CHINA’S CONTENTIOUS CAB DRIVERS: A WINDOW ON WORKER ACTIVISM AND POLICY CHANGE

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Introduction

China is faced with a rising tide of labor contention. Popular unrest of all types has risen steadily over the past decades, from 9,000 separate “mass incidents” (the state's term for strikes, protests and riots) in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005, the last time the Chinese government released figures—to 127,000 in 2008, according to a leaked report (Tanner 2004; Wedeman 2009). Using a sample of 947 domestic and foreign news articles from 1990 to 2008, Wedeman (2009) estimates that the largest single category of these incidents is employment-related disputes. Sociologist Yu Jianrong further guesses that a third of all Chinese protests are labor protests, putting the number of worker incidents in 2009 at roughly 30,000 (quoted in China Labour Bulletin 2011a). The country's arbitration panels and courts have meanwhile been forced to accept a rapidly increasing number of labor cases, with the greatest spike coming in 2008, when such cases nearly doubled over the year before (Xinhua 2009). But what does all this activism add up to politically?

Research on Chinese labor contention has tended to focus on why and how workers and their elite opponents contend, not on the results of that contention. For example, Cai (2002), Chen (2000), Hurst and O’Brien (2002), Lee (2002, 2007), and Weston (2004) have all described the “subsistence crises” and moral economy claims that drove northeastern state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers into the streets in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the work unit-based networks and Maoist framing of issues that sustained those protests. This “rust belt” contention has been further compared with the legal rights-oriented activism of a younger generation of southeastern migrant workers by Blecher (2010), Friedman and Lee (2010), and Lee (2007). However, with the exception of Hurst’s (2009) cross-regional comparison of layoffs and labor
protest in the early 2000s and Solinger’s (2009) study of the impact of worker unrest on the trajectory of market reforms in France, Mexico and China in the 1990s, little has been written about whether the state has been forced to significantly adjust its goals to these pressures.

This paper uses taxi strikes as a window on the conditions that make working people more or less likely to achieve lasting success in contests with authorities, i.e. to extract real policy concessions, not mere payoffs. Taxi strikes tend to be directed at local regulations, thereby bringing worker-state interactions into sharp relief. They are also extremely common and occur more or less evenly across the whole country, reducing the need to consider regional political economies and allowing us to delve into interactions closer to the point of conflict.

Based on interviews conducted with cab drivers in six Chinese cities, I suggest that the combination of 1) a relatively uniform labor market and 2) a local leadership with a popular image to maintain make policy changes favorable to workers more likely. In places where only one of these conditions obtain, the result is small payoffs to drivers (in the case of image-oriented leaders and scattered drivers) or repression (in the case of leaders unconcerned with their image and united drivers). Where neither factor is expressed strongly, the result is constant low-level conflict with shifting outcomes. The paper will explore these hypotheses' potentially important implications for our understanding of Chinese working class solidarity, the power of the state, and the gradual de-politicization of labor issues amid rising worker unrest.
Why Study Cab Drivers?

*Intrinsic Value of Taxi Research*

Taxi drivers are intrinsically interesting part of the working class. Their lives mirror those of SOE workers, migrant workers, middle class professionals and the *lumpenproletariat* in key ways, while their relative freedom and “social distance” from employers set them apart. Cabbies' ability to bring transportation in urban areas to a near halt provides them with enviable leverage.

Many drivers are laid-off SOE employees, a fact that reveals itself in the socialist-era phrases they use, such as “serving the people” and “receiving a fair recompense” for their “labor power expended” (*fuchude laodongli*). Similar to young migrant workers, cabbies put in brutal hours and are often employed via complex chains of sub-contracting. Drivers' relatively high earnings\(^1\) and (often) local household registration (*hukou*) status put them closer to the lower middle class. Their odd jobs and occasional gangland ties, finally, cause them to resemble the country's expansive *lumpenproletariat*.

Unlike most other workers, taxi drivers work in isolation from their bosses, if they have bosses, and are mostly in control of their own pace of work. Many drivers interviewed for my research cited “freedom” as the greatest upside to their jobs. This included “freedom” to stay home and rest when they wished, most prominently, but also the freedom to interact with people from all walks of life and, as one politically opinionated Jingzhou driver put it, complete “freedom of speech”—if only in the confines of the cab (Interview 54).

\(^1\) The 20 drivers who revealed their earnings for this paper had a median income of 3,000 RMB per month. Migrant workers reportedly earn 1,690 RMB per month on average (Y. Li 2011).
Kerr and Siegel (1954) and Kerr (1964) argue that the “social distance” between workers and their employers is an important determinant of inter-industry strike propensity, with sectors like logging, where bosses are far from the work site, showing the highest rates of unrest. This analysis rings true for the taxi business. As one driver interviewed for this paper put it when describing cab companies, “Ours is blood and sweat money; they can sit in air conditioned rooms and earn the same amount” (Interview 6).

Cabbies, finally, enjoy an incredible degree of leverage over their employers and the state. Drivers who strike can quickly bring a major urban a city's transportation to near halt. In recent work stoppages, cabbies have parked their cars across roads and encircled gas stations (see, for example, Zhongguo Molihua Geming 2011). Though many Chinese urban areas are in the process of building subway and light rail lines, citizens are still very much reliant on buses and cabs. Even when drivers merely stay home, they affect others' ability to get to work.

For all the differences between taxi drivers and other workers, though, the cab sector still offers a useful window into Chinese worker-state interactions for two reasons. First, the fact that drivers' complaints mostly relate to local government policies, not disputes with their immediate employers, puts their relationship with the state in especially sharp relief. Second, taxi strikes are extremely common and occur across the whole country, allowing us to take a broader view than that allowed by sectors with workers who rarely protest or who only protest in particular regions.
Bringing Worker-State Relations into Focus

Most of the grievances of cabbies center on municipal rules and regulations. These include the number of taxi licenses permitted in a given city and whether drivers are allowed to own their own cars (i.e. whether drivers enjoy “business rights” or jinying quan), the base or “drop” fares set by authorities, subsidies for oil or compressed natural gas (CNG), and fines by police for illegal parking or for customer complaints. Other sources of driver dissatisfaction relate to difficulties that, while not the direct result of state policy, can only be eliminated by government action, such as bad traffic or competition from unlicensed "black cabs."

Economists like You (2011) of the liberal Beijing-based Transition Institute use rising taxi-government conflicts to argue for a reduced state role in the sector (and the abolition of private cab monopolies, too). However, drivers themselves, like other Chinese workers (see Su and X. He 2010), have consistently demanded more, not less government intervention as a solution to their problems. This may, of course, be a case of workers simply making demands in the language to which they have grown accustomed, not in accordance with their deeper grievances, as discussed by Hyman (1989) in the British context, but it is worth noting that even drivers in Wenzhou, the poster child for liberal reforms in the sector, have repeatedly gone on strike.

Importantly, despite their statist orientation, different from China's farmers (Bernstein and Lü 2003; K. J. O’Brien and L. Li 2006) and northeastern SOE workers (Hurst 2009; Lee 2007; Weston 2004), taxi drivers do not typically appeal to central government policy when challenging local regulations. This may be because there are few central policies for their sector to which they can appeal or because, to the extent that Beijing has set policy for taxis at all, it has
been to urge the consolidation of independent drivers into taxi monopolies, something that began in the late 1990s and early 2000s (J. Li 2010)—and is resented by drivers in the cities where the policy has been implemented. It may also be because, like migrant workers, drivers do not depend much on the central government for financial support (Wright 2010). Regardless, taxi strikes serve to highlight worker-state interactions at the most immediate point of conflict: local governance.

*The Wide Reach of Taxi Strikes*

Taxi strikes occur very frequently. According to a recent report in *China Economic Weekly*, there have been over a hundred work stoppages by cabbies during the past seven years (X. Cui 2011). My crowd-mapping website *China Strikes* ([http://chinasstrikes.crowdmap.com](http://chinasstrikes.crowdmap.com)) has documented 49 incidents between January 2008 and December 2011. Wedeman (2009) singles out taxi strikes as a particularly common sort of “mass incident”—three percent of all the incidents he documents—in his data set covering 1990 to 2008.

Moreover, unlike auto strikes, for instance, which have mainly occurred in the Pearl River Delta despite the presence of auto plants in the Yangtze River Delta and northeast, taxi strikes have been spread evenly across the country (see Figure 1). This suggests that drivers view the national “political opportunity structure” (Tarrow 1998) as relatively flat. A number of region-specific political economy factors, such as those highlighted by Hurst (2009), therefore do not require our attention.
**Policy Change, Solidarity and Local Officials**

My research concerns policy changes as a result of taxi strikes. A policy change is defined as a fundamental alteration in a local government's plans for the cab sector, not small concessions like higher fuel subsidies, or, conversely, a temporary crackdown on driver-activists. I thus assume that protests can accomplish more than is allowed by Lorentzen's (2008) rational choice model of Chinese activism, which posits that protests are tolerated only as an alarm bell for the central state and that targeted pay-offs are the limit of the state's response. My case studies below, I believe, bear out this assumption. Drivers' interactions with local governments are the focus of my analysis because, unlike distant authorities in Beijing, local governments must respond directly to worker demands.

**Solidarity**

In order to avoid overdetermining my subject, I have chosen to observe variation in only two
broad variables: worker solidarity and the personal characteristics of grassroots officials. In regards to the first variable, an extensive literature already highlights the complex allegiances and divisions—within work units, between sectors, between people from different hometowns and different generations, etc.—that block or re-channel working class mobilization in China (Blecher 2002; Lee 1998, 2007; Perry 2002; Sargeson 1999; Walder 1988). If these divisions are not constant across all situations, then their variation would seem to be a powerful force in determining the success of attempted collective actions.

There is a structural basis for divisions between Chinese drivers varying considerably from city to city. Taxi sectors nationwide take “two main forms” in China. One of these forms is a “loose relationship between drivers and companies… in which drivers have ownership of taxi cabs while companies only charge [a] certain management fee.” However, the “the most common practice is the company system, exemplified by the Beijing and Shanghai model, in which local governments grant property rights and operational rights to taxi companies, and drivers pay monthly rent to the companies” (J. Li 2010).

Powerful taxi monopolies with ties to municipal governments via licensing systems dominate many cab markets. By closing the taxi market to new competitors, the monopolies foster the “black cab” sector hated by legitimate drivers (China Daily 2010). Meanwhile, they pass their costs down a long chain of sub-contracting. According to the Falun Gong-connected dissident newspaper *The Epoch Times*, companies typically obtain “a license from the government through bidding and then will subcontract their franchise to small companies, who in turn subcontract the franchise to individual drivers. From there, individual drivers may also subcontract their license
to alternate drivers. Because of this, driver profits are being exploited level after level” (Long 2008). Cabbies employed by monopolies effectively work in small workplaces and large corporations at the same time, two or three to one immediate “boss” but hundreds or thousands to one company.

It was not always this way. In Beijing, for example, the taxi sector went from high consolidation under the planned economy, to *laissez faire* deregulation in the 1990s, to re-consolidation at the end of the decade. Up until the early 1990s, there were very few taxi companies in Beijing and they all fell under the control of the Beijing Municipal Transport Bureau. With market reforms, taxi companies mushroomed: by 1994, the city was home to 1,400 companies with a total of 60,000 cabs. Even primary schools and kindergartens began running their own taxi operations. Drivers invested a certain amount in the cars, making the vehicles their own property, while paying a maintenance fee to companies (J. Li 2010).

In 1996, in an effort to bring order to the market, the Beijing city government made taxi companies the only conduits for taxi licenses, while placing a ceiling on how many licenses the companies could grant. It also forced drivers to return their cars to the companies, with no compensation except a “risk guarantee” commensurate with their prior investment (J. Li 2010). In addition to having to buy their licenses from taxi bosses at exorbitant costs, drivers had to begin paying monthly “rental” fees and arbitrary penalties for various infractions of their employers’ rules, all of which forced them to work longer hours for less. Companies meanwhile shirked legally mandated health care contributions and other benefits for their employees. Spurred by government pressure to consolidate, by 2004 there were only approximately 200
companies in the capital. Together, they controlled 66,000 cabs, a mere fraction more than the number plying the capital’s streets a decade before (People’s Daily 2004).

Again, not all Chinese taxi markets are dominated by monopolies, though. In Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, the government licenses both “cab bosses” (che zhu or che laoban), who subcontract to multiple drivers, and individual driver-owners (X. Cui 2011). In one of the case studies below, Guiyang in Guizhou Province, an old collectively-owned cab company still exists alongside individual driver-owners, employees of “cab bosses,” and newly-created private cab companies. The central government plans to gradually move all sub-contracted drivers nationwide to formal employment relations, complete with signed contracts and the possibility of representation by the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) ((China Labour Bulletin 2012). A multitude of different ownership structures is likely to persist for some time, however—and with these different structures, a variety of different divisions between drivers and opportunities for solidarity.

Local Officials

My second variable, variation in the personal characteristics of grassroots officials, draws on research that shows how, under the China’s “decentralized authoritarianism,” leaders below the provincial level—those who must deal directly with striking cab drivers—enjoy considerable autonomy in decision-making (Landry 2008). If local cadres are responsible to anyone, it is to their superiors in provincial governments or to the provincial levels of functional bureaucracies, such as, in the case of taxi drivers, possibly the transportation bureau (Mertha 2005). Nor are their incentives necessarily aligned to follow central directives. Landry (2003) has found that
city mayors, in particular, are constantly urged by the central government to “deliver good governance—defined, for the most part, in terms of economic growth” (33), but given the fact that mayors experience extraordinarily short terms in office (only a little over two years on average) and low rates of promotion, economic performance actually shows only a “limited impact” on their “political fate” (46).

What factors, then, do grassroots officials take into account when making decisions? They may easily focus only on those areas of effective governance that lend themselves to easy measurement by provincial-level authorities, such as public works projects or implementation of the “one child policy,” allowing popular grievances, like those of cab drivers, to fall on deaf ears (K. J. O’Brien and L. Li 1999). They might also reach out to private entrepreneurs out of a desire to co-opt them for the Party or out of brazenly corrupt motives, offering special treatment in the form of membership in various consultative organs or illicit property deals (Dickson 2003; Tsai 2006). But there is risk in alienating ordinary citizens excessively. Major disturbances, including labor disturbances, have resulted in punishments for grassroots leaders (e.g. in Zengcheng, Guangdong, several administrators lost their jobs following riots by migrant workers there, see Y. Zhang 2011). Most intriguingly, especially ambitious local officials may cultivate a positive image and offer their localities as a “model” for rehabilitating the Party-state's image more broadly. Mertha (2008, 2009) has shown how politicians have sometimes acted as “political entrepreneurs,” siding with protesters against hydro-electric projects. For such officials, a taxi strike offers a chance to put their popular touch to the test—and a risk, in the form of damage to their image.
Methodology

To determine how, exactly, changes in my two variables, driver solidarity and local officials, might affect striking taxi drivers' chances of success, I interviewed 63 taxi drivers and 12 labor academics, labor activists, and other experts during the summer of 2011 in eight cities across China. I contacted most of the interviewees by randomly hailing cabs (only one turned down an interview), though some driver-activists were contacted through mutual acquaintances. The interviews were “semi-structured” (Bernard 2006), meaning that I attempted to cover a specific set of questions in each conversation, but changed the questions' ordering and phrasing to fit the rhythms of different interactions.

As the total number of interviews in each city did not lend itself to rigorous statistical analysis, I used the conversations primarily as an opportunity to check and re-check facts, such as the sequence of a particular strike or the number of cab companies in a given place. Nonetheless, this paper makes claims about drivers' different attitudes in different places and about the popular images of local officials. To help readers judge the validity of these claims, I have cited the particular interviews on which a statement is based when it is based on only a few interviews and have included brief background sketches of all the interviewees in the appendix of the paper.

The survey was divided into two rounds. First, I interviewed drivers in Chongqing and Guiyang, a pair of urban areas that were, in accordance with the dictates of Przeworski and Teune (1970), as “similar” as possible: both were in the country's interior; both had large populations (first- and second-tier); and both had high bureaucratic rankings (a provincial capital and a “directly controlled municipality”). Chongqing's 2008 taxi strike caught world attention and spurred a
nationwide strike wave, making it a case that had to be discussed in any investigation. Guiyang, which I wrongly believed to have not experienced any taxi strikes, was intended to provide maximum contrast. When I discovered that the city had actually experienced a strike shortly before my visit, I added Wuhan, another large interior metropolis, as a strike-less “control case” in my final comparison. The Chongqing-Guiyang contrast was nonetheless revealing.

Second, I tried out the fit of two rough hypotheses about markets and leaders that I developed in Chongqing and Guiyang on a fresh batch of cities: Xianning, Suizhou and Jingzhou. These cities were also as “similar” to each other as possible. All were prefecture-level cities and all were in Hubei Province; all lay roughly equidistant from the provincial capital, Wuhan; all had populations that put them in the third and fourth tier of Chinese cities; and none had a subway system that might compete with drivers. Before visiting Xianning, Suizhou and Jingzhou, however, I knew that for all their similarities, they had shown considerable variation in strike results. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) describe such sampling for variety on the dependent variable as a “retrospective research design.” Staying in Wuhan between trips to Xianning, Suizhou and Jingzhou helped further sharpen my thinking: what happened in these places that did not happen in Wuhan?

**Chongqing and Guiyang**

Chongqing and Guiyang both experienced taxi strikes in recent years: Chongqing in 2008 and Guiyang in 2011. The strike in Chongqing ended after two days with a dramatic negotiation on live television between the city's Party Secretary and representatives of the drivers. The government promised lower fuel costs and a crackdown on “black cabs,” as is common
following taxi stoppages, but also the establishment of a local cabby branch of the ACFTU, the substantial lowering of fees paid by drivers to cab companies, and the enforcement of benefits payments to drivers by companies. Some promises, such as the cabby union, have still not materialized (though national government plans for increasing cabbies' participation in unions may soon change this), but most drivers in the city who I interviewed said that the strike had “brought certain benefits” (yidingde haochu).

In Guiyang, in contrast, drivers planned a three-day strike but were only able to turn out half the drivers the first day; things fell apart from there. The local Party Secretary in Guiyang, Li Jun, while he did not negotiate with drivers on live television, also promised improvements to the sector, but these improvements amounted to no more than a short crackdown on “black cabs” and some tweaks to the fees drivers paid to companies, tweaks that were subsequently undermined by a lowering of the “drop fare.” Guiyang cabbies did not view their strike as a success—if they had even heard about it.

**Chongqing**

Chongqing is a fast-growing metropolis of almost 32.4 million people (including the city’s substantial rural districts, which account for roughly 20 million of its residents) that serves as a gateway to Southwest China (China City Statistical Yearbook 2008). In 1997, Chongqing broke off from Sichuan Province to become a “directly controlled municipality”, an enviable status equivalent to that of a province and shared by only three other urban areas: Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. Since then, the city has grown by leaps and bounds, with pastel-colored luxury housing rapidly replacing the older, pollution-stained apartment blocks that still cling to the
steep, misty slopes of the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers. Investment from the likes of the Taiwanese electronics manufacturer Foxconn has begun to flowing to this “Chicago on the Yangtze,” drawn by the city's relatively low wages, but Chongqing's heavy industry is still alive, churning out chemicals, cement, motorcycles and arms for the military (Larsen 2010).

The Chongqing taxi sector is fairly uniform. Beginning in the late 1990s, new rules consolidated drivers into companies district by district (Peng 2008; Tian 2006). As of 2004, of the 20,000 drivers then operating in the city and its suburbs, only 700 were self-employed (Wu 2007). Now, almost all of cabbies in Chongqing's urban core are employed by 1,000 companies, with 34 companies owning more than 100 cabs each (Xinhua 2008). Conditions are so similar in these enterprises that the drivers I interviewed all cited roughly the same rental fees or *fenr qian* per shift (190 RMB) and the roughly same cut in those fees following the strike (a reduction of about 30 RMB from a previous level of 220-230 RMB), as well as the same improvement in pension and health care payments (though change in this area appears to have been more uneven, with one driver bringing a pioneering lawsuit against his company for continued non-payment, according to Interviews 4, 15, 16).

All registered taxi drivers in Chongqing are from the city itself or from its rural areas, not from outside. They live in the same suburbs and drive downtown for work, returning home to gas their vehicles and change drivers. Many, including some of the activists I met, are former SOE workers. While a continual source of frustration for registered drivers, Chongqing’s black cabs are not especially numerous and are forced to operate during rush hour to evade arrest (Interview 8); occasional “strike hard” campaigns against illegal drivers have raised the earnings of their
licensed counterparts for brief periods (Interview 12). According to a “black cab” driver I interviewed, unlicensed drivers come from essentially the same backgrounds as licensed drivers (Interview 8).

The government in Chongqing at the time of the strikes was headed by a newly arrived Party Secretary named Bo Xilai, who has since gone on to become one of the most talked-about politicians in the country. Before and after the strike he cultivated a populist image. Bo expanded affordable housing, eased the registration requirements for migrants from the countryside, built parks and planted trees (many drivers spoke approvingly of his “Forest Chongqing” campaign in interviews), sent officials down to the countryside to learn from farmers, spurred a nationwide fever for singing Mao-era “red songs” and sending “red text messages” and, most controversially, launched a large-scale crackdown on organized crime that trampled on civil liberties (for a critique of his legal excesses see He (2011), and for praise for his innovations, see Z. Cui (2011)). Bo's installation of security cameras across the city made cabbies feel safer (Interviews 8, 13).

Taxi drivers spoke of having high expectations of Bo Xilai even before he began his term, owing to his successful previous stewardship of the port city of Dalian. One of them could even remember the exact moment when a friend told him by phone that Bo would be Party Secretary (Interview 15). But driver-activists stated clearly that the decision to strike was unrelated to their feelings about Bo—they would have struck if someone else was Party Secretary, too—and no interviewees said that they had expected that the Party Secretary would negotiate with drivers on live television. Typical quotes included, “I was a little surprised” (Interview 10), “No one
expected Bo Xilai to negotiate” (Interview 12), and, “Drivers did not have high expectations” (Interview 4).

**Guiyang**

Guiyang is the capital of the impoverished southwestern province of Guizhou. With a population of 3.6 million, the city is considerably smaller than even Chongqing's downtown core, but it is still in the top tiers of Chinese cities. Guiyang, like the province it belongs to, is quite ethnically diverse. Its blue skies attest to a relatively small manufacturing sector, but its tourist trade is booming and the city is a beneficiary of the country’s western development strategy.

Whereas almost all Chongqing cab drivers work for taxi companies, most of Guiyang’s registered 4,000-plus drivers are self-employed or work for “cab bosses” who are themselves self-employed. A municipally-run collective cab company recently went through privatization, resulting in a rump collective company now employing roughly 650 drivers and three private companies employing three hundred-some employees each (Interview 25). Registered drivers of all types are far outnumbered by “black cabs”, which prowl the streets unmolested by police.

Interviewees reported a wide range of working conditions. One driver working for a self-employed “cab boss” said she endured strict rules concerning smoking and cell phone use and a unique percentage-based payment system but also enjoyed a generous base salary and “humane” (renqing hua) management (Interview 19). Others said they paid set rental fees to their employers and worked draining hours. “Cab bosses” did not provide insurance; the rump collective company did and the private companies were under pressure to do so (Interview 22).
A black cab driver who picked me up a during non-rush hour on a downtown street corner said he regularly earned more than his licensed counterparts (Interview 23).

According to a cab activist, many new cabbies are from the countryside and are ready to take risks that others avoid and are “easily satisfied” with low earnings (they are also said to lack “respect” for the craft and to cheat customers by driving unnecessary loops around blocks) (Interview 25). Guiyang drivers thus lack the hometown and neighborhood ties that bind together their Chongqing counterparts. Mutual suspicion is the rule.

The municipal Party Secretary of Guiyang, Li Jun, received high marks for his management of the city, even from a driver-activist who was disappointed in the Secretary’s handling of taxi issues (Interview 25). However, the Secretary clearly felt very little pressure to please drivers when they went on strike March 2011. The strike was set to last three days, but it only drew the participation of half the city’s cabbies on the first day. As noted above, the government ultimately lowered the fees paid by drivers to their bosses but also lowered the starting fare cabs could charge, eliminating any gain for cabbies; it also cracked down on black cabs for two days (Interviews 21, 25).

*Two Rough Hypotheses*

These contrasts between Chongqing and Guiyang led me to two rough hypotheses. *First, cities with uniform cab markets are more likely to generate the sort of solidarity necessary for a successful strike.* Local governments are also more likely to make concessions in a situation of market uniformity: they can be assured that their reforms will satisfy everyone. For example, in
Guiyang, a concession might easily appease the self-employed drivers or the company drivers but would be unlikely to satisfy both; “black cabs”, meanwhile, could be expected to act as scabs during a strike. Moreover, as X. Chen (2012: 184) has found in regards to petitioners, “the size of protests or complaints is strongly correlated to the probability of a substantial government response” because large numbers carry more “symbolic value.”

Second, popular leaders (i.e. leaders with an image to protect) will see more to gain from creative responses to a taxi strike, as opposed to mere pay-offs or repression. As the leaders in Chongqing and Guiyang were both relatively popular at the time of their respective strikes, this hypothesis in particular would benefit from testing on further cases.

**Three Hubei Cities: Xianning, Suizhou and Jingzhou**

To try out the fit of the rough hypotheses above on a “fresh” set of cases, I visited three mid-sized cities in Hubei that lie in close proximity to each other. All had experienced taxi strikes. Xianning's drivers went on strike in the winter of 2010-2011, as well as in the summer of 2010 and in 2004; Suizhou and Jingzhou's drivers had struck in 2008, as a part of the strike wave that started in Chongqing that year. Jingzhou had also experienced strikes in 2001 and 2006.

**Xianning**

Taxi drivers in Xianning have traditionally all been independent operators, although they “anchor” themselves (guakao) with six companies, paying a minimal fee to them. According to one driver (Interview #29), the local government guaranteed drivers' rights to their cars in a 2006 document. But with a change in Party Secretaries, policies changed. The new Party Secretary
demanded that cabbies in the city center relinquish their cabs and business rights (*jingying quan*) within a decade and become the full employees of taxi companies (Xie 2011). Minimal compensation was offered, even for drivers who had only recently purchased new vehicles (Interviews 29, 32, 36, 37). According to one driver, this change in policy sprang from a concern that self-employed cabbies were overcharging for trips and hurting tourism (Interview 34).

Eighty to ninety percent of the city's 456 cabbies went on strike from December 16, 2010 through January 25, 2011 (Interview 29, 32; Xie 2011), returning to work in the end because of the pressures of supporting their families over Spring Festival (Interview 39). Drivers also engaged in creative demonstrations, such as singing patriotic songs outside of government buildings (X. Zhang 2011). In conversations months after the strike, cabbies expressed pride in the fact that their action had caught national and international attention through web reports (Interviews 29, 39). Activism continued in the form of petitioning to Beijing and, when that failed, in the form of two (to date) unsuccessful lawsuits against the city (Interview 29).

Authorities responded to the strike by arresting at least seven drivers, five of whom were subsequently released (Interviews 29, 34, 38) and, eventually, by licensing over two hundred new cabs that worked directly for companies, as the government intended all drivers to do in the future. The new cabs, distinguished from the old ones by their multiple colors (the old ones were a worn red), expressed sympathy for the strikers and encountered no overt expressions of ill will from them. But anger at “black cabs” was palpable (especially Interviews 29, 35, 39, 40). As one red cab driver exclaimed, “See all those black cabs? They are driven by people who moved here from elsewhere! No one controls them!” (Interview 39).
Judging from the interviews I conducted, the current Party Secretary, Huang Chuping, had an extremely negative local image compared to his predecessor, Xu Kezhen. Nor were red car drivers alone in disliking Huang. A “black cab” driver I spoke with pointed out how the previous Party Secretary was responsible for building all the new roads in the city and added, “People had a good impression of Xu;” he had nothing, however, to say about Huang (Interview 36). A red car driver (Interview 38) similarly gave Xu positive reviews despite the fact that licensed cabbies had gone on strike and petitioned against him, as well, in 2004 (Xie 2011). Thus, Huang's poor image and Xu's good image appear to have been rooted in more than just their handling of the strikes.

At any rate, Huang Chuping clearly did not care about how a 41-day lack of cabs immediately before the biggest holiday of the Chinese calendar might affect his approval in the city. He went ahead with his original policy of taking back business rights at the end of the strike. In contrast, the Xianning outlying district of Chibi tried to adopt a similar plan to that of the city center but backed off, according to a driver there, because implementing the plan would have been “too much trouble” (Interview 30). Secretary Huang did not worry about “trouble.”

Suizhou

Suizhou's taxi market is fairly unified. Its drivers, similar to Xianning's, have long been independent operators. However, some have “anchored” themselves with companies. Reforms over the years have strengthened and loosened those companies' powers (Interviews 43-4), but drivers remain essentially in control of their own cars.
In 2008, the local government, much like in Xianning, attempted to force drivers to give up their business rights and, moreover, pay higher fees (Interviews 41, 59). The drivers responded by going on strike. As one driver recalled, “We went on strike for a week! There were no cabs anywhere! The streets were empty! All taxis participated. It was in their interests” (Interview 43). Another interviewee put the number of strikers at “95 percent” (Interview 41). Of course, “black cabs” poached on the edge of the strike (Interview 44).

As a result of subsequent negotiations, the Suizhou government backed away from its plan to take control of the cabs. Instead, it seems to have settled for levying higher fees on the drivers and demanding that they sign contracts with authorities (Interviews 41, 43, 61). This result led drivers to judge their action a less-than-full victory. In the words of one, “This was a compromise” (Interview 41). Another was more negative: “The strike was not a success. The government did not meet all of the workers' demands. Fees were also a source of satisfaction for drivers” (Interview 42). However, as yet another driver noted, “Compared to Xianning, we were relatively successful” (Interview 43). It is hard to disagree with this assessment: while Suizhou's drivers did not get all they wanted, they did force a significant turnaround in local policy.

Suizhou's leader at the time (alternately referred to as “mayor” and “Party Secretary”) seems to have been popular. He presided over the construction of a massive park centered around a statue to Shennong, a legendary ruler who is mythologized as the bringer of agriculture to China. Some drivers expressed ambivalence about the mayor / Party Secretary (Interview 43). But others made clearly positive comments. For example, one said, “The old mayor was alright,” adding that that mayor had “understood that if traffic was bad, nobody would want to invest; things were
better managed back then” (Interview 42). Another added, “Though the previous government demanded higher fees from drivers, it did more good works than the new Party Secretary has done. He [the new leader] has been in charge for over a year, but we haven't noticed that he's done anything” (Interview 61).

*Jingzhou*

The cab market in Jingzhou is mildly scattered. Most taxis in Jingzhou, as in Xianning and Suizhou, are owned by the drivers themselves or by “cab bosses,” though some belong to companies (Interview 55). One driver gave the breakdown as 1,400 individually-owned cabs versus 188 company cabs (Interview 49). Different colored cabs belong to different districts of the city (it includes, for example, a historic, walled section, as well as a commercial section called Shashi), but the distinctions between the districts are dissolving and the cab divisions should soon merge (Interview 50). There are not many “black cabs”; those that operate are clustered around the bus station (Interviews 48, 50). But illegal motorcycles that take passengers were called troublesome by some drivers (Interview 53, 56) and cited by others as a factor in the city's 2008 strike (Interviews 52, 53, 55).

Besides motorcycle competition, the 2008 strike seems to have been caused by a range of other grievances. Among the complaints cited were a city plan to force drivers to buy new cars (Interviews 49, 51), higher government fees (Interview 53), and high CNG prices (Interview 55). Interviewees were frequently confused, though, about which strike, exactly, was being discussed. Some mentioned a strike in 2006; others mentioned a particularly fierce action in 2001. Another said that there had been three strikes in 2008, not just one (Interview 53).
It seems that the government used both carrots and sticks in dealing with strikers. According to one driver, the 2001 strike lasted a week and “the more extreme drivers were sent to reeducation through labor” (Interview 54). During one strike, according to another interviewee, officials paid some drivers money to break ranks and return to work. In the respondent's words, “China is a country with lots of strike breakers and traitors! Once some people started driving, then everyone started driving and the strike was over” (Interview 54). Yet, local authorities held negotiations after each action and made small adjustments to their policies. For example, in response to the strike over switching cars, the government took back a demand that drivers buy from a certain dealer and required instead that any cars bought simply meet certain standards (Interview 49). It also raised CNG subsidies (Interview 55).

It was unclear what people thought of local leaders. One driver said, “There are no big problems with the government. If small things come up, they can be resolved” (Interview 50). Another said, “Jingzhou is alright. If people have problems, they can raise them” (Interview 52). But a particularly disgruntled driver said that the local government faked compliance with central government regulations on fees (a rare example of a driver making reference to central government regulations) and investigated troublemakers through the “taxi drivers' association” (Interview 56). No one distinguished new from old leaders.

**Wuhan**

Between trips to Xianning, Suizhou and Jingzhou, I stayed in Hubei's provincial capital, Wuhan. Drivers in Wuhan are mostly laid-off SOE workers with tight economic margins (Non-Cab Interview 8). Some are independent and only “anchored” with companies, paying small fees to
them, and some are full company employees, paying 4,000 to 5,000 RMB per month to the firms; in the words of one driver, “different companies are different” (Interview 46). Many complained to me about competition from “black cabs” and motorcycle cabs; there were 5,000 such illegal drivers in the city by one count (Interview 40).

Unlike the other cities I visited, Wuhan's had not (to my knowledge) gone on strike. Typical responses to my questions about why drivers had not done so included, “Wuhan drivers have no solidarity” (Interview 46), “Who dares to strike?” (Interviews 40, 46, 47), and “Wuhan drivers aren't brave enough” (Interview 58). As repression is unlikely to be worse in Wuhan than in Chongqing or Guiyang, the fear expressed by drivers was likely to have been a fear “taking the lead” (as Interview 58 put it) when other drivers might not follow. The city government, which has been embroiled in corruption scandals (Zhu 2011), did not seem particularly image-conscious—but it was never put to the test, at any rate, because drivers never went on strike.

A Typology of Local Worker-State Interactions

The Hubei cities (including Wuhan) and the hypothesis-generating cities of Chongqing and Guiyang are all mapped together in Figure 2. “Labor market uniformity” in the figure varies from the disorganization of Wuhan and Guiyang on the left hand side to the consolidation of Suizhou, Chongqing, and Xianning on the right. On the y axis, “popularity of local leader” varies from Xianning's unpopular Secretary Huang to Chongqing's charismatic Secretary Bo. The space between the axes has been divided into three bands, each of which corresponds to one set of worker-state interactions. Of course, typologies like this, unlike taxonomies, are intended to highlight different situations' distance from interacting ideals; they do not aim for the perfect
categorization of everything (Doty and Glick 1994).

![Graph showing labor market uniformity and popularity of local leader](image)

*Figure 2*

The first band, Situation I, consists of both low labor market uniformity and unpopular (or dull and technocratic) leadership; here, few strikes are likely to occur in the first place, resulting in passivity. In Situation II, which probably includes most Chinese cities, the best that strikers can hope for is a small payoff (in the upper left hand corner), while a crackdown and no compromise is also a strong possibility (in the lower right hand corner). When an image-conscious leader is combined with a mixed labor market, a few token concessions may be offered, as in Guiyang;
when a united labor market is matched with an unpopular leader, intransigence and repression result. A modest level of labor market unity and non-descript leadership, as in Jingzhou (in the center of the figure), results in constant, low-level conflict and small concessions mixed with patchy repression. Situation III responds to the central question of my research: what conditions lead taxi strikes to yield real policy concessions? The answer: high levels of labor market unity matched with image-conscious local leaders.

**Divided Workers**

Marx (1990 [1867]) asserted that “as the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital” (449). This, he and Engels (1997 [1847]) said, was because as the proletariat “becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more” (17-18). However, Marx also emphasized that “the co-operation of wage laborers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them. Their unification... lies outside their competence” (1990 [1867]: 449). This empowering yet at the same time helpless understanding of the position of workers fits well with my analysis of taxi cab strikes above. Drivers have certainly “felt their strength” in successful strikes like the one in Chongqing. However, it is elites—officials and company bosses—who gather cabbies together under the same companies or, alternately, scatter them under a variety of different employment regimes. Drivers, to paraphrase Marx, may make history, but not under conditions of their choosing.

Beyond the taxi sector, Chinese workers are similarly both constrained and empowered by the labor markets imposed upon them. Every year brings news of increasingly sophisticated strikes organized by laborers in a range of different workplace settings, such as the 2010 Nanhai Honda
strike, which was spearheaded by student interns, and, in recent months, the coordinated leave-taking of workers at Pepsi bottling plants in at least five cities on the same day (for a description of this latter action, see China Labour Bulletin 2011). However, even in these “successful” examples, cracks in worker unity appear on closer examination. The Honda workers, for instance, who were divided between interns and permanent employees, were unable to settle on fewer than 30 representatives for their negotiations with authorities (Meng 2010). Chinese working people can overcome these sorts of divisions with effort, but it is not easy. As this paper's discussion of taxi strikes shows, the chances of success for workers are higher when a market is as uniform as possible.

**Recalcitrant Local Governments**

A troubling implication of this paper is that a local government in China that does not wish to give in to popular demands will never have to, that it can always hold out if it does not mind a serious blow to its public image. There have certainly been cases in the news of provincial or central authorities replacing lower-level leaders who have been the targets of unrest. When the boomtown of Zengcheng in Guangdong Province erupted in migrant worker riots in the summer of 2011, for example, its officials were promptly fired (Y. Zhang 2011). Yet, there are also numerous examples of extraordinarily unpopular leaders riding out waves of dissent for years. When the suppression of a recall campaign against an allegedly corrupt official in Taishi Village in Guangdong led to mass protests, for instance, drawing international attention, the government resorted to naked repression and kept the official in place (Hu 2005). In fact, it seems that when an incident escalates to a certain level, authorities are anxious not to set a precedent by giving
protesters a “win.” This may change with time. However, for now, supporters of Chinese workers may do well to consider their targets carefully.

The De-Politicization of Strikes

A recurring theme from the cases above and from other cases gleaned from the media is the de-politicization of taxi strikes in China. While there have been instances in which local governments are reported to have responded to strikes with severe repression and “Cultural Revolution language,” as in Xining, Qinghai Province in 2009 (China Labour Bulletin 2009), the trend seems to be toward treating work stoppages as “economic issues.” In turn, contrary to Tilly’s (2006) expectations of contention in authoritarian states, Chinese drivers do not normally violently resist authorities, though smashing of strikebreakers' cabs is common as a means of preventing free-riding. Strikes in several cities I visited were resolved through low-key meetings of drivers and officials from the transportation bureau. In Taiyuan, Shanxi Province (not a case study city), representatives of “passengers” also attended discussions (Interview 3). After its high-profile August 2011 strike, the Hangzhou City government in Zhejiang Province announced that “a public hearing on a fare hike” would be held a month later and that “24 people, including government officials, scholars, taxi drivers and 10 members of the general public” would be invited to give their opinions (Xinhua 2011).

The empowerment of driver-activists as a permanent, if grudgingly accepted and sometimes harassed, part of local decision-making in some cities is a potentially important development. It echoes the role of “burden-reducing heroes” in the Chinese countryside in the 1990s and early 2000s, during the high tide of resistance to the arbitrary taxation of farmers (Bernstein and Lü
2003: 146-157) or the “de facto pressure groups in local politics” formed by petitioners (X. Chen 2012: 5). In Chongqing, one of the cab drivers who acted as a representative in the negotiations that ended a 2001 work stoppage went on to launch lawsuits (Tian 2006), run a cabbie website, and lead efforts to establish a driver-owned taxi company (China Labor News Translations 2009; Wu 2007) in the lead-up to the 2008 strike. Reports from Jingzhou and elsewhere suggest the existence of a group of cabbies ready to step forward to speak on behalf of their co-workers when strikes reached critical points (Agence France Press 2001).

 Strikes in China, whether in the taxi sector or other sectors, are still not “normal” enough to be understood as mere miscalculations or as symbolic gestures intended to maintain a credible threat in an ongoing bargaining relationship, as theorized by industrial relations experts like Hicks (1932) and Tracy (1987). But they increasingly resemble pluralistic interest arbitration, not great clashes of the sort likely to generate political crises. This shift could give drivers new footing for making claims of their employers and the state. However, to the extent that drivers at present enjoy leverage through not only their ability to grind traffic to a halt, but also through their ability via strikes to affect “stability” and therefore endanger a local leaders' image and career opportunities, de-politicization may rob cabbies of a crucial weapon. The same might be said for Chinese workers more generally.

by a particular group, in Perry's view, does not necessarily signify a democratic turn in Chinese politics, but might instead represent simply adaptation by the group to a new set of “rules.” When taxi drivers or others go on strike are they merely moving into a new space opened by the state? If so, what does this mean for working class power?

**Conclusion**

My research suggests that taxi strikes are most likely to result in real policy changes when the labor market is relatively uniform and the local government is led by a leader with a popular image to protect. If the poles in my model are unpopular leaders and disunity, on one end (as in Wuhan), and popular leadership and unity, on the other (as in Chongqing and Suizhou), then most cities fall somewhere in between, with popular leaders but scattered labor markets or unpopular leaders and united markets (as in Guiyang and Xianning respectively) and mere payoffs or repression the result. My model also allows for intermediate cases like Jingzhou, where leaders are unexceptional and markets are hard to place, with resulting constant conflict and constant concessions and repression.

The variables I have observed are not comprehensive. More research is needed, for example, on factors like the “mobilizing structures” (Tarrow 1998) that sustain drivers and other protesting workers. One example of such a structure may be the mafia, a group that was cited by some respondents (Interviews 4, 8) as a factor in the Chongqing strike (echoing Perry's (1993) research on pre-revolutionary Shanghai). Another might be CB radio networks composed of drivers who once worked on the same SOE shop floors; these are reported to exist in Tianjin (Non-Cab Interview 10). Online cabbie networks may also now be significant.
However, the paper has highlighted a potentially important dynamic, namely the nexus of workers' leverage over local officials and a strong, structural basis for worker unity. Future research should take this dynamic as a starting point and expand upon it. The paper, moreover, offers insights into where working class policy breakthroughs are likely to occur next in China, what organizational hurdles must be overcome in order for them to occur, and what may become “normal” Chinese dissent in the future—and whether that “normality” is a good thing for workers.
APPENDIX

*Cab Interviews*

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