

Global Issues

Migrants and Mobilization: Sectoral Patterns in China, 2010-2013

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China's migrant workers have evinced an extraordinary capacity for ardent, courageous, and often successful collective action despite living in a one-party state that denies them the right to strike and organize and that is capable of draconian political repression. Their protests' stimuli, repertoires, discourses, and capacity for contagion have varied over time and space. Some analysts detect nascent, potentially destabilizing class-based politics (e.g., Pun and Lu, 2010), while others (e.g., Elstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014) see incipient bread-and-butter labor-management conflict. Both may be right, if only because they may be looking at different kinds of cases across this differentiated terrain. In this article, we probe the variation and debates by zooming out from the rich literature about labor politics in particular firms, localities or sectors¹ to a comparison across sectors – specifically, apparel, automobiles, construction and electronics. Beyond the analytical findings about explaining protests are significant political implications: for even if we find some instances of class-based and potentially militant or contagious politics in some sectors, the differences among them are likely to increase the fragmentation of labor protest, and, therefore, weaken it overall.

Labor politics differs across industrial sectors only because they in turn tend to differ along a range of important *explanans* such as gender, skill, labor process, ownership, enterprise size and organization, social relations (between management and workers and also among workers), and wage levels. Specifically, the apparel and electronics sectors – especially the former – tend heavily to employ young women, while automobile manufacturing and construction are heavily male trades. Electronics firms in China are vast, often employing hundreds of thousands of workers at a single site that resembles a city in itself; the other three tend toward much smaller factories. Electronics and automobiles rely on constant-flow assembly lines, a very different labor process, involving different skills, forms of labor discipline, and relations among workers, from construction and apparel. Many automobile plants are foreign joint ventures, whose management patterns and institutions differ from those in smaller, Chinese-owned apparel contractors or vast electronics plants owned by Chinese or other Asian firms, or even from foreign-owned construction firms. Apparel, automotive and electronics factories are very different from construction sites, mainly because of the nature of the labor process and organization. Skill requirements differ too.

As an analytical concept, sectors are important not in and of themselves – there is, after all, nothing magical about the differences among dresses, drive trains, diggers or devices. Rather, they are useful analytical categories because and only insofar as different sectors are characterized by somewhat distinctive economic, micro-political and social factors and relationships. At the bottom we, like our colleagues who have done focused ethnographic work, are interested in the effects of those myriad factors on contentious labor politics. And to be sure, as units of analysis, sectors combine them in complex ways that do not allow us to neatly isolate those underlying factors. Ideally, we would want to study in depth many hundreds of factories where workers protested (and did not do so), and to

differentiate them by the full range of potential *explanans*. But until that is possible – i.e., as long as the available materials are restricted to a few score brief, journalistic reports – industrial sectors can provide a starting point out of which we can tease tentative hypotheses about some of the overall dynamics of protest that may help guide future, more in-depth and nuanced research. Our work, then, remains exploratory and inductive. Mindful of the limitations of the available materials, we went into this study without textured hypotheses about the effect of the variegated differences among sectors on collective action other than that we expected that they would point to some. These qualifications notwithstanding, we believe the time has come to begin to move on, however provisionally, from research on individual cases and explanatory factors to a more cross-sectional approach that can expand the ongoing debate about the nature and complex determinants of migrant workers' collective action.

We surveyed the online databases of the China Labour Bulletin and the China Strikes crowdmap² to develop a compendium of every instance of migrant workers' collective action between the start of 2010 and the middle of 2013. Of course, even though these two sources are as comprehensive as anything available, we cannot argue that the material they provide constitutes the universe of instances of such labor protest in China during those years. However, our analysis does not depend on our having to do so. For we are not attempting to describe *quantitatively* the terrain of such labor conflict – e.g., how it is distributed over time, space or industrial sector. Rather, we develop a *qualitative* analysis of migrants' collective action based on the cases we do have. To be sure, insofar as there surely are incidents of migrant labor collective action that have eluded our sources, the analysis might well change. Of course we can hope that the cases we have found are in a broad sense representative of the universe of cases, but we have no basis for arguing that it does. This, then, is another respect in which our findings must be treated as tentative and suggestive.

Moreover, our approach limits the questions we can ask. We are unable to say anything about many of the potentially important characteristics of the individual participants: their ages, levels of education or skill, home areas, personalities, social networks, and the like. We also cannot get deeply into protesters' underlying forms of consciousness, or even the nuances of discourse that might provide clues to them – though we do make an attempt at a rough-and-ready categorization of protest discourses based on the reports we deployed. We cannot probe the processes by which collective action developed, a truly fascinating and narratively thrilling matter. For all this and more, scholars must continue to rely on the rich body of case studies undertaken by our colleagues.

But we can ask different questions. Most centrally, we attempt to understand how collective action differs across the range of enterprises in which migrants work. Our materials turned up four: apparel, automobiles, construction, and electronics. Based on their differences along various potentially important social, economic and political dimensions, there are good theoretical reasons to expect systematic variation in the collective action that took place among them. Our data allow us to ask the following questions:

- What repertoires of collective action took place?
- What stimulated them? More specifically, what were the issues and demands? And were they offensive or defensive?
- In what kinds of discourses did workers engage?
- Was collective action contagious?

Repertoires

Migrant workers' protests evinced a considerable range of virtuosity, from informal bargaining to rioting and self-harm or threats of same (table 1).³ Overall, strikes and public demonstrations predominated in all sectors, as we would expect.⁴ Informal and legal forms may be underrepresented

in our data because they are less likely to have featured in news reports; moreover, most are individual rather than collective in the first place. In light of the very small number of times they were mentioned, it seems prudent not to attempt to interpret those figures further, beyond saying that they are not a prominent repertoire of *collective* action. The very low incidence of slowdowns may seem surprising, since they could be thought to involve less risk than strikes. But they may actually involve more danger for individual workers, since a slowdown takes place in the direct face of management, who can easily single out particular workers for blame, correction and retribution; by contrast, in a strike workers leave the shopfloor. Sabotage and factory occupations were relatively infrequent, perhaps again because they bring workers into much more direct, face-to-face contact with management than the former may find intimidating.

Table 1: Repertoires of Collective Action

	Informal request	Legal (petition, lawsuit, letter, arbitration, mediation)	Slowdown	Strike	Public protest (blockade, march, demonstration, press tipoff)	Sabotage, occupation	Self-harm (including threats)	Riot	N
Apparel	0	2	0	12	10	1	0	1	17
Automobiles	0	0	1	13	3	0	0	0	13
Construction	2	2	0	11	12	1	5	3	22
Electronics	0	0	0	28	13	2	4	5	37
% of N									
Apparel	0%	12%	0%	71%	59%	6%	0%	6%	
Automobiles	0%	0%	8%	100%	23%	0%	0%	0%	
Construction	9%	9%	0%	50%	55%	5%	23%	14%	
Electronics	0%	0%	0%	76%	35%	5%	11%	14%	

The most violent repertoires – self-harm and rioting – occurred only in construction and electronics, perhaps because, arguably, their labor processes and working conditions are even worse than in apparel and automobiles. Construction work is particularly demanding physically, and the working conditions extremely difficult, with laborers toiling and often living out of doors – a toxic mix. Electronics plants in China are infamous for their grinding pace, elongated hours, and draconian regulation backed by severe fines. The near complete absence of violent repertoires in apparel plants is a bit of a puzzle. We resist any temptation to link it to the effects of patriarchy on the overwhelmingly female character of the labor force, especially since women were involved in protests threatening collective suicide in electronics plants. Their complete absence in automobile plants surely has everything to do with the stunning success of striking workers in winning significant concessions from management quickly, preempting any such escalation. It may result from the fact that automobile workers’ demands were offensive – demanding higher wages – rather than defensive in responding to management assaults on wages and working conditions (an issue to which we return below).

In construction, all five cases of actual or threatened self-harm involved disputes over dismissals of workers who had claimed their wage arrears, demands that were unsuccessful and in some instances met with beatings. In the most extraordinary case, four of nineteen workers involved sat down at the entrance to Tsinghua University in Beijing and cut off the tips of their fingers (China Labour Bulletin, 2010). In another, eleven workers climbed a construction crane and threatened to jump (Lou and Hu, 2011). Only one of the riots was associated with one of these incidents of self-harm, which means there were seven in all.

In electronics, all four cases of self-harm involved collective suicide threats, three in Foxconn plants. This form of protest represents an escalation to the collective level of a wave of widely publicized individual suicides at Foxconn in 2010 and 2011.⁵ In all three of our Foxconn cases, which were scattered across the country, workers faced losing their jobs, two because of plant relocations and one due to severe harassment designed, workers claimed, to force them to resign. The fourth, in Zhenxiang Electronics, was occasioned in precisely the opposite way: workers attempted a collective resignation in response to excessive demands for overtime at very low pay, but were told that if they did so they would not be paid their wage arrears, at which point three women positioned themselves on the roof and threatened to jump (China Labour Bulletin, 2011). None of the five riots that broke out in electronics plants was associated with any of these cases of attempted suicide, so there were nine in all.

Three points emerge in conclusion. First, different sectors displayed markedly different forms of collective action by migrant workers. Second, violent repertoires were the second most frequent after strikes and demonstrations, coming in well ahead of legal and informal ones, slowdowns, and occupations and sabotage. Both findings, especially the latter, reflect the poorly institutionalized character of contentious labor relations in China. Third, violent repertoires were unevenly distributed across sectors, and may have varied with the characteristics of their labor and supervisory process.

Stimuli

What drove migrant workers to engage in collective action? Grouped as *material* are complaints about hours, working conditions, wages (including arrears), benefits, employment security, changes in ownership, and firm relocation and restructuring. *Humanistic* grievances include bullying, disrespect and violence. *Moral* ones are corruption, including management absconding with firm assets. *Political* stimuli involve complaints about enforcement of legal rights and demands for new policies. *Offensive* refers to collective action undertaken not in response to management initiatives that threatened or degraded workers' existing situation, but rather as demands for improvement, often to bring workers into line with labor conditions elsewhere in the same sector.

Table 2 sums up the findings.⁶ Obviously, material issues predominated across the board. More specifically, the most common complaint was about wages and benefits (raised in 64 cases [25 of which concerned arrears]), followed by hours and working conditions (21), changes in ownership, relocation and restructuring (10), and employment security (6). But they were most prominently front and center in automobiles and electronics.

Table 2: Stimuli of Collective Action

	Material	Humanistic and moral	Political	Offensive	N
Apparel	18	10	1	0	17
Automobiles	19	3	0	9	13
Construction	23	6	0	0	22
Electronics	53	8	1	0	37
% of N					
Apparel	106%	59%	6%	0%	
Automobiles	146%	23%	0%	69%	
Construction	105%	27%	0%	0%	
Electronics	143%	22%	3%	0%	

Workers in all four sectors also voiced humanistic and moral complaints, though they were significantly more common in apparel. Here we can fashion a hypothetical explanation around three interwoven structures: labor process, management, and gender. In apparel, management enforcement of labor discipline depends heavily on direct, personal monitoring. By contrast, in the automotive or electronics sectors, it is built more into the routinized and automated labor process of constant-flow assembly line production. Moreover, in apparel the monitoring is generally done by male supervisors over female workers, setting up a flashpoint of gender-based, face-to-face friction that could easily produce humanistic and moral outrage. Artist Jeff Wall's classic photograph 'Outburst' comes to mind (figure 1). Though it was staged, it offers an excellent depiction of a typical apparel factory shopfloor, with its women working one-by-one at their tables, compared with an electronics assembly line. In construction, we hypothesize, such complaints may be less common even though supervision is also personal because both the workers and supervisors are overwhelmingly male. Moreover, setting gender aside, the multi-tiered subcontracting system of employment (from managers to sub-contractors to cellular groups working together under informal leaders) could well provide a barrier to the expression of humanistic and moral complaints.

Figure 1:



Jeff Wall, 'Outburst'



Electronics Assembly Line, China Celestica Technology
(http://newshopper.sulekha.com/china-celestica_photo_914309.htm)

Our data confirm the widely held view that most labor strife in China is basically apolitical. Only two cases (out of a total of 89) mentioned political demands: the workers in Amphenol Electronics (Guangzhou) complained that their union existed 'in name only' (Radio Free Asia, 2013), and there was an anti-tax riot in Huzhou (Zhejiang) in 2011 (Fung et. al., 2011).

Finally, aside from the automobile strike wave of 2010, we found not a single case of collective action that was not defensive – i.e., stimulated by a specific alleged depredation by management. In several cases (one in apparel and two in electronics), workers defending themselves against management offensives did compare themselves with fellow workers in similar plants. But that is a very different matter than in the offensive automobile strikes, in which such gaps provided the workers' primary stimulant.

Discourses

How workers expressed their grievances may provide a clue to how they have been conceiving their predicament, their relationship to their employers and their fellow workers, and the pathways they hope will take them forward – to use an all too vexed term, their consciousness. Do they think of

themselves as employees, citizens with rights, human beings entitled to respectful treatment, Chinese (in opposition to a foreign employer), rural migrants, oppressed women, and/or members of the working class? The question is extremely challenging theoretically, substantively and methodologically, and any satisfactory analysis would require a complex combination of ethnographic, survey and documentary research; here we can only begin to scratch the surface of the latter. So again, as we shift from detailed, ethnographic case studies to a more general, comparative map, from the trees to the forest, our claims must remain modest.

Analysis of collective action discourses requires categorizing workers' written and oral statements, slogans, chants, signs and the like. We fashioned our categories around their discourses, rather than out of some theoretical abstraction. There is obviously some subjectivity involved here, and several of the categories may require explication. For each of them, then, let us begin by providing an example or two.

- Material: 'We suffer from poor health and poverty.' 'Our wages are low compared to others in Fengcheng.'
- Legal rights: 'Protect the rights and interests of all Chinese workers.'
- Management authority: 'We earn less than ¥2,000 a month, but we could be subjected to fines of ¥50-100 for arriving late or spending more than two minutes in the toilet.'
- Humanistic: 'They don't treat us like human beings.' 'They couldn't care less if we lived or died.' 'They treat us like rabbits.'
- Nationalist: 'The [Japanese] owners are blackmailing us Chinese.'
- Political: We 'demonstrate our absolute resolve in protesting...the inability of the judicial system to deliver justice.' 'We have lost our faith in the Party.'
- Moral: 'Give us back the money from our blood and sweat.' 'We are loyal workers who were fired by the irresponsible factory.'
- Solidaristic: 'If the company sacks any one of us, we will all walk out and quit.' 'The larger the event the more trouble.'
- Class (making claims on behalf of workers beyond the company): 'Protect migrant workers' interests.' 'Protect the rights and interests of all Chinese workers.'

Table 3 displays the findings. As we would expect, material themes comprise the most common discursive elements across all sectors. Interestingly, though, in automobile manufacturing, they were coequal with legal rights and moral claims. Moreover, the discourse in the automobile plants was much broader than in any other sector. That may have something to do with these workers' much greater level of confidence as expressed also in their uniquely offensive strike wave. The absence of nationalism in apparel and construction workers' discourses makes perfect sense, of course, since half the apparel firms and all the construction firms in our dataset were Chinese. It may be significant that discourses involving class and solidarity only appeared among automobile and electronics workers – the two sectors with the largest and most modern plants, both of which also use constant-flow assembly line labor processes that make workers particularly dependent on each other. But even here, themes of class and solidarity were not particularly prominent. What was most on workers' minds, or at least their lips, was pay and working conditions.

Table 3: Discourses of Collective Action

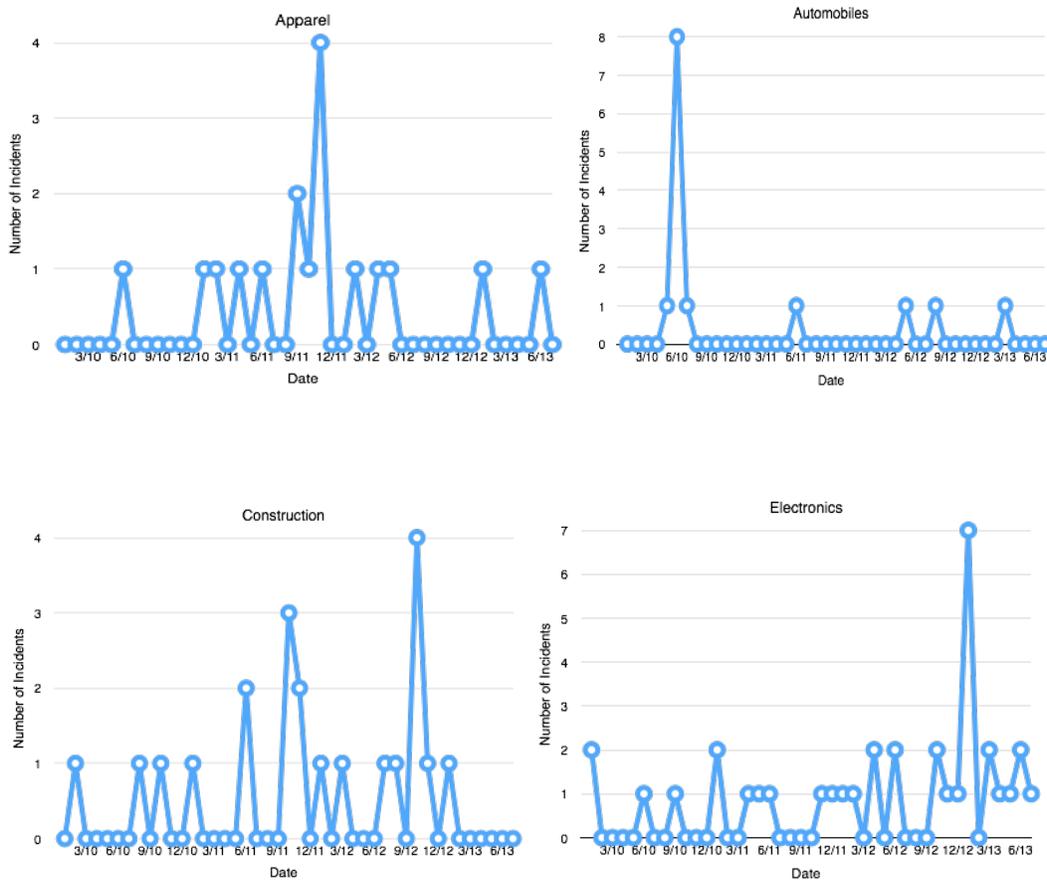
	Material	Legal Rights	Humanistic	Nationalist	Political	Moral	Class	Solidaristic	Management Authority	N
Apparel	5	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	1	17
Automobiles	2	3	2	2	2	3	1	2	0	13
Construction	7	3	2	0	3	1	0	0	1	22
Electronics	9	4	8	2	4	1	2	2	2	37
% of N										
Apparel	29%	6%	18%	0%	0%	6%	0%	0%	6%	
Automobiles	23%	23%	15%	15%	15%	23%	8%	15%	0%	
Construction	32%	14%	9%	0%	14%	5%	0%	0%	5%	
Electronics	24%	11%	22%	5%	11%	3%	5%	5%	5%	

Timing and Contagion

What capital and the state in China fear most from the country's workers are waves of strikes and protests. For capital, they could presage broad, across-the-board wage rises, threatening profitability and international competitiveness. For the state, they could usher in metastatic political instability. The two major (and very different) strike waves that have occurred under the structural reforms⁷ – by laid-off workers in the Northeast in 2002, and by migrant auto workers in 2010 – therefore rang loud alarm bells among both supporters and opponents of labor activism in China. In the end, though, they turned out to be exceptions that proved what is widely thought to be the rule in Chinese labor relations – that collective action is, in general, basically cellular. Our study complicates this understanding somewhat by uncovering more localized, sector-based forms of temporal clustering that are missing from that big picture. But only some of that co-temporality reflected actual metastasis of collective action. Nonetheless, we may be seeing here the traces of a yet unexplored pattern of clustering that lies between the standard categories of broad protest waves on the one hand and cellularity on the other.

The data appear in figure 2. In the apparel sector, four of the seven collective actions in late 2011 took place in or around Guangzhou, though none were in the same town, and we have no evidence that the workers were in touch with each other; so the spike in the data may just reflect random variation. After all, there were only four cases. The spike in the data from May-July 2010 in the automotive sector reflects the clearly documented strike wave in automobile plants. While it took place across three provinces, in joint ventures with two different Japanese companies (Honda and Toyota), workers who went out a few days later had been in communication with the earlier strikers or had news about their strikes (Butollo and ten Brink, 2012). In construction, collective action spiked in 2011 and 2012 across widely scattered locations, both years in October. Workers in one case mentioned the Mid-Autumn Festival in their appeal (Li, 2010), which alerts us to the possibility that what we are seeing here is the effect of holiday timing rather than a protest wave. Finally, in electronics, there was a clear strike wave in January 2013 at three plants in Jiangxi, in which workers communicated with and inspired each other (Chan, 2013). The remaining four were scattered across Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, with no apparent connection except, perhaps, for the timing around the Lunar New Year.

Figure 2: Dates of Collective Action by Sector



Overall, then, except for the 2010 automobile plant strike wave and one small triad of electronics strikes, there is little evidence that collective action among migrant workers even within the same sector involved significant direct contagion. Moreover, looking across sectors, the spikes occurred at different times, which reinforces the point. Still, capital and the state should resist complacency. Butollo and ten Brink argue that the unusual offensive and contagious strikes in the auto sector could occur because of effective, energetic leadership, which can happen anywhere, but also due to specific structural characteristics of these firms: they employed better educated workers who had graduated from technical schools, and the workers understood that the just-in-time production system in Japanese automobile production gave them real leverage: shutting down one smaller supplier factory, which is where these strikes occurred, can bring the big assembly plants to a halt in very short order. Insofar as Chinese industry moves over the coming decades toward more sophisticated forms of lean production with more highly trained workers, dangers could lie ahead. For the moment, though, the very factors that made for contagion in the automobile sector militate against it spreading to other sectors (Butollo and ten Brink, 2012).

Conclusion

How can the variation in Chinese migrant workers' collective action be explained? For just one example, how can the debates between scholars who detect nascent class consciousness and politics on the one hand and those who see 'bread and butter' conflict on the other be resolved? By zooming out from in-depth case studies to map the wider pattern across the apparel, automotive, construction

and electronics sectors, we have begun to detect some qualitative differences that suggest some patterns. Our core findings are several.

- Whereas in all sectors strikes and demonstrations were the most common repertoires, and legal and informal approaches and slowdowns the least, threatened or actual violence (self-harm and rioting), which were in between in terms of frequency, occurred almost exclusively in construction and electronics. The reasons may have to do with the arguably more brutal labor processes and working conditions in those sectors.
- Although material stimuli for collective action were the most common in all sectors, here again there was a range in terms of other issues. Apparel workers evinced the most concern with humane treatment and moral values, which could reflect the directly interpersonal forms of supervision and the more heavily female labor force working under male supervisors in this sector.
- Hardly any collective action raised overtly political concerns.
- Automobile workers were almost alone in waging offensive strikes.
- Consistent with the above, material issues dominated migrant workers' discourses in all sectors. Yet auto workers evinced the broadest discourses that transcended economic complaints by speaking also in terms of legal rights, humanism, nationalism, politics, morality, and firm- and even class-based solidarity more than workers in other sectors. There may be no contradiction here – i.e., automobile workers' capacity to go on the offensive for material gain may have inclined them to take a grander view of their predicament as workers.
- Movement contagion, generally low in China, was also highly unevenly distributed across sectors, concentrating in the automobile sector but not strongly in evidence elsewhere, for structural reasons specific to that sector that are themselves unlikely to spread quickly to other sectors. But rather than thinking in terms of cellularity *vs.* broad movements, ongoing research should stay attuned to the possibility of small, localized clusters of contagion such as those we detected.

Finally, returning to the question of whether Chinese migrants' collective action presages the rise of class-based or bread-and-butter politics, our study suggests that even if there is some evidence of the former, the wider sectoral differences we have explored may themselves be fragmenting workers in ways that undermine the prospects for broader forms of class-based movements.

ENDNOTES

1. For just a few examples, see Chan and Pun (2009); Butollo and ten Brink (2012); Elfstrom and Kuruvilla (2014); Pun and Lu (2010); Chan and Pun (2010); Friedman and Lee (2010) and Pringle (2013).
2. <http://www.numble.com/PHP/clbmape.html>; <https://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com/>
3. Many instances of collective action involved more than one repertoire. Hence, the total of the figures in each row exceed the total number (N) of incidents.
4. It's interesting that they go together so often in China, compared with the US or the UK, where, apart from picket lines, strikes do not generally engender public demonstrations. No doubt it

- has a good deal to do with the lack of legal protection and routinized practices for dealing with strikes in China.
5. We did not include them in our database because they were not, strictly speaking, collective action in themselves, even though sixteen of them occurred in something of a wave over the first half of 2010.
 6. The figures for material stimuli as percentages of the number of incidents exceed 100% because they all involved more than one specific complaint in this category.
 7. Waves of strikes and protests were also reported immediately after the June 4, 1989 crackdown, in Hangzhou and elsewhere. They had a very different character, of course, originating in and around a moment of political crisis.

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