Ethical Challenges in Comparative Politics

Experiments in China

Xiaobo Lü*
Department of Government
University of Texas at Austin
xiaobolu@austin.utexas.edu

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Abstract

Scholars often face ethical dilemmas when studying politics in non-democratic regimes, and conducting experimental studies is not an exception. While scholars strive to follow the scientific standards in their studies, they also need to ensure the safety of local collaborators, respondents, and themselves. By providing in-depth discussions of these issues in the context of China, I highlight the complexity of ethical challenges that many scholars face in similar settings. Specifically, I detail the motives behind the Chinese government’s restrictions on data collection involving either foreign researchers or funding, and the corresponding regulatory regime. I show that understanding the government’s motives and regulations allows researchers to better manage the potential risks to respondents and local Chinese collaborators, and help them consider the potential ethical issues. Finally, I highlight several common practices that scholars have adopted when conducting experimental or public opinion research in China, and discuss their pros and cons.
Students of Chinese politics have taken a new methodological approach in recent years by conducting experimental studies. These studies have generated numerous new insights into Chinese politics and comparative political behaviors. However, the Chinese government is keen to control the information flow within society in order to maintain regime stability. In particular, the government is anxious about social science research studies conducted by foreign scholars and organizations that could potentially be regime destabilizing. Consequently, conducting experimental studies in China raises a number of challenges to researchers, ranging from experiment logistics to research design. In many occasions, scholars face ethical dilemmas between satisfying the scientific standards in their studies and ensuring the safety of local collaborators, respondents, and even scholars themselves. These issues are particularly salient when studying topics that are considered politically sensitive to the Chinese government.

The difficulties of conducting research in this controlled information environment have not gone unnoticed. Several studies have made important contributions to our understanding of the challenges and strategies for studying politics in contemporary China.¹ For example, Manion (2010) provides an overview of public opinion research on Chinese politics in the last two decades. Tsai (2010) offers some valuable insights concerning quantitative and field research on politically sensitive issues in rural China.

However, issues related to experimental studies of Chinese politics remain largely unexplored. Although experimental studies inherit many existing challenges in traditional methods of data collection in China, they also generate some new issues. I argue that

¹ A recent edited volume by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Melanie Manion offers some excellent insights into research methods for studying contemporary Chinese politics (Carlson et al., eds., 2010).
Experimental studies differ from traditional studies primarily in two aspects: the data-generating process and the barrier of entry in data collection. Specifically, researchers who conduct experimental studies, particularly field experiments, not only are observers but also play a more active role in the data-generating process. Hence, the “treatments” in these studies could potentially generate unintended political behaviors that are not trivial in non-democratic regimes. Meanwhile, the low barrier of entry in data collection (e.g., research costs, the degree of collaboration with local partners) may induce some researchers to overlook the safety concerns of those local collaborators who implement the data collection for them. If the trust between local collaborators and foreign researchers is broken, it may undermine future collaborative opportunities for other foreign scholars. Given the burgeoning experimental studies in political science outside of China in the last decade, scholars have increasingly attempted to employ this new methodology in the study of Chinese politics, with various degrees of success. This paper sheds some light on tackling the ethical issues that scholars may encounter in this context.

Building on the insights in Manion (2010) and Tsai (2010), I begin by first briefly outlining the motives behind the Chinese government’s restrictions on social science research involving data collection with foreign affiliations. Next, I discuss the potential risks facing respondents, local collaborators, and scholars in the context of China’s regulatory regime. Specifically, many practitioners consider the enforcement of these regulations to be a gray area because the enforcement is arbitrary and inconsistent at best. I then examine experimental studies in the context of China’s political environment and suggest some potential ethical issues.

For an overview of recent developments in experimental studies in political science, see Druckman et al. (2006) and Humphreys and Weinstein (2009).
that scholars may face. Given these challenges, I discuss several common practices concerning experimental studies in China and their practical trade-offs.

**Understanding the Chinese Government’s Motives**

Governments in authoritarian regimes often have concerns about any activities involving social, economic, and political data collection in their societies. Governments in authoritarian regimes may fear the *process* and/or the *outcome* of studies that could shape mass political attitudes and engender political actions, which subsequently destabilize the regime. As the discussion below shows, however, the *process* of using non-experimental research approaches, to my knowledge, has generated little impact on political attitudes and behaviors of Chinese citizens to date. The *outcome* of these studies, on the other hand, could be regime destabilizing in the eyes of the government under some conditions. I further argue that the fear that regime destabilization might result from the outcome of the research (even though that destabilization is very unlikely) could induce the government to take action against the scholars and their Chinese collaborators, but *not* necessarily against the subjects involved in the study.

Broadly speaking, one may understand the Chinese government’s restriction on social science research through the theories of censorship. As recently suggested by King et al. (2013), we can conceptualize the motives of the Chinese government’s censorship in two categories: a *state critique* theory that emphasizes silencing dissidents, and a *collective action potential* theory that suggests governments repress the potential for citizens to collectively express their dissatisfaction toward the government. King et al. (2013) argue that the primary motives of the Chinese government’s internet censorship programs are to repress the potential for collective action, and they find supporting evidence in the analysis of social media in China.
If we follow this line of logic, we may consider collective action potential as the primary motive behind the Chinese government’s restriction on social science research that involves data collection, particularly those studies conducted by foreign scholars or funded by foreign organizations. To my knowledge, however, we have not observed that the process of social science research engenders mass collective action against the government among Chinese citizens to date. There are several factors that can explain the low level of impact on collective action from the research process. First, the sampling strategy in many studies, particularly public opinion research, randomly selects respondents from a large pool of individuals. Hence, these respondents often do not know other participants involved in the project, and therefore are unlikely to organize collective action. Second, the survey or interview questions used are often subtle and not very sensitive, in large part due to the discretion of the scholars. These traditional data-collection methods may avoid engendering strong anti-government sentiment among subjects, which could potentially put the subjects at risk if they chose to take political action.

However, the government may remain concerned when research is conducted at sensitive times or in sensitive areas. For example, the Chinese government, especially local governments, often discourage research activities in unstable areas (e.g., Tibet and Xinjiang) or during sensitive times (e.g., post-riot, post-natural disaster, and during annual meetings of the national assemblies and Party congress). Furthermore, studies that challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, such as exposing high-level political elites’ corruption without government approval, or raise issues concerning territorial integrity (e.g., Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang) are also considered sensitive.³ It is worth noting that the process of social science

³ The definition of “high-level” usually refers to cadres in the central government and party organizations.
studies has not provoked much social unrest in China to date, in part because most scholars have been careful in to design their research to avoid crossing red lines.

In the meantime, the outcomes of social science research, particularly those papers that are not published in Chinese, have not yet directly generated any anti-government activities among Chinese citizens. Specifically, it is very difficult for the outcomes of academic papers to generate significant impact on mobilizing opposition against the regime for two reasons. First, papers published in academic journals are not easily accessible to Chinese citizens because they often require institutional subscription. Second, even if these papers are accessible, most of them are in English and use social scientific methodologies and terminologies that present barriers to Chinese citizens’ comprehension. In particular, those who are more prone to social unrest, such as peasants and migrant workers, lack the necessary language skills and scientific training to make any use of these papers.

If neither the processes nor the outcomes of social science research generate significant collective action potential among citizens to destabilize the regime, it is puzzling why the Chinese government maintains tight restrictions, at least in the regulatory regime. I highlight two conditions under which the outcomes of social sciences research could draw government’s attention and potentially cause them to take action against scholars and local Chinese collaborators. First, when the research results are critical of the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party as the ruling party, they could attract the government’s attention. This concern is compounded by those studies that are widely reported by foreign media outlets and social media venues. The Chinese government is wary about the content of media reporting, particularly those reports related to the quality of governance that could undermine regime legitimacy. For better or worse, media outlets and social media do a better job than academics
when informing Chinese citizens about the state of governance in Chinese society. Consequently, research results reported in the media could shape political attitudes, and subsequently, generate political action.

Second, if Chinese dissidents and foreign governments or organizations use researchers’ papers as the ammunition to criticize the government and the party, and as the means to mobilize other citizens against the government, they could draw the government’s attention. The Chinese authorities are particularly worried about any organizations with mass mobilization capacity, which could potentially serve as an opposing force to challenge the monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party. As a consequence, the government will punish any activities that directly challenge the regime.

**Understanding the Risks under the Chinese Government Regulations**

Because most research does not directly fuel the potential for collective action by citizens to express their dissatisfaction toward the government, the Chinese government does not censor social science research as tightly as they do media and the internet. However, the inconsistency in censoring provides both challenges and opportunities to scholars. On the one hand, inconsistent censoring creates a significant gray area in which scholars do not know when and how the government might take action against them, because the government often selectively enforces the rules and regulations when deemed appropriate. On the other hand, the inconsistency in government enforcement provides leeway to enable scholars to collect data and answer some important questions that were not possible in previous research. In this section, I discuss specific Chinese regulatory regimes concerning social sciences research with foreign affiliation (i.e., funded by foreign sources or conducted by foreign individuals and entities), and their corresponding risks to respondents, local partners, and scholars.
The current regulatory regime concerning research projects with foreign affiliation is directed by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS). The most relevant regulation is the *Measures for the Administration of Foreign Affiliated Surveys* (涉外调查管理办法, the *Measures* hereafter), which was issued by the NBS in 2004. This document was a revision of the previous regulations established in 1999, and it aims to regulate market research (市场调查) and societal investigation (社会调查) activities funded by or in cooperation with foreign individuals, entities, and local subsidiaries of foreign entities outside of mainland China. It defines market research as “activities collecting information concerning commercial products and services in the Chinese market.” It defines societal investigation as “any activities such as survey, interviews, ethnographic observations, and any other approaches to collect, organize, and analyze information about the Chinese society.”

There are two issues worth noting regarding this document. First, the Chinese wording of the document could refer only to public opinion surveys, but it could also have a broader interpretation. Specifically, the definition of societal investigation (社会调查) includes many approaches that are not considered standard survey methods, as reflected in the definition above. Second, the wording of “any other approaches” (其它方式) in the definition of societal investigation is purposely vague, thus giving the government flexibility to enforce this rule as it sees fit. Vague language is a general pattern in some Chinese laws, and the government flexibly interprets these regulations to serve its own purposes.

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5 “Foreign individuals and entities” refers to citizens and organizations outside of mainland China, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.
According to the *Measures*, data collection with foreign affiliation, as defined above, cannot be conducted without the approval of the NBS. There are several steps that organizations or individuals need to take in order to conduct market research or societal investigation with foreign affiliations in China. First, the local institutions or firms are required to obtain a permit from the National Bureau of Statistics of China prior to the study if the study involves interviewing subjects across provinces.⁶ Similarly, if the study requires interviewing subjects within a province, the local institutions or firms are required to apply for a permit from the provincial Bureau of Statistics of China. Without obtaining the permit from the government, no organizations or individuals can conduct data collection with foreign affiliation. In terms of the application process’s timeline, the *Measures* indicate that NBS is obliged to approve or disapprove the application within 20 days, and this deadline could be extended by another 10 days if necessary. The permit remains valid for three years, and it is renewable. Second, even after obtaining the permit, the organizations are still required to apply for approval from the NBS when conducting any specific projects with foreign affiliations. The application includes a brief description of the study objectives, target population, and questionnaires, among many other requirements detailing the study. Again, the NBS and corresponding provincial statistical bureaus are obliged to approve or disapprove the project within 20 days, with a potential 10-day extension. While the application process appears to be straightforward, it is a common knowledge among practitioners that studies concerning sensitive topics or during sensitive times could face a lengthy reviewing process, often resulting in rejection.

The *Measures* specifies the punishment for violating the regulations. It is worth noting that the associated risks for respondents, local partners, and researchers could sometimes exceed

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the *Measures* because of other Chinese laws and regulations, especially those concerning so-called “state secrets.”

To begin, the *Measures* do not indicate any specific punishment or repercussions for the subjects who participate in studies that violate the regulations in the *Measures*. Furthermore, I am unaware of any individuals who have been fined or prosecuted by the government because of their participation. Hence, the risks to research participants are minimal as far as government harassment is concerned.

However, for scholars and local Chinese collaborators (e.g., survey firms, academic institutes, and Chinese scholars), the violation of the *Measures* could result in a fine up to RMB 1,000 (approximately US$160) if the research is not for profit, and up to RMB 30,000 (approximately US$4,840) if it is for profit. Although the financial punishment is relatively small, the local organizations could lose their permit to conduct future market research and societal investigation. Losing the permit is the most severe punishment to Chinese local collaborators, because it threatens their institutional survival. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars could face disciplinary action by their organizations, and they could be blacklisted by the government, undermining their career prospects.

Note that the *Measures* suggest if research activities violate other Chinese laws and regulations, the individuals and local collaborators could face potential criminal charges. For example, the *Measures* prohibit research activities such as undermining Chinese sovereignty, stealing state secrets, provoking inter-ethnic tension, disturbing social safety and welfare, and violating other laws and regulations. Again, the vague language of “*other Chinese laws and regulations*” in the *Measures* gives room for government discretion regarding the definition of “violation.”
Despite the harsh language in the regulation, the enforcement of these rules is not as universal as one would expect. To understand the pattern of selective enforcement, one could borrow insights from the “police patrols versus fire alarms” model on congressional oversight in the United States (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). Essentially, the selective enforcement is due to the fact that the Chinese government lacks the capacity to monitor every single market research and societal investigation study. As a result, the Chinese government’s actions are likely to be reactive rather than proactive, and the extent of their reaction is often based on media exposure, particularly by foreign media. However, the government is sometimes more proactive and vigilant in restricting societal investigation during sensitive times and on sensitive topics, and will enforce these rules and regulations more strictly.\(^7\) For example, the Chinese government often has strict oversight of research activities during the annual national assemblies’ meetings (“liang hui”) or during political transitions at the higher levels of government and party organization. In addition, local governments may be more assertive when the studies could potentially expose the governance issues in their localities.

**Experimental Studies in China and Potential Ethical Issues**

In this section, I first highlight some examples of the existing experimental studies concerning Chinese politics. I then suggest two important differences in data collection between experimental studies and traditional methods. In light of these differences as well as above discussion of government motives and potential risks, I discuss several potential ethical challenges that scholars conducting experimental studies could face.

\(^7\) Qiang Xiao, a scholar at University of California at Berkeley, regularly publishes the most recent censorship guidelines issued by the government at China Digital Times ([http://chinadigitaltimes.net](http://chinadigitaltimes.net)).
Experimental studies of Chinese politics are burgeoning in recent years, and they have taken several different forms, primarily field and survey experiments. For example, Guan and Green (2006) conducted one of first field experiments on door-to-door canvassing techniques in China. Hoffmann and Larner (2013) used field experiments to study the formation of nationalism among Chinese citizens. King et al. (2013) conducted a large scale field experiment to detect the internet censoring mechanism in China. Using survey experiments, Lü et al. (2012) studied the effects of inequity aversion on trade protection preferences and Lü (2013) investigated how unequal educational opportunity affects resentment toward income inequality. Finally, Gries et al. (2012) conducted a cross-country survey experiment of nationalism in both the United States and China.

Given the restrictions on research with foreign affiliation imposed by the Chinese government, scholars conducting experimental studies in China face similar issues as scholars who use traditional methods. Nonetheless, I contend that experimental studies differ from traditional research methods in two important ways: the data-generating process and the barriers of entry in data collection. Consequently, these differences could raise some new ethical challenges.

First, researchers in experimental studies play a more active role during the data-generating process, which could potentially provoke political behaviors that traditional research may not be able to. Previously, most foreign scholars relied mainly on three types of traditional data-collection approaches when studying contemporary Chinese politics: 1) government documentation and statistics; 2) public opinion surveys; 3) interviews and ethnographic studies. Scholars using these methods function as observers with minimum intervention in the data-
generating process. In other words, these data-collection methods have little ability to provoke political behaviors among the subjects or by the government.

Scholars using experimental methods, however, play a more active role during data collection, which could potentially generate greater impacts on social and political dynamics. By definition, experimental studies require scholars to invoke a “treatment” on the subjects in the experimental group, and compare the outcome with that of a control group that does not receive the treatment. Current studies’ experimental treatments range from minimum intervention, such as survey experiments that present different information to the subjects, (e.g., Gries et al. 2012; Lü et al. 2012; Lü 2013) to intermediate levels of intervention, such as field experiments that trigger different political behaviors in subjects (e.g., Distelhorst and Hou 2014; Guan and Green 2006; King et al. 2013). Take King et al. (forthcoming) as an example, in which the experimental protocol attempts to reverse engineer the internet censoring mechanism in China by randomly creating different social media texts on many Chinese websites and studying the extent to which these texts are deleted. While generating important insights, one could expect the Chinese government to revise their future censoring mechanisms in response to this study.

The second primary difference between experimental studies and traditional studies is that traditional studies have a higher entry barrier in data collection, namely the need for a local partner and the research costs. Collecting reliable information concerning China’s politics has been a great challenge to foreign social scientists since 1949, largely because of the complexity of Chinese society and the Chinese government’s tight control of information. New opportunities arose for scholars after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States in 1978 as well as the subsequent economic reforms in China.
Nonetheless, scholars still need to possess sufficient language skills and develop strong ties with Chinese domestic scholars, academic institutions, and even government officials in order to carry out their studies.

However, researchers using experimental studies may rely less on the assistance from local partners in China, if not eschewing their help completely. For example, researchers conducting survey experiments may only need to ask a few questions for their experimental treatments. Hence, survey experiments could be embedded into a larger, “omnibus” survey, and many local organizations, especially market research firms, offer these survey opportunities to make a profit. In this approach, the costs could be as little as a few thousand dollars to several thousand dollars, depending on the sample size and methods of interview (e.g., internet, phone, or face-to-face). In addition, field experiments conducted over the internet (e.g., Distelhorst and Hou 2014; King et al. 2013) may minimize the need for local partners. In contrast, a traditional large-scale survey, especially those with nationally representative samples, could cost more than ten thousand dollars. Furthermore, carrying out these kinds of studies requires strong collaboration among the foreign and domestic researchers and institutions.

These two unique features of experimental studies generate some ethical dilemmas for researchers to consider. First, the intervention of the experimental treatment could potentially provoke changes in political behaviors by some subjects. As a result, should scholars be responsible for the subsequent political actions taken by the subjects, and more importantly, the adverse responses from the Chinese government? Some may argue that the experimental studies are conducted on such a small scale that they could hardly generate any significant political impact. Furthermore, even if the subjects decide to take political action, one could hardly identify the experimental treatment as the only reason; these subjects may act regardless of the
experiment. However, scholars have to be mindful about the potential adverse consequences of the experimental treatment, because ultimately the Chinese citizens and collaborators, not the foreign scholars, are subject to them.

Even if scholars are mindful about the potential adverse consequences, it is difficult to anticipate all of the potential issues *ex ante*, especially for foreign scholars who are not always aware of the most current political environment in China. Traditionally, foreign scholars resolve this issue by relying on Chinese domestic collaborators to gauge the political sensibility of their studies and the potential risks to the subjects and Chinese collaborators. As discussed earlier, however, scholars who conduct experimental studies may not develop strong ties with local collaborators. Hence, the probability of generating adverse consequences could potentially be higher in experimental studies. In other words, the low barrier of entry in experimental studies compounds this issue because it may not require the scholars to possess strong language skills and/or develop strong ties with Chinese researchers or institutions. While the lower barrier of entry for conducting research in China is an advantage for experimental studies, scholars could potentially generate some unintended consequences because of their lack of understanding of Chinese society.

Furthermore, even if researchers have strong ties with domestic collaborators, scholars could pass the ethical dilemma onto the Chinese collaborators by relying on them to make the judgment about whether a study generates too much risk. Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought concerning this issue. On the one hand, some scholars contend that as long as the research protocol satisfies the Human Subject Committee’s board of review, and if Chinese collaborators are willing to participate in the study, they explicitly or implicitly agree to the risks because they understand what they entail. As a result, the burden falls on the Chinese
collaborators if they decide to participate in the project. On the other hand, others suggest that scholars should bear the full burden, and may not conduct this kind of research if any potential risks emerge that might harm the local partners and/or respondents.

These are two extreme viewpoints, and I would argue that neither of them is completely appropriate in the context of conducting experimental studies in China. The problem with the first perspective is that some Chinese collaborators may not be fully informed about the risks involved, and it is unrealistic to assume they implicitly accept them. In particular, a significant number of commercial marketing firms have been founded in China in recent years. Because many of these firms are new to market research and seek profit maximization, they may not fully understand the potential risks involved, as their primary customers are domestic ones. Concerning the second perspective, if we strictly follow the regulations indicated in the Measures, very little, if any, research could be conducted within China’s borders. Given the ambiguity of regulations and their inconsistent enforcement, it is difficult for scholars to gauge the risks involved ex ante. More importantly, the approval process could undermine the objectivity of the research because the government is inclined to disapprove projects that could expose governance issues.

Finally, scholars may still face a dilemma between the research design and Chinese collaborators’ unwillingness to complete compliance for their own safety. Publishing experimental studies in academic journals outside of China has many standard practices, such as detailing the experimental protocol, revealing the institution that carries out the experiment, and sharing the data after the paper is accepted for publication. However, precisely because it is the outcomes rather than the processes of research that are likely to draw the Chinese government’s attention, releasing information such as the identity of the Chinese collaborators
could potentially jeopardize their safety. As a result, Chinese collaborators may not want to reveal their identities in the publication, and/or suggest unconventional ways to describe the data-collection process that conflicts with commonly shared scientific standards.

**Common Practices of Experimental Studies and Their Trade-offs**

As the above discussion demonstrates, scholars could face various ethical dilemmas when collecting data through experimental studies in China. In particular, the regulatory regime in China suggests that the government is more likely to take action against the local Chinese collaborators than against foreign scholars. In what follows, I discuss four common practices of conducting experimental studies in China and their practical trade-offs. The upshot is that although in theory scholars could individually apply for the permit from NBS to conduct their research, these applications often face a lengthy process and significant barriers to approval. As a result, foreign researchers often seek collaboration with local partners in China.

**Practice 1: Collaboration with Chinese academic institutions**

Collaborating with Chinese academic institutions has been a traditional method for foreign scholars to conduct research in China in past decades. Scholars work closely with Chinese collaborators in academic institutions and think tanks and bear a significant share of the financial costs of the study. The primary advantages of working with Chinese academic institutions are their institutional knowledge and networks that facilitate the study’s design and implementation. Chinese domestic academic institutions, particularly those well-established universities and think tanks, offer valuable local knowledge and extensive institutional networks to help foreign scholars navigate the complex and unclear regulatory regime in China. Furthermore, these institutions generally have the government permit and expertise to carry out research with foreign affiliation.
The disadvantages of this practice are twofold: barriers to entry and potential limitations in research design and data distribution. First, the barriers to entry to work with these academic institutions could be high, because they do not easily commit to projects with foreign scholars and institutions without credible referrals. In addition, conducting a large-scale study in China with academic institutions could be expensive, partly because these institutions have high overheads costs. This is particularly true when the study aims to draw from a national representative sample. Second, these institutions are often more reluctant to ask sensitive questions because they have greater concerns regarding the institution’s long-term survival. Furthermore, some of the organizations have close ties with the Bureau of Statistics, and the Bureau could indirectly influence the research design. Finally, they may be reluctant to make the data publicly available, given their concerns that scholars could misuse the data in their publications, thus potentially undermining Chinese academic institutions’ survival. As a consequence, foreign scholars may have to seek some compromises when working with Chinese academic institutions.

**Practice 2: Collaboration with commercial marketing firms**

Public opinion research conducted by marketing firms has been increasing in China in recent years. The growth of marketing firms provides new opportunities for scholars to conduct public opinion and survey experiments. It is worth noting that many of these marketing firms are new to this research area and may not fully understand the potential risks involved. Consequently, scholars need to bear a significant share of the responsibility to inform these firms about the potential risks resulting from the regulations in the *Measures*. Scholars also
need to make sure the local partners have the appropriate permit to carry out studies with foreign involvement.  

There are several advantages to working with marketing firms. First, the barriers to entry are generally low, because these firms are less selective when working with foreign scholars. Furthermore, working with them generally incurs lower costs than working with academic institutions. Second, studies can be implemented at a faster rate when working with commercial firms. Finally, scholars tend to have a greater degree of freedom in the research design and data distribution.

However, several caveats remain when working with marketing firms. First, upon learning of the potential repercussions, some firms may remain committed to a partnership. Scholars, however, may want to avoid some profit-seeking organizations that do not have much experience with foreign-funded projects, even if these organizations claim to fully understand the risks and are willing to be involved. Second, some firms often lack the capacity to design a proper sampling strategy, especially a nationally representative sample, to satisfy common standards in survey research. While this may not be a critical issue in experimental studies, it remains a concern if scholars attempt to obtain a nationally representative sample. In sum, scholars face a significant challenge when choosing reliable marketing firms to implement their studies in China, as well-established firms will generally have greater capacity than newer ones.

**Practice 3: Independent research without government approval**

Anticipating that the Chinese government will not approve the subject of their studies, some scholars may choose to conduct independent research without acquiring government approval or the required permit. In some cases, one or more scholars carry out the study by

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8 The National Bureau of Statistics of China publishes the list of organizations approved to carry out research with foreign involvement on their website.
themselves without utilizing local collaborators. In other cases, they may bring a team of research assistants from outside of China or hire local residents to help them implement the study. Many of these scholars are either unaware of the regulations specified in the Measures or choose to ignore them.

The advantage of this approach is that scholars bear the full responsibility of the study without exposing local collaborators, eliminating the ethical dilemma regarding potential harm to local partners. Furthermore, scholars have a significant degree of freedom in designing and implementing the study, as well as post-study data distribution.

The disadvantage of this approach is that it violates the Chinese government’s regulations, regardless of how unreasonable the regulations may be. The study could be undermined at any point during the implementation process if the authorities discover it and choose to intervene. In addition, while this approach may be appropriate for ethnographic observations and interviews as well as small-scale survey studies, the sampling strategy has significant limitations, particularly if the scholars aim to draw a national or local representative sample. For experimental studies, while generating a nationally representative sample may not be necessary, conducting independent experimental research may still face significant logistical and coordination challenges.

**Practice 4: The use of internet**

In recent years, scholars have explored new ways to conduct survey or field experiments through the internet. These studies have been carried out by using internet services (e.g., email, web pages, etc.) either on domestic Chinese servers or on foreign servers. In some studies, scholars use these venues to directly recruit participants for their studies. In others, scholars directly use the existing Chinese internet portals to carry out the experiments. This new method
has the advantage of relatively low costs and a high degree of freedom in research design, and they may not need any local collaborators to carry out their research. In addition, this method may allow some researchers to legally avoid acquiring government permits when conducting their research. Finally, scholars have complete control over data generation and distribution.

However, experimental studies through the internet in China are very new, and the scholars could face several potential issues. First, it is difficult to obtain a nationally representative sample through the internet in China. In particular, it is difficult to reach rural residents, who in most cases do not have internet access. Second, if scholars rely on Chinese domestic websites to recruit participants or to conduct their experiments, they may implicitly involve local Chinese “collaborators” without their consent. There is a probability that the Chinese government could take action against these websites while the scholars bear few repercussions.

Discussion

The risks associated with the first and second strategies largely fall upon the local collaborators. In short, academic institutions or marketing firms bear the main responsibility if the studies generate backlash from the government. As a result, researchers have to think about how much risk they would place upon their local collaborators by carrying out the study. Furthermore, honest and open communication with Chinese collaborators is critical to ensure they understand the risks involved.

For the third and fourth strategies, in which no local collaborators are involved, the risks are ethical and practical ones: (1) Is breaking the law equivalent to “harm” and should we care in an authoritarian country? (2) Does breaking the law make it harder for other scholars to do work in China? Some would argue that breaking the law in authoritarian regimes does not equal
to “harm,” particularly when the research outcomes could potentially have a positive impact on improving the Chinese society. However, the primary risk of this approach is that may potentially endanger other scholars’ opportunity to conduct future research in China. For example, if researchers opt for the third strategy, of conducting studies inside China without seeking government permission, and the study attracts significant government attention, the government could impose stricter visa policies for scholars’ future visits. Finally, it remains possible that the Chinese government could pursue the researchers when they enter mainland China.9

Conclusion

In this essay, I discuss the challenges of conducting experimental studies in a controlled information environment, such as in China. I argue that although the Chinese government has imposed strict regulations governing social science research with foreign involvement, the enforcement of these regulations is rather scant and inconsistent. Hence, scholars face significant uncertainty with respect to the potential risks when conducting experimental studies in China. In addition, I suggest that if the government decides to take action, it is more likely to punish local collaborators, but not subjects or foreign scholars.

Scholars have attempted different approaches to overcome these restrictions, each of which has various advantages and disadvantages in terms of research design and risk-sharing among scholars and local collaborators. These strategies have been successful in generating insights for our understanding of mass political behaviors in an authoritarian regime context. The pillars of these successes are scholars’ cultural sensitivities and the open and honest

9 For a recent example, see the case of Peter Humphrey and his wife, Yingzeng Yu. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/08/28/china-peter-humphrey_n_3827834.html (accessed on Sep. 26, 2013).
communication with Chinese collaborators in most cases. However, one can easily imagine that a single study could provoke the government to tighten the control of data collection with foreign affiliation. Hence, most scholars have been trying to avoid sensitive and controversial questions, or at least study these questions in an indirect way.

One could argue that scholars’ culture sensitivity is a form of self-censorship, which hinders our ability to answer important questions about authoritarianism (Holz 2007). This is a valid critique, and scholars should think about the greater social benefits of tackling these important questions. However, risking one’s own career and safety to study important questions about authoritarianism may be worthwhile, but risking others’ careers and safety in the process is unethical at the minimum. Ultimately, this is the key ethical issue we should consider when conducting research in an authoritarian context. As advocated in Wood (2006) and Tsai (2010), no research is more important than the safety of respondents and local collaborators. Researchers have to be mindful about the potential adverse consequences to Chinese collaborators and citizens in order to avoid killing the goose for the golden eggs.
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