Consent to Contend: The Power of the Masses in China’s Local Elite Bargain*

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Abstract

This study explores how local officials tolerate and use mass mobilization to extract policy concessions from above. Local officials strategically tolerate mass mobilization when the demands of the masses are congruent with elements of their own agenda that they are otherwise unable to pursue. Protestors in the streets turn out to be a powerful bargaining chip for local officials: they illustrate *ex ante* that higher level leaders risk causing social instability if they reject the masses’ demands. The article lays out the institutional environment that gives rise to such a strategy, presents a detailed case study focusing on the

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alliance between local officials and citizens in a mass mobilization regarding administrative redistricting, and discusses the presence of such “consent instability” in other issue areas in China. The result from a survey experiment of Chinese officials is consistent with the hypothesis that officials are more likely to concede to the demands of their subordinates when popular pressure back their demand. The findings reveal a crucial elite-mass linkage in China’s bureaucratic politics that researchers have neglected.

More than 1,000 residents of county C held a protest at the county building in 2013. The impetus was that officials of the city, which I will call H, that administers the county had decided to turn county C into a district under its direct jurisdiction. Thus they were essentially proposing to merge the county with city H. County C, one of the most affluent in the city, was financial independent, which meant their strong tax base could provide amenities in the city and that county officials had autonomy that district officials lack. County C residents took their county’s relatively independent status as a point of pride and argued that the merger would have negative impact on various aspects of their lives, such as the quality of local public service. While Chinese officials generally treat social stability as a priority, clear evidence suggests that county C officials did little to prevent this protest and even sided with organizers.

Using county C as a case study, this article studies how the power of the masses shapes intra-elite bargaining within authoritarian bureaucracies. I argue that “consent instability” in which local officials strategically tolerate bottom-up mobilizations to strengthen their bargaining power functions in some jurisdictions in China. Specifically, officials who oversee less influential segments of the regime and therefore lack other bargaining power often favor this strategy. They capitalize on local mass mobilizations when the demand of the masses is congruent with elements of their agenda that they are otherwise unable to pursue, especially those that involve bargaining between the locality and higher levels of the government. The protestors in the streets turn out to be a powerful bargaining chip for local officials. They illustrate \textit{ex ante} that rejecting the locality’s demand brings a risk of social instability, which brings the pressure of the masses to bear on higher level leaders.
Several institutional conditions of the Chinese party-state breed what I call consent instability. The first is that the hierarchies of the party-state create an uneven playing field for actors seeking policy resources from above. Agents with higher ranks or those who capture traditionally important positions in the nomenklatura receive more resources than others. Agents representing weak bureaucracies, in contrast, have minimal bargaining power with their superiors. These weak players therefore seek sources of bargaining power from outside the bureaucracy. This study explores the way in which such local officials tap public pressure of local citizenry to achieve their purposes. Second, cadre incentives are not uniform across different levels of the party-state. Grassroots officials, who have very little chance of getting promoted beyond their localities, choose to prioritize the augmentation of local interests. Cadres at higher levels, however, value their career prospects more than grassroots officials do. This discrepancy of incentives explains why grassroots officials might risk their own careers to tolerate citizen mobilizations that promote local interests, and why officials at higher levels often concede when they face such demands.

My case study of eastern county C’s response to a proposed government merger will demonstrate this logic. Drawing on interviews with local officials and residents, I show that county C officials tolerated the protesters because their interests coincided with protesters’ demands. The merger would significantly weaken their power and authority, and county officials successfully used local citizen mobilization to resist higher level officials’ decision.

Local officials’ tacit consent to mobilization makes the grassroots into a powerful weapon for weak bureaucrats, as it forces their superiors to consider the possibility that ignoring protesters’ demands will imperil social stability. To offer a systematic assessment of the efficacy of using public pressure as leverage in intra-bureaucratic bargaining, I employ a survey experiment of 346 local officials. I use an endorsement experiment design in which the subjects (local cadres) evaluated a hypothetical budgetary earmark request from a leader at the grassroots. The subjects showed a significantly higher level of approval of the earmark when popular pressure that threatened the stability of the regime backed the request.

The consent instability model offers new insights on our understanding of how Chinese officials respond to sources of social instability. While the conventional understanding that Chinese officials actively
contain, stifle, and repress mass mobilizations applies to many officials, this model shows that some local officials seek opportunities in popular contention. Protestors send costly signals of local demand and help officials to extract concessions from the above. Such a state-citizen relationship has been observed in various issue areas featuring intensive bargaining among multiple segments of the government, most of which are prominent in cases involving administrative redistricting or allocations of investment in large infrastructure projects (such as high-speed railways). It challenges the often-perceived elite-masses dichotomy in authoritarian politics, pointing to the possibility that the masses can play a meaningful role in shaping interactions among the authoritarian elites.

1. Defining “Consent Instability”

“Consent instability” refers to the strategic tolerance of mass mobilization by weaker bureaucratic actors, who use public pressure as bargaining leverage against their superiors. It involves two key actors. The first is local bureaucracies with relatively weak influence in the bureaucracy. Those are territorial administrations or functional bureaucracies that oversee less influential segments of the regime, such as local governments in more remote parts of the country or those lower in the hierarchy, or bureaus in charge of issues that are not key policy concerns of the party-state. These bureaucracies often get sidelined in the intra-bureaucratic competition for resources or advantageous policies from above. They either have difficulties drawing attention from superiors or lack bargaining leverage in competing with more powerful peers. The second actor is a local citizenry with collective action potential. This collective action potential stems from their demand for policy changes, which could include improvements in local infrastructure, social welfare, and other locality-specific policies. These demands do not target local governments, but instead target higher level officials that have the authority to make such decisions. Citizens express their demands through mobilizations that carry an implicit threat to social stability.

Consent instability involves the officials’ strategic tolerance of—and in some cases, even collusion with—citizens’ expressions of demands toward upper-level officials. The public displays of constituents’ discontent, particularly mass mobilizations, help strengthen officials’ bargaining power in soliciting policy benefits. First, bottom-up mass mobilizations serve as a credible piece of evidence of public dissatisfaction. They single
out the demands of a particular locality from a myriad of noisy signals that leaders at higher levels receive, including those “cheap talks” by competing agents that claim the existence of similar demands from their constituents. When the demand of people in streets is congruent with what the officials want from above, public pressure becomes a powerful leverage that officials can invoke to demand policy concessions that they are otherwise unable to pursue. Second, the disruptive effect of mass mobilizations illustrates \textit{ex ante} the grave consequences (i.e., social instability) of rejecting a locality’s demands, and brings the pressure of the masses to bear on the side of leaders at above. Higher level leaders face a choice between acceding to the demands of the localities or rejecting them and being responsible for priming the local population to join a more fundamental challenge to social stability.

It is important to note that official consent does not necessarily mean local officials publicly organize or assist protestors against their superiors. Organizing protests against higher level decisions is considered a serious disciplinary violation (“activities against party organization”) in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and once found out, officials will face harsh sanction. What we can publicly observe in most cases is that local governments defect from their usual practices in preventing and repressing mobilizations, and demonstrate a high degree of tolerance to protestors. Therefore, the role of local government in these events is more about consent rather than collaboration. In some rare cases, local officials also join mobilization as individual participants.

Consent instability reflects an informal alliance between the local state and the citizens. It also departs from our traditional understanding of how local governments manage popular contention. It is nonetheless a strategic response by local officials facing various formal and informal institutional incentives and constraints. In the next section, I highlight two key institutional characteristics of the Chinese bureaucracy that give rise to consent instability.

2. The Institutional Setting

Two institutional features of the Chinese party-state create conditions for consent instability to emerge. The first is the unequal distribution of bargaining power among various bureaucratic units. Intra-bureaucratic bargaining for advantageous policies often sideline those weak segments of the bureaucracy. To strengthen their positions, they seek sources of
bargaining power outside the bureaucracy (i.e., public pressure). At the same time, China’s cadre evaluation system imposes differential incentives. Grassroots officials who value departmental or community enrichment more than promotion, use social instability as a tool to extract policy concessions from higher level leaders.

a. Unequal Distribution of Bureaucratic Bargaining Power

Bargaining takes place in the day-to-day operation of the Chinese government. Various bureaucratic units, who have a diverse and often conflictual agenda, compete, negotiate, compromise, and collude among themselves to try to maximize their departmental interests. The unequal distributions of bargaining power among various bureaucratic units shape the outcomes of these interactions. Those with greater bargaining power are better positioned to secure preferential policy outcomes, which are often at the expense of those with relatively weak bargaining power.

The unequal distributions of bargaining power exist in two dimensions. First, units of different administrative ranks have unequal power in a straightforward hierarchical model. Higher level officials can force those at the lower level to accept the terms the offer. For example, when officials at various levels of government disagree on the shares of specific taxes they collect, or the divisions of responsibilities in expenditure, the higher level officials prevail, because they have both explicit and effective power. Redistricting or administrative merger decisions have the same impact.

Bureaucracies of equal rank can also have unequal bargaining power. For example, provincial capitals usually have more influence over provincial policy making than ordinary municipalities; municipal public security bureaus are considered more important—and therefore can garner more resources—than health or sports bureaus. Formal institutional arrangements recognize some of these differences: the heads of these more important locales or bureaus often have dual appointments at a higher level. For example, the secretary of the provincial capitals always sits on the provincial party standing committee, and municipal public security bureau chiefs also carry concurrent titles such as deputy mayor.

Beyond such arrangements, nothing formal sets out the differences in bargaining power among officials of the same rank, but those who get lower priority recognize the informal norms and consensus that give them less bargaining power than their peers. Consequently, some of them
take a risky path of seeking sources of power that strengthen their positions from outside the bureaucracy—such as the pressures of the citizenry.11

b. The Differential Official Incentives

The strategic use of public pressure by weak officials to extract policy concessions from above hinges upon an important assumption: that officials at lower levels have less to lose than those at higher levels. To understand this point, we need to review the institution that governs officials’ incentives—the cadre management system.

The cadre management system evaluates officials’ performance in various aspects of governance, and links the evaluations to officials’ career prospects.12 Numerous empirical studies have found the system to be effective in supplying high-powered incentives for officials to pursue desired policy goals set by the regime, such as economic growth,13 revenue collection,14 and environmental regulation.15 The party has placed additional emphasis on social stability maintenance by sanctioning officials whose “negligence” in their work cause social instability.16 The party also institutes what’s called the “one veto rule,” making social stability a top priority for local officials.17

A single mass incident in an official’s jurisdiction does not necessarily lead to sanction, however. If citizens mobilize in favor of policy change that authorities at higher levels determine, and direct their demands toward upper levels of government, leaders at higher levels will be directly responsible for failure in containing the situation, had they not reacted properly to appease the local population. Local officials who lack direct authority over the issues of contention can shed the responsibility for mobilizations if they communicate with their superiors about how to address the situation. Other improvisations that signal good work ethic can also ward off the accusation of negligence.18

The officials’ incentive structure also differs along the administrative ranks, as officials at different levels have different opportunities to advance. Most lower ranked officials (including vice leaders and bureau chiefs) are not rotated but serve lifetime posts in one locale.19 These officials, as Yuen Yuen Ang estimates, account for more than 99 percent of the Chinese bureaucracy.20 Whereas promotion incentives are important to higher level leaders,21 the incentives most relevant to lower ranked officials “come in the form of compensation, not promotion.”22
compensation of grassroots officials, besides a fixed salary, relies closely on the performance of the bureaucracy they serve. “The more income their departments earned the more benefits they received.” The autonomy grassroots officials enjoy in commanding the local economy is an important source from which they generate surplus for the bureaucracies they serve.

This incentive structure empowers grassroots officials in an unintended way. Higher level officials, especially those in leadership positions, value promotion. Promotions at higher ranks are highly competitive and subject to political struggle, and stain on an official’s résumé, including major failures in social stability management, can block their hopes for advancement. Officials at the grassroots level, in contrast, value compensation over promotion, and their compensation is closely tied to local and departmental interests. When higher level orders confront local interests, officials at the lower level therefore can use mobilization to extract concessions. The career ambitions of superiors paradoxically make them vulnerable in the bargain.

To summarize, two institutional characteristics of the party-state create space for “consent instability” to emerge. The unequal distributions of bargaining power place some bureaucracies in a weak position. The officials who oversee these agencies seek sources of bargaining power from outside the bureaucracy. Grassroots officials in these places often value the augmentation of local interests more than their own advancement. Therefore, they can risk using social instability as an extortionary tool to extract policy concession from higher level leaders. The county C case study in the next section illustrates these dynamics.

3. A Case Study of “Consent Instability”

County C is one of the most affluent regions under the administration of city H in province K. As I have described, county officials did not attempt to squelch residents of county C’s protest in the spring of 2013 because they widely opposed the measure to merge the county with the city, believing it would undermine their autonomy and benefits. The gathering of over 1,000 people in front of the county government building opposing the merger plan was the culmination of expressions of dissatisfaction on various online and offline channels. Rather than inducing repression, the city government hastily suspended the merger plan following the mass demonstration, stating that the plan was “still
immature.” The analyses of the preferences and behaviors of city officials, county officials, and the local population draw on 21 interviews with local officials and residents, as well as other primary sources regarding the incident that I acquired during the fieldwork.

a. Actors and Their Preferences

City H: Like many other cities in province K, the city H government presides over a relatively small urban center. It is the result of province K’s long-term practice in managing its counties directly (省管縣 shengguanxian). Whereas counties exist administratively under cities, as elsewhere in China, they are economically accountable only to the province. The allocations of revenue, government investment, land quota, and other resources take place directly between the provincial government and the counties. This management system means the city government can extract resources from districts within it but not counties. City H, for example, controls the resources of only two districts. Because of this arrangement many cities in province K lack resources to invest in infrastructure and urban construction and cannot develop the urban centers. The two largest cities in province K turned several of their counties into districts in the early 2000s, and have since then achieved rapid urbanization and growth. In turning county C into a district under its direct control, the government of city H sought to strengthen its capabilities. The provincial government endorsed the plan as a way to grow the provincial economy through a new wave of urbanization.

It is crucial to note that city H government is the more powerful player in this case. The city enjoys higher political rank than the county despite the latter’s relatively independent economic status. The county officials could not openly oppose their superiors’ decisions, at least not in an institutionally recognized manner.

County C: As county C residents and county officials perceived, county C has benefited enormously from its relatively autonomous status. The deputy chief of the county’s fiscal bureau told me that the county currently retains 80 percent of its revenue and transfers the remaining 20 percent to the provincial government, whereas a merger would require it to turn over 50 percent or more of this revenue to the city government. Further, the county would lose its annual land conversion quota and its control of the land use right transfer fee to city H. The county has relied on this large supplement of tax revenue for a number of its infrastructure
A merger might give these funds to city H, which sought to develop an urban center.

Beyond revenue allocation, county C would lose much of its control of various aspects of economic and social management, such as urban planning and the recruitment of public employees. A county official described the difference between the county and district structure in province K as follows:

> Our ranks won’t change (if county C becomes a district). But as a district, we are only a “half government” (半級政府 banji zhengfu). We are functionaries of the city and only get to do whatever the city government wants us to do. Now [as a county] we are in full charge of ourselves.

In interviews, I proposed that the change could have benefits, such as increased access to public service offered by the city, but county C officials dismissed these. Proud of the county’s status as one of the “national top 100 counties” (全國百强縣 quanguo baiqiangxian), the county’s officials worry that joining city H—an average prefecture struggling with its own development—would impose liabilities on the county. An official at the county’s development and reform bureau, for example, said that the county has never received help from the city, and he would not expect that to change if it became a district. He noted that the county sought help from the capital of province K or Shanghai when doctors needed a medical specialist in rare diseases or the county’s factories needed technical experts. “There has not been a single time we received help from city H,” he noted. “They also don’t have what we need.”

There are also concerns that the county would face direct competition with the city’s two districts in attracting outside investment, while not having all the policy advantages as a county after the merger. Throughout my interviews in county C, every official, including those within the county leadership, was quite outspoken on the potential downsides of the merger. None, however, expressed support of the merger plan.

County C Citizens: Local citizens objected to the potential merger for similar reasons to those that prompted officials’ objections. Some expressed concern that the city government would not give the needs of the county attention and that the urban center would benefit at the cost of services they currently enjoy. Some openly expressed a lack of desire to share their schools, hospitals, and other public facilities with city residents. Local businessmen, who were already unhappy with the redundancy of the county’s bureaucracy, worried that the merger would further
increase their cost of doing business. For example a businessman who runs a private tutoring school told me that he would lose valuable time traveling 30 kilometers to the city to obtain permissions for his business.

Many county residents voiced their concerns online once the plan became public. On the county’s Baidu Tieba page, I identified 816 posts that discuss the merger, each of which had at least ten replies and many of which had many. Some posts suggested the city was trying to squeeze as much as it could from the county; others pointed to another county that had lost its independence under city H a decade ago and suggested its fate had been negative and that county C’s would be as well. Akin to the nationalistic accounts that Chinese netizens often invoke, they appealed to local pride, portraying city H as an “invader” that sought to undermine the interests of the county. Some of these posts used derogatory terms to refer to city H. They called the merger a way of humiliating county residents, avowing they “would never be the conquered people” (堅決不做亡縣奴 jianjue buzuo wangxiannu).

b. Bureaucratic Bargaining before the Demonstration

The bargaining between the county and the city took place long before the protest. According to county C officials, the city government conducted months of field investigation (調研 diaoyan) prior to the decision. The working group of investigation from the city summoned county officials (including bureau chiefs and township heads) and listened to their opinion regarding the merger plan. These meetings took place behind closed doors, and the merger plan was kept a secret to the public at the beginning. In these meetings, the city officials assured the county officials that the interests of county C would not be harmed if the merger took place. The county officials were strongly against the merger from the very beginning. They suspected that the city officials’ guarantee was just an expedient rhetoric to lure them into agreeing the plan and would not be credible in the long run. They cited district N as an example—the district used to enjoy autonomy as a county, yet its development lagged behind after becoming a district under city H. Despite unequivocal opposition expressed by the county officials in these meetings, the city government did not seem to take these opinions into serious consideration and proceeded with the merger plan anyway.

There is no direct evidence on why city government disregarded county officials’ opinion in the first place. One plausible explanation is that
city officials underestimated the scale of opposition. They thought that the sentiment against merger was only shared by a fracture of county officials and they were overconfident that these officials would eventually acquiesce to higher authority. After all, the city government is one level above the county and by the virtue of their relative positions in the party-state’s hierarchy the county officials should have followed the order from the city.

c. The Demonstration

Several weeks after these meetings, the county officials were informed that the city officials would soon come down to the county and announce the merger publicly. While the city’s intention was never officially public, many county residents soon learned of it, which led them to post calls to action to county C citizens to resist. It is reasonable to assume that county C officials deliberatively leaked that information to the public after they found out their opposition did not work.

Attempts at offline resistance began with a request for a permit to demonstrate by a township branch of the county’s business association. The request to the county’s public security bureau alleged that “the merger would seriously undermine the interests of the county C people and the local business… After collective discussions among the members, [we] request permission to hold a demonstration with 150 anticipated participants in the square in front of the county government.” In line with the policy of all Chinese government agencies, the county’s public security bureau declined the request, but the county’s business association would continue to show leadership in the ensuing public response.

The demonstration went ahead at the proposed date without the permit, and far exceeded the number in the application. Only a few of the at least 1,000 protesters were members of the business association. The business association distributed T-shirts and banners with printed slogans on the spot. The T-shirts worn by some protestors declared “I love county C.” Banners read “County C belongs to the people of County C,” “County C has over a thousand year of history, it could not become a district over night!,” and “The half million County C people must not be the conquered people!” Some participants held a piece of large white cloth and asked people passing by to sign it, indicating their support for the protest. County residents live broadcasted the event on the social media, and there is a post contained a picture of the poster’s small child wearing the “I love county C” shirt.
Other signs of protest appeared in public in the form of stickers on cars. A foreign media outlet ran a photograph of such a sticker that stated, “County C people thank those who contributed to the development of our county, and will remember as criminals those who turn our county into a district.” A sticker on a taxi stated that the county police would fine anyone who did not have a sticker opposing the merger. A local hotel’s outdoor LED screen stopped displaying room rates in order to display a slogan opposing the merger.

d. The Response of the County Officials

The county government’s refusal of a permit aligned with party policy, as did the county’s other actions: deploying police forces to manage the crowd when the demonstrations took place, but not taking any drastic measures that would further provoke public anger, and keeping their superiors in city H informed about the situation.

Yet in addition to these standard responses, the officials demonstrated an unusual degree of tolerance. While they are cautious about suppressing protests once they have begun, local-level Chinese government officials often take measures to prevent them, but they did not in this case. The permit request had notified the county of the intent to hold the demonstration, and the police could have preemptively contained the organizers. But they did not. The protestors showed up on the exact date as in their application. The business association made T-shirts and banners ahead of time and distributed them on the spot, suggesting the organizers were able to prepare without police obstruction. The police also tolerated protestors’ behavior such as entering the gate of the government compound and hanging banners with anti-merger slogans on the glass door of the government building in the course of the demonstration. A local resident who attended described the police as “gentle,” concluding “they were with us.”

Some officials participated in oppositional activities. Several officials from the county fiscal bureau and commerce bureau—the two bureaus the merger would most limit—were among the protesters in front of the county building. Over 200 retired county cadres also wrote letters to the county leaders voicing their opposition regarding the merger. On the same day, leaders of the local townships and industrial parks signed a petition letter threatening to resign altogether if the city government did not retract the decision. In the letter, these local leaders said that their
resistance (to preserve county independence) “will and must be supported by the half million county residents.” They seemed to be fully aware that their action would be echoed by citizen mobilization.

It seems obvious that the police and the local officials had the support of county leadership or they would not have taken this risk. Perhaps nothing summarizes the intricate position of the county better than the words of a county C’s party standing committee member, who told me that the county government supported the people who were “the front stage” from “the backstage.” Ample evidence suggests that officials tolerated the mild instability that the demonstration created.

e. The Outcome of the County’s Resistance

As the demonstration unfolded, the county officials quickly reported the situation to the city and waited for their directives. Hours after people gathered in the government square, the county’s deputy party secretary walked out of the government building and spoke to the crowd. He told them that the city’s and county’s governments and party committees had “carefully considered” the merits of turning county C into a district and concluded it was premature. “Thanks, everyone, for supporting county C. Many thanks!” The crowd cheered and quickly dissipated.

No formal sanctions punished county officials for working against their superiors. Here the cadre evaluation system worked in their favor, because the impetus for the unrest was the city’s interest in merging the county, and they had monitored, contained, and reported during the protest, as the swift joint response in making the announcement suggests. The protest had ended peacefully after the announcement, in contrast to a 2005 incident that led to the removal of several high-level county officials in Daye, where the Huangshi prefecture-level city sought to turn the county into a district. Protesters besieged the city government building and destroyed government property in that case, but county C officials avoided this outcome.

The provincial authority treated the county officials who stood with the protesters, as voluntary individual actions instead of a concerted scheme by the bureaus they represented. The provincial authority sent an informal warning in the form of an investigation team to have one-on-one meetings (约谈 yuetan) with those township leaders who signed the petition against the merger, but did not enact further sanction.
4. Consent Instability in the Broader Context

a. Consent Instability in Various Issue Areas

The details of the county C incident allow us to deduce the conditions under which consent instability takes place. It is triggered by upper-level decisions that put weak agencies in a disadvantageous position. Local citizens voice their dissatisfaction against such decisions, which empowers local officials at the bargaining table. Such conditions—which rely crucially on the preference congruence between local officials and citizenry—can appear in various issue areas and across different parts of the country.

In addition to county C in 2013, I am aware of four other cases where administrative redistricting led to consent instability. National media reported the Daye incident in Hubei in 2005, and the Longnan incident in Gansu in 2008. In both cases, thousands of residents protested the disempowerment or planned disempowerment of local government. Investigations conducted later reveal local officials’ involvement in these events. In interviews, a professor at Zhejiang University told me that Huangyan county officials opposed its conversion into a district in 1994. Most of the delegates of the Local People’s Congress were entrepreneurs, and they opposed the merger for economic reasons. After the city government forced the conversion, they refused to perform their duties. In another case, retired cadres mobilized, unsuccessfully, against the redistricting of Shaoxing’s two counties in 2013.

The construction of high-speed railway stations is another issue area in which local officials have invoked local popular pressure to demand preferential consideration. In recent years, protesters have demanded local stations in the planned high-speed railway routes in at least a dozen small localities where local officials do not have the leverage to demand a station. Chinese media term such mobilizations “high-speed railway social movements” (高鐵社會運動 gaotie sheyun). As in county C’s aversion of the merger, local officials have tolerated or even encouraged protesters and many of these movements have had success.

b. The Role of Intermediaries

Like in county C, local business owners played an active role in many of these events elsewhere. For example, in 2015, a local business association in Jingzhou, Hubei organized a rally and collected more than 10,000
signatures from local citizens, advocating the construction of a local station along the proposed Wuhan-Chengdu high-speed railway. When interviewed by a newspaper, the organizer emphasized that the business association “is a legal nonprofit organization founded under the permission of Jingzhou civil affairs bureau.” Local businesspeople (mine owners) also played a pivotal role in mobilizing the protestors in the Daye incident.

The frequent presence of local business organizations might help explain why local governments were able to remain largely invisible in these events. Local business in China are highly dependent on the state, and businesspeople form close ties with local officials to survive and flourish. It is reasonable to hypothesize that in these events business associations serve as the crucial interlocutor between the state and the citizens. The state green-lit the mobilization from the backstage, and the business associations mobilized the people in public. Because the local state never publicly organized the protest by itself, they were able to (in most cases) avoid being identified and sanctioned by their superiors.

c. The Risk of Consent Instability

A legitimate concern is how do local officials control the power of the masses once they unleash them, and what will happen if protestors get out of control. Yet the use of mass mobilization as a bargaining tool depends on some risk of instability. If a protest appears perfectly controllable or staged, then its messages are likely dismissed as “cheap talks.” Despite being genuine and spontaneous, consent instability is relatively easy for local governments to control. First of all, the appeals of the citizens are localist (e.g., opposing redistricting, demanding a high-speed railway station) and do not pertain to individual grievances or official misconduct. Such localist appeals are unlikely to garner much popular support beyond the locality. Consequently, the potential protesters are limited to the people in the locale.

Second, as shown in the case of county C, the local government is aware of the mobilization ahead of time, and thus can make preparation (e.g., dispatching police) to prevent the situation from going out of control. In those few cases in which protesters began to attack government building or damage property (such as in Daye and Linshui), the local public security forces quickly stepped in and dispersed the crowds. The ease with which they have done so reveals that lack of repressive
capability is not the reason these mobilizations take place. Rather, repressive capability gives local officials the confidence to take a risk, expecting they can control the protests that they tacitly permit or support.

Finally, as shown in earlier discussions, there are intermediaries (such as local business associations) between local governments and protestors. These intermediaries give local government some leverage in influencing the crowd. When mine owners (i.e., intermediaries) in Daye tried to organize the protest, some of the people they paid to join the protest had criminal records (these were also the people who attacked the building). The mine owners lost control of these people and the protest ended in violence.

Whether the mobilization went out of control and became violent was a crucial criterion for whether officials involved would be punished by their superiors. As mentioned earlier, the state usually sanctions the party responsible for causing unrests. In these cases, the direct cause of contention, at least seen from outside, is the policy decisions by higher level authorities. Superiors thus lack good reasons to punish county officials. But if the mobilization turns violent, then the superiors can accuse local officials of failure in containing the situation. In Daye, the protest was accused of “causing severe political consequences,” and such accusation was not seen in other cases (including county C). The scale and violence made Daye incident a high-profile event and forced Hubei provincial government to conduct thorough investigation. When investigated, Daye officials were found to collude with organizers of the protest and were charged of plotting against party organization. In many other cases, the mild mobilization did not trigger thorough investigation from higher authority.

5. Assessing the Power of the Masses

Consent instability in county C led to policy change. The case study however does not provide satisfying answers to every question. For example, why did the city authority ignore the county officials’ opinion in the first place yet conceded when the protest took place? So far we have conjectured that city leaders do not want to be responsible for causing greater instability. Is this just the result of the idiosyncratic situation in city H, or does it reflect a broader, more systematic pattern? There are not many evidence on how things operate at the city level. Officials at higher levels are generally more difficult to approach.
To investigate whether this is a pattern that likely goes beyond the cases I know about, between December 2016 and May 2017 I conducted a survey experiment of 368 local officials. I recruited from the cadre training classes in the Master of Public Administration programs in two universities in Beijing.⁷³

a. The Respondents

By arrangement with the schools’ staff, only public officials participated in the survey. Table 1 describes the participants.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Subjects (N = 368)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male (1 = male, 0 = female)</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree or above (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>16.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of service in government (years)</td>
<td>18.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank at or above department chief (1 = yes)¹</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank at or above section chief (1 = yes)²</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank at or above deputy section chief (1 = yes)³</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold leadership position at work unit (單位 danwei) (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1. Positions at the rank of department chief (處級 chuji) include county executive, municipal bureau chief, and section chief in provincial bureaus.

2. Positions at the rank of section chief (科級 keji) include township executive, county bureau chief, and section chief in municipal bureaus.

3. Positions at the rank of deputy section chief (副科級 fu keji) include deputy township executive, deputy county bureau chief, and deputy section chief in municipal bureaus.

Of course, this is not a representative sample of Chinese local officials. It would be difficult to assemble such a sample because of the party’s political control. Therefore, in line with past research, this study employs rerandomization within the sample to test causal hypotheses.⁷⁴

Notwithstanding its limitations, the sample clearly has sufficient experience and knowledge of how local governments operate. More than 83 percent of participants have obtained the rank of deputy section chief or better, and over 60 percent report that they hold leadership positions at their work units, meaning they are cadres. The average work experience in the government is 18.77 years, much longer than the 10-year average in
the benchmark survey study of Chinese local officials the field. The subjects work in five provinces, including three coastal provinces and two inland provinces.

b. Survey Experiment Design

Officials are unlikely to admit to the dynamic of consent instability, even on an anonymous survey, which would signal regime weakness and suggest they themselves are a threat to the party-state. Thus I employ an endorsement experiment design.

The endorsement experiment design uses subtle cues to measure survey respondents’ support of statements or policies socially sensitive actors endorse, thus avoiding directly addressing sensitive political issues.75

Respondents were first divided into the control, treatment, and placebo groups. The control group read the following statement:

City A is under a tight budget this year. Mr. Wang, the party secretary of a district under the city, goes to the city’s fiscal bureau, asking for a special earmark for a reconfiguration project [形象整修工程 xingxiang zhengxiu gongcheng] of a main road in his district. If you were in charge of the city’s fiscal bureau, would you support the earmark?


The treatment group read the same statement, only it included, just before the concluding question, “Many of the local people have been strongly demanding the reconfiguration for a while due to the road’s poor condition.” The placebo group also read the same statement as the control group, only it included this sentence just before the concluding question: “Mr. Wang claims that many of the local people have been strongly demanding the reconfiguration for a while due to the road’s poor condition.” The objective of comparing the control group with the treatment group is to test whether public pressure has an impact. The objective of comparing the placebo group and the treatment group is to test whether a claim of public pressure has a different impact from actual public pressure. Since it is costless for Mr. Wang to fake the public pressure, his superiors may not believe him and it may not be a useful bargaining tool. The comparison between the treatment and the placebo scenarios could also ameliorate the concern that the observed treatment effect, if there is any, is purely driven by the revelation of citizens’ policy demands.
The wording of this hypothetical scenario does not reference merging districts or planning high-speed railway stations, even though the aforementioned cases involve these issues, because I expected to recruit city and county bureaucrats, who lack the power to influence such decisions. Such officials would have power over a special earmark, and using this scenario makes their responses more realistic and reliable.

c. Results

I first compare the control and treatment groups. In addition to the key variable that identifies a respondent’s group, I control for the enumerator fixed effect, as the survey questionnaires were distributed by different staff members in different classes. The results are presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Baseline Result: Comparing the Control and Treatment Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept (control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enumerator fixed effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The level of support in the control group, as reflected in the coefficient for the intercept, is about 2.94, suggesting moderate opposition. This result likely reflects the central government’s pressure on local government to cut back wasteful spending in “showcase” infrastructure projects. The language used in the survey—reconfiguration of a main road—suggests that the earmark could be used in such a project.

The coefficient for treatment group is 0.76, and is statistically significant (p < .001). This means that the inclusion of a statement that local citizens also strongly demand such an earmark shifts the level of support to 3.7 (2.94 + 0.76), an almost 26 percent increase from that of the control group. This result lends strong support to the claim that officials consider public pressure in determining their actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Comparing the Control and Placebo Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept (control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placebo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enumerator fixed effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I also compare the control with the placebo treatment, as shown in Table 3. The size of the coefficient for the placebo treatment is 0.32 and is significant at $p < .05$. I then run the analysis using the placebo group as the benchmark, and the difference between the placebo and treatment groups is also large (0.43) and significant at $p < .001$, as shown in Table 4. Thus the support for the earmark was stronger in the placebo group than in the control group but much weaker than in the treatment group. This is consistent with my hypothesis that real citizen demand has a stronger treatment effect than claimed citizen demand. Together, these results help illustrate why local officials need to risk social instability in order to have a strong bargaining tool.

Table 4: Comparing the Placebo and Treatment Groups

|                       | Estimate | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|)   |
|-----------------------|----------|------------|---------|------------|
| Intercept (placebo)   | 3.4643   | 0.1885     | 18.382  | <0.001***  |
| Treatment             | 0.4338   | 0.1284     | 3.377   | <0.001***  |
| Enumerator fixed effect | Yes      |            |         |            |

6. Concluding Remarks

This article studies local officials’ strategic use of instability in bureaucratic infighting. I develop a theory of “consent instability” in which mass mobilizations—with appeals that are congruent with officials’ agenda—could serve as powerful bargaining leverage for weak bureaucrats to extract policy concessions from above. The article examines the institutional environment that gives rise to such a strategy, uses a detailed case study to show how officials’ responses to a public protest deviate from the default mode of repression, and employs a survey experiment to assess the efficacy of public pressure in intra-bureaucratic bargaining.

This study contributes to the literature on the multifaceted nature of stability maintenance in China. While conventional wisdom suggests that the Chinese state prioritizes stability and spares no effort in preventing social movements, recent studies suggest a more nuanced picture. Local states in China enjoy considerable autonomy, and differ in their strategies addressing sources of social instability. Through interviews with local officials in Beijing and Shenzhen, Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang find that grassroots officials and aggrieved citizens
surprisingly “share a common interest in sustaining a certain level of instability,” because “the existence of instability justifies demands for an augmented budget for the departments and personnel involved in preserving stability.” Similarly, Lianjiang Li and Mingxing Liu find that local bureaucrats and business elites collude in mobilizing protests to protect their own interests. Jessica Weiss argues that the Chinese authority tolerates and capitalizes on nationalistic protests to generate bargaining power in international diplomatic negotiations. This study adds to this line of research by showing that local officials can benefit from the presence of protests in intra-bureaucratic policy bargain and therefore have the incentive to tolerate citizen mobilization with congruent demand. These findings suggest that public displays of discontent are not always ominous for officials, and officials sometimes use (or even manipulate) such events to their advantage.

The finding of the article is also consistent with the notion that the Chinese state is far from monolithic. Instead, it is a segmented, multilayered system with actors of different interests competing for influence, and these actors occasionally seek allies within or outside the state against their shared enemy. While a large body of literature suggests that the multilayered, decentralized system provides incentives for economic growth, this article shows that such a system also breeds intergovernmental conflict and popular contention. The tension stems from the paradox of economic decentralization coupled with political centralization. Local states, which enjoy considerable policy autonomy in their jurisdiction, routinely confront attempts of top-down political control and develop various strategies of resistance to preserve their autonomy.

Finally, this study contributes to the comparative literature of authoritarianism by highlighting an elite–mass linkage in authoritarian politics. While students of dictatorships increasingly recognize that elites have greater influence than the masses in authoritarian political processes, many scholars have importantly noticed that bottom-up citizen mobilizations, when they come at the right time and in the right forms, might empower authoritarian elites in unanticipated ways. The argument developed in this study echoes this logic, and offers rich evidence on how Chinese local officials exploit public pressure to extract policy benefits from their more powerful counterparts within the regime. The question of how the masses might change the landscape of Chinese elite politics at various levels is a promising area for future research.
Notes

1. As I draw intensively from interviews with local officials, to protect the safety of these informants and also to comply with institutional requirement involving human subjects, I have removed all potential identifiers that could reveal the true identity of the informants. This includes specific names, positions, locations, and exact dates of the incidents.


4. For earlier work on how state and society mutually empower one and another, see Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); for recent work on how social pressures shape elite interactions, see, for example, Dan Slater, Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

5. For case studies of official-activist collusion, see Lianjiang Li and Mingxing Liu, “Lisheng gongmou” (Official-Elites Collusion), Er-Shiyi Shiji (Twenty-First Century), No. 5 (2016), pp. 57–67.


9. For examples of intergovernmental disputes between higher and lower levels, see Yanlong Zhang. “Caizheng fenquan yu shengyixia zhengfujian guanxi de yanbian—dui 20 shiji 80 niandai A sheng caizheng tizhi gaigezhong zhengfujian guanxibianqian de geanyanjiu” (Fiscal Decentralization and the


11 This logic is also consistent with the sequence of bargaining generalized by Xueguang Zhou and Hong Lian, who argue that intergovernmental bargaining often starts with formal communication among bureaucratic units, followed by altering the offer in an informal context. See Zhou and Lian, “Zhengfujian shangxiaji bumenjian tanpan de yige fenximoxing.”


18 For example, Lee and Zhang note that the implementation of the one-veto rule leaves ample space for discretion at the grassroots. In many cases, grassroots officials are able to dodge sanctions through proper improvisations. See Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, “The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China,”
Similar views were also expressed during my interviews with local officials in social stability maintenance unit. Interview 22, deputy director of letter visit office of a coastal district, 20 October 2015; Interview 43, deputy director of letter visit office of a coastal district, 24 December 2015.


For example, Li and Zhou, “Political turnover and economic performance.”


One of my interviewees, who works in a local social stability maintenance unit, commented on the political use of the “one-veto rule” as follows: “This is very complicated. If you are in good relation with ‘the above’ (superior), you are fine. If ‘the above’ is looking after you, this (the ‘one veto rule’) becomes a good excuse to punish you. You know, this is something of Chinese characteristics.” Interview 24, staff member at politics and law commission of the capital of a coastal province, 22 October 2015.

As in most cities in China, the city leaders hold the rank of bureau chief (ting ji), and the county leaders hold the rank of department chief (chu ji), which is two ranks below the city leader.

The size of county C’s land use-right transfer fee is about half the size of the formal revenue. Interview 36, deputy director of the county fiscal bureau and Interview 37, section chief of the county land bureau, 13 November 2015.

Interview 37, section chief of the county land bureau, 13 November 2015.

Interview 33, director of the county policy research office, 13 November 2015.

Interview 34, deputy director of the county development and reform bureau, 13 November 2015.
Interview 38, deputy director of the county commerce bureau, 13 November 2015.

Interview 30, member of the county party standing committee, 13 November 2015; Interview 32, secretary to the county executive, 13 November 2015.

Interview 1, local resident 1, 24 June 2015; Interview 7, local resident 2, 18 August 2015; Interview 26, local resident 3, 12 November 2015; Interview 27, local resident 4, 12 November 2015; Interview 28, local resident 4, 13 November 2015; Interview 29, local resident 5, 13 November 2015.

Interview 38, deputy director of the county commerce bureau, 13 November 2015.

Interview 31, local resident 6, 13 November 2015.

This number might underestimate the citizens’ online participation, as the incident took place three years before I conducted the search and many posts had been deleted. Because county C’s name appears in these posts, to protect informants’ identity, I do not include links to these posts.

Interview 32, secretary to the county executive, 13 November 2015; Interview 34, deputy director of county reform and development commission, 13 November 2015.

Ibid.

This section mainly relies on the coverage of the incident by a major commercial newspaper in China. Because the name of the county was mentioned in the news report, to protect the identity of the informants, I do not include the title of the report, and later refer to the report as “Report 1.”

The author acquired a copy of the letter online.

Report 1 stated there were “several thousand.” Online posters claimed there were over ten thousand participants, but this seems unlikely.

I changed the number of people to protect the county’s identity.

Some overseas media outlets covered the demonstration with photos from the scene. To protect the identity of the informants, I refer to these reports, which I accessed on a foreign website, as “Report 2.”

Ibid.

Report 2.

Ibid.

The photo was uploaded to a Baidu Tieba post.

For example, Yan, “Patrolling Harmony.”

Interview 7, local resident 2, 18 August 2015.

Report 1.

Ibid.

Ibid.; the author also acquired a photocopy of the signed letter online.

Ibid.

Interview 30, member of the county party standing committee, 13 November 2015.
The Power of the Masses in China’s Local Elite Bargain

57 Report 1.
59 Interview 30, member of the county party standing committee, 13 November 2015.
62 Interview 18, professor of public administration at Zhejiang University, 20 August 2015.
63 Ibid.
65 Take the Linshui incident as an example, Sichuan provincial government hastily announced that the route of the high-speed railway in question—Dayu Railroad—was not finalized and will be subject to further review following the protest.
68 Kellee S. Tsai, Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Bruce J. Dickson,

Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling,” p. 3


To protect the identity of the respondents as well as the school officials who helped implement the survey, I do not disclose the names of the schools.


Lee and Zhang, “Power of Instability,” p. 1493.

Li and Liu, “Lishen gongmou.”


Mertha, “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0.”
The Power of the Masses in China’s Local Elite Bargain


87 Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.