

Dan Chen

REVIEW ESSAY: THE SAFETY VALVE ANALOGY IN CHINESE POLITICS

Abstract

Studies on Chinese politics frequently utilize the safety valve analogy to describe various political decisions that allow space for feedback and challenges. Drawing upon these empirical studies and the theoretical literature on institution, authoritarianism, and democratization, this review essay delineates the logic of the safety valve strategy and how it fits into the scheme of prolonging authoritarian rule. It identifies the use of informal and temporary measures to appease aggrieved citizens as the central feature of the safety valve strategy, complementing formal means such as institutional reform. The informal and temporary measures are different from the patronage system, and credibility is not necessarily a prerequisite for effectiveness. The safety valve strategy contributes to authoritarian resilience by relieving public frustration, reducing the propensity to contentious politics, and in some cases enabling the government to collect information on potential opposition groups or emerging problems.

Keywords

safety valve, informal measures, Chinese politics, authoritarian durability

One of the central puzzles in studying authoritarianism is the political decision that allows space for feedback and challenges. The ambiguous and changing courses of tightening and loosening political control are essential to understanding authoritarianism and its durability. China provides a case study of such sophisticated authoritarianism. Among the studies on Chinese politics, it has become a consensus that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹ is adaptive and resilient at dealing with emerging problems and challenges through formal and informal means (Cai 2008; Dimitrov 2013b; Nathan 2003; Weller 2012). For example, China scholars have identified political decisions that loosened state control, a common interpretation of which is that they may help vent public dissatisfaction and thus prevent more serious challenges to the regime and political stability.

In this growing body of research, scholars often use the safety valve analogy to describe political decisions that allow feedback and challenges, such as tolerating mild criticism in both traditional and new media (Hassid 2012; MacKinnon 2008, 33; Zhou 2000, 592), allowing certain protests against local governments (Chen 2014, 113; Lee 2010, 71) or foreign nations (Weiss 2014, 39), and initiating legal reforms to address individual grievances (Liebman 2007, 635). Why do scholars apply the same analogy to very different political decisions? Are there common characteristics shared by these political decisions? What is the implication for our understandings of authoritarianism?

Going beyond the physical metaphor of the safety valve, this review essay delineates the logic of how it fits into the scheme of prolonging authoritarian rule. Drawing upon the empirical studies on Chinese politics that utilize the safety valve analogy, and the theoretical literature on institution, authoritarianism, and democratization, this essay identifies an important mechanism of authoritarian rule—the use of informal and temporary measures to appease aggrieved citizens. It argues that informal and temporary changes in policy or policy implementation by the Chinese government dilute social and political tensions, improve governance, and sustain the CCP rule. Such changes may have the appearance of concession, which is key to effectiveness. However, the government decides whether and when to terminate such adjustments. This is different from formal means such as long-term policy changes or institutional reform.

Considering the logic of such informal and temporary measures, this essay argues that credibility is not a prerequisite for such measures to take effect. Citizens form opinions based on comparison with the immediate past, and they rarely possess perfect information to identify a lack of credibility or to ask for institutionalization of concessions. Such measures are different from the patronage system many studies employ to understand authoritarian durability. This is because the Chinese government's informal and temporary measures can be both material and rhetorical concessions, more than the typically material rewards in a patronage system. More importantly, such informal and temporary measures are not institutionalized, thus they are unable to form iterated exchanges between elites and citizens that are necessary for a patronage system. Finally, in addition to relieving public frustration and reducing the propensity to contentious politics, the safety valve strategy contributes to authoritarian resilience by enabling the government to collect information on potential opposition groups or emerging problems. Consequently, these informal and temporary measures are an important strategy to prolong authoritarian rule.

Next, this essay provides a brief review of the studies on Chinese politics that use the safety valve analogy, followed by a discussion of the assumptions and the logic of the safety valve strategy utilized by the Chinese government. It is important to note that the informal and temporary measures reviewed here are intended to weather challenges from the masses, not the elites, which is how scholars apply the safety valve analogy to understand Chinese politics.² This essay situates the safety valve strategy in authoritarian politics through a discussion of the common themes in the literature on institution, authoritarianism, and democratization, including the credibility problem and the patronage system. It then delineates the contribution of the informal and temporary measures to the durability of authoritarian rule. It concludes with openings for future research.

THE USE OF THE SAFETY VALVE ANALOGY IN THE STUDIES OF CHINESE POLITICS

Scholars have used the safety valve analogy to describe and understand various phenomena in Chinese politics. Commenting recently on *Under the Dome*, the documentary on environmental pollution in China that drew unusual nationwide attention, historian Daniel K. Gardner (2015) wrote in *The New York Times* that it “may have provided a safe ‘public’ space for Chinese citizens to vent collectively about government corruption and incompetence in addressing the toxic air they breathe each and every day.” In the studies of politics and the media, Hassid (2012) argues that blogs can serve as a safety

valve that allows discussions on politically sensitive issues that have already been reported by the mainstream media, thus reducing bloggers' anger over political and social problems. Similarly, MacKinnon (2008) and Esarey and Xiao (2008) argue that blogs can serve as a safety valve by letting off steam of public anger over government corruption or incompetence. Zhou (2000) points out the functionalist view that watchdog journalism can act as a safety valve without undermining the one-party political system. Instead, it smoothes "the rough edges of the current transformation" in China (Zhou 2000, 592).

In the studies of the legal system in China, courts are understood to have the safety valve function when they accept but do not decide difficult cases. By accepting those cases, the intention is that the grievances will gradually dissipate. The letters and visits system is also seen as a safety valve that can advance social stability (Liebman 2007). In a study of social protests, Tanner (2004) refers to the reactionary strategies of containment and management that the Chinese government used in responding to protests as a safety valve strategy. Local, small-scale, and non-violent social protests can function as a safety valve to protect the regime. Weiss (2014, 39) discusses the view that nationalist protests can function like a "safety valve" for domestic grievances; this view is premised on the idea that protesters must see progress toward popular demands.

In the area of education, Zhao (1996) makes the case that the failure of the safety valve function may result in political instability, which indirectly confirms the function of the safety valve to maintain stability in China. He argues that the opportunities, in the early 1980s, for Chinese students to study abroad, acted as a safety valve for the political stability of the regime. However, the diminishing opportunities to study abroad in the late 1980s led to awareness of a gap between expectation and reality for Chinese university students, resulting in increased student political activism. Therefore, the safety valve function of foreign education was losing power. According to Zhao (1996), this was one of the factors that led to the 1989 Tian'anmen student movement.

ASSUMPTIONS AND THE LOGIC OF THE SAFETY VALVE STRATEGY

While the safety valve analogy has been widely used in the study of Chinese politics, it has yet to be rigorously defined. The broad range of its use raises questions about its utility as a concept. The logic of how the safety valve works is also unclear. "Safety valve" is a metaphor, which conveys the working mechanism in a vivid yet imprecise way. However, it is a useful analogy that can help us explain the logic of authoritarian politics and the durability of authoritarian rule.

The safety valve metaphor has two essential components and two related scenarios. A safety valve is a part of a pressure system, such as a pressure cooker. The essential components are the amount of steam inside of the pressure system and the safety valve. The amount of steam inside the pressure system changes, according to the frequency and duration of the releases of the safety valve. If the safety valve fails to be released regularly, it may result in explosion due to excessive pressure. In normal situations, the safety valve should be released regularly to maintain a safe pressure level. However, if the safety valve is constantly released, then the system would no longer maintain necessary pressure.

There are several assumptions made in applying this metaphor to authoritarian politics in China. First, the steam is constantly accumulating,³ and if the safety valve fails to

release some of the steam, the consequence will be detrimental. Applied to China, the “accumulating steam” is found in the challenges currently facing the Chinese government, such as environmental pollution, official corruption, local noncompliance, and social protests. Injustice and inequality persist while public frustration and the propensity to contentious politics grow. As long as the system remains authoritarian, and citizens are not given regular and effective means of participation, steam pressure will accumulate. The steam can take on many forms, including a psychological element of frustration and anger, and a behavioral component of partaking in contentious politics. If the steam is not properly addressed, the public may turn to more openly contend or even subvert the political authority. Thus, the key purpose of the safety valve strategy is to control the release of pressure—to channel political activity from uncontrolled venues into controlled ones.

The second assumption made in applying this metaphor to Chinese politics is that releasing the safety valve can discharge the steam of public frustration and propensity to contentious politics. Appeasing the public “releases the safety valve,” and the “steam” of psychological frustration and behavioral propensity to contention are released. Such appeasement can take different forms. It may take the form of a rhetorical concession such as mild media criticism of local officials’ wrongdoing, or of allowing small-scale local protests; it can also include material benefits, such as resolving individual grievances through providing basic public goods and services. While the patronage literature (Arriola 2009; Geddes 1996; Magaloni 2006; Pepinsky 2007) has noted the importance of providing material benefits in exchange for support as a mechanism of prolonging authoritarian rule, psychological appeasement can also have a positive influence on restoring government image and support. Public shaming of government officials on television or simply pointing out in the mass media problems such as rampant local corruption, air pollution, and the lack of food safety insinuates that top leaders acknowledge the problems. This sends a positive signal to the public that the government is working to solve, or at least to alleviate, these urgent problems that share broad grievances.

The third assumption is that releasing the safety valve is temporary. If the safety valve were permanently released, the system would cease to be a pressure system. Examples of a permanent release in pressure are long-term policy change or institutional reform, such as implementing political reforms that incorporate the public into the decision-making process or democratization. Although full incorporation of the public into the decision-making process is unlikely to occur in China in the near future, instituting village elections is an example of partially incorporating institutional reform. On the other hand, safety valve changes—be they relaxing media control or turning a blind eye to local protests—are only temporary; they are not institutionalized and may change at any time. For example, the degree of control over the news media changes. News reports tend to be more tightly controlled around politically sensitive times such as during the meetings of the National Party Congress or the recent crackdown on corruption that has led to conviction of several high-level leaders (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016).

Given these assumptions, how does the logic of the safety valve strategy work in authoritarian politics? This essay offers a framework that addresses the meaning of the steam in a pressure system and the purpose of releasing the safety valve. Given the accumulating problems in various issue areas that manifest themselves in contentious forms such as political criticism online and offline, visiting government officials, and

social protests (this is what “steam” represents), central and local governments may use informal and temporary measures to try to release the accumulating frustration among the public and reduce the risk of political contention. Such measures function like a safety valve, and they may include allowing critical news reports and commentaries, punishing corrupt officials, replacing incompetent officials, and allowing local protests. These measures are not based on clearly written rules, and they are subject to change. The immediate purpose of these informal and temporary measures is to prevent tension from escalating into conflict and to provide information to the regime (Lorentzen 2015; Nathan 2003; O’Brien and Li 2005). The appearance of concession, which will be discussed in detail below, is essential to achieving this goal. The long-term purpose is to maintain the authoritarian rule.

INFORMAL AND TEMPORARY MEASURES OF AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE

The central feature of the safety valve strategy in Chinese politics is that such policy or implementation changes are informal and temporary. Releasing the safety valve does not change the nature of the pressure system, that is, the authoritarian system. Autocrats do not make changes unless they are forced to do so, because such changes are costly and may imply transferring a certain amount of power to the citizens. Thus, the safety valve typically is triggered in reaction to pressure, rather than in anticipation of a problem. This is also related to the informational mechanism that will be discussed below. Releasing the safety valve has the appearance of concession or transferring power to the citizens, but the informal and temporary nature actually suggests that power ultimately lies in the hands of autocrats. The flexibility inherent in such informal and temporary measures allows the Chinese government to tackle challenges without changing the system. This is essential to the resilience in adaptive authoritarianism.

Based on the assumptions and the logic of the safety valve strategy discussed so far, it is important to note that the informal and temporary measures are different from long-term institutional reforms. Tanner (2004) argues that local and non-violent protests can function as a safety valve because the regime would not need to respond with extreme repression nor institutional change. Some studies have used the safety valve analogy to refer to an institutionalized change. For example, Wang (2003) argues that institutionalized participation can function as a safety valve through which the CCP can reduce state–society tensions, and Oi (1999, 626) refers to village elections as a safety valve, allowing peasants to vent their dissatisfaction. However, these are not examples of safety valves because they appear to mark institutional changes. In this essay the safety valve analogy is used carefully to differentiate formal and informal instruments of adaptive authoritarianism.

This is not to say that institutional reform is not important for prolonging authoritarian rule. It is indeed an important category of factors contributing to adaptive authoritarianism. For example, Gandhi and Przeworski’s (2006) model explains how autocrats may use institutional changes, such as setting up a functioning legislature that allows negotiations to address opposition elites’ and citizens’ demands. In the case of China, Nathan (2003) points to the institutionalization of rules in leadership succession and political participation that partly account for the source of authoritarian resilience exhibited by the CCP regime. In rural China, village elections are an example of an institutional reform

that not only increased congruence between village leaders and electorates (Manion 1996), but also improved public evaluation of elected leaders (Kennedy, Rozelle, and Shi 2004) and villagers' political efficacy (Li 2003). Furthermore, the change in the *hukou* (household registration) system that allows people born in rural China to obtain an urban *hukou* is another example of institutional reform that deals with emerging problems in the process of rapid urbanization (Deng and Gustafsson 2014).

There also exists a middle category, in between formal and informal measures. Institutional experimentation is a method used by the Chinese government to encourage innovation for effective governance. There is potential for such experimentation to be either implemented nationwide or to be terminated (Heilmann, Shih, and Hofem 2013; Kennedy and Chen 2014; Tsai and Dean 2014). If the experimentation were terminated, it would be a safety valve strategy. If the experimentation were implemented nationwide, it would become an institutional reform. For example, at the township level there have been institutional innovations in electing or selecting the township leader since the late 1990s. According to Wang and Ma (2015), some of these changes can be attributed to county and city cadres who had to respond to local crises in governance or pursued faster promotion. If such limited participation and competition become the new status quo of township institutions, as the authors argue, then these changes would become another example of institutional reform, rather than a safety valve strategy.

A more complicated example of the middle category is selective implementation of formal laws and regulations. Wang (2014) finds that the implementation of the rule of law is selective in China. A partial form of the rule of law is implemented when the CCP needs cooperation from certain interest groups. This has typically resulted in judicial fairness in commercial areas, but not in political realms. In this case, the selective implementation of the rule of law could fall into either category. When it is implemented, such as in commercial areas, it is a type of formal institution. When it is not fully implemented, however, it could be a safety valve strategy because of its selective nature. Table 1 summarizes the measures to prolong authoritarian rule discussed so far.

The political decisions to which the safety valve analogy applies are essential to understanding authoritarian durability in China. The informal and temporary measures allow flexibility that is central to the ability of the authoritarian regime to adapt and weather

TABLE 1 Measures of Authoritarian Resilience

	Formal measures	The middle category	Informal and temporary measures (The safety valve strategy)
Description	Long-term policy change or institutional reform	Institutional experimentation or selective implementation of formal rules and laws	Short-term policy change or implementation change
Examples	Village election; institutionalized rule of leadership succession; reform in the <i>hukou</i> system	Experimentation of selecting township leaders; selective implementation of the rule of law	Allowing mild media criticism; tolerating small-scale local protests

Data from: Author's collection and review

serious challenges (Weller 2012). Unlike established democracies, where rules and laws are clearly written and strictly enforced (Weingast 1997), China often has unwritten rules that dictate how things work. There is a “dual discourse universe” between the official/written universe and the private/unwritten universe in the way the Chinese society works (He 2008, 2009). This provides flexibility for the CCP to adapt, and to relieve or even resolve problems. The safety valve analogy thus summarizes the informal and temporary nature shared by some of the mechanisms of authoritarian resilience identified in the literature. For example, Hassid (2008) points out that by deliberately keeping media control an uncertain business, the CCP is able to keep the journalists in line by prompting them to self-censor. Stern and O’Brien (2012) argue that the experience of advocacy activists in China such as lawyers, journalists, and NGO leaders, suggest a key feature of the Chinese state—mixed signals about the limits of the permissible. By intentionally keeping the limit of political tolerance ambiguous, the CCP can change it at any time and react to emerging problems in a flexible way. In other words, the important rules are unwritten. This allows the CCP to expand or shrink the space for citizen freedom as it sees beneficial to maintaining its rule while keeping potential challengers in line through threat from uncertainty.

THE PROBLEM OF CREDIBILITY AND THE PATRONAGE SYSTEM

A natural question about the safety valve strategy is the credibility of the informal and temporary measures. In the context of the iterated interactions required to prolong authoritarian rule (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006), wouldn’t citizens discount temporary and non-institutionalized measures as mere tricks and thus demand institutional changes in order to ensure the benefits last? Can releasing the safety valve really release the steam of public anger and the propensity to contentious politics?

There are at least three reasons why citizens may be satisfied with just temporary concessions, and why credibility may thus not be a problem. First, individuals often evaluate benefits based on comparison with alternatives. The social comparison theory suggests that people form opinions based on comparison with others (Festinger 1954). Applied to understanding Chinese public opinion, Huang (2015) examines how knowledge about foreign nations affects Chinese citizens’ evaluation of China and the Chinese government. The results suggest the importance of comparison in forming political opinion. Similarly, Truex (2014) examines the effects of the online public feedback portal of the National People’s Congress, widely seen as an instrument of consultative authoritarianism. One of the dimensions of comparison used in his study is the difference between citizens’ expectations and their perceptions of government performance. The lower expectations were against perceived reality, the more satisfied citizens tend to be with government institutions and policies. The same logic applies to citizens’ evaluations of the informal and temporary concessions, the results of which are immediate. Thus, so long as citizens can recognize quick resolution of unacceptable situations, they will form positive evaluations of the government.

Second, although it is a rational choice for citizens under an authoritarian regime to secure their benefits through demanding institutional change (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006), citizens need to have the necessary knowledge of complex political and economic systems in order to reach such a decision. Proposal for a new type of political system or

even mere dissatisfaction with the system (not just with individual officials or local governments) has to be based upon sufficient knowledge and information about the existing system. This is a high demand for most citizens who may not have the willingness or capability to devote to such a risky cause. Average citizens do not possess the perfect information to know that changing the system may further advance their interests in the long term when they weigh costs and benefits in the short term. Thus, immediate benefits are highly appealing. For example, in most studies reviewed above, citizens' demands are not fundamental challenges to the system. Indeed, they are mostly local grievances that center on a particular problem, such as under-compensation for demolition or local officials failing to provide basic public services.

Alternatively, there could be a small group of citizens who have the sufficient knowledge and willingness to lead. This may, however, suffer from the third factor—the collective action problem. There have always been groups of political activists in China that engage in political and social causes in different ways. Most of them do not enjoy broad public attention or support. A prominent example is the Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo, who is currently jailed for “inciting subversion of state power” (Lim 2009). While he has the vision and the courage to publicly ask for change to the political system, rarely do average Chinese citizens know his name, let alone his cause. For most Chinese citizens, the tremendous improvements in their material life and the prospect of future opportunities are deterrents to consider protesting for changes to the system. Furthermore, the physical danger that challenging the regime may inflict upon individuals, their families, and fellow activists is often enough to inhibit them from engaging in collective action. Considering these factors, even informal and temporary policy or implementation adjustments can make citizens content with such “non-credible” concessions.

The informal and temporary measures thus are an important strategy essential to authoritarian durability. These measures, however, are different from the patronage system widely employed in the literature to understand authoritarian durability (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Geddes 1996; Lust-Okar 2006; Magaloni 2006; Pepinsky 2007; Wintrobe 1998). A patronage system is an institutionalized exchange system, opposite to the informal and temporary measures that the safety valve analogy applies to. As discussed earlier, institutionalization is neither necessary for citizen satisfaction nor desirable for the CCP, as it limits the flexibility to deal with problems and challenges. Moreover, the informal and temporary measures include not only material benefits, but also rhetorical concessions. In contrast, the patronage system typically centers on material benefits or the rents that citizens receive from the government as a way to trade for support (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010).

Another set of studies on institution, especially those using a rational choice approach, also emphasizes the material benefits provided to the citizens by institutional arrangements. For example, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) provide a compelling framework that articulates the origin of economic performance and distribution of resources as a key perspective on the possible paths of democratization. However, in addition to assuming that citizens are rational and have perfect information, the exclusive focus on material benefits may also undermine the explanatory power of this framework; it is not the only factor that decides whether citizens would engage in collective action to demand political equality. Based on the empirical results of the studies that use the safety valve analogy, citizens can be satisfied, at least temporarily, with both psychological appeasement

through rhetorical concessions and material benefits. Therefore, the rhetorical and material concessions to which the safety valve analogy is applied indicate a larger “toolkit” that an authoritarian regime can use to deal with challenges from the citizens.

CONTRIBUTION TO AUTHORITARIAN DURABILITY

Given the diverse “toolkit” of authoritarian rule, are informal and temporary measures transient? Will they gradually lose effectiveness as the exchange between government and citizens recurs? Is the safety valve strategy resilient so long as its methods evolve, or is it a temporary strategy useful only to extend a transition from authoritarian to democratic rule? This essay argues that such measures are a strategy essential to authoritarian rule, because of the way they generate effects. In the perspective of aggrieved citizens, there is little incentive to undertake the sustained political action that would be required to turn the informal and temporary measures into institutionalized changes. They compare immediate improvements with the unacceptable past; they rarely possess the necessary knowledge and information about the political system to make an informed request to institutionalize government concessions; and they often suffer from the collective action problem, especially considering a repressive regime and an overall upbeat economic outlook.

In the perspective of the authoritarian government, the informal and temporary nature of such measures allows flexibility without real concessions. The key to an effective safety valve strategy is that while the informal and temporary measures look like concessions the government makes to the citizens, they are not. The government can terminate such changes at any time. Despite this, what really matters is how such informal and temporary measures are perceived by the intended audience—citizens with grievances. Based on the studies reviewed in this essay, so far these informal and temporary measures seem to have worked well. It is the appearance of concession, therefore, be it rhetorical or material, that is key to appeasing aggrieved citizens.

In fact, it is precisely the lack of institutionalization, or the flexibility it provides, that enables the Chinese government to weather challenges from citizens. The works on institution, such as Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), emphasize the importance of institutionalization as a way to make political gains more durable and therefore credible. However, this is contrary to the logic of the Chinese government. The less fixed the rules are, the more room the government has to alleviate or even resolve challenges. Moreover, such flexibility minimizes the real concessions the government has to make. This signifies political power because the government ultimately decides whether and when to concede. It may even strengthen the government’s political power when the public is appeased through “non-credible” concessions.

Such flexibility also allows the Chinese government to gather information on potential opposition groups or social problems. Allowing public discontent to play out, be it online criticism or small-scale local protests, can help the central leadership gain a more accurate assessment of the nature and scale of problems and react accordingly (Dimitrov 2013a, 2014, 2015). As existing studies note, collecting credible information is a key problem in maintaining authoritarian rule (Ames 1970; Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015; Truex 2014). While formal institutions such as the National People’s Congress can, to a certain degree, reflect problems in the society (Truex 2014), such formal

channels usually lack the capacity to reflect more contentious and grassroots problems. As discussed earlier, the safety valve strategy is a response to a known and recognized problem, rather than the anticipation of one. By collecting information, the government can efficiently implement a calculated concession to release the safety valve. If successful, the concession goes far enough to appease the citizens without tipping the government's hand on further concessions, such as institutionalization, that it is willing to make to maintain stability. Depending on the information collected, if the problem continues to escalate and the solution is beyond the capacity of the safety valve strategy, then the government may choose to use repressive means or institutional reforms to address the problem. For example, Dimitrov (2013a, 295) points out that in the 1990s the number of complaints from rural citizens grew. Common issues included excessive taxation, cadre malfeasance and corruption. When petitions were not able to resolve the growing complaints, the central government adopted the annual performance evaluation system as an institutionalized means to punish officials who failed to resolve grievances. In this case, the safety valve strategy allowed citizens to petition and functioned as a precursor of institutional change that established the performance evaluation system. Such a mechanism allows the government to collect information on grassroots problems that is key to making decisions on how to address grievances.

The contribution to prolonging authoritarian rule discussed so far relies on the prudent and adroit use of the informal and temporary measures. Otherwise, a poorly calculated concession can fail to release the safety valve and increase the danger of citizens challenging or even subverting the authoritarian regime. So far, the CCP has been effective at selectively adopting informal and temporary measures. To effectively loosen control in certain areas without losing control, it is important for the CCP to clearly identify and assign blame to individual leaders or non-political actors. For example, the central leaders have assigned blame to local governments and officials in tax collection affairs (Takeuchi 2014). While the government typically had been tolerant of local officials overtaxing citizens, they assigned blame when it led to persistent local protests. As a result, central leaders were able to show responsiveness to pressing problems. Consequently, aggrieved citizens were appeased, and contentious politics were no longer necessary. Another example concerns online criticism. Hassid (2012) provides several examples of politically sensitive criticisms that were tolerated after the issues were reported by the controlled mainstream media. The media reports assigned blame to local leaders, allowing citizens to vent frustration online without demanding institutional reform.

The safety valve strategy overlaps with the loosening and tightening cycles (*Fang and Shou*) in Chinese politics (Baum 1994; Shirk 1993), originally applied to China's economic reform since the late 1970s. Safety valve measures apply more broadly than economic issues to include political and social problems. Nevertheless, the cycles of loosening and tightening illustrate the amount of flexibility and the ensuing effectiveness inherent in informal and temporary measures. While these measures, especially in the early phases of the economic reform, indicated frequently contradicting policies, they did not descend Chinese economy into chaos. Instead, they helped Chinese leaders discover a unique path to modernization that has worked so far. Institutional reforms would not allow such frequent contradictions. The exploratory cycles of loosening and tightening not only achieved the goal of economic development, but also ensured political

stability. Deng's famous comment summarizes it well: "Cross the river by groping for stepping stones" (*mozhe shitou guohe*).

The importance of informal and temporary measures does not diminish the significance of formal institutional changes. In fact, institutional reforms are indispensable for the authoritarian regime to resolve challenges in light of socioeconomic development. For example, despite implementation variations, instituting village elections is an important step to ensure popularity of village leaders and effective governance within the most local ranks of the political system. Reforming the *hukou* system is essential to resolving problems that arise with migrant workers who live and work in urban areas but are denied access to many urban social benefits. Reforming the welfare system, such as expanding health care coverage, is consequential for addressing relevant grievances. Autocrats have a diverse "toolkit" that they use to maintain authoritarian rule. While institutional reform and suppression are crucial, the use of informal and temporary measures represents a complementary, flexible, and creative tool to prolong the regime.

OPENINGS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering the large picture of authoritarian politics, the effects of the safety valve strategy at solving problems and sustaining authoritarian rule would be better theorized with more generalizable empirical results. Link and Xiao (2013) offer a critical perspective that the safety valve function of critical online speech is limited in its effects on the way people think and behave offline. In other words, while criticism may temporarily release steam of public anger, such a safety valve function is unlikely to eradicate the threat to the authoritarian rule. This indicates the challenge to empirically connect the act of releasing the safety valve with the assumed effects of discharging public frustration and the propensity to contention, which may be difficult to measure. Future studies should focus on addressing the empirical challenge.

Also worth further investigation is the effect of the changing media environment. The increasing information about foreign countries and domestic politics may undermine the effectiveness of the safety valve strategy in the long run. Huang (2015) finds that knowledge and information about foreign countries affect people's perception of domestic situations, suggesting the importance of politically relevant knowledge and information. While the Chinese government still strictly controls the media, media reform and the rise of the Internet certainly influence the information flow. For example, studies have found that the online media have changed the organization and effectiveness of grassroots activism (Yang 2009; Yang and Calhoun 2007; Zheng and Wu 2005). Therefore, information control is a premise for the effectiveness of the safety valve strategy.

The safety valve strategy is important for us to understand sophisticated authoritarianism, especially its adaptive and resilient nature. The informal and temporary measures allow flexibility for the CCP to deal with problems and challenges. The safety valve strategy may also help us understand the paradox of authoritarianism that scholars have observed (Truex 2014). By opening up the political feedback system, incorporating public opinion, and thus advancing information, the regime may be at a better position for effective governance and maintaining political stability (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Weller 2008). However, opening up the system too much would also undermine the ruling status of the CCP. Considering this, the safety valve strategy seems to have

become a solution used by the CCP to avoid such a paradox. Powered by the flexibility inherent in the informal and temporary measures, so far the CCP is able to relieve pressing problems while avoiding formal institutional changes.

Dan Chen is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Asian Studies at Elizabethtown College. Her research areas are media politics, public opinion, Chinese politics, and authoritarian durability.

NOTES

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¹In this essay, CCP and the Chinese government are used interchangeably.

²This is not to say that we can treat the CCP as a monolithic actor. In fact, the central–local relation is essential to explaining various behaviors of the Chinese government, such as instituting village elections (Oi 1999), implementing tax reform (Takeuchi 2014), allowing local protests (Chen 2014) and media criticism (Esarey and Xiao 2008; MacKinnon 2008; Hassid 2012), and local noncompliance (O’Brien and Li 1999; Zhou 2010). This essay focuses on the challenges from the masses because of the studies reviewed. This does not suggest less importance of the challenges from elites. For further reference, see Magaloni and Kricheli (2010, 127) for a general account of the relationship between the dictator and the central leadership of the ruling party.

³This is somewhat similar to Lorentzen’s (2015) definition of “controlled burn,” especially the description that “In managing forests and other wild areas, fire is a constant threat.”

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