ZHAIQIAO, China — Qian Yunhui would not be silenced. A local leader in a community of farmers, Qian devoted much of his time to protesting a power plant being built on his village’s ancestral land.

In a country where public dissent against the government is rare — and quickly silenced when it appears — Qian continued to lead demonstrations and submit petitions despite having been sent to prison twice in three years. He wrote letters to provincial and national leaders naming the government officials and companies he accused of stealing land — something most Chinese would consider extremely dangerous.

His provocative campaign ended Christmas morning. That’s when after receiving a phone call, Qian’s family said, he walked out of his modest concrete home to meet someone, though it’s not known whom. Villagers found his body a short while later, mangled under the front wheel of a construction truck. The fat tire had crushed Qian’s chest and neck, coming to a rest at the back of his head — the pressure sent blood and flesh spurting from his mouth. Qian’s face lay in the cold mud, eyes shut.

Every villager interviewed by McClatchy in Zhaiqiao said they thought Qian, 53, was murdered as a warning to locals that it was time to stop talking about the power plant. Witnesses, they said, had seen men holding Qian down as the truck pulverized his body.

Death in China: Crushing dissent or tragic accident?

By Tom Lasseter • McClatchy Newspapers

Mourners at a shrine for Qian Yunhui at his home in Zhaiqiao Village, China, January 5, 2010. In a country where public dissent against the government is rare, and quickly crushed when it appears, Qian Yunhui led demonstrations and submitted petitions protesting a power plant being built on his village’s ancestral land despite being sent to prison twice in the past four years. His campaign finally ended on Christmas morning, when villagers found his body mangled under the front wheel of a construction truck.
Government officials maintain that Qian died in a simple traffic accident, an unfortunate bit of bad luck on a wet patch of road.

The difficulty of drawing a conclusion about what happened that morning says a lot about the system in which China’s authoritarian government operates.

As the world focuses on Chinese President Hu Jintao’s visit to Washington next week, and his country’s growing economic clout and military ambitions, at home the Chinese Communist Party is often far more preoccupied with maintaining domestic order — “harmonious” is the adjective preferred by leaders like Hu.

The death of Qian Yunhui is in many ways a startling reminder of how high the cost can be for those who won’t fall in line, a reality that the government tries hard to suppress.

China’s Zhejiang Province, where Zhaiqiao sits, is an epicenter of factories that make clothes, shoes, lighters and other cheap goods for export to the West. The billions of dollars that flow each year from that manufacturing boom have filled the roads south of Shanghai with Mercedes sedans and sprinkled towering homes in the middle of impoverished villages.

The flood of cash, however, hasn’t brought a corresponding rise in civil liberties. While the state allows the election of local village heads, like Qian Yunhui, it does not tolerate challenges to its political or financial decisions.

In Qian’s case, his efforts only got him arrested, imprisoned twice and, locals say, murdered.

“He went to Beijing (to lodge formal complaints) only after he petitioned at every local level,” said his 31-year-old son, Qian Chengxu. “It was all useless.”

Whatever the cause of Qian Yunhui’s demise, this much is clear — he was not afraid to stir up trouble. He said publicly that village leaders had signed over their mountain plot for a power plant in 2004 only after police detained them at a hotel for a week until they agreed.

That same year, Qian helped lead hundreds of villagers to protest the property deal in the nearby town of Yueqing, which oversees Zhaiqiao. That earned him an 18-month prison term after a Yueqing court convicted him of intent to “make disturbances and provoke incidents.”

The sentence was suspended, apparently on the condition that he keep quiet. Instead, Qian ran for and was elected village leader in 2005 and kept complaining about what he described as an illegal land grab. The local security bureau appealed for help to the court, which dusted off the 2004 conviction and sent Qian to prison for eight months in 2006, according to a case summary provided by Yueqing officials.

By 2008, his role as village leader was no longer officially recognized, but Qian was re-elected anyway. Court records show he was sent back to prison in 2008 on a new charge of land fraud, though government documents given to McClatchy didn’t fully explain the charges.

Qian was released in July, the same month that the provincial government announced the power plant officially had been put into operation. Qian was not deterred — he continued writing letters to officials alleging corruption and organizing locals.

The leadership in Yueqing maintains that
villagers in Zhaiqiao were simply trying to renge on their agreement to sell the mountain plot and other pieces of land. The villagers, according to a release from Yueqing’s government, were given about $5.7 million but kept demanding more and more cash.

While residents of Zhaiqiao say they never received the $5.7 million, the Yueqing government contends the money was put in a special account and that village leaders decided not to disburse it.

In the days after Qian’s death, grisly photographs and videos showing his bloody remains spread across the Internet. His name became a national symbol for frustration with the country’s widespread corruption.

On Jan. 1, hundreds of demonstrators clashed with police down the road from Zhaiqiao. Video footage from the standoff shows protesters lobbing rocks and the police charging into the crowd behind riot shields.

A few days before, police commanders from the nearby metropolis of Wenzhou had attended a news conference to confirm that Qian’s death was an accident. Their explanation: The truck was 35 tons overweight with broken rock, its driver was unlicensed and “Pedestrian Qian Yunhui crossed the road before confirming that it was safe to cross.”

Video shot not long after Qian’s death showed the truck in a nearly straight line on the shoulder of the wrong side of the street, with Qian’s body lying under the front tire with scant evidence that he’d been thrown by any impact. There was little sign of skid marks on the road that one might expect from such a large truck slamming to a halt.

The police acknowledged that four other men were at the scene shortly after the incident — raising suspicions locally that it was they who killed Qian — but officials said the group consisted of a passenger from the truck and three guards from a nearby construction site who’d run over to see what happened.

The government said it would allow a combination of lawyers, Internet activists and rural experts to investigate the matter. By the time those gestures were made, the state had snipped away any loose ends that might contradict the official narrative.

Qian’s body was taken away before an autopsy could be performed. Officials reported that a security camera at the spot where Qian died wasn’t working.

The two people who villagers say saw men press Qian down as the truck ground his life away disappeared briefly. When they surfaced on state television in separate interviews four days later, they denied seeing anything suspicious.

One of them, Qian Chengyu, was in handcuffs and behind bars during the television interview.

The other, Huang Diyan, said she’d been coached by unnamed collaborators to say she’d witnessed a killing. Careful viewers could see a man dressed in what looked like a police uniform reflected in the window behind her.

A friend, who asked for anonymity for fear of being arrested, told McClatchy that police had taken Huang’s husband to a hotel for a night and told him that it would be best for her
family if she recanted her tale of murder.

Even Qian’s family is reluctant to talk. His 81-year-old father, Qian Shunnan, was recently standing near his dead son’s house as relatives sat in front of a small shrine and burned paper meant to serve as money in the afterlife.

“I can’t tell you anything except what the government wants me to say,” he said, wearing dusty cotton pants. Then he looked toward the altar with a picture of his son and blurted out, “He was murdered!”

Qian Yunhui’s younger brother was listening nearby and offered an explanation for why his father seemed torn about what to say.

“None of the villagers want to talk about it. If the government finds out they spoke with you, they’ll be arrested,” said Qian Yunyong, 45, a rice farmer with rough hands.

Like everyone else in town, he’d seen the men in a black Volkswagen with no license plates on a nearby road filming passersby and taking photographs.

A visiting Western journalist was approached several times by more than a dozen villagers who hurriedly whispered that Qian Yunhui had been killed because he’d openly challenged area powerbrokers and officials.

The accounts were followed by pleas not to report the speakers’ identities.

“Don’t take our pictures; don’t write down our names,” said one middle-aged woman in jeans and a dark coat. “They will beat us.”

A younger man in a brown jacket with the hood pulled down said that some in the area had made the unfortunate decision to talk candidly with Chinese state media; they were later arrested.

“I’m very scared,” he said.

The young man, like many others, said he was speaking up only because Qian Yunhui had sacrificed his life for them.

That, said the villagers, should count for something.
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BEIJING — Lu Weixing decided this year to run as an independent candidate for a local council position in Beijing.

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“They beat me and then I lost a tooth,” Lu said recently.

Voting for the largely powerless councils happened Tuesday. Lu’s name was not on the ballot.

The next day, International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde flew into Beijing, likely seeking financial help from China to prop up the European Union’s flailing economy.

The juxtaposition of the two events — a stage-managed election marred by thuggish behavior and the West’s lender of last resort looking for cash — was a reminder of a central question surrounding China’s growing strength on the world stage:

What are the consequences of an opaque, authoritarian government hurtling toward such immense international power?

The lack of a clear answer has created an ambiguous and, to critics, an unsettling situation.

Most Chinese, pleased by the material gains of the past few decades, stay away from politics.

But in instances when someone openly defies the Chinese Communist Party’s sense of order, the consequences can be severe.

That same party is now in command of the second-largest economy in the world, and increasingly it calls the shots when the West comes calling.

A few weeks before the trip by Lagarde, the head of the European Union’s bailout fund made a similar appearance in Beijing.

There was a time when analysts in Washington spoke hopefully that China’s economic growth would lead to a broad expansion of civil liberties. Engage China’s business interests, the thinking went, and the government’s harsh ways would relax.

Decades later, that has not happened.

Instead, China continues to be guided by a system that at its core would have been familiar to Vladimir Lenin at the founding of the Soviet
Union: A secretive group of nine men in the standing committee of a politburo, and a Communist Party that seeks a firm grip on all facets of society.

The first part of the equation, however, has been more successful than anyone could have imagined when China began its “Reform and Opening-up” at the end of the 1970s.

Trade between the United States and China reached some $457 billion last year. Fueled by its seemingly endless exports, Beijing now holds more than $1.1 trillion in American Treasury debt.

At the same time, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, a group Congress created in 2000 to monitor the country’s democratic progress, noted last month: “Official rhetoric notwithstanding, China’s human rights and rule of law record has not improved ... a troubling trend is officials’ increased willingness to disregard the law when it suits them, particularly to silence dissent.”

As Lu found out after returning last year from a decade abroad in France, that extends all the way down to obscure neighborhood politics.

His quirky and unsanctioned campaign in west Beijing included wearing a cap with a long queue braid reminiscent of the Qing Dynasty. It was a reminder that although 100 years have passed since the Qing fell, China’s central government is still ruled by non-elected officials.

Lu said that one afternoon in September, a group of plainclothes security officers told him to cut it out. When he refused, Lu said, the men dragged him into a grove of trees and kicked him in the face. Uniformed police were called to the scene, he said, and they broke up the melee. Still, the damage was done.

During lunch the next day, Lu said, he felt his tooth loosening, and when he gave a little tug, it popped out.

Lu said the local election office had refused to give him the form needed to collect signatures to certify him as a candidate. When friends submitted one on his behalf, Lu said, it was ignored.

“By law we’re able to run as candidates,” Lu said, apparently not sure how to finish the sentence.

Another independent in the west of the capital, Han Ying, managed to be accepted as a candidate. But as elections approached she reported being hounded by both police and unidentified men. The day she was scheduled to meet with a McClatchy reporter, Han called to give her regrets.

“When I stepped outside to walk my son to school this morning, a policeman stopped me,” explained Han, who said her name was ultimately omitted from ballots.

In addition to the attempts at independent candidacy, there have been broader signs of citizenry pushing for change in China. In August, a large demonstration demanding the relocation of a chemical plant in the northeast city of Dalian was met with promises to do just that.

Rising frustration with pollution levels in Beijing, and the government’s prior insistence that it was only fog, led this month to state press coverage of the issue. There’s also been
public discussion about why the U.S. Embassy’s air quality readings give a more alarming picture than do official statistics.

But those examples so far seem more indicative of allowing the public to release some steam than of any large-scale change to the way the Chinese Communist Party operates.

One example of the direction in which the party might be heading: China has announced proposed revisions to its criminal law code that would legalize the secret detention of suspects for up to six months. Details of the detentions could be kept secret if authorities deem that informing families might “hinder” their investigation. In other words, it would be lawful to make people disappear.

On Thursday, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch warned that the measure also could formalize the use of “soft detention,” a form of extrajudicial house arrest that’s been used on a raft of dissidents and rights lawyers in China. The Human Rights Watch press event on the announcement took place in Hong Kong; such meetings are not allowed on mainland China.

Among the oft-cited cases of “soft detention” is that of Chen Guangcheng. The blind legal activist received a 51-month prison sentence in 2006 on charges related to his attempt to arrange a class-action lawsuit against officials who’d forced women to have abortions or be sterilized in China’s eastern Shandong province.

Upon his release in 2010, Chen was not only put under de facto house arrest, but his village was surrounded by plainclothes guards who’ve attacked outsiders trying to visit him.

Many observers were surprised, then, when a Hollywood film production company named Relativity Media decided to shoot part of a raucous comedy last month in Linyi, the city with administrative oversight of Chen’s village.

The movie, “21 and Over,” was billed as “a wild epic misadventure of debauchery and mayhem.” Relativity is in a partnership with a Chinese state-backed film distribution company.

After controversy flared among activists in China and abroad, Relativity put out a press release that sounded a familiar argument: “As a company, we believe deeply that expanding trade and business ties with our counterparts in China and elsewhere can result in positive outcomes.”

As of this writing, Chen Guangcheng was not a free man.

After meeting with senior Chinese leadership, the IMF’s Lagarde told reporters that there was “clear understanding” that China’s currency would in due course be included in the basket of currencies used for much of global trade.

And Lu Weixing was still missing a tooth on his lower right jaw.
China’s economic rise hasn’t brought moves toward democracy

By Tom Lasseter | McClatchy Newspapers

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“They beat me and then I lost a tooth,” Lu said recently.
Woman’s rape case shows pitfalls of Chinese justice

BEIJING — In March 1997, Jia Hongling was raped by a low-level manager of a mining company in Henan Province. The 28-year-old daughter of a farmer and a construction worker, Jia reported the sexual assault to the police in her hometown of Jiyuan in central China.

That July, the policeman assigned to investigate her allegations invited Jia to a room and then, with two men standing watch outside, raped her, according to Jia’s account.

It took Jia eight years of filing complaints in Jiyuan and making trips to Beijing to beg for justice before the first man was sentenced to five years in prison. The policeman in the second incident, however, was never brought to trial — despite a report from the Jiyuan prosecutor’s office saying there was “strong evidence” a rape had occurred.

Now 42, Jia still travels to Beijing, lining up at one government office after another to submit forms that she knows probably will just be forwarded back to the Jiyuan city government. Wearing an orange waist pack and lugging a paper bag stuffed with documents that outline her grievances — there was also a wage dispute with a state-owned printing factory — Jia has joined the unknown number of petitioners who converge on China’s capital to seek redress.

A pilgrimage of sorts, petitioning is a ritual with ties to imperial times. Today, it is a journey marked largely by futility, emblematic of the distance between official talk of addressing the country’s social ills and the reality of life in China for those who don’t have the right connections.

In China’s sea of 1.3 billion people, the number of petitioners is relatively insignificant. But their stories are a reminder that in spite of China’s economic progress, its central government has so far been unwilling to enact deep legal and political reforms that would allow ordinary individuals to challenge officials or their allies.

State media said in 2007 that 10 million complaints were filed each year at the government’s central petitioning bureau and its subsidiaries. It’s not clear how many individuals that included, or what the figures are today.

“I have presented many complaints at the local level, but nothing gets done,” Jia said on
a recent afternoon, wiping the sweat from her face and preparing to take a bus to the State Bureau for Letters and Calls, the main petitioning office in Beijing.

She'd already made her way that morning to a reception office of the National People's Congress, a mostly rubber stamp political body, and the complaints bureau of an organizational department of the Communist Party.

"I went in, they took my name and ID card number and that was it," Jia said. "It was useless."

The details of the petitioning process suggest a system at times more informed by Franz Kafka than Karl Marx.

It is not unusual when people file a complaint against officials at the local petitioning office, as they are legally entitled to do, for the bureau to refer them to the very officials involved in the dispute.

If they then take the complaint to Beijing, their files are often again sent to their home officials. At that point, police or hired security guards are sometimes ordered to find the "troublemakers" and haul them home.

An acquaintance of Jia's, Yuan Junfang, has been to Beijing three times to petition as part of her feud with the police in coastal Jiangsu Province. After a December 2008 accident in which a cargo truck slammed into the bicycle her brother was riding, killing him, Yuan claimed that police in the city of Ganyu accepted bribes from the owner of the truck to reduce the amount of compensation owed.

Yuan's petitioning documents, however, have been sent repeatedly to the police in Ganyu.

Last year, according to Yuan, a family member of hers was approached by the son of a policeman — she named both men — who said, "If there's no easy way to solve this, we'll just have her killed." Yuan, 50, hasn't been to her hometown since.

An official with the discipline and inspection office of the Ganyu traffic police, Shi Qiang, told McClatchy during a phone interview that, "I'd like you to tell her there's no such problem, and she can come home safely."

For those who persist in petitioning after being told by local officials to stop, retribution can involve labor camps or psychiatric wards.

The document from the Jiyuan prosecutor's office noted that Jia was committed to a psychiatric ward for paranoid personality disorder, and seemed to lament that "when she was discharged from hospital, she still wouldn't stop petitioning."

The political bureau of the Jiyuan prosecutor's office made an official available for interview about Jia's case; he acknowledged that it took eight years to sentence her first rapist.

The man, who gave only his surname, Li, also confirmed the authenticity of a report from his office that concluded there was compelling evidence, including semen collected at the time, that the policeman raped Jia.

But Li declined to elaborate much about either case.

"There was an investigation, but there wasn't enough evidence," he said about the alleged second rape, pointing out that the policeman had been on a temporary contract and was fired.
Late last month, Jia was living with four other people in a storage shed near downtown Beijing. It had been converted to two rooms with thin plasterboard walls — a mattress in one room, and a bunk bed and sleeping mat in the other.

With only two cheap plastic fans suspended from the ceiling with wires, the nearly-90-degree heat outside created an oven effect.

One of the men there, Cao Qingyan, explained that like the others, he'd moved to the shed because officials from his home province were using hotel registration information to track him down — a common tactic.

"We spend everyday worrying that someone will come get us, but there's no other way of doing this," said Cao, 45, who kept his good shirt hanging on the wall to avoid it getting soaked with sweat.

Cao began coming to Beijing to petition after his scrap metal recycling store was torn down by the government in Shandong Province during November 2008. In return, according to a signed agreement, he was to receive 1.17 million yuan (about $183,000) and another piece of property.

But after the shop was demolished, Cao was presented with a new contract that canceled the previous terms, called for a payment of only 593,725 yuan, or some $92,500, and did not include any property. Cao, who provided copies of the contract that appeared to support his story, appealed to Beijing for help.

In return, Cao said, on June 30 he was thrown into a white van and driven to Shandong while two burly men took turns sitting on him and punching his sides now and then.

On July 25, four days after Cao told his story to a McClatchy reporter, Beijing police detained him until police from Shandong showed up. He was again taken back to Shandong, Cao later said in a phone conversation.

Three weeks of attempts to speak with officials about Cao's story resulted in hang-ups, denials that requests had been received, and referrals to other departments.

As for Jia, McClatchy asked Li from the prosecutor's office whether she'd been punished in the past. Li insisted that his government had only her best interests in mind.

But he added: "Because we have concerns about her (Jia's) living conditions when she is in Beijing petitioning, we send people from Henan to pick her up and bring her back to Jiyuan."
Woman's rape case shows pitfalls of Chinese justice

Jia Hongling, who's been pushing the Chinese government to prosecute a police officer who she says raped her in 1997, paused during a recent day of petitioning in Beijing. | Tom Lasseter / MCT

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BEIJING — In March 1997, Jia Hongling was raped by a low-level manager of a mining company in Henan Province. The 28-year-old daughter of a farmer and a construction worker, Jia reported the sexual assault to the police in her hometown of Jiayuan in central China.

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http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/08/14/120620/womans-effort-to-have-rapist-tried.html
LANGFANG, China — It was a juicy story: a tangled web of corruption and betrayal involving a local Communist Party leader and a businessman in a village less than 20 miles from Beijing.

A reporter from the state-run Global Times newspaper followed up with a round of calls, including one to a police officer.

“If you guys report any further ... we will beat you until your legs are broken,” the officer said, according to an item last month in the newspaper’s English-language edition.

It wasn’t the only threat police allegedly issued in the case.

The day before the story ran, someone from the Langfang public security bureau, which oversees the police, reportedly called a lawyer who’d gotten involved in the case. After reciting the lawyer’s address and license plate number, the caller said he had intimate knowledge of criminal gangs in Beijing who could “take care” of him.

As the 100th anniversary of the revolt that ended 2,000 years of imperial rule in China passes next week, Beijing’s central leadership increasingly finds itself trying to clamp down on local officials who run their turf like mafia dons.

Those concerns might well have been familiar to officials in the teetering, final days of the Qing Dynasty, which collapsed after an uprising that began in central Hubei province on October 10, 1911.

At the time, a boy emperor named Puyi sat in Beijing. The powerful Empress Dowager Cixi had died three years before. Unrest was spreading as the empire crumbled.

The Communist Party today isn’t in any obvious danger of losing control of the country. But even as China’s economic growth of the past three decades has lifted hundreds of millions from poverty, allegations of official greed and lawlessness have become commonplace, much to the worry of the central government.

The characters in the Langfang tale each represent in their own way the failure of China’s institutions to function effectively when confronted by the interests of party officials or their friends. It’s a system that runs largely on connections and influence, and, when conflicts...
arise, offers little comfort to those who have neither.

There’s the local businessman, Dong Yuyou, who at one time cultivated a cozy relationship with the party leader of Bei Jianta, a small village adjoining Langfang.

That official, Bei Jianta Party Secretary Liu Guangfu, was later accused by Dong of looting a factory he owned.

Then there’s the middleman/fixer whom Dong reached out to because he didn’t trust the court system to resolve the dispute.

That man in turn guided Dong to a controversial online journalist and activist whose subsequent posting enraged area leadership.

And, of course, there are the police, and their threats that tried to make it all go away.

**CHINA LOOKS WARILY AT FALL OF QING DYNASTY**

The Chinese press recently has pointed to a series of events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the fall of the Qing Dynasty, including a film opening and a new museum in central Hubei province. The government placed a portrait of Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China after the Qing, in Tiananmen Square.

Perhaps owing to a sense of unease with historical echoes, Beijing has explored the 1911 uprising with less depth and fanfare than it did the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in July.

The National Museum of China, for example, has an installation marking the 100th anniversary. To get to it, visitors must walk past “125 Years of Italian Magnificence,” a retrospective of the Italian jewelry maker Bulgari, then ride an escalator to the second floor and find a room next to a stand that sells sodas and potato chips.

Inside, the display consists of a collection of calligraphy by the 1911 revolution’s leaders.

It’s a decidedly modest exhibition for the momentous sweep of events that upended history in the world’s most populous nation.

The revolt started in Hubei during October of 1911. The membership list of an anti-Qing group was discovered after a bomb went off in its office, setting off a chain of events that led to rebel troops mutinying. The crisis swept across much of the nation before an assembly of provincial leaders — Beijing hadn’t yet fallen — elected Sun Yat-sen that December.

The communists took power some 38 years later, after winning a civil war against the nationalist Kuomintang party, formerly led by Sun.

Among the main lines of Communist propaganda used to rally support against the Kuomintang: Its officials were deeply corrupt.

**THE FACTORY SCANDAL BEGINS**

Dong Yuyou wore neatly ironed Pierre Cardin jeans, brown leather loafers and an expensive-looking shirt as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Why did he agree in September 2009 to allow someone to take over running his cement factory in Bei Jianta without signing a contract?

The Langfang Fuyuan Cement Co. made up to 1 million yuan a year, about $156,600. Yet,
Dong said, he lent it out to Liu Guangfu with no paperwork for just 300,000 yuan annually, some $47,000.

Why?
“Because he's the party secretary of Bei Jianta,” Dong said.

To do business, Dong said, he needed good “guanxi” — a term that means relationship or network — with Liu.

“He can make sure the common people don't stand in the way of my business,” said Dong, a 41-year-old who was chauffeured to an interview in his black Buick LaCrosse, a car that's seen as a stylish ride in China. “It's the climate these days.”

Dong came to regret the decision a year ago, when he learned that Liu had been selling off the factory's equipment. He filed a lawsuit, accusing Liu of theft.

Then on Nov. 2, Dong asked a district branch of the Langfang city public security bureau to charge Liu with illegally seizing his property. He accused Liu of having sold 170,000 yuan worth of equipment, about $26,600. To add insult to injury, Dong told McClatchy, Liu never paid the $47,000 annual rent.

Reached by phone, Liu said simply that, “I didn’t do that.”

“For me, this is a personal matter between Dong and myself,” Liu told McClatchy, shortly before hanging up. “It’s pointless for you to ask me for any details.”

A Langfang district court ruled that Liu should restore the equipment he’d “dismantled,” though it said it couldn’t verify the company’s prior assets, and return management rights to Dong, according to a court summary supplied to McClatchy by the city government, which said the ruling was handed down in January.

By Dong's account, Liu ignored the court’s decision and padlocked the cement factory’s gates with the implicit message that it's still under his control. The factory remains closed.

A HARMONIOUS FUTURE?

Compared with the Qing Dynasty, which lasted from 1644 to 1912, and the stretch of imperial rulers back to 221 B.C., the Chinese Communist Party’s time has been remarkably brief. For now, it’s impossible to predict what shape its legacy will take.

The party is infamous for its insistence through propaganda and hard-line tactics on the need to build a “harmonious society.”

While that may sound like authoritarian double talk, the phrase appears to reflect serious angst about how to address the expanding distance between China’s economic gains and social inequalities.

In 2006, the Communist Party’s central committee emphasized “harmonious society” as a main theme of governance. Official sources have noted that 2006 saw some 90,000 “mass incidents” in China, an inexact term for outbursts of discontent that encompasses everything from very small squabbles to citywide riots.

And though such protests were directed almost exclusively at local governments, the tumult was more than Beijing would prefer.

A diplomatic cable from the U.S. Embassy in China during October 2006, made public by
WikiLeaks last month, paraphrased an official from the nation’s State Council Development Research Center as saying that “Chinese leaders are obsessed with internal stability and spend the vast majority of their time working on this issue.”

The government no longer publicly releases annual counts of “mass incidents.” In 2010, reports carried by the Chinese press said that the 2006 number had doubled.

Meanwhile, a raft of ongoing scandals suggests that political and business leadership is, at the least, drifting away from the general population.

A few examples:

• Amid mounting concerns about China’s food safety, Chinese media wrote a story in May that said a tall fence kept the public way from vegetables grown organically for customs officials in Beijing. Similar practices were documented in other parts of the country.

• In July, a deadly crash that involved two high-speed trains in coastal Zhejiang province led to national soul-searching about the high costs of corruption and mismanagement. The former railways minister had been dismissed from his post earlier in the year after allegations that he’d pocketed kickbacks of at least $122 million.

• There was an outcry in September when a tourist to Beijing was mistaken for a petitioner — typically a Chinese who travels to the capital to file complaints about local government misconduct — and dragged from his hotel room by a Beijing security firm hired by the petitioning office in Henan province. The security firm’s men beat the tourist severely before dumping him, unconscious, with pants torn to rags, on the side of a street.

• The practice of seeking mercy in Beijing is a holdover from imperial times. As with feudal-era hopes for a benevolent emperor’s intervention in local injustices, today’s petitioners rarely find help.

**DONG LOOKS FOR HELP**

Unable to solve his problems in court, Dong Yuyou said, he sought other ways to push forward. A fellow businessman in Langfang had a relationship with reporters in Beijing and offered to make introductions. Maybe, he suggested, they would take an interest.

In a conversation with McClatchy, the man asked that neither his identity nor the name of the company he owns be made public.

“What good can that bring me?” said the man, who chewed pumpkin seeds as he directed two assistants to keep pouring tea and occasionally run errands. “I can live in a peaceful environment if nobody knows about me.”

The businessman connected Dong with Zhu Ruifeng, a 42-year-old online anti-corruption activist and digital journalist with a reputation for muckraking. Tellingly, Zhu has his website, People’s Supervision Network, registered in Hong Kong, placing it further from the grasp of Beijing authorities. When he’s asked for credentials, Zhu is given to quoting Article 41 of the Chinese Constitution. That passage ostensibly gives citizens the right to criticize government departments and officials.

Both parties insist that Dong only recounted
his travails to Zhu, who found them intriguing, and that no payment changed hands — a key assertion, since allegations of “fake” or “black” journalism, in which reporters demand cash for coverage, or for no coverage, are common in China. Zhu had been accused previously by a Chinese newspaper as having received pay-off money to delete a damaging piece about a government agency, but he supplied McClatchy with a copy of the court decision in a lawsuit he filed, and won, against the newspaper. (The Beijing court involved confirmed the case number of the document.)

Zhu’s Aug. 17 online story was a sharply confrontational piece that, among other things, contained descriptions and license plate numbers of cars that Liu Guangfu and his immediate family allegedly have owned, including a black Porsche Cayenne and an Audi A6.

Zhu wrote that through Liu’s position as Communist Party chief of Bei Jianta village, population 1,400, “Liu has turned himself from a tattered-clothed peasant into a rich man owning eight luxurious villas ... and eight luxurious cars.”

Dong was quoted as saying that in deference to Liu’s unquestionable influence in the area, he’d sent 200,000 yuan, about $31,250, and a Mazda 6 car to Liu’s daughter’s wedding.

In two days of reporting in Bei Jianta, a McClatchy reporter came across no one who directly contradicted Zhu’s characterization of Liu.

One 59-year-old woman, a farmer who asked that her name not be printed, said of Liu: “He’s very powerful; he’s very rich. If you don’t do what he says, then. ...” And with that she walked away.

A local hair salon owner named Xing, who was sitting close by, added: “He got rich by taking bribes.”

 Asked for comment in a subsequent phone call, Liu said that Zhu “is talking nonsense. I would like to confirm with you that I only have one car and that I bought it myself.”

Zhu, he said, “is out to set me up.” A few moments later, Liu abruptly hung up.

NO ONE NEEDS TO EXPLAIN ANYTHING

Within days of Zhu’s story appearing on the Internet, Langfang police brought Dong in for questioning. The deputy director of the Langfang security bureau, Sun Weike, told him that “you have to have the report deleted,” Dong said. If that didn’t happen, Sun reportedly threatened, Dong would be sent to jail on unrelated charges.

Soon after, a man who identified himself as Sun called Zhu’s lawyer, Zhou Ze, to tell him that, “Langfang is very close to Beijing and it’s very easy to get things done,” according to Zhou’s account.

“It was unimaginable that those words would be coming from a deputy police chief,” said Zhou, a former law professor at the China Youth University for Political Sciences — which has close ties to the Communist Party — who now does legal advocacy work.

Zhou added in his interview with McClatchy: “I think they’re very afraid of being exposed; that’s why he called me and threat-
ened me.”

Contacted by McClatchy for comment on Zhou’s account, Sun said, “I don’t have any response.” He referred McClatchy to the propaganda department of the Langfang security bureau.

McClatchy made multiple calls, took a trip to Langfang and faxed questions to give the bureau an opportunity to set the record straight about Sun’s remarks. The result was a short phone conversation with a woman who identified herself only by her surname. “Our leader said that it’s not convenient for us to give you an interview,” she said.

Like the emperors of old, Sun and those around him apparently don’t have to explain themselves.
After 100 years, corruption still a major problem in China

By Tom Lasseter | McClatchy Newspapers

LANGFANG, China — It was a juicy story: a tangled web of corruption and betrayal involving a local Communist Party leader and a businessman in a village less than 20 miles from Beijing.

A reporter from the state-run Global Times newspaper followed up with a round of calls, including one to a police officer.

"If you guys report any further ... we will beat you until your legs are broken," the officer said, according to an item last month in the newspaper’s English-language edition.

It wasn’t the only threat police allegedly issued in the case.

The day before the story ran, someone from...
HONGYUAN, China — The young man's hands began to shake, and he tugged at his fingers to keep them still. The 20-year-old ethnic Tibetan was terrified of the police finding out that he’d spoken about the Buddhist monks who’ve been burning themselves alive.

“They’re doing it because they want freedom,” said the man, a livestock trader who asked that his name not be used because of safety concerns.

He paused before adding, “Because we want freedom.”

Since March, according to rights groups, 10 Tibetan Buddhist clergy have set themselves on fire in China’s western Sichuan province. Almost all those have come in or around the town of Aba, 50 miles as the crow flies to the west of Hongyuan, amid mountain ranges at the edge of the Tibetan plateau where yaks graze and prayer flags inscribed with mantras and blessings flap in the wind.

At least five reportedly have died in the fiery exclamations of Tibetan complaint about restrictions on their culture and religion and the continued exile of their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

The chain of self-immolations — comprising six monks, three former monks and a nun — is unprecedented in modern Tibetan history. The most recent occurred Oct.25.

The response so far by the Chinese Communist Party has been to knuckle down even more. Towns surrounding Aba are stacked with police. Internet access is shut off in many spots. Those suspected of sympathizing closely with activist monks are said to have disappeared.

A McClatchy reporter was detained for two hours Saturday when he was pulled over at a police checkpoint 15 miles from Hongyuan on the winding road toward Aba. He was released only after photos were deleted from his camera and he agreed not to stop again in Hongyuan on the way out, a condition emphasized by threats to his driver and the multiple vehicles that followed him.

Beyond issues particular to the Communist Party’s policy in Tibetan areas, the situation also may hint at the limits of the effectiveness of Beijing’s authoritarian approach toward social unrest.

Conversations at Hongyuan and outlying villages suggest that the government’s tough re-
sponse hasn’t deterred angry Tibetans. Rather, it now threatens to alienate those who were accepting of the regime.

One Tibetan businessman interviewed in the vicinity said that he appreciated the roads and offices the government built. The man, who gave his name as Tsering, said he understood the pragmatic reasons that his daughter received Tibetan language instruction at school only two or three times a week, while she was taught Mandarin Chinese every day.

When talking about the self-immolations, however, Tsering, 29, was adamant. “The monks are asking for justice,” he said.

The first self-immolation came on March 16, when a 21-year-old monk named Phuntsog lit himself aflame, apparently to mark the third anniversary of riots that struck Tibet and neighboring territories. Tibetans claim that in one incident during the 2008 disturbances, police shot 13 people dead at a demonstration in Aba.

After Phuntsog’s death, six monks — including Phuntsog’s brother and uncle — were sentenced to prison or labor camps, according to Free Tibet, a London-based Tibetan advocacy group.

In April, about 300 monks from Phuntsog’s Kirti Monastery allegedly were taken away in trucks, prompting the United Nations to inquire about their whereabouts. The Chinese government denied that monks had disappeared from the monastery, although it did note that some were taken away for “education.”

The crackdown didn’t stop monks from spreading their complaints via pamphlets in the area nor did it put an end to people soaking themselves with gasoline and lighting matches; six self-immolations took place in October alone.

Many Tibetans say that the country’s Han Chinese majority, with the muscle of the Communist Party behind it, essentially is occupying their lands and moving to monopolize business interests while marginalizing the Tibetan language and way of life.

The Chinese government maintains that it liberated Tibetans from a feudal existence, and now works to improve their lives with billions of dollars in infrastructure projects. Any outbursts of Tibetan rage, the government maintains, are due to outside influences personified by the Dalai Lama.

Speaking about the self-immolations, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said in a news briefing Oct. 19 that the Dalai Lama and those around him had encouraged “more people to follow suit,” an action that Jiang said amounted to “terrorism in disguise.”

Later in the month, the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet in 1959, said it was China’s own “ruthless policy” that was to blame.

At one Tibetan monastery nestled by snow-capped hills in the region, there are no photographs of the Dalai Lama visible from outside the compound’s main buildings. Police are stationed nearby.

In the living quarters of one of its senior monks, though, a large portrait of the Tibetan leader greets visitors.

The monk, whose name and location McClatchy is withholding to prevent retribution
from local officials, said he’d tried last August to visit Aba, which is known in Tibetan as Ngaba.

“The police wouldn’t even let me into the town,” said the monk, whose elderly uncle smiled a toothy grin and pulled a cell phone from the folds of his vest to show a visitor his picture of the Dalai Lama. “The living conditions for monks in Aba aren’t very good, and there’s a conflict now between the Han and the Tibetans there.”

Standing in a prayer hall that a group of young monks was sweeping for a ceremony the next day, the soft-spoken man in a crimson robe and yellow fleece jacket said that, “a lot of these problems have roots in the 2008 troubles.”

Here in Hongyuan, police now swarm the streets. Many of those patrolling the predominantly ethnic Tibetan town appear to be Han Chinese.

“A lot of people have been taken away by the government,” said the livestock trader, who wore a puffy neon-blue jacket and jeans. “A lot of Tibetans feel that we aren’t free. We aren’t allowed to put up pictures of the Dalai Lama. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He was joined by a group of friends, a couple of whom wore small likenesses of the Dalai Lama at the ends of thin leather necklaces that they tucked beneath their shirts.

One of them, another Tibetan trader in his early 20s, spoke up, “We are all afraid of the government.”

A few blocks away, a policeman sat in his car and filmed every person who walked by an intersection.

Chinese officials have tried suppressing news about the extent of the security presence and pressure on Tibetans in places such as Hongyuan.

When the McClatchy reporter was stopped while traveling in the direction of Aba, one man in the small police stand where he was held set the ground rules: “It is against the law to write things down in here.”

The reporter was told four different times that he could leave, only to be stopped by further demands: handing over his camera, explaining to two additional plainclothes officers why he was in the area and, finally, tearing out a page of notes that contained the name of a local police commander, Qiu Po.

In the meantime, a driver whom McClatchy had hired was taken outside and told that he could be arrested.

The next morning, a police officer visited the reporter’s room in a hotel some four hours away. The officer said that news media were hereby forbidden from traveling in the direction of Hongyuan. It was permissible, he said, to remain near the town of Songpan, where Tibetans and Han Chinese dressed as Tibetans cater to tourist groups flying in every day from Beijing.

Later in the afternoon, a second police officer stopped the reporter outside the hotel and, accompanied by three men in plainclothes, questioned him about every detail of his trip.

The Han Chinese officer, surnamed Jiang, seemed particularly anxious to know what the Tibetans had been saying.

UPDATE: A Tibetan Buddhist nun burned to death Thursday (Nov. 3), bringing to 11 the number of clergy or former clergy who’ve killed themselves by self-immolation since March.
Tibetans' self-immolations lead China to crack down harder

Police work at a checkpoint about 15 miles outside the town of Hongyuan where a McClatchy reporter was pulled over while reporting on a recent spate of self-immolations by Tibetan Buddhist monks. The officers at this checkpoint had the reporter for two hours, during which they deleted photos from his camera's memory card. This photo was later salvaged from the memory card.

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