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### *Internal Government Assessments of the Quality of Governments in China*

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### **About the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL)**

CDDRL was founded by a generous grant from the Bill and Flora Hewlett Foundation in October in 2002 as part of the Stanford Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. The Center supports analytic studies, policy relevant research, training and outreach activities to assist developing countries in the design and implementation of policies to foster growth, democracy, and the rule of law.

## **Abstract**

Authoritarian governments produce internal assessments of the quality of governance that allow them to identify and address brewing problems before they threaten regime stability. This paper provides a theory of how the information necessary to produce such assessments is gathered. The empirical focus of the paper is on China, which is used to illustrate how information-gathering channels in communist autocracies differ from those used in electoral autocracies. In particular, petitions rather than elections function as the main channel for gathering information on popular perceptions about governance problems in communist autocracies. The paper argues that information compiled through the analysis of petitions is valued in China because it allows the leadership to identify problems with policy implementation; to track corruption; and to monitor the level of popular trust in the regime. Therefore, petitions serve as a barometer of public opinion regarding governance problems. The paper is based primarily on archival sources and on internal-circulation (*neibu*) materials collected in China.

Authoritarian governments need assessments of the quality of governance in order to identify and address brewing problems before they fuel public discontent that may threaten regime stability. To produce such assessments, they have to collect a wide array of information. Certain types of information like economic and social development indicators are relatively easily gathered. Others are not. Trying to assess popular perceptions of the quality of governance is especially difficult, because citizens have incentives to misrepresent their views for fear of retaliation. Obtaining reliable public opinion information therefore becomes a major governance challenge in autocracies. How can such a challenge be overcome? This paper argues that authoritarian regimes are aware of the problem and actively devise strategies to mitigate it by fostering channels for gathering information on the popular mood. Communist regimes in particular develop an unusually broad array of such channels. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on communist autocracies, of which China is an example.

Two types of information-gathering channels exist in communist autocracies: those that allow for the involuntary collection of information and those that promote voluntary information transfer. The involuntary extraction of information from citizens is carried out through numerous methods, ranging from state security surveillance and police monitoring to party reporting and opinion polling. The avenues for the voluntary transfer of information are relatively limited, with elections, protests, and petitions being the main channels. As involuntarily gathered information is more prone to preference falsification, voluntarily provided information is more highly valued. However, promoting information transfer through elections and protests carries a high risk: we need look no further than Poland and East Germany in 1989 to see the respective dangers for the durability of communist autocracies presented by non-orchestrated elections and unconstrained protests. This therefore places an extraordinary burden on petitions, because they emerge as the

only channel that promotes the regularized voluntary transmission of information about governance problems without the risks to authoritarian stability presented by competitive elections and by unconstrained protests.

The analysis of citizen petitions can produce information about certain types of governance problems. This information is not readily available in individual petitions. However, when all petitions received in a jurisdiction are read, aggregated, and analyzed, they yield two types of data. The first is about important or representative cases that can provide illustrative examples helping leaders to grasp the impact of bad governance at the level of the individual citizen. The second is about variation over time, across provinces, and by issue area; this type of data provides nuanced, in-depth information about trends in popular discontent that reflect underlying governance problems. The process of aggregation can occur at all levels of the political system, from the township all the way up to the center. When petitions are aggregated at the central level, they reveal comprehensive information about governance problems throughout China.

This paper argues that the analysis of citizen petitions provides the Chinese government with an instrument for assessing the quality of governance. This instrument differs from existing indicators of the quality of governance in two important ways. First, it is derived from popular opinion as expressed in voluntarily provided information, rather than from country expert surveys. Second, it is both sensitive (it can provide continuous measures of the quality of governance, in contrast to the standard governance indicators, which are typically binomial variables or have a limited 1-5 or 1-10 scale) and granular, as it provides detailed information on different types of governance problems.

The existing literature offers several possibilities for defining and measuring the quality of governance. The World Bank (2006) defines governance as “the set of traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised” (p. 2). Good governance is captured through six aggregate indicators: voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; and control of corruption. Bo Rothstein (2011) conceptualizes the quality of government as impartiality (p. 13). The Quality of Government Institute’s definition of the quality of government as “trustworthy, reliable, impartial, uncorrupted, and competent government institutions” is sufficiently broad to accommodate these different perspectives ([www.qog.pol.gu.se](http://www.qog.pol.gu.se)). The World Bank and the Quality of Government Institute have developed hundreds of governance indicators along these lines. Yet, the Chinese government relies on its own indicators. Surprisingly, these internal Chinese assessments of the quality of governance overlap with Western scholars’ understanding of how to define and operationalize this concept.

Petitions provide the Chinese government with at least three indicators that are often thought to be measures of the quality of governance by Western experts: they reveal the level of popular dissatisfaction with policy implementation; they present an opportunity to track corruption; and they allow the regime to monitor the overall level of popular trust it has among the general population. Given the extreme versatility of this instrument, understanding the technical aspects of aggregating and analyzing petitions provides scholars with a privileged view of how the Chinese government resolves the problem of gathering information about popular perceptions of the quality of governance. A review of the content of petitions in turn gives us insight into what the actual governance problems on the ground are.

This paper is organized as follows. It starts with a discussion of the information problem in communist autocracies and a review of the solutions to this problem offered in the existing literature. It then presents a theoretical argument about how alternative channels can be used to mitigate this problem. The third section focuses on the organization of petitions work in China. The fourth section discusses how petitions provide information on problems with policy implementation; on the incidence of corruption; and on the overall level of popular trust in the regime. The fifth section concludes.

A note on sources is necessary. The paper is based primarily on archival documents (mostly collected at the Shanghai Municipal Archive) and on internal-circulation (*neibu*) materials collected in China, which are supplemented with Soviet archival materials. These sources, which are rarely used by political scientists, allow us to get at an important, but elusive topic: how the leaders in communist autocracies understand their governance problems.

### **Section I: The Information Problem in Communist Autocracies**

Authoritarian leaders who want to gather information on the quality of governance face a fundamental obstacle: the exceeding difficulty of collecting reliable information. First identified in the classic literature on totalitarianism (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1965) and emphasized in more recent studies (Shih, 2010), this problem poses a major challenge to governance in dictatorships. Some theories of authoritarian politics consider this obstacle to be insurmountable. For example, Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) posit that dictators operate in an information vacuum, since they have “no way of ascertaining the common man’s views” (p. 135). In the absence of information, citizens are prevented from revolting only through the systematic use of pervasive terror (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1965; Arendt, 1951). A logical extension of the

arguments about the impossibility of compiling information on popular discontent is provided by the most influential formal model of authoritarian rule to date: in the *Logic of Political Survival*, dictators do not even attempt to gather information on popular discontent (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Instead, they govern through repression (which targets the masses) and concessions (strategies of cooptation, where elites are rewarded with membership in institutions for rival incorporation, such as the selectorate, legislatures, and ruling parties) (Bueno de Mesquita et al, 2003; see also Gandhi, 2008). This kind of governance strategy only exacerbates information scarcity, because elites rarely have information about the popular mood, whereas the masses have such information but are unwilling to reveal it under a system of pervasive terror. As the general literature on dictatorships argues, dictators who repress are more insecure than those who do not (Wintrobe, 1998, pp. 25-29, 39). This leads to the logical conclusion that repression not only does not resolve the information problem but actually shortens the lifespan of dictatorships. And yet, some dictatorships are especially durable (with communist regimes being the longest-lasting type of non-democratic regime to emerge since World War I),<sup>1</sup> which suggests that they have found ways of mitigating the information problem.

Another relevant body of research is the literature on preference falsification, which has argued that repression intensifies the information problem, because citizens in autocracies are unwilling to reveal their true level of support for the regime due to fear that criticism will be met with reprisals (Kuran, 1995; Havel, 1985). Instead of showing their opposition to the regime, therefore, citizens engage in preference falsification, which manifests itself as reluctant

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<sup>1</sup> Communist regimes are the most durable type of non-democratic regime, outlasting both noncommunist single-party regimes and non-democratic monarchies. As of 2000, the average lifespan of noncommunist single-party regimes was 28.51 years and that of non-democratic monarchies was 34.75 years. In contrast, communist single-party regimes had an average lifespan of 46.2 years as of 2000. My dataset includes 39 noncommunist single-party



participation in ritualistic acts of public dissimulation (which Wedeen [1999] has called “as if” compliance), such as compulsory mass rallies, manifestations, and elections. Preference falsification makes dictators fundamentally insecure, since they cannot know their true level of support and thus face an incalculable risk of being deposed through revolution or a coup (Kuran, 1991; Lohmann, 1994). It is lack of information, this literature argues, that accounts for why the revolutions of 1989 came as a surprise for communist leaders (Kuran, 1991). Although these later studies concur with Friedrich and Brzezinski that the absence of information is a serious deficiency in autocracies, they reach a different conclusion about its effects: namely, that information scarcity prevents leaders from anticipating revolution and repressing the masses effectively. What is important for our discussion is that both approaches posit that autocracies cannot gather the type of information that this paper is concerned with: namely, information on the magnitude and sources of popular discontent; if it is gathered, such information can help communist regimes to assess the quality of governance.

Arguments about preference falsification are built on the assumption that the presence of preference falsification affects the ability of the government to get information, because, as Kuran (1991) has argued, “vulnerable regimes can block the production and dissemination of information potentially harmful to their own survival” (p. 47). This assumption is problematic. Although the regime may want to block public *dissemination* of results in order to prevent coordination of the masses (as, for example, when sensitive information is deleted from websites in China), there is no good theoretical or practical reason why it should block the *production* of knowledge about popular preferences for internal uses. Autocratic regimes have one advantage over both the citizens of autocracies and over those who study autocracies: they control a range

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regimes (based partially on Smith, 2005), 20 non-democratic monarchies, and 15 communist regimes. As of 2013,

of bureaucracies that can be mobilized to compile the necessary information on the public mood. Therefore, although citizens, analysts, and authoritarian leaders alike are aware of the presence of preference falsification, only authoritarian leaders have the capacity to compile information that allows them to assess the magnitude of this problem and to try to mitigate it. For this reason, the leaders of authoritarian regimes actively search for channels that would allow them to obtain information on the popular mood.

What might these channels be? One literature that addresses this question is the new research on electoral autocracies. In contrast to studies inspired by the totalitarian model, this literature takes seriously the role of the masses in autocracies. In this vein, new studies of hegemonic-party authoritarian regimes have highlighted that competitive elections can play an important role as a channel for providing information to the regime about its level of mass support. The general insight is that a higher voteshare for the opposition sends a signal to the incumbent dictator that support for him has declined (Magaloni, 2006; Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Blaydes, 2011). Implicitly in these models, a higher voteshare indicates higher levels of popular discontent. Electoral information is used to determine which constituencies would be rewarded for supporting the regime and which would be punished by a withdrawal of monetary transfers. But in contrast to hegemonic-party systems, which have at least a nominal commitment to allow opposition parties to contest elections, communist regimes view competitive elections as a dangerous mechanism for transmitting information about levels of popular support. For example, when Poland allowed opposition candidates to run freely in 1989, the regime suffered a highly visible and embarrassing electoral defeat by Solidarity. Therefore, when communist regimes allow competitive elections, they restrict them to the

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the five remaining communist regimes have an average lifespan of 56 years.

grassroots level or carefully orchestrate their outcome through candidate vetting and district gerrymandering (Birney, 2010; Malesky & Schuler, 2010). Thus, fear that elections may precipitate regime collapse leads communist regimes to avoid designating them as the main channel for assessing levels of popular support.

Relatedly, ongoing research has identified protests as a second channel for transmitting information about levels of discontent to the leadership in autocracies. A recent study has argued that the Chinese government encourages protests because of its inability to gather information through other channels and rewards with concessions those who engage in small-scale protests, whereas large protests are repressed (Lorentzen, 2007). It is of course true that protests transmit information. Extensive archival evidence reveals that in pre-1989 Eastern Europe, communist regimes extracted information about local governance problems by analyzing protests.<sup>2</sup> But Eastern Europe provides a cautionary tale for China, since it was such mass protests that ushered in regime instability and, eventually, regime collapse (Bunce, 2003). Internal government publications indicate that the Chinese government similarly understands protests as a source of either local-level or system-wide social instability (Lin & Liu, 2008). Thus, although the Chinese regime tracks protests and uses them as a source of information that is free from preference falsification, it aggressively tries to limit their number. In recent years, local-level government leaders have been penalized when protests occur in their jurisdictions (China Interview 110729; Zhang & Zhang, 2009, p. 279). Furthermore, protests targeting the central leadership have been suppressed, brutally at times. From the perspective of the government, the incidence of protests indicates a failure to anticipate and preempt brewing public discontent. Instead of such highly visible and potentially volatile displays of discontent, communist governments want to foster

channels that allow for regularized transfer of information about governance problems from citizens to the regime without endangering social stability.

To sum up, existing research points in contradictory directions. Some studies suggest that autocrats are not interested in gathering information about public discontent at all. Others allow that autocrats want to assess discontent, but argue that they do not have the tools to do so. This information scarcity leads to either repression (according to Bueno de Mesquita et al.) or, paradoxically, results in lack of repression (Kuran). Finally, some studies identify elections and protests as channels for transmitting information to the leadership.

Two fundamental objections to the existing scholarship can be raised. The first objection concerns the literature on blocking the production of information: equating the regime and ordinary citizens in terms of lack of knowledge about the spread of discontent is incorrect. We cannot know what regime insiders knew until we read the documents that were prepared for them. Once we do so, it becomes clear that the leaders of communist regimes had access to abundant information about popular discontent that was used to evaluate the quality of governance. The second objection has to do with arguments about the role of elections and protests as channels for transmitting information to the leadership: because elections and protests can destabilize the regime, they cannot serve as the main channels for transmitting information in communist autocracies.

The existing research can be modified in two different directions. We should be mindful that communist regimes were aware of the presence of preference falsification and actively worked to foster channels for information collection that would allow them to mitigate this problem. We also need to theorize the full range of channels that were used for this purpose,

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<sup>2</sup> The most important pre-perestroika Soviet case is the Novochoerkassk riot of 1962. On the lessons learned, see the

rather than restricting ourselves to elections and protests, both of which can at best serve as supplements to other, more mainstream channels. These points of clarification are elucidated in the theoretical argument presented below.

## **Section II: An Alternative Approach to Information**

The argument of this paper proceeds from one premise: communist regimes want to obtain information about the popular mood, because such information allows them to assess citizen perceptions about existing governance problems. Although this premise is supported by the primary sources this paper is based on, it diverges from some of the extant theorizing about autocracies, which assumes that communist regimes are only concerned with monitoring elites rather than with taking stock of the popular mood. The premise generates three implications.

First, communist regimes foster channels that can supply them with such information. One remarkable aspect of information gathering is the *number* of channels that are devoted to it: the public security and state security systems; various departments of the Communist Party; various government bureaucracies; and the mass media, where journalists prepare special internal reports for the leadership. Also remarkable is the breadth of material that is considered a valuable source of information: although monitoring the activities of dissidents and the communication of ordinary citizens alike by state security would come as no surprise, the regular production of top secret reports on the “popular mood,” the systematic analysis of citizen petitions, and the ongoing monitoring of rumors and jokes do not fit with standard conceptions

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following KGB archival documents: TsKhSD, F. 89 per. 6 d. 11 and d. 12.

about either what communist regimes wanted to know about the masses or how they went about knowing it.<sup>3</sup>

In trying to maximize information, leaders of communist regimes are aware that some of these channels are more likely to suffer from preference falsification and therefore put less weight on them. A case in point is opinion polling. In the 1960s, research institutes were established in at least five East European countries on the basis of top-secret Politburo decisions (TsKhSD, f. 4 op. 20 d. 467, pp. 36-38). However, the leadership quickly lost interest in them, and one institute was even closed down in 1979 (Friedrich, 1999, p. 32). What explains such rapid change? Because participation in surveys was coerced and non-anonymous, citizens could not be trusted to give honest answers to survey questions (Shlapentokh, 1987). Even in China at present, where polling techniques have become much more sophisticated (Manion, 2010), polling has yet to emerge as a major channel for assessing popular opinion, as evidenced by the fact that Guangdong (a province that is acutely aware of the necessity to monitor public opinion due to recent strikes) has established a department of social investigation that, as its internal publications reveal, uses opinion polling as only one of several techniques for gathering information on public opinion (Guangdong Shengqing Neican, 2011). These limitations of other channels raise the importance of gathering information through the analysis of petitions, which provide information that is not likely to suffer from preference falsification.

A second and related implication is that communist regimes need to overcome the powerful *disincentives* of citizens to petition. We can illustrate this by a simple three-actor game. The actors in this game are the citizens, the central government, and the local government. These three actors have divergent preferences with regard to petitioning. The central government is

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<sup>3</sup> On the tracking of rumors under Stalin, see Johnston (2011).

interested in a steady flow of petitions because analysis of the petitions allows it to ascertain the preferences of the population. In contrast, the local government is interested in suppressing petitions because they typically contain information about malfeasance or inaction by local government employees when faced with citizen requests for provision of goods, services, or protection of legal rights. Citizens would like to petition, but they are inclined not to do so because of fear of retaliation by the local government. Given these disincentives, it is surprising that citizens of communist societies petition with such great frequency. This raises the question of why citizens find it worthwhile to petition despite the possibility of retaliation.

What makes lodging petitions possible is trust. Because rational citizens do not trust the integrity of the local government, their trust resides with higher levels of government, and ultimately with the central government. Opinion poll data indicate that low trust in the local government and high trust in the central government can be found across dictatorships as diverse as current-day China (Asian Barometer, 2002; Asian Barometer, 2008), the Soviet Union under Gorbachev (VTsIOM, 1990, p. 15), and Russia under Putin (Levada Center, 2004). For China in particular, this finding has been confirmed by extensive survey evidence produced by both Chinese and Western scholars (Chinese Communist Party Organization Department, 2009; Zhang & Zhang, 2009, pp. 152-153; Saich 2012). However, the central government cannot take this trust for granted. Rather, it has to work actively to build and maintain it. In a communist dictatorship, the central government can build trust when it acts as the proxy of citizens, holding local officials accountable on their behalf. If local officials fail to respond to citizen complaints, higher levels of government can instruct lower levels of government to resolve the problems referred to in the complaint. In more egregious cases, higher levels of government may also punish unresponsive local officials by unleashing corruption investigations or by deducting

points from their annual performance reviews (Whiting, 2004). In the end, local officials are more likely to respond to citizen complaints when higher levels of government are involved. This paper argues that as long as the public trusts the central government to intervene on its behalf, it will continue to provide information through citizen complaints.

The third implication is that subnational officials will aim to thwart information transfer. The center has tried to prevent this through the tool of performance contracts, which punish local leaders who allow unresolved complaints to escalate to higher levels in the political system (Zouping County Government, 2007). But instead of improving responsiveness, these policies raised the stakes for local-level government officials, who began to send retrievers (*jiefang*) to Beijing to intercept any petitioners from their localities trying to lodge a complaint. Intercepted petitioners would then be held at illegal detention centers (“black jails”) prior to being forcibly returned to their hometowns (China Human Rights Yearbook, 2007-2008, pp. 4-10, 40-77). By helping local governments avoid a negative performance review, this practice undermines the very foundations of voluntary information transfer, as it presents obstacles to citizens who want to appeal to higher levels of government for investigation and resolution of their grievances. This explains why in 2010 the center began closing down the more than 5,000 liaison offices of the various subnational governments in Beijing that formerly had been used as “black jails” (China Daily, 2010). This policy represents a new attempt on the part of the central government to increase local-level responsiveness to complaints and to restore the faith of citizens in the complaints system. This was reiterated in a recent jail sentence for petitioner interceptors from Henan province issued by a Beijing court (Reuters, 2012).

The preceding discussion leads to the main hypothesis of this paper: incentivizing citizens to participate in the petitions system allows the government to establish an essential



channel for compiling information about governance problems that is free from preference falsification. Despite opposition from lower-level officials, the central government is committed to preserving this channel for assessing public opinion.

To sum up the contributions of this paper, a focus on information sheds new light on the inner workings of communist autocracies. It reveals that communist regimes not only want to assess the popular mood, but also decide to invest substantial resources into creating the institutions necessary to do so. This decision is driven by practical concerns for regime preservation: information allows for governance problems to be identified and assessed when they are still manageable and do not threaten to produce regime instability. Petitions information is especially relevant for producing such assessments and for making governance decisions aimed at preventing the rise of regime-destabilizing protests. These findings suggest that existing theories of communist resilience should be expanded to incorporate insights regarding how a regime's ability to produce accurate assessments of the quality of governance may prolong its tenure.

### **Section III: The Organization of Petitions Work in China**

This section addresses two questions: Where can citizens lodge petitions? And does petitions information reach leaders at various levels of the political system? By answering these questions, we can establish that petitions indeed function as an important avenue for collecting information on public opinion in China.

#### *Avenues for Receiving Citizen Petitions*

One of the least familiar aspects of petitions in China is the wide array of agencies that are tasked with handling them. This abundance of actors has not been described and theorized in

the existing literature in English, which has understandably focused on the National Administration for Letters and Calls and its subnational letters and visits offices (Luehrmann, 2003; Cai, 2004; Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012). These combined party-and-state offices have existed for practically the entire duration of the People's Republic and, because they penetrate as deep as the township level, have functioned for most of that period as the main recipients of petitions in China (Diao, 1996). These offices are equivalent to petitions clearinghouses, receiving all types of letters and visits and then liaising with the appropriate agency that can address the problem identified (Zhang & Zhang, 2009).

However, virtually all branches of the Chinese party-state handle letters-and-visits work, with the main recipients being: the party; the legislature; the courts and the procuratorate; the system of government offices; and the media. Within the party, the Discipline Inspection Commission and the Organization Department are the main recipients of petitions, handling primarily corruption tip-offs (China Interview 020919B; Jijian Jiancha, 2007). Within the government, the ministries that have emerged as the main recipients of petitions are in charge of policy implementation in areas where public discontent is very high: the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the Ministry of Public Security (Annual Work Reports, 2008). Court petitions concern queries about initiating legal proceedings (*gaosu*); appeals of judicial decisions (*shensu*); and suggestions and criticisms (Li, 2009). Finally, all media have established specialized offices for work with the masses (*qunzhong gongzuo bu*), which investigate petitions and write internal reports on them that occasionally culminate in an article published in the newspaper (China Interview 120721; SMA A73-2-178-1; SMA B246-2-944-83; SMA B248-2-1024-35; SMA B252-1-109-58).

In sum, multiple channels have been created to receive letters and visits in China, reflecting the importance of petitions as a source of information on popular views. But does the government use petitions as an instrument for assessing governance problems? To address this question, we need to demonstrate that petitions are analyzed and that the resulting findings about the volume and scope of petitions are transferred to the leadership.

### *Transmission of Petitions Information to the Leadership*

In China, agencies that receive petitions are not only expected to record them and monitor how they are resolved, but also have to inform the leadership about the content of petitions at regular intervals. Special divisions for “letters-and-visits information” (*xinfang xinxi*) are established within all bureaucracies. We can use interview evidence, archival materials, and government documents to shed light on how these divisions transmit information to the leadership.

In general, leaders receive two types of reports on petitions: periodic information on general trends in letters and visits and reports highlighting individual (important or representative) letters and visits. Reports of the first type are issued monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, and annually (SMA B180-1-41-15; Zhang & Zhang, 2009, p. 42). They provide statistical data on the volume of petitions, the breakdown of petitions into different categories, and the social characteristics of petitioners. Reports of the second type may bear a variety of different names: a briefing (SMA B250-2-769-14; SMA B257-2-2; SMA B246-2-940-40), a summary (SMA B248-2-1024-35), or a special report (Tianjin Tongzhi, 1997, p. 250), though typically they are called either “reactions of the masses” (*qunzhong fanying*) or “letters and visits information” (*xinfang xinxi*) (see documents reproduced in Tianjin Tongzhi, 1997). These reports are prepared at various intervals. In Zouping county in Shandong province, for example,

*Reactions of the Masses* is issued weekly (China Interview 110729). At the provincial level, this bulletin is issued three times a week (Tianjin Tongzhi, 1997, p. 311). At the national level, leaders received 597 petitions reports in 2007 (Annual Work Reports, 2008, p. 1083); depending on the length of their workweek, that equals two- to three petitions reports per day. The general trend of increasingly frequent reports as we move from the base to the top of the power pyramid reflects the complexity of monitoring citizen reactions to governance problems on an expanding scale.

How engaged are leaders with the reports they receive? A technical feature of the petitions transfer procedures allows us to produce an answer with a high degree of precision. When leaders receive a report on petitions, they have three choices: to ignore it; to read it and take no further action; and to issue written instructions (*pishi*) about some problem highlighted in the report after reading it. Though some reports would have a purely informational purpose, a high proportion of reports that result in written instructions generally serves as a clear indication of leadership involvement with the issues raised in these reports. Data on leadership response is understandably hard to come by, but it can be found in internal government reports. An annual report of the National Administration for Letters and Calls reveals, for example, that central leaders (*zhongyang lingdao tongzhi*) responded to 62% of the 597 petitions reports they received in 2007 (Annual Work Reports, 2008, p. 1083). Politburo Standing Committee members were even more responsive: they issued instructions on 90% of the reports on trends in letters and phone calls (*xindian qingkuang*) that they received throughout 2007 (Annual Work Reports, 2008, p. 1083). We also have specific evidence that Jiang Zemin, Zhu Rongji, Hu Jintao, and Wen Jiabao have all issued instructions on citizen complaints (Renmin Xinfang [RX], no.

7/2000, p. 16; RX, no. 3/2000, p. 3; Annual Work Reports, 2008, p. 1084). This surprisingly high level of responsiveness bespeaks the value that leaders attach to monitoring petitions.

#### **Section IV: The Role of Petitions in Assessing Governance Problems**

This section turns to three questions that form the crux of this paper: Can petitions help identify problems with policy implementation? Can they help expose official corruption? And can they provide an index of the level of popular trust in the regime? The answers to these questions allow us to address the puzzle of how the Chinese government uses petitions to assess the quality of governance.

##### *Identifying Problems with Policy Implementation*

One of the most widely accepted metrics for the quality of governance concerns the capacity of governments to engage in consistent policy implementation (World Bank, 2006, p. 2). In all polities, policy implementation is plagued by agency problems: policies are formulated by principals at higher levels of the political system but are implemented by agents at lower levels. These problems are exacerbated under decentralization. In China, every level of government faces informational disadvantages when trying to assess policy implementation by lower levels. Petitions can help alleviate these problems by identifying the areas where citizens perceive policy implementation to be inconsistent. Once these areas have been identified, leaders can focus their attention on them.

We have access to petitions data from three different levels of the Chinese political system: counties; provinces; and the center. The data reveal that there are no major differences in the types of policy implementation problems that are raised in citizen petitions directed to the leadership at these three different levels. This might seem surprising, considering that it is well

known that rural and urban residents in China have different concerns that should be reflected in different types of complaints: for example, rural residents tend to suffer from excessive taxation and illegal land redistribution, whereas unemployment and inadequate compensation for housing are major concerns for urban residents. Yet, rapid industrialization has brought “urban” problems to rural areas. As a result, in the 2000s, petitions at these three levels concerned very similar issues. What varied, of course, was the magnitude of the issue at stake: as petitioning higher levels of government requires more resources than petitioning lower levels, citizens typically have more serious grievances when they approach letters-and-visits offices at higher levels.

Let us first examine the county level in the 2000s. Take Zouping county in Shandong province as an example. Three decades ago, this county was very rural. Today, it is one of the top 100 richest counties in China (Zouping Zhengfu, 2009, p. 1). For this reason, its letters-and-visits office has handled both complaints about land distribution and complaints from migrant workers who have worked in Zouping but have not been paid (China Interview 110729). Another example comes from Lintong, a rural district of Xian. There, residents naturally complain about land use, but also lodge petitions concerning home ownership, life difficulties, family problems, and cadre corruption, which are “urban” issues as well (Zhang & Zhang, 2009).

Moving to the provincial level, concerns are wider in scope, but do not differ fundamentally from issues raised at the county level. In Guangxi in 2006, for example, citizens typically approached the letters and visits offices with concerns about labor and social insurance; housing destruction and displacement of owners; land expropriation; enterprise system restructuring; legal matters and appeals; the rights of employees of retail stores and markets; assistance to decommissioned military personnel; the quality of substitute teachers;

environmental protection; and cadre work style (cadre corruption) (Guangxi Nianjian, 2007, p. 195).

At the central level, petitions received by the National Administration for Letters and Calls in 2009, for example, focused on land expropriation; housing destruction; non-payment of wages by bankrupt enterprises; social insurance concerns; environmental pollution; and product safety (RX, no. 2/2010, pp. 9-13). These petitions were not dissimilar from those handled at lower levels of the system, except that petitioners reaching Beijing would have usually engaged in petitions for years, and in some cases, decades.

Leaders can use this information in two ways. The first is to identify the issues that present problems in policy implementation, as reflected in the major concerns raised in petitions. The second is to get a sense of the regional variation of petitions.

The next step is to try to assess what drives this regional variation. Using publicly available data, we can run regressions to test for the impact of different independent variables on the volume of petitions in Chinese provinces in 2005. The results are presented in Table 1. They indicate that a strong predictor of petitions across Chinese provinces is the level of unemployment (t-value of 2.17). However, the strongest predictor is gross provincial product per capita (t-value of 8.4); one plausible interpretation is that in richer provinces the greater scarcity and higher value of both rural and urban land lead to a higher volume of petitions (see Table 1). The Chinese government has access to other indicators that would allow for a different type of analysis and conclusions. The OLS model presented here is used only to illustrate what types of insights about governance problems can be yielded when data about complaints are subjected to systematic analysis.

Table 1: OLS Regression Model of Citizen Petitions in China (dependent variable=number of letters and visits per million people in 2005; n=31)

Independent Variables	Coefficient
2005 gross regional product per capita	.796*** (.0947875)
2004 total court cases	-.024*** (.0088589)
2005 percentage illiterate population	-188.3* (128.3004)
2005 percentage urban population unemployed	3203.2** (1474.489)
Constant	-09398.02* (7170.699)

**R-squared= 0.78**

Standard errors listed in parentheses. Significance levels: \*=0.1; \*\*=0.05; \*\*\*=0.01

Source: Author's dataset on citizen petitions.

### *Identifying Corruption*

The preceding paragraphs demonstrate that cadre corruption is often raised as an issue in citizen petitions directed to the National Administration of Letters and Calls and its subnational offices. But there are other agencies that are exclusively in charge of dealing with corruption: two of them are within the party (the Discipline Inspection Committee and the Organization Department) and two are within the government (the Ministry of Supervision and the General Administration for Combating Embezzlement and Bribery at the people's procuratorate). Technically, the party departments impose punishments on party members; the Ministry of Supervision imposes punishments on civil servants; and the procuratorate can detain those party members and civil servants who have engaged in criminal violations of the law. In practice, the discipline inspection and the supervision organs exist separately only at the national level and are merged into one entity (*heshu bangong*) at the subnational level.



In principle, a corrupt cadre can receive three types of punishment: a party punishment; an administrative sanction; and a criminal sentence. Party disciplinary punishments vary from warning to exclusion from the ranks of the party (CCP Disciplinary Punishment Regulations, 1997, Art. 10). There is a gradation of administrative sanctions from administrative warning to dismissal from office and discharge (PRC Law on Administrative Supervision, 1997, Art. 24). Criminal punishments for embezzlement, bribery, and dereliction of duty vary from criminal detention and a fine to the death penalty (PRC Criminal Procedure Law, 2012).

A surprisingly large proportion of the investigations initiated by corruption-control agencies in China are triggered by citizen complaints. A Ministry of Supervision official estimated that 70-80 percent of the corruption cases that are handled by the joint Discipline Inspection/Supervision offices result from citizen complaints (China Interview 020919B). A government publication similarly states that 80 percent of Discipline Inspection/Supervision investigations of violations of law and tax discipline are based on information provided in citizen complaints (RX, no. 3/2003, p. 10). These statistics highlight that instead of engaging in police-patrol behavior (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984), anti-corruption agencies prefer to use complaints as fire alarms that trigger investigations. To stimulate citizens to provide information, the Discipline Inspection/Supervision bureaus even accept anonymous signals, which account for a quarter of the overall complaints caseload (Zhongyang Jilü Jiancha Weiyuanhui, 1987). The share of anonymous complaints increases when cadres at higher levels in the hierarchy of the communist party are concerned, accounting for as much 93 percent of the complaints concerning disciplinary violations by ministerial- and army-level cadres (Zhongyang Jilü Jiancha Weiyuanhui, 1987). In sum, complaints do serve as an indicator of corruption, which is one of the main governance problems in contemporary China.

As archival materials and government documents make clear, leaders in China receive at regular intervals both statistical reports on the volume of corruption tip-offs and narrative reports on individual high-profile investigations of corruption cases (SMA A72-2-284-16; SMA A73-2-178-1). The importance they attach to these complaints is revealed by their public speeches. Zhu Rongji has repeatedly stressed the value of complaints for pursuing the goal of “clean government” and fighting corruption. Jiang Zemin has spoken to the same effect. In the Hu-Wen administration, both Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have stressed the role of complaints in anti-corruption efforts in speeches they have delivered to leaders of letters-and-visits offices (Shandong Xinfang, no. 3/2011, p. 3; Shandong Xinfang, no. 4/2011, p. 3). Similar statements are contained in discipline inspection manuals (Zhongyang Jiwei, 2001, pp. 25-57; Zheng, 2009, pp. 277-282 and 576-582). The consensus reflects the value of tip-offs for identifying corrupt officials throughout the country.

#### *Petitions as an Indicator of Trust*

Perhaps the most surprising function of petitions is as an indicator of the underlying level of trust in the regime. The logic is simple, though it is counterintuitive and has not been presented in existing scholarly treatments: What makes petitioning possible is trust. From the perspective of the central leadership, a steady volume of petitions indicates that citizens trust the system sufficiently to seek resolution of their grievances through the formal channels. In China, this view has been most clearly expressed by State Councilor Ma Kai, who said in his speech for leaders of letters and visits offices in provinces and major cities delivered at a teleconference on January 29, 2010: “Citizens revealing their problems to us reflects their trust in the party and the government” (RX, no. 2/2010, p. 7). Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have respectively opined that petitions allow for the establishment of an “intimate” or a “flesh and blood” relationship between

the masses and the party (RX, no. 7/2000, p. 14; Shandong Xinfang, no. 4/2011, p. 3). Party and internal-circulation journals also reveal that petitions are understood as a channel for building trust (Wu, 2009; Tian, 2012). Thus, letters and visits not only measure the volume of trust in the regime, but also help *create* such trust by maintaining continuous responsiveness to citizen concerns. Petitions are not simply signals about problems with policy implementation. They stem from specific grievances to which citizens demand responsiveness from the party-state.

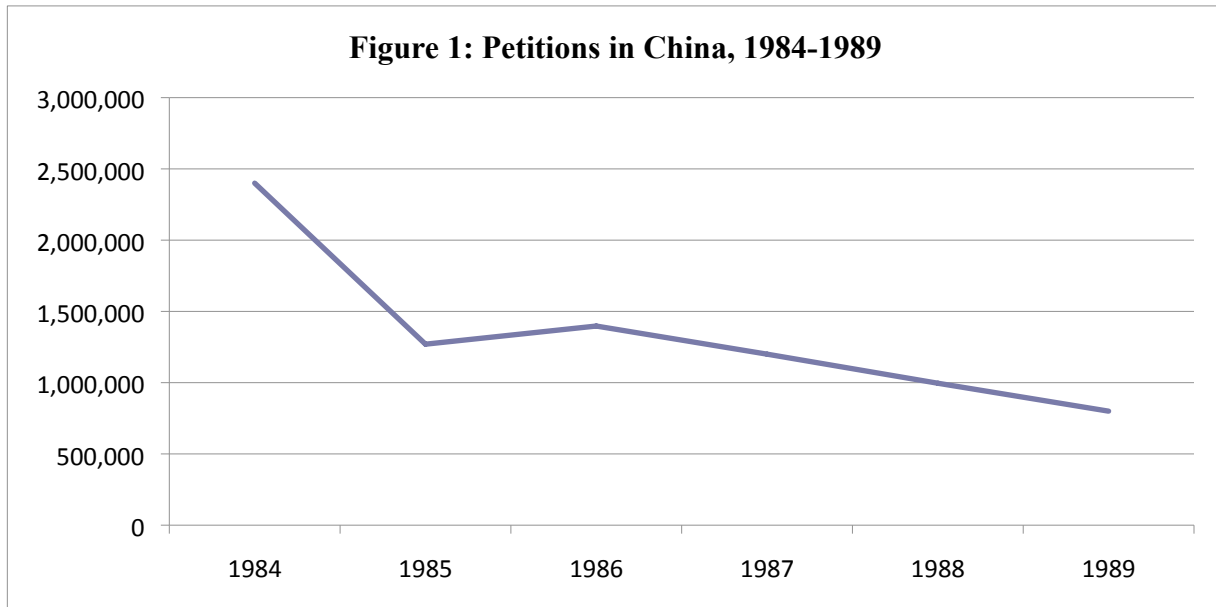
Just as lodging petitions indicates trust in the regime, increasing unwillingness to petition signals declining trust in the system.<sup>4</sup> Assessing fluctuations in the aggregate stock of trust therefore requires evaluating time-series data on the volume of petitions. A rise in the volume of petitions would indicate increasing trust expressed as buying into the system. *Drops* in petitions would indicate declining trust, expressed as exiting the formal petitions system. This trend is worrisome for the regime even when it occurs by itself. It is a cause for considerably greater concern when it is accompanied by a rise in protests, as happened prior to the 1989 Tiananmen events and as has occurred once again since 2004.

Let us first discuss the declining volume of petitions prior to Tiananmen and the regime response to that trend. Based on data that I have compiled from *Renmin xinfang* (an internal-reference journal that began publication for letters-and-visits personnel in 1985), there was a sizable drop in the number of petitions between 1984 and 1989 (see Figure 1). This trend was surprising when we take into account that there was widespread discontent among China's urban residents in the second half of the 1980s, who were distressed by the rising double-digit inflation and by newly announced policies that meant that they would no longer be entitled to lifetime

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<sup>4</sup> This is by no means a uniquely Chinese understanding: archival evidence reveals that Soviet leaders had a similar understanding of downward trends in the volume of petitions (f. 646 op. 1 d. 3., p. 11).

employment and generous benefits, known as the “iron rice bowl” (*tie fan wan*) (Walder 1991). Yet, urbanites were exiting the complaints system.

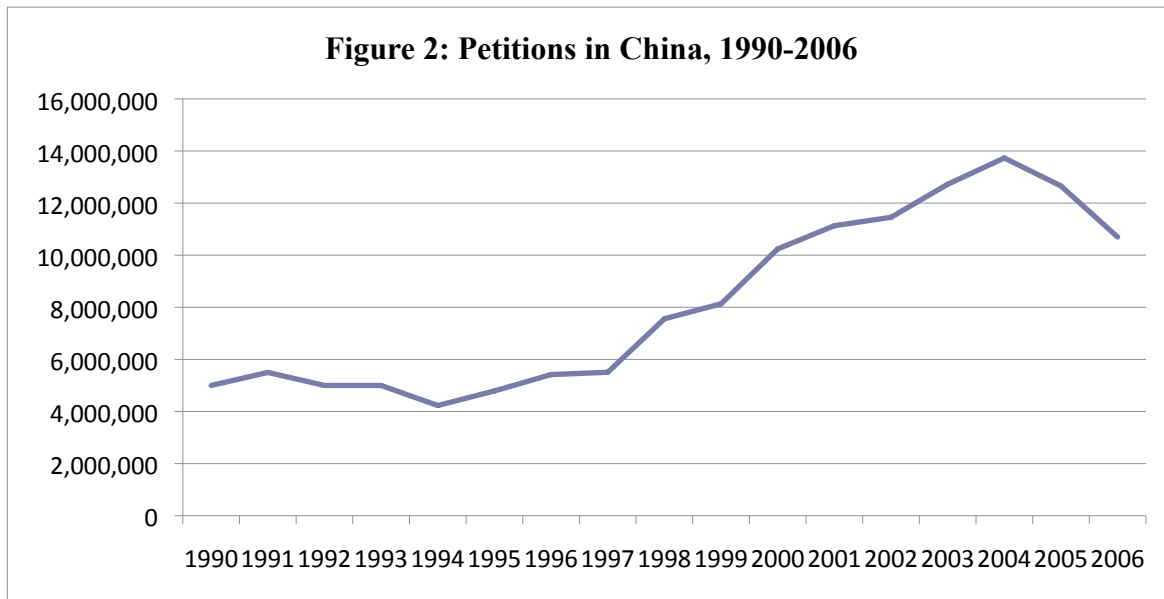


Source: Author’s dataset on citizen petitions.

The Chinese regime reacted with alarm to the drop in the number of petitions. Numerous articles in *Renmin xinfang* stressed that government responsiveness to petitions is important for preserving communist rule because petitions provide a channel for dialogue with the masses and for maintaining citizen loyalty (RX, no. 22/1985, pp. 2-3; RX, no. 7/1986, pp. 2-8, 19; RX, no. 4/1987, pp. 3-4). These exhortations did not buck the trend: new petitions continued to decline and citizens began to engage in practices such as repeat complaining and collective petitioning, both of which signaled their frustration with the system (RX, no. 1/1988, pp. 15-17; RX, no. 2/1989, pp. 38-40).

Following the Tiananmen crackdown, the leadership again turned its attention to petitions. Between June and September 1989, Shanghai mayor Zhu Rongji, General Secretary

Jiang Zemin, Politburo Standing Committee member Qiao Shi, and Premier Li Peng each made separate statements about the importance of providing prompt and detailed responses to citizen complaints (RX, no. 10/1989, p. 2; RX, no. 11/1989, pp. 2-4). In August 1989 the top leadership convened a meeting in Beijing of ten directors of provincial-level letters-and-visits bureaus (RX, no. 10/1989, pp. 3-8), and in September 1989 the Central Bureau of Letters and Visits sent out a notice to all provincial-level party and government offices regarding the need to strengthen letters-and-visits work (RX, no. 2/1990, pp. 2-3). The petitions system had never before received as much sustained attention from the top leadership as it did in the summer of 1989. This attention is not surprising, considering that the leadership wanted to regain the trust of the masses through increased responsiveness to petitions. The leadership also thought that greater responsiveness would maintain stability by preventing the escalation of individual complaints into group petitions or into visits to Beijing. A series of measures implemented throughout the 1990s, including vertical expansion of the complaints network to the township level and eventually to the villages (RX, no. 2/1991, pp. 17-19; RX, no. 5/1995, p. 19), helped reverse the trend, as illustrated by Figure 2.

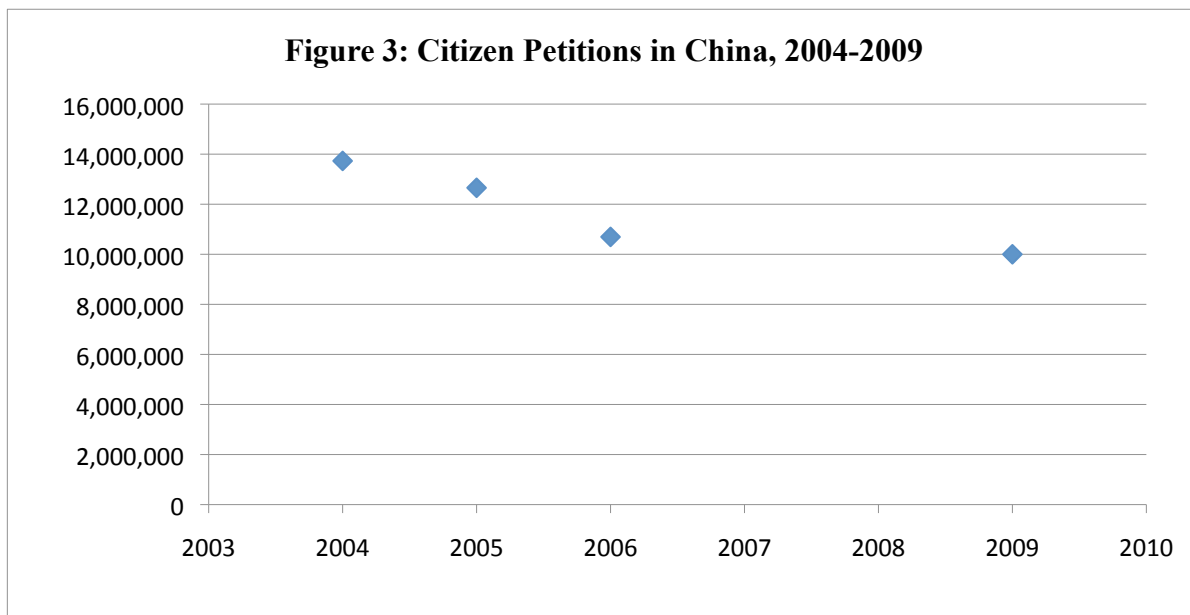


Source: Author’s dataset on citizen petitions.

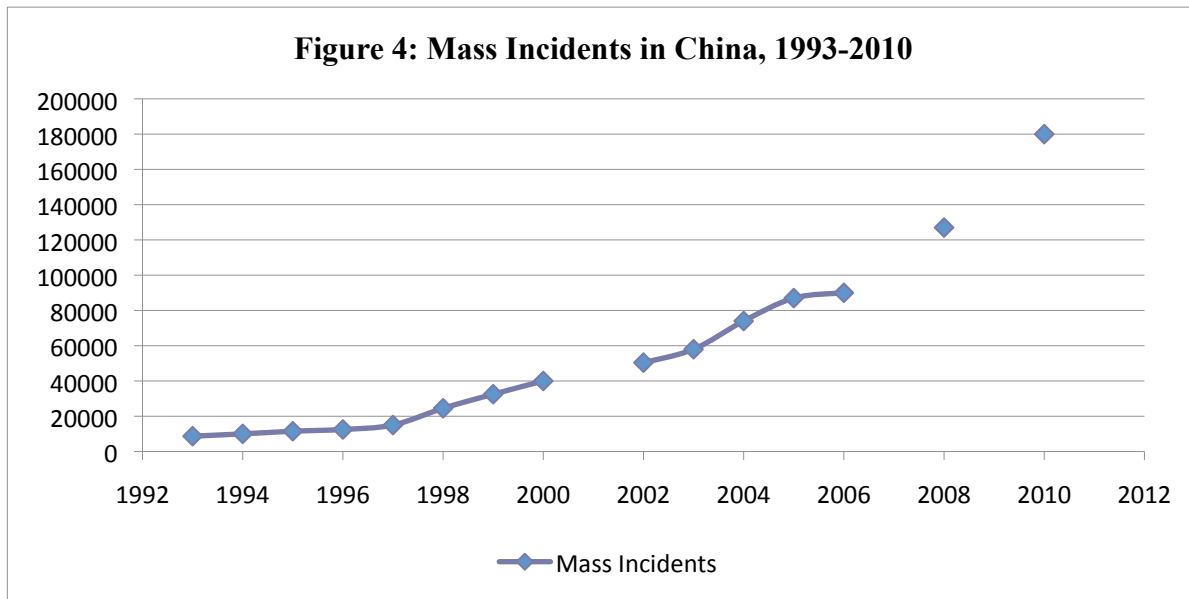
Then, in 2004 there was another drop in the volume of petitions. Documenting the precise magnitude of this decline is exceedingly difficult and statistics do not exist in the scholarly literature in either Chinese or English. However, relevant statistics on the volume of subnational petitions can be assembled from the annual reports of the National Bureau of Letters and Calls and from other internal government publications. These documents allow us to shed light on how the volume of petitions fluctuated through 2009 (see Figure 3). What is especially worrisome about the decline registered in Figure 3 is that it has occurred in conjunction with two other developments: a rise in the number of petitions that were lodged at the central level in Beijing and a dramatic increase in the number of mass incidents, most of which took place at the subnational level (on mass incidents, see Figure 4). Though the existence of a “high tide” of petitions to Beijing is well known and has even been discussed in a recent article in English (Li, Liu & O’Brien, 2012), the precise magnitude of the phenomenon remains unfamiliar. In contrast, data on collective protests, which are variously classified as “mass incidents” (*quntixing shijian*)

or “sudden incidents” (*tufa shijian*) is more readily available. Both petitioning Beijing and participating in mass incidents indicate that citizens do not believe that their grievances can be resolved through the formal petitioning channels available at the local level.

Since 2004, the central government has implemented various measures that make it easier for citizens to petition online. Yet, even though it is now easier than ever to complain simply by sending an email or filling an online form, citizens continued to exit the petitions system and to use other channels, such as online chat room, blogs, and microblogs (*weibo*). Exiting the petitions system and turning to online public opinion platforms is worrisome for the regime. These channels transmit information as well, of course, but they do so differently from petitioning. Simply put, petitioning is an act of trust in the system; participating in public fora is an act of frustration.



Source: Author’s dataset on citizen petitions.



Sources: Author's dataset on mass incidents.

Currently, the central leaders can use three trends to document the scope of the erosion of trust that is occurring in China: the decline of subnational letters and visits; the increase in petitioning Beijing; and the steady increase in mass incidents. What are the implications for long-term regime stability in China? So far, the erosion of trust seems to affect grassroots governments rather than the central government. The center has managed to ensure that the anger of citizens is aimed at local governments and that mass incidents do not cross county or provincial lines; the center attempts to appear as an ally of the protesters, creating institutions to help the disadvantaged social groups through redistributive spending and interceding on their behalf to discipline local officials. As a result, protests, even when they do turn violent, thus far have not endangered regime stability (O'Brien and Li, 2006). Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that the center will be able to continue to manage protests this effectively in the future. A further erosion of trust could easily occur and it might affect trust in higher levels as well, especially if the center proves unable to intervene sufficiently often on behalf of petitioners.



## **Section V: Conclusion**

This paper has identified petitions as one of the primary channels through which the Chinese government collects information that can be used to develop internal assessments of the quality of governance. In contrast to information that is involuntarily extracted, citizens voluntarily transfer information to the regime when they petition. Thus, petitions are less likely to suffer from preference falsification than involuntarily collected information. Petitions information is prized by the leadership because it reveals problems in policy implementation; identifies corrupt officials; and allows the regime to ascertain what level of trust it has among the general population.

The recent decline of petitions in China is a cause for concern primarily because it signals a rapid erosion of trust in the regime. The stability of the political system in China will depend in part on the ability of the central government to reverse this decline, while at the same time stemming the steady upward trend in protests. This would be a tall order for any government. It is especially challenging for a government that has been plagued in recent years by numerous product quality and safety scandals, which have called into question its ability to provide consistent policy implementation. The Bo Xilai, Xi Jinping, and Wen Jiabao corruption scandals that rocked China in 2012 have further eroded the already low stock of trust that ordinary citizens have in the regime. This explains why immediately after the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2012, both Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang made high-profile speeches about the vital importance that combating corruption has for regime preservation (BBC, 2012). At least from the perspective on governance offered by citizen petitions, China has entered a deep crisis of popular trust that may prove to be insurmountable.

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no. 2/1991

no. 5/1995

no. 3/2000

no. 7/2000

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