

Between Riots and Protests: A Structural Approach to Urban Environmental Uprisings in China

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Abstract : The last decade has witnessed increasing urban environmental uprisings in China, as thousands of citizens swarmed into streets to express their deep concerns about the environmental threat and public health through various collective actions. The prevalent western approaches to collective actions, which usually treat urban riots and social movements as distinct phenomenon, have plagued an adequate analysis of the urban environmental uprisings in China. The increasing urban environmental contention can neither be categorized into riots nor social movements, as they carry the features of both: at first sight, they are spontaneous, disorganized and disruptive with an absence of observable mobilization process; however, unlike riots in the west, these collective actions conveyed explicit demand in a mostly non-destructive way rather than a pure expression of frustration. This article proposes a different approach to urban environmental uprisings in China which concerns the diminishing boundaries between riots and social movements and points to the underlying structural causes to the unique forms of urban environmental contention. Taking the urban anti-PX protests as examples, this article analyzes the societal and political structural environment faced by the Chinese environmental protesters and its influence on the origin and development of their contention.

Keywords : urban environmental uprisings, China, anti-PX protests, opportunity structure

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