The changing pattern of state workers’ labour resistance in Shaanxi province, China

Zhiming Cheng

Abstract
State workers in China have been suffering multiple negative shocks due to state sector reforms and massive lay-offs since the 1990s. One of their responses has been to engage in conventional forms of rightful resistance to assert their rights and benefits. The recent development of such labour resistance, however, has been less studied. This paper examines the recent collective rights action among state workers in Shaanxi province to examine the evolving pattern of resistance that changed from relatively non-threatening to radical, and from offline to a mixture of real-life and cyberspace actions. Because the recent movements directly challenged the authoritarian power of the agencies of the ruling party, local authorities have not tolerated the rights action as they had previously, but have suppressed resistance. The findings add to the body of knowledge regarding the changing relationship between the state and workers, and the interplay between traditional resistance politics and emerging cyberspace activism in transitional China.

Keywords: China, Shaanxi province, state workers, resistance, cyberactivism.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese Government has restructured the ownership of state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—the once predominant danwei (socialist work units) of urban economy—and reduced their staff. By 2005, nearly 30 million, or 60 per cent, of SOE workers had been dismissed (Liu 2005), and the state sector’s share of urban employment decreased from 82 per cent in 1978 to 27 per cent in 2005 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2006). As a result, most state workers’ relationships with danwei ceased after they were compensated with a one-off severance payment, which was usually perceived as being disproportionate to their contribution. Disenfranchised and in dire straits, state workers also perceived themselves as enduring a great injustice and rights violation (Cai 2006). Claims for rights and justice through petitions, protests and demonstrations between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s were very often seen in SOE compounds and streets, sparking massive labour insurgencies (Mok, Wong & Lee 2002). Since the mid-2000s, few official statistics and little information about lay-offs have been published, giving the public an impression that the national program was completed.
On the contrary, the lay-offs never ended; rather, after shedding a massive number of workers, SOEs embarked on an even more aggressive wave of restructuring. These moves resulted in numerous new resistance activities, which have been scantily studied. One research report looks into the many emerging disputes by state workers who had recently been, or were about to be, laid off and asserts that local governments have learnt nothing from the debacle of the late 1990s (China Labour Bulletin 2009b). The ongoing SOE reform and labour retrenchment have induced a series of ongoing, heated resistances with new characteristics.

This study focuses on workers in the SOE reform in Shaanxi province in northwestern China. The province was representative of the inner-China development model that relies on the state’s investment (Walcott 2004), and has been stricken by urban poverty induced by lay-offs since the late 1990s (Cheng & Beresford 2012). The reason for studying Shaanxi is that its state sector had been the backbone of its provincial economy throughout the pre-reform and early post-reform eras, and its SOE reform is still in progress.

This paper examines the emergence, rise, decline and resurgence of a state workers’ organisation called the Shaanxi Enterprise Union Rights Defence Representative Congress in Shaanxi province, which was one of the most extraordinary and influential cases of resistance carried out by state workers in recent years. It provides a detailed and updated account of the significant but less revealed movement within the research framework around rightful resistance—one of the major types of contention expression in post-reform China. Since the case was almost unreported by traditional media, collection and critical analysis of both original and secondary data are crucial. Between September 2010 and June 2011, data was collected through three major approaches. First, semi- and unstructured interviews were conducted in order to reconstruct the timeline and key events of the movement from the perspectives of different parties. Interviewees included 15 state workers and their supporters (including three leading organisers) who participated in the resistance, three managers in associated SOEs, three trade union officials, six government officials and one journalist. Second, released government and court documents, and other materials made publicly available by the lawyers who defended a major activist, were collected and analysed as secondary data in order to examine the local state’s responses to the movement and activists, and vice versa. Third, materials from online media such as blog texts, articles, petitions, reports, online communication and instant-messaging conversation records of participants were collected to examine the spread of influence during the course of action, as well as how activists interacted and cooperated with each other in cyberspace and how the interaction and cooperation affected real-life resistance activities.

The next section explains how hardship, poverty and labour disputes are still current issues facing the cohort of (former) state workers. It is followed by two sections describing how the patterns of resistance carried out by state workers in Shaanxi, and the local state’s responses, have changed over time, with one section providing deeper analysis on the interplay between the local state and the state
workers and their supporters during the changes. The final section further discusses the resistance in the context of recent socioeconomic changes in China and concludes the analysis of this study.

**Research background**

Once-secure state workers have found it hard to endure rapid increases in educational, medical, housing and living costs, and, combined with reduced incomes and limited savings accumulated before the lay-off, many have fallen into hardship and poverty (Fang, Zhang & Fan 2002). Yao (2004) estimated that about one-fifth of the urban poverty has been caused by the state sector lay-offs. The disadvantages to state workers’ social and human capital that have been caused by deficiencies in education and utilisable social connections have deterred workers from seeking re-employment and have dampened their career progress in an emerging market-oriented labour system (Knight & Song 2005). Only approximately 30 per cent of laid-off workers have been able to get jobs through the re-employment service (China Labour Bulletin 2009d).

State workers’ movements related to lay-off procedures, hardship and poverty constitute a substantial proportion of labour disputes, which rose 55 times in volume between 1993 and 2009 and have involved more than one million employees a year (Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2009). Many of these disputes have triggered strikes, demonstrations, rights suits and even violence and riots, or the so-called ‘mass incidents’ (quntixing shijian) (Weil 2006).

In the pre-reform era, the danwei system was in place to maximise the use of labour by controlling the daily production of labour power and mobility. The theory of neo-traditionalism suggests that danwei managed their workers through organised dependence and principled particularism (Walder 1986). The organised dependence dictated that state workers had to rely solely on danwei’s overall control and provision of living resources and career opportunities in a systematic, structural manner, while principled particularism implied a reward system to state workers who were committed and loyal to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and management. These two approaches created a patron–client relationship between SOE cadres—the representatives of the party-state regime—and ordinary workers, deterring collective action and organised political activities. In the pre-reform political economy that excluded market mechanisms, individuals were assigned to danwei without choice, and separated geographically in confined city compounds that usually served both production and residential functions.

In the post-reform era, the danwei system actually has the potential to spark large-scale collective action (Zhou 1993). Individuals are gathered in unified, highly concentrated groups working and living in the same compound and community, providing the proximity and convenience for collective action to be formed and carried out. In other words, the organisational structure of danwei has given state workers a convenient structure in which to organise collective action and protest in the form of rightful resistance.

While SOE lay-offs were devalued by the state as outdated, they nevertheless continue surreptitiously in many cities, under the guise of different names such as
‘optimisation of human resources’ and ‘reducing overstaffing’. Although much of the research on state workers was published in the early 2000s, a series of significant rightful resistance events among state workers have since occurred between 2008 and 2010, prompting the need for further research. For example, in 2008 Xi’an, the capital of Shaanxi province, had the largest SOE bankruptcy in the province’s history, retrenching more than 9000 workers from a restructured state-owned textile industrial complex (Cheng 2011).

Silenced traditional media and institutionalised benign resistance

Since the author’s initial observations in Xi’an in 2001, numerous rights groups have gathered and sometimes purposely blocked traffic in front of government buildings and headquarters of traditional media, such as newspapers and television stations, to protest and express their grievances in the hope of attracting official and media attention. The local state realised that such demonstrations were an opportunity for state workers to release their pent-up anger, and that strong measures could attract a negative public reaction. Thus, it usually endured such activities and publicity campaigns, provided protestors did not assault police officials who maintained order.

But the local state could not be regarded as merely passive. This study uncovered that, until the late 2000s, the local state’s superior and authoritarian status over traditional media and state workers had allowed it to curb resistance and direct it to a preferred path. Under strict media censorship especially after the early 2000s, traditional media was not allowed to report workers’ resistance, even after journalists found workers’ allegations justifiable. Ironically, interviews conducted revealed that small pieces of news (usually containing only a few sentences) in relation to aggressive labour protestors who were found guilty were published at the request of the authorities. Eventually traditional media lost interest in investigating workers’ allegations because they were mostly unpublishable. According to an interviewed government official who coordinated local newspapers and the provincial propaganda department, the purpose of strict media regulation in this regard was to annihilate the adverse influence of resistance and conjure up a public image that labour resistance was politically risky and discouraging, ‘leaving no media space for labour activism’.

Without the help of traditional media, workers were usually left with one institutional option: they had to rely solely on the local government to solve their issues, even if there was an inherent distrust of officials. Reconciliation was then cautiously achieved between workers and involved parties (for example, the trade union, court, procurator or SOE management) through cooperation on, or behind, the scenes of resistance. More importantly, a situation of mutual understanding between the local state and state workers stabilised: workers would not be too aggressive in challenging the local government’s principles and limits, while the local government promised—and sometimes did make progress—to address claims through financial compensation to workers and legal supervision on SOE
restructuring. These measures essentially de-radicalised workers and transferred their discontent to governments’ preferred institutionalised channels, such as official mediation and arbitration, and the judiciary.

The ‘path dependence’ effect manipulated by the local state through its media censorship and institutional arrangements, among other forces, compelled state workers to enter into a mutual agreement with the local state. State workers were cautious about their behaviour because all protests were unregistered, and hence illegal. By reading from the news pieces regarding the protesters, workers also understood that the government would not tolerate radical approaches, and so they mostly followed a pattern of nonviolent and sometimes silent and disciplined protests in public. According to some workers who participated in resistance activities, officials of responsible departments often pacified protesters with promises of assistance and investigations into alleged injustice, corruption and so on as a comforting measure.

Although, on occasion, some heated conflicts occurred between state workers, the authorities and (post-reform) SOE management, Shaanxi was able to maintain a relatively less tumultuous relationship between the local government and state workers, compared to the situation in some of the north-eastern provinces. This falls in line with other observations that the Chinese regime has shown a considerable degree of tolerance toward protests by workers if they remained clearly contained in both scale and aspirations (Tong & Lei 2010), and it has been willing to accommodate some of their requests (Su & He 2010).

**New communication technologies and coordinated radical resistance**

For some years, state workers’ protests in Shaanxi had been spasmodic, spontaneous and mostly uncoordinated, as seen elsewhere in China (Blecher 2002), and they were usually confined to single firms (Gold, Hurst & Won 2009). In the late 2000s, Shaanxi’s state workers in the context of widening socio-economic inequalities expressed a new round of grievance and discontent. The understanding and reconciliation between the local state and state workers, fragile as they were, began to erode after a series of unforeseen real-life and cyberspace events. It is these events that form the basis of this analysis.

The new resistance featured four new major characteristics: 1) It promoted a different target of resistance; 2) it was more radical, organised and coordinated than previous practices in terms of organisation and operation; 3) online communication tools and media played an important role in organising the resistance, dodging the authorities and censorship, and interacting with wider community; 4) real-life and cyberspace actions were implemented simultaneously during the course of resistance, to make the most out of each approach in achieving goals.

As the first step, in August 2008, the Shaanxi Study Group of Mao Zedong Thought (hereafter ‘the Study Group’) was established among workers—mostly in or above their 40s—of several SOEs in Xi’an. While most similar study groups and activities in other provinces mainly mourned the vanishing socialist ideals in the
context of nostalgia for the Mao era, the Study Group had greater ambitions than ‘shallow monetary goals’ sought under the guise of promoting Maoism, and this was beyond the expectation of local government, which believed that workers had to rely on the aforementioned institutionalised channels to give voice.\(^5\) The later resistance ignited by the Study Group was divided into two phases of before and after one of the leading organisers, Zhao Dongmin, who was a committed Maoist and labour advocate, was taken into custody by the local enforcement department (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Actions and responses in the first and second phases of resistance.**

The first phase: before Zhao Dongmin was taken into custody.

Between October and November 2008, the Study Group established the Shaanxi Enterprise Union Rights Defence Representative Congress (hereafter 'the Rights Congress'). The Rights Congress promoted a more organised form of labour
movement across SOEs and cities in Shaanxi, and explicitly asked workers not to protest in government agencies but instead to express their concerns and requests in a (self-perceived) legal, collective and organised manner, such as through the official trade union. Meanwhile, the Rights Congress carefully bounded the proposal by closely and unconditionally following the ideological principles of the CCP.\textsuperscript{6}

Online communication technologies were widely used by the organisers and participants. At the beginning, small, secretive discussion groups registered through instant messaging programs were used to propagate information and to circumvent the nodes of traditional social control systems (such as neighbourhood committees) that the government deployed in SOEs in order to monitor and silence dissent. As revealed in interviews, the Rights Congress did raise concern among public security officials, but officials believed that this did not warrant deeper investigation since the affiliated Study Group was quite an ordinary, unthreatening assembly of state workers. This oversight on the government’s part made way for the expansion of one of the most extraordinary and influential state workers’ resistance actions in Shaanxi’s history.

As the authorities did not react to the workers’ online activities, resistance had more openly gone out live on the Internet in order to ‘understand vox populi and inform comrades and supporters’.\textsuperscript{7} Dispersion methods included a number of online communication tools and media including mailing lists, online forums, blogs, and instant messaging programs. According to participants, these were considered to be safer than face-to-face communication and making phone calls, which could be more easily monitored by the authorities. The go-online strategy was ‘effective, economical and safe’, according to an interviewed organiser,\textsuperscript{8} in the sense that the Rights Congress’ proposal to establish a representative organisation and online promotion attracted an increasing number of workers where it had previously failed to draw attention from traditional media and lacked recourse to institutional politics.

After the preparation stage, the Rights Congress turned more attention to organising real-life activities. On 7 April 2009 Zhao assisted a group of nearly 400 workers from approximately 20 SOEs to apply to the Provincial CCP Committee and the provincial branch of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU, the only legal trade union under the leadership of the CCP; hereafter ‘the Provincial Trade Union’) to register the Rights Congress as an enterprise restructuring watchdog. They were concerned that the official trade union was failing, and that workers’ congresses—the peak legal bodies in SOEs—had been bypassed in the reform process. Officials immediately dismissed the application and refused workers’ request for a formal meeting.

The rebuff was seen to validate the setting up by workers of their own representative congress, according to one of the Rights Congress’ reports later published online to appeal to workers for support (China Labour Bulletin 2009f). Although making no progress in legalising the Rights Congress, it became better known among workers in Xi’an and other cities through online dissemination of information conducted by a group of volunteers who closely followed the progress...
of resistance, or participated in it. This also drew overseas journalists' attention and a number of interviews of participating workers and related videos were published and broadcast through news websites and online radios such as Radio Free Asia based in the United States.  

On 15 June 2009 the Rights Congress requested the dismissal of the Provincial Trade Union’s president through a visit to submit an open letter. According to an interview, this request, being viewed as an unacceptable challenge, irritated the officials of the Provincial Trade Union and prompted them to ask local authorities for the suppression of the Rights Congress. The authorities made use of a sophisticated operation of government agencies to outlaw the Rights Congress. On 10 July 2009, in a confidential report (leaked and subsequently obtained by Zhao's lawyers), the Provincial Trade Union officially asked the police for a raid on the Rights Congress, particularly targeting Zhao (Li 2010b).

The workers believed that they had protested against the Provincial Trade Union using moderation, but the report described them, their leaders and their resistance activities as a major threat to the Party-state. Authorities, however, defended their actions as rational and necessary by referring to a labour conflict that had erupted in an SOE in Jilin Province on 24 July 2009. Against this background, the fear of mass incidents was fermenting inside the Provincial Trade Union, and affected SOEs and government agencies.

More steps were taken to crack down on both online and offline activities of the Rights Congress. On 27 July 2009, the Provincial Bureau of Civil Affairs, the superior administration of civic organisations, stepped in and outlawed the unauthorised Rights Congress. At the same time, according to participants, online petitions and discussion groups were also deleted by the Internet police. The Rights Congress ignored the ruling, and its key members accepted online leftist media interviews to call for public support beyond Shaanxi. According to a local government official who took part in implementing the restrictions on the Rights Congress, this irritated the authorities, who had intended to confine the Rights Congress’ influence to Shaanxi, and had hoped to put an end to the nuisance quickly.

As the final step and attempt before Zhao's detention, showing further noncompliance to local government’s directions, he wrote a petition to the Central Government and the CCP committees at the municipal, provincial and central levels. Posted online through leftist blogs, online discussion boards and Maoist websites, the petition made the issues and propositions much more widely known within and outside of Shaanxi. Appealing to higher, more central, and presumably more righteous and powerful authorities, constituted the major approach adopted by agitated state workers in Shaanxi and elsewhere in rightful resistance. Their behaviour, however, finally provoked the local authorities, who had hoped that the workers would retreat after the Rights Congress was made illegal in real life, and further suppression attempts were made against key resistance members.

On 19 August 2009 Zhao was detained and isolated from his family and the public until late 2010. He was in custody for more than 13 months—far in excess of the legal limit—during which time his wife died. On 25 October 2010, in his
first trial, Zhao was sentenced to three years in prison for the crime of ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt social order’. After the second trial, on 27 January 2011, Zhao was finally released from jail with a suspended sentence of three years. During this period, online supporters appealed for donations and asked for support for Zhao’s family, who were in poverty. One of the supporters interviewed by the author, however, was subpoenaed by the public security office and asked not to post any more online support. It was obvious that the local authorities had realised, after the outbreak of the Rights Congress, the importance of controlling online information dissemination with respect to Zhao’s case. But this control was deemed ineffective. In fact, the case demonstrated an evolving pattern of labour resistance in the context of emerging communication technologies and new media characterised by strong cyberspace support.

Emerging cyberactivism and an evolving pattern of resistance

Recent research shows that 1980s resistance favoured direct and confrontational approaches while in the late 1990s it relied increasingly on indirect and legal means (Pei 2010). This study confirms that state workers and their supporters have indeed applied a mixed strategy in redeveloping and refining their tactics, and further argues that this strategy has successfully reshaped their power relations with the local state (see Figure 1). On one hand, the approaches of the Study Group and the Rights Congress shared characteristics with earlier state workers’ resistance, in that they followed a conventional pattern of combining naming, framing and blaming (Hung & Chiu 2009). On the other hand, compared to earlier resistance movements, several new characteristics, including use of online media, reshaped the pattern of resistance in the context of emerging online activism, or cyberactivism.

First, the timing and organising of resistance was more proactive. In the past, radicalism had occurred upon exit from the working class (for example, lay-off and forced retirement), when workers no longer had the power to stop production (Lee 2002). But the Rights Congress took the initiative to prevent potential or further infringement on the benefits accrued by workers and the threat to state assets. This was in line with a growing trend for workers to take action against the corrupt conditions under which their enterprises were reformed and privatised (Gilbert 2005). The proactive approach adopted by the workers made the local authorities, who were cautious about post-retrenchment resistance, neglect the early development of the Rights Congress.

Second, the requests in the resistance were more radical—and damaging to the established state-led conciliation. Previously, workers’ bargaining approaches to SOE management mainly campaigned for economic gains, respect and autonomy at the shop-floor level (Zhang 2008). But the Rights Congress not only opposed SOE reform, but also asked for supervisory power over management and the enterprise branches of the trade union. In addition, they directly challenged the leadership of the Provincial Trade Union through real-life and cyberspace actions. This not only broke the once peaceful, benign and somewhat cooperative
relationship between the trade union and workers, but it also irrevocably altered worker–danwei and worker–state relationships by transforming them from dependency to defiance (Morris, Sheehan & Hassard 2001). This later resulted in a mismatch between the perceptions of the workers and the local state in terms of the tolerance boundary, spurring the local state to repress activists.

Third, the resistance was less tolerated by the local state after the breakdown of conciliation. The Provincial Trade Union and its multi-level branches have been wary of, and have often felt threatened by, workers’ attempts to establish their own representative organisations (China Labour Bulletin 2009c). The Rights Congress was dangerous in the eyes of local authorities and the trade union because it linked different cities and organised workers from several SOEs. After the crackdown on Falun Gong spiritual discipline in the late 1990s, China has heavily repressed revolts and potentially radical popular movements. Therefore, many civic movements tried to shield themselves by labelling their purpose as ‘not against the state’ (Zhu & Ho 2011). Although workers had argued that they had no intention to contest the authorities, the activities of the Rights Congress had, from the trade union’s perspective, challenged the legal and superior status of the union that was backed by the CCP.

Fourth, the resistance was operated in a relatively organised form to muster different subgroups. With different rights claims and statuses, the varied contentions of the groups of current, laid-off and retired workers in SOEs meant that they did not always pool their resistance efforts. The Rights Congress differed from these rights groups because it provided a platform that was inclusive of different groups from multiple SOEs who shared ‘a bitter hatred for corrupt management, the trade union and the SOE reform program’, according to interviewed participants. This produced a stronger collective voice than ever before. The organisational form, however, created new challenges to the governance power for the local authorities, as their capacity for governing labour matters and unrest had been mainly built on the experiences of dealing with workers with conventional claims, which could often be solved within established governance frameworks and within single firms or groups.

Finally, and most distinctively, the resistance was a combination of conventional and cyberspace activities. Interviewed officials admitted that Zhao and his colleagues’ ability to organise and mobilise workers across SOEs and cities was the reason that the authorities kept him in detention for such a long period—an attempt to quash his influence. However, his case attracted even more widespread attention on the Internet and more support from Maoists and other leftists in general, both within and outside China. The online movements in this phase had gone through several steps to reach the peak of national attention, illustrating the contentious characters of the Chinese Internet.

Initially, in order to raise wider attention, Zhao’s close supporters in Shaanxi posted articles online, portraying his life experience and praising him as a self-giving activist and brave challenger to corrupted officials. The dissemination of these pieces, which were certainly banned by the traditional media, rapidly attracted attention beyond the province through the means of mailing lists, forums,
blogs, Twitter-like microblogs and instant messaging programs. It was beyond the provincial Internet police’s capacity to control the proliferating online resistance information outside Shaanxi. Yang (2009, p. 7) too suggests that the state’s efforts at censorship are fairly ineffective, stating that ‘state power constrains the forms and issues of contention, but instead of preventing it from happening, it forces activists to be more creative and artful’. For the very first time, the power relationship between workers and the local state, as manifested in the outcomes of their struggles in the cyberspace, had slightly shifted in favour of the former.

More online and offline activity further pushed the resistance in favour of Zhao. First, people in China and other parts of the world signed petitions arguing for the release of Zhao. Second, since October 2010, Li Jinsong, a Beijing trial lawyer famous for defending the disadvantaged and rights activists (Kahn 2007), has written a number of widely circulated public reports from the legal perspective and continually updated his client’s progress online. Li’s participation significantly enriched the means of second-phase resistance, which was initially morally based but lacked substantial legal challenges to the local state.

Under such pressure, especially that emerging from cyberspace, the local court finally had to hear Zhao’s case. Instant messaging programs, microblogs and so on were used to quickly disseminate information about the trials of Zhao. During the trials, activists from all over the country and many local state workers went to the court site to voice their protests. The online organisation of resistance in the second phase, which was less amenable to control and beyond the provincial boundary, made the local authorities very difficult to deal with. The overwhelming influence of this case amplified through the Internet made the local government act as if ‘it was facing a major enemy force’ during the trials, one interviewee said. Nonetheless, the suppression of Zhao has not stopped the resistance, and it actually ‘provided a channel through which citizens defend or pursue their legitimate rights in China’ (Cai 2008, p. 24).

In sum, the study shows that the basic structural conditions for the resistance were furnished by technological development in communication and transformation in labour politics among state workers. With the help of the Internet, a fledgling civil society of online communities, offline rights organisation among workers and the creativity of Internet users combined to sustain both online and office activism in this case. The author agrees with what Economy and Mondschein (2011) argue, in that ‘while the Internet may not have produced a revolution in China’s political system, it most certainly is producing an evolution’, especially as it helped workers gain significant media influence which was unavailable previously.

Discussion and conclusion
Faced with substantial income inequality, rampant corruption and social ills, the masses in China have for a long time been filled with anger and indignation. Protesters refer to rights clearly set out in law, government policies and extracts from CCP leaders’ discourses for justification. Among the (former) state workers, there is a growing scepticism about the current regime and a yearning for the old
Maoist era. Not content with the status quo, they refer to Maoist theory and ideology about socialism, socio-economic rights and justice, and most importantly, the status of state workers, in protesting against SOE management and malfunctioning trade unions.

Against this background, this paper has presented a case study of rightful resistance using traditional and emerging means.

In the first phase of the resistance, although largely following the conventional pattern, the Study Group and the Rights Congress represented a strategic turn in Maoist organising in contemporary China. Their allegations, requests and proposals all mixed Maoist rhetoric with contemporary legal and constitutional arguments and showed absolute allegiance to the Party-state, even though the author found that not all participants essentially believed in these principles. Actually, these organisational designs and rhetoric were more or less contrived to create difficulties for the local authorities to have charges of ‘state subversion’ or ‘collusion with foreign elements’ stick to the Study Group and the Rights Congress. Therefore, this was a self-protective approach to legitimise their actions. The participants in general saw their actions as legal, peaceable and concessional in front of corrupted officials. But the Provincial Trade Union, the target of the resistance, took a different view and perceived these actions as disturbing and threatening. It magnified the severity of these actions to the level that they directly challenged the authorities of the state.

The strategy and rhetorical standing were reused in the second phase but on a different platform. After Zhao was detained, state workers from the original group and supporters in Shaanxi and other places had consistently exposed the matter beyond the provincial boundary through the Internet. They also excogitated a plan to turn the case into a referendum on the nature of the CCP through a mixture of online and real-life activities confrontational to the local state which had hoped to limit the influence of the case within Shaanxi. The questions facing the local state changed from being about whether the Rights Congress was legal to whether the CCP would defend one of its own who was merely attempting to uphold the legal rights of workers. If not, then wasn’t the CCP signalling that it no longer represented the workers, or the putative protagonists of the CCP and nation?

The suppressing approach taken by the local authorities—especially during Zhao’s wife’s sickness and death—triggered more anger among workers and the online audience, and wiped out any hope for an amicable settlement with the local authorities. Nonetheless, considering that a three-year sentence was the minimum for this crime, the sentence was relatively light compared to other harsh suppressive measures. Leftist groups and rights defenders therefore hailed Zhao’s suspended sentence as a major victory of grassroots leftist resistance. But, by criminalising this type of movement, the local authorities could now deter similar activities in the future by referring to Zhao’s case. Thus, a new and as yet unclear baseline regarding what would (or would not) be tolerated was established by the local state. This crushed the state workers’ hopes for establishing a self-organised labour movement within the framework of rightful resistance that had previously been less risky than wholly un-institutionalised defiance.
This phenomenon of rights resistance coalescing into Maoism is especially evident in the inland industrialised cities of China, whose economies and administrations have been unable to accommodate disadvantaged state workers through compensations, strong job markets and welfare systems. In these cities, Maoists often hold meetings, discussions and commemorative activities on anniversary dates for Mao, the CCP and socialist China to protest against capitalism-driven development. As demonstrated earlier, online media have been widely used in recent years to promote, organise and spread resistance. The Chinese Government now keeps a close eye on the Maoists and their political activities, especially those that are relatively organised and radical. In order to preserve the one-party dictatorship of the bureaucratic regime, the CCP has continued to brutally suppress many kinds of social or mass movement that could potentially challenge it. An increasingly harsh and secretive court procedure is imposed on social activists, including rightist liberals, leftist Maoists and trade unionists. Since the arrest of Zhao and the crushing of a more radical group of activists called the Maoist Communist Party of China, there have been further conflicts and clashes between Maoist masses and the police in places such as Shaanxi and Henan provinces where a larger number of SOEs locate.

The state had once allowed a relatively loosened environment on the Internet (Tai 2006). But at the time of this study, the state has tightened its control over online leftist discussion and communication and attempts to snuff out the radical voice of dissension. Bo Xilai, one of the high-profile leftist leadership contenders hoping to enter the Standing Committee of Politburo, was dismissed on 15 March 2012, one day after Premier Wen Jiabo called for actions to avert the repeat of Maoist Cultural Revolution. After that, some leftist forums that supported Bo were warned, suspended or even closed down. Between 31 March and 3 April 2012, two major Chinese microblogging sites were punished for allowing bloggers to spread rumours about a military coup linked to Bo in Beijing and their comment functions were suspended. All these actions explicitly signal to the Maoists and leftists that online organising of activities and dissemination of radical information that challenged the Party-state are unsupported and becoming difficult now more than ever. Nonetheless not only leftists but also other discontents have been closely monitored online (Davies 2012).

At the local level, the rapidly developed online media in China have thrust many local conflicts and low- and middle-tier officials into the limelight, which would not have been possible before. In many cases, the revelation of illegal activities has resulted in disciplinary action, dismissal from post, and even formal investigation over potential corruption. For example, in September 2012 the former head of Shaanxi province’s Bureau of Work Safety photographed grinning at the scene of a fatal coach crash has been removed from his post, due to ‘serious violation of discipline’ after Internet vigilantes found that he was in possession of a number of expensive watches (Spegele 2012). Following this, Goldkorn (2012, p. 169) believes that the year 2011 was a watershed because:
the Chinese Government officials began reading Internet postings with a care once reserved for picking through editorials in the *People’s Daily*. The ability to decipher gnomic utterances in the Party newspaper was once vital to a political career; today, understanding the Internet is arguably even more important for Party and non-Party observers alike for the way it reflects China’s restive reality.

But the trend becomes indistinct in 2012, and beyond it is hard to predict, since the top Chinese politicians themselves were recently affected by these information flows. Right before the once-in-a-decade power shift in November 2012, a devastating investigative report on Premier Wen Jiabo’s hidden family wealth was published by the *New York Times* and widely circulated online before it was banned in mainland China by the most extensive and sophisticated system for Internet censorship (Barboza 2012; Bradsher 2012). It seems that the system will continue to provide some limited space for censored discussion on certain topics, but the high pressure approach to Internet regulation will not change in a foreseeable period of time given that there will be no change to the CCP’s hardline policies. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the Chinese state is not ‘the high-capacity juggernaut familiar from the headlines’, but ‘a hodgepodge of disparate actors ambivalent about what types of activism it can live with’ (Stern & O’Brien 2011, p. 190).

Though the Rights Congress is still in operation in Shaanxi at the time of this article being published, its decline has not ended. The resistance has continued despite the state’s negative response. After release, Zhao continues his resistance efforts through writings, and most of these are published on his personal blog in the name of the Study Group, addressing the authorities in a softened manner. Meanwhile, a differentiation among the members of the Study Group and supporters has emerged, and some of them no longer agree with Zhao. For example, an interviewed major liaison that was responsible for managing the donation to Zhao during his detention questioned Zhao’s sincerity in helping workers and criticised him for his self-promotion as the most important leader of the resistance.

The conflict between online disorder in the second phase and local state’s pursuit of both online and real-world order in this case imply that, although it is tightly controlled and risky sometimes, cyberspace has proved to be a usable platform for democratic and civic participation in a more and more open society (Benney 2011). The state itself is currently in a difficult position as to how to decide the extent of openness of cyberspace, during the construction of consultative authoritarianism, which essentially requires more understanding and involvement between the state and the people. Therefore the conflicts in this and many other cases may create certain space for negotiation as the local state has strong incentive to avoid such conflicts.

During the local state’s attempt to reconcile the contradiction and suppress the dissidence, state workers’ labour action will surge again—probably in a different form—to find out what the new bottom line is and what the new outlets can be. In the future, it will be important to examine the new interplays between these parties.
For example, how will the workers’ future resistance adapt to the increasingly constrained online and offline environments after the local state outlawed the Rights Congress and disgraced Zhao? How will the local state’s new counter-actions influence the state workers, Maoists and leftists? And a fundamental question pertains to how the Party-state copes with more and more conflicts in the existing socio-political framework, especially after the then General Secretary of CCP Hu Jintao explicitly dismissed the possibility of either adopting Western-style democracy or returning to the Maoist governance in his farewell speeches at the 18th Party Congress.

Notes

1. O’Brien (1996, p. 31) defines rightful resistance as: ‘… a partly institutionalized form of popular action that employs laws, policies, and other established values to defy power holders who have failed to live up to some ideal or who have not implemented a popular measure […] Aggrieved individuals and groups turn to established principles to anchor their defiance; use legitimating myths and normative language to frame their claims; rely on existing statutes and government commitments when leveling their charges; and locate and mobilize advocates within officialdom. In differing contexts, a combination of rights talk, legal tactics, and open confrontation may induce power holders to surrender advantages in accord with principles that usually favor them.’ Rightful resistance has been widely adopted as a major tool against the state and capital by peasants, disadvantaged state workers and other groups (O’Brien & Li 2006). The movement employs a mix of characteristics, from institutional participation, social movements, rights consciousness-raising and everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1987). It is essentially ‘a fight to compel the authorities to narrow the gap between what they say and what they do in a context where rights […] are recognised—more or less formally—but are not guaranteed’ (Froissart 2007, p. 117).

2. In the 1990s, investigative journalism flourished in China. Therefore looking for help from journalists in traditional media has been deemed by protestors as an important approach to raise official attention.

3. Interview with a local newspaper journalist, Xi’an, 12 December 2010.

4. Interview with a Xi’an city government official, Xi’an, 10 December 2010.

5. Interview with a Shaanxi provincial government official, Shaanxi, 20 May 2011.

6. These principles, briefly speaking, are 1) resolutely upholding the leadership of the CCP, 2) protecting the principles of the Constitution and 3) uniting the working class (China Labour Bulletin 2009e).

7. Interview with an organiser, Xi’an, 20 April 2011.

8. Interview with an organiser, Xianyang, 18 April 2011.


10. A video recording of the process can be found on YouTube (see http://youtu.be/n-23fRbSfgU).
11. Interview with a trade union official, Xi’an, 20 September 2010.

12. A section of the report reads: ‘Since April this year (2009), key members of the Rights Congress have changed their focus from inciting people online to taking real action in the society. They stepped up from brewing a plot from behind the curtain to the front stage of confrontation, with more frequent unrest, deeper harm, and the possibility to make the Rights Congress bigger and stronger… Zhao Dongmin and other key members expressed the intention to organise a larger ‘legal gathering’ at a critical point, showing an obvious political intrigue… They utilised some social problems and older and poor health retired workers as the leverage to press on the government, showing a strong ability of agitation and captivation, and an insufferable arrogance. If immediate action is not taken and they are indulged, it is highly possible that mass incidents will occur.’

13. After a private company had taken control of Tonghua Iron and Steel Group (Tonggang) as the major shareholder, a new general manager was appointed by the private company to replace the formerly government-assigned manager and prepare for a proposed full takeover. Meanwhile, rumours were circulating among workers that large-scale lay-offs would occur. Nearly 10 000 workers who were disgruntled about the privatisation and worried about their jobs rioted and beat the newly appointed general manager to death (Ouyang, Zhang & Li 2010).

14. Series of interviews with organisers and participants, Xi’an and Xianyang, October 2010.

15. Court documents accused Zhao of organising workers to rally at the Provincial Trade Union’s offices, ‘severely disrupting the Union’s business operation for seven hours’ where the workers were ‘making noises, shouting slogans and humiliating staff members’ (Li 2010a).

16. Interview with an organiser, Xi’an, 22 September 2010.

17. Workers named the problematic SOE reforms as the main cause of their miseries; framed their requests by referencing the theories of Marxism and Maoism that the Chinese socialist regime had been built on, and blamed the weak trade union for not safeguarding workers’ benefits, displaying elements of moral economic resistance (Hurst & O’Brien 2002). They especially referenced Maoism in discussing China’s transition towards capitalism, and how Mao’s foresight had been proven and his concerns validated in transitional China (Wei 2011).

18. For instance, in February 2009, right at the height of the global financial crisis, the ACFTU reminded its branches to ‘keep a close lookout for foreign and domestic hostile forces using the difficulties encountered by some companies to infiltrate and undermine the ranks of migrant workers’. These words were echoed by Shaanxi’s officials, who claimed that the Rights Congress was in collusion with foreign forces, and was a reactionary organisation that could harm China’s achieving of a harmonious society (China Labour Bulletin 2009a).

19. Series of interviews with participants, Xi’an and Xianyang, October 2010.


21. Supporters compiled a volume of articles about Zhao with 1101 pages. See link
via http://dajialai.org/ziliao1/.

22. In Wuyouzhixiang (literally ‘Utopia’—shut down 12 April 2012), arguably the most influential leftist online forum, nearly 4000 articles and opinion pieces were posted in a short time, and were reposted daily by other forums such as Maopai gongren (literally ‘Maoist workers’) that were devoted specifically to state workers. A number of Zhao Dongming Concern Groups (guanzhu tuan) were also established online in most provinces, posting articles on local websites and asking for the immediate release of Zhao.

23. For example, an open letter was signed and posted online by 53 domestic and overseas academics, including some from leading institutions (China Labor News Translations 2010). In the cities of Luoyang and Zhengzhou in Henan Province, Maoist activists organised sympathy protests to support Zhao. Protests were even held at Chinese embassies overseas.

24. Some of the most influential and confrontational reports exposed the internal, confidential communication on how the Provincial Trade Union secretly thwarted Zhao, illuminated detailed allegations of corruption among union officials, and defended Zhao’s actions as a manifestation of his commitment to the CCP (China Labor News Translations 2011).

25. For example, information was regularly updated on Wuyouzhixiang (http://www.wyzsx.com/) and then reposted to other websites.

26. Interview with a participant, Xi’an, 3 March 2011.

27. For example, in 2007 two laid-off workers involved in a lesser-known case in Xi’an were sentenced to three years for the same crime enacted on a much smaller scale (they led a group of laid-off workers to block the entrance of a suburban SOE).

28. For example, in July 2010 workers at two largest post-reform textile mills in Xianyang coordinated simultaneous strikes for wage increases and they succeeded.

29. Zhao’s speech about ‘revolution and amendment’ can be found on YouTube (see http://youtu.be/L5-edu7L1lO).

30. Interview with an organiser, Xi’an, 20 June 2011.

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**Author note**

Zhiming Cheng is lecturer in the School of Economics at the University of Wollongong.