

# Misinformation in an Authoritarian Society

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## Abstract

Misinformation, misperceptions, and rumors have greater influence on citizen attitudes and behavior in authoritarian countries than in democracies. Curiously, their roles in authoritarian politics, and especially Chinese politics, have rarely been systematically investigated, but mostly relegated to anecdotal discussions and the popular press. This memo calls for more attention to misinformation and misperceptions in the study of Chinese politics, including those about domestic situations and those about foreign countries.

## 1 Introduction

Recent happenings in the US and around the world have highlighted the political significance of misinformation, fake news, and rumors. A rapidly growing literature has also analyzed the dynamics and effects of misinformation in democratic countries, both misinformation and rumors about specific sociopolitical events and situations (e.g. Berinsky 2017; Nyhan, Flynn and Reifler 2017), and misperceptions about general policy and socioeconomic facts (Gilens 2001; Kuklinski et al. 2000).

Curiously, there has been a dearth of studies on misinformation and misperceptions in authoritarian countries, including China, even though they are possibly more prevalent and politically important in these countries. Misinformation is more prevalent and significant in authoritarian countries because of their general lack of independent media that can provide relatively objective and verifiable information to counter the claims of either the government or fringe social sources (Kapferer 1990). This lack of credible public information has made China's popular social media

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platform Weibo “the world’s best rumor mongering machine ever” (Larson 2011). Chinese internet and media are also filled with misleading tales about foreign countries, with consequences for citizens’ imaginations and yearnings (Bildner 2013; Yung 2011; Neidhart 2015). Fake news and rumors can also directly cause, or at least spark, revolts and revolutions in authoritarian societies (Bilefsky 2009; Pei 2008).

Nearly twenty years ago Lynch (1999) succinctly summarized China’s information environment as “public sphere praetorianism.” He was mainly referring to the sometimes disorderly flow of diverse information from a multitude of official, unofficial, and global sources. In the present age this praetorianism must include the vast amount of misinformation and misperceptions flowing online and offline. Unfortunately, discussions of such information flows have so far been mostly relegated to anecdotes and the popular press. Academic studies of information flows in authoritarian countries, including China, focus on the government side, whether propaganda (Huang 2015*b*; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011), media control (Shirk 2010), or censorship (King, Pan and Roberts 2014; Lorentzen 2014). Information flows within the mass society have been far less studied. Put differently, existing studies of media and information in authoritarian countries focus on what citizens are told or allowed to know, rather than what they think they know that just isn’t so.

Research in American politics has clearly shown that having incorrect information and having no information have entirely different implications (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Just as recent events around the world have spurred great interest in the role of misinformation and misperceptions in democratic politics, it is high time that the study of authoritarian politics, including Chinese politics, pays proper attention to these critical issues. I divide the discussion below into misinformation about domestic situations and that about foreign countries. Because the topic is new in Chinese politics, there is not much knowledge accumulation to talk about. I will simply summarize the limited research that currently exists and then suggest potential future research directions.

## **2 Misinformation and Rumors about Domestic Situations**

Misinformation is a broad concept, and this section focuses on rumors, which are usually defined as unsubstantiated claims about specific events or situations (Huang 2017*a*). Given the ubiquity of rumors in China, there have been descriptive studies. For example, Kuhn (1992) tells the story of how rumors about soul-stealing sorcerers led to mass hysteria and severe government responses during the Qing Dynasty. Zhao (2001) describes the role rumors played in mobilizing participation in the 1989 Tiananmen Movement. But systematic investigations into the origins, dynamics, and effects of rumors on public opinion in today’s China, especially when the internet and social media have dramatically increased the speed and reach of rumor propagation, are scant.

Two recent studies attempt to fill in the void. Zhu, Lu and Shi (2013) combine survey data and

local corruption cases to study how self-reported exposure to general rumor networks and official media affect Chinese citizens' perceptions of government corruption. They find while exposure to rumor networks increases perceptions about the severity of government corruption, access to official media can dilute the influence of rumor networks. Huang (2017a) studies the political effects of concrete false rumors and the government's anti-rumor rebuttals. Using an experimental procedure featuring actual rumors from Weibo, he finds that rumors accusing the government of various kinds of malfeasance and negligence decrease citizens' trust in the government; moreover, individuals of diverse socioeconomic and political backgrounds are similarly susceptible to thinly evidenced rumors. Rebuttals generally reduce people's belief in the specific content of rumors but often do not restore political trust, unless the government brings forth solid and vivid evidence to back its refutation or wins the endorsement of public figures broadly perceived to be independent. But because such high-quality rebuttals are hard to come by, rumors are erosive of political support in an authoritarian state.

More studies are needed. For example, although rumors still spread on Weibo, the social networking platform WeChat has now become the biggest channel for rumors in China (Osawa and Wong 2016). However, due to the semi-private nature of WeChat's design, rumors there are harder to detect and study (Zhang 2017); even how widely a rumor has been shared is very difficult to ascertain. To what extent has this aggravated the challenge of (mis)information to the Chinese government? Is it one of the reasons behind its increasing reliance on repression (rather than rebuttals) to stem the circulation of unfavorable (mis)information on social media?

Another issue worth studying is the origin of politically-relevant rumors. Do they all emerge spontaneously out of uncertainty and anxiety about government policies and actions? Are some of them planted by the regime's foes? Might there be commercial interests involved since rumors can be attention-grabbing? Moreover, not all initially unsubstantiated news turns out to be fake, and sometimes it seems to emerge first out of state-affiliated media outlets. Might such stories be government trial balloons to test public reactions?<sup>1</sup> Addressing these questions will reveal a great deal about authoritarian information dynamics.

Related to rumors are conspiracy theories, about which there is an emerging literature in American political behavior research (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014). But there do not seem to be any rigorous studies of conspiracy theories in China, such as the claim that genetically modified foods are biological weapons of the United States.<sup>2</sup> Who is more likely to believe such conspiracy theories? What are their effects on Chinese public opinion? Future research can look into these questions.

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### 3 Misinformation and Misperceptions about Foreign Countries

Another kind of politically important misinformation is about foreign countries, given that aspiring citizens in a developing and authoritarian country often use foreign countries as benchmarks to judge their domestic situations. Here the most important misinformation and misperceptions are probably not about specific events in foreign countries, but rather foreign countries' general social, economic, and political conditions. For example, how high is the standard of living in advanced democracies? What are their crime rates like? What kind of political rights and civil liberties do their citizens enjoy? After all, the value of living under an alternative regime or setting is a crucial factor in citizens' decisions about participating in collective action (Meirowitz and Tucker 2013).

Surprisingly, the effects of knowledge and perceptions of foreign countries have rarely been studied in the social science literature, to say nothing of China studies. The vast literature on citizen knowledge focuses almost exclusively on people's domestic knowledge, particularly domestic political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Prior 2007), neglecting that citizens' knowledge and perception of foreign countries may significantly shape their political behavior. Research on censorship similarly deals with what citizens can learn about domestic situations rather than foreign countries.

Huang (2015a) attempts to remedy the situation by studying the relationship between Chinese citizens' international knowledge and domestic attitudes. His survey experiments show that while overestimating and underestimating foreign socioeconomic conditions are both somewhat common in China, overestimating foreign socioeconomic conditions causally leads to lower evaluations of China and the Chinese government. Correcting misinformation about foreign countries, on the other hand, can improve individuals' domestic attitudes. Similarly, the rapidly rising mass phenomenon of Chinese emigration does not always reflect informed decisions about voting with feet, but is sometimes the result of overly rosy perceptions about foreign socioeconomic conditions (Huang 2017b). In a related study, Huang and Yeh (Forthcoming) find that Chinese citizens with higher pro-Western orientation and lower domestic evaluations are more inclined to read foreign media content that is positive about foreign socioeconomic performances or negative about China. Crucially, since mainstream Western media reports are generally more accurate and realistic than the overly rosy information about foreign countries that popularly circulates in China, reading foreign media can improve the domestic evaluations of Chinese citizens who self-select such content.

These results are somewhat counter-intuitive. Conventional wisdom assumes that, due to media censorship and government propaganda, citizens in authoritarian countries lack sufficient knowledge about the prosperity of advanced democracies, and that more information about the outside world will inspire them to demand changes at home. The aforementioned studies suggest that the opposite is also possible: In a rapidly developing country, a sizable population may have views of foreign countries that are too rosy rather than too bleak; more accurate and ample information may

prolong rather than undermine authoritarian rule. Censorship of foreign information, in this sense, can be counter-productive.

Obviously more research is needed. In particular, the above studies focus on foreign socioeconomic information, and the surprising findings may be due to China's fast economic growth in recent decades, which leads people to have unrealistic expectations about foreign countries. Politically, China has been stagnant and even backsliding. The effects of international political knowledge may thus be different: More information about the vibrancy of political and civic life abroad could enhance Chinese citizens' awareness of their political plights and reduce their domestic support. This will be an important topic for future research.

In addition, it will be useful to examine how Chinese citizens consume international political information: Who is more interested in positive/negative reports about foreign democracies, and what are the outcomes of such potentially selective exposure? The 2016 US presidential election has also shown that fake news about specific foreign events and politicians can travel far inside China (Fang 2017). What are the dynamics and effects of such fake news?

The American public is often criticized for being ignorant about foreign countries; for example, many American citizens vastly overestimate China's economic prowess (Dugan 2014). Given that Chinese citizens generally have lower levels of education, more limited personal exposure to foreign countries, and less reliable information sources, their knowledge about the outside world is likely even worse. Studies of Chinese citizens' (mis)information and (mis)perceptions about foreign countries will therefore be a fruitful research topic.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

Information is essential for political participation and decision making. It is understandable that the existing literature on authoritarian media and information flow has focused on the government side, given the nature of authoritarianism. But information flows in all societies, including authoritarian ones, are multi- rather than unidirectional, and an exclusive focus on government-directed information flow is vastly incomplete. Information emerging from society, including and perhaps particularly misinformation, needs to be part of the picture.

In the past, misinformation has been difficult to study. For example, rumors tended to be informal, mercurial, and transmitted through whispers. Nowadays, however, they are frequently posted and recorded online, greatly facilitating research. Advances in survey and experimental methods have also made it easier to understand patterns of information acquisition and processing. The age of "alternative facts" and "post-truth" thus demands studies about misinformation and misperceptions in settings where they are most relevant and influential.

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