

Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China^{*}

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Abstract

Using riot police to break up a big demonstration is a familiar occurrence in many parts of the world, including China. But all protest control does not involve the use of force, nor is repression always directed at large groups of people assembled in one location. Some repression rests on psychological rather than physical coercion and is aimed at individuals, often in their homes or nearby. This type of repression may be carried out by people with only a loose connection to the state's coercive apparatus, such as relatives, friends, or neighbors of the target who work for the government or receive benefits from it. "Relational repression" is labor intensive and a sign of a high-capacity state that uses multiple levers to suppress contention, but has limited reach and remains insecure about its ability to maintain social stability. It builds on Maoist and dynastic techniques of control and aims to extend state penetration into a marketized society whose members have

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increasingly emancipated themselves from direct dependence on the government. Relational repression often alienates both the agents of repression and their targets. But it can, at times, be effective in demobilizing resistance or preventing a person from taking part in protest.

China has been experiencing a remarkable amount of popular protest, with over 500 “mass incidents” (群體性事件 *quntixing shijian*) daily, by some estimates.¹ But as striking as the volume of contention is the number of aggrieved people who do not give up. Even when they are ignored for years or forcefully repressed, they persist. “Old-hand petitioners” (上訪老戶 *shangfang laohu*) lodge complaints and seek audiences with officials for a decade or more.² Tent-sitters occupy chemical parks for months and refuse to stand down even after 1,500 police and government workers descend on them with truncheons.³ “Nail-like households” (釘子戶 *dingzihu*) resist demolition orders and urban renewal projects for years.⁴ Many Chinese are engaged in resistance for the long haul, and failure or even a stint in prison is not enough to demobilize them permanently.

To deal with tenacious contention, China’s “security state”⁵ has been employing innovative means to put down and preempt protest. Beyond conventional police action, judges and court staff may be sent to the streets to buy off demonstrators,⁶ housing officials may be empowered to give rural evictees the right to move to cities,⁷ and retrievers may be paid bounties to surveil and intercept persistent petitioners to ensure that they do not make it to Beijing.⁸ Whether they rely on money, bargaining, or coercion, one common feature of these approaches is that they are directed at individuals and are designed to get a person off the street not only today but also in the future.

At the same time that protest control is taking on a person-by-person quality, the top leadership has been expressing doubts about using force to demobilize resisters.⁹ To be sure, harassment, detention, and riot policing are often employed to halt contention. Chinese local officials are not hesitant about turning to hard repression when faced with challenges, existential or otherwise. And violent forms of repression, such as deploying hired thugs to end the occupation of village lands requisitioned for a power plant, are common.¹⁰ Force remains a likely choice when protest by restive minorities erupts, as seen in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang more recently, but is also evident in everyday disputes about local abuses