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REVIEW ESSAY

Responsive Authoritarianism in China – a Review of Responsiveness in Xi and Hu Administrations

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Abstract
Xi Jinping's efforts to recentralize political power have triggered a debate over if these changes will destroy the "authoritarian responsiveness" in China credited with regime durability. This review essay assesses "responsiveness" based on empirical research on three types of mechanisms through which the Hu-Wen administration interacted with citizens – within official settings (e.g. responding through government online portals), beyond official government arrangements (e.g. responding to protesters), and channels "in between" (e.g. responding to public outcry on social media). Recent studies seem to suggest that government responsiveness has been declining due to the centralization of political control, the tightening of ideological discipline, and the intolerance of citizen participation. Through our evaluation of the literature on responsiveness of the Chinese government under Xi's leadership, we find that although initial signs of a less responsive government do exist, there are also counter-forces both inside and outside of the political system. Our findings suggest the need for longitudinal empirical studies of responsiveness to understand if the government might be less resilient due to changing feedback mechanisms.

Keywords Authoritarian responsiveness · China · Feedback mechanism · Government response · Xi administration

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Introduction

Many scholars argue that the Chinese party-state has been durable longer than other Communist regimes due to its "responsiveness" [1–3]. The state deliberately engineered institutional channels for public participation, including limited autonomy to civil society and media [4–8]. Although this kind of responsiveness is limited to particular geographical areas and issues [9], a significant number of researchers still use the term "responsive authoritarianism" to describe the phenomenon of Chinese officials taking into account the demands of societal actors without sharing the CCP's monopoly on political power [10–13].

However, these studies on the responsiveness of the Chinese state are mostly from the Hu-Wen period, some even dating back to Jiang period, so it is not clear whether this concept of "responsiveness" is still valid under the Xi leadership. Shambaugh [14], for example, suggests that the government responsiveness is declining due to the recentralization of political power with more emphasis put on officials' loyalty rather than professional performance, and stricter controls imposed on civil society and media. Fewsmith sees such a trend of centralization of power as a challenge to norms and institutions of the CCP, although also argues that these norms and institutions were epiphenomenal to CCP power[1] [15]. Nathan agrees with the existence of such a trend; however, does not see it as weakening the party. Instead, he argues that Xi has been acting within the existing party institutions and even strengthened these [15]. Despite the nuance of this debate, all agree that this new governance style prioritizes "top-level design" and discourages local responsiveness, which might generate particular risks [16]. These arguments hinge on changing political institutions and practices decreasing government responsiveness to lower-level elites and citizens. To find out whether this is happening, we examine the government responsiveness literature focusing on both the current and the previous administration.

In the next section, we first introduce the concept of responsive authoritarianism, the features of this system, and why authoritarian governments respond. This introduction is followed by a review of the earlier literature on responsive authoritarianism in China. Extant research on responsive authoritarianism in China mostly analyzes the channels citizens use to interact with the government, the responsiveness of the government through this channel, and the strategies citizens use to make the government more responsive. This literature finds that government responsiveness varies across the three channels, and in each, citizens can employ different tactics to increase responsiveness. Finally, we evaluate the literature on government responsiveness under the Xi administration using the same framework. We find that although initial signs of a less responsive government do exist, there are also counter-forces both inside and outside of the political system. Thus, it is hard to distinguish unintended from intended reductions in responsiveness, and many elites and citizens seem to interpret these changes as rectifying the wrong type of "responsiveness" – local officials responsiveness to vested interests in SOEs and the Party-state rather than to citizens, and ad-hoc concessions rather than those based on law (see [17]). However, if future studies confirm the persistence of these initial signs of a less responsive government, then the government centralization efforts might destroy important feedback mechanisms, which would lead to a less resilient authoritarian regime as socio-economic cleavages continue to develop in a slowing economy.

[1] This mirrors a similar debate in the broader comparative authoritarianism literature of if outcomes are causally related to institutions (Svolik; Gandhi; Brownlee) or epiphenomenal to power (Pepinsky; Slater).

Responsive Authoritarianism Defined

A government is considered responsive if "it adopts policies that are signalled as preferred by citizens" through public opinion polls or direct political action, such as demonstrations, letter campaigns, and elections ([18]: 9). Two actions are part of this definition of responsiveness – information collection and state response. Although responsiveness often refers to the level of accountability in democracies, it does not have to be used only in the democratic context. Being responsive can also refer to if government officials answer the demands of societal actors [10], similar to the concept of being "consultative"— power holders use communication to collect the preferences of relevant citizens, or "deliberative"— a mode of communication involving persuasion-based influence [5, 19–21]. Due to the overlap in these concepts, responsive authoritarianism is often used interchangeably with "consultative authoritarianism" and "deliberative authoritarianism", referring to an effective form of authoritarian governance that helps to collect information about the policy, co-opt dissent, maintain social order, and strengthen the legitimacy of the party-state. Despite these similarities,"consultation" implies that decision-makers ask for information from those their decisions will affect, and "deliberation" implies that decision-makers also enable space for people to discuss issues and engage in the discussion [5]. In recent years, consultative authoritarianism has been increasingly used to analyze the state-society relations in China. Teets [20, 21], for example, used the term to explain the phenomenon of Chinese state giving more operational autonomy to civil society organizations on the one hand and imposing more sophisticated control on the society on the other hand. However, there is no sign that deliberative authoritarianism is used in the same way. Therefore, consultative authoritarianism and deliberative authoritarianism differ in that the former has been increasingly linked to the state's treatment of grassroots activities in China, but the latter, in the Chinese context, is still limited to the communication between party-state and political/social elites. More significantly for this essay, consultative authoritarianism and deliberative authoritarianism emphasize the procedure of information solicitation, and responsive authoritarianism includes the state reaction based on the information.

Responsive authoritarianism can be understood as a form of government that "proactively monitors citizen opposition to state policies and selectively responds with policy changes when it gauges opposition to be particularly widespread" [11]. In this sense, the authoritarian state can be efficient in answering citizens' requests and satisfying needs. However, as many have pointed out, this should not be mistaken as a process of democratization or state weakness, as the state still maintains substantial autonomy in decision making and a high level of control over the society, but that the control is transformed from a costly "naked coercion" ([22]: 208) to softer strategies [12, 23, 24]. Similarly, consultative authoritarianism and deliberative authoritarianism should not be seen as necessarily the start of democratization either, because no matter consultation or deliberation, it is the state that decides who, when, and to what extent citizens can participate in this procedure.

There are some common features of responsiveness in authoritarian contexts. First, the state tends to establish institutions or official channels to facilitate citizen feedback [1, 11, 25, 26], and to be responsive in such settings to encourage citizen participation within these structured feedback mechanisms. Distelhorst and Hou [27] even found that

the authoritarian Chinese government was more effective than a democratic government when it came to responding through institutional channels. Second, the state tolerates a certain level of citizen action, such as local protests, insofar as people's actions remain controllable ([28]: 8). This means the scale of the movement should be manageable, targets of these actions should be outside of the government (such as corporations) or at lower levels, and the grievances should focus on narrow issues [12, 29, 30]. Third, the state allows greater information flow through partially opening up the media [12, 31], which helps citizens to air grievances and acts as a sounding board for the government. However, the government restricts these channels when the topic is too broad or political, potentially causing social unrest. Therefore, although the government can be responsive, this is inherently limited. When citizens' action threatens regime security, the state will immediately restrict this space and impose harsh punishments. However, if there is such associated political risk, why do authoritarian government try to be responsive in the first place?

The predominant answer is that the government encourages feedback directly from society because the quality of information available to authoritarian leaders is generally poor [8, 20, 32, 33]. This feedback mechanism not only allows the government to address social problems promptly, but it also allows it to gather information on potential opposition, prolonging authoritarian rule [8, 34, 35]. These feedback mechanisms transmit information to higher levels of government, and also act as a safety valve to release social grievances to contribute to the stability of the authoritarian regime [36].

Besides information gathering and stability maintenance, officials also have personal incentives for being responsive, especially in the local bureaucracies in a nomenklatura system. In such a system, officials are promoted by their superiors based on their performance [10]. Since stability maintenance is an important issue in any authoritarian state, official responsiveness becomes evidence of officials' efforts to improve social stability, thus a kind of tangible career accomplishment [11]. In short, the nomenklatura system and its focus on stability maintenance make local officials more responsive. At the lowest levels, local officials respond to citizens' demands due to the existence of elections, a similar incentive as constituency service in democracies [27], or because they are embedded in local society [37]. Although both local and central officials have incentives to be responsive, the central government is often more inclined to respond to social justice issues than the local government [13]. This is because political elites are concerned with the legitimacy of the state, which is essential for regime durability.

Responsive Authoritarianism under Hu (2002-12)

During the 2000s, a consensus emerged among scholars that the Chinese government had become more responsive: the authorities created institutional channels for public participation, and the state gave more autonomy to civil society organizations (CSOs) and media [4–7, 12, 20]. Reviewing this literature on Chinese government responsiveness, two main approaches were revealed. Influenced by the institutional turn in the study of authoritarian politics [38], scholars focused on how the state collected and used societal information. Regarding the "how" question, scholars divided information collection channels into formal and informal. In formal channels, citizens communicated through government-engineered official channels, such as writing petition letters,

visiting in person to petitioning offices, and communicating through government online portals. In informal channels, they participated "beyond" institutional arrangements by conducting protests, sit-ins, and traffic blockages. Additionally, they participated through virtual channels "in between" by reposting and commenting on social media platforms. We thus categorize this literature into three channels – within formal settings (e.g., government online portals), beyond official government arrangements (e.g., protests), and through virtual channels "in between" (e.g., social media). The channels discussed in this article were identified through the main mechanisms in the extant literature employing the term "responsive authoritarianism", rather than our own theoretical construction. Thus channels some scholars might consider part of responsive authoritarianism (e.g., participation through people's congress system) are not included, and channels some scholars might not agree upon (e.g., participation through protest and social media) are included.[2] In the Hu era, scholars found that the government's response to societal information was both channel-dependent and tactics-dependent.

Government-Initiated Channels

Citizens were encouraged to interact with officials through government channels, including traditional channels such as writing petition letters, visiting petitioning offices, or through new channels like communicating by government online portal [10, 13]. Since the imperial time, offices at all levels receive petitions in person or via written forms, and regularly generate reports based on this information and deliver it to leaders and relevant departments. This was maintained in the PRC [11], and after the "Open Government Information Ordinance" in 2007 [10], many local governments set up online government portals and citizens started to use these to petition as well.

Under the Hu administration, the Chinese government was very responsive when citizens participated through the government-engineered channel. In field experiments conducted between 2012 and 2013, Distelhorst and Hou [27] found that mayors' offices provided helpful responses to 43% of appeals, which made these agencies more responsive than the offices of elected representatives in some democratic countries. Regardless of the response rate, the mere presence of these channels for citizen participation created a perception of responsiveness. For example, Truex [8] showed that respondents, especially those less educated and politically excluded citizens, became more satisfied with the government merely after being exposed to the National People's Congress' online participation portals.

However, this responsiveness varied based on how complaints were framed. Chen et al. [10] conducted research before 2012, and found that the government prioritized among the 10 to 13 million petitions received every year by complainants threatening to 1) appeal to upper-level government and 2) start collective action. Chen et al. [10] also noticed that, while threatening complaints to upper levels only led to increased overall response rate, threatening collective action also led to increased probability of receiving publicly viewable responses and direct detailed responses; thus, the latter frame could be considered more effective. However, Distelhorst and Hou [27] argued that without collective action threats, the government was still surprisingly responsive, which indicates that the government encourages citizens to use this channel. In addition, at the elite level, citizens used

[2] We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

membership in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and CSOs to advocate successfully using government-sponsored "consultative" channels [39].

Beyond Official Channels

Despite the government's preference, some citizens chose to pressure the government through more direct channels, such as protests. Contrary to conventional assumptions about authoritarian regimes, the Chinese government had been relatively tolerant towards demonstrations, as long as they remained a "controlled burn" [40]. These protests could act as a safety valve to release citizens' grievances and deliver information on social problems [36], and due to such a function, concessions from the government had become a frequent response. For example, in response to protests over land expropriations in the countryside, the government had dramatically increased compensation to farmers who lost their land in government-led land expropriations; in urban areas, the government had mandated market compensation for homeowners whose houses were demolished in the early 2000s [11, 41].

This outcome was a result of protestors' well-designed strategy of persuading local officials that the protest was beneficial to these officials' own political interests. Heurlin [11] showed that due to the fragmentation in the political system, citizens who use protests to alter bureaucrats' calculations by causing them to see protesters as potentially facilitating career goals, such as promotions, were more likely to get support. Another strategy was "rightful resistance", or maintaining a high level of congruence in protest rhetoric with central government policies. O'Brien and Li [42] noted that "waving the red flag to oppose the red flag" was a good way to make initially unresponsive authorities respond to protestors. This is because, if the demonstrators used the central government official discourse to defend their rights, the local government often had to answer to avoid being charged with disloyalty to the central government.

Additionally, in a comparative study on the government's reaction to environmental complaints and protests from 2007 to 2011, Marquis and Bird [12] found that when the government encountered civic activism within the system that was less visible to the public, it was more likely to follow the complaint-response model by providing case-by-case solutions to citizens' specific complaints in a one-off fashion. In contrast, when the government faced civic activism outside the system that was more visible to the public, the government was more likely to address the underlying social issues generating the discontent by launching a high-profile campaign and/or developing new laws and regulations tackling the underlying root cause of the grievance [12]. In addition to citizen protest, CSOs' advocacy through public campaigns also achieved similar policy responses in many areas like health and environment [20, 43]. Therefore, even though civic activism outside of the system was risky, it appeared to be effective in triggering a government response. Although this outcome varied by faming and the potential of "virality" similar to government channels, the potential for mobilization (or virality) seemed to appear higher or more visible to government officials through this channel.

Channels "in between"

In addition to the more direct channels discussed above, citizens also try to influence government actions, policies, and agendas through social media by reposting and

commenting on social issues. This kind of online participation is not as conventional as petitioning through government portals, and it is normally not as risky as protesting. Despite internet censorship in China, there was considerable space for Chinese citizens to discuss social topics online during the Hu era [44].

Hassid [45], drawing on cases between 2000 and 2011, notes government responsiveness when Chinese netizens showed dissatisfaction. However, Hassid contends that this response was conditioned by size, intensity, and socioeconomic class. First, if a large number of netizens got sufficiently angry, then authorities reacted quickly to assuage their demands and to avoid potential collective action [45]. For example, the Chinese government responded quickly to punish railway officials after the July 2011 Wenzhou train crash because of the video shared of the hasty burial of the wrecked train cars by the Railway Ministry enraged netizens and generated 26 million Weibo messages within days [46]. Second, when middle-class citizens' interests were jeopardized, the authorities were likely to act in a swift manner. An illustration of this is the Sun Zhigang incident in 2003. Sun, a college-educated worker, was arrested by Guangzhou police for not carrying his local residence permit and eventually beaten to death at the detention facility [47]. This incident created uproar online and resulted in the scrapping of the system of internal detention facilities by authorities within weeks, but Hassid [45] pointed out that it is less likely that Sun's death would have provoked such a big reaction if he were not a white collar, college-educated professional. Therefore, Hassid [45] concluded that even though the Chinese social media had some level of a sounding board effect, due to the demographic composition of netizens and the government's selective response strategy, this was limited to better-off citizens (also see [48]).

Despite these more responsive cases, Zhao [49] argues that although the Chinese state may appear to tolerate the development of the public sphere online, social media was most often used to guide public opinion in a direction beneficial to government rule, similar to traditional media. King et al. [50, 51] also pointed out that the state has been deliberately deleting negative posts and fabricating favorable comments to change online discussion. In short, the government had a sophisticated view of the role of online space, and it had developed a complex system of "networked authoritarianism" to combine censorship with a range of other techniques [52].

This summary of the extant literature during the Hu administration reveals the pattern of the responsiveness of the Chinese government before 2012: citizens increasingly interacted with the authorities, and in all three channels, the government had shown a considerable level of responsiveness given the authoritarian context, especially with certain framing and potential for contagion. Next, we analyze the literature on responsiveness in China under the Xi administration, to see if those patterns continue or change.

Changing Responsiveness in the Xi Era

After Xi came to power in 2012, political control became more centralized, ideological discipline increased, and the state became less open to citizen participation in any form [53–55]. These new developments suggest that the Chinese government has become less responsive. Many scholars noted the attempt to divide information collection from

state response by removing autonomy for the local government to make decisions in response to this information collected by local state actors [56–58]. In distinction to the Hu era, scholars noted that governance is more technocratic with "top-level design" in that the local government collects information but the central government responds [16, 59]. This diluted the power of citizen information in decision making but also could indicate more "mature" or "Weberian" institutionalization of governance. In this section, we analyze the recent literature to see if the previously-identified feedback mechanisms still function under Xi Jinping, and how the government responds to societal information.

Government-Initiated Channels

Although studies replicating ones from the Hu era do not exist, the literature does suggest that authorities' responsiveness through petitions and other institutional channels has declined due to the anti-corruption campaign started by Xi Jinping in 2012. This campaign has a detrimental effect on officials' performance because it has replaced the previous incentive-based system with the one based on fear: bureaucrats tend to be "too frightened to do anything without explicit orders from the top" [60]. This results in passiveness instead of responsiveness [56]. In this context, although the formal channels of the petition offices and government online portals still exist, they have become less effective. For example, over the past six years, bureaucratic burdens have been increased significantly by attending study sessions or filling out audit reports for the discipline inspectors, and given a fixed amount of human resources, the time and energy for responsiveness have decreased [53]. The risk, uncertainty, and changing duties all interact to decrease local responsiveness [61].

Additionally, due to the priority shift in the bureaucratic system, the previous strategies to pressure the government to respond might be less effective. First, for the threat of informing upper-level government to work, the system has to put officials' professional performance as its criteria for promotion or demotion, but as shown before, the current system is moving from meritocracy to "followcracy", resulting in civil servants shifting their priorities "from showing results to showing loyalty" [53, 60]. Second, for the threat of collective action to work, social stability has to be the primary concern. However, the emphasis on top-level design encourages local officials to implement regulations exactly as written even at the cost of triggering instability [62, 63]. The consultative role of the CPPCC and CSOs has been maintained under Xi, but severely restricted [55, 64].

Despite this initial evidence, it might be too early to conclude that the government responsiveness has declined as a new feature of Xi's governance style. Several recent signs indicate that the central government is aware of the lack of response of local officials and trying to reverse the trend, which is also a sign of responsiveness, albeit more centralized. For instance, at the third plenary session of the 19th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CCP in January 2019, Xi Jinping specifically introduced a new priority of encouraging and rewarding civil servants' "excellent conduct" [65]. This is apparently to address the unintended consequences of the anti-corruption campaign and other centralization mechanisms, namely causing officials' paralysis and lack of responsiveness to citizen concerns. Xi Jinping appears to be creating a system where local officials collect information to pass to central

policymakers, but any response seems to come only from the center. The discretion for local officials to respond to the information they are collecting seems constrained under this new governance style. As mentioned above, scholars need more time to replicate earlier studies to evaluate the overall responsiveness of the Chinese state under Xi's leadership through official channels to determine if these changes to the system encourage a new version of rule-based local responsiveness or simply local bureaucrats as agents embedded in a Weberian "iron cage".

Beyond Official Channels

In April 2013, the Communist Party circulated the *Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere*, in which civil society is described as one of the seven perils that harms "socialism with Chinese characteristics" [66]. This was quickly followed by a commentary in *People's Daily* entitled "Why People's Society is Better Than Civil Society", which Hu An'gang creates a binary between sacred people's society (Chinese and homegrown) vs. profane civil society (Western and imported) [67]. Following this was a series of crackdowns where human rights lawyers were arrested [68], feminist movements were under pressure [69], and labor NGOs were suppressed [70]. All these actions signaled that the government is less open to unofficial channels of participation.

As a result, both organized advocacy and protests have become more risky and nearly impossible in some issue areas, such as human rights, women's rights, and labor rights. Activists from these issue areas have three unsatisfying options: 1) constraining their actions within acceptable parameters; 2) facing an increased likelihood of incarceration; 3) continuing their activities abroad [66]. Despite this shrinking space, Qiaoan [43] finds that similar to the Hu-Wen Era, the current government is more likely to respond to social groups if they align with government rhetoric and show relevance to government interests, as can be seen with environmental groups.

To some extent, the "war on pollution" can be seen as a case where the current government responded to civil society pressure, like the case of water pollution in the "swimmable river" campaign [62]. However, Economy [66] claims that even in this issue area, civil society is arguably less powerful under the new Charity Law and Law on the Management of Foreign NGOs (FNGO law). For example, support from foreign entities, which are traditionally the largest source of financial and capacity-building support for Chinese environmental NGOs, decreased after the FNGO law was enacted. Also, since environmental data may be classified as issues of national security, environmental NGOs can be charged with harming national security and helping hostile foreign forces when they investigate sensitive issues. The grey space in which NGOs acted was always contested with frequent crackdowns, but rule changes over who can share information, who can initiate/run programs, etc. demonstrate a purposeful shrinking of this space, further dividing elites from regular citizens as bigger NGOs mature while smaller groups are closed [71], and linkage issues repressed (such as the feminist five, the Maoist students, and labor organizations). As a result, the breadth and quality of information collected to inform government responses has declined. For example, despite the new vigor demonstrated by the leadership to address air pollution, failures in policy implementation have occurred due to limited feedback from civil society [72]. Given the inability to share grievances outside of government channels, civil society is less likely over time to be capable of pressuring the government, which means the

conditions which influenced the government to launch the "war on pollution" in the early 2000s might no longer exist.

Channels "in between"

In August 2013, the Chinese government issued the "Seven Baselines" (qitiao dixian 七条底线) at the China Internet Conference to clarify the responsibilities of netizens [73]. Chinese internet companies soon reacted, with Sina shutting down 100,000 Weibo accounts that did not comply with the new rules [66], and a few big Vs[3] on Sina Weibo were found guilty of "slander" and of "picking quarrels and provoking troubles" [74]. This development represents a turning point for Sina Weibo, the primary online political/social discussion platform in China. According to a study of 1.6 million Weibo users, by 2013, the number of Weibo posts fell by 70% from 2011 [66]. Meanwhile, the government also implemented a set of soft controls on the internet. Repnikova and Fang [75] investigate the upgraded version of state-led communication designed for online persuasion under Xi's leadership from late 2012 to late 2015, and find that the state's digital propaganda is increasingly participatory, meaning the targets of propaganda are turned into collaborators to recreate online pro-party discourse.

Even though new online platforms are emerging, public space in the virtual world is arguably shrinking. A visible turn is that the online space is becoming more private and non-political, with the shift from Weibo to Wechat as a typical case. While Weibo is a Twitter-like platform that allows public discussion among strangers, Wechat is a Whatsapp-like tool that facilitates communication among friends and acquittances [76]. Because of Wechat's focus on limited person-to-small-group communication, it slows down the burgeoning Chinese virtual civil society that was facilitated by Weibo [77]. Although it is possible to create a public/official account (公众号) on Wechat to create Weibo-like public communication, the procedure is more complex and the experience is different. First, while no personal information was needed for registering a Weibo account, official ID and mobile phone number are the minimum information needed for Wechat public/official account. Secondly, followers of Wechat public/official accounts receive information in isolation, which means public debates are rare. The result is that WeChat has been moving Chinese netizens away from mass-oriented online discourse and leaving fewer opportunities for citizens to share opinions publicly on a broad scale [77].

In addition, the strategies that citizens previously employed to push the government to respond are becoming increasingly out of reach. Recently, a regulation from the Cyberspace Administration of China requires social media companies to impose "graduated control" on public accounts according to, among others, the content of publications and the number of readers [78], indicating that the government aims to prevent negative posts that might induce public anger reaching a considerable number of citizens. This means the condition to push the government to act discussed in the last section — a significant number of citizens getting angry — will not be easily met. For instance, in November 2017, the government quickly clamped down on expressions of public outrage about an alleged child abuse scandal at a Beijing kindergarten before

[3] Big Vs stands for VIP account of Sina Weibo, who are the most prominent Chinese web influencers with many followers.

public anger spread [79]. In March 2018, the censorship on netizens' comments regarding the Constitution revision was similarly effective.

However, it remains questionable if this restricted online space can last, as many seem to be pushing the limits. For example, at the March 2016 meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, several representatives, including well-known CCTV anchor Bai Yansong, called for greater media freedom [66]. An article published on the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection website titled "A Thousand Yes-Men Cannot Equal One Honest Advisor" called for more open debate, stating "We should not be afraid of people saying the wrong things; we should be afraid of people not speaking at all" [80]. Although this had no immediate result, it might indicate that it will be hard for the government to maintain these restrictions.

Conclusion

This explorative assessment suggests that the government is less responsive in all three channels under the Xi administration, potentially depriving it of important feedback from citizens. However, the reduction in responsiveness through the institutional channel appears to be, at least partially, an unintended consequence, and therefore, might change over time. Despite the findings in the existing literature, it might be too early to conclude that the current government will remain less responsive in the future. For example, Minard [81] noted that governments are more responsive to citizens with better access to ICTs, so with the development of technology and the widespread use of mobile devices, the Chinese government will face increasing pressure from informed and connected citizens. Similarly, Distelhorst and Hou [27] found that the quality of government service is predicted by economic modernization such that the government shows a higher level of responsiveness when the economy is dominated by industrial and service sectors. If this relationship holds, the Chinese government might be forced to be more responsive as the economy and technology mature; although it would become more reponsive to elite citizens and their interests first.

Additionally, some researchers claim that Xi is not such a norm-challenger, and his manner of handling Party institutions, major state firms, and religious observance actually strengthens rather than weakens existing party institutions and norms [82–85]. For example, Nathan claims that Xi has been acting within the existing party institutions to follow and even strengthen party institutions [15]. Thus, it is too early to draw a sharp line between administrations, at least as far as persistent trends impacting responsiveness. It is clear that central government preferences for collecting and responding to citizen feedback have changed to promote more of an "iron cage" for local state officials. However, it is not clear that these changes will reduce overall responsiveness permanently, and in fact, by sidelining local vested interests and power centers, the local state might become more accessible (or responsive) to regular citizens. This form of responsivenss might become more rule-based and less ad-hoc, reducing participation for some but perhaps increasing it for others. In sum, we might see that the channels, tactics, and participants change, but the system remains fairly responsive.

As this initial analysis of the literature on government responsiveness between administrations illustrates, more empirical research should be conducted to answer these unresolved questions regarding the responsiveness of current Xi government.

Empirical research evaluating government responsiveness in the three channels is needed: how the petition offices and online portals are functioning in the Xi era, how various levels of government officials have been responding to different types of protestors, and how officials have been taking (or not) public feedback online. Repnikova and Fang [75]'s paper is an exemplary study of the government's response to social media sentiment, but longitudinal research on changes within the other two channels is still missing. For example, if Chen et al. [10]'s persuasive assessment of the Chinese government's responsiveness through online portals prior to 2012 were replicated through a similar experiment, testing whether 1) assignment to threats of collective action, 2) assignment to threats of evoking the oversight of upper-level government, and 3) assignment to claims of CCP membership and loyalty to the Party increase responsiveness of current county-level officials to citizen demands, it might highlight differences in government responses between administrations. Longitudinal studies of the three channels through which citizens voice concerns would allow researchers to identify the channels or strategies where Xi's administration is either less or more responsive. If future empirical studies confirm the persistence of these initial signs of a less responsive government without corresponding efforts to develop new channels, then government centralization mechanisms might cause it to lose important feedback mechanisms, which might lead to a less resilient authoritarian regime.

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