

# Research Statement

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My research interests lie in comparative politics, political behaviors and political communication in autocracies. The focus of my research program is on 1) information control and manipulation, and 2) the consequences of such control, i.e. how citizens' political behaviors and attitudes are shaped.

## **1 The Consequences of political information in autocracies**

### **1.1 Information about protests**

My dissertation focuses on how the effects of protest messages change audiences' protest participation in future.

Conventionally, protests are regarded as destabilizing in authoritarian regimes because they may be contagious to encourage further protests. This argument is based on the assumption that the protest messages reach the audiences in a homogeneous way that encourages further participation. However, the components of a protest message are complex and they do not reach audiences homogeneously, due to the diverse natures of media outlets and the different levels of information control. Then, the mechanism of protests are destabilizing still remains opaque.

In the dissertation, I argue that the effects of protest-related messages on political participation are mediated by three factors. The first is the information environment (the media channels) which selectively presents certain behaviors and hides the others of the same protest event. Via an automated content analysis, I found that state-control professional media are more likely to report government responsiveness to a protest and conceal repression, compared to social media posted by ordinary citizens. Second, behaviors of the government and the protesters in a protest message can generate heterogeneous effects on audiences' participation willingness. I conducted a survey experiment on Chinese citizens. I find that citizens' participation willingness increases when they read the government has made concession to the protesters, while messages of repression have no effects. Finally, I argue that personal attributes of an individual can affect the interpretation of the protest

message. I continue to work on the survey experiment data to examine the heterogeneous effects of protest messages.

My dissertation is limited by an online sample. In the future, I plan to conduct a survey via representative sample, in order to examine the external validity of my argument. This project will hopefully turn into a book project on information's effects on political participation in autocracies. Because the dissertation only focuses on information about domestic protests, I also plan to extend the project by examining the effects of news on foreign protests. In addition, I also plan to study the effects of other protest-related messages. For example, how the policy information related to the targets of protests will affect participation willingness; how the regime's propaganda on political participation will change people's behaviors, etc. I will also look for collaboration with specialists whose regional focus is not China to test the theory in another context.

## 1.2 Projects on the effects of other political information

Other than protest information, I examine how different types of political information change Chinese citizens' political behaviors and attitudes. Political information includes political satire, the op-ed of opinion leaders, propaganda, political discourse or trolling on social media, etc. Studies about the political consequences of political contents in various media channels are mostly conducted in the democratic context, while we still know little about how such information performs in autocracies. My article with Dongshu Liu (Syracuse University), published in *Political Studies*, examines the influence of user-generated political satire on citizens' political trust and political participation in an authoritarian context. Via a survey experiment, we found that political satire reduces political trust for the regime while at the same time discourages political participation against the regime. We concluded that satire elicits cynicism which can stabilize the regime in the short run while erodes its rule in the long run. This finding provides counter-evidence to the conventions in the literature that political satire is a weapon to resist the authoritarian rule.

In an article I co-authored with He Huang (Renmin University of China) and Fangfei Wang (Dalian University of Technology), examines the effects of opinion leaders on policy attitudes and behaviors. We argue that such effects are moderated by the context of pervasive propaganda in China. Audiences are willing to trust opinion leaders when the leaders criticize the government. They are also more willing to repost such criticism to their social media circle. When opinion leaders endorse the position of the government, however, audiences will interpret such opinions as a type of propaganda and thus are less trustworthy. Their willingness to repost such information also reduces. We conducted a survey experiment on Internet users in Beijing to prove our theory. The article is published by *International Journal of Communication*.

In the future, I plan to extend my research on various types of political discussion on media available in authoritarian contexts. I hope to explore the causes of the formation of political opinions and ideologies in a partially-open information environment. Such studies are important to understand how authoritarian regimes cope with information technology advancement and maintain political stability, and what potential changes new ICTs can

bring to societies under autocracy.

## 2 Information Control

Information control, or censorship, is interesting because it represents one of the essential differences between contemporary autocracies and democracies. The phenomena of censoring political information reflects the concerns of authoritarian leaders: information can destabilize their rule. Therefore, understanding censorship is helpful to understand the self-perceived weakness of autocracies.

My paper published in *Journal of East Asian Studies*, “The Dilemma of Criticism: Disentangling the Determinants of Media Censorship in China,” argues that the government selectively censors political criticism. In a survey experiment with Chinese journalists, I found that Chinese censors are more tolerant of criticisms of government performance, while intolerant to attacks on the legitimacy of one-party rule. This project supports and then develops the “collective action potential” theory which argues the regime only censors collective expressions, not political criticism.

The second project, which I co-authored with Rongbin Han, aims to establish a dynamic model of censorship in China. While the previous works focuses on the “surgical control”, which content is most likely to be censored, we ask why the standard of censorship changes over time regarding citizen’s complaints on the Internet. We call it “categorical control” – the control over a category of content. We collected time-series data on *Tianya*, one of the most popular BBS in China, to examine our theory. We found that the Chinese government tends to censor more 1) during ritualistic moments (like political annual meetings or the Party’s important anniversaries) and 2) when the regime launched information control campaigns.

The third project, which I co-author with Dimitar Gueorguiev and Charles Crabtree, examines self-censorship of citizens rather than the state. We argue that people with better knowledge about the “red line” self-censor less than those who are unclear about the censorship standards. We used replication data, a field experiment and an online survey experiment to test the theory.

In conclusion, I have extensive interests in studying political behaviors and political communication issues in authoritarian contexts. I plan to continue this field of research after I get my Ph.D. degree.