

China Dissent Monitor

Issue 9: July – September 2024

DISSENT EVENTS: 7,377

WHAT IS THE CHINA DISSENT MONITOR?

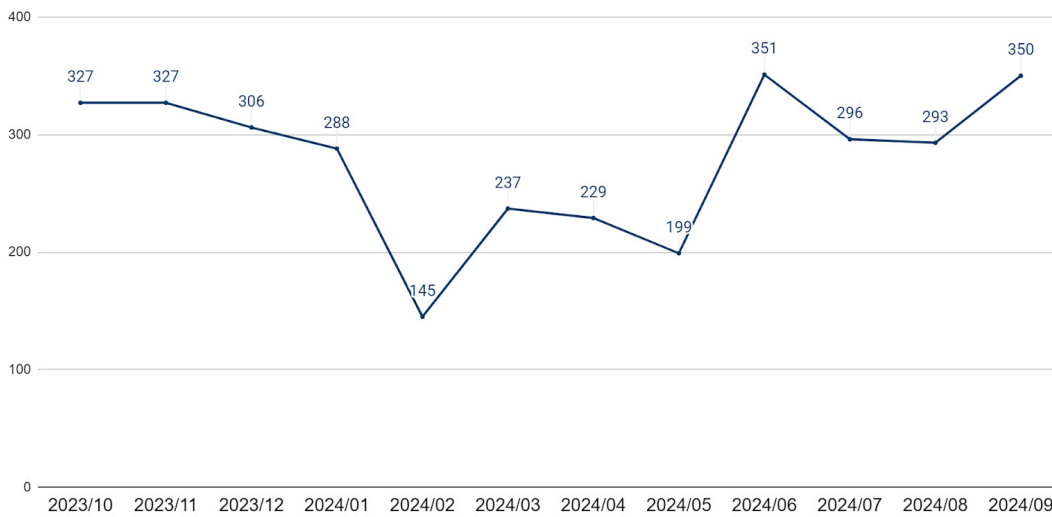
The China Dissent Monitor (CDM) collects and shares information about the frequency and diversity of dissent in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was created in response to the information gap resulting from media restrictions in the PRC and risks associated with collecting information from within the country about dissent and protest. The project prioritizes capturing offline collective action in public spaces, though cases of less public and online dissent are also included to illustrate diversity among dissent actions. Sources for the CDM database include news reports, civil society organizations, and PRC-based social media, including the application of a machine-learning algorithm developed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Doublethink Lab. See the full dataset and methodology at chinadissent.net.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **A 27 percent year-on-year increase in dissent events.** CDM logged 937 dissent events in the third quarter of 2024, a 27 percent increase over the same period in 2023. The majority of these protests are led by workers (41 percent), property owners (28 percent), and rural residents (12 percent), with the remainder driven by diverse groups such as parents, students, investors, consumers, members of religious or ethnic minority groups, and activists. The top regions for protest events were Guangdong (18 percent), followed by Shandong, Sichuan, Henan, and Zhejiang. CDM has logged a total of 7,377 cases of dissent since data collection began in June 2022.
- **Citizens fighting for autonomy in their communities.** This issue analyzes 174 cases of homeowners pushing back against perceived abuses and overreach by property management companies. When homeowners have attempted to democratically form owners' committees to take back powers that were seized by the management companies, they have been met with obstruction or other repression by the company or local government. These tensions have been exacerbated by the government increasingly treating property managers as the first line of social management.
- **Dissenting through *xinfang*.** Citizens often use *xinfang*, or petitioning, a complaint channel encouraged by the government, to carry out collective action or other contentious forms of dissent. This report explores the trends underlying 182 such cases, at least half of which led to some form of repression.
- **Rise in frequency of consumer and investor protests.** CDM has documented a rise in protests over recent months by consumers and investors amidst a sluggish economy. Despite the grievances originating with the conduct of private companies, nearly 40 percent of these protests demand government intervention.



Distribution of protest events, July to September 2024

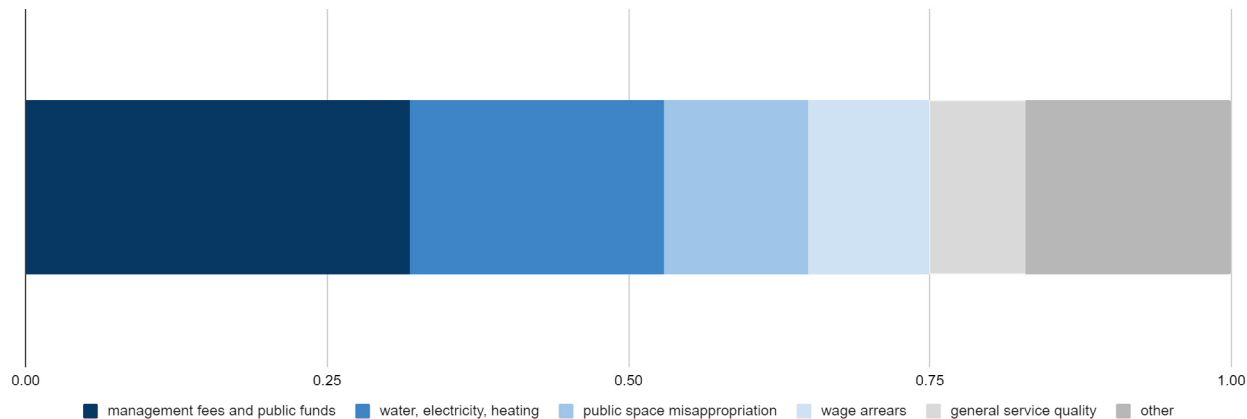


Total dissent events recorded, by year and month

FEATURED ANALYSIS

CITIZENS FIGHT FOR AUTONOMY IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS

CDM has recorded 174 events in which property owners protested property management companies. Among the 108 fully analyzed cases, nearly a third were motivated by unreasonable management fees or unauthorized use of public funds, followed by issues with water, electricity, and heating (21 percent), and misappropriation of common spaces for the company’s profit-making activities (11 percent).

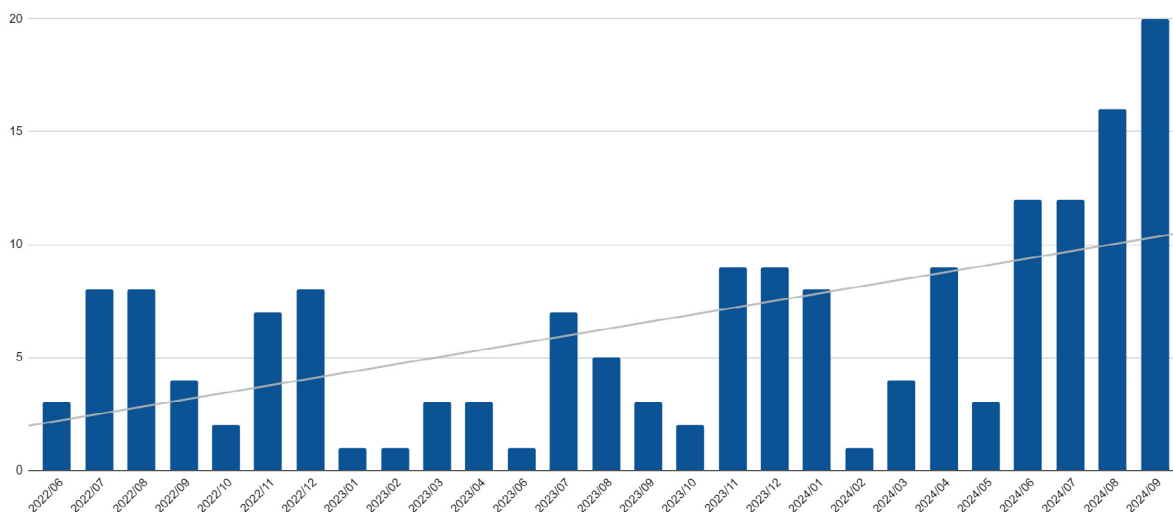


Proportion of protests against property management companies by issue

Property management companies are only entrusted under the law to provide services to owners. In reality, they are often in powerful positions that allow opportunities for abuse, and they operate without effective supervision from owners or the government. Both statutory restrictions and obstruction by vested interests make it difficult for owners to protect their rights through institutional means such as legal complaints. As a result, property owners appear to be resorting to more contentious tactics to protest abusive management companies, such as public protest, which is met with various levels of repression. CDM recorded police monitoring in 23.5 percent of all protests targeting property management companies, with 4 cases of arrests and 16 cases of violence by state security or people associated with the company.

The number of cases recorded by CDM rose significantly over the third quarter. This may be influenced in part by adjustments in CDM data collection methods¹, but the trend also correlates with an increased amount of online discussion about removing property management companies nationwide. Earlier this year, a National People’s Congress (NPC) deputy [proposed](#) amendments to the property management regulations during the annual NPC plenary. Subsequently, online posts [rumored](#) the complete abolishment of property management, and public discussion of the topic increased.

¹ CDM added a data source and made adjustments to data collection that could have helped capture more events.



The numbers of protests against property management companies rose significantly this quarter.

Developers and property management companies impede owners’ committees. Presale contracts for commercial properties typically include a front-end realty service agreement, in which the developer [appoints](#) a property management company—often affiliated with the developer—to provide necessary front-end services like security and sanitation when an owners’ committee (OC) does not exist. The OC is an entity meant to act in the interests of the homeowners to organize and administer their neighborhood affairs through self-governance. Buyers have no choice in the selection of the management company or the level of management fees. As [most](#) property management companies that currently exist fall into this category of front-end realty service providers with ties to developers, property owners tend to see protests against the property management company as also protesting the developer.



Homeowners of Junfa Ecological Peninsula locked the door of a community space in protest against the property management company’s unauthorized use of that space as a nursing home (case 1656). Source: Weibo

Fed up with poor conduct or services by property managers, residents often seek to change the management companies. To do this, under regulations, the owners must first hold an election to form an OC. However, the percentage of residential communities in China with an OC is only about [30 percent](#). Apart from the fact that it is difficult to meet the legally required number of voters to establish an OC, developers and property management companies [obstruct](#) the procedure of forming the committees to protect their interests. For example, in Dalian, as owners attempted to hold an OC election, the property management staff parked outside the polling station, installed surveillance, and blocked access to the venue to hamper voting (case 4053). Even if the OC is successfully established and the decision to change the company is approved, the old company may still refuse to leave, resulting in violent clashes (cases 3238 and 3986).

Authorities intervene in community self-governance and freedom of association. In addition to companies’ obstruction, the involvement of the government makes it more difficult for owners to exercise autonomy. After the adoption of China’s Civil Code in 2020, the threshold for setting up an OC has been [raised](#) from half or more to two thirds or more of the exclusive units both by area and by number of unit owners. On some occasions, local authorities even intervene directly in the election. For instance, a group of property owners in Lanshan District, Linyi City held an OC election, an activity that is permitted by law, but the organizers were then criminally detained by police on suspicion of “gathering a crowd to disrupt order in a public place” (case 938).

Against this backdrop, the recent effort by the government to bring property management companies into local governance networks is all the more worrying. Since last year, cities like [Wuhan](#), [Dezhou](#), and [Fuxin](#) have developed plans to allow property management personnel to act as “[grid workers](#)” and regularly participate in community governance, such as home visits, inspections, and dispute resolution in the neighborhood. This model may further empower property managers and jeopardize already-fragile community autonomy.



A group of property owners in Changde hung banners to protest the “authoritarian rule” of the property management company and “demand democracy” (case 2382). Source: Douyin

DISSENTING IN THE GRAY AREA OF XINFANG

An administrative procedure as a space for collective action. Xinfang, which translates to “letters and visits,” is a common method used by Chinese citizens to hold government officials accountable for policy failures or to seek government intervention in social or economic disputes. Xinfang may take the form of filing a written complaint at a local petition office, or it may be an in-person visit (known as *zoufang* or 走访) to higher authorities, such as at a provincial bureau.

Although government regulations explicitly permit xinfang, a significant gray area exists, especially regarding in-person visits. Petitioners view these visits as an exercise of their civil rights, but Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities often treat them as grassroots collective action that it generally wants to suppress. Notably, the English translation of “xinfang” remains [inconsistent](#), reflecting the term’s [ambiguous nature](#) under authoritarianism and the varying interpretations among different groups. Obfuscated by the meaning of xinfang, petitioners often submit appeals in the spirit of civil petitions that are common in democracies, but in China are met with state repression.



A group of medical workers petitioned outside the District Health Commission of Huai-an City, Jiangsu, demanding that the government address their wage arrears and social welfare issues. Source: Weibo (case 3666)

Contention linked to the number of participants. According to the [Regulations](#) on the Work of Letters and Visits (信访工作条例) published by the central government, there is a strict limit for the number of people permitted to join an in-person visit. When multiple individuals submit a joint petition through in-person visits, a maximum of five representatives may participate. The regulations prioritize written appeals over in-person visits, and authorities frequently view group visits as illegal assemblies. While the regulations explicitly state that “no organization or individual may retaliate against petitioners,” the lack of clear regulatory boundaries often makes petitioners vulnerable to arbitrary state actions. That some petitioners are often reporting powerful local actors also makes retaliation more likely. As a result, despite xinfang’s institutional origins, CDM documents certain contentious cases of individual and collective petitioning as dissent.



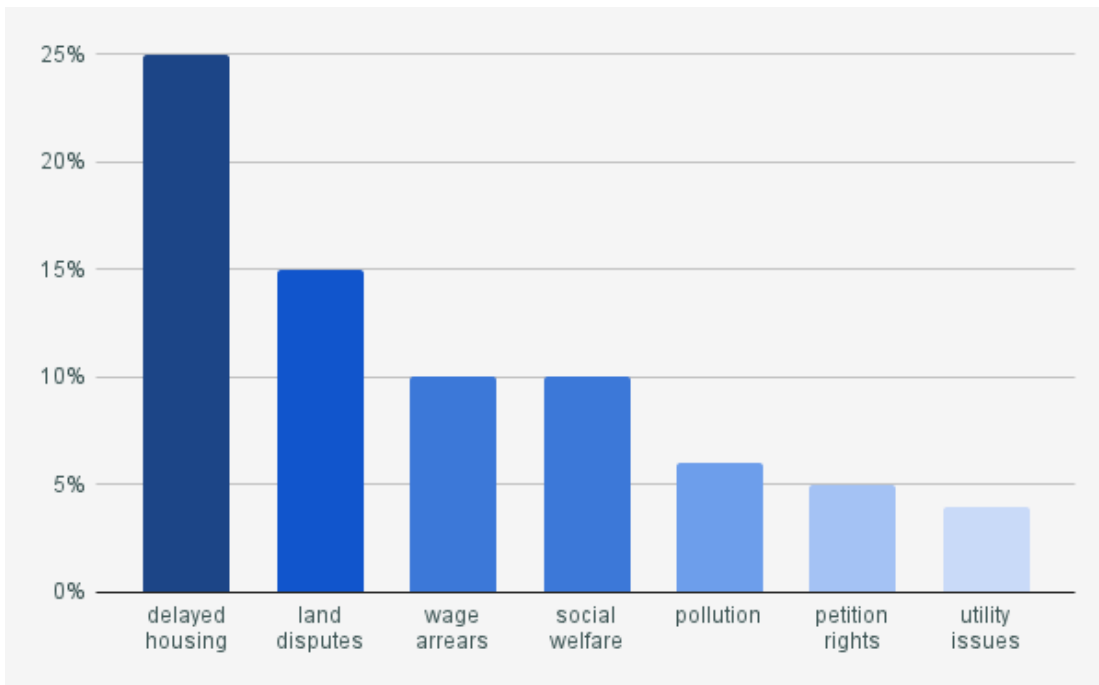
People who claimed to suffer from adverse side effects of COVID-19 vaccinations went to the National Bureau of Disease Control to file a petition and seek compensation from authorities (case 3963). Source: Weiquanwang

CDM has so far recorded 182 events where petitions or collective petitions were the primary mode of dissent. Over 50 percent of these cases encountered some form of repression, ranging from police surveillance and obstruction to state violence and detention. Among the fully coded cases, 76 percent involved collective petitions with more than five participants. Nearly 70 percent of cases were directed at local governments, while 20 percent bypassed local authorities to appeal directly to the central government, a practice strictly [prohibited](#) by regulations.

Noncollective petitions also face repression. When individual petitioners or small groups of two to five people repeatedly petition to address longstanding grievances, authorities may label these actions as “[pestering petitions](#)” or “troublesome petitions,” framing them as deliberate disruptions of public order. Such petitioners often face severe consequences, including state violence or detention in “black jails,” informal and secretive prisons used to detain petitioners and activists (cases 2619, 2988, 3445, and 3464). Moreover, in line with the government’s mandate for local cadres to “resolve issues locally to maintain social stability,” petitioners who directly approach central authorities are frequently intercepted and detained en route to the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration in Beijing.

A strategy to legitimize collective action despite the risk of repression. Xinfang cases in the CDM dataset span a wide variety of issues, including delayed housing (24 percent), land disputes (14 percent), wage arrears (10 percent), and social welfare concerns (9 percent). Major groups involved in xinfang are property buyers dissatisfied with stalled housing or construction quality (25 percent), rural villagers facing forced land acquisitions or pollution (17 percent), retirees seeking social welfare (8 percent), and urban residents with other concerns such as utility issues and petition rights (7 percent).

Ten percent of these cases involved additional forms of dissent, such as collective protests, strikes, or noncooperation. This may partly imply that xinfang is a strategy for protesters to legitimize their dissent by associating it with an institutional mechanism.

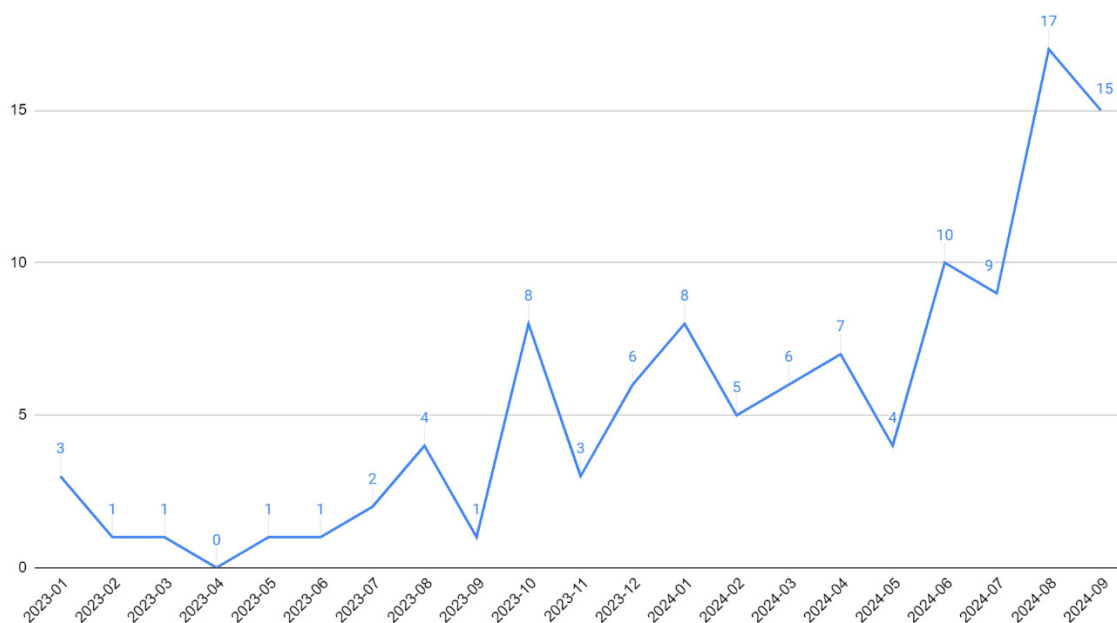


Proportion of cases of contentious petitioning by issue

BY THE DATA

CONSUMER AND INVESTOR PROTEST IN A SLOWING ECONOMY

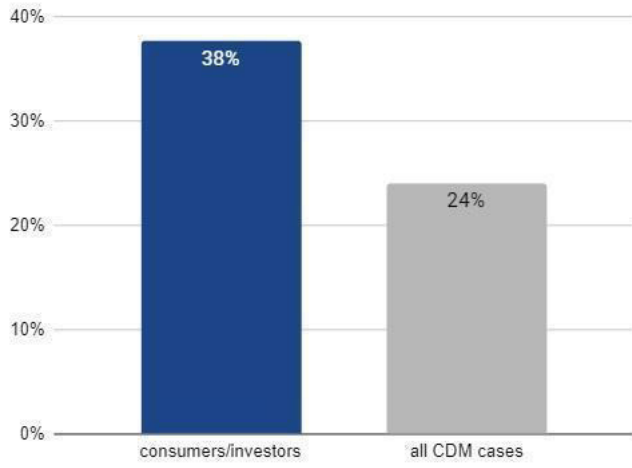
Approximately three-quarters of the dissent events in CDM’s database are linked to economic grievances. Workers demanding unpaid wages, homeowners facing stalled housing projects, and rural conflict related to land confiscation are several of the top drivers of economic protests. Another set of protests has also become more frequent: that of consumers and investors who dissent in public when companies suddenly shut down or are unable to deliver purchased services. This group includes parents who have bought private daycare or tutoring sessions, gym members whose gym closes, car owners whose automobiles have major flaws, and investors who demand that companies make good on promised returns. CDM analysis, illustrated below, shows that such protests have steadily increased since the beginning of 2023, after the central government ended COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and as China’s economy has faced growing headwinds.



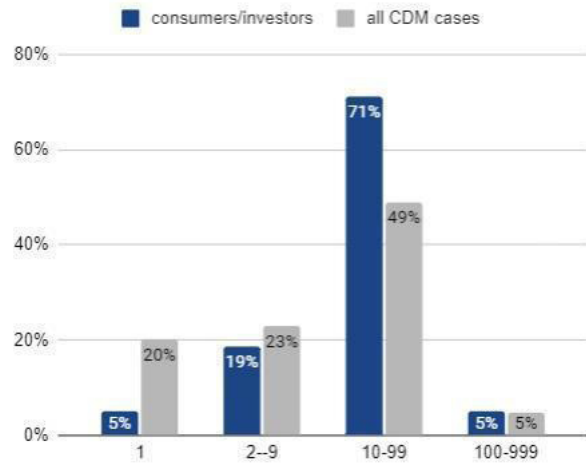
Protests by consumers and investors, by year and month

CDM data also indicates that at least a third of such protests are met with some form of repression like police monitoring, arrests, or violence from the state or company personnel. This means that despite grievance linked to corporate misconduct instead of criticism of the state, consumers and investors face a considerable likelihood of reprisals from the state for speaking out. A factor resulting in a higher incidence of repression of consumer and investor protests could be that these protesters often aim their action at the government to demand intervention—this appeared as a factor in 38 percent of the cases CDM has fully analyzed. Another reason for increased repression could be that these protests are likely to be medium- or large-scale. Previous CDM analysis has shown that both of these factors—targeting the government with demands and being of a larger size—correlate with greater incidence of repression. Underlying this is the CCP’s broad motivation to mitigate all forms of bottom-up collective action by citizens.

Proportion of protests directed at government



Proportion of protests by scale (number of participants)



Comparing consumer and investor protests with the full CDM database