Disguised Repression: Targeting Opponents with Non-Political Crimes to Undermine Dissent*

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Abstract

Why do authoritarian regimes charge political opponents with non-political crimes when they can levy charges directly related to opponents' political activism? We argue that doing so disguises political repression and undermines the moral authority of opponents, minimizing backlash and mobilization. To test this argument, we conduct a case study of the arrests of vocal government critics in China in 2013. Analyzing millions of Weibo posts made before and after the crackdown shows that individuals with larger online followings are more likely to be charged with non-political crimes, and those charged with non-political crimes are less likely to receive public sympathy and support. We then conduct an experiment, which shows that disguised repression decreases perceptions of dissidents' morality, decreases people's willingness to engage in dissent, and increases support for repression. These results challenge the assumption of public opposition to repression, showing instead why the public may support repression.

Keywords: repression, dissent, China

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1 Introduction

On September 22, 2020, Ren Zhiqiang, a real-estate tycoon and long-time critic of the Chinese government, was sentenced to 18 years in prison for corruption. Some observers believed that his real crime was criticizing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its top leaders.[1] Ren's arrest is not unique. Many critics of the Chinese regime—e.g., Xue Manzi, Xu Zhangrun, Ai Weiwei, Ou Shaokun, Dong Rubin, Di Xiaonan—as well as political dissidents around the world have been convicted and imprisoned for non-political crimes that tarnish their moral standing. Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra was accused of corruption and abuse of power after he was overthrown in a military coup in 2006. Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny has received multiple sentences between 2012 and 2014 on charges of embezzlement and fraud. Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced to five years on a sodomy charge in 2015. In 2020, Pakistani authorities arrested Shehbaz Sharif, president of the country's main opposition party, on corruption charges.

Why do authoritarian regimes punish some political dissidents with non-political crimes—crimes where penalties are levied for actions unrelated to activism against the state—when the same regimes have made many forms of political activism illegal and charge other dissidents with political crimes? In this paper, we argue that disguised repression is used instead of "blatant repression," where punishments are explicitly linked to political activity against the state, to demobilize the public and other would-be dissidents.

Disguised repression demobilizes the public because it undermines the moral authority of opponents, casting dissidents as offenders who violate societal moral codes. This, in turn, diminishes support for opponents and legitimates the actions taken by the state to punish dissidents, increasing support for repression. Minimizing backlash to repression has become vital for the survival of authoritarian regimes in the face of rising global

[1] See, for example, reports from New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/world/asia/china-ren-zhiqiang-tycoon.html) and The Economist Magazine (https://www.economist.com/china/2020/09/24/a-prominent-critic-of-chinas-leader-gets-18-years-in-jail)

popular protests. Coups accounted for 33% of authoritarian regime change between 1946 and 2000 but only 9% between 2001 and 2017. Instead, mass movements have led to the demise of twice as many authoritarian governments as those unseated by coups in the 21st century. Moreover, from 2000-2017, nearly 60% of all authoritarian regimes faced at least one large-scale anti-government protest (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz and Wright 2020). This rise in mobilization is attributed to the decentralization of communication and the reduction in coordination costs through the internet and social media (e.g., Diamond 2010; Enikolopov, Makarin and Petrova 2020; Steinert-Threlkeld 2017). Importantly, authoritarian regimes around the world have perceived these technologies as threatening (Morozov 2012) and, triggered by perceptions of threat,[2] have repressed those who use these technologies for political dissent and mobilization (Earl, Maher and Pan 2022). However, the use of blatant repression in the digital age often backfires, increasing public support for dissidents and mobilizing opposition (Guriev and Treisman 2019; Pan and Siegel 2020; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan and Joo 2022). Thus, disguised repression emerges as an effective strategy to subdue dissidents without triggering backlash from the public.

Disguised repression also demobilizes other dissidents because it may increase their perceived risk of punishment. Non-political charges brought against dissidents are often based on actual, not fabricated, crimes—activities that, while technically illegal, are usually tolerated and not legally penalized. However, under disguised repression, these ordinarily accepted activities can lead to legal punishments. This increases the perceived risk for dissidents who have engaged in similar behaviors, leading to self-censorship and avoidance of political dissent. This also means that the use of disguised repression incurs a cost for the regime, as building a case requires time and resources. Consequently, disguised repression is unlikely to be used for all dissidents and more likely to be use alongside blatant repression. As we discuss in greater detail in the theory section, there are scope conditions to disguised repression that relate to factors such as judicial capacity as well as trust in the judicial system.

[2]There is a large literature on threat and threat perception as causes of state repression, see, for example, Davenport (2007); Earl (2003).

We assess this argument through a case study and a survey experiment. The case study analyzes millions of Weibo posts made before and after a major crackdown on vocal critics of the Chinese regime in 2013, who were arrested and charged with a mix of political and non-political crimes. It shows that more influence critics, which we operationalize as those with larger online followings, are more likely to be charged with non-political crimes. Furthermore, non-political charges are associated with decreased willingness of supporters to engage in dissent on behalf of the arrested individual as well as decreased overall support for the critic. It is unlikely that the CCP levied non-political crimes against vocal critics with larger online followings because it could not charge them with political crimes. This is because the CCP, like many other authoritarian regimes, has passed broad-sweeping laws against "terrorism" and "undermining state power" that can be and are indeed used to punish vocal critics for their dissent. The reduced online dissent and support for critics charged with non-political crimes is also unlikely driven by Weibo's censorship because prior research does not show that non-political topics are censored at higher rates than political topics.

To provide causal evidence of the effect of disguised repression on dissent and repression, we conduct an online survey experiment with a diverse sample of 1,065 respondents in China in 2022. As expected, disguised repression decreases respondents' willingness to engage in dissenting behavior and decreases their support for dissidents who are charged. and increases their support for repression against dissidents by the state. These results are robust to the inclusion of a variety of individual characteristics and provincial fixed effects. In an exploration of potential mechanisms, we find that with disguised repression, respondents are more likely to perceive the arrested dissident as immoral. This suggests that disguised repression reduces dissent on behalf of those charged because it damages the dissident's moral authority rather than signaling the strength of the regime. We also find that disguised repression induces self-censorship among critics of the regime, and this deterrence effect is stronger among those critics who have less stringent moral standards (i.e., those who are more likely to have engaged in behaviors that could lead to non-political charges).

Our findings challenge prevailing understandings of attitudes toward repression. Even though existing research shows that repression can have variable effects—ranging from mobilizing dissent to suppressing dissent, it is characterized by the underlying assumption that there is intrinsic public opposition to state repression (Carey 2006; Davenport 2007; Kuran 1991; Lichbach 1987; Pop-Eleches and Way 2021; Ritter and Conrad 2016; Sullivan 2016; Young 2021). This underlying assumption of opposition to repression is central to studies of both overt and covert forms of repression. This paper challenges this premise, showing that when repression is disguised as punishment for non-political crimes unrelated to actions taken by the dissident against the state, the public may in fact support repression.[3] We attribute support for repression to perceptions of dissidents' compromised morality as well as the legitimation of penalties levied against the dissident. While morality has long been identified as a source of power and mobilization (Hall 1997; Jasper 2008; Pomeroy and Rathbun 2023) and a foundation of law and social relations (Fuller 1964), its role in repression has not been extensively examined in the literature. The fact that repression can generate public support also highlights the moral dimension of state repression, showing how repression can reduce political opponents' ability to invoke and use moral authority to challenge those in power and mobilize their followers.

The results of this paper also speak to the literature on censorship and information manipulation in the digital age (e.g., Lorentzen 2014; Guriev and Treisman 2019; Gläßel and Paula 2020). Because social media enables social mobilization (Enikolopov, Makarin and Petrova 2020), authoritarian governments have worked to dampen its ability to spur collective action by limiting access to social media platforms, censoring discussions that garner widespread attention, as well as using tactics of traditional, coercive repression to silence vocal online critics (Hobbs and Roberts 2018; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Pan and Siegel 2020). Research shows, however, that censorship backfires when the acts of

[3]Some recent studies have looked at how protester violence increases bystanders' support for state repression (Metcalfe and Pickett 2022; Edwards and Arnon 2021; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan and Joo 2022). In contrast to this research, in this paper, we focus on how state repression itself can garner support.

censorship paradoxically draw attention to what censors are trying to suppress (Jansen and Martin 2015), and the anonymity afforded by social media means that trying to silence popular online opinion leaders often inflames their supporters (Pan and Siegel 2020). Our study finds that disguised repression not only de-legitimizes individuals in ways that account bans and post deletions cannot, but also instills a chilling effect among other activists, thereby lowering the costs of other digital censorship strategies.

That disguised repression of high-profile dissidents may minimize backlash also has implications for the literature on preventative repression. There is a growing body of work on preventative repression, which emphasizes the importance of covert, targeted repression (e.g., Sullivan 2016; Truex 2019). The main thesis of this research is that highly visible forms of repression, such as firing on large crowd or repressing famous dissidents, risks backlash from the public such that those in power turn to lower-profile forms of repression to dissuade dissident leaders and activists—for example, by putting pressure on family members and friends of activists to demobilize them (Deng and O'Brien 2013; Dimitrov and Sassoon 2014; Way and Levitsky 2008; Xu 2021). In contrast, the results of this paper show that highly visible forms of repression against public opinion leaders need not backfire when repression is disguised by punishment for non-political crimes. This result has important implications for our understanding of what authoritarian governments are doing beyond blatant repression to demobilize dissent.

Finally, this paper speaks to a resurgent literature on the relationship between repression, crime and policing. Sociologists have for decades examined the intersection between social movements and the criminal justice system (Balbus 1973; Barkan 1985), and there is a large literature on repression through policing (e.g., Davenport, Soule and Armstrong 2011; Della Porta and Reiter 1998). Until recently, however, most of this work has been focused on developed democracies where police and law enforcement institutions are the main channel through which the state represses (Curtice and Behlendorf 2021). This paper shifts the focus to authoritarian contexts where repression is traditionally levied through state security organs (e.g., secret police, militarized police) that are not responsible for public safety or law and order. However, as this paper shows, when institutions for law

and order in authoritarian contexts are deployed for political repression, this can introduce new dynamics and potentially change public perceptions of state repression.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 lays out a theory of disguised repression and its observable implications. Section 3 presents the the case study. Section 4 reports findings from the experiment. Section 5 concludes by discussing the results.

2 Disguised Repression

Political dissidents are those who, collectively or individually, challenge the political authority of those in power (Davenport 2007; Sullivan and Davenport 2017). What constitutes a challenge will differ by context—for example, vocal critics of party policies are considered challengers in China, while in other countries, mere criticism may not qualify as a challenge compared with organized mobilization or insurgency.[4] Dissidents pose greater threats to political stability and the survival of an authoritarian regime than the average citizen because they are more likely than the average citizen to hold anti-regime sentiments and to take actions, such as protest, to challenge the political status quo (Lust-Okar 2005). In addition, dissidents can play a key role in forming the critical mass that is needed for anti-regime mobilization (Oliver and Marwell 1988).

Autocrats have two general strategies to deal with political dissent: co-optation and repression. Co-optation entails the provision of benefits to those who, in exchange, willingly forgo specific activities (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Svolik 2012). Repression is the actual or threatened use of physical or psychological sanctions taken by the state in response to behavioral challenges (e.g., protest, insurgency, terrorism) against the state, its institutions, practices, or personnel.[5] However, co-optation of dissidents, especially

[4]In this paper, we use the terms "dissident" and "critic" interchangeably to indicate people who challenge the state, even if the challenge is simply vocal criticism.

[5]This definition follows research that defines repression as related to physical coercion (e.g., imprisonment, torture, killing) (e.g., Davenport 2007; Goldstein 1978; Young 2019), but some scholarship defines repression more broadly as actions increasing the cost of contention without necessarily applying coercion (Pan 2020; Tilly and Wood 2015).

high-profile ones, is costly because dissidents are challengers who can hold strong anti-regime sentiments and have high mobilization capacity (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Gel'man 2015). Research typically finds that co-optation targets loyalists or those whose loyalty is up for grabs, such as swing voters (Brusco, Nazareno and Stokes 2004; Mares and Carnes 2009). Repression of dissidents, on the other hand, yields highly variable outcomes (Goldstone and Tilly 2001), sometimes causing backlash and further mobilizing their supporters (Pan and Siegel 2020; Young 2021).[6] One reason it might backfire is due to perceived injustice and the illegitimacy of authorities in blatant repression which can ignite further mobilization and draw bystanders to the cause (Rathbun 2023).

Disguised repression is the act of charging dissidents with non-political crimes that are unrelated to their political activism. For example, in some authoritarian states, protests are illegal as they are seen as anti-state activities (Pan 2020). When those who protest are punished for protesting, this constitutes a political crime—what we refer to as blatant repression. However, when protesters are punished for charges unrelated to their activism such as tax evasion, this constitutes disguised repression. Similarly, some authoritarian states may outlaw dissenting voices on social and political issues under the mantle of "combating misinformation" because such actions are seen as undermining state authority. Here, blatant repression is punishing individuals for the political crime of spreading such misinformation, whereas disguised repression is charging the same individuals a crime unrelated to their political actions such as bribery.

Importantly, disguised repression is defined by the type of non-political charge leveled against political opponents, not by whether or not observers can perceive the political motives behind the charges. In other words, belief in the validity of the non-political charge is not what defines disguised repression. Indeed, it is possible for someone to understand that the non-political charge is a punishment for political activity and, at the

[6]The effects of repression depends on individual characteristics (Opp and Gern 1993), participants' level of commitment to a social movement (Sullivan and Davenport 2017), time frame (Rasler 1996), whether dissent is violent or not (Moore 1998), organizational categories (Davenport 2015), and societal categories (Goldstein 1978).

same time, believe that the dissident is guilty of the non-political charge. This is because the most effective forms of disguised repression require the state to charge dissidents with actual crimes. Although a dictator can make up crimes against activists, implausible charges can damage regime legitimacy and trigger backlash. Let's suppose a dissident is charged with soliciting prostitutes. If the state fabricate the location and time where the solicitation took place, the state's legitimacy may be damaged if its claims could be verified as false (e.g., location does not exist, or a nearby security camera shows that the dissident never went to that location at the specified time). Thus, it is more likely that non-political charges are actual crimes that activists have committed. To ensure that such non-political chargers can be found, the state can construct a legal framework that makes violations likely. For example, in China, the tax system is structured such that people in the business sector can easily run afoul of tax evasion charges (Zhang 2021).

Authoritarian regimes use disguised repression because it can minimize backlash by attacking the very moral authority dissidents invoke and use to challenge those in power. As such, disguised repression legitimizes punishments levied by the state against dissidents. Morality is a fundamental set of standards concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. According to Durkheim (2009), at the heart of morality is a central moral authority that commands adherents to moral precepts. "Through this central authority the individual feels an external constraint to conform to a society's moral code (Carls 2022)." Moral authority is a resource of power for protest mobilization (Hall 1997; Jasper 2008; Pomeroy and Rathbun 2023; Rathbun 2023). Since leaders are considered moral role-models in organizations and society (e.g., Sims and Brinkman 2002; Brown, Treviño and Harrison 2005), unethical behavior of leaders leads to follower defiance and negative outcomes in organizations (Schyns and Schilling 2013; Asnakew and Mekonnen 2019). By charging political dissidents with non-political crimes, disguised repression paints dissidents as offenders who violate societal moral codes and casts state repression as legitimate because repression becomes framed as just punishment for immoral behavior. When dissidents are charged with such crimes, some may not believe the charges and see such efforts as ill-disguised attempts to justify repression while

others may believe the non-political charges to be valid and withdraw their support. On the whole, disguised repression leads to disagreement and division among supporters and would-be supporters, which helps prevent coordination and reduces the chances of backlash (Chen and Xu 2017). Thus, we expect the following implications (pre-registered):

1. ***Support****: Compared with blatant repression, disguised repression reduces general support for the dissident.*

2. ***Repression****: Compared with blatant repression, disguised repression increases general support for punishing the dissident.*

3. ***Dissent****: Compared with blatant repression, disguised repression decreases the willingness to engage in dissent.*

Disguising repression as punishment for non-political crimes may have another advantage over blatant repression: it can produce a chilling effect through self-censorship among other political activists. Because disguised repression relates to what charges are levied against opponents, it means that any activist who has ever engaged in any wrongdoing may be punished. There is often a gray zone, varying by context, where people engage in activities that are not legally permissible but generally understood as unlikely to incur legal punishment—e.g., jaywalking in the US, prostitution in Thailand. Disguised repression changes this calculus because it implies that any wrongdoing may be used as justification for punishment. This means activists will perceive risks to be higher if they have in the past or may in the future engage in behaviors that the regime can use as fodder for disguised repression. We then expect the following implication (pre-registered).

4. ***Self-censorship****: Compared with no repression and blatant repression, disguised repression increases self-censorship among political activists who have less stringent moral standards.*

Because it is in the interest of the state to charge dissidents with actual crimes, disguised repression has a cost. It takes the state relatively more time and effort to identify a plausible non-political crime that can be levied against a dissident than to pin a political

crime on the dissident since political crimes were developed to suppress political opposition. In situations where the dissident has limited mobilization power, levying political charges against the dissident may be sufficient to destroy an organization or nascent movement. However, when a dissident has a large base of followers and strong mobilization power, it may be worth the effort to charge the dissident with a non-political crime. In addition, authoritarian governments may want to charge some opponents with political crimes to send the signal that political opposition is not allowed. Thus, disguised repression is aimed at some, but not all, opponents and is used in tandem with blatant repression. This contrasts with the "spin dictators" concept (Guriev and Treisman 2022), which refers to the trend in authoritarian regimes of moving from direct, violent repression to indirectly disciplining all opponents by charging them with non-political but disreputable crimes. Besides, the punishments levied for disguised repression can be direct and violent.

5. ***Mobilization Power****: Dissidents with larger followings are more likely to become targets of disguised repression.*

While we proxy follower base by the number of online followers in this paper, disguised repression is not limited to online critics or even digital activism. Disguised repression is used to target all kinds of influential dissidents—from vocal critics to top opposition party members to leaders of violent insurgencies—because blatant repression against these individuals who have large influence may trigger backlash even if they are not active online. The examples in the opening paragraph of the paper include dissidents who are not digital activists.[7]

There are a number of scope conditions that influence whether disguised repression is used. First, the use of disguised repression requires a well-developed criminal justice system and law enforcement capacity.[8] Judicial and law enforcement capacity is often

[7]Even in the Chinese context that we focus on, disguised repression is not only levied against online critics. For example, in 2020, Xu Zhangrun, a famous intellectual who criticized the elimination of presidential term limits in China and who did not have an active online presence, was detained on the charge of soliciting prostitutes.

[8]We do not see the level of crime as a scope condition. While others have noted that

used as an indicator of state capacity (Besley and Persson 2009), so more broadly, the state need to have a certain level of capacity in order to use disguised repression. Second, the judicial system has to some extent have its own moral authority. In other words, there must be some perception of "impartial justice." In contexts where the judicial system is seen solely as an extension of state repression, disguised repression is unlikely to produce the expected outcomes. Third, while this paper focuses on the use of disguised repression by authoritarian regimes, there is nothing inherently restricting its usage exclusively to autocracies. As long as a regime maintains a functioning judicial system and sufficient state capacity, it can use disguised repression to target influential dissidents. However, in political contexts with strong partisan divides, disguised repression may only have the expected effect for one side. For example, suppose a country is polarized between Party A and Party B. If Party A were in power and charged a prominent political opponent in Party B with a non-political crime, supporters of Party A may believe that the punishment is justified but supporters of Party B are unlikely to do so. In other words, in a highly polarized setting, partisan affiliation will likely determine who will see disguised repression as cover for political repression.

To see whether we find evidence of the above observable implications, we first conduct a case study of arrests of vocal online critics in China in 2013. By analyzing a large quantity of social media data pertaining to these arrested critics, we gain a better understanding of whether dissidents with greater mobilization power (more social media followers) are more likely to be targeted by disguised repression (*observable implication 5*). We also gain a better understand of online attitudes toward the dissidents targeted with blatant versus disguised repression (*observable implications 1-4*). To test for the observable implications, we conduct an online survey experiment that establishes the causal effects of disguised repression on support for dissident, support for repression, willingness to dissent, and self-censorship (*observable implications 1-4* which are pre-registered in our experimental pre-analysis plan) as compared with blatant repression and no repression.

changes in context can give states opportunities for repression (Grasse et al. 2021), the general level of crime is exogenous to the use of disguised repression.

3 China's Crackdown on Online KOLs in 2013

We conduct a case study where we analyze 13,404,800 Weibo posts that mention the names of eleven critics of the CCP from late 2009 to early 2014. This case study does not allow us to formally test the relationship between disguised repression and the outcomes we expect, and it is not intended to do so. Instead, it allows us to explore the concept of disguised repression in a real-world setting, so we can generalize beyond the experimental context. We analyze data from Sina Weibo, the Chinese social media platform that is most similar to Twitter, because it was China's most popular social media platform until 2013.[9] Weibo posts are public, which means users are not limited to content from their friends or network but can see content of all other users and browse trending topics.

3.1 China's 2013 Crackdown on Online Opinion Leaders

In the early 2010s, Weibo was a space for active discourse and debate (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2015). Individuals with a large followings posted opinions on social and political issues, often challenging the official narrative of the regime. These individuals gained prominence for their opinions and their influence on social, economic, and political issues.[10] For example, Charles Xue, a China-born American investor who wrote under the name Xue Manzi, amassed more than 10 million followers on Weibo and was well-known for his criticisms of CCP and Chinese government policies. Concerned about the influence of these online critics, the Chinese government launched a crackdown between August to December 2013 in the name of combating malicious online rumor-mongering, which led to the arrests of a number of high profile online critics.[11] These vocal critics

[9] Starting in 2013, Weibo's popularity was eclipsed by that of WeChat.

[10] Vocal critics are distinct from celebrities or others known for non-political reasons but occasionally involved in politics. For instance, Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai, censored for accusing a retired Vice Premier of sexual assault, is primarily known for tennis, not politics. As such, she doesn't fit our definition of a 'vocal critic'.

[11] See https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/asia/china-cracks-down-on-online-opinion-makers.html.

are dissidents, based on the definition from the repression literature that we use because the CCP sees them as challenges to its political authority (Davenport 2007; Sullivan and Davenport 2017).[12] Importantly, the critics charged with non-political crimes such as Xue Manzi could have been charged with political crimes such as "gathering crowds to disrupt public order" because they mobilized followers.

Because this research focuses on vocal critics, we searched BBC News, New York Times, and other prominent media sources to identify eleven individuals arrested before or during the 2013 crackdown (see Table 1 for a summary). Among them, six were charged with non-political crimes, including Xue Manzi for "soliciting prostitutes, group licentiousness,"[13] Zhou Lubao and Tian Jiguang for "extortion and blackmail," Bian Min for "illegal business," and Qin Huohuo and Lierchaisi for "profiteering from spreading rumors." Five of them were charged with political crimes: Xu Zhiyong, Wang Gongquan and Guo Feixiong for "gathering crowds to disrupt public order" and Zhang Baocheng and Ding Jiaxi for "illegal assembly." These eleven opinion leaders cover the most prominent cases of disguised and blatant repression in this relatively condensed period. Critics arrested during the 2013 crackdown are not representative of all arrested dissidents in China in recent years; however, this was one of China's largest crackdowns of political dissent in the last two decades and substantively important for our understanding of Chinese politics.

In China, well-known dissidents are usually charged with two types of non-political crimes: first, economic or financial crimes such as illegal business, tax evasion, extortion, blackmail, and corruption; second, crimes involving illegal personal-sexual activi-

[12]This definition of dissident differs from how the term dissident is often used in public discourse about China and in China studies, where vocal critics are not considered dissidents but only a smaller subset of political activists who are willing to engage in other behaviors in contention against the regime are considered dissidents (Truex 2022).

[13]Soliciting prostitution is not a crime but illegal under Chinese law and typically leads to administrative detention of between 10 and 15 days. Group licentiousness, on the other hand, is punishable under criminal law in China.

TABLE 1. VOCAL CRITICS ARRESTED UNDER THE CHARGES OF POLITICAL AND NON-POLITICAL CRIMES IN 2013

Weibo Username	Chinese	Real Name	Arrest Date	Alleged Crime
Disguised Repression:				
Zhou Lubao	周禄宝	周禄宝	2013-08-25	Extortion and blackmail
Bian Min	边民	董如彬	2013-09-10	Illegal business
Tian Jiguang	田继光	田继光	2013-10-15	Extortion and blackmail
Xue Manzi	薛蛮子	薛必群	2013-08-26	Soliciting prostitutes, group licentiousness
Qin Huohuo	秦火火	秦志晖	2013-08-20	Profiteering from spreading rumors
Lierchaisi	立二拆四	杨秀宇	2013-08-20	Profiteering from spreading rumors
Blatant Repression:				
Xu Zhiyong	许志永	许志永	2011-08-18	Unknown reason
			2012-06-28	Unknown reason
			2012-11-24	Unknown reason
			2013-07-17	Gathering crowds to disrupt public order
Wang Gongquan	王功权	王功权	2013-09-13	Gathering crowds to disrupt public order
Guo Feixiong	郭飞雄	杨茂东	2013-08-08	Gathering crowds to disrupt public order
Zhang Baocheng	张宝成	张宝成	2013-04-01	Illegal assembly
Ding Jiaxi	丁家喜	丁家喜	2013-04-17	Illegal assembly

Note: the alleged crime indicates the crime the individual was suspected of during his arrest, which might be different from the formal charges levied in trial. Alleged crimes during arrests are more important than final crime charges in trials for our analysis because the online activity we aim to measure would occur immediate after the arrest. Trials, on the other hand, are often held much later.

ties such as soliciting prostitutes, group licentiousness, and drug abuse. Economic crime charges are usually used against dissidents who have their own business or work in the state sector. For example, due to very high nominal tax rates in China, tax evasion is common among private entrepreneurs, which make them vulnerable to state censure (Zhang 2021). Many prominent dissidents were charged with economic crimes, like Ai Weiwei, Di Xiaonan, and recently Rebiya Kadeer's sons. For dissidents in the state sector like Ren zhiqiang, corruption, and embezzlement are commonly used crimes to arrest them. Personal-sexual crime charges usually target scholars, journalists, internet commentators, or other dissidents who do not own business. Examples include Xu Zhangrun, Xue Manzi, Ou Shaokun, etc. In our six non-political crime cases, one was charged with personal-sexual crimes, and the other five were charged with crimes involving illegal economic activities.

The dataset for our observational study was primarily sourced from a prominent commercial data provider in China known for maintaining the most comprehensive archive of public Weibo data since 2009. This data provider started by scanning all of Weibo users and posts in 2009 and since then, has been updating its database daily by taking public posts from users' timelines. Furthermore, to maintain the contemporaneity and relevance of the database, the data provider implements a dynamic expansion strategy. Every 30

days, the pool of users extends as new users are included, contingent on them being mentioned or reposted by existing users in the pool. For our research, we specifically accessed all Weibo posts that mentioned Weibo handles or actual names of eleven predetermined opinion leaders from this commercial source of Weibo posts. Notably, we strictly adhere to data privacy rules and the data obtained do not contain personally identifiable information beyond the handles or names of the KOLs.[14] Because data from this historical dataset were collected on a daily basis if posts were censored within 24 hours after being posted, they would not be captured by the dataset. From previous research, we know that removal of online content usually takes place within the first 48 hours (King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Zhu et al. 2013), we expect that this dataset misses some but not all censored content. From 2011 to 2014, we identify 13,404,800 Weibo posts referencing to the eleven opinion leaders.

Figure 1 compares the total number of Weibo posts related to these critics for non-political crimes (light grey) and political crimes (dark grey). The vertical axes indicate the number of Weibo posts by month. Prior to the crackdown, mentions of vocal critics later charged with non-political crimes are much more voluminous and rapidly increasing compared to those later charged with political crimes or imprisoned without justification. This pattern suggests that it is more likely for the government to use disguised repression against influential critics instead of blatant repression, which aligns with observable implication 5.

Figure 1 also shows that after the crackdown, in November 2013, the volume of mentions of those charged with political crimes dropped rapidly. This sharp decrease was likely driven by a number of factors, including a) the fact that the Weibo accounts of the critics were banned so no additional posts and reposts were made; b) censorship of discussions of the arrested individual after the crackdown by Weibo;[15] and c) decreased support and self-censorship among Weibo users (observable implications 1 and 4). We

[14]We remove Weibo posts that contain the characters of the individual's name but were not in reference to the critic. For example 周边民众 contains characters 边民 but does not refer to 边民, the person.

[15]Since the dataset is based on a daily collection of Weibo posts, we do not expect the

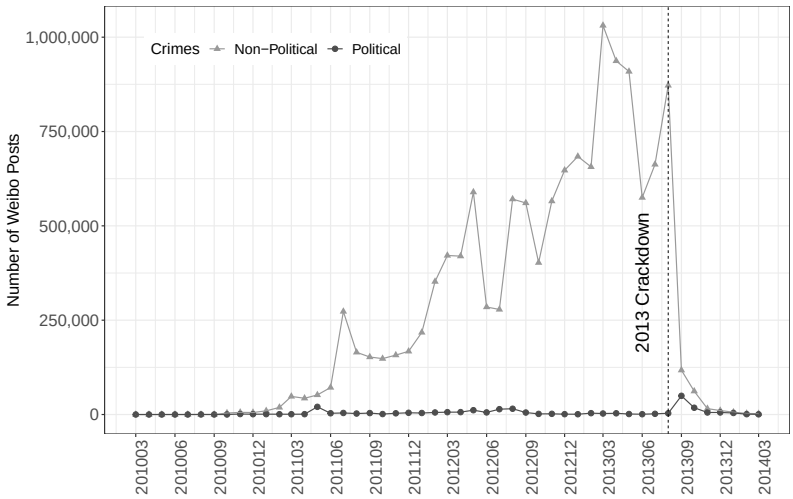


FIGURE 1. WEIBO POSTS CITING DISSIDENTS' NAMES BY CRIME TYPES

cannot quantify the relative impact of each of these factors, but the pattern suggests that charging dissidents with non-political crimes is associated with a substantial reduction in online discussion of the dissidents.

We see a striking contrast when examining the number of posts related to vocal critics who were charged with political crimes or jailed without justification (in dark grey in Figure 1). The number of posts mentioning these individuals actually increased after the 2013 crackdown. This finding points to the possibility that political charges might have inflamed online dissent against the government among those who supported the arrested opinion leader.

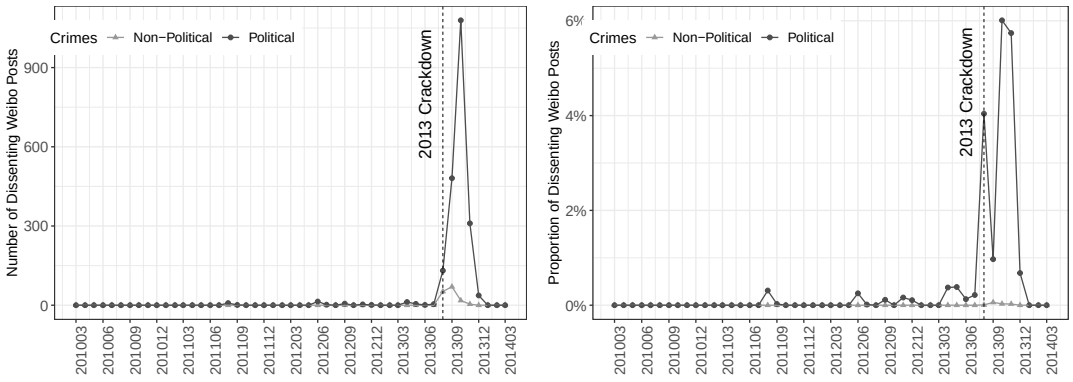
3.2 Online Dissent on Behalf of Arrested Critics

We find additional evidence that political charges, but not disguised repression, may have been associated with backlash when we examine posts containing the vocal critic's name and "release" (释放) or "release them" (放人) within three months of the individual's arrest. Because the critics were not allowed to post anything after their arrests, we can use online requests for their release during the period, specifically, the combination of

data to be affected by censorship prior to the crackdown but we do expect the data to be affected by platform censorship after the crackdown.

"release" and the person's Weibo handle, to measure the amount of support the critics received and dissent against the regime. After finding 4,268 posts that meet this criteria, we manually checked each post to remove posts that were not calling for the release of one of the critics, resulting in 2,239 posts containing calls to their release.

Figure 2(a) compares the frequency of calls to release vocal critics for those targeted with disguised repression (light grey line) and those targeted with blatant repression (dark grey line). The volume of calls to release those charged with political crimes vastly outstrips the volume of calls to release those charged with non-political crimes (*observable implication 3*). Figure 2(b) plots the proportion of calls to release the critic relative to the total number of posts related to them. Figure 2(b) shows the same pattern, providing further evidence that dissent on behalf of vocal critics targeted by disguised repression is lower than dissent on behalf of those targeted with blatant repression.[16]



(a) Number of Posts (b) Proportion of Posts

FIGURE 2. CALLS FOR THE CRITICS' RELEASE

We further disaggregate this result and compare the level of dissent for each critic. Figure 3 orders the eleven individuals by the proportion of posts that call for their release among all posts that mention them in three months after their arrest. This figure clearly shows that there is less online dissent on behalf of critics targeted with disguised repres-

[16]If we believe that posts mentioning critics with large followings are more likely to be censored than those with smaller followings, the fact that censorship exists strengthens rather than weakens this argument.

sion. Evidence from Figure 2 and Figure 3 both suggest that charging dissidents with

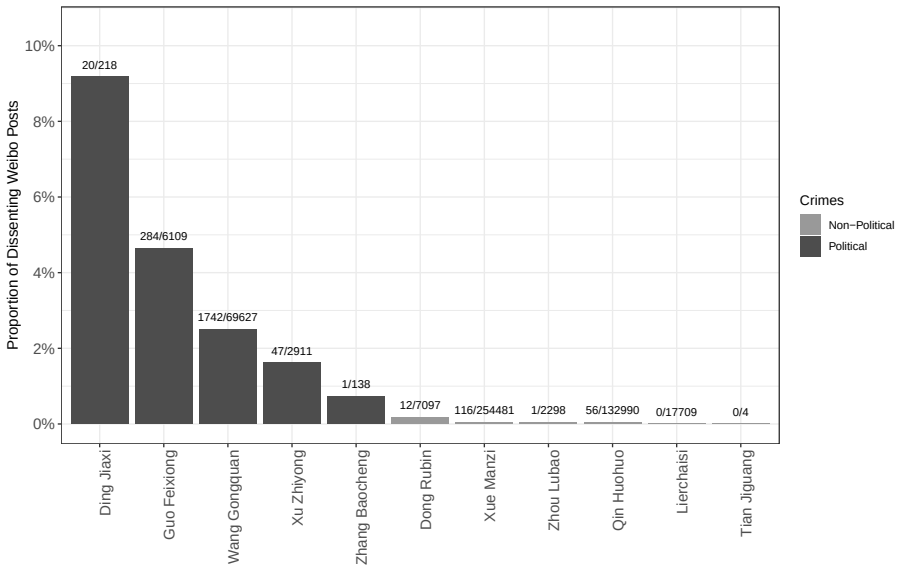


FIGURE 3. ONLINE DISSENT FOR INDIVIDUAL CRITICS

non-political crimes discourages online dissent.

3.3 Attitudes toward Arrested Critics

We expand the analysis beyond narrow calls for the release of arrested critics and hone in on two people who were arrested—Wang Gongquan, who was charged with a political crime, and Xue Manzi, who was charged with a non-political crime—to examine more deeply how they are discussed on Weibo before and after their arrests. We do not collapse posts about different individuals together because each critic was associated with different causes and was charged with different crimes. As a result, discussions about each person are very different both before and after the arrests. We focus on Wang and Xue because they are the most popular critics in the blatant repression and disguised repression categories, respectively.

We analyze all Weibo posts about each person in three months before and after their arrest. We use a log-odds ratio to identify words that most effectively separate pre-arrest Weibo posts and post-arrest Weibo posts, following Monroe, Colaresi and Quinn (2008) and Grimmer (2013). The log-odds ratio is a method to compare the relative frequency of a word used before and after an intervention—here the opinion leader's arrest. To

construct the log-odds ratio for words about Xue Manzi, we identified the 1,000 most frequent words in posts prior to arrests and in posts after the arrest and then matched the two sets of words to find the common words used both pre- and post-arrest. After matching, we calculate the relative frequency of each word among the pre- and post-arrest posts. Let $prop_{w,pre\text{-}arrest}$ represent word w as a proportion of all words in Weibo posts about Xuemanzi before his arrest. For each word, the odds of this word appearing in pre-arrest Weibo posts is:

$$Odds(w, pre\text{-}arrest) = \frac{prop_{w,pre\text{-}arrest}}{1 - prop_{w,pre\text{-}arrest}} \tag{1}$$

and we calculate the analogous odds for the word appearing in the post-arrest posts as $Odds(w, post\text{-}arrest)$. We then calculate the log-odds ratio as:

$$logOdds(w) = logOdds(w, post\text{-}arrest) - logOdds(w, pre\text{-}arrest) \tag{2}$$

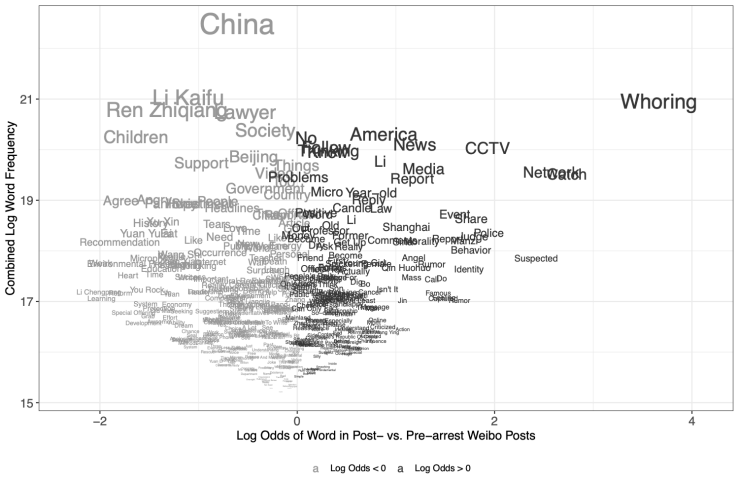
If a word appeared more often in post-arrest Weibo posts, the log-Odds ratio for the word is positive, and if a word appeared more often in pre-arrest Weibo posts, its log-Odds ratio is negative. We then construct a measure of combined log frequency for each word as:

$$logFreq(w) = logFreq(w, pre\text{-}arrest) + logFreq(w, post\text{-}arrest) \tag{3}$$

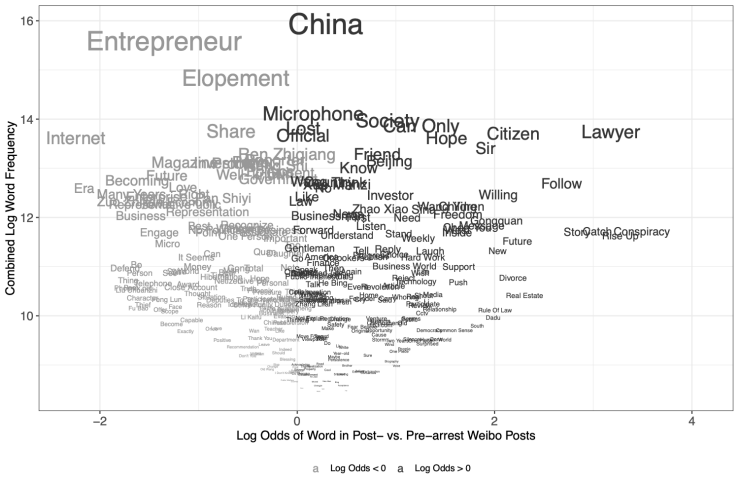
to make it easier to compare posts by the two critics since the volume of posts before and after their arrest was very different (see Figure 1).

Figures 4(a) and (b) show word frequency and the log-odds ratio for Xue and Wang, respectively, with words appearing more often after arrests in dark grey and word appearing more often pre-arrest in light grey. Words on the diagonal are more frequently mentioned and more effective at separating pre-post Weibo posts than off-diagonal words. Xue Manzi is a successful investor known for his investments in Internet and technology companies in China. He became an Internet celebrity in early 2010s for his investing tips and commentary on social issues, including child trafficking and the plight of the underprivileged people in China. Figure 4(a) shows that discussions involving Xue Manzi before his arrest focus on his political and online activism, with words such as “China,” “Li Kaifu,” and “Ren Zhiqiang” (other critics), “children,” “lawyer,” and “support.” However, after his arrest discussions focus on his crime and immoral behavior, with words such as “whoring”

FIGURE 4. WORD FREQUENCY REGARDING CRITICS PRE- AND POST-ARREST



(a) Xue Manzi (arrested for soliciting prostitutes)



(b) Wang Gongquan (arrested for gathering crowds to disrupt public order)

Note: The figures show the log odds of words for each critic (x-axis) versus frequency (y-axis). Words appearing more frequently in post-arrest Weibo posts have a positive log-Odds ratio (dark grey); those more common pre-arrest have a negative ratio (light grey). The word size represents its relative log frequency.

(soliciting prostitutes), "CCTV," "network," "catch," "police," "suspected," "licentious," and "barbarian." This result suggests that disguised repression reduced public support and worsened perceptions of the morality of the dissident.

Wang Gongquan is also an investor known for his wealth and success in real estate and venture capital investment. Since 2005, Mr. Wang began strongly advocating for more liberal policies and became involved in a wide range of social issues. For example, he condemned "black jails" where security officers secretly detained aggrieved petitioners.

He advocated for the rights of the children of migrant workers. In 2011, Mr. Wang garnered attention on social media after he publicly announced that he was leaving his wife and eloping with Wang Qin, a businesswoman from Southern China. In contrast to the case of Xue Manzi, Figure 4(b) shows that Weibo discussions about Wang Gongquan before his arrest focus on his activism, with words such as "entrepreneur," "Internet," "era," and "represent," and discussions after his arrest were related to activism and hopes for his release.

The comparison between posts mentioning Xue and Wang shows that while public attitudes toward both critics were focused on their political and social activism before their arrests, online discussions about Xue became highly negative and focused on his immoral behavior after he was charged with "soliciting prostitutes, group licentiousness" while online discussions about Wang remained focused on his activism after he was charged "gathering crowds to disrupt public order."

4 Estimating the Effects of Disguised Repression

The case study gives us a sense of the external validity of the concept of disguised repression. Building on it, we design and conduct an online survey experiment to test the effects of disguised repression.[17]

4.1 Experimental Design

We recruited 1,065 respondents to participate in an online experiment using a quota sampling strategy. The quotas are set to match, to the extent possible, age, gender, and education marginals to the urban population in China according to the 2010 census in order to capture diverse views in China's urban population. We also set geographic quotas such that half of the respondents are from richer provinces (based on 2017 per capita income)

[17] We secured approval from the IRBs of the authors' home institutions and abide by EGAP principles on research transparency and protection of research team staff. We also took particular caution to protect online survey takers. For detailed discussion of ethical considerations, see Appendix A1.3

and the other half from poorer provinces. We have relatively few respondents from rural areas because they are difficult to reach in online surveys.

Figure 5 shows the flow of the experiment. We first screen respondents, including only those age 18 and older. We then ask demographic questions (e.g., age, ethnicity, marital status, education). Then we measure respondents' predisposition, including questions pertaining to political knowledge, liberal values, and nationalism ideology. We then gauge respondents' fundamental preferences including risk attitude, altruism, and reciprocity. The respondents then answer a second set of demographic questions (e.g., occupation,

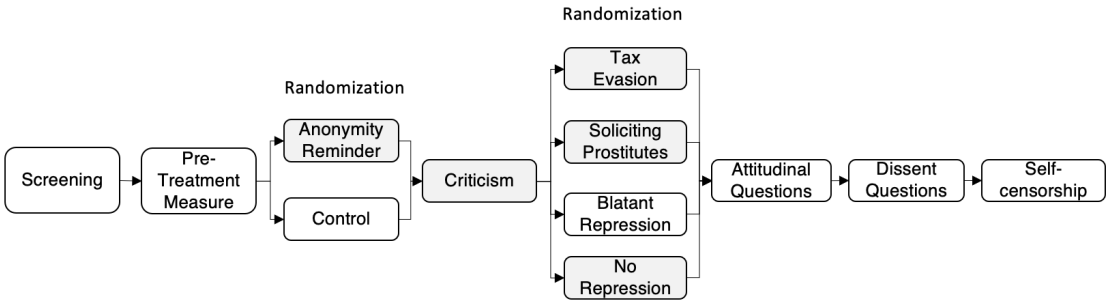


FIGURE 5. FLOW CHART

income, religion) along with questions about media consumption, political efficacy, and political trust.

Next, half of the respondents are randomly sampled and reminded of the anonymity and privacy protection they are afforded during the experiment. We use this randomized anonymity reminder treatment to address potential preference falsification problems.[18]

All respondents then read an excerpt about an unnamed dissident's online criticisms of Chinese government policies ("Criticism" panel in Figure 5). We then randomly assigned respondents to one pure control condition or one of three treatment conditions. In the pure control condition ("No Repression"), respondents receive no information about

[18]If respondents face pressures to hide their true preferences, reminding them of their anonymity should decrease this pressure. If respondents who receive this reminder and those who do not do not exhibit significant differences in their later responses, this suggests that preference falsification is less likely to be at work. Appendix A1.2 shows no discernible effects of this anonymity treatment.

punishment. In three treatment conditions, respondents read information about the dissident being charged with a) the political crime of spreading harmful information ("Political Repression")), b) the non-political crime of soliciting prostitutes and group licentiousness ("Soliciting Prostitutes"), or c) the non-political crime of tax evasion ("Tax Evasion"). The political crime treatment captures blatant repression while tax evasion and prostitution capture disguised repression. We fix the level of punishment by saying that the dissident was sentenced to three years in jail.[19] Appendix A4.1 shows the wording of the criticism excerpt and treatment conditions.

We use "spreading harmful information" as the political crime treatment because respondents just read about the dissident's online, political activism, and this crime links directly to that activity.[20] Any crime can shift perceptions of morality because the criminalization of any behavior (e.g., peaceful protest, voicing criticisms of those in power) associates that behavior with negative values and overtones of immorality. However, we expect the crime of "spreading harmful information" to diminish the moral authority of the dissident to a lesser degree than the crimes of tax evasion and soliciting prostitutes. Paying taxes is a civil duty, required by law in most countries. Tax evasion is considered

[19]For half of the respondents, we randomly insert information about the dissident's confession into the three treatment conditions ("Confession" in Figure 5). Appendix A3.1 shows that there are no discernible effects of confession on the outcome variables. For another randomly sampled subset of respondents (one-third), we measure their perceptions of the dissident's morality ("Mediator" in Figure 5) to examine whether there are heterogeneous effects by respondents' attitudes toward morality. We only randomize one-third of the respondent to measure morality is because we want to gauge and limit these questions' influence on the main outcomes of interest.

[20]This crime is based on the No. 13 clause of the Implementation Rules for Provisional Regulations of the Administration of International Networking of Computer Information in the People's Republic of China (1998) and the Judicial Interpretation of the No. 246 Clause of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China regarding Defamation Via Information Network (effective on September 10, 2013).

morally reprehensible in most societies. Soliciting prostitutes and group licentiousness is illegal in most countries and considered immoral in many societies, including those influenced by Confucianism culture such as China (Bell 2010).

Our main outcomes of interest are respondents' attitudes toward the dissident, attitudes toward repressing the dissident, willingness to engage in dissent on behalf of the dissident, and level of self-censorship. To measure outcomes, respondents in treatment and control groups first answer a set of questions about their attitudes toward the dissident and online expression. Then, respondents in three treatment groups answer questions about their attitudes toward repressing the dissident and their willingness to dissent on behalf of the dissident. Table 2 shows the wording of the first three main outcome questions (for more detailed questionnaire, see Appendix A4). Finally, to measure self-censorship, we inform respondents at the end of the survey that they can answer a few slightly sensitive questions where for each question, they have the option of selecting "I don't want to answer this question." Each question in the set of sensitive questions solicits respondents' opinions about criticism directed at the policies of the Chinese government. We conceptualize self-censorship as silence (i.e., refusing to answer the question) and as compliance with the stance of the government (i.e., refuting the criticism directed against the government).

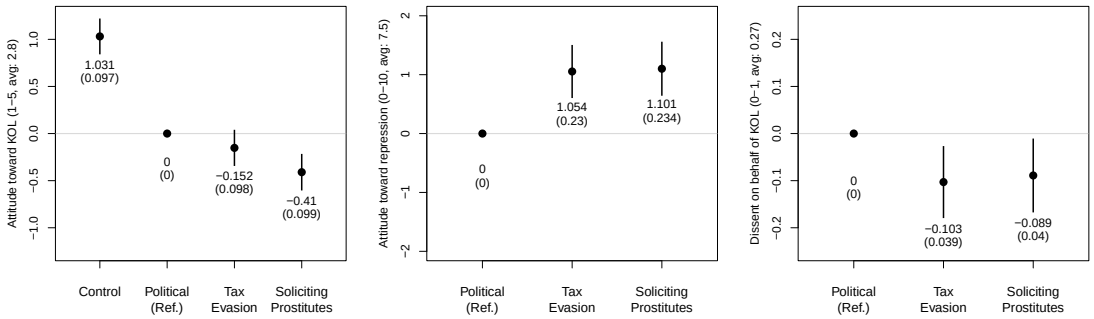
TABLE 2. MAIN OUTCOME QUESTIONS

Item	Question	Scale
Attitude toward dissident	Based on the information currently available, what is your general attitude towards this person? 基于目前有限的信息，您会对这位人士大致持什么样的态度	1.Very disgusted 非常厌恶... 5. Very supportive 非常认可
Attitude toward repression	Do you think it is reasonable to arrest this person? 您认为逮捕这位人士是合理的吗	0.Totally unreasonable 完全不合理... 10. Totally Reasonable 完全合理
Dissent on behalf of dissident	If there are netizens calling for solidarity with the detained KOL, would you express solidarity for the KOL on social media? 假如有网友呼吁声援这位被拘捕的知名人士，请问您是否愿意在社交媒体上表示支持?	1. Yes 愿意, 0. No 不愿意

4.2 Disguised Repression Changes Attitudes

Figure 6 presents the main results of how disguised repression affects people's attitudes toward the arrested individual, government repression, and willingness to dissent on behalf of the dissident. Figure 6(a) shows that all charges, including the political charge, substantially reduce people's support for the critic (*observable implication 1*). However, charging dissidents with non-political crimes reduces respondents' support for dissidents more than

FIGURE 6. ATTITUDES TOWARD KOL, REPRESSION, AND DISSENT FOR KOL



(a) Attitude: KOL (1055 Obs.) (b) Attitude: Repression (759 Obs.) (c) Dissent (759 Obs.)

Note: The reported estimates are relative to political repression; bars represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors. Point estimates and standard errors are reported below each dot. The sample size in panels (b) and (c) is smaller than that of panel (a) because questions about repression and dissent for the KOL can only be asked in the three treatment arms. The model controls for a number of individual characteristics such as gender, age, education level, employment status, income, etc. The full model results with controls are reported in Table A3 Column (3), (6), and (9) in Online Appendix. Table A3 also shows that the results are the same when excluding the controls.

charging dissidents with political crimes. Figure 6(b) also shows that disguised repression makes respondents more likely to support repressing the critic (*observable implication 2*). The absolute level of support for arresting the dissident is 7.5 on a scale where zero indicates that the arrest is "totally unreasonable" and ten is "totally reasonable." Figure 6(c) shows that, compared with charging critics with a political crime, charging critics with both non-political crimes reduces respondents' willingness to engage in dissent on behalf of the repressed opinion leader (*observable implication 3*). Note that the sample size of Figures 6(b) and (c) is smaller than that of Figure 6(a) because questions about repression and dissent for the critic can only be asked in the three treatment arms. Respondents in the control arm do not know the KOL was arrested so that they only see questions regarding attitudes toward the critic, which apply to all four arms. We use political crime as the comparison group to make the three figures more comparable.

Disguised repression would not be very effective if people did not believe the charges leveled against the dissident, especially if they understood that these charges were actually *disguised* repression. Note that we cannot directly test this since such questions would interfere with the treatments. However, we ask respondents' belief on the charged crime and find that 89% of respondents believe the critic is guilty of the accused crime

(scoring ≥ 5 on a 0 - 10 Likert scale). Appendix A2.5 further indicates a higher belief in a dissident's guilt for non-political versus political crimes among respondents, suggesting that non-political crime charges are credible to the average respondent in our survey.

4.3 Compromised Moral Authority as a Potential Mechanism

We theorize that disguised repression influences the behavior of supporters and observers because it calls into question the moral authority of dissidents. However, an alternative explanation for why charging dissidents with non-political crimes would influence support for the dissident and for repression is that it signals the strength of the regime (Huang 2015). If disguised repression works through the moral authority mechanism, it should increase respondents' support for repressing the dissident. If disguised repression works because it signals the strength of the regime, we should not observe an increase in support for repression with non-political crimes either. The main results shown in Figure 6(b) support the moral authority mechanism, rather than that of signaling strength, because disguised repression significantly increases support for repression.

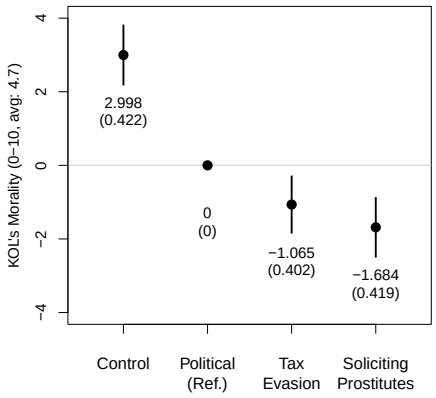
In addition, if disguised repression works by compromising dissidents' moral authority, we would expect charging them with non-political crimes to influence respondents' perceptions of the morality of the dissident differently than when dissidents are charged with political crimes. The experiment finds that this is indeed the case. Respondents do perceive the opinion leader as less moral when they are charged with a non-political crime as opposed to a political crime (see Figure 7).

4.4 Disguised Repression Induces Self-Censorship for Regime Critics

We find that compared with no repression, disguised repression may increase self-censorship among critics of the regime, including those who have less stringent moral standards. This finding aligns with *observable implication 4*. In contrast, blatant repression does not have this effect.

Table 3 Column (1) shows that, in the *full* sample, neither political nor non-political crimes increase citizens' willingness to refute criticism against the regime. However, as we preregistered, we expect disguised repression to induce self-censorship "among polit-

FIGURE 7. PERCEIVED MORALITY OF KOL



Note: The reported estimates are relative to political repression; bars represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors. Point estimates and standard errors are reported below each dot. The sample size is 336—because we do not want this question to interfere with the treatments, we randomly select one-third of the respondents to ask this question. The full model results with controls are reported in Table A6 in Online Appendix.

ical activists who have less stringent moral standards." We use a pre-treatment question "Do you criticize unreasonable policies, rules and regulations on social media or online forums?" to identify critics of the regime. Individuals who criticize "occasionally", "usually", and "very frequently" are considered critics (503 observations). We further use the WVS morality measures to identify critics who have less stringent moral standards (morality $\leq$ 50 percentile, which results in 307 observations).[21] Table 3 Column (2) shows that, among these critics, political and tax evasion charges against the opinion leader have positive effects on self-censorship when compared to the control group, though the effects are statistically insignificant. Soliciting prostitutes has a positive and statistically significant effect at the 0.1 level. Among non-critics, as expected, the effects of the treatments on self-censorship are indiscernible from zero (Table 3 Column [3]). Table 3 Column (4) further shows that, among critics with less stringent moral standards, soliciting prostitutes has an even larger effect on self-censorship. This self-censorship effect does not exist among critics with more stringent moral standards (Table 3 Column [5]). The findings are consistent with *observable implication 4*.

Note that we view these findings about self-censorship as suggestive because we use

[21]The results remain robust when we change the threshold up to morality $\leq$ 66 percentile.

TABLE 3. SELF-CENSORSHIP

Outcome Variable: Self-censorship	(1) Full Sample	(2) Critics	(3) Non-Critics	(4) Less Morally Stringent Critics	(5) More Morally Stringent Critics
Political	0.022	0.129	0.074	0.173	-0.002
	(0.142)	(0.185)	(0.200)	(0.245)	(0.278)
Tax Evasion	0.007	0.118	0.036	0.213	-0.263
	(0.142)	(0.183)	(0.203)	(0.232)	(0.277)
Prostitution	0.059	0.374*	-0.121	0.547**	0.030
	(0.144)	(0.191)	(0.203)	(0.246)	(0.313)
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,055	503	547	307	194
R-squared	0.160	0.238	0.271	0.307	0.381

Self-censorship is quantified as respondents refuting criticism against the government in response to a set of five sensitive questions. The reported estimates are relative to the control condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. The full results of the model with all controls are reported in Table A4 in Online Appendix.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

self-reports of criticisms of the regime as a proxy for dissent and activism. We do not know for sure whether these respondents are vocal critics of the regime or whether they are influential. The effect we observe may be an underestimate because prominent, vocal critics face greater risk than those who say they are critical among the respondent sample, but it may also be an overestimate because prominent activists tolerate more risk than these respondents. To study vocal critics and dissenters, we would need to over-sample them, which is risky for participants and the research team given the current political climate in China (Pan 2021).

The fact that disguised repression increases self-censorship means that there is a lower likelihood of dissent. We also find that disguised repression diverts attention, which also lowers the likelihood of dissent. In the experiment, ask respondents whether they want to read more about the critic. We find that even though neither political nor non-political charges change respondents' interests in reading more about the critic, for respondents who choose to read more information, they are more likely to look for information about the critic's personal life rather than political activism for those charged with non-political crimes compared than with political crimes (see AppendixA2.3).

5 Conclusion

The existing literature on repression typically assumes that those who witness repression will oppose it or fear it. In this paper, we argue that when repression is disguised as punishment for non-political crimes, public support for dissidents decreases and for repression increases. We show that this is likely because disguised repression damages perceptions of dissidents' moral authority, diminishing support for dissidents' causes, and legitimizes state actions against dissidents, increasing support for repression. Together, this may reduce the level of dissent towards the authoritarian government as we show that disguised repression demobilizes followers and induce self-censorship among other activists. Over the long term, disguised repression may help increase the duration of the regime and boost its legitimacy compared with blatant repression.

Our case study of the 2013 crackdown in China shows that disguised repression is used by authoritarian governments, and suggests that disguised repression is more likely to be used against those who have a greater ability to mobilize others. Disguised repression has a cost since it is in the interest of the state to levy actual, plausible charges against dissidents, hence we do not expect it to always be used. In addition, there are scope conditions such as trust in the judicial system that affect the use of disguised repression.

This research shows how repression is framed and described—here charging dissidents with non-political crimes—has implications for how the general public and bystanders who are not already committed to a cause may view repression. Rather than being universally opposed to state repression, framing can generate public support for repression. We can imagine other ways in which repression can be framed—e.g., casting vocal critics as agents of foreign powers in contexts with strong nationalism or nativism—that future research can explore.

Finally, our research emphasizes the role of morality in the studies of political repression. We show that disguised repression reduces perceived moral standing of dissidents among the public and induces self-censorship among less morally strict activists, which suggests that morality may be an important feature of mobilization and repression that deserves more attention in the study of contentious politics.

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Online Appendix

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A1 Extended Data and Methods

A1.1 Balance Check

Table A1 reports the covariate balance among control and treatment groups based on a number of individual characteristics, including gender, age, education, minority status, religion, marriage status, work status and experience, party affiliation, income, language skills, social class, and media usage. As shown in Table A1, randomization is successful,

and most covariates are balanced among all groups. The control group and political crime group are somewhat unbalanced in terms of leadership experience and English skills. But our main results remain robust after controlling for the covariates.

TABLE A1. BALANCE TABLE

Outcomes	(1) Female	(2) Age	(3) Education	(4) Minority	(5) Religious	(6) Married	(7) Work
Control	0.024	0.142	-0.115	0.009	0.009	-0.047	-0.009
	(0.043)	(0.965)	(0.202)	(0.015)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.030)
Tax Evasion	-0.011	0.120	0.037	-0.010	0.029	-0.023	0.014
	(0.044)	(0.979)	(0.211)	(0.013)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.030)
Prostitution	0.055	0.656	-0.070	-0.004	0.013	-0.013	-0.021
	(0.045)	(1.025)	(0.211)	(0.014)	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.032)
Constant	0.486***	37.267***	13.769***	0.028***	0.223***	0.785***	0.858***
	(0.032)	(0.716)	(0.151)	(0.011)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.022)
Observations	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,065
R-squared	0.002	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.001
F test	0.451	0.922	0.873	0.578	0.886	0.618	0.707

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

TABLE A1. BALANCE TABLE, CONTINUED

Outcomes	(8) Public Job	(9) Leadership	(10) CCP	(11) Income	(12) English	(13) Social Media	(14) Class
Control	0.009	-0.092**	0.044	0.085	-0.216**	-0.054	-0.046
	(0.037)	(0.043)	(0.030)	(0.141)	(0.104)	(0.069)	(0.170)
Tax Evasion	-0.005	-0.035	0.014	-0.101	-0.148	-0.015	-0.262
	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.029)	(0.152)	(0.107)	(0.070)	(0.174)
Prostitution	-0.003	-0.022	0.053*	0.133	-0.119	-0.039	0.178
	(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.032)	(0.153)	(0.109)	(0.074)	(0.174)
Constant	0.239***	0.538***	0.117***	6.445***	2.794***	3.377***	5.737***
	(0.027)	(0.032)	(0.021)	(0.105)	(0.077)	(0.049)	(0.122)
Observations	1,065	1,065	1,065	1,057	1,065	1,065	1,065
R-squared	0.000	0.005	0.004	0.003	0.004	0.001	0.006
F test	0.978	0.159	0.270	0.443	0.215	0.868	0.0966

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

A1.2 Check for Preference Falsification

To address potential preference falsification problems, we randomly sampled half of the respondents and reminded them of the anonymity and privacy protection they are afforded during the experiment. Figure A2 shows that the anonymity treatment does not change respondents' attitudes toward the KOL and state repression, and willingness to express dissent and conduct self-censorship. The findings suggest that respondents are unlikely to have been hiding their true preferences during the survey.

TABLE A2. EFFECTS OF ANONYMITY ON OUTCOMES

Outcomes	(1) Support KOL	(2) Support Repression	(3) Express Dissent	(4) Self-Censorship
Anonymity	0.064	0.059	0.025	-0.036
	(0.078)	(0.193)	(0.032)	(0.101)
Female	-0.097	0.322	0.015	0.401***
	(0.082)	(0.199)	(0.035)	(0.110)
Age	0.011**	0.005	-0.003*	0.006
	(0.004)	(0.011)	(0.002)	(0.006)
Education	-0.033*	-0.036	-0.002	0.101***
	(0.018)	(0.042)	(0.008)	(0.025)
Minority	0.178	0.174	0.005	0.614**
	(0.255)	(0.631)	(0.129)	(0.269)
Religious	-0.049	0.658***	0.063	0.124
	(0.094)	(0.217)	(0.042)	(0.126)
Married	0.075	-0.169	0.023	-0.663***
	(0.115)	(0.302)	(0.052)	(0.158)
Employed	-0.206	0.080	-0.033	-0.331*
	(0.128)	(0.334)	(0.053)	(0.179)
Public Job	0.115	-0.182	0.118***	-0.434***
	(0.095)	(0.248)	(0.041)	(0.124)
Private Job	-0.013	0.142	0.062	0.232*
	(0.094)	(0.243)	(0.038)	(0.124)
CCP Member	0.161	0.362	0.072	-0.074
	(0.115)	(0.283)	(0.053)	(0.149)
Income	0.043	-0.189***	-0.017	0.046
	(0.030)	(0.065)	(0.012)	(0.039)
English Skill	0.024	0.148	0.025	-0.065
	(0.040)	(0.105)	(0.018)	(0.054)
SNS Usage	-0.091*	0.402***	-0.045**	0.089
	(0.053)	(0.128)	(0.021)	(0.072)
Class	0.007	0.095	0.038***	-0.112***
	(0.025)	(0.059)	(0.010)	(0.032)
Province FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	2.819***	6.347***	0.295*	1.692***
	(0.359)	(0.851)	(0.154)	(0.489)
Observations	1,055	759	759	1,055
R-squared	0.061	0.096	0.131	0.160

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

A1.3 Ethical Considerations

We obtained approval for all aspects of this study from the IRBs of the authors' home institutions and adhere to the EGAP Principles on Research Transparency and Protection of Research Team Members. We also follow the APSA Principles and Guidance for Research with Human Subjects in conducting the online survey experiment. First, we obtained informed consent from our respondents. The consent form was presented to respondents immediately upon entering the survey. We provide information about the content of the survey, the general purpose of the research, the estimated time of the survey, the potential risks and benefits to respondents, the respondent's rights in participating in

the survey, the anonymous nature of the survey, and the contact information for the IRBs in case of complaints. Respondents could choose to agree or disagree with the consent form. Choosing "agree" indicates explicit consent to participate. Choosing "Disagree" automatically exited people from the survey.

The survey ended with a debrief to inform respondents that the information about government criticism in the survey were made by several different public figures instead of one as stated in the experiment. When respondents read the information about the dissident prior to treatment randomization (the "Criticism" panel in Figure 5), they are told that the criticisms were all made by one public figure. In the debriefing at the end of the experiment, respondents are told that the criticisms they were shown earlier were made by several different public figures. We associated a number of different criticisms with one figure because we do not want respondents to associate the criticism with a particular public figure that they might know and have prior conceptions of. Making the criticism more general is essential in reducing the impact of respondents' preconceptions associated with specific public figures, which would have made it difficult for us to measure the effects of disguised vs. blatant repression. Providing general criticisms rather than a specific case also helped minimize the sensitivity of the research for respondents. Aside from this, there is no deception in any other aspect of the research, including the identity, activities, and motivations of the researchers.

We took a number of measures to further minimize potential risks to respondents and research team staff. First, we collected non-identifiable information only and the information are securely stored in servers outside China. We informed respondents the protection of privacy in the beginning of the survey and allowed them to exit the survey at any time. Second, we also avoid asking questions that are sensitive in the context of China. For example, we did not ask about support for political institutions, attitudes toward the CCP, and opinions toward political leaders. Third, we carefully choose the wording of the questions to minimize their sensitivity. We then asked our Chinese collaborators to check the questions and languages used in the survey and removed sensitive ones. The non-sensitive nature of the survey is reflected by the low voluntary dropout rate. Among

the 2263 survey takers, there are only 137 respondents (6%) who did not finish the survey but were not forced out by screening mechanisms (i.e., respondents who spent 2 to 30 minutes in the survey but did not finish all questions).[A1] And many of them might leave the survey for reasons other than its sensitivity. Given its non-sensitive nature, this online survey should cause no harm or trauma to participants.

The survey was conducted through a reputable, US-based survey company, which further help protect respondents' privacy and increase data security. Each respondent received a small amount of payment (10 - 15 Chinese Yuan, or 1.5 - 2.2 USD equivalent) as compensation for their time.

A2 Main Analyses

A2.1 Main Results and Robustness Check

Table A3 reports the effects of crime charges on three main outcomes. The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition. Columns (1), (4), and (7) show the results without controls. Columns (2), (5), and (8) show that the results remain robust with covariates such as gender, age, education, minority status, religion, marriage status, employment status, public sector job, private sector job, party affiliation, income, language skills, social class, and social media usage. Columns (3), (6), and (9) add province fixed effects and the results remain statistically significant. In the main paper, we use estimates from Columns (3), (6), and (9) for Figure 6.

A2.2 Self-censorship

Table A4 reports the full results of the Table 3 in the main paper, including the estimates of each individual control variable. To summarize the results again, compared with no repression, charging the critic with soliciting prostitutes increases self-censorship among self-reported critics of the regime (Column[2]), especially those who have less stringent moral standards [Column[4]].

[A1] Except for the 1065 effective respondents, the other 1061 survey takers were screened out for quota control or attention check reasons.

TABLE A3. EFFECTS OF CRIME CHARGES ON OUTCOMES

Outcomes	Support KOL			Support Repression			Express Dissent		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Control	1.017***	1.025***	1.031***						
	(0.095)	(0.096)	(0.097)						
Tax Evasion	-0.167*	-0.156	-0.152	1.037***	1.047***	1.054***	-0.109***	-0.098**	-0.103***
	(0.097)	(0.097)	(0.098)	(0.227)	(0.224)	(0.230)	(0.039)	(0.038)	(0.039)
Prostitution	-0.404***	-0.408***	-0.410***	1.093***	1.082***	1.101***	-0.076*	-0.084**	-0.089**
	(0.101)	(0.101)	(0.099)	(0.236)	(0.230)	(0.234)	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Female		-0.097	-0.121*		0.173	0.251		0.006	0.020
		(0.069)	(0.071)		(0.182)	(0.195)		(0.034)	(0.035)
Age		0.011***	0.011***		0.002	0.004		-0.003	-0.003
		(0.004)	(0.004)		(0.011)	(0.011)		(0.002)	(0.002)
Education		-0.024	-0.036**		-0.056	-0.037		-0.001	-0.002
		(0.016)	(0.017)		(0.038)	(0.041)		(0.008)	(0.008)
Minority		0.188	0.072		-0.008	0.231		0.039	0.005
		(0.172)	(0.173)		(0.574)	(0.611)		(0.117)	(0.128)
Religious		-0.113	-0.060		0.821***	0.650***		0.076*	0.064
		(0.079)	(0.081)		(0.213)	(0.219)		(0.040)	(0.042)
Married		0.119	0.102		-0.139	-0.118		0.019	0.020
		(0.098)	(0.099)		(0.295)	(0.292)		(0.052)	(0.052)
Employed		-0.204*	-0.241**		-0.017	0.069		-0.029	-0.030
		(0.113)	(0.113)		(0.312)	(0.329)		(0.052)	(0.053)
Public Job		0.074	0.091		-0.081	-0.185		0.118***	0.117***
		(0.085)	(0.086)		(0.231)	(0.239)		(0.041)	(0.041)
Private Job		0.074	0.081		0.160	0.153		0.065*	0.061
		(0.080)	(0.082)		(0.238)	(0.240)		(0.037)	(0.038)
CCP Member		0.129	0.113		0.183	0.247		0.079	0.082
		(0.103)	(0.104)		(0.273)	(0.275)		(0.052)	(0.053)
Income		-0.008	0.021		-0.135**	-0.193***		-0.021*	-0.017
		(0.026)	(0.028)		(0.058)	(0.063)		(0.011)	(0.012)
English Skill		0.038	0.034		0.192*	0.189*		0.021	0.021
		(0.035)	(0.035)		(0.100)	(0.105)		(0.017)	(0.018)
SNS Usage		-0.050	-0.074		0.361***	0.408***		-0.037*	-0.045**
		(0.048)	(0.049)		(0.127)	(0.128)		(0.021)	(0.021)
Class		0.018	0.015		0.092	0.098*		0.039***	0.037***
		(0.023)	(0.023)		(0.059)	(0.059)		(0.010)	(0.010)
Province FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Constant	2.623***	2.625***	2.745***	6.777***	5.846***	5.611***	0.332***	0.349**	0.378**
	(0.071)	(0.315)	(0.324)	(0.173)	(0.754)	(0.819)	(0.030)	(0.144)	(0.156)
Observations	1,065	1,057	1,055	767	761	759	767	761	759
R-squared	0.204	0.234	0.260	0.036	0.094	0.131	0.011	0.093	0.140

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

A2.3 Information Seeking

Table A5 Columns (1)–(3) show that neither political nor non-political charges increase citizens' willingness to read more information about the arrested opinion leader. However, Columns (4)–(6) show that for respondents who choose to read more information, respondents are more likely to look for information about the opinion leader's personal life rather than political activism when they are charged with non-political crimes compared to opinion leaders charged with political crimes. State repression can lead to backlash when the act of repression generates more interest in the dissident and their cause. This

TABLE A4. SELF-CENSORSHIP

Outcome: Self-censorship	(1) Full Sample	(2) Critics	(3) Non-Critics	(4) Less Morally Stringent Critics	(5) More Morally Stringent Critics
Political	0.022	0.129	0.074	0.173	-0.002
	(0.142)	(0.185)	(0.200)	(0.245)	(0.278)
Tax Evasion	0.007	0.118	0.036	0.213	-0.263
	(0.142)	(0.183)	(0.203)	(0.232)	(0.277)
Prostitution	0.059	0.374*	-0.121	0.547**	0.030
	(0.144)	(0.191)	(0.203)	(0.246)	(0.313)
Female	0.401***	-0.098	0.771***	-0.043	-0.212
	(0.111)	(0.141)	(0.175)	(0.176)	(0.287)
Age	0.006	0.009	0.009	-0.004	0.024
	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.015)
Education	0.101***	0.073**	0.088**	0.076*	0.063
	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.044)	(0.043)	(0.073)
Minority	0.610**	0.456	0.828**	0.394	-0.532
	(0.270)	(0.484)	(0.338)	(0.479)	(0.924)
Religious	0.127	-0.500***	0.489**	-0.704***	-0.400
	(0.126)	(0.172)	(0.199)	(0.226)	(0.300)
Married	-0.663***	-0.782***	-0.398*	-0.709**	-0.358
	(0.159)	(0.242)	(0.230)	(0.309)	(0.367)
Employed	-0.328*	-0.041	-0.429*	-0.320	0.252
	(0.179)	(0.308)	(0.229)	(0.422)	(0.503)
Public Job	-0.434***	-0.383**	-0.220	-0.088	-0.846***
	(0.124)	(0.162)	(0.215)	(0.224)	(0.287)
Private Job	0.231*	0.362**	0.078	0.332	0.232
	(0.124)	(0.175)	(0.184)	(0.232)	(0.309)
CCP Member	-0.074	0.449**	-0.802***	0.566**	-0.012
	(0.149)	(0.179)	(0.291)	(0.232)	(0.358)
Income	0.046	0.028	-0.025	0.116	-0.088
	(0.039)	(0.054)	(0.057)	(0.076)	(0.091)
English Skill	-0.065	-0.075	0.181**	-0.300***	0.127
	(0.054)	(0.075)	(0.090)	(0.101)	(0.124)
SNS Usage	0.087	0.359***	0.039	0.338**	0.621**
	(0.072)	(0.125)	(0.090)	(0.157)	(0.249)
Class	-0.112***	-0.181***	-0.035	-0.060	-0.306***
	(0.032)	(0.045)	(0.049)	(0.056)	(0.069)
Province FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.652***	1.203	1.222*	1.256	0.649
	(0.495)	(0.821)	(0.715)	(1.142)	(1.278)
Observations	1,055	503	547	307	194
R-squared	0.160	0.238	0.271	0.307	0.381

The reported estimates are relative to the control condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

result suggests that charging dissidents with non-political crimes can reduce this backlash by diverting attention to the non-political aspects of dissidents lives and behavior.

A2.4 Perceived Morality of the Critic

Table A6 reports the effects of crime charges on respondents' perceived morality of the critic. The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition. Column (1) shows the results without controls. Columns (2) and (3) shows that the results remain

TABLE A5. SEEKING INFORMATION ON KOL

Outcomes	Read More Info. (RM) (Full Sample)			Read More Info.: Political (RM=Yes)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Control	0.056	0.072*	0.063	-0.022	-0.028	-0.030
	(0.043)	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.062)	(0.062)	(0.064)
Tax Evasion	0.025	0.022	0.006	-0.239***	-0.238***	-0.239***
	(0.043)	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.068)
Prostitution	0.038	0.054	0.038	-0.258***	-0.265***	-0.265***
	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.069)
Female		-0.069**	-0.063**		0.075	0.082
		(0.031)	(0.032)		(0.049)	(0.052)
Age		-0.003	-0.003		0.002	0.000
		(0.002)	(0.002)		(0.003)	(0.003)
Education		0.027***	0.028***		0.005	0.003
		(0.007)	(0.008)		(0.012)	(0.014)
Minority		0.136	0.132		0.032	0.015
		(0.093)	(0.109)		(0.115)	(0.133)
Religious		0.075**	0.091**		-0.064	-0.066
		(0.035)	(0.037)		(0.055)	(0.058)
Married		0.008	-0.009		0.158**	0.175**
		(0.046)	(0.047)		(0.069)	(0.075)
Employed		0.069	0.071		-0.119	-0.136
		(0.047)	(0.047)		(0.085)	(0.092)
Public Job		-0.008	0.024		-0.030	0.000
		(0.040)	(0.040)		(0.057)	(0.059)
Private Job		0.030	0.041		-0.061	-0.057
		(0.036)	(0.036)		(0.055)	(0.059)
CCP Member		0.105**	0.110**		-0.045	-0.047
		(0.049)	(0.050)		(0.066)	(0.071)
Income		-0.035***	-0.022*		0.034**	0.038**
		(0.011)	(0.012)		(0.016)	(0.017)
English Skill		0.055***	0.060***		0.006	0.009
		(0.016)	(0.016)		(0.023)	(0.024)
SNS Usage		0.052***	0.042**		0.015	0.010
		(0.019)	(0.019)		(0.034)	(0.035)
Class		-0.014	-0.021**		-0.022	-0.022
		(0.009)	(0.009)		(0.014)	(0.014)
Province FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Constant	0.417***	0.043	0.003	0.660***	0.367*	0.441*
	(0.031)	(0.134)	(0.147)	(0.047)	(0.215)	(0.241)
Observations	1,065	1,057	1,055	477	471	469
R-squared	0.002	0.118	0.162	0.056	0.102	0.146

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

robust when adding the aforementioned controls and province fixed effects. In the main paper, we use estimates from Column (3) for Figure 7.

A2.5 Belief in Criminal Charges

Some people may see the political motivation behind disguised repression and doubt about the non-political crime charged against the dissident. If people do not believe the non-political crime charge, we would not observe a decrease in the support for the dissident. We further examine to what extent respondents believe that the dissident committed the

TABLE A6. PERCEIVED MORALITY OF THE CRITIC

Outcomes	(1) Morality	(2) Morality	(3) Morality
Control	3.012***	2.821***	2.998***
	(0.406)	(0.408)	(0.422)
Tax Evasion	-1.062**	-1.179***	-1.065***
	(0.411)	(0.402)	(0.402)
Prostitution	-1.351***	-1.717***	-1.684***
	(0.448)	(0.423)	(0.419)
Female		0.258	0.279
		(0.308)	(0.332)
Age		0.017	0.019
		(0.018)	(0.019)
Education		-0.057	-0.069
		(0.062)	(0.070)
Minority		-0.331	-0.492
		(0.572)	(0.633)
Religious		-0.609	-0.330
		(0.381)	(0.399)
Married		0.099	0.134
		(0.414)	(0.426)
Employed		0.130	-0.106
		(0.493)	(0.509)
Public Job		0.380	0.237
		(0.408)	(0.440)
Private Job		-0.063	0.076
		(0.355)	(0.399)
CCP Member		1.409***	1.486***
		(0.482)	(0.501)
Income		-0.115	-0.084
		(0.114)	(0.133)
English Skill		0.110	0.122
		(0.157)	(0.168)
SNS Usage		-0.158	-0.258
		(0.189)	(0.211)
Class		0.198*	0.219**
		(0.104)	(0.109)
Province FEs	No	No	Yes
Constant	4.494***	4.298***	4.371***
	(0.306)	(1.122)	(1.247)
Observations	340	338	336
R-squared	0.300	0.361	0.417

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

charged crime. Table A7 shows that respondents in the non-political crime conditions are more likely to believe that the dissident committed the charged crime than respondents in the political crime condition. The findings suggest that non-political crime charges are credible to the average respondent. The differences between the political crime and non-political crimes may further imply that respondents do not agree with the political crime charge against the dissident.

TABLE A7. BELIEF IN THE CHARGED CRIME

Outcomes	Committed Crime		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Tax Evasion	0.840***	0.826***	0.844***
	(0.229)	(0.226)	(0.227)
Prostitution	1.068***	1.059***	1.080***
	(0.232)	(0.229)	(0.228)
Female		0.151	0.255
		(0.193)	(0.199)
Age		-0.013	-0.013
		(0.011)	(0.011)
Education		0.005	0.012
		(0.041)	(0.044)
Minority		-0.009	0.266
		(0.577)	(0.607)
Religious		-0.081	-0.217
		(0.229)	(0.241)
Married		-0.135	-0.068
		(0.282)	(0.283)
Employed		0.215	0.223
		(0.305)	(0.316)
Public Job		-0.685***	-0.805***
		(0.250)	(0.255)
Private Job		0.283	0.273
		(0.228)	(0.229)
CCP Member		-0.283	-0.204
		(0.288)	(0.290)
Income		0.223***	0.170**
		(0.068)	(0.071)
English Skill		-0.163	-0.194*
		(0.105)	(0.111)
SNS Usage		0.260**	0.308**
		(0.122)	(0.123)
Class		-0.038	-0.004
		(0.063)	(0.064)
Province FEs	No	No	Yes
Constant	6.619***	5.322***	5.183***
	(0.171)	(0.724)	(0.808)
Observations	767	761	759
R-squared	0.031	0.082	0.139

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

A3 Additional Pre-Registered Analyses

A3.1 Does Confession Matter?

Forced confession to alleged charges is usually a component of disguised repression. Dictators sometimes require political dissidents confess in front of the public. For example, the cases of Xue Manzi in China and Pratasevich in Berlarus involved public confession. When we examine the interaction effects of criminal charges and confession on the main outcomes, Table A8 shows that public confessions do not moderate the treatment effects in a statistically significant manner.

TABLE A8. INTERACTION EFFECTS OF CRIME CHARGES AND CONFESSION

Outcomes	(1) Support KOL	(2) Support Repression	(3) Express Dissent	(4) Self-censorship
Control	1.105***			-0.120
	(0.139)			(0.200)
Control x Confession	-0.147			0.172
	(0.193)			(0.282)
Tax Evasion	-0.169	1.260***	-0.087	-0.055
	(0.141)	(0.324)	(0.054)	(0.199)
Tax Evasion x Confession	0.027	-0.399	-0.032	0.082
	(0.195)	(0.457)	(0.078)	(0.288)
Prostitution	-0.350**	0.879**	-0.075	-0.007
	(0.147)	(0.352)	(0.057)	(0.200)
Prostitution x Confession	-0.125	0.461	-0.027	0.093
	(0.204)	(0.468)	(0.082)	(0.289)
Confession	0.094	-0.006	-0.014	0.036
	(0.141)	(0.337)	(0.059)	(0.199)
Female	-0.121*	0.241	0.021	0.395***
	(0.072)	(0.196)	(0.035)	(0.111)
Age	0.011***	0.004	-0.003	0.006
	(0.004)	(0.011)	(0.002)	(0.006)
Education	-0.035**	-0.043	-0.002	0.103***
	(0.017)	(0.041)	(0.008)	(0.025)
Minority	0.048	0.274	0.017	0.616**
	(0.174)	(0.616)	(0.129)	(0.274)
Religious	-0.061	0.655***	0.065	0.128
	(0.081)	(0.217)	(0.042)	(0.127)
Married	0.102	-0.113	0.019	-0.658***
	(0.099)	(0.295)	(0.052)	(0.159)
Employed	-0.244**	0.093	-0.033	-0.311*
	(0.114)	(0.328)	(0.054)	(0.182)
Public Job	0.092	-0.209	0.121***	-0.445***
	(0.087)	(0.239)	(0.041)	(0.125)
Private Job	0.085	0.130	0.062	0.226*
	(0.082)	(0.240)	(0.039)	(0.125)
CCP Member	0.118	0.224	0.084	-0.093
	(0.104)	(0.275)	(0.053)	(0.151)
Income	0.022	-0.197***	-0.017	0.045
	(0.027)	(0.062)	(0.012)	(0.039)
English Skill	0.032	0.194*	0.022	-0.063
	(0.035)	(0.105)	(0.018)	(0.054)
SNS Usage	-0.075	0.425***	-0.047**	0.096
	(0.050)	(0.129)	(0.021)	(0.073)
Class	0.015	0.102*	0.037***	-0.110***
	(0.023)	(0.059)	(0.010)	(0.033)
Province FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	2.819***	6.347***	0.295*	1.692***
	(0.359)	(0.851)	(0.154)	(0.489)
Observations	1,055	759	759	1,055
R-squared	0.061	0.096	0.131	0.160

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

A3.2 Heterogeneous Effects by Respondent Morality

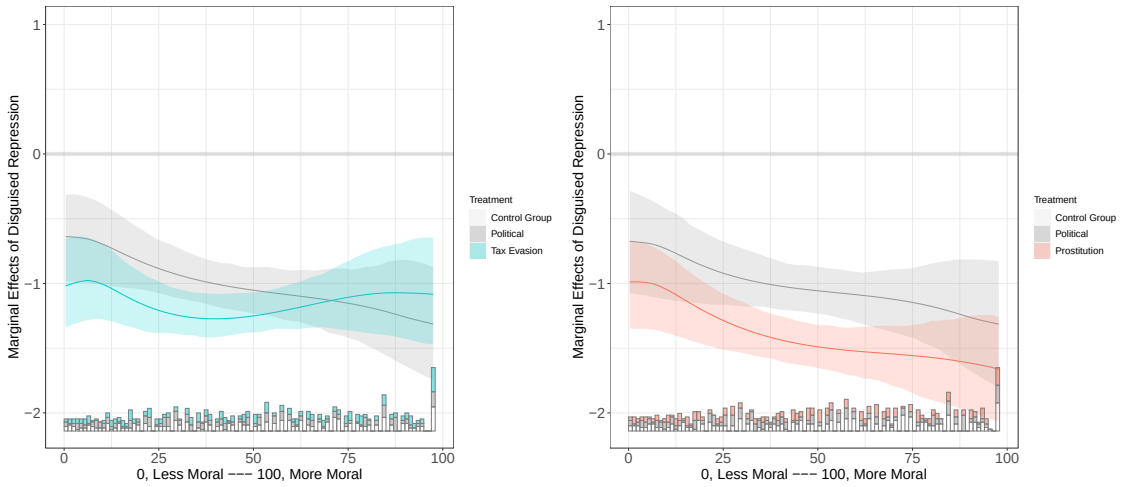
To measure moral standards, we use the ethical values and norms battery from the World Value Survey (WVS). The WVS is one of the most frequently used survey instruments to capture the values and beliefs of people around the world. The ethical values and norms questions have been widely used to measure moral values in different societies (e.g., Barker 1992; Doerrenberg and Peichl 2013; Vauclair and Fischer 2011). We use 15 items from the 6th wave of the WVS and one item ('casual sex') from the 7th wave (see Table A9). The items were rated on a 11-point Likert scale with higher numbers reflecting a more lenient or tolerant attitude (from 'never justified' = 0 to 'always justified' = 10). Previous research finds that these question should be organized into different dimensions of morality Barker (1992) and Halpern (2001). We follow this research and organize items into three dimensions: self-interest, personal-sexual, and violence.

TABLE A9. WVS MORALITY ITEMS

No.	Item	Chinese	Category
1	Fraudulent collection of government benefits	向政府要求自己无权享受的福利	Self-Interest
2	Fare evasion (e.g., do not pay for bus ride)	逃票(乘坐公共汽车不买票)	Self-Interest
3	Stealing	偷盗	Self-Interest
4	Tax evasion	有机会就逃税	Self-Interest
5	Taking bribes	接受贿赂	Self-Interest
6	Homosexuality	同性恋	Personal-Sexual
7	Prostitution	卖淫	Personal-Sexual
8	Abortion	堕胎	Personal-Sexual
9	Divorce	离婚	Personal-Sexual
10	Premarital sex	婚前性行为	Personal-Sexual
11	Casual sex	随意的性行为	Personal-Sexual
12	Suicide	自杀	Violence
13	Euthanasia	安乐死	Violence
14	Wife beating	打老婆	Violence
15	Corporal punishment (of children)	父母打孩子	Violence
16	Violence against others	针对他人的暴力行为	Violence

Do the effects of disguised repression differ for those who have more and less stringent moral standards? To explore whether this is the case, we use a composited measure that adds up all morality items, across the self-interest, personal-sexual, and violence dimensions (Table A9). Figure A1 shows the results with Panel (a) comparing tax evasion (cyan) with political crime (grey) and Panel (b) comparing prostitution (coral) with political crime (grey).

FIGURE A1. RESPONDENT MORAL VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS



(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion

(b) Political vs. Prostitution

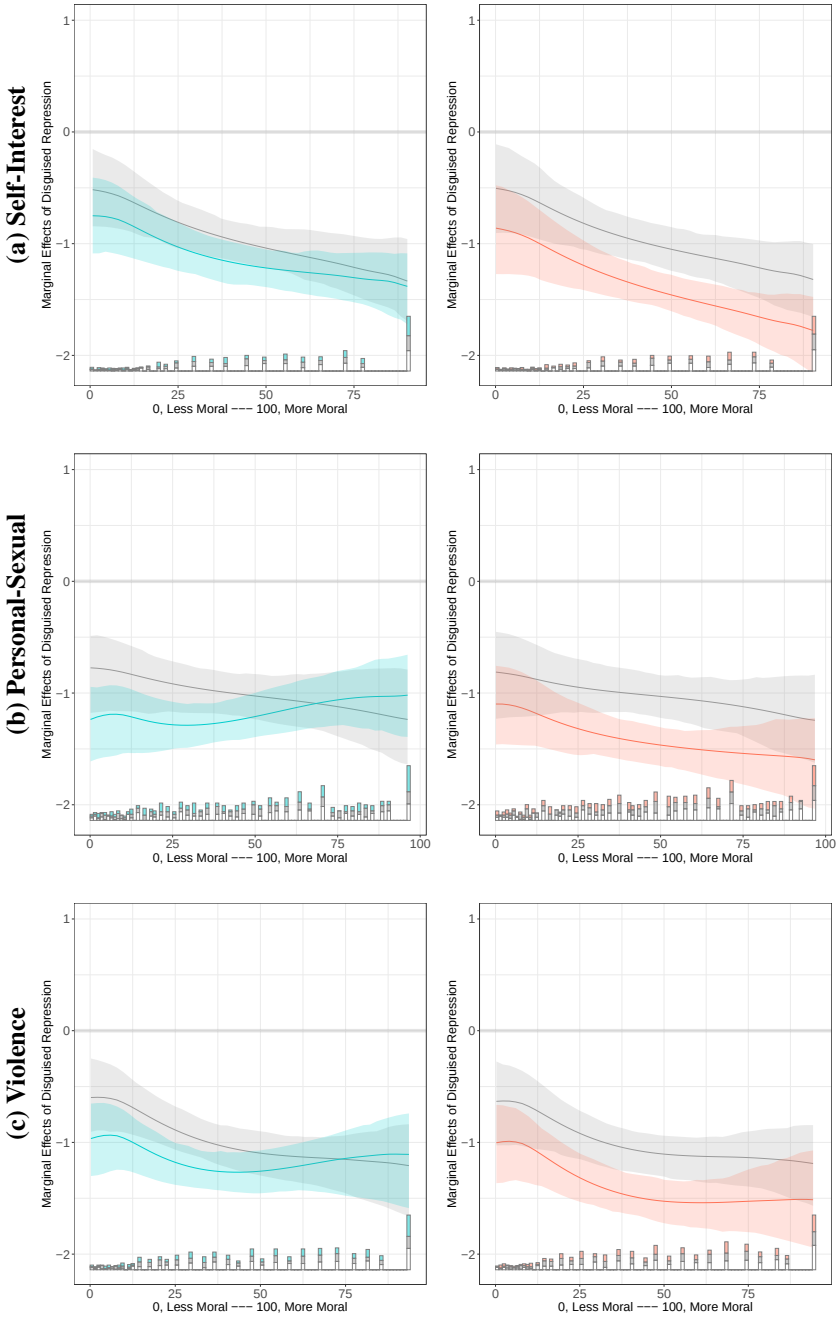
Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

Figure A1 shows that non-political crimes such as tax evasion and soliciting prostitutes have stronger effects on diminishing support for the arrested opinion leader among respondents who hold more stringent moral values. This moderating effect is especially large with regard to the prostitution charge, and the political crime has a smaller overall effect than non-political crimes (i.e., the grey lines in Figure A1 are generally above the cyan and coral lines).

Next, we generate three measures of moral values by analyzing items in each moral dimension (self-interest, personal-sexual, violence) separately. Figure A2 plots the heterogeneous effects of disguised repression on attitudes toward KOLs using the three different dimensions of moral values. The tax evasion treatment affects people with more stringent moral values on the self-interest dimension but not people with more stringent values on personal-sexual and violent behavior (the cyan lines in Figure A2). On the other hand, the prostitution treatment affect people with more stringent moral values on all three dimensions (the coral lines in Figure A2).

It is worth noting that compared with the control condition, charging dissidents with a political crime also significantly reduces perceived morality of the KOL (Figure 7) and has a stronger negative effect among respondents with more stringent moral standards

FIGURE A2. THREE TYPES OF MORAL VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS



Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors. Grey line indicates political crime; cyan line indicates tax evasion; coral line indicates soliciting prostitutes.

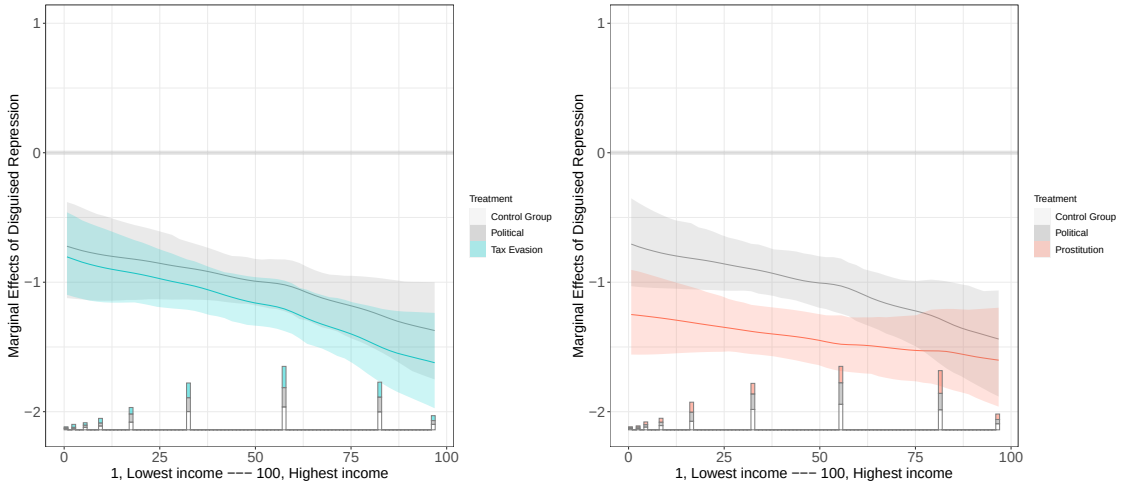
(Figure A1 and Figure A2). These results may be driven by the fact that criminalization of any behavior (e.g., protest, free speech) associates that behavior with negative values and overtones of immorality. This means for individuals with more stringent moral standards, any actions that is criminalized may be seen as immoral. Moreover, it is also possible that people with more stringent moral standards are more likely to abide by rules and regulations set by an authoritarian regime because morality is what *societies* determine to be "right" and "acceptable," and in authoritarian regimes, the autocrats can shape what is "right" and "acceptable" by setting the rules. In other words, these results suggest that individuals with higher moral standards in these authoritarian societies may be more likely to agree with political repression when political acts are criminalized than those with lower moral standards. Future research is needed to determine whether criminalizing dissent may be in and of itself effective in justifying repression in dictatorships.

A3.3 Heterogeneous Effects by Respondent Demographics

As we pre-registered, we explore the heterogeneous effects of disguised repression by respondent demographics. Figure A3 shows that political and non-political crimes have stronger effects on diminishing support for the arrested opinion leader among higher-income respondents.

Figure A4 shows that tax evasion has stronger effects on diminishing support for the arrested opinion leader among better-educated respondents. Education does not moderate the effects of political crime and prostitution.

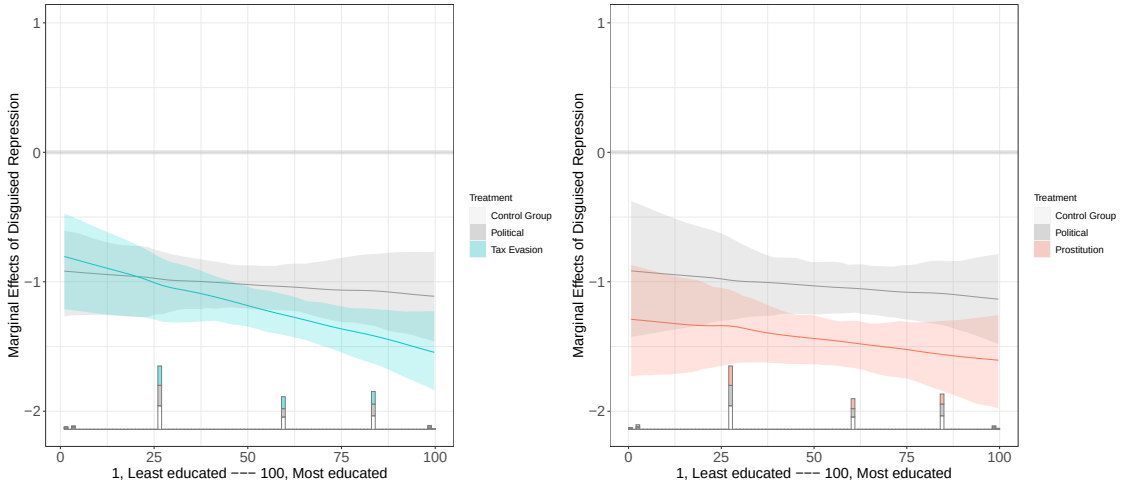
FIGURE A3. RESPONDENT INCOME AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS



(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion (b) Political vs. Prostitution

Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

FIGURE A4. RESPONDENT EDUCATION AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS



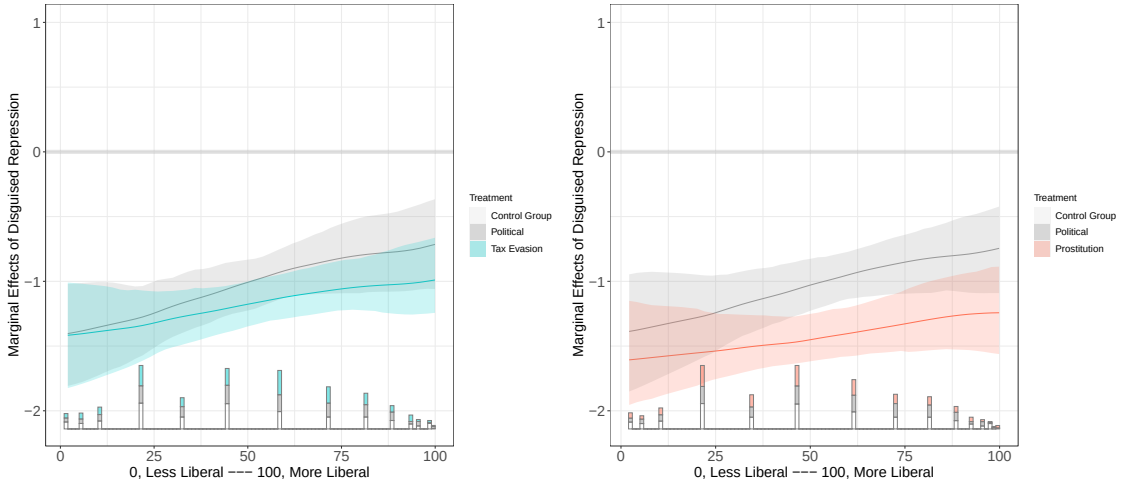
(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion (b) Political vs. Prostitution

Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

A3.4 Heterogeneous Effects by Other Respondent Characteristics

When we explore the heterogeneous effects of disguised repression by other pre-registered respondent characteristics, Figure A5 shows that non-political crimes such as tax evasion and prostitution have weak effects on diminishing support for the arrested opinion leader among respondents who hold more liberal values. Moreover, liberal values appears to have a larger moderating effect on the political crime than on non-political crimes.

FIGURE A5. LIBERAL VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS



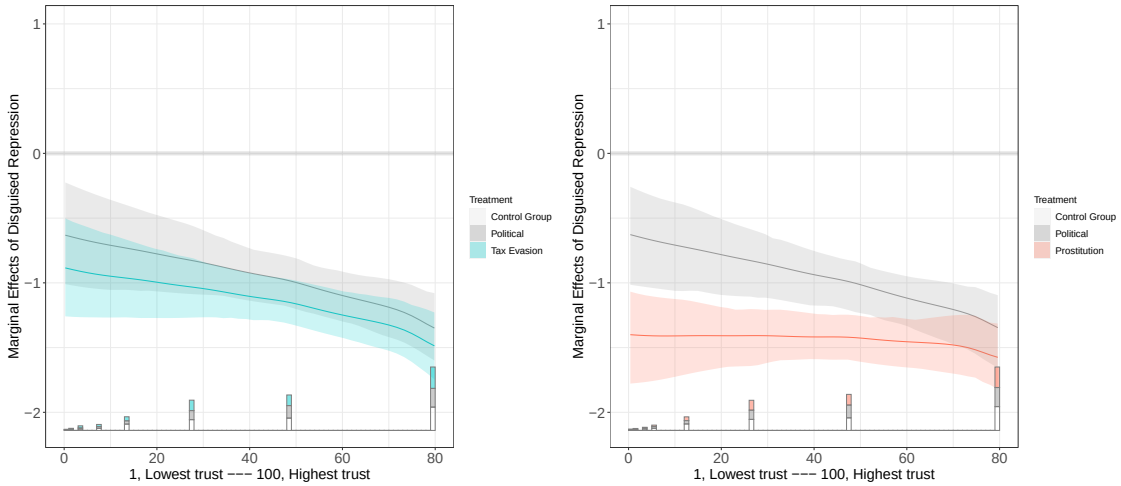
(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion

(b) Political vs. Prostitution

Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

Figure A6 shows that the political crime and tax evasion have stonger effects on diminishing support for the arrested opinion leader among respondents who trust the government more. On the other hand, trust in government does not moderate the effects of prostitution.

FIGURE A6. TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS



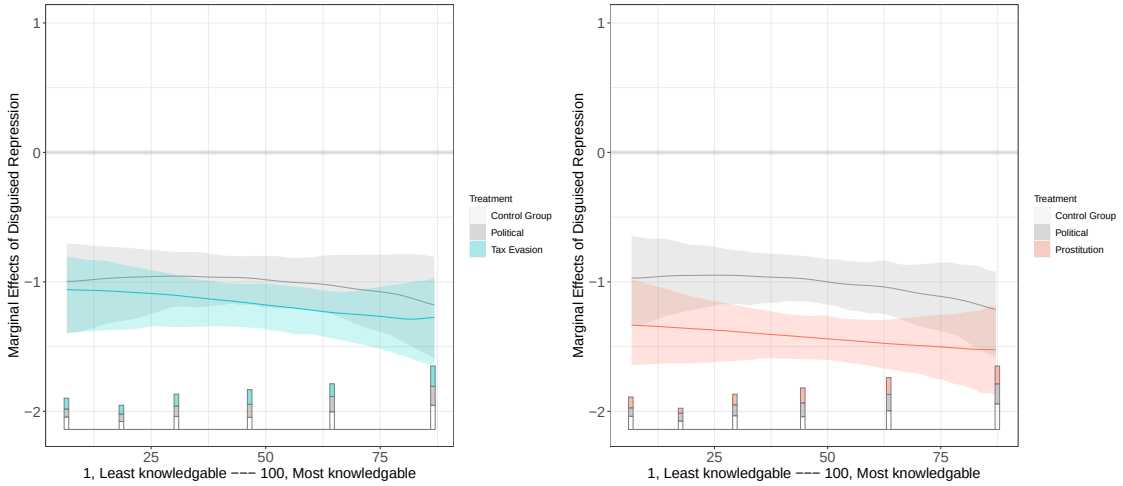
(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion

(b) Political vs. Prostitution

Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

Figure A7 shows that respondents' political knowledge does not moderate the effects of political and non-political crimes.

FIGURE A7. POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARD KOLS

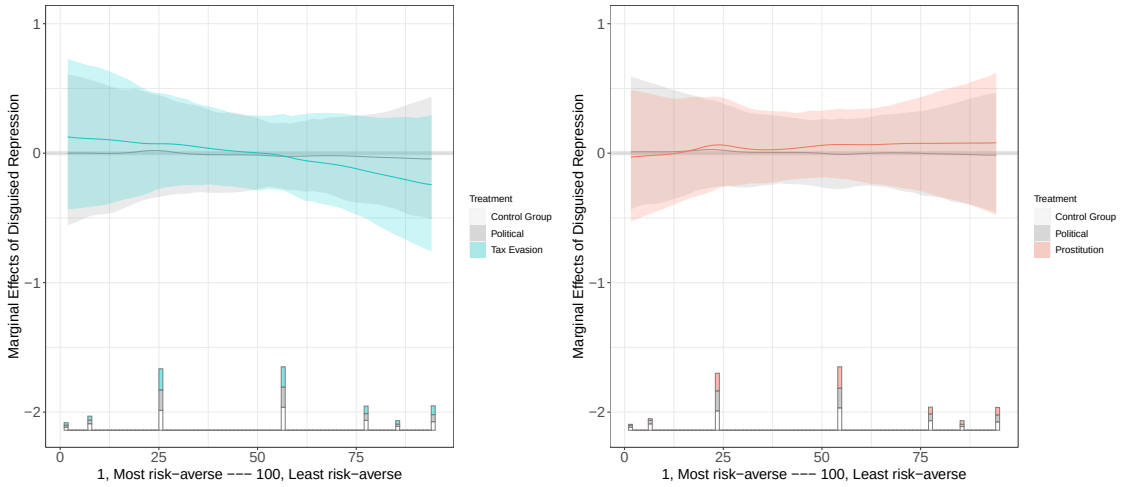


(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion (b) Political vs. Prostitution

Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

Figure A8 shows that respondents' risk Tolerance does not moderate the effects of political and non-political crimes on self-censorship.

FIGURE A8. RISK TOLERANCE AND SELFCENSORSHIP



(a) Political vs. Tax Evasion (b) Political vs. Prostitution

Note: The reported estimates are relative to the control group (at 0); areas represent 95% confidence intervals based on Huber-White robust standard errors.

A3.5 Manipulation Check

We include manipulation checks at the end of the survey so that the manipulation check question does not intervene with treatment effects. The multiple choice question asks respondents to identify which crime the KOL was charged with. Table A10 cross-tabulates the treatment variable and respondents' answer to the manipulation check question. The accuracy of responses are high for all three crimes: 85% for political crime, 85% for tax evasion, and 86% for prostitution. However, respondents in the control group, who received no information about punishment, tend to mistakenly think the KOL was charged with the political crime. This implies that Chinese citizens have a strong tendency to link online criticism to political repression. The fact that respondents confuse the control condition with the political crime condition instead of non-political crime conditions further suggests that the crime of spreading harmful information is a reasonable proxy of political repression.

Note that the manipulation check question is asked at the end of the survey–a relatively long time after respondents saw the treatment information. This might explain why the accuracy of this check is not higher. Nevertheless, when we check the robustness of the main results by excluding respondents who answered this question incorrectly, Table A11 shows that all the results remain robust.

TABLE A10. MANIPULATION CHECK

Treatment \ Manipulation Check	Control	Political	Tax Evasion	Prostitution	Total
Control	152	105	12	29	298
Political	13	211	8	15	247
Tax Evasion	10	22	234	8	274
Prostitution	11	19	5	211	246
Total	186	357	259	263	1,065

TABLE A11. MAIN RESULTS: MANIPULATION CHECK PASSED

VARIABLES	Support KOL			Support Repression			Express Dissent		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Control	1.583***	1.575***	1.564***						
	(0.104)	(0.106)	(0.108)						
Tax Evasion	-0.171*	-0.179*	-0.189*	1.217***	1.260***	1.297***	-0.151***	-0.134***	-0.142***
	(0.103)	(0.103)	(0.103)	(0.248)	(0.245)	(0.251)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Prostitution	-0.469***	-0.464***	-0.484***	1.246***	1.239***	1.280***	-0.085**	-0.094**	-0.106**
	(0.102)	(0.102)	(0.102)	(0.258)	(0.253)	(0.255)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Female		-0.042	-0.049		0.153	0.215		0.038	0.047
		(0.073)	(0.076)		(0.197)	(0.210)		(0.036)	(0.036)
Age		0.007	0.007		0.006	0.011		-0.003	-0.004*
		(0.004)	(0.004)		(0.012)	(0.012)		(0.002)	(0.002)
Education		-0.032*	-0.037*		-0.045	-0.026		0.001	0.000
		(0.018)	(0.019)		(0.043)	(0.046)		(0.008)	(0.009)
Minority		-0.031	-0.145		-0.043	0.237		-0.055	-0.108
		(0.179)	(0.180)		(0.635)	(0.673)		(0.107)	(0.113)
Religious		-0.269***	-0.208**		0.895***	0.653***		0.015	-0.004
		(0.088)	(0.090)		(0.232)	(0.237)		(0.042)	(0.044)
Married		0.017	-0.012		-0.170	-0.152		0.014	0.009
		(0.104)	(0.106)		(0.314)	(0.317)		(0.054)	(0.054)
Employed		-0.035	-0.099		-0.283	-0.310		-0.038	-0.045
		(0.119)	(0.117)		(0.316)	(0.339)		(0.056)	(0.055)
Public Job		0.090	0.122		0.070	-0.047		0.108**	0.111**
		(0.092)	(0.094)		(0.254)	(0.264)		(0.045)	(0.044)
Private Job		0.124	0.148		0.120	0.143		0.065*	0.063
		(0.089)	(0.091)		(0.260)	(0.262)		(0.038)	(0.040)
CCP Member		-0.020	-0.036		0.197	0.255		0.064	0.060
		(0.104)	(0.104)		(0.289)	(0.296)		(0.056)	(0.056)
Income		0.005	0.041		-0.122*	-0.210***		-0.016	-0.013
		(0.029)	(0.031)		(0.064)	(0.071)		(0.012)	(0.012)
English Skill		0.023	0.017		0.062	0.019		-0.000	-0.003
		(0.038)	(0.039)		(0.116)	(0.122)		(0.019)	(0.020)
SNS Usage		-0.072	-0.091		0.457***	0.513***		-0.027	-0.041*
		(0.055)	(0.057)		(0.139)	(0.145)		(0.022)	(0.023)
Class		-0.014	-0.019		0.103	0.111*		0.030***	0.028**
		(0.025)	(0.026)		(0.066)	(0.066)		(0.011)	(0.011)
Province FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Constant	2.569***	2.998***	3.007***	6.706***	5.563***	5.574***	0.318***	0.384**	0.473***
	(0.075)	(0.353)	(0.360)	(0.194)	(0.826)	(0.900)	(0.032)	(0.152)	(0.163)
Observations	808	802	800	656	651	649	656	651	649
R-squared	0.331	0.351	0.386	0.049	0.100	0.149	0.021	0.066	0.135

The reported estimates are relative to the blatant repression condition; Huber-White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

A4 Questionnaire

A4.1 Criticism and Treatment Conditions

In the experimental setting, all respondents read an excerpt about an unnamed dissident's online criticisms of Chinese government policies. The following content shows the wording of the criticism excerpt and three treatment conditions. Note that in the pure control condition, respondents receive no information about punishment.

Criticism: A well-known opinion leader often criticizes current affairs and discusses viral public events online on behalf of the public. For example, he once: called

for greater disclosure of officials' property; fought for the equal right to education for the children of migrant workers in cities; called on the government to strengthen law enforcement against "child trafficking". His remarks are widely disseminated on the Internet and have a large social influence.

Treatment 1–Political Crime: Recently, this opinion leader was taken away by the police. After a period of investigation and evidence collection, this person was charged with publishing and disseminating harmful information, and was formally arrested. The police disclosed some more detailed incriminating evidence, including the testimony of several witnesses. The verdict stated that this person posted the controversial remarks online and spread a large amount of harmful information, which had an extremely bad influence on the public. The court sentenced the person to three years in prison.

Treatment 2–Tax Evasion: Recently, this opinion leader was taken away by the police. After a period of investigation and evidence collection, this person was charged with tax evasion and was formally arrested. The police disclosed some more detailed incriminating evidence, including the testimony of several witnesses. The verdict stated that in order to obtain more benefits, the person employed a lot of tricks to evade paying taxes, and took advantage of some loopholes in tax systems. The court sentenced the person to three years in prison.

Treatment 3–Soliciting Prostitutes: Recently, this opinion leader was taken away by the police. After a period of investigation and evidence collection, the person was charged with soliciting prostitutes and group licentiousness, and was formally arrested. The police disclosed some more detailed incriminating evidence, including the testimony of several witnesses. The verdict stated that the person had special desires and sexual habits, frequently visited pornographic places, and was obsessed with soliciting prostitutes and promiscuous activities for a long time. The court sentenced the person to three years in prison.

A4.2 Variable Definitions

TABLE A12. VARIABLE DEFINITIONS

Variable	Question	Options
	Individual Characteristics:	
Female	What is your gender?	1 = female; 0 = male. Age
Which year were you born?		
Province	Which province is your permanent residency?	
Education	What is your highest level of education attainment?	1 = primary school; 2 = secondary school; 3 = vocational middle school; 4 = high school; 5 = junior college; 6 = college; 7 = master's; 8 = Ph.D.
Minority	What is your ethnicity?	0 = Han; 1 = otherwise.
Single	What is your marital status?	0 = married; 1 = otherwise.
English proficiency [1, 5]	What is your level of English proficiency?	1 = do not speak English at all; 2 = can say a few sentences; 3 = can speak and read a little; 4 = can manage conversations, but not fluently; 5 = can speak fluently.
Income category [1, 10]	What is your total disposable income, including salaries, stipends, and allowances?	10 categories, from low to high.
Religious	Do you have a religion?	1 = yes; 0 = no.
CCP member	What is your political affiliation?	1 = Chinese Communist Party; 0 = otherwise.
Self-reported social class [0, 10]	What do you think is your social class on a 0-10 scale?	0 = the bottom of the society; 1 = the top of the society.
Having worked	Have you ever had a full-time job?	1 = yes; 0 = no.
Public sector worker	What is the nature of your employer?	1 = SOEs or the government; 0 = otherwise.
Being reported to	In your job, are there any people who report to you?	1 = yes; 0 = no.
	Predispositions:	
Liberal values: component 1	The government has no right to interfere in the decision to have a child, or how many children to have.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
Liberal values: component 2	People should be restricted from gathering and participating in demonstrations in public places.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
Liberal values: component 3	Foreign journalists who frequently publish negative reports about China should be allowed to enter China.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
Liberal values: component 4	People should be allowed to post positive or negative comments on government policies on the Internet.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
Liberal values: component 5	In the long run, multiparty systems are unsuitable for China in its current state.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
National sovereignty: component 1	Both elementary and middle school students or college students should participate in military training arranged by the state.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
National sovereignty: component 2	Founding leaders and national heroes can be used as objects of criticism or ridicule in literary and artistic works.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
National sovereignty: component 3	Statutory holidays should be set up to commemorate Chairman Mao's birthday.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
National sovereignty: component 4	The government should attach importance to the development of military strength, as it does to the development of the economy.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.
National sovereignty: component 5	In the case of mature military conditions, military power can be considered to unify Taiwan.	5-point Likert scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.

Political Knowledge:

Political knowledge 1	How many members are there in the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China?	1 = 7; 0 = 5, 9, 15, Not sure.
Political knowledge 2	Which of the following people does not belong to the Standing Committee of the 19th Politburo of CPC?	1= Wang Qishan; 0 = Han Zheng, Zhao Leji, Li Zhanshu, Don't Know.
Political knowledge 3	Which of the following countries is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council?	1 = Germany; 0 = United States, China, Russia, UK, Not sure.
Political knowledge 4	During the past 5 years, what is roughly the average real GDP growth rate of China?	1 = 6%; 0 = 3%, 13%, 20%, Not sure.
Political knowledge 5	Which of the following is the current Prime Minister of France?	1 = Emmanuel Macron; 0 = Jacques Chirac, François Hollande, Nicolas Sarközy, Not sure.

Morality Items:

Could you please tell me to what extent do you accept the following behaviors?		
Item 1	Fraudulent collection of government benefits	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 2	Fare evasion (e.g., do not pay for bus ride)	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 3	Stealing	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 4	Tax evasion	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 5	Taking bribes	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 6	Homosexuality	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 7	Prostitution	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 8	Abortion	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 9	Divorce	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 10	Premarital sex	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 11	Casual sex	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 12	Suicide	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 13	Euthanasia	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 14	Wife beating	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 15	Corporal punishment (of children)	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable
Item 16	Violence against others	11-point Likert scale, 0 = Totally unacceptable, 10 = Totally acceptable

Other indicators:

Trust in the central government	Do you trust the central government?	11-point Likert scale. 0 = not trust at all; 10 = trust completely.
Trust in the local government	Do you trust the local government?	11-point Likert scale. 0 = not trust at all; 10 = trust completely.
State media usage	Do you usually get news information from official media, such as CCTV news, People's Daily, reference news, etc. (including its website and social media account)?	1 = Never, 2 = Several times per month, 3 = Several times per week, 4 = Everyday
Social media usage	Do you usually get news information from social media, such as browsing WeChat, Weibo, etc.?	1 = Never, 2 = Several times per month, 3 = Several times per week, 4 = Everyday
Online comments	Do you usually forward or comment on hot political events on social media?	1 = Never, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Usually, 4 = Very frequently.
Online criticism	Do you criticize unreasonable policies, rules and regulations on social media or online forums?	1 = Never, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Usually, 4 = Very frequently.
Trust in state media	If there is disagreement over a viral event, how much do you believe in the content reported by official media?	11-point Likert scale. 0 = not trust at all; 10 = trust completely.

	Attitudinal Outcomes:	
Attitude toward dissident	Based on the information currently available, what is your general attitude towards this person?	1.Very disgusted ... 5. Very supportive
Attitude toward repression	Do you think it is reasonable to arrest this person?	0.Totally unreasonable ... 10. Totally Reasonable
Dissent on behalf of dissident	If there are netizens calling for solidarity with the detained KOL, would you express solidarity for the KOL on social media?	1. Yes, 0. No
Keep following	If you have followed this person's Weibo or Wechat, are you going to keep following his or her?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Unfollowing friends	If your friends or WeChat public accounts you follow continue to repost this person's remarks, would you consider unfollowing them?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Others keep following	If other people have followed this person's Weibo or WeChat account in the past, do you think they would continue to follow it now?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Likes	Do you give likes to some Wechat or Weibo articles that discuss current affairs and hot events?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Forwarding	Do you forward some articles that discuss current affairs and hot events?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Discussing	Do you participate in discussions of current affairs and hot events online?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Following	Do you follow some Weibo or WeChat public accounts that often discuss current affairs and hot events?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Discuss in private	Do you discuss current affairs and hot events privately with your friends?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Protest online	If you or your family have been treated unfairly in your life and have nowhere to appeal, would you post the matter online to seek public opinion support?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Others protest online	If other people are treated unfairly in their lives and have nowhere to appeal, do you think they will post things online to seek public opinion support?	1 = Certainly not, 2 = probably not, 3 = probably yes, 4. certainly yes.
Crime committed	Do you think this individual has committed the alleged crime?	0. Certainly no ... 10. Certainly yes.
Perceived morality	What do you think of this person's moral level?	0. Very low... 10. Very high.
	Behavioral Outcomes:	
Read more	If you wish, you can choose to "read more" about the individual after completing all the questions. If you select "Do not want to read" now, this information will not be displayed when you complete the questionnaire.	1 = Read more, 2 = Do not want to read.
Information to read	Earlier you selected "Read more" about the individual. Which of the following information would you like to read?	1 = Online remarks and behavior, 2 = Morality and life style.
Self-censorship 1	Some people say, "China's population is rapidly aging, and the social pension burden is greatly increased, which is the result of the government's long-term implementation of family planning." Do you agree with this statement?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Strongly agree, 5 = I do not want to answer this question.
Self-censorship 2	Some people say, "Because of the state's policies on housing, education, medical care, etc., the burden on the Chinese people is heavier." Do you agree with this statement?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Strongly agree, 5 = I do not want to answer this question.
Self-censorship 3	Some people say, "In the past few years, intellectuals have been afraid to express their opinions in public." Do you agree with this statement?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Strongly agree, 5 = I do not want to answer this question.
Self-censorship 4	Some people say, "In the past few years, our country's policies towards Hong Kong and Taiwan have been problematic." Do you agree with this statement?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Strongly agree, 5 = I do not want to answer this question.
Self-censorship 5	Some people say, "the abolition of the term limit for central leaders may mean that leading cadres will be held for life". Do you agree with this statement?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Strongly agree, 5 = I do not want to answer this question.

Appendix References

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