
Thugs and Outsourcing of State Repression in China

Lynette H. Ong*

ABSTRACT

This article examines “thugs-for-hire” in state repression. Local governments regularly deploy third-party violence to evict homeowners, expropriate land from farmers, manage illegal street vendors, and deal with petitioners and protestors in China. Violence is effective in implementing unpopular and illegal policies and also allows local authorities to evade responsibility for using violence and maintain a veneer of lawfulness. However, it may run the risk of backfiring and imposing costs vis-à-vis the legitimacy of the local state and of the Communist regime as a whole.

Three weeks ago, a bunch of muscular tattooed thugs came banging on our door in the middle of the night. When we answered the door, they shouted at us, “We are giving you a final warning. Make sure you sign the relocation consent papers immediately, otherwise we will make your lives a living hell.” They came back a few days ago at three in the morning. This time, they came marching alongside a bulldozer—ready to bulldoze my house! Awakened by the noise of the machine, my son and I tried to stop them from tearing our house down. The thugs beat us up. My son, who is 30 years old, could take it, but they won’t even spare the life of an old man like me. My wife and daughter-in-law helplessly watched as they looted our home and destroyed our property. (Interview in 2014 with a 55-year-old male villager whose home had been recently demolished in Anhui Province)

This harrowing account is not extraordinary. Thugs and gangsters are regularly hired by local governments across China to repress residents and coerce them into complying with government orders. They are recruited to dislodge farmers in

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land expropriation cases and to evict homeowners in demolition projects. Local authorities also regularly employ thuggish violence to intercept petitioners who try to lodge petitions with the central government, including petitioners against local government corruption. Local authorities also hire thugs to threaten activists who take their grievances into the streets. Municipal officers called *chengguan*, who enforce order in neighborhoods, employ thuggish contract workers to manage street vendors and migrant workers. In short, local authorities prefer hiring thugs instead of using their own police force when they are taking illegal actions, implementing unpopular policies, and carrying out repression.

To be sure, the Chinese state also employs repressive measures in a direct official capacity. The past decade has witnessed vastly increased expenditures on public security¹ and on monitoring and controlling information.² Alongside this, local authorities make use of a variety of techniques to reduce specific acts of non-compliance and protest. For instance, they sometimes put pressure on relatives to coerce residents to cave in to property expropriations,³ or alternatively they dole out money to buy acquiescence.⁴ Within this range of measures, “thugs-for-hire” are yet another important instrument in the authoritarian local state’s tool kit to forestall and repress resistance.

Juxtaposed “thugs-for-hire” against “relational repression,” it is evident that the state uses both “hard” and “soft” repression tactics against citizens. They can be differentiated on a few dimensions. While “thugs-for-hire” deploy threat of violence or violence as intimidating and coercive strategies, “relational repression” rests on social ties and human psychology. Further, “relational repression” is usually applied at earlier stages of contention episodes to persuade protesters to give up their activism.⁵ In contrast, “thugs-for-hire” are engaged at various stages of popular contention, from earlier stages as a preemptive strategy to intimidate protesters into giving up, during protests to demobilize contentious actions, as well as after contention as a form of revenge. Yet, both instruments converge as state repressive strategies outsourced to third parties: while “thugs-for-hire”

1. Yuhua Wang and Carl F. Minzner, “The Rise of the Security State,” *China Quarterly*, no. 222 (June 2015): 339–59; Yuhua Wang, “Empowering the Police: How the Chinese Communist Party Manages Its Coercive Leaders,” *China Quarterly*, no. 219 (2014): 625–48; Sheena Greitens, “Rethinking China’s Coercive Capacity: An Examination of PRC Domestic Security Spending, 1992–2012,” *China Quarterly*, no. 232 (July 2017).

2. Daniela Stockmann and Mary Gallagher, “Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 436–67.

3. Yanhua Deng and Kevin O’Brien, “Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters,” *China Quarterly*, no. 215 (September 2013): 533–52; Kevin O’Brien and Yanhua Deng, “The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties, and ‘Harmonious Demolition,’” *China Journal*, no. 74 (July 2015): 1–17.

4. Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, “The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China,” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 6 (2013): 1475–1508.

5. Deng and O’Brien, “Relational Repression in China,” 2.

relies on paid violent agents, “relational repression” depends on relatives, friends, and coworkers. Taken together, they demonstrate the resourcefulness of the Chinese state in engaging nonstate agents and utilizing informal ties to exert control over the society and repress the citizenry.

Thugs are coercive agents hired on a temporary or contract basis. They can be easily dismissed when the job is done and thus are more cost efficient than conventional coercive agents who are part of a government bureaucracy. Their use of violence is effective in extracting citizen’s compliance with orders, including orders imposed on local governments by the central authorities. Additionally, hiring thugs provides greater scope for local governments to evade responsibility for the violence used, allowing them to maintain a veneer of lawfulness in the eyes of higher authorities.

However, an agency problem arises when thugs use more violence than is necessary to get the job done. The government’s tactic is then likely to backfire and embolden victims’ resistance instead of suppressing it. Excessive violence may also incur a cost because the victims often know who gave the order even though the identities of the direct perpetrators are not known. While thugs-for-hire may be effective in the short run, their use has negative implications for state legitimacy in the long run.

“Thugs-for-hire” differ from other means of control in the following respects. First, the state deploys nonstate agents to carry out the control. These agents are distinct from the military or the police who are the formal state coercive agents. They are also different from the other nonstate agents deployed to bring pressure on resisters, such as relatives and coworkers.⁶ Second, because thugs have no relationship with the state unless hired by it, the relationship between the state and thugs is one of market transactions, either premised upon payment in cash or “in-kind” benefits. If it is payment in cash, it is no different from hiring hit men or “violent entrepreneurs,”⁷ as was the case in Russia during the 1990s, when many ex-KGB officers offered violent service to the state and to private individuals who were willing to pay to get dirty work done. If the service is paid in kind, a tacit bond exists between the two parties in which thugs and gangsters offer their service in exchange for the state’s “protection umbrellas” (*baohusan*) for their illegal criminal activities. This type of arrangement is found in China in organized crime in Chongqing⁸ and resembles the Mafiosi in Sicily.⁹ Third, when the state deploys third-party

6. Deng and O’Brien, “Relational Repression in China.”

7. Vadim Volkov, “Violent Entrepreneurship in Post-Communist Russia,” in *Beyond State Crisis? Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2002), 81–104.

8. Peng Wang, “The Rise of the Red Mafia in China: A Case Study of Organised Crime and Corruption in Chongqing,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16, no. 1 (2012): 49–73.

9. Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

thuggish violence, it is relinquishing its territorial monopoly of legitimate violence, which is essential in enforcing law and order and upholding justice.¹⁰ When private agents are authorized to use illegitimate violence to meet state objectives, it undermines state legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens.

TYOLOGY OF VIOLENT AGENTS

Various types of violence can be differentiated in terms of the nature of the agents and purposes of the violence used. As illustrated in table 1, state agents—namely, the police and military—deploy the most legitimate use of violence when they do it for the purpose of protecting borders and citizens. At the other end of the spectrum, in the lower right-hand quadrant, is violence used by private entities, such as mafias and other organized crime groups and private militias, for the private purposes of subduing opponents and protecting their own turf or material interests. The upper right-hand quadrant represents the realm of privatized state violence, when the state engages thugs, paramilitaries, militia groups, or vigilantes to fulfill state objectives. The engagement of such agents can take the form of providing weapons, personnel, logistics, intelligence, or financial sponsorship and refusing to quell the violent repressive activities of these groups.¹¹ The use of formal coercive force by the state to pursue private objectives (the lower left-hand quadrant) can be found in instances such as senior officials ordering the police to assassinate political opponents or their own private enemies or to silence citizens who want to reveal an official's personal corruption.¹²

Why do some states prefer using private agents to execute violent repression and to fight covert wars? In a study of regimes' use of militias in genocide, Alex Alvarez argues that the first obvious benefit of relying on a paramilitary group is deniability.¹³ Typically, governments in weak democracies and countries reliant on foreign aid from democracies are eager to maintain a veneer of lawfulness and accountability.¹⁴ Studies have found such evidence in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America.¹⁵

10. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

11. Philip G. Roesler, "Donor-Induced Democratization and the Privatization of State Violence in Kenya and Rwanda," *Comparative Politics* 37, no. 2 (2005): 207–27.

12. Outside China, in the high-profile case of the murder of a Mongolian model in Malaysia, it was alleged that senior government officials had ordered the police to kill her in order to silence the model, and state military equipment was employed in the process: Lindsay Murdoch, "Convicted Malaysia Cop Sirul Azhar Umar Breaks Silence about Death of Model Altantuya Shaariibuu," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 19, 2015.

13. Alex Alvarez, "Militias and Genocide," *War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes against Humanity* 2 (2006): 1–33.

14. Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 850–76.

15. Julie. Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Threaten Democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

Table 1. State vs. Private Agents and Purposes of Violence

Purpose	Nature of agent	
	State	Private
State	Police, military	State use of private agents, such as thugs, militias, and vigilantes to carry out violence for state purposes
Private	Officials' use of violence for private purposes	Mafias, organized crime groups

Source: Author's analysis.

While Chinese “thugs-for-hire” somewhat resemble Volkov’s concept of “violent entrepreneurs” in Russia, they are not entirely the same. When the rule of law broke down in Russia in the late 1980s and 1990s, private businesses could not function due to difficulties in enforcing contracts and resolving commercial disputes. To protect their commercial activities they hired “violent entrepreneurs” who were often ex-KGB officers and thus were disciplined and effective trained agents. They took advantage of the breakdown in the court system and law enforcement agencies to supply covert violence to protect businesses, enforce contracts, and force out rival companies. By providing *krysha*, a Russian concept denoting “roofs,” these entrepreneurs facilitated the smooth running of businesses. The idea dates back to Gambetta’s analysis of the emergence of the Sicilian mafia. Russia’s “violent entrepreneurs” and the Sicilian mafias most frequently fall into the lower right-hand quadrant in table 1, as they were mostly hired by private individuals to bring down business rivals or personal enemies. However, they were also sometimes hired by governments to deal with political dissidents or state enemies, in which case they belong in the upper right-hand quadrant.

“THUGS-FOR-HIRE” IN CHINA

The new information in this article is drawn primarily from ethnographic research from 2011 to 2014, during which I conducted a total of 135 semi-structured interviews in Beijing and cities and rural areas of Anhui, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Henan Provinces. My field sites included six streets (*jiedao*) and townships in Anhui Province, an “urban village” (*chengzhongcun*) in Henan Province, six villages and urban communities (*shequ*) in Sichuan Province, seven “urban villages” and urban communities in Henan Province, and a so-called petition village (*shangfangcun*) in Beijing, where I spoke to petitioners who had traveled from other parts of China to channel their grievances through the official petition system.

The majority of the interviewees were villagers in the city outskirts and urban residents who had been affected by land expropriation and housing demolition efforts spearheaded by local authorities. Some of them became activists who or-

ganized or participated in protests against the local governments' expropriations of their properties. Whenever feasible, I also interviewed Party cadres and government officials in the localities. In addition, I drew upon secondary literature on *chengguan* and on local governments' collection of taxes and fees.

The "thugs-for-hire" whom I will describe include hooligans, gangsters, and professionals such as security guards, who offer violence as a form of profit-making service. They provide services ranging from violent threats, surveillance, and harassment to beatings and murder. Like the Russian "violent entrepreneurs," Chinese "thugs-for-hire" use coercive force in their execution, but mostly for local governments, though sometimes they also hire themselves out to private businesses. But unlike their Russian counterparts, "thugs-for-hire" in China have not received any systematic military or security training.

The thugs are usually unemployed youngsters whom my interviewees referred to as ruffians (*xiao hunhun*) or hooligans (*liumang*). They are hired by local governments, said interviewees, to "manhandle villagers," "intimidate residents with vulgar language," "tear down billboards to disrupt business," and "loot stores." Such actions require no specific skills aside from physical strength and hooliganism. An interviewee from a village in Yunnan Province noted in 2012 that,

The thugs hired to do dirty work in this village are recruited from other villages or towns within the same region. They are relatively familiar with the area and speak the local dialect, yet they have an escape route if they get into trouble. The local authorities will never hire local villagers to beat up their own people.

When I pressed the interviewee on why the village authorities did not hire local villagers to be their agents, he responded,

Of course, they dared not do so. If the victims found out the neighbor's son had carried out intimidation and beating, the neighbor's family will be in trouble. Few locals would want to do the dirty work for fear of getting their own family members in trouble. Outsiders, however, have an advantage of not being recognizable to the locals under attack.

My interviewees said that sometime the thugs call themselves "patrol officers" (*xunfang renyuan*). Other times, they said they were "law enforcers [*zhifa renyuan*] in charge of implementing the local authorities' demolition directives, but they carried no official pass." They often wear "camouflage military uniforms" (*micaifu*) that provide them with a pseudo-military or pseudo-government security identity.

"Thugs-for-hire" are frequently deployed when local officials are mandated and put under great pressure by higher levels of government to achieve numerical

targets. Yet, they have to balance against another imperative, namely, to prevent public protests that reach the attention of the higher levels. These bureaucratic pressures are endemic among local authorities in China, from the municipal governments in charge of carrying out housing demolition projects to peri-urban and rural local authorities involved in land expropriation. In addition to being swift and effective, “thugs-for-hire” as a third-party coercive measure also allows greater scope for local authorities to evade responsibility for their actions. These governments most frequently resort to hiring thugs when implementing the following specific policies.

Land Expropriation and Housing Demolition

Local governments in China face bureaucratic pressure to generate economic activities that help raise revenues. The 1994 fiscal recentralization significantly reduced local governments’ share of revenue, while keeping their share of expenditures unchanged.¹⁶ Collection of land-sales revenue, which is not subject to sharing with the higher-level authorities, became an imperative for local governments,¹⁷ and it pushed local governments to expropriate land either to build industrial zones or to resell at a profit for commercial real estate.¹⁸

Yu Jianrong, a prominent researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has estimated that 90 percent of all demolition and relocation cases involve thug violence.¹⁹ Local governments face tight deadlines to complete urban development projects because the interest from bank loans and costs of unsold real estate properties increase over time. A land expropriation and urban development project stalls when a handful of households in a village or neighborhood refuse to vacate their properties. There are always some intransigent households who refuse to comply regardless of the level of compensation. These “nail households” (*dingzihu*), as they have come to be called, are particularly vexatious for local authorities. In these circumstances, strong-arm tactics are likely to be used to force compliance.

16. Vivienne Shue and Christine Wong, eds., *Paying for Progress in China: Public Finance, Human Welfare and Changing Patterns of Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2007).

17. Local governments here refer to county, township, and village authorities. Unlike value-added tax and other formal taxes, land-sales revenues collected by these municipal and local governments are not subject to sharing with the central and provincial governments. For more details, see Ran Tao, “The Issue of Land in China’s Urbanisation and Growth Model,” in *Deepening Reform for China’s Long-Term Growth and Development*, China Update Series (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2014).

18. Lynette H. Ong, *Prosper or Perish: Credit and Fiscal Systems in Rural China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

19. Jianrong Yu, “守住社会稳定的底线” [Upholding the baseline of society] (在北京律师协会的演讲, 北京财政部礼堂 [Speech delivered at Beijing Lawyers’ Association, Great Hall of the Ministry of Finance, Beijing], December 26, 2009), http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46d026af0102e5r3.html.

An urban community-level Communist Party secretary in Sichuan Province whom I interviewed in 2013 acknowledged the heavy pressure local cadres face in housing demolition:

Housing demolition [*chaiqian*] is a veto target [*yipiao fojue*] imposed by higher-level authorities. If the community government failed to get all the households to relocate by a certain date, we would be considered as having failed the task. We need to differentiate the “nail households” who just want to get a better bargain [*mantian yaojia*] from the nail households who are genuinely in need of help. We will take certain coercive measures [*qiangzhi shouduan*] against the former in order to get the job done.

On occasions where local officials expropriate land without approvals of higher-level governments,²⁰ the expropriations become illegal. In those cases, local officials’ inability to produce official eviction notices will encounter even fiercer resistance from villagers. Violence becomes an even more necessary means of gaining compliance.

Here is a case involving escalating violence related by a group interview with villagers in Yunnan Province in 2012 discussed escalating violence starting in 2010, when the villagers collectively resisted this type of illegal demolition:

The first measure taken [by village authorities who were party to the demolition project] was cutting off water and electricity supplies to homes. Then, they sent thugs to spray-paint our houses with intimidating words: “If you refuse to move, the house will be bulldozed while you are asleep!” and “Those who don’t vacate, watch out for your safety!”

Both threats were carried out. Some villagers found their homes bulldozed in the middle of the night. Others were beaten up:

At night, they drove trucks through the paddies and farms, destroying our crops and vegetables, killed our poultry, and fed our dogs poison.

They set fire to my courtyard, built with teak wood in the nineteenth century. Four generations of my family have lived in this traditional home. My life was spared only because I wasn’t at home at the time.” (A 76-year-old man who led the resistance against home demolition.)

20. The law states that county governments (a level above the township, and two levels above village authorities) must approve land expropriation projects because of the central government’s policy objective of protecting arable land areas for the purpose of food sufficiency. When land is expropriated illegally, grassroots officials can pocket a substantial proportion of the proceeds that would have otherwise gone to government coffers.

Those of us who submitted a petition letter were particularly targeted. The eldest daughter of one of the petition organizers was badly beaten by a bunch of thugs when she returned from work one night. She was left unconscious and had to be hospitalized for a few weeks.

On other occasions, the strategy of the thugs or the local government is to target the sources of income on which the villagers depend, rather than the villagers per se. In an “urban village” (*chengzhongcun*) in Henan Province where I conducted field research, most of the villagers were landlords who had built apartment buildings where their homes had stood after the expropriation of their farmland some two decades ago. Typically, they run small retail businesses on the ground floor, have their residence on the second story, and rent out the third and fourth stories to migrant workers. Thus, they had two sources of income: a business income and rental income from migrant workers. The local authorities wanted to demolish their buildings and uproot the entire “urban village” altogether to make room for a lucrative real estate development. An interviewee from the village in 2014 described what happened.

The local authorities sent thugs to loiter around our stores, intimidate our customers with vulgar language, and sometimes even to loot our businesses. They set up checkpoints at the entrances to the village manned by some fierce-looking and tattooed fellows to run ID checks on migrant workers, routinely harassing them by questioning whether they have overstayed and whether their jobs are legitimate. These fellows even imposed curfews to prevent any residents from entering the village after midnight. This was a major inconvenience for the migrant workers who work in restaurants and have shift jobs. Some of our tenants have decided to move out to avoid the constant harassment. The village authorities think they can get us to relocate by cutting off our income sources.

Not just local governments hire third-party agents to harass and physically attack citizens. Even the central government has condoned thuggish practices in order to be able to deny culpability under the watchful eyes of the international community. In preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo, tens of thousands of residents in both cities were forcibly evicted from their homes to make way for construction. While the world’s spotlight was on China’s “coming of age” as the host of these glamorous international events, thousands of citizens endured human rights violations.²¹ Housing rights advocates and other human rights activists were silenced through beatings, intimidation, and detention.

21. Amnesty International, “Standing Their Ground: Thousands Face Violent Eviction in China,” October 10, 2012, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/standing-their-ground-thousands-face-violent-eviction-in-china/>.

Collection of Rural Taxes and Fees

During the 1990s and early 2000s, rural county and township governments collected extra taxes and arbitrary fees to supplement their official budgets. Collection of revenue was also a criterion by which these grassroots governments' performance was evaluated by their superiors. These arbitrary exactions ranged from various agricultural surcharges to fines for violating the one-child policy, to education surcharges, and mandatory contributions toward local infrastructure building. They could reach as high as 30–40 percent of a farm household's total annual income.²² Thus, they became a frequent source of peasant discontent and protests before their abolition in the early 2000s by the Hu-Wen administration.²³

Not dissimilar to cases of housing demolition and land expropriation, gaining peasants' compliance to exorbitant payments was vexatious for local officials. Many village and township authorities lacked the capacity to collect taxes and fees during the 1990s and early 2000s. Peasants refused to pay because they saw the extractions as unjustifiably high and local government's actions as lacking legitimacy.²⁴ Consequently, local governments had to borrow the capacity of the thugs—in the forms of physical coercion and domineering aggressiveness (*baqi*)—to intimidate peasants into acquiescence.²⁵

Managing Urban Social Order

During the 1990s, restructuring of state-owned enterprises resulted in a large number of laid-off workers. In addition, an influx of migrant workers increased the size of “floating population” in the cities, posing challenges to social stability. In those circumstances, the *chengguan* post was created in 1996 to allow municipal governments to better preserve social order.²⁶

There are two types of *chengguan*, and their recruitment channels differ accordingly. The first are formal civil servants recruited through the civil service entrance exams. The second type are *xieguanyuan* (assistant management personnel), who are on temporary contracts and are recruited through various market channels, including private security and property management companies, sometimes without being subject to any selection criteria. Many of them are laid-off workers or retired soldiers who have received no formal training.²⁷ Formally, their jobs are to assist

22. John James Kennedy, “The Face of ‘Grassroots Democracy’ in Rural China: Real versus Cosmetic Elections,” *Asian Survey* 42, no. 3 (2002): 456–82; Ong, *Prosper or Perish*.

23. Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

24. Baifeng Chen, “两湖平原的乡村混混群体:结构与分层—以湖北G镇为例 [Village bullies in Lianghu plain: Structure and stratification; take G Town in Hubei Province as an example], 青年研究 [Youth Research], no. 1 (2010).

25. Ibid.

26. Emmanuel Caron, “Interactions between Chengguan and Street Vendors in Beijing,” *China Perspectives* 1 (2013): 17–28.

27. Human Rights Watch, “‘Beat Him, Take Everything Away’: Abuses by China’s *Chengguan* Para-Police,” Washington, DC, 2012, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/china0512ForUpload_1.pdf.

the formal city management enforcers since they are not qualified to enforce any laws. Yet, owing to insufficient personnel, they are informally deployed on the streets on a daily basis to carry out the functions of their formal counterparts.²⁸

The urban *chengguan* offices outsource this work to private security companies to help meet the demands of heavy workloads imposed on the offices by municipal authorities. The municipal governments are in turn put under pressure to maintain social stability in the cities by higher-level authorities.

Hoodlums, thugs, and even mafia types have made inroads into the private companies—and by extension—into the ranks of the *chengguan*.²⁹ They are notorious for using excessive force with impunity against unlicensed street vendors, beggars, and residents living in “illegal” buildings (*weizhang jianzu*). A Chinese commentator has described the privatization of *chengguan* responsibilities as the state’s hiring of “private militias” to deal with citizens.³⁰ Unscrupulous coercive behavior is officially encouraged by some city management agencies: a leaked training manual of the Beijing municipal *chengguan* agency revealed instructions for furtive behavior: “in dealing with the subject, take care to leave no blood on the face, no wounds on the body, and no one in the vicinity.”³¹

By allowing members of underground criminal groups to permeate the city management agencies as contracted *xieguan*, the criminals have been presented with safe opportunities to profitably carry out their illicit activities. In the name of safeguarding social stability, they extract money by blackmailing (*qiaozha*) and collecting “protection fees” (*shouqu baohufei*) from the poor and vulnerable.³² In effect, many *chengguan* agencies and, by extension, municipal governments have become “protection umbrellas” for thugs and underground criminal groups.

Intercepting Petitioners

A separate set of gangsters and private security companies are widely engaged by local governments to “intercept” (*jiefang*) petitioners who are traveling to lodge complaints with the central authority in Beijing. China’s petition (*shangfang*) sys-

28. Ibid.

29. Yefei Yuan, “‘城管外包’: 是创新 还是卸责? —聚焦城管改革中的‘业务外包’” [Outsourcing *chengguan*: Innovation or shirking responsibility?—focus on service outsourcing in *chengguan* reform], 中华建设 [China Construction Urban Management], no. 9 (2012): 6–9; “城管外包, 合法性‘先天不足’” [Outsourcing *chengguan*: Innate deficiency in legality]; “深圳宝安区‘城管外包’新模式破解城市管理难题” [*Chengguan* outsourcing in Shenzhen Bao’an district applies new model to solve issues in urban management], 中国政务信息网 [China Governance Information Network] 23 (June 2008); Austin Ramzy, “Above the Law? China’s Bully Law-Enforcement Officers,” *Time Magazine*, May 21, 2009.

30. Yuan, “‘城管外包’” [Outsourcing *chengguan*].

31. Dongfeng Zhang, “网友曝光城管‘打人不见血’教材” [Netizen exposes textbook on “beating without drawing blood”], 南方都市报 [Southern Metropolis Daily], July 22, 2009, http://epaper.oeeee.com/A/html/2009-04/22/content_767607.htm.

32. Human Rights Watch, “‘Beat Him, Take Everything Away’: Abuses by China’s *Chengguan* Para-Police”; Yuan, “‘城管外包’” [Outsourcing *chengguan*].

tem allows citizens to seek redress from the central authorities for corruption and misconduct of local officials. Although the central government intends for the system to serve as a gauge of local misconduct, paradoxically it also sets targets to ensure that the number of petitions does not spin out of control. The system punishes local officials, jeopardizing their career prospects, when they fail to maintain “social stability,” and the government measures this in part by how many complaints get registered. This encourages local officials to prevent disgruntled citizens from lodging complaints in Beijing.³³

A village Party secretary in Henan Province explained in 2014:

Petitions are a headache for grassroots governments. There are some villagers who are not only stubborn but are also impossible to please. You give them an inch; they want a yard from you. They think, “Babies who cry out loud get the mother’s milk [huiku de ying’er younaihe]!”

“Babies who cry out loud get the mother’s milk” is a popular adage in Chinese society that means the more noise one makes (*nao*), the more one is able to attract attention and sympathy from the authorities.

When I asked the Party secretary whether the village authority had intercepted petitioners, he told me,

Of course, we had to intercept petitioners. It will deal a big blow to our work performance if we let the disgruntled lodge petitions in Beijing. I have intercepted petitioners myself, by traveling to Beijing or ambushing them at the train station. We just hire some Beijing-based security companies to do it for us now.

While local governments could send their own officials to do the job, it is not cost-effective, given transport and lodging expenses. The job of “petition interceptors” is to deploy all necessary means to ensnare petitioners before they reach the central petition bureau in Beijing. According to reports, these hired agents regularly assault petitioners, detain them illegally in “black houses,” and then haul them back to the villages. There are also widespread reports of rapes and deaths of petitioners while in custody.³⁴ These black houses became prevalent after the introduction of the “petition ranking system” by the central government in 2004. This system ranked all provinces according to the number of “abnormal petition

33. Lianjiang Li, Mingxing Liu, and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003–2006,” *China Quarterly*, no. 210 (June 2012): 313–34.

34. For examples of media reports on this, see Andrew Jacobs, “Seeking Justice, Chinese Land in Secret Jails,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/09/world/asia/09jails.html>, and “Chinese Media Retreat after Reports of Unexpected ‘Black Jail’ Verdict,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2012; Zhi Long and Yipei Yang, “安元鼎: 北京截访“黑监狱”调查” [Anyuanding: An investigation of Beijing “black jails” for petition-stopping], *南方都市报* [Southern Metropolis Daily], September 24, 2010.

cases.” It was designed to put pressure on local governments to limit the number of registered petitions under their jurisdiction.³⁵ Hiring professional security guards to manhandle petitioners and incarcerating them in black houses are measures taken by local governments to meet the centrally set targets.

I conducted interviews in 2014 with activists in a village in Sichuan Province who had made repeated attempts to petition in Beijing and the physical abuses they have endured.

We started petitioning in Beijing against local government corruption since last year. On our first attempt eight months ago, a few villagers were detained on our train ride to Beijing. In the middle of the night, a few thugs dragged us out from the train cabin, covered our heads in gunnysacks, started beating us and intimidated us into giving up our petition. I guess the local government was tipped off.

But we did not give up. We tried petitioning again three months later, and this time with more careful planning we managed to reach Beijing without being intercepted. However, on our way to the petition office a group of thugs trailed us, again covered our heads in gunnysacks, tied us up, and shoved us into a mini-van. They drove for several hours to a small hostel in the outskirts of Beijing. We were held captive there for 67 days before we managed to escape by breaking a window when one of the guards went off duty.

The most highly publicized case involves a private security company called Anyuanding. The Beijing-based firm was founded by Zhang Jun, a native of Hebei Province, a leader of the militia in his village who moved to Beijing in the 1990s and initially took on various odd jobs. The profiles of the security personnel he employed were not much different from hooligans. The company made RMB 8.6 million in sales revenue in 2007. In the following year, the company established an “escort” department that specialized in handling petitioners for local governments. Though it was only one of ten departments in the company, the escort business proved to be very lucrative and drove the company’s gross revenue up to 21 million RMB in 2008.³⁶

The company was subject to a criminal investigation in 2010 that led to Zhang’s conviction and imprisonment. This came about when a dozen petitioners from various parts of the country who had been abused and illegally detained pleaded collectively to the media to expose their ordeals. The company’s background and its abuse of petitioners became the subject of extensive investigative journalism.³⁷

35. Li, Liu, and O’Brien, “Petitioning Beijing.”

36. Hai Lin and Yilong Zhang, “保安公司专职截访” [Security companies’ full-time petitioner-stoppers], 财经网 *Caijingwang*, September 13, 2010, <http://www.caijing.com.cn/2010-09-13/110519727.html>.

37. *Ibid.*; see also Long and Yang, “Anyuanding.”

Despite the prevalence of “black houses” that hold captive the Beijing-bound petitioners, the Chinese government flatly denied their existence when questioned by a foreign correspondent at a press briefing in 2009.³⁸ Privatized state violence and extralegal channels of detention enable local governments to carry out these egregious acts while allowing the central government to avoid condemnation by the international community. They serve the interests of both central and local authorities alike as tools of repression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

Backlash

One of the negative implications is the risk that such excessive violence can backfire. While it is difficult to predict exactly when violence will backfire, third-party violent repression may be counterproductive in emboldening resistance from victims. When violent repression results in serious casualties, particularly deaths, it is likely to spark mass protests and even riots.

In July 2011, in Anshun city, Guizhou Province, a disabled street vendor sur-named Deng was selling fruits at a crowded marketplace when the city’s *cheng-guan* conducted checks on illegal street vending. Deng’s leg had been amputated and he also suffered from a mental disability. The cart was his sole means of live-lihood. When a group of *chengguan* attempted to confiscate Deng’s fruit cart be-cause he did not own a license, Deng resisted and got into a tussle with them. He was eventually beaten to death by two *chengguan*. Eyewitnesses filmed the in-cident and posted a video on the Internet that went viral within a few hours. Thousands of Anshun residents poured into the streets to express their sympathy for the disabled street vendor and their rage at the local government’s thuggish behavior. The incident turned into a riot as citizens threw stones at the police and overturned government vehicles, and chaos ensued. Around 30 protestors and 10 police officers suffered injuries.³⁹

This is not an isolated incident. *Chengguan* have become the target of public grievances with their thuggish behavior and use of excessive force against defense-

38. Perhaps it was no coincidence that two foreign journalists, Melissa Chan of Al Jazeera and Chris Buckley of Reuters, who investigated these extralegal detention centers were expelled from the country and had their reporter permits revoked by Beijing: see Human Rights Watch, “An Alleyway in Hell,” November 2009, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/china1109webwcover_1.pdf; Al Jazeera, “Inside China’s Secret ‘Black Jails,’” March 13, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/asia-pacific/2012/03/201231343650917522.html>.

39. “Official Detained after Chinese Vendor’s Death Sparks Riot,” *Reuters*, July 28, 2011, <http://news.trust.org/item/20110728093400-a573k/>; Fotini Gan, “Chengguan in Guizhou Beat One-Legged Vendor to Death, Riots Ensue,” *Shanghaiist*, July 28, 2011, http://shanghaiist.com/2011/07/28/anshun_chengguang_beat_one-legged_ve.php.

less citizens. Dozens of large-scale incidents each year have been triggered by illegal use of brute force against citizens by *chengguan*.⁴⁰

In land expropriation and housing demolition cases, I have observed a similar dynamic of violent repression triggering mass activism. I interviewed a group of long-term petitioners who resisted illegal housing demolition in a village in Henan Province in 2014. In the interviews, I asked them why they had been so persistent with their activism. As a woman in her late 40s explained to me,

The village authorities started the demolition project in 2007, and that marked the first occasion we tried to file a petition with the central authorities. After so many years since then, the voices opposing demolition in the village have only gotten stronger, not weaker. It's not so much the inadequate monetary compensation that angers us. It's the violent oppression [*baoli yazhi*] that shows blatant disrespect for villagers' lives and rights that unite us [*ninjuli*] and provide the momentum [*dongli*] that keeps us going. Three years ago, they beat us so badly that my fingers were broken, a sister's shoulder was dislocated, and my husband nearly went blind from a major blow to his left eye. How could we possibly give up our struggle having endured so much suffering, physically and emotionally? How could you expect any human being to swallow this?

She and other activists in this village told me that they have not stopped trying to lodge petitions in Beijing. But, these days they have learned to do it more surreptitiously, breaking up into smaller groups and avoiding peak times, such as during national Party conferences, when security is on high alert in the capital city. Some of the activists have moved out of the village, living in rental properties elsewhere, to avoid coming under the village authorities' surveillance. Their activities have moved underground, so to speak. Violent abuses have not defeated them but instead have hardened their resolution to fight for justice.

Decline in Regime Legitimacy

Victims of violence often know who gave the order despite the obscurity of the attackers' identities, and such extralegal violence has led to cynicism and declining faith in state legitimacy:

In the process of demolition, a few stocky tattooed fellows came into our home, broke the door and windows, and dented the walls with a hammer. We tried to seek help by calling the local police station. After hearing our description, the police just hung up on us! You don't need to be a genius to figure out who gave the order. Whoever they are, they're acting in cahoots with the local police.

40. Lynette Ong, "Reports of Social Unrest: Basic Characteristics, Trends and Patterns, 2003–12," in *Handbook of the Politics of China*, ed. David S. G. Goodman (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2015), 345–60.

Another interviewee observed that

the local officials are worse than the Japanese soldiers. The Japanese might steal your chickens, but they wouldn't evict you from your homes! . . . So much for the "people's government" [*renmin zhengfu*]. None of its actions is in the interest of the people. With the Japanese, as long as you didn't resist them, they wouldn't try to decimate you, whereas the people's government takes your land away, demolishes your house and makes you homeless. . . . This bunch of Communist bandits cheat and swindle the people! The Communist Party is far worse than the Nationalist Party.

My interviewees who were long-term petitioners renting space in the "petition village" in Beijing had carried high hopes with them when they first landed in the capital city. The dichotomous perception of "benign central government" versus "corrupt or malign local authorities" deeply entrenched within the Chinese society was on full display. However, over time, as they experienced their grievances being ignored by the central authority, and worse still, their attempt to reach out to the center inflicted even more harm like being detained illegally at black houses, their dichotomous frame of the multilevel government collapses into one approximating their perception of local authorities.

In 2014 I interviewed a couple in their late 50s from Hebei Province who had been living on the streets in Beijing for the past 18 years. They had gone to the capital in the early 1990s to lodge a complaint against forced abortion imposed by the local government. They left their only son in the home village when they came. After lodging the complaint with the central petition bureau, the central government tipped off the local authorities of their presence in Beijing. The local government threatened to harm their son if they refused to give up their petition. Before they decided to return to the village, they heard the news that their son had been beaten up and hospitalized and had died shortly after. From then on, they decided to stay in Beijing for fear of retribution by the local government if they returned to their home village: "We carry no hope [*meiyou qiwang*] for the local or central government. They are all the same—all the crows are equally black [*tianxia wuya yibanhei*]!"

The stories I have collected corroborate those of other scholars. Lianjiang Li writes that petitioning in Beijing becomes "a moment of truth" for those who have participated in it. Citizens who have had experience channeling their grievances through the center-endorsed petitioning system "have seen through the central government's duplicity" of sanctioning citizen's lodging claims, on the one hand, and tacitly approving local government's crackdowns, on the other.⁴¹

41. Lianjiang Li, "Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside," *Comparative Politics* 40, no. 2 (2008): 209–26. Li's survey results show that regardless of a petition's outcome, petitioners who had been to Beijing were 31 percent less likely to agree that the center truly cared about farmers than those who had not, 41 percent less likely to agree that the center welcomed farmers to petition, and 46.5 percent less likely to agree that petitioning Beijing was very useful.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the existing literature on social control and state repression in China by underlining the pervasive use of thugs and gangsters by the local governments to meet their objectives. Third-party agents who could be hired to do the job only when needed are less costly to the state compared to permanent coercive agents. Violence used by the third-party agents is an effective means of coercing citizens and acquiring their compliance to unpopular policies. This enables local governments to complete challenging tasks mandated and imposed by higher-level authority, the chief among which is the goal to preserve social stability. At the same time, it allows the local authorities to evade responsibility for their illegal violent actions by distancing themselves from the perpetrators.

Despite its benefits to officials, “thugs-for-hire” can be costly to the regime, as there is great scope for excessive use of violence, which risks backfiring, leading to declining local-state legitimacy. Citizens who are victims of violent acts are more often than not cognizant of the masterminds behind the violence. Declining local-state legitimacy often means local governments face greater challenges when implementing policies, which may induce increased use of coercive force to get the job done: use of violence can beget more violence. The citizens who have endured brutal treatment when they sought to bring their grievances to Beijing often see through the central government’s duplicity. Therefore, the legitimacy of the Communist state suffers as a whole. This is a slippery slope for the Chinese regime.