Large-scale Mass Incidents in China

TONG Yanqi and LEI Shaohua*

Most large-scale mass incidents in China revolved around economic or social grievances which are generated by the rapid socio-economic transformation and the poor quality of local governance. The more dangerous trend is the increasing social disturbances and riots triggered by minor incidents which later snowballed to uncontrollable scale. To minimise the likelihood of such destabilising outbursts, governments at all levels need to reduce corruption, increase public trust and improve communication with the population.

SINCE THE TURN of the 21st century, there has been a steady upsurge of “mass incident” or social unrest in China. According to various sources and calculations, the mass incidents had increased from 8,700 in 1994 to 90,000 in 2006 and to an unconfirmed number of 127,000 in 2008. These mass incidents exemplify the pains

* TONG Yanqi is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. LEI Shaohua is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Utah
and challenges associated with China’s development. To a certain extent, they are normal symptoms of a society that experiences profound social and economic transformation. Yet, if not handled properly, the prolonged and widespread social unrest may threaten regime stability.

In order to examine the causes and patterns of the social protest, we have collected data on large-scale mass incidents. By “large-scale mass incident,” we refer to mass incident with more than 500 participants. Usually, the occurrence of mass incident of this scale is hard to be covered up by local authorities. It would be publicised one way or another through the domestic or international news media, personal blogs or internet discussion forums. Therefore it is easier to collect information on large-scale mass incidents. Moreover, issues or problems that could inspire large-scale mass incidents are more reflective of acute social tensions in contemporary China and have larger impact on the stability of the system.

![Figure 1: Large-Scale Mass Incidents by Year (2003-2009)](source: Authors’ database)

We have recorded 248 large-scale mass incidents since 2003. Figure 1 shows that there was a huge upsurge of large-scale mass incidents in 2007 and 2008, jumping from 25 cases in 2006 to 63 in 2007 and 76 in 2008. Then there was a downturn in 2009.

Table 1 presents the distribution of large-scale mass incidents by province. Guangdong has the most incidents with 54, three times that of the next province in line, Hubei, which has 17 cases. With its physical proximity to Hong Kong, Guangdong naturally has large foreign investment and consequently the most number of labour disputes in the country. Similarly, as an industrialising region, the land requisition issue has generated
Anhui 8 Heilongjiang 5 Shaanxi 10
Beijing 7 Henan 8 Shandong 13
Chongqing 9 Hubei 17 Shanghai 3
Fujian 3 Hunan 16 Shanxi 5
Gansu 7 Jiangsu 8 Sichuan 13
Guangdong 54 Jiangxi 8 Tianjin 2
Guangxi 6 Jilin 1 Tibet 1
Guizhou 3 Liaoning 3 Xinjiang 4
Hainan 8 Neimenggu 2 Yunnan 10
Hebei 6 Qinghai 1 Zhejiang 7

Source: Authors’ data base

a lot of land disputes in the province. In contrast, Jiangsu Province, which is at comparable level of socio-economic development, has much less large-scale mass incidents.

Category of Large-scale Mass Incidents
Surging mass incidents are the product of mounting social discontent and rising tensions between citizens and the authorities. Major types of mass incidents include labour disputes, land and relocation disputes, disturbances, pollution disputes and ethnic conflicts (Table 2).

| TABLE 1 FREQUENCIES OF LARGE-SCALE MASS INCIDENTS BY PROVINCE (2003-2009) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anhui | Heilongjiang | Shaanxi |
| Beijing | Henan | Shandong |
| Chongqing | Hubei | Shanghai |
| Fujian | Hunan | Shanxi |
| Gansu | Jiangsu | Sichuan |
| Guangdong | Jiangxi | Tianjin |
| Guangxi | Jilin | Tibet |
| Guizhou | Liaoning | Xinjiang |
| Hainan | Neimenggu | Yunnan |
| Hebei | Qinghai | Zhejiang |

Source: Authors’ data base

| TABLE 2 LARGE-SCALE MASS INCIDENTS BY TYPE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | Total |
| Labour | | | | | | | | |
| SOE | 6 | 9 | 5 | 24 | 12 | 8 | 64 |
| Non-State | 2 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 28 | 4 | 44 |
| Land | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 6 | 26 |
| Disturbance/Riot | 1 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 13 | 14 | 39 |
| Pollution | 1 | | 3 | 3 | 5 | | 12 |
| Ethnic | 1 | | 1 | 2 | 2 | | 6 |
| Student | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 7 | |
| Taxation | 2 | | | | | | 2 |
| Relocation | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | 4 |
| Veteran | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | |
| Corruption | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 | |
| Family planning | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Peasant vs Co | | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 | |
| Others | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 5 | 23 | |

Source: Authors’ data base
Labour Disputes

Labour disputes are the most frequent protests, constituting 45% of the total large-scale mass incidents. They could be subdivided further according to their origination: SOEs and non-state sectors. Generally, the first sub-category of labour disputes is generated by the structural change of the SOEs, reflecting the uneasy transitions of the SOEs and their social costs.

The structural reform primarily includes introducing private shareholders into the SOEs, selling SOEs to private companies, and buying out the position of unnecessary employees. These measures affected the welfare and benefit of the SOE workers. Many were bought out at a low price and lost medical care and pension. Some were even unable to collect the buy-out money in full. The losers in the structural change therefore mounted protests, demanding their due benefits. Because of the scale of the SOEs, the number of protesters was often in the thousands. This type of labour protests peaked in 2007 and progressively declined thereafter.

One tragic case of this kind of mass incident occurred in Tonghua Iron and Steel Company (Tonggang) in Jilin Province. Tonggang was a state-owned enterprise before the provincial government decided to let a private company become the majority shareholder in 2009. After taking control of Tonggang, the private company made several major changes, including the appointment of a new general manager. Rumours were circulating that there would be large-scale lay-offs. The workers were unhappy with the privatisation and preferred to keep the SOE status. They started to riot after the news broke out, with participants close to ten thousands. The newly appointed general manager from the private company was beaten to death by the workers on the first day of his appointment. The government was forced to cancel the deal with the private company.

Labour disputes that occurred in non-state sector are different in nature. With loose government regulations and the absence of labour unions, workers in private enterprises usually enjoy few benefits and suffer worse working conditions than SOE employees. In most disputes, workers are requesting better working conditions or wage increase. The majority of such cases took place in Guangdong where most of the enterprises are foreign-owned or joint ventures.

Large-scale mass incidents in this category topped all other protests in 2008. Surprisingly, contrary to the anticipation of more labour unrests due to the slow-down of export demand, the occurrence of labour protests in non-state sectors (export oriented) dropped dramatically, from 28 in 2008 to four in 2009.
An interesting case is that of two toy factories in Zhangmutou Township of Dongguan County, Guangdong Province. The two factories declared closure in October 2008. Workers had not received wages for about two months and the managers were nowhere to be found at the time of closure. All together, the two factories owed workers back wages in the amount of 24 million RMB. In desperation, 7,000 employees protested in front of the township government. The township government, originally hoping to mediate the dispute, failed to reach the general manager. In the end the government paid the workers out of its own pocket (of course with the expectation to be repaid later by the closing enterprises).

Large-scale mass incidents in this category topped all other protests in 2008. Surprisingly, contrary to the anticipation of more labour unrests due to the slow-down of export demand, the occurrence of labour protests in non-state sectors (export oriented) dropped dramatically, from 28 in 2008 to four in 2009.

Land and Relocation Disputes

Because of high economic growth, land requisition of industrial or commercial uses has expanded rapidly. Land requisition and subsequent relocation are some of the main causes of large-scale mass incidents. The disputed issue was mostly on the compensation of the requisited land, which was often considered unfair by the affected population.

A well known case of land dispute occurred in Hanyuan County of Sichuan Province. Local villagers were forced to surrender their land and relocate to other places to make way for the building of a hydroelectric plant. Many relocated farmers did not receive proper compensation and the newly allocated land was of lower quality. A mass incident involving more than several tens of thousands of people broke out eventually in October 2004. The angry peasants started to attack the electricity plant and government buildings and also detained the governor of Sichuan Province, who went to the scene in an attempt to reconcile the dispute, for more than 10 hours. The conflict resulted in several deaths and many injuries. The event startled the central government and an investigation group was dispatched. The investigation group announced that the electricity plant would be temporarily closed until the relocation disputes are settled.

Another case is the large-scale mass incident in Dongzhou village, Shanwei County of Guangdong Province. The electricity plant built in 2002 occupied a large land area in Dongzhou village. The villagers believed that they were not properly compensated and protested. They built sheds outside the factory and attempted to stop the construction. The arrest of three villagers during the effort to demolish the sheds escalated the protest and the rank of protestors soared to several thousands. Armed police were dispatched. Tear gas was used to dispel the crowd and the riot became violent in December 2006. There were explosions and the major part of the plant was blown away. In the end the armed police opened fire, leading to several deaths and injuries. This is the first time since 1989 that the government has opened fire during a citizen-government confrontation. Since then, violent protests have recurred many times. The dispute has not been resolved so far.
Overall, land and relocation disputes erupted at a lower rate than labour disputes, and also demonstrated a descending trend in 2009.

**Disturbances and Riots**

The occurrence of all major types of large-scale mass incidents declined in 2009 except for disturbances and riots (Figure 2). Compared to mass incidents triggered by specific economic grievances, the increase of social disturbances and riots that are not economic interest oriented is alarming. By disturbance we refer to mass incidents that have the majority of their participants not having a particular demand or direct interest, but simply wanting to disturb the public order. A riot is the more radical form of disturbance in which gathering crowds are committing acts of violence. As Figure 2 indicated, disturbances/riots became the most frequent large-scale mass incidents in 2009, surpassing both labour and land disputes. These disturbances were often triggered by minor incidents but rapidly became confrontational between citizens and government.

One such case is the Weng’an incident in Guizhou Province. On 22 June 2008, a teenage girl was drowned in a river while she was hanging around with three other teenagers. The girl was from a poor peasant family and her parents refused to accept the police conclusion that their daughter committed suicide for no apparent reasons. Several biopsies were performed by different agencies and the conclusion remained that the girl was drowned. Then a rumour started to circulate that she was raped. This

![Figure 2: Frequencies of Major Large-Scale Mass Incidents by Year](source: Authors’ database)
soon turned into a riot with tens of thousands involved. The participants believed that the government was trying to cover up the rape case for the probable reason that some government officials were involved in the rape. The burning and looting lasted for about seven hours; county government headquarters were destroyed and a police station was smashed. About 150 people were injured during the incident. The incident caught the attention of General Secretary Hu Jintao who made several instructions for the resolution of the riot. The Minister of Public Security, Meng Jianzhu, led the entire operation to quell the riot by phone.

Another case is the Shishou incident in Hubei Province. On 17 June 2009, a worker was found dead in front of the hotel where he had been working. The police determined that it was a case of suicide. Yet the relatives and the public were not convinced. They blocked police effort to remove the dead body, which led to a large scale riot. Rumours about more bodies being found in the hotel were rife, fanning the imagination of the crowd. The incident lasted for more than 80 hours with several tens of thousands of participants. The hotel was burned down and police vehicles were destroyed. It is the social disturbance with the most participants since 1989.

**Ethnic Conflicts**

There were only six large-scale ethnic conflicts from 2003 to 2009. However, once erupted, the ethnic conflict is often characterised by violence, expanding quickly to attract huge crowds. There are mainly two types of ethnic conflict. One is a random type which is often ignited by a minor incident that turned into large-scale disturbance. Because of the rigidity of ethnic identities, it is easier to generate the “us” versus “them” sentiment among different ethnic groups. It is similar to a disturbance of public venting along ethnic lines. In one case, an accident in which a taxi driver of Hui ethnicity hit a girl of Han ethnicity in Henan Province later led to large scale violent fighting between the two ethnic groups.

The other type of ethnic conflict is much more comprehensive, organised and involves political agendas. The incidents in Lhasa in March 2008 and in Urumqi in July 2009 belong to this category. Both had international background and explicit or implicit separatist agendas.

A random Uyghur-Han conflict that occurred on 26 June 2009 in Shaoguan County of Guangdong served as a pretext for the eruption of the 5 July Urumqi incident. In the beginning, there was a rumour that one of the Uyghur workers raped a girl of Han ethnicity in a toy factory. Then massive fighting between the Han and Uyghur workers broke out. Two Uyghur workers were killed and 120 (Uyghur 81, Han 39) injured. The authorities were blamed for failing to handle the Shaoguan incident in a fair manner; the Uyghurs in Urumqi of Xinjiang Autonomous Region launched a large scale protest in July 2009. The organisers never intended it to be a peaceful protest and turned the city into a killing and burning field. According to the official report, 197 people were killed in the riot. Among them, 156 were innocent citizens (Han 134, Hui 11, Uyghur 10, and Man 1). It was believed that the World Uyghur Association, a strong advocator of Xinjiang Independence, was the behind-the-scene organiser.
Ethnic conflicts are usually not caused by economic grievances, as economic cleavages cross cut ethnic lines. Ethnic differences are the most difficult to reconcile and are therefore the most persistent cause of social frictions and the most effective means in political mobilisation.

Protests from the Middle Class

Most of the mass incidents were launched by disadvantaged social groups, such as laid-off workers and peasants. They were fighting for their right to subsistence. Yet there were a couple of large-scale mass incidents that was mainly participated by the new middle class in the cities. Two were related to environmental protection (anti-maglev protest in Shanghai and anti-PX plant protests in Xiamen) and the other was the anti-dog killing gathering in Beijing.

The protest in Xiamen was against the building of a para-xylene chemical plant near Xiamen city. A chemistry professor at Xiamen University warned that the chemical might cause cancer among nearby residents. On 1 June 2007, citizens of Xiamen launched a “walking” protest against the project, eventually forcing the government to relocate it.

The protest in Shanghai was against the building of a magnetically levitated train between Shanghai and Hangzhou. The reason for the protest was the anticipated radiation effect from the magnet. On 12 January 2008, protesters in Shanghai took the form of strolling to voice their concerns. As the maglev is a huge developmental project and the Shanghai government has already committed to it, the protest did not achieve its goal. But the incident had delivered a message to the authority that more scientific research and public hearing are needed for such big projects.

The protest in Beijing was against the killing of dogs that were homeless or exceeded the officially prescribed height and weight. Thousands of participants gathered in front of the Beijing Zoo on 11 November 2006 with the “Protect the animals” slogan. The anti-dog killing protest successfully stopped the dog killing campaign in Beijing.

These protests reflect certain post-modern values of citizens. Environmental awareness usually emerges when a society has reached a high stage of economic development. The new middle class is the beneficiaries of the economic boom in China. Therefore their concerns are primarily about the quality of life. Unlike protests against pollution that directly threatened the survival of affected population, the protests in Shanghai and Xiamen are against the potential threat, reflecting the educational and knowledge level of the urban middle class. These types of protests are rare, but have demonstrated the different features of mass incidents in China. All three mass incidents were peaceful in style. Thousands of people were mainly mobilised by cell phones or internet messages.

Disappearing Types

Certain types of mass incidents that were popular in the past had disappeared in recent years. Mass incidents against excessive taxation in rural areas were frequent in
the 1990s. The most typical case was the mass protest in Renshou County of Sichuan Province in 1993.

There were only two such instances in 2004. Both instances were against excessive taxation and spread to multiple counties with more than 100,000 participants. For example, in Henan Province, Anyang, Puyang, Hebi and Kaifeng counties, nearly 200,000 peasants demonstrated, gathered and occasionally occupied office buildings of several township governments. They made large banners with slogans like “resist taxation, resist exploitation, and resist land requisition.” In Jiangxi Province, Yichun, Xinyu and Jian counties also had large scale peasant mass incidents. Mass incidents against excessive taxation were usually intense and violent.

The abolition of the agricultural tax, effective on 1 January 2006, removed the structural cause for such rural protests. The protests against excessive taxation in rural areas have largely disappeared.

**Origins of Social Protests**

The overall upsurge of large-scale mass incidents in recent years is a reflection of increased social tensions in China due to the structural changes of SOEs, the widening income disparities and the growing rights awareness on the part of the population. It is too early to say whether the drop in the frequencies of large-scale mass incidents in 2009 represents a short- or a long-term trend. If the decline is mainly caused by tighter government control in preparation of the 60th anniversary of the PRC, then it could be a short interval before another outburst. If the drop is primarily due to improved socio-economic conditions and local governance, then it could signal a long-term trend decline.

Our data does not support the view that the economic slowdown in China would trigger more social unrest. It was expected that the brunt of the world economic slowdown would hit China’s export sector from September 2008 to the entire year of 2009. Yet from September to December 2008, there were only seven cases of large-scale mass incidents as a result of factory closures. The protests spread out to various places: two in Guangdong, two in Jiangsu and one each in Shanghai, Hunan, and Zhejiang. The overall number of large-scale labour unrests decreased even further in 2009. Altogether there were only four large-scale labour protests in non-state sector with three of them related to factory closures in Guangdong. These numbers are far from adequate to substantiate arguments of widespread labour unrest in China due to world economic recession.

---

Ethnic conflicts are usually not caused by economic grievances, as economic cleavages cross cut ethnic lines. Ethnic differences are the most difficult to reconcile and are therefore the most persistent cause of social frictions and the most effective means in political mobilisation.
Large-scale mass incident over land requisition issues is a major type of social protest. Despite the impression generated by the media that large-scale mass incidents over land disputes were widespread, such incidents occurred much less frequently than labour disputes in reality. This is because land requisition is necessary only in rapid developing areas or places where there are mining discoveries. Furthermore, as the peasants are usually not well organised due to their mode of production, they are unable to organise effective protests even if they are deprived. However, protests over land disputes, if organised, could be fierce.

Most land disputes share a similar pattern. On the surface, the conflict over land requisition was between farmers and companies that use the land. However, because the related industrial projects often times are part of the official development plan, the companies involved in the project had strong government backing. In order to push for their development plan, local governments had an inclination to use force on behalf of the companies. In the case of Dingzhou, Hebei Province, the city government even quietly allowed the company to hire gangsters to beat up and kill villagers to force the relocation. As a result, land disputes often turned into confrontations between the peasants and the government.

The increasing social disturbances may be a dangerous signal for the central government. Non-economic interest driven mass incidents are not easy to appease. Tens of thousands of participants were just angry, discontent and took any opportunity to vent their frustrations against the authorities. There is a strong “us” versus “them” sentiment in the crowd, which is one of the symptoms of profound social grievances. Just one minor spark could cause the cumulated anger to erupt. This could include those who do not have any direct interest in the incident, those who are influenced by the “square effect” and those who have some sort of psychological identification with the victim.

How did minor incidents cause social disturbances of such magnitude? It may be due to the confluence of several factors. First, social tensions had been brewing for a long time in these locations. For example, because of the discovery of mines in Weng’an region, there were a lot of forced relocations and consequently a lot of disputes over relocation. A large number of relocated migrants, forced out of their residence on unfavourable conditions, had been grumbling and unsettling.

Second, local governments and police force were generally perceived as corrupt and incompetent. The fact that the police force were often dispatched in favour of the capitalists who have close relationship with the government whenever there was a dispute between peasants and the companies reinforced the public perception. There was a profound distrust of the government.

Third, the root cause of the social tension and distrust of the government is poor local governance. For example, several large-scale disturbances were triggered by conflicts between staff members of the city management agency (chengguan) and illegal vendors on the street. The cleaning up of the illegal street peddlers was prescribed by official regulations and legitimate. Yet the public sympathy was with the illegal vendors, as chengguan staff is perceived as local bullies because of their rude manners. The
government was also awfully ineffective in communicating with the masses in crisis times. For example, during the Shishou incident, amidst a plethora of rumours, the government statements about the incident were few and vague. This does not help the authority to quiet down the angry population.

**Policy Challenges for Chinese Leaders**

All large-scale mass incidents, except for a couple of ethnic conflicts and student anti-Japanese demonstrations, revolved around economic or social grievances. These grievances were generated by rapid socio-economic transformation and poor local governance. Most large-scale mass incidents are localised and isolated incidents, except for a number of protests that occurred simultaneously in multiple adjacent counties, such as the teachers’ strikes in Sichuan Province and taxation protests in Henan and Anhui.

Economic grievance driven mass protests will not threaten regime stability. Most of the causes for economic grievances that have arisen during the process of socio-economic transformation are on the passing soon. Increasing financial capabilities also enable the government to ease the economic pains of the transformation and significantly reduce the occurrence of large-scale mass protests.

The most dangerous trend is the increasing social disturbances and riots triggered by minor incidents which later snowballed to uncontrollable scale. While it seems that the participants had no particular purpose or interest, these incidents reflected profound and broad social grievances that are not easy to address. In order to minimise the likelihood of the most destabilising disturbances and riots, governments at all levels need to design more institutional mechanisms to improve governance, such as reducing corruption, increasing public trust and facilitating better communication with the population. Training programmes could be extended from teaching local leaders on how to cope with emergency incidents to training the entire government staff on the manner of governance. A clean, effective and civilised government is the key to long-term social stability.