Authoritarian state and civil society: a study of rulers' motivations for concessions, cooperation and accommodation

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Abstract

Research typically stresses the repressive component of authoritarian states-civil society relations, but the role of concessions in these relations is still under-studied. As such, these analyses do not consider a broader spectrum of dynamics and overlook that authoritarian state relations with civil society often combine coercive and cooperative elements. Seeking to answer the question of what drives authoritarian rulers to give concessions to civil society, this research concludes that perceived country-level threats motivate state concessions to civil society organisations working alongside state objectives of national stability and social cohesion. Focusing on present-day China, this study uses congruence analysis to test its conclusions against those anticipated by the hypothesis. The results contest theories that assume the relationship between authoritarian rulers and their citizens as unidirectional and expand on the literature on "consultative authoritarianism." In providing a broader understanding of these relations, this research also hopes to help equip democratic leaders looking to foster the growth of civil society in authoritarian nations with the knowledge that is helpful to formulate more context-appropriate and effective foreign policy goals and behaviour.

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Introduction

State-civil society relations are typically treated as dichotomous in nature, whereby part of civil society's (CS) power resides in its ability to resist state pressure and limit state action (Lugar, 2006; Fung, 2003; Davidson, 2017). In the context of authoritarian regimes, these perspectives often stress the repressive role of a power-seeking ruler seeking political and economic engorgement.

However, these interpretations have two limitations. First, a potential conflation of authoritarianism with kleptocracy (see: Davidson, 2017; Conley, 2017; Sible & Judah, 2021). In assuming one to be associated with the other, the theories become unable to consider that some authoritarian rulers' ambition may be to seek greater stability and prosperity for their countries. Second, state-CS relations in authoritarian regimes combine both coercive and cooperative elements (Béja, 2006; Lewis, 2013; Teets, 2014). Because of this, focusing primarily on repression emphasises the inhibitory component of these relations and discounts the role of concessions and cooperation. Doing so overlooks relevant dynamics that are often endogenous to them.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the role of state concessions to CS under authoritarian rule. Moreover, while acknowledging that some authoritarian leaders seek wealth and influence for personal interests, it stresses the possibility that this will not be the case with all rulers. Instead, concessions may be given for reasons other than assuring the ruler's political longevity and acquisition of power. For example, rulers may be concerned by threats to the country's economy or social stability (Crepaz & Naoufal, 2022). For such analysis, the following question was put forth: why do authoritarian rulers make concessions to civil society?

This project theorises that threat perceptions concerning the country's socio-political fragmentation motivate rulers to give concessions to CS. The findings confirm the hypotheses and suggest that, faced with country-level threats, the state grants concessions to organisations working to improve domestic stability and cohesion. Drawing from President Xi Jinping's China as a case study, this research employs congruence analysis to test its expectations against the outcomes.

The results contest theories that assume the relationship between authoritarian leaders and CS as unidirectional and expand on the literature on "consultative authoritarianism" (Béja, 2006; Teets, 2014; Chen, 2016. In inviting greater scrutiny, this research seeks to help broaden academic discussions and question normative assumptions.

Stressing that democratic and authoritarian nations have ontologically distinct perceptions of CS, the results also highlight the necessity of unpacking value-laden notions of the roles of the state and citizens, and of the relationship between them. This is especially relevant in light of interstate political frictions caused by divergent frameworks of understanding. In addition to helping to dismantle diverging paradigms, the results can also help to equip democratic leaders looking to foster the growth of CS in authoritarian nations with the knowledge that is helpful in producing context-appropriate and effective foreign policy goals and behaviour**.**

This paper will proceed as follows: the next section provides a review of the literature on state-CS relations. The following section describes the theory underlying the research and concludes with the hypothesis. This is succeeded by the research design and methodology, and followed by the analysis of the case study with a discussion of the findings. The final section concludes with an overview of the insights and their implications.

Literature review

There is considerable scholarship on state-SC relations in authoritarian regimes, but there are shortcomings to this research as a whole. Because the literature predominantly concentrates on the repressive component of state-CS relations, it dedicates less attention to dynamics of concession, accommodation and cooperation. As such, it misses elements that are integral to these interactions. Furthermore, most researchers employ a democratic lens to evaluate dynamics of interaction in societies with a distinct authoritarian history. The following discussion will elaborate on the problems posed by these deficiencies.

When discussing authoritarian state repression, the literature is prolific. Some researchers analyse popular dissent and the general suppression of different forms of opposition to state ideology and power (Gartner & Regan, 1996; deMeritt, 2016; Ritter, 2014; Burton-Bradley & Xiao, 2018). Others focus on specific forms of repression, such as censorship of the press and the online space (MacKinnon, 2011; King et al., 2014), repression of protest movements (Arslanalp, 2020; Chyzh & Labzina, 2018), and the more extreme forms of violence employed in genocides and massacres (Valentino et al., 2004; Verwimp, 2003; Krain, 2005). Other researchers examine authoritarian rulers' motivations for repression and the subsequent accumulation of political power and economic benefits (Conley et al., 2016; Sible & Judah, 2021).

More limited than the literature on repression, studies on authoritarian state concessions often focus on contexts of rebellion and dissent, protest movements, mass mobilisation, revolutions and civil wars (Rasler, 1996; Ishihara & Singh, 2016; Davies, 2016; Massaro, 2018). Here, concessions are typically granted or withheld from opposition and rebel groups that offer resistance to the political regime and threaten the ruler's political survival. Because failure to

choose a suitable approach to interact with rebels can lead to violent conflict and ousting of the regime, the stakes are high for the state.

In these sensitive contexts, the literature converges in the conclusion that when giving concessions to CS, rulers' motivations derive from their assessment of the gains and costs of concessions against those of repression (Ishihara & Singh, 2016; Davies, 2016; Massaro, 2018). For them, a key consideration is the relationship between the state and the military. For instance, state power over the military wanes if the degree of political competition is high, or when there are significant military defections amidst civil resistance (Ishihara & Singh, 2016; Massaro, 2018). Because lack of military support increases the costs of repression, rulers have stronger motivations to offer concessions (Ishihara & Singh, 2016; Massaro, 2018). By contrast, stronger military power motivates rulers to opt for repression.

Irrespective of their focus, the common thread underlying studies on state repression and concessions follows the precept that authoritarian state actions towards CS are aimed at increasing power. The reasoning follows that power is acquired for guaranteeing greater access to resources and the undisputed political authority of the ruler, and that this level of power over citizens is excessive and objectionable. In fact, some researchers propose that there is currently little to no distinction between authoritarians and kleptocrats (Conley, 2017; Davidson, 2017).

While this literature contributes to the overall understanding of state-CS relations, it is inadequate for explaining them in authoritarian contexts. By focusing on cases where rulers facing opposition risk losing their tenures and even their lives, research bypasses daily-life contexts in (moderately) stable authoritarian regimes. In doing so, it misses integral components of the ongoing long-term relations between the state and its citizens. These are relevant for a more accurate understanding of their interactions and for gauging rulers' motivations for

acquiring power. Most significantly, this understanding could help to identify some of the causes for later movements of popular dissent and unrest.

Furthermore, although repression is usually present, it is often employed along with concessions, cooperation and accommodation. Research on "consultative" authoritarianism describes forms of interaction that are characterised by the advisory and informatory functions of citizens in communicating relevant social matters to the state (Béja, 2006; Teets, 2014; Chen, 2016; Quiaoan & Teets, 2020). These functions can be executed by CS leaders or organisations that, through channels of communication with state officials, facilitate mutual learning and create mechanisms of cooperation (Teets, 2014).

Finally, the literature does not always consider that democratic and non-democratic nations hold different perceptions of the nature and role of CS, and that these differences in perception will produce distinct forms of interaction with the authorities. Definitions of CS are numerous and sweeping. However, generally speaking, democracies understand the role of the state to be fundamentally different from that of CS. That is, CS is autonomous from the state and expected to curtail state power, their relations are dichotomous rather than cooperative, and the two can oppose one another (Lewis, 2013; Teets, 2014). When referring to authoritarian countries, this narrative perceives the duties typically held by a healthy CS as stepping-stones to democratisation (Lewis, 2013; Teets, 2014).

Conversely, authoritarian nations often showcase state-CS relations that are interdependent and cooperative rather than antagonistic (Beckman, 2001; Ziegler, 2010; Wischermann, 2011; Teets, 2014). For example, Ziegler (2010) describes a "hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime" in Kazakhstan that gives some space for CS to operate in areas that support the party, that are apolitical, or that are considered crucial for the state, including support for

education and human capital development (p. 799). Wischermann (2011) describes a CS in Vietnam that is not located in a realm separate from the government, but acts from within the state apparatus. Nevertheless, rather than interpreting these relations as swerving from a necessary path to democratisation, it is important to recognise them as exhibiting different perceptions of the responsibilities held by CS.

Overall, because the literature emphasises the role of repression in authoritarian state-CS relations, it downplays their multifaceted nature and ignores their political and historical contexts. In addition to giving less attention to the role of concessions, research also incurs the risk of oversimplifying authoritarian rulers' motivations as quests for personal power.

However, the link in the chain of connections gets broken at the stage of power accumulation and several questions are left unanswered. What, exactly, do authoritarian leaders plan to do with this power? And why do they offer concessions outside contexts of conflict**?** Failure to address these questions may not only retrench normative presumptions, but also widen the schism between diverging interpretations.

Theory

Rather than adopting a democratic or authoritarian lens to define CS, this research assumes CS to more broadly refer to a set of voluntary associations and activities involving citizens with common interests and objectives. These may take form in nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations (NPOs), charities, faith-based communities, collective-bargaining groups, social movements, etc. Given the breadth of these configurations, the focus here lies on state concessions allocated to NGOs and NPOs, henceforth designated as CSOs.

To understand authoritarian rulers' relationship with CSOs, it is important to consider how their perception of the world can elicit particular responses. Borrowing from political psychology research, this project suggests that authoritarian personalities perceive the world as perilous and are thus sensitive to perceptions of threat (Oesterreich, 2005; Jugert & Duckitt, 2009; Torres-Vega et al., 2021). These perceptions tend to produce a rigid attachment to conventional systems of norms and values, a resistance to the unfamiliar and unconventional, and to ideologies that do not conform to the dominant culture (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Oesterreich, 2005).

To protect themselves from an essentially insecure world, authoritarians try to gain control over their environment while committing themselves to group cohesiveness and to a subordination of personal needs to those of ensuring the stability of the community (Oesterreich, 2005). This may produce aggression towards people perceived to threaten the group, a search for stability, and attempts to control the source of the threat (Torres-Vega et al., 2021).

On a country-level, authoritarian rulers seeking to control threats, gain better command of the country, and ensure national stability can opt for repressing the source of the challenge, offering concessions, or a combination of both.

Authoritarian state repression is generally defined as a form of state coercion that deprives or violates citizens' rights and freedoms (Gartner & Regan, 1996; deMeritt, 2016). These include freedom of speech, assembly, association and belief, press and travel, and the right to physical security (deMeritt, 2016). To manage opposition and control dissent, the ruler can choose to employ repression. However, he can also opt for concessions when anticipating that costs will be superior to gains if he chooses otherwise (Ritter, 2014).

While the literature offers various ways to conceptualise state concessions, these can generally be defined as non-repressive measures aimed at accommodating or cooperating with demands (Ishihara & Singh, 2016). In this study, concessions refer to an overarching umbrella encompassing given privileges, allowances, and forms of cooperation and accommodation. For example, the state can issue policies that respond to CSOs' needs and requests, accommodate new cultural trends, restructure the economy to enhance citizens' quality of life, and cooperate with organisations that work on these parameters.

To narrow down this definition, this project draws from Brancati's (2016) theory of concessions as related to state policies, to the economy, or to the political space. While economic and policy concessions include "promises to improve living standards, create public sector employment, [and] reduce widespread corruption," political concessions include increasing electoral openness and political competitiveness, and are the only ones with the "potential to affect the structure of regimes" (Brancati, 2016, p. 107). The key distinction between policy and economic concessions, and political concessions is that unlike the former two, political concessions directly address citizens' ability to access and alter the political space. For instance, rulers can establish elections and give citizens the ability to vote or create competitive elections by legalising opposition parties.

By contrast, economic and policy concessions do not pose the risk of removing the ruler from power or altering the political system. Instead, they give citizens and CSOs rights and privileges that are outside the political sphere, and which allow greater access to economic resources, bargaining power for improved social conditions, or for any other number of societal or organisational concerns. It is reasonable to deduce from this framework that authoritarian

rulers who do not experience major threats to their political regime will not need to offer political concessions that may destabilise them.

However, although research often focuses on threats to rulers' political power (Gartner & Regan, 1996; Ritter, 2014; deMeritt, 2016), threats may instead be directed at the country's socio-political stability (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Crepaz & Naoufal, 2022). Naturally, a threat to the country will inevitably threaten the stability of its ruler. Nevertheless, it does so indirectly, and may not directly challenge the ruler's authority or administration. Rather, the threat targets any number of the country's weaknesses, and can be inherited by the ruler upon taking office. Such threats include economic depression, high-levels of migration, environmental problems, etc. Nevertheless, because it is not always possible to gauge where a threat to the country stops and a threat to the ruler begins, this study assumes a combination of the two to be a likely scenario.

Furthermore, state-CS relations draw from the country's socio-political history (Teets, 2014). Because authoritarian state-CS relations often combine repression with cooperation, a state with a history of cooperation can use established ties for improving socio-political cohesion via concessions to relevant CSOs. Since these concessions are not political, and thus are unlikely to affect the political order, the authoritarian ruler is motivated to give them.

Based on these conceptualisations, this research proposes that authoritarian rulers faced with perceived economic, social or political fragmentation - country-level threats - seek to strengthen national stability and cohesion. To do this, they grant economic and policy concessions that do not undermine the regime's survival, and which concurrently serve state interests. In countries with a history of cooperative relations between the state and CS, rulers give concessions to CSOs that support the state's objectives.

The causal mechanisms for this argument are summarised as follows: because authoritarian personalities tend to perceive the world as unsafe, they are more likely than other rulers to interpret hazardous country-level events as threats to the country's social, political or economic integrity. Seeking security, group conformity, and greater control over their environment, these perceptions drive rulers to implement measures that ensure national resilience and stability. Considering their propensity for strict rules of social control, authoritarian rulers will favour measures that increase state power over CS and use it to foster social cohesion. Concurrently, if the state has a history of cooperation with CS, it can use these relations and recruit relevant segments of CS to further its objectives. This motivates rulers to offer concessions to CSOs that promote national unity and stability. Hence, the following hypothesis can be surmised:

H. In the face of perceived country-level threats, authoritarian rulers give concessions to civil society organisations working towards greater national stability and cohesion.

Research design

This project finds China under Xi Jinping's rule an appropriate case study for several reasons. While President Xi tightened measures of social control relative to his recent predecessors (Deane, 2021; Schenkkan & Cook, 2021; Teets, 2021), he also increased the number of concessions to CSOs (Deane, 2021). Most significantly, these concessions were selective and given to organisations that worked on parameters conducive to social stability while excluding CSOs that did not work on these domains (Fu & Dirks, 2021).

Moreover, since before taking office in 2013, President Xi has repeatedly expressed concerns about preventing a breakdown similar to that of the Soviet Union, and China's "century

of humiliation" of the Opium Wars (Jinping, 2013, 2016a, 2017, 2021a, 2023; Allison, 2017). These anxieties are compounded by more recent events; after taking office in 2013, Xi declared an immediate need to clear the country from the political corruption that had been degrading the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Branigan, 2013; Diallo, 2021). These satisfy the hypothesis' conjectures of rulers' fears of domestic and political fragmentation.

Finally, the Chinese state has held collaborative relations with citizen-led organisations since imperial times (Béja, 2006; Simon, 2013; Teets, 2014). This is in line with the hypothesised mechanisms for an existing history of cooperation between the state and CS.

To operationalise the variables in the hypothesis, processes of fear formation and their effects on the political response are measured through China's history of events or threats of socio-political fragmentation. These can be caused by conflicts, coups, revolutions, civil wars and other risks to the country and to social cohesion. Specifically, attention is given to two events within China: 1) the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars, and 2) the 2012 CCP crisis of legitimacy. Given its level of emphasis on Xi Jinping's speeches, a third event outside China was added: 3) the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Case selection is based on Xi's perception of a country-level threat when referring to these events, and to the problems they pose for national stability. Because they are mentioned in the context of his vision for the country, the incidents reflect Xi's concerns and motivate his political decisions.

Data is gathered from literature on political psychology and coupled with news and political speech published in Chinese news and official communications channels, including

China Daily, the Chinese nytimes, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Goals for national stability are measured in Xi's statements of his concerns and vision for the country, and their congruence with state actions. Data from the aforementioned sources and the official English-language communication platform of the State Council of the PRC will be set against the 2016 Charity Law on NGOs, and the 2017 Foreign NGO Law. Finally, to analyse past relations between rulers and ruled, data is drawn from the history of imperial China and contrasted with literature and news on current relations.

As a methodology, this project employs congruence analysis. This is a pattern-matching procedure that tests the implications observed against those anticipated by the theory. Here, the theory anticipates observing: a) history of cooperative relations between the Chinese state and CS, b) empirical evidence of President Xi's fears of political, social and/or economic fragmentation; c) state policies demonstrating increased concessions to CSOs working to promote state interests of national stability and cohesion; d) state concessions are not political in nature, and thus unlikely to affect the political order. If, upon matching, the study's final observations corroborate the expectations, the hypothesis will be supported.

Analysis

Civil society organisations in contemporary China

By Western-democratic standards, China is far from having a fully functional and free CS (Freedom House, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Yet, since the late 1970s, the country has witnessed the emergence of a burgeoning number of domestic and foreign CSOs (Tenzin, 2022). Partly a consequence of the economic liberalisation and the new paradigms brought by this

change, these organisations addressed what then became commonly seen social ills, such as income inequality, poverty alleviation, and disease (Curley, 2002). Also in part due to a focus on social welfare, the number of CSOs grew even larger during the Hu-Jintao administration between 2002 and 2012 (Teets & Almen, 2018).

Nevertheless, what appeared to be an increasingly stronger CS took a reversing turn when Xi Jinping became China's president. Since then, there have been numerous reports of increased measures of repression and social control (Chen, 2022; France24, 2022; Deane, 2021; Schenkkan & Cook, 2021). Different accounts refer to Xi's attacks on public forms of expression that veer away from an identity based on state ideology and his targeting of ethnic and religious minorities that do not conform to this identity (CIVICUS, 2021; Schenkkan & Cook, 2021; Maizland, 2022; Burton-Bradley & Xiao, 2018).

Despite increasing state repression, Xi Jinping also created avenues for concessions, and by the 4th meeting of the Twelfth National People's Congress, the 2016 Charity Law was passed (China Law Translate, 2016). The law included measures for giving domestic "Charitable Organisations" that conduct "non-profit activities on a voluntary basis" easier access to formal registration, and thus to improve their legal status and legitimacy (art. 3, Chpt. 1, 2016 Charity Law, China Law Translate, 2016). While domestic CSOs previously had to register via a cumbersome dual-administration system introduced after the 1989 Tiananmen Square students' protest, they could now register quickly and directly at the "civil affairs department at the county level or above" (art. 10, Chpt. 2, 2016 Charity Law, China Law Translate, 2016).

The law also made it easier for domestic CSOs to conduct their activities while giving them better access to funding opportunities. For example, it enabled CSOs to rely on public

funding, a privilege previously reserved for organisations that were managed by the state (China Law Translate, 2016; Fu & Dirks, 2021).

The Overseas NGO Law and the Charity Law caused commotion among observers trying to puzzle out the motivations behind them. A common viewpoint is that the laws contain preemptive steps for restricting foreign CSOs' activities, and for squeezing out the grassroots sector that does not fall under the concessive parameters of the Charity Law (Tenzin, 2022; Fu & Dirks, 2021). This interpretation assumes the state to be trying to limit foreign influence and domestic threats to the party with increasing restrictions on CS. While this may appear reasonable on the surface, the observation focuses only on the repressive angle of the policies and does not explain Xi's reasons for concessions. This renders it unable to fully grasp his long-term vision for the country and the nature of state-CS relations in contemporary China.

Obtaining this understanding requires a study of state concessions, the broader historical context of state-CS relations in China, and the ways these have shaped current socio-political dynamics. This point is important, because not only does the Chinese state have a long history of cooperative relations with citizens and social organisations, but this history significantly influences current state-CS relations. I will turn to these matters next.

State-civil society relations in historical perspective

Present relations between the Chinese state and CS are rooted in a long history of interdependencies and relative autonomy that have changed over time. They are also not territorially uniform; China is a large country and different administrative regions exhibit varying degrees of control and cooperation between CSOs and local authorities.

Nevertheless, there are three common themes, and since imperial times state-CS relations in China can be characterised by: various degrees of autonomy of local groups and organisations, cooperative relations between some of these groups and the local authorities, and the incorporation of some groups into state organisations (Teets, 2014; Simon, 2013; Qiaoan, & Teets, 2020). Because these configurations still feature in contemporary China and shape current state-CS relations, it is important to consider their individual role in society and the reasons for their continued existence.

Local associations held by common people have existed in China since the pre-dynastic era (Simon, 2013). For instance, Simon (2013) and Rowe (1993) describe an associational life whereby groups evolved around traditional institutions of clan, family and shared local roots, and which was relatively independent from the authorities. Their activities revolved around social welfare and support, including relief in times of famine, drought, disaster and disease, and the handling of minor offences, e.g. disputes over land, debt, inheritances, etc. (Simon, 2013; Huang, 2008). This relative autonomy was not only tolerated but, sometimes, even encouraged, because in addition to helping in the management of relevant social concerns, it also relieved the authorities of a large country from having to incur the management burden solely by themselves.

These associations grew in numbers during imperial times when they gained a more formal status as organisations (Simon, 2013). They performed what was understood as "charitable" functions that entailed several forms of social management, aid and relief. Largely unregulated by the state, many of them had their own internal rules and continued to benefit from state sanctioning. Local organisations upheld their duties until the current era and, by the early 2000s, the Chinese government began to withdraw from its role as the provider of the "iron rice bowl" (i.e. security of job and livelihood) to assign larger responsibilities to CSOs (Curley,

2002). Without its historical context, this withdrawal could not be fully understood, for it denotes a long record of CSOs' position in managing social affairs with the endorsement of the state.

The proliferation and autonomy of CSOs in China's history defies descriptions of a CS under authoritarian rule that is entirely under the control of the state.[1] It also suggests a relationship between rulers and ruled that is more supportive than oppositional, and herein lies a perceptual problem for democratic analyses. By understanding the state and CS in opposing spheres of engagement, they risk misperceiving alternative dynamics such as state sanctioning as monopoly and control.

Notwithstanding, the boundaries between Chinese CSOs' autonomy and a concerted relationship of cooperation with the authorities have been blurry, and it is not always possible to distinguish the dividing line. In performing social welfare tasks, CSOs have also informed the state of social problems and of citizens' preferences (Teets, 2021). China's territorial vastness has always created administrative challenges whereby central powers struggled to obtain information on how policies implemented in remote regions of the country have been faring (Teets, 2021). To circumvent this problem, the state created low-cost information flows by empowering local organisations to gather feedback from the population (Teets, 2021). These included opinions on policies and on citizens' contents and discontents, and conferred CSOs with a consultative role.

The state also recruited *xinghao*, or quasi officials, to serve as liaisons between the authorities and the people (Huang, 2008). Notably, xinghao held the hybrid role of simultaneously representing the interests of the state and the citizens. Some xinghao could be powerful societal leaders, others could have a greater affiliation with the government, yet others could be equally invested in serving both.

[1] See: Rutzen 2015, Hasmath & Hsu 2021, and Chamberlain 1998 for discussions on civil society autonomy.

CS' cooperative role has been maintained to this day, and during his speech at the 19th National Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping outlined his plan to tackle environmental concerns "in which [the] government takes the lead, enterprises assume main responsibility, and social organizations and the public also participate." An example of this participation happened between 2012 and 2018 in the Zhejiang province when, in concerted effort with local authorities, NGO Green Zhejiang mobilised the population to successfully change policy for tackling water pollution (Gao & Teets, 2021).

It is of note that rather than the central authorities taking the lead, it was NGO leader Ruan Junhua who sought to strengthen connections with the government to obtain resources and support for his mission. This suggests that seeking cooperation can come from either the state or the CSO because both find the relationship advantageous.

A final type of configuration concerns the incorporation of CSOs into the state. Here, connections with the government become so close and reciprocal that CSOs are eventually integrated, in whole or in part, into governmental institutions. Chamberlain (1998) and Teets (2014) describe this as a form of state corporatism entailing direct transfers of information, increased state control, and partial or full governmental funding.

There are examples of corporatist integration since China's imperial times. In the 11th century, some of the Buddhist hospitals that cared for the poor and needy were eventually incorporated into government institutions (Simon, 2013). Another example is the mixed legacy of Chinese universities that developed through an interplay of scholars' auto-organising efforts in combination with directions from the central authorities (Chamberlain, 1998).

State incorporation of CSOs continues today, a subject of concern for democratic observers who perceive it as a means for authorities to increase control over CS (Shieh, 2018).

However, incorporation cannot be seen in black and white terms, rather, it represents interacting dynamics and motivations of the state and CS. While the government will hold greater control, incorporation may be a natural development of already close ties that, from rulers' perspective, improves systematisation and governance. Furthermore, and as NGO Green Zhejiang's case suggests, CSOs can themselves seek for greater entwinement to more easily advance their purposes and influence state action.

When considering CSOs' role throughout China's past, it becomes apparent that the choices of contemporary rulers' concessions to CSOs are influenced by the importance they have systematically held in handling social matters. This confirms that state-CS relations in China cannot be understood without their history. What can nowadays be perceived as state monopoly by democratic standards is also a legacy of long-term relations between CSOs and the state. These have been held in a nebulous space where the boundaries between autonomy, cooperation and integration are not always clear, where both sides hold motivations for closer connections, and where officials can simultaneously represent the state and the citizens.

In this context, state concessions to CSOs are not only a prolongation of what has already been practised in the past, but also denote contemporary rulers' motivation for upholding the ongoing role of these institutions. These results confirm expectation a) of the theory: a history of cooperative relations between the Chinese state and CS.

Fear-derived motivations

The second expectation of the theory concerns empirical evidence of Xi Jinping's fears of a threat to the political, social, and/or economic order. To understand how threat perceptions affect Xi, it is helpful to refer to China's history and to the history of countries with similar

socialist systems. Three events are relevant in this context: the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the CCP's crisis of legitimacy in 2012.

Because Xi Jinping has publicly referred to the Opium Wars on several occasions, his references are important for his political objectives. In a speech at the Körber Foundation in 2014, Xi described the 100 years that followed the beginning of the first Opium War as a time when "China was ravaged by wars, turmoils and foreign aggressions (...) it was a period of ordeal too bitter to recall (...) These atrocities are still fresh in our memory." In a later reference, the Opium Wars "reduced [China] to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society [that] suffered greater ravages than ever before (Jinping, 2021). The country endured intense humiliation (...) and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness." Xi's discourse draws from the CCP's narrative of the "century of humiliation" that succeeded the wars and which, as the narrative goes, should come as a lesson from history (Metcalf, 2020).

Since 2014, Xi has used similarly aggrieved references to the Opium Wars and to "China's humiliation" (e.g. Jinping, 2017, 2023). While these may be political weapons to justify authoritarian state actions, they also denote an almost visceral concern for preventing the political and economic ravages of before. Although this may involve targeted foreign policy, for authoritarian personalities it also requires work in the domestic domain for controlling the source of the challenge and consolidating internal stability and cohesion (Oesterreich, 2005; Torres-Vega et al., 2021).

These intentions are corroborated by Xi when he systematically appeals to national unity (China.org.cn, 2014), for the country to "staunchly oppose all attempts to split China or undermine its ethnic unity and social harmony and stability," and to "guard against all kinds of

risks, and work determinedly to prevail over every political, economic, cultural, social, and natural difficulty and challenge" (Jinping, 2017).

Hence, considering the state's cooperative history with local associations, Xi's concessions to CSOs that promote social stability, while retrieving assistance from those that do not are congruent with those of an authoritarian ruler motivated by perceptions of threat. Moreover, and as will later be discussed, Xi endorsed CSOs that work alongside state objectives (see: 2016 Charity Law, China Law Translate, 2016). This can help him to harness the unified energy, mentality and incentive for the level of domestic cohesiveness he seeks.

Also looming over Xi's concerns is the collapse of the Soviet Union. In papers that were later circulated from private talks with party officials, Xi mentioned the necessity of learning the lessons of the Soviet Union to avoid the corruption, heresy and ideological confusion that fragmented it (Liang, 2013). In early 2013, Xi asked: "Why did the USSR collapse? Why did the CPSU fall?" (Jinping, 2016a). Citing ideological struggles, a denial of history, and the absent role of party organisations, Xi concluded that "In the end, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dispersed as a huge party, and the huge socialist country of the Soviet Union fell apart. This is a lesson from the past!"

This narrative extends to concerns for separatism. In a series of speeches delivered in 2014, Xi allegedly used the Soviet Union's former republics as examples to proclaim that economic development would not prevent a country from breaking down at the hands of separatist agendas (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019).

It is important to consider Xi's statements in light of China's similarities with present-day Russia, for they are likely to exacerbate instinctive aversive reactions in a threat-sensitive authoritarian mind. China's administrative structure composed of autonomous regions, which

themselves have offered resistance to the central government, resembles that of the Soviet Union's republics (Radchenko, 2020). This can help to explain Xi's hostility to notions of domestic divisiveness and his repression of minority groups that do not conform with a unified mentality.

Concurrently, it can also help to explain Xi's concessions to CSOs that work on state priorities. If Xi is looking to consolidate an integrated national mindset capable of resisting internal divisiveness, it should come as no surprise that he recruits the help of willing segments of CS whose work supports the state's objectives.

A final point of analysis pertains to the CCP's crisis of legitimacy (Panda, 2015). Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalisation of the late 1970s had the effect of replacing the CCP's communist ideology for what later became a "performance legitimacy" based on economic growth, social stability, strengthening national power, and good governance (Zhu, 2011).

The ideology was partly inspired by the experiences of other East Asian nations whereby state legitimacy is derived from the government's ability to supply the people with the goods they care about (Zhu, 2011). In addition to building a market economy, performance legitimacy entailed streamlining of regulatory procedures, fostering national unity, the provision of public commodities, and welfare programs for providing housing, healthcare, and education.

Underlying Chinese notions of performance legitimacy is a fundamental difference with democracies that associate legitimacy with direct elections and other democratic procedures. Instead, the CCP has an integrated concept of the party as one with the state (Zhu, 2011). In the CCP's language, failure of the party is *wáng guó*, that is the death of the party is the death of the nation. Similarly, a threat to the party is a threat to the country. In connection with this understanding, legitimacy for the CCP is not derived from the political structure or from

democratic behaviour; instead, legitimacy derives from the CCP's notion of good governance. This entails streamlining regulatory frameworks, strengthening national unity, and giving people the goods and services they consider important.

Performance legitimacy has been maintained as the CCP's creed, and while China's impressive economic growth was met globally with a mixture of fear and admiration, by the time Xi Jinping came to power party ideology was on shaky grounds. Some of the reasons behind this were signs of economic stagnation and popular discontent due to people's perception of high-levels of corruption among government elites (Laurence, 2016). In fact, the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests that almost removed the CCP from power had begun with students' disgruntlement over rampant corruption within the party (Zhu, 2014). Students of the time demanded democracy as what they understood to be a solution to the disproportionate profiteering from government officials at the expense of the people (Zhu, 2014).

The conjunction of an eroding party legitimacy in 2012 with the Tiananmen ghost from the past instilled in Xi the conviction that reinstating legitimacy was of utmost priority. In early 2013, Xi declared the need for the party to clean up its act under premises that "the style in which you work is no small matter, and if we don't redress unhealthy tendencies and allow them to develop, it will be like putting up a wall between our party and the people, and we will lose our roots, our lifeblood and our strength" (as cited in Braningan, 2013).

It is of note that it is challenging to gauge in this context where perceptions of the threat being directed at the country stops, and where it being directed at the party begins. For the CCP, both are one and the same. It is also important to highlight that when Xi Jinping assumed office, the threat was already there. Therefore, the inherited threat likely motivated combined concerns for the country and its epitome, the party.

To reinstate legitimacy, Xi initiated a nationwide crackdown on corruption and increased repression over groups with the potential to destabilise party ideology (Yuen, 2014). Naturally, he also needed to employ all means necessary to foster the CCP's performance legitimacy. Therefore, Xi's concessions to CSOs working towards social stability, unity and welfare provision not only aid good governance, but also elevate the success of the CCP's performance in the minds of the people. Over time, Xi's concessions can thus kill two birds with one stone: improve people's living conditions, and by extension, their levels of satisfaction; and as a result, their faith in the party.

These three events suggest that, as an authoritarian ruler sensitive to suggestions of threat, Xi Jinping had sufficient motivations for making decisions based on fears of socio-political fragmentation. Xi often used the Opium Wars and the fall of the Soviet Union as examples of the perils that present-day China needed to avoid at all costs, and to justify political action. Under the phantom of these two occurrences, the 2012 crisis of legitimacy propelled his motivation for repressing groups deemed capable of destabilising a social and political cohesiveness that was growing fragile. At the same time, it motivated Xi to provide concessions to CSOs working on the charitable parameters of social provision that support party legitimacy. This analysis confirms the theory's expectation b) empirical evidence of President Xi's fears of political, social and/or economic fragmentation.

What exactly the charitable parameters entailed, and whether the 2016 Charity Law and the 2017 Overseas NGO Law correspond to Xi's motivations, are the matters that I will turn to next.

State concessions to civil society organisations

To understand why Xi Jinping implemented the Charity Law and the Overseas NGO Law, it is important to refer to China's administrative challenges. The difficulties of managing a large territory described in the historical section also plagued CSO governance. China never had a uniform process of registration for foreign CSOs, and while the dual-administration system had been implemented for domestic organisations, the process was so burdensome and demanding that it created a blurry area where many groups operated without formal registration (Teets, 2021).

With the implementation of the Overseas NGO law, Xi tightened the reins on foreign CSOs, yet he also created a uniform system of registration that gave organisations a more legal status. Successfully registered CSOs could now enjoy greater legitimacy, open bank accounts in China, and "benefit from tax incentives and other preferential policies in accordance with the law" (art. 36, Chpt. IV, 2017 Overseas NGO Law, 2017).

Xi's motivations for enacting the law can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, he increased state control over international CSOs, and thus on foreign influence. In fact, the process of registration became so stringent and extensive that it drove many of the almost 10.000 foreign CSOs to cease activities in the country (Tenzin, 2022; Deane, 2021; France24, 2022). On the other hand, he systematised a system across different provincial administrations and decreased what was before a vast grey area for ad hoc decisions.

The Charity Law made registration easier for some domestic CSOs while excluding others. In a double-edged sword effect similar to the Overseas NGO Law, Xi began to smother the grassroots sector and groups working on what the Chinese government considers to be sensitive issues. However, the law also streamlined and standardised registration processes

across the country while giving selected CSOs greater incentives in funding and in accessing government channels for requesting support. Because this removed administrative burdens and improved regulatory procedures, they contribute to good governance and satisfy some of the CCP's performance legitimacy objectives. Irrespective of these effects, it is important to highlight that because these incentives are removed from the political sphere, they are not political in nature nor defy the political order.

But which groups exactly did the laws favour? The 2016 Charity Law concerns "natural persons, legal persons and other organizations carrying out charitable activities or activities related to charities" (art. 2, Chpt. 1, 2016 Charity Law, China Law Translate, 2016). These activities are described as non-profit and based on public interest, including poverty alleviation, eldercare, aid for orphans, the ill or disabled, relief from damage caused by natural disasters or other emergencies, development of education, culture and sports, control of pollution, and environmental protection (art. 3, Chpt. 1, 2016 Charity Law, China Law Translate, 2016). As may be anticipated, the 2017 Overseas NGO Law follows similar wording and provisions (see artcs. 2 & 3, Chpt. I, Overseas NGO Law, The National People's Congre**ss** Standing Committee, 2017).

It is clear that these parameters are imbued with the history of social organisations in China. Not only do the CSOs favoured by the law perform charitable activities like the organisations of before, these include the same elements of aid, relief, and overall social development. While the terminology of charity does not feature in the Overseas NGO Law, what is included in the scope of their operations is nevertheless similar.

Moreover, the activities of favoured CSOs' follow the CCP's premise of a performance legitimacy based on fostering social stability and the provision of welfare and goods. These

elements comprise what the CCP considers to be a common prosperity (Jinping, 2021b). Implemented in 2012, common prosperity is a strategy that involves mitigating income inequality, providing education, equitable access to housing and public services, and improved employment opportunities (Jinping, 2021b). According to Xi (2016b), China's common prosperity is of utmost importance for an harmonious united nation that is immune to separatism and capable of preventing national disunity and weakness. By working on the parameters outlined in the strategy, CSOs thus help to promote the internal harmony and social cohesion Xi considers necessary to attain his objectives.

Furthermore, common prosperity follows the precepts of good governance and social provision that comprise the CCP's performance legitimacy. This point is relevant, because according to Xi (2016b), the party is the main unifier of the Chinese people, the "lifeline of [the] country, and the source of [the] people's wellbeing." To "establish one's authority, and win the trust of the people" is thus paramount not only for the sake of the party, but for the stability of the nation (Jinping, 2016b). In recruiting the help of CSOs to foster common prosperity, the state thus helps to build public faith in the party, its capacity to act as the backbone of the nation, and its ability to strengthen domestic resilience.

Nonetheless, to understand even more broadly the intended effects of the laws, it is helpful to contextualise them within Xi Jinping's long-term vision. Xi has often spoken of the Chinese Dream and, with it, of his aspiration for "pursuing strength of the country, rejuvenation of the nation and happiness of the people" (PRC, 2022). The Chinese Dream evokes a hope for restoring the greatness of China's past dynasties and of carving this greatness into the future. The aspiration for greatness may in part be a response to Xi's almost knee-jerk reaction to perceptions of threat and to a glory lost due to some of these threats. Plausibly, the stronger this

perception, the stronger the need to acquire national and international excellence. With high aspirations comes the necessity to build an internally strong nation. In Xi's mind, this is a nation unplagued by ideological divisiveness, united through faith in the party, and by people's contentment at having their needs met. These too, are aspirations to be achieved through all necessary means, including the aid of relevant CSOs.

Finally, additional motivations not considered here likely underlay ratification of the NGO laws. For example, given that China is the second leading foreign direct investment (FDI) recipient worldwide, preceded only by the U.S. (OECD, 2022), the state may be trying to develop a competitive domestic human capital capable of attracting foreign investors. Granting concessions to CSOs that assist in developing professional skills and provide access to education would therefore support these objectives.

As mentioned earlier, another potential explanation lies in the government's attempts to regulate systems that were previously disorderly. These not only led to case-by-case, unscripted decision-making, but also created heavy administrative strains. In removing these constrictions, the government streamlined registrations, enhanced transparency, and coordinated procedures across the country.

Nevertheless, while there may have existed combined motivations, this study concludes that perceived country-level threats were a decisive factor for law implementation. Threat perceptions were particularly effective in instilling fear-derived motivations in Xi Jinping and encouraged him to give apolitical concessions to CSOs working on government priorities. Therefore, this analysis satisfies the theory's final expectations: c) state policies demonstrating increased concessions to CSOs working to promote state interests of national stability and

cohesion; and d) state concessions are not political in nature, and thus unlikely to affect the political order.

Conclusion

This study was driven by the question of what motivates authoritarian rulers to offer concessions to CS. It hypothesised that rulers faced with perceived country-level threats give concessions to CSOs working towards greater national stability and cohesion. In analysing rulers' motivations through the case study of China, this research concludes that country-level threat perceptions motivated a strategy towards unification of the nation based on shared common values and ideals, and the provision of goods that people care about. This level of unity requires a strong uniter, the party, which is perceived as such by the people. Hence, the state gave selected CSOs concessions that did not defy the political order, which worked alongside state priorities, and that were capable of buttressing the party's legitimacy.

These findings have implications for academia and policy makers. By considering the role of concessions in authoritarian environments, this research not only questions implicit assumptions of state-CS relations, but also helps to dismantle normative interpretations of authoritarian rulers' behaviour. Additionally, in studying concessions outside of contexts of mass mobilisation and conflict and, instead, focusing on concessions given by relatively stable regimes, it contributes to a broader understanding of authoritarian rulers' ambitions and long-term visions.

Naturally, this study has limitations in its generalisability and in the number of parameters that was able to consider. First, not all authoritarian states have followed China's consultative model, further analysis in countries following alternative patterns is therefore

warranted. Second, the nature, scope and extent of state concessions to CS may differ depending on whether they are allocated to organisations or to individuals. This study focused on organisations, but it invites additional research on the presence, or lack thereof of concessions given to individuals.

Finally, there are certainly a number of possible motivations underlying authoritarian state concessions. Here, a conjunction of historical factors with fear-derived incentives were the object of analysis, however, studying concessions from the perspective of rulers' ambitions for the future is of no less importance.

Furthermore, considering today's degree of interdependence between states, analysing the effects of a given level of exposure to globalisation on state-CS relations may produce insightful findings. For example, in authoritarian countries with greater exposure, what considerations may weigh on rulers' decisions for concessions? Can this exposure affect rulers' future objectives, and thus, state relations with CS? How may FDI and migration influence dynamics of concessions and repression? Unable to answer these questions, this study therefore invites further analysis on potentially valuable streams of inquiry and research.

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