

New Tactics in Rural Protest

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

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, some Chinese villagers engaged in a form of protest that has been called rightful resistance. This involves using the policies, laws, and commitments of the central state to combat local officials who have been ignoring those policies, laws and commitments. In the early post-Mao period, rightful resistance tended to be mediated, in the sense that protesters didn't directly confront their opponents, but instead relied on a powerful third party to address their claims. Activists acted under the sufferance of, and energetically sought support from 1) officials as high as central policy makers, 2) cadres as low as any local official other than the ones they were denouncing, and 3) journalists (or others) who could communicate their grievances to high-ranking officials. When they acted in this mediated fashion, rightful resisters sometimes mobilized popular action, but their main goal was to use the threat of unrest to attract attention from potential mediators and to apply pressure on officeholders at higher levels to rein in their underlings. They sought, in other words, to bypass their local opponents rather than to force them to negotiate.

More recently, there's been a notable radicalization of tactics -- a move from humble petitioning to the politics of disruption. In places such as Hengyang county, Hunan, protest leaders increasingly place demands on their targets in person and try to wring concessions from them on-the-spot. This increasingly direct form of rightful resistance doesn't 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" they (and the villagers who join them) try to put out the fires themselves. Rightful resisters may still view the Center as a symbolic backer and a guarantor against repression, but they no longer genuinely expect higher-ups to intervene on their behalf. Instead, they assert a right to resist (not only expose and denounce) unlawful acts, and they regard themselves and their supporters to be capable of resolving the problems at hand.

Direct action has three main variants. The least confrontational might be called publicizing a policy. In the course of "studying documents," 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 to alert the public to official misconduct and mobilize opposition to unapproved "local policies." The documents they select always relate to issues that concern villagers greatly, like reducing excessive taxes and fees, decrying the use of violence, corruption, or promoting well-run village elections.

Policy disseminators use a variety of methods. They may begin by showing copies of laws they have acquired to their neighbors. As their confidence mounts, they may often turn to more public ways to expose local misconduct, such as playing tape recordings, or even using megaphones or loudspeakers, to inform villagers of policy misimplementation. Many efforts to make beneficial policies and laws known are limited to a single village; others expand the field of action. An example of the latter is employing "propaganda vehicles" or putting up posters throughout a township criticizing excessive fees or rigged elections. Although they usually shy away from physical confrontation, policy disseminators sometimes publicize policies and laws in ways that can't help but lead to conflict. Two techniques sure to produce official ire are distributing documents or holding so-called "ten thousand person meetings" near a government compound. Such gatherings often turn into melees when township or county officials intervene.

Publicizing documents often leads to repression; but it also sometimes further protesters' ends. By reading out or distributing central laws and policies, activists expose unlawful 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. In so doing, rightful resisters assert their right to know about beneficial measures and to communicate their knowledge. 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 unlawful local actions

The second variant of direct action is “demanding a dialogue.” Activists and their supporters, often after collective petitioning or publicizing a policy fails, 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. Instead of simply lodging a collective complaint, which would have been more common in the past, a group of “burden reduction representatives” may proceed directly to the school. The arrival of these “peasant heroes” 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 activists 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.

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 less possible when protesters turn to the third variant of direct action: face-to-face defiance.

Activists who use face-to-face defiance confront local officials on the job and try to halt any illegal acts. They, for example, flatly reject unauthorized local impositions and loudly encourage others to follow suit. 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* too much. The tax collectors dared not challenge him in public, but one of them mumbled 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.

The three variants of direct action I’ve outlined here 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, especially when activists lose control of their followers or officials panic. It also opens up the possibility that protesters will continue to escalate their tactics (perhaps toward out-and-out violence) while embracing broader and deeper claims — claims that are general and ideological rather than concrete and specific, claims that challenge the legitimacy of local government rather than the lawfulness of local decisions.

How new is all this? Mediated tactics haven’t gone away; in fact, they continue to be employed while direct, confrontational forms of contention have also become more common.

How widespread is direct action? We can only speak at this point about tactical escalation in Hengyang. But there are tantalizing signs of tactical diffusion as protesters run into each other while engaging in mediated forms of contention, be it in reception rooms, outside “letters and visits offices,” and in

“petitioners’ camps,” and share stories of their frustration with the older tactics and victories with the newer ones. Mobile telephones also enable protest organizers in different counties to stay in touch and carry tales of inventive tactics far and wide.

Why have direct tactics appeared just now? There are four factors. First, past defeats. For many long-time complainants, the bitter truth is that protectors at higher levels are often all talk and little action. Protesters who employ mediated tactics are commonly ignored, given the run-around, or harassed. Even if they do obtain a favorable response from someone in power, their antagonists at lower levels often ignore “soft” instructions from above or delay endlessly in implementing them. So, new tactics arise first and foremost because mediators don’t mediate. Failure leads to growing frustration and encourages some protest organizer to find new ways to further their goals.

Second, despite these many failures, mediated contention can generate resources and create openings for direct contention. Activists, most notably, have obtained copies of authoritative “red-headed documents” and laws via mediated contention that confirmed policy violations were taking place. Some of these measures even authorize direct action when central directives are ignored, such as the Agriculture Law, which empowers villagers to reject illegal fees. Participants in mediated contention also sometimes obtain oral or written assurances that, for example, disseminating beneficial policies is legally protected. 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, resourceful activists often interpret these off-hand “instructions,” to be evidence that a meaningful gap exists between authorities at higher and lower levels, which they can exploit.

Technology has also facilitated direct action. Beyond tape recorders, loudspeakers, and mobile broadcasting stations, cell phones have become important for coordination and planning rightful resistance, while photocopying and computerized printing have played a large role in easing duplication of central, provincial and city regulations and lending a patina of authenticity to documents that officials previously would have claimed were bogus. All these technologies enable 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 agitated, disgruntled villagers

Fourth, there is popular support. So long as rightful resisters refrain from demanding excessive donations or harassing free-riders, tactical escalation usually generates more community approval than disapproval. Unlike protest in the West, where the presence of a “radical flank” often works to the benefits of more moderate elements, ordinary villagers often respect and admire people who engage in dramatic acts of resistance. The beginning of direct action in a village often sets in motion a sequence of events where wary but hopeful spectators (and some new participants) are delighted to see imperious, corrupt, and abusive local officials get their comeuppance and even privately egg protest leaders to ratchet the level of confrontation up a notch.

Let me close with just a few words on who innovates. Although in many countries new tactics depend on the entry of new protesters, our evidence suggests that tactical escalation is mainly the handiwork of seasoned complainants. 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 action. Most of the innovators we have encountered are unusually assertive and self-confident characters, who, for example, enjoy telling anyone who would listen how much pride they took in fighting wrongdoing. These die-hards have remarkably hard-charging personalities, and disenchantment with mediated tactics only feeds their indignation, brinkmanship, and dreams of grandeur while boosting their commitment to find a way to do whatever it takes to prevail.

Putting it all in a nutshell, rightful resistance has evolved in rural China. Some long-time activists, seeing few alternatives and too proud to accept defeat, have turned to more confrontational forms of protest. Instead of counting on higher-level patrons to address their claims, protesters 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 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.