

Fighting the Prairie Fire: Why do Local Party-States in China Respond to Contentious Challengers Differently?

YAN Xiaojun and ZHOU Kai

Why do local officials across China respond differently to societal challengers? In this article, the authors analysed six recent and influential social protests in China—the Dongyang protest (2005), Xiamen protest (2007), Weng’an protest (2008), Shanghai Anti-MagLev Railway Project protest (2008), Shenzhen protest (2008) and Shishou protest (2009). The article demonstrates that disparities in state capacity noticeably affect the trajectories of contentious collective actions and shape government responses in China. Local states in China respond to social protests by dynamically and vigorously assessing their capacity as the social protest develops, and by weighing the probable effectiveness of control measures designated for the locale.

INTRODUCTION

Contentious challenges launched from the peripheries of grassroots society against the highest echelons of the mighty state are not new to China. Through collective action, underprivileged social groups (such as farmers, workers, veterans and pensioners) voice their grievances and pose sensible demands and challenges to the authoritarian regime. Today, with social protests a daily phenomenon in China, the survival of the Communist Party-state hinges on its institutional capacity to process, adapt to and abate a historically high volume of contentious challenges.

Conventional political science scholarship holds that non-democratic regimes must rely overwhelmingly on state coercion and repression when forced to confront emergent societal challenges. As Jack A. Goldstone and Charles Tilly opine, “[a]uthoritarian states tend to be highly reliant on repression while democratic states more often are inclined to a mix of concession and repression or to greater concession”.¹

Yan Xiaojun (xyan@hku.hk) is Associate Professor of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Harvard University. His research interests evolve around political development, authoritarianism, democratisation, local government, contentious politics, comparative historical study of revolution and Chinese reforms.

Zhou Kai (zhoukai926@sjtu.edu.cn) is Assistant Professor in the School of Marxism at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. He obtained his PhD in Political Science from the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include contentious politics, political participation and authoritarianism resilience.

¹ Jack A. Goldstone and Charles Tilly, “Threat (and Opportunity): Popular Action and State Response in the Dynamics of Contentious Action”, in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 188.

Sidney Tarrow explains that autocratic political elites may feel that “giving in to even a trickle of moderate claims will lead to a torrent of more threatening ones”.² He observes that as a result, “[i]n authoritarian settings...repression crushes resistance under most conditions”.³ Matthew Krain provides a succinct synopsis: “[t]he general consensus among scholars is [that]...violence is more likely to be used in non-democracies to quell domestic dissent than in democracies”.⁴

Contrary to this widespread belief, however, the Chinese Communist Party-state has demonstrated considerable variation in its response to contentious challenges over the last decade, particularly at the local level. Despite the regime’s centralisation of power, local governments in China enjoy varying levels of autonomy, and local officials have been granted broad discretionary authority to deal with collective challengers. However, it should be noted that, on many occasions, the state and its societal challengers do not necessarily engage in an antagonistic and confrontational relationship; for various reasons, they are often in the same boat and a win-win solution is not always out of the question. Their relationship is not always contentious.⁵ In China’s case, William Hurst observes that although some states still use ruthless coercive methods to deal with protesters, officials in other regions tend to tolerate (and may even sympathise with) societal challengers.⁶ Of the reported 261 cases of social protest that Cai Yongshun surveyed and collated from 50 newspapers between 1994 and 2007, 78 cases (or 29.9 per cent) showed evidence of concessions (or concessions with discipline) made by the local authorities to subdue protest.⁷ This indicates that even an authoritarian state may use compromise to placate contentious claims-makers.

Why do local officials across the People’s Republic of China (PRC) respond differently to societal challengers? The complexity of state responses in regimes such as China’s merits a great deal of attention from students of contentious politics. Indeed, with ever-increasing social unrest and state responses that vary enormously from case to case, China provides a valuable opportunity for political scientists to study the patterns of state responses to contentious movements. In this article, the authors

² Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 150.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴ Matthew Krain, *Repression and Accommodation in Post-Revolutionary States* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), pp. 135–6.

⁵ The authors would like to thank the anonymous editorial board member of CIJ for this suggestion. For the relationship between the state and its societal challengers, see Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 5. See also Elizabeth J. Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?”, *The China Journal*, no. 57 (January 2007): 1–22. Perry noted in her article that the “rule consciousness” among Chinese societal challengers may lead them to limit the expression of their grievances to the officially approved channels in order to mitigate the chance of negative reprisal.

⁶ William Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 122–7.

⁷ Cai Yongshun, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 18, 44–5.

analysed six recent and influential uprisings in the PRC—the Dongyang protest (2005), Xiamen protest (2007), Weng’an protest (2008), Shanghai Anti-MagLev Railway Project protest (2008), Shenzhen protest (2008) and Shishou protest (2009)—to identify and examine the factors that may lead to differences in the official response to protesters. Due to the limited scale of this study, the authors do not attempt to provide an overarching explanation of all of the state’s responses to social protest in the PRC today; rather, the limited aim is to propose a tentative explanatory framework that may open up interesting lines of future empirical enquiry into China’s increasingly numerous contentious movements.

STATE RESPONSES TO SOCIETAL CHALLENGERS

The state plays a fundamental role in shaping contentious politics through its responses to societal challengers. States and their challengers are “engage[d] in continuous interaction”, both during social protest and outside its confines.⁸ The state is a self-interested actor with considerable autonomy in defining threats, mobilising resources and taking action in response to challengers’ manoeuvres. The existing literature provides three lines of enquiry into the state’s varying responses to social protesters.

The first strand of research addresses the role of a polity’s structural characteristics in shaping or determining its government’s response to protesters. For example, Conway W. Henderson argues that macrostructural variables such as “the degree of democracy, the extent of inequality in society, and economic growth rate go a long way to explain and predict political repression”.⁹ Ted Robert Gurr suggests that political authorities with smaller capacity are more likely to use repression to preserve their economic and political power.¹⁰ However, Tarrow and Krain reached a contrary conclusion, arguing that weak states are more liable to accept concessions because it is extremely dangerous for a weak government to fail in a heavy-handed attempt to repress contentious challenges.¹¹ Hurst points out that local state capacity (especially fiscal capacity) plays an important role in determining state response, as local states that are unable to “buy off” protesters are more inclined to use coercive methods of suppression.¹²

⁸ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 74.

⁹ Conway W. Henderson, “Conditions Affecting the Use of Political Repression”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 1 (March 1991): 120.

¹⁰ Ted Robert Gurr, “The Political Origins of State Violence and Terror: A Theoretical Analysis”, in *Government Violence and Repression: An Agenda for Research*, ed. Michael Stohl and George Lopez (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 45–71.

¹¹ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, pp. 149–50; Krain, *Repression and Accommodation in Post-revolutionary States*, pp. 19–22.

¹² William Hurst, “Understanding Contentious Collective Action by Chinese Laid-off Workers: The Importance of Regional Political Economy”, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 94–120.

The second strand of research addresses the contextual variables. An important example of contextual variable is prior response; a state's response to a current crisis is assumed to be contingent on the effectiveness of past responses to similar events.¹³ The use of repression thus has habitual features, and crises become "situation[s] where decision-makers rely on previously established rules to guide their behavior".¹⁴ External attention, primarily in the form of media coverage, is another important contextual variable. Kurt Schock notes that the "intense media coverage [generated by] violent confrontations between armed state forces and unarmed protesters" encourages uninvolved parties to exert pressure on the state to compromise.¹⁵ In addition, media involvement may help societal challengers in the PRC to voice their claims more effectively.¹⁶

The third line of enquiry addresses the attributes of the protesters, such as their claims, tactics and demographics. Proponents of this approach argued that state response will depend on the type of protesters with which the regime is required to deal. For example, scholars have found that protesters with limited, specific, unambiguous, low-cost, economically driven, isolated demands and those who do not call for the "displacement" of their opponents, are more likely to obtain concessions.¹⁷ In terms of tactics, scholars generally believe that protesters' use of violence (or threat of violence) is counterproductive and provides authorities with an excuse for repression.¹⁸ As to the composition of participants, there are three crucial variables: the scale of participation, the social status of the protest leaders, and the level of organisation of protests. "[T]here always seems to be power in numbers",¹⁹ i.e. the more participants in a collective action, the greater the likelihood of realising a state concession.²⁰ Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden contend that states are more likely to tolerate geographically or

¹³ Gurr, "The Political Origins of State Violence and Terror", pp. 45–71.

¹⁴ Christian Davenport, "The Weight of the Past: Exploring Lagged Determinants of Political Repression", *Political Research Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (June 1996): 379.

¹⁵ Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 43.

¹⁶ Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 61. See also Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*, p. 12.

¹⁷ See William Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 41–6; Scott S. Gartner and Patrick M. Regan, "Threat and Repression: The Non-Linear Relationship Between Government and Opposition Violence", *Journal of Peace Research* 33, no. 3 (August 1996): 273–87.

¹⁸ Peter K. Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities", *American Political Science Review* 67, no. 1 (March 1973): 11–28.

¹⁹ James DeNardo, *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 35.

²⁰ Susanne Lohmann, "A Signaling Model of Informative and Manipulative Political Action", *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (June 1993): 319–33.

institutionally insulated challenges and suppress challenges that cross geographical boundaries or socio-economic sectors.²¹

The rich literature provides keen insights into the patterns of state response to contentious social conflicts. However, the stateside dynamics and rationale underlying the variations in governmental responses to contentious conflicts are underexamined. Based on this examination of the Party-state's responses to six influential, large-scale social protests, the authors argue that state capacity is a crucial factor that shapes the authoritarian regime's reactions to contentious social protests. The authors found that local states with stronger financial, coercive and institutional capacities are more likely to solve large-scale social protests by encouraging angry protesters to bargain and negotiate with the government, and by offering them concessions. By contrast, weak local states tend to be less capable and less willing to negotiate with societal challengers. Compared with their more capable counterparts, weaker local states are more likely to resort to the use of violent state forces to suppress any large-scale social conflicts that may threaten public order, endanger the regime, ruin the political careers of local Party bosses or result in bloodshed.

CASES OF SOCIAL PROTEST IN CHINA

According to Joel S. Migdal, “[f]or those interested in discerning how third-world societies are ruled and the influence of politics on social change, the local level often holds the richest and most instructive hints”.²² Despite the regime's centralisation of power, local governments in China have varying levels of autonomy, and local officials have been granted broad discretionary authority to collectively deal with challengers. The resulting diversity in state response at the local level provides an ideal context for investigating and comparing the factors that shape state responses to social protests under relatively stable macro-level political conditions.

To understand the Chinese authoritarian state's behaviour in dealing with social protests, the authors examined two categories of contentious social conflicts: environmental protests and social riots. Environmental protests are primarily related to environmental or public health concerns, which have become frequent triggers of large-scale collective action in China today. The authors examined the Dongyang (2005), Xiamen (2007) and Shanghai (2008) protests in relation to environmental protests. Social riots, on the other hand, “reflect generalized anger that has built up over time and then is released when an incident, sometimes a relatively minor one, occurs”.²³ As for social riots, the authors studied the Weng'an (2008), Shenzhen (2008)

²¹ Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1–26.

²² Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 88.

²³ Joseph Fewsmith, “An ‘Anger-Venting’ Mass Incident Catches the Attention of China's Leadership”, *China Leadership Monitor* 26 (September 2008), at <<http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM26JF.pdf>> [18 August 2015].

and Shishou (2009) protests. Environment protests and social riots have become striking phenomena of Chinese society in recent years due to citizens' concerns over environment protection or accumulated discontent over local governance.

The authors chose the cases based on the most similar systems design, which controls certain variables through careful selection of paired cases to isolate causal variables and generate explanatory theories. As Arend Lijphart suggests, cases should be "similar in a large number of important characteristics (variables) which one wants to treat as a constant, but dissimilar as far as those variables are concerned which one wants to relate to each other".²⁴ Indeed, the environmental protest and social riot cases that the authors chose to study "differ on the outcome of theoretical interest but are similar on various factors that might have contributed to that outcome".²⁵ Using this methodological framework, the authors sought to exclude alternative explanations by controlling a set of challenger-specific variables and enabling a more accurate examination of the variables of interest.

*The Dongyang Protest*²⁶

In 2001, the local government of Dongyang, in Zhejiang province, began a project to transform 66 hectares of land into an industrial park comprising 13 chemical plants, intending to stimulate the stagnant local economy. Over the subsequent decade, however, the concentration of chemical plants in Dongyang yielded disastrous environmental effects: a nearby river was polluted and the surrounding farmland contaminated. In response, the villagers petitioned government agencies at all levels, demanding the immediate termination of chemical plants responsible for this severe industrial pollution. As all of their complaints were ignored, the residents of Dongyang finally decided to take more aggressive action. On 20 March 2005, a group of village elders occupied the main entrance to the industrial park, setting up tents and blocking the supply of raw materials to the chemical plants inside. The interruption of the daily operations of the industrial park drew the attention of local officials, who despatched a work team that used verbal threats to disperse the protesting crowd. The mission failed. Worse still, the botched negotiation encouraged even more local residents, already outraged by the pollution, to join the ranks of the protesters.

²⁴ Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method", *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (September 1971): 687.

²⁵ John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 131.

²⁶ This brief introduction to the Dongyang protest is based on the following sources: Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "In Riot Village, the Government is on the Run", *South China Morning Post*, 13 April 2005; Song Yuan, "Zhejiang Dongyang huanbao jiufen chongtu zhenxiang" (The Truth of Environmental Conflict in Dongyang of Zhejiang), *Fenghuang zhouban* (*Phoenix Weekly*), no. 13 (May 2005): 20–4; Cui Yadong, "Cong Guizhou Weng'an 6.28 shijian kan xinxingshixia quntixing shijian de yufang yu chuzhi" (Reflections on the Weng'an 6.28 Incident of Guizhou Province: How to Prevent and Handle Mass Incidents under New Conditions), *Gong'an yanjiu* (*Policing Studies*), no. 7 (July 2009): 5–10.

Eventually, the local state decided to take aggressive action. On 10 April 2005, an army of more than 3,500 “law enforcement” personnel, such as officials, police officers and hired security guards, were mobilised to tear down the tents. The state’s heavy-handed deployment of coercive force was met with violent resistance from the locals. More than 30,000 residents reportedly arrived to defend the protesters’ tents, and used rocks and sticks against the armed state employees. To restore order, more professional riot police had to be called in to overpower the protesting crowd using tear gas, clubs and shields. The movement ended in bloodshed. According to a newspaper report, 3,500 law enforcement personnel were deployed, killing more than 10 protesters and injuring a thousand.²⁷

*The Xiamen Protest*²⁸

The Xiamen protest broke out in mid 2007 when residents and activists mobilised to reverse the municipal government’s decision to construct a petrochemical plant producing paraxylene (hence the name “PX” project as is known in China) that they believed to be toxic to the health of local residents and detrimental to the city’s overall safety and environment. The plan to develop the petrochemical industry in the Haicang district of Xiamen was first incorporated into the city’s 1995–2010 zoning plans. The project was approved by the State Council in 2004 and subsequently passed the mandatory environmental impact reviews.

The mood changed in December 2006 after six academics at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering wrote jointly to the municipal government in opposition to the proposed petrochemical plant, citing environmental, health and safety concerns. Shortly afterwards, in March 2007, 105 members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) launched a petition calling for an end to the PX project. The petition was delegated the “No. 1 Proposal” at the plenary session of the CPPCC, and subsequently disseminated to the public, attracting extensive media attention. Activists immediately started to organise collective action online and via mass text messages. Blogs and instant messaging groups were created for concerned citizens to discuss the project, express their anger and propose concrete responses. By the end of May 2007, a text message urging the citizens of Xiamen to take part in a demonstration against the petrochemical project on 1 June was circulated among tens of thousands of residents. The same message was posted on various portal websites and reported by numerous online news outlets. On 1 June

²⁷ “Zhejiang wannongmin baodong shushi si yu qianshang” (Farmers’ Rebellion Caused Dozens of Death and Thousands of Injuries), *Dongfang ribao* (*Oriental Daily News*), 12 April 2005.

²⁸ This brief introduction to the Xiamen protest is based on following sources: Qiu Meihui, “Xiamen haicang PX xiangmu fengbo shimo” (The Story of the Xiamen Haicang PX Incident), *Zhongguo huagongbao* (*China Chemical Industry News*), 4 June 2007; Xie Liangbing, “Xiamen PX shijian” (Xiamen PX Incident), *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban* (*China Newsweek*), no. 20 (June 2007): 17–8; Shao Fangqing, “Zhengxie ti’an beihou” (Behind A Proposal of CPPCC), *Diyi caijing ribao* (*First Financial Daily*), 18 April 2007; John Ruwitch, “Xiamen Mayor Says Street Protests ‘Inappropriate’”, *Reuters*, 6 June 2007.

2007, more than 20,000 Xiamen residents took to the streets and conducted a peaceful demonstration described as “peaceful collective stalking” in front of the municipal government building. The demonstration continued the next day until another anonymous text message called for an end to the protest. Five months later, the municipal government made the final decision to terminate the PX project, and the relevant provincial authorities agreed to relocate the project to another city. The Xiamen protest thus ended peacefully and with full concessions made by the local authorities.

*The Shanghai Protest*²⁹

The target of the Shanghai protest in 2008 was a proposed extension of the city’s magnetic levitation (“MagLev”) railway line. China began its construction of a national high-speed railway transportation system in the late 1990s. The Shanghai municipal government decided to build a couple of MagLev lines for testing purposes, one of which was intended to connect Shanghai and Hangzhou. When the proposed MagLev route was announced in December 2007, citizens living next to the proposed line expressed grave concerns over potential radiation exposure, noise pollution and potential structural damage to their houses caused by vibrations. The frightened residents launched a series of campaigns and petitions, hoping to halt the MagLev’s construction.

On 12 January 2008, approximately 7,000 homeowners living along the proposed MagLev route gathered peacefully at the People’s Square, one of the major public spaces in downtown Shanghai, directly opposite the municipal government compound. As the crowd grew, people started to shout slogans such as “Resist the MagLev!” and “Defend our homes!” By afternoon, the crowd began to march towards Nanjing Road, the busiest commercial boulevard of Shanghai, which is also a major tourist attraction. As the Shanghai police did not try to block the unexpected demonstration but merely segregated the demonstrators from onlookers and tourists, the protesting crowd adopted a new, mellower slogan: “Nanjing Road is good for a walk” (*Nanjing lu, hao sanbu*). The next day, the municipal government issued a series of statements reiterating that the proposed MagLev line was only a tentative plan that had yet to undergo rigorous environmental assessment. It also dispatched vehicles to the relevant residential areas to broadcast through loudhailers the government’s response to the MagLev protests. Meanwhile, Yu Zhengsheng—Shanghai’s top Party cadre and a Politburo member—publicly declared that the municipal government would not rush into making a decision on the MagLev project, and would take into account the interests of the affected citizens. This clearly signalled the government’s interest in forging compromise. A new

²⁹ This brief introduction to the Shanghai protest is based on the following sources: Qin Ailing, “Shanghai sanbu” (Shanghai Stalking), *Nandu zhoukan* (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*), no. 6 (January 2008): 18–23; Qin Lang, “Hu shimin shiwei fan cifu muhou” (Behind the Scenes: Shanghai Citizens Protest against PX), *Yazhou zhoukan* (*Asiaweek*), no. 4 (January 2008): 34–5; Li Xiaoming, “Biaoda yu najian: Shanghaishi yi zhihui yingdui kaoyan” (Expressing Opinion and Taking Advice: Shanghai Copes with Challenges Using Wisdom), *Nanfang zhoumo* (*Southern Weekly*), 17 January 2008.

conventional railway line connecting Shanghai and Hangzhou by a different route was completed in 2010. The municipal government therefore considers the original MagLev proposal to be indefinitely postponed.

*The Weng'an Protest*³⁰

The Weng'an protest originated in Weng'an county, Guizhou province on 22 June 2008 when a female junior middle-school student fell to her death in a river while in the company of three classmates. The local police ruled the student's death a suicide, citing the results of a forensic investigation and an autopsy report. However, this official verdict was rejected by the girl's relatives and friends, who believed the girl was sexually assaulted and then murdered by her classmates. Demanding a thorough re-investigation and RMB500,000 in compensation, the relatives seized the victim's body and set up a makeshift mortuary with provocative banners. This dramatic scene attracted numerous onlookers from both the immediate locality and neighbouring towns over the succeeding days. Rumours started to spread in the public that the perpetrators were the sons of powerful local Party cadres. Despite the publication of the official medical report reaffirming the verdict on 25 June, the girl's relatives persisted to demand financial compensation and threatened to petition a higher authority.

The local government, infuriated by the threat, issued a formal order for immediate removal of the corpse on 28 June 2008. The government's aggressive posturing angered the crowd, especially the deceased's schoolmates. On 28 June, schoolboys marched towards the compound of the local Party-state, holding banners which read "give justice to the people". The news spread fast and wide via modern telecommunications, and more onlookers joined the ranks of the protesters, thereby culminating in a large gathering of approximately 30,000 aggrieved protesters. The army of demonstrators included not only the original core of protesters but also suffering immigrants who were relocated as a result of the hydropower plant construction, farmers who had lost their land, residents victimised by local gangsters, other petitioners with unresolved grievances and enthusiastic onlookers without any specific reasons of involvement. In response to the local Party-state's unwillingness to make any substantial concessions, the protesters became increasingly radical and violent as the march progressed. By late afternoon, the crowd smashed and burned the local police bureau, the Communist Party headquarters and the local government compound. It was reported that the Weng'an protest was eventually suppressed in an aggressive manner, resulting in the detention or arrest of at least 317 participants within a week of the crackdown.

³⁰ The brief introduction to the Weng'an protest is based on the following sources: Qian Zhen, "Weng'an shijian diaocha" (The Investigation of the Weng'an Incident), *Renmin wenzhai* (People's Digest), no. 20 (July 2008): 28–9; Ding Buzhi, "Yige nusheng de si yinbao yizuo cheng" (A Schoolgirl's Death Causes Riot in a City), *Xinwen tiandi* (News Universe), no. 8 (August 2008): 20–3; Liu Zifu, *Xin qunti shijian guan* (A New View of Mass Incidents) (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2009); Luo Huashan, "Jiben chaqing 6.28 shijian fasheng yuanyin" (The Cause of the 6.28 Incident Identified), *Guizhou ribao* (Guizhou Daily), 26 July 2008.

*The Shenzhen Protest*³¹

A series of regulations prohibiting the operation of motorcycle taxis in the city of Shenzhen were put in place in 2003. Despite the official ban, however, unlicensed motorcyclists continued to participate illicitly in this profitable business. On the morning of 7 November 2008, the government decided to take action to stop the illegal operation of motorcycle taxis citywide. Li Guochao, a 31-year-old motorcyclist, was stopped at a checkpoint while transporting a passenger. After the passenger dismounted, Li suddenly accelerated and drove through the checkpoint. A government official reacted by throwing a walkie-talkie at Li, who lost control of his motorbike and hit against a roadside lamp post with great impact. He died shortly after being taken to hospital.

Li's unexpected death shocked his family and friends. At around 1 pm the same day, the Li family—together with more than 20 relatives and friends—put Li's body on display in front of the office of the traffic police. The protesters demanded the arrest of the official who hit Li, in addition to cash compensation of RMB0.6 million. The dramatic scene attracted thousands of onlookers. By 5 pm, more than 2,400 people had gathered at the protest scene, and the crowd swelled to 5,000 protesters by night-time. At 7 pm, a deputy mayor from the Bao'an district of Shenzhen arrived at the protest scene and negotiated with the deceased's family. The local government accepted all of the protesters' demands.

At around 8 pm, however, thousands of onlookers—mostly motorcycle-taxi drivers aggrieved by the city's ban on their transportation business—who waited outside the traffic police office became impatient and violent about the information blackout on the negotiations. When the crowd started to throw stones at the building and smash official vehicles, more than 250 well-equipped riot police intervened, but did not attack the protesters. The local police force exercised considerable restraint at the scene; as a domestic newspaper reported, they “stood in formation at the gate of the police detachment...Stones could not hurt these police officers with shields. Protesters soon ran out of supply of stones and stopped attacking”.³² When the outcomes of the negotiations were announced around midnight, the protesting crowd began to disperse peacefully. The Shenzhen protest thus ended peacefully without the deployment of massive state violence.

³¹ This brief introduction to the Shenzhen Protest is based on the following sources: Liu Yanxun, “Zhiming de jianchagang” (The Fatal Checkpoint), *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* (*China Newsweek*), no. 42 (November 2008): 28–30; Wang Chuanzhen and Peng Yong, “Shenzhenshi Bao'anqu shiyan shijian jiben pingxi” (The Shiyan Incident Ended in Bao'an, Shenzhen), *Xinhua News Agency*, 9 November 2008. “Shenzhen baoli xijing shijian” (Violent Assault on Police in Shenzhen), *Shenghuo xinbao* (*Life News*), 9 November 2008.

³² “Shenzhen fasheng baoli xijing shijian” (Police Assaulted in Shenzhen), *Qingnian shibao* (*Youth Times*), 9 November 2008.

*The Shishou Protest*³³

The Shishou protest was triggered by the accidental death of a young chef, who was found to have fallen from the window of a local hotel, his workplace of four months. Based on a forensic investigation and an unsigned note left in the chef's bedroom, the local police declared his death a suicide. However, the chef's family members refused to accept this official conclusion, citing the normalcy of his recent phone calls. The local residents suggested a series of conspiracy theories. The most widespread was the conjecture that the hotel where the chef worked was a den of drug addicts, and that the hotel owner was closely related to the city's Party cadres who helped to cover up the drug dealings. Some locals speculated that the chef was murdered when he discovered by chance the criminal activities going on at his workplace.

The hotel management and the local government remained silent as the chef's family members and onlookers disseminated these conspiracy theories. To test the limits of their lack of response, the chef's relatives turned the hotel lobby into a makeshift mortuary, attracting tens of thousands of local onlookers. The family members refused to bury the body until a new official inquiry into the cause of death was launched. During the subsequent negotiations, the onlookers began to side with the deceased's family. When the riot police attempted to remove the body by force, more than 2,000 people revolted to prevent them. The violent confrontation surprisingly attracted even more people to the scene, igniting a mass riot on 19 and 20 June 2009. The local police then summoned the riot police from nearby cities and launched two raids to seize control of the building and remove the body. More than 40,000 civilians used bricks, stones and glass bottles to attack the police, and even set up barricades at a major road intersection to block government vehicles' passage to the hotel. More people arrived to join the antagonism against the police. The episode ended on 21 June after the provincial Party chief and the provincial governor arrived at the scene with an additional 5,570 riot police despatched from neighbouring provinces. Only then were the augmented authorities able to forcibly lock down the area and disperse the outraged crowd.

STATE RESPONSES

A comparison of these events clearly shows that the nature and theme of social protest is insufficient in explaining the variations in the state's response to protesters. As outlined in Table 1, the causes of the environmental protests in Dongyang, Xiamen and Shanghai were similar, so were the attributes of the crowds; nonetheless, the local state response differed from case to case. The Xiamen and Shanghai protests ended

³³ This brief introduction to the Shishou protest is based on the following sources: Ouyang Hongliang, "Shishou de fennu" (The Anger of Shishou), *Caijing*, no. 14 (July 2009): 38; Deng Fei, "Shishou shijian de dianxing qingjie" (The Typical Plots in the Shishou Incident), *Fenghuang zhoukan (Phoenix Weekly)*, no. 21 (August 2009): 73–4; Chen Jiang, "Shishou: quntishijian hou de jingmo" (Shishou: the Silence after a Mass Incident), *Nanfang zhoumo (Southern Weekly)*, 31 December 2009.

with the government offering complete concessions after peaceful negotiations, but the Dongyang protest broke out in violence and bloodshed following state suppression. The final outcomes of the Xiamen and Shanghai protests were favourable to the challengers, as the local authorities in both cases abandoned their original, unpopular decisions without exacting violent reprisals. In Dongyang, the local state dealt the incident with heavy-handed suppression and with abject refusal to concede to the villagers' demands, and the industrial park in question thus remained in normal operation.³⁴ It is hence apparent that an environmental cause of unrest neither guarantees governmental concession nor precludes violent state repression. Local governments respond in significantly different ways to social protests of similar or even identical themes/causes.

TABLE 1
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS

	Xiamen Protest	Shanghai Protest	Dongyang Protest
Protesters' Claims	Termination of the PX chemical plant	Termination of the MagLeV project	Termination of chemical plants
Protest Tactics	Peaceful demonstration and occupation	Peaceful demonstration and occupation	Peaceful demonstration and occupation
Number of Participants	Around 20,000	Around 7,000	Around 30,000
State Capacity	Strong	Strong	Weak
State Responses	Concession	Concession	Repression

Sources: Compiled by the authors based on the characteristics of the Xiamen, Shanghai and Dongyang protests.

TABLE 2
SOCIAL RIOTS

	Weng'an Protest	Shishou Protest	Shenzhen Protest
Protesters' Claims	Justice in criminal investigation and damage compensation	Justice in criminal investigation and damage compensation	Justice in criminal investigation and damage compensation
Protest Tactics	Violent riot	Violent riot	Violent riot
Number of Participants	Around 30,000	Around 40,000	Around 5,000
State Capacity	Weak	Weak	Strong
State Responses	Repression	Repression	Concession

Sources: Compiled by the authors based on the characteristics of the Weng'an, Shishou and Shenzhen protests.

³⁴ This article defines the Dongyang protest as a failure case based on two facts. First, the villagers' demand for removal of all of the polluting factories was originally denied by the local authorities. Although six factories were later ordered to relocate, it was because of direct intervention from provincial governments. This outcome was not the local government's voluntary decision. Second, eight villagers who played a leading role in the protest were arrested and sentenced to prison terms from eight months to five years. For details, see Lu Xiangfu, "Zhejiang 4.10 Dongyang Huashui shijian de genyuan yu yanbian" (The Origins and Evolving Developments of 4.10 Dongyang Huashui Incident in Zhejiang), *Minzhu Zhongguo* (*Democratic China*), at <<http://minzhuzhongguo.org/FileData/146issue/146jz8.htm>> [20 August 2017].

As shown in Table 2, the three social riots analysed in this study have many similarities. In each of the three cases, the triggering event was the suspicious death of an innocent victim allegedly at the hands of criminals with close ties to local Party cadres. In each case, what had begun as a peaceful demonstration eventually became a violent confrontation between the protesters and local state authority representatives. However, there were considerable variations in the local states' responses to the more radical and violent protesters. In Weng'an and Shishou, the local Party-state decided to put down the movement by deploying police and paramilitary forces, thus resulting in a large number of injuries and arrests. In Shenzhen, local officials tacitly avoided using repressive violence outright to quell the riot and instead relied on peaceful negotiations and cash compensation. The outcome of the Weng'an and Shishou protests represented a total loss for the challengers: the authority's original decisions were unchanged, and the participants in the movements were severely punished. On the other hand, in Shenzhen, the local state's full concession to the protesters' demands quelled the riot. It is therefore clear that the themes underlying social movements cannot sufficiently explain the state's varying response towards protesters. The question to ask then is why the local authorities in the PRC respond so differently to social movements sharing similar themes and characteristics.

STATE CAPACITY: THE CRUCIAL VARIABLE

The state's responses in these six cases can be roughly divided into two categories: (i) concession (i.e. protesters' demands are met in full without the deployment of excessive state violence); and (ii) repression (i.e. the state remains firm with its decisions and is heavy-handed in the deployment of force to terminate collective actions). While the macrostructural and contextual theses, and challenger-centred theories—stressing either the sociopolitical contexts of protests or attributes of protesters—are the most prominent approaches that researchers have taken in studying the variation in state response, the role of the state is, however, largely overlooked.

In this study, the authors submit that local authorities' responses to protests are shaped by state capacity. State capacity can be best understood as a synthesis of the coercive, fiscal and institutional capacities of the local state apparatus, which are tightly interrelated with local government confidence and capability in effectively solving social conflicts. Local governments with stronger state capacities are more capable of tampering with claimants' demands, making concessions, maintaining effective background deterrence and reaching peaceful compromises with protesters without hurting either public order or the political careers of officials. However, governments with weaker state capacities are less capable of containing protesting crowds and preventing the escalation of initial confrontations. Weaker local states also do not have adequate materials or symbolic resources to resolve conflicts via concession and compromise—in other words, to 'buy off' political stability. State insecurity usually results in an overcautious, hard approach in communications, increased probability of state violence deployment and thus bloodshed.

State Capacity

Upon engaging contentious actors, the strength of a targeted state inevitably influences its perception of the challenge and choice of coping strategies. Nevertheless, scholars have presented rather contrasting findings about the effect of state capacity in shaping state responses. Some scholars observed that a strong state capacity is associated with a high level of tolerance and an increased possibility of concessions made to collective actors.³⁵ Young and Hurst make this explicit point by arguing that leaders in strong states obtain greater bargaining room when negotiating with challengers, as doing so is likely to lead the state to avoid repression.³⁶ But Tarrow stresses that states with weaker capacities are more likely to offer concessions because failed repression could be fatalistic to the regime.³⁷ Christian Davenport also suggests that the more resources for repression the state has at its disposal, the higher the possibility that the state will use repressive strategies due to the lower cost of implementation.³⁸

The authors' examination of the six cases demonstrates that, whether consciously or subconsciously, a local authority's choice of strategy in response to contentious claims can be assessed from the state capacity. In this study, the authors define a state's capacity according to its *coercive* and *fiscal capacity* and the *strength of its state institutions*.³⁹ Coercive capacity measures the material- and personnel-related resources and means available to local authorities to monitor and curtail protests. Fiscal capacity not only maintains a state's coercive means, but also represents resources the local government can use to "buy off" protesters and accommodate their claims. In China's political context, institutional capacity is measured primarily according to the efficacy of the local communist Party-state and its capacity to mobilise resources.

From State Capacity to State Response

The authors further suggest that state capacity, as a crucial shaping force of state response, has to operate through a series of state control mechanisms over social protesters. "State control mechanism" refers to the coping strategies utilised by states to engage and contain collective actors. For authoritarian rulers, brutal repression may not be the only way of response to societal challengers. It is very likely that authorities demobilise collective actions in which challengers confine themselves to the streets

³⁵ Ted Robert Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State", *Comparative Political Studies* 21, no. 1 (April 1988): 45–65.

³⁶ Joseph K. Young, "State Capacity, Democracy, and the Violation of Personal Integrity Rights", *Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 4 (November 2009): 283–300; Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism*, pp. 30–1.

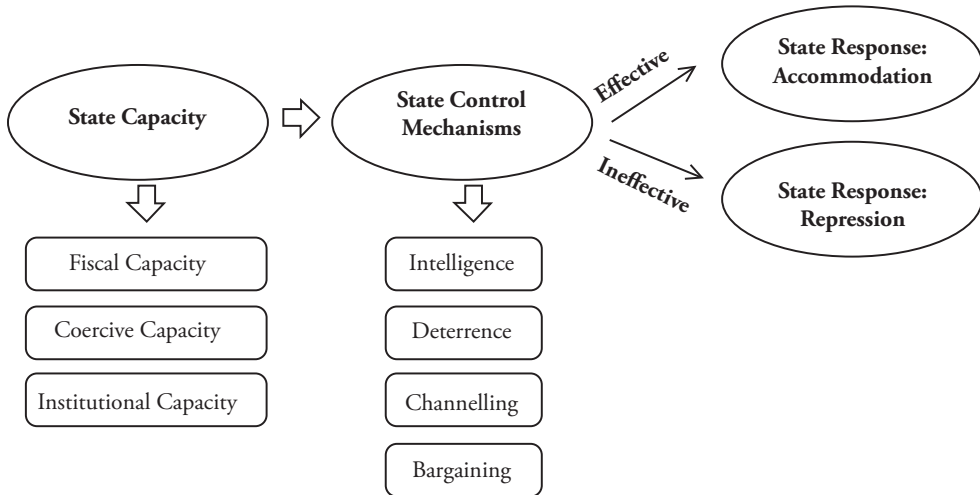
³⁷ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, pp.149–50.

³⁸ Christian Davenport, "Multi-Dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry into Why States Apply Negative Sanctions", *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 3 (August 1995): 683–713.

³⁹ Cullen S. Hendrix, "Measuring State Capacity: Theoretical and Empirical Implications for the Study of Civil Conflict", *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 3 (May 2010): 273–85.

through non-violent or “soft” means, rather than immediately respond with brutal crackdowns. In China today, it is rare that the police force would fire on the crowds or otherwise repress a collective action in a high-profile, violent manner. Instead, the authorities would rather seek to employ more sophisticated strategies to intervene the claim-making processes of collective actions, interact with protesters, defuse tensions and contain contentious challenges.

Figure 1. An Explanatory Framework for Analysing State Response to Social Protest



Upon examining the cases, the authors proposed that the Chinese authoritarian state possesses a diverse range of control mechanisms—namely, *intelligence*, *deterrence*, *channelling* and *bargaining*—to engage protesters and manage collective actions on the ground (Figure 1). Through state control mechanisms, officials aim to isolate the protest scene, ensure protesters exercise self-restraint or even demand cooperation from challengers. Once these control mechanisms are effectively implemented, governments will tend to adopt non-repressive tactics towards social protesters. On the contrary, the authorities are more inclined to revert to repressive methods to terminate collective actions when control mechanisms prove to be ineffective, with symptoms of increasing protest scale, hostility and protesters’ insistent refusal to compromise or consider offers.

Intelligence refers to the information-gathering and early-warning efforts that inform officials about and prepare them for upcoming collective actions. Intelligence closely affects official readiness to react to and deal with contentious challenges. If the authorities obtain early warning about a potential collective action, they will have a higher chance to intervene through preemptive methods such as detaining protest organisers and reserving adequate police strength. Intelligence also accentuates the importance of information-gathering efforts sponsored by state actors on potentially contentious challenges ranging from narrow interest-based protests to broad anti-regime campaigns, or any other collective actions that may interrupt social stability. Preemptive

preparation based on this information reduces the potential for panic attacks or exaggerated threat assessments so that authorities can react with calm and confidence to confront the challengers.

Deterrence involves despatching coercive forces to maintain social order and stop any potential escalations. Chinese authorities adopt this strategy to quickly maintain public order and prevent escalation of emergent protests. In the authoritarian context, protests are commonly viewed as “illegal” collective actions that interrupt social order and local governance. Although immediate repression may not be applicable, the objective in despatching a police force to the scene is to gain firm control of the development of collective actions and to thwart protesters’ attempts to escalate the situation. Massive police deployment has a twofold deterrent effect. First, it poses psychological threats or fear among the protesters, thus deterring severe confrontation. The protesters’ fear of repression would dissuade them from carrying out any acts of violence, vandalism or other aggressive actions when a police force is brought in on standby. Second, the police presence also ensures that local officials enjoy maximum leverage in the channelling and bargaining processes. The deployment of a police force could boost officials’ confidence to interact with participants and also signal the possible use of state violence if protesters refuse to “negotiate” with the authorities.

As for *channelling* mechanisms, officials can persuade angry protesters to direct their grievances to government-sanctioned, institutionalised dispute resolution forums. Local officials will attempt to convince agitated protesters to abandon their rabble-rousing for alternative means of redress, such as filing collective petitions, submitting to collective bargaining or resorting to legal procedures. In any given situation, officials will approach the protesting crowd, investigate the causes of their collective action and their demographics, and identify the organisers. They will also remind protesters of the illegality of their protest and urge them to redirect their concerns through institutionalised channels. The channelling efforts serve three basic functions: first, it helps the authorities understand the protesters’ grievances and demands; second, it pacifies the protesters’ emotions when authorities show their attention and responsiveness; and third, it facilitates a start to the bargaining process.

Bargaining is the process of negotiation between social protesters and government officials that aims to reach an agreement which is satisfactory to both parties. From the perspective of the protesters, the act of protest itself is, to some extent, a bargaining chip that enables social groups without political leverage to influence decision-makers. In the practice of contentious politics, protesters anticipate engaging with state officials to achieve their desired outcomes and to explore opportunities to negotiate with representatives of the targeted state and resolve their concerns when they decide to launch collective action. While the protesters’ objective is to seek fulfilment of their demands, state actors hope for the collective actions to end as quickly and quietly as possible. From the state perspective, bargaining is a useful strategy for containing and pacifying aggrieved protesters, demobilising collective actions and settling cases by non-repressive means.

Despite the wide deployment of such control mechanisms as *intelligence*, *deterrence*, *channelling* and *bargaining* by states to cope with contentious challenges, the efficiency varies from government to government. For instance, governments with solid fiscal resources, sufficient police personnel and deeply entrenched bureaucratic organisations tend to be more capable of handling contentious challenges. In terms of *intelligence*, wealthy states devote their resources to recruitment of more police officers, provision of rewards for informants and investment in modern surveillance technologies. An adequately formidable police force is the foundation of community stability and has the capability to react to emergent situations. Entrenched bureaucracies permit states to penetrate grassroots society and collect strategic information. In terms of *deterrence*, the fiscal capacity of governments is fundamental to building and maintaining a strong police force, which directly affects the effectiveness of deterrence. Additionally, rich states have more resources and capabilities to recruit, train and ultimately deploy large numbers of police officers than states with manpower and equipment shortages. The efficacy of *channelling* mechanisms is contingent upon the institutional strength—i.e. states with strong bureaucracies are more likely to efficiently mobilise government agencies, local cadres and mass organisations to implement commands when engaging with contentious challengers. By logic, wealthier states have more *bargaining* room than their poorer counterparts. Fiscal capacity is therefore a decisive factor in how states can effectively confront social protesters, giving the states options to “buy stability” (*huaqian mai pingan*) by offering economic compensation, emergency funds and other monetary solutions.

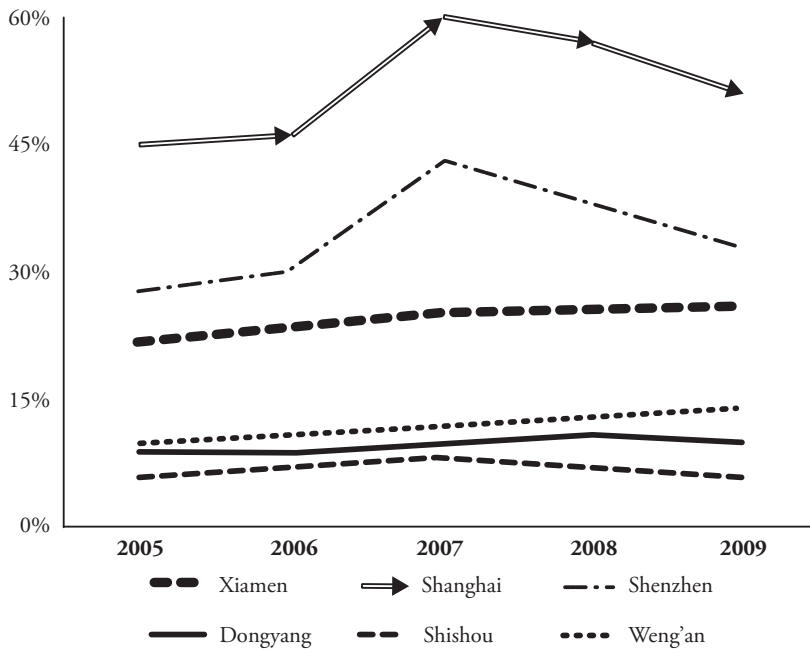
By contrast, weak states have only restricted response options to handle protest events. States with limited fiscal resources, inadequate police forces and dysfunctional bureaucratic apparatus tend to respond sluggishly to potential contentious collective actions, and employees may be less motivated to fulfil their information-gathering duties. If contentious challenges suddenly break out, it may be difficult for the authorities to muster adequate coercive forces for deterrence and bureaucratic resources to conduct channelling work in a timely manner. Without the presence of a strong police force on the ground, officials are less confident about their physical safety and tend to perceive upset protesters as threats when engaging them. Moreover, bargaining may become an unpleasant process under such circumstances because weak states cannot afford to offer monetary solutions, hence leading to negotiation deadlock and protest escalation. This results in a vicious circle, whereby weak state actors are more likely to label protest participants as troublemakers, state enemies or terrorists posing substantial threat to regional stability and thus adopt repressive tactics to end collective actions.

COMPARING VARIATIONS IN THE STATE CAPACITY

The authors suggest that variations in state capacity may have significantly shaped the Chinese local states’ responses to social protest in the six cases. In this study, the authors used specific metrics to quantify the coercive, fiscal and institutional resources

of the local Party-states. The number of police officers per 100,000 residents serves a measure of the coercive capacity at each locale. To measure fiscal capacity, two operational indicators are used: (i) total revenue/gross domestic product (GDP) ratio; and (ii) per capita GDP. The first indicator measures the extractive capacity of the local Party-state, and the second measures the overall economic development of the local authority and the material resources it possesses. Although the authorities involved in the case studies have different levels of jurisdiction within the sprawling Chinese

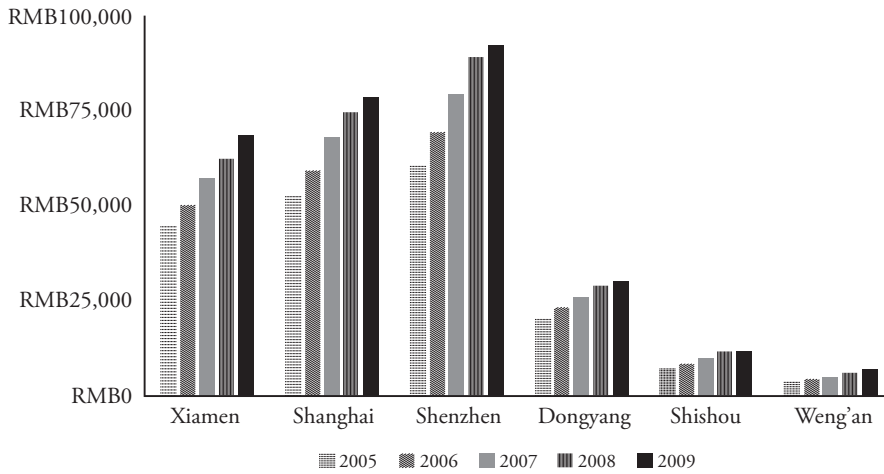
Figure 2. Total Revenue/GDP Ratio



Notes: "Total revenue/GDP Ratio" refers to the government's tax revenue as a percentage of GDP. The nominal GDP is adjusted by the consumer price index (CPI) (Adjusted data=Nominal data/CPI *100).

Sources: For total revenue, see *Xiamen jingji tequ nianjian* (XJTN, *Xiamen Special Economic Zone Yearbook*) 2010, p. 344; *Shanghai tongji nianjian* (STNJ, *Shanghai Statistical Yearbook*) 2007, p. 10; *STNJ 2009*, p. 11; *STNJ 2010*, p. 5. *Shenzhen nianjian* (SZNJ, *Shenzhen Yearbook*) 2006, p. 452; *SZNJ 2007*, p. 406; *SZNJ 2008*, p. 298; *SZNJ 2009*, p. 351; *SZNJ 2010*, p. 291. *Guizhou nianjian* (GZNJ, *Guizhou Yearbook*) 2006, p. 442; *GZNJ 2007*, p. 488; *GZNJ 2008*, p. 522; *GZNJ 2009*, p. 512; *GZNJ 2010*, p. 527. *Jingzhou tongji nianjian* (JTNJ, *Jingzhou Statistical Yearbook*) 2006, p. 164; *JTNJ 2007*, p. 57; *JTNJ 2008*, p. 54; *JTNJ 2009*, p. 54; *JTNJ 2010*, p. 42. *Zhejiang tongji nianjian* (ZTNJ, *Zhejiang Statistical Yearbook*) 2006, p. 640; *ZTNJ 2007*, p. 612; *ZTNJ 2008*, p. 573; *ZTNJ 2009*, p. 549; *ZTNJ 2010*, p. 551. For GDP, see *XJTN 2010*, p. 250. *STNJ 2007*, p. 10; *STNJ 2009*, p. 10; *STNJ 2010*, p. 4. *Shenzhen jingji tequ nianjian* (SZJTN, *Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Yearbook*) 2010, p. 30. *Guizhou nianjian* (GZNJ, *Guizhou Yearbook*) 2006, p. 442; *GZNJ 2007*, p. 488; *GZNJ 2008*, p. 522; *GZNJ 2009*, p. 512; *GZNJ 2010*, p. 527. ; *JTNJ 2006*, p. 76; *JTNJ 2007*, p. 56; *JTNJ 2008*, p. 53; *JTNJ 2009*, p. 52; *JTNJ 2010*, p. 40. *ZTNJ 2006*, p. 638; *ZTNJ 2007*, p. 610; *ZTNJ 2008*, p. 571; *ZTNJ 2009*, p. 547; *ZTNJ 2010*, p. 549. For CPI, see *XJTN 2006*, p. 332; *XJTN 2008*, p. 325; *XJTN 2010*, p. 346. *STNJ 2007*, p. 10; *STNJ 2009*, p. 11; *STNJ 2010*, p. 5. *SZJTN 2010*, p. 228. Due to the lack of CPI data in Weng'an, Qiannan prefecture's CPI data (Weng'an is under its jurisdiction) was used instead, at <http://www.qiannan.gov.cn/qnpublic/auto475/201208/t20120816_29716.html> [11 October 2013]. *JTNJ 2006*, p. 175; *JTNJ 2007*, p. 60; *JTNJ 2008*, p. 58; *JTNJ 2009*, p. 62; *JTNJ 2010*, p. 50, at <<http://www.stats-dy.gov.cn/gbnj.aspx?class=9>>; <<http://www.stats-dy.gov.cn/shownews.aspx?id=910>> [20 November 2013]. Due to the lack of 2009 Dongyang CPI data, this figure uses the 2009 Jinhua City CPI data (Dongyang is under its jurisdiction) instead.

Figure 3. Per Capita GDP



Notes: “Per capita GDP” refers to total GDP divided by total population. The total revenue data is adjusted by the consumer price index (CPI) (Adjusted data=Nominal data/CPI *100).

Sources: The GDP and CPI data are the same as those in Figure 1. For population data, see *Xiamen jingji tequ nianjian 2010* (Xiamen Special Economic Zone Yearbook 2010), p. 289. *Shanghai tongji nianjian* (STNJ, Shanghai Statistical Yearbook) 2007, p. 36; STNJ 2009, p. 10; STNJ 2010, p. 4. *Shenzhen jingji tequ nianjian 2010* (Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Yearbook 2010), p. 29. *Guizhou nianjian* (GZNJ, Guizhou Yearbook) 2006, p. 442; GZNJ 2007, p. 488; GZNJ 2008, p. 522; GZNJ 2009, p. 512; GZNJ 2010, p. 527. *Jingzhou tongji nianjian* (JTNJ, Jingzhou Statistical Yearbook) 2006, p. 76; JTNJ 2007, p. 56; JTNJ 2008, p. 53; JTNJ 2009, p. 52; JTNJ 2010, p. 40. *Zhejiang tongji nianjian* (ZTNJ, Zhejiang Statistical Yearbook) 2006, p. 638; ZTNJ 2007, p. 610; ZTNJ 2008, p. 571; ZTNJ 2009, p. 547; ZTNJ 2010, p. 549.

administrative hierarchy, none of them are central authorities; to facilitate analysis, the authors therefore defined all of the locales in this study as “local states”. Notwithstanding, the size of local resources depends on jurisdiction size, and the resulting differences are factored in the relative ratios used to quantify coercive and fiscal attributes (the number of police officers per 100,000 citizens, the total revenue/GDP ratio and the per capita GDP) to allow for comparison. The data collection between 2005 and 2009 provides an overview of the capacities of local authorities in Dongyang, Xiamen, Shanghai, Weng’an, Shenzhen and Shishou.

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, Xiamen, Shanghai and Shenzhen have a significant advantage over Dongyang, Weng’an and Shishou in terms of fiscal capacity. The authorities in Xiamen, Shanghai and Shenzhen have more room to manoeuvre to satisfy public demand, and the authorities in Dongyang, Weng’an and Shishou are less able to satisfy expensive requests. For example, the local authority in Dongyang was unable to decommission the polluting chemical plants to assuage the political tensions because the plants provided about a quarter of the local government’s revenue.⁴⁰ Financial reliance has forced the government to prioritise its support for this industry

⁴⁰ Zou Jianfeng, “Yige feifa gongye yuanqu de huanbao weiji” (An Illegal Industrial Park’s Crisis on Environment Protection), *Zhongguo jingji shibao* (China Economic Times), 8 June 2005.

which happens to be both environmentally and socially damaging. By contrast, in Xiamen, despite the expected benefits that its proposed giant chemical plant project would generate for the local economy, the government did not desperately need the revenue due to its ample taxation base. Thus, the local authorities in Xiamen were able to easily abandon the project when the protests became intense and socially destabilising.

TABLE 3
COMPARISONS OF NUMBER OF POLICE OFFICERS PER 100,000 CITIZENS IN XIAMEN, SHANGHAI, SHENZHEN, DONGYANG, WENG'AN AND SHISHOU

	Police Officers	Population	Police Officers per 100,000 Citizens
Xiamen	4,021	2,430,000	165
Shanghai	46,000	18,884,600	244
Shenzhen	18,000	8,768,300	205
Dongyang	550	797,700	69
Weng'an	290	450,000	64
Shishou	400	633,800	63

Notes: The number of police officers per 100,000 citizens is based on the year the protests occurred, e.g. Xiamen protest in 2007. As data on police officers per 100,000 citizens in the Shishou protest in 2009 and the Dongyang protest in 2005 are inaccessible, the authors used the 2010 data for Shishou and 2006 data for Dongyang.

Sources: *Xiamen jingji tequ nianjian 2010 (Xiamen Special Economic Zone Yearbook 2010)*, p. 289; *Shanghai tongji nianjian 2009 (Shanghai Statistical Yearbook 2009)*, p. 10; *Shenzhen jingji tequ nianjian 2010 (Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Yearbook 2010)*, p. 29; *Zhejiang nianjian 2006 (Zhejiang Yearbook 2006)*, p. 638; *Guizhou nianjian 2009 (Guizhou Yearbook 2009)*, p. 512; *Jingzhou tongji nianjian 2010 (Jingzhou Statistical Yearbook 2010)*, p. 40; Cui Yadong, "Cong Guizhou Weng'an 6.28 shijian kan xinxing shixia quntixing shijian de yufang yu chuzhi" (Reflections on Weng'an 6.28 Incident of Guizhou Province: How to Prevent and Handle Mass Incidents under New Conditions), *Gong'an yanjiu (Policing Studies)*, no. 7 (July 2009): 8; Zhuang Zhunmin, "Dali peiyu renmin jingcha hexin jiazhiguan" (Making Great Efforts to Cultivate Core Values of the Police), *Shanghai gong'an gaodeng zhuanke xuexiao xuebao (The Journal of Shanghai Police College)* 19, no. 5 (October 2009): 5; Hu Donghan, "Shenzhen jiang chudong baceng jingli huwei huojia" (Shenzhen Despatches 80 Per Cent Police Force to Xiamen, Dong Yan and Shishou), *Shenzhen tequbao (Shenzhen Daily)*, 5 May 2008. For the number of police in Xiamen, Dongyang and Shishou, see <http://xm.cnr.cn/xwpd/zjxm/200608/t20060830_504280792.html>; <<http://www.dongyang.gov.cn/dongyang/dysq/dynj/2009/zfwz/81368.shtml>>; and <<http://www.hbcz.cn/arkcms/UploadFile/20111217063450989.doc>> [20 November 2013].

Xiamen, Shanghai and Shenzhen were found to have a higher ratio of police officers per 100,000 citizens, compared to Dongyang, Weng'an and Shishou (Table 3). Furthermore, the Dongyang, Weng'an and Shishou authorities had fewer material reserves to draw on for monitoring or controlling social movements. For example, a Chinese researcher reported that the local police involved in the Weng'an incident had only two anti-riot guns, 15 bullets and eight walkie-talkies at their disposal for the entire county.⁴¹ In Shishou, the local state's weakness is best illustrated by the local police's two failed attempts to remove the victim's body from the protest scene.⁴² Due

⁴¹ Cui, "Cong Guizhou Weng'an 6.28 shijian kan xinxingshixia quntixing shijian de yufang yu chuzhi" (Reflections on the Weng'an 6.28 Incident of Guizhou Province: How to Prevent and Handle Mass Incidents under New Conditions).

⁴² Ren Bo, "Shishou wenze weiliaojia" (The Unfinished Enquiry for Accountability in Shishou), *Shidai zhoubao (Times Weekly)*, 30 June 2009.

to the lack of local law enforcement, the Dongyang authorities had to hire private security guards and recruit temporary personnel to put down the movement.⁴³ Local authorities may fall into a confidence crisis because of a lack of resources, prompting them to panic rather than engage in any substantive deliberation of claims. By contrast, richer authorities such as those in Xiamen, Shanghai and Shenzhen had more room to consider protesters' claims.

Among various local states, the efficacy and mobilisation capacity of state institutions also contrast remarkably. Local Party-states are responsible for establishing various institutions for mobilisation and control, including local Party branches, village committees, resident committees, district offices, mass organisations, public security organisations and local militia. The local state in Weng'an was in a weak and perhaps even fragile position on the eve of the protest. The ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) experienced great difficulties recruiting younger members from this region. In fact, just 17.5 per cent of the county's CPC members were under the age of 35 at the time of the protest, much lower than the national average; and more than half of the overall local Party membership was comprised of uneducated peasants.⁴⁴ The institutions that are supposed to safeguard social stability were either non-existent or understaffed in Weng'an. One local people's representative (i.e. member of the local quasi-legislature) described the situation as follows:

Even the local mafia is much more powerful than the police. They can mobilise 500 people in five minutes, and the police cannot even summon equivalent manpower in two hours. Whereas the local state has difficulty in mediating certain disputes, by contrast, the mafia can often resolve them within minutes.⁴⁵

At the institutional level, the local authorities in Weng'an were too weak to either resolve a collective action via negotiation or suppress a mass movement.

When the local Party-state decided to despatch 156 working groups into every neighbourhood of the city to persuade and pacify angry citizens participating in the Shishou protest, it found that none of the groups was able to fulfil the task.⁴⁶ In fact, according to journalists' accounts, many of the Party cadres and local government officials at the service of the Party-state turned their back on the regime. Several local cadres joined the ranks of the protesters, and some deliberately leaked to the public information related to the Party-state's dealings with the protest.⁴⁷ Before and during the protests, these local Party-states were institutionally weak and unfit, unable to either iron out the escalating social tensions or engage in any meaningful negotiations with the protesters.

⁴³ Song, "Zhejiang Dongyang Huangbao Jiufen Chongtu Zhenxiang" (The Truth of Environmental Conflict in Dongyang of Zhejiang).

⁴⁴ Liu, *Xin quntishijian guan* (A New View of Mass Incidents), p. 115.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴⁶ Ren, "Shishou wenze weiliaoju" (The Unfinished Enquiry for Accountability in Shishou).

⁴⁷ Deng, "Shishou shijian de dianxing qingjie" (The Typical Plots in the Shishou Incident), pp. 73–4.

Xiamen, Shanghai and Shenzhen, however, provide a different scenario. Out of Xiamen's Party membership of 126,678 members, 41.31 per cent are below the age of 35 and 47.77 per cent have university education. The Shanghai Chapter of the CPC boasts about 1.64 million members of whom 22.54 per cent are below 35 years old and 46.37 per cent of the Party members in that chapter have at least one university degree. Shenzhen's local Party branch has 318,879 Party members, of whom 77.7 per cent have a college degree and 48.8 per cent are under the age of 35.⁴⁸ As is evident, each of these three cities is thus governed by a Party-state that is strong enough to attract younger and better-educated representatives. The authorities, as a result of more young blood, have greater drive and enthusiasm to better mobilise and exercise social control. On several evenings before and after the 1 June 2007 "peaceful collective stalking", the Party-state of Xiamen's Haicang district (the area most affected by the unrest) sent cadres to every household to ascertain public opinion and concerns about the PX project, and the official women's organisation, university and youth communist leagues, as well as residence committees were also mobilised to pacify the enraged public.⁴⁹ In Shanghai, the state mobilised a local legal-services association and dozens of law firms to provide consultation services to concerned residents.⁵⁰ In Shenzhen, the authorities managed to call on those cadres who were originally from the same hometown as the deceased to facilitate negotiations and ease tensions at the scene.⁵¹ In each case, the state's strong institutional capacity ensured that the unrest remained under control, as the local authorities had confidence in their ability to negotiate with the angry citizens and resolve the dispute in a non-violent manner.

Furthermore, the disparities in fiscal, coercive and institutional capacity have shaped different scenarios in the implementation of *intelligence*, *deterrence*, *channelling* and *bargaining* mechanisms. For example, the local authorities in Xiamen and Shanghai received early warnings from their informants and via internet surveillance systems about the upcoming collective actions.⁵² This facilitated the deployment of police forces to the scene and the channelling work afterwards. Despite being caught off guard by the incident, the Shenzhen authorities' strong coercive forces and fiscal powers had ensured their control over angry protesters in the deterrence, channelling and

⁴⁸ Due to the unavailability of the 2008 Shenzhen data, the authors used the 2009 demographic data instead. See Zhang Ping, "Woshi 35sui yixia dangyuan bili zhunian dizeng" (The Party Members under Age 35 Increase Annually in Shenzhen), *Shenzhen tequbao (Shenzhen Special Zone Daily)*, 17 May 2010. For the Shanghai data, see the CPC Shanghai Branch's statistical communiqué of 2008, at <<http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node2314/node2319/node12344/userobject26ai19396.html>> [18 August 2015]. For the Xiamen data, see *Xiamen Government Website*, at <http://www.xm.gov.cn/xmyw/200710/t20071012_188377.htm> [18 August 2015].

⁴⁹ "Gongtong beijia zhenxi an'ding tuanjie lianghao jumian" (Treasuring the Good Condition of Stability and Solidarity), *Xiamen ribao (Xiamen Daily)*, 2 June 2007.

⁵⁰ Yang Wanguo and Wu Di, "Shanghai cixuanfu zhenglunxia de minyi shudao" (Channelling Public Opinion over the Maglev Train in Shanghai), *Xinjingbao (The Beijing News)*, 22 January 2008.

⁵¹ Liu, "Zhiming de jianchagang" (The Fatal Checkpoint), pp. 28–30.

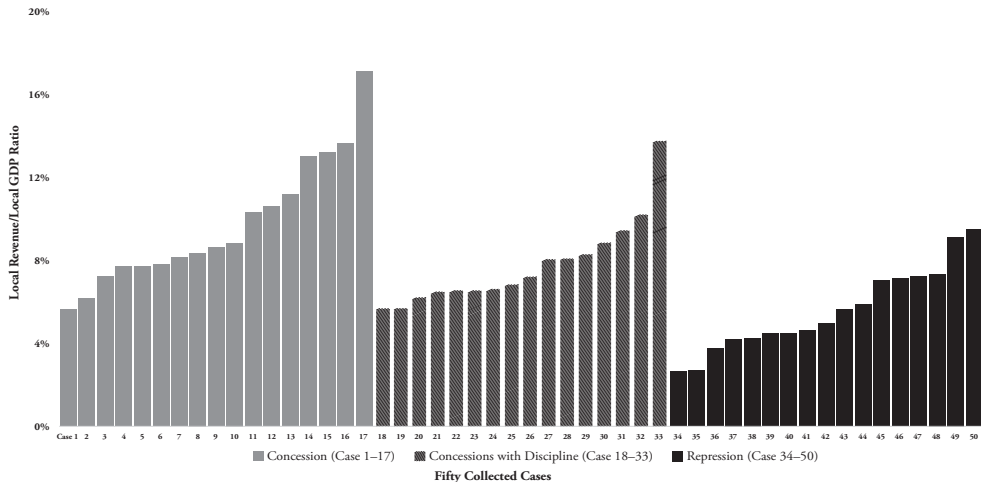
⁵² Zhu Hongjun and Su Yongtong, "Minyi yu zhihui gaibian Xiamen" (Public Opinion and Wisdom Change Xiamen), *Nanfang zhoumo (Southern Weekly)*, 20 December 2007.

bargaining processes. It is apparent that the authorities in Xiamen, Shanghai and Shenzhen effectively applied state control mechanisms on protesting crowds and managed the whole claim-making processes with success and solutions that accommodated the protesters.

By contrast, for the Dongyang, Weng’an and Shishou protests, the officials had no information at all about potential collective actions. The Party secretary of Weng’an, Wang Qin, recounted that the government was caught off guard and totally stranded since no one, not even the police “informants”, provided any early warnings of the street protest that rallied hundreds of protesters.⁵³ Worse still, inadequate police manpower, limited financial resources and dysfunctional bureaucracy all contributed to the state’s failure in containing the protests, thereby leading to further escalation and the eventual state repression. This clearly demonstrates that each of the three dimensions of state capacity—coercive and fiscal capacities, and institutional strength—plays a pivotal role in shaping local states’ response strategies towards social protesters.

Besides the six case studies, the authors attempted to highlight the effects of fiscal capacity on state responses to popular protests (Figure 4). Fiscal capacity, despite functioning as a dimension of state capacity, is actually associated with local states’ coercive and institutional strength (e.g. increasing the manpower, equipment acquisition, mobilising social resources). It is evident from the analysis of 50 recent popular protest cases that local states with a stronger fiscal capacity are more likely to make concessions and exert little discipline control over protesters, whereas weaker states tend to use repression to terminate contentious challenges.

Figure 4. Fiscal Capacity and State Responses



Sources: The authors’ database. The database contains 50 protest cases (25 environment protests and 25 social riots) which occurred at the local level from 2008 to 2016.

⁵³ Zhao Peng et al., “Weng’an shijian beihou” (The Story behind Weng’an Incident), *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* (Outlook Weekly), no. 28 (July 2008): 10–1.

In this article, the authors suggest that the response of Chinese local governments to social unrest is shaped by the state capacity of individual jurisdictions and is also contingent on the strategic interaction between the state and its societal challengers, as determined by the effectiveness of the local arsenal of control mechanisms (i.e. intelligence, deterrence, channelling and bargaining). Thus, no single variable can fully predict the local Party-state's potential decisions, which involve multidimensional and complex decision-making, when it has to deal with collective societal challengers. However, it also becomes crystal clear that state capacity is the central factor connecting different veins of strategic vetting in this complex process. For one thing, state capacity determines the effectiveness of and level of implementation of state control measures over societal challengers. This in turn contributes to officials' perception about the level of threat and their consequential choice between stepping up repression or devising concessional solutions. Local Party-states, because of their varying state capacity, often have different thresholds for threat perception and may respond very differently to protests even if they are of similar size and scope.

This article by no means suggests that local state capacity exclusively determines the decision-making process of deriving the state's response to contentious challenges. Other variables that may affect the local states' choices of response to social challengers include intervention by higher levels of government and the ideological stance of local authorities. Investigation into higher authorities' intervention and the ideological stance of local officials involves deeper analysis of rationale and causality, both of which are beyond the scope of this article.

PROTEST STRATEGY AND ORGANISATION LEVEL

It is still debatable whether protest strategies or organisation levels explain the variation in state action. The six case studies were cross-examined in order to consider these two explanatory variables. The authors found out there are two distinct *protest strategies*. Protesters in the Xiamen and Shanghai incidents consciously adopted non-violent methods. They carefully evaluated the local authority's legal and political tolerance limits, and used non-incendiary language to state their claims. Protesters in the Weng'an and Shishou incidents, however, did not show the same level of rationality and deliberation. This attracted many onlookers with unrelated claims to use confrontation as an opportunity to vent long-term accumulated grievances. In both the Weng'an and Shishou cases, the escalating tension and protesters' eventual use of mob violence might have reinforced the state's perception of the danger it faced. However, protest tactics may not be able to fully explain the local authorities' choice of response. For instance, protesters in the Shenzhen protest adopted violent tactics similar to those in the Weng'an and Shishou incidents, such as smashing the windows of police buildings and damaging police vehicles. Nevertheless, with their strong coercive capacity and financial resources, the Shenzhen authorities considered the riot merely a controllable social disorder rather than a dire threat. Despite Dongyang protesters' relatively peaceful

demonstration, the authorities' weak state capacity in the region encouraged local officials to label the movement a serious incident that threatened regime stability, and this thus led to repressive action.

Furthermore, protesters' *organisation level* is also not the sole factor to explain the state response. For instance, despite the good coordination of Dongyang protesters by local solidarity groups,⁵⁴ the local state's weak financial, coercive and institutional capacities led its officials to perceive these highly disciplined protesters as manipulated by a handful of individuals with ulterior motives to disrupt social order, hence viewing them as a threat to be addressed by state violence. By contrast, the local authorities in Shenzhen did not feel greatly threatened in the face of a disorganised and violent mob that attacked the police and destroyed buildings. Shenzhen's greater tolerance can be attributed to its strong capacities—i.e. financial capacity to accommodate protesters' monetary claims and coercive capacity to mobilise a large team of well-equipped riot police on demand.

CONCLUSION

Will H. Moore argues that “states are purposive actors that are capable of acting strategically” to shape contentious politics.⁵⁵ The Chinese Party-state is certainly not a passive adjudicator on which type of contentious challengers would impose their will on the state. Rather, the Party-state is an active player in the nexus of ongoing social contention, and currently it is at an advantageous position. A good understanding of the motivations, rationales and processes underlying local governments' choice of protest-response strategies is vital to comprehending China's growing contentious movements.

This study demonstrates that disparities in state capacity noticeably affect the trajectories of contentious collective actions and shape government responses in authoritarian regimes. State capacity is a multidimensional concept encompassing essential elements of coercive, fiscal and institutional capacity. Local governments with stronger fiscal resources, coercive forces and institutional competence are more confident in interacting with protesters and in effectively managing protest events, including pacifying protesters, mediating protests and providing material compensation. By contrast, weaker governments are less capable of containing the development of contentious challenges and are therefore more likely to be threatened by protesting crowds, thereby leading to escalation and state violence. Moreover, protesting crowds' attributes, such as protest tactics and campaign organisation, are contingent on the state's definition of its coercive, fiscal and institutional capacities to deal with contentious

⁵⁴ Deng Yanhua and Kevin J. O'Brien, “Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters”, *The China Quarterly*, no. 215 (September 2013): 533–52.

⁵⁵ Will H. Moore, “The Repression of Dissent A Substitution Model of Government Coercion”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 1 (February 2000): 120.

challenges. Thus, state capacity is a crucial variable for accounting for the variations in government responses in an authoritarian context.

This article draws on case studies to make a threefold contribution. First, by a multidimensional approach, the authors established the central importance of state capacity—which includes *fiscal capacity* (the resources to accommodate challengers), *coercive capacity* (the ability to deploy coercive force) and *institutional capacity* (the organisational strength to mobilise resources) capacities—in shaping the form of state–society interaction in contentious politics. This conceptual framework shall lay the foundation for further research on state capacity and government responses to societal challengers. Second, the authors identified the series of control measures that Chinese local authorities have used to monitor the situation on the ground, defuse social tension, and demobilise protesting crowds, and that the effectiveness of deploying these measures directly impacts the local state’s threat perception of a collective action. The authors demonstrated that interactions between state officials and challengers are more multifaceted than previously thought. Third, the authors introduced a dynamic perspective to study the rationale of governmental response to societal challengers in China. State capacity is not a static concept. The authors demonstrated that local states in the PRC respond to social protests by dynamically and vigorously assessing their capacity as the social protest develops, and by weighing the probable effectiveness of control measures designated for the locale. Overall, this article provides a preliminary and tentative framework to explain various different factors. However, due to the limited scope of the initial inquiry, future research is proposed to expand the framework. The authors hope that the state-centred perspective will open new interesting lines of inquiry for future studies on contentious movements that China’s national and local governments increasingly have to deal with.