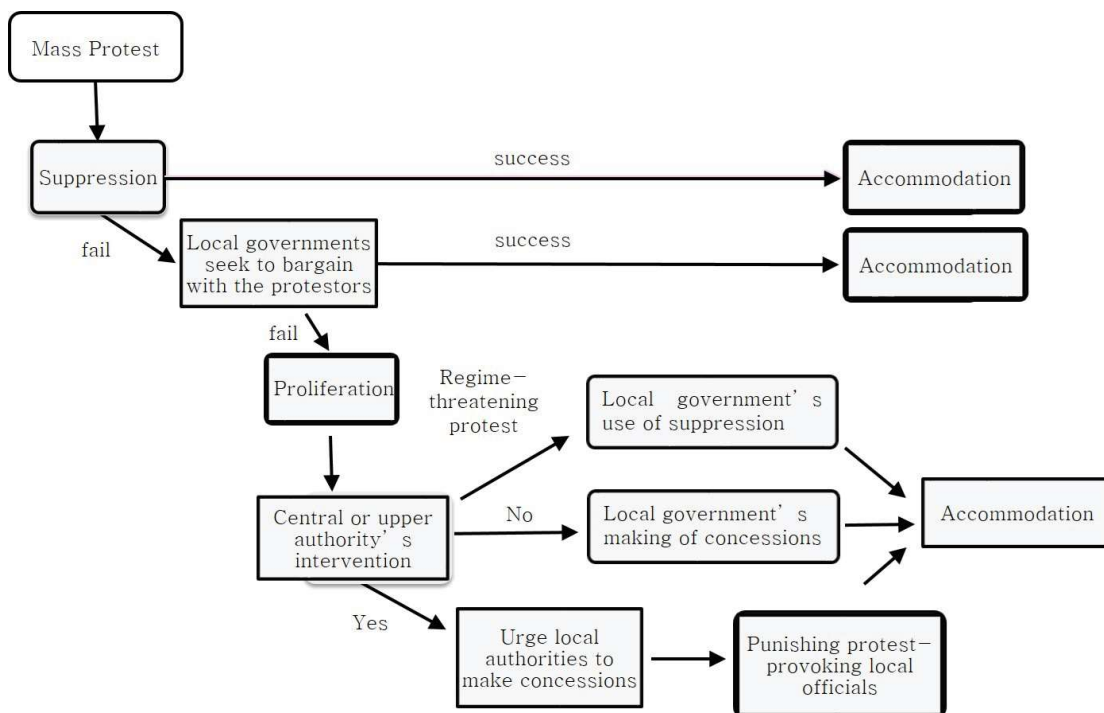
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55) Jinyong Kim, "Studies on the China's Strategy against Collective Protests: Focusing on the Cases Intervened by Central Government," *Dispute resolution studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2013b), pp. 168-169.

56) Huang, Shue & Jianwen Ma, Lun gonganjiguan chuzhi quntixing shijian yuanze, *Guangdong jingguan xueyuan Zhengfa xuekan*, Vol. 4 (2006), p. 4; Yixin Xiong, *Zhili guanlixue* (Zhongguo renmin gongan daxue chubanshe, 2007), pp. 511-529; Junhe Lu, *Xinxihua tiaojian xia wujingbudu ichuzhi quntixing shijian jizhi yanjiu* (Guofang kexue jishu daxue, 2009), p. 66.

hierarchical dynamics between the central and local governments. When consensus has been reached among the differing interests, the coercive strategy is continued. As shown in Figure 3, the overall responsive mechanism towards mass incidents has been clearly outlined.

<Figure 3> Responsive Mechanism towards Collective Resistance



Source: Data collection and analysis by the author

As illustrated above, suppression is the initial response towards any mass incident. Collective efforts involving lower working-class citizens, especially, promote the continuous use of armed forces as the local authorities, in an attempt to deepen their relationship with business leaders, side with large enterprises. Maintaining close relations with local enterprises is of utmost importance not only because of any potential influence on Gross Domestic Product that is used to measure the local leaders' accomplishment (zhengji) but also because doing so attracts both domestic and foreign investors who provide strong financial drive to the region. Consequently, the local authorities are strongly predisposed to standing with the corporate owners and taking a coercive stance towards the protestors who are usually members of lower working classes.<sup>57)</sup> Upon successful suppressive attempts, mass incidents are immediately dissolved. On the other hand, the local

governments may seek to bargain with the protestors at the site if any suppressive means fails. When the demands of the protestors are satisfied, the local authorities choose the concessive path, and the mass incident is soon quelled. However, when consensus is not reached, the incident enters its proliferation phase. A high potential of pan-national spread provides a legitimate excuse for the central government to intervene with the local authorities. As clearly outlined above, the central government makes the decision whether to continue coercion or change to concession as it gauges the potential threat the incident poses to social stability.

It is a general rule that the local authorities initially respond to mass incidents with coercive suppressive methods. Upon any failed attempt to bring the incident under control, the concessive approach allows the local governments to bargain with the protestors. If demands of the protestors are not satisfied, the potential proliferation of the protest will significantly increase. In the situation of the high probability of spread, there are three possible solutions to deal with mass incidents. The first is the continuation of coercion by the local governments prior to any intervention from the central government, when protests were transformed into regime-threatening popular resistance.<sup>58)</sup> Another option is for the local authorities to meet the demands of the protestors by assuming a concessive attitude prior to forceful intervention from the central government. The third solution is the central's forceful intervention that strongly urges the local authorities to take a concessive approach towards mass incidents.

Accordingly, based on the level of threat and size of the collective resistance effort, the central and local government of China can establish: 1) a national emergency commanding unit, 2) a province-level emergency unit consisting of highly ranked officials, and 3) a local-epicenter-located commanding body. The national commanding unit manages the national-level social disturbances whereas, if exceeding the provincial administrative district, it is handled within the scope of authority. Party committees and local governments are responsible for any social uproars and are able to install a Small Leading Group (*lingdaoxiaozu*) consisting of public security, prosecutors, the courts, the judiciary, and the police. The province-level emergency unit handles all large-scale collective resistance efforts in the same class of administration under the unified command system of the provincial government. Local-epicenter-located commanding bodies organize party committees, public security, ministry of state security, armed police, people's government, and the local elites take charge of all the incidents of local

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57) Yang Su & Xin He, "Street as courtroom: State accommodation of labor protest in South China," *Law & Society Review*, Vol 44, Issue 1 (March, 2010), p. 162.

58) Collective protests can be transformed into political demonstrations under certain conditions. For example, the problem of late payment of laborers' wages may lead to the collective petition, and the authorities would treat it as a political issue. See Weijian Tang, *Quntixing jiu fen susong jie jue jizhilun* (Beijing University Press, 2008), p. 9.

and lower-level government.<sup>59)</sup>

As it has been observed in collective resistance efforts occurring since 1993, the people's police, armed police, and People's Liberation Army have served as suppressive tools towards collective resistance efforts. The members of the police department are dispatched to the site at the initial breakout of a mass incident. However, any proliferation of protests calls for the use of armed forces. The military units, although deployed to the site, do not interfere with suppressive actions as they are bound to martial law; instead, they are only present at the site to minimize further social disturbances.

The political leaders in China have thoroughly revised the constitution, criminal law, any law articles pertaining to collective resistance, security management regulations, response measures to any unforeseen social disturbances, and public security policies related to mass incidents (in order to facilitate its legitimacy in suppressing any occurrence of collective resistance efforts). The policies regarding popular protests are mostly prohibitive and involve many regulations.<sup>60)</sup> Moreover, the written lawful articles are abstracted by unclear principles and instructions as a specific written manual for collective resistance does not exist. Although the central government desperately attempts to construct and standardize anti-protest strategy, the preexisting response design has proven inadequate to successfully suppress the rapidly changing, frequently occurring popular resistance efforts. In the highly decentralized political environment, the local authorities must improvise and determine the next course of action as the main decision-maker. However, there are numerous real-life elements that require constant adjustments. Furthermore, how the local governments handle protests depends heavily on whether the decision-making personnel grasps the gravity of a given circumstance—as the level of situational comprehension serves as a direct determinant of consequences of any suppressive attempts. In other words, the criteria of anti-protest policies must remain flexible and adjustable as all popular resistance efforts are not identical.

## Conclusion

In sum, the clash between the central political elites—whose objective is to strengthen its authority and legitimacy by interfering in such a highly decentralized political setting—and the local governments—whose intention is to maintain and protect their autonomy—is a drama unique to the post-political reformation era in China. The central authorities have cleverly manipulated the frequently occurring popular resistance efforts as a potent medium for interference

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59) Lu, *Xinxihua tiaojian xia wujingbudu ichuzhi quntixing shijian jizhi yanjiu*, p. 66.

60) Yan & Lin, *Yufang yu chuzhi quntixing shijian dangzhengganbu duben*, p. 128.

as the local governments desperately attempt to avoid political intrusion. The conflicting interests have created the unique dynamics in China's political environment, and such a political implication has further been enhanced as the central government officially institutionalized an anti-corruption plan in 2000. This particular structural change has successfully supported the central's stronger hold on the local governments and the legitimacy of the regime, while the attempt from the local authorities to protect their autonomy enhances the inertia of the current political dynamics between the central and local. The conflict of the differing interests has convinced local authorities of the value of adopting the concession strategy. However, the local governments do not expropriate demands from the protestors upon an occurrence; rather, they are more likely to express concessive attitudes when political interference from the central government is highly likely—especially when faced with the limitations of the initial use of suppression or when there is room for intervention by upper-level governments. It is quite evident that the concession strategy serves as a convenient political escape conduit for the local governments to avoid assuming any responsibilities.

On the one hand, the decentralized political setting has naturally endowed the local governments with the official rights and authorities to suppress any popular protests. That is, any failed attempt to dissolve a rioting incident directly reflects the assumption of the heavy responsibility that local leaders must assume. Therefore, the local authorities interchangeably manipulate the use of coercion and concession—as necessary—to eliminate any possibility of pan-national proliferation of collective resistance.

Conclusively, the pan-national proliferation of Chinese collective protests is highly unlikely as long as the central and local leaders cunningly implement the two politically powerful tools—coercion and concession—when suppressing any occurrence of collective resistance. The ultimate goal of this article was to examine why the pan-national proliferation of China's highly frequent collective protests is seemingly inconceivable. The examination revealed that protest proliferation is hindered by the combinational use of coercion and concession strategies in the highly decentralized, central-local political environment.

This research into the current political and social trends in China may direct any alternative hypothesis toward a new perspective that the authoritarian regime of China must be capable of withstanding any bottom-up collective efforts, as opposed to the conventionally pessimistic opinion regarding the Chinese authorities' ability to maintain stability.<sup>61)</sup> As thoroughly analyzed and determined

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61) Edward Friedman, "A Comparative Politics of Democratization in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, Issue 34 (2003) pp. 103-123; Suisheng Zhao, "Political Liberalization without Democratization: Pan Wei's proposal for political reform," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol 12, Issue 35 (Aug 2003), pp. 333-355; Henry S. Rowen, "When will the Chinese people be free?" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, No, 3 (July 2007), pp. 38-52;

above, as long as the Chinese governing figures cleverly use the coercion and concession strategies when suppressing any events of collective resistance, the Chinese authoritarian regime is likely to remain politically and socially stable despite the presence of frequent collective protests.

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