Protest Leadership and State Boundaries: Protest Diffusion in Contemporary China*

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Abstract

How does protest spread in contemporary China? This paper analyses one case of cross-firm protest and two cases of cross-village protest in order to demonstrate a mechanism for protest diffusion, a topic rarely studied in the existing literature. It argues that central policies, protest leadership and a connective structure that links protest leaders and followers enable people with shared economic interests to protest together. Protests emerged when protest leaders, who were trained politically by the state and enjoyed moral standing in a small community, started popularizing policy documents among followers. Protest diffusion occurred when representatives from each participating unit coordinated with one another and coalesced around the core leaders, who decided tactics for the entire protest. The protestors, however, did not form coalitions across different administrative boundaries. Thus, protest leaders did play a decisive role in the spreading of a protest. However, the state also moulded and restricted the scale of the diffusion.

Keywords: protest diffusion; protest leadership; policy documents; the Chinese state; mobilizing structure; close-knit communities

On a hot and humid day in August 2002, about 1,000 retired workers from the collective enterprises in Huaizhou, a city in northern Hunan, staged a collective sit-in and petitioning (*jiti jingzuo shangfang* 集体静坐上访) in front of the city government.[1] While retired workers in the city had protested before, this was a new type of protest. The workers were tenacious and the sit-in continued for two weeks, the longest protest of its kind in the city at the time. Furthermore, the workers came from all the collective enterprises in the entire city, making it a city-wide protest. This was the first time that protesting workers in the city had built a coalition across different work units. The workers' demands, however, were surprisingly modest. They were asking for the government to pay them the

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minimum living standard allowance each month, which ranged from 50 yuan to 30 yuan per person.[2]

Long before these workers from collective enterprises protested, retired workers from the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the city had frequently protested and made claims on the city government. The SOE workers, however, had always protested on an individual work unit basis. Since the 1990s, when many public enterprises collapsed, there have been widespread protests by SOE workers across China. However, there has not been a single case of cross-firm protest staged by SOE workers laid off when their firms went bankrupt or were restructured. Even the Liaoyang 辽阳 protest in 2002, where around 10,000 workers from more than ten SOEs protested together, turned out to be orchestrated from a single SOE.[3]

The protest staged by the retired workers from the collective enterprises in Huaizhou was different to the protests of their fellow workers from SOEs, and instead more closely resembled the widespread collective action taken by peasants to protest against the heavy taxes and fees levied by the local government (counties, towns/townships, and villages) in the 1990s.[4] The peasant protests often spread from the village where the protest originated to the entire township or town which collected the taxes and fees and typically governed dozens of villages.

Many scholars have analysed popular protest in contemporary China.[5] However, there has been no study of cross-firm protest and little is known about cross-village protests. Although we do know why protestors in China do not build coalitions with others when protesting, there is scant understanding of the mechanism of protest diffusion among either workers or peasants. The Huaizhou protest and township-wide peasant protests against heavy taxation present an opportunity to examine an important question in Chinese politics: under what conditions can protest diffusion occur in contemporary China?

Protest diffusion is defined as the spread of a protest from one site to another.[6] Protest diffusion happens through either coordination or learning.[7] This paper focuses only on those protests which are diffused through protestors coordinating across multiple sites. Thus, a diffused protest refers to a protest coordinated across different work units or villages. Diffused protest is used in contrast to a cellular protest, which is a protest restricted to a single work unit or village. Many social groups in contemporary China have learned from others and orchestrated protests.[8] Few, however, have been able to stage a protest coordinated across different units. Clearly, a coordinated protest is larger and more challenging to state power than small and scattered protests. The key question, therefore,

2 Interviews with retired workers' representatives, Huaizhou, 28 September 2002; 30 September 2002; 1 October 2002; 1 June 2003; 6 July 2014; 8 July 2014; and 9 July 2014.
3 Lee 2007a, 232; Cai 2010, 126–130.
4 Bernstein and Lü 2003, 116–165; Pan 2003, 104–130; Yu 2003; O'Brien and Li 2006.
5 Cai 2010; Tong and Lei 2013.
6 Givan, Roberts and Soule 2010, 1–15.
7 Ibid., 2–3.
8 See, e.g., Chen 2010.

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is not whether groups in China can protest separately, but whether they can stage a large-scale coordinated protest.

To answer why and how protest diffusion occurs, this paper compares three protest actions in Hunan: a protest organized by retired workers from collective enterprises in Huaizhou, and two peasant protests against heavy taxation in northern and central Hunan. Data on the background of worker and peasant protests were collected gradually over two years during fieldwork in Hunan from 2001 to 2003 and in the summer of 2004. Hunan is a large grain-producing province in central China where peasants and local cadres clashed continually over heavy taxation in the 1990s. Most of the province's small and medium-sized enterprises collapsed in the 1990s and workers often sought economic relief from the local government through collective action. As such, there have been many incidences of both worker and peasant protests in this province. For the Huaizhou case, I carried out four intensive group interviews between September 2002 and June 2003, each lasting several hours, with the key leaders of the protest soon after they staged a city-wide collective sit-in. I also interviewed two of these leaders in July 2014 regarding the diffusion process at the very beginning of the protest. For the peasant protest cases, I interviewed peasants, their leaders, the leaders' relatives, and in one case, township cadres, in 2002 and 2004. All interviews, except one group interview with peasants in Qizong township and the 2014 interviews with workers, were tape-recorded. The events surrounding and during the protests are reconstructed based on the recorded interview transcripts, the printed materials and petition letters provided by the workers and peasants, and on notes taken after the group interview with peasants in Qizong and the 2014 interviews.

This study looks at the activism of retired workers, as they are particularly prone to protest.[9] Retired workers not only have the time to protest, but also can make a legitimate claim on the local government using state policies, their old age and their contribution to the state as their weapons. Laid-off workers, too young to retire, are usually expected to overcome economic hardship on their own. The peasant protests against heavy taxation, on the other hand, involved the entire peasant class.

In this article, I argue that political opportunity structure, protest leadership and mobilizing structure can explain protest diffusion in contemporary China.[10] Protest diffusion happens in China when protest leaders, prompted by a favourable central policy, mobilize followers by popularizing the policy document and petitioning the local government. Participants respond enthusiastically when united by common economic interests and when their anonymity is protected by following protest leaders. The protest spreads from one work unit or village to another, and finally encompasses the entire administrative unit (the city or the township) that governs the peasants or workers when protestors

9 Hurst and O'Brien 2002.

10 For a synthetic approach to the study of contentious politics, see Tarrow 1998 and McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996.

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succeed in building a two-layered mobilizing structure, which includes five or six leaders for the entire protest and representatives from each participating unit. However, the protestors do not make coalitions across different administrative units.

Literature Review

Why does protest diffusion occur? In the Western context, social movement scholars have studied how technology such as the mass media and the internet, the modularity of repertoires, bonds among activists, cycles of protest, and political brokers help a protest to diffuse.[11] In China, the question is little studied because protest diffusion rarely happens. The research puzzle then is why protestors do not coordinate across different units. Studies on Chinese workers, for example, have observed that SOE worker protests are restricted to individual work units. SOE workers have refrained from making cross-firm coalitions because organizing across enterprises is more risky for the activists,[12] because workers' interests are divided,[13] and because the work unit system fragments the working class by turning their lived experiences into a self-contained universe which prevents them from thinking in class terms.[14] Even when SOE workers did think in class terms when protesting against privatization in the late 1990s, they only carried out firm-level mobilization because the state would suppress cross-firm activism.[15]

Ching Kwan Lee calls protest by workers "cellular activism," as workers are mobilized at enterprise level and there is no coordination across work units.[16] Even the Liaoyang protest in 2002 did not break this pattern. Although around 10,000 workers from more than ten SOEs in the city of Liaoyang protested together, the protest started from a single work unit and the protest organizers "insisted on excluding workers at other factories from participating in planning meetings and the leadership hierarchy."[17] The protest became big by chance, not by plan.

Yongshun Cai also has argued that protests by Chinese workers are based around individual firms. His research on the Liaoyang case confirmed that the protest was limited to the Liaoyang Ferroalloy Factory, and that it was only in the final two days of the action that workers from other firms joined the Ferroalloy Factory workers on the streets.[18] In numerous articles, Feng Chen has studied various kinds of workers' protests, all of which were based around a particular work unit.[19] In his 2010 article, for example, Feng Chen examined

11 Tarrow 1998, 144–45, 187; Givan, Roberts and Soule 2010; Myers 2000.
12 Cai 2002, 2005.
13 Lee 2007a, 236–37.
14 Chen 2000, 59.
15 Chen 2006, 59.
16 Lee 2007b.
17 Lee 2007a, 232.
18 Cai 2010, 126–130.
19 Chen 2000, 2003, 2006.

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a strike wave in Dalian City in 2005 that involved 18 enterprises. The strikes, however, were still centred on individual enterprises, and little cross-firm coordination occurred.[20]

There is also little understanding of why cross-village protest sometimes occurs. Bernstein and Lü, who have studied rural taxation in depth since the 1980s, have acknowledged that a growing subset of peasant protests against taxation spread to one or more townships, but they have not explained the diffusion mechanism behind these large protests.[21] Similarly, Pan Wei and Yu Jianrong have both, separately, briefly examined cases of peasant collective action against heavy taxation in Sichuan and Hunan that spread to a township or a rural district. However, they do not explain why protest diffusion occurred in these cases but not in others.[22] Thus, the existing literature on social protest in contemporary China lacks a basic understanding of protest diffusion, either among workers or peasants. This knowledge has to be gained from new empirical studies. Through analysing three cases of diffused protests, this paper aims to fill a major gap in the literature.

Protest by Pensioners from Collective Enterprises

Prior to going bankrupt in the early 1990s, the collective enterprises in Huaizhou formed a pillar of the local economy. Before 1949, the city was well known for its many private craft shops. In the 1950s, these shops were organized into 42 co-ops, which employed a total of 4–5,000 workers. Even by the 1960s, the city had only two SOEs; by the end of 2001, Huaiyang district of Huaizhou had 87 collective enterprises, but only eight SOEs.[23] Most of these collective enterprises were small, employing a few hundred people making textiles, shoes and leather goods, or providing services such as food provision. The workers from the collective enterprises worked long hours and, in addition to regular work, dug canals, built roads, and supported the "third front projects" (*sanxian gongcheng* 三线工程).

Under the planned economy, workers in these collective enterprises lived simple but secure lives. The firms were profitable and provided the workers with a salary and a safety net that were enough to support a family. In the 1980s, the market reform unleashed competition and corruption, both of which dealt a fatal blow to small and medium-sized public enterprises. The collective enterprises were among the first to collapse, as these firms usually had a few liquid assets, which were quickly depleted. Production halted in the workshops, equipment was dismantled and sold as scrap metal, and the workshops were rented out to private business people.[24] Between 1991 and 1994, 90 per cent of the collective

20 Chen 2010, 113–15, 121.
21 Bernstein and Lü 2003, 116–165.
22 Pan 2003, 104–130; Yu 2001, 557–562; Yu 2003.
23 Interviews with local cadres, Huaizhou, April 2002.
24 Interviews with workers, managers, and local officials, Hunan, 2001–03.

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enterprises in Huaizhou stopped production. By 2002, all but five of the collective enterprises had closed their doors. After production had halted, each firm hired a few people to take care of administrative and economic functions, such as distributing the occasional poverty relief money provided by the government, selling equipment, and finding buyers for any remaining assets such as land, which was perhaps the most valuable asset that the firms still had.

As the firms went bankrupt, the workers lost their livelihoods and many did not receive a penny in compensation from their former work units. In October 2000, the local government started issuing poverty relief money for these workers. The amounts were pitiful: 8, 15, or 25 yuan a month. Laid-off workers too young to retire yet too old to find a job in the private sector usually did not protest against these changes. Young and still able-bodied, they were not in a position to demand that the local government should provide them with a bowl of rice. Retired workers, however, could easily make a claim, as they were old and had a social contract with the local government. They had worked extremely hard during the socialist period, received low wages and had turned in large amounts of taxes to the state. In return, the local government explicitly guaranteed them a pension.

Despite this entitlement, retired workers from collective enterprises in Huaizhou were quiescent for about ten years after their firms collapsed. Despite experiencing extreme economic hardship, they made no claims on the local government. Instead, they preferred to solve their problems privately, for example by only eating twice a day, seeking re-employment despite their old age, and turning to their spouses or children for help. These private solutions often proved inadequate, however, because workers from collective enterprises tended to marry workers from within the same system and their children were usually employed by the same enterprises as their parents.

This period of inactivity changed in 2000 when the central government issued a notice (*tongzhi* 通知) concerning retired and laid-off workers from collective enterprises which had halted production for many years. It stipulated that if these workers did not have money to join the city's pension fund (*shebao* 社保), they were entitled to receive the minimum living standard allowance (*dibao* 低保).[25] The provincial government also promulgated two policies on retired workers from collective enterprises.[26] Both emphasized that these workers were entitled to the minimum living standard allowance.

25 State Council Notice No. 8, Article 3, issued in 2000, "Guowuyuan guanyu qieshi zuohao qiye lituixiu renyuan jiben yanglaojin anshi zu e fafang he guoyou qiye xiagang zhigong jiben shenghuo baozhang gongzuo de tongzhi" (Notice on doing our job properly in providing basic pensions in full and on time to retired workers from enterprises and guaranteeing basic living expenses for laid-off workers from SOEs).

26 15th Circular of the Hunan Provincial Government in 2000, "Hunan sheng renmin zhengfu guanyu qieshi zuohao qiye lituixiu renyuan jiben yanglaojin anshi zu e fafang he guoyou qiye xiagang zhigong jiben shenghuo baozhang gongzuo de tongzhi" (Circular on doing our job thoroughly in providing basic pensions in full and on time to retired workers from enterprises and guaranteeing basic living expenses for laid-off workers from SOEs); and the 248th document of the Department of Labour and Social Security

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The publication of these policies prompted the retired workers to take action. Once they had mobilized, the workers proved to be determined and capable of building coalitions. By summer 2002, the workers' representatives had petitioned the city government 39 times. They also orchestrated two city-wide protests. In the summers of 2001 and 2002, hundreds of workers from dozens of collective enterprises protested together in front of the city government.

The mobilization began when Yang, a retired worker from the water pump factory, obtained a copy of the State Council notice from her husband, a retired cadre from the urban planning bureau. Yang's firm was small, so she began to spread word of the circular among the few thousand retired workers from the firms administered by the Second Light Industry Bureau.[27] The news travelled quickly through word of mouth, as the retired workers, most of whom were women, attended the same vegetable market, lived on the same street, and often played cards and mahjong together.[28] The retired workers quickly mobilized. To communicate with other workers effectively, each of the 23 enterprises administered by the Second Light Industry Bureau selected one or two representatives, who made frequent contact with one another through telephone calls and meetings. Although these retired workers were from different work units, they were determined to cooperate with one another from the very beginning: "Since we all faced the same problem and since the policy applied to us all, we started linking with workers from other firms. We started petitioning the city government, asking it to issue us the minimum living standard allowance."[29]

On 12 September 2001, the pensioners began to petition the local government to implement the State Council notice and issue them the allowance. On 23 September 2001, they staged their first collective sit-in in front of the city government. More than 700 retired workers from the water pump factory and the 23 collective firms from the Second Light Industry Bureau participated in the protest. The sit-in was organized by representatives from each of the firms.

The local government told the pensioners that collective petitioning on such a scale was illegal and that they should select just three to five representatives. The pensioners then elected five or six representatives, including Chen, a man in his 60s who worked in a leather factory. Chen was a former soldier and had also been a rebel during the Cultural Revolution. Yang, who initiated the mobilization, was also elected.[30] These representatives, called the "representatives of the

footnote continued

of Hunan Province in 2001, "Hunan sheng laodong he shehui baozhangting guanyu jiti qiye jiqi zhigong canjia jiben yanglao baoxian youguan wenti de tongzhi" (Circular on questions related to collective enterprises and their workers enrolling in the basic pension).

27 The bureau administered the largest number of collective enterprises in the city.

28 The enterprises lined the main street of Huaiyang district of Huaizhou.

29 Interview with Zhao, a worker's representative, September 2002.

30 Owing to pressure put on her husband by the local government, she quit the protest in 2002.

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representatives" (*daibiao de daibiao* 代表的代表), formed the kernel of the protest's leadership. They took on the work of organizing the retired workers, communicating with the media and researchers, and negotiating with the local government. The representatives were articulate, strong-willed, well-versed in the language of the state, and remained calm when conducting negotiations and meetings with the local government. Most spoke up for the common interests of all the pensioners, rather than dwelling on individual economic hardships. Before their firms went bankrupt, many of the representatives had been important cadres (*gugan* 骨干) or activists (*jijifenzi* 积极分子), and had worked as managers, Party secretaries or trade union officials. In other words, they had belonged to the political class. The majority of the representatives were women, since most of the workers in the collective enterprises were women.

Although the representatives met with city officials for close to two hours on 23 September, the pensioners' problems were not resolved. The representatives continued to petition the city government, but the workers still did not receive any money. The representatives then petitioned the provincial government twice. After being shuffled from one department to another, they were told to return to Huaizhou and apply for social relief there.

Eventually, the retired workers did receive the allowance for a period of three months (December 2001, January and February 2002). The money was largely financed by transfers from the central government. The Huaizhou government was severely lacking in funds and so set the allowance at only 120 yuan per person per month. The workers were to receive the difference between their personal income and the allowance. The poorest pensioners received 50 yuan a month, while the others received either 40 or 30 yuan. Families with televisions or refrigerators and those with children to support were disqualified. The retired workers were to receive the allowance from their neighbourhood committees, an arrangement that the workers loathed. In their view, this put them on a par with "ordinary residents" (*chun jumin* 纯居民) and negated their status as workers and their contribution to the state.

The retired workers continued to insist on two points. First, each retired worker should automatically receive 120 yuan a month, and that this amount should not be subject to any evaluation or any quota. Second, they should receive the allowance from their work units, rather than from the neighbourhood committees where they would have to compete with "ordinary" residents for the allowance. They argued that forcing them to apply for the allowance from the neighbourhood committee lowered their social status from a worker to an "ordinary" resident, i.e. someone without a job or a work unit who had made no contribution to the state.

Despite these strong feelings, the retired workers halted their protest during the three months they received this pitiful amount of money. However, in March 2002, the money stopped coming. By the end of June, no more money was forthcoming, despite numerous petitions at the local level. The retired workers then decided to petition Beijing. By this time, six other collective firms in the district

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had joined the protest. Close to a thousand pensioners signed their names on a large piece of white cloth, on which was written "retired workers need to eat rice" (*tuixiu gongren yaofan chi* 退休工人要饭吃). To pay for the trip to the capital, representatives from every collective enterprise collected five yuan from each retired worker. More than 3,000 yuan was collected, of which 2,390 yuan came from the 23 enterprises administered by the Second Light Industry Bureau and more than 1,000 yuan from the enterprises administered by the State Asset Bureau. In June 2002, five retired workers representing 30 enterprises took their petition to Beijing. The delegation comprised two representatives from the Second Light Industry; one from the State Asset Bureau, representing five companies; one from the water pump factory; and one from the printing factory.

At the Letters and Visits Office of the State Council, the representatives were told that the central government cared about them and had allocated 460 million yuan that year to local governments for the allowance. They were also told that they should ask their local government to solve their problems according to the State Council Notice No. 8. The representatives were informed that their petition materials would be handed over to the relevant leaders and that the office would brief the local government about their situation. The representatives also petitioned the Letters and Visits Office of the National People's Congress and the All-China Federation of Labour Unions, and attempted to contact some mass media, such as *Focus*, a popular CCTV programme, but did not succeed.

After returning from Beijing, the retired workers continued to petition the local government. They then received the news that the district government lacked sufficient funds to pay everybody. The number of people claiming the allowance exceeded 10,000 and the district government only had about 3 million yuan to pay them. The allowance would be reduced from 50, 40, or 30 yuan a month to 30, 25, or 20 yuan a month, respectively. Further, the number of people receiving the allowance would have to be cut by 5 per cent. For example, in Chen's work unit, four out of the 82 retired workers receiving the allowance would no longer be allowed to claim. The representatives agreed to lower the amount of the allowance, but insisted that nobody should be cut from the relief list. The Civil Affairs Bureau disagreed. This fuelled the pensioners' discontent and they decided to stage a second big protest.

To make this protest action more effective, the pensioners decided to stage a sit-in that would last longer, involve more people and so would be harder for the local government to handle. To prepare for the sit-in, Chen and other leaders organized several meetings of the representatives from dozens of firms. On 5 August, 2002, the second collective sit-in and petition began. Raising four giant banners, which read "The great CCP will not forget us," "People are the foundation of ten thousand things and food is the most important thing for people," "Return the right of survival to us retired workers" and "We demand strongly that the city leaders meet with us retired workers," the pensioners marched to the city government.

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On the first day, 818 retired workers from 31 enterprises took part in the sit-in. They came from the 23 enterprises from the Second Light Industry Bureau and eight other collective firms. On the second day, pensioners from the Fengling district of the city joined the sit-in. On the third day, the number of participants increased to more than 1,000. By this time, the protest had spread to all of the collective enterprises in the city whose workers did not receive their pension (about 7,000 workers), making this protest a truly city-wide coalition.

On 6 August, the city government closed its office and cut off the running water to the compound. Unable to access drinking water, some protestors blocked the gate of the government compound and stopped motorized vehicles from moving in or out of the compound. This lasted for about an hour.

After its gate was blocked, the government provided water for the protestors. It also sent a propaganda vehicle with a loud speaker blaring out a warning to the protestors that since their action broke the law, they would be punished. The government also wrote an open letter to the pensioners telling them that they had to present their request lawfully and in a civil manner, and that only through developing the local economy could their problems be solved.

On 7 August, the local government received the workers' representatives. The workers were told that their collective petitioning was organized and planned and that it had greatly disrupted the normal workings of the government. The government would arrest the organizers, but pardon the participants. The local government also promised to issue the March–July allowance to the pensioners soon.

The collective sit-in lasted from 5 August to 16 August, perhaps the longest protest staged by workers in any city. The protestors agreed to disband because the city was due to host a major sports game. The local government asked Chen for help disbanding the workers and he agreed to organize a meeting of the representatives. More than 60 representatives attended the meeting. They consented to end the protest, as they did not want to disrupt the first major sports games hosted by the city. More importantly, they were hopeful that the 16th National Party Congress, which was due to convene soon, would issue more favourable policies for pensioners from collective enterprises. Finally, the hot and humid weather was wearing out the protestors. Many became sick. As rain poured down on the day of the meeting of representatives, the number of protestors dwindled to about 30 or 40 people. Thus, the protest ended.

However, the workers insisted that this was not the end of the protest. The pensioners vowed to continue with their collective action until they received the subsistence allowance regularly, as the following quotations show:

> If they do not issue the minimum living allowance, we will continue to protest. We workers plan to stage a sit-in again (Zhao, a workers' representative, 1 October 2002);

> If this problem is not solved, we will continue to petition. If I do not, others will. Those with no rice to eat will sleep in front of the city government gate and die there (Qian, a workers' representative, 1 October 2002).

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Peasant Protest against Heavy Taxes and Fees in the 1990s

In many ways, the Huaizhou protest resembled peasant protests against heavy taxes and fees. Local governments in rural China, desperately short of revenue and facing large fiscal demands, taxed peasants excessively in the 1990s.[31] Peasants, whose income was falling, responded with everyday forms of resistance, such as failure to pay taxes, as well as with riots and protests. In the 1990s, peasant protests against heavy taxation were widespread in Hunan. Central policies played a crucial role in these protests. Just like the pensioners from the collective enterprises in Huaizhou, peasants in Hunan only protested after they had learned about central policies which forbade the local government from collecting excessive and random rural taxes and fees. Peasant protests were organized by a few leaders, who had the same roles as the workers' representatives. Furthermore, many peasant protests spread from the centre, i.e. the village where the protest started, to the township or town which was the seat of the local government responsible for collecting rural taxes and fees.

Peasants in Qizong township in central Hunan protested twice in the 1990s.[32] Their action began in 1993, when tuition fees at the village school increased to more than 300 yuan per student. A peasant, who was a retired village Party secretary, read a document (No. 33) on tuition fee caps issued by the city in the local newspaper. He then contacted several peasants, including Xie Weimin, and urged them to use the policy to protect their interests. After reading the document, several peasants decided to protest against the high tuition fees.

Xie was a middle-aged, well-educated and highly respected peasant. With three children attending school, his financial burden was heavy. He had a high school diploma, the highest degree of education among peasants in the 1990s. He was willing to "do things for peasants and sacrifice all he had for them." Xie once worked for the village propaganda team. He was a powerful political orator and could "stir the masses" with his speeches. Xie became the most prominent leader of the protest and his village became the protest centre.

Xie and a dozen or so others emerged as leaders of this protest. These leaders were articulate, public-spirited and well-versed in government policies. They were all men. Most were middle-aged and held a high school diploma. Few were Party members but all had worked for the local party-state, many as heads of a team, a sub-unit of a village.

The protest had a mobilizing structure identical to the one built by the Huaizhou pensioners. The peasants founded an informal protest organization, called the Parents' Association. The association was made up of the elected representatives of each of the 18 villages under the township's jurisdiction. Altogether, the association had more than 80 representatives, from among whom about a dozen emerged as leaders. Five or six of the leaders formed the leadership core. In September 1993, all the

31 Bernstein and Lü 2003; Li, Changping 2002.
32 Interviews with peasants and township cadres, Qizong township, summer 2004.

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representatives marched to the seat of the township government and negotiated with the local government for three days and nights. The local government agreed to rescind the tuition hike and the peasants dissolved the association.

When taxes and fees increased dramatically in 1996, the peasants protested once more. The mobilization again started in Xie's village. After several peasants knelt down and begged him in tears, Xie agreed to lead the protest for the second time. This time around, the same retired village Party secretary provided three documents: the No. 1 central document, the No. 9 provincial document, and the No. 28 prefectural document. Peasants also received two more documents from a peasant activist from Zhi prefecture, a southern prefecture hundreds of kilometres away from Qizong township.

The peasants reactivated the organization set up in 1993, but this time they called it a burden reduction council. Every village elected a few representatives to the council. The same dozen or so representatives became leaders, and the same five or six leaders provided the core leadership. The organization enabled the protest to spread from Xie's village to the entire township quickly. Documents were posted in each village's public space and relayed from one peasant to another. The policies were also recorded and broadcast through a loud speaker. Meetings of the representatives were convened. Open letters written by the leaders reached the peasants in each village via its representatives. The representatives in each village relayed the leaders' decisions, collected donations, made banners and mobilized the peasants. Throughout the protest, Xie's village remained the centre of the protest. It was where the protest originated (*fayuandi* 发源地) and where most of the planning meetings took place. It formed the base area (*genjudi* 根据地) of the protest. However, two other villages also rose to prominence during the protest: Qianshui village, where the peasants kidnapped a township cadre for 12 days and founded their own school, and Xiaoqiao village, where the peasants kidnapped a police officer to force the local government to release a leader.

The collective action became militant during this second round (1996–1998). The peasants repeatedly kidnapped local cadres and encircled the township government. They ransacked the county government and built a primary school of their own where teachers were subject to evaluation by the peasants. Government authority broke down completely in several villages. After complex interactions between the local government and the peasants that involved concessions, cooperation and repression, the protest was finally suppressed in 1998. The local government arrested more than ten leaders and sentenced them to many years in prison, but the peasants achieved their goal. Their taxes and fees were lowered, and remained the lowest of the entire county for many years.

The Qizong protest never spread beyond the boundaries of the township, and there was no coordination between the Qizong protest and a protest in Zouma town, which bordered Qizong. Zouma town was ten kilometres away from the protest centre via a good asphalt road. This was the same distance between the protest centre and Qianshui, a barely accessible village deep in the mountains governed by Qizong township. While Qianshui village became the second most

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important hub of the Qizong protest, the protest in Zouma town did not form part of the Qizong protest. The influence of the collective action in Qizong on the Zouma protest was limited to setting an example and providing policy documents. The Zouma leaders did pay a visit to the leaders in Qizong and copied policy documents from them, but they did not discuss protest tactics or organizational strategies. No coordination or exchange of information other than policy documents occurred between the two sets of protestors.

The Qizong protest was not unique. In Changtang town in northern Hunan, a town formed when three small townships were consolidated in 1995, peasants also carried out a town-wide protest from 1996 to 1999. Most of the 50,000 or so peasants in the town were mobilized by about ten leaders.[33] The town is located where three counties intersect, an ideal location for protest diffusion. The protest began in two villages more than 40 *li* 里 apart from each other. The two protests merged into one and gradually spread to the entire town, encompassing all three original townships. The leaders in Changtang, however, refrained from coordinating with protesting peasants in Qianzhu village, which bordered the protest centre but was governed by another county.

Despite their grievances about heavy taxation and corruption, peasants in Changtang dutifully turned in their taxes and fees. This changed in 1996 when two peasants somehow acquired policy documents issued by the central government which gave peasants the right to resist unreasonable burdens and to audit village accounting books. In Xujiaba village in the original Miaoyufeng township, Liu Aimin, a peasant in his 40s, shared this information with fellow villagers. He organized meetings among team heads. He also looked up Guo Weiguo, a fellow villager and a classmate with a high school diploma. Guo decided to quit a well-paid job in the provincial capital to lead the protest.

More than 40 *li* away in the original Xiaoxiang township, Lin Zhiqiang, a peasant in his 60s and a team head, had been disseminating central policies on lowering peasant burdens for a few years. Acting like a movement entrepreneur, Lin devoted all his time to reducing peasant burdens. He recorded these policies on a tape recorder and broadcast them to crowds of peasants attending rural periodic markets. He also grew a long beard, vowing never to have it cut until peasant burdens had been alleviated.

Under severe pressure from the county government, Liu quit the protest. Guo, however, refused to be co-opted. Guo was a Party member, a team head and a former soldier. He also taught at the village school. Guo was public-spirited and well respected. He helped the poor, devoted his time to public works and, in 1998, had headed a team that built the only small irrigation project in Changtang town. The only leader with a high school diploma, he was cultured, articulate and persuasive in his writing. Guo became the most prominent leader of the protest.

33 Interviews with peasants, Changtang town, October 2002.

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Liu and Guo quickly mobilized peasants in Xujiaba village. At organized meetings, the central policies were read out loud. Slogans taken from the policies were written on red pieces of paper and plastered on peasants' doorways and walls. Policy documents were copied and relayed from one person to another. As a result, the news that central policies allowed peasants the right to resist unreasonable taxes and fees quickly spread among peasants through word of mouth.

The protest in Xujiaba greatly encouraged peasants in neighbouring villages, and new leaders gradually emerged. Zhang Xiuyuan, for example, lived in Sanyi village, which borders Xujiaba. He was a Party member, a former soldier, a team head, and a good person. He helped to install electric pumps to irrigate farmland for his team. He followed news events closely by reading newspapers and watching TV, and had long regarded the heavy taxation by the local government as unreasonable. After seeing the protest in Xujiaba, Zhang soon decided to become a leader. He joined forces with Guo and others, petitioned the provincial and the central government, and mobilized peasants.

Lin, Liu and Guo were the early risers of the protest. Their burden-reduction activities were well known in the region. Learning from their examples and influenced by the protest atmosphere, more peasants became leaders.[34] Gradually, a peasant representative emerged in almost every village. These representatives became latecomers. Out of all the peasant representatives, about ten emerged as leaders. All the leaders were men. With one exception, all leaders were either middle-aged or old. All worked for the local party-state. Most were Party members. Some were demobilized soldiers and many were team heads.

The early risers of the Changtang protest cooperated with one another and with the latecomers. Lin, a professional rebel who lived the furthest from the centre of the protest, joined forces with Guo. Together with Zhang Xiaowei, the only young leader, Lin specialized in linking up with emerging leaders in new villages. Lin and Zhang would visit any new leaders and invite them to petition jointly with them.

The leaders were spread out over the entire town, an area that covered three small townships. Many leaders lived too far apart from one another to form strong bonds through regular interactions. Lin Zhiqiang, for example, lived 40 *li* from Guo Weiguo, a distance four times the size of a peasant's social field.[35] Many leaders, therefore, were outside each other's social networks and did not know each other before the protest. Once they began to take action, however, the leaders visited one another often and gradually coalesced around Guo, the

34 Tarrow (1998, 77, 87–88) argues that early risers of a social movement expand opportunities for groups with fewer resources.

35 Peasants who attend the same rural periodic market, which is within a ten-*li* (equivalent to 5 km) walking distance, frequently interact with one another. Interviews with peasants, northern and central Hunan, 2001–03. Skinner (1964, 32–33) argues that the standard rural marketing area, not the village, forms the social field of the peasants and that the maximum walking distance from a village to a nearby rural market town is only 4.5km.

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most prominent leader of the protest. The leaders made decisions through informal meetings, during which Guo's opinion carried a lot of weight.

Thus, the protest spread from the centre to the entire town, not because of strong and natural ties between the peasants, but because of peasant support and deliberate coordination among the leaders despite the geographical distance:

> All leaders recommended themselves and emerged as leaders on their own … At first, all that leaders did was advocate the Party's policies individually and there was no coordination among them. Only later when leaders became well known everywhere did peasants all support the protest and respect [the leaders]. Leaders also started to hold meetings together and discussed issues (Zhang Xiuyuan, October 2002).

The Changtang protest was not an isolated event. Peasants in Qianzhu village also protested against heavy taxation at the same time. Qianzhu bordered Xujiaba village, the centre of the Changtang protest, but it was governed by another county. Although it was not clear which protest started first and who learned from whom, the two protests did mutually influence each other. Specifically, the leaders borrowed policy documents from each other and the peasants were greatly encouraged by each other's examples. Peasants in Qianzhu and Changtang, however, never protested together. These two protests had distinct sets of leaders and processes. Again, peasant leaders within the same town cooperated with one another, no matter how far apart they lived; however, they refrained from doing so, even when they lived right next to one another, if they were governed by different administrative units.

The local government tried persuasion, co-option and repression to control the protest. It co-opted Liu by promoting his father and issuing him an interest-free loan. Guo refused to be either persuaded or co-opted, and the town government decided to leave his village alone. It abolished the education surcharge levied on students for two semesters in 1998 and 1999 and lowered the taxes and fees for Guo's village.

The Changtang protest peaked in summer 1998. The leaders organized a peaceful mass burden-reduction meeting, which was attended by thousands of peasants, inside the town government compound after returning from their petition trip to Beijing. Half a year later, in January 1999, the leaders planned to organize another mass meeting to push for a further reduction of peasant burdens. This time the local government decided to suppress the protest. Thousands of policemen arrived in the town the night before the planned meeting. They blocked the roads and guarded the town government. The local government arrested and tried the protest leaders. Guo was sentenced to six years in prison and the protest collapsed.

Protest Diffusion in Contemporary China

People with common interests often do not act as one class, because they are divided by different identities, deceived by false consciousness, suffer state repression, or simply cannot solve the dilemma of collective action. Thus, in China, while tens of millions of workers lost their livelihoods and hundreds of millions

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of peasants suffered heavy taxation in the 1990s, many failed to carry out cross-firm or cross-village protests.

However, the three cases discussed above show that it is possible to overcome the constraints that fragment the poor and carry out coordinated collective action. All three protests spread from a village or a firm to the entire administrative unit that governed them (cities for workers and towns/townships for peasants). The three concepts identified in the social movement literature – political opportunity structure (POS), protest leadership and mobilizing structure – illustrate well the common process seen in all three cases.

Tarrow defines political opportunity as "consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure."[36] Openness or closure of a political system, the stability of elite alignment, the presence of elite supporters, and a state's capacity for repression often affect people's opportunities to protest.[37] In China, government policies often provide protestors with an opening of the political opportunity. In all three cases, protest emerged when protest leaders, prompted by central policy notices which promised them economic benefits, started publicizing these documents and mobilizing fellow workers or villagers. Central policies exposed the division between the central and the local governments and provided an opening of the POS for workers and peasants, as the local government, sitting at the bottom of a multi-layered centralized political system and lacking an independent source of power or legitimacy, was obliged to implement these policies.[38] The protestors used the policies either strategically, as a tool to force the hand of the local government, or ideationally, as the base for a shared belief that legitimized the protestors' claims on the local government. The followers, who had up until then silently suffered long-term grave economic deprivation, now rallied around their leaders, donated money, participated in demonstrations, sit-ins and meetings, sheltered their leaders, and pushed the local government to implement the policies. The support from the followers turned the efforts of a few leaders to petition the government and publicize policies into a full-flown protest.

Protest leadership is crucial in turning common interests expressed in policies into motives for collective action. In other words, leaders make protest happen.[39] They make it both rational and safe for followers to protest. Arguably, protest leadership is particularly important in a state-centred system where the right of social groups to protest is not protected by the law.[40]

The protest leaders discussed above belonged to the political class. Worker leaders were important cadres in their firms, such as Party secretaries, managers and

36 Tarrow 1998, 76–77.
37 McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, 10.
38 Bernstein and Lü 2003, 116–165; O'Brien 1996; O'Brien and Li 2006.
39 For a general discussion on protest leadership, see Barker, Johnson and Lavalette 2001, and Nepstad and Bob 2006.
40 Li, Lianjiang, and O'Brien 2008; Cai 2010, 34–37.

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trade union officials, while the peasant leaders were trained politically by the local party-state. Some were Communist Party members or former soldiers, and many were team heads, the lowest level of rural cadres, who shared the same interests as the peasants. These protest leaders were articulate and adept at using the terms and policies of the state to reason with the local government.[41]

The protest leaders also enjoyed moral standing in their close-knit communities. They were public spirited and respected by fellow villagers and workers. They enjoyed a close relationship with their followers, which was forged from regular interactions and strong ties formed in a close-knit community. All three communities studied in this paper are small. A typical village in Hunan has a little over 1,000 peasants. A village is further divided into teams, which consists of a few hundred people and dozens of peasant households. People within the same village, particularly within the same team, live close to one another, attend one another's weddings and funerals, exchange labour with one another, and gossip with and about one another. The collective firms were also very small. The average number of employees in a collective enterprise in 1995 was only 41.[42] In Huaizhou, the 23 collective enterprises of the Second Light Industry Bureau had more than 1,900 retirees in 2003. On average, each firm had about 83 retired people. Further, these workers had worked in the same work unit for decades. As Elizabeth Perry has argued, "the link between community solidarity and a capacity for protest has been well established in the social science literature."[43] The smaller the size of a group, the stronger the community ties, the easier it is to overcome the free-rider problem.[44] Close ties among people in a small community make it easy for public-spirited people to emerge as leaders and to sustain this commitment once they have decided to become leaders. Close ties also make it harder for followers to defect from collective action.[45]

Natural and strong ties can only be formed in a small community. A protest will remain tiny and self-contained if protestors do not reach beyond their dense daily networks. Therefore, if a protest is to diffuse, the protestors must build a structure that will enable the leaders to mobilize a large number of followers. A mobilizing structure is defined as a connective structure that links leaders and followers. It can be a formal or informal organization.[46] It can also be a line of authority or a relationship that enables the leaders to coordinate the protest and reach the followers.

All three of the cases discussed in this paper had the same mobilizing structure, which consisted of one or a few representatives from each unit and five or six leaders, who played the role of "the representatives of the representatives." Both the representatives and leaders played an important role in the diffusion

41 See also Bernstein and Lü 2003, 148; O'Brien and Li 2006, 135–37; Yu 2001, 565.
42 Cai 2010, 165.
43 Perry 1993, 37.
44 Olson 1965, 53–65.
45 Taylor 1988, 64, 84.
46 Tarrow 1998, 123–24; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, 3, 141.

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of the protests. The leaders persistently petitioned higher authorities, negotiated with the local government, determined tactics, spoke in the name of the protesting group, and provided the public face of the protest. The representatives relayed the messages from the leaders, implemented their decisions, and mobilized workers and peasants in each village and firm. In other words, a few leaders mobilized thousands of peasants or workers via representatives.

Through analysing three cases of protest, this paper has demonstrated a mechanism for protest diffusion in contemporary China. Central policies, protest leadership and a connective structure that links the leaders and followers enable people with shared interests to protest together as a group. Protests emerged when protest leaders, who were trained politically by the local government and enjoyed moral standing in a small community, began to bring to the attention of fellow villagers and workers policy documents which promised economic benefits to a group. Protest diffusion occurred when worker or peasant representatives from each participating unit coordinated with one another and coalesced around the five or six leaders who decided tactics for the entire protest. Representatives coordinated with one another and rallied around the leaders because they were bonded by the same policy, the same economic interest, and the same protest target: the local government.

Thus, the protestors were mobilized by leaders trained by the state, used opportunities offered by the state, and made claims on the state. While the state has facilitated protest diffusion, it has also restricted the scale of the diffusion. It was difficult for the protestors to mobilize across different administrative boundaries: although they crossed the boundaries of the organizations that regulated their lives (work units and villages) and staged a city-wide and town-wide protest, the protesting workers or peasants in Hunan did not cut across different administrative boundaries.[47] Leaders played a decisive role in the emergence and spreading of a protest; however, diffusion in a state-centred system is moulded and restricted by the state.[48]

Why does protest diffusion occur among some groups, but not among others? SOE workers, for example, have never staged a cross-unit protest, even though the central government has issued policies that apply to a large number of them. Is it possible to have interest-based protest diffusion, i.e. a coordinated protest that emerges before any favourable policies are issued? Can protest leaders not trained politically by the state emerge? With the internet, is it possible to

47 Note that Yu (2003) and Li, Lianjiang, and O'Brien (2008, 9–10) argue that peasant leaders from different townships coordinated with one another by adopting the same petition letter and forming informal organizations. However, coordination among leaders from different townships alone does not prove that any cross-township protest has happened, as a protest must involve interactions between leaders and followers.

48 Perry (2007, 2010) argues that the Chinese state shapes social protest. In particular, protestors frame their grievances in the language of the state and take pains to ensure that they stay within the boundaries of the state.

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have a more mobile mobilizing structure? Can protestors build coalitions across administrative boundaries? These are interesting questions for future research.

摘要: 在当今中国, 抗争是如何传播的? 现存文献对这一课题很少研究。本文通过对一例跨厂的工人抗争和两例跨村的农民抗争的考察, 阐释了当今中国抗争传播的一种机制: 中央政策, 抗争领袖以及将领导者和追随者联结在一起的结构能促使有共同经济利益的人们一起抗争。抗争起源于领袖们在追随者中宣传党和国家的政策和文件。这些领袖都曾接受过国家提供的政治训练, 居住在小社区中并且享有良好的道德声誉。当各单位或村的抗争代表相互合作并团结在为整个抗争制定策略的主要领袖的周围时, 抗争就开始扩散, 从而拉开传播的序幕。可是, 抗争中的工人或农民并不跨越国家的行政区域进行串联。可见领袖在抗争的传播中起到了至关重要的作用。但是, 国家也限制了该传播的规模。

关键词: 抗争的传播; 抗争领袖; 文件; 动员结构; 结合紧密的社区; 国家

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