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What do we know about the punctuated equilibrium theory in China? A systematic review and research priorities

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Abstract

The punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) shows that government policy is mostly stable with occasional drastic change, which scholars attribute to institutional friction and limited information processing capacity. Although the existing PET literature predominantly focuses on democracies, scholars have started to apply the theory to authoritarian countries. Autocracies are a fertile testing ground for the theory's underlying mechanisms because they appear to experience less institutional friction but more informational restrictions than democracies. However, PET studies on autocracies are still rare. To deepen our understanding of the PET and the policy process beyond democracies, we conduct a systematic review of 88 Chinese language PET journal articles. We show that Chinese language PET research is increasing. Contrary to the English language PET literature, most Chinese studies are qualitative, while a key similarity is the weak operationalization of PET core concepts. The reviewed studies confirm a punctuated equilibrium pattern of policymaking in China but provide only limited evidence for more intense punctuations compared with democracies. Future PET research on China ought to use long-term data sets and examine institutional friction and information processing by policymakers. We also argue for more international exchange and comparative research to advance our understanding of the policy process in China and other autocracies.

KEYWORDS

China, public policy, punctuated equilibrium theory

INTRODUCTION

According to the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), government policy is generally stable with only incremental change, but occasionally we witness large-scale departure from existing policies (True et al., 2006). This pattern was first identified by Baumgartner and Jones in their 1993 study on agenda change in the United States. Since then, the PET has been applied to other countries. These studies have

found the same punctuated equilibrium pattern in policy change as in the United States, not just in agenda setting but also in policy output (Baumgartner et al., 2018). In subsequent studies, this punctuated equilibrium pattern of policy change has been attributed to institutional and cognitive constraints, both of which prevent policymakers from responding in a timely and proportional manner to existing and emerging problems (Baumgartner et al., 2018).

Although the PET was originally developed to explain policy change patterns in the United States, scholars have started to apply the theory to autocracies (Chan & Zhao, 2016; Jones & Thomas III, 2019; Lam & Chan, 2015; Meng & Fan, 2022; Sebők & Boda, 2021). Autocracies provide a fertile ground for testing existing PET hypotheses (Lam & Chan, 2015) as they tend to experience less institutional friction due to centralization, but more informational restrictions than democracies. Applying the PET to these new contexts can advance our understanding of the PET's underlying mechanisms of institutional friction and information processing (Baumgartner et al., 2017).

Despite the potential for theory development, very few studies have applied the PET to autocracies. In the English language policy literature, not more than two dozen articles have been published on the PET in autocracies.[1] A pioneering study by Lam and Chan (2015) applies the PET to Hong Kong during autocratic and democratic times. They found more intensified punctuations during the authoritarian period, and attribute this to lower institutional friction. Chan and Zhao (2016) were the first to publish an English language article that applies the PET to mainland China. They show punctuation intensification by examining policymakers' exposure to information (Chan & Zhao, 2016). Baumgartner et al. (2017) compare budgetary change in autocracies and democracies, demonstrating that liberal democracies have an advantage in collecting and processing information compared with nondemocracies. Sebők and Berki (2018) examine budgeting in Hungary during autocratic and democratic times. Their evidence supports the hypothesis that policy agendas in autocracies show a higher level of punctations.

Given the small number of English language PET studies on autocracies, many issues and questions remain unaddressed. First and foremost, it is necessary to test whether the same punctuated equilibrium pattern is visible in data sets other than the few used in existing studies (Baumgartner et al., 2017). Secondly, existing research has only shed light on some aspects that shape underlying mechanisms. Beyond labor disputes, it is unclear what other factors (e.g., civil society, crisis events, or news media) may lead to punctations in autocratic contexts (Chan & Zhao, 2016; Yan et al., 2021). Moreover, it is unclear how institutional design affects information processing, when policymakers gather information, and how they prioritize among the myriad of problems that they are facing (Baumgartner et al., 2017; Chan & Zhao, 2016). Thirdly, as raised by Boda et al. (2021), additional research is needed on the implications and effects of punctations, including in terms of regime legitimacy and social stability.

To contribute to addressing these pressing questions, we conduct a systematic review of 88 Chinese language PET studies on China. Given the effort and time required to conduct PET studies—due to the need for long-term data sets (Eissler et al., 2016)—it is important to leverage *existing* research to advance our understanding of the policy process. This is especially true in authoritarian settings, where limited data availability further challenges PET research. We focus on China because it is the world's largest autocracy. Despite its population of more than a billion people—whose daily lives are directly shaped by public policy—China remains understudied in the realm of policy process theories.

By meticulously synthesizing and analyzing Chinese language PET studies on China and by identifying research priorities, we aim to contribute to theory development while providing insights into China's policy process. Our review is structured around three research questions: (1) How does Chinese language PET research use the PET to study the policy process in China?; (2) To what extent does Chinese language PET research on China find the punctuated equilibrium pattern in policymaking and how are policy-making patterns explained?; and (3) What are the most urgent research gaps regarding PET in China? By addressing these questions, we directly respond to calls for more systematic and rigorous policy process studies covering countries beyond North America and Europe (Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018; Williamson & Magaloni, 2020). Moreover, this review advances diversity in policy process theories by focusing on a new context and new authors, which is consistent with the recent call by Heikkila and Jones (2022) for more inclusiveness in the subfield of policy process theories.

Addressing these research questions leads to the following contributions. Firstly, we show that Chinese language PET research on China is increasing. However, contrary to the English language PET literature, most Chinese language PET research is qualitative and rather narrow in scope. Moreover, these studies tend to be loose applications of the PET and do not thoroughly operationalize the PET core concepts. Secondly, the studies in our review confirm a punctuated equilibrium pattern of policymaking in China, but there is only limited evidence for more intense punctuations compared with democracies. This has important implications for discussions on the PET in China as this finding runs counter to existing expectations of the nature of punctuations in autocracies versus democracies and it calls for additional (replication) research on the intensity of punctuations in China. Thirdly, contributing to our understanding of China's policy process, based on our analysis, we identified several features that profoundly impact policy dynamics in China, namely centralized institutions, top-down leadership, and a single-party system. Fourthly, based on our review, we put forward a set of recommendations for future research. PET research on China ought to examine the intensity of punctuations over long periods of time, the nature of institutional friction, and information processing by policymakers. We also argue for more international exchange and comparative research to advance our understanding of the policy process in China and other autocracies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The punctuated equilibrium theory

The PET captures and explains the observation that while government policy is stable for long periods of time, radical change does occasionally happen. First put forward by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) in *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, the PET was inspired by modern paleontology theory that argued against incrementalism in evolutions (Prindle, 2012). Baumgartner and Jones (1993) based their theory on extensive empirical evidence and policy case studies conducted over long periods of time, up to a century (Eissler et al., 2016). They demonstrated how policy monopolies prevent policy change and how such equilibria can be destroyed by expanding issues to other policy venues.

In later work, the PET developed into a "general punctuation thesis" (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) that emphasizes the importance of information processing in policymaking. This is due to policymakers being boundedly rational (Jones, 1999; Lindblom, 1959, 1979), which means that their attention is limited to only a small portion of policy issues at any given time. Consequently, most policies will remain at the status quo since policymakers are unwilling or unable to focus their attention on them (Baumgartner, 2017). However, if a policy issue does not receive sufficient attention, the issue may deteriorate. When policymakers finally pay attention, drastic change follows (Baumgartner et al., 2018). In these cases, policymakers tend to overreact and disrupt the status quo.

In addition to information processing, institutional friction is another key mechanism underlying the PET. Institutional friction has been described as the decision and transaction costs involved when translating "informational inputs" into "institutional outputs" (Jones et al., 2003). High turnover of government employees (Flink, 2017) and institutions such as procedural rules, electoral systems, interest groups, and competing political parties hinder information being translated and changes being made (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2003). Long-term budgetary commitments and bureaucratic inertia make it difficult for governments to shift attention to emerging problems (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

In addition to attention allocation and institutional friction, scholars further operationalize the PET through the concepts of policy image (Peterson, 2018, 2021) and policy venue (Burns et al., 2017; Jegen & Philion, 2017). Policy image refers to "how a policy is understood and discussed" by the public and in news media (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 25). Policy images can shift dramatically in tone and focus over time (Chaqués & Palau, 2009; Wyszomirski, 1998). Policy venues are the institutions in society that have the power to decide on a particular policy issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Policy image and venues are closely related. When a policy image changes, venue change becomes more likely and vice

versa (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jegen & Philion, 2017). Policymakers can "manipulate the dominant understanding of the issues," while influencing the institutions that have decision-making power over it (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 35). Political systems and policy actors respond to information and actions through negative and positive feedback mechanisms. In case of negative feedback, existing policy venues and the policy image are mutually reinforcing, leaving new information unnoticed and inefficiently processed. Policy change is limited, and the state of stability is prolonged (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Wolfe, 2012). On the other hand, a positive feedback mechanism extends signals and, therefore, produces profound punctuations (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002). When an issue goes through a positive feedback process, its effect can be extended, altering the policy image, and mobilizing potential participants, so that small actions can generate dramatic disruption (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002).

In terms of methods, PET studies tend to examine budget change or agenda change, which is typically measured based on leptokurtic distribution (Breunig & Jones, 2011; Jones et al., 2003). The PET assumes that policy change shows a normal distribution if policymakers adequately and timely respond to policy issues (Desmarais, 2019). However, a punctuated equilibrium pattern of policy change shows a higher central peak and bigger tails compared with a normal distribution (Baumgartner et al., 2018). Consequently, an L-kurtosis value above 0.123 is considered to be evidence of a punctuated equilibrium pattern of policymaking (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

The punctuated equilibrium theory in China: Theory-based expectations

Although the PET was originally developed in the United States (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), the punctuated pattern of policy change is expected to be found even in other political systems (Baumgartner et al., 2009). This is because punctuations are the result of bounded rationality (Baumgartner et al., 2018), that is, the limited capacity of human beings to comprehensively process all information rationally (Jones & Thomas III, 2019). Since bounded rationality is an inherent feature of human beings and organizations, there is no reason to expect that China will not experience periods of stability alternated with punctuations.

However, a difference between democracies and China is the expectation that punctuations will be more intense in the latter. The policy process in China is relatively centralized, which means fewer veto points in decision making and lower institutional friction. Moreover, restrictions on the availability of information (which may result from centralization) restrain adequate information processing. Consequently, it has been hypothesized that policy punctuations will be more intense in contexts of high centralization and restricted information availability (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Koski & Workman, 2018). Based on this reasoning, one would expect to find more intense punctuations in China, which would be reflected by relatively high L-kurtosis values.

Centralization and restrictions on information flows are also likely to contribute to more stable policy images and fewer venue changes in China compared with democracies. This is because marginalized groups play a key role in changing existing policy images by making their concerns known in new policy venues (Boushey, 2012). However, the formation and activities of interest groups in China are strictly regulated (Ashley & He, 2008; Gao & Teets, 2020; Teets, 2014). Moreover, strict governance of news and social media (Roberts, 2018) makes it difficult to challenge existing definitions of policy problems and solutions. Consequently, we expect policy images in China to remain stable over relatively long periods of time, with relatively few policy venue changes. Likewise, we expect negative feedback to be prolonged due to limited channels for providing feedback.

The punctuated equilibrium theory in China: Existing English language studies

Compared with countries in North America and Europe, very few English language PET studies examine mainland China. A search for "punctuated equilibrium theory" on Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of

Science, WorldCat, and Scopus in May 2022 resulted in only eight peer-reviewed journal articles on the PET in mainland China, which are listed in Appendix A. This section provides an overview of their main findings in relation to the theoretical expectations introduced above.

All eight existing English language PET studies on China agree that the punctuated equilibrium pattern is indeed present in policymaking in China. Based on an analysis of provincial-level annual budget change, Chan and Zhao (2016) find L-kurtosis values between 0.66 and 0.99. Yan et al. (2021) find L-kurtosis values of 0.24 for change in China's State Council's agenda and 0.20 for change in the Chinese Communist Party's agenda. In a study on attention to the concept of e-government, Meng and Fan (2022) find an L-kurtosis value of 0.605. Yao et al. (2021) calculate the L-kurtosis for change in selected aspects of fiscal expenditures in China and find values of 0.32 for economic construction, 0.39 for science, education, culture and health, and 0.22 for public health. Qualitative case studies also find punctuated patterns of policymaking. This includes studies by Tan (2007) on the Renewable Energy Law, Wang (2014) on rural land transfer policy, Dou and Liu (2020) on rural homestead policy, and Li et al. (2020) on cybersecurity.

Evidence of more intense punctuations in China is limited. There are only two English language studies that comprehensively measure L-kurtosis values in mainland China. In their study of provincial-level budgets, Chan and Zhao (2016) find L-kurtosis values (0.66 and 0.99) that are much higher compared with democracies. However, research on State Council and Party agendas by Yan et al. (2021) find L-kurtosis values (0.24 and 0.20) that are comparable with or slightly lower than in democracies.[2] One possible explanation for these disparate findings is the Progressive Friction Hypothesis (Baumgartner et al., 2009), which theorizes that punctuations in output (e.g., budget) tend to be more intense than punctuations in input (e.g., government agendas). The periods studied and analytic methods may also play a role. Hence, further research is needed to measure the intensity of punctuations in China.

Regarding the mechanisms underlying the punctuated equilibrium, Chan and Zhao (2016) attribute punctuations to restrictions on information flows. This is consistent with existing literature in the field of Chinese politics. News and social media in China are monitored and censored by government authorities (Roberts, 2018; Stockmann, 2013). Although China has developed mechanisms for citizens to communicate their concerns to government(s), the information shared through such channels is incomplete and not necessarily accurate (Pan & Chen, 2018). Systems specifically designed for local governments to report data to the national-level government also suffer from incomplete and even manipulated data (Ghanem & Zhang, 2014). Consequently, policymakers in China face challenges regarding information collection, which shapes their ability to respond to problems in a timely and adequate manner. However, based on their PET study of government attention to e-government, Meng and Fan (2022) argue that the information disadvantage has been decreasing in recent years, which they partly attribute to the development of new channels for public participation.

The exact role of centralization in China's punctuated equilibrium pattern of policymaking is unclear. Centralization allows policymakers to quickly adjust their attention and pass major policy change because there is limited space for opposition (Li et al., 2020; Tan, 2007). National-level centralization has become more visible through so-called "central leading groups" (*lingdao xiaozu*), which consists of top leaders in the Communist Party, who have access to both authority and resources (Li et al., 2020; Meng & Fan, 2022; Yan et al., 2021). Because central leading groups are assigned a specific small range of issues, this creates ways for parallel processing, presumably strengthening policymakers' ability to quickly process and respond to information in those issue areas (Li et al., 2020; Meng & Fan, 2022; Yan et al., 2021). However, Chan and Zhao (2016) argue that the advantages of centralization cannot outweigh the disadvantage of limited information availability.

Because only eight English language articles on the PET in China had been published up till 2021, many PET aspects remain underdeveloped. This includes measuring and explaining the intensity of punctuations throughout the policy cycle; the availability and processing of information at different levels of government; and the role of centralization. Moreover, most (6 out of 8) of these studies have a narrow focus, covering only a few policy venues, issues, and a limited period of time.

Long-term data sets are preferred for PET research. Collecting such data is resource-intensive in any context, but in China, this is exacerbated by challenges to data availability, access, and transparency.

Therefore, we collect and analyze *existing* Chinese language PET research on China to provide insight into how the theory is used in China and to deepen our understanding of China's policy process.

METHODOLOGY

This literature review follows the PRISMA approach, which stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Page et al., 2021). This approach consists of a checklist that aims to ensure transparency in terms of "why the review was done, what the authors did, and what they found" (Page et al., 2021, p. 1). The PRISMA approach has previously been applied to policy process theories, including by Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018) in a review of the PET. It has also been used in literature reviews of the Multiple Streams Framework (Jones et al., 2016; Rawat & Morris, 2016). Li and Weible (2021) use the PRISMA approach in their review of Chinese language research on the Advocacy Coalition Framework.

Figure 1 summarizes our steps of identifying, including, and excluding journal articles for our review. We elaborate on these steps below.
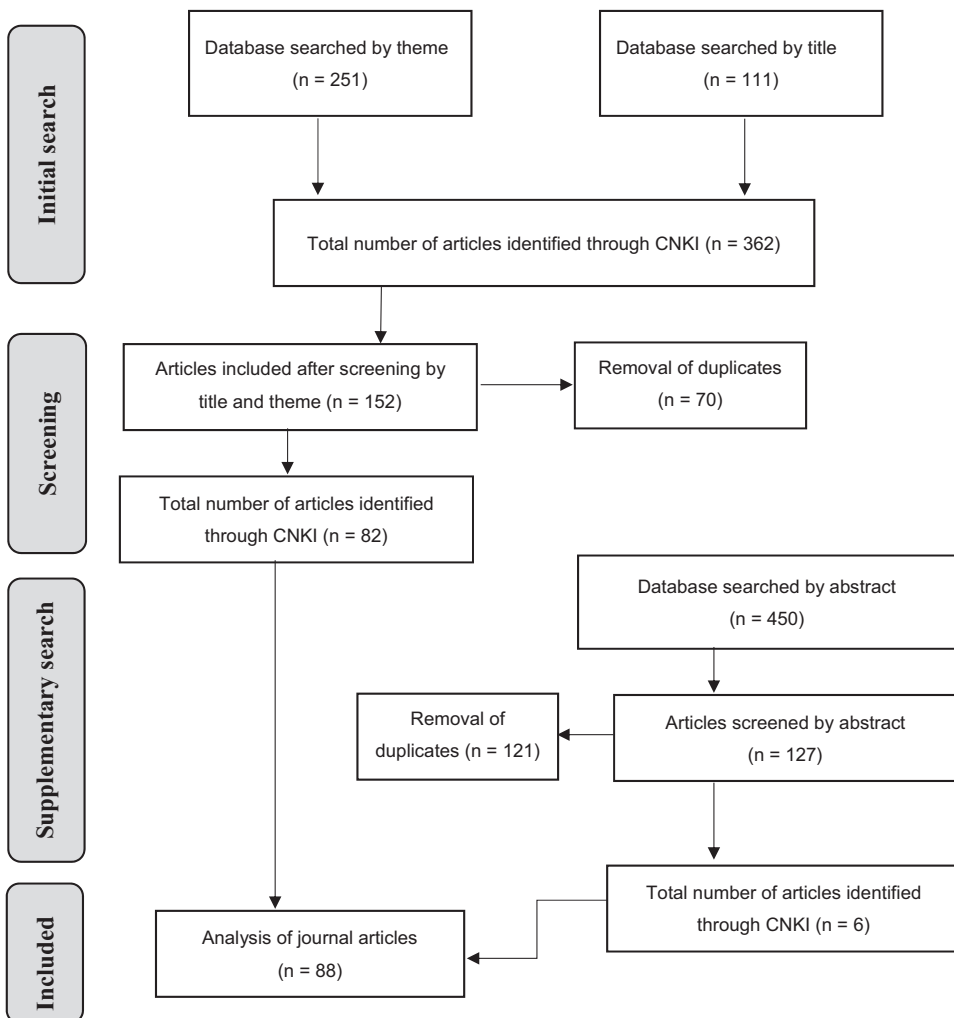

FIGURE 1 PRISMA-based systematic review: Identification of articles collected through CNKI.

Step 1: Initial search. Our initial search was conducted in January 2022, using the CNKI China Academic Journal Database. This is the world's largest database for Chinese academic literature. We searched for Chinese language articles published in academic journals, using the keywords "*jianduan junheng*" (punctuated equilibrium), "*jianduan pingheng*" (punctuated equilibrium), and "*jianduan junheng lilun*" (PET). As detailed in Appendix B, this initial search resulted in 362 articles.

Step 2: Initial screening. We read the titles and abstracts of the identified 362 articles and eliminated articles irrelevant to public policy or policy change. We used three criteria for inclusion. Firstly, we only included public policy studies. We removed studies on paleobiology, biology, demography, geology, economic transformation, and industry development that mentioned the PET but did not study policy change. Secondly, we only included studies focused on China. Six articles were excluded because they examined countries other than China. Thirdly, we only included studies that engage with the concept of PET. We ignored studies that merely mention PET as an example of public policy theory or a policy analysis method in their abstract but do not consider PET as the main research subject. Some other articles were excluded because they use punctuations and equilibriums simply as terms to describe change but fail to apply and operationalize the theory's concepts. After initial screening, the number of records was 152. See Appendix B Step 2 for the detailed number of exclusions.

Step 3: Duplication removal. We removed all duplications from the total 152 records. This resulted in a total number of 82 articles.

Step 4: Supplementary search. After the abstract screening process, we discovered a deficit in our initial search. We had only searched in articles' themes and titles but overlooked the abstracts. Since it is possible that a study engages in detail with the PET without explicitly mentioning PET in its title and themes, we conducted a supplementary search in abstracts using the three abovementioned key words. This resulted in 450 articles (see Appendix B). After repeating Step 2 (screening), we included 127 articles.

Step 5: Duplication removal. We repeated Step 3 to remove all duplications and found six additional PET studies. In the end, the PRISMA approach yielded 88 Chinese language journal articles that apply the PET to China. Appendix C lists all articles.

All 88 articles were read in detail and initially coded by the second author based on the codebook developed by both authors and summarized in Table 1. To ensure coding reliability, both authors met weekly to discuss the coded articles and reconcile any disagreements. All articles were analyzed again 6 months later in a second round of coding by the second author. Any discrepancies between the two coding rounds were reconciled through discussions between both authors and refinement of the codebook. In addition, consistent with O'Connor and Joffe (2020), the first author coded 10% of the journal articles ($n = 9$). For this, we selected every tenth article in Appendix C. A comparison of coding results showed that coding between the two authors was consistent, except from "policy area." We addressed this issue by refining the coding categories and conducting another round of coding for "policy area." The coding of each article is provided in Appendix D.

RESULTS: PET RESEARCH IN CHINA

The following sections present the results of our systematic review and answer the following research questions: (1) How does Chinese language research use the PET to study the policy process in China?; (2) To what extent does Chinese language PET research on China find the punctuated equilibrium pattern in policymaking and how are policy-making patterns explained?

Basic publication information: Growth, key scholars, and key journals

As shown in Figure 2, Chinese language PET research is increasing in recent years. The first Chinese language PET study in our data set was only published in 2009, more than a decade after the pioneering research published by Baumgartner and Jones in 1993. After the Chinese translation of *Reconceiving Decision-Making in Democratic Politics* (Jones, 1994) was published in 2010 and *Agendas and Instability in American*

TABLE 1 Codebook for analysis of Chinese language punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) articles.

| Item	Description
Publication information	Author, publication year, journal title, institutional affiliation, journal index (GCJC and CSSCI)
Policy area	Topical focus, adjusted from Jenkins-Smith et al. (2020): agriculture/ rural, budget, economy, education, environment and natural resources, governance, health, science and technology, social, or other
Government level	National, regional/provincial, or sub-provincial
Article type	Empirical, theoretical, or review
Methods	Qualitative or quantitative
	Research question or objective included: yes or no
	Methods section included: yes or no
	Hypothesis testing: yes or no
	L-kurtosis value: yes or no
Data	Data type: policy documents, case study, budget, literature, other
	Data period: start year till end year
Literature	Baumgartner or Jones cited (any publication): yes or no
	Lam and Chan (2015) cited: yes or no
	Chan and Zhao (2016) cited: yes or no
	Number of times cited by other Chinese language PET articles
	Citation of English to Chinese translated publications: yes or no
PET core concepts (adjusted from Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018))	Policy image operationalized: yes or no
	Policy venue operationalized: yes or no
	Attention allocation operationalized: yes or no
	Institutional friction operationalized: yes or no
	Feedback mechanism operationalized: yes or no
PET in China	PET can be applied to China: yes or no
	Main differences PET in China versus elsewhere
Conclusions	Article's main conclusions: themes and substance
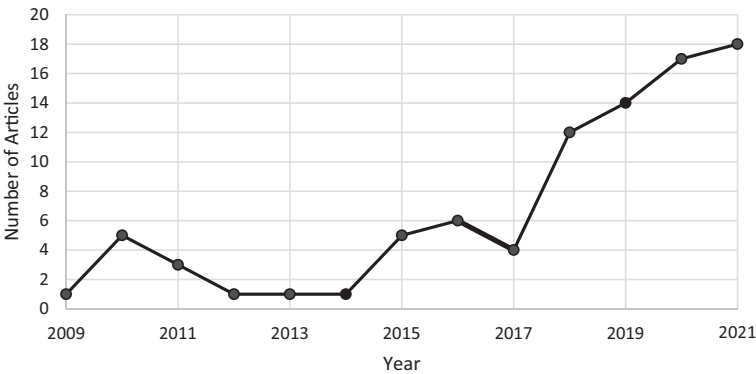
FIGURE 2 Chinese language punctuated equilibrium theory articles published per year. *Source*: CNKI, *n* = 88.

Politics (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) in 2011, Chinese language PET studies began to emerge, but only from 2018 did the number of studies start to increase more rapidly. Twelve studies were published in 2018, and the number has steadily risen to 18 in 2021.

Among all 126 authors in our data set of 88 articles, we found that most authors ($n = 112$) have published one PET article. There are only 12 authors who have published two PET articles. Wenzhao Li, a professor at Renmin University of China, has authored the most articles on PET in China ($n = 6$). Renmin University is one of the top universities for policy studies in China, which is reflected in the fact that 19% of all PET authors ($n = 17$) are based at this university. Cao Tangzhe at the Central University of Finance and Economics authored two articles in our data set (Cao & Hao, 2019, 2020), and, together with Wen Ya, translated A*gendas and Instability in American Politics* (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) to Chinese in 2011.

The articles in our data set were published in 75 different journals. Among them, the Journal of Gansu Administration Institute (*Gansu xingzheng xueyuan xuebao*) published the most PET articles ($n = 5$), while three other journals each published three articles, namely the Journal of Public Management (*Gonggong guanli xuebao*), the Journal of Public Administration (*Gonggong xingzheng pinglun*), and Chinese Public Administration (*Zhongguo xingzheng guanli*).

Most articles ($n = 60$) have been published in Chinese Core Journals and 62.5% ($n = 55$) has been published in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI). Chinese Core Journals (GCJC) and CSSCI are widely used indicators of research quality in China (Huang et al., 2021) and are integrated in the CNKI database that we used to collect the articles.

Diverse policy areas

Most articles in our sample have a narrow scope: they focus on one specific policy area. As shown in Figure 3, environment and natural resources is the most popular policy focus ($n = 12$), followed by education ($n = 11$), health ($n = 9$), and social issues ($n = 9$). Our results are consistent with the PET review by Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018), which found that environment is the most popular focus area, while health and education were also common. Other foci in the Chinese PET literature include governance, economic policy, agriculture and rural issues, and science and technology. While budget studies are common in English language PET studies (Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018), this is less prevalent in our data set, with only 8 such articles. Among all analyzed 88 PET articles, 10 are theory papers about the PET framework, which do not involve theory application and empirical analysis. Several articles cover two policy areas (Gao & Wu, 2020; Lei, 2019; Qi, 2021) and are, therefore, counted twice in Figure 3.
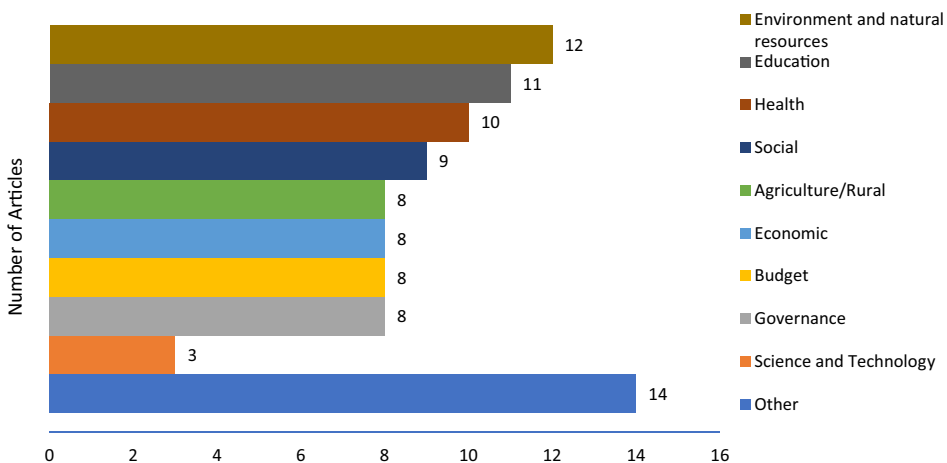

FIGURE 3 Policy areas covered in Chinese language punctuated equilibrium theory studies ($n = 88$).
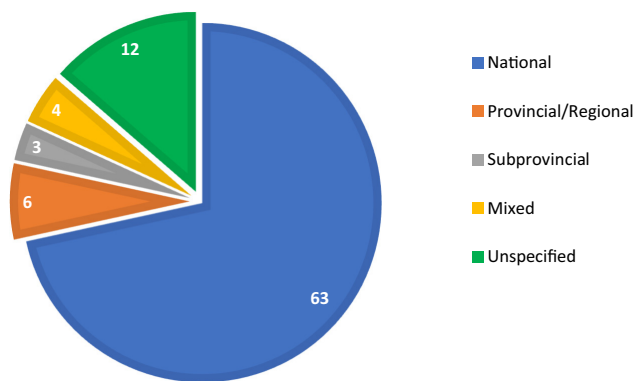
F I G U R E 4   Government levels studied by Chinese language PET studies ($n = 88$).

Focus on national-level government

As shown in Figure 4, most papers ($n = 63$) in our data set focus on the national-level government. Only six studies examine policy change at the provincial or regional level, for example, Yang (2021) on coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and Wang and Wang (2019) on environmental protection policy in Liaoning province. Three applications study sub-provincial policymaking, namely Meng and Zhang (2020), Qi (2021), and Wen (2014). Four studies combine data from all levels of governments (national, central, and provincial), which allows for a more comprehensive analysis of Chinese policymaking. Twelve studies did not specify the exact level of government, including all theoretical papers.

Citation of existing literature

The articles in our data set rarely cite English language PET literature beyond Baumgartner and Jones. All but 13 articles refer to key PET publications (see Figure 5), namely research by Baumgartner and/ or Jones, the 2011 Chinese translation of *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), or the 2010 translation of *Reconceiving Decision-Making in Democratic Politics* (Jones, 1994). The former translation has been cited by 30 articles, and the latter by 17. The 2004 Chinese translation of *Theories of the Policy Process* (Sabatier, 1999) was also cited extensively by Chinese scholars ($n = 27$). Moreover, 11 Chinese articles only cited the translated books but no other English literature. Only three Chinese articles cited both Lam and Chan (2015) and Chan and Zhao (2016), and another three articles referred to only one of these two studies. The fact that few articles cited English language articles beyond Baumgartner and Jones and the frequent citation of Chinese translations suggests that language may be a barrier for Chinese scholars to connect to the global PET research community.

How well do Chinese PET studies interact with others within China's academic community? On average, each article cited approximately three other articles in our data set and is cited more than twice by others. A study on taxi industry regulations in Lanzhou (Wen, 2014) is particularly popular: it is cited by 32 articles within our data set of 88 articles. Empirical studies tend to refer more to the explanations and conclusions of policy processes drawn by others before drawing their own. Without the language barrier, we observe active interaction and communication in this field of research in China.

Qualitative focus

While Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018) found that most existing English language PET research is quantitative, the Chinese PET studies in our data set are predominantly ($n = 67$) qualitative. Relatedly, we found that only eight articles explicitly tested PET hypotheses, with almost all of these ($n = 7$)

being quantitative studies. Similarly, only seven articles tested whether policy change follows a leptokurtic distribution.

In general, budget data are used less frequently compared with English language PET literature (Breunig & Jones, 2011; Jones et al., 1998, 2009). Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018) show that around 22% of PET applications focus on budgets. However, our results on Chinese PET studies demonstrate that only 7% used budgetary data. An explanation for this may be that reliable, comparable long-term budget data are not easy to collect in China.

Although most articles ($n = 64$) raise detailed and precise research questions or research objectives, as shown in Table 2, a majority ($n = 66$) does not have an explicit research methodology section, making it difficult to replicate the research. Only 22 articles state the data source and data collection method, including all quantitative articles.

As shown in Figure 6, data sources include statistical yearbooks, online policy databases, CNKI, and government websites. Most studies ($n = 55$) analyze policy documents but rarely mention how these policy
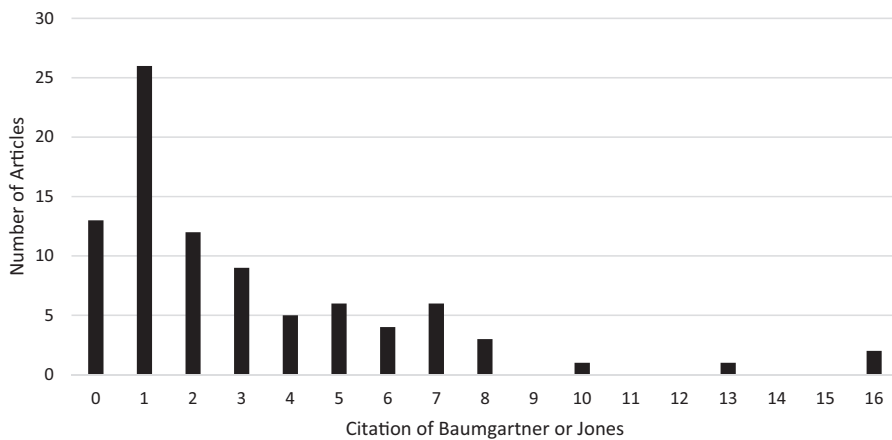

FIGURE 5 Frequency of Chinese language punctuated equilibrium theory articles citing Baumgartner or Jones ($n = 88$).

TABLE 2 Research approaches in Chinese language punctuated equilibrium theory studies ($n = 88$).

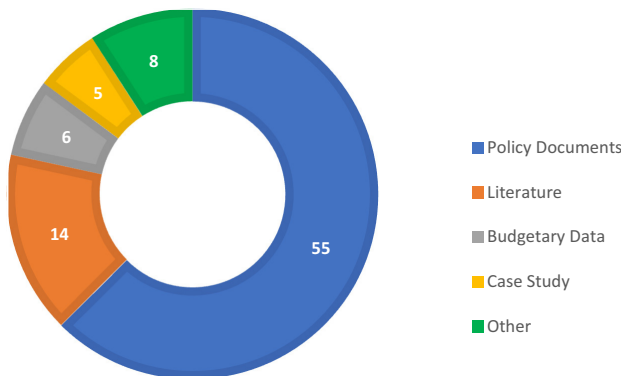|	Research question(s)	Method section	Hypothesis testing	Leptokurtic distribution testing
Yes	73%	25%	9%	8%
No	27%	75%	91%	92%

FIGURE 6 Types of data used in Chinese language punctuated equilibrium theory studies ($n = 88$).

documents were collected. Just six articles use budgetary data, and five studies analyze data derived from case studies. The remaining empirical studies ($n = 8$) rely on a mixed data source, including interviews, surveys, literature, policy documents, news articles, speeches, and meeting minutes. The theoretical papers ($n = 14$) rely on existing literature.

Loose operationalization of punctuated equilibrium theory core concepts

Following Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018), we address several questions: do Chinese PET studies merely refer to the concept of PET or carefully operationalize it? If the latter, how are they operationalized? To answer these questions, we examined the 74 empirical studies in our data set of 88 articles.

As shown in Table 3, the PET core concepts received uneven attention. Policy image and policy venue are the two most mentioned concepts, with more than 66% of all empirical articles ($n = 54$ and $n = 49$) paying attention to them. Only less than one-half ($n = 34$) refers to government attention allocation, and a minority ($n = 10$) addresses institutional friction. True et al. (2006) emphasized the interaction among these concepts as affecting the policy agenda. However, only 5 studies operationalize all four factors, while 21 articles refer to three factors, 10 articles refer to one factor, and 27 articles address two factors. About 15% of empirical studies ($n = 11$) did not mention any of these four concepts at all. Yet, compared with English language PET studies, where 31% of studies do not refer to any of these concepts (Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018), the Chinese PET literature is more in line with Baumgartner and Jones' work.

Feedback mechanisms have received only limited attention in China. Most empirical studies ($n = 46$) do not mention any feedback mechanism or they fail to obtain adequate evidence to prove the existence of a comprehensive feedback loop. Among those who have explicitly addressed the mechanisms, 9 studies

TABLE 3 Operationalization of punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) concepts in empirical Chinese language PET studies ($n = 74$), adjusted from Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018).

PET concepts	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Total number of articles that operationalize specific PET concepts		
Policy image	54	73.0%
Policy venue	49	66.2%
Attention allocation	34	46.0%
Institutional friction	10	13.5%
Number of articles that operationalize 1–4, or none of the PET key concepts		
Operationalization of one concept	10	13.5%
Operationalization of two concepts	27	36.5%
Operationalization of three concepts	21	28.4%
Operationalization of four concepts	5	6.8%
None of the concepts	11	14.9%
Number of articles that operationalize only one PET key concept		
Policy image	3	4.1%
Policy venue	1	1.4%
Attention allocation	3	4.1%
Institutional friction	3	4.1%
Number of articles that operationalize the PET concept of feedback		
Feedback in general	3	4.1%
Positive feedback	9	12.2%
Negative feedback	2	2.7%
Positive and negative feedback	14	18.9%
No feedback mechanism	46	62.2%

only focus on positive feedback, 2 focus on negative feedback, and 14 studies refer to both mechanisms. While negative feedback is more common in policymaking, positive feedback is correlated to punctuations and therefore it is unsurprising that it receives more attention than negative feedback.

FINDINGS: POLICY CHANGE PATTERNS IN CHINA

Punctuated equilibrium pattern in China

The studies in our data set observed the punctuated equilibrium pattern in Chinese policymaking. Most of the empirical studies ($n = 74$), covering a wide range of policy areas, show that policies in China are mostly stable in the long term but are disrupted by profound changes from time to time. Table 4 lists the L-kurtosis values measured in public budget studies. While the number of such studies in our data set is small ($n = 4$),[3] central, regional, and national public budget change since the 1990s all show a leptokurtic distribution (LK > 0.123), providing support for the punctuated equilibrium pattern in Chinese policymaking. This, thus, confirms the General Punctuation Hypothesis, which expects that "output change distributions from human decision-making institutions dealing with complex problems will be characterized by positive kurtosis" (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 608).

However, there is only limited evidence for punctuations being more intense in China compared with democracies. As shown in Table 4, the L-kurtosis for central-level budgetary change is between 0.262 and 0.431, for national-level budgets, it is between 0.287 and 0.446, and for regional budgets, it is between 0.326 and 0.832. Most of these values are approximate to L-kurtosis values found in democracies, which are between 0.28 and 0.611. These findings are at odds with the Informational Advantage Hypothesis, which was developed, tested, and confirmed by Chan and Zhao (2016), who found an L-kurtosis score of 0.87 for mainland China.

A key explanation for these different findings is that the data sets used in most Chinese PET studies are different from Chan and Zhao (2016), which is summarized in Table 5. First of all, Cao and Hao (2020) and Li et al. (2019) analyzed only budget estimates (*yusuan*), while Li and Li (2021) used government expenditure (*juesuan zhichu*), and Li et al. (2021) include both budget estimates and government expenditure. Chan and Zhao (2016) used government spending. Secondly, Cao and Hao (2020) and Li and Li (2021) do not include the full range of budget categories, which makes it difficult to compare these studies with Chan and Zhao (2016). To illustrate, Cao and Hao (2020) include 12 out of the total 24 categories used in government budgeting. Likewise, Li and Li (2021) include 9 out of 11 categories from 1995 to 2006 and 11 out of 24 categories after 2007. Chan and Zhao (2016) combined data from 1996 to 2013 covering 28 policy topics. The range of included budget categories may greatly affect the L-kurtosis score as some policy areas may be more prone to punctuations than others. Thirdly, in addition to the differences in data sets, the four Chinese language budget studies use a different data analysis approach than Chan and Zhao (2016). The former present a collection of provincial budgets and then calculate an L-kurtosis value of the aggregate data set, while the latter calculate the provincial-level L-kurtosis score and then calculate the mean.

Consequently, the only study that is comparable with Chan and Zhao (2016) is Li et al. (2019), who, as shown in Table 5, calculated L-kurtosis scores for each province and found an L-kurtosis score very similar to Chan and Zhao (2016). The former found a mean L-kurtosis of 0.8323 in their calculation of budget change for 36 provinces and administrative regions, while Chan and Zhao (2016) found a mean value of 0.87 for 28 provinces and administrative regions.

Information disadvantage and institutional friction

While Chan and Zhao (2016) explain the intensity of punctuations by the absence of "diverse, independent sources of information" and "traditional mechanism of institutional friction," only few Chinese language studies engage with these two underlying mechanisms.

TABLE 4 L-kurtosis values for annual public budget change in punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) studies.

Country	L-kurtosis	Time period	Source
PET studies on China (in English and Chinese)			
China central	0.262	2007–2016	Cao and Hao (2020)
	0.373	1992–2019	Li et al. (2021)
	0.431	2007–2019	Li et al. (2019)
China national	0.287	2007–2016	Cao and Hao (2020)
	0.329	1992–2019	Li et al. (2021)
	0.446	2007–2019	Li et al. (2019)
China regional	0.326	1995–2006	Li and Li (2021)
	0.339	2007–2017	Li and Li (2021)
	0.409	2007–2016	Cao and Hao (2020)
	0.417	1992–2019	Li et al. (2021)
	0.605	2007–2019	Li et al. (2019)
	0.832	2007–2019	Li et al. (2019)
	0.87	1995–2012	Chan and Zhao (2016)
PET studies on democracies			
European Union	0.280	1979–2013	Citi (2015)
Great Britain	0.319	1981–1999	Jones et al. (2009)
Brazil	0.321	2002–2010	Baumgartner et al. (2017)
UK	0.37	1963–1989	Breunig (2006)
Canada	0.379	1990–2004	Jones et al. (2009)
Germany	0.42	1963–1989	Breunig (2006)
Denmark	0.421	1971–2003	Jones et al. (2009)
Denmark	0.43	1971–2003; 1964–2004	Baumgartner et al. (2009)
Germany	0.456	1962–2000	Jones et al. (2009)
Hungary	0.467	1990–2013	Sebők and Berki (2018)
Denmark	0.47	1963–1989	Breunig (2006)
Malta	0.483	2001–2011	Baumgartner et al. (2017)
USA	0.49	1963–1989	Breunig (2006)
France	0.505	1868–2004	Jones et al. (2009)
USA	0.512	1947–2005	Jones et al. (2009)
USA	0.54	1800–1994	Baumgartner et al. (2009)
Belgium	0.611	1991–2000	Jones et al. (2009)
Belgium	0.64	1991–2000	Baumgartner et al. (2009)
Turkey	0.657	1973–1978	Baumgartner et al. (2017)
PET studies on nondemocracies			
Russia	0.499–0.514	1998–2003; 2004–2006; 2010–2014	Baumgartner et al. (2017)
Malta	0.569–0.625	1827–1937	Baumgartner et al. (2017)
Hungary	0.648	1886–1989	Sebők and Berki (2018)
Hong Kong	0.695	1946–2007	Lam and Chan (2015)
Turkey	0.706	1970–1972; 1979–2004	Baumgartner et al. (2017)

Note: Chinese regional data are the aggregation of each province's data. Central data are the central government's public budgets. National budget data are calculated based on the sum of central budget and regional budget.

TABLE 5 Regional-level punctuated equilibrium theory budget studies on China (Chinese and English): Scope and data.

Article	Period	Years	Data type	Provinces	Budget categories	LK for each province	L-kurtosis
Cao and Hao 2020)	2007–2016	10	Budget estimates	31	12	No	0.409
Chan and Zhao (2016)	1996–2013	18	Government spending	28	28	Yes	0.87
Li et al. (2019)	2007–2019	13	Budget estimates	36	>20	No	0.6049
				36	>20	Yes	0.8323
Li et al. (2021)	1992–2019	28	Budget estimates	31	Unclear	No	0.375
			Government spending				0.417
Li and Li (2021)	1995–2006	12	Government spending	31	9	Yes	0.326
	2007–2017	11			11		0.399

When it comes to the Chinese context, it is argued that the party and the state have a solid incentive to proactively seek out information to maintain social stability and consolidate the regime (Fei, 2021). The information inputs, such as public attention, scientific knowledge, and values, to be responded to by decision-making system should be within the boundaries and frameworks set by the party state. Otherwise, such inputs will be ignored or suppressed (Fei, 2021). The mechanisms of information collection, such as media, online petition system, and the people's congress system, are frequently mentioned in Chinese PET articles but are not closely studied. To illustrate, 18 articles stress the critical role of focusing events (*jiaodian shijian*) in facilitating information dissemination and encouraging policy change. Several studies, covering a small number of policy issues, such as environmental protection and education, investigate how the media and other external actors influence the central governments' attention allocation (Cao & Hao, 2019; Fei, 2021; Huang & Li, 2018, 2019; Wu & Guohua, 2020). However, given their narrow scope, we cannot draw any broad conclusion from these studies. How the information reaches top decision makers in China and how it differs from democracies remains to be examined in a more systematic manner.

Institutional friction is even less extensively studied. Some scholars in our data set mention that it exists in the Chinese political system but that it works differently (Li et al., 2019). Consensus among decision makers is built through major state agencies' negotiations and bargaining (Fan & Guo, 2019). Conflicts and competitions take place between state ministries representing conflicting interests, which serve as institutionalized friction against policy change. Others claim that China faces less institutional friction than democracies but do not conduct a systematic comparative analysis (Fei, 2021).

Proposals to localize the punctuated equilibrium theory to China's context

A quarter of the 88 studies in our data set mention that while the PET has explanatory power in China, the theoretical framework needs localization to better fit with the Chinese context. Across these articles, we identified three themes: lack of diverse policy subsystems, the importance of focusing events, and the role of high-level political leaders.

Firstly, articles in our data set point out that the decision-making system in China consists of an official system and an unofficial one (Cao & Hao, 2019; Guo & Yuan, 2020; Li & Wang, 2018; Long, 2020; Xu & Hanhan, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Some argue that because of the country's centralized, top-down decision-making system, independent subsystems do not exist in China (Lei, 2019; Li & Guo, 2021; Li & Wang, 2018; Long, 2020; Sun, 2021; Wu & Guohua, 2020). The conditions for creating political subsystems are not met, which means that there is a lack of "separated institutions, overlapping jurisdictions, and relatively open access to mobilizations" (True et al., 2006, p. 4). Instead, the Chinese Communist Party together with the central government plays the dominant role in policymaking. Citizens and experts can participate to some extent, but do not directly interact with official policy actors. The public's influence

on policymaking is limited, and sometimes they resort to noninstitutionalized and illegal methods, such as public protest, to shape the policy agenda (Huang & Zhao, 2020; Wang & Wang, 2020; Wen, 2014). Consequently, policy images are formed primarily by top leaders before they are passed on to the public (Fan & Guo, 2019; Gao & Wu, 2020; Guo & Yuan, 2020). Once settled, policy venues are rarely challenged or competed because each government department is specialized and expected to be capable of addressing issues under its remit (Fan & Guo, 2019; Xie & Zhu, 2018). Policy monopolies are therefore prolonged.

Secondly, authors in our data set mention that focusing events are a key trigger for policy change in China (Fei, 2021; Gao & Wu, 2020; Huang & Huang, 2021; Huang & Zhao, 2020; Jiang, 2015; Kang, 2019; Wu, 2021; Wu & Guohua, 2020). A focusing event is "an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously" (Birkland, 1997, p. 22). Regarding democracies, the PET emphasizes interest group mobilization, minority obstruction, and policy entrepreneurs' role in breaking policy monopolies and fostering punctuations (Baumgartner et al., 2018). However, Chinese authors argue that this mobilization mechanism does not apply in authoritarian China, where a centralized government dominates policymaking (Fan & Guo, 2019; Wei & Miu, 2018). Instead, focusing events, such as natural disasters, social scandals, and serious crimes, are more effective in reshaping a well-defined policy image, mobilizing new participants to join the policy arena, and drawing public attention. Also, for certain policy issues, scholars argue that the Chinese government's response to such events tends to be quick and efficient (e.g., Fei, 2021).

Thirdly, scholars argue that top-level attention allocation is much more influential and decisive to the policy agenda in a top-down system (Cao & Hao, 2019; Fan & Guo, 2019; Gao & Wu, 2020; Huang & Huang, 2021; Huang & Zhao, 2020; Li & Guo, 2021; Sun, 2016; Wang & Wang, 2020; Wen, 2014; Wu, 2021; Xie & Zhu, 2018). Consequently, party leaders' attention is described as one of the most powerful guarantees for breaking the status quo and initiating new policy objectives (Wang & Wang, 2020; Wu, 2021). In addition, scholars in our data set argue that the policy agenda in China is more susceptible to top leaders' personal preferences, party ideologies, and political values compared with democracies (Huang & Huang, 2021; Wei & Miu, 2018).

PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE PET RESEARCH IN CHINA

Applying the PET beyond democracies sheds light on mechanisms underlying the policy process while contributing to broader theory development. In particular, testing whether policymaking in autocracies such as China experiences the punctuated equilibrium pattern and whether punctuations are more intense in such contexts helps us establish the external validity of the PET (Baumgartner et al., 2017; Lam & Chan, 2015). If research would consistently show that autocracies do not experience more intense punctuations, we would need to adjust our expectations about institutional friction and/or information processing in autocracies. Such findings could also point out a need for further refinement and better measurement of institutional friction and information processing, which would contribute to broader PET theory development, relevant to both democracies and autocracies. Alternatively, falsification of existing PET hypotheses in the context of autocracies could mean that institutional friction and information processing are not the (only or primary) mechanisms that explain policy stability and change. This again would contribute to theory development for both autocracies and democracies as additional mechanisms identified in autocracies may also play a role in democracies.

In light of this potential for autocracy-focused PET research to contribute to broader theory development, based on our review of Chinese language PET articles on China, we identify several priority areas for future research.

Firstly, we look forward to more quantitative studies on the PET in China, especially more empirical studies on the intensity of punctuations over long periods of time. These can help explain the disparity

between Chan and Zhao (2016), who observed more intensive punctuations in China compared with democracies, and the quantitative studies in our data set, which mostly find punctuations similar to those in democracies.[4] Replication studies and comparative studies between China and other countries can further help explain differences between political systems. Long-term quantitative studies are not only needed at the national level but also at the local level. Examples of such studies in the context of the United States include Jordan (2003) and Park and Sapotichne (2020), who examine expenditure change at the city level. Similar studies for China would help measure local variation across the country, which subsequently contributes to the identification of causal mechanisms.

Secondly, information processing and institutional friction warrant more research. Regarding the former, a key question is: how do signals for change reach top decision makers and how do restrictions on information flows shape the ability of policymakers to collect and analyze data? Future PET research on information-gathering infrastructures such as the citizen appeals system and the People's Congress delegates are of great importance. Moreover, literature on institutional design and responsiveness in China should be integrated into PET research. Regarding institutional friction, key questions are: what kinds of friction exist at each level of government in China? How does this differ from democracies? How does institutional friction in China shape policy change? Future research ought to measure the impact of institutional friction on change in governmental activities, from inputs to process and outputs (Baumgartner et al., 2009). In parallel, scholars ought to explore additional or alternative explanations for punctuations in China, beyond information processing and institutional friction.

Along with addressing these research questions, it is important to increase research methodology transparency and improve the operationalization of PET core concepts, which are the two main methodological weaknesses of the studies in our data set. Authors can do so by including a methods section that describes how key concepts are measured, what data are used, how data were collected, and how they are analyzed. Journals and reviewers can contribute by asking authors to include such information in their manuscripts.

Finally, we would like to emphasize the role of translated publications in PET research in China. Chinese scholars have extensively cited Chinese translations of books by Baumgartner and Jones and the first edition of the *Theories of the Policy Process* in their journal articles. We find that Chinese PET research rarely referred to previous English language PET studies on China. This suggests that there may be language barriers. Further research is needed to verify whether language barriers can explain the lack of English language citations. If this is indeed the case, translation from English to Chinese would be of particular importance in distributing research output to China.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is the first to systematically review Chinese language studies on the PET in China, a policy process theory that has been well studied in democracies but has been much less applied to autocracies. Our review of 88 journal articles finds that this theory has received increasing academic attention over the past decade in China. The articles cover a diverse range of policy areas, mostly at the national level, are mostly qualitative in nature, and predominantly rely on policy documents as data. The articles in our data set did use the core components of the PET developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2009), but these are operationalized rather loosely. A large proportion of the articles does not provide clear and rigorous research methodology. This review also shows that Chinese studies are poorly connected with English language PET literature, and seldom refer to English language PET research other than publications by Baumgartner and Jones.

While our review shows that scholars have observed a punctuated equilibrium pattern in Chinese policymaking, our data set of 88 articles provides only limited evidence of more intense punctuations in China compared with democracies. Moreover, only few Chinese PET studies utilize the concepts "information processing" and "institutional friction" to explain policy punctuations. Consequently, the role of these two mechanisms in the policy process in China remains unclear. The reviewed studies provide suggestions

for refining the theory to the Chinese context with respect to the lack of diverse policy subsystems, the importance of focusing events, and the role of high-level political leaders in attention shifts.

Chinese language PET research shares some similarities with English language PET research (Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). Firstly, both cover a wide range of policy areas, with environmental issues being the most popular research area. Second, both share a similar propensity when operationalizing the PET core concepts. For example, to explain policy change, they both pay attention to the interaction between policy image and venues but overlook how institutional friction impedes the process. Moreover, both bodies of literature operationalize PET key concepts loosely. Few studies operationalize the framework and its components completely in the ways described by Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2002, 2009).

The most distinct difference is the small number of quantitative studies in our data set compared with the existing English language PET literature (Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). One possible underlying explanation is that collecting data about politics and government in China is not easy. A large proportion of Chinese PET studies uses official policy documents. However, long-term empirical data, such as statistical data, government communication records, and government announcements are even more difficult to collect. Information about the policy-making process and government administration is not always accessible to the general public, and collecting data is arduous. Sometimes, Chinese scholars are forced to turn to off-the-book means to gather the information they need, such as non-recorded and non-reported interviews, which easily leads to a certain level of vagueness in research methodology (Li & Weible, 2021). Given these contextual limitations, it is difficult to conduct research with long-term empirical data sets and quantitative methods.

Another limitation of the studies in our data set concerns the type of topics covered, which is likely shaped by China's political context. Most studies focus on environment, education, and health. The perspectives and topics covered are generally deemed unsensitive, while politically sensitive topics, such as relating to territory, ethnicity, and religion are not present in our data set. This again relates to data collection, which is easier for the former compared with the latter. As Li and Weible (2021) pointed out, this is important because understudying sensitive issues may influence our understanding of the policy process as the characteristics of the policy process may differ depending on the level of sensitivity.

This review contributes to expanding diversity in the English language literature on policy process theories by concentrating on a relatively understudied context and new authors. As shown in our study, while the Chinese language PET literature is growing, it is still separated from the English language literature. Consistent with Heikkila and Jones (2022), we argue that more international scholarly communication and cooperation should be encouraged to exchange research. This review only focuses on one autocracy and additional research is needed to better understand the differences and similarities among authoritarian countries. Through this review, we provide a starting point for rich conversations and comparative studies to further advance our understanding of the policy process in China and elsewhere.

FUNDING INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

[1] A search for "punctuated equilibrium theory" on Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of Science, WorldCat, and Scopus in May 2022 resulted in 15 peer-reviewed journal articles on the PET in countries that are listed as autocracy in "Democracy Report 2021" by V-Dem Institute.

[2] Yan et al. (2021) compare their findings to the following L-kurtosis values mentioned in Baumgartner et al. (2009) and Alexandrova et al. (2012): 0.27 for change in questions by Denmark's prime minister; 0.33 and 0.27 for change in hearings in the US House and Senate; 0.332 for change in the European Council agenda.

[3] There are three quantitative studies in our dataset that we have not included in Table 4. Cao and Hao (2019) focus on education policy. Kuang (2015) tests government spending on environmental protection. Yao et al. (2021) studies the relationship between regional budgets and leadership changes but does not present L-kurtosis values.

[4] A very recent study by Qin and Huang (2023), published after acceptance of this manuscript, contributes to overcoming this research gap through an analysis of 40 years of State Council policy documents, which showed a relatively high L-kurtosis (0.42) compared to studies of democracies at the same level of output.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.