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Upward Targeting and Social Protests in China

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ABSTRACT

Protesters in China may face two types of targets. One is the target of blame that is deemed responsible for causing their grievances, whereas the other is believed to be obligated to solve their grievances. Upward targeting occurs when citizens whose grievances are connected to lower-level authorities approach higher-level authorities for solutions. Based on a collection of over 12,000 instances of collective protest in China from 2000 to 2018, this study finds that some groups—such as small groups, veterans, and petitioners—are more likely to resort to upward targeting than others. However, collective actions directed at central authorities are more likely to be suppressed. Blame attribution and the difficulties in coordinating large-scale upward-targeting actions have combined to manifest protest patterns in China.

Introduction

In 2018, the collapse of the peer-to-peer (P2P) loan industry in China eradicated the life savings of a vast number of people who had put their money in the high-risk, high-return schemes. On 6 August 2018, thousands of P2P investors gathered in Beijing to protest outside the offices of the China Banking Regulatory Commission, but were quickly intercepted and put onto buses by police who had been awaiting their arrival. These petitioners came from every corner of the country—from the southernmost province of Guangdong to the far-west region of Xinjiang—in hopes that by gathering *en masse*, the government would recognize their grievances and take action. However, the central authority was reluctant to accommodate the investors' demands. More than 120 buses lined the roads around the China Banking Regulatory Commission, where the protest was supposed to take place. Most of the protesters were arrested, while hundreds of others were ordered to board buses and leave the capital.¹

This incident is by no means an isolated case in which Chinese citizens directed their complaints at a high-level authority that did not directly cause their grievances.² This case points out an essential phenomenon in Chinese citizens' dispute resolution, which is known as 'upward targeting.' Chinese citizens who encounter problems and therefore have objections may face two targets. One is the party that has caused the problems or grievances, whereas the other is believed to have the moral or administrative obligation and ability to solve the problems. When these two targets are not identical, the aggrieved may resort to approaching the latter party for a solution. Upward targeting occurs

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¹Yujing Liu, 'Police Thwart Protest Rallies by Victims of China's Underground Financial System', *South China Morning Post*, August 6, 2018, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/business/banking-finance/article/2158533/police-thwart-protest-rallies-victims-chinas-underground>

²Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); 陈桂棣 [Chen Guidi] and 春桃 [Chun Tao], *中国农民调查 [Surveys of Chinese Peasants]* (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2004).

when the aggrieved whose grievances are connected to local authorities or non-state actors approach high-level authorities for solutions.

Upward targeting is commonly used by Chinese petitioners who complain about local actors but approach high-level authorities, including central authorities, for solutions.³ As the case presented above indicates, upward targeting also occurs in collective actions. While this phenomenon is common, several vital questions concerning this practice have not been adequately addressed. First, which groups of people are more likely to use upward targeting? Second, how does the targeted authority respond to different groups of protesters who resort to upward targeting?

Answers to these questions shed light on the geographic distribution of social protests and their implications on social stability in China. Based on a collection of more than 12,000 cases of collective action in China from 2000 to 2018, this study examines Chinese citizens' use of upward targeting in their collective actions. It finds that upward targeting occurs more commonly among smaller groups (i.e., less than 100 participants) instead of large ones. In addition, certain groups such as veterans are more likely to use upward targeting than others. Therefore, upward targeting is conditional. Aggrieved people's blame attribution and the difficulties in coordinating collective action combine to limit upward targeting, thereby localizing social protests in China.

Political Hierarchy and Upward Targeting

Aggrieved Chinese citizens who take individual or collective action to seek solutions to their issues may face two types of targets: the target of blame and the target of action. The former refers to the party that has caused citizens' grievances, whereas the latter is perceived to be obligated or able to help address the grievances. These two targets may or may not overlap. When the two targets are different, the upset citizens may direct their actions to a party that has not caused the problems but is believed to have the obligation and/or ability to solve the problems. In China, target shifting often takes the form of upward targeting because of the political hierarchy that holds local authorities answerable to their superiors. Yet, upward targeting creates problems for the targeted body who is motivated to discourage such actions.

Political Logic of Upward Targeting

The Chinese political hierarchy consists of multiple levels of authorities, where higher-level authorities can make credible threats to lower-level ones.⁴ As local governments are responsible for resident governance, they have direct interaction with local residents and cause most of their grievances. Local authorities thus become the primary target of citizen complaints.⁵ However, these local governments are not necessarily the target of action when the aggrieved take action to address their grievances. Instead, the aggrieved whose problems are connected to local authorities may approach higher-level authorities for solutions.⁶

Upward targeting is common among Chinese petitioners who present their grievances against local authorities or even non-state actors to higher-level authorities.⁷ Some petitioners simply skip

³Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Lianjing Li, Mingxing Liu, and Kevin O'Brien, 'Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003–2006', *China Quarterly* 210, (2012), pp. 313–34; Yongshun Cai, 'Managed Participation in China', *Political Science Quarterly* 119(3), (2004), pp. 425–451.

⁴Jidong Chen, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu, 'Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China', *American Journal of Political Science* 60(2), (2016), pp. 383–400; Yongshun Cai, *State and Agents in China: Disciplining Government Officials* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁵Chih-Jou Jay Chen, 'A Protest Society Evaluated: Popular Protests in China, 2000–2019', *Mobilization: An International Journal* 25(5), (2020), pp. 641–660; Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Societies of Senior Citizens and Popular Protest in Rural Zhejiang', *China Journal* 71, (2014), pp. 172–88; Zheng Su and Tianguang Meng, 'Selective Responsiveness: Online Public Demands and Government Responsiveness in Authoritarian China', *Social Science Research* 59, (2016), pp. 52–67; Chih-Jou Jay Chen, '有效治理的桎梏：當代中國集體抗爭與國家反應' ['Policing Protest in China: Findings from Newspaper Data'], *台灣社會學 [Taiwanese Sociology]* 33, (2017), pp. 113–164.

⁶Chen, 'Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China', pp. 95–98; Li, Liu, and O'Brien, 'Petitioning Beijing,' pp. 313–334.

lower-level authorities (*yueji*; or leapfrog) and go directly to central and higher-level authorities to report their cases.⁸ Upward targeting has also been used by participants of collective action in China. Chinese protesters with specific claims similarly face two types of targets. One is the target of blame that has caused the complaints, and the other is the target of action that is believed to be obligated or able to solve the complaints. These two types of targets may not be identical. If the target of action differs from the target of blame, then the former is approached in an effort to engage them as conflict moderators.

While ‘whom to blame’ and ‘whom to ask for help’ may be different, protesters themselves are very clear about this distinction. For example, targets of blame can be firms failing to pay workers their wages, or village governments failing to pay villagers’ relocation fees. In the Chinese political system, targets of action are often state authorities, including higher-level ones. The central and provincial governments may be approached to correct local cadres’ wrongdoings. This is upward targeting. While villagers protesting against land seizures may blame the township government, they may still gather in front of the municipal city hall, demanding a response and intervention from the government.⁹ Similarly, workers protesting unpaid wages may blame their employers but still gather on the streets paralyzing traffic throughout the town, and demand the government to come forward to do justice for them.¹⁰

Upward targeting occurs because upper-level authorities assume more political power in the political echelon; thus, they are believed to be better suited to address people’s complaints by making their subordinates respond to the aggrieved.¹¹ Upward targeting results from people’s belief or faith in upper-level authorities’ obligation and ability to address injustices.¹² By using upward targeting, protesters can increase their chance of success by pressuring high-level government officials to help solve problems. However, upward targeting creates challenges for the targeted authority because it is difficult to manage.

Upward Targeting as Challenges to the Government’s Legitimacy

Upward targeting shifts the burden of responsiveness to higher-level authorities, thus creating a dilemma. If the targeted authority fails to respond (or respond in a meaningful way), it loses legitimacy and authority. But if it responds effectively, it will encourage more petitioners or protesters to follow suit. Therefore, the Chinese central government began discouraging skip-level petitions. In 2014, the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration (NPCPA; 国家信访局) promulgated a regulation prohibiting skip-level petitions and increased obstacles for petitioners. An NPCPA official admitted in 2014 that approximately 90 percent of petitions received by the bureau were skip-level petitions. The 2014 directive stipulated that skip-level petitions would be

⁷For example, in one city, about 50 percent of the 484 repeated collective petitions from 2010 to 2014 concerned civil disputes. 夏瑛 (Xia Ying), ‘信访制度的双重逻辑与“非行政信访”——以A市重复集体访为例’ (The Dual Logic of the Petition System and Non-Government Related Petitions: A Case Study on Repeated Petitions in City A), *政治学研究* [Political Studies], 4, (2019), pp. 102–128.

⁸Chen, ‘Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China’; Ying Chen and Chih-Jou Jay Chen, ‘The State Owes Us: Social Exclusion and Collective Actions of China’s Bereaved Parents’, *Modern China*, OnlineFirst, accessed September 15, 2020, doi:10.1177/0097700420948801.

⁹Chih-Jou Jay Chen, ‘Peasant Protests over Land Seizures in Rural China’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, doi: 10.1080/03066150.2020.1824182; David Zweig, ‘The “Externalities of Development”: Can New Political Institutions Manage rural Conflict?’, in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 120–142.

¹⁰Chih-Jou Jay Chen, ‘中國威權政體下的集體抗議：台資廠大罷工的案例分析’ [Popular Protest in an Authoritarian Regime: A Wildcat Strike in Southern China], *台灣社會學* [Taiwanese Sociology] 30, (2015), pp. 1–53; William Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Yongshun Cai, *State and Laid-Off Workers in Reform China: The Silence and Collective Action of the Retrenched* (London: Routledge, 2006); William Hurst and Kevin O’Brien, ‘China’s Contentious Petitioners’, *China Quarterly* 170, (2002), pp. 345–360.

¹¹Chen, Pan, and Xu, ‘Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness,’ pp. 383–400.

¹²Lianjiang Li, ‘Political Trust in Rural China’, *Modern China* 30(2), (2004), pp. 228–258

rejected and that the central authorities would no longer be accommodating petitioners. Consequently, whereas nearly 90 percent of the petitions to the NPCPA were accepted by the bureau before May 2014, only 10 percent were accepted after May 2014.¹³

A high-level government faces the same dilemma when it deals with protesters who resort to upward targeting, because it is believed to be obligated or able to address the problems. If the targeted authority gives in to the protesters' demands and addresses their problems, then other people will likely be encouraged to follow suit. Conversely, if the targeted authority refuses to help address the problem, its legitimacy will be tarnished. Pent-up grievances will arise and erupt when opportunities emerge.

Upward targeting also creates severe problems for the Chinese government if it is tolerated. High-level authorities in China are located in cities or big cities; therefore social protests targeting high-level authorities in big cities are more disruptive than those in small cities because the high population density in large cities is more conducive to media attention and protest mobilization.¹⁴ In addition, the eruption of protests in large cities signals the weakness of state control and encourages protest diffusion. Collective action targeting central authorities in Beijing is likely to be perceived as a direct challenge to the national government and its leadership, prompting even more protests throughout the country.¹⁵

In China, the political hierarchy dictates that upward targeting is an option for those who have decided to take protest actions. However, the problems associated with upward targeting have made high-level authorities—in particular, the central government—become reluctant to tolerate this practice. Consequently, local governments have repressed protesters who resorted to upward targeting to deter or limit such actions. Repression does not always eradicate collective action, but consistent repression tends to decrease it.¹⁶ The repressive state may eventually reduce upward-targeting actions or even all types of collective action.

Data for This Study

This study draws on data from the first author's collection of more than 12,000 protest news events that occurred in China from 2000 to 2018. Since 2007, this study's research assistants have been collecting news events of social protests from 15 online sources, including newspaper databases—six of which are located outside of mainland China.¹⁷ For a news event to be included in the database, four nominal criteria had to be met: it had to involve more than ten participants; it had to present either a grievance against some target or a demand made to some institution; it had to assume confrontational form; and it had to be located in the public sphere. Based on these criteria, non-confrontational events such as complaints, letter writing campaigns, lawsuits, and press conferences have been excluded. Petitioning (*shangfang*) events are included only if they escalated into public protests (e.g., demonstrations or sit-ins in front of government offices); legal and routine petitioning activities are not included in the database.¹⁸

¹³国家信访局: 绝大多数进京上访被拒受理' [National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration: Most Petitions Presented to the Central Authority were Rejected], 南方都市报 [Southern Metropolis News], September 29, 2014, accessed October 19, 2019, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-09-29/063330930964.shtml>.

¹⁴Jeremy Wallace, 'Cities, Redistribution, and Authoritarian Regime Survival', *Journal of Politics* 75(3), (2013), pp. 632–645; Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973); Jeremy Wallace, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁵中华人民共和国国家教委思想政治工作司 [The Department of Ideological and Political Work of State Education Commission, PRC], *惊心动魄的56天* [*The Soul-Stirring 56 days*], (Beijing: Dadi chubanshe, 1989).

¹⁶March Lichbach and Ted Gurr, 'The Conflict Process: A Formal Model', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25(1), (1981), pp. 3–29.

¹⁷The cases were collected from a news database, 慧科 [Wisers] (<http://wiseneews.wisers.net/wiseneews>), and three online news agencies. Wisers' news database provides full-text content from nine news agencies or newspapers published in China and two newspapers in Hong Kong, including 中国新闻网 [China News Service], 新京报 [The Beijing News], 南方日报 [Nanfang Daily], 南方周末 [Southern Weekly], 南方都市报 [Southern Metropolis Daily], 华西都市报 [Xuaxi doushi bao], 广州日报 [Guangzhou Daily], 深圳晚报 [Shenzhen wan bao], 兰州晨报 [Lanzhou chen bao], 苹果日报 [Apple Daily] and 明报 [Ming Pao]. The three online news agencies include Radio Free Asia, 博讯 [Boxun] and 大纪元 [Epoch Times].

Assessing whether the collected cases are representative of the overall protest landscape in China is difficult. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this database includes the largest number of publicly-accessible news reports from the past decade. Still, sole reliance on media reports may introduce bias into the data.¹⁹ First, the fluctuation in the number of protests over the years may be caused by the business operations of the news media, or the degree of censorship. Hence, the number of reported protests may not accurately reflect the actual number of protests. Second, protests by some groups (e.g., urban workers) may be more likely to gain media attention than others (e.g., peasants in remote areas). Small-scale protests are also less likely to be reported than large-scale ones. Therefore, certain kinds of protests may be underrepresented in the database. These possibilities certainly exist, but they do not necessarily invalidate the analysis in this study as the authors have been carefully maintaining the validity and reliability of the database.

During data collection, the data sources were not altered, and cases were systematically drawn from newspaper databases and news agencies. Furthermore, protest news published on blogs, new social media, or other online sources were not included in order to prevent the introduction of another layer of bias. Second, the dataset comprises over 2,500 large-scale protests with 1,000 or more participants each. As large-scale protests are less likely to be covered up, they can be indicative of the Chinese government's protest management. A study on protest events in China drawing data from social and news media also finds that reporting bias in the news media is substantially reduced for large events.²⁰

China Labour Bulletin has also kept a record of worker protests in China since 2011. Its website reports 368 large-scale worker protests (more than 1,000 participants) from 2011 to 2018.²¹ During the same period, the authors' data include 579 large-scale worker protests (more than 1,000 participants). When comparing their collection of all cases with the collection of only large-scale protests, the authors found that the distribution of protests across different social groups over different time periods displays similar patterns across the two collections.

When the research team had completed data collection of protest news events for a certain period of time (usually three months), the coding of these events was conducted manually by a group of research assistants. The point of observation was singular protest incidents that might be reported by multiple sources. The variables and codes of each event were created as comprehensively as possible so that original variables and values could be recoded or combined during the analytical process by a researcher. The list of variables included various characteristics of the protest event, including date, location, claims (issue), initiating social group, blame target, protest target, forms (tactics), number of participants, frequency, duration, and police response.

The initiating social group is the most exogenous variable that measured the social/demographic characteristics of the group involved in a given event. In most cases, protester affiliation to a social group (e.g., state-firm workers, peasants, homeowners, etc.) was mentioned in the news sources. Occasionally, affiliations to two groups might overlap. In total, the authors registered 158 social groups including various occupational groups, status groups, and occasional groups. In this study, the variable of social group was recoded from the original detailed 158 groups into ten more general group categories; including public sector employees, private-sector workers, foreign-firm workers,

¹⁸The reports that met these criteria were then coded for content. In collecting and coding the data, the procedures were subject to intensive reliability and validity checks. First, two coders were responsible for coding the same variables for each event. Then, their coded values for the variable were checked to see if they were a match. When two coded values of a variable for an event differed, a supervisor would check and decide on the correct value. The inter-coder reliability was calculated by calculating the percent agreement for two coders when every one hundred values were coded for each variable. In general, above 90 percent is considered acceptable. If a result was lower than 90 percent, the authors would further examine the causes and clarify the coding procedures or subject the coders to more training sessions.

¹⁹Jennifer Earl, Andrew Martin, John McCarthy, and Sarah Soule, 'The Use of Newspaper Data in the Study of Collective Action', *Annual Review of Sociology* 30, (2004), pp. 65–80.

²⁰Christian Göbel and H Christoph Steinhardt, 'Better coverage, less bias: using social media to measure protest in authoritarian regimes', *ResearchGate* (2019), accessed May 27, 2020, doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.32856.75523/1.

²¹Calculated from data of the 'Strike Map' released by China Labour Bulletin, accessed October 2, 2019, <https://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>.

veterans, urban residents harmed (e.g., homeowners, displaced residents, and investors), religious and minority groups, petitioners, students, ad hoc groups, and farmers.

As for protest forms, coders were offered 12 types of protest tactics which were dummy-coded so that the presence of each tactic was coded as 1 and its absence as 0. Then, for the purposes of this analysis, they were grouped into two categories: (1) nonviolent forms (i.e., gatherings, strikes, hunger strikes, sit-ins, slogan chanting and/or display of posters, walkouts & demonstrations, and blocking traffic or factories; and (2) violent forms (i.e., physical attacks, property damage, arson, and looting). Thus, the authors believe that the database is large enough to provide crucial information for analysis of upward targeting in collective action in contemporary China.

Collective Action and Choice of the Target

The authors' current collection of 12,607 cases that occurred from 2000 to 2018 revealed informative features about the development of popular protests in China. First of all, there was an increase of social protests from 2000 to 2014 (Table 1); the number of protest news events grew from 56 in 2000 to 791 in 2010, only to rise to its peak of 2,258 in 2014.²² In 2015, however, the number fell to 1,799, and finally shrank to a 12-year low of 452 in 2018. Meanwhile, large-scale protests revealed a similar pattern; their numbers increased from 26 in 2000 to 117 in 2010, before reaching 321 in 2014. They dropped to 283 in 2015, and fell to a 12-year low of 61 in 2018. Both collections of all protest incidents showed that the number of social protests in China reached its climax in 2014, only to fall dramatically during the 2016–2018 period. Similar trends were reported by a study identifying more than 100,000 collective action events from social media from 2010 to 2017 in China, showing that the number of collective action events reached its peak in the years of 2013/2014, and dropped off sharply since 2016.²³

Table 1. Yearly number of protest events, 2000–2018

Year	All samples			Large-scale Protest		
	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban
2000	56	12	44	26	4	22
2001	114	18	96	39	8	31
2002	126	31	95	41	9	32
2003	133	25	108	37	8	29
2004	177	44	133	49	13	36
2005	237	45	192	90	13	77
2006	301	92	209	65	20	45
2007	505	133	372	130	40	90
2008	572	97	475	137	21	116
2009	720	134	586	147	29	118
2010	791	181	610	117	32	85
2011	668	150	518	158	36	122
2012	773	137	636	237	43	194
2013	1329	335	994	309	78	231
2014	2258	549	1709	321	61	260
2015	1799	471	1328	283	63	220
2016	941	263	678	208	28	180
2017	655	123	532	104	22	82
2018	452	70	382	61	10	51
Total	12607	2910	9697	2559	538	2021

Source: Authors' collection; A large-scale action involves 1,000 or more participants.

²²This tendency of persistent protests is in line with the numbers released by sanctioned sources in China. The number of publicly reported collective actions rose from 8,700 in 1993 to about 127,500 in 2008. But sanctioned sources stopped releasing the aggregated statistics after 2008. Jae Ho Chung, 'Managing Political Crises in China: The Case of Collective Protests', in *China's Crisis Management*, ed. Jae Ho Chung (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 25–42.

²³Zhang Han and Jennifer Pan, 'CASM: A Deep-Learning Approach for Identifying Collective Action Events with Text and Image Data from Social Media', *Sociological Methodology* 49(1), (2019): pp. 1–57.

Table 2. Targets of blame and action (%)

Sample	Type of Target		Difference
	Blamed (A)	Approached (B)	B—A
Government	56	71	15
Central	7	10	3
Provincial	7	10	3
Prefecture	17	23	6
County	14	18	4
Grassroots	11	10	-1
Non-government actors	44	29	-15
Public institutions or firms	14	10	-4
Private firms and others	30	19	-11
Total (%)	100	100	
Total cases	11,324	11,241	

Source: Authors' collection.

As far as the target of action is concerned, there is target shifting in these instances of collective action. Table 2 presents the distribution of two types of protest targets: those who were blamed for grievances, and those who were approached by protesters. From the authors' collection of 11,324 protest events with information about the target to blame and the target to approach for help, 56 percent of the protests consisted of participants who blamed various levels of government for causing their problems; namely, 7 percent at the central level, 7 percent at the provincial level, 17 percent at the prefecture level, 14 percent at the county level, and 11 percent at the grassroots level (i.e., townships and villages). This distribution indicated that decentralization in China shifted much of the governance responsibility to local governments, allowing the central and provincial governments to avoid becoming the major targets of complaints among the people.²⁴

For analytical convenience, 'upward targeting' in this study means that participants in a collective action approached a higher-level authority than the one they blamed for their hardships. Or, they approached the government if their problems were caused by non-state actors such as firms. In the authors' collection, non-governmental public actors (i.e., state firms and public institutions) and private firms were blamed in 44 percent of the protests, but they were targeted in just 29 percent of protest events. It was also found that while only 56 percent of the protests blamed governments, 71 percent of the protests were directed at the governments for solutions, including the central government (10 percent), provincial governments (10 percent), prefecture governments (23 percent), county governments (18 percent), as well as township and village governments (10 percent). Thus, although the target of blame and the target of action often overlap, around 15 percent of protest events saw protesters engaging in upward targeting—blaming non-governmental actors but approaching government authorities to solve their problems.

The authors' data revealed localized upward targeting in China. Chinese citizens tended to approach the provincial and prefecture governments more frequently when they used upward targeting. Prefecture governments were blamed in 17 percent of the cases, but were targeted in 23 percent of the protests. Hence, prefecture governments experienced the most frequent upward targeting. The prefecture government has been frequently targeted, probably because this government level is considered more approachable and helpful in resolving local grievances.²⁵ As prefecture governments are located in smaller cities than Beijing and provincial capitals, collective actions in prefectures are less disruptive. Due to protesters' blame attribution and the difficulties in coordinating collective actions against high-level authorities, the majority of collective actions were directed at prefecture or lower-level authorities in China.

²⁴Yongshun Cai, 'Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China', *British Journal of Political Science* 38(3), (2008), pp. 411–432.

²⁵It is also found that online complaints are more likely to be solved if they are posted on websites of prefecture authorities. Yongshun Cai and Titi Zhou, 'Online Political Participation in China: Local Government and Differentiated Response', *China Quarterly* 238, (2019), pp. 331–352.

Targeting High-Level Authorities

Although nearly 80 percent of the protests approached and targeted the government at the prefecture level or lower, some collective actions were still directed at high-level authorities, including central authorities. This section presents empirical analyses of factors that affect the likelihood of Chinese citizens' staging protests targeting high-level governments. The first dependent variable in this analysis is a dummy indicating whether a protest approached and targeted central authorities in Beijing. A protest was coded as '1' if it targeted the central authority; otherwise, it was coded as '0.' The second dependent variable is also a dummy indicating whether a protest approached and targeted the provincial government. A protest was coded as '1' if it approached and targeted the provincial authority; otherwise, it was coded as '0.'

The explanatory variables include the time period during which a protest occurred and the type of protest group. This study divides protests into six time periods based on successive administrations at the central government level, namely the late Jiang Zemin years (2000–02), the early and late Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao period (2003–07 and then 2008–12), and the first three years and the last three years of the Xi Jinping era (2013–15, and then 2016–18). Xi's administration is divided into two equal periods of time for a simple consideration of assessing whether Xi administration had changed its attitude towards social protests over a period of six years.²⁶

Protesting groups are divided into the following ten categories: employees in the public sector, workers in domestic private firms, workers in joint-venture or foreign firms, petitioners, students, urban groups whose interests were harmed, ad hoc groups, religious and ethnic groups, veterans, and farmers. It is hypothesized that petitioners and veterans tend to use upward targeting to pursue their interests²⁷; that is, these two groups are more likely to stage protests targeting high-level governments. Other groups of protesters are posited to be less likely to target high-level governments because their grievances are mostly caused by local authorities or their employers.

Table 3 presents the results of logistic regressions predicting protests targeting central governments (Model 1) and protests targeting provincial governments (Model 2). For protests targeting central authorities, the time of the occurrence of protests is statistically significant. Despite the repressive attitude of the Xi Jinping administration,²⁸ other things being equal, protesters were more likely to stage protests targeting the central authority from 2016 to 2018, relative to the 2008–12 period. Chinese protesters commonly focused on non-political demands to reduce the risk of repression. If they believe that their claims do not challenge the political rule of the party, then they may think that their actions do not carry high risks.²⁹ The overall trend to increasingly target central authorities signals that protesters had less confidence in local governments' capacities; they turned to central authorities as they saw no alternative to seek local support. For example, veterans staged a series of large-scale protests in Beijing in recent years.³⁰ However, this belief in the central government may prove to be misplaced because such actions were more likely to be repressed, as discussed below.

As far as the protesting groups are concerned, veterans, petitioners, ethnic minorities and religious groups were more likely to stage protests targeting central authorities in comparison

²⁶The Xi administration began to impose stricter control over society after 2015. The laws and regulations that tightened social control were mostly promulgated and implemented in the latter three years of his rule (2016–2018). They include the '国家安全法' ['National Security Law'] implemented on 1 July 2015, the '反间谍法' ['Rules Governing the Counter-Espionage Law'] on 22 November 2017, the '反恐恐怖主義法' ['Anti-Terrorism Law'] on 1 January 2016, the '网络安全法' ['Cyber Security Law'], as well as the '境外非政府组织境内活动管理法' ['Foreign NGO Law'] on 1 January 2017.

²⁷Neil Diamant, 'Veterans, Organization, and the Politics of Martial Citizenship in China', *Journal of East Asian Studies* 8(1), (2008), pp. 119–158; Kevin J. O'Brien and Neil Diamant, 'Contentious Veterans: China's Retired Officers Speak out', *Armed Forces & Society*, 41(3), (2015): pp. 563–581; Neil Diamant and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Veterans' Political Activism in China', *Modern China* 41(3), (2015): pp. 278–312.

²⁸Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, 'State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?', *China Journal* 80, (2018), pp. 111–129; Diana Fu and Greg Distelhorst, 'Grassroots Participation and Repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping', *China Journal*, 79, (2017), pp. 100–122.

²⁹O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Chih-Jou Jay Chen, 'Deriving Happiness from Making Society Better: Chinese Activists as Warring Gods', in *The Chinese Pursuit of Happiness: Anxieties, Hopes, and Moral Tensions in Everyday Life*, eds. Becky Yang Hsu and Richard Madsen. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), pp. 131–154.

Table 3. Logistic regression estimates of reported protest targeting central governments and targeting provincial governments

	(1) Central government	(2) Provincial governments
Size of the protest group		
Less than 100	.441***	-.158
100–1,000 (reference group)		
More than 1,000	.171	.059
Period:		
2000–02	.187	-.250
2003–07	.243	-.026
2008–12 (reference group)		
2013–15	-.039	-.760***
2016–18	.385**	-.389***
Protesting group		
Public sector employees (reference group)		
Veterans	1.872***	1.363***
Workers in private firms	-.871***	.252
Workers in foreign firms	—	-2.648***
Ad hoc groups	-.275	-.158
Students	-.213	-.501
Urban residents harmed	.210	.449***
Petitioners	3.176***	.995***
Minorities and religious groups	2.486***	-1.847***
Farmers	-.689***	-.331*
Violent protest	-.833***	-.574***
Constant	-2.915***	-1.731***
Chi-square	2143.80***	509.74***
N	8768	9274

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001;

Note: Cases of workers in foreign firms was not included in the analysis of Model (1) because this group had not staged any protests targeting the central government.

with public sector employees. All other things being equal, for veterans, the odds of targeting the central governments were about $e^{1.872} = 6.50$ times (550 percent higher) than for public sector employees; for petitioners, the odds of targeting central governments were about $e^{3.176} = 23.95$ times (2,295 percent higher) than for public sector employees; for minorities and religious groups, the odds of targeting central governments were about $e^{2.486} = 12.01$ times (1,101 percent higher) than for public sector employees. Workers in private firms and farmers were less likely to stage protests targeting central authorities, partly because their grievances were mostly caused by their specific employers or local officials.

The size of a protesting group is used as an indicator of the cost or feasibility of coordination. Coordination among a group of protesters is critical for a protest to move from other parts of the country to Beijing. The authors posit that a small group is easier to coordinate than a large one. The protests are divided into three categories based on their size: less than 100 participants; between 100 and 1,000 (i.e., the reference group); and more than 1,000. The statistical results of logistic regression show that small-scale protests (i.e., less than 100 participants) targeting central authorities were more likely to occur than medium-scale ones with 100 to 1,000 participants. Coordinating a small protest is much less costly because of the travel expense and communication cost. Also, large groups of participants are likely to draw the attention of local authorities who will block them from proceeding to Beijing. Certainly, for participants from different parts of the country, some of them may be able to evade local authorities and successfully make their way to Beijing.³¹

Model 2 of Table 3 presents the results of logistic regressions predicting protests targeting provincial authorities. The effect of protest timing is statistically significant but differs from Model

³⁰Catherine Wong, 'China's Military Veterans Ministry Opens after Pension Protests', *South China Morning Post*, April 16, 2018, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2141894/chinas-military-veterans-ministry-opens-after-pension>.

³¹This is common among petitioners and veterans. Peasants from the same village may also travel to Beijing separately to avoid government monitoring. Chen and Chun, 'Surveys of Chinese Peasants,' pp. 115–116.

1. Other things being equal, protesters were less likely to stage protests against provincial authorities during the period of 2013–18, relative to the 2008–12 period. It suggests that under Xi's rule, protesters either employed upward targeting directed at central authorities or approached prefecture or lower-level governments to solve their problems.

Relative to public sector employees, veterans, petitioners, and urban residents whose interests were harmed were more likely to stage protests against provincial authorities. The results of Model 1 and Model 2 show that ethnic minorities and religious groups were more likely to approach the central government, but less likely to approach the provincial authorities. This may reflect these people's lack of confidence in the provincial authorities.

The statistical results also indicate that veterans and petitioners are the two groups that are most likely to launch protests targeting high-level governments, including central and provincial authorities. Veterans—hailing from all over the country and with tight bonds formed during military service—were unhappy about the mistreatment, poor employment prospects, and inadequate benefits, which they considered to be much worse than what they deserved.³² Until the mid-2010s, Beijing had seen thousands of petitioners traveling from the provinces to lodge their complaints in person with the highest petitioning body (the NPCPA) in Beijing. This phenomenon shows the ineffectiveness of the local governments in dealing with popular grievances; popular protests would occur when petitioners saw their cases dragging on for years or even decades, pushing them to resort to more desperate tactics.

Government Reaction

As upward targeting creates a dilemma for targeted authorities, they are motivated to discourage upward-targeting actions. One way of examining how the government deals with protests is to determine whether protesters succeed in achieving their goals.³³ However, because most of the protest news reports do not contain information on the results of protests, the authors were unable to use the result as a proxy for the government's attitude toward protests. On the other hand, this study's data includes information on whether the police made arrests when handling protests. Regardless of the results of protests, police arrests quantitatively denoted the risks that protesters faced. By examining the factors that influenced protester arrests, it is possible to explore the government's attitude toward protests targeting high-level authorities.

Empirical Analysis of Government Repression

This section presents a statistical analysis of the government's use of repression when it comes to dealing with instances of collective action. The dependent variable is a dummy—whether the police made arrests when handling a protest. A case was coded as '1' if the police made arrests when dealing with the case; otherwise, it was coded as '0.' Although not all arrested protesters faced criminal charges, arrests signaled the government's reluctance to tolerate protests and its intention to threaten and deter protesters.

The major explanatory variable is the target of action. The targets of protests were divided into four categories: the central authority, the provincial authority, the prefecture and county authorities, grassroots authorities, as well as firms and others. The authors hypothesize that the police were more likely to make arrests in dealing with protests targeting the central or provincial authorities because tolerating such protests weakens the state's authority and encourages more protests.

³²O'Brien and Diamant, 'Contentious Veterans', pp. 119–158; Neil Diamant and Kevin O'Brien, 'Veterans' political activism in China', pp. 278–312.

³³Cai, 'Collective Resistance in China'; Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, 'The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China', *American Journal of Sociology*, 118(6), (2013), pp. 1475–1508.

Three sets of control variables were included in this study's analysis. One is the time when a protest occurred, as explained in the above section. A second control variable is whether a protest involved violence (i.e., physical attacks, damaging property, arson and looting). Protesters who used violence were more likely to provide a justification for government repression.³⁴ A third control variable is the type of protesters. As explained previously, protesting groups were divided into ten categories, with public-sector employees as the reference group.

Table 4 reports the results of a logistic regression analysis on arrests of protesters in China. As hypothesized, the police were more likely to make arrests when dealing with protests targeting the central authority. All other things being equal, the odds of arresting protesters targeting central authorities were about $e^{.546} = 1.73$ times (73 percent higher) than of arresting protesters targeting firms and other agencies. As expected, violent protests were more likely to be repressed as the government uses repression to deter violence. The Chinese government has been more repressive during the Xi Jinping administration, particularly in the latest period of 2016–18. Specifically, all other things being equal, the odds of protesters being arrested were about $e^{.401} = 1.49$ times (an increase of 49 percent) higher during the early Xi Jinping era (2013–15) compared with protests during the late Hu-Wen period (2008–12); the odds of protesters being arrested were about $e^{.673} = 1.96$ times (an increase of 96 percent) higher during the late Xi Jinping era (2016–18) compared with protests during the late Hu-Wen period (2008–12).³⁵

Table 4. Arrests of protesters in China

Size of the protest group:	
Less than 100	-.230***
100–1,000 (reference group)	
More than 1,000	-.023
Period:	
2000–02	-.248
2003–07	-.049
2008–12 (reference group)	
2013–15	.401***
2016–18	.673***
Protesting group:	
Public sector employees (reference group)	
Veterans	-.235
Workers in private firms	.213*
Workers in foreign firms	-.084
Ad hoc groups	-.132
Students	-1.116***
Urban residents harmed	.650***
Petitioners	.589***
Minorities and Religious groups	1.079***
Farmers	.688***
Protest target	
Central authority	.546***
Provincial authority	.041
Prefecture and lower authority	-.062
Grassroots	-.019
Firms and others (reference group)	
Violent protest	1.587***
Constant	-1.900***
Chi-square	1619.779***
N	9376

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

³⁴Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), P. 104; William Gamson, 'The Success of the Unruly', in *Social Movements*, ed. Doug McAdam and David Snow (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 357–364.

³⁵The authors of this paper also tested if there is any interaction effect between period 2016–18 and central/provincial authority here. The results show the interactions are not significant.

Of all the protesting groups, students were the least likely to be the subject of government repression. Repressing students who do not raise political demands damages the regime's legitimacy. Compared with public sector employees, the workers in private firms, the urban residents whose interests were harmed, petitioners, religious and ethnic minority groups, and farmers were more likely to be arrested by police. All other things being equal, the odds of arresting petitioners were about $e^{.589} = 1.80$ times (80 percent higher) than those of public sector employees; the odds of arresting ethnic minorities and religious groups were about $e^{1.079} = 2.94$ times (194 percent higher) than of public sector employees; and the odds of arresting farmers were about $e^{.688} = 1.99$ times (99 percent higher) than of public sector employees. Thus, government repression is selective.

Government Responses

The data presented in this study show that in the Xi era (particularly during the 2016–18 period) social protests were more likely to target central authorities. However, citizens protesting against central authorities were also the subject of state repression, particularly petitioners and minorities and religious groups. Facing challenges from various social groups, the Chinese government employed different strategies to cope with protesters, resorting to both repression and accommodation.³⁶ In addition, the Chinese government has also attempted to amend its policies to reduce collective actions.³⁷

For veterans, the state offered conciliation and benefits. As Beijing seeks to more effectively manage the welfare of the country's 57 million former military personnel, it set up a Ministry of Veterans Affairs on 15 April 2018. The new ministry aims to establish a centralized system to formulate policies and care regulations for veterans, including handling their pensions and retirement benefits. The government had promised that veterans would be given preference when it comes to seeking jobs. In July 2018, the government announced it was raising the standard stipends paid to disabled veterans by about 10 percent, among others. It claimed to delive 'plaques of honor' to the homes of all acting and demobilized soldiers, a straightforward way of making them feel more appreciated.³⁸

According to Chinese official media, during the first 100 days of the establishment of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs in 2018, more than 23,000 veterans had visited the ministry to petition; sometimes within one day, there were as many as 1,600 veteran petitioners and more than one thousand petition letters arriving at the ministry.³⁹ It appears that the newly-founded Ministry of Veterans Affairs has not been able to solve the most urgent problems of disgruntled veterans. Whether it can achieve its mission of establishing a support mechanism to ensure a good quality of life for veterans remains to be seen.

For petitioners, minorities and religious groups, the state responded with even tougher management and tightened surveillance. The priority task for the state is to reduce the number of collective petitions arriving in Beijing asking for intervention from central authorities. The state's critical measures included establishing an online petitioning system and banning leapfrog (skip-level) petitions. Furthermore, through the decentralization of responsibilities, local governments have been prompted to coordinate organizational forces at all levels to investigate potential petitioners, intercepting them before they can mobilize to visit high-level governments and make formal complaints.

As mentioned earlier, the NPCPA announced in 2014 new petitioning procedures, stating that the petition authorities would no longer receive in-person visits if petitioners 'skip levels' (*yueji*); or

³⁶Lee and Zhang, 'The Power of Instability'; Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters', *The China Quarterly* 215, (2013), pp. 533–52.

³⁷Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, 'Rightful Resistance in Rural China', pp. 95–114; Cai, 'Collective Resistance in China', pp. 155–183.

³⁸Catherine Wong, 'China's Military Veterans Ministry Opens after Pension Protests'.

³⁹"平地起楼"退役军人事务部第一个百天' [The First 100 Days of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs], *新华网* [Xinhua News], August 1, 2018, accessed October 4, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-08/01/c_1123204524.htm.

leapfrog), while written petitions sent via the Internet or traditional mail would not be subject to restrictions.⁴⁰ The new procedures also stipulated that petitioning results should be entered into the system so that when people are unsatisfied with the results and resubmit complaints based on the same reasons and facts, the petition department will no longer be required to process their requests.

The ban on 'skip-level' petitions and the new transparency regarding the information on petitions have increased local governments' zeal to deal with petitioners' complaints. As a result, government-published data maintains that 'after May 2014, the number of petitioners visiting the NPCPA in Beijing decreased by 36 percent.'⁴¹ Also, the promotion of 'online petitions' has also reduced the number of people visiting central authorities in person. In 2013, the government began to implement online petitions and engaged in vigorous propaganda work, arguing that the most significant advantage of the reforms was that those who intended to petition would no longer have to pay for transportation and accommodation costs, and could easily complain directly through the Internet from the comfort of their homes.

Furthermore, petitions can be tracked online so that petitioners can examine which departments are currently handling their cases and learn about processing results. This has notably improved the efficiency of petition work. In 2018, the NPCPA Administration stated that the number of online petitions had increased significantly across the country; its proportion of all petitions had increased every year. During the first half of 2018, the number of online petitions processed by the NPCPA already accounted for more than 50 percent of all petitions, showing that for a large part of the public online petitions have already become the main channel to lodge petitions. However, these channels are not necessarily effective in solving grievances.⁴²

These changes in the petition system have reduced the number of petitioners in Beijing, but they have diverted most of the pressure to local governments. On the one hand, illegal means such as violence, interception, and detention of petitioners are still common. On the other hand, petitioners are also subject to more government control and mediation efforts. The government has employed digital monitoring to intercept petitioners. Not only are their WeChat conversations infiltrated and surveilled, but they are also regularly harassed or detained by police.⁴³ In 2017, a facial recognition system was integrated into the waiting area of Shanghai's Main Railway Station. During the session of the 19th National People's Congress, the 'investigative efforts during key periods and the timely detection of suspicious persons' were strengthened to meet the needs of petitioner interception.⁴⁴

Collective protests of ethnic minorities and religious groups have been met with particularly severe suppression by the state. In addition to strengthening social control in both Xinjiang and Tibet, the rapid growth of religious organizations and activities in Han majority areas has also become a subject of state repression. In 2013, Zhejiang began its 'Three Rectifications, One Demolition' (*San gai yi chai*) campaign, transforming old residential areas, old factories, and urban villages, and demolishing illegal buildings. Among those, houses of worship set up by Christians and practitioners of folk religions have often been targeted as illegal structures. In 2014, of Christian

⁴⁰ 国家信访局印发关于进一步规范信访事项事宜办法' ['National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration Issue of Information on Further Regulation of Letters and Visits'], 中央政府网 [Chinese Government Network], April 23, 2014, accessed October 2, 2019, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-04/23/content_2665286.htm.

⁴¹ 国家信访局官员: 进京上访人数下降减少北京压力' ['The Official of National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration Said: The Decline in the Number of Petitioners to Beijing Reduces the Pressure on Beijing'], 人民网 [People's Network], February 9, 2015, accessed October 3, 2019, <http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2015/0209/c1001-26528977.html>.

⁴² 网上受理信访制度实行5年来 网上信访量占比过半' ['Online Acceptance of Petition System for 5 Years, Online Letters and Visits Accounted for more than Half'], 人民日报 [People's Daily], July 27, 2018, accessed October 3, 2019, <http://sc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n2/2018/0727/c345167-31865108.html>.

⁴³ 天津访民微信发被监控视频遭刑拘' ['Tianjin Petitioner Wechat Issued Surveillance Video was Arrested'], 自由亚洲电台 [Radio Free Asia], October 9, 2017, accessed October 3, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/renquanfazhi/q1-10092017103348.html>.

⁴⁴ 铁路进京明起实行二次安检' ['Railways Enter Beijing Jingming to Implement Secondary Security Inspection'], 上海勞動報 [Shanghai Labor News], October 8, 2017, accessed October 2, 2019, <http://www.51ldb.com/shsldb/tt/content/b4771794-1c1e-45d8-af61-d3b1e0902258.html>.

buildings in Zhejiang alone, 100 churches and 426 crosses were razed.⁴⁵ During the demolition process, dozens of collective protests and police-community conflicts occurred.

In February 2018, the new 'Religious Affairs Ordinance' went into effect,⁴⁶ subjecting China's Christian churches and believers to even more stringent control. For example, local government officials have been going door-to-door to conduct searches, as well as confiscating and prohibiting all items containing the words 'Emmanuel' and 'God Loves All Beings.' Churches are restricted from holding youth camps. Schools are forbidden to spread religious ideas or host religious activities. The wearing of religious clothing and religious symbols (such as cross necklaces) inside schools is also strictly forbidden. Parents are now required to educate minors not to enter religious places.

When comparing the state's control over religious groups and petitioners, the rough manner in which local governments banned or suppressed religious groups and religious sites becomes even more obvious. Petitioners may be seen as threatening social stability, but religious groups are seen as challenging the political rule of the Communist Party.⁴⁷ As a result, the party state suppresses religious groups in the name of 'national security.' Therefore, to ensure regime stability, state repression targets not only politically weak groups like petitioners,⁴⁸ but also politically challenging religious groups.

Conclusion

The political hierarchy in China dictates that citizens whose grievances are connected to lower-level authorities may approach high-level authorities, including the central government. Their 'upward targeting' reflects their belief in higher-level authorities' obligation and ability to address their problems. Upward targeting has occurred in citizens' individual actions, such as petitions, as well as collective actions like gatherings or protests. However, upward targeting creates a dilemma for the targeted authority because neither accommodation nor repression is a desirable option. Accommodating people who use upward targeting can encourage such behavior, whereas repressing them sacrifices the legitimacy of the authority.

This study analyzes citizens' use of upward targeting in China by examining more than 12,000 instances of collective actions that occurred from 2000 to 2018. There have been three major findings. First, the majority of social protests in China have been caused by local authorities, but upward targeting still occurred among some people who chose to direct their action at high-level authorities, including the central authority. Specifically, veterans, ethnic minorities, and religious groups were more likely to target the central government. However, upward targeting tends to be localized in that the prefecture government has been most frequently targeted by local residents who resorted to upward targeting. It is more feasible to coordinate small-scale actions instead of large ones in upward-targeting actions.

Second, Chinese local governments tend to be repressive towards collective actions directed at the central authority. Participants who directed their collective action at the central authority were more likely to be repressed. As upward-targeting actions put pressure on the government, the government has taken a number of measures to reduce people's grievances and their collective actions. The central government tried to accommodate veterans' interests, but its policies towards petitioners and ethnic or religious groups were not as accommodating.

⁴⁵二〇一四年中国维稳与人权状况年终总结' [Year-End Summary of China's Stability and Human Rights Situation in 2014], 民生观察 [Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch], February 16, 2015), accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.msguancha.com/a/lanmu12/2015/0216/11888.html>.

⁴⁶宗教事务条例 [Religious Affairs Management Regulations], 中国政府网 [Chinese Government Network], September 9, 2017, accessed October 3, 2019, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm.

⁴⁷Lily Kuo, 'In China, They're Closing Churches, Jailing Pastors—and even Rewriting Scripture', *The Guardian*, January 13, 2019, accessed October 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>.

⁴⁸Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp. 134–135; Cai, 'Power Structure and Regime Resilience', pp. 441–432.

Authoritarian governments may tolerate social protests to gather information on state agents and local situations.⁴⁹ However, these protests may escalate or diffuse. This study sheds light on why government tolerance does not necessarily lead to protest escalation and diffusion in China. It finds that the combination of citizens' blame attribution and the difficulties in coordinating upward-targeting collective actions lead to localization of social protests. The diffusion of protests is conditional upon the rise of focal issues and the decline of state capacity.⁵⁰ Because of decentralization, citizens' grievances are localized in China. Moreover, because of the power and resources of the central and local governments, both diffusion and upward targeting become difficult in individual and collective action.

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⁴⁹Haifeng Huang, Serra Boranbay and Ling Huang, 'Media, Protest Diffusion, and Authoritarian Resilience', *Political Science Research and Methods* 7(1), (2019), pp. 23–42; Peter Lorentzen, 'China's Strategic Censorship', *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(2), (2014), pp. 402–414.

⁵⁰Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Kenneth Andrews and Michael Biggs, 'The Dynamics of Protest Diffusion: Movement Organizations, Social Networks, and News Media in the 1960 Sit-Ins', *American Sociological Review* 71(5), (2006), pp. 752–777.