

Nontransparency and Theory Generation in the Study of Chinese Politics

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Opacity is a fundamental hurdle that confronts students of all autocracies. Although some aspects of authoritarian politics can be observed with relative ease, many others are either invisible or can only be evaluated indirectly. One acutely important question that is especially difficult to study is the strategies that autocrats use to assess popular discontent. The classic literature has posited that this problem is insurmountable (Kuran 1991; Wintrobe 1998). More recent research on authoritarianism has identified competitive elections (Magaloni 2006; Blaydes 2011), unconstrained protests (Lorentzen 2013), and liberalized media as channels that reveal levels of popular discontent (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Stockmann 2013; Lorentzen 2014). This short memo argues that elections, protests, and free media are undesirable from the autocrat's point of view because they provide publicly observable indicia of discontent that can increase the likelihood of anti-regime collective action. Channels that allow for the private transmission of information on popular discontent have considerably greater utility from the perspective of regime insiders. The existence of these private channels for information transmission raises the question of why autocrats hold competitive elections, tolerate some protests, and occasionally permit critical reporting. The memo argues that these publicly observable spectacles are deployed as carefully managed tools for promoting resilience, rather than as mechanisms for collecting information on levels of popular discontent.

The central methodological concern that motivates this short essay is the strategies for generating theories about nontransparent phenomena in autocracies in general and in China in particular. Aspects of authoritarian politics, such as the techniques used to monitor public discontent, are hidden by design, thus raising practical challenges regarding the collection of empirical data that are necessary to develop theories of authoritarian rule. Because the monitoring of popular discontent is not officially acknowledged to exist, it cannot be studied on the basis of publicly available materials. The memo argues that government documents, which were prepared for regime insiders and were not meant for public dissemination, are useful for revealing internal regime understandings of the problem of assessing and responding to popular discontent. Such materials were largely unavailable when the classic theories of authoritarian rule were developed but have recently become accessible for a range of authoritarian regimes, including for China. The present essay argues that these materials can produce new empirical insights about the internal logic of authoritarian rule. Such materials allow us to generate theories that provide a different explanation for the functions of elections, protests, and the media from theories developed on the basis of publicly observable indicia of discontent. Due to space limitations, this essay will illustrate the general problem of the impact of nontransparency on theory generation by focusing only on the specific question of the political logic of media control in China.

Internal Media and Existing Theories of Media Control

China has two separate types of media (public and internal), with different content that is aimed at two distinct audiences. Public media include print media (books and periodicals), broadcast media (film, radio, and television), and digital media (Internet and mobile media). Internal media occasionally feature books and documentaries, but consist primarily of limited-circulation periodicals that carry analytical and news reports. In contrast to the public media, whose content is openly available, internal media circulate only to regime insiders, usually those holding various types of leadership positions. The rapidly burgeoning scholarship on the Chinese media has focused on the public media and has produced two closely related central insights about the political logic of media control: one is that censorship is more likely to affect content that can lead to collective action (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013), and the other is that critical reporting that does not lead to collective action will be encouraged in order to alleviate information shortages (Lorentzen 2014). What deserves further scrutiny is the calculus that determines whether particular events have a collective action potential (and thus information about them should be censored) and what types of critical reporting can be allowed. To address this question, we need to examine the content and functions of the internal media in China. The analysis reveals that internal media content guides both decisions about what information should be censored and what types of investigative reporting are permissible. Existing studies of the internal reporting system have not engaged with the issue of how the internal media can be used to shape the content of public media in China (Schoenhals 1985; Grant 1988; Yan and Zhao 1993; Hsiao and Cheek 1995; Tang 2017).

This essay argues that the central function of the internal media in contemporary China is to provide time-sensitive information to the regime about popular discontent. The knowledge that is generated through the internal media system is then used to determine which events have collective action potential and should be subject to news censorship. The internal media also allow the power-holders to decide when information about such events should be released to the public in the form of so-called “investigative reports.” Though infrequent, the strategic publication of such reports allows the authorities to present an image of responsiveness to popular concerns and to portray the media not as simple mouthpieces of the party but as organs of public opinion supervision (Liebman 2005).

The internal media (内参 *neican*) system in China dates back to 1931, when the Red China News Agency (the precursor to the Xinhua News Agency) started publishing classified daily bulletins for the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which was then operating out of the Ruijin Soviet in Jiangxi Province. During the decades since 1949, the internal media system has increased in size and complexity. Today, all major periodicals as well as television and radio stations prepare classified internal news bulletins. Although some scholars have argued that the rise of investigative journalism in the commercial media since the 1980s has made the internal media obsolete (Lorentzen 2014: 412), there is no sign that these media have disappeared. On the contrary, the number of internal publications has significantly expanded to accommodate the special challenges for monitoring public opinion presented by commercialized media in the 1980s, the Internet in the 1990s and 2000s, and social media in the 2010s.¹

¹ See Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴 (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, various years).

From the point of view of the consumers of internal media, their main advantage over the public media is the content that they are required to produce. As a general rule, all internal media carry negative news but the most sensitive material is published in bulletins with the highest levels of classification and the most restricted circulation. The difference between the public and the internal media persists to the current day. Chinese journalists are encouraged to write information (信息 *xinxi*) for internal periodicals and news (新闻 *xinwen*) for the public outlets. A leaked directive from 2011 on writing reports for the party and the government sheds light on the different expectations involved in generating internal information and in producing public news stories.² Information reports are supposed to help leaders reach decisions and need to be presented in an objective and clear writing style. By contrast, apart from entertaining the masses, news serves to propagandize, to educate the masses, and to guide public opinion and should thus be presented in ornate language that uses metaphors and analogies. This document also specifies the kinds of information (on disasters, epidemics, and sudden incidents), whose casual release to the public can impact social stability; such information can appear in the public media only with prior approval from the senior leader at the relevant level.³ Internal media therefore continue to serve as a repository for negative information; the role of the public media, as was recently emphasized by Xi Jinping, is to correctly guide public opinion (正确舆论导向 *zhengque yulun daoxiang*) by emphasizing positive publicity (正面宣传为主 *zhengmian xuanchuan weizhu*) (Bandurski 2016).

Rather than being fossils of a bygone earlier chapter of communist governance, internal media have survived and thrived in the era of the Internet and social media, when the importance of the rapid collection and transmission of information on brewing popular discontent to regime insiders has increased exponentially. Chinese leaders receive a broad array of classified reports on popular opinion, including regular briefings on Internet public opinion.⁴ This transfer of information notwithstanding, a stylized fact about communist regimes is that leaders ignore the reports they receive (Dikötter 2010). One feature of the Chinese internal reporting system allows us to test this assumption: leaders have the option to ignore the information; to read it; or to read it and to issue instructions (批示 *pishi*). We have evidence that in 2005 central leading cadres (中央领导 *zhongyang lingdao*) issued instructions on 1,460 internal reference reports prepared by the Xinhua News Agency; by 2011, the number of reports receiving instructions by the top leadership had risen more than threefold to 4,557.⁵ This rapid increase attests both to the value that leaders attach to internal reporting and to the frequency with which these reports inform policy decisions: according to the internal rules of the Chinese bureaucracy, a report that has received a *pishi* automatically acquires the status of a policy document (Tsai 2015).

² 党政信息写工作的几点体会, http://www.zk168.com/fanwen/fanwenxinde_274744 (accessed December 1, 2017)

³ Ibid.

⁴ For the types of Internet monitoring reports that the Xinhua News Agency has been preparing since the late 1990s, see Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴 1997-2015 (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 1997-2015).

⁵ Calculated from Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴 2006 (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 2007), 198 and Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴 2011 (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 2012), 259.

Internal Media and Theories of Censorship and Investigative Journalism

Censorship is pervasive in China and applies to all media from books and periodicals to broadcast media and the Internet. It is widely accepted that reporting topics are classified into three categories: those that cannot be covered (Tiananmen, Falun Gong, Taiwanese independence, Tibetan independence, the personal lives of top leaders, etc.), those whose coverage is encouraged (economic and social development, sports and cultural achievements, ethnic harmony, etc.), and those that fall in a grey zone, where coverage may sometimes be permitted (Wang 2016: 53-65; Stern and O'Brien 2012). What the existing literature has not established is how the government develops an algorithm for deciding whether content in the gray zone should be subject to censorship. Although some deletion of content is automatic, existing studies have documented a time lag between the appearance of material in the grey zone and its censorship (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Ng and Pan 2018), suggesting that decisions about the removal of content are made in light of information about the collective action potential of events that are being discussed on social media. Considering that we know that reports on rumors and on events with collective action potential are routinely prepared for the leadership (Xinhua 1997-2015), it is reasonable to assume that these reports inform decisions about existing content in the gray zone that needs to be expunged, prevented from appearing in the future through additions to the list of blocked keywords, or subject to posts by pro-government commentators who aim to distract the public (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017).

A second line of research that can be extended by paying attention to the internal media is the scholarship on investigative journalism in China (Tong 2011; Hassid 2016). The basic facts are beyond dispute: investigative reporting has been rare (Bandurski and Hala 2010 document a mere eight cases in 1996-2003) and has become essentially extinct since 2008, though citizen journalism on social media has occasionally filled the investigative reporting niche in recent years. What is less clear is why the government allows investigative reporting, either in print or on the Internet. There are no truly independent print media in China (even the most liberal commercial periodicals have a parent newspaper or company that is owned by the communist party or is affiliated with a state agency) and any Internet content can be removed by the two million censors that manage the web. This suggests that there is a strategic logic to allowing investigative reporting content to circulate in print or on the web. The only explanation that has been offered thus far argues that investigative reporting is not simply permitted but actively encouraged in order to reduce the information deficit of upper-level officials about malfeasance by lower-level cadres; the paper clarifies that the need of officials to obtain information through investigative reporting has to be balanced against their concern that investigative reporting can reveal that discontent is widespread and facilitate collective action against the regime (Lorentzen 2014). The formal model therefore postulates that the regime will restrict the amount of investigative reporting it allows depending on the underlying social tensions. What is not clear is how the regime will obtain information on what these social tensions are, especially if it restricts the very channel (investigative reporting) that is supposed to provide it with this information. The answer is the internal circulation media. But the very existence of the internal media (which are investigative by design) alongside other channels for the collection of information (the party, state security, and various state agencies) makes us wonder why the party would encourage investigative reporting as a source of information (Dimitrov 2017).

An alternative explanation that is suggested by this essay is that so-called “investigative reporting” is permitted not in order to obtain information but to fulfill other goals. The hypothesis that the publication of such reports may be subject to a hidden political logic is generated by the fact that in the highest-profile cases of investigative journalism (the Henan AIDS crisis, the Sun Zhigang incident, and the Sanlu melamine scandal) (Bandurski and Hala 2010: 35-60; Liebman 2005: 82; Zhang 2014), the public media broke the stories many weeks and sometimes months after information about them first began to circulate. In these cases, the publication of investigative reports allowed the central government to appear responsive to citizen concerns: the illegal blood collection centers in Henan that facilitated the spread of HIV were eliminated; the custody and repatriation system that led to the death of Sun Zhigang was abolished; and efforts were made to strengthen the notoriously lax food safety standards following the Sanlu scandal.⁶ Materials on the internal media indicate that decision makers were made aware promptly of these problems through internal reports,⁷ thus suggesting that “investigative reporting” was used by the regime in order to signal its resolve to address long-standing concerns that were generating significant social discontent. In this way, the open press in contemporary China is similar to the Cuban press today, which also engages in carefully calibrated public opinion supervision (Dimitrov 2018).

The examples discussed in this essay cast doubt on theories that emphasize the utility of open media for transmitting information about popular discontent as a result of bureaucratic inaction or malfeasance to the leadership in authoritarian regimes. Critical media content generates information for scholars and for the general public. From the point of view of regime insiders, internal media are a superior source of such information, because their content is not publicly disseminated and cannot be used to coordinate anti-regime collective action.

Conclusions

This essay has addressed a general problem in the study of autocracies, which also impacts China. Autocracies are nontransparent by design. This creates a hurdle for analysts studying sensitive issues like popular discontent. Easily observable empirical indicators, such as the holding of competitive elections, the eruption of protests, and the publication of investigative reports, are consistent with two very different theoretical explanations. A theory based on the analysis of publicly observable indicia may postulate that these phenomena appear because the regime needs information. An alternative theory based on the internal reporting system would specify that the regime has abundant sources of information that is not publicly disseminated, thus making competitive elections, protests, and the publication of investigative reporting phenomena that are subject to a different logic and allow for other regime goals (such as appearing accountable) to be fulfilled. The problem of the observational equivalence of theories of authoritarian politics that are based on open sources vs. internal documents is not limited to these issues; rather, it is a central concern for students of autocracy and should be explicitly acknowledged when developing theories of various phenomena in authoritarian regimes.

⁶ On the Sanlu scandal, see Yasuda 2015: 759.

⁷ See Xinhua yearbooks, especially 新华社年鉴 2008 (on the Sanlu scandal). See also Tsai 2015: 1008 (on the role of Xinhua reporting in the abolition of the custody and repatriation system).

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