The State of the Field in Chinese Politics
Small Group Memo #1
Stanford University
December 2018

Our group answered the posed questions, more or less, by focusing on areas of our own interests and expertise. Thus, this is not exhaustive or comprehensive, not that a five-page memo could be. In conceptual terms, our main interest could be summarized as the relationship between repression and political attitudes. Or in other words, in the context of the "dictator's dilemma", how can we as researchers "really" know what Chinese people think about their government. We examine this problem with two substantive issues - the nature of political trust and the relationship between the CCP and China's socio-economic elite – and two methodological issues – the benefits and constraints of different survey approaches and the effect of repression on qualitative research.

Substantive Issues

Political Trust

Public opinion surveys consistently show China as having one of the highest levels of political trust in the world. However, many China specialists question the reliability and validity of the survey results because one, authoritarian regimes like China are expected to discourage political trust and two, protests and demonstrations against the government are seemingly frequent in China.

Several people have attempted to provide explanations for China's high level of political trust. Some apply the Eastonian thesis and distinguish between diffuse and specific support (Shi 2001, Chen 2004, etc.). Others look at the vertical difference in political trust between central government and local government (O'Brien 1996, Li 2004, Dickson, Shen, Yan 2017, Tang 2005.) Yet others examine survey non-response (Ren 2009). The most recent attempts are driven by experimental research (Huang and Yeh 2019; Jiang and Yang 2016), including list experiment (Tang and Zhang 2016) and implicit association test (IAT) (Zhou, Tang and Lei). Some examine other dimensions and targets of trust, such as the extent to which the state (Hsu and Hasmath 2014, Teets 2013; Spires 2011; Yang and Alpermann 2014) or community (Heurlin, 2010; Deng and O'Brien 2013) trusts NGOs.

The consensus of the existing research supports the validity of the findings about high political trust. Yet critiques challenge the current studies by arguing that there is dissatisfaction among the Chinese public about their government and its policies, as reflected in social media discussions (King, Pan and Roberts 2013) and China's high rate of protests and demonstrations (Heurlin 2016, Lee and Zhang 2013, Chen 2011, Y. Cai 2010). The challenge is how to understand the relationship between dissatisfaction in many areas (food safety, land requisition, working conditions, environmental pollutions, etc.) and high levels of political trust.

There are at least three ways to detect political distrust in China:

1. Improving the quality of survey experiments. For example, the key to the success of a list experiment is to make the respondents understand that they can hide their true political attitudes while answering the experimental question. Observation of the field interviews suggests that respondents sometimes don't realize that list experiment is designed to help them hide their political distrust. These respondents directly mention the specific items in the experimental question, instead of giving a number (see Tang and Zhang 2016 for further discussion).
2. Detecting dissatisfaction with specific policies. The second way to detect political distrust is to examine questions related to specific policies, such as food safety, environment, corruption, income gap, and so on. People tend to be more relaxed to voice their dissatisfaction about specific policies than about the government as a whole.
3. Decomposing the meaning of political trust. The final way of gaining further understanding of the high level of political trust is by asking more specifically what people mean when they show political trust (Dalen 2005). Does it mean policy making, policy implementation, specific leaders, central vs. local government, ideology, or something else?

All three methods will help reveal the dissatisfaction and distrust that people observe in social media anecdotes and frequent protests/petitioning behavior. However, as Dimitrov (2013) has argued, voiced dissatisfaction can be a sign that citizens have confidence in the regime. Gallagher (2017) argues that government seems to prefer uninstitutionalized "wildcat" labor strikes and demonstrations to the political inclusion of collective labor rights. Tang's (2016) "populist authoritarianism" also includes an important role for popular protest. In a system that minimizes effective channels of institutionalized political participation, the co-existence of high levels of political trust *and* frequent protest is not incompatible or contradictory.

Socio-Economic Elites

The field of Chinese politics has made a great deal of progress—in terms of both knowledge accumulation and producing concepts that travel outside of China—in interrogating how the Chinese party-state relates to the "masses." The field has coalesced around concepts such as "rightful resistance," "rules consciousness," and "populist authoritarianism" to explain the apparent puzzle of high levels of collective action / contentious politics and high levels of support for the regime (O'Brien and Li 2006; Perry 2008; Tang 2016).

However, we have made much less progress in understanding how the regime relates to socio-economic-elites, especially the newly rich and China's celebrities and "public opinion leaders." Given that China produces two new billionaires per week and, presumably, these elites control substantial resources, the lack of focus on socio-economic elites is surprising. To be sure, a literature on the apparent political impotence of China's new capitalist class has concluded, mostly driven by survey data as well as qualitative fieldwork, that capitalists have failed to agitate for democracy because they have been "co-opted," brought into the regime to obviate the need for them to organize outside of it (Tsai K. 2005, 2007; Dickson 2003; Pearson 2000). We know little, however, about what high-level social and/ or economic elites give and get from the CCP; if they were willing to exchange political fealty for the ability to pursue profits, now that entrepreneurs and social elites (e.g. celebrities) are being disciplined by the CCP, should we expect that

fealty to persevere? Moreover, that capitalists neither prefer democracy nor act democratically does not mean that they do not act politically or wield substantial power vis-à-vis the political elite.

If ours is a moment of tightening controls on data collection and fieldwork in China, it is also one of expanding Chinese influence abroad, including the internationalization of Chinese firms and the political, social, and personal activities of Chinese elites. We can learn a great deal about trust between elites / business and the state by looking at where firms and elites invest their assets, send their children to school, and even seek citizenship. Chinese firms and individuals going abroad confront international standards of disclosure, which can reveal more than domestic sources about the structure of companies, ownership of assets, and so forth.[1] Similarly, the anti-corruption campaign has produced an abundance of evidence on the nature of the relationships between political elites and economic elites, for example the extent to which political officials have pursued and obfuscated their business dealings and the exchanges between officials and businesses (Lu and Lorentzen 2018). While this information cannot be said to be comprehensive or unbiased, both offshore sources and information revealed as party-elite relations appear to undergo a transformation can shed light on the important but neglected question of how the CCP manages elites.

Methodological Issues

Can survey research reveal political attitudes?

Despite the continued questions about the reliability of surveys for some topics, such as political trust, research on public opinion is becoming increasingly popular in the China field (Manion 2010). Researchers normally use or collect survey data in the following three ways:

1. They directly use questions in existing large-scale household surveys that are publicly available, such as the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), China Urban Household Survey: Beijing, China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), and China General Social Survey (CGSS).
2. They conduct ad-hoc household surveys or insert questions in ongoing household survey projects.
3. They conduct online surveys through vendors from both mainland China and the United States.

There are pros and cons of each of three methods. The biggest advantages of using existing large-scale household surveys are the low-cost and the professionalism of the organizations that administer these surveys. As a result, data from these surveys can often achieve national or regional representativeness. The biggest constraint of using these surveys is that questions in these surveys may not be of direct interest to political scientists and there is not much flexibility in changing the questionnaires.

For this reason, researchers sometimes opt for option two. However, the cost of conducting household survey is prohibitively high. In 2011 (7 years ago!), one of the authors helped design and administer a household survey in 29 provincial capitals with a sample of about 4000 respondents. The cost then was RMB 30 per household; it is now reported that the cost has risen to RMB 150-300 (or 20-40 dollars) per household, depending on sampling strategies. Moreover, researchers conducting household

[1] For example, the US SEC requires disclosure of parent and ultimate parent information for Chinese companies pursuing mergers / acquisitions of US assets, and similar regulations exist in the EU. Used in combination with records from the State Administration of Industry and Commerce in China, these disclosures can reveal a good deal about the extent of asset control and expatriation.

surveys—either by themselves or by working with a Chinese partner—often face severe censorship on political questions. Currently, almost all household surveys need to obtain approval from a Chinese academic institution or a local government. We have encountered cases in which very basic, seemingly non-sensitive questions, such as party membership and knowledge about the names of Politburo Standing Committee membership, cannot be asked. This is frustrating.

Researchers conducting online surveys may face a similar censorship constraint when they work with a Chinese domestic vendor. So far, we do not know of any cases in which international vendors proactively censor a researcher's questionnaire. However, these vendors also charge a higher fee: the cost is around $3-$6 depending on the length of the survey and sampling techniques. Online surveys are much cheaper than household ones, but they have three potential problems. First, the sample is very homogeneous, and far from representative of even the online population. For example, if researchers do not set specific quotas before fielding the survey, a typical sample from SSI or Qualtrics will consist of over 80% college educated respondents, many of whom reside in coastal cities. When researchers try to set quotas to match age, gender, education and geographic marginals of, say, the urban population in China, it is often difficult for the vendors to recruit enough respondents to fulfill the quotas in a timely manner. Researchers need to pay special attention to this issue even when running a survey experiment because an internally valid online experiment will face a severe external validity challenge.

Second, compared with household surveys, it is often hard to evaluate the level of attention respondents give to the survey. Certain survey techniques, such as incorporating attention filters and giving incentives based on correct answers, can be useful. Third, it is an open question whether respondent will be more or less comfortable when answering potentially sensitive questions online than offline. Li, Shi, and Zhu (2018) conducted a pioneering study comparing answers from offline and online samples, but it is still unclear whether the differences mainly come from differences in sample compositions or survey modes. More research is needed to accumulate further evidence. (A brief table summarizes this discussion at the end of the memo.)

Qualitative Research and Fieldwork in the Context of Rising Repression

We have come to a crossroad in doing fieldwork in China. Given heightened levels of repression for both scholars and research subjects alike, do we continue to try to gain access to the field to conduct politically sensitive research? Or, do we try to study China from afar by finding new sources of data and fieldwork sites outside of mainland China?

Access to the field has become increasingly restricted for researchers employing all kinds of methods including survey, experimental, interview-based, and ethnographic research. Problem areas may include 1) finding willing partners for survey research 2) finding research subjects for field experiments 3) gaining access to interview subjects and/or ethnographic field sites 4) pressure (whether perceived or real) from state security while doing fieldwork and/or afterwards on the researcher and subjects 5) inability to do sustained immersive participant observation due to political pressure.

How have Chinese politics scholars overcome these obstacles and what gaps in research/knowledge are created by this shift in research areas/strategies? First, there is a trend in field of studying China from afar. Scholars do this by using publicly available datasets which tend to cluster in certain topic areas. A number of studies on censorship take advantage of a change in government policy

to study "before" and "after effects" of a sudden opening or closing of the internet. Qualitative researchers have also started to interview subjects outside of China or conduct comparative studies in other countries.

These are all worthy pursuits that can generate new knowledge. However, we also need to be aware of what we are *not* able to capture/study as a result of this drift towards studying China from afar. The gaps in research may include 1) the subjective/affective experiences of citizens living with heightened censorship and repression 2) governance such as policing/surveillance as it is carried out by local authorities 3) politically sensitive topics like ethnic and gender politics 4) new contentious tactics 5) how policy-making around major political decisions like the Muslim camps or the ban of VPNs is rolled out and at what levels 6) internal contradictions (both ideological and practical) between different arms of the state.

In order to understand the consequences of these changes, we need to do a mapping of the field in terms of what kinds of research questions are still being asked and which ones are not. This exercise will force us to be self-reflexive in how our field is adapting to these changes. We should also remember that while some difficulties in studying Chinese politics are new, others have existed during the entire reform era. There have always been tradeoffs between what's feasible and what's interesting, and it's not at all obvious that the "academic opportunity structure" is worse now than it was, for example, between June 4th 1989 and Deng's 1992 Southern Tour. Yet, China scholars persisted and research adapted.

The other question specifically related to repression is the extent to which what we observe in China is unique. As noted above, there are patterns to and concepts of repression and resistance in China that travel well to other political contexts. Yet there are also areas where either China appears to be an outlier, or we need more comparative research to understand where China stands in terms of cross-national variation. For example, there is debate over China's coercive capacity, with some studies (and most media portrayals) depicting China as powerfully coercive, while other scholarship focuses on weaknesses, limitations, and constraints on state exercise of coercive power (Scoggins and O'Brien 2016; Greitens 2017). A better comparative understanding of this question would enable us to speak more authoritatively, for example, to debates about China's authoritarian resilience and what it can or cannot tell us about authoritarian resilience more broadly (on China, see Nathan 2003, Pei 2017, Heilmann and Perry 2011, Wang 2014; for general theories of coercive capacity and authoritarian durability, see Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Bellin 2004).

Similarly, many of the constraints that Chinese politics scholars encounter are constraints navigated by those doing field research in other contexts as well (see for example, Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018; APSA QTD 2018). In many cases, we just don't have the data to understand whether our work in China is unique, and if so, to what extent. For example, Greitens and Truex (2018) document in detail both the frequency of challenges faced by researchers operating in China's often-repressive context, but also call for additional work to understand whether and how these challenges compare to researchers operating in repressive contexts in other parts of the world. In addition to the above suggestions, therefore, comparative discussions of both substantive theory-building and strategies for research under repressive conditions would help China scholars both to develop creative tools to continue effective research and to communicate their findings to the discipline.

Cited Sources

Albertus, Michael & Menaldo, Victor. Coercive Capacity and the Prospects for Democratization. *Comparative Politics*. 44. (2012).

Bellin, Eva. "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139-57. doi:10.2307/4150140.

Cai, Yongshun. *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Chen, Jie. *Popular Political Support in Urban China*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004.

Chen, Xi. *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Dalen, Kristin. "Trust and Distrust: A Study of Trust and Social and Personal Capital in the Contexts of China and Denmark." *Cand. Polit. thesis. University of Bergen, Department of Comparative Politics,* 2005.

Deng, Yanhua & O'Brien, Kevin. "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters." *The China Quarterly*. 215 (2013): 533-552.

Dickson, B. J., Shen, M., & Yan, J. Generating Regime Support in Contemporary China: Legitimation and the Local Legitimacy Deficit. *Modern China*, 43, no. 2 (2017): 123–155.

Dickson, Bruce J. *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change*. Cambridge Modern China Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003..

Dimitrov, Martin K. "Vertical accountability in communist regimes: the role of citizen complaints in Bulgaria and China." *Why communism did not collapse: Understanding authoritarian regime resilience in Asia and Europe*, (2013): 276-302.

Gallagher, Mary E. *Authoritarian Legality in China: Law, Workers and the State*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. "Rethinking China's Coercive Capacity: An Examination of PRC Domestic Security Spending, 1992–2012." *The China Quarterly* 232 (2017): 1002–25.

Greitens, Sheena and Truex, Rory, Repressive Experiences among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data (August 1, 2018). Available at
SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3243059 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3243059

Heilman, Sebastian and Elizabeth J. Perry. *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Heurlin, Christopher. *Responsive Authoritarianism: Protest and Policymaking in China*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016..

Heurlin, Christopher. "Governing Civil Society: The Political Logic of NGO-State Relations Under Dictatorship." *Voluntas;* Baltimore Vol. 21, Iss. 2 (2010): 220-239.

Hsu, Jennifer and Reza Hasmath. The Local Corporatist State and NGO Relations in China, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23:87m (2014): 516-534,

Huang, Haifeng, and Yao-Yuan Yeh. "Information from Abroad: Foreign Media, Selective Exposure, and Political Support in China." *British Journal of Political Science* 49, 2 (2014): 611-636.

Jiang, Junyan and Dali Yang. "Lying or Believing? Measuring Preference Falsification from a Political Purge in China *Comparative Political Studies*. 49(5): 600-634

Lee, Ching Kwan, and Yonghong Zhang. 2013. "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China." *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 6 (2013): 475-508.

Li, Lianjiang. "Political Trust in Rural China." *Modern China* 30, no. 2 (April 2004): 228–58.

Lorentzen, Peter L. and Lu, Xi, Personal Ties, Meritocracy, and China's Anti-Corruption Campaign (November 21, 2018). Available at
SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2835841 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2835841

Manion, Melanie. "Survey Research in China: What Have We Learned." In *Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Methods, Data, and Field Strategies*, Allen Carlson, Mary Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal, Melanie Manion, eds. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Morgenbesser, Lee and Meredith L. Weiss. "Survive and Thrive: Field Research in Authoritarian Southeast Asia," *Asian Studies Review*,42:3: (2018): 385-403

Nathan, Andrew J. "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience." *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6-17.

O'Brien, Kevin J. "Rightful Resistance." *World Politics* 49, 1 (1996): 31–55.

O'Brien, Kevin J. and Lianjiang Li. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Pearson, Margaret. *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000..

Pei, Minxin. *China's Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Perry, Elizabeth J. "Chinese Conceptions of 'Rights': From Mencius to Mao—and Now." *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (2008): 37–50.

Ren, Liying. *Surveying Public Opinion in Transitional China: An Examination of Survey Response*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2009. (Unpublished)

Scoggins, Suzanne E. and Kevin J. O'Brien. "China's Unhappy Police," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 56 No. 2, March/April 2016; (pp. 225-242).

Shi, Tianjian. "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan." *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001): 401-19. doi:10.2307/422441.

Spires, Anthony J. "Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs." *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 1 (2011): 1-45.

Tang, Wenfang. Public Opinion and Political Change in China. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Tang, Wenfang and Yang Zhang. "Political Trust: An Experimental Study." In Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Teets, Jessica C. "Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China." *The China Quarterly* 213 (2013): 19–38. doi:10.1017/S0305741012001269.

Tsai, Kellee S. Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Tsai, Kellee S. "Capitalists without a Class: Political Diversity Among Private Entrepreneurs in China." Comparative Political Studies 38, no. 9 (2005): 1130–58. doi:10.1177/0010414005277021.

Wang, Yuhua. *Tying the Autocrat's Hands: The Rise of Rule of Law in China*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Yang, Katja M., and Björn Alpermann. "Children and Youth NGOs in China: Social Activism between Embeddedness and Marginalization." *China Information* 28, no. 3 (November 2014): 311–37. doi:10.1177/0920203X14554350.

Table 1: Types of Survey Research

	Existing Surveys	**Household Surveys**	**Online Surveys**
Flexibility	Low	Medium	High
Cost	None or Low	High	Low
Censorship	High	High	Low
Representativeness	High	High or Medium	Low
Quality control	Excellent	Excellent or Good	Depends
Feasibility of running survey experiments	None	Low	High

The State of the Field in Chinese Politics Conference
Small Group Memo #2
Stanford University

December 14-15, 2018

A. Core Questions and Key Gaps

The field has made significant progress in building our knowledge about how ordinary citizens and officials at subnational levels experience Chinese politics. This focus on society and the local state has taken advantage of greater openness since the early 1990s to conduct research using a variety of state-of-the-art methods to collect and analyze new data. Certainly, many questions about Chinese society remain puzzles, even basic questions such as the strength and basis of political support, for example. Yet, taking stock of where we have come in our research in recent decades, we have learned much less and still know much too little about elite politics and the inner workings of the party-state. In particular, we know too little about policymaking. Moreover, from an institutional perspective, we know too little about the communist party and its relationship with the government. These constitute key gaps in our knowledge.

1. Elite politics. Authoritarian politics depends crucially on the preferences and priorities of those at the apex of power. Increasingly, it seems that the party center in Beijing is being overtaken by top leader Xi Jinping himself. How do top leaders like Xi Jinping consolidate power and change the terms of longstanding regimes? Does Xi's approach replicate or depart from that of other paramount leaders in the history of the People's Republic of China and elsewhere in the world? Sincerity of effort in the anticorruption campaign and the adulation of Xi are of particular interest in this regard. How do political elites, including Xi himself, view these campaigns? How do the campaigns affect actions of political and economic elites? How divisive among the elite is the increased politicization under Xi and the demand for expressions of loyalty? What is the impact of these methods on party-state institutions from the center to the grassroots?

2. Policymaking. In authoritarian regimes, institutional checks on power are already weak. With the increased concentration of power in Xi Jinping himself, what is the role of other leaders in the Politburo and its Standing Committee in driving the policy agenda? How institutionalized is their influence in policymaking—and how are procedures channeling this influence institutionally configured? For example, how does the proliferation and relabeling of leading small groups, most of which Xi himself now heads, contribute to the policymaking process and its change? To what extent do their governance portfolios overlap, and how should we conceptualize their organizational interests? Further, to what extent is contemporary Chinese policymaking influenced by international models and pressures? In the past, we know, the examples of the Soviet Union and the East Asian Developmental State along with pressures from organizations such as the International Labor Organization, International Monetary Fund, World Bank have played a powerful role in China's policymaking; what about today?

3. Communist party. We lack good knowledge of how the Communist Party of China functions as an organization and, in particular, its relationship with the government in the policymaking and policy implementation processes. Older works highlight coordinating mechanisms—such as party saturation, party groups, and leading small groups. The limited understanding that has emerged in recent years

emphasizes a division of labor between party and government chief executives, but we know little about how this division is negotiated and the extent to which it is contested. Moreover, both theorizing and empirical findings in work on political selection are mixed. We will want to frame these studies in comparative terms in order to understand better how the party in China does and does not differ institutionally and operationally from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and other ruling parties in other (in some cases formerly) communist states.

In sum, our rough consensus is that it is time for the field to refocus its attention upward and outward, both because our knowledge in these core areas was never strong enough and because what we know about recentralization of powers under the current regime reminds us of its importance.

Recent events highlight the need to build our basic knowledge in these core areas, to help illuminate policy choices in **pressing issues of public concern**, such as: (i) the rapid escalation of extraordinary coercive actions against the Uyghur ethnic minority in Xinjiang, (ii) the escalation of trade disputes, especially with the Trump administration; and (iii) China's emerging role as a global player on issues such as climate change, infrastructure, and international development. China's actions on these issues occur as the regime appeals for domestic support based on economic success, Chinese nationalism, and a cult of the leader.

B. Strategies for Making Progress

Today's environment for field research is inhospitable to many of the research methods used to study Chinese politics as recently as a decade ago. For example, it has become difficult to conduct high- quality probability sample surveys on any topic or to raise explicitly political questions in qualitative interviews, especially with elites. Increasingly, it seems our scholarly interest in contributing to an understanding of China is regarded with suspicion; consequently, we proceed cautiously in our work and even our communications, to protect Chinese colleagues who may suffer repercussions from official misunderstanding of our intentions.

Below, we discuss strategies for making progress in a concrete and pragmatic way.

1. New official data. China increasingly provides a wealth of official data of high quality or data of relatively high quality but with systematic biases, due to political cycles, for example, that we can incorporate into our estimations. Lots of valuable existing data, much of it accessible online, goes unexploited. The current research environment requires us to look beyond simple accounts in annual reports to uncover and scrape online data on the large number of routine transactions (for example, issuance of bank licenses) that can illuminate the institutional landscape. We will have to be more opportunistic in crafting our research, digging deep into existing data as we formulate specific research questions—a sort of Jeopardy strategy that begins with (sources for) the answers. From a research design perspective, this may not be ideal, but already we see the discovery of new data.

2. New mindset and incentives. Although new data are available, creating a machine-readable dataset for analysis is a non-trivial task. Even more difficult is creating a dataset that is user-friendly enough for others. Generally, datasets generated by individuals in political science are not used by others. To encourage transparency and active data sharing, we might as a group (perhaps even as this group!) formally recognize contributions to active data sharing, as the Comparative Politics Organized Section of the American Political Science Association does.

3. New methods. The study of elite politics, policymaking, and the party cannot adopt the methods of past studies. For one thing, we do not have the same access to elites as did an earlier generation.

Moreover, methods such as survey experiments, adopted in research on Chinese society, will not be of much help in the study of elite politics. We need not resign ourselves to a close reading of official sources, however, especially as the now massive volume of material produced by the regime across its many media allows for many different narratives to be crafted from it. Methods such as large-scale text analysis of documents, plans, policies, proposals, press releases, and news stories scraped from the web can cut through the noise to ascertain the strength of the various signals sent out. Satellite imagery can (literally) bring perspective to assess changing patterns of development on the ground.
As difficult times have led scholars to discover new data, so have they produced methodological innovation.

4. Old methods. The next generation of newly tenured scholars who study Chinese politics will be more quantitative empiricists exploiting existing data rather than collecting data in the field. The career incentives for graduate students to spend a year or more on the ground in China are no longer strong; the current research environment is inhospitable to qualitative fieldwork too. We think it important to continue to promote methodological pluralism, including a strong qualitative tradition. We advocate encouraging young scholars, even those who grew up in China, to invest for the long term in acquiring knowledge of Chinese politics through fieldwork in China. By fieldwork, we mean something more than just putting in time in China—but what, beyond this? Is it about building deep, long-term relationships? Gaining sufficient understanding of institutions, organizations, and processes to access or recognize new sources of data? We should be thinking about general guidance to offer young scholars about how to make time in the field truly productive.

C. Broader Contributions

China's distinctiveness arises for many reasons and along many dimensions, including its population, history, political system, economic reform transition, and global position. Yet, trivially, all countries are unique—yet, the discipline holds that comparisons have value. We strongly believe that the study of Chinese politics contributes to the study of politics generally. We focus below on China's centrality in the human experience, its comparability at a macro level, and the methodological innovations that difficult research environments can help generate.

1. Demographic importance. Of the world's 7.53 billion people, over 18 percent reside in China. China's centrality in demographic terms demands that political scientists interested in individual behavior pay attention to the study of individuals in China. Further, many political phenomena, such as misinformation flows, industrial policy, economic regulation, administration of justice, censorship, propaganda, and surveillance, happen on a much larger scale in China than elsewhere. Consequently, their effects can perhaps be discerned more clearly in China.

2. Extreme values. China's vast scale is only one way in which it is extreme. Across several theoretically relevant variables by which it can be compared to other countries, even other authoritarian countries, China is exceptional in its extreme values. Being located at the extreme on these dimensions means that we should be circumspect in making counterfactual claims. It does not mean we should not make them at all. We are, after all, part of an academic discipline that has built its core theoretical claims on the basis of another single and exceptional case.

3. Research methods. Finally, the methods and techniques used to study Chinese politics, in no small part because of its restrictions and pressures, have forced scholars to push harder and look deeper than in country cases where data are more readily available. Our methods themselves can continue to make contributions generally to the study of politics. We see this already in the happy fact that a number of the leading young methodologists in the political science field today work primarily with Chinese data.

The State of the Field in Chinese Politics Conference
Small Group Memo #3
Stanford University

December 14-15, 2018

I. What are the core questions and key gaps (i.e., the "burning questions") in Chinese politics about which we don't have answers and would like to understand?

Our group came up with two sets of questions—one on the evolution of "institutions of control" and one on "elites." These two sets of questions suggest very different approaches to the study of Chinese politics and might appear as two "separate tracks" of research. However, these two sets of questions may be complementary and form a more complete agenda for the study of burning questions and help us in gaining a more dynamic understanding of Chinese politics.

Whether the ruling families/factions/the ruler dominates over institutions of control depends on the time period. And the question of when people/factions/the ruler can trump – even eviscerate – institutions should be seen as an empirical question– i.e., it's one of the variables that can explain how control works at different times. Obviously, individual autocrats, ruling families, or coalitions may be in a position to create institutions of control. In 1989 liberal reformers were pushed out after Tiananmen and a new group/coalition of conservatives was formed. One might see this as a change of coalitions (rather than institutions) resulting in different institutions (e.g., a new cadre evaluation system focused on stability maintenance, among others) in the 1990s and ended China's political moves toward political liberalization (e.g., intra-party democracy). However, given that many of the institutions of control today are in essence similar to those in the Mao period, at least in form, the more pressing question may be the role of individuals or groups in manipulating how these institutions change or are used. Can what happened after 1989 also be seen as a case where the basic institutions remained the same? What changed was how that institution of cadre evaluation was implemented and what criteria for assessment rose in importance.

Similarly, we know that during the Cultural Revolution, bureaucratic institutions were attacked and in some cases decimated. In a different way, institutions under Xi are being re-aligned and reformulated to strengthen his hand in everything. Why does that happen? How does that happen? Why (and how) does the strength of that particular variable – i.e., ruling families / autocratic ruler himself – fluctuate depending on different time periods to affect how institutions of control over society and economy work? What does it say about the institutions that seemingly remain the same but have changed over time? Is it the case that ruling families/coalitions/and the potential for strong autocrats to emerge have always lurked in the background in Chinese politics and yet do not always rear their heads? The question as to why they do or do not is, perhaps, one of the "burning questions" – and the reason why our two memos can be integrated and yet also appear as though they stand on "two separate tracks." In the two memos below, we start with the assumptions about change over time and the importance of context. What is different is that the first one examines the operation of institutions themselves while taking into account the context, which would include the

autocrat or ruling coalitions; while the other seeks to understand who is behind the institutions and what they can gain at whose expense.

I. Evolving Political Economy and Institutions of Control in a One-Party State

State control changes over time. The effectiveness of institutions of control are shaped by the context in which they are deployed. Context includes but is not limited to changes in regime goals; policies passed are not necessarily policies implemented. The concept of state control should be dynamic and able to specify the variables that explain how control works and the effectiveness of policy implementation in different periods. Aside from rapid economic growth, how do globalization and technology affect state control strategies and mechanisms? China is an ideal case to study changes in control over time. It will allow us to understand how control in China today differs after four decades after reform and opening and also enable us to use that to compare how China's evolution of control is different from control elsewhere in the world.

Post-Mao leaders acknowledged that China was only in the early stage of building socialism and that going too far with expansion of control would impose a tight straight jacket on the economy, damaging "the further development of the productive forces" (cf. Chen Yun's birdcage metaphor). Hence major reductions in state control took place, boosting China's extraordinary growth, although conflict arose over how much planning should be retained and how far market forces could go.

What has been surprising is Xi Jinping's campaign to expand the scope of Party control over society and economy. This runs counter to Western conventional wisdom which sees China as becoming increasingly capitalist, dominated by markets, with socialist ideology as a fig leaf that hides the real story. Some observers also believe that the hugely increased complexity of the society brought about by rapid development will compel rulers eventually to yield to the necessity of more political openness.

Recent literature on Chinese politics has helped us better understand how the CCP manages its elites and controls discontent, but we need to better understand how the CCP manages the economy in a radically different economic and global context that has emerged since reforms began: how do we account for its success in managing and growing the economy? What are some of the new challenges in the political economy, and how does the CCP deal with these new challenges? While stressing further reform and opening, including development of markets and support for the private sector, there are signs that Xi wants to strengthen SOEs and to re-impose more control over the private sector, insisting on the primacy of Party committees even in foreign firms. But to make the new control system work, to what extent will firms have to acquiesce to the state's orders and still get the job done? What are the implications of this Party-state control for the trajectory of China's economy?

Apart from the economy, the Xi regime tightened control over the public sphere, the flow of information, the diffusion of Western values, and over academic teaching and research. The regime has also strengthened Party leadership over the legal profession, academic institutions, and the cultural sphere. Xi has also sought to exert personal control and revive elements of a personality cult, as seen from the ubiquity of his images, slogans, and fawning messages about him all over the media and public venues. How effective are these controls in this new context? What impact will these attempts have in today's China?

Thus, burning questions include: How are the systems of control being implemented in a radically different economic and social context? Are existing institutions of control being repurposed or new ones being created? Who are the actors charged with implementing and enforcing these levers of control in the different sectors of economy and society? Are they being implemented as intended? Why is there compliance or lack of compliance? How is compliance being achieved in a reformed economy when the state no longer has monopoly control over key resources and opportunities? While some Mao era institutions, such as *hukou* and grassroots party organizations, are still important, the government has increasingly used big data to control citizens. How has technological change that allows for the collection and management of massive digital data changed how the Chinese government controls society and the economy? How has the state updated its control mechanisms? How does this affect whom the agents must rely on for effective control? How do these agents implement control? Does control of more information mean the state is more effective? What are the principal-agent problems with these new types of control?

Related questions to consider with regard to the economy is whether increased state control is necessarily bad for growth and for innovation in the short run? How about in the long run? How sustainable are China's industrial policies in selecting winners and promoting indigenous innovation? Are losers sufficiently compensated by the state? How does the international political economy affect China's state control over the economy? Are tightened controls a reflection of the Party's collective goals or Xi's personal agenda? Are there disagreements among ruling elites about current political trends?

Aside from questions of implementation and compliance, we need to be clearer about what we mean by control, including violent repression. Is it just a difference in degree or a difference in kind? Is Xinjiang a special case of extreme control? Are the demands by Xi enforced fully or only partially; or only in some places but not in others? Does this pattern of enforcement and implementation differ from the past? If so, how and why? Can one discern a gap between rhetoric and reality? Or, is there deliberate evasion and feigned compliance as in the past? If not, what are the differences and how and why? Does the observation that the "Center has its policy; the localities have counter policies" still apply with no changes? If not, what are the changes and why? Answers to these questions will shed light on previous understandings of change during earlier decades of reform—changes that many thought would not be reversible. Did we overestimate the degree of change from the Mao period?

II. The Role of Elites in Chinese Politics

Understanding elite politics remains crucial to understanding where China is going. Important questions would include the following: Is there indeed a structural tendency towards one-man rule in communist regimes, and how is this playing out in the current era? Is rivalry among elite coalitions (also known as "factions" in earlier literature) swaying national policies in drastically different directions, at times leading the country to disaster (as seen under Mao) and at other times to spectacular achievements (as seen under Deng)? Is the current regime trying to smash existing "coalitions, factions, families" or is it the case that there are "ruling families" that have persisted? Despite the importance of such questions, elite politics remains opaque and admittedly difficult to study. Nonetheless, we need to move beyond speculation to seek conceptual and empirical improvement.

Institutions are endogenous to the interests of the political coalitions who design the institutions. Studying the dynamic nature of political coalitions, how they were formed, and how they have evolved over time would yield insights into the interests of these coalitions that in turn may allow a better understanding of institutions. Coalitions, of course, are not particular to China. What is perhaps of special interest to China scholars is the resilience of political coalitions despite changes in the context in which they operate.

Combining the above points, we can go back to a question that has long been core in the study of Chinese politics but has yet to be fully answered: What are the lines that divide elites into rival factions or coalitions: factions, families, personal patronage networks, or others? But now we may be in a better position to employ new data or deploy new methods to study them in a more rigorous way. We can also ask whether coalitions are exogenous or are the products of socio-political conflicts at critical junctures.

For example, one can hypothesize that there is a coalition of ruling families that was formed during the Civil War era and consolidated after 1949. Key members of these coalitions were the high-ranking revolutionary veterans who survived the Long March and sided with Mao during the Yan'an Rectification Campaign. These people formed the regime founding coalition of the PRC. This coalition, disrupted by Mao before the Cultural Revolution, was further weakened during the Cultural Revolution but reassembled in the late 1970s and helped Deng Xiaoping consolidate his power. Relying on this coalition, Deng established (or resumed) a spoils system among the ruling families to grant them special access to state resources and prioritize their promotion in the bureaucracy and military. These families then perpetuated their power by marrying their sons and daughters, forming business ties, and building political coalitions. Some preliminary evidence has emerged about these ruling families and how the spoils system works. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. We still know little about these ruling families. Are there ruling families in China? If so, who are they? How are they formed? Does it make sense to study the origins of these ruling families and trace them back through the entire PRC history? Is there a spoils system among the families? If so, how does the spoils system work? How does the Chinese system differ from that of other countries that are also seen as being ruled by families (like Saudi Arabia)?

Having said that, the existence of "ruling families" or any factional divides should be questioned rather than assumed. It is always possible to find connections along family lines, not only in China, but even in America (for example, Bush, Clinton, Kennedy). If evidence is found that family connections exist and matter, does it mean that political families define American politics? Might such connections not overlap with partisan or other factional aligments, and if so, is it possible to disentangle them? In other words, any dividing line of interest should be studied in relation to other possible divides. We should also pay attention to the relationships among political coalitions, institutions, and social-political cleavages. Is it a linear causal relation or endogenous to one another?

II. How might we make progress on these questions in light of the current research environment in China?

Despite the recent trends of a more "closed" China, new or relatively unexplored data sources continue to surface and some old ones may still be viable. New sources, especially in political economy, include published annual reports, such as those by the agricultural dragon head enterprises and others by the National Bureau of Statistics that include information about large manufacturing firms with detailed information on ownership, location, production and the balance sheet of firms. Emerging cutting-edge technologies also open up new opportunities for data collection online.

Moreover, localities at different levels now are required to post financial and budgetary information on their websites. In addition, data on elites appear on these local websites. There are also other digital sources with detailed information on elites that are already being mined.

Undoubtedly, while it has become more difficult to do fieldwork and to obtain access to political elites in China, the restrictive research environment varies by (a) research questions, (b) interviewees (elites vs. non-elites), and (c) identity of researchers (faculty or student). As might be expected, students are likely to need more institutional support to get access. However, as has been the case ever since we have been allowed to do research in China, working with local scholars still often offers an array of ways to get around a more restrictive environment. Even in the more restrictive environments, foreign scholars have done new firm and local government surveys in multiple cities by partnering with local scholars and have been allowed to do interviews. The key is finding the right partners.

In sum, sensitive times call for entrepreneurial data collection endeavors. We should be seeking out all available sources including newly available data (both online and offline) paired with interviews and archival materials to analyze burning questions in Chinese politics and work with local scholars.

III. China is a highly unusual system/case, even compared to other authoritarian regimes. Why do we think this highly unusual case has anything to offer to our understanding of politics in general?

Instead of accepting as given that "China is a highly unusual case," we question whether China is really more unusual than other cases, and if so, how. On the one hand, we recognize that China has many unique attributes; most notably, it is one of the few surviving single-party autocracies in the world today. Elite politics are organized around factions, families, informal coalitions, rather than political parties and elections. Political control and repression also play a far bigger role in Chinese politics than in democracies. On the other hand, universal themes of politics play out in China, such as elite competition for power and state domination of society, except in a different context. Early modern Western Europe is a modal case for classical theories in political economy. Is it any less unusual than China? Is it generalizable to contemporary China, India, or Kenya? Yet nobody ever seems to question the "scope conditions" of European-based accounts, while Chinese exceptionalism is assumed.

The State of the Field in Chinese Politics Conference
Small Group Memo #4
Stanford University

December 14-15, 2018

1. What are the core questions and key gaps (i.e., the "burning questions") in Chinese politics about which we don't have answers and would like to understand?

Rapid changes in Chinese society and politics provide both opportunities and challenges for scholars. Even while scholars are still playing "catch-up" to understand some foundational concepts (e.g., informal politics), we need to account for unexpected social and political phenomena. We identify a need to revisit existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks, as well as to continue to assess emerging sources of data, as we strive to understand both old and new empirical phenomena. Our memo focuses on four gaps, which we see as interrelated:

(1) *Policymaking* processes at the top are off the institutional equilibrium and appear increasingly reliant on individual leaders rather than structural factors that are more predictable.

(2) *Policymakin*g is made even more unpredictable by enormous subnational variation , the drivers of which we have a growing but still relatively weak understanding.

(3) *Policy input* increasingly draws on public opinion, but this data is relatively thin, and not well measured or understood.

(4) *Policy implementation* is increasingly carried out in ways not easily accounted for in existing frameworks of state-society relations; in particular, we highlight that state functions are increasingly executed by actors outside the state.

Policymaking at the Top: The Institutionalization Equilibrium, Disrupted?

Understanding the logic of policymaking is a fundamental focus in Chinese politics. Theoretical models for post-Mao policymaking can largely be categorized into two canonical schools of thought: "fragmented authoritarianism" emphasizing policymaking as the output of bargaining between multiple bureaucratic and social interests; and the "selectorate" model emphasizing career incentives and reciprocal accountability as the key drivers of the coalition formation. Although these remain foundational models for understanding elite policymaking in China, they were built on observations of policy during the early reform era, and now face challenges. We see a need to revisit the institutionalization equilibrium presumed to underlie elite politics.

The "fragmented authoritarianism" and "selectorate" models operate within a broader context of institutionalization (often counter posed to mobilization). However, institutionalization of the system has faced challenges in the last decade. Elite succession conflicts have intensified. When the power struggles among central elites prevent one group

from prevailing, there are incentives to change the rules of the game. Moreover, political consolidation and realignment under Xi Jinping suggests another challenge to the existing models. Xi's anti-corruption campaign has disrupted the factional politics structure, and broken a number of institutionalized norms governing elite management, e.g., failure to name successors during the 19th Party Congress and elimination of the president's term limit. Lastly, "consensus building" is a key characteristic of previous policymaking models. Both the "fragmented authoritarianism" and "selectorate" models imply that policymaking is slow and incremental because of procedural and structural veto points embedded in the political system. However, Xi's power consolidation and the rapid changes of central government policies suggest that coordination and consensus building models may not work.

Policymaking and Subnational Variation, Consequences?

The value of research examining sub-national variation is well-recognized in our field. Greater availability of sub-national data from both government and private sources, including data collected through surveys, web-scraping, interviews, documentary and archival research, is a key driver of this trend, as is the sub-national turn in comparative politics more broadly. Scholars are employing sub-national analysis and leveraging new data to investigate the extent and sources of variation in areas such as migration, development, contentious politics, and policy implementation. Sub-national analysis is a way to increase the number of cases (without having to worry about country-level differences) in order to better test theories derived from other empirical contexts; it can also generate new hypotheses for research in other countries.

Moving forward, however, several substantive concerns deserve attention. First, much research on sub-national variation focuses on the causes of variation. While undoubtedly important, this focus ignores the larger context and consequences of variation. The tendency to isolate and define cases according to administrative divisions—provinces, prefectures, counties, etc.—risks an incomplete understanding of the interactions among units as well as the true level of autonomy exercised by local governments across the country. It may reinforce narratives about Chinese politics, such as the decentralized nature of the regime, without adequately considering the strength of bureaucratic controls or power relations as a whole.

Second, sub-national researchers tend to shy away from addressing bigger questions such as: Under what conditions does sub-national variation in policy implementation challenge regime stability and legitimacy? What does sub-national variation mean for economic reform and development at the national level? While not every study can or should grapple with all of these questions, a deeper connection between levels of analysis would enrich the study of sub-national variation.

Finally, methodologically, researchers employing sub-national analysis should seek to incorporate the insights of both case studies and larger-N work to create more cumulative scholarship. Case study research enables fine-grained identification of sub-national variation and its drivers, illuminating effects of local histories, actors, and processes. Quantitative work can extend generalizable propositions and test them in broader geographic contexts, but often cannot satisfactorily identify causal mechanisms behind observed empirical patterns. While scholars frequently employ mixed-methods research designs in larger book projects, the field would benefit from cross referencing in both directions with scholars building on each other's works.

Policy Input: Understanding and Measuring Public Opinion, How?

Public opinion has become increasingly important in policymaking. We urge better understanding of how public opinion informs policymaking, and particularly whether public opinion plays a greater role in the current information environment.

How does the government evaluate public opinion? For most of the post-1949 period, three main channels have been used (i.e., party reporting, journalistic reporting, and security system reporting). The geographic reach of these channels, as well as the content of the information that they have transmitted to the leadership, has varied over time. Yet the research challenge has been constant: the capacity of scholars to secure access to appropriate regime-generated documents from which we can produce accurate accounts of state techniques for assessing public opinion. This challenge becomes progressively more serious as we move from the Mao period (for which we have archival documents, despite the fragile information-collection infrastructure) to the current day and as we attempt to assess the public opinion monitoring strategies of higher levels of government. Post-Mao, new techniques were added to the toolkit of information gatherers: opinion polling; state security surveillance; automated phone tapping; more pervasive and sophisticated Internet and mobile phone monitoring; the systematic use of public consultation; and the rise of a competitive commercial public opinion monitoring industry that supplies a steady stream of information on public opinion to governments at various levels.

Given the increasing importance of public opinion in government policymaking, how do researchers gain a better understanding of public opinion? Challenges measuring public opinion in China for both the government and researchers are significant. Surveys in authoritarian regimes are known to be affected by preference falsification, previous work suggests that preference falsification may be important in China. Future research should extend these findings to delineate whether preference falsification varies by time period, respondent characteristics, and question. Beyond preference falsification, researchers face an increasingly difficult environment for gathering data on public opinion. Many PRC survey firms will not collaborate with foreign academics and collaborations with PRC academics is often required to run surveys. Even such collaborations are not immune to scrutiny, including from local governments and police. Unlike advanced democracies, where weekly or daily surveys can capture the pulse of society and its response to national and international events, publicly available survey data collected at regular intervals on Chinese public opinion is rare.

These obstacles of measuring public opinion in China have pointed both researchers and the government to the Internet as a massive repository of public opinion. However, using the Internet for public opinion poses its own unique challenges. Curation of Internet opinion is sometimes facilitated by local governments, who may paint a rosier picture of comments on social media than the true reality. Social media also only represents a subset of the population—typically younger, more educated, and urban. Further, social media are easily manipulated by bots or paid commentators who distort the content of the online discussion. More research on how more readily available data such as social media could be used to study public opinion in China would be of huge benefit to the field.

Policy Implementation and Governance outside the State: The Boundaries, Blurred?

In comparative politics, the distinction between "state" and "society" often seems clear. Many scholars of China's reform era have long found this distinction problematic. Post-

communist studies' focus on civil society (seeking societal action *against* the state) has generally given way to other formulations (e.g., local state corporatism, GONGOs). Nevertheless, our standard conceptualizations continue to depict reforms as a moving boundary between state and society, and the political process as a zero-sum tug-of-war between state and non-state actors over rights, rents, and power. Based on observed trends in China, we suggest the need to update and rethink the state-society division in China, as this division has become increasingly elusive, porous, and fluid. This ambiguity of state-society boundaries should be taken seriously rather than evaded or assumed away. We urge the need to pay attention to governance outside the state.

We find three types of activity relevant. Not all are new or unique to China, opening opportunities for comparison with other systems. First, the state *outsources* traditional governance activities. Aspects of this phenomenon – such as thugs-for-hire in land relocations and law enforcement in online markets - are already detailed in the literature on China. Second, Beijing has *co-opted* private firms to carry out critical economic and political functions. For example, digital platforms have been made arms of the state to combat corruption (through big data), enforce censorship, streamline government services, and strengthen political surveillance. Creating party cells in private enterprises is relevant but not the only mechanism of attempted co-optation. Third, in the economy, state and private spheres appear increasingly *blended*. For example, mixed-ownership reforms – such as China Unicom's acceptance of strategic investments from Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu – make simple categorization difficult. (We think the term "state capitalism" is insufficient, and even misleading.)

While *outsourcing, coopting,* and *blending* phenomena are recognized in some empirical studies, neither theorizing nor research designs have caught up. We lack an overarching theoretical framework to address a foundational question about China's political-societal relations in general and political economy in particular: What is "state" and what is "private"? Is the power relation always a zero-sum game, such that when "the state advances, the private sector retreats," or vice versa? More fundamentally, how should we define and operationalize the concept of the state (and state capacity) if the state is not a discrete entity fully distinguishable from society?

2. How can we make progress on the above core questions?

We have commented on the sometimes difficult research environment for both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the context of specific research topics above; given space constraints, will let those sections speak for themselves. In addition to overcoming specific empirical challenges, we believe that the field as a whole is ripe for some major theoretical/conceptual rethinking, along the lines suggested above. In addition, it will be important to assess where it is useful to draw on advances in computational social science (such as big data and machine learning) to better infer from the past, and for the sake of increasing predictability.

3. Does study of Chinese politics – a highly unusual case – offer anything to our understanding of politics in general?

Many elements of the Chinese political system – especially the endurance of a Leninist system, the context of extraordinarily rapid growth from a low level of development, and extraordinary subnational variation – allow a case to be made for studying China as a *sui generis* system. The size and importance of the country in and of itself would justify that position (a

case often made for American politics). Moreover, many questions remain about the foundations of the political system, such the balance of institutionalization and mobilization, the role of public opinion, and the drivers of subnational variation. The importance of many of these features have been amplified under Xi Jinping. Seen in this light, researchers should have confidence to formulate research questions that fit the context of China. This is not so much a call to return to a "China studies" perspective, or to posit a "China model," but to relax a felt need to squeeze our research into dominant paradigms (such as concepts in the dominant "authoritarian rule" school) – which often happens for strategic purposes related to publication. We should not ignore links of our research to dominant paradigms, but suggest that asking appropriate and non-trivial questions and answering them as makes sense given our data remains important.

On the other hand, as much of the above discussion indicates, there are natural synergies between emerging trends in the study of Chinese politics and other comparative cases, whether developing or authoritarian systems. Studies of sub-national variation in China can be a lodestar for hypothesis-generating and testing research on other countries. Study of the role of public opinion and social media in China, which already are having an impact more generally in political science, have much to tell us about information politics in other countries. China can generate a lot of data that can be mined using newer computational social science methods, and made available to other areas of the discipline. Renewed conceptualization of the state- society/private economy divides may help us better understand how states, for example, use big business (whether private or SOE) to help carry out its needs, allowing a better understanding of advanced market-oriented economies. More importantly, attention to context and scope conditions of existing studies of Chinese politics could enhance the ability of our work to travel to other contexts.

The State of the Field in Chinese Politics Conference
Small Group Memo #5
Stanford University

December 14-15, 2018

I. What are the core questions and key gaps (i.e., the "burning questions") in Chinese politics about which we don't have answers and would like to understand?

How has China changed under Xi Jinping? How might these changes affect the vulnerabilities of the regime? These are the two burning questions our group has flagged for future research.

In this memo we identify key areas of change and continuity as focal points from which to draw insights about the vulnerability of one-party rule in the PRC. Regime vulnerability is the flip-side of resilience that has been the focus of much productive attention. Students of comparative politics have a better grasp of why and when regimes perish than about how they prosper. So what can we say about the PRC where one party rule seems so thoroughly entrenched?

We divide the sources of regime vulnerability into two types: Elite politics and state-society relations. The two are closely related. An open elite split is unlikely unless it can mobilize some public support. Likewise, mass opposition is unlikely unless it finds elite backing.

Elite politics:

Power-sharing within the CCP

Is the CCP more or less vulnerable than it was before Xi Jinping came to power? We start by asking how the CCP is functioning under personalistic leadership, whether the end of collective leadership augurs leadership splits, and what form such a split may take. Can we apply what we learned from the Mao era, including ideology and organization, cult of personality, etc. to the Xi era of elite politics?

A prominent concept in the theory on authoritarian systems is authoritarian power-sharing, but, as we suggest below, questions remain about the durability of power-sharing arrangements and how evolving power-sharing arrangements shape regime survival. Xi's consolidation of power might be interpreted by Geddes, Wright and Franz as a shift towards personalism, where "the leader has concentrated power at the expense of his closest supporters," and a shift away from institutions that constrain the top leader and create clear paths of advancement for subordinate officials. Boix and Svolik might describe the removal of executive term limits, increasing reliance on leading small groups, and the disruption of succession norms as an erosion of power-sharing institutions. Svolik tells us that all dictators have the instinct to maximize their power vis-a-vis the ruling coalition. Some dictators may successfully transition from contested to established dictatorship, where they become so powerful they are no longer credibly threatened by other elites. Xi's rapid purge of key figures of other power centers within the Party fits this theoretical model. But is Xi's dominance a new equilibrium or does it increase the risk of an

elite backlash against him? Has Xi succeeded in coup-proofing himself, and if so how? The Chinese shifts back and forth between collective leadership and personalism provide good tests of the power-sharing theories.

If intra-elite management is central to survival, what do recent organizational consolidation and centralization within political/administrative and military institutions imply about CCP vulnerability? Institutional consolidation creates winners and losers, and losers need to be compensated to keep them on board. Likewise, no matter how centralized, leaders cannot govern alone; new lines of delegation are bound to emerge. By charting the changes within the structure of the Party, the state, and the military we can contemplate the potential risks in centralization, including decision-making, delegation, and accountability for policy failures. It would be particularly valuable to compare the functioning of the Party organization and principal-agent relations up and down the party hierarchy to how they worked under Mao and post-Mao leaders.

We also want to consider how to apply a factional framework under a more centralized personalistic leadership. Xi appears to have centralized patronage networks more than his predecessors but it's unlikely that factions have entirely disappeared or that the CCP has become "rent" free. We should search for patronage persisting via less overtly corrupt means including debt financing, insider trading, revolving doors and backscratching between industry and government/military. Related research should investigate whether the obscurity of informal coalitions (factions) undermines or facilitates power-sharing.

Beyond the top leadership, we are interested in how the career ladder has changed under Xi's new cadre promotion policies, supposedly based more on virtue/loyalty than performance and age. Have these policies widened the disparity in promotion prospects between princelings and self-made politicians? Does the fear of being targeted by Party disciplinary bodies mean that officials need the protection of a patron more than before? Or if patronage has declined, what are the likely knock-on effects for recruitment and loyalty in the cadre pipeline? Does the reemphasis on subjective virtuocratic criteria for promotion make the system more vulnerable? Again, comparisons to the Mao era could be instructive.

Civil-Military Relations

Another important area of study for identifying political vulnerabilities at the elite level is civil-military relations. While much of the previous work on civil-military relations has been done by international security scholars, the topic is profoundly important from the standpoint of comparative politics (by such leading figures as Huntington) and for determining whether any regime is vulnerable to a coup. Civil-military relations in China have always been distinctive from those in other Leninist systems. How does the CCP control the PLA when the General Secretary is the only civilian member of the CMC? Is the military more firmly under Xi's control than under previous leaders, thus reducing the moral hazard of repression (Svolik)? How are the military budget, doctrine and strategy decided? How does the military-industrial complex lobby for investments in technology and procurements? Is the military a collection of factions or a set of interest groups related to inter-service rivalries similar to other militaries?

The military is a particularly hard target for study because of the extreme secrecy of the Central Military Commission. We should try, however, to interview military officers or retired officers. Scholars are collecting biographical data on military elites which can be integrated and analyzed with such data on civilian elites and possibly interrogated with information from listed companies with military ties. Increasingly more private companies are producing equipment

procured by the military. We should pursue a much better understanding of the military-industrial complex in China.

Economic Elites

Given the consolidation of power by Xi Jinping and the secular decline in growth in China, the dynamics involving the economic elite may have just as important an impact on regime vulnerabilities as intraparty elite dynamics. For economic elites in both the private and state sectors, new research can investigate how slower growth and high debt have affected the incentives of economic elites to lobby or to defect. Does an increasingly tight budget constraint and slower growth make the regime more vulnerable? Earlier analyses focusing on regime transitions (Bellin 2000; Haggard and Kaufman 1995) highlight the ways in which economic crises and related reforms may eliminate policy rents that tie economic elites to the regime. Have the anti-corruption campaign and slower growth actually reduced the rents or just changed the form of the patronage available to create state-business coalitions, for example the rise of technology innovation guidance funds?

We also agree that a new wave of research on SOEs is desirable to investigate the continual clout of SOE executives, to determine whether Xi's statist turn is a form of sharing diminishing rents with SOE insiders, and to uncover the internal politics that give rise to various types of industrial and trade policies.

For private sector elites, we would like to see further research on networks among private businesspeople, politically connected firms (Faccio 2006), how they lobby for or oppose government actions, and the conditions under which private businesses may turn against the leadership. Some candidates include drastic capital controls (Pepinsky 2009), physical limitation on travel outside of China (Hirschman 1970), and de-facto expropriation (Weingast 1998).

Finally, we see payoffs in a follow-up of Scott Kennedy's work on whether industry specific interests are more important than ownership. Not only would this line of inquiry provide a much more contextualized addendum to coalition theories, it also would revive the literature on state-business relations and the literature on developmental states, exploring the rent-seeking and opportunism arising from major industrial policies.

State and Society:

Regime Legitimacy

In broadest terms, the basis for the claim to regime legitimacy, judging by rhetoric at least, has shifted from economic prosperity to national rejuvenation. How does this shift change the way the regime elicits compliance? Has this shift put the CCP on a more or less precarious footing?

How do we understand the public's complex attitudes toward the regime -- supporting it yet also doubting and scorning it? Does the shift to national rejuvenation make it harder to shift blame for state failures horizontally or hierarchically? Comparative studies identify multiple sources of legitimacy—performance (Perry 2008; Levi et al 2009) and procedural (Tyler 2001). A prominent recent thread in the comparative literature focuses on the authoritarian embrace of law and constitutionalism as a legitimation tool (Ginsburg and Moustafa 2008; Ginsburg and Simpser 2013).

Timur Kuran's classic work on preference falsification identifies hidden sources of regime vulnerabilities, but it is unclear how the phenomenon of preference falsification is affected by new social media and the digital economy. There are multiple audiences that attempt

to read citizen preferences and attitudes toward the regime, including citizens, the state, and outside observers. Does the censored social media landscape reduce or compound the preference falsification problem in terms of citizens' mutual awareness? Does the proliferation of data from government surveillance and the digital economy make citizens more legible to the state (Scott)?

People have layers of attitudes toward the regime, which are interlayered with attitudes toward the nation, specific leaders, policies, yet not identical with these attitudes. It would be productive to move beyond standard questions of regime support and trust in government, instead mapping variation in ideology and policy support. We also should study citizens' response to China's high-tech surveillance state, the facial recognition, social credit system, and so on. Citizens may generally support the system (diffuse support) but dislike Xi's recent repressive turn (specific support).

Social Forces

Specific attention should be paid to the property-owning middle class which could be the wild-card for the future of the regime. What are their demands in terms of property and other rights and public goods, and how well is the party addressing their demands? What is the role of the legal system in helping the Party manage these demands? Will the tolerance of the middle class for repression and restricted rights weaken as the economy slows or if real estate prices collapse? Is there evidence that a "revolution of rising expectations" has begun, or is the public at large still generally acquiescent? While the middle class has been central to theories of regime transition from modernization theory (Inglehart) to analyses of social forces (Moore), new research on emerging middle classes raises questions about its political role, especially in countries that have only recently achieved middle income status (Weitzke and Sumner 2018). Challenging the influential literature stemming from the Meltzer-Richard model (Boix 2003, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006), Ansell and Samuels (2010) theorize that rising economic groups seek more credible commitment against any action by the incumbent political elite that might undermine their newfound income and assets. Comparative studies employ multiple forms of data to capture these dynamics, including census and survey data as well as observational data on collective action events.

While here we address the role of the middle class, related literatures focus on the more narrowly defined roles of capital and labor in political change in late developers (Rueschemeyer Stephens and Stephens; Collier; Bellin). Is there a labor movement in China?

Reach of the State

In the context of rapid urbanization, a declining share of the population resides in the countryside; thus, the reach of the state at the rural grassroots may appear less salient to understanding regime vulnerabilities today. However, the party itself remains invested in rural governance, expending resources and evaluating cadres on party building, anti-superstition, and other campaigns as well as sending upper-level cadres to work at the village level. Why this level of political investment and attention? Competition over land and water resources, along with access to capital in the form of informal lending, continue to generate contentious politics. Significant governance challenges remain in managing environmental ecosystems and providing public goods and services--especially education and healthcare--to the rural population. How do these challenges shape growth prospects with what implications for political participation, policy, and political stability?

II. How Should We Study These Questions?

The Chinese politics field has benefited from the introduction of at least four fruitful data sources and accompanying methods, which have greatly enhanced our ability to test a range of existing and new theories including those related to the regime's political vulnerability. The next wave of research will combine these new data sources and existing data to generate and test even more nuanced understanding of Chinese politics and extend these insights into the comparative field.

First, the use of text as data on a large scale in Chinese politics. With the advent of new sources of textual data and machine learning techniques, text as data promises to open up many new avenues of research. For example, these tools can map the leadership's activities, travel, and speeches, which promises to allow for more finely tuned elite theories that connect preferences, incentives, and policy actions. To be sure, traditional tools of elite politics such as interviews and dissection of key speeches continue to be important. In state-society relations, we can study how the Party defines its own legitimacy through text analysis of official rhetoric over time and then evaluate public opinion along those regime-defined parameters in through survey and survey-experimental methods. Although it has become more difficult to carry out survey research in China, online surveys are second-best substitutes and can be combined with analysis of social media and other data on various types of public behavior.

Second, a sizable body of elite biographical data can be used to directly test theories of elite politics and map out social networks at the top level. The accumulation of elite biographical data means that elite politics need not be a "black box" any more and that researchers can directly map elite networks using network analytical tools. They will allow researchers to map out informal networks between state agents and private business-people, as well as to estimate their policy preferences. Of course, firm surveys, surveys of private business- people, scientists and engineers, as well as elite interviews will continue to be important in testing and generating theories.

Third, survey experiments, long used in US politics, have made great inroads in Chinese politics. Complementing traditional surveys, this new approach allows researchers to randomly insert treatments which simulate government actions or political news. Better use of sensitive question techniques (list experiments, endorsement experiments, implicit measures) may also allow us to probe deeper into questions of trust and legitimacy.

Finally, remote sensing makes possible alternate measures of economic conditions and holds the potential to integrate satellite data with existing survey and statistical data that can be geo-coded.

III. Is China highly unusual?

We challenge the premise of the prompt that China is a highly unusual case. China is not "highly unusual." Other than being the biggest country by population (and that temporarily), China fits easily into many well-populated comparative categories. The Chinese case intersects with major literatures in comparative politics in specific ways, which means that comparativists working with the Chinese case must move up and down the ladder of abstraction with alacrity in order to apply and advance comparative theory.

China is a single-party state led by a Leninist party that came to power through an indigenous revolutionary struggle. The Chinese state exercises civilian control of the military, but the military has played a central role in governance in certain historical periods. The case has some elements of electoral authoritarianism without directly elected national or provincial legislatures. The party relies on a combination of coercion, performance, socialization, nationalism, and adherence to traditional beliefs to sustain public support. It boasts the world's

largest number of social media users with a dynamic digital economy, but it features a closed media ecosystem, positioning the state to shape national political discourse as well as development of the new economy. Domestic and foreign NGOs are active in China, but their autonomy is severely circumscribed by the state.

China is a case of late development, with a legacy of extreme import-substituting industrialization in the form of the socialist planned economy. The presence of the Leninist party, economic planning, and state-owned enterprises continue to provide the state with more tools for intervening in the economy than in many other late developing economies. China is highly populous with a large domestic market, shaping the country's leverage in the global political economy. The country has a large emerging middle class, but a non-trivial segment of it is employed by the state. The legacy of the planned economy and the hukou system mean that the rural-urban divide is a highly salient feature of the case with implications for the nature of public goods provision, the dynamics of the labor market, and the process of urbanization. China is a unitary state but is among the most decentralized in many policy arenas, with significant state revenue outside the formal fiscal system. It has a very firm-centered tax system with little role for individual income tax.

China is a multi-ethnic state in which ethnic minorities are subject to different policy regimes; at the same time, a single group accounts for the vast majority of the population. It is also a case of multiple, contested sovereignties in territories claimed by the PRC. The state features adherents of diverse religions, but it regulates religious practice and limits links to international religious entities. The state exists at the heart of the Confucian cultural region, providing a particular set of cultural resources to the regime.

Thus, a challenge for comparative theory building is employing comparative concepts while avoiding concept stretching (Sartori). Moving up and down the ladder of abstraction will strengthen the contribution of China-specific studies to comparative politics more broadly. Here it is important to remember that the institutionalization challenges facing the CCP are not sui generis, indeed they are not even limited to authoritarian party systems (Huntington 1968). Likewise, the strategies and technologies the CCP employs to control society—co-optation, censorship, legal and extra-legal repression—are common in many other parts of the world (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The State of the Field in Chinese Politics Conference
Small Group Memo #6

Stanford University

December 14-15, 2018

---

1. What are the core questions and key gaps (i.e., the "burning questions") in Chinese politics about which we don't have answers and would like to understand?

As a group, we came up with 20 discrete questions, which can be collapsed into five large categories. These five categories are (in no particular order): the periphery (Tibet, Xinjiang) and "Greater China"; links between domestic and international politics (beyond "Greater China"); Party politics, broadly defined; center-local relations; and state-society connections. These are pretty much age-old categories, but we had specific questions, many of which are new or have new significance, as we relate below. Whether to term them "gaps" or "burning questions" or "core questions" is debatable, but they are issues we all believe to be critical enough now and into the foreseeable future to merit further research.

1. <u>The periphery & Greater China</u>: Reeducation in Xinjiang, pressure on local autonomy/residual freedoms in Hong Kong, and China's efforts to influence Taiwan all demand fresh, in-depth, and ongoing investigation: what are China's aims and motivations, what are the effects and side-effects of its actions, and how are identities and preferences in these places changing?

2. <u>Links between domestic and international politics</u>: How does the outside world influence China, and vice versa, and in what ways (this goes beyond the question of nationalistic protests or behind-the-scenes human rights appeals)? Also, how can we reconcile the conflicting portraits of China as "insecure" internally while being increasingly confident abroad? Are both these pictures—of insecurity and confidence—truly accurate and how would we know?

3. <u>Party politics, broadly defined</u>: The following queries were raised under this general heading: How are factions defined and how do they intersect with the political system writ large? How did Xi become so powerful, especially given his lack of a faction? What can we learn or infer about the inner workings of the Politburo? Given that China self-identifies as a Leninist party-state, we do not focus enough on how the party as an institution works. Specifically, how institutionalized is or ever was the Party, and is de-institutionalization the "new normal?" How are decisions reached in Zhongnanhai, and where does power come from at this juncture? Related to the theme of party politics, there were two problems raised related to corruption:

first, is it really ever fully eradicable? and second, what are the political and economic consequences of the repetitive campaigns aimed against it?

4. <u>Central-local relations</u>: What is the reciprocal influence of the center and the lower ranks on each other, and what is the respective weight of influence each can exercise against the other? What constraints can each level place on the behavior of the other?

5. <u>State-society relations</u>: Under this rubric several topics came up: what is the influence, if any, of public opinion upon the ruling elites? Also, how much support or legitimacy does Xi command? Additionally, there is the general question about who gets what and how; and how do business and other sorts of interest groups interact with the central and local governments and how much can they shape or influence policy? Finally, how can the puzzle of repression of bad news versus congress delegates' role in conveying bad news be reconciled? Which vision better fits the aims and preferred procedures of the central leadership?

We don't claim that any of these topics and lines of inquiry have not been explored in the past. But they seem to us especially vital in light of where China stands politically at the current time.

2. How might we make progress on these questions in light of the current research environment in China?

Our group concurs about the continuing need to employ a variety of methodological tools. The metaphor of blind men describing an elephant radically differently (depending on the scholar's particular discipline or area expertise) applies equally well to the observation that different methodologies each contribute in partial ways to the whole picture. **Methodological eclecticism is particularly important** now given that certain methods are less accessible in China's current research environment.

The accessibility of **data from the internet** has made it possible to investigate new topics (e.g. online propaganda and censorship), and to investigate old topics in new ways (e.g. career paths of bureaucrats), or across a broader cross-section of the population (e.g. nationalism). This has partially offset the increased difficulties of access we face for in-person field interviews, surveys, and archival research. However, we share a concern that scholars in each generation should be trained in each of these techniques. In particular, **on-the-ground field experience** is critical for ensuring that researchers are able to correctly interpret findings derived from larger-scale data collection efforts. Field experience, along with a solid command of the existing literature, helps ensure that the questions asked using new methods are consequential ones, not just driven by new tools.

Meanwhile, the opacity of elite politics will continue to be a source of frustration. Some insights will come from the analysis of elite career paths and biographies, but few, if any junior scholars specialize in close reading and interpretation of official press and policy statements. Mid-level bureaucrats and retired cadres, however, may still be viable sources of insight. Such contacts are more likely to be feasible for mainland-origin students and scholars than foreign

researchers. While **mainland-origin scholars** are better positioned to develop trusted contacts with key sources, they (and their relatives) may face more pressure from the government to be "cooperative." Another approach is to reflect on how research findings about less controversial topics may or may not be generalized to more sensitive ones. The study of political economy, for example, tends to be less sensitive than others, and often provides a useful lens for understanding important political and policy-making processes that go beyond the specific economic topic being explored.

One "fashionable" method, driven by recent disciplinary trends, is the use of **field experiments** to explore questions about state-society relations. Although this emerging approach has produced some interesting findings, many of these studies appear to be driven by the desire to use experimental methodology, which comes at the expense of focusing on important topics. Furthermore, experiments have become difficult to implement with tightened controls and regulation, as some of our group members have recently experienced.

One member of our group suggested that **focus on the enduring questions** such as corruption, as opposed to the "hot" questions arising from recent developments, also opens up the prospect of **historical research**. This may be easier to study than current issues, since it is (sometimes) less sensitive and faces less risk that unexpected developments will completely change the patterns researchers hoped to explain.

Another member advocates for a continued role for theoretical work both as a free-standing enterprise and as a component of larger projects. "**Big think" theory** (whether formal or not) helps us make sense of diverse and sometimes apparently discordant empirical findings. Careful theoretical work can also suggest indirect tests of our ideas about elite politics and other sensitive topics for which direct quantitative tests or in-person interviews may be impossible. Finally, this may also prove useful for bridging the gap between China and other fields of comparative politics.

3. China is a highly unusual system/case, even compared to other authoritarian regimes. Why do we think this highly unusual case has anything to offer to our understanding of politics in general?

Responses to this question fall into three general categories: 1) China represents a clear case of authoritarianism; 2) China should be studied as any other case in comparative politics; and 3) China's size and global influence makes it worthy of study in its own right.

<u>China as a Case of Authoritarianism</u>

Within the study of authoritarian politics, no one seems to question the relevance of China, which arguably represents a "**paradigmatic case of persistent authoritarianism**." Whether at the regime level or at the level of particular practices (web management, information control, control of protests, how media affects citizen perceptions, responsiveness, etc.) the connections and possibilities for comparison with other authoritarian systems seem manifest

and numerous. Yet framing the case of China in terms of "authoritarian resilience" may be reaching the outer limits of interest in the study of Chinese politics.

Within this context, a senior scholar critiqued facile use of the term "authoritarian." Even when disaggregated into monarchical, military, and one-party systems, this literature ignores the uniqueness of Leninist systems. Given that China self-identifies as a **Leninist party-state**, we do not focus enough on how the party as an institution works.

China as a Comparative Case in General

Most group members see value in studying China in comparative perspective, and not only as an authoritarian regime. By the same token, many findings from other countries, irrespective of regime type, are applicable to China. From this perspective, China is more of *a complex case* than an unusual case, which is further complicated by its size. Unpacking that complexity is key. When we break the larger puzzle of "China" into smaller pieces and/or focus on elements of a longer causal chain, things no longer appear quite as "unusual." We can examine behavior in terms of **generic categories** and find analogues in other countries. All countries are unique. Specifying what is unique, and hence not comparable, has always been a part of comparative politics.

It is precisely because China is one of the largest countries in the world that we have an opportunity to examine its experience diachronically, cross-regionally, cross-sectorally, etc. It is the best **natural laboratory** in the world. We can still learn much about how different types of state institutions, policies, and international/regional/local contexts shape incentives and developmental outcomes in various sectors. That includes drawing larger insights from studying China, but mainly from studying China comparatively. We should think not merely about "politics in general," but encourage **regional and sub-national comparisons** that may bear distinctive fruit while de-centering Western concepts and scholarly trends.

China's Size and Global Influence is Sufficient

Even if China is an unusual case, it is an increasingly important one given its political and economic might—or more simply, it is "**big enough to matter** regardless." China is also becoming **more influential globally** both from its economic/political clout and as a (at least perceived) exemplar of how to keep power (and extract plentiful rents) without stifling economic growth. It is also becoming a **model for other autocrats** with regard to some of its more specific strategies, such as censorship.

If there ever was a reason to worry about whether China is relevant to the study of politics in general, there is less now than ever. Moreover, the discipline has shifted from needing to have theories of everything, to saying useful things about important places and events, although the pressures remain.

Concluding Caveats

Despite the outsized influence of China today, we should still make an effort to address audiences who do not work on China, or not just on China. We should always endeavor to draw implications from our work that stretch beyond the China case.

Finally, we need to situate our work within the context of China, no matter what. Merely citing literature and theory derived from other cases is not sufficient; we need to apply externally-generated concepts and approaches with thought to apparently similar phenomenon in China. By the same token, when framed in sufficiently general terms, concepts from Chinese politics may resonate with colleagues working on other areas.

The State of the Field in Chinese Politics Conference
Small Group Memo #7
Stanford University

December 14-15, 2018

In recent years, many of us have sought to explain the continuity of China's authoritarian regime. We have interpreted the governance practices in China through the lens of "authoritarian resilience," and much of our work has aimed at showing how these practices either strategically or inadvertently enable the regime to create strong institutions, both formal and informal, adapt them to changing circumstances, control its agents, and build or sustain at least minimal levels of public support.

As our group reflected on the "burning questions" that this recent scholarship has yet to answer, we came to the conclusion that there were three important directions that future work on China ought to pursue in order to ensure that we investigate the questions that matter the most, both in terms of real world implications and in terms of contributing to our understanding of political phenomena more broadly and comparatively. Each of these directions implies particular questions and approaches to research, as well as constituting an alternative lens to that of authoritarian resilience. We conclude the memo with a few reflections on engaging with comparative politics more broadly.

Integrating the international and domestic

How should China's participation in global politics and its increasing involvement in the domestic political economies of other countries change the way we approach our research on China (the questions we ask, the approaches we take, the levels of analysis we use)? What implications do China's actions abroad have for research more broadly in comparative politics?

China's increasingly outward orientation, ranging from exports of OFDI, to soft power (or "sharp power"), to public demonstrations of its alternative development model, means that even those of us who are primarily interested in the politics and governance within China may need to integrate a consideration of its activities and priorities internationally in order to have an accurate understanding of its domestic policies and practices.

China's increasing emphasis on the "global" raises a number of important research directions for scholars of domestic Chinese politics. One set of questions concerns the relationship between domestic public opinion and foreign policy. How much does the Chinese public care about China's foreign activities and engagements, and if they do, why? What are the dynamics of domestic opposition to overseas investment and development aid (China as "West Virginia coal country")? What is the

influence of domestic nationalism on overseas engagements? A second set of questions concerns the relationship between foreign policy and regime stability. What are the vulnerabilities of the regime in the event of poor (economic or military) performance abroad, and what are the contradictions of BRI as a slogan versus a solid policy strategy? A third set of questions concerns the increasing flow of resources, people, and activities from non-governmental actors within China to other countries – the spread of Chinese technologies, including information and communications technologies (ICTs); Chinese financial and corporate activities; Chinese research, development, and technical assistance; and Chinese philanthropy. What will be the impact of these activities on public opinion, policy making, and governance, both in China and abroad?

These developments also present an exciting opportunity for China scholars to work together with non-China scholars in comparative politics that we have yet to leverage. It may only be through collaboration that comparativists can fully understand global reactions to Chinese engagements, as well as the potential diffusion of China's authoritarian model outside its borders. The analysis of external reactions is intimately interconnected with that of domestic politics, whereby the perceptions and interpretations of China may also shape its strategic posture and preoccupations with anticorruption, supply-side reform, slowing economic growth, and social stability[i]—something worthwhile closely untangling.

We should also think about China as it fits into the larger context of international relations, not simply or even primarily within the context of US-China bilateral relations (these could include Central Asian Politics, Global Politics of the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea politics, "Breakers" to "Makers" in global institutions, etc.). For scholars interested in comparative research, it is timely to examine how Chinese investment abroad and its cultural initiatives compare to that coming from non-Chinese entities, including liberal democracies like the United States.

Considering the sensitivities of China's current research environment, the global-domestic nexus actually presents a fruitful research opportunity for China scholars. First, these issues are arguably less sensitive and more publicly discussed than those on strictly domestic issues. Second, this research can and should be carried out outside of China (in addition to within China), which may ease the access challenge.[ii] More broadly, the global-domestic focus urges us to come into conversation with China IR scholars as well as other IPE and CPE scholars, and to push for a critically reassessment of the IR scholarship on China to reflect for the domestic context, as well as for domestic politics scholarship to respond to the important global pivots of the Chinese polity.

Bringing back political economy

What is the state of the "political economy" approach to Chinese politics? Has it receded? Do we need to bring it "back"?

Our understanding of the political economy of China – that is, the relationship between the operation of the economy and the political system – has atrophied in recent decades, despite the centrality of the economy to a wide range of vitally important subjects. We used to know a lot about how the planned economy operated, and how that system related to political institutions. We largely lack that kind of knowledge today. But that kind of knowledge illuminates a range of important issues – "authoritarian resilience", corruption, the coherence of the party of an organization, the transformation of political elites into propertied social classes, the debate over the role of private vs. SOE dominance in the economy, the effects of OFDI, etc. – that are central to understanding China today. Engagement with this subject has been remarkably narrow – restricted to studies of promotion patterns within the political hierarchy (i.e., local "GDPism"), or opinion polls of business elites that show higher than expected levels of approval for the regime (higher than expected, that is, if this were a liberal democracy) without any underlying theory or conception of how China's political economy is structured, or how it has been transformed in recent decades. Has clientelism made a comeback? Has it ever left? Is there a new form of "super-clientelism" that we need to understand going forward?

We also need to understand how China's model of export-oriented growth developed in 1992-1994 and how it essentially broke in 2008-9, as well as what has emerged since.[iii] There is some preliminary attention being focused on supply-side reform, but besides William Overholt's new book and Nick Lardy's forthcoming one, this area remains extremely under-studied.

Understanding the tensions and fractures in state and society

The turn to "authoritarian resilience" in the early 2000s usefully moved us away from the teleological assumptions of the transitions literature. Research on authoritarian resilience has done much to help us understand how Chinese leaders and institutions have adapted to economic and political changes while maintaining control over their agents and ordinary citizens.

Given, however, the prospect of an economic slowdown, rapid technological transformations, and increasing international involvement, we may need to pay more attention to emerging fractures within both state and society. One area where we have already seen promising research is in technology and social control. What does the implementation of the social credit score look like at the local level? Will new technologies for social control lead to citizen apathy, dissent, or withdrawal from engagement with the state? Given the challenges of internet governance, will there be an evolution of creative activism into less easily controllable areas such as entertainment and entrepreneurship?[iv]

These technologies also have important implications for the state and bureaucratic accountability. What do these technologies mean for principal-agent relations within the state? Are higher level officials employing new technologies to monitor and sanction lower-level agents? Given an era of big data, machine learning, and predictive analytics, do we need to rethink our understanding of central-local relations, cadre supervision, and performance targets? Will these technologies improve governance and reduce corruption in some areas? If so, what lessons might the Chinese case have for other countries with dominant-party systems and/or significant bureaucratic capacity (Rwanda,

Tanzania, Pakistan, Nigeria) seeking to improve governmental performance and accountability through digital governance and biometric ID technologies?

As China's economy slows, it will likely define a new generation of citizens in China, which may entail new approaches and questions for research. Yet, we lack a systematic understanding of what group identities are politically salient in China today, or the relative importance of different group identities to the state and to each other. Unless we understand the landscape of group identities and interests, we cannot understand where there is likely to be collective action or political conflict. Empirically, we may need to invest in more granular local-level studies (for example, looking at official attempts to regular and respond to issues that citizens mobilize around such as food safety, environmental degradation, sexual harassment).

Given these key structural changes, we need to be asking where identities and interests are changing, and whether institutions are resolving potential conflicts between different identities and interests? We may also want to build on scholarship from previous periods of rapid change within China to help us understand how fissures open and close? How have government actors in the past succeeded or failed at resolving these tensions (during periods of protest over rural taxation and SOE layoffs, in the wake of 1989 and the Cultural Revolution)? As Franz Schurmann noted in 1968, when we pay too much attention to the unifying forces of ideology and organization, we fail to see individual and societal challenges to state power.

The economic and technological changes facing China may also provide us with an opportunity to engage with comparative political theory by looking at the waning days of the USSR, the backsliding following the "Arab Spring," and the indeterminancy of the "color revolutions" along a number of important dimensions, including the institutional level (questions of economic and political adjustment and adaptation), the individual level (mass psychological response and adjustment to economic anxiety – the "Xi Jinping generation"), and a return to class-based analyses (tensions, or alliances, between different social groups and the regime's response to these).

Reflections on engaging with comparative politics

Despite years of hand-wringing about how to contribute to theory in comparative politics, by and large the literature on Chinese politics remains highly Sino-centric, with a remarkable bias toward what is going on right now in China, and trying to foretell what will happen in the near future. At this point, it goes without saying that given China's extraordinary internal diversity, to study China is inherently to be a comparativist.

Whether we speak effectively, however, to non-China scholars is a different question and concern. In order to contribute effectively to theory in comparative politics – or even to be read by non-China scholars[v] – we need to do better at building our theories in more general terms. This means constructing our theories with variables and scope conditions that are developed with an understanding of other contexts and cases.[vi] We should either be acquiring more working knowledge of other

empirical contexts, or we should be collaborating more with non-China scholars working on the same theoretical questions. Collaboration between China and non-China comparativists working on political behavior and political development remains uncommon, even though such collaborations in the past successfully contributed to an influential comparative research agenda on state-society relations in China and other developing contexts.

In a world of growing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, scholars of Chinese politics will undoubtedly have a lot to say to others who are facing increasing repression, closing civic spaces, and rising authoritarian populism, as well as anticorruption initiatives and effective governance. What previously seemed like "nonobvious comparisons," such as comparative research between China and other countries such as the US on internet governance, misinformation, and the relationship between online and offline participation, can become important ways of building empirically rigorous theories.[vii] For other questions, it may be the differences with other dominant-party regimes and dictatorships that provide leverage over more general questions about politics. It may turn out that in some respects, say, in comparison with contemporary Russia or Cambodia – China shares certain common features, but the differences will stand out in bold relief. The point is that we have to frame questions about China from a comparative vantage point – only then will the distinctive features stand out and suggest ideas about general political processes.

In closing, we pose a question to the group. When we think of Latin Americanists,[viii] we might think of their contributions to theories of clientelism, corporatism, social movements, or democratic transitions. When we think of Africanists, we might think of their contributions to theories of ethnic politics, the political economy of development, and the role of chiefs and traditional authorities in distributive politics and state building. In the coming years, what might other comparativists come to think of when they think of China scholars?

---

[i] Bently Allen,

*An essay looking at more global/empire narrative for examining the evolution of China's political system: Vivienne Shue, "Party-state, Nation, Empire: Rethinking the Grammar of Chinese Governance." Journal of Chinese Governance 3 (3) (2018): 268-291. [ii]

[ii] CK Lee, The Specter of Global China (University of Chicago: 2017) is an excellent example of combining domestic and global contexts with solid comparative research.

[iii] See William Hurst: https://www.academia.edu/21604682/A_China_Model_or_Just_a_Broken_Mould. Duara and Perry, *Beyond Regimes*.

[iv] See, for example, the party's discourse on social policy and high-level references to the Internet as the "battlefield," which are symptomatic of the party's insecurity in governing public opinion online.

[v] See Tsai, "Bringing In China," *Comparative Political Studies,* 2017.

[vi] See Tsai, "Bringing In China," *Comparative Political Studies,* 2017.

[vii] Mertha and Lowry, "Unbuilt Dams…"

[viii] https://www.chinoiresie.info/blandness-bathos-or-brashness-choosing-pathways-to-validity-and-relevance-for-chinese-politics-research/)?