

## **Chris Chafin**

### **Unrest in China**

They don't believe in liberty. They don't believe in China before the Communists. There is only one simple, clear task: to protect their control, to maintain their governing. Which is such a pity, (Wines 2009).

The above quote was Chinese dissident and artist Ai Weiwei in a recent interview with *The New York Times*. From the point of view of Mr. Ai and many pro-democracy protesters, China's central government's fixation on retaining power is undoubtedly a pity. This paper will examine how the government's prerogative to remain intact in the face of innumerable challenges may in fact render it more responsive to the needs of its domestic population than one might expect from a autocratic state socialist regime. This paper will present three separate crises which have beset China this decade: the Pitchfork Rebellion, the corruption crisis, and the tainted product scandal. It will briefly lay out the causes of each event, those involved, and the response by the government. In almost every case, this paper will argue that the central government in some way addressed the concerns of the protestors in some way. These reforms ranged from radically un-communist land-sale schemes to summary executions. While these actions were most likely undertaken only pursuant to the central government's goal of maintaining order, this paper seeks to prove that the Chinese central government does change policy in the face of popular unrest.

### **Growing Unrest**

China has seen a remarkable increase of incidents of unrest in recent decades. While full-scale delineation of every cause of such activity is beyond the scope of this

paper, it is helpful to establish some facts about the number and frequency of such incidents. Beginning in the mid-1990s, only a few short years after 1989's Tiananmen Square Massacre, China saw a rise in large-scale protests, or "mass incidents" in official parlance (BBC 2009). There was a 268 percent rise in mass incidents between 1993 and 1999, with 32,000 reported that year (Tanner 138). Unrest has been especially pronounced as China's economy has continued to grow at a breakneck speed throughout the first decade of the new millennium. Some provinces saw almost 10,000 protests during the period 2000 – 2002, or "nearly 10 per day for almost three years" (Tanner 140). The Chinese central government acknowledged 87,000 such incidents in 2005. This is an increase of nearly 300 percent in just six years, and a total increase of 600 percent in less than fifteen years (Beech 2006).

In response to these populist actions, the Chinese central government has adopted a surprisingly diverse strategic toolkit which includes reforms, criminal prosecutions, and remuneration. This paper does not seek to prove the Chinese central government is benign in its actions; coercion and intimidation are undoubtedly also part of their strategy. As RAND Corporation's Murray Scott Tanner wrote in a 2004 paper, "organizing protests [in modern China] is still an extremely risky undertaking, but protest itself is often rewarded with concessions" (Tanner 2004). In the next section, this paper will examine three causes of protest and detail the government's response.

### **The Pitchfork Rebellion**

Of the 87,000 mass incidents in 2005, roughly 40 percent occurred in the countryside (Li 2006). While rural unrest has many causes (some of which this paper

will consider in the following sections), research completed by the *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* identifies land expropriation as the most common, and “most volatile”, issue for rural populations (*ibid*). Here, land expropriation means government seizure of peasant land for low or nonexistent compensation. China’s eminent domain policy is designed to make way for large-scale commercial and governmental projects, encompassing everything from casinos to highways. The issue is complicated by Chinese property rights or lack thereof. According to Chinese law, peasants cannot own the land upon which they work. They are compensated according to “complex formulas” which “rarely approach the market value of the land” (Kahn 2006). Because of this policy, in a sense, there is nothing strictly illegal about dispossessing a farmer of his land for an insultingly paltry sum. This practice does little to stop the seething anger among villagers.

The below description, from a 2006 article in *Time* magazine is typical of the unique character of resistance against such land grabs:

In mid-January, [a farmer] joined a remarkable protest against the local government's decision to seize communal farmland and lease it to a foreign investor. For several days, more than 1,000 villagers gathered near the disputed land, brandishing pitchforks and blocking a highway (Beech 2006).

Similar incidents abound. In the north, Wanli saw protests against demolishing homes and a collectively-owned factory. In the south, Hong Kong residents turned out en masse to protest against large-scale demolition to make way for a commercial shopping district (Lynch 2004, Wehner 2004). Taken together, these protests are referred to herein as *The Pitchfork Rebellion*, apologies to Hannah Beech, who used it in the above 2006 *Time* piece.

News reports on *Pitchfork Rebellion* actions first appeared between 2002 and 2004. The protests continued to increase in frequency and violence over the following

years, reaching a peak in the 2006 – 2007 period. In 2007, 20,000 protestors in Hunan Province faced off against government forces in a dispute which began over a proposed increase in mass-transit fees during the annual lunar holiday (Economist 2007). While this last incident strictly falls outside the parameters we have established for the Pitchfork Rebellion actions, it is generally included in consideration as it involves mass action by peasants against the government over local economic issues.

Faced with a wave of increasing unrest, how did the central government respond? Repression and physical violence were popular tactics. According to witnesses, the clash in Hunan resulted in “scores of people injured and a middle-school student beaten to death by the police” (Economist 2007). Other protests frequently have similar endings; police charging in with batons beating protestors, making mass arrests until the crowd disperses (Lynch 2007, Beech 2006). Leaders of these protests faced harsh reprisals from the government. A 2006 study by Lianjiang Li uncovered at least one 1999 instance in the Hengyang Province, where leaders of mass movements were “rounded up . . . beaten badly, paraded through the streets like criminals, and even put up on makeshift stages to be denounced” (Li 2006, 253). Violence and repression are not, however, the only means by which the government combats unrest.

As early as December of 2005, the central government began making conciliatory noises towards the protestors, with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao decrying “illegal seizures of farmland” and cautioning that:

We absolutely cannot commit a historic error over land problems. In some areas, illegal seizures of farmland without reasonable compensation have provoked uprisings. This is still a key source of instability in rural areas and even the whole society (Kahn 2006).

These are hardly the words of a government determined to end unrest at the barrel of a gun.

Even before his remarks, the central government abolished certain onerous taxes on rural farmers (Kahn 2006). Then, in 2008, the Central Committee seemed poised to institute radical reform which allowed peasants private ownership of land and allowed them to freely buy and sell it on the open market (Wong, 2008). While this reform was in the end scrapped for a more limited scheme which allowed farmers to trade and charge rent for their land, the action was widely characterized in the media as a first step on the road to more sweeping reforms by the Central Committee rather than a defeat for market ideas (Magnier 2008). While it must be admitted that these actions do not directly address the specific grievances of *Pitchfork Rebellion* protestors, namely establishing a fair system for compensating farmers in imminent domain matters, it does recognize the need for a solution that goes beyond jailing and beating dissidents. It shows a willingness on the part of the central government to address the needs of those protesting.

### **Crisis of Corruption**

The below section will examine corruption by government officials, the response from the public, and the moves made by the central government in response.

On average throughout the 1990s, 140,000 party officials per year were implicated in corruption scandals. By 2006, that number was up to 170,850 (Pei 2006). Corruption also involves more money than before: in 2000, roughly 41 billion yen (\$6 billion U.S.) was recovered by the central government from corruption schemes. In 1984, only 91 million was seized (Wededman 2005). This shows the dramatic increase

over the period of market reforms in the 1990s and late 1980s. Data further suggests that 30 to 60 percent of all corruption cases involved “large-scale corruption rings,” implicating dozens of governmental actors across wide territorial regions (Pei 2006). A 2007 auction in Hefei, in China’s northeast, was an unusual window into the world of official corruption (Fariclough 2007). While the province is one of China’s poorest, its auction house had on offer “Rolex and Omega watches, a woman's black mink coat, a Sony video camera and a heap of gold jewelry with a minimum bid of \$43,000,” all of it illegal gifts given to senior officials, seized by government prosecutors (A1).

This epidemic of public corruption has not gone unnoticed by Chinese citizens. The same Chinese Academy of Social Sciences study cited earlier also found that corruption by local officials was near the top of the list of villagers’ grievances (Li 2006). Corruption is also the number one concern among China’s rising middle class (Wang 2009). Many of the large-scale protests in China additionally have corruption as their central focus (Eckholm 2002). Corruption is also a primary concern among one of China’s most important constituencies: foreign investors. According to a recent survey, almost half of Asian bankers see China as a corruption hot-spot (Young 2007). Business publications sternly caution potential investors that, “China is a society and an economy in flux, and the inevitable uncertainties of this situation provide fertile ground for corruption of many kinds” (Norton & Huang 2001, 26). China Central Bank was recently unable to find a major foreign investor despite its concerted efforts in large part due to a reputation for corruption (Young 2007). The bank disciplined tens of thousands of employees and dismissed its president, Zhang Enzhao, who was later sentenced to fifteen years in jail, in an attempt to clean up its image (Reuters 2006; Economist 2005).

The government's response to this corruption crisis has had three main components. These are:

- 1) Keeping popular anger centered on local officials;
- 2) Punishing, and being seen to punish, those most directly implicated in corruption
- 3) Making concessions to those groups who engage in active civil disobedience.

There is a Chinese proverb which is essential to understanding the first tactic employed by the central government to combat unrest over corruption, "The mountains are high, and the Emperor is far away." In modern China, this proverb has a dual meaning. The first meaning is that local cadres, far away from the regulation of the central government, do as they please. The second is that despite its best intentions, the virtuous central government is unable to control the actions of those officials with the most direct effect on the life of a common villager (Li 2004). Accordingly, much of the tenor of local protests in rural areas often take the form of bringing an unjust act to the attention of the central government. Hong Kong University Professor Lianjiang Li offers an effective summation of this attitude when he writes,

The strategy of helping themselves by helping the Center sounds not only appealing, but feasible to these villagers . . . they seem to believe that the Center will welcome villagers who volunteer to help. In the eyes of such villagers, the Center is . . . a potential ally (Li 2004, 243).

A survey, conducted over three years of four counties within China found that 75 percent of respondents had differing opinions of the levels of trustworthiness at varying levels of government. Interestingly enough, the lowest scores went to the most local levels of government and the highest to the Center (Li 2004).

This attitude is highly advantageous to the central government, as it funnels popular unrest at particular actors within the government, and not the governmental

structure itself. As such, the center is more than happy to present itself as a tireless crusader against a seemingly unstoppable foe: corruption. The statement from Chinese president Hu Jintao in early 2009 that called for the anti-corruption body of the Communist Party to “firmly correct any official wrongdoings” is one of dozens of similar documents (Chinese Government Press Release, 2009). It presents the center as an unflinching virtuous organization that is unable to fully stem the tide of corruption. (cool sentence)

While it is no secret rogue local officials exist within China’s government, many of whom defy central policy and enrich themselves, this is unlikely the entire spectrum of the problem. A recent study found that village cadres look at duties handed down from the central government as hard responsibilities and always place their completion above any actions for their community or family (Kung, et al 2009). In other words, if there were a directive from the central government that would be beneficial to a cadre’s community, s/he would be sure to implement it. And implement it well, not only because of a duty to the center, but also because it would be beneficial during the limited elections held at the village level in China. While these elections are not substantive in every village, a 2009 study found they “act as a constraint upon village cadres in many places” (Kung, et al 2009, 62).

The second tactic is punishing and being seen to punish those most responsible for corruption. Punishment for those accused of corruption is often swift and harsh, with party officials often sentenced to long jail terms, and even death (Hutzler 2000, Kahn 2007, Fairclough 2007). While these actions are indeed taken largely for public relations reasons they also have another important component: policing party officials. While the

regime's anticorruption policies, "are unlikely to eradicate corruption," according to a detailed study of anti-corruption efficacy by Andrew Wedeman, "the function of the campaigns is not to eliminate corruption, but rather to control it," keeping it "from spiraling out of control" (Wedeman 2005, 94). In his study, Wedeman found these efforts are largely effective at lowering the incidence of corruption, if not its relative scale (*ibid*).

The Chinese government also places a priority on disseminating information on its anti-corruption activities. "10,000 prosecuted for corruption in rural China in '08" screams one of thousands of headlines in *China Daily*, the official English-language mouthpiece of the central government (Lisheng 2009). The list of similar stories is long: "Guangdong vows to check rising cases of corruption," "Corruption charged in awarding of highway contract," "Axe corruption not cigarettes" (Lisheng 2009, Chang 2009, China Daily 2009). In fact, a search on *China Daily's* website turns up over 10,000 results for the word "corruption." The center wants everyone from rural peasants to hedge-fund managers in New York to know it is aware of corruption and give the impression of being on top of it.

In some cases, as in the case of the *Pitchfork Rebellion*, the central government made limited concessions to citizens who engage in large-scale protests. This was the final tactic used by the central government to combat corruption. A protest in Liaoying in 2002 by factory workers against corrupt owners who had "looted the assets of the company," was met not only with the jailing of the factory owners in question, but with payments of lost wages to the workers (Eckholm 2002). Evidence of such action is anecdotal at best and anticorruption tactics focus largely on prevention.

## **Product Safety Crisis**

For importing countries, 2007 was the year of Chinese recalls. Pet food exported to Western nations was found to have melamine, a nutrient-rich industrial additive which was routinely added to pet foods and livestock feed to make it appear more nutritious (Martin, 2007). It also turned out to be extremely fatal. After numerous pet fatalities in America and Europe, 60 million cans of pet food were pulled from the US market (Hansell 2007). Later that same year, children's toys produced in China were recalled after it was discovered they had higher-than-acceptable levels of lead paint (Lipton 2007). That year, products from China accounted for nearly 60 percent of all product recalls in America (*ibid*). The Chinese government pledged to clean up its act, and began working with western governments on the safety of its exports. It even established a product-safety organization known as The National Special Rectification Program for Product Quality and Food Safety (Silnicki 2008). By late August, it had again offered copious reassurances to the world of the safety of 99% of its products (Associated Press 2007). The world seemed satisfied enough to resume business as usual.

What China had not done, however, was clean up its domestic market. Shortly after the end of the Beijing's 2008 Summer Olympic Games, China suffered a major product safety crisis, again involving the addition of melamine to an everyday product. This time, the product was baby formula (Barboza 2009). Beginning in mid-2008, babies in China fell ill in large numbers (Yardley 2008). The cause was soon traced to baby formula, to which some manufactures had been adding nitrogen-and-protein-rich melamine, which increases the milk's apparent nutritional value in testing (LaFraniere

2009). Within a week of the central government's acknowledgement of the crisis, thousands of children were confirmed to have suffered acute kidney failure, and a handful had died (Yardley 2008). Families clogged hospital emergency rooms around the country and wait times for kidney-function tests for infants stretched to nearly a week (*ibid*). By the end of the crisis, six children were dead and over 300,000 ill (LaFraniere 2009).

Unlike the other situations examined within this paper, which are long-term problems requiring a complex mixture of policy prescriptions, the tainted baby formula scandal was a true domestic crisis: sudden in onset and wide in scope. This affected the response by both the government and the population at large. First, those affected by the crisis were those firmly within the middle class enough to purchase baby formula in a grocery store. Secondly, there was little time to organize protests or other mass actions. There was simply concern for one's own family, and rage at those perceived to be responsible. A Chinese peasant relayed a typical reaction in an interview with *The New York Times*:

I read a story in the newspaper two days ago [about the tainted milk]. I was stunned. My concern is that whether or not people will be held accountable and whether they will be put in jail. They might simply buy their way out. I want to see them jailed or even executed for this (Yardley 2008).

The Chinese government moved swiftly to oblige. Within days, it had arrested a handful of milk producers, fired product safety inspectors, and begun offering free medical care to children affected by the crisis (*ibid*). The swiftness of the response may have been aided by a strategic delay on the part of the central government in its public acknowledgement of the crisis until after the close of the Summer Olympics (LaFraniere 2009). The central government would go on to execute two milk manufacturers and

sentence 19 others to jail terms ranging from 2 years to life for their role in the crisis (*ibid*).

More interestingly, the central government also responded with a Western-style assortment of monetary and regulatory measures. First, it established a medical compensation fund for those families affected by the crisis (Xinghua 2009). The fund's money was supplied by 22 dairy firms implicated in the crisis, including the group deemed to be the most egregious offender, Sanlu (Zhe 2008). Sanlu would provide over 80% of the fund's \$161 million budget (Wong 2009). The fund was very modest in compensatory size, however, offering only one-time payments of \$29,000 to the families of deceased children, \$4,400 for seriously sickened children, and \$292 for those suffering minor kidney problems (Zhe 2008). While civil suits have been necessary for many families to receive compensation, the Chinese government has allowed these suits to proceed to trial faster than usual, a tacit sign of approval (Wong 2009).

The central government also instituted a new regulatory regime for consumer products in February of 2009 (Gobinpuri and Fang, 2009). Dubbed The New Food Safety Law, it is revolutionary in its goals. It establishes mandatory food safety standards, a monitoring system, the abolition of any current examination exemptions, allows for consumers to sue companies who have produced defective or harmful products, and codifies penalties for firms who breach the standards (*ibid*). While reasonable objections have been raised concerning the effectiveness of the law and the fairness of its application, the establishment of a broad regulatory regime in response to a public outcry is nothing short of revolutionary (Ramzy 2009).

## **Conclusions and Analysis**

As we have seen from the preceding cases, the central government responds to unrest by choosing among a range of tactics: distancing itself from the misdeed, severely punishing those seen to be directly responsible, making concessions to protestors, and occasionally instituting meaningful reform. Each problem demands a slightly different mixture of the above, depending on the extent of popular anger, the target of that anger, and the speed with which action is required.

These actions may seem like the hollow gestures of a regime grasping to maintain power, and to some extent this is correct. The central government knows that it cannot keep its grip on power if enough of its population is dissatisfied enough. What is important in these actions is the willingness on the part of the central government to make concessions, and the desire to be known both internally and externally to have the best intentions.

This sets an interesting precedent. As the product safety crisis shows, the central government is highly sensitive to demands from its middle classes, and quick to establish new governmental standards. What would happen if the members of China's rising middle class united behind an issue like travel restrictions, free-speech issues, or an opening of the political system? The center seems to have dug itself into something of a hole by spending the last decade reforming long-standing institutions (such as property rights), rolling back taxes, appealing for proper conduct by party officials, and passing new regulations. The adoption of even a few of the policies used around local issues, like development and corruption crises, towards national targets would indeed be revolutionary. Anything is conceivable: national-level corruption scandals involving the

resignation of party higher-ups; substantial reforms of basic communist policies, as almost happened with land ownership in 2008; the institution of additional freedoms. The precedent is set, and would be ignored at the peril of a government facing increasing protests from the largest citizenry of any one country on earth.

Perhaps these thousand small concessions will be the road to reform and true freedom in China. Unlike America or France, which formed their governments and credos virtually overnight, perhaps China will develop more like England: numerous tiny rulings, taken into common law, and enforced with greater efficacy over an extended amount of time, until it is as free as any other nation on Earth. Given its determination to hold on to rule, the Chinese Communist Party may well remain in power over that entire period.

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