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

- **Documented protest increased 21 percent year-on-year.** During the first quarter of 2024, CDM logged 655 dissent events, a 21 percent increase over the same period in 2023. Labor protests (57 percent) were the most common, followed by those led by religious groups (10 percent), and by home buyers or owners (9 percent). The remainder were led by rural residents, students, parents, investors, consumers, activists, Tibetans, Mongolians, and members of the LGBT+ community. The top regions for protest events were Guangdong (17 percent), followed by Shandong, Henan, Liaoning, Hebei, Beijing, and Zhejiang. CDM has logged a total of 5,455 cases of dissent since June 2022.

- **Increased censorship on video platforms.** CDM data indicates that protest-related posts on Douyin, China’s version of Tiktok, during the first quarter dropped by approximately 50 percent compared to the previous quarter. This followed an announcement in December 2023 by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) that it would launch a campaign to remove “objectionable content” on video platforms. These restrictions reduced the dissent cases CDM was able to document, especially housing protests.

- **Protests over inadequate heating.** CDM has documented 51 demonstrations or sign protests during the past two winters by home owners and buyers over inadequate heating in northern regions of China, such as Shaanxi, Shandong, and Liaoning. These heating issues appear to be linked to energy shortages and rising fuel prices.

- **Dissent through music.** In this issue, CDM examines the ways Chinese citizens incorporate music into dissent against authorities. These 29 cases include protests against COVID-19 lockdowns, social benefit cuts, and ethnic assimilation. In 5 cases, people raised rainbow flags at concerts despite restrictions on the public display of this symbol in recent years.

- **Demanding justice for gender-based violence.** CDM has logged 29 cases of dissent against sexual assault and sexual harassment, predominantly in the form of women publicly naming alleged perpetrators online. Over the past 12 months, women have increasingly used “real-name complaints,” a kind of symbolic protest that has been used across a range of issues in China. Most of the 29 cases compelled some form of official action, demonstrating the power of public dissent.

- **The myriad ways citizens dissent.** CDM has documented more than three dozen types of dissent in the PRC, such as group and solo demonstrations, protest through art, non-cooperation, cyber dissent, and contentious petitioning or lawsuits. For this issue, CDM analyzes the degree to which different groups use multiple methods to voice grievances and challenge power.
Distribution of protest events (January to March 2024)

Total dissent events recorded, by month
FEATURED ANALYSIS

DISCONTENT OVER INADEQUATE HEATING

The impact of fuel prices and the domestic decarbonization agenda. China is speeding up its dual carbon targets, a plan to hit peak carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. To reduce carbon emissions, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has enforced a policy beginning in 2017 to reduce coal-based energy in favor of natural gas; the policy has since had a strong impact on energy-intensive heating systems. In the past two years, a natural gas shortage has worsened even more due to the soaring fuel prices caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. These factors underlie problems of inadequate heating in China.

Indignation over insufficient heating. Many Chinese citizens consider subsidized public heating a basic right during the winter, and supply failures can lead to intense grievances. CDM has documented a total of 51 offline protests related to heating disputes since June 2022, with 35 percent occurring in Shaanxi, 24 percent in Shandong, 14 percent in Liaoning, and the remainder spread across six other northern provinces. The cases occurred primarily during the period between November and January, when extreme winter cold hits northern China.

With heat being part commodity and part social welfare in China, collective protests can emerge when homeowners fail to receive the service they expect. Since the 1950s, the CCP has provided state-subsidized, coal-fired central heating to urban households north of the Huai River and Qinling Mountains each year from mid-November to mid-March. State regulations mandate that indoor temperatures should reach 18 degrees Celsius (64 Fahrenheit). Yet, the government is failing to ensure adequate heating in the face of the expansion of urban areas, carbon emission-reduction policies, and increases in fuel prices. Supply issues are made worse by variable rates for heat in residential properties based on the supplier, in addition to failures by property management to provide adequate heating. In the cases recorded by CDM, many residential projects could not provide the necessary infrastructure for district heating systems. Some disputes have arisen when indoor temperatures did not meet the required level, despite homeowners paying the fees.

The residents of a community in Zhengzhou, Henan demonstrate to protest the property manager for failing to provide adequate heating (case 915).
Urban residents brave the chilly outdoors to protest. In Xianyang, Shaanxi, property owners at the Wealth Center project blocked a road to protest the property management company’s failure to provide heating (case 1333). Residents in Xi’an, Shaanxi, threw red paint at the window of a heating company for low-quality service (case 2512). Protesters in Linyi, Shandong, held a banner that read: “We need socialist warmth, not capitalist cold” (需要社会主义温暖 拒绝资本主义寒冬) (case 2515). In six cases documented by CDM, residents posted the Chinese character “cold” (冷) on their windows to express their grievances related to insufficient indoor heating. Among the 51 cases logged by CDM, 60 percent were group demonstrations and 25 percent were sign protests. In eight cases, protesters targeted local governments, demanding that authorities address their complaints.

One fifth of heating-related dissent cases resulted in repression, including police monitoring and obstruction. There was evidence of some type of concession, such as government negotiation and service improvement, in two cases. Additionally, CDM noted numerous online posts expressing dissatisfaction with poor heating that included photos of indoor thermostats significantly below the 18-degree Celsius standard. While these posts are not included in the 51-case dataset of offline protest, they indicate that grievances related to poor heating are more widespread.

DISSENT AND MUSIC IN CHINA

Increasing controls on musical dissent. As public protest, advocacy, and organizing have become increasingly difficult under various restrictions imposed by the CCP in recent years, many people have turned to more indirect ways of expressing their dissatisfaction with society and the government. One such method has been artists expressing dissent through music lyrics, but this too has been subject to restrictions. The Ministry of Culture published a blacklist of songs in 2015 and enacted provisions on management of entertainment venues, stipulating that karaoke song lists across the country must not contain content that jeopardizes national security. These rules also require that concert setlists and lyrics be submitted for advance review and approval.

Dissent persists. Despite new regulations, CDM has recorded 31 incidents since June 2022 of people using music or music venues to express protest against government policies or express views prohibited by authorities, including gender diversity and ethnic identity. Among these cases, half (15 cases) were related to COVID-19 lockdown policies. During the first month of the lockdown in Shanghai in April 2022, many artists posted songs online to protest the policy. In subsequent months, several artists released songs critical of zero COVID-19 policies, including Mr. Weezy and Professor He, and the rock band Slap (cases 394, 3047, 3048). The state quickly censored and blocked these artists.

The national anthem as a melody of resistance. The most common song to appear in these protests is the Chinese national anthem, “March of the Volunteers.” This melody could be heard in 12 events, including anti-lockdown protests, White Paper protests, and health care reform protests. During the Shanghai lockdown, many netizens protested on Weibo using the first line of the song, “Arise, you who refuse to be slaves!” as a hashtag. This led authorities to, ironically, ban part of the national anthem online. By the time of the White Paper Movement, people in major cities such as Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu were singing the national anthem or using its lyrics as slogans to protest government policies. In February 2023, retirees in Wuhan and Dalian protested in front of the government buildings against cuts to their health care benefits, with crowds also singing the national anthem as a sign of protest.

The voices of Tibetans and Mongolians. CDM has also documented seven cases of ethnic minority resistance through music, including the singing of hymns to the Dalai Lama and traditional Tibetan songs by Tibetans as a way of resisting the CCP’s assimilationist policies. These Tibetans were soon stopped or warned by the local government (including cases 820, 2069). In May 2023, government authorities in Tibet and Qinghai prohibited Tibetans from singing songs expressing their ethnic identity or calling for Tibetan unity, subsequently launching a related campaign of censorship. Mongolians have also expressed their dissatisfaction with government policies through songs (cases 1261, 1863, 1978), such as the artist Mr. Sumyaa, who performed a folk music song in May 2023 criticizing the government’s efforts to change the Mongolian way of life.
Rainbow flags at music festivals. Another type of dissent related to music is the raising of rainbow flags, the prominent symbol for diversity and support for the LGBT+ community, by attendees of music concerts. CDM has documented five rainbow-flag protests (cases 2187, 2188, 2493, 3049, 3050) since April 2023. Authorities have taken increasingly harsh measures against gender diversity and related advocacy in recent years, blurring out rainbow flags during the broadcast of the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest, and confiscating the flags at public events. Despite this, concertgoers have managed to wave their flags, suggesting that music festivals have become something of a space to preserve the spirit of resistance. However, there are recent signs that authorities may move to increase surveillance of these spaces.

A concertgoer in Huzhou, Zhejiang raised a rainbow flag that was later confiscated by security (case 3050).

DEMANDING JUSTICE FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Most protests against gender-based violence happen online. CDM has documented 29 cases since June 2022 of dissent related to gender-based violence and gender discrimination. Among these, 18 involved protests of sexual assault, mostly online, with three cases of parents protesting at schools where their children had allegedly been assaulted. CDM documented some type of concession in 14 cases. For example, after a woman posted about a Yangzhou police officer she said sexually assaulted her and her experience with other police who tried to get her to admit it was consensual, the Yangzhou Municipal Public Security Bureau and the Municipal Discipline Inspection and Supervision Commissions opened an investigation into the case (case 2445). Despite these responses from authorities, protesters experienced repression, such as censorship and obstruction, in four cases. Another eight cases involved protests against sexual harassment, all but one of which occurred online. It is worth noting that six of these occurred at schools and universities. The remaining three cases involved people promoting gender equality or protesting gender stereotypes.

#MeToo in China. Within the set of 26 protests against gender-based violence, half took place at schools and universities or involved perpetrators who were educational professionals. The act of publicly exposing assault and harassment in China can be traced back to the case of Luo Xiu, a PhD graduate of Beihang University, who started the #MeToo movement in China in 2018 by using her real name online to report that associate professor Chen Xiaowu sexually harassed her when she was a graduate student. Many other women subsequently come forward to publicly talk about their experiences and reveal the identity of the perpetrators. For a time, these protests were posted with the hashtag “#MeToo” or other hashtags based on homophones, which were largely censored by the government. In the 22 cases of online dissent documented by CDM since 2022, none used these hashtags.
Supporters of Zhou Xiaoxuan gathered outside a Beijing court before a trial in which she accused CCTV host Zhu Jun of sexual harassment (case 920).

**Obstacles in the reporting system.** From this set of cases documented by CDM, some patterns emerge concerning the obstacles women and girls face when reporting these violations. Local police are reluctant to receive complaints or delay taking legal procedures after cases are opened, and investigations that do take place are sometimes aggravated by corruption and cover-ups. School and university personnel mishandle or delay responses to gender-based violence cases, sometimes allowing perpetrators to go unpunished. As a result of these issues, survivors often gradually lose trust in authorities. This contributes to the trend of survivors turning to online spaces to dissent and report sexual assault, often holding their ID cards to make a “real-name complaint.”

**“Real-name complaints” against gender-based violence.** Originating from a series of years-old Chinese laws and regulations that encourage citizens to use their “real name” to file complaints through formal mechanisms against corrupt public officials, citizens have incorporated the symbolism into public dissent in recent years. Typically, the person or group states their grievances and demands remedy while holding up their ID cards. CDM documented a protest movement utilizing this symbolism in 2022, which was sparked in part by violence against four women at a restaurant in Tangshan. Among the 76 cases involving “real-name complaints” in CDM’s database, most are related to corruption and corporate misconduct. But, eight involve sexual assault; notably, these have all occurred over the past 12 months, indicating a recent trend in the use of “real-name complaints” for protest against gender-based violence. Two of the video posts had more than 10 million combined views, and authorities responded to seven out of eight. These concessions usually involved opening investigations into the cases; the results, including whether the perpetrators were penalized or the survivors were free from retribution, largely remain unknown because the conclusions are not published online or survivors did not talk about their result.

A woman used “Real-name complaints” to report sexual assault on Douyin (case 2452).
BY THE DATA

THE MYRIAD WAYS CITIZENS DISSENT

Since CDM launched in 2022, it has used a relatively broad definition of “dissent,” inclusive of many acts that challenge power in the PRC. The project prioritizes documenting offline collective action in public spaces because this is among the most contentious forms of dissent, and 70 percent of the more than 3,000 incidents that CDM has fully analyzed are offline events. But, this project also aims to capture the diversity of ways that PRC citizens dissent, with more than three dozen types documented in the database. The Sankey diagram below represents a sample of 369 cases of these alternative approaches to dissent and their relationship to different groups engaged in dissent. This visualization indicates that some groups are more likely to engage in certain types of dissent. People using petitioning, lawsuits, and similar types of institutionalized mechanisms to engage in dissent are often pursuing economic grievances, including workers, property buyers, and rural residents. An exception are activists bringing lawsuits against government actors. Activists are also more likely to engage in solo demonstrations, a risky form of dissent in that it lacks the relative safety of a group.

Members of the LGBT+ community, who face higher risks for public activism, tend to engage in types of protest that are comparably less contentious, such as dissent through artistic expression or in cyberspace. Additionally, LGBT+ rights advocates organize low-profile gatherings to create space for discussion or education, although authorities sometimes halt such events. Nearly every group engages in cyber dissent, such as critical posts online. However, the degree to which Tibetans and Mongolians rely on this space is a product of the CCP’s severe restrictions on public dissent for these communities.

Sankey chart demonstrating the relationship between groups engaged in dissent and their modes of dissent for 369 cases. Some groups and modes of dissent have been combined for purposes of the chart.