

China Dissent Monitor

Issue 3: January – March 2023

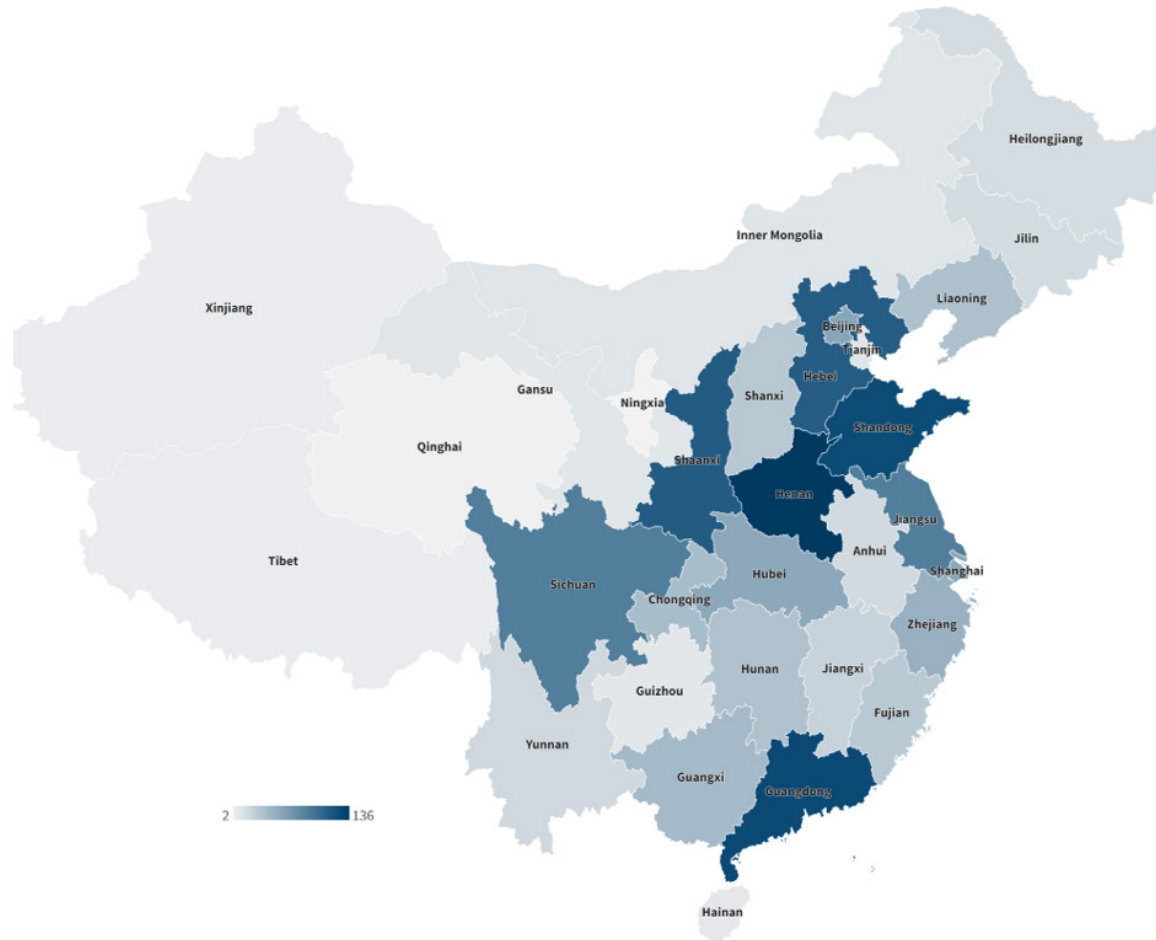
DISSENT EVENTS: 2,230

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, including the application of a machine-learning algorithm developed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Doublethink Lab. See the full dataset and methodology at chinadissent.net.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Two thousand dissent events since June 2022:** CDM has documented and analyzed 1,432 dissent events and logged another 798 cases that have not yet been coded, bringing the total number of events to 2,230 between June 2022 and April 2023. This includes 583 events for the quarter from January to March 2023. At least 29,000 people cumulatively have participated in the events that have already been coded. 78 percent were demonstrations and marches, 10 percent were sign protests, 4 percent involved obstruction and occupation, 3 percent were collective petitioning and 3 percent were labor strikes.
- **Geographical distribution:** The top regions for dissent events are Henan (10 percent of events), Guangdong (9 percent), and Shandong (9 percent). However, the top per capita regions for dissent are Shaanxi (2.86 events per million people), Beijing (2.65), and Shanghai (2.17).
- **Spike in labor protests:** CDM has captured 370 labor protests between December 2022 and February 2023, more than double the number of labor protests documented during the prior three months. While this reflects a cyclical pattern of dissent over unpaid wages around the Lunar New Year period, it is also influenced by an ongoing fiscal crisis in the property sector and the long-term issue of inadequate labor rights protections.
- **Housing protests persist:** Demonstrations over stalled housing projects and related grievances have declined relative to their high point last summer, but they continue to be a primary source of dissent. CDM has recorded 218 housing protests since the central government announced measures in November 2022 to address the fiscal crisis in the real estate sector.
- **Dissent among persecuted religious and ethnic communities:** Despite severe restrictions on religious and ethnic minorities in the PRC, people in these communities continue to push back. Since June 2022, CDM has recorded 34 acts of dissent among Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetans, Christians, Muslims, and ethnic Mongolians. Their resistance is expressed through non-cooperation, artistic expression, online posts, and sometimes offline demonstrations. Members of these communities experienced state repression in 27 of these 34 cases, underlining the severity with which the party-state targets these groups.
- **Protester arrest more likely when demonstrating against local government:** CDM has documented evidence of repression in one-quarter of dissent events. Further analysis indicates that while local government actors are the target of protest in 29 percent of cases, it is the target in 55 percent of cases that involve arrest or detention of protesters.



Distribution of protest events (June 2022 to March 2023)

FEATURED ANALYSIS: LABOR PROTESTS SURGE

Labor protest among top two sources of dissent. Workers have led 33 percent (742 cases) of all dissent events captured by CDM since June 2022, including 367 coded cases and 375 backlogged cases.¹ Driven primarily by wage arrears, construction workers account for about half of the coded cases (184), followed by transportation workers in 15 percent (53). The remainder are distributed among a wide range of sectors, including education, retail, sanitation, health, and tech. Property developers were the target of labor protests in one-third of cases (126), followed by local governments in 13 percent, and construction companies in 12 percent. Unable to obtain due wages from companies through institutional channels, workers have turned to other channels, such as group demonstrations in 68 percent of cases, strikes in 11 percent, solo protests in 8 percent, and occupation of spaces in 3 percent.

Repression and concessions. There is direct evidence of authorities repressing protesters in 15 percent of labor protests (56). Police or company personnel used violence against protesters in 4 percent of cases (16), and police arrested or detained participants in 2 percent (8). In some cases, security guards or personnel hired by the companies were tasked with violently suppressing workers. CDM recorded concessions by government or companies, such as payment of wage arrears or responding to protester demands, in 17 cases. While this is likely an undercount because concessions are often not evident in protest information collected by CDM, it does demonstrate workers’ ability to win compromise using non-institutional means to defend their rights.

¹ More than half of these events were drawn from the organization China Labour Bulletin and its Strike Map. The remainder were primarily sourced from PRC social media posts.



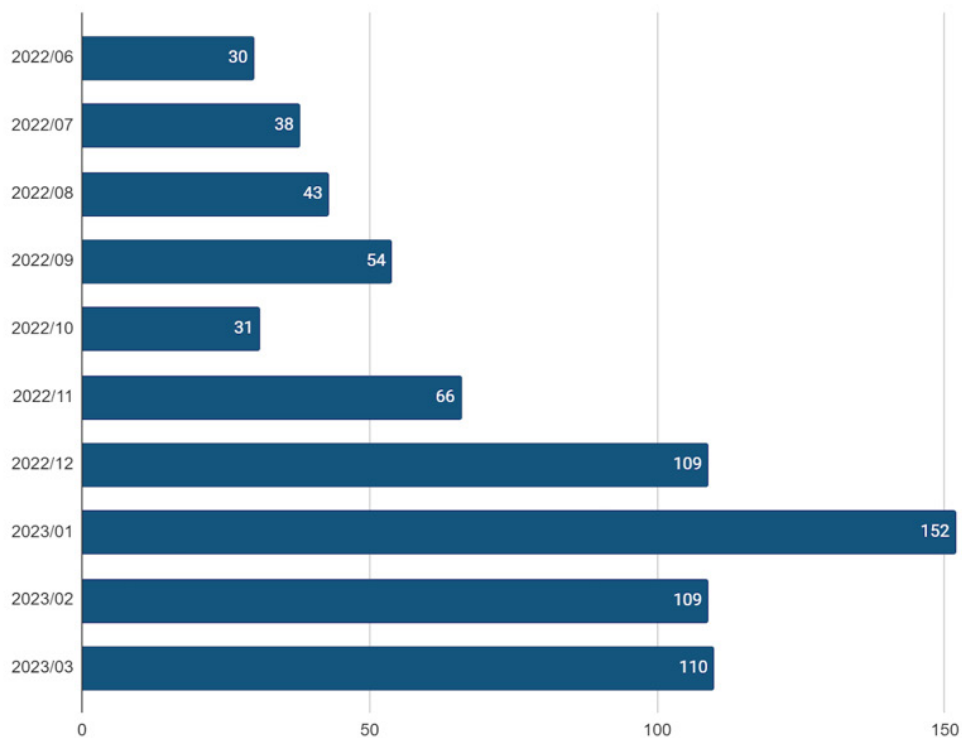
Construction workers hold banners in front of the construction site of Maisheng Science and Technology Industrial Park in Suqian to demand wages from CSCEC Company.

Labor protests surge. Against this general backdrop of labor dissent, CDM documented a major rise in labor dissent around the Lunar New Year period (January 21-27, 2023). Preliminary data indicates there were 261 labor protests in January and February, compared to a total of 341 such protests in the six-month period between July and December 2022. This is reflective of a cyclical pattern among workers, primarily internal migrants, who face the prospect of returning home for the holiday.



Police in Zhaoqing, Guangdong detain worker protesting the property developer Evergrande for unpaid wages.

Weak labor rights protections contribute to protest. The annual pattern of wage arrears persists for at least two major reasons. First, a lack of union rights. The Communist Party has systematically suppressed efforts by workers to form independent labor unions that could reduce the incidence of employers refusing to pay employees, insisting instead that the CCP-controlled and conflicted All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) remain the only legal labor union. Second, lax enforcement of labor laws. While China has relatively strong de jure labor protections, they are widely disregarded by employers because inspection and enforcement is [ineffective](#). Relatedly, when courts or arbitration committees do handle labor disputes, they often break up collective grievances into individual cases, weakening the leverage of workers.



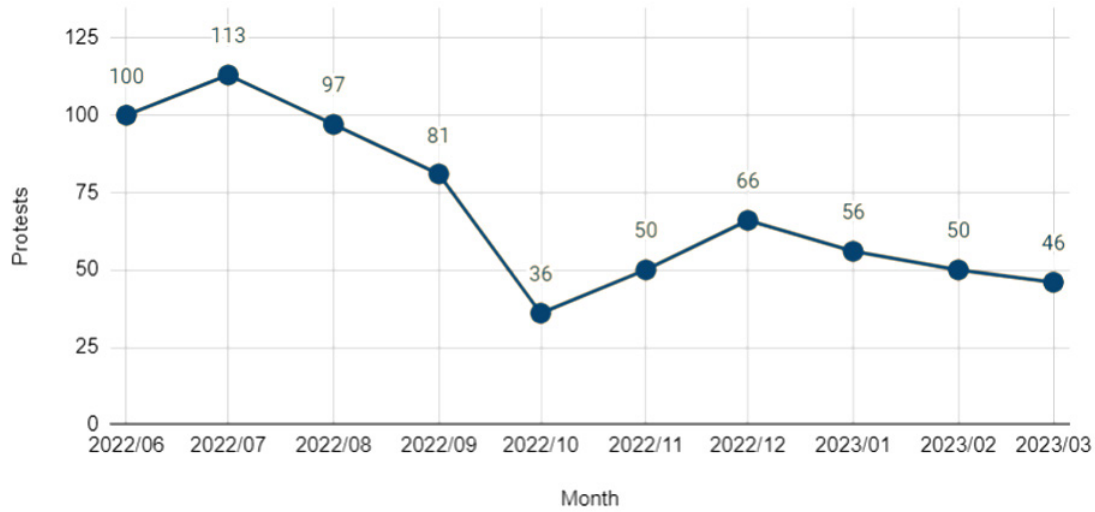
Labor protests by months

Economic slowdown and labor dissent. Beyond the cyclical nature of Lunar New Year labor protests, at least some of the downturn in the broader economy appears to be contributing to unrest. Much of recent labor protest implicates construction and real estate companies. Just as property developers' lack of liquidity has led to widespread protest over stalled housing projects (see the analysis below on housing protests), it has likely contributed to insufficient funds to pay workers on time, leading to arrears that can last months or even years. Economic growth [slowed markedly](#) in the second half of 2022, in part driven by the effects of strict Zero-Covid measures. However, CDM's data, which begins in June 2022, does not allow for direct comparison with previous years or insight into the impact of that economic change.

DESPITE POLICY CHANGES, HOUSING PROTEST PERSISTS

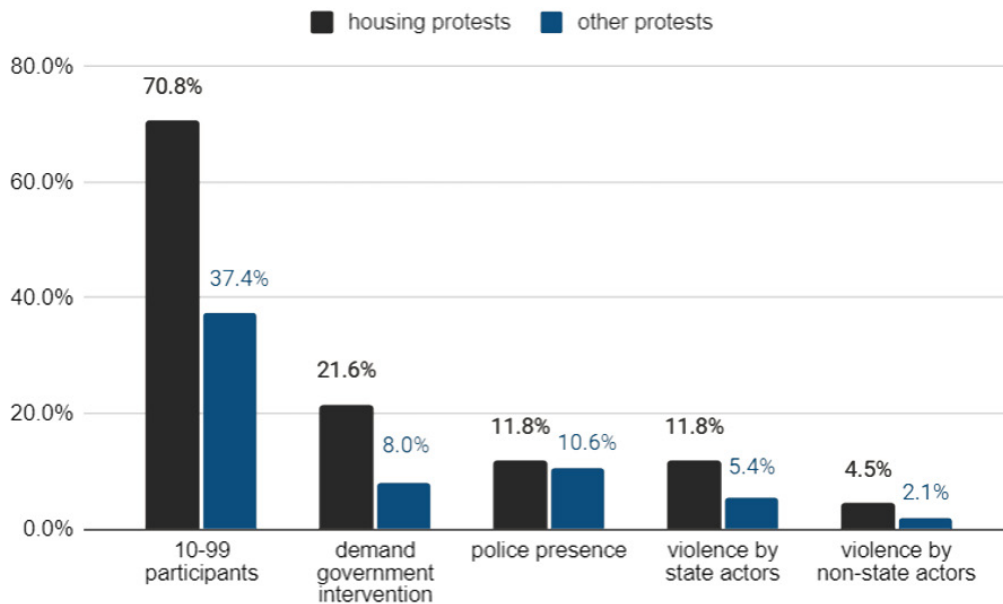
Housing grievances have been one of the main sources of protest in the CDM database, constituting about 40 percent of all cases. A driver of dissent by homebuyers has been the fiscal crisis of real estate companies. Stalled housing projects became so widespread and persistent in the summer of 2022 that homebuyers around the country began organizing mortgage boycotts, refusing to pay loans until developers completed the homes owed to buyers. CDM provided an analysis of mortgage boycotts in [Issue 1](#) of this publication.

Government measures. In response to the growing housing crisis, the central government [announced](#) steps in November 2022 to increase liquidity in the real estate sector, including greater financing from state banks. Later, the government said it would [ease](#) borrowing and repayment rules for developers. According to analysis of CDM's coded and backlogged data, housing protest has dropped from its peak last summer, but it has not yet significantly changed in frequency since the government announced its measures. Stalled housing continues to be a major source of discontent across China. CDM has recorded housing protests in 27 of 31 provinces or regions, led by Henan (13 percent), Shandong (10 percent), Guangdong (9 percent), and Shaanxi (9 percent).



Housing protests by month

Protesters demand government action and encounter violence. Housing demonstrators may be more likely to experience violence by state and non-state actors. While police are just as likely to be present at housing protests as at other types of protests, reports of violence against participants in these events by police (11.8 percent) and non-state actors like company personnel (4.5 percent) appears to occur at twice the rate of non-housing demonstrations. There are two potential explanations for the higher rates of violence. First, demonstrations over housing issues are more likely to reach medium-sized scale (10 to 99 participants) than other protests. Second, they demand government intervention in nearly 22 percent of cases, in contrast to 8 percent of other protests. Both the relatively larger scale and demands on the state may be perceived by authorities as a greater threat.



Characteristics of housing protests and all other protests

MEDICAL STUDENT PROTEST MOVEMENT

CDM documented a multi-day protest movement by medical students over the impact of pandemic policies on their lives and working conditions. Between December 10 and 12, 2022, CDM recorded 13 protests initiated by medical students and clinical medicine professional degree postgraduate students (hereafter “postgraduates”) undergoing standardized residency training in hospitals across seven provinces.¹ On December 7, the central government announced new Covid rules that shifted from complete control to coexistence with the virus. This subsequently led to a spike in new infections among citizens and medical staff.



Anhui Medical University students gathered to protest the school policy and unfair treatment they received.

The injustices underlying discontent. As the spike in Covid cases increased pressure on the medical system, several hospitals required postgraduates to stay and take shifts, even if it was their time to return home. Some institutions provided N95 masks only to doctors and did not give any protective equipment to postgraduates working as part of their training. In addition to safety issues, postgraduates generally do the same work as physicians but are only given a monthly allowance of a few hundred yuan because of their student status. These combined injustices drove them to collectively demonstrate on their campuses.

Three days of action. Beginning December 10, medical students protested at various universities with the slogan “Let us go home, equal pay for equal work.” After three days, the protests seemed to subside. It is unclear to what extent state repression played a role; CDM documented a police presence in at least three of the 13 events. On December 14, a postgraduate working at the clinical department of West China Hospital at Sichuan University died of heart failure during his shift after having a fever for days. But based on what CDM could observe, the incident did not trigger additional protests, and there did not appear to be follow-up actions in 2023.

¹ The standardized residency training system was formally implemented in 2015 across China. Based on the training systems of physicians in Europe and the United States, residents are expected to have clinical experience in different departments before undergoing specialized training. As a result, related postgraduates spend several years rotating through various departments in hospitals and have to pass a series of tests.

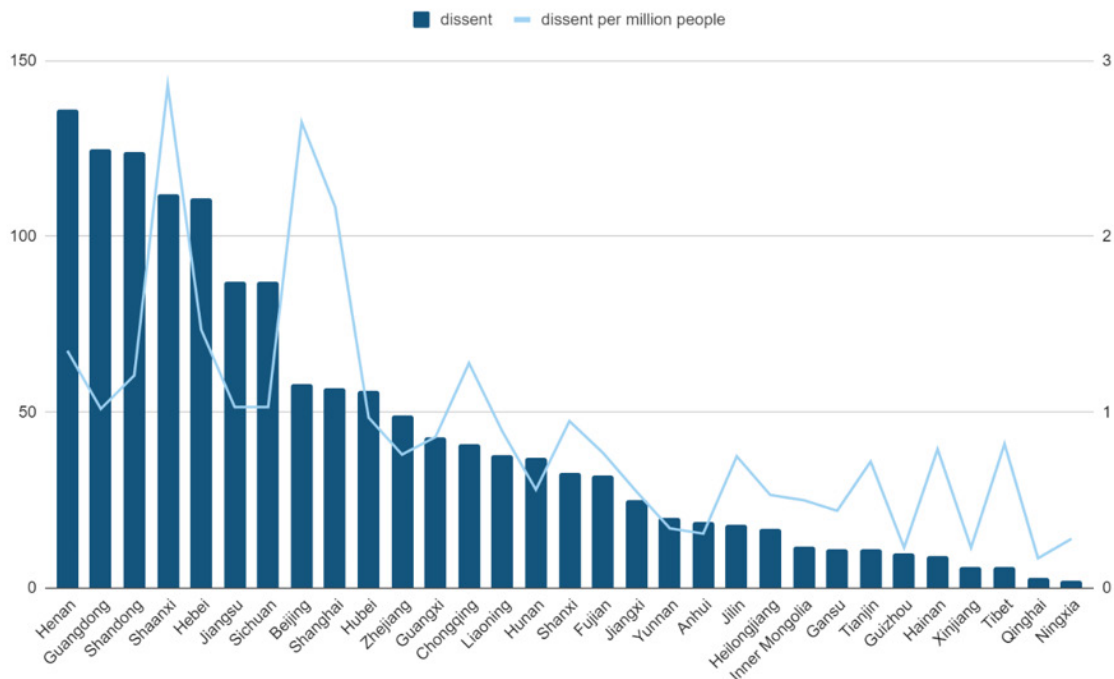
The tail-end of a multi-month wave of protests. This student movement is important because it marks the last wave of protests directly linked to Covid-19 prevention policies. As CDM’s [Issue 2](#) analysis illustrates, dissent linked to these rules built up over a period of months in 2022, reaching a crescendo in November and spawning the White Paper Movement. There was a notable spike in student protest during the multi-month anti-lockdown movement. The movement by medical students represents an extension of that student protest, and it also exemplifies how dissent toward Covid policies were often driven by more than one factor. On one hand, medical students protested university rules that prevented them from going home. On the other hand, postgraduates were discontent with the treatment they received as labor and an unfair residency training system.

BY THE DATA

Dissent Per Capita

When examining dissent events by province or region, Henan, Guangdong, and Shandong occupy the top three spots. Protest in Henan is driven by a large number of unfinished and delayed housing projects, while Guangdong and Shandong have the most employed people in China and therefore have more dissent over wage arrears. But if we bring population into the analysis, the top rankings change considerably. Based on China’s 2020 census figures, Shaanxi has the highest per capita rate of dissent (2.86 events per million people), followed by Beijing (2.65), and Shanghai (2.17). Whereas dissent in Shaanxi is a mix of housing and labor protests, one-third to one-half of events in Beijing and Shanghai were driven by anti-lockdown grievances in 2022. The median per capita rate of dissent is 0.9 per million people, making the levels of dissent in Henan, Guangdong, and Shandong appear more common than when population is not taken into account.

There are several factors that could cause differences in per capita protests across regions. Population density and economic prosperity—or inequality—could contribute to people in rich metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai being more likely to engage in protest. On the other hand, the relative lack of dissent events in places like Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet may be a result of more systematic surveillance and repression by the party-state in these regions. At the same, greater censorship in these regions could result in CDM undercounting dissent events.



Dissent events per million people, by province or region

Relationship Between Repression And The Target Of Dissent

CDM has found evidence of repression in one-quarter of dissent events, and this data provides insight into the ways in which repression is linked to the target of dissent. A pattern that emerges from the Sankey chart below is that arrest or detention of protesters occurs disproportionately in cases where the government is the target of dissent. Local government actors are the target in 29 percent of protest events, but local government is the target in 55 percent of cases in which arrests occur. Another pattern highlighted by the chart is that protests targeting non-government actors like companies are often suppressed by state actors. This emphasizes the fact that the party-state considers acts of dissent themselves a threat, even when the issue or target does not involve the government.

