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# FACING CITIZEN COMPLAINTS IN CHINA, 1951–1996

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## Abstract

This article examines Chinese institutions designed to funnel citizen opinions to leaders. It argues that the dynamic between individuals hoping to solve grievances and officials hoping to scout out problems strengthens higher-level control over subordinates. The process, when done well, may promote regime legitimacy.

*“When avenues of expression [of the people’s opinion] are free, the government is regarded as good, and when these avenues of expression are blocked, so that the Emperor has no way of finding out the true conditions and opinions of the people, the government is doomed to failure.”—Lin Yutang<sup>1</sup>*

*“Complaint bureau work is important not only for our relations between the party, government and the masses, for fostering a clean government, and promoting legal construction, but even more so to persist in the life and death struggle of our party and government.”—Statement from the Fourth National Complaint Bureau Conference, October 1995.<sup>2</sup>*

Owing to widespread restrictions on expression, non-democratic states are plagued by the absence of reliable sources of informa-

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1. Yutang Lin, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), pp. 59–60.

2. See Han Wuyan, “Zhongnanhai qinxi yiwan renmin” [Zhongnanhai is affectionately linked with millions upon millions of people], *Liaowang* [Outlook] 11 (1996), p. 7.

tion from the populace. Groups and organizations are routinely required to register with the government; opposition parties, if they exist at all, are forced underground; and activists who openly challenge official policies put themselves, and often their families and friends as well, at risk. All of this might lead us to expect that government functionaries do whatever is in their power to limit face-to-face interaction between officials and citizens, and that, in particular, the expression of dissatisfaction would be vigorously prohibited. Therefore, it might appear puzzling that leaders in non-democratic regimes actively solicit input from society, including citizen complaints.

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), long lines form outside of petition-receiving offices, and hundreds, sometimes thousands, sign on to daring collective complaints against officials. These bold acts are permitted by leaders who sense some utility of communication channels between themselves and the population. In this case study, I examine institutions in China that are explicitly designed to mediate citizen-based complaints against government officials. This conduit may be viewed by both leaders and the led, as well as outside analysts, as even more important in the absence of a free press, free elections, or other sources for the expression of popular discontent. With the existence of formal communication offices to handle communications between leaders and the led, ordinary citizens are provided a legal institutional option to speak out about their dislikes—similar, in many regards, to ombuds offices in other systems. Not surprisingly, leaders attempt to limit input from the masses, by specifying formal restrictions on group complaints and by making it politically difficult to pursue sensitive grievances. Communication of a complaint does not necessarily translate into resolution of the grievance. Indeed, this article argues, effective operation of these institutional channels strengthens, rather than weakens, regimes by propping up sagging legitimacy.

To undertake this study, I analyze formal institutions that facilitate communication between officials and citizens in contemporary China. In particular, I focus on the network of “letters and visits institutions” (*xinfang zhidu*), a set of governmental bureaus established in the 1950s to handle requests, complaints, and suggestions from ordinary citizens. Through their communication of citizen views, these “complaint bureaus,” as they are known, are intended to promote citizen efficacy, regime legitimacy, and system stability, as their institutional precursors did in the imperial period.

Authoritarian leaders attempt to promote stability in a variety of ways. To do so, on the most basic level they need to maintain institutions that foster communication between political leaders and the masses. Leaders in non-democratic states as diverse as medieval France, imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, Singapore, and the PRC all established formal channels to permit citizens to file petitions, complaints, and

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suggestions with the government.<sup>3</sup> Even in strictly controlled single-party systems, there are channels to monitor officials, oversee governmental policy, and give a voice to the masses, although these organizations have never been intended to challenge the ruling establishment. Institutions such as petition offices, problem centers, and reception bureaus allow citizens to relay their concerns to officials. This category of voluntary participation, in which individuals approach government officials seeking assistance for themselves or others, is often referred to as “contacting.”

Contacting is an institutionalized form of citizen participation, with established rules and procedures, as well as predictable patterns of behavior. It can be either an individual or a group act, although most authoritarian governments ardently strive to limit collective attempts to stage complaints. Even though contacting often begins on citizen initiative, participants take cues from governmental representatives charged with acting as a conduit for the legitimate expression of dissatisfaction. Citizen contacting, not always rooted in the traditional institutions of civil society such as families, schools, work places, or temples/churches, is instead mediated through public offices established deliberately for this purpose. It is distinct from other forms of political participation because, as Zuckerman and West note, it

does not involve the selection of office holders, does not include public demonstrations of political strength, and does not require the formation and maintenance of ties among claimants, whether through political parties, interest groups, or other political associations.<sup>4</sup>

Institutions that facilitate citizen contacting have a dual purpose. First, they provide a way to meet people’s desires to participate in decision-making and to be heard by their leaders.<sup>5</sup> In every political system, people encounter

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3. For examples, see Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Theodore H. Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Planning Without Markets: Knowledge and State Action in East German Housing Construction,” *East European Politics and Societies* 4:3 (Fall 1990), pp. 557–79; Tianjian Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

4. Alan S. Zuckerman and Darrell M. West, “The Political Bases of Citizen Contacting: A Cross-National Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 79 (March 1985), p. 117. For another study that analyzes citizen contacting, see Nicholas Lampert, *Whistleblowing in the Soviet Union: Complaints and Abuses Under State Socialism* (London: MacMillan, 1985). A formal complaint system in the Soviet Union developed much later than its counterpart in the PRC. Even though citizens’ rights to submit proposals and complaints existed in law before the 1930s, the first formal resolution permitting citizen contacting was not passed by the Central Committee until 1967, and a “Letters Department” was not established until 1978.

5. I use the classic definition of political participation provided by Verba, Nie, and Kim: “Those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the

difficulties within their daily lives. From traffic problems, to complaints about public services including trash collection and utilities, to more explicitly political concerns such as reports of corruption and malfeasance, individuals and groups attempt to articulate their concerns through whatever channels are available. Second, contacting institutions furnish information to the ruling elite, who are often disconnected from affairs in the localities. Contacting institutions provide governments the chance to systematically gather information about popular preferences and officials' behavior, even if they choose not to act on the (often-unfavorable) content of the data.

This research relies mainly on interviews and archival research. I interviewed officials at local complaint bureaus and met cadres from mass organizations, including the Chinese Women's Federation and Communist Youth League. The written materials collected include many nationally circulated journals, government reports, and handbooks that were published for complaint cadres. Local county and provincial histories provide an extremely valuable source for my arguments here, as they corroborate general trends highlighted in interviews.<sup>6</sup> In total, I examined complaints registered in 22 counties across 15 of China's 32 provinces, autonomous regions, and provincial-level cities. (Counties used for the analysis, and their provincial locations, are listed in the Appendix.)

To trace trends in Chinese complaint bureau work, I identify four separate periods of institutional development since 1951, which I label as establishment, rupture, restoration, and equilibrium. These snapshots, based on national complaint bureau publications and county-level data, demonstrate the ebb and flow of formal citizen contacts with officialdom. In this way, complaint bureau work mirrors events and trends in the larger political, economic, and social environment of the Chinese system. For example, the establishment phase (1951–65) highlights the complex processes involved in the consolidation of a new regime. The period of rupture (1966–77) for complaint bureaus is analogous to the collapse of most formal institutions in China during the Cultural Revolution. Similarly, after this 10-year period of involution and self-destruction, there was a dire need for renewal and reintegration. I label this period of complaint work (1978–88) the restoration phase, during which time we witness dramatic peaks in the number of complainants approaching offices. I note a stage of equilibrium following this increase, from

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selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take." Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie, and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 46.

6. For more on the use of local histories, see Stig Thøgersen and Søren Clausen, "New Reflections in the Mirror: Local Chinese Gazetteers (*difangzhi*) in the 1980s," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 27 (January 1992), 161–84. They contend that most histories published in the 1980s were at the county level.

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1989–96. During some time periods, I have more data to present, with a notably high number of counties reporting from 1978–88. To overcome the disparities within the data for each period, I present a graph of the average number of complaints at the conclusion of the discussion.

### 1. Establishment (1951–1965)

At the outset of the 1950s, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, weary from almost three decades of civil and regional war, attempted to consolidate their victory by grooming reliable cadres and promoting harmonious relations with the masses. As part of the much larger effort to solidify the communist regime, complaint bureaus were just one tool for establishing political control.

In the early 1950s, complaint work at the Government Administration Council (GAC) was dominated by reports of offenses (*jianju*), accusations (*konggao*), and other negative accounts of cadre behavior. These cases corroborated well with Party and state leaders' attempts to uncover counterrevolutionary behavior and punish violations of law and discipline.<sup>7</sup> Judging by a summary report of the General Affairs Office of the North China Bureau of the CCP, many local cadres failed to take complaint work seriously, and suffered from the error of "bureaucratism,"<sup>8</sup> a damning code word broadly applied to condemned actions and personnel often accused of lacking revolutionary vigor.

Overcoming the resistance of local authorities to accept and act on contacts from citizens proved to be an exacting task for leaders invested in the institutional integrity of citizen complaint bureaus. The 1951 Chang Shunyu case highlighted the bureaucratic ineffectiveness of such institutions in their early years. In an attempt to rein in wayward cadres and encourage citizens to contact local officials, central-level leaders publicized the plight of this young cart driver. The persistent Chang attempted to report the illegal behavior of his boss, Sung Yude, who forged road passes in an attempt to flee a party rectification campaign. Initially reporting his allegations to authorities in Shanxi Province, Chang ended up approaching officials in 27 separate government organizations in his "miniature Long March" to formally denounce his boss, labeled a "counter-revolutionary landlord and despot."<sup>9</sup> Ultimately,

7. *Jinghai Xianzhi* [Jinghai County history] (Jinghai Xianzhi Bianxiu Weiyuanhui Bianzhu, 1995), p. 442; James R. Townsend, *Political Participation in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 178.

8. "North China Bureau CC, CCP, Calls Meeting on Work in Dealing with Public Complaints," *Tianjin Ribao* [Tianjin Daily News] December 9, 1952, in *Current Background* 224, January 15, 1953, p. 2.

9. "The Communist Bureaucracy in Action: The Case of Chang Shunyu," *Current Background* 196, July 30, 1952.

Chang took the charges to the North China Bureau of the CCP Central Committee, which ordered a detailed investigation into the matter. This 1951 episode, which later received national attention when it was published in the *People's Daily*, became the poster case for overcoming "violations of law and of party discipline," as well as the elimination of bureaucratism within Party ranks. While detailed results of the investigation were not publicly announced, Chang's complaint was used by central leaders to encourage ordinary citizens to use available channels, and to educate local officials about the need to be responsive.

As revolutionary fervor dwindled in the mid-1950s, and the routine tasks of governing set in, regime leaders faced increased demands for information about local affairs. The newly inaugurated citizen complaint system was central to this effort. Party cadres recognized that complaint bureaus, analogous to imperial systems of palace memorials, censors, and complaint drums, could help leaders become aware of festering problems.<sup>10</sup> For this, they looked to ordinary people for help. In 1953, a *People's Daily* editorial argued:

The most practical, the most economic, and the most direct method for the masses of the people to criticize and to offer recommendations is the writing of letters. The letters now received by leadership organs at all levels today are still very few compared with the problems existent in our various tasks and the scale and needs for the nation's construction enterprises.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1950s, complaint work was valuable in helping the Party leadership make the transition from being revolutionaries to being state administrators. People's letters were often sources of raw information on what needed to be done to consolidate the regime.<sup>12</sup> Yet, local-level officials largely resisted the time-consuming and often tedious tasks associated with complaint work. As a result, part of the goal of the first national conference on complaint bureau work, held in 1957, was to raise leadership awareness of the impor-

10. As a result of the party expansion drive in 1955–56, creation of the township level of administration, and collectivization campaigns, officials in Beijing treated local information as a premium resource. See Michel Oksenberg, "Methods of Communication within the Chinese Bureaucracy," *China Quarterly* 143 (January–March 1974), p. 32. During imperial times, citizens could strike complaint drums placed in front of imperial palace and censorate offices to communicate perceived breaches of justice; this was used often in capital sentences.

11. "Renmin Ribao Editorially Calls Attention to Proper Handling of Public Complaints," *Survey of China Mainland Press* (SCMP) 498, January 23, 1953, p. 13.

12. This use of contacting channels has been observed in other newly consolidating regimes as well. For example, imperial radicals in Japan who overthrew the Tokugawa regime in 1868 immediately set up petition boxes to increase the appeal of their government. See Luke S. Roberts, "The Petition Box in Eighteenth-Century Tosa," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 20:2 (1994), p. 456.

tance of mass contact to improve government work. At this conference, one cadre argued, “It is especially important now that we pay attention to problems that are revealed to us through the people’s complaints, as we are making many mistakes, we have much to learn. . . . If we pay attention to our mistakes, things will not be that big of a deal. . . .”<sup>13</sup>

An essential part of the development of complaint channels during this period was their extension to local levels, and to organizations beyond the Party and government. In the late 1950s, central-level organizations including the Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Supervision, Ministry of Agriculture, Health Ministry, Ministry of Culture, and others formalized reception rooms and procedures to receive the masses’ letters and visits.

In the mid-1950s, provincial level party committees and governments also established formal complaint bureaus. Specialized offices within provincial organizations, including the courts, people’s congresses, and public security bureaus began to develop during this time.<sup>14</sup> Even though the 1951 GAC decision establishing complaint bureaus ordered offices to be established at the county level and above, formal complaint bureaus became prominent at the county level only in the late 1950s, mostly after the Anti-Rightist campaign and purge of 1958. In areas where formal bureaus did not exist, a complaints “small group” (*xiaozu*) was frequently established within party and government offices. These local offices, however, were often unable to satisfy complainants, many of whom went straight to Beijing in search of higher-level attention.<sup>15</sup>

By the late 1950s, especially between 1955 and 1957, citizens were filing record numbers of complaints. The average increase in complaints at 21 provincial-level bureaus between 1955 and 1956 was 58.2%.<sup>16</sup> This surprising escalation has three likely sources: the publicity surrounding Chang Shunyu

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13. *Quanguo xinfang gongzuo huiyi* [Countrywide letters and visits work conferences] (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangongting, Guowuyuan Bangongting Xinfang Ju Bianjin, 1989), pp. 3, 8; Wang Xiantang and Chen Hongbin, *Xinfangxue gailun* [An outline for studying letters and visits] (Liaoning: Liaoning Daxue Chubanshe, 1987), p. 72.

14. For example, the complaint bureau at the Jiangsu Province Supreme Court began formally receiving citizens’ letters in the mid-1950s. Reported peaks were between 1956–57, 1963, and 1981–82. See *Jiangsu shengzhi* (shenpan zhi) [Jiangsu provincial history] (Jiangsu Sheng Difangzhi Bianzhu, 1997), chapter 8.

15. In a speech at the first national conference, an official alludes to the Beijing City Complaint Bureau Conference that had taken place prior to the National Conference in 1957 (*Quanguo xinfang gongzuo huiyi*, p. 7). The official confirmed that hordes of masses approached the leadership compound at Zhongnanhai, State Council offices, and other ministries with their demands. There was much discussion about how to better equip local-level bureaus to solve problems and prevent this skipping of levels, a challenge that continues today.

16. Author calculated, based on data in Diao Jiecheng, *Renmin xinfang shilue, 1949–1995* [A brief history of the people’s letters and visits, 1949–1995] (Beijing: Beijing Jingji Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 76–77. Diao’s data also demonstrate a dramatic increase in the second half of 1956,

and similarly aggrieved citizens; formal directives aimed at promoting mass work in general; and a more relaxed environment for consultation and deliberation.<sup>17</sup> This pattern, however, reversed after the Anti-Rightist campaign as the political risk for speaking out ballooned. Central-level complaint bureaus noted a rise in letters signed anonymously or with vague pseudonyms, an indication of the danger of public challenges.

The first half of the 1960s was a brisk period for complaint work, when numbers of complaints again began to rise at national and provincial bureaus. In spite of the tendency to lodge central-level complaints, county-level bureaus also reported peaks, especially in 1963 and 1964. While earlier appeals ranged from attacks on foot-dragging officials to attempts to challenge party policies, most of the cases recorded during this period concerned economic matters, particularly wage disparities in rural areas, and appeals from previous campaigns.<sup>18</sup> During the period immediately following the 1959–61 Great Leap Forward famine, people desperately sought audiences to improve their plight. Many complainants bypassed local bureaus, even dramatically presenting their pleas written in blood (*xue shu*) to central authorities. Such dynamism within complaint bureau work would not be seen again for more than 10 years, as China became gripped by the internal struggles of the Cultural Revolution.

## 2. Rupture (1966–1977)

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), which officially began in August 1966, ushered in a bleak era for most Chinese institutions, and complaint bureaus were no exception. During this period, complaint work in most areas was discontinued as a bourgeois practice.<sup>19</sup> In some locales, Revolutionary Committees took over complaint work during the so-called “Red Guard phase” of the revolution, from 1966–1969. For example, leaders in

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in response to the Hundred Flowers Campaign. I was unable to obtain sufficient data on complaints at the county level during this period to expand the argument to that level as well.

17. “Summary Report on Major Problems Existent in Connection with the Disposal of Letters from the People and the Receiving of Callers” (in Chinese) *Tianjin Ribao* [Tianjin Daily News], December 9, 1953, in *Current Background* 224, January 15, 1953, pp. 14–15.

18. The average annual increase in complaints posed to the GAC between 1960–65 was 39.4%, with the largest increase (107%) between 1961 and 1962. Author calculated, based on data in Diao, *Renmin xinfang shilue*, p. 165. Many provinces also reported sharp increases in the number of complaints during the first half of the 1960s, including Anhui, Shanxi, and Sichuan.

19. Many counties show no record of complaints at all in 1966 or 1967, reporting no contacts again until 1968 and 1969. One county history reported that all party and government offices, including complaint bureaus, were attacked, forcing the discontinuation of their normal work. See *Chixiang xianzhi* [Chixiang County history] (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), p. 495. This closure was not unusual. From April 1969 to December 1978, neither Party discipline inspection committees nor governmental supervisory organs existed.

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Wuqing County (Tianjin) reported that, beginning in September 1966, “Many people joined together in a counterrevolutionary spirit . . . most of the complaint bureau work of this period was against the law, and was not recorded.”<sup>20</sup> A textbook for complaint bureau cadres, published jointly by the Central Committee Complaint Bureau office and the State Council Complaint Bureau, noted a “high tide” (*gao chao*) in complaints received during the second half of 1966 and 1967. The report stated, however, that these complaints were “distinct,” and that they were not reflective of objective contradictions, or the “regular patterns” of complaint bureaus.<sup>21</sup> Complaint offices, to the extent that they existed, were overrun with personal vendettas that strayed from the established purpose of contacting work.

Any meaningful ties fostered between complaint bureau cadres and the masses during the 1950s were largely lost in this period of social unrest.<sup>22</sup> As one interviewee put it, during the Cultural Revolution, some complaint bureaus existed in name, but even those did not engage in anything that could be called “working with the masses.”<sup>23</sup> Many higher-level complaint bureaus closed during the years of the Cultural Revolution, and were not reestablished until 1979 or later. The Complaint Bureau at the National People’s Congress, for example, did not formally reopen until October 1988.<sup>24</sup>

Activity in local complaint bureaus began to reappear in 1969, at the end of the first and most violent stage of the GPCR. By 1972–73, the number of complaints tendered to county-level bureaus was again reaching peak levels, although, judging by reports of the swarms of people who bypassed complaint bureaus to place their demands at the gates of government and party offices in Beijing, local bureaus were unable to satisfy people’s demands. In the absence of effective public reception rooms at many levels, people often went directly to Beijing Party and government offices to complain, placing a strain on central-level authorities. In February 1972, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai called on local leaders to manage their work with the masses more effectively, demanding that complaint bureaus in all organizations solve citizen problems at the basic levels, in order to decrease the numbers of masses heading for Beijing.

The Second National Conference on Complaint Bureau Work was held in September 1978. The speeches of the conference reveal more about elite

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20. *Wuqing xianzhi* [Wuqing County history] (Wuqing Xian Difang Shizhi Weiyuanhui, 1991), p. 717.

21. *Xin角度学 gailun* [An outline of letters and visits studies] (Beijing: Zhongyang Bangongting Xinfang Ju and Guowuyuan Bangongting Xinfang Ju, 1991), p. 150.

22. Diao, *Renmin xinfang shilue*, pp. 212–13; Wang and Chen, *Xin角度学 gailun*, p. 75.

23. Interview with head of District Complaint Bureau, 1996.

24. “People’s Congress Handles Grassroots Petitions,” *Xinhua*, February 25, 1993, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, China* (FBIS-CHI), 93-037, February 26, 1993, p. 17.

conflicts than about procedural details of complaint work. There were some reports at this conference of the continuing problem of people storming Beijing en masse. But, because of issues surrounding the looming leadership succession, most notably the struggle between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping, this conference did not introduce any major changes in complaint bureau work.<sup>25</sup> Once this difficult period of modern Chinese politics subsided, complaint bureaus began a new phase of contacting work.

### 3. Restoration (1978–1988)

After Deng Xiaoping's ascendancy to the helm of state power in December 1978, the so-called "new period" of complaint bureau work began, during which "new types of demands, more extensive problems . . . and concrete, everyday issues" were handled by rejuvenated complaint bureaus across the country. In particular, 1979–82 was a time of restoring complaint offices. This included clearing away the influence of the revolutionary committees, increasing the numbers of front-line cadres staffing complaint bureaus, and developing new training programs.<sup>26</sup>

A chief aspect of this period was the record numbers of complaints filed at bureaus at every level, with most reporting "high tides" in 1978 and 1979. Although this terminology was used in other periods to describe peak contacts, one study designated a "high tide" as a day during which more than 1,200 visitors were received at a complaint bureau. Diao Jiecheng reported that the Beijing United Complaint Bureau recorded such elevated complaint totals in January, April, and August of 1979, tallying in these months a figure more than twice that for all of 1978.<sup>27</sup> Diao states that approximately one-third of those visits were "repeat" visits and appeals of lower complaint bureau decisions. He also says that many provinces and cities also chronicled record numbers of complaints in 1979, a claim that I extend to the county level, based on data from 20 counties.

The Third National Conference on Complaint Bureaus, held in 1982, stressed the constitutional mandate of complaint work as a way to achieve "socialist democracy." Leaders addressing this gathering frankly admitted

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25. Wang and Chen, *Xinfangxue gailun*, p. 76. The Chinese source for this assertion places the blame on the "mistakes of the 'two whatevers'," referring directly to Hua Guofeng's attempt to act on Mao's purported wishes that he be Mao's chosen successor.

26. Diao, *Renmin xinfang shilue*, pp. 252–55. A related development reported in Wang and Chen, *Xinfangxue gailun*, p. 151, highlights the establishment of complaint offices in mass organizations, often staffed by moonlighting complaint cadres from party and government bureaus.

27. After 1978, the Central Level CCP and Government Complaint Bureau merged, taking on the titles *dangzheng xinfang* (party and government) and *lianhe* (united) complaint office. Patterns for combining provincial- and county-level complaint bureaus are less clear, although most county-level bureaus in the 1980s reported joint work as well. For more on this, see Diao, *Renmin xinfang shilue* p. 230.

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that the errors of the previous decade had damaged relations with the masses, and that every attempt should be made to rectify this situation.

A major focus of complaint work during this period was to mend “historical grievances,” referred to in Chinese as “*lishi yiliu wenti*” (literally, problems handed down from history).<sup>28</sup> More specifically, these historical problems were typically requests to reverse verdicts and rectify injustices from the Cultural Revolution. The early 1980s were critical years for handling this so-called “historical problem.”<sup>29</sup> The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection was also involved in this task, directly handling the verdicts of Party members who argued that they were unjustly accused during the Cultural Revolution. Over 3.6 million corruption cases were reported in “public letters” handled by party discipline inspection departments at various levels from 1982–87.<sup>30</sup> In 1982, it is estimated that 80% of all letters and visits requested redress for Cultural Revolution grievances, a percentage that steadily declined, to 30%, in 1986.<sup>31</sup>

In the latter half of the 1980s, citizen complaints focused on more contemporary problems, including the regional discrepancies of economic modernization. For example, Jianchang County (Liaoning Province, in northeastern China) reported its two “big cases” of complaint bureau work during the 1980s; both were labor-related disputes. The first was essentially a worker’s compensation case, during which a forestry employee sought and received assistance from the county complaint office in receiving reimbursement for lost wages and medical costs stemming from an injury incurred on his job.

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28. McCormick acknowledges progress in Cultural Revolution verdicts, but argues there are still potentially reversible verdicts that have been ignored, such as sentences following the anti-rightist campaign, as well as the counterrevolutionary verdict of 1989. See Barrett L. McCormick, “Political Change in China and Vietnam: Coping with the Consequences of Economic Reform,” *China Journal* 40 (July 1998), p. 126. Relatedly, Sullivan highlights the role of the Secretariat, the Organization Department, and control committees in reversing verdicts on party rightists following the Great Leap Forward. See Lawrence R. Sullivan, “The Role of Control Organs in the Chinese Communist Party, 1977–1983,” *Asian Survey* 24:6 (June 1984), p. 603.

29. For more on this, see *Zuzhi bumen xinfang gongzuo changyong wenjian jianbian* [Organization department letters and visits work handbook] (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Zuzhibu Bangongting zhe, 1995), section III.

30. Han Wuyuan, “Xinfang: Chuangkou, qiaolang, niudai” [Letters and visits: The window, the bridge, and the link], *Liaowang* [Outlook] 1 (March 11, 1996), pp. 12–15; Huang Yasheng, “Administrative Monitoring in China,” *China Quarterly* 143 (September 1995), p. 834; Xinhua, November 25, 1988, “Public Oversees Party Discipline.” See also Melanie Manion’s discussion of dossiers and unjust cases from the Cultural Revolution, in Melanie Manion, “The Cadre Management System, Post Mao: The Appointment, Promotion, Transfer and Removal of State Leaders,” *China Quarterly* 102 (June 1985), p. 225.

31. These statistics are reported in Huang, “Administrative Monitoring,” p. 823. In multiple interviews, informants corroborated the general pattern of redressing cases, although they could not cite the actual statistics confirming these trends.

The second major dispute reported in this county history was a case initiated by 25 community school instructors who objected to their paltry level of compensation. The latter case was solved with the help of the county CCP assistant secretary and the village secretary.<sup>32</sup>

In the mid-1980s, a new focus on “complaint bureau information” (*xinfang xinxi*) began to emerge, as leaders attempted to analyze the content of citizen complaints for the insight that they provided into “policies and trends.”<sup>33</sup> By processing the “societal information” received through citizens’ letters and visits, officials attempted to better understand the people’s “life-styles,” and to forecast social trends.

#### 4. Equilibrium (1989–1996)

Beginning in the late 1980s, the high tides at complaint bureaus started to recede. The general decline in this period derived from an increase in venues for presenting complaints, such as petition offices at other government agencies, letters to the editor and other opportunities within the media, and “hot-lines,” as well as a rising tendency by citizens to report local-level problems to higher jurisdictions. Both trends provide evidence for continued participation in contacting channels, and point to a wider range of possibilities for complainants to pursue.

In recent years, the number of public channels to express grievances, of which complaint bureaus are only one part, has been increasing.<sup>34</sup> Some see this as a natural evolution, as a spillover effect from economic liberalization. Expressing this view, Minxin Pei wrote:

The [increase] confirmed what many informed analysts of Chinese politics had long suspected: the slow evolution of China’s political system during economic reform had created multiple avenues for redressing public grievances, thus helping reduce the pressure on the government.<sup>35</sup>

32. Dang Jiang and Wen Lu, *Jianchang xianzhi* [A history of Jianchang county] (Liaoning: Liaoning Daxue Chubanshe, 1992), p. 470.

33. Shi Yi, “Zuo hao xinfang xinxi gongzuo you guan wenti huida” [Answering questions related to performing letters and visits’ information work], *Minqing yu Xinfang* [Popular sentiment and letters and visits] 10 (1995); Hou Lei, *Xinfang gongzuo* [Letters and visits work] (Beijing: Dangan Chubanshe, 1990), p. 67; *Wuqing xianzhi*, p. 717.

34. In some areas, the decline in absolute numbers of complaints has been attributed to hot-lines and other channels. See Zhang Yan and Xiang Ying, “Let Villagers Become Genuine Masters of Their Own Villages, Commentary on the National Work of Village Affairs Transparency and Democratic Management,” *Xinhua*, June 21, 1999; FBIS-CHI-1999-0623, June 21, 1999.

35. Minxin Pei, “Citizens v. Mandarins: Administrative Litigation in China,” *China Quarterly* 152 (December 1997), p. 19.

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While the county data report a decline in numbers of local complaints, data at the provincial and central levels indicate increases. For examples, Hunan provincial officials reported that during 1998, the total number of complaints handled by provincial authorities exceeded 300,000, which was the largest annual number since the mid-1980s.<sup>36</sup> Dongguan City (Guangdong Province) also reported increases since 1992.<sup>37</sup> Officers in Beijing municipality cited peak numbers of letters and visits for each year in the 1990s, claiming that most were “collective petition activities,” an increasingly present form of contacting in modern China.<sup>38</sup> Local statistics from people’s congresses show that the number of complaints made to the congresses have more than doubled since the mid-1990s. Although complaints have never been exclusively a “local” issue, trends show that center leaders’ attempts to keep issues at the local level have largely been in vain.

Additionally, citizens’ choices for contacting methods have broadened. As recounted in a journal dedicated to complaint bureau work, offices in some areas are reporting a dramatic increase in citizen phone calls to their offices. Officials in a district-level complaint bureau in Longyan City (Fujian Province) reported that citizens use phones to report “urgent issues” and matters they want to conceal, as well as to make suggestions to officials.<sup>39</sup> Some ministry officials in Beijing have even made public their personal e-mail addresses.<sup>40</sup>

In the 1990s, complaint bureaus were caught up in the effort to build “honest government” (*lian zheng*). In fact, “corruption” ranks at the top of citizens’ dissatisfaction with government performance in contemporary China,

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36. The report attributed the increase to disputes about land development. See “Hunan Party Chief on Handling People’s Complaints,” FBIS-CHI-99-024, January 24, 1999, *Hunan Ribao* [Hunan Daily News], January 16, 1999, p. 1.

37. “New Ties Between Government Officials and People,” Xinhua, June 19, 1996; FBIS-CHI-96-121, June 24, 1996.

38. Liu Feng, “Beijing Says ‘No’ to Collective Petition,” *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, September 14, 1999, in FBIS-CHI-94-183, 11/12/95. For example, even though officials in Heilongjiang Province reported a “slight decline” in collective complaints between 1994 and 1995, the first target in their goals for 1996 was to decrease the number of collective complaints. See “1996 nian quansheng xinfang gongzuo yaodian,” [The main points from province-wide complaint bureau work in 1996], *Heilongjiang xinfang* [Heilongjiang letters and visits] 122 (1996:2), p. 2. The director of a county complaint office whom I interviewed argued that the number of collective complaints to her office had increased since 1991; before, the office only had one or two collective complaints a year. In 1996, it received more than 20. My interviewee argued that the increase was brought on by a rise in concrete problems facing individuals at local levels.

39. Huang Xiaoxia, “Ban hao qunzhong dianhua xinfang, rexin wei min fuwu” [Handle mass complaints through phone calls well, warmly serve the people] *Renmin Xinfang* [The People’s Letters and Visits] 4:23 (1998).

40. “Dalian [city] Encourages Citizens to Evaluate Officials,” FBIS-CHI-1999-0623, from Xinhua, June 24, 1999.

particularly as the Communist Party deepens its ongoing and increasingly thorny anti-corruption campaign. As a simple measure of the seriousness with which central-level leaders approach the problem of cadre malfeasance, it was often reported that former President Jiang Zemin referred to the CCP's battle with corruption as the "life and death struggle" of the Party.<sup>41</sup>

According to more than one source, at the Central Level Government and Party Complaint office, one-third of all grievances reflect concerns about clean government and cadre work style.<sup>42</sup> It has also been reported that 80% of the clues used to pursue prosecution of malfeasant cadres came from complaint bureau work.<sup>43</sup> In the countryside, where objections to corrupt cadre practices have reached a boiling point in recent years, cases alleging abuses in tax and fee collection have also been widely recounted. A 1993 article published by the Central Level Complaint Bureau reproduced a citizen's letter titled, "It is still difficult for cars to travel on the roads," which highlighted the intimidation by officials collecting illegal fees from peasants.<sup>44</sup> Following the letter was an order to develop a "coordinated strategy" for collecting fees, requiring all related departments to stop being careless in this matter.

In addition to reports of corruption and malfeasance, people increasingly turn to complaint bureaus to solve "concrete" (*jūti*) problems, including issues such as street repair, traffic congestion, and access to educational facilities.<sup>45</sup> In this way, complaint cadres are becoming more akin to caseworkers attempting to solve the everyday ills of constituents.<sup>46</sup>

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41. Such an analogy is hardly new. Chen Yun made comparable references before the Cultural Revolution. Leaders in the Yuan dynasty similarly pointed to dangers of the loss of political control owing to popular anger over corruption. See Sullivan, "Role of Central Organs," p. 605; Graham Young, "Control and Style: Discipline Inspection Commissions since the 11th Congress," *China Quarterly* 97 (March 1984).

42. Han, "Zhongnanhai qinxi," p. 8; Luo Xingping, "Queshi yikao qunzhong fan fubai," [Conscientiously rely on the support of the masses against corruption], *Liaowang* [Outlook] 10 (March 1996), p. 9.

43. Han, "Zhongnanhai qinxi," p. 9; Huang, "Administrative Monitoring," p. 835.

44. Han, "Zhongnanhai qinxi," p. 9.

45. Liang Guan, *Xinfang changshi* [General knowledge about letters and visits] (Xueyuan Chubanshe, 1990), pp. 8–9; Ma Hongyi, "Zhineng zhuanhuan: Xinfang jigou qixu jieju de xianshi wenti" [The function is transforming letters and visits' construction to solve practical problems], *Shike Xinxu* [Social Science News] in *Zhongguo Zhengzhi* [Chinese Politics] 9 (September 1994); author interview with head of district-level complaint bureau, 1996.

46. For similar work by People's Congress deputies, see Kevin J. O'Brien, "Agents and Remonstrators: Role Accumulation by Chinese People's Congress Deputies," *China Quarterly* 138 (June 1994), pp. 359–80.

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### Accounting for Citizen Contacts

Figure 1 presents the average number of complaints reported by county complaint bureaus from 1957–94. Looking at this data, we can see that there are stark variations in the numbers of citizen “letters and visits” through the years.

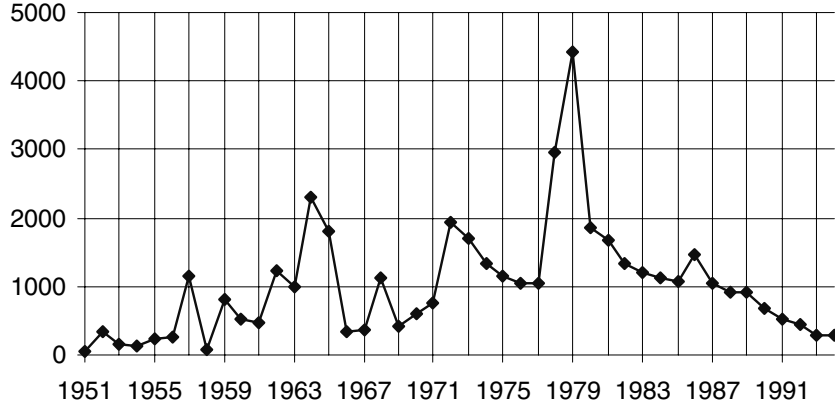
Chinese complainants are savvy entrepreneurs, literate in the contours of the political environment. A large part of the variation observed since the 1950s can be understood by tracing major national trends in political programs. Complainants take cues from these events. The best example of this relationship is during the first phase of the Cultural Revolution, when the political-ideological conflict of the period brought complaint work to a near-halt. Citizen contacts returned again after the tide turned, reaching their highest levels in the earliest years of the Deng regime. Buoyed by official proclamations of more-rational decision making by high-profile victims of the ideological carnage, including Deng Xiaoping himself, complainants felt a sense of empowerment when presenting their grievances to officials. This argument, which takes into account a strong sense of individual agency on the part of complainants, helps us understand the other peak in contacts observed since the Maoist period, in 1986. This was also a relatively liberal period of open debate and speech, and citizens were able to capitalize on these openings.

Secondly, as argued above, complaints to any one office rise and fall based on the venues available to petitioners. When the government operated a virtual monopoly on the provision of goods and services, solving problems related to these matters required approaching government officials. As this hold loosened, with the introduction of financial joint ventures, semi-private housing options, and educational opportunities and other openings beyond Party-centered life, numerous problem-solving offices were generated to handle affairs within their purview. While these units maintain formal ties to the Party and government and cannot contradict sensitive CCP directives, the proliferation of area-specific complaint centers provides citizens with more choices for redress, increasingly relieving the government of its mediating role. The frequency of complaints recorded at official governmental offices is only part of the story. I now turn to an analysis of the content of citizen complaints.

### Categorization of Citizen Complaints

What types of problems do people present to Chinese complaint cadres? The issues that have been identified in public bureaus are largely the universal problems that people under all governmental regimes gripe about, including corruption, taxes, uneven economic growth, and incompetent officials. In an attempt to understand the major substantive trends of Chinese contacting

FIGURE 1 Average County Level Complaints, 1951–1994



NOTE: This table begins in 1957 in order to have a meaningful statement of averages. Prior to 1957, there were only two data points, both in 1952. The table ends in 1994 for the same reasons. The data are based on records of 22 county-level complaint bureaus across 15 provinces and provincial-level units.

work since 1951, I group the primary categories of complaint bureau work into five types. Scholars often try to place messy, boundary-crossing issues into neatly crafted analytical categories that defy the complexity of life on the ground. Recognizing the limits inherent in any such enterprise, I contend that this categorization is nonetheless useful in that it allows us to speak of larger patterns, rather than idiosyncratic stories. These patterns illustrate the topics that are perceived to be within the accepted discourse of allowable contention.

Studies of institutionalized political participation in China often focus on the form of participation, rather than the content of the act itself. This likely derives from the “modes” focus in the prominent comparative studies of political participation. For example, in his study of urban workplace participation, Wenfang Tang distinguishes between “instrumental, managerial, and regime consonant” participation.<sup>47</sup> In his analysis of peasant interest articulation, John P. Burns differentiates between written, personal relations, and violent forms of expression.<sup>48</sup> Scholars have also identified Chinese political

47. Wenfang Tang, “Workplace Participation in Chinese Local Industries,” *American Journal of Political Science* 37:3 (August 1993), pp. 920–40.

48. John P. Burns, “Chinese Peasant Interest Articulation,” in *Groups and Politics in the PRC*, ed. David S. G. Goodman (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1984).

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participation based on the institutions for channeling sanctioned behavior.<sup>49</sup> Since I focus on one set of institutions with one dominant “mode” (particularized contact), and treat the “forms” (written letters, personal visits, and telephone calls) as equivalent, my focus here is on the content of this participation. The categories below are based on registers of contacts at national-, provincial-, and county-level complaint bureaus, as well as conventions developed by other studies of Chinese political participation.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Community Relations*

This category includes the seemingly least-political types of contacting work, but shows that complaint cadres are often community mediators and problem solvers. Many issues brought to the attention of complaint officials are related to everyday struggles with neighbors, businesses, or families. In one district of Tianjin City, the complaint office reported a barrage of citizen complaints about the need for regulations for an open-air market in the residential area.<sup>51</sup> Conghua County (Guangdong Province) officials reported that one of their “big cases” in 1984 was helping an anxious groom procure a place to hold his wedding ceremony.<sup>52</sup> Officials have also been contacted to help locate missing children and estranged family members, and citizen contacts have helped alert leaders to trends in drug-trafficking in southern China.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Public Services*

People also commonly turn to local complaint bureaus to report problems in obtaining services, including public transportation, housing, electricity, water, and other resources in scarce demand. Included in this category would be various concrete issues that have become dominant in complaint work since the late 1980s. Examples include contention over the dates when heat can be turned on in public buildings, problems with roads, and mail delivery.<sup>54</sup> Complaints about schools and training facilities were common in one

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49. See Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing*.

50. Chen Peixiang and Chen Jinhong, *Fenkai xian xinfang zhi* [Fenkai county letters and visits history] (Guangdong Sheng Fenkai Xinfang Bangongshi, 1995); Diao, *Renmin xinfang shilue*; M. Kent Jennings, “Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside,” *American Political Science Review* 91:2 (June 1997), pp. 365–66.

51. Author interview with district-level complaint bureau chief, 1996.

52. Huang, “Ban hao,” p. 11.

53. Han, “Zhongnanhai qinxi,” p. 8; author interview with mass work office director, 1996.

54. Burns argues that activities are “political” because “actors attempt to obtain advantages from state and party officials or their agents . . . and because these activities have an impact beyond individual concerns on the wider community.” See Burns, “Chinese Peasant Interest Articulation,” p. 10.

Guangdong County.<sup>55</sup> A citizen complaint in Tianjin about hospital overcharging was solved only after it was publicized in the local newspaper.<sup>56</sup>

#### *Economic Livelihood*

Most complaint bureau handbooks, and histories that record categories of complaints include categories concerned with both livelihood and production, signaling that these issues generate many citizen concerns. Issues related to personal financial hardship, difficulties finding housing outside the public sector, and more recently, problems with personal financial investments, including losses in the stock market and other forms of trading, are included in this category. It also includes contentious acts. For example, five Guizhou veterans collectively committed suicide after a petition regarding their pensions was unsuccessfully lodged at provincial offices. In Shijiazhuang, 250 retirees stormed provincial offices in Shijiazhuang, calling the leadership there “a newborn Kuomintang,” referencing the perceived corruption of the Nationalist Party in the 1920s, because of their slow response.<sup>57</sup>

Complaint cadres also address the thorny problems of relocating workers displaced during the Cultural Revolution, and helping individuals and families find a place to settle down.<sup>58</sup> Conghua County reported the case of one worker separated from his family in 1964 who, when he returned in 1982, was denied full-level wages.<sup>59</sup> Transfers of household registration and the so-called “floating population,” the itinerant groups who travel from city to city in search of day labor, have also been common issues demanding the attention of complaint cadres.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Political Affairs*

This category includes most aspects of formal elite-mass relations. Designating a means by which citizens could report problems in local political affairs was one of the motivations for initiating formal complaint work in the 1950s. Citizens approach complaint bureaus to report offenses, make accusations, and level criticisms at local political leaders.

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55. Huang Cijin, *Conghua xian xinfang jianzhi* [Conghua county letters and visits history] (Conghua Xian Yinshuachang, 1989), p. 10.

56. Author interview with mass work office director, 1996.

57. See Yueh Shan, “Retired Veteran Cadres Take to Streets” (in Chinese) *Cheng Ming* [Contention], Hong Kong, February 2, 1998, in FBIS-CHI-98-092, April 4, 1998.

58. *Jinghai xianzhi*, p. 442.

59. Huang, *Conghua xian*, p. 11.

60. Xiao Xue, “Huji de fanli” [The hurdle of household registration], *Minqing yu Xinfang* [Popular sentiment and letters and visits] 12 (December 1994), pp. 32–33.

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Within this category, there are two types of political affairs about which citizens grumble. The first targets are policies and regulations, including population control policies, taxation, and local policies that complainants argue run counter to the central party line. Second, citizens express contempt for certain individuals, usually pointing to cadres whom they view as corrupt “local emperors.”

It is difficult to find evidence of complainants challenging central-level policies. It is more common, however, to find accounts of citizens charging that such policies are being distorted, mishandled, or just plain ignored at the local level.<sup>61</sup> Complaints surrounding the problem of “peasant burdens” and the contentious practice of local governments issuing IOUs in lieu of payment would fall into this category.<sup>62</sup>

Criticisms of individual officials, the second type of “political affairs” complaint, are extremely common. Citizens have been very active in exposing local corrupt officials, such as cadres who use public office for private gain, as well as other forms of whistle-blowing. When people report extortion of funds, lavish life-styles, and blatantly illegal behavior, their complaints are not with CCP policies, but rather, with individual Party members. This is an important distinction, both for complainants and regime leaders. Once individuals’ complaints rise above the acceptable level of the idiosyncratic behavior of a single misguided official or small faction, the complaints, in the government’s view, risk becoming branded as an illegitimate challenge to Party authority. The characteristics of acceptable criticism are subtle, and vary, with close correlation to dominant political campaigns. While most behavior may be categorized as falling between risky anti-regime criticism and personalistic griping, fine lines around the edges of safe behavior are difficult to interpret.

### *Appeals*

The final category of citizen complaints that I highlight is appeals, of which there are two types: appeals of decisions made by lower-level complaint bureaus or other organizations, and attempts to overturn past political judgments, primarily related to the Cultural Revolution.

According to the 1995 national regulations for complaint bureau work, complainants have 30 days to ask the agency that originally handled their

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61. O’Brien argues that this is a common tactic used by “rightful resisters” who employ central laws and policies to pursue their ends. See Kevin J. O’Brien, “Rightful Resistance,” *World Politics* 49:1 (October 1996), p. 32. See also Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China,” *China Quarterly* 143 (September 1995), pp. 759–60.

62. Peasants’ “burdens” is a term used to convey the challenges that rural agricultural workers are facing in light of economic, social, and political changes in the Chinese countryside. Most often, it refers to taxes and fees illegally imposed on citizens in the countryside.

complaint to reconsider (Article 33).<sup>63</sup> Individuals are given the right to present charges against infringement on their “legitimate rights and interests as complainants,” according to Article 8. Enough mention is made of the illegality of acts of retribution against complainants, both in regulations and in training documents intended for complaint bureau personnel, to suggest that this is an area of great concern.

Historical appeals, particularly of counterrevolutionary verdicts branded on individuals during political campaigns, complete this categorization.<sup>64</sup> Complaint bureaus at all levels have been magnets for individuals and families hoping to overturn past judgments related to political campaigns, especially the Cultural Revolution. Many of these complaints are post mortem attempts by family members to clear a relative’s tarnished name. As discussed above, this subsection of complaints dominated party and government offices from approximately 1978–86.

Since these categories emerged from the data collected, and because of the absence of an extant uniform categorization scheme, I am unable to report precise empirical accounts of complaints across these categories. Instead, I present general trends in contacting categories.

In a government and party affairs handbook on complaint work, one author argues that citizens contact complaint officers for two reasons: either to report a situation they feel needs to be monitored or to ask assistance in solving a problem. Three of the categories highlighted above are dominated by the latter type of work: Community Relations, Public Services, and Appeals. The two remaining categories, Political Affairs and Economic Livelihood, are a hybrid of resolving dilemmas and communication situations to superiors. It is from these hybrid complaints that governmental leaders can cull the most

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63. In October 1995, the State Council passed national regulations on complaint bureaus, the first set of national regulations since 1952. See *Xinfa ng tiaoli* [Complaint Bureau regulations], Guowuyuan di 185 hao [State Council document no. 185], Beijing, 1995. For an English translation of the regulations, see “Regulations Issued on Handling Complaints,” Xinhua, October 30, 1995, in FBIS-CHI-95-216, November 8, 1995, pp. 13–16. Local regulations exist as well; many were promulgated before the national guidelines. For example, Heilongjiang and Guizhou both passed provincial regulations in the late 1980s, Jilin Province completed regulations in 1992, and Tianjin city did so in 1994. These regulations supply both avenues and roadblocks to complainants, providing bureaucratic loopholes for extending the time for resolving complaints, as well as specifying restrictions on complainant group size and behavior. They dictate the need to follow laws and administrative rules, although many officials I spoke with confirmed that petitioners often have a better sense of the rules than complaint cadres themselves.

64. In this sense, I conceptualize “appeal” as an act of overturning a decision. This is different from citizens’ use of complaint bureaus, for example within the National People’s Congress, as a legal “court of appeal.” For the latter, see Minxin Pei, “‘Creeping Democratization’ in China,” *Journal of Democracy* 6:4 (October 1995), pp. 65–79. He contends that each year, citizens contact the NPC with over 100,000 letters seeking assistance, p. 71.

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insight into local affairs, while citizens may derive the most satisfaction of participating in political affairs.

Clearly, there are limits to the types of issues people may successfully present to complaint bureaus. Contentious politics in China, even within the boundaries of formalized channels, remains a perilous game for most citizens. As with the pre-communist institutions that existed to receive feedback from the masses, some issues are simply not up for debate.<sup>65</sup> Complaint bureaus are not arenas for questioning Communist Party rule, reversing verdicts from 1989, or challenging the Party's ban on "cult" activities highlighted by the regime's characterization of Falungong participants. Cadres are instructed that "the basic guiding principle (of complaint work) is to satisfy the *proper or legitimate* demands of the people."<sup>66</sup> In contemporary China, it is permissible to disagree, but not to rebel. Complaints likely to be solved within the official bureaus discussed here are related primarily to personal, rather than systemic, grievances, or they are complaints about misimplementation of policies, rather than the wisdom of the plan in the first place.<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusions

Citizen contacting is a particularistic act that occurs within regime-defined limits. As demonstrated in this article, this form of political participation is crucially dependent upon the continued support of regime leaders. While individuals are looking for solutions to "grievances," representatives of the powerful are looking for broader "problems and issues" that could make their continued leadership problematic. Ironically, petitioners, in abiding by the institutional rules of the system, often strengthen regime institutions. Complainants in China, like petitioners around the world, rarely organize into social groups that are able to sustain their identity beyond the lifespan of their original grievance. Rather than creating centrifugal pressures, these complainants often help sustain the central government's legitimacy, appeal, and ultimately, power.

The content of citizen letters and petitions often includes important clues that help leaders understand the sources of popular discontent, and possibly even discern avenues for heading off problems or even full-blown crises.

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65. See Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Acting Out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49:4 (November 1990), p. 851.

66. Liang, *Xinfang changshi*, p. 9; emphasis added.

67. There is an emerging consensus within the participation literature that argues that even though demands are seemingly particularistic, they can have an impact on the larger society. Ekiert and Kubik's study of protests in Eastern Europe argues that although protesters' concerns were predominantly particularistic, over time, protesters acted on behalf of the entire society. See Grzegorz Ekiert and Jay Kubik, "Collective Protest in Post-Communist Poland, 1989–1993: A Research Report," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31:2 (1998), pp. 91–117.

Yet, citizen complaints, similar to other sources of information in regimes of all types, are often mishandled by leaders, being ignored at best and manipulated at worst. Receiving information about a festering problem does not necessarily impel individuals to rectify the situation. Party and government leaders choose to afford prominence to citizen contacting in order to accomplish goals that may be unrelated to the needs and concerns of ordinary citizens.

It is not difficult to find evidence of restrictions on participation in China, or in other authoritarian regimes. Rather, through examining the means by which the participation of citizens is encouraged, we can challenge claims of a regime autonomous from the people. Since 1949, the government of the People's Republic of China has claimed to act in the interest of the people. Only by allowing the people to speak, even if in constrained, government-established and government-manipulated channels, can regime leaders begin to realize this aim. Contacting may not change fundamental policy directions, but without it, the regime is doomed to drift further away from the people.

### Appendix

Counties in the analysis and their provincial location include:

Antu County, Jilin Province  
Cenkung County, Guizhou Province  
Chiashan County, Zhejiang Province  
Chiaxiang County, Sichuan Province  
Conghua County, Guangdong Province  
Fenkai County, Guangdong Province  
Gao'an County, Jiangxi Province  
Hanchuan County, Hubei Province  
Haiyen County, Qinghai Province  
Jianchang County, Liaoning Province  
Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province  
Jinghai County, Tianjin  
Laixi County, Shandong Province  
Liuhe County, Jilin Province  
Longjiang County, Heilongjiang Province  
Neiqiu County, Hebei Province  
Pinghu County, Zhejiang Province  
Pingyuan County, Shandong Province  
Wuqing County, Tianjin  
Xinfeng County, Jiangxi Province  
Yongchang County, Gansu Province  
Yongchun County, Fujian Province