Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters*

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Abstract

Chinese local officials frequently employ relational repression to demobilize protesters. When popular action occurs, they investigate activists' social ties, locate individuals who might be willing to help stop the protest, assemble a work team and dispatch it to conduct thought work. Work team members are then expected to use their personal influence to persuade relatives, friends and fellow townspeople to stand down. Those who fail are subject to punishment, including suspension of salary, removal from office and prosecution. Relational repression sometimes works. When local authorities have considerable say over work team members and bonds with protesters are strong, relational repression can help demobilize protesters and halt popular action. Even if relational repression does not end a protest entirely, it can limit its length and scope by reducing tension at times of high strain and providing a channel for negotiation. Often, however, as in a 2005 environmental protest in Zhejiang, insufficiently tight ties and limited concern about consequences creates a commitment deficit, partly because thought workers recognize their ineffectiveness with many protesters and partly because they anticipate little or no punishment for failing to demobilize anyone other than a close relative. The practice and effectiveness of relational, "soft" repression in China casts light on how social ties can demobilize as well as mobilize contention and ways in which state and social power can be combined to serve state ends.

Keywords: protest control; soft repression; policing; work teams; thought work; social network; China

For some years now, students of contentious politics have been calling for a broader understanding of protest control.[1] They argue that existing scholarship

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1 For typologies of protest control, see Earl 2003; Cunningham 2004, 236, 243.

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has been overly focused on state-based and "hard" forms of repression at the expense of less heavy-handed ways to suppress popular action. In order to redress this imbalance, a number of studies have explored how surveillance,[2] ridicule and stigma,[3] mixed signals[4] and control parables[5] can demobilize protesters. This article contributes to this new line of research by examining relational repression in contemporary China.

Relational repression is a control technique that uses social ties to demobilize protesters. In China, it amounts to relying on relatives, friends, and native-place connections to defuse popular action. Relational repression rests on persuasion, pressure and the impact of influential people. It may be deployed in the earlier stages of an episode of contention, after more forceful types of suppression have failed, or in conjunction with harder forms of repression. For smaller incidents, relational repression may be the only or main type of control employed. But whether used alone or with other "stability maintenance" (*weiwen* 维稳) tools, its distinguishing feature is clear: when popular action breaks out, local officials, staff of public organizations (e.g. school teachers) and beneficiaries of government largesse (e.g. pensioners) with ties to protesters are assembled into a work team to conduct "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作). Team members are then expected to use their influence to pacify and "transform" (*zhuanhua* 转化) activists, and to coax or pressure them into abandoning popular action.

Relational repression is one of many techniques, short of force,[6] that Chinese local authorities use to demobilize protesters. Like agreeing to "demands for a dialogue" (*yaoqiu duihua* 要求对话)[7] or sending high-ranking officials to activists' homes,[8] it entails listening, talking and "moving the masses."[9] But it also involves an irreducible amount of pressure, applied by people who can be difficult to resist. In this sense, although it does not rely on physical coercion, relational repression shares some traits with harder forms of control. It is a type of "psychological engineering"[10] that rests on both emotional blackmail and feelings of affinity. For a state that does not penetrate as deeply as it once did, it offers access to protesters over whom officials have limited sway, protesters who may not trust or fear local cadres as much as they did in the past. As an alternative to mobilizing the police or hiring local toughs, relational repression is becoming increasingly common at a time when pressures are growing to preserve social order without resorting to force.[11] When it is effective, relational repression enables local

2 On surveillance, see Cunningham 2007; Walby and Monaghan 2011.
3 Ferree 2004; Linden and Klandermans 2006.
4 Stern and O'Brien 2012; Cunningham 2009.
5 Stern and Hassid 2012.
6 On hard repression in China, see Wright 1999; Tong 2002; Cai 2008.
7 See Liu, Wang and Zhu 2008.
8 For example, during a December 2011 protest in Wukan village, Guangdong, Zhu Guoming, a provincial deputy Party secretary, visited Wukan and spoke personally with a number of protesters. See Cai Wenhui 2011.
9 See Perry 2002.
10 For this term, see Perry 2002, 122.
11 Of late, local officials have become more cautious about using coercion to halt protests. In 2008, the

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authorities to soften popular demands, explore compromises and minimize concessions.

By examining a protest control effort in rural Zhejiang and episodes of relational repression elsewhere in China, this article explores how relational repression is carried out, what determines its effectiveness, and what lessons can be learned about the dynamics of soft repression.

The Huashui Encampment and the Government Response

In spring 2005, villagers in Dongyang 东阳 county, Zhejiang were unhappy. For four years, farmers in eight villages in Huashui 画水 town had been complaining about crop damage and declining public health caused by pollution originating in the Zhuxi 竹溪 Chemical Industrial Park. They had repeatedly petitioned higher levels, even travelling to Beijing twice, but with no results. On 24 March, disgruntled residents of Huaxi 画溪 No. 5 village, the most seriously affected site, turned to more confrontational tactics. They put up a tent at the entrance to the chemical park and began a round-the-clock vigil. Their hope was to block delivery of supplies to the park, thereby forcing the polluters to shut down. Huashui town officials and police dismantled the tent the next evening, but the protesters immediately erected a second one. After villagers raised tents and officials pulled them down three more times, county leaders changed their approach. On 30 March, they formed a work team to conduct thought work. Over the next ten days, the team reportedly held 135 meetings attended by over 5,000 people to learn about the villagers' grievances and to explain government plans to address them. They also conducted more than 4,000 door-to-door visits, during which they distributed leaflets detailing new measures to deal with the pollution.[12] The work team consisted of about 60 county officials, including some who hailed from Huashui town, some who had relatives in the villages affected by the pollution, and still others who had previously worked in Huashui. The team also recruited village cadres, local school teachers and factory workers, as well as retired town leaders and pensioners with ties to the activists. From 30 March to 10 April, despite the team's efforts and the detention of several protest leaders, the size of the encampment grew, as residents from about ten other villages joined the protest, with each village erecting its own tent. County leaders, incensed that protesters were "pushing their luck" (*decun jinchi* 得寸进尺) while the government was "doing everything called for by humanity and duty" (*renzhi yijin* 仁至义尽),[13] decided to turn to a more forceful approach. At about 3 a.m. on

footnote continued

Central Discipline Inspection Committee, Procurator, Letters and Visits Bureau, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security jointly issued provisional rules stipulating that local officials who use illegal force to deal with mass incidents will be punished. See Xinhuanet.com 2008.

12 Shan 2005.

13 Interview C13 with a Huashui town official, 23 May 2007.

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10 April, the county leadership sent in over 1,500 local cadres and public security personnel to put an end to the encampment. During their efforts to clear out the protesters, violence broke out and over 100 officials or police officers and more than 200 villagers were injured; 68 government vehicles were also burned or damaged. In the wake of the "April 10th incident," the protesters still refused to withdraw and the number of tents grew to about 30, representing 22 villages. The local government at this point opted against another crackdown, since the "April 10th incident" had attracted considerable media attention; more importantly, higher levels of government, including Beijing, had sent a team of investigators to look into the protest and the county's response. County leaders quickly switched back to thought work and the floating of possible concessions as their main control techniques. For more than a month after the violence of 10 April, some 200 people served on a work team that collected evidence about what had occurred, conducted relational repression and explained the government's new policies toward the polluting factories. Promises to address the pollution in various ways were made[14] and efforts to buy off the tent-sitters took place, but to no avail.[15] Only on 20 May, several days after the county promised to close all 13 factories in the park, did the protesters acquiesce to removal of the tents.[16]

To learn about the work team's relational repression, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 122 informants from early April to late July 2007. The interviewees ranged from protest leaders to village cadres, township cadres, municipal officials and ordinary villagers. The interviewees were selected in a snowball fashion owing to the sensitivity of the topic. With exceptionally good access to both local leaders and protesters, it was also possible to collect archival materials, including petition letters, leaflets and posters penned by villagers, work diaries and reports written by local officials, official regulations, meeting records and an internal "daily report" (*meiri yibao* 每日一报) that meticulously traced what happened each day.

The Practice of Relational Repression

Based on the Huashui protests and other episodes of contention discussed by Chinese researchers, the media and government reports, relational repression unfolds in four, roughly sequential steps: first, information is collected about

14 These included setting up an environmental monitoring system, planting a buffer zone of trees (*fanghu lin*), cleaning up the river, improving drinking water quality, and offering compensation for losses from the pollution.

15 In this comparatively well-off area, local authorities had sufficient funds to bribe the tent-sitters to leave the encampment, but the protesters were also in a position to turn down their offers. Local residents were also truly pained by the seriousness of the pollution and its health consequences and some felt that no amount of money, or half-measures to address the problem, would compensate for continued exposure to foul air and water. Finally, tent-sitters were concerned that they would be criticized by fellow villagers if they allowed themselves to be bought off in exchange for standing down. On villagers who call protesters who back down "cowards" or "traitors," see Li and O'Brien 2008, 20.

16 For reports on these protests, see Song 2005; Watts 2005.

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ties between protesters and individuals who may be able to influence them; second, people with ties to the protesters are recruited onto a work team to serve as thought workers; third, members of the work team are organized and deployed to demobilize protesters; and fourth, team members are encouraged to take their work seriously and reminded of the costs of failure, and those who show insufficient zeal are disciplined.

To undertake relational repression, local officials must first learn who the key activists are and who might be available to influence them. The head of the Public Security Bureau in Fusong 抚松 county, Jilin, emphasized the importance of "four types of knowledge" (*sizhi* 四知) when faced with a restive population: knowledge of the protesters' identities, family situation, social relations and contact information.[17] Similarly, in a Xinyang 信阳 city, Henan, police report, which discussed what should be done when accidental deaths might trigger a mass incident, "three crucial points" were underscored, one of which was locating government workers with close ties to the deceased, such as brothers, lineage elders or extended family members, and convincing them to conduct thought work on their relatives.[18]

As for the "Huashui incident," the work team immediately compiled a roster of people who might be responsive to requests to help demobilize protesters. The lists assembled by the team head, who was also the second-in-command in the Dongyang county government, included: leaders of the Society of Senior Citizens in all Huashui villages, highlighting those who received state pensions;[19] retired cadres in Huashui town; cadres (including school teachers) who hailed from Huashui and worked in government positions or public organizations; cadres who had served in Huashui in the past; village leaders who were also Party members; and cadres sitting on villagers' committees. At the same time, the work team also drew up a list of protesters, especially those staying in the tents.

The work team then tried to ferret out bonds, especially kinship relations, between potential thought workers and villagers in the encampment. This search continued until the protest concluded in late May, because "useful" ties often could not be discovered quickly and activists also came and went.[20] From the outset, the top two county leaders emphasized the importance of "feeling out the main activists and collecting information about their relatives and other social relations."[21] After much effort, the work team compiled detailed lists of "organizers" and "villagers in the tents" who had relatives on the public payroll:

GYX in Huaxi No. 5 village, a deputy chief of Nanjiang 南江Reservoir (the son-in-law of LHE's uncle); LDF in Pingyuan 平原 village, a staff member at the power supply station in

17 Li 2011.
18 Shen 2009.
19 The Society of Senior Citizens was a key source of mobilization during the Huashui protests. Society leaders were usually retired officials or workers. Thus the units for which they had previously worked were responsible for preventing them from taking part in the encampment.
20 We have collected 11 lists of work team members issued from 1 April to 16 May.
21 Two documents, "The performance of the work team" (6 May 2005) and "The recent performance of the work team and the next plan" (3 May 2005), both stressed this point.

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Huangtianfan 黄田畈 town (YG's nephew); WWB in No. 2 village, the director of the moral education office at Huangtianfan Elementary School (his mother WXG and wife are often in the tents); WHJ, a teacher at Huangtianfan Elementary School (his mother FJ is active in the tents); WRL in No. 3 village, a staff member at Lishan 里山 Reservoir (his mother is often in the tents) . . .[22]

The lists included the name, sex, age and even telephone numbers of some individuals who would be approached to join the work team.

The second phase of relational repression entails building up the work team. Local authorities, when faced with this task, typically judge the desirability of new recruits according to two criteria: the strength of relations with one or more protesters, and willingness to help end the protest.[23] Government cadres from the area, and others who depend on the state and have close ties to protesters, are prime targets for recruitment, since they score high on both counts.

County authorities established the Huashui work team on 30 March and expanded it gradually over the next seven weeks. The team was at first led by the deputy government head and deputy Party secretary of Dongyang county. Its membership consisted mainly of government workers born and raised in Huashui and cadres who had previously worked in leadership posts in Huashui town. The day after the work team was formed, and in response to a rapidly deteriorating situation, the Party secretary and the government head of Dongyang county assumed leadership of the team and began enlarging it. It grew from several dozen officials, drawn from organizations such as the Environmental Protection Bureau, the Bureau of Land and Resources, the Discipline Inspection Committee and the Organization Department, to several hundred members, including school teachers, workers in state-owned enterprises, and local entrepreneurs. A town official who came from Huaxi village recalled: "People who used to live in our village but were then working in Jinhua 金华 city had to return to do thought work. My older brother, who was then employed by the Jinhua procurator, also returned. All Huashui natives working in the Dongyang government returned, as did cadres who had served in Huashui town in the past."[24] Beside officials with family, friendship or native-place ties with protesters, local entrepreneurs with high standing in the community were also expected to help demobilize protesters. One prominent businessman who gave small, annual gifts to Huashui residents over the age of 60 was asked to conduct thought work on older villagers involved in the protest.

The third phase involves organizing and deploying work team members to carry out relational repression. To do this, local governments often establish "person-to-person" (*ren ding ren* 人盯人) responsibility, so that one thought

22 From lists entitled "Relatives of the villagers in the tents," "Organizers," and "Villagers in the tents." Such lists are common. See Wang and Tan 2010; Zuo 2010.

23 Deng 2009, 61.

24 Interview C23 with a Huashui town official, 25 June 2007.

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worker is charged with reforming the mind-set of one activist.[25] As the Party secretary of Huaxi No. 5 village explained, "If a member of the work team had a relative in the tent area, it was his or her job to deal with that relative."[26] A document entitled "Members of the Work Team in Huaxi No. 5 Village" laid out how thought work in that village was led by two county deputy heads, with 48 team members divided into nine subgroups. The team was assigned 50 activists to transform, with one person responsible for each activist and sometimes two or three additional team members designated to help out. In another village, 36 team members conducted thought work on 22 protesters, most likely because some "hard cases" (*yinggutou* 硬骨头) necessitated deploying more than one person to apply pressure on a persistent protester.

Work team members in Huashui, like elsewhere, were expected to rely on personal influence to persuade relatives, friends and fellow townspeople to stand down. For relatives in particular, they were encouraged to tap into "feelings of affection" to transform their targets.[27] Team members were also instructed to play on protesters' worries that, however willing they might be to sacrifice themselves, refusal to give up would have a negative effect on those close to them.[28] In Gongyi 巩义 county, Henan, a female worker was sent to conduct thought work on her grandmother, who was resisting demolition of her home. Racked with fear that she would lose her job at a local carpet factory, the worker knelt down and pleaded, "Grandma, please sign the document. Otherwise they won't let me go back to work. You know how hard it is to find a job these days."[29] The old lady, with tears in her eyes, ultimately signed the document. Invoking career consequences is a common tactic younger thought workers use to soften up older, "uncooperative" relatives. In Beihai 北海 city, Guangxi, for example, a school teacher implored her mother to give in, saying, "Mom, I won't blame you if you don't agree to sign the paper, but our house will be torn down anyway. How terrible it would be if we lost our home and I also ended up jobless!"[30] It is clear that relational repression often depends on pressure, emotional blackmail and feelings of guilt more than it does on affection.

Work team members with only weak ties to protesters or bystanders who might join the action are typically urged to undertake thought work with extra diligence and to mobilize second-order connections. During the Huashui protests, the county required that team members "enter every village, visit every family, save no word, spare no effort, and try all possible measures," even if "doors are closed and the faces behind them are hateful."[31] After the crackdown of 10

25 Assigning cadres personal responsibility for protesters is common and does not always rest on social ties. For personal responsibility of "retrievers" (*jiefang renyuan*) for long-time petitioners, see Li, Liu and O'Brien 2012; Laiyang.gov.cn 2011; Dazhu.gov.cn 2011.
26 Interview V4 with a village cadre, 13 April 2007.
27 See also Liang 2008, 35; Wu 2010.
28 Deng 2009, 61.
29 Qiu 2008.
30 Xie 2010.
31 From the records of a work team meeting held on 5 April 2005.

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April backfired, the county deputy Party secretary called on all team members to "put aside their pride" and engage in even more thought work. He compared the team's efforts to a "hen brooding," saying "It takes quite a while to warm the eggs before the chicks are hatched."[32]

When work team members lack close, direct ties to protesters they are often asked to contact relatives and friends who do. During Jilin's "Tonggang 通钢 incident" in 2009, the director of the Tonghua 通化 Municipal Public Security Bureau required that all local police mobilize friends, relatives and "comrades in arms" (*zhanyou* 战友) to collect information about protesters and conduct thought work.[33] In Huashui, two notices urged village cadres and Party members to activate their relatives and other social relations to coax protesters to halt popular action. Relational repression by proxy is less likely to succeed, because the ability to apply pressure declines as intermediaries are added, but is still frequently attempted when direct ties are unavailable.

The last stage of relational repression involves motivating and disciplining work team members. To ensure high levels of commitment, local governments use every opportunity to explain what will happen should a team member fail. According to a report written in the wake of a large protest over home demolitions, county officials in Jiangxi talked one-by-one with each team member to "dispel misgivings" (*daxiao sixiang gulü* 打消思想顾虑) about doing thought work on relatives and friends.[34] Beyond meetings, local governments also use more formal means to persuade team members to throw themselves into their work. Two notices issued by Huashui authorities prior to the 10 April repression stipulated that if village cadres failed to take a firm stand when doing thought work, they would be subject to suspension of duties, removal from office, and prosecution. After the crackdown, when virtually all local officials with any connections to Huashui were placed on the work team, another regulation was issued by the county's Discipline Inspection Committee, Organization Department, and Supervision Bureau. It called on all officials, at every level throughout the county, to prevent relatives from joining the protest. It also warned that any cadre who did not work hard to demobilize a relative in the encampment would be punished according to Party and government regulations and might face dismissal from office, expulsion from the Party, and criminal prosecution.

Such directives, more often than not, are strictly enforced. In Jiahe 嘉禾 county, Hunan, in 2004, more than 160 government officials and staff of public organizations who failed to ensure that their relatives were "cooperative" when their homes were scheduled for demolition were subject to "two suspensions" (*liangting* 两停): suspension from office and suspension of salary.[35] Over the

32 From the document "Speech at a meeting of Huashui village cadres," delivered on 1 May 2005 and then broadcast repeatedly over the radio.
33 Tu 2009.
34 Liu Chuang 2009.
35 See Xinhuanet.com 2004.

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course of the Huashui protest, several work team members were punished for failing to persuade relatives to leave the encampment. They were not allowed, for instance, to return to their regular posts if family members continued to participate.[36] Thought workers, particularly those with close relatives in the tents, fell under great pressure. "Some were criticized because of their contentious relatives," said one village cadre, "and some broke down in front of their superiors. A deputy chief of the Bureau of Investment Promotion was even suspended from his duties because his aunt would not leave the encampment."[37]

At times, thought workers themselves can become victims of relational pressure. Local authorities may mobilize a team member's relatives and friends to stiffen a person's resolve to do this rather unpleasant work.[38] A reluctant thought worker may seek to deflect this pressure by claiming, for instance, that all ties with a protester have been severed (*duanjue guanxi* 断绝关系) owing to divorce or a personal falling out,[39] but faced with administrative punishment and prodding from family members or friends, many cave in and do the thought work they are assigned.

The Effectiveness of Relational Repression

Relational repression can help put an end to popular action. After more than 200 villagers from Linxiang 临湘 county, Hunan flocked to Changsha 长沙 to file a petition in 2009, county leaders used a work team of relatives, friends, and well-respected cadres to convince the petitioners to withdraw their complaint.[40] In 2008, villagers from Xinjian 新建 county, Jiangxi, who opposed having their land requisitioned for a new college campus, blocked roads, occupied a construction site and submitted petitions to the province. Their protest was finally put down after several weeks. A deputy Party secretary from Xinjian county attributed this "success" in large part to "mobilizing family affection" (*fadong qinqing* 发动亲情).[41]

Even when relational repression is only one of several control techniques employed, or is only partly successful in staving off further protest, it can play a role in limiting the length and scope of popular action. For example, during the 2004 "Shishou 石首 incident," in which doubts about the alleged suicide of a young cook spiralled into a riot involving tens of thousands people, a work team consisting of over 580 "cadres born and bred in the locality" (*yuanji ganbu* 原籍干部), local entrepreneurs, village leaders and lineage elders served as conduits between the authorities and the demonstrators and helped prevent

36 Interview V12 with an activist, 24 May 2007.
37 Interview V4 with a village cadre, 13 April 2007.
38 For example, co-workers may be mobilized to urge team members to conduct thought work. See Jin 2008.
39 On divorce, see Luo 2012.
40 Linxiang.gov.cn 2011.
41 Liu Chuang 2009.

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further violence. A combination of pressure, skilful "emotion work" and mediation can soften up protesters and defuse a volatile situation, while channelling demands to the authorities and allowing them to float possible compromises through team members.

Relational repression in Huashui largely failed and closing down the chemical park was seen as a "complete defeat" (*chedi de shibai* 彻底的失败) by local officials. However, it had some effects short of bringing the encampment to an end. In particular, a willingness by some work team members to engage in one-on-one conversations diminished tensions at moments of high strain, such as following the 10 April crackdown. Building on their rapport with relatives, friends, neighbours and fellow-townsmen, thought workers played a mediating role when conflicts arose between protesters and the authorities. And even if their suggested compromises were rejected, the team members at least had fewer difficulties approaching protesters and striking up a conversation. One township cadre who served on the work team explained the edge he had over thought workers who lacked family, friendship or native-place ties:

> When I went to the tent area, I didn't get beaten up. I also suffered relatively less abuse. The elderly villagers [in the protest] just told me to leave them alone. If other work team members went to the scene, the older protesters, at the very least, would bow down on their knees with burning incense, chanting "we beg you to save us" (*qiuqiu nimen, jiujiu women* 求求你们,救救我们).[42]

Kneeling down, burning incense, and begging for assistance might seem respectful, but when elderly villagers did this in front of younger team members, it was seen as threatening; so threatening, in fact, that it led many thought workers to flee the scene whenever it was underway.

Another township cadre, also a native of Huaxi village, explained how he helped tamp down anger and defuse dangerous situations: "When township cadres were besieged by the villagers and could not escape, they usually called on us for help. Sometimes my phone rang after midnight. We had to go aid them. . . . We were better able to help them because we had strong relationships with the protesters."[43]

The advantages that family, friendship and native-place ties offer, however useful, cannot ensure successful demobilization of a protester. The effectiveness of relational repression rests largely on two factors: how much sway the local state has over work team members and the strength of ties between team members and protesters.[44]

42 Interview C31 with a town official, 25 June 2007.
43 Interview C23 with a town official, 25 June 2007.
44 The intensity of a grievance also influences effectiveness. The less a protester has at stake, the more likely relational repression will succeed. For example, a Huashui villager who lived about five kilometres from the chemical park was selling snacks and also occasionally taking part in protest activities. His older brother, a retired township cadre, was instructed to conduct thought work on him. According to the cadre's diary, it took only one chat for the snack-seller to be convinced to stop going to the encampment, largely because he suffered little direct harm from the pollution. Protesters from the most-affected villages were rarely so easily dissuaded.

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Influence over thought workers varies greatly. At the high end of the scale, local authorities have much say over work team members from government offices and public organizations through their control of salaries and career prospects. During the Jiahe demolition protests, for example, the local government suspended 160 officials from their posts and withheld their pay to motivate them to convince their relatives to vacate their homes. One victim of this policy, a nurse from an urban hospital who was transferred to a rural health centre because her mother refused to move, sobbed uncontrollably during a television interview and said, "My whole life has been affected."[45]

Local entrepreneurs are also vulnerable to pressure, since the government can slow the growth of their enterprises by, for instance, turning down a loan application. Pensioners, for their part, fear that local authorities may instruct employers to withhold pension payments. Officials generally have less influence over other team members, including elected cadres mainly paid with village funds, workers from privately owned factories, and other rank-and-file citizens who are more able to resist pressure to conduct thought work diligently.

Another factor that affects the effectiveness of relational repression is the strength of ties between work team members and protesters. The authorities assume that thought workers have great influence over close relatives, and punishment for being ineffective can be high for those who fail to persuade a family member to stand down.[46] Anticipation of serious consequences leads some team members to do thought work with special care. For instance, during a demolition dispute in Huili 会理 county, Sichuan, in 2010, two school teachers were under great pressure from their bosses to talk repeatedly with their parents about accepting a date for departure and the compensation offered.[47] Two county court workers were also so afraid of losing their jobs that they badgered their families incessantly, ultimately convincing them to sign the demolition agreement on the last day allowed.[48] Similarly, in Li 蠡 county, Hebei, a government worker "could not stand the pressure" (*chengshou buliao yali* 承受不了压力) in 2011 when her parents refused to give up their land. In the end, she signed the requisition documents on her father's behalf and before her parents knew they had "agreed" to it, their peach trees had been chopped down.[49]

The prospect of punishment increases the odds that protesters will withdraw to protect their relatives. In the 2004 Jiahe housing protests, a teacher was transferred to a remote rural school because her mother-in-law refused to leave her home. To help the young woman get her job back, the mother-in-law eventually accepted the terms and moved out, and the teacher was reassigned to her original

45 China Central Television 2004.
46 The director of Jiahe's Politics and Law Committee said: "We [the county leaders] thought that their relatives would listen to them [government officials], and their work would be effective." See China Central Television 2004.
47 Wang and Tan 2010.
48 Ibid.
49 Ccvic.com 2011.

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post.[50] Some protesters point out that it is illegal to hold relatives responsible for the actions of others,[51] but most recognize that "guilt-by-association" (*lianzuo* 连坐) is a common practice and give in.

When team members and their targets are not close relatives, relational repression becomes much more difficult. Local governments are less likely to punish ineffective thought workers with weak ties to protesters, and protesters are more likely to ignore or even fight back against non-relatives who try to pressure them. Anticipating few or no sanctions and knowing they will probably fail however hard they try, these people often have little commitment to thought work and simply go through the motions.

Relational repression in Huashui suffered from under-committed work team members with weak ties to the tent-sitters. The origins of limited influence over protesters trace back to before 2005, when an earlier round of contention was repressed in October 2001. In early 2001, Dongyang county opened the Zhuxi Chemical Industrial Park and announced it would place a pesticide plant notorious for its pollution there. Villagers opposed this. They sought a "dialogue" (*duihua* 对话) with the town Party secretary, which ultimately led to the secretary being cursed, beaten and dragged to the chemical park, where villagers made him walk a lap around the park barefoot. Windows and doors of three chemical plants were smashed, and phones and computers in factory offices were vandalized or stolen. Following this incident, 12 villagers were tried for disturbing social order and ten spent from one to three years behind bars. This experience alerted the 2005 activists to the possibility of both hard and soft repression, including relational repression. The protesters thus were careful to recruit as many tent-sitters as possible who did not have close relatives working for the government or public organizations.[52]

Low commitment to thought work also appeared when personal influence was turned back on work team members who had close ties with protesters. A township cadre born and raised in Huaxi village described the cross pressures team members faced:

> We had an extremely hard time then and were under great pressure. We helped the government remove the vehicles [damaged during the April 10th violence] from Huaxi village, and immediately were labelled traitors. Generally, as members of the village we had to help our fellow villagers. The chemical factories were indeed too foul. We were expected to stand with our fellow villagers. In short, we were in a very difficult situation.[53]

A village cadre said he felt deeply embarrassed when an elderly protester scolded him: "How many days do we [older people] have left? We are only doing this for

50 Ibid.

51 One Sichuan protester refused to budge even after three of her family members were suspended from office. She said: "Those leaders should come to discuss demolishing my house with documents that conform with national policies. They shouldn't threaten my son. This is my business and is unconnected to my son's unit, nor with leaders of his unit." Wang and Tan 2010.

52 The Huashui work team included some members with close ties to protesters, who enjoyed some success in demobilizing relatives and friends, but their numbers did not reach the critical mass necessary to put an end to the protest.

53 Interview C23 with a town official, 25 June 2007.

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you young people."[54] Hearing this, the thought worker had no reply, and gave up persuading protesters to leave the encampment.

Many village committee members were under even greater pressure to back off, since they had been elected to office largely based on a promise to address the pollution problem. One county official admitted: "It's very difficult to ask village cadres to stand up and work for us. Some cadres said they would only agree to remain in the village for two days and then would leave the area," to avoid being treated like traitors by their neighbours or as insufficiently hard-working by the government.[55] The head of the work team noted that "some village cadres who stood up to conduct thought work changed their minds overnight and dared not do it any longer."[56] Fear of being denounced and ostracized in their home village, and agreement that the polluting factories should be shut down, commonly trumped worries about disappointing team leaders, despite several notices threatening punishment. The head of Xishan 西山 village was asked to speak in front of his entire village after municipal and county officials arrived with a plan to mollify the protesters. He said:

> Regarding the pollution from the chemical factories, the municipal government has sent a work team to deal with it. The members are working very hard. But the chemical factories have done great harm to our Xishan village. We welcome the county setting up businesses here, but you can't hurt our fundamental interests. We wouldn't have said anything if you had done a good job protecting the environment. But your performance was really bad, and thus the masses have risen up and rebelled. The uprising was spontaneous, not organized. If you continue to fail to protect the environment, there will be a life-and-death struggle between our village and the chemical factories.[57]

When he completed his speech, the assembled villagers applauded, but the municipal and county leaders were angry and criticized him. The village head told them: "I said something nice for you at the beginning. But I also had to say something that takes into account villagers' interests. Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to leave the village safely."[58] Social ties clearly cut both ways. They sometimes help work team members persuade protesters to pull out, but can also chip away at thought workers' commitment and diminish their effectiveness.

In Huashui, team members often developed ways to appear to be working when they were not, to avoid both punishment from higher-ups and criticism from protesters. One villager encountered several groups of thought workers hiding in a pavilion near Huaxi village. He asked why they were there and they responded: "If we remain at our offices, our superiors will criticize us for not going to villages to do thought work. If we go, we will be abused by villagers. It is impossible for us to do thought work. So we decided to simply stay here, sit and chat for a while, and then return home after working hours."[59] The

54 Interview V4 with a village cadre, 13 April 2007.
55 From the records of a work team meeting held on 2 April 2005.
56 From the records of a work team meeting held on 5 April 2005.
57 Interview V5 with a village cadre, 6 June 2007.
58 Ibid.
59 Interview P4 with a Huaxi villager, 23 June 2007.

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head of Huaxi village observed a similar problem. He said that most work team members refused to enter the encampment. They instead stood at a distance for a few minutes and counted a brief appearance near the tents as their "on-the-spot work" (*xianchang gongzuo* 现场工作).[60]

Some team members with little to lose ceased all thought work when they could not stand the taunts and criticism of villagers. For example, one Huaxi village committee member who was physically threatened after he helped dismantle a vigil tent, became so frustrated with being sandwiched between villagers and the authorities that he left the area for two months.[61] Several retired cadres simply refused requests to help demobilize protesters. When a deputy Party secretary of Jinhua city attempted to persuade one retired town official to conduct thought work, he responded:

> I possess dual identities – as both a retired cadre and a villager. On the one hand, I have to comply with orders from superiors. When the Party and government make a correct decision, I will accept it and propagate it among the masses. On the other hand, I have to defend the interests of my fellow villagers. The villagers have suffered a lot, both physically and financially during the past few years. Although they have submitted petitions to all levels of government, their problems have not yet been addressed. Putting up tents is not anti-government or anti-socialist. The villagers just hoped this would attract the attention of the government and lead to the problem being resolved. As for me, I have great sympathy for their actions, but I have not become involved in the protest.[62]

He did not take part in the encampment, but nor did he encourage the tent-sitters to withdraw.

Conclusion

Chinese local officials frequently turn to relational repression to demobilize protesters. When popular action occurs, they investigate activists' social ties, locate individuals who might be willing to help stop the protest, assemble a work team, and dispatch it to conduct thought work. Work team members are then expected to use their personal influence to persuade relatives, friends and fellow townspeople to stand down. Thought workers with weak ties to protesters are encouraged to work with extra intensity and to rely on people they know with closer connections. Those who fail to "transform" the protesters they are assigned are often subject to punishment, including suspension of salary, removal from office and prosecution.

Relational repression sometimes works. When the authorities have considerable say over work team members and bonds with protesters are strong, relational repression can help put an end to popular action. Even if thought work does not halt a protest entirely, it can limit its length and scope by reducing tension at times of high strain and providing a channel for negotiation and discussion of possible compromises. Quite often, however, insufficiently tight ties and

60 Interview V1 with a village cadre, 3 June 2007.
61 Interview V2 with a village cadre, 17 June 2007.
62 Interview V13 with a retired town cadre, 25 April 2007.

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limited concern with consequences creates a commitment deficit, partly because thought workers recognize their scant effectiveness with many protesters and partly because they anticipate little punishment for failing to demobilize anyone other than a close relative.

During the Huashui protests, thought workers with few ties were ignored and better-connected ones experienced pushback. Many sided with protesters against the polluters and feared being denounced, ostracized, or called traitors. Most thought workers did not throw themselves into their work and a handful refused to do it at all. Despite the rapport some team members had with the tent-sitters, relational repression in Huashui failed and the authorities closed the chemical park to bring an end to the encampment.

Relational repression is not a state policy but a local practice that has become more prominent in an era when maintaining stability is paramount and local leaders are highly motivated to prevent or halt protest. For at least one type of dispute – forced eviction – the State Council has gone as far as to issue an urgent circular banning "demolition by implicating homeowners' relatives" (*zhulian chaiqian* 株连拆迁).[63] Yet relational repression continues and remains common in rural areas (where dense social ties facilitate it) and cities (where many residents still work in units and there is a ready supply of work team members).

People who take part in group protests are not the only victims of relational repression. Individual activists also experience it.[64] Lone petitioners, birth control resisters, human rights campaigners and rights protection lawyers all are subject to relational repression.[65] Among collective protesters, urbanites who live in neighbourhoods slated for demolition and villagers whose land has been requisitioned have been targeted especially often in recent years,[66] and even migrant workers have been singled out, despite difficulties in locating intermediaries to place pressure on them.[67] Elderly protesters appear to be particularly common victims of relational repression, perhaps because it is unseemly to use force on them and it is assumed they will be responsive to importuning by younger relatives.[68]

As a form of social control, relational repression harks back to the *baojia* 保甲 system of mutual responsibility in imperial China. The practice of "guilt by association" reminds us that local authorities have long held the population in

63 State Council General Office 2010; also Sina.com.cn 2011.

64 For small-scale protests or individual activists, local authorities often mobilize only a few thought workers and a work team is not set up. The authorities may also threaten, harm or detain relatives and friends of activists to place pressure on them, as was seen when Chen Guangcheng fled house arrest in April 2012 and sought refuge in the US embassy.

65 Bai and Hu 2009; sdrkjsw.gov.cn 2012. On birth control resisters, also see O'Brien 1996, 42. For human rights and legal activists, personal communication, Eva Pils, 26 April 2012.

66 Since 2004, at least 20 episodes of relational repression related to land requisition and demolition have been discussed in the Chinese media. For a particularly well-covered treatment of the 2004 "Jiahe incident," see Sina.com.cn n.d.

67 Voc.com.cn 2012.

68 On local authorities being in a "morally weak position" and fearing intervention from above if they use force on elderly protesters, see Cai Yongshun 2010, 124–25.

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check by making relatives, friends, and neighbours responsible for each other. The thought work at the heart of relational repression also resonates with governance practices from China's past. Assembling work teams and descending on villages was a standard policy implementation tool in the Maoist era that has received little attention recently.[69] But grassroots thought work and the sudden appearance of big work teams persists, as leaders still seek to "engineer emotions" by mixing "practical incentives and psychological pressures" and tapping a "Confucian stress upon social bonds and obligations."[70]

The era of large-scale mass movements may be over, but "managed campaigns" continue in realms as varied as population control, crisis management and economic development.[71] As campaigns have evolved, so too has ground-level thought work. If work teams were once used to overcome inertia, circumvent opposition and mobilize participation, in today's "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) they are equally often employed to maintain social order and demobilize those who threaten it.

That work teams are used to demobilize protesters also speaks to a large literature on networks and popular action. Many studies have shown that protest recruitment "flows along lines of pre-existing social relationships"[72] as social ties enhance feelings of trust and offer newcomers reassurance,[73] while also providing opportunities to apply subtle forms of pressure ("If you go, I'll go, too").[74] Relational repression in China, on the other hand, illustrates how family, friendship and native-place ties are not just "pull factors"[75] that draw individuals to popular action; they can also be deployed to push people away from contention. When mobilizing protest, strong, weak and even absent ties can all be exploited;[76] for relational repression, tie strength is key. Do strong ties of thought workers to family and friends trump ties to the local state? If they do, commitment deficits and pushback are likely.

Finally, attention to relational repression fills in one more piece in the puzzle of protest control. Most accounts of policing focus on the police. This is especially true in China, where the authorities are not hesitant to rely on force to put down popular action. But just as local toughs may be used to carry out hard repression, relatives, friends and fellow townspeople can be agents of soft repression. Societally-based control has advantages that state coercion lacks; most notably,

69 Research on thought work in the reform era has focused on the media and propaganda apparatus. See Lynch 1999; Brady 2008. On the composition and effects of work teams during the Cultural Revolution, see Walder 2009, ch. 2. Present-day work teams have a lower profile, but their use has been encouraged and to some extent institutionalized by a series of State Council regulations on handling "public incidents." See Gov.cn 2006.

70 See Perry 2002, 112, and Liu Yu 2010, 357.

71 Perry 2011, 30–61.

72 Gerlach and Hine 1970, 97.

73 Passy 2003, 33, 41; Nepstad and Smith 1999, 33–34.

74 Diani 2003, 8.

75 McAdam 1986, 65; Kitts 2000, 241.

76 On strong ties, see Su and Feng 2013. On ties of varying strength, see Shi and Cai 2006, 314–32; Becker 2012. On absent ties, see Vala and O'Brien 2007.

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it suppresses contention in a less visible way that does not reflect directly back on the state. By filtering pressure through people the state has influence over, and then expecting them to be the familiar, friendly face that persuades a protester to give up an "inadvisable" course of action, social power is combined with state power. Putting the onus of "soft violence" (*ruan baoli* 软暴力)[77] on individuals whom protesters are related to, know, or at least share a hometown with, blurs the origins of repression, shields the state from owning up to its authoritarian impulses, and – when it succeeds – diminishes the need to rely on naked coercion.

Many questions remain about relational repression. To what extent is it employed before as well as after protest breaks out?[78] Is it seen to be a strong or weak tool, an effective means to halt contention or a likely-to-fail last resort? What tactics do the best thought workers use and what sort of arguments do they marshal? Is relational repression more effective for certain kinds of protest or perhaps in rural areas where communities are tighter, social ties are a bigger part of daily life, and close relatives can be more readily located?

Much also remains to be learned about the inner life of thought workers. What does thought work feel like for people who conduct it, some of whom may consider it a tolerable duty, and others of whom undoubtedly would rather avoid it entirely? Do thought workers feel patriotic or guilty when doing their work? Are they typically angry with wayward relatives, friends and neighbours or concerned about them?

Relational repression is one of a suite of methods Chinese authorities employ to suppress contention. More research on soft repression, and how officials view and prioritize its many techniques, promises a fuller picture of how a state may respond to protest without resorting to the surest sign of governance failure: outright force.

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77 For this term, see Chen 2011.

78 Social ties are sometimes used to prevent popular action ex ante. On "management through family affection," see Wang 2006. In Jinggangshan city, Jiangxi, local authorities have encouraged officials "to go home and take responsibility for maintaining social stability" and this is said to be effective in deterring protest. See Gzswdx.gov.cn 2011.

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