Maintaining Social Stability without Solving Problems: Emotional Repression in the Chinese Petition System

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Abstract

What role do emotions play in state repression? Building upon ethnographic observation in one Beijing petition bureau, this paper explores the emotional labour performed by grassroots officials to demobilize social dissent. The petition system serves as an official channel through which the Chinese government receives complaints and grievances from citizens. Notwithstanding its institutional inefficiency in addressing petitioners' requirements, this system plays a critical role in maintaining social stability. I investigate the process by which frontline petition officials manage petitions. I argue that channelling petitioners' emotions has become one of these officials' core functions. Petition officials have developed three types of emotional strategies – emotional defusing, emotional constraint and emotional reshaping – to absorb petitioners' complaints. This study of emotional repression offers a fresh perspective on the affective dimension of contentious politics and also contributes to the theoretical discussion on how authoritarian regimes deal with dissent.

Keywords: emotional labour; emotional repression; authoritarian regime; China; state repression

How does the state use emotional labour to demobilize dissent and what role do emotions play in authoritarian domination? Existing literature has shown that politics and emotions have always gone hand in hand, whether it be in the everyday activities of political parties[1] or in the protest repertoires of activists.[2] However, in the study of authoritarian politics, although much attention has been paid to the emotional strategies of protest participants, the affective dimension of state repression is still underexplored. Few case studies explore whether the state strategically manipulates the public's emotions to demobilize social protest and how the emotion work of players other than protesters influences contentious engagement.

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1 Capelos 2013; Ost 2004; Richard 2007.

2 Gould 2009; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000; Yang, Guobin 2000; Jasper 2011.

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This article explores these issues by investigating the Chinese petition system (*xinfang* 信访). The petition system is a typical institutional arrangement used by authoritarian governments to receive the complaints and grievances of citizens.[3] In China, *xinfang* was nationally designed to help the state hear and resolve social conflicts.[4] Petitioners using this system do so with the expectation that their voices will be heard by the government and action taken. I argue that channelling citizens' emotions has become an internal function of the *xinfang* system, which relies on the emotional labour of grassroots petition officials to neutralize public dissent and maintain social stability.

My focus on the emotional function of the petition system is prompted by a classic puzzle: how can an authoritarian political institution maintain political stability when it cannot resolve the grievances that are presented to it? Although the petition system has been regarded by scholars as an important deliberative practice that upholds the Chinese authoritarian regime,[5] it is unable to efficiently resolve petitioners' problems.[6] How is it, then, that the petition system still plays an irreplaceable role in maintaining the stability of the Chinese state?

In other words, how can this system preserve stability without resolving actual problems? Anecdotal accounts highlight that rather than solving petitioners' problems, the *xinfang* system helps the state to collect information from the public, control potential protests, build citizens' trust and supervise local cadres.[7] However, these explanations emphasize the multi-functionality of the petition system for the state but fail to address the subjective dimension of contention: petitioners come to *xinfang* bureaus not only with their complaints and grievances but also with their frustrations, anger, alienation and despair; if their problems remain unresolved, those emotions will not disperse by themselves. Emotions are not merely an incidental characteristic but the motivating force of protest.[8] How can an inefficient problem-solving system address the dissatisfied petitioners and their negative emotions? Much evidence has shown that the fundamental function of the petition system is to allow the Chinese authoritarian state to deal with social grievances in a non-coercive way.[9] I argue, however, that frontline emotion work is a neglected factor that explains how governments can prevent protesters from resorting to aggressive protest when their appeals are not satisfactorily addressed through official channels.

In this article, I focus on a highly consequential but usually overlooked group of frontline bureaucrats: grassroots petition officials. I argue that these officials, without the necessary administrative resources to resolve citizens' problems and without enough discretion to either award concessions or conduct repression,

3 Dimitrov 2014.
4 Minzner 2006.
5 Cai 2008; He and Warren 2011; Fu and Distelhorst 2018.
6 Chen, Jing 2016; Heurlin 2016; Wong and Peng 2015.
7 Chen, Xi 2014; Cheng 2013; Luehrmann 2003; Chen, Jing 2016; Heurlin 2016; Minzner 2006.
8 Jasper 1998; 2011; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000.
9 Distelhorst 2015; Wong and Peng 2015, Chen, Xi 2014.

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perform emotional labour to defuse social dissent. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I identify three strategies of emotional repression: (1) emotional defusing, which is aimed at comforting and pacifying petitioners by disarming their intense emotions; (2) emotional constraint, which utilizes the emotional ties formed in the *xinfang* system to control petitioners' behaviour; and (3) emotional shaping, which goes beyond passively responding to petitioners' anger and actually attempts to make petitioners appreciate the state's kindness and feel guilty about their protests. By exploring the coping strategies employed by petition officials, I shed light on the politicized emotional labour inscribed in the Chinese petition system, which illustrates the affective dimension of authoritarian domination.

Literature Review

Theorists argue that emotions are intimately involved in social movements and collective behaviour by providing social actors with meaning, motivation, resources and goals.[10] Two streams of empirical studies contribute to our understanding of the role of emotions in contentious politics. The first stream explores how the mobilization and framing of contention are proceeded by certain types of emotional experiences such as anger, hate, compassion, shame or hope.[11] The second stream, mostly influenced by Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotion management, focuses more on the concrete activities or strategies used by protest organizers to mobilize the public or strengthen inner solidary.[12]

The second stream, where I posit my research, has paid more attention to protesters than to repressors. If protest is imbued with emotion, is repression? Given that experienced organizers use emotion work to arouse people's outrage and eliminate participants' fear, I wonder if authorities also adopt similar strategies to neutralize this emotional mobilization.[13] Recently, the literature on China's repression, inspired by the shift from studying state-based coercive repression to exploring non-coercive forms of protest control, has begun to address this topic.[14] For example, Yanhua Deng and Kevin O'Brien argue that Chinese local officials employ relational repression to demobilize protesters. This type of "soft" repression amounts to relying on relatives, friends and native-place connections to defuse popular action.[15] Chin Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang find that grassroots officials manage protesters' emotions by "making friends" and "talking love" with them.[16]

10 Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000; Yang, Guobin 2000; Jasper 1998; 2011.
11 Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000.
12 Goodwin and Pfaff 2001; Gould 2009; Jasper 2011; Perry 2002.
13 Martin 2007.
14 Earl 2011; Ferree 2004.
15 Deng and O'Brien 2013; O'Brien and Deng 2017. The term "soft" is used here to highlight the fact that this type of repression is operated with little physical coercion and no intent to cause bodily harm.
16 Lee and Zhang 2013, 1487.

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These findings show that Chinese grassroots officials intentionally target citizens' emotional experience and psychological states to maintain social stability. Yet, two questions remain unanswered. First, while previous studies have found some control strategies related to emotions, they lack a systematic and detailed analysis of the actors, conditions, processes and consequences of this control. We know little about whether the emotional control in grassroots China is adopted occasionally by certain cadres or if it is frequently used by all officials. Second, current emotion studies in politics, as criticized by David Ost, are limited by the same "rationality–emotionality" dualism they attempt to challenge: official ("normal") politics understandable in the language of interests and rationality, versus movement ("abnormal") politics where emotions remain key.[17] We may keep looking for different emotion-control strategies sporadically appearing in various grassroots contentious contexts but questions remain about how so-called emotional control can be related to normal institutions or cultural traditions in Chinese politics. In general, we need to rethink what theoretical contribution emotion studies could make to our understanding of state repression and authoritarian regimes.

To fill the gaps in the current literature, I put petition officials and their emotional labour as the central focus of this paper. I identify petition officials from within the general category of local officials based on two considerations. The first is empirical fact. In the Chinese petition system, although different types of officials need to collaborate when addressing a petition case, they have different motivations and usually have control over different resources. Previous research on the Chinese petition system has placed too much focus on local officials whose careers are determined by the cadre-evaluation system.[18] Although scholars often take the cadre-evaluation system as a key variable to explain the decision-making process of Chinese officials, the careers of grassroots petition officials are usually less influenced by this evaluation mechanism because these officials have neither decision-making authority nor any opportunity for promotion; they are lowlier than the local governors who have a higher degree of discretion to deploy the police or make concessions.[19] Narrowing the focus down to petition officials will provide a better understanding of how grassroots officials deal with protestors even though they lack administrative power and have little hope of moving up the hierarchy.

The second consideration behind narrowing the focus to petition officials is more theoretical. I argue that the routine work of grassroots petition officials, including their daily coping strategies, should also be considered as the microfoundation underlying China's petition governance. Previous research has emphasized the critical role of grassroots bureaucrats for policy implementation

17 Ost 2004.
18 Ahlers and Schubert 2015; Mei and Pearson 2014; Wang 2015.
19 Chen, Xi 2014, 96.

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and state governance.[20] However, petition officials are the most critical group of bureaucrats implementing the Chinese *xinfang* institution. By focusing on petition officials, we can systematically observe the concrete working conditions shaping frontline emotional control. Considering that the petition system is an official institutional arrangement in China as well as in many other authoritarian regimes, studying the profession created by this system also provides a better understanding of the emotional dimension of "normal" authoritarian politics.[21]

Methods

Between 2012 and 2013, I spent four months conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the petition bureau of one district government in Beijing. I obtained permission to do the fieldwork as an intern. This study draws from casual conversations and observations of how petition officials interacted with petitioners in the designated reception hall. Additionally, I formally interviewed all 15 officials working in this *xinfang* bureau, asking them to reflect on their daily work and to share their experiences of efficiently controlling situations.[22] During my internship, I sometimes helped new petitioners fill out their petition forms. After they had learned that I was a researcher, some petitioners came to me to complain about how they had been treated by petition officials and governments. Taking advantage of these occasions, I conducted brief interviews with eight of these petitioners. Interning in the *xinfang* bureau also provided me with access to internal publications, such as *People's Xinfang* (*Renmin xinfang* 人民信访). To check the generality of my observations of the Beijing bureau, I conducted interviews with 11 petition officials working in Shandong and Jiangsu provinces.

The Emotional Labour of Petition Reception

In the petition system, the initial work of dealing with petitioners is called petition reception (*jiefang* 接访), which is the primary duty of petition officials. Petitioners always come to the *xinfang* hall to express their grievances. There, trained petition officials explain the related laws and regulations to the petitioners and allow them to give vent to their emotions in the hope of preventing them from adopting more aggressive actions.

This duty is highlighted in an article published in the official journal of the petition system, *People's Xinfang*, which clearly illustrates the emotional dimension of the Chinese petition system:

> Xinfang officials should display a cordial attitude. [They should] not only work with [their own] emotions and try to move petitioners but also control their own emotions to remain calm. In particular, working with emotions means mentally adjoining the masses, caring for and serving the masses. Controlling one's own emotions is to carefully observe petitioners' sentiments, to

20 Lee and Zhang 2013; Lipsky 2010; Seim 2017.
21 Dimitrov 2014.
22 In this paper, I use pseudonyms to protect the interviewees.

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feel the feelings of the masses and yet to keep a cool head at the same time. Balancing working with emotions and controlling one's own emotions is a mark of mature petition reception work.[23]

Hochschild reveals the invasion of capitalism into private emotions and posits that emotions could be studied as an object of management or control. She defines the concept of emotional labour as something which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."[24] Borrowing from this concept, front-line petition reception can be considered as the emotional labour of the party-state. On the one hand, petition officials must deal with the emotions of petitioners. As one petition official explained:

As long as the petitioner leaves the petition office in a peaceful mood, we're done. No matter what he's doing here … if he is going to do something aggressive or to drink pesticide [i.e. commit suicide], there would be big trouble. We could not even handle that situation. The leader would also hold us accountable.[25]

To maintain social order and prevent social conflict, petition officials need to comfort petitioners and emotionally move them in order to influence their behaviour. However, petition officials know that they do not have resources to resolve petitioners' grievances immediately. No matter what final solution will be offered by the leadership, the primary goal of petition reception is to neutralize petitioners' intense emotions. In this sense, petition reception is the conduit through which citizens' negative emotions are channelled into the bureaucratic machine.

On the other hand, petition officials also need to manage their own feelings. As the embodiment of the state, they need to express patience, kindness and, sometimes, sympathy.[26] The primary feeling rule in the petition hall is that officials can never be rude to petitioners no matter what they are suffering from because their behaviour will affect the presentation of the state image. The party-state believes that the action of petitioning represents citizens' trust in the government. This is because those with grievances come to ask higher-level governments for help instead of protesting against them.[27] During the reception process, petition officials are required to maintain and even enhance the valued trust that citizens have in their government; the role they should play is one that embodies the power the state has to meet petitioners' demands and provide justice. It is necessary for the government to pacify emotional petitioners if it is to avoid large-scale conflict. As one petition official put it:

Why does the state need *xinfang* work? … [the fact that] these petitioners have a place to talk and a channel through which to express their feelings is useful for maintaining social stability. It is useful because a person without any hope may pursue extreme actions. This *xinfang* bureau

23 *Renmin xinfang* 06(2012), 13 (internal document).
24 Hochschild 2012, 7.
25 Fieldnote No. 20121110.
26 Experienced officials also adopt "poker faces" and a cold tone to daunt protesters while being aware of the risk that more experienced petitioners might use recording devices when talking with petitioner officers.
27 Chen, Jing 2016, 2.

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offers a place for him and provides someone to listen to him. Since there is someone listening to him, it is less likely that he will think about doing something dangerous [i.e. commit suicide].[28]

Providing a space for petitioners' emotional release is a hidden function of the grassroots petition agencies. Without the resources or authority to meet petitioners' demands, petition officials must try their best to cope with petitioners' indignation or sadness.

But, obviously, petitioners will not accept mere "symbolic satisfaction" every time.[29] They will still feel angry, and sometimes they lose patience and abuse or even beat up officials. However, the officials must try to endure this. One training brief explains that petitioners with grievances need to be respected because they need to release their emotions and they need someone to listen to them. It advises that "petition officials should defuse petitioners' negative emotions to comfort them: even if they are scolded or beaten, officials should bear it and swallow the wrongs."[30]

However, this ideological preaching is not sufficient to assuage the dissatisfaction felt by the petition officials. The routinized interactions with petitioners burn officials out. The chief of the petition bureau I observed complained:

Petitioners complain about us. They tell our supervisors that we don't have a good attitude. The administrative complaint departments will accuse us, but who would accuse these rude petitioners? It is unfair. We have no power to solve problems, and it is not our [department's] responsibility to solve them. They cannot always ask us to be the scapegoats. We are also human beings. Why should we be scolded by others?[31]

Although many officials constantly complain about their work difficulties, the pressures of the stability-maintenance aspect of the petition officials' work places an exceptional emotional burden on them. Hochschild understands emotional labour to be the commodification of private emotions sold for a profit in a capitalistic economy; however, the emotional labour of the Chinese petition system serves a political and not an economic aim, that of maintaining social stability.[32]

Although maintaining stability can be understood as the primary principle guiding frontline petition work, the emotional labour of petition officials is also shaped by other concrete structural factors. Frontline governance is usually undertaken by a series of laterally interacting institutions and influenced by downward pressure from bureaucratic authorities.[33] The horizontality and the verticality of petition work not only distinguish petition officials from other Party cadres but also create the narrow space in which certain strategies of emotion control are developed.

One critical pressure is exerted from above by the decision-makers in the local governments. *Xinfang* work is deemed to be "leader" work.[34] This means that

28 Interview with petition official Zhang, Beijing, 23 November 2012.
29 Cheng 2013.
30 *Renmin xinfang* 06(2012), 12 (internal document).
31 Interview with head of petition bureau, Beijing, 23 November 2012.
32 Hochschild 2012; Tsang 2017.
33 Lipsky 2010; Seim 2017.
34 Chen, Xi 2014, 97.

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heads of local governments have the authority to decide whether a petitioner will receive a concession from the related agency or repression from the police. Because *xinfang* work is heavily dependent on the opinions of local leaders, a change in leadership and the subsequent change in attitude to petitioners makes grassroots petition officials anxious about how to respond appropriately to petitioners' requests.

As well as addressing the top-down pressures from the leadership, petition officials also need to work horizontally with the police, who are responsible for keeping order in the reception hall. During my fieldwork, I witnessed a collective petition incident during which a group of unpaid workers blocked the front gate to a government building to protest about their unpaid wages. Policemen took them to the petition bureau, which was located at the back gate of the building, and warned them that they could voice their discontent only inside the petition hall. An official told me that about ten more plainclothes policemen were waiting outside the hall to ensure that the protesters would not return to the front gate. In such ways, the state's coercive power ensures that the smooth operation of the petition reception office will not be interrupted by aggressive protests. The policing of protest actions draws a clear boundary that forces protesters to choose an official channel through which to express their discontent. During my internship, I observed that because many petitioners persist with their petitions for many years, they become very familiar to and with the local policemen. There is often an unwritten understanding between the experienced petitioners and the regular policemen: as long as the petitioners do not make trouble during a politically sensitive period, such as during a national congress conference or on national holidays, they are allowed access to the petition bureau to vent their frustrations. After the police leave these angry petitioners inside the petition bureau, the petition officials then have to address their grievances. And yet, even though the policemen are supposed to coordinate with petition officials, the petition officials do not have the authority to call or dispatch the police.

These vertical forces and horizontal interactions not only dictate the working conditions of petition officials but also lead to persistent local petitioning. The changes in leadership and the bargaining characteristic of the petition system motivate some petitioners to keep on petitioning even though, supposedly, their cases have received a final decision.[35] Petitioners who visit petition offices many times are called "repeat petitioners" by petition officials. As the inefficiencies of the system and the opaque decision-making processes work to turn new petitioners into repeat petitioners, the grassroots petition officials find that their main duties revolve around dealing with repeat petitions and pacifying repeat petitioners.

During my four-month fieldwork, I observed a total of 140 petition cases, of which 112 cases were repeat petitions. In the *xinfang* bureau where I worked

35 Li, Liu and O'Brien 2012.

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as an intern, a lack of administrative resources for solving petitioners' problems meant that petition officials' duties included slowing down the official procedures and using persuasion to make petitioners' protests controllable. However, the lengthy petition process and frustrating responses from the government sorely try the petitioners' patience and their pent-up emotions are sometimes vented in the petition bureau's hall. In such situations, grassroots petition officials have to fully deploy their emotional labour. Long-time practices have led them to develop a set of skills and coping mechanisms to control the petitioners. Some of these strategies have been generalized by the central government and have become official models. In the next part, I will provide a brief typology of these strategies, showing how grassroots petition officials carry out their emotion work.

Frontline Strategies for Emotional Repression

Based on my fieldwork, I identify three types of strategies in which emotions play a critical role when controlling petitioners: (1) emotional defusing, (2) emotional constraint and (3) emotional reshaping. From the basic relief that comes with airing complaints to the temporary expropriation of petitioners' friendship to the fundamental transformation of petitioners' affective state, these various strategies show how state power deals with citizens' (negative) affect.

Emotional defusing

Emotional defusing means that petition officials pacify the powder-keg emotions exhibited by petitioners. Volatile emotions such as indignation, sadness and even desperation have great mobilization value because they can transform into intense antagonistic conflicts. Grievances become grievances only because their emotional dimension is experienced strongly.[36] Whereas leaders of collective contention intend to motivate such emotions for mass mobilization, the government's concern is how to defuse them.[37] Although allowing protesters to vent their negative emotions acts as a safety valve-type defusing method, transforming their affective state is more critical. Previous literature has found that local cadres have developed several persuasive strategies, including fact clarification, policy explanation and legal education.[38] In addition, from my interviews, I identify two previously unexplored skills used by petition officials to defuse petitioners' emotions: "elude then guide" (*bi yu yin* 避与引) and "confuse and conceal" (*rao yu cang* 绕与藏).

Grassroots officials use the term "elude then guide" to refer to the first step of emotional defusing, which is to restructure the discourse of petitioners.

36 Jasper 1997, 126.
37 Gould 2009.
38 Chen, Xi 2014, 80–83.

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According to one of my interviewees, the term means that "first you must avoid the petitioner's sharpness (*bi qi fengman* 避其锋芒) and then steer the conversation round to your logic."[39] This is a time-tested tactic for coping with emotional petitioners. Petitioners, especially newcomers, tend to present their grievances in a very emotional way. Petition officials believe that this has two implications. The first is that in order to make their grievance sound more pitiable and their demands more reasonable, petitioners use exaggeration, metaphors or analogies when presenting their statements. Some petitioners may embellish their petitions with unrelated private matters while at the same time hide some facts that work against their demands.[40] The second issue is that in order to make officials feel guilty enough to pay more attention to their cases, some petitioners do not talk about their cases when they meet the officials. Instead, they focus on outlining the negative work attitudes of officials, saying that it is not as positive as they expected.

Faced with petitioners using these tactics, petition officials employ their own coping mechanisms. "Elude" means "do not talk with an angry man." Petition officials know that some petitioners use vexatious expressions to deliberately provoke the officials. If the officials lose their patience and become rude, the power relations would be changed and the officials would transgress their professional codes of conduct, which require them to be patient and friendly. A female official told me:

> Truth needs not many words. Some people come here for the chance to have their voices heard. They yell at us no matter whether [or not] their demands are reasonable. I don't like talking to them … Some of them quarrel with everyone here every time. They have [already] gone to the national *xinfang* bureau and other high-level bureaus. I feel they are frauds. They always avoid talking about their cases and blame our attitudes.[41]

The "elude" tactic – that is, avoiding being drawn into an argument – is followed up by the "guide" tactic, which an experienced official described in the following way:

> Most of the time, you don't need to listen to him. You just let him talk. I think at the beginning he doesn't know what he himself is saying. After the emotional grumble, you could begin to ask him: "What do you need?" Step by step, you try to unravel his problems … They just tell you the bits that are to their advantage and they hide the truth. You must ask them piece by piece.[42]

Asking "step by step" or "piece by piece" is the "guiding" tactic. Petition officials need to reorganize petitioners' statements according to the government's position. Unrelated personal circumstances and emotional exaggerations need to be excluded, as explained by an official:

> Some people come here with intense emotions. They always add some "condiments" when presenting their cases. They tell us that they are very poor and tragic. But we must tell them the regulations and policies … The petitioners think they are right; they believe what they say is the truth. But after listening to them, we usually don't think so; the truth is not like what

39 Interview with petition official Li, Beijing, 13 November 2012.
40 For example, to make themselves seem more pitiable, some petitioners talk about the suffering in their life, which has no relevance to their petition issues.
41 Interview with petition official Bai, Beijing, 13 November 2012.
42 Interview with petition official Zhang, Beijing, 20 November 2012.

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they tell us. We must clarify their cases again. For example, some cases are related to the minimum subsistence guarantee system. If someone came here to say that he was poor and he wanted to get the money, we have to explain the policies and official procedures to him. We can sympathize with them, but we can only solve their problems according to procedures. We have to explain to him which part of his demand is reasonable and warn him not to mention the unreasonable part. First, second, third … we tell him all the points and make him believe that we are trying to help him rather than hassle him.[43]

This quotation shows that "guiding" is essentially a *de-emotionalizing* and *depersonalizing* process which is aimed at making personal grievances fit or conform with abstract policies. Thus, "elude then guide" involves a stripping away of the emotional parts that are deemed to be a threat to social stability.

The second defusing strategy, "confuse and conceal," is also widely used. Evidence shows that some petitioners have a deep understanding of government policies and can use them skilfully.[44] The "elude and guide" strategy is not appropriate for such petitioners, especially those whose cases stem from the mistakes of local governments. Wary of taking responsibility and facing huge compensation claims and even investigation by higher-level authorities, local governments look for other solutions rather than follow legal procedures. Here, "confuse and conceal" needs to be used. This is a kind of procrastination strategy aimed at shifting or fuzzying up the hostile sentiments petitioners harbour towards the local government.

During my fieldwork, I met a petitioner who had suffered huge financial losses because of Beijing's land-acquisition policy. In this case, the petitioner's house was torn down by the government and she was not satisfied with the amount of compensation provided. She had been petitioning for more than seven years. She complained to me about the officials' attitudes towards her case:

Our petition is to make the government understand that we want to clarify the case with them. I ask them to sit and talk with us. Give us a chance to express our opinions. Let us make this case clear. But now they don't do that. My case is obviously a contractual issue, but they don't talk about the contract. Instead they talk about something else to cover it up. You tell me, how we could control our anger?[45]

Talking about something else to avoid discussing the contentious issue is the essence of "confuse and conceal." The petitioner was convinced that the government was responsible for her loss and that there were laws and policies she could turn to in order to obtain proper compensation. She believed her demand was legally reasonable. The evidentiary materials she offered to the *xinfang* bureau included many copies of law texts as she believed that the law provided the strongest weapon for her to protest against the government. It was her understanding of and emphasis on the rule of law and policies that prevented the officials from employing the "guide" strategy. Instead, the local leader switched to a new tactic: "negotiation and coordination" (*xietiao jiejue* 协调解决). Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang describe these manoeuvres as "legal-bureaucratic games."

43 Interview with petition official Wang, Beijing, 18 January 2013.
44 O'Brien and Li 2006.
45 Interview with petitioner Li, Beijing, 18 January 2013.

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Officials use such procedural games to channel conflicts in a certain way and buy local governments time and maintain stability.[46] In order to help the local government play this game, petition officials blur the issue of original legal responsibility and avoid petitioners' detailed attribution of liability when they accept petitions. Specifically, officials need to avoid words such as "laws," "policies" and "regulations," all of which are used for emphasis by petitioners, because these words may lead the case in the wrong direction. This cautiousness can be understood as concealing the original logic of the petitioners and replacing it with the logic of the government. For example, in the above case, the government offered to give five million yuan to the petitioner in the form of an emergency hardship fund. Here, the underlying logic is that the government will not admit its mistakes but will show its humanitarian spirit. According to the relevant contract, the petitioner should have been compensated with 13 million yuan. Not surprisingly, the petitioner would not accept an 8 million yuan difference, so she refused the government's proposed solution. She told me:

> My biggest dissatisfaction is that the government knows it is at fault, but [won't admit it.] Now it wants to give me [only] 5 million. It is illegal. The original legal case becomes illegal. And they are making it more and more illegal. They told us that if we were badly off, I should take this money. But I think that even if I took this money, I would continue petitioning according to the laws; I mean, in the legal way.[47]

It appeared that after seven years, the case had reached a deadlock. Yet, the petitioner was still going to the petition bureau to seek a solution to her problem. Until the government leader offered a new solution, the petition officials would no doubt continue to use the "confuse and conceal" strategy to buy time for the local government. The petitioner complained to me:

> What worries me most is that the government always lets me wait, wait for half a year. After a six-month wait, there is still nothing. Some officials are bad. To clarify, if I attempted to talk about the contract, I am sure, they would not talk about it. They are always trying to talk about something else. I don't come here to have a happy chat. They keep talking about irrelevant issues. Someone even [tried to] persuade me to go on a trip because he thought I was in a bad mood.[48]

As the leader had not offered a new solution and the discussions could not be brought back to the old legal logic, the petition officials attempted to talk about various irrelevant matters to confuse the petitioner. They could not risk infuriating her by telling her the truth; at the same time, they had to try to lessen her desperation. That is why one official suggested to the petitioner that she should go on a trip to boost her spirits. Although this tactic has no benefit for problem solving, it does buy time and wear down the petitioner's will. The petitioner lamented:

> I tell you the truth, I kept asking for compensation in a legal way for a long time. But look what a big loss I am suffering now. Is my *xinfang* petition useful? No! Seven years have been wasted. Do you know how old I am now? I can never go back to the past. So I think I will write a letter

46 Chuang 2014; Lee and Zhang 2013.
47 Interview with petitioner Li, Beijing, 1 November 2012.
48 Ibid.

to the government leader. As long as my problem can be solved, everything will be OK. I will listen to their suggestions. We have given in step by step.[49]

The petitioner had lost her original passion; her initial indignation had been eroded by the repeated fruitless interactions with officials. Although procrastination has been noted as a special strategy used by the Chinese state, there is little understanding about how it operates and to what extent it is effective.[50] The "confuse and conceal" strategy described above illustrates the micro processes used by petition officials to delay petitioners' demands at the frontline. These defusing tactics show how grassroots petition officials try to temper petitioners' emotions from the extreme to the controllable.

Emotional constraint

As well as directly working to defuse petitioners' emotions, petition officials are also adept at cultivating a pretend emotional relationship with petitioners in order to keep them under control. Previous literature shows that local governments frequently rely on the influence of friends, relatives and native-place connections to demobilize popular action.[51] Different to relational repression, which utilizes petitioners' existing social ties, what I term as emotional constraint is based on the petitioners' relationships with the officials, relationships which do not exist prior to the petitioners submitting their complaints. Rather than saying that this is a tactic deliberately employed by the officials, I argue that it is an unconscious condition produced by an unequal relationship within the petition framework and Chinese political culture. In particular, the everyday relationships between petitioners and officials are subtle and are situated in the fuzzy middle between a working relationship and a personal relationship. As repeat petitioners continue to come to their local petition bureaus over a long period of time, they get to know the officials well, and vice versa, and it seems that a rapport develops between them. But it is worth noting that the relationship is a kind of specious friendship, the nature of which is neither romantic nor altruistic. On the one side, petitioners hope to extract information useful for their petition from these "official friends"; on the other side, petition officials expect petitioner friends to control themselves and not make any trouble because of their "friendship." Both sides have their own motivations to maintain the pretence of this relationship. Seen from the outside, they appear to chat together like friends but, indeed, this is not the reality. A petition official disclosed the difference:

How to talk to them? You cannot say that I am not telling them the truth, yet I am not telling them the whole truth, either. It is complicated to communicate with them. Sometimes, we can tell them something serious, but sometimes we must talk about some easy-going matters. But [we must] remember it is not the same as talking with friends. When we talk with a true friend, we cannot tell him everything because you need to consider his feelings. But these petitioners

49 Ibid.
50 Chen, Xi 2014; Cheng 2013.
51 Deng and O'Brien 2013; Lee and Zhang 2013.

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can say anything to us; they don't care about the consequence. However, we must be vigilant. Once we say something inappropriate, they would grasp it and fight with us. Some [may] even use a recording pen to record any slip of the tongue on our part.[52]

Moreover, a fragile balance exists within the interaction. I observed that when some petition officials were verbally abused by rude petitioners, they turned to other, familiar, petitioners for comfort. One petition official was even treated for free by a dentist who was introduced by a petitioner. This façade of friendship conceals the tense relationship that exists between government and petitioner. Because their cases remain unresolved, petitioners find it impossible to smile at officials every day, so they still have occasional emotional outbursts. However, these are just passing episodes of frustration and both sides go back to putting on the pretence of a friendly relationship in the end. An official told me:

I know they will lose their temper someday. They come here every day. At some point, their emotions will bubble over. But I am not worried. First, [if they lose control of their emotions], I won't talk to them actively, and I know how to make my attitude neither hot nor cold. Second, they know my attitude. Once they fall out with me, I am the official, and they are petitioners. [We are not friends anymore.] We do official business according to official principles. It is uncomfortable for them, but it makes no difference to me.[53]

From this quote, it appears that it is easy for officials to casually quit this front of a friendship and suffer no loss. But petitioners feel uncomfortable, and in order to get more information from the government, they feel they have to continue with this pretence of friendship. This is when the unequal power relationship begins to take effect. Petition officials are able to manage the behaviour of petitioners and stop them from breaking off this relationship. The state power deprives petitioners of the right to terminate this façade of friendship and merely leaves them with the right of emotional release. Although emotional constraint may not be a deliberate act by the petition officials, it is inherent in the hegemonic relationship shaped by the petition system. A friendship becomes a tool for controlling petitioners' actions. According to John Osburg, in order to maintain a strong tie with business partners, Chinese entrepreneurs "tried very deliberately to mix the instrumental with the affective, the calculated with the moral, and contracts with kinship."[54] Rooted in the same cultural context, the emotional constraint strategy shows how the blurred boundary between affective interaction and instrumental relationship is utilized for political domination.

Emotional reshaping

It has been noted that grassroots officials use phrases such as "making friends" and "talking love" when describing the emotion-control skills they use to preserve stability.[55] By making friends with stubborn petitioners, sending them gifts and inviting them to dinner, petition officials are attempting to show their kindness

52 Interview with petition official Wu, Beijing, 11 December 2012.
53 Interview with petition official Zhao, Beijing, 18 November 2012.
54 Osburg 2013, 27.
55 Lee and Zhang 2013.

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and sincerity – with the aim of swaying the obstinate petitioners. Actually, if we disassemble the process of such emotional control, we can identify a special strategy which is sustained by a different logic than the ones described above. What I term "emotional reshaping" refers to the process in which petition officials deliberately try to create a new emotional state in petitioners. Specifically, the focus is no longer limited to intense emotions such as anger or sadness; rather the petition officials attempt to make the petitioners feel guilty about their continued protest and try to arouse in them a sense of gratitude towards the government.

This strategy can be traced back to the early revolutionary period of the Chinese Communist Party. The Party has a rich history of manipulating mass emotions for revolutionary mobilization.[56] Yu Liu argues that the Maoist discourse of redemption was used to make class enemies and intellectuals feel guilty about their political sins.[57] Deploying a similar evocation of guilt, emotional reshaping in contemporary petition work creates a variant discourse of redemption that aims at producing an ideal type of petitioner, one who may regret protesting and appreciate the state's love and mercy. An article in *People's Xinfang* offered the following guidance for petition work:

> From the perspective of promoting relationships, we should build a mutual-trust relationship with petitioners. No matter how hard the case is, only by strengthening emotional associations can things yield twice the result with half the effort. Petition officials should consider petitioners to be our brothers or sisters at work. Respect them, understand them, and help them as if they are our family members. This emotional devotion can make them feel shameful about their petitioning behaviour and make them unwilling to petition.[58]

Many other articles in official publications offer similar stories of how experienced officials use their kindness to influence petitioners. Influencing petitioners by providing emotional support and persuading them to give up petitioning sounds inconceivable, but it exactly creates the discourse frame whereby guilt or appreciation is aroused to demobilize protest. During fieldwork, I witnessed a petitioner indignantly asking a petition official whether her case would get direct feedback from the leader. The experienced petition official avoided answering her query and employed the emotional reshaping tactic, as the following conversation shows:

> Official Zhang: We need to consider each other's situation. You said your case has been delayed for 30 years. No matter whether it can be resolved [or not], we petition bureaus have no power to address it. We are here to help you. We help you meet the leader and coordinate with different sectors. You just blame us as if we are the bad people who caused your loss.
> Petitioner Ma: I was not thinking in that way.
> Official Zhang: [Maybe] you do not think in that way, but your behaviour makes us think so. You make us feel bitterly disappointed. Now you bring a recording pen. If you turn it on, I will not talk to you anymore. I could say ten sentences, but now I just choose to say one sentence. Why? I am afraid you will frame me if I say something

56 Perry 2002.
57 Liu 2010.
58 *Renmin xinfang* 05(2012), 13 (internal document).

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unintentional. We had a good relationship. Now you say we are bad. It shows a disrespect and mistrust of us. We are here to help you. If you were us, how would you feel?[59]

After being shamed by the official, the petitioner gradually calmed down and after a moment's silence, she left the petition bureau. Although it is hard to tell whether she actually felt guilty about making the official feel "bitterly disappointed," it is evident that emotional reshaping effectively undermined her vigour at that moment.

A petition official in Shandong told me that because he put on a display of kindness towards petitioners, he expected them to appreciate his work.[60] When he was assigned to stop local petitioners from petitioning Beijing, this official used his own money to buy them food and gifts. By caring for the welfare of the petitioners, offering them emotional support and providing material help, the state avoids having to resolve the more substantive problems. Most of the repeat petitioners' cases have experienced huge delays and no leader wants to take responsibility for them. Instead, the government tries to manage the petitioners' affective state and to keep them calm instead of provoking them further. Another petition official in Jiangsu explained that only time could solve the problem of stubborn petitioners and their issues.[61] If the government is able to show them love, it can avoid pushing them into an emotionally negative corner.

Different from the emotion work conducted in the revolutionary period, emotional reshaping today does not require institutional rituals such as "speak-bitterness" or self-criticism sessions. Rather, it permeates the daily interactions between petitioners and grassroots officials. Through highlighting the mercy of the state, this strategy aims at transforming the protesters' contention into appreciation, thereby not only helping to preserve social stability but also constructing a positive image of state power.

Conclusion

While Xi Jinping's accession to power in 2013 has had dire consequences for civil society and contentious participation broadly, institutionalized political participation such as *xinfang* has persisted.[62] An examination of the emotional strategies employed by petition officials shows how an underexplored level of grassroots officials copes with petitioners at the frontline and provides an understanding of how the petition system helps to maintain social stability while failing to resolve petitioners' problems. Lacking the authority to either make concessions or execute any form of repression, petition officials rely on their communicative skills to work directly on the emotional state of petitioners. In short, the

59 Fieldnote No. 20121116002
60 Interview with petition official Hui, Shandong, 7 March 2013.
61 Interview with petition official Kuang, Nanjing, 6 May 2013.
62 Fu and Distelhorst 2018.

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emotional labour of petition officials, which is the critical part of the petition system, helps the state absorb potential protests in a non-violent way.

Existing research has summarized the various non-violent mechanisms used to suppress protest.[63] The Chinese case offered here adds a new weapon to the arsenal: emotional repression. Emotional repression here refers to the practices by which officials conduct emotion work and develop emotional relationships with petitioners in order to demobilize and prevent resistance. Specifically, emotional repression can be understood as comprising three empirically intertwined strategies: emotional defusing, emotional constraint and emotional reshaping. This brief typology provides an analytical framework that helps us to understand how human emotions can be targeted and manipulated in various ways for political domination.

The typology demonstrates the state's flexibility in dealing with emotions. In the first strategy, the state tries to defuse the individual emotional elements embedded within the petitioners' discourse that are considered to be irrelevant to the petition issue. But, in the second strategy, personal emotions are excluded; instead, by having officials make friends with petitioners, the state injects irrelevant emotional elements into official affairs. In the third strategy, the state works towards evoking a particular personal emotion in petitioners – appreciation. From the beginning to the end, the state holds the power to determine what kind of emotional expression is appropriate; establishing the standard for emotional experience consolidates its domination.[64] The dualism between emotionality and rationality cannot be used to understand this process because emotional expression is usually conducted in a strategic way. The Chinese petition system shows how the state manages people's contentious emotions and negative affect in order to govern society.

Management of public emotions is a significant topic for state governance.[65] Mass-media communication and therapeutic psychology are considered to be the foundations underlying emotional governance in Western democracy.[66] Although similar strategies have already been observed in the Chinese context,[67] the repression of emotions in the petition system represents a different image. When faced with dissenters, the state's use of emotional repression not only displays how the instrumental relationship is packed into sentimental ones but also shows how the state has inherited the Maoist discourse of arousing people's shame and guilt. Emotion has proven to be a critical arena for political struggle for both social protesters and state power, not to mention how Chinese traditional culture highlights the role of emotions in shaping people's political life.[68] The *xinfang* case reveals an authoritarian state's sophisticated strategies to exploit emotions even in its frontline governance over dissent. As such, it allows us to explore the affective dimension of authoritarian governance.

63 Deng and O'Brien 2013; O'Brien and Deng 2017; Earl 2011; Ferree 2004.
64 Reddy 2001, 124
65 Richard 2007.
66 Foster 2016; Richard 2007.
67 Yang, Jie 2015.
68 Perry 2002.

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Although emotional repression helps the Chinese state to maintain governance to some degree, it is worth noting that the manipulation of emotions can be difficult to manage and sometimes even risky. Tensions exist between different emotion-based strategies; as I observed in the field, the officials often struggle to balance these tactics. Emotional defusing portrays petition officials as impersonal policy implementers, whereas emotional constraint requires them to be friendly and considerate. These contradictory emotional characteristics impact the construction of the state's image. Officials are the embodiment of the state and as such, their fickle faces reflect the unreliability of the state. Thus, we can argue that while the "soft" coercive power of emotion control helps the state to preserve social stability, it also brings risks that cannot be overlooked. How to construct an integrated emotional state image still remains a challenge for the Chinese government.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical note

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摘要: 情感在国家镇压中发挥了什么作用？本文基于对北京某信访办的民族志观察，研究了基层官员通过情感劳动来化解社会矛盾的过程。信访是中国政府为了听取民间异议而设置沟通制度。虽然信访制度在解决访民问题上被诟病效率有限，但是其在维系社会稳定的过程中发挥着重要作用。通过对基层信访官员应对上访者的过程进行详细考察，本文认为吸纳访民负面情感已经成为信访制度的重要功能之一。信访官员在基层工作中发展出情绪疏解，情感约束和情感重塑三种情感策略来吸纳上访者的抗议。本文对情感镇压的考察为我们研究抗争政治的情感维度提供了一个崭新的视角，同时也丰富了我们对权威政体异议处置手段的理论见解。

关键词: 情感劳动; 情感镇压; 权威政体; 中国; 国家镇压

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