Administrative Errors and Discontent: The Case Studies of Mass Incidents in China

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Abstract

Mass incidents (MIs) refer to the conflicts between certain civilians and authorities or other powerful social entities. This study analyzes four cases of MIs which occurred in 2008 or 2009, focusing on their societal backgrounds. Through comparisons of the judgments and attributions between civilians and officials on local public issues, the results indicate that the root causes of MIs are public policy failures and improper executions. In addition, dysfunctions of various institutional correction mechanics are shown to be a derived contributive factor to MIs. Based on the results of these comparisons, this study illustrates the concept of administrative errors, i.e. defects of administrative institutions, policies, rules, or procedures, caused as the results of knowledge-based errors made by officers. This study concludes that administrative errors are inevitable, and that discontent among civilians is a normal consequence of these errors, but this discontent does not necessarily transfer to an MI if various correction mechanics are effective.

Key words: Discontent; Mass Incidents; Administrative errors; Correction mechanics.

INTRODUCTION

Xinhua News Agency (the official media of China) reported a story on October 20, 2004 entitled “A mass incident (quntixing shijian) which occurred in Wanzhou District has been appeased”. The report was as follows:

At approximately 13:00 on October 18, Hu Quanzong, a temporary worker of the Haosheng Real Estate and Fruit Wholesale Market, was walking with his wife, Zeng Qingrong, along Shuangbai Rd of Wanzhou District. When they passed by Yu Jikui, a migrant porter, Yu accidentally impacted Zeng with his shoulder pole (a simple traditional tool for carrying heavy things on the shoulder), and a quarrel commenced between the two. Hu then hit Yu and injured him, and claimed that he was a civil servant and could solve any matter by monetary means. Hu’s words aroused indignation among the surrounding crowds, and several bystanders contacted the 110 emergency hotline. Police officers from Baiyan Rd Station arrived at the scene and were preparing to escort the three persons away by police car, but some of the bystanders voiced their opinions that the police would take the side of the “civil servant”, and the wounded porter would be treated unfairly. This intensified the conflict, and the members of crowds refused to allow the police car to leave. After three and a half hours of patient interpretations by police officers, the three persons were finally escorted away from the scene.

However, this matter did not end here. Several persons present at the scene were instigated by rumors and made the situation complicated. At approximately 18:00, another police car passing by Xincheng Rd was surrounded by the agitated crowd, then the car was smashed and burned. As this had occurred during the evening rush hour, thousands of passersby crowded around to witness the event. At approximately 20:00, hundreds of people had crowded in Gaosuntang Square, where the district government is located, destroyed the glass door of the government building, and rushed inside. They were taken away at approximately 03:00 am the following morning.

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This is an example of mass incidents (MIs) which occurred in current China. The term of mass incident is initially used by Chinese authorities as the neutral appellation of inciting conflicts between collective civilians and local authorities (Wang, 2009).

A. Characteristics of Mass Incidents

MIs, a peculiar phenomenon, accompany the economic system reform of China, according to Ru, Lu, and Li (2004). China’s economic system began its reform and transition in the late 1970s. Since then, various social problems have gradually accumulated, such as unemployment, environmental pollution, inflation, the wealth gap, and so on (Li, 2005; Ma, 2005). Simultaneously, the number of MIs has also increased rapidly (Ru, Lu, & Li, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2011). The number of MIs first saw a breakthrough of ten thousand in 1993, then this figure increased by an annual average of 17% until 2003; the scale of the MIs also ceaselessly continued to expand, with the number of participants increasing annually by 12% (Ru, Lu, & Li, 2004). As of 2011, it was stated that “occurrences of petitioning and mass incidents are still numerous.” (Ru, Li, & Lu, 2011).

Both officials and scholars have given this problem much thought. More than 4000 articles or journalistic reports regarding MIs were published over the past three decades, but studies including empirical evidence have yet to be reported. Most of these, articles of only two to five pages or media reports of approximately 100 to 800 words, were based on the observations of certain MI cases. According to these articles and reports, an MI was clearly restricted to a certain region, a certain enterprise, or a certain occupation. Most conflicting behaviors related to MIs were relatively mild, although the actions of some participants were quite violent. In all of MIs, the participants would simply appeal their economic interests to the local authorities. Therefore, the main characteristic of MIs is civilian-authority conflict, which involves both regional restrictions and behavioral constraints.

Order-broken collective actions may be found in both developed and developing countries. For example, the London riot of 2011 (McCluskey, 2011; Silverstone & Silverstone, 2012), Paris riot of 2005 (Murphy, 2011), Los Angeles riots of 1992 and 1960s (Reynolds, 1992; Miller, 2001); and riots occurred in the African and Asian countries (Bush, 2010). Compared with these collective actions, according to observations and journalistic reports, even the most violent actions related to MIs only damaged or destroyed the property of the local authorities, with no damage did to private property, nor injury caused to civilians.

MIs may be clustered into three types based on the investigations and reports (Wang, 2009). The majority of MIs are related to compensation disputes over land expropriation (Guo, 2001; Yu, 2003; Ni & Xie, 2008), demolition for urban reconstruction (Qiu & Zhu, 2006), or migrations for large construction projects ecological environment issues (Shang, 2009), etc.. The second most common type of MIs involves disputes for employment, salaries or welfare in certain industries or occupations (Ge, 2008; Xiao, 2008). In these two types of incidents, the boundaries of the participants involved are usually quite certain, and their economic interest appeals are clear and specific. The third type, labeled by some as “Wanzhou-type” incidents (Zhong & Guo, 2006), are triggered by ordinary civic disputes or security events, and have three characteristics: a) the conflict suddenly turns toward local authorities when officials attempt to intervene with the event; b) the boundaries of the participants and onlookers are not certain; and c) the participants often advanced scattering and vague political appeals, as opposed to the economic interest appeals in the other two types of MIs (Wang, 2009).

Therefore, MIs clearly differ from gang activity; from traditional conflicts between villages or lineages concerning resources or interests; from conflicts caused by ethnic or religious contradictions; from attacks against governments incited by outside hostile forces, involving ethnic or religious contradictions; and from the collective actions of other countries.

In summary, all MIs share three characteristics: They are aimed at local authorities, restricted to certain regions, and involve relatively mild actions. Therefore, MIs may be defined as conflicts between collective civilians and local authorities or powerful social entities, in which social entities refer to local state-owned or private enterprises. Local authorities are always found behind the actions of these social entities (Wang, 2009).

B. Cause Speculations of MIs

MIs are considered to represent a large amount of discontent in some regions of China (e.g. Yu, 2003; Zhu, 2008). Why is there still so much discontent among civilians, despite the fact that the people’s living standards have greatly improved during the Reform and Opening-up period? Why do some civilians choose such a harmful way to express their appeal?

Many articles attempted to speculate on the causes of MIs. This current study categorizes these speculations into seven general causes: intergroup conflicts of interests (e.g. Yu, 2003; Zhu, 2008); failures of appealing measures (e.g. Zhou & Ye, 2006; Wang, 2008); defects of institutional and legal systems (e.g. Qiu & Zhu, 2006; Wang, 2008); unbalanced development of economy among different regions (e.g. Ge, 2008; Liu, 2009); political trust issues (e.g. Liu, 2009; Yao & Peng, 2009); and corruption (e.g. Ge, 2008; Liu, 2009).

It is difficult to determine the legitimacy of some of these speculated causes, such as the defects of legal systems, or the unbalanced development of economy among regions. China is a power-centralized nation, and the legal systems are unified throughout almost all
of its regions. However, the speculation of legal system defects is unable to interpret why MIs occur so frequently in some regions, yet rarely in others. Similarly, it is difficult to explain why MIs occur either frequently or rarely in both developed and developing regions too. Some speculated causes are merely representations of certain social problems, rather than the root cause, such as social discontent, intergroup conflicts of interests, and political trust. For example, a low level of trust toward political authorities may result in the civilians refusing to cooperate, but this will not inevitably lead to conflict with authorities (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000). As of yet, there have been no theories, from China or elsewhere, interpreting restricted conflicts between civilians and authorities, such as MIs.

C. Research Question

There have been discontent persons in any society during any era, but the anti-social actions of persons with private reasons could never mobilize collective actions such as MIs. There must be certain root causes which lead to shared discontent of civilians, then result in an MI. This root cause may be sought for only in the behaviors of authorities and officials.

Corruption may be one speculated cause which is most likely to arouse the resonance of people. Only a small number of scholars have thoroughly studied the corruption of current China, although many articles regarding MIs have touched upon this topic. Wederman (2004) generalized the investigations or reports of predecessors on China’s corruption problems, and concluded that corruption has actually worsened since the execution of the Reform and Opening-up policy. Based on the social cultural characteristics of China, Wederman differentiated corruption from other misconduct or malfeasance of officials. This study broadly refers to the latter as deviant work ethics—inappropriate motivations or attitudes of officials toward their jobs or civilians, and narrowly refers to the former as corruption—using public authority for private gain. However, Wederman’s study did not involve the relationship between corruption and MIs. Rocca (1992) observed that Chinese civilians usually ignored certain types of “minute” corruption behavior, but felt anger toward large corruption cases. He considered that the corruption situation was caused by defects in the institutional structure. It should be noted that corruption and deviant work ethics share a common characteristic, i.e. both of them are violation behaviors on behalf of individual officers. Civilians are deeply opposed to corruption and deviant work ethics, therefore these may be the root causes of MIs.

Failures of public policies and executions of authorities at any level are another type of authority behavior that arouses discontent among civilians. Officials or scholars without systematic psychological knowledge often neglect these failures and their effects on civilians. Reforms in every domain of China have been described as “feeling rocks to cross a river” (meaning “trial and error”). Not every public policy is able to both effectively resolve relevant public issues and makes various social groups equally satisfied. This type of official behavior possesses two essential differences from corruption and deviant work ethics. First, these failures are the results of knowledge-based errors (Reason, 1990) on behalf of the policy makers or executers. This matter also differs from policies with known shortcomings which authorities must still execute, for example, the one-child family planning policy. In such situations, authorities must pay special attention to the negative effects of these shortcomings, whereas the failures of some policies are unknown by the policy makers and executers until they have recognized the unexpected results. Reason (1990, 1993) referred to these management defects as “latent failures”. The interests of some social groups are no doubt impaired or ignored by these defective administrative behaviors. Second, all these behaviors are organizational, rather than personal. At any level of administration, policy-making is a complex procedure which involves many sectors, as well as many officials. When civilians believe their interests have been impaired or ignored they will blame the authorities, rather than civil servants.

Which type of behavior is the root cause of MIs: corruption and deviant work ethics, or public policy failures and improper executions? Logically, there are four possible answers to this question: a) both types of behavior are the root causes; b) public policy failures and improper execution are the root causes, but corruption and poor work ethics are not; c) corruption and deviant work ethics are the root causes, but public policy failures and improper execution are not; and d) neither type of behavior is the root cause. The present case study attempts to determine the respective root causes of these cases.

1. METHOD

1.1 Cases

This study investigates ten MI cases which occurred in 2008 to 2009, but only four of the cases were completed the interviews of both local civilians and officials. These cases were the Weng’an incident (in Guizhou Province, 2008), Menglian incident (in Yunnan Province, 2008), Shishou incident (in Hubei Province, 2009), and Tonggang incident (in Jilin Province, 2009). The brief introductions to these cases based on the reports of Chinese official media are as follows.

Weng’an incident: According to the report by Xinhua News Agency (2008), in the afternoon of June 28, a group of people crowded the buildings of the local government, due to dissatisfaction with the police’s identification of a female middle school student’s death. As a result, many
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offices and cars belonging to various administrative sectors were damaged and burned.

Menglian incident: According to Xinhua (2008), conflicts of interest between the local rubber companies and farmers had occurred frequently over the past years. In the early morning of July 19, local police attempted to take the suspects involved the conflicts away from a village. The action of the police was violently opposed by the farmers of the village, resulting in injuries to both police and farmers, and the death of two farmers.

Shishou incident: According to Xinhua (2009), a male chef was found dead in front of a restaurant where he worked on the evening of June 17. The local police identified the dead as a suicide, but the relatives of the deceased chef doubted the identification, and refused to have the corpse cremated. People crowded around the scene to support the chef’s family. The crowds grew increasingly larger until they were driven away in the early morning of June 21.

Tonggang incident: According to Xinhua (2009), on July 24, many workers of the Tonggang Iron and Steel Company crowded the company headquarter to express their dissatisfaction with the recent restructuring of the company. The actions of the workers caused seven blast furnaces to cease production, and the general manager of the company was beaten to death.

1.2 Study Procedure

1.2.1 Interviews with Local Civilians and Officials

The researchers visited Weng'an County, Guizhou Province, in September and November 2008, and interviewed 22 urban or rural residents and 8 officials; the researchers also traveled to Menglian Dai, Wa, and Lahu Minorities Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, in October 2008 and June 2009, where they interviewed 10 urban or rural residents and 8 officials; Tonghua City, Jilin Province, in September 2009, they interviewed 16 employees of Tonggang or urban residents and 4 managers or officials; and Shishou City, Hubei Province, in December 2009, where they interviewed 13 urban residents and 4 officials.

The interview questions (see Appendix) included: How the local government has performed for developing the local economy, improving the living standards of civilians, and maintaining social harmony and stability; how the local government has learned about public issues and the efficiency of its policies; and how the local government has dealt with conflicts of interests between enterprises and residents. While interviewing local officials, researchers also asked them how the local government had dealt with MI situations.

Before each interview, the researchers asked the interviewees for permission to make an audio recording of the session. These audio records were later transcribed into text forms.

1.2.2 Coding Analysis of Interview Content

Three psychology scholars specializing in public administration research (domain experts) were appointed as code analysts for the study. First, the three experts reviewed the contents of the transcribed interview independently. Next, they discussed the transcribed content together, in order to generate several aspects of the content with large variance. These aspects, named as characteristic variables by this study, reflect public issues as well as the judgments and attributions of civilians and officials regarding the issues, such as economic development, social security, institutional appealing measures, etc.

A coding dictionary was inducted after the discussion of the domain experts to cover all the aspects of the interview contents. Then, each of the experts encoded every script independently, and the coding results of all the scripts were assembled together, taking the majority consistency of the three codings as the final coding results for a script. For calculation, the coding consistency coefficient among the three domain experts was 0.92.

Finally, all coding results of the interview transcriptions of the civilians and officials from a given region were paired for comparison. Seven characteristic variables for public issues were generated as follows:

- **Economic development** – this refers to the livelihood and incomes of local civilians, local industrial structures, etc., or comparing local economic development with neighboring regions;
- **Social security and public establishment** – housing, medical care, education, minimum living security, ecological environment, and public infrastructure establishment;
- **Intergroup conflicts of interest and the wealth gap** – conflicts or contradictions between local enterprises and residents, between employees and employers due to transitions, between civilians and authorities, or income discrepancies among social groups;
- **Public security issues** – acts threatening the safety of the local population, such as theft, robbery, drug abuse, and gambling;
- **Efficiency of institutional appealing measures** – the functions of institutional measures designed for appealing, such as filing complaints (xinfang), administrative litigation, and petition demonstrations;
- **Functions of non-administrative entities** – the role of “grassroots units” of the Party, as well as the roles of trade unions, and media criticisms for maintaining the interests of various social groups;
- **Corruption and deviant work ethics** – the various violations of local civil servants.

There were two levels of coding analysis for the interview transcriptions. The first involved determining whether or not an interviewee mentioned a certain public issue in a region, a task which was relatively simple to perform. The second level of coding involved judging
how serious the public issue was and how it was attributed by the interviewee. This task was a somewhat difficult one due to three restrictions: large deviation of interviewee numbers among the case regions, broad scattering of the contents, and large differentials of semantic and emotional expressions of interviewees. This study stipulated that, if a public issue was mentioned by two or more interviewees on the same side of either civilians or officials in a region, then the issue was considered serious; otherwise, it was considered not serious. Therefore, every characteristic variable for public issues has three variances: “not mentioned”, “not serious”, or “serious”.

The attributions of the public issues judged by the interviewees were coded separately to indicate the inconsistent directions between the civilians and officials. Seven characteristic variables for the attributions of the relevant public issues were generated. In addition, the researchers noted that when the civilian interviewees spoke about the public issues, they usually implicated their satisfactions with and trust in both the central and local authorities. Therefore, this study generated four other characteristic variables regarding authority satisfaction and trust. The variances of the attributions were categorized as one of three levels: “not mentioned”, “positive”, or “negative”. The attributable variables are as follows.

**Promoting economy** – efficiency of public policies and administrative measures of the local authorities related to the adjustment of industrial structures, promoting employment, and improving the living standards of the people;

**Solving the issues of social security and public establishment** – efficiency of public policies and administrative measures of the local authorities regarding housing, medical care, education, minimum living security, ecological environment, public infrastructure construction, and other relevant issues;

**Adjusting intergroup interests and narrowing the wealth gap** – efficiency of public policies and administrative measures of the local authorities for adjusting intergroup interest structures and narrowing the wealth gap;

**Maintaining public security** – efforts and efficiency of the local authorities regarding public security;

**Guaranteeing the functions of institutional appealing measures** – efficiency of various institutional measures such as filing complaints either by mail or in person, administrative litigation, protest demonstrations, and media criticism;

**Permitting work of non-administrative entities** – efficiency of “grassroots units” of the Party, trade unions, women’s federations, and youth leagues, for protecting the legitimate rights and interests of the people;

**Creating a probity government** – efforts and efficiency of the local authorities for punishing corruption and improving work methods;

**Central authority satisfaction** – satisfaction with the central authorities;

**Local authority satisfaction** – satisfaction with the local authorities;

**Central authority trust** – trust in the central authorities;

**Local authority trust** – trust in the local authorities.

### 1.3 Postulations

This study postulates that the root cause of the MI should be sought for in the behaviors of the local authorities or officials. By comparing the judgments and attributions of civilians and officials toward local public issues, inconsistencies between the two sides may indicate the behaviors of authorities or officials which do not meet the values and expectations of civilians, and thus may be determined as the root cause of the MIs. Four possible types of causes for the MIs are proposed: a) If civilians explored and criticized the corruption and deviant work ethics of officials, but officials denied these allegations, this inconsistency indicated that corruption and deviant work ethics were the root cause of the MIs. b) If civilians complained about local public issues and relevant policies, but officials neglected the issues, or advocated their policies, this inconsistency discloses that such policy failures and improper execution were the root cause. c) If the officials denied either the corruption and deviant work ethics, or the policy failures and improper execution disclosed by civilians, this inconsistency indicates that both corruption/deviant work ethics and policy failures/improper execution collectively formed the root cause. d) If both local officials and civilians criticized the corruption and deviant work ethics, as well as policy failures and improper execution, this consistency clearly implicates that neither type of behaviors was the root cause, and the root cause should be sought for from other perspective.

### 2. RESULTS

The data obtained from the interviews were abundant but scattered. In general, most civilian interviewees mentioned public issues under the precondition of approbating the efforts and achievements of the local authorities, while officials often harangued their own achievements. Three types of response combinations regarding public issues given by civilians and officials were found: consistent (both sides determined the same issue, or took the same attribution toward an issue), inconsistent (one side considered an issue, but the other side denied it, or one side attributed an issue negatively, but another attributed positively), and incomplete consistent (one side complained about an issue, but the other did not mention it). This paper cites some examples of transcribed contents to show these combinations, based on the characteristic variables. All details cited here, such as names of persons, companies, or places, are represented with capital letter strings.
2.1 Economic Development

(A farmer who produces peppers and tomatoes under the guidance of the local government policies) We lost a lot this year. Many people like us said they had a big loss, and even the seed money was problematic. Especially tomatoes, they were selling for only 15 fen per catty (approximately USD $0.05/kg). That’s way too low! Some farmers just left the tomatoes to rot right where they had grown, since they were worthless. (AC10)

(The head of the local bureau of agriculture) We do our best to support agriculture, and benefit peasantry according to central policies. We strive to help farmers maximize their incomes and support the poor. Pepper growing has seen quite a development in the last two years. This year alone, 70 thousand mu (approximately 4666.7 hectares, almost one fourth of the county’s total cultivated land) of peppers were planted. We believe the incomes of the masses will see a large increase. Each mu of peppers contains 3 or 4 thousand catties (approximately 1,500 or 2,000 kg), and the sale price of peppers is 50 fen per catty (approximately $0.16/kg). That means the gross revenue of one mu will be more than 1,700 yuan (approximately $267), and the net profit will be 1,300 yuan (approximately $204) per mu. This is more than the sum earned from planting paddies. ... In 2007, the farmers in our region who planted tomatoes gained an income of more than 10,000 yuan (approximately $1572) per mu (approximately 666.7 m²). ... But this year, too many tomatoes were planted, so there was a surplus and a large part of the yield had to be left in the field to rot. Therefore, some people have been using the saying, “You can’t get lucky every time”. (AO01)

This pair of statements shows the inconsistencies of judgments and attributions regarding the same public issue and related policy between civilians and officials in the same region.

2.2 Social Security and Public Establishment

(A veteran complaining about the immigration policy for a local reservoir project) At first they acknowledged us as immigrants, and signed contracts with us. We didn’t have to move for a few months after we signed the contracts; the immigration project was launched in 2005 ... In 2003, the Bureau of Immigration also acknowledged us (who were serving in the army at that time) as immigrants. Then, in the end, they changed the policy! (AC20)

Simply put on the issue of immigrants, the compensative resettlement is higher for larger projects, and lower for smaller ones. However, civilians do not have trust in us or in the official publicity. For example, to the immigrants of our OUAN Reservoir Project, which is part of a hydropower station, our province’s policy is favorable, but the immigrants still don’t believe our publicity. They asked about the compensative policy from provincial authority. Since there is some discrepancy between the province and our county, the immigrants say “How much money does the province give you, and how little does your county give us?” They don’t realize that some of the money isn’t for them. Of course, we give them all that is rightfully theirs. (AO02)

In this case, the same type of inconsistencies exists for judgments and attributions toward a public issue and related policies. As a matter of fact, one officer told the researcher privately that the immigration policy “forgot” to take students and soldiers abroad into account.

2.3 Intergroup Conflicts of Interest and the Wealth Gap

The price of rubber has been going up in recent years. If you (the local rubber companies) raise your purchase price of the initial products by just a little bit, how much will it really affect your profit? Everyone is aware of the laws. Since your previous purchase price was quite low for a long time, your divided profit rates (to farmers) are pretty low as well. Now the rubber price has gone up, and you’ve got to raise your purchase price in order to maximize your interests. And these companies did so just a bit too much. (BC10)

The local rubber plantation was founded during the Reform and Opening-up period. At first, these enterprises were township-owned, then transited as private firms. Rubber seedlings generally require seven or eight years to mature. During the growth phase, the farmers are unable to continue cultivating land. Their living expenses were supplied by other townships which we call the supply base. Therefore, the interest relationships among firms, farmers, and supply bases became structured. The conflicts of interest were not so big before the transitions of the firms. But afterwards, especially in recent years while the purchase price was raised, the conflicts became bigger, mainly the ones between firms and farmers. The state forest right reform was also a factor, involving the rubber plantations here. How should the property rights of rubber plantations be allocated? The local government had no idea before the incident. (BO03)

This pair of statements is an example showing consistent judgments but inconsistent attribution to a public issue.

2.4 Public Security Issues

The public security in IOU (a city) was pretty bad. There were lots of burglaries, as well as some robberies. My house was broken into twice within one month. The first time that happened I called 110 (police emergency hotline). The police officer said on the phone that I should go their office to report the case. I said my footprints are all over the scene, and I have to stay here and protect the scene. Why don’t you just send someone over? He said they wouldn’t take the case if I didn’t go to the police station to report it. (CC03)

No official in the same region mentioned this public issue or how it should be solved. This is the type of incomplete consistency for both judgments and attributions.

2.5 Efficiency of Institutional Appealing Measures

(A retired woman who used to be a farmer. Her cultivated land was requisitioned at a low price from a state-owned enterprise in the 1990s, and as for compensation, she was employed by the enterprise for a non-skilled job. She speaks of how she was discouraged from appealing in Beijing.) They (the enterprise staff) told us that “Yes, it is true your wage isn’t reasonable, your plantations were occupied and you were compensated too little. It is really unreasonable to you, and as a result, you can not support yourself. We don’t seek interpretations of policies or laws here, let’s just go home and we’ll find a solution for you.” We heard these words and thought it was really good for us. ... So we went home. But ever since we left, they haven’t done a thing to solve our problems. What solution have they searched for? How hard have they looked for a solution? They just lied to us! (DC07)
This pair of statements is an example of consistency of judgments and attributions on a public issue.

(A journalist of a local newspaper) Now we’re not allowed to write anything that involves exposing problems or the defects of public administrations, since the authority considers it might disrupt social harmony. ... The media aren’t allowed to criticize the authorities on the same or higher levels, they can only criticize or expose the problems or defects of subordinate sectors or lower hierarchies. (DC16)

No official commented on this issue. This is an incomplete consistency.

2.7 Corruption and Deviant work Ethics

Your government officials illegally shared the stocks (of the local rubber companies). ... You’d better do this (raising the purchase price of original rubber products) just to maximize your interests. (BC10)

The county Party Secretary is a scoundrel! ... Why did you, the Party Secretary, get involved with the business of companies? For what? ... Oh, so the supervision mechanism of our Party doesn’t work at all! ... It can’t supervise a secretary, or a deputy secretary! (BO06)

This pair of statements indicates the consistency of judgments and attributions on the same public issue.

Table 1 shows comparisons of the judgments between civilians and officials on local public issues.

Table 1: Coding Results of Interviewees Reflected Local Public Issues

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a: A, B, C, and D represent separately the four case regions.

1: Economic development;
2: Social security and public establishment;
3: Intergroup conflicts of interests and wealth gap;
4: Public security issues;
5: Efficiency of institutional appealing measures;
6: Functions of non-administrative entities;
7: Corruption and deviant work ethics.

The local authorities involved with, were not aware of or not sensitive to the public issues, a trend which may be seen from Table 1. a) There were more inconsistencies or incomplete consistencies than consistencies of judgments between civilians and officials regarding the local public issues. b) There was at least one inconsistency or incomplete consistency on an aspect of the local public issues in each of the four cases. c) Not all aspects shared the same type of inconsistency in all four cases, except for the efficiency of institutional appealing measures, in which all case regions share the same type of incomplete consistency, i.e. serious vs. not serious, or not mentioned vs. not serious. d) Concerning corruption and deviant work ethics, there was either consistency or incomplete consistency among the four cases.

Table 2 shows the combinations of attributive judgments of the civilians and officials regarding the public issues.
Table 2
Coding Results on the Attributions of Public Issues Problem and Government Satisfaction and Trust of Interviewees

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a: A, B, C, and D represent separately the four case regions.
b: 1. Promoting economy;
2. Solving the issues of social security and public establishment;
3. Adjusting intergroup interests and narrowing wealth gap;
4. Maintaining public security;
5. Guaranteeing the functions of institutional appealing measures;
6. Permitting work of non-administrative entities;
7. Creating a probity government;
8. Central authority satisfaction;
9. Local authority satisfaction;
10. Central authority trust;
11. Local authority trust.

The authorities did not learn about the efficiency of their policies and administrations accurately enough. This impression can be gained from Table 2. a) There were more attributional inconsistencies between the civilians and officials than judgmental inconsistencies on public issues (compared with Table 1). b) Most of the inconsistencies shared the same pattern, i.e. negative attributions of civilians vs. positive attributions of officials. c) Concerning the matters of solving the issues of social security and public establishment and adjusting intergroup interests and narrowing the wealth gap, all four cases shared the same inconsistencies. 4) Concerning the matter of creating a probity government”, there were two consistencies (either negative or not mentioned) and two incomplete consistencies (negative vs. not mentioned).

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Root Cause of MIs
The root cause of MIs, according to the postulations of this study, may be determined by means of the inconsistencies of judgments and attributions between civilians and officials concerning local public issues.

Corruption and deviant work ethics cannot be determined as the root causes of MIs based on the results of these four cases, due to the fact that there were both of consistencies and incomplete consistencies of judgments given by civilians and officials. As the matter of fact, civilians spoke of corruption much less frequently than other public issues. What they said concerning corruption mainly consisted of emotional or ethical critiques rather than concrete facts, and more importantly, they did not relate corruption to their impaired private interests. When the civilians mentioned deviant work ethics, they sometimes pointed out concrete individual officers and actions, and related these persons and actions to their own impaired interests. On the official side, in the open-ended interviews, the interviewees who did not mention this issue did not necessarily deny or approve of the phenomena in their respective regions. In fact, the officials spoke of the matter more cautiously. Considering the fact that corruption is illegal and must operate in secret, most civilians learn of disclosed corruption cases from media reports. To deviant work ethics of some officials, although civilians might encounter it in their daily lives, they learned more about it from the criticisms of media and authorities. These reports criticisms indicate not only the existence of corruption and deviant work ethics, but also the volition of the authorities to punish them. This study did not generalize inconsistent attitudes between civilians and officials toward corruption and deviant work ethics.
The inconsistencies of the judgments and attributions between the civilians and officials regarding other public issues were more prevalent. The general pattern of the inconsistencies was that civilians complained about certain issues and attributed them to the local authorities, whereas officials claimed that their policies were successful. While complaining, the civilians interviewed always stated that their impaired or ignored interests were related to certain local administrations or public policies. The public policies criticized by the civilians in the four cases included: the policy promoting large plantations of peppers and tomatoes, adjusting interest allocations between rubber companies and farmers, compensating and resettling immigrants of reservoir projects, pushing the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, maintaining social security, etc. These public policies most likely impaired or ignored the interests of some social groups. This study refers to these situations as policy failures, due to the fact that there were no improper intentions involved, but the policies failed to achieve the intended goals.

The administrative actions criticized by the civilians may be generalized as three “no”s – no police, no action (to solve a problem), and no reply. It is no doubt these actions worsen civilian-authority relationships. In contrast, the officers often made excuses for themselves as the discrepancies between the over-expectations of civilians and capacities of officials: we can do nothing without a relevant state policy; we will not be able to solve your appeal right away, because we have to follow a certain procedure in order to solve an issue; we are not here to serve only you, we have to listen to everyone’s appeals, etc. This study refers to these situations as improper executions, because there were no improper intentions involved, and the officers did act according to administrative rules and procedures.

These policy failures and improper executions may be regarded as the sources of discontent among civilians and the root cause of MIs. Although discontent among different regions bears similar characteristics, the concrete behaviors of the authorities which caused the discontent differ. This may explain why MIs are regionally, industrially, or occupationally restricted.

Almost all civilians who complained about public policy failures or improper executions also expressed dissatisfaction and a certain degree of helplessness. They considered themselves as the victims of a policy or an administrative action, and felt strong relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976). Previous studies have pointed out that relative deprivation does not inevitably mobilize oppositional behavior (Folger & Martin, 1986; Zhang, Wang, & Zhou, 2010, 2012). In fact, most people in this situation would suffer and complain. They express their discontent via spreading political jokes and rhymes. However, suffering and complaining are merely a superficial stability, and in fact such reactions cause the local authorities to become less sensitive to public issues, and learn of the efficiency of their public policies less accurately and in a less timely manner. Provided that the local authorities do not believe that these policies and administrative behaviors require change, the civilians’ interests will be impaired or ignored, and as a result discontent among the civilians will accumulate. Once someone triggers a conflict with the local authority, those who have been suffering and complaining may be aroused to support the conflict. To some extent, suffering and complaining may be regarded as a foreboding of societal disorder.

3.2 Why Do Errors Occur in Public Administrations?

To err is human; this applies to organizations, including government and political parties.

Reason (1990) inferred the mechanisms of knowledge-based errors. One is the capacity for information processing. Working memory is the “bottleneck” of the information processing system, analogous to the memory of a computer, but with a capability of 5 to 9 chunks (Simon, 1974). Another mechanism is the accessibility of knowledge stored in long-term memory. Not all pieces of the stored knowledge are equally available for use. It is not difficult to understand this if one has experience of school examinations. When attempting to solve a problem, it is possible to not be able to draw upon relevant knowledge, or to draw upon incorrect knowledge.

Unfortunately, most public issues are very complex problems involving many different elements and factors. This leaves the possibility of some omission when making a public policy or executing it. Some examples found in the cases of this study have shown this, e.g. the policy for promoting large areas for cultivating peppers and tomatoes ignored the market factors, the reservoir immigration policy “forgot” the persons abroad at provincial schools and in the army, the promotion restructuring policy of state-owned enterprises, and so on.

These mechanisms are simply personal issues. Computer-assisted systems may support authorities in decreasing the number of these mistakes. As Rocca (1992) indicated, corruption is the result of certain defects in the institutional structure, mainly lack of effective supervision and restraint. No one would consider the fact that these defects were intentionally left for corruption. Not only may policy making and executing include errors, as the findings of this study have exposed, it may also be concluded from this point to all man-designed and man-executed administrative systems – administrative institutions, policies, rules, or procedures. Any of these may possibly contain certain knowledge-based errors of their designers or makers. These are no longer personal errors, and become administrative errors. This study defines administrative errors as the defects of administrative institutions, policies, rules, or procedures,
which are the results of knowledge-based errors made by officers. It should be differentiated the administrative errors from those administrative behaviors have clear defects or shortcomings which officials are aware of and will pay special attention to. For example, China has to implement the one-child family planning policy, due to its large population burden and limited resources, although policy-makers know that this policy will inevitably negatively affect population structure, family structure, parenting styles, and the personalities of children. Administrative errors, on the other hand, are “potential failures” (Reason, 1990, 1993). No one realizes these potential failures until unexpected consequences occur.

In the 1990s, several scholars studying the safety control of socio-technical systems pointed out the term of “organizational errors” (e.g. Reason, 1990, 1993, 1995; Wagenaar, 1993; Wagenaar, Souverijn, & Hudson, 1993; Wilpert & Klumb, 1993; Amalberti, 1993; Qvale, 1993; Marsden, 1993; Grabowski & Roberts, 1996; Anheier, 1999). They considered organizational errors as the defects in safety control systems (e.g. Reason, 1995; Marsden, 1996; Anheier, 1999), insufficient training (e.g. Amalberti, 1993; Wagenaar, Souverijn, & Hudson, 1993), unhealthy safety culture (e.g. Wilpert & Kumb, 1993; Amalberti, 1993; Wagenaar, 1993), and decision faults on behalf of managers (e.g. Qvale, 1993; Grabowski & Roberts, 1996). Therefore the concept of human error had entered the management of socio-technical systems. Unfortunately, none of the results mentioned here touched upon the mechanisms of organizational errors, and research enthusiasm regarding this theme has not persisted.

The mechanisms of administrative errors must be much more complex than those of personal errors. The former includes but is not limited to the latter. A case study is not capable of exploring the mechanisms throughout. This paper attempts to assume some of the causes of administrative errors according to the nature of public issues.

Most public issues are less structural problems. Simon’s bounded rationality theory (1955, 1956, 1965) undisputedly proves that such problems have no unique algorithm or satisfactory solution; instead, people must apply heuristic strategies to achieve certain acceptable solutions. This process implies the possibility of failure. Moreover, people with various value orientations will expect their own acceptable solutions regarding a public issue. Facing such a situation, a government, much like a chef preparing a meal for various guests, would not possibly be able to satisfy every social group equally with one solution. This process implies further subtle failures. Chinese authorities often say “no differentiating, no policy” (meiyou qubie jiu meiyou zhengce). However, in reality, some officers seem to hold such an idea that, if they believe a particular solution for a public issue is the best one, then others must feel so too. Many oversimplified policies ignore the differentials among various social groups. Li and Wang (2007) identified that an acceptable public policy should be a trade-off among various social groups. That is to say, the interests of all relevant groups should be taken into account, but it is not possible for any of them to be maximized.

In summary, administrative errors are inevitable, so discontent is a normal consequence of such errors.

### 3.3 Dysfunctions of Correction Mechanics

Determining administrative errors as the root causes of MIs does not make an excuse for the authorities involved. This study exposed another danger, which may be more dangerous than administrative errors: various institutional appealing measures, such as administrative litigation, petition demonstrations, and filing complaints, as well as media criticisms, trade unions, employee delegate congresses, women’s federations, youth leagues, etc., do not perform as planned. This phenomenon is the consequence of intentions on behalf of authorities, and is derived from administrative errors. The findings of this study indicated the inconsistencies of judgments and attributions regarding the functions of institutional appealing measures and non-administrative entities between civilians and authorities in most of the four case regions.

No matter what purposes of those appealing institutional measures or non-government organizations are, they all share an important function for the public administrations: to allow the authorities at all levels to learn about the possible failures of their policies or executions. This paper considers these as correction mechanics. Administrative errors are inevitable, but their effects may be minimized by means of various correction mechanics. Without these mechanics, it would be difficult to imagine how authorities would learn in a timely manner of the interest appeals of civilians, how they would accurately determine pressing public issues, how they would appraise the efficiencies of their own public policies and executions, and how they would detect the failures of their administrative behaviors. It seems that civilians would only be able to express their discontent and interests through MIs. MIs, in a certain sense, temporarily take the place of those correction mechanics, but the cost of this correction is too heavy.

In summary, discontent is normal, but it is not inevitably transferred as an MI if civilians are able to legally express their discontent and appeals. MIs may be avoidable if all institutional designed correction mechanics function properly.

### CONCLUSION

Administrative errors, this study focuses on policy failures and improper execution, are determined as the root cause
of MIs. Dysfunctions of various correction mechanics are derived from administrative errors, and as the main contributive factor to MIs.

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, a limited number of cases were used in this study. Although ten regions were investigated, only four included completed interviews with both civilians and officials. The most difficult task in this study was the interviews with the officials. Many officers refused the interviews when they learned of the purpose of the study, often by making the excuse of being too busy to accept the interviews. The researchers felt a strong administrative atmosphere from these contacts. If the officials were not so concerned about the interviews, then more cases could have been covered in this study, and the scope of the comparisons between civilians and officials may have been more abundant.

Secondly, the extension of the administrative errors was broader than the coverage of the study, although the authors believe that the entire administrative system shares the same error-conducting mechanisms, due to its man-made nature. Further research may enlarge the explorative scope to other aspects of an administrative system.

Thirdly, this study did not empirically test the mechanisms of administrative errors, only postulated them. Certain causal models should be designed for determining these mechanisms in future research.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX**

**Interview Questions for Officials**

a) Please tell us what the local government has done for developing the economy, improving the living quality of civilians, and maintaining social harmony and stability in recent years. What do you think of the efficiency of this work?


**APPENDIX**

a) Please tell us what the local government has done for developing the economy, improving the living quality of civilians, and maintaining social harmony and stability in recent years. What do you think of the efficiency of this work?

b) How does the local government learn about issues related to the lives of local civilians? Please cite specific examples.

c) How does the local government make your public policies known by civilians? How does the local government gain information concerning the acceptability of the policies? Please cite specific examples.

d) How does the local government deal with conflicts or contradictions between enterprises and residents? Please cite specific examples.

e) What lessons has the local government learned from this incident?

f) Is there anything more we should have asked but did not? Please provide us with any additional information that you believe will be helpful.

**Interview questions for Civilians**

a) How has your life been in recent years? Please cite specific examples.

b) How do you feel about what the local government has done in recent years? Please cite specific examples.

c) How does local government deal with conflicts or contradictions between enterprises and residents? Please cite specific examples.

d) How do other residents cope when their interests are infringed upon? What would you do in this situation? Please cite specific examples.

e) How much did you learn about the incident? Please tell us whatever you know about it. What do you think of this incident?

f) What do you think of the measures the local government used for dealing with this incident?

g) Please tell us the doggerels you have known concerning the local government or political leaders.

h) Is there anything more we should have asked but did not? Please provide us with any additional information that you believe will be helpful.