

## MASTER'S THESIS

### Target-contingent protest: repertoires of labor contention in reform China

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**Target-Contingent Protest:  
Repertoires of Labor Contention in Reform China**

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for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy**

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## ABSTRACT

While economists have marveled at the growth achievements China's reform has produced, rather less scholarly concern has been devoted to the social and political consequences and "externalities" of the reform agenda; still less attention has been drawn to the labor conflicts that reform engendered, and the myriad arenas of resistance that have been its byproducts at every stage. As a result of large-scale planned layoffs of workers in the state industrial sector, many state workers have had to confront a drastic reversal of fortune within the past decade, from being "*master*" of their enterprises to becoming "*new crowd of dispossessed*". The pattern of "organized dependence" and paternalism characteristic of state-labor relations under state socialism has given way to new *market despotism*. Deepened reforms have triggered both a proliferation and an intensification of labor strife. By the early 2000s, incidents of worker unrest by the massive unemployed population had become so routine that government and party leaders identified labor problems as one of the biggest threat to social stability, alongside tax revolts and land disputes by peasants.

Whether they have voice their grievances in the language of rights and law or not, China's workers have increasingly responded to these changes with sit-ins, strikes, and demonstrations challenging growing economic disparities, poor labor conditions, financial entitlement, and unemployment. Bearing this in mind, this study attempts to investigate the various "*repertoires of labor contention*" in contemporary China where profound reforms and transitions of all sorts have not only been observed, but still well ongoing. With reference to the labor protests taking place last decade, this research tries to bring the "*political opportunity structure*" theory developed in Western context further by proposing a "*target-contingent protest*" approach to analyze the dynamics of labor contention in China, but arguably also applicable to territories beyond China.

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