

Local Governments and Policy Responses:  
The Case of Shifang Protest

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

Most research on Chinese protests' outcomes focuses on aspects such as the strength, resources, and strategy choices of these protests. Although studies on Chinese contentious politics have taken great consideration of the significant role played by the state in the political process, little attention has been paid to the state itself which is actually the provider of "political opportunity". With a state-centered perspective, this thesis examines how elite division within the authority shapes the Chinese local governments' policy responses to popular protests. Based on a case of protest in Shifang, an environmental protest targeting the Shifang local government on its construction of a chemical plant, this study shows an elite division between the Shifang local government and the police force who were dispatched to Shifang to maintain stability by its vertical professional leadership and how this division has contributed to a successful policy outcome of this protest. To further understand the Shifang case in a larger institutional background of China's modern political climate, this chapter provides a possible explanation that the elite division in the Shifang case is an embodiment of the structural division between Chinese local governments and the stability maintenance system which has grown into a powerful interests group as a result of the policy priority of maintaining rigid social stability in the last decade.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

It is almost a consensus among scholars of Chinese contentious politics that despite the increasing number of popular protests in present day China, these protests are far from revolutionary turmoil. According to the observers, popular protests in China are mostly “trouble making” tactics which remain submissive to the authority as a mode of political participation,<sup>1</sup> and some also contend that popular protests have been normalized to a certain extent by the adaptive Chinese government in recent decades<sup>2</sup>. When examining the attributes of Chinese protests, Xi Chen demonstrates that “National leaders shun meaningful democratic reform but seem to believe that ‘facilitating’ and even ‘routinizing’ social protests help maintain stability”<sup>3</sup>, while at the same time “Chinese citizens have exploited the opportunities created by the evolution of government structures in recent decades.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, Perry also concludes that the contemporary patterns of protests in China are more system-supportive than system-subversive.<sup>5</sup>

Agreeing with this judgment on Chinese contemporary protests, nevertheless, Chinese citizens who stage resistance are still in a weak legal position as their actions often violate the law or government regulations.<sup>6</sup> Thus, given the sensitive nature of authoritarian regime towards social resistance, staging protests in China is by no means a safe or interesting task

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<sup>1</sup> Xi Chen (2012 ). “Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China”, New York: Cambridge University Press. P15

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Mertha (2009), “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0”: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 200 (December 2009), pp. 995-1012. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009990592>

<sup>3</sup> Xi Chen (2012 ). “Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China”, New York: Cambridge University Press.p8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Perry (2008), “Permanent rebellion? Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Protest”, Kevin J. O’Brien, “Popular Protest in China”, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Yongshun Cai (2008). “Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China”, *The China Quarterly*, Vol.193, pp. 24-42 , doi:10.1017/S0305741008000027

since the response of Chinese government towards any specific protest is still unpredictable and conditional.<sup>7</sup> On one hand, it seems Chinese governments are more likely to tolerate or make concession to some of the protests in recent years. For example, almost all anti-PX protests<sup>8</sup> in recent years, such as Xiamen, Ningbo, and Chengdu anti-PX protests, promptly received rather positive policy responses from local governments. This phenomenon seems to deliver a message to the public that the most effective way to resolve their grievance is to stage protests and bargain with the government. “A major fuss for a major settlement, a small fuss for a small settlement, no fuss no settlement”, this Chinese proverb is always used by Chinese citizens to describe the attitude of governments when dealing with popular protests. As a consequence, the threshold of public resistance is becoming lower in recent years.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there is no doubt that the modern authoritarianism still has robust tools to suppress dissent<sup>10</sup>. In some occasions, the governments severely punished or suppressed the participants without considering their demands even in some non-regime-threatening cases. So, what is the rationale behind Chinese governments’ response towards popular protests? And what factors will contribute to the governments’ inclination to make positive policy adjustment?

So far, most research on Chinese governments’ policy responses are focusing on aspects such as the strength, resources, strategy choices of these protests, and specific social groups

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<sup>7</sup> Yongshun Cai (2008). “Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China”, *The China Quarterly*, Vol.193, pp. 24-42 , doi:10.1017/S0305741008000027

<sup>8</sup> “PX” refers to P-Xylene, which is an aromatic hydrocarbon based on benzene with two methyl substituents with the chemical formula C<sub>8</sub>H<sub>10</sub> or C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub>(CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>. Overexposure of p-xylene in humans can cause headache, fatigue, dizziness, listlessness, confusion, irritability, gastrointestinal disturbances including nausea and loss of appetite, flushing of the face, and a feeling of increased body heat.

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Dingxin, “Will Revolution Happen in Today’s China?”, *21 Century Review*, 134, Dec 2012 p 4-16

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “Prologue: The New Contentious Politics in China: Poor and Blank or rich and Complex”, in Kevin J. O’Brien (ed.), “Popular Protest in China”, (Harvard University Press, 2008), p 10



which are more effective on influencing governments' policy-making process. All these works shed important light on the study of protests' outcomes or policy responses in contemporary China. Also, these scholars have taken great consideration of the significant role played by the state in the political process. However, to date, little attention has been paid to the state itself which is actually the provider of "political opportunity" in this process. There is still lack of sufficient work focusing on internal factors within the state which have contributed to the government's preference to make policy responses.

Without denying the importance of the strength and strategy for a particular protest to achieve its goal, by examining a specific case of Shifang protest, this article demonstrates that under a certain circumstance, the positive policy response rests on the elite division within the authority and the role played by Chinese local governments who sometimes prefer to fulfill their responsibility to citizens as a reaction to the pressure of the elite division. In Shifang case, the protestors who demanded cancelling a chemical refinery plant were fiercely suppressed by police promptly after it took place. Soon after the suppression, a number of bloody images and videos started to spread on the internet and "Shifang Protest" became the key words of Chinese Microblog (Weibo). Moreover, this protest had also caused criticism towards Shifang local government from the central government. However, in contrast to the behavior of the police, Shifang local government showed an abnormally benign attitude towards the protestors in this process and made concessions by gradually changing their policy and in the end promised to give up the plant forever.

By comparing different attitudes and behaviors of different actors in Shifang case, I contend that there is an elite division between the police department and Shifang local

government. This elite division led to the final positive policy response from the Shifang local government. This thesis proposes to do a signal case study and the Shifang protest is selected because it is a “tough” case which is almost unlikely to achieve positive policy response in light of the existing literature which assess the possibility of a protest to achieve success by its participants, resources, leverages, social networks, and strategies. All these factors and alternative explanations will be examined in Chapter three.

To understand the Shifang protest in a larger social and political environment and to analyze the elite division from the structural level of China’s present political condition, this thesis further explains the elite division in the Shifang case as a result of the Chinese central government’s policy priority in the term of President Hu Jintao. In the last decade, especially from the second term of Hu, rigid maintenance of social stability became the top concern of Chinese central government and a complete “stability maintenance” system was established covering all institutional levels of Chinese government. With great amount of financial expenditure and excessive power of using violence and political resources, the “stability maintenance” system became a powerful interest group comprised of a range of government agencies with a large population of its members from central to local levels. Under this circumstance, local government leaders were seriously devoted to maintain social stability by cooperating with the “stability maintenance” agencies for their common interest. There is no doubt that Chinese local government also gained great benefits from this policy orientation, such as the increase of local GDP and personal goods of government officials by using the excessive power of violating citizens’ rights and suppress public resistance.

There are two mechanisms which led to the division between the stability maintenance

system and local government leaders. 1) As the number of popular protests increased rapidly in recent years, Chinese local governments were exhausted by the financial burden of maintaining social stability by suppression and supervision. 2) As the performance in maintaining social stability became the top concern for assessing cadres, local government leaders face great pressure from upper level. However, the “stability maintenance” agency use violence towards popular protest to exaggerate social conflicts and thus maintaining their power. In addition, with the wide use of internet and the developing rights consciousness among citizens, it becomes hard to maintain social stability by suppression.

There is an ambiguous nature of Chinese local government and in this thesis I define this ambiguous nature of the local government as “amphibiousness”. The term of “Amphibiousness” is first used by X. L. Ding to describe the organizations between state and civil society and extended by Xi Chen in studying formal institutional agencies. This thesis further applies this term to describe the characteristics of Chinese local government. On one hand, Chinese local government makes profit from depriving ordinary citizens. On the other hand, it is responsible for local management. Thus, when cooperating with the “stability maintenance” agency to deprive citizens leads to a miserable situation for local government leaders, it becomes a rational choice for them to please the citizens by satisfying their requirements.

This study intended to provide a possible explanation for the policy outcome of Chinese popular protest. However, it is always risky to summarize from a single case. Answers provided in this research give rise to hypothesis that must wait for future testing.

## **Organization of this Thesis**

The following chapters investigate the causal relationship between elite division and government's policy response by undertaking close scrutiny of the Shifang Protest, which took place in Sichuan Province, 2012.

Chapter two aims to locate this research in the existing literature and to explain relevant concepts in this study. Focusing on the outcome aspect of Chinese popular protests, this chapter narrows the concept of "outcome" down to the specific policy adjustment demanded by protestors in this specific case, in order to avoid overestimating the impact of the independent variable. Several available approaches were examined in this chapter and I use a "Political Opportunity Structure Model" as the underlying theory of this research. This chapter exposes a lack of sufficient work on the internal factors within the state actor and places great emphasis on the influence of the elite division between the police department and local government on the policy outcome of the Shifang protest.

Chapter three turns to the case study of the Shifang protest, which took place in Sichuan Province in 2012. In this chapter, I first make a thorough description of the background of this incident and the interaction between different actors in the process. This chapter demonstrates the existence of the elite division between the police department and Shifang local government and analyzes how this particular division led to a positive policy adjustment by exerting pressure on Shifang local government. Moreover, this chapter also discusses alternative explanations which also seem plausible to interpret this case.

Chapter four discusses the case from the structural level of China's political condition and its policy evolution. This chapter demonstrates the development of China's "Stability

Maintenance” system in the past decade and illustrates the mechanisms leading to a division of Chinese local government from cooperating with the “Stability Maintenance” agencies. Besides exposing the non-monolithic nature of the Chinese government, this research also challenges the conventional wisdom that the state’s response to popular protests only comes from the tension between the state and the civil society. In contrast, from the perspective of this study, the state is struggling with both the intense pressure from inside and outside the regime.

As a conclusion, chapter five demonstrates that the policy responses of Chinese local government to popular protests reflect both its struggle with internal tension and its compromise to the increasing number of social resistance. However, whether this elite division exists widely in other cases or whether it will have stable impact on Chinese contentious politics still awaits further study.

## Chapter II: Concepts and Literature Review

Research on social movements and popular protests has usually addressed issues of emergence, mobilization, and outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the dimension of protest outcomes and policy responses, this chapter first clarifies several relevant concepts used in this research, such as, “outcome”, “settlement”, and “policy adjustment”. By distinguishing these concepts, this research aims to examine the policy response dimension of protest outcomes in order to avoid overestimating the impact of the independent variable. Second, this chapter displays several approaches which have been used to study policy response and explains the necessity of using a political opportunity structure approach in the study of the Shifang protest. As the state actor is regarded as an independent variable in this study, this chapter takes a thorough examination of dimensions of “state” and “political opportunity” to avoid concept stretching. Third, although the political opportunity structure model is widely used in studying Chinese contentious politics, this chapter exposes the lack of sufficient work which focusing on the internal factors of the state actor with a state-centered perspective. Regarding the elite division as an independent variable, this study proposes to analyze the “political opportunity” in the Shifang case from both the perspective of the contingent opportunity in the particular case and the stable political structure of present-day China. Fourth, this chapter also displays existing theoretical framework on studying the policy-making mechanism of China and demonstrates the characteristics and action logic which shapes the policy preference of Chinese local government.

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<sup>11</sup> Macro G. Giugni (1998). Was It Worth the Effort? The Outcomes and Consequences of Social Movements, *Annual Reviews*, Vol. 24 (1998), pp. 371-393.

## 2.1 Explaining Protest Outcomes and Policy Responses

If we devote ourselves to study the outcomes of social movements and popular protests, what are the specific dimensions of a particular outcome should be examined? Is it possible to make a judgment on whether a protest is successful or has failed? Of course the main goal of popular protests is to bring changes; sometimes however, the ultimate outcomes of protests are even unintended by these protestors themselves. That is mainly because outcomes of popular protests can take different forms in a single case: not only concerning the fate of the challenging groups, but also influencing other aspects of the society by changing government's policy preference, shifting public attention, or even providing new ideologies. Gamson divides the outcomes of social movements and protests into two categories, "one concerned with the fate of the challenging group as an organization and one with the distribution of new advantages to the group's benefit."<sup>12</sup> In studying democracy movements in Eastern Europe, Giugni also suggests that, besides the political and policy outcomes of social movements, broader culture and institutional effects should also be taken into consideration.<sup>13</sup>

In this study, as for research of protest outcomes of present-day China, is it the same as what it is like in Western countries or it should be measured differently in the Chinese political context? Although existing literature on democratic countries does shed important light on the study of Chinese popular protests outcomes, it is by no means a casual task to assess the protest outcomes in present day China. Popular protests in post-Mao China can be

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<sup>12</sup> Gamson, W. (1990). *The strategy of social protest* (2nd ed., p. 28), Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

<sup>13</sup> Macro G. Giugni (1998). Was It Worth the Effort? The Outcomes and Consequences of Social Movements, *Annual Reviews*, Vol. 24 (1998), pp. 371-393.

divided into different phases. The first phase is between 1976 and 1989, in this period, a considerable number of large-scale protests happened as a result of the tragic policies of Mao's era. After 1989 Beijing student movements, as a consequence of social changes brought by market-oriented economic reform, new emerging popular protests mainly focus on economic issues.<sup>14</sup> Although Zhao Dingxin further divides protests after 1989 into two phases by their degree of populist tendency, most of these protests have common characteristics, such as aiming at economic issues, targeting local governments, and being limited in time, space, and scope. Thus, we regard these protests emerged after 1990s as a new noticeable phenomenon in Chinese society. Under this circumstance, there has not get been enough time to examine the enduring impact of these protests currently. Moreover, as there are hardly any influential protests which can be compared with the 1989 student movement or the democracy movements in Eastern Europe; it is difficult for us to observe the cultural or institutional influence of a single case. Thus, most research on protest outcomes in China actually focus on the government's settlements of the protests rather than these protests' indirect outcomes.

Even ignoring the difficulties discussed above on measuring the cultural and institutional dimension of Chinese protest outcomes, it is always a reasonable and effective approach to explain Chinese protest outcomes by focusing on the role played by the state. Unlike modern western social movements which are mostly peaceful and issue-oriented, which are sometimes even too institutionalized to be called social movements<sup>15</sup>, Chinese

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<sup>14</sup> Dingxin Zhao (2011). Book Review, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Poplular Protests Succeed or Fail*. *Contemporary Sociology, A Journal of Reviews*. vol.40. no. 2 (March 2011). pp. 161-162.

<sup>15</sup> Donatella Della Porta (1995). *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative analysis of Italy and Germany*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p1



popular protests are still in weak legal status and their outcomes still highly depend on the governments' reaction. Since suppression is still one of the important modes used by Chinese local government to deal with popular protests, Cai Yongshun examines the rationale of Chinese local government of using suppression with a study of 66 cases. In this research, Cai suggests that "Suppression becomes the option when concessions are difficult to make and citizen resistance threatens social stability, policy implementation or local officials' image"<sup>16</sup>. Besides using suppression as a settlement of popular protests, Chinese government also make concessions to the resistance or use a combination of both suppression and concession.<sup>17</sup>

Concessions made by the government can be understood as completely or partially meeting the protestors' demands. Although economic compensation used to appease the protestors can also be regarded as concession, meaningful concession is mainly embodied in government's policy adjustment. Policy adjustment can be defined as, "the revision or abolition of policies that have directly caused or failed to address citizens' grievance, as well as the creation of new policies to address the problems that have triggered resistance or to accommodate protester's demand."<sup>18</sup> In terms of the level of policy adjustment, it is not difficult to understand that cancelling a specific plant in a community is not as meaningful and outstanding as a policy response such as establishing an institutional public hearing channel. Generally speaking, a meaningful policy adjustment such as establishing new institutions cannot be ascribed to the specific contribution of one protest. A deliberate change of policy preference always comes from long-existing social conflicts and constant

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<sup>16</sup> Yongshun Cai (2008). Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China. *The China Quarterly*, Vol.193, pp. 24-42 . doi:10.1017/S0305741008000027

<sup>17</sup> Yongshun Cai (2010). *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. p 7

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.13

requirements for a sustainable resolution. Hence, while a prominent policy response is always the goal of participants in a collective action, it is risky for an observer to overestimate the effectiveness of a single case. Thus, to clearly identify the causal mechanism between elite division as an independent variable and policy response as a dependent variable, this study exclusively focuses on the specific policy adjustment made by the government as a response to the specific protest. And in the study of Shifang case, policy response can be defined as the gradual concession made by the Shifang government to cancel the policy of constructing the Hongda refinery plant.

Conventional research always regards suppression and concession as two alternative options selected by a same subject, however in this study, I suggest that different bureaucratic actors that may have different option preference. And as a consequence, their division may influence the final policy outcome of the protests.

## **2.2 Theoretical Approaches to Study Chinese Protest Outcomes**

It is not a long history since the role of the state was brought into the scope of studying social movements and protests, although it seems nothing unusual for the students of contentious politics today. In this section, we will talk about four main approaches to analyze social movements and protests, and all these approaches have been used to explain Chinese social resistance in the present day.

### **A Grievance-based Approach**

Protests and social movements were first regarded as grievance-based, emotional and

irrational collective action from the perspective of psychology before the wave of social movements in Western Countries in 1960s. Although the study of contentious politics today sees social resistance as collective action more than a result of a social or economic structure after the emergence of resource mobilization theory, grievance-based explanations can also be used to demonstrate the origin of particular social resistance or motivation of special social groups. However, this approach mainly focuses on analyzing the reasons which may cause the potential impulse of people to stage resistance, but is incapable of explaining the outcome of a certain collective action.

### **The Resource Mobilization Theory**

With the emergence of social movements in western countries struggling for minority' rights, such as student, Afro-American and women's movements, people started to change their bad impression towards social movements which is regarded irrational in the past. Resource mobilization theory, which stresses on the value of increasing resources, social networks and organization in the development of a social movement, became dominant at that time. However, this approach is not as widely used by Chinese scholars as other theories since most Chinese social resistance has weak organizational bases. Mature social organization and effective social networks are both scarce resources in present Chinese political climate. Even so, there are still some noticeable works focusing on the organizational aspect of particular groups, such as farmers and students. In the study of rural resistance in contemporary China, Yu Jianrong demonstrates the existence of rural resistance organizations and social networks which have been established by rural elites. Different knots

within the network are coordinated by a stable rural elite committee and they cooperate with each other to mobilize protests with legal methods.<sup>19</sup> Also, when examining the 1989 Beijing students' movement, Zhao Dingxin also emphasizes the function of students' dormitories as the organizational base of this particular movement. Despite focusing on the mobilization aspect of the student movement, Zhao also demonstrates how the state actor shaped the mobilizing structure and the cultured framing strategy during this movement.<sup>20</sup> Thus, according to Zhao, both the state actor and the state-society relationship play a significant role in shaping Chinese contentious politics, even in the organizational and the cultural dimensions.

### **The Political Opportunity Structure Model**

In accordance with the opinion of Zhao, most Chinese scholars today have embraced the model of "political opportunity structure" which stresses on the role of the state actor in analyzing Chinese popular protests. However, before the political opportunity structure model became a dominant theory in western countries, there was a long period when "sociologists discuss social movements without assessing their relationship with institutionalized political processes, while the political scientists have traditionally conceptualized power almost exclusively in institutional terms"<sup>21</sup>. To bridge the gap between social movement study and political institutions, Tilly and McAdam outlined an alternative "political process" model of social movement. This model claims that the emergence of

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<sup>19</sup> Yu Jianrong(2004), "An explanation of Chinese rural social resistance", *Sociology Study*, 2, 49-55.

<sup>20</sup> Zhao, D. (2000), "State-society relations and the discourses and activities of the 1989 Beijing student movement", *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(6), 1592-1632.

<sup>21</sup> Doug McAdam, "Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970", (The University of Chicago Press) p 2

widespread protest activities is the result of both the expanding political opportunities and the development of indigenous organizations in modern societies. The concept of political opportunity was developed by Tarrow in the book “Power in movement: social movements and contentious politics”, which is regarded as a textbook of the “political opportunity structure” model. In Tarrow’s model, political opportunity can be understood as the possibility provided by the state for social movements to set their agendas and influence politics. With the development of this theoretical model, it is widely accepted and used by Chinese scholars as it is hard not to consider the influence of the state when examining social resistance within an authoritarian regime.

To define the concept of “political opportunity structure”, Tarrow specified it into two levels: temporary or short-term changes in opportunity and the stable aspects of opportunity structure that condition movement formation and strategy.<sup>22</sup> However, the concept of political opportunity is always criticized as too broad and there is no clear border to distinguish what is political opportunity and what is not. Tarrow also admitted that this model is a group of variables rather than a single one.<sup>23</sup> To clarify the concept of “political opportunity” by delimiting the boundary “state”, Huang Dongya breaks down the concept of the role of “State” into three categories, 1) stable political structure, such as the nature and the basic institution of the state; 2) relatively stable political environment, such as the ability of the regime to instill its idea to the society and the strategy of the state to deal with popular protests in a particular period; 3) flexible political background, such as the closing or opening of the regime, elite division, unstable political alliance, the capability of policy implement, and so

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<sup>22</sup> Sidney Tarrow (1994). “Power in Movement.” New York: Cambridge University Press, p.89

<sup>23</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “‘Aiming at a Moving Target’: Social Science and the Recent Rebellions in Eastern Europe.” *Political science and Politics* 24 (1)

on.<sup>24</sup> This conceptualization of “state” provides a clearer understanding of the roles of the state actor in the study of contentious politics.

### **Strategic Framing of Popular Protests**

There are also existing literatures focusing on the strategic framing dimension of Chinese popular protests. This approach is also widely used to analyze the protest outcomes and policy responses. With a sample of 266 cases of grassroots collective action, Cai Yongshun examines the outcomes of Chinese popular protests with a “cost-benefit calculation” model. In his book, Cai summarizes his findings as: “The resisters' chance of success lies in their ability to exploit the constraints facing the government or to reshape the latter's cost-benefit calculations in a way that suppressing or ignoring an act of resistance is not a feasible or desirable option”<sup>25</sup>. Other prominent works also shed light on the relationship between strategic framing and policy response. For example, from analyzing two cases in present-day China, the Falun Gong spiritual organization and the public posting of subversive “doorway couplets”, Thornton demonstrates that the adaptive strategy of articulating dissent in authoritarian regime should be irony, ambiguity and metonymy rather than defining problems clearly.<sup>26</sup> Besides examining protest outcomes by focusing on the strategic framing dimension, studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of specific groups in achieving success. In a study of homeowner resistance in Shanghai, Shi Fayong elaborates the advantages of a

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<sup>24</sup> Huang Dongya, “How the State Shape Contentious politics”, *Research Review*, (2011.2) p218-242

<sup>25</sup> Yongshun Cai (2008). “Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China.” *The China Quarterly*, Vol.193, pp. 24-42 . doi:10.1017/S0305741008000027 p24-42

<sup>26</sup> Patric M. Thornton, “Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy”, *the China Quarterly*, 2002 p662-681

specific social class or group during the interaction with the state. By looking into the specific response of the local government and the leverage utilized by the protests, Shi concludes that the social networks of the middle class homeowners, such as their connection with individual government official and mass media, works effectively to increase their possibility to success.<sup>27</sup>

As for the approach used in the study of the Shifang case, I suggest that the policy outcome of the Shifang protest is greatly influenced the by elite division between the police department and the Shifang local government, and this “elite division” can be regarded as a “political opportunity”. The Shifang protest is a non state-threatening environmental protest which can be regarded as a typically “Nimby” (Not in my back yard) campaign in present-day China from the perspective of the grievance-based approach. Just the same as most of other popular protests in China, the Shifang protest is weak in its organizational base. Although the cyberspace played an important role in mobilizing this collective action, there is still lack of effective resources utilized in this protest even comparing with other successful protests in China. Other aspects of this particular case, such as the power, advocacy strategy and the feature of its participants, are all exposed and analyzed in the next chapter. By examining these variables which can also lead to positive policy outcomes in this particular case, this study demonstrate that the Shifang protest is not a forceful resistance in terms of its own characteristics. Thus, this thesis mainly focuses on the specific “political opportunity” aspect of the Shifang protest, and tries to explain why such a seemingly ordinary protest could receive a rather positive policy response from the local government.

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<sup>27</sup> Fayong Shi, Yongshun Cai, “Disaggregating the State: Ntework and Collective Resistance in Shanghai”, the China Quarterly, 186 (Jun 2006) p314-332

In addition, it is also important to avoid being too structure-oriented and ignoring the interaction between the protests and the state. There is no doubt that while the state shapes social resistance, at the same time the resistance also shapes the state's behavior in turn and resistance creates or exploits opportunities for themselves in the process of interaction. For example, when studying the advocacy of disabled people in China, Xi Chen analyses why the mass association, which was regarded as a weak actor in the formal political forum in China, would like to represent the public in some cases. He demonstrates that, when the motivation of the public becomes stronger, it is more likely that "state advocacy" will cooperate with "popular advocacy" to lobby the policy gatekeepers, who have the final words in the decision making process.<sup>28</sup> In my study, even focusing on the variable of elite division, the thesis also regards the motivation of Shifang protesters, the use of internet and other communication technologies, and the public awareness of civil rights as conditions without which the elite division may not be as obvious as it was in this case.

### **2.3 A State-Centered Political Opportunity Structure Model**

As evidence constantly accumulates for the growing tension within Chinese society, both Chinese and foreign scholars have begun to explore the richness of China's emerging culture of contention with new analytical tools.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to most of the Western popular protests which have already been institutionalized, protests in authoritarian regime are even

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<sup>28</sup> Xi Chen and Ping Xu (2011). From Resistance to Advocacy: Political Representation for Disabled People in China. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 207 (September 2011), pp. 649-667. doi:10.1017/S0305741011000695

<sup>29</sup> Sidney Tarrow, "Prologue: The New Contentious Politics in China: Poor and Blank or rich and Complex", in Kevin J. O'Brien (ed.), "Popular Protest in China", (Harvard University Press, 2008), p 2



more influenced by the state's power. As O'Brien suggests in the introduction of his book<sup>30</sup>, when studying China, all contention reflects political constraints, and negotiates and contests these constraints.

Although a large number of existing literature on Chinese contentious politics deliberated used or unintended borrowed the approach of political opportunity structure model, most of these literature just regard the state actor as an important constant rather than an actual variable. In other words, even it depends on the ability of the protestors to exploit political opportunities; the state actor itself also plays an important role in providing political opportunity and leaving space for social resistance to exist. However, up to now, there is still insufficient real "state-centered" work addressing the internal factors of the state actor which will also impact the outcome of the protest.

Examining the limited number of existing literature with a "state-centered" approach, there are mainly three dimensions of the political opportunity that have been studied, 1) decline of Chinese party-state capacity to control society, 2) expanding political access provided by new established institutions and developing expectations raised by new policies, 3) elite divisions within the authority.

First, in recent years, the Hu administration has loosened both the state control over media coverage of local unrests and the control over local government by local management. Just as Tarrow describes, "as Chinese politics become less centralized and more difficult to control by a single actor, scholars are beginning to think about the kind of contention and the

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<sup>30</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien and Rachel E. Stern, "Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China", in Kevin J. O'Brien (ed.), "Popular Protest in China", (Harvard University Press, 2008), p 23

sorts of issue that are likely to receive positive policy response.<sup>31</sup>” When examining the decline of party-state capacity, Andrew Mertha refers to a new concept of “Fragmented Authoritarianism”. He suggests that the previously-excluded members of the polity such as the media, non-governmental organizations and individual activists, have successfully entered the political process as a result of political pluralism of the fragmented authoritarianism.<sup>32</sup> Given the lack of institutional channels, the governments prefer to form cooperation with social actors as “consultation and adoption”. Teets also suggests that, as a result of the declining state control of China, government-civil society collaboration form through the decentralization of public welfare.

Second, expanding political access may encourage citizens to stage more resistance. When the access to political power is completely closed or open, people are not likely to express their grievance in public. However, “gaining partial access to power provides them with such incentives.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to expanding political access, new policies such as eliminating agriculture taxes, and the accessible image established by top leaders, will also raise the expectation of the public about the government. For example, Li Lianjiang examines why there was a “high tide” of “Petitioning Beijing” from 2003-06 and ascribes this phenomenon to a central leadership change in 2002. According to Li, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao had adopted a more populist leadership style which greatly encouraged citizens to approach the Xinfang system in Beijing. However, as the central government cannot deal with so many petitions, frustrated petitioners then adopted disruptive tactics and finally

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<sup>31</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “Prologue: The New Contentious Politics in China: Poor and Blank or rich and Complex”, in Kevin J. O’Brien (ed.), “Popular Protest in China”, (Harvard University Press, 2008), p 7

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Mertha, “‘Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0’: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy process”, *the China Quarterly*, 200 (Dec 2009) p 995-1012

<sup>33</sup> Sidney Tarrow (1994). “Power in Movement.” New York: Cambridge University Press, p.89

receded under the suppression of the government.

The third cluster of state-centered studies focuses on elite divisions within Chinese authority. Elite divisions can be multifaceted in different contexts, for example, the division between reformist and conservatives; higher and lower level governments; elites who are in power and who are not; strong department and weak department within the bureaucracy; representatives of different vested interest groups, and so on. According to existing literature on elite division in China to date, the division can be categorized into vertical division and horizontal division.<sup>34</sup>

In his study of achieving successful protests in China, Cai Yongshun presents a vertical elite division as “central-local divide”<sup>35</sup>. Cai suggests that the central government has greater interest than the local government in protecting its legitimacy, thus the opportunity to achieve success lies in the popular protests’ ability to seek leverage from the central government. In contrast to Cai’s opinion, Michelson demonstrates the converse conclusion in his study of rural resistance. Also conceding that there exists a division between central and local governments, Michelson suggests that seeking resolution from local governments would be more effective since the local leaders are more sympathetic to local protesters while the central government are more inclined to ignore their interest.<sup>36</sup> In terms of horizontal division, Lo and Leung studied the environmental policy-making process in Guangzhou and demonstrate that in developing countries; the environmental agencies are always weak

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<sup>34</sup> Xi Chen (2012 ). “Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China”, New York: Cambridge University Press. P.126

<sup>35</sup> Cai Yongshun(2008), “Disruptive Collective Action in the Reform Era”, Kevin J. O'Brien(ed), *Popular protest in China*, (Harvard University Press), P178

<sup>36</sup> Ethan Michelson (2008). *Justice from Above or Below? Popular Strategies for Resolving Grievances in Rural China*. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 193 (March 2008), pp. 43-64. doi:10.1017/S0305741008000039

compared with other bureaus which are in charge of economic development. Thus, under certain circumstances, the environmental agencies sometimes take the initiative to cultivate the environmental awareness of the public and promote their eagerness to participate in the policy-making process.<sup>37</sup>

In this thesis, both the decline of party-state capacity and the expanding of political access can be applied to the Shifang protest as a political background. However, both of these two conditions can be regarded as a stable and structural aspect of political opportunity in China. As O'Brien and Stern mentioned, there is not one unitary, national opportunity structure, but multiple, crosscutting openings and obstacles to mobilization.<sup>38</sup> Not only do different cases include different political opportunities, even the same opportunity will reveal different dimensions in different context. When several mechanisms work together, it is more important to tell in what mechanism gain priority in a particular situation while in other cases other mechanisms had higher priority. As China is so large and complicated, it is always impossible to explain all the contention with a stable combination of several factors. Thus, we have to carefully look into the cases without taking their similarities for granted. By examining the Shifang protest, this study builds a hypothesis that the positive policy outcome of this case is caused by the division between the police system and the Shifang local government. This is an accurate and contingent political opportunity rather a common political background for a specific case. In order to understand this "elite division" from a structural level, this study also explains this temporary and contingent opportunity in the

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<sup>37</sup> Carlos Wing Hung Lo, and Sai Wing Leung. "Environmental Agency and Public Opinion in Guangzhou: The Limits of a Popular Approach to Environmental Governance." *The China Quarterly*, 163, (Sep 2000), pp. 677-704.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien and Rachel E. Stern, "Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China", in Kevin J. O'Brien (ed.), "Popular Protest in China", (Harvard University Press, 2008), p 13

Shifang case as a specific embodiment of the stable division between the stability maintenance system and Chinese local government in China's present political contest.

## **2.4 Policy Making of Chinese Local Governments**

Focusing on the policy outcomes of Chinese popular protests, this study also refers to the decision-making process of the Chinese bureaucratic system, especially the local governments. This section displays several theoretical frameworks which have been widely used by scholars to describe the decision-making mechanism of present-day China with respect to the whole political system. Moreover, this section demonstrates several factors which shape Chinese local governments' policy making process. This study confirms that the decision-making process in China is fragmented and the Chinese local governments have to deal with multiple interest in the policy making process. Last, this study also illustrate that Chinese local governments has an institutional amphibious feature which contributes to its varied policy preference in different circumstance.

### **Policy Making in China**

Several theory frameworks have been developed by scholars to describe the decision making mechanism of China. This section selects three notable mechanisms among these frameworks---“bureaucratic pluralism”, “fragmented authoritarianism” and “consultative authoritarianism”--- to demonstrate the basic feature of Chinese decision making mechanism. What is worth mentioning here is that these frameworks are not stagnant; Scholars who support these models keep bringing new variables into these frameworks in order to cope with the changing of Chinese political environment.

David Lampton describes the Chinese policy making model as a “Bureaucratic Equilibrium Policy-making System”<sup>39</sup> which derived from a “divided” and “centrally-coordinated” policy-making system when examining the succession of health policy-making system from 1949 to 1974. Lampton demonstrates that there is a non-monolithic feature of the Chinese state structure, showing that the plethora of institutions and bureaucratic tensions in the Mao era shaped the policy process.<sup>40</sup> In Lampton’s opinion, the decision making power in China is highly disaggregated by the competence within the bureaucratic system, and this theory is also concluded as “Bureaucratic pluralism”.

The concept of “fragmented authoritarianism” was developed by Lieberthal, Oksenberg and Lampton based on the “bureaucratic pluralism” framework. This model argues the notion of “the very peak of the Chinese political system is fragmented and disjointed.”<sup>41</sup> This fragmentation is structurally based on the bureaucratic ranking system and the functional division among various bureaucracies. This model remained the most durable and heuristic through which to study Chinese politics. It was also criticized for ignoring the efficacy of the civil society and the market<sup>42</sup>. Andrew Martha further developed this framework into “fragmented authoritarianism 2.0” and suggests that the policy-making process in Chinese has become pluralized as a result of the increasingly diverse demand of different “policy entrepreneurs”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lampton, D. (1974). *Health Conflict and the Chinese Political System*. (p. 110). Ann Arbor: The university of Michigan Center for Chinese studies

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p,118

<sup>41</sup> Lieberthal, K. G. (1992). Introduction: The "fragmented authoritarianism" model and its limitations. In K. Lieberthal & D. Lampton (Eds.), *Bureaucratic, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Mertha (2009), “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0”: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 200 (December 2009), pp. 995-1012. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009990592>

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Mertha (2009), “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0”: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 200 (December 2009), pp. 995-1012. DOI:

Further emphasizing on the significance of the civil society on influencing the decision of the governments, Jessica Teets argues the existence of the local government-civil society collaboration in the policy-making process. According to Teets, “the decentralization of public welfare to local governments and the linkage of promotion to the delivery of these goods created the motivation for officials to collaborate with an emerging civil society”.<sup>44</sup> This model of analyzing Chinese government’s decision-making mechanism is concluded as “consultative authoritarianism”.

Thus, existing literature on studying the decision-making mechanism of the Chinese political system shed great light on the complexity of the current state structure. Even without legitimate channels for public participation, various factors have been brought to the policy making process of the Chinese government, including both the internal competence and tension within the regime and the external pressure from the civil society and other “policy entrepreneurs”. There is no doubt that the Chinese local government is a key actor within this policy-making system regarding its responsibility to the central government’s demands, its motivation of struggling for local benefits, and its direct contact with the public. The question then raises what factors influence the policy-making process of Chinese local governments?

### **Policy Making of Chinese Local Governments**

To analyze the role played by local governments in dealing with popular protests, it is important to examine the factors that contribute to the decision-making process and the logic of action of Chinese local governments.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009990592>

<sup>44</sup> Jessica C. Teets (2013), Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 213 (March 2013), pp. 19-38. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0305741012001269>

According to existing literature, some scholars regard local government as a local “industrial firm” which focuses on expanding local fiscal revenue and enhancing local economy<sup>45</sup>. As a result of the gradual tax reform carried out by central government in China since 1994, the redistribution of local fiscal revenue has increased the financial resources of central government while reducing the proportion of revenue left to local governments at the same time. This policy not only made local governments more dependent on central government funds, but also forced local government leaders to increase GDP by creating extra financial resources, such as urban expansion and land finance. Thus, from this perspective, the decision of local governments lies in its incentives for more financial consideration.

In addition, there are some scholars interpreting local governments’ action as maximizing the interest of local government leaders. In terms of the interest of local government leaders, it includes not only incentives to gain personal benefits from depriving ordinary citizens, but also improving their performance and coordinating their behavior according to the expectation of upper-level authority. When examining the motivation of Chinese government officials to make public policies, Zhou Li’an developed a “Promotion Tournament Model”, which suggests that the economic miracle of China comes from the incentive system governing Chinese officials<sup>46</sup>.

There is also existing literature focusing on the influence of interest groups on influencing the policy-making process of Chinese local governments. According to Luo

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<sup>45</sup> Qi, J. (1992). Fiscal reform and the economic foundation of local state corporatism in china. *World politics*, 45(1), 100-122.

<sup>46</sup> Zhou, L. (2007). Governing china. s local officials: An analysis of promotion tournament model zhou l-i an ( *guanghua.Economic Study*, 7, 36-50.



Yiping, the participation of interest groups into the policy-making process can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, interest groups can contribute to the pluralism of the policy-making mechanism and limit the power of the local government. On the other hand, local government can be kidnapped by the powerful interest groups with abundant political and economic resources.<sup>47</sup>

Almost all these aspects discussed above appear in the case of Shifang. In fact, the Chinese local governments are dealing with multiple stakeholders and interest in the process of making public policies. The economic reform and the reshape of the central-local relationship created more opportunities for Chinese local governments to realize a “developmental localism” objective and to follow their internal incentives. Thus, local governments in China are by no means just executors of central governments’ demands or the so-called “public servants”, which is the phrase often used by them to describe themselves. In this circumstance, what is the role played by local government among the mix picture of different stakeholders and what is the rationale of Chinese local government to choose between different policy preferences?

### **The Institutional Amphibiousness of Chinese Local Government**

This study interprets the logic of action of Chinese local government as a “rational actor” which shifts between different policy preference with a characteristic of “institutional amphibiousness”. “Institutional amphibiousness” was first coined by X.L.Ding to describe organizations which usually belong to civil society but are attached to government in China,

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<sup>47</sup> Luo, Y. (2009). The influence of powerful interest group on chinese local government's policy making. *Inner Mongolia Social Scientific*, 30(6), 5-7.

such as trade union, youth organizations, and women's organizations. According to Ding, "First, the boundaries between institutional structures are ambiguous... Second, the nature of individual institutions is indeterminate"<sup>48</sup> This amphibious nature of some organizations and institutions is connected with an elite division because when this particular amphibious institution inclined to fulfill its response of the public, it will stand opposed to its institutional partners.

This theory was also used by Xi Chen to demonstrate the amphibious role played by Chinese mass organization of disabled person. After that, Chen further extends the application of this term to a wide range of government institutions other than "mass organizations"<sup>49</sup>. In his study, he labeled the Xinfang system as a amphibious government agency and illustrates that,

"Institutions of interest articulation in state socialist regimes tend to be more amphibious; in contrast, the function of the army, police, and party propaganda apparatus is more clearly defined and therefore they have lower levels of or no amphibiousness."<sup>50</sup>

Thus, "Institutional Amphibiousness" can be understood as both functional and ideological characteristic. In this study, I also extend the application of this term to describe the nature of Chinese local governments who on one hand makes profits by depriving ordinary citizens, and on the other hand rely heavily on good performance legitimacy. The

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<sup>48</sup> X. L. Ding (1994). "Institutional Amphibiousness and the Transition from Communism: The Case of China". *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No.3 (July 1994), pp. 293-318. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/194251>

<sup>49</sup> Xi Chen (2012). "Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China", New York: Cambridge University Press. P.126

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, p.127

amphibiousness of Chinese local government can be seen in both the multiple institutional purposes it serves and the shifting balance between the benefits and costs it faces. This feature and logic of action of Chinese local government explains the policy process in the case and Shifang, and help understand the collaboration and division between Chinese local governments and the stability maintenance system.

### **Chapter III: A Case Study of Shifang Protest**

The existence of elite division within the authority is pervasive in China. However, the effect of elite division is often neglected as it is not as obvious as other variables and requires careful scrutiny into the evidence which may seem nothing uncommon at first glance. Based on a case of protest in Shifang, an environmental protest targeting the Shifang local government on its construction of a chemical plant, this study shows a division between the Shifang local government and the police who were dispatched to Shifang to maintain stability. Although it might not be representative enough of the condition that all Chinese protests face, the Shifang case sheds light on a noticeable factor contributing to government policy adjustment, which should be regarded as an important aspect of successful resistance. This chapter first introduces the emergence and process of the Shifang protest, then demonstrates the existence of elite divisions between the police and Shifang local government by comparing their behaviors and analyzing the command system of Chinese public security police and armed police. In addition, this chapter also analyses the underlying mechanism through which the elite division between these two actors influences the policy outcome of this protest.

#### **3.1 Rise of Conflict in Shifang**

“Nimby” (Not in my back yard) campaigns have become a significant form of civil resistance in present-day China. Projects launched without public participation often arouse environmental concern of local residents and exaggerate their ever-present distrust of the authoritarian regime, especially these notorious local governments. Thus, protecting their

community environment always serves as an effective reason to assemble citizens and stage environmental campaigns in modern China.

Shifang is a county-level city, under the municipal administration of Deyang, Sichuan Province. It is located about 50 km from Chengdu with an area of 863 km<sup>2</sup> and with a population of about 430 thousand. Named as “Bright Pearl of West Sichuan”, Shifang is not only famous for its mineral water but also its rich phosphate rock. It was rated as one of the "Top 100 Medium-sized Cities Worth of Investment in China" and consecutively maintained the second place of the "top ten counties" of Sichuan Province from 1995 to 2007<sup>51</sup>.

As one of the most severely hit cities in the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, Shifang suffered heavy loss of life and major damage of infrastructure. After the earthquake, as a result, the Shifang government made great efforts to help the local economy recover. Under this consideration, with a registered capital of 100 million yuan and a \$1.64 billion investment in total, a copper-molybdenum refinery plant was planned by Hongda Corporation with the goal of promoting local GDP and employment rate. Moreover, this plant was encouraged, and of course permitted, by the Sichuan provincial government as the most great effort aiming at economic revitalization in the provincial “Twelfth-five” plan<sup>52</sup>.

This copper-molybdenum refinery plant was managed by Sichuan Hongda Corporation whose boss, Liu Canglong, started his enterprise in Shifang and now came back to construct this profitable plant as a repayment to the hometown<sup>53</sup>. The project was intended to cover an

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<sup>51</sup> He, X. (2007, 09 24). Top 100 medium-sized cities worth of investment in china. Retrieved from <http://scitech.people.com.cn/GB/53945/53950/103716/6305547.html>

<sup>52</sup> The general office of the people's Government of Sichuan Province, (2010). Notice of the general office of the people's government of sichuan province on the issuance of national economic and social development "twelfth-five" planning ([2010]86). Retrieved from Sichuan Provincial People's Government website: [http://www.sc.gov.cn/zwgk/zcwj/zfwj/cbf/201010/t20101018\\_1045624.shtml](http://www.sc.gov.cn/zwgk/zcwj/zfwj/cbf/201010/t20101018_1045624.shtml)

<sup>53</sup> Cui, W. (2012, 07 09). The Cover story: The truth behind the hundreds copper-molybdenum plant's death.

area of about 3,500 acres and the land was expropriated from two villages of Luoshui Town, Shifang, reclaiming property from more than 1,000 villagers from Hongmiao and 1,300 villagers from Jinguang. The land expropriation was approved for the project use by the Shifang government in 2008, after the Sichuan earthquake.

As a profitable plan also coveted by other municipal governments such as Chengdu and Shanghai, the Hongda copper-molybdenum refinery plant will greatly benefit the local economy once put into operation, just considering the perspective of profit. In the morning of June 29, 2012, the Hongda copper-molybdenum refinery plant laid its foundation in the Economic Development Zone of Shifang. On June 28, one day before its foundation ceremony, the official Sina Microblog account of Shifang government, named “Vital Shifang”, posted seven items to introduce this particular refinery plant. “Vital Shifang” first introduced the investment and benefits of this plant:

“The first over 10 billion-investment project, Hongda copper-molybdenum refinery plant, held its opening ceremony in our Economic Development Zone at ten o’clock this morning... If this plant goes into operation, its annual sales income will be more than 50 billion...its fixed employment will be more than 3000 and provide more that 15 thousand auxiliary employment opportunities.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition, “Vital Shifang” also exposed the construction schedule of this project and claimed that the construction standards of the copper-molybdenum chemical plant could

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Chinese Business News, p. A09.

<sup>54</sup> Vital shifang. Retrieved from

<http://e.weibo.com/luolishifang?ref=http://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E6%25B4%25BB%25E5%258A%259B%25E4%25BB%2580%25E9%2582%25A1?topnav=1&wvr=5&b=1>

Sina Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website. Vital Shifang is an official account registered by Shifang local government on the Sina Weibo website as an official propaganda channel. Many other local governments in China have their own Weibo accounts.

reach advanced world-level standards in six aspects----planning, design, technology, equipment and installment, management, and custodian. All these aspects introduced by “Vital Shifang” deliberately underscored the environment-friendly quality of this plant:

“This plant has passed the administrative approval of our State Environmental Protection Department. Carrying out these environmental protection measures, the pollutant could meet the emission standards...all the pollutant will be disposed with high technology and advanced equipment, realizing environmental recycling and zero emission.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite the large number of job opportunities and great economic profit it would create, local residents were most concern most about the potential environmental risk of this plant. Some local residents believed that the pollutant will affect a wide sphere even including Chengdu, and as the center of the polluted area, Shifang would become the biggest village of cancer within the next five years. People also spread online that this plant might produce a variety of toxic byproducts, including mercury, sulphur, dioxide, and arsenic. So it was widely believed that this chemical plant would threaten the natural environment and harm public health if its pollutants seeped into the city’s air and water supply.

Actually, there was no clear evidence showing whether the plant is environmentally harmful or not in the end. As well, the Shifang local government only ascribed the cancelling of the plant to the public objection rather than to the flaws of the plant itself. Even after the party secretary, Li Chengjin, promised to call off this plant, some officials still strongly defended that this plant had already passed environmental impact assessment and was the

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<sup>55</sup> From Vital shifang

most strictly regulated one in present-day China. In the government environmental assessment report, this plant was truly qualified as "environmentally acceptable." But since the government only publicized a short version of the report with no detailed information, citizens are not satisfied with the attitude of the government and speculate that there was corporation between the local government and the official evaluation agency. There was also an environmental evaluation report issued by Beijing General Institute of Mining & Metallurgy that claimed that, "This plant does have an affect on surface water, ground water, atmosphere environment, sound environment, solid waste environment and biological environment; however, all these effects are controllable."

Even assuming the evaluation report to have showing scientific foundations, local residents prefer to suspect its validity as the obscure data and evidence were beyond their understanding. In addition, people also doubted the government's credibility to implement any practical custody or control of the chemical plant afterwards. Most of all, Hongda Corporation was accused of polluting crops last year by peasants from Luoshuo Town, Shichuan province. The infamy of this particular corporation, beyond all doubt, exaggerated the widespread concern among local people. Thus, anyhow, distrusting the government was always a rational choice for Shifang residents.

In addition, there were two other factors that intensified the antagonistic emotion among local residents towards this plant. On one hand, the impact of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 made local people more concerned about their present and future living conditions. There were rumors among local residents that the over-exploitation of mineral resources in the past decades had made the geology more vulnerable to earthquakes and could be partially



responsible for the great loss in 2008. Since the refinery plant would be located in a seismic zone, the security risk would be extremely high if there were geologic activities in the future. Given these considerations, people in Shifang are highly sensitive to this project. On the other hand, there was hardly any information released by the local government on the plant's construction in the past years, and of course, no public hearing in the decision making process as well. According to the report from Hongda Corporation, this plant was started in 2010. However, in the past two years before the opening ceremony on 29 June, the public had not heard anything about such a big plant. Even the villagers who lived only miles from the location of the plant got to know it when they saw some officials from surrounding cities came to celebrate the laying of its foundation. As a result of the lack of transparency in the policy making process, the public were even enraged by the government's dereliction in the earlier stage.

Relevant information accompanied by rumors started spreading online, asserting the potential risk of the plant as well as criticizing the government's conspiracy of sneaking in the plant without any public consultation. A widespread petition letter circulated online by protesters reads: "It will be too late to protest once the factory is built ... How many of us have enough money to move away from the city? So we have to unite to expel the chemical plant out of Shifang."<sup>56</sup> Consequently, fears of the potential risk of this chemical plant and the hostility towards local government promptly provoked Shifang residents to get into the street.

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<sup>56</sup> Guardian.co.uk. (2012, 07 03). Anti-pollution protesters halt construction of copper plant in china. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/03/china-anti-pollution-protest-copper?newsfeed=true>

### 3.2 Mobilization, Framing and Process of Shifang Protest

Shifang protest was mainly mobilized online and by sending text messages. Although the contribution of cyberspace to modern collective resistance is widely acknowledged, it was still remarkable in China for using cyberspace as the main channel of mobilization. As most of the early participants in the Shifang protests were middle school students who were well-educated and familiar with modern technology and equipment, this particular incident first took place in cyberspace, such as Shifang Baidu Post Bar, QQ groups and other online forums. Microblogging (or “*weibo*” as they are called in Chinese) also played an essential role in protest mobilization by disseminating information and drawing wide attention.

One day after the founding ceremony, on June 30, a dozen of the citizens gathered in front of the building of the Shifang Municipal government to launch their petition and was soon persuaded to subside. In the next day, the petition became a “mass incident” as increasing numbers of people were gathering for the closure of the Hongda plant and most of the participants were middle school students who are called “Post-90” (the generation born in the decade of 1990). Schools were pushed to demand students come back with a warning of expelling them from school, but it did not work. Increasing numbers of participants was spurred to take to the street, including Shifang local students and their parents, other ordinary citizens and even students from surrounding cities who come to support the protest.

As July 1<sup>st</sup> is the birthday of the Communist Party of China, the Shifang local government got even more nervous when people staged a large-scale campaign in such an important festival throughout the nation. However, the framing of the Shifang protestors’ demand was rather prudent throughout the whole process even though it soon turned into

violence. In the photos of the protest, people were carrying banners reading “Long lives the Chinese Communist Party, kick out the copper factory!”, “Protect our hometown and oppose the chemical factory’s construction” and “Unite to protect the environment for the next generation”. Although threatened by their schools with severe punishment, students did not stop but got even angrier. They wrote their slogan on the wall of the government building, proclaiming that, “We can sacrifice because we're the Post-90”. Among all these demands and slogans, the most disruptive one was which targeting the party secretary of Shifang, Li Chengjin. Protesters denounced Li as betraying his responsibility to his citizens in order to get profit from the certain project. People wrote on the wall and shouted in front of the government building, “Li Chengjin, get out of Shifang.” Actually, this kind of demand is a common phenomenon in China’s environmental campaigns as a result of the leading cadres' responsibility system. In the Qidong protest, another environmental protest against a proposed waste water pipeline in Jiangsu province also taking place in July 2012, the angry protesters even stormed into the party secretary’s office, dragged him out of the government building and ripped off his clothes.

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, some students and citizens assembled outside the government building and blocked streets in downtown districts of Shifang, including East Tingjiang Road, West Tingjiang Road, Small Garden Road, and North Zhuanyuan Street. In response to this activity, local public security police of Shifang were dispatched to guard the government building and maintain order and the mass was soon persuaded to disperse. In the evening of July 1st, hundreds of protesters once again gathered in Hongda Square and outside the government building, signing a petition and shouting slogans for cancelling the refinery plant. The

Shifang local government did not clearly respond to the protesters, and no violent conflict between government and protesters was reported at that time. In addition, the official government website of Shifang published a letter which spoke highly of the advanced technology and environmentally friendly quality of Hongda refinery plant and described it as "scientific and modern".

As the atmosphere of this advocacy campaign heated up, not only the local students, but also other ordinary citizens as well as citizens from surrounding cities inspired by the students' determination were involved in this collective action. The total numbers of this protest reached tens of thousands. In the morning of July 2, growing numbers of protestors assembled in front of Shifang government buildings again. Some of them were furious and impulsive as there was still no response from the government. These angry protestors pulled up the sign of the Shifang party committee, smashed it on the ground and stamped on it. At the same time, some of them pierced the protective cordon and stormed into the government building. According to the official statistics, these protesters smashed eight windows, three bulletin boards and four advertising boards.

In order to appease the masses, at noon of July 2, the mayor of Shifang, Xu Guangyong and the Deputy Mayor, Zhang Daobin came out to speak to the public saying that the plant would be suspended in light of public concerns and promising that they wouldn't restart construction without public support. Moreover, as reported by China News Service, Xu Guangyong also stated that, "The local government will definitely carry out supervision during the entire process of constructing the project. If the company fails in the environmental protection assessment, the local government will not allow it to go into

production." <sup>57</sup> This announcement seems like a temporary compromise aiming at maintaining the social order rather than making a practical concession to the advocacy campaign. So after this announcement, only some of the protesters left while most of them who were not satisfied still crowded in front of the government building demanding for further promises of policy adjustments since they did not believe the government will give the project up easily.

According to the official media of Sichuan Province, at about 13:30 pm local time, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, protestors started to attack the government building by throwing bricks, bottles and pots at the local public security police who were on duty and overturning a dozen of police vehicles. However, no violent suppression was utilized in this phase and only some of the police got injured in the conflict. The protest culminated at 14:00 in the afternoon when special public security police and armed police were dispatched to quell the protests and things then escalated to a bloody conflict between the police and ordinary citizens. In the confrontation, the police threw tear gas and stun grenades into the crowd to disperse the mass and beat citizens with batons, causing dozens of people to be injured in the process.

After that, videos and photos were posted and circulated online that showed the images of bloody individuals who got injured by the stun grenades and badly beaten by the police in the conflicts. According to the report of the government, thirteen people were hurt in the process. Witnesses told the South China Morning Post that about 8,000 police were stationed along major roads, and apparently, it was the first time that stun grenades were used to

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<sup>57</sup> From Vital Shifang

suppress a protest.<sup>58</sup>

Just at the moment when the police started to quell the protest with violence, at 14:04 pm, July 2, Shifang local authorities made further concessions which clearly proclaimed their decision to cancel the plant rather than suspending it. In addition, the local government dispatched working groups comprised of government cadres and staff to different districts and streets of Shifang to appease and communicate with local residents. Moreover, in order to remain accessible to its citizens, the Shifang local government posted its official email address and telephone number on Sina Microblog by “Vital Shifang”. In the evening of July 2, Shifang government issued a long notice tracing the whole process of this incident and demonstrating that thirteen people were injured in this conflict. Although witnesses to the conflict and other media entered the scene that day had reported more casualty than the government statistics, other facts stated by this notice were mostly compatible with other information sources.

Despite receiving the clear promise from the government, protesters did not leave. What’s more, even the citizens who did not participate in the campaign got angrier with the violent suppression that had taken place the day before. Believing that it was the local government leaders that pretended to be friendly and benign on one hand while ordering the brutal police to suppress them with force on the other hand, thousands of people demonstrated on the street shouting, “Li Chengjin, get out of Shifang” with cursing him and his family members at the same time. Besides of this, the protesters were also dissatisfied with the government arresting people in the conflict the day before and claimed that most of

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<sup>58</sup> Shi, J. (2012, 08 15). Rumours fuel new protests in shifang. Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com/article/1006281/rumours-fuel-new-protests-shifang>

the people arrested were teenagers. Moreover, hostility towards the police among Shifang citizens was ignited and rumors began to spread online, such as that the police had beaten several people to death, Shifang was blockaded by armed force, or even that they would shoot at citizens to maintain stability. There was a photo widely re-posted online showing a notice clinging on the door of a restaurant in Shifang, read “No Police and Dogs”. With the persistence of protesters, more special public security police and armed police were dispatched to Shifang. According to a witness, the police carrying batons in July 2 were changed to guns on July 3rd.<sup>59</sup> Journalists also reported that police were still there confronting the public and their vehicles shows that they were from other surrounding cities, including Chengdu, Deyang, and Mianyang<sup>60</sup>.

In the evening of July 3rd, thousands of protesters once again gathered on Hongda Square demanding the police releasing these citizens who had been arrested the previous day. In addition, on seeing the experience of Dalian anti-PX protest, in which the cancelled project was restarted by the local government month later in silence, Shifang protesters kept asking for a further promise that this factory would be removed forever. Facing this coercion of the public, the party secretary, Li Chengjin, made the final concession in the afternoon of July 3:

“Because of the lack of propaganda and communication in the earlier stage, some of the citizens do not understand nor support the construction of this plant. In order to satisfy the demands of our citizens, Shifang municipal Party committee and municipal government made a decision: we will firmly safeguard the legitimate

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<sup>59</sup> BBC News. (2012, 07 03). Shifang large-scaled resistance was warned by the government. Retrieved from [http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/simp/chinese\\_news/2012/07/120703\\_shifang\\_warming.shtml?](http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/simp/chinese_news/2012/07/120703_shifang_warming.shtml?)

<sup>60</sup> Cui, W. (2012, 07 09). The Cover story: The truth behind the hundreds copper-molybdenum plant's death. Chinese Business News, p. A09.

rights and interests of our citizens. As some people were strongly concerned that this copper -molybdenum refinery plant would cause environmental pollution and affect public health, we decide to call off the plant construction from now on and Shifang will no longer construct this plant in the future.”<sup>61</sup>

The protest finally culminated in this announcement of Li Chengjin, presenting a remarkable success in the history of China’s environmental campaign. To further appease the emotion of local residents, Shifang government also group texted messages to proclaim their decision, making sure that it would be widely known. “Vital Shifang” also posted a notice clarifying that there was no death in the conflict of July 2 and that Shifang was not blocked by armed forces as well. Besides, to warn the protesters, the public security department of Shifang issued a notice named “Notice on the Prohibition of Illegal Assembly, Parade and Demonstration”:

“First, anyone who used the Internet, mobile phones or text messages to mobilize collective action should immediately stop or they will be punished. Second, anyone who had already participated in this illegal activity should give themselves up to the police within three days or they would be punished.”<sup>62</sup>

The protest eventually calmed down at the end of July 3. In order to respond to the demand of protesters for releasing the arrested people, in the early morning of July 4, Shifang government released a third notice explaining the situation of these people and claiming none of them were students:

“In order to deal with the riot in July 2, twenty-seven people were detained by

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<sup>61</sup> From Vital Shifang

<sup>62</sup> From Vital Shifang



the police. Up to now, three of them were in criminal detention, three of them were in administrative detention, and the rest were all released by 23:00 pm after criticism and education”<sup>63</sup>

In the evening of 7.5, Shifang government announced the decision of Deyang Municipal Part Committee to nominate a First Secretary Zuo Zheng for Shifang.

### **3.3 Existence of Elite Division in the Shifang Case**

By examining the resistance of the protesters, the suppression used by the police and the response of Shifang government, the study above presents the interaction between different actors in the process of Shifang protest. Besides the meaningful success it achieved by coercing the government to yield to public demand, Shifang case is also marked by both the fierce suppression and the friendly policy response it received simultaneously, or in other words, what makes the protest outstanding is the divergent attitude and incompatible behavior of different actors within the authority. Thus, who are these special public security police and armed police? And who have the authority to command these armed force to use violent suppression?

To answer these questions, this section first introduces the vertical and horizontal control over Chinese public security organs, then analyses the command system of armed police in China. By examining these institutions and their command systems, the author suggests that: 1) local governments in China do have the authority to command local security police organs, and this explains the moderate behavior of Shifang local public security police. 2) The special

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<sup>63</sup> From Vital Shifang

police referred above are actually a special unit of public security police in China. Different from common public security police, the special police are riots police in China mainly in charge of antiterrorist, and antiriot operation, and dealing with social emergencies. However, commanding special police from different cities is beyond the ability of Shifang local government. 3) Armed police in China is actually a branch of People's Liberation Army (PLA) and this military force can only be controlled by the top leader of its vertical professional agency. Thus, in conclusion, this section illustrates the existence of division between the Shifang local government and the police force dispatched to Shifang to put down the protest.

### **Vertical and Horizontal Control over Public Security Organs**

“At about three o'clock in the afternoon...there were many heavily armed police, with camouflage and explosion-proof clothing, guarding every entrance of the courtyard. In addition, standing by both sides of the courtyard, a number of special police and armed police were confronting with the crowd with shields and batons. Judging from the license plates of these explosion-proof vehicles reading Chuan A, Chuan B and Chuan C, they came from Chengdu, Mianyang and Deyang respectively.”<sup>64</sup> This paragraph is from the cover story of China Business News (Zhong guo jing ying bao) on July 9. What we can tell from this description is that this suppression had mobilized armed forces not only from Shifang but also from surrounding cities. A witness of Shifang protest also claimed that, “In the beginning of the protest, there were only some local police maintaining order. However, with more and more police coming from other places converging in Shifang, heated antagonistic emotion

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<sup>64</sup> Cui, W. (2012, 07 09). The Cover story: The truth behind the hundreds copper-molybdenum plant's death. Chinese Business News, p. A09.

rose among local citizens.”<sup>65</sup>

There is also other evidence showing a different behavior between the special police dispatched to Shifang from other cities and Shifang’s local public security police. The following is part of the second announcement posted by “Vital Shifang” on July 2:

“The agitated protesters stormed into the government building, throwing flowerpot, bottles and garbage towards the public security police who were on duty. Several policemen were injured in the process...but they (local public security police) persistently followed the attitude of forbearance and the principle of ‘neither shout back nor hit back’...However, the conflict escalated at about 2:00pm and the special police who were dispatched to carry out their task were forced to use tear gas and stun grenade to disperse the crowd.”<sup>66</sup>

Not only thoroughly reported details about the process of the conflict in the afternoon of July 2 and describing the behavior of the on-duty local public security police as calm and sober, this announcement also deliberately distinguished between the local public security police and the special police dispatched to fulfill the task by obviously protecting the image of local public security police. So, who are the special police referred to in this announcement? And why did the Shifang local government prefer to expose the behavior of these special police while exempting the responsibility of the local public security police?

The Special police referred to in this announcement is a special unit of public security police in China. Unlike common public security police, the special police are riot police in

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<sup>65</sup> Cui, W. (2012, 07 09). The Cover story: The truth behind the hundreds copper-molybdenum plant's death. Chinese Business News, p. A09.

<sup>66</sup> From Vital Shifang

China, mainly in charge of antiterrorist, and antiriot operation, and dealing with social emergencies. As most of the public security policemen are government officers who are not highly combat effective, the special police unit was established to handle some dangerous tasks. And generally speaking, most of the important cities have a unit of special police in their public security department.

Given the large bureaucracy and the complex intergovernmental relationships of China, it is difficult to run such a complex police system effectively in China without both vertical and horizontal bureaucratic domains<sup>67</sup>. In other words, in the case of a specific public security police agency in a local area, it can be simultaneously commanded by both its vertical-professional superior bureaucracy and the horizontal local party committee and government. Then, in this condition, which boss has a larger power to command this particular agency, and why? Scholars<sup>68</sup> always argue about whether it is actually “horizontal serves the vertical” or the “vertical serves the horizontal”. In terms of a local public security agency, the Chinese government coined a term itself to describe the “horizontal-vertical” relationship as “Tiao-Kuai” relationship (Tiao means vertical lines while Kuai means horizontal pieces). Thus, the principle of local leadership on public security work in China has been summed up as “Combining Tiao and Kuai leadership, with Kuai as the main part.”

Unlike fiscal revenue which has been more tightly controlled by central government in order to strengthen the state capacity since the 1990s, the control over legal coercion is not as concentrated in present-day China. Although it is beyond local governments’ ability to

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<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal (1995). *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company Inc, p. 169

<sup>68</sup> Murray Scot Tanner and Eric Green (2007). Principals and Secret Agents: Central versus Local Control over Policing and Obstacles to “Rule of Law” in China. *The China Quarterly*, No. 191, China’s Legal System: New Developments, New Challenges (September 2007), pp. 644-670

command armed police which consist of soldiers on duty, Chinese local governments can exert great control over local security police. There are several reasons that contribute to the local governments' influence on police behavior. First, as it is inherently hard for the superior public security organs to gain information on local issues or monitor local activities, local party committees and governments enjoy great autonomy over local policing.<sup>69</sup> Second, the “lesson of history” of early security crises has taught the party to adopt a decentralized coercive power structure to maintain social stability.<sup>70</sup> According to Tanner, this “historical lesson” of China can be traced back to late 1930s, when the simply copy of Stalin’s secretive system caused massive crisis of the CPC Jiangxi government. Third, most of the key power resources of local security police are controlled by local governments, such as organizational and personnel power, financial resource, and monitoring power.<sup>71</sup>

This understanding of the command system of public security organs can also be applied to the Shifang case, in which the local public security organ is under the control of the Shifang local government. Before the afternoon of July 2, even on July 1 which is the birthday of CCP, no violence took place between the police and the protestors. When people gathered to attack the government building in July 1, local police just maintained order without causing severe public hostility. However, when the armed police and special police from other cities were dispatched to Shifang, a bloody suppression policy was adopted towards the protestors. Afterwards, when the public started to criticize the behavior of police

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<sup>69</sup> Murray Scot Tanner and Eric Green (2007). Principals and Secret Agents: Central versus Local Control over Policing and Obstacles to “Rule of Law” in China. *The China Quarterly*, No. 191, China’s Legal System: New Developments, New Challenges (September 2007), pp. 644-670

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

online, there also was a ridiculous conflict online among public security police from different cities. In a popular Chinese real name online forum called “Renren”, a person named Chen Xiaogong declared himself to be a special policeman from Chengdu and said he never used violence towards ordinary citizens. Chen also claimed that all the stun grenades were thrown by the Mianyang police. This declaration caused heated debate between the police from different cities online and mutual abuse.

Thus, the division between the special police and the Shifang’s local public security police is clear from the analysis of the command system of Chinese public security organs. First, the Shifang’s local public security organ is controlled by Shifang party committee and government. In this sense, the behavior of the Shifang’s local public security police can be regarded as a representative of the Shifang local government’s attitude. This explains why the local police kept calm in the process of the conflict and why the Shifang local government deliberately protected their image in the government announcement. Second, in the Shifang protest, special police units from different cities were dispatched to carry out suppression. However, it is beyond the Shifang local government’s ability to command the special police from other cities. The power of commanding special police units from different administrative areas comes from the vertical professional organ of the police system. Thus, in conclusion, although the local public security organ obeys the principle of local government, the division still existed as the vertical command system of the police department is more effective when it comes to cross-regions issues.

### **Command System of Armed Police Force in China**

Armed police are officially called “Chinese People's Armed Police Force” (CPAP). Some people misunderstand armed police to be “police”, but armed police are soldiers on service. This is no different from the People’s Liberation Army, which branched out from PLA as an independent armed force primarily responsible for civilian policing as well as providing support to PLA during wartime. As the primary mission of CPAP is internal guard, it was also named “Internal Guard” from January 1, 2005 to July 31, 2007 and changed to CPAP on August 1, 2007. The CAPA has a dual command structure including the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the State Council through the Ministry of Public Security.

CAPA was first established in 1982, composed of the internal security units, border security unit, forest unit, gold mines unit and hydropower facilities, as well as traffic-policing, fire fighting and road construction units. Among them, the Border Security and fire fighting units are under the control of both CMC and Ministry of Public Security while the other forces are under the control of CMC only. The CAP is estimated to have a total strength of 1.5 million, with over half its strength (800,000) employed in its internal security units<sup>72</sup>. Compared with the CPAP, the public security police department is a totally different system which is composed of real policemen as traditionally understood. In contrast with the armed police who are actually soldiers, the public security police are government officials.

The authority to mobilize the CAPA must obey the statutory procedures of asking for the specific approval by the State Council and the Central Military Commission. Any unit or individual should not violate the provisions of using CAPA. If the CAPA receives a task that oversteps its authority, it should refuse to execute that task and immediately report to their

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<sup>72</sup> Information Office of the State Council. (2011, March). *China's national defense in 2010*. Retrieved from [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/31/c\\_13806851.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/31/c_13806851.htm)

superiors.

In terms of the political system of China, the CAPA is beyond the control of Chinese local governments. As Chinese government during the Hu Jintao Administration has placed more restriction on the local government's use of violence against protests<sup>73</sup>, the decision to repress was made by higher authorities within the CAPA system based on their judgment of the protest's characteristic. Thus, what Shifang local government can do is only ask the higher authority for cooperation.

### **Modes of Repression in China**

China has seen a large amount of popular protest in recent years and repression is one of the importance responses from the authority when dealing with this resistance. Although the use of violence has been limited in recent years especially when the protests are not “regime-threatening”, repression still remains an effective and important method of dealing with collective actions. In terms of the mode of repression, the Chinese governments may punish the participants, coercively dispersing protestors or bloodily suppressing the protesters. Punishment of the participants often includes arrest, detention, and jail sentence and local police security departments are always in charge of this punishment. Most protests will receive this level of repression, especially for the leaders of the collective action. Sometimes, police force was only dispatched to the scene to maintain order and protect public infrastructure. It will attract the attention of the public if the armed police coercively disperse or attack ordinary citizens with weapons such as tear gas and stun guns. The level of

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<sup>73</sup> Dingxin Zhao (2011). Book Review, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Poplular Protests Succeed or Fail*. *Contemporary Sociology, A Journal of Reviews*. vol.40. no. 2 (March 2011). pp. 161-162.



repression escalates if the police use bloody violence towards the protestors, including using injurious weapons, attacking protesters to serious injury, or even opening fire on unarmed citizens. The highest level is repression with the army, which is regarded as national defense. The fierce repression received by the Shifang protestors was almost the most severe level of suppression, compared with other “non regime-threatening” protests in recent years. The severity of the suppression embodied in two dimensions: Armed forces were dispatched and weapons utilized in the suppression; indiscriminate violence towards ordinary citizens who did not participate into the collective action.

It is the first time that the Chinese government utilized stun grenades in suppressing ordinary citizens’ resistance. A stun grenade is a non-lethal explosive which can cause temporarily disorient of senses. Although the stun grenade is designed as non-lethal, it causes injure and may cause death occasionally. Thus, the stun grenade is often used to subdue terrorist.

The Shifang protest was also marked by the brutality of police during the process of suppression. Even the leader of the Shifang government conceded that the suppression was a measure of indiscriminate violence. The Vice Minister of Shifang Municipal Propaganda Department told the reporter of China Business News that, “There were some aggressive behaviors during the conflict. Not only these protesters, but also some of the onlookers also injured in the process”<sup>74</sup>.

On July 3, some citizens were being treated in The Second People's Hospital of Shifang. Most of them claimed that they had not participated in the demonstration but got beaten when

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<sup>74</sup> Cui, W. (2012, 07 09). The Cover story: The truth behind the hundreds copper-molybdenum plant's death Chinese Business News, p. A09.

they were watching the conflict or just passed by the scene of the protest. One of these injured Xiao Cao, who is a sixteen year-old boy, told the media that he was beaten by some policemen with a stun gun when he was taking his middle school diploma home and he didn't know what happened at that time.<sup>75</sup>

A famous public intellectual, Li Chengpeng, who arrived in Shifang in July 3 and was regarded as the public opinion leader of this protest recorded the same experience in his published article, “ A Case of the Lucifer Effect: A Little Investigation of Shifang”. In this report, he said that some of the citizens who were injured in the process are not even participants in the protest. He exposed the images of three injured people in the hospital and explained each of their experience of being beaten by the police. According to Li, all three of these people were not participants of this protest. One of them came to the surrounding area to buy some food, one was talking with friends on the way back from work, and the other one was an old man who was just passing by and looking at what was happening. The images of these people show the brutality of the police and Li said some of them would never recovered from their injuries. This report documented the brutality of the police towards ordinary citizens and was widely shared on the internet.

### **Existence of Elite Division in Shifang Protest**

In contrast with the brutal violence utilized by the police, a second remarkable characteristic of the Shifang protest is the response and attitude of the local government. Although the Shifang municipal government should be denounced for its attempt to construct

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<sup>75</sup> Cui, W. (2012, 07 09). The Cover story: The truth behind the hundreds copper-molybdenum plant's death Chinese Business News, p. A09.

such an influential plant without consulting the public, this thesis demonstrates that the measures adopted by Shifang government in the face with the protest were appropriate to some degree.

First, given the fact that the protest had already taken place on June 30 and July 1, the protesters were persuaded to leave by of the government officials and there were no severe conflicts in the early stage. As early as noon in July 2, before the citizens broke into the government building, the mayor of Shifang municipality, Xuguang Yong, and the Deputy Mayor, Zhang Daobin talked directly to the masses, expressly saying that the Hongda plant would be suspended from then on. Although this was not a reliable promise, it showed the basic attitude of the government for dealing with this event.

Second, at two o'clock on the afternoon of July 2, the Shifang government issued a notice in "Vital Shifang", indicating that "As some of the cadres and citizens were concerned about the environmental effect of Honda copper and molybdenum plant...We decide to stop the construction of the project from now on."<sup>76</sup> This clear promise was issued at exactly the same time as the violent suppression by the police took place. This notice, which could have calmed down the conflict, did not avoid the bloody conflict between citizens and the police since the police ignore it.

Third, using the new tool of Microblog, the Shifang government kept following the situation in the unfolding of this conflict and tried to communicate with the public to clarify the truth. Compared with the citizens' statements and the report of "Vital Shifang", the facts exposed by the Shifang government were basically true. Even the well-known writer and

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<sup>76</sup> From Vital Shifang

political critic, Hanhan, said in his blog "In general, (the Shifang government) did not lie ...and each step of improvement should be encouraged."<sup>77</sup>

From July 2 to July 6, "Vital Shifang" posted thirteen Weibo microblogs in total to follow up and explain this incident, receiving 141 731 replies and being reposted 135,475 times<sup>78</sup>. Guidance of public opinion is always emphasized as "rumors would be stopped by the truth." In this kind of incident, in general, rumors tend to have a larger guidance as a result of the limited information. Hence, accessible information and freedom of communication will diminish the value of rumors and thereby contribute to the pacification of the conflict. In this particular case, "Vital Shifang" described the whole incident in detail, especially how the police dispersed the protesters. In addition, it also announced the number of injuries, clarified there was no death in the conflict and explained the release situation of the protesters who were arrested. These measures effectively curbed the spread of rumors and played a significant role in forming public opinion.

In addition, the measures adopted by the Shifang government went beyond these. Before the outbreak of the conflict in July 2, Shifang government started to send working groups to propagandize and explain the plant to residents and try to make people accept it. Opening all the relevant channels of newspapers, television, internet, and also distributing promotional materials to citizens, Shifang government did a lot to communicate with the public. After the outbreak of the conflict, Shifang TV channel looped the announcement of the city leaders on the decision to cancel the plant in a group text to the public to reiterate the decision. In addition, the government also provided a special telephone hotline and email

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<sup>77</sup> Han, H. (2012, 07 03). Liberation of shifang. Retrieved from <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-2615971-1.shtml>

<sup>78</sup> This data is culculated by the author based on the number of reposts and responses on "Vital Shifang".

address to answer the public's questions.

In conclusion, with close scrutiny of Shifang case, the study shows there was an elite division between the Shifang local government and the police department, including armed police and the special public security police. Thus, if it is already clear that the authority itself is not an impervious one, how did the elite division affect the decision making of the Shifang government and consequently influence the outcome of the protest?

### **3.4 Pressure on Local Government and its Countermeasure**

In China, local governments are more often targeted by social resistance than are central governments or other institutional agencies within the authority. There are several reasons: First, some Chinese citizens believe that most of the policies made by the central government are reasonable, but trampled by the local government during the process of implementation. Second, generally speaking, as local governments are responsible for local daily governance and have more opportunity to contact with local residents, they are always the one who violate the rights or interests of citizens directly<sup>79</sup>. Third, protesters in China prefer to frame their demands in legal ways to protect their legitimacy to solely target the local government in order and show their “non state-threatening” nature<sup>80</sup>.

Hence, compared with the police department, local government is somehow different as its leaders have more concern than do the police because of their responsibility for unintended consequences. Especially in the traditional understanding of Chinese ordinary

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<sup>79</sup> Yongshun Cai (2010). *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.4

<sup>80</sup> Kevin J. Obrien and Lianjiang Li (2005). *Popular Contention and Its Impact in Rural China*. *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 38 (No. 3), pp. 235-259.

citizens, local government is always the one responsible for every aspect of social life and all the failures of public administration. In terms of this particular incident, the most criticized aspect of the Shifang case was the opaque policy-making process in the early stage and brutal violence of the police towards ordinary citizens in the end. The fierce repression not only exacerbated the rage of local residents, but also spread over the internet and drew nation-wide attention. As a consequence, this broad social impact naturally drew the attention of the central government.

Although neither the use of violence nor the level of repression can be decided by the local government, it has to be responsible for the resulting consequence. In this section, I argue that, the severe repression measures adopted by the police department rapidly drew widespread criticism towards the Shifang government and as a result put the local government in an awkward position facing great pressure.

The pressure mainly comes from two aspects: First, pressure on the local government comes from the intervention of the central government. In the vertical political system of China, the destiny of a local government official is mainly controlled by his upper level authority. In this sense, managing to calm down social riots within its territory without causing intervention from the upper level authority would be the goal of Chinese local government leaders. Second, the pressure on local government also comes from the public. In the Shifang case, the participation of public intellectuals, widely using the free media and especially the microblog, and the post-90 students who were regarded as the new strength of China's civil society brought impetus to the development of this protest, exerting even greater pressure on the local government for dealing with the incident.

Facing this embarrassing situation, the Shifang local government was pushed to take countermeasures to release the pressure. To deal with the trouble, the local government attempted to please the citizens by making concessions to their demands and behaved in a rather benign way. This section analyzes the two sources of pressure exerted on the Shifang local government both from the central government and the public while at the same time examining the specific countermeasures adopted by the Shifang government.

### **Pressure from the Central government**

In terms of the attitude of the central government towards popular protest, it may tolerate some of the resistance in order to release social tension while suppressing the others according to its judgment of their nature<sup>81</sup>. Since too much concession will inspire the citizens to stage even more resistance while excessive violence will shake the legitimacy of the regime, the central government expects local governments to find a reasonable settlement for local resistance in order to limit it within a controllable level.

As a result of the lack of legal elections or other public participation channels, both the measurement of local performance and the destiny of individual government officials are decided by their superior in this vertical system. Thus, in China's hierarchical political system, it is always a top concern for local governments to please the upper level authority or central government. According to Cai, as local governments are the ones who are responsible for local governance, ineffective repression or serious casualties will signal the failure of local

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<sup>81</sup> Yongshun Cai (2008). Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China. *The China Quarterly*, Vol.193, pp. 24-42 . doi:10.1017/S0305741008000027

governments to maintain social stability and draw attention from central government.<sup>82</sup> So, local governments have only constrained autonomy to deal with popular resistance and these certain constraint, or pressure in other words, come from the intervention by the central government.

In this particular case of Shifang, pressure from the central government can be found in the reports and editorials of the state-run newspaper Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao). Global Times is a daily newspaper under the auspices of the People's Daily (Renmin Ribao) newspaper, which is an organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. From the general consensus of Chinese citizens, Global Times is a state-run newspaper which can represent the attitude of the central government. But in fact, the Global Times cannot be regarded as the tongue of the central government as a whole. Strictly speaking, none of the Chinese official media serve as the tongue of the central government, even People's Daily. This is because important official media in China is always controlled by different factions within the bureaucratic system. Global Times is marked by its populist and nationalist approach among official media and there is always apparent divergence between Global Times and People's Daily. However, as there was no coverage or no clear attitude was shown on the case of Shifang in People's Daily, Guangming Daily, Xinhua Website, and other official media, Global Times is the only relatively reliable source to represent the pressure from the central government in this context.

From July 3 to July 5, Global Times issued three successive articles criticizing the failure of the Shifang government while to deal with this social conflict. The first article

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<sup>82</sup> Yongshun Cai (2010). *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.6



publicized in July 3 was as follows:

“In many cases, government officials take the chance that it is very easy to overcome different opinions in the society, and some even believe that people will not aware of what are they doing... They (Shifang local government) turned a simple problem into a serious conflict, and even hurt the image of our party and our government.”<sup>83</sup>

This is a rather severe criticism for a local government to receive from the central government. Since central government always regards the image of the regime as a top priority while local governments are more concerned with policy implementation<sup>84</sup>, it presents a big failure of a local government if its performance has damaged the image the party-state. In July 4, another article was published by Global Time stated:

“As the party secretary said in the interview, the objection of the public towards this chemical plant comes from lack of communication in the early stage. Obviously, there was a flaw in the decision making process...An important plant approved by the State Environmental Protection Department was eventually made infamous (by the local government), as if the project itself is wrong, no matter where it would be constructed ...”<sup>85</sup>

Also, the editorial of July 5 reads that:

“Shifang local government made mistakes in the decision making process by

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<sup>83</sup> Mao, S. (2012, 07 03). The enlightenment of shifang case. Retrieved from <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2012-07/2876426.html>

<sup>84</sup> Yongshun Cai (2010). *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.5

<sup>85</sup> Global Times. (2012, 07 04). We hope this is the last time of making mistake. Retrieved from <http://china.huanqiu.com/newchinahotcomment/2012-07/2881692.html>

neglecting public opinion. This mistake led to antagonism between the government and the public...In this process, Shifang government and Deyang government should pay attention to public participation and information publicity and sincerely reflect on their mistakes.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Pressure from the Public**

The pressure from the public can be found by examining both the attitude of Shifang citizens towards their local government as events unfolded as well as overall public opinion on the Shifang protest on the internet. This section demonstrates the existence of pressure from the public towards the Shifang local government as a result of the bloody repression.

Before analyzing the pressure and its influence, there is the question of why bloody repression will cover so much reaction from the public that the focus of the public opinion thoroughly moved from the opaque policy making process to the suppression itself?

First, in contrast to the opaque policy making which can be labeled a lack of democracy, the bloody violence upgraded this incident to the criminal level of trampling on the human rights of ordinary citizens. The behavior of the police caused a panic among the public and gave ammunition to the critics who regard the authoritarian regime as a “Leviathan”. As a famous “post-80s” writer and political critic who has many fans in China, Hanhan said in his blog article, “If the local government uses a stun grenade on the residents, actually it has already admitted its tyranny...the blinding flash of light recorded the moment of history

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<sup>86</sup> Global Times. (2012, 07 05). Editorial: Dealing with shifang protest legally. Retrieved from <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2012-07/2884161.html>

which you can never erase.”<sup>87</sup> Also, Li Chengpeng described the behavior of the police as:

“They kept striking on ordinary citizens when teenagers were pulling their banner, when parents were asking for their children, when the plant was already called off, when the people arrested was released...that is to say, they choose to use violence no matter whether it is necessary...This demonstrates that they are not nervous or impulsive in fact, they are just too confident, arrogant and disdain communicating. Hence, the conclusion will be, when a government is strong enough, its probability of making mistakes is far beyond our imagination.”<sup>88</sup>

Second, since the online supervision was lenient in the Shifang case, a large number of bloody images and videos were spread online and raised people’s sympathy for the suffering of Shifang citizens and hostility towards the government. Among these images, two were reposted most online and was widely used by western media in their reports. One of them shows a police officer chasing a girl to beat her. When the image was publicized online, people started to search for this particular policeman in reality and exposed his name, occupation and family address in the online forum. The other image shows a girl stretching out her arms to deter the police. This image reminded the public of another image showing a girl carrying a poster reading, “PLA, I love you” in the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and damaged people’s feeling towards state apparatus. In consequence, these photos severely exaggerated the tension between government and citizens.

Third, the Shifang protest was notable as most of the participants were young teenagers.

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<sup>87</sup> Han, H. (2012, 07 03). Liberation of shifang. Retrieved from <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-2615971-1.shtml>

<sup>88</sup> Li, C. (2012, 07 04). A Case of the Lucifer Effect: A Little Investigation of Shifang. Retrieved from <https://plus.google.com/中国数字时代/posts/KdUKU47FW7g>

The antagonistic emotion became even more serious when people thought of those teenagers and their own children and realize that the government would still dare to quell the young generation with armed force just as they did in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest. Local citizens persisted in demonstrating after the government's concession when they heard that some students were arrested by the police. Hanhan publicized an article on July 3, speaking highly of the post-90s to be the hope of China's democracy<sup>89</sup>. In addition, news praising young students was composed by both Chinese media and western media. The BBC News reported the Shifang case on July 4 named "Post-90s in Shifang Protest Become the Centre of Attention" and praised the role of the students, saying that "It is an indisputable fact that they (the students) have made great contribution in the resistance."<sup>90</sup> Also, Leslie Hook, an editorial writer of the Financial Times, wrote that the protests "revealed a potentially important shift in the country's politics: youth were at the forefront of the three-day demonstration, exposing a new vein of activism in a generation seen by many as apathetic."<sup>91</sup> Moreover, alarmed by the participation of students in the demonstration, the state-run Global Times newspaper issued an editorial on 6 July titled "Do Not Foment Youngsters to Protest." The editorial warned "The participation of young demonstrators should not be encouraged. They should be kept out of mass protests and especially political conflicts."<sup>92</sup>

All these factors contributed to the pressure faced by the Shifang local government. Not only were the local residents of Shifang enraged by the excessive violence towards their

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<sup>89</sup> Han, H. (2012, 07 04). Yi Lai De Zhu Ren Wenging. Retrieved from [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4701280b0102e7wj.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4701280b0102e7wj.html)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> Hook, L. (2012, 07 09). China's post-90 generation make their mark. Retrieved from <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4fcbab6c-c67d-11e1-963a-00144feabdc0.html>

<sup>92</sup> Global Times. (2012, 07 06). Do not foment youngsters to protest. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/719376.shtml>

people, according to a survey by the IRI consulting firm of online public opinion from July 1 to July 10, 37.8% of the opinion expressed online shows an antipathy or satirical attitude towards the Shifang local government.<sup>93</sup> Hence, the overwhelming pressure from the public pushed the Shifang local government to take countermeasures to deal with this situation. To clarify the relationship between the growth trend of public opinion and the attitude of government, this study also cites a research result compiled by the IRI consulting firm.

This chart shows the growth trend of online public opinion. Since the beginning of the Shifang protest, especially after the clash between protesters and police on July 2, this particular incident drew heated attention quickly on the internet with the wide spread of relevant pictures and video. “Shifang” became the top searched keyword on Sina Microblog and Internet users expressed their anger and their condemnation of the local government as the result of the bloody violence. In this chart, the index of internet public opinion increased rapidly in the first two days. Despite the Shifang government leaders having already promised to stop the plant’s construction in the afternoon of July 2, this concession did not appease the public criticism as the violent repression had offset the effort of the local government. The increasing public opposition culminated in the afternoon of July 3 when the plant was officially called off; however, the index only shows a slowly decreasing trend from July 3 to July 4. In that period, Shifang protesters are still advocating resistance and demanding for the release of the arrested citizens. Public opinion finally calmed down after the afternoon of July 4 when the government made further concessions to release these people.

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<sup>93</sup> IRI Consulting Firm. (2012). Shifang case: Gas tear cannot resolve nimby movement. Informally published manuscript.

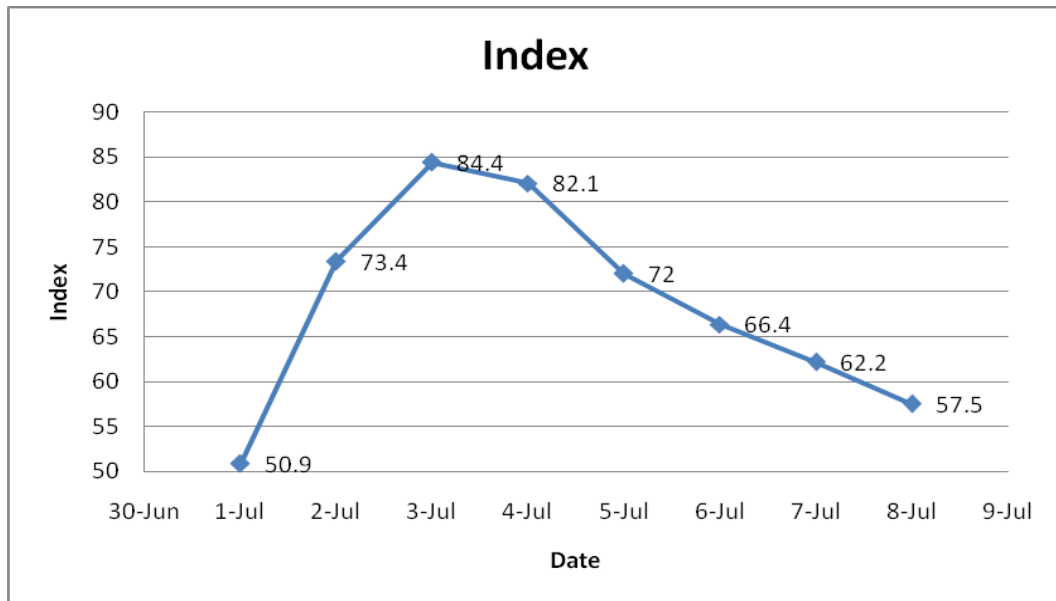


Figure 3-1. Growth Trend of Online Public Opinion Index<sup>94</sup>

By examining the successive criticism from the central government and the growing trend of public opinion, this section compares of the measures adopted by the local government with the pressure it faced. In conclusion, the section suggests a correlation of the accumulation of pressure and the concessions made by the Shifang government, while in turn, the concession did help the local government to appease the conflict and release the public pressure.

In conclusion, the pressure faced by Shifang local government comes from both the criticism from the central government and the public opinion of the citizens. However, the proportion of significance of these two sources of pressure cannot be calculated or compared in this single case. Although we can tell from the statistics that the gradual policy adjustment made by the Shifang local government is almost compatible with the spreading of public opinion, there is no clear evidence showing whether the central government's attitude is more

<sup>94</sup> IRI Consulting Firm. (2012). Shifang case: Gas tear cannot resolve nimby movement. Informally published manuscript.

important and direct on influencing the behavior of the local government. But what is more important is that the central government's attitude is not independent of the public pressure. The central government is not designed to play a role as a judge or a mediator between the local governments and the public, in most situations, the central government itself prefers to ignore popular protests when it does not damage the image or the legitimacy of the party-state. In the Shifang case, the central government's clearly attitude was also related with the overwhelming public opinion on this issue.

### **3.5 Alternative Explanation - Strength of Social Media and Forceful Resistance**

#### **Strength of Social Media in Shifang Case**

As mentioned above, the media played a significant role in Shifang case and was thus regarded as an alternative explanation for the positive policy outcome. Since the Shifang case was first mobilized online and then drew widespread attention as photos and articles were reposted on the website, it is necessary to pay attention to the important role of internet in this particular case. In this section, despite conceding the great effect of social media on the development of Shifang case, however, by comparing with another case, Ningbo anti-PX protest, this study also suggests that whether the media will have such great influence on a particular case still depends on the government's decision of controlling the media.

Sina Microblog was the most important information source, filling with photos, comments, and official announcements in this particular case. Other website or online forums, such as Baidu post bar and Tencent Microblog also played a part in the process. According to statistics, the "Shifang" case initiated 2384 related news reports, 764,784 comments on these

reports by the online population, and involving 243 relevant websites in total. Besides these, this case also involved 121 relevant blog articles, 218 posts in online forums with 4326 responses following these posts.<sup>95</sup>

What is worth mentioning here is that the supervision of public opinion was abnormally lenient in this particular case. In terms of the Chinese government's conventional treatment similar situations, the name of the protest is usually regarded as a "sensitive word" online and most of the posts and comments would be deleted promptly. However, in the Shifang case, only several of the extremely hostile or anti-state words were limited and even the bloody pictures kept spreading online. Some people believe this represented a progress for the Chinese government to relax supervision of public opinion although other people suspected the motivation of central government to be some kind of conspiracy. There is no way to detect the real reason why the authority decided to leave a space for public opinion in the Shifang case, but one should not overlook the ability of Chinese government to control the freedom of speech.

This section compares Ningbo anti-PX case, another significant environmental protest took place in Zhen Hai district of NingBo city in 2012, with Shifang case to show that the condition of free speech was not always lenient and was highly dependent on the attitude of Chinese authority.

In Oct 25 and 16, 2012, more than a thousand people gathered in Ningbo Tianyi square and in front of the government building to protest against a plan to expand a petrochemical plant. Carrying a placard reading "PX...Get out of Ningbo!", the protesters claimed that an

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<sup>95</sup> IRI Consulting Firm. (2012). Shifang case: Gas tear cannot resolve nimby movement. Informally published manuscript .



chemical element, paraxylene, that would be produced by this plant was a serious carcinogen. Police were also dispatched to crack down on the protest but no bloody violence was reported in this case. However, in the Ningbo anti-PX case, journalists were banned from covering it in China and discussion of the protests on microblogs was blocked as well. The name of the district, “Zhenhai”, cannot be searched or posted online and relevant photos and comments were deleted. Citizens within the Ningbo area were limited to the use of uploaded photographs through Sina or Tencent Microblog in that period.

Overall, even though cyberspace and social media have contributed to an informational politics in China by making the internet a new means, stake and arena of political struggle<sup>96</sup>, it is risky to overestimate the importance of social media from such a special case by demonstrating the effectiveness of Chinese government to control the internet.

### **The Shifang Protest, A Forceful Resistance or Not?**

Apart from the strength of social media, the determination and solidarity of Shifang local residents also made a remarkable contribution to the outcome of this resistance. The strong motivation of Shifang local residents to protect their hometown reflected an increasing environmental awareness among Chinese citizens, while the admirable courage to resist violence represented a developing consciousness of civil rights. However, is Shifang protest a forceful resistance besides the precious spirit and strong motivation? Using a theory developed by Cai Yongshun in analyzing successful protests in modern China, this section

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<sup>96</sup> Yang, G. (2005). Environmental NGOs and Institutional Dynamics in China. *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 181(March 2005), pp. 46-66. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192443>

argues that Shifang case is not a qualified “forceful resistance” which is likely to lead to larger positive outcomes. On the contrary, by assessing different dimensions of this particular case, I suggest the Shifang protest is a hard case which is not likely to achieve positive government policy response under normal evaluation.

Although it is not new to use a cost-benefit approach to analysis collective resistance, Cai has developed a specific calculation model to analyze the rationale behind different outcomes achieved by modern Chinese “non-political” collective resistances.<sup>97</sup> Although his concepts of “outcome” or “success” are different from the single “policy adjustment” aspect focused in our thesis, this section will only use the evaluation method of “forceful resistance” which is not affected by how we define success.

As Cai suggested, participants are most likely to succeed when their demands are less costly and their action is forceful.<sup>98</sup> As mentioned early in this chapter, the Hongda copper-molybdenum refinery plant would provide great profits and employment opportunities for the recovery of the local economy as well as having a significant status in the “Twelfth-five” plan of Sichuan province. Hence, it is reasonable for us to regard the concession of Shifang local government to give up this plant as costly option.

As for the factors which contribute to staging successful resistance, Cai defined “forceful resistance” with several dimensions. First, in China’s authoritarian political system, the most important constraint exerted on local government is the intervention from central government. However, as the threshold of the central-government intervention is relatively

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<sup>97</sup> Yongshun Cai (2010). *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.185.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p.67

high, it would be a great leverage if the participants in a certain protest have the ability to achieve upper-level intervention. Second, it will be beneficial if the participants in a certain resistance have useful social networks which can help them gain support among the bureaucratic elite.<sup>99</sup>Third, using violence is always counterproductive as this tactic will be highly unacceptable to local governments in most situations.

Turn to the case of Shifang protest, it seems rather plausible that it is a forceful resistance as it has successfully drew attention from central government and gained a benign attitude from local government leaders. However, when we undertake close scrutiny of the Shifang case, most of the protesters are middle school students who even took the risk of being expelled from school and other ordinary citizens living in such a small county-level city. In this sense, this particular campaign is not a strong organization which has a lot of useful resources or leverage to coerce the local government to make concessions. A comparison can be made between the Shifang protest and the Xiamen anti-PX protest in 2007, which was regarded as an outstanding example of successful protests in present-day China. The participants in the Xiamen protest were mostly urban middle class, who utilized a full range of repertoires to achieve success with a mostly peaceful demonstration. In the Xiamen case, a number of scientists, including scientists in office within the legislature, signed a petition to the central government refusing the PX-plant. Well-known real estate businessmen, who have a concern about property values, along with school presidents and teachers worried about their recruitment, cooperated to gain support from inside the local government. However, among the social celebrities and scientists, who has ever united to speak for the Shifang

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<sup>99</sup> Yongshun Cai (2010). *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.87

people as happened in Xiamen? Even at the end of the incident, whether the Hongda plant was polluted was still unknown. Just because Shifang protest was not a forceful resistance based on its own ability, it was repressed by the police without any hesitation or communication. Moreover, the use of violence also aggravated the disadvantages and soon incurred fierce repression from the police department.

However, if the Shifang protest is not as forceful as it seems to be, then why did it gain intervention from the upper-level and make the local government leader yield to its requirement step by step? From the evidence provided in this chapter, the central government started to exert pressure on the Shifang local government as the bloody repression and indiscriminate violence had undermined the image of the government among the public. In this sense, the central government's intervention was never a "leverage" that was sought by Shifang protesters in their strategies; instead, it was just a consequence after the settlement of a particular resistance had a very bad political effect. Also, as shown earlier in this chapter, the positive response of local government leaders was not a result of the "social network" owned by Shifang protesters.

Demonstrating the Shifang protest to be a less "forceful" one, it is more reasonable to regard the Shifang protest as a case that has less opportunity to have policy response. More importantly, the extent to which the Shifang case was not as forceful as other successive social resistances means that the case can be regarded as "extreme" by achieving such a positive policy adjustment.

## **Chapter IV: Understanding the Shifang Case from Modern Chinese Politics**

The last chapter demonstrated an elite division between the police department and Shifang local government. But why these two actors adopt different measures to deal with popular protest and what are the principles they are following? To further understand the Shifang case, this chapter puts the elite division of these two actors into a larger institutional background of China's modern political climate. This chapter provides a possible explanation that the elite division in the Shifang case is an embodiment of the structural division between Chinese local governments and the stability maintenance system.

There are three main goals of this chapter. First, this chapter introduces the stability maintenance system in China by examining its development, financial investment and institutional structure. Second, by analyzing Chinese local governments' characteristic of "institutional amphibiousness", this study demonstrates that Chinese local governments are neither just the executors of upper authority policies nor public servants of citizens in present-day China. This judgment on Chinese local governments lays theoretical foundation for analyzing its collaboration and division with the stability maintenance system. Third, this chapter illustrates two mechanisms through which the collaboration between local governments and the stability maintenance system collapses.

### **4.1 Stability Maintenance System in China**

The 1978 reform of China legalized multiple forms of ownership and encouraged the growth of private and collective enterprises outside the state sector<sup>100</sup>. With more than thirty

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<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal (1995). *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company Inc. p148

years' rapid economic growth in China, the nature of capital and market led to a requirement for compatible social and political reform. However, decades of economic development has not provided benefit to all Chinese citizens equally. Conversely, the gap between the rich and poor created a highly differentiated society which contains more social conflicts. Government officials and state-owned enterprises leaders formed cooperative monopolies through corruption and nepotism to expel private enterprises, while at the same time eroding social justice and equity exaggerates confrontation between the government and citizens. Moreover, as there is no legitimate channel to express their grievance, citizens were forced to stage collective actions since it seems to be the only effective way to bargain with governments.

Despite this, as demonstrated in earlier chapters, most social resistance in present-day China involves disruptive tactics aimed at specific benefits rather than state-threatening activities. Liping Sun, a professor of Tsinghua University, described Chinese society as a “mirage of turbulence” within which most of the unrest can be solved expediently.<sup>101</sup> Dingxin Zhao also agrees that Chinese social resistance is far from revolutionary turmoil.<sup>102</sup> In addition, some scholars are rather optimistic about the future of CCP and deem the present period as the best opportunity for the Party-state to deepen reforms. According to Yongnian Zheng, this best opportunity comes from the growth of central resources in recent years which makes it possible for the Chinese government to implement extensive welfare policies to resolve social conflicts and recover the government's legitimacy.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Research Group of Social Development Tsinghua University. (2012). Interest groups refuse to reform under the name of maintaining stability. Informally published manuscript, Tsinghua University.

<sup>102</sup> Dingxin Zhao (2011). Book Review, Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail. *Contemporary Sociology, A Journal of Reviews*. vol. 40. no. 2 (March 2011). pp. 161-162.

<sup>103</sup> Zheng, Y. (2012, 11 21). Social reform is the focus of the next phase of reform. Retrieved from <http://www.caogen.com/blog/index.aspx?id=66&page=5>

However, despite the good financial situation of Chinese central government in recent years, rather than extending social security and social welfare budget, a great proportion of government expenditure was used as “stability maintenance” funds. China is among the states that invest the largest financial resources to ensure stability. Scholars always compare public security expenditure with military expenditure to illustrate the state’s emphasis on internal contend. In 2009, the public security expenditure of China was 514 billion *yuan* and the military expenditure was 532.1 billion *yuan*. In 2010, the public security expenditure was 548.6 billion *yuan* and in 2011, for the first time the public security expenditure which was 624.4 billion *yuan* outnumbered the military expenditure of 601.1 billion *yuan* in the same year. In 2012, the public security expenditure was 701.7 billion *yuan* while the military expenditure was 670.2.<sup>104</sup> Although the Chinese government claimed that “public security expenditure” is not equal to “stability maintenance expenditure”, within the public security expenditure in 2011, the expenditure of public security department was up to 322.5 billion *yuan*, armed police department 104.6 billion *yuan*<sup>105</sup>. So, why such a great proportion of government expenditure was used for maintaining social stability?

In the last ten years, social conditions became more intractable in China. The growth of the internet and modern communication technology, Chinese citizens’ awareness of human rights, the influence of the Arab Spring Movement, as well as the accessible and friendly image of the top leaders, created more difficulties for the Chinese government to deal with increasing social unrest, even they are mostly not state-threatening. Thus, there seems to be no choice for Chinese government but to carry out meaningful policy or implement rigid

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<sup>104</sup> Xu, K., Chen, X. & Li, W. (2011, 05 08). Bill of public security expenditure. *Caijing*, 11(289).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*

maintenance of social stability.

Under this circumstance, in the last decade, especially in the second term of the Hu Jintao administration, maintaining social stability became the top priority of Chinese governments. Thus, the Party-state set up a national wide “stability maintenance” system whose offices can be found at every level of Chinese government. The center of the stability maintenance system is named “Central Government Leading Group for Stability Maintenance” and located inside the “Central Political and Law Committee”. There is also a standing office beneath the center charged with collecting and analyzing information on social conflicts across the nation. The “Central Political and Law Committee” is a powerful and characteristically Chinese organ whose full name is “Politics and Law Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China”. This agency is designed to be responsible to the CPC Central Committee for political and legal affairs. However, in practice, this organ and its subordinate agencies that were established at all Chinese government levels oversee all administrative and judicial authorities. The composition of the “Political and law Commission” is complex and very powerful, including public security departments, procuratorate departments, the judicial system, the state security, and also propaganda departments. As an internal organization of the CCP, the “Political and law Commission” is always criticized as the greatest intervention in China’s judicial independence. Moreover, this political condition largely enhances the status of the public security system in China and some people even describe China as a “police state”.

In addition to its powerful central leading group, stability maintenance offices were established across the country including in Beijing, the provinces and autonomous regions,



cities, counties, villages, and even streets and neighborhoods. In consequence, the systematizing of the stability maintenance system creates a large population of personnel who implement the task of maintaining social stability. Thus, this “stability maintenance” industry has nourished a large interest group who obtained both political and economic resources from the great policy emphasis on stability. Yujie, a Chinese political writer and democracy activist who suffered one-year of house arrest by the CCP before emigrating to the U.S. in January 2012, reported his conversation with a district policeman. In this conversation, the policeman told him that during his monitoring in Beijing, their district was able to enjoy millions of Yuan for maintaining stability and now his only task is to supervise him.<sup>106</sup> Also, according to an investigation in Yun’an County, Hunan province, 1800 jobs out of 6700 in total who receive financial allocation as their salary in that county are related to the stability maintenance system.<sup>107</sup>

This particular interest group covers the whole system of stability maintenance from top leaders of central governments to local governments, including the Commission of Politics and Law at different levels, armed police department, the public security department, and so on. This powerful interest group, which has more access to influence policy-making process, deters the social and political reforms which would harm their vital interest. When confronting social resistance, the instinctive response of the police system is to suppress the protesters and threaten them with arrogant attitudes. In addition, to maintain their political power and the large amount of government expenditure on their group, they sometimes

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<sup>106</sup> Veith, G. (2012, 06 04). “maintaining stability” in china. Retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2012/06/maintaining-stability-in-china/>

<sup>107</sup> Doyon, J. (2012, March). Local Governments Under Pressure: The Commodification of Stability Maintenance. *China Perspectives*, pp. 82-84.

exaggerate social contradictions and thus wield their power of repression.

However, what should be mentioned here is that the “Political and law Commission” is not representative of the central government; conversely, it is becoming an independent powerful interest group which is somehow out of the control of the central government. As for the relationship between central government and stability maintenance system, in the first place, maintaining social stability is a common interest of the whole bureaucratic system of China. So generally speaking, the interests of these two actors are not opposite to each other.

But there is no doubt that they are two different actors in this case, not only inferred from this case, but also reflected from the political changes in recent years. Evidence accumulates to prove the conflicts between the top leaders of stability maintenance and other top leaders within the central government, and this division is always pried by western media and some informed Chinese citizens. During the 18th CPC National Congress, the secretary of “Political and law Commission” was downgraded to be out of the Politburo Standing Committee and since then, several important government officials of this political faction was punished for varied reasons. As it is difficult to find reliable evidence to prove the conflict within the central government, the only fact we conclude from this case is that we should examine these two actors separately.

As for the case of Shifang protest, although it is unknown whether the authority of commanding the police is out of the control of the central government, like most cases, central government should have known about the settlement in advance. Also, the criticism from central government towards Shifang local government does not mean a wrong judgment on the actors who should be in charge of this suppression. On the contrary, it is reasonable for

the central government to blame the local government as its responsibility of local management. In order to examine the division between local government and the stability maintenance system, in this context, this study regards the central government as a neutral actor who did not show clear preference besides protecting their image and legitimacy.

Thus, elites who have not benefited from or even actually suffer from the stability maintenance policy behave differently from the stability maintenance system. In terms of the local governments, obviously, it is far beyond reality to defend their behavior of implementing rigid stability maintenance towards social resistance as well as seeking personal profit by depriving the rights of ordinary citizens. However, in recent years, in order to appease social conflicts and control these social incidents, local government leaders are more inclined to “spend money to buy peace” or to make concessions to popular protests without using either the legal channel nor repression. However, sometimes this behavior not only sacrifices the authority of laws but also encourages more people to see the effectiveness of taking a disruptive action. So, what is the action logic of Chinese local governments when dealing with the awkward situation between the superior authority and the public? And what is the relationship between Chinese local governments and the stability maintenance system?

#### **4.2 The Institutional Amphibiousness of Chinese Local Governments**

The second chapter demonstrates the role played by Chinese local governments in the policy making process as “institutional amphibiousness”. This section aims to analyze the specific cost-benefit balance that Chinese local governments are facing when choosing between private goods and good performance.

On the other hand, since the Chinese government is not popularly elected through legal procedures, it has to rely heavily on good performance in order to compensate for the lack of procedural legitimacy. When the performance legitimacy buttressed by economic development waned after several decades of economic growth, the civil society started to coerce the local government to resolve their grievances by targeting local government's excessive power over controlling the society. In this perspective, the action logic of Chinese local government is to balance both good performance and their invested interest in terms of specific issues and the environment. Chinese local government is more likely to collaborate with the stability maintenance system when sacrificing a certain degree of good performance, such as violating the property rights of citizens, in exchange for better access to private goods through trade. However, when the interest and benefit acquired through this collaboration diminishes or even becomes harmful, the collaboration ends. Thus, the only way to get rid of the trouble is to rely on good performance. And under the condition in which making meaningful institutional measures are prohibitive, good performance means a benign attitude, and compensation and concession with or without principles.

### **4.3 Collaboration and Division between Local Governments and the Stability**

#### **Maintenance System**

Local government leaders would like to collaborate with the stability maintenance system for two main reasons: First, given the nature of the authoritarian regime with neither effective nor a channel of public participation nor public monitoring mechanisms, it is routine for local government leaders in China to hide their policy making process and to make

personal profits through corruption and depriving ordinary citizens. Thus, most petitions or protests are targeting local governments by exposing their faults on corruption, over taxation, polluting the environment, or their illegal behavior in encroaching on land and resettlement. To disguise their faults by deterring and suppressing local unrest, local government leaders enjoy the privilege of abusing power under the name of maintaining social stability. In addition, as the cadre assessment standards highlight the aspect of maintaining social stability; Chinese local governments' leaders are rather nervous about serious social incidents that will draw the attention of the central government. To control the social conflicts to a certain degree but without seeking meaningful resolution, local governments prefer to collaborate with the stability maintenance system to suppress these incidents to avoid being called to account from upper level authority.

However, when the number of both petitions and protests increased rapidly and effective ways to bargain with the governments became widely known by Chinese citizens<sup>108</sup>, the collaboration between local governments and the stability maintenance system collapsed as a result of the awkward situation faced by local government leaders. First, the increasing number of protests and petitions in local areas has exhausted the financial resources and caused a “fiscal fatigue”<sup>109</sup> of local governments. Since it is a tradition for Chinese citizens to complain about local issues by launching their petition to Beijings' central Xinfang bureau, there are always government officials in Beijing dispatched to local governments all over the nation to contact and deter these petitioners, especially during the “two sessions” period in

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<sup>108</sup> Dingxin Zhao (2011). Book Review, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Poplular Protests Succeed or Fail*. *Contemporary Sociology, A Journal of Reviews*. vol.40. no. 2 (March 2011). pp. 161-162.

<sup>109</sup> He, Q. (2012, 12). China's stability maintenance system faces financial pressure. Retrieved from <http://www.hrichina.org/crf/article/6415>

Beijing. In dealing with these petitioners, there are three main methods for local government leaders to “buy peace” for themselves, the first is to supervise these petitioners by government officers in the petitioners’ neighborhoods and villages, the second is to outsource this task to other social organizations such as private security firms, the third is to bribe relevant agencies to delete the central governments’ records of petitions they cannot deter.<sup>110</sup>

All these three measures are highly expensive. For example, there is a famous petitioner Tanghui in Hunan province, whose daughter was forced into prostitution. Tang kept petitioning for seven years after 2006,<sup>111</sup> and according to the local government of Fu Jiaqiao Town, 800,000 yuan was spend on the stability maintenance on this single case in the past seven years. However, the situation would be even worse when social grievance became popular protests. In terms of protests, either compensating these protestors with money or suppressing them with violence would be costly for local governments. Obviously, this situation of “fiscal fatigue” violates the local governments’ incentives to pursue financial resources.

Second, as the cadre assessment standards became stricter on stability maintenance performance and it seems even less possible for local governments to control information in recent years, repression is no longer a good option for local government leaders as the influence of a violent incident will not only draw public attention but also incur punishment from central government. In 2010, the central government issued a document named “Temporary provision on the enforcement of the responsibilities of government and party

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<sup>110</sup> Doyon, J. (2012, March). Local Governments Under Pressure: The Commodification of Stability Maintenance. *China Perspectives*, pp. 82-84.

<sup>111</sup> Hua, B. (2013, 08 07). Institutional earthquake caused by tanghui. Retrieved from [http://bbs.creaders.net/politics/bbsviewer.php?trd\\_id=882068&language=big5](http://bbs.creaders.net/politics/bbsviewer.php?trd_id=882068&language=big5)

leaders”, which proclaimed the responsibility of local government leaders on the social incidents which threaten social stability. This principle is also named the “zero-incident rule” by Chinese government leaders. Of course, the “zero-incident rule” does not mean there should not be any incident at all, instead, it only means there shouldn’t be any large-scale riots or severe social conflicts which would cause the intervention of the central government. In addition, there is also a strict assessment approach named “one-vote vetoes”, which is interpreted as “one failure (in stability maintenance), all achievements voided”<sup>112</sup> by local leaders. Obviously, this rule exerts great pressure on local cadres who can be vetoed by the particular selection criterion even if only one severe social incident took place in his jurisdiction. Moreover, the wide use of internet, cell phone and other modern technology makes it almost impossible for local governments to control the spread of information. As the state control over social media is not as strict as before, it became even more difficult for local government to keep social unrest from being perceived by the public and higher authority. Under this circumstance, the local governments, who are responsible for unlimited problems with quite limited resources, are caught between the public criticism and the central government’s punishment.

In conclusion, the implementation of rigid stability has trapped Chinese governments in a vicious circle. Given the enormous financial burden faced by local governments, their leaders manage to create profit by constructing industrial projects or selling land in local areas. These measures always lead to more social dissents and conflicts. When these conflicts were expressed by social resistance, more investment on maintaining stability financial

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<sup>112</sup> He, Q. (2012, 12). China’s stability maintenance system faces financial pressure. Retrieved from <http://www.hrichina.org/crf/article/6415>

expenses exhausts the financial resources of local government and sometimes even destroys the career of local leaders. Thus, under the name of “maintaining stability”, local government leaders face both financial burdens of dealing with social resistance and political threats to their career. As He Qinglian concludes, “Chinese local governments, being at the forefront of conflicts between government authority and the people, are increasingly weary of the never-ending stability maintenance measures, both in terms of budget input and the patience of grassroots officials.”<sup>113</sup> Thus, as a result of the “institutional amphibiousness” of Chinese local government, when the benefit getting from maintaining rigid stability minimized for Chinese local governments, the collaboration between the stability maintenance system and local governments collapse.

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<sup>113</sup> He, Q. (2013, 07 10). Stability maintenance and china. Retrieved from <http://hqlenglish.blogspot.com/2013/07/stability-maintenance-and-china.html>



## Chapter V: Conclusion

As Tarrow says, “A diverse and changing society is producing a rich and complex panoply of studies of contentious politics.”<sup>114</sup>The political condition of authoritarian regimes, especially those undertaking liberalizing reforms such as contemporary China, may provide popular protests a variety of political opportunities, from flexible to stable. Indeed, not only the macro institutional design and policy priority but also a subtle change of a known variable will create a new political opportunity contour confronted by Chinese popular protests.

This study places great emphasis on the importance of inside factors within the regime. Unlike existing literatures which mostly focuses on the development of the civil society or the conflicts between the society and the state, this study highlights the importance of the tension between different political actors within the state on influencing the policy outcomes of the protests. In actuality, the state-centered perspective of this study definitely does not mean I believe in the state’s capability of deliberately leaving space for popular protests or being well equipped to control social conflict in a certain degree. On the contrary, the non-monolithic feature of Chinese government limits its ability to control the society and makes it more permeable to the demands of social resistance.

However, the internal tension within the regime is not groundless. In this study, I also demonstrate that this elite division is also promoted by the increasing number of social resistance in China. In addition to the internal factors within the state actor, there are multiple aspects of the society and increasingly intractable variables that are beyond the control of the state, such as the development of communication technology, the influence of western

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<sup>114</sup> Sidney Tarrow, Prologue: The New Contentious Politics in China: Poor and Blank or Rich and Complex? From Kevin J. Obrien (2008). *Popular Protest in China*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

ideology and increasing rights awareness among Chinese citizens. By exhausting the financial resources of “maintaining stability” policy that dominated in the last decade and exerting great pressure on local governments, Chinese popular protests are actually forcing the authority to make concessions to public desires. Thus, it is too early to regard Chinese social resistance as just a moderate compensation for the absence of meaningful political reform. The Chinese government is not the one who shapes the reality in most situations; contrariwise, they are struggling with difficulties both inside and outside the regime and adjusting their behavior according to the reality which shapes it.

This study of Shifang protest builds a theory that the elite division between the police system and the Shifang local government had influence the policy outcome of this protest. However, there comes another issue. If the elite division is a stable and structural variable in present-day Chinese political environment, then how are varied outcomes explained from different cases? To answer this question, this study argues that the success of Chinese popular protests is always highly conditional even the elite division between the stability maintenance system and local governments is a relatively stable feature in the political environment.

That is mainly because the mechanism between the elite division and policy responses includes many other factors which can also influence the behavior of key actors. First, there are conditions under which the effectiveness of the elite division will be hidden. As I have mentioned in chapter three, if the participants of a particular protest are powerful enough with considerable political and economic resources, the police are less likely to use violence in repression, making the division hidden in these cases. As well, if the media is restricted strictly on reporting a protest and the protest is unable to draw wide public attention, then

there would be little pressure faced by the local government to repress the protests. In this circumstance, the local government may still choose to collaborate with the stability maintenance system. Second, even when the elite division is not hidden by other factors, the local governments have to deal with different stakeholders and balance varied interests in particular cases. If the cost is too high to make concession, or if the central government factually support the behavior of the stability maintenance system on specific issues, then these factors will also influence the policy-making process and the local government may have different policy preference.

Thus, in conclusion, as the lack of research on other popular protests in present-day China, it is still unknown whether this “elite division” exists widely among other cases or under what condition this variable will be effective. Thus, the validity of this theory still awaits further testing.

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