

## **FROM MEDIATED TO DIRECT PROTEST: TACTICAL ESCALATION IN THE CHINESE COUNTRYSIDE**

Kevin J. O'Brien, University of California, Berkeley

Forms of contention generally have a limited lifespan. Even the most creative tactics tend, over time, to lose their power to surprise opponents and stir followers. Tactical escalation offers a means to regain momentum when established techniques of protest no longer create the sense of crises and excitement they once did. As the effectiveness of familiar methods wanes, enterprising activists sometimes turn to more disruptive acts to demonstrate their commitment, leave their opponents rattled, and mobilize supporters (on the advantages of unruliness, see Andrews, 2001; Gamson, 1990; Guigni, 1999: xvi-xviii; Tarrow, 1998: 163, chap. 6). Although confrontational tactics can at times alienate the public and generate a backlash (Rochon, 1988), they can also help draw newcomers to a cause (Jasper, 1997: 248) while offering leverage to actors who have few other resources (Piven and Cloward, 1992).

Tactical escalation typically involves dramatic gestures and provocations that test the vulnerabilities of one's foes. It may appear in the form of a single tactic (e.g. the sit-in, the mock shantytown, the suffrage parade) that vividly symbolizes injustice and is difficult for the authorities and onlookers to ignore. Or it may arise as a cluster of related innovations (Voss and Sherman, 2000) that reflects a fresh approach to protest and signals a new "tactical grammar" (Ennis, 1987: 531) is at work.

In rural China, much like it did during the American Civil Rights Movement, revitalizing the repertoire of contention has entailed a radicalization of tactics – a move from humble petitioning to the politics of disruption (McAdam, 1983: 738) In places such as Hengyang county, Hunan,<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Also the Hunan counties of Lianyuan, Ningxiang, and Qidong, as well as Xinyang county, Henan, and Zhangpu county, Fujian, See Duan Xianju et al. (2000), Yu Jianrong (2001), and Ints. 37, 79, 54, 80.

rightful resistance has become far more confrontational since the early 1990s, as the mediated tactics of the past are being demoted or adapted and more direct protest routines have been adopted.

In its basic form, rightful resistance is a rather tame form of contention that makes use of existing (if clogged) channels of participation and relies heavily on the patronage of elite backers. It is mediated in the sense that complainants do not directly confront their opponents, but instead rely on a powerful third party to address their claims. Activists at this point always act under the sufferance of, and energetically seek support from 1) officials as high as central policy makers, 2) cadres as low as any local official other than the ones they are denouncing, and 3) journalists (or others) who can communicate their grievances to high-ranking authorities. In this basic form, rightful resisters may mobilize popular action, but their main aim is to use the threat of unrest to attract attention from possible mediators and to apply pressure on officeholders at higher levels to rein in their underlings. Protest leaders, in other words, seek to bypass their adversaries rather than to compel them to negotiate.

Direct action is quite different. In Hengyang, for instance, activists increasingly place demands on their targets in person and try to wring concessions from them on-the-spot. This form of rightful resistance does not depend on high-level intercession, but on skilled rabble-rousers and the popular pressure they can muster. Although protest organizers still cite central policies, rather than sounding "fire alarms" (McCubbins and Schwarz, 1984) they (and the villagers who join them) try to put out the fires themselves – they enforce rather than inform. In direct rightful resistance, though activists may still view the Center as a source of legitimacy, a symbolic backer, and a guarantor against repression, they no longer genuinely expect higher-ups to intervene on their behalf. Instead, they regard themselves and their supporters to be capable of resolving the problems at hand. Acting as ever in the name of faithful policy implementation, rightful resisters

now confront their targets (often face-to-face) and mobilize as much popular action as they can to induce them to halt policy violations. Direct action, in the end, relies on appeals to the community rather than to higher level authorities and its goal is immediate concessions.

This chapter will begin by examining some of the forms that direct rightful resistance takes in rural China. Then we will move on to a series of questions suggested by the broader literature on tactical innovation, including: are these tactics truly new and how widespread are they? Who is mainly responsible for initiating direct action, newcomers or seasoned complainants? And, most importantly, why is tactical escalation occurring? Along the way we will alight on a number of explanations for tactical change, including ones that underscore the role of prior experiences with contention, resources, and popular support.

It is worth mentioning that studies of tactical innovation usually concentrate on how a repertoire of contention evolves rather than why certain tactics are chosen (Jasper, 1997: 234; Brown, 2003).<sup>2</sup> We tread a middle path here, emphasizing both external forces that structure the options open to rightful resisters and internal factors that sometimes lead them to make tactical decisions that attention to the environment alone would never predict. We derive most of our conclusions from interviews with rural protest organizers about actions they have taken and why they thought certain tactics were effective or not (on the advantages of interviewing over after-the-fact theorizing, see Brown, 2003). We also draw on government reports that detail episodes of popular unrest, other written accounts, and our own earlier field research.

### **THREE VARIANTS OF DIRECT ACTION**

Mediated contention is a form of seeking grace from intercessors whose characteristic expression is group petitioning. Direct action, on the contrary, rests on a public rallying call and

---

<sup>2</sup> On tactical choices and the development of a student protest repertoire in 20<sup>th</sup> century China, see Wasserstrom (1992) and Esherick and Wasserstrom (1990).

high-pressure methods that are designed to coax local leaders to revoke an improper decision. When employing direct tactics, protesters and their supporters assert a right to resist (not only expose and denounce) official misconduct.

In contemporary rural China, direct action has three main variants. The least confrontational might be called publicizing a policy. In the course of “studying” (*xue*) or “disseminating documents” (*xuanchuan wenjian*), activists make known or distribute materials which (they contend) show that county, township, or village cadres have violated a central or provincial directive. They do so for the purpose of alerting the public to official misconduct and mobilizing opposition to unapproved “local policies” (*tu zhengce*). The documents they select always relate to issues that concern villagers greatly, be it reducing excessive taxes and fees, decrying the use of violence, or promoting well-run village elections. In Hengyang county alone, activists have publicized the following materials: President Jiang Zemin’s 1998 speech on reducing “peasant burdens” (*nongmin fudan*) (Wang et al., 1998, January 10: 1), Hunan Provincial Document No. 9 (1996) on the same subject (Int. 7; Yu Jianrong, 2001: 559), and the 1993 *Agriculture Law* (Int. 6), especially its clauses (Arts. 18, 19, 59) that forbid imposing unlawful fees, affirm the right of villagers to “reject” (*jujue*) unsanctioned exactions, and stipulate that higher levels should work to halt such impositions and have them returned to villagers.

Participants in direct action use a variety of methods to make beneficial policies known and to mobilize resistance to their violation. They may begin by showing government papers they have acquired to their neighbors. The most inconspicuous way to do this is in a private home (Ints. 5, 6, 7, 38). A somewhat more overt approach involves photocopying central or provincial documents and then handing or selling them to interested villagers (Ints. 17, 21). One activist in Hengyang (Int. 17) proudly explained that he charged his neighbors precisely what he paid the copy shop and

actually lost a fair sum when some villagers walked off with photocopied documents without reimbursing him.

As their confidence mounts, rightful resisters may turn to more public ways to expose local misconduct. An example of this is playing tape recordings, or even using megaphones or loudspeakers, to inform villagers of beneficial policies. In Henan, for instance, in response to township manipulation of village elections and increasing exactions, a young man from Suiping county used a megaphone to acquaint his fellow villagers with the *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* (1998) and central directives prohibiting excessive taxes and fees (Hao Fu and Chen Lei, 2002). In Hengyang county, a middle-aged shop-owner went a step further and was detained and beaten by township authorities for his cheekiness. He rented some audio equipment, set it up on his roof, and aired central and provincial documents about easing peasant burdens to his entire village (Int. 19).

Disseminating policies need not employ even the simplest technology and can occur at unexpected times, as is seen when resourceful activists appropriate apolitical rituals or celebrations and turn them to their own ends. In rural Hengyang for instance, rightful resisters hijacked a traditional dragon dance during Spring Festival (three consecutive years!) to publicize central documents granting villagers a right to reject unreasonable burdens and (on the sly) to solicit donations for their cause. While parading up and down every lane, they summarized the “spirit of central documents” (*zhongyang wenjian jingshen*) in rhymed verse, chanting in unison as they wound their way from home to home (Ints. 21, 39).

Many efforts to make beneficial policies known are limited to a single village; others expand the field of action. An example of the latter is employing “propaganda vehicles” (*xuanchuan che*) or putting up posters throughout a township criticizing excessive fees or rigged

elections (Ints. 8, 21, 39). One activist in Hengyang (Int. 5), already famous for organizing a road blockade in 1999, rented a truck and used it as a mobile broadcasting station to transmit provincial directives limiting rural taxation to a number of small hamlets scattered throughout his township (see also Johnson, 2004: 63, 67, 71). Another protest leader, after participating in an expensive and fruitless collective complaint to the Hunan provincial government in 1996, copied excerpts of central documents calling for tax and fee reductions on large posters and had a group of young villagers paste them up around the county (Int. 8).

For many of these tactics, the intended audience does not have to make any special effort. They can stay indoors, open their windows and listen, or simply walk outside and watch what is going on. One variety of dissemination that involves a more direct (if surreptitious) effort to attract a crowd is presenting a movie and then publicizing beneficial policies moments before the show begins. In Henan, as early as 1993, a villager did this with a State Council regulation that limited township and village fees (Yu Xin, 1993). Activists may also inform villagers about poor implementation at rural markets. This again, involves taking advantage of a ready-made audience. According to several Hengyang protest organizers, on market days they sometimes simply set up a loudspeaker in the town center and read out documents concerning tax and fee reduction that were issued by the Center, Hunan province, or Hengyang city (Yu Jianrong, 2001: 555; Ints. 4, 13, 40). In such cases, even though rightful resisters may do their best to minimize confrontation, clashes frequently occur after local officials appear. Township cadres, when they heard the Hengyang activists disclosing fee limits on a busy market day in 1998, first cut off electricity to their loudspeaker. But a sympathetic restaurant owner stepped in and supplied the villagers with a generator. Then, a number of officials came out of their offices and ordered the protesters to

disperse, only to find themselves upbraided for impeding the lawful dissemination of central policies.

Although they usually shy away from physical confrontation with their adversaries, policy disseminators sometimes publicize policies in ways that cannot help but lead to conflict. One technique sure to produce official ire is distributing documents near a government compound. A Hengyang activist (Int. 6), for example, excerpted central directives limiting peasant burdens on large, red posters and plastered them on several buildings in the township government complex. Protest organizers in Jiangxi have likewise sold pamphlets about Beijing's fee reduction policies directly in front of a Party office building (Ding Guoguang, 2001: 433-34). In both cases, these tactics cornered township officials, heightened their fears that further popular action was imminent, and led to a swift (and negative) response. In Hengyang, township cadres removed the posters; in Jiangxi, the book sellers were arrested.

By far the most assertive form of publicizing policies involves both deliberate confrontation and undisguised mass mobilization. One common tactic employed in Hengyang is to trail behind township tax collectors as they try to collect fees, all the time loudly quoting tax reduction directives (Ints. 13, 21). This practice not only challenges the legality of an exaction, it also often draws scores of onlookers and encourages less daring villagers to withhold their payments. Another highly provocative form of propagating policies involves calling so-called "ten thousand-person meetings" (*wan ren dahui*) in a government compound to study policies that excoriate corruption or limit fees (Duan Xianju et al., 2000). Activists in Xinyang county, Henan, for example, have organized numerous mass meetings (the largest of which township officials estimated drew over 6,000 participants) to publicize central policies and provincial regulations that call for reducing excessive appropriation (Int. 80). Such gatherings can rapidly turn into melees

when township or county officials intervene. In Hengyang, a protest leader organized a mass meeting to force a rollback in taxes and fees. To symbolize the activists' willingness to challenge the township head-on, the speaker's podium was placed just steps away from the main government office building. Hundreds of villagers were invited to attend the rally and the organizers planned to detain and deliver to the city authorities any township official who ventured to interfere (Int. 4). In another widely-reported episode in Ningxiang county, Hunan, after a multi-village band of "Volunteer Propagandists for the Policy of Reducing Burdens" used tape recorders and hired a loudspeaker truck in 1999 to tell villagers about their rights, protest organizers assembled four thousand people outside the town government complex to demand adherence to central and provincial directives that capped taxation and opposed corruption. But before the speakers could say a word, the assembled villagers rushed into the compound. Over one thousand police and five hundred soldiers dispersed the demonstrators, using clubs and tear gas. Many villagers were arrested or injured, and one man was killed (Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 128-129).

Publicizing documents does not always lead to repression; it can sometimes further protesters' ends. By reading out or distributing central policies, activists expose unauthorized actions, shatter information blockades, and demonstrate (both to officials and interested bystanders) that it may be possible to muster large-scale resistance to local misconduct.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, rightful resisters assert their right to know about beneficial measures and to communicate their knowledge to others. Ordinary villagers may be emboldened to join them, or at least support them, not simply because they have been made aware that central directives have been neglected, but because they have seen fellow community members take the lead in standing up to unsanctioned local acts. As we will see in the next chapter, when a campaign of dissemination

---

<sup>3</sup> For urban workers in China who "are no longer simply presenting their grievances to those in charge, but publicizing them," see Kernan (2003a: 5). On being "not only concerned with handing over a petition to the authorities, but also with inserting their claims into the 'public arena,'" see Kernan (2003b: 9).



unfolds, formerly-uninvolved villagers sometimes become much less timid inasmuch as they observe new “peasant leaders” (*nongmin lingxiu*) emerging and a weakening of the local government’s usual stranglehold over political life.

The second variant of direct action is “demanding a dialogue” (*yaoqiu duihua*). Activists and their supporters, often after collective petitioning or publicizing a policy fails to budge their foes, may insist on face-to-face meetings with local officials (or their proxies) to urge immediate revocation of unlawful local measures. Rightful resisters have used this tactic in Hengyang most notably to fight mounting school fees. Since many townships can no longer collect as much revenue as they used to (owing both to pressure from above and resistance from below), and many poorer districts are financially-starved in the wake of the 1994 fiscal reforms, township leaders have frequently allowed local schoolmasters to increase educational fees on their own.<sup>4</sup> Self-styled “burden-reduction representatives” (*jianfu daibiao*), usually after hard-pressed parents come to them for help, may demand that all overcharges be returned. Instead of lodging a collective complaint, which would have been more common in the past, a group of representatives may proceed directly to the school. The arrival of these “peasant heroes” (*nongmin yingxiong*) typically attracts a large crowd, not least because the parents who invited them often encourage onlookers to come, support them, and watch the drama unfold. In one such incident in Hengyang, the lead activist requested a face-to-face meeting with the head of a township middle school. In front of a large assembly of local residents, he displayed documents issued by the city and county education bureau that fixed fees at a certain level and told the schoolmaster item by item how much more students had been charged. The presence of nearly twenty hardened “burden reduction

---

<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 2001, the Center began increasing rural education funding significantly (Bernstein 2003: 31-32). Whether this defuses conflicts between school masters and villagers should become clear soon.

representatives,” as well as over one hundred bystanders, led to a round of intense bargaining, after which the schoolmaster agreed to return about 80% of the illegal charges (Int. 18).

But events do not always unfold so peacefully. On another occasion also in Hengyang, a school head postponed a scheduled dialogue so that he would have time to hire a group of local toughs to scare off the “burden reduction representatives.” But when the meeting began and the schoolmaster signaled his men to make their move, an elderly bystander came to the defense of the representatives. He said he admired their altruism and would protect them to the end (Int. 18).

“Demanding a dialogue” has also been employed against far more powerful targets than local school heads. In Qidong county, Hunan, a riot occurred in July 1996 in which hundreds of people attacked township and village officials and smashed the signboards of the township government. (Destroying the placards that identify government offices is a symbolic denial of their legitimacy, much like burning a flag or effigy). The county Party secretary rushed to the area to look into what had caused the unrest. At the urging of hundreds of villagers, he agreed to have an unlawfully-collected education surcharge rescinded. The incident ended, but news of the successful protest spread rapidly. Upon learning of it, villagers in other parts of Qidong county were inspired to rise up and demand dialogues. In early September 1996 three activists arranged a movie presentation in order to read out a Hunan provincial document that reduced peasant burdens, to organize villagers to resist excessive education apportionments, and to gather signatures for a petition to present to the township. After the video ended, just before a group of indignant moviegoers set out for a nearby government compound, a skirmish broke out with township officials who had come to dissuade the protesters from demonstrating. Two days later, over six hundred villagers, carrying banners and flags, beating drums and gongs, and setting off fireworks, paraded down the busiest street in the township to the main office building to insist on a meeting with the

Party secretary and government head. Over the next three days, hundreds of villagers from four other townships in Qidong marched to their township seats and demanded dialogues with Party and government leaders (Yu Jianrong, 2001: 558-60).

If publicizing a policy aims to remind errant cadres that they are vulnerable to rightful claims, demanding a dialogue is directed at unresponsive targets who refuse to back down. At this stage, negotiation and compromise are still possible, even desired by activists. Cool bargaining and face-saving concessions become distinctly less feasible when protesters turn to the third variant of direct action: face-to-face defiance.

Activists who use this tactic confront local officials on the job and try to halt improper acts. They, for example, flatly reject unauthorized impositions and loudly encourage others to follow suit (Ints. 13, 17). In Hengyang in 1998, one particularly feisty rightful resister followed township tax collectors wherever they went. With two other “burden reduction representatives” at his side, he brandished a copy of a central directive and contested every effort to collect even a *yuan* (12 US cents) too much. The tax collectors dared not challenge him in public, but one of them muttered an insult after he refused to get out of their way and let them do their job. A scuffle broke out and hundreds of villagers came to defend the fee resister, eventually pinning the beleaguered taxman in his jeep (Int. 17). That same year a similar incident occurred in another township in Hengyang county. Two “burden-reduction representatives” had locked horns with township revenue collectors when they tried to prevent the collection of several unauthorized fees. When the officials struck one of the representatives with a flashlight, a shoving match broke out. Again, angry villagers responded, this time overturning two jeeps the township cadres used for their work (Ints. 13, 41).

Rightful resisters may also rely on face-to-face defiance to challenge rigged elections. In one dramatic episode in the early 1990s, a group of villagers in Hubei successfully disrupted a villagers' committee election in which nominations were not handled according to approved procedures. Just as the ballots were being distributed, one villager leapt to the platform where the election committee was presiding, grabbed a microphone and shouted: "Xiong Dachao is a corrupt cadre. Don't vote for him!" Immediately several of his confederates stood up and started shouting words of support, seconding his charges. To further dramatize their resistance, the assembled protesters then tore up their own ballots as well as those of other villagers who were milling about waiting to vote (Zhongguo Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshe Yanjiuhui, 1994; on six villagers seizing stuffed ballot boxes, see Agence France Presse, 1999, September 4).

Public-minded intellectuals sometimes urge on direct action. The following episode involved both disseminating policies and face-to-face defiance. In Jiangxi, the deputy editor of a rural affairs journal published 12,000 copies of a *Work Manual on Reducing Farmers' Tax Burdens*. He later said: "I was just carrying out my duty to help farmers personally monitor arbitrary fees," and "at the end of the day, central government policies are not enough to help the farmers. They need to be able to help themselves." The book had a section advising farmers how to seek redress and its subtitle was "The imperial sword is in your hands, farmer friends, hold on tight!" Although the editor ultimately lost his position and the provincial government dispatched the police to confiscate as many copies of the book as they could locate, the story received national attention in the newspaper *Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo)* (Gilley, 2001, April 5; O'Brien and Li, 2004: 78; Wang Zhiqian, 2002: 6; Yang Xuewu, 2001: 39).

The three variants of direct action described here are interrelated and often appear together. In addition, rightful resisters sometimes employ them in sequence, starting by publicizing policies

and then moving on to demanding dialogues or face-to-face defiance. Whatever form it takes, direct action marks a significant break from mediated contention. Its appearance leads local cadres (and protesters themselves) into uncharted territory and introduces new uncertainties, especially when activists lose control of their followers or officials panic. It also opens up the possibility that rightful resisters will continue to escalate their tactics (perhaps toward out-and-out violence) while embracing broader and deeper claims (see Rucht, 1990: 171-72) – claims that are general and ideological rather than concrete and specific (Mueller, 1999: 530-31; Tarrow, 1989), claims that challenge the legitimacy of local government rather than the lawfulness of particular decisions.

### **HOW NEW?**

Techniques of protest are seldom invented out of whole cloth. More often, they appear at the edge of an existing repertoire of contention as “creative modifications or extensions of familiar routines” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001: 49; Tilly, 1993: 265-66; in the Chinese context, see Wasserstrom, 1992: 117, 131-33). Innovations, in this way, signal a broadening of tactics and a growing strategic flexibility by activists who are generating a multi-pronged strategy that can be deployed on many fronts (Andrews, 2001: 77; McCann, 1994: 86, 145; Rochon, 1998: 202-03; Tarrow, 1998: 37, 104)

This is very much the story in rural China today. Mediated tactics continue to be used while direct, confrontational forms of contention have also been adopted. Especially in locations where the old ways have been found wanting again and again, nearly contained acts are being augmented by decidedly boundary-spanning or even transgressive acts, as protesters begin to enforce central directives themselves and literally use policies as a weapon in their battles. As a researcher from the Development Research Center of the State Council put it: “contention within

the system' (*tizhi nei kangzheng*) (such as petitioning) is still the main feature of peasant action, but contention outside the system (such as violence) is also obviously increasing. . . . Peasants start by lodging complaints at the county level or higher, and doing so at the province or in Beijing is also fairly common. . . . If the petitions fail, they often turn to 'direct' (*zhijie*) resistance" (Zhao Shukai, 2004: 213, 221).

The repertoire of contention, in other words, has expanded and some of the newer tunes are becoming quite popular. Protest leaders in places such as Hengyang are "stretching the boundaries" (Tilly, 1978: 155) of rightful resistance and are trying to breathe life into a form of contention that had been enjoying only limited success. In particular, they have established a "radical flank" (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996: 14) at a time when it has become clear that the mediators they put their faith in are often ineffective and local opponents are largely impervious to half-hearted pressure from above.

### **HOW WIDESPREAD?**

We can only speak with confidence, at this point, about tactical escalation in Hengyang and a handful of other counties. Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that protest forms spread slower in China than in more open polities where the media deems dramatic, innovative tactics newsworthy (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 186; Rochon, 1988: 102-04) and rapidly transmits accounts of them nationwide (Soule, 1997: 858). In China, tactical diffusion still depends on word-of-mouth and informal social networks.<sup>5</sup> Complainants, in the course of lodging complaints at higher levels (i.e. using mediated tactics), encounter one another in reception rooms, outside "letters and visits offices," and in "petitioners' camps" (*shangfang cun*), and share stories of their

---

<sup>5</sup> On the limited reach and generality of "diffusion" compared to "brokerage," see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001: 335). For a discussion of "relational" and "non-relational" diffusion, as well as brokerage, see Tarrow (2005). On "contagion effects" in rural China, see Bernstein (2003: 21).

frustration with the old forms and victories with the newer ones.<sup>6</sup> Telephones enable protest organizers in different counties to stay in touch and carry tales of inventive tactics far and wide.<sup>7</sup> Migrant workers bring word of popular action in distant locales. Successful tactics often draw a stream of activists from the surrounding area to confer with “peasant heroes” who have achieved what had seemed impossible (Int. 41). Much as it has in other authoritarian settings, “low-intensity forms of communication . . . enable activists to learn their trade, share experiences, and develop common identities” away from official scrutiny and interference (Euchner, 1996: 150-51).

Direct rightful resistance spreads by imitation; it can also become more common owing to contemporaneous creation. Broadly similar grievances and experiences with contention can help forge a collective identity when limited interpersonal contact establishes minimal identification between transmitters and adopters (McAdam and Rucht, 1993), or even without any direct, relational ties (Soule, 1997: 861; Strang and Meyer, 1993; Tarrow, 2005).<sup>8</sup> And this collective identity can inspire a wave of a similar protests when a tactic becomes modular (Tarrow, 1998) and

---

<sup>6</sup> On finding, at any given time, about 50,000 aggrieved individuals in a petitioners’ camp outside one of the largest of Beijing’s complaints’ offices, see Beech (2004, March 1). “Training classes” (*peixun ban*) run by some public intellectuals in Beijing have also provided opportunities for rural complainants to meet and discuss their experiences.

<sup>7</sup> According to a Chinese researcher, “some leading figures among the peasantry have close ties with dozens or even a hundred peasant complainants inside and outside the province. Sometimes they even assemble to discuss important matters” (Zhao Shukai, 2004: 222). On the “elaborate organization” of many protests, including the existence of designated leaders, public spokespersons, underground core groups, as well as hired lawyers and invited journalists who cover their events, see Tanner (2004: 141). On the creation of a “basically” national student protest repertoire in China by 1919, see Wasserstrom (1992: 131).

<sup>8</sup> Collective identities can be strengthened on the basis of little more than a snippet of news. After the 1996 protests against education surcharges in Hezhou town, Qidong county, Hunan, news of success spread rapidly and other activists argued that elite solidarity was not as great as it seemed, that villagers elsewhere should not suffer more than those in Hezhou, and that other townships were also vulnerable to direct tactics. One protest leader rallied his followers with the words: “We are all citizens of the People’s Republic. We live under the same blue sky. Why do we have to pay this unlawful apportionment if our fellow citizens in Hezhou don’t?” (Int. 30; also see Yu Jianrong, 2001: 558-60).

adroit practitioners either import it wholesale or reinvent it (with perhaps a local twist) to fit their particular situation (Scalmer, 2002: 2).<sup>9</sup>

To this point, Chinese researchers have uncovered evidence of what we call direct rightful resistance in the provinces of Sichuan, Anhui, Hunan, Jiangxi, Henan, Shaanxi, and Hebei (Yang Hao, 1999; Jiang Zuoping and Yang Sanjun, 1999; Duan Xianju et al., 2000; Yu Jianrong, 2001; Liu Shuyun and Bai Lin, 2001; Jiang Zuoping et al., 2001; Ding Guoguang, 2001; Hao Fu and Chen Lei, 2002; Xiao Tangbiao, 2002; Zhao Shukai, 2004).<sup>10</sup> Our 2004-2004 and 2005-2005 surveys (see Appendix B) showed that direct action occurs throughout rural China. Among 1314 respondents from 28 provinces who had lodged complaints since 1980, 786 from 26 provinces had also led or taken part in “publicizing central policies and laws”; 829 from 27 provinces had led or taken part in “demanding dialogues with local government leaders”; 280 from 14 provinces had led or joined other villagers in “rejecting unreasonable burdens.”

### **ORIGINS OF DIRECT TACTICS**

It is only a start to say that tactics wear out “in the same way that rote speech falls flat” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001: 138). New tactics are not a “blind reflex” (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 185) or an automatic response to anything. They must be created through an interactive process (Jasper, 1997: 295; Tarrow, 1998: 102) that entails “incessant improvisation on the part of all participants” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001: 138) and “a series of reciprocal adjustments” (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 186-87). This depends on strategic decisions by protest

---

<sup>9</sup> On “improvisations upon familiar scripts” in the Shanghai student movement of the 1920s and the protest movement of 1989, see Wasserstrom (1992: 133) and Esherick and Wasserstrom (1990).

<sup>10</sup> Our interviews suggest that direct rightful resistance may be particularly well-developed in Dangshan county, Anhui, Gushi county, Henan, and Fengcheng county, Jiangxi. Furthermore, direct tactics in Hunan have appeared not only in Hengyang, but also in the counties of Lianyuan, Ningxiang, Qidong, Taoyuan, Xiangyin, and Yizhang (Duan Xianju et al., 2000).



leaders and their foes, as well as newly-available resources and changes in the external environment. Most of all, in rural China, it hinges on activists who reflect on their earlier experiences with mediated tactics, learn from their successes and failures, and come up with perhaps brilliant, perhaps ill-advised ways to pursue their ends the next time around (on tactical virtuosi, see Jasper, 1997: 301, 319-20).

In the following pages, we discuss four factors that have contributed to tactical escalation in the Chinese countryside: 1) past defeats, 2) information about government policies and assurances obtained during mediated contention, 3) advances in communications and information technology, and 4) popular support for disruptive protests.

## **Defeats**

Defeat sometimes drives protest leaders underground or spurs them to give up. It may also, however, motivate them to up the ante and touch off a round of tactical escalation. Recurring failures can trigger thoughts about jettisoning ineffective tactics (Beckwith, 2000; McCammon, 2003) while the harsh policing often associated with defeat may usher moderates into private life, leaving the stage to those with more militant inclinations (Tarrow, 1998: 84-85, 150, 158, 201; see also della Porta, 1996: 89-90; della Porta and Diani, 1999: 211).<sup>11</sup> In rural China, a growing realization of the inadequacy<sup>12</sup> and riskiness of mediated tactics has undermined the faith some activists had in lodging complaints and has induced them to take direct action.

---

<sup>11</sup> In Hengyang in 1998, thirteen “burden-reduction representatives” were whittled down to six by threats leveled by a township government. Backed into a corner, the remaining activists felt they either had to accept defeat or change their course of action. They decided to press on and engage in direct action by publicizing the Center’s effort to reduce farmers’ burdens to every household in the township (Yu Jianrong, 2001: 555).

<sup>12</sup> Our 1999 survey of 1384 villagers in 25 provinces included 190 participants in collective complaints. Of these 190, 3 percent were very satisfied with the outcome of their action, 18 percent relatively satisfied, 24 percent neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 31 percent dissatisfied, and 23 percent very dissatisfied. For more on this survey, see Appendix B and Li (2001: 1).

For many long-time complainants, the bitter truth is that protectors at higher levels have too often shown themselves to be all talk and little action. Anticipated backers frequently turn out to be little more than a symbolic source of legitimacy, who intervene only when egregious wrongs threaten political stability (such as after village cadres in Henan killed a villager who persisted in pursuing complaints) (Zhang Sutang and Xie Guoji, 1995, March 29: 4) In less incendiary circumstances, rightful resisters who employ mediated tactics are commonly ignored, given the run-around, or harassed. Even if they do receive a favorable response from someone in power, their antagonists at lower levels often ignore “soft” instructions from above or delay endlessly in implementing them (O’Brien and Li, 1999; Wedeman, 2001; but cf. Edin, 2003, Whiting, 2004: 119).

Defeats arise first and foremost because mediators do not mediate. Delegations languish for weeks waiting for an appointment with leaders who never emerge. Sympathetic words are not backed up with written instructions (Int. 4). Complainants are treated politely in person and then undercut behind their backs (Int. 5). The appearance of many open doors in Beijing (e.g. letters and visits offices at the Central Committee, the Party Discipline Inspection Committee, the National People’s Congress, various ministries, *People’s Daily*, *Farmer’s Daily*) and at lower levels can keep hopes of mediated rightful resisters alive for a while, but only intensifies their resentment when they receive no response, are referred to yet another office, or a complaint ends up in the hands of the official charged with misconduct (on letters and visits, see Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 177-190; Cai, 2004; X. Chen, 2003; Luehrmann, 2003; Minzner, 2005; Thireau and Hua, 2003).<sup>13</sup>

According to a researcher from the Hunan Organization Department: “People who visit higher

<sup>13</sup> Complainants are often rounded up and sent home during annual people’s congress sessions and at other times when officials are busy announcing their achievements or showing off their city (see Beech, 2004). Before the 2004 National People’s Congress, for example, the Ministry of Land and Resources issued an urgent circular instructing local officials to use “firm and effective” measures to handle long-time complainants who were disputing land requisitions, and to “do everything possible to stabilize the masses in their locality” (*jinliang ba qunzhong wending zai dangdi*) (Guo Tu Ziyuanbu, 2004, February 1).

levels to lodge complaints very rarely obtain justice. Justice for them is like a carrot dangling in front of a donkey. The donkey walks for many kilometers but can never eat the carrot” (Zhang Yinghong, 2002; also Cai, 2003: 664, 679).

In the end, many veteran activists have come to doubt the capacity of the Center to ensure faithful policy implementation, and some even think of it as a clay Buddha that local officials must bow to but can ignore with impunity (Li, 2004; Int. 10). All this has led to growing frustration among protesters who had relied on mediated tactics and has encouraged some of them to find new ways to pursue their goals.

### **Information and Assurances**

Despite its frequent failure to produce much redress, mediated contention can generate resources and create openings that promote direct contention. Activists, most notably, have obtained copies of authoritative “red-headed documents” via mediated contention that confirmed policy violations were taking place. In Hengyang, for instance, Hunan Provincial Regulation No. 9 (1996) on limiting exactions has played a large part in helping activists pinpoint misconduct by local officials. Such documents can be shown to potential supporters to prove, in detailed and clearly-worded language, that township and county cadres have betrayed their superiors.

Some of these measures even authorize direct action when central directives are ignored. A 1991 State Council regulation, for example, states: “It is the obligation of farmers to remit taxes to the state, to fulfill the state’s procurement quotas for agricultural products, and to be responsible for the various fees and services stipulated in these regulations. Any other demands on farmers to provide financial, material, or labor contributions gratis are illegal and farmers have the right to reject them” (cited in Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 48). Even more authoritatively, the 1993 *Agriculture*

*Law* (Art. 18) explicitly grants villagers the right to refuse to pay illegal impositions. It is true that these acts offer little protection if rejecting a demand leads to detention, a beating, having one's home torn down, or having one's valuables or livestock confiscated. Nor do they spell out punishments for cadres who flout the limits. But this incompleteness has only stimulated some protest leaders to devise their own ways to make these rights real. Among other initiatives, activists in various provinces have organized mass meetings to study and publicize the *Agriculture Law* and provincial caps on taxation, and they have openly challenged officials who fail to comply with them (Ints. 6, 7; Duan Xianju et al., 2000; Ma Zhongdong, 2000).

Participants in mediated contention also sometimes obtain oral or written assurances that disseminating beneficial policies is legally protected. When several farmers in Hunan asked whether they could publicize documents concerning excessive fees, officials at the provincial letters and visits office encouraged them to do so, so that villagers knew what was forbidden and what was not. On one occasion, the office director also reassured them that such actions were lawful and jotted some supportive remarks on the cover of a provincial regulation he gave to the lead complainant (Int. 5). Another Hengyang protest leader received similar words of encouragement when he visited the Ministry of Agriculture in Beijing (Int. 6). More remarkably, when several farmers lodged a complaint at the Fujian provincial government concerning a township's illegal sale of farmland they had contracted, the staff member who received them at the Letters and Visits Office reassured them that they had the right to block the purchaser from taking over the land (Int. 37). Acting on a belief that they had located a "guarantor against repression" (Tarrow, 1998: 79), each of these protest leaders then transformed a few kind words (in fact, the only politically correct response) into permission to pursue a broad-based campaign of publicizing policies. In the Fujian

case, villagers also went a step further: they took the official's advice literally and physically blocked the land buyer's men when they came to claim the property (Int. 37).

Strictly speaking, there is no law that allows Chinese citizens to publicize Party policies and state laws. But this is an act whose correctness no one can legitimately challenge. While an official who scrawls on a letter of complaint "disseminating policies is protected by law" may be seeking mainly to get a group of activists out of his or her office and to discourage them from returning (see Guo, 2001: 434), enterprising activists often waste little time expanding this discursive crack into a window of opportunity. They interpret official "instructions" (*pishi*), as informal and off-hand as they usually are, to be evidence that a large gap exists between authorities at higher and lower levels. What might have been little more than a brush-off, in other words, can easily justify upgrading a general license to publicize policies into an explicit go-ahead to challenge abusive local officials and mobilize opposition to improper decisions in one's own village.

In sum, even though mediated contention usually fails to generate the hoped-for relief, it can provide activists with crucial information about official misconduct, suggest political openings (that may or may not exist), and (by changing protest leaders' expectations and their store or resources) set the stage for direct rightful resistance.

### **Communications and Information Technologies**

Some activists in rural China use remarkably low-tech (or no-tech) means to mobilize and coordinate direct action. In Jize county, Hebei, for example, protest leaders set off firecrackers to assemble villagers in front of a general store before leading them to demand a dialogue with township leaders (Yang Shouyong and Wang Jintao, 2001: 40-42), while in Hunan village

lookouts used gongs to summon community members to defend protest organizers who were about to be arrested (Duan Xianju et al., 2000; Int. 6).

But some newer technologies (which have only recently reached the countryside) have played an even bigger role in facilitating direct rightful resistance. We have already seen how audio equipment such as tape recorders, loudspeakers, and mobile broadcasting stations can help publicize policies and rally supporters. Inasmuch as direct action requires considerable coordination and planning, telephones have also become an important tool for protest leaders. More and more activists these days use mobile phones to arrange multi-village or even multi-township actions. In Hengyang, for instance, one farmer (Int. 4) set up a telephone tree that connected hundreds of activists in nearly a dozen townships. Many of his fellow organizers now have cell phones or land lines at home; those who do not, rely on neighbors who are willing to pass on messages about the time and place of meetings, upcoming actions, the number of protesters to turn out, and so on. In Hunan, villagers have even used mobile phones to protect investigators who have come to do research on rural contention. One protest leader called two journalists sent by the magazine *Window on the South Wind* (*Nanfeng Chuang*) to warn them (three times!) to change taxis after his followers discovered that county officials had learned the license plate number of their vehicle; later, after the reporters stayed in one location too long and were detained, another activist phoned to offer to mobilize hundreds of villagers to free them (Int. 43; on other rescues, see Bernstein, 2003: 15; Johnson, 2004: 69).

Personal computers are another breakthrough that has promoted the use of direct tactics. Computer printing, in particular, can aid both in publicizing policies and reproducing letters of complaints. Activists in Anhui province, for instance, painstakingly entered a beneficial tax policy on a computer, character by character, and then distributed printouts to stir up resistance to

unlawful taxation (Zhang Cuiling, 2002). Shortly before a number of “burden reduction representatives” in Hengyang demanded a dialogue with a school head concerning tuition and fee increases, they circulated printouts of their letter of complaint to parents of local school children (Int. 18).

Most of these newer technologies are no longer forbiddingly expensive. Mobile phones can be bought for 200 to 300 *yuan* (approximately US\$25-\$40) and calls run about 60 *fen* (7 US cents) or less per minute. Shops that provide word-processing and computer printing can be found in virtually all county towns and many townships.

The technology that has transformed protest the most is also one of the most widely available: photocopying. In Hunan, it costs 30 *fen* (4 US cents) to reproduce a page the size of this one and copy shops can be found in most township seats. Photocopying not only eases duplication of central, provincial and city regulations, it also lends a patina of authenticity and legitimacy to those documents and impedes crackdowns by officials who previously would have claimed they were bogus (Ints. 4, 6, 7). In Hengyang, when a deputy township head and the chair of the township people’s congress attempted to shut down a group of activists who were reading copied regulations over a loudspeaker and alleged that they were publicizing phony “black documents” (*hei wenjian*), several activists challenged them to produce the real or “red” (*hong*) versions. Rebuffed, the officials had nothing more to say. The protest leaders then immediately announced to the surrounding crowd that these officials were “active counter-revolutionaries” (*xianxing fan geming*) because they had “defiled” (*wumie*) central policies (Int. 44).

All these technologies enable adept rightful resisters to reach out to (and fire up) a mass constituency in a way that was less critical when they were simply lodging mass complaints and depended largely on elite allies rather than disgruntled, agitated villagers. Advances in duplication

and communication (with faxes, e-mail, text-messaging, and the internet not far behind)<sup>14</sup> (Tarrow 1998: 132) also help organizers mount popular action and gauge how disruptive they can be without crossing into “forbidden zones” (*jinqu*).

## **Popular Support**

In rural China today, there is not much evidence of a “strategic dilemma” where disruption is necessary to draw attention but militancy reliably alienates the public (cf. Jasper, 2004: 9, 13; Rochon, 1988). So long as rightful resisters refrain from demanding excessive donations or harassing free-riders, tactical escalation usually generates more community approval than disapproval. Particularly in locations where villagers have become exasperated with the Center’s failure to rectify long-standing wrongs, unconventional tactics do not undermine the legitimacy of protest and drive away supporters, but more often lead to comments such as: “when officials push people to rebel, people have to resist” (Int. 45).

Direct tactics can help a group of activists expand their base by creating solidarity, forging a collective identity, and strengthening trust. It is often the case that the more assertive and enterprising protest leaders are, the more their stature rises – though popular acclaim does not always translate into active participation in the next round of contention. As we will see in Chapter 5, interested onlookers sometimes join protests or become leaders themselves; more frequently, they offer financial support or applaud the actions of activists whom they have come to respect or even admire. In this way, although direct tactics establish a “radical flank,” they do not redound chiefly to the benefit of those who employ moderate, mediated tactics. Instead, they often set in

---

<sup>14</sup> On the use of mobile phones, text messaging, e-mail, and internet bulletin boards to coordinate anti-Japanese protests in urban China, see Yardley (2005, April 25). For a discussion of Falun Gong and other Chinese “cybersects, see Thornton (2002, 2003).



motion a sequence of events where wary but hopeful spectators (and some new participants) are delighted to see imperious, corrupt, and abusive officials get their comeuppance and even privately egg rightful resisters to ratchet the level of confrontation up a notch.

The following episode illustrates how the back-and-forth between protest leaders and their followers can lead to tactical escalation. In Shandong, an elected village director lodged numerous complaints and even filed a lawsuit against an accountant who was the front-man for a corrupt village Party secretary. But the director could not secure access to the accounts that confirmed the financial shenanigans of the two men. (To shield their underlings and themselves township officials had spirited away the account books to their office and locked them up). In 2002, with a new election approaching, the director realized that he might lose, largely because he had been so ineffective in bringing the Party secretary and the accountant to justice. His supporters were concerned and urged him to use bolder, direct tactics. The director demanded a meeting with the township head, during which he threatened, if he was again prevented from seeing the accounts, to mobilize his following to occupy the township office building. The township head relented but only granted permission to review the books for a single day. The director agreed but decided to spring a surprise. At the end of the appointed time, nearly 60 of his supporters suddenly appeared, seized the accounts, and ran off with them. This incident led the township leadership and the village Party secretary to cancel the upcoming election, thereby allowing the village director to retain his position. It also helped the director win back many of his former backers who had been disappointed with his lack of resolve (Int. 36).

Popular support for direct tactics arises for a number of reasons. Above all, it derives from widespread frustration with the ineffectiveness of mediated contention (Int. 4, 5, 6). Of nearly equal importance, participating in direct rightful resistance, or offering financial or moral support to

those who do so, is often not perceived to be as risky as it might seem. Unless atypically heavy-handed county leaders authorize the use of violence against rightful resisters, such as occurred in Hengyang in 1999 and Yiyang, Henan, in 2002 (Ints. 4, 7, 79), township officials are often hamstrung, not least because the township police are responsible to the county public security bureau, not the township. Although township leaders may seek to get around this by fabricating “riots” (*sao luan*), their case for repression is sometimes belied by the facts. In 2003, for instance, a township party secretary in Xinyang county, Henan, phoned the county leadership to report that thousands of villagers were about to start a riot near the government compound. When hundreds of county policemen arrived to restore order, they found a peaceful mass meeting underway, at which a well-known activist was doing nothing more than reading a central document about peasant burdens through a loudspeaker. The county police left without taking any action, and the head policeman complained that the township Party secretary should be sacked for making a false report (Int. 80).<sup>15</sup>

More broadly, since their ham-fisted involvement in suppressing the 1989 protest movement, China’s security forces have become much more concerned with the misuse of force. The police increasingly seek “to minimize popular anger through more moderate policing of protests” (Tanner, 2004: 148) and rely on containment and management rather than deterrence and quick suppression. This shift has meant that many low-key protests are permitted to continue (and crowds allowed to disperse), with little danger to most participants (Tanner, 2004: 148).

---

<sup>15</sup> Of course, alarming the county leadership sometimes succeeds and villagers underestimate the risks of direct action. In the Daolin incident of 1999 hundreds of People’s Armed Police were sent in after township officials reported that a peasant leader and his associates planned to organize an attack on the township government compound, while (according to one of the protest leaders), they were only calling a mass meeting to “study the Center’s burden-reduction policies.” In the ensuing confrontation, a villager was injured by a tear-gas canister and subsequently died under mysterious circumstances in the county hospital. One key organizer was later arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison; another organizer went into hiding and dared not return home until September 2004 (Int. 54).

Moreover, from imperial days to the present, protest leaders have always paid the highest price when collective action backfired, while followers have been protected by their numbers, their relative anonymity, and the authorities' fear of alienating a broad swath of the population. In fact, a common outcome has been arrest and imprisonment of ringleaders followed by concessions on the subject of the protesters' demands (Bianco, 2002; Bernstein and Lü, 2003; O'Brien, 2002: 150).<sup>16</sup> In some senses, taking part in a demonstration is even less dangerous than participating in typical mediated tactics, such as openly identifying oneself by signing or thumb printing a collective letter of complaint. While direct tactics require considerable planning and coordination, and place protest leaders in no small jeopardy, they also often ease the job of amassing and retaining popular support.

### WHO INNOVATES?

In many countries, new tactics are associated with new activists (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 189; Jasper, 1997: 231, 241) — with successive “micro-cohorts” (Whittier, 1995: 56) who enter a movement often after working in another movement (Meyer and Whittier, 1994; Voss and Sherman, 2000: 328).<sup>17</sup> Although in rural China we see some of this, particularly among new recruits who took part in mass campaigns during the waning days of the Maoist era, our limited evidence suggests that tactical escalation is mainly the handiwork of seasoned complainants who have learned new tricks as their abilities, resources and commitment have grown. In Hengyang, for instance, *all* 32 protest leaders on whom we have information had been involved in collective action for at least eight years, and *all* of them employed mediated tactics before moving on to direct

---

<sup>16</sup> On the high risks leaders of collective appeals typically face, see Cai (2004: 447-48).

<sup>17</sup> A younger, more militant generation of activists often appears at the peak of a protest cycle, in the midst of escalating violence and repression (Zwerman and Steinhoff, 2005: 89).

action (on protest in Hengyang in the late 1980s and early 1990s, see Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 187-89; Yu Jianrong, 2003).

Of course, long-time complainants do not always graduate to direct rightful resistance. Those who do, in Hengyang, have typically been middle-aged or slightly older men who say they feel boxed in, in that they have few other options to improve their economic, social or political position. A number of Hengyang protest leaders who were under 35 years of age simply left the countryside and became migrant workers after a multi-village, collective complaint in 1996 failed to produce any relief. Older complainants (like interviewees 4, 5, and 6) however, could not easily do the same, not least because they often had elderly parents and teenage children to look after. Some of these men had also been migrant workers themselves for a time, but were unwilling to relive the discrimination and exploitation they had experienced (Int. 5). Others had served in the army and found themselves locked out of the village leadership when they returned home (on veterans and rural protest, see O'Brien and Li, 1995: 758; Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 148-49; Yu Jianrong, 2003: 1).<sup>18</sup> After years of fruitless mediated contention, most felt they had no alternative to escalation, unless they were willing to discard their ambitions, their self-respect, and their hopes for a better life (Ints. 4, 5, 6, 8, 19).

Personal, psychological factors also help explain why some veteran complainants have adopted direct tactics.<sup>19</sup> Most of the innovators we have encountered are unusually assertive and self-confident characters, who, for example, enjoyed telling anyone who would listen how much

---

<sup>18</sup> Our 1999-2001 survey of 1600 villagers in four counties (two in Jiangxi, one in Jiangsu, and one in Fujian) (Li, 2004: 244) showed that both men and army veterans were considerably overrepresented among rightful resisters. This survey did not distinguish between mediated and direct forms of rightful resistance. For some tentative thoughts on the broader question – “who tends to lead rightful resistance?” – see Appendix A.

<sup>19</sup> For survey data on personality traits shared by many protest leaders, see Appendix A. For a psychological explanation of worker-rebel defiance in Cultural Revolution Shanghai, which focuses on personal inclinations, ambitions, and audacity, arising from factors such as alien native place origin, difficult family circumstances, participation in youth gangs, and military service, see Perry and Li (1997: 66-69, 190-91).

pride they took in fighting wrongdoing.<sup>20</sup> Along these lines, one activist in Hengyang said “ I have been combative since I was young and have no tolerance for injustice and evil” (Int. 8). Another protest leader from Hengyang was proud to announce that he “had been rebelling against abusive cadres since Mao Zedong was still ruling China” (Int. 6).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, several rural organizers even compared themselves to vaunted Party martyrs and vowed that they would rather die than knuckle under to unjust and corrupt local officials (Ints. 13, 19, 21; also Int. 36; Duan Xianju, et al., 2000). One activist from Lianyuan county, Hunan went so far as to allude to the famous Qin dynasty rebels Chen Sheng and Wu Guang by claiming that “kings and generals are not born to be kings and generals” (Duan Xianju et al., 2000). These die-hards not only refuse to retreat, they also have no use for tactics that have repeatedly shown themselves to be inadequate. For protest leaders with such hard-charging personalities, disenchantment with mediated contention only feeds their indignation, brinksmanship, and dreams of grandeur while boosting their commitment to find a way to do whatever it takes to prevail.

That many rightful resisters possess strong personalities and no lack of self-esteem also means that they are likely to find it humiliating to let their supporters down. Tactical innovators in rural China are typically highly attuned to questions of dignity and “face” and believe (often correctly) that they will be mocked as cowards if they back down after a few setbacks (Yu Jianrong, 2001: 568).<sup>22</sup> This is especially true when protest leaders have openly vowed to defend

---

<sup>20</sup> Wood (2003: 234-37) highlights the “pleasures in agency” experienced by many participants in collective action. Her study of insurgency in El Salvador showed that feelings of increased autonomy, self-esteem and pride came about “in the course of making history, and not just any history but a history they perceived as more just” (p. 235).

<sup>21</sup> On “insolent” protest leaders, see Guo (2001: 432). On their persistence and reputation for courage, see Bernstein (2003: 13). On the “forceful personalities” and “common feistiness” of worker-rebels during the Cultural Revolution, see Perry and Li (1997: 67, 69). On the assertiveness of leaders of rightful resistance, see Appendix A.

<sup>22</sup> For rumors that he had been bribed by a county government spurring an activist to begin a campaign of publicizing fee-reduction policies, see Johnson (2004: 57-58).

their neighbors to the end and have repeatedly solicited contributions from the public to lodge complaints. As time goes by, they often feel growing pressure to find a way, any way, to deliver at least a portion of what they have promised. They wish to show that they have the mettle to stand up to the authorities for as long as it takes and to demonstrate that their acts of defiance will ultimately have a payoff.

Lastly, architects of direct rightful resistance seem to possess an abiding faith in the Center's desire (if not capacity) to halt policy violations. They appreciate better than most that officials up to the province level are unlikely to redress popular grievances (Ints. 4, 21, 36), yet they continue to say that some leaders at the Center truly wish to end misimplementation of beneficial measures (see Guo, 2001: 435-37; Li, 2004). In the words of a protest leader from Fujian, "central leaders share a common interest with people like me, at least to the extent that they agree that what I'm struggling against also undermines Party rule" (Int. 37). Similarly, although an activist from Shandong repeatedly dodged questions about whether he genuinely trusted the Center,<sup>23</sup> he insisted that so long as China's President wished to stay in power, he would need people like him to help control wayward local officials (Int. 36; also Ints. 46, 79). For such individuals, declining trust in the Center's capacity does not cause a lapse into passivity; instead, it strengthens their resolve and encourages them to step up their efforts to assist a besieged and weakened Center.

---

<sup>23</sup> To what extent rightful resisters use central policies as an instrument and to what extent they actually have faith in such policies is difficult to assess. It is always problematic to gain access to protesters' true motivations (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004: 542) and there are dangers in inferring intent from actions. We suggest a hypothesis: some degree of sincere belief in the Center is critical at first, to become a rightful resister. But declared trust in the Center may become more strategic with time, as rightful resisters scale the official hierarchy, allies prove unreliable, and defeats often mount.

## SOME IMPLICATIONS

Rightful resistance, in rural China has evolved since the 1980s. Some long-time activists, seeing few alternatives and too proud to accept defeat, have turned to more confrontational forms of contention. Instead of counting on higher-level patrons to address their claims, these rightful resisters and their followers have increasingly come to demand justice on the spot. In an attempt to halt policy violations, they have transformed tiny openings into opportunities to deploy new, more disruptive tactics, such as publicizing policies, demanding dialogues, and face-to-face defiance. In the course of doing so, they have exploited the spread of communications and information technologies, including mobile phones, photocopying, and computerized printing. Direct tactics, to this point, have generally not overstepped the Center's sufferance (so long as protest leaders and their followers stop short of violence and clearly illegal acts), and they almost always meet with popular acclaim, as rightful resisters persist, win occasional victories, and keep trumpeting their willingness to sacrifice all for the interests of the Party and the people.

These developments have several broader implications for research on contentious politics. Tactical escalation, it should be noted, has brought about what McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: 144-58) call "object shift," in two different senses. On the one hand, the focus of rightful resistance has shifted downwards, since direct contention is usually aimed at lower level officials than mediated contention. Local adversaries are confronted not bypassed. Protesters give up on high-level patrons and take matters into their own hands. On the other hand, rightful resisters sometimes turn on their ineffectual (or two-faced) advocates at higher levels and attack them. Consider this example from Hengyang: after a protest organizer's wife (Int. 38) was beaten by township cadres and several hired toughs, another activist (Int. 5) led a delegation of villagers to the county to insist that the perpetrators be punished. At this point, the protesters were employing

mediated tactics because they treated the county as a potential ally against their township foes. But when the county head summarily rejected their demands, the activists decided that the county was in truth a backstage supporter of their antagonists. Instead of proceeding up a level to the city government (which they still considered an ally), they decided they would challenge the county itself by setting up a human blockade on a county highway. As their perception of the county's stance changed, their tactics had morphed from mediated contention (aimed at the county, by appealing to it for help) to direct action (against the county, by blocking the county road). So far, direct contention has mostly targeted township and village cadres; this episode shows it can move up the hierarchy, with potentially explosive consequences (for another example, see Li, 2001: 1-2).

Much more research is needed on which tactics tend to be used at which levels in the hierarchy. Are protesters less confrontational at lower levels and more confrontational at higher levels? Or does a progression toward transgression occur at each level, before they move up the hierarchy? Most rightful resisters, to this point, seem to “take strong measures only after courteous ones fail” (*xian li hou bing*) at each level (Ints. 5, 36, 37). At the county, for instance, protesters usually begin by lodging complaints and then move on to staging demonstrations, sit-ins, and traffic blockades only if their demands are rebuffed. Direct rightful resistance remains uncommon at the municipal or provincial level. Still, confrontational tactics are showing signs of reaching upwards. Complainants in Beijing, for instance, have applied for permission to hold demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, knelt down en masse at the Monument of People's Heroes, and carried mourning wreaths to the gate of the Zhongnanhai compound where top leaders reside (Ints. 56, 58, 66). In March 2005, just days before the annual session of the National People's Congress, over three thousand complainants in Beijing signed a collective petition that demanded



an overhaul of the letters and visits system and judicial review of the constitutionality of the newly-promulgated *Regulation on Letters and Visits* (2005) (Int. 58).<sup>24</sup>

The “addressees” (Szabo, 1996) of contention have changed in another important way. In rural China, the audience for collective action is broadening well beyond fair-weather friends in officialdom. Rightful resisters now regularly turn to another third party – the public. The strategic dilemma that researchers have observed in the West (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 182-83; Jasper, 2004: 9, 13; Rochon, 1988) can easily be overstated in the Chinese countryside, where radicalism typically attracts support rather than chases it away. Many of our interviewees in fact believe that protest organizers should have acted earlier and even more dramatically (e.g., Ints. 25, 45). This is a good reminder that tactical escalation is often as much about building a protest subculture as winning specific battles (see Jasper, 1997: 237) and that we need to look deep inside protest groups to understand how internal solidarity is built and collective identities form (see della Porta and Diani, 1999: 181-82). This implies more attention to recruitment and leader-group dynamics, and further consideration of the ways in which tactical choices can “widen the circle of those psychologically prepared for mobilization” (see Rochon, 1998: 162), play a role in knitting a group together, and “reinforce affective ties among protesters” (Jasper, 1997: 237).

The evolution of rightful resistance also suggests how political opportunities can figure in tactical escalation. Yes, some sympathetic officials have provided rightful resisters information about beneficial policies and assurances that it is safe and advisable to go beyond group petitions (on expanding opportunities and tactical innovation, see McAdam, 1983: 737; Minkoff, 1999: Szabo, 1996). But the inability of protesters to locate allies who will stick with them to the end has

---

<sup>24</sup> More ominously, in a letter posted on the internet, a protest leader from Fujian wrote that petitioners from Hunan and Sichuan he encountered in the “complainants’ village” in Beijing wished they had explosives so that they could imitate Iraqi suicide bombers and blow up county government buildings. He called for an overhaul of the letters and visits system to restore people’s trust in the Party (Zhongyang: Shangfang, 2005). On rightful resistance evolving into full-fledged dissent, see Chapter 6 and Li (2004).

often been more significant than new openings. Journalists may promise to expose official wrongdoing, but then disappear after blackmailing wrongdoers. Backers in weaker bureaus, such as Civil Affairs and Agriculture, may be overpowered by representatives from the Organization Department or the Public Security Bureau. Letters and Visits officials and staff and deputies of peoples' congresses may wish to help petitioners, but lack the resources and clout to do so. Ranking officials at higher levels may be willing to scrawl a few words of support on a complaint, but unwilling to offer any follow-up when their "instructions" are ignored. Activists have learned that they must rely on themselves and their constituency more, both for protection and to prevail. Their advocates at higher levels have often shown themselves to be virtual allies at best, and this has altered the costs and benefits of different forms of contention. Seen in this light, whether opportunities have expanded or contracted hinges on the tactics under consideration. Tactical escalation in rural China thus depends less on whether the system is open or closed (cf. Kitschelt, 1986: 66) than on which doors are opening and closing. The key question, as we saw in Chapter 2, is "opportunity for what" (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004: 1461-63, 1484)? A shifting opportunity structure (not an improving one) has undermined mediated rightful resistance and promoted direct action.

At the same time, tactical innovation requires that skillful activists seize available opportunities (Jasper, 1997; McAdam, 1983: 737).<sup>25</sup> Protest leaders may understand or misunderstand their situation, and then devise brilliant or foolish moves.<sup>26</sup> In the Chinese countryside, a growing realization that most of their anticipated allies are missing-in-action has

<sup>25</sup> On political opportunity structures as "a system of permissive incentives rather than of firm constraints," see Rochon (1998: 203).

<sup>26</sup> Tactics are also chosen partly for psychological, cultural, and biographical reasons. They express moral visions and identities. Activists may find some certain tactics enjoyable and others dull. Protest leaders may have their self-image tied up in being at the cutting edge. For these and other reasons, tactical choices can diverge from what an opportunity structure would predict. See Jasper (1997: 244-45, 301, 320).

demoralized less committed activists and encouraged more assertive protesters to search for new, more effective tactics. After repeated failures, some rightful resisters have developed a new (perhaps more realistic) appreciation of the openings and threats they face, and have adjusted their tactics accordingly. Crises, turbulence and shocks (brought on mainly by defeats), and the response of activists to them has precipitated tactical escalation (see Beckwith, 2000; Voss and Sherman, 2000: 341). Through a long and bumpy process of experimentation, protesters in different locations have groped their way from mediated to direct contention.