



Dalian community protest in 2011 forced the closing of a petrochemical plant.

New Signs of Hope:

Resistance in China Today

By Au Loong Yu and Bai Ruixue

CASES OF RESISTANCE in China continue to grow. Protests both large and small are extremely frequent. These range from workers' protests against unpaid wages and demands for labor rights to protests against corrupt officials and environmental abuses. While these struggles have often been brought to a swift end through repression, they have also frequently led to protestors being granted concessions. The party-state adopts different means by which to limit social unrest and restore "social harmony."

The fact that the overwhelming majority of protests are spontaneous, or limited to one locality or issue, and furthermore that the information and reports are frequently censored, means that it is very difficult to gain an in-depth picture of resistance. However, some recently emerging struggles stand out for having significant and new features. They seem to mark unprecedented steps forward.

Since the 1989 crackdown on the democratic movement there has been a deep demoralization among workers in the declining state sector while the low expectation of rural migrant workers among the booming private sector has meant they have been unaware of their rights. Thus workers' economic struggles have been highly atomised and spontaneous. Recent cases show that things may be changing. There

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seems to be a higher awareness about coordinating struggles and even an aspiration for grassroots democracy.

Although the party-state apparatus remains very strong, there are signs at the provincial level that the party has to come to terms with an aspiration growing at the grassroots. We would like to attempt an assessment of some of the more significant struggles over the last three years.

Labor Struggles: Tsonghua, Honda, Pepsi

The July 2009 anti-privatization struggle by steel workers at the state-owned Tonghua Steel Mill in Jilin province, which led to the death of a factory boss, resulted in a victory for the workers. Plans to buy out and privatize the mill have been dropped.¹

The protest began when workers found out about plans that Jianlong Steel would take over and control the company. The workers resented this because when Jianlong bought a 36% share in Tonghua in September 2005, a wave of layoffs followed. In 2008, when Jianlong temporarily controlled the company, workers fared badly when steel prices had fallen.

Afraid of further job losses, workers took action as soon as they heard about the takeover of the steel mill, the only major employer in the city. On July 24, a worker who had been previously laid off hung a banner outside the main office building, saying "Jianlong, Get out of Tonghua." Workers started to blockade a railway in order to stop supplies from reaching the

mill. Approximately 30,000 present and former workers and their families were involved in the protest.

Much of the workers' anger had been specifically directed at their factory boss, Chen Guojin, who had first come to Tonghua in 2006, not long after Jianlong first purchased a stake in the company. He was resented not only as the representative of Jianlong but also because of his tough disciplinarian style and the pay differential between management and themselves. One 2008 report claimed, for instance, that while Chen was paid three million yuan, some of the company retirees were receiving as little as 200 yuan per month.

During the protest the steel workers beat Chen to death. Just hours later Jianlong withdrew their offer to buy the mill. The struggle successfully halted Jianlong's privatization.

The following year China's Shougang Steel Group, a giant State Operated Enterprise, acquired a majority share in the company. Although this is considered a victory, it remains to be seen how long workers can keep their jobs. After restructuring, SOEs are run as any other commercial entity, under pressure to cut labor costs.

The Tonghua struggle offers several significant lessons.

First, Chinese workers were not prepared to passively sit back in the face of privatization. The fact that a manager was killed illustrates the depth of anger and desperation among workers whose livelihoods and means of survival were at stake. Meanwhile they observed how management was reaping rich rewards.

During the enterprise reforms since late 1980s, it was not uncommon to read in the news that the individual workers killed the managers for sacking them or for cutting their wages, but this was never a *collective action*. Where there were collective actions — mostly demonstrations or camping in front of factories — they were moderate and very self-disciplined due to fear of retaliation. The Tonghua incident is the first case where a manager was killed by a large group of workers and was supported by most fellow workers.

The workers' violence was also widely supported by netizens. Such a massive outbreak of anger frightened the local government and forced it to make significant concessions. Whether this represents a sign that the demoralizing effect of the 1989 defeat is now receding remains to be seen. But future SOE workers' struggles may refer to this example and continue to draw inspiration from it.

Second, more or less at the same time as the Tonghua struggle workers at the Linzhou Steel Company in Puyang City were also fighting against privatization; the victory at Tonghua greatly encouraged their struggle. The workers locked up an official from the municipal government for 90 hours. They also ended their fight with a victory.

Third, the Chinese steel industry, the world's largest, is one where many workers have been victimized by large-scale layoffs. The central government's policy is to push industries into privatization and/or force them to merge in order to make them globally competitive. For example, from 1996-2001 the workforce in the ferrous metal industry declined by 40%, from 3.37 million to 2.04 million.² Although SOE and collective enterprise workers are now just one-fifth of the national working class, the Tonghua struggle proves that they remain important. Even after restructuring, the most important industries are still SOEs, and collective enterprise workers still

remain a formidable force.

Finally, in both Tonghua and Linzhou all the supposedly pro-labor institutions within the plants — the trade union, the staff and the workers' representative congress — proved ineffective at representing workers' interests. This was why workers — including many union members — took actions independently of the official trade union. One Tonghua employee speaking to the *China Daily* commented, "I can't remember the last time we had a conference with our union representative. The union certainly didn't do any good the day Chen was killed."³

In May 2010, what has been probably the highest-profile strike action in China's recent history began when Honda workers in Foshan, Guangdong province, took action calling for higher wages and — perhaps even more significantly — the reorganization of their workplace trade union. This triggered a wave of strike actions in foreign-owned car plants that summer. Unlike the Tonghua struggle, these workers did not take action in the face of privatization and imminent job losses. Already working at privately owned enterprises, they sought to improve on their current situation.

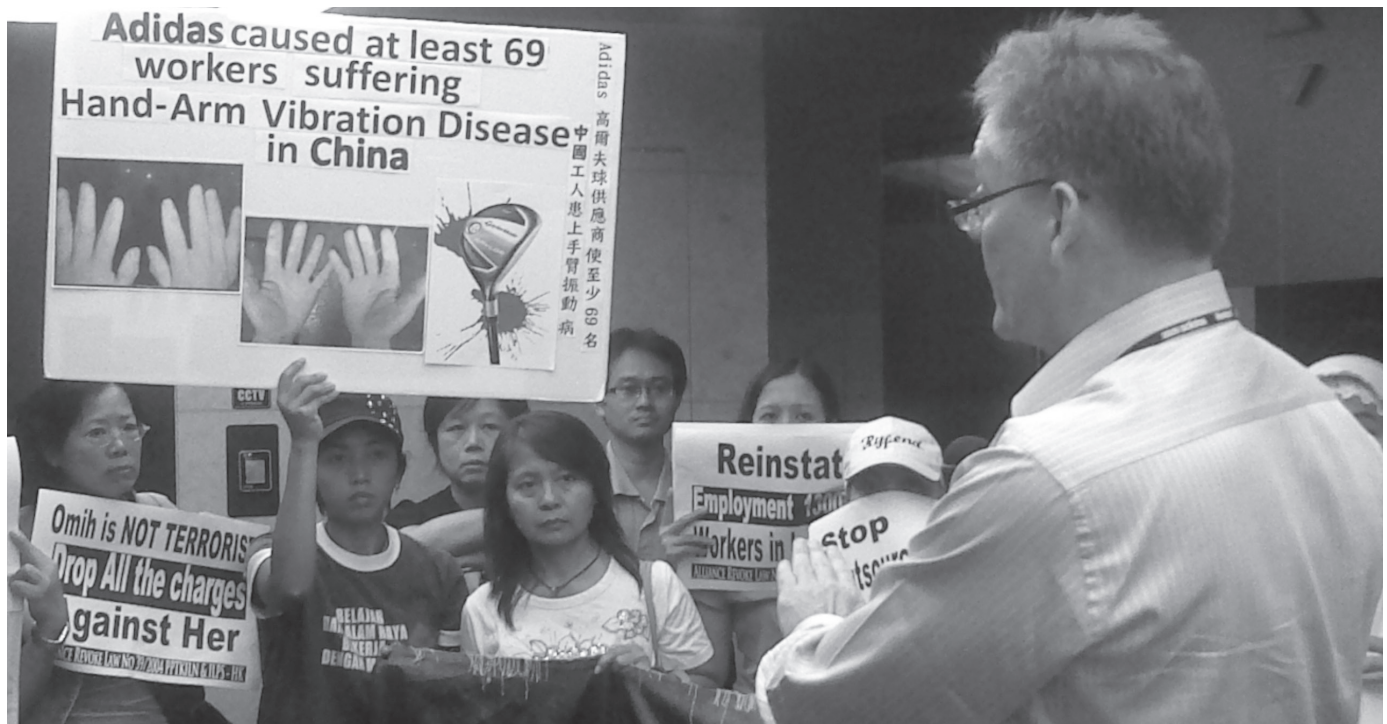
The action, which first began on May 17 with around 100 striking workers, was followed by two further strikes four days later. This led to retaliation by Honda management, who dismissed two of the workers' leaders. The workers did not give in, however, and the following day the strike spread as the whole factory went on strike. Production was completely halted. The strike lasted for more than two weeks and only ended after management offered regular workers a 35% pay increase while those working as interns received a raise of more than 70%.

Previously Honda workers had been receiving wages well below industry standards. Honda had also been particularly quick to exploit those in internship programs. Since interns were not protected by Chinese Labour Law, they were paid less than the minimum wage.

As in the Tonghua struggle, the ACFTU (official union) at the Honda plant failed to protect the interests of the workers. Indeed, during the course of the strike the local level trade union stood apart from the strike. In fact, on May 31 some strikers reported that they had been physically attacked by men wearing union badges. Even after it issued a vague apology letter, the union was clearly more keen on encouraging workers to go back to work as quickly as possible than on ensuring a just outcome to the strike.

At an enterprise level the Honda workers recognized that their union was failing them. Thus they made the reorganization of the workplace union a key demand. Additionally, in an open letter, worker representatives condemned the branch trade union saying, "We are outraged by the trade union's appropriation of the fruits of the workers' struggles. We insist that the branch trade union of the factory shall be elected by the production line workers."⁴

In the end, the workers were unable to win this demand. Although the local trade union announced a workplace union election in late August 2010, it turned out that this was only a by-election where just a part of the leadership was to be elected. The original chairperson, who was very much resented by the strikers, kept his seat. In a highly complicated four-stage process, members of the management team were elect-



ON OCTOBER 18 a group of labor organizations protested at Adidas Hong Kong office. They demanded that Adidas take responsibility for occupational hazards at supplier plants in Indonesia and China, particularly 69 workers at Dynamic Casting in Guangzhou. According to Globalization Monitor, which issued a report the previous month, TaylorMade-Adidas has failed to stop these hazards at the supplier plant a full year after the first group of workers was identified as suffering from Hand-Arm Vibration disease, which is caused by substandard vibration units or their improper usage. For more information about how you can get involved in this campaign, go to <http://www.globalmon.org.hk/en/>.

ed. Meanwhile activists who led the strike were pushed out.

Nevertheless, the workplace union negotiated a second wage increase in March 2011.⁵ The fact that many of the workers were so young — more than 50% of those who took part in the first strike in Foshan were high school students on internship programs — is also significant: The strike represents the actions of a new generation of Chinese workers, who have no memory of the 1989 democracy movement and its defeat.

In fact, because of censorship most of these young workers probably do not know of the event at all. However they are prepared to fight to improve conditions at their own workplace. While SOE workers generally were unprepared to call for workplace union elections out of fear that they would be accused of “trying to get rid of the leadership of the party,” these young private-sector workers, mostly from rural household or from small cities, dared to break the taboo.

At the height of their struggle the strikers made clear that they saw their actions as being in the interests of the whole Chinese working class. They said, “Our struggle to defend our rights is not just about fighting for ourselves, the 1800 workers of Honda. We are concerned about the rights of all the workers in the whole country. We want to set a good example of workers struggling for their rights.”⁶

We are not sure how many workers may share this vision, but one thing is certain — they are quite unlike their parents, who may say “*ershi ding chushan, sishi ding shoushan*” (“when we are at twenty we all go to cities to work, and when we turn forty we all go back to our home village”). Instead this young generation of rural migrant workers has a strong desire to establish roots in the cities. They are more likely to view themselves as part of the urban working people rather than

as *nongmingong*. In fact, they rarely till the land and have little intention of living as peasants.

Those who receive secondary education or vocational training are more likely to have a broader vision than their parents. Even if the Honda strike remains an individual case, it will nevertheless be an important signpost for developing resistance among young rural migrant workers. What they can accomplish is still unknown, but these young workers may surprise us in many ways in the near future.

Another significant recent example was the protest by thousands of workers from Pepsi bottling plants on November 14, 2011, against an agreement between PepsiCo Inc and Taiwanese Tingyi Holding Corporation (also known as “Master Kong”). The agreement involves PepsiCo giving up its bottling operations in China and transferring its equity interests to Tingyi-Asahi Beverages Holding Co. (TAB), a joint-venture between Tingyi and Japanese company Asahi Group Holdings Ltd, in exchange for a stake in this joint-venture company.

Workers were to have their existing contracts with PepsiCo terminated; they would be forced to renegotiate them with TAB. On hearing the news, the workers, who claimed that they had previously known nothing about the deal between the companies, took the day off⁷ and demanded that either the takeover be halted or, if their contracts were to be terminated, that they had a right to compensation from PepsiCo for its violation of the original contract.

Significantly, these workers took the unprecedented step of coordinating their action. Protests took place at bottling plants in more than five different cities at the same time, including Chongqing, Chengdu, Fuzhou, Changsha and Nanchang. Moreover following the protest action, an online

campaign was organised to try and involve workers at all of PepsiCo's bottling plants across China.

On November 30, Pepsi actually did announce some compensation packages for the workers. They were given the option of a) staying on, working one more year and then receiving a higher level of compensation pay, b) immediate compensation (a smaller amount), or c) keep their current labor contracts. Nevertheless, posts on workers blogs, quickly deleted soon after they appeared, indicated that at least among some workers there was dissatisfaction with the situation.

On December 1, for instance, a Lanzhou Pepsi workers' microblog stated that the workers did not agree with the terms offered by their employers. Workers were still demanding that their employers respond to their demands. If the management did not respond in time, the workers threatened to do whatever they could within the law to express their grievances. The alliance between PepsiCo and Tingyi was finally approved by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce at the end of March 2012. But while there are reports that the workers remain unsatisfied, it remains to be seen whether any further action will occur.

The Wukan Uprising

Probably the most remarkable case of resistance last year was the 2011 struggle by villagers in Wukan, a fishing village with a population of approximately 13,000, in Guangdong province. This struggle saw the ruling Communist Party temporarily losing control of the village. The result was a partial victory for the villagers, who were able to prepare for independent elections to their village committee for the first time.

The Wukan incident began with action taken by villagers over their opposition to illegal land seizures by corrupt government officials. "Land grabbing" is a common problem in China, and indeed it has been officially acknowledged that more than 43% of Chinese farmers have been victims; as a result local governments have made huge profits.⁸

Protests in opposition to corruption have become extremely frequent. This is worrisome to China's leadership, who want, above all, to maintain social stability. As a result, they now claim that there is a need to protect peasants' rights.

In Wukan, according to villagers, the problem of land being taken from them and then sold to property developers began in the mid-1990s. It was not until a few years ago, however, that a group of the villagers first began submitting legal complaints about corrupt officials misappropriating village land.

In September 2011, the villagers finally decided that they had had enough and came out onto the streets in mass protests, storming local government offices and driving out the party secretary. Riot police were sent in and villagers driven back. Shortly afterwards, the local government asked the villagers to choose 13 representatives to represent them in mediation. But as soon as the villagers' anger seemed to die down, the government tried to get the village back under their control. In early December the representatives were arrested at a restaurant, interrogated and thrown into jail.

Two days later, when riot police were again sent into the village, they were met by more mass protests from the villagers. Despite attempts to regain control, using tear gas and water cannons, police were pushed out of the village. They

retreated to block a road a few miles away, preventing food and water from entering the village. When villagers learned that Xue Jinbo, one of the 13 representatives, died in custody, anger only fuelled villagers' determination.

In the end, despite the initial brutality and the horrendous death of Xue Jinbo, the protests were not as fiercely suppressed as they have been in the past. Rather those detained were released and the local government promised to address the villagers' complaints. For the first time in decades, the municipal and provincial governments' officially recognized the provisional committee founded by the villagers.⁹ This provides villagers with a vehicle through which to prepare for elections of a new village committee. Struggle from below, as this case indicates, has the potential to change the party's practical ban on any form of autonomous organisation.

In February 2012, an 11-member elections committee organized the election of a new village committee the following month. The old officials who had overseen the illegal selling of the land had already been driven out. In order to insure transparency all elections committee candidates were required to collect 50 signatures from fellow villagers, indicating that they had at least minimal support, and publicly declare that they would not run in the forthcoming election.

To ensure that these elections were open and democratic a census of the village population was carried out. Many villagers participated in their first election and were enthusiastic about the process.¹⁰ According to a Xinhua report, more than 70% of those eligible participated.

One of the representatives hoped that this election might inspire the nation and that all levels of the government, from the villages to the central government will be democratically elected in the future.¹¹ That they won the right to these elections no doubt represents a remarkable and unprecedented step forward for the villagers in Wukan.

Recent online comparisons between the Wukan elections and the election for the Hong Kong Chief Executive have shown how Wukan is now more democratic than Hong Kong. This is a reflection on both the achievement of the villagers in Wukan and on the lack of democracy in Hong Kong.

What this new democracy will actually mean for the villagers of Wukan is yet to be seen. Indeed, the problem of the illegal land seizures initially raised by the villagers has not yet been resolved. It is uncertain as to whether it really will be.

It is also worth remarking that despite the protestors denouncing the corruption of officials, the protest was not against the Communist Party. There were in fact many banners and statements throughout the incident expressing support for the Party, a common thread throughout different protests in China. This reflects the view that corrupt local officials, rather than the central government, are to blame.

Indeed, among the protest leaders were Communist Party members, one of whom, Lin Zuluang, has since been promoted to the position of party secretary of Wukan. In the March election he was elected to head the village committee. This means he now holds both the position of party secretary and head of the village committee.

One question that has frequently surfaced in the discussion over the implications of the Wukan incident is whether the event has led to the emergence of a much more democratic

model that has the potential to be replicated elsewhere in China. However, talk of a “Wukan model” is overly optimistic if not misleading.

The events at Wukan were a victory brought about by determined grassroots resistance on a massive scale, but also under specific conditions, namely that one of the leaders of the struggle was a popular and skillful Communist party member and that it had the support of a fully developed network of young villagers who, through electronic devices and the internet, broke through news censorship. An additional factor is probably the fact that, in recent years, the Guangdong provincial government has been seen as being a bit more tolerant towards economic protests. It realizes that these are not necessarily threatening to the party-state.

If such reforms were to be introduced elsewhere from above, however, they would most likely only be on a limited scale. At any time candidates who lacked party approval, or were perceived as a threat, were elected, these reforms could be reversed. Only through more widespread struggle that could see beyond the immediate single issue might a more genuinely democratic and accountable model emerge.

Environmental Protests: Dalian, Haimen

Environmental issues are also a major cause of protests in China. Despite government claims about aims to reduce environment pollution and to create a cleaner environment, such claims are put aside where they conflict with the desire to attract investment. Nevertheless, due to the fear of social instability, environmental protests have had at least some successes.

One recent widely reported environmental protest is the Dalian struggle of August 2011, when protests in the city of Dalian in Liaoning province, Northeast China, led authorities to order a petrochemical plant shut down immediately. The protest began after Dalian residents became concerned about the potential spill of toxic chemical paraxylene (PX) from the Fujia chemical plant, following a heavy storm that had caused high waves to burst through the dike protecting the plant.

Despite the authorities’ insistence that there had been no spills, thousands of residents took to the streets in anger over the safety risks to which the plant exposed them. Many claimed that toxins had, in fact, leaked from the plant. They raised slogans demanding “PX out of Dalian” and “Refuse PX.” It was furthermore reported that Chinese reporters who had tried to investigate the plant had been beaten by security guards.¹²

Authorities were anxious to limit the scale of social unrest, and early into the protests the mayor, Li Wancai, tried to appease protesters by offering to relocate the plant. However, protesters demanded that a clear timetable had to be established and the detained protesters released before the protests would end. Indeed one of the key issues was the residents’ clear mistrust of the authorities. In the words of one demonstrator, “Even if there was contamination, the government would restrict the news.”¹³

This was not the first protest to lead to the scrapping of a project involving the chemical PX. Following protests in Xiamen in 2007 authorities were also pushed into halting a similar project and moving it out of the city’s jurisdiction.

Despite the Dalian protest ending with what seemed like a victory as the plant was being shut down and the promise that

the authorities would relocate it to Xizhong Island, reports have since suggested that the factory may have reopened. References to the plant’s reopening on mainland websites have since been removed.¹⁴ If the plant has indeed reopened, it demonstrates just how little the word of the authorities’ means and how easy it is for them to backtrack on their promises.

In December 2011, thousands of villagers protested for four days in Haimen, a town in Guangdong province not far from Wukan. They blocked a road and surrounding government offices to express their opposition to the planned expansion of a coal-fired power station owned by state-run Huaneng Power. The residents were prompted to protest by concerns about the high level of pollution. They said the power station was leading to health problems including a rise in the number of cancer cases.

In this case riot police fired tear gas at the crowd to break up the protest, resulting in injuries and reports of two deaths. Police also detained protesters, allegedly for vandalism. Due to fear that the protests might grow, and probably with Wukan in mind, there were many efforts to deter protesters. Students, for instance, were prevented from leaving school until late in the day out of fear that they might join in the protest.¹⁵ Meanwhile, local televisions broadcast clips showed legal experts warning that those who joined the protests could face up to five years in prison.¹⁶

Reports have suggested that many of the residents in Haimen had been following the situation in Wukan and were influenced by it. The fact that these two events took place at the same time would no doubt have only added to the pressure on the provincial government. It may also have contributed to the quick decision to suspend the power station project, once the immediate response of deterring the protesters failed.

Authorities would certainly not want there to be any chance of events at Haimen spiralling out into another Wukan, potentially involving even larger numbers. The protest therefore resulted in the Shantou city government, under whose jurisdiction Haimen falls, announcing that the project would be temporarily suspended. But no promise was made to put a stop to the plan altogether.

As the cases here have shown, resistance in China can bring about limited positive change. This is important not only to understand the benefits of the immediate victory, such as halting privatization, better working conditions or limiting harm to the environment. More such victories can inspire future actions and help improve the potential for their positive outcome. This is illustrated by the influence that the struggles of the Tonghua steel workers, the Honda workers and the villagers of Wukan had on other similar struggles at the same time.

The forms that resistance have taken also reflect how the current generation is becoming increasingly bold. Although still on a smaller scale, the attempt by Pepsi workers to coordinate their action is of particular note. Even if such coordination was contemplated in the past, fear of the consequences acted as a deterrent.

The fact that the young Honda workers made the claim that they were acting in the interests of the whole Chinese working class again shows how the mark of this new

generation, free from the memory of the terrible defeat of 1989, has the potential to see beyond their immediate issue and to identify with wider concerns. Although at present these remain small signs, they give us reason not to give up hope. §

Notes

1. The sections on the Tonghua anti-privatization struggle and on the Honda Workers' Strike are adapted from our article "The Case for an Autonomous Labour Movement in China," Au Loong Yu and Bai Ruixue.
2. *Woguo zhongchangqi shiye wenti yanjiu* (Research on China Medium and Long Term Unemployment), Jiang Xuan, China People's University Press, Beijing, 2004, 181.
3. Cited in "China debates the lessons of Tonghua tragedy," *China Labour Bulletin*, <http://www.clb.org.hk/en>.
4. Open Letter to the Public and All the Workers in Honda Auto Parts Manufacturing Co., Ltd., 3rd June 2010, <http://worldlabour.org/eng/node/361>.
5. *Nanhai bentian laozhi tanpan, jinnian gongzi zaizhang 600 yuan*, (Honda Nanhai Wage Negotiation Resulted in Raising 611 Yuan wages for This Year), <http://gcontent.oeeee.com/7/1/b/71bfbe458113bbc3/Blog/b4f/433268.html>.
6. *Nanhai bentian gongren daibiao fachu gongkaixin* (Honda Nanhai Workers Representatives' Open Letter), June 3, 2010, <http://www.sina.com.cn>.

7. Workers are reported to have claimed that they were not on strike but simply protesting to demand their rights.
8. "Nearly half China farmers suffer land grabs," AFP, February 7th 2012. http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h-rLJET4ZgUjQMlrTI_iSjaErNLQ?docId=CNG.9a22c95cb0e7b0a49350a92381891d4c.221.
9. It is also significant, however, that the Honda Foshan workers' representatives won official recognition as elected as grassroots representatives, which is rare, in their negotiating with the management.
10. *Guangdong Wukan cunmin yiren yi piao tuixuan cunmin xuanju weiyuanhui*, Xinhua Guangdong, February 2nd 2012.
11. *Ming Pao*, December 18, 2011.
12. Cited in "Tens of thousands protests against chemical plant in Northern China", *Guardian*, 14th August 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/aug/14/china-protest-against-px-chemical-plant>
13. *Ibid*.
14. "Dalian Plant Re-opens after protests dissipate," <http://rightsite.asia/en/article/dalian-chemical-plant-re-opens-after-protests-dissipate>.
15. "Chinese official denies reports of deaths at Haimen Protest," Reuters, 21st December 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/21/china-protest-plant-idUSL3E7NLOKR20111221>.
16. "Police fire tear gas at protesters in Chinese city," *New York Times*, 23rd December 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/24/world/asia/china-jails-rights-activist-chen-wei-for-9-years.html>.