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

Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng

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

of power, or even to break up demonstrations by thousands of city dwellers who oppose having a high-speed rail station located one county over.¹¹

But if hard repression is hardly unknown, the leadership in Beijing has nonetheless urged lower-level officials to eschew the use of force whenever possible. A number of directives have been issued that discourage relying on physical coercion when dealing with “contradictions among the people.”¹² And local cadres who turn to force too quickly (or unsuccessfully) are often punished with lost bonuses, demotions, or even imprisonment. Although grassroots officials are strongly incentivized to reduce the number of petitions and protests that occur on their watch, they are also told to avoid violent repression, except in the most threatening circumstances.

Persistent resistance and constraints on the use of force have led both urban and rural leaders to step up the use of nonviolent, individualized strategies to “nip elements of instability in the bud.”¹⁴ Some of these techniques evoke the practice of “guilt by association” (連坐 *lianzuo* or 株連 *zhulian*) in the dynastic past. Others bring to mind Maoist campaigns and efforts to turn family members against each other, or the early reform era and the community pressure exerted on birth control resisters to comply with the one-child policy. All hinge on psychological rather than physical coercion and are carried out by agents of social control who have only a loose connection to the state’s public security apparatus, such as relatives, friends, or neighbors of the target who work for the government or receive benefits from it. This “relational repression” relies on emotional blackmail and pressure from people who are hard to ignore, and can be effective in breaking a person’s will to resist and preventing them from taking to the streets again. Although relational repression is costly to mount in terms of personnel and time, it is feasible and common in a country where the resources devoted to internal security have grown rapidly and the number of people involved in “stability maintenance” is in the millions.

1. Relational Repression

After a period when information-gathering about social discontent and using protest to monitor local officials appeared to explain why some resistance was tolerated,¹⁵ now there is more attention to simply halting all contention as quickly as possible.¹⁶ Overwhelming force can put an

end to popular action in a matter of hours, but ugly scenes of bloody protesters or groups of angry citizens who return to the streets after the police leave suggest that this approach to maintaining stability has limits and costs. It is more shrewd to get in front of resistance before it happens,¹⁷ or to coax protesters to stand down during lulls in ongoing contention, when the aggrieved can be isolated from one another and pressure can be exerted by individuals whom the targeted person knows.

This is what relational repression does. It turns repression into a highly charged conversation with family members, neighbors, or old friends, and uses people who have a hold over the protester to deliver the state's message to desist. In particular, relational repression is a control technique that exploits social and family ties to demobilize or prevent resistance. In China, it amounts to relying on relatives, friends, and neighbors to defuse popular action.¹⁸ Relational repression hinges on persuasion, pressure, and the impact of influential people. It may be deployed prior to protest, early in contention, after forceful types of suppression have failed, or in conjunction with harder forms of repression. For smaller incidents, relational repression may be the only or main type of control. But whether used alone or with other methods, its distinguishing feature is clear: when resistance breaks out or looms, local officials, staff of public organizations (e.g., school teachers), and beneficiaries of government largesse (e.g., pensioners) with ties to protesters are assembled into a work team to conduct "thought work" (思想工作 *sixiang gongzuo*). Team members are then expected to use their influence to pacify and "transform" (轉化 *zhuanhua*) individuals over whom they have leverage, and to coax or pressure them into abandoning popular action.¹⁹

Relational repression is one of many techniques, short of physical force, Chinese local authorities use to demobilize protesters. Like agreeing to "demands for a dialogue" (要求對話 *yaoqiu duihua*) or sending high-ranking officials to activists' homes, it entails listening, talking, and "moving the masses."²⁰ But it also involves an irreducible amount of coercion, applied by people who can be difficult to resist. It is a type of "psychological engineering"²¹ that rests on both pressure and feelings of affinity. For a state whose resources and capacity have increased markedly in recent years, but which does not penetrate as deeply as it did in the Maoist era, it offers access to aggrieved people over whom officials have limited sway, protesters who may not trust or fear local cadres as much as they did in the past. As an alternative to mobilizing the police or hiring local toughs, relational repression can, when it

works, help local authorities soften popular demands, explore compromises, and minimize concessions.

This article is based on fieldwork, media reports, and government documents. To learn how relational repression unfolds, the second author conducted semistructured interviews with 122 informants in Dongyang, Zhejiang, in 2007 and 2008. In addition, written materials, including petition letters, leaflets, and posters penned by villagers, work diaries, and reports by local officials, regulations, meeting records, and an internal “daily report,” shed light on protest control techniques employed during the “Huashui Incident.” We also examined demolition disputes to show how relational repression is used to prevent and halt individual rather than collective resistance. We collected Chinese media accounts of 35 episodes of “demolition by implicating homeowners’ relatives” (株連拆遷 *zhulian chaiqian*) that occurred from 2004 to 2013. Most of these reports appeared in prominent, nationally distributed newspapers, such as *China Youth Daily* (中國青年報 *Zhongguo qingnian bao*), *The Beijing News* (新京報 *Xinjing bao*), *Southern Weekend* (南方周末 *Nanfang zhoumo*), and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (南方都市報 *Nanfang dushi bao*). For community pressure applied during “autonomous redevelopment,” we relied on government documents, media reports, and online materials, such as posts from *Weibo* (微博), blogs, and bulletin boards.

2. Using Relational Repression to Stop Collective Protest

In spring 2005, villagers in Dongyang county, Zhejiang were unhappy. For four years, farmers from eight villages in Huashui town had been complaining about crop damage and declining public health caused by pollution originating in a nearby chemical park. They had petitioned higher levels again and again, even going to Beijing twice, but to no avail. In late March, disgruntled residents of the most seriously affected village turned to more confrontational tactics. They put up a tent at the entrance to the chemical park and began a round-the-clock vigil. Their hope was to block supply trucks and to force the polluting factories to shut down. Huashui town officials and police dismantled the tent the next evening, but the protesters immediately erected a second one. After villagers raised tents and officials pulled them down three more times, county leaders changed their tactics and formed a work team to conduct thought work. Over the next 10 days, the team held 135 meetings attended by over 5,000 people to learn about the villagers’ grievances and to explain government

plans to address them. They also conducted more than 4,000 door-to-door visits, during which they distributed leaflets detailing new measures to deal with the pollution.²² The work team initially consisted of about 60 county officials, including some who hailed from Huashui town, some who had relatives in the villages affected by the pollution, and still others who had previously worked in Huashui. The team also recruited village cadres, local school teachers, and factory workers, as well as retired town leaders and pensioners with ties to the activists. Despite the team's efforts and the detention of several protest leaders, the size of the encampment grew, as residents from ten other villages joined the protest, with each village erecting its own tent. County leaders, angered that protesters were "pushing their luck" while the government was "doing everything called for by humanity and duty,"²³ decided to turn to a more forceful approach and sent in over 1,500 local cadres and public security personnel to end the encampment. During their efforts to clear out the protesters, violence broke out and over 100 officials or police officers and more than 200 villagers were injured; 68 government vehicles were also burned or damaged. Even after the violent suppression, the protesters still refused to withdraw and the number of tents grew to about 30, representing 22 villages. The local government at this point opted against another crack-down, partly because the use of force had attracted considerable media attention and higher levels of government, including Beijing, had sent a team of investigators to look into the protest and the county's response. County leaders quickly switched back to thought work and the floating of possible concessions as their main control techniques. For more than a month, relational repression was carried out daily, and up to 200 people served on a work team that explained the government's new policies toward the polluting factories and urged the tent-sitters to stand down. Promises to address the pollution were made and efforts to buy off the tent-sitters took place, but with no result.²⁴ Finally, seven weeks after the protests began and several days after the county promised to close the chemical park, the protesters acquiesced to removal of the tents.²⁵

Relational repression in Huashui proceeded in four sequential steps. First, information was collected about ties between protesters and individuals who might be able to influence them. Toward this end, the work team immediately compiled a roster of people who might be responsive to requests to help demobilize resisters, including local cadres, leaders of the Society of Senior Citizens, any villagers who received state pensions,

retired cadres, school teachers who hailed from Huashui, officials who had served in the town in the past, and village leaders who were also party members. The work team also drew up a list of protesters, especially those who regularly stayed in the tents.

Next, the work team tried to learn about bonds, especially kinship relations, between potential thought workers and villagers in the encampment. This took some weeks and ultimately produced lists that included the name, sex, age, and telephone numbers of individuals who would be approached to join the work team.

The second phase of relational repression entailed building up the work team, after determining the desirability of potential recruits according to two criteria: the strength of relations with one or more protesters and willingness to help end the encampment.²⁶ Over the next seven weeks, as the situation deteriorated, increasingly highly ranked county officials were put in charge of relational repression, and the work team grew from several dozen to several hundred members, including many school teachers, workers in state-owned enterprises, local entrepreneurs, and officials from organizations as varied as the Environmental Protection Bureau, the Bureau of Land and Resources, the Discipline Inspection Committee, and the Party Organization Department.

The third phase centered on organizing and deploying work team members to carry out relational repression. To do this, local leaders set up “person-to-person” (人盯人 *ren ding ren*) responsibility so that (about) one thought worker was charged with reforming the mind-set of one activist. One team of 48 members, for example, was assigned 50 protesters, with one person responsible for each tent-sitter and sometimes two or three additional team members designated to help out. In some villages where there were many “hard cases,” the number of thought workers exceeded the number of tent-sitters, so that more pressure could be applied on particularly tenacious protesters.

Work team members were encouraged to use their personal influence and to tap into “feelings of affection” to transform their targets.²⁷ They were instructed to play on protesters’ worries that, however willing they might be to sacrifice themselves, refusal to back down would have negative effects on those close to them.²⁸ Since many of the tent-sitters were elderly women, having a protester’s offspring invoke dire career consequences if a mother did not give up was a favorite strategy to break down determined protesters.

The last stage of relational repression focused on motivating and disciplining work team members. To ensure high levels of commitment, local governments used every opportunity to explain what would happen if a team member failed to convince a relative, friend or neighbor to stop protesting.²⁹ For those who refused to throw themselves into relational repression, sanctions included suspension of duties, removal from office, and even prosecution.³⁰ For party members, expulsion from the party was a possibility. When their enthusiasm flagged or they experienced pushback from protesters, thought workers were sometimes subject to relational pressure themselves, with prodding from their own family members or friends used to stiffen their resolve. In the end, at least several work team members were punished for failing to persuade relatives to leave the encampment, including a deputy chief of the Bureau of Investment Promotion who was suspended from his duties because he could not convince his aunt to return home.³¹

In Huashui, relational repression successfully deterred many from joining the resistance and persuaded some tent-sitters to leave the encampment, but it failed to end the protest. This happened partly because the protest leaders, following an earlier round of unsuccessful contention, were careful to ensure that most of the tent-sitters did not have family ties that could be exploited to apply pressure on them. The protesters fought back against relational repression, and undercommitted thought workers felt torn between their responsibilities to the state and a desire to avoid alienating friends and relatives.³² Cross pressures were particularly intense on elected cadres (some of whom had risen to office based on a promise to address the pollution problem) and fears of being denounced, ostracized, and called a “traitor” weighed on many work team members and chipped away at their commitment and effectiveness. Although the one-on-one meetings that stand at the heart of relational repression helped reduce tensions at moments of high strain, and thought workers with social ties to protesters had fewer difficulties approaching the encampment and striking up a conversation, relational repression did not induce the most committed tent-sitters to stand down.

But in some locations relational repression succeeds in halting popular action. And even when relational repression fails in staving off contention entirely, it can play a role in limiting the length and scope of popular action. During the 2009 Shishou protests in Hubei, a work team consisting of over 580 “cadres born and bred in the locality” (原籍幹部

yuanji ganbu) local entrepreneurs, village leaders, and lineage elders served as conduits between the authorities and the demonstrators and helped tamp down the violence.³³ A combination of pressure, skillful “emotion work,” and mediation softened up protesters and defused a volatile situation, while channeling demands to the authorities and allowing them to explore possible compromises through work team members.

3. Using Relational Repression to Demobilize Individual Resistance

Demolition disputes have become flashpoints for contention in recent years and are by most accounts one of the larger sources of petitions and protest in urban China. These disputes occur when city dwellers are compelled to leave their homes and their housing is torn down, typically in the name of urban renewal. Resistance is frequent and vigorous, both because eviction orders are compulsory and because some homeowners are offered meager compensation compared to the windfall local governments and real estate companies receive when the land is redeveloped.³⁴ Unlike collective protests, many demolition disputes are lonely battles fought by individuals against local governments, developers, and even neighbors who are willing to leave their homes on the terms offered.

Since the late 1990s, violence has been extremely common in demolition disputes.³⁵ But recently, as with other kinds of protest, local officials have been edging away from the forceful approaches of the past. To avoid and put an end to resistance that can last for years and scenes of people being dragged out of their homes, the authorities have shifted toward what Habich calls “soft coercion,”³⁶ including some methods that bring to mind Mao’s mass line. “Soft coercion” involves propaganda, thought work, negotiation, and time spent with homeowners, in order to give them a sense of inclusion in decision making, as well as limited rights to expression and supervision — so long as they ultimately comply with the eviction order. Compensation levels are often increased, and efforts have been made to preempt potential alliances between evictees by negotiating with them individually and offering them advantageous terms that must be accepted quickly.³⁷ These techniques usually succeed in clearing out most evictees, and may leave some feeling that they have been treated tolerably well. But for more reluctant homeowners, relational repression, or what is sometimes called “harmonious demolition” (和諧拆遷 *hexie*

chaiqian), “demolition with affection” (親情拆遷 *qinqing chaiqian*), or “demolition by implicating relatives” (株連拆遷 *zhulian chaiqian*), is another nonviolent means to persuade them to vacate their homes without further delay.

“Harmonious demolition” begins when local officials establish special temporary organizations to deal with recalcitrant homeowners. These “demolition offices” (拆遷辦 *chaiqian ban*) or “demolition headquarters” typically have no (or few) permanent personnel and almost all of their members are seconded from party offices, government bureaus, hospitals or schools.³⁸ In some locations, where dozens of demolition projects are under way at once, staff may be recruited from nearly every government department and state-owned enterprise in the city, as well as many other work units.³⁹ Special efforts are made to locate thought workers whose relatives live in homes slated for removal. The strong ties of family are generally preferred to weaker ties of friendship or community, though as will be seen below, neighbors can be drawn into facilitating demolition, too.

Although they are assembled quickly and are usually disbanded once relocation is complete, demolition offices have considerable power. That power is used first to pressure thought workers to persuade their relatives to accept the compensation offered. To increase the likelihood of success, a “contract system” (包案制 *bao'an zhi*) is usually set up. Thought workers whose relatives continue to resist signing an agreement may have their wages withheld or be suspended from their job. Under this arrangement, government bureaus and other state-owned enterprises are often made accountable for employees’ relatives who refuse to vacate their homes. Responsibility goes straight to the top and leaders of a bureau, factory, or school can be punished by having their subsidies or merit pay withheld.⁴⁰ Collective punishment is also used, and hospitals, for example, in Kaifeng City that were unsuccessful in persuading staff members to do thought work on relatives who ignored demolition orders were charged 5,000 yuan for each failure.⁴¹ If the relative of one employee refuses to hand over a home, the other members of the organization may also be threatened with loss of their year-end bonuses.

To curb shirking and clarify who is responsible for what, local authorities often draw up documents that specify which state unit is responsible for which “nail house.” In Hejian, Hebei, county officials compiled a seven-page table setting out information on 231 homeowners

and their kin.⁴² After matching names individually, organizations were instructed to persuade their employees' relatives to leave.

Local regulations are used to motivate any thought worker who fails to take part in "demolition with affection." Beyond losing one's job and being subject to "organizational treatment" (組織處理 *zuzhi chuli*), half-hearted demolition facilitators may find themselves marginalized at the office or subject to sanctions, including criticism, warning, suspension, transfer, and deprivation of job title.⁴³ Moral appeals may also supplement financial penalties and career consequences can be great, especially for teachers who are expected to be exemplars and "engineers of people's souls" and government cadres who are expected to set an example and have higher political consciousness than ordinary people.⁴⁴

In the face of unremitting pressure and likely sanctions, many thought workers throw themselves into pressuring relatives to sign a demolition agreement. Being poorly positioned to resist, they generally feel little choice but to cajole their family members into submitting. To do so, they often resort to emotional blackmail and tap into "feelings of affection." For example, a police officer in Ziyang, Henan, was assigned to persuade his older sister to give up her store and its desirable location. His superiors leaned on him so hard that he could not bear it any longer. He pleaded desperately with his sister, ultimately writing her a text message that said: "family affection is more important than money." She broke down and agreed to accept the resettlement offer.⁴⁵ In Gongyi county, Henan, a woman was sent to conduct thought work on her grandmother. Overcome with worries that she would lose her job at a carpet factory, the woman knelt down and begged: "Grandma, please sign the document. Otherwise they won't let me go back to work. You know how hard it is to find a job these days." The old lady, in tears, signed the agreement.⁴⁶ Invoking career consequences is a common tactic used to soften up older, "uncooperative" family members. In Beihai city, Guangxi, for instance, a schoolteacher implored her mother to give in, saying: "Mom, I won't blame you if you don't agree to sign, but our house will be torn down anyway. How terrible it would be if we lost our home and I also ended up jobless."⁴⁷

Some demolition facilitators even demean themselves or employ deception to complete their assignment. A middle school teacher in Hanshan county, Anhui, who had always been a model of success in his family, used every method he could think of to get his sister to cave in,

finally resorting to rolling on the floor, kicking and screaming. His sister and brother-in-law ultimately accepted the demolition agreement.⁴⁸ In Lixian county, Hebei, a government worker could not withstand the pressure when her parents refused to give up their land. She signed the requisition document on her father's behalf and before her parents knew they had "agreed" to it, their peach trees had been chopped down.⁴⁹

Relational repression can leave everyone it touches feeling helpless and victimized. Demolition facilitators say they feel powerless to resist, and see no way out, while targets experience pressure from people who are hard to brush off. Soft coercion and psychological pressure turns relatives against each other and can easily cause a family to unravel. Still, relational repression often works. Homeowners are persuaded to leave and residences are torn down. The pressures put on the thought workers and homeowners are sufficient to induce people to vacate their homes on the terms offered.

In the 2010s, local authorities have added a new wrinkle to "demolition with affection." Rather than relying mainly on family members and strong ties, they have turned to neighbors and weak ties to apply pressure on strong-minded evictees. "Autonomous redevelopment committees" (自治改造委員會 *zizhi gaizao weiyuanhui*) have been established in at least ten provinces to urge resisters to accept demolition on the terms offered.⁵⁰ The committees are formed in communities where the large majority already support urban renewal and only a small number of holdouts oppose it. The committees are staffed with popularly elected members who work in accord with an injunction from the local government that a "100 percent consent rate" (百分百簽約 *baifenzhai qianyue*) is required before redevelopment can begin. Committee members are then let loose to put pressure on "nail houses" and to remind them again and again that the "general will" favors everyone leaving. Reluctant evictees are told repeatedly that the living conditions of the majority who reside in run-down housing can be improved only if they relent. Committee members marginalize the holdouts, call them selfish, and employ "mass power" to "conquer" or "knock them down." They typically use "one tactic for one household" (一戶一策 *yihu yice*), take advantage of their knowledge of the community, and conduct unrelenting "emotion work" on anyone who will not give in. These voluntary thought workers isolate and stigmatize holdouts and emphasize the broad consensus that exists behind accepting the relocation plan. They may put up charts in public

areas showing the many who have signed their contracts and the few who have not, and start countdown clocks that display the deadline for signing (e.g., 100 percent consent must be achieved within 100 days). Committee members may use gongs, drums and loudspeakers to unsettle holdouts, and engage in collective harassment, shouting out: “[So-and-so] sign your contract! Sign your contract.” At times, their actions can veer into intimidation, as they demand that holdouts “follow the will of the masses” and shove or detain people who will not submit. Local authorities tend to watch from a distance, providing behind-the-scenes encouragement, helping the committee devise tactics, and looking the other way if pressure crosses the line. Local officials may also step in at the last moment, so that resisters come to believe that they are rational and considerate compared to the “mobs” they face every day. Early indications suggest that this type of relational repression on individual resisters has been quite successful in achieving “100 percent consent” in Sichuan and elsewhere.⁵¹

4. Conclusion

Repression often entails using force to put an end to collective action. But sometimes it rests on psychological rather than physical coercion and is directed at individuals rather than a group. Undermining oppositional consciousness one person at a time is typically a face-to-face activity that depends on an agent of social control finding a target’s vulnerabilities and exploiting them. Relational repression, at least in China, operates through carefully tailored threats, emotional blackmail and pressure from people who are difficult to ignore. Though very resource-intensive and unpleasant for most of those involved, it can be effective in changing attitudes and inhibiting protest.

To specify exactly when relational repression succeeds requires more research, and there are also conceptual issues concerning whether success refers to deterring a given protester or halting collective action as a whole. Preventing and demobilizing contention may also unfold somewhat differently. To this point, our cases suggest that the degree of dependence a thought worker has on the state is important, and while strong ties between thought workers and targets are advantageous, weak ties can also be exploited if a large number of neighbors or acquaintances bear down on a single resister. When the agents of repression are

effectively compelled to join a work team, a thought worker's relationship to the state is key. So, managers and workers in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are generally less motivated and less effective than teachers or government personnel, whose salaries, benefits and promotions flow directly from the state. Although not as free to push back as employees in the private sector, SOE leaders and staff often have more options than teachers or government workers and are better placed to fend off demands to pressure relatives or friends. Members of autonomous development committees are quite different. They are willing participants in relational repression. They do not need to be convinced to engage in it but instead are eager to do the state's bidding, and it is an advantage that they do not have close ties with those they are coaxing to accept eviction, many of whom they will never see again after redevelopment occurs. Relational repression involves three parties and is a two-step process: first thought workers must be motivated to conduct the work; then the target must be induced to heed what is sought. Success rests on close ties and dependence on the government when the agents of state power and their targets are unwilling, and self-interest and common purpose when the agents of state power are willing.

The prominence of relational repression in today's China's has many implications. First, it offers a fresh perspective on the strength of the Chinese state. Unlike scholars who interpret the use of hired thugs and other proxies to carry out repression as an indicator of state weakness,⁵² the outsourced, socialized repression examined here is a sign of a high-capacity state that has diverse levers to pursue its ends.⁵³ Putting so much effort into demobilizing a single protester or reluctant evictee reflects a government that believes "stability overrides all" (穩定壓倒一切 *wending yadao yiqie*) and has extensive resources to ensure that its policies are carried out. Subjecting ordinary protesters or homeowners to "man-to-man coverage,"⁵⁴ as if they were protest leaders or full-fledged dissidents, is something that no state without many tools at its disposal could even contemplate.⁵⁵ Still, depending on relational repression also suggests rising insecurity and waning faith in wholly state-based methods for maintaining control. That relational repression is an everyday occurrence thus attests to both the capacity of the Chinese state and its limited reach into a marketized society where many of the disgruntled are not as dependent on the government as they once were.

Reliance on relational repression also reflects growing doubts about the effectiveness of conventional hard repression. Hired toughs may

swiftly induce nail-like homeowners to vacate their houses,⁵⁶ retrievers may drag persistent petitioners home or lock them up in informal “black jails” (黑監獄 *hei jianyu*),⁵⁷ and the armed police are often called in to deal with large demonstrations. But force can backfire and lead to tactical escalation and more resolve by protesters,⁵⁸ as well as damaging publicity, both domestically and internationally. Turning repression over to state-affiliated surrogates,⁵⁹ and encouraging them to employ nonviolent means, cloaks, at least partially, the origins of repression, and obscures the line between overt and covert coercion.⁶⁰ Repression once-removed shifts blame, creates a veneer of deniability, and muddies accountability, while empowering alternative front-line agents of state power who have more tools to work with. The duly constituted coercive organs are, in short, blunt instruments for snuffing out contention and oppositional ideas, compared to relatives, friends, and neighbors, all of whom have far more means to coax a protester out of returning to the streets or to get a homeowner to leave an area designated for redevelopment. Soft in form, because it relies on persuasion, relational repression is hard in substance, because it puts a particularly insidious type of pressure on its unfortunate targets. From the state’s vantage point, policing without the police has clear advantages for preempting and quashing resistance, and also preventing it from breaking out again. Although the central government has begun to express some misgivings about its long-term consequences, relational repression has become an integral part of the social control toolkit.

Finally, consideration of relational repression suggests new lines of inquiry in the study of repression.⁶¹ For one, it draws attention to the agents of repression, who they are, what their motivations are, what pressures they face, and what type of interactions they have with their targets.⁶² It reminds us that although repression is sometimes little more than a brief encounter where riot-control police use a billy club to strike a protester, at other times it hinges on a long-standing relationship and talk rather than physical force. Deftly selected state proxies act against individuals over whom they have leverage and browbeat them to stand down. Repression, in this way, can be a discussion as much as an act, and the wheedling at the heart of it can be profoundly uncomfortable for everyone involved.

Relational repression can also be slotted into familiar typologies, sometimes snugly and sometimes less so. Is it soft or hard repression, or perhaps the hard side of soft repression, or the soft side of hard

repression? Do Earl's distinctions between observed/unobserved, coercive/noncoercive, state/private forms of repression accommodate it?⁶³ Broadly speaking, it is a type of unobserved,⁶⁴ coercive repression carried out by loosely connected state agents, a category that Earl noted is understudied and merits further examination.⁶⁵ As for its status as hard or soft repression, the lack of overt force and attention to eradicating oppositional ideas suggests that it may lean toward the soft,⁶⁶ while its face-to-face bullying and coercive nature edges it back toward the hard. Relational repression does not resemble the stigma, ridicule and silencing that Ferree identified as typical forms of soft repression.⁶⁷ Yet it has none of the violence or intent to cause bodily harm characteristic of much hard repression.⁶⁸

Perhaps most important, the existence of relational repression reminds us that the gap between physical and psychological coercion can be smaller than is often thought,⁶⁹ and that while force can induce large numbers of people to give up, there are other techniques that drain away the will of a protester to fight. Although repression is typically directed at collective acts, it need not be one-size-fits-all. If enough resources are available and surrogates are sufficiently motivated, repression can be conducted in a customized way one person at a time.

Notes

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- 2 Lianjiang Li, Mingxing Liu, and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003–2006," *China Quarterly*, No. 210 (2012), pp. 313–334; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Qin Shao, *Shanghai Gone: Domicide and Defiance in a Chinese City* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
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- 4 Matthew S. Erie, "Property Rights, Legal Consciousness and the New Media in China: The Hard Case of the 'Toughest Nail-House in History,'" *China Information*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2012), pp. 35–60; Steve Hess, "Nail-Houses,

- Land Rights, and Frames of Injustice on China's Protest Landscape," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 5 (2010), pp. 908–926; Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties and 'Harmonious Demolition,'" *China Journal*, No. 74 (2015), pp. 1–17.
- 5 Yuhua Wang and Carl F. Minzner, "The Rise of the Chinese Security State," *China Quarterly*, No. 222 (2015), pp. 339–359.
 - 6 Feng Chen and Xin Xu, "Active Judiciary: Judicial Dismantling of Workers' Collective Action in China," *China Journal*, No. 67 (2012), pp. 87–108; Yang Su and Xin He, "Street as Courtroom: State Accommodation of Labor Protest in South China," *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2010), pp. 157–184.
 - 7 Julia Chuang, "China's Rural Land Politics: Bureaucratic Absorption and the Muting of Rightful Resistance," *China Quarterly*, No. 219 (2014), pp. 649–669.
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 - 10 Lynette H. Ong, "'Thugs-for-Hire': State Coercion and Everyday Repression in China" (unpublished paper, Workshop on Collective Protest and State Governance in China's Xi Jinping Era, Harvard-Yenching Institute, 18 May 2015); Xi Chen, "Origins of Informal Coercion in China," *Politics & Society*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2017), pp. 67–89.
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- 14 Chongyi Feng, "Preserving Stability and Rights Protection: Conflict or Coherence," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2013), pp. 27–28; Su and He, "Street as Courtroom," p. 162.
 - 15 Peter L. Lorentzen, "Regularized Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2013), pp. 127–158; O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*; Wang, "Managing Social Stability," pp. 2, 10–11.
 - 16 On the government's preference "to derive information about popular discontent from petitions rather than protests," see Martin K Dimitrov, "Internal Government Assessments of the Quality of Governance in China," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2015), p. 64. On protest providing more information than petitions, see Peter L. Lorentzen, "Designing Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China," *Modern China* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1177/0097700416688895.
 - 17 Chuang, "China's Rural Land Politics"; Diana Fu, "Fragmented Control: Governing Contentious Labor Organizations in China," *Governance* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1111.gove.12248.
 - 18 Respected religious figures may also be used, such as inviting an imam to persuade ethnic minority protesters to stand down. See Zhou and Yan, "Question for Stability," p. 10. Native-place connections can also be exploited.
 - 19 For the original statement on relational repression and greater detail on the cases discussed below, see Deng and O'Brien, "Relational Repression in China"; O'Brien and Deng, "Reach of the State"; Yanhua Deng, "Autonomous Redevelopment: Moving the Masses to Remove Nail Households," *Modern China* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1177/0097700416683901. Others have discussed "individualizing collective disputes" (see Chen and Xu, "Active Judiciary"), keeping a close eye on "instability suspects" (*shewen renyuan*) (Feng, "Preserving Stability and Rights Protection"), and curbing protest through "personalized and local negotiation" (see Jonathan Benney and Peter Marolt, "Introduction: Modes of Activism and Engagement in the Chinese Public Sphere," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 [2015], p. 94). Targeted welfare benefits may also be used to encourage specific individuals to avoid disruptive acts (see Jennifer Pan, "Social Policy as Strategy: Selective Welfare Provision and Social Disruption in Urban China" [unpublished paper, Workshop on Collective Protest and State Governance in China's Xi Jinping Era, Harvard-Yenching Institute, 18 May 2015]). Relational repression surrounding autonomous redevelopment differs from the other cases

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 - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
 - 22 Shan Changyu, "Wo shi qingli zhuxi feifa dajian zhupeng shou qunzhong weidu" (Local Officials Were Besieged by the Masses When Clearing Illegally Erected Tents), *Dongyang ribao* (Dongyang Daily), 11 April 2005.
 - 23 Interview with a town official, 23 May 2007.
 - 24 In this comparatively well-off area, local authorities had sufficient funds to pay off the tent-sitters to encourage them to leave the encampment, but the protesters were also well-placed to turn their offers down. Local residents were also truly pained by the seriousness of the pollution and its health consequences and some felt that no amount of money, or half-measures to address the problem, would compensate for continued exposure to foul air and water. Finally, tent-sitters were concerned that they would be criticized by fellow villagers if they allowed themselves to be bought off in exchange for standing down. On villagers who call protesters who back down "cowards" or "traitors," see Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 193 (2008), p. 20.
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 - 29 Liu Chuang, "Kexue yifa chuzhi nongcun quntixing shijian de shijian yu sikao" (Reflecting on Dealing with Rural Mass Incidents Scientifically and

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- 32 Interview with a town official, 25 June 2007.
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- 64 For Earl (*ibid.*, pp. 47–48), "unobserved repression" is covert or latent and "observed repression" is overt or manifest. An example of the latter is the suppression of the Chinese student movement in 1989. Earl acknowledges that the dividing line between visible and invisible actors as well as actions and intentions is often blurry, and notes that one key division is whether the agents of repression and their actions are intended to be unknown to the general public. Relational repression is generally but not entirely unobserved. Some aspects of it are public, but others are private and difficult to observe.
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- 66 Myra Marx Ferree, "Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma and Silencing in Gender-Based Movements," in *Repression and Mobilization*, edited by Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston, and Carol Mueller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 141.

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69 On repression necessarily entailing physical sanctions, see Christian Davenport and Molly Inman, "The State of State Repression Research since the 1990s," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2012), p. 620. On "subtle, coercive measures" and "silent" repressive tactics, see Oscar José Martín García, "Soft Repression and the Current Wave of Social Mobilisations in Spain," *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2014), p. 303.