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Overcoming the Collective Action Problems Facing Chinese Workers: Lessons from Four Protests against Walmart

Chunyun Li and Mingwei Liu*

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In contrast to various structural accounts of collective inaction or short-lived contention of Chinese workers, the authors take an agency-centered approach to explain how the few sustained labor protests during closure bargaining develop against long odds. They suggest that workers' capacity to resolve collective action problems is essential to understanding why a few contending workers are able to sustain protests whereas many others fail to do so. They argue that workplace representatives and external labor activists are crucial for helping Chinese workers resolve the collective action problems that prevent the formation of sustained labor protests. Their comparative analysis of four protests against Walmart store closures—including one unusually long, one relatively sustained, and two short-lived—shows how presence and strategic capacity of workplace representatives and external labor activists shape protest duration. The authors conclude by discussing lessons learned from these cases of closure bargaining for future development of labor contention in China.

By mid-June 2014, a widely reported protest against the closure of the Walmart store in Changde in China's Hunan province had persisted 97 days, becoming one of the longest labor struggles in China over the past decade.¹ The majority of extant literature focuses on structural accounts of collective inaction or short-lived contention among Chinese workers and draws pessimistic conclusions for the future of Chinese labor. Admittedly, structural constraints, such as the

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¹ See <https://www.reuters.com/article/walmart-china-lawsuit/former-wal-mart-china-employees-prepare-to-file-suit-idUSL3N0OF16U20140626>.

Chinese state's tight control of the official trade union and a strict ban on any independent worker organizations, are daunting. Yet, examples of sustained labor contention such as the Changde protest have emerged. How do these workers sustain their collective action given the various structural constraints? And why can a few contending workers sustain their protests while many others fail to do so?

Solving this puzzle is of great importance for the development of a Chinese labor movement. To do so, we develop an agency-centered account of labor protest duration in China, focusing on workers' mobilizing agents and their strategies and tactics to overcome obstacles in the way of protests. Collective action theories suggest two prominent problems that may prevent workers from engaging in protracted struggles: a free-rider problem in which individuals wait for others to fight for conditions that would benefit all and an efficacy problem in which individuals are reluctant to join a futile protest. Workers' mobilizing agents and the strategies and tactics that can help workers resolve these collective action problems take particular forms in authoritarian China.

Our central argument is twofold. First, workplace representatives and external labor activists are instrumental in enhancing Chinese workers' capacity to resolve the collective action problems that prevent the formation of sustained labor protests. Second, whether these two groups of mobilizing agents are at play and the degree to which they are able to deploy effective mobilizing strategies and tactics explain variation in protest duration. Our study is based on a comparative analysis of four protests against Walmart store closures in 2014. Of these protests, one was unusually long (97 days), one was relatively sustained (21 days), and two were typical short-lived outbursts lasting four days and one day, respectively. Our key contribution is to show that workers with the capacity to resolve the collective action problems still have opportunities

for sustained protests in authoritarian China. Although our cases feature closure bargaining, lessons can be learned regarding sustainability of labor contention in China.

Review of Relevant Literature

Since its market transition in 1978, China has seen waves of labor unrest, with the major protestors evolving from workers in export factories in the 1980s to state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers and pensioners in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and then to rural migrant workers a few years after that (Lee 2007; Chen and Tang 2013). A frequently cited source of labor unrest in China—China Labor Bulletin²—recorded a rising number of strikes in the 2010s: from 185 in 2011 to 2,660 in 2016.

Despite growing in frequency, strikes in China have largely remained short-lived (Lee 2007; Chen 2016). Although some SOE worker protests have lasted months, and even up to two years (Lee 2000: 224), migrant workers' strikes are usually not sustained, having a duration of only hours or a few days (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014: 458). Wang's (2014: 22) analysis of 526 strikes from 2008 to June 2013 showed that 66% lasted less than one day, 19% two to three days, 14% four to 30 days, and only 0.7% more than one month. The longest protest in Wang's data persisted for three months. High-profile strikes such as the Nanhai Honda strike in 2010 and the Yue Yuen strike in 2014 continued for 19 and 14 days, respectively.

Moreover, the number of workers involved in strikes is often small. Wang's (2014: 23) data showed that more than half (54.4%) of the strikes involved fewer than 500 workers. Collective inaction remains a key form of worker politics (Lee 1998; Becker 2014: 7). The vast majority of aggrieved Chinese workers tend to solve their disputes individually, using personal

² See strike map: <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>.

connections with supervisors, or they simply put aside their grievances, rather than engaging in collective action (Liu 2014).

Previous research has focused on state regulation, accommodation, and control to explain collective inaction or short-lived contention of Chinese workers (e.g., Lee 2007; Chen 2016). On the one hand, state restriction of collective labor rights, especially the prohibition of the right to organize (Chen 2007), has deprived Chinese workers a key organizational resource—representative trade unions—that is crucial in coordinating and sustaining labor activism in democratic countries. Chan (2010:16) in particular characterized Chinese workers' protests as "class struggle without class organization." On the other hand, the state has resorted to authoritarian legalism, heightening individual employment standards to show its benevolent intentions and trumpeting use of the state-controlled legal system to resolve labor disputes (Lee 2007; Gallagher 2017). These strategies have not only deprived workers of the right to act in organized ways but also reduced their motivation to organize (Chen 2016). In addition, the state has mastered tactics to undermine trust, solidarity, and class consciousness among workers, thereby preventing the formation of collective labor contention (Blecher 2002; Cheng 2013; Chen 2015, 2017).

Researchers have also noted several examples of sustained labor protests, such as a year-long, intermittent collective struggle of several dozen silicosis-afflicted workers in the Pearl River Delta (Leung and Pun 2009) and several labor nongovernmental organization (LNGO)-facilitated strikes that persisted more than two to three months (Li 2016; Chen and Yang 2017). To date, however, accounts of the few sustained labor protests have been insufficient, focusing mainly on several structural factors while downplaying or neglecting the agentic role of protestors. For instance, Zhang (2015) highlighted the role of political opportunity structure

(favorable central policies), mobilizing structure (a two-layered connective structure that includes several core leaders and representatives from each participating unit), and protest leadership in sustaining a year-long protest by hundreds of retired SOE workers in an inland city. Lee (2000) suggested that communal resources such as enterprise residential communities and enterprise property helped sustain labor agitation among state workers.

Although prior research is helpful for our understanding of the structural constraints on or the limited structural facilitators of Chinese workers' collective action, the structural accounts are not able to explain variation in protest duration for labor contentions with similar structure. We still do not know why some contending workers can sustain protests while others fail to do so even for similar grievances and in similar regional contexts. The answer to this question is important because sustaining collective action is integral to the formation of a movement that can lead to greater social change (Tarrow 1994: 5–6). To address this question, insights from collective action theories are helpful. In particular, collective action theorists have identified two key collective action problems and suggested that solving these problems may enable weak contenders to mobilize and sustain collective resistance amid hostile environments (e.g., Chong 1991; Lichbach 1998). The first is the classic free-rider problem originally articulated by Olson (1965), who noted that the optimization of individual cost-benefit analysis may produce collective inaction. The second is the efficacy problem: Most people participate in sustained collective action only when such action has a realistic opportunity to achieve desired goals (Chong 1991: 112–13). These problems exacerbate as collective action lasts longer because sustained participation incurs more costs and renders free-riding more desirable while exhausting the hope of quick victories. The most notable solution to the free-rider problem is a critical mass of mobilizing agents or leaders—a small group of especially resourceful and motivated

individuals who pay the start-up costs and set collective action in motion (Oliver, Marwell, and Teixeira 1985). To resolve the efficacy problem, the critical mass needs to devise effective strategies that can build a record of success, disseminate the potency of collective action, and inspire hope among participants (Chong 1991: 173–79). The likelihood of developing effective strategies, that is, strategic capacity, is unevenly distributed among protest leadership groups (Ganz 2000). Protest leaders with strong strategic capacity can mount successful collective action despite the lack of a favorable environment (*ibid.*).

However, protesters' solutions to collective action problems can be impeded by authorities (Lichbach 1998: 22). For Chinese workers, protest leadership faces the risks of arrest and managerial retaliation (Cai 2002; Leung 2015), which may hinder its emergence. Furthermore, many effective strategies to enhance protesting/striking workers' sense of efficacy found in democracies may not work in China because of the Chinese state's authoritarian rules and its massive repressive capacity. Thus, resolving Chinese workers' collective action problems calls for protest leadership and mobilizing strategies with Chinese characteristics.

The Argument

Our agency-centered account of sustained labor protests in China focuses on the role of two emerging groups of mobilizing agents of workers: workplace representatives and external labor activists. We argue that both groups are instrumental in helping Chinese workers resolve the collective action problems that prevent the formation of sustained labor protests. Further, the presence and strategic capacity of the two are critical factors accounting for variation in protest duration.

Workplace representatives in this study are workers who are formally elected by their fellow workers to lead a collective protest. Although hidden leadership or informal strike activists exist in some strikes, formally elected workplace representatives have rarely been seen in China because of the legal restrictions on independent worker organizing and workers' fear of managerial retaliation (Chan 2010; Leung 2015). Notwithstanding the missing support for independent election of worker representatives in labor laws, Chinese workers in labor disputes can draw on the principle of "authorized agents" in civil affairs (which is stipulated in the Chinese Civil Law) to conduct a formal election and authorization of their representatives. This action facilitates the emergence of a critical mass among protesting workers in two ways.³ First, it provides workplace representatives with legitimacy or legal ground to deal with management and government authorities. Second, it enables workers to hold their representatives accountable by specifying issues to be negotiated and ensuring proper conduct of leaders (e.g., timely informing of participants and restricting under-the-table talks with management) in the authorization letter. This practice, though largely unknown to workers, has been increasingly adopted in LNGO-assisted protests in the Pearl River Delta in recent years.

Although workplace representatives are still rare, they may emerge out of various backgrounds and with a variety of motives. Chen's (2017) analysis of 59 former SOE protest activists showed that they often held positions such as middle- or high-ranking cadres, which provided them with the necessary information and political savvy to play a significant role. Cai (2002: 335) found that some laid-off SOE workers became protest organizers in response to their personal stake in the action, community pressure, and sometimes a sense of justice. Participants' trust in leaders was also found to be important for leadership and for sustaining collective action among former SOE workers (Chen 2015). Although Chinese workplace unions usually side with

³ Workers not in labor disputes cannot use this principle to elect representatives.

management (Liu 2010; Liu and Li 2014), workplace union leaders may possibly lead protests when their personal economic interest is seriously affected (Li and Liu 2016). In addition, Leung's (2015) analysis of jewelry workers' strikes in Guangzhou showed that experience in previous collective struggles made a few workers committed activists and enhanced their leadership in organizing a series of strikes.

External labor activists are a second group of mobilizing agents in Chinese workers' contention. Prior research focused primarily on one group of external labor activists, namely, those working for LNGOs, who tended to shepherd individual worker grievances into legal channels and shunned collective action (Lee and Shen 2011). Some LNGOs have begun to mobilize workers for strikes and collective bargaining, however, and they have supported several sustained protests in Guangdong over the past few years (Li 2016; Chen and Yang 2017). Most of the leaders and activists of these movement-oriented LNGOs are former workers who have experienced legal disputes with their employers, but a few have a legal background as lawyers or paralegals. For many of these activists, their legal expertise has been augmented by a decade of activism in advocating labor rights and assisting workers. Yet, their legal knowledge does not limit them to legal channels to address workers' grievances (Fu 2017). On the contrary, their understanding of the heavy cost imposed on workers by the legal system has prompted them to experiment with organizing workers' collective struggles. These LNGOs have also coordinated several online and off-line networks that link labor activists, such as labor lawyers, LNGO staff, worker activists, and scholars, across China. Moreover, although alliance between workers and intellectuals remains politically sensitive in China, a few scholars have developed intervention programs to support workers (Lee and Shen 2009; Pun et al. 2014). Thus, over the years, some

LNGO activists and supportive scholars have accumulated legal, network, and tactical resources to support workers' collective action.

External labor activists' support to restive workers hinges on three factors. First, information channeled through social media or networks is critical for external activists to identify disgruntled workers and incipient protests as well as for workers to locate external supporters such as LNGOs. As such, social media plays an important role in linking external activists with aggrieved workers. The second factor is external activists' physical proximity to the protesting workers, as onsite support and mobilization are especially necessary for novice protestors. The third is the existence of capable workplace activists who can collaborate with external activists and mobilize their coworkers in the workplace. Elected workplace representatives are one example of such capable workplace activists.

The presence of workplace representatives and external labor activists contributes to sustained labor contention by helping workers resolve collective action problems. Specifically, the availability of workplace representatives can help workers reduce the free-rider problem for three reasons. First, workplace representatives are usually workers who are active. Their initiatives and bold acts can attract the participation of those who tend to follow the lead of others. Second, workplace representatives bear disproportional costs and risks. They undertake the coordination task and thus reduce the cost of collective action for others, inducing participation of potential free-riders. Their presence can also reduce political risks for participants, as the government usually targets protest organizers (Cai 2008: 27–30). Third, the presence of external labor activists can enhance protesting workers' sense of efficacy because it signals to the workers that their grievances and actions have caught public attention that may impose pressures on the employer and that they have social supporters who may help justify their

demands and increase their power. More important, rather than simply showing up, these mobilizing agents normally devise and deploy strategies and tactics to help workers resolve collective action problems, though the effectiveness of these strategies and tactics varies across protests.

A particularly effective mobilizing strategy that can help Chinese workers overcome the collective action problems is worker-led collective bargaining, an emerging type of collective bargaining in China conducted between workers and employers through formally elected workplace representatives and often involving concerted collective action of workers (Li 2016; Chen and Yang 2017). This incipient worker-initiated formal election and collective bargaining not only contrasts with the Chinese official collective consultation dominated by management or the party-state but also differs from “collective bargaining by riot” (Chan and Hui 2014) in that it is openly organized and coordinated. As a form of collective action, worker-led collective bargaining can mobilize and maintain workers through its clear targets and sequential steps starting from election of representatives and aggregation of demands to pressuring management to the bargaining table (Li 2016). Yet, devising this effective mobilizing strategy is one thing; implementing it is another. Both are contingent on mobilizing agents’ strategic capacity.

Because of differing backgrounds, workplace representatives may have varied capacity to devise and implement effective mobilizing strategies. Thanks to their past experience in activism, corporate management, or trade union work, some representatives may possess relatively higher mobilizing skills, more resources, and therefore stronger strategic capacity to resolve collective action problems and to sustain protests. Depending on their strategic capacity, workplace representatives may adopt the mobilizing strategy of worker-led collective bargaining, either on

their own or as suggested by external labor activists, and deploy one or more of the following tactics to implement this strategy.

First, to attract and maintain workers for collective contention, workplace representatives have several ways to reduce free-riders and to show the potency of collective action. For example, they may provide selective incentives to participants (Olson 1965) by integrating workers' demands into the overall goals of collective contention; they may create social pressure to continue by enhancing mutual monitoring (Lichbach 1998) among workers; they may increase workers' stake in collective action by collecting strike/protest funds from workers; and they may use new communication technologies such as social media to facilitate coordination among contenders (Chong 1993: 134). Second, to contend with the employer, workplace representatives may create workers' leverage vis-à-vis management, such as financial or reputational cost to the employer, which can enhance workers' persistence and hope in trying to gain concessions from the employer (Lee 2000). Third, in engaging with the government apparatus, workplace representatives may confront hostile government officials or try to persuade sympathetic government authorities to support workers' claims, which, if successful, can buoy the spirit of workers.

As with the case of elected workplace representatives, the strategic capacity of external labor activists also varies with their mobilizing skills and resources. Benefiting from their background, experience, or social network, some external labor activists have higher mobilizing skills and more legal, network, and tactical resources, resulting in a stronger strategic capacity to mobilize workers and overcome the collective action problems. Moreover, social media may allow external labor activists to come together to increase their strategic capacity. Since 2011,

external labor activists have increasingly used worker-led collective bargaining as their major mobilizing strategy. As to implementing this strategy, they typically focus on three areas.

First, external labor activists may coach protesting workers on tactics of worker-led collective bargaining, including how to hold the election of workplace representatives, aggregate and frame worker demands, pressure management to bargain and to concede, and so on. Second, they can provide legal and social support to protesting workers, bolstering the latter's sense of efficacy. For example, providing legal advice or representation to workers in case of arrest can enhance workers' confidence and perseverance to engage in collective action. External labor activists may also garner symbolic or substantive support to protesting workers from various social groups, such as journalists (Shi and Cai 2006). Such social support and encouragement can inspire hope among workers. Third, those activists with greater strategic capacity (especially stronger networks or academic reputations) can help neutralize government's hostile approach toward the protest or gain officials' support for workers' claims, which can significantly improve workers' sense of efficacy.

In summary, mobilizing agents such as workplace representatives and external labor activists vary in their availability in different strikes and protests, and in their capacity to devise and implement effective strategies and tactics to help workers sustain collective action. Different configurations of *presence and strategic capacity* of these two groups of mobilizing agents may lead to varying duration of labor contention through influencing workers' capability to resolve collective action problems.

Methodology

We investigated four protests against Walmart store closures in 2014 and compared them by focusing on factors that may explain their varied duration. Walmart entered China in 1996, had opened 393 stores by the end of 2013, and started to close a number of low-performing stores thereafter. In 2014, Walmart closed 25 stores and encountered protests at five of these stores in four cities: Changde (Hunan province), Ma'anshan (Anhui province), Xinxiang (Henan province), and Guangzhou (Guangdong province).⁴ Because workers at the two stores in Ma'anshan, which were just two blocks apart, protested together, we treated this converged protest as one case. Figure 1 presents the geographical distribution of these protests.

[[Figure 1 Near Here]]

Following the announcement of a store closure, Walmart typically asked workers to either leave the company with severance pay ($[N+1]$ months' salary with N denoting years of service) or relocate to nearby stores on equal terms of employment. It also transferred replacement workers from nearby stores to immediately take over the targeted stores. The short time frame of the closures and the sudden rupture stimulated worker grievances. As one female worker representative at Guangzhou explained, "I just cannot swallow this wrath. After working here for so many [nine] years, it is closed all of a sudden. . . . I put all my hope in this company."⁵ Table 1 summarizes basic information of the four protests, which constitute our cases.

[[Table 1 Near Here]]

The workforce attributes of these stores were similar: Female employees accounted for 70 to 75% of the total workforce; most were middle-aged; typical tenure ranged from four to seven years; and more than 80% had settled in nearby communities with or without local

⁴ We hereafter use the names of the cities to represent the stores.

⁵ Shared in the activists' WeChat group, August 21, 2014.

household registration. With demographically similar groups of workers opposing the closures of similar stores belonging to one employer at around the same time, the four protests allowed us to control for several potential determinants of worker agitation, such as workforce attributes, types of grievances, and employer strategies (Edwards 1995; Chen and Tang 2013).

We collected qualitative data in a variety of ways that could reveal the dynamics underlying causal relationships (Eisenhardt 1989: 542). First, from March to May 2014, one of the authors volunteered to work at Laowei—a key LNGO in China that provided support to both workers and labor activists to advance worker-led collective bargaining—and observed how it coordinated external activists to help the Changde workers. We also observed the Changde protest on-site on March 19, 2014, and at a one-day workshop attended by four Changde protest leaders and 15 labor activists in April. We joined multiple social media groups of workers and external labor activists to observe their discussion and actions from March to September of 2014. We assisted the core external labor activists in their mobilization, encouraged workers, and, occasionally, helped clarify relevant legal articles on-site or in social media groups.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with three store union leaders and two workers from Changde and one core workplace representative at Guangzhou to understand the roles and strategies of workplace protest leaders. We also interviewed 10 key external labor activists who supported the protests at Changde, Ma'anshan, and Guangzhou (four scholars, one lawyer, three LNGO staff, and two social activists) to comprehend the activities and strategies of external activists. Our face-to-face interviews were further supplemented by intermittent communication over instant messaging software with three key workplace representatives at Changde and Guangzhou as well as three LNGO staff between March 2014 and August 2016. During our various interactions with the workplace representatives and external labor activists,

we also took note of their backgrounds, skills, and resources to understand their strategic capacity. Our long-term observation and iterative conversations with the external labor activists and core workplace leaders enabled us to capture a range of strategies and tactics that these mobilizing agents used to sustain labor protests. We coded and compared potential determinants of protest duration across the four stores and consulted core labor activists on what we might miss. We reached theoretical saturation when this interactive coding and sharing process did not reveal any new facilitating actors, strategies, or tactics. Additionally, although Walmart management and local government officials declined our interview requests, we managed to interview one former senior manager of Walmart China and one national security officer in charge of labor issues to understand the practices of Walmart and government in these protests. In total, we interviewed 18 informants.

Finally, to triangulate information from interviews, we examined documents on the background of the stores and the protests, including the Changde store union's blog, electronic and physical copies of worker writings at Changde and Guangzhou, two newspaper reports on the Xinxiang protest, and news on Walmart China's official website. Our information on the isolated Xinxiang protest, however, was limited to news reports. We chose not to hide the names of the workplace union chair at Changde (Mr. Huang Xingguo) or two prominent activists (Lawyer Duan Yi and Professor Chang Kai), as they were widely identified by newspapers and in social media. We did, however, code the names of other participants.

Our case study approach may limit the generalizability of our findings. Specifically, our cases are unusual for a number of reasons: They involved bargaining over business closure; the Changde protest was exceptionally led by the store union; and the notoriety of Walmart attracted substantial attention from external labor activists. Therefore, the facilitators of sustained labor

protests derived from these cases may not be present or unfold in the same way in other protracted struggles. In particular, workplace unions' protest leadership and scholars' support, as shown in the Changde case below, may continue to be rare, whereas workplace representatives and LNGOs' mobilization have to some extent spread among labor protests in Guangdong (e.g., Chen and Yang 2017). Although our cases do not represent the prototypical labor protest in China, mid-range propositions based on these case studies can serve as working hypotheses generalizable at the conceptual level (Yin 2014: 68). In-depth examination of these cases can shed light on why and how complex social phenomena work (ibid.: 4).

Findings

Table 2 provides a sketch of the four protests in 2014, and Table 3 presents the variation in protest duration and different configurations of workplace representatives, external labor activists, and their strategic capacity in these protests. As can be seen from these tables, the Changde protest lasted the longest—from early March to mid-June. The Guangzhou protest persisted for three weeks—from early to late August. The two protests at Ma'anshan and Xinxiang, by contrast, were typical short-lived resistance and lasted four days and one day, respectively.

The variation in protest duration cannot be well explained by the differences in local political opportunities. At the forefront of China's economic and social reform, Guangzhou arguably has the most favorable political opportunity for labor protests, whereas Changde, Ma'anshan, and Xinxiang are all inland cities in central China where local government officials tend to be very conservative, often repressing labor contention. As shown in Table 2, police indeed arrested protesting workers in Changde and Ma'anshan, but did not do so in Guangzhou

and Xinxiang. The Changde protest and Xinxiang protest lasted the longest and the shortest, respectively, however.

[[Tables 2 and 3 Near Here]]

Table 3 shows that the presence of workplace representatives and external labor activists is associated with protest duration. Neither workplace representatives nor external labor activists were a factor in Xinxiang. As a result, the protest dissolved in one day. With remote, limited support from external labor activists, the Ma'anshan protest lasted a little bit longer (four days). Workplace representatives and external labor activists both played an important role in the Changde and Guangzhou protests, leading to more sustained contention. The comparison of the Changde, Guangzhou, and Ma'anshan protests further suggests that strategic capacity of the mobilizing agents mattered. Although worker-led collective bargaining was taken as the key mobilizing strategy in these protests, the workplace representatives and external labor activists at Changde were able to deploy more extensive and effective tactics to implement this strategy than were their counterparts at Guangzhou, which explains the much longer duration of the Changde protest (97 days) than the Guangzhou protest (21 days). The short duration of the Ma'anshan protest (4 days), however, was a result of the limited capacity of external labor activists and missing workplace activists that made the workers fail to implement even the first step of worker-led collective bargaining, that is, electing workplace representatives. In what follows, we examine in more detail the unusually long Changde protest and relatively sustained Guangzhou protests. We explore how they differed and the factors that differentiate these two protests from the other two brief struggles.

Workplace Representatives

The workers at Changde and Guangzhou were able to elect workplace representatives to coordinate and sustain their protests, whereas no workplace protest leaders emerged in the Ma'anshan or Xinxiang outbursts. The workplace representatives at Changde comprised mainly the store union committee members, who proactively obtained authorization from the workers. A local LINGO helped the Guangzhou workers elect their workplace representatives. The emergence of workplace representatives contributed to the longer protests at Changde and Guangzhou. In addition, the workplace representatives at Changde had stronger strategic capacity than did their counterparts at Guangzhou, which resulted in their more effective use of various mobilizing tactics and therefore longer protest duration.

Emergence: Personal Stake and Workers' Trust

The workplace representatives at Changde and Guangzhou stood up to lead protests because of their personal stake in the issues and the trust placed in them by their fellow workers. An employee's economic stake in the store closures was directly associated with his or her salary and tenure, given the calculation of severance pay. The core protest leaders at both Changde and Guangzhou had longer-than-average tenure. Furthermore, at Changde, a high proportion of the representatives were managers or supervisors who received higher-than-average salaries. For instance, the two workplace representatives at Changde who first planned the protest were both managers with more than 10 years' tenure, the longest among the workers. For them, changing the severance pay formula from $[N+1]$ to $[2N+1]$ as demanded by the workers (see below) would bring substantial financial gains. At Guangzhou, the chief worker representative also had more than 10 years' tenure.

Coworkers' trust can also facilitate the emergence of workplace representatives. In our cases, workers' trust manifested in two forms. One was based on prior positive interactions

among workers, such as supporting each other's initiatives and those of a few proactive workers or managers. Such trust encouraged, and sometimes put a moral pressure on, the trustees to take leadership to defend their groups' interest. For example, Huang, an administrative manager and the workplace union chair at Changde, evolved from a typical management co-opted union chair to a protest leader in response to his fellow workers' trust. In his account of his motivation to lead the protest, Huang noted several times that, "All of the workers cast positive votes on me [in the 2013 union election]," and, "I cannot betray (*gufu*) workers' trust."

Another form of coworkers' trust is most often revealed in the election process when workers nominate or vote for particular fellow workers as candidates for workplace representatives. Being nominated or elected by coworkers, workplace representatives may respond to coworkers' trust in their good will and capability to lead the collective action. This form of trust can even boost ordinary workers' confidence in serving as representatives. For instance, two ordinary female workers at Guangzhou who believed that Walmart improperly handled the store closure called for an employee meeting through WeChat (an instant messaging app) and phone calls to plan collective resistance (after consulting with an LNGO in Panyu, a district of Guangzhou). These two women did not deem themselves influential at the store, but to their surprise, 70 out of the 153 employees attended the rally, and a large number of attendees elected them, along with seven other employees, as representatives. That their courage and initiative were well received by coworkers encouraged them to act as hard-core protest leaders.

Strategic Capacity

Whereas the workplace representatives at Changde and Guangzhou helped sustain the two protests, the Changde protest leadership showed stronger strategic capacity. Specifically, the core

workplace representatives at Changde were union committee members who had experience of collective consultation with management that resulted in a collective contract in 2013. They had also organized two democratic elections of union committees in 2011 and 2013 and coordinated numerous collective activities among workers since 2009. Furthermore, many of the workplace representatives occupied managerial positions, which contributed to their advanced coordination skills and access to corporate information. For instance, the store union chair, Huang, was formerly responsible for public relations and thus developed the skills to deal with government authorities. In addition, the Changde store union had some union funds (several thousand RMB), which were used to support the protest, such as by printing the workers' letters to Walmart and relevant government agencies. By contrast, the workplace leaders at Guangzhou were mostly newly elected representatives without much managerial or union experience and thus were newcomers to worker mobilization and collective negotiation. The varying strategic capacity of the workplace representatives at Changde and Guangzhou is most evident in the tactics they deployed toward management and the government apparatus.

Mobilizing Tactics and Protest Duration

To help workers overcome collective action problems, the workplace representatives at Changde and Guangzhou deployed a number of mobilizing tactics targeting the workers, Walmart, and local government agencies. To mobilize and sustain workers, the workplace representatives utilized three major tactics to overcome the free-rider problem. The first was aggregating workers' demands to solicit the widest possible participation. The workplace representatives collected demands from their fellow workers, which resulted in a list of demands that offered selective incentives to participation: 15 demands in total at Changde and seven at Guangzhou,

with the common core demand of $[2N+1]$ severance pay. Further, to reduce the risk or cost of participation, the workplace representatives framed these demands primarily on legal grounds. In particular, they asked for $[2N+1]$ severance pay as a legal penalty for Walmart's failure to fulfill the procedural requirements for layoffs as specified in the Labor Contract Law.

The second tactic was creating social pressure and increasing workers' stake in the collective action. The workplace representatives collected workers' signatures and red thumbprints on authorization letters, which in Chinese culture signals people's vow to uphold their promise and commitment. A total of 120 signatures (out of 135 workers) at Changde and 70 signatures (out of 153 workers) at Guangzhou were collected. This practice also made all participants visible to one another and imposed peer pressure on them to persist. In addition, the workplace representatives gathered a small collective action fund from all of the participants to increase their commitment to the contention, in which they now had a financial investment as well.⁶

Third, the workplace representatives used social media to facilitate internal communication and coordination among the protesting workers, who could then encourage and monitor each other at any moment to prevent withdrawals. Workers at each of the stores had a WeChat group in which workers living far away assured each other of their continual participation, discussed concerns, coordinated actions, and received timely information from their workplace representatives. For instance, the Changde store union established two WeChat groups, one for the leadership team and one for all of the participating employees. After the leadership team discussed various tactics, the workplace representatives took turns⁷ in communicating the key points to the employee WeChat group. There, the store union also posted

⁶ This fund was later used to support the workers' various actions such as making protest banners.

⁷ The leaders believed that alternating the spokesperson would make it difficult for government officials to identify the key leaders.

the names of workers assigned to occupy the store on day and night shifts. Workers who occupied the store used WeChat to share photos of their protest as well as funny moments to encourage other workers. In the first two months, the WeChat groups had dozens and even up to hundreds of posts every day.

To effectively confront the employer, it is important to increase workers' leverage to help resolve the efficacy problem. In this regard, the Changde workplace representatives did better than their counterparts at Guangzhou. The timing of contention is crucial for closure bargaining. When management wants to cease operations, it is not threatened by workers' most basic weapon—withdrawal of their labor. In such cases, workers who act before the removal of production tools and goods can hold these materials as a bargaining chip. At Changde, Huang acted quickly and called for a union committee meeting to discuss resistance plans one day before Walmart's closure announcement. The union committee selected an eight-person rights-defense team and laid out plans to occupy the store, a key bargaining chip for the workers. By contrast, mobilization at Guangzhou occurred after all of the goods at the store were transferred. The occupation of the store was crucial in sustaining the Changde protest: 69 workers persisted and took turns protecting the goods for more than two months. With goods in custody, the leaders at Changde could easily explain the workers' tangible bargaining chip. They calculated the cost to Walmart, thanks to their prior managerial jobs and access to company information, and told the workers that the goods in custody totaled a few dozen million RMB, much larger than what the workers had asked for in compensation. The occupation also enabled the union leaders to give frequent mobilization speeches to the rallied workers, maintaining their hope and solidarity.

Finally, given that government agencies usually intervene in labor protests as part of social control, workplace representatives who can outwit or persuade relevant officials are in a better position to maintain protesting workers' hope and endurance. At Changde, the government took a hard-line approach toward the protest. Although the store union persuaded the city Federation of Trade Unions (FTU) to support workers for a time at the beginning (Li and Liu 2016), the police warned the protesting workers in early March, and a few dozen policemen engaged in physical conflicts with the workers on March 18 and arrested two workers (one was released soon because of her pregnancy) on March 21. The police's intensive monitoring and threat at Changde was in sharp contrast to the soft control of the government at Guangzhou, where the city FTU urged the workers to use legal channels to resolve their dispute.

Despite harsher repression, the workplace representatives at Changde were more effective than their counterparts at Guangzhou in maintaining workers' confidence and perseverance in the face of government threats. The most telling instance is Huang's actions after the arrest of the two workers. Huang was out of town at that moment, but he sent a message to the workers saying, "Remain calm. I will take all of the responsibility. After returning to Changde, I will ask the police to arrest me in exchange for releasing them." In addition, the store union representatives promptly visited the jailed worker and held a welcome-back party after he was released four days later. Because of the store union's swift response, the arrest did not deter the workers; instead, the released worker—an ordinary worker not in the leadership team—became a tenacious activist and helped coordinate the ongoing protest.

By contrast, the workplace representatives at Guangzhou were shaken by the city FTU officials, who brought lawyers with them and univocally emphasized the legality of Walmart's practice, criticized the collective protest, and asked the workers to use institutionalized means to

address their grievances. The workplace representatives were not able to offer effective counter-arguments to justify the workers' protest. As such, the union officials' disapproval undermined the workers' conviction of Walmart's wrongs. Workers' sense of potency further dwindled after their street protest elicited no positive response from the government or Walmart. The workplace representatives' ineffective contestation with government authorities and management evaporated workers' hope. "Co-workers feel that there is no hope anymore. They left [the protest]," summarized a female workplace representative.⁸ The Guangzhou protest gradually dissolved after persisting for three weeks.

External Labor Activists

As a result of the activities of a few LNGOs and social media, labor activists in China had already networked with each other when the protests against Walmart began in 2014. Laowei, headed by Duan (a labor lawyer in Shenzhen) had organized seven collective bargaining forums by the end of 2013, through which Duan became acquainted with Professor Chang (a renowned labor scholar in Beijing) and two professors at Changsha who supported the Changde protest. In addition, Duan had provided training and legal support to many LNGOs and workers, including activists ZJ, ZLY, and the LNGO in Panyu that supported the Guangzhou protest. He also incorporated into his network of activists Professor WJS in Beijing, who established a WeChat group for Duan's network in mid-March 2014 comprising 147 labor activists across China.

Contingent Support: Information, Proximity, and Capable Workplace Activists

As noted, substantial support of external labor activists to a particular labor protest is contingent on three factors: whether external activists are informed of the protest, their proximity to the

⁸ Shared in the activists' WeChat group, August 21, 2014.

protest site, and the availability of capable workplace activists who can act on external activists' advice.

Information. After learning of the Changde, Ma'anshan, and Guangzhou protests through social media, some external labor activists contacted the protesting workers. By contrast, the resistance at Xinxiang was not disseminated widely on social media and thus eluded the attention of external labor activists. Clearly, social media facilitated external labor activists' ability to reach protesting workers. In the case of the Changde protest, labor activist ZJ, a Walmart employee in Shandong province who is a self-taught legal expert specializing in assisting discontented workers through online coaching, first noticed the protest on social media in mid-March. ZJ called Huang to give legal advice, which boosted the latter's sense of efficacy. "His explanation empowered me. . . We would have given up without his call," recalled Huang at a workshop in April. ZJ further introduced Huang to the WeChat group of labor activists, who were excited by a union-led protest and eagerly offered their advice to Huang. ZJ also asked for help from Duan, who gathered three more activists to visit Changde and encourage the protesting workers. Learning about this protest via the activists' WeChat group, Professor Chang visited Changde a few days later. Meanwhile, a worker at Ma'anshan learned about the Changde protest on social media and contacted Huang on WeChat. Huang posted the contact information of the Ma'anshan worker in the activists' WeChat group on March 19. With this information, ZLY and several other activists immediately joined the Ma'anshan workers' WeChat group to encourage the protesting workers. On that morning, after the closure was announced at Ma'anshan, approximately 100 workers spontaneously blocked the doors of top managers' offices and had physical conflicts with the managers. By that evening, approximately 40 workers intended to persist. External activists' mobilization over WeChat increased the number of protesting workers

to more than 60 on the morning of March 20, among whom five were arrested by police and released that evening.

Proximity. External labor activists were able to provide substantial support to workers at Changde and Guangzhou, partly because of the proximity of these two stores to some of the activists. When the Changde protest was disseminated on social media, Duan and three other activists happened to be in Changsha, a city near Changde. Duan and the activists thus were able to visit and provide timely support to the Changde workers. Similarly, being located in the same city (Guangzhou), the movement-oriented LNGO at Panyu involved itself extensively in the Guangzhou protest. By contrast, external labor activists' support to the Ma'anshan workers was limited partly because of lack of local labor activists and the long distance of Ma'anshan from those external activists who did become involved.

Capable Workplace Activists The protesting workers at Changde and Guangzhou elected representatives who were able to implement the mobilizing strategies and tactics advised by external labor activists. The lack of capable workplace activists at Ma'anshan, however, meant that external labor activists' strategic support failed to materialize. In fact, the external activists suggested the Ma'anshan workers elect representatives who could then collaborate with Changde representatives to have joint collective bargaining with Walmart. Some Ma'anshan workers were convinced to consolidate their spontaneous outburst around noon on March 21, but ultimately they failed to convince their coworkers to elect representatives. Three factors contribute to this shortcoming. First, there was a lack of bold, articulate, and active workers who could serve as representatives. An external activist lamented that the few active workers at Ma'anshan were afraid of talking to journalists, let alone taking a leadership role. Second, solidarity was weak among the workers, and the managers were bought off by Walmart. Third, the violent police

intervention also deterred some workers from acting as representatives.⁹ Without capable workplace protest leaders who could act on external activists' tactical advice, the four-day protest at Ma'anshan dissolved on March 23.

Strategic Capacity

The external labor activists supporting the Changde, Guangzhou, and Ma'anshan protests differed significantly in their strategic capacity (see Table 3). The Changde store union's protest leadership, which was extremely rare in China, captivated labor activists nationwide. As a result, a larger group of worker activists, LNGO staff, lawyers, and scholars supported the Changde workers. The large group of external labor activists formed strong strategic capacity that was most evident in activating social groups and influencing government officials. By contrast, only one LNGO supported the Guangzhou workers. This LNGO had developed good mobilization skills through several years' involvement in workers' collective action. Its strategic capacity, however, was weaker than that of those external activists supporting the Changde protest due to its limited legal and network resources. Although a few external labor activists who supported the Changde workers also assisted the Ma'anshan workers through social media, these activists spent most of their time and resources at Changde.

Mobilizing Tactics and Protest Duration

We now examine the mobilizing strategies and tactics of external labor activists in more detail. Their tactical, legal, and social support significantly enhanced the workers' sense of efficacy. In the eyes of the workers, third-party support might enhance their capacity of contention, put pressure on the employer, or influence government authorities to intervene in favor of workers.

⁹ Shared by a female worker in the activists' WeChat group, March 28, 2014.

First, the external labor activists promoted worker-led collective bargaining, which sequenced workers' actions and served as a realistic road map for workers to sustain contention. At Changde, Duan gave a mobilization talk to the protesting workers, explaining the legality and legitimacy of their demands. Duan's team helped the store union draft a letter to Walmart requesting collective bargaining and reframed the workers' demands based on the general principle of collective consultation laid out in Article 4 of the Labor Contract Law¹⁰, thereby changing the previously rights-based dispute over Walmart's layoff procedures into an interest-based bargaining over the severance package. Huang and the workers' sense of efficacy was greatly enhanced by this newfound legal ground and the labor activists' tactical support. As written on the store union's blog (March 19), "No longer wavering; coworkers now feel solid. We finally realize that we are not lonely fighters, with so many warm-hearted people from many circles visiting us and supporting us behind the scenes. . . . What can stop us from persisting?"

At Guangzhou, the Panyu LNGO advised the protesting workers on how to initiate collective bargaining. Two staff members attended the first mass meeting of protesting workers and facilitated the election of nine worker representatives. A meeting of representatives ensued the next day, followed by a second mass meeting on the fourth day to decide on the content of the letter to Walmart requesting collective bargaining. On the eighth day, attendees of a third mass meeting discussed how to pressure Walmart to the bargaining table. On the eleventh day, Walmart's non-response resulted in a 70-worker protest on the street, featuring banners and media exposure. Although the workers lacked quick victories, the protocol and prospect of collective bargaining with Walmart focused workers' attention and kept hope alive for more than two weeks.

¹⁰ The law can be found here: http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2009-02/20/content_1471106.htm.

At Ma'anshan, the external labor activists suggested the workers elect workplace representatives and collectively bargain with Walmart. Although the workers were ultimately unsuccessful in electing their representatives, the prospect of collective bargaining increased the hope and persistence of a few active workers.

Second, the external labor activists provided substantial legal support to the Changde workers. In addition to the legal advice given by Duan, Professor Chang found legal articles to justify workers' occupation of the store in the face of hostile attitudes from local government officials, which boosted the workers' sense of efficacy. At Ma'anshan, Professor Chang also expressed his willingness to represent the workers, and Professor WJS circulated a template authorization letter among the workers. The news of potential legal support greatly encouraged the Ma'anshan workers. As an activist in the Ma'anshan WeChat group shared, "With this [Chang's promise of support], they will have confidence. Currently they think they have nothing to rely on and have no confidence."

The external labor activists also mobilized various social groups to support the Changde and Guangzhou protests, more intensively so at Changde than at Guangzhou. At Guangzhou, the Panyu LNGO notified their media friends about the workers' planned protest on the street, resulting in 16 local reports of the one-day demonstration. This media attention buoyed the spirit of the workers for a few days. However, media exposure failed to elicit favorable responses from Walmart or the government. Further dismaying the workers, information on their protest was later censored on social media and journalists shunned their calls.

The situation was better at Changde because of the external labor activists' swift actions and international media attention. Duan initiated a donation campaign on March 22 to raise money to support the Changde workers. In two days, the store union received 3,720 RMB from

external supporters. Duan's team also tried to contact international trade unions and initiate a consumer boycott campaign to pressure Walmart. Although warned by security officials to not visit Changde, on April 3 and 4, Duan's team coordinated a special workshop in Dengfeng City, Henan Province, bringing more than 20 experts (including lawyers, arbitrators, social activists, and scholars) to discuss strategies with Huang's team. Three journalists from *Financial Times* and *Reuters* who met Huang's team in person for the first time at this workshop later reported extensively and sympathetically on the protest. In short, these programs and activities mobilized a large number of social actors to contribute their financial, human, and cultural capital to support the Changde protest, which significantly enhanced the workers' sense of efficacy and persistence.

Third, drawing on their reputation and networks, a few scholars tried to persuade relevant government officials to support the Changde workers. In particular, Professor Chang used his status as a highly regarded labor law expert to lobby Hunan government and union officials at various levels and to interpret the workers' demands in accordance with the state's legal discourse. After Chang's first visit, local media were allowed to report on the protest, in contrast to a journalist's failed attempt to do so in early March. Chang's lobbying also changed many officials' attitudes. As written on the union blog on April 10, "The attitudes of the city union, labor bureau, and other government departments have changed greatly. This is the result of Professor Chang's top-down influence. It is noticeable in the officials' words." Another professor at Changsha persuaded the Hunan Provincial Democratic League (HPDL) to investigate the dispute by highlighting the livelihood crisis of the workers. The HPDL's investigation was a big event for the local government, given the Democratic League's symbolically high political status as one of the eight democratic parties in China. During the field

visit, the professor criticized the local officials' pro-capital intervention and recommended labor-management negotiation to solve the dispute. The HPDL's stance signaled to the local officials that the workers had political support within the party-state system. The efforts of these professors not only encouraged workers but also enlarged the political space for the protest and lowered political risks for the workers involved.

The political space narrowed once the Changde protest had lasted more than two months, however, as the city government became determined to end it. The city FTU ordered the store union to stop occupying the store, and grassroots government cadres visited the workers' families and relatives to warn them. On June 11, approximately 200 policemen escorted Walmart's transport of goods from the store, thus ending the workers' daily gathering at the delivery depot. Without face-to-face communication, the posts in the WeChat groups dwindled. The workers were increasingly uncertain about who still persisted and the prospect of winning. Consequently, most workers accepted Walmart's settlement offer of an extra 3,000 RMB. By late June, only 18 workers persisted, and six of them filed litigation in early July. The protest then dissolved into a labor dispute conducted purely on legal grounds.

Discussion

Despite many similarities in causes, employer approaches, and workforce demographics, the four protests against Walmart varied significantly in duration as a result of two factors: the presence (or absence) and strategic capacity of both workplace representatives and external labor activists. Different configurations of these factors account for workers' varying capacity to resolve the problems of collective action. Of these two groups of mobilizing agents, workplace representatives seem to be essential in sustaining labor contention. They attenuate the free-rider

problem and enhance the sense of efficacy among workers, and they materialize the strategic support of external labor activists. Benefitting from the presence of workplace representatives, the Changde and Guangzhou protests lasted more than three months and three weeks, respectively, whereas the leaderless protests at Ma'anshan and Xinxiang quickly dissolved. The two-week duration of the protest at Changde prior to the external labor activists' involvement suggests that workplace protest leaders can sustain protests even without the support of external activists.

Strategic capacity of workplace representatives also matters. The longer duration and more positive outcome of the Changde protest compared to the Guangzhou protest largely resulted from two features of the Changde protest leadership. First, the workplace union that led the Changde protest enjoyed legitimacy in representing the protesting workers, as specified in Article 27 of the Trade Union Law¹¹. Through prior union activities, the store union committee had accumulated skills and resources to mobilize workers and to contest with management and the government apparatus. Second, in contrast to the workplace representatives at Guangzhou, key workplace leaders at Changde occupied managerial positions, which facilitated protest mobilization and workers' access to firm information. These features not only significantly helped workers create leverage over management but also empowered the workplace leaders to withstand state repression, which was much harsher at Changde than at Guangzhou. The Changde leaders' capacity to formulate effective strategies and tactics enhanced workers' sense of efficacy and therefore perseverance.

External labor activists can help workers resolve collective action problems by coaching mobilizing strategies and tactics to workplace representatives, providing legal and social support, and influencing government's approach toward protesting workers. They are in a position to

¹¹ The law can be found here: http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/12/content_1383823.htm.

provide substantial support if a protest is disseminated on social media, is occurring within a short distance, and has workplace activists who can act on external advice. To what extent external labor activists can effectively play their roles, however, also depends on their strategic capacity, which varies with their skills and resources. A high profile labor protest, such as the union-led protest at Changde, is likely to attract a large number of external labor activists who tend to have strong strategic capacity thanks to their pooled skills and resources.

The mobilizing strategies coached by external labor activists, particularly the strategy of worker-led collective bargaining, were effective in enhancing workers' sense of efficacy at Changde and Guangzhou, and to a lesser extent, at Ma'anshan. Collective bargaining listed workers' action in a sequence to show progress and therefore kept their hope alive and encouraged persistence. Furthermore, the external labor activists advocated joint collective bargaining as a strategy to coordinate the protests at Changde and Ma'anshan. Although this cross-store alliance did not materialize, an LNGO successfully promoted joint collective bargaining when assisting a 37-day strike involving 2,000 workers from two sister factories in Shenzhen in 2015.¹² In addition, the external labor activists' efforts in providing legal and social support to the Changde and Guangzhou workers and influencing relevant state agencies at Changde inspired those workers and contributed to the longer duration of the Changde and Guangzhou protests.

Note that workplace representatives are temporary, as they can lawfully exist only for the purpose of resolving a specific labor dispute. Although institutionalization of independent worker representation is forbidden in China, it is possible for workplace representatives to turn into long-term labor activists and expand their mobilization to more contentious workers. The Changde protest enhanced the interaction between two Walmart workers: ZJ in Shandong and

¹² See http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2015/11/201511130423.shtml#.VqwLI_T0eGQ.

ZLY in Shenzhen. In September 2014, the pair established the Walmart China Employee Association to coordinate Walmart workers' action nationwide. After ZJ quit his job in December 2015 and ZLY was fired in April 2016, they devoted all their time to mobilizing Walmart workers. By establishing more than 40 WeChat groups involving approximately 20,000 members, they mobilized more than 10,000 workers nationwide to resist Walmart's new scheduling system in 2016.¹³ The transformation of active workers in particular protests into professional labor activists, as seen from the experience of ZJ and ZLY, is of high value to the future development of Chinese labor activism. Not only can it carry on the lessons accumulated through short-lived protests, it can also link scattered protests to form organized labor contention. This development challenges Lee's (2007: 249) observation that Chinese workers' local struggles were not able to produce a significant legacy because of state repression and the lack of civil society support. The decade since Lee's book was published has witnessed the transformation of some LNGOs and civil society actors into mobilizers or supporters of workers' collective struggles. In addition, the widespread use of social media among Chinese workers enabled workers to sustain and expand durable networks of activists.

Despite the agency role of workplace representatives and external labor activists in sustaining workers' collective action, protest duration and outcome are also mediated by the employer and government apparatus. For instance, Walmart's extremely hard-line stance spurred workers' persistence at Changde (the workers who were ready to compromise on the settlement package might not have protested for such a long time if Walmart had agreed to negotiate with them), but evaporated workers' hope of winning concessions and thus thwarted endurance at Guangzhou. As to the role of government, our cases suggest that government responses cannot

¹³ The external labor activists supporting the Walmart workers' struggles in 2016 later split into two groups. They had contrasting views on the strategy of worker-led collective bargaining and openly attacked each other (see Chan 2018).

fully account for variations in protest duration. Whereas government repression at Ma'anshan greatly lowered the workers' sense of efficacy and partly explained the short protest duration, the harsh government repression at Changde did not deter the workers from persisting for more than three months. Nonetheless, government has the capacity to dissolve any targeted labor protest, as seen in the eventual concerted government repression of the Changde protest.

Conclusion

Our comparative analysis of four protests against Walmart store closures suggests that workplace representatives and external labor activists are critical for Chinese workers to resolve the collective action problems and to sustain collective contention. Our agency-centered approach to theorizing how sustained labor contention develops in a highly repressive political context departs from prominent structural accounts of collective inaction or transient labor activism in China. Our findings shine light into the "black box" of worker mobilization and provide important implications for future development of labor contention in China.

First, despite contrasting views on Chinese trade unions (Li and Liu 2016), researchers generally agree that unions are more likely to constrain than to support grassroots mobilization. However, the Changde store union's protest leadership shows that these much-criticized grassroots entities can possibly transform into genuine worker representation under certain conditions. Participation in union activities, though frequently influenced by management, may help union activists develop mobilization skills and thus enhance their strategic capacity. Therefore, recent experiments in union reform, such as direct elections of workplace union chairs and professionalization of union cadres at the community level (Liu and Kuruvilla 2017), may

potentially contribute to the future emergence of representative workplace unions despite their various limitations.

Second, in contrast to prior research that lamented the leaderless struggles of Chinese workers (e.g., Leung 2015) and criticized the anti-solidarity tendency of Chinese LNGOs (Lee and Shen 2011), we find that workplace protest leadership has started to emerge in China and that some LNGOs act in solidarity with workers to sustain labor protests. Our findings suggest that workplace representatives and LNGOs can function as a critical mass in labor protest organizing and in maintaining collective resistance. Integrating workplace and social mobilizing structures, the nexus between workplace representatives and LNGOs may lay a foundation for organized labor contention in China.

Third, as a mobilizing strategy, worker-led collective bargaining, which includes election of workplace representatives, may serve Chinese workers as a pragmatic solution to the state's restriction on independent worker organizations, substituting traditional union-based mechanisms of dispute resolution. Workplace representatives form informal worker organizations that can orchestrate workers' collective action to negotiate with the employer and the government. As shown by a year-long struggle led by workplace representatives at a jewelry factory in Guangzhou from 2012 to 2013,¹⁴ this transitory form of worker organization can operate for months until achieving workers' demands or being dismantled by management or the government.

Although we highlight labor agency in accounting for varied protest duration, such agency is greatly constrained by structure. The state's latest responses sent mixed signals about the boundary of tolerated labor contention. On the one hand, the "Opinions from the State Council of China on Building Harmonious Labor Relations" (Articles 15 and 16), issued in

¹⁴ See <http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/diary-chinese-worker-activist-women-workers-fight-justice-guangzhou>.

March 2015, differentiates “collective work stoppages” or strikes from “labor relations mass events” that are politically sensitive, and prescribes conciliatory mechanisms to dissolve economic strikes. On the other hand, workplace representatives and external labor activists continue to face government threats, as seen in the jailing of core workplace representatives such as Wu Guijun¹⁵ in 2013, the crackdown of two movement-oriented LNGOs in Guangzhou, the arrest and heavy prison sentences of four labor activists in late 2015, and the virtually unchecked power of the police and the government granted by recent decrees¹⁶ in targeting NGOs and restricting their activities. These repressive actions of the state, nonetheless, coexist with its continual tolerance of a few movement-oriented LNGOs and dozens of workplace representatives in the Pearl River Delta. As such, government responses to labor protests and the fate of mobilizing agents of sustained labor contention remain ambiguous. Future development of labor activism in China therefore calls for further work in pushing the boundary, in which workers’ capacity to overcome collective action problems is crucial.

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¹⁵ See <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/detention-of-labor-representative-highlights-challenges-for>.

¹⁶ These include the 2016 Overseas NGO Management Law and the Opinion on the Reform of the Social Organization Management System and Promotion of the Healthy and Orderly Development of Social Organizations.

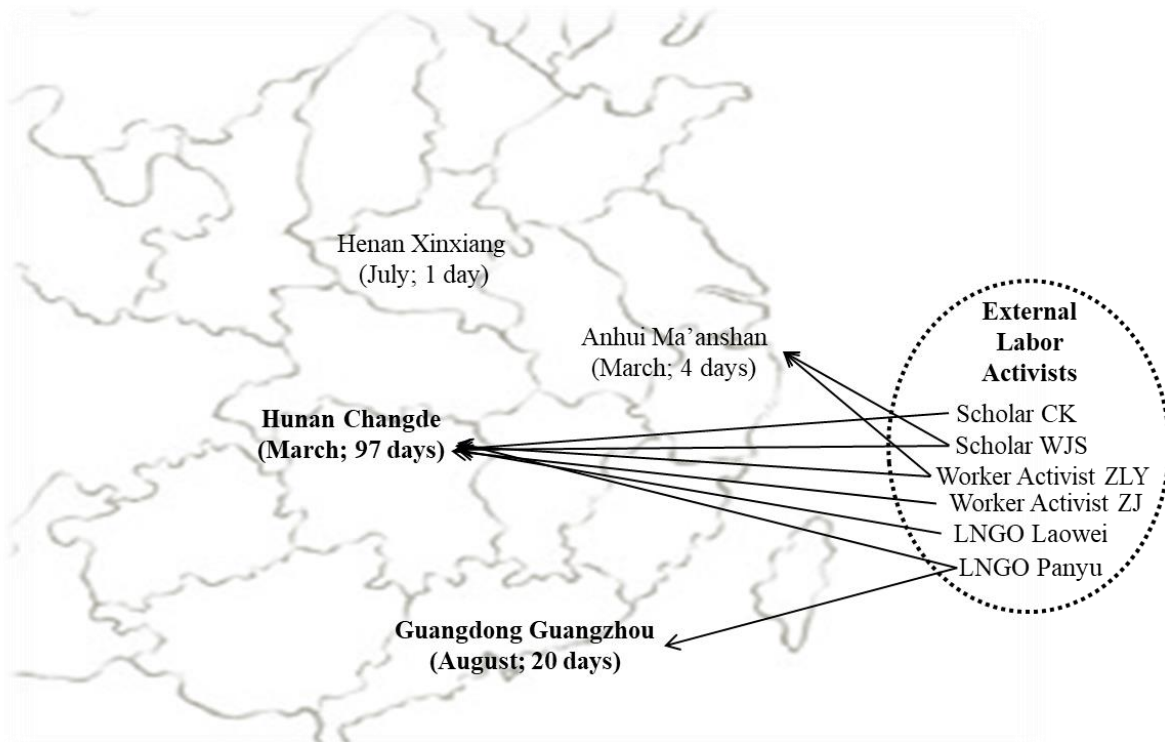
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Figure 1. Approximate Locations of Four Protests against Walmart Store Closures in 2014



Note: Arrows indicate direct support; bold type indicates sustained protest.

Table 1. Basic Information of Four Protests against Walmart Store Closures in 2014

Store location	Changde	Ma'anshan	Xinxiang	Guangzhou
Founding year	2008	2010	2010	2007 (acquired)
Total workforce	135	300	150*	153
Share of female workers (%)	75	75*	75*	70
Share of local workers (%)	90*	85*	90*	80*
Age of typical worker (years)	30–50	30–50	30–50	30–50
Tenure of typical worker (years)	5	7	4	4
Protesting workers	69–120	40–100*	100*	30–70
Protest time	March 5–June 11	March 19–22	July 15	August 8–29
Protest outcome	Extra 3,000 RMB in severance	Dissolved	Dissolved	Dissolved

Notes: * denotes approximate value. Acq. is short for acquired. Local workers refer to those who have settled down in local communities including both native people and migrants with or without local household registration. The numbers of protesting workers at Ma'anshan and Xinxiang are estimates from the media.

Table 2. Key Events of Four Protests against Walmart Store Closures in 2014

Key events of a union-led protest at Walmart Changde store (March–June)	
March 4	Store union chair decided to lead the protest.
5	Management announced and posted provisions package and replaced employees; 121 employees signed rights-defense authorization letter and occupied the store.
6	Protests on the street.
7–18	Officials coordinated several labor–management conciliatory meetings.
19	Team of labor activists led by Duan Yi arrived; approximately 70 employees remained.
21	Labor law scholar (Chang Kai) arrived; two employees arrested.
22–25	Donation campaign and foreign contacts stopped by various union federations.
April 3–4	Labor activists organized a workshop to analyze future strategies.
10	Team of provincial officials led by professor X visited to investigate the dispute.
29	Labor arbitration panel accepted arbitration application.
May 15	City FTU issued notice disapproving occupation and any donation campaigns.
16	Massive cadre harassments, which dissuaded more than 50 employees by June 25.
26–27	Arbitration hearing attended by all 69 employees and observers.
30	Walmart's settlement of an additional 3,000 RMB vetoed by all employees.
June 11	More than 200 police and officials escorted Walmart while it moved goods; occupation ended.
Mid-June onward	Evolved into pure legal dispute at various levels of courts; provincial court hearing regarding eight-employee appeal on August 18, 2016.
Key events of a workplace representatives–led protest at Walmart Guangzhou store (August)	
August 4	Walmart announced store closure.
7	LNGO staff mobilized two female workers.
8	First worker meeting attended by more than 70 workers; nine representatives elected.
9	First worker representatives meeting decided to send a notice to Walmart.
11	Second meeting of 70 workers; sent collective bargaining request to Walmart.
14	District union took lawyers to visit the protesting workers.
15	Third meeting of 70 workers; crafted responses to district union president the next day.
17	Managers called workers to threaten half severance pay if they persist.
18	70 workers, many holding banners protested on the street.
21	Many workers withdrew because they had lost hope.
26	30 workers remained in the protest; two representatives withdrew.
29	23 workers remained but protest dissolved in early September.
Key events of a leaderless protest at Walmart Anhui Ma'anshan store (March)	
March 18	Walmart announced that the stores would be closed on March 31.
19	100 workers obstructed managerial office; workers contacted Huang at Changde.
20	More than 60 workers protested; more than 100 police showed up and arrested workers.
21	Activists convinced a few workers to follow collective bargaining at Changde.
22	A female worker lamented the lack of articulate leaders.
23	Activists sent message to mobilize via WeChat but received no response.

A spontaneous protest at Walmart Henan Xinxiang store (July)

July 15 Walmart announced that the stores would be closed on July 29; more than 100 workers obstructed the store gate to seek a reasonable explanation.

Table 3. Mobilizing Agents and Duration of Four Protests against Walmart in 2014

	Number of protest days			
	Changde	Guangzhou	Ma'anshan	Xinxiang
Mobilizing agents	97	21	4	1
Workplace representatives				
Presence	Yes	Yes	No	No
Strategic capacity	Strong	Moderate	No	No
External activist support				
Presence	Yes, onsite	Yes, onsite	Yes, remote	No
Strategic capacity	Strong	Moderate	Limited	No