

# Public Opinion and Authoritarian Resilience in China<sup>1</sup>

A working paper by

Wenfang Tang (唐文方), University of Iowa

## The Rise of Public Opinion Survey in China

One of the most remarkable changes in the study of Chinese politics in the post-Mao era is information explosion based on public opinion survey research. Before then, Chinese politics was sometimes described as Byzantine-style palace coup d'état behind the bamboo curtain. China scholars were trained to predict policy and personnel changes by reading the front-page articles of the Communist Party's official newspaper the *People's Daily* and detecting the slightest changes in wording. They were also trained to closely examine the official photos in which leaders appeared in different orders, symbolizing the subtle realignment and reconfiguration of elite power balance<sup>2</sup>. Elite politics remained to be the only way to study Chinese politics, until public opinion survey research emerged.

As China opened up, government officials and scholars realized the importance of collecting scientific data on public opinion. In May, 1987, the Economic System Reform Institute of China (ESRIC) conducted the first public opinion survey using a national probability sample based on China's urban population. The ESRIC was set up as a think tank by the then Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang. Concerned about public intolerance and social instability, Zhao ordered ESRIC to carry out biannual urban surveys in order to monitor the public mood during China's transition from state planning to market capitalism.

The leader of the ESRIC survey team was Yang Guansan, an official/scholar who was a brilliant sociologist and a graduate of the 1977 class, which was the 1<sup>st</sup> crop of China's college graduates in the post-Mao era. Under his leadership, the ESRIC conducted 6 urban surveys in May and October of 1987, 1988 and 1989. While analyzing the survey data, Yang realized the rapidly rising public dissatisfaction with inflation, unemployment, social morale, and government inefficiency.

In early 1989, Yang wrote a top secret internal report to Zhao Ziyang, showing the survey results and warning him the danger of urban unrest. It was too late. The massive urban protests began in April that year. Zhao and the other leaders in the Chinese Communist Party never had the time and appropriate measures to respond to the public dissatisfaction.

When the protests were cracked down and when Zhao Ziyang was stripped off all of his titles, Yang Guansan's report was found on Zhao Ziyang's desk. An investigation followed and Yang Guansan was found guilty of instigating the urban riots. He was immediately arrested and jailed at Qin Cheng Prison, the place for the highest level political prisoners such as the Gang of Four.

In 1991, Yang was released from Qin Cheng. He managed to continue the ESRIC surveys two more times in 1991 and 1992. The 1992 ESRIC survey was particularly important because it adopted many questions

---

<sup>1</sup> Presented at the Chinese Politics Workshop, the Asia Center, Harvard University, December 15, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Andrei Lungu, 2017. Xi Jinping Has Quietly Chosen His Own Successor: Meet Chen Miner, the man who has been getting groomed to run China — without anyone in the West seeming to notice. *Foreign Policy*, October 20, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/20/xi-jinping-has-quietly-chosen-his-own-successor/> (accessed Oct. 21, 2017).

from the General Social Survey in the U.S., therefore making the Chinese data systematically comparable to other societies for the first time.

As Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992 confirmed China's determination to continue market capitalism without political liberalization, Yang finally decided to give up his political and academic career. He turned down my invitation to come to the U.S. as a visiting scholar and jumped into the futures market. Soon he became a successful trader and a frequent visitor of Beijing's private clubs in his black Mercedes-Benz 600.

After a brief quiet period in the early 1990s, public opinion survey research regained its momentum in China. At the forefront of political science surveys was Shen Mingming. A Michigan-trained political scientist, Shen returned to Peking University and took over the leadership of the Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) in the mid-1990s.

Since then, the RCCC worked with many international scholars and conducted numerous national and international surveys, such as the 1999 Urban Survey, the 2004 Legal Survey, the 2008 China Survey, the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> World Values Surveys, and the 2013-2015 Urban Surveys, among many others local surveys.

Probably the most important contribution to public opinion survey research by the RCCC was its pioneer use of spatial sampling in China during the 2004 Legal Survey under the leadership of Shen Mingming and Pierre Landry. Traditional sampling method relied on household registration record which was often incomplete, inaccurate, and politically difficult.

The GPS-based spatial sampling can avoid these problems and more easily capture any resident, particularly in large cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen where migrant population can be as high as 30-50%.

Since then, spatial sampling has become a standard technique that assured the representativeness of survey samples in China. This sample representativeness later turned out to have important implications in the study of regime resilience.

Survey research has mushroomed quickly since the 1990s. There are several large-scale national surveys backed by the generous grants from the Chinese government, such as the Chinese Labor Dynamics Survey (panel survey) conducted by Sun Yat-Sen University, the Chinese Family Panel Survey conducted by Peking University, the Chinese General Social Survey conducted by Renmin University; and independent national surveys conducted by overseas scholars including the World Values Surveys in China, the Asian Barometer Surveys in China, the Chinese Income Inequality surveys, and so on.

In addition to using spatial sampling, these surveys also borrowed many questions from the existing international surveys.

Today, survey research in China can rival any country in the world in terms of sampling technique, questionnaire design and survey quality control; and there are tons of survey data publicly available from China and much of them are underutilized.

## The "Surprises" of Public Opinion Surveys in the Study of Regime Resilience

Public opinion surveys have brought profound influence in the study of regime resilience in China. Sometimes these surveys challenge the long-existing beliefs about the political and social realities in China. Below I will mention five controversial survey findings.

*1) Tiananmen protest was not a pro-democratic movement.* While analyzing the ESRIC data, I found something really interesting and unexpected. As the public dissatisfaction with inflation, unemployment, social morale, and government inefficiency skyrocketed during the peak of the urban protests in spring, 1989, the majority of urban residents (more than 50%) thought that market reform was going “too fast” and such “anti-reform” attitude closely echoed the rise of inflation during the same time.

In the meantime, public demand for liberal democratic ideas such as freedom of speech and freedom of press never surpassed one third even during the peak of the Tiananmen protest in May, 1989.

Putting these findings together, what the ESRIC surveys reveal is that Tiananmen protest was by nature an anti-reform campaign when the urban residents panicked about the negative consequences of marketization.

In a miracle of miracle if there were free elections, the conservative anti-reform candidates probably would have won and China would have returned to the centrally planned system where urban residents enjoyed cradle-to-grave social safety net.

This is a very different picture from the Western media coverage of the Tiananmen protest. According to Western media, Tiananmen protest was a pro-democratic movement where the majority of Chinese urban residents demanded liberal democratic reform.

The findings in the ESRIC surveys were very unpopular in the early 1990s during the domino collapse of the communist governments in the Soviet Bloc. Yet regime resilience in China later proved that the findings in the ESRIC surveys were a realistic reflection of the public sentiment in urban China.

Today the ESRIC surveys stand as the best and the only available scientific evidence about what really happened in the spring of 1989 in Tiananmen. I would rather trust the results of the ESRIC data which are based on probability samples than the media reports based on anecdotal examples.

*2) Regime support.* One of the most consistent findings in the Chinese surveys is the high level of regime support. Chinese survey respondents have shown strong positive feelings toward their government no matter how the survey questions are worded, such as “support for the central government”, “trust in the Communist Party”, “trust in the central government leaders”, “confidence in the key political institutions”, “approval of China’s political system”, “satisfaction with central government performance”, or “identity with the Chinese nation”.

Such strong regime support is found in different Chinese surveys conducted by different organizations and different investigators, including the World Values Surveys, the Asian Barometer Surveys, the PEW Surveys, the Chinese General Social Surveys, and the Chinese Urban Surveys, among others.

The most common challenge to this finding of strong regime support is the “political sensitivity” argument. According to this argument, China is an authoritarian police state and Chinese survey respondents hide their unhappiness with the regime due to the fear of retribution.

This view could be true during the Mao era but is a little out of date in today’s China. Analyzing their online comments, researchers including Gary King, Jenifer Pan and Molly Roberts found Chinese internet users to be politically active and highly critical of the government, as long as they do not advocate organized political actions.

Survey tools such as List Experiment have been used in the U.S. to detect the respondents' political desirability by hiding their racial bias. When the same List Experiment was used in Chinese surveys, only 8-10% of the respondents were found to hide their unhappiness with the central government.

Even after discounting the political desirability effect, regime support in China is still among the highest in the world, higher than in many democracies.

Some people think that authoritarian regime trust is unhealthy and democratic regime distrust is healthy. This may be true since critical democratic citizens can play the role of assuring government accountability.

Yet it seems equally true that decision making is more efficient and less wasteful of time and resources if there is less tension and greater harmony between the state and the public, particularly in societies with a lot of people and limited resources to spare.

*3) Interpersonal trust.* The third "surprise" in the Chinese surveys is the high level of interpersonal trust. Many Chinese survey respondents in the past 20 years have consistently agreed that "most people can be trusted".

For example, 60% of the Chinese respondents in the 6<sup>th</sup> Wave of the World Values Survey in 2012 agreed that most people could be trusted, ranking the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in the world only next to the Netherlands (62%), and much higher than many democracies such as the U.S., Taiwan, Japan and South Korea that only produced some 30% of trusting citizens.

This finding is counter-intuitive because it conflicts with the traditional theory of democracy that tends to make interpersonal trust and social capital a precondition for successful functioning of democracy, as articulated by authors such as Almond, Verba, Putnam, Inglehart, and Fukuyama.

Such finding is equally controversial. Some people do not want to believe it because it does not go with their impressions when they travel to China and talk to Chinese people.

Unfortunately, personal impressions cannot serve to discredit survey findings, especially when surveys are based on representative samples. The disbelievers need better evidence to challenge the survey findings.

Others tend to argue that interpersonal trust has different meanings in different societies. China is a Confucian society so that interpersonal trust must mean trusting one's own family members, while in democratic societies, interpersonal trust means trusting strangers.

Such depiction is only partially true. While family trust is very high in China, it is not the most important reason for the high level of general trust. Instead, community-based trust turned out to be most closely related to general trust in China and it has a positive effect on regime support in multivariate regression analysis when other factors are controlled.

The abundance of social capital but the lack of democracy seems to make China a significant outlier in the existing theory of civic culture and democracy.

*4) Political activism.* The fourth "surprise" in the Chinese surveys is the high level of political activism. For example, in the 2004 Legal Survey, only 6% of the respondents chose to do nothing when they were involved in legal disputes and the rest would try to resolve them by various channels.

Similarly, in the 2012 Chinese Labor Dynamics Survey, nearly half of the employees mentioned that they had at least one labor dispute in the past two years.

These findings are consistent with the media reports of the increasing number of mass protests in recent years, particularly at the local level.

On the surface, political activism seems to contradict regime support, as the former brings out public political confrontation against the regime in the conventional belief.

Yet, what is remarkable is that in the survey data such as the Chinese General Social Survey, trusting the central government makes people protest more. In other words, central government supporters and the protestors are the *same* people.

Authors such as Keven O'Brien and Li Lianjiang believe that Chinese citizens engage in a clever practice by which they protest against local governments and their bad policies while using the central government's glorious propaganda about serving the people.

According to this belief, the protestors learn to fight for their rights in this process and eventually will fight against and bring down the authoritarian regime itself.

In contrast, others such as Yanqi Tong, Shaohua Lei, and Peter Lorentzen believe that mass protests at the local level is encouraged by the central government either through the CCP's populist ideology of the Mass Line, and/or to test and identify unpopular local policies and officials.

These authors suggest that such practice will eventually improve public support of the central government. If the second view is true, political activism is an integral component of regime resilience in China.

5) *Government responsiveness*. The fifth "surprise" is the high level of government responsiveness. For example, in the second wave of the Asian Barometer Survey conducted in 2008, 77% of the mainland Chinese respondents agreed that their government would respond to what people needed. In contrast, only 36% of the Taiwanese respondents agreed with the same statement in the same survey.

Government responsiveness played the single most significant role in promoting regime support in China, in addition to the findings by authors like Pippa Norris, Tianjian Shi and Doh Shin about other factors such as economic performance, media control and cultural values.

One of the most common challenges to this finding goes like this: the Chinese live in an unfree society so that they have extremely low expectations about what their government can do for them. They tend to be thrilled if their government does a little of something. In a democratic society, the government regularly responds to public demand but the public is always grumpy and constantly asks for more.

This view *may be* true, but it discounts the importance of public opinion. A high opinion of government responsiveness shows the public's external political efficacy that is a political commodity desired by any government, regardless of how much a government actually responds.

Another even more provocative explanation of the above finding is that the Chinese authoritarian government is actually more responsive than a democratically elected government such as in Taiwan.

Leaders of a democratic government may be hyper-responsive to public opinion during the election season and to their own supporters, but less so once they get elected, between elections, and to those who don't vote for them.

In contrast, leaders in authoritarian China don't have the luxury of electoral cycles. The CCP claims to represent the interest of the highest number of people in China, yet it doesn't have elections as the simple but effective yardstick to measure such representativeness. They become easily paranoid and compelled to respond even when they see a single protestor on the street.

Authors such as Zhu Yunhan and Tong Yanqi in their studies show that the CCP spends a large amount of time and resources to calm and compensate protestors and petitioners, as an effort to maintain social stability. Perhaps that explains the alleged fact why the CCP spends more on maintaining social stability than on defense.

### Enriching Comparative Politics with Chinese Public Opinion Surveys

The rise of public opinion survey research in China since the past 30 years has left a few cracks in the empirical foundation of some of the classic theories in comparative politics that were first developed in the West with limited first-hand evidence.

For example, the classic theory of Civic Culture was developed from survey data in only 5 countries, the U.S., UK, Germany, Italy and Mexico. Today, the World Values Surveys cover more than 80 countries in all the continents with human inhabitation.

Among these countries, China stands out as an outlier and does not fit the theoretical predictions of comparative politics. As discussed in the above mentioned "surprises",

- Tiananmen protest in 1989 was an anti-reform movement, but it was expected to be a pro-democratic movement;

- the Chinese regime enjoys strong public support even it is expected to collapse soon;

- social capital in China is among the highest in the world even Chinese citizens are expected to distrust each other in a police state;

- the authoritarian government is highly responsive even the theory of democracy predicts otherwise;

- and Chinese citizens are politically active and enjoy strong feeling of political efficacy even if they are expected to be politically apathetic.

Today, China scholars enjoy the best data and the most sophisticated mythological tools, but China Study remains poorly integrated into the theories of comparative politics.

One problem in the existing comparative politics literature is the rigid (and black and white) definition of democracy. For example, in their rankings of democracy and freedom by *Polity* and *Freedom House*, both are highly respected organizations and their annual rankings are widely used in comparative politics, China has been consistently ranked at the very bottom of freedom and democracy.

Yet in the World Values Survey in 2012, more than 60% of Chinese respondents said they felt free, which was higher than in many democracies.

Yes, the Chinese may have extremely low expectations, but they do feel free and that feeling matters because unhappy citizens can cause political disruption.

The problem of measurement error is not only limited to China. In fact, when comparing the subjective feelings in public opinion surveys with the “objective” measures of democracy in the rankings by *Polity* and *Freedom House*, public opinions throughout the world show a negative correlation with democracy.

In other words, democratic citizens feel less democracy in their societies than authoritarian citizens.

One way to integrate China into the general theoretical framework is to slightly stretch the concepts in comparative politics.

Concept stretching may carry a negative meaning in comparative political analysis, because stretching a concept too much will result in the diluted explanatory power of a theory.

Yet overly rigid definition can limit the scope and effectiveness of comparative studies. Some of the key concepts in comparative politics can be stretched (or enriched) by the available public opinion surveys.

For example, the traditional definitions of democracy, freedom, government responsiveness, and political legitimacy that are derived from the institutional designs (objective measures) can be stretched to include public perceptions of these concepts (subjective measures).

Similarly, the traditional study of authoritarianism can include both elites and masses, and formal and informal politics<sup>3</sup>; social capital can incorporate both civic trust (trusting strangers) and community-based interpersonal trust.

Such concept enrichment requires the acceptance by the comparative politics scholars in the non-China fields.

Another danger and threat to the integration comes from some China scholars themselves. Feeling left out by the existing comparative political framework, these scholars tend to focus on the Sino-centric model that is uniquely based on China’s history, culture and political terminology such as “Confucian tradition,” the “three representativenesses,” the “harmonious society,” and the “core socialist values”.

Such Sinocentric focus results in the isolation of China studies and prevents constructive dialogues between China scholars and non-China scholars.

The final barrier of integrating China into comparative politics is ideological biases. While people outside China take it for granted that academic research in China is ideologically controlled, it is also true that China is frequently judged with ideologically tinted glasses in the West by some media organizations and scholars.

For example, the authoritarian political system is inherently bad, supporting such system is unhealthy, civic trust is the only type that can qualify as interpersonal trust and social capital, government responsiveness is due to Chinese citizens’ “extremely low expectations”, and so on.

These value judgements prevent researchers from understanding what is working and what is not working in the Chinese political system, regardless whether it is good or bad.

---

<sup>3</sup> The best studies on the relationship between formal and informal politics can be found in Liz Perry’s research on urban protest, Lily Tsai’s work on the interaction between formal and informal institutions in rural public goods provision, and Victor Shih’s study of informal ties embedded in the CCP’s formal organizations.