

Explaining Variance in Patterns of State Reaction to Religious and Land-Related Protests in Contemporary China

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China has been characterized by a growing amount of collective protests since the 1990s. Government sources state that while the number of individual and collective protests reached 74,000, with a total number of 3.8 million protesters in 2004¹, more than 87,000 protests occurred throughout the country in 2005². The actual number may have been higher than suggested. Patterns of state reaction to such protests have varied significantly. Unfortunately, this variance has not been reflected transparently enough in the academic literature on contentious politics in China or in the Western media. In its attempt to cope with the rise of social unrest, the central government has prioritized certain claims over others. This paper addresses the following puzzle: why has the Chinese government been constant in sanctioning religious protests on the one hand, and has recently shown greater responsiveness to increasingly disruptive land-related mobilization? There are two reasons why this question constitutes a puzzle. First, in an authoritarian system such as that of China, where challenges to the authority are regularly sanctioned, one would expect that the ways in which people organize and mobilize (i.e. whether or not protests are disruptive and/or involve violence) matter in how the state responds to collective action. The paper suggests that violence and/or central government actors' perception of protest disruption do not influence the form that the central government's reaction to protests takes. Second, the behaviour of the central government in China is puzzling as it has involved status quo or accommodation in some cases of illegally conducted protests. Where freedom to organize and freedom of speech are severely limited, one would expect that illegal protests such as public demonstrations as a result of land seizures and underground religious resistance³ all be sanctioned. Not all have been so in China, however. While the most discreet forms of illegal protests (i.e. religious ones) have been regularly sanctioned, the central government has increasingly resorted to status quo or accommodation in dealing with the most socially visible illegal forms of resistance. I address the above puzzle by arguing that the Chinese state's responsiveness to collective protests depends upon the following factors: 1) the level of perceived anti-stateness of mobilized claims on the part of the central authorities; 2) whether state actors believe mobilized interests have been accommodated already to a significant extent; 3) whether the problems highlighted by the claims are framed according to one of the central government's current priorities, that is the fight against local corruption; and 4) the likelihood that mobilization on the basis of an issue encourage the formation of a cross-national movement disruptive of political order and societal stability. Religious protests are less likely to be accommodated because: the accommodation of religious claims entails a reconsideration of the core principles underlying the Chinese nation; there is a general consensus among central state authorities that the government has done enough for the protection of religious diversity; religious claims are usually not related to problems of local corruption, and thus the central government has less incentives to disagree with local officials' sanctions on religious protesters; and religious protests are localized to the extent of not posing any significant threat of large-scale rebellion to the state. The central government, however, has been more responsive to land-related

¹ Reuters, 'Social Unrest Challenges Communist Rule', 7 December 2006.

² Xinhua News Agency, 'China Strives to Prevent and Handle Mass Incidents', 9 December 2006.

³ Religious resistance, regularly take the form of underground religious ceremonies. To the extent that these ceremonies are not officially recognized, and that they involve the existence of unregistered religious sites, they are labelled as illegal by the authorities.

protests, which increasingly involve significant levels of disruption and/or violence. Such responsiveness has been motivated by the following factors: land-related claims have not questioned the principles underlying the idea of the Chinese nation; there is no real sense among the central leadership that land-related claims have been accommodated satisfactorily; land-related protesters have strategically incorporated their claims within an ‘anti-local corruption’ discourse, resonating with one of the central authorities’ key concerns⁴; and unlike religious protests that have a greater chance of remaining localized, land-related mobilization has the potential to grow as a cross-national movement challenging the political establishment.

The paper is divided into three parts. First, it introduces key concepts commonly used in the contentious politics literature on China, and clarifies their meaning. It then elaborates on the theoretical *raison d’être* of the study. Second, it explains why central authorities have not been accommodative of religious protesters, and why they have been responsive to land-related protests. In doing so, I develop four hypotheses hoping that they be further tested on additional cases, inside and outside of China. Finally, I draw important conclusions as to the potential explanatory role of societal violence in accounting for central government reaction to collective protests in decentralized authoritarian societies.

The Conceptual and Theoretical Boundaries of the Analysis

Collective Protests

I define protests as forms of public and collective action that involve contestation or claim making targeted at an individual, an organization, or an aggregation of state or non-state actors. Cases of protests in this study, however, specifically target local or central state actors. Protests may take the form of a process that unfolds over a relatively long period of time, and may include changes in mobilization or protest strategies. Indeed, throughout that process, protesters may resort to a variety of pressuring tactics such as writing petitions, attempts at negotiating directly with the authorities, public demonstrations, road blockages, and at times, the destruction of infrastructure, physical clashes, and/or assassinations. The objective of the paper is to understand patterns of central government reaction to collective forms of claim making. The definition thus excludes individual forms of protests in China, such as individual petitions, hunger strikes, and self-immolation.

Moreover, the paper assumes that types of collective protests in China vary on the basis of the issue(s) protesters mobilize upon, rather than the main actors concerned. Scholars of contentious politics (Perry, 2001; Wasserstrom, 1999) have generally defined types of protests according to the main victims of the issues addressed in claim making. For instance, they have too often talked about student, peasant and workers’ protests. This is problematic for two reasons. First, using the ‘workers’ protest’ category leads to the misleading impression that actors involved in such workers are exclusively peasants, while in reality this may not always be the case. For instance, the Democracy Wall period in China, which lasted from 1978 to 1980, saw the re-emergence of a youth movement which some politicized workers joined as an opportunity to express their own

⁴ The first three factors in both cases of religious and land-related mobilization have been identified as a result of discourse analysis conducted based on a number of government speeches, reports, and Chinese media-based articles.

claims and dissatisfaction⁵. Dissident journals often run by student communities addressed problems pertaining to the working classes⁶. The scholarly community and the media have talked about the Tiananmen protests as student-led, thereby neglecting other important actors who also mobilized with politicized students, namely workers and peasants⁷.

Second, distinguishing protests on the basis of the main actors involved leaves unspecified, the motives underlying the organization of protests. For instance, students in China have mobilized on the basis of a variety of claims such as some of the immediate problems student communities are facing (i.e. tuition fees, the abolition of some university courses in minority languages, and so on), broad societal concerns including the need for democratization, and the negative effects of the implementation of economic reforms in China since the 1978. Students have also mobilized in reaction to particular international events⁸. Collective protests should thus be distinguished by the claims they are based on, rather than the actors who organize and/or take part in them⁹. In a similar vein, for purposes of conceptual clarity, I choose to call 'land-related protests' what several scholars in the literature on contentious politics in China have commonly called 'peasant protests'. Like the 'student protest' category, the term 'peasant protest' does not allow us to specify whether peasants (and other potential actors such as local officials) mobilize as a result of tax burdens, land expropriation, lack of compensation as a result of land seizures or some environmental disaster, and so on. The category of 'land-related protests' is in this sense, more specific than that of peasant mobilization, and yet, large enough to allow several kinds of actors to mobilize on the basis of distinctive issues pertaining to land rights in China's rural areas.

Violent vs. Disruptive Protests

Violent protests involve destruction on the part of protesters. Such destruction is voluntary, and may be planned or not, prior to mobilization. Violence may be targeted at individuals, groups, public infrastructure, or government offices. Cases of protests involving civilian violence have in the last decade mostly involved identity-based (i.e. religious, racial), land-related and pension or wage-related claims. Among some of the violent religious protests were the Urumqi bus bombs and market bombings in 1992 and 1993, the July 1995 demonstrations of violence in Khotan, protests, assassinations and bombings in 1996, the three Uyghur-orchestrated bombings in February 1997, following the Yining (or Ghulja) incident in February 1997, in Xinjiang¹⁰. Cases of violent land-

⁵ Goldman, Merle, 'The Twentieth Anniversary of the Democracy Wall Movement', *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. III, No. 3 (1999): <http://www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/41/43/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Han, Dongfang (2005), 'Chinese Labour Struggles', *New Left Review*, Vol. 34, pp. 65-85.

⁸ The anti-NATO demonstrations well illustrate that. The protests occurred in 1999 on a number of student campuses, including that of Beijing University, as a result of the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade (Wasserstrom, 1999).

⁹ The distinction between claims and claim makers suggests that certain interests ought not to be associated with a particular set of actors. Actors do not always have a fixed set of preferences because they belong to a particular occupational group or social class.

¹⁰ In January, a demonstration, which started out as peaceful, turned into a riot involving confrontations between Uyghur protesters and the Chinese police. The incident followed the government's ban of traditional Uyghur social clubs called 'Mäshräp', which consisted of Uyghur gatherings involving musical performances and soccer tournaments (Millward, 2004, p. 17). The government suspected they were

related protests also abound, especially in the 1990s. In 1993, the authorities reported 6,000 disturbant cases, involving some level of disruption and/or violence. Violent protests all together led to '8,200 casualties among township and county officials, 560 [ransacked] county-level offices, and some 385 [fatally injured] public security personnel' (So, 2007, p. 561).

For protests to be disruptive, protesters' claims must in some way challenge the power of the authorities, and the latter must perceive this challenge. Hence, a protest is disruptive if perceived by the authorities as potentially compromising societal stability. It is often associated with the level of violence involved in a protest. While violent protests are categorized as disruptive, protests do not need to involve violence in order to be perceived by their targets as disruptive. Non-violent protests may be perceived as disruptive in the eyes of the authorities if they occur at a high frequency, or if protesters are persistent in their mobilizing efforts. From that perspective, a group is less likely to appear as disruptive in the eyes of local officials if it stops its activities after having failed to obtain what it demanded as a result of a protest or a few instances of non-violent mobilization.

Why State Reaction as the Dependent Variable?

The literature on contentious politics in China has predominantly studied resistance and protests as the dependent variable. In doing so, scholars have attempted to explain the determinants of political participation in the countryside (Jennings, 1997), the conditions under which protesters are likely to mobilize disruptively (Chen, 2007; Cai, 2004), the reasons for the rise of legal collective and individual forms of protests (O'Brien and Li, 2006), the reasons why China lacks cross-national movements (Stalley and Yang, 2006), the role of history in shaping current protests (Perry, 2002; 2001), cross-regional patterns of [labour-based] claim-making in China (Hurst, 2004), the reasons why peasants protests against local authorities as opposed to Beijing (So, 2007; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Hurst and O'Brien, 2002), the conditions under which mobilization may be successful (O'Brien and Li, 2006; Shi and Cai, 2006), the reasons why mobilization has been unsuccessful (Yu, 2006; Perry, 2001). While protests have been studied extensively as a dependent variable, very few analyses¹¹ have studied the conditions under which state reaction may be accommodative or not. The ones that have done so (O'Brien and Li, 2006, in some of their chapters; Perry, 2001) have failed to provide a comprehensive and hence accurate account of patterns of Chinese state reaction to collective mobilization, for three reasons. *First*, some analyses have treated the Chinese state as a monolithic entity for purposes of theoretical convenience. This is particularly true of Perry (2001)'s analysis, which nowhere distinguishes the potentially different ways in which local authorities (i.e. provincial, county, township, village) and the central government react to different forms of collective protests. Perry provides a historical explanation of the reasons why the

associated with the conduct of illegal religious activities. This Yining demonstration subsequently became a symbol of Uyghur nationalism. Following the demonstrations, three men were sentenced to death penalty, and 27 of them were jailed. The Western media see the Chinese state's strong reaction to the Yining riots as having encouraged a series of terrorist attacks on the part of Uyghurs in Xinjiang as well as in Beijing, in 1997.

¹¹ Perry (2001) has compared the Chinese government's handling of different types of protests including 'economically motivated actions [...], nationalistically inspired demonstrations [...] and religiously rooted resistance' (p. 163).

central authorities are more tolerant of localized labour strikes and riots as a result of tax burdens, encourage anti-US imperialism protests, and yet repress Falun Gong members (p. 163). Her puzzle however is based on a misleading assumption. Perry's analysis does not specify that central authorities tolerance toward localized strikes and tax riots in no way means that these strikes and riots are tolerated; in reality, whether they protests are tolerated or not on an immediate basis depends upon local government officials. Beijing, in the majority of instances, has limited control over the tolerance of localized strikes. Hence, the central authorities may 'accommodate' protesters, but accommodation does not necessarily mean that protesters will not immediately be repressed for 'disrupting' stability in a particular locality. *Second*, some scholars have disaggregated the state with unsatisfactory analytical intentions. In a number of studies, the disaggregated state is not used in order to assess protest outcomes per se or shed light on the complexity of state responses to protests, but has served the purpose of shedding light on protesters' mobilizing strategies and the way they frame their claims to increase their chances of success. For instance, in O'Brien and Li's *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (2006), the disaggregated state is central to the idea that rightful resisters do not target the state as a whole per se but try to appeal to Beijing as they are denouncing local officials' misconduct. The authors however do not theorize about why the central government is at times responsive to some instances of rightful resistance, and why at other times, it is not. Disaggregating the state ought to go beyond the simple acknowledgement that the state is a complex aggregation of actors with conflicting interests, and entail an exploration of what it actually means for the state to be disaggregated for how different layers of the Chinese state respond to collective protests. In other words, scholars have failed to theorize about the multi-layered aspects of state reaction to societal mobilization. *Third*, scholars have failed to distinguish immediate state reaction and medium- or long-term reaction to collective protests. While local governments tend to react to protests immediately, Beijing commonly reacts to social unrest in the medium- or long-run. Scholars have typically emphasized the state's immediate reactions to the outbreak of protests¹². In doing so, they have failed to understand the state's dealings with the rise of social unrest as one that involves different layers of reactions at different points in time, and in this sense, as an ongoing process which does not always involve sanctions but in several respects, a constructive and responsive attitude.

Why An Exclusive Focus on the Central Government?

This paper primarily focuses on the central government's reaction to collective protests, as opposed to that of local authorities. By local authorities, I specifically refer to elected and non-elected village leaders as well as township and county governments. At the local level, disruptive or violent mobilization on the basis of either religion or land-related claims is likely to trigger sanctions on the part of local authorities, though the latter are also commonly applied in the absence of disruption or violence. Why are sanctions on protesters regularly applied at the local level? Three factors are worth highlighting. *First*, local authorities are closer to the population, and hence more likely to feel the potentially

¹² See O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*; Hurst, 'Understanding Contentious Collective Action by Chinese Laid-Off Workers: The Importance of Regional Political Economy'; Wright, 'The China Democracy Party and the Politics of Protest in the 1980s-1990s'; Chen Feng, 'Subsistence Crises, Managerial Corruption and Labour Protests in China'.

disruptive impact of protests. Because one of their responsibilities is to maintain societal order in their locality, they are likely to be the ones immediately reacting to protests. The use of force is perceived as a legitimate means of maintaining stability, and because it aims at achieving the latter purpose, it is often not questioned at higher levels of China's bureaucracy. *Second*, decentralization in the absence of strong institutionalization of regulatory practices within the Chinese bureaucracy has also increased the gap between central, provincial and local governments. This has, as a result, led to the perpetuation of power abuses on the part of local governments, which the central government frequently remains unaware of. *Third*, because the primary aims of protesters have been to report the misconduct or misbehaviour (i.e. property mismanagement or violations of religious practice)¹³ of local officials to higher levels of the bureaucracy¹⁴, local governments have reacted to mobilization in a harsher way. Protesters' denunciations are threatening to local authorities as they send the central government the message that the former are unable to secure stability in their own localities. Beijing is also increasingly relying upon instances of local protests as indicators of the poor quality of local governance, as well as to identify cases of fraud and corruption on the part of local governments. It remains thus in the interest of local officials to sanction protesters when they mobilize and discourage them from further articulating their claims in order to avoid attracting Beijing's attention.

In exclusively focusing on the central government's reaction to protests, I do not mean to disregard that these events regularly end up on a negative note. I believe that there is an advantage in focusing on the central government's reaction to collective protests, rather than state reaction as a whole. Understanding state reaction to rising social unrest requires analyzing the effects of social unrest on state priorities, policy formulation, and political reforms. The latter are formulated at the top of the Chinese leadership. Policy decisions may not always have direct effects on the Chinese population; they however shape and redefine the legal and political systems. If one wants to understand whether or not and how social unrest affects policy-making, one ought to theorize about the ways in which the central government responds to various kinds of mobilized claims, some of which resonate with Beijing's priorities and concerns.

The central government may react to instances of collective protests in various ways including accommodation, status quo, the application of sanctions, or a combination of either two or three of them, over time. Generally, the central government has simultaneously maintained positions of status quo and sanctions with respect to religious mobilization. The central government has maintained status quo to the extent that it has not taken any action to solve the problems of religious protesters. It has not been accommodative to the extent that it has denounced religious mobilization, and voiced its support for the actions of the local government to 'maintain peace'. In contrast, the central government has been more accommodative of violent land-related mobilization. Accommodation entails a degree of responsiveness to claims articulated by protesters, on

¹³ Decentralization in China since the 1980s has had the effect of increasing peasants' expectations vis-à-vis their village, township or county governments on a range of daily matters, including the freedom of cultural practices, the right to possess land, taxation, and so on.

¹⁴ O'Brien and Li (2006)'s interviews and surveys indicate that a large amount of protesters trust the central government and distrust lower levels of the bureaucracy (p. 42). The authors claim this 'encourages the transformation of policy violations into opportunities for rightful resistance' (p. 43).

the part of the state. There are several possible levels and forms of accommodation. A case scenario reflecting lower degrees of accommodation would be one involving the absence of sanctions, and the state's sympathy with protesters' claims without concrete actions to alleviate the problem that generated protests. A case scenario reflecting a high degree of accommodation would involve concrete actions taken by the state to alleviate the problems of protesters. Such actions may take the form of the adoption and implementation of central policies that address the claims of protesters. They may also involve the central authorities' intervention at the grassroots level to persuade or force local authorities to change some of their controversial strategies or policies. Perry (2001) provides as an example, the case of taxicab drivers' strike in the city of Changsha in the province of Hunan in 1993, which led Beijing to take measure to convince the municipal authorities to abandon its intentions to increase taxi drivers' license fees to an unaffordable level (p. 168).

The Rise of Social Unrest in China since the 1990s: Religious and Land-related Mobilization

Religious Protests

Religious protests have been common in Chinese society since the 1980s. The launching of economic liberalization in the country in 1978 was accompanied by the softening of policies towards religious groups. The state now recognizes and protects five religions: Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. The 1978 Constitution guarantees the freedom of religious practice, with some restrictions. These restrictions take different forms across religions. For instance, in order to be a CCP member, individuals must abandon any religious allegiance (Mackerras, 2001, p. 290). Political participation within the rather rigid boundaries of the Chinese political sphere conflicts with religious practice. Moreover, the construction of religious sites is controlled by the state. The authorities commonly choose religious leaders to ensure that the practice of religious faith does not conflict with the interests of the political establishment. The content of religious publications is also closely monitored by the state (Fuller and Lipman, 2004). And finally, there are severe restrictions in terms of children and teenagers' access to religious education. In Xinjiang, Uyghurs¹⁵ under the age of eighteen are not allowed to receive any kind of religious instruction. Restrictions on the freedom of religious practice have in some cases fostered religious discontent. Religious discontent however has not exclusively been triggered by restrictions on religious practice. Socio-economic grievances have also helped generate resentment toward the Han Chinese and the central government, among some religious groups. For instance, Uyghur nationalists in Xinjiang claim that the Uyghur people are discriminated against in terms of access to employment and resources. Mackerras (2001) maintains that most of the tertiary sector in Xinjiang's urban areas is dominated by the Han Chinese. Among Uyghur nationalists exists the genuine belief that Han migration to Xinjiang has constituted a state-led colonization project, aiming at dispossessing the Uyghurs of their land and natural resources (Mackerras, 2001).

¹⁵ Uyghurs are a Turkic Muslim group concentrated for the most part in the northwestern autonomous region of Xinjiang, in China.

While the 1980s and 1990s have been portrayed as the decades of Islamic and Tibetan Buddhist resurgence in China, more attention has been paid to Christian mobilization since the early 2000s. The latest instances of protests in Tibet however seem to indicate a public revival of Tibetan nationalism¹⁶. Intentions underlying religious protests have varied, including pressuring the local and central governments for greater religious autonomy or for the respect of already existent regulations on religious practice. Religious mobilization has taken individual and collective, as well as overt and covert forms. In both cases of disruptive and non-disruptive forms of religious mobilization, the central government has not been accommodative. I elaborate on two cases to illustrate this point: first, the central government's reaction to covert Christian contestation of restrictive religious policies through the organization and attendance of private religious ceremonies; second, the instances of Tibetan mobilization in Tibet and neighbouring provinces, in March 2008.

Attending private religious ceremonies in underground churches has become a common collective form of covert protest against restrictive religious policies, among some Christian groups¹⁷. Calling for the freedom of conscience, Christian members¹⁸ and pastors meet in private houses without contacting the state-run Three Self Patriotic Movement¹⁹. In December 2007, the central government conducted a campaign against illegal Christian practices and arrested 270 pastors across the country²⁰. Christian activist Zhou Heng was arrested in Xinjiang in August 2007 accused of illegally receiving bibles with the intention of distributing them among the population²¹. On 29 July 2006 more than three thousand Christians in the province of Zhejiang protested against the local authorities for demolishing a Christian church²². Protesters mobilized against what they perceived as a violation of their fundamental religious rights, that is their right to religious practice. Local officials justified their decision to demolish the church by saying that it had been under construction without official and legal approval²³. The protest took the form of non-formal public collective action. While it was initially aimed at being peaceful, it turned into violence when clashes occurred between Christian residents and the local police force.²⁴ Local authorities reacted to the protest by arresting a large

¹⁶ 'Tibet Riots: Enforced Calm After the Storm', *China Digital Times*, 21 March 2008.

¹⁷ Such forms of resistance are also common among the Uyghurs in parts of Xinjiang, where attending going to the Mosque on Friday as well as underground religious training for youth under the age of eighteen have become a way a contesting central government policies.

¹⁸ While the East China Normal University in Shanghai estimates that the Christian population in China is of 40 million, unofficial estimates range from 50 to 100 million members (SCMP, 26 January 2008).

¹⁹ The Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council represent the only legally registered Protestant church in Mainland China.

²⁰ 'Small Mercies: Indications of a Policy Shift May Save Christians from Persecution on the Mainland', *South China Morning Post*, 26 January 2008.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Buckley, Chris, 'China Detains Christian Reporter for Church Protest', *Reuters News*, 12 August 2006.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Two types of protests are commonly categorized as violent: on the one hand, the ones that were planned to be violent, and on the other, the ones that did not aim at violence but in the course of their manifestation, involved clashes between protesters and the police. These two types of protests are characterized by very different dynamics, different types of actors with distinctive interests and goals. When one seeks to assess the effects of societal violence on state behaviour and decision-making, one hence ought to grasp the nuances between these types of violent protests. More ink ought to be spilt on whether or not protests that

number of protesters, mostly the ones suspected of having triggered the event and those who had been disruptive. Two weeks following the protest, between twenty and fifty Christian activists remained detained, several of whom had been severely injured. A Christian journalist who had denounced the reaction of local authorities in reports published on the Internet was also detained as a result²⁵. Cases of religious arrests commonly involve the confiscation and burning of religious literature, harassment, as well as torture, and are at times followed by medium- or long-term detention in labour camps²⁶.

Public religious demonstrations whether conducted peacefully or involving disruption and/or violence appear as less common than covert ones, though this may also be symptomatic of the lack of media coverage of such events, or censorship. The central government's reaction to recent instances of Tibetan mobilization is worth elaborating on. Monk-led demonstrations in Lhasa started out as peaceful on March 10th, 2008. On March 16th, these protests gathered over 10,000 protesters (including a large amount of lamas) in various locations in Tibet, and the provinces of Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai²⁷. The immediate causes of these protests remain unclear. Media-based reports dwell on some of the structural conditions that have been feeding Tibetan religious, political, social and economic grievances against state-sponsored modernization projects, which have been accompanied by restrictions over the practices of Tibetan Buddhism, have generated economic and social opportunities (i.e. access to employment and education) for the Han Chinese population as opposed to the dominant ethnic minority in Tibet, and have encouraged the replacement of Tibetan architectural heritage including Buddhist temples, with modern high-rise buildings. While the causes of such demonstrations need to be understood clearly, I believe it is equally important to shed light on the central government's reaction to the events. The central government condemned the protests and was indirectly pro-active in sanctioning them. While it did not directly send troops to Tibet to stabilize the situation, the Tibetan regional autonomous government as well as neighbouring provincial governments were ordered to intervene militarily. A large number of protesters were injured, killed and/or arrested. The regional autonomous government has encouraged some to turn themselves in to the police in order to avoid harsher punishment. It is worth noting that the proportions sanctions have taken in the case of recent Tibetan mobilization are incomparable to central government sanctions in cases of covert Christian mobilization. In the former case, the central government ordered direct military intervention on the part of Tibet's regional autonomous government as well as the Gansu and Qinghai provincial governments, to stabilize the situation in areas where social unrest was occurring. In most cases of covert Christian contestation however, the central government has not resorted to such actions. While reasons for variance in the proportion of state sanctions are important to address, they are beyond the scope of this analysis.

originally aimed at violence trigger more repressive reactions on the part of the central authorities than those that originally aimed at being peaceful, and turned into clashes between civilians and the police. To what extent are the causes of violence and its manifestations during instances of protests any important in shaping state actors' understanding of the protests, and their subsequent reactions?

²⁵ Buckley, Chris, 'China Detains Christian Reporter for Church Protest', *Reuters News*, 12 August 2006.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lam, Willy, 'Strongman's Olympic Glory Is Already Tarnished by the Unrest', *Asia Sentinel*, 17 March 2008.

Land-related Protests

Land disputes between farmers and local officials are among the most widespread forms of conflict in contemporary China. Such disputes have emerged as a result of the effects of the implementation of socio-economic reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some of these reforms consisted of the dismantling of agricultural communes, the establishment of the individualized household responsibility system (HRS)²⁸, and political decentralization, which gave the local government greater economic influence, full responsibility to collect taxes among the population, and made it the exclusive representative of collective ownership (Guo, 2001). The decentralization of responsibilities facilitated abuses of power on the part of local governments, in some localities (Guo, 2001; So, 2007). These abuses took the form of household tax burdens, arbitrary land expropriation for highly lucrative industrial or recreational projects, as well as unkept promises of household compensation for land seizures (Guo, 2001). For instance, the Chinese Ministry of Land and Resources reported that 168,000 cases of illegal land expropriation had occurred in 2003 (Gilboy and Heginbotham, 2004, p. 258). So (2007) claims that since 1987 '34 million peasants have been dispossessed of their holdings' (p. 570). Villagers' tolerance of such abuses has varied across localities. Some have been quicker to react than others. Those who protested against such abuses have done so via legal channels, such as the petitioning system, or illegal ones, including public demonstrations, road blockages, 'personal denunciation letters against individual cadres' (Guo, 2001, p. 431), reports and complaints to the local media, the destruction of infrastructure, and so on. Farmers who have been mobilizing for land rights have been doing so with different goals in mind, and solutions to their problems. While some pressure the state for full privatization, others worry about being displaced from the land they rented from the government, or are concerned about not having received reasonable compensation in exchange for land expropriation.

Cases of land-related protests, which escalated into violence between protesters and the police or locally employed thugs, abound. In June 2005 in the province of Henan, protesters clashed with hundreds of armed thugs linked to the local government, who attempted to expropriate their land. Ten protesters were killed and hundreds severely wounded²⁹. Cases of non-violent but highly disruptive³⁰ protests against land expropriation are also numerous. In late December 2007, groups of villagers from the northeastern province of Heilongjiang attempted to regain control over and privatize

²⁸ The household responsibility system (HRS) replaced the production team system in 1979. The production team system, which lasted about twenty years, gave workers work points based on their daily productive performance. Farmers were given quotas for food production and would receive compensation if they met such quotas. The amount of work points accumulated over the course of a year determined the income of workers, their tax deductions, as well as access to public welfare (Lin, 1988, p. 200). The implementation of the HRS reduced food production quotas peasants needed to meet annually. What they produced beyond the quota could be sold at an unfixed price for purposes of profit making. Households were hence able to generate an unregulated income, and as a result, increase their standard of living. According to Lin (1988), the HRS was the source of a considerable increase in agricultural productivity.

²⁹ Congressional – Executive Commission on China, 'Growing Social Unrest and the Chinese Leadership's Counterproductive Response', 6 December 2005:

http://www.cecc.gov/pages/annualRpt/annualRpt05/2005_a_intro.php

³⁰ These protests ought to be categorized as disruptive as they challenged central authorities by calling for an alternative system in which land does not belong to the state but to peasants.

farmland expropriated by local officials³¹. Farmers from two other provinces (Jiangsu and Shaanxi) as well as areas surrounding the municipality of Tianjin ‘issued similar privatization declarations online’ following the letter posted by Heilongjiang protesters³². According to media-based sources, ‘the four declarations claim[ed] to represent 120,000 farmers’³³. The leader of the movement was arrested and sent to labour camp by Heilongjiang officials. The central government however remained relatively quiet in light of such protests. State officials did not declare the movement illegal, and encouraged farmers to resolve land-related disputes via the legal system, including formal petitions to the government. It is too early to tell whether mobilization in this case, and the fact that the movement was supported by groups of farmers in other provinces, will further push Beijing to reconsider its recently implemented property law. The central government’s immediate attitude vis-à-vis the conflict was nonetheless not a negative one.

How has the central government been accommodative of land-related claims? The leadership has taken a series of measures since the early 2000s in order to cope with arbitrary land expropriation on the part of local authorities. In 2006, the government has established ‘a new land superintendence’, dramatically increased oversight of land markets, and imposed new rules on those markets’ (So, 2007, p. 571). The purpose of these measures is to ensure that local officials do not gain discretionary profits from the selling of land to urban contractors (Naughton, 2007). The National People’s Congress has also adopted a new property law in October 2007, indicating that the issue of land rights is among some of the leadership’s top priorities. However, to the extent that the law still forbids private ownership of land, it seems to have had very little impact on the lives of millions of peasants. Moreover, while the law forbids fraudulent land acquisitions on the part of local state authorities, such practices seem to remain common in China’s rural areas. The central government has also shown concern over the issue of land expropriation in arresting a number of local officials accused of land-related corruption and illegal land seizures. For instance, in July 2005, Ma De, a senior official in the province of Heilongjiang was arrested for, among other things, taking two million yuan in early 1999 from Shen Baichen, a contractor interested in construction projects requiring land seizures³⁴. The following sections explain variance in central government reaction to religious mobilization and land-related protests, and propose four hypotheses that ought to be further tested.

Explaining Variance in State Reaction to Religious and Land-Related Protests

What explains the regularity in the central government’s application of sanctions on religious mobilization across Tibetan and Christian groups on the one hand, and the greater responsiveness of the central government to increasingly disruptive protests against land expropriation on the other? I address this puzzle by developing four

³¹ Ma, Josephine, ‘Tough Sentence Likely Over Land Row: Reform Leader To Be Sent to Labour Camp’, *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), 16 January 2008.

³² Ma, Josephine, ‘Village Land Claim Could Shake Core Principle of Collectivism’, *SCMP*, 24 December 2007.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Congressional – Executive Commission on China, ‘Chinese Government Takes Steps Against Corruption While Land Abuses Continue’, 1 February 2006:

<http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.phpd?showsingel=33854>

hypotheses pertaining to the behaviour of the central government in a decentralized authoritarian context characterized by significant levels of social unrest, as in China. The below hypotheses ought to be tested with additional data from and outside of China.

The Level of ‘Anti-Stateness’ of Mobilized Claims

Hypothesis 1: The central government in a decentralized authoritarian context is likely to sanction collective protests if central government actors perceive protesters or mobilized claims as ‘anti-state’.

In a centralized authoritarian or soft-authoritarian context where the distinction between local and central governments is blurred, one would assume that claims attacking any level of the government (including the local authorities) would be considered by central government actors as anti-state. Indeed, where the state is centralized, central authorities are more likely to consider protests that target local authorities as also targeting the state or the political system as a whole. In China, however, where the bureaucracy is decentralized, and where different government levels have developed an identity of their own, the central government is less inclined to consider protests exclusively targeting the local government as ‘anti-state’. Religious claims articulated during instances of collective protests have however generally been based on the assumption that further accommodation of religious groups would require redefined political and legal systems. Religious protests in China have regularly been sanctioned by central government authorities because state actors see religious protesters as anti-state, and more specifically, as anti-Chinese nation³⁵. Central government actors choose to negotiate with citizens who seek to work within the current political system, as opposed to citizens who want to transform that system. Why do the authorities perceived religious claims as conflicting with the basic principles upon which the Chinese nation-state was created? First, regardless of their content, religious demands tend to be framed as an alternative to Chinese secularism, rather than calling for an alternative (and perhaps, more ‘transparent’) form of secularism. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 on the basis of Marxist principles, which considered religion as an obstacle to national integration, a potential source of local nationalism, and an impediment to societal development and progress. The state was founded on the principles of atheism, accordingly. Atheism was institutionalized with the intention of ensuring that the Chinese population’s primary allegiances would be to the Chinese nation-state, not to their specific ethnic identity or religion. This objective left room for the accommodation of some ethnic minority needs, with periods of interruption (i.e. the Cultural Revolution). Communist heritage combined with Chinese secularism have influenced how the state distinctively accommodates minority identities, interests and needs. Religious interests have been less accommodated than linguistic ones as in the eyes of the central government linguistic diversity does not compromise national integrity to the extent that some religious practices seen as an obstacle to modernity and societal advancement do.

³⁵ I use anti-state and anti-Chinese nation as synonymous, not because I believe that the nation-state is a relevant concept in the Chinese context. Rather, in my attempt to make sense of state behaviour in light of social unrest, I choose to use language that central government actors use in their interpretations of religious protests.

Allowing religious minorities greater rights in terms of religious practice would conflict with the state's objectives in two ways. It would entail a re-evaluation of the secularist principles upon which the Chinese nation-state has been built. In the eyes of central authorities, allowing religious groups to have their own schools for instance could contribute to increasing the social and political salience of religion among Tibetans, Christians and Muslims, and as a result, severely undermine the state's attempt to integrate ethno-religious minorities within a Han-dominant society. Additionally, greater rights to religious groups could increase the risks that the central government loses control over the practice of faith, and the ideas and allegiances of religious practitioners. Because religious protesters ask for more than they currently have, and because what they ask for is interpreted by the leadership as conflicting with the core principles of the Chinese nation, they are considered 'anti-statist'. For instance, Tibetan monks protesting in the streets of Lhasa in March 2008 were very early in the unfolding of demonstrations associated with the 'Dalai clique' or called 'separatists'³⁶. Chinese media-based reports categorized protests as 'anti-Chinese'. Categorizing religious protesters as such has also come with a process of state 'demonization' of challengers. Indeed, protesters were described as 'a thuggish mob' and as 'enemies'³⁷. Such forms of labelling on the part of the leadership helped de-dramatize and justify the use of sanctions. In the eyes of Beijing, any threat to the principle of national sovereignty and societal stability 'ought' to be sanctioned.

In contrast to religious demands, land-related claims have less potential to be categorized as 'anti-state' by central government authorities, as they are criticisms that do not question China's identity as a nation per se, but aim at finding viable solutions for the well being of the Chinese nation. The claims articulated in the context of these protests, however, do question some of the foundations upon which the People's Republic of China (PRC) was created in 1949. For instance, calls for privatization evidently oppose the Socialist principle that land shall belong to the state. Demands in favour of privatization question the legitimacy of the remnants of the socialist system upon which China is based. If one takes Socialist property regulations to be a means towards the Chinese leadership's end, namely the creation of a 'harmonious' and stable Chinese nation, one could infer the following: because claims for privatization attack the leadership's means to their end, and do not question the end in itself (i.e. the existence of a Chinese nation), land-related demands are more acceptable in the eyes of the leadership than religious claims are, perceived as attacking the leadership's end³⁸. This may help shed light on why the central authorities do not deem sanctioning land-related protests as indispensable.

³⁶ The Chinese government however did not provide evidence supporting such an association. This lack of transparency was notably emphasized by 29 Chinese activists who urged the central government to engage in a dialogue with the Dalai Lama (Kang Lim, Benjamin, 'China Dissidents Call for Dialogue with Dalai Lama', *Reuters*, 23 March 2008).

³⁷ Associated Press, 'Tibetan Riots Spread Outside Region', 16 March 2008.

³⁸ This line of reasoning was notably expressed during some of the interviews I conducted among a sample of NGO representatives, lawyers and scholars in Beijing, during the summer of 2007. I had asked my interviewees the following questions: 'Do you believe Chinese authorities are more responsive to certain claims or issues than others? If so/not, why?'

State Perception of Prior Accommodation of Mobilized Claims

Hypothesis 2: *The central government in a decentralized authoritarian context is unlikely to accommodate mobilized claims, which central government actors believe have already been accommodated to a significant extent.*

How central government actors think of the state's performance in accommodating certain interests prior to the emergence of protests shapes how they react to claims for greater rights or accommodation. Central government actors in China share the perception that the state has, since the 1980s, taken significant steps to accommodate religious groups, to the extent that asking for more rights is interpreted as an 'unreasonable' and hence an illegitimate move on the part of protesters³⁹. State actors' perception that religious interests have already been accommodated to a significant extent is influenced by a number of factors. These are: 1) *state actors' tendency to compare the incomparable*: the central authorities have a tendency to praise their performance in ensuring religious acceptance and harmony, based on references to a Maoist past which at times was almost entirely un-accommodative of religious interests (i.e. the Cultural Revolution). To compare the present with a less than satisfactory past, however, is likely to lead the authorities to assess their performance in accommodating religious needs and interests on the basis of low historical standards. The risk in doing so is thus to turn relatively low levels of religious acceptance into a fixed and idealized strategy of accommodation. 2) *State actors' inclination to understand accommodation numerically*: there is a genuine belief among central government authorities that the more churches, temples and mosques are built, the better religious groups are accommodated. Hence, for the leadership, the quantity of religious sites positively affects the quality of rights. This line of reasoning is apparent in the majority of government speeches and reports. On May 5th, 2008, in response to the recent instances of religious mobilization in Tibet, state-controlled media de-legitimized Tibetan demands for greater accommodation by emphasizing that 'Tibet has over 1,700 monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism, 46,000 monks and nuns, four mosques and one Catholic Church', suggesting that the level of religious accommodation in the autonomous region had reached a peak⁴⁰. The report also stressed the amount the central authorities invested in the maintenance of religious heritage sites, claiming that Beijing has 'allocated more than 700 million yuan [US\$100 million] since 1980 to maintain 1,400 monasteries and cultural relics'⁴¹. In emphasizing these facts, state authorities and media show an understanding of the accommodation of religious interests primarily based on financial and infrastructure-based standards, as opposed to spiritual and political ones. Because the central government has been effective in accommodating religious groups 'quantitatively', and numerical accommodation is somehow perceived as superior to 'qualitative' or spiritual acceptance, central government actors have had a tendency to consider additional religious demands as unreasonable, or see the conduct of underground religious ceremonies as unacceptable. 3)

³⁹ Radgi, former Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, described protesters as 'a handful of lawless people' on 19 March 2008.

⁴⁰ China Daily, 'Facts about Tibetan Lives', 5 May 2008: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-05/05/content_6660650.htm

⁴¹ Ibid.

The frequency and size of mobilization influence the credibility of issues: state actors' perception that religious claims lack credibility has been influenced by the fact that religious mobilization is less common and widespread than other types of protests such as land-related, as well as pension- or wage-related ones. State actors use this reality to their advantage, claiming that if religious protests are not widespread, religious groups who do not protest must be satisfied. Mobilizers tend to be discredited by the authorities on the basis of the fact that religious protests commonly involve a numerically small proportion of the overall religious communities in China, and hence are portrayed as unrepresentative of the interests and needs religious groups. The minority of religious mobilizers are categorized as 'unreasonably' dissatisfied 'trouble makers' whose behaviour ought to be 'corrected'.

While central government actors commonly believe that the Chinese state has successfully ensured the accommodation of religious interests, there is no real consensus among the central leadership that land-related claims have been accommodated satisfactorily. Two factors seem to indicate the absence of such perception. *First*, the central authorities are taking actions to address the problem of land grab, and explicitly express these intentions in government and media-based reports. For example, actions have taken the form of appointing particular key officials in the Ministry of Land and Resources whom the top leadership deemed would be better able to effect change at the local level. For instance, in September 2006, the State Council appointed the Minister of Land and Resources, Sun Wensheng, as State Superintendent General of Land⁴². The State Council presented this designation as another step taken in the process of regaining control of instances of local corruption, and more particularly, addressing the issue of land grab in rural areas⁴³. In taking such actions, the central leadership acknowledges the existence of a problem, which yet ought to be solved. Central government actors may not understand the problem the way protesters and the larger group of people they represent experience it, but the mere fact that the authorities perceive the existence of a societal problem leaves the door open to central government reactions to protests that may exclude sanctions. *Second*, the reasons that keep the central government from allowing full-fledged privatization of property also shows that the state is not clearly opposed to the claims of land-related protesters for full privatization. What stops the government from legalizing private ownership is not the lack of credibility of land-related claims, but some of its potential socioeconomic side effects, including the concentration of land in the hands of a limited number of rich landowners⁴⁴.

Framing of Mobilized Claims Based on National Priorities

⁴² Xinhua News Agency, 'Chinese Government Appoints Minister as Superintendent General of Land', 21 September 2006:

<http://www.china.org.cn/english/NM-e/181809.htm>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See National People's Congress (NPC), 'Real Right Law of the People's Republic of China', 16 March 2007:

http://www.fdi.gov.cn/pub/FDI_EN/Laws/GeneralLawsandRegulations/BasicLaws/P020070330630886879886.pdf

Hypothesis 3: The central government in a decentralized authoritarian context is more likely to accommodate or maintain status quo in the face of collective protesters who mobilize on the basis of claims that resonate with national priorities (i.e. such as the fight against corruption at the local government level in China).

Whether or not the claims of protesters resonate with the national objectives or priorities in Beijing matters in how the central government reacts to instances of collective protests. More specifically, I claim that land-related demands are more likely to be accommodated by central authorities as they are intimately linked to calls for solutions to problems of local corruption. The Chinese government has made the fight against local corruption, one of its main national priorities in recent years. The Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee approved in early 2008, a five-year plan to prevent and punish corruption within the Party and the government⁴⁵. Not only are cases of land expropriation the product of local corruption, but also protesters calling for greater land rights have relied upon anti-corruption and rule of law frames in order to make their actions appear as more legitimate in the eyes of the central government (O'Brien and Li, 2006). These frames have had an appeasing effect on the central government, for two reasons. First, they are associated with a discourse of legality, legitimizing the existence of the central government, emphasizing its good intentions. In doing so, protesters are transmitting the message that they want change while remaining committed to respecting China's laws and regulations. Land-related protesters may or may not genuinely believe in the good intentions of the central government. What matters however is the content of their discourse, the way they articulate their concerns during instances of mobilization, and how central government actors interpret their messages. Second, these frames resonate with the central government's commitment to regain control over the lower levels of China's bureaucracy. The rise of corruption at the local level, as a result of decentralization, increased the gap between central and local governments, and shrank the central government's grip over local affairs. The central government has, as a result, since the late 1990s, shown a high level of commitment to fight power abuses on the part of local officials.

Religious claims are for the most part, unrelated to problems of local corruption, or illegal practices on the part of local governments. The central government has thus no real incentive to disagree with local officials' sanctions on religious protesters, unless religious claims pertain to the legal violation of a fundamental right protected in the Chinese constitution. Because the claims of religious mobilizers do not allow them to put the blame on local authorities (i.e. for breaking regulations pertaining to the practice of religion), they are disadvantaged in the eyes of the central government (as opposed to land-related protesters). In fact, religious mobilizers are more likely to target the central government's laws as opposed to the actual application of those laws at the local level. Targeting the central government makes them more prone to being perceived by the authorities as not resisting 'rightfully' (O'Brien and Li, 2006), but as contesting the political order.

Cross-National Mobilization Potential

⁴⁵ China View, 'Premier Outlines Anti-Corruption Work, Vows to Build Clean Government', 30 April 2008: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-04/30/content_8080030.htm

Hypothesis 4: The central government in a decentralized authoritarian context is more likely to accommodate the claims of protesters central government actors perceive as having the potential to form a cross-national movement disruptive of political and/or societal order, under the following conditions: 1) if mobilized claims are not perceived by central government actors as anti-state or anti-Chinese nation; and 2) if mobilized claims are not perceived as having been accommodated already to a significant extent.

The above hypothesis is based on an assumption that challenges some of the claims of Perry (2001), namely that the central government is likely to repress movements that are likely to become cross-jurisdictional or cross-national and disrupt societal stability (p. 169). While there are elements of truth in such an argument, Perry disregards the fact that the central government has increasingly become responsive to protesters that have the potential to unite cross-nationally and be disruptive. This is particularly the case of citizens who protest against local tax burdens, land seizures, the side effects of environmental degradation, and local government's failure to compensate the population for losses caused by environmental disasters. Hence, central government actors' fear or perception that a movement becomes cross-national is insufficient to ensure a repressive reaction on their part. Land-related and religious protests are both geographically localized. However, while religious movements lack the potential to unite cross-regionally and cross-nationally, the same cannot be said of land-related protesters. Some of the latest instances of land-based protests seem to confirm Beijing's fears. In December 2007, groups of farmers in four provinces posted letters online, declaring that farmers were taking over the land in their respective localities. The protest evolved over a period of three weeks. On December 19th, a thousand farmers in Changchunling, a village located in the northeastern province of Jilin, began protesting against the government's land ownership system. They did so by dividing up the village's collective land, with the intention of redistributing it equitably amongst themselves⁴⁶. In November 2007, peasants in seventy other villages in Jilin had also attempted to privatize the land. Movement leaders posted an announcement on the Internet shortly after their redistribution exercise, declaring peasant ownership of the land⁴⁷. Peasants in three other provinces saw this declaration, and posted similar ones online. Media-based reports claim that more than a hundred thousand farmers were represented by such declarations. This suggests that farmers in various parts of China are building linkages that were nonexistent a decade ago. Access to the Internet has changed the extent to which Chinese citizens can reach out to each other. Farmers across the country are realizing that they are victims of similar power abuses. Shared information via the Internet promotes collective consciousness and solidarity. Hence, localized land-based movements increasingly have the potential to grow beyond the confines of villages, townships or counties. Central authorities are aware of these changes. Among them lies the consensus that if the state does not intervene to correct some of the injustices pertaining to access to land, protesters

⁴⁶ Cody, Edward, 'Farmers Rise in Challenge to Chinese Land Policy', Washington Post, 14 January 2008: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/13/AR2008011302383_pf.html

⁴⁷ Ibid.

could organize cross-nationally. The central government is thus more likely to accommodate disruptive protesters who have the potential to mobilize cross-nationally.

Several indicators may help one detect the cross-national mobilization potential of claims. *First*, the variety of claims a particular type of collective protest (i.e. environmental, identity-based, political) addresses may impede protesters' ability to unite cross-nationally. The more homogeneous claims across groups of protesters are, the more likely the latter are to unite. Hence, religious groups such as the Uyghurs and the Tibetans fighting for distinctive levels of political autonomy may be less likely to form a cross-national alliance than religious groups aiming at territorial sovereignty. The similarity between some of the claims of pro-independence Uyghurs and Tibetans however does not guarantee that this alliance will form. The second and third points address the core obstacles to such an outcome. *Second*, how closely groups of protesters identify with other groups of protesters who mobilize on the basis of similar claims influences the likelihood of the emergence of cross-national movements. For instance, while a large amount of Tibetan nationalists and Uyghur nationalists share similar objectives (i.e. some are in favour of greater political autonomy, some ask for national sovereignty), perceptions among the two groups that the identities of Tibetans and Uyghurs are fundamentally different helps cultivate among them, the belief that their interests and objectives are also distinctive. From a rational choice perspective, a cross-religious alliance would require initial steps towards the generation of perceptions on both parts that regardless of identity-based differences, each side is fighting for the same cause, and an alliance would increase their chances of success in their struggle. This has not happened so far, and is unlikely to happen in the near future⁴⁸. *Third*, the amount of financial and human resources localized movements have may impede or facilitate their ability to form a cross-national movement. *Fourth*, protesters' perceptions of the level of risks involved in mobilizing collectively shapes their willingness to create alliances with similar groups in other parts of the country. Local protesters have refrained from expanding their movements because they fear of the potential political consequences of organizing into cross-regional social or political movements⁴⁹. This fear is fed by the perception that the Chinese state is less tolerant of the existence of cross-regional movements. While from the perspective of political leaders, being cross regional would entail having stronger organizational capacities, having greater confrontational abilities, and thus being a potential candidate for social instability, central authorities are unlikely to respond to movements that have the potential to expand regionally or nationally exclusively with sanctions. Perceptions on the part of central government actors that religious protests are localized and unlikely to become cross-national feeds the belief on their part that religious protests are not so alarming, especially when compared to land-related protests that have greater capacity to disrupt societal stability.

⁴⁸ There are signs that pro-independence religious movements have created linkages of solidarity. This is particularly true of Tibetan and Uyghur diasporas in a number of Western countries. Recently, the Uyghur American Association (UAA) has expressed its support of Tibetan protests. See UAA, 'Uyghur Democratic Leader Rebiya Kadeer Expresses Full Support and Solidarity to the Tibetan People', 17 March 2008: <http://uyghuramerican.org/articles/1495/1/Uyghur-Democratic-Leader-Rebiya-Kadeer-expresses-full-support-and-solidarity-to-the-Tibetan-people/index.html>.

⁴⁹ Stalley and Yang, 'An Emerging Environmental Movement in China?', p. 338-39.

Conclusion: Does Disruption or Violence Influence Decentralized Authoritarian States' Reaction to Collective Protests?

I have argued that the central government's reaction to collective protests depends upon four factors, namely the level of perceived anti-stateness of mobilized claims on the part of the central authorities; whether state actors believe mobilized interests have been accommodated already to a significant level; the extent to which problems raised by mobilized claims are framed according to the central government's current priorities (i.e. fight against local corruption); and the likelihood that mobilization on the basis of an issue encourage the formation of a cross-national movement disruptive of political order and societal stability. While it would be tempting to believe that disruption or the escalation of protests into violence prompted the central government to order military intervention in Tibet and neighbouring provinces, such an inference would be profoundly misleading. Based on the above analysis, I argue that societal disruption and violence cannot be treated as independent variables explaining outcomes in terms of state reaction to collective protests in China's authoritarian context. I make this claim, hoping that it be further tested on various types of non-democratic contexts.

Disruption or the use of violence per se on the part of protesters does not influence central government reactions to collective protests in China, for three reasons. *First*, the authorities do not sanction all cases of societal violence or disruption. For instance, in the face of highly disruptive Internet-based challenges to Chinese rule on the part of tens of thousands of peasants in December 2006, along with disruptive public demonstrations, the central government remained calm. This reaction was not manifested in the latest case of instances of Tibetan protests. *Second*, non-violent protests, and often the subtler illegal forms of resistance, involve sanctioning on the part of the state. This is particularly the case of covert religious mobilization via the opening of underground churches and the unofficial conduct of religious ceremonies among Christian communities in various provinces, including Henan, Hunan and Shandong. *Third*, and most importantly, the nature of state reaction is more issue-driven than it is influenced by the ways in which protests are conducted. My argument however emphasizes that issues do not possess inherent characteristics that make them more contentious than others in the eyes of central authorities. Issues are perceived as salient if state actors believe they resonate with their interests and priorities, need yet to be accommodated to some extent, and do not fundamentally conflict with the principles underlying the Chinese nation.

My analysis *prima facie* suggests that the literature on contentious politics has failed to understand patterns of authoritarian state reaction to collective protests. It has done so due to some normative biases and analytical weaknesses. First, analyses that take the emergence of collective protests in authoritarian contexts as the dependent variable, and primarily seek to understand protesters' behaviour in particular political settings, are biased to the extent that they treat mobilization in a relatively politically closed environment as a puzzle (Cai, 2004; Tarrow, 1994). Indeed, they often start their analyses based on research questions such as: why do groups of protesters mobilize despite the risks of state repression? In asking so, scholars assume that repression is the natural outcome of collective protests in authoritarian settings. Such an assumption constrains

our analyses to the extent that it homogenizes state reaction to protests⁵⁰, and as such, disregards that each level of the bureaucracy in a decentralized authoritarian context has its own set of priorities and challenges which are likely to influence distinctive reactions to social unrest on the part of each. This paper was an attempt to shed greater light on that process at the central government level. Second, centralized and decentralized authoritarian states are likely to react to disruptive and non-disruptive, violent and non-violent instances of collective protests, in distinctive ways. This suggests that the extent to which my findings travel across non-democratic countries may be constrained. More qualitative and quantitative work ought to be done to refine and test the claim that societal violence does not influence the form that state reaction to collective protests takes.

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⁵⁰ In implicitly or explicitly assuming that China is a politically closed society, scholars have also been biased in their choice and interpretation of empirical data. Their assumption that the Chinese leadership's behaviour towards contentious protests consistently involves repression (emphasis on behavioural fixity), has led them to study cases of protests that involve the repression of protesters, rather than having more representative samples of cases of state reaction to collective protests. A better understanding of the political development path the central government has engaged in requires that scholars of contentious politics abandon their biases against China's authoritarian regime.

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