## *Special Section on Rural Protests*

# Protest Leadership in Rural China*

Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien

ABSTRACT Rural protest leaders in China play a number of roles. Among others, they lead the charge, shape collective claims, recruit activists and mobilize the public, devise and orchestrate acts of contention, and organize cross-community efforts. Protest leaders emerge in two main ways. Long-standing public figures initiate popular action on their own or in response to requests from other villagers; and ordinary villagers evolve into protest leaders when efforts to seek redress for a personal grievance fail. Rural officials sometimes attempt to co-opt or buy off protest leaders, but more often turn to repression. Although cracking down may inhibit further contention, at other times it firms up the determination of protest leaders and makes them more prone to adopt confrontational tactics, partly by enhancing their popular support, partly by increasing the costs of withdrawal.

Nearly every discussion of protest leadership begins with a statement that the topic remains woefully understudied.[1] Whether it is because most social scientists shy away from "great man theories of history," favour explanations that emphasize culture or structure over agency, or are put off by the idiosyncrasies of personality, examining the people who mobilize and plan collective action has largely been left to psychologists, journalists and activists,[2] rather than sociologists or political scientists.

* For helpful comments, we would like to thank Yongshun Cai, Feng Chen, Xi Chen, David Meyer, Rachael Stern, Sidney Tarrow and Guobin Yang. Special note should be made of Professor Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who kindly shared some of his interview transcripts with us. Generous financial support was provided by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong and the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California-Berkeley.

1 See Ron Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone and Elizabeth J. Perry, "Leadership dynamics and dynamics of contention," in Ronald R. Aminzade *et al.*, *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 126–28; Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavalette, "Leadership matters: an introduction," in Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavelette (eds.), *Leadership and Social Movements* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 2; Aldon D. Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Leadership in social movements," in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kries (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 171; Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information* Age (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 332; Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Clifford Bob, "When do leaders matter? Hypotheses on leadership dynamics in social movements," *Mobilization*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2006), p. 1.

2 For a perceptive organizer's perspective, see Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971).

© The China Quarterly, 2008 doi:10.1017/S0305741008000015

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Studies of contention in rural China share this general orientation. Much has been learned about the origins, dynamics and consequences of protest, but little about the people who stand at the centre of the action. For every study of grievances, petitions or demonstrations, there are only brief passages here and there about the individuals who make it all happen.[3] This article has the modest aim of redressing this imbalance a bit. In it, we offer a series of generalizations (and examples from the field) focused on two basic questions: what do protest leaders in rural China do; and how do villagers become protest leaders? Then we turn to an area where research on the Chinese countryside may be able to make a contribution to the study of contentious politics more broadly: the relationship of repression to mobilization. Here, though we find that repression sometimes inhibits further protest (as political opportunity theorists would predict), at other times it generates outrage, enhances popular support and boosts the determination of protest leaders to persist.[4]

## Sources and Research Sites

What follows is based on archival materials, in-depth interviews and remarks made on a series of surveys we conducted from 1997 to 2005. Key written sources included: government reports detailing episodes of popular contention; accounts of "peasant leaders" (*nongmin lingxiu* 农民领袖) published by journalists, policy researchers and scholars based in China; letters of complaint and essays penned by protest leaders; and Western studies of collective action in the Chinese countryside.

Interviewees ranged from officials and researchers in Beijing, Henan, Hubei, Hunan and Jiangxi to township officials and protest leaders in Anhui, Fujian, Hebei, Henan, Hunan, Jiangxi and Shandong. Interviews sometimes occurred in informal settings (such as at banquets, in hotel rooms, on trains) and sometimes were semi-structured. The more structured encounters with protest leaders typically began with a set of questions about their age, education,

3 For discussions of leadership, see Yongshun Cai, "The resistance of laid-off workers in the reform period," *The China Quarterly*, No. 170 (2002), pp. 327–44; Yongshun Cai, "Collective ownership or cadres' ownership? The non-agricultural use of farmland in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 175 (2003), pp. 662–80; Patricia Thornton, "Comrades and collectives in arms: tax resistance, evasion, and avoidance strategies in post-Mao China," in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (eds.), *State and Society in 21st Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 87–104; and especially Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Yu Jianrong (trans. Thomas Michael), "Conflict in the countryside: the emerging political awareness of the peasants," *Social Research*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (2006), pp. 141–58; Yu Jianrong, *Dangdai Zhongguo nongmin de weiquan kangzheng: Hunan Hengyang kaocha* (*Farmers' Struggle to Defend Their Rights in Contemporary China: An Investigation of Hengyang, Hunan*) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenhua chubanshe, 2007); and Wu Zhang, "Peasant power in China: a comparative study of peasant protest in Hunan in the 1990s," paper presented at the 101st Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1–4 September 2005, Washington DC. On "rebel" and "mandarin" styles of leadership in Maoist China, see Aminzade, Goldstone and Perry, "Leadership dynamics," pp. 133–42.

4 On the debate over how repression affects mobilization, see Jennifer Earl, "Repression and the social control of protest," *Mobilization*, Vol. 11. No. 2 (2006), p. 129; Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston and Carol Mueller, *Repression and Mobilization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Party membership, political positions held (if any), family background, and out-of-the-ordinary experiences (such as having been in the army or an urban wage worker). Afterwards, respondents were usually guided to recount how they had started challenging political power holders; what specific actions they had taken and what had transpired; what they had gained or lost from taking part; how their family members and neighbours had reacted to their activism; what they had learned about themselves, other villagers and various levels of government; and how they felt about their actions now.

One of our most important sources was a series of in-depth interviews with "complainants' representatives" (*shangfang daibiao* 上访代表) in Hengyang county (衡阳县), Hunan, most of which were conducted in January and March 2003 by Dr Yu Jianrong (于建嵘) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Hunan, along with a number of other provinces in China's central agricultural belt,[5] has been a hotbed of popular contention since the late 1980s. Yu enjoyed exceptional access to protest organizers in Hengyang, and he invited Lianjiang Li to conduct joint fieldwork with him to explore the course and consequences of a decade-long cycle of protest. All the interviews in Hengyang were recorded and transcribed. Some were also videotaped. Given the sensitivity of the topic, the selection of respondents was done quietly through personal networking. To explore new issues that arose during the course of the fieldwork, a number of protest leaders were interviewed several times.

Many of the Hengyang interviews are available in Yu Jianrong's book, *Farmers' Struggle to Defend Their Rights in Contemporary China: An Investigation of Hengyang, Hunan* (*Dangdai Zhongguo nongmin de weiquan kangzheng: Hunan Hengyang kaocha* 当代中国农民的维权抗争: 湖南衡阳考察).

## What Protest Leaders Do

We use the term "protest leaders" to refer to people who initiate group petitions, mass demonstrations and other types of collective action that target political power holders. There are no reliable estimates of how many protest leaders there are in the countryside, but few doubt that their number has increased over the last decade.[6] Chinese government sources, for example, have admitted that owing to the emergence of "a small number of individuals who organize, lead and instigate the masses," the number of "collective incidents" (*quntixing shijian*

5 Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, p. 6. In central agricultural provinces popular protest is much more common in some counties than in others. Younger and better-educated county Party secretaries are more likely to seek promotion by launching expensive development projects, which often increase peasant burdens and provoke popular protests. By contrast, county Party secretaries who are near retirement or who do not have sufficient education to justify further promotion often choose to accord highest priority to maintaining stability.

6 Our 2005 survey in 100 villages suggested that protest leaders were active in much of the countryside. Of 96 villages where data was collected, 58 had protest leaders. The 100 villages were randomly sampled in 50 townships of 25 counties in Fujian, Hebei, Jilin, Jiangsu and Sichuan. Data were not collected from four villages in two Hebei townships, where county officials did not allow the questionnaire to be administered.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

群体性事件) has jumped ten-fold in the last dozen years, from 8,706 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005, with about 40 per cent of them occurring in the countryside. Moreover, the authorities have expressed alarm that such incidents have become more organized since the mid-1990s.[7]

Protest leaders provide leadership in a number of ways. They may literally lead the charge, by appearing at a government office to lodge complaints on behalf of others, by marching in front of an angry crowd that is "demanding a dialogue" (*yaoqiu duihua* 要求对话) with local officials, or by defying their adversaries face-to-face. In Hengyang county, Hunan, for instance, a man concerned with over-taxation was doing housework when he heard indignant neighbours shouting "robbers" and "thieves" at some township cadres who had come to collect yet another unauthorized fee. He rushed to the scene and found that an elderly villager who refused to pay up had been knocked to the ground by the tax collectors. He began arguing with the taxmen and demanded that they cease collecting illegal fees and compensate the old man for his injuries. In short order, dozens of villagers poured out of their homes and joined him in condemning the township for excessive extraction. The dispute turned into a brawl after an official hit the protest leader on the head with a torch.[8]

Sometimes such leadership is close to accidental. Popular discontent may be running high, but no protests are on the horizon until one or more individuals openly confront officials, setting off a significant event. This is what happened in Cangshan county (苍山县), Shandong. The county had ordered local farmers to grow garlic-shoots but then failed to deliver the marketing assistance it had promised. Helpless garlic-growers were left to watch their hard-earned harvest rot. Public anger mounted. On a hot market day, a single irate villager and his wife suddenly charged into the county government compound and demanded to see the county head. Moments later hundreds of farmers who happened to be milling about also rushed into the compound. The county head failed to appear and the crowd became increasingly agitated. Then a few individuals smashed a glass door and ran into an office building. Many offices were ransacked, and nearly a thousand pieces of furniture and reams of government archives were destroyed. The man who initiated the incident professed no desire to set off a mass protest, let alone a riot, but his action did just that. He was later detained for "instigating a major social disturbance," but many community members

7 On collective incidents, see Gonganbu disi yanjiusuo "quntixing shijian yanjiu" ketizu, "Woguo fasheng quntixing shijian de diaocha yu sikao" ("Investigation and reflection on collective incidents in our country"), *Neibu canyue* (*Internal Reference*), No. 31 (10 August 2001), pp. 18–25; Zhongyang zhengfawei yanjiushi, *Weihu shehui wending diaoyan wenji* (*Collected Essays on Maintaining Social Stability*) (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 2001). On the number of collective incidents in 2005, see "Gonganbu zhaokai xinwen fabuhui tongbao 2005 nian shehui zhi'an xingshi ji huozai xingshi" ("The Public Security Ministry holds a news conference on the public security and fire disaster situation in 2005"), http://www.mps.gov.cn/cenweb/brjlCenweb/jsp/common/article.jsp?infoid=ABC00000000000001018; accessed 14 August 2006.

8 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003. A riot then broke out, during which two government jeeps were overturned. The man who initiated the action was ultimately sentenced to three years in jail for "gathering a crowd to disturb social order" (*Criminal Court Verdict*, No. 66, 1999, People's Court of Hengyang County, Hunan Province).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thanked him for the marketing assistance that suddenly appeared once the popular action ended.[9]

A more recent episode in Jiangxi, in which hundreds of villagers raided government offices, also occurred unexpectedly. On a market day in 1999, a car owned by a township collided with a two-wheeled cart, and a man who was pulling the cart was slightly injured. His wife, who had been riding in the cart, demanded compensation, but the township officials refused on the grounds that it was the couple who had been in the wrong. A quarrel ensued, in which the woman loudly explained to onlookers how the township had mistreated villagers by collecting one unapproved fee after another. Linking this critique to the incident which had just occurred, she claimed that township officials levied unlawful taxes in part to buy themselves luxurious automobiles. A number of bystanders then joined her in condemning the township officials for increasing "peasant burdens" (*nongmin fudan* 农民负担) and for their corruption. After the officials who had been in the car fled into the township complex the crowd followed them inside. When the police tried to drive out the angry villagers, fights broke out and some villagers began to smash windows in the government building.[10]

The authorities (quite accurately) consider this type of collective action "accidental" (*oufaxing* 偶发性) and usually argue that "the masses" (*qunzhong* 群众) followed a handful of law-breakers because they "did not know the facts" (*bu ming zhenxiang* 不明真相). Of course, more often than not, villagers know exactly what is going on, and they (and their inadvertent leaders) use a random incident to express their discontent about a widespread and deeply held grievance.

In most cases, however, protest leaders, rather than acting reactively and on the moment, perform some or all of the following four tasks.[11] First, they shape individual grievances into collective claims. Many rural people are dissatisfied with aspects of local governance, but their complaints do not automatically gel into collective discontent. Moreover, some villagers may assume that their suffering is caused by the government as a whole and thus feel powerless before a force that is "armed with fighter planes and missiles."[12] Even when villagers sense that a problem arises from official misconduct, they may not be able to pinpoint exactly what policy or law has been violated, and therefore find it

9 See Li Cunbao and Wang Guangming, *Yimeng jiuzhang* (*Nine Chapters on Yimeng*), *Renmin wenxue* (*People's Literature*), No. 11 (1991), pp. 73–77; Song Zhenyuan, "Zouxiang shichang – xie zai Cangshan 'suantai shijian' fasheng shinian zhihou" ("Marching toward the market: a note written ten years after the 'garlic-shoots incidents' in Cangshan"), *Shichang bao* (*Market*), 23 December 1998, p. 7; Ding Xiguo, Wang Jinye and Song Zhenyuan, "Yi zhua keji, er zhua liutong: Nongye jiegou tiaozheng caifang zhaji" ("First to use new technologies, second to improve circulation – notes on agricultural restructuring"), *Renmin ribao* (*Huadong xinwen*) (*People's Daily, East-China News*), 1 November 2000, p. 1.

10 Interview, rural researcher in Jiangxi, 2001.

11 On leadership tasks more generally, see Aminzade, Goldstone and Perry, "Leadership dynamics," pp. 126–54; Morris and Staggenborg, "Leadership in social movements," pp. 171–96; Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, pp. 339–40; Nepstad and Bob, "When do leaders matter?" pp. 1–22.

12 Interview, villager, Hebei, 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

overly risky to take action. In the words of a man from Hunan: "There are many regulations regarding peasant burdens and we do not know which burdens are lawful and which are not. If we make one mistake, we'll end up breaking the law."[13] Protest leaders, by contrast, typically know exactly which regulation local officials have ignored or distorted. A protest leader in Hunan, for instance, accumulated a large trove of government documents on tax limits and used them to convince other villagers that the township had acted against central policies when it collected exorbitant fees.[14]

Much like "framing" elsewhere, protest leaders construct an interpretation of the nature and source of a grievance that can be used to mobilize people to take part in collective action.[15] Usually, they attribute villagers' woes to local violation of a central policy, thus placing the blame squarely on rural officials and identifying a powerful potential ally in the central government. This framing converts a broad, inchoate sense of being wronged into a specific claim against named officials. It also fosters a feeling of empowerment by highlighting the vulnerabilities of one's targets. In one Hunan hamlet, villagers had complained about excessive fees for a number of years but did not act until a protest leader explained that township officials had ignored a central policy.[16] Also in Hunan, a protest leader spelled out to a group of villagers while they were dining in a country eatery how they had been over-taxed by the township. His fellow diners were so grateful that they insisted on paying his bill and then used the copies of central documents he gave them to lodge complaints about over-taxation.[17]

The second task commonly undertaken by protest leaders is recruiting activists and mobilizing the public. Recruiting is differential and often rests on existing social networks, such as fellow clan members, friends or acquaintances.[18] Protest leaders also seek out villagers who are known to have grievances against rural officials. More cautious organizers tend to avoid accepting recruits who have criminal records or other political "stains" (*wudian* 污点), to avoid offering a pretext for repression and to dispel concerns that the contention will come to naught. When collective action draws on villagers from different communities, they usually strive to ensure that each community has at least one representative as a core leader. In Hengyang, Hunan, for instance, a protest leader recruited 13 activists, one from each natural village involved in a series of collective petitions.[19] In Ningxiang county (宁乡县), Hunan, two organizers likewise recruited one or two activists from each village in Daolin

13 Yu Jianrong, *Yuecun zhengzhi* (*Politics in Yue Village*) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2001), p. 499.
14 Xiang Jidong, "Cong 'xianfa guanhuai' tan qi" ("About 'constitutional concerns'"), in Zhang Yinghong and Qi Zuliang, *Zhongguo nongmin yu dangdai zhengzhi* (*Chinese Peasants and Contemporary Politics*) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2005), p. 222.
15 Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, *Frames of Protest: Social Protest and the Framing Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
16 Yu Jianrong, *Politics in Yue Village*, p. 554.
17 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
18 On recruitment using networks, see Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
19 Yu Jianrong, *Politics in Yue Village*, p. 554.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

town (道林镇) and appointed them "burden-reduction supervisors" (*jianfu jianduyuan* 减负监督员).[20]

Protest leaders mobilize supporters primarily through persuasion, though they sometimes employ more heavy-handed techniques. On the one hand, they try to coax others to join in by deploying the moral authority they have acquired by taking the initiative to defend villagers' interests. A man in Shandong, for instance, was beaten repeatedly by cronies of a village Party secretary for demanding a thorough auditing of the village accounts. His "sacrifice," he said, won him many devoted followers, dozens of whom he persuaded to seize the village account books, after the Party secretary had entrusted them to the township for safe-keeping.[21] On the other hand, protest leaders sometimes employ the threat of violence, property destruction and social ostracism against free riders. "Petitioners' representatives" in Hebei, for example, sought to isolate villagers who refused to join petition campaigns by boycotting their weddings and funerals.[22] Protest leaders in Hebei had followers throw stones through the windows of neighbours who were reluctant to join an effort to topple a corrupt cadre.[23] In a Shandong village, protest leaders even threatened to drive out families who refused to support a mass demonstration against county officials who had failed to compensate the village after a dam flooded its farmland.[24]

The third major role played by protest leaders is devising and orchestrating collective action. Undertaking popular contention in present-day China is always a delicate matter. Although the authorities have granted citizens a right to hold demonstrations and lodge complaints, they nearly always prohibit popular action in the name of maintaining stability. Furthermore, the State Council's "Regulation Concerning Letters and Visits" (1995, revised 2005) allows complainants to petition as a group, but does not permit them to send more than five representatives at once (Article 12 (1995), Article 18 (2005)). As a result, protest leaders often find themselves in a dilemma. If they pursue their

20 Liu Jian *et al.*, "Nongcun wending: yige ningzhong de huati" ("Rural stability: a grave topic"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)* (*Fortnightly Chats, internal edition*), No. 4 (1999), p. 10; Duan Xianju, Tan Jian and Chen Peng, "'Yingxiong' hai shi 'diaomin'?" ("'Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 2 (2000), p. 10.

21 Interview, petitioners' representative from Shandong, 2003. For more reports on this man, see Xu Zhiyong, "Xuanju zhi hou – Liji cun cunmin zizhi diaocha" ("After the election: an investigation of villagers' self-government in Liji village"), *Zhongguo gaige (nongcun ban) (China's Reforms, rural edition)*, No. 2 (2003), pp. 10–14; Huang Kaitang and Dong Lanfang, "Cunweihui tao gongzhang zhuanggao zhen zhengfu" ("A villagers' committee sues the township government to obtain the village chop"), *Zhongguo gaige (nongcun ban)*, No. 9 (2003), pp. 35–37; Zhu Ling, *Hui cun ji shi – caogen minzhu yu qian guize de boyi* (*Stories of Hui Village: A Game of Grassroots Democracy and Hidden Rules*) (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 2004).

22 Yang Shouyong and Wang Jintao, "'Wending cun' weihe chule da luanzi?" ("Why did a big disturbance occur in a 'stable village'?"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 1 (2001), p. 42; Zhang Jun, "Xiang zhengfu yuanhe zao chongji" ("Why was the township government attacked?"), *Minzhu yu fazhi* (*Democracy and Legality*), No. 1 (2001), p. 41.

23 Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The politics of lodging complaints in rural China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (1995), p. 775.

24 Interview, rural researcher from Beijing, 1999. For a similar case in Anhui, see Xu Jingping, "'Xiaoji wending' niang eguo" ("'Negative stability' leads to disastrous consequences"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 12 (2000), p. 40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

claims strictly according to law, their likelihood of prevailing is slim because they cannot apply sufficient pressure on their foes. If they hope to be effective, they have to work around or brush up against the law. They must locate a means, in other words, to balance maximizing pressure on their opponents with minimizing the risk of repression. In the last two decades, they have employed a number of strategies to do this. One is to work around the law, paying attention to its letter, if not its spirit. They may, for instance, send no more than four persons to lodge a complaint, but set up many groups, each representing a nominally different constituency.[25]Another approach is to mobilize an enormous throng and to rely on the safety of numbers for protection.[26] A third strategy is to act in a way that is acceptable to some power holders if not to others. Protest leaders may, for example, elicit an innocuous remark such as "it is lawful to publicize central policies" from a high-ranking official and then use it as a justification to call a mass meeting in their locality to "study policies."[27] When they are confident that their followers are willing do their bidding, they may go a step further and deliberately break the law by leading a crowd to block roads, besiege officials, hold sit-ins, or raid government buildings, burn them down or even blow them up.[28]

In addition to choosing tactics, protest leaders make an incident occur. Orchestrating a protest often involves collecting evidence of official wrongdoing, raising money, designing slogans, deciding whether and how to negotiate with the authorities, and arranging group action. In 1999, for instance, six protest leaders in suburban Beijing staged a demonstration against corrupt village cadres at the entrance to a municipal compound. A group of villagers was instructed to take turns stationing themselves at the main gate, and a contingent of support staff was formed to bring them food and drink.[29] In actions that involve long-distance travelling, protest leaders also establish communication links and set the time and place of gatherings.[30] In 2004, for instance, protest leaders from a village in Zhangjiakou (张家口), Hebei, mobilized hundreds of villagers to trek to Beijing to lodge a complaint against a county for allowing a private, under-financed company to seize a large plot of farmland without paying the promised compensation. The county government deployed hundreds

25 Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

26 O'Brien and Li, "The politics of lodging complaints," pp. 773–74; Carl Minzner, "Xinfang: an alternative to the formal Chinese judicial system," *Stanford Journal of International Law*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2006), pp. 103–79; but cf. Yuen Yuen Tang, "When peasants sue en masse: large-scale collective ALL suits in rural China," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2005), pp. 46–49.

27 Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003; rural researcher in Henan, 2004. Yang Hao, "Nongmin de huhuan" ("Cries of peasants"), *Dangdai* (*Modern Times*), No. 6 (November 1999), p. 79; Yu Jianrong, *Politics in Yue Village*, pp. 548–49; Jiang Zuoping and Yang Sanjun, "Chuanhuan si wei 'lingxiu' niang cheng yi chang fengbo" ("Subpoenaing four 'leaders' results in an incident"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 2 (2000), p. 16.

28 Interviews, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003; rural researcher in Jiangxi, 2006; Duan Xianju, "Jujiao jiuyi nongmin de minggenzi" ("Focusing on the life-roots of 900 million farmers"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 1 (2002), p. 5; Zhongyang zhengfawei, *Collected Essays*, p. 245.

29 Zhongyang zhengfawei, *Collected Essays*, p. 66.

30 *Ibid.* pp. 98, 153, 221, 324.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of police to stop them. The police were stationed at railway ticket counters and long-distance bus stations to question passengers, and they guarded major intersections leading into Beijing to inspect suspicious vehicles. In spite of their efforts, hundreds of petitioners made it to the capital. It turned out that the lead complainants, upon learning of the county's plan to intercept the petitioners, had divided the villagers into dozens of small teams and instructed them to travel to Beijing by bicycle. To avoid unwanted attention, teams departed at different times and took different routes. The petitioners only reassembled at a pre-set time and place after they had passed the check-points the county police had set up around Beijing. By the time county officials learned what had happened, hundreds of villagers had made it to the State Council's Letters and Visits Bureau. Under pressure, the county swiftly took out a loan to compensate the farmers for losing a year's harvest and returned the land to them.[31]

Lastly, protest leaders are responsible for organizing multi-village and even multi-township episodes of contention, particularly (so far) in Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi and Shaanxi.[32] To do so, they often set up some type of organization, formal or informal. The more formal groups have names such as "burden-reduction societies" (*jianfu xiehui* 减负协会), "rights-defence societies" (*weiquan xiehui* 维权协会), "anti-corruption small groups" (*fanfu xiaozu* 反腐小组), "burden-reduction groups" (*jianfu xiaozu* 减负小组) or "peasant societies for rights-defence" (*nongmin weiquan xiehui* 农民维权协会).[33] In a Guizhou township, protest leaders established a "Peasant Alliance for Justice" (*nongmin zhengyi tongmeng*, 农民正义同盟) to resist excessive local fees.[34] In Yilong county (仪陇县), Sichuan, four protest leaders set up a "County Command Centre for Speaking Up for Peasants" (*quanxian wei nongmin shuohua zhihui zhongxin*, 全县为农民说话指挥中心). This latter group met every ten days to "stir up the masses to resist the Party and government" and its organizers attempted (unsuccessfully) to call a county-wide meeting to study central documents that limited taxation.[35]

More cautious protest leaders often prefer to build on informal networks in order to keep their organizations invisible. In Hengyang county, Hunan, for example, protest leaders from over a dozen townships formed a loose network of mutual protection and communication. They stayed in touch through mobile

31 Interview, rural researcher in Beijing, 2006.

32 Zhongyang zhengfawei, *Collected Essays*, pp. 245, 262, 277, 302.

33 Zhao Shukai, "Shequ chongtu he xinxing quanli guanxi – guanyu 196 feng nongmin laixin de chubu fenxi" ("Community conflicts and a new type of power relationship – a preliminary analysis of 196 letters of complaints by farmers"), *Zhongguo nongcun guancha* (*China Rural Survey*), No. 2 (1999), p. 45; Yu Jianrong, "Zhuanxing Zhongguo de shehui chongtu – dui dangdai Zhongguo weiquan kangzheng huodong de guancha" ("Social conflicts in transitional China – observation of rights-defence activities by workers and peasants in contemporary China"), *Gaige neican* (*Inside Information on Reform*), No. 34 (2004), p. 18; Zhou Yuan and Wang Yanping, "Minjian liliang guanli minjian" ("Let civil forces manage communities"), in Zhou Yuan (ed.), *Nongmin! Nongmin!* (*Peasants! Peasants!*) (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2004), p. 140.

34 Zhongyang zhengfawei, *Collected Essays*, p. 277.

35 Jiang and Yang, "Subpoenaing four 'leaders'," pp. 15–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

phones and a telephone tree, and vowed to come to each other's rescue "even if a family member had just died."[36] "Rural underground organizations" were also said to be behind unrest that broke out in Shanxi, Henan and Hunan in late 1995, and "deliberate co-ordination" was evident in other clashes that occurred in Sichuan in 1993 and Hunan throughout the 1990s.[37]

These varied "mobilizing structures"[38] not only help get people out on the streets, they also facilitate allocating leadership responsibilities more efficiently.[39] In Shaanxi, protest leaders reportedly developed a complex division of labour in which different leaders specialized in planning, co-ordination, propaganda, communication, transportation and negotiation.[40] In Hengyang county, Hunan, protest leaders also increased their effectiveness by sharing the tasks involved in conducting a protest campaign.[41] Some of them focused on finding and analysing new regulations; some were in charge of collecting evidence against rural officials; some were responsible for raising funds and mobilizing supporters; some did the more mundane (but important) work of disseminating petition letters to villagers. Thanks to their co-ordination, protest leaders in Hengyang were able to continue making a living and sustain their contention for nearly a decade. As time passed, they also became better at applying pressure on the county government, culminating in 2003 in a single letter of complaint that challenged excessive irrigation charges, signed by representatives from 13 of 18 townships in the county.[42]

## Making a Protest Leader

Protest leaders emerge through several channels. Some are public figures before they initiate popular contention. This group includes former village cadres, retired government officials, clan elders, school teachers and religious figures.[43] These well-established opinion leaders usually command moral authority in their community. Villagers often call them "little sages" (*xiao shengren* 小圣人),

36 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

37 Zhonggong Sichuan shengwei zuzhibu ketizu, "Zenyang zhengque chuli quntixing tufa shijian" (How to correctly handle collective and abrupt incidents), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 1 (2002), pp. 29–32; Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, pp. 155–56.

38 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 8.

39 Zhongyang zhengfawei, *Collected Essays*, p. 277.

40 *Ibid.* p. 302.

41 On one person rarely having the full complement of skills needed to organize contention, see Aminzade, Goldstone and Perry, "Leadership dynamics," p. 152.

42 Interview, rural researcher in Beijing, 2004.

43 Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, p. 149; O'Brien and Li, "The politics of lodging complaints," pp. 767–68; Wu Zhang, "Peasant power," *passim*; Yang Hao, "Cries of peasants," p. 79; Zhongyang zhengfawei, *Collected Essays*, p. 277. Our 2005 survey showed that of 991 ordinary villagers randomly selected in 96 villages, 55 (5.8%) had in the previous decade taken the lead in: petitioning; going to Beijing to petition; rejecting illegal fees; demanding dialogues with government leaders; or blocking traffic. Of 441 purposively selected incumbent village cadres and heads of villagers' small groups, 22 (5.0%) had done the same. Of 209 purposively selected "public figures," e.g. former village cadres, former candidates of villagers' committees, clan elders, religious leaders and former members of a village election steering committee, 20 (9.6%) had done the same.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"natural leaders" (*ziran lingxiu* 自然领袖) or "the enlightened" (*mingbairen* 明白人).[44] They are also typically known for being outspoken, upright, assertive and knowledgeable about politics.[45] That is also why people come to them for help when they face illegal impositions or have other grievances. More often than not, such individuals are the first to stand up on behalf of other villagers, partly because they share the same grievance, partly to demonstrate their high moral standards, and partly to confirm their status as community leaders. In Henan, for example, a well-regarded former cadre was urged by fellow villagers in 1998 to lead a petition campaign against excessive fees, and he did so.[46] In many places, particularly Fujian and Jiangxi, members of the "society of senior citizens" (laonianren xiehui 老年人协会) *and clan elders have played leading parts in organizing collective petitions against corrupt or incompetent cadres.*[47]

Sometimes even incumbent village Party secretaries and villagers' committee directors have become protest leaders.[48] Grassroots cadres, in some places, have played a role in devising tactics and claims-making strategies and have participated in demonstrations, rallies or petition drives.[49] In Hunan, for instance, a newly elected villagers' committee director led a group petition against a hefty education surcharge, after dozens of angry villagers approached him for help.[50] Village authorities also sometimes side with villagers in land requisition disputes, either "because they share common interests with farmers,"[51] or because they were cut out of kickbacks or did not get as much as they believed they deserved.[52]

In many instances, community leaders do not wait to be asked and start down the road to being a protest leader by challenging a government decision or action

44 Interview, petitioners' representative from Zhangpu, Xiamen, 2004; Bao Yonghui, "Dui nongcun sige zhongda wenti de zai renshi" ("Reflections on four major rural issues"), *Xiangzhen luntan* (*Township Forum*), No. 7 (1991), p. 15.

45 On the personality traits of rural protest leaders, see Xiaolin Guo, "Land expropriation and rural conflicts in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 166 (2001), p. 432; also Wu Zhang, "Peasant power," pp. 43–44; O'Brien and Li, "The politics of lodging complaints," pp. 767–71; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and popular resistance in contemporary China," *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1996), pp. 28–61; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Appendix A.

46 Interview, rural researcher in Henan, 2004.

47 Interviews, rural researcher in Jiangxi, 2001; rural researcher at Beijing University, 2005.

48 Interview, petitioners' representative from Shandong, 2003. Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, pp. 152–53; Lucien Bianco, *Peasants without the Party: Grass-roots Movements in Twentieth Century China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe), pp. 250–51; Thornton, "Comrades and collectives in arms," pp. 90, 97–98; Li Junde, "'Jianfu yingxiong' za cheng le fanzui xianyiren" ("How did peasant burden-reduction heroes become crime suspects"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 2 (2000), pp. 13–14; Zhang Cuiling, "Zenyang duidai zheli de nongmin shangfang – Anhui Chengzhuang shijian diaocha baogao" ("How to deal with peasants lodging complaints? An investigative report on Anhui's Chengzhuang incident"), *Fazhi yu xinwen* (*Legality and News*), No. 1 (2002), pp. 4–8.

49 Thornton, "Comrades and collectives in arms," p. 98.

50 Lianjiang Li, "Elections and popular resistance in rural China," *China Information*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2002), pp. 89–107.

51 Yu Jianrong, "Social conflict in rural China today: observation and analysis on farmers' struggles to safeguard their rights," *Social Sciences in China* (Autumn 2005), p. 130.

52 Interviews, rural researcher at the Development Research Centre of the State Council, 2006; rural researcher in Beijing, 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on their own. Xiong Maisheng (熊麦生), a well-known "burden-reduction hero" in Taojiang county (桃江县), Hunan, for instance, was a successful private entrepreneur and locally renowned barefoot doctor. He enjoyed the respect of other villagers, who called him "Dr Know-Everything" (*quanneng boshi* 全能博士). In 1997, the authorities abruptly increased township levies several-fold. Xiong, on his own initiative, immediately lodged a complaint at the county government.[53] Public figures have also acted on their own on other issues of community concern, such as village finances, grassroots elections and land requisition.

Lone petitioners usually find it difficult to prevail, however. During their struggle with rural power holders, some of them quickly graduate from acting on their own interests to acting on other villagers' behalf. Xiong Maisheng's contention is a good example of this. After learning of his petition to the county, township leaders first attempted to buy him off by offering a fee waiver and a 20,000 yuan (US$2,500) bribe. When Xiong rejected the offer, a township official threatened his life. But Xiong still refused to back down. Then a group of cadres and policemen went to Xiong's house and threatened to beat him unless he paid the fees in full. Xiong paid up but obtained a receipt that he kept as evidence of the township's wrongdoing. Two weeks later, Xiong learned that the heads of nine nearby villages had decided to "demand an explanation" (*tao shuofa* 讨说法) of the fee hike, and Xiong volunteered to co-ordinate efforts to have it reversed.[54]

Sometimes a decision by individual petitioners to lead popular contention is a tactical move, designed to mobilize community support in the hope that this will elicit concessions on one's original private grievance. Cui Luokun (崔罗坤) was a prominent protest leader in Ningxiang county, Hunan, who helped mobilize a large demonstration against excessive taxation that came to be known as the Daolin incident. Initially, however, state extraction was not his concern. In 1994, Cui, then the head of a villagers' small group, asked more senior members at the villagers' committee and township to address a soil erosion problem. For questioning the powerful, a group of hired toughs ransacked his house and beat him badly, and the county police detained him for 15 days. Cui then began to lodge complaints at various levels of government, seeking compensation for his property damage, his injuries and wrongful detention. In the course of several years of futile petitioning, he bought books about the law and learned of policies calling for the reduction of peasant burdens. Cui later shifted his appeals to the issue of over-taxation, hoping to apply pressure on local authorities so that they would take his demand for compensation seriously. While speaking out on behalf of other villagers, Cui amassed a large following and became a determined "peasant leader" who led a number of collective petitions and

53 Li Xuexiang and Xiao Qing, "Cong 'jianfu yingxiong' dao 'zhengfu jianduyuan'" ("From a 'burden-reduction hero' to a 'government supervisor'"), *Zhongguo gaige (Nongcun ban)*, No. 9 (2003), p. 40.
54 *Ibid.* p. 41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

played a pivotal role in organizing mass meetings to study tax-reduction measures.[55]

Unlike those who have enjoyed a high profile for some time, other protest leaders are newcomers to public life. These individuals are frequently male, better-educated, have strong personalities, and have undergone transformative experiences such as serving in the army.[56] Some of them feel excluded from community affairs, most often because they have poor relations with local officialdom. Others have had little interest in village politics, perhaps because they have been too busy making a living or raising a family. Some of them may have been politically active earlier in life, for example as a Red Guard leader during the Cultural Revolution or as a school activist. Zhou Decai (周德才), a protest organizer in Henan in the early 2000s, fits in this last category. He led a demonstration in support of the student movement in 1989 and was expelled from middle school, thus losing his opportunity to take the university entrance exam.[57] Zhang Dean (张德安), the moving force behind the 1993 Renshou (仁寿) protest, is an example of the former path to leadership. In the late 1950s, he was labelled a "rightist" and expelled from the army when the Hundred Flowers era came to a sudden end.[58]

For these individuals, the journey toward leadership usually begins with an act of defiance, often following mistreatment by rural officials. In Hengyang, Hunan, one young woman tried to take her own life by drinking pesticide after township birth control inspectors confiscated all the equipment from her photo studio because she refused to pay a fine for having her first child without prior authorization.[59] Her father, an army veteran, came across a group of activists who were studying central limits on taxation while he was feverishly looking for

55 Duan *et al.*, "'Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?" pp. 10–11.

56 O'Brien and Li, "The politics of lodging complaints," p. 768; O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*; Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, p. 148; Ethan Michelson, "Climbing the dispute pagoda: grievances and appeals to the official justice system in rural China," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2007), pp. 459–85; Ethan Michelson. "Justice from above or below? Popular strategies for resolving grievances in rural China," in this issue of *The China Quarterly*; Zhao Shukai, "Shangfang shijian he xinfang tixi: guanyu nongmin jin jing shangfang wenti de diaocha fenxi" ("Petitioning incidents and the letters and visits system: investigation and analysis of the issue of farmers who lodge complaints in Beijing"), *Sannong Zhongguo 2003* (*Chinese Agriculture, Countryside and Farmers, 2003*), pp. 115–25. Yu Jianrong, *Politics in Yue Village*, p. 565; Yu Jianrong, "Social conflict," p. 129. Our 2005 survey corroborated some of these observations. A weighted multiple logistic regression showed that, among ordinary villagers, the better educated were significantly more likely to be protest leaders ($p < .01$). Veterans of the People's Liberation Army split, with those who were Party members significantly less likely to lead popular protests, whereas those who were not Party members significantly more likely to do so ($p = .05$). Older villagers were marginally more likely to be protest leaders than younger people, and men were more likely to be protest leaders than women ($p < .10$).

57 Zhou Decai, "Geren jianli" ("A short autobiography"), mimeograph, 2002.

58 In October 1975 Zhang Dean was jailed on what he considered a trumped-up charge. On his release date in 1977, Zhang refused to leave the prison at first and demanded an explanation of why he had been detained for 15 months. He told a reporter in 2001: "I have personally tasted the bitterness of losing the basic rights of a citizen, so I cherish those rights." See Xiwu Lapa, "Zhengce he falü shi nongmin de baohushen – nongmin Zhang Dean de jianfu shijian yu sikao" ("Policy and law are farmers' guardians – reflections on burden-reduction practices of farmer Zhang Dean"), *Zhongguo gaige (Nongcun ban)*, No. 1 (2002), p. 7.

59 Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

medicine for his stricken daughter. The young woman survived, but her father refused to let the birth control inspectors go unpunished. Using what he had learned from the study group, he began lodging complaints against officials who used family planning regulations as an excuse to impose arbitrary fines.[60] Unsuccessful in this tack, the old man later joined the other fee protesters and became a prominent "burden-reduction representative" in his community.

By standing up for themselves, assertive villagers can develop a reputation for having the derring-do and expertise to challenge power holders. After this happens, they are frequently approached by other people who have any sort of gripe with local cadres. One protest leader, for example, was a successful businessman in rural Xiamen (厦门) until a township nearly ruined him by ending a factory lease prematurely. He then began to lodge complaints but was unable to recoup his losses. In the course of confronting the powers-that-be, the man became known for his mastery of policies and his skill at writing petition letters. Other aggrieved villagers then began to ask him for help composing their letters. Over the next few years, he set up an advisory service for rural people who felt cheated by cadres who had sold off village land without public consultation. He advised numerous villagers how to pursue complaints more effectively by combining them with popular action. Some of his clients later succeeded in obtaining compensation, and this led more people to approach him for advice. In a short time he became one of the key protest leaders in Zhangpu county (彰浦县), Xiamen.[61]

Even if they do not suffer serious mistreatment themselves, these assertive and knowledgeable individuals are more likely than most to confront rural cadres. Here, it is knowledge of beneficial policies that typically sensitizes a person to actionable misconduct. Ling Xuewen (凌学文), a previously inactive Hunan villager, obtained some central and provincial documents from a city cadre while he was working as a bricklayer. After reading them, he immediately realized that it was unlawful for the township to collect a per capita slaughter tax, irrespective of whether a farmer raised livestock. Ling successfully drove a team of township tax collectors from his home by citing these documents. He later became angry, and began to mobilize other villagers, when he learned that his younger brother, who had not heard of the policy, was forced to take out a bank loan to pay off a slaughter tax he did not owe. He copied the relevant regulation on a large piece of paper and pasted it on a wall outside the township office building. From this moment, Ling started down what he called a "no-return road to petitioning." After spearheading a number of clashes with township officials and joining some

60 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

61 Interview, petitioners' representative from Zhangpu, Xiamen, 2004. This protest leader was arrested in 2005 and charged with plotting to abduct two county officials. He vehemently denied the charge. To coerce a confession and deprive him of sleep, the police shone bright lights in his cell around the clock. Despite numerous collective petitions by villagers, he was sentenced to seven years in prison. Personal communication with a rural researcher in Fujian, 26 December 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

protest leaders from neighbouring townships, by 1999 he was one of the most visible activists in Hengyang county.[62]

Heightened emotions, as in this last case, often play a role in spurring otherwise non-political individuals into action.[63] Peng Rongjun (彭荣俊), a noted protest leader in Hengyang, came across a document about reducing peasant burdens, but did not even glance at it because he was busy tending his small sweet store. His wife, however, read it and started goading him into "being a man" and "struggling against" those "bastards" and "thieves" at the township. Also in Hengyang, Deng Zisheng (邓仔生), a villagers' small group leader, asked a Party secretary for permission to inspect the village accounts. The secretary rudely rejected the request and dismissively claimed that he had no say over villagers' committee affairs. In the shouting match that ensued, the secretary challenged Deng to lodge complaints wherever he pleased. Shamed and outraged, Deng launched a petition campaign, first by himself and then at the head of other villagers frustrated with the lack of financial openness in their community.[64]

Finally, simple bad blood or personal rivalry between former and sitting cadres,[65] or village small group leaders and villagers' committee directors,[66] or villagers' committee directors and Party secretaries,[67] and so on, may also set a person down the path towards becoming a protest leader. In 1997, Zhong Shunde (钟顺德), a former village cadre in Xuanhan county (宣汉县), Sichuan, refused to pay a small fee of 7 yuan (US$0.90) that he felt was unlawful. The Party secretary who came to collect the money dismissed him with the words: "I don't think a flea can overturn a blanket." Insulted and humiliated, Zhong responded: "That's exactly what I want to see it do." Shortly afterwards, Zhong began to lodge complaints over illicit fees, and he soon became a local "burden-reduction leader." During the next three years, he led more than 20 petition drives at the county, city and province and staged several dozen demonstrations in his village.[68]

## Repression and Its Effects

Nearly all protest leaders start by leading collective petitions. Initially, they call themselves "petitioners' representatives," "burden-reduction representatives" (*jianfu daibiao* 减负代表), or simply "villagers' representatives" (*cunmin daibiao* 村民代表). Most are careful to avoid politically-loaded terms like "leader"

62 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
63 Ronald R. Aminzade and Doug McAdam, "Emotions and contentious politics," in Aminzade *et al.*, *Silence and Voice*, pp. 14–30.
64 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
65 Jiang Zuoping, Li Shuzhong and Yang Sanjun, "Jianfu zuzhi wajie ji" ("The dissolution of a burden-reduction organization"), *Banyuetan (neibuban)*, No. 4 (2001), pp. 73–74; O'Brien and Li, "The politics of lodging complaints," p. 769.
66 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
67 Interview, petitioners' representative from Shandong, 2003.
68 Jiang Zuoping *et al.*, "The dissolution," p. 73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(*lingxiu* 领袖) or "organization" (*zuzhi* 组织), to dispel suspicions that they might be fomenting revolution. One protest leader in Hengyang, Hunan, for example, insisted that he had no "organization," only a "troop" (*duiwu* 队伍).[69] In their contention, petitioners' representatives usually make efforts to stay within the law or at least avoid breaching it. They also tend to be deferential to those they approach for redress. Perhaps because they still have confidence in the centre's ability to deliver justice,[70] they often expect to receive protection or even rewards from Beijing.[71] In the words of a protest leader from Shandong: "Some wicked officials have sealed off the centre from reality. If peasants do not lodge complaints, the emperor will never know what is going on. If I tell the emperor, he should thank me and take care of me. Anything otherwise and he would be an 'Edou Liu Chan' (阿斗刘禅)" – referring to an emperor notorious for his lack of wisdom.[72]

At this stage, protest leaders often consider themselves to be heroic defenders of more timid and "helpless" (*pinku* 贫苦) villagers, who in their words are of "lower quality" (*suzhi jiaodi* 素质较低) or have "low political consciousness" (*zhengzhi juewu di* 政治觉悟低).[73] They may solicit donations in the community and seek co-signers for their petitions, but they do not actively mobilize others to make visits to higher levels. They claim to represent other villagers but do not seek their endorsement, on the grounds that most people would be too afraid to express support publicly.[74] Instead, they typically base their claim to stand for others on what they do and how other villagers receive them. Explaining why he deserved to be called a petitioners' representative, one protest leader from Hunan argued that although the complaint he presented to the city government did not have many signatures, he represented many other villagers, because he had discussed the letter with them and they did not sign it only because they feared repercussions. Moreover, the villagers he met afterwards were very respectful towards him.[75]

By stressing that they are merely representatives, petitioners' representatives convey three messages. First, they embody other villagers but do not lead them. They are simply reflecting the "opinions of the masses," not mobilizing or shaping public opinion. Second, they are not rabble-rousers but only humble petitioners. They may challenge what local officials do, but typically avoid

69 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
70 Lianjiang Li, "Political trust in rural China," *Modern China*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004), pp. 228–58; but cf. Ethan Michelson, "Social resources and petitioning the state in rural China," unpublished paper, 2 March 2006. On declining faith in the centre, see also O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, ch. 4.
71 One protest leader in Hengyang expected to receive an official commendation for his efforts. Another said he was qualified to be a provincial governor. A third believed he could be a good county head. Interviews, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003; petitioner from Henan, 2005; petitioners' representative from Shandong, 2003.
72 Interview, petitioners' representative from Shandong, 2003.
73 Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
74 On the reluctance of bystanders to take action owing to fear of village cadres and their allies in the township government, see Xiaolin Guo , "Land expropriation," p. 433.
75 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confronting them directly. Their aim is to sound fire alarms to higher levels so that problems can be addressed before it is too late, but they do not attempt to put out fires by themselves. Lastly, because they work for the benefit of the community rather than themselves, they are not private citizens but stand at the head of a group of constituents. At this juncture, protest leaders usually have more confidence in higher authorities and in themselves than in the people they represent.

And sometimes this persistence and faith in higher levels pays off. Unlawful fees are revoked, illegal land grabs are reversed and corrupt cadres are dismissed. But more often than not, despite their "reasonable claims" (*heli yaoqiu* 合理要求), petitioners' representatives meet with repression.[76] Public security officers raid their homes and confiscate valuables such as furniture, television sets and even coffins. Sometimes local cadres go so far as to tear down the houses of protest leaders, partially or completely. Rural officials may beat protest leaders and their family members, illegally detain them, or have them sentenced to labour education or jail on charges such as "resisting taxes," "disturbing social order," "beating up cadres," "attacking the government," "impeding government work," "interfering with law enforcement" or "illegally instigating a disturbance."[77] Cadres in some places have used periodic strike-hard anti-crime campaigns to imprison petitioners' representatives in the name of maintaining stability and safeguarding law and order.[78] In late 1998 and early 1999, for instance, the Hengyang county government rounded up dozens of petitioners' representatives, many of whom were beaten, paraded through the streets as criminals and put up on temporary stages to be reprimanded at "ten-thousand person struggle meetings" (*wanren pidou dahui* 万人批斗大会).[79]

Repression of course often works.[80] One effective way to end an incident, at least in the short term, is to jail a protest leader. This takes "troublemakers" (*naoshi fenzi* 闹事分子) off the streets and can demoralize followers. In Hebei, one leader vowed never to petition again because he and his co-complainants were detained for two weeks by the county police after a fruitless visit to Beijing. In his words: "the Communist Party is corrupt. Lodging complaints is useless.

76 Individual petitions are, of course, most often ignored. That is much more difficult to do for collective complaints that have five or more signatures. Sometimes rural officials also try to buy off protest leaders by offering them a village position or a financial inducement. In Hubei, one villager organized a collective petition demanding lower taxes and fees. But he abandoned his efforts immediately after the township offered to lease him a fishpond at a below-market price. Interview, rural researcher in Wuhan, Hubei, 2006. See also Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, p. 150.

77 Xiang Jidong, "About 'constitutional concerns'," p. 222; Zhang Cuiling, "How to deal with peasants," p. 8; Guo Yukuan, "Taishi cun: yichang meiyou shengli zhe de duikang" ("Taishi village: a confrontation without winners"), *Gaige neican* (*Inside Information on Reform*), No. 33 (2005), p. 28; Yu Jianrong, *Politics in Yue Village*, pp. 555–56.

78 Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003; rural researcher in Hunan, 2004.

79 Anonymous, "Wushi renquan jingyong jizuo fangshi bangjiao duixiang bei kunbang guapai" ("Without regard for human rights, people who should be educated were bound up and publicly exposed in extreme leftist fashion"), *Hengyang ribao* (*Hengyang Daily*), 18 October 1999, p. 3. Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

80 On this more generally, see Earl, "Repression and social control," p. 134.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It's not only a waste of time, energy, and money, it's also subject to repression."[81] Imprisonment of a protest leader also tests community support for further action. In Xupu county (溆浦县), Hunan, an elderly petitioners' representative had become such a "nail in the eye and thorn in the flesh" for township officials that they concluded "the government will collapse if we don't beat him down."[82] At the township's insistence, the man was sentenced to seven years in prison. Though angered by his incarceration, his followers ceased lodging complaints because they saw no hope of success. According to one of them: "If such an outrageously incorrect verdict can't be overturned under the rule of the Communist Party, who can believe that we petitioners will ever get a fair hearing?"[83]

Varieties of repression short of imprisonment (such as intimidation, fines, beating, property seizure, public humiliation) may also damp down protest, particularly when they appear to be (or are) condoned by higher authorities.[84] Repression also tends to be more effective on younger people, who may give up a seemingly hopeless battle and move to cities to become migrant workers.[85] Repression, finally, can demoralize protest leaders sufficiently that they accept much less than they had hoped for. In Yiyang county (宜阳县), Henan, a man was left disabled after a beating by township officials. Everyone expected him to keep fighting now that he had little left to lose. To the dismay of fellow petitioners' representatives, he accepted an offer of 25,000 yuan (US$3,000) compensation and dropped out of any further collective action.[86]

Effective as it often is, repression can also backfire.[87] As it does elsewhere, "repression can sometimes turn the tables on a government, exposing its brutality and undermining its legitimacy while generating public sympathy for protestors."[88] In rural China, instead of deactivating them, repression at times transforms occasional and opportunistic petitioners' representatives into dedicated and committed protest leaders. It, in other words, can steel a protest

81 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hebei, 1999.
82 Xiang Jidong, "About 'constitutional concerns'," p. 222; Interview, rural researcher in Hunan, 2004.
83 Interview, rural researcher in Hunan, 2004. On undermining a collective lawsuit by suppressing a small group of informal leaders, see Yuen Yuen Tang, "When peasants sue," p. 47.
84 In Hebei, a township Party secretary ordered the police to "hang" (*diao qilai*) a petitioners' representative on a telephone pole, facing the sun, with his hands held high. Anticipating that the legality of this punishment would be challenged, the secretary claimed that the county had advised him to be firm in dealing with trouble makers. In a further attempt to pre-empt a legal challenge, he also threatened to sue the petitioner for tampering with the village's electricity transformer. The man then gave up his petitioning. Interview, township Party secretary, Hebei, 1994.
85 A number of protest leaders in Hengyang who were under 35 years old simply left the countryside after a multi-village, collective complaint in 1996 failed to produce relief. Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
86 Interviews, rural researcher in Henan, 2004; petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
87 In China, see Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation without Representation*, p. 149; Yuen Yuen Tang, "When peasants sue," p. 48. On repression backfiring elsewhere, see Jack A. Goldstone and Charles Tilly, "Threats (and opportunities): popular action and state response in the dynamics of contentious action," in Aminzade *et al.*, *Silence and Voice*, pp. 80–81; David Hess and Brian Martin, "Repression, backfire, and the theory of transformative events," *Mobilization*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2006), pp. 249–67.
88 Nepstad and Bob, "When do leaders matter?" p. 15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leader's resolve, not least by generating new or more intense popular support.[89] Harsh repression by officials who are widely believed to be corrupt or predatory may convince attentive bystanders that protest leaders are truly taking action on their behalf. A villager in Hengyang, for instance, said that he was not paying much attention to the activities of a group of complainants until he saw thugs hired by the township beat up a protest leader's wife. That the activists had borne such a cost persuaded him that they must be doing a "favour" (*hao shi* 好事) for villagers like himself, so they deserved his backing. He soon joined up and became a petitioners' representative himself.[90] With new backers, the main protest organizer was able to continue lodging group complaints and publicizing central policies after six of his 13 initial recruits withdrew.

Even jailing protest leaders may not put as final an end to contention as rural officials might hope. In fact, imprisonment can enhance the prestige, honour and social recognition of people who are willing to "hazard time, liberty and even life against powerful, sometimes ruthless foes."[91] On the day a 73-year-old protest leader from Yibin county (宜宾县), Sichuan, was due to be released after three years in jail, nearly 20,000 of his supporters gathered for a welcome-home ceremony. They had raised nearly 8,000 yuan (US$1,000) to buy fireworks for the celebration.[92] In Hunan, one of the men behind the Daolin incident received a hero's welcome when he was released from prison in 2004, with villagers dispatching seven vehicles to pick him up in Changsha (长沙) and setting off fireworks when he and his entourage reached his home town.[93] The boost in prestige that jailing produces can translate into a new episode of popular action, when a protest leader becomes more determined both to persist and to not let his followers down. In Hengyang, Hong Jifa (洪吉发) was jailed for three years for "disrupting social order." His incarceration, however, did not diminish his standing, but instead brought him public acclaim as a "good man" and a "hero" from his comrades and fellow villagers. Immediately after being released, Hong rejoined a group of petitioners' representatives and became a "daring vanguard" (*ji xianfeng* 急先锋) in subsequent protests. This case corroborates an observation made by three Xinhua reporters: "some grassroots cadres think that the reason their localities are unstable is that a tiny number of 'peasant

89 Some protest leaders, of course, overestimate the social support they enjoy. In Hengyang, one long-term protest leader was so confident that he would win a villagers' committee election in 2005 that he did not campaign. But he lost badly. Even the main protest leader in the county failed (by a narrow margin) to win in his village, partly because of the township's efforts to delegitimize his candidacy and partly because he did not start soliciting votes until a few days before the election. Prior to the balloting, both men assumed that they would sail to overwhelming victories. Interview, rural researcher in Beijing, 2006.

90 Interviews, petitioners' representatives, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.

91 On the enhanced status and recognition that Nelson Mandela, Aung Saan Suu Kyi, Vaclav Havel and Daniel Berrigan won as a result of being jailed, see Neptstad and Bob, "When do leaders matter?" pp. 5, 9.

92 Yang Xianhong, "Zhuanfang Liu Beixing: jianzheng Sichuan nongmin lingxiu nao geming" ("An interview with Liu Beixing: witnessing a peasant leader in Sichuan fomenting a revolution"), http://www7.chinesenewsnet.com/gb/MainNews/SinoNews/Mainland/2006_7_20_19_43_40_62.html. accessed 21 July 2006.

93 Interview, rural researcher in Hunan, 2004; also Wu Zhang, "Peasant power," pp. 29–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

heroes' (*nongmin yingxiong* 农民英雄) are 'up to no good' (*gao gui* 搞鬼). So they believe that stability will be restored if only those individuals are arrested and jailed. But the outcome is often just the opposite of what they wish.''[94]

Other than enhancing social standing, repression may generate two other types of popular support. First, it can increase a protest leader's credibility, thereby making it easier to raise funds.[95] Repression suggests to some onlookers that protest leaders are public-spirited or even altruistic, that donations will not be pocketed, and that a small contribution may help them hang on long enough to obtain intercession from above. Second, repression can prompt community members to offer protection to their champions. This can involve offering them meals and places to hide, tipping them off when the police are nearby, or serving as lookouts.[96] In many places, particularly Hunan, Sichuan, Jiangxi, Anhui and Hebei, large numbers of villagers have clashed with local officials and police while trying to defend protest leaders or rescue them after they were detained.[97] Rural people in parts of Hunan, Henan, Fujian and Shandong have also volunteered to serve as bodyguards for protest leaders.[98] One protest leader from Shandong quite proudly said that he always had several unpaid bodyguards accompanying him when he went to the township or county to lodge complaints.[99]

With support, the likelihood of success may seem high enough for a protest leader to continue pursuing a claim. Retreat can also become difficult because social recognition nearly always comes packaged with high expectations. Once they begin, protest leaders often find it hard to retreat, partly out of fear they will be considered half-hearted cowards by their supporters and partly because they may be mocked by other protest leaders as shameless ''traitors'' (*pantu* 叛徒) to their own cause.[100]

Repression also generates yet another compelling motive not to give up. By inflicting humiliation, property damage, injuries or other losses on protest leaders, repression can increase the costs of withdrawal by adding a new grievance to the list – why was I repressed and how will I be compensated for my losses? This new reason for discontent is often even more deeply felt than the grievance (public or private) that originally precipitated action. In the words of a protest leader in a Hebei village, who refused to stop petitioning after he was

94 Duan *et al.*, '''Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?'' p. 12. For more on what he calls ''peasant champions,'' see Ian Johnson, *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), ch. 1.
95 Duan *et al.*, '''Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?'' p. 9.
96 *Ibid.* p. 12; Li and Xiao, ''From a 'burden-reduction hero','' p. 42; Liu *et al.*, ''Rural stability,'' p. 10.
97 Liu *et al.*, ''Rural stability,'' pp. 10–11; Duan *et al.*, '''Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?'' p. 11; Yu Jianrong, *Politics in Yue Village*, pp. 568–69; Yu Jianrong, ''Nongmin you zuzhi kangzheng jiqi zhengzhi fengxian'' (''Organized peasant resistance and its political risks''), *Zhanlue yu guanli* (*Strategy and Management*), No. 3 (2003), p. 2; Jiang and Yang, ''Subpoenaing four 'leaders','' pp. 15–16.
98 Duan *et al.*, '''Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?'' pp. 9–10.
99 Interview, petitioners' representative from Shandong, Guangzhou, 2004.
100 Interviews, petitioners' representative from Hengyang, Hunan, 2003; petitioners' representative from Shandong, 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beaten by some thugs hired by the township: "You either don't start it or you pursue it to the end. If I quit now, I have suffered a serious beating for nothing."[101] Some protest leaders conclude that they have lost so much that they have little left to lose. One man in Hengyang admitted that petitioning was a sure road to bankruptcy, but he refused to give up because he had already used up all his savings, was deep in debt and his house had been damaged by township officials. He was not sure what might await him if he continued to lead group petitions, but he felt he had no other choice but to persist.[102]

Besides cementing a person's determination to continue petitioning, repression may also lead to radicalization and make a protest leader more prone to adopt tactics that entail popular mobilization and open confrontation. In Hengyang, one long-term protest leader admitted that he broke into tears after learning of a county-wide crackdown that came to be known as the Zhajiang incident (渣江事件). He said that he had never believed that the authorities could be so "cruel" (*canren* 残忍) as to break the arm of a 70-year-old protester and nearly beat him to death; neither had he thought the masses would be so "defiant" (*bu fu* 不服) as to throw stones at (and drive away) officials during a mass meeting to denounce protest leaders. According to him, this crackdown was a turning point, after which he and his associates relied more and more on publicizing policies and directly confronting tax-collectors, because it was obvious that "petitioning by itself was useless."[103] According to three Xinhua reporters, other protest organizers have been similarly radicalized. Based on an investigation of six Hunan counties, they concluded that "many 'peasant leaders' are even willing to go down together with rural officials, if that's the only choice."[104]

When repression continues or intensifies, protest leaders may become completely disillusioned with the regime and begin to act like movement entrepreneurs.[105] Wanted by the police or fearing further retaliation, some activists from rural Henan and Hunan have gone into hiding or departed for urban areas. They work only to scratch out a living and spend much of their time seeking foreign media attention or the support of reform-minded NGOs inside and outside China.[106] Some protest leaders have even edged towards becoming revolutionaries. In Hunan, for instance, Huang Guoqing (黄国卿) reportedly said "kings, lords and generals are not determined by birth," quoting Chen Sheng, one of the leaders of the rebellion that brought down the Qin Dynasty.[107] Zhou Decai, another well-known protest leader and essayist from

101 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hebei, 1994; also Wu Zhang, "Peasant power," p. 28.
102 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
103 Interview, petitioners' representative, Hengyang, Hunan, 2003.
104 Duan *et al.*, "'Heroes' or 'shrewd, unyielding people'?" p. 12.
105 For more analysis, see Lianjiang Li, "Political trust and petitioning in the Chinese countryside," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2008).
106 Interviews, rural researchers in Beijing, 2004.
107 *Ibid*. The quotation may sound innocent, but it implies that Huang favours dynastic change and the overthrow of Communist rule. The logic is that since "kings" are not determined by birth, everyone can be a king.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Henan, vowed in 2002 to launch a democratic revolution to end one-party rule.[108]

## Conclusion

Protest leaders in rural China perform a number of tasks. Among others, they lead the charge, shape collective claims, recruit activists and mobilize the public, devise and orchestrate acts of contention, and organize cross-community struggles. They emerge through several channels. Long-term public figures initiate popular action on their own or in response to requests from other villagers; ordinary villagers evolve into protest leaders after efforts to seek redress (largely for personal grievances) fail. The making of protest leaders is a joint product of self-selection, public acclaim (and pressure), and heavy-handed attempts to suppress dissent, which sometimes backfire.

Rural officials may attempt to co-opt or buy off protest leaders, but more often they turn to repression. Although cracking down can inhibit further contention, at other times it increases the determination of organizers and makes them more likely to adopt confrontational tactics, partly because it enhances their popular support and partly because it increases the costs of withdrawal. Detaining or jailing a protest leader may put an end to contention or inspire more spirited defiance. Public humiliation, threats, fines, beatings and property destruction likewise have uncertain consequences. Why do some instances of repression demobilize protest leaders and their followers while others fire them up? The earliest political opportunity theorists suggested that repression normally works. Others, more recently, have pointed out that repression can backfire, or that the relationship between it and a new round of popular action is complex and conditional.

In rural China, whether repression backfires appears to depend on three factors. In general, if it is authorized by township or county leaders, who do not have much popular trust,[109] it is more apt to backfire than if it is authorized by higher levels. The effect of repression also depends on the amount of social capital a protest leader possesses. Crackdowns are less likely to meet popular outrage if a protest leader has alienated community members by, for example, collecting compulsory "donations" or refusing to pay for restaurant meals. Lastly, repression is much more likely to backfire when a protest leader can somehow attract the attention of higher levels or sympathetic journalists, lawyers and public intellectuals.

Protest leaders are admittedly only a small fraction of the rural population, but their prominence of late is an indicator of wider discontent. The appearance

108 Zhou Decai, "Zhi zhongyang bangongting, guowuyuan bangongting, rendaihui bangongting bing Jiang Zemin zongshuji, Zhu Rongji zongli, Li Peng weiyuanzhang" ("A letter to the general offices of the Central Party Committee, the State Council, and the National People's Congress and to General Secretary Jiang Zemin, Premier Zhu Rongji, and Chairman Li Peng"), mimeograph, 2002.

109 See Li, "Political trust in rural China."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of "peasant leaders," "peasant heroes" and "rights defenders" in many places was only possible because aggrieved villagers sought them out or enthusiastically followed them once they took up a cause. Moreover, protest leaders would find it difficult to persist and organize new episodes of contention in the face of repression without support in the community. That rural people often hold in high esteem those whom officials wish to see isolated and ostracized is perhaps the main reason why the authorities find the presence of protest leaders in the countryside so alarming. So far the government has relied primarily on repression (combined with moderate concessions) to silence protest leaders. But repression has costs, too. It undoubtedly discourages people from organizing protests, but also rewards the adventurous few with considerable moral authority and community influence.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000015 Published online by Cambridge University Press