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Value-driven Contention in China: Forms, Tactics and State Responses

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Abstract

This research challenges the conventional wisdom that value-driven protests in China are exceedingly rare and face harsh state repression. Drawing on a hand-coded, multi-source dataset of over 3,100 protests in three Chinese megacities from 2014 to 2016, we identify 67 protests that reveal a hitherto unknown under-belly of everyday, value-driven contention. Qualitatively, we identify three main forms of contentious performances. Quantitatively, we show how value-driven protesters combine non-disruptive tactics with ambitious targets and virtually never extract concessions. Surprisingly, we find that such protests are less often policed and repressed than other protests. They are also never met with violence from non-state actors. We provide three interpretations for the counter-intuitive finding on repression. This study shows that the Chinese state coexists with a non-negligible amount of explicitly regime-critical contention. It adopts a containment strategy, tolerating a certain extent of value-driven performances when the risk of spill-over into wider society is limited.

摘要

本研究挑战了传统的观点，即在中国，价值驱动的抗议活动极为罕见，且会遭受严厉的镇压。通过对 2014 年至 2016 年三个中国特大城市中超过 3100 起抗议活动的手工编码、多源数据集的分析，我们识别了67起抗议活动，揭示了一个一直被忽略的价值驱动的日常抗议现象。定性方面，我们发现了三种主要的抗议表现形式。定量方面，我们展示了价值驱动的抗议者如何将非破坏性策略与雄心勃勃的目标相结合，并几乎从未获得政府让步。令人惊讶的是，我们发现此类抗议活动不如其他抗议活动受到警方镇压。从非国家行为者那里也从未遭受暴力相向。我们提供了三种对压制结果的解释。本研究表明，中国政府与明确批评政权的抗议活动相互共存。它采取一种遏制策略，在风险不向更广泛的社会蔓延的前提下，容忍一定程度的价值驱动的抗议。

Keywords: value-driven activism; protest control; stability maintenance; protest event analysis; Chinese politics
关键词: 价值驱动的抗争; 游行管制; 维稳; 抗争事件分析; 中国政治

In March 2014, while the National People's Congress was meeting in Beijing, a group of activists in Chongqing challenged the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). They waved a portrait of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山, the founding father of the rival Nationalist Party, accusing the CCP of corruption and dictatorship. Despite police action to disperse the protestors and confiscate their banners, no violence occurred.[1] In February 2016, on the second day of the Chinese New Year, a group of rights campaigners staged a public protest in Shanghai's People's Park, holding up a banner that read: "Release all prisoners of conscience immediately!" They also sent New Year's greeting

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1 "Han Liang deng Chongqing jinian Sun Zhongshan he sanmin zhuyi zao jingcha weigong" (Han Liang and others commemorating Sun Yat-sen and the Three Principles of the People in Chongqing were surrounded by police). *Boxun*, 13 March 2014, https://boxun.com/news/gb/china/2014/03/201403130003.shtml#.WC1yRPl97IU. Accessed 17 June 2016.

cards to some 200 political prisoners, including the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波. No police presence or violence was reported.[2]

These protests directly violated a political taboo and exemplified a type of popular contention that has received insufficient attention from scholars of Chinese contentious politics: value-driven contention. We use this term to refer to popular protests advocating non-materialist and public interest claims that are at odds with the ideology and practices that undergird the political regime.

Value-driven protests contradict prevailing beliefs about popular contention in China in two ways. First, scholars have paid extensive attention to protests driven by materialist and exclusive group interests, such as state workers' protests against retrenchment or peasants' resistance against taxation.[3] Evidence on contention driven by non-materialist and public interests has been largely reduced to exceptionally attention-generating events, such as the 1999 Falun Gong protest, the 2008 Charter 08 movement, the 2011 *Southern Weekly* incident, or the 2022 protests against Covid regulations.[4] However, events of such national relevance have been exceedingly rare in the post-1989 era. The above examples point to an everyday form of value-driven activism that has largely escaped scholarly analysis. How frequent are such forms of protest? What claim-making tactics do they employ? How do they differ from the routine repertoire of contention?

Second, scholars have suggested that protests driven by dissident values in China are consistently being repressed.[5] The harsh suppressions of the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s and the Falun Gong movement in the late 1990s, as well as the recent crackdown on human rights lawyers, seem to support that argument. However, the above examples suggest that violent coercion is not a given, and the form, timing and intensity of state repression may vary. How does the Chinese state respond to everyday forms of value-driven protest? To what extent does it treat them differently from other social protests?

In this study, we address these questions with a sample of value-driven protests (N = 67), embedded in a unique hand-coded and multi-source dataset of over 3,100 protests in three Chinese megacities between January 2014 and May 2016. We begin by conceptualizing value-driven activism in the Chinese context and reviewing the existing literature on political opportunities. Then, we introduce our data and measurements, which we follow with qualitative and quantitative descriptions of our cases. We further model state responses to value-driven protests statistically, before deliberating our findings in an extended discussion section and then summarizing the insights gained in the conclusion.

Conceptualizing Value-driven Contention

What is value-driven contention and how can we position it within the landscape of contention in China? In authoritarian regimes, social movements and popular protests can be driven by a repertoire of claims, ranging from revolutionary claims that aim to overthrow the incumbent regime, to reformist ones that aim to alleviate grievances under the current system.[6] In the case of China, scholars have distinguished between protests making materialist and non-materialist claims.[7]

In materialist protest, citizens exert pressure on state or non-state actors, such as factory owners, to force them to concede to demands for group-specific material benefits. These protests do not usually question the legitimacy of the regime. Over the past three decades, a rich literature has

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2　"Shanghai fangmin jichu qian zhang mingxin pian wenhou xiyu 200 liangxin fan" (Shanghai petitioners send out a thousand postcards to greet 200 imprisoned prisoners of conscience). *Radio Free Asia*, 10 February 2016, https://archive.ph/VPXPy. Accessed 22 June 2016.

3　See, e.g., Cai 2010; Chen, Xi 2012; Lee 2007; O'Brien and Li 2006.

4　See, e.g., Béja, Fu and Pils 2012; Chen, Sally Xiaojin 2020; Cunningham and Wasserstrom 2011; Ong 2023; Thornton 2002.

5　Chen, Xi 2020, 624; Li, Yao 2018, 119; Perry 2002, xiv.

6　Klein and Regan 2018.

7　Lee and Hsing 2009; Perry 2002.

covered materialist protests staged by such groups as peasants,[8] workers[9] and homeowners.[10] These protesters tend to restrict their claims to material interests that are exclusive goods and which bene-fit their delimited group.[11] They typically frame their demands around official rules and ideology, which they accuse their targets of violating.[12] Instead of challenging the regime itself, such "loyalist protest" seeks to engage the state to help resolve parochial grievances.[13]

In contrast, non-materialist protests are frequently characterized by claims for public goods and advocacy for civic values. These can include values with less direct implications for the regime's operating rules, such as feminism or LGBT rights.[14] Alternatively, non-materialist claims also appear in nationalist protests.[15]

In this research, we focus exclusively on civic values that are at odds with the ideology and prac-tices that define and undergird the incumbent political regime, such as demands for the direct elec-tion of national leaders, due process and the rule of law, full transparency of officials' assets, and the protection of human rights. We understand a contentious gathering where such value claims are made to be a "value-driven contention." Protests in support of activists pursuing such aims are also included in our definition, because participants thereby align themselves with the values advo-cated by the supported activists. Additionally, protests by activists striving for value-driven claims also fall within this scope. In such cases, the initial disputes may revolve around materialist and pri-vate issues, but when dissidents join the ranks, contention becomes politicized.[16]

The Political Opportunity for Value-driven Contention

Scholars of Chinese politics assume that the regime is highly intolerant of value-driven protests. However, a scholarly consensus has emerged that the state shows conditional tolerance or even makes concessions to the predominantly materialist protests with non-civic claims.[17] Such protests are believed to be helpful for central leaders to identify social grievances, monitor local state agents and gather public opinion on state policies.[18] Many protests are not too costly to appease with con-cessions,[19] so the state tries to avoid excessive repression, fearing potential damage to regime legit-imacy.[20] In some cases, local officials even capitalize on protests to advance their careers.[21]

However, the suggested mechanisms underlying conditional tolerance of contention in China all hinge on the precondition that claims focus on materialist and private interests. Historically,

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8 O'Brien and Li 2006.
9 Chen, Feng 2000; Elfstrom 2021; Lee 2007.
10 Cai and Sheng 2013; Johnson 2010.
11 Steinhardt and Wu 2016.
12 O'Brien and Li 2006; Tsai 2015.
13 Lorentzen 2013, 130.
14 Protesters may also frame their exclusive interests along the lines of a public good, such as the anti-corruption struggle, but refrain from questioning the authoritarian polity itself (Kuang and Göbel 2013). Alternatively, protesters make demands regarding village election irregularities, a non-materialist objective, but only in the context of their locality (Chen, Xi 2020). The former is a protest for a public good in the absence of civic values; the latter is a protest for civic values, in the context of a group good.
15 Extant studies have treated nationalist protests separately as such protests can have mixed implications. As the nationalist movements in the past century have shown, citizens could rally closely around the incumbent regime against external threats, but they may also shift their target, from foreigners to their own government (Perry 2002, xi).
16 Prominent examples for these dynamics are the Jasic factory workers' protests in 2018 (Elfstrom 2022) or the Wukan village protests in 2011 (Hess 2015).
17 Elfstrom 2021; Heurlin 2016; Meng, Pan and Yang 2017; Steinhardt 2017; Su and He 2010.
18 Chen, Xi 2012; Lorentzen 2013; O'Brien and Li 2006.
19 Göbel 2021; Lee and Zhang 2013.
20 Cai 2010; Steinhardt 2017.
21 Hurst 2004; O'Brien, Li and Liu 2020; Wang 2012.

"protests motivated by explicitly religious or political agendas" have been treated very differently than those motivated by subsistence claims.[22] Since 1989, there have been no visible disagreements among CCP leaders regarding political reforms advocated by ideational activists. Such advocacy has universally been viewed as sedition.[23] If citizens begin to make value-driven claims, it is believed that the state perceives such protests to be "regime-threatening" rather than "regime-engaging" and responds with repression.[24]

Indeed, the party-state has good reason to remain wary of value-driven protests. Protests with such claims are not centred on the exclusive interest of "communities of 'victims'" but instead make civic claims on behalf of the public.[25] Hence, their demands may resonate with a wider constituency and thus such contention has a greater potential to diffuse across classes or regions. If not contained in a timely manner, such protests could disrupt the operation of the political system and undermine the ruling party's core ideological principles.[26]

The heavy-handed crackdowns on the student movements of the 1980s, the Falun Gong movement and the Charter 08 democracy campaign seem to support the state's consistent repression of value-driven protests. In the Xi Jinping 习近平 era, the state appears to have intensified its repression of activists and organizations that advocate for civic-political values, such as human rights lawyers, leftist students and church leaders,[27] and has toughened its response to routine protesters.[28]

These assumptions are useful yardsticks for painting an overall picture, but as the above examples illustrate, they may be insufficient for anticipating state responses to value-driven protests in concrete instances. Different forms of civic mobilization may be perceived differently by the state in terms of the degree of threat. For instance, protests by human rights campaigners in a single city may not be deemed as equally threatening as coordinated protests at the national level. A protest by a small group without recognizable leaders is viewed differently to one staged by a large group with a charismatic leader like Li Hongzhi 李洪志 in the Falun Gong movement. A protest solely demanding human rights protection is not as threatening as one advocating immediate regime change. Moreover, when examining state responses to popular protests, we need to consider the intensity of repression. The mere presence of police to disperse crowds at a protest site differs from a police presence involving arrests, although these are all indicators of repression. Thus, how does the government handle value-driven protests? Does it repress all of them, and if so, how? Does the state ever grant concessions to activists?

Data and Measurement

Data collection

We explore our questions using a hand-coded dataset of 3,104 protest events in three Chinese megacities (Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chongqing) between January 2014 and May 2016.[29] We suppose that value-driven protests predominantly occur in urban centres with international exposure, dense networks of activists, symbolically potent locations at which to stage contentious performances, and important political institutions to target. Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chongqing are the political, economic and cultural hubs of south, east and west China, and the fifth, third and largest cities

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22 Perry 2002, xiv.
23 Wright 2018, 165.
24 Li, Yao 2018, 119.
25 Steinhardt and Wu 2016, 77.
26 Yang, Kai 2023, 292.
27 Elfstrom 2022; Fu, Diana, and Distelhorst 2018; O'Brien 2023.
28 Chen, Chih-Jou Jay 2020.
29 The period of data collection ends in May 2016 because the largest source of data, the Wickedonna blog, ended its operation in June 2016.

in the country, respectively.[30] The sites of data collection thus maximize the likelihood of finding value-driven protests.

To identify protest events, we followed Charles Tilly's definition of a contentious gathering as "an occasion on which a number of people (here, a minimum of ten) outside of the government gathered in a publicly accessible place and made claims on at least one person outside their own number, claims which if realized would affect the interests of their object."[31] To prevent the duplication of protest events, we followed the Dynamics of Collective Action project. We coded gatherings with the same location, group and issue, and with no more than 24 hours between them, as one protest event. When the gap between events with these same attributes exceeded 24 hours, we recorded them as separate events in a series of protests.[32]

We collected data from four types of sources: (1) international English and Chinese language news media outside of the direct influence of Chinese censorship,[33] (2) domestic news media, (3) dissident media and (4) social media. We manually extracted international English media through keyword queries from the LexisNexis database, which contains more than 1,000 global news outlets.[34] Using similar procedures, we collected international Chinese and domestic media from the Wisenews database, which contains over 600 Chinese-language newspapers from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and South-East Asia. In addition, we screened three major Chinese language news media platforms (*BBC Chinese*, *Duowei News* and *Radio Free Asia Chinese*) manually or with search engine keyword queries, depending on the source. We collected Chinese dissident media sources from six websites renowned for reporting sensitive political news and protests in mainland China (*Boxun* 博讯, *China Labour Bulletin*, *Canyu* 参与, *Minsheng guancha* 民生观察, *Zhongguo molihua geming* 中国茉莉花革命 and *64tianwang* 64 天网). Again, we screened them manually and through search engine queries. We gathered events posted on social media from the Wickedonna blog, which was compiled and published online by activists Lu Yuyu 卢昱宇 and Li Tingyu 李婷玉. The data comprise more than 200,000 social media posts related to more than 70,000 protests.[35] To the best of our knowledge, ours is the most source-diverse dataset on popular contention in China available.

Measurement of value-driven contention

Based on our conceptualization, we measured value-driven contention with variable batteries that recorded, first, the key issues or claims driving the protests and, second, the shared social identities of participants. Value-driven claims were recorded when demands for political (elections) and civic rights (freedom of expression, assembly, association, due process), human rights, disclosure of officials' assets, the election of labour union representatives, etc. were present. We also included cases where protests were organized in support of individuals who frequently engage in activism for political or human rights causes. Value-driven identity was recorded when there were clear indications of the presence of individuals making such claims.[36] A key distinction for value-driven activists is

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30 Defined according to the total population in urban districts under the administration of the cities. See Division of Urban Society and Economics Investigations of the National Bureau of Statistics 2015.

31 Tilly 1993, 270. We also considered gatherings in publicly accessible restaurants as protest events when conscious efforts were made to publicize this information, when explicit claims were made on banners or similar, or when the police made attempts to stop activists from gathering. Of our cases, 11 are gatherings in restaurants, 8 of which include gatherings outside of these restaurants. These cases are not included in our main regression model on repression below because they have missing values on other covariates.

32 McAdam et al. 2009.

33 Included here are news media outlets from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

34 See Appendix A in the online supplementary material.

35 Göbel 2021.

36 This was facilitated by the curious fact that activists frequently provide their names (and often their telephone numbers) in reports on dissident websites. This allowed us to track their activities. If anything, our coding undercounts the presence of value-driven activists, as not all participants provide their names.

that they engage in causes that go beyond an exclusive concern with specific injustices that is typical of protests in China.

We reassessed the original coding of every case to make sure only those where both codes could be confirmed with a very high degree of confidence were included in the analysis. This led us to exclude 22 cases previously coded as either containing value-driven claims or identities, rendering a final sample of 67 value-driven protests (see Appendix B in the online supplementary material for details). We identified 2.15 per cent of all protests (and 2.27 per cent of protests with non-missing values on our two dimensions) as value-driven.[37]

Measurement of protest attributes and responses

To understand the basic protest attributes, and in particular those that could be relevant for state responses, we looked at the location of the event (Guangzhou, Chongqing or Shanghai), the year the event took place, the number of participants (the mean of the highest and lowest protest estimates, if more than one was available), and if a protest occurred in a highly visible central location of a city (i.e. in districts with either major government institutions,[38] the most important shopping street[39] or the two tallest sky scrapers in the city[40]). To gauge potentially relevant protester behaviour, we looked at disruptive action (for example, if protesters engaged in blockades of traffic or buildings, if they used violence against people or property), if they displayed loyalty to the CCP or the national leadership, if they used central policy to support their demands, and the level of government the protest targeted.

In terms of protest responses, we considered the following. First, we tapped state repression with three frequently used binary variables: policing (whether police were reported to be present at the protest site), arrests (whether arrests at the protest site were reported) and coercion (whether coercive methods were used). These were recoded into a categorical variable with three outcomes: 0) no policing, 1) police only (without coercion or arrests) and 2) policing with arrests or coercion. Second, we also considered whether protesters experienced non-state repression through private security, thugs or other non-state actors. Third, we measured if the protest targets responded to protests with forms of concessions. We noted if at least one of the issues driving the protest had been resolved, had a promise to be resolved or if the targets of the protest responded in any non-repressive way (including engaging in dialogue with protesters) either directly on site or within one week of the protest. We further controlled for the sources of information described above.

Variables were coded by three coders who, after establishing sufficient interrater reliability, independently coded the data under the close supervision of one of the authors. The interrater reliability from parallel coding throughout the coding process for the variables coded from media content is reported in Appendix C in the online supplementary material.

Findings

To make the most of our medium-N sample of value-driven protests and the fact that we have both detailed case descriptions and the coded dataset, we combine qualitative and quantitative strategies

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37 Based on protester claims, the frequency of other protest issues in the sample was as follows: labour (36%), housing (23%), conflicts with administration and law enforcement (13%), consumer rights (10%), rural issues (7.51%), private and business disputes (5.70%), environment (4.28%), welfare issues (4.09%), investment and business fraud (3.80%), nationalism (<0.1%), women and gender (<0.1%), Falung Gong (<0.1%), religion (0%), ethnic minorities (0%), leftism (0%). Percentages do not add up to 100 because events can belong to more than one category.

38 Defined as the municipal/city, provincial governments, the municipal/city, provincial people's congress halls, the municipal/city, provincial public security headquarters and the municipal/city, provincial petitioning offices.

39 The first shopping street in the three cities in the category "shopping" (gouwu) on the website https://travel.qunar.com. Accessed 19 February 2020.

40 The two tallest buildings in the three cities on the website http://www.skyscrapercenter.cn/cities. Accessed 19 February 2020.

for our analysis. We begin with a typology of value-driven protests discerned from a close reading of our cases. We then proceed with a descriptive quantitative analysis of basic attributes before estimating regressions to explore associations between value-driven protests and state responses.

A typology of value-driven contention

When value-driven activists engage in collective action, they embrace contentious performances that are distinct from ordinary protests. Some of them express "solidarity" (*shenyuan* 声援) with well-known dissidents. The case in support of "prisoners of conscience" (*liangxin fan* 良心犯), mentioned above, is one example. The term "prisoners of conscience" reappears repeatedly. In another case in 2014, a group of petitioners in Shanghai demonstrated in a busy historic district. They waved banners stating, "anti-violence hero Gong Jinjun 巩进军 is innocent, resist violent interception and black jails."[41] This shows that mutual support protests sometimes expand their claims to civic values. In another case, in 2016, a small group of activists in Shanghai held banners demanding the release of human rights lawyer Guo Feixiong 郭飞雄.[42] The practice of forming solidarity groups was similarly seen in Chongqing. For instance, in 2016, around 300 activists, including Huang Qi 黄琦, the founder of the dissident *64tianwang* website, gathered in front of a local court to express solidarity with two prisoners.[43]

Other protesters make claims more explicitly, expressing support for alternative political regimes. In two cases, claimants expressed their dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime by praising its rival. On Chinese New Year's Eve in 2014, 500 petitioners demonstrated in Shanghai. They condemned the government for its abuse of power and disregard of the rule of law and waved the flag of the Republic of China (ROC) based in Taiwan.[44] Similarly, in the Chongqing case discussed in the introduction, activists marched on a major street waving a canvas banner bearing a portrait of Sun Yat-sen alongside his political slogans such as freedom, democracy and no dictatorship.[45] The activists' selection of reference groups was probably strategic, as they tactically avoided referring to Western liberal democracies. Sun Yat-sen and his ROC were a less offensive alternative because Sun is also recognized as a nationalist hero by the CCP.

In other cases, protesters pointed the finger at the incumbent regime. In one such regime-critical protest, in 2014, around 1,000 activists demonstrated before the Shanghai city government. Some waved placards with moderate political claims, such as "sweeping corruption within the political and legal affairs agencies," but one demonstrator was wearing a top bearing the phrase, "eliminate communist bandits."[46] In 2014, a few days after the outbreak of the Hong Kong Occupy Central movement, a group of elderly activists unfurled a banner in Shanghai's People's Park that read: "We stand with the people of Hong Kong, we want universal suffrage too."[47] On Human Rights

41 "Shanghai minzhong naoshi qu ju Xi Jinping, ting Gong Jinjun" (Citizens in downtown Shanghai display Xi Jinping's image and express support for Gong Jinjun). *64tianwang*, 3 February 2014, http://64tianwang.com/bencandy.php?fid-17-id-16085-page-1.htm. Accessed 16 June 2016.
42 "Shanghai renquan hanwei zhe shangjie jupai yaoqiu liji shifang Guo Feixiong" (Human rights defenders in Shanghai take to the streets holding signs demanding the immediate release of Guo Feixiong). *Canyu*, 28 February 2016, http://www.canyu.org/n110113c12.aspx. Accessed 17 August 2016.
43 "300 ren weiguan 400 ren weiwen Chongqing shen Liu Lin, Chen Youchun" (300 people gather to observe the trial of Liu Lin and Chen Youchun in Chongqing, with 400 present to maintain stability). *64tianwang*, 26 May 2016, http://64tianwang.com/bencandy.php?fid-10-id-22827-page-1.htm. Accessed 31 May 2016.
44 "Layue 29 Shanghai fangmin 500 ren zai shi zhengfu jihui shiwei" (On December 29th of the lunar calendar, 500 petitioners from Shanghai demonstrated before the municipal government). *Boxun*, 30 January 2014, https://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2014/01/201401301414.shtml#.WCwLbfl97IU. Accessed 11 June 2016.
45 *Boxun*, 13 March 2014.
46 "Lianghui qian Shanghai shang qian ren shi zhengfu qian kangyi shiwei" (Before the Two Sessions, thousands of people in Shanghai demonstrated before the municipal government). *Boxun*, 19 February 2014, http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201402/dzb/67_1.shtml. Accessed 16 November 2016.
47 "Shanghai weiquan gongmin zai renmin gongyuan huyu minzhong zhichi Xianggang renmin yaoqiu zhen puxuan, zhanzhong xingdong" (Civil rights activists in Shanghai are calling on the public to support the demands of the

Day in 2014, Shanghai activists publicly requested that the state "stop human rights abuse and establish constitutional democracy."[48]

Value-driven protests in comparison

We identified 2.27 per cent of all protests as value-driven. In Shanghai, Chongqing and Guangzhou, the percentages were 4.15, 2.34 and 0.23 per cent, respectively. Given that value-driven protests were previously assumed to be practically non-existent, this is remarkable. Table 1 displays the comparison of value-driven and other protests according to key attributes. Appendix D (online) displays the relevant logit regression model.

Value-driven protests are not outstanding in terms of their distribution over the years, but they are less disruptive than other protests. They (almost) never use the disruptive tactics of blockades or violence, while these methods are used in 24 per cent and over 4 per cent of other protests, respectively. By contrast, value-driven protests more often display loyalty to the CCP or leadership (10 per cent) or cite central policy (19 per cent) to frame their claims. However, their less disruptive tactics are not significant in the regression model.

Value-driven protests are decidedly more ambitious with regards to their target and choice of location. They are much more inclined to target the state and higher levels of authority in particular. A stunning 49 per cent target the central government and 24 per cent target the province or city government. By comparison, just 0.2 per cent and 3.6 per cent of other protests take aim at these levels of authority. The targets are significant predictors of value-driven protests in the regression model as well. This ambitious targeting also explains the frequency with which central policies are cited. Moreover, 68 per cent of value-driven protests take place in a central (and symbolically significant) location in a city. This is the case for only 27 per cent of other protests (this variable is not significant in the regression).

The mean number of participants is not significantly different in the bivariate comparison, but it becomes negatively significant when the number of participants is logged and included in the regression model. Hence, an increase in participants reduces the likelihood of a protest being value-driven (once log-transformation leads the atypical events with many participants to have less influence). Lastly, mirroring previous findings,[49] value-driven protests are less often reported in social media but much more often reported in dissident and international media (this variable is significant in the regression model).

In terms of location, it is noteworthy that only 3 per cent of the protests took place in Guangzhou, and 57 per cent occurred in Shanghai. We cannot exclude that existing networks of political activists do not take to the streets in Guangzhou. However, given Guangzhou's comparatively "liberal" tradition within China, this is unlikely. It is more likely that the dissident media outlets, where most of the cases were reported (85 per cent of cases were reported in such outlets), had stronger ties to activists in Shanghai and Chongqing. This, in turn, suggests that we have not caught the full population of events.

In summary, value-driven protests are less disruptive but are, by nature of their aims, much more inclined to target the state. Almost half target the highest level of authority, a tactic virtually never employed by other protests. How does this combination of mildness and boldness play out in terms of state responses, and in terms of responses by the non-state agents of violence that are known to target protesters in China?[50]

Hong Kong people for genuine universal suffrage and the Occupy Central movement in the People's Park). *Boxun*, 24 September 2014, http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201409/dzb/124_1.shtml. Accessed 17 November 2016.

48 "Shanghai fangmin jixu la hengfu huyu: tingzhi renquan pohai, jianli xianzheng minzhu" (Petitioners in Shanghai continue displaying banners, calling for an end to human rights persecution and the establishment of constitutional democracy). *Boxun*, 11 December 2014, http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201412/dzb/50_1.shtml. Accessed 18 November 2016.

49 Göbel and Steinhardt 2022.

50 Ong 2022.

Table 1. Key Attributes and Sources of Value-driven and Other Protests

Variables	Value-driven protests N = 67[1]	Other protests N = 2,883[1]	p-value[2]
Violence	0 (0%)	123 (4.3%)	0.115
Blockades	3 (4.5%)	695 (24%)	**<0.001**
Central policy	13 (19%)	88 (3.1%)	**<0.001**
Loyalty	7 (10%)	85 (3.0%)	**0.005**
Protest target			**<0.001**
Not state	2 (4.9%)	1,888 (80%)	
Below district gov.	2 (4.9%)	284 (12%)	
District gov.	7 (17%)	109 (4.6%)	
Province/city gov.	10 (24%)	85 (3.6%)	
Central gov.	20 (49%)	4 (0.2%)	
Central location	41 (68%)	743 (27%)	**<0.001**
Participants	36 (21, 58)	30 (20, 60)	0.477
Year			0.154
2014	31 (47%)	1,021 (36%)	
2015	23 (35%)	1,258 (44%)	
2016	12 (18%)	596 (21%)	
City			**<0.001**
Guangzhou	2 (3.0%)	876 (30%)	
Chongqing	27 (40%)	1,129 (39%)	
Shanghai	38 (57%)	878 (30%)	
Type of source			
Social media	8 (12%)	2,740 (95%)	**<0.001**
Dissident media	58 (85%)	480 (17%)	**<0.001**
Int. media	5 (7.5%)	79 (2.7%)	**0.040**
Domestic media	0 (0%)	35 (1.2%)	>0.999

Notes: [1] n (%); Median (CIs). Missing values for different variables have been excluded. [2] Pearson's Chi-squared test; Wilcoxon rank sum test; Fisher's exact test. P <= 0.05 highlighted in bold.

State and non-state responses

Value-driven protests seem to provoke state and non-state responses that are markedly different to the responses elicited by other protests. Table 2 displays the simple frequency distribution of value-driven and other protests in terms of state repression, concessions and non-state repression. Surprisingly, given the expectations in the scholarly literature, value-driven protests are much less often policed or met with state repression. While 69 per cent of value-driven protests are not policed, the same applies to only 44 per cent of other protests. Conversely, 16 per cent of value-driven protests are policed only and 16 per cent are policed and repressed. For other protests, the same applies for 27 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively. Moreover, while almost 10 per cent of other protests experience repression from non-state agents, this does not happen at all for value-driven protests. Finally, value-driven protests are much less likely to be met with concessions (3.3 per cent, compared to 15 per cent for other protests).

Table 2. State and Non-state Responses to Value-driven and Other Protests

Variables	Value-driven protests N = 67[1]	Other protests N = 2,883[1]	P[2]
State repression			**<0.001**
No police	44 (69%)	848 (44%)	
Police only	10 (16%)	522 (27%)	
Arrests or coercion	10 (16%)	576 (30%)	
Non-state repression	0 (0%)	210 (9.7%)	**0.009**
Concessions	2 (3.3%)	206 (15%)	**0.014**

Notes: [1] n (%); Missing values for different variables have been excluded. [2] Pearson's Chi-squared test.

In the next step, we test if these differences hold when we control for key attributes and sources of protests, explored above. We do not model non-state repression because there is no variation along the value-driven dimension. The bivariate comparison here is sufficient to conclude that value-driven protests are systematically different.

Table 3 displays a multinomial logit model on the likelihood of protests being policed and repressed (see Appendix E (online) for the uncontrolled model). All else being equal, value-driven protests are 88 per cent less likely to be policed and 93 per cent less likely to be repressed compared to other protests. When we change the reference category from "no police" to "police only" (see Appendix F for the uncontrolled model and Appendix G for the controlled model), we find that value-driven protests that are being policed are not less likely to be repressed than other protests that are being policed.

Thus, value-driven protests have a lower risk of being repressed because they are less often policed. The much lower likelihood of being policed cannot be accounted for by any of the variables we control for in our models. There is something beyond these factors that leads value-driven protests to be met with significantly less state repression than is the case for other types of protest.

Table 4 displays logit regression models on concessions, with value-driven protests as the predictor of interest and the other protest attributes and information sources serving as control variables (see Appendix H for the uncontrolled model). In Model 1, we control for all variables except for the target of protest. Here, value-driven protests are significantly (85 per cent) less likely to elicit some form of concession than is the case for other types of protest. However, when we introduce the variable of protest targets in Model 2, the significance of the coefficient vanishes.[51]

Appendix I shows that among the protests included in Model 2, the rate of concessions hovers between 14 and 17 per cent when protests target non-state entities and levels of government that are below the centre. Only protests targeting the central government never win concessions. Of the 18 cases included in Model 2 that target the centre, 16 are value-driven protests. Hence, it is the strong inclination of value-driven protests to target the highest level of authority that is behind their lower likelihood of winning concessions.

Discussion

This analysis reveals a pattern of state responses to value-driven activism that is remarkably different from responses to ordinary social protests in China. Beginning with the least counter-intuitive, we find that value-driven protests are much less likely to extract concessions. Concessions, in turn, are

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51 We collapsed the categories "city/province" and "centre" to increase the number of value-driven cases per category.

Table 3. Multinomial Logit Model on State Repression (Ref.: No police)

Variables	Police only			Arrests or coercion		
	OR[1]	95% CI[1]	P	OR[1]	95% CI[1]	P
Value-driven	0.12	0.02, 0.79	**0.027**	0.07	0.01, 0.44	**0.005**
Violence	1.81	0.87, 3.77	0.110	5.53	2.91, 10.5	**<0.001**
Blockades	1.46	1.08, 1.97	**0.013**	1.46	1.07, 2.01	**0.018**
Central policy	0.84	0.45, 1.58	0.596	0.73	0.34, 1.66	0.344
Loyalty	1.30	0.69, 2.47	0.417	0.76	0.34, 1.66	0.485
Protest target						
Not state	Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.	
< District	1.49	0.99, 2.25	**0.054**	4.21	2.86, 6.20	**<0.001**
District	1.15	0.62, 2.14	0.654	3.27	1.89, 5.65	**<0.001**
City/Province	1.75	0.86, 3.55	0.122	2.84	1.40, 5.77	**0.004**
Centre	33.0	3.67, 297.23	**0.002**	47.5	5.06, 445.38	**<0.001**
Central location	1.10	0.83, 1.45	0.505	0.97	0.72, 1.31	0.859
Participants (log)	1.44	1.28, 1.63	**<0.001**	1.59	1.40, 1.80	**<0.001**
Year						
2014	Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.	
2015	1.09	0.83, 1.44	0.540	1.65	1.21, 2.24	**0.001**
2016	0.88	0.63, 1.23	0.457	1.87	1.32, 2.66	**<0.001**
City						
Guangzhou	Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.	
Chongqing	0.97	0.72, 1.31	0.824	2.00	1.42, 2.81	**<0.001**
Shanghai	1.31	0.97, 1.77	0.084	2.55	1.81, 3.61	**<0.001**
Intercept	0.05	0.02, 0.13	**<0.001**	0.02	0.01, 0.04	**<0.001**
No. Obs.						1,662
AIC						3,334

Notes: [1]OR = Odds Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval. The control variable source type is not displayed. P <= 0.05 highlighted in bold.

absent from protests that target the central government – and almost all protests targeting the central government are value-driven protests. When the level of the protest target is controlled for, value-driven protests are no longer systematically different from other protests. Value-driven protests' low likelihood of gaining concessions is thus a function of their targeting central authorities (and their challenging claims).

Moreover, we find that the state does not outsource the repression of value-driven protests to non-state agents of violence. This outsourcing strategy is primarily used by local officials to handle civil disputes such as housing demolition protests or land seizures.[52] Since value-driven protests mostly target higher levels of authority, they are at a lower risk of non-state repression. Moreover, we can safely assume that many of the activists involved in these events are under state surveillance. Thus, the state may block the involvement of non-state actors in these matters.

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52 Ong 2022.

Table 4. Logit Models on Concessions

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	OR[1]	95% CI[1]	P	OR[1]	95% CI[1]	P
Value-driven	0.15	0.02, 0.56	**0.014**	0.34	0.05, 1.41	0.186
Violence	0.71	0.36, 1.33	0.311	0.77	0.38, 1.45	0.438
Blockades	0.75	0.50, 1.10	0.153	0.80	0.53, 1.21	0.305
Central policy	1.02	0.45, 2.08	0.965	1.12	0.48, 2.38	0.773
Loyalty	0.31	0.07, 0.89	0.057	0.32	0.07, 0.94	0.068
Central location	1.15	0.81, 1.60	0.430	1.19	0.82, 1.71	0.360
Participants (log)	1.29	1.13, 1.47	**<0.001**	1.32	1.15, 1.52	**<0.001**
Year						
2014	Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.	
2015	1.48	1.02, 2.16	**0.040**	1.37	0.92, 2.06	0.124
2016	2.15	1.41, 3.30	**<0.001**	2.02	1.30, 3.16	**0.002**
City						
Guangzhou	Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.	
Chongqing	0.75	0.50, 1.11	0.151	0.83	0.55, 1.26	0.387
Shanghai	0.90	0.61, 1.34	0.614	0.80	0.52, 1.21	0.284
Protest target						
Not state				Ref.	Ref.	
< District				1.21	0.73, 1.94	0.441
District				1.17	0.53, 2.36	0.676
> City/Province				0.64	0.26, 1.42	0.295
Intercept	0.10	0.04, 0.23	**<0.001**	0.09	0.03, 0.22	**<0.001**
No. Obs.		1,433			1,251	
AIC		1,110			999	

Notes: [1]OR = Odds Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval. The control variable source type is not displayed. P <= 0.05 highlighted in bold.

Our most surprising finding is that value-driven protests are systematically less likely to be policed and met with coercion or arrests. These differences are at odds with the scholarly literature and demand an explanation. How can we make sense of this?

One interpretation could be that the findings are the result of media bias. Most of our value-driven protests were reported in the dissident media. Christian Göbel and H. Christoph Steinhardt have shown that the dissident media we consulted are strongly inclined to report acts of state coercion,[53] while the opposite is true for government and commercial news media.[54] Thus, if anything, the bias of our main sources points in the opposite direction to that of our findings. Moreover, the dissident news media often report detailed information such as the names and telephone numbers of protest participants, indicating that they have in-depth knowledge of the

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53 Göbel and Steinhardt 2022.
54 Ibid. See also, Zhang, Lu and Bai 2024.

events, which apparently often comes directly from participants.[55] Thus, both "information report-ing" and "information gathering" biases about repression are highly unlikely.[56] Finally, we control our regressions for the type of sources that record an event. Media bias is therefore unlikely the rea-son for the lower likelihoods of repression we find.

What else could account for the results? We offer three interpretations. First, although our events make regime-challenging claims and/or have political activists as participants, their "cellular,"[57] "fragmented"[58] and "parochial"[59] form does not constitute an imminent threat to the regime. All value-driven protests in our dataset occurred at the local level only. Effective cross-regional mass mobilization usually requires the presence of charismatic leaders and organizational structures to facilitate collective actions and maintain group solidarity. Capable potential leaders are usually known to local officials and are likely to be monitored or pre-emptively detained.[60] Politically moti-vated organizations are ruthlessly repressed. Without these elements, it is extremely difficult for value-driven activists to make unified claims and stage cross-regional protest campaigns comparable to the Falun Gong movement. The fact that many value-driven protests take the form of expressing mutual support with detained activists and involve only a small number of participants (36 on aver-age) points to the weakness of such protests vis-à-vis state power, despite their ambitious claims.

Much anecdotal evidence suggests that when localized value-driven protests start to diffuse cross-regionally and escalate, the state is compelled to resort to hard repression. For example, in 2015, Beijing-based lawyers went to Heilongjiang to protest the police killing of a petitioner. The protest gained momentum on social media, garnering support from rights lawyers nationwide. The authorities detained 14 lawyers, an act which attracted the attention of more lawyers. Later, 660 lawyers signed an open letter condemning police brutality, transforming a local dispute into a national campaign that prompted the state to use repression.[61] Similarly, in 2018, the government initially took a tolerant view of students supporting workers' activism in the Jasic factory in Shenzhen. Only when more activists at home and abroad expressed solidarity did a nationwide crackdown ensue.[62] Thus, protest fragmentation may partially explain why value-driven protests are not met with increased repression. But why, holding other protest attributes equal, are value-driven events even less likely to be repressed than other protests? Our second and third explanations attempt to answer this question.

Second, central and local governments may perceive the threat of value-driven protests differ-ently. The central government prioritizes regime survival, making it averse to political opposition.[63] But local authorities, who are at the frontline of protest management, are possibly more worried about disruptive actions that draw mass attention and harm their performance evaluations. They may choose to ignore small-scale and non-disruptive protests.[64] Compared to ordinary protests, value-driven protesters almost never use disruptive tactics, thus their actions do not necessitate policing to keep public order. Moreover, given that value-driven activists are committed, local offi-cials may deliberately avoid confronting them to prevent becoming their targets and potentially

55 For some of the cases in this study, see, for instance: "Zu tu: Shanghai lianghui shang qian ren kangyi yu qingsuan zhengfa wei" (Photos: thousands protest in Shanghai at the two sessions demanding the liquidation of the Political and Legal Affairs Committee). *Aboluowang.com*, 22 January 2014, https://archive.ph/oGf4G; "Shanghai fangmin yaoqiu dangju huan rendao huan zunyan huan requan (zu tu)" (Shanghai petitioners demand humanity, dignity and human rights from the authorities – photos). *Xin tangren dianshi tai*, 2 April 2014, https://archive.ph/N9ldj.

56 Göbel and Steinhardt 2022, 278–280.

57 Lee 2007.

58 Chen, Xi 2019.

59 Yang, Kai 2023.

60 Li and O'Brien 2008; Xie 2013; Truex 2019.

61 Fu, Hualing 2018.

62 Elfstrom 2022.

63 Cai 2010.

64 Xie 2013, 196.

attracting even more attention.[65] Therefore, as long as value-driven protests remain peaceful and go unnoticed by higher authorities, local officials may choose to ignore them.

In contrast, when value-driven protests have the potential to draw mass attention, local authorities are inclined to act. On 31 December 2014, a fatal stampede occurred near Chen Yi Square 陈毅广场 in Shanghai, leaving many dead. On 6 January 2015, many value-driven activists, who were not directly linked to the incident, gathered in the square to commemorate the victims. Although the act was peaceful and small-scale, the local government promptly detained some activists.[66] Arguably, this happened because the incident was a broadly shared concern and contentious sentiment could have easily escalated.

Third, repression is not limited to policing on the protest site. In our dataset, state repression is measured as conventional police action, in terms of on-site presence, coercion and arrests. But nowadays, the state has a wider repertoire of protest-control tactics, including surveillance, pre-emptive repression and post-hoc punishment. The state closely monitors political activists, and security organs regularly detain dissidents prior to sensitive periods that are known to everyone and could facilitate protest coordination, such as the annual "two sessions."[67] Owing to pre-emptive repression, it is likely that those protests taking place are already "filtered" according to their perceived threat level and regarded as less dangerous by the state.[68]

Moreover, extensive surveillance implies that sending the police to a protest site to gather basic information may not be necessary. Our finding that value-driven protests are policed less frequently than other protests – but are equally likely to experience coercion or arrests when they are policed, points in this direction. Finally, the surveillance of key activists allows the state to impose punishments at a later point, should it deem it necessary. In fact, policing regulations specify that "making arrests on the scene" is "generally not advisable" owing to the risk of a repression backlash.[69]

Conclusion

This article examines value-driven protests and state responses in contemporary China. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, we find that a non-negligible underbelly of everyday value-driven activism exists in urban China. The events largely take the form of demonstrating mutual support, where value-driven activists take to the street to express their support for detained dissidents. We also find cases where activists openly advocate for alternative political systems or demand fundamental changes in the prevailing political order. Compared with other protesters, we find that value-driven protesters use comparatively mild tactics but are much more ambitious in their targets.

In terms of state responses, the value-driven protests in our data were never repressed by non-state actors and almost never extracted concessions. Counter-intuitively, we find that value-driven protests are less likely to be policed and repressed. While bias can never be completely excluded in media-based protest event data, our data make bias a highly unlikely explanation for this observation. Instead, we offer three interpretations about patterns of state repression that can help to make sense of these findings. In essence, we suggest that the Chinese state appears to be quite capable of distinguishing between value-driven protests that pose a manifest threat and require swift repression, and other types of protest that are less likely to spill into wider society and can be contained. Also noteworthy is that the authorities do not seem to regard it as necessary to visibly repress all, or even most, of the value-driven protests in order to send a signal of deterrence to society.

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65 O'Brien and Deng 2015.
66 "Shanghai 20 yu ren jidian caita sinan zhe, yasong jiuzhu zhan" (Over 20 people in Shanghai mourn the victims of the stampede and are sent to a rescue station). *64tianwang*, 6 January 2015, http://64tianwang.com/bencandy.php?fid-12-id-19557-page-1.htm. Accessed 2 June 2016.
67 Chen, Huirong, and Greitens 2022; Steinhardt 2021; Truex 2019; Yan 2016.
68 Danneman and Ritter 2014; Steinhardt 2021.
69 Ministry of Public Security 2008.

We argue that it is useful to think of the state's threat perception as a two-dimensional space. Aside from the nature of claims (value-driven versus non-value driven), the scale of mobilization (local versus cross-regional) is critical for the state to decide if repression is necessary. When only one of these dimensions is transgressive, such as claims in the present cases, or scale in recent research on cross-regional mobilization,[70] protests remain in a grey zone where the option for non-repressive responses or casting a blind eye remains open. When claims and scale are both transgressive, harsh repression is almost unavoidable.

Three points of caution are needed when considering broader implications for Chinese politics. First, the three interpretations of our findings cannot be effectively tested with the present data, but they should be the focus of future studies. Second, our dataset does not cover recent years, during which the political space for value-driven protests may have contracted. Scholars have noted an overall increase in repression in the Xi era,[71] and a particular intolerance of civil society activists.[72] However, value-driven protests do not seem to have disappeared. It is not difficult to find such protests from more recent years. For instance, on International Human Rights Day in 2020, a group of Shanghai activists, including well-known dissidents, collectively petitioned in Beijing, demanding human rights protection and judicial justice.[73] On the same day in 2021, they again petitioned in Beijing, shouting regime-challenging slogans.[74]

Third, the prevalence of value-driven activism is almost certainly greater than we have observed, as we rely on information about street contention. Since the Xi government became more repressive, activists such as human rights lawyers, church leaders and NGOs have tactically refrained from public activities in exchange for survival.[75] But they maintain private networks and communicate their claims clandestinely. In addition, despite the state's extensive censorship efforts, in some domains oppositional discourse has intensified in cyberspace.[76] In other words, the potential threat posed by value-driven protests to the political regime may be more profound and enduring than what is observable on the surface.

The existence of everyday value-driven protests in Chinese urban centres shows that the occasional but more spectacular eruptions of politically inspired protests do not come out of nowhere. While it is not known to what extent, for instance, the participants in the protests against Covid regulations in November 2022 were influenced by value-driven activists who were involved in the cases that we have examined, it is plausible that intellectual or personal linkages exist.[77] The general rule that "activism begets activism" likely also applies to value-driven activism. Thus, although our findings point to a repressive apparatus that is well capable of adjusting the intensity of its repression, the underbelly of value-driven activism poses a constant threat to regime stability in China.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741024001085.

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70 Yang 2023.
71 Chen, Chih-Jou Jay 2020; Fu, Diana, and Distelhorst 2018.
72 Minzner 2015; Fu, Hualing 2018.
73 "Shijie renquan ri Shanghai zhongduo fangmin zaijing jupai" (On International Human Rights Day, many petitioners in Shanghai hold signs in Beijing). *Minsheng guancha*, 6 January 2015, https://archive.is/wip/flEww. Accessed 3 December 2023.
74 "Renquan ri, yu ershi fangmin jinjing gaohan: renquan gaoyu zhuquan" (Over 20 petitioners enter Beijing on Human Rights Day, loudly proclaiming "Human rights supersede sovereignty"). *Da Jiyuan*, 11 December 2021, https://archive.ph/wip/DDAQP. Accessed 3 December 2023.
75 O'Brien 2023.
76 Yang, Shen, and Wu 2022.
77 A participant in the protests against Covid-regulations in Shanghai in 2022 made an explicit reference to human rights lawyers as a source of inspiration for participation. See "EP-027: naxie nianjing de kangyizhe: women weishenme yao shangjie" (EP-027: those young protestors: why we want to take to the streets). *Bumingbai.net*, 29 November 2022, https://archive.ph/NLLvU.

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