

Executive Summary

Title: *Information Politics: Learning, Governing, & Manipulating Facts in China*
Organization: The Ohio State University
Investigator: Jeremy L. Wallace
Time Frame: October 2014 to December 2016

Issue: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rules the world's most populous country with a rapidly growing economy ranked second in size globally. How does it understand and rule such a complex society and economy? In *Information Politics*, I investigate the ways in which the Chinese regime learns about itself and the people that it governs, while simultaneously examining the ways in which those being measured attempt to evade and manipulate such measurement. In particular, how does the regime collect, collate, and digest basic information about the political, economic and social situations across its territory? How do these pieces of information reflect perceived threats to the regime?

Project: Four investigations—representing the four empirical chapters of the book—address how the Chinese regime (1) learns, (2) governs, and (3) manipulates facts and (4) how it compares with other regimes. I begin by examining the origins of party and state institutions that gather information to show what gaps in knowledge each institution was created to close. A statistical analysis contrasting census and the household registration (*hukou*) system population figures shows the limits of these institutions. Then, I turn to how the regime uses information to govern, focusing on the quantified, omnipresent cadre evaluation system. Comparing China's failed Green GDP initiative with the success of the air pollution metric PM2.5 illuminates the political weight of numbers in China's party-state system, as is also seen in a study of promotions. Next, the responses of local officials and citizens to pervasive measurement—adjusting what is counted, ignoring non-measured negative externalities, and outright manipulation of statistics—are explored. Cases and statistical analyses expose the extent and seriousness of such behaviors. Finally, I attempt to place China in context. How do other developing countries and regimes compare to China in the ways in which they address critical information problems?

Policy Implications: Because of China's growing immensity on the global stage, insight into how its regime rules can improve understandings of its current preferences and future trajectories in domestic and foreign policy spheres. While numerous works have described China's reform era political economy, most tend to consider economic reform as moves toward an assumed end state—American-style capitalism—and political reforms as approaching democratization. *Information Politics* instead examines how the regime governs, the perverse consequences of performance targets and quantification strategies, and the CCP's evolving efforts to address these problems.

*Information Politics:
Learning, Governing, and Manipulating Facts in China*

Jeremy L. Wallace
Smith Richardson Foundation, Strategy and Fellows Program Proposal

Issue

The Chinese Communist Party rules the world's most populous country with a rapidly growing economy ranked second in size globally. How does it understand and rule such a complex society and economy? In *Information Politics*, I investigate the ways in which the Chinese regime learns about itself and the people that it governs, while simultaneously examining the ways in which those being measured attempt to evade and manipulate such measurement. In particular, how does the regime collect, collate, and digest basic information about the political, economic and social situations across its territory? How do these pieces of information reflect perceived threats to the regime? Because of China's growing immensity on the global stage, insight into how its regime rules can improve understandings of its current preferences and future trajectories in domestic and foreign policy spheres.

The Chinese regime's information strategies—both internally and vis-à-vis their populations: propaganda, censorship, statistical agencies, and even elections—are at the project's core. I argue that understanding the center's institutions that gather statistics, its development of metrics to govern based on these statistics, and the ways that local officials and citizens manipulate these statistics for their own benefit can illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese governance, including its unintended consequences.

China's economic engine continues to operate at a tremendous pace, fueling the expansion of China's presence globally and requiring the devotion of more energy to understanding the regime's policies, desires, and modus operandi. The Smith Richardson Foundation has funded important works on China's economic and political rise. Those works and others gives insight into on China's economic development and its foreign policy behavior. *Information Politics* differs from these other studies by focusing on the regime's information strategies and institutions, the ways in which these strategies shape the behavior of locals—in both intended and unintended directions, and what these strategies and responses imply regarding threats to the survival of the CCP regime.

Background

Contemporary analysis of China's political system revolves around the idea that authority is fragmented. While the central leadership in Beijing does indeed lead the regime, local officials or society are not under the total control of the center. Indeed, local discretion is a defining characteristic of the Chinese regime during the reform era and is often seen as a "double-edged sword" given credit for inculcating policy innovations and economic development while at the same time facilitating corruption and other misconduct.¹

Local competition between officials is seen as one channel accounting for China's impressive economic growth during the reform era.² Promotions are valued by local officials who are, in part, judged on macroeconomic performance data. Such competition constrains local governments from predatory behavior; businesses benefit from this competition to attract investment and improve the climate for economic activity. Many argue that the ruthless competition for promotion translates into good economic policymaking and efficient, or at least business friendly, governance.

On the other hand, local government discretion has some demonstrably negative consequences. Local governments have relatively free hands in dealing with economies under their rule, yielding pervasive corruption. Competition between localities has also led to internal trade barriers as officials act to protect local businesses from competition from "external" actors. Trucks carrying goods across county borders can be charged extortionate tariffs or prevented from entering the rival county to sell their goods, no matter the price.³ Such protectionism is considered inefficient at the level of nation-states; when the actors in question are Chinese counties, with populations on average in the single digit millions, the amount of waste is a substantial share of total economic production in the county. Negative consequences of local discretion can move to the point of defiance, where specific targets put forward by the center are ignored by local officials.⁴

Local discretion is fundamentally an information problem. The center is unable to observe its agents at the local level and the multitude and variety of issues with which they deal on a daily basis. The center, then, attempts to create a system of information collection that focuses on what needs to be observed and how. The regime's emphasis

¹ (Mei & Pearson, 2014)

² (Oi, 1999; Weingast, Qian, & Montinola, 1995)

³ (Wedeman, 2003)

⁴ (Mei & Pearson, 2014)

has been to collect quantitative metrics of economic performance, population growth, social stability, and, increasingly, the environment.

History

Information gathering by Chinese elites has a long lineage. After all, the concept of a competent bureaucracy staffed by mandarins originates in the western world after exposure to the Chinese state. In terms of making society legible to China's leaders, the best example is the contemporary *hukou* (household registration) system, building off of the imperial *baojia* (collective responsibility) system.⁵ The *baojia* system of registration and collective responsibility was put in place for the most basic functions of the state, taxation and stratification of the population, allowing the state to extract resources and protect itself from the people by knowing who was where, improving the "legibility" of the population for the state.⁶ Under the system as nationalized by the Qin in 221 B.C., "everyone was required to report residence, age, gender, and profession to the authorities," which the state verified three times per year. Under this system, official approval for relocations was also required.⁷ Of course, registering one hundred percent of the population proved impossible, and stateless areas persisted throughout many imperial dynasties.⁸ The sophistication of these censuses should not be doubted, however, as in the Ming they even included estimates of under-registration.⁹

A dynasty's strength could also be seen by its information gathering abilities. The Qing Dynasty Kangxi emperor extended the system of memorials—open communication lines with the bureaucracy through different channels—to include some that were for his eyes only, allowing lower level officials to report on the actual situation rather than in politically correct platitudes that might obscure real threats. The Qianlong emperor's long reign ended with a weakened bureaucracy and a disintegrated secret palace memorial system allowing dangers to the leadership to go unnoticed and unaddressed.¹⁰

⁵ Registration was introduced as early as the Western Zhou period (11th C – 771 BCE), predating the Qin dynasty from which the name China is derived (Wong, 2009, p. 55) .

⁶ For more on legibility, see (Scott, 1998).

⁷ (Wang, 2005, p. 35)

⁸ (Lee, 1978, p. 28) See also Scott 2010.

⁹ (Lee, 1978, p. 28n40) referencing Ming memorials from 1442.

¹⁰ (Elliott, 2001; Spence, 1999). Inability to collect information leaves a regime blind to conditions and threats. A strong public information gathering system may generate official figures that do not reflect the real situation, leaving the regime worse off than without any information, as at least in the former case their own ignorance is apparent to them.

With the founding of the PRC in 1949, the new Communist regime set to work re-establishing a bureaucracy to govern and report local conditions to Beijing. Capturing a state through civil war and governing it are tasks requiring different skill sets. The guerilla fighters made up the backbone of the Red Army often lacked formal education. Successful bureaucrats—tax assessors, judges, and the like—needed these skills since illiterate paper pushers can be taken advantage of and are not particularly useful in following and understanding unintelligible central dictates. As a consequence, the revolutionary regime kept legions of its KMT enemies on the payrolls because of their expertise.¹¹

The regime from 1949-1952 had very little in the way of a statistical system until the creation of the State Statistical Bureau on 8 August 1952.¹² Yet it quickly developed complex arrangements for the collection and communication of information within its own organization and society.¹³ The regime then took a census that enumerated individuals and also systematized ethnic classifications into what came to be known as the 55 minority peoples along with the Han majority.¹⁴

Concerned about bureaucratism and a lack of domestic innovation, the regime opened itself up for constructive criticism with the Hundred Flowers Campaign, attempting to revitalize the country. Yet the critiques quickly became too much for officials. Those who had spoken out as directed were pilloried as Rightists who were against the Party in the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign.

The Mao Era's nadir was the Great Leap Forward, a campaign that ultimately resulted in the worst man-made famine in history due to problems of lack of information and data manipulation.¹⁵ The height of China's High Modernist period, the regime believed that with proper discipline and right-minded thinking, labor could replace capital and China could leap towards its development goals.¹⁶ Political pressures on local leaders pushed them to vastly overestimate production; indeed, Li Choh-Ming's book *The Statistical System of Communist China* spends an entire chapter on the "Statistical Fiasco of 1958."¹⁷ In 1959-60, leaders believed that harvests had produced double the amount of grain that was available. Only about 180 million metric tons were produced whereas production estimates and leader's statements put their figures at

¹¹ Indeed, they often received salaries higher than former Communist guerrillas (Vogel, 1969).

¹² (C.-M. Li, 1962, p. 13). Operations officially began on National Day of that year (October 1, 1952).

¹³ (C.-M. Li, 1962; Oksenberg, 1974)

¹⁴ (Mullaney, 2010)

¹⁵ (Kung & Chen, 2011). See also (Dikötter, 2010; Yang, 2012).

¹⁶ On high modernism, see (Scott, 1998).

¹⁷ (Bernstein, 1984; Kung & Chen, 2011). Also see (C.-M. Li, 1962). Li's 1962 book is the most recent on the statistical system in English.

over 365 million metric tons.¹⁸ Hoping to produce numbers pleasing the center, local leaders manipulated harvest data. The center taxed the countryside as if the faked numbers were real, leaving nothing for the starving farmers to eat and causing a famine that killed tens of millions.¹⁹

In the reform era, the center continues to learn about the performance of local officials chiefly through quantitative metrics. These performance metrics incentivize and shape local governance. The pursuit of positive assessments also can lead to data manipulation. More broadly, the center's efforts to govern through quantitative metrics are at the heart of its attempts to create the impression of itself as a neoliberal, benevolent regime with apolitical mechanisms for resolving conflicts in society.

Theories of Chinese Political Stability

China's economic growth is paralleled by its political regime's stability. While this would be surprising to modernization theorists who argued that rapid economic growth led to political difficulties, subsequent research shows that economic development tends to aid regime's survival rather than undermine it.²⁰ Yet such cross-national patterns do not provide much guidance as to how the Chinese regime rules, the threats facing the regime, and how it responds to such threats. *Information Politics* argues that understanding the regime's identification of threats to political and economic stability with quantified statistics can shed light on the regime's operations. The project builds on a literature on the relationship between cadre promotions and performance.²¹ While prominent, such analyses are by no means monolithic with two prominent rival schools of thought being factional (or connection-based) rule and adaptive governance.

The most direct assault on the idea of the Chinese regime as utilizing an internal system of promotions to create an incentive structure that induces economic growth and political stability is put forward in Shih et al. 2012.

[F]actional ties with various top leaders, educational qualifications, and provincial revenue collection played substantial roles in elite ranking, suggesting that promotion systems served the immediate

¹⁸ (Bernstein 1984, Li 1962).

¹⁹ (Dikötter, 2010; Yang, 2012)

²⁰ (Gandhi, 2008; Geddes, 1999; Wallace, 2014) contrasted with (Huntington, 1968; Lipset, 1959).

²¹ This literature is sometimes described as the "tournament model" of promotion and has been used to justify descriptions of the CCP-led regime as a meritocracy (e.g., (E. X. Li, 2012; Su, Tao, Xi, & Li, 2012)).

needs of the regime and its leaders, rather than encompassing goals such as economic growth.²²

Shih et al. find little evidence supporting the contention that “provincial officials who generated higher-than-average growth or higher than expected growth were rewarded with higher party ranks in any year.”²³ As such, the article rejects the claim that China’s economic growth was caused by political competition measured in GDP terms. While showing patterns of promotion consistent with the party using various other quantitative measures, the authors focus on the regime’s factional politics as dominant.²⁴ Rather than a complex technocratic structure incentivizing local leaders to maximize economic growth, they point to promotions—and the political system more generally—as defined by networks and factions.

While Shih et al. see the CCP-led regime’s political system as driven by personal connections, *Mao’s Invisible Hand*, a volume edited by Heilmann and Perry, credits China’s adaptive governance for much of the regime’s economic and political success.²⁵ Counter-intuitively, such adaptability in the reform era comes in large part from the revolutionary legacy of the CCP when it was led by Mao Zedong. The regime’s “guerrilla policy work style” helps account for its ability to move quickly to respond to challenges. The continued need for flexibility accounts for the lack of legalization or institutionalization within China. As they write,

The political world and its power constellations are subject to eternal flux and ceaseless change that cannot be effectively halted or channeled by political-legal institution building.²⁶

From this perspective, technocratic rhetoric is only the latest thin veneer over what remains a regime rooted in the guerrilla mindset.

I argue that the center’s limited vision into localities has induced quantitative metrics to come to the fore when evaluating performance, but such limited ability to monitor local behavior allows local leaders great freedom to act—in ways both consistent and inconsistent with the desires of the center and often directly profiting the local elite and their political networks.

²² (Shih, Adolph, & Liu, 2012, p. 166)

²³ (Shih et al., 2012, p. 183)

²⁴ A similar case is made in Richard McGregor’s *The Party*, which, if anything, goes further into the lucrative and nefarious operation of the party-state.

²⁵ (Heilmann & Perry, 2011)

²⁶ (Heilmann & Perry, 2011, p. 12)

Methods and Personnel

At its heart, *Information Politics* addresses how China's central leadership rules in an environment where others have and pursue their own interests. The question is how the center—Beijing—sees, which I argue builds on a core issue for all businesses, states, and societies: the principal-agent problem.²⁷ To know all of the individuals in all of the remote outposts of the country is impossible, so standards are set, goals are laid out, monitors are put to work, and a cadre evaluation system is devised. The elements of this system are almost all quantified.²⁸

My analytical framework combines these separate literatures as fundamentally about the politics of information. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese regime's emphasis on quantitative performance? How can leaders learn of and respond to threats without generating additional dangers by their methods of observation and response? Additional research questions include:

- How has China's statistical system evolved?
- How has the cadre evaluation and promotion system changed over time?
- How have local experiments been used to assess policies before national rollout?
- How have relaxed migration restrictions affected public goods provision?
- What accounts for the different trajectories of Green GDP and the PM 2.5?
- How do local officials use information advantages in dealings with higher levels?
- Can patterns of systematic data manipulation be found in China? Cross-nationally?

The project contains four main empirical investigations, combining archival and interview research in the People's Republic of China with statistical analyses of quantitative data. These investigations address how the Chinese regime (1) learns, (2) governs, and (3) manipulates facts and (4) how China compares to other developing countries along these lines. These represent the four empirical chapters of the book.

The first empirical activity outlines the information gathering mechanisms of the Chinese regime, demonstrating their proliferation and extent but also their limits. Archival research at provincial and city party archives will provide details on the creation, temporary dismantlement during the Cultural Revolution, and evolution of the statistical reporting system in China. A statistical analysis comparing the quality of annual population data based on *hukou* lists with decadal census information traces the

²⁷ On legibility and states vision, see (Scott, 1998); on the principal-agent problem, see (Bendor, Glazer, & Hammond, 2001; Miller, 1992; Rasul & Rogger, 2013; Shapiro, 2005).

²⁸ (Landry, 2008; C.-M. Li, 1962; Oi, 1999; Whiting, 2000)

inability of the state to track where its population lives as migration restrictions are loosened.

The second empirical activity turns to how the regime governs information and uses information to govern. Archival documents, interviews, and statistical analyses will demonstrate the cadre evaluation system's quantified nature and omnipresence in the politics world. Case studies contrast the failure of Green GDP, an economic measure including environmental costs, with the success and political significance of PM 2.5 air quality index measure, illuminating the importance of numbers in this political system. A statistical analysis on local variation in public goods provision shows that as migration expands, the regime and local agents have an increasingly difficult time allocating fiscal resources and public goods. As population moves without state vision, plans and expenditures fall out of alignment, leading to areas of systematic over-provision and corresponding areas of under-provision; if conditions are poor enough, these latter become slums. The costs and benefits of the cadre evaluation system's emphasis on targets is also seen in the statistical link between areas with the fastest growth as measured by GDP having high vacancy rates akin to ghost cities.

Those willing and able to manipulate statistics in this system can accrue significant advantages. The project's third empirical piece contains original statistical analyses that find evidence consistent with officials 'joking the stats' by which they are judged by Beijing. In particular, I find that GDP growth rates jump during politically significant moments more than other less politically sensitive measures indicate.²⁹ Citizens, too, take advantage of the limits of the regime and manipulate data to their own benefit. I explore examples of strategic divorces, grey income, and growing houses.

The final empirical piece expands the scope of inquiry, comparing the information problems of dictatorships with those in developing democracies. Are basic economic facts misrepresented in dictatorships for political purposes? Satellite imagery of nighttime lights and other external data sources lead to some concerns. The free press constrains grand corruption in developing democracies, but newspapers filled constantly with reports of official malfeasance can create a climate where pervasive corruption becomes normal. I examine the efforts that regimes use to combat and evade these information problems, such as shifting from commodity to cash transfers.

Status of the Proposed Book Project

"Joking the Stats," a paper forthcoming at the *British Journal of Political Science*, combines the heart of the book's theoretical argument with an empirical analysis of

²⁹ (Wallace, 2013)

provincial-level GDP manipulation in China. Much of the data for the other statistical analyses has already been compiled, although some additional census data is likely to need to be purchased. Travel to China in the spring and summer of 2015 should be able to provide sufficient time for interviews and access to archives. The book should be prepared for submission to a publisher—likely a top university press—by December 2015.

Personnel

I, Jeremy Wallace (Ph.D. Stanford, 2009), am an Assistant Professor of Political Science at The Ohio State University. My research interests include Chinese politics, economic development, urbanization, and nondemocratic regimes. My work has been published at *The Journal of Politics*, *Global Environmental Change*, *Land Use Policy*, and the *British Journal of Political Science* and has been funded by the Mershon Center and Initiative for Population Research at the Ohio State University, the Asia/Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, and NASA. My first book, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China* (OUP, 2014), examines China's management of urbanization. My research combines statistical and theoretical sophistication with deep knowledge of China.

Policy Implications

Because of China's growing immensity on the global stage, insight into how its regime rules can improve understandings of its current preferences and future trajectories in domestic and foreign policy spheres. While numerous works have described China's reform era political economy, most tend to consider economic reform as moves toward an assumed end state—American-style capitalism—and political reforms as approaching democratization. Such studies have given insight into China and Chinese political economy but such perspectives can distort assessments of the real strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese regime. *Information Politics* instead examines how the regime governs, the perverse consequences of performance targets and quantification strategies, and the CCP's evolving efforts to address these problems.

Budget

Estimated grant request amount	\$60,000
Two course reduction	\$24,720
Fringe benefits	\$ 7,169
One month summer salary	\$ 8,583
Fringe benefits	\$ 1,425
Research assistant	\$ 3,000
Fringe benefits	\$ 378
<i>Personnel Subtotal</i>	<i>\$45,275</i>
Travel expenses	\$ 7,000
2010 Census Information	\$ 1,000
Database access (e.g., Infobank.cn)	\$ 1,000
Other yearbook, archive, and data purchases	\$ 271
Overhead/Indirect Costs (OSU)	\$ 5,454
Estimated Project Start Date and Grant Term	Oct. 2014 to Dec. 2016

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