

Voluntary Sacrifice of Freedom: Why Are Some Chinese Nationals Supporting Government  
Censorship?  
(Preliminary Draft)

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## **Abstract**

While the effects of government censorship are widely explored in the literature, most works on government censorship have assumed a nature intention for citizens to seek freedom of speech in authoritarian regimes. However, citizens in authoritarian regimes may actually support government censorship due to various reasons. In this study, I explore the potential reasons of citizen's support towards government censorship in China among Chinese nationals both domestic and abroad. Also, I will investigate individual's willingness to self-censor and the types of censorship one would likely to give consent to. Adopting a mixed methodology design consisting of an online survey experiment, a cross-national online survey and a semi-structured qualitative interview, I examine the following factors of interest: (1) personal experience of government censorship, (2) personal pursuit of democracy as an ideal form of government, and (3) the political environment experienced by individuals. The preliminary analysis based on the Seventh Wave of World Value Survey data shows a negative relationship between the personal pursuit of democracy as an ideal form of government and one's support of government censorship. The pursuit of ideal democracy is also demonstrated to be a more consistent predictor of support towards censorship compared to political ideology, when compared across countries.

*Keywords:* China, authoritarian support, government censorship, authoritarianism, political communication

## Introduction

Recently, the executive order from President Trump on banning the use of WeChat, a Chinese social media platform, in the US due to national security concerns gives rise to the concern over the freedom of speech. The phenomenon of interest, however, is not the executive order itself, but the response given by the public: While some Chinese Americans are supporting President Trump for his tough stance against the Chinese Communist Party, which is viewed as a templet of authoritarian ruling party, they simultaneously support the ban of WeChat, an authoritarian move endangering free speech as ruled by a US appeals court (E. Guo 2020). The public support among Chinese Americans of an apparent censoring behavior in the US reminds us of what happens in China when it banned Facebook in 2009, banned Google in 2010 and banned WhatsApp in 2017 under the name of national security. Moreover, the emergence of “wolf warriors” (战狼)<sup>1</sup> gives rise to the praise of Chinese political institutions, including the use of government censorship to guide public opinion and disseminate positive energy (正能量)<sup>2</sup>, on social media. Considering the number of population involved, it’s hard to summarize the effect as a unvoluntary uniform action taken by the citizens under the threat of the government.

The existing literature of government censorship in China usually assumes that citizens have a general intention to pursue freedom of speech and will pay attention to uncensored information when available (Roberts 2018; 2020). Nevertheless, the phenomenon observed display a more complicated pattern: the public may sometimes support, instead of opposing,

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<sup>1</sup> The population in China who actively defend the Chinese culture, political institutions and social situations against foreign, especially Western, counterparts. It’s hard to determine whether the social group originally rose as a grassroot phenomenon or is the outcome of an active government propoganda. Nevertheless, it’s clear that the Chinese government is utilizing the phenomenon in multiple areas today, such as the “wolf warrior diplomacy,” and such nationalist narrative is actively promoted online in China.

<sup>2</sup> Positive Energy Campaign: The CCP leadership propagate that instead of complaining about the grievances online, a good citizen should learn to discover the positive sides of one’s life, appreciate the merits of the institution, have a positive way of thinking, and spread positive emotions online.

government censorship due to different reasons. Such support could exist in authoritarian regimes, as well as democracies, among citizens who display authoritarian ideologies, as well liberal ideologies. To investigate such phenomenon, this project will explore the question in a limited scope related to China, an authoritarian regime with well-developed, matured, and complex censoring structure. In particular, I ask the following questions: What factors influence the support of government censorship held by domestic and foreign Chinese nationals? What factors influence one's willingness to self-censor online? What kinds of government censorship are viewed as justifiable by domestic and foreign Chinese nationals? The research will build on existing literature of public response towards government censorship in China and trying to solve the problem from a behavioral perspective. I argue that the support of government censorship is largely influenced by one's personal experience, the surrounding political environment, and the evaluation of democracy as an ideal form of governance derived from those personal experiences. Furthermore, I argue that the theory proposed can be examined from a comparative perspective among Chinese nationals within different countries and has a potential for further generalization.

To advance the discussion, I will present the arguments in the following order: First, I will summarize the existing literature on censorship support. Then, the proposed theory and hypotheses will be detailed together with a justification over theoretical contributions made by this paper. Furthermore, the methodology and research design will be discussed for both advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, a preliminary analysis using existing cross-national dataset will conduct a proxy check of some of the hypotheses to lay the ground for pilot survey experiments. Finally, a short discussion of the project will elaborate the empirical implications of the research, as well as the proposed future research agenda.

## **Sources of Citizen Support towards Government Censorship**

The study of authoritarian compliance contributes an important body of literature investigating authoritarianism. The authoritarian compliance refers to the support or compliance of citizens given to authoritarian leaders, authoritarian legal system, or authoritarian control in general. The authoritarian control consists of a wide range of government behaviors through which the authoritarian regimes maintain their ruling over societies, such as voter repression, exclusion of political opponents, deprivation of civil liberties, government propaganda, and government censorship.

There are two different types of authoritarian compliance—voluntary and involuntary ones. Involuntary compliance usually originated from the fear of punishment, which leads to social desirability bias, preference falsification, and risk averse calculations. Citizens refrain from revealing their true policy preferences and express the support the government directives in fear of political prosecution in authoritarian regimes (Wintrobe 1990; Robinson and Tannenber 2019). Citizens in China are also found more likely to obey laws regulating state-citizen or economic relationships when the perceived criminal punishment is severe (Liao 2008).

Voluntary compliance, on the other hand, usually comes with the perception of legitimacy. The performative legitimacy can sometimes justify the authoritarian ruling and increase citizens' compliance if the government is performing well in policy areas like economy (Park 1991). Voluntary compliance may also be triggered by one's psychological traits. For example, the patriotic sentiments aroused by the rallying around the flag rhetoric or ethnocentric sentiments aroused by the unvarnished, us-versus-them rhetoric both increase authoritarian compliance and support (Hale 2018; MacWilliams 2016). Social bonds with paternalistic leadership and policy enforcement from non-governmental actors can also lead to increase

compliance among social groups and local governments (Feng et al. 2019; Anderson et al. 2019). Unlike involuntary compliance, voluntary compliance is usually free from fear: citizens are resonating with the authoritarian regime in a certain policy area and support the government because they think the policy is justified, not because they are afraid of retrospective punishment.

Though it's hard to determine whether involuntary or voluntary compliance is dominating within the society, voluntary compliance is perhaps more pervasive than one might think. Also, voluntary compliance is of theoretical interest because it goes against the intuition that citizens share a natural desire to pursue basic rights and the democratic values associated. Thus, in this paper, I'm more interested in the potential factors driving a voluntary compliance instead of an involuntary one. Since the support of government censorship is a form of citizen support towards authoritarian ruling, the voluntary support of government censorship originates by similar mechanisms as the voluntary compliance stated above. In particular, the voluntary support of government censorship is usually independent of one's fear of being censored or punished. Often, citizens support government censorship because they regard the censorship as justified. The reasons of voluntarily supporting government censorship can be mainly categorized into two fields: the perception of threats, which legitimize government censorship to certain extent, and the personal characteristics, which are related to psychological traits.

The perception of threats is referring to the idea that citizens are more likely to support government censorship online when they view the internet as a threat to their lives due to various reasons. In authoritarian regimes, government propaganda is a critical tool to frame such perception of threat. For example, an increased exposure to Russian state media helps to construct a stronger perception of internet as a threat and in turn leads to a more consolidated support towards the online censorship in Russia (Nisbet, Kamenchuk, and Dal 2017). Since

propaganda is pervasive in authoritarian regimes and serves important function in public opinion guidance, this theory helps to connect together propaganda and censorship. More importantly, Nisbet et. al (2017) hint on the potential relationship between partisanship and support towards government censorship: a divided narration upon controversial political topics based on partisan views can foster the sense of threat in a polarized environment. Although Nisbet et. al (2017) haven't tested the idea, the potential implication is interesting given the rise of polarized media in democracies.

Beyond government propaganda, citizens' perception of the internet can also be framed by their individual experience with the online contents, independent of the government's actions. The content abstraction effect is an important finding among those theories: people are more likely to perceive the threat when the discussion is abstract. In a survey experiment examining how people perceive the threat posed by violent video games, Ivory and Kalyanaraman (2009) find that when the threat of violent video games is stronger when evaluated in general terms: on an unspecified population or by an unspecified game. The individual exposure to general description of pornography, sexual violence or social violence also increases the perception of threat and leads to support of government censorship (Randy D. Fisher, Ida J. Cook, and Edwin C. Shirkey 1994). The content abstraction effect works well with the propaganda theory because the authoritarian regimes can construct a "straw man" to fight against when justifying government censorship without providing detailed explanations: the western countries, the social unrest, the antagonistic foreign forces (敌对境外势力)<sup>3</sup> etc. The ambivalence of the concepts frees the government from justifying the claim, but the content abstraction effect ensures the effectiveness of propaganda.

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<sup>3</sup> An ideological term used by the Chinese Communist Party to refer generally to any foreign entities defined by the government as attempting to threaten the legitimacy of the Chinese government.

Besides abstract discussions, concrete personal experiences can also contribute to one's support of government censorship. A personal experience of privacy threat or online crimes will drive citizens to argue for internet protection based on regulation and censorship due to a significantly increased opposition to the Dark Web (Jardine 2018). Or, a personal exposure to foreign culture online may cultivate the urgency of cultural preservation and lead to a support of government censorship (Martin, Martins, and Wood 2016). Different from the previous discussion about content abstraction, the theory of personal experiences put more emphasis on how first-hand experience instead of an evaluation of information construct the perception of threat. This approach focusing on personal experience is related to my hypothesis, but I'm focusing more on how personal experience cultivate the evaluation of democratic values instead of the perception of threat.

Another major group of theories on censorship support speaks to the psychological traits possessed by citizens. People with ideological tendency to support authoritarianism, ethnocentrism and siege mentality are also more likely to support government censorship (Hameiri et al. 2017; S. Guo and Feng 2012). The shared underlying psychological characteristics are usually an appreciation of strong leadership, a strong distinction between in-group and out-group differences, which amplifies the desire to shelter the society from outsiders. However, the magnitude of the effect induced by such in-group-out-group evaluation can differ across gender. Women are found to have more pathogen- and sexual disgust sensitivity towards the online content and thus are more likely to support government censorship imposed on relative arts, films and images (Zhang 2019).

Another important predictor of one's support of censorship is the submissive personality: if a person is more willingly to submit to authority, then he or she is more likely to support

government censorship (S. Guo and Feng 2012). This explanation is rather self-evident since the submissive personality is likely to give similar responses to any kind of authoritarian authority, including government censorship. Also, the personal characteristics embedded in social network can also cast an influence. People who rely more on interdependent relationship to construct the self-images are more likely to support government censorship than those who have more independent self-construal (Detenber and Rosenthal 2018). Thus, how individuals interact with the social network is also important in analyzing the support of government censorship.

Finally, there are other reasons why citizens may support government censorship other than those two large categories. The theory of reasoned action proposes that a stronger intention to support web blocking will encourage an actual support of government censorship in practice due to psychological reasoning in finding conforming evidence and arguments (S. Guo and Feng 2012). The patriotic sentiment and collective memories of how democracies failed in countries transiting from democracy to autocracy also increase the chance of supporting government censorship, without appealing to the perception of threat (Hale 2018; Belmonte and Rochlitz 2020). The government censorship can also be supported when used by authoritarian leaders as a reward to their political allies (Esberg 2020).

In summary, citizens may voluntarily support government censorship when they feel the online environment as hostile and threatening due to government propaganda or personal experience. Citizens may voluntarily support government censorship due to factors irrelevant to the political environment, such as political ideology, submissive personal characteristics, or patriotic sentiments, as well. In this paper, I will mainly explore the sources of support towards government censorship of the former kind, that is, how political environment shapes citizens' opinions and attitudes towards government censorship.

## Theory and Hypotheses

The theory proposed are centered around how political environment and personal experiences affect people's support of government censorship. The local community, political environment, and major political incidents are found to affect people's political attitude and opinion regardless of the persistent political partisanship, with the magnitude of effects hinges on demographic factors (Dalton and Duval 1986; Markus 1979; MacKuen and Brown 1987; Putnam 1966). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume a direct experience of government censorship will affect people's attitudes on government censorship. Since people are likely to oppose the policies that directly cause harm to them, I hypothesis a negative relationship between exposure to government censorship and the support of it.

*H1a: Respondents without exposure to government censorship in the short-term is more likely to support government censorship*

Also, it is possible that a previous exposure to government censorship can have long-lasting effect in the absence of a more recent stimulus. The presence of a significant political event such as a military drafting is found to have a long-term effect on changing citizens political attitude (Erikson and Stoker 2011). Thus, it's reasonable to expect that a direct exposure to government censorship would have a similar effect in turning citizens against the support of government censorship. Nevertheless, it would be hard to detect whether the respondents have been exposed to government censorship in the past. Therefore, I have to rely on self-reporting of the personal experience to test the following hypothesis. The memory of directly experiencing government censorship serves as the substitute in my inquiry because in order for a political event to have long term effects on one's political attitude, the event itself should at least be memorable. It would be hard to justify why a vanished memory has long-lasting effects.

*H1b: Respondents without memory of directly experiencing government censorship in the past is more likely to support government censorship*

Besides the personal experiences, the political environment and the political attitudes shaped by the general environment can also affect one's political attitude. In order to examine the question in a cross-national setting and address the recent trend of rising populism around the globe, this paper explores the relationship between one's support of government censorship and one's belief in democracy as an ideal way of governance. It is worth noting that the hypotheses make no assumption of the respondents' political ideology: a respondent could either be pro-liberal or pro-authoritarian while he or she view democracy as an ideal way of governance. For instance, a Chinese national could reason that although an ideal democracy is desirable, the recent political turbulence observed in the United States proves the insufficiency of current institutions, and thus he or she supports the authoritarian ruling for stability until a better system emerges.

*H2: Respondents experiencing low quality of democracy is more likely to support government censorship.*

*H3: Respondents not viewing democracy as an ideal way of governance is more likely to support government censorship.*

Next, I will move on to examine the relationship between one's support of government censorship and one's willingness to self-censor. According to the theory of reasoned action, people are more likely to take certain actions if they think the action is good or necessary. Thus, it seems natural to assume that citizens with higher level of support towards government censorship is more willing to self-censor. Yet, I argue that this hypothesis could be flawed given the following reasoning: those who support government censorship less are more likely to

comprehend the repressive behaviors practiced by the government and are thus more likely to be wary when posting online. Then, the theory of risk evaluation will predict an opposite direction in which people behave under the censorship structure compared to the theory of reasoned action. Therefore, instead of theorizing a strict positive correlation between one's support of government censorship and one's willingness to self-censor, I argue that the two variables are in fact independent: a moderate level of willingness to self-censor can be generated from both groups of citizens supporting or not supporting government censorship, but through different mechanisms. However, I'm not excluding the possibility that some social groups are more willing to self-censor compared to others due to demographic factors such as age, gender, and party membership etc., as found in other studies (Stern and Hassid 2012; Lei and Lu 2017; Robinson and Tannenbergs 2019).

*H4: Respondents display a similar distribution of willingness to practice self-censorship at any given level of support towards government censorship.*

*H5: Respondents with low level of support towards government censorship are mainly driven by the risk evaluations, such as the risk and fear of opposing the government or the existence of peer pressure, to practice self-censorship.*

*H6: Respondents with high level of support towards government censorship are mainly driven by political beliefs, which justifies government censorship as legitimate, to practice self-censorship.*

Finally, I will investigate what kinds of censorship are tolerated by Chinese nationals. Since one's political attitude is likely to be influenced by the political environment, I hypothesize that citizens within similar political environments will value certain attributes, such as the prevention of crimes or economic development, similarly and thus regard censorship upon

contents endangering those attributes as justifiable universally. Furthermore, I hypothesize that there is a consensus among the population within mainland China on the acquiescence of government censorship given to a set of topics propagated by state media regularly: social stability, misinformation, and public crises.

*H7a: Respondents within similar political environments to mainland China are more likely to share a consensus on what topics are justified to be censored by the government.*

*H7b: Respondents within mainland China will share a consensus that government censorship on materials disrupting the social and economic stability, such as hate speech, misinformation, or significant public crisis, as justifiable.*

The main theoretical contribution made by this study is to address the problem of endogeneity in the existing literature. For theories explaining citizens' support of government censorship from a psychological trait perspective, the measurements usually involve severe problem of endogeneity. For instance, the support of government censorship is a legitimate component of measuring one's ideological tendency towards authoritarianism and one's personality towards submissive characteristics. Thus, explaining the support of government censorship directly from psychological and attitudinal measurements may fall into the trap of circular reasoning or measurement difficulties. To address this problem, I propose theories explaining support of government censorship by personal experience and political environment, which both can influence the respondents' political attitude and psychological status but are more independent in terms of measurement.

Furthermore, this study tries to address the problem of whether the support of government is more likely to be determined by natural characteristics or nurtured ones. The submissive personalities observed in China, Russia, Japan and Singapore are sometimes

hypothesized to be a cultural outcome (S. Guo and Feng 2012). Nevertheless, such cultural argument is hard to test and is not supported by existing data since most literature engaging the problem either adopts a survey experiment or a case study design. By proposing theories in a cross-national setting and studying subjects who have been exposed to alternative political regimes, I try to give clues on determining whether the external political environment could have an effect on those psychological factors contributing to the support of government censorship.

Finally, the theory proposed has a strong potential of generalization. On one hand, the theory can be put into an up-to-date context: the global rise of populist nationalism and an increasingly partisan media environment have posed the significant questions of hatred speech and misinformation on social media to both authoritarian and democratic regimes. The rise of fake news label also poses the question of whether the social media blocking the spread of certain information is a form of censorship and whether the practice is tolerable (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). On the other hand, as noted above, the pursuit of democracy as an ideal form of governance is not a variable only applicable in authoritarian regimes. By incorporating the political environment and the belief in democratic regime as explanatory variables, the research sheds light on how the public opinion regards government censorship could shift in democracies when citizens begin to question the efficiency and value of democracies.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

This research adopts a mix-methodology design consisting of an online-survey experiment, cross-national online surveys, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The mixed methodology design is adopted for three reasons. First of all, the topic of interest is a specific kind of political attitude. Recently, more and more literature in this field are using experimental designs for clearer causal inferences. Since the short-term exposure to government censorship is

manipulable, a survey experiment could set the foundation of my arguments. Furthermore, the manipulation of political environment is hard to obtain in an experimental setting because the exposure to a general environment should be viewed as an accumulation of different experience across the time. Consequently, carefully selected cases based on the v-dem score indicating the level of democracy will function as an approximation of variation in political environment. Although can't be claimed as a natural experiment, a cross-national survey will be administrated to capture the difference of political attitudes across Chinese nationals in different countries. Finally, the semi-structured interviews serve to strengthen the causal inferences made from the quantitative data and capture what types of censorship is tolerable to citizens.

#### Online Survey Experiment

The online survey experiments target two different sample population: (1) the general public in mainland China and (2) the Chinese nationals in the US, including both Chinese students studying abroad and first-generation Chinese immigrants spending over 15 years of their lives in mainland China before coming to the US. The targeted sample population is of interest because they represent three social groups with the same cultural origin but later experiencing different political environment during their lives. The Chinese students studying abroad and the Chinese nationals who are immigrants are both of theoretical interest in this study because they may have different expectation towards the future interaction with political systems: while the students studying abroad may expect a future interaction with the authoritarian system again when they are back for work, the immigrants are more likely to expect a future interaction with the democratic system. Then, beyond the causal inference made from the total treatment effect, the selection of sample population enables the investigation of whether the treatment effect in conditioning on cultural origin, whether the treatment effect differs according to the political

environment, and whether the treatment effect interacts with one’s expectation of future political environment.

The survey experiment will adopt a between-subject design with complete randomization. The single treatment presented will be a signal of government censorship similar to the design used by Roberts (2018). The control group will be exposed to a webpage consisting of three effective links towards short articles discussing the environmental protection in China. The treatment group will be exposed to an identical webpage consisting of two effective links towards short articles discussing the environmental protection in China, and the other link towards a sign of government censorship.

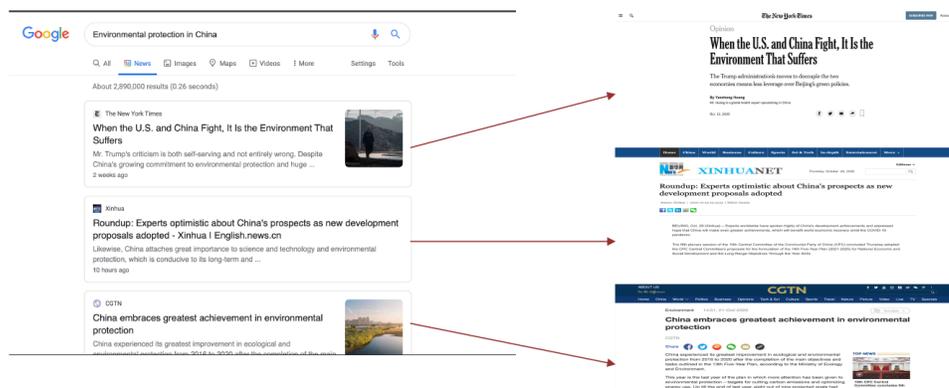


Figure 1. Illustration of Control Exposure

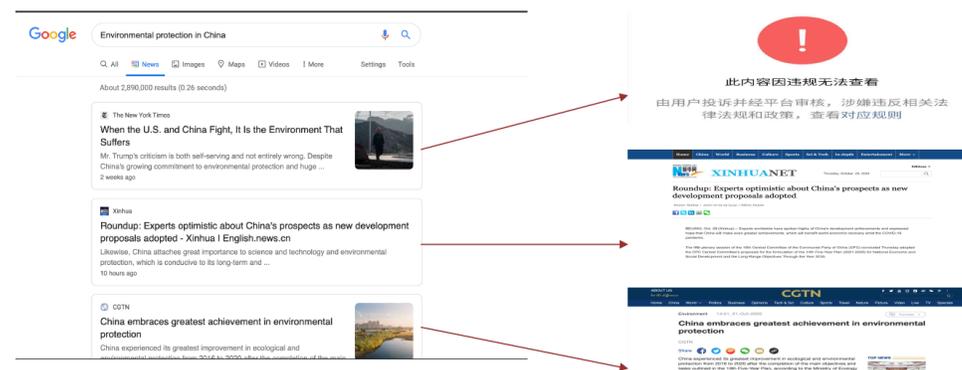


Figure 2. Illustration of Treatment Exposure

The experimental materials will be constructed based on actual news contents. The use of artificial materials instead of actual news contents is intended to prevent the interference of

political knowledge—more educated population may be more aware of the ongoing environmental protection movements in China and thus introducing unknown biases into the study. Also, prior to the research, the true research purpose will be concealed to the participants. The participants will be told that this is a general study of how people respond to environmental protection message in different countries and media environments. The concealment is designed to remove the potential priming effect of the political sensitivity entailed in the study: if respondents are aware of the true research purpose, which is related to government censorship, the respondents are more likely to experience social-desirability bias and not truthfully answering the questions given the political sensitivity of the topic. A placebo measurement of attitudes towards environmental protection will be included for both groups to disguise the true research purpose. Finally, the environmental protection is chosen as a politically related, yet not heated discussion topic because sensitive topics such as the covid pandemic or government corruption are more likely to be perceived as subject to government censorship even if the control group is given no clues of the actual censorship. This perception of information as subject to censorship could introduce biases into the study. Since environmental protection is now advocated by the central leadership in China as an important policy orientation,<sup>4</sup> the discussion of environmental protection is no longer likely to be regard as subject to censorship in mainland China anymore.

In the survey experiment, the treatment effect is defined as the difference of evaluations on the selected variables identified between groups, controlled for all demographic and political attitude co-variates. If H1a holds, we should observe a negative treatment effect in both countries

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<sup>4</sup> “Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets (绿水青山就是金山银山).” President Xi Jinping said in a congratulatory letter to ecological forum in 2018. [http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2018-07/09/content\\_55761576.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2018-07/09/content_55761576.htm)

on the support of government censorship. If H4 holds, we should observe no treatment effect in both countries on the willingness to self-censor. If H4 holds, we should observe no statistically significant relationship between the willingness to self-censor and the support of government censorship when analyzing a pooled set of data.

There are some potential drawbacks associated with the survey experiment design. First of all, the survey experiment is subject to the question of external validity. The treatment is a proxy of short-term personal experience related to government censorship, but we can not reconstruct the environment where respondents know their relatives are experiencing the same kind of censorship simultaneously. In other words, the treatment doesn't account for the social network in which the government censorship is embedded. Nevertheless, I argue that limited external validity is a common problem shared by all experimental designs and it is a justifiable trade-off for making clearer causal inferences. Furthermore, there exists potential social desirability bias. Although I try to minimize the social desirability bias by hiding the true purpose of the research, the result may still experience such bias given the sensitivity of asking about people's opinion on government censorship in mainland China and the unavoidable mentioning of phrases indirectly signaling government censorship in the questions. I argue that this is a universal problem in conducting research in authoritarian regimes and the tone of questions is already made soft to compensate for the potential biases. A further way to address the problem is to adopt questioning tactics uncovering sensitive attitudes such as ranking or probability answering. These techniques will be tested in the pilot survey experiments for validity. Finally, there exists a problem of biased sample. It's not likely to get a representative sample in each country due to different reasons. However, although not ideal, I argue that a balance

analysis of the sample can provide sufficient information for us to compensate for the empirical difficulty in collecting representative samples on politically sensitive topics in China.

### Cross-National Survey

The cross-national survey is designed to exploit variation in political environment and political experience. The cases are selected according to three criteria: (1) difference in the quality of democracy as measured by the v-dem score, (2) sufficient targeted sample population of Chinese residents, Chinese students, or Chinese immigrants in the country or region, and (3) variation in culture as represented by the range of geographic locations.

	Free	Partly Free	Not Free
Asia	Japan (1.5)	Republic of Korea (2)	Mainland China (6.5) Hong Kong Singapore (5)
Middle East		Israel (2)	UAE (5.5)
Europe	United Kingdom (1.5) France (1.5)		
North America	United States (1)		

Table 1. Case Selection of the Cross-National Surveys

Some cases are of particular interest. The Hong Kong SAZ is selected in the absence a v-dem score to study how a tightened control of the CCP on freedom of expression is causing changes within the region. Singapore is chosen as an example of a censoring regime sharing the Asian culture with China to study whether the same culture origin ensures similar political attitude and behaviors under similarly sophisticated censoring institutions. The full spectrum of v-dem distribution in Asia (Japan, Korea, and China) is, in contrast, chosen to study whether the same culture origin can still foster different political attitude behaviors under various regime types. Finally, the United States is chosen as a particular case of interest given the executive order attempted by the Trump administration to ban the use of WeChat in 2020. The EO

represented a typical censoring behavior and endangered a social media platform on which Chinese American campaigned for President Trump's reelection bid (Yang 2020). Therefore, it would be of theoretical interest to see how respondents react to government censorship given their support in a leader attempting to disrupt their daily communication and endanger their freedom of speech.

While the design is far from a well-justified natural experiment, we can still draw inferences about the hypotheses based on the correlations identified in the data. If H1b holds, we should observe a negative relationship between personal experience of censorship, regardless of the time, and the support of government censorship, independent of regime types. If H2 holds, we should observe a structured difference between samples coming from different regime types in their support of government censorship. If H3 holds, we should observe a negative relationship between the support of democracy as an ideal worth pursuing and the support of government censorship, independent of regime types. If H5 holds, within each country, we should observe a higher level of risk calculation among the group of people disapproving government censorship, independent of regimes; also, we should observe a higher level of risk calculation in not free regimes compared to the free counterparts since citizens in authoritarian regimes are more likely to fear the political prosecution. If H6 holds, within each country, we should observe a higher level of legitimacy rating of censoring behaviors among the group of people supporting government censorship, independent of regimes; also, we should observe a higher level of legitimacy rating of censoring behaviors in not free regimes compared to the free counterparts.

The cross-national survey design, of course, has certain drawbacks. First of all, in general, there exist biases introduced by translation and cross-national measurements. For

example, the potentially different conceptualization of the same concept in different countries. To compensate for this problem, the questionnaire is written in language as plain as possible and provides explanation to technical terms mentioned (e.g. VPN). Secondly, there might be unbalanced samples across countries. This problem can be addressed by adding a matched sample analysis to the study in the data analysis process. Furthermore, there is an insufficient number of partly free countries because most partly free countries are either in the middle east, Africa, or Latin America, where not a lot of Chinese nationals present. Unfortunately, this problem can not be solved by rearranging the case selection. Yet, I argue this should cast little doubt on the conclusion if a sharp contrast is found between the free regimes and the not free regimes. The inclusion of partly free regime, however, will help us to conceptualize the problem: is the relationship linear or is it more likely to be dichotomous? Also, there exists a disagreed scale of democracy measurement between the v-dem score and the traditional democratic index such as the Freedom House. I would justify the use of v-dem score as the base of reference because the v-dem score measurement incorporate more dimensions to measure the implicitly complex concept of democracy as studied by political scientists.

### Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

The semi-structured qualitative interviews will be conducted in both mainland China and the US, using a snowball sampling technique. The main purpose of the semi-structured interviews is to identify the categories of information for which respondents think the government censorship is justified. Also, I will compare the qualitative results from the interviews with the qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions in the cross-national surveys. In theory, I expect a high level of correspondence between the two sets of data. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews can strengthen the causal arguments of H5 and H6

by interviewing respondents with different level of support towards government censorship, and trying to decipher the psychological reasoning behind their willingness to practice self-censoring. Finally, the semi-structured interviews can strengthen the causal arguments of H1a, H1b, H2 and H3 by identifying whether respondents' reasoning on democratic values is associated their support of government censorship.

Unfortunately, the snowball sampling is a convenience sample and is thus not representative. The respondents may even share a strong similarity in political attitudes since people with similar political beliefs are more likely to associate with each other. However, I argue such trade-off is acceptable given how sensitive the topic is in mainland China. Also, it's more likely to get a diverse sample in the US if the snowball sampling starts with two separate beginning respondents lying on different ends of the ideological spectrum.

### **Preliminary Analysis and Proposed Pilot Study**

The preliminary analysis is conducted based on the seventh wave of the World Value Survey (WVS7).<sup>5</sup> The dataset allows us to investigate on the following countries and regions: mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and United States. The preliminary analysis can only serve as a proxy test of the hypothesis due to two reasons. On one hand, the surveying population is the national representative sample within that country or region, which is different from our targeting population, the Chinese nationals. On the other hand, the survey questions of WVS7 didn't directly measure the variables of interest of this study. Consequently, the variables are usually constructed based on available data as an approximation. The variable of interest, support towards government censorship, is coded as an ordinal variable taking values 0, 1, and 2 depending on respondents' responses towards the following questions:

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<sup>5</sup> (Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.), 2020)

**Q154.** If you had to choose, which one of the things on this card would you say is most important? (*Code one answer only under “first choice”*):

**Q155.** And which would be the next most important? (*Code one answer only under “second choice”*):

1. Maintaining order in the nation
2. Giving people more say in important government decisions
3. Fighting rising prices
4. Protecting freedom of speech

Then, for the support of government censorship, the respondent is coded 0 if his or her first choice is freedom of speech, is coded 1 if his or her second choice is freedom of speech, and is coded 2 if his or her choices don't contain freedom of speech. As expected, the support of government censorship is higher in mainland China, a not free country, compared to Japan and the United States, the free counterparts. The pairwise difference in Figure 3 are all statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  level, and the differences between China and other countries/regions are all statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$  level. This result partially confirms H2 that people living in countries with low quality of democracy is more likely to support government censorship.

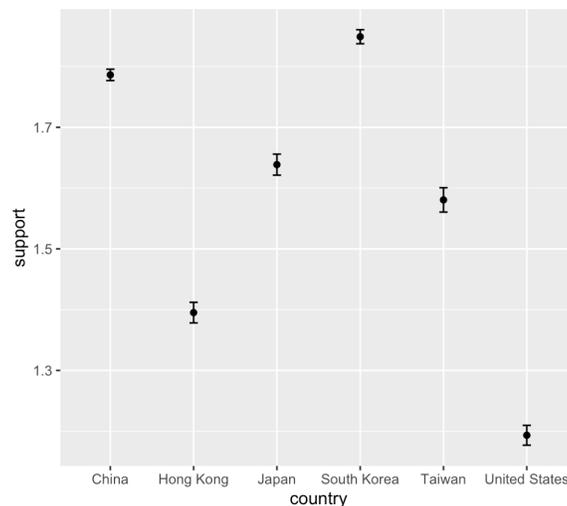


Figure 3. Support of Government Censorship Across Countries and Regions

Another important result is the extremity of support towards government censorship in South Korea. South Korea is classified as a partly free country but the level of support of government censorship is even higher than that in China. Due to the limitation of cases, it would be hard to conclude whether this shows that the relationship is not linear—although there is a contrast between free and not free countries, the relationship is more complicated in partly free countries—or it could be that South Korea is simply an outlier due to unobserved reasons. Another candidate of potential explanation is that the quality of democracy is different from the perceived quality of democracy—how respondents self-rate whether the country they live in is democratically governed. As shown by Figure 4, the perceived democratic quality in South Korea is similar to that in mainland China and the difference in mean is not statistically significant by a two-sample t-test. Nevertheless, this explanation is not satisfactory because the perceived quality of democracy in the United States is low while the support of government censorship is also low. Consequently, extra justification is needed in either case.

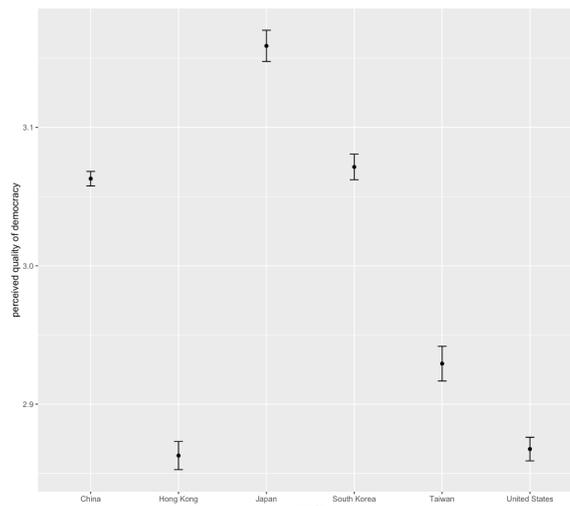


Figure 4. Perceived Quality of Democratic Governance Across Countries and Regions

Next, the variable of interest is whether the respondent view democracy as an ideal form of governance. The variable is coded as an ordinal variable ranging from 1-7 by taking the simple average of the scores (adjusted for directionality) of the following questions:

**Q90.** What do you think should international organizations prioritize, being effective or being democratic? (ordinal 1-10)

**Q234.** How important would you say is having honest elections for you—very important, rather important, not very important or not at all important? (ordinal 1-4)

**Q238.** I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? *Having a democratic political system* (ordinal 1-4)

**Q250.** How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? (ordinal 1-10)

As shown by Table 2, the evaluation of democracy as an ideal way of governance is negatively correlated with the support of government censorship in all countries except for South Korea, and the results are all statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$  level. This universal result indicates a strong support of H3 that respondents not viewing democracy as an ideal way of governance is more likely to support government censorship. Nevertheless, it is interesting to find that the perceived quality of democracy governance within the country or region is positively correlated with respondents' support of government censorship in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Japan, which is unexpected. Although no plausible explanation can be generated for Hong Kong and Japan, the case of mainland China might be explainable. In Figure 4, the evaluation of democratic governance in mainland China is comparatively high (an average of 3.036 for an ordinal variable ranging from 1-5), which suggests that citizens in China are viewing their political environment as rather democratic. Thus, it is possible that, respondents in mainland China are viewing the concept of democracy differently from the traditional

conceptualization of democracy in political science literature. For example, to an extreme, they may not view government censorship as a violation of democratic governance. Nevertheless, although such an explanation is possible, we will need further evidence on this.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Support of Government Censorship					
	Mainland China	Hong Kong	Taiwan	Japan	South Korea	United States
democratic_ideal	-0.052*** (0.019)	-0.153*** (0.028)	-0.107*** (0.028)	-0.106*** (0.027)	-0.018 (0.020)	-0.053*** (0.020)
democratic_quality	0.254*** (0.039)	0.448*** (0.039)	0.016 (0.049)	0.139*** (0.052)	-0.039 (0.039)	0.042 (0.047)
male	-0.043** (0.020)	-0.091*** (0.032)	-0.093** (0.041)	-0.091** (0.037)	0.009 (0.025)	-0.095*** (0.035)
age	0.0005 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)	0.004*** (0.002)	-0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)
immigrant		0.011 (0.038)	0.019 (0.116)	-0.179 (0.181)	0.120 (0.114)	-0.033 (0.054)
education	0.006 (0.006)	-0.013 (0.010)	-0.003 (0.013)	-0.049*** (0.014)	-0.004 (0.009)	-0.042*** (0.012)
marriage	0.086*** (0.026)	0.049 (0.034)	0.103** (0.042)	0.009 (0.044)	0.022 (0.034)	0.052 (0.035)
unemployment	0.011 (0.047)	-0.008 (0.099)	-0.060 (0.099)	-0.096 (0.238)	-0.018 (0.092)	-0.105 (0.068)
income	-0.009* (0.005)	0.003 (0.010)	-0.021 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.006 (0.009)	0.003 (0.010)
political_knowledge	-0.033* (0.020)	-0.008 (0.033)	0.050 (0.043)	-0.073* (0.039)	0.043 (0.027)	-0.045 (0.034)
political_interest	-0.020 (0.018)	0.138*** (0.031)	0.098*** (0.035)	0.064* (0.038)	0.067*** (0.025)	0.139*** (0.032)
lack_participation	0.075*** (0.024)	0.010 (0.018)	0.013 (0.017)	0.038** (0.018)	0.001 (0.028)	0.107*** (0.040)
ideology	0.0003 (0.009)	0.016 (0.017)	0.016 (0.022)	-0.072*** (0.020)	0.023 (0.017)	-0.039** (0.016)
media_corruption	0.052*** (0.019)	0.198*** (0.030)	0.057* (0.029)	-0.005 (0.035)	-0.005 (0.017)	0.061** (0.024)
independent_character	-0.098*** (0.029)	-0.111** (0.045)	-0.128** (0.055)	0.019 (0.066)	-0.030 (0.041)	-0.045 (0.041)
ethnocentrism	-0.021 (0.016)	0.077*** (0.027)	0.022 (0.033)	0.015 (0.033)	0.040* (0.023)	-0.001 (0.030)
risk_evaluation	-0.001 (0.004)	0.033*** (0.008)	0.014 (0.011)	-0.001 (0.008)	-0.003 (0.007)	0.013 (0.008)
Constant	1.166*** (0.220)	-0.116 (0.264)	1.481*** (0.330)	2.300*** (0.339)	1.609*** (0.244)	1.135*** (0.307)
Observations	2,809	2,046	1,220	1,168	1,245	2,462
R <sup>2</sup>	0.031	0.191	0.064	0.100	0.025	0.077
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.025	0.184	0.051	0.086	0.011	0.070
Residual Std. Error	0.509 (df = 2792)	0.699 (df = 2028)	0.683 (df = 1202)	0.614 (df = 1150)	0.404 (df = 1227)	0.804 (df = 2444)
F Statistic	5.564*** (df = 16; 2792)	28.084*** (df = 17; 2028)	4.871*** (df = 17; 1202)	7.495*** (df = 17; 1150)	1.832** (df = 17; 1227)	11.964*** (df = 17; 2444)

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Table 2. Linear Regression Models

The gender is also found be an important influencer. In accordance with the existing literature, female respondents are found more likely to support government censorship on average across all countries. Besides, a status of marriage is found to positively related with

one's support of censorship in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan but not in other cases. However, there are two co-variables behave contrary to expectation. Firstly, the education is found not important except for the cases of Japan and the US, where the higher level of education leads to lower level of support towards government censorship. Since the distinction is drawn between the free countries and the partly free/not free counterparts, a potential explanation is that education doesn't alter people's attitudes towards government censorship if the political institution is not free. Nevertheless, such an explanation is rather counter-intuitive and needs further examination. Secondly, political knowledge is found not important in four out of six cases, while is behave as expected in mainland China: the more politically sophisticated a respondent is, the less likely he or she will support government censorship.

There are three other variables of interest across the cases. First of all, the personal interest in politics is found to be positively related to the support of government censorship. A potential explanation is that people who are interested in politics are more likely to be aware of how the internet is facilitating the spread of misinformation and the increase of political partisanship. Thus, they forester a sense of threat which in turn leads to an increase in the support of government censorship. Yet, it would be interesting to investigate why we have a negative result in mainland China. Furthermore, the sense of lack of political participation<sup>6</sup> is positively related to the support of government censorship in mainland China, Japan and United States. This means that the variable has predictive power across different regime types and may need further investigation. The third variable of interest is the perception of media corruption. In four out of the six cases, the respondent is more likely to support government censorship if he/she thinks that the media is corrupted.

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<sup>6</sup> Measured by the question: SDG1. How much would you say the political system in your country allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?

Finally, the results shown a partial rejection of the cultural argument related to submissive personal characteristics contributing to the support of government censorship. While submissive personal characteristics is found important in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, they are not influencing people's attitudes towards censorship in South Korea and Japan, which also share an East Asian culture. The variable is also found not important in the US. Yet, this doesn't serve as a definite rejection towards the cultural argument because a similar pattern is still observed in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. These three areas are arguably more closely related in terms of culture but are having different political institutions. Therefore, a sample specified with Chinese nationals are necessary to further reject or affirm the cultural argument related to authoritarian support.

I also approximate whether the respondents will agree on the importance of political topics under similar political institutions by summarizing the responses of the following questions:

**Q152.** If you had to choose, which one of the things on this card would you say is most important? (*Code one answer only under "first choice"*):

1. A high level of economic growth
2. Making sure this country has strong defense forces
3. Seeing that people have more say about how things are done at their jobs and in their communities
4. Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful

**Q154.** If you had to choose, which one of the things on this card would you say is most important? (*Code one answer only under "first choice"*):

1. Maintaining order in the nation

2. Giving people more say in important government decisions
3. Fighting rising prices
4. Protecting freedom of speech

**Q156.** If you had to choose, which one of the things on this card would you say is most important? (*Code one answer only under “first choice”*):

1. A stable economy
2. Progress toward a less impersonal and more humane society
3. Progress toward a society in which ideas count more than money
4. The fight against crime

The four responses of particular interest are a high level of economic growth, maintaining order in the nation, a stable economy and the fight against crime. Few evidence is found to support H7a and H7b since there exists statistically significant differences between the percentage of respondents valuing each of these attributes across cases. Yet, it would be too soon to reject the hypotheses for two reasons. On one hand, the attitudes held by respondents from Japan and United States are similar in three out of four attributes (except for “maintaining order in the nation”) given the differences in means are not statistically significant. On the other hand, maintaining social order does seem important to respondents within mainland China, which is in accordance with H7b. On the other hand, the importance of these statements is still different from whether respondents think censorship to protect these attributes are justifiable. The only exception would be the term “maintaining order in the nation” because the respondent will directly compare it with the term “freedom of speech.” Therefore, it is possible that the proxy is not working well.

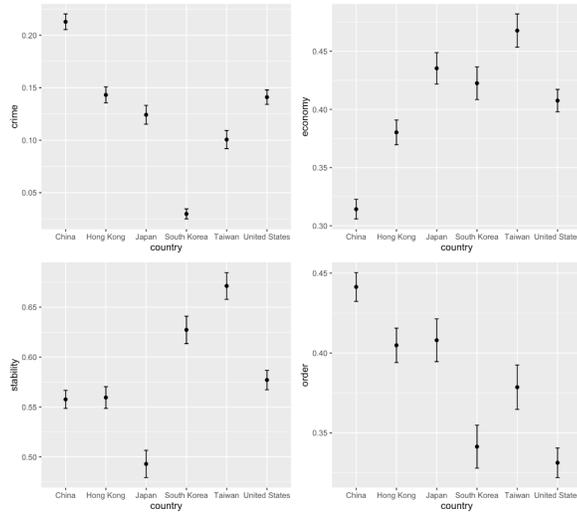


Figure 5. Perceived Importance of Four Chosen Political Topics Across Countries and Regions

The next step of this research is a proposed pilot survey experiment in the US. The survey experiment will be administrated via prolific.co, an online survey company based in the US. The main purpose of the pilot survey experiment would be to validate the questionnaire in preparation for a larger pilot survey experiment in mainland China. Also, some unstructured interviews will be scheduled with Chinese students studying in the US will be scheduled to explore whether the survey questions are understandable to respondents, and whether there exists a potential consensus on what types of censorship are justifiable.

## Discussion

This research has profound empirical implications. First of all, the discordance between the willingness to practice self-censorship and the support of government censorship, if found true, challenges the traditional measurement of self-censorship as an effective behavioral indicator of authoritarian support. Furthermore, the hypotheses, if found true, challenges the assumption of involuntary obedience, which states that citizens support government censorship to avoid government punishments. Finally, this research raises the question of whether an accidental exposure to free media could strengthen people’s desire of freedom of speech. If there

exists a universal support of government censorship on certain kinds of information across different regimes, then it would be hard to conclude that there is a natural pursuit of free speech.

While the preliminary analyses have shown moderate support towards some of the hypotheses, especially one of the key hypotheses on the relationship between one's attitude towards democratic ideal and one's support of government censorship, the data also cast doubt on whether there exists a social consensus on what kinds of government censorship is justifiable.

In the future, a replication can be done to test the hypothesis in different authoritarian regimes on their nationals at home and abroad. For instance, a replication for Russian nationals or Singapore nationals to understand whether the theory is universally applicable to all authoritarian context. Furthermore, for the generalization purpose, a second replication of the study can be done to test the hypotheses in democracies on their own citizens. For instance, the survey experiment can be replicated among American citizens using materials of campaign information to see whether citizens support the censoring behaviors on given types of campaign information. Finally, the future research can address the further inquiries of what determines the types of censorship tolerable to respondents. For example, is the main driving force for citizens to reach a consensus on the types of justifiable censorship the government propaganda, social and economic status, or social network.

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## **Appendix A. The Survey Experiment**

### **Material 1 (Censored in the Treatment)<sup>7</sup>**

Title: Laws should be strictly enforced to better protect the environment

Source: The Global Times

Content: Governments at different levels in China have worked out mid-term and long-term plans for environmental protection, and increased investment in the environment sector.

According to the party central led by Xi, the remaining challenge in implementing such plans is to stop officials' malfeasance and corruption.

### **Material 2 (Common Material)<sup>8</sup>**

Title: China Embraces Achievement in Environmental Protection

Source: The Global Times

Content: Under the Xi Jinping Leadership, China experienced significant improvement in ecological and environmental protection during the recent years. The advancements are made in disciplines such as the clean energy, the preservation of the agricultural land, and the protection of the forest etc.

### **Material 3 (Common Material)<sup>9</sup>**

Title: China's eco-efforts bear healthy social fruits in new environmental era

Source: The Global Times

Content: The improvement of air quality in Beijing and its surroundings is a microcosm of the changes in many cities across China. In the 2019 World Air Quality Report published by IQAir, a Swiss air quality technology company, China did much better compared to the past several years.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202010/27/WS5f976e79a31024ad0ba811ea.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-21/China-embraces-greatest-achievement-in-environmental-protection-ULBx0zbf0I/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1203920.shtml>

## **Appendix B. The Survey Experiment Questionnaire**

### **Participation Consent**

I am asking you to participate in a research titled "The examination of how social media exposure affects people's attitude on environmental protection." I will describe this study to you before you consent and proceed to participate in the research. This study is being led by researchers in the Department of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

### **What the study is about**

The purpose of this research is to understand how people respond to environmental protection message in different countries and media environments.

### **What we will ask you to do**

I will ask you to browse a webpage consisting of three article links towards short articles discussing environmental protection in China. Then you will be asked several questions concerning the content of the pieces of information separately to discuss your political attitudes around the topic. Also, some questions will be asked about you online information sharing behavior and demographic information. The whole survey is expected to take 15-20 minutes.

### **Risks and Discomforts**

We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the internet. We do not collect any biological-identifiable information from you. Therefore, please do not provide us your sensitive personal information, such as your name, address, or personal ID in any form during the study.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information, and I consent to take party in the study.

### **Demographics: Please fill out the following part based on your personal circumstances**

1. Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Would rather not tell

2. Age

- a. 18-22
- b. 23-28
- c. 28-40
- d. 40-55
- e. 55+

3. Education

- a. Highschool or below
- b. Some college or equivalent
- c. Bachelor's or equivalent
- d. Master or equivalent
- e. PhD or above

4. Party-Membership

- a. Party Member
- b. Not Party Member
- c. Pre-Party Member

5. Occupation

- a. Student or Self-employed
- b. Employee of State-owned Enterprise
- c. Employee of foreign-invested Enterprise
- d. Employee of Private Enterprise
- e. Employee of Hybrid-invested Enterprise
- f. Others

6. Annual Income (Include Part-time Income)

- a. < ¥36,000
- b. ¥36,000 – ¥144,000
- c. ¥144,000 – ¥300,000

- d. ¥300,000 – ¥420,000
- e. ¥420,000 – ¥660,000
- f. ¥660,000 – ¥960,000
- g. > ¥960,000

**Political Ideology and Political Attitudes<sup>10</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. I'm interested in political affairs. [interest in politics]
2. We should strive to learn from multi-party institutions and ideas. [ideology]
3. We should not maintain our own institutions and way of life, instead, we should become more and more like other countries. [ideology]
4. I think our country's current political system is inappropriate for the country. [ideology]
5. People should have universal suffrage even if they have not been educated about democracy. [ideology]
6. Lawyers should always do their utmost to defend clients even if the client has committed a crime. [ideology]
7. Individuals should be able to own, buy and sell land. [ideology]
8. The interests of state-owned enterprises should not be considered as part of the national interests from the economic perspective. [ideology]
9. Instead of having a strong leader or experts to decide things, we should allow opposition party to compete for power. [ideology]
  
1. I'm satisfied with the overall situation now in mainland China. [regime support]
2. In general, we can trust our government's work in improving public safety and protecting people's lives and properties. [regime support]
3. In general, we can trust that our government will give equal treatments to Chinese citizens and foreign citizens, without giving foreign citizens preferential treatments over Chinese citizens. [regime support]

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<sup>10</sup> (Pan and Xu 2018; Huang 2017; "Asian Barometer Survey" n.d.)

4. In general, I think the corruption in politics and government is under control in China.  
[regime support]
5. In general, I think the gap between the wealthy and the poor has been narrow in China.  
[regime support]
6. In general, I think the government is good at prevent crimes and maintaining order in China.  
[regime support]

**Political Knowledge<sup>11</sup>: Please select the appropriate answers for the questions below.**

1. Who is the president of China?
  - a. Hu Jintao
  - b. Xi Jinping
  - c. Kim Jong-un
  - d. Zhang Qun
2. Who is the prime minister of China?
  - a. Zhu Rongji
  - b. Jiang Zemin
  - c. Li Keqiang
  - d. Wang Huning
3. What is the highest decision-making body within Chinese political system?
  - a. Chinese Communist Party
  - b. Standing Committee of the Political Bureau
  - c. Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
  - d. National People's Congress

**Knowledge on Government Censorship: Please identify True or False for the following statements<sup>12</sup>**

1. I think we have public opinion guidance in China.

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<sup>11</sup> (Huang 2015)

<sup>12</sup> Public Opinion Guidance (輿情引导) is a practice identical to censorship. I use the indirect term instead of censorship to prevent triggering preference falsification.

2. I think there is a specific definition on what topics are “politically sensitive.”
3. I think public opinion guidance is solely conducted by robots.
4. I think public opinion guidance is solely conducted by the government institutions.
5. I think the online public opinion guidance is conducted only on a small scale.
6. I think the government don't have a clear standard for public opinion guidance.

**Personal Characteristics<sup>13</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. Even if parent’s demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.
2. When one has a conflict with a neighbor, the best way to deal with it is to accommodate the other person.
3. A person should not insist on his own opinion if his co-workers disagree with him.
4. For the sake of the family or other social groups, the individual should put his personal interests second.
5. When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother.

**(Placebo) Attitudes towards Environmental Protection<sup>14</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. In general, how much do you feel you yourself know about environmental issues and problems?
2. In general, I think the laws and regulations on water pollution are working well in China.
3. In general, I think the laws and regulations on air pollution are working well in China.
4. In general, I think the laws and regulations on recycling and sustainability are working well in China.

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<sup>13</sup> (“Asian Barometer Survey” n.d.)

<sup>14</sup> (“The Second Minnesota Report Card on Environmental Literacy” 2004)

5. In general, I think the government should be responsible for solving environmental problems in China.

**Evaluation of Democracy as an Ideal Way of Governance<sup>15</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.
2. Democracy is capable of solving the problems of our society.
3. Economic development should not come in the cost of democratic institutions.
4. Even when the country is facing a difficult situation, the government should not disregard the law in order to deal with the situation.
5. The most important thing for a political leader is to follow the established procedure instead of accomplishing his goals.
6. Even if a political leader enjoys majority support, he still should not implement his own agenda and disregard the view of the minority.

**Support of Government Censorship: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. In general, I think it's justifiable for the government to regulate discussions online.
2. In general, I think the freedom of speech should be limited within certain scope in order to sustain the society in social stability, economic growth, etc.
3. In general, I think not all political topics should be discussed in public.
4. In general, I think it's justifiable for the government to withhold certain information under proper considerations.
5. In general, I think it's important for citizens to follow the regulations set by the government on public political discourses.
6. In general, I think the media should follow the government instructions on reporting the positive sides of the society.

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<sup>15</sup> (“Asian Barometer Survey” n.d.)

**Willingness to Self-Censor: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. I think it's not prudent to discuss politics on internet.
2. I think we should be careful online.
3. I think I should not express different opinions online.
4. I think express my own opinions is dangerous.
5. I think I will make my conversation in the public spaces consistent with the government regulations.
6. I'm willing to remove contents published online if the government identify it as endangering social stability.

### **Participation Consent (Continued)**

Thanks for participating in a research study titled “Voluntary Sacrifice of Freedom: Why Are Some Chinese Nationals Supporting Government Censorship?” In order to prevent potential bias and priming, the stated research purpose at the beginning of the study is not the whole purpose of the study. I will now describe this study to you before you consent and proceed to actually submit the response data. All data will be discarded and will not be stored if you don't consent at this point. This study is being led by researchers in Department of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

#### **What the study is about**

The purpose of this research is to identify the potential relationship between people's political experience and people's support of government censorship among Chinese Nationals.

#### **What we asked you to do**

I asked you to browse a webpage either containing or not containing a clue of government censorship. Then you are asked several questions concerning your political ideology, political attitudes, political knowledge, support of government censorship, and willingness to self-censor.

#### **Risks and Discomforts**

As Qualtrics will protect your privacy and personal identity, the survey experiment will not pose more risk than stated before. We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the internet. We do not collect any biologically identifiable

information from you. Therefore, please do not provide us your sensitive personal information, such as your name, address, or personal ID in any form during the study.

**Statement of Consent 1**

I have read the above information, and I consent to take part in the study.

**Statement of Consent 2**

I've fully understood that all materials displayed are constructed and Fake. I also give my consent not to spread similar rumors on internet.

**Statement of Consent 3**

I will be responsible for all the information provided by myself.

**Statement of Consent 4**

I am not asked to provide any sensitive personal information and didn't provide any sensitive personal information voluntarily.

## **Appendix C. Cross-National Survey Questionnaire**

### **Participation Consent**

Thanks for participating in a research study titled “Voluntary Sacrifice of Freedom: Why Are Some Chinese Nationals Supporting Government Censorship?” I will now describe this study to you before you consent and proceed to take the survey. All data will be discarded and will not be stored if you don’t consent at this point. This study is being led by researchers in Department of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

### **What the study is about**

The purpose of this research is to identify the potential relationship between people's political experience and people’s support of government censorship among Chinese Nationals.

### **What we will ask you to do**

I will ask you to provide honest responses towards several questions concerning your political ideology, political attitudes, political knowledge, support of government censorship, and willingness to self-censor etc. The total duration of the survey is expected to be 20-25 minutes.

### **Risks and Discomforts**

As Qualtrics will protect your privacy and personal identity, the survey experiment will not pose more risk than stated before. We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the internet. We do not collect any biologically identifiable information from you. Therefore, please do not provide us your sensitive personal information, such as your name, address, or personal ID in any form during the study.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information, and I consent to take party in the study.

### **Demographics: Please fill out the following part based on your personal circumstances**

1. Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Would rather not tell

## 2. Age

- a. 18-22
- b. 23-28
- c. 28-40
- d. 40-55
- e. 55+

## 3. Education

- a. Highschool or below
- b. Some college or equivalent
- c. Bachelor's or equivalent
- d. Master or equivalent
- e. PhD or above

## 4. Occupation

- a. Student or Self-employed
- b. Employee of State-owned Enterprise
- c. Employee of foreign-invested Enterprise
- d. Employee of Private Enterprise
- e. Employee of Hybrid-invested Enterprise
- f. Others

## 5. Annual Income (Include Part-time Income)

- a. < ¥36,000 or equivalent
- b. ¥36,000 – ¥144,000 or equivalent
- c. ¥144,000 – ¥300,000 or equivalent
- d. ¥300,000 – ¥420,000 or equivalent
- e. ¥420,000 – ¥660,000 or equivalent
- f. ¥660,000 – ¥960,000 or equivalent
- g. > ¥960,000 or equivalent

7. I lived in mainland China for

- a. 15-18 years
- b. 18-22 years
- c. 22-28 years
- d. 28 years or above

8. I lived in [the Current Country] for

- a. 0-2 years
- b. 2-7 years
- c. 7-12 years
- d. 12 years or above

**Political Ideology and Political Attitudes<sup>16</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

- 1. I'm interested in political affairs. [interest in politics]
- 2. We should strive to learn from multi-party institutions and ideas. [ideology]
- 3. We should not maintain our own institutions and way of life, instead, we should become more and more like other countries. [ideology]
- 4. I think our country's current political system is inappropriate for the country. [ideology]
- 5. People should have universal suffrage even if they have not been educated about democracy. [ideology]
- 6. Lawyers should always do their utmost to defend clients even if the client has committed a crime. [ideology]
- 7. Individuals should be able to own, buy and sell land. [ideology]
- 8. The interests of state-owned enterprises should not be considered as part of the national interests from the economic perspective. [ideology]
- 9. Instead of having a strong leader or experts to decide things, we should allow opposition party to compete for power. [ideology]

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<sup>16</sup> (Pan and Xu 2018; Huang 2017; "Asian Barometer Survey" n.d.)

1. I'm satisfied with the overall situation now in mainland China. [regime support]
2. In general, we can trust our government's work in improving public safety and protecting people's lives and properties. [regime support]
3. In general, we can trust that our government will give equal treatments to Chinese citizens and foreign citizens, without giving foreign citizens preferential treatments over Chinese citizens. [regime support]
4. In general, I think the corruption in politics and government is under control in China. [regime support]
5. In general, I think the gap between the wealthy and the poor has been narrow in China. [regime support]
6. In general, I think the government is good at prevent crimes and maintaining order in China. [regime support]

**Political Knowledge<sup>17</sup>: Please select the appropriate answers for the questions below.**

1. Who is the president of China?
  - a. Hu Jintao
  - b. Xi Jinping
  - c. Kim Jong-un
  - d. Zhang Qun
2. Who is the prime minister of China?
  - a. Zhu Rongji
  - b. Jiang Zemin
  - c. Li Keqiang
  - d. Wang Huning
3. What is the highest decision-making body within Chinese political system?
  - a. Chinese Communist Party
  - b. Standing Committee of the Political Bureau
  - c. Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
  - d. National People's Congress

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<sup>17</sup> (Huang 2015)

**Knowledge on Government Censorship: Please identify True or False for the following statements<sup>18</sup>**

1. I think we have public opinion guidance in China.
2. I think there is a specific definition on what topics are “politically sensitive.”
3. I think public opinion guidance is solely conducted by robots.
4. I think public opinion guidance is solely conducted by the government institutions.
5. I think the online public opinion guidance is conducted only on a small scale.
6. I think the government don't have a clear standard for public opinion guidance.

**Personal Characteristics<sup>19</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. Even if parent’s demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.
2. When one has a conflict with a neighbor, the best way to deal with it is to accommodate the other person.
3. A person should not insist on his own opinion if his co-workers disagree with him.
4. For the sake of the family or other social groups, the individual should put his personal interests second.
5. When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother.

**Evaluation of the Quality of Democracy<sup>20</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. I would rate my country as a full democracy.
2. I would say my country well sustains democratic values such as equal rights and free speech.
3. I think the votes are counted fairly in [Country].
4. I think the opposition candidates are not prevent from running in [Country].

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<sup>18</sup> Public Opinion Guidance (輿情引导) is a practice identical to censorship. I use the indirect term instead of censorship to prevent triggering preference falsification.

<sup>19</sup> (“Asian Barometer Survey” n.d.)

<sup>20</sup> (“Asian Barometer Survey” n.d.; “2017 -2021 World Values Survey Wave 7: Master Survey Questionnaire,” n.d.)

5. I think the media is not particularly favoring the governing party in [Country].
6. I think the voters are not bribed in [Country].
7. I think journalists provide fair coverage of elections in [Country].
8. I think election officials are fair in [Country].
9. I think voters are offered a genuine choice in the elections in [Country].
10. I think women have equal opportunities to run the office in [Country].

**Evaluation of Democracy as an Ideal Way of Governance<sup>21</sup>: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.
2. Democracy is capable of solving the problems of our society.
3. Economic development should not come in the cost of democratic institutions.
4. Even when the country is facing a difficult situation, the government should not disregard the law in order to deal with the situation.
5. The most important thing for a political leader is to follow the established procedure instead of accomplishing his goals.
6. Even if a political leader enjoys majority support, he still should not implement his own agenda and disregard the view of the minority.

**Evaluation of Censorship Legitimacy: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. Citizens should not be allowed to say whatever they want online.
2. The online behavior of citizens could be monitored by the government if necessary.
3. The use of VPN (a technique to hide your actual IP address online) should be banned if necessary.
4. Citizens should not to express personal grievance online if it can cause social unrest.
5. Online discussions should not involve important political figures.

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<sup>21</sup> (“Asian Barometer Survey” n.d.)

**Risk Evaluation Index: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. In general, I think all data, including my personal conversations and public statements, are subject to data breach
2. In general, I think the government is likely to monitor citizens life regardless of their public discourses on protecting privacy
3. In general, I think it's better to act safe when I don't have sufficient knowledge about the law.

**Support of Government Censorship: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. In general, I think it's justifiable for the government to regulate discussions online.
2. In general, I think the freedom of speech should be limited within certain scope in order to sustain the society in social stability, economic growth, etc.
3. In general, I think not all political topics should be discussed in public.
4. In general, I think it's justifiable for the government to withhold certain information under proper considerations.
5. In general, I think it's important for citizens to follow the regulations set by the government on public political discourses.
6. In general, I think the media should follow the government instructions on reporting the positive sides of the society.
7. In general, I think the government is justifiable in preventing the following information from spreading online [Open-ended]

**Willingness to Self-Censor: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.**

1. I think it's not prudent to discuss politics on internet.
2. I think we should be careful online.

3. I think I should not express different opinions online.
4. I think express my own opinions is dangerous.
5. I think I will make my conversation in the public spaces consistent with the government regulations.
6. I'm willing to remove contents published online if the government identify it as endangering social stability.

**Appendix D. Interview Questions**

**Validity of the Interview:**  Valid  Invalid

**No.**

**Background Information (ask in the end)**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date of Birth:** \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**Party Membership:**  Yes  No  Probation **Marriage Status:**  Single  Married

**Education:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Years Lived in Mainland:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Years Lived in [Country]:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Media Consumption (ask in front)**

**Top 3 Social Media Use:** \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**Main Source of Political Information:** \_\_\_\_\_

**General Attitude (ask at the very end)**

Do you consider yourself interested in politics?

**Attitudes Towards Regime/Democracy**

Have you ever heard of a story undermining your trust in the government? If so, what is the most impressive one you have ever heard?

What kinds of events are most likely to undermine your trust in the government?

If you heard about some government criticism online, would you do a fact check? Would you spread the information? Why or why not?

In the past years, there have been criticisms on the US not sustaining democratic values such as basic human rights, equal opportunities, etc. Do you regard those allegations as legitimate?

Do you care about whether a country is a democracy? Why or why not?

Do you regard democracy as an ideal form of governance worth pursuing? Why or why not?

**Government Censorship**

In your opinion, what is a government censorship?

Have you ever seen a government censorship imposed on someone else?

Have you ever experienced a government censorship yourself?

Can you give some examples on topics you think will be censored by the government?

Have you ever seen some posts online which you think are more likely to be censored?

Can you give me an example on the events that you think the government conducted censorship in the past? (If the example is given, I'd like to know how your opinions about the event change when the censorship is conducted)

Do you think it is easy or hard to detect censorship? Why?

Do you think censorship is sometimes justifiable? If so, when? If not, why?

Will you withhold controversial opinions in online discussions? Why?

Do you feel comfortable in criticizing politicians or the government online? Why?

### **Political Sensitivity**

Can you give some examples on topics you think is politically sensitive? Do you think they will be censored by the government?

Have you ever written any political comments online? If so, do you think you have ever written any "politically sensitive" comments?

Do you think other people will write politically sensitive comments online?

Do you think there exists risk in discussing politics online?

## Participation Consent

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “Voluntary Sacrifice of Freedom: Why Are Some Chinese Nationals Supporting Government Censorship?” I will describe this study to you before you consent and proceed to participate in the research. This study is being led by Department of Political Science researchers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

### What the study is about

The purpose of this research is to identify the attributes related to information credibility within online posts similar to the setting of social media WeChat.

### What I will ask you to do

I will ask you some questions related to your belief in political rumors, government censorship and media credibility. I am expecting honest answers to your best knowledge.

### Risks and Discomforts

I anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than minimal risks. I do not collect any biological-identifiable information, such as finger prints and blood samples, from you. Therefore, please do not provide us your sensitive personal information, such as your SSN, address, or personal ID in any form during the study. Also, I’d like you to understand:

- The response will not be linked to you personally (The preserving record will identify you with a unique categorical number instead of your actual name)
- The recording of the interview process is for research purpose only and will not be disclosed in any form to the third party
- Both the interviewer and the interviewee will not disclose the sensitive discussions during the interview in any form to the third party

### Statement of Consent

I have read the above information, I understand that the conversation will be recorded, and I consent to take part in the study.

I have read the above information, and I won’t take part in the study.

Signature of the Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

