

Large-Scale Mass Incidents and Government Responses in China⁺

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Abstract

Most large-scale mass incidents revolved around economic or social grievances which are generated by the rapid socioeconomic transformation and the poor quality of local governance. With the passing of the economic distresses over time, occurrences of large-scale mass incidents are on the decline. The more dangerous trend is the increasing social disturbances and riots triggered by minor incidents which later snowballed to uncontrollable scale. The participants usually have no direct interests involved in the incident, but take the chance to vent out their anger against the authorities. Contrary to the view that authoritarian regimes tend to suppress social protests by force, the Chinese government has tolerated most large-scale mass incidents and rarely applied force. Further more, the government has also accommodated close to 30 per cent of the large-scale mass incidents with economic compensation. The Chinese political system is able to learn and make institutional adjustment from its own experiences. While the authorities hardly ever admit to wrong doings or offer any apologies, they certainly correct their mistakes. Failed policies would be revoked or changed due to persistent social protests, such as the abolition of agricultural tax and the increase in retirement pension for SOE retirees. This mechanism of social protests ensures rather than undermines social stability in China.

Keywords: *mass incidents, disturbances, social stability, governance, accountability system*

1. Introduction

Ever since China embarked on the course of socioeconomic transformations in the late 1970s, social protests have accompanied the processes every step of the way just like inseparable shadows. Redistribution of wealth and power inevitably produces winners and losers. The further and deeper

the transformations proceed, the more social protests break out. The types of social protest range from tax riots to land and labour disputes and from environmental protests to ethnic clashes. According to various sources and calculations, the collective protest incidents had increased from 8,700 in 1994, to 90,000 in 2006, and to an unconfirmed number of 127,000 in 2008.¹

To be sure, these social unrests exemplify the pains and challenges associated with China's development. To certain extent, they are normal symptoms for any society that experiences profound social and economic transformation. Yet the prolonged and wide spread social unrests may very well trigger regime transition (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 2000). Because social unrests are believed to be the expression of intense social discontent and barometers for regime stability, the study of social protest in contemporary China has become a rapid-growing industry among social scientists (Perry, 2008).

This growing body of literature includes the discussion of labour protests and pension protests followed the SOE reforms (Chen, 2000; Hurst and O'Brien, 2002; Lee, 2003; Gallagher, 2005; Cai, 2002 and 2005; Su and He, 2010); tax protests and land disputes in rural areas (O'Brien, 1996; Bernstein and Lu, 2002; Ho, 2003; Guo 2001; and Zweig 2003); and environmental protests over serious pollution caused by the reckless developmental frenzy (Jing, 2003; and Tong, 2005). While most of the students of Chinese protest have documented harassment, intimidation, and arrest as the common state responses to social protests (Lee, 2003; Shirk, 2007; Cai, 2008), some scholars have started to examine a more dynamic and accommodating state power (Tanner, 2004 and 2005; Su and He, 2010).

All these scholarships have significantly advanced our understanding of social protests in China. However, as most of the research works were based on case studies or small-scale opinion surveys, the existing literature has left ample space for further inquiries. We remain unable to gauge a big picture of the social protests in China. For example, how widespread exactly are the social protests in China? What is the proportion of each type of the protest on a national scale? Are there any changes over the years with regard to content, strategies, and types, and participants? How do we explain the paradox that the Communist regime continues to be stable despite these social protests?

In order to obtain the big picture that characterizes the cost of China's epochal socioeconomic transformation and to generate data that is as systematic as possible, we have adopted a compromised research strategy. Instead of collecting the information on all social protests in China, we chose to focus on large-scale mass incidents only.² This would greatly reduce the difficulties in collecting a more or less complete data set while at the same time not losing our sight of the big picture. By "large-scale mass incident," according to the Ministry of Public Security, it refers to a mass incident with

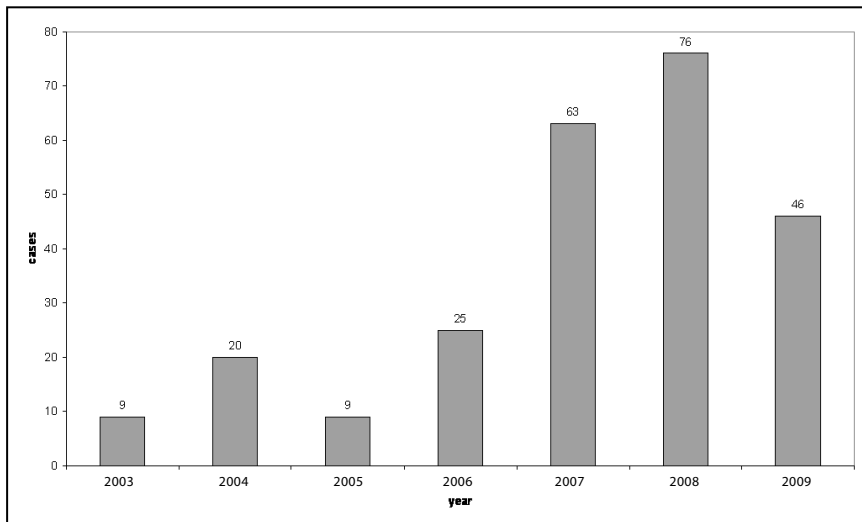
more than 500 participants (Chen, 2004: 32). Usually, mass incident of this scale is hard to be covered up by local authorities. It would appear in the public sphere one way or another through domestic or international news media, personal blogs, or Internet discussion forums. Therefore it is more manageable to collect information on large-scale mass incidents. Moreover, issues or problems that could inspire large-scale mass incidents are more reflective of the acute social tensions in contemporary China and have larger impact on the stability of the system.

The sources of our data are from the following channels: media reports (both Chinese and international), personal blogs from activists, Internet public discussion forums, reports from China Labor bulletin (a Hong Kong-based NGO), and personal field work. For the convenience of analysis, we count the recurring mass incident over a single issue in one location within a year as one incident. The eruption over the same issue in another year will be counted as another case. We will also count the mass incident over a single issue but spread over multiple counties as one incident.

2. An Overview of Large-Scale Mass Incidents in China

We have recorded 248 large-scale mass incidents since 2003. Figure 1 shows that there is a huge upsurge of large-scale mass incidents in the years 2007 and 2008, jumping from 25 cases in 2006 to 63 in 2007 and 76 in 2008. Then there is a downturn in 2009.

Figure 1 Large-Scale Mass Incidents by Year, 2003-2009



Source: Authors' database.

Table 1 Frequencies of Large-Scale Mass Incidents by Province, 2003-2009

Anhui 安徽	8	Heilongjiang 黑龙江	5	Shaanxi 陕西	11
Beijing 北京	7	Henan 河南	8	Shandong 山东	13
Chongqing 重庆	9	Hubei 湖北	17	Shanghai 上海	3
Fujian 福建	3	Hunan 湖南	15	Shanxi 山西	5
Gansu 甘肃	7	Jiangsu 江苏	8	Sichuan 四川	13
Guangdong 广东	54	Jiangxi 江西	8	Tianjin 天津	2
Guangxi 广西	6	Jilin 吉林	1	Tibet 西藏	1
Guizhou 贵州	3	Liaoning 辽宁	3	Xinjiang 新疆	4
Hainan 海南	8	Neimenggu 内蒙古	2	Yunnan 云南	10
Hebei 河北	6	Qinghai 青海	1	Zhejiang 浙江	7

Source: Authors' database.

Table 1 presents the distribution of large-scale mass incidents by province. Guangdong has the most incidents with 54, three times that of the next province in line, Hubei, which has 17 cases. With its physical proximity to Hong Kong, Guangdong naturally has large foreign investment and consequently the most number of labour disputes in the country. Similarly, as an industrializing region, the land requisition issue has generated a lot of land disputes in the province. In contrast, Jiangsu Province, which is at comparable level of socioeconomic development, has much less large-scale mass incidents.

3. Category of Large-scale Mass Incidents

Surging mass incidents are the product of mounting social discontent and rising tensions between citizens and the authorities. Major types of mass incidents include labour disputes, land and relocation disputes, disturbances, pollution disputes, ethnic conflicts, etc. (Table 2).

3.1. Labour Disputes

Labour disputes are the most frequent protests, constituting 45 per cent of the total large-scale mass incidents. They could be subdivided further according to their origination: SOEs and non-state sectors. Generally, the first subcategory of labour disputes is generated by the structural change of the SOEs (*guoqi gaizhi* 国企改革), reflecting the uneasy transitions of the SOEs and their social costs.

The structural reform primarily includes introducing private shareholders into the SOEs, selling SOEs to private companies, and buying out the position

Table 2 Large-Scale Mass Incidents by Type

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total
Labour								
SOE	6	9		5	24	12	8	64
Non-State		2	1	1	8	28	4	44
Land	1	2	3	4	8	6	2	26
Disturbance/Riot		1	1	5	5	13	14	39
Pollution			1		3	3	5	12
Ethnic		1			1	2	2	6
Student	1		1	2	2		1	7
Taxation		2						2
Relocation	1	1				1	1	4
Veteran			1		2	1	1	5
Corruption		1		3	1		1	6
Family planning					2			2
Peasant vs. Co.				2	2	2	2	8
Other		1	1	3	5	8	5	23

Source: Authors' database.

of unnecessary employees. These measures affected the welfare and benefit of the SOE workers. Many were bought out at a low price and lost medical care and pension. Some were even unable to collect the buy-out money in full. The losers in the structural change therefore mounted protests, demanding their due benefits. Because of the scale of the SOEs, the number of protesters is often in the thousands. This type of labour protests peaked in 2007 and progressively declined thereafter.

One tragic case of this kind of mass incident occurred in Tonghua Iron and Steel Company (Tonggang) in Jilin Province. Tonggang was a state-owned enterprise before the Provincial government decided to let a private company become the majority shareholder in 2009. After taking control of Tonggang, the private company made several major changes, including the appointment of a new general manager. Rumors were circulating that there would be large-scale lay-offs. The workers were unhappy about the privatization and preferred to keep the SOE status. They started to riot after the news broke out, with participants close to ten thousands. The newly appointed general manager from the private company was beaten to death by the workers on the first day of his appointment. The government was forced to cancel the deal with the private company.

Labour disputes that occurred in non-state sector are different in nature. With loose government regulations and the absence of labour unions, workers in private enterprises usually enjoy few benefits and suffer worse working conditions than SOE employees. In most disputes, workers are requesting better working conditions or wage increase. The majority of such cases took place in Guangdong where most of the enterprises are foreign-owned or joint ventures.

An interesting case is that of two toy factories in Zhangmutou 樟木头 Township of Dongguan 东莞 County, Guangdong Province. The two factories declared closure in October 2008. Workers had not received wages for about 2 months and the managers were nowhere to be found at the time of closure. All together, the two factories owed workers back wages in the amount of 24 million RMB. In desperation, 7,000 employees protested in front of the township government. The township government, originally hoping to mediate the dispute, failed to reach the general manager. In the end the government paid the workers out of its own pocket (of course with the expectation to be repaid later by the closing enterprises).

Large-scale mass incidents in this category topped all other protests in 2008. Surprisingly, contrary to the anticipation of more labour unrests due to the slow-down of export demand, the occurrence of labour protests in non-state sectors (export-oriented) dropped dramatically, from 28 in 2008 to 4 in 2009.

3.2. Land and Relocation Disputes

Because of high economic growth, land requisition of industrial or commercial uses has expanded rapidly. Land requisition and subsequent relocation are some of the main causes of large-scale mass incidents. The disputed issue was mostly on the compensation for the requisited land, which was often considered unfair by the affected population.

A well known case of land dispute occurred in Hanyuan 汉源 County of Sichuan Province. Local villagers were forced to surrender their land and relocate to other places to make way for the building of a hydroelectric plant. Many relocated farmers did not receive proper compensation and the newly allocated land was of lower quality. A mass incident involving more than several tens of thousands of people broke out eventually in October 2004. The angry peasants started to attack the electricity plant and government buildings and also detained the governor of Sichuan Province, who went to the scene in an attempt to reconcile the dispute, for more than 10 hours. The conflict resulted in several deaths and many injuries. The event startled the central government and an investigation group was dispatched. The investigation group announced that the electricity plant would be temporarily closed until the relocation disputes are settled.

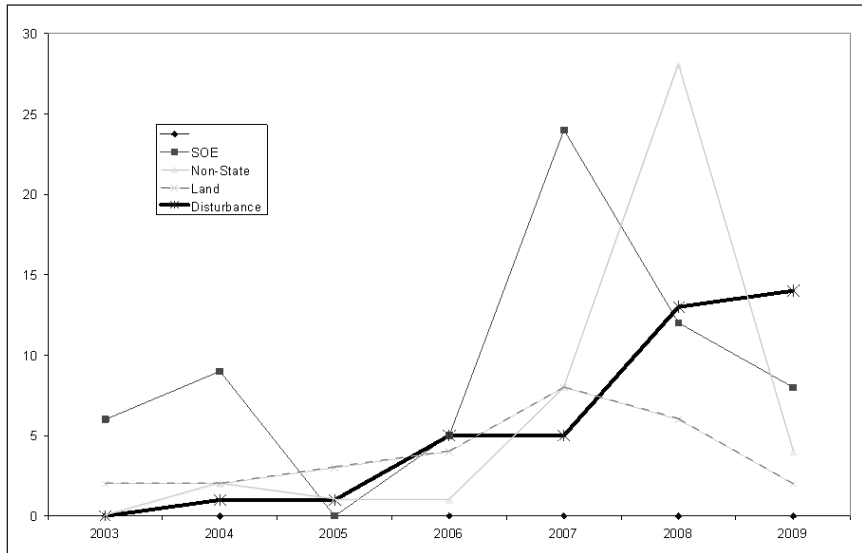
Another case is the large-scale mass incident in Dongzhou 东洲 village, Shanwei 汕尾 County of Guangdong Province. The electricity plant built in 2002 occupied a large land area in Dongzhou village. The villagers believed that they were not properly compensated and protested. They built sheds outside the factory and attempted to stop the construction. The arrest of three villagers during the effort to demolish the sheds escalated the protest and the rank of protestors soared to several thousands. Armed police was dispatched. Tear gas was used to dispel the crowd and the riot became violent in December 2006. There were explosions and the major part of the plant was blown away. In the end the armed police opened fire, leading to several deaths and injuries. This is the first time since 1989 that the government opened fire during a citizen-government confrontation. Since then, violent protests have recurred many times. The dispute has not been resolved so far.

Overall, land and relocation disputes erupted at a lower rate than labour disputes, and also demonstrated a descending trend in 2009.

3.3. Disturbances and Riots

The occurrence of all major types of large-scale mass incidents declined in 2009 except for disturbances and riots (Figure 2). Compared to mass incidents triggered by specific economic grievances, the increase of social disturbances

Figure 2 Frequencies of Major Large-Scale Mass Incidents by Year



Source: Authors' database.

and riots that are not economic interest oriented is alarming. By disturbance we refer to mass incidents that have the majority of their participants not having a particular demand or direct interest, but simply wanting to disturb the public order. A riot is the more radical form of disturbance in which gathering crowds are committing acts of violence. As Figure 2 indicated, disturbances/riots became the most frequent large-scale mass incidents in 2009, surpassing both labour and land disputes. These disturbances were often triggered by minor incidents but rapidly became confrontational between citizens and government.

One such case is the Weng'an 瓮安 incident in Guizhou Province. On June 22nd, 2008, a teenage girl was drowned in a river while she was hanging around with three other teenagers. The girl was from a poor peasant family and her parents refused to accept the police conclusion that their daughter committed suicide for no apparent reasons. Several biopsies were performed by different agencies and conclusion remained that the girl was drowned. Then a rumor started to circulate that she was raped. This soon turned into a riot with tens of thousands involved. The participants believed that the government was trying to cover up the rape case for the probable reason that some government officials were involved in the rape. The burning and looting lasted for about 7 hours; county government headquarters were destroyed and police station was smashed. About 150 people were injured during the incident. The incident caught the attention of General Secretary Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 who made several instructions for the resolution of the riot. The Minister of Public Security, Meng Jianzhu 孟建柱, led the entire operation to quell the riot by phone.

Another case is the Shishou 石首 incident in Hubei Province. On June 17th, 2009, a worker was found dead in front of the hotel where he had been working. The police determined that it was a case of suicide. Yet the relatives and the public were not convinced. They blocked police effort to remove the dead body, which led to a large scale riot. Rumors about more bodies being found in the hotel were rife, fanning the imagination of the crowd. The incident lasted for more than 80 hours with several tens of thousands of participants. The hotel was burned down and police vehicles were destroyed. It is the social disturbance with the most participants since 1989.

3.4. Ethnic Conflicts

There were only six large-scale ethnic conflicts in this period (2003-2009). However, once erupted, ethnic conflict is often characterized by violence, expanding quickly to attract huge crowds. There are mainly two types of ethnic conflict. One is a random type which is often ignited by a minor incident that turned into large-scale disturbance. Because of the rigidity of

ethnic identities, it is easier to generate the “us” vs. “them” sentiment among different ethnic groups. It is similar to a disturbance of public venting along ethnic lines. In one case, an accident in which a taxi driver of Hui ethnicity hit a girl of Han ethnicity in Henan Province later led to large-scale violent fighting between the two ethnic groups.

The other type of ethnic conflict is much more comprehensive, organized, and involves political agendas. The incidents in Lhasa in March 2008 and in Urumqi in July 2009 belonged to this category. Both had international background and explicit or implicit separatist agendas.

A random Uyghur-Han conflict that occurred on 26th June 2009 in Shaoguan 韶关 County of Guangdong served as a pretext for the eruption of the 5th July Urumqi Incident. In the beginning, there was a rumor that one of the Uyghur workers raped a girl of Han ethnicity in a toy factory. Then massive fighting between the Han and Uyghur workers broke out. Two Uyghur workers were killed and 120 (Uyghur 81, Han 39) injured.

The authorities were blamed for failing to handle the Shaoguan Incident in a fair manner; the Uyghurs in Urumqi of Xinjiang Autonomous Region launched a large scale protest in July 2009. The organizers never intended it to be a peaceful protest and turned the city into a killing and burning field. According to the official report, 197 people were killed in the riot. Among them, 156 were innocent citizens (Han 134, Hui 11, Uyghur 10, and Man 1). It was believed that the World Uyghur Association, a strong advocator of Xinjiang Independence, was the behind-the-scene organizer.

Ethnic conflicts are usually not caused by economic grievances, as economic cleavages cross-cut ethnic lines. Ethnic differences are the most difficult to reconcile and are therefore the most persistent cause of social frictions and the most effective means in political mobilization.

3.5. Protests from the Middle Class

Most of the mass incidents were launched by disadvantaged social groups, such as laid-off workers and peasants. They were fighting for their right to subsistence. Yet there were a couple of large-scale mass incidents that was mainly participated by the new middle class in the cities. Two were related to environmental protection (anti-maglev protest in Shanghai and anti-PX plant protests in Xiamen 厦门) and the other was the anti-dog killing gathering in Beijing.

The protest in Xiamen was against the building of a para-xylene chemical plant near Xiamen city. A chemistry professor at Xiamen University warned that the chemical might cause cancer among nearby residents. On 1st June 2007, citizens of Xiamen launched a “walking” protest against the project, eventually forcing the government to relocate the project.

The protest in Shanghai was against the building of a magnetically levitated train between Shanghai and Hangzhou 杭州. The reason for the protest was the anticipated radiation effect from the magnet. On 12th January 2008, protesters in Shanghai took the form of strolling to voice their concerns. As the maglev is a huge developmental project and the Shanghai government has already committed to it, the protest did not achieve its goal. But the incident had delivered a message to the authority that more scientific research and public hearing are needed for any such big project.

The protest in Beijing was against the killing of dogs that were homeless or exceeded the officially prescribed height and weight. Thousands of participants gathered in front of the Beijing Zoo on 11th November 2006 with the “Protect the animals” slogan. The anti-dog killing protest successfully forced the termination of the dog killing campaign in Beijing.

These protests reflect certain post-modern values of citizens. Environmental awareness usually emerges when a society has reached a high stage of economic development. The new middle class is the beneficiaries of the economic boom in China. Therefore their concerns are primarily about the quality of life. Unlike the protests against pollutions that directly threatened the survival of affected population, the protests in Shanghai and Xiamen are against the potential future threat, reflecting the educational and knowledge level of the urban middle class. These types of protests are rare, but have demonstrated the different features of mass incidents in China. All three mass incidents were peaceful in style. Thousands of people were mainly mobilized by cell phone or Internet messages.

3.6. *Disappearing Types*

Certain types of mass incidents that were popular in the past had disappeared in recent years. Mass incidents against excessive taxation in rural areas were frequent in the 1990s. The most typical case was the mass protest in Renshou 仁寿 County of Sichuan Province in 1993.

There were only two such instances in 2004. Both instances were against excessive taxation and spread to multiple counties with more than 100,000 participants. For example, in Henan Province, Anyang 安阳, Puyang 濮阳, Hebi 鹤壁, and Kaifeng 开封 counties, nearly 200,000 peasants had continuously demonstrated, gathered, and occasionally occupied the office buildings of several township governments. They made large banners with slogans like “resist taxation, resist exploitation, and resist land requisition”. In Jiangxi Province, Yichun 宜春, Xinyu 新余, and Jian 吉安 counties also had large scale peasant mass incidents. Mass incidents against excessive taxation were usually intense and violent.

The abolition of the agricultural tax, effective on January 1st, 2006, removed the structural cause for such rural protests. The protests against excessive taxation in rural areas have largely disappeared.

4. Origins of Social Protests

The overall upsurge of large-scale mass incidents in recent years is a reflection of increased social tensions in China due to the structural changes of SOEs, the widening income disparities, and the growing rights awareness on the part of the population. It is too early to say whether the drop in the frequencies of large-scale mass incidents in 2009 represents a short- or a long-term trend. If the decline is mainly caused by tighter government control in preparation of the 60th anniversary of the PRC, then it could be a short interval before another outburst. If the drop is primarily due to improved socioeconomic conditions and local governance, then it could signal a long term trend decline.

Our data does not support the view that the economic slowdown in China would trigger more social unrest. It was expected that the brunt of the world economic slowdown would hit China's export sector from September 2008 to the entire year of 2009. Yet from September to December 2008, there were only 7 cases of large-scale mass incidents as a result of factory closures. The protests spread out to various places: 2 in Guangdong, 2 in Jiangsu, and one each in Shanghai, Hunan, and Zhejiang. The overall number of large-scale labour unrests decreased even further in 2009. Altogether there were only 4 large-scale labour protests in non-state sector with three of them related to factory closures in Guangdong. These numbers are far from adequate to substantiate arguments for widespread labour unrest in China due to world economic recession.

Large-scale mass incident over land requisition issues is a major type of social protest. Despite the impression generated by the media that large-scale mass incidents over land disputes were widespread, such incidents occurred much less frequently than labour disputes in reality. This is because land requisition is necessary only in rapid developing areas or places where there are mining discoveries. Furthermore, as the peasants are usually not well organized due to their mode of production, they are unable to organize effective protests even if they are deprived. However, protests over land disputes, if organized, could be fierce.

Most land disputes share a similar pattern. On the surface, the conflict over land requisition was between farmers and companies that use the land. However, because the related industrial projects often times are part of the official development plan, the companies involved in the project had strong government backing. In order to push for their development plan, local governments had an inclination to use force on behalf of the companies. In

the case of Dingzhou 定州, Hebei Province, the city government even quietly allowed the company to hire gangsters to beat up and kill villagers to force the relocation. As a result, land disputes often turned into confrontations between the peasants and the government.

The increasing social disturbances may be a dangerous signal for the central government. Non-economic interest driven mass incidents are not easy to appease. Tens of thousands of participants were just angry, discontent, and took any opportunity to vent out their anger against the authorities. There is a strong “us” versus “them” sentiment in the crowd, which is one of the symptoms of profound social grievances. Just one minor spark could cause the cumulated anger to erupt. This could include those who do not have any direct interest in the incident, those who are influenced by the “square effect” and those who have some sort of psychological identification with the victim.

How did minor incidents cause social disturbances of such magnitude? It may be due to the confluence of several factors. First, social tensions had been brewing for a long time in these locations. For example, because of the discovery of mines in Weng’an region, there were a lot of forced relocations and consequently a lot of disputes over relocation. A large number of relocated migrants, forced out of their residence on unfavourable conditions, had been grumbling and unsettling.

Second, local governments and police force were generally perceived as corrupt and incompetent. The fact that the police force were often dispatched in favour of the capitalists who have close relationship with the government whenever there was a dispute between peasants and the companies reinforced the public perception. There was a profound distrust of the government.

Third, the root cause of the social tension and distrust of the government is poor local governance. For example, several large-scale disturbances were triggered by conflicts between staff members of the city management agency (*chengguan* 城管) and illegal vendors on the street. The cleaning up of the illegal street peddlers was prescribed by official regulations and legit. Yet the public sympathy was with the illegal vendors, as *chengguan* staff is perceived as local bullies because of their rude manners. The government was also awfully ineffective in communicating with the masses in crisis times. For example, during the Shishou Incident, amidst a plethora of rumors, the government statements about the incident were few and vague. This does not help the authority to quiet down the angry population.

5. Government Responses to the Large-scale Mass Incidents

Most observers in the West have primarily focused on the protesters, especially their grievances. Very few have paid attention to how the Chinese government has reacted to these mass incidents. The general assumptions are

that the outbreaks of social protests are caused by socioeconomic illnesses, and a communist authoritarian regime would crush these unrests which would further destabilize the political system.

However, if one looks at the issue of political stability from the perspective of how the government has responded to mass incidents, the conclusion would be different. Socioeconomic protests are rarely system-threatening and the political system in China is capable of making self-adjustment and responding to socioeconomic problems.

The central government will do well to capitalize on the frequency and scale of social protests as an effective performance indicator to keep the local governments on their toes and press for improving governance, reducing corruption, and perfecting crisis management. Beijing could step in as the arbitrator if social protests became uncontrollable to further strengthen its legitimacy.

6. Non-Threatening Mass Incidents

6.1. Political Tradition

A salient feature of Chinese political tradition is, as Mencius emphasized, the responsibility of the government in the provision of people's welfare. Such political culture encourages and empowers protesters to rise up from the bottom of society to challenge government leaders. Claims to a basic subsistence that stay within local confines have seldom been deemed threatening by the Chinese regime. Only when the rulers repeatedly failed to respond to subsistence demands were they doomed.

A well known social protest scholar, Elizabeth Perry at Harvard University, has long argued that social protest in China is one of the major components of social stability. They serve as checks against the abuse of power by the leaders and as mechanisms to ensure the accountability of the government. In an authoritarian polity where elections do not provide an effective check on the misbehavior of state authorities, protests can help to serve that function, thereby undergirding rather than undermining the political system (Perry, 2002 and 2008).

Most of China's 248 large-scale mass incidents were driven by economic grievances, and therefore fit into the above category. These economic grievances were generated either by the misconduct of local officials or the process of socioeconomic transformation when there was a lack of experience in handling these problems or the lack of proper regulations.

These economic protests do not threaten the regime for two reasons. First, if the protest has economic demands, it involves expectations for government action. By asking the government to "enforce justice" (*zuozhu* 做主), the protests themselves provide legitimacy to the regime. In other words, if people

are counting on the government to solve their problems, they are endorsing the authority of the government.

Second, economic demands are most likely to be satisfied when the state has plenty of financial resources. If the state could respond to these demands, it further consolidates its legitimacy.

6.2. The Passing of Economic Distress

As China is in the process of socioeconomic transformation, the causes for certain grievances that have arisen during the process would also disappear as the process evolves. In other words, many forms of grievances are developmental, and they will be solved by further development. For example, the taxation disputes, once a cause for fierce mass movement, have totally vanished from the scene.

Some of the current causes of large-scale mass incidents may be on the passing soon. The most frequent large-scale mass incidents are labour disputes of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). In these cases, the government is directly responsible for the grievances generated by the structural changes. However, structural changes to the SOEs may have passed their most difficult period. In today's China, the SOEs have become the equivalent of the rich with huge surplus in savings. They are able to settle financial disputes with their employees more easily than before. Other social security mechanisms have also matured over time and are likely to reduce large-scale mass incidents.

The second type of labour dispute is in the non-state sector. Labour disputes with foreign or private investors do not directly involve the government. Therefore these kinds of mass incidents do not threaten regime stability. Sometimes, the government has to step in to be the mediator between the workers and the investors. At other times, the government has to even provide financial assistance to calm down the angry workers. This would only further strengthen the legitimacy of the government.

Land disputes are more complicated. Land disputes usually occur between peasants and developers or business companies. However, as developers or business companies are typically backed by the local government, these land disputes often evolved into a confrontation between the peasants and the government. Some of the resistance was fierce. However, land disputes only occur in selected areas. If it is a matter of economic compensation, it is not difficult for the government to put down the resistance.

Ethnic conflicts are caused by different rationales. Yet economic distress such as income disparities has compounded ethnic conflicts. Continued economic prosperity will ease certain ethnic frictions. Moreover, although conflicts of different ethnic identities are hard to reconcile, they are mainly confined to minority areas.

The most system-threatening mass incident is disturbances and riots with no specific economic demands. The outburst of disturbances is often the product of broad and diffused social grievances over a variety of issues ranging from inequality, corruption and social injustice to increasing drug addiction. Disturbance is often triggered by poor local governance, especially the misconduct of *chengguan* or the police. In these cases, social anger, not economic demands, is directed at the authorities. These incidents could be system-threatening because they are challenging rather than endorsing regime legitimacy. Reduction of disturbances requires the improvement of local governance.

7. Types of Government Responses

Contrary to common belief that an authoritarian regime would suppress mass protests, the regime in China has shown a considerable degree of tolerance toward protests by farmers and workers if they remain clearly bounded in both scale and aspirations (Table 2).

The multi-layered administrative structure of the Chinese state has provided a favourable mechanism to mitigate the impacts of large-scale mass incident. The targets of the protests were mainly local authorities, which serve as a cushion for the central government. The central government can not only use these opportunities to check on the misconducts of local officials, but also step in as the arbitrator for justice rather than the blame bearer.

7.1. Tolerance

About 60 per cent of large-scale mass incidents were tolerated (152 out of 248). The government would watch the development of the mass incident closely but refrain from using force. The police sometimes may detain a

Table 2 Government Reactions to Large-Scale Mass Incidents

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total	% of Total
Cases	9	20	9	25	63	76	46	248	
Tolerance	5	8	3	17	46	46	27	152	61%
Accommodation	4	11	3	4	16	24	10	72	29%
Discipline	1	2	4	0	2	5	6	20	8%
Force	0	0	2	4	0	2	2	10	4%

Note: In some cases, the government used more than one method. Therefore the summation of different methods is slightly larger than the total number of cases.

couple of activists but would release them soon after the incident without any charges. Local government officials usually would not be held accountable for these incidents. Yet the protests would not receive much compensation.

For protests that are not particularly targeted at government, such as the labour disputes within foreign ventures, anti-Japanese student demonstrations, or student protests against school administration, the government has typically stayed out of the disputes.

In 2008, the Ministry of Public Security had issued several documents, repeatedly emphasizing that local governments should deploy their police force with caution (*shenyong jingli* 慎用警力). The police have been instructed not to carry weapons and not to fight back if attacked. Sometimes the caution in dispatching police forces has received sharp criticisms. There have been complaints that the armed police was dispatched way too late in the Lhasa and Urumqi incidents which led to unnecessary deaths and injuries.

7.2. Accommodation

The government is also willing to accommodate to the demands raised by the protestors. Accommodation has been the second most frequently used method in large-scale mass incidents (29 per cent). Using money to pacify unrest has become possible only after the central government has accumulated enough financial resources after the taxation reform of 1994. Some rich local governments are also able to do so. But this is not a viable solution in the poor areas.

All five veteran protests were solved with economic compensation. One third of the disputes in SOEs received some kind of economic accommodation (21 out of 64). Sixty per cent of the land disputes ended with monetary compensation (16 out of 26).

Half of the labour disputes in the non-state sector received economic compensation (23 out of 44). Most of the compensation was paid by the enterprises with government supervision. Occasionally, if the enterprise is bankrupt, the government would shoulder the financial burden. One such example is the case in Dongguan County of Guangdong Province. When the Hong Kong investor deserted the factory and disappeared, the township government paid the workers their wages.

7.3. Disciplining Officials

Since protests are mainly targeted at the local government, local officials sometimes are held accountable for either the outburst or mishandling of the incident. The central government would discipline local officials to calm down the social unrest. In 20 out of 248 incidents (8 per cent), local officials were sacked afterwards.

The occurrence of large-scale disturbance and riot is an indicator of poor governance. Without exceptions, local leaders would be disciplined (dismissed) if a large-scale disturbance accelerated into mass riot. Typical cases are Weng'an and Shishou incidents. All major leaders from these counties were removed from their offices.

In general, government officials would be disciplined under any of the following conditions: 1) there is a large number of participants in mass incidents; 2) the participants have assaulted government institutions or transportation hubs; 3) there are deaths and injuries; 4) the incident occurs on the eve of important holidays or event (e.g. National Day, or Olympic Games); and 5) the incident has attracted intense pressure from the public.

7.4. Application of Force

The government has been avoiding the application of force as a solution to mass incidents. The overwhelming majority of the incidents were not forcefully repressed and few activists were arrested. But this does not mean that the government has no teeth. There were cases where the government deployed the police force. From 2003 to 2009, the government has used force in 10 of the 248 large-scale mass incidents (4 per cent).

The preconditions for applying force are 1) police officers are attacked in their efforts to keep order; 2) violent acts such as killing, burning, looting, and smashing; and 3) the political purposes and goals of these incidents. Large-scale ethnic riots were typical cases where force was used.

In general, there are several ways of applying forces: 1) Opening fire on site, such as the case of Dongzhou Village when police was under attack; 2) Arresting those who have participated in killing, looting, burning, and smashing, such as the case in Urumqi; and 3) Investigating criminal liability after the mass incident has quieted down, which often means making delayed arrests (*qiuhou suanzhang* 秋后算账), such as the case in Shishou.

8. Learning Capability of the Political System

The willingness of the central government to respond to some of the protesters' key grievances points more toward political flexibility than toward fragility. Moreover, the Chinese political system is able to learn from its own experiences. The governments have been learning to prevent and deal with mass incidents in a more effective manner.

8.1. Training Programme for Local Officials

After the Weng'an Incident, the central government has organized training programmes for over 3,000 county party secretaries and chiefs of public

security bureaus. The training programme focuses on ways to deal with “emergency incidents” (*tufa shijian* 突发事件). The central theme is to conciliate first and refrain from using force. This may help to explain the reduction in number of large-scale mass incidents in 2009.

Yet, in some places, such as Shishou (where the largest riot occurred one year after the Weng’an Incident), the training programme did not seem to work. Web bloggers commented that officials from Shishou were too dumb to learn and deserved to be sacked.

8.2. *Accountability System*

After the Shishou Incident, on 13th July 2009, the central government enacted an “accountability system” for officials above the county level government, including the central government. It stipulates that if the misconduct of the officials leads to the outburst of mass incident or the officials mishandled the mass incident, they would be held accountable. Depending on the seriousness of the incident, the officials will have to either make public apologies, or resign, or be dismissed.

Similar systems have been implemented at local levels as well. For example, in Jiangxi Province, the standards for the township governance evaluation are, in descending order, 1) zero petition visit to Beijing; 2) zero mass incident; 3) family planning; 4) environmental protection; and 5) solicitation of outside investment. Among them, not only the economic development listed the last, the first two could trump all the others. Other provinces have also set comparable criteria.

This kind of accountability system is different from the system in democracies in which elected officials are accountable to voters. However, as long as the officials are held accountable for their mistakes, the Chinese system is equally effective. It has obviously provided incentives for local officials to annihilate any potential mass incidents as the political careers of the local government leaders are at stake.

8.3. *“Harmony Bonus”*

With these political incentives, local governments have designed various schemes to prevent mass incidents. An interesting example is that of the “harmony bonus” established by the government of Minhang 闵行 District of Shanghai. If a village has no mass incident during land requisition process, in addition to land and relocation compensation, every family will receive a harmony bonus of 8,000 RMB each, to be delivered in installments in two and a half years. Any mass incidents within this period will deprive the entire village of its harmony bonus.

8.4. Improving Governance

As the government is tolerative of most mass incidents, it has been adjusting its policies. The government is well aware that the persistence of protests of a same type indicates serious problems that need to be addressed.

Policy adjustment ranges from issues as big as the abolition of agricultural tax to matters as small as the termination of a dog-killing campaign. Another example is that the consecutive waves of protests by laid-off SOE workers in Northeast China had forced the central government to appropriate huge funds to renovate the shabby houses of laid-off workers to survive the harsh winter season.

In December 2009, the State Council decided to raise the retirement pension of SOE retirees for six consecutive years. This had alleviated the pain caused by the structural changes of the SOEs and would significantly reduce the labour disputes arising therefrom. The housing relocation regulation is also under revision to ease the friction during such a process.

The manner in which the government deals with social protests has improved in some places. A case in point was the taxi drivers strike in Chongqing in 2008; the taxi drivers were complaining about the high rent imposed by taxi companies and the illegal competition from unlicensed taxis. Party Secretary of Chongqing city, Bo Xilai 薄熙来's direct dialogue with the taxi drivers was broadcast live on television. Bo promised to reduce the rent and remove unlicensed taxis from the market. His effort was well received by the public.

Other cities took the cue from Chongqing. The Beijing Municipal Government for the first time has allowed taxi drivers to charge a fuel tax (*ranyou fei* 燃油费) while the Shanghai Municipal Government has also invited the taxi drivers to voice their concerns. The eagerness to wipe out unlicensed taxis led to schemes such as the so-called "fishing."³ In Shanghai, one such fishing effort hooked the wrong guy, and the public security bureau had to make public apologies to the victim.

9. Conclusion

All large-scale mass incidents, except for a couple of ethnic conflicts and student anti-Japanese demonstrations, revolved around economic or social grievances. These grievances were generated by rapid socioeconomic transformation on the one hand, and poor local governance on the other. Most large-scale mass incidents are localized and isolated incidents, except for a number of protests that occurred simultaneously in multiple adjacent counties, such as the teachers' strikes in Sichuan Province, and taxation protests in Henan and Anhui.

Economic grievance driven mass protests will not threaten regime stability. Most of the causes for economic grievances that have arisen during the process of socioeconomic transformation are on the passing soon. Increasing financial capabilities also enable the government to ease the economic pains of the transformation and significantly reduce the occurrence of large-scale mass protests.

The most dangerous trend is the increasing social disturbances and riots triggered by minor incidents which later snowballed to uncontrollable scale. While it seems that the participants had no particular purpose or interest, these incidents reflected profound and broad social grievances that are not easy to address. Social protests in China are one of the major components of social stability. They serve as checks against the abuse of power by the leaders and as mechanisms to ensure the accountability of the government. Large-scale mass incidents driven by economic grievances are likely to decline in the coming years. Most of the causes of economic grievances that have arisen during the process of socioeconomic transformation may be on the passing soon. Increasing financial capabilities also enable the government to ease the economic pains of transformation.

Contrary to the view that the authoritarian regime tends to suppress social protests with force, the government has tolerated most of the large-scale mass incidents and rarely applied force. The government has accommodated close to 30 per cent of the large-scale mass incidents with economic compensation.

The Chinese political system is capable of learning from its own experiences. In order to deal with large-scale mass incidents, the central government has established training programmes for leading officials from local governments. The central government has also established an accountability system holding officials accountable for the outbreak and mishandling of mass incidents. The institutional innovation may be crucial to reducing the occurrence of large-scale mass incident. While the authorities never admit wrong doings or apologize for them, they do correct their mistakes. Failed policies would be revoked or changed due to persistent social protests. This mechanism of social protests ensures rather than undermines social stability in China.

In order to minimize the likelihood of the most destabilizing disturbances and riots, governments at all levels need to design more institutional mechanisms to improve governance, such as reducing corruption, increasing public trust, and better communication with the population. Training programmes could be extended from teaching local leaders on how to cope with emergency incidents to training the entire government staff on the manner of governance. A clean, effective, and civilized government is the key to long-term social stability.

Notes

- ⁺ Some parts of this article have been published in *East Asian Policy*. See Tong Yanqi and Lei Shaohua, "Large-scale Mass Incident in China", *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April/June 2010, pp. 23-33. The entire article will be part of our coming book on social protest in China which will be published by Routledge Press.
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1. The figure for 2008 was an "estimate" reported by Andrew Jacobs, "Dragons, Dancing Ones, Set-off a Riot in China", *New York Times*, 10th February 2009. In another news report, an estimate of 90,000 such incidents annually for 2007, 2008 and 2009 was quoted from a Chinese insider by John Garnaut, "China Insider Sees Revolution Brewing", *Sidney Morning Herald*, 2nd March 2010.
 2. In China, mass protests are usually termed "mass incidents" by official documents. It first appeared in official document in the 1990s, there has not been a complete official definition for the term. Summarizing several similar definitions provided by scholars, we hold in this paper that a mass incident generally refers to any of the following activities that involve more than 10 participants: 1) collective petition visit to upper level government offices and sit-ins; 2) illegal assemblies, parades, and demonstrations; 3) strikes (labour, merchant, student, teacher, etc.); 4) traffic blocking; 5) disturbances; 6) surrounding or attacking party/government buildings; 7) smashing, looting, and burning; and 8) obstructing the performance of government administration.
 3. Referring to plain-clothed police officers who pretended to be customers and tricked private car drivers into taking passengers.

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