Public Opinion in China

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Preface

We know that the People’s Republic of China is a vast country, made up of varied and diverse constituencies spread horizontally across social groups, and laterally across the very different dynamics within separate Chinese provinces and autonomous regions, and then within each of these places, from prefecture, to township, down to village level. How analysts and scholars outside of the country best get to grips with this complexity is a constant issue. When we come to asking questions about what Chinese people might think about their country, their key day to day challenges, their past and their future we hit particularly severe issues. These are the questions that constantly interest us, and yet which it has proved surprising hard to get good empirical evidence for.

These questions about what broad publics might think are hard to answer anywhere. Understanding public opinion even in the most densely surveyed terrain is hard. Pollsters are always being wrong footed on electoral outcomes, and trying to improve their methods. In China, trying to monitor public opinion objectively through surveys is relatively recent. Officials right at the top are always appealing to public opinion support for their domestic and foreign policy positions. But in the era of extensive social media coverage and connectivity, are they able to continue doing this without engaging with some difficult evidence that comes to us through the voices of these new ways of giving expression as individuals to personal opinions? Just grandly stating that all Chinese believe something is no longer good enough. Just a simple look at Sina Weibo proves in fact that there are varied spectrums of opinion in China as anywhere else.

These are the questions raised by Hsiao-Wen Lee in her paper on public opinion in China. She shows the historic basis of collection of data about what the public think, dating right back to the Republican Period, and then the institutions and assessment methods that have been set up over the last few decades to gather opinion, and make it useful for leaders as they try to make decisions. She also shows, clearly, the many pitfalls and limitations that this system has had, and where it currently stands.
Chinese leaders are responsive to public opinion, as she shows. But there are major issues about the quality of data that is being collected, the methods by which it is interpreted, and finally the ways in which it is then fed into the policy making apparatus. The one thing one can say with some certainty now is that the dramatically different terrain of social media has created new dynamics and challenges, and that these are going to take years to work out. This excellent paper offers a well grounded overview of an issue critical to China’s future, and yet one which is understudied and misunderstood. Dr Lee, a scholar based in the UK, brings to this subject cultural sensitivity, and a refreshing lack of bias, as she used extensive field research experience in China to approach this important subject.

The China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney hopes that in offering policy-focused papers like these, we can contribute to the deeper understanding of modern China and its challenges as it undertakes more reforms in the coming decade. It is a great pleasure to have this paper as the first in what we hope will be a long series of papers that contribute to this debate.

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Summary

1. There are three main aspects to surveys of public opinion in China: the ‘public opinion survey’, public expression via Internet forums and ‘public opinion supervision’ by the media. Public opinion surveys are conducted by Government survey organizations and by other organizations such as quangos, government-linked or independent private commercial companies. These organizations collect opinions from people using different research methods, such as questionnaires, panel discussions, or interviews, but the government influences the choice of topics and dissemination of results.

2. The government also encourages people, businesses, schools and private individuals to go online to express their opinions. The Internet has rapidly become a place for young people to socialize, and to challenge and debate issues, or to vent their anger and frustration. Although the Government has built the ‘great firewall’ to block access to foreign websites and limit freedom of speech, at the same time it encourages people to use the Internet’s characteristics of efficiency, openness and immediacy to help it supervise public officials and expose corruption. The system of online expression of public opinion is different from the systematic, scientific methodology of the official public opinion survey.

3. Public opinion supervision by the media is a different concept from both the official public opinion survey and online public opinion. Public opinion supervision is also known as ‘media supervision’ and is supervision by the media or the press. The function of public opinion supervision is to mediate the relationship between the people, the Government or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Judiciary. In other words, public opinion supervision is when journalists use their skills to conduct investigative reports in order to expose problems in the government or in individual communities or Chinese society, such as corruption, food security, or social inequality. Public opinion supervision exists to monitor Government Officers, especially at local levels of government.
4. Public opinion supervision is very similar to the concept of the ‘fourth estate’ in the West, in that its aim is to be a watchdog to supervise and monitor the government and administration. The term ‘public opinion supervision’ has, since the early 1990s, appeared in official documents and speeches. It first appeared in 1990 in the text of ‘The temporary regulation of the Press Management’ legislation, which said ‘the press should do supervision work to reflect public opinion and suggestions.’ The purpose of public opinion supervision changed in 2004 when ‘The regulation of CCP internal supervision’ legislation came out, citing public opinion supervision as one of the ten means of Party supervision, thus linking public opinion supervision to anti-corruption measures.

5. China’s economic prosperity has gone hand in hand with an increase in social conflict stemming from the growing poverty gap, social injustice and corruption. In order to manage this, the Chinese Government has appealed to its citizens by emphasizing that the government wants to listen to the people’s opinions and work towards building a ‘harmonious society’. The purpose of these official surveys has primarily been to collect people’s opinions on government policy which in turn increases the accountability as well as the effectiveness of government policy.

6. Public opinion supervision by media reporting is an alternative method (to surveys) to monitor the work of Government Officials and declare that this supervision is representative of the will of the public. Public opinion supervision is an approach used in the fight against corruption in the regulation of the Chinese Communist Party; however, both official public opinion surveys and public opinion supervision by media is overseen by and controlled by the Central Government. Therefore, the topics for public opinion surveys and the quality of the results are questionable. Additionally, news reports of public opinion supervision cannot be seen to threaten or challenge the Central Party’s interests. These restrictions illustrate the Chinese Government’s attitude towards public opinion. This paper will discuss public opinion surveys in China and the responses to them by the Chinese Government.
Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party has been conducting public opinion surveys since the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Mao Zedong declared ‘if there is no investigation of public opinion, we have no rights to voice … Public opinion is our guidelines for action.’ However, ‘public opinion surveys’ have a variety of definitions in China. They can encompass anything from opinion polling, market surveys, audience surveys, to advertising surveys. This paper attempts to explore the concept of public opinion as defined by the Chinese Government, how the Chinese Government conducts public opinion surveys and, moreover, whether or how the Chinese Government responds to public opinion.

This paper is divided into three parts exploring the development of and changes to public opinion surveys in China. First, it will examine the apparatus of the Chinese Government for conducting official public opinion surveys and the rise of online expression of opinion. Second, it will examine how the Chinese Government uses news reports as a means to declare the will of the public. Third, this paper tries to uncover the Chinese Government’s views of and responses to public opinion.

The history of public opinion surveys in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

Public opinion surveys in China began under the leadership of Mao Zedong during the late 1920s. The initial format of these surveys was a fairly basic ‘panel discussion’ in which one place, such as a village, farm or factory, was selected and people were interviewed and conclusions drawn regarding their opinions. These localised opinions would then be claimed as representative of the entire country. However as this method was open to manipulation by investigators and politicians, this led to these panel discussions being used as the means to attack and exclude political rivals.

In the post-Mao era the government wanted to know people’s interest in and attitudes to the reforms that had caused many changes in society, economics and media, and which had produced a relatively liberal period in China. The first systematic
A compilation of statistics using public opinion surveys was titled ‘Media and the Chinese Public: a survey of Beijing media audience’ and was published in 1982.\(^4\) This survey was conducted for the government by the Beijing Statistics Bureau and combined questionnaires and interviews to gauge people’s attitudes regarding the need for news reform. There were 2430 samples collected.

From the 1980s until the 1990s, many government, or government connected, academic institutes started entering the survey market. This wave of expansion also included the establishment of the first private survey company, Horizon Research Consultancy Group – China, which was founded in 1992. Before this only government-owned survey institutes were allowed.

Some significant surveys were done during this period, such as the 1988 Sociological Institute of the Chinese Social Science Association and State Statistical Bureau survey of 12,000 workers in 16 large cities regarding their political and social lives.\(^5\) The results revealed the rising intensity of social conflict at that time. Another important series of surveys was conducted by the Economic System Reform Institute of China (ESRIC) between 1987 and 1988.\(^6\) The findings of these surveys indicated that people were highly dissatisfied with the economic reforms implemented by the authorities, especially those related to social improvements, promotion of good morals and inflation control. As the social atmosphere was comparatively more liberal during this period than in previous periods, many reformists tried to conduct public opinion surveys to push for further reforms, especially in the areas of politics and economics. However, these reformists’ efforts suddenly ended with the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square.

After Tiananmen Square the topics of surveys and the publication of polling results were severely restricted. Surprisingly, despite the restrictions a great number of survey organizations developed, including government institutes, academic institutes, international companies, and even private companies, although the latter had their own separate purposes for surveys. The government wanted to show they listened to the opinions of the people and that they had a stable society. This was the first phase of establishing the official public opinion survey apparatus.
During the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002 and 2003, requests for information both domestically and internationally, along with the need for transparency of the information, became much more urgent. In his address after the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2002, Chairman Jiang Zemin stated that ‘policy-making should deeply understand public opinion, adequately reflect public opinion … by establishing a mechanism of reflecting social situation and public opinion.’ The establishment of this mechanism basically required all provincial Communist Party Committees (CPCs) to send a report on the social situation and public opinion in their province to the Central Committee four times a year. Additionally, in the 4th Plenum (Plenary Session) of the 16th CPC Central Committee in 2004, Hu Jintao instructed all Party leading officials to build a ‘harmonious society.’ A ‘harmonious society’ is defined as one in which people are cooperative and friendly to one another. Listening to the people has now become top of the agenda for the CCP as it strives to construct a ‘harmonious society’. This has resulted in a rapid increase in the number of survey organisations during 2004 and 2005, and marks the second phase in the establishment of public opinion survey apparatus.

According to official government statistics, in 2004 there were more than 33,400 survey organisations in China and since then the number has risen on average by about six per cent each year. The organizations involved in conducting official public opinion surveys now include government ministries, media companies, marketing firms, research institutions in universities, as well as foreign and private companies. By 2008 the number of survey organisations had reached over 42,000.

The sudden increase in survey organizations is due first to the need to enhance the feasibility of government policy and, second, to the Government’s increasing dependence on people’s responses so that it can adjust its central policy, both to make the policy more acceptable and to increase the perception of accountability.
The apparatus of public opinion surveys

Although there has been a boom in the number of private companies, marketing firms and international companies conducting surveys in China, the government still maintains its own survey systems and organizations. These survey organizations have differing aims and functions. This section will look at these organizations to examine how the Chinese government defines public opinion.

Offices of Research and Investigation
Almost every unit of the government and Party, from central through to local, has its own Office of Research and Investigation. The main purposes of these offices are to investigate public opinion and gather responses to their bureau’s work, as well as to reflect people’s thinking and perceived needs to upper-level officials. However, in many provinces the work of these offices has been subsumed into administrative support functions, for example, writing speeches for the Local Party Leader and participating in the process of policy making. So staff that should be investigating public opinion at the grassroots level are now focused on assisting upper-level officials instead. This situation is due to a) staff spending too much time on paper work for upper-level officials; b) the difficulty in conducting investigative public opinion surveys outside of the office; and c) the lack of official requirements for an annual report on investigations. In other words, investigating public opinion is not regarded as necessary work for an Office of Research and Investigation, and thus these offices are more interested in the service of upper-level officials rather than listening to people’s opinions.

Government public opinion apparatus and the State Statistic Bureau
Before the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square, there were some key government or government-controlled public opinion organizations (known as quasi-government organisations (quangos) in the West). The first of these was the Institute of Chinese Social Survey (ICSS), followed later by the China Social Survey System (CSSS). These two organizations have carried out many surveys since the economic reforms of 1987. However, after 1989 and Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 visit to Shenzhen, during which he announced his ‘open market policy’, the main purpose of the CSSS has been
the assessment of the social mood and public mentality under the economic reforms of 1987.

At local government level, one of the first public opinion survey institutes set up in 1988 was the Centre for Guangzhou Social Information and Public Opinion in Guangdong. The Guangzhou Centre was also responsible for the publication of two of the earliest public opinion journals in China: *Public Opinion Reference* and *Public Opinion Internal Reference*. The former was mainly sent to academic institutes and the latter sent to the Party Leaders in Guangzhou for their reference. In the same year (1988), the Propaganda Department in the Beijing City Government also set up the Beijing Research Institute of Social Mentality due to concerns regarding the student democratic movement that was threatening social and political stability in Beijing, as well as concerns over rising corruption and inflation that were making the public highly dissatisfied. Public opinion surveys were very important during that period and, moreover, led to the publication of an internal journal for officials called *Public Opinion*. These local government apparatus became the bridge between the public and the government by conducting public opinion surveys during the age of political and economic reform.

In 2004, after Hu’s appeal for a ‘harmonious society’ at the National Congress, the State Statistics Bureau decided to promote the establishment of public opinion apparatus under the control of its provincial branches and accelerate the use of the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. Ten provinces had set up public opinion apparatus by the end of 2004, and regularly carried out opinion polling for the Statistics Bureau. However the Statistics Bureau has jurisdictional power over all opinion polls conducted within China, so the content, procedure and the publication of opinion polls are all under the government’s purview. As a consequence most opinion polls focus only on the topics of living standards and inflation.

*Academic institutes and private commercial companies*

The most influential academic institute for official public opinion surveys is the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), which is China’s most prestigious academic research organization in the fields of philosophy and social sciences. Their
survey projects are usually well-funded by government research grants.¹² CASS has affiliates in each province, but differs from the provincial public opinion apparatus of local government, as it can not only conduct polls regarding local issues but also large-scale social surveys in China. For example, CASS publishes the *Blue Book of China’s Society* every year, which is an influential survey in China. In 1999 it also carried out and published *Social Mobility in Contemporary China* which presented the changes of social class in China. In 2011, CASS went on to publish the *2011 Research Report of the mindset of China’s Society*, which showed that individual (personal) concerns are stronger than ever. People now focus more on individual benefits, lifestyle, and satisfaction, which suggests that this is key to understanding, as well as forming, the solidarity of public interests and social responsibility required for a ‘harmonious society’.

Other academic institutes which were established during 1980s were the Institute for Public Opinion Research at Renmin University, established in 1986, and the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, established in 1988. The centre at Peking University is self-funded. It conducts some surveys in cooperation with other international academic research institutes and attracts grants for research projects. Additionally, it does survey work for the Beijing Government and other local government organizations. The institute at Renmin University claims to reflect public opinion to the government and detects problems concerned with news reform and propaganda news.¹³

As well as the above organizations, private companies also conduct some surveys for the government. For example, Horizon Research Consultancy Group (founded by Yuan Yue in 1992) has conducted a variety of surveys covering such topics as policy issues, public attitudes to news or to social problems, and even evaluations of the government.¹⁴

Overall, while the methods and skills used in the public opinion surveys are already well established in China, the results can be questionable because the government reviews the topics of the surveys and has jurisdictional power over them which impacts the surveys’ authenticity and objectivity.
The rise of online public opinion expression

Concurrently with official opinion surveys, online public opinion expression has also grown rapidly since the 1990s. The first online public forum was the Qing Guo forum [强国论坛], a Party-based media forum that was part of the online edition of the People’s Daily.15 The opening of this forum was to the result of the ‘7th May 1999 incident’ in which, during NATO bombings of Yugoslavia, the Chinese embassy was hit and partly destroyed in what the Americans claimed to be an accident.16 Soon after, the People’s Daily set up ‘the BBS forum for strongly protesting NATO’s violence’. This forum became the place for the public expression of patriotism and emotion, and sowed the seeds of new forms of cyber activism, for example ‘hacktivism’.17 Soon after, this forum officially changed its name to the Qing Guo forum to provide a fixed place for people to express their opinion in the People’s Daily website.

The China Internet Network Information Center reported in July 2011 that 485 million Chinese now access the Internet via the Chinese networks, and that there are more than 220 million bloggers and more than three million messages exchanged online everyday in China.18 People now use many methods such as RSS feeds, blogs, instant messaging services, mini blogs, micro blogs, chat rooms, online forums and e-mails to express their opinions. However, the government conducts a ‘dual-track strategy’19 towards the Internet. While the government has been very successful in encouraging businesses, schools and private individuals to use the Internet more, with the penetration of Internet access already reaching 36.2 per cent in June 2011,20 the government also enforces regulations to limit the freedom of speech and monitor communications. However, young people in China are already used to spreading their dissatisfaction with government control via the Internet and have the technical knowledge to circumvent restrictions.21 The vibrant Chinese blogosphere is full of young people who participate in public debates and forums where they contest various social norms. The Internet has become an important agenda-setting place for public debate in China.

The differences between public opinion survey and the online expression of public opinion are that in public opinion surveys, emphasis is placed on using a scientific
and systemic approach to collecting public opinion and obtaining objective statistic data for policy makers’ references. In contrast, online forums are more open, efficient, interactive and immediate places for people to socialize and express their opinions, or even to vent their anger. Therefore, online public opinion is often concerned with scandals, the darker side of society and contested subjects. The government built the ‘great firewall’ to block many foreign websites and censor content that could be accessed on the Internet; yet, at the same time, the government also encourages people to use the Internet as a tool to help supervise corrupt public officials or expose corruption.

Public opinion supervision (media supervision)

In comparison with official public opinion surveys that are used by the government to gauge people’s opinion, public opinion supervision is operated by media companies with the main purpose of monitoring government officers, especially corrupt officers, and to ensure that news reports represent public opinion. In 2004, the CCP passed a regulation, ‘The Supervision Regulation (Implementation) in Communist Party of China (CPC).’ This was the first supervision regulation in the Party, and public opinion supervision is one of the supervision approaches.

During the time of Mao Zedong, to criticize the government in media reports was a news genre known as the ‘criticism report’. This was originally conducted through panel discussions to investigate public opinions, self-criticize and accept other’s criticism, which was an important part of the Party’s work during the Mao era. In reality, when a criticism report appeared in the media, it represented the view of an officer toward a subordinate who would then be punished by political powers or the administration. The function of criticism reports has been adjusted over time, and they have been transformed into public opinion supervision or media supervision. One of the obvious differences is that by conducting the surveys in the name of ‘public opinion supervision’, the Party/State media can declare its legitimacy and power by presenting the supposed will of the public and using it to expose corruption and other social problems.
There are two aspects that need to be considered when discussing public opinion supervision: the relationship of the media with the government or the CCP, and the relationship with the judiciary.23

The relationship of the government to public opinion supervision
Since local government in China oversees its region’s media, local media cannot supervise or criticize their own local government directly. However, it can criticize other provinces’ governments. A good example of successful public opinion supervision is *The South Weekend* in Guangzhou. *The South Weekend* was established in 1984 and created a section for public opinion supervision, and many of its reports have become famous. Due to its fame, the circulation of this weekly newspaper reached up to 1.6 million copies and it has been called the most influential liberal newspaper in China by the *New York Times*.24 However, as the news reports of *The South Weekend* challenged the Central Party, the chief editor and senior editors were sacked and the Central Propaganda Department blocked some reports by forcing them to be taken out of the newspaper.

Because local media cannot directly criticize their local government, they avoid pressure from the local government by writing reports that use coverage from outside media to avoid direct blame for the content. This is often referred to as ‘article laundering’. For example, when important but sensitive news is exposed, such as corruption events, the media outside of the province or county concerned has more freedom to report the event. However, in local news media, public opinion supervision does offer possibilities for covering many subjects, from political issues to social problems. There are many complicated power struggles at many levels within the Party, and between the many different administrative organisations, which provide plenty of opportunities for public opinion supervision to report on local issues, such as contradictions between Party Officials and Public Officials. The local media in China has provided good coverage of many news stories exposing problems such as food security, withholding of wages or corruption.

Given the size and regional diversity of China, the application of public opinion supervision has to be adapted. Put simply, public opinion supervision is a kind of
extension of executive power rather than legislative power. Public opinion supervision is not a rule of law but supports the rule of law. The texts of public opinion supervision regulations are very abstract and general, thus public opinion supervision always involves moral persuasion and can be influenced by the local leaders’ intentions. Due to this moral grounding, the effects of public opinion supervision are very much influenced by individual leaders in different provinces. The drawback is that public opinion supervision can be used to attack political rivals or as a tool in power struggles. For example, if public opinion supervision is has been effective in hurting the careers of many incumbent officials, other officials might also use other tools of power to get local official leaders to step down. In other words, public opinion supervision could become the political rivalry between officials at local level.

Although public opinion supervision cannot effectively report or criticize the Central Party’s high-ranking officials, public opinion supervision reports have an impact on the problems people experience in everyday life, such as land rights, sanitation, food security, medical problems or ecological problems. Public opinion supervision is very effective in tackling these social problems indirectly. Therefore, public opinion supervision is welcomed by the general public and has generated much attention that has led to the government’s acknowledgement and eventual support.

In contrast to the past, public officials in the government have made many changes in response to public opinion supervision reports. These include holding regular press conferences, opening up government information to the people and media in regard to such matters as the activities of Government Officials, and the passing of new regulations on how to respond to breaking news events, such as those encountered during the SARS epidemic.

The relationship of the judiciary to public opinion supervision
As the judicial system is also the target of public opinion supervision, their attitude towards journalists and the media is another important element in public opinion supervision reports. In China, the judicial system is also an extension of the executive power. A key issue when the media and journalists write public opinion supervision reports is the ability of the judicial system to protect and respect the journalists’ work.
There are some statistics that show that the media and journalists are placed in an inferior, compromised position most of the time, for example the media in China lose up to 70 per cent of court cases. In contrast, the rate of court cases lost by the media in the USA is only eight per cent. In those court cases where the media loses, in China 61 per cent paid compensation to the claimant, compared with only six per cent in the USA. Some scholars, such as Zhiwu Chen and Dapei Zuo, criticize the fact that in China there is a deficiency in the law and regulations regarding the media’s duty to give evidentiary proof to the court when journalists are defendants, and that this causes the journalists to lose lawsuits. Without clearly defining the boundaries of the defamation act, standards and protections, the conduct of the judiciary will endanger the effectiveness of public opinion supervision and hamper the media’s ability to carry out such supervision.

In short, there is a tripartite struggle between the media, government and judiciary. This dynamic power struggle affects the effectiveness of public opinion supervision in China. The relationships between the executive, the judiciary and the media in China paves the way to examinations similar to those conducted in the West over such topics as media concentration, ownership, freedom of the press, and privacy.

Conclusions

Whether they are panel discussions, public opinion surveys or public opinion supervision, the key problems for all surveys in China are: who makes the survey? How can the truth be obtained? And what are the responses of the government to public opinion? In 2010 the Xin Hua News Agency, which acts as the government’s official mouth-piece and media agency, released a widely circulated feature report that said, 'the time of the public opinion survey is coming!', which emphasized how important public opinion surveys are. Another article, in Outlook Weekly, conducted a report on public opinion surveys and stated that public opinion surveys have already become an important reference during the process of policy making, which now demonstrates that the Chinese Government is eager to listen to the people’s needs and opinions. It goes on to say that the public opinion survey is also an important foundation for the creation of a ‘harmonious society’. This emphasis on
'harmonious society’ and the increased importance placed on public opinion surveys shows how tough times are for the ruling Party, which is now faced with many potential social challenges and an increasing risk of conflicts and protests.

*What does public opinion mean to the Chinese Government?*
In appearance, there are at least three key aspects to the attitude of the Chinese Government to public opinion. First, given the increased number of public opinion survey organisations, one can conclude that the government wants to assure its adequate performance within the Communist system, though these surveys also serve as a control mechanism.

Second, most of the public opinion surveys are concerned with demography and prices of commodities, or are marketing surveys. However, from government institutions through to private commercial companies, all are eager to carry out many different types of public opinion surveys.

Third, the effects of public opinion supervision represent the Central Government’s determination to combat corruption and punish corrupt officials. This could also alleviate people’s dissatisfaction with the government and media, and lead to greater financial support from audiences and advertisers.

*What are the responses of the Chinese Government while facing challenges?*
In essence, because there is a huge proportion of Chinese people who are not well educated or are heavily influenced by the social climate or atmosphere, many of the answers to survey questions are ‘don’t know’, ‘don’t care’, or ‘don’t want to say’, especially when faced with sensitive issues. However, ‘don’t know’, ‘don’t care’, and ‘don’t want to say’ are not the equal of ‘no’. Along with the rise in reported social conflicts, these non-committal responses show dissatisfaction, dispute or lack of consensus among people about current conditions in China, while seeming to maintain the facade of ‘harmonious society’. This shows the challenges faced by public opinion surveys on sensitive issues.
When facing the challenges from the public or public opinion supervision, the government’s responses can be divided into three levels: tough, mild and light.

The **tough response** occurs when the opinions challenge the Party line, the legitimacy of the Communist Party or threaten the Party’s interests. In these instances the surveys cannot be openly conducted, completed or published. Once the Party line is touched, those involved in the action are either sent to jail or are forced to be sacked.

The **mild response** occurs when, although the consequences of a survey or media supervision threaten local officials’ interests or allude to government policy, the Central Government and the Party support the results of the survey and supervision, even though the local government may want to respond harshly. This often results in the officials involved being punished or regulations having to be adjusted or changed to favour the people’s interests.

The **light response** is when the Central Government uses the survey to monitor prices or local officials’ work. The government may shape public opinion and get more impetus (mandate) for proposed policy reforms. In this instance, the government views public opinion as a tool to make the policy accountable and acceptable.

The political thinker John Keane’s opinion might help explain the current relationship between the Chinese Government and public opinion. ‘There is no recorded historical case of democracy caused by expanding GDP,’ Keane says. ‘Monitory democracy will happen in China if and when large numbers of wealthy and poor citizens together decide that the pursuit of wealth is not the same as the pursuit of wellness, and that non-violent power-sharing is indispensable for a better life.’ In other words, Keane believes a growing economy does not necessarily accompany political reform. Instead, political reform occurs only when the public accumulates a growing sense of political purpose and a desire to have a greater say in its own affairs. Therefore, although social conflicts and people’s disputes appear to be quite serious in China, the government still could conduct different levels of control mechanisms to build a ‘harmonious society’. Therefore, due to the Government’s ability to conduct different levels of control mechanism in its push to build a ‘harmonious society’, the sense of
urgency for political reform hardly seems to accompany the growing seriousness of social conflicts and people’s dissatisfaction in their lack of say in their own affairs.

Notes


2 Feng, ‘Report on the outcome of the National Science Council Grant research project’, p.170.


6 Womack, *Media and the Chinese Public*.


8 Womack, *Media and the Chinese Public*, p.52.


19 Johan Lagerkvist After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).


25 Feng, ‘Exploring discourses and practices of China’s ‘supervision by the press’.


30 Womack, Media and the Chinese Public, p.65.