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

(Short Title: Disguised Repression)

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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 survey experiment, which shows that disguised repression decreases perceptions of dissidents' morality, decreases people's willingness to engage in dissent on behalf of the dissident, and increases support for repression of the dissident. We then assess the external validity of the argument by analyzing millions of Chinese social media posts made before and after a large crackdown of vocal government critics in China in 2013. We find 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.

Keywords: repression, dissent, China, opinion leader, moral authority

*The study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Princeton University and Stanford University. An appendix with supplementary material is available at https://doi.org/XXXXXX. Replication files are available in the JOP Dataverse (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst. The pre-registration for the survey experiment is available on the Open Science Framework: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Y2GT7.

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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 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 make 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 activities 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 the repression of these opponents. Minimizing backlash to repression has become vital for the survival of authoritarian regimes in the face of rising global 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

[1] See, for example, reports from New York Times (https://nyti.ms/3zyhT3F) and The Economist Magazine (https://econ.st/3B9J45D)

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 has been attributed to the role of the internet and social media in decentralizing communication and reducing coordination costs (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—including activities that, while technically illegal, are sometimes tolerated and not legally penalized. However, under disguised repression, these activities that fall into this gray zone can lead to legal punishment. 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 credible case requires time and resources. Consequently, disguised repression is unlikely to be used for all dissidents and more likely to be used 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.

We assess this argument through a survey experiment and an analysis of China's 2013 crackdown on online critics. 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

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

in China in 2022. We find that disguised repression decreases respondents' willingness to engage in dissenting behavior, decreases their support for dissidents who are charged, and increases their support for repression of charged 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, who we expect are more likely to have engaged in behaviors that can be used as fodder for disguised repression. This aligns with our expectation that disguised repression demobilizes other dissidents by increasing their perceived risk of punishment.

To assess the external validity of disguised repression, we analyze 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. This analysis shows that more influential critics, operationalized as those with larger online followings, are more likely to be charged with non-political crimes. Furthermore, non-political charges are associated with a 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 posts were collected within 24 hours and prior research does not find higher rates of censorship for non-political as opposed to political topics (King, Pan and Roberts 2013).

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).[3] 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 the repression of specific individuals.[4] 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 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).

[3]One exception is Shadmehr and Boleslavsky (2022), where protests after observing repression depend on perceptions of the government and activists.

[4]Some studies examine how protester violence increases bystanders' support for state repression (Metcalfe and Pickett 2022; Edwards and Arnon 2021; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan and Joo 2022), but in this paper, we focus on how state repression itself can garner support.

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.

Our finding that disguised repression of prominent dissidents can mitigate backlash also contributes to the literature on hidden and preemptive repression. A growing body of work 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 police firing on large crowd or government agents 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; Xu, Kostka and Cao 2022) or outsourcing repression to pro-government militias and other groups (Akins 2021; Daxecker 2017; Mitchell, Carey and Butler 2014; Ong 2022). 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 as 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. It is thus closely related to "stealth authoritarianism," a term coined by Varol (2014) to depict authoritarian regimes' covert repressive tactics under legal guises, and the work of Shen-Bayh (2018) on judicial strategies autocrats use to address internal ruling coalition challenges. This paper is among the first to demonstrate empir-

ically that employing law and order institutions for political repression in an authoritarian setting can alter 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 reports findings from the experiment. Section 4 presents the results of the 2013 crackdown in China. 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, organized mobilization or insurgency may qualify as a challenge but mere criticism would not.[5] 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 views 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.[6] However, co-optation of dissidents, especially high-profile ones, is costly because dissidents are chal-

[5]In this paper, we use the terms "dissident" and "critic" interchangeably to indicate people who challenge the state, including when the challenge is vocal criticism.

[6]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).

lengers 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 mobilization of supporters (Young 2021).[7] One reason for backfire is the perceived injustice and illegitimacy of authorities engaged 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 same time, believe that the dissident is guilty of the non-political charge. This is because it is advantageous for the state to charge dissidents with

[7]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).

actual crimes, not fabricated charges. Although a dictator can make up crimes against activists, doing so can damage regime legitimacy and trigger backlash. Suppose a dissident is charged with soliciting prostitutes. If the state fabricates the location and time where the solicitation took place, the state's legitimacy may be damaged if its claims can 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 based the actual behavior of activists. To increase the chances that such non-political charges can be found, the state can construct a legal framework that creates gray areas for violations. For example, in China, the tax system is structured such that people in the business sector can easily run afoul of tax evasion charges but such charges are unevenly levied (Zhang 2021).

Authoritarian regimes use disguised repression because it can minimize backlash by attacking the very moral authority dissidents invoke to challenge those in power. Morality is a fundamental set of standards concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. According to Durkheim (1953), crucial to the concept of morality is a central moral authority that directs adherents to follow moral principles. Carls (2022) writes "Through this central authority the individual feels an external constraint to conform to a society's moral code." Thus, individuals who serve as moral role models are expected to adhere strictly to moral principles. Moral authority becomes a resource of power for protest mobilization as the opposition competes against the state for the moral high ground (Hall 1997; Jasper 2008; Pomeroy and Rathbun 2023; Rathbun 2023). From studies of organizational behavior, we know that immoral or unethical behavior of leaders leads to follower defiance and negative outcomes in organizations (Schyns and Schilling 2013; Asnakew and Mekonnen 2019). Thus, by charging political dissidents with non-political crimes, disguised repression paints dissidents as offenders who violate societal moral codes and can no longer claim the moral high ground. Furthermore, disguised repression legitimizes punishments levied by the state against dissidents, allowing repression to be reframed as criminal justice. Some observers may perceive disguised repression as ill-disguised attempts to justify repression while others may view the non-political charges as valid and withdraw their support. On the whole, disguised repression leads to disagreement and division among supporters and would-be supporters, which hinders coordination and reduces the chances of backlash (Chen and Xu 2017). Thus, we

expect the following (pre-registered) implications:

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 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. If disguised repression is used, 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 and prostitution in Thailand. Disguised repression changes the calculus of the cost of such actions because it increases the risk that any wrongdoing can be used as justification for punishment and exposed to the public. This means activists will perceive risks of disguised repression 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 (pre-registered) implication:

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

This assumes that those with less stringent moral standards (e.g., those who believe behaviors ranging from fraudulent collection of government benefits to violence against others are more justified) have a higher likelihood of having engaged in behaviors punishable by disguised repression.

Because it is in the interest of the state to charge dissidents with actual, rather than fabricated, non-political crimes, disguised repression has a cost. It takes the state 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 contrast, non-political crimes are not used solely, or even predominantly, to punish political dissidents. For example, among all individuals charged with tax evasion in an authoritarian regime in a given period, it is unlikely that all or even most of those individuals are being charged with tax evasion for political reasons. This means that for the state to credibly use disguised repression, it must follow the normal rules and procedures of the judicial system as it pertains to non-political crimes, which is costly. 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 a broader signal that political opposition is not allowed.[8]

This means 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.[9] Specifically, we expect:

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 social media 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

[8]If the opponent were subject to extra-judicial punishment—e.g., made to disappear—it may instill fear in their immediate network but may not clearly signal to others what the regime objects to.

[9]Another difference between the idea introduced in Guriev and Treisman (2022) and disguised repression is the fact that punishments levied for disguised repression can be direct and entail violence. For example, those convicted of tax evasion and soliciting prostitutes are often imprisoned in China's penal system, not simply fined.

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.[10]

Three scope conditions are essential for the use of disguised repression against political opponents. First, there needs to be sufficient legal capacity, which is often seen as a facet of state capacity (Besley and Persson 2009), with rules and procedures as well as capable-enough agents to navigate the system. Second, it must be possible to influence this system to implement disguised repression through "selective, though legally accurate, application of existing criminal laws" (Varol 2014, p. 1707). Third, the criminal justice system must possess sufficient credibility to ensure that disguised repression suppresses opposition without jeopardizing overall regime legitimacy. The CCP under Xi Jinping meets these conditions. The regime possesses not only robust state capacity for law enforcement but has also centralized power and strengthened control "in a highly legalistic way, empowering courts against other state and Party entities" (Zhang and Ginsburg 2019, p. 309). Legal scholars studying China argue this approach is adopted because a competent judicial system solves principal-agent and resource allocation issues in a large country. Additionally, the Chinese populace places high value on law and legality, even in the absence of sufficient checks on political power and protection of civil rights (Fu, Xu and Zhang Forthcoming).

While this paper focuses on disguised repression in authoritarian regimes, its use is not limited to autocracies. Any regime that meets these scope conditions can employ disguised repression against influential dissidents. However, in politically polarized contexts, the effect of disguised repression may be asymmetric, limiting its effectiveness. Consider a polarized country with Party A and Party B. If Party A, in power, charges a key Party B figure with a non-political crime, Party A supporters might see the action as justified, while Party B supporters may view it skeptically. Thus, in a polarized environment, partisan allegiance likely influences perceptions, and the downstream

[10]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.

effects, of disguised repression.

To see whether we find evidence of the above observable implications, we first 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. Then, we analyze the arrests of vocal online critics in China in 2013. By examining a large quantity of social media data on 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 understanding of online attitudes toward the dissidents targeted with blatant versus disguised repression (*observable implications 1-4*).

3 Estimating the Effects of Disguised Repression

Building on our theoretical discussion, we design and conduct an online survey experiment to test the effects of disguised repression.[11]

3.1 Experimental Design

In 2022, 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 to capture diverse views of 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) 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 1 shows the flow of the experiment. We first screen respondents, including only those

[11] We secured IRB approval from the authors' home institutions and adhered to EGAP principles on research transparency and protection of research team. We also took extra precautions to protect online survey participants. For more on ethical considerations, see Appendix A1.4

age 18 and older. We then ask demographic questions (e.g., age, ethnicity, marital status, education). Then we measure respondents' predisposition, including questions about 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

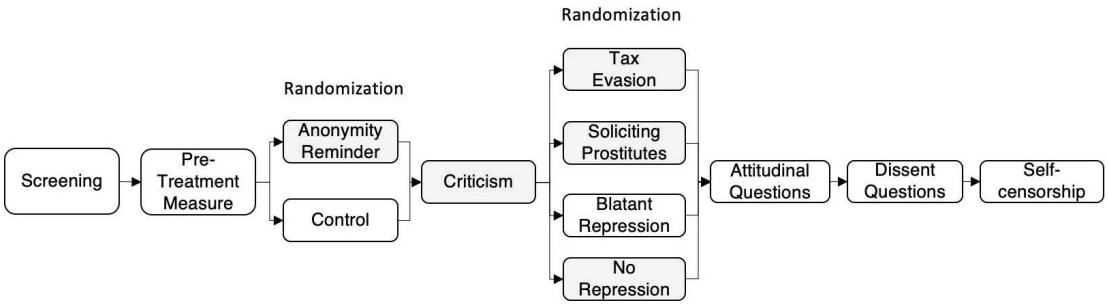


FIGURE 1. FLOW CHART

of demographic questions (e.g., occupation, 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.[12]

All respondents then read an excerpt about online criticisms of the Chinese government by an unnamed dissident who we refer to as a key opinion leader or KOL (知名人士), a term that denotes someone as influential on social, political, and economics issues ("Criticism" panel in Figure 1). 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 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

[12]Reminding respondents of their anonymity should reduce pressure to conceal true preferences. However, we found no significant differences between those who received this reminder and those who did not, suggesting preference falsification is less likely (Appendix A1.2).

crime treatment captures blatant repression while tax evasion and prostitution capture disguised repression. We chose tax evasion and prostitution because they represent different dimensions of why behavior may be considered immoral (economic and personal/sexual). Paying taxes is a civil duty, required by law in most countries. Tax evasion is considered 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). Indeed, existing research shows that there is a high degree of opposition among the Chinese public to tax evasion (McGee 2014; McGee, Petrides and Zhou 2022) and prostitution(Cao and Stack 2010; Ma, Chan and Loke 2018).We fix the level of punishment by saying that the dissident was sentenced to three years in jail.[13] Appendix A4.1 contains 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.[14] 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

[13]For half of the respondents, we randomly insert information about the dissident's confession into the three treatment conditions ("Confession" in Figure 1). 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 1) 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.

[14]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).

diminish the moral authority of the dissident to a lesser degree than the crimes of tax evasion and soliciting prostitutes.

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 1 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).

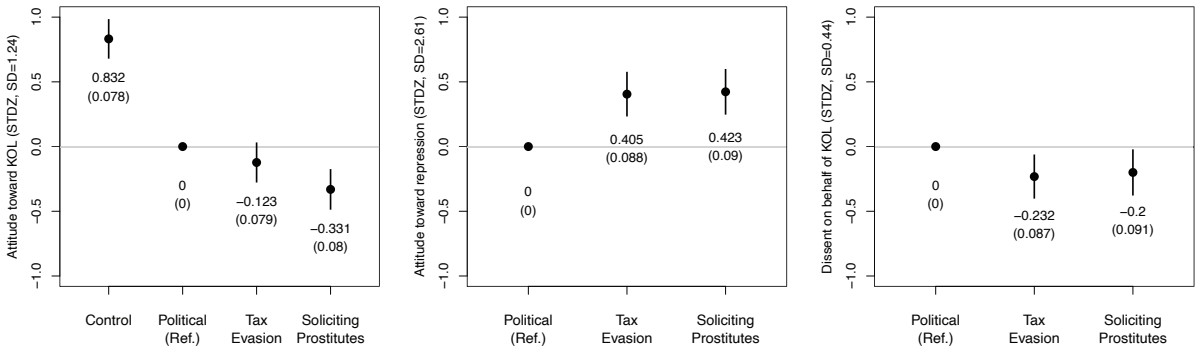
TABLE 1. MAIN OUTCOME QUESTIONS

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

3.2 Disguised Repression Changes Attitudes

Figure 2 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 2a 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 charging dissidents with political crimes. Figure 2b also shows that disguised repression makes respondents more likely to support

FIGURE 2. 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 outcome variables are standardized (STDZ). 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, and income. The full model results with controls are reported in Appendix Table A4 Column (3), (6), and (9) in Online Appendix. Appendix Table A4 also shows that the results are the same when excluding the controls.

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" (Appendix Figure A1b). Figure 2c 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 2b and 2c is smaller than that of Figure 2a 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 loses effectiveness if the public doubts the charges against the dissident, particularly when these charges are perceived as *disguised* repression. We cannot directly test this possibility since such questions would interfere with the treatments. Nevertheless, when asking respondents about their belief in the charged crime, we find 89% believe the critic is guilty (scoring $\geq$ 5 on a 0 to 10 Likert scale). Appendix A2.5 shows a greater belief among respondents in a dissident's guilt for non-political compared to political crimes, which suggests that non-political

crime charges appear credible to the average respondent in our survey. This result aligns with Zhang and Ginsburg (2019)'s observations regarding the credibility of China's judicial system among the public, as well as findings from the World Value Survey, conducted in China in 2018, showing that 85% of the Chinese public considers the country's judicial system trustworthy.

3.3 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 2(b) support the moral authority mechanism, rather than that of signaling strength, because disguised repression significantly increases support for repression.

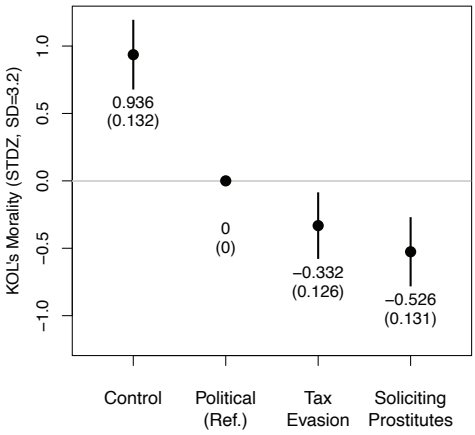
In addition, if disguised repression works by compromising dissidents' moral authority, we would expect charging them with non-political crimes to influence respondents' perceptions of the morality of the dissident differently than when dissidents are charged with political crimes. The experiment finds 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 3).

3.4 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 2 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 political activists who have less

FIGURE 3. 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 A7 in Online Appendix.

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).[15] Table 2 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 2 Column [3]). Table 2 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 2 Column [5]). The findings are consistent with *observable implication 4*.

Note that we view these findings about self-censorship as suggestive because we use self-reports of criticisms of the regime as a proxy for dissent and activism. We do not know for sure

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

TABLE 2. 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 A5 in Online Appendix.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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).

Disguised repression increases self-censorship, reducing the likelihood of dissent. It also diverts attention, further lowering dissent. In the experiment, we ask respondents if they want to learn more about the critic. While neither political nor non-political charges affect their initial interest, those who do seek more information are more likely to focus on the critic's personal life rather than political activism when the charges are non-political (Appendix A2.3).

4 China's Crackdown on Online Critics in 2013

To explore the concept of disguised repression in a real-world setting, we analyze 13,665,925 Weibo posts that mention the names of 28 critics of the CCP from late 2009 to early 2014. This

analysis is not intended to measure the causal relationship between disguised repression and the outcomes we expect, but rather, to help us assess the external validity of the argument. 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.[16] 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.

4.1 The 2013 Crackdown

In the early 2010s, Weibo was a space for active discourse and debate (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2015). Individuals with a large following 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.[17] 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. We consider these vocal critics to be dissidents based on the definition from the repression literature since the CCP views critics as challengers to its political authority (Davenport 2007; Sullivan and Davenport 2017).[18] 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

[16]Starting in 2013, Weibo's popularity was eclipsed by WeChat.

[17]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 does not fit our definition of a 'vocal critic'.

[18]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

mobilized followers.

Because this research focuses on vocal critics, we searched both Chinese and English media sources such as *South China Morning Post*, BBC News, *The New York Times*, as well as google and baidu in Chinese and English to identify 28 individuals arrested before or during the 2013 crackdown (see Table 3 for a summary). Among them, 11 were charged with non-political crimes, and 17 of them were charged with political crimes. These 28 dissidents cover the most prominent cases of disguised and blatant repression in this relatively condensed period.[19] 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, charges of non-political crimes typically fall into two categories: 1) economic or financial crimes such as illegal business, tax evasion, extortion, blackmail, and corruption; and 2) crimes involving illegal personal-sexual activities such as soliciting prostitutes, group licentiousness, drug abuse, libel, and false accusation. 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 relatives of Rebiya Kadeer. For those working in the state sector, like Ren Zhiqiang, corruption and embezzlement are common charges. Charges of personal-sexual crimes, including libel and false accusation, usually target scholars, journalists, internet commentators, or other dissidents not involved in business. Examples of such cases include Xu Zhangrun, Xue Manzi, Ou Shaokun, and Meng Zhaosen. In our 11 non-political crime cases, 5 was charged with personal-sexual crimes, and the other 6 were charged with crimes involving

against the regime are considered dissidents (Truex 2022).

[19]We have included Zhang Baocheng and Ding Jiaxi, along with Xu Zhiyong, as they were all part of the New Citizen Movement, which the government repressed around the same time as the 2013 Crackdown on online critics, although Zhang Baocheng and Ding Jiaxi were arrested before the crackdown. Note that removing them from our analysis does not change the results.

TABLE 3. 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 (11 Individuals):				
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
Recorder Chen Baocheng	记录者陈宝成	陈宝成	2013-08-09	Illegal detention
Fu Xuesheng	傅学胜	傅学胜	2013-08-19	Libel
Beijing Fengtai District Forced Demolition Victim Song Baojiang	北京丰台区强拆户宋保江	宋保江	2013-08-25	Illegal dumping
Ge Qiwei	格祺伟	周波	2013-08-28	Extortion and blackmail
Meng Zhaosen	孟照森	孟照森	2013-09-22	False accusation
Blatant Repression (17 Individuals):				
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
Li Xiangyang	李向阳	李向阳	2013-08-01	Severely disrupting public order
EE-Liu Jiacai	鄂E-刘家财	刘家财	2013-08-02	disrupting public order & Inciting subversion of state power
Song Yangbiao Weibo	宋阳标微博	宋阳标	2013-08-09	Picking quarrels and provoking trouble
Nuowei Senlin	挪威森林	李化平	2013-08-10	Gathering crowds to disrupt public order
Yaocheng	姚诚	谭春生	2013-09-04	Gathering crowds to disrupt public order
Hefei Zhou Weilin	合肥周维林	周维林	2013-09-06	Gathering crowds to disrupt public order
24 Solar Terms	24节气	梁志刚	2013-08-29	Picking quarrels and provoking trouble
Fierce Bandit V	悍匪V	王某	2013-09-03	Disrupting public order
Cao Shunli	曹顺利	曹顺利	2013-09-14	Illegal Assembly
Guanyin Clay	观音土	段小文	2013-09-23	Picking quarrels and provoking trouble
Yin Weihe	尹卫和	尹卫和	2013-09-26	Picking quarrels and provoking trouble
Liusha1959	刘沙1959	刘琳娜	2013-10-09	Disrupting public order

Note: the alleged crime indicates the crime the individual was suspected of during the arrest, which may differ from the formal charges levied at 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 immediately after the arrest. Trials, on the other hand, are often held much later.

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 data 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.

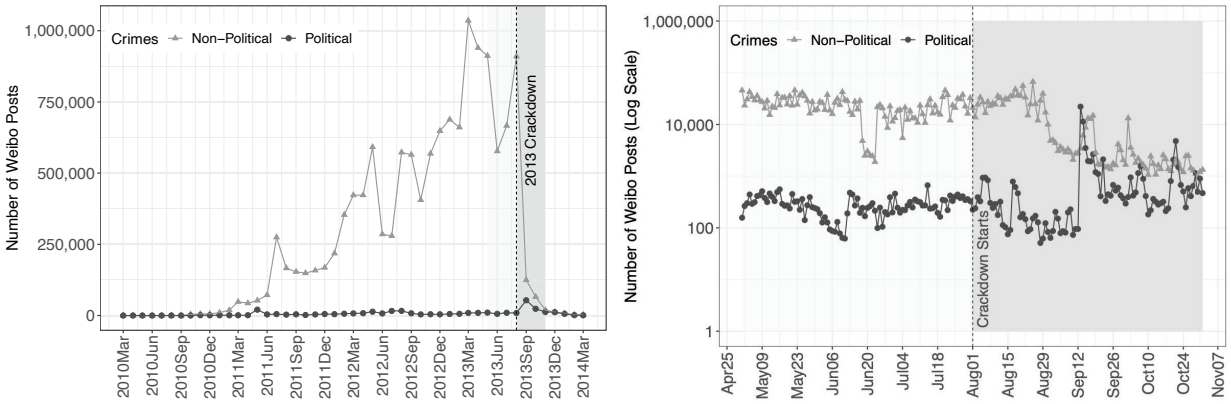
For our research, we specifically accessed all Weibo posts that mentioned Weibo handles or actual names of 28 predetermined opinion leaders from this commercial source of Weibo posts. Notably, we strictly adhere to data privacy rules and the data obtained do not contain personally identifiable information beyond the handles or names of the online critics.[20] 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), therefore, we expect that this dataset misses some but not all censored content. From 2011 to 2014, we identify 13,665,925 Weibo posts referencing to the 28 opinion leaders.

Figure 4a 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. Before the crackdown, mentions of vocal critics later charged with non-political crimes were 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 4a also shows that after the crackdown, in September 2013, the volume of mentions of those charged with non-political crimes dropped rapidly (light gray line). 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;[21] and c) decreased support and self-censorship among Weibo users (*observable implications 1 and 4*). We cannot quantify the relative impact of each of these factors, but the pattern suggests that charging dissidents with non-political crimes is

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

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



(a) Number of Posts, Mar.2010 - Mar.2014 (b) Logged Number of Posts, May.2013 - Oct.2013

Note: Figure 4a plots the raw number of Weibo posts by month over four years. Figure 4b then zooms in on a six-month window between May 1, 2013, and October 31, 2013, aggregates Weibo post counts by day and takes logarithms to reduce disparities in volumes. Shading in both panels denote crackdown period.

FIGURE 4. WEIBO POSTS CITING DISSIDENTS' NAMES BY CRIME TYPE

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 (dark gray line in Figure 4a). The number of posts mentioning these individuals actually increased after the 2013 crackdown. In Figure 4b, we hone in on a 6-month time window (the same period is shaded in gray in Figure 4a), aggregating Weibo post counts by day and taking logarithms to reduce disparities in volumes for more effective comparison. Again, we observe a decline in the volume of mentions for individuals charged with non-political crimes (light gray line), which contrasts with an increase in mentions of those charged with political crimes (dark gray line).[22] This pattern points to the possibility that political charges might have inflamed online dissent among those who supported the arrested opinion leader.

[22]The arrests of the 28 dissidents occurred throughout this period, so the numbers do not immediately change post-August 1, 2013.

4.2 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 "release" and the person's Weibo handle, to measure the amount of support the critics received and dissent against the regime. After finding 5,009 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 2,479 posts containing calls to their release.

Figure 5 compares the relative frequency of calls for the release of vocal critics between those targeted with disguised repression (light grey line) and those targeted with blatant repression (dark grey line). We plot the proportion of calls to release the critic relative to the total number of posts related to them. It shows that dissent on behalf of vocal critics targeted by disguised repression is lower than dissent on behalf of those targeted with blatant repression.[23]

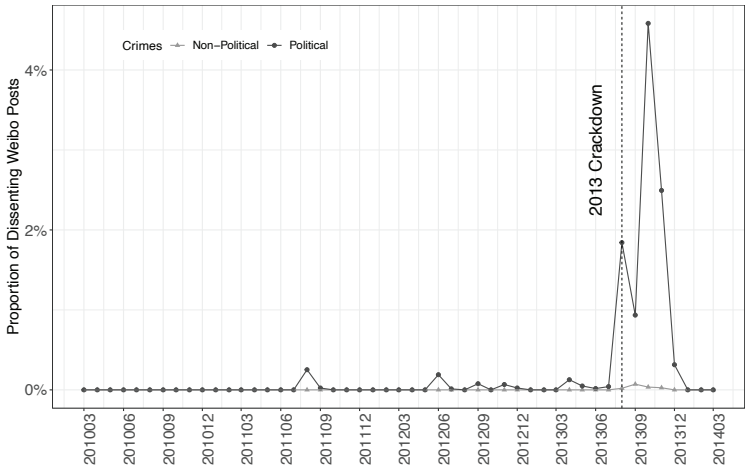


FIGURE 5. CALLS FOR THE CRITICS' RELEASE

We further disaggregate this result and compare the level of dissent for each critic. Figure 6

[23]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.

arranges the 22 individuals according to the proportion of posts calling for their release among all posts mentioning them in the three months following their arrest (6 individuals were excluded due to no Weibo mentions). This figure clearly shows that there is less online dissent on behalf of critics targeted with disguised repression. Evidence from Figure 5 and Figure 6 both suggest that

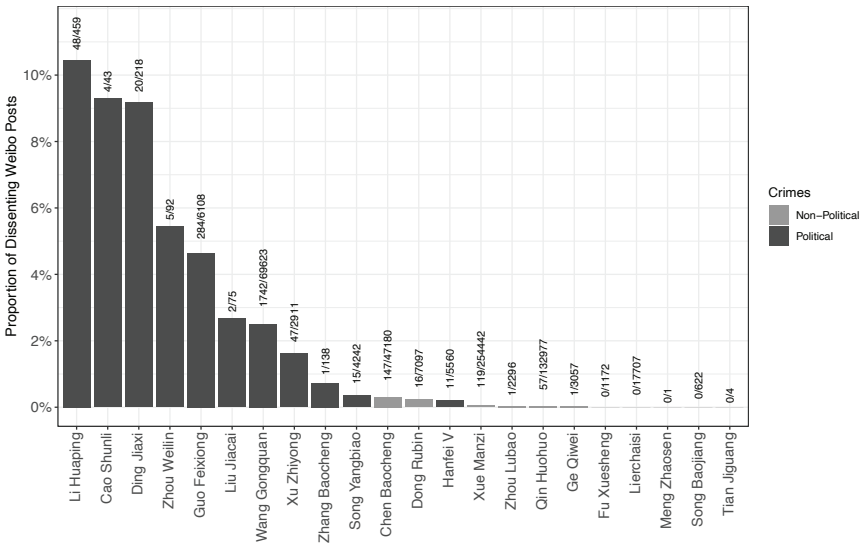


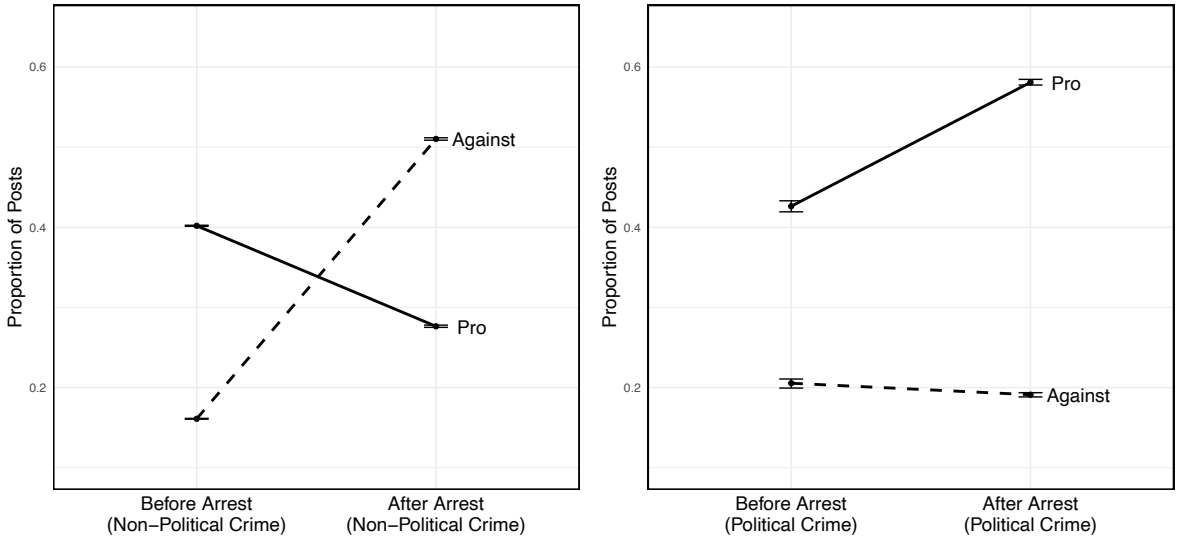
FIGURE 6. ONLINE DISSENT FOR INDIVIDUAL CRITICS

charging dissidents with non-political crimes discourages online dissent.

4.3 Stance Toward Critics

We expand the analysis beyond narrow calls for the release of arrested critics to measure the stance of Weibo posts toward the critics. We measure stance by training a version of the DeBERTa-v3 large language model, mDeBERTa (He, Gao and Chen 2022). Here, stance detection entails taking the Weibo post w_i and a target t_i, which is the name and alias of the critic, and outputting the stance $s_i \in \{Pro, Against, Neutral\}$ of the post towards the target. We use the C-Stance dataset (Zhao, Li and Caragea 2023), a Mandarin-Chinese dataset of 48,126 passage-target pairs with corresponding stances from Weibo, for training and use the embeddings of the mDeBERTa model and a two-layer feed-forward network with softmax (Dunne and Campbell 1997) activation for classification. After we have classified the stance of each Weibo post, we estimate the proportion of posts made before and after arrests for those charged with political and non-political

crimes that contain Pro and Against stances. Figure 7 shows that prior to arrest, the proportion of



(a) Non-Political Crimes (b) Political Crimes

Note: "Pro" and "Against" represent the proportions of posts that are in support of or against the critics, respectively. The proportions of the "neutral" stance are not shown. 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals are shown.

FIGURE 7. STANCE TOWARD CRITICS

positive stances toward critics subsequently charged with political and non-political crimes is similar, at 42% and 40%, respectively. Before arrests, the proportion of negative stance toward critics subsequently charged with political and non-political crimes is low, at 21% and 16%, respectively. However, after arrests, while the proportion of positive stance increases (58%) and proportion of negative stance decreases (19%) toward those arrested for political crimes, we see the opposite trend for those arrested for non-political crimes. After critics are arrested for non-political crimes, the proportion of positive stance drops to 28% and the proportion of negative stance jumps to 51%.[24]

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

[24]We also conducted more traditional sentiment analysis, measuring the overall tone of the post. The same patterns holds. We also conduct case studies of two critics. For both, see Appendix A5.

non-political crimes, public support for dissidents decreases while support for repression of the individual in question 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 induces 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.

There are several limitations to the study. First, the focus of this study is on why dissidents would be charged with political or non-political crimes. This study design is not oriented toward answering the question of why dissidents would be charged at all, which we see as an important area of future research. Second, the study focuses on support for the repression of specific individuals charged with disguised repression not on attitudes toward repression in general or the regime. When support of repression targeting a specific individual changes, we may or may not see corresponding changes in support for repression as a strategy of the regime.

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 the 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.

Acknowledgement

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