

THE LOGIC BEHIND THE SCENE: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE “XINCUN INCIDENT”

Licheng Qian¹

Although rural social movements have certain commonalities, different social contexts cause distinctive characteristics to emerge. When observing this type of movement in China, it is important to note these unique features of the Chinese reality that do not necessarily correlate to standard Western theory. Through examining the Xincun incident, this paper argues that three distinguishing features appear: one, peasants adopt a “strategy of the weak” which depends heavily upon the exploitation of cultural/moral norms and marginal forms of political legitimacy when participating in rural social movements; two, the former cadres, taking on the role of local elites, play an important role in the process of mobilization; and three, the cleavage and mistrust cultivated between peasants and local administration-enterprises alliance are determined to be consequences of institutional failure. In aggregate, the rural collective action itself is a *de facto* product of institutional failure. However, because there is no comparative analysis, identifying which features are characteristics unique to the Chinese experience can only be left to future study.

Key words: rural social movements, strategy of the weak, cultural and moral norms, institutional failure

Received 20 July 2009. Revised 13 January 2010. Accepted 1 March 2010.

There are endless debates about rural social movements: What is the nature of these movements? What characteristics do they represent? What strategies do

¹ School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Nanjing University (China), licheng1121@gmail.com

Correspondence to: Licheng Qian, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China. 210093

The author would like to thank Professor Yulin Zhang for organizing the investigation, Professor Adam Webb and Professor Xiaohong Zhou for their suggestions and comments, and Lisa Moore for proofreading this paper. As the team leader, the author would also like to thank the other participants on the research team for conducting this investigation with the author. According to the academic norm, the names of the places, companies, and interviewees involved have been modified.

peasants use? All of these queries seek to construct the logic behind the phenomenon of rural social movements. However, though these collective actions share some common features, different social contexts shape their distinctive characteristics.

In this paper, the author will use the “Xincun Incident,” which was a rural collective action that occurred in southern Jiangsu Province in 2005, as a case-study to explore both the characteristics and the logic propelling this type of rural social movement. Through close examination, one may find that the actors in this incident adopted different strategies and represented distinctive features of the incident as a whole. The peasants’ actions can be coined as the “strategy of the weak”² relying heavily upon the exploitation of cultural and moral norms as well as a marginal form of political legitimacy. The local elites, many of whom were former cadres, played an important role in this process of mobilization due to their past experience and villagers’ trust towards them. The local government and enterprises (including township and village enterprises, TVEs; or private enterprises, PEs), shared many common interests, encouraging them to solidify their alliance. Moreover, the way these players interacted with each other illustrates the fact that the rural collective actions, which can be seen as a form of “bargaining-by-riot” (see Scott, 1976: 34), were the peasants’ last choice in the face of the failure of current institutions.

Admittedly, the Xincun Incident alone can represent neither the whole picture of Chinese rural social movements nor the distinctive Chinese characteristics that distinguish it from other incidents worldwide (due to the lack of comparative analysis), but the features it represents are important and unique parts of the whole picture within the Chinese context.

1. Brief Literature Review

It is important to exercise caution when selecting the terminology used to describe the Xincun Incident as there are a wide variety of terms that vary in both connotation and scope of definition. According to Zhao Dingxin, the term “collective action” primarily refers to spontaneous political behaviors outside of institutions, whereas the term “social movements” refers to more organized behavior seeking social change, and the term “revolution” is specifically concerned with overthrowing the state (see Zhao, 2006: 2). Relying on the above definitions, “collective action” is the most appropriate term to apply while discussing the Xincun Incident. However, Chinese scholar Ying Xing expresses a

² This term was inspired by James Scott’s concept “weapons of the weak” (see Scott, 1985).

different opinion. He believes the terms "collective action" and "social movements" in Western academia both refer to contentious political actions that are not institutionalized, but still legitimized by the existing legal structures. Similar actions in China, on the other hand, lack legitimacy. Thus, he uses the more specialized term of "expressive behaviors of the group interest" to describe actions that lie on the fringe of legitimacy (Ying, 2007). However, in day-to-day discussion as well as in government discourse, behaviors of this kind are generally referred to as "mass incidents" (群体性事件). Thus in lieu of one universally accepted term, the term "incident" or "riot" will hereafter be used to directly describe the Xincun Incident.

In addition to terminology, there are other aspects of "collective types" of behavior that interest scholars, namely that of the reasons behind such actions as well as the process of their development. The early theory about collective action is rooted in social psychology. Gustave LeBon believes that as the density of a "crowd" increases, the rationality of the individuals within the crowd decreases, giving the crowd an emergent new characteristic that exceeds the power of the individual (see Le Bon, 2001; Zhao, 2006: 27). Mancur Olson introduces the question of the "free-rider" as a possible inhibitor to mobilization. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of group organization (Olson, 1971). These arguments comprised the early stage of collective action theory.

Based on the critiques of these traditional theories, American academia developed new approaches regarding the behavior of collective action. Among them, the most famous frameworks are the resource mobilization theory and the political process model. Two widely used scholars in resource mobilization theory are John McCarthy and Mayer Zald. In their opinion, resources, organization, and political opportunities are extremely important to the process and nature of the movement. The term "professionalization" and "entrepreneurial mobilization" became widely used because of their theory (see Jenkins, 1983; Ying, 2007). From the political process approach, Charles Tilly differentiates two categories of people: people within the polity and those that challenge it. If those that challenge the polity cannot find a way to change or enter into it, they have one way left of achieving their objectives: to destroy the polity (see Zhao, 2006: 29). In addition, Tilly believes that a successful collective action is based on factors including participants' interest, organization, mobilization, repression and facilitation, actors' power, and political opportunity and threat (see Zhao, 2006: 191). Doug McAdam, another representative of the political process model, argues that the social movement originates from "broad socioeconomic

processes,” emphasizing the importance of social change, organization, and “cognitive liberation”³.

It should be noted that although all of these theories make sense, they focus more on the general model of movements. When it comes to analyzing the particularities of peasant movements and resistance, there exist other approaches which differ from the aforementioned theories. In his famous book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, James Scott emphasizes the importance of morality concerning one of the reasons why peasants revolt. In his words, it is the “right to subsistence” that gives peasants moral justification for their actions (Scott, 1976: 164-167). In addition to rural collective action, Scott argues that there are other forms of peasant resistance which he terms “weapons of the weak.” These “weapons” include foot dragging, dissimulation, sabotage, and other methods which may be called “everyday forms of peasant resistance” (see Scott, 1985: 29).

Generally speaking, many aspects of the aforementioned theories are of universal significance. However, it should also be noted that several theories, because they originate from Western backgrounds, are not fully applicable to situations in rural China. For example, the emphasis on professionalization in resource mobilization theory is not appropriate when discussing Chinese rural resistance due to the fact that professionalized organizations are rarely formed in the context of Chinese rural collective actions. Instead, Ying Xing believes that grassroots mobilization in rural China embodies the following characteristics: peasants will choose specific ways to express their interest and concerns based on different situations, and the legitimacy of their actions is ambiguous (Ying, 2007). In this way, it is necessary for Chinese scholars to draw lessons from the Chinese experience itself, instead of “tailoring” Chinese realities to fit a sort of Western “mental box.” This also becomes a focal point of this paper.

2. Introduction to the Investigation

It is necessary to first clarify the investigation method used in this research and the contents it included. The investigation was conducted in several villages of Xincun, a town in southern Jiangsu Province, in June 2006 (the incident broke out in 2005). The investigation method included individual as well as group interviews. In order to find persons most closely affiliated with the incident, the

³ According to Zhao Dingxin in his work *Social Movements and Revolutions*, the concept of cognitive liberation refers to people’s opinion about what is legitimized and what is not (see Zhao, 2006: 193).

author and his co-investigators adopted a method of "playing snowball." The specific process is as follows: we first contacted a local environmentalist and asked him to introduce us to other interviewees, who in turn helped us find even more interviewees. Through this process, the author was able to find many key actors in the Xincun Incident and gather reliable information. We also conducted several random-sample interviews of villagers to gain an outsiders' opinion concerning the incident. Therefore, the interviewees in this research project constitute three groups: key villagers who were involved in the incident, local villagers who were outsiders or followers, and local cadres. Unfortunately, the director of local enterprises (PEs) did not accept our offer for an interview. However, via interviews with the people mentioned above as well as through the close analysis of other documents from the local government, we were able to extrapolate a clear picture of the Xincun Incident.

3. Telling the Story: the Real Xincun Incident

The Xincun Incident originated from the "crop crisis" in the Xinhe Administrative Village (行政村), which is divided into 12 teams (组; 自然村). The total population of this village is 3877, consisting of approximately 1184 households⁴. The village per capita income is 5534 Yuan, lower than the average 6190 Yuan per capita income of its neighboring city⁵. The major financial income of this village comes from several enterprises which manufacture lamps and chemical products. At first glance, this information seems irrelevant; however upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the above information is integral to setting a solid background from which to better understand the Xincun Incident.

Attempting to unravel the whole story of what really happened behind this "riot" is an intricate process. Due to the subjectivities inherent in perception, people in different positions often give different answers, even though they are not trying to alter the facts on purpose. Because of this, the Xincun Incident can be viewed as a "story" which can be "recreated," but when these perspectives are compared and examined with each other in a larger context, a relatively objective "story" can be constructed in the end. Whatever inconsistencies may exist, the alterations of the "real story" by the interviewees are still significant as they represent different attitudes and perspectives of the actors.

Here is the real story: on June 17, 2005, large amounts of crops in the areas from Team1 to Team4 (1-4 组) of Xinhe village were found to have died from

⁴ According to the data in 2004.

⁵ Ibid.

pollution. Confused, the villagers came to the village cadres for answers, but they did not receive satisfactory replies. In protest, many villagers gathered the next day and blocked the road for two hours, among whom there were many elderly and children. In the meantime, due to the lack of information about the death of the crops in Teams 1-4, the villagers in the remaining eight teams were not able to adequately find the source of the pollutants and discontinue their use; thus, their crops died too in the following days. It is said that there was about 3000 mou (亩) of farmland affected in total. The death of the crops made peasants in the entire village irate; as a result, they attacked the village government offices. Several days later, the villagers in Teams 1 - 4 blocked the road for the second time, while the villagers in Teams 5 - 12 damaged facilities belonging to Xincun Additives Co., Ltd and Xincun Equipment Factory. Later that night, five villagers from Teams 1 - 4 found a notice (传唤证) asking them to report to the local police station. Angered by police intervention, the villagers in Teams 5 - 12 blocked the road for the third time. On the same day, the five villagers who were asked to the police station were released. However more notices were found on the front doors of residents from Teams 5 - 12. Following these rounds of "fighting", four trucks of villagers came to Xincun, besieged the township government, and forced local officials release the people being held in custody. In response to this emergency, the local government asked more than 100 policemen from the Anti-Riot Brigade (市防暴大队) to enter Xincun. After their arrival people dared not organize other activities.

The local government provided some compensation to the villagers. For example, they stopped using the polluted water to irrigate the crops, bought new seeds to replace the dead crops, and gave each villager five Yuan a day as a subsidy for buying clean drinking water.

Interestingly enough, opinions of the local cadres and the villagers varied on two points. The first concerns the origin of the pollution. According to the cadres, the pollution was caused by chemical materials bought from another city by Xincun Energy-saving Power Plant, which is a factory located outside of Xinhe village. These materials were not completely used by the factory, and because the workers were unaware of their poisonous nature, the remaining materials were stacked near a pond. As a result, rainfall in subsequent days caused these poisonous materials to wash into the river, eventually causing the deaths of the crops. According to our investigation, this is the most likely scenario. The villagers, however, do not trust this explanation. They believe the pollution was caused by local chemical factories adopting new technologies and promoting production, hence why these factories were the target of the villagers' attacks.

The other episode concerns the laboratory test of the dead crops. The local cadres brought these crops to Nanjing for testing. The results confirmed that the death of crops was not due to the chemical materials produced by Xinhe local factories. However, the villagers distrusted this assessment as well, believing that the local government was protecting the factories. This mistrust between the two groups was another major cause of incident.

4. The Logic behind the Scene

Now that the whole story of the Xincun Incident has been clarified, the next step is to reveal the logic behind this phenomenon: What characteristics emerge from this incident? What strategies and mobilization techniques did the peasants adopt? Why did the local government respond in the way that it did? What lesson can be learned from studying the interactions between different actors in this riot? Answering these queries requires us to engage in a more detailed analysis.

The villagers adopted the "strategy of the weak" when fighting against the local cadres. This "strategy of the weak" depended heavily on the moral foundation shared by all Chinese people as well as a subtle understanding of how to marginally exploit political legitimacy. For example, the peasants in Xinhe village did not receive satisfactory replies from the local cadres and thus blocked the road. Many of those participants were the elderly or children. In the words of an interviewee, Zhou San, "all the old people and children in the village went there."⁶ Why old people and children? In Chinese culture, revering elders and caring for the young (尊老爱幼) has always been regarded as a precious virtue. This notion is shared not only by peasants but also by other people, including the local cadres. If the cadres sent policemen to put down the old and the young, it would be nearly impossible to justify the use of force, thus presenting a moral predicament. That is the very reason why the villagers sent the elderly and children to block the road. Another example of utilizing morality comes from examining the behavior of Zhou's wife. When Zhou was detained, his wife went to the local cadres with pesticide in her hands, threatening to commit suicide if they did not release her husband. Respecting life is a universal virtue. Any policy based on the cost of life is regarded as unjustified. Zhou's wife used this "moral code" as her weapon.

Another aspect of the "strategy of the weak" relies on the exploitation of a marginal form of political legitimacy. This is also what Chinese scholar Ying Xing calls "the ambiguity of political indirection" (see Ying, 2007). In other words, the

⁶Based upon the interview with villager Zhou San.

peasants tried to mould their un-institutionalized behavior to fit inside the institutional framework, or at least keep it on the fringe of what is considered legitimate behavior. For instance, the total amount of time spent blocking the road lasted approximately two hours each time. According to the villagers, if the roads were blocked for more than two hours, their behavior would be seen as a serious breach of the law, losing legitimacy. Thus understanding the extent of regulations, the peasants used this “strategy of the weak” to increase their political legitimacy, thereby guaranteeing the general legitimacy of their actions.

In addition to the “strategy of the weak,” the Xincun Incident also illustrated the importance of local elites in the process of mobilization. For example, when villagers began to destroy the facilities of the local factories, there was a person who rode a bicycle back and forth in the village urging villagers to participate in the event. When villagers wanted to send representatives to Nanjing to petition (上访), there were also some leaders responsible for collecting money from every household for the petition.

Then who were these people—these so-called “local elites”? Despite not being able to find the bicycle rider, we did identify the people who collected the petition money. Jin Wu, who was responsible for collecting the money, was the former team leader in the village. Wu Long, who was responsible for accounting, was the former accountant in the village. Another person who shared these responsibilities was Shen Tang. He was also the accountant many years ago. Thus it can be seen that among the “local elites” many of them were former or retired cadres and leaders in the village. The reason why they participated actively in the incident is that they had more common interests with the villagers than with the current cadres. The skills they had mastered and the experiences of their pasts enabled them to be major contributors to the movement. In contrast, the present local cadres were mainly responsible for the top-down pressures and thus could not represent the interests of the local community. In other words, they might be qualified as “bureaucratic elites,” but the term “local elites” can only be used to describe people such as the former cadres who stood on the side of the local villagers.

During the Xincun Incident, the work these local elites did can be called “successful”. When the peasants prepared for a petition, the elites successfully collected the money (100 Yuan per household) from the villagers without many obstacles. The “free rider” phenomenon, as Mancur Olson mentioned, did not appear. There are two factors that guaranteed the success of these local elites: one, the prestige of the local elites which engendered the villagers’ trust; and two, the long-standing egalitarian tradition in Chinese rural culture. As mentioned above, the good reputation and capabilities of the local elites, coupled with the

interests they shared with the villagers, sealed a tacit agreement of trust that these elites would be able to fulfill the hopes of the villagers and not merely engage in actions solely for their own personal gain. Local rural society in China is always considered a place without strangers, and the Xinhe Village is no exception. The egalitarian tradition within the village did not allow for the existence of "free riders." If any villager had not paid 100 yuan, the peer pressure in this society-without-strangers would have greatly affected his reputation. Thus, the phenomenon of the "free rider" would not appear in this incident. This argument is also supported by Yingxing's study on grassroots mobilization. In his opinion, in comparison to the Western experience, the egalitarian tradition in rural China effectively solves the problem of lacking money in the mobilization process (see Ying, 2007). In short, both the local elites' prestige and the egalitarian tradition within the village guaranteed the success of the elites' work.

The other two actors in the Xincun Incident—the local government and the enterprises (TVEs or PEs)—shared many common interests and thus could be seen as having an alliance. Although the direct factor which led to the Xincun Incident was not due to pollution from local factories, the main cause of the incident did involve the protection of the local enterprises by the government. For example, the local Xincun Additives Co., Ltd often discharged sewage into the river at night to escape observation by the villagers. Because the local government depends heavily on the revenue collected from the taxes on these types of enterprises, there was no government enforcement to stop it from happening. Similarly, one criterion for judging the local cadres' performance is GDP growth in the area, which is then also closely tied to the "development" of local TVEs or PEs. It is no wonder then that the local administrators would protect the local enterprises. In this context, it is not important whether the real factor causing the death of the crops was related to the local factories or not. The primary reason leading to the incident arose from villagers' long-standing anger towards the alliance between the local government and enterprises.

In *Culture, Power, and the State*, Prasenjit Duara proposes the concept of "entrepreneurial brokerage" to describe the rent-seeking nature of the late Qing local administration in rural society. Rather than the "protective brokerage," which stands for the interests of the local community, the "entrepreneurial brokerage" was viewed by peasants as predatory (Duara, 1988: 42-43). In the Xincun Incident, the local administration shared more characteristics of the "entrepreneurial brokerage," "fulfilling" this role by having an alliance with the local enterprises.⁷ This is not to say that all local administrations in rural China are

⁷ This also made it hard for the villagers to trust the local administration, which will be elaborated on in later paragraphs.

“entrepreneurial brokerages,” but when incidences of this type break out, the characteristic of this “entrepreneurial brokerage” will often become dominant.

Looking at the interaction between the villagers and the local administration, one may find that the Xincun Incident was the inevitable result of institutional failure. The villagers in Xincun did try to solve the problem within the available institutions, but their efforts failed. For example, after the crops of Team 1 to Team 4 died, the villagers in these teams went to the local cadres for answers, but they did not receive a satisfactory reply. Meanwhile, when people collected money to petition the Jiangsu provincial government, the local administration detained Shen Tang and some other villagers in the name of “illegal fund-raising.” Therefore, the villagers abandoned the plan for the petition, which is a typical way of solving problems within the institution. From Charles Tilly’s approach, this outcome could also be seen as the failure of solving problems in the polity.

As a result, villagers had no choice but to riot. Only through “bargaining-by-riot” (see Scott, 1976: 34) could they ensure that their problems would be noticed by the government, in this way gaining some small hope that although consequences for their actions would follow, there would also be serious consideration given to how to address their problems. According to Han Jin, who was a main participant in the road-blocking event, the villagers’ objective in blocking the road was to attract the attention of the upper levels of government, since the township-level government did not give them satisfactory answers. In other words, after all the methods of problem solving within the available institutions were “blocked,” villagers had no choice but to resort to these outside-institution behaviors. Blocking the road was only one manifestation; the entire Xincun Incident as a whole can be seen as proof of the institutional failure.

Another noteworthy problem was the mistrust between the villagers and the local administration, making it impossible for the problems to be solved solely inside of the institutions. According to Li Lianjiang, Chinese people have a tendency to place more trust in the central government than in local authorities (Li, 2004). This is also true of the Xincun Incident. In the words of some interviewees, “the local officials cheated mid-level officials, while the mid-level officials cheated high-level officials.” Moreover, many villagers trusted that the central government was “good” and hoped that central authority could help them control pollution which was why those involved in the incident initially wanted to go for a petition. Meanwhile, the two episodes mentioned above are also good examples to prove the mistrust. Although the local cadres spoke the truth about the direct factor causing the death of the crops, which was not related to the local enterprises, the villagers did not trust them and damaged the facilities of these enterprises. The same distrust was found in the episode of laboratory test. Several villagers thought that the test was carried out by relatives or friends of the

cadres. In this sense, how to repair the trust between peasants and the local administration becomes a serious problem, adversely affecting people's confidence towards the current institution.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Taking all of these factors into consideration, we may finally discover the behavioral logic lurking behind the complexities surrounding the Xincun Incident. This logic reflects some of the important characteristics of "collective action" (in a broad sense) in rural China.

The major methods employed by the peasants in this kind of movement can be called "strategies of the weak," which depend heavily on the justification of cultural and moral norms as well as marginal forms of political legitimacy. The high percentage of the elderly and children participating in the road blocking would create a moral predicament if local cadres initiate a crackdown due to the Chinese traditional ethics on revering elders and caring for the young. Furthermore, the peasants' attempt to limit the hours of road blocking, illustrates this "strategy of weak" in another way, exploring a marginal form of political legitimacy.

What should be noted here is that the concept of "strategy of the weak" is different from James Scott's "weapons of the weak." Scott's concept focuses more on daily forms of resistance rather than directly concerning peasants' rebellion. Here, the term "strategy of the weak" emphasizes the characteristics manifested in the process of peasants' riots as opposed to the *daily practice* of the resistance itself. It should also be mentioned that James Scott touched on the importance of moral issues – such as the right to subsistence – when analyzing the peasants' revolt (see Scott, 1976: 164-167). But the morality he mentioned is more concerned with the reasons why peasants embark on revolt, while this paper's emphasis of morality is more concerned with the methods adopted in the process of a revolt.

Meanwhile, the "local elites," who played a very important role in the process of mobilization, were mainly those former cadres. Due to their good reputation and past experience, as well as their common interests with the villagers, the local elites were trusted that they had not only will but also capability to fulfill the villagers' hope. Concurrently, the long lasting egalitarian tradition within rural China did not allow for the existence of "free riders." To be a "free rider" in a village which is virtually known as a "society-without-a-stranger" would inevitably result in an unfavorable reputation as well as severe social pressure. Thus, it is

because of this rural tradition as well as the efforts of the “local elites” that the Xincun Incident finally erupted.

The other side of the story concerns the relationship between the local government and enterprises (TVEs or PEs). They shared many interests and thus could be seen as an alliance. To some extent, the local administration embodied the features of an “entrepreneurial brokerage,” engendering mistrust between the villagers and the local government. On the other hand, looking at a broader framework concerning state-society relations, many scholars identify this strong relationship between local government and economic development as a feature of the “developmental state” (see White & Wade, 1988). From this perspective, the role of local administration is quite positive. Thus, understanding the differences on the nature of the state necessarily comes from understanding different aspects of the same phenomenon. In the “Xincun Incident,” the author would emphasize the end costs of this relationship between local government and enterprises. The environmental pollution, which was a direct source of the incident, is now a serious problem that cannot be overlooked any longer. To some extent, this environmental by-product of the “developmental state” is establishing the groundwork for examining many other “incidents” like the Xincun case.

Through examining the interaction between different actors in the incident, one may find that the Xincun Incident was an inevitability given the level of institutional failure which is best exemplified by the unsuccessful petition attempt made by the peasants. According to Martin Whyte, due to the lack of well-developed institutions, the Chinese government will face increasingly difficult challenges from the local society in the future (see Whyte, 2000), of which the manifestation of social movements is one such example.

These three key features—the peasants’ “strategy of the weak,” the critical role of the local elites in mobilization, and the marked division between villagers and the local administrative-enterprises alliance due to institutional failure—all begin to construct and characterize the “logic behind the scene,” thus fleshing out a larger picture of what constitutes Chinese rural “collective actions.” Because of the lack of available comparative analysis, differentiating which features are specifically unique to the Chinese context and which features have universal significance can only be left to future study.

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Scene management and scene assessment (secure the scene, make sure it is safe for investigators to do their job). Witness management (provide support, limit interaction with other witnesses, interview). As little time as possible should be lost between the moment of an incident and the beginning of the investigation. In this way, one is most likely to be able to observe the conditions as they were at the time, prevent disturbance of evidence, and identify witnesses. The tools that members of the investigating team may need (pencil, paper, camera or recording device, tape measure, etc.) should be immediately available so that no time is wasted. What should be looked at as the cause of an incident? Causation Models. An incident investigator's first priority should be to ensure that the incident site is safe and secure. In some situations, you may have to travel a significant distance to reach the place where an incident occurred. In those cases, you should immediately contact on-site management to make sure that company protocols are being followed. Once you make it to the scene of the incident, verify that anyone injured has received appropriate medical assistance. You'll also need to confirm that any equipment involved has been de-energized. Take photos or video recordings of the scene as soon as possible.

Investigation of accidents and incidents. When an accident or serious incident occurs, the accident investigation process is set in motion to find out any possible failure within the aviation system, the reasons therefor and to generate the necessary countermeasures to prevent recurrence. Being an important reactive component of the elements contained in the SMS and SSP frameworks, accident investigations contribute to the continuous improvement of the aviation system by providing the root causes of accidents/incidents and lessons learned from analysis of events.