Public Opinion, International Reputation, and Audience Cost in an Authoritarian Regime

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Public Opinion, International Reputation, and Audience Cost in an Authoritarian Regime

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Abstract

Does the public in authoritarian regimes react to their leaders' foreign policy behavior similarly as their democratic counterparts? We investigate this question by implementing a series of survey experiments in China, a single-party authoritarian state. Findings based on responses from 5,375 Chinese adults show that empty threats and commitments expose the Chinese government to substantial disapproval from the citizens out of concern for potential damages to China's international reputation. Additionally, qualitative evidence reveal that citizens have multiple channels to express their disapproval, thus identifying potential mechanisms through which authoritarian audiences can punish their leaders for pulling out of public commitments. These findings contribute to the ongoing debate over whether and how domestic audiences make commitments credible in authoritarian states.

Introduction

How domestic publics can constrain and inform foreign policy has long been a topic of interest to scholars of international relations. Recent attempts to identify the causal mechanisms of the domestic sources of foreign policy have shifted to survey experiments[1]. These studies find micro-evidence of domestic audience cost—the punishment imposed on leaders by their citizens for backing down from making foreign commitments and threats.[2] With a few exceptions,[3] however, almost all of existing empirical contributions to the audience cost literature are limited to democratic countries. As a result, we know relatively little about if and how political preferences of the public matter in non-democracies.

Our goal in this study is to empirically examine the micro-foundation of audience cost in authoritarian regimes. Using a series of survey experiments and open-ended questions in China, we provide direct answers to the following questions. First, do the public in authoritarian regimes react to their leaders' foreign policy behavior similarly as their democratic counterparts? Second, why do citizens disapprove of leaders who back down from public commitments and threats? Third, is a subset of population particularly likely to impose audience cost on the Chinese government? Additionally, we use open-ended questions to indirectly assess the potential formal or informal mechanisms that enable the public to pressure or punish the autocrats.

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[1] Chaudoin 2014; Davies and Johns 2013; Driscoll and Maliniak 2016; Horowitz 2012; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Levendusky and Rousseau 2005; Potter and Baum 2014; Tomz 2007; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Trager and Vavreck 2011.

[2] Fearon 1994.

[3] Weiss and Dafoe 2016; Johnston and Quek 2016.

Choosing China as the focus of our study is significant for two reasons. First, China is a single-party authoritarian state, where audience cost is believed to be most likely to arise.[4] The case of China thus provide an excellent plausible probe into the complex relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy in authoritarian regimes. Second, China is the most powerful autocracy today, whose foreign policy decisions have global repercussions. In the Asia Pacific region in particular, the rise of China has already led to tensions that could escalate into military conflicts. These conflicts could in turn affect the security and economic interests of countries both within and outside of the region. Thus, findings of this study could generate policy implications for countries in Asia and the rest of the world.

We fielded three waves of surveys in China between 2014 and 2015 with a total of 5,375 Chinese adults. In the first two waves, we replicated the experimental template in Tomz, which gauged respondents' approval rating of their leader's performance in a hypothetical military crisis.[5] In the third wave, we designed an experiment with a realistic scenario about China's participation in a hypothetical UN peacekeeping operation. The results lend strong support to the existence of autocratic audience cost: empty threats and commitments expose the Chinese government to substantial disapproval from the citizens. Furthermore, we find that the disapproval are primarily invoked by citizens out of the concern for potential damages to China's international reputation, which is consistent with the reputation-based theory of audience cost.[6]

We also used closed and open-ended questions to explore how authoritarian citizens can constrain their leaders. Answers to these questions suggest that a sizable proportion of

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[4] Weeks 2008.

[5] Tomz 2007.

[6] Guisinger and Smith 2002.

respondents do not shy away from expressing their disapproval through both formal and informal channels, including traditional and social media, constituency service agencies, and the National People's Congress. Of particular interest is the finding on social media, which has become an important avenue for public discourse and is actively monitored by the Chinese government. This leads us to suspect that audience cost could very well factor into the decision-making process of the leaders even in the absence of popular election. Moreover, given the nature of authoritarian regime in China, the government has more reasons to worry about the potential consequences of online disapproval because it could eventually lead to street protest and social instability, something the government is constantly trying to prevent.

The findings of this study make two contributions to the literature on the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy in international relations and audience cost theory in particular. First, it is one of the first studies to directly test whether audience cost exists in authoritarian regimes, thus filling a critical empirical gap in the audience cost literature. Second, our study demonstrates the mechanisms through which the public in authoritarian regimes could punish their leaders caught bluffing. The rest of this article is divided into six sections. Section 1 surveys the existing literature of audience cost in democracies and autocracies. Section 2 discusses the research design in the first two waves. Section 3 presents the main findings, which are compared to the original study in the United States. Section 4 reports additional findings from our third wave, including qualitative evidence that citizens react negatively to leader's empty threats primarily out of concern for potential damage to China's international reputation. Section 5 examines the possible mechanisms through which audience cost may be transmitted to the leaders. The last section concludes with discussions of the broader implications of this study.

Audience cost in Democracies and Autocracies

Scholars of international relations have devoted considerable attention to the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy. One linkage that has received substantial coverage is the concept of audience cost, that is, the domestic punishment that leaders would incur for backing down from public threats and commitments. Leaders who are better at generating and signaling their audience cost is believed to enjoy an advantage in conveying their preferences credibly during international conflicts and negotiations. Scholars have since built the causal mechanism of domestic audience cost into theories of democratic peace, crisis bargaining, and interstate cooperation.[7]

Critics of the audience cost theory argue that there is no direct evidence to suggest the existence of audience cost in practice.[8] To address this issue, recent works have employed survey experiments to explore the micro-foundations of audience cost and the mechanisms linking public opinion with foreign policies.[9] These studies demonstrate robust evidence of the existence of audience cost in a number of countries.

Nevertheless, existing experimental works examining whether and how public opinion affect foreign policy are almost exclusively carried out in democracies, primarily the United

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[7] See Tomz (2007) and the special edition (2012) on audience cost in *Security Studies* for a more detailed review of this large body of literature.

[8] Baum 2004; Rosato 2003; Schultz 2001; Slantchev 2012; Snyder and Borghard 2011; Trachtenberg 2012.

[9] Chaudoin 2014; Davies and Johns 2013; Driscoll and Maliniak 2016; Horowitz 2012; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Levendusky and Rousseau 2005; Potter and Baum 2014; Tomz 2007; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Trager and Vavreck 2011.

States.[10] The focus on democracies can be attributed to the commonly held assumption that these countries face greater domestic audience cost, as democratic accountability increase the likelihood that the leader will actually face punishment for backing down.[11] A large number of studies have indeed found evidence to support this core argument: democracies do tend to win or gain advantages in various international disputes.[12]

This assumption of democratic advantage, however, has been problematized by recent studies that argue that democracies should have no particular audience cost advantage over autocracies.[13] In particular, Weeks argues that authoritarian leaders should be equally likely to generate audience cost as long as the following three conditions are met: "first, there should exist mechanisms for domestic audience to punish the leaders. Second, domestic audience must view backing down negatively. Third, outsiders must be able to observe such processes."[14] The implication is that autocracies should also be capable of sending informative signals to demonstrate their resolve. Using the Militarized Interstate Disputes dataset, she shows that the likelihood that a threat is reciprocated with militarized response is similar for democracies and single-party authoritarian regimes.

Despite the recent contributions to the theory of autocratic audience cost, there is a lack of empirical evidence as to whether and how political preferences of the public matter in non-

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[10] Two recent exceptions are Weiss and Dafoe (2016) and Johnston and Quek (2016).

[11] Eyerman and Hart 1996; Fearon 1994; Gelpi and Griesdorf 2001; Levy 2012; Partell and Palmer 1999; Prins 2003; Schultz 1999.

[12] Leventoglu and Tarar 2009; Schultz, 1998; Schultz and Weingast 2003; Slantchev 2006; Smith 1996.

[13] Weeks 2008, 2012, 2014; Weiss 2013, 2014.

[14] Weeks 2008: 37.

democracies. At the micro level, are authoritarian publics more or less likely to disapprove of leaders who back down after making threats? What are the reasons behind their disapproval? What can they do if they are dissatisfied with government foreign policy? For scholars of autocratic audience cost, answers to these questions are often assumed but not empirically established.[15] Nevertheless, only after we can demonstrate that citizens in autocracies do view backing down after making threats unfavorably *and* have means to punish the leader can we begin to discuss the foreign policy implications of autocratic audience cost. In this study, we take a first stab at these questions.

Research Design

To explore audience cost in the authoritarian context, we implemented a series of survey experiment in China, a single-party authoritarian state. We choose China because it is believed that audience cost should be more likely to arise in single-party regimes compared to other types of autocracies.[16] In addition, given the importance of China in regional and international order, even though the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other authoritarian states, they can offer a window into the Chinese public's reactions to the country's foreign policy choices, and whether such views may be policy relevant for the Chinese government.

Practically speaking, survey research in China presents fewer obstacles than similar research in other non-democracies where access is restricted and responses from surveys can often be biased due to "political fears" or "pressures to comply". Both foreign and Chinese

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[15] Weeks, for example, suggests that there is no clear theoretical reason that "members of domestic audiences in democratic regimes are on average more likely to value credibility or competence than audiences in various types of autocratic regimes (2008: 42)".

[16] Weeks 2008.

scholars now routinely conduct public opinion surveys in all parts of China. Their experiences suggest that citizens nowadays are generally free to express their views.[17] Scholars have even been able to use public opinion to examine issues far more politically sensitive, such as corruption, democratic values and political participation.[18] Indeed, a recent study on the Chinese Internet shows that, other than postings that could trigger collective action and mass protests, all kinds of public discussions, including explicit criticisms of Chinese leaders, are tolerated in the Chinese cyberspace today.[19]

We fielded the survey experiment to a total of 3,261 Chinese adults in two waves (February and October 2014).[20] SoJump, an Internet marketing research firm in China, administered both waves by randomly drawing from its 2.6 million registered subjects by an opt-in method.[21] The respondents' gender, age, and other social demographic indicators are comparable to those in online samples drawn in similar studies conducted in China.[22] They tend to be younger, better educated and more likely to reside in urban areas. While online samples are

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[17] Carlson et al. 2010; Johnston 2006; Zhong 2012.

[18] Shen and Wang 2006; Shi 2004; Wang 2013; Tang 2016; Zhu, Lu and Sheng 2013.

[19] King, Pan and Roberts 2013.

[20] The first wave has 1,037 respondents. The second wave has 2,224 respondents.

[21] Detailed information about the panel can be found at SoJump's website at http://www.sojump.com/. We use online panel for this study due to its cost-efficiency and the ease to implement randomized experimental interventions. For a review of other studies using online panels in China, see Li, Shi and Zhu (2016).

[22] Huang 2015; Truex 2016.

by no means representative, a recent study shows that they are much more representative of Chinese netizens, who account for approximately half of the Chinese population.[23]

We replicated the same experimental template utilized by Michael Tomz in his pioneering work on domestic audience cost in the United States.[24] We chose the same template because it would allow us to directly compare our results with those from a democracy. For the experiment, which was embedded in a longer public opinion survey, each respondent read the following script with four randomized contextual variables that vary in regime type, motive, power, and interests (a 2x2x2x2 factorial design):

> The following question concerns China and its relation with other countries in the world. This is a hypothetical question China may encounter in the future: Country A sent its military to take over a neighboring country B. The attacking country was led by a [dictator, who invaded/democratically elected government, which invaded] [to get more power and resources/because of a longstanding historical feud.] The attacking country had a [strong military, so it would/weak military, so it would not] have taken a major effort for the China to help push them out. A victory by the attacking country would [hurt/not affect] China's economic and security interests.

We then randomly assigned one-fifth of the respondents to each of the five scenarios of potential courses of action taken by the Chinese government. The first scenario establishes the baseline in which the government stayed out of the conflict. In the other four scenarios, the government made a threat but eventually backed down. The differences are the levels of

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[23] In the Chinese context, one may even argue that netizens are the people whose opinions presumably matter more for the government than the general population. See Shirk (2007).

[24] Tomz 2007.

escalation from mild to severe, which include verbal threat, displace of force, and use of force with and without Chinese casualty.[25] In both waves, the four treatment groups and the control group are balanced in their key demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, geographical location, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership, international news readership, as well as the four contextual variables—motive, capability, and regime type of the invading country and the stakes for China.[26]

After reading the scenarios, the respondents were asked to express their opinions of the potential responses from the Chinese government. In wave 1, we followed the design in Tomz by first asking: "Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way the Chinese government handled the situation?"[27] Respondents who approved or disapproved were further asked if they held their views "strongly", or "only somewhat strongly". Those who answered "neither" were prompted to further clarify if they leaned toward (dis)approving or were completely neutral. In wave 2, we simply asked the respondents to place their evaluation on a five-point scale, ranging from strong disapproval to strong approval. For ease of comparison, in the analyses we collapsed both measures to a three-point scale: disapproval, neutral and approval. In the combined sample, 33% approved the government's course of action and 40.7% disapproved, suggesting that the respondents were quite comfortable in voicing their opinions.

The experimental design yields one simple observable implication. If audience cost does exist in China, respondents selected into the scenarios in which the Chinese government

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[25] For detailed discussions on the different scenarios, see Tomz (2007: 824-5). The Chinese wording of the survey can be found in the supplemental information.

[26] See Online Appendix for summary statistics and covariate balance.

[27] Tomz 2007: 825.

threatened either verbally or by action but then backed down should disapprove the leaders more

than those who were told that the Chinese government stayed out of the conflict. By virtue of

randomization, any systematic difference in the respondents' ratings should be entirely due to the

treatments, i.e. the different courses of actions the Chinese government took, and not to

variations in the demographic or contextual variables. Findings from the survey experiments will

thus provide direct micro-level evidence of audience cost in China, while at the same time

avoiding problems of endogeneity and collinearity.

Findings: Evidence of Autocratic Audience cost

We first examine the difference between the scenario in which the government stayed out

and the scenario in which the government made a verbal threat, i.e. the mildest scenario of

backing down. To do so, we first calculate the percentage of respondents who disapproved,

approved, or held a neutral opinion about the government staying out of the conflict and backing

down, respectively. We then calculate the differences between the two. The results are reported

in Figure 1 for both waves, separately and combined. For comparison, we also included results

from Table 1 in Tomz.[28]

Focusing on the "disapproval" category first, we can see that, compared to the baseline

scenario of staying out of the conflict, the government's failure to follow through its public

threat, even a mild one, is associated with a jump in domestic disapproval by 5.6 points in wave

1, 14 points in wave 2, and 12 points when both waves are combined. These numbers can be

considered as the "absolute audience cost", i.e. the "surge in disapproval from staying out to

backing down after escalation" (Tomz 2007: 829). Because of its small sample size and lack of

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[28] Tomz 2007.

power, the absolute audience cost from wave 1 fails to achieve conventional statistical significance. But the results from the wave 2 sample and the combined sample are both statistically significant. These results lend strong support to the fact that empty threats could expose the Chinese government to disapproval from the citizens. The substantive effects are slightly smaller than those found in the United States.[29]
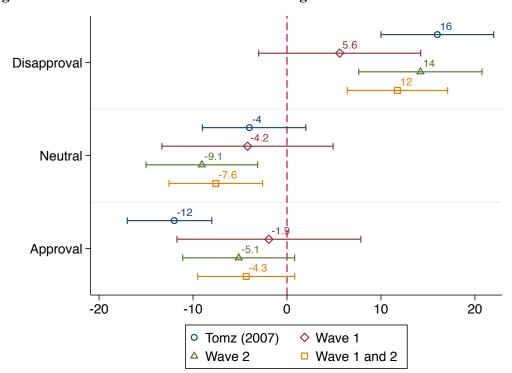
Figure 1: Autocratic Audience Cost of Backing Down from Verbal Threat

Notes: This figure plots the rating differences between the two scenarios in percentage points with 95 percent confidence intervals. Sample sizes for "staying out" and "verbal threat" scenarios are 204 and 192 for wave 1, and 433 and 434 for wave 2. Estimates for Tomz (2007) are taken from his Table 1.

In the meantime, the shares of the fence-sitters and approvers fall by 7.6 points and 4.3 points in the combined sample, though the drop in approval is statistically insignificant. In other

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[29] Tomz 2007: 827.

words, the surge in disapproval is mostly coming from people who would have held the neutral

opinion when the government stayed out of the conflict. This contrasts the results in the US

survey, where the surge in disapproval was matched by a similar drop in the percentage of

approvals. In China, it seems that approvers are not too bothered by the government's backing

down from public commitment. It is those in the moderate center that appear to be adjusting their
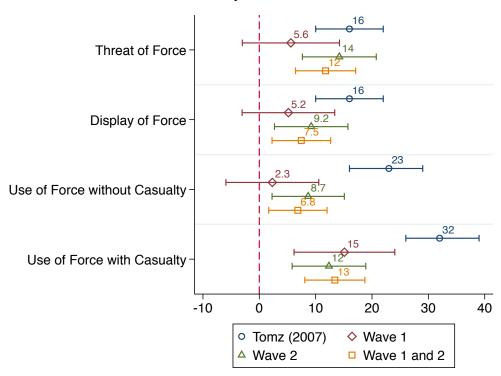
opinions downward.

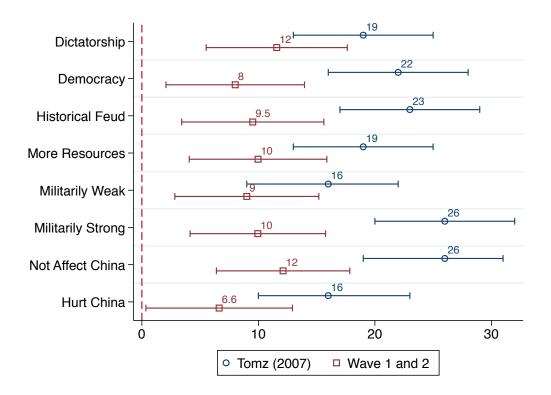**Figure 2: Autocratic Audience Cost by Level of Escalation**

Notes: This figure plots the rating differences between "staying out" and different scenarios of "backing down" in percentage points with 95 percent confidence intervals. Sample sizes for "display of force", "use of force without casualty", and "use of force with casualty" scenarios are 234, 213, and 194 for wave 1, and 444, 473, and 440 for wave 2. Estimates for Tomz (2007) are taken from his Table 2.

Does public sensitivity to government weaseling out increases with the level of hostility?

Figure 2 plots the absolute audience cost (i.e. change in disapproval) for each of the four

scenarios involving progressively stronger signals sent by the government: verbal threat, display of force, use of force without casualty, and use of force with casualty. The estimates in the figure display two patterns. First, similar to results in democracies, audience cost in China arises in all levels of escalation, though the effects are much smaller at higher levels of escalation; the surges of disapproval in the three scenarios involving the display and use of force fall between 6.8 and 13 points in the combined sample, which are 53% to 70.5% smaller compared to the U.S. sample. Second, unlike results in the U.S., audience cost in China does not increase monotonically with each level of escalation. In fact, the display and use of armed forces exposed the government to lower audience cost than verbal threatening. It appears as if the Chinese public is rewarding the government for flexing its military muscle more than blaming it for not following through its commitments. Only after the leaders ratchet crises up to the highest level of hostility that involves casualty of the Chinese military do we see audience cost revert back to the level in the empty threat scenario. These findings suggest that Chinese leaders may enjoy greater maneuvering room in foreign policy decision-making compared to their democratic counterparts.

Next, we examine how audience cost in China varies depending on different international contexts. Figure 3 displays the estimates of audience cost in the combined sample, using the same calculation before but pooling all four "backing down" scenarios, as a function of the four variables of international context. Consistent with findings in the U.S., evidence of audience cost exists in every scenario, with surges of disapproval ranging from 6.6 to 12 points and 95 percent confidence intervals all above zero. Chinese citizens seem to disapprove of their government reneging from public threats against both democracies and autocracies with varying motivations and military power, and regardless of the potential impact on China's national interest.

Figure 3: Absolute Audience cost by International Context

Notes: The absolute audience cost is calculated combining all four scenarios of backing down. Estimates are percentage points with 95 percent confidence intervals. Sample sizes for the stay-out and escalation conditions, respectively, are 310 and 1,318 for "dictatorship"; 327 and 1,306 for "democracy"; 305 and 1,337 for "Historical feud"; 332 and 1,287 for "more resource"; 301 and 1,360 for "militarily weak"; 336 and 1,264 for "militarily strong", 345 and 1,325 for "not affect China"; and 292 and 1,299 for "hurt China". Estimates for Tomz (2007) are taken from his Table 3.

Finally, we examine heterogeneity of treatment effects in the combined sample across different sub-groups, also known as "local treatment effects" (Imai and Strauss 2009). Here we focus on five socio-demographic variables: age, gender, education, CCP membership and interests in international news. For age, we separate the respondents into two sub-groups: those younger than 30 and those aged 30 and more. For education, we look at people without college degrees and those with college degrees and above. Interest in international news is based on a question asking how much the respondent cares about international news. We aggregate the

original 4-point scale into two sub-groups: those who "care little" or "do not care at all" and those who "somewhat care" or "care a lot".
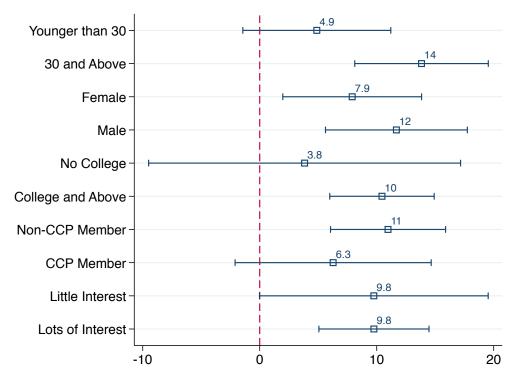
Figure 4: Sub-group Analysis of Absolute Audience Cost

Note: The absolute audience cost is calculated combining all four scenarios of backing down. Estimates are percentage points with 95 percent confidence intervals. Sample sizes for the stay-out and escalation scenarios, respectively, are 280 and 1,217 for "29 and younger"; 357 and 1,407 for "30 and older"; 314 and 1,286 for "male"; 323 and 1,338 for "female"; 57 and 257 for "no college"; 580 and 2,367 for "college & above", 476 and 1,939 for "non-CCP"; 161 and 685 for "CCP"; 117 and 484 for "don't really care"; and 520 and 2,140 for "care a lot".

Figure 4 reports the results of the sub-group analysis, which reveals some interesting patterns. First, there is significant surge in the percentage of disapprovals for the older generation: the absolute audience cost is 14 points for respondents born before 1985. The fact that the younger generation is less critical of the government seems to suggest that China's patriot education campaign, implemented around 1994, has been working. Second, education

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seems to be an important predictor of audience cost. Empty threats have a much larger effect on respondents with college degrees, increasing their level of disapproval by 10 points. Third, males and respondents interested in international news are both slightly more critical of the government's failure to honor its commitment than females and respondents not interested in international news, though the differences are not significant.

Our most intriguing result is the fact that non-CCP members are more likely than CCP members to impose audience cost on Chinese government. Previous research has suggested that regime insiders in single-party regimes can generate audience cost and thus hold their leaders accountable to some extent.[30] What we find here casts some doubt on this reasoning. One possible explanation is that the CCP has monopoly over political appointment and party leaders are not elected but selected. As such, personal or factional networks are more important than semi-open competition in official promotions, thereby posing strong constraints on party members' behavior.[31] In the meantime, the Chinese public (mostly non-CCP members) has been quite critical of the government in recent years in a variety of domestic problems such as corruption, environmental deterioration, and urban-rural inequality. In response, Beijing has increasingly resorted to stronger foreign policy positions to divert public attention and stoke up support for the regime. The downside of this strategy is that the public is more likely to regard the government's bluffing in international crisis as either damaging China's international reputation or demonstrating incompetence. This also suggests that the biggest challenge to the CCP legitimacy might come from the public rather than internal party members.

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[30] Weeks 2008.

[31] Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012.

Additional Evidence: UN Peacekeeping Experiment

The benefit of replicating an existing experimental design is to make the survey results from the two countries directly comparable. However, the vignettes were developed in the U.S. context and thus may not be appropriate in China. Americans were probably thinking of one of the many cases of U.S. inventions abroad in evaluating the hypothetical scenario. What did Chinese respondents have in mind when they read that China decided to "push out the invader in another country"? If respondents used history as reference, the two most prominent cases that somewhat fit this scenario would be the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and both times the U.S. was the "invading" country. This casts doubt on the external validity in transferring the design to China, which is further complicated by the country's official rhetoric on non-intervention and the importance it places on sovereignty.

We address this issue by fielding another wave of the survey. One key assumption of the audience cost theory is that the public has strong preferences for consistency between their leader's commitments and actual policy choices.[32] This suggests that we can design a contextualized experiment for China as long as our treatment involves inconsistency between leader's deeds and words. We designed such an experiment using a realistic scenario about China's participation in a hypothetical UN peacekeeping operation and implemented it to a sample of 2,114 respondents in May 2015. We chose peacekeeping because China has participated in a number of multinational missions since it sent its first peacekeepers to Libya in 2003.[33]

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[32] Chaudoin 2014; Fearon 1994; Smith 1998.

[33] Pang 2006; Richardson 2011.

In this new experiment, which was also implemented by SoJump, each respondent read the following vignette with four randomized contextual variables that vary in regime type and motive of the attacking country, cost of participation in the peacekeeping operation, and China's interest at stake (a 2x2x2x2 factorial design):
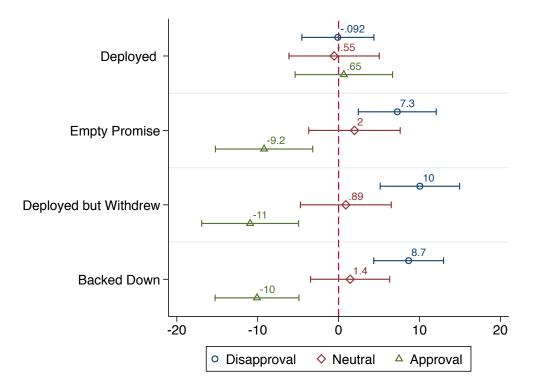
A humanitarian crisis has occurred as a result of the military conflict between Country A and its neighboring country B. The country that initiated the conflict was led by a [dictator, who invaded/democratically elected government, which invaded] [to get more power and resources/because of a longstanding historical feud.] The United Nations passed a resolution to send peacekeeping troops to maintain order in the conflict zone. The Chinese government now faces an important decision on whether or not China should participate in the UN peacekeeping operation. The conflict zone is [large/small], and thus requires [significant/small] contributions of material and human resources from China. In addition, failure of the peacekeeping operation would [hurt/not affect] China's economic and security interests.

After receiving this background information, each respondent was randomly assigned to one of four scenarios. In the first scenario (the control group), China remained neutral and did not participate in the UN peacekeeping operation. In the next two scenarios, China committed to participating in the operation, but differed in whether or not it honored the commitment by sending peacekeepers to the conflict zone as part of the UN mission. In the last scenario, China sent the peacekeepers initially but withdrew in the middle of the operation. At the end of each scenario, respondents read that the peacekeeping mission failed eventually and the humanitarian crisis in the conflict zone continued to deteriorate. Similar to wave 1, we asked the respondents to rate the course of action taken by the Chinese government on a seven-point scale, from strong

disapproval to strong approval. Overall, 47.5% of the respondents approved the government's course of action and 20.6% disapproved. Compared to the previous scenario, the higher support seems to indicate that Chinese citizens on average prefer multilateral to unilateral intervention when it comes to conflict resolution of third countries.

Figure 5 shows the rating changes between the three treatment scenarios and the control scenario. Clearly, there is no evidence of audience cost when the Chinese government honored its commitment by deploying peacekeepers. The percentages of respondents in the approval, neutral and disapproval categories are all statistically indistinguishable between the two groups. On the other hand, the two backing down scenarios both lead to substantial surges in disapprovals. Combining these two scenarios, backing down from the commitment to participate in the peacekeeping operations results in an average of 8.7 points surge in disapproval. Interestingly, the Chinese audience seems to view their government's withdrawing from the operation mid-way even more unfavorably than not following up with its promise to deploy peacekeepers. These results provide further evidence of audience cost in China.

Figure 5: Autocratic Audience cost in the UN Peacekeeping Experiment

Notes: This figure plots the rating differences in percentage points with 95 percent confidence intervals between "staying out" and the three different scenarios about China's participation in the peacekeeping operation. Sample sizes are 527 for "staying out", 530 for "deployed", 526 for "empty promise", and 531 for "deployed but withdrew". The "backed down" category combined the "empty promise" and "deployed but withdrew" scenarios.

Why do citizens view the inconsistency between deeds and words negatively? We explored this question in the third wave by asking respondents to further elaborate in an open-ended follow-up question why they approved or disapproved the government's decision. In total, 264 of the 1,057 respondents that received the backing down scenarios strongly or somewhat disapproved the government's decision. In total, we obtained 256 valid responses, which can be grouped into four different categories.[34]

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[34] In the first two waves, we included open-ended questions as well. But the response rates for these questions were extremely low (less than 1%). In the third wave, we forced respondents to supply answers to all of the open-ended questions. A few respondents wrote gibberish; but the majority of the responses

The first group, which includes the majority of the disapprovers (158 out of 264, or 62%), singled out potential damage to China's "international reputation and credibility" as the main reason why they disapproved the government's "inconsistent attitude" (前后态度不一) and "unfulfilled promise" (承诺没有兑现). One respondent wrote: "Honoring its commitment is an important reflection of a country's national reputation. Broken promises not only undermine the credibility of the country, but also cause harm to the national interest, which is very undesirable" (国家承诺是非常重要的国家信誉的体现，违背承诺不仅破坏了国家信誉，同时也给国家利益造成危害，十分不可取). Similarly, one respondent observed: "Since [China] decided to participate after weighing the pros and cons, it should stick to the end; otherwise it would hurt China's national image" (既然在权衡利弊后决定参加，就应该坚持到底，否则影响中国国家形象). Another respondent shared the same concern: "A country should keep its commitments; backtracking or empty talks with no action will make one lose credibility in the world" (做为国家政府应当信守承诺，出尔反尔或光说不做会失信于天下). These responses echo those found in the United States (Tomz 2007). The fact that the majority of disapprovers in both countries are concerned with the reputational cost of saying one thing and doing another suggests that the same micro-mechanism may apply to democracies as well as autocracies.

The next group of respondents (49 out of 264, or 19%) provided a more instrumental reason for disapproving the government's decision, stating that "the failure of the peacekeeping operation would hurt China's security and economic interests" (维和运动失败会伤害到中国的安全和经济利益). Not surprisingly, many of these respondents were primed with the scenario involving high stakes for China. The third group (33 out of 264, or 13%) included people who

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were surprisingly sensible, some even highly sophisticated. The valid response rates for the open-ended questions were all over 90%.

thought China should have participated in the peacekeeping operation because it was the right thing to do. One respondent wrote: "China is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council; thus it is obligated to assist the UN in maintaining world peace by sending peacekeepers to the UN operation" (中国是联合国的常驻理事国，理应协助联合国维护世界和平，派遣维和人员参与行动). Another wrote: "Being a responsible great power, [China] should take on relevant tasks and assume responsibilities in international humanitarian rescue" (作为负责的大国，理应承担相关任务，承担国际人道救援责任). In the meantime, the instrumental and normative considerations account for 28% and 58% of the reasons of disapproval in the control scenario, suggesting that they are less likely to be the main sources of audience cost.

In the residual group, some respondents disliked the fact that China participated in the operations in the first place, noting that China "hasn't addressed many of its own internal problems" (中国自己内部都还有很多问题没有解决). One respondent summed up this sentiment quite passionately: "China is facing crises everywhere: Diaoyu Island, South China Sea, Sino-Indian border disputes, corruption, unemployment, economic decline, pollution, education, patient-doctor conflict, to name a few. The government hasn't solved any of these, and yet it is meddling in other countries' affairs?" (自己国家到处都危机，钩鱼岛、南海、中印边境等，国内官员腐败、失业、经济下滑、污染、教育、医患矛盾等，自己没搞好管别人闲事！). A few respondents criticized the government for "under-estimating the potential risks in a failed peacekeeping operation" (对维和失败的风险预估不足). The remainder did not articulate a clear reason for disapproving.

Overall, the responses to the open-ended questions are consistent with the reputation-based theory of audience cost (Guisinger and Smith 2002; Tomz 2007). In fact, this is a common concern for most Chinese citizens. At the end of the experiment, we asked every respondent:

"How do you view national reputation in international relations? Do you think that countries need to honor their commitments?" (您怎么看待国际关系中的国家信誉问题？国家需要遵守做出的诺言吗？) The vast majority of the respondents (1,573 out of 2,017, or 78%) said that national reputation is very important and countries (including China) must honor their commitments. One respondent elaborated: "Honesty is the foundation of a country. National reputation is part of a country's soft power. Countries with good reputation can be trusted and accepted by other countries; otherwise they will be looked down upon" (诚信是立国治本。国家信誉是国家软实力的一部分，信誉好在跟别国打交道的时候才能被信任，才能更好的被其他国家接受。国家必须遵守诺言，否则会被别人轻视、看不起). About 17% of the respondents subscribed to a more instrumental view, saying that whether or not a country should honor its commitment "depends on the particular situation" (具体情况具体分析). One respondent remarked: "[The concern for] national reputation does not mean that one needs to commit to its words unconditionally. The key is whether or not it is in the interest of the country. For those countries that fail to honor their commitments, we can respond in kind, a tooth for a tooth" (国家信誉不能简单承诺，关键还是看是否对自己国家有利，对于那些出尔反尔的就可以相应的以牙还牙). The rest of the respondents (5%) believed that "national interests trumps everything else" (国家利益至上), and countries should not be bound by their words because "there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests" (没有永远的朋友，只有永远的利益). As one respondent observed: "National reputation is built on military and economic power. International relations is more of a game between countries. Commitments are meaningless to powerful countries. The United States is still powerful even after breaking its commitment" (国家信誉是建立在军事和经济实力上的，国际关系更多的是国与国之间的博弈。诺言对于强国没有意义，美国不遵守承诺却依然强势).

Does Audience cost Matter in Autocracies?

The findings thus far confirm that audience cost does exist in China, and they are often invoked by citizens out of the concern for potential damages to China's international reputation. Of course, autocratic audience cost may not matter in foreign policy making unless they satisfy two additional conditions: first, autocratic leaders pay attention to and is constrained by the audience cost. Second, citizens will act in some way to convey their disapproval to their leaders. We investigate the second condition first. In Wave 1, we asked a follow-up question to those respondents who disapproved the way the Chinese government handled the hypothetical crisis: "How would you express your disapproval?" The answers included four choices: "do nothing (什么也不做)", "post comments online (上网发帖)", "forward relevant posts online (上网转发相关帖子)", and "others (其他)", for which they were asked to elaborate.

Over half (52.3%) of the respondents said that they would forward relevant posts online to express their disapproval. Another 22.6% of the respondents preferred to post comments themselves. Three respondents provided more detailed answers, which included "discuss with colleagues (和同事聊聊)", "discuss with friends (和朋友讨论)", and "general exchange (平时交流,只做一般性谈起)". On the other hand, less than a quarter (23.9%) chose not to do anything about it. Even though the features of our sample, i.e. younger, better educated and urban netizens, may bias toward getting these results, the fact that a substantial majority of those who disproved government's bluffing chose not to remain silent suggests that citizens are willing and able to convey their disapproval to the leaders.

It is possible that these close-ended questions have limited respondent choices and discouraged disclosure of their true opinions. In wave 3, therefore, we asked all of the respondents to elaborate on what they would do if they were dissatisfied with the government's

foreign policies. The 2,063 responses can be roughly divided into six categories. Figure 6 lists

some of the representative quotes and Figure 7 shows the distribution. The majority of the

respondents (40%) lamented that there was "nothing [they] could do" because "opinions from

ordinary [citizens] don't mean anything". About 15% of the respondents were firm supporters of

the government's foreign policies even if they "seemed relatively weak". Many of them also

expressed their "love for the country". Neither of these views is surprising as they fit the

conventional wisdom of Chinese public opinion toward government policies. Nevertheless, the

remainder of the responses revealed a multitude of channels for disgruntled citizens to express

their disapproval. In addition to "venting to friends and coworkers" and complaining on social

media", the two options we provided in Wave 1, some respondents (11%) said that they would

complain directly to the government through "media and official government websites" and the

National People's Congress. A few of the respondents (2%) even mentioned "protest" as an

option. Furthermore, respondents who disapproved of the government's decision in the

peacekeeping scenario are more likely to take it to action.

Figure 6: Actions Following Dissatisfaction with Government's Foreign Policy

Do Nothing (N = 826)

"As civilians there is nothing we can do but to turn a blind eye" (平民百姓，只有听之任之)

"Nothing we can do. Opinions from ordinary don't mean anything. One can only silently disagree"(不满意也没办法。普通小老百姓说的话连个牛毛对不如。只能自己默默的表示反对了)

"What can I do? Oh, vent?" (我能干什么呢？呵呵，吐槽？)

"Go play some (basket)ball to vent emotions"(出去打打球发泄一下情绪)

"Take a shower and go to bed"(洗洗睡吧)

State Doing Fine (N = 303)

"Dissatisfied with nothing" (没有不满意)

"I love my country. Even if I am unsatisfied, it won't change my love to my country" (我爱我的国家，就算不满，也改变不了对祖国的爱！)

"I always support government's foreign policies no matter what" (我一直支持政府的外交政策)

"Though [China's] foreign policy seems relatively weak, I still think that leaders are much smarter than ordinary people like us! So there's nothing to complain" (尽管外交看起来比较疲软，但我还是觉得高层比我们普通人聪明多了！所以没什么不满)

Discuss with Friends (N = 295)

"As an average guy, I'd just complain to my friends" (普通百姓一枚，朋友圈子发发牢骚罢了)

"venting to friends and coworkers" (跟朋友同事吐槽)

"At most I'd discuss it during gatherings of friends and relatives" (至多在亲朋好友聚会时讨论／议论一下罢了)

"I'd whine, but won't do anything radical" （发发牢骚，但是不会做过激的行为）

Complain on Social Media (N = 357)
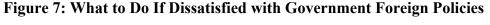
"Openly express my dissatisfaction at major social media forums"(在各大社交论坛公然表达自己的不满)

"Leave message at big V's Weibo account"(到大人物的微博留言之类的)

"I will use my Weibo and other online forums to lodge my complaints, getting more people's attention." (我会通过我的微博、论坛进行控诉，从而引起更多人的关注)
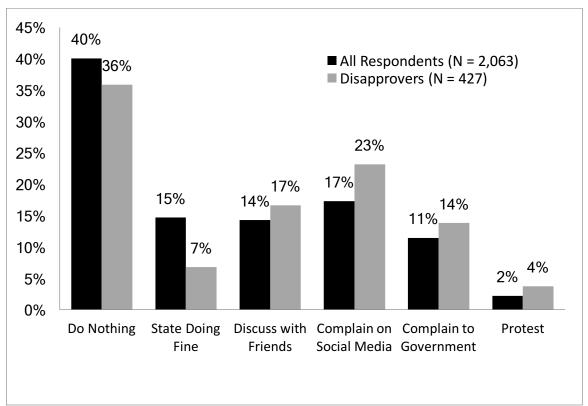
Complain to Government (N = 236)

"Leave comments on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' online message board" (在外交应答留言网上留下自己的看法和提出自己的意见)

"I will send my discontent, thoughts and suggestions to Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Internet, letters, etc., in the hope that they can make choices best for China based on the public opinion" (我会用合适的行为将我的不满和我的想法观点以及建议通过网络、书信等方式送达到政府外交部门，希望他们能够看到民意做出对我国有利的选择和行为)

"Express views and submit recommendations through media and official government websites" (媒体及政府官方网站反映观点和建议)

"Call the complaint hotline and send recommendation letters to local government's opinion mailbox" (拨打投诉热线，到当地政府意见箱投建议信)

 "Contacting members of the National People's Congress" (通过联系人大代表)

Protest (N = 46)

"Protest" (提出抗议)

Figure 7: What to Do If Dissatisfied with Government Foreign Policies

The results from the closed and open-ended questions suggest that Chinese citizens do take advantage of the legitimate channels to make their voice heard. Of particular interest is the finding on social media, which has become an important avenue for public discourse and is actively monitored by the Chinese government.[35] Thus we have reason to suspect that audience cost could very well factor into the decision-making process of the leaders even in the absence of popular election. Moreover, given the nature of authoritarian regime in China, the government has more reasons to worry about the potential consequences of online disapproval because it

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[35] There is already empirical evidence suggesting that the government monitors public opinion, especially online public opinion, very closely and worries about possible collective action activities. See, for example, Hassid (2012); King, Pan, and Roberts (2013); Lorentzen (2014).

could eventually lead to street protest and social instability, something the government is constantly trying to prevent.[36] One can even argue that the Chinese government is more vulnerable to online public opinion than democratic governments to approval ratings. This is so because leaders in authoritarian regimes might face more dire consequences if overthrown by popular protests whereas leaders in democratic regimes do not need to worry about their personal safety.[37] The recent upsurge in Internet policing is a telltale of such fears.[38]

Finally, we turn to the first condition about the constraining effect of public opinion in autocracies. Notwithstanding the rise of social media, Chinese leaders may not worry too much about what the general public is thinking due to the lack of electoral accountability; Instead, they would pay more attention to the views of members in the selectorate—"the set of people whose endowments include the qualities or characteristics institutionally required to choose the government's leadership".[39] In China, Communist Party leaders are chosen by an elite selectorate consisting of "the members of the Central Committee, the revolutionary elders, and top military leaders fewer than five hundred people in all".[40] While it is infeasible to survey these people for their opinions, we could examine responses from those who more closely resemble this elite

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[36] Online disapproval could quickly turn into online protest, which can in turn result in street protest for two reasons. First, online protest can solve the problem of collective action by providing a focal point and relevant information. Second, online protest can solve the problem of resource mobilization (Weiss 2013; 2014). On the role of social media in collective action, see Segerberg and Bennett (2011).

[37] Debs and Goemans 2010.

[38] Xu 2014.

[39] Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003: 42.

[40] Shirk 1993: 10.

group than the general public. If this group is equally or even more likely to express disapproval than the general public, we will have more confidence that the leaders would respond to the public opinion. To do so, we divide our sample into four groups: CCP member only, college graduate only, CCP member and college graduate, and neither. We then look at how each group responded to Wave 3's open-ended question.

Table 1: Expressing Disapproval from Party Members and College Graduates

	Neither	BA Only	CCP Only	BA & CCP
Do Nothing	191	446	26	163
	45.15%	41.49%	38.81%	32.73%
State Doing Fine	61	143	13	86
	14.42%	13.3%	19.4%	17.27%
Subtotal (Inaction)	252	589	39	249
	59.57%	54.79%	58.2%	50%
Discuss with Friends	55	164	6	70
	13%	15.26%	8.96%	14.06%
Complain on Social Media	65	200	4	88
	15.37%	18.6%	5.97%	17.67%
Complain to Government	41	105	8	82
	9.69%	9.77%	11.94%	16.47%
Protest	10	17	10	9
	2.36%	1.58%	14.93%	1.81%
Subtotal (Action)	171	486	28	249
	40.43%	45.21%	41.8%	50%
Total	423	1,075	67	498
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Pearson chi2 = 89.87. Degrees of freedom = 15. P-value < 0.001

The results are shown in Table 1, which reveals some interesting patterns. First, about 40% of the respondents among the general public and CCP members without college degrees said that they would act in some way to express their disapproval. Their choices of action, however, differ sharply. While social media was the preferred channel for the general public, the majority of less-educated CCP members chose protest. The latter seems counterintuitive, but it is possible that party members as regime insiders might be less fearful of repression and thus are

emboldened to employ more confrontational tactics. Second, for college graduates who are not CCP members, the largest group out of the four, 45% said were willing to take action. This group is also the most likely users of social media. Finally, for CCP members with college degrees, i.e. the group that is most similar to members of the selectorate, the percentage of respondents willing to act is the highest—half of this group said that they would express their disapproval, with the majority of them choosing official channels. We take this as additional albeit tentative evidence that audience cost can and does matter in China.

Conclusion and Implications

Previous research using survey experiments to empirically assess the existence and effects of audience cost have exclusively focused on democracies. While recent works have suggested that audience cost exists in authoritarian regimes as well, scholars have yet to offer direct empirical evidence to support such claims. This study takes a step toward such endeavor by directly testing whether or not audience cost exists in authoritarian regimes, thus filling an important gap in the audience cost literature. Moreover, this study also explores the mechanisms through which the public in authoritarian regimes might punish their leaders caught bluffing.

There are three central findings to be taken away from our analysis. First, we find that audience cost does exist in China as citizens would disapprove the government's failure to honor its public commitment, and the magnitude of the effects are comparable to those found in the United States. Second, we find that audience cost is primarily invoked by citizens out of the concern for potential damages to China's international reputation, which is consistent with the reputation-based theory of audience cost. Finally, we have identified potential mechanisms through which Chinese citizens can punish Chinese leaders for backing out of public

commitments. The majority of our respondents who disapprove of the way the government handled the hypothetical crisis are able and willing to let their voices be heard through both formal and informal channels. This in turn may constrain the Chinese government's maneuvering room in crisis bargaining, though this mechanism of punishment might not be as powerful as the election mechanism in democracies.

This study has important implications for policymakers as well. Our results show that the display and use of armed forces exposed the government to lower audience cost than verbal threatening, suggesting that the Chinese public seems to be rewarding the government for flexing its military muscle more than blaming it for not following through its commitments. This suggests that because of the slow criticisms from Chinese citizens the Chinese government might be emboldened to take more assertive and even aggressive positions in early periods of international crisis, thereby increasing the level of tensions and likelihood of conflict.[41]

Some remaining issues of autocratic audience cost have not been resolved. While our experimental study has identified mechanisms through which citizens might be able to punish leaders, it is still incomplete in the sense that we do not know how leaders actually perceive this information and how they would react toward it. In other words, we still need more evidence to show that authoritarian leaders (and democratic leaders too) in their decision-making processes pay serious attention to how domestic react to their foreign policies. These are challenging questions that demand more research in the future either through carefully designed case studies or quantitative and experimental studies.

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[41] This is particularly relevant when one thinks about the current territorial disputes between China and other Asian states.

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