

## Patrolling Harmony: pre-emptive authoritarianism and the preservation of stability in W County

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### ABSTRACT

Today, with social protests a daily phenomenon in China, the Party-state's survival hinges upon its institutional capacity to prevent, monitor, process information on, and overcome real and potential challenges. Over the past decade, the Communist Party has consistently stressed the critical importance of 'stability preservation' (*weiwen*) as central to ensuring the longevity of the authoritarian regime. Drawing upon intensive interviews and archival research, this article looks into the stability-preservation system in W County in North China. By exploring the institutional configuration, work mechanisms, daily activities and operational principles of the stability-preservation apparatus in the county, the author seeks to gain insight into the PRC regime's mythical operations of 'system maintenance' and the ways in which the Party-state exerts control over society.

From the grand military parades in Buenos Aires when Peronism was at its peak, to the excited crowds that protested relentlessly to topple dictatorial rule during the Arab Spring, moments of high drama have long attracted students of authoritarian politics. However, despite the abundant literature on authoritarian resilience and fragility, scholars around the globe have yet to develop a clear understanding of the everyday operations of power and domination under such regimes. For example, the questions of how authoritarian rule is 'effectuated, organized and executed'<sup>1</sup> and how authoritarian rulers maintain their grip on power by avoiding systematic political collapse are yet to be adequately explained.

Drawing on archival research conducted in W County in North China in 2012, along with intensive interviews, in this article, the author examines an understudied but important component of the ruling apparatus of the People's Republic of China (PRC), namely, the regime's stability-preservation system (*weiwen xitong*, 维稳系统). By exploring and scrutinizing the institutional configuration, working mechanisms, daily activities and operational principles of the stability-preservation apparatus in one 'sample' county, this article seeks to gain insight into the PRC regime's mythical internal operations of 'system maintenance' at a grassroots level.

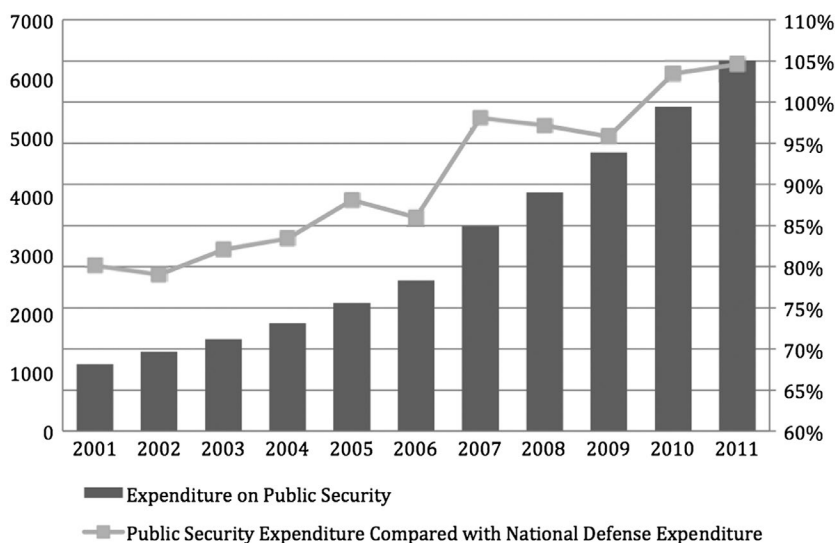
### Preserving stability

With social protests now being a daily phenomenon in the PRC, the survival of the communist state hinges on its institutional capacity to prevent, monitor, interpret and overcome real and potential challenges. Over the past decade, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently stressed

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Arab Authoritarianism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).



**Figure 1.** Ratio of national defense budget to central budgetary funding for public security per year (2001–2011). Notes: From 2001 to 2006, expenditure on public security was listed separately in national statistical documents as expenditure on law enforcement and expenditure on armed police. Since 2007, the two items have been combined into a single item entitled ‘expenditure on public security’. Sources: Ministry of Finance of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhongguo caizheng nianjian 2002* [*Finance Yearbook of China 2002*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Caizheng Zazhishe, 2002), p. 295; National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012* [*China Statistical Yearbook 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 2003–2013), p. 292; p. 308; p. 278; p. 288; p. 286; p. 264; p. 264; p. 290; p. 280; p. 293.

the critical importance of ‘stability preservation’ (*weihu wending*, 维护稳定, or the shorter *weiwen*, 维稳) in constructing a ‘socialist harmonious society’ and ensuring the longevity of the authoritarian political regime.

The term ‘stability preservation’ first appeared in the *People’s Daily*, the Party’s mouthpiece, in 2002. The use of this ‘buzzword’ by the regime’s top news outlet has since increased sharply, from approximately 50 instances in 2008 to 180 in 2011.<sup>2</sup> To cope with the growing social unrest, the CCP has significantly increased its spending on maintaining social order and preserving political stability. As a result, the expenditure on public security in China soared from RMB 113.692 billion in 2001 to RMB 630.427 billion in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 compares the national defense budget and the central budget for public security from 2001 to 2011. In both 2010 and 2011, China’s expenditure on public security can be seen to rival its defense budget.<sup>4</sup> With the regime in grave danger due to increasing political unrest at the grassroots level, *weiwen* appears to provide a lifeline for the regime’s safety and survival.

Students of non-democratic politics have long offered substantially different explanations for the durability of authoritarian regimes, ranging from cultural determinism to voluntarist arguments that focus on human agency and initiative.<sup>5</sup> In the past two decades, however, political scientists have

<sup>2</sup>Gang Qian, ‘Weiwen heshi chengwei changyongyu’ [‘When did “stability preservation” become a buzzword?’], *The New York Times*, (12 August 2013), available at: <http://cn.nytimes.com/article/china/2012/09/19/cc19qiangang2/> (accessed 12 September 2015).

<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Finance, *Zhongguo caizheng nianjian 2002* [*Finance Yearbook of China 2002*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 2012); National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2012* [*China Statistical Yearbook 2012*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>See the note on sources beneath Figure 1.

<sup>5</sup>For example: for cultural theories, see Yahya Sadowski, ‘The new Orientalism and the democracy debate’, *Middle East Report* 183, (1993), pp. 14–21; Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994). For structural arguments, see Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya Since Independence: Oil and State-Building* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Michael L. Ross, ‘Does oil hinder democracy’, *World Politics* 53(2), (2001), pp. 325–361; for political agency, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

gradually come to realize the essential role of political institutions in ensuring the persistence of authoritarian systems. For example, Greene found that the fiscal strength of an authoritarian state is a vital determinant of its survival, as a fiscally strong regime can always 'politicize public resources' to its own advantage.<sup>6</sup> Political parties also play a crucial role in binding 'opportunistic leaders... together institutionally' and helping create credible power-sharing arrangements between dictators and their ruling coalitions.<sup>7</sup> The legislature under an authoritarian regime can also contribute to the regime's survival by providing a central institutional forum in which to incorporate the interests of opposing forces by revealing their demands, hammering out compromises, and addressing and publicizing agreements in a legalistic form.<sup>8</sup>

Recent studies on the durability of the PRC reflect this institutional emphasis.<sup>9</sup> Remarkably, having witnessed the Communist Party's increasing emphasis on stability preservation, China scholars have paid particular attention to the regime's various institutional arrangements and strategies for coping with the mounting social and political challenges. Keith and Lin examined the Party-state's instrumental use of politicized legal codes and legislative procedures to counter rebellious quasi-religious sects and social organizations.<sup>10</sup> O'Brien and Li explored the dynamic interplay between the local Party-state and its societal challengers in administrative litigation procedures. They found the PRC to constitute a 'far-flung, many-layered state' that is 'less a monolith than a hodgepodge of disparate actors, some of whom have multiple identities and conflicting interests'.<sup>11</sup> Their observations on the 'segmented and layered structure' of the Party-state are especially important for understanding the everyday exercise of control in the PRC.

Cai examined the suppression of popular resistance by local governments—a particular form of state response to social challenges that has had variable results.<sup>12</sup> Chen and Xu examined the role of the judicial system in settling collective labor disputes and demonstrated that the courts' extrajudicial intervention, and their strategy of individualizing collective disputes, can serve to 'foreclose labor movements in China'.<sup>13</sup> Lee and Zhang constructed a heuristic framework for analyzing the micro-foundations of authoritarianism in China, and showed that protest bargaining, legal-bureaucratic absorption and patron-clientelism are the three primary tactics used by the local Party-state to depoliticize social unrest. Together, these tactics 'constitute a lived experience of authoritarian domination as a non-zero-sum situation'.<sup>14</sup>

Although these groundbreaking studies provide numerous insights, little systematic archival and field research has examined the institutions that make up China's stability-preservation apparatus—a

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth F. Greene, 'The political economy of authoritarian single-party dominance', *Comparative Political Study* 47(7), (2009), pp. 807–834.

<sup>7</sup>Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Cooperation, cooptation, and rebellion under dictatorships', *Economics & Politics* 18(1), (2006), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>For example, Andrew J. Nathan, 'Authoritarian resilience', *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), (2003), p. 6; for Party adaption see, Bruce J. Dickson, *Wealth into Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); for state and petitioning, see Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); for regime inclusion, see Xiaojun Yan, 'Regime inclusion and the resilience of authoritarianism: local people's political consultative conference in post-Mao Chinese politics', *The China Journal* 66, (2011), pp. 53–75; and for the coercive apparatus, see Xuezhong Guo, *China's Security State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>Ronald C. Keith and Zhiqiu Lin, 'The Falun Gong problem: politics and the struggle for the rule of law in China', *The China Quarterly* 175, (2003), pp. 623–642.

<sup>11</sup>Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, 'Suing the local state: administrative litigation in rural China', *China Journal* 51, (2004), pp. 75–96.

<sup>12</sup>Yongshun Cai, 'Local government and the suppression of popular resistance in China', *The China Quarterly* 193, (2008), pp. 24–41.

<sup>13</sup>Feng Chen and Xin Xu, 'Active judicial: judicial dismantling of workers' collective action in China', *The China Journal* 67, (2012), pp. 87–107.

<sup>14</sup>Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, 'The power of instability: unraveling the microfoundations of bargained authoritarianism in China', *American Journal of Sociology* 118(6), (2013), pp. 1475–1508.

unique institutional agency of the PRC.<sup>15</sup> Previous studies mostly tackle the issue of stability preservation in the PRC with reference to various forms of contentious claim making and the Party-state's handling of collective action during periods of social unrest. Thus, the existing studies have failed to address the everyday operations of the authoritarian regime, and the pre-emptive measures it implements to prevent unrest. Yet, as shown in this article, such pre-emptive actions are the backbone of the regime's overall strategy for maintaining socio-political order at the foundational level. Hence, the inadequate attention that previous studies have paid to these pre-emptive mechanisms has hampered our understanding of authoritarian stability in China. In the following sections, this article examines the institutional configuration and daily operations of the stability-preservation apparatus in W County and describes the major threats it is required to handle. Overall, the author seeks to shed some light on the everyday practice of pre-emptive authoritarian control in the PRC, and to dynamically depict the system of power that has enabled the CCP to tenaciously retain its authoritarian rule into the twenty-first century.

### Chains of command

Accompanying an increased emphasis on stability and harmony over the past decade, how to keep society in order, and how to ensure compliance among the Chinese people, are the major questions and challenges faced by local governments across China. W County is no exception. A powerful and well-integrated institutional framework for maintaining social and political stability, with efficient chains of command, has been established in the county. Stability-preservation or *weiwen* mechanisms, with their crucial role in ensuring the regime's survival, operate under the strict scrutiny and control of the country's prerogative authority, the Communist Party, rather than its normative authority, county-level government.<sup>16</sup>

The stability-preservation system in W County is just such an interconnected structure under the direct leadership of the county's Communist Party representatives. At the top of the hierarchy is the Standing Committee of the CCP Committee of W County (*xianwei changwei*, 县委常委), which is formally considered to have final approval within the territory. However, as the 'principal cadre' accountable for the socio-political stability of the county, the Communist Party Secretary of W County shoulders the full responsibility for any decisions taken. Indeed, stability preservation is one of the most important criteria used by Party Secretaries' supervisors at the provincial and prefectural level to evaluate their subordinates' performance. Any negative record for this single criterion may disqualify a county-level Party Secretary from political awards or promotion for a couple of years. This so-called 'single-item veto' (*yipiao foujue*, 一票否决) is a powerful mechanism for holding local Party officials in China accountable for the safety of the regime, and forcing them to invest their full complement of financial and human resources in the project of preventing social upheavals from taking place. For this purpose, the CCP Committees conduct annual inspections at all levels to review the implementation of pre-emptive measures and evaluate the performance of their subordinate Party Secretaries in terms of stability preservation.<sup>17</sup> This strictly enforced accountability system exerts immense pressure on local Party officials, enabling higher-status Party cadres to transmit their concern for regime safety to the grassroots level of the ruling apparatus. It thus ensures a consensus as well as a united force for safeguarding the regime's survival across administrative levels.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>See Appendix A, Notes On Fieldwork.

<sup>16</sup>In *The Dual State* (Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 2010), Ernst Franenkel proposed a 'dual-state' model for the National Socialist regime in Germany. The 'prerogative state' denotes a 'governmental system that exercises unlimited arbitrariness and violence unchecked by any legal guarantees', whereas the normative state is 'an administrative body endowed with elaborate powers for safeguarding the legal order as expressed in statutes, decisions of the courts, and activities of the administrative agencies' (see p. xiii).

<sup>17</sup>Other criteria treated with sufficient seriousness to warrant the 'single-item veto' include family planning and extraordinarily serious safety accidents with high casualties. See Interview 20120628-01.

<sup>18</sup>Interview 20120628-01.

One of the core members of the Standing Committee is held responsible for the daily management and supervision of the *weiwen* system in each county. In W County, the individual in charge is the Secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Committee (PLAC, *zhengfa wei*, 政法委). Accordingly, the county's PLAC is assigned the second title 'Office of the Stability Preservation Leading Group' (OSPLG, *weiwen ban*, 维稳办). The OSPLG is empowered to 'supervise, co-ordinate and lead the entire law-enforcement and judicial systems' in working towards the prevention of social unrest and the maintenance of political stability. The members of the OSPLG thus include the county's People's Court, People's Procuratorate, police force, Bureau of Legal Affairs (*sifa ju*, 司法局) and Bureau of Civil Affairs (*minzheng ju*, 民政局).<sup>19</sup> Under the OSPLG, an 'Office of Comprehensive Management of Public Security' (*shehui zhian zonghe zhili bangongshi*, 社会治安综合治理办公室) has been established in each township. Together, these institutions constitute the local branches of the *weiwen* system. Each village government has a 'Station of Comprehensive Management of Public Security' (*shehui zhian zonghe zhili zhan*, 社会治安综合治理站) staffed by CCP cadres, a village security director and ordinary CCP members who live in the village. The operations of the Letters and Visits Bureau (*xinfang ju*, 信访局), the Party-state agency dealing with petitions, are also closely integrated with those of the stability-preservation system. At the grassroots level, the Party-state has also established quasi-official mass organizations such as the Public Security Society (*zhibaohui*, 治保会), the Dispute-Mediation Society (*tiaojiehui*, 调解会) and the local militia to support the official *weiwen* apparatus. The entire system is a giant 'interlocked pyramid of Party machinery'<sup>20</sup> extending from the County Secretary to grassroots village members, and boasting extensive coercive power, the capacity to respond in real time and to provide around-the-clock surveillance, plentiful resources that can be mobilized in response to emergencies, and enormous discretionary power outside the command of the normative county government.<sup>21</sup>

Among the major responsibilities of the stability-preservation system is the protection of political security (*zhengzhi anquan*, 政治安全), public security (*gonggong anquan*, 公共安全) and production safety (*anquan shengchan*, 安全生产). Political security denotes the safety of the political regime: the OSPLG must ensure that no anti-regime activity, political protests, anti-government demonstrations, open practice of 'evil cults' such as the *Falungong*, or mass riots occur within the territory. Provisions for public security entail the maintenance of basic social order and a crime-free environment. In particular, the OSPLG must strive to prevent major violent accidents with high casualty rates, radical social protest due to unaddressed grievances, and the collective petitioning of the provincial capital or Beijing. Production-safety practices involve the monitoring of workplace safety and the prevention of serious workplace accidents such as explosions in factories, severe traffic accidents that cause a certain number of deaths, and coal-mining accidents.<sup>22</sup> The *weiwen* apparatus in W County, headed by the OSPLG, appears to be a cross-agency system that systematically coordinates the maintenance of overall stability. With its responsibility for coordinating and supervising the local implementation of almost all of the government's important policy areas, it is only natural that the OSPLG and its staff have attained an increasingly important status within the Party-state hierarchy.

## Threats

For an institutionalist study of the *weiwen* apparatus in the PRC, it is first essential to clarify the major threats to socio-political stability the Party-state may have to routinely deal with at the grassroots. Fortunately, the county archives provide plenty of materials that reflect the basic contour of the threats

<sup>19</sup>In neighboring counties, where the PLAC Secretary is not a Standing Committee member, the Committee creates a specific 'Stability Preservation Leading Group' headed by another member of the Standing Committee, as the county-level headquarters of the *weiwen* apparatus. See Interview 20120705-01.

<sup>20</sup>Andrew Walder, *Fractured Rebellion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup>Interview 20120705-01.

<sup>22</sup>The specific threshold for traffic-accident casualty rate at which a given accident is considered a cause of public instability is confidential government information and not available to this study. See Interview 20120713-01.

the *weiwen* system in W County has to handle on a daily basis. In the official language, the stability-preservation apparatus of W County is required to deal with a variety of ‘indications of potential instability’ (*buwending zhenghou*, 不稳定征候) and to handle on site any emergent incidents (*tufa shijian*, 突发事件) that might influence social or political order.

In terms of the extent of threat, timing is equally—if not more—crucial. As a local official in the OSPLG noted in an interview:

There are sensitive periods [in a year] in terms of the threat to socio-political stability. Usually, when there is an election to change the leadership of a village government, you are more likely to see social unrest and collective protests. Also, during the weeks of 4 June [the anniversary of the 1989 Tian’anmen Movement], 5 July [the anniversary of the 2009 Uighur Riot in Xinjiang], or before and during major local festivities or traditional holidays, we are always on high alert. In addition, each year, when peasant workers from other places who work here are due for salary payment, the entire *weiwen* system is set in full motion as this is another period when mass incidents are likely to break out.<sup>23</sup>

At the county level, the stability-preservation system is rarely required to deal with ‘high politics’ or anti-regime activities directly. Such events are normally addressed by provincial Party bodies, or representatives even higher in the Party-state hierarchy, unless concrete and detailed county-level instructions are provided from above (such as the prevention of *Falungong* activities). The day-to-day threats to socio-political stability in W County come from four overlapping issue areas, namely feud warfare, competing economic interests, land disputes and unanticipated triggering events.

### Feuds

Due to its location on the borders of two provinces and nine counties, the major causes of social instability or ‘mass incident’ in W County are historical feuds between people from neighboring territories. The situation is described in one government document as follows:

W Lake connects W County with the neighboring jurisdictions—particularly P County and T County of Jiangsu Province. In our county, seven townships are bordered with Jiangsu Province. In some places, ‘you take one step and have already crossed two provinces; you take two steps and have already crossed three counties’ (*yibu kua liangsheng, liangbu kua sanxian*; 一步跨两省·两步跨三县). Since 1959, the people from these two provinces who live on the shores of W Lake have engaged in more than 400 instances of armed conflict of different scales, due to disputes over the reclamation of land from the lake, and the harvest [from these lands] ... the hostility is so grave that family members have not been allowed to cremate the corpses [of a few victims of this armed combat] for more than a decade.<sup>24</sup>

In a document released by J City’s Party Committee, which operates in a supervisory capacity at prefectural level, it was noted that ‘31 people were killed and more than 800 injured’ in the 400 or more instances of armed combat (*xiedou*, 械斗) in this region.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore,

the relatives of victims who died in these fights repeatedly blocked the entrance to the compounds of the local CCP Committee and local government, assaulted the respective township government and the local police, and even attacked members of a central investigation group dispatched by Beijing.<sup>26</sup>

### Economic interests

With the PRC’s transition to a market economy, competing economic interests have also become a major cause of social unrest. If feud is more or less peculiar to W County, disputes over economic interests

<sup>23</sup>Interview 20120625-03.

<sup>24</sup>Archival Document 1-7, The CCP Committee of W County and W County Government, ‘Qianghua “Wulian” Cuoshi, Quanli Weihu Weishanhu Bianjie Diqu Hexie Wending’ [‘Enhancing the “five connections” measures and wholeheartedly maintaining the harmony and stability of the border region around W Lake’] (date of issue ca. 2005–2006), pp. 1–2.

<sup>25</sup>Archival Document 1-6, The CCP Committee of J City and J City Government, ‘Jianli Changxiao Jizhi, Henzhua Zonghe Zhili, Quanli Weihu Lusu Bianjie W Hu Diqu Hexie Wending’ [‘Create long-term mechanisms, pay close attention to comprehensive social management, wholeheartedly preserve the harmony and stability of the W Lake region on the border of Jiangsu and Shandong Province’], (June 2009), pp. 1–2. See also Archival Document 3-18, The CCP Committee of W County and the W County Government, ‘W Xian Huqu Bianqu Wending Gongzuo Qingkuang Huibao’ [‘Briefing on the stability preservation work in the lake and border region of W County’], (March 2009), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup>Archival Document 1-6, p. 2.

might represent a more general pattern of threats that the *weiwen* system has to face at the grassroots. In W County, it is not unusual for disputes over property rights, profit sharing, business privileges and other monetary issues to escalate into open protests, demonstrations or riots.

An example of unrest due to the infringement of local business privileges occurred in 2009, when the officials at a major coalmine in W County decided to hire fewer vehicles privately from villagers for the long-distance transportation of coal products and chose instead to use the state-owned railroad. This caused the peasants who relied on this business for a living to violently assail the compound of the mine to signal their opposition to the plan. The stability-preservation apparatus was immediately instructed to step in.<sup>27</sup> In the same year, another 'indication of instability' was identified when the outside wall of an explosive-materials storage building collapsed in heavy rain, which damaged the drainage channel in a nearby village. When the powerful corporation who owns the storage exhibited arrogant carelessness toward the small village community, the villagers organized and engaged in direct confrontation with the company. To prevent a major 'mass incident' capable of attracting nationwide media attention, the county's stability-preservation force was again fully mobilized to dissolve the high tension.<sup>28</sup>

In W County, conflict over economic interests usually arises from civil disagreements between individuals or families, or tensions between peasants and local corporations. The weaker side in the dispute may use collective action or public protest as an effective instrument to demand justice. Regardless of their particular motivations, economic conflicts constitute a huge reservoir of causes of potential social upheavals, which must be treated with great seriousness by those responsible for the country's stability preservation.

### **Land disputes**

Land disputes in W County are a specific kind of economic conflict involving the ownership, rights, privileges, profits and/or revenue associated with farmland or residential lots. China's drastic development of her industrial and urban sectors have made disputes over land rights increasingly significant, violent and complicated over the past decade—particularly in rural areas. It is unsurprising then, that conflicts over land rights have come to constitute another grave threat to W County's socio-political stability.

In W County, most serious land disputes with the potential to cause social protest occur between members of the rural community and local corporations. For example, in 1989, the state-owned D Company claimed around 60 *mu* of farmland from D Village with a promise that 106 workers from D Village would be hired by the factory. By the end of 1993, however, only 28 villagers had been hired. When the company refused to honor its promise, the villagers launched a series of collective petitions all the way up to Beijing, and threatened to take any protest action they saw fit until the contract was enforced. The County OSPLG thus had to spend an enormous amount of time and considerable resources to deal with this 'major indication of instability'.<sup>29</sup> State-directed projects—when violating the land rights of the local community—are also potential causes of instability. In 2008, for instance, the government began a construction project to strengthen the dykes near B Village. However, the site was immediately besieged by villagers, and the construction machinery was seized by the angry

<sup>27</sup>Archival Document 2-6, 'Shou Kuangba Youzuzhi Ganrao, Meitan Baoxiao Yunshu Hetong Yanzhong Shouzu De Qingkuang Fanying' ['Briefing and petition: contract for the production and transportation of coal blocked by organized harassment'], (10 November 2009), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>Archival Document 2-5, 'W Xian Chenggong Chuzhi Guanyu Kongzhuang Meikuang Zhayao Ku Weiqiang Daota De Jiufen' ['W County successfully handles dispute over the collapse of the wall of the explosive materials storage building owned by Kongzhuang Coal-mine'], *Jianshe Ping'an J Jianbao* [Briefs on the Construction of a Peaceful J City] no. 47, (23 July 2009).

<sup>29</sup>Archival Document 2-10, The Leadership Group on the Coordination of State-owned Coal-mines and the local government of W County, 'Guanyu Datun Meidian Gongshe Wei Lvxing Zhengdi Xieyi Jiejue Nongmin Didaigong Qingkuang de Diaocha Baogao' ['Investigative report on the non-compliance of D Thermal Power Company in implementing the agreement on "Employment to Substitute Land Rights"'], (18 August 2008).

crowd. The villagers' grievance was that government officials had paid insufficient compensation for the farmland claimed from the village for another project in 2000. When the local officials tried to approach the angry crowd, villagers 'beat down the principal cadre of the township government and assaulted other officials violently. More than ten government staff and two policemen were injured'.<sup>30</sup> W County's stability-preservation officials took over the case, hoping to foreclose a potentially larger and more radical conflict.

### **Unanticipated triggering events**

Sensitive incidents that take place suddenly and without the state's foreknowledge can also have a serious effect on county-level stability. The likelihood of large-scale social unrest is even higher when such incidents involve casualties among members of certain social groups (such as students and ethnic minorities), overlap with politically sensitive events (such as the CCP's five-yearly National Congress) or arouse rumor and mass discontent. One of the daily tasks of W County's stability-preservation system is to prevent potential activists from assigning to triggering events 'symbolic political connotations' upon which to found and mobilize a movement.<sup>31</sup>

In July 2008, for example, a 21-year-old male student drowned during a trip with high-school friends after receiving a university-admission offer. The boy's family did not accept the results of the police investigation and suspected murder or at least foul play. They threatened to organize a radical protest and to post the case on the Internet. The family even planned to move the corpse to the house of one of his friends—whom they suspected to be the 'murderer'—and to make a scene there. As this incident took place only one month prior to the opening of the Beijing Olympics, and even closer to the scheduled local Olympics Torch Relay Ceremony, it was immediately classified as one of the most serious threats to the county's socio-political stability that warranted immediate government intervention.<sup>32</sup>

Another such event took place in 2007. In the morning of 23 August, one Muslim prisoner—who was a Hui Chinese in terms of ethnicity—was found unconscious in his cell and was immediately sent to the W County Hospital, where he died. After his family was informed of his death, a large crowd of Muslims started to gather in front of the county jailhouse. The following morning, two buses loaded with more than 100 Muslims arrived, and their occupants attempted to break into the prison, but were blocked by the police. Afterwards, the protestors attempted to smash the administrative building of the prison, and claimed that more Muslims from neighboring cities would soon arrive in support.<sup>33</sup> As this unanticipated incident involved a sensitive population and a sensitive place, it was immediately identified as a serious indicator of social unrest.

Unanticipated and agitating 'triggering events' usually attract large crowds of people with various potential grievances regarding the Party-state, and make it easy for potential leaders of movements to assign symbolic connotations to social unrest.<sup>34</sup> When casualties among sensitive social groups are involved, or the incident overlaps with important political affairs, it is especially convenient for anti-systematic forces to rally supporters around such events and construct larger social movements.

<sup>30</sup>Archival 2-7, PLAC of W County, 'Guanyu "3.26" Shijian Chuli Qingkuang de Huibao' ['Report on the handling of the "March 26 Incident"'], (29 April 2008).

<sup>31</sup>Hank Johnston, *States and Social Movements* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup>Archival Document 2-8, 'Guanyu J Shi Tuoshan Chuzhi Yi Zhongxuesheng Nishui Siwang Shijian Youxiao Huajie Yingxiang Shehuiwendeng Yinhan Qingkuang de Tongbao' ['Briefing on the ways in which J City successfully handled the case of the drowning of a high-school student and effectively removed the potential threat to social stability'], (6 August 2008), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup>Archival Document 2-1, PLAC of J City, 'Guanyu J Jianyu J Jianqu Huizu Zuifan J Yinbin Siwang Yinfa X Xian Huimin Juji J Jianqu Shijian Chuzhi Qingkuang de Baogao' ['Report on the gathering of Muslims from X County in J prison caused by the death of prisoner J'], (29 August 2007).

<sup>34</sup>Archival Document 2-8, p. 8.



## The net of stability

In response to various kinds of threats of social unrest, the individuals and institutions responsible for stability preservation in W County have constructed a safety-net of control mechanisms to prevent nascent social unrest from flourishing, and to deal effectively with collective political protests when they do break out. Founded upon an institutional framework that enables formal and informal information gathering, population control, conflict resolution, emergency-response tactics and political surveillance, the apparatus of stability preservation in W County has historically served as an important pre-emptive force, safeguarding the political regime and ensuring peace within the county. In the following section, the author examines the primary components of the daily operations of W County's *weiwen* system.

### Cross-border institutional collaboration

As W Lake accounts for two-thirds of W County's territory, the county's CCP Committee has repeatedly emphasized that 'maintaining a socio-politically stable lake region is the most difficult and the most essential work of this county'.<sup>35</sup> The lake itself straddles borders, leading to considerable struggle for its natural resources and thus enormous long-term hostility between local communities. This has made the lake region famous for feud warfare and high crime rates, both of which pose major threats to the socio-political stability of W County.<sup>36</sup> As one document issued in 2005 noted,

the stability-preservation work in the lake region is not only a focus of the stability-preservation work of W County, but also of the entire prefecture and province. If we have an orderly and safe lake region, we have a socio-politically stable county; if we have a safe border region, we have a safe county.<sup>37</sup>

The complexity of the issue lies primarily in the fact that the authorities of the neighboring counties are all invested in the competition for W Lake's natural resources, and tend to protect their own people when a feud breaks out. The lack of communication between these neighboring jurisdictions has also created a law-enforcement vacuum. When large-scale cross-border protests occur and the claims made by the protestors involve people from other counties, it is difficult for W County's *weiwen* system to effectively address people's grievances, control the crowds or solve the problem.

Accordingly, a major part of the daily work of the stability-preservation apparatus of W County is to create, maintain and enhance liaison and cooperation with governmental authorities in the neighboring counties. This emphasis is common at all levels, from village police to the county's highest-ranked Party cadre. Representatives of W County's stability-preservation system spend considerable time every year visiting and holding regular bilateral or multilateral meetings with the Party-state agencies of neighboring counties. Since 2006, a county-level working conference on stability preservation has been hosted in W County once every six months, and involves all of the neighboring counties. The principal cadres of W County have also visited its neighboring counties frequently, and signed a number of Memos of Understanding regarding collaborative law enforcement and stability preservation. Township governments in the border region have also reached out to the townships of neighboring jurisdictions to establish 'joint work forces' to screen, detect, mediate and solve cross-border social conflicts or deal with early signs of socio-political

<sup>35</sup>Archival Document 4-1, The CCP Committee of W County and W County Government, 'Jinjin Weirao Kexue Fazhanguan, Shenru Tuijin Huqu Bianqu Wending Gongzuo' ['Closely adhering to the Concept of Scientific Development, Deepening and Furthering the Stability Preservation Work in the Lake and Border Regions], (December 17, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup>Archival Document 3-18.

<sup>37</sup>Archival Document 3-6, The CCP Committee of W County and W County Government, 'Quanmian Jiaqiang Jiceng Jichu Gongzuo, Quanli Dazao Ping'an Huqu Bianqu' ['Comprehensively enhancing grassroots and foundational work, wholeheartedly constructing a peaceful lake and border region'], (June 2005), p. 2.

unrest.<sup>38</sup> In W County's official documents, this work is termed as 'four kinds of liaison' (*silian*, 四联), comprising 'friendly' liaison between county-level Party-states, liaison between the government agencies of different counties for 'development' purposes, liaison between the local police forces of neighboring counties to foster 'stability', and liaison between villages in different counties for the purpose of 'unity'. These four types of liaison, collectively *silian*, are deemed an ultimate guarantee of the success of W County's stability-preservation work.<sup>39</sup>

Institutions also liaise and collaborate in infrastructure investment, anti-crime campaigns, and the creation of routine communication and cooperation mechanisms to prevent mass incidents.<sup>40</sup> The stability-preservation authorities in W County work closely with those of neighboring counties to provide everyday surveillance and law enforcement, hoping to facilitate the county's overall work of fighting crime and to prevent serious cross-border conflicts from taking place. For instance, as disputes over summer and autumn harvests on the land reclaimed from W Lake have traditionally been a cause of feud warfare and other contentious action, W County's authorities have established a specific strategy for dealing with this problem that if a harvest is controversial and has the potential to cause feud warfare, it must be given up. For people of W County who incur any financial loss by implementing this strategy, they must be compensated in cash by the government of W County.<sup>41</sup>

In 2008, W County's authorities worked closely with those of the neighboring P and T Counties to solve historical cross-county enmity and thereby to remove a major cause of future collective unrest. They reached agreements with the family members of victims, and cremated the four corpses that had remained in the morgue for several years.<sup>42</sup> Between 2006 and 2008, W County successfully collaborated with its neighboring counties to mediate 64 cross-border disputes of various types, prevent 14 civil disputes from turning into criminal conflicts, and solve 19 cases in which the relevant parties had launched petitions to either the provincial capital city or Beijing.<sup>43</sup>

The institutional collaboration between W County and its neighbors also facilitated the mediation of social conflict and reduced the possibility of collective violence. For example, a W County official recalled that in March 2012, when the Z family of W County entered into very serious dispute with the Y family of the neighboring P County over the ownership of a graveyard with good *fengshui* (风水), each side recruited more than 200 male family members in preparation for armed combat. When this significant indicator of social unrest was reported, W County's authorities immediately notified the government of P County, and suggested dealing with the tension together. The police forces of the two counties also dispatched a joint force to deter the two parties from engaging in armed combat. Eventually, an agreement was reached under the supervision of the two county governments, and the plans for feud warfare were given up.<sup>44</sup> The successful resolution of this cross-county conflict and the prevention of major armed combat were highly praised by the supervisory Party-state cadres.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the Party-state considers this kind of grassroots-level cross-border collaboration to be one of the most critical components of the preservation of socio-political stability in W County. As one document notes,

<sup>38</sup>Archival Document 3-15, The W County PLAC Secretary, 'Wanshan Huqu Bianjie Wending Jizhi, Quanmian Goujian Hexie Xin Weishan' ['Improving stability-preservation mechanisms in the lake region, comprehensively constructing a new and harmonious W County'], (September 2008), p. 3.

<sup>39</sup>Archival Document 3-6, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>41</sup>Archival Document 3-4, 'Guanyu Jiaqiang Lianxi Miqie Hezuo Gongtong Jianli Wending Xiezuo Jizhide Xieyi de Shishi Xize' ['Detailed instructions on the implementation of the agreement on the joint construction of stable mechanisms of cooperation by strengthening liaison and enhancing collaboration'], (issuing authority or date not indicated), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup>Archival Document 3-5, The W County PLAC, 'Huqu Bianqu Wending Gongzuo Qingkuang Huibao' ['Briefing on the Stability-Preservation Work in the Lake and Border Region'], (December 2005).

<sup>43</sup>Archival 3-11, 'Qianghua Wulian Cuoshi, Quanli Weihu W Hu Bianjie Diqu Hexie Wending' ['Strengthening the "five measures", wholeheartedly safeguarding harmony and stability in the W Lake border region'] (issuing authority or date not indicated), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup>Interview 20120705-01.

<sup>45</sup>Archival Document 4-4, '2005 nian Geji Lingdao de Pishi' ['Comments made by leaders at different levels in 2005'] (issuing authority or date not indicated), p. 12.

When indications of social unrest start to emerge, we should coordinate our stability-preservation work from the grassroots level. Through real-time communication between villages and townships across county borders, people could reach an understanding and solve disputes by negotiation and discussion. At the same time (through cross-border collaboration mechanisms), we could take advantage of kinship influence, family pressure and social relationships to solve contradictions at the grassroots and ensure the peaceful co-existence ... of people from different jurisdictions.<sup>46</sup>

### **Screening and detecting social disagreements**

Although cross-border collaboration provides an improved institutional infrastructure for stability preservation in W County, the 'screening and detection of social disagreements' (*paicha shehui maodun*, or simply *paicha*; 排查社会矛盾) constitutes the foundational everyday work of the system. The Party-state considers the screening and detection of 'social disagreements' an important tool for removing potential threats to socio-political stability before they mature into visible social unrest. This work has thus been attributed tremendous importance. Indeed, the crucial pre-emptive measure of *paicha* has become a daily endeavor to which a substantial amount of the resources and manpower of W County's stability-preservation apparatus is assigned.<sup>47</sup>

These screening and detecting mechanisms are operated by the OSPLG at all levels of stability preservation in W County. A senior police officer in the county described their operation as follows:

We have a comprehensive system for screening and detecting [social contradictions and conflicts] ... In every village, this work must be conducted once a week; at the township level, it is conducted every two weeks. The results of the village government's weekly screening are reported to the township government. For this work, we have a very clear responsibility and division of labor. Each piece of information reported by the village government should be carefully scrutinized and analyzed by higher authorities [to identify any indicators of potential socio-political unrest]. And all of these procedures are documented in detail in official archives for future reference.<sup>48</sup>

Led by the village's Party Secretary or Director of Security (*zhibao renzhu*, 治保主任), various forms of screening and detection are carried out at the grassroots level, such as field investigation, information gathering and analysis, household visits and discussions with relevant parties. Information is transmitted efficiently through the hierarchy: when indicators of potential social unrest are detected, the OSPLG and the law-enforcement agencies under its supervision become involved at an early stage. If the problem concerns inter-village or even cross-county conflict, the handling of the case is directly reported to and overseen by the principal cadres of W County. In addition to this hierarchical information-transmission channel, the OSPLG employs more than 500 ordinary villagers as full-time or part-time 'informants' (*xinxi yuan*, 信息员) who report any serious irregularities directly to the county-level stability-preservation cadres, thereby bypassing the bureaucratic ladder. As the county's CCP Committee has boasted, W County has created an information-gathering and reporting system that 'reaches vertically down to the grassroots level and horizontally to the farthest border of the county', enabling the Party-state 'to carry out its [stability-preservation] work with clear targets and in a timely manner'.<sup>49</sup>

As cross-border conflicts in the W Lake region are a major source of social unrest in W County, the screening and detecting mechanisms also include a number of 'joint groups' comprised of representatives from W County and its neighboring counties along the lakeshore, who work collaboratively to identify and remove indications of cross-border socio-political unrest. The W County Party Committee released a document acknowledging that 'these joint groups, operating at the township level, greatly facilitate our timely communication and intelligence sharing with neighboring counties. The work of

<sup>46</sup>Archival Document 3-3, The CCP Committee of W County and the W County Government, 'Renzhen Guanche Luoshi Wuxiang Xieyi, Quanli Weihu Huqu Bian[qu] Wending' ['Seriously implementing and realizing the five agreements, wholeheartedly safeguarding stability in the lake and border region'], (16 December 2004), p. 3.

<sup>47</sup>Archival Document 3-22, The PLAC of J City, 'Woshi Zhaokai Lusu Bianjie W Hu Diqiu Wending Gongzuo Diaoduhui' ['A conference was held in this city on the coordination of stability-preservation work in the border regions of Shandong and Jiangsu Provinces'], (26 April 2006), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup>Interview 20120707-01.

<sup>49</sup>Archival Document 3-6, p. 4. See also Interview 20120707-01.

these groups ensures that we are able to prevent disputes and contradictions from escalating [into social protest and riot].<sup>50</sup> In addition, the Communist Party's traditional 'letters and visits' system, designed to handle petitions from the people, has become another important instrument for screening and detecting early signs of political instability or social unrest. A township Party Secretary made the following observation on this process:

[An important part of the screening mechanism is to] identify and scrutinize grievances reflected in the petitions we receive through the letters and visits system. Especially for those cases that are still being processed by the Letters and Visits Bureau, we usually pay much closer attention and seek to establish direct contact with the petitioner. The purpose is to clarify what the issue is and how to address the problem without radicalizing the relevant parties. For those cases that might lead to petitions to Beijing or the provincial government, we have to organize a special work team. Again, by doing so, our goal is that these cases should not be allowed to escalate into socio-political unrest and grievances not turn into anti-regime political sentiment.<sup>51</sup>

To facilitate the screening of signs of socio-political unrest, six categories of social unrest most likely to cause mass incidents in W County, and to which Party officials at all levels are thus instructed to pay particularly close attention, have been designated. First, issues that emerge during harvest seasons; second, events that coincide with important and sensitive memorial dates; third, disputes over the natural resources of W Lake; fourth, serious disagreements regarding economic transactions; fifth, serious struggles regarding marriage; and sixth, serious disputes between neighbors. The OSPLG has prepared detailed action plans for identifying, mediating and controlling potential conflict in each category, and quelling mass incidents if they do break out.<sup>52</sup> It is thus clear that central to the Party-state's endeavor to screen and detect social conflict is a coordinated and systematic pre-emptive framework designed to remove any threat to the county's socio-political stability at an early stage. Also,

[u]sing the information and intelligence provided by this mechanism, the Party-state can prepare all kinds of action plans well in advance. Once social unrest or turmoil indeed breaks out, the government can handle and stop it as early as possible, as promptly as possible and as effectively as possible.<sup>53</sup>

### **Mediating social disagreements**

Another essential part of the daily operations of the stability-preservation apparatus in W County involves the mediation and resolution of social disagreements (*tiaochu shehuimaodun*, 调处社会矛盾) and the removal of potential causes of political unrest or social upheaval. The CCP Committee of W County has set out the requirements for this mediation work as follows:

We must proactively mediate and resolve social contradictions and conflict, and take this work as an important pre-emptive measure in stability preservation. The goal is to properly solve each and every social contradiction at the grassroots level and at an early stage. Once social conflict takes place, we should properly solve it based on the principle that 'you should have fewer enemies rather than more', and disagreement should be handled from the perspective of the county's general [socio-political stability] as the top priority.<sup>54</sup>

For this purpose, the OSPLG has re-established a People's Mediation Committee (PMC) in W County, and appointed an influential local community leader as its 'Chief Mediator'. The PMC runs eight Petition and Mediation Groups to help resolve civil disputes at the township level. Higher-ranking officials are dispatched directly from the county government to help village cadres mediate conflict in villages with a higher likelihood of unrest due to existing disputes within their communities. The cadres in each village are instructed to behave as 'servants' to their village community, 'mediators' of social conflicts, 'informants' of public opinion, 'educators' in the implementation of security measures and 'supervisors'

<sup>50</sup>Archival Document 3-16, The CCP Committee of W County and the W County Government, 'Huqu Bianqu Wending Gongzuo Qingkuang Huibao' ['Briefing on the stability-preservation work in the lake and border region'], (November 2008), pp. 3–4.

<sup>51</sup>Interview 20120707-02.

<sup>52</sup>Archival Document 3-21, The Policy Research Office of the CCP Committee of W County, *Diaoyan Yu Tongxun* [Research Correspondence] no. 1, (26 February 2006), p. 8.

<sup>53</sup>Archival Document 1-5, The CCP Committee of W County and the W County Government, 'W Xian Wending Gongzuo Qingkuang Huibao' ['Briefing on the conditions of W County's stability-preservation work'], (1 April 2009), p. 6.

<sup>54</sup>Archival Document 1-5, p. 6.

of their village's stability-preservation work.<sup>55</sup> One component of the stability-preservation apparatus is a monthly inspection of the subordinate townships to 'identify and solve social contradictions'. For every instance of social conflict discovered during this tour, the OSPLG requires a separate record to be created in the official database, and a cadre assigned to follow up the case, communicate with the parties in dispute, and report any new information to the OSPLG. The intention is thereby to 'solve the problem when it first emerges and minimize the scale of conflict'.<sup>56</sup>

In addition, all of the senior cadres in W County are required to serve by rotation in the county's Letters and Visits Bureau, to address petitioners' grievances and resolve their issues in a more direct and effective way. The Party-state has established a fund to solve the most difficult problems, 'unaccountable petition cases' (*jian huajie jijin*, 积案化解基金). Twenty percent of this funding is supplied by transfer from the central government budget, and the rest comes from the local government's revenue from land sales. This funding supplies the necessary financial resources to 'buy off' petitioners when necessary.<sup>57</sup> However, local cadres in W County are extremely reluctant to use this fund to 'purchase stability'. As one senior police officer observed,

in some places, the leaders seek to buy off troublemakers by satisfying their demands. In the long run, however, this only makes the situation worse, because everyone thinks that 'the crying baby gets the milk' (*huiku de haizi younaichi*, 会哭的孩子有奶吃), which tends to encourage an endless cycle of social unrest.

In W County, this funding is considered the last resort, and is rarely used.<sup>58</sup>

The Party-state has set up a strict accountability system to evaluate the performance of cadres in mediating and solving social conflict at the grassroots level. In general, it requires that 'the case is closed, the issue is finished and the relevant parties are satisfied' (*anjie, shiliao, renfu*; 案结,事了,人服): the three criteria for a successful outcome proposed by the central PLAC. If social conflict escalates into political protests or riots that threaten 'the political security and national security' of the Party-state, the cadres responsible are disqualified from promotion for the next few years, and the state agency to which they belong is disqualified from competition for any award, prize or group honor during the same period.<sup>59</sup>

### **On the spot: handling collective actions**

The most visible component of the daily operations of stability preservation in W County is, of course, the handling of imminent or ongoing collective unrest. Despite the provisions made for tight surveillance, coordination and mediation, social conflict of every kind still has the potential to intensify quickly, sometimes giving rise to protests in the street or other forms of public confrontation. At these critical moments, stability-preservation mechanisms must be implemented immediately at the scene of the conflict. Those responsible for stability preservation must control the crowds effectively, take suitable emergency measures and resume social order in the shortest possible time. The ultimate goal is still pre-emptive: to prevent the protest or collective action from escalating into a large social movement or violent riot that could attract media attention.

The handling of mass incidents is part of the routine training of local police; however, the OSPLG always requires the police to deal with contentious activities professionally and with the minimum level of state coercion. When the OSPLG receives notification of an imminent mass incident from informants or through other channels, its representatives inform the local police of the situation, and begin investigative work with village cadres to determine the cause of the unrest, the probable number of participants, the individuals responsible for its organization, and the planned location and schedule of any activity. The results of this investigation are reported to the chief county-level cadres responsible for stability

<sup>56</sup>Archival Document 3-21, p.8. On the dispatching of higher-rank cadres to important villages, see also Archival Document 3-6, p. 4; and Interview 20120713-01.

<sup>57</sup>Interview 20120625-02.

<sup>58</sup>Interview 20120709-03.

<sup>59</sup>Interview 20120713-01.

preservation, who then give instructions to the police. The police do not usually make arrests or deploy state violence prior to the outburst of a mass incident, as a fierce government response in the early (and emotional) stages of a social protest runs the risk of merely fuelling its fire. While the police monitor the potential protestors and maintain basic order, the stability-preservation apparatus is mobilized in collaboration with township and village governments, with the primary purpose of engaging in direct conversation, discussion and negotiation with the leaders of the movement. This kind of persuasive work can continue until the moment before the crowd bursts onto the street.<sup>60</sup>

When a protest or other form of collective action does take place, the priorities for cadres and officers on the scene remain roughly the same: to disperse the protestors, limit the scale of their action and end the protest as soon as possible without applying massive state force and attracting media attention. A district-level police inspector described the behavior of the police force at such times as follows:

One of the basic principles set by the Ministry of Public Security is the careful deployment of police force [at the scene of a mass incident]. Although we always arrive as soon as the collective action starts, our primary job is to ensure an orderly gathering and ensure that the persuasive work carried out by Party-state officials can continue. So long as the protestors do not assault civilian officials or smash public property, we do not forcefully intervene ... In W County, we basically rely on direct communication and conversation with the leaders of protests, as well as our collective strength [*qunzhong gongzuo*, 群众工作], to solve problems.<sup>61</sup>

A senior police official explained the principle in more general terms:

Even when the police are on the spot of public protests, our role is still pre-emptive. Our purpose, by taking proper measures very carefully, is to direct the crowd to be calm and to facilitate the government's work in mediating conflicts on the spot and negotiating with both sides of the conflict ... In our opinion, if we were to use violent means on the protesting masses regardless of the concrete situation, we would only make the confrontation more radical and aggressive. For stability preservation, our work on the spot of a protest is to set a boundary for the people and let them know which things they absolutely cannot do according to the law. By maintaining the basic order on the scene, we create conditions for our colleagues in the stability preservation system to do their job and to pacify the tension in a more effective way.<sup>62</sup>

The handling of political crises is a test of the capacity of an authoritarian state. The case of W County indicates the state's strong preference for pre-emptive measures over outright violence to preserve stability, even in the most critical moments. The entire *weiwen* apparatus appears to be founded on the constrained deployment of a police force and the importance of 'mass work' in preventing imminent social unrest from breaking out and in putting a halt to existing social upheavals.

## Concluding remarks

As Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski argued, 'institutions do matter under authoritarian regimes'.<sup>63</sup> Recently, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which various authoritarian institutions are used to facilitate policy compromise, coalition building, regime consolidation and national defense. However, as David Art pointed out, the early scholarship on authoritarian institutions tended to 'focus on the democratic-looking features of authoritarian regimes at the expense of, ironically, their authoritarian ones'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the institutions that supply the means for monitoring society, detecting problems, mediating conflict and preventing anti-systematic social unrest are precisely the components that define a regime as authoritarian.

To understand the endurance of the PRC's authoritarian regime, it is all the more important to place its authoritarian institutions in context, and to examine the regime's everyday practice of power through these dynamic agencies of control. In this article, the author has shown that the stability-preservation

<sup>60</sup>Interview 20120709-03.

<sup>61</sup>Interview 20120709-03.

<sup>62</sup>Interview 20120713-02.

<sup>63</sup>Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats', *Comparative Political Studies* 40(11), (2007), pp. 1279–1301.

<sup>64</sup>David Art, 'What do we know about authoritarianism after ten years?', *Comparative Politics* 44(3), (2012), pp. 351–373.

apparatus operating in W County indicates that the Party-state in China has woven a tight and dynamic net of pre-emptive surveillance and control, which is a crucial component of the regime's overall effort to protect the body politic. These pre-emptive processes help the regime to detect and handle all kinds of potential threats to socio-political stability, and ensure that the power of the Party-state is not shaken by any outright collective defiance. This unique institutional feature of the authoritarian regime in the PRC merits considerably more attention from scholars and observers who seek to predict the future of the country.

Compared to similar autocratic regimes in other parts of the world, the stability-preservation system in W County has three distinct features. First, the entire *weiwen* apparatus in W County goes beyond the usual concept of 'law enforcement' or 'coercive' agencies under authoritarian regimes, in that it appears to be a more synthesized, better coordinated and closely supervised Party-state bureaucracy that enjoys wide intergovernmental support based on cross-agency and cross-regional collaboration. The PRC's efforts in system maintenance—at least in well-run counties—are regularized, bureaucratized, routinized and neatly integrated into the regime's daily operations and system-wide workflow. Second, although W County possesses considerable coercive force, its stability-preservation apparatus appears to be intentionally focused on everyday pre-emptive actions that aim to prevent major social turmoil from taking place, rather than preparations for heavy-handed control and repression in the event of violent social unrest. This requires the rather mundane monitoring of potential social conflict, the daily monitoring and solving of social tensions, and dealing with social problems before they escalate into hard-to-control situations or actual riots. In fact, by operating a highly organized and routinized stability-preservation apparatus that focuses on its day-to-day engagement with grassroots society, the Party-state apparatchiks in W County have successfully avoided the use of excessive state violence in maintaining public order and overall socio-political stability. Third, the stability-preservation apparatus in W County is characterized by an institutionalized division of labor that is based on the hierarchical ranks of the Party-state. While the Party-state agencies higher-up in the ranks may be more concerned about political dissent, regime challenges or underground religious activities, the W County stability-preservation apparatus—which is at the very grassroots of the incumbent regime—devotes all of its attention to detecting, locating and solving everyday social conflicts, problems and tensions. After all, the Party-state's efficient, localized and mundane efforts in extending its reach to China's grassroots society have enabled the incumbent political regime to build its strength and consolidate the durability of its socio-political basis, at least at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>55</sup>Interview 20120713-02.

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## Appendix A. Notes on fieldwork

W County is located in North China. In 2012, W County had a population of around 720,000, comprising 29 ethnic groups, including a significant Hui Muslim population. Although W County is small in size and remote from the major provincial centers, it has achieved relatively strong local industrial development. In terms of per capita GDP and per capita income,

W County is ranked in the middle for the Prefecture and around 50th–60th among the 173 country-level jurisdictions in the Province.

Permission to access archives and conduct field interviews was granted by the Politics and Law Committee of the supervisory prefectural municipality through a personal network, with full disclosure of the intent of the academic research. The archives the author consulted included the archives of the Public Security Bureau of W County and the Politics and Law Committee of W County (also known as the County Stability Preservation Office), and the County Archives. Documents from the early 1980s to the present were examined, including general working documents, briefings, reports, instructions and official statistics. The interviews were arranged through the County's Public Security Bureau in the form of a series of individual or group meetings. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed, and the personal identities of the interviewees were removed. The author had relatively broad and unrestrained access to all of the above-mentioned archives, except for documents related to classified information. The author was unable to consult the archives of other relevant Party-state agencies, such as the Propaganda Department, Organization Department or the County Militia.