

Authoritarian Resilience: Persuasion & Political Education¹

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Over the past three decades, popular uprisings have removed at least twenty-one dictators from office, despite in many cases their long tenure, considerable coercive powers, and alliances with powerful international actors. Often the first group to take to the streets and challenge autocratic rule is the country's youth. During the color revolutions across Eastern Europe and Eurasia (1998-2005), youth movements played a prominent role in toppling dictators in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). In the Arab uprisings (2010-2014), it was the younger generations filling out central squares across the Middle East and North Africa (Lynch 2013). Even in countries where authoritarian leaders have remained firmly entrenched, such as China after the 1989 Tiananmen uprisings, students have been at the forefront of challenging authoritarian leaders and their allies (Calhoun 1994; Wright 1998). Given that young people tend to lead the charge for political change, how do authoritarian regimes attempt to promote loyalty among their younger and more contentious generations? How do they educate students and future elite to be supportive of those in power? What are the instruments of political persuasion?

The purpose of this memo is to weigh in on these questions in the context of contemporary China. I do so in three ways. One is to take stock of what we know about political education in China—that is, the ways in which the regime teaches political knowledge and attempts to socialize students to be supportive of the party-state. Another is to highlight how strategies of political socialization contribute to authoritarian resilience. The final concern is to suggest the ways in which the study of political education in China advances the discussion of authoritarian resilience in comparative politics.

What do we know about political education in China?

Political education is hardly new. Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau and Lenin all recognized the importance of education in cementing and sustaining support for those who rule. This is because it is argued that what is learned early on in life is difficult to displace (Easton and Hess 1962). In contemporary China, political education centers largely on cultivating support for communist party rule. Political education began in the 1930s at revolutionary bases where the communists used the basic tenants of Marxism-Leninism to teach literacy and explain to rural residents how and by whom they were being exploited (Pepper 1996; Selden 1995; Seybolt 1971). *The Red Children's Reader*, for example, taught of the benefits of collective power over individualism and how to fight against oppressors like Chiang Kia-shek and the GMD. Even mathematics instruction had an ideological orientation—basic statistics were taught by estimating how many houses were destroyed by the Japanese and then rebuilt by the communists (Law 2010).

After 1949 the Chinese leadership continued to place a high priority on political education, a priority that Xi Jinping has recently reaffirmed (Qian 1949; Xinhua 2016). Beginning in primary school, students spend a minimum of one hour per week in political education courses to help develop the correct political orientation. Here, children learn to sing the national anthem, identify the national flag and capital, as well as the key facts about the founding and leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The political education curriculum expands in junior high school,

¹ This memo is based on a book project, *Learning to Be Loyal: Political Education in Authoritarian Regimes*, that is a comparative study of political education in China and Russia.

where nearly all students spend at least two hours weekly surveying core political doctrines and positions of the CCP. This regiment intensifies in senior high school where students take compulsory courses, such as Thought and Politics (*sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu*) that are designed to “mold popular consciousness” (Vickers 2009, 524).²

To be sure, the politics curriculum has broadened over the years and we observed an elaborate patriotic education campaign after Tiananmen, but the purpose of political education has remained consistent: to legitimize communist party rule (Cantoni et al. 2017; Law 2011; Wang 2008; Zhao 1998; Hayoe 1993). Specifically, political education courses are designed to “systematically educate students in ideology, moral character, general knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, and the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics” in order to “nurture the entire body of students as citizens who love the socialist motherland, who have social morality and civilized behavior, and who observe discipline and obey the law” (Outline on Secondary School Moral Education 1995: 22, 27). We have also learned that political education may not necessarily achieve these lofty goals and transform the behavior of young people (Rosen 2010), and may lead to unintended consequences, such as heightened competition among youth (Shirk 1981; see Yurchak 2005 for the Soviet comparison).

However, what is distinctive about political education in contemporary China and sets it apart from many other authoritarian regimes is that all courses are geared toward passing the politics section of the National College Entrance Examination. The National College Entrance Examination (*putong gaodeng xuexiao zhaoosheng quanguo tongyi kaoshi*), commonly known as the *Gaokao*, is a two-day, grueling examination that functions as the gatekeeper of higher education in China. Among the many subjects covered on the examination—mathematics, Chinese, foreign languages, physics, biology, chemistry, geography, and history—is politics.³

On the politics section, students must demonstrate fluency in regime ideology (Marxism-Leninism and socialism), knowledge of political institutions and specific government policies, and awareness of political, cultural, and economic events—all subjects covered in political education in schools. Unlike other subjects tested on the *Gaokao*, the politics section evaluates how well a student can interpret politics and current events inline with the regimes’ worldview. In 1956, for example, students had to “explain the superior nature of the People’s Congress” (Question 5, 1956); during the Great Leap Forward, one essay required reflection on “why the people’s commune is the best form to take in the transition from socialism to communism” (Question 2, 1959); in 1961 students explained “why the Kennedy Administration will only be worse, and not better, than the Eisenhower Administration” (Question 8, 1961). In the post-Mao era, test takers weighed in on the economic benefits of “red tourism,” the patriotic education program to promote socio-economic development at revolutionary bases (Question 40, 2005). In the most recent *Gaokao*, students were asked about poverty alleviation policies attributed to “Comrade Xi,” identified on the exam as “the core of the Communist Party Central Committee” (Questions 15 and 16, 2017). As these questions reveal, the politics section is not intended to be a reflection of a student’s creativity and individuality, but an opportunity to demonstrate their “good political thinking” as the party-state understands it.

The *Gaokao* & Authoritarian Resilience

The *Gaokao* contributes to regime resilience in four ways. The first is as a mechanism to test and reward loyalty. Students who reproduce the regime’s worldview receive top scores and access to

² Political education is required in primary school and junior high, two of the three years of high school, the first two years of college, and during the first year of graduate school.

³ Students majoring in arts and humanities (*wenke*) will have a slightly different exam than those pursuing the sciences (*like*). The humanities track tests only one of the three sciences covered on the exam (biology, chemistry, and physics).

higher education—a main pathway to upward mobility. Another is as a mechanism of political socialization. Here, we can point to the years of political education courses that seek to unify thinking and legitimize communist party rule. Students across the country learn from government-approved textbooks and are socialized around the values the party-state deems as most important. Top performers on the *Gaokao* are then elevated to the next generation of elite—that is, an elite with a shared political socialization and pathway.

A third is as a mechanism of social control. Not only is the Chinese educational system oriented towards the *Gaokao*, but also outside of the classroom Chinese youth spend countless hours in preparation for this high-stakes exam. Families spend their savings on expensive tutors, *Gaokao* cram schools, and even special diets in hopes of boosting their child's score (Yu and Suen 2005). The implication, of course, is that the focus on the *Gaokao* means there is very little time for Chinese youth to focus their efforts elsewhere, including contentious politics.

A final way the *Gaokao* contributes to authoritarian resilience is by cultivating the image of a level playing field. In a country with a large population, limited access to higher education, and widespread perceptions that personal connections matter, the *Gaokao* is held up as a meritocratic tool of evaluation. This image is carefully guarded by the regime, which closely oversees the design of exam. Each year, for instance, distinguished experts are invited to prepare new questions, divided into teams, and held in isolation until after the exam is given. Questions go through a series of reviews before final approval and the team will not know whether their questions will be ultimately selected (Ye 2013). To reinforce the image of the regime as the defender of meritocracy, examination booklets frequently arrive at testing centers with military or police escorts to signal that they have not been corrupted.

It is worth noting that the use of a national examination to reinforce the regime has a long history in China that dates well before the founding of the communist party (Perry 2015). In the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD), the Imperial Service Examination (*keju*) was first used to select capable and loyal elites for the civil service (see, e.g., Elman 2000; Yu and Suen 2005). Young men who passed the examination were given a position within the imperial bureaucracy, which meant access to wealth, power, and prestige for the candidate and his entire family. In other words, guaranteed elite status. The content of the imperial examination tested a candidate's knowledge of the nine classic texts of Confucian philosophy, which also served as the unifying ideology for the imperial state (Feng 1995; Miyazaki 1976). The preparation for the imperial exam was both time consuming and functioned as a powerful tool of socialization in a large, fragmented, and linguistically diverse empire. Aspiring elites spent much of their youth studying the same materials, participated in the same grueling examination ritual, which fostered a shared sense of unity (and suffering) among the diverse civil service. The imperial examination was abolished in 1905, but we must remember that it propped up over 1,300 years of autocratic rule.

How does the study of political education in China advance the discussion of authoritarian resilience in comparative politics?

The long tradition of political education in China can contribute to theoretical debates about the durability and resilience of authoritarian regimes. More specifically, the study of how regime strategies of legitimation have shifted overtime in China can provide insight into how authoritarian leaders seek to cultivate popular legitimacy; when and why they turn to ideology and economic growth as opposed to nationalism and ethnicity to foster national unity; and whether these strategies of legitimation free those in power from the need to rely so heavily on coercion.

The study of Chinese political education also offers an important empirical comparison. While the politics section of the *Gaokao* may be unique to China, political education is not. In Belarus, for example, political education courses are compulsory and seek to enhance patriotism and

morality (Sidorovitch 2005, 486). In Vietnam, undergraduates devote up to twelve percent of their studies to political education and take a regiment of classes on Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, Scientific Socialism, and the history of the Vietnamese Communist Party. At the graduate level, Vietnamese students are required to spend an additional 60 hours on the study of Marxist-Leninist philosophy in order to advance to candidacy (Doan 2005, 457-58). Since 1965, children in Singapore have taken civics classes that emphasize the importance of “Asian values,” including “personal and physical discipline, and a strong sense of responsibility to his parents, to others and to [the] country” (Han 2008, 115). In Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev re-introduced political education classes to increase pride in the Fatherland (Bajzhabaginova 2011). Since coming to power, Vladimir Putin has overseen a number of programs to restore patriotic education across the Russian Federation, including the creation of a new government agency to promote patriotism, the establishment of over 22,000 patriotic youth organizations, and the opening of 78 military-patriotic education (Sanina 2016; Omelchenko et al. 2015; *Gosudarstvennaya Programma* 2015). To ignore the broad trends of political education across the authoritarian world or to dismiss them as indoctrination and propaganda misses an opportunity to unpack the micro-foundations of authoritarian rule, and to compare how China and other authoritarian regimes attempt to transform rebellious youth into loyal regime stakeholders.

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