

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Information and authoritarian rule

In late 2010, a Tunisian street vendor set himself and much of the Arab world on fire. Tunisia erupted into protest. The previously iron-fisted rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya lost power and others came close. But this was not the first time seemingly strong authoritarian regimes have collapsed suddenly as previously hidden discontent exploded to the surface. Two decades before, a similar sudden wave of opposition led to the collapse of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe. In 1986, the People Power movement drew perhaps a million people to the streets of Manila and overthrew the twenty-year rule of dictator Ferdinand Marcos. And in 1989, China experienced a similar sudden outpouring of discontent and was able to contain it only with harsh repressive tactics at great reputational cost, sending tanks onto the streets of the capital in full view of the world media.

While in each case the sudden explosion of discontent resulted from the highly contingent convergence of a variety of factors, the very fact that these eruptions were unanticipated shows that top leaders' lack of accurate information played a central role. Citizens at every level of authoritarian society know not to speak their mind to those in power. Ronald Wintrobe influentially characterized this as the "Dictator's Dilemma" (1998), arguing that the more powerful a dictator is, the harder it will be for him to know his true level of support, because all of his subjects worry that the presentation of accurate but unflattering information will be viewed as a sign of disloyalty. Even regime insiders may share that fear, leading them to avoid reporting on social problems or to understate the degree of discontent they reflect, as illustrated in Schatzberg's (1988) study of Mobutu's Zaire.

The idea that authoritarians lack information may seem surprising if one has in mind the classic totalitarian model. In its ideal form, a "superefficient and supercompetent" secret police (Arendt, 1973: 420) uses its network of informers to keep detailed dossiers on every member of society, identifying potential dissidents long before they can cause any trouble. Yet such systems are very

costly, and perhaps less pervasive and effective than foreign observers initially thought (Loughlin, 2011; Dimitrov and Sassoon, 2014). In addition, these systems function best in tightly controlled planned economies where neither people nor resources can move freely.¹ Moreover, knowing that anyone could be an informant, most people camouflage their true thoughts even from those closest to them, outwardly expressing enthusiastic support for the regime. Havel (1985) presents the archetypal example of a greengrocer who puts a poster bearing Marxist slogans among his vegetables because he knows that failure to do so will only lead to trouble for him and his family, an act Kuran (1997) terms “preference falsification.” Similarly, Wedeen (1999) documents the pervasiveness of insincere “rituals of obeisance” in Hafiz al-Asad’s Syria. Thus, despite or even because of their attempts to monopolize communication and establish control over society, autocratic leaders lack information not only on their overall level of support but the specific identities of those individuals or social groups who might be most aggrieved and inclined to challenge them. This makes it difficult to respond effectively to potential challenges, regardless of whether this response might be in the form of concessions or preemptive repression.

Two other kinds of information are also in short supply in dictatorships, relating to the quality of governance, not just the maintenance of power. One is information about the impact of policies and ways in which they could be improved. James C. Scott (1999) has catalogued numerous examples of grandiose and ultimately disastrous “schemes to improve the human condition,” including the Soviet Union’s collectivization drive, villagization in several African countries, as well as China’s Great Leap Forward (which I discuss more below). Each of these failures results from the aggressive imposition of grand plans, imposed by authoritarian regimes over the wishes of their subjects. Echoing Hayek’s (1945) critique of central planning, Scott argues in particular that these schemes failed because they disregarded the highly dispersed, localized knowledge held by ordinary members of society. While an important reason for this disregard was an ideologically-motivated desire to implement a grand plan regardless of the interests or preferences of the masses, it is also a natural consequence of the repression of information flow characteristic of autocracies. Were ordinary citizens able to speak freely, the failure and, indeed outright infeasibility of their leaders’ grand designs would become apparent sooner.

The final kind of missing information is about implementation. Repression, along with other governmental functions, must be at least partly delegated to lower-level and local arms of the state. For precisely this reason, local state agents can suppress information about their own performance, hiding incompetence, shirking, or outright corruption from higher levels of the state. While one might argue that implicitly condoned rent-seeking is part of the price dictatorial regimes pay to their subordinates, in the absence of monitoring lower-level state agents will naturally be tempted to push the limits. If they are allowed to overfish the common pool, so to speak, they may generate popular discontent

¹Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) include a centrally planned economy as one of the six defining and mutually supporting characteristics of totalitarian rule.

that endangers the regime as a whole.

As a result of considerations like these, the top leaders of authoritarian polities have been characterized as operating in an “information vacuum” (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1965: 135). By contrast, democratic politicians benefit from a constant (perhaps even overwhelming) flow of informative feedback. Advocacy and opposition groups articulate their grievances and complaints about current policies, while promoting alternative approaches. News media and legislative institutions serve as fora for debates between these groups and the party in power. Journalists, NGOs, academics, pollsters, and others investigate the facts on the ground and bring new information and perspectives to the general discussion. Ordinary citizens indicate their level of support for or discontent with current leaders and policies through voting or, when an issue is particularly important to them, through public protest and other forms of mobilization and expression protected under democratic governance.²

Recent work by Dimitrov (2014a,b; 2015) moderates this extreme dichotomy, taking advantage of newly available government archives to show that communist regimes past and present have made extensive use of the information contained in citizen petitions and complaints to gather information about the popular mood and governance problems. This provides one explanation for their well-documented longevity relative to other autocratic regimes (Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010), but the ultimate stagnation and sudden collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes suggests that it nonetheless falls well short of what an autocracy needs to survive and prosper.

Why, then, do dictators suppress negative information? Wintrobe emphasizes the fear of displeasing the dictator by implying that he is not well-loved (1998). But why, aside from vanity, should this be so important as to outweigh the potential value of critical information that would help him to identify and deal with discontented group and better achieve his social goals (however perverse or destructive)? If subordinates only communicated negative information directly to the dictator, there would seem to be no rational reason for him to suspect or punish the bearer of bad tidings.³ The problem (from the dictator’s point of view) is that information rarely travels only vertically, up through a hierarchy to the ears of a single leader. Instead, it almost always spills over, flowing horizontally as well. This horizontal flow of information is crucial. In order to successfully depose an authoritarian leader, his opponents must coordinate to act together, lest their heads be removed one by one. But when each discontented citizen is uncertain about whether and which others share this discontent, the problem of coordination is combined with one of signaling and inference. How many others feel the same? Would there be enough to make a challenge succeed? Who is only pretending to be a loyal subject and true believer but would join eagerly join a collective challenge to the existing power structure if one emerged? Kuran (1989, 1991, 1995) and Lohmann (1994) show that popular protests can spread this information among the population, po-

²See Shih (2010), and Wallace (2015) for useful discussions of this contrast from the point of view of scholars of authoritarianism.

³Although see Prendergast (1993) for a partial rationalization of similar behavior.

tentially leading them to develop into mass uprisings. Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland (2014) demonstrate theoretically and empirically that open disclosure of economic data can also facilitate coordinated anti-regime action. These and other mechanisms that disseminate information through the population pose a real danger to autocratic stability.

While the vanity and egotism of autocrats should not be underestimated, careful consideration of how the need for vertical information flow from society upward to top leaders is traded off against the fear of horizontal flows from citizen to citizen can contribute greatly to our understanding of authoritarian rule. This book examines how this tradeoff shapes politics under authoritarianism, focusing on the case of China, a strong, centralized Leninist authoritarian regime that nonetheless has taken a number of important steps in recent years that have resulted in greater flows of information, both vertical flows that might help it maintain power and horizontal flows that could undermine it.

1.2 Information Management in the People’s Republic of China

A lack of timely and accurate information has caused major problems for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) more than once. Most famously, between fifteen and forty-five million Chinese people starved in China between 1958 and 1961, the greatest famine the world has ever known (Dikotter, 2010; Kung and Chen, 2011). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still refers to this period understatedly as the “difficult three year period” (*sannian kunnan shiqi*), blaming the outcome on poor weather. Yet, as Amartya Sen famously noted, democracies have never experienced famine on this scale (1999). Sen attributed this to the pressures that voters and opposition groups can exert on politicians. While it is true that autocrats are often willing to sacrifice lives to an ideology or simply to the cause of staying in power, few have argued that this great famine was the CCP’s objective. Rather, the famine arose and lasted for three years in large part because the central leadership lacked accurate information about the impact of its policies.

The policies to blame were known in aggregate as the Great Leap Forward. The CCP, led by Mao Zedong, aimed to use its techniques of mass mobilization to industrialize faster than any economy ever had before. In particular, agricultural production was consolidated into massive communes, which were expected to produce huge surpluses of grain to feed growing cities. At the same time, farmers were redirected from agricultural production to massive public works projects and ill-advised rural industrial projects such as the well-known “backyard steel mills.” Officials at every level, under pressure to show their revolutionary zeal, falsified grain production statistics in a “wind of exaggeration” and extracted grain from farmers based on these inaccurate numbers (Bernstein, 1984; Kung and Chen, 2011). Top leaders became aware of the problems with the policies by 1959, but were slow to correct them. Peng Dehuai, a senior

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military figure, made a major public criticism of the Leap policies, but this had the opposite of the desired effect. Mao viewed this criticism as an attempt to undermine him and purged Peng from the party. This stifled further discussion and inhibited those who might have given the top leadership an honest picture of how badly things were going. Appalling reports slowly filtered up, central leaders did not become aware of the full extent of the catastrophe their policies had caused until the winter of 1960, when famine was already well under way.⁴

While the tragedy of the Great Leap Famine was the CCP's most extreme information failure, the problem has continued to the present. In the countryside, the officials responsible for reporting economic data do so without the benefit of any special training in accounting and data collection and frequently fail to systematically follow mandated procedures (Tsai, 2008). Moreover, they face strong incentives to over-report income in order to make themselves look good to their superiors (Cai, 2000; Tsai, 2008). These same incentives exist for officials at every level, leading to widespread skepticism about the accuracy of GDP statistics (Rawski, 2001). This skepticism is shared by the party's leaders. While serving as provincial party chief of Liaoning, China's current Premier Li Keqiang reportedly told the US Ambassador that he could not trust the "man-made" GDP numbers for this province, and preferred to rely on the less-easily distorted figures for electricity consumption, rail cargo, and bank lending (Wikileaks, 2007). It seems even province-level leaders are not immune from pressures to distort information, with growth in reported GDP tending to implausibly outpace electricity consumption at times when they are under consideration for promotion (Wallace, 2014).

This problem has only been exacerbated by the decentralization and marketization of the economy that began under Deng Xiaoping. While these reforms have improved economic decision-making by taking advantage of the local knowledge emphasized by Hayek and Scott, placing more of the economy out of even the nominal control of the state further reduces its ability to monitor developments on the ground. For example, when the government attempted to shut down the thousands of small, dangerous private coal mines that provide this highly polluting but heavily demanded fuel to the lower end of the economy, many formally closed but continued to operate with tacit or explicit local government collusion, leading to distorted national energy-use statistics (Sinton, 2001). The new mobility of the population made it difficult to identify individuals facing economic hardships, such as the unemployed (Solinger, 2001).

The problems do not stop with economic data. In 1999, Jiang Zemin, China's top leader, woke up to the news that a crowd of 20,000 silent protesters from a group he had not previously heard of were literally on his doorstep. These protesters represented a national organization of perhaps two million, the Falun Gong. Among them were party cadres from some of the state's key institutions. Angered and frightened, the party launched a nationwide purge and propaganda campaign against the group.⁵ Although the party succeeded in es-

⁴See Dikotter (2010) for one of the more recent narratives of this time.

⁵Tong (2009) provides the authoritative account of this crackdown.

entially eradicating the group in China, the fact that it had managed to form a nationwide organization and mobilize its members to besiege the capital on its behalf demonstrates that central leaders still lack crucial information about which groups in society may have crossed the line from ordinary grievances to dangerous and mobilizable discontent.

Corruption, too, has been a major concern of top leaders at least since the early 1980s (Gong, 1994; Manion, 2004). In 2013, 182,000 officials were disciplined and 23,000 corruption cases reached the courts (Floracruz, 2014). While top leaders may overlook each other's questionable activities except when this provides leverage in internal political battles (as in the 2014 investigation of former security head Zhou Yongkang), pervasive corruption at lower levels of the state undermines their ability to implement policy and creates pervasive dissatisfaction among the ordinary people affected by it. This problem, too, is exacerbated in a liberalized, marketized economy in which fewer economic decisions are closely monitored by the central state, and a fancy house, car, or watch can be acquired by legitimate means, not only through graft (Wedeman, 2012).

The limited introduction of democratic institutions and practices holds the promise of mitigating these problems. The most intensely studied and discussed example of this in China was the gradual introduction of elections for village heads over the course of the 80s and 90s. While this and other formal institutional reforms initially inspired hope that China would match its astounding economic reforms with equally fundamental political reforms, it soon became clear that there was little serious movement in this direction, even to the extent of introducing elections for levels of government above rural villages (Li, 2002; O'Brien and Han, 2009). Analysts stopped viewing these reforms as a hopeful first step toward democratization and started taking the more pessimistic perspective that these institutional changes might serve to perpetuate authoritarianism rather than undermining it (O'Brien, 2010). These reforms to formal institutions were accompanied by equally important informal changes in state policies toward various forms of communication and expression. Public gatherings and protests became a common and relatively accepted (although still dangerous and often formally illegal) mode of political expression. The commercialized media were permitted to report and comment more openly on a variety of social problems. These changes acted even more directly than village elections to enhance the quality of information the government had about the nature of social problems, the identity of aggrieved groups, and the intensity of their discontent.

But this strategy is not without risks. As mentioned above, the problem for an authoritarian government is that policies permitting greater openness of expression have two competing effects. They benefit the regime⁶ by enhancing

⁶I use the term "regime" throughout this book both in the technical social science sense, meaning the overall structure of politics in a state, and in the vernacular sense in which it refers broadly to the ruling powers of an authoritarian society. The second usage becomes necessary when discussing China because when we refer to the "government" or "state," this usually refers to the formal and relatively public institutions such as the State Council, as

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the vertical flow of information from ordinary citizens to the governing elite, helping the regime find out how policies are working and where pockets of discontent are developing, as well as acting as a check on local leaders who might otherwise engage in corrupt or abusive behaviors. However, they also endanger the regime by enhancing the horizontal flow of information, from citizen to citizen. Not only does the regime learn about its own successes and failures and the identity of discontented groups, but so do ordinary people. Without this information, an individual might know that he is dissatisfied with his lot under the current system, and he might well know that others in his community share his unhappiness, but this is not enough to threaten the regime. To have any chance of overthrowing the state requires coordinated action by a large number of people. Discontented individuals or communities need to know that their discontent is shared widely enough that an attempt to overthrow the regime could have a reasonable chance of success. And even if they have this knowledge at an aggregate level, organizing a challenge to the regime becomes easier if a horizontal flow of information helps ordinary citizens and activists recognize which other members of society might be aggrieved enough to join in.

The idea that permitting some forms of popular expression might help preserve authoritarian rule is often referred to as a “safety valve” theory. But the safety valve metaphor, left over from the age of steam engines, is a poor one for several reasons. When the pressure in a steam engine gets too high, releasing pressure with a safety valve reduces the risk of a dangerous explosion. The worst that can happen if the valve is opened for too long is that pressure becomes too low to drive the engine. By contrast, no less an expert on regime change than Mao Zedong offered a competing metaphor, that “a single spark can ignite a prairie fire.” A mass movement need not start out massive, but instead can spiral out of control from a small start, as formal models from Kuran (1991) and Lohmann (1994) show. The truth of Mao’s claim is apparent from the fall of the Soviet Union after the glasnost reforms, and many other instances of protests around the world that started small but rapidly grew, as in East Germany in 1989, the Arab world in 2011, and China itself in 1989.

A better metaphor, then, is to think of this strategy as a kind of controlled burn. In managing forests and other wild areas, fire is a constant threat. As plants naturally grow and die, more and more flammable material builds up, to the point where that “single spark” can indeed cause a general and hard-to-control conflagration. A controlled burn is what happens when foresters permit fires to break out or even deliberately light them in order to burn off this flammable material in a contained area. Because a fire will not spread through these previously burned areas, this limits the potential for other undesired fires to spread. While no metaphor can perfectly capture the complexity of the CCP’s strategy of governance, the idea of a controlled burn will be a useful one to keep in mind while reading this book. The Chinese government permits limited freedoms in order to deal with discontent on a relatively routine, manageable

distinct from party bodies such as the Politburo, which are usually the actual decision-making institutions.

scale, thereby avoiding an uncontrollable general conflagration. As with any use of fire, though, there is always the risk that a spark will escape the controlled environment, causing precisely the problem the controlled burn was meant to avoid.

Even this metaphor, however, only highlights the fact that an authoritarian regime faces an important tradeoff when it plays with the “fire” of partial liberalization. To go beyond this, we need to provide microfoundations for the strategic interactions between the various agents of the state and ordinary citizens. In particular, we must carefully think through the decisions these political actors face, including the alternatives not chosen, and the information they have available to make these choices. This book does just that, combining game-theoretic analytical techniques with in-depth examination of the case of modern China to explore the role of information management in authoritarian rule and the ways in which the tension between a need for vertical information flow and a fear of horizontal information flow plays out. It focuses on two areas in which these tensions are most acute—policy toward popular protest and policy toward the mass media—but also ranges more broadly to consider the ways in which a variety of other quasi-democratic institutional reforms may embody similar tensions and to understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of each.

As is apparent from the discussion thus far, this book takes a state-centric approach, asking how the CCP’s top leaders might set their policies and structure formal and informal institutions in order to shape the behaviors of both lower-level officials and ordinary citizens. Methodologically, this leads me to make extensive use of the approach known as “mechanism design.” This branch of game theory analyzes how a mechanism can be structured in order to create incentives that induce participants in the institution to behave in a certain way, subject to the very important limitation that participants either have information unavailable to the mechanism designer or are able to engage in some actions that are hidden to the designer. In economics, it has been applied to the design of everything from employment contracts, auctions, taxation systems, financial markets, school assignments, and even organ donation. In political science, it has been used to study the relationship of voters to elected officials and delegation to bureaucrats, among other topics. I will apply it to the topic of China’s contentious politics by treating the CCP’s top leadership as the mechanism designer: given their objectives, how should they structure their formal and informal rules, policies, and responses?

In so doing, I make the major simplification of treating the central state as a unitary actor. In practice, the vicissitudes of intra-elite conflicts play an important part in the course of Chinese politics, whether they involve mysterious airplane crashes in Mongolia, as with Mao’s chosen successor Lin Biao, or the unexpected attempted defection of a Chongqing’s police chief Wang Lijun to the US Consulate and the resultant exposure and fall first of his patron Bo Xilai and then of China’s top security official Zhou Yongkang. Although one should not discount the importance of such events, or the rise and fall of different individuals, factions, and viewpoints within the CCP, abstracting away from

these details can provide important insights. Whoever is at the head of the CCP will face similar pressures and tradeoffs. The elites of the Politburo Standing Committee may not always be able to work coherently to achieve these goals, but it is nevertheless a reasonable first approximation, just as we often think of how the “interests” of particular countries affect their foreign policies even though these policies are made by specific political leaders and coalitions, and as we ask how a company’s decisions will affect its profits, even though individual decision-makers within a firm may have other competing objectives.

It is not my claim that all of these policies are the result of a far-sighted grand plan by China’s modern philosopher-kings. I suspect that like the rest of us, they muddle through, uncertain of the future and routinely being surprised by unexpected consequences of their decisions. Any specific political decision doubtless involves improvisation, logrolling, and horsetrading. Nonetheless, looking at how specific practices may or may not serve their shared objectives can offer important insights. In particular, this analysis helps explain a number of puzzling facts about China:

- Why the central government does not take a consistent hard line with protesters, nor make protesting routine and safe.
- Why protesters generally do not take actions that would strengthen their bargaining position against the state.
- How tolerating protest can forestall challenges to the regime by permitting what might appear to be challenges to the regime—and when this strategy might fail.
- Why journalists and publications that overstep boundaries set by the regime are rarely punished.
- Why constant micro-management of the media by the CCP’s Propaganda Department is necessary.
- Why China’s investigative media have been reined in sharply even as the internet makes it more difficult to suppress unfavorable news.
- Why the PRC before 1989 underwent such sharp swings between periods of political openness and closure while other communist states did not.

This approach also has implications for our understanding of other governance reforms the regime has made in the post-Tiananmen era, including the introduction of village elections, the strengthening of local and national legislative bodies, and the strengthening of the legal system. Thinking of these reforms in terms of the kinds of information they generate and how this information then flows vertically and horizontally provides a common framework that facilitates understanding of the ways in which they are substitutes or complements.

The analysis in this book also has implications that go beyond China. Every authoritarian regime faces the same tradeoff to some extent. Where openness

is pursued with few limits, as with the Soviet Union's glasnost, the entire ruling structure may collapse. But the opposite extreme may lead to a general stagnation, as in Myanmar until recently. With over thirty years of extraordinary economic growth and a rising profile in world affairs, China serves as something of a role model for authoritarians everywhere. By examining how this particularly successful authoritarian regime manages the flow of information both vertically, from citizens to the center, and horizontally, from citizen to citizen, and exploring the implications of this logic, this book enhances our understanding of how this strategy has worked for so long and the conditions under which it might fail.

1.3 Theoretical background: Quasi-democratic institutions in authoritarian states

In recent years, scholarly attention has been drawn to the large number of regimes that seem to be somewhere between classic authoritarianism and full democracy, often without showing any signs of being in transition from one to the other. While not meeting any of the conventional minimum standards of democracy, they nonetheless exhibit many democratic features, such as elections, legislatures, independent judiciaries and above-ground opposition groups or even parties. Importantly, these institutions and groups often have real power. Elections and legislative votes are not just “rubber stamp” formalities putting a veneer of democratic legitimacy on decisions already made by the regime. Opposition organizations and outlets are able to express at least moderately critical views of the regime and its policies.

One view is that the imperfect domination of these states by their authoritarian rulers is unintended—they would happily suppress all dissent were it not for international pressures or the immediate domestic backlash that would ensue. For example, Schedler contends that these democratic institutions are unwilling concessions made by autocrats, for which they compensate by undermining and manipulating them at every turn (2010). Similarly, Levitsky and Way argue that what they call competitive authoritarian regimes permit contestation by opposition forces in some political arenas only because they are “...unable to eliminate them” (2003: 53). Regimes holding elections but without an electorally active opposition are merely “facade” electoral regimes, where what might appear to be democratic practices “simply serve to legitimate an existing autocratic leadership” (54).

However, an emerging body of research suggests that often democratic institutions exist in authoritarian regimes not simply because they cannot be suppressed, nor just to offer a veneer of legitimacy to credulous audiences at home or abroad, but because authoritarian leaders find them useful in maintaining their own power. Furthermore, these have appeared not only in hybrid regimes but also in regimes that count as fully authoritarian by any standard. The reasons given for the adoption of these institutions fall into two broad

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categories—cooptation and information. With cooptation, the ruler or the ruling elite allows some members of the opposition or a previously excluded group such as the middle class to win seats in a legislature. They then gain enough of a stake in the status quo that they no longer wish to challenge it (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Gandhi 2008; Lust-Okar 2005; Blaydes 2011; Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). A dictator may be driven to introduce a legislature as much from fear of those within the governing elite as from any external forces (Magaloni 2006, 7; Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng 2011). Institutionalized political parties can also play a role in structuring and containing intra-elite conflict (Brownlee 2007). Other actors may also need to be convinced to support the regime in order to invest and generate economic growth, leading to the creation of legislatures, party structures, or judicial systems to give them a credible defense against expropriation (North and Weingast 1989; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011, 2012; Wright 2008; Gandhi 2008; Solomon 2007).

Others have used game theory to dig deeper into the ways in which institutions make the concessions involved in such cooptation strategies credible, the problem of authoritarian power-sharing identified by Svobik (2012). While the specifics vary, they derive the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that these institutions are valuable for authoritarians precisely because they make it easier for other elites to overthrow a dictator if he reneges on his promises. By helping elites to coordinate and solve their collective action problems, these institutions give them confidence that the intra-elite bargain will indeed be upheld. This ultimately enhances stability (Myerson 2008; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011; Boix and Svobik 2013).

A second strand of research emphasizes the dictator's dilemma discussed earlier. Because dictators rely on force to maintain their rule, their henchmen and subjects may be reluctant to tell them about problems for fear of appearing disloyal. As a consequence, they know very little about their actual level of support. Wintrobe's (1999) analytical framework essentially sets information aside, instead treating the dictator's problem as one of the optimal balancing of expenditures on loosely defined "loyalty" and "repression," but others have recognized the potential for seemingly-democratic reforms to mitigate this problem. For example, Egypt's authoritarian presidents chose to grant greater independence to the judiciary even though there was no significant societal pressure to do so. Rosberg (1995) argues that they chose to do this at least in part because it made it easier to monitor and control lower levels of government, which in turn facilitated decentralization and delegation of authority.

Scholars of Chinese politics have found that elections can help mitigate these agency problems, keeping in check or replacing local leaders who might otherwise be incompetent or corrupt. This has improved governance and state-society relations at the lowest levels even though the CCP has retained the power to remove any leaders who forget that their first responsibility is to the party (Manion 1996, O'Brien and Li, 2000; Manion 2006, O'Brien and Zhao 2010, Birney 2010). Elections for executive posts remain restricted to the lowest possible level, the heads of rural villages, but ordinary voters are also permitted to nominate and elect candidates for township and county congresses. As a result

many of these low-level legislators now actively seek to understand constituent needs and address them, primarily through the provision of local public goods (Manion, 2014).

Elections and legislatures at higher levels of government can also generate information. While completely fair elections might be unacceptable, an authoritarian regime can benefit if at least some of its candidates run some risk of losing office, since any loss indicates either a particularly incompetent candidate or a particularly discontented electorate, both of which the regime would like to know about (Magaloni 2006). An authoritarian legislature can also be designed to provide some useful feedback about citizen preferences and policy impacts to top leaders without going so far as to allow real mobilization (Manion 2008, O'Brien 2009, Malesky and Schuler 2011).

This literature has primarily focused on the role of formal institutions like elections and legislatures, but scholars of Chinese politics have argued that less formal policies and practices can serve important informational functions. Greater toleration of investigative journalism can hold misgovernance in check at the local level and provide informative feedback on policy-making (Zhao, 2000; Nathan, 2003; Shirk, 2011). Similarly, O'Brien and Li (2005) suggest that China's leaders condone protests against misbehavior by local level authorities because this enables them to invest less in alternative means by which they might gather such information. In 2007, a new set of Open Government Information regulations led many local governments to set up online systems through which citizens could submit questions or comments. Requests for assistance made through these systems often receive helpful responses (Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2014).

Overall, the consensus among China scholars has been that these and other changes add up to a novel set of "input institutions" that "allow Chinese to believe that they have some influence on policy decisions and personnel choices at the local level" (Nathan 2003, 14), perhaps even representing a novel form of "authoritarian deliberation," (He and Warren 2011) although they differ on whether overall this should be interpreted positively as a growth of new "realms of freedom" (Oi 2004) or pessimistically as a "partial reform equilibrium" that betrays the initial hopes of many that these reforms would be the first step toward more thoroughgoing political change (Pei 2006).

Two previous sets of researchers have used game-theoretic techniques to understand the internal logic of practices like these and the conditions under which they might benefit an autocratic government. Smith (2008) and Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2009, 2010) develop a set of models in which a dictator can expend resources in each period on freedoms of information and assembly, which they characterize as "core public goods." These enhance the productivity of workers in the economy and thus the resources the dictator can extract, but they also make it easier for out groups to organize and revolt. This has the same spirit as the tradeoff between vertical and horizontal information flows examined in this book, but information is not modeled explicitly. Instead the tradeoff is assumed and various implications are derived in a perfect information setting. These models also make the unusual assumption that it is costly

to remove restrictions on speech or public gatherings, whereas most studies of authoritarianism find instead that repression of these activities requires significant expenditure. The theoretical framework of this book is particular indebted to Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin (2009), which provides a model of media freedom embodying the tradeoff between vertical and horizontal information central to the present work. In their model, a dictator could allow a competitive free media to develop because this improves his ability to monitor and incentivize a bureaucrat, increasing the economic output from which he can extract rents. However, this generates a risk that his own poor performance will be publicly revealed, resulting in revolution by a newly-informed mass public. Their key conclusion is that dictators like Vladimir Putin who have ready access to natural resource rents will repress the media, since they no longer need to preside over a functioning economy to live well. However, their model offers the dictator only a dichotomous choice between liberalizing and repressing the media, whereas this book explores the more nuanced scenario of partial liberalizations of various sorts as well as periodic alternation between political openness and closure. In addition, whereas freer media can only endanger the regime in their model, I show how a carefully managed partial liberalization can actually increase regime stability.

1.4 Methodological Considerations

This book examines a single case, that of China, in some depth, using formal models to think through key aspects of the politics of information flow. This approach may raise questions for both of its major intended audiences. First, for many comparativists, especially those familiar with formal theory, it is unusual to see an extended examination of the politics of one country as opposed to a larger cross-sectional study with numerous cases and illustrations interspersed. On the other hand, other comparativists, and China scholars in particular are relatively unfamiliar with the approach of formal game-theoretic logic and consequently may be unclear about its function or how to evaluate it. This section will address each group in turn.

1.4.1 Why study China?

The first and most obvious reason is that China is important in its own right. With China comprising about a fifth of the world population and closing in on a similar share of economic production and trade, it is hard to say we understand any aspect of politics if we do not understand how it works in China. Just as we study the operation of the US Congress and its other institutions in detail, even when these details are so idiosyncratic as to make cross-national comparisons difficult, so to is it important to understand China as it is. Consequently, when faced with the choice between making a more general assumption that does not really fit China but could arguably be viewed as more widely applicable, or one that rings true to the reality and institutional details of the Chinese state, I

have tried to choose the one that better fits China.

Scholars focused on other parts of the world or taking a global perspective may then question whether the ideas in this book are relevant to them. Indeed, it is hard to assert that China is typical of anything, nor that it is directly comparable to many other autocracies in the way that one might find commonalities and relatively controlled comparisons within the sets of Eastern European, Latin American, Southeast Asian, or Middle Eastern hybrid regimes and even between them. However, the challenges of information management that the CCP faces are shared by authoritarian regimes of all stripes. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, many an autocracy has fallen or stagnated for lack of accurate information, and the dictator's fear of horizontal information dissemination is a central reason for this.

Moreover, the CCP has become something of a role model and standard-bearer for other authoritarian governments. Michael Ignatieff writes that China (and Russia) “offer the elites of Africa and Eurasia an alternate route to modern development: growth without democracy and progress without freedom. This is the siren song some African, Latin American, and Asian political elites, especially the kleptocrats, want to hear” (NYRB, 7/10/2014). Having maintained almost unquestioned control while Communist and other authoritarian regimes fell around the world, even while implementing a wrenching process of economic reform that resulted in unprecedented growth, China offers the hope that authoritarianism need not be a synonym for backwardness (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014). A venture capitalist received a standing ovation from a largely western audience for his TED talk arguing that China's party-led governance model was superior in many respects to western democracy (Carlson, 2013). Indeed, even Francis Fukuyama, who attracted worldwide attention with his forceful claim that the world had reached the “End of History,” leaving no further serious competition to liberal democracy (1992), now emphasizes the importance of strong state institutions, praising the CCP's revival of its historically strong bureaucracy (2014).⁷ Of course, any attempts at emulation are likely be imperfect. Nevertheless, as Andrew Nathan notes, “even though no other authoritarian state has the organizational resources to model itself fully on China, many are emboldened to try their own homebrews of repression and state capitalism” (2010, Foreign Affairs).

In addition, while formal theory is often lumped together with statistical empirical approaches as a quantitative method, applied formal theory benefits greatly from close engagement with the qualitative details of a particular case. An applied game theorist cannot even get started developing a model without some sense of who the key actors are, what they might want, and what options are available to them. These are not statistical associations but rather qualitative facts. In addition, when models are evaluated by the scholarly community, whether they are assessed as useful or not often hinges as much on the credibility of their assumptions and the qualitative insights they offer into a

⁷He is, however, quick to reject the reading of his work that China's current state should be treated as a long-run alternative to the liberal democracies, despite their flaws (Cao, 2015).

particular process as it does on whether they explain or correctly predict statistical relationships (Clarke and Primo: 2007, 2012). This is true despite Milton Friedman’s famous claim to the contrary (1953), and the tendency of formal modelers to refer dismissively to the qualitative evidence they provide in their own work as mere “illustration.” As a consequence, there is real value in having models that are about somewhere in particular, as a complement to more abstracted models that capture theoretically-interesting points but often do not quite ring true in any empirical setting to those who know it.⁸

The approach of this book bears a strong resemblance to the combination of rational choice theory and historical evidence put forward by Bates et al (1998) under the label of “Analytic Narratives.” However, it differs somewhat in that most of this book is not primarily narrative or historical in nature. The models here have implications both for processes of change over time as well as cross-sectional variation.

That said, the discipline of formalization inherently leads to generalization. Specifying the assumptions underlying the models and the parameter ranges necessary to get outcomes like those observed in China makes clearer what the crucial differences are between China and other authoritarian states. Where might we expect to see similar phenomena? If other authoritarians are trying to emulate China’s success, what factors may limit this? In addition, will practices that work for now in China continue to be feasible into the future? I touch upon these issues throughout, and discuss them at greater length in the concluding chapter.

1.4.2 What are models for? How should they be evaluated?

A second audience may have entirely different methodological concerns. Although it has made inroads in recent years, formal game-theoretic modeling remains relatively uncommon in the subfield of comparative politics, by comparison with international relations or American politics. This has been particularly true in the study of Chinese politics, perhaps because of the unusual time commitment it takes to become proficient either in Mandarin or in the mathematical tools underlying formal theory.⁹ For readers who are less familiar with this approach, this section briefly surveys some of the key methodological issues surrounding formal theory, with specific attention the modeling approaches taken in this book.

As international relations scholar Robert Powell puts it, “Models are a constrained, best effort to capture what the modeler believes to be the essence of a complex empirical phenomenon or at least an important aspect of it” (1999, 24). By focusing on a few potentially important elements of a strategic interaction, a model enables us to precisely trace a logical and causal path from assumptions and preconditions to conclusions and outcomes. On the one hand,

⁸See Lorentzen, Fravel, and Paine (2015) for more discussion of these issues.

⁹Rare exceptions include Manion (1996), Takeuchi (2013, 2014), and Chen and Xu (2014).

this inherently involves simplification or even oversimplification. In order to make a problem tractable, important aspects of reality have to be “abstracted away” (that is, ignored). However, at the same time as it compels simplification, the act of developing a model forces the modeler to ask questions that may be neglected or glossed over in narrative accounts or verbally-expressed theories. The modeler must ask what options each actor might be considering, who knows what, and when, what they really want. Game theory then offers a systematic way of predicting what choices they will make based on their inferences about others’ behavior and their expectations of how others will respond.

There are a number of ways for a model to prove itself useful. In some cases, it may be that a logic that sounds plausible when explained in words does not hold up when laid out formally. In other cases, the act of formalization may highlight crucial assumptions necessary to make a theory work. These assumptions can help delineate the scope of the theory’s applicability, and if they seem too implausible, this may lead us to question the theory. A model can also be useful if it shows that a simple dynamic can explain important features of what at first glance seems like an intractably complex or subtle phenomenon, enabling generalizations that extend beyond a single case.¹⁰ Although models are simple in some respects, the mathematical formalities of analyzing them can be dauntingly complex. This naturally leads one to ask whether the actors themselves could possibly meet the standards of “rationality” assumed in these models. However, one does not have to do math in order to solve a mathematical problem. Few basketball players know enough calculus or Newtonian physics to calculate the force and trajectory needed to get a ball through a hoop, yet through practice they develop a remarkably good feel for how to make it happen nonetheless. Children do not have to understand the technicalities of mixed strategy equilibria to know that predictable behavior is sure to lose in the game of scissors-paper-rock. Similarly, working through Bayes’ rule is difficult on paper, yet real people do update their beliefs about how the world works based on experience and observation. A formal model is not intended to be a precise representation of any one individual’s behavior, but can still capture important pressures that person may face and give insights to how they may behave even if from that person’s perspective he or she is just muddling through. This is especially true over the longer run—the basketball player may not make his first shot, but over time the ball’s path from hand to basket will more and more closely converge to the arc a physicist would calculate. Closer to the empirical focus of this book, a mob may riot based on the impulses of the moment, but at least some participants will be thinking about whether to join in or take a leadership role may do so based on their expectations of how the government may respond, based on comparable past incidents.

As a result, models have often been compared to maps, which highlight certain features and neglect others depending on their intended use (Krugman, 1994; Clarke and Primo, 2012). Because of this it rarely makes sense to ask

¹⁰See also Svobik (2015) for an in-depth discussion of the role of game-theoretic models as specifically applied to the understanding of political institutions.

whether a model is true or false. Rather, it is more accurate to ask whether it is *useful* for a particular purpose (Clarke and Primo, 2012). Does it help us understand where we have been and where we are going, even if, for instance, it shows the highways and bridges but not the city alleys or the mountain ranges? If it does, it is a useful model. The aim of this book is to provide some models that will prove useful both to China specialists and to the broader community of comparative politics scholars.

1.5 An overview of the book

As the above discussion implies, the role of information is crucial to my analysis, and especially the tension the regime faces between its desire to encourage vertical transmission of information from citizens to the regime, and its concern about horizontal transmission of information from citizen to citizen, which might facilitate challenges. The other common theme through all these analyses is that we can better understand the government's responses to specific events not by treating them as disconnected dyadic interactions but as reflecting an overarching plan. That is, how it responds to a given protest or potentially controversial media expose is determined not just by the characteristics of that particular challenge or event, but by the regime's objectives in managing the vertical and horizontal information flows created by the aggregate of all the actual and potential events arising over time.

This book proceeds in four parts. The first introductory part sets the stage through this first chapter, which sketches the approach and key findings of the book, and the Chapter Two, which looks at the CCP's approach to information gathering in the period up to the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the problems that this approach created. The next two parts explore the new approach the party developed after 1989. Chapters Three, Four, and Five examines the party's policy toward popular protest, while Chapters Six and Seven turn attention to censorship and the management of the media. The book concludes with a comparative discussion, examining the role of information in some of China's other major political reforms of recent years, then discussing where China and these phenomena fit in the broader universe of authoritarian states, before finally speculating on developments in the first few year's of Xi Jinping's leadership and on what China's future might hold.

1.5.1 Authoritarian institutions and their failings

Chapter Two examines the way that the CCP dealt with its information problems before the 1989 protests. It first discusses these information problems in more detail, showing how attempts to deal with them through top-down autocratic institutions had only limited success. It then shows how this contributed to sharp oscillations between periods of political loosening and periods of tightening up, a fact often noted by students of Chinese political history. The classic instance of this began in 1957, with Mao Zedong publicly called for the party

to let “a hundred flowers bloom, a hundred schools of thought freely contend.” China’s intellectuals began to speak up about problems they observed. Workers joined in, making demands and even launching strikes. The regime then declared that “rightists” were exploiting this openness in an effort to destroy the party-state and cracked down. In the ensuing period of terrified conformity, the infeasibility and destructive consequences of the Great Leap Forward became apparent only slowly, with tragic results. Eventually, political constraints were eased and there was once again space for relatively open discussion of how the country should move forward.

While this was the most extreme such fluctuation, similar cycles of political opening and closure recurred many times in the ensuing years. This pattern has been explained in a variety of ways, each containing significant insights, but these explanations have neglected an important factor: the tradeoff between vertical and horizontal information flows, or more precisely the regime’s inability to manage this tradeoff. Periods of generalized opening and liberalization allow the regime to evaluate policies and remove incompetent or corrupt local leaders, but also provide opportunities for discontented citizens to organize themselves to challenge the regime. This creates pressures for a cyclical alternation between periods of opening and periods of “flying blind,” during which the quality of governance decays due to lack of feedback.

A simple model formalizes this logic and shows how it played out in China from 1949 through 1989. The formalization highlights two factors that would tend to exacerbate such policy cycling. The first is the intensity of the regime’s need for information, particularly about the potentially unanticipated consequences of new policies. The second is the regime’s ability to open up for brief periods without dissent spiraling out of control and leading to its overthrow. A comparison with the Eastern European communist regimes on both dimensions suggests why such cycles were so notable in China but barely in evidence in these sister countries. China’s leaders had a stronger need for informative feedback both because they lacked experience managing a large and complex economy, and because their unwillingness to simply imitate the Soviet model meant the outcomes of their policies were particularly unpredictable. Periods of openness were also far less risky for the CCP. Rather than being concentrated in a single core city where a city-wide movement could almost instantly become a national movement, such as the one that took place in Hungary in 1956, China’s population was largely rural, with several nearly co-equal urban centers each separated from the other by high mountains and limited communication and transportation infrastructure. Thus, even if openness spiraled out of control into a direct challenge to the regime, it could be contained.

This strategy was far from perfect, however. It nearly failed in 1989 when student protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square spread to other social groups and to cities around the country. Along with the fall of communism in the Soviet Bloc around the same time, this pushed the CCP to rethink how it could retain power and gather the information it needed without sharing the fate of its European counterparts. The remainder of the book examines the logic and consequences of this rethinking.

1.5.2 Regularizing rioting

China has seen a steady rise in public protests since the 1990s. While this has often been taken as an indicator of regime weakness or a pentup “social volcano,” the regime has survived and even thrived for over two decades nonetheless. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I explore this apparent paradox.

Chapter Three sets up the puzzle, showing that protests in China share some important common features even as they emerge from quite different parts of society and raise very different demands. First, protests are neither forbidden, as you might expect if they threatened the regime, nor safe, as might be implied by claims that they serve useful functions for the regime. Second, protesters follow a remarkably narrow format, restricting themselves to very localized and primarily economic concerns, carefully limiting the scope of the protest by not making common cause with other groups with similar grievances, targeting their complaints only at lower levels of government, and framing their cause in terms that support the broader regime rather than challenging it. These actions do not follow naturally from standard rationalist bargaining models, which suggest protesters could gain greater concessions by increasing the potential threat they might pose if not appeased. Nor do they accord with some broad themes in social movement theory, which also suggest that protesters would be more effective if they took steps to frame their cause more broadly and then recruit and organize a larger movement behind this cause. The third puzzle is the overarching one, linked inextricably with the other two—how can protest be so common in an authoritarian regime?

Chapter Four shows how the regime’s policy toward protest reflects the objective of gathering useful information about citizen grievances and local-level malfeasance while minimizing the costs of responding to these complaints. Recognizing the role of the central government as institutional designer helps to explain the three puzzles outlined. First, what is the information a protest might convey? A petition or a letter-writing campaign can express the objective facts underlying citizen grievances, with far less disruption. Protests are special precisely because they are costly and even dangerous. Because only a truly aggrieved group would endure the discomfort of an extended protest, not to mention the risk of arrest or injury, protests distinguish deep grievances from ordinary gripes. This matters because an authoritarian regime has no reason to address every concern citizens might raise. Instead, it will only want to address those concerns that if not addressed might leave the aggrieved group primed to join a more fundamental challenge to the regime, like the 1989 protests, if one should arise. Taking the regime’s perspective also helps explain the narrowness of the protests. If the regime were responding to each event in isolation, broadening a protest would be to the advantage of the protesting group, making it the most sensible strategy. But the regime needs to set its policy toward different forms of protest knowing that this policy will affect not only whatever group it faces at the moment, but all other groups of citizens who might be tempted to protest. Permitting one group to broaden its protest would only result in all groups doing so, resulting in a much greater drain on government coffers by

forcing it to make larger concessions to each group.

Last, this chapter addresses the biggest question of all. Why so many protests? First, the events of 1989 both in China and in its fellow communist regimes in Europe showed that its leaders needed to develop mechanisms that could provide information and improve governance without risking their downfall. Protests, if managed correctly and constrained to a narrow, regime-supporting format, could help serve that purpose. In addition, the process of marketization and decentralization resulting from the ongoing economic reforms weakened the existing channels of information gathering the regime had previously relied on. This, too meant that tolerating appropriately constrained protests became valuable as a means of generating information in a way that would not have been true when the planned economy was still functioning.

This analysis shows how the regime's desire to create and optimize a vertical flow of information shapes its responses to protests. However, it does not take into account the risk that even in their most narrowly-constrained format, protests still convey information horizontally—across society rather than solely upwards to the state. Since protests reflect a level of discontent significant enough to lead its participants to risk significant personal harm, protesting groups form a natural target for any member of society who might hope to organize a broader challenge to the regime. Thus by encouraging discontented groups to reveal themselves by protesting in the expectation of receiving concessions, the government puts itself at risk.

Chapter Five extends the framework developed in Chapter Four to take these factors into account. This exercise reveals two important facts. First, and most importantly, it shows that despite the potential for protest to spiral into revolt, tolerating protest by the most severely discontented may be the only thing that keeps a generalized revolt from breaking out, a paradoxical “controlled burn” strategy. In addition, even if the regime could forestall revolt by instead making a preemptive transfer to society at large, this might actually be worse for the worst off than if they were required or permitted to protest but then received concessions targeted only at them.

While at one level, this elaboration of the theory further validates the claim that protests are occurring in China because they are in the regime's interest, it also suggests its possible limits. As in forestry, letting fires burn can only work if they will not spread too rapidly. In our context, the key is how easily potential challengers to the regime can learn about ongoing protests and act to organize them. Here again the CCP was helped by its undeveloped transportation and communication networks, its low level of urbanization, and the extent to which its urban population was dispersed among a large number of geographically separated cities. This meant that even a highly motivated revolutionary would have difficulty identifying, contacting, and organizing more than a fraction of protesting groups. But this is changing. With China's heavy investment in high speed rail lines, freeways, airports, as well as the rapid spread of internet access, events in one part of the country become harder and harder to isolate from other parts. As a result, it is possible that the time when the CCP could maintain its power using a controlled burn strategy may be limited.

1.5.3 Strategic Censorship

Next I turn to the role of the media. The extent of independent and especially investigative journalism in non-democratic states is often interpreted as the outcome of a contest between a civil society pushing for greater press freedom and an authoritarian regime struggling to suppress all independent voices. However, it is increasingly acknowledged that even a strong authoritarian regime may in fact benefit from giving the press some freedom to serve as a check on difficult-to-control local officials. As with protests, the regime faces a tradeoff between a desirable vertical flow of information and a dangerous horizontal flow.

Chapter Six develops a model in which the regime must decide how freely the news media should be allowed to report bad news from localities around the country. It values this information because it allows the regime to identify and punish local officials for corruption or misgovernance that they might otherwise get away with. Freer investigative reporting therefore reduces the prevalence of such misbehavior. This has two effects. First, it directly improves governance—even the most self-serving rent-seeking autocrat does not benefit when corruption by officials at the bottom of the state hierarchy results in schools collapsing on children or entire villages becoming infected with AIDS, only two of China’s most notable governance failures. Second, though, even if the regime were indifferent to these problems, they harm the regime indirectly by generating societal discontent that could result in revolt.

In the model, whether there is bad news to report from any given community depends both on local corruption and on the overall national state of social tensions. That is, when things are going well in general, a little corruption may be tolerable, but when they are not, corruption can be what pushes a community over the edge. The problem from the regime’s perspective is that while reporting on any individual case is almost purely beneficial, the more negative stories are published, the more the implicit message becomes not about a particular local problem, which the regime can address, but about national-level policy failures. People may realize that not only are they unhappy with their circumstances, but enough other people around the country share their experience to create a critical mass that could have a realistic chance of overthrowing the regime. However, the model shows that the regime can avoid this threat, maintaining uncertainty as to whether the overall level of social tensions is dangerously high or not, by constantly adjusting the acceptable bounds of reporting. When things are going well, it can allow the media to report fairly freely, while when things are going poorly it cuts back. The net effect is that from the perspective of the ordinary media consumer, the news appears roughly the same from one day to the next.

The model can also be extended to take into account the impact of the internet. The internet provides an additional way for bad news to become broadly disseminated in addition to the traditional media. While the regime has a number of tools it can use to control this information flow, this remains imperfect compared to its ability to manage traditional media produced by identifiable editors or producers and tied to printing presses or broadcast facilities. How-

ever, it can still maintain popular uncertainty about the underlying state of discontent. The key is that it must tighten constraints on traditional media, so that the aggregate picture remains the same.

Chapter Seven shows how this theory both is a good representation of the contemporary Chinese media environment and helps to explain a number of puzzling and distinctive aspects of Chinese press policy over the past twenty years, including why the boundaries of permissible reporting fluctuate unpredictably from the perspective of journalists, and why punishments for occasionally overstepping boundaries are relatively mild. The extension of the model in turn helps to explain why in recent years China's investigative journalists have been reined in: while this is often interpreted as or even assumed to be reflecting a weakening of liberalizing forces in society or within state elites or an attempt to cover up growing social problems, the model suggests that it instead reflects the adaptation of a consistent strategy to take into account the spread of new sources of information from the internet.

1.5.4 Conclusion and Comparative Perspective

The concluding chapter of the book ranges more broadly both in geography and in the range of institutions examined. First, it shows how the information-centric perspective of this book offers insights into the development of some of the other seemingly democratic reform initiatives the CCP introduced or expanded in the post-Tiananmen era. These include village-level elections, strengthening of legal processes for challenging state agencies, use of party-appointed legislative bodies to research and represent citizen concerns, the sanctioning of non-governmental organizations, new transparency regulations, and online mechanisms for gathering popular input. While previous work has largely analyzed these one by one, this chapter considers them in relation to each other. What kind of information does each provide? What risks or costs does each generate for the regime? How do they complement or substitute for each other?

The chapter then addresses the implications of this framework beyond the case of China. Here, I examine in more detail the implicit and explicit scope conditions that have made the CCP particularly able to pursue a "controlled burn" strategy. China's size and dispersed population is one important factor that made this strategy feasible, just as it made the broader openings of the pre-Tiananmen period less dangerous. The stability of its top leadership also made it more able to commit to an approach that incurs short run costs, such as the occasional release of damaging revelations and the disruption of small-scale protests, when forbearance would benefit the regime in the longer term. Finally, the ability to refer to similar practices from earlier periods of its history facilitates coordination on similar practices in the present. No other country shares all these characteristics to the same extent, meaning it will be difficult to reproduce China's "model" precisely. However, evidence from Mubarak's Egypt and Suharto's Indonesia suggested that protests played a similar role in sustaining these long-lived autocracies, and cross-national statistical evidence suggests that other party-states may have used limited media freedom in a sim-

ilar fashion to China. Finally, this chapter looks to the future, considering recent developments under China's latest leader, Xi Jinping and assessing whether this approach will continue to help the CCP maintain power. I conclude that while it has not yet reached its limits in China, the CCP's own efforts to promote economic development and modernization will eventually make it unsustainable. However, Xi Jinping's largely successful efforts to extinguish some of the most dangerous sparks of counter-regime activity suggest that the end of China's controlled burn may be a long time coming.