China Dissent Monitor

Issue 1: June-September 2022

WHAT IS THE CHINA DISSENT MONITOR?

The China Dissent Monitor (CDM) collects and shares information about the frequency and diversity of dissent in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It was created in response to the information gap resulting from media restrictions in the PRC and risks associated with collecting information from within the country about dissent and protest. The project prioritizes capturing offline collective action in public spaces, though cases of less public and online dissent are also included to illustrate diversity among dissent actions. Sources for the CDM database include news reports, civil society organizations, and PRC-based social media platforms. See the full dataset and methodology at chinadissent.net

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Nationwide, real-world protests:** 668 dissent events have been documented for the period of June to September 2022. Among them, 636 cases (95 percent) occurred offline, such as demonstrations, strikes, and occupations, while 32 cases (5 percent) involved online dissent. The greatest number of events occurred in the provinces of Hebei (77), Henan (72), Guangdong (49), and Shaanxi (49).

- **Thousands of participants:** 60 percent of offline events had 10 to 99 participants, 18 percent had 2 to 9 participants, and 7 percent had 100 to 999. At least 8,755 people have cumulatively participated in offline dissent during the time period we assessed.

- **Top issues:** Among all documented cases, 214 (32 percent) involved delayed housing projects, 110 (17 percent) involved pay and benefits, and 106 (16 percent) involved fraud. There were 37 cases of dissent against COVID-19 restrictions, including large street demonstrations and online hashtag movements with hundreds of thousands of posts, linked to at least 14 provinces or directly administered cities.

- **Repression in at least a quarter of cases:** The project documented evidence of repression in 25 percent of dissent events. Violence by state or nonstate actors against those engaged in dissent was the most frequent form of reprisal, occurring in 75 cases.

- **Targets and concessions:** Companies (64 percent) and local governments (33 percent) are much more likely to be the target of dissent than the central government (3 percent). The project documented 37 cases that led to some type of concession by the government or a company, such as local governments changing policies after citizens protested.

- **Featured analysis:** Homeless home buyers: Stalled housing projects and mortgage boycotts; Real-name Complaints: A decentralized, cross-province movement.
**Overview: The Many Forms of Dissent in China**

**Group protests.** Three-fourths of the events (521) CDM documented between June and September were offline group demonstrations, marches, and obstruction of roads or pathways. These are the modes of dissent that the state considers the most contentious and is most keen to repress and censor. So, CDM makes it a priority to collect and document evidence of these kinds of public action. Among offline protest cases, 380 (60 percent) were actions of moderate size, with between 10-99 participants. While less frequent, it is notable that there were 47 large-scale events, with 100 to 999 participants.

**Other offline dissent.** Collective protests are not the only mode of dissent in China. CDM also recorded 36 cases of sign protests, 28 single-person protests, 25 contentious acts of collective petitioning, 15 labor strikes, 9 occupation protests, 9 instances of noncooperation as dissent, and 1 car caravan by taxi drivers from Ningbo to protest a government policy that raises their operating costs. Additionally, CDM has recorded 8 cases of religious believers dissenting through the practice or sharing of their faith.

**Online dissent.** Individual and collective dissent is widespread in cyberspace, despite years of concerted efforts by the government to prevent or reduce the visibility of online dissent and cyber movements. CDM collects a sample of such online...
events to provide readers with a sense of their scale and dynamics. In this study period, we documented 18 cases of online hashtag movements, each involving thousands of users posting about an issue that is critical of government actors or powerful private actors. The online movements in the CDM database often accumulate hundreds of millions of interactions from users, reflecting a broad reach. Ten cases were popular or viral posts on Weibo, WeChat, or other social media. Two were cases of highly contentious individual posts, such as a Ludong University student who posted the Chinese characters for “8964,” a reference to the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, on WeChat. The remaining cases were cyber protests, one of which involved netizens employing coded language on Weibo to post “It’s my duty” on June 4, in reference to a phrase made famous by a student interviewed on the way to Tiananmen Square in 1989.

What is the real frequency of dissent in China?
Most statistics outlined above are likely a drastic underrepresentation of dissent. Aside from group demonstrations, it is not the goal of CDM to compile a comprehensive list of all dissent events; rather, it is our mission to share a sample of such acts in order to highlight their diversity. What is clear is that citizens in China commonly employ a variety of methods, from small acts of individual resistance to various modes of collective action, to challenge social and political authority and advance their rights or interests. And while the average size of an individual protest is rarely massive, a minimum of 8,775 people cumulatively participated in the 636 offline dissent events we documented.

FEATURED ANALYSIS: HOMELESS HOME BUYERS—STALLED HOUSING PROJECTS AND MORTGAGE BOYCOTTS

Nationwide protests. Property buyers led 43 percent (288 events) of all dissent events recorded by CDM, 73 percent (213 events) of which are linked to delayed housing projects. These events occurred across 22 provinces or directly administered cities. Most of the buyers of unfinished projects expressed their demands by protesting with banners or through collective petitioning. While the most common target of these protests are developers, 27 percent also involve actions targeted at—usually local—governments to demand accountability.

Root causes. Thirty years ago, China established a presale housing system that granted developers more flexibility in funding applications. This has allowed developers to

Bank customers in Hangzhou protest frozen deposits, appealing to “Chairman Xi” by name (Source: Weibo)

People blocked a road on multiple days in Taiyuan to protest corruption by a local official (Source: Weibo)
frequently appropriate funds allocated to the construction of an ongoing project, for the land acquisition of a new project. Companies then use presale funds from the new project’s buyers to cover the funding gap of the earlier project.

When China’s economy was growing rapidly, moving funds in this way did not often cause problems. But after a 2016 speech in which Xi Jinping declared that “houses are for living in, not for speculation,” the government imposed the “three red lines” guidance, which is aimed at limiting debt of real estate companies and which made it harder for developers to obtain financing. Since then, several well-known developers, such as Evergrande, Kaisa, and Sunac, have faced debt crises. Unable to pay construction companies, a great number of housing projects across China have stalled, and many buyers have been forced into financial hardship as they struggle to pay the mortgage on an unfinished home at the same time they also pay rent for the space in which they actually live. Some who cannot afford two monthly payments have even chosen to move into these empty concrete caves without windows, elevators, water, and electricity. In one case documented by CDM, more than 100 home buyers in Xi’an occupied an unfinished housing project to protest Huayue Enterprise’s failure to complete it.

**Turning to mortgage boycotts.** As housing construction in many places stalls—often due to developers’ misappropriation of funds—some home buyers have turned their focus toward the banks responsible for supervising those funds. In attempt to pressure the banks into getting involved, buyers announced that they would stop paying their mortgages until the developers resume construction and hand over their property. While the earliest case of such mortgage boycotts may be traced back in home buyers of Tahoe’s Noble Mansion project in Taiyuan in April 2021, it was not until July 2022 that we observed a larger set of mortgage boycotts take shape.

On June 30, home buyers of Evergrande Long Ting in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, announced they would halt mortgage payments. Within a few days, a wave of mortgage defaults spread across the country. According to statistics on the GitHub group “WeNeedHome,” apparently maintained by users in China, home buyers of 343 housing projects in 119 cities subsequently announced their own mortgage boycotts between July and September. Henan hosts more housing projects being boycotted (69) than any other province, and Evergrande as a company has the most boycotted projects (86). Though most of the announcements were made online, CDM has still managed to record six offline street protests in which hundreds of home buyers declared their mortgage boycotts.

**Government response.** Home buyers’ protest actions across regions ultimately forced the Chinese government to promise a policy review. Authorities announced a special rescue fund in September that aims to support developers in finishing delayed

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residential projects and finalizing property handovers. The
government also sanctioned the practice of homeowners
temporarily halting mortgage payments on stalled housing
projects. But with rules curtailing developer financing still in
place and no changes made to the presale housing system,
the tides of property-buyer protests and mortgage boycotts
in China may not let up any time soon, and the number of
home buyers forced to move into unfinished buildings could
keep rising.

REAL-NAME COMPLAINTS:
A DECENTRALIZED, CROSS-
PROVINCE MOVEMENT

A spark in Tangshan. On June 10, 2022, a group of men
assaulted four women at a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan,
Henan. The manager of a cake shop in the city subsequently
filmed a video holding his ID card, explaining that his shop
had been damaged by the same group of men. Posts
featuring the video with the hashtag “Man makes real-name
Real-name complaint protest against a financial company accused of fraud in Chengdu, Sichuan (Source: Weibo)

Real-name complaint protest against Tangshan gangsters” went viral on Weibo, drawing public attention and forcing the government to investigate the incident. The impact of that video led many locals to issue similar complaints publicly, sparking a large-scale “real-name complaints movement” that spread online and offline across the country.

Protest in this movement typically involved complainants gathering offline to air grievances at authorities while holding their ID cards. Within two months after June 10, CDM had documented 61 collective actions of more than three people each in 17 provinces and 35 cities associated with this movement. Most participants accused officials of dereliction or abuse of power; some also levied complaints about corporate fraud. Notably, there were even retired police officers who made complaints against prosecutors.

Online component. In parallel, a large number of posts with the hashtag “Real-Name Complaints” have appeared on Weibo since June 11. The hashtag movement’s peak occurred between June 13 and June 19, with as many as 30 million interactions on over 6,000 posts per day. As the movement slowed down after June 19, the volume of offline collective real-name complaints gradually decreased, so did corresponding posts using the hashtag. However, as of the end of September, dozens of daily posts using the hashtag “real-name complaints” continue to appear on Weibo.

Origins of real-name complaints. The symbolic power of holding an ID card to make a “real-name complaint” grows out of a series of years-old Chinese laws and regulations that formally enable citizens or organizations to file reports against public servants suspected of corruption and bribery, dereliction of duty, and abuse of authority. Many of these rules encourage people to report under their “real name.” The authorized channels for filing such complaints are limited to phone calls, letters, online government platforms, or going to government agencies in person. In reality, these channels often do not resolve a citizen’s grievance. In the past, this has led some citizens to issue “real-name complaints” outside of official channels, posting grievances on social media while holding their ID card. Individual “real-name complaints” like this have been posted in the past but never appeared to connect to one another or form a major trend until the movement in June.
A movement linked through symbols. The real-name complaints movement, which spread across at least 35 cities, was a decentralized and uncoordinated social movement. With CDM’s focus on collective action, we only recorded offline collective real-name complaint protests initiated by at least three people, often involving tens of people gathering together. However, the number of single-person complaints was far more than 61 cases and involved more than 35 cities. Although the participants in this movement didn’t directly organize with each other, they were linked through hashtags, similarly themed grievances, and similar tactics and symbolism. While participants may not have had the same experiences, their methods were consistent, and they related through common symbolism, successfully forming a large-scale “real-name complaints” movement in China.

BY THE DATA: REPRESSING DISSENT

CDM has documented evidence of 238 instances of repression amongst 168 dissent events—25 percent of all cases—during the reporting period. This is likely an undercount. Photos, videos, and posts that CDM collects about acts of dissent are often limited to a snapshot in time, so we are unable to determine if and how authorities responded.

Despite these limitations, the data suggests that repression is common. The chart on the left displays the frequency of repression by type. The chart to the right displays frequency of repression by group. Violence—often in the form of shoving or dragging protesters—is the most prevalent form of repression, when combining state and nonstate incidents. Property buyers’ dissent has been met with far more repression than other groups, constituting nearly 50 percent of cases of repression, though it is roughly in line with the proportion of property buyer-led protests. In contrast, faith groups currently only constitute 2 percent of all dissent events in the database, but they suffer 6 percent of repression. This in part reflects the severity of controls over the activities of faith groups, but there may also be some reporting bias because faith-related dissent that has resulted in repression is more likely to be reported by activists or journalists.

A BROAD RANGE OF ISSUES GALVANIZES DISSENT

While CDM data indicates that stalled housing projects and labor grievances motivated half of the 668 total events, there is a range of other issues that drive dissent in China, from fraud and land rights to COVID-19 policies and state violence. Companies and local governments are far more likely to be the target of protest or other dissent than the central government, but the demands directed at targets are varied, driven in part by the diversity of issues and groups. For example, while local government is a common target of protest, the government could either be accused of wrongdoing or demanded to intervene in wrongdoing by another actor—often a company.
Events by issue

Percent of events, by target

Percent of events, by group

Percent of events, by demand

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