

**Discursive Accommodation**  
**Popular Protest and Strategic Elite Communication in**  
**China**

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**Abstract:** The question of how elites respond to, and seek to defuse, popular protest has gained traction in the literature on the functioning and resilience of contemporary authoritarian regimes. To date, however, the role of elite communication in these processes has remained under-appreciated. Thus, scholarship has deprived itself of a readily accessible yardstick for gauging elite behavior, perceived political opportunity, principal-agent dynamics, and regime-evolution. This study develops the concept of discursive accommodation and seeks to demonstrate the utility of a communicative approach to protest response by tracing the development of contention and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's strategic political communication about protest between 1990 and 2010. It reveals that although China's rulers have expressed unwavering hostility to specific forms of regime-challenging mobilization, they have responded to cycles of intense, but largely non-regime-challenging, unrest with increasing sympathy for protesters. Triangulating evidence from China with counterfactuals and comparisons from other authoritarian and democratic contexts, the article argues that the rationale behind this symbolic appeasement of popular pressure has been to prevent a revolutionary movement through two intended effects: first, to persuade aggrieved citizens of the leadership's benevolent intentions and deflect discontent from the regime and, second, to temper local official and protester behavior. And yet, it is illustrated why the unintended outcome of the rulers' discursive accommodation may well have been accelerated mobilization. Hence, the paper provides a new perspective to understand why contention in post-1989 China has become endemic, but remained conspicuously moderate. It also suggests surprising parallels with the process of protest normalization in Western democracies. Moreover, the pattern of elite communication

stands in stark contrast to previous findings on the censorship of citizen discourse on protest in China and, thus, reveals another dimension of the intriguing communicative strategy the Chinese leadership draws upon to keep rising discontent at bay.

How do authoritarian elites respond to, and seek to defuse, popular protest? This critical question has gained traction in the literature on the functioning and resilience of contemporary authoritarian regimes. Complementing substantial attention to the organization of intra-elite conflict and the embrace of electoral competition as well as other ostensibly liberal institutions (e.g., Brancati, 2014; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009), scholars have begun to catalogue the repertoire of practices authoritarian rulers use to respond to contentious popular pressure, and to understand how these reactions affect the development of protest and regime durability (e.g., Bellin, 2012; Boudreau, 2009; Davenport, 2007a; b; Johnston, 2012; Koesel and Bunce, 2013; Lorentzen, 2013b; Robertson, 2009, 2010; Trejo, 2012; Way and Levitsky, 2006). To date, however, this debate has notably under-appreciated the “strategic political communication” (Manheim, 1991, p.8) by the political elite. Although some studies have touched upon aspects of communication, they have focused on smear campaigns and censorship (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Koesel and Bunce, 2013, p.756; Robertson, 2009, 2010). While undoubtedly important, such “negative” responses do not comprise the full range of discursive acts contemporary authoritarian elites deploy. Moreover, the discussion on authoritarian protest response lacks a clear conceptual distinction between discursive and non-discursive elite behavior and does not take into account the substantial insights gained in studies of elite communicative on protest in democracies (e.g., della Porta, 1999; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Shriver, Adams and Cable, 2013).

This is unfortunate as studying elite public “protest discourse” (della Porta, 1999, p.86) can provide at least four sets of valuable insights: first, its public nature implies that this approach is less susceptible to the notorious problem of obtaining reliable data that

studies of repression in authoritarian contexts suffer from. It can provide a useful yardstick on how the rulers' attitudes on protest vary over time, space, and contentious issue. Second, since discursive responses to protest are predominantly the domain of state leaders and other kinds of reactions those of local enforcers (acting in the name of their superiors), focusing exclusively on the latter means that elite behavior receives less attention than it possibly should. The extensive literature on Chinese contentious politics, for instance, is therefore characterized by a substantial lack of attention to the "intentions and actions" of the leadership (Lorentzen, 2013a; see also, Stern and O'Brien, 2012). Third, public communication is the primary resource for citizens to gauge the agenda of political elites and the resulting political opportunity for successful contention. If this is true in democracies (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004), the linkage between elite discourse and perceived opportunity ought to be even more important in authoritarian contexts where leaders' ad-hoc assessments are decisive and protester rights fragile. In China a widely perceived "structural opening" between predatory local officials and a seemingly benevolent central government, a perception based on signals emanating from the center of power, has been found to be crucial for mobilizing aggrieved citizens into action (O'Brien and Li, 2006, p.27; Li, 2008). Hence, it would be very helpful, or even necessary, to closely examine how the ruling elite engages discontented citizens in its public communication in order to: a) ascertain if the perceived opening has expanded over time, and b) generate further insights on the role of elite discourse in the observed pattern of contention. Fourth, apart from citizens, local bureaucrats are the other key audience of elite communication. Authoritarian rulers have been found to use symbolic displays to demonstrate their power to subordinates (Wedeen, 1999; Schoenhals, 1996),

strengthen the organizational cohesion of the ruling apparatus (Schurmann, 1970; Remington, 1988), or shepherd economic policy by local officials (Huang, 2013). Elite communication on protest and protest policing could therefore open a new angle to understand how autocratic principals attempt to steer their agents' use of repression at the local level. In addition, all these points can provide a fresh perspective on the question of how "exactly ... contention itself transform regimes" (Tilly, 2006, p.216).

Hence, this study focuses on the co-evolution of rapidly accelerating contention and the public communication on protest by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership between 1990 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence, it reveals a counter-intuitive pattern of discursive accommodation: a symbolic appeasement of contentious popular pressure by the political elite. Although China's rulers have expressed unwavering hostility to specific forms of regime-challenging mobilization, they have responded to cycles of intense but largely non-regime-challenging unrest with increasing sympathy for protesters. The CCP party center has gradually acknowledged the legitimacy of widespread protest-provoking grievances and blamed local officials for the occurrence of unrest in ever more explicit terms. It has also become much more vocal in emphasizing the non-political nature of most protests and in circumscribing the conditions for legitimate repression. Thus, although the Chinese ruling elite has never directly endorsed contentious tactics, its discourse has effectively rendered livelihood-centered acts of protest against local targets "rightful" (O'Brien and Li, 2006).

Triangulating evidence from China with counterfactuals and comparisons from other authoritarian and democratic regimes, the article argues that the rationale behind this response pattern has been to prevent a revolutionary movement through two intended

effects: first, to persuade the public of the leadership's benevolent intentions and deflect discontent from the regime and, second, to discipline both local officials and protesters. While the paper illuminates that the intended effects may indeed have played out, it also shows why the unintended outcome of intensifying discursive accommodation may well have been accelerated popular mobilization.

This provides a new perspective to understand why contention in post-1989 China has become endemic, but remained conspicuously moderate at the same time. Moreover, quite in contrast to what one would expect in an authoritarian regime, but similar to what has been found in Western democracies (della Porta, 1999), waves of contentious mobilization have spurred increasing sympathy for protesters in elite communication. As a result, popular protest in China has moved closer to the orbit of "normal politics." The revealed pattern of more outspoken elite communication on protest also stands in stark contrast to the finding that China's gargantuan Internet censorship system is primarily geared at thwarting citizen discourse on the very same issue (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). Hence, the difference between elite and tolerated mass expression reveals a new dimension of the intriguing communicative strategy the Chinese leadership draws upon to keep rising discontent at bay.

The following discussion begins with a review of the research on elite protest discourse in Western democracies, and a conceptual clarification on different dimensions and modes of state responses to popular contention. It then reviews scholarship on protest response in authoritarian regimes and China. Subsequent to an introduction of the data and analytical strategy, the empirical section traces the evolution of protest and discursive elite responses in China. This is followed by an extended discussion of the intended and

unintended effects of the leadership's communicative tactics, before the conclusion points to broader implications and new puzzles provoked by this study.

### **Two Dimensions of State and Elite Responses to Popular Protest**

Traditionally, scholarship on state responses to protest focused on street interaction between protesters and the police; the effects and rationales of repression, tolerance, or concessions; and the institutional environment of protest (Davenport, 1995; della Porta and Reiter, 1998; Goldstone and Tilly, 2001; McCarthy and McPhail, 1998). More recently, however, research has turned to a "broader conception of relevant behaviors" (Davenport, 2007a, p.18). Scholars have begun to explore practices described as "soft" (Ferree, 2005; Linden and Klandermans, 2006), "relational" (Deng and O'Brien, 2013), or "covert repression" (Cunningham, Noakes, Deflem and Ulmer, 2008), as well as the discourse on protest by non-movement political elites.

Since such discourse is believed to have a major impact on the political opportunity as it is perceived by activists, della Porta (1999, p.67) has argued that it is a critical "intervening variabl[e] between structure and action." In other words,

regime weaknesses and openings that do not become publicly visible may be considered 'nonopportunities,' which for all practical intents and purposes might as well not exist at all (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004, p.201).

Moreover, Tilly (2006, pp.215, 183) has suggested that the very "naming [of contentious performances] is a consequential political act" in that "influences the reactions of both participants and other political actors as it brings relevant models of action into play."

Relevant empirical studies have provided three main insights: first, elite

communication indeed has a significant impact on contentious mobilization and also affects state repression as well as citizen to citizen violence (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Koopmans, 2005; Shriver, Adams and Cable, 2013). Second, quite possibly for these reasons, politicians in democracies, who face significant constraints regarding the use of repression, sometimes turn to stigmatizing, ridiculing, and vilifying discourse to demobilize challengers, exclude them from the political process, or legitimize coercion (Ferree, 2005; Koopmans, 2005; Linden and Klandermans, 2006; Shriver, Adams and Cable, 2013). Third, over time, however, the increasing normalization of protest in the political process of European and North American democracies between the 1950s and 1980s has been facilitated by elite discourse that became more supportive of protester rights (della Porta, 1999, p.92). Hence, elite discourse turned out not to be an epiphenomenal byproduct of, but an important “input into contentious politics” (Davenport, 2005, p.xxvi).

*[Table 1 about here]*

To clarify how discursive responses to protest are distinct from non-discursive reactions, one can differentiate between discursive and practical-institutional *dimensions*, and accommodating and prohibitive *modes* of response (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> The practical-institutional dimension of response comprises the traditional focus of research on protest policing, repression (including some of the alternative forms of repression mentioned above) as well as the design of the institutional context of protest. It varies between *tolerance* and *repression*. Although institutions are designed by political elites, the

practices of policing protest within these institutions are the domain of local enforcement and allow only indirect inferences on elite behavior and intentions.

The discursive dimension comprises all forms of public communication by state and other political elites on the social practices and institutions of protesting and responding to protest. It ranges from *sympathy*, characterized by statements and labels that justify protesters' grievances, claims, and/or their contentious acts, and de-legitimize repressive measures, to *hostility*, characterized by utterances with the opposite connotation. In the following, this specific kind of "strategic political communication" (Manheim, 1991, p.8) will be understood as "protest discourse" (della Porta, 1999, p.86). In contrast to the practical-institutional response dimension, protest discourse is almost entirely the domain of elite behavior.

### **Protest Response under Contemporary Authoritarianism**

Students of contentious politics in contemporary authoritarian regimes have begun to pay increasing attention to how such states respond to popular contention or try to prevent it. These studies have brought to light a substantial variation in the intensity of repression under different regime sub-types (Davenport, 2007b; a), catalogued and explained variation in protest response strategies (Bellin, 2012; Chang and Vitale, 2013; Hess, 2013; Johnston, 2012; Way and Levitsky, 2006), and investigated the repercussions of response patterns for the development of contention and regime survival (Bellin, 2012; Boudreau, 2009; Escribà-Folch, 2013; Hess and Martin, 2006; Johnston, 2012; Koesel and Bunce, 2013; Trejo, 2012).

Most of this research has revealed response strategies that intend to demobilize or completely preempt the open expression of discontent. Some authoritarian regimes,

however, have moved beyond such a robust prohibitive inclination. Instead of indiscriminate repression that risks turning “even moderate dissenters [into] opponents of the regime” (Tarrow, 1998, pp.84–85), some states have engaged in variants of “governing” or “managing contention” (Robertson, 2010, p.12; Trejo, 2012, p.45). They accept a certain level of protest as unavoidable, or even useful, and proactively seek to “control, manipulate, and channel it” into forms that are less threatening (Robertson, 2010, p.18). These systems rely on selective repression of contention that is dangerous to the regime, display conditional tolerance for less principled and organized forms of protest, or mobilize counter-protests (Kerkvliet, 2011; Rezai, 2012; Robertson, 2010; Trejo, 2012).

Being a high-capacity single party regime with an annual number of so-called “mass incidents” (*qunti xing shijian*) surging from 8,700 to 74,000 between 1993 and 2004 (Cai, 2010, p.30) – and according to unofficial estimates even up to 230,000 by 2009 (Chu, 2010) – China has been at the center of this discussion. Without a doubt, Chinese “central leaders remain deeply wary of popular action” (O’Brien and Li, 2006, p.33). Ethnic-inspired protests and those with openly regime-challenging claims are met with an iron-fisted approach (Koesel and Bunce, 2013). “The threat of state repression” remains substantial for other protesters as well (Chen, 2012, p.138; see also, Cai, 2008; Tanner and Green, 2007). Nonetheless, substantial evidence suggests that Chinese local officials have become more inclined to manage rather than crudely repress. Cadres draw on a mix of repression and tolerance, conditional concessions, soft repression or emotion work, and mobilize just about any governmental department that may assist in defusing unrest (Cai, 2008; Chen, 2012; Deng and O’Brien, 2013; Lee and Zhang, 2013; Schucher, 2009;

Su and He, 2010). Somewhat mirroring the state's conditional tolerance, Chinese protesters tend to be remarkably modest. In a pattern Lorentzen (2013b, p.130) calls "loyalist protest," resisters frequently accuse local state agents of abuses, but focus on rather narrow, livelihood-centered demands, demobilize as soon as their grievances are addressed, and avoid making claims against the regime. By contrast, protesters are often at pains to express their support for the CCP and the central government (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012; Lee, 2007; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Perry, 2007).

Thus, recent research on authoritarian contentious politics has provided an increasingly nuanced picture of contention and state response in contemporary authoritarian settings. As pointed out above, however, scholarship has largely sidelined the discursive dimension of state response. Moreover, in spite of a voluminous literature on contention in China, attempts to account for the unique pattern of protest expansion and state and protester moderation are few and have focused on institutional conversion and monitoring rationalities arising from economic reform (Chen, 2012; Lorentzen, 2013b). Given the insights gained on elite protest discourse by social movement scholars, research has thereby overlooked the arguably most important channel of how state leaders engage discontented citizens directly and deprived itself of a readily accessible yardstick for gauging elite behavior, perceived political opportunity, principal-agent dynamics, and regime-evolution.

### **Data and Analytical Strategy**

This study is based on an in-depth analysis of protest discourse in major outlets of the Chinese central leadership, primarily the People's Daily and the two official news agencies. It pays particular attention to the most authoritative pronouncements, such as

the title pages of the People's Daily or the publicized annual government work report delivered by the Premier at the National People's Congress (NPC). In order to strengthen claims on change over time, it also analyses frequency counts of keywords appearing on the front pages of the People's Daily. Together, this data aims to trace the "signaling game" (Huang, 2013) in which the Chinese central authorities send messages to two main audiences: local officials and discontented citizens. For background information on popular unrest and closed-door elite behavior, the analysis draws on relevant scholarly research, official statistics, conversations with Chinese policy researchers, and news media accounts. The observation period between 1990 and 2010 covers, depending on the definition, two to five administrations and two to three major power reshuffles. It should therefore be appropriate for identifying underlying patterns that transcend the particular preferences of individual leaders.

As this type of evidence is "nonexperimental and cannot be analyzed in a sample-based format," the analysis relies on a historical narrative that pulls different pieces of information together akin to the logics of "process tracing" (Gerring, 2007, pp.172–185) and more specifically "discourse tracing" (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009). Comparisons, counter-factual thinking, and timing are important heuristic devices. Mindful of the need to distinguish between "motivation and effect" when interpreting authoritarian elite behavior (Brancati, 2014), the article separates the discussion of evidence for the motivations behind the observed evolution of protest discourse and its intended as well as unintended effects.

The content analysis focuses on utterances that refer to protest in general terms or specifically highlight typical forms of livelihood-centered, non-regime-challenging

contention. This kind of protest discourse comprises the vast majority of official communication. The occasional statements that explicitly refer to ethnic or religious issues, such as in the discussion of minority policies, religious work, or the Falun Gong sect, as well as references to foreign events or forces are drawn upon for illustrative purposes. These as well as explicit references to Chinese nationalistic protests, where state-society interaction works according to a very different logic (Weiss, 2013), have been excluded in the keyword frequency counts. For more details on the exclusion strategy, as well as the exact numbers of articles counted and omitted, please refer to appendices A to E.

### **Popular Mobilization and Strategic Elite Communication in China (1990-2010)**

After the CCP's life-and-death crisis surrounding the Tiananmen Movement of 1989, the leadership's dominant message was that challenging the authorities in any form was not permitted. This notion was captured most succinctly in Deng Xiaoping's ultra-conservative 1989 dictum "stability overrides everything" (*wending yadao yiqie*). It was with this concern in mind that in 1991 the new CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin proclaimed in the People's Daily that the armed forces had "to be prepared to handle sudden incidents at any time" in order to protect "social stability" (Xinhua She, 1991).

In early 1992, Deng Xiaoping set out on his famous Southern Tour to garner support for the contested course of continuing economic reform. By the time of the 14<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 1992, the reformers' victory was settled. Surrounding these shifts at the top, a surge of popular resistance began at the grassroots. It was dramatically epitomized in a major popular uprising in Sichuan Province's Renshou County,<sup>3</sup> leading the political elite in Beijing to be "panicked by rural rioting" (Bernstein and Lü, 2003,

p.119).<sup>4</sup>

Initially, the state media began to take note of renewed popular unrest by blaming it on “a small number of people who incited parts of the masses” (see, for example, Meng, 1992). Yet this framing began to change in early 1993 when Jiang Zemin internally re-invoked Mao Zedong’s 1957 theory of “contradictions among the people” (*renmin neibu maodun*). Highlighting that “new contradictions” were bound to emerge under conditions of renewed economic reform, legitimate popular grievances were cautiously acknowledged and officials were urged not to overreact (Jiang, 1993). Subsequently, this interpretation of “contradictions among the people” also appeared in the government work report delivered to the NPC and publicized in the People’s Daily (Premier of the State Council, 1993).

Between 1994 and 1996, the growth of unrest apparently slowed somewhat and relevant references in the center’s public pronouncements became rare.<sup>5</sup> But around and subsequent to the CCP’s 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in late 1997, protests among peasants and workers began to surge again, leading to a number of major clashes between citizens and local authorities (Bernstein, 2004; Blecher, 2002). The nationwide number of incidents recorded by the authorities skyrocketed from 12,000 in 1997 to 25,000 in 1998 to 32,000 in 1999 (Chung, Lai and Xia, 2006). The central government responded by initially criticizing local officials through internal channels (Li, 1997). Beginning in late 1998, however, top leaders began to go public. Jiang Zemin urged public security officials not “to act tyrannically before the masses” (Liu, Zhang, Wu and Qi, 1998). He also asked local cadres to show “patience” even when citizens brought up “certain unreasonable demands.” When cadres “oppress the masses,” Jiang stressed, they had to be “dealt with

severely” (Liu, Wang and Chen, 1999). Likewise, in early 1999, Premier Zhu Rongji poured scorn on rural officials on the title page of the People’s Daily, claiming that:

Contradictions between farmers and cadres in the countryside are sometimes rooted in grassroots cadres’ sloppy work methods, their rude work style, and their use of official power for personal gain. This must definitely change (Sun and Chen, 1999).

Moreover, around the same time the neologism “mass incidents,” which facilitated discussing protest candidly without having to turn to more loaded terminology, began to appear in the leadership’s pronouncements.

In contrast to these increasingly neutral-to-sympathizing depictions of protest, contentious incidents by supporters of the Falun Gong sect, which had been declared an enemy subsequent to a contentious event in central Beijing in 1999, were denounced in the most vilifying language. Conspicuously absent from these descriptions was the term “mass incidents.” Instead, Falun Gong protests were stylized as “illegal gathering incidents” (*feifa juji shijian*) or “evil incidents” (*e’lie shijian*) that were “anti-government” and “anti-people” in nature (see, for example, Renmin Ribao, 1999).

Although the number of contentious incident continued to proliferate after 1999, when new leadership, under Hu Jintao, ascended to power between late 2002 and early 2003, grassroots activism again entered a phase of particularly rapid expansion. Official statistics indicate that the number of events climbed from about 58,000 in 2003 to 74,000 in 2004 (Chung, Lai and Xia, 2006). Moreover, from mid-2003 onwards, a growing surge of aggrieved citizens arrived in Beijing to petition the central government. By 2004, they began to use more disruptive tactics to bring their grievances to the attention of the media

and the authorities. In one case, frustrated petitioners organized a resistance movement against a dam building project in Sichuan Province that led to clashes between reportedly up to 100,000 farmers and security forces (Li, Liu and O'Brien, 2012, pp.321–323).<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in fall 2004, the new leadership began to respond publicly by placing the issue of managing “contradictions” and “mass incidents” at the core of its new policy agenda of “Building a Socialist Harmonious Society.” In a major speech on the subject in early 2005, Hu Jintao again turned to Mao’s theory of contradictions and highlighted that China was about to enter a “crucial stage of development” that would lead to an “increase and diversification” of “contradictions.” Therefore, “problems which harm the masses’ interests” had to be “solved” and popular complaints had to be dealt with in a “legal, timely, and reasonable” manner. If “mass incidents” occurred nonetheless, they had to be “appropriately handled” (Hu, 2005). A few weeks later, the media quoted the Minister for Public Security, Zhou Yongkang, clarifying that “mass incidents” were not to be interpreted as regime-challenging protests:

In the ultimate analysis these incidents are contradictions among the people ... essentially belong to the category of economic interest grievances, and have no evident political objective (Chen, 2005).

The new leadership also embarked on a broader endeavor of discursive disarmament. In his first government work report in 2004, Premier Wen essentially omitted all elements that could be interpreted as supportive of a hardline approach to protest. For instance, he excluded all references to “hostile forces” or “elements,” which had been part of these reports on and off since 1990. Until 2010, such terminology did not re-emerge (Premier of the State Council, 1990-2010). Again highlighting the discursive distinction between

different kinds of contentious threats, a highly conspiratorial and hostile kind of discourse, was used to portray the events in the simultaneously occurring Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Koesel and Bunce, 2013, pp.756–757).

After two years of a relative slowdown in popular activism over 2005-06, contentious pressure mounted once more. Circulated numbers suggest that “mass incidents” climbed from 100,000 incidents in 2007, to 120,000 in 2008, and up to 230,000 in 2009 (Chu, 2010; Yu, 2010). Likewise, a scholarly database suggests that the number of particularly large-scale incidents tripled from 25 in 2006 to a peak of 76 in 2008 (Tong and Lei, 2010)..<sup>7</sup>

This time, the central authorities immediately responded with publicized sympathy. For instance, shortly after some particularly major protester-police clashes in mid-2008 and mid-2009, regulations that stipulated punishments for officials who caused or mishandled protests were publicized with great fanfare (Renmin Ribao, 2008, similarly, 2009a). This move stood in sharp contrast to the past when such edicts were handed down internally. Moreover, illustrative of how much the official party line had come to side with contentious citizens by then is a provincial Propaganda Department circular carried by the national state media subsequent to a protest incident in 2009. It read:

In the overwhelming number of cases the core contradictions [behind mass incidents] are located in the relationship between party committees, governments, and the masses. Again and again this is related to ... [the formers’] inappropriate policy-making, their indifferent work, and dishonest work-style ... All levels of the party and government ... should not blindly criticize the masses, or wrongly stigmatize petitioners (Zhongguo Xinwen She, 2009).

This portrayal again contrasted sharply with the intensely hostile depictions of more regime-challenging threats. The major ethnic protests and riots in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009 were stylized without even the slightest reference to government behavior that may have contributed to popular discontent. Instead, these incidents were blamed on enemy outside forces in conjunction with domestic “criminal elements” and framed as “smashing-vandalizing-plundering-torching violent incidents” (*dazaqiangshao baoli shijian*) – terminology that hailed from the Cultural Revolution (Renmin Ribao, 2009b; Li and Li, 2008).

*[Figure 1 about here]*

The trend towards increasing sympathy in the leadership’s discourse on non-regime-challenging protest is further corroborated by the annual frequency of key terms appearing on page one of the People’s Daily between 1990 and 2010 (Figure 1). Terminology typical of a hostile reading of protests, such as “stability overrides everything” and “hostile forces,” was very common immediately after the Tiananmen crisis, but had already been scaled down by 1992. After 1998, when protests had surged, such terms had a slight comeback and then almost vanished from the ruling elites’ vocabulary after the new leadership came to power in 2002. The opposite trend is evident for keywords indicating a sympathizing or neutral reading of discontent and protest, such as “contradictions among the people” (or “social contradictions”) and “mass incidents.” The usage of these terms substantially increased over time, peaking every few years subsequent to the above outlined periods of particularly intense popular activism.

## **The Intended and Unintended Effects of Elite Protest Discourse**

Although the Chinese leadership has never directly endorsed the act of taking to the streets, and has signaled that specific types of contention remain off-limits, the observed pattern of discourse response is puzzling. Given the substantial risk of initiating further cascades of contention, “why should authoritarian state elites show the slightest wavering [even] towards ... small-scale demonstrations” (Johnston, 2010, p.127)? In the following, I develop an argument on the intentions behind the Chinese leadership’s communicative strategy that interprets elite behavior in light of the overarching policy objective since 1989: to avert a regime-challenging popular movement (Shambaugh, 2008).

### ***Regime Legitimation***

One of the defining characteristics of Communist rule in the Maoist tradition is that the ruling party has never tried “to rule through pure coercion,” but has always attempted to induce genuine belief and “establish its legitimacy through the transformation of minds” (Liu, 2010, p.330). If legitimacy is, according to Weber, understood as a dualism composed of a “claim to legitimacy” by the ruler and a more or less pronounced “belief in legitimacy” among the ruled (Weber, 2006, p.215), then legitimation is principally a symbolic exercise of discursive “articulations” (Luckmann, 1987, p.111). Thus, a critical legitimacy dilemma for the post-1989 leadership has been to articulate mounting conflict between citizens and local officials in a way that shields itself from popular blame. Discursive accommodation serves this end in two ways.

First, by openly admitting that severe tensions exist, Chinese leaders have sought to bolster the credibility of their messages. Would the ruling elite have insisted on Leninist orthodoxy, and pretended that conflict between citizens and the socialist state was

impossible, it would have run serious risk of experiencing the fate of leaders in the late Eastern Bloc, where the “contradiction between the slogans” emanating from above and citizens’ “daily experience” became so blatant that official discourse completely “ceased to be a believable representation of reality” (Lohmann, 1994, p.58; Yurchak, 1997, p.183). Hence, Kozlov (2002, pp.xvii, 314) concluded that the hostility of the Kremlin’s public response to localized protests in the 1950s and 60s which – strikingly similar to post-1989 China – featured substantial support for the central government, characterized the “Soviet leadership's inadequate grasp of popular consciousness” and laid the foundation for the subsequent “ideological collapse of the regime”. Clearly, this credibility problem has not been lost on the CCP. Chinese assessments of the breakdown of the Soviet Union have highlighted that the sole “reporting [of] good news” had the effect that the authorities eventually completely “lost the people’s trust” (Shambaugh, 2008, p.67).

Second, by criticizing local officials and blaming them for the occurrence of unrest, the leadership has followed a time-tested CCP strategy to create a wall of symbolic distance between itself and its policies, on the one hand, and local agents and policy implementation, on the other. Nathan observed that even back in the Mao era publicized criticisms of local officials served to “separate[s] the party [center] from acts of arrogance and corruption committed in its name and so assures the public that the leaders care for their welfare” (Nathan, 1985, p.156). Likewise in the reform period, Deng Xiaoping (1994) pushed for publicizing exemplary cases of official corruption in order to prevent the people from “com[ing] to believe that we are protecting the wrongdoers.”

Legitimatory concerns also seem to have driven similar patterns of protester-sympathizing elite discourse in other authoritarian contexts. Vietnamese Communist

leaders have responded to livelihood-centered protests and strikes that have proliferated since the 1990s by “sid[ing] with the peasants” (Thomas, 2001, p.324) and “publicly chastis[ing] employers for abusing workers” in order not to alienate “the two main pillars of the party” (Kerkvliet, 2011, pp.182, 180). Similarly, Jansen (2011, pp.83–84) has shown that left-leaning Latin American leaders who have ruled with strong authoritarian characteristics have tried to “animat[e] political support” with a populist legitimacy rhetoric that portrays local elites as exploitative and thereby mobilized disadvantaged classes into contention.<sup>8</sup> Although Chinese leaders cannot be said to have intentionally mobilized citizens, these cases underline that autocrats, under certain conditions, use protester-sympathizing rhetoric in order to forge vertical alliances with average citizens to the detriment of an exploitative class of mid-level elites.

According to an established record of attitude research, the Chinese ruling elite has been astonishingly effective in maintaining high levels of political support (Lewis-Beck, Tang and Martini, 2014; Li, 2004, 2013), and there are good reasons to believe that its public communication is a vital condition for this state of affairs (Blecher, 2002; Li, 2004, 2013). Illustrating the important role that central signaling plays in the formation of popular beliefs, petitioners in Beijing have justified their steadfast confidence in the leadership’s “good intentions” by emphasizing that “the Center has issued many documents in the last few years which show that it is determined to solve our problems ” (Li, 2013, pp.14–15). Likewise, ethnographic research on worker protests has shown that “the mere promulgation” of pro-citizen policies in the news media was crucial for aggrieved workers’ “faith in the moral and political integrity of the central state” (Lee, 2007, p.119). Although the framing of state-society conflict is just one issue area of elite

communication, it is certainly a critical one. Hence, the discursive accommodation of popular unrest may well have been a vital component of this relatively successful endeavor.

### ***Agent and Protester Governance***

A fundamental assumption behind the Maoist tradition of “criticism and self-criticism” and the later developed concept of “public opinion supervision” is that publicized criticism has an impact on the conduct of local officials (Nathan, 1985, p.156; Tong, 2011, pp.23–26). Moreover, the experience of numerous Maoist mass campaigns has ingrained into the collective memory of the CCP the idea that elite discourse is capable of directing existing “grievances of the people” at specific “targets,” and away from others (Liu, 2010, p.357). Thus, I argue that other intention behind the leadership’s protest discourse is to temper the behavior of local state agents and protesters.

Under the prevailing Leninist institutions, leading officials at the local level enjoy a great deal of authority over all branches of government. This results in severe principal-agent dilemmas and plenty of opportunity to abuse authority (Lorentzen, 2013b), a problem that is particularly pronounced in the field of public security. Cai (2008) has observed that in order to guarantee that the security apparatus remains a credible threat, central leaders have been reluctant to restrain their local agents’ capacity to apply coercion flexibly. The downside of this approach is that coercive power is at substantial risk of being misused for “tak[ing] revenge against those who complain about [official] abuses” (Tanner and Green, 2007, p.669; see also, Cai, 2008). The leadership is clearly aware that such behaviors are detrimental to the interests of the regime. As early as 1993, Jiang Zemin underlined that the usage of “incorrect methods,” such as “coercion and

commandism” in handling “contradictions among the people” can easily give rise to “escalation ... or even lead to chaos” (Jiang, 1993). Hence, a major policy objective has been to dissuade officials from responding to non-regime threatening expressions of discontent with overly harsh repression. Two features of publicized protester-sympathizing communication assist this endeavor of non-institutional agent control.

First, by “going public” in criticizing local officials’ conduct the leadership sends out a strong signal that it is united (Domke et al., 2006), means business, and is less inclined to tolerate protest-provoking and escalating behavior. It thereby also informed citizens of its policy preferences. This is a necessary condition for what Fox has called a “sandwich strategy,” an approach in which authoritarian elites engage citizens “to support policy goals against reluctant bureaucrats” (Fox, 1993, p.152).<sup>9</sup>

Second, discursive accommodation also complicates the justification of repression against non-regime-challenging protests. Sinologists have observed that local officials rely on hostile cues in the center’s discourse to “discredit and disrupt” popular resistance, and that the vagueness of official language grants them a great deal of “discretion to judge if a boundary has been crossed” (O’Brien and Li, 2006, p.12; Stern and O’Brien, 2012, p.188). Hence, when such cues become much less often used and the circumstances under which repression can be legitimately applied are increasingly specified, as demonstrated above, this discretionary space contracts. Thus, local officials have fewer discursive resources to justify coercion and should therefore be less inclined to overuse it.

The leadership’s faith in publicly-based instruments of agent control helps to understand why it moved from criticizing officials behind closed doors to vocal public condemnations during the period of rapidly rising unrest in 1997 and 1998. Internal

criticism had apparently not brought about the behavioral change the center had desired. Moreover, this strategy also illuminates why central authorities eventually turned to publicizing regulations on cadre responsibility and protest policing in response to major protester-police clashes in 2008 and 2009, instead of continuing to rely on confidential circulars.

Another major threat to regime survival is that activists with a broader political agenda link up with protesters that have livelihood-centered grievances (Lorentzen, 2013b). Hence, by promoting a vague form of sympathy for protest in general, on the one hand, while continuing to display steadfast hostility to specific forms of regime-challenging contention, on the other, the rulers signal to potential protesters that leniency can be expected as long as no higher levels of government are targeted and distance is kept from dissident and separatist groups. This intention helps to understand the conspicuous co-occurrence of vocal publicized sympathy for protesters during periods of extensive mobilization in 2004-05 and 2008-09, which stood in stark contrast to the firm hostility used to frame the Color Revolutions and domestic ethnic unrest.

Social movement scholars have shown that “other things being equal ... protests that are widely condemned in the public sphere as illegitimate are more likely to be repressed than protests that receive broad public support,” and vice versa (Koopmans, 2005, p.160; for similar findings, see also, Shriver, Adams and Cable, 2013). Likewise, a growing emphasis on protester rights in elite discourse in Western democracies has complicated the justification of forceful measures by the police and contributed to a change of “police knowledge” towards more cooperative conceptions of protester-police relations (della Porta, 1999, p.93, 1998, p.229). Studies have also indicated that public discourse by non-

movement elites “significantly shapes the targets” of grassroots contention (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004, p.199), and is capable of “obstruct[ing]” (Shriver, Adams and Cable, 2013, p.873), “blocking or disarming” certain forms of contention (Ferree, 2005, p.151). Hence, the Chinese leadership’s increasing discursive accommodation of contentious pressure may actually have supported its endeavors of taming local officials and reinforcing the self-restraint displayed by most Chinese protesters.

### ***The Proliferation of Protest***

Although mobilization patterns in post-1989 China have been thoroughly researched, the question of why contention has proliferated so rapidly still remains less well understood. Pei (2006, p.16) has argued that an increasing accumulation of state-society tensions due to a post-1989 halt of liberalizing institutional reforms are driving the expansion of unrest. Chen (2012, p.14) has suggested that the state has “facilitate[d]” protest proliferation through a combination of contradictions between “state ideologies and institutions” and changes to the system of social control under economic reform, as well as through a growing inclination to pay off protesters. Lorentzen (2013b, p.147) has made the case that economic reforms have made it increasingly difficult for the central state to obtain accurate information about discontented social groups and local official performance, which “made toleration of protests a more attractive means of gathering that information.”

In addition to these valuable accounts, I suggest another one. A repeated theme in scholarship on Chinese contentious politics has been that citizens display, what Perry (2007, p.21) has called, “a seasoned sensitivity to...top-down signals emanating from the state.” Stern and O’Brien (2012, p.177; see also Li, Liu and O’Brien, 2012) have

demonstrated that these cues are decisive for activists' assessment of "opportunities and threats" in an uncertain environment. The documented evolution of elite protest discourse has shown that such signaling has substantially changed over time. Thus, the "discursive opportunities" for non-regime-challenging acts of resistance have considerably (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004), if not dramatically, increased. Thus, in combination with what is known about the mobilization-enhancing function of protester-sympathizing elite discourse in Western democracies, it is plausible to surmise that the leadership's increasing inclination to accommodate protesters discursively has substantially contributed to the impressive proliferation of contention in China. Given the imperatives of regime legitimation and agent control, combined with the ability to signal what kinds of acts remain off limits, Chinese leaders have apparently come to the conclusion that this risk was worth taking.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that the Chinese ruling elite has responded to cycles of intensifying grassroots contention since the early 1990s with increasing, yet not unconditional, discursive accommodation. It has suggested that the underlying rationale behind this puzzling reaction has been to prevent large-scale revolutionary mobilization through regime legitimation, and non-institutional endeavors of agent and protesters governance. There are good reasons to believe that these intended effects have not been entirely illusory. But there are equally good reasons to surmise that discursive accommodation has been an important driving force behind the impressive growth of unrest in China.

Thus, investigating elite protest discourse provides an alternative angle on the "art of

mastering the people” (*yu min zhi shu*) that Chinese rulers use to deflect substantial contentious pressure without being washed away by it, and manage popular contention without institutionalizing it.<sup>10</sup> To Chinese political leaders, “talk” is therefore quite literally “power” (Manheim, 1991, p.8). However, it remains to be seen if Chinese citizens remain content with the resulting state of a conditionally granted right to protest. In recent years, intellectuals have begun a critical public debate on the logic of maintaining stability and the right to resist (Steinhardt, forthcoming). Protesters have on several occasions submitted formal applications for holding demonstrations – a right that is theoretically legally protected although requests for official permits are almost always denied – and have publicized these on the Internet (Guanchazhe, 2013; Weiquanwang, 2013). Such acts do not only indicate a keen awareness of the authorities’ inconsistent stance on this issue, but also a readiness to expose it through publicity and thereby generate political pressure.

For the broader debate on authoritarian contentious politics, the case of China has shown that widening the focus of research on state responses to contention from social practices and institutions to elite discourse pays off. It opens a readily accessible source of evidence to study the behavior of political elites as well as principal-agent dynamics in a domain critical for regime stability, and allows gauging the perception of opportunity by those who contemplate the risky endeavor of taking to the streets in an authoritarian environment. Hence, studying public elite communication can provide crucial insights on how political regimes evolve in response to contentious pressure that scholars ought to pay more attention to.

Although similarities must not be over-exaggerated, the observed trajectory also

provides some intriguing parallels to developments in Western democracies a few decades earlier. In China too, an “interactive process” of pressure from below and responses from the top “contribut[ed] to a change in the political culture” and elite communication on popular contention, and contributed to a “‘normalization’ of several protest forms and a stigmatization of others” (della Porta, 1999, pp.92, 93). In addition, the present study has opened a new dimension of the intriguing media strategy by the Chinese leadership. Similar to the seemingly counter-intuitive strategy of media commercialization (Stockmann, 2013), “going public” (Domke et al., 2006) on a delicate issue can, under certain circumstances, be a beneficial policy for such actors.

Finally, studying protest discourse in China has provoked questions that wait to be empirically studied in other authoritarian contexts and beyond. Under what conditions are authoritarian rulers inclined to signal sympathy for protesters? Does elite protest discourse have a stronger effect on mobilization in a non-democratic than in a democratic context? Does discursive sympathy-hostility by elites affect not only citizens’ inclination to mobilize, but also their responses to acts of repression and the probability of repression backlash? And lastly, has the expansion of discursive sympathy for protest in Western democracies between the 1960s and 1980s continued, or has this process been partially reversed over the past two decades? More research on the trajectories, causes, and consequences of discursive elite responses to popular protest in both authoritarian and democratic regimes is needed.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the following I will use the terms leadership, center, party center, central government, and political/ruling elite synonymously.

<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between “social practices and representations of social practices” in discourse see, van Leeuwen (2008, p.7).

<sup>3</sup> On Renshou and rising rural unrest, see, Bernstein and Lü (2003, pp.130–137). On rising worker’s unrest in 1992 and 1993, see, Blecher (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Conversations with three senior social scientists working on popular protest in central government think tanks and a Beijing university (all June 2010), and a public security scholar working in a policing academy (May 2014), support the impression that series of major protest events in 1993, 2004-05, and 2008-09 had critical impacts on central government thinking on protest.

<sup>5</sup> For figures on unrest between 1994 and 1996 see, Chung et al. (2006).

<sup>6</sup> See, note 4.

<sup>7</sup> See, note 4.

<sup>8</sup> The authoritarian cases Jansen discusses are Juan Péron in Argentina, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, and Juan Velasco in Peru. I thank Robert Jansen for providing additional information on these cases.

<sup>9</sup> For an application of this concept to China, see O’Brien and Li (1999).

<sup>10</sup> I thank Chen Gang for mentioning this metaphor to me.

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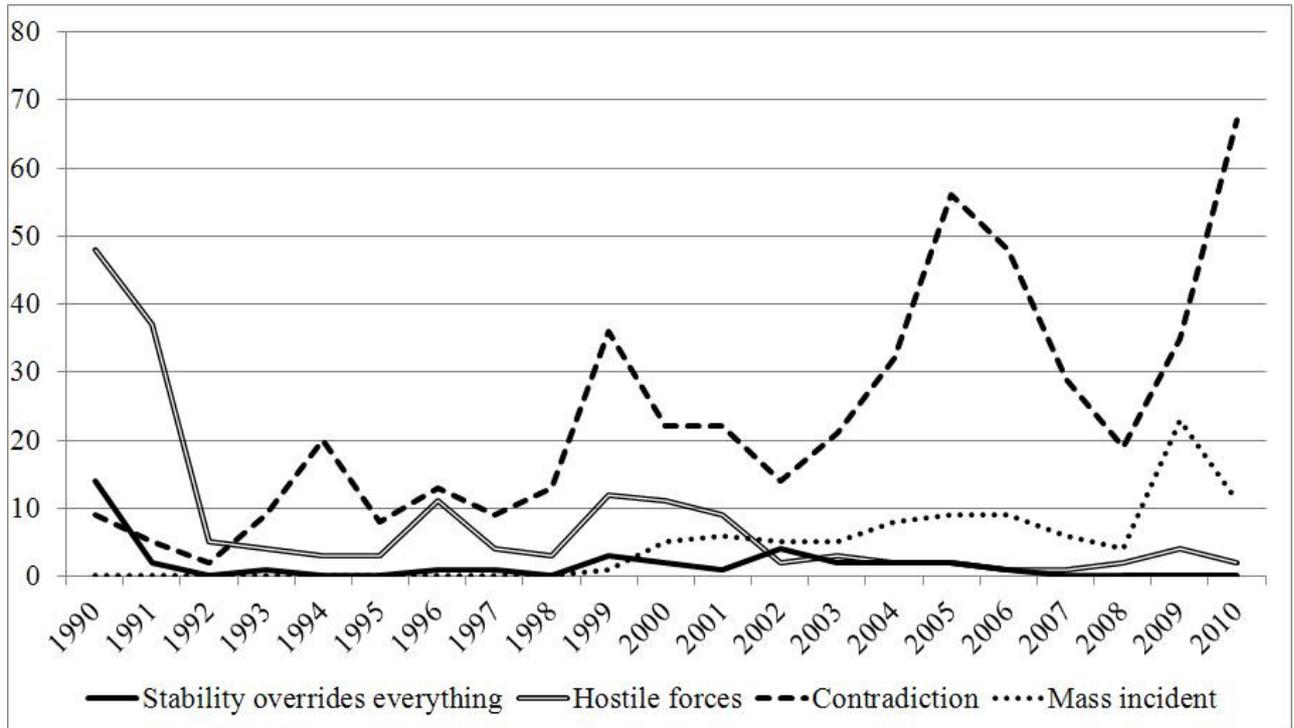
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## Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Dimensions and modes of state and elite responses to popular contention**

Dimension \ Mode	Accommodation	Prohibition
<b>Practical-institutional</b>	Tolerance	Repression
<b>Discursive</b>	Sympathy	Hostility



**Figure 1. Keywords in the People's Daily's (title page), 1990-2010**

Notes: Depicted values represent the annual frequency of articles that contain the relevant key words. "Hostile forces" also covers the term "hostile elements." "Contradiction" stands for "contradictions among the people" and "social contradictions." Two synonymous ways to write "mass incident" were included. Articles with explicit references to nationalistic, ethnic minority, or religion-based contention were excluded. Also excluded were references to foreign forces or events abroad. For further details see appendices A to E.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **The Keyword Frequency Count Exclusion Strategy**

To replicate this analysis access the electronic version of the People's Daily via Oriprobe Information Services (2012).

Articles which use relevant keywords in the context of ethnic or religious issues, such as in discussions of the minority regions, religious work, the outlawed Falun Gong sect, or Chinese nationalistic protests, were excluded from the frequency counts. Also excluded were instances in which the keywords appeared in the context of references to societies or forces (from) outside of China Mainland or to pre-1980s historical events. However, as the tables below show, the overall picture remains essentially the same, even with these utterances are included. The most important difference between adjusted and raw frequencies is that the burst of hostile terms in 2008-09, which were almost entirely directed at ethnic unrest, has been corrected in the former.

Articles were not counted when the title obviously narrows content down to above contexts in cases such as: "Zhou Yongkang emphasizes during his inspection tour to Xinjiang...;" "Zhu Rongji emphasizes on the closing session of the ethnic work conference;" "...Realizing the vain attempt to subvert the socialist system and the reactionary nature of cult organization trouble-making;" "The greatest danger for Taiwan is Li Denghui's playing with 'Taiwan independence.'"

Articles were also excluded when the relevant keywords within the piece appeared in excluded meaningful contexts such as "Zhou Yongkang joined the religion sector's discussion

group ... Zhou Yongkang said ... our country is going through a period of strategic opportunity and pronounced *social contradictions*, we need to grasp the two big tasks of development and stability;” “Our country’s struggle against corruption takes place behind an intricate international political background. Western *hostile forces* take every opportunity to instigate Westernization, splittist activities.”

## Appendix B

Complete keyword statistics for “stability overrides everything”

	Total number of occurrences	Refers to ethnic minority issues	Refers to religious issues	Refers to nationalistic protests	Refers to societies or forces (from) outside of China Mainland	Refers to historical events (pre- 1980s)	Number of articles counted
1990	16	2					14
1991	2						2
1992	0						0
1993	1						1
1994	0						0
1995	1	1					0
1996	1						1
1997	1						1
1998	0						0
1999	6		2	1			3
2000	3		1				2
2001	2		1				1
2002	4						4
2003	2						2
2004	2						2
2005	3	1					2
2006	1						1
2007	0						0
2008	0						0
2009	7	7					0
2010	1	1					0

## Appendix C

### Complete keyword statistics for “hostile forces”

	Total number of occurrences	Refers to ethnic minority issues	Refers to religious issues	Refers to nationalistic protests	Refers to foreign countries or forces (from) outside of China	Refers to historical events (pre- 1980s)	Number of articles counted
1990	85	6	1		30		48
1991	63	2	2		22		37
1992	11	3	1		2		5
1993	7				3		4
1994	6	2			1		3
1995	10	4			3		3
1996	16	1			4		11
1997	8	2			2		4
1998	4	1					3
1999	31*	3	6		10		12
2000	26	2	3		10		11
2001	30	2	6		13		9
2002	4	1			1		2
2003	6	1	1		1		3
2004	6		1		3		2
2005	6	3			1		2
2006	6	3			2		1
2007	3		1		1		1
2008	4	2					2
2009	18	13			1		4
2010	6	2			1	1	2

\* Note that in the electronic version of the People’s Daily four articles appeared twice in identical form. Duplicates were not counted.

## Appendix D

### Complete keyword statistics for “contradictions”

	Total number of occurrences	Refers to ethnic minority issues	Refers to religious issues	Refers to nationalistic protests	Refers to societies or forces (from) outside of China Mainland	Refers to historical events (pre- 1980s)	Number of articles counted
1990	10	1					9
1991	5						5
1992	2						2
1993	10	1					9
1994	21	1					20
1995	8						8
1996	15	1			1		13
1997	11	2					9
1998	15	2					13
1999	42*	2	4				36
2000	22						22
2001	22						22
2002	14						14
2003	21						21
2004	32						32
2005	59	3					56
2006	48						48
2007	30		1				29
2008	19						19
2009	36	1					35
2010	69	1	1				67

\*Note that in the electronic version of the People’s Daily 15 articles appeared twice in identical form. Duplicates were not counted.

## Appendix E

### Complete keyword statistics for “mass incidents”

	Total number of occurrences	Refers to ethnic minority issues	Refers to religious issues	Refers to nationalistic protests	Refers to societies or forces (from outside of China Mainland	Refers to historical events (pre- 1980s)	Number of articles counted
1990	0						0
1991	0						0
1992	0						0
1993	0						0
1994	0						0
1995	0						0
1996	0						0
1997	0						0
1998	0						0
1999	2		1				1
2000	5						5
2001	6						6
2002	5						5
2003	5						5
2004	9	1					8
2005	9						9
2006	9						9
2007	6						6
2008	4						4
2009	23						23
2010	12	1					11