

Do Citizens in Authoritarian Countries Censor Themselves?

---- A Survey List Experiment in Beijing, China

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Department of  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

Citizens' opinions in authoritarian countries are overlooked in the current research on authoritarian regimes. It is also hard to elicit the true opinions of the citizens because they might fear the consequences of disclosure and they might be unwilling to report socially undesirable opinions. Researchers question the surveys conducted in authoritarian countries, and worry about the possible "self-censorship" in those countries. In this paper, I applied a survey technique named list experiment to answer whether citizens in authoritarian countries censor their opinions towards sensitive questions, what kinds of issue could be sensitive and what kinds of people tend to self-censor. Based on my experiment in the capital of China, people do censor themselves, especially with regard to fundamental political issues. People are more willing to reveal true opinions towards economic issues. Among different subgroups, elderly people, probationary CCP members, and government employees tend to censor themselves more.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved family, especially ...

to my parents, Qingjuan Ye and Yongjun Dai. Your love and encouragement make me strong and confident. Your trust and support give me the courage and ability to chase my dream.

to James and Heidi Radford. You make this project possible, and you make North Carolina my home in United States.

to Benjamin Radford. Your help and company make my master study easy and enjoyable. You as a role model keep me interested in our field.

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I also thank Prof. Sunshine Hillygus from Duke University and Prof. Long Sun from Renmin University for their generous help in my survey method.

## **1. Introduction**

After two decades focusing on democratization, the study of authoritarianism has recently gained more attention and become one of the hottest topics in both comparative politics and international relations. We have gained knowledge of political institutions, like parties and elections, in authoritarian countries (Gandhi, 2008; Wright, 2008; Gandhi & Lust, 2009; Malesky & Schuler, 2010; Landry, et al., 2010; Malesky, et al., 2012), authoritarian survival (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; George, 2007; Svobik, 2012), popular movements in authoritarian countries (Kuran, 1991; Robertson, 2007; O'Brien, 1996; Li, 2008), and different types of authoritarian regimes' conflict behavior (Buono de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995; Weeks, 2012).

However, in the current literature, researchers mostly focus on the study of elites while citizens in authoritarian countries are important to its rule. Citizens in authoritarian regimes are important in generating rents, and the rebellions they could launch against dictators are a primary threat to authoritarian survival (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Identifying threats from outsiders as one of the two types of threats to authoritarian rule, researchers find that institutions like parties and legislatures contribute to authoritarian survival by helping to make reliable commitment to co-opt those outsiders (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Svobik, 2012). However, we lack empirical evidence to test whether the outsiders or the citizens are coopted by the government.

Moreover, most studies of authoritarian regimes rely on the assumption of complete information and the assumption that the outsiders or the citizens would behave collectively as a single opposition group. According to Kuran's theory on popular movements, apart from mass discontent and regime weakness, awareness of other peoples' preferences are important in an individual's decision of whether or not to reveal his or her own private preference (Kuran, 1991). While a person's private preference remains constant, as public opposition grows, there comes a point where his external cost of joining the opposition group falls below his internal (psychological) cost of hiding his true preference and pretending to support the regime (preference falsification) (Kuran, 1991). When this switching point is reached, an individual will switch from supporting the regime to opposing it in public. In reality, apart from direct repression and buying off the citizens, autocracies make large efforts to block information about public preference to prevent collective action. In a study of China's online censorship, researchers find that "the censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content." (King, et al., 2013)

Therefore, the study of authoritarian regimes without studying citizens' opinions and behaviors is incomplete. However, because of the opaque nature of authoritarian regimes, it is hard to gain information about citizens' views and behaviors under authoritarian rule. Authoritarian regimes rarely collect or publish data on citizens' opinions and behavior. As citizens' satisfaction can be considered a measure of the officials' performance, the government has incentive to control the flow of this

information or even to fake citizens' opinions (Cai, 2000). Safety concerns also prevents widespread data sharing (Manion, 2008).

When survey research itself is sensitive in authoritarian countries, collecting high quality data by researchers themselves are difficulty. Because the citizens' might not be willing to reveal their true opinions towards sensitive political issues, survey data collected in authoritarian countries are of questionable accuracy. Take China study as an example, most surveys do not mention how they deal with the self-censorship and researchers failed to justify the accuracy of their data, including Tianjian Shi's two surveys on political attitudes and political behavior of Chinese citizens in 1990 and 1999 (Shi, 1999), Pierre Landry's 2003/2004 survey on the institutionalization of legal reform in China (Landry, 2009), and Martinez-Bravo et al.'s village democracy survey (Martinez-Bravo, et al., 2012).

To gain accuracy, some researchers carefully designed their questionnaires to avoid taboo issues, and some of them even did preliminary research first to find out what issues are too sensitive (Tsai, 2010; Dickson, 2010). Conversational interviews are also recommended and used to gain trust from respondents to elicit their true opinions (Lianjiang, 2013; Wang, et al., 2013; Tsai, 2010; Tsai, 2007). Although conversational interview can help researchers to build closer relationship with their respondents and give the respondents chances to justify their behavior, it cannot guarantee that the respondents are willing to express their true opinions, instead of saying things that the government or the researchers want to hear, especially when the fear of disclosure remains and when the

researchers are cooperating with official institutions. The conversations between the researcher and the respondents may also lead the respondents to respond in a certain way. Simply avoiding sensitive issue cannot help us to understand citizens' opinions towards sensitive issues and whether and why certain group of people might hide their true opinions.

This paper attempts to shed lights on the study of citizens' views and behaviors under authoritarian rule. In this paper, by using an indirect questioning technique, I first examine whether citizens hide their true opinions when answering survey questions. Then I analyze what kinds of people tend to hide their true opinions more.

The reminder of this paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I explain the meaning of "sensitive questions" and possible reasons citizens may hide their true opinions. I also explain why we might observe "self-censorship" in authoritarian regimes and give hypotheses about different types of people's responses. In the second section, I describe the indirect questioning method, list experiment, used in my survey, and also describe the survey I conducted. In the third section, I present the data analysis and results. Finally, I conclude by reviewing key findings and listing some possible future research based on this project.

## **2. Possible "self-censorship" in Authoritarian Regimes**

A question is sensitive if (1) it could be seen as an invasion of privacy, like questions about sexuality and income; or (2) it raises fears of the consequences of

disclosure of the answer (threat of disclosure); or (3) it elicits answers that are socially unacceptable or socially undesirable (social desirability bias)(Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). In most cases, the threat of disclosure and the social desirability bias are combined. Respondents worry about the disclosure because the behaviors or opinions they hold are socially unacceptable, for instance hatred towards a certain ethnic group.

In authoritarian countries, apart from worrying about “punishment” from the society, respondents might also worry about punishment from the government. In Chinese history, “literary inquisition” was common in all dynasties. If people said or wrote something that could be considered offensive to the regime or the emperor, they and their whole family could be imprisoned or even be killed. A recent and well-known case of “literary inquisition” in China is the Cultural Revolution. Any words or behavior that could be interpreted as “capitalist” or anti-revolution could lead to the loss of freedom or life. Although people today enjoy much more freedom in China than before, they can still get into trouble because of what they say or write.

In authoritarian countries, it is even hard to tell what kinds of opinions are really socially unacceptable. Because of the fear of government punishment, the lack of free media, and the online censorship, it is hard for the citizens in authoritarian countries to know about the true preferences of other people, especially those people who share different backgrounds and to whom they have no private connection. Without knowing their peers’ preferences, it is safest to report behaviors or opinions that follow the government’s propaganda.

Because citizens' concern could include both government's punishment and society's punishment in authoritarian regimes, I use the word "self-censorship" to describe the unwillingness to reveal a true opinion, instead of "social desirability bias."

Different people might be different in how much they worry about the "threat of disclosure" based on whether they have something to hide and based on their sense of vulnerability to "punishment" from the government and society. Some hypotheses based on the social-economic factors are presented below:

### ***Demographic Hypotheses***

**H1:** Elderly people tend to censor themselves more

Elderly people experienced more political events that might make them feel more vulnerable. In the China case, people older than 50 experienced Cultural Revolution and they observed how society violently punished individuals and groups with unacceptable opinions. To protect themselves, it is wise to think twice before saying or doing anything, and it is wise to follow the mainstream idea. People older than 40 directly or indirectly experienced the Tian'an Men Square Protests and observed the cost of publicly protesting against the government. In contrast with previous generations, younger generations were born after China's reform and have witnessed few or no violent confrontation between the government and the citizens or the confrontation among citizens. To them, the possible punishments from government and society are far from their life, they thus have less pressure to conceal their true opinions.

**H2:** Communist party members and probationary party members tend to give more positive support to the government, but will censor themselves less in government related issues

Party in authoritarian countries is perceived as an instrument of co-optation and control (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Magaloni & Kricheli, 2012; Svobik, 2012). As an instrument of control, party helps autocracies to gain political control over appointments and selective recruitment and repression (Svobik, 2012). Due to their career aspirations, party members have more incentive to show positive support for the government. Because the members and probationary members either have gained benefit from the Party or anticipate future benefit, they could have a higher evaluation to the government. Therefore, they have less negative opinion to hide.

**H3:** Communist party members and probationary party members tend to censor themselves more in value/moral related issues

It is a “requirement” for CCP members to hold a higher moral standard and to always behave as model for other citizens. CCP members could get punished by the government for their immoral behaviors if these behaviors are exposed. Therefore, CCP members and probationary CCP members will be more sensitive to other peoples’ expectations. They have more incentive to hide any behaviors or attitudes that might be considered undesirable.

**H4:** People who work for the government tend to more positive support to the government, but will censor themselves less

This is driven by the same mechanism described in hypothesis 3 about CCP members and probationary CCP members.

**H5:** People with higher educational backgrounds will tend to censor themselves more

People with high education usually have more access to information because they are able to read and communicate in different languages and to use high technology. Because of this, they tend to be exposed to more diverse sets of values. They are also more likely to be able to travel between different countries. Their ability and experience could help them to compare their country with other regimes and to evaluate the regime and the society from different angles. Therefore, it is likely that they will hold opinions different from those advocated by the government.

### **3. Method**

#### ***3.1 The List Experiment***

To elicit truthful answers to sensitive questions, a technique called list experiment (sometimes called the item count technique) was used. The list experiment has been used in psychology to study sensitive issues like drug use and sexual behavior for more than forty years (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). In recent years, list experiment has gained more popularity in political science. Some political scientists have successfully adjusted this technique for political science study, and developed new statistical methods for examining multivariate relationships efficiently (Glynn, 2013; Blair & Imai, 2012).

Political scientists have also successfully used list experiments to study corruption (Gingerich, 2010), voter turnout (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010), and vote buying (Gonzalez-Ocantos, et al., 2012).

The list experiment works by indirect questioning. First, a sample is randomly divided into two groups. Each group is asked the same question, and given several options to choose from. Instead of asking them to answer directly, the researcher asks the respondents to report only the number of options they agree with. The only difference between the treatment and control groups is the number of options they are given. For example, the question could be: **Among the following statements, how many statements you agree with?** The options listed for the control group could be:

- Income inequality and corruption problems exist in all countries, and it is normal that our country has these problems too.
- The flaws of our political system make the cadres more easily corrupted.
- Corruption is a personal problem of the cadres, instead of the design of a political system.
- To solve the current social problems, everyone has responsibility and should participate.

All respondents receive the four options listed above. However, the treatment group receives one more option that is the “sensitive item” we are interested in:

- Though there are a lot of problems in China now, the current political system is the most suitable one for China

Because the respondents only need to answer the number of statements they agree with, this technique provides the respondents with a high degree privacy and protection. Neither the researchers nor other persons can identify the specific preference of a respondent, so there is no need to hide his or her true opinions towards the sensitive items.

Because the respondents are randomly assigned to two groups, we should expect them to have the same response towards the same “non-sensitive” options on average. Therefore, by simply compare the means of each group, we can derive the proportion of respondents who agree that the current system is the most suitable one for China. If no one thinks the current system is the most suitable one for China, there should be no difference in the average numbers reported by each group. If the mean of the numbers reported by the control group is 3.2, and the mean of the numbers reported by the treatment group is 3.5, we can say that about 30% of respondents agree that the current political system is the most suitable for China.

### ***3.2 Survey Description***

With this list experiment technique in hand, I conducted an independent face-to-face survey in Beijing, China with the help of nine college students between December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 and January 22<sup>th</sup> 2014. The questionnaires were given to passengers in Beijing

Subway. 53 subway stations were chosen randomly from 201 non-transfer stations in 16 Beijing subway lines<sup>1</sup>. These stations range from suburban areas to the center of Beijing and therefore represent a variety of different neighborhoods. Because the subway is the fastest means of transportation and it is very cheap and comfortable, it is the most popular choice for citizens to travel within the city. The respondents we surveyed from the 53 stations are representative of the large population of low to middle class citizens. 906 questionnaires were collected in total.

Because I am also interested in whether the citizens censor themselves, I added a normal questionnaire asking respondents to answer sensitive questions directly in addition to the two questionnaires using the list experiment technique. The three questionnaires were given to different people from the same station at the same time every day. An example question in the normal questionnaire would be:

Do you agree that though there are a lot of problems in China now, the current political system is the most suitable one for China?

A. Agree    B. Disagree

The following six sensitive items, phrased here as declarative statements, were included in each questionnaire:

- 1) Whether Diaoyu Island belongs to China has nothing to do with my life.

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<sup>1</sup> Transfer stations are excluded, because usually they are the busiest stations and there are no space for the respondents to answer the questionnaire.

- 2) Though there are a lot of problems in China now, the current political system is the most suitable one for China.
- 3) Reports about President Xi's and Prime Minister Wen's large private wealth are probably true.
- 4) The government has the legal power to censor the internet.
- 5) The government can adjust its policies to satisfy peoples' demands.
- 6) My house should belong to me forever and I should have the right to decide whether to sell my own house.

Because there's no existing theory on what kinds of questions are sensitive in China, and identifying these issues is one of the goals of this research, the six "sensitive items" in the survey range from international issues to domestic issues, and from more fundamental issues to specific policy issues.

Because some bias from the questionnaires in China could be caused by different understandings of abstract ideas like "democracy", most sensitive items in my questionnaires are about views towards certain facts. The sentences containing abstract items about political system and government policies are taken from politics text books in Chinese schools, and have long been the government's "slogan," so we should expect no miss-understanding of those sentences.

Seven demographic questions are also included in each questionnaire for research interests, and assessing balance between groups. These questions include gender, race, residency, age, party membership, education, and occupation.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Results from List experiment**

In this section, I first compare the difference between indirect measure (list experiment) and direct measure to see whether citizens censor themselves. I also compare responses to different questions to see what kinds of questions might be more sensitive. Then I analyze the contribution of different characteristics to respondent's response to see what kind of people tend to self-censor more. Because simply comparing means cannot examine the relationships between respondents' characteristics and their responses to sensitive items, in the data analysis I used Blair and Imai's methods and R package<sup>2</sup> (Blair & Imai, 2012) which provides efficient multivariate regression method for my three groups research design with two groups using list experiment and one group using regular questionnaires.

##### ***4.1 Do citizens Self-censor?***

The first step is to estimate the proportion of people who agree with each sensitive item in the list experiment. The next step is to estimate the proportion of people agreeing with the same sensitive items when being asked directly. Two groups of estimations were

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, please check Blair & Imai, 2012, Imai, 2011, and package "list".

derived from two separate logistic models. Finally, to measure the extent to which the respondents hide their true opinions towards the sensitive items, I estimate the differences in response to the list experiment and direct asked questionnaires.

A logistic model was used to estimate the “true proportion” of people agreeing with the sensitive item in list experiment, and another logistical model was used to estimate the proportion in direct asked questionnaire. The differences between the two proportions were estimated via Monte Carlo simulations based on the two logit models. Because the residency, age and occupation are unbalanced across groups, they are controlled in both models<sup>3</sup>. Because there’s no existing theory about what characteristic might influence peoples’ willingness to tell their true opinion, no other independent variables were included in the two logistic models. The estimates here represent the proportion of the population as a whole. In the next section, different characteristics were added to the model as independent variables to check their contribution to people’s response to sensitive items.

If citizens censor themselves, I should observe a difference between the estimates from list experiment and direct asked questioning. If we consider the government advocated value as socially desirable opinions, and if the citizens do worrying about the “punishment” from government and society, we should observe more of them disagree with statement one in the direct asked questionnaire, and therefore show high interests in the Diaoyu Island issue. We should observe more people report that they think the current

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<sup>3</sup> Demographic information of each group is showed in Appendix

political system is the most suitable one for China and they think the government can adjust its polity to satisfy the peoples' demands. Information about leadership in China has long been censored, so we should observe a large amount of people disagree with statement 3 about top leaders' private wealth. We should also observe more people agree with online censorship in direct asked questionnaire. After economic reform, discussion about economy is always hot. People are exposed to debate about economic reform in TV and online. They might feel safe to reveal their opinion towards statement 6 about property right, and we might not see big difference between the list experiment and the direct asked questionnaire.

As I mentioned in section two, the "fear of disclosure" is also influenced by whether the respondent has something to hide, so if citizens' true opinions are the same as the socially desirable view, they have no need to censor themselves. In this case, we will see no difference between the list experiment and the direct asked questionnaire.

The results are showed in Table 1 with the first column presenting the results from the list experiment, the second column presenting the results from the direct asked questionnaire, and the third column showing the difference between the list experiment and the direct asked questionnaire. These results are visualized in Figures 1-6 with each figure corresponding to one of the six sensitive questions.

**Table 1. Responses to List Experiment and Direct Asked Questions**

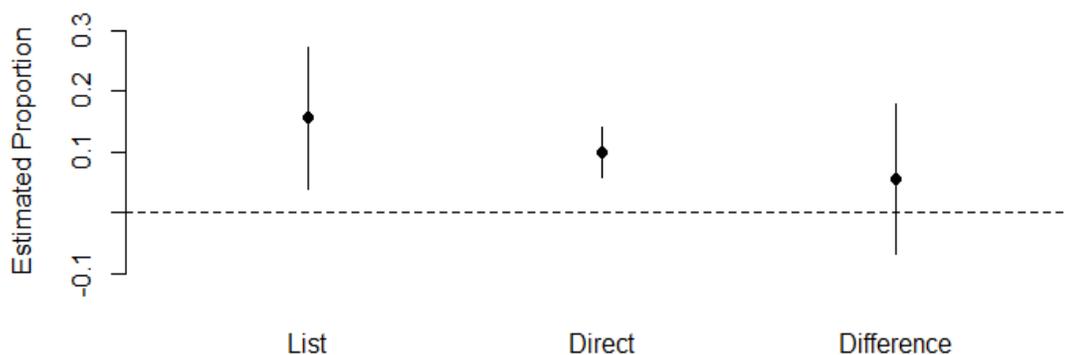
	List Experiment	Direct	Difference
Q1. Diaoyu Island	15.59%**	9.97%**	5.63%
Q2. Political System	52.57%***	72.3%***	-19.72%*
Q3. Leaders' Wealth	38.64%***	55.89%***	-17.25%*
Q4. Online Censorship	58.25%***	62.03%***	-3.78%
Q5. Satisfaction towards Policy	62.7%***	72.7%***	-10%
Q6. Property Rights	51.14%***	87.46%***	-36.32%***

Note: Values in List Experiment column are estimated differences in means between control and treatment groups. Values in Direct column are estimated proportion of people agreeing with the sensitive items. Values in Difference are the differences between list experiments and directed asked questionnaires. \* $p < 0.05$  for differences between list experiments and direct asked questionnaires in political system issue and leaders' wealth issue. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  for difference in property rights issue. The differences between list experiments and direct asked questionnaires in Diaoyu Island issue, online censorship issue and satisfaction towards policy issue are not statistically different.

From Table 1, the estimated proportions of people agreeing with the sensitive items in the list experiment are all statistically significant when compared to the null hypothesis of 0% agreement, and they all differ from the estimated proportions of people agreeing with the sensitive items taking direct asked questionnaires. However, the difference between list experiment and direct questionnaire varies between different sensitive items. This may reveal different sensitivity levels for different topics.

Before comparing sensitive items, I first discuss the result of each sensitive item. Figure 1 to 6 plot the estimated proportion of people who agree with each sensitive item. In each figure, the point estimates from the two logistic regression models are presented with solid circles. 95% confidence intervals shown in vertical lines are obtained via Monte Carlo simulations.

#### 4.1.1 Diaoyu Island issue

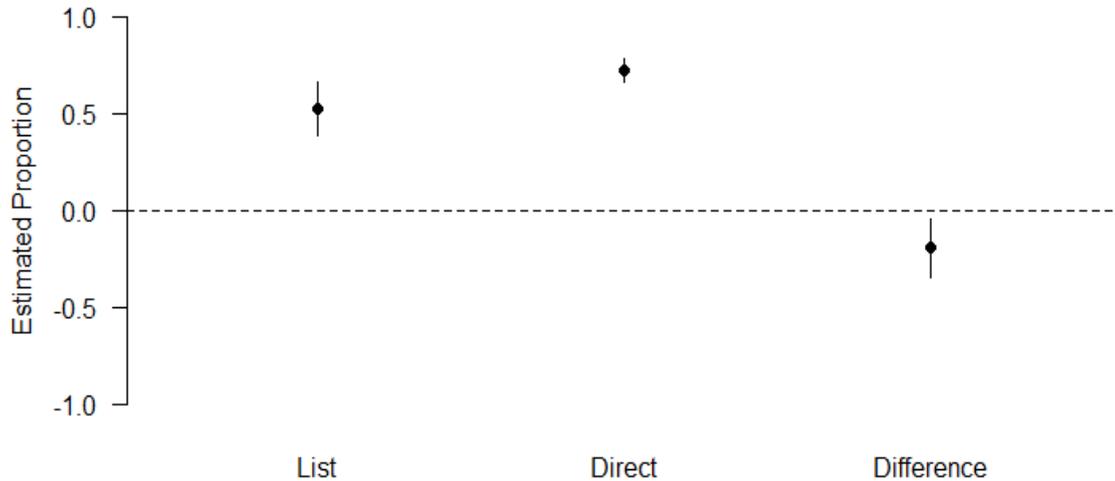


**Figure 1. Responses to Question 1**

As I expected, the estimated proportion of people agreeing with statement 1 in direct asked questionnaire is lower than in list experiment. In the list experiment, 15.59% people agree that whether Diaoyu Island belongs to China has nothing to do with their life. We can perceive that 15.59% people don't care about Diaoyu Island issue. When asked directly about their opinion towards this issue, only 9.97% people are willing to reveal that they do not care much about this issue. If we consider 15.59% as the true proportion of people holding the opinion that they do not care about Diaoyu Island, when asked directed, more than 1/3 of them are too scared to reveal their true opinion.

The 84.41% of people who do not agree with the sensitive item includes people who disagree with the sensitive item and people who are not sure about it, the proportion of people "self-censored" in this issue might be higher than the difference we can observe here which are 5.63%. Note that 0% is contained within our 95% confidence interval.

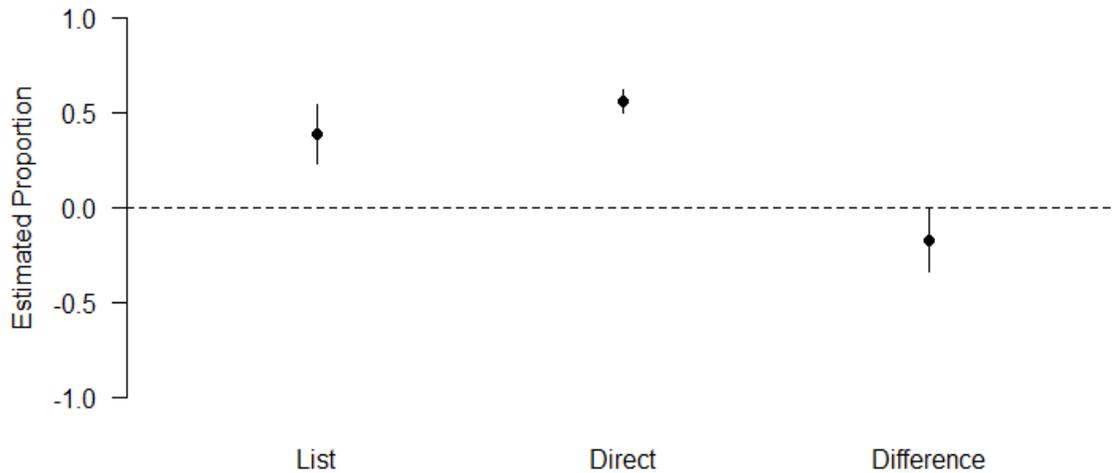
#### 4.1.2 Opinion towards Current Political System



**Figure 2. Responses to Question 2**

The result in question 2 also follows my expectation, although in both measurements the proportion of people thinking the current political system is the most suitable one is large. 52.57% people think the current political system is most suitable one for China based on the list experiment, while 72.3% would report they think so when asked directly. The 19.72% difference is very large and statistically significant. About 1/3 of the people who disagree with the sentence would not be willing to tell the truth in direct asked questionnaire. A large amount of people would hide their negative opinion towards the current political system.

### 4.1.3 Opinion towards Leaders

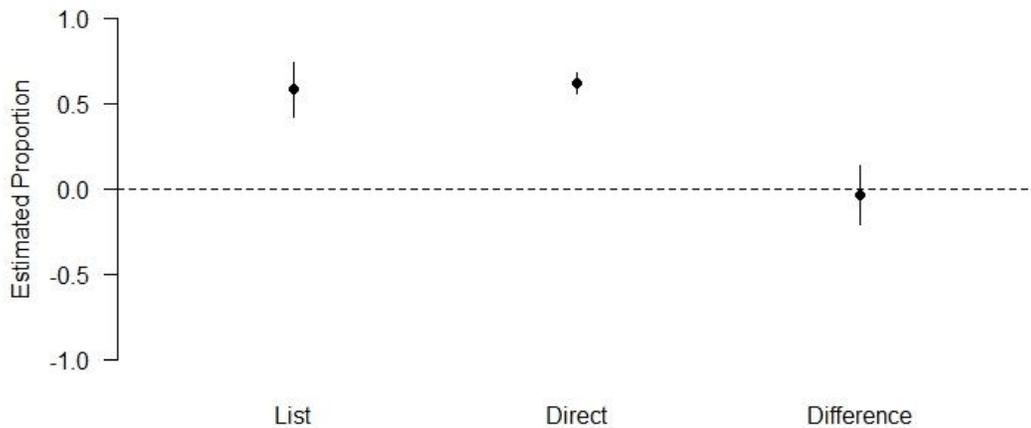


**Figure 3. Responses to Question 3**

In this question, we saw more people responded to the sensitive item in the direct asked questionnaire than in the list experiment which I did not expect. When taking the list experiment questionnaires, 38.64% people respond that they think the reports about President Xi's and Prime Minister Wen's large private wealth are probably true. When taking the direct asked questionnaires, 55.89% people respond so. Because opinion towards this issue needs background about the New York Times' and Bloomberg News' reports, both of which are censored in China, large amount of people may never have heard of this kind of these reports. It is very possible that a lot people are not sure about this statement, so they choose to not respond to this item in taking the list experiment questionnaires. It seems without knowing news papers' reports, a lot of people are still

willing to believe the top leaders in China have large private wealth, and they feel comfortable to reveal this opinion to a stranger.

#### 4.1.4 Online Censorship



**Figure 4. Responses to Question 4**

There's almost no difference between the list experiment and the direct asked questionnaire in this issue. In the list experiment measure, 58.25% people think the government has the legal power to censor the internet, while 62.03% people think so in the direct measure. In both measurements, the proportion of people agreeing with the item is high. And there's only 3.78% difference between the two measurements. It seems more than half of the citizens think it is legitimate for the Chinese government to censor the internet. The people who disagree with this do not feel pressure to reveal their true opinion.

#### 4.1.5 Satisfaction towards Government



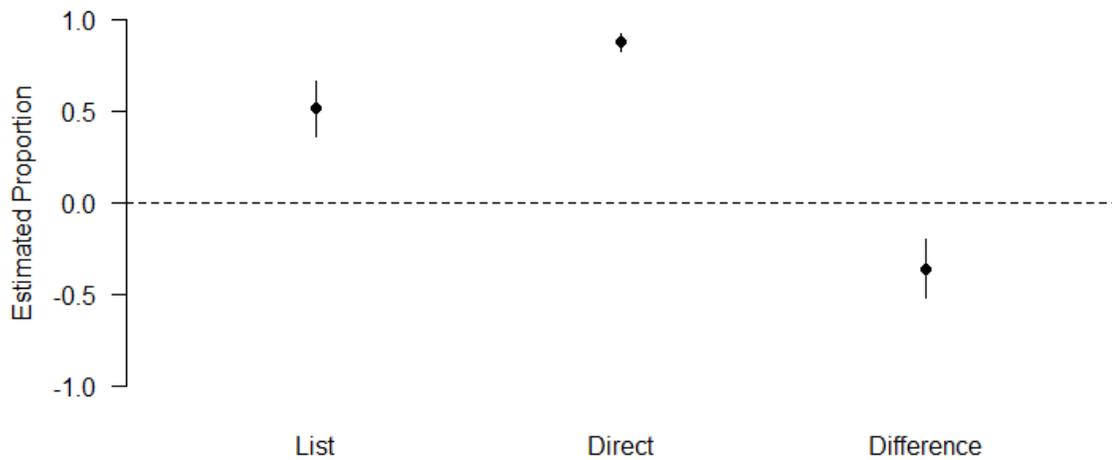
**Figure 5. Responses to Question 5**

The sensitive item in question 5 asks whether you think the government can adjust its policies to satisfy peoples’ demand which has long being a “slogan” among all levels of government in China. 62.7% of people in the list experiment measure agree that the government can adjust its policy to satisfy people’s demand, while 72.7% people agree so in direct measure. There’s a 10% difference between the two measurements which is not statistically significant. As expected, about 1/4 of the people who disagree with this government “slogan” are unwilling to express their true opinion.

#### 4.1.6 Property Rights

This question asks people’s opinion towards ownership of house. Individuals in China only have right to use their land or apartment for 70 years or less. Whether citizens

should be allowed land and home-ownership rights is a hot topic of debate in China is in hot debate in China. When asked indirectly whether they agree that a house should belong to its owner forever and whether they should have the right to decide whether to sell their own house, 51.14% of people agree so. However, when being asked directly, more than 80% of people think they should have the right to own their house and the right to decide whether to sell their own house. There may be a large number of people who are unsure about this issue, and would not respond it in the list experiment. When asked directed and they have to choose between agree or disagree, most of them choose to agree. Thus, it seems likely this is not a real sensitive issue.



**Figure 6. Responses to Question 6**

#### ***4.2 What kind of issue is more sensitive?***

The six sensitive items can be divided into difference groups. Basically, it can be divided into two groups: foreign policy issues and domestic issues, with Diaoyu Island issue in the foreign policy category and the other five in the domestic category. The five domestic issues can be further divided into two groups: fundament issues (political system) and policy issues (online censorship, satisfaction towards policy, property rights), or can be divided into other two groups: political issues (political system, satisfaction towards government policies, online censorship) and economic issues (property rights).

If we rank the sensitiveness of an issue based on the difference between direct and indirect measure, the rank of the six issues in the research would be: political system > satisfaction towards government policies > Diaoyu Island > online censorship > property rights. When we only use the difference between direct and indirect questioning to measure the sensitive level, we actually consider both the need to hide and the pressure to hide true opinions. More sensitive items, given this measure, are those for which more people hold the undesirable opinion and more people are unwilling to reveal the truth.

If we only measure the pressure people get to tell truth, we can rank the sensitivity level of an issue based on the proportion of people unwilling to tell true when they hold undesirable opinions. In this measurement, the sensitivity level of political system and Diaoyu Island is almost equal with the political system issue being slightly more sensitive.

People are least willing to tell their true opinion towards fundamental political issue (political system). Compared to the fundamental issue, people are more likely to tell their true opinion towards specific government policies. People are more willing to reveal their true opinions towards foreign policy issues than fundamental domestic issues, but are less willing to reveal true opinion towards foreign policy issues than specific domestic policy issues.

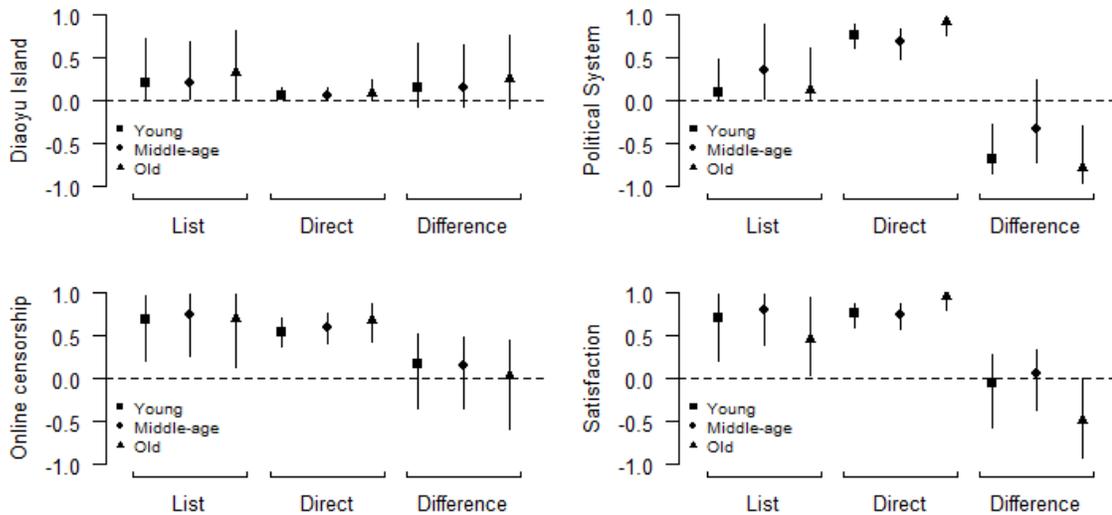
#### ***4.3 Who tends to self-censor?***

In this section, I examine four demographic factors that might have important influence on peoples' responses to sensitive items. Graphs that show point estimates and uncertainty of each predictor (sub-group of people) to the four sensitive items are presented<sup>4</sup>. In estimating each demographic factor, the other controlled factors are set as constant in their median levels.

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<sup>4</sup> Because in previous analysis there seems are no social desirability bias in leader's private wealth and property rights, I didn't include these two issues in analyzing different characteristic's contribution to social desirability bias.

### 4.3.1 Age



**Figure 7. Estimated responses from different age group**

With the y-axis shows the proportion of agreeing with a certain sensitive item, Figure 7 presents different age groups' responses to sensitive items. The young age group contains people from 18 to 28. The middle age represents people from 29 to 39. Respondents older than 40 are aggregated to the old group.

Based on the Hypothesis one, I expect the difference between list experiment and direct asked question is the largest in old group. And the results confirm this expectation. As can be seen in the figure 7, the differences between list experiment and direct asked questionnaire are the largest of old group people in three of the four sensitive issues. People who are older than 40 is least likely to tell their true opinion towards Diaoyu Island issue, political system issue and satisfaction towards government policy. There is no difference between list experiment and direct measurement in the online

ensorship issue in old people group which might be caused by using internet less. In both political system issue and satisfaction towards government policy, older group's favorable towards current system and government is the least among the three age groups in list experiment. But in direct asked questionnaire, they show the highest supportive to the system and government.

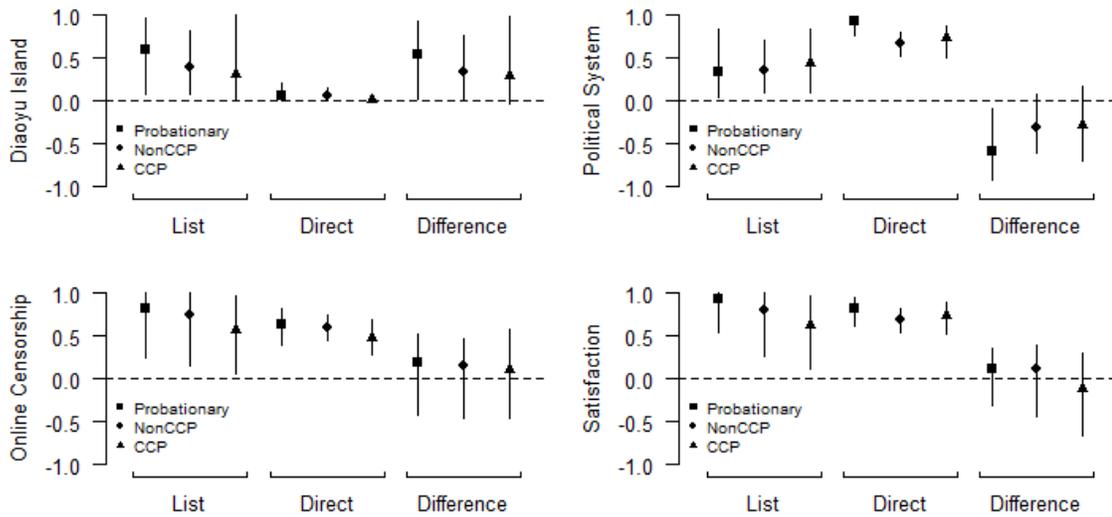
The response of young group in political system issue is not expected. In the political system issue, although only little amount of young people think the current political system is most suitable one for China in the list experiment, a large proportion of them report so in direct asked questionnaire. A large amount of young people would hide their true opinion towards political system issue. There's almost no difference between young and middle age group in their opinion towards other issues.

#### **4.3.2 Party Membership**

Based on hypothesis 2, I expect that a large proportion of CCP members and probationary members agree that the current political system is the most suitable one for China in both list and directed asked questionnaire. The proportion of CCP members and probationary members agreeing with this item is expected to be higher than people who are not CCP members. And there is less difference between the list experiment and the direct asked questionnaire among CCP members and probationary members. Their response to whether the government can adjust its policy to satisfy people's demand should be the same as in political system issue.

Based on hypothesis 3, I expect that in the Diaoyu Island issue the difference between list experiment and direct asked questionnaire among CCP members and probationary members are higher than non CCP members.

The results presented in Figure 8 shows the responses of CCP members and probationary CCP members are quite different, and my expectations are partly supported.



**Figure 8. Estimated responses from people holding different CCP membership**

As can be seen in figure 8, in Diaoyu Island Issue, probationary CCP members are most likely to hide their true opinion. Although in list experiment they show the least interest in the Diaoyu Island issue, they show very high interest in directed asked questionnaire. In contrast, the large amount of CCP members show interest in Diaoyu Island issue, and thus have no need to lie. At least probationary members show they want to be seen as they have higher moral standard. The less difference in CCP members group in this issue cannot be seen as evidence that CCP members are more willing to reveal

their true opinion. It is because most CCP members already hold the socially desired opinion in this issue.

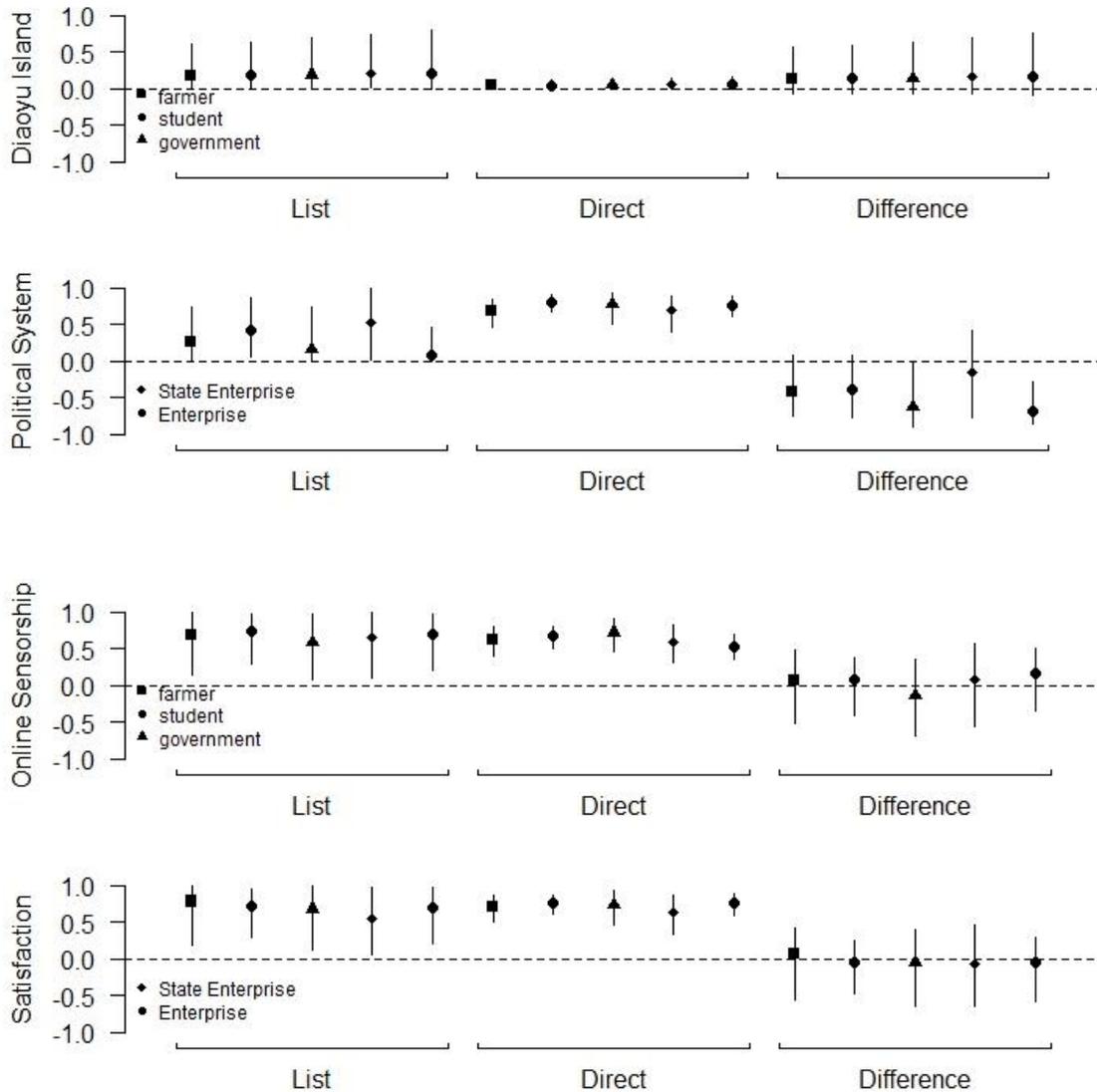
In the political system issue, although the proportions of supporting the current political system are very close in list experiment, a large amount of probationary CCP members are unwilling to reveal their true opinion which makes them the most supportive group in direct asked questionnaire. While in list experiment the estimated proportion of probationary CCP member who think the current political system is the most suitable one for China is the smallest, the proportion of probationary CCP members who agree so is the largest in direct asked questionnaire. It seems probationary CCP members might feel more vulnerable in their political career and more vulnerable to the other people's expectation. CCP members show the highest support to the system in list experiment which is consistent with my expectation.

In the online censorship issue and the satisfaction towards government policy issue, there's no much difference between list experiment and directed asked questionnaire among each group, and there is no much difference across groups in the sense of "self-censorship". However, the difference between CCP members and probationary CCP members' response in the Satisfaction issue is big. In the satisfaction issue, the estimated proportion of probationary CCP members agreeing that the government can adjust policy to satisfy people's demand is the highest which is consistent with hypothesis 2. In contrast, CCP members tend to be more critical in this issue.

### **4.3.3 Occupation**

Different jobs are aggregated into five types, and four of them are added as dummy variables in the two models with Enterprise as excluded category. Farmer and migrant workers are aggregated as farmer group. Students are one group. Government, party organ and national institution are aggregated as government group. State owned enterprises are one group. All the other types of enterprises, including private enterprises, foreign enterprises and individual business, are aggregated as enterprise group.

Based on hypothesis 4, I expect that the estimate proportion of government and state owned enterprises employees agreeing with the political system issue and satisfaction more in list experiment, and thus smaller differences between list experiment and direct asked questionnaire. However, government employees' response to political system issue is not what I expected.



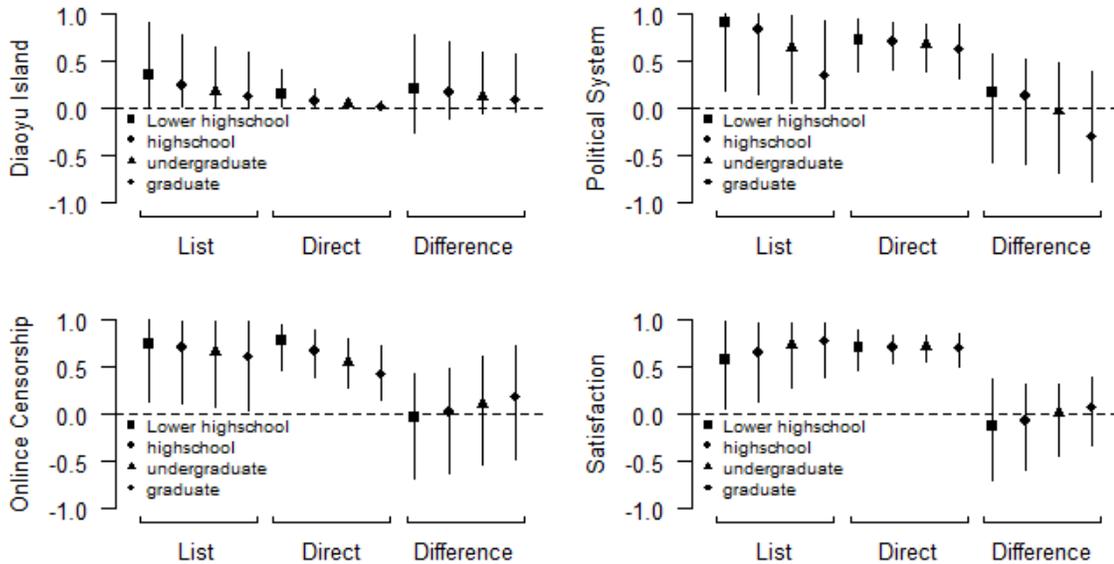
**Figure 9. Estimated responses from people owning different occupation**

In political system issue, farmer group, government group and enterprise group all show lower support to the current political system in list experiment. They all show very high support to the current political system in direct asked questionnaire. The government group shows the highest extent to hide their true opinion towards the current political

system. State owned enterprise group shows the highest support the current political system. There's no big difference among different occupation group in other issues.

It seems the government employees are more critical in the political system issue, while employees in State owned enterprises are more supportive to the current political system. Although these two groups both benefit from the system, government employees have more experience and knowledge of how this system works. It might be why the government employees are more critical.

#### 4.3.4 Education



**Figure 10. Estimated responses from people with different level of education**

People with higher education show higher interest in Diaoyu Island in list experiment, but the extent to which different group willing to express true opinion seems

the same. People with higher education are also more critical to the current political system in list experiment and are also more likely to hide their true opinion towards this issue which is consistent with hypothesis 5. People with higher education are more satisfied towards government's policy. Although there's little difference between their opinions towards government's online censorship, people with higher education show less support to this policy.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper shows that the regular survey design with directed asked questions is not reliable in authoritarian countries and provides an alternative method to elicit true answers from citizens in these countries. By showing that citizens do censor themselves in authoritarian countries, this paper also raises questions about the assumption of complete information and raises the possibility that the current theory of authoritarian survival is incomplete. By creating and promoting certain social values that favor the authoritarian rule and by maintaining a strong control of violence and promotion, the government can prevent people revealing their true opinions without using overt repressive tactics. In this way, the government prevents the outsiders from forming of opposition groups.

This paper shows that the people holding socially undesired opinion may not be minority, for example in the political system issue, about half of citizens do not agree that the current political system is the most suitable one for China. Even given this large

proportion, many people are still unwilling to reveal their true opinions. Of the 50% of citizens that hold this negative opinion, just over half are willing to express this opinion when asked directly. This paper also opens questions of how citizens in authoritarian countries exchange opinions, in what circumstance they are willing to reveal their true opinions, and how they would respond when seeing others reveal their true opinions. Answers to these kinds of questions will help us better understand collective actions in authoritarian countries and authoritarian survival.

This paper does not answer whether the citizens worry about the government or the society when hiding their true opinions. To answer this question, different set of carefully designed sensitive items will be needed.

By using multivariate regression to analyze subgroups, this paper also reveals important characteristics that influence a person's feeling of vulnerability to possible "punishment" from the government and society. It shows that older people, probationary CCP members, government employees, and people with higher education background have more undesired opinions to hide and are more reluctant to reveal their "socially unacceptable" opinions. The findings about probationary CCP members support the theory that parties are efficient cooptation instrument. Even a big proportion of the probationary members do not hold positive views of the regime, the possible future benefits of joining the party motivate them to disguise their true opinions and to support the regime.

This paper also reveals citizens' true opinions towards the regime, government policies, and a border dispute. Overall, more than half of Chinese citizens, or at least Beijing citizens, are satisfied with the current regime. Therefore, Chinese government does have a majority support. Moreover, according to this study, CCP members and non-CCP members show almost equal support to the regime. It seems that the majority support is not the result of buying off certain groups of outsiders. Instead, it is possible that the mass support is gained by providing benefit to the whole society.

In sum, this paper shows the true opinions of the citizens in China, and shows that they do censor themselves. This should lead us to question the validity of past surveys in China. It also demonstrates the difficulty for revealing information and forming an opposition group in authoritarian countries. This raises questions about collective actions in authoritarian countries. Further exploring the possibility that governments might intentionally foster a climate in which citizens self-censor will help us to better understand the survival of authoritarian regimes.

## Appendix

**Table 2: Demographic information of Group A (treatment group in the list experiment)**

Gender		Race		Residency		Age		
Male	Female	Han	Minor	Urban	Rural	18~28	29~39	40~
179	148	304	20	256	70	214	71	42
CCP Membership			Education					
CCP member	Probationary member	Not a member	Lower than high school	High school	Undergraduate	Graduate		
57	53	212	10	47	225	44		
Occupation								
Farmer		Student	Government	State owned enterprise	Enterprise	Other		
28		110	26	35	94	33		

**Table 3. Demographic information of Group B (Control group in the list experiment)**

Gender		Race		Residency		Age		
Male	Female	Han	Minor	Urban	Rural	18~28	29~39	40~
172	114	260	27	207	80	143	85	59
CCP Membership			Education					
CCP member	Probationary member	Not a member	Lower than high school	High school	Undergraduate	Graduate		
61	23	211	18	44	171	53		
Occupation								
Farmer		Student	Government	State owned enterprise	Enterprise	Other		
30		110	35	25	108	35		

**Table 4. Demographic information of Group C**

Gender		Race		Residency		Age			
Male	Female	Han	Minor	Urban	Rural	18~28	29~39	40~	
131	110	226	16	165	77	139	64	39	
CCP Membership			Education						
CCP member	Probationary member	Not a member	Lower than high school	High school	Undergraduate	Graduate			
47	32	163	15	30	164	33			
Occupation									
Farmer		Student		Government		State owned enterprise		Enterprise	Other
29		69		26		19		74	25

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