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Discursive channeling: evidence from newspaper responses to anti-waste incineration protests in China

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ABSTRACT

Discourse is a critical tool for authoritarian states to control social protests. The literature highlights a hostility–sympathy dichotomy in official discourse, viewing official discourse as either repressing or facilitating protests. In this paper, we propose a more nuanced framework by introducing the concept of discursive channeling. Apart from facilitating protests, official sympathetic discourse can also be used to channel protests—redirecting radical claims into more moderate ones. Drawing on newspapers’ responses to anti-waste incineration protests in China from 2002 to 2021, we identify the early 2010s as a watershed moment. While hostile discourse declined, sympathetic discourse surged—however, its content fundamentally changed. While pre-2010 sympathetic discourse recognized the major claim concerning decision-making on the siting of waste incineration plants, post-2010 sympathetic discourse redirected the focus toward a minor and more moderate claim concerning environmental monitoring and compensation. As a form of indirect repression, this discursive channeling elucidates how authoritarian states mitigate the upward-scale shift in protests and why repression intensified in Xi Jinping’s era without backfiring.

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Introduction

Official discourse is a critical tool for authoritarian states to control social protests. Official discourse on protests, primarily conveyed through the media, can target a wide audience, including not only protesters but also the general public. Moreover, the mechanisms through which it influences behavior are diverse, encompassing not only persuasion but also signaling the political risks associated with taking certain actions (Carter & Carter, 2021; Huang, 2015).

In the literature, authoritarian states’ discourse on protests has been characterized by a hostility–sympathy dichotomy. Hostile discourse includes downplaying or dismissing the grievances of protesters (Du et al., 2022; Liu & Lo, 2022; Zeng et al.,

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2017), polishing the government's image (Xu & Sun, 2021; Zeng et al., 2019), and stigmatizing protesters (Arnon et al., 2023; Edel & Josua, 2018; Jung & Zeng, 2022; Ma & Weiss, 2023; Ozen, 2014). Occasionally, states also permit sympathetic discourse, including the recognition of protest grievances, claims, and actions, as well as criticism of targeted authorities (Huang et al., 2019; Steinhardt, 2015, 2017).

While hostile discourse is intended to repress protests by persuading people of the merits of governments and the demerits of protesters or by signaling a high risk of government repression, sympathetic discourse is intended to facilitate protests by persuading people of the legitimacy of protests or signaling a low risk of being repressed (Huang et al., 2019; Steinhardt, 2017). Empirical evidence has also suggested that sympathetic discourse has facilitated the occurrence and success of many social protests (Liu, 2016; Tang & Côté, 2021; Zeng & Huang, 2015).

Apart from facilitating protests, we argue that official sympathetic discourse could also be used to channel protests—redirecting radical claims into more moderate ones. We draw evidence from newspaper responses to protests against the construction of waste incineration plants in China. Since the early 2000s, the Chinese state has promoted waste incineration as a more environmentally friendly and land-efficient alternative to the traditional method of landfilling to address increasing municipal solid waste (MSW) and the skyrocketing price of land. However, top-down promotion faced considerable opposition from Chinese citizens because of the environmental risks associated with burning waste.

We selected anti-waste incineration protests as our study focus for two reasons. First, protests against the construction of environmentally risky projects, such as waste incineration plants, could involve diverse claims that constitute alternative solutions to the same grievances. The central and most prominent claim concerns the siting of waste incineration plants. This claim challenges top-down local government decision-making and demands democratic participation in the decision-making process (Steinhardt & Wu, 2016). This *claim regarding decision-making* exhibits an upward-scale shift to a broader, more radical *claim regarding policymaking*. It demands changes in pro-waste incineration policy as a result of the involvement of middle-class and civil society actors (Bondes, 2019; Johnson, 2013; Lang & Xu, 2013; Tang, 2018). Nevertheless, certain protesters retreat to a more moderate *claim regarding policy implementation* (namely, emissions monitoring) *and compensation* (Huang et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2018; Li, 2019).

The literature situates these three types of protest claims in a hierarchy of threats to authoritarian stability. It is widely agreed that rule-based and economic claims pose the least threat to authoritarian stability and are even regime-serving in facilitating policy implementation (Cai, 2008; Huang et al., 2019; Lorentzen, 2013; O'Brien & Li, 2006). In the case of anti-waste incineration protests, the claims regarding decision-making and policymaking challenged the state's policy goal of developing waste incineration at the local and central levels, respectively. In contrast, the claims regarding policy implementation and compensation aligned more closely with the policy goal. Moreover, protest actions supporting this claim were more likely to be channeled into institutionalized participation and economic bargaining.

Second, Chinese society has witnessed a series of anti-waste incineration protests over the past two decades, enabling us to examine temporal changes in official

discursive responses to these protests. Over the years, the Chinese political landscape has undergone many significant political changes, such as leadership change, more centralized environmental governance (Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Gilley, 2012), and the marginalization of critical journalism (Jaros & Pan, 2018). Therefore, the temporal changes in discursive strategies further enable us to suggest how these changes are related to broader shifts in the Chinese political landscape.

We web-scraped and manually coded 1,023 waste incineration-related articles published between 2002 and 2021 in 194 Chinese newspapers. We coded the discourse that dismissed the environmental grievances of people and promoted waste incineration as an environmentally friendly technology as hostile discourse and the discourse that recognized environmental grievances as sympathetic discourse. Within the sympathetic discourse, three subcodes recognize the three claims regarding policymaking, decision-making, and policy implementation and compensation. We also compiled an original dataset of 32 large-scale anti-waste incineration protests that had at least 1,000 participants and were covered by at least two credible media sources during this period.

We found that the early 2010s marked a watershed moment in official discourse. In response to the seven protests that occurred between 2006 and 2010, 70% and 41% of the newspaper articles published during this period contained hostile and sympathetic discourses, respectively. In response to the remaining 25 protests that occurred between 2013 and 2019, hostile discourse decreased to 50%, and sympathetic discourse increased dramatically to 74%. Moreover, the protest claims recognized by the sympathetic discourse underwent significant changes. In the first period, the claim regarding decision-making dominated, accounting for 52% of the articles with sympathetic discourse. In contrast, in the second period, sympathetic discourse became more selective in targeting the minor and more moderate claims regarding policy implementation and compensation, accounting for 82% of the articles with sympathetic discourse.

This change was further verified by analyzing the meaning of NIMBY (i.e. not in my backyard), a term globally used to label social opposition to the siting of unpleasant public projects. In this Chinese case, NIMBY was not widely used until the early 2010s. Since then, instead of stigmatizing protesters (McAvoy, 1999) or promoting democratic participation (Mannarini & Roccato, 2011), "NIMBY" co-occurred most often with the framing of environmental monitoring and compensation. In addition to qualitative discourse analysis, we used a series of logistic regressions to validate this temporal shift and to show that it was not a gradual but a sudden change in the early 2010s.

This significant rise in official sympathy with the claim regarding policy implementation and compensation suggests that sympathetic official discourse has played an increasingly salient role in channeling protests since the early 2010s. Among the possible explanations concerning leadership change, environmental governance, and media practices, we believe that one of the most plausible explanations is the state's greater need to suppress claims that challenge the policy goal of developing waste incineration. This greater need resulted from a variety of factors, including policy change (developing waste incineration was significantly prioritized in the state's agenda), a more empowered anti-waste incineration civil society, and the political economy characteristics of incineration projects.

This article is organized into five sections. First, it provides a theoretical discussion on selective sympathy and protest channeling under authoritarianism. It then introduces the research methods and data. The findings section employs both qualitative and quantitative analyses to demonstrate the rise of discursive channeling since the early 2010s. Next, possible explanations for the temporal changes are proposed. The final section discusses the effects of discursive channeling.

Selective sympathy and protest channeling under authoritarianism

Why would an authoritarian state respond to protests with sympathy? What are the underlying state rationales? While sympathetic discourse is conventionally believed to facilitate protests (Huang et al., 2019; Liu, 2016; Steinhardt, 2017; Tang & Côté, 2021; Zeng & Huang, 2015), we argue that this understanding needs a subtler perspective. One important reason is that sympathy is always characterized by remarkable selectivity. Many studies have noted this selective sympathy and, more broadly, the selective accommodation of protests. These discussions have focused mainly on protests across a variety of issues. In these protests, the claims, the core element of protests, have been categorized along different dimensions, including economic or political, rule-based or non-rule-based, and local interest- or public interest-oriented claims (Cai, 2006; Chen, 2000; O'Brien & Li, 2006). This selectivity is reflected in greater sympathy with more moderate claims.

In contrast, less attention has been given to protests concerning the same issue. On the one hand, claims could likewise be multiple along these dimensions. As Benford and Snow (2000) noted, protest framing is a dynamic process contingent on various factors, including political opportunities and the participation of different social groups. On the other hand, multiple claims are not independent but constitute alternative solutions to the same grievances.

In this context, selective sympathy for more moderate claims regarding the same protest issue reflects the state's intention to channel claims. According to Earl (2003, 2004), channeling is a form of less coercive and less direct repression that intends to transform rather than eradicate protests. Here, channeling *via* official sympathetic discourse refers specifically to transforming protest claims. By persuading people to seek more moderate solutions to their grievances or signaling the lower political risk of making more moderate claims, sympathetic discourse could redirect radical claims into more moderate ones.

Notably, the repressive implications of sympathetic discourse should be distinguished from those of hostile discourse. While hostile discourse is intended to demobilize protest actions, sympathetic discourse targets the making of claims rather than mobilization. Certainly, the moderation of claims may further lead to the moderation and even the demobilization of protest actions, such as more depoliticized or more institutionalized claim-making actions.

This study contributes to our understanding of authoritarian states' discursive control over social protests, particularly with respect to sympathetic discourse. Our research first corroborates previous findings (Steinhardt, 2015, 2017) that the state's sympathetic discourse is strategically reserved for moderate protests—those that pose

a lower threat to the state's authority and legitimacy. Furthermore, as one of the few studies focusing on protests concerning the same issue, our paper suggests that this selective sympathy has important implications for protest channeling in addition to facilitating protests (Huang et al., 2019; Steinhardt, 2017).

This study also brings attention to how other forms of official discourse, in addition to media discourse, serve channeling purposes. For example, local officials have been widely found to persuade protesters to moderate their claims or protest repertoires in China (Chen & Liu, 2021; Lee & Zhang, 2013; Zhuang & Chen, 2015) and other authoritarian states (Heuer & Hierman, 2022). Compared with discursive channeling by the media, discursive channeling by local officials is more contingent on popular trust in officials and the personal agency of officials in terms of, for example, articulation, and emotional and psychological work.

Discursive channeling elucidates how authoritarian states address upward-scale shifts in social protests. While social protests under authoritarianism are mostly rule-based and economic interest-oriented (Cai, 2006; Chen, 2000; Lorentzen, 2013; O'Brien & Li, 2006), an increasing number of recent studies have suggested an upward-scale shift to claiming rights and interests unsanctioned by states, particularly when civil society actors become involved (Chen & Yang, 2023; Truong, 2024). This research further demonstrates how authoritarian states employ discursive strategies to channel these protests into officially recognized forms.

This study also helps improve the understanding of repression under Xi Jinping's leadership since 2012. While we agree that Xi's era has been more repressive toward social protests (Chen & Cai, 2021; Wang et al., 2021), our analysis of discursive channeling reveals that repression under Xi could be achieved in more indirect and accommodating ways. While repressing certain forms of protests, the state has expanded other channels to address popular grievances in a manner that favors the state.

This finding echoes previous studies that have highlighted the prominence of protest channeling under Xi's leadership. For example, compared with those during Hu Jintao's era, institutions of public participation were found to be more widely used and no less responsive (Balla & Xie, 2021; Fu & Distelhorst, 2018; Wang et al., 2025). Chen (2020) also revealed more polarized state responses to protest claims that conflict with and fit the state's agenda in Xi's era. By showing that channeling could also be achieved *via* discourse, we, along with these studies, shed light on the low risks of backfiring despite the increased repression in Xi's era.

Research method

Data sources

We searched for anti-waste incineration protests in China on two search engines (Google and Baidu) and two news databases (LexisNexis and WiseNews)¹ using a list of protest-related terms, including waste incineration (垃圾焚烧, *laji fenshao*), oppose (反对, *fandui*), protest (抗议/抗争, *kangyi* or *kangzheng*), street protest (上街, *shangjie*), and letters and petitioning (信访, *xinfang*). Between 2002 and 2021, we identified 32 large-scale and high-profile protests. Details of the protests, including date,

turnout, claims, and outcomes, were recorded.² In addition, we consulted qualitative accounts of these protests by other scholars to gain a more in-depth understanding.

With respect to the state's discursive response, we focused on newspapers from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), which contains more than 600 Chinese central-level and local-level newspapers covering all 31 provincial administrations in mainland China. Despite the commercialization of the Chinese media since the 1980s (Stockmann, 2013), newspapers remain dominated by official narratives (Wang et al., 2018), especially since Xi Jinping assumed leadership (Jaros & Pan, 2018; Wang & Sparks, 2019). A keyword search with the term 垃圾焚烧 ("waste incineration" in Chinese) in CNKI returned 2,045 articles published between 2002 and 2021, of which 1,023 were manually identified as relevant.

Unlike prior studies that focused on official discourse specifically about social protests (Li, 2022; Steinhardt, 2015), this research examined a more general discourse about contentious issues. We believe that in an authoritarian context, media outlets tend to avoid explicitly mentioning protests while continuing to respond to them. Statistical analysis validated this responsiveness by revealing that the number of articles published during protest periods was approximately twice that during non-protest periods.³

Coding scheme

The development of a coding scheme is a theory-generation process that involves going back and forth between the literature and the data. The authors randomly sampled 98 (~ 5%) of the 2,045 articles to develop the coding scheme.

Authoritarian states' discursive responses to social protests generally demonstrate a hostility-sympathy dichotomy (Steinhardt, 2017). In line with this dichotomy, here, one code is termed *hostility*, which dismisses popular grievances about the environmental risks of burning waste. It promotes the environmental and social benefits of incineration, highlights advances in Chinese waste incineration technology, and presents incineration as a state-of-the-art technology widely embraced in developed areas of China and developed countries. The following is an example of hostile discourse:

Prof. Yan Jianhua pointed out that ... a well-designed and well-run modern waste incineration plant can achieve low or even near-zero dioxin emissions. ... In fact, incineration handles a considerable proportion of waste in developed countries, especially in Japan, Europe, the East Coast of the United States, and other regions with scarce land resources. (China Science News 中国科学报, 2010-05-10)

In contrast, sympathetic discourse acknowledges popular grievances about waste incineration. We further divided this code into three subcodes that recognize the three claims that were voiced in the protests. *Sympathy-policymaking*, which recognizes the claim to policymaking, questions incineration as an environmentally friendly method of managing waste, and advocates alternative methods such as recycling, composting, and a waste-free lifestyle. It frequently quotes criticism from civil society actors. The following is an example of this discourse:

Professor Zhao ZhangYuan is the leader of the anti-waste incineration camp. ... Professor Zheng Minghui ... pointed out that because of the high technical requirements of dioxin detection and testing, no incineration plant in China is capable of real-time monitoring. ... Stuart Harrad, a dioxin expert from the University of Birmingham, also confirmed that the real-time monitoring of dioxin is a problem in advanced countries. (Shanghai Science and Technology News 上海科技报, 2009-09-04)

Another subcode, *sympathy-decision-making*, shifts the focus to decision-making on the siting of waste incineration plants. It criticizes local governments for ignoring the voice of local citizens in decision-making and encourages more public participation through environmental impact assessment (EIA), public hearings, and referendums. The following is an example of this discourse:

In recent years, mass incidents triggered by environmental conflicts have occurred from time to time because citizens are enraged. ... Regrettably, the legal rights of citizens to participate in environmental assessment and related decision-making have not been fully guaranteed. Although the relevant laws and regulations have stipulated the principle of public participation ... some construction companies, EIA organizations, and local governments blatantly manipulate data, fooling the citizens, deceiving the monitoring authorities, and using improper means to obtain EIA approvals. (Xinhua Daily Telegraph 新华每日电讯, 2012-07-16)

The final subcode is termed *sympathy-policy implementation and compensation*. It recognizes the claim on the monitoring of emissions and compensation. To address popular grievances, it emphasizes both top-down and bottom-up environmental monitoring and greater compensation for local communities through job opportunities and public goods. The following are examples of this discourse:

In recent years, waste incineration projects have triggered a lot of NIMBY incidents. Due to limited information disclosure, it is difficult for the public to monitor the operation and pollutant emissions of incineration plants, and it is natural for them to cast doubt. ... But by inviting residents to visit the plant, disclosing the monitoring data, and welcoming third-party monitoring and supervision, some waste incineration plants have moderated the hostility of the public. (China Environment News 中国环境报, 2019-12-18)

NIMBY projects will inevitably bring negative externalities and harm the interests of the people in the surrounding areas. ... Two types of compensation, monetary and nonmonetary, should be established to balance the interests of the various parties involved. (Study Times 学习时报 2014-10-13)

Following the coding scheme [Table 1](#), the two authors conducted intercoder reliability tests by independently coding a pilot sample of 98 articles. All the codes achieved a Cohen's kappa coefficient of more than 0.80, indicating "almost perfect agreement" between the two coders (Landis & Koch, 1977). Each of the two authors subsequently coded half of the 2,045 articles, treating each code as a binary variable (i.e. an article could receive more than one code). This resulted in 1,023 articles coded with at least one of the four codes from 194 newspapers (67 at the central level and 127 at the local level). The remaining articles were therefore considered irrelevant.⁴ A total of 830 of the 1,023 (81%) articles in our dataset received only one code, suggesting that our codes were coherent and conceptually distinct. We also performed word cloud analyses for each code, and the returned keywords were consistent with the codes' definitions.⁵

Table 1. Coding scheme of newspapers' responses to anti-waste incineration protests.

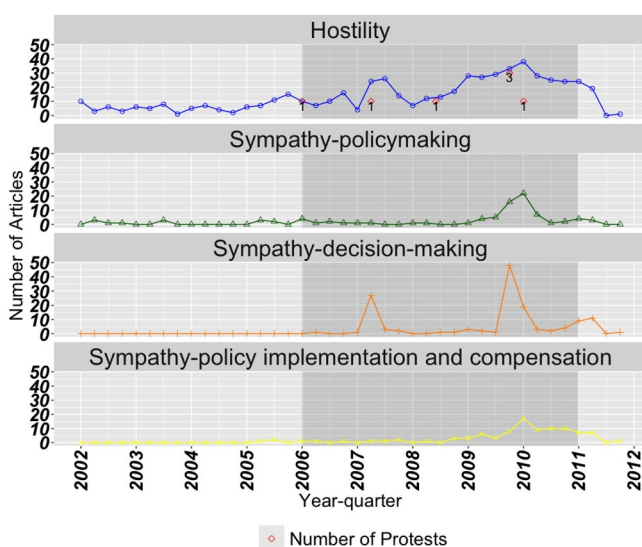
Code	Definition	Keywords
Hostility	Dismiss popular grievances by propagating the environmental and social benefits of waste incineration and downplaying its environmental risks	harm elimination (wuhai hua 无害化), volume reduction (jianliang hua 减量化), internationally advanced (guoji xianjin 国际先进), facility (shebei 设备)
Sympathy-policymaking	Recognize the protest claim regarding changes in pro-waste incineration policies	recycling (huishou 回收), composting (duifei 堆肥), utilization (ziyuanhua 资源化), social cost (shehui chengben 社会成本)
Sympathy-decision-making	Recognize the protest claim regarding democratic participation in decision-making on the siting of waste incineration plants	siting (xuanzhi 选址), decision-making (juece 决策), EIA (huanping 环评), public opinion (yijian/minyi 意见/民意)
Sympathy-policy implementation and compensation	Recognize the protest claim regarding improved monitoring of emissions and compensation for affected communities	monitoring (jianguan/jiance 监管/监测), publicizing data (gongkai xinxi 公开信息), compensation (huikui jin 回馈金), NIMBY (linbi 邻避)

The early 2010s: a temporal shift from facilitating to channeling

The early 2010s marked a watershed moment in the newspapers' responses to these protests. We divided the 32 protests into two waves—seven protests from 2006 to 2010 and 25 protests from 2013 to 2019 (with at least one protest each year during a wave). One of the most significant changes was that in the second wave, policy implementation and compensation replaced decision-making to become the major focus of sympathetic discourse.

Before the early 2010s: sympathy to facilitate protests

In the first wave of protests from 2006 to 2010, hostile discourse accounted for 70% of all articles. Given the authoritarian regime, the dominance of hostile discourse was

**Figure 1.** Number of waste incineration-related articles by quarter, 2002–2011.

not surprising. However, articles expressing sympathy accounted for 41% of the total. Most of the sympathy concerned accommodating the dominant claim in the protests regarding decision-making.

Specifically, [Figure 1](#) shows the number of waste incineration-related articles for each code and the number of anti-waste incineration protests per quarter from 2002 to 2012, with the first wave of protests shaded in gray. Before the first protest in 2006, most newspaper articles focused on propaganda related to waste incineration. In the second quarter of 2007, when the Liulitun protest occurred in the capital city of Beijing, we observed a dramatic surge in the number of articles showing sympathy with the claim regarding decision-making at a similar level as hostile discourse.

In the fourth quarter of 2009 and the first quarter of 2010, the protests underwent a more dramatic increase. Three protests occurred in Guangdong Province, and one in Jiangsu Province. In response, while hostility continuously increased, the newspapers showed more sympathy regarding the decision-making claim, which eventually surpassed hostility at the end of 2009. More alarmingly, during this period, the claim exhibited a significant upward-scale shift toward a broader claim regarding changes in pro-waste incineration policy. In contrast to their reluctance to become involved in prior protests, civil society actors began to actively help local protesters look beyond their parochial interests to understand problems in government policymaking (Bondes, 2019; Johnson, 2013). The newspapers responded positively by showing more sympathy toward the policymaking claim during this period.

While the increase in sympathy-decision-making and sympathy-policymaking could facilitate the protests, we also observed that the newspapers began to channel the claims toward a more moderate one regarding the monitoring of emissions and compensation. This attempt at channeling was most explicitly suggested in the following quote:

The real question is not whether to incinerate waste or not, but how to incinerate. ... Why didn't the Ministry of Environmental Protection do a better job of monitoring? How can people be assured when they can't find monitoring data anywhere? (21st Century Business Herald 21 世纪经济报道 2010-02-04)

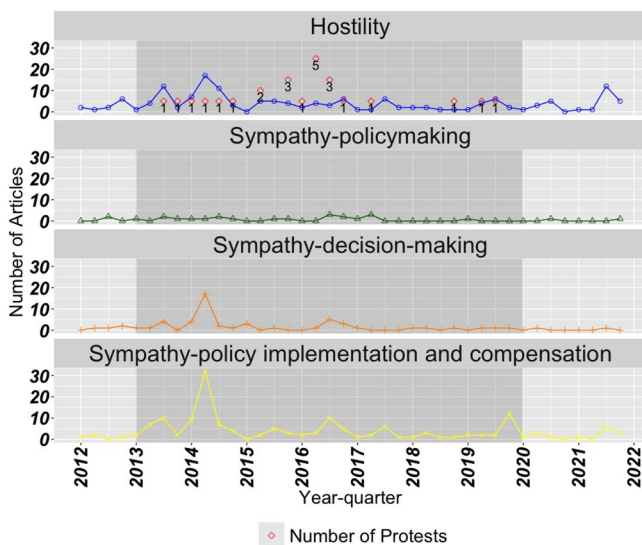
Since the early 2010s: selective sympathy to channel protests

In the second wave of protests, discursive channeling became more salient. First, the percentage of articles with hostile discourse decreased from 70% in the first wave to 50%, whereas the percentage of articles with sympathetic discourse increased from 41% to 74%. However, the content of sympathetic discourse changed significantly: it became more selective, targeting the less prominent but more moderate claims regarding policy implementation and compensation. The percentage of related articles skyrocketed from 14% to 60%, surpassing that of hostile discourse ([Table 2](#)).

The discursive pattern from 2012 to 2021 is presented in [Figure 2](#), with the gray-shaded area indicating the second wave of protests. We can observe that sympathy toward the claim regarding policy implementation and compensation became

Table 2. Distribution of articles by waves of protest.

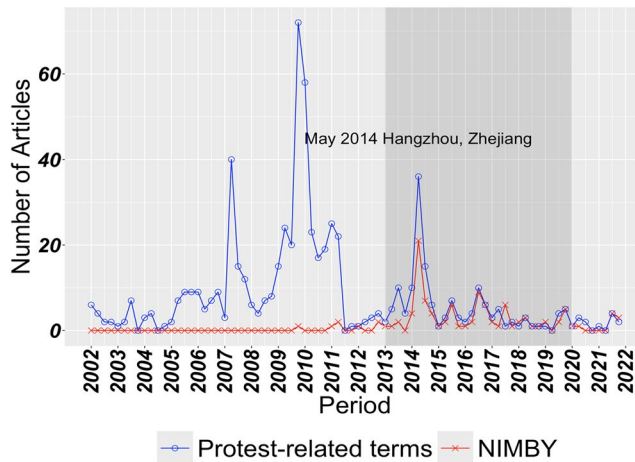
Period	1st wave (2006–2010)	2nd wave (2013–2019)
Total number of articles	560	228
Hostility	392 (70%)	115 (50%)
Sympathy	229 (41%)	168 (74%)
- Policymaking	70 (13%)	21 (9%)
- Decision-making	118 (21%)	50 (22%)
- Policy implementation and compensation	77 (14%)	137 (60%)

**Figure 2.** Number of waste incineration-related articles by quarter, 2012–2021.

the dominant discourse, outperforming other types of discourse at almost every protest.

The shift in official sympathetic discourse toward the claim regarding policy implementation and compensation was certainly partly related to the increased occurrence of this claim from 29% during the first wave of protests to 64% during the second wave.⁶ Nevertheless, the claim regarding decision-making continued to be voiced in all of the protests, as it was during the first wave. While the numbers of protests involving the claims regarding decision-making, policy implementation, and compensation are 25 and 16, respectively, the numbers of articles exhibiting sympathy with these two claims are 50 and 137, respectively. Greater sympathy with the minor claim further suggests greater selectivity in sympathetic discourse during this period. This kind of selectivity suggests the state's intention to propose an alternative but compromised solution for people with more radical claims, thereby achieving a channeling purpose.

We further verified the significant increase in sympathy-policy implementation and compensation by analyzing the meaning of NIMBY. As shown in Figure 3, it was not until the second wave (shaded area) that NIMBY was commonly used by the newspapers to label the protests.



Note: All protest-related terms are listed in the Methods section.

Figure 3. Number of articles containing protest-related terms and NIMBY by quarter, 2002–2021.
Note: All protest-related terms are listed in the Methods section.

Table 3. Number of articles mentioning NIMBY by narrative during the second wave of protests.

Narrative	Cause of NIMBY	Keywords	Number of articles	Percentage (N = 94)
Hostility	People's ignorance of public interest and irrationality	Public interest, irrationality	17	18%
Sympathy	Lack of public participation in decision-making on siting of unpopular projects	Siting, democracy	15	16%
Sympathy	Injustice for local people and inadequate monitoring of emissions	Compensation, emission	76	81%
Total			94	

When the newspapers used NIMBY in the second wave of protests, they primarily explained the causes of the NIMBY phenomenon. In 94 articles containing the term “NIMBY” published during this period, we identified three NIMBY narratives, as listed in Table 3. Of these articles, 81% emphasized injustice for local communities and inadequate environmental monitoring, opinions that echo the official sympathetic discourse on policy implementation and compensation. This finding further confirms the state’s underlying intention to channel these protests toward this more moderate claim.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, we ran a series of logistic regressions. The dependent variable is whether an article includes sympathy-policy implementation and compensation or not. In Table 4, we note that across all the models, being published after 2012 has a positive and significant effect, whereas being published during a protest period has a negative effect. There was a positive interaction between these two variables, meaning that articles published after 2012 were more likely to adopt this discourse, especially during protest periods. We further controlled for the time trend effect in the dynamic models, which is almost canceled out by its interaction

Table 4. Logistic regression results.

	Static model			Dynamic model		
	(1) Month	(2) 3-Month	(3) 4-Week	(4) Month	(5) 3-Month	(6) 4-Week
Temporal units						
After 2012	1.98*** (0.182)	1.84*** (0.219)	2.03*** (0.177)	5.89*** (0.935)	5.50*** (0.990)	5.97*** (0.921)
Protest period	−0.557 [†] (0.304)	−0.235 (0.242)	−0.041 (0.293)	−0.679* (0.309)	−0.295 (0.249)	−0.423 (0.296)
After 2012* protest period	0.652 (0.412)	0.587 [†] (0.341)	0.449 (0.443)	0.737 [†] (0.421)	0.636 [†] (0.357)	0.810 [†] (0.447)
Time trend: year since 2002				0.496*** (0.082)	0.498*** (0.084)	0.515*** (0.084)
Time trend* After 2012				−0.521*** (0.093)	−0.503*** (0.096)	−0.535*** (0.095)
N	1,023	1,023	1,023	1,023	1,023	1,023
AIC	963	964	966	910	913	912

Notes: 1. The standard error is in parentheses, and [†] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. 2. Temporal units: Monthly: protests that occurred during the same month as the article; 3-Month: protests that occurred during the current month or prior 2 months; 4-Week: protests that occurred during the current week or prior 3 wk. 3. Durbin–Watson ~ 1.82 in all three dynamic models, indicating weak positive autocorrelation after the time trend correction.

term with being published after 2012, suggesting that this change is a one-off phenomenon.

Finally, we conducted a series of robustness checks of our findings on newspaper articles that specifically mentioned the protests on newspapers directly affiliated with the party-state, which helps alleviate bias arising from critical journalism (Stockmann, 2013), and by comparing central and local newspapers, since Chinese local media often have their own interests in determining what and how they cover (Tong, 2010).⁷

Possible explanations for discursive channeling

How can we explain the greater salience of discursive channeling since the early 2010s? We argue that one of the most important explanations is the increased need for the state to repress claims regarding changing either the siting of waste incineration plants or the pro-waste incineration policy. As early as 2007, the central government had already assigned local government targets for the proportion of MSW processed by incineration. However, these regions were limited only to eastern developed areas that faced the most severe waste problems. Since 2012, the development of waste incineration has been significantly prioritized on the state agenda. The central government began to assign targets to local governments throughout the country. In addition, the targets increased significantly, from approximately 30% to 50% to 65% in the three consecutive five-year plans from 2011 to 2025. Central financial subsidies for the industry also increased dramatically during the same period (Renmin Net, 2019).

This policy change was followed by a dramatic expansion of incineration across the country. The period from 2012 to 2021, for example, witnessed a sharp increase in both the number of waste incineration plants and the percentage of MSW

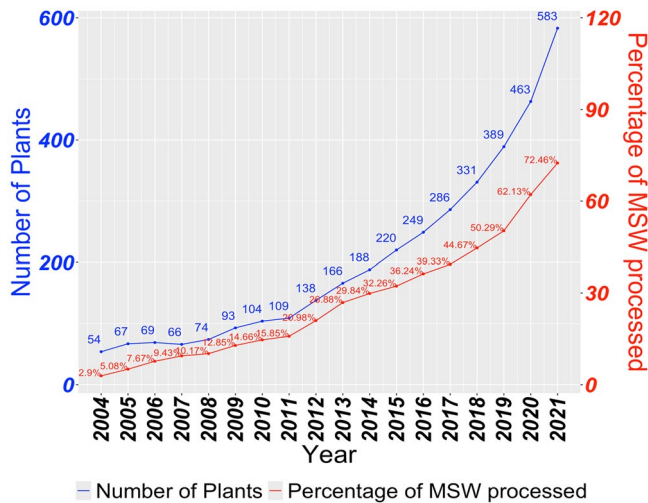


Figure 4. Number of waste incineration plants and percentage of MSW processed by waste incineration, 2004–2021.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2024)

processed by incineration (Figure 4). As a result, the state faced mounting pressure to address an increased number of anti-waste incineration protests and geographic expansion from megacities to less-developed areas, as we can see from the second wave of protests.

This challenge was further exacerbated by an empowered anti-waste incineration civil society. The protests at the end of 2009 and early 2010 provided important networks, shared values, and resources for establishing a trans-local anti-waste incineration alliance (Wong, 2016; Wu & Martus, 2021). The most notable example is the Zero-Waste Alliance, which was formed in 2011 by dozens of local and supra-local environmental NGOs and activists in China. Many of the members were involved either directly or indirectly in the 2009–2010 protests (Lu & Steinhardt, 2022). This trans-local alliance suggests the potential to further facilitate the upward-scale shift of protest claims to challenge central policymaking on waste management.

Moreover, the political economy and technical characteristics of incineration projects further increased the need to repress protests. Given the post-2008 context of credit expansion and financialization, the construction of many projects had already been locked in through debt arrangements and contractual obligations by the early 2010s (Wang et al., 2019). Thus, the remaining space for negotiation was often limited to implementation or compensation issues.

In this context, while the claims regarding decision-making and policymaking obstructed the fulfillment of the state's policy goals to develop incineration and challenged the central government's authority, the claim regarding policy implementation and compensation was more tolerable for the state because it fundamentally agreed with and could even facilitate achieving the state's policy goal.

Certainly, apart from the state's increased need for repression, there are other possible explanations for discursive channeling. For instance, it could be related to

changes in the targeted audience. The second wave of protests expanded to rural and inland areas, where residents were more receptive to claims regarding policy implementation and compensation. The greater effectiveness of discursive channeling may drive more use of this discourse. One could also argue that it is associated with the increasing professionalization of environmental reporting in China. Although this may drive newspapers to report more about environmental monitoring, it may also increase media attention to the siting of environmental projects—an effect that, however, was not evident after the early 2010s.

Conclusion and discussion: effects of discursive channeling

By differentiating the distinct claims voiced in protests concerning the same issue and examining temporal changes in how Chinese newspapers responded to these claims, we argue that sympathy from authoritarian regimes is used not only to facilitate protests but also more proactively to channel radical claims into more moderate ones. Discursive channeling helps explain how authoritarian states mitigate the upward-scale shift in protests and why the Chinese state in Xi's era was able to increase repression without backfiring.

Although these research findings are based on an analysis of print media, it is believed that discursive channeling will continue to dominate as the state increases its online engagement. Compared with print media, social media is less hierarchical and more interactive, making it more difficult for the state to dismiss popular grievances. In this context, discursive channeling, a less direct form of repression, might be more widely used in the online arena. A recent study on an influential state-affiliated Weibo account, for instance, suggested a similar strategy of channeling: shifting the blame from central policymaking to local policy implementation (Long & Shao, 2023).

Admittedly, this discourse research cannot establish causal effects on protests. On the one hand, we observed a shift in the focus of China's anti-incineration protests toward being more rule-based and economic interest-oriented since the early 2010s. In the first wave of protests, it was common for the protests to end with local governments changing their decisions on the location of waste incineration plants—five out of the seven protests led to the cancelation of the opposed projects. In contrast, the protests of the second wave were more likely to subside when local governments shifted to emphasizing environmental monitoring and compensation through extensive work in local communities. The 2014 Hangzhou protest is a case in point (Huang & Yang, 2020). This “successful experience” was highly praised by the central government as a Chinese solution to NIMBY for local governments of other places to follow (People. cn, 2017). Similar successful practices were documented in the 2016 Wuhan protest (Lu, 2023). This shift was also documented among civil society actors. As their environmentalist anti-waste incineration voices gradually faded or became more moderate, certain civil society actors had to shift their focus to environmental monitoring to avoid the risk of repression (Tan & Zhang, 2021).

On the other hand, the extent to which this shift in the protest trajectory can be attributed to discursive channeling is uncertain. Key causal links—whether the discursive strategy reaches the targeted audience, sways their opinions on protests or governments or their assessment of political risks, and then changes their behaviors—remain unproven.

In this context, future studies should investigate the effects of discursive channeling on Chinese social protests and public participation in general. For example, the effects could be conditioned by the nature of contentious issues. Public perceptions of contentious issues should entail room for manipulation. While issues such as environmental problems involve considerable uncertainty and complexity (Mol, 2006; Tilt, 2013), issues such as the economy and public health, with respect to which citizens are more capable of identifying the status quo, policy effects, or the responsible entities, offer less room for manipulation. Alternatively, contentious issues should entail a “zone of possible agreement” in which citizens’ rights can be compromised to an extent acceptable by both citizens and the state. Such a zone is less likely to exist for issues such as human rights.

Notes

1. WiseNews is based in Hong Kong and covers the Greater China region. LexisNexis is a leading provider of global news.
2. See [Appendix A1.1](#).
3. See [Appendix A2.1](#).
4. These irrelevant articles were mainly factual, including announcements of the commencement or completion of waste incineration plants, financial, and business news about waste incineration technology firms, and briefings on government policies.
5. Notably, we also paid attention to waste sorting because it has been an important part of the official Chinese discourse on waste management, especially since 2017. In the coding process, we distinguished between waste sorting as an alternative to waste incineration and waste sorting as part of the propaganda promoting waste incineration. The results showed that the latter use was more frequent.
6. See [Appendix A1.1](#).
7. See [Appendix A2](#).

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