JOURNAL OF ASIAN SOCIOLOGY
Volume 49 | Number 1 | March 2020, 29-56
DOI 10.21588/jas/2020.49.1.002

Article

Structural Encounters, Meaning Making, and Self-construction: The Reproduction of Chinese Petitioners from a "Normalization" Perspective

Ruichen Zhang | the University of Cambridge
Neng Liu | Peking University

Existing literature on China's system of petitioning (xinfang) usually takes a perspective of institutional change or social problematization, understanding it as either a malfunctioning institution or an indicator of governance crises. This article utilizes a normalization perspective instead, seeing xinfang as an understandable, even rational practice of specific individuals. Based on participant observations in Dongzhuang, Beijing, and in-depth interviews with petitioners in the neighborhood, this article aims to reveal the social mechanisms involved in the so-called normalized xinfang, suggesting that structure and agency are weaved together in this process of reproducing motives and perceived realities, which then leads to the continuation of xinfang practice. The article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how individual petitioners persevere through multiple crises in their encounters with structural socio-political realities via meaning making and self-construction. Our study helps uncover the somehow neglected micro foundation of the macro level dilemma of enduring xinfang in China.

Keywords: *China, xinfang, petition, normalized xinfang, cognitive reproduction*

Introduction: Understanding *Xinfang*

As a unique bearer of political meanings in Chinese society, petitioning (*xinfang*) as a social fact has received considerable attention in both popular discourse and academic research. Xinfang is an administrative system in China for individuals to express complaints and grievances in the forms of letters and visits to governmental offices. Xinfang can also refer to the problems arising from this system as well as social practices of petitioning acts in different contexts. At its beginning in the early 1950s, xinfang was meant to bridge communication between the grass roots and the new government, serving multiple functions including justice recovery, communication of public opinion, political mobilization, and public supervision of government behavior. In this regard, many scholars have investigated the origins of xinfang in China, suggesting that it initially came from the mass line methodology of the Chinese Communist Party, serving the purposes of political participation and social mobilization (Feng 2012; Liu 2014; Tian and Jiao 2012; Ying 2004).

Xinfang practice evolved accordingly with the continuous political changes that ensued in the following decades. In the 1950s, when national security was being threatened by the ideological conflict during the Cold War and undermined by the activities of foreign and KMT spies, xinfang played a crucial role in supporting the political system of the new-born regime in multiple ways. First, the masses were invited into the political campaign of maintaining national security by means of xinfang; in this process, tensions created by grassroots resentment that had accumulated during the rapid social transformations were relieved. In addition, it also supported public supervision over potential enemies and inexperienced local governments. In the early 1960s, when domestic conflicts heightened, xinfang as a means of grassroots supervision was widely applied to regulate the decreasingly revolutionary and increasingly bureaucratic state apparatus. During the era of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), xinfang was utilized by polity actors working on various levels with competing political intentions either as a means of political manipulation and political mobilization, or as a tool of preventing political persecution and humanitarian disasters. In the following Rectification Period (late 1970s and early 1980s), however, xinfang switched its role to support an institutional justice recovery procedure on a massive scale, "emancipating" all levels of cadres that had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. In the first two decades of reform and opening (1979-

1999) with multi-level institutional changes and structural transformations, xinfang had become a major means for the grass roots to seek amends for their personal damages in this radical turn, mirroring the increasing forfeiture of public wellbeing at the cost of social transformation.

As social stability becomes a major political concern in twenty-first-century China, xinfang has been proliferating in new ways; the grass roots make use of this system to seek extra benefits, which is consistent with the general understanding of collective protests that "misbehaviors work as misbehaviors profit" (Liu 2008; 2009). As xinfang gradually turns into a system servicing multi-level social governance, it is time to rethink its political role and the centrality of practices within this mechanism. With respect to the research of King, Pan and Roberts (2013), xinfang can also be seen as a structural representation of the relationship between central and local governments. In other words, online public opinion of dissidence and the xinfang system share a commonality: they both potentially favor higher level authorities, serving their administrative purposes of guiding, supervising, and regulating local governments in both acts and intents.

Existing Paradigms: Institutional Studies and Problematized Xinfang

As xinfang connects the grass roots with the political system and has itself become increasingly predominant in hierarchical politics in China, it presents an important multidisciplinary area in social research. Early studies on xinfang were initiated by officials and scholars affiliated with governments. It was not until the early 2000s when independent social researchers entered the discussion and shared their insights from perspectives of sociology, political science, and legal studies. Such scholars view xinfang as an important social institution with unique Chinese characteristics, a characterization which has become the leading framework for xinfang research. In this paradigm, xinfang is studied from a diachronic angle as a national strategy of social mobilization and social control, and discussions mainly focus on its institutional changes in the Chinese context of political processes and social management.

Studies within this paradigm mainly focus on three topics: 1) institutional tensions within xinfang practices; 2) logical flaws inherent to the political course of "maintaining stability"; 3) the imbalanced relations among the triad of central government, local governments, and the grass roots. Regarding institutional tensions, Ying (2004) argues that xinfang, with its aim of maintaining order and solidarity, bears within it a conflict between civil

rights in principle and social order in practice. On the one hand, the state is committed to the democratic principle of keeping the communication channel open in order to guarantee the civil rights of the grass roots. On the other hand, the state also requires that all complaints be handled on the local level in order to prevent disruptive collective actions on site, repetitive xinfang, and complaints to higher level authorities. Consequently, the primary concern of local governments is no longer the civil rights of the grass roots, but rather formulating various strategies to prevent them from complaining.

With respect to the logical flaws, the Tsinghua University Research Project (2010) suggests that the political logic of maintaining stability in China is based on the premise of suppressing normal acts of public complaint, resulting in a vicious cycle. This oppositional relationship between rightful claims and social stability results from a pursuit of "rigid mechanic stability" that features a monopolized control of state power and requires authoritative suppression of any possible causes of instability at all costs, which causes contradictions in government work on xinfang (Yu 2010, p.38).

As for the triad theme, He (2011) argues that the efficacy of the xinfang system is dependent upon a balance between central government, local governments, and grassroots peasants. Because the abolition of the agricultural tax in the mid-1990s eroded government authority on the local level, the high cost of petitioning in central sites such as provincial capitals or Beijing, was transferred from peasants to local governments, thus breaking the balance of the triad: the central government can no longer regulate local governments via the xinfang system. Preoccupied with preventing their residents from traveling to provincial capitals or Beijing, local governments can hardly spare any effort to actually deal with their complaints; peasants now have nowhere to seek redress for damages and some of them turn to seek benefits through xinfang. Such imbalanced relations among the triad eventually results in ineffective governance, hence increasing numbers of xinfang being representative of imbalanced relations. In fact, as Shen (2010) argues, peasants are not on the opposite side of the state when they appeal to higher authorities, they are actually asking for help. The current problem of xinfang can thus be attributed the structural dilemma of eroded governance on the local level after the tax reform.

With the explosive growth of xinfang since the 1990s and the deterioration of xinfang-related conflicts in recent years, the system has become increasingly problematic. What was initially designed to resolve disputes is now in fact producing trouble (Lin 2014). In light of this,

researchers shifted their understanding of the system towards the second paradigm of social problematization. In this paradigm, xinfang is studied from a synchronic angle as a practical problem that reflects structural disorder precipitated by institutional failure, governance crises, and difficulties in interest articulation. Research in this paradigm has developed two frameworks: contentious politics and non-contentious nuances. The former sees xinfang as a peasant strategy of resistance, emphasizing their identity as the weak in their struggles against the powerful state (Chen 2014). It is therefore also called society-centric research of xinfang, as it analyzes its initiation, its features in practice, and its social impact from the standpoint of society – the masses or the peasants in this case (Tian and Jiao 2012). The theoretical approaches within this framework include Scott's (1985) study on weapons of the weak that focuses on the everyday forms of resistance in uninstitutionalized ways, O'Brien and Li's (2006) theory of rightful resistance that conceptualizes the xinfang activities of Chinese peasants as a form of institutionalized contention based on laws and regulations, and Yu's (2003; 2004) conceptualization of "lawful rebellion" that highlights the organizational and political features of peasants' protests. Some researchers further investigate xinfang as a protest tactic, categorizing it with different terms such as "resistance through social networks" (Shi 2005), "tenacious weapons of the weak" (Zhe 2008), and so on.

As xinfang scholarship has continued to develop, researchers have gradually felt the inadequacy of contentious politics in explaining xinfang activities. Empirical evidence in multiple areas has proven that there has been a change in its rationale from rights-protection to benefit-seeking (Chang 2012; Tian 2010) and a decline in its contentious nature. A case study of irrigation-related petitioning practices further illustrates the non-contentious and non-political nature of xinfang by revealing an even mutually beneficial relationship between peasants' interests and government intentions (Jiao 2010). In this respect, scholars have moved beyond contentious politics towards a non-contentious framework that emphasizes the normalized nature of xinfang in social governance and its complexity and diversity in reality. Xinfang studies in this framework mainly focus on game tactics, e.g. "problematizing strategy" (Ying 2001), "*shi*-based game" (a complex of expediency and flexibility in particular circumstances) (Dong, 2010), or "performative xinfang" (Yin 2012). In exploring the versatility of concrete xinfang strategies in reality, these studies expand the research context from contentious politics to include comprehensive macro structures of rigid stability, administrative systems, and national ideologies.

Normalization Paradigm: Micro Reproduction of Individual Petitioners

The above literature review of xinfang's changing political role and the existing paradigms of xinfang studies sheds light on the mechanisms necessary for organized xinfang practice to take place and continue as an enduring social phenomenon on the meso-level. It also explains the institutional rationale of xinfang as a phenomenon representing China's politics on the macro level. Overall, these studies address the paradoxical fact of xinfang: that this ineffective system (regarding its function of settling disputes) continues to be utilized despite its frequent failure. This article, then, tries to address this question on a micro level: given xinfang's inefficiency in justice recovery, why do individuals persist in their ceaseless xinfang practice and maintain the identity of petitioners as their master status in the long term?

Based on our theoretical review, this article assumes that a unique construct of socio-cultural cognitions plays a key role in the ongoing process of xinfang practice when individuals are thrown into structural encounters with local injustice: it not only drives individuals to start a new lifestyle as petitioners, but also helps sustain their identity and reproduce their practices. Following this theoretical hypothesis, we continue to focus on the normalized aspect of xinfang, as implied in the non-contentious framework, and suggest a normalization perspective beyond existing paradigms to study the reproduction of individual petitioners on the micro level. This perspective requires that we enter into the field of xinfang practices in order to understand the real world of individual petitioners' everyday lives—not just how xinfang actions take place step by step, but, more importantly, how they are constantly practiced by social actors within this micro field.

Previous studies of grassroots collective actions have provided multiple conceptions to address the socio-cultural cognitive factors that ignite complaints and grievances, e.g. "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006), "lawful rebellion" (Yu 2003; 2004), "grievance (resentment)" (Liu 2004), "Qi" (an ethical and moral complex rooted in Chinese culture) (Ying 2007b), "hero syndromes" (Wu 2010), etc. In this vein, this article draws on observations of individuals' cognitive reality to account for the enduring process of their xinfang practice. In analyzing the social cognitive mechanisms that support their constant practice in the long run, we try to understand these seemingly "deviant" individuals as rational and *normal* social actors. Based on a qualitative analysis of our fieldwork in Dongzhuang

(East Village), Beijing, we suggest a theoretical mechanism to explain the social reproduction of this particular group of long-term petitioners on a micro level.

Into the Field: Dongzhuang and Normalized Practice of Xinfang

Guided by the normalization perspective, we entered the Dongzhuang (literally East Village) area in Beijing for field observations and tried to make sense of petitioners' lives via in-depth interviews with long-term petitioners who were wandering around the neighborhood. Located between Taoranting Park and Beijing South Railway Station, Dongzhuang is adjacent to the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration office. The settlement of individual petitioners in Dongzhuang dates back to the 1960s, but it was not until the 2010s when it gained its reputation as 'xinfang village' for multiple reasons related to institutional change and urban planning (Zhang 2010, pp.22-23). However, due to policy changes related to xinfang, regional planning in this area,[1] and effective local community governance in the recent decade, Dongzhuang is gradually shrinking in its size as 'xinfang village,' and thus its social impact is also in decline. The individual petitioners we met in the field no longer live in the neighborhood as those who proceeded them once did. Most of them simply wander around the area after registering their complaints with the national offices, take advantage of the easy traffic and the "xinfang industry"[2] in this area to share information and experiences with their peers, work some part-time jobs in nearby restaurants, rest in warm and cozy shops, or sleep over in the railway station.

Although Dongzhuang as a xinfang village is in decline, it left behind a spatial heritage and petitioners from outside Beijing still rely on it to organize their xinfang activities and everyday life. Compared to what it was at its peak, Dongzhuang now seems to accommodate more diversified groups of

[1] In 2014, the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration issued an official regulation, asking xinfang functionaries to properly divert petitioners from the capital to local levels of authorities; in 2016, the demolition of Dongzhuang shacks was officially put into motion.

[2] In the neighborhood, there are a number of print shops experienced in formatting and printing complaint letters and materials, small law firms specializing in xinfang related cases, small bookshops selling booklets of the latest laws, regulations, policy documents, and contact information of all the cabinet-level executive departments of the State Council, as well as small convenience shops, fruit stalls, restaurants where they can buy essentials and also do some part-time work.

individual petitioners. Some aim to benefit from xinfang activities, while others insist on justice recovery; some are used to handing over their documents to officials in person, others prefer sending their complaints via post. There are also some people who occasionally go to the extremes of demonstrating in Tiananmen Square or in front of Zhongnanhai[3] where all forms of protest are strictly forbidden.

In this context, we paid regular visits to the neighborhood, made close contact with dozens of petitioners from across the country, and had in-depth conversations with 13 informants among them (see Table 1 in Appendix). All of them were long-term petitioners. Over the years they have been traveling back-and-forth between their hometown, the provincial capital, and Beijing for individual interest articulation. In order to make sense of their lifeworld, we paid particular attention to their self-narration, as they were not only describing what happened in their past, but more importantly while doing so, constructing their self (Yang and Sun 2005). With these interviews, we aim to reflect on the social processes in which participants perceive and interact with the structural pressures from the macro system, as well as the individual processes in which they construct and organize their lives via cultural cognition and social practice.

Preliminary observations from the field support the general understanding of xinfang as a normalized practice within the space in terms of petitioners' continuous dependency on this neighborhood. Conversations with informants further enrich this understanding as we find that there is more to normalized xinfang than its temporal and spatial continuity. Xinfang has now become an ordinary way of life for most petitioners in Beijing despite their diversified motives and strategies. Normalized xinfang is actually a kind of lifestyle in that individuals organize their personal life based on xinfang activities. It is the absolute focus of their social identities, daily activities, social networking, even their mental world. While some petitioners *earn* a living with the financial profits gained through xinfang activities, we find that a majority of petitioners simply *make* a living and habituate themselves in their practice of xinfang. For example, many of them visit national bureaus and hand over their materials to officials on weekdays then prepare their letters and post them to relevant government agencies on weekends and holidays. Occasionally they will return home to see if local governments have made any decisions about their complaints, and then most

[3] The former imperial garden located west of the Forbidden City now serves as the central headquarters of the State Council and the Communist Party of China.

likely come back to Beijing asking the central government for help. Some may even take risks by resorting to illegal protests in order to exert stronger pressure on local governments. They have abandoned their farm work or jobs back at home, distanced themselves from their friends and relatives, not *because of*, but *for* xinfang. They have chosen this life at tremendous cost for a variety of purposes, but have eventually accommodated themselves in their new life, a normalized life of xinfang.

The Normalized Life of Petitioners

Xinfang activities of individuals are subject to the influences and changes of the bureaucratic system, politics of rigid stability, and social governance, which has been fully discussed in previous literature from the institutional and problematization perspectives. Most of the analysis focuses on political processes on the macro level, or meso-level social governance and gaming strategies. Here, the story is reframed from a micro-subjective perspective of social actors, analyzing how individuals' daily life is forced to change under these structural pressures. In this way, we aim to provide a better understanding of the plight of these estranged petitioners in Beijing.

Structural Encounters

First, we must consider the two structural factors of xinfang's political role in the bureaucratic hierarchy and the tensions between government rationale and grassroots strategy. As alluded earlier, xinfang constitutes a field of contest between central and local governments. On the one hand, the central government reigns over local governments, requiring rigid stability in local governance. On the other hand, local governments are able to "pressurize" the central government with the very excuse of local stability, asking for more flexibility and freedom in handling local issues (Feng 2012). On the local level, government rationale of resolving grievances follows an economic logic (Wu 2007), while the masses resort to a strategy of politicization. As a result, individuals are trapped within a binary of physical suppression or financial bribes, two of the government's most common solutions to xinfang. We met Ms. L from Hubei who told us about her experience of being persecuted by local authorities. She tried to make public her experience on the internet and had paid for her attempt to do so:

> *My brother-in-law reached out to a local newspaper for reporting, but they asked for 150 grand, so we didn't agree. My brother then just posted it briefly online. Then the internet police in our county urged us not to say anything on the internet. At the beginning, they came to my place, my brother was also there. One of them asked us who did this and none of us replied. My brother then admitted it was him. He posted it on the internet. He was quite frank. Then the police went to his school where he works and threatened to arrest him. Well they didn't actually do that. Instead, they gave him a serious admonishment. Now his colleagues all get a rise in pay, but not my brother. His monthly pay is quite a few hundred less than normal, just because of my case.*
>
> Interview with Ms. L, 9 December, 2016

As for bribes from the government, we learnt from our conversations that most petitioners are suspicious of the government's intentions behind the money. We talked about illegal xinfang with Aunt G, asking her if it was true that once pressured, local xinfang functionaries might buy them off with a sum of money. She replied:

> *Money? Nothing! I knew a woman, her local government gave her like two or four grand, and then threw her into prison. She stayed in jail for several months, four months I think. Now do you dare take their money eh? They can say that you are a fraud. It's the police and the government for heaven's sake! Who can cheat them? You never know what's there waiting for you.*
>
> Interview with Aunt G, 25 November 2016

Our interviews usually took place in public places like print shops where other people felt comfortable to join us and share their opinions. When Aunt G expressed her distrust in xinfang functionaries, several passers-by nodded in agreement. Therefore, from our field experience, the binary of government response mainly takes the form of suppression for those who do not seek benefits from xinfang activities.

Secondly, regarding the bureaucratic organization and management in administration systems, a very common governmental strategy of dealing with xinfang is buck-passing. Governmental departments work independently while also cooperating closely with each other. More often than not, expedient decisions are made in pursuit of administrative efficiency, which makes them likely to result in disputes. And it is never easy to redress these problems as these decisions sometimes do not follow formal regulations and they usually concern multiple departments. As a consequence,

departments usually simply pass the buck to avoid the difficult task as well as to deny their own responsibility in the matter. In the field, we find that it is precisely this tactic of buck-passing that forced individuals to spend years appealing to different departments. All of the petitioners we met in the field talked about their experience of going back and forth between Beijing and their hometown. Many of them sought out a number of national bureaus in Beijing and have received their letters addressed to local governments urging them to re-investigate. However, when they returned home with hope, their problems remained stuck somewhere between local government sections. In a group interview, several informants criticized the bureaucratic inertia of local governments that renders good policy from Beijing futile. Uncle C from Heilongjiang Province petitioning for land expropriation disputes complained with anger:

> *You see even a case as serious as mine got no response from governments. I made my complaint, visited the offices, and yes they replied, but then nothing else…They just give you a reply and that's it. They are cheating authorities above and cheating us. We came all the way to report the problems, and got re-directed home, and heard nothing whatsoever.*
>
> Interview with Mr. B, Uncle C, Aunt D, 18 November 2016

A considerable number of petitioners have experienced continuous suppression and deliberate delays in their interactions with governments, which has placed them under tremendous pressure, disrupted their pace and plans for their life, left themselves atomized in social participation, and their xinfang life in a state of anomie.

Perceived Pressures

Petitioners travelling to Beijing were under massive financial and mental pressure. It was difficult or even impossible for them to go back to their normal life. Ms. A from Henan was arrested by mistake for selling products along the street without permission when she was in her twenties and a migrant worker in Beijing. She had been visiting national bureaus for complaints ever since and had been struggling for a life in Beijing for nearly 20 years. Now in her forties, she suffers from mental anxiety and physical illness. All the plans she had made in her youth were ruined. She told us about her life of doing part-time jobs to support her xinfang:

Now I just wander around, not knowing what to do exactly, where to go exactly. I used to have big plans, like I wanna make some money, I wanna do something. But now I have no plans. I just live my life, one day after another. Before I was arrested, I was planning to leave Beijing and run a local store in my hometown, at least just do something on my own. But then that thing happened and I haven't been well ever since. I've been suffering from a headache, and also an aching chest. And I'm tired. So I can't really do anything, and can't really think about anything. I just want to end this. But even if they re-investigate and prove me innocent, I won't be able to open a store now. I can't do that anymore. I have nothing left with me, no health, no money, no youth. I have no idea what to do next.

Interview with Ms. A, 25 November 2016

Aunt F from Shanxi came to Beijing regarding a case of land expropriation. Eight years of xinfang had worn her out. She had been suffering from a deteriorating cerebral infarction and needed to return home frequently for treatment. Once she felt better, she came back to Beijing for complaint visits. She groaned hopelessly to us, complaining about how xinfang had seriously damaged her social status.

The most important thing is to get my case solved, get my deserved compensation, so that I won't have to be running around doing nothing. I feel my life is just crap. We used to live a happy life as a family, and it's all ruined because of xinfang for this piece of land. After all these years of xinfang, now we are left far far behind. We can't afford to build a new house, or to get my son into a proper marriage. We can't even survive. That's where we end up, miserable crap.

Interview with Aunt F, 25 November 2016

Worried about persecution from her local government, she usually managed to stay overnight in the railway station. At the end of our interview at sunset, we asked her where she would stay for the night, to which she replied:

Later we're going to the south station to try our chances if they'd let us in. We're a bit afraid of crashing elsewhere. The station is much better, with the lights and the crowds. We're just afraid. At our age, we're not afraid of the other things (sexual harassment), but we're just afraid that they might attack us, because we've been visiting the state bureaus in Beijing countless times. After

all, the station is crowded with people, they don't dare do it.

Interview with Aunt F, 25 November 2016

This psychological pressure and fear of local retaliation is prevalent among petitioners. Aunt H from Helongjiang said that she was attacked by local mobs. She was forced to come to Beijing because of an unfair criminal case and had to ask the Ministry of Public Security for help. She said to us:

I went to the Ministry of Public Security on 9 March earlier this year and even they agreed that I was supposed to win this case. They sent a letter requesting my local government to re-investigate and do me justice. Then about 20 policemen from my home came to Beijing to arrest me. It's our local party secretary who demanded the vice mayor and the head of police to do this to me. I'm telling you, I'm too frightened to go home this whole year. They got me in March and I ran away. I have a home but I just can't go back.

Interview with Aunt H and Aunt I, 2 December 2016

Atomized Individuals

Most individual petitioners live an acutely atomized life. Distant from their close family and friends back home, they fail to establish any meaningful social network in Beijing either. Most of their relatives and friends do not support their xinfang travels as they are worried about their health and likely ill-treatment. Petitioners themselves also do not want to bother their family and friends with their plight in xinfang; they do not even bother telling them that they are still in Beijing, visiting as many national bureaus as they can. Some of them deliberately distance themselves from their close family, worrying that they might implicate the innocent. Some of the elderly petitioners are separated from their spouses, have lost contact with their children, and have to make a living on their own alone. Similarly, the middle-aged live a lonely life, like Ms. A from Henan and Mr. B from Heilongjiang, unmarried and isolated from their parents because of their long-term xinfang.

To make things worse, their life in Beijing as petitioners does not bring them any meaningful social connections or support. Though they do communicate frequently with their peers in grievances, their communication is unidirectional and unidimensional. They have a strong desire to speak but barely pay enough attention to listen. They simply need to pour out their miserable past to seek resonation from others, instead of actually providing

emotional support to each other like close friends. Their conversations almost exclusively revolve around xinfang and related topics, such as useful strategies, personal experiences of injustice, new government policies, recent news about xinfang, good ghostwriters at a reasonable price, etc. They are very cautious about their personal information and private life, and we hardly observed any emotional involvement in their conversations. Our field observations find a keen sense of self-protection among petitioners in their social communication.[4] They remain highly alert to strangers including other petitioners and, in most cases, avoid in-depth conversations with others. It is therefore very unlikely that they find support in a social group. Whether they are back home or here in Beijing, they are more like atomized individuals, only sharing the common identity of "petitioners" that has nothing to do with group attachment.

Overall, we can see how individual petitioners come to be trapped in a state of anomie as their structural encounters in xinfang practice have forced them to change their way of living. Of course, numerous temptations such as political pressure, financial stimuli, family's consolation, etc. in this field encourage them to quit their pursuit and they are indeed offered the option to give up and go back to their normal life. However, in reality, xinfang looks more like a dead end: once you choose it, there is no way out. Why is it so difficult to quit? What has trapped petitioners in this scenario? Or from a normalization perspective, the question might be: how do individual petitioners cope with their life of anomie and gradually habituate to it? We suggest that they are seeking a sense of safety and certainty in life through their constant xinfang practice, rebuilding the norms via strategic methods of active self-justification.

Formation of Norms

> *It's not easy to be a petitioner. I once told the leader in our county that I hope I would never ever have to go to Beijing in my whole life. If my problem could be properly solved, I would never go to Beijing. For me, there's no good memory about Beijing. I can even say that I hate Beijing. I don't want to come back ever again… But you know in life, you just need something to hope for, and this is my hope. I'm just hoping my grievance one day would be resolved.*

[4] This is closely related to their structural encounters. Many petitioners told us that local functionaries paid people to act like lawyers or petitioners to approach them and spy on them.

Interview with Aunt F, 25 November 2016

This is what Aunt F told us in our conversation. When we asked her if she would identify herself as a petitioner, she said she never thought it that way and that she was only an ordinary person like any other, an ordinary rural woman. She did not want to be classified as a petitioner because it was not what she desired. Her view of being a petitioner more or less speaks for a large group of individual petitioners like herself. Our conversations with them were full of their desperate expressions of their miseries, grievances, and hopelessness. For most of them, life is far from satisfactory. More often than not, xinfang means agony and torture to them. However, they always hold on to the faintest hope and continue to persevere through all these difficulties. We find a sense of inconsistency in many interviews with petitioners, as Aunt F said above: our life is miserable; we do not know what is out there in the future, but we never regret it and will keep doing this. As mentioned earlier, the strategy of seeking benefits through xinfang does not work well for these petitioners. They are now resorting to an ethical motive fundamentally aimed at justice recovery. This ethical turn leads them to justify their xinfang activities and helps them rebuild norms of their everyday life. Through our observations and interviews we have found that the re-establishment of norms on both individual and societal levels mainly relies on processes of meaning making and self-construction. These processes organize and integrate various cognitive factors effectively into a well-functioning mechanism in order to achieve self-adjustment in their plight. Thus, xinfang is no longer to blame for anomie, but instead, it is the new norm of their life. And it is in this sense that we suggest their xinfang life has literally become "normalized."

Meaning Making: Cognitive Justification Based on Self-Regulation

The first step of cognitive justification is to hold on to the belief in "justice" and establish a set of self-norms, fundamentally through the production of symbolic meaning to make up for the negated logic of economic rationality in normalized xinfang practice. A firm belief in ethical values is present in all of our informants, and they attribute these symbolic values to their xinfang practice. Aunt G first came to Beijing in 2000 but failed, inevitably. Over the years she had been staying in the provincial city Taiyuan for complaint visits. It was in 2013, when President Xi took over the country, that she regained hope and decided to return to Beijing again. Now she is counting on

President Xi for justice.

Researcher: *Your arduous journey back and forth with all the tortures, what does it mean to you? How do you see it helping with your life and your case?*

Aunt G: *Nothing at all. It's just an idea, that I have to fight for it. You see these people, these badass from my town, said to me, "go to hell." I said I'm on the side of justice. These monsters, they didn't even think it's them that should go to hell, and instead cursed me! If I didn't sue them, no one sued them, they would continue to play bad and never get what they deserve, and the society would end up in chaos, right?*

Researcher: *But what if, in three or five years, or even ten years, your case remained unsolved? Would you regret that all your sufferings over these years are all for nothing?*

Aunt G: *No, I don't regret it. I have to fight him. As government officials, you never should have done that to your people. I've said, I'm here for justice, I did nothing wrong. If people don't fight against these villains and their misbehaviors, the world will be doomed, everyone can go killing and bullying people.*

Interview with Aunt G, 25 November 2016

Her opinion resonates widely among petitioners. In their self-narrations, this symbolic meaning of ethical values is the essential motive for their long-term xinfang activities. Many of them told us they would carry on despite any difficulties simply because they believe they are on the right side of justice. Aunt H from Heilongjiang is the only one among the informants who has support from family and friends. Her life depends on assistance from her relatives.

It's all because of my big family that I can carry on. They sympathize with my predicament. My sisters can take care of me in one way or another. They agree that there are so many dark sides in society today. Local governments are even more bossy than Xi Jinping. They never ask me to quit, because they know I'm right. They all support me, because I have my reason. Otherwise I won't be here for all the sufferings.

Interview with Aunt H and Aunt I, 2 December 2016

But obviously "justice" or "reason" as symbols are ambiguous and uncertain. It is in fact very unlikely that what petitioners really need will ever

be finally realized, be it financial compensation, juridical justice, or moral reputation, and deep down, petitioners themselves know it as well, after everything they have experienced in their encounters with the system. When asked about their expectations regarding their xinfang complaints, most of them said that they "hadn't thought that far" or "can't tell what's gonna happen at the moment." They just feel that "gradually things will get better" or that "we believe in the party and the government, eventually they will help us sort things out." Neither have they planned carefully about how to go back to their previously normal life after their grievances are finally redressed, nor have they given any thought to the feasibility of resolving their problem in reality. In fact, had they really planned their life rationally, they would have had to give up xinfang long ago. For this reason, they have to draw sustenance from a remote, symbolic meaning of justice, detached from its actual effectiveness.

This mechanism of how petitioners hold on to ethical and moral values has been discussed in previous literature. For example, Wu (2010, pp.202-203) argues that personal life experience, moral codes in everyday life, and the passion provoked by resistance can actually have a decisive impact in contentious acts. Ying (2007b, p.108) conceptualizes these unspecified factors of irrationality as *qi* in Chinese culture, "a representation of self-value at all costs in order to fight against humiliation, despise, and regain recognition and dignity." However, these studies hardly analyze how these symbolic meanings of moral values actually work.[5] From a normalization perspective, our observations find that there is more to the production of meaning as an internal cognitive mechanism within individuals: petitioners have learnt to form a system of norms based on the meaning of "justice" to achieve self-regulation.

On the one hand, they avoid xinfang activities considered to be in the "gray area" of illegal practice, adhering to their legal aim of justice. Such cognition lends itself to their firm anti-bribery stance. Aunt F told us she was once offered a sum of money by local xinfang functionaries but she refused. She insisted that she wanted her case solved and taking the money would not

[5] Han and Tian (2015) suggest an explanation of social cognition from a social psychological perspective. They argue that petitioners have formed a special cultural cognition of selective attention in the particular circumstances of everyday living, which further enhances their cognitive perceptions, thus supporting their long-term xinfang activities. Although they try to analyze the processes in which "qi" is transformed into a continuous motive for xinfang resistance, their explanation puts more focus on social cognition in a psychological sense, which seems to result in a lack of attention regarding how xinfang facts are constructed through individual psychological activities.

have helped. She would have to come back to Beijing again and that is not what she wanted. Ms. A from Henan told us she had never tried illegal xinfang. When asked about the possibility of her receiving some benefits by doing xinfang in this way, she said:

> *It's not important how much they repay me. I didn't break the law. Now you punished me with laws and pronounced me guilty, of course you should do me justice and prove me innocent.*
>
> Interview with Ms. A, 25 November 2016

Uncle J from Shanghai has been petitioning for decades. He knows well about this strategy but he is firmly against it:

> *Yeah I know. Some of us would take it. They said it's the "stability fund." Usually it's several grand. If you protest really hard, you might get ten grand or even more. But I don't want that. You have to redress my case. What the hell does that work with a few grand of money eh? They just don't want to help you, they just protract your problem so that they never need to deal with it. They'd rather give you money. Do you see what it means?! They are just rogues and embezzlers!*
>
> Interview with Uncle J, 2 December 2016

Their attitude is a tactical response to their experience in reality. As mentioned earlier, they have learnt from their communications with their fellow petitioners that you do not always get away with the money government officials so "kindly" offer. Very likely they would have to pay for it in one way or another. That is why they no longer trust economic motives.

On the other hand, in order to maintain their legality and justifications, many petitioners strictly conduct their xinfang activities within the safe zone. They try their best to avoid directly challenging the discourse and power of the state such as by transgressing the perceived political red line. For example, nearly all of the informants disagree with illegal xinfang and refuse to take radical actions. When asked about protests in Tiananmen Square and Zhongnanhai, Aunt I from Heilongjiang said:

> *I think I have righteous reason and I'm not supposed to go there for illegal activities, don't you agree? I have the legal right to protest, why would I violate the law and go to these places?*
>
> Interview with Aunt H and Aunt I, 2 December 2016

Aunt F shared her opinion on this question:

We always think, well, the minor complaints of ours do not deserve somewhere like Tiananmen. There are people from all over the world there, and you are humiliating yourself in front of these foreigners. They'd laugh at you, "Wow look! That's typical Chinese!" We don't want that. It does no good to any of us, let alone to our country. Not just the big things. Think about the officials, isn't it embarrassing? Think about those police in Beijing, in that Tiananmen police station, isn't it humiliating?

Interview with Aunt F, 25 November 2016

Yet at the same time we also find that some petitioners have indeed tried radical actions. Fed up with hopeless xinfang visits, they went to protest in Tiananmen and Zhongnanhai and then returned to legal xinfang after learning some hard lessons. Their conformity to the legal system is not entirely voluntary: petitioners learn their lesson, whether from their own experience or interactions with other petitioners in their daily communications, gradually change their strategy for their encounters with different government sections at different levels, and try to behave in the best possible way. This is how they learn self-regulation, through an interactive process of structural encounters and individual actions. They keep trying, keep failing, and eventually choose to adhere to legal xinfang visits, fighting local injustice with national policies and laws and institutionalized protests. This way, they are able to legitimize their behaviors and find the mental support to carry on. How they circumvent political risks can be seen as a technique of justification from the normalization perspective. Neither spontaneous or forced, it is a tactic developed through long-term practice. In avoiding any illegal activities that might harm the legitimacy of their actions, petitioners are carefully trying to maintain a balance with the state. Thus, the cognitive justification based on self-regulation is a meaningful attempt to self-adjust when economic rationality fails, and it is in this sense that we argue the cognitive change itself is rational.

Self-Construction: Cognitive Justification based on Social Norms

To further examine their self-regulation, a large group of petitioners expand their re-establishment of norms from the level of self to social recognition, i.e. construct a self that complies with the core values most commonly praised among public, via presenting themselves as a heroic figure and taking active actions to live up to it.

In pursuit of symbolic justice, petitioners attempt to construct a self-image with heroic virtues, moving beyond the ethical rationale to the political rationale of fighting on behalf of a larger group for their rightful interest. This phenomenon also resonates with previous studies of grassroots protestors and collective xinfang that both suggest a willingness to speak for a wider public and to take a leading responsibility in collective actions among protesters (Cheng 2012; Ying 2007a). We observed similar mentalities, albeit more prevalent on the level of self-recognition in regulating or moralizing individual acts rather than effective organizing activities that are socially recognized in collective practice.

Uncle J's self-narration provides a good example. He was convicted of "counter-revolutionary crimes" in the 1980s and had started xinfang in Beijing in the 1990s when he was released from prison. As time went on, he accrued more cases for complaints, including land expropriation, local corruption, and grievances of other petitioners. He proudly spoke of his participation in other organized collective xinfang activities in Shanghai, saying that he wanted to be of some help and to have their back. Now he is content with his life of offering others advice while petitioning for his own cases. After more than twenty years of xinfang, Uncle J now sees himself as a leader in grassroots protests. Our interview took place when he was in the middle of drafting a manifesto:

> *You see this stuff I'm writing, after I finish it I will send it to the media, and all the petitioners. I wrote I'm speaking for all the people in this country, for all the petitioners in our country. Now that we are here in Beijing for xinfang, we shall regard it as city tours, as revolutions. We're just comforting ourselves with this spirit, aren't we? We must have the spirit of revolutionary optimism, that we are petitioning, we are fighting, for people's dignity, for our future generations, for a better society!*
>
> Interview with Uncle J, 22 December 2016

Uncle J's construction of his heroic self-image is predominantly romantic. He tries to exaggerate how he himself represents a larger population in order to establish a socially recognized leadership which may well reflect an abstract self-perception on a higher societal and moral level. Uncle J's self-construction may seem radical in his rhetoric, but this general mentality is prevalent among long-term petitioners. It shows an alternative strategy of constructing a leader's identity through the simple mechanism of cognitive adjustment. They see themselves as representing the groups of

people who have suffered the same types of injustice and reframe their highly personal and specialized problems to achieve wider resonance and social relevance. This way, their atomized life is rationalized in their self-perception: they have abandoned their family against all odds, not for their own private interest, but for a wider ambition of social justice; everything that seems unreasonable—their loneliness, their sacrifice, their persistence, etc.—has now been attributed with higher symbolic values and more important social meanings.

In addition, some of the petitioners we know are active participants in various cultural activities for self-improvement, such as going to public lectures in law schools around Beijing, speaking with professional scholars and lawyers, making acquaintances with the media and researchers, going to the libraries, studying legal knowledge, etc. We often came across several petitioners carrying one or two heavy law books with them in an attempt to learn more about laws in China. Many petitioners mentioned renowned xinfang researchers like Professor He Weifang and Yu Jianrong in our conversations, quoting their words and arguments to support their protests. Some of them said they were able to contact recognized media like Voice of America and Beijing News when necessary. They also talked about articles written by social activists in China like Cui Yongyuan and Chen Yiwen, sharing their opinions with us with self-confidence.

All the active participation in what seems to them a higher level of cultural practice, in fact, appears to be cognitive attempts of self-persuasion. We hardly saw any actual improvement in our deep conversations with them. For example, the two petitioners with law books spent most of their afternoon chatting with passers-by, with barely any look at these challenging books in front of them, which were only opened to the first few pages. However, there was a strong air of self-pride when they spoke of their cultural activities. They were convinced that this cultural engagement could broaden their mind, raise their intellectual level, and help them make contacts with social celebrities with prestigious status. In this sense, xinfang indeed can improve their subaltern social identity and thus serves spiritual satisfaction with a raised moral value of their practice and an improved self-image. To conclude, the romantic construction of the self not only justifies their problematic life of anomie, but also raises it to a higher level for the greater good. In their perception, they are no longer a subaltern loser who has allowed xinfang to ruin their normal life. Instead, they are grassroots heroes, warriors for justice, social activists fighting for the wider public and a better society. This perceived self and reality thus provides a reasonable explanation

for all the hardships they must undergo throughout their lives, while also sustaining their enduring xinfang activities.

Conclusion

Based on ethnographic observations in Dongzhuang and in-depth interviews with petitioners, we find that the formation of long-term individual petitioners, which constitutes an important part of the xinfang phenomenon as we see it today in China, can in fact be understood as a re-normalization of their xinfang life in anomie. In their encounters with the structure/system, individuals try to rebuild the norms through self-judgement and self-decisions in particular circumstances. At the beginning, due to the structural dynamics in the bureaucratic system and the political system prioritizing rigid stability, petitioners constantly interact with government strategies of suppression, procrastination, or bribes. They try to haggle with different government departments or, if have to, stay in opposition with them, which leaves them in a situation of serious plight and anomie. Structural encounters have forced them into normalized xinfang regarding its temporality, which is the first step.

Furthermore, to deal with various crises in their everyday life, petitioners have to find a way to rebuild meaning in their lives, and our field study suggests that the main strategy of doing so is cognitive reconstruction that justifies their xinfang practice. On the one hand, they establish a system of norms for self-regulation based on the ethical values of symbolized justice, which constantly reminds them to act in a legal manner, reject inducements from local functionaries, and avoid any conflicts with the state. This way, when the logic of economic rationality fails in normalized xinfang, petitioners are able to develop an alternative strategy to live with this ineffective system and support their life of long-term xinfang. On the other hand, they weave socially recognized moral values into the construction of their self-image in order to raise their social status as the grassroots and attribute social values to their seemingly meaningless persistence in pursuing xinfang, albeit more likely in a self-satisfactory and imaginative way. These cognitive activities incorporate the impulsive and transient motives and a variety of irrational elements aforementioned in previous research into a more or less well-developed mechanism of socio-cultural cognition that is able to support the enduring practice of xinfang. These activities are, therefore, active attempts rather than passive struggles to rebuild norms, i.e.

norms and regulations that hold xinfang as enduring and sustainable, thus complete the second and essential step of the normalization.

In suggesting an explanation of cognitive justification from a normalization perspective, this article contributes to the existing literature by weaving together dispersed points from previous xinfang studies into a complete framework: the "qi" as the initial motive and various irrational elements necessary for cultural cognition (e.g. experience, culture, ethics, emotions, personal gains and loss, etc.) are transformed into value orientations that individuals can actually live up to through everyday practices. This framework rationalizes all the emotional and even radical impulses so that they have an enduring effect to support normalized xinfang as the very norm.

Furthermore, this article incorporates various tactics of "problematization" from existing empirical studies into one consistent framework of "justification." Previous scholarship has categorized two different techniques of problematization: reframing their grievances upward in resonance with the state agenda in order to promote proceedings within governments (Ying 2001), or downward in consistency with grassroots tradition for purposes of social mobilization (Dong 2010). In fact, both aim to moderate the problematic nature of xinfang practice and to stay in line with the existing institutional and cultural systems. In other words, they are strategies of *external* justification. The activities of cognitive construction in this article, then, can be seen as strategies of *internal* justification, including an *inward* technique based on self-identification that incorporates xinfang practice in their own structure of living and perceptive framework by balancing their losses in material interest and social support with symbolic meanings, and an *outward* technique based on social recognition that attributes their self-image with common social values in order to increase their social status in their own perception. To conclude, the argument of micro cognitive construction from a normalization perspective puts forward a coherent framework to integrate the variety of cognitive elements and action strategies that had been discussed in previous studies, thus providing a more convincing answer to address the xinfang phenomenon as a complex of ongoing social processes in contemporary China.

(*Submitted*: December 2, 2019; *Revised*: February 21, 2020; *Accepted*: February 21, 2020)

References

Chang, Qian. 2012. (In Chinese) "Yinglixingshangfang, yinglixingjingji yu jicengshehuicanyu [Profitable Petition, Profitable Management and Grassroots Social Participation]." *Dongnanxueshu* [*Southeastern Academic Research*] 3: 120-127.

Chen, Feng. 2014. (In Chinese) "Cong kangzhengzhengzhi, dicengzhengzhi, dao feikangzhengzhengzhi: Nongmingshangfang yanjiushijiao de jianzhi, fansi yu tuozhan [From Contentious Politics, Subaltern Politics to Non-contentious Politics: An Examination, Reflection and Expansion of Perspectives in Farmer Petition Research]." *Nanjingnongyedaxue Xuebao (Shehuikexueban)* [*Journal of Nanjing Agricultural University (Social Science Edition)*] 14(1): 20-27.

Cheng, Xiuying. 2012. (In Chinese) "Xiaosanshi ezhi: Zhongguo laogong zhengzhi de bijiaogean yanjiu [Dispersive Containment: A Comparative Case Study of Labor Politics in China]." *Shehui* [*Chinese Journal of Sociology*] 32 (5): 194-218.

Dong, Haijun. 2010. (In Chinese) "Yishi boyi: Jiceng shehui weiquan xingwei de xinjieshi kuangjia [Shi-Based Game: A New Explanatory Framework for Right-Safeguarding Action in Grassroots Society]." *Shehui* [*Chinese Journal of Sociology*] 30(5): 96-120.

Feng, Shizheng. 2012. (In Chinese) "Guojiazhengquanjianshe yu xinzhongguo xinfangzhidu de xingcheng ji yanbian [State Building and the Installation and Change of the Xinfang System in China since 1949]." *Shehuixueyanjiu*[*Sociological Studies*] 4: 25-47.

Han, Xiaoyan and Xiaoli Tian. 2015. (In Chinese) "Dangxiaqingjing, wenhua yu xuanzexingzhuyi: changqishangfanghu de renzhi [Expedient Context, Culture, and Selective Attention: The Cognition of Long-term Petitioners]." *Qinghuadaxue Xuebao (Zhexueshehuikexueban)* [*Journal of Tsinghua University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 30(2): 59-67.

He, Xuefeng. 2011. (In Chinese) "Guojia yu nongmin guanxi de sancengfenxi: yi nongminshangfang wei wentiyishi zhi laiyuan [Three-dimensional Analysis of the Relationship between the State and the Peasants: Originated from the Problem of Peasants' Petitions]." *Tianjin Shehui Kexue* [*Tianjin Social Sciences*, no. 4 (2011): 68-72.

Jiao, Changquan. 2010. (In Chinese) "Zhengquanxuanfu yu shichangkunju: yizhong nongminshangfangxingwei de jieshikuangjia ['Floating' Government and 'Gridlocked' Market: A Frame of Explanation for Farmer Petition]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (6): 39-51.

King, Gary., Pan, Jennifer and Margaret Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2): 326-343.

Lin, Huihuang. 2014. (In Chinese) "Shejingshangfang yu zhuanxingzhongguo de

fazhikunjing [Police-related Petition and the Legal Dilemma in Transforming China]." *Fazhiyushehuifazhan* [*Law and Social Development*] (2): 5-19.

Liu, Neng. 2004. (In Chinese) "Yuanhenjieshi, dongyuanjiegou he lixingxuanze: youguan zhongguo dushidiqu jitixingdong fashengkenengxing de fenxi [Explanation of Resentment, Mobilization Structure, and Rational Choice: Analyzing the Possibilities of Collective Actions in Chinese Urban Areas]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (4): 57-70.

_____. 2008. (In Chinese) "Dangdaizhongguo quntixing jitixingdong de jidian lilunsikao [Some Theoretical Thoughts on Mass Collective Actions in Contemporary China: Observations Based on Case Studies]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (3): 110-123.

_____. 2009. (In Chinese) "Dangdaizhongguo zhuanxingshehui zhongde jitixingdong: duiguoqu sanshinianjian sanci jitixingdonglangchao de yigehuigu [Collective Actions in Contemporary China of Social Transformation: A Review of Three Waves of Collective Actions in the Past Three Decades]." *Xuehai* [*Academic Bimetrics*] (4): 146-152.

Liu, Zhengqiang. 2014. (In Chinese). "Xinfang de rongliangfenxi: lijie zhongguo xinfangzhili jiqixiandu de yizhongsilu [Analyzing Xinfang's 'Volume': A New Perspective of Understanding Xinfang Governance and Its Limit in China]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (1): 130-143.

O'Brien, K.J. and Lianjiang Li. 2006. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shen, Duanfeng. 2010. (In Chinese) "Xiangcunzhiquan yu fenleizhili: Nongminshangfangxingwei luojibianqian de yige jieshikuangjia [Village Administrative Jurisdiction and Assorted Governance: A Paradigm Shift in Farmer Petition Studies]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (6): 5-23.

Shi, Fayong. 2005. (In Chinese) "Guanxiwangluo yu dangdaizhongguo jicengshehuiyundong: yi yigejiequ huanbaoyundong geanweili [Guanxi Networks and Grassroots Social Movements in Contemporary China: A Case Study of An Environmental Movement]." *Xuehai* [*Academic Bimetrics*] (3): 76-88.

Tian, Xianhong. 2010. (In Chinese) "Congweiquan daomouli: nongminshangfang xingweiluojibianqian de yige jieshikuangjia [From Right-protection to Benefit-seeking: A Frame of Explanation for the Changing Logic behind Farmer Petition]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (6): 24-38.

Tian, Xianhong and Changquan Jiao. 2012. (In Chinese) "Shehuizhongxin fanshixia de nongminshangfang yanjiu jiqi tuozhan [The Petition Study and Its Expandition in Society-Centric Paradigm]." *Huazhongkejidaxue Xuebao (Shehuikexueban)* [*Journal of Huazhong University of Science Technology (Social Science Edition)*] 26(3): 54-61.

Tsinghua University Research Project, 2010. (In Chinese) "Yi liyibiaoda zhiduhua shixian shehuide changzhijiuan [Enduring Social Stability through Institutionalized Interest Articulation]."

Wu, Changqing. 2010. (In Chinese). "Congcelue daolunli: dui yifakangzheng de pipinxing taolun [From Strategies to Ethics: A Critique of the 'Rightful Resistance']." *Shehui* [*Chinese Journal of Sociology*] 30(5): 198-214.

Wu, Yi. 2007. (In Chinese). "Quanli-liyi de jiegouzhiwang yu nongmin quntixingliyi de biaodakunjing: duiyiqi shichangjiufenanli de fenxi ['Nets of the Power-Rights Structure' and Dilemma of Peasants' Group-rights Expression: An Analysis of a Gravel Pit Dispute]." *Shehuixueyanjiu* [*Sociological Studies*] (5): 21-54.

Yang, Shanhua and Feiyu Sun. 2005. (In Chinese). "Zuowei yiyitanjiu de shendufangtan [Depth-Interviewing as Meaning Exploring]." *Shehuixueyanjiu* [*Sociological Studies*] (5): 53-68.

Yin, Limin. 2012. (In Chinese) "Biaoyanxing shangfang: zuoweiruozhe de shangfangren de wuqi ['Performative Shangfang': 'Weapons' of Petitioners as the Weak]." *Nanchangdaxue Xuebao (Renwenshehuikexueban)* [*Journal of Nanchang University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*] 43(1): 18-24.

Ying, Xing. 2001. (In Chinese) *Daheyimin Shangfang De Gushi* [*Stories of Petitioners of the Great River Migrants.* Beijing: Sanlianchubanshe [Joint Publishing].

_____. 2004. (In Chinese) "Zuowei teshu xingzhengjiuji de xinfangjiuji [Xinfang Assistance as a Special Type of Administrative Assistance]." Faxueyanjiu [*Chinese Journal of Law*] (3): 58-71.

_____. 2007a. (In Chinese) "Caogendongyuan yu nongminquntiliyi de biaodajizhi: Sigegean de bijiaoyanjiu [Grassroots Mobilization and the Mechanism of Interest Expression of the Peasants Group: A Comparative Study of Four Cases]." *Shehuixueyanjiu* [*Sociological Studies*] (2): 1-23.

_____. 2007b. (In Chinese) "Qi yu zhongguoxiangcun jitixingdong de zaishengchan ['Qi' and the Reproduction of Collective Actions in Rural China]." *Kaifangshidai* [*Open Times*] (6): 106-120.

Yu, Jianrong. 2003. (In Chinese) "Nongmin youzuzhi kangzheng jiqi zhengzhifengxian: hunansheng hxian diaocha [Organized Peasant Resistance and Its Political Risks: A Case Study in County H, Hunan Province]." *Zhanlueyuguanli* [*Strategy and Management*] (3): 1-16.

_____. 2004. (In Chinese) "Dangqiannongmin weiquanhuodong de yige jieshikuangjia [An Explanatory Framework of Contemporary Farmers' Right-defending Activities]." *Shehuixueyanjiu* [*Sociological Studies*] (2): 49-55.

_____. 2010. (In Chinese) *Kangzhengxingzhengzhi: Zhongguo Zhengzhi Shehuixue Jichuwenti* [*Contentious Politics: Fundamental Issues in Chinese Political Sociology*]. Beijing: Renmin Press.

Zhang, Yongjun. 2011. (In Chinese) "Kongjian, yuanhen he fankang: beijingshi moushangfangcun de geanyanjiu [Space, Grievance, and Resistance: A Case Study of Shangfang Village in Metropolitan Beijing]." Beijing: Peking University

Bachelor Dissertation.
Zhe, Xiaoye. 2008. (In Chinese) "Hezuo yu feiduikang dizhi: Ruozhe de Renwuqi [Cooperation and Unconfrontational Resistance: Tenacious Weapons of the Weak]." *Shehuixueyanjiu* [*Sociological Studies*] (3): 1-28.

RUICHEN ZHANG is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Cambridge. Her PhD thesis works on discursive practices of polysemic humour on Chinese internet. Her research studies language and power in the digital age, with a special focus on power struggles and meaning making in relation to cultural identities, political communication, and social contentions in China. [E-mail: rz292@cam.ac.uk; mailing address: Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, 16 Mill Lane, CB2 1SB England]

NENG LIU is professor of sociology at Peking University and deputy dean of the department of sociology at Peking University. He is also a member of the editorial committee of the Journal of Asian Sociology. His main research interests include social movements and collective behaviour, urban studies, social change and social problems, youth subcultures and deviance. His recent work focuses on the micro-level adaptive practices of various social actors, such as urban migrant youth, disabled persons, people living with haemophilia, and urban homeless people, centering on the theoretical concepts of human agency and cultural embeddedness. [Email: liun@pku.edu.cn; mailing address: Department of Sociology, Peking University, #5 Yiheyuan Road, Haidian District, Beijing 100871, China]

Appendix

Table 1
Basic Information of Informants

Name	Gender	Age	Province of Residence	Reasons for Xinfang Complaint(s)	First Xinfang Visit in Beijing	Date of Interview
A	Female	40	Henan	Illegal custody	2003	17, 25 Nov 2016
B	Male	40-50	Heilongjiang	Work injury	2015	18 Nov 2016
C	Male	65	Heilongjiang	Land expropriation	2012	18 Nov 2016
D	Female	60-70	Shandong	Demolition	Unknown	18 Nov 2016
E	Female	60-70	Anhui	Birth planning	1994	24 Nov 2016
F	Female	50	Shanxi	Land expropriation	2009	25 Nov 2016
G	Female	60-70	Shanxi	Criminal injustice	2009	25 Nov 2016
H	Female	56	Heilongjiang	Criminal injustice	2013	2 Dec 2016
I	Female	65	Heilongjiang	Criminal injustice	2001	2 Dec 2016
J	Male	69	Shanghai	Wronged conviction	1997	8 Dec 2016
K	Female	50-60	Hubei	Demolition	2005	8 Dec 2016
L	Female	49	Hubei	Criminal injustice	2015	9 Dec 2016
M	Male	50-60	Heilongjiang	Unpaid wages	1998	22 Dec 2016