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# The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China

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# The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China

## **Abstract**

A qualitative shift is underway in the nature of labor protest in China. Contrary to prior literature that characterized strikes as being largely defensive in nature, the authors suggest that since 2008, Chinese workers have been striking offensively for more money, better working conditions, and more respect from employers. They explain these developments using a “political process” model that suggests economic and political opportunities are sending “cognitive cues” to workers that they have increased leverage, leading them to be more assertive in their demands. Such cues include a growing labor shortage, new labor laws, and new media openness. Their argument is supported by a unique data set of strikes that the authors collected, two case studies of strikes in aerospace factories, and interviews with a variety of employment relations stakeholders.

## **Keywords**

China, labor relations, strikes, labor rights

## **Disciplines**

International and Comparative Labor Relations | Unions

## **Comments**

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# THE CHANGING NATURE OF LABOR UNREST IN CHINA

MANFRED ELFSTROM AND SAROSH KURUVILLA\*

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A qualitative shift is underway in the nature of labor protest in China. Contrary to prior literature that characterized strikes as being largely defensive in nature, the authors suggest that since 2008, Chinese workers have been striking offensively for more money, better working conditions, and more respect from employers. They explain these developments using a “political process” model that suggests economic and political opportunities are sending “cognitive cues” to workers that they have increased leverage, leading them to be more assertive in their demands. Such cues include a growing labor shortage, new labor laws, and new media openness. Their argument is supported by a unique data set of strikes that the authors collected, two case studies of strikes in aerospace factories, and interviews with a variety of employment relations stakeholders.

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Following the mishandling of an employee during June 2010, some 1,700 workers at a Honda parts plant in Zhongshan, Guangdong Province, went on strike, calling for higher wages, better working conditions, and a more representative union. More recently, in January 2012, more than 2,000 workers at the state-owned Pangang Group Chengdu Steel and Vanadium Company struck, demanding a raise, more stable contracts, and the dismissal of “lazy, redundant personnel” (managers) (China Labor Watch 2012). The Honda and Pangang cases were different in several aspects: the employees involved were, respectively, migrants from the countryside and local residents; the factories’ ownership, respectively, was foreign private and state owned; and their locations, respectively, were the southeastern coast that has benefited the most from market reforms and the late-developing interior. Nonetheless, the workers’ stances in both cases were surprisingly similar and epitomize what we argue is an important qualitative shift underway in Chinese industrial unrest: labor going on the offensive.

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Using a “political process” model adapted from McAdam (1999), we suggest that structural and political opportunities (changes in the economy, notably a growing labor shortage, and changes in the country’s “political opportunity structure,” including new labor laws and new government policies on “mass incidents” and press freedom) have provided workers with cognitive cues that they possess increased leverage and space to be more assertive. In the absence of government strike statistics, we utilize a specially constructed crowd-mapped data set to show that the number of labor “incidents” in China is large and increasing, and that the incidents are distributed across all regions. In addition, we draw on two mini case studies of strikes in the aerospace industry and 30 interviews with a variety of employment relations stakeholders to suggest that Chinese workers are increasingly using strikes and protests proactively to demand higher wages, better working conditions, and increased respect from employers.

We contribute to existing literature in three ways. First, we introduce a fresh model for understanding changes in worker demands and actions in China. Second, we provide new data on the number and nature of strikes related to employment conditions in the country since 2008. Finally, our finding that workers are striking “offensively” differs sharply from the prevailing scholarly depiction of Chinese labor activism as defensive, while offering new evidence for the claims of a small but growing number of researchers who posit that the world’s largest working class is becoming more assertive.

## Relevant Literature

### Estimates of Unrest

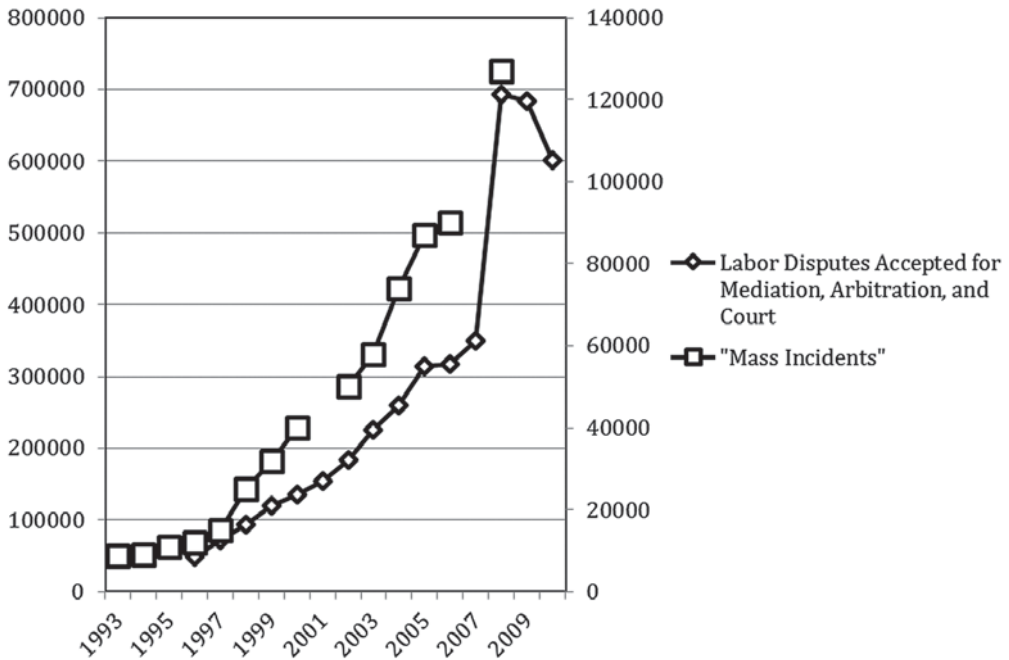
While precise figures on strikes and protests in China are unavailable,<sup>1</sup> popular unrest of all types, including labor issues, land struggles, environmental disputes, and so forth, has risen steadily over the past two decades, from 9,000 separate “mass incidents” (the state’s term for strikes, protests, and riots) in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005, the last time the government released figures, to 127,000 in 2008, according to a leaked report (Tanner 2004; Wedeman 2009). How many of these incidents, though, are related to labor issues is unclear.

In the absence of official data, academics and civil society groups have stepped in to fill the void. Wedeman (2009) assembled a database of 947 “mass incidents” reported in news articles from 1990 to 2008 and found 345

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<sup>1</sup>The legality of striking is ambiguous (Taylor, Chang, and Li 2003: 33). The positive right to strike was removed from the Chinese Constitution in 1982. Feng (2011) argued that Article 27 of the 2001 Trade Union Law nonetheless implies that strikes are legal. A clause in Shenzhen’s 2008 “harmonious labor relations” legislation tasked unions with representing workers in “negotiations” (rather than mere “consultations,” as in the Trade Union Law) in the event of a “work stoppage” or “slowdown” (China Labour Bulletin 2008b). However, China also has rules in place that prohibit, for example, “gathering a crowd to disturb public order” (Articles 290–292 of the 1997 Criminal Law).

Figure 1. “Mass Incidents” and Labor Disputes Accepted for Mediation, Arbitration, and Court, 1993–2010



Sources: China Labour Statistical Yearbook (2011); Tanner (2004, 2005); Wedeman (2009).

Note: Labor dispute figures are on the left axis, while “mass incident” figures are on the right axis.

incidents (36.7% of the total number of incidents) involving workers and employment issues. (Farmers come in second with 229 incidents or 24.21% of the total.) Chen (2009), relying on a variety of news reports, recorded 1,097 mass incidents occurring between 1997 and 2007, of which 355 involved workers. In a similar vein, China Labour Bulletin (2012) collected news reports of worker protests between 2000 and 2010, counting 553 incidents. These tallies undoubtedly understated reality. Sociologist Yu Jianrong (China Labour Bulletin 2011a) estimated that roughly 30,000 strikes and protests by workers occurred in 2009 alone—a number that roughly matches the figure obtained when the percentages of Wedeman and Chen’s “mass incidents” that relate to labor disputes (36.7% and 32.3%, respectively) are projected onto the total number of incidents that the government acknowledged occurred in 2005 (87,000 incidents).

Government employment-dispute data show a clear upward trajectory as well. Data from arbitration panels and courts reveal an increase in the number of formally settled labor cases, with the greatest spike coming in 2008 when such cases nearly doubled over the year before (from 350,182 to 693,495 separate cases) and involved 1.2 million workers (P.R.C. Department of Population and Employment Statistics 2011). Labor-dispute numbers have settled only somewhat after the financial crisis, falling to 600,865 cases and 815,121 workers in 2010 (P.R.C. Department of Population and Employment Statistics 2011). Figure 1 shows “mass incidents” through 2008

and labor disputes accepted for mediation, arbitration, and courts through 2010. Silver and Zhang (2009: 174) aptly called China “an emerging epicenter of world labor unrest.” Friedman (2012) went further, dubbing the country “undeniably *the* epicenter of global labor unrest” (emphasis added).

### Causes and Nature of Labor Protest

Prior literature characterizes Chinese strikes and protests as being “reactive” or “defensive.” This is especially true for workers in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which were dramatically restructured in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Gallagher 2005). Park and Cai (2011) noted that while SOEs accounted for 80% of urban employment in 1978, this figure declined to less than 30% by 2005. In just one year, 1997, SOEs lost about 13 million jobs, while 39% of urban households experienced a drop in income (Hassard et al. 2007: 86–87, 157), even as the state simultaneously withdrew “in the areas of social reproduction and social protection” (Pun, Chan, and Chan 2010: 133). Workers, who may once have turned down university educations for the promise of lifetime employment on the production line (Blecher 2002: 286), fell in one generation from being “master to mendicant” (Solinger 2004). Chen (2000), Lee (2002, 2007), Weston (2004), and Hurst (2009) argued that “subsistence crises,” corruption, and a profound sense of betrayal at the dissolution of the Mao-era “socialist social contract” drove SOE employees into the streets in the late 1990s and early 2000s—what Lee (2007) called “protests of desperation.”

The late 1990s also witnessed an increase in resistance by migrant workers in coastal export-oriented factories. Migrant workers’ grievances are described as not being about unfulfilled promises from the past—coming from the countryside, these people were never given such promises—but rather institutional “discrimination” (Lee 2007) in the form of limited rights to urban social insurance and schools for their children, combined with rampant violations of China’s basic statutory protections (Chan 2001; Pun 2005). Although migrant workers resort to wildcat strikes at times, they are said to resort to legal routes to justice (more than their SOE counterparts), often by way of labor nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Chan 2006; Halebua 2008; Friedman and Lee 2010; Lee and Shen 2011). Their reliance on the law and NGOs has been alternately praised as empowering and effective at pressuring state institutions (Chan 2006; Halebua 2008; Clarke and Pringle 2009) and criticized as overly individualistic and easily co-opted by the same institutions (Pun et al. 2010; Lee and Shen 2011; Chen and Xu 2012). Regardless, the activism of migrants, like that of SOE workers, is seen as reactive, as a request that the *minimums* of an existing system be upheld.

Along with adopting a generally “defensive” posture, Chinese workers are described as varying in their activism by region, by their relationships with local authorities, by the different managerial regimes under which they labor, and by their own networks and connections (Perry 2002). Lee (2007), Hurst (2009), and Blecher (2010) all map broad regional differences, particularly

between the northeast and southeast, inland and coast. Su and He (2010: 162) highlighted variation in activism based on the reaction of local authorities “who maintain a close, if not downright collusive, relationship with employers and thus will often take their side.” Chen and Xu (2012), though, noted that governments are also under intense pressure to actively reduce social instability, leading to different local mixes of accommodation and confrontation. Zhang (2008: 40–41) and Lüthje (2012) highlighted differences across managerial regimes, while Cooke (2008: 125) found that labor disputes were disproportionately high in foreign-invested (and Hong Kong-, Macau-, and Taiwan-invested) enterprises. Workers were further said to be divided by recruitment networks based on hometown ties and connections (Lee 1998; Sargeson 1999) and by dormitory regimes that put workers out of reach of “geographically rooted norms” and “localized practices” (Pun and Smith 2007). These divisions can reduce the information that workers acquire about both protest and legal-advocacy techniques (Becker 2012). Consequently, and as a result of a well-founded fear of repression (Lee 2002: 210, 2007; Weston 2004; Pan 2009), with very few exceptions (e.g., Chan and Pun 2009) “few people are willing to take the lead to organize cross-factory action” (Cai 2002: 340), and strikes are “fundamentally cellular in the sense that the ‘cells’ are not combining to form ‘tissues’” (Friedman and Lee 2010: 521).

Against this rough consensus, a small number of scholars have argued that an important shift is underway in worker activism. Chan and Pun (2009), Clarke and Pringle (2009), A. Chan (2010), C. Chan (2010), Butollo and ten Brink (2012), and China Labour Bulletin (2012) have all posited that labor protests are increasingly interest based rather than rights or social contract based. These claims echo the prediction of Silver (2003: 106), who wrote in her survey of world labor unrest a decade ago that “the growing labor unrest in China to date has largely taken the form of Polanyi-type movements against the disruption of established ways of life and livelihood” but there is “every reason to expect that Marx-type labor unrest will also emerge,” that is, unrest will switch to an increased reliance on shop floor “bargaining power.”

Applying a different framework, we investigate whether such a change is indeed taking place and why. In line with the new scholarship noted above, we find that Chinese workers are now increasingly acting “offensively,” for example, for progressive improvements in wages and working conditions. Our definition of “offensive” overlaps somewhat with the “proactive” (as opposed to “competitive” or “reactive”) category in Tilly’s (1976) schema of different claims made by collective actors but is most consistent with industrial relations literature, such as Stearns’s (1974) categorization of strike demands along a scale of sophistication. Per Stearns, “the lowest level consists of strictly defensive wage strikes; next comes strikes over personal issues; next, defensive strikes over conditions and intermediate wages and hours strikes; next, genuinely offensive wage strikes, the often related demands for reduction of hours, and on occasion union and solidarity issues” (24).

## Theory and Argument

Clearly, no “organized labor movement” is thriving in China nor is a “social movement” as defined by Tilly and Tarrow (2007).<sup>2</sup> Our challenge therefore is to explain an apparent shift in worker aims and actions without the unifying force of a trade union or a social movement behind them—what C. Chan (2010) called “class struggle without class organization.” To do this, we use McAdam’s (1999) “political process” model, based on the experience of the U.S. civil rights movement. Accordingly, structural (economic) developments (the decline of Big Cotton and northward migration of African Americans in McAdam’s case) and political openings (themselves the result of economic changes) lead to a new sense of possibility and therefore a new assertiveness on the part of an oppressed group by means of a process of “continuous” change. McAdam noted that “the altered response of elites to a particular challenger serve to transform evolving political conditions into a set of ‘cognitive’ cues, signifying to insurgents the political system is becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenge” (49). The simultaneous growth of “indigenous organizations” provides a forum for reinforcing those cues, leading to “cognitive liberation” and the birth of a full-fledged social movement. Strategic decisions, especially alliances with other groups, thereafter determine the longevity of the “insurgency.”

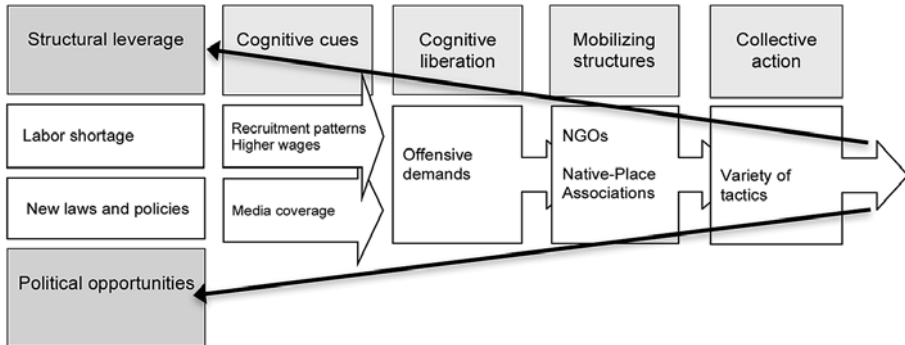
For McAdam’s model to be applicable to the Chinese labor context, we would expect certain factors to be present. First, economic and political factors that influence workers’ bargaining power should exist. We identify China’s growing labor shortage as the key economic factor driving increased worker activism, and the government’s changing labor laws and responses to unrest as the key political factors. Second, the importance of these factors should be conveyed to workers through “cognitive cues.” We point to “cues” in the form of new company recruitment policies and higher wages, on the one hand, and increased press coverage of legal activism and “mass incidents,” on the other. Unlike McAdam, who adopted a traditional structural priority of economics over politics, we treat these two factors (see Figure 2) as equal drivers of labor unrest, since we believe that Chinese legal reforms and decisions to deploy police against strikers or allow media to report on strikes are driven as much by concern for the stability of the regime as they are by economic pressures from businesses. The ways in which unrest, in turn, affects the structural and political basis for further mobilization (the arrows in Figure 2) are beyond the article’s canvass.

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<sup>2</sup>Tilly and Tarrow (2007: 111) described a social movement as “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.” While labor activism in China certainly features performances, strikes, organizations such as labor NGOs, and networks such as native-place associations, it does not yet meet Tilly and Tarrow’s core condition of constituting a “sustained campaign of claim making,” for two reasons. First, strikes and protests by Chinese workers are not “sustained,” typically lasting only hours or days. Second, they do not join together to form a “campaign.”



Figure 2. A “Political Process” Model of Chinese Labor Activism  
Based on McAdam (1999)



### Economic and Political Factors

The key *economic* change relevant here is China’s development of a labor shortage since the early 2000s (Barboza 2006; Rapoza 2011). Although the 2008 financial crisis delayed the shortage’s full impact, a lack of workers is currently evident in the Pearl River Delta, the Yangtze River Delta around Shanghai, and even in places in central China (Chung 2011). Clarke and Pringle (2009: 92) argued that “the capacity of workers to strike has been considerably increased in recent years as labor shortages have emerged.” Gallagher (2010) also linked the increase in labor militancy and bargaining power directly to the shortage of workers, arguing that these shortages are a function of three issues: the decline in the working population as a consequence of China’s one-child policy; policy changes in agriculture (sharp cuts to the taxes paid by farmers and stimulus-driven increases in rural infrastructure) that are raising the “opportunity costs” of working on the coast and reducing migration to the cities; and, finally, institutional discrimination against migrants as a result of the *hukou* system, which remains a barrier to the permanent migration of many rural citizens.

Besides limiting the pool of present and future workers,<sup>3</sup> the one-child policy is also credited—together with overall rising prosperity—with creating a generation of workers who are temperamentally different from the previous generation on a number of levels. According to Gallagher, Kuruville, and Lee (2011: 190), young Chinese workers “tend to be better educated, with greater exposure to mass media, technology and more acclimated to city life.” More important, this second generation of migrant workers is far more informed of their rights and more knowledgeable about the economic and social environment in which they live than the previous generation, and therefore they are more likely to be aggressive in pursuing their demands.

<sup>3</sup>Wang (2012) noted: “The proportion of rural workers older than 40 has gone from 30 percent in 2008 to 38.3 percent in 2011. In those three years, the average age of rural workers went from 34 to 36 suggesting that there . . . [is] a limit to what has previously been called an ‘unlimited supply’ of migrant workers.”

Increasingly, rural workers are staying closer to home. A poll of 200,000 migrant workers in 2011 found that more chose to work in their provinces of birth than chose to go elsewhere (Wang 2012). Whether the labor shortage is temporary or permanent is still being debated. While some have suggested that China may be at the Lewisian turning point, in which labor scarcity begins to shift the economy away from labor intensive, input-driven growth toward enhanced productivity, declining inequality, and greater domestic consumption, K. Chan (2010) has argued that the country has not yet reached such a point but is experiencing a series of shorter-term mismatches of ages, skills, and demand. But whether permanent or temporary, the shortage has served to increase labor militancy and bargaining power, reflected particularly in increasing demands for wages.

In the *political* sphere, the state's policies regarding labor protections and collective bargaining serve to further increase the bargaining power of workers. Beginning in 2008, the government enacted a range of pro-labor pieces of legislation, including the Labor Contract Law, Employment Promotion Law, and the Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law, as well as daring municipal collective bargaining measures such as the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Harmonious Labor Relations Regulations, which came close to recognizing a right to strike. New national Regulations on Consultation and Mediation for Labor Disputes in Enterprises went into effect in January 2012. These laws, taken together, show the state's interest in channeling conflict into legitimate channels. But even when conflict spills out of legitimate channels, the state appears increasingly unwilling to punish workers. Clarke and Pringle (2009: 93) argued that "the balance between repression and concession has markedly shifted toward the latter in the last five years." Though repression is likely to vary with the level of government and type of enterprise involved, China's "political opportunity structure" for workers (Tarrow 2011) has clearly shifted since these laws were passed. Workers have new opportunities for pressing individual legal claims and, through some laws' emphasis on collective consultation, have attained a shadow of legal legitimacy for collective actions.

### **Cognitive Cues**

Consistent with McAdam's framework, workers should receive "cognitive cues" that their leverage and opportunities are changing. Companies' efforts to "reverse-market" themselves as "preferred employers"—by actively recruiting in working-class neighborhoods (rather than waiting for desperate workers to line up at factory doors), by building better dormitories, by publishing factory magazines, and by forming "task forces" of employee representatives (Interviews 10, 28–30)—may be received by working people as powerful cues that the balance of power has shifted and that they (the workers) hold greater leverage over capital than they did a decade ago. A recruiter for a shoe factory who was interviewed said, "These days, people don't look for jobs, the jobs look for people" (MacKinnon 2012).

Rising earnings may send similar signals. Between 1996 and 2000, average monthly wages grew from 500 RMB to approximately 800 RMB, but between 2000 and 2007 they more than doubled to well over 2,000 RMB (China Labour Bulletin 2008a). The government has decreed that “the average growth of China’s minimum wages should be at least 13 percent” through 2015 and should constitute “40 percent of average local salaries” by that year (China Post 2012). In 2010, strikes led to wage increases of 500 to 800 RMB at two Guangdong Honda plants; wages doubled the same year at the electronics giant Foxconn, following a string of worker suicides (Culpan 2010; Butollo and ten Brink 2012). Though wage growth slowed somewhat in 2012 (Reuters 2013), and Chinese workers struggle with rising inflation, changes of this order cannot go unnoticed.

Equally important, media coverage of the new labor laws and greater reporting on strikes may provide cues that more activism is tolerated by authorities. The 2008 Labor Contract Law was preceded by an unprecedented public debate that drew in foreign chambers of commerce and unions (Gallagher and Dong 2011). After the law’s enactment, domestic media reported on workers who successfully used the law “as a weapon.” Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) noted that by telling gritty stories of mistreatment and eventual redemption through arbitration and court, Chinese state newspapers both attract readers and increase trust in the efficacy of legal activism. Partially as a result of both the preimplementation debate and postimplementation news coverage of the Labor Contract Law, attendance at legal trainings held by labor NGOs in the Pearl River Delta spiked in early 2008.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially, besides encouraging coverage of new labor laws and successful legal cases, the state has also allowed more open discussion of industrial strife. The year 2008 marked the rollout of China’s “Control 2.0” approach (Bandurski 2008) to media and public opinion: Communist Party Secretary Hu Jintao called for “releasing authoritative information at the earliest moment, raising timeliness, increasing transparency, and firmly grasping the initiative in news propaganda work.” In other words, rather than simply blocking coverage of (all) instances of unrest, the new policy is for the state-controlled media to pre-empt critical coverage by reporting on “mass incidents” before anyone else and framing incidents in the “correct” light. As a result, strikes and protests by workers have received increased reportage, albeit with a party-approved slant, such as a special emphasis on local officials’ mediation of conflicts. This has meant that workers hear more about other workers’ activism than ever before.

Given these cognitive cues—reverse-marketing by employers, rising wages, wide public discussion of labor laws, positive news stories on labor litigation, and new policies on reporting mass incidents in a prompt manner—we should expect “cognitive liberation” to take place. Workers should demand

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<sup>4</sup>One of the authors was then responsible for the China programming of a foreign labor rights advocacy group and was able to observe the excitement generated by the law firsthand.

higher wages, more attention to the details of working life, and greater respect. There ought to be higher levels of strike and protest activity in all parts of China, not just the coastal areas. Cognizant of their new leverage and opportunities, workers should show signs of a new tactical aggressiveness, too, such as through more coordinated strikes. We would also expect to see increases in other forms of protest.

### Data and Methods

To determine whether “cognitive liberation” is taking place, we use three sources of data in this article. First, given the absence of any official statistics on labor activism in China and the limits of existing estimates by scholars and civil society groups, we develop our own data. Manfred Elfstrom maintains a unique website titled China Strikes (<http://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com>) that documents strikes and protests by Chinese workers in a format that is accessible to the public. “Protests” (not just strikes) are included because Chinese workers often resort to dramatic street actions—marching, blocking roads, holding banners outside government agencies—instead of or in addition to halting production, in hopes that the state will intervene (Su and He 2010). For a protest or strike to make it into this database, it should be clear that the workers involved engaged in *collective action* and that their grievances were clearly related to their *employment relationship*. China Strikes includes a total of 763 strikes and protests occurring between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2012, and is constantly being updated.

Given that China lacks a clear set of newspapers that can serve as reliable barometers of unrest and no foreign papers provide consistent coverage, data gathering for the website is necessarily ad hoc. All of the scholars mentioned in our literature review use similar approaches, but they draw on different sources. While Chen (2009) relied mainly on the news archive of the Central News Agency in Taiwan and a variety of Internet-based sources, Wedeman (2009) stuck to the “international media” (including Xinhua). *China Labour Bulletin’s* strike map (2011 to present) and its regular research reports (the most recent of which, released in 2012, covers the years 2000 to 2010) have used Chinese newspapers’ websites, new dissident blogs (e.g., Jasmine Places and Jasmine Revolution), and information from the organization’s call-in radio show. China Strikes differs in that we additionally include individual tip-offs about incidents that come in through the site’s crowd-mapping submission form, as well as a greater array of English-language web materials. After comparing our data with that of *China Labour Bulletin*, we found several strikes listed in their reports and map that did not show up in our site, and vice versa. We have therefore added CLB data to China Strikes.<sup>5</sup> Thus, though the trends we find are broadly consistent with

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<sup>5</sup>Because the CLB strike map, in particular, captured many incidents missed by China Strikes, the inclusion of their data led to a sharp rise in the overall incidents captured by China Strikes from 2011 onward. The resulting ratio of China Strikes data from 2008 to 2011 versus post-2011 may therefore be

*Table 1.* Number of Strikes and Protests by Workers in Four Studies

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Wedeman 1990–2008</i>	<i>Chen 1997–2007</i>	<i>CLB 2000–2010</i>	<i>China Strikes 2008–2012</i>
Number of incidents	345	355	553	763
Number of years	18	10	10	5
Number of months	216	120	120	60
Strikes per month	1.59	2.95	4.60	12.72
Strikes per year	19.16	29.58	46.08	152.60

*Sources:* Wedeman (2009), Chen (2009), China Labour Bulletin (2012), China Strikes (2012).

those observed by these other researchers, the data used in this article are likely the highest publicly available count of strikes and protests nationwide by workers during the period 2008 to 2012. Table 1 compares our data set to those of the others mentioned.

The China Strikes data allows us to examine different subsets of activism. We focus on three subsets in particular: strikes over higher wages, over work hours, and over respect. Activism over higher wages includes any incident in which workers demanded increased pay without reference to legal minimums and not in response to a pay cut. Work hours activism includes strikes and protests over work hours, speedups, and holidays. Finally, activism over respect includes incidents that featured demands concerning verbal or physical abuse by managers or a more general perception by workers that human resource policies at their worksite were flawed. As it is often impossible to determine from news or blog reports which single demand was the most important in a given action—workers have no independent union to sum up their positions, so different workers interviewed typically highlight different grievances—incidents are coded according to each and every demand raised (including several demands that are not the focus of this article). This leads to 31 instances of overlap between the three subsets discussed here. Fifteen of these overlaps involve strikes that feature both demands for higher wages and better work hours. Because our interest is in change in the frequency with which different grievances are being articulated and not the relationships between different demands (an intriguing topic in its own right), these overlaps should not present any complications.

We acknowledge several shortcomings with this data. First, it certainly underreports the level of unrest, as many labor incidents in the country are not reported by the media, bloggers, or tipsters.<sup>6</sup> After all, the state's openness toward the media is a recent and evolving position. Second, our data

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somewhat skewed toward later dates, when the power of two groups of data collectors was combined. In the rare instances in which we did not add CLB-recorded incidents, this was because they were not clearly collective strikes and protests but instead were individual grievances, or seemed more litigious than contentious.

<sup>6</sup>For example, a strike wave that allegedly included dozens of enterprises in Dalian in 2010 shows up as only one incident in China Strikes, because information on only one of the actions could be located online.

could be skewed toward coastal areas where the media has greater access and where citizens are more connected to the Internet, as well as toward greater reporting on those strikes that disrupt life outside the factory gates, such as bus and taxi work stoppages, and strikes in foreign firms (which may be less “sensitive”) as opposed to SOEs. The large number of inland incidents captured, however, speaks to greater documentation than might be expected, and there is no obvious reason why changes in worker demands as recorded by China Strikes should be systematically biased.

Our second source of data are two case studies of strikes in plants operated by a multinational aeronautics firm with more than 17,000 employees in China. The plants, located in Chengdu, the capital of the southwestern province Sichuan, and Zhuzhou, a major transportation junction in the central province Hunan, employ 405 and 320 skilled workers, respectively. Here we rely on internal corporate reports and interviews with five of the company’s global industrial managers in March 2012, as well as two human resources personnel on-site in June 2012. The Chengdu plant, a joint venture with a state-owned engine company, makes components for commercial engines. The Zhuzhou plant, also a joint venture with a state-owned plant, manufactures integrally bladed rotors (IBRs), shafts, and cases for engines, which “are not simple parts; IBRs are about as tough as it gets . . . complex machines . . . and tough material machines, also” (Interview 34). In the words of one of the firm’s global industrial relations managers, the workers in both places do not “do the sort of work where you can necessarily bring in . . . hundreds of folks from the farms and just sort of put them on an assembly line and they go make things; it is very highly skilled aerospace machining, which . . . requires a certain skill set” (Interview 33). Earnings are relatively high, and turnover is low (less than 2% per year). The average age is about 30 years, and these workers are not housed on-site but live in the surrounding communities, where they have *hukou* or local household registration.

We acknowledge that these are not representative cases. Neither of these plants fits the stereotype of Chinese production as mere assembly for export; they are sophisticated enterprises composed of a blue-collar labor aristocracy. As such, the cases may be considered outliers. However, the conformance of these outliers with trends we observe across other sectors should add strength to our argument. Moreover, the cases provide an important window on Chinese workers’ changing attitudes and tactics, since activism in top firms is likely to be emulated by less-skilled workers.

Our third source of data is a series of 30 interviews conducted with a variety of Chinese employment relations stakeholders between June and July 2011. These included managers, labor activists, laid-off SOE employees, factory auditors, and labor scholars. Managers are the first group to feel the impact of any change in workers’ attitudes; labor activists interact daily with workers and hear their most serious concerns; laid-off SOE employees can make clear contrasts between their own conditions and activism and those of today’s young people; and factory auditors, in this case “corporate social

*Table 2. Strikes and Protests by Workers, January 2008 to June 2012*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of strikes</i>	<i>Number (and %) of strikes for higher wages</i>	<i>Number (and %) of strikes over hours, speedups, etc.</i>	<i>Number (and %) of strikes over respect</i>	<i>Average number of strikes per month</i>
2008	43	3 (7.0)	5 (11.6)	1 (2.3)	3.6
2009	29	8 (27.6)	0	0	2.4
2010	79	35 (44.3)	8 (10.1)	4 (3.8)	6.6
2011	227	42 (18.5)	24 (10.6)	13 (5.3)	18.9
2012	385	88 (22.86)	9 (5.2)	9 (5.5)	32.1
Total	763	176 (23.0)	46 (6.0)	27 (3.5)	

*Source:* China Strikes (2012).

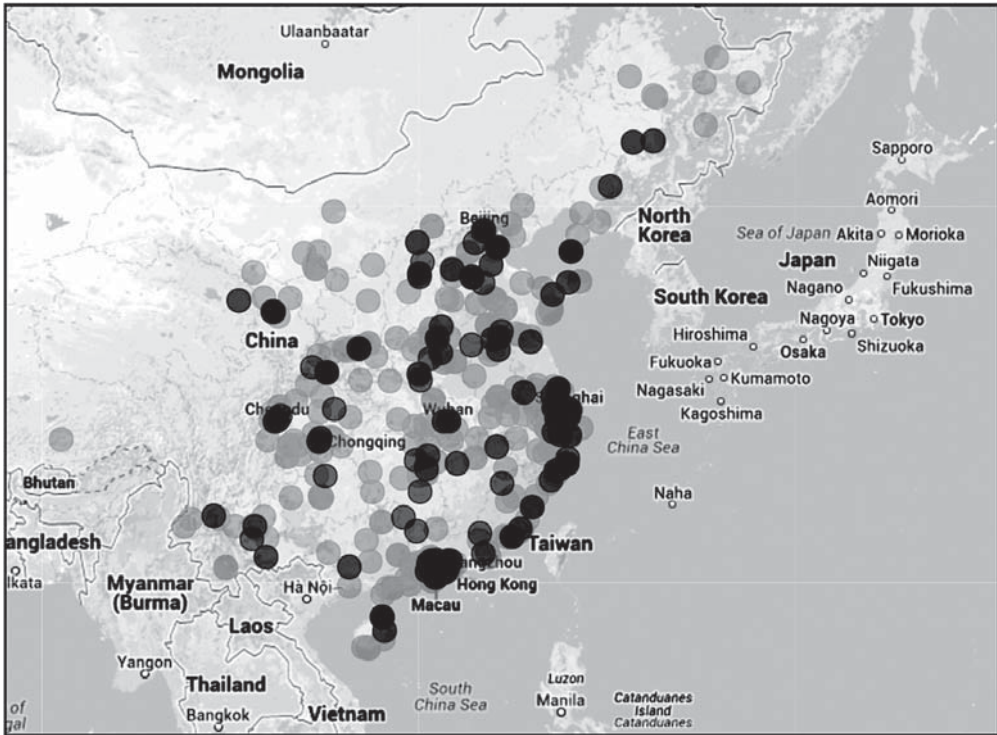
responsibility” (CSR) auditors hired by major brands, have extensive experience with a variety of workplaces and worker willingness to share problems with outsiders. These interviews can all be classified as “outside looking in” views of Chinese workers’ changing attitudes—not the views one might obtain through interviewing young workers themselves. As such, they provide a strong measure of change in labor’s position over a long period of time; such a measure might not be obtained through interviews with people who are the agents of change. Interviewees were contacted via “snowball sampling,” and the conversations took a “semi-structured” form, meaning that core questions of interest to us were covered but in an order and manner determined by the flow of the discussion (Bernard 2006). Notes from the interviews were openly and axially coded (Strauss and Corbin 1990). We accompany our interviews, case studies, and China Strikes information with data from the news and secondary sources. Throughout the article, we attempt to triangulate between these sources, whenever possible. Different forms of data—quotes, descriptive statistics, and event narratives—are combined to produce most of our findings.

## Results

### Strike Rates and Distribution

Our database identifies 763 industrial actions between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2012. Table 2 suggests a steadily increasing trend in strikes, from 3.6 actions per month in 2008 to 32.1 actions per month in 2012. Of course, this growth is likely partially an artifact of increased media reporting, but while the media has opened up in recent years, it is unlikely to have done so in such a linear fashion. In fact, the big “break” in coverage came at the beginning of our time frame, in 2008. We expect that incidents and coverage are correlated enough to accurately convey a general rise. Apart from a general increase in strikes, we find that, although strikes and protests are reported with particular frequency in the Pearl River Delta, labor unrest occurs at a high rate throughout China; that is, a distinct regional pattern is

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution of Strikes and Protests by Workers, 2008–2012



Source: China Strikes (2002), using Google Maps: <https://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com>.  
 Note: Strikes for higher wages are in black.

less pronounced than previously suggested. (See Figure 3 for a plot of the geographic distribution.)

**Causes of Strikes and Protests**

Contrary to the depiction of collective actions by Chinese workers as “defensive,” our data support the arguments of a small number of scholars that an upsurge in more “offensive” strikes is underway, although more traditional demands, such as for payment of wage arrears persist. Specifically, we find a rise in demands for more money, better working conditions, and more respect, that is, the traditional concerns of workers and trade unions everywhere.

The centrality of demands for more money is apparent in both our data set and our interviews. A full 176 out of 763 strikes and protests in China Strikes reflect demands for higher earnings rather than legal minimums, wage arrears, or the reversal of wage cuts, with almost all such demonstrations (165) occurring from 2010 onward. Although defensive calls for payment of wage arrears, in particular, persist, the percentage of industrial actions featuring “offensive” demands rose from 7% in 2008 to 44.3% in 2010, the year that a strike at a Honda plant in Guangdong sparked a wave



of aggressive auto factory strikes, before settling down to 22.9% for the whole of 2012. (But note that 31.2% of incidents in the first half of 2012 were offensive.) Figure 3 shows that the distribution of strikes and protests featuring such demands crosses regional boundaries. (Demonstrations for higher wages are marked in dark black.)

Our interview results are consistent with this view. Today's employees are less easily satisfied monetarily than were previous generations. This attitude is understood as "moneygrubbing" by older workers and factory managers. A member of a group of laid-off SOE workers in Guizhou, reflecting on the difference between themselves and their children, had the following to say: "Everyone is focused on earning money now. In the past, you got a bit of social support and you felt you were doing something for your country. You would even do some stuff as a volunteer. . . . Now, if you're not paid, you don't do anything" (Interviews 12–18). Echoing this assessment but from a different perspective, a foreign apparel factory manager noted, "Workers want 1,500 RMB for just their training period, when they aren't doing anything for the company. In the past, they didn't make any demands at all. They were happy to have air-conditioning" (Interview 10). In some instances, such as those described in our two case studies below, workers have sought to keep up with rising wages in nearby factories. Clearly, workers are acting on cognitive cues such as those presented in McAdam's framework.

Workers do not just strike and protest for more money, though. A CSR team noted that workers' complaints are now more "pointed" (*jian rui*): "Now, they will bring up 'overtime' and other, more specific issues. They now dispute speedups without corresponding pay" (Interviews 28–30). In the words of an official from the Hubei Federation of Trade Unions (HFTU), "They [workers] care about new things, like time to rest. If they've earned enough, they want time for themselves" (Interview 26). Besides overtime and rest, a number of other details of work conditions appear to cause worker dissatisfaction. The same apparel factory owner quoted above also lamented to the authors, "Workers get angry about missing documents. Everything has to be in writing now. 'Don't say it, write it'" (Interview 10). The percentage of strikes due to work hours has held steady at around 10 to 11%, with the exception of low points in 2008 and the first half of 2012. We suspect that data covering a longer time span would show an uptake compared with the 1990s and early 2000s.

Finally, workers are more likely than in the past to demand something more intangible: respect. The apparel factory boss said that workers are "definitely more easily offended now" and that, in order to retain employees, he "has to make people proud of their jobs, make them feel like they are highly qualified seamstresses" (Interview 10). According to an activist in the Pearl River Delta who has helped workers file legal cases, "It is now no longer just about money or about winning the case. . . . They will fight for their 'face' and status" (Interview 21). The HFTU official quoted above agreed: "They don't just want a job . . . but also want respect" (Interview 26). A Wuhan-based activist who had previously worked in Guangdong made a

regional distinction, though: “In the south, people will say they’re suing their company for ‘face’ or for ‘respect’ or because they want ‘their labor respected’ or ‘workers respected,’” whereas in places like Wuhan, the focus is more on “small, purely money demands” (Interview 25). Chan (2001) recorded several instances of managerial abuse that sparked outrage in the 1990s, but these tend to involve extreme abuse—for example, foreign bosses forcing workers to kneel in the sun. Workers now appear to be focusing on more routine interactions (e.g., Li and Liu 2012). In our aggregate data, the percentage of strikes and protests explicitly featuring “respect” demands—relating to physical or verbal violence by managers, poor human resource practices, and the like—rose from 2.3% in 2008 to 5.5% in 2012. Clearly, therefore, the results are consistent with our predictions based on McAdam’s model that point to a new aggressiveness on the part of Chinese workers.

### **Rising Worker Militancy**

Consistent with our framework, it would appear that the increase in strikes and protests is part of a general increase in worker militancy. At the most basic level, workers are exercising their “exit” (as opposed to “voice”) options (Hirschmann 1970), leaving employers who offer subpar wages or who are abusive. The factory boss quoted above estimated his plant’s turnover at 20%, up from next to zero “back in the day,” when he first began manufacturing in China, and the boss said that 20% was low compared with his competitors, who were experiencing 60 to 70% turnover (Interview 10). An SOE worker interviewed for this article said, “People don’t learn skills, they switch jobs constantly” (Interviews 12–18). Such comments were echoed by a survey of 108 foreign-invested manufacturers in China by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai and Booz & Company (2009: 19), which found that 60 respondents had “difficulty in finding and retaining reliable personnel.” A full 34% of the businessmen interviewed, moreover, rated “poor employee retention” as one of their “top three” issues in 2007; this figure only dropped to 19% in 2008–09, during the height of the financial crisis layoffs (23).

Workers are also engaging in what Scott (1985) called “everyday acts of resistance” using “weapons of the weak.” One factory boss said, “It’s not so much that there are different demands by workers. The behavior of today’s workers is different. Not steaming ahead, not as hard working” (Interview 10). The boss added that new incentives, including negative ones such as the threat of revoking housing and food subsidies, were now required to force employees to meet his factory’s standards (Interview 10). He also complained of increased “aggression” from workers, of a greater potential for violence over small disagreements; to protect against this, his factory has had to install 280 surveillance cameras. An activist similarly worried that “if no one steps in to represent workers, things will develop in an increasingly violent direction” (Interview 23). It should be noted, though, that reports of violence by police, factory security guards, and hired thugs against workers far outnumber reports of violence by workers themselves in our data set.

In addition, workers are taking increased advantage of emergent institutions outside the state and party-backed mass organizations. One activist in the southeast said workers used to be suspicious of his NGO when he would contact them, but now “they actually call and request materials” (Interview 20). The CSR auditor noted: “Five years ago, when we conducted CSR audits, most workers said what their bosses wanted them to say. . . . When we investigate factories now, workers say what they want to, tell the truth, explain their factories’ actual conditions, say things they wouldn’t say in the past” (Interviews 28–30). Wang (2011) said civil society activists were an important element in the 2010 Honda strikes. This sort of outreach shows a new savvy on the part of workers.

Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests increased coordination of strikes and protests, better organization, and a more strategic focus. The first incident in the 2010 strike wave at Honda auto parts plants was perfectly placed in the company’s supply chain, shutting down the firm’s operations nationwide, and it involved extended negotiations led, on the workers’ side, by worker-elected representatives and by pro-worker academics. Workers at more than 20 other auto plants followed suit (IHLO 2010). The academics involved were impressed by the workers’ “complicated process of choosing goals” and “strong collective consciousness” (Interviews 6–8; see also Meng and Lu 2013). In November 2011, employees at Pepsi bottling plants in at least five widely separated cities (Changsha, Fuzhou, Chongqing, Nanchang, and Chengdu) held a coordinated leave-taking protest on the same day (China Labour Bulletin 2011b), while in July 2012, workers in Wanzhou, Chongqing, and Huizhou all struck on the same day over a leadership change at NVC Lighting (see, e.g., X. Li 2012). If the auto strike wave spread by demonstration effects and emulation, what Tarrow (2005) called “non-relational diffusion” (albeit within factories supplying the same companies), then the Pepsi, Motorola, and NVC Lighting waves seems to have been guided by neither “relational diffusion” (where the participants know each other or are part of the same networks) nor entirely “non-relational diffusion” but rather simply well-organized online outreach. This coordination contrasts sharply with the depictions of prior literature.

All of these tactics—strikes, “everyday resistance,” and seeking out external organizations—are best viewed as expressions of workers’ new empowerment, not as themselves catalysts of that empowerment. In making their new demands for better pay, for greater attention to the details of working life, and for more respect, while employing new tactics, workers appear to be responding to the cognitive cues described here. For example, several interviewees noted the effect of media coverage of the Honda strike on workers’ sense of possibility. An NGO leader in the Pearl River Delta, said, “The Honda strike, in particular, gave workers a new momentum. It awakened them” (Interview 20). According to another, “The Honda strike had a big impact on workers’ opinions, because of the media attention given to the strike. Similar strikes occurred in the past, but without the same attention”

Table 3. Chengdu and Zhuzhou Case Studies

<i>City, ownership, and number of employees</i>	<i>Reasons for strike</i>	<i>Demands</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Role of union</i>	<i>Result</i>
<b>Chengdu Joint venture 405</b>	Performance bonus cut Transfer of fac- tory across city Neighboring fac- tories catching up in terms of wages	Restoration of performance bonus Transfer com- pensation based on ser- vice before joint venture	Three-week strike fol- lowed by two-week slowdown	Telling company about planned strike Ineffectively urging work- ers to return to work	Indirect in- crease in bo- nuses Older, pre-joint venture em- ployees com- pensated for past service Net wage in- creases of 37%
<b>Zhuzhou Joint venture 320</b>	Performance bonus cut Termination of worker for as- saulting man- ager Local manage- ment team ir- regularities	Restoration of incentive bonus More communi- cation on pay issues Different pro- cess for nego- tiation Transparent ac- counting of local manag- ers' failures	Small act of violence Work to grievance procedure rule via a two-day "dive"	Staff and Work- ers Represen- tative Con- gress leads action Negotiating a new agree- ment via the Staff and Workers Rep- resentative Congress	Promise of prior announce- ment of pay changes One month's supplemental wage payment No retaliation against strik- ing workers More open and honest com- munication Share report on actions taken against cor- rupt managers

(Interview 21). The importance of other cues, especially rising wages, is shown in the case studies below.

### Evidence from Case Studies

The trends that come through in our interview and China Strikes data are also evident in the results of our mini case studies of the Chengdu and Zhuzhou aerospace factories.<sup>7</sup> A summary of the case results can be found in Table 3.

#### *The Chengdu Case*

The Chengdu plant was different from most of the worksites discussed in the incidents documented above. Many of the facility's employees previously belonged to a state-owned enterprise that entered into the current joint venture with the international firm. These workers were given a

<sup>7</sup>Out of a commitment to the anonymity of our interviewees, only one of the two incidents used as mini case studies is included in the China Strikes data set. The one that is included in China Strikes appears in other online reports, but on China Strikes it has been scrubbed of any identifiers beyond those used in this article.

one-time severance payment for their previous service in the SOE when they joined the new entity. While there were a few “senior individuals” among the workers, the “majority of the workforce” were in their mid-30s (Interview 34).

Two incidents sparked discord at the factory. First, in June 2009, the Chengdu government announced that, owing to housing pressures, the plant would have to relocate from near the city center to a suburb, resulting in an increased commute of an hour to an hour and a half for the workers, who lived in neighborhoods close to the old plant. The older workers, in particular, believed they deserved compensation for the move—including compensation for their service to the previous SOE, despite the one-time payment they were given when the joint venture began. Second, in September 2009, management announced a decrease in the factory’s performance bonus due to what was deemed a drop in effort, although the New Year bonus of 2,000 RMB was paid as usual in January 2010. The workers, led by a core of older employees, went on strike in February and March for three weeks.

Rather than immediately raising wages or, alternately, cracking down on the protesters, as occurred in other parts of China at the same time, management waited, promising a consideration of the workers’ concerns at a later date. It urged employees to return to work with promises of nonretaliation. Phone calls were made to individual workers, and the protesters were allowed into the plant for bathroom breaks. But menacing private security guards were also hired. Slowly, discussions with a small group of workers started. Others then trickled back. Workers had to re-sign their contract commitments as a condition of regaining their work. The enterprise’s union branch played a marginal role; in a well-worn pattern for the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), it tipped management off about the strike and encouraged workers to resume production (Interview 31).

After the workers resumed work, base pay was increased and “special” bonuses were added; senior employees were bought out at an “in-between” level that partially acknowledged their pre-joint venture years of service. The senior workers were not completely happy with their settlement, however, and the problem regarding the relocation of the factory was not resolved fully. After a follow-up slowdown by workers in May 2010, compensation was increased again. In total, the base wage was raised 8.8%; overtime was adjusted 12.2% in line with the base wage; a “special bonus” of 50% replaced a “monthly bonus” of 41%; and other bonuses were increased 25%, for an overall pay raise of 37%. Ninety-five percent of employees agreed to move to the new plant location, and company buses now transport the employees from their homes in the old factory’s neighborhood (Interview 35).

### *The Zhuzhou Case*

The disputes at the Zhuzhou facility were rooted in a long history of mistrust but began most concretely July 2011, when an employee assaulted a

manager with a metal bar over not receiving a merit pay increase. When the worker was terminated, there was a 28-hour slowdown; “people stayed at their work stations, they didn’t walk out in the street with posters and that . . . but they refused to work” (Interview 33). According to an official with the company, “Having someone that assaults his manager is something, but knowing that . . . our shop floor employees were supportive of this employee was a kind of surprise for us, and this was where we started being a bit concerned about, what is the issue in this shop? Is there something behind it that is more significant?” (Interview 33). The company started a dialogue process with an ombudsman and focus groups.

While this process was ongoing, a “multifunctional” quality and accounting audit was also underway to assess the factory’s compliance with the corporation’s standards. Problems were found with preventative equipment maintenance, reimbursements for false receipts for managers (used as a form of motivation), and “fudged” numbers in factory documents. “The employees really saw that something was wrong” (Interview 33). The general mismanagement of the factory was compounded in their eyes by issues of favoritism and “perceived lack of respect from the management team.” At the end of the year, as investigators finalized recommendations for the factory, local managers announced that there would be no incentive compensation payouts for 2011 because of the quality issues that had been discovered, issues that workers felt were the fault of management, not line employees. A two-day work stoppage then commenced in January.

Using the company’s “root cause corrective action” procedures, the union gathered workers in the canteen to do a “deep dive” (an English-language term used by the international firm’s managers—the Chinese translation is unknown) about why there was no payout (Interviews 31–34). According to an official, “When we would say, OK, go back to work, they would say, ‘We’re not done with our root cause activity.’ So, it was quite a clever trick that I hope that one of our more mature unions doesn’t someday decide to employ” (Interview 32). The union reached out to the Zhuzhou Municipal Federation of Trade Unions, which said their tactics were “not the way to go” and instead recommended third-party mediation—something the company had no experience with in the Chinese context and was reluctant to try and that the union felt comfortable ignoring. In the end, the enterprise-level union made a list of demands, including, in addition to bonus-plan changes, nonretaliation against workers who participated in the “dive,” more open and honest communications with the company in the future, and, importantly, a report on what action would be taken against the local management team for various irregularities, not just in regard to pay and human resource strategies but also in regard to the quality and accounting audit. “Western-style” negotiations with the factory’s 22-member Staff and Workers’ Representative Congress resolved the stoppage. (Twenty-one out of 22 members agreed to the company’s offers, and one abstained; eight of the members belonged to a union negotiating team.) Workers received a

one-time supplemental payment of one month's wages and a commitment to notification 10 days prior to any change to the merit-pay plan.

### **Analysis of Case Studies**

Despite the capital-intensive and highly skilled nature of production in both cases, the dynamics of protest appear quite consistent with McAdam's predictions and our quantitative and other interview results. Workers in both Chengdu and Zhuzhou made wage and bonus demands without reference to the minimum wage or unpaid overtime. The strikes suggest an increased focus on details and process issues. This took the form of calls for payments according to factory tenure and compensation for work travel in Chengdu, disputes about bonus plans in both plants, and, in the Zhuzhou case, scrutiny of the competence and honesty of local managers, coupled with attention to the very processes by which negotiations between labor and management took place. One manager, reflecting on the Zhuzhou case, expressed surprise: "One of the things in China, from the experience that I've had until now, is that policies, procedures, that type of stuff, you sort of agree on after negotiations—they're not normally part of the negotiation process" (Interview 33). The global labor relations director for the company noted that "pride" was important, especially in Chengdu, where demands for respect sprang, perhaps, from the plant's roots in the state economy (Interview 31).

The main "cognitive cue" driving workers to strike at the Chengdu plant was rising salaries in surrounding factories that ate away at the workers' sense of still being "premium" employees (Interview 31). Similarly, in Zhuzhou, a company official noted, "We've always been a good payer; we're not below the market. In fact, in the past . . . when we first started there ten or fifteen years ago . . . we paid significantly more than other industries," such as other facilities run by the company's state-owned joint venture partner. "Over time," however, the partner "has caught up to our salaries." Thus, "there was that in the backdrop, as well: the perception that they [the employees] had been hard done by because everyone had caught up to them and now they weren't earning significantly more than the others" (Interview 32). In both factories workers received considerable raises following their strikes, reinforcing the earlier cognitive cues. In addition to rising local wages, changing political opportunities were a catalyst for all these demands. Police do not seem to have intervened significantly; private security guards had to be hired in Chengdu, for example. The Zhuzhou union's unusual activism, which adds to the reports of tentative ACFTU reform by other scholars (Howell 2008; Liu 2010; Chen 2010), no doubt provided a powerful cue regarding the legitimacy of collective action.

Consistent with our interviews with managers, laid-off SOE workers, factory auditors, and trade union officials, the data from these two case studies show a working class that is proactive in its demands and sophisticated in its tactics. In both places, in the words of the company's global industrial

relations director, the demand was “not about rights, not about other things” but rather about it being “time to get some more!” (Interview 31). He adds, “The industrial relations climate in China continues to evolve on an almost daily basis.”

### Conclusions

The central finding in this article is that a qualitative shift is underway in the nature of Chinese labor unrest. The evidence from data, interviews, and cases is broadly consistent with our adaptation of McAdam’s (1999) “political process” model. As a result of economic and political changes and the cues they have sent to workers (in the form of higher wages, new recruiting practices, and greater media coverage of labor unrest), workers appear to be demanding more pay and increased respect, while also paying attention to workplace details. They are also employing new tactics in their activism. These would not be dramatic claims in other contexts, but in China, while conflict has long been intense, workers have until recently been understood to be focused on largely “defensive” demands. Consistent with Gompers’s (1893) comment, Chinese workers now appear to “want more.”

Three objections may be raised to our argument. First, although we interpret workers’ demands for higher wages as evidence of “workers going on the offensive,” an alternative interpretation is that these are actually “defensive” demands, in that workers are simply trying to keep real earnings constant given that inflation has risen dramatically in recent years, with the exception of a brief dip at the beginning of the recession,<sup>8</sup> and several of the reports that serve as a basis for our data set quote workers as complaining about prices. Our case studies, however, demonstrate a holistic change in workers’ demands that goes beyond wages: our interviews and China Strikes data show simultaneous rises in demands regarding job “details” and “respect.” Moreover, in many recent incidents, the pay hikes received by strikers and protesters have far exceeded what would be required to keep up with inflation. The Honda strikers, for example, did not stop their action when offered a raise of a few percentage points. Finally, it should be noted that inflation has been a constant feature of postreform China, but previous generations of workers struck and protested on very different grounds.

Second, it may be argued that our data do not capture regional dynamics adequately or the different interactions workers may have with different levels of government. We acknowledge this shortcoming and urge others to replicate our research but with greater attention to these dynamics. Finally, some may find that our model does not give workers enough agency, painting them instead as passive recipients of structural cues. It is not our

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<sup>8</sup>According to the World Bank, China’s annual CPI inflation rose from 4.8 to 5.9% between 2007 and 2008, crashed into the negative zone (−0.7%) in 2009, following the global financial crisis, and rose again to 3.3% in 2010 (World Bank 2012). In July 2011, CPI hit a high of 6.5%, according to Chinese government figures (Rafiei 2012).



intention to downplay the bravery and ingenuity of Chinese labor activists. We have not investigated the bonds formed by workers on the picket line; that is, we have not engaged the “indigenous organizations” component of McAdam’s model, but future research should focus on the sorts of collective action spurred by various worker-led bodies: grassroots NGOs and native-place associations (the right-hand side of Figure 2).

Our use of McAdam’s model helps us understand inflection points in worker activism under conditions of repression. Existing industrial relations theory focuses on strike rates within stable, formalized bargaining relationships. Chinese strikes are all wildcat strikes. The study of such activism requires greater attention to how individual workers interpret their environment, that is, take in cues. The presence of independent unions may eventually be required in China in order to reinforce these scattered interpretations and turn them into a sustained movement. For now, Chinese workers must rely on themselves and, again, perhaps NGOs and native-place associations.

This article confirms and adds to the strand of the literature that is beginning to argue that Chinese workers are showing a new level of assertiveness. One key question for future research will be to examine whether differences in strike behavior between migrant and SOE workers continue to exist. A second question lies in the dark black arrows leading back from “new tactics” to the “new structural and political opportunities” in McAdam’s model in Figure 2. Workers’ current “offensive” activism may change the opportunities for further action in a positive—or negative—direction. A circular relationship between laws and action may exist, one that makes defining the direction of causality difficult and raises issues of endogeneity. For now, though, this circular relationship seems to be a “virtuous” cycle for workers. A contraction of the country’s economy or the enactment of repressive policies could lead to more defensive or cautious worker demands. Thus, whether the nature of Chinese labor unrest changes again going forward warrants scholarly attention.

## Appendix

### Interviews with ER Stakeholders

- Interview 1: Academic, June 2011, Beijing
- Interview 2: Labor activist, June 2011, Beijing
- Interview 3: Academic, June 2011, Beijing
- Interview 4: Academic, June 2011, Beijing
- Interview 5: Academic, June 2011, Beijing
- Interviews 6–8: Group interview with academic and students, June 2011, Beijing
- Interview 9: Academic, June 2011, Chongqing
- Interview 10: Apparel factory manager, July 2011, Pearl River Delta (via Skype)
- Interview 11: Labor activist, July 2011, Guiyang
- Interviews 12–18: Group interview with laid-off SOE workers, July 2012, Kaili
- Interview 19: Labor activist, July 2011, Pearl River Delta
- Interview 20: Labor activist, July 2011, Pearl River Delta

Interview 21: Labor activist, July 2011, Pearl River Delta  
 Interview 22: Labor activist, July 2011, Pearl River Delta  
 Interview 23: Labor activist, July 2011, Pearl River Delta  
 Interview 24: Labor activist, July 2011, Hong Kong  
 Interview 25: Labor activist, July 2011, Wuhan  
 Interview 26: Trade union official, July 2011, Wuhan  
 Interview 27: Academic, July 2011, Beijing  
 Interviews 28–30: Group interview with CSR compliance auditor and assistants, July 2011, Tianjin

## Case Study Interviews

Interview 31: Director of global labor and employee relations, February and March 2012, United States  
 Interview 32: Industrial relations manager, March 2012, United States  
 Interview 33: Industrial relations manager, March 2012, United States (via conference call)  
 Interview 34: Industrial relations manager, March 2012, United States (via conference call)  
 Interview 35: Industrial relations manager, March 2012, United States  
 Interview 36: Human resources manager, June 2012, Chengdu, China  
 Interview 37: Human resources supervisor, June 2012, Chengdu, China

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