

Collective Resistance in China



Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail

STUDIES OF THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN
ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

Yongshun Cai

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Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Cai, Yongshun.

Collective resistance in China : why popular protests succeed or fail / Yongshun Cai.

p. cm. — (Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-6339-4 (cloth : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-8047-6340-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Social movements—China. 2. Protest movements—China. 3. Political participation—China. 4. China—Politics and government—1976–2002.
5. China—Politics and government—2002– I. Title. II. Series: Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center.

HN733.5.C365 2010

303.60951'09045—dc22

2009019445

Typeset by Thompson Type in 11/14 Adobe Garamond

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ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center

Andrew G. Walder, General Editor

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Acknowledgments

I received help from many people during the process of writing this book. Over the years, Jean Oi has never hesitated to give me intellectual support and encouragement, and she has continued to be a patient reader of my manuscripts and to offer comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Andrew Walder for his suggestions on the manuscript and for his encouragement. Ever since I became interested in contentious politics in China, I have benefited from, among many others, the works by Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li and from my communications with them. When the book manuscript was under review at the Stanford University Press, Kevin O'Brien was one of the two anonymous reviewers. His comments and suggestions helped me to place the case of China in a broader theoretical context. I also wish to thank the other anonymous reviewer whose insightful suggestions helped me to clarify issues about my framework as well as the process of interactions among the different parties involved in collective resistance in China.

I would like to thank Shi Fayong, Guo Jiguang, and Li Siliang for their assistance in collecting the data for this book. I also wish to thank Virginia Unkefer and Margaret Pinette for their editorial assistance. Research for this book was partly financed by the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (640108) and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (RG008-P-07).

At Stanford University Press, I wish to thank Stacy Wagner and Jessica Walsh for their patience and their support for the book.

Part of Chapter Five originally appeared in "Disaggregating the State: Networks and Collective Resistance in Shanghai" (by Fayong Shi and Yongshun

Cai), *The China Quarterly* (published by Cambridge University Press), volume 186: pp. 314–332 (2006). I wish to thank Cambridge University Press and Fayong Shi for allowing me to include this article in Chapter Five.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support for my research over the years. My wife, Wang Chen, has been the source of support and encouragement ever since I began my academic life. I also wish to thank my daughter, Xinyu, for the joyful moments she has given me. Although she believed that I should write interesting books for kids, she tolerated my spending much time on the research for this project. This book is dedicated to them.

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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