
The Quest for Stability

Policing Popular Protest in the People's Republic of China

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Loyal local police forces play an important role in preserving the social and political stability that the Chinese Communist Party needs to maintain its absolute grip on power.

THE Chinese Communist Party (CCP) persistently stresses the critical importance of preserving stability (*weihu wending*, or *weiwen* in common parlance) as part of an overall effort to maintain its absolute grip on power amid increasing pressure to democratize and a challenging domestic political environment. As one mainstream Hong Kong newspaper reported, the CCP regime firmly believes that “stability is our overriding task. . . . If there is no stability, then nothing can be done, and whatever achievements we have made will be lost.”¹

The emphasis on preserving stability came to prominence under Deng Xiaoping, China’s paramount leader throughout the 1980s. Drawing lessons from the Cultural Revolution’s stunning devastation, Deng elevated “stability and unity” (*an’ding tuanjie*) to the pinnacle of the CCP’s post-Mao Reform and Open-up Policy.² Deng repeatedly reiterated the “overriding importance” of sociopolitical stability for the CCP regime, particularly after the tragic 1989 democratic movement at Tiananmen Square.³ “Stability” has since become an increasingly common keyword in official discourse. Deng’s successor, Jiang Zemin, emphasized with apparent reference to the 1989 bloodshed that “development and reform must have a stable political and social environment—this is a consensus we reached at a high cost.”⁴

After Hu Jintao assumed the helm of the party-state in the early twenty-first century, “preservation of stability” became further entrenched as a fundamental guiding principle for the operations of the party-state apparatus

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at all levels, from the commanding heights in Beijing to the smallest grassroots villages. The term appeared in the CCP's official mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, for the first time in 2002. Since then, its frequency in that publication has risen sharply, from approximately fifty times in 2008 to nearly two hundred times in 2011.⁵ The CCP's concern about political unrest at the grassroots level is at least partly responsible for this increasingly obsessive emphasis. The number of reported "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*, a term encompassing protests, demonstrations, petitions, rallies, large-scale riots, and other assorted collective actions) skyrocketed from 8,700 in 1993 to over 180,000 in 2010.⁶ In response, the CCP has significantly increased its spending on maintaining stability. For example, spending on public security soared from 113 billion RMB in 2001 to 630 billion RMB in 2011.⁷ This figure exceeds the officially reported national defense budget of 602 billion RMB for 2011.⁸

The CCP's persistent efforts to preserve social and political stability have attracted enormous attention from students of Chinese politics. Scholars intensely scrutinize the *weiwen* system and attempt to explore the party-state's various "toolkits" for maintaining stability and preventing large-scale social unrest from boiling over. Xi Chen asserts that this highly centralized and pervasive power structure comprises the "entire party-state apparatus." In his words, "party leaders supervise and coordinate a bewildering and overlapping range of agencies—including police, surveillance, and propaganda organizations—dedicated to preserving social stability."⁹

Scholarly opinion differs in terms of the actual contents of the various toolkits at the party-state's disposal, however. On the one hand, researchers note that actual repression and the threat of coercion remain important vehicles for forcing compliance and safeguarding stability. As Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü find, local officials often use crackdowns to respond to peasant resistance to unjust taxation and levies.¹⁰ Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li also point out that the rural collective actions they term "rightful resistance" are often ruthlessly repressed by local authorities. This is especially true where protesters fail to persuade central authorities to intervene or gain the attention of influential news outlets.¹¹ Yongshun Cai concurs that local governments tend to reflexively turn to coercive suppression whenever a popular protest "threatens social stability, policy implementation, or local officials' images."¹²

On the other hand, scholars also emphasize the in-

creasing importance of the "soft" side of state control. At times, the party-state may also use noncoercive means to mediate social conflicts, pacify discontent, and prevent potential social unrest from exploding into a large-scale riot or opposition movement. Yanhua Deng and Kevin O'Brien have discovered that local officials sometimes utilize their personal influence and social networks to demobilize protesters and halt popular action without deploying outright violence.¹³ Rachel E. Stern and Kevin O'Brien argue that the Chinese state constantly sends out mixed signals concerning the boundaries of forbidden activity zones, enabling authorities to gather information and preempt dissident activity.¹⁴ Rachel Stern and Jonathan Hassid examine didactic stories about transgression, which they term "control parables," and conclude that these measures "harden limits on activism by illustrating a set of prescriptions designed to prevent future clashes with authority."¹⁵ Ching Kwan Lee and Zhang Yonghong identify three nonviolent means used by local authorities to depoliticize dangerous social unrest, namely "buying stability," "legal-bureaucratic games," and "patron-clientelism."¹⁶ Yang Su and Xin He note that the PRC's judicial institutions (such as local people's courts) may also serve as a crucial component of the *weiwen* system by colluding with local authorities.¹⁷

Yet one crucial social actor—the police—has remained significantly underexplored in all these insightful studies. Murray Scot Tanner suggests that the party-state has "little choice but to rely upon public security forces (i.e., the police force) to contain, manage, and if need be to suppress social protest" due to widespread institutional incompetence.¹⁸ In reality, although local police are subordinate to local party and government leaders, security officials are granted a great deal of discretion in controlling protest and often "rely upon their explicit, latent authority to act decisively according to law."¹⁹

Indeed, policing a vast and fundamentally diverse society like China's is a complex and challenging enterprise, especially with a coercive, omnipresent, and patriarchal authoritarian regime in command. During the Maoist era, the police served as the CCP's official means to implement the so-called "people's democratic dictatorship" (i.e., state-sanctioned violence) over designated class enemies, alleged counterrevolutionaries, and the unfortunate intellectuals who happened to find themselves at odds with a vacillating revolutionary ideology. As Mao stated, the state's law-enforcement forces are "instruments for the oppression of antagonistic classes, exercising violence and not benevolence."²⁰ After Mao's

death in 1976 and a drastic shift in the CCP's attention from stoking perpetual revolution to constructing socialist modernization, the Chinese police ceased to be "the 'tool' of proletarian dictatorship it used to be under the 'rule of man' of the Maoist era."²¹ Instead, post-Mao Chinese police forces have attempted to transform themselves into law-enforcement agencies, ensuring domestic tranquillity while guarding the authority of the incumbent political regime. An important goal of policing is to create and maintain a stable social environment to help facilitate economic development. As Michael Dutton states, "policing stability, not the revolutionary line, became the new order of the day."²²

Policing in China has thus been reshaped by a highly politicized process of incremental normalization over the past three decades. As the CCP began to propagate its version of the "rule of law" ideal, the art of local policing became increasingly governed by laws and regulations. Over 50 percent of newly promulgated national laws and regulations between 1979 and 1991 concerned some aspect of public security, while another six hundred regulations were issued by local governments over police activity during the same period.²³ The promulgation of the long-anticipated People's Police Law of February 28, 1995, exhibited the CCP's resolution to institutionalize the nationwide police forces and further normalize policing.²⁴ In the Chinese institutional context, police forces have to constantly balance the CCP's demands for order against strict laws regulating police activities, the fundamental rights of protesters, and, at times, intrusive machinations from autocratic local party bosses. Rather than blindly considering Chinese police to be nothing more than the party-state's "iron fist" of repression, a genuine need exists to better understand their role within the CCP's sophisticated stability preservation regime.

An extensive examination of the daily operations of a local Chinese police force through intensive interviews, in-depth archival research, and onsite observation drive this attempt to provide an alternative perspective from which to view the political role of the Chinese police in mediating social disputes, pacifying political tensions, and safeguarding the communist regime. The empirical evidence was gathered in a county-level city in northern China (hereafter, F City) between 2008 and 2012. Based on our analysis, we argue that China's local police serve as moderators between the party-state and its contentious grassroots challengers, both real and potential. Employing outright violence only as a last resort, the police first overwhelmingly rely on preemptive mechanisms to prevent social protests, then apply a series of

persuasive tactics to pacify protests in progress. Where outright repression is ordered, the police tend to use considerable discretion and selective application of force to punish the protest's leaders and organizers. Overall, the dynamism, strategies, and role of the Chinese police in maintaining the incumbent political system and safeguarding social stability—particularly the way in which it uses its discretionary power and mediates between an autocratic state and the subjects under its rule—may be much more complex than previously thought.

Policing Popular Protests in F City

F City is well known for its cultural heritage. The local party leadership stresses the importance of maintaining a stable social environment to promote tourism and the local economy. As F City's party secretary commands: "the Party and government agencies at all levels should always tighten the strings to maintain social stability and speed up economic development."²⁵ The Public Security Bureau (i.e., the official name of the local police headquarters) is the apparatus primarily responsible for maintaining public order and social stability in F City. The bureau has 42 internal departments, 19 police stations, and 524 police officers at the time of writing.²⁶ In terms of policing popular protests, the local police force develops a series of daily operational strategies to cope with contentious challenges. We first examine the major strategies used to control protests, then discuss the role played by the police in monitoring protests.

To learn about local policing strategies for protest control and preservation of stability, the authors interviewed twenty-five police officers and local officials in July 2012. The interviewees ranged from ordinary police officers and directors of police stations to village and township cadres and municipal officials. The interviews were conducted in a semistructured manner, and interviewees were selected based on whether they possessed experience in policing popular protests. In addition, we accessed archival materials ranging from 2008 to 2012, including official regulations, work diaries and reports written by police officers, and internal documents that are extremely helpful in tracing daily police work.

Drawing on Donatella della Porta and Herbert Reiter's study of police strategies for protest control, this article categorizes the tactics used by the local police in their daily handling of popular protests into three dimensions: (1) information strategies, (2) persuasive strategies, and (3) coercive strategies. According to della Porta and Reiter's typology, *information strategies* refer to all at-

tempts to use extensive and targeted information gathering as preemptive measures to prevent disorder and to identify lawbreakers. *Persuasive strategies* consist of discursive contacts and negotiation with organizers for ensuring peaceful protest. *Coercive strategies* require the use of force to control or disperse protests.²⁷

These three strategies are based on the well-accepted proposition in democratic societies that the ability to protest is a constitutional right.²⁸ It is necessary to redefine this taxonomy for application to an authoritarian context. Therefore, in this article, *information strategies* consist mainly of intensive, intelligence-led policing to prevent protests and discipline activists; *persuasive strategies* focus on ending protests through various forms of nonviolent persuasive tactics; and *coercive strategies* generally involve the deployment of repressive force. The following analysis draws on this revised framework to look into the police work in handling social unrest in F City.

Information Strategies

Information strategies serve as a crucial part of protest policing in which the police act preemptively to identify potential protesters and prevent collective actions. F City police implement three approaches to intensively collect protest-related information: “One Village, One Policeman” (*yi cun yi jing*), Internet surveillance (*wang luo jian kong*), and the informant system (*xin xi yuan zhi du*).

“One Village, One Policeman”

“One Village, One Policeman” (OVOP) is an initiative to match one police officer to every village and community (i.e., with a population not exceeding two thousand) in F City.²⁹ Starting in April 2009, in addition to fulfilling their routine duties, police officers in F City were stationed in an assigned village every Saturday and asked to visit at least two or three workdays per month.³⁰ Police officers were to distribute specifically designed cards with their contact information (*lian xi ka*) during their visits and build personal connections with local residents.³¹ Meanwhile, in each and every village an information placard containing the name, current post, phone number, and photograph of the responsible police officer was set up at prominent locations. The aim is to ensure that these police officers can be reached anytime, on a “24/7 basis” (*quan tian hou*).³²

Police officers normally carry out three major duties. First, they conduct inquiries into the overall situation in the village (population demographics, economic development statistics, the current condition of public security and social stability, etc.).³³ Second, the police

detect potential social conflicts and resolve disputes on the ground. Officers often go door-to-door, chatting with residents and paying attention to small problems that might incite larger petitions or protests, such as contract disputes, neighborhood tensions, and criminal cases.³⁴ When disputes, grievances, or dissatisfaction are detected, the police coordinate with local cadres, township officials, and local court judges to collectively resolve the underlying issues.³⁵ Third, police officers are obliged to monitor so-called key people (*zhong dian ren wu*) in their assigned village or community, such as Falun Gong practitioners, unemployed youngsters, recently released prisoners, ethnic minorities (e.g., Uyghurs), and petitioners.³⁶ The police collect and record detailed information (name, age, home address, and family members) about these suspect individuals.

Such labor-intensive policing techniques require a massive input of material resources and manpower. In practice, police officers frequently complain that the OVOP scheme imposes an extra burden on the police force, and that as a result some officers only pay superficial visits to the village assigned to them. Others only make periodic telephone calls to the village’s communist cadres as a gesture.³⁷ One police officer bluntly criticized the system: “We have to rely on a hard-working attitude and self-sacrifice to fulfill our duty. This is not sustainable. The real enthusiasm and passion of the police have never been stimulated at all.”³⁸

To encourage enthusiastic participation, the local police force incorporates an individual officer’s performance in the OVOP scheme into his or her annual evaluation and treats it as a main element in promotion. “If any severe incidents take place in an assigned village or community (e.g., mass incidents, protests, collective petitions to higher authorities), the responsible police officer will not be considered for any awards, honors, and promotion in that year and will be questioned accordingly.”³⁹ Within one year of implementing OVOP, both individual and collective petitions declined sharply by 61.6 percent and 47.5 percent, respectively.⁴⁰ As the secretary of F City’s CCP Political and Legal Committee suggested, OVOP is an effective way to cope with a manpower shortage while maintaining social stability at the grassroots level. This strategy can guarantee that all disputes and conflicts are resolved in a timely manner.⁴¹

Internet Surveillance

As the Internet has become an important platform for protesters to launch contentious challenges, police forces have also become more adept at using the virtual realm

for surveillance work. In 2009, a department dedicated to monitoring the Internet was established in F City under the direct leadership of the local police force. Its core responsibility is to monitor the Internet daily to analyze and influence online public opinion.⁴² Police officers pay special attention to online rumors or commentaries on major regulations and social policies that could trigger popular protests or collective petitions.⁴³ As one director of a police station commented: “We take online public opinion very seriously. If anything receives widespread attention from the citizens, we will inform our leaders and closely monitor it to avoid escalation.”⁴⁴ In addition, daily reports on policing and public opinion are written and sent to major leaders of the local police force.⁴⁵ Digests that summarize key information on social stability, early warnings, and suggestions for action are also delivered to the police chiefs every week. The police chief of F City admits: “Tightening control over the Internet and carefully censoring information and comments on major policies of the government and other hot topics in society are key. Internet cafes, online forums, and Internet portal Web sites are the primary focus of Internet monitoring.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, the police have set up an Online Police Station (*wang luo jing wu shi*) and QQ Chatroom (QQ *zi xun tai*, an instant messaging platform) to interact with citizens.⁴⁷ Through these channels, police officers receive instant reports on crimes, disputes, and potential mass incidents. In early 2010, for example, 260 business owners from Zhejiang and Fujian provinces had a dispute with the property management team of a shopping mall regarding an increase in rent. These merchants complained that such high fees during a market downturn made their businesses and livelihoods untenable. Nevertheless, the landlords insisted on the increase. The confrontation started with a verbal quarrel and could have quickly escalated into a physical clash and large mass incident. Local police officers of F City received an instant message from the Online Police Station and immediately went to the scene. They first pacified the irritated merchants and dispersed the onlookers, then mediated the conflict by requesting that the business owners and landlords elect representatives to conduct a dialogue.⁴⁸ Thanks to the timely intervention and patient mediation of local police, the conflict was ultimately resolved in a peaceful way.

The local police force not only works constantly at online policing but also explores new methods to monitor the Internet. The Internet Security Association, a government-organized nongovernmental organization, was founded on 11 November 2011.⁴⁹ The deputy po-

lice chief of the city chairs this organization, while all government agencies and state-owned enterprises are enrolled as its members, including the owners of local Internet cafes.⁵⁰ The main duties of the association are to monitor Internet service providers and Internet users to ensure that national policies are not violated, as well as to purify the Internet environment and provide early warnings about emerging social conflicts.⁵¹

Informant System

Hiring informants is an established police practice in both democratic societies and authoritarian regimes.⁵² F City’s police force emphasizes information collection as a favorite strategy for coping with popular protests. An intricate informant system from the city level down to the village level has been established. Informants are predominantly recruited from villages, residential communities, enterprises, and the service sector. The composition of this group is diverse and includes CCP party cadres, Youth League members, security personnel from state-owned enterprises, retired workers, small business owners, waiters and waitresses, tour guides, and taxi drivers.⁵³ The identities of some informants such as local cadres and community volunteers are open to the public, while other informants remain anonymous. These two types of informants—known and anonymous—are tasked with providing warnings or inside stories to the police and with helping the local police to identify potential unrest and strengthen social control.⁵⁴ Unlike spies, informants have no obligation to engage in collective actions or to weaken, destabilize, or break social protests. Their duty is simply to report information regarding potential protests and disturbances to the police. Informants have no fixed salaries but receive compensation based on their activity level and the value of the information they provide.⁵⁵ The number of active informants varies from region to region. For instance, one local police station staffed with six police officers in a scenic area admitted to being in contact with about forty informants.⁵⁶

The local CCP committee asks the police “to implement and explore the informant system to ensure that emerging petitions or mass incidents can be discovered at an early stage.”⁵⁷ Local police forces usually obtain all sorts of information ranging from reports of Falun Gong activity to the smallest neighborhood quarrels.⁵⁸ As one director of a police station admitted, “informants are essential for the police to collect information.”⁵⁹ For instance, if antiregime slogans are posted in public places, informants might notify local officers. Similarly, if a group of local petitioners is found to be going to Beijing,

or protesters are discovered to be planning collective action, an informant would make these circumstances known to the police.⁶⁰

The Japanese prime minister visited F City in December 2007. At that time, anti-Japanese sentiment was running high among Chinese citizens over Japan's revisions to domestic history textbooks concerning the Nanjing massacre. Although the leaders of F City kept a low profile while preparing for the prime minister's visit, the Xinhua News Agency announced the exact date of the trip.⁶¹ At the same time, several local business owners were complaining about a new government regulation regarding the relocation of a tourist souvenir market. The local police station received warnings from several informants that some business owners were planning to petition during the prime minister's visit. Police officers detained the entrepreneurs ahead of time to avoid the occurrence of any "disturbing" activities.⁶² As the director of one police station said: "After receiving the warning, we immediately made arrangements to manage the contingent collective actions. The informant system is extremely helpful."⁶³

To summarize, F City's police force robustly implements the OVOP scheme as well as comprehensive Internet surveillance and a sophisticated informant system to accomplish intelligence-led policing. To some extent, the widespread use of such information-gathering strategies by local police forces illustrates the Maoist legacy of mass-line and mass-movement policing on contemporary Chinese police. The police deeply penetrate grassroots society and extensively mobilize common villagers to detect and transmit information through direct communication, social media, or patron-client relations. As one police officer commented, "police resources are limited but the people's power is without limit."⁶⁴

Persuasive Strategies

Persuasive strategies are deployed once a mass incident takes place. Their ultimate goal is to terminate the collective action rapidly by avoiding the use of a full-scale crackdown. According to the directives of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), if collective actions take place only within schools or workplaces and there are no casualties, illegal detentions, or rioting, then the police should resolve any situation through persuasion rather than coercion.⁶⁵ In addition, protests inspired by individual interests (land acquisitions, enterprise reforms, back-pay issues, pensions, environmental pollution, illegal fund raising, etc.), or protests that pose no threat to traffic and social order should be settled by persuasion.⁶⁶

Police officers follow a three-step strategy to demobilize protesters in F City: (1) making a show of force, (2) engaging in dialogue, and (3) coordinating solutions. *Making a show of force* refers to the presence of a large number of police officers on the scene in order to intimidate protesters, therefore encouraging them to cease their violent activity and enter into negotiations. *Engaging in dialogue* means that the police approach protesters and try to understand their demands. *Coordinating solutions* relates to how police officers bring other government agencies and third parties into the mediation to work out a resolution for protesters.

Making a Show of Force

Once collective actions have begun, local police must arrive on the scene and take control of the situation as quickly as possible. Yet the presence of overwhelming police force is not used to immediately crush the protest but rather to show the participants that the police have the capacity to take decisive action if any extreme behavior takes place.

The police mobilization aims to demoralize the protesters. In F City, depending on the seriousness of the protest, the deployment of police forces is divided into three strength levels: fifty, one hundred, and two hundred police officers.⁶⁷ The guiding principle is that the police force should be equal to or greater than the number of protesters. As a director of a local police station put it: "We need strong police forces. If they have 100 people, we should gather 150 police."⁶⁸ A police analyst from the Chongqing Police College reaffirms this principle: "If the crowds on the scene commit only minor infringements, the number of police officers should be the same as the number of protesters while extra police forces stand by. If public transportation is blocked or severe casualties are caused by rioting so that social order and public security are undermined, the police should convene all personnel at their disposal and deploy sufficient officers (at least one and a half times the number of protesters) to the scene."⁶⁹

To mobilize effectively, all F City police officers are required to be reachable via their mobile phones and/or family phone numbers at all times.⁷⁰ "Our goal is to convene sufficient police forces to arrive on the scene quickly and control the situation firmly" (*la de qi, gen de shang, da de ying*).⁷¹ Furthermore, the police force has a clear division of labor regarding protest control. Patrol police should arrive on the scene first and maintain order.⁷² Community police play a role in persuading participants to retreat because they have more experience in

conducting “mass work.” Criminal police, meanwhile, are responsible for investigating the leaders and organizers of mass incidents.⁷³ Finally, riot police are deployed as a last resort to forcefully disperse the crowd.

The deployment of police forces to manage social protests is routine, even in the West. David Cunningham suggests that the presence of police actually protects participants in civil rights movements in terms of safeguarding the participants’ rights to assemble and securing their physical safety, although the police decisively repress protesters if groups adopt illegal or violent means to achieve their goals.⁷⁴ In the Chinese context, police are obliged to arrive immediately and control collective actions. However, their presence is meant neither to protect protesters’ rights nor to repress contentious challenges. Rather, their presence delivers an implicit message to the protesters that the police are ready to make arrests and use violence to take control if necessary. As one Shanghai police specialist suggested, “the police department should rapidly convene sufficient forces to overawe protesters by displaying police strength and eliminate any attempts at violent resistance.”⁷⁵ The show of force, therefore, is meant as a psychological threat toward the protesters and to “subdue the enemy without fighting.”⁷⁶

Engaging in Dialogue

Facilitating dialogue is a key persuasive tactic by which the police come to know the specific demands of the protesters as well as identify the organizers of the collective action. Most popular protests in F City are triggered by the restructuring of enterprises, land acquisitions, and compensation for demolition, which are all deemed “serious threats to the political stability of the city.”⁷⁷ Local police exhibit a certain degree of tolerance toward these economic protesters, however, and channel their energies into negotiation and mediation. “We primarily rely on education and persuasion to deal with mass incidents.”⁷⁸ Another experienced police officer concurred: “Currently, most protesters are laid-off workers and landless peasants. We would not use coercive means to deal with them so long as they do not behave violently.”⁷⁹ By conducting face-to-face dialogue with protesters, the police are able to pacify their anger and prevent any further escalation.

For example, more than forty villagers petitioned for back payment of their wheat production in 2008. A local flourmill took the wheat after offering an initial payment, with the balance to be paid once a profit was made on the market. However, the flourmill ultimately sold the supply to a wood company at a discounted price.

The villagers became angry over the prolonged wait and unsatisfactory payment. The police immediately took action after receiving reports about their petition. They initiated a dialogue with the villagers and solicited their complaints. They then persuaded the villagers to stop the petition by organizing a work team to help them recover their losses.⁸⁰ At last, the wood company promised to pay the market price plus interest to the flourmill by June 2010, with the villagers to be paid immediately thereafter.

In 2006, a villager surnamed Liu had a clash with his neighbors. He was placed in custody and received public order punishment (*zhi’an chufa*) from the police. Liu felt that the police treated him unfairly and filed suit, but the court rejected his case. Believing that the police and the court were acting in collusion, Liu petitioned different local government agencies such as the CCP headquarters, the People’s Congress, and the procurator to redress his grievances. In September 2010, the police directed the local People’s Congress, the People’s Political Consultative Conference, the Political and Legal Committee, the court, and the procurator to meet and hold dialogues with Liu. All of Liu’s questions were answered directly and patiently by police officers and agency officials.⁸¹ Liu’s anger abated, and he promised to make no further petitions.

Eliminating antagonism and resolving problems through legal means are the principal goals of initiating dialogue with protesters. Such communication is essential to peacefully resolving contentious challenges. According to guidance issued by the MPS, police should primarily rely on education and channeling (*shu dao*) to defuse mass incidents. The police chief is required to arrive on the scene once a protest takes place and is in charge of opening a channel to the protesters—especially, when possible, with the protesters’ representatives.⁸² As one police officer suggested: “Protesters are often ordinary people and their claims are personal conflicts among people. Therefore, we seldom use coercion toward them.”⁸³ Once the dialogue begins, there is a good chance that the contention can be diverted into an “institutionalized” channel.

Coordinating Solutions

As stated, the causes of collective actions are rather diverse. Identifying and addressing grievances is crucial to peaceably demobilizing protesters. The means of achieving peaceful mobilization, however, are often beyond the capacity and jurisdiction of the police. This explains why popular protests target China’s local governments

rather than police forces. Although local officials deploy the police on the front lines to confront angry protesters, many policemen believe that injecting the police into such unstable situations is unwise and sometimes counterproductive. For example, police deployment may be interpreted as a sign of repression that could infuriate protesters. Furthermore, government agencies may be in a better position to deal with specific issues such as demolition and migrant relocation, since they can explain their policies on the scene.⁸⁴ Indeed, pacifying protesters by resolving problems should not be the responsibility of the police alone—the village cadres, government officials, state agencies, and other institutions must also be involved.

F City police officers rely on the collaborative work of village cadres, government officials, and other agencies to work out solutions for mass incidents or collective petitions. For instance, in 2012 an eighteen-year-old man from one village died by drowning in the pond of a brick factory in a neighboring village. After hearing of his death, the victim's family went to the brick factory and accused the enterprise of negligence. They threatened to petition higher authorities unless they received substantial compensation. The local police immediately began investigating and mediating the case. Due to the complex situation, the police invited the two village committees and the township judicial institute (*si fa suo*) to join the mediation. The police began by talking with the victim's family members to understand their claims. They next exchanged those views with the manager of the brick factory and the cadres from the two villages. The police also consulted the township judicial institute and sought information on relevant laws and similar cases. After continuous efforts, the two village committees and the factory all agreed to provide an acceptable amount of compensation to the victim's family. In return, the family promised to stop protesting and signed an agreement to that effect with the brick factory.⁸⁵

Cases in which the police work hard to find solutions to protesters' claims are all too common. While the police are responsible for restoring order at the scene of minor protests, fulfilling the demands of collective actors is normally beyond their pale. To pacify protesters and disperse crowds, police officers often need to call on other government agencies to collaborate in finding acceptable solutions as soon as possible. An MPS order commands that the primary duty of the police force is to maintain social order and assist the party-state in performing "mass work" while remaining prepared to restrain any escalations.⁸⁶ The police strive to coordinate

all resources to persuade and pacify collective actors. For instance, if the main participants are ethnic minorities such as Muslims, the police will invite an imam to do the persuasive work.⁸⁷

In theory, the police on the scene are the first to address protesters' claims and coordinate government efforts to defuse protests. In reality, however, police officers possess very limited authority to resolve the underlying conflicts. Large-scale collective actions always involve serious claims and complicated demands which a single patrolman or team of responding officers are powerless to resolve. Hence long-term pacification has to involve consultation or action by senior party cadres. If those actors are viewed as dilatory, it may result in the radicalization of a movement.⁸⁸ If the situation does get out of control, one final stopgap tactic is for the police to detain the protest's leading activists, and then release them after the incident without pressing charges.⁸⁹ Beyond that, there are situations where police officers will apply coercive force.

Coercive Strategies

Chinese police have been ordered to restrain the application of force to mass incidents, theoretically considering it a last resort. The MPS has issued several guidelines for the police handling of mass incidents since 2001, emphasizing caution during police deployments (*shen yong jing li*).⁹⁰ Yet in practice the police face a fundamental dilemma: the central authorities command them to use force sparingly (not to carry weapons or suppress protesters), while local officials demand that they quickly put a stop to collective actions. Thus, the police have to balance the instructions they receive from central command and local bosses.

One adaptation strategy seems to be to selectively apply force by differentiating among the claims, tactics, and roles of protesters. The police tend to distinguish protesters' claims once they arrive on the scene. The basic principle of handling mass incidents is to analyze the legitimacy of protesters' claims. From a police perspective, mass incidents are collective petitions and, by nature, "internal contradictions of the people." As a senior local official in charge of maintaining stability stated, "if their demands are in line with party policies and government regulations, the police will persuade them to pursue their interests through legal channels."⁹¹ Police tolerance toward legitimate claims does not, however, mean that police work excludes an element of repression. The nature of protesters' claims is important—that is, whether they involve the economy or politics or sim-

ply discharge anger. Although the police show deference to economic claims, they will not abide any protests with a political agenda (for example, the Tibetan independence movement).⁹²

In terms of tactics, the police will not tolerate serious disturbances to public order or the use of violence. As one experienced police officer stated: “Generally, we adopt persuasion as the main method to deal with protesters. If they use violence or radical tactics, however, we arrest them immediately.”⁹³ The following boundaries of police tolerance have been identified: (1) no severe interruption of traffic, especially in city centers; (2) no rioting, including assault, vandalism, looting, or arson; and (3) no attacks on party headquarters, government agencies, state-owned enterprises, or public service sectors.⁹⁴ To put it simply, if violence occurs or public order is disturbed, the police will crack down on the collective action regardless of cause.⁹⁵

The police also respond differently according to the roles played by specific protesters. Police officers try to differentiate between protest organizers and more passive followers.⁹⁶ The effort is significant because experienced police officers admit that “we take a hard stance toward organizers.”⁹⁷ Once the decision to arrest is made, timing becomes critical. The police generally prefer to detain organizers or leaders after the protest has ended, because spontaneous arrests might escalate the situation. “The common procedure is to stop them first, then take them away and formally arrest them (with legal paperwork).”⁹⁸

In 2009, residents of one F City village sought economic compensation for land acquisition. They believed that their compensation was unfair and organized a petition movement. That July, about two thousand villagers marched to the township government building on hearing that local officials would convene a meeting to discuss their concerns. The villagers remained calm while they awaited a decision. They became enraged, however, when the officials announced that no evidence existed to prove that the sale monies were embezzled or otherwise improperly distributed. The incensed villagers accused the bureaucrats of a massive cover-up, and some found it impossible to physically restrain themselves. The police immediately intervened and arrested dozens of irritated villagers. The police detained the petition’s three organizers and released the elderly and female participants later.⁹⁹

Current media coverage provides a confusing image of Chinese police. Video footage from across the nation sometimes shows them patiently holding position while

being berated by shouting protesters but ruthlessly beating helpless individuals at others. Responses vary in part because of the numerous contradictory instructions and guidelines that direct police discretion in the deployment of coercive force. For instance, written guidelines absolutely forbid the deployment of violent force against protesters who make purely economic claims, yet police are also instructed to decisively repress any violent behavior.¹⁰⁰ There is much room for discretion in such cleavages. For example, how should the police deal with a mob of laid-off workers from a state-owned enterprise who are peacefully protesting for their rights, if some members of the aggrieved crowd suddenly throw bottles of water at the police line? Police are often confused as to the proper timing and degree of force to use in such circumstances. As one specialist commented, “it is very hard for police on the scene to find a balance between the letter of written directives and the exigencies of real-time situations.”¹⁰¹

Even when the choice is clear, Chinese police must exercise extreme caution in deploying force against contentious challengers. In large-scale riots or antiregime protests, the police tend to arrest enthusiastic participants at the scene as well as conduct delayed arrests.¹⁰² Seeing the police open fire on protesters is, however, very rare. In most modern cases, the police are more inclined to “invite” organizing activists to stop by the bureau for “a cup of tea,” which serves as an effective warning that they are being closely monitored.¹⁰³

Key Period Policing

Chinese police carry out a sophisticated and restrained policing strategy characterized by preventive mechanisms, persuasive maneuvers, and the selective use of force. Any one of these strategies may be favored in specific situations. There are key calendar dates during which the police exert extra caution to prevent mass incidents. F City police are on heightened stability maintenance alert during “national holidays, cultural festivals, and major sports events. We should focus on identifying all sorts of emerging issues, conduct community patrols, and control unemployed youngsters.”¹⁰⁴ Sensitive anniversary dates (e.g., June 4 and July 5) and crucial local events (village elections, local conferences, and policy consultation periods) are peak targets for popular protests, and the police engage all their resources to prevent instability.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, the police are advised to closely coordinate with the intelligence service, the military, and other political and legal departments for the collection and dissemination of intelligence.¹⁰⁶

Mass incidents are particularly likely to occur during major CCP conferences, government meetings, and politically sensitive anniversaries. These venues and times attract crowds because they provide a focal point for aggrieved persons to gather in order to draw more official and media attention.¹⁰⁷ The police are under especially intense pressure to maintain stability during these periods, as the MPS regulates that the directors of a police station will be summarily dismissed if mass incidents succeed due to negligence.¹⁰⁸ Thus, F City police act decisively to preempt such collective actions. For instance, they dispatch more officers to patrol villages on a more regular basis while keeping a standby force mobilized in reserve.¹⁰⁹ Even party-affiliated organizations such as the Communist Youth League are called on to provide volunteer patrol teams.¹¹⁰ They also conduct more intensive Internet surveillance. Once potential issues are uncovered, police officers work alongside local cadres to resolve conflicts and pacify the relevant individuals.¹¹¹ Those who have previously been involved in mass incidents or petitions will be closely monitored as key periods approach to prevent them from making a scene in Beijing or the provincial capitals.¹¹²

For example, F City's chief of police emphasizes safeguarding the city's sociopolitical stability during sessions of the local and National People's Congress (the nominal central legislature) and of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (the supreme consultative body for the central government): "As the dates of the local people's congress approach, we should do everything within our power to prevent key activists and individuals with petition experience from going to the provincial capital and Beijing. . . . We should spare no effort in maintaining social order and public security. The most urgent task is to look into key industries and areas with unsolved conflicts, tighten control over key activists, collect all information relating to social instability, and examine potential or emerging disputes."¹¹³

During the annual Spring Festival, F City police remain on patrol around the clock. They focus on main roads and transportation hubs, party and government buildings, the downtown district and major marketplaces, schools and universities, hotels and restaurants, and highly populated areas.¹¹⁴ The police dispatching and information center closely monitors these potential powder kegs while coordinating police forces to ensure a prompt response to any emergency.¹¹⁵ According to governmental statistics, from January to April 2013—the period in which the traditional Chinese New Year celebration as well as the annual one-week session of the local legisla-

tures take place—the police force at F City brags a stunning rate of 100 percent in dispute mediation and claims to have achieved "zero occurrence of criminal offense" (*ling fa an*) in 93.1 percent of the villages and communities under its jurisdiction.¹¹⁶

Three Dilemmas in Policing Protest

Conventional wisdom assumes that copious police brutality and ruthless violence characterize protest control in authoritarian regimes.¹¹⁷ While Chinese police play a pivotal role in maintaining order and regime stability, the examination of policing work in F City reveals sophisticated strategies to deter the need for brute force. The police adopt a series of preemptive measures to prevent protests and, failing that, conduct persuasive work so as to contain existing incidents. Even where force appears inevitable, the police tend to focus pressure on the protest organizers. It therefore seems that police strategies have shifted to a preventive and negotiation-oriented model of conflict resolution. The formation of these strategies can in fact be attributed to three dilemmas that Chinese police have to face when they confront social protests: (1) the dilemma of being sandwiched between aggrieved protesters and local officials, (2) the dilemma of being dictated to by dual bosses (the central and local state authorities), and (3) the dilemma of trying to enforce existing laws while processing real-time political instructions.

The Chinese police are sandwiched between aggrieved protesters and government officials. As one police expert stated: "In the eyes of some local officials, the police are a panacea. They will turn to the police no matter what happens. The police officers are constantly pushed to the front line of any conflict between the government and the public."¹¹⁸

Clashes between citizens and police have become a major trigger for popular protest in China: 22.2 percent of mass incidents were caused by bad police behavior (e.g., negative attitudes, violation of laws, and denial of justice) in 2012.¹¹⁹ This is not surprising, as police are often involved in many nonpolice related activities, such as house demolitions, land seizures, and the personal protection of criminal officials. The image of the police as "hired thugs" somehow prevails among antagonized citizens.

Police on the scene tend to act as go-betweens and "clear channels" between protesters and government officials or other relevant parties. A police officer from the Kunming in southwest China pointed out, "we know that local officials totally rely on the police force, espe-

cially as a defensive wall to cover up their illegal and arbitrary conduct.”¹²⁰ Therefore, in practice, the primary duties of the police are to arrive promptly on the scene of an incident, monitor protesters, and try to negotiate with them. The police are especially careful to avoid taking any coercive measures against protesters with economic grievances unless they begin to behave radically.¹²¹ They are aware that the protesters’ demands are beyond their jurisdiction and that the local officials are the true main targets; therefore, the police must coordinate various departments and agencies to mediate the issue. As a director of a police station in F City reflected: “This is an issue of comprehensive management. Village cadres ought to play a key role in dealing with conflicts. Local leaders should intervene, and all relevant state agencies have to engage.”¹²²

The police also have to balance directives from the central authorities with the commands of local officials. As Yongshun Cai suggests, the central and local authorities have different priorities in dealing with popular protests. The central government is more sensitive to regime legitimacy and tends to yield more concessions, while “local officials are more concerned with policy implementation or task fulfillment (e.g., maintaining social stability).”¹²³ Chinese police are administered by both the central and the local authorities, a practice that “combines vertical and local leadership, with local leadership playing the main part” (*tiaokuai jiehe, yikuai weizhu*).¹²⁴ The MPS generally oversees police work in terms of professionalism, while the local party-state possesses primary command and control.¹²⁵

The twenty-first-century MPS leadership has strengthened the vertical control of police recruitment and accountability “to disturb the existing balance between the local and central accountability of the police and to redistribute that power in favor of the Public Security Bureau at the superior level.”¹²⁶ Although the MPS insists that the police should obey the local party branch’s leadership directives, it also affirms that police should avoid participating in any nonpolice activities—tax collection, the implementation of birth control, or house demolition, and so on.¹²⁷ In practice, however, local police cannot refuse local officials. As Tanner suggests, “local party authorities have been able to invoke control over police budgets, personnel, and the need for loyalty to party leadership to overcome police hesitancy to carry out these coercive actions.”¹²⁸ One police officer who handled a local medical dispute complained: “We [the police] are the third party in these disputes. The victim’s family and the hospital should settle the case by nego-

tiation or lawsuit. Yet once disputes escalate into disturbances, the police are called to intervene by local officials whether a legal channel is available or not.”¹²⁹

The police have to obey the real-time directives from two bosses in handling actual protests. On the one hand, the central authorities “advise” the police to favor persuasion and education to rechannel protester energies. Coercive tactics and direct repression are strongly discouraged. On the other hand, the police must “respect” their local “boss” and swiftly complete the stability preservation mission. A police officer stated: “The Chinese police are a half-militarized force. We have to follow orders from the Party and governments at all levels.”¹³⁰ This balancing act does create a cleavage in which police are able to apply some discretion in choosing their tactics. After all, as William K. Muir suggests, the police are essentially “street-corner politicians” who must deal with the “conflicts between civility, departmental objectives, personal goals, and coercive effectiveness.”¹³¹

Moreover, the police must reconcile their commitment to the “rule of law” with loyalty to the political order. Since Deng’s era, the Chinese police force has been reinventing itself as a professional law-enforcement agency, “being more scientific, rational, rule-bound, and humane.”¹³² However, the police often encounter the dilemma of obeying existing laws while following the real-time orders of local officials during crises. As one police officer opined: “The Party and government tend to request that the police settle protests by force, which places them in an awkward position between officials’ orders and existing laws. Police work is regulated and limited by laws, but refusing the orders of local officials might cause an accusation of dereliction of duty. It is very difficult to balance the relationship between laws and orders when they contradict each other.”¹³³

To “nip all factors of instability in the bud,” police use intense intelligence and information collecting to detect potential sources of social conflict (often at odds with constitutional guarantees of liberty), while local police rarely approve protest applications (although the Chinese constitution stipulates the legal right to demonstrate).¹³⁴ The extent to which political deliberation is incorporated into policing strategies is a critical difference between the police forces of authoritarian and democratic states. Police in democratic nations take a more independent position and can respond to protesters within an established and respected legal framework, while their authoritarian counterparts have to balance a kaleidoscope of contrasting rules and instructions from different sources of authority.¹³⁵ Notwithstanding the

limited amount of discretionary authority they do enjoy in the early phases of collective actions, Chinese police do not hesitate to “decisively put down the incident according to the law” once the protest poses a threat to social order and authority.¹³⁶ The suppression of the Weng’an Riot of 2008 and Shishou Riot of 2009 provide chilling reminders of a red line.

Conclusion

As Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner suggest, “the ultimate form of stability does not entail meeting and overcoming crises, but avoiding and, when they cannot be totally avoided, resolving crises decisively in the regime’s favor.”¹³⁷ Studies of stability preservation require the examination of street-level bureaucrats who constantly “interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of the benefits or the allocation of public sanctions.”¹³⁸ As Michael Lipsky points out, “The decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routine they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressure, effectively *become* the public policies they carry out.”¹³⁹ The police undoubtedly play an essential role in allowing authoritarian regimes to “stay out of trouble or put troubles behind them.”¹⁴⁰ Yet, although the police are officially under strict state control, it is conceivable that they possess certain discretionary powers in policing protests and maintaining stability. Thus, to understand the new dynamics of authoritarianism, we need to reexamine police actions.

Challenging the common perception that authoritarian police forces always ruthlessly repress disturbances, this article suggests that the Chinese police have shifted strategy toward the more permissive means of “managing and moderating” protest. The authors conclude that the Chinese police are now far more adept in the arts of preemption, persuasion, and the selective application of coercive force than they have been in the past. Their role as the Party’s repressive army against class enemies has faded away; instead, the modern Chinese police are transforming themselves into a proactive law-enforcement agency. This adaptation has occurred in an environment where police are anxiously sandwiched by tensions between the state and the people, the dual leadership of central and local authorities, and the commitment to the “rule of law” as well as political orders.

This article describes a threefold role for the Chinese police in curtailing social protest and maintaining the regime’s political stability. Police officers are at once moderators between protesters and cadres, service per-

sonnel of the central authorities and the local government, and executors of political orders who are simultaneously restricted by legal codes. Yet, by no means are the Chinese police an autonomous force between the omnipresent party-state and the people under its rule; on the contrary, the police remain central within the CCP’s social control apparatus and play a fundamental role in safeguarding the supremacy of the incumbent political regime. The party-state dominates the agenda of police work and counts on the police to pacify social tension and maintain political stability and, for those purposes, it grants the police considerable discretion to deal with potential antagonists. The complicated role played by the Chinese police force in preventing, containing, and managing popular protests deserves further attention from those who have an interest in understanding the ongoing sustainability of the People’s Republic of China’s authoritarian regime in the twenty-first century.

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