

Applying Insights from China: A Typology for Subnational Comparative Politics

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Abstract

Recent surveys in studies of Chinese politics indicate that few concepts from this sub-field have gained traction in comparative politics or other social sciences. In this article, we draw on theories of subnational analysis and comparison to argue that even in a strong, authoritarian state such as China—often considered to be “unique”—there are some policy areas where the preferences of the center are less important. In these cases, theories and findings may be applicable to other contexts. We introduce a typology to show that careful consideration of the interests and information of national and subnational actors can allow us to identify generalizable policy areas. Depending on the particular configuration, we can then predict how the central state evaluates local actors, variations in local implementation, and the potential for generalizability to settings beyond China. We apply this typology to several policy areas—social stability, social security, environmental governance, and political selection—to derive expectations about the behavior of central and local states, and identify when researchers can (and cannot) treat subnational units as independent. We argue that this typology gives researchers a tool to construct their theoretical framework more precisely and interpret the implications of their findings more broadly for future subnational research.

Keywords: China studies, central-local relations, principal-agent problem, subnational analyses, comparative politics

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1 Introduction

China—a region-sized, geographically and administratively complex authoritarian state with massive subnational variation and a recent history of rapid economic development—should provide an ideal context to build and test comparative politics theories. However, this potential has yet to be realized: the number of quantitative single-country articles about China in top political science journals is still significantly lower than other regions such as Latin America, the Eastern Bloc, and Sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 1¹). What aspects of China as a region and Chinese politics as a sub-field obstruct dialogue with the larger field? Why do political scientists fail to engage with research from the China context? Under what conditions can theories and findings generated in the China context be generalized? Prominent China scholars have raised these questions in recent appraisals of the field. Lily Tsai² presents data showing the limited uptake of China scholarship among non-China researchers, and suggests areas where scholarship on China can contribute to theory building in comparative politics. David Shambaugh³ argues that China studies is a “borrower” rather than “producer” field and “few concepts developed in the study of China have been picked up more broadly in comparative politics or other social science disciplines” (4).⁴

Indeed, there is a prevailing sense among non-China specialists that China’s strong central state and particular institutional background are so unique that it makes findings non-transferable to other contexts. In this article we draw on theories of subnational analysis and comparison⁵ to argue that even in a strong, centralized, authoritarian state such as China, there are some policy areas

¹Pepinsky 2019

²Tsai 2017.

³Shambaugh 2023.

⁴There are exceptions, for example Shih (Shih 2004) and King et al. (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013) are widely cited outside the China field. Here, subnational variations are muted in the patron-client framework and the censorship regime of the internet, respectively. As Shambaugh (Shambaugh 2023) notes, Nathan’s concept of “authoritarian resilience” and Shirk’s “selectorate” have been widely adopted in comparative politics.

⁵Snyder 1999; Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019

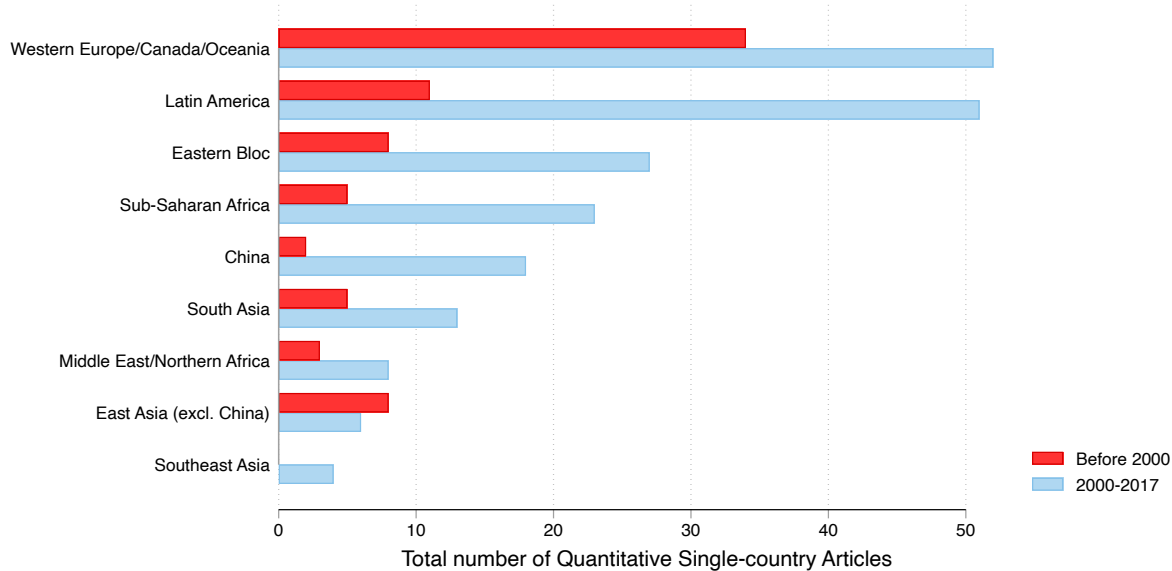


Figure 1: Quantitative single-country articles by region

Data are collected by Thomas Pepinsky covering *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *World Politics* in 1965-2017. Data are reanalyzed by the authors to display quantitative articles on China.

where the preferences of the center are less important—in these cases, theories and findings may be applicable to other contexts. We develop a typology to show that careful consideration of the interests and information of national and subnational actors can allow us to determine the nature of central-local dynamics. The configuration of interests and information varies across different policy areas. Depending on the particular configuration, we can then predict how the central state rewards and punishes local actors, how local states behave in turn, and the generalizability to settings beyond China. We argue that we can treat subnational units as independent units if—and *only if*—subnational governments share interests with the central government. In these cases, subnational units may be treated as independent observations and findings may be generalizable to other contexts. However, when the two actors *do not* share interests, the central government will pursue its interests through imposing an incentive structure such that subnational units either become lower-level clones of the central government or agents of a top-down organization—both of which are inherently interdependent. Misaligned interests invite central intervention, which elevates the role of a strong central state and its idiosyncratic preference. As a result, research questions under

these conditions implicitly incorporate some of China’s institutional contexts into the theoretical framing, thereby hindering the generalizability of the findings.

The benefits of subnational research are well established. Using subnational analysis allows us to not only increase the number of observations but also strengthens the researcher’s control over potential explanatory variables as “subnational units within a single country can often be more easily matched on cultural, historical, ecological, and socioeconomic dimensions than can national units”⁶. In addition to increasing the number of observations and making controlled comparisons, going subnational can provide a “multilevel perspective that focuses on interactions between national and subnational factors can offer a stronger understanding of national policymaking” (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019, 8). There are also several common pitfalls in using the subnational approach. First, the process described by the hypothesis under study may not occur within subnational units, as is the case with macroeconomic policymaking. Second, subnational observations may be interdependent, affecting our ability to draw valid inferences. Under our typology, we demonstrate how to identify and avoid these pitfalls, and in doing so, more clearly delineate research questions, scope conditions, and assumptions.

China presents an ideal setting for subnational analyses.⁷ Chinese politics scholars have long used access to rich local data and a well-studied institutional background to produce studies analyzing subnational differences in public goods,⁸ welfare provision,⁹ environmental programs,¹⁰ agricultural

⁶Snyder 2001, 96.

⁷P. Landry 2008; Zuo 2015; Rithmire 2014; Mertha 2021

⁸Tsai 2017; J. Chen and Huhe 2013

⁹Huang 2015; Ratigan 2017

¹⁰W. Li 2011

de-collectivization,¹¹ poverty reduction efforts,¹² political selection,¹³ policymaking processes,¹⁴ labor protests,¹⁵ and economic development.¹⁶ These studies have provided important insights into how and why political and economic phenomena lead to different outcomes in different parts of the country, what areas drive national averages and trends up or down, and what contradictions exist between national policies and subnational practices. Overall, these studies have helped to develop and advance the now widely held recognition that China is anything but monolithic. Still, despite China's immense heterogeneity and data richness, many of these theories and findings have not gained traction outside the Chinese politics sub-field.

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 briefly discusses how China studies fits into the comparative subnational approach. Section 3 introduces a new typology of central-local relations. Section 4 explains its applications and results with examples from the Chinese politics literature in specific policy areas. In section 5, we conclude with our contribution.

2 China and the Subnational Comparative Method

In an influential article in *Studies in Comparative International Development*,¹⁷ Snyder describes the analytical and methodological benefits of using subnational units in comparative politics. He begins with a vision of burgeoning global decentralization due to the devolution revolution in industrialized countries, Washington Consensus-style economic reforms in developing countries, democratization, and the collapse of central states. These motivating examples seem to preclude China

¹¹Chung 2000

¹²Donaldson 2007

¹³Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim 2015; P. F. Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018

¹⁴Heilmann 2008

¹⁵Fu 2017; Lee 2007

¹⁶Bulman 2016; Whiting 2001; Yang 1997

¹⁷Snyder 2001

as an ideal place to practice the subnational comparative method. These cases capture the centrifugal tide in the 1990s—but many of these forces have reversed in recent decades: overoptimism of democratization in the 1990s,¹⁸ signs of democratic backsliding,¹⁹ stigmatization of the Washington Consensus,²⁰ recentralization in many developing countries,²¹ and theoretical and empirical evidences supporting centralization in governance.²² These developments seem to run counter to the vision of a more suitable world for the subnational comparative methods. At first glance, centralization and authoritarian states are both at odds with local autonomy and “scaling down.”

However, local autonomy does not necessarily rely on democratization and federalism to exist. It is local autonomy that makes treating subnational units as independent observations credible. Indeed, regime type does not inherently diminish the applicability of subnational analysis in strong, authoritarian states. Autocrats with absolute power over subnational leaders sometimes delegate substantial power to subordinates such that there exists considerable local autonomy in some policy areas (e.g. post-reform China, see²³). Conversely, democratic national governments can appoint subnational leaders and set local budgets to leave little autonomy for local governments (e.g. post-Taliban Afghanistan, see²⁴). The degree of local autonomy is not about the sources of the local authority, but rather the degree of freedom in local policymaking. Admittedly, the presence of a strong central government does pose challenges to the transferability of China studies due to the particularities of Beijing’s preferences. However, not everything is about Beijing and its imperatives. We argue that with clear delineations of central-local relations in research questions, we can identify many policy areas in China studies where there is sufficient local autonomy to generate

¹⁸Levitsky and Way 2015

¹⁹Waldner and Lust 2018

²⁰Serra and Stiglitz 2008

²¹Dickovick 2011

²²Treisman 2007; H. Cai and Treisman 2009; Malesky, Nguyen, and Tran 2014

²³C. Xu 2011

²⁴Murtazashvili 2016

and test comparative politics theories.

3 A New Typology

We develop a new typology of central-local relations in authoritarian states that recognizes that central-local dynamics vary across policy domains. In some policy areas, the subnational government may be treated as an independent unit; in others, it cannot. The central-local dynamic that develops depends on two factors: Alignment of interests (natural or incentivized) and information symmetry (easy or difficult for the center to observe local conditions). We illustrate our typology in Figure 2.

		INTERESTS	
		Natural Alignment	Incentivized Alignment
INFORMATION	Symmetry: easy for center to observe local conditions	I: Supervised Autonomy	III. Central Command
	Asymmetry: difficult for center to observe local conditions	II: Unsupervised Autonomy	IV: Principal-Agent Problem

Figure 2: Dynamics of Central-Local Relations in Authoritarian States

3.1 Information: Observe, Understand, and Compare

The information dimension is automatic in that it arises from the inherent characteristics of the political task. The formulation of some policy goals requires less local knowledge than the formulation of others, and they are easier to measure than others. The main distinction here is how easy (or difficult) it is for the central state to observe and understand policy outcomes without relying on local information.

For authoritarian regimes that do not rely on performance for legitimacy, such as long-reigning

monarchies and regimes dependent on charismatic leaders,²⁵ the information dimension is less pronounced. However, for most modern autocracies, “socioeconomic or ‘performance’ reasons...have typically been regarded as the principal basis on which they can seek legitimacy.”²⁶ In the absence of legal legitimacy achieved through competitive elections, performance legitimacy renders objective information especially vital for the regime. Ensuring access to accurate information becomes paramount for securing desired outcomes. Consequently, the dynamic between the central and local authorities must adopt an almost impersonal, even mechanical, nature. The assessment of officials should hinge on their actions and performance rather than their personal affiliations or identities. In such evaluations, local officials adhere to benchmarks established by the central authority *ex-ante*, and the subsequent *ex-post* data is then appraised.

Information symmetry refers to an information situation in which the relative performance of local states is easy for the center to observe and understand without relying on local reporting. When information is symmetric, the central and local states agree on what to expect if the policy outcome falls short of the center’s demands. The certainty of the consequences induces the local states to strive to meet the center’s demand. Since the outcome of the evaluation (likelihood of career advancement) is predictable for local states and the performance is visible to the central state, local states should adopt the preferences of the center, regardless of the alignment of interests. However, whether they can be treated as independent units depends on how heavily the central preference is imposed upon local states through top-down incentives. If local states are incentivized to not deviate from central demands, then their behaviors are just duplicate observations of a single central state. Mistakenly treating them as independent can give rise to an overestimation of statistical significance.

²⁵This refers to “traditional legitimacy” and “charismatic legitimacy” respectively in Max Weber’s three types of legitimate rules. The third type is rational-legal legitimacy, where both elections and performance are classified.

²⁶White 1986, 463

In an asymmetric information situation, it is difficult for the political center to observe and understand the relative performance of local states without relying on local reporting. In this situation, the central state is reluctant to cede more autonomy to local states because it cannot exercise effective control. When information is asymmetric, standards for punishments and rewards are close to symbolic (e.g., social security collection) or sometimes relative rather than absolute (e.g., local tax collection). As evaluation depends on the actions and performance of other local states, which are also less visible to the central state, punishments and rewards are less predictable. Owing to this uncertainty, the central state requirement is not met without deviation. Indeed, Jiang²⁷ finds that local officials in patronage networks can moderate this uncertainty by securing credible promises of promotion from their patrons. With relatively clear expectations of rewards for economic growth—a policy area rife with asymmetric information—these officials are more incentivized to promote growth in their localities.

3.2 Interests: Externalities, Intervention, and Interdependence

The interest dimension is not automatic, but is determined by central preferences. The center sets its preferences and then intervenes to a greater or lesser extent depending on whether it perceives the local interests as coinciding with its own.

Natural alignment refers to policy areas or government functions where the preferences of the central and local states coincide. This may be because the central state has lower stakes, because central and local time horizons and goals are similar, or both. When this is the case, the central state willingly cedes more autonomy to local states and exercises less control because it can trust local states.

Incentivized alignment refers to policy areas or government functions where the preferences of the central and local states diverge. This may be because the center has higher stakes or a different

²⁷Jiang 2018

time horizon than the local states. When the policy issue has an externality—as in the case of pollution or the control of a very contagious disease—central intervention becomes necessary to align interests between the center and the local level. The center can set hard targets for local officials and threaten them with penalties to internalize externalities. The more incentives the center imposes, the less autonomy the local state has, as not only are local conditions dwarfed, but more central oversight takes place to enforce these incentive structures. Interestingly, the more geographic externalities a policy issue has, the less likely it is that the outcome can be manipulated by local officials, as neighboring communities can detect spillover effects and report back to the center. Meanwhile, the more temporal externalities one policy issue has, the more likely the result can be manipulated by local officials since only ex-post audit can reveal the true situation. This explains why air pollution draws much more local government effort than soil pollution, which is one of the biggest environmental challenges.²⁸

Externalities invite intervention and intervention transforms local concerns into principal-agent problems. When the preference of the principal become more salient and clear, the relative weight of local conditions depreciate in subnational officials' decision-making. With multiple agents and one principal, agents compete for relative performance and the acceptable standard fluctuates with the average performance. Interdependence between subnational units become an institutionalized feature. As a result, subnational leaders do not behave like independent leaders who have autonomous power and do not heed top-down incentives.

We theorize that we are more likely to observe local autonomy in the analysis of policy areas and government functions in Quadrants I and II due to the configuration of information and interests. The extent of local state autonomy varies according to our characterization of the central-local dynamic, ranging from unsupervised autonomy to supervised autonomy. The autonomy of a local state increases with interest alignment and decreases with information symmetry. In Quadrant III

²⁸Reuters, April 16, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-china-pollution-soil/china-soil-pollution-efforts-stymied-by-local-governments-greenpeace-idUSKCN1RT04D

(central command) local states are clones of the central state such that they should be treated as duplicate observations rather than independent observations. In policy areas and governing tasks in Quadrant IV—where both interests and information between central and local governments are misaligned—principal-agent problems are present. In these cases, subnational units cannot be treated as independent.

Findings in Quadrants III and IV are harder to generalize not just because they violate standard statistical inference assumptions, but also because the interdependence is a symptom of more fundamental threats to generalizability. First, the reason for high interdependence among subnational units is the existence of a strong authority from the central state that sways local states easily in these policy areas. As Xu²⁹ argues, political centralization is a prerequisite for yardstick competitions between local states; without it, promotion rewards would not be credible for local agents. Second, the direction of interdependence is shaped by the central government’s particular preferences. For instance, the central state’s ever-changing preference determines whether local agents “race to the bottom” with tax concessions to attract capitalists or zealously implement nationalization policies aimed at eliminating capitalists. Study of these local behaviors are highly dependent on how we understand the principal and faces the danger of falling into “Kremlinology” (or “Pekingology”) in an authoritarian context.

4 Applications and Outcomes

Through careful consideration of interests and information, we can determine the nature of central-local dynamics in certain policy areas. Depending on the outcome, we can then predict how the central state rewards and punishes local actors and how local states behave in turn. This section explains our typology and describes the implications for the central and local behaviors we are likely to observe in each category. To illustrate the potential applications of our typology, we draw on examples from policy areas that have inspired a large literature in both political science and

²⁹C. Xu 2011

China studies.

4.1 Quadrant I: Supervised Autonomy

In analyzing policy areas and government functions where central and local interests naturally align and information is symmetrical, we should observe that the central state cedes autonomy to the local state. The natural alignment of interests allows the central state to rely on the local state's knowledge and its handling of complex local circumstances. The central state allows for some variation in implementations and outcomes and does not set specific standards or goals but retains the ability to monitor outcomes and punish incompetence. As such, local states behave as independent units with some autonomy.

4.1.1 Social Stability

Social stability is one of the “imperative goals” (*yipiao foujue*) that the central state sets for local officials.³⁰ However, contrary to the conventional wisdom that the central imperative forms the basis of why local states maintain social stability, it is not universally enforced. The center is more tolerant of social instability in some regions than others: local officials in high-growth regions can be promoted despite social unrest while officials in low-growth regions may be punished for social unrest.³¹

Enforcement of this imperative is also unfeasible. Analysis of social media posts, Zhang and Pan³²

³⁰After the 1989 Tiananmen protests, a central rule stipulated that the occurrence of “mass petitions to higher levels, illegal demonstrations, mass riots, strikes, or school boycotts” in a jurisdiction constituted a one-time denial of a local official's promotion, regardless of performance in other areas. See “Provisions of the Central Committee for Comprehensive Management of Social Security on the Implementation of the One-Vote Veto System (Trial Implementation)” 《中央社会治安综合治理委员会关于实行社会治安综合治理一票否决权制的规定（试行）》, Central Committee, 1992, www.elinklaw.com/zsglmobile/lawView.aspx?id=10144.

³¹Bulman 2016.

³²H. Zhang and Pan 2019.

identifies more than 100,000 “collective action events” that occurred during the period from 2010 to 2017, distributed across 96% of counties. The pervasiveness of collective action events implies that not all occurrences of social instability result in punishments for local officials. If we limit ourselves only to observable, large-scale social unrest, the enforcement of centralized punishments is still not categorical. Even high-profile, large-scale protests that attract international attention may not lead to punishment. For instance, neither the Wukan incident in 2011³³ nor the Xiamen p-Xylene plant protests in 2007³⁴ impeded the promotion of city leaders. In sum, while social instability increases the chance of central punishment, it is not as compelling as conventional wisdom assumes. Indeed, if nullification of other gains is certain once collective action occurs, then the local official would have no incentive to resolve the crisis.

In addition to penalties imposed by the central authority, local governments have compelling motivations to curb social unrest. Primarily, protests often exhibit a geographically concentrated nature, typically targeting the local government. Such strategies aim to garner the central government’s attention to address potential mismanagement or ineffective policy implementation.³⁵ Furthermore, widespread social unrest can lead to significant disruptions in local communities, evident through traffic impediments and demonstrations.³⁶ Whether driven by the apprehension of retribution from the central government, self-preservation, or a combination of both, it’s clear that local governments share the central authority’s vested interest in upholding social stability.

Local officials have at their disposal a variety of strategies to address different forms of collec-

³³Andrew Jacobs, “Village Revolts Over Inequities of Chinese Life,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/world/asia/chinese-village-locked-in-rebellion-against-authorities.html>.

³⁴“Thousands Protest Against Chemical Plant in Xiamen,” *South China Morning Post*, June 2, 2007, <https://www.scmp.com/article/595260/thousands-protest-against-chemical-plant-xiamen>.

³⁵Y. Cai 2010; Lorentzen 2013; O’Brien and L. Li 2006; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017

³⁶Y. Cai 2002

tive action events. These methods include providing material concessions,³⁷ targeting activists' friends and families,³⁸ employing physical intimidation and repression,³⁹ and co-optation.⁴⁰ This suite of options for tackling social unrest underlines the level of autonomy vested in local governments. While the emergence of social unrest may be relatively transparent for external observers to identify, resolutions typically demand local insights to ensure swift and effective interventions. Through a combination of permitting autonomy and judiciously penalising local officials who do not meet expectations, the central authority has been adept at "forestalling the development of comprehensive social movements".⁴¹

Applying our framework to the politics of social stability in China, it maps to supervised autonomy. First, despite low incentives for local reporting, large-scale social unrest—by definition—causes observable effects, making it relatively easy for the center to monitor and evaluate. Second, the central and local governments have a shared interest in preventing social unrest. The resulting configuration of information and interests suggests that local states behave like mini-states to manage social unrest. The central state tolerates deviations in the implementation and results. However, it also makes clear that it is closely monitoring outcomes and may punish failures in social stability maintenance.

4.2 Quadrant II: Unsupervised Autonomy

In areas of policy and government where central and local interests naturally align but information is asymmetric, we should observe that the central state cedes the greatest autonomy to local states. The natural alignment of interests allows the central state to rely on local states' knowledge and handling of complex local circumstances. However, because of the information asymmetry, the

³⁷Pan 2020

³⁸Deng and O'Brien 2013

³⁹Ong 2018

⁴⁰Elfstrom 2019; Liu 2019; X. Xu 2021.

⁴¹Elfstrom 2019, 860

central state cannot monitor outcomes or punish incompetence, unlike in Quadrant I. The central state has no control over the local states. Therefore, in this type of policy, the central state allows for variation in outcomes, but we do not see central standards associated with rewards and punishments. This is not because these policies are unimportant to the central state, but because the central state does not want to jeopardize natural alignment by offering rewards and does not have sufficient information to enforce punishments. Under these conditions, local states will also behave like mini-states with autonomy.

To be sure, there may still exist interdependence between subnational units in this quadrant. For example, even if localities have the unsupervised autonomy to set local tax rates, the incentives to attract investment with tax breaks can lead to a “race to the bottom” competition between them. This certainly violates the independence assumption among cases. However, this kind of interdependence is not so different from pro-business competition between national units for investment from international capital and multi-national corporations.

4.2.1 Social Security

China’s approach to social security is primarily characterized by its decentralised nature. As per the 2011 Social Insurance Law,⁴² administration of social security tax collection and disbursement is vested in county-level governments.⁴³ As Huang articulates, central authorities bequeath local officials a degree of autonomy in shaping policy vis-à-vis the “scope and magnanimity of social insurance” to suit the nuanced demands of individual localities.⁴⁴ This delegation of authority has engendered a milieu wherein both the formal aspects, such as caps on payments and payment rates, and the informal aspects, like ground-level enforcement, often diverge from one locale to

⁴²‘Social Insurance Law’ 《中华人民共和国社会保险法》, 2010 [http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2010-10/28/content_1732964.htm], accessed [Date]. The legislation was formally adopted in 2011.

⁴³For context, provinces in China are hierarchically superior to prefectures, which in turn govern counties. Typically, prefectures encompass county-level urban districts and their rural counterparts.

⁴⁴See Huang 2015, 457

the next.⁴⁵ A case in point is illustrated by analyses of corporate data sourced from Shanghai. Nyland et al. discern that the repercussions for non-adherence to social security tax regulations are tepidly imposed on non-state-owned enterprises. In contrast, their state-owned counterparts witness more stringent enforcement and consequently demonstrate heightened levels of compliance.⁴⁶ This atomized approach to social security is evident across close to 3,000 county-level jurisdictions. Strengthening the premise that the central authorities are amenable to such variances, Persson et al. could not establish any significant link between social expenditure and the career trajectories of local bureaucrats.⁴⁷ The observed variance is more coherently explicated by local contingencies. In fact, Huang observes that local governmental bodies mould social health insurance policies in alignment with the availability of local fiscal assets and the perceived threats of social upheaval.⁴⁸

Widespread collective action following massive layoffs during the reform of state-owned enterprises in the late 1990s prompted the central government to establish a social security system.⁴⁹ Not only does the center want to avoid collective action, economic-driven collective action often targets local governments such that it is in their interest to head off social unrest with concessions.⁵⁰

Applying our framework to social security policy in China, it corresponds to the principle of unsupervised autonomy. First, the center recognizes the information asymmetry in the design and implementation of social security policy and deliberately delegates its authority, allowing for enormous regional variation. Second, the central and local states have a common interest in maintaining social stability through the provision of social security. We observe differences in policy outcomes, but no evidence of reward or punishment related to social security. As independent units, local

⁴⁵Rickne 2013

⁴⁶Nyland, Smyth, and Cherrie Jiuhua Zhu 2006, Nyland, Thomson, and Cherrie J. Zhu 2011

⁴⁷Persson and Zhuravskaya 2016

⁴⁸Huang 2015

⁴⁹Hurst and O'Brien 2002

⁵⁰Y. Cai 2002

states use their autonomy to adapt their policies to local challenges.

4.3 Quadrant III: Central Command

In policy domains where central and local interests are aligned only through imposed incentives (i.e., not naturally), but information is symmetric, we should observe that local states strive to meet standards set by the central state and face predictable penalties when they fail. Since the center does not rely on local knowledge, the standards are likely to be hard targets. Under these conditions, local states would manipulate information if they could—but they cannot. As the center upholds the universal standard, it does not allow for differences in outcomes and will use penalties to identify and weed out disloyal or incompetent local representatives. Consequently, local states behave like clones of the central state, i.e., without autonomy. Only in this quadrant, local officials can be said as agents without agencies that mindlessly implement central commands. If local states are incentivized to not deviate from the central demand, then their behaviors are just duplicated observations of a single central state. Mistakenly treating them as independent can give rise to an overestimation of statistical significance.

4.3.1 Environmental Governance

Environmental policy is an example of a policy area in transition. Existing literature has focused on the implementation gap that exists between ambitious central policies and local execution and enforcement.⁵¹ Principal-agent problems—marked by data falsification,⁵² uneven enforcement,⁵³ and foot-dragging and blame games⁵⁴ are inherent as a result of misaligned interests and asymmetric information, as environmental officials are largely “under the authority of officials whose priority is short-term growth rather than long term sustainability.”⁵⁵ Indeed, scholars note that a “critical

⁵¹Economy 2010; Kostka 2016; Ran 2013; Rooij 2006.

⁵²Ghanem and J. Zhang 2014.

⁵³Rooij et al. 2017.

⁵⁴Eaton and Kostka 2014; Rooij et al. 2017.

⁵⁵Lieberthal 2007, 8

constraint” on policy implementation is the inability to access accurate information, and monitor, evaluate, and enforce the policies at local levels.⁵⁶

This dynamic is changing, however. Beginning with the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006–2011), the center introduced hard targets for emission reductions and new mechanisms to monitor local agents. Chen *et al.*⁵⁷ find a significant decrease in both SO₂ emissions and GDP growth following the implementation of hard targets for pollution reduction.⁵⁸ Zhang *et al.*⁵⁹ evaluates the effects of a Ministry of Environmental Protection program launched in 2007 to decrease data falsification and enhance the quality of emission data; she finds that “the implementation of the program increased the difficulty for localities to overreport emission reductions, enhanced local monitoring and enforcement capacity, and deterred violations among regulated parties” (749). More and better information is also coming from civil society and non-governmental organizations that are posting real-time measurements of air and water emissions on websites and mobile apps.⁶⁰

The trend toward re-centralization has accelerated under Xi Jinping. Technological advances and big data approaches to environmental management have made local conditions more visible to the central state.⁶¹ In 2016, the Ministry of Environmental Protection announced the construction of

⁵⁶Wong and Karplus 2017.

⁵⁷Y. J. Chen, P. Li, and Lu 2018.

⁵⁸This policy change was accompanied by increased local oversight by the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). SEPA records report each firm’s SO₂ emissions through direct monitoring. They (Y. J. Chen, P. Li, and Lu 2018) conclude that it is very unlikely that the data were systematically manipulated via collusion between SEPA officials and local bureaucrats. In this case, accurate information and incentivized alignment resulted in effective Central Command.

⁵⁹X. Zhang 2017.

⁶⁰Shin 2017.

⁶¹Kostka and C. Zhang 2018.

a national ecological big data platform to centralize data management.⁶² In 2018, Xi consolidated environmental governance into a new and expanded Ministry for Ecology and Environment. While scholars note that recentralization efforts have produced mixed results, there is a consensus that “the strengthening of vertical linkages between the Ministry of Environmental Protection and new local enforcement agencies have made it harder to fabricate information about local conditions and created new obstacles for those shirking environmental responsibilities.”⁶³

As central knowledge of local practices becomes more symmetrical, environmental policy has moved from a P-A problem dynamic to a central command dynamic. Our framework points to the importance of a thorough knowledge of policy in a spatial and temporal context to determine which quadrant best reflects it. As Rooji and others⁶⁴ point out, richer and more urbanized areas have stronger and more frequent enforcement than do inland areas. Furthermore, in some cases, where the center still relies heavily on localities for information, environmental policies continue to be P-A problems. For example, this remains the case with water quality and soil pollution, where investment in data measurement and collection has lagged.⁶⁵ However, where data is more reliable, and the center has good enough information—air pollution, for instance—we will observe a Central Command dynamic, characterized by hard targets accompanied by predictable punishments for failing to achieve the targets. Despite an unwillingness to curb pollution, local states behave like clones of the central state through effective central command.

⁶²“Notice of the State Council on Issuing the Action Plan for Prompting the Development Plan of Big Data,” 《国务院关于印发促进大数据发展行动纲要的通知》 State Council, 2015, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-09/05/content_10137.htm.

⁶³Kostka and Nahm 2017, 750

⁶⁴Rooij et al. 2017.

⁶⁵Kostka and C. Zhang 2018.

4.4 Quadrant IV: Principal-Agent

Misalignment of interests and information asymmetry between the principal and the agent are the two conditions that lead to a principal-agent relationship between central and local governments.⁶⁶ In Quadrants I, II, and III, the central government can impose its will: through delegation, monitoring, and punishment, it can either trust local agents or force renegade local agents back into line. In Quadrant IV, however, local officials can behave like opportunistic agents, as they have both the incentives and the latitude to undermine the central state's plan.

As the source of authority is top-down from the central state rather than bottom-up from the pluralistic consent of citizens, the dynamic between the central government and local authorities in authoritarian states often take on P-A characteristics.⁶⁷ First, by assuming that the subnational unit has different interests than the national unit, the hypothesis tested on subnational units inherently does not apply to national units. Second, interdependence among subnational units is unavoidable as competition and collusion are built into the model that multiple agents adhere to one principal. Explicitly or implicitly, a large swathe of the Chinese politics literature focuses on P-A problems as the theoretical framework of central-local dynamics.⁶⁸ While this approach provides valuable insights to help us understand how P-A problems play out differently in different contexts⁶⁹, it often morphs into a study of organizational behavior rather than comparative policy. It is no longer about “taking territory seriously” but about taking biographies of subnational leaders seriously. Different localities' decision makings are together swayed by the common factor of central preferences and central incentives; as a result, the P-A problem framing in these subnational analyses theoretically precludes treating subnational units as independent units that

⁶⁶The selection of these two dimensions is not arbitrary. See the classic article: Jensen and Meckling 1976

⁶⁷Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Svolik 2012.

⁶⁸Edin 2003; Lü and P. F. Landry 2014; X. Zhang 2017; Jiang 2018; Liu 2019; J. Qian 2021; Greenstone et al. 2022.

⁶⁹In rare cases, it may be applied to subnational contexts with similar principal-agent dynamics like post-Taliban Afghanistan.

implement policy autonomously according to local conditions. By scaling down, these analyses succeed in increasing the number of observations in terms of dyads between principal and agents. However, going subnational under the P-A framework only increases the number of agents—it does not add to the number of observations that resemble independent units.

4.4.1 Political Selection

Principal-agent problems are inherent to political selection in China.⁷⁰ Political selection means the principal is promoting a subset of agents according to certain standards. It is selective such that there must be competitions. There is information asymmetry as the qualities of agents are not perfectly observable and need imperfect proxies. There is interest misalignment because every agent has the incentive to misrepresent their qualities.⁷¹ Lacking the information necessary to reveal local agents' qualities—not unlike regulators lack information about monopolies' cost functions⁷²—a yardstick competition is used to incentivize local agents to exhaust their potential and deliver relatively better results than their peers.⁷³ Under these conditions, subnational units are agents responding to the common top-down incentives and each other's actions.

Economic growth itself does not involve any obvious misalignment of interest—both the central government and local states should naturally prefer higher economic growth. However, once the center uses economic growth as a yardstick for political selection (i.e., promotes the most competent officials to the top), local interests are no longer aligned with the center, as each local official

⁷⁰We note that in Shirk's seminal 1994 work, she applies the principal-agent theory to the relationship between the CCP and the government. This is different from the central-local delegation that we discuss here where multiple agents facing heterogeneous local conditions. The division between the party and the state is also less salient after 2012.

⁷¹Spence 1973.

⁷²Shleifer 1985.

⁷³Maskin, Y. Qian, and C. Xu 2000; H. Li and Zhou 2005; C. Xu 2011; Lü and P. F. Landry 2014; Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim 2015; P. F. Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018.

now has an incentive to signal his or her type with GDP figures that are boosted by short-term investments and even falsified statistics.⁷⁴ Of course, economic growth has its advantages to be a good metric: it is selective enough to have many variations, complex enough to avoid brute force enforcement, and aligned with the main central objective. However, these conditions are not necessary for political selection to transform any policy areas into P-A problems.

Political selection can misalign the originally aligned central-local interest: if social security collection was somehow deemed the primary way to measure the quality of local officials, local agents would have perverse incentives to collect social security tax beyond local conditions. Furthermore, political selection substitutes the metric of the policy area to the unobservable qualities of local agents such that information asymmetry always exists irrespective of the metric: even if the metric itself is as transparent as pollution reduction that can be observed by satellites, it faces (maybe even higher) danger of being subject to the P-A problem when local agents have perverse incentives to over-comply to signal their unobservable qualities.

A large vein of the Chinese politics literature focuses on political selection. As such, understanding the interests of a local state has often been conceptualized in a P-A framework that focuses on how local officials navigate a particular career system designed by their principal. This may contribute to why much of the Chinese politics literature has yet to be incorporated into the mainstream comparative politics literature.⁷⁵ It is not a coincidence that yardstick competition is borrowed from the regulation literature into China's subnational governance but hardly into other subnational contexts. The scope conditions in the yardstick model includes a principal evaluating unobservable traits of multiple but comparable agents. This condition is easily broken when the power source of subnational leaders flows not from the upper government, but local constituents. Local constituents may be the principal of authority but it only has one agent—the local government of their jurisdiction—such that there are no other comparable agents to evaluate.

⁷⁴Wallace 2016.

⁷⁵Tsai 2017.

5 Contribution

This typology offers three major contributions. First, it provides substantive and theoretical clarity about central-local relations in China. Second, this typology enables not only the identification of central-local dynamics, but also the prediction of the pattern of behavior among central and local states within these dynamics. Third, it helps scholars conducting subnational analyses in China contexts design research agendas that may be able to better contribute to the larger comparative politics literature.

5.1 Analytical Clarity

The typology we present here allows us to identify the underlying dynamics of central-local relations in different policy domains. Substantively, this typology provides researchers with a more precise way to understand and interpret the mechanisms that lead to desired outcomes. For example, it can explain why central leadership imposes its preferences in some policy areas and cedes autonomy to local leadership in others. Theoretically, it forces researchers to make explicit their assumptions about information symmetry and alignment of interests in formulating the policy issue of their study.

Classifying a policy can be complicated: Not all policies can be clearly placed in a single category. For example, economic growth is desired at both the central and local levels, but policy choice creates further incentives for alignment, creating principal-agent problems. Some measures are more easily observed in certain regions or sectors than in others. For example, births in rural China are often unreported or underreported because infants in rural areas can be enrolled in local elementary school without the household being registered.⁷⁶ Finally, political changes can occur within a very short period of time. For example, the Chinese state could not monitor urban air quality until after 2012. Also, in 2015, the One-Child Policy was replaced by a Two-Child Policy. Policies with natural alignment tend to be more stable than those with incentivized alignment.

⁷⁶Shi and Kennedy 2016.

Despite these caveats, this typology is useful because this complexity can be unraveled with the help of expert knowledge and a clearly defined policy goal. At the outset of a research project, researchers can consider where a particular policy (in their chosen geographic and temporal context) should be placed on the interest-information matrix to determine the expected central-local dynamics, the degree of local autonomy, and what the consequences are for generalizability.

5.2 Predictions

As Shrik⁷⁷ reminds us, “to predict policy outcomes in any political system, we must chart the lines of institutional authority” (55). Indeed, as described in section III, we can not only identify the central-local dynamics that result from a given configuration of information and interests, but also make predictions about how central and local states will behave. In this way, we can, in a sense, trace how the central state sets standards and incentives in particular policy areas and how local states manage these dynamics.

For example, we can predict that the central-local dynamic of the implementation of the zero-COVID policy in China should change according to the extent of externalities associated with pandemic control. The early 2020 COVID-19 situation in China can be characterized as supervised autonomy when the unvaccinated population was facing a deadly virus with a reproductive number (R_0) of 2.5.⁷⁸ This means local governments and the center share interests in containing the disease since the locality reaped most of the benefits after shouldering the costs of lockdown. As the virus mutated to be more contagious (the Delta variant’s R_0 is just under 7 and Omicron’s R_0 is estimated to be around 10⁷⁹) and less deadly among the vaccinated population, the divergence between locality and the center became more stark. Firstly, the cost of losing control of the virus became lower for the local state because less people would die even if most of the local population was

⁷⁷Shirk 1993.

⁷⁸Burki 2022.

⁷⁹Burki 2022.

infected. Secondly, the increased contagiousness increased the cost of controlling the virus within a locality. Thirdly, the externalities of losing control in one city became higher because the spillover was more probable and would impact larger population in a shorter period of time. The Omicron wave in early 2022 marked the transformation of the central-local dynamic on the zero-COVID policy from supervised autonomy to central command. The alignment of interests was no longer natural but completely reactive to the threat of punishment from the center. We should observe less variations in policy implementation despite the zero-COVID policy remaining unchanged.

5.3 Research Agenda

This typology serves as a guide for a new research agenda for scholars conducting subnational analyzes in China. Studies of strong authoritarian states tend to predominantly on Quadrants III and IV. Our typology draws attention to Quadrants I-II. Where subnational units have autonomy, we can treat them as independent units and apply the subnational comparative method. Where P-A problems exist or subnational units are clones of the center, the comparative analysis potential is limited.

With the increasing abundance of data and better ability to analyze it, central-local relations are changing. Technology-enabled information collection and monitoring systems are making local conditions more legible to the central state, increasing information symmetry. To understand how these changing dynamics play out, it is particularly important to focus our attention on Quadrants I and II.

Finally, this typology emphasizes local autonomy. Understanding local state interests is central to the research agenda. Without a deep understanding of local state interests, researchers cannot develop expectations about central-local dynamics in cases of autonomy. Indeed, local states may have conflicting policies and preferences that buck national trends. Researchers should be sensitive to these undercurrents and look beyond what the center wants—as tempting as that may be when studying a strong, authoritarian regime. By turning our attention to policy issues with varying

degrees of local autonomy, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of local interests and, in doing so, help China studies realize its potential to contribute to the wider comparative politics literature.

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