

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, and Melanie Manion

At a workshop at the University of Michigan in November 2006, three generations of scholars met to discuss and debate the study of Chinese politics and how new and diverse sources and methods are changing the field. This volume is the culmination of that workshop. Drawing on diverse research experiences, we present a wide range of sources, methods, and field strategies for the study of Chinese politics in the new era. As political scientists, we place our distinct methodological approaches in the framework of the discipline and point to particular challenges or opportunities (or both) of adaptation in the context of contemporary China. With the main focus on methodological concerns and the discovery of new data sources, the chapters in this volume are also richly substantive illustrations that demonstrate how to adapt method to context innovatively and appropriately. Thus, this book illustrates the benefits of the emerging cross-pollination between China studies and the broader discipline.

Three major themes emerged from our workshop discussions: (1) how to effectively use new sources and data collection methods, (2) how to integrate the study of Chinese politics into the discipline of political science to the betterment of both, and (3) how to deal with logistical and ethical problems of doing research in a challenging environment. In this Introduction, we discuss these themes in the sections below in the context of the initial workshop, the substantive chapters in this volume, and the field more generally. As only sporadic attention has been paid to the nuts and bolts of the study of Chinese politics, we hope this volume will spark future debates and other publications, conferences, and graduate training on research design and methodology in challenging fieldwork sites. We recognize that this volume joins an existing ongoing debate (Baum, 2007; Harding, 1994; Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006; Manion, 1994; Perry, 2007 and 1994b; Shambaugh, 1993; Wank, 1998). Collectively the following chapters illustrate that although much has changed

The editors would like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies, the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, and the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan for their generous support.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in the realm of studying Chinese politics, many of the fundamentals that previous scholars learned about this endeavor still apply. Language skills and familiarity with China strike us as remaining core prerequisites for scholars wishing to make sense of any given aspect of Chinese politics. Moreover, local knowledge – that is, knowing China – is increasingly insufficient. Each of the contributors to this volume has also utilized a wide variety of research skills in his or her work. These skills cover a broad set of approaches to politics and include the use of sophisticated quantitative techniques, the production and utilization of survey data, the application of new technologies, searching out and making use of previously closed archival sources, and even conducting quasi-experiments. Although such approaches cover many tools in the political science kit, and are illustrative of the impressive and at times conflicting directions in which the study of Chinese politics is headed, all contributors to this volume have made use of such methods with a common purpose in mind: to amplify their ability to describe and explain key aspects of politics in contemporary China. As such, the volume shows the rewards of bringing together scholars with diverse backgrounds, yet who share a collective commitment to pushing both China studies and the discipline forward in an inclusive and mutually beneficial manner. Thus, although the volume focuses on mainland China almost exclusively, we believe that the methodology and research design strategies presented here are relevant to scholars in many other places around the globe.

AN ABUNDANCE OF RICHES? DEALING WITH DATA

The study of China within the discipline of political science has changed dramatically over the past thirty years, reflecting in many ways the events and transformations that have occurred in Chinese politics. From a period of near total isolation from one's subject of study when China was closed off from Western scholarship, to a new period in which China's engagement with the world has become a source of wonder, political scientists studying China have gone from a dearth of sources and data to an overwhelming abundance.¹ Moreover, this recent surge in the access that scholars have to a staggering array of sources relating to the Chinese state represents a rather fundamental change in the way in which scholars come to know China. In other words, although the use of new methods is laudable and receives a good deal of attention in this volume, it is also clear that the contributors have been able to apply more advanced social science techniques to the study of Chinese politics only as they have gained access to a historically unprecedented wealth of information within China relating to domestic politics, foreign relations, and national security.

¹ See Baum (2007) on the generations of political scientists studying China in the post-World War II period.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

The increasing diversity, amount, and complexity of data on Chinese politics require that scholars pause to think about and debate how to use the data effectively and responsibly. The availability of new, often more systematic, data presents researchers with new opportunities not only to use these data effectively but also to combine these riches with more established data sources. Such opportunities can increase the external and internal validity of our arguments and also effectively bring the Chinese case to bear on debates in comparative politics and political science. Several of the chapters in this volume deal explicitly with strategies for using multiple methods and sources to achieve these goals. Lily L. Tsai discusses field strategies to improve the quality and reliability of survey data. Pierre Landry applies new methods of statistical sampling using Global Positioning System (GPS) spatial technology, allowing him to show the patterns of legal diffusion and the actual mechanisms of changing popular opinion toward China's legal system. Victor Shih, Wei Shan, and Mingxing Liu present a new database on members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which permits more systematic analysis of China's key political elite. Neil Diamant and Xi Chen demonstrate the value and increasing accessibility of state-generated data in Chinese archives.

Changes in sources and data also impact how we interpret and evaluate older methodologies and sources. Although few China scholars would accept the comparison to the "Kremlinologists" of old, some of what we study still necessarily includes attention to and analysis of important facets of Chinese politics that do not lend themselves to systematic study. Although the elite politics examined by Shih, Shan, and Liu in Chapter 3 comes immediately to mind, other important social phenomena, such as collective violence, corruption, tax evasion, and ethnic conflict, are also critical research topics that must be studied with limited, often flawed data, and in a political atmosphere that at times entails overt government suppression and at other times astoundingly effective self-censorship on the part of informants, local officials, and in-country colleagues. Many of the authors here provide detailed explanations of how they deal with important topics that can yield insufficient or flawed data. Xi Chen's typology of "upstream" and "downstream" state-generated data provides helpful strategies on how to interpret and assess the reliability and accuracy of government reports and statistics regarding contentious actions by Chinese citizens. He also details how clear knowledge and familiarity with the bureaucratic structure and politics of the government units in charge of monitoring citizens' collective action are critical for measuring accurately the value of one's data. Calvin Chen's ethnographic study of Chinese factories provides a critical look at the seamy side of the "workshop of the world" on China's southeastern coast. In addition, Neil Diamant's contribution illustrates how digging deeper into previously unavailable archival sources can shed new light on past events and challenge conventional wisdom about politics during the early years of the PRC. Many of these strategies should be a more visible part of any political scientist's toolbox in challenging fieldwork

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)

locales, in China and elsewhere. Daniela Stockmann utilizes the vast wave of new print media sources that have flooded China during this period. Although China's newspapers and wire reports may be dismissed by some as doing no more than reproducing official rhetoric, Stockmann shows that via the use of new technology, specifically Yoshikoder, it is possible to find in these publications a great deal of new information about trends in contemporary Chinese politics. Allen Carlson and Hong Duan turn to Internet resources related to Chinese foreign policy and national security, and although they find that there is less here than initially meets the eye, these sources too are promising.

COMPARATIVE POLITICS AND COMPARING CHINA

The study of Chinese politics in recent decades has also been profoundly influenced by the political science discipline. This is evidenced not only by the ongoing lively debate about appropriate methodology but also by renewed attention to placing area studies in the broader context of comparative politics. Increasingly and appropriately, graduate school training in political science requires acquisition of strong methodological skills, offering new opportunities for students of Chinese politics. At the same time, application of these methods requires sensitivity in the field to take into account the different context – a developing economy, an authoritarian polity, and an Asian culture. There is then a delicate balancing act to be maintained in the training of graduate students working on China. Increased knowledge of methods (quantitative or qualitative) is a must, but so too are language and cultural training. It is now clear that both of these skills are required, that is, walking on two legs, to conduct successful research on Chinese politics. The nuances of such adaptations are not commonly acquired in the classroom.

Moreover, in recent years, the study of specific places (especially single countries but even specific regions) has been deemphasized in the field of political science. Whether or not this constitutes progress, comparative politics, and to a certain extent international relations and security studies as well, now aspire to develop theories and arguments that can be investigated in and applied to any locale. Ideally, theories with the greatest amount of breadth should be developed to explain important political and economic transformations, for example democratization, rapid economic growth, efficient public goods provision, and ethnic peace and conflict. In most places around the globe, comparative work has absorbed traditional “area studies,” and specialists on a single country or region are encouraged and rewarded professionally when they show their ability and inclination to go “cross-national.” Although cross-national comparison has long been a hallmark of comparative politics, the methods of comparison have changed as better data have become available, as many recently democratized countries have produced electoral data waiting to be analyzed, and as computing programs have become more powerful. Combined with the growing emphasis on quantitative research methods in graduate school training, studies in comparative politics increasingly employ

large-N datasets and sophisticated statistical analysis to compare countries. For various reasons, these methods are often regarded as more effective and powerful than comparative case studies or other small-N comparisons (but see Schrank, 2006).²

In general, specialists on Chinese politics have not gone down this path, or at least have not gotten very far down this path. There are several reasons that the study of China remains somewhat apart from these broader trends. They include the problem of making relevant comparisons, China’s significant internal diversity, and the challenge of finding or producing high-quality data for cross-national comparisons. Given that these problems are not unique to China and are often present in many other regions and countries, the strategies used to enhance comparison in China may also be applied elsewhere.

The countries most commonly compared to China in earlier periods either collapsed or democratized (or both) during the 1990s as socialism failed in countries from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. The end of the Soviet Union in particular complicated the previously active field of comparative communism. Although comparisons between China and Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the former Soviet Union continued into the 1990s and beyond, apt comparisons have become more difficult as the political systems have diverged markedly. Even in the resurgent authoritarian states of the former Soviet Union, a number of the political systems remain more democratic and more open than the one-party state of the Chinese Communist Party. As many studies across the globe now focus on elections and party politics, China’s one-party system and dearth of competitive elections beyond the grassroots level leave China out of many cross-national studies. In some cases, the availability of systematic electoral data has redirected research away from questions that cannot be probed this way. As Lieberthal notes in the conclusion, research questions should be developed that are interesting and relevant rather than simply because they can be answered through available data. This exclusion of important questions, and by extension some countries, because the data are not comparable to those available in developed democracies is regrettable. In the Chinese case, both quantitative and qualitative research on grassroots elections, and semicompetitive elections at other levels, have yielded important, perhaps pathbreaking, insights into the nature of elections in nondemocratic societies (e.g., Manion, 1996; Shi, 1999a; Tsai, 2007b). However, because Chinese data remain difficult to integrate into mainstream comparative politics research on elections (which is overwhelmingly drawn from democratic countries), the Chinese case does not have a large impact on the field.

Because China does not conform to the path hewed by other socialist states that experienced socialist breakdown – first economic, then political – before

² We cannot do justice here to the ongoing, vibrant debate on the strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies. Despite the increased reliance on quantitative methods in political science over the past two decades, qualitative methods have enjoyed a renaissance of sorts. These include comparative case studies, process tracing, ethnography, and others. All of these methods are highlighted in this volume.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)

moving on to democratic transitions with varying success, the range of countries to which China can be appropriately compared remains unclear, particularly as cross-national work often aims to classify countries by regime type. China's extraordinary economic successes in the past twenty-five years place it solidly among the tigers of the developing world. Therefore, comparisons to the economies of its East Asian neighbors across time or to Brazil, Russia, and India (the other "BRICs") today are becoming more common. In its politics, however, China's atypical path of sustained authoritarian rule by an unreformed Communist Party presents researchers with problems of both theory and method. To what other nations should China be compared? How should we accurately code China's regime type in large, cross-national studies? How can we avoid the ontological goal of democratic transition when most of our theories treat democracy in some form as the normal state of politics? In other words, how can we examine China for what it is rather than for what we hope it to become?

Second, comparative research on China as a single entity often masks the remarkable and sustained regional diversity within China itself. Although aggregate statistics for China demonstrate its economic success, the rapid decline in poverty, and the impressive numbers in rural-to-urban migration, urbanization, and industrialization, they often mask the huge and growing regional inequalities. Chinese coastal cities are now reaching the levels of development and standards of living of some of their wealthy developed neighbors whereas the interior still struggles with high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment. Economic diversity is matched by cultural, linguistic, and social diversity that in some cases approaches differences between countries in other parts of the globe. As William Hurst argues in this volume, scholars of comparative politics should be encouraged to pursue any kind of comparative research that yields interesting theoretical and empirical findings. Subnational comparisons can be as fruitful as some of the cross-national research that is so highly esteemed in the discipline. Indeed, many of the authors in this volume utilize China's rich internal diversity to test hypotheses or to explore causal mechanisms of general theories in political science about the nature of economic development, changes in state-society relations, or developments in civil society.

Finally, even though the quantity and quality of Chinese data have improved markedly over the years, it remains difficult to find high-quality data that are easily comparable to data compiled in other countries by international agencies, national governments, academic organizations, or commercial companies. The Chinese government regards much information as politically sensitive and continues to obstruct the collection of systematic political data, broadly defined. In some cases, the government manipulates data for political purposes, which makes it difficult to be confident about the accuracy of government figures. As a result, statistical data from China are rightfully regarded with a healthy degree of skepticism by many researchers. Numbers, although of utmost importance in studying Chinese politics, have

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

to be placed in context, used only when it is clear how they were generated and for what purposes. Indeed, tracing the origins of statistical data generated within China is an exercise that can reveal a great deal about how the modern Chinese state works, as Chen and Diamant show in their chapters on state-generated data in Chinese archives. Although China is surely not unique in this regard, the Chinese Communist Party's attention to the importance of both information and organization can translate into tight controls over survey research and access to some government documents and certain archives. Even some regulations and laws are official secrets. This control continues to limit the creation of accurate datasets, which in turn reduces the integration of China into comparative studies.

Although the study of Chinese politics is not wholly integrated into the subfields of comparative politics and international relations as a whole, the contributions to this volume show that engagement with the theory and methods of the discipline are now the norm for political scientists who conduct research in China today. The problems discussed in this Introduction and the sense of distance between the field of Chinese politics and the discipline are diminishing as scholars trained in the historical, cultural, and institutional context of China deploy standard methods of social science research. The chapter by Peter Hays Gries exemplifies this trend. His scholarship is grounded on a particularly close read of Asian culture yet is informed by a highly critical understanding of work in the vein of political culture that has forwarded rather unsustainable generalizations about differences between East and West. Rather than simply perpetuating this mythical divide, Gries explores recent advances in the field of political psychology and then conducts a series of social experiments in Asian and American settings to determine the degree to which his subjects "see" the world differently. His findings are then applied to developing a more rigorous frame for analyzing the role of leadership psychology in the interaction between states (including the United States) in the Asian security sphere.

POLITICAL RESEARCH IN CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENTS

China's sustained authoritarianism also presents political scientists with logistical, ethical, and political problems when undertaking research that touches on sensitive topics, uses new and innovative data collection methods, or reaches results that may be unsettling or dangerous for powerful domestic interests. As in many other places around the world, studying politics in China is still difficult, at times dangerous, for researchers and research subjects alike, and is wrapped up indelibly with the practice of politics. This work highlights the value added of making use of new sources and methodologies. However, it became clear during our discussions at the workshop that alongside such accomplishments, there is a need for a more candid discussion of the trade-offs when doing fieldwork in difficult locations or on sensitive topics. Although as social scientists we strive for robust internal and external validity,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)

we are routinely presented with situations that require compromise. There are risks in the study of Chinese politics. Researchers who strive to gain access to data that are considered to be “internal” (内部), or related to state secrets, may put themselves at odds with the Chinese state. This is particularly so when the research delves into areas of political sensitivity in China (topics that include ethnic minorities, democratization, religious freedom, etc.). At the same time, carrying out interviews, conducting surveys, and working with officials to gain access to archival sources may also put one’s subjects and colleagues in harm’s way. Thus, although we do not intend to overemphasize these challenges, at the same time the challenges confronting political scientists working in China extend beyond the issues of increasing explanatory power.

The logistical and ethical problems of doing research in China have become more complicated as our research access and opportunities have widened. As with the treatment of foreigners generally in China, foreign scholars are now much more autonomous from their official sponsors and somewhat better integrated into Chinese society at large. In addition to a more receptive environment for scholarly work, there are new avenues for collaboration with mainland scholars and a better infrastructure for large-scale projects – sample surveys, archival research, and construction of large databases. Such integration and more frequent collaboration require additional attention to the ethical problems of social science research, including protection of informants, attention to the needs and concerns of local collaborators, and striking a balance between the requirements for human subject protection in Western universities with the more informal approaches often taken by scholars working in the field. Several of the chapters here provide effective strategies to mitigate the problems that occur when one is doing research on sensitive topics. Lily L. Tsai examines interviewing techniques that may reduce response errors or misunderstandings between survey enumerators and respondents, particularly with sensitive questions about local government performance, clan relations, or the enforcement of unpopular policies such as birth control or tax collection. Bruce J. Dickson shows the importance of the local partner to ensure on-the-ground cooperation with the survey team. Local partners and colleagues better understand how topics can be presented to reduce political sensitivity, limit self-censorship, and encourage support by local officials. Benjamin L. Read’s reliance on “site-intensive methods” allows him to gather information and participant-observation experience at the grassroots level in urban China, the critical point where citizens encounter the state most often and most intimately. Without a considerable amount of time and energy spent intensively studying a few places, Read argues, we often miss the hidden and subtle aspects of power in an authoritarian regime.

ROAD MAP

One of the more exciting developments in much of the recent scholarship on Chinese politics is the exploitation of different sources of evidence and multiple

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

research methodologies in a single study. Indeed, although we have organized the following chapters according to their main methodological themes, a number of them draw from research that illustrates multiple research methods at their best. We hope this volume contributes further to this development and to fruitful collaborative relationships among scholars to exploit more fully the new sources, methods, and field strategies in investigating important questions of Chinese politics.

The chapters in Part I focus on new sources for the study of Chinese politics. Chapters 1 and 2 are companion pieces. In Chapter 1, Xi Chen examines the promise and pitfalls of utilizing *xinfang* (信访 i.e., petitioning) archives. This chapter then meticulously outlines a road map of the kinds of documents available, where they are located, and how accessible they are likely to be, and also presents a series of strategies for maximizing the chances of successful use of such materials. More broadly, Chen assesses the reliability of Chinese archival data. Neil J. Diamant's Chapter 2 echoes and expands upon this conclusion. With a focus on the utility of making more direct use of open archival sources, he crafts a compelling case for broadening the temporal scope of Chinese politics, that is, for bridging the divide between historians and political scientists. Building on this observation, he demonstrates how newly available archives that detail aspects of the personal lives of veterans can provide a new understanding of broad issues in Chinese politics, including controversial questions such as citizenship and patriotism.

Whereas Diamant and Chen examine the Chinese state in the past, and do so largely at the level of local politics, in Chapter 3, Victor Shih, Wei Shan, and Mingxing Liu look to the present and turn attention to the study of elite politics. Shih et al. show how bringing more rigor to the study of elite politics has its own rewards. More specifically, they develop a comprehensive database of the Chinese leadership dating back to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. They argue that previous studies of Chinese elite politics lacked such a detailed foundation for studying how and why the careers of China's leaders progressed (or declined).

Chapters 4 through 6 redirect attention to how the consideration of new data sources can deepen understanding of Chinese politics. In Chapter 4, Peter Hays Gries looks for sources in an entirely new direction, mainly by turning to experimental methods and psychological measures to study Chinese foreign policy. In so doing, he seeks to push the discussion of political culture's role in China's emerging relationship with the rest of the world beyond the earlier flawed work in this vein. More specifically, he first outlines the approach he developed in two separate psychological studies. He then utilizes this work to inform a broader discussion of the challenges and limitations of experimental work and psychological measures in the study of Chinese foreign policy. In Chapter 5, Allen Carlson and Hong Duan examine the apparent surge in cyber activity related to Chinese foreign policy. They argue that this development has been poorly understood by researchers, and, ultimately, has tended to be overhyped in the field. Rather than finding a revolutionary development

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19783-0 - Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies

Edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion

Excerpt

[More information](#)

unfolding in China's Internet space dedicated to foreign affairs and national security, they uncover a limited set of new sources in this terrain. Although these data are valuable to scholars, they appear to be less extraordinary than initially expected. In Chapter 6, Daniela Stockmann casts a broad net to reach a somewhat different conclusion. She explores the vast number of Chinese news media sources that are now available online and contends that they provide scholars with new opportunities to conduct content analysis across media sources, across regions, and over time. Stockmann explores the problem of choosing the appropriate sample size for content analysis of Chinese daily newspapers. Drawing on insights from communication methodology, she compares the effectiveness and efficiency of various sample sizes for content analysis in the Chinese context. Although focusing on sample size, Stockmann also includes suggestions for sampling frames for content analysis that involve comparisons across media sources, across regions, and over time.

Part II focuses on qualitative methods in the study of Chinese politics. Qualitative methods of varying kinds have been the hallmark of the study of Chinese politics since American researchers were allowed back into the field in the early 1980s. This volume builds on this strong tradition, but the authors also look beyond the study of Chinese politics to the larger discipline, demonstrating how the study of politics in China can contribute to larger debates on the nature of state-society relations in authoritarian regimes (Read), workshop politics in a rapidly developing economy (Calvin Chen), and the comparative political economy of unemployment (Hurst).

In Chapter 7, Calvin Chen demonstrates how ethnography is a useful tool to understand contemporary Chinese politics. Although some scholars consider the approach inadequate to meet such a challenge, Chen suggests that ethnographic research can go beyond the simple provision of "thick description" and afford a stronger grasp of the multiple and sometimes hidden factors that trigger, sustain, or obstruct change. In focusing on and dissecting developments in communities and institutions at the micro level, ethnography provides a means for generating deeper insights into how macro-level forces influence the interactions and lives of ordinary Chinese citizens and vice versa. Indeed, this approach can aid conceptual development and refinement not only by offering an empirical "reality check," but also by identifying and evaluating the factors that contribute to the social and political outcomes in reform-era China that we seek to explain.

In Chapter 8, Read expands on this approach by arguing for research designs that incorporate "site-intensive" research. His methodology, used in a project on the changing nature of residents' committees in urban China, combines an ethnographic approach that is broader than a single case but still not a large-N study. Read argues that this approach is integral to political science as it allows researchers to develop new hypotheses, expose causal mechanisms, and even falsify existing hypotheses in the literature. His argument builds on the wider literature that has employed these methods, under different names and in other subfields, including American politics. Read also