Article

The Long-Term Impact of Mobilization and Repression on Political Trust

Scott W. Desposato[1]*, Gang Wang[2]*, and Jason Y. Wu[3]* (iD)

Abstract

Authoritarian regimes respond to threatening student movements with repression and censorship. In many cases, failed movements are effectively erased from public memory. Do such movements affect long-term attitudes? We use a survey of college graduates to measure the impact of a failed student movement. Some of our respondents began college immediately before a major protest; others started after the movement had been suppressed. Using a fuzzy regression discontinuity, we find that individuals who attended college during the movement are significantly less likely to trust the government, more than 25 years later, than individuals who enrolled after the protests. The effects are strongest for trust in the central government, and weakest for local government. These results are robust to a range of specifications, and show that the experience of mass mobilization and state repression can have a long-term impact on public attitudes, even if the event in question remains taboo.

Keywords

China, trust, social capital, non-democratic regimes

[1]UC San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA
[2]Independent Scholar
[3]Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

*These authors contributed equally to this work.

Corresponding Author:
Gang Wang, Independent Scholar.
Email: wang.uc@gmail.com

Introduction

The leaders of authoritarian regimes try to elicit cooperation from their citizens by delivering public services, buying off potential malcontents, and signaling strength, but when these measures fall short, dictators and their associates often resort to repression. Most of the time, autocrats are able to target their repressive efforts toward specific individuals or organizations, but if the opponents of the regime are able to coordinate and organize mass protests, autocrats frequently respond with violence (Davenport, 2007; Gerschewski, 2013; Greitens, 2016).

The short-term effects of mobilization and repression are readily observable: the regime either manages to hang on to power, or its leaders are ejected from office. A new wave of scholarship has also begun to investigate the long-term effects of mobilization and repression by gathering data on the attitudes and experiences of individuals who lived through these violent episodes, or on their descendants. These studies have focused on cases where the repressive government has left the scene (Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov, 2019), or where the victims of repression have been officially rehabilitated (Wang, 2019).

What is more mysterious is the long-term legacy of these popular movements when the repressive regime remains in power and the movement itself remains taboo. In most cases, elites will weave narratives about repression into collective historical memory for instrumental or ideological reasons (Halbwachs, 1992; Wang, 2012). These narratives play a key role in giving these repressive episodes their political force. What is the impact of a mass movement that has been written out of collective memory?

In this paper we examine the long-term impact of a prominent example of this class of mass movement: the Tiananmen Square protests in China. For six weeks in the spring of 1989, students, intellectuals, and workers demonstrated to demand political reforms and accountability from their leaders. The protests began when thousands gathered to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang, a reformist Party leader who had been purged two years before. When the Party failed to step in immediately to break up the movement, signaling division at the top, the demands and aspirations of the protesters grew, and similar protests appeared in dozens of Chinese cities. The resulting political standoff was only broken when the Party high command sent in the army to clear Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds or perhaps thousands of protesters in the process.

As the Tiananmen protests grew larger, government officials who had been sympathetic to the students' concerns, such as General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, were removed from office. After the crackdown, the party poured

resources into maintaining social stability by developing an expansive internal security apparatus, locking down college campuses, and redesigning the education system to emphasize patriotic loyalty to party leadership (Zhao, 1998).

Our project lies at the nexus of three related literatures: repression, social movements, and trust. This study assesses the impact of both a massive social movement and the subsequent state crackdown on political trust. We use a unique survey of 1208 Chinese citizens who started college in Beijing between 1985 and 1994 to investigate the long-term legacy of the Tiananmen Incident. We find that individuals who were attending college in Beijing in 1989 during the protests at Tiananmen Square are significantly less likely to trust the regime, more than twenty-five years later, than individuals who started college immediately after the protests. This loss of trust is especially severe for the central government. The results from this analysis suggest that the memory of repression can erode political support for the regime even if the government that engaged in repression is still in power.

In the next section of this paper, we review previous research on the historical legacies of mobilization and repression, and lay out our theoretical expectations for how mobilization and repression affect political trust. We then explain some of the historical context related to the Tiananmen movement, introduce our data collection efforts and research design, and present the empirical results. The conclusion discusses the implications of our findings, both for students of historical legacies and for observers of Chinese politics.

Theoretical Expectations

Our expectations about the long-term impact of repression are a function of political context.[1] One strand of the literature has found that repression works, by producing obedience to the government. An authoritarian state can extract obedience by encouraging citizens to falsify their preferences (García-Ponce and Pasquale, 2015; Kuran, 1991; Lichbach, 1987; Young, 2019), inducing psychological adaptations in survivors of repression (Adler, 2010), and changing expectations about what the regime's response will be to potential challenges (Beissinger, 2002; Truex, 2019). Even after the relevant authorities pass from the scene, localities that experienced more repressive violence are more likely to abstain from politics (Zhukov and Talibova, 2018).

While repression is a vital tool for autocrats, it often produces unintended consequences. Experiencing repression can encourage opponents of the regime to develop the skills necessary to mount a determined resistance effort

(Finkel, 2015). In some contexts, memories of repressive violence can erode political support for the regime (or its successors) among both the original victims and their descendants (Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas et al., 2017), creating a "backlash effect." In cases where repression backfires, the memory of state brutality produces distrust of the government (Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011; Wang, 2019) and political disengagement (Wang, 2019; Zhukov and Talibova, 2018).[2]

Rozenas and Zhukov (2019) argue that these seemingly disparate results can be reconciled. In this account, the key factor for explaining the behavioral legacies of repression is the credibility of the state to engage in further repression. In particular, they argue that exposure to Stalin's repressive agricultural policy in Ukraine was associated with political acquiescence when Soviet rule was secure. But when Soviet rule was unstable, regions that were repressed became more likely to oppose Moscow's will, because political instability made the threat of punishment less credible. The backlash effect persists after the expiration of Soviet rule; regions that were repressed under Stalin are also more likely to vote against Russian interests (Rozenas and Zhukov, 2019).

We would anticipate that in the case of China, the Communist Party's ability to provide a credible threat of repression is an indication that individuals will falsify their preferences by supporting the regime and acquiescing to repression. In a study of the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Wang (2019) finds mixed support for this argument. Exposure to violent repression during the Cultural Revolution had divergent effects when it came to attitudes and participation. Individuals who are living today in localities that suffered more violence during the Cultural Revolution often become silent dissidents; they often critique the political system and are less likely to trust the government, but they are also less likely to participate in protests.

We might expect individuals who were exposed to the repression at Tiananmen to respond in similar ways. There are, however, a number of significant differences between these two events. In particular, while discussions about the violence of the Cultural Revolution are still censored by the media and the educational system, many of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution were publicly disavowed by the government after Mao's death (CCP Central Committee, 1981). Millions of victims of government persecution were rehabilitated, scores of senior officials were restored to power with the help of Deng and his allies, and a new genre that came to be known as scar literature emerged to commemorate the suffering of ordinary citizens (Lee, 1983).

The silence around Tiananmen is more complete. The democracy movement and its violent end remain one of the primary taboos in Chinese politics.

After the army cleared the square, the party leadership declared the protests a counterrevolutionary riot and focused on commemorating the sacrifices of the soldiers, rather than the suffering of the broader population. The protesters at Tiananmen have never been rehabilitated, despite the best efforts of activist and victims' groups, like the Tiananmen Mothers, and Zhao Ziyang remained in house arrest until his death in 2005 for advocating a different response to the protesters. The regime continues to observe anniversaries of the violence on June 4th by tightening controls on public discussion and pre-emptively detaining political dissidents (Truex, 2019). The campaign to stifle discussion of Tiananmen is not limited to domestic voices. In 2017, officials instructed Cambridge University Press to censor nearly every article published in *The China Quarterly* where Tiananmen appears in the title or the abstract (Wong and Kwong, 2019), as well as pieces on Tibet, Xinjiang, the Cultural Revolution, and other sensitive subjects. As a result of these efforts at suppression, many people who came of age after the Tiananmen protests have never grasped their full significance. Government censorship, patriotic education campaigns, and the threat of repression ensure that any reckoning with the Tiananmen protests is piecemeal and outside of the realm of common knowledge.

While we have learned a great deal about the historical legacies of authoritarianism and repression, most of what we have learned comes from studies of cases where the public has had a chance to investigate the causes and consequences of political violence. Collective commemorations play a major role in helping define the legacy of violence in historical memory by allowing citizens the chance to move beyond official positions and dissident narratives (Adler, 2010). The impact of violence that remains taboo is less clear; we might anticipate that the legacy of the crackdown would be more muted as a result of the absence of a collective historical image. Our study breaks new ground by identifying the impact of repression on public attitudes when an open discussion has not taken place.

We also provide a unique contribution to the study of political attitudes in China, particularly the study of political trust. Many observers have found that in China, the level of trust in the government among the general population is unusually high (Chen, 2004; Shi, 2001; Tang, 2005). Moreover, while citizens of other countries tend to trust local governments more than they do provincial or national ones, in China the opposite is true (Chen, 2017; Li, 2004, 2016; Wu and Wilkes, 2018). The source of this puzzle is the subject of ongoing debate. Some scholars argue that these differences are driven by differential coverage from the news media. While criticism of top leaders is taboo, malfeasance at the local level is often widely publicized by the media (Brady, 2008; Kennedy, 2009). Others say that these patterns are the product

of differing degrees of political sensitivity. If respondents are influenced by varying levels of social desirability bias, they may be more willing to admit dissatisfaction with local officials than with central ones (Li, 2013). Finally, some scholars suggest that the gap between central and local trust is a product of institutional design. In this account, the central government delegates potentially unpopular functions to local governments. In the event of a crisis, or if local officials turn out to be too corrupt or incompetent to carry out the work assigned to them, the central government has another institution ready to take the blame, as well as the opportunity to take credit for rectifying the situation (Cai, 2008; Cui et al., 2015; Lü, 2014).

One of the exceptional characteristics of the Tiananmen Incident was the obvious culpability of the central government. Premier Li Peng and other central officials met with protesters to try to convince them to abandon their demands, and the top leaders bore clear responsibility for ordering the crackdown. The usual difficulty of attributing blame to the right level of government was absent. In our analysis, we test whether these differences shape political trust toward the central, provincial, and local government. We expect that exposure to Tiananmen will have the greatest effect on trust in the central government.

The Tiananmen Movement

The individuals who joined the Tiananmen Movement saw themselves as the latest participants in a long tradition of activism. The most important previous antecedent to the movement was the May 4th movement of 1919, which began as a series of anti-imperialist and nationalist protests and eventually developed into a popular call for science and democracy. In the spring of 1989, students and intellectuals planned to mark the 70th anniversary of the May 4th movement with a protest in Tiananmen Square. But when Hu Yaobang died on April 15, the students moved up the protest (Calhoun, 1994). Hu had been Deng Xiaoping's erstwhile successor and a political reformer who was purged for his handling of student protests in 1986, and the students took the occasion of his death to present a set of demands for reform. The initial protests were relatively traditional in character (Zhao, 2001), and asked the government to re-evaluate Hu Yaobang, end press censorship, and publicly account for the wealth of government officials and their families. The government was divided in its response but eventually condemned the protests in an April 26th editorial in the *People's Daily*, which described the bulk of the protesters as well-meaning but led astray by a small number of "black hands" and foreign agitators who were attempting to foment *dongluan*, or turmoil.

The next day some $100,000$ students, who comprised a majority of those enrolled in Beijing's universities, marched to demand that the government retract the *People's Daily* editorial which they saw as an affront (Zhao, 2001). Divisions within the government hampered the state response to the widening protests. Hardliners, such as Premier Li Peng, argued that the government should mount a forceful response, but General Secretary Zhao Ziyang favored dialogue with the students (Vogel, 2011).

Meanwhile, the protests expanded in both their scope and their membership. A group of workers calling themselves the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation joined with the students, and sympathetic members of the media began to report more forthrightly on the student protests; hundreds of journalists joined with the students during another march on May 4th (Calhoun, 1994).

Abortive attempts at dialogue with government officials proved unsatisfactory, and more radical demands came to the fore. Student activists launched a hunger strike on May 12th; before long, 3,000 people had joined the strike, which was covered not only by emboldened domestic media but also by international news outlets which had originally come to Beijing to report on the state visit of Mikhail Gorbachev on May 15th. By the middle of May, government control over the news media had nearly collapsed, and the majority of the stories printed in the *People's Daily* and other newspapers strongly favored the students (Zhao, 2001). The news coverage helped the protests continue to gather momentum; more than a million people joined in the marches on May 17th (Zhao, 2001).

The renewed student protests and the chaos surrounding Gorbachev's visit strengthened the hand of Li Peng and the other hardliners, and with Deng Xiaoping's blessing, they purged Zhao Ziyang and began to prepare the military to intervene (Zhang et al., 2001). The government declared martial law on May 19th, and began to regain control of the media by sending troops to occupy major media outlets in the capital. The initial efforts to dislodge the protesters were unsuccessful. Beijing citizens set up makeshift barricades and lectured the soldiers about their duty to protect the people, rather than repress them. The authorities responded by withdrawing these troops and replacing them with other units which had been fed a steady diet of propaganda (Lim, 2014).

Faced with the prospect of state repression, many of the Beijing students left the protests and returned to class. Their leaders tried to organize a withdrawal from Tiananmen Square, but a new contingent of students who had traveled to Beijing from the provinces refused to go along with a retreat, and the occupation of the square continued. This stalemate continued until the

party high command ordered a second wave of troops to clear the square. As they forced their way through the city, the troops opened fire, killing hundreds of people and suffering many casualties of their own in the process. Early in the morning on June 4th, the troops surrounded Tiananmen Square, and the remaining students decided to withdraw rather than risk further bloodshed.

After crushing the protests at Tiananmen, the Party renewed its efforts to exert control over college campuses. Officials sent incoming freshmen at Peking University to a year-long military training program, revived Mao-era efforts to study models of Communist rectitude, pushed for the creation of new groups to study Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, and redoubled efforts to recruit college students into the Party (Genevaz, 2019; Guo, 2005; Rosen, 1993). A new state-led patriotic education campaign sought to equate patriotism with support for the state (Zhao, 1998), while new monitoring institutions and networks of informants helped Party officials stay on top of developments on college campuses (Yan, 2014).

Initial evaluations of these re-education efforts suggested that they were of limited effectiveness. In particular they were more successful at reaching new students than students who had been on campus in the Spring of 1989 (Rosen, 1993). Over the years, however, the Party's efforts may have had an effect; college students today have become much less likely to engage in overt activism than the students of the 1980s. For many of those who came of age in later years, the purpose of the Tiananmen movement is muddled or obscure (Lim, 2014).

Design and Identification

Investigating the impact of exposure to the Tiananmen protests and the subsequent crackdown on political attitudes is challenging for several reasons. The political sensitivity surrounding Tiananmen prevents direct measurement of respondent attitudes, both because respondents themselves are unlikely to provide unbiased reports of their own participation and because the threat of government punishment prevents survey research firms from fielding a questionnaire that asks specifically about Tiananmen. Because of these challenges, we do not have a direct measure of participation in the protests, or exposure to violence.

As a result, in this study we explore the impact of Tiananmen on political attitudes indirectly. We do this by surveying Beijing residents who were either enrolled in college in Beijing at the time of the protests or who enrolled in college immediately afterwards.

Our approach hinges upon the idea that individuals who started college between 1985 and 1988 were much more likely to be directly exposed to the Tiananmen protests than those who started in the fall of 1989 or later. For students who were enrolled in college at the time of Tiananmen, strong social ties ensured that the level of participation in the protests was exceptionally high. College students in Beijing lived for the most part in dormitory rooms shared by six to eight other students. As a result, information about the protests spread quickly amongst the students once the movement got off the ground. The dense social ties between the students also made it easier for participants to monitor and sanction one another. Once the norm of participating in the protests emerged, it became costly for students to decline to participate; individuals who chose to stay out of the movement were often ostracized (Zhao, 2001).

Once information about the protests circulated at one university, it also spread rapidly to others because of the geography of Beijing. The vast majority of universities and students in Beijing are concentrated in the Haidian district, and student leaders during the movement often traveled between campuses to keep abreast of developments and serve as liaisons. As a result of these factors, the proportion of students who took part in the protests was exceptionally high. An estimated 100,000 students participated, for instance, in the April 27th demonstration, while full-time enrollment for Beijing's 67 universities at the time was around 141,600 students. As a result, virtually everyone who was enrolled in a Beijing university at the time of the Tiananmen movement was directly exposed[3] to the protests and the crackdown.

Direct exposure to the Tiananmen movement was much more limited for those who were still in high school in the spring of 1989. While many high school students also participated in the Tiananmen movement, particularly as the movement expanded beyond college campuses, the members of our sample who were still in high school during the Spring of 1989 were less likely to be directly exposed to the Tiananmen movement for several reasons. Many future college students attended high school outside of the capital and did not move to Beijing until they enrolled in university after the conclusion of the movement.[4] Most college-bound high school students were preoccupied with preparing for the grueling national college entrance exam under the watchful eye of their parents, who generally discouraged them from getting involved in the movement.

While most decisions about when to enroll in university were determined by when respondents began primary school, it was possible for students, parents, or school officials to change when they enrolled in university, and as a result there is some potential for endogeneity.[5] To alleviate concerns about the potential for pre-treatment differences between different cohorts, we also

conduct a fuzzy regression discontinuity analysis, using birthdate as an instrument for the year of college enrollment.

In theory, students who were born before September 1, 1970 would be on track to enroll in college in the fall of 1988 and experience the Tiananmen movement firsthand, while students who were born after September 1st would enroll in the fall of 1989 and miss direct exposure to the movement. In practice, compliance with this cutoff was uneven. Some students attended college earlier than expected because their parents and school officials pushed them up. Students who did not comply with the cutoff were however more likely to enroll late, either because they failed the college entrance exams the first time, or because they began their studies after a reform that mandated six years of primary school instead of five.[6] While the cutoff was not strictly enforced, the students were nevertheless unable to precisely determine their future exposure to Tiananmen, so a fuzzy regression discontinuity approach is appropriate (Lee and Lemieux, 2010).

A fuzzy regression discontinuity design addresses the ability of individuals to manipulate their assignment into treatment or control, by using a two stage approach. In the first stage, exogenous predictors of assignment to treatment or control are used to create an instrument for treatment. In the second stage, this exogenous instrument for treatment is used to measure the causal effect of the treatment. For the first stage regression, we propose the following model specification:

$$T = \alpha + \beta_1 C + \beta_2 D + \varepsilon.$$

Here T indicates students' treatment[7] status in the movement. More specifically, $T = 1$ implies a student was in college in the spring of 1989 and $T = 0$ indicates that he/she was in high school. α, β_1, and β_2 are regression coefficients, and ε is the error term. C is a dummy variable where $C = 1$ if a student was born before the education entry cutoff of September 1970 and $C = 0$ if not. A continuous variable D captures the difference between students' birthdates and the cutoff variable C. We compare our results with results when using an alternative first-stage model which includes polynomials and interactions of C and D.

One particular advantage of our design is that it addresses two important challenges to understanding the impact of movements. First, there is an endogeneity challenge. Participants in social movements typically self-select into such organizations. This creates challenges for identification, as participants may be uniquely different than non-participants. In the case of the Tiananmen movement, however, nearly all students in Beijing directly participated in or were heavily exposed to the movement. This exposure, however, was

completely unexpected just a few months before it occurred. Second, in authoritarian regimes, such movements are often extremely sensitive and cannot be discussed. Indeed, in the case of China, we cannot ask about participation, survey firms would refuse to field a study asking about participation, and respondents would almost certainly fail to answer questions about participation. The spontaneous character and massive reach of the movement thus addresses both challenges. Assignment to college during or after the movement was pre-determined long before students mobilized and was unrelated to political attitudes. In addition, the massive size of the movement allows us to use enrollment cohort as a proxy for exposure.

To be clear, participation in the Tiananmen movement combines the experiences of mobilization and repression, as is typical of movements in authoritarian regimes. In other words, this is a "compound treatment."[8] We note first that repression is rarely an exogenously and randomly administered form of state violence. Typically, repression is provoked by a regime's perception of a threat, and much research on the impact of repression is in fact research on the impact of both mobilization and repression. In some cases, non-mobilized individuals suffer state violence, especially in cases of indiscriminate repression. However, the same community that is repressed has often been mobilized in some way that a regime finds threatening. In the literature, research on repression generally involves such compound effects (Balcells, 2012; Rozenas et al., 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov, 2019; Wang, 2019).

This implies that, in many cases, the impact of repression should be understood as combining both the impact of the repression and the impact of the mobilization and movement experience. This is certainly the case for the Tiananmen Incident, where students mobilized into a massive movement that was a unique and life-changing experience, then saw that movement repressed by the state and an enduring set of social controls imposed. Thus, more than just thinking about repression, we must also consider the impact of mobilization, protest, or other forms of collective challenge to a state. This mobilization may be just as influential as the repression, and in many cases, it may be impossible to separate the two.

For students in college in the Spring of 1989, they participated in or were heavily exposed to both the movement and the repression that followed. They would have seen organizing events and rallies on campus, heard speeches and joined marches, and protested in Tiananmen Square. They also would have seen an increased security presence and the army's violent drive to clear Tiananmen Square.

Post-Tiananmen China provided a very different college experience. Protest, mobilization, and dissent were aggressively discouraged, the media was tightly controlled, and discussion of the Tiananmen Incident remains

Table 1. Differences Between the Tiananmen and Post-Tiananmen Cohort.

	Tiananmen Cohort	Post-Tiananmen Cohort
Mobilization	Yes, students were mobilized in massive pro-democracy movement	No, students were in high school, many not in Beijing
Repression	Yes, movement was violently repressed	No, students were in high school, many not in Beijing
Military training	Yes, students had military training before college	Yes, students had military training before college*
Enduring state control	Yes, censorship and restrictions on political activity	Yes, censorship and restrictions on political activity

*Military training was more extensive for some Post-Tiananmen students, particularly those at Peking University.

Table 2. Survey Methods and Number of Observations.

Method	Respondents	Percent of sample (%)
Email	14	1.2
Online	1108	91.7
Face to face	16	1.3
Telephone	70	5.8
Total	1208	100.0

suppressed. This new environment affected both the Tiananmen and post-Tiananmen cohorts, but only the Tiananmen cohort was mobilized and then violently repressed by the state. Table 1 summarizes the different experiences of these two cohorts.[9]

Data

Our data come from a survey of Chinese citizens who attended college in Beijing.[10] The survey was implemented between May 2015 and September 2015. Table 2 reports the mix of survey methods used and the number of people surveyed by each strategy. Most of the data was collected through an online survey. Our sample of interest is college graduates between the ages of 40 and 49 who entered four-year colleges in Beijing between 1985 and 1994. The survey asked respondents to report the years that they were studying at university as well as their birth month and year. These variables are used to

measure our main independent variable, the degree of exposure to the student movement and the crackdown.

Our main dependent variable is the level of trust that our respondents have in government. Our survey contains three different measures of political trust, which capture the degree to which respondents trust central, provincial-level, and county-level leaders. The text of our survey measure is included below:

How much do you trust central and local government leaders? Please use 0 on the scale to represent complete distrust, and 10 to represent complete trust. You can pick any number between 0 and 10 to express your opinion.

	Complete distrust										Complete trust
Central leaders	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Provincial leaders	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
County leaders	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Table 3 presents the summary statistics for our survey, broken down into the cohorts who were enrolled in university at the time of Tiananmen, and the ones who enrolled afterwards. The two cohorts are quite similar when it comes to pre-treatment covariates, such as gender and hometown, though the control group tends to be a bit older at the time they start college. The post-treatment variables show slightly more divergence—the older cohort is more likely to have received an advanced degree and earns a higher income on average. These differences could be a product of exposure to the Tiananmen incident or patterns associated with life-cycle effects, since the Tiananmen cohort is slightly older than the post-Tiananmen respondents.

Results

Figure 1 shows the relationship between birthdate and assignment to treatment. The *x*-axis is the birthdate of our respondents in month-year bins, while the *y*-axis is the proportion of respondents who were assigned to the treatment category because they were attending college during the Spring of 1989. The vertical line at September 1970 is the cutoff; if assignment were perfect, all students born before the official enrollment deadline in September 1970 would be attending college during the Spring of 1989, while all students born afterwards would not.

Table 3. Summary Statistics.

Variable	Control (enrolled after Tiananmen)	Treatment (enrolled during Tiananmen)	Overall
Age enter college	19.6	18.8	19.4
Where respondent grew up (%)			
Village	19.4	18.3	19.1
Small town	20.1	17.7	19.5
City	60.5	64.0	61.4
Gender (%)			
Male	65.0	65.0	65.0
Female	35.0	35.0	35.0
Marital status (%)			
Single	5.8	6.9	6.1
Married	94.2	93.1	93.9
Education (%)			
BA	68.9	56.4	65.7
MA	21.8	29.3	23.8
PhD	9.3	14.2	10.6
Income in thousands of RMB (%)			
0–5	3.8	2.2	3.4
5–10	11.1	15.4	12.3
10–20	36.1	35.0	35.8
20–30	23.7	19.9	22.7
30–40	9.8	5.7	8.7
40–50	6.9	5.4	6.5
50–80	3.5	5.7	4.1
80–100	2.4	3.5	2.7
100+	2.8	7.3	4.0
N	891	317	1208

Treatment assignment is imperfect for a number of reasons. A few students attended college earlier than they were expected to because their schools did not strictly enforce the enrollment deadline. What was more common was for students to begin college late, either because they were part of the cohort of students who attended elementary school for 6 years, because they worked before attending university, or because they failed the annual college entrance exam the first time they took it. As a consequence of this pattern, several hundred students in our sample are part of the control group, rather than the treatment group.
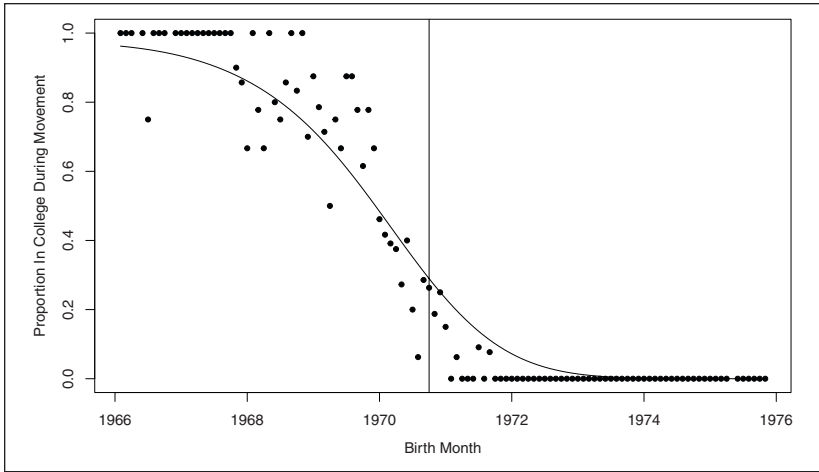
Figure 1. Birth month for our respondents predicts exposure to the Tiananmen protests. Each point depicts the proportion of respondents born in a given month who were enrolled in college in the Spring of 1989. The vertical line is the September 1, 1970 cutoff which divides students who were expected to begin college in the Fall of 1988 or earlier from those who were expected to enroll in the Fall of 1989 or later. The trend line is a kernel smoother.

We break down the average level of trust in the central, provincial, and local levels of government for each cohort of students in Figure 2. The data shows that the individuals in our sample followed the pattern of hierarchical trust established in other studies of Chinese citizens; individuals in both the treatment and control conditions are more likely to trust the central government than the provincial government, while the local government is the least trusted. Figure 2 also shows that on average, individuals who entered college between 1985 and 1988 are less likely to trust the government than individuals who enrolled between the fall of 1989 and 1994. The gap is the clearest for trust in the central government.

Table 4 shows the results from the first stage of our models, which predict assignment to treatment or control. Our regressions in these models predict exposure to Tiananmen (T) by using two different variables: an indicator variable that captures whether an individual was born before the cutpoint (September 1970), and the difference between an individual's birthdate and the cutpoint. The predictive power of the models is lowest when the bandwidth is relatively narrow; the R^2 for the narrowest window is 0.152. As more data is incorporated, the models do better at predicting assignment to treatment. If our bandwidth encompasses the entire dataset, the R^2 is 0.511.
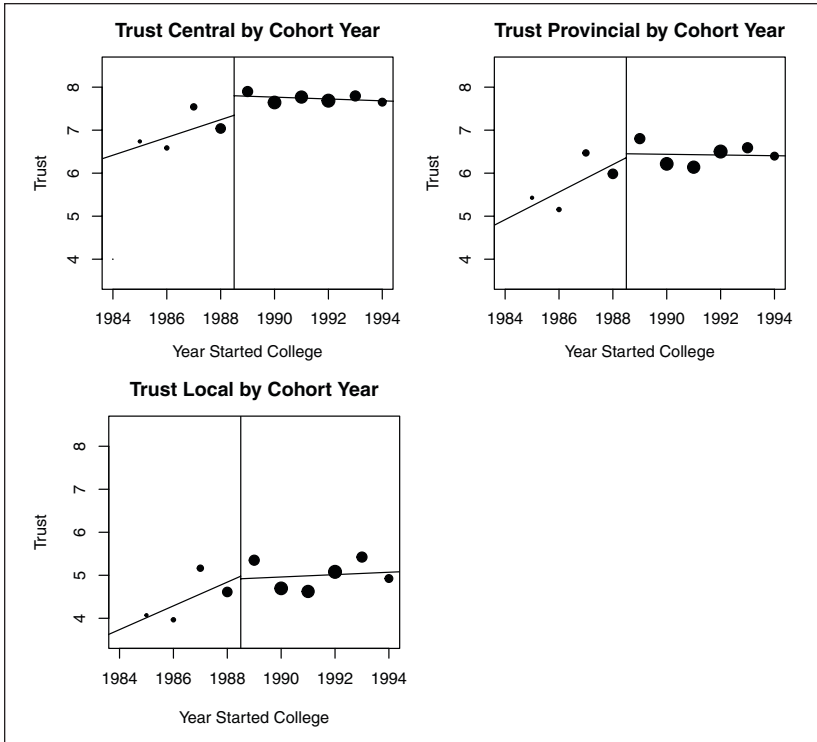
Figure 2. The level of trust in the central, provincial, and local government for our sample, as a function of the year they enrolled in university. The size of the dots is proportional to the number of individuals surveyed in each cohort.

We present additional first stage results in Table A.1 in the Supplemental Appendix.

Table 5 presents our estimates of the effect of exposure to Tiananmen on trust in the government. The rows correspond to trust in the central, provincial or local government, while the columns delineate the type of model we estimated. The control variables are not listed in the table, but they include education, membership in the Communist Party, state sector employment, income, and marital status. Our analysis was pre-registered, and the full results are presented in the Supplemental Appendix Tables A.2, A.3, and A.4. The results are significant at a 0.05 level in five of the six models, and at a 0.10 level in the Fuzzy RD model estimated with controls where polynomials are not used. The impact of exposure to Tiananmen has the right sign in all of the models estimated for trust in government at the local and provincial

Table 4. Simple First Stage Models for Fuzzy RDD.

	Cohort years included					
	1988–1989	1987–1990	1986–1991	1985–1992	1984–1993	1984–1994
Intercept (α)	0.364*	0.253*	0.252*	0.237*	0.233*	0.225*
	(0.056)	(0.034)	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.019)
Born before	0.082	0.184*	0.208*	0.262*	0.268*	0.285*
cutoff (β_1)	(0.085)	(0.056)	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.033)	(0.031)
Birthdate -	−0.183*	−0.166*	−0.140*	−0.106*	−0.094*	−0.085*
cutoff (β_2)	(0.044)	(0.022)	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.007)
R^2	0.152	0.336	0.450	0.501	0.505	0.511
N	262	514	734	944	1084	1190

Note. First stage results that present the relationship between when a respondent was born and T, exposure to Tiananmen, for students entering college in a range of year cohorts. The dependent variable, T, is an indicator variable that captures assignment to treatment or control. The combination of whether a respondent was born before the cutoff (September 1970) and the number of days between their birthdate and the cutoff successfully predicts exposure to Tiananmen for broader bandwidths. These results support the use of these two variables as instruments for treatment assignment.
*$p < 0.05$.

Table 5. Trust in the Central Government is Significantly Lower for Tiananmen Cohort.

	OLS		Fuzzy RDD – IV			
Impact on trust in:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Central government	−0.72*	−0.51*	−0.36*	−0.30†	−0.50*	−0.40*
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.20)
Provincial government	−0.57*	−0.35*	−0.18	−0.10	−0.36†	−0.23
	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.21)
Local government	−0.45*	−0.25†	−0.26	−0.17	−0.41*	−0.27
	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.24)	(0.24)
Controls included?		✓		✓		✓
Polynomial model?					✓	✓
N	1208	1208	1190	1190	1190	1190

Note. Each cell presents an estimated coefficient and standard error (in parentheses) for T, our indicator variable, which captures exposure to Tiananmen. Each row corresponds to a different dependent variable, and each column corresponds to a different model and specification. The control variables included education, Communist party membership, state sector employment, income, and marital status. The full results are available in the Supplemental Appendix.
*$p < 0.05$, †$p < 0.10$, one-sided, pre-registered tests.

levels, but these estimates are not always statistically significant. Figure 3 presents a summary of the results from model 2 and model 6 from Table 5.
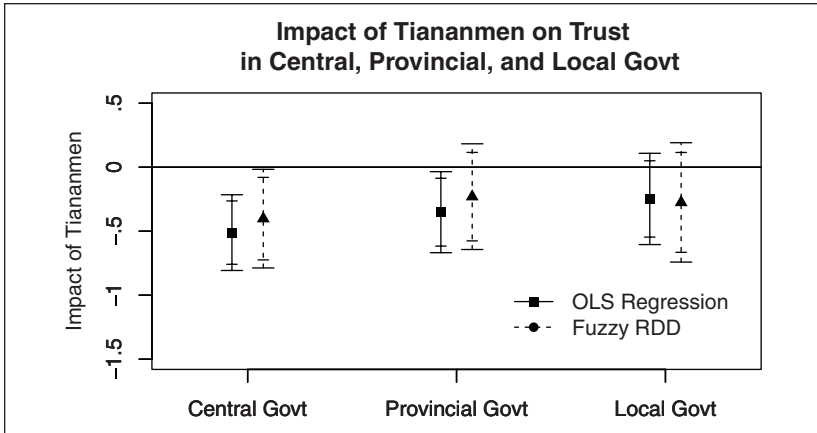
Figure 3. Tiananmen reduces trust in central government. OLS and Fuzzy RDD estimates of the impact of Tiananmen on trust in central, provincial, and local government. The points are estimated coefficients and the lines show 90% and 95% confidence intervals for our estimates. The results correspond to columns (2) and (6) in Table 5.

The figure shows that individuals who were exposed to Tiananmen are significantly less likely to trust the central government. These results hold for both OLS and Fuzzy RD specifications using instrumental variables, and are robust to conditioning on our socioeconomic control variables.[11]

The magnitude of these effects is substantively important. Exposure to Tiananmen leads to a decline in trust in the central government of 3.9 - 9.3 %, depending on the model specification. Trust in the provincial government declines 1.5 - 8.9 %, while trust in the local government declines 3.4 - 9.0 %. These results are comparable to the effect that Wang (2019) finds in his study of the Cultural Revolution, where one additional death per 1000 people between 1966 to 1971 in a given locality led to a 6.5 % decline in trust in central leaders for respondents who were surveyed in that same locality, 40 years later.

Discussion

Our findings show that the Tiananmen protests have had a persistent effect on the political attitudes of Chinese citizens. While the government suppressed the movement and continues to try to erase it from collective memory, the individuals who were enrolled in a college in Beijing in the spring of 1989,

and thereby directly exposed to the movement, are still less likely to trust the government than individuals who began their studies after the crackdown. The difference that we observe is consistent, statistically significant in most specifications, and of substantive importance.

We find that members of the treatment group, who were already college students at the time of the 1989 student movement, were significantly less likely to trust political leaders, compared to their counterparts who started college after the end of the 1989 student movement. Trust in the central government suffered the largest decline for members of the treated group, relative to the control group. This suggests that the respondents who experienced the Tiananmen movement and the subsequent crackdown were especially likely to blame the central government for what transpired.

How did exposure to Tiananmen erode trust, particularly trust in the central government? We argue that the revelation of information about the center that occurred at Tiananmen is one mechanism that helps explain our results. In most cases, citizens with grievances with a local government office or policy continue to idealize top leaders and express confidence in the good intentions of the center (O'Brien and Li, 2006). Because they trust that the central government has their best interests at heart, these citizens are willing to engage in "rightful resistance" against local misconduct in the hope that the central government will intervene on their behalf.

Both the movement and the crackdown at Tiananmen challenged this set of beliefs about central benevolence. After the protests took root, student leaders engaged in organized dialogues with central leaders, such as Premier Li Peng, which they found unsatisfactory. The declaration of martial law and the decision to use force also revealed information about the center's motives and intentions which helped dispel popular notions about the moral virtue of the state. Taken together, this informational mechanism helps explain one of the most important patterns in our results—the disproportionate erosion in trust in the central government.

Why would the experience of Tiananmen under one set of political leaders still have an effect on political trust, more than twenty-five years later? One key reason is that there remains broad continuity in both party policies and leadership in the intervening period. Leaders like Zhao Ziyang who expressed dissenting views about the crackdown were purged, while the party leaders who were empowered in the wake of Tiananmen, such as Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, were chosen in large part because of their ability to successfully suppress unrest. Moreover, in authoritarian regimes citizens commonly do not draw clear distinctions between individual leaders and the regime as a whole (Lu and Dickson, 2020). As a result, if we conceptualize political trust as a heuristic that helps citizens decide if the political system will produce

preferred outcomes when left untended (Gamson, 1968), then the effect of direct exposure to violence at an earlier point is liable to influence contemporary evaluations of the same regime. Wang (2019) finds a similar degree of persistence over a longer period of time with respect to the Cultural Revolution's enduring impact on political attitudes, which is consistent with what we find for Tiananmen.

There are a number of important caveats to bear in mind when we consider the implications of these results. First, because the government crackdown followed on the heels of the mass mobilizations of April and May 1989, we are unable to distinguish between the impact of exposure to the student movement and exposure to its violent end. When we consider our treatment in this study, we conceive of it as exposure to the Tiananmen Incident as a whole, that is, both the movement and the crackdown.

Second, the results that we find are likely to be an underestimate in some ways of the impact of the crackdown. After Tiananmen, one of the ways the government re-exerted control over former participants was by controlling whether they could remain in Beijing. Participants who demonstrated ideological commitment to the regime were more likely to be allowed to stay (Rosen, 1993). Many of the most disheartened students decided to move abroad after June 4th, and some had the chance to apply for political asylum outside of China (Zhao, 2001). Since our sampling strategy focused on residents of Beijing, we may be missing many of the most ideologically committed members of the Tiananmen cohort. We might imagine that individuals who chose to exit after their attempts at voicing their discontents were crushed would be less likely to trust the government than those who managed to stay behind in the capital. These considerations mean that our results are biased toward zero, which attenuates the effects that we estimate; the upshot is that our findings are especially robust.

Third, political sensitivity is another potential source of bias in our results. The evidence for self-censorship in Chinese public opinion surveys is mixed; while several studies have found evidence for self-censorship in measures of political support, others cast doubt on the prevalence of political wariness. Some studies have found that Chinese respondents are likely to overstate their support for the government (Robinson and Tannenberg, 2019; Shen and Truex, 2020), and their trust in the central government (Ratigan and Rabin, 2020). Others argue that political sensitivity is unlikely to be severe enough to inflate measures of trust. Stockmann et al. (2018) show that the Communist Party is associated with positive emotions, rather than political fear, while Lei and Lu (2017) show that respondents do not become more reticent when they are interviewed by enumerators who wear a Party emblem.

In the case of Tiananmen, political sensitivity may be an especially important consideration, since political purges can induce some respondents to misrepresent their support for the regime. Jiang and Yang (2016) find, for instance, that respondents living in Shanghai were more likely to overstate their support for the regime after their party secretary was purged in 2006, though in that case the impact of heightened sensitivity receded after several weeks. If exposure to a political purge is correlated with overstated regime support, then we might anticipate that respondents who were enrolled in university at the time of the crackdown are more likely to say they trust the government. Since attitudes toward top leaders are more sensitive, we would anticipate that wary respondents would be the most likely to overstate their trust in the center, which would make it more difficult for us to identify the effect that we have outlined.

After the party crushed the student movement, it set about reshaping the education and propaganda apparatus to prevent another mass uprising from taking shape. The new incoming freshman class at Peking University in the fall of 1989, for instance, spent its entire first year at a military base in Shijiazhuang, 160 miles from Beijing, absorbing party propaganda and military discipline (Genevaz, 2019; Rosen, 1993). Some may wonder whether the results we find about political trust are a product of this redoubled attention to political indoctrination, rather than a product of exposure to the Tiananmen protests.

While we are unable to completely isolate the impact of these re-education efforts, we are able to examine the impact of military training by comparing students from Peking University with students who attended peer institutions. We show in Table A.5 in the Supplemental Appendix that students who attended the year-long training program were actually less likely to trust the regime than those who attended shorter training programs at comparable universities. We also show in Supplemental Table A.6 that Peking students who attended the year-long military training do not trust the government any more than Peking students who started college in 1993 or later, after the program had been cancelled.

Furthermore, our trust measures for individuals who began at any university in Beijing after the fall of 1989 were quite stable, while the government's indoctrination efforts waned as time passed. Taken together, these results indicate that variation in these re-education efforts do not do a satisfactory job of explaining the variation we see in the trust measures, and that exposure to the Tiananmen movement was more important.

Because our analysis is based on the experience of individuals who attended college in Beijing, we have a hard time assessing the impact of

Tiananmen on other types of participants, such as the workers and citizens who joined with the students as the protests wore on. We also do not draw specific inferences about the legacy of the movement outside the capital. As the Tiananmen protests developed, similar protests emerged in many other Chinese cities, and news of the movement filtered down into the political consciousness in rural areas as well. More work is needed to uncover the long-term impact of Tiananmen in these settings.

We have however, found clear evidence of the impact of Tiananmen on the political attitudes of those who lived through it. The legacy of the protests and the Party's crackdown is a trust deficit that lingers on.

Conclusion

Thirty years have passed since the protests at Tiananmen, but the memory of the protests continues to haunt the regime. The Party's efforts to suppress the history of Tiananmen have intensified under Xi Jinping (Schell, 2016; Tiffert, 2019). In 2013, the Central Committee issued a "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere," better known as Document 9, which subsequently leaked to the press. Document 9 instructed Party cadres to prepare themselves for ideological conflict with the West and to watch for seven dangerous ideological trends, which included attempts to promote civil society, freedom of the press, and constitutional democracy, as well as efforts to spread "historical nihilism," which is the label that the Party has affixed to challenges to the party's historical narratives. Document 9 warns officials that Western anti-China forces and internal dissidents are disseminating open letters and petitions calling for a reversal of the party's verdict on Tiananmen, and that these challenges are part of a larger effort to infiltrate China's ideological sphere (ChinaFile, 2013).

Our research helps explain why the Party has tried so hard to control the narrative over Tiananmen. The evidence we have assembled suggests that those who lived through the protests are still markedly less likely to trust the regime. Moreover, in some ways, the legacy of Tiananmen is uniquely threatening. Other citizens who develop grievances with the government in China often blame local authorities, rather than the center. Peasants who have their land seized, for instance, tend to be less likely to trust local officials afterwards, while their opinion of the central government is typically unchanged (Cui et al., 2015).[12] In the case of Tiananmen, our findings suggest that the opposite was true; individuals who were exposed to Tiananmen were more likely to revise their opinion of the central government. The danger inherent in this line of thinking may provide one explanation for why the government continues to suppress discussion of Tiananmen, 30 years later.

Most autocracies try to suppress discussions of their repressive acts and to prevent these narratives from being incorporated into collective memory. But after the original autocrats lose power, their victims and their political opponents have the opportunity to reshape the historical memory of their societies. A growing body of research on the historical legacies of violence has found that repression has persistent effects on both political attitudes and political behavior, but this body of work focuses on cases where the original repressers are no longer in power, and the victims of repression have begun to tell their story (Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov, 2019; Wang, 2019). Our study breaks new ground by showing that repression can erode political trust in an authoritarian context, even in a case where the repressers remain in power, and official silence remains in force. Future research can build on our work by examining the ways in which collective memory develops and recreates the legacies of repression in other contexts.

ORCID iD

Jason Y. Wu ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4566-3679

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See Simpser et al. (2018) for a review.
2. In some contexts, the legacy of state violence is associated with increases in voting, voluntarism, and prosocial behavior (Bauer et al., 2016; Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009). These effects, however, often go hand-in-hand with lower levels of trust, either in central government institutions (Grosjean, 2014), or in mixed communities (Cassar et al., 2013). In a review, Bauer et al. (2016) show that the overall effect on trust in nine separate studies is centered on zero.
3. We consider individuals who possessed first-hand experience of the protest movement and the crackdown on June 4th to have direct exposure. Individuals who heard about the movement second-hand or from the media have indirect exposure. Nearly all of the individuals who we categorize as indirectly exposed experienced the government's efforts to clamp down on activism in the weeks and months after June 4th.
4. While some of these students may have been exposed to the protests taking place in their hometowns, those protests did not typically have the reach of the protests in Beijing.
5. But because enrollment decisions were mediated by the national college entrance exam, most applicants did not have precise control over when they would be able to enroll.
6. In 1980, Chinese government decided to abolish the $5 + 3 + 3$ model of education (5 years of primary school, 3 years of middle school, and 3 years of high school) and extended primary education to 6 years. This policy was first applied in some regions before rolling out nationwide. The impact of this exogenous education policy reform on our treatment assignment is pretty straightforward. First, a student who was born before 1970 was highly likely to take a $5 + 3 + 3$ model of education and the probability of attending college before 1989 should be much higher as well. It was very difficult for a younger student who followed a $6 + 3 + 3$ education model to take the college entrance exams before 1989. A consequence of this reform is that the number of prospective college students dropped from 2,720,000 in 1988 to 2,660,000 in 1989 and then jumped to 2,830,000 in 1990. From 1985 to 1988, on average more than 60% of new admitted students were younger than 19, but starting in 1989, typically less than 40% of students who entered college were younger than 19.
7. The effect that we are identifying is not the average treatment effect, but rather the local average treatment effect (LATE) for the subpopulation of compliers, where the forcing variable is at the cutoff. This can be understood as a weighted LATE, where the weights reflect the likelihood that an individual is near the threshold (Bertanha and Imbens, 2020; Lee and Lemieux, 2010).
8. We suspect that different aspects of this compound treatment have different effects. For example, the mobilization and rallies and marches where students discussed democracy and civil liberties may have changed attitudes about regime type—increasing support for democratic forms of government and freedom of

the press. On the other hand, we suspect that state violence and repression would have affected trust and affect toward the incumbent regime. We cannot imagine any way to separate these mechanisms with our study, and doing so might be impossible in many cases where mobilization and repression are closely linked, but future research may find appropriate cases or designs that are able to do so.

9. We must note as well that many high school students participated in the movement, but most of these students would not have been in college the following fall. In addition, at Peking University, military training increased significantly, starting in the fall of 1989. We identify and test for the impact of this training in the Supplemental Appendix.
10. The replication files are available through the Harvard Dataverse. See Desposato et al. (2020).
11. We also present the results of a placebo test, which shows that exposure to Tiananmen did not affect perceptions of China's role in regional affairs, in the Supplemental Appendix Tables A.11 and A.12.
12. We should note, however, that individuals who follow this hierarchical trust pattern (i.e., they trust the center more than they do local governments) are still more likely to be dissatisfied with the level of democracy in China than individuals who trust all levels of government (Li, 2016).

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Author Biographies

Scott W. Desposato is professor of Political Science and Simón Bolívar Chair of Latin American Studies at the University of California, San Diego. His research focuses on attitudes, institutions, and ethics.

Gang Wang research focuses on comparative political studies and political communication.

Jason Y. Wu is an assistant professor of Political Science at Indiana University, Bloomington. His research focuses on ideology and public opinion in China.