

CHAPTER 5

Falsification of ‘manufactured compliance’ and wider legitimisation and governmentality issues

Although China is experiencing tremendous social and economic changes, the Chinese government reports considerable public endorsement from many kinds of survey results – all of which suggest people’s praise of the current authority together with a strong sense of belonging and solidarity. Of course, the government uses many tactics to manufacture public consent and minimise the possibility of challenge from the governed with the case of pension reforms, as earlier chapters have shown. However, people can also reflect on and reshape the idea of the ‘state’, ‘politics’, and the ‘state–individual relationship’ in their interactions with governmental power. In other words, despite the well-designed statecraft of the government, *there are risks for the authorities of falsified compliance/consent from the people.*

These individual-level reflections and (undisclosed) second thoughts – or ideological rebellions or modifications – play an important role in shaping the long-term expectations and superficial compliance of the general people. Many studies have highlighted the constant bubbling up of collective actions from the bottom of society in China, which obviously contradict the orderly scene on the surface. Chapter 4 also showed empirically that, while in the short term people may express contentment with a controversial policy, in the long term there is a decline in political support as the real impact of the policy on their everyday lives fails to match with the official propaganda. This situation makes China an interesting field for studying the possibilities of falsified compliance and its implications for state governmentality.

Explaining why people do not do something is always complex and needs to take account of several different factors. I begin by considering the idea of ‘falsification’ by individuals of their views and what methods might help in detecting it. The second section looks at different aspects of people’s compliance,

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and especially words left in the shadows. Section 5.3 explores the idea that there is a dual track of political knowledge, allowing people to hold ideas in tension at the same time. The fourth section looks at ignorance, apathy, and collective conservatism as underpinnings for the status quo. Section 5.5 examines the impact of education, generations, and social heterogeneity on individuals' attitudes. The final section examines the likely actions people could take in such scenarios.

5.1 'Falsification' and methods for exploring it

The concept of 'falsification' is used here as a convenient label for a situation where people construct their public images/attitudes/preferences in a way that may not be exactly the same as their privately held images/attitudes/preferences. Most commonly, a falsification in public compliance or consent usually describes the situation when people hide their true attitudes/preference. The population's falsified compliance could reshape and even distort the social order and public knowledge, and could be especially dangerous for the authority where it may lead to an unexpected 'cascade' (Kuran 1991; Kuran 1997). This chapter sets out to dig into the seemingly paradoxical situation that, on the one hand, the Chinese people report high public consent regarding authority, while on the other there is empirical evidence of discontent in private. A lack of confidence in the claims of the official publicity seems to have led to numerous collective activities around specific issues and people 'voting with their feet'. So, why and how do citizens disentangle their reported consent from private attitudes/choices? How do different mechanisms work for different social groups? Owing to the complexity of the research question, I combine observation and in-depth interviews to investigate the black box of the subjectively constructed public political attitudes of the people in an authoritarian regime.

Attitude falsification occurs when people are unwilling or unable to truthfully reveal their actual preferences (or attitudes), and so intentionally (or unintentionally) construct preferences that can be publicly reported. The notion of 'constructed attitudes' has its roots in social psychology studies and is sometimes used by the critics of social surveys. It is also an idea frequently used when describing public political attitudes in authoritarian regimes, as either 'falsified compliance' or 'preference falsification'. Social science scholars have devoted considerable effort to identifying examples and mechanisms whereby people falsify their ideas. In everyday social interaction, people tend to convey specific information about themselves (which may not be true in private) to others, in order to influence the audience's perceptions and judgements (Goffman 1978). The motivation of self-performance or impression management is to either to match one's own self-image or to match audience expectations and preferences. In these practices, individuals can achieve high social value (which is also called 'face') or satisfaction with themselves.

Social interaction therefore occurs when a person 'can be relied upon to maintain himself as an interactant, poised for communication and to act so that others do not endanger themselves by presenting themselves as interactants to him' (Goffman 2017, p. 155). The capacity to present oneself in the way one wishes is in practice distributed very unequally across the population. It may be determined by people's resources, experiences, personalities, and so on. Individuals' intentions and actions in constructing social images not only change the way that they express themselves but also exert a certain social pressure on others and change their behaviours (Bursztyn and Jensen 2017). In spite of the fact that self-presentation itself is investigated by many scholars, the prevalence of impression management causes inevitable problems in social science studies and opinion polls before elections/referendums. Since empirical social science research relies heavily on interviews and surveys, individuals' self-presentation can distort the results of empirical evidence. Researchers have identified many conditions involving the 'social desirability bias,' such as the 'interviewer effect' in interviews and the 'pressure of social expectation' in social surveys (Edwards 1957; Nederhof 1985).

Research about the falsification of political preference was especially salient when the social scientist Tim Kuran proposed a theory to explain the unexpected revolutions in East European countries in the late 20th century. He defined falsification as the difference between people's public preferences and private preferences; 'preference falsification' occurs when an individual's public preference diverges from the one that he holds in private (Kuran 1991). Building on impression management, Kuran described a situation when individuals have several public preferences on a given issue, each tailored for a particular audience. He presented a vivid example of a Soviet citizen admitting to 'six faces' under communist repression: 'one for my wife; one, less candid, for my children, just in case they blurted out things heard at home; one for close friends; one for acquaintances; one for colleagues at work; and one for public display' (Kuran 1997). These 'faces' differed from each other in that the faces for his family could be very private and sincere, while the ones worn for colleagues and the public could be disguised. There are some extreme examples (such as during the Maoist period in China) when everyone had to perform in a politically correct way, even in private, because close family members could turn people in to the authorities for some casual 'wrong' word or action.

As opposed to spontaneity, performance and impression management are fairly common in societies of all kinds, where people are connected with others and receive rewards/punishment from 'others' – be they other individuals, social groups, or certain institutions. For instance, people with unorthodox views may fear revealing themselves in public owing to the social pressure in their community. Some candidates running for an election may seek to 'buy off' anyone who does not support them in the first place. The state apparatus can also force dissenters to show compliance, notwithstanding their strong discontent in private. What is fascinating for social scientists is to investi-

gate the interaction of powers beneath the norm-enhancement, support, and compliance. Among the institutions and arenas that may generate falsification, authoritarian states (that are generally recognised as intolerant) attract much attention.

Public opinion or public support is crucial for political stability and even for the survival of the authority. Scholars are especially curious about changes of public opinion in authoritarian states, including the distribution of public opinion, the directions of any changes, and factors that shape changes in these regimes. More importantly, observers are often keen to assess how far the state is perceived by the citizens to be legitimate. Even more intriguing are unexpected events, such as the fall of the Soviet Union and the communist authorities in East Europe – when there was no clear sign of a revolution before the event (Kuran 1991). Falsification of public opinion may be one of the main factors to blame:

[People] knew that to criticize their governments openly could derail their careers or land them in jail ... even in the absence of formal sanctions, there is the universal human desire for approval, which often prevents people from voicing minority opinions. (Frank 1996, p. 115)

In this way, the discontent of the public can be disguised beneath the fake flourish of praise for the status quo. When the time comes, however, private non-compliance may turn into collective public non-compliance.

Studies about falsification in China have been undertaken, although of course the fall of the state has not occurred. It is commonly agreed that the political trust reported from survey data is very high. Tang's work (2016), along with many others, attributes this high political support to China's economic growth, the state's effective promotion of Chinese nationalism, the individual's external efficacy based on the government's responsiveness to public demands, and the cultural tradition of conformity. However, it is also widely admitted in China studies that people in Chinese society do hesitate to report discontent, especially when it concerns political authority. Scholars who do not think that people do not report their political trust in a sincere/truthful way also tend to believe that, as a typical communist and Asian regime, China's high political support derives from people's fear of the authority, or from the patriarchal and hierarchical culture of society and its politics (Fuchs 2007; Rose 2007; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2006).

Yet, although falsifying compliance has been broadly discussed and recognised by plenty of theoretical arguments, empirical studies that provide evidence of 'preference falsification' in authoritarian regimes are scarce. Currently, several published or working papers have been produced. Jiang and Yang's paper (2016) took advantage of the political fall of one high-profile official in Shanghai, China, and constructed a semi-natural experiment to examine which people would lie about their attitude to corruption and the government.

Their result showed that the falsification was most intense among the groups that had access to alternative information but were vulnerable to political sanctions (Jiang and Yang 2016). Frye and his colleagues used a list experiment to test Putin's political support among Russian people and found counter-intuitive evidence: the high approval of Putin in Russia was genuine (Frye et al. 2017). Tang's work (Tang 2016) used a similar design and found similar 'true support' in China's case. Other empirical work includes Tannenbergs's working paper manipulating the affiliation of the survey – government, academic institute, or NGO – to see whether or not people would falsify their answers (Tannenbergs 2017). Shen and Truex's (2018) working paper considered existing social surveys and compared the abnormal 'no answer' replies to sensitive questions and to non-sensitive questions.

Many factors that could exacerbate the falsification of ideas in general social interactions and in the context of authoritarian regimes. Falsification in public attitudes may stem from inner utility, external temptations, or pressure. For instance, people may find it rewarding to falsify their opinion so as to follow the crowd, or find it frightening to reveal their true feelings in public. In some cases, people simply feel content or happy to present themselves with a certain public image. Generally speaking, there are several recognised sources of falsification in public political attitudes.

The most obvious ones are the 'reward' (or patronage resources, in many studies) and 'punishment' associated with one's reported preference (Magaloni 2006; Wedeen 1999). Reward is seen as a common tactic for the authority to exchange for loyalty and votes from the public (Lane 1984; Lust-Okar 2006; Pepinsky 2007; Zhao 2001). People who have fewer endowments and little bargaining power may be bought off more easily and then controlled by the authority (Blaydes 2006). Sharing benefits can also silence people who may not be pleased with those in power. So long as they display compliance, they may still be entitled to the benefits of being a member of the club. Punishment is another common factor that causes political attitudes to be falsified. People who voice their discontent and disloyalty may be punished by violence or must have their voices censored. Authoritarian governments find it easier to mobilise resources to buy loyalty and carry out punishment; people are thus more likely to disguise their true feelings/preferences, lest they seem unacceptable or undesired by the authority.

Some indirect sources are also identified in explaining the falsification in public opinion. For instance, individuals may overestimate or underestimate the conditions of public opinion, which is sometimes termed 'pluralistic ignorance'. For example, some members of the public could reject certain norms in private but mistakenly assume that most others accepted them (O'Gorman 1986; Noelle-Neumann 1993). A famous early lab experiment in social psychology (Asch and Guetzkow 1951) showed that individuals tended to obey a false consensual judgement rather than risk being isolated as deviants. Using a computational simulation, Centola and his colleagues (2005) carefully

discussed the equilibrium in pluralistic ignorance, whereby few people would actually enforce a norm but no one realises this. They found that, if agents' horizons are limited to their immediate neighbours, highly unpopular norms can be enforced by both true believers and non-believers. Another explanation for possible (ignorant) falsification in public attitudes is the effect of socialisation and education. For example, students in high school may present a politically correct opinion for questions about politics, simply because they know the 'right' answer and have not reflected on it. These two indirect sources are more or less unconscious falsifications compared to the types of falsification brought about by rewards and punishments. However, they may still be useful for the authority and manipulated by state power through information segregation and educational cultivation.

When the state acts as a central source of power, both 'totalizing' and 'individualizing' power (Foucault 2009), a phenomenon in Chinese political attitudes in line with the effective governmentality can be identified: the involution of people's political attitude. The concept of 'involution' – meaning internal shrinkage, turning in, or closure, as the opposite of external growth – was originally used by Clifford Geertz to describe the process in Java where agriculture appeared to intensify rather than change under the external economic pressure from the Dutch rulers and the internal population (Geertz 1963). Later on, the concept was borrowed by Philip Huang to describe the rice economy of the Yangzi Delta, which he argued was locked in a pattern of 'involutionary growth' with little or no improvement in per capita output and living standards and a pattern of declining labour productivity (Huang 1990). Another school stretched the concept of 'involution' to apply to state theory; for example, Pra-senjit Duara (1987) took China's example in the early 20th century and introduced 'state involution' as an imperfect state-making process wherein:

an expanding state structure penetrating levels of society untouched before, subordinating, co-opting, or destroying the relatively autonomous authority structures of local communities in a bid to increase its command of local resources, appeared to be repeating itself in late imperial and republican China. (Duara 1987, p. 132)

Entering the 1990s, the concept of involution was widely used in social science writing on China to describe the phenomena of the social economy or cultural system exhibiting 'increased inertia.' Both external restrictions and internal factors are possible reasons for such involution. For instance, in explaining the operational logic of the state-owned enterprises, Li and Zhang (1999) argued that the SOEs followed two contradicting objectives: optimising the efficiency of the enterprise while maximising the welfare of the employees. The two objectives dragged the SOEs in the direction of functional involution and staffing intensification and led to the standstill of enterprises. Some other works have addressed the involution of dictatorship, the involution of *guanxi* (social

connections), and the involution of social class in Chinese society. Generally speaking, it can be used to refer to all kinds of communities or situations where transformation fails and the inner complexities proliferate without new inputs.

I introduce the notion of 'involution' here to capture the increasingly obvious trend in Chinese political attitudes formed in a situation where the state as a central source of power can construct the knowledge (political or social) in whatever form is most suited to maintaining its power. Individuals who have limited access to alternative explanations of social facts are less likely to interpret the environment in a different way. In the long term, even when citizens are provided with a new possibility, they are not capable of accepting a different version of the story, or reaching out on their own initiative (as shown in Chen and Yang 2019). To be sure, social knowledge is still increasing in society, thanks to the diversity of the population and the historical trend that keeps moving forward. However, it increases without questioning past or current stories, and therefore is leading to an involution of the population's 'hard knowledge' (Kuran 1997). In the following section, I demonstrate with more substantive evidence the 'involution' process as regards social knowledge and public opinions.

Is there any chance of breaking the cycle? A Foucauldian understanding of counter-conduct can be found in all kinds of power relation: struggles against exploitation, domination and subjection. Foucault did not use concepts such as 'revolt', 'disobedience', 'insubordination', 'dissidence', and 'misconduct' because they were, in his view, 'either too strong, too weak, too localized, too passive, or too substance-like' (Foucault 2009, p. 200). Conduct and counter-conduct emphasises the idea of the same thing being *utilised and reutilised* in state-population interaction, analogous to describing the state's strength and its circular working through the population's well-being. In Foucault's example of techniques of Christianity, he argued that one of the most important aspects of Christianity's 'pastoral' power was that it had a sophisticated understanding of the congregation's imagining of the world, their inner secrets, their expectations of reality. The respective counter-conduct against the pastoral power similarly relies on the form of the tactical elements being used in conduct. The struggle against subjection requires individuals to make an effort to break out of the subjectification imposed by the state through the process of self-formation and self-understanding. My exploration of the individual's subjective rebellion against the involution of political attitude in authoritarian regimes begins with two different but overlapping approaches: either through falsified compliance (intentionally or non-intentionally) or through active reflection on subjectivity, power and the current state-individual relationship. Of these two approaches, reflection is more difficult to achieve, but more meaningful in breaking the 'involution' of public/private knowledge.

In this research, I take falsified compliance in authoritarian regimes as the hidden discontent with and disdain for the authorities in people's voiced consent. Compliance includes political trust of the government and the incumbent

leader. Acceptance regards political uncertainties during the reform, approval of the official propaganda, and so on. It is not easy to find people's real attitudes, especially in answers to questions that may be quite sensitive. Therefore, I use a combination of observation and in-depth interviews to address this problem.

Observational data are valuable for painting a preliminary picture of the population. Combining with the relevant literature, they are also important for researchers constructing basic assumptions and hypotheses. I actively participated in the social life of Beijing during my fieldwork from September to December 2018. I also keep track of changes in public opinion through Chinese social media and make notes on important texts accordingly, as evidence to reflect on. Observational evidence provided a solid foundation for my follow-up research design and data collection; it also worked as a useful source of cross-validating references in my final analysis.

Face-to-face interviewing is a useful tool that allows researchers to observe the interviewees' reactions and add tailored follow-up questions (Seidman 2006). The emotions, the choice and the lengths of pauses and reactions during an interview are good pointers to the unnatural situation of an interviewee. For the first round of interviews, I conducted 10 face-to-face in-depth interviews with four male and six female interviewees from various backgrounds. Their ages ranged from early 20s to late 60s, and their occupations covered government officials, retired enterprise employees, public institutional employees, private sector employees, unemployed young people, students at school, and so on. Five of the interviewees were recruited through my own social network (such as a friend of my parents, a remote relative, the parent of a college friend, who might have willingness to reveal their true attitudes to me), while the other five were recruited through a local community in collaboration with a municipal social science research institute. Each interview lasted at least one hour, rising sometimes to five hours, depending on the situation. To help them relax and feel secure in talking about politics, all the interviewees were informed in advance that the whole conversation would not be recorded and notes would not be taken during the interviews (with permissions to use the anonymised content of our dialogue in the book). Thus, quotations from the interviews given here are not verbatim records of what the interviewees said, but recalled versions, noted after the interviews and translated for inclusion here.

The first-round interviews focused on the interviewees' experiences, ideological changes, and the politics in their daily lives. We discussed such topics as how they perceived the current political situation, the past 40 years of transformation (reform) and the future possibilities of society; their view of a desirable state-individual relationship; whether they believed the rhetoric and discourses promoted by the authority; and what they thought about the potential challenges of the state. In some conversations, I asked directly about falsified public attitudes in general and their opinion of falsification. In addition to these in-depth interviews, during the fieldwork period I discussed the above topics with more than 15 social scientists from various academic institutions in

China in private talks, workshop panel discussions, and so on. These materials provided me with primary evidence of the falsification in public political attitudes. Combining them with the existing theories and the research questions underlying my whole book, I narrowed down some hypotheses, which were designed to be further discussed and explored with a second-round interview.

The first set of hypotheses relates to the existence and different types of falsification of political consent. It has been constantly argued in both theoretical and empirical works that general (or diffuse) political support is substantially different from specific political support, since Easton's (1965; 1975) work on the multiple dimensions of this concept. People may show different levels of compliance regarding different branches of the current political institutions. They may have specific complaints regarding certain polities and may even have special expectations of certain politicians. Thus, my investigation of the heterogeneity of falsification in people's political support starts from the varied features related to politics.

The political support for the Chinese state's institutions already has considerable internal variations. Many of my interviewees had a sense that 'the state is good and sincere [to its people], [it's] just local authorities twisting the policies and instructions.' The *state* here is more than central government; it is also an abstract idea of the grand governors who rank above local officers. For ordinary Chinese people, the idea of the 'state' is a vague concept that mixes the notion of country, nation, government, and sometimes even the Communist Party. Chinese people in general never seem to fear the expansion of the state – as long as they can get benefit and convenience from the expansion (Xiang 2010). In this sense, the state–individual relationship reveals some duplicity. On the one side, the 'state' as an abstract image is moralised and is given legitimacy by its nature in good faith. Yet, on the other side, the public is highly suspicious about the specific actions of state institutions: the interaction between individuals and the branches of government/officials relies heavily on the exchange of benefits. With such Janus-faced attitudes in mind, it is easy to explain hierarchical political trust (T. Shi 2001), as well as the rule consciousness in China's contentious politics (L. Li 2010). People trust the central government more than the local government and would blame the local government for 'not following directions from the centre'; and, when people perceive 'injustice' from local government, they tend to appeal for 'just and right' supervision from a higher authority. Examples of treating local officials/government as scapegoats when a policy fails, but respectfully addressing the top leader as 'Chairman Xi', are not uncommon in my interviews, either.

To better understand the complexity of political support revealed in my interviews and the theoretical arguments, I first hypothesise about the potential differentiation of falsified compliance directed at the various types of state representative: the local authority, the central government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the incumbent president Xi Jinping as top leader. The public's criticism of these state representatives differs in the freedom of

discourse that is allowable: the lower in the hierarchy is the subject discussed, the less controlled the speech is. Thus, the deficiencies of local government furnish the least sensitive context. My first hypothesis is about the heterogeneity of falsification of political support: people falsify their compliance regarding the central government, the party, and the top leader, but will reveal their true discontent regarding local authorities.

The objects that I use to test the varieties of compliance include a multilevel measurement. The first – *attitudinal* – level covers questions about whether the respondents would agree with various statements (which might not be 100% true) about social conditions under the promotion (endorsement) of different state representatives; for example, ‘under the leadership of CCP, education brings a higher possibility of social mobility’, or ‘under the leadership of the central government, the dual track social pension system [covered in Chapter 3] has been largely reduced’. The second – *cost* – level refers to the individual level of cost that people are willing to bear at the request of different state representatives. Here I distinguish two kinds of cost: the cost of common goods (taxes imposed on individual goods to protect the environment) and the cost of national requests (income/consumption degradation to help China win in the trade war with the US). The underlying rationale here is that people are more willing to express their true feelings in response to questions that are less sensitive to them.

As indicated in the duality theory of the state, Chinese people are quite capable of disentangling the policies from the policymakers – a policy is acceptable as long as it does not hurt their own interests too much. In many cases, people take their chance in the policy reform and bargain with the government (without fundamentally questioning the legitimacy of the policymakers) to gain more benefits. There are many cases of controversial policies that the interviewees criticised in our conversations, but very few of them would directly blame the incumbent central authority. When it came to specific policies, such as the property tax, education reform, and health care policies, some interviewees would open with, ‘I am not saying there is anything wrong with it, just some things I think the policy could improve in a little bit’ or ‘The state may have an overarching design and I believe it’s a good policy, but there may be some local officials who distort it when they put it into action’. For instance, with regard to the education policy of ‘lifting the student’s burden’, young parents complained that this leads to the problem of shifting the burden of educating children from the schools to the parents. Since the primary schools are reducing the school hours and the size of the curriculum, parents have to register their children in private education institutions after school. When I probed their complaints, however, some of them identified the discontinuity and arbitrariness of the policy to a certain extent. Therefore, we may suppose that the degree of falsification is not significant for specific policies even when the policy is controversial.

The logic of people’s attitudes to the official propaganda is not one-way, either. On the one hand, they are easily guided by the propaganda content (as shown

in Chapters 3 and 4). On the other, I also discovered that people could identify the disjunction between official propaganda and the policy content and this disjunction sooner or later led to a loss of political trust. Existing studies suggest that the Chinese public is aware of pro-regime bias from official mouthpieces, but still trust these outlets more than other sources (Truex 2016). It is possible that the public prefers the official reports to commercial/foreign news sources, while also being able to admit that their preferences are swayed by the propaganda. In other words, people may recognise that the official propaganda only says 'good words' about the government and never says 'bad words', but still believe that these words are 'real' and 'trustworthy'. This is consistent with the model shown in Kamenica and Gentzkow's work: that the degree to which citizens are persuaded by a positive media report is negatively related to the degree of media bias (Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011). To further explore the 'cognitional duality' regarding official propaganda, I extended my exploration of falsified compliance to a third subsection: people's attitudes to the legitimacy of official news. To be more specific, I wanted to know whether people could identify the element of indoctrination in official propaganda and why they liked biased official news better than other news. The related hypothesis is that people do not falsify their acknowledgement of the social constructive nature of official propaganda. Moreover, people may be aware of the potential discontinuity in public discourse.

Apart from the existence of falsification, I was also interested in the mechanisms that could induce falsification in reported public attitudes. An inference design is not feasible with qualitative data; therefore, in this research I focused only on the details of possible reasons, rather than making causal inferences as shown in the hypotheses. As I explained in the theoretical discussion, people may choose to falsify their true political attitudes – because they are aware of the potential rewards of displaying loyalty in public, or because they are afraid of potential punishment from showing discontent, or they mistakenly perceive that the general public hold a certain 'common' viewpoint. In line with the model of statecraft used to generate compliance in Chapter 1, the state would prefer to manufacture true consent and avoid falsification brought about by fear. For individuals, I hypothesise the following relationship between the effect of punishment and rewards on displayed compliance: punishment, rather than reward indicates a higher degree of falsification.

During the first-round interviews, one factor that was not highlighted in the existing explanations was the low political efficacy people have when talking about the reason for not telling the truth or fighting for their own rights. 'There won't be anything changed even if I speak up'; 'It's just not my turn to discuss about [these political issues]'. This may be because citizens are not confident about the responsiveness of the government, or they are not confident in their own ability of making a difference, or both. To identify the role of political efficacy, one hypothesis I propose to further discuss regarding the mechanism behind the falsification is: low political efficacy might relate to a high degree of falsification.

In addition to the general scenario of falsification and the average effect of stimulation (such as the rewards for showing loyalty, or punishments for non-compliance) on the population as a whole, people with distinctive endowments may have different degrees of falsification and various degrees of elasticity regarding the spectrum of stimulation. Chapters 2 and 3 showed that the government is prepared to differentiate the allocation of benefit and construct specific knowledge for people of high or low political status. Political status and age group determine ‘what pension benefits people get’, as well as ‘what policies/propaganda/education they receive or experience.’ Consequently the cost of expressing oneself truthfully varies and the motivation to construct a public face varies a great deal. Exploring the potential heterogeneity of falsification among different social groups was valuable for unpacking the varied degrees of falsification in people’s political attitudes.

Jiang and Yang (2016) also touched upon unequally distributed falsification of the attitude to corruption in different social groups. Falsification was most intense among the groups that had access to alternative information but were vulnerable to political sanctions. Shen and Truex (2018) in their working paper also showed that, when they measured the falsification with an unusual inflation of ‘don’t know’ and ‘no answer’ responses to sensitive questions in cross-sectional surveys, self-censorship was more prevalent among older cohorts (who voiced extremely high levels of support for the regime), women, ethnic minorities, non-Party members, and members of the working class. The evidence of these writers thus suggests that people who are marginalised in society are more likely to falsify their political attitudes with ‘don’t know’ and ‘no answer’ responses.

I highlighted the first category of heterogeneity among social groups by saying that people who are closer to the power system react more strongly (with a higher degree of falsification) to the possibility of punishment than people who are further from it. The logic is that people who are closer to the power system may enjoy more benefits and privilege, but they are also sensitive to the potential loss that they might suffer if they revealed their discontent and moved away from the ‘guided road’. For instance, taking the most prestigious group, would an officer from the public sector be more prone to falsify their loyalty to the authority than a farmer? I asked one interviewee from the government sector why he did not try to use his position inside the government machine to offer a suggestion to the decision makers when he found aspects of policy that were not feasible at the local level. He replied:

we are not like ordinary people who have nothing to lose by arguing with the government. We [government officials] all have to be very careful about picking out errors for the leaders. It’s like skating on thin ice – one careless move could ruin everything. (no. 22)

Another characteristic that may determine people’s ability to distinguish the problem in official propaganda and deliberately construct their public

preferences is their educational level. People who are more educated are more likely to receive diverse sources of information ('alternative information', as Jiang and Yang (2016) called it) and are more likely to be critical about the current political, social, and economic situation. Meanwhile, an individual's education level may highly correlate to people's closeness with the power system, which makes them more likely to hide their discontent (if it exists). I propose the next hypothesis: people who are more educated are more likely to falsify compliance regarding nationalist requests from the authority.

In addition to the feature of 'distance from the power system' and 'educational capacity' discussed above, some other heterogeneities may be decisive for people's reported compliance regarding authority and the state apparatus. For example, would a respondent who had been exposed to a socialist education be less likely to falsify loyalty to the party? Would respondents who belong to an ethnic minority be more sensitive than other people to possible political sanctions? I investigate these questions in greater depth when I analyse the data. The final differentiation of social groups is age, or generational difference. People who have experienced more in society are in general more likely to conceal their true discontent. Hence, the last hypothesis is: people who are younger are less likely to falsify their discontent.

The 15 second-round interviews were conducted in late May and June 2019, through the video chat on the online social platform WeChat (for interviewees who were located in China) and face-to-face interviews (for the few interviewees who were in London). In order to capture the heterogeneity of the population, I invited interviewees through snowball sampling from a diverse range of ages, genders, occupations, education levels, ethnicities, and locations in China. A detailed table of interviewees' attributes is shown in the Appendix A, Section A5. Each interview lasted 1.5 to two hours. As in the pre-research interviews, the interviewees were informed in advance that the interview would not be recorded and would be anonymous. Rather than rigidly following the three blocks of hypotheses proposed above – 'falsification, mechanism, and potential actions' – the interview questions were tailored for the interviewees according to their personal situations and instant reactions to specific questions. The questions were also continually modified according to the stream of interactions between them and me.

My strategy of interviewing for falsified compliance and disguised discontent also took advantage of the changing political and social environment in the presidency of Xi Jinping. The period of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's administration was widely recognised as open in political power sharing and decentralised. During their administration from 2003 to 2013, much progress was made in social welfare reforms and social events often drove the institutional reform (e.g. see Kelly 2006; Liu and Sun 2016; K. Ngok 2013). The abolition of the 'temporary residence permit' regulation is an outstanding instance. It originated from the death of one migrant worker, but it later gathered widespread attention from the whole society and hastened the change of policy on migrants (Qiu and Wen 2007). It was also the period when online social media platforms

(such as Weibo, launched in 2009) and some non-official papers (such as the *Southern Weekly*) came to the forefront of the forces monitoring political power through publicity and reports (Stockmann 2013; Tong and Lei 2010).

Xi's administration, however, started with a vehement anti-corruption campaign, a recentralisation of political power, and a gradual tightening up of the societal space. Censorship on online content accelerated around late 2017 and 2018. Moreover, in early 2018, the 13th National People's Congress approved the abolition of the limited presidential term in the constitution proposed by the CPC.¹ Beginning in 2018 and intensifying in 2019, the US–China trade war posed new challenges in the domestic socio-economic situation. This 'new normality' affected everyone's daily life, directly or indirectly. Many people experienced or heard of the 'disappearance' or 'explosion' of some personal social media accounts. Some government officials or civil servants were required to use a state-issued app called 'STUDY (XI) STRONG COUNTRY' every day. All the changes could be seen by people from every background and would be assessed and compared with conditions in previous periods. Therefore, it is fascinating to make use of the theme of *transition* in objective scenarios and to investigate the subjective perceptions of ordinary people.

In my interviews, I normally started with some casual talk about the worsening trade war and invited the interviewees to evaluate its impact on their everyday lives. I asked how much they would feel like paying as a patriotic sacrifice if the state requested them to give something up in order to win the trade war. Further questions could then turn to the general socio-economic situations in China in the previous year or two and how it differed from previous years, with varied questions regarding controversial social policies (such as the education inequality brought by the *hukou* system, or the patriotic slogans all over the streets), social issues (such as the perceived loss of space for public speech, or the accusations made against teachers by students for using 'inappropriate speech' in class), and institutional reforms (such as the lifting of term limits for the top leader, or anti-corruption moves and the foundation of the National Supervisory Commission). In addition to interviewees' personal reactions, I also paid attention to public opinion and public knowledge as they perceived them.

The potential problem is that the collected interviews data are not distinctively 'public' or 'private' in the attitudes they represent. They are clearly not 'public' since the interviews are all one-to-one conversations, so the interviewees can feel the intimacy of the dialogue and it is possible for them to trust me as a friend. But nor are they purely 'private', in the sense that I as the interviewer was still counted as a semi-stranger, not in the inner circle for most of the interviewees. However, from a different perspective, this may have been useful for my analysis. By combining the interview data with observational data, I could actually construct a relatively smooth scale, which covered the observational data proper to a public space (online and offline), the interview data of the middle-distance interviewees, and the observational data of very close friends/relatives.

Table 5.1: Qualitative data collection on falsified compliance

		Institutional difference	Difference in compliance
Falsified compliance	Legitimacy of representatives of the state	Local government	Agreements on social facts descriptions; Attribution of controversial policies
		Central government	
		CCP	Controversial institutional reforms; Pay for a nationalist request
		Xi as the top leader	
	Legitimacy of public discourse	Official propaganda	
		Political Knowledge	

It should also be highlighted that, owing to the accessibility problem, the interview evidence mainly came from the group of people who were more educated or living in major cities. Even though I tried my best to reach samples with distinctive attributes and backgrounds, the analysis in the following sections has *no* intention to offer any general inferences about the whole population. The discussion all focused on interpreting the accessible data from the interviews and observations, deciphering the rationale of certain choices at an individual level and revealing the heterogeneity of political compliance across different social groups within the range of available data. To better present the structure in the analysis part, Table 5.1 is helpful.

5.2 Different faces of compliance: the words in shadow

In this section, I first present the varied political compliance for different representatives of the state with evidence from the observational and interview data, deciphering the differentiated ‘distinctive faces’ that people constructed and the words in shadow.

The differentiated niches of the different levels of government resulted in several observable phenomena of people’s political compliance. The first and most obvious one was that people tended to blame the local government for controversial policies while not questioning the ability and good faith of higher-ranking/central government. In other words, people generally did not avoid complaining or discussing controversial policies in public, but they would be cautious over attribution. For instance, from late 2018 to early 2019, a new policy of ‘clearing and unifying the billboard format’ was promoted in big cities and caused large-scale debates about the appropriateness of doing so. Many people argued that there was no need to keep the same format (e.g. font, size, and

background colour) for all the billboards in the street; it was unaesthetic and the government was too controlling. A propos of this controversial urban policy in an interview, one interviewee who worked in Beijing said:

Sometimes I feel like it is the local government that tries to do something excessive to take credit and seek rewards from the upper government or the central government ... The 'unifying the billboard' campaign was getting heated last winter. Our office building ... used to be able to control the light outside the building ... last year, the local government informed us that we need to remove the original lights and install a new set of lights and follow the unified rule for on and off. We used to show the shape of a Christmas tree in the Christmas period, but now we can only follow the general instructions. (no. 11)

Although intolerable for some, policies relating to minor aspects of urban planning such as lighting and billboards seem no big deal to others. They can certainly tolerate the seemingly nonsensical regulations. Many people find it acceptable so long as the government can give explanations, even when a plan may affect local residents' lives, such as the construction of a chemical plant, or changing the purchase constraints on the real estate market:

The government has its own difficulties; we [the people in general] should try to give sympathetic consideration to the mountainous problems the government has to solve. If the government gives us reasons [for policies that seem controversial], we should understand and give full support and not trouble them. (no. 16)

Regarding the reason why a higher-ranking government, especially the central government, should be trusted more than the local government, some people reasoned by comparing the abilities of the officials.

The appearance of weird/strange policies is mostly like ... the central government puts forward a certain project and the executive department and the local government are responsible for implementing it. However, the policies are very likely to be distorted or twisted in the process. The governance capacity of county level governments is very worrying; the local governmental officials do not possess enough knowledge and ability to capture the whole picture. But I think the cadres and leaders in upper government have higher education and merit, they can deal with the governance problems appropriately. (no. 9)

Although the topics of government, governance, and the state were not absolutely taboo in people's daily conversations, the sensitivity of various representations of the government was varied. As discussed in the section on

hypotheses, the sensitivity of political issues relating to the government, party, and top leader gets more significance in moving to the right side of the scale. People were less likely (either from will or ability) to publicly discuss issues relating to the top leader, especially after the accession of Xi. For instance, the official accounts of state newspapers would close the comment area (which was in grey and no one can leave a comment under the post) when they posted a Weibo (a Twitter-like social platform) post concerning the top leader. For topics related to the party or central government, the official account would show only certain select comments with positive content.

The regulation of the party became stricter after the large-scale anti-corruption campaign in late 2012. At the time of writing, one former member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, two vice-chairmen of the military commission, one alleged successor in the 20th Party Congress, and more than 200 provincial-level officials were all in jail due to this unexpectedly intense and protracted campaign. Following the anti-corruption campaign, the party regulations became more and more strict and came to directly affect party members in many ways. One of my interviewees who worked in a local government office talked about her personal experience and attitude:

I read the news quite often, but mainly focus on the items which are closely related to my work and life. In everyday work, we basically have quite limited autonomy with regard to policies ... we just follow the guidance from the upper government. In recent years, especially after Xi's reign, the workload has got substantially larger, working overtime is just as common as your meals every day ... I knew many cases of death by overwork [among] local government officials ... Everyone faces the heavy pressure of performance evaluation [by the upper government and the inspection group from central government] and strict regulation [of your behaviour]. The inspection group from the central are just like the feudal prefectural governor (刺史, CI SHI) in the old days² ... I am aware that this is because of the start of the anti-corruption campaign and ideological education is very necessary inside the party. We currently have many 'red education' modules, such as party history, new theory, new thoughts [proposed by Xi] and local governments organise a visit for us to the 'red-base'³ occasionally. I mean, in the current international and domestic situation, it's necessary to have ideological unity [inside the party]. (no. 2)

Party members who do not work in a government department can also identify changes in party regulations and have their own understanding of these topics. For instance, as one of the interviewees commented,

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China [when Xi was elected as the Party leader], the party regulation became

a core issue, which is much stricter than in previous periods. It starts from the cadres, with the campaign against the ‘four styles’ [formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance]. Then party members are encouraged to join the ‘two studies, one action’ [study the party regulations, study the leader’s speech, be a qualified party member]. There is also the ‘STUDY (XI) STRONG COUNTRY’ app, so all party members are strongly encouraged to use it every day. In other words, the party regulations have been normalised ... There are also campaigns for a youth league, called ‘one study, one action’ [study Xi’s thoughts, be a qualified youth league member]. And we all know the interaction between the party and the youth league is very close. We can see that ideological education has moved to the forefront in our society. This is better – the ruler can listen to the public and help to solve the problems at the grassroot. [I think] for a party that wants to rule such a big country with so many people, that it’s necessary and correct to unify its own members and regulate their behaviour. (no. 4)

Another interviewee, who was a member of an ethnic minority and worked in a university that gave professional training, had similar observations to make in and outside the party:

My own experience, from school to work, is that the emphasis on ideology is stronger now. There used to be regulations for party members, but these were not strictly followed and no one would come along and accuse you directly. Now it’s getting formal ... In universities, we would also organise teachers to learn the new thoughts, or new regulations. The ideology is not just about communist or red ideology as you might think, it also includes our traditional concepts such as ‘kindness and love’, ‘respect’, ‘equality’, and so on. We also try to include patriotic ideas in our professional courses; [the attempt] is encouraged and promoted by our city government. For instance, we would introduce the idea of ‘glorious China’ in our textile courses and encourage students to include more traditional beauty in their work ... The existence of such things must have its proper reasons. (no. 3)

Although many people might have genuinely found the Party regulations necessary and important, other voices mentioned the conspiracy feature of the anti-corruption campaign and the Party’s stringent inspection of its cadres. For instance, in informal conversations, people passed on gossip and hearsay, like: ‘The anti-corruption campaign started with good intentions, but seems to have been used as a weapon that certain people used to pull their opponents out of the party.’ The issues related to the party were, however, generally not very controversial and people found it easy to accept the changes as new governance tactics that would contribute to social well-being. After all, the new

party regulations reduced corruption and brought better-regulated and better-behaved cadres.

When we move from the party to the top leader (of the party and the state), the related issues are less likely to be discussed openly and discontents are less likely to be disclosed. One significant move of the top leader in recent years was the removal of limits to the term a state president can serve. Under the previous constitutional regulations, the president could not serve more than two consecutive terms; this rule was obeyed from 1982 onwards. But in the 2018 National People's Congress conference this constitutional limit was lifted, with only two delegates voting against and three abstaining, out of 2,964 votes.⁴ This news attracted considerable attention overseas, because the move technically allowed a person to remain president for life. There were some domestic objections from a few intellectuals, though without anything being changed. What did ordinary people think? In the interviews, I asked, directly or indirectly, 'Would you think that if a leader has enough merits, he/she shouldn't be limited by term regulations?' In some interviews, when the conversation went well, I directly asked their feelings about Xi's case and what their friends' reactions had been back in 2018. Their reactions expressed similar passive sentiments. Although they did not agree with the political move of lifting the term limits, they were already trying to accept it and find excuses for it.

If you ask me, I would say we really need term limits for top leaders. Our society and history are all very different from the Western system. It's difficult to change a 'guanxi' society and our reliance on the assumption of upright rulers. In such circumstances, if a leader stays in power for a long time, we might expect some flaws or wrong doings. Therefore, we need to make sure that when the time comes someone else will be there to fill the position ... But currently, [regarding Xi's] move we have no power to change the situation, although we can complain in private with our friends. (no. 3)

Some interviewees resorted to the reasoning that it was 'pointless to reject', or 'doesn't affect normal life' or 'people are already finding life enough of a struggle' when they disliked strong reaction to political change. Some simply responded to such events with 'we are not trained to express our opinions' or 'we should trust the central government'. Here are several examples of interviewees' replies regarding the term limit change:

I feel like the change of term limit is just a political game. To be fair, whether it changes or not does not make much difference. We are a one-party state, the power and the rule of the party chairman is not under the control of any other authority ... and for people in general, well, we don't really do anything about it, right? If you can't fight why don't just accept it? I can see it [the party] is moving forward, progressing ... (no. 9)

I was really worried when I heard about the [term limit] change. However, when I mentioned it to my colleagues, they were, like, not anxious at all. They felt like it had nothing to do with their lives, whoever was in that position didn't matter at all. If it's something directly related to their own interests, they might complain, very probably without doing anything about it. Maybe it's because we were educated to avoid showing our own views when we were young. We can't parade or strike like capitalist countries; we can't unleash our anger. (no. 11)

The term-limit thing, to be fair, is something you can't change now. People are already thinking how to adjust themselves to it. We don't really have much choice. If we did, we might not be like this; but we don't. Most people feel like the change has no direct impact on our income and living conditions ... currently the cake is large enough for almost everyone [to share], so the resentment is not strong. Even if the state censored most of the political news, people might still feel like events had no impact on their own career. Honestly, I would say that people are very tolerant about issues related to politics. (no. 5)

It's useless [to try to change it]. I would say, maybe it [the changed term limit] is for the better development of the country. We [ordinary people] should do whatever we can and not make troubles to the state and society ... the term limit change was probably a group decision [by all the central leaders] and we should fully understand and trust them. If anyone has other [different] views, it would be pointless [to voice them] and might obstruct public order. (no. 4)

It seems as though the top leader had a golden shield that excluded any criticism from the public. Even in private, most of the interviewees chose without much complaint to swallow their worries and discontents over the changed term limit. In later sections, I discuss further their defence of the political apathy in themselves and their circle in response to their weak political efficacy and nationalist ideology.

But, if the public are tolerant of undesired political moves by the leader and still willing to find excuses for it, would things change if they were asked to bear some personal cost in order to promote the state's interests? In addition to people's direct attitudes to the government, I asked questions about interest exchange by taking advantage of the ongoing trade war between the US and China⁵ to see if they were willing to accept an individual burden in order to win the trade war. Most of the interviewees said they did not personally feel any direct influence of the trade war (such as domestic inflation, unemployment, or difficulties in international communication). But some mentioned that they had friends working in a factory where the trade war had reduced the number of overseas orders. One interviewee who worked for the press said that the

reason why many people were not aware of the effect and the danger of the trade war was the information control:

Now we are having the trade war and the whole economy is slowing down, everyone is stressed out. Like Huawei, directly hit by the conflict. But the central state doesn't allow much news reporting on the trade war issue – well, maybe some nationalist articles are allowed. I personally feel that the issue is actually quite serious, many companies are laying off employees, just it's not reported publicly. Any issue, whether it's a social, political or simply economic issue, if it has a chance of sparking wide public discussion is not allowed to be reported nowadays. (no. 13)

Whether directly perceived or not, if the central government encouraged individuals to bear more costs (in the form of more taxes, inflation, and so on, converting into income reduction), would they agree to accept or not, and why? Some would find it acceptable to bear some burdens if it was for the general good:

[The trade war] doesn't have much effect at the personal level. Although, emotionally, you will feel like it's being at war and we should stand together and stay strong. In reality you can't really measure any influence, like, our schools still have their normal exchange programme with US schools. The price of daily goods may go up slightly, but it's really small and you can't perceive it, to be honest. If one day the state calls everyone to bear the cost [of the trade war], I would probably accept a maximum reduction of 5%~10% income. Anything more would affect my personal life. Although, if we really had to bear more costs more than that, I think maybe I would have to accept it. I mean, well, for most people, we just let our complaints loose when we're at home and in practice you have to bear the cost anyway. Most people don't really have a choice, or don't have the capital to make choices. (no. 3)

Some interviewees did not find the costs problematic at the individual level, since very few rational discussions were heard:

Is the trade war really because China is doing better than the US now? I only have some ideas about the trade war because our company invited a lawyer to show us the changed regulations and further sections that we needed to pay attention to. Our colleagues were kind of patriotic for a bit, but just complained a little bit and didn't discuss it too much ... We [work for] a Japanese company, so can't really do much or say much about the stand. Our colleagues do not really consciously care about it. But if you asked them to bear some costs, they might have no objection. (no. 11)

Other interviewees would refuse to make a patriotic sacrifice proposed by the state:

Our friends may discuss the trade war a bit about when we get together for dinner or something. But they mostly focus on the things that directly relate to everyday life ... generally speaking, it [the trade war] is not a good thing ... About the request to bear an individual level cost, I would refuse. Why should I? I really don't like this grand storytelling. It [the trade war] is not a war about justice or injustice – it's just a Party action. I just don't like the big idea of letting state or country influence my personal life ... I mean, I would be willing to devote myself or make a sacrifice, but I just don't want to do this for any big, macro concept. I hope we can make judgements from an objective and fair angle, not just some emotional and ideological perspective [calling for sacrifice] ... Other people in the society, I would say, people in a different social stratum or age group may have different degrees of acceptance of nationalist requests, or ideological requests. Maybe older people may be easily motivated, but I don't think the younger generation will ... (no. 10)

Another example of a refusal to take on an individual burden for the trade war insisted that no one should bear the cost because the trade war is merely a typical political game:

[I think] no one is willing to bear the cost. I personally wouldn't ... Why would anyone do so? It [the trade war] is caused by certain politicians. There shouldn't be any sacrifice or cost at the individual level. (no. 8)

Comparing people's attitudes and reasoning regarding the top leader's controversial actions and a nationalist request that might directly damage someone's personal interests, it can be identified that people were cautious about complaining over political issues that related to core politics, especially when the issues did not directly affect their benefits. However, a nationalist request that might bring about changes in personal living was more likely to be rejected, even though the topic itself was still not publicly debatable.

Throughout this research, I identify the falsification of compliance as a distinguishable difference between people's public support and private support. The change from public face to private face, however, does not seem from the interview evidence very distinctive. There are complaints that people are not allowed to publicly discuss or spread certain opinions. But the degrees of falsification differ according to whether the issue directly relates to the speaker's life, whether the issue is sensitive or not, and which level of authority the issue refers to. As common sense would suggest, people did not hesitate to reveal their true discontent regarding local authorities. People might be cautious when discussing in public issues relating to the central government, the Party, and the top

leader, while in private they would be honest. From the evidence above it is clear that people's public faces were not the same as their private faces. But there is no clear line between these faces and people themselves might not necessarily have been aware of the difference.

One interviewee reflected on whether or not to publicly present discontent:

About discontent, normally people are not willing to discuss it in public. Mostly because, if you don't have a better solution, or a constructive suggestion, I would rather not talk about it with total strangers ... Don't make a fuss. If you simply want to unleash your emotions, it's pointless and will not help to solve the problem. Moreover, it might deepen the social conflicts, or social divisions. And make it difficult for the government to work. (no. 17)

Some close friends expressed their views of people's discontent and the boundary between expressing it publicly and not:

In my opinion, in today's China, you can discuss your discontent in public, regarding politics, the government, the party or any other authority. But don't touch historical issues such as June 4th, or issues relating to the state's fate, like classified topics. If you do, it might be identified as treason; people might treat you as a traitor to the country. (no. 19)

Another obvious feature when people talked about politics, in many public discussions and even in private conversations, was that people were very keen to see things from the position of the governor and tended to explain/consider issues from his standpoint. For instance, one friend's view of ideological education ran like this:

I would say, everyone should take care of themselves, live their own life. Don't make trouble for the state or the government ... When the international and domestic situation gets tough and tense, like the trade war, it's totally necessary to emphasise the ideological education from the state's point of view. Or you might say we need special policies in special times. (no. 21)

The smooth transformation of people's public and private attitudes made it difficult to capture the moment when people began to hide their true discontent intentionally. However, this observation enriches the theoretical discussion of falsified compliance and constructed political attitudes by highlighting the elusiveness of varied compliance and the way in which the cautiousness of political sensitivity is embedded in daily life. In later sections, I investigate further how people manage the discontinuity (and continuity) between different faces.

5.3 The dual track of political knowledge

In addition to the varied attitudes to different state representatives, another field in which people may have perceptions in private that are unlike their public discourse is political knowledge. People's social knowledge is shaped by various agents. School, family, public education, and past experiences are all effective in establishing or changing the way that individuals perceive, describe, and understand their situation. How, then, do people think about the shaping agents of their knowledge? Moreover, is there any possible difference between their public knowledge and private knowledge?

The public media have been recognised as main sources in shaping people's knowledge, preferences, and desires. As noted earlier (Chapter 1), authoritarian and communist countries rely heavily on ideological legitimation, through tactics such as knowledge construction and media censorship. Chapters 3 and 4 also elaborated on the content of knowledge construction in official propaganda and the effect of the media on individuals' welfare preferences. The question then arises: are people themselves aware of the power of the official media in shaping their political attitudes? And do they find information censorship tolerable or not?

The interview data along with observational data show that people did not falsify their acknowledgement of the socially constructive nature of official propaganda. They acknowledged the shaping power of official propaganda and were also aware of the possibility of the state to use biased discourse. However, they would argue that discourse construction is a necessary to maintain the rule of the authority.

The state is very cautious about changes in public opinion. You can't mention certain issues in public, for sure ... The whole propaganda system, or the official voice is a bit harsh now, I admit, kind of leaning to the left. But I would also say that 80% of the opinions that were censored or deleted had inappropriate content, or twisted the facts. From the viewpoint of the government, our government is led by the party, no question, so when it feels like its interest is harmed, it will surely take action, like using propaganda, or just censoring wrong opinions ... As individuals, we all only have so much energy every day, so we would definitely be influenced by the official discourse. (no. 4)

I think most people are quite obedient in public and do not publicly criticise the authorities, no matter which social stratum you come from, upper level or lower level ... I think we all have similar perception of the nature of politics. It's all about governance and rule. So, it's natural that the official media will only say good things about the country. I totally understand that sometimes the [official] media will avoid tackling social or political issues head on. (no. 1)

One press editor who had worked for several commercial presses in China for 10 years also admitted that the educative nature of the public press had never changed:

We all know that the press in China is nothing but propaganda. Even the commercial press is just some platform that puts forward official decisions or policies. Well ... several years ago, there was still some space, but now we can feel it getting tighter and tighter. But no matter whether it was years ago or yesterday, the nature of the press in our socio-political scenario has never changed. It's beyond question a tool for the state to manage its governance. (no. 13)

Some attributed the necessity of news control to the weakness of the Chinese population, arguing that the state needed to lead the trends in public opinion in order to keep society moving forward.

There are some things the government prefers us not to know. I think it might be because Chinese people are not intelligent enough to digest some information properly. There are many social conflicts in our society, so people are quite easily led by inappropriate opinions ... About the official propaganda, I think the starting point must be good and the intentions are good. I believe the leaders still want to serve the people and the think tanks are not dumb, they definitely know how to govern the country. In many cases we may see the emotions being set above the rational. But we all understand that we are a huge country with 1.4 billion people, that is very difficult to govern. We have a very complex population structure so every move of the government needs to be very cautious ... I know there are historical cases that the party does not want to mention or explain, but they have no effect on our domestic development ... When we get strong, all our actions and choices will be understood [by the world]. (no. 15)

It was quite common for people to be aware of the problem of information control while also having very limited optimism about other approaches of obtaining information due to the limited freedom of expression. One interviewee who had experienced the pre-reform period compared the current information control to former times:

Currently the control on free speech is quite tight. But the sky won't fall if you let people say something. Now I know there are some local platforms, if you say 'too much', your post will be censored. The situation is somehow similar to that in Mao's time. Only good and positive things can be publicly discussed, only things that are beneficial to the state and the party ... other approaches exist [if you want to solve problems other

than resorting to the press], for instance, you can write to a government office or something of the kind, but it won't help much. (no. 12)

From the interview evidence and observational evidence on the social media, people were aware of the shaping power of official propaganda and the constructed official discourse when they described the situation. However, many accepted that they were thus influenced and seemed not to be too worried about the extensive role of the state. How is this discontinuity sustainable for them?

Even though China experienced so many reforms in the short period after 1978, whether politically, socially, or economically, the official discourse was quite consistent regarding the institutional nature of the state. The public description of the political system is still 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and the economic system remains a socialist market economy. However, as many scholars have identified, the economic system in China is more like state capitalism (Huang 2012; Naughton and Tsai 2015) and the so-called 'socialist' structure has largely been changed since the reform. So how does the general population interpret the ideological position and the nature of the current economic system in China? Is private knowledge consistent with or variance with the public discourse? One of the interviewees who worked in a private equity company expressed concerns about the disjunction between the perceived situation and the public discourse:

In our current [economic] system, I think the state of affairs and the public propaganda don't match. The state-owned economy serves political ends, but does nothing to improve the market efficiency ... Some people admire the state's capacity to use collective resources to solve big problems. I certainly don't doubt it, but I'm not quite convinced.

[Interviewer: Would you agree that different kinds of market economy and governance rationale exist?]

I don't think so. I know many people argue that there are different forms of market economy, such as the ones with Chinese characteristics. I don't agree. There is one single concept of a market economy and there is only one governance rationale with respect to it, which consists of the market, democracy and the rule of law. If the state claims that it is serving the interests of the people, the only object of people's interest is to have a living standard comparable to that in the developed countries ... A market economy and the rule of law are indispensable. I agree there are local scenarios for each country. We all have our peculiarities and should definitely try to find our own path. But what I was talking about is the ideal type, the 'should be' type, the one we all want to reach in the end. (no. 8)

Unlike the view from a respondent that 'there is only one type of governance rationale', I more commonly noted opinions (in public and in private) that emphasised the special situation in China and the country's own institutional rationale with Chinese characteristics. For instance, one interviewee paid attention to tradition and history in discourse about possible institutional routes for the state:

I think the cleverest people are among the government officials. In their minds, the so-called capitalist-socialist division is just a conceptual classification. No matter what the form of the politics, the ultimate aim is to rule. The state is essentially a force machine and the nature of human beings is selfish. So, they must have institutions that can rule the population. Different countries have their different culture and history. The Chinese or Asian culture is so different from those in Europe and North America. Europeans have the accumulated political culture of democratic decision-making, but we have a long history of one-man decision-making, or dictatorship, as some might call it. I would personally support a parliamentary system if I could choose, but I would not prefer a parliamentary system which only had the format and lacked the spirit. Look how Taiwan has gone. We have a quite different history and culture and communication with other countries and systems will surely help us to find a way that suits us. (no. 9)

Another interviewee made a similar judgement when discussing leftist or rightist positions on the politico-economic spectrum and their indication of the direction that economic reform would take in China:

I would say, we are in a situation where it doesn't matter whether it's leftist or rightist, so long as it's useful. In recent years we see clearly that the 'the state enterprises advance, the private sector retreated', which is definitely a left turn in the Chinese context ... We have a system called socialism with Chinese characteristics, which literally means that whatever is useful and effective for the authority's rule can be employed by the authority – without completely crashing the economy, society and people's lives, surely. From my point of view, the left-right argument doesn't really matter, and this is also consistent with my observation of the society. (no. 13)

These opinions suggest a pragmatic logic similar to that in political compliance towards the state's representatives. Constitutional change does not matter, information restriction does not matter, ideology position does not matter, as long as they are useful to society and development.

Supporting such pragmatic logic, the wider crisis or problems of liberal democracy in recent years caused confusion for many Chinese people who

used to firmly doubt the official discourse and believed that China should aim to have democratic politics. As one interviewee said,

In the old days when our country was still struggling for food, we may have been quite lost about the direction of the political reform. Recently, we have gained some knowledge of a political way out. However, watching how the US and the EU has got on lately, I'm not really sure if we want to follow in their footsteps any more ... quite disappointed about democracy, to be honest. (no. 11)

One noticeable feature of individuals' political attitudes from the examples above is that they are full of conflict. It seems that people recognise the misbehaviour of the authority, but also assume that it has kind intentions; some are aware of and feel uncomfortable about the heavy pressure of party regulations and performance evaluations, but still find it necessary to have the rules tightened. Interviewees sometimes noted that it was unacceptable to ask someone to check on a teacher's talk in class, while also agreeing with the idea that they 'would rather go further "left" than further "right"'. And some people argued that the government stretched its hand too far into society/the market, while complaining about the government's inaction regarding the high cost of housing.

Psychological studies have noted that people tend to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962). However, as Tim Kuran identified in his work on preference falsification:

the models that an individual applies to an issue need not be mutually consistent. A person may subscribe to conflicting models, for instance, a 'big government' model that justifies lower taxes together with an 'educational crisis' model that calls for more government services. (Kuran 1997, p. 159)

In most cases, individuals were learning to use a coherent supermodel consolidated from multiple explanatory models. People might not have been aware of the costs of inconsistency between distinctive models, so long as these models 'yield[ed] reasonably satisfactory choices and generate[d] fairly accurate predictions' (Kuran 1997, p. 179).

In China's case, one formula that individuals used to justify seemingly controversial statecraft and public discourses that were not consistent with personal knowledge was: 'It's common in every country to find the state needing to rule the population in many areas. Countries merely differ in specific actions, but essentially, we are the same.' Also: 'It's all for the state's governance, all about legitimacy.' By dissolving the division between the role of the state and of society and seeing things with the ruler's eyes, individuals can find ways of living with the inconsistency in their minds. At the same time, a smooth change

between the political attitudes belonging to different faces allowed individuals a little space in which to buffer themselves from the external shocks that might have challenged their original beliefs.

5.4 Ignorance, apathy, and collective conservatism

The reason why people assume different faces in public and in private and construct a public preference for public display has been examined by scholars from different areas of social science. Explanations such as fear of punishment, desire for reward, ignorance of the general opinion, or the motivation of fitting in have been identified separately or simultaneously. In authoritarian regimes, the mechanism of compliance as falsified by the general public can be explained similarly, but has some specific features. For instance, in China's case, many people who work in the public sector receive more respect from society and treat this reputation as a reward from the Party, thus creating more loyalty. Rewards for them can either be conducive to the individual's self-interest, such as higher living standards, or take the form of a long-term payback that can be extracted from the state's stability and development. Some scholars have argued that socialist education has a strong influence on the individual's action preference to express loyalty and conceal discontent. My interview evidence, combined with the observational data, shows that the mechanisms in people's choosing to falsify their public compliance are complicated, intertwined, and sometimes contradictory.

People's actions or preferences are strongly directed by social norms and by their past education. Their knowledge about society and the desired social behaviours that people have encountered in the past are crucial motives of their choices. In understanding Chinese people's preference for political participation and political attitudes, we should address the core features of its political culture. The traditional Chinese culture, which is selectively promoted by the state, emphasises concepts such as the 'middle course' (*zhongyong*, 中庸), 'tolerance' (*rongren*, 容忍), and 'ethics' (*daode*, 道德). These notions can still be identified in today's Chinese politics. For instance, 'LI' (礼) in traditional political culture is a layered and societal concept. It can be interpreted as ethics, manners, and rules; it can only be established when the whole society accepts and obeys it. Therefore, it nurtures the culture of collectiveness, in which the community rather than the individual is treated as the ultimate principle of achievement. All individuals can realise their personal value only when they have fulfilled society's requirements. With such cultural incentives, collectiveness and conservatism are prevalent in China's contemporary political culture.

The consistency of Chinese history for more than 3,000 years also leads to the phenomenon that people still (consciously or unconsciously) use concepts or terms from Chinese history to describe the conditions or institutions in the contemporary world. One example is the term 'CI SHI', which was used by

one interviewee to describe an inspection group from the central government during the anti-corruption campaign period (explained in endnote 2 of this Chapter). The idea of a ‘crown prince’, which is used to refer to the successor of a top leader, is also a concept from the period of monarchy. These terms were attached to a systematic ‘ruler and ruled’ ideology. Although people often use them unconsciously, they still indicate the enduring shadow of admiration of authority and obedience to it.

Even though the CCP came to the fore by breaking the chain of (worthless) traditional culture and promoting the revolutionary spirit, cases of the state’s promotion of traditional values so as to maintain its authority have actually become very common in recent years. One example is the concept of the ‘harmonious society’, which was introduced by the then president Hu Jintao in his ideology, or ‘thoughts’, during the ‘Scientific Development Concept’ around the mid-2000s, before being written into the constitution in the National People’s Congress Conference of 2005. The idea of a ‘harmonious society’ (which strongly discourages any attempts by the public to ‘make a fuss/trouble’) was a response to the increasing outbreaks of social unrest in the early 2000s due to economic inequality and the flaws and injustice of government actions. Ironically, over the years, the notion of ‘harmonious society’ has developed into a substitute for ‘stability at all costs’, and what was ‘harmonised’ actually referred to what had been censored on the online platforms. In Xi’s presidency, the central authority also was in favour of ‘enhancing the national cultural heritage ... and building up our cultural confidence.’⁶ As indicated above, borrowing ideas from traditional culture also magnifies the structural features behind it. It reveals the way that the authority imagines its population and the approach it finds (thinks) most appropriate for persuading the public.

Some interviewees attributed compliance falsification to the socialist education. One remarked: ‘I don’t think the public choice of staying silent comes from the traditional culture; it’s implanted in the education we’ve received through the past 70 years.’ Other qualitative evidence from interviews also suggested that such core concepts as ‘people’s democratic dictatorship’, ‘leadership core’,⁷ and ‘maintaining social stability’ were unconsciously accepted and used in daily dialogue. Existing studies also confirm that the part played by education (such as the high school politics curriculum) shaped students’ political attitudes (Cantoni et al. 2017). The socialist education led to a belief in collectivism and meritocracy and dismissed personal appeals and universal values such as freedom and democracy.

In spite of the ideologies, social memories brought about by core historical events also shaped the population’s political preference in the long term. In his work, Kuran used a thought experiment to reveal that small events can be responsible for the establishment of a particular equilibrium of public opinion and are not averaged out over time (Kuran 1997). Moreover, once an event has tipped public opinion toward one equilibrium or another, subsequent

events do not necessarily weaken its impact. In China's case, there are many specific actions from the revolutionary period that were still carried out at the time of writing, such as reporting speech that one dislikes to higher-level supervisors (such as the upper government, or the school, or the administrator of an online forum). Other past events, such as the Cultural Revolution or the June 4th movement, had become terms that could not be mentioned either in public or in private conversation.

No matter whether the cautiousness of political preference came from the traditional political culture, the socialist education, or past events, once the intentional concealment of certain individual attitudes (or the meticulous avoidance of certain topics) is established, the interaction of certain preferences with everyday rituals forms a circle that constantly reinforces itself in the long run – see the discussion of this 'circle' in relation to 'ideological involution' (Section 5.1).

In addition to the pressure brought by social knowledge and historical events, external pressure from state coercion and censorship was also frequently observable in my qualitative evidence. For instance, from early 2019 the pressure on public speech had accelerated, as many interviewees identified from their own experience:

Recently many public accounts on WeChat have been blocked, sometimes you just don't know why and where you have stirred up a sensitive point in your words. (no. 6)

There are many restrictions online, like certain topics, issues, certain people and even certain dates. It feels like most people are quite afraid to say something meaningful ... If you do [have a serious discussion] your post will probably be censored or your account will be blocked. We all treasure the Weibo or WeChat accounts which we devoted much effort to maintain, so after several attempts, everyone gets to be docile in their behaviour. (no. 5)

One interviewee described the everyday regulations on an editor for a commercial press:

On average I would receive about 30 messages or emails [from the relevant supervision departments] per day with instructions on what I should or shouldn't do. It's regulations on every hand. Sometimes the instructions can refer in detail to the words, or phrase corrections in the articles ... We have a massive bureaucracy which specialises in media management. If you want to join the bureaucracy you need to pass the proper exam ... I know most of the officials in the system genuinely agree on the idea that the propaganda is the tool for the ruler. (no. 13)

When I asked, ‘How does a press, like your institution, find the line between publishable and unpublishable issues’, he replied:

[T]hrough careful trying and summarising the existing cases. Like, recently one self-media site got censored on the topic of the ‘trade war’. After communication, we found that it was because they had directly cited a report from the *New York Times*. So we realised that even on the most heated topic, we are not expected to cite the foreign press directly. It would be safer to cite official reports in that case.

Another interviewee who worked for a new media institution faced similar supervision from the government in the selection of content.

This year we have a special digital column which is designed to deliver one poem every day to our audience. On June 4th, we published a short one with a title that roughly reads ‘There isn’t a day in our life’. We didn’t initially intend to signal a memorial or anything special and we didn’t even realise the title had some relevance for this special day. But soon after it was published on our website, I received a call from our leader and got reproved for not being careful enough. I didn’t get a chance to explain ... We can’t control people’s interpretation though ... The selection of topics needs extra care when it relates to issues of the party, minorities and religions ... Strict external inspection [by the government] surely leads to stricter self-censorship. (no. 10)

The control on information had a considerable impact on people’s public knowledge about current society and shaped people’s attitudes in the form of the attitude desired and expected by the authority. For instance, one event in June 2019 that attracted the headlines in media all over the world was the anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong.⁸ The protest there was the most significant political protest since the Umbrella Movement in 2014; nearly 2 million people turned out to demonstrate. However, all information about this protest was blocked in mainland China. One of my interviewees who went to school in Hong Kong and then worked in Beijing told me that, even though she personally used a VPN (virtual private network) sometimes to access external news, she learned about the massive protest only after several days. Until then, most of her colleagues still had no idea what was going on in Hong Kong.

To be honest, even I, who still have the knowledge and ability to occasionally climb the wall [the Great Firewall⁹] and get access to the external world, was a day or two late in discovering the situation in Hong Kong. There hasn’t been a single mention of Hong Kong in the mainland’s social media. (no. 11)

Several days after the protest, the official government account issued a statement that identified the nature of the protest as a 'riot' and supported the Hong Kong government's 'sensible treatment.' The statement told a one-sided story of the Hong Kong movement and left no space for argument or defence. My interviewee told me that after she read news and reports of Hong Kong's protest she tried to explain the complexity of the Hong Kong issue and the appeals of the Hong Kong people to her colleagues and they seemed to be very open to this information and recognised that the protest was not simply the riot that the central authority had claimed. But she still could not discuss these issues openly online.

Recently bloggers have complained of the many rules about public discussions and the many topics/issues are not allowed to be discussed. Feels like the restriction has tightened up and the list of sensitive words is somehow extended.

Not everyone felt this pressure, however. Some voices still argued that: 'I don't think that the so-called pressure on free speech will affect daily life too much; most of the pressure still comes from the struggle to live without overspending in this competitive society.'

In spite of the structural factors that may have shaped or constrained people's choices to express opinions, or signal their preferences, there were many mechanisms that relate to internal reasons on the personal level.¹⁰ For instance, when the interviewees were asked why they would not say something about the issues that they felt to be unfair, they would often reply, 'For what?' and 'What would be the point? It won't change anything.' Problems such as weak political efficacy, or sometimes incorrect evaluations, in the general view, also led to reluctant political expression and further appeals for social change.

Political apathy normally refers to a situation where individuals lack interest in participating in political activities. In China's case, many interviewees mention the scenario that people are not interested even in talking about social or political issues.

In my current working environment, in which most of my colleagues have a background in science education, most of them have no clue about the social or political issues. They kind of live in their own small space, and will even blame you for not 'having your feet on the ground' if you bring up some socio-economic topics. They basically care about their own lives, just trivial things really. (no. 3)

Why would this happen? The unaccountability of the authority regarding social issues tends to weaken the intention to take part in politics. The weakened external efficacy interacts with and reduces people's internal political efficacy.

For instance, one interviewee recalled the days when many people still hoped to participate (in whatever forms) so as to push the government or policy to change and when disappointment gradually led to silence:

In the past, like 10 years ago, people still believed that crowds of onlookers could somehow change society, or China's politics someday. The internet provided a great opportunity for everyone to pay attention to and support people who were miles away when they were suffering injustice. The logic was, crowd attention can bring pressure on the authority and force them to make changes. But now it's totally useless. You can't change anything. Meanwhile, everyone is so pre-occupied by the struggles in their own lives, they barely have enough energy to really engage in social issues. It really takes time, energy and passion and watching things end inconclusively definitely kills the crowd's enthusiasm. (no. 6)

One radical explanation given regarding the public's weak political efficacy was that ordinary people were not capable of discussing the political issues seriously and we should trust the wisdom of the government.

Things are much more complicated than we thought. For instance, for the events of June 4th, there has been much criticism at home and abroad. Some people ask why the government doesn't just make the archives public and then all the criticism and puzzles will be clear. I would say, the Zhongnanhai¹¹ must have thought about this solution and they definitely have a reason for not choosing to do so. There are many things we ordinary people have no clue about, so we can't really comment on them. (no. 4)

Although it seemed as if most people care nothing about the political issues, some studies have mentioned that the Chinese make a cult of political rumours (H. Huang 2017). Many local websites gossip about such things as political factions and conflicts, the direction of international or domestic policies, and even the personal lives of government leaders. However, some interview comments denied the role of these rumours in Chinese politics: 'All this gossip and rumour is just natter. China's politics is 100% closed-door politics' (no. 23).

In addition to the changes in political efficacy, the benefit that each person had received or perceived also determined their chosen attitudes. Hence, another common reason for not discussing political issues was that some Chinese people felt that life was much better and there was no need to change the current system further or criticise the politics. The self-interest to which this refers is not some dramatic benefit from the current system but a simple and everyday convenience that one may derive from interaction with current system.

I think our country is doing very well lately, especially since Xi's rule. In the old days, we had an old version of 'official accountability', but it turned out to be nothing but swagger and exaggeration. The new version nowadays is more solid. Each level of government takes its role and the general secretary takes full responsibility. Any officials who are not doing their part get punished. For example, in the past when you wanted to be reimbursed from the health insurance scheme, you had to go through many offices and counters. Now the whole process is simplified and the officers are friendly to our patients ... This is what I call satisfaction. I definitely thank the government and the Party for that. (no. 12)

My experience is, the payment for scientists nowadays is far better. Like the decentralisation of the funding management, we enjoy more space to maximise the use of project funding. Our research also has nothing to do with politics or society, so why would I care about the change in the term limit, or Hong Kong issues? (no. 27)

The trifling but recurring benefits that individuals received from the current system somehow offset the risks they might incur from the inefficiency of society as a whole. These benefits also diverted people from serious reflection on the state-individual relationship. Personalised longitudinal comparison sometimes shoulders aside the horizontal and societal comparisons with other disadvantaged groups, especially when the information is asymmetric and controlled by the state.

If individuals felt personally unable to make a difference, or if personal interest was not affected, how did they imagine other people's attitudes? Would they have perceived potential discontent from their peers? As I explained in the theoretical discussion, social psychology scholars have identified a bias in group opinion whereby the group members mistakenly assume that the general group accepts a norm, even though most of the group members privately reject it. The idea of 'pluralistic ignorance' sums up a scenario in which few in the population believe, while the majority thinks that all the others believe. Kuran also argued that the fear inside individuals would lead to pluralistic ignorance, since the multitudes who objected to communism did not know how widely their resentment was shared (Kuran 1997):

Even if they could sense the repressed discontent of their conformist relatives and close friends or observe the hardships in the lives of their fellow citizen, they lacked reliable information on how many of their fellow citizens favoured radical political change. (Kuran 1997, p. 125)

The interview data verified part of the mechanism of 'unknowing' other's private opinions. Some of my interviewees personally realised the problems of the

current system, but felt that the other people in the community would certainly support the regime at whatever cost. For instance:

If you ask me, I really think most people, especially the ones who suffered a lot in former times, like farmers and rural residents, sincerely support the government. And it may also be true for people whose interests are not directly related to the social problems. They will surely support the party. I mean, if we really open up and get to the stage of a general election, like everyone has a right to vote, I believe most people, maybe 90%, will still vote for our current system. (no. 13)

I feel like most people in the society don't really find 'big government' problematic. They think that there is nothing wrong with 'imperial power'; the only problem is 'there isn't a good empire yet'. In their mind, there's nothing fundamentally wrong in the system. (no. 10)

Pluralistic ignorance can actually interact with people's weak efficacy and political apathy and make them lose confidence and hope that they can change things through any kinds of participatory approach.

However, some respondents were more cautious in identifying other people's opinions, arguing that the whole population was too large to generalise about.

Everyone has his or her own ideas, I mean, based on their experiences and their affiliation to certain social groups. I really have no idea of their true feelings. There are some popular opinions on the internet, but who knows? Many people are not keen to express their ideas. So many people live in our country, it's impossible to have a general idea regarding political issues, not even social issues. If any voice supports something, there must be some voices that disapprove of it. (no. 15)

5.5 Heterogeneity of social groups: education and generations

One important reason why people were unwilling to infer the nature of general public opinion was that the diversity of the subpopulations was so great. This diversity led to different reactions to the socio-economic changes, while their own experience and endowment varied the weights of the mechanisms that led to compliance falsification. As one interviewee argued,

Falsification? I'm sure it exists in the population. However, I cannot really make a judgement on the society as a whole. It really depends, depends on the subgroups in the society. We have over 1.4 billion people, there are huge internal differences and variations, and there are many social classes. I can't really imagine it, to be honest. (no. 10)

In this section, I try to identify several important variations of the population that have marked implications for the diversity of falsified compliance. Education is one of the most important factors, in that it correlates with people's knowledge, cognitive capacity, and possible experiences. In a society such as China's where social, political, and economic capital are highly integrated, education-based social capital is also highly correlated with the distance to the core political power. Hence, more education may bring rights consciousness, independent thinking, and more resource for political participation. From the viewpoint of the authority, education is a crucial approach to socialising the governed, especially useful when no alternative explanations/stories are allowed or available. So, it may be the case that people who are doing well in the official education system are more likely to approve the notions and ideologies of the current system. I briefly unpack the complex ways in which education indicates people's political compliance, with evidence from formal interviews, informal conversations, and observations.

People who are more educated are generally more likely to be aware of the potential rewards brought by signalling loyalty to the incumbent authority. Hence, educated people are more likely to choose a specific public image that differs from their private image. An interviewee with a college degree addressed the notion of public/private faces as follows:

In current society you can enjoy a really good life if you have enough power. It's not like we never talk about the social or political issues, just it's only with people you are really familiar with ... There is no need to discuss political issues too much in public. Why do it? The upper level will never appreciate your sincerity, it just [needs] your loyalty. (no. 5)

If they were rational enough in reaching their decisions, would educated people show less compliance regarding nationalist requests from the state, such as helping with meeting the costs of the trade war? Not necessarily. My qualitative evidence shows that many highly educated people would identify the trade war as a good opportunity for China to establish itself, and therefore they were tolerant of the costs they might have needed to bear.

In addition, people who enjoy more social capital are more likely to acknowledge the potential punishment that could follow undesired actions. Enjoying more rewards, they are also more likely to react more strongly to the possibility of punishment compared to people ones who are relatively far from the system. For instance, one respondent working in a para-state body noted:

When you have seen or experienced more, you are more likely to understand the ruling tactics, whatever kind of authority is in power. Punishment will definitely come if you cross the line, so you will become more and more cautious in your choices ... Especially when you have too much to care about, your family, your career, all these [things] will

hold you back when you are making choices. In making a decision, the more you have, the more concerned you are.

The pressure is also high for people who work in education, such as researchers and teachers, one of whom argued:

The intellectuals are less likely to express their true opinions about the society and politics. If you conduct research in a mainland university and your topic entails sensitive issues, such as the constitution, modern or contemporary history, or civil society, you need to be very careful. There are cases in which a teacher in class was reported by the students because they found the teacher's speech not '[politically] correct'. (no. 23)

Informal conversations with social science scholars at top universities in mainland China verified the high pressure that they feel on their daily research and life. One of them complained in private that the landline in his office is monitored. Another mentioned that, because he came from Hong Kong, his mother-in-law (a government cadre in mainland China) had been investigated on tax issues, quite unjustifiably. A third case concerned a research topic, which had to be changed due to political pressure from political circles about the methodology to avoid potential disputes. These directly perceived pressures cause the people concerned to drastically disguise their public political attitudes, believing that it would not be a good idea to reveal their discontents in public.

Theoretically speaking, the social capital brought by education may increase individuals' confidence in political participation and raise their motivation to pursue their own interests. As Kuran argued, an individual's proficiency in pursuing their own interests may add to the inefficiency of society. Moreover, the falsified public preference of individuals could cause societal inefficiency to persist (Kuran 1997). In the interviews, many pragmatic opinions seemed to exaggerate the autonomy of individual-level choices in the current system and take a seemingly 'objective', 'neutral', or 'rational' stand on controversial social issues. Many people who have less sympathy for others' suffering would imagine that under the current system the space for the individual's personal choice is generous enough. So long as people do their best, it is possible to achieve social mobility and defend personal property. For instance, when they talked about the inequalities in education and the troubles for individuals brought by the inconsistency of educational policies, three respondents said:

I don't feel the current system puts many restrictions on me. I mean, sure, there are some rules imposed by major structures, but the private space is quite enough for us to develop ... I don't deny that difficulties prevent some people from gaining access to educational resources, like some migrants from rural areas. I won't judge them on their actions or

choices, like, if they choose to defend their rights through exposure in the news or political appeals, that's totally fine. But every person in a society has a position that decides the [available] choices. I don't think I will end up in a similar [difficult] position ... Of course, we need social responsibility and caring, but not [from] me. (no. 8)

The specific issues such as urban–rural inequalities, educational justice, resource distributions, all are crucial challenges for the government. But I feel like the main issue is still the limited resource in our country ... the cake [of the economy] is not large enough for everyone to enjoy; some people must be left behind or sacrificed ... Educational injustice is a problem of our time and it can be solved by creating more education resources ... For individuals, there are many other solutions you can try. Like immigration, [attending] international or private schools [if you don't have a *hukou* in your area]. Do use your power to act. It won't help if you are too stubborn and just want to fight against the government. It's a waste of your time and energy to keep an eye on the institution. These are the facts, I would say; it's your problem if you remain disadvantaged. (no. 4)

As far as I know, the political opportunities are plenty. The key issue is still your own efforts. Society is already quite open. (no. 12)

There is nothing wrong with the 'perceived' potential space at the individual level. However, the illusion of 'free choices', whether social, economic, or political for different people, actually leads them to underestimate the disharmony between public and private faces. It also prevents them from sharing the pain of other disadvantaged groups and questioning systematic problems in society.

In addition to education, a person's age group is another factor that correlates with their social status, experience, cognitive capacity, and knowledge. It has been identified as a core factor that determines people's political attitudes and behaviours (Braungart and Braungart 1986). For instance, people who are born in a certain period are likely to experience similar social events, and therefore are quite likely to share a similar social memory (e.g. Schuman and Rieger 1992). Meanwhile, people in a different age group are in a life stage of their own and the issues and themes that they worry or care about are different. Thus, investigating heterogeneity in political compliance brought by generational variation is another main theme in this section.

Owing to the lack of statistical evidence, I give only a brief summary of the perceived generational difference from the interviews and the observational data. Existing studies suggest that the older generation was more cautious on political topics, while the younger generation was more liberal (e.g. Hahn and Logvinenko 2008; Rose and Carnaghan 1995). Qualitative data in my study suggested a generational difference as regards political compliance and the

contradictions in whether or not to hide discontent. More importantly, the interaction between any two generations indicates the long shadow of falsified political attitudes in preserving a socially conservative ideology.

As I noted in the previous section, social knowledge can persist quite strongly in the shaping of people's political attitudes. The transmission of knowledge from one generation to another is one of the forces that helps social knowledge to persist (Glass, Bengtson, and Dunham 1986; Jennings 1996). The younger generation learns about what is 'thought' and 'unthought' from their society, family, and education. However, the existence of falsified public opinion has some long-term repercussions. If certain ideas are blocked due to social or political pressure, the younger generation cannot renew them and the older people will die with their ideas unspoken. The distribution of young people's public opinion will undoubtedly reflect the existing bias in social discourse. Imagine certain issues or topics that are unthinkable for one generation because of certain political or social constraints. The unexpressed ideas are less likely to be heard and incorporated into the ideas of the younger generation than the ones in public discourse. In this way, 'unthinkable' turns into 'unthought' as the generations succeed one another (Kuran 1997).

The interviews showed some cases where a son or daughter had certain ideas or thoughts about politics or historical events, while the parents refused to share their opinions:

My education and my overseas experience have made me think a lot about politics and the history of Chinese politics ... But every time I plan to have a serious discussion with my parents about my ideas, they refuse to have a real conversation with me. They just dodge when I mention related topics. (no. 25)

Another interviewee described his interaction with his parents:

My father worked abroad when he was young, it was something like a governmental delegation. I thought he might be quite open to different political attitudes ... There were times I expressed my disagreement with the government's behaviour – my Dad wasn't very happy and blamed me for being brainwashed by the foreign forces. (no. 14)

These cases of several interviewees with different political attitudes from their parents demonstrated the pressure, but also indicated the possibility of breaking apart the intergenerational heritage (Inglehart 2018; Svallfors 2010). As one respondent put it,

as long as the state keep open and allows people to interact with the outside world in different ways, the younger generation will have some new ideas denied to their parents and will ultimately change the societal scenarios. (no. 26)

However, it might take a great effort from the younger generation to generate a counteracting bias against the existing bias in public opinion. People will not automatically reflect on existing theories or facts or become critical, even when they have received new information. Unless this information is powerful, their thoughts will tend to conform to the dominant ideas of their parents' generation and internalise the viewpoint that dominates public discourse, owing to inherently lazy thinking (Kuran 1997). In the last part, I want to consider further the potential breakthrough from the existing structural forces, social pressures, and the trap of generational knowledge transformation for individuals.

5.6 Heading (no)where: actions or agencies

One popular model that describes the interaction between the state and its subordinates is the 'exit, voice, and loyalty' (EVL) model originally proposed by Hirschman (1970). The state can be treated as an organisation and the population may choose to stay loyal, or voice their discontent through formal and informal political participation, or leave the state through emigration when they are unhappy with the authority's certain actions. Individuals' choice of reaction is evaluated on the basis of the benefits and costs of each option. The authority will also evaluate the possibilities of its population's choice in the policymaking process or subsequent amendments. If citizens can make a credible threat of leaving, the authority is less likely to impose controversial policies. Conversely, the option to exit will be reduced if loyalty is strong, or is not wholly appealing or feasible. At the other extreme, sincerely loyal members may be more likely to voice their opinion because they care more about the organisation succeeding in its aims.

How would falsified compliance affect these strategies? In other words, which of the EVL options would be chosen by people who falsify their loyalty to the authority? Theoretically speaking, preference falsification is often cheaper than escape or voice and it avoids the risks entailed in public protest. Yet, disguised public opinion may cause many to underestimate the extent of popular dissatisfaction and conceal the possibilities of change. In this section, I give some preliminary evidence of individuals' opinions regarding the political participation, and the degree of loyalty when controversial policies are imposed and some emigration choices are open. Further explorations such as formal models and statistical inferences can be made in future research.

Existing studies have argued that the Chinese government encourages many innovative 'voice' approaches to public participation, such as the mayor's mailbox, local government's comment boards, and so on (Distelhorst and Hou 2014; Su and Meng 2016). Does the general population find these approaches valid or helpful? How do they personally rate the effectiveness of individuals' voices in the policymaking process and politics in general? And what do they think of informal political participation (such as appeals, protests, or

assembly) compared to formal approaches? The feedback from interviewees who had perceived more constraints in the previous several years was generally negative and passive regarding people's function in the current political system: it was both objectively not possible and subjectively not necessary. For instance:

About the so-called 'deliberate decision making', like the ones you mentioned, the Mayor's mailbox, or Wenling's case of a collective meeting, I would say that only individuals who were desperate to solve their problems would participate. Normal people won't voice their opinions if they do not have to ... Several years ago, there were some cases of informal gatherings to protest against local government's misbehaviour or against some factory or something. [I] don't see many similar reports in recent years, maybe very occasionally ... Especially this year, these issues would definitely get blocked online. (no. 11)

I don't think individual citizens have a say in policymaking. If some policies are claiming to encourage the public's opinion, we are mostly represented by some 'officials'. Even if votes are used to decide [something], I don't believe they are legitimate or transparent enough ... You don't know where those samples come from. I can definitely say, me and my friends have no idea or interest on these [political participation approaches ... they are] just for show. (no. 10)

How do people who are loyal to the authority explain the space for voice within the current system? Two interviewees gave their views:

I understand that most people don't really want to publicly discuss issues of political reform, or controversial social issues. The key issue nowadays is still development. To achieve that, the state can't [afford to] be in a mess and no one really wants it become a battlefield (of opinions). (no. 2)

I would say, seize the day. Any discussions about politics should be done under the umbrella of development and the stability of the whole society ... We should trust the judgement of our peers. The current authority is elected to power, so is Xi ... we should support whoever is in that position ... It's totally ok to express your own opinion, about the society or about politics, but it should be done in an appropriate way. It's better to engage in formal ways, like the Mayor's mailbox; things can be solved very quickly ... It's definitely unacceptable to ideologically oppose the state or the party ... The social problems we are encountering right now are accumulated problems from the past 40 years. We cannot rush, cannot solve the problems of certain social groups in a flash ... Some people will unavoidably be sacrificed during the process. (no. 4)

The importance of social stability was confirmed by many people, as in one summary from an informal conversation: 'stability suppresses all, this is the motive power of the current authority, higher than any other noble notions.' An interviewee said:

Being [in] a[n ethnic] minority does have some inconveniences, such as applying for a visa, the process takes much longer than it does for my Han friends ... But I think so long as I don't commit any violation of the law, there is no need to worry. Cooperation with the police is everyone's obligation, it's especially necessary for security reasons ... Like, the security check on Shanghai's tube-trains is stricter than in any Japanese airport. People may complain but I don't really advocate abolishing it ... The anti-terrorism situation is serious for every country in the world. China just takes it more seriously than some other countries do. We value safety and security more ... Most of us citizens are willing to cooperate with the security checks at tube stations, as long as the process is efficient and the officers' attitudes are friendly ... We Chinese can really endure hardships and work really hard; we also have a high threshold of tolerance. (no. 3)

If using voice was not possible and if someone was not sincerely loyal, was there any preference for 'exit'? When I asked about or mentioned the option of emigration, many respondents were concerned about the cultural problem:

I don't consider emigration as an option. Neither culturally nor in daily habits is it easy to change for people of our age. We also have jobs here, why ask for trouble? Besides, people in other countries won't really take you in as a fellow-citizen, I don't want to expend my energy and efforts in a foreign land. (no. 4)

Yet, if there was a chance, others would be happy to send their children abroad for a better view of the world:

I'm not saying it's a bad idea to move to other countries if possible, just not for myself. The culture, habits, politics and even legal systems are so different. I don't think I can adjust to a new environment. Children might do, maybe when they were grown up and if they themselves wanted to go abroad. (no. 9)

Some interviewees who were more capable (or more self-confident) or more worried about the current system would more readily decide to choose 'exit':

I am not sure who is going to take the leader's role and don't know what the society is going towards. So, I do consider moving abroad as an option, maybe once the child is a little older. (no. 5)

Yes, (for me) emigration is a possible choice, although I've not decided yet. Will (decide) on the basis of my further career plan. (no. 8)

However, for most people who do not possess the resources to leave, even if they are discontented and would wish to move elsewhere *if possible*, the possibilities are not on their side.

Many people who seem politically apathetic, or feel ignorant of political issues, are mostly heavily pre-occupied by social pressures, or everyday life: work, society and life. One example is the recent debate about the oppressive so-called '996' work schedule (from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week), which is a common and even rampant phenomenon in high-tech and internet companies. In spite of the fact that the '996' work schedule already violates labour laws, many people actively supported the idea of 'hard work'. When the debate was at its peak, Jack Ma, founder of the Alibaba Group, stated in public that 'employees who get the "opportunity" to work according the "996" schedule are the lucky ones,' because 'in many companies employees don't even get the chance to work long hours.'¹² The excessive workloads common in China leave people no time to think, read, or question the problems in their lives. As one interviewee put it, they felt like 'the capitalists and the politicians collude with each other, just to exploit people's labour, time and minds. Sometimes even our dignity' (no. 11).

There are some other 'tailored' social and political pressures for social sub-groups in the population. For instance, women are more and more commonly encouraged to go back to the family and resume the traditional role of 'good wife'. In recent years, the official policy of encouraging families to have a 'second child', the official propaganda promoting traditional cultural values and the popularity of 'moral women'¹³ modules have formed a political, cultural, and economic cage that prevents women from achieving their self-value and self-awareness.

Another example is the younger generation, whose members enjoy less and less possibility of upward social mobility. From the interview data, many young people complained of the pressure when they were asked about their ideas on the future of the state and themselves in the following five years. Even some who were positive about the state's development were concerned about the opportunities for younger people. All these pressures, initiated by the state or generated from the economic environment and traditional culture, left no space for many people to really think through the current political and societal conditions, to say nothing of deep reflection on the state-individual relationship.

Luckily, some voices among respondents still attested to the possibility of 'free will'. Unlike those who accepted the illusion of individual autonomy, there were some who wanted access to more knowledge and reflections on the state of society, arguing: 'I want to read more, books or news, to really understand what is going on with myself and the country. I truly want to be clear enough and see through the society' (no. 10). Another popular online post urged:

[I]n this time, ask yourself to never be lazy in thinking, never blindly follow the others. Try your best to understand the truth of all kinds of events, keep your sympathy for the disadvantaged, be aware of any kind of power. This is already a form of resistance. Even save an article that you find reasonable (and might disappear soon) and share it with others. This is resistance, too.

Conclusions

Ideological involution in current Chinese society follows from the totalising and individualising effects of the strong government. Confining the resources of social knowledge results in a diverged but limited increment. By assuming different faces in social life, individuals manage their cognitional counter-conduct. Yet, in many cases, the falsification of compliance or the change of faces is for many people unconscious. They tend to show more honesty on political issues in private without any distinguishable awareness. Many of them can recognise the obvious restrictions from the authority, such as censorship, the risk of punishment, lack of government accountability (and related weak political efficacy), but many people (and their contacts or friends) intentionally do not pay attention to or reflect on these issues.

The potential for 'falsification' in Chinese political compliance provides the 'people-side's story' to the overarching questions of my book – how state governmentality maintains an answering compliance in a rapidly transitioning Chinese society. Previous chapters showed how the state may intentionally use knowledge construction, policy experimentation, and interest allocation, among many other tactics, so as to effectively shape public opinion and maintain compliance from subordinates. However, individuals enjoy the possibility of hiding their true discontents or opinions when there are limited choices of voicing or exiting and falsified compliance can be dangerous for the authority regarding its long-term rule.

The qualitative insights given here cannot speak to the numerical distribution of viewpoints or attitudes across China's massive general population. But they do illuminate some of the pathways and details by which falsified political compliance can operate, and illuminate in an exploratory way the various potential factors that might lead to a change in people's public/private faces and heterogeneity across social groups. Such qualitative evidence can be useful in guiding areas or directions of future research. My analysis shows that people's compliance regarding different representatives of the state varied substantially with regard to specific issues and the atmosphere at the time. Although the central government, the party, and the top leader enjoyed more approval, and respondents demonstrated a sympathy for state or government's tasks, people in private conversations sometimes objected to bearing the political cost at an individual level. In addition to political trust, people's private political knowledge and

public discourse sometimes ran along separate tracks. Although many people registered a disconnection between their private knowledge and public debate, as well as the discontinuity within official discourse, many chose to tolerate these gaps without further questioning. Why would many people still choose (intentionally or unconsciously) to arrange their public/private faces regarding certain political/societal issues? The reasons can be traced back to the existing cultural, historical, and educational factors that have socialised their ideas from the beginning. They can also be identified in the external force imposed by the state and society and the resulting fear, political apathy, and group ignorance in the population.

Does falsified compliance vary between the people in different social groups? Although my qualitative data cannot make any inferences about the distribution of attitudes in the population as a whole, the diverse people involved in interviews had different endowments, experiences, and human capital, and the detailed discussion sustained also illuminated many different preferences and nuances about political compliance. For instance, education can bring people more socio-economic capital, as well as a certain illusion of autonomy, but it also imposes a binding power when individuals face a threat from the state. Regarding generational differences, the past experience of the older generation may turn some of their 'unthinkable issues' into 'unthought issues' for the next generation. What, then, are the implications, for one's actions and for the possible breakthrough of individual subjectivity, of falsifying one's political attitudes? My evidence suggests that, although many people are pessimistic about any kind of political participation, some tend to preserve their awareness, consciousness, and rationality despite the pressure from the state and society.

Going one step further from the qualitative data of public opinion and individual private opinions, we can also identify some possibilities of subtle statecraft in the management of people's views. Drawing on the population's propensity to admire or sympathise with authority, the state may take a number of steps to direct popular opinion: it may allow public debate at a controllable level, sending opinion leaders to set the rhythm. Then, once the public debate reaches a certain level, the state can issue an 'official statement' in the name of 'neutrality' and 'justice'. If necessary, in dire cases, it may sacrifice some lower-ranking officials as scapegoats, and utter credible threats to society at critical moments. However, when the manipulation of popular opinion causes the state's credibility to backfire, leading to severe distrust or even considerable compliance falsification, it may produce a serious challenge to state rule in the long term. For individuals, it takes an effort to break out of the aggregated ideological and political power constraints, but it is not impossible.

Notes

¹ Xinhua Net, 'CPC proposes change on Chinese president's term in Constitution', See <https://perma.cc/N38D-SLD6>

- ² The 'CI SHI' system, or 'feudal prefectural governor' system, was originally established in the Qin and Han dynasties (around 202 BC) and continued to be used (with brief interruptions) until the Republic of China period in the early 1900s.
- ³ Such as Yan'an, Jing Gangshan, etc., where the CCP originated, or where some historical event had taken place.
- ⁴ BBC News, 2018-03-11, 'China's Xi allowed to remain "president for life" as term limits removed', <https://perma.cc/3PDM-4UM6>
- ⁵ Swanson, Ana, 2018-07-05. 'Trump's trade war with China is officially underway'. *The New York Times*. <https://perma.cc/TKZ6-EUL6>
- ⁶ A related theoretical article on the official website is Jing, Qi, Cui, Xiantao, 'Inheriting and promoting traditional culture', 2015-07-22, <https://perma.cc/73ZA-TLFQ>
- ⁷ A related article and explanation is 'Xi Jinping becomes "core" leader of China', 2016-10-27, <https://perma.cc/LD7G-SPE3>
- ⁸ 'Hong Kong democrats urge leader Carrie Lam to drop extradition law plans entirely and resign; Sunday protest to proceed'. *Hong Kong Free Press*, 2019-06-15. <https://perma.cc/7SW8-M87L>
- ⁹ For more information on the Great Firewall in China's internet blocking, see Ensafi et al. (2015); Roberts (2018).
- ¹⁰ The structural factors and the personal level factors are surely correlated in many ways. Here I make no causal inferences or comparisons between different mechanisms, but present a description of some observable factors.
- ¹¹ Current residence of the top leaders of the Party and central government (such as Central Politburo Standing Committee members).
- ¹² *China Daily*, "'996" schedule must not be imposed on workers', 2019-04-15, <https://perma.cc/7QYP-NT28>
- ¹³ For further introduction, see: 'Some "moral women" promotions already touch the red line of the law' (in Chinese), 2017-05-22, <https://perma.cc/TX83-YM3B>

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