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# Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China

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# Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China

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Rachel E. Stern<sup>1</sup> and Jonathan Hassid<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Well-known tools of state coercion, such as administrative punishment, imprisonment, and violence, affect far fewer than 1% of Chinese journalists and lawyers. What, then, keeps the other 99% in line? Building on work detailing control strategies in illiberal states, the authors suggest that the answer is more complicated than the usual story of heavy-handed repression. Instead, deep-rooted uncertainty about the boundaries of permissible political action magnifies the effect of each crackdown. Unsure of the limits of state tolerance, lawyers and journalists frequently self-censor, effectively controlling themselves. But self-censorship does not always mean total retreat from political concerns. Rather, didactic stories about transgression help the politically inclined map the gray zone between (relatively) safe and unacceptably risky choices. For all but the most optimistic risk takers, these stories—which we call control parables—harden limits on activism by illustrating a set of prescriptions designed to prevent future clashes with authority. The rules for daily behavior, in short, are not handed down from the pinnacle of the state but jointly written (and rewritten) by Chinese public professionals and their government overseers.

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Even the most resilient authoritarian states face an ongoing dilemma: how to secure compliance (or at least grudging silence) from lawyers, journalists, and other public professionals who, by dint of occupation, are unusually influential citizens. Clearly, the state's ability to reward subservience and punish dissent stills opposition. Yet an examination of the mechanics of quiescence among journalists and lawyers in contemporary China suggests the common state-centered explanation of control overlooks how uncertainty helps maintain the status quo. Although the triad of state coercion—administrative punishment, imprisonment, and violence—touches less than 0.2% of both professions in China,<sup>1</sup> deep-rooted uncertainty about the boundaries of the permissible magnifies the effect of these isolated incidents. In China, as elsewhere, unpredictable flashes of repression instill fear and amplify silence. Beyond the observation that fear speeds retreat from politics, however, how do working journalists and lawyers gauge day-to-day political risk? One answer is through what we call control parables: didactic stories that seek to explain the hidden reasons behind state crackdowns by imagining a set of rules that mark the limits of political safety.

By drawing attention to uncertainty and introducing the concept of control parables, we hope to bring the China case to a broader audience interested in the dynamics of state control. Despite the fact that China is a large, important, and stable authoritarian state, it is rarely discussed in the growing literature on strains of modern authoritarianism (Gallagher, 2007, p. 198). Here, our research fits into a comparative effort to look beyond quotidian surveillance and headlines-grabbing crackdowns to untangle the roots of authoritarian resilience. In recent years, social scientists have started to detail alternative control strategies such as cults of compliance (Wedeen, 1999), elite agenda-setting power (Schatz, 2009), and outright graft (Darden, 2008). Following political scientist Joel Migdal, we focus on the call-and-response between state and society, specifically how ambiguous political signals bolster Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control. The “rules for daily behavior” are not handed down from the pinnacle of the state but jointly written (and rewritten) by Chinese public professionals and their government overseers (Migdal, 2001, p. 11).

In broad strokes, China combines a strong, illiberal state with limited, but real, space for activism. This unusual combination offers insight into subtler

shades of control that likely pass unnoticed both under totalitarianism and in a truly open polity. China's current leadership is well aware that high-profile coercion can exacerbate diplomatic tensions, boost public sympathy for protesters, and radicalize participants (Tarrow, 1998, p. 149). At a time when spending on maintaining stability (*weiwen*) rivals the defense budget (Tsinghua University, 2010), bypassing "large-scale brutality" in favor of the "steady pressure" and lower cost of everyday control makes sense (Scott, 1985, p. 274).<sup>2</sup> Still, world events in the mid-2000s increased high-level CCP skittishness about citizen power. In particular, the color revolutions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia encouraged the Chinese government to focus a careful eye on China's own journalists, lawyers, and other potential rabble-rousers (Wilson, 2008, p. 7).

At the same time, changes since the start of the reform era in 1978, particularly the CCP's turn toward law and experiments with public participation, have created more space for citizen activism. Here, journalists and lawyers play a particularly important role as *public professionals*: those whose jobs offer a platform (courts for lawyers, the media for journalists) to attract public attention and broadcast opinions.<sup>3</sup> Unlike public professionals living with the pro forma façade of participation of police states, a core group of contemporary Chinese journalists and lawyers believe in the possibility of meaningful change under CCP rule. Although the majority of both professions are concentrated on making a living, some infuse work with their social and political commitments. These are the rights protection lawyers (*weiquan lüshi*) and public interest lawyers (*gongyi lüshi*) who emerged in the 2000s determined to use law for social change. And these are the advocacy journalists interested in "playing edge ball" (*da ca bianqiu*) to push the boundaries of acceptable coverage and expand journalists' right to participate in national policy debates. Even in a place where freedom of speech is decidedly limited, the boldest public professionals have some room for a "critique within the hegemony," especially wrapped in allegiance to party and nation (Scott, 1990, p. 106).<sup>4</sup>

Unlike a policy change or a protest, quiescence—what Chinese leaders might call "stability"—takes place in what former Czech dissident Vaclav Havel calls the "hidden sphere" or the prepolitical "semi-darkness" of inaction (Havel, 1986, p. 66). By definition, this is a challenging place for research. It is hard to study actions *not* taken, especially when decisions rely less on fact than on perception. Power, as Lukes observes, is "most effective when it is least observable," and close to the ground research offers our best chance to understand the interplay between state control and citizens' choices (Lukes, 2004, p. 1). Our approach is based on two research projects, including a

combined 29 months of fieldwork from 2005 to 2009 and approximately 200 interviews with Chinese journalists and lawyers.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the shared meals, offhand remarks, and gossip that came along with long-term exposure to a community helped us see the ways in which uncertainty and storytelling shape public professionals' sense of the political landscape.

## **Basics of the Authoritarian Toolkit: Coercion and Regulation**

Many accounts of how the Chinese government controls public professionals hinge on two powerful, well-documented strategies: coercive repression and regulation. Coercive repression is state-sponsored harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, and violence, whereas regulation refers to the network of laws, ordinances, and guidelines that facilitate, overlook, or forbid certain actions. For example, a member of the Committee to Protect Journalists, based in Washington, D.C., testified in 2005,

In decades past, Chinese authorities relied on censorship and legal action as the main tools to silence the press, but in today's dynamic climate, the Communist Party has increasingly resorted to jailing journalists in order to silence some of the nation's most enterprising reporters. (Smyth, 2005, p. 92)

In a similar vein, a 2008 Human Rights Watch report distilled state control over lawyers to "violence, intimidation, threats, surveillance, harassment, detention, prosecution and suspension or disbarment . . . [especially] in politically sensitive cases" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 3).

This focus on coercive repression and regulation is not wrong, but incomplete. Students of authoritarian politics and organizational theory have long been attuned to the link between uncertainty and control,<sup>6</sup> an insight that deserves to be better integrated into portrayals of Chinese politics, which too often depict a country run simply by "naked coercion" and full of "long languishing political prisoners" (Schatz, 2009, p. 208).<sup>7</sup> Although heavy-handed laws, threats, and violence assuredly help maintain order, coercion is the exception rather than the rule. More often, uncertainty over the limits of political tolerance amplifies repression and pushes people to control themselves. Public professionals are not, as others have argued, "acutely aware of permissible political boundaries," but daily cope with the anxiety of not knowing exactly where those boundaries lie (Zhao & Sun, 2007, p. 307). Uncertainty strengthens the effects of coercion and regulation and transfers much of the

burden of control onto professionals themselves. Before discussing how uncertainty works, however, it is helpful to first take a closer look at the basics of coercion and regulation.

Coercive repression is, of course, one of the key ways the CCP controls the media and the bar.<sup>8</sup> Both groups are subject to violence and intimidation from local power holders and, at times, different factions within the state. The Foreign Correspondents Club in China received more than 180 reports of interference in journalists' work in 2007, including beatings by hired thugs (Redl & Simons, 2008, p. 70). Stories about colleagues who were, for example, burned to death in a car after reporting on a corrupt and politically powerful coal mine boss in Shaanxi province are not uncommon (Hassid, interview with a Chinese senior editor, Beijing, China, June 2008). Lawyers similarly report being beaten by court officials, attacked by gangs, dragged from petition offices, and followed by toughs. In the mid-2000s, well-known political lawyers like Gao Zhisheng and Chen Guangcheng were routinely harassed, arrested and questioned by officials. A December 2006 open letter to the government signed by 53 lawyers and law experts complained that the working environment is "day by day more dangerous" with threats "increasingly com[ing] from forces of the Public Security Bureau, the Procuracy and the courts themselves" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 32).

When violence and threats fall short, imprisoning lawyers and journalists on flimsy charges, such as corruption or selling state secrets, is also a possibility. As of January 2011, China had at least 30 journalists in prison, more than any other country in the world (Reporters sans Frontières, 2011). Even foreign correspondents are sometimes jailed if they manage to infuriate government officials. For example, Ching Cheong, a Hong Kong correspondent with the Singapore-based *Straits Times*, was imprisoned for nearly three years on charges of leaking state secrets (Greenslade, 2006). Many observers also speculated that lawyer Guo Feixiong's 5-year prison term for "illegal business activity" was linked to his 2005 work on behalf of villagers trying to oust a corrupt local leader (Human Rights in China, 2007).<sup>9</sup>

Beyond coercive repression, routine regulation keeps the risk-averse majority in line. Most importantly, the state carefully regulates entry into both professions. All periodicals in China must have a "periodical number" (*kanhao*), assigned by the General Administration on Press and Publication to publishers (Redl & Simons, 2008, p. 62).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, establishing a newspaper or periodical in China requires sponsorship by a state administrative department (*zhuguan bumen*)<sup>11</sup> as well as proof of at least 300,000 RMB (US\$45,000) in assets and a fixed address in the same district as

the sponsoring department.<sup>12</sup> On an individual level, journalists must have a government-issued press card and are required to frequent training sessions covering topics such as journalistic ethics and Marxist-Leninist press theory. These regulations correspond to requirements that practicing lawyers must hold a license (renewed yearly by the Ministry of Justice), join the local lawyers' association, and retain employment at a registered law firm. These three rules, especially yearly license renewal, give officials a great deal of leverage. "The first warning," one Shanghai lawyer explained, "is that someone at the Judicial Bureau will give you a simple phone call to invite you to 'have a chat'" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 87). Journalists and editors too receive warning calls from unlisted numbers threatening fines or even closure (Hassid, interview with two Chinese journalists, Beijing, China, November 2007 and March 2008). Although news workers have no way of verifying who is calling, the fact that the numbers show up as "blocked" indicates a probable government connection. For the truly recalcitrant in both professions, the next step is "making trouble" (*zhao mafan*). As two Beijing lawyers discovered, intransigence can lead to delayed license renewal and pressure on law firms to find a new employee (Stern, interviews with Chinese lawyers, Beijing, China, May and October 2007). And journalists who go too far can have their press card temporarily or permanently revoked. Losing a livelihood is a potent threat that keeps the vast majority of journalists and lawyers from even considering the controversial.<sup>13</sup>

## Uncertainty and Silence

Most accounts of state control in China stop here, with a tangle of restrictions and warnings backed by a formidable police force. Yet as scholars of contentious politics have documented, there are many types of repression, depending (at a minimum) on the form, audience, and degree of state involvement (Earl, 2003, p. 49). Building on this more nuanced approach, we look beyond state-centered control at how uncertainty magnifies the effect of each instance of coercion such that it is possible to limit the political ambitions of a national network of lawyers and journalists with only relatively rare recourse to heavy-handed retribution. Of course, it is well known that illiberal governments rest on widespread public reluctance to take political action. Journalist Slavenka Drakulic, for example, writes about how mysterious visits by press control officials intensified a climate of "autocensorship" among 1980s Yugoslav journalists (Drakulic, 1993, p. 81). But although statements like "self-censorship is the major form of media control in China" are common, much less is known about what drives individuals to back

down, change emphasis, or avoid certain actions altogether (Chen, 2003). Above all, journalists and lawyers frequently do not know in advance what constitutes a safe story or a safe case. Given the risk of ex post sanctions, sticking to well-trodden areas makes sense.

Uncertainty on the ground reflects a fundamentally reactive state strategy. Rather than prepublication censorship or prelitigation approval, the norm is ad hoc judgment of whatever actions catch official attention. Given limited resources, the state cannot completely police the ill-defined and flexible border between tolerated and forbidden, and inevitable gaps in attention open up room for “boundary-spanning contention” to slide by unobserved (O’Brien, 2003, p. 53).<sup>14</sup> Yet even those with an activist bent are often remarkably hazy about what might attract official notice. The combination of subtly shifting political winds and the absence of detailed rules for every situation mean that even long-time journalists, editors, and lawyers can get in trouble for actions they thought were acceptable or that had gone unnoticed in the past. The Central Publicity Department (CPD),<sup>15</sup> in particular, changes its standards about acceptable topics so often that a story praised yesterday or last week might merit disapproval next time it is published. “It’s something we are all aware of, we sense it, but we can’t really express it,” one veteran reporter said about which topics are allowable when (Pan, 2000, p. 82).

In a far-flung, decentralized system, uncertainty also arises because state policy is not necessarily coherent or consistent. As political scientists O’Brien and Li point out, the Chinese state is not “a monolith,” but a “hodgepodge of disparate actors” with disparate and sometimes cross-cutting goals (O’Brien & Li, 2006, p. 66). Actions officially celebrated in one province, or at one level of government, may inspire unease in another. Even as environmental lawyers won a landmark water pollution lawsuit in Inner Mongolia, for example, courts in Heilongjiang refused to accept similar cases after a 2005 benzene spill along the Songhua river (Jiang, 2006). Schisms like this between local authorities can often be triangulated and exploited by public professionals pushing an agenda. And the state is certainly aware of this possibility; to prevent such strategizing, journalists are officially banned from reporting outside their region although this restriction is often ignored (Hassid, interview with Chinese journalist, Beijing, China, March 2008).

Of course, central leaders are also perfectly capable of enforcing forbidden zones around party priorities. Certain third-rail political issues, like Taiwanese independence or the events of 1989, are universally understood to be off limits even if no one has ever officially said so. As lawyer Gao Zhisheng explained,



Every attorney knows the government departments concerned do not allow lawyers to get involved [in defending Falun Gong practitioners]. . . . Ask any lawyer and he will tell you that the prohibition was definitely put into place when Falun Gong was banned in 1999 although no lawyer has ever seen it in writing. (Gao, 2007, p. 43)

Sometimes, government bureaus also declare new areas out of bounds. The CPD, for example, posts daily briefings outlining which current topics are unacceptable for press coverage on an internal website that journalists are encouraged to check (Hassid, interview with a former Chinese journalist, Shanghai, China, July 2005). Directives detailing newly forbidden areas can be quite specific. For example, one January 2008 notice told media outlets not to report on roaming problems with cell phones.<sup>16</sup> Or, in 2004, a district-level Bureau of Justice in Sichuan issued a document prohibiting lawyers from representing water pollution victims along the Tuo river (Fu, 2006, p. 13). When core interests (including powerful, state-linked corporations) demand it, the state stands ready to shift toward a proactive united front.

More often, however, journalists and lawyers operate in the murky mid-range between uncontroversial and forbidden. One of the best examples of unexpected political fallout is the Sun Zhigang case (Hand, 2006; Liebman, 2005). Graphic designer Sun Zhigang moved to the southern city of Guangzhou early in 2003 to begin working for a garment company. In April, the local police detained him for not carrying his temporary residence permit. While in police custody at an internal migrant detention facility, he was beaten to death by staff members and other inmates. After the *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported on Sun's death, newspapers all over the country reprinted the article, generating a national uproar. Under intense pressure, the government repealed the 20-year-old law authorizing internal detention facilities in what amounted to a major victory for a watchdog press. This victory was temporary, however, as just a few months later police raided the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and detained top editors in what many regarded as retribution for aggressive reporting on this and an earlier story on the government's SARS cover-up.<sup>17</sup> The managing editor and one other official were sentenced to prison for alleged corruption, and the chilling effect was immediate: A former editor at another popular Guangzhou-based newspaper called the arrests "the most serious blow to the Chinese media in the last decade" (Beach, 2005).

Beyond the direct effect of new CCP-appointed editors at *Southern Metropolis Daily*, the arrests cautioned other investigative journalists. Newly unsure about the boundaries of the acceptable, many took refuge in the anodyne. Indeed, self-censorship is a common reaction to systemic uncertainty

punctuated by occasional retribution. As novelist Yan Lianke poetically put it, “In the same way a prisoner becomes accustomed to his cell . . . China’s writers are imprisoning themselves. . . . Reluctance and conditioning are their greatest enemies” (Yan, 2008). Or, in a 2008 blog entry titled “My Cowardice and Helplessness,” a reporter known for pushing limits confessed, “What I’ve practiced most is avoiding risk. Self-censorship has become part of my life. It makes me disgusted with myself” (P. Chang, 2008). Unlike, perhaps, in other illiberal states, it is extraordinarily difficult in China to “anticipate state activity, search out its pattern and, in light of that pattern, calibrate movement . . . between the innocuous and the suicidal” (Boudreau, 2004, p. 3). And the very difficulty of calculation pushes would-be activists to err on the side of safety, to overlook an angle on a story, or to quietly let a case slide. As one environmental journalist explained, her philosophy requires that she “be objective and not make a bigger deal out of things than they are” (Stern, interview with Chinese journalist, Beijing, China, August 2007).

Outside of journalists and lawyers, corrosive uncertainty is also a feature of everyday life for one of China’s largest group of aspiring activists: non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Because of the difficulty of finding the requisite government sponsor, many NGOs are unregistered and vulnerable to the sudden withdrawal of implicit tolerance. Even registration is no guarantee of safety. State-initiated Clean-up and Reorganization (*qingli zheng-dun*) reviews mean that the legal status of an organization can be revoked at any time (Dillon, 2008, p. 23). This means that even loyalist organizations are often unsure what is acceptable. As one HIV/AIDS activist told Yunnan provincial officials in 2008, “We want to know what we can do! Tell us what we are allowed to do and this will help us decide our activities!” (Hildebrandt, 2009, p. 124). And when well-known organizations are shut down, others often retreat to lower profile, less controversial activities. The unexpected July 2007 closure of China Development Brief after 12 years of operation, for example, left other international NGOs wary. The American director of a Beijing-based NGO reported 18 months later that caution inspired by the shutdown had finally faded: “Around the time that China Development Brief got shut down, I was really feeling anxious because it seemed so arbitrary. But now I feel like we have the luxury of having so much rhetoric in support of what we’re doing. So it can’t be that sensitive” (Stern, interview with an American NGO staff member, Beijing, China, January 2009).

Short of a candid heart-to-heart with top officials, there is no way to be sure whether uncertainty is a conscious state strategy.<sup>18</sup> At the very least, however, it is fair to say that China’s leaders often seem uninterested in promoting clarity. Although officials are certainly capable of issuing clear instructions about unacceptable topics,<sup>19</sup> mixed signals are equally

(if not more) common.<sup>20</sup> Premier Wen Jiabao, for example, urges the media to “fully play their oversight role” (Wen Jiabao, 2010) and help combat corruption, but the CPD often punishes papers that actually do so. Lack of clarity extends online too. One Chinese website creator writes that whether a post is deleted depends on “the political environment, the website’s background, size and location [and] the different understandings of web masters,” an array of factors that results in a “complete absence of clear-cut rules” (Zhang, 2010).<sup>21</sup> Yet leaders’ intentions, however interesting, are not critical to understanding the political effects of uncertainty. Uncertainty is a potent type of control, regardless of who knows it. By allowing authorities to avoid the expense of scrupulously enforcing a uniform policy and simply zero in on whomever they want, uncertainty provides a particular advantage in large, hard-to-govern territories.

In China, state-sponsored uncertainty dates back decades. Mass campaigns exemplify uncertainty as a routinized feature of Maoist rule and Mao “would deliberately conceal his real views, or cloak them in utterances of Delphic ambiguity, in order to see how others would react” (Short, 2000, p. 586).<sup>22</sup> And this unpredictability at the top echoed throughout society, especially during mass campaigns. There were 74 mass campaigns between 1950 and 1978, each organized as a struggle against a dangerous minority such as American missionaries, rightist intellectuals, or organized crime (Liu, 1981). Each campaign, however, was unpredictable. There was little to no indication of when the next campaign might come, who the next targets might be, or whether hard-learned rules of survival from the last one might apply. In combination, overarching ambiguity and periodic accusations encouraged potential targets—and these included virtually everyone—to behave like party loyalists.<sup>23</sup> Given this history, it is unsurprising that uncertainty features so prominently in contemporary Chinese politics. Illiberal states fall into particular patterns of repression and legacies can prove sticky for years to come (Boudreau, 2004, pp. 4, 6).

Using uncertainty as a control strategy occurs outside China too. In contemporary Egypt, to take a particularly striking parallel, the government relies on several press laws that mandate jail time for the “vague and easy-to-abuse offences of ‘displaying bad publicity,’ ‘insulting the head of state,’ and ‘endangering national interests’” (Black, 2008, p. 3). The last transgression, in particular, is quite similar to the ill-defined Chinese charge of “leaking state secrets.” Even in the much freer United Arab Emirates (UAE), state pressure leads to self-censorship. Despite the UAE’s stated policy of media freedom, the head of the journalists association claims that “freedom without responsibility may invite chaos,” and it is no surprise that this “responsibility”

is especially pronounced around sensitive topics (Badran, Turk, & Walters, 2003, p. 56). Nor is uncertainty a new political phenomenon. Writing about 15th-century Florence, Padgett and Ansell note that Cosimo de' Medici—the founder of the Medici dynasty that dominated the city-state for the next 300 years—“never said a clear word in his life” (Padgett & Ansell, 1993, p. 1308). Cosimo's talent for cryptic, brief remarks allowed allies and rivals to interpret his actions in multiple ways while preserving his own flexibility. For Cosimo, as for the contemporary CCP, this “multivocality” maintained discretion and helped consolidate power.

### Control Parables

But how does atmospheric uncertainty punctuated by occasional crack-downs lead to self-censorship? The most obvious answer is that a little bit of coercion produces a great deal of fear, especially when locals “transmit didactic tales of fear among themselves . . . increasing its reverberating effects” (Robin, 2004, p. 181). As fear permeates everyday life, self-preservation pushes most citizens to avoid politics as much as possible. From Saddam Hussein's Iraq to Stasi-dominated East Germany, authoritarian leaders often retain control by nourishing enough political fear to empty the public square. Yet although focusing on fear explains why the apolitical majority studiously avoid politics, it tells us little about how politically inclined professionals navigate the gray zone between tolerated and forbidden. Absent clear signals from top leaders, how do China's gutsy boundary pushers decide which actions are (relatively) safe and which are unacceptably risky? Or, more abstractly, where do beliefs about the limits of political tolerance come from?

When public professionals are linked into a social network,<sup>24</sup> the unwritten rules of political conduct are shaped by what we call control parables: stories about transgression that counsel caution and restrict political possibilities.<sup>25</sup> Control parables, in other words, are *a type of* didactic story that invent or recapitulate an understanding of why certain types of action are dangerous or even impossible. Often told informally during conference breaks or over meals, control parables typically begin with news of how colleagues ran into political trouble. Then, rather than uncritically accepting the state's explanation (when there is one), storytellers and listeners speculate about the hidden reasons for retribution. In the back-and-forth of conversation, what starts as a nugget of gossip turns into a parable as listeners and storytellers suggest and refine a set of lessons about when and why tolerance thins. Sometimes listeners and storytellers converge on a single understanding

of which political trip wires triggered official displeasure. And sometimes the moral of the parable is open-ended enough for two people to read different lessons into the same event. The key point is that speculation surrounding a warning or punishment generates a set of imagined rules designed to prevent future clashes with authority. Without state involvement or necessarily even knowledge, then, control parables dissipate political possibilities from below. The “economy of fear,” to borrow political theorist Corey Robin’s phrase, runs on “small acts of education” that minimize the amount of actual coercion and maximize its effect (Robin, 2004, p. 181).

The best way to see how control parables work is through an example, like the controversial training program for public interest lawyers that one of the authors attended in 2007. Over the next 6 months, she heard (and overheard) at least a half dozen conversations about political blowback from this meeting.<sup>26</sup> The consistent kernel of the story was that local officials reported the conference (*huibao*) up the party chain of command to President Hu Jintao on the grounds that some participants vilified (*chouhua*) the government. Regardless of truth, this rumor was eagerly discussed among the community of Beijing lawyers, academics, and international NGO representatives involved in public interest law. Aside from the sheer fun of transmitting insider information, these conversations marked an attempt to decipher how the conference differed from dozens of similar meetings and, in particular, what the organizer did wrong. Storytellers, as sociologist Francesca Polletta observes, “rarely say explicitly to their audience, ‘and the moral of the story is’” (Polletta, 2006, p. 10). Instead, each conversation organically unearthed lessons about how to avoid political fallout. Theories about why the conference ran into trouble included (a) the location (a small town where it was hard to avoid notice), (b) the attitude of the local government (too conservative), (c) the source of financing (the politically sensitive Open Society Institute), and (d) the sponsors (no “protective umbrella” [*baohu san*] of university involvement). These are all plausible explanations, but the more interesting point is how locals draw meaning from seemingly random sanctions. Finding fault with an inexperienced conference organizer helps moderate the anxiety of uncertainty, especially when even the well connected find government actions inscrutable. The call-and-response of control parables, like all stories, fills a human impulse to “tame time, map space, and understand character and motive” (Khalili, 2007, p. 226).

Control parables are a subset of larger attempts to draw meaning out of seeming randomness. We tell ourselves stories to explain uncertainty all the time, coming up with theories about when highway police are most likely to be ticketing or why some PhD students get better jobs than others. The difference is that control parables deal with one particular type of uncertainty:

ambiguity about which actions political authorities consider off limits.<sup>27</sup> Confusion over the boundaries of tolerance, in turn, leaves citizens unsure whether any given action will be encouraged, forbidden, or ignored. This is not an exclusively authoritarian phenomenon. Democracies, too, are capable of unpredictable crackdowns, at times harassing some groups that challenge the prevailing political orthodoxy and not others.<sup>28</sup> Still, democratic leaders are usually limited in ways that authoritarian leaders are not. Pressure to maintain the appearance (if not the reality) of clear laws and consequences constrain democratic leaders' flexibility. The availability of information matters as well. In places like East Germany or contemporary China, where media reports range from incomplete to false, citizens often rely on rumors to know what is going on (Markovits, 1996, p. 2275). Yet rumors vary in reliability and require conversations to transmit and interpret them. And when these conversations turn to repression, participants can be heard telling parables that depict—and create—the limits of tolerance.

Another good example of a control parable is the 2006 dismissal of Chen Jieren, the top editor of the *Public Interest Times* (*Gongyi Shibao*). The official reason was that the paper ran into trouble over its criticism of English translations of government documents posted on a state website, but few journalists were convinced that any one article—even one the Ministry of Civil Affairs claimed “negatively affect[ed] the image of the Chinese government” (South China Morning Post Staff, 2006)<sup>29</sup>—would be enough to fire Chen.<sup>30</sup> Privately, one journalist speculated Chen was fired because of a story about prostitution at Wuhan University, and Chen himself attributed his dismissal to past, unspecified articles that strained official patience (Hassid, interview with Chinese journalist, Beijing, March 2006). In short, in supplementing the unsatisfying official explanation, journalists themselves deemed a range of topics problematic. Not only was criticism of shoddy English translations of government documents politically risky, journalists decided that prostitution among college students and other topics were too. Grassroots explanations for Chen's dismissal contracted journalists' horizon of political possibilities and, in so doing, reinforced media control.

Sometimes, ambiguous new regulations spawn control parables too. Much as unpredictable crackdowns inspire a search for meaning, cryptic policy changes can also prompt conversations that scrutinize past transgressions, guess at official motives and reinterpret political limits. One good example is the State Administration on Foreign Exchange's March 2010 regulations requiring notarized agreements between registered Chinese NGOs and foreign funders.<sup>31</sup> Although some observers read the measure as an attempt by mid-level bureaucrats to monitor cross-border capital flows, others saw the new policy as a high-level attempt to monitor donations and smother grassroots

groups (Tan, 2010). Uncertainty over the reasons for the change, as well as over how strictly the rules would be implemented, generated anxiety among both Chinese NGOs and their foreign supporters. One control parable, heard in Beijing in May and June 2010, clearly manifested this concern.<sup>32</sup> The recurrent, unconfirmed rumor was that the Public Security Bureau had a chart dividing foreign donors into three color categories, red, yellow, and green, corresponding to the political sensitivity of the money and the degree of monitoring that should accompany it. Subsequent speculation over which funders were red, yellow, or green (i.e., safe, moderately safe, or risky) was often accompanied by stories of NGOs that ran into trouble after accepting donations from “red” organizations. (The consensus was that multilateral organizations such as the UN were safest, whereas groups with an acknowledged political agenda, such as the Open Society Institute or the National Endowment for Democracy, were cited as riskiest.) In an environment where foreign funding is both politically sensitive and badly needed, the “red, yellow, green” control parable provided a way for Chinese NGO leaders and staff members to exchange information, assess political risk, and navigate uncertainty.

Although living by the lessons of control parables does not guarantee safety, cutting back on controversial behavior is often seen as the best way to avoid surveillance, harassment, and arrest. Certainly those with a reputation for treading cautiously, like rights lawyer Mo Shaoping, run into less trouble than those who boldly forge ahead. Within a community, the names of repeat transgressors like HIV/AIDS activist Hu Jia or online commentator Stainless Steel Mouse (Liu Di) often come to serve as shorthand for unacceptable tactics. What constitutes “unacceptable,” however, remains open to interpretation, and the subtext underlying these references can sharply diverge. Fragmented understandings need not necessarily coalesce into shared, credible lessons, especially when social networks are weak or gossip about controversial figures quickly runs dry.

One of the most notable political consequences of control parables in contemporary China is the degree to which they shift blame away from the political system. Instead of criticizing top leaders or the CCP, control parables usually attribute repression to obstructionist local cadres or hold participants responsible for the consequence of their own actions.<sup>33</sup> Research on Chinese NGOs, for example, shows how those who have never run into problems with authorities tend to see clashes as activists’ fault, perhaps prompted by excessive radicalism or ignorance of the rules. As political scientist Timothy Hildebrandt writes, NGO “leaders are quick to point to the ‘poor choices’ of others, while drawing attention to their own ‘smart decisions’” (Hildebrandt, 2009, p. 78). Beyond China, too, it is not uncommon for citizens to think

targets of coercion must have done something to deserve attention. “Say what you like,” one Soviet woman commented about political prisoners, “there’s no smoke without fire” (Robin, 2004, p. 179). Still, control parables need not necessarily divert blame from leaders. Political elites can be held culpable for coercion, even when stories about transgression encourage listeners to circumscribe action. In listening to control parables, then, staying attentive to who gets blamed offers important insight onto the extent to which the powerful have “successfully themselves and their interests into the processes by which the weak understand themselves, their goals, their possibilities and their constraints” (Stokes, 1991, p. 270). Failure to blame China’s leaders reflects widespread acceptance of the status quo and, for most, the difficulty of imagining radical change.

If control parables arise from an impulse to interpret political uncertainty, we should expect to hear them outside of China too. Yet an environment of arbitrary, unpredictable government power does not necessarily mean that citizens will dissect patterns or discuss the limitations of permissiveness. Rather, the collective nature of control parables requires “safe enough spaces” that protect the give-and-take of conversation from official observation.<sup>34</sup> One reason that online control parables are rare, for example, is that the Chinese government closely scrutinizes the Internet and few are willing to discuss crackdowns in a space notorious for surveillance.<sup>35</sup> When monitoring and fear mark even private interactions between relatives and friends, political gossip often disappears entirely. In 1970s Ba’athist Iraq, for instance, author Kanan Makiya reports that “political dialogue and gossip about public affairs, once the stable diet of all gatherings and conversation, had vanished” (Makiya, 1989, p. 61). Likewise, surviving the terror of Stalinist Russia required strict silence and avoidance of anything political. In a culture of fear, few are thinking about politics, much less discussing it. As one Uruguayan psychoanalyst recalled the 1970s and early 1980s, “it wasn’t just that you stopped talking about certain things with other people—you stopped *thinking* them yourself. Your internal dialogue just dried up” (Robin, 2004, p. 179). Control parables, then, are most likely to appear in places like contemporary China where repression is palpable and unpredictable but space remains for private, political conversations.

Just after high-profile incidents, traces of control parables can occasionally be found in the media. News reports after the 2009 arrest of Azerbaijani bloggers Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli for “hooliganism,” for example, recounted competing local explanations for repression. One theory was that Milli and Hajizade’s age (both are in their 20s) exacerbated fear of a



youth-led opposition movement (Guliyev, 2009), whereas others suggested that Hajizade's father's work for the political opposition was the problem (Barry, 2009). But at least overseas, public speculation was short-lived. The English-language media rapidly converged on the understanding that Milli and Hajizade were arrested because of an online video satirizing government imports of expensive European donkeys. Headlines about the "donkey case" promoted and lent credibility to a single interpretation of events even as the open-ended ambiguity of control parables slid out of public view.

## Conclusion

Stories about transgression need not always buttress elite control. Gossip that turns into a control parable in a stable regime with long time horizons, like China, may turn into a resistance-inspiring example of martyrdom in times of popular unrest or political change. Even in contemporary China, a place where organized political opposition is weak at best, not every story about transgression turns into a control parable. Widespread uncertainty about the boundaries of acceptable political action means that the didactic stories that encourage self-censorship in most can reveal inspired opportunity to others, especially those with an optimistic bent.<sup>36</sup> But when exactly do stories about transgression encourage risk taking or counsel retreat? Future research will want to consider a range of explanations, such as severity of grievances and the presence (or absence) of followers, that might radicalize leaders. Among public professionals, role conception is important too. Already, researchers are distinguishing news workers driven by financial concerns from a small core of "advocate journalists" willing to occasionally challenge the CCP because they see themselves as representing "the people" rather than the party state (Hassid, 2011; Lee, 2005). Although the vast majority of lawyers are likewise interested in making money and getting ahead, observers are starting to tease apart strains of activist lawyers devoted to a cause rather than cash (Fu & Cullen, 2008). It is clear that professional identity, particularly how public professionals define their role vis-à-vis the party and the state, conditions how individuals listen to control parables and the lessons they take away. For embedded ethnographers, the next step will be tracing a control parable through a community to explore how the transcript and interpretation shift with the audience.

But without denying the reality of resistance, focusing on uncertainty and control parables suggests that the politics of inaction can be as interesting as the more familiar terrain of dissent, protest, and revolution. Self-censorship plays a critical and sometimes overlooked role in explaining the resilience of regimes that have long since failed to inspire adoration. The widespread

perception, for example, that tolerance for dissent is reduced during high-profile public events like the annual meeting of the National People's Congress tamps down activity during those times.<sup>37</sup> The calendar of activism, a collective understanding of the best and worst times to criticize the state, can strike out entire months or even years (like the run-up to the 2008 Olympics) for action. Here, the politics of self-censorship “mark the boundaries of state society relations through silence” (Barzilai, 2007, p. 274).

Understanding how uncertainty and control parables shape public professionals' choices also tells us much about the type and tenor of mobilization. Repression and resistance are intertwined, and the CCP's long-standing inclination toward ambiguity over clear-cut rules, for example, goes a long way toward explaining the current popularity of boundary-spanning contention. Over time, layered histories of choices about how to deal with dissent also come to encapsulate “larger ideas about what is politically possible, how one might live under a particular regime, and what kinds of acts might change things” (Boudreau, 2004, pp. 27-28). These collective (and sometimes competing) understandings are forged, in part, in telling and retelling stories about transgression. Long after the event is over, hard lessons—both real and imagined—can endure for years and decades to come.

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## Notes

1. Statistics on state coercion are sketchy, but it is possible to get a ballpark sense of how frequently crackdowns occur. As of 2011, there were 30 journalists imprisoned out of 173,000 registered, representing a vanishingly small 0.0019% of the total. For lawyers, there were 208 instances of administrative punishment (warnings, suspended licenses, revoked licenses) among 113,457 lawyers in 2004 (0.18%) and 107 cases of violence (illegal kidnapping, detention, beatings) between 1999 and 2004. The number of journalists jailed is from Reporters sans Frontières (2011). The number of total journalists in China is from official figures, obtained from the website of the General Administration of Press and Publication (gapp.gov.cn), accessed Nov. 2010 but no longer available online. Information about lawyers is from Fu, 2006.
2. According to a 2010 estimate, the annual cost of “maintaining stability” is 514 billion RMB, making it the second largest budget item behind the 532 billion RMB military budget (Link, 2011, p. 56).
3. Following Wilensky’s seminal 1964 article, we think of *professionals* as groups with jobs that require training, inculcate norms, and pay at least lip service to an ideal of public service. See Wilensky (1964).
4. All but the most radical public professionals cast themselves as unwavering patriots. They draw a distinction, often elided in the literature on nationalism, between allegiance to the country and to the party. Even dissident lawyers like Gao Zhisheng, who publicly withdrew from the CCP in 2005, are vocal exponents of Chinese pride. As Gao wrote in 2004, “My purpose in writing this letter . . . is not to promote a certain group of people, nor to intentionally go against the Party or government. I love my country. And that is the only thing that inspires me these days” (Gao, 2007, p. 111).
5. Journalists and lawyers are concentrated in cities, and most interviews took place in urban areas. This article draws on fieldwork conducted in Beijing, Chongqing, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hebei, Hubei, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Yunnan.
6. See, for example, Crozier (1964) and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978).
7. For two significant exceptions, see Link (2002) and Hassid (2008, p. 419).
8. Our focus here is primarily on licensed lawyers who have passed the state bar exam. Of course, others (including legal workers, barefoot lawyers, and black lawyers) also provide legal advice and services, both legally and illegally. Likewise, there are numerous “fake” or unlicensed journalists, who range from legitimate but unofficially employed reporters to outright hucksters and blackmailers. We concentrate on legally employed, state-licensed news workers.
9. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/ybubexq>.

10. In the book publishing market, it is common for publishers to illegally resell these numbers to others, but this happens less frequently with periodicals.
11. In practice this sponsorship is rarely hands-on.
12. Chapter II, Article 9, Sections 3, 5, and 7, respectively, of the “Regulations for the Administration of Periodical Publication,” Promulgated by the General Administration on Press and Publication on September 30, 2005, as Decree No. 31, as translated by J. T. H. Chang, Wan, and Qu (2006).
13. Hassid estimates that no more than a quarter of even elite Chinese journalists are interested in being politically active. For lawyers, the numbers are significantly lower. Jerome Cohen, a New York University law professor and a well-known advocate for Chinese rights lawyers, estimates that no more than 1% of lawyers are politically motivated, a reasonable estimate. See Cohen (2009).
14. For more on disparities of attention, see Hirschman (1978).
15. The Central Publicity Department (previously the Central Propaganda Department) is the party department responsible for controlling and “guiding” the Chinese media.
16. Document provided by Hassid interviewee, Beijing, June 2008.
17. On how the arrests were seen as retaliation for aggressive reporting, see Beach (2005) and Kahn (2005). It is unclear whether this crackdown was initiated by the Central Publicity Department or by local or provincial authorities.
18. Interviewing government censors would also shed light on whether ground-level bureaucrats see uncertainty as a conscious strategy. However, this would require excellent access to candid officials—no easy task considering that social science research is often politically sensitive and the censorship bureau is so secretive that not even its address and phone number are publicly listed.
19. For a partial listing of banned, often very specific, media topics in 2009, see Woo (2010, pp. 9-12), available at <http://tinyurl.com/ykluh9f>.
20. For more on mixed signals, see Stern and O’Brien (2012).
21. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/y9nztvu>.
22. For more on uncertainty under Mao, see Dillon (2008).
23. See Link (2002) on how uncertainty pressures people into changing their behavior. For more on mass campaigns, see Dillon (2008, esp. pp. 10-12).
24. Although some Chinese lawyers are more networked than others, journalists constantly share information. An incredible 100% of 24 elite journalists contacted in 2008 meet with their colleagues outside of work at least a few times a month. In addition to regular informal information sharing, there are also several semiformalized journalist organizations that serve as a clearinghouse of information and gossip, including at least three such groups in Beijing (for legal, environmental, and entertainment journalists, respectively) and one in Guangzhou.

25. We call them parables because they are less detailed than a story (often there is no true beginning, middle, or end) but more open-ended than an adage (which summarizes a moral in a pithy proverb).
26. Stern was an active participant in some of these conversations, and obviously her presence affected the story telling. Overhearing several similar conversations, however, convinced her that she did not change the basic script.
27. Note that this is different from ambiguity surrounding whether citizens will be punished. Drivers frequently get away with speeding, for example, but everyone is clear that it is illegal.
28. For examples of surveillance and harassment in the United States, see Starr, Fernandez, Amster, Wood, and Caro (2008). On the chilling effect of the McCarthy-era hunts for communists in the United States, see Robin (2004, esp. chap. 5).
29. Available via the EastSouthWestNorth blog at <http://tinyurl.com/ygepukj>.
30. The official version appears in Marquand (2006).
31. A Chinese version of the regulations is available on the State Administration of Foreign Exchange website at <http://tinyurl.com/2usjlex>.
32. Stern participated in these conversations during trips to Beijing in May and June 2010. Other rumors circulating during earlier periods of anxiety over foreign funding divided foreign organizations into a “black list” and a “white list.”
33. Li discusses Chinese citizens’ “bifurcated” view of the state and how blame accrues to local mismanagement without denting the integrity of the central government. See Li (2004).
34. The term *safe enough spaces* is borrowed from Vala and O’Brien (2008, p. 123). For more on safe spaces, see Gamson (1996).
35. Despite the rising popularity of Twitter, we expect that limitations on the number of characters per tweet, state surveillance of Twitter feeds, and blocked access within China make it an unlikely venue to share control parables.
36. On how activists tend to be overly optimistic, see O’Brien and Li (2006, p. 47).
37. This is a shift from the past perception that high-profile public events were an opportunity for activism. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, for example, took advantage of media coverage provided by Mikhail Gorbachev’s state visit.

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**Bios**

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