

Playing by the Informal Rules

Growing protests in nondemocratic countries are often seen as signals of regime decline. China, however, has remained stable amid surging protests. *Playing by the Informal Rules* highlights the importance of informal norms in structuring state–protester interactions, mitigating conflict, and explaining regime resilience amid mounting unrest. Drawing on a nationwide dataset of protest and multisited ethnographic research, this book presents a bird’s-eye view of Chinese contentious politics and illustrates the uneven application of informal norms across regions, social groups, and time. Through examining different types of protests and their distinct implications for regime stability, Li offers a novel theoretical framework suitable for monitoring the trajectory of political contention in China and beyond. Overall, this study sheds new light on contentious politics and authoritarian resilience and provides fresh perspectives on power, rules, legitimacy, and resistance in modern societies.

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Playing by the Informal Rules

*Why the Chinese Regime Remains Stable
despite Rising Protests*

YAO LI

Harvard University



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To my parents, Yao Shuchun and Li Chensheng

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Acknowledgments

This book started with a 2007 conversation with my mother's colleague, a retired doctor who was leading his colleagues in a fight against a government decision to privatize their hospital. At that point the struggle was close to victory. When the doctor described their protest experience, I was not only impressed by his eloquence, charisma, and wit, but also amazed at the protesters' ability to affect government decision-making and to push policy implementation in their favor. The first question that came to mind then was how they got there. The more I learned about this case, the more I was drawn into Chinese contentious politics and the more questions arose: What about other protest cases? How does the Chinese state handle protests in general? Are there regional differences? Does the state treat distinct social groups differently? What are the political implications of these protests? This book is the culmination of my efforts to answer these questions.

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Abbreviations

BLR	binary logistic regression
CAP	contradiction among the people
CBOE	contradiction between ourselves and the enemy
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDP	China Democracy Party
DCFTU	D City Federation of Trade Unions
DCPB	D City Petition Bureau
DCTB	D City Traffic Bureau
ICPC	Independent Chinese PEN Center
LAPD	<i>Law on Assemblies, Processions, and Demonstrations</i>
MLR	multinomial logistic regression
NGO	non-governmental organizations
NIABY	not in anyone's backyard
NIMBY	not in my backyard
NPB	National Petition Bureau
PEA	protest event analysis
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSAPL	<i>Public Security Administration Punishment Law</i>
PSB	public security bureau
SEPA	State Environmental Protection Administration
SOE	state-owned enterprise
WUC	World Uyghur Congress