The Politics of Complaints: Responsiveness and Repression in Chinese Municipal Government since 2013

The Question

- The Puzzle: Although the former USSR and its affiliated countries in East Europe collapsed in 1989, a number of authoritarian regimes have endured. This poses the question of how these regimes address conflicts and preserve stability, avoiding the fragmentation and collapse of the Soviet bloc.
- Importance: This question both deals with the empirical puzzle that the seemingly brittle regimes endure, but also diversifies our understanding of state-society relations by focusing on the otherwise neglected dimensions of state power in non-Western contexts.
- Research Question: How has stability maintenance in China changed after 2013 and how do these changes affect regime stability? Here, stability maintenance refers to various measures of the regime to eradicate unstable elements and keep society stable.
- My Case: I illustrate the changes with a case study of xinfang, a government agency responsible for receiving citizen complaints and coordinating for their solutions. Specifically, I show how both local officials and petitioners are institutionalized and repressed in different scenarios.

Data and Methods

- Data: I conducted five months of ethnographic- and interview-based research in China from July to November 2020.
- Method: 1) Data analysis through the lens of micro-foundations; 2) Rejection of the over-simplified executive-decision-maker relationship between the bureaucracy and the central state but address the activeness and initiatives of the bureaucracy and local officials in playing around relevant tasks.

Results: Institutionalization and Repression

- Main Findings: Unlike the earlier situation where local officials enjoy a high degree of flexibility and discretionary power, there are simultaneous developments in institutionalization and repression. The two are divided by an invisible line drawn by the central state to divide acceptable and unacceptable actions, both by its agents and by social actors. The state institutionalizes activities within the line while ferociously repressing those outside of the line.
- Petitioners: 1) Face intensification of control manifested in interception, detention, and legal actions; 2) Disciplined by legal and financial means to petition in institutionalized channels.
- Local Governments: 1) Repressed if going beyond allowed means of implementation; 2) Lacked flexibility to pursue the goals set by the central state in their desired ways, facilitated by enhanced control through algorithms and automation, direct inspection with a traceable electronic system, and strict hierarchies.

Discussion: Different Futures of “Rule by Law”

- The Situation: Such a change, I believe, can be characterized by a move towards “rule by law”, i.e., the law as a routine institutional structure and formal tool for the regime, but not “rule of law”.
- Possible Futures: 1) A transition towards “rule of law” with an independent judicial system; 2) Authoritarian backsliding due to the failure of carrying out effective governance; 3) The emergence of a new form of authoritarianism with the strengthened central regime.

Theoretical Framework

- Authoritarian Resilience: Conflict resolution is a crucial topic in authoritarian resilience, as it acts as an effective means for the regime to interfere with civil affairs in an early and preventative manner in order to prevent them from developing into serious disturbances and endanger its durability. However, research on the conflict resolving process has not yet explored its institutional constituency, but only focused on its ad-hoc local discretion. In this essay, I advance the institutional approach in the realm of conflict resolution.
- Diminishment of Flexibility: Previous work on stability maintenance in China concentrates on the micro-foundations of the authoritarian regime (Lee and Zhang 2013) and has examined how flexibility and discretion of the local governments helped to maintain stability (Benney 2016; Spires 2011). However, they cannot explain the situation nowadays—on one hand, they rely on empirical evidence collected a decade ago, which is qualitatively different from the new phenomena; on the other hand, it is difficult, if not impossible, to adapt their analytical framework to the changing regime, as it is constituted by local flexibility, which has diminished to a large extent today, rather than broader political institutions and structures.

Photo by me: Petitioners were at a xinfang office in China. They lost a large amount of money in a giant fraud case and were asking to be received by the relevant police department.

Photo by me: Houses were demolished in the process of land expropriation (fangwu zengshou). Many petitioners come to the office to complain of insufficient compensation for their former residence.