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Understanding CCP Resilience:

Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time

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Executive Summary

This policy brief reviews the findings of the longest-running independent effort to track Chinese citizen satisfaction of government performance. China today is the world's second largest economy and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has ruled for some seventy years. Yet long-term, publicly-available, and nationally-representative surveys in mainland China are so rare that it is difficult to know how ordinary Chinese citizens feel about their government.

We find that first, since the start of the survey in 2003, Chinese citizen satisfaction with government has increased virtually across the board. From the impact of broad national policies to the conduct of local town officials, Chinese citizens rate the government as more capable and effective than ever before. Interestingly, more marginalized groups in poorer, inland regions are actually comparatively more likely to report increases in satisfaction. Second, the attitudes of Chinese citizens appear to respond (both positively and negatively) to real changes in their material well-being, which suggests that support could be undermined by the twin challenges of declining economic growth and a deteriorating natural environment.

While the CCP is seemingly under no imminent threat of popular upheaval, it cannot take the support of its people for granted. Although state censorship and propaganda are widespread, our survey reveals that citizen perceptions of governmental performance respond most to real, measurable changes in individuals' material well-being. For government leaders, this is a double-edged sword, as citizens who have grown accustomed to increases in living standards will expect such improvements to continue, and citizens who praise government officials for effective policies may indeed blame them when such policy failures affect them or their family members directly. While our survey reinforces narratives of CCP resilience, our data also point to specific areas in which citizen satisfaction could decline in today's era of slowing economic growth and continued environmental degradation.

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Introduction: On Authoritarian Resilience

Regime theory has long argued that authoritarian systems are inherently unstable because of their dependence on coercion, over-centralization of decision making, and the privileging of personal over institutional power. Over time, these inefficiencies tend to weaken the legitimacy of the ruling government, leading to generalized unrest and citizen dissatisfaction. In China, President and General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, appears determined to test this theory. Since assuming power in late 2012, he has undermined the foundation of what many observers argued was the driving force of CCP resilience – deepening institutionalization. Reversing the trends initiated by his predecessors, Xi removed emerging norms culminating in ending presidential term limits. Reforms of the cadre system designed to strengthen meritocracy have been undermined by centralization and the imposition of greater ideological conformity. Finally, by deploying and heading key leading work groups, Xi effectively sidelined functional and professional institutions of party and state. Nevertheless, as the CCP prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of its founding, the Party appears to be as strong as ever. A deeper resilience is founded on popular support for regime policy. Thus, an intriguing question is whether, given Xi Jinping's increasingly centralized and intrusive style of governance and the erosion of institutionalization, is there a danger that the CCP might lose legitimacy in the eyes of its people?

Because long-term, publicly-available, and nationally-representative surveys in mainland China are so rare, it is difficult to know how ordinary Chinese citizens feel about their government. Many scholars have written on this topic, with some observers arguing that rising expectations, worsening income inequality, and the pluralization of information sources have created a platform for a "social volcano," whereby a crisis could trigger mass political unrest. Others contend that Chinese citizens credit the CCP for decades of rapid income growth, and are therefore unlikely to challenge its legitimacy to rule, provided that their standards of living continue to rise. Yet others maintain that the Party's grip on social order is so powerful that even a clear failure of leadership would be unlikely to affect the loyalty of most Chinese citizens. For a country that is home to one-fifth of the world's population and represents more than 16% of the global economy, China still presents us with few systematic avenues to understand the satisfaction levels of the general public.

The goal of this research brief, and of the longitudinal survey that informs it, is to address the question of government legitimacy in China using the most objective and quantitative methods currently available. Our survey[1] contains data from eight separate waves between 2003 and 2016, and records face-to-face interview responses from more than 31,000 individuals in both urban and rural settings. As such, it represents the longest-running independent effort to track citizen approval with all four levels of the Chinese government across time (ranging from the township, to the county, to the provincial, and finally the central government). While no single survey can adequately address all aspects of satisfaction levels in China, this brief identifies two important yet contrasting findings.

First, since 2003, Chinese citizen satisfaction with government has increased virtually across the board. From

1 The survey referenced in this brief was designed by the Harvard Ash Center for Democratic Innovation and implemented by a reputable domestic Chinese polling firm.

the impact of broad national policies to the conduct of local town officials, Chinese citizens rate the government as more capable and effective than ever before. Interestingly, more marginalized groups in poorer, inland regions are comparatively more likely to report increases in satisfaction, casting doubt that China is sitting on a looming "social volcano." Second, the attitudes of Chinese citizens appear to respond (both positively and negatively) to real changes in their material well-being, which suggests that such support could be undermined by the twin challenges of declining economic growth and a deteriorating natural environment.

This brief is divided into five main sections. The first provides an overview of public's assessment of the Chinese government and its officials, and the next three present a more detailed examination of public opinion in three key policy areas: public service provision, corruption, and the environment. The concluding section offers a look at how Chinese public opinion might continue to evolve in the current era of stagnating economic growth and continued environmental degradation.

Recent Trends in Citizen Satisfaction

The most striking feature of our survey's data since 2003 is the near-universal increase in Chinese citizens' average satisfaction toward all four levels of government. To gauge satisfaction, respondents were asked to evaluate government performance on a scale of 1-4: 1 indicating "very dissatisfied"; 2 "fairly dissatisfied"; 3 "fairly satisfied"; and 4 "very satisfied." In all iterations of the survey, satisfaction declines as the government gets closer to the people, with local county and township governments consistently generating lower satisfaction from citizens than the central or provincial governments. This "hierarchical satisfaction" is particularly noteworthy because it is the opposite of what researchers observe in the United States and many other democracies, where local political leaders tend to be far more popular than state or federal leaders. Nevertheless, recent increases in public approval have begun to narrow this "hierarchical satisfaction" gap in China (Table 1). Even in 2003, the central government received a strong level of satisfaction, with 86.1% expressing approval and 8.9% disapproving. This high level of satisfaction increased even further by 2016, but such increases were minimal because public satisfaction was already high to begin with. By contrast, in 2003, township-level governments had quite negative satisfaction rates, with 44% expressing approval and 52% disapproving. However, by 2016, these numbers had flipped, with 70% approving and only 26% disapproving.

These increases in satisfaction are not just limited to overall assessments of government performance. When asked about the specific conduct and attributes of local government officials, increasing numbers of Chinese citizens view them as kind, knowledgeable, and effective (Table 2). For example, in 2003, more than

half of respondents felt that local officials were "talk only" and were not practical problem solvers. However, by 2016, 55% felt that officials were practical problem solvers, while only 36% disagreed. Similarly, in 2003, the proportion of respondents who felt that local officials were "beholden to the interests of the wealthy" was nearly double the proportion who felt that they were "concerned about the difficulties of ordinary people." By 2016, this situation had reversed, with 52% agreeing that local officials prioritized the needs of ordinary people and only 40% agreeing that they prioritized those of the wealthy.

Beginning in 2004, the survey asked about respondents' personal interactions with local government officials and their impression of those interactions. In each survey iteration, roughly 15% of the sample reported interactions with government officials during the previous 12 months. However, while the interaction rate stayed relatively constant, citizen impressions of government response did not. The percentage who claimed that their situation was "not resolved at all" shrunk from 28% in 2004 to just 7.6% in 2016. By contrast, the percentage who claimed that their situation was "completely resolved" rose from 19.3% in 2004 to 55.9% in 2016. Notably, in 2004, the rate of citizens who were satisfied with the eventual outcome of their interactions was less than half the rate of those who were dissatisfied; while in 2016 the rate of satisfaction was more than triple the rate of dissatisfaction.

Although it is clear that overall satisfaction with government performance increased significantly between 2003 and 2016, it is less obvious why these trends have occurred and whether or not they are sustainable. Therefore, in the next three sections, this brief delves more deeply into three key issues to understand better the precise nature of Chinese people's satisfaction.

Table 1: Overall Satisfaction by Level of Government(2003-2016)

		2003	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011	2015	2016
Central	1	1.3	1.8	1.4	0.6	0.3	1.2	0.4	0.3
	2	7.6	9.5	7.6	5.2	2.9	5.0	6.3	4.0
	3	60.7	59.2	59.8	54.1	50.9	54.5	55.2	61.5
	4	25.4	22.9	20.7	38.2	45.0	37.3	37.6	31.6
	Avg	3.16	3.11	3.11	3.32	3.41	3.3	3.31	3.3
	Dis.	8.9	11.3	9.0	5.8	3.2	6.2	6.7	4.3
	Sat.	86.1	82.1	80.5	92.3	95.9	91.8	92.8	93.1
Provincial	1	2.4	2.0	1.6	1.3	0.6	1.9	1.9	0.8
	2	16.7	13.3	10.9	10.4	8.7	10.3	13.6	13.8
	3	64.0	62.4	60.7	55.3	56.0	57.2	64.6	51.9
	4	11.0	14.6	14.7	30.2	33.2	28.4	19.0	29.8
	Avg	2.89	2.97	3.01	3.18	3.23	3.15	3.02	3.1
	Dis.	19.1	15.3	12.5	11.7	9.3	12.2	15.5	14.6
	Sat.	75.0	77.0	75.4	85.5	89.2	85.6	83.6	81.7
County	1	7.0	5.8	4.6	4.4	3.1	2.9	6.2	1.6
	2	35.1	25.8	24.2	18.0	19.1	22.1	29.9	19.9
	3	45.9	51.5	49.7	58.6	61.4	57.2	53.1	56.4
	4	6.1	10.8	11.6	16.2	13.4	14.6	9.7	17.6
	Avg	2.54	2.72	2.76	2.89	2.88	2.86	2.67	2.9
	Dis.	42.1	31.6	28.8	22.4	22.2	25.0	36.1	21.5
	Sat.	52.0	62.3	61.3	74.8	74.8	71.8	62.8	73.9
Township	1	18.7	12.3	9.3	8.9	7.3	6.2	9.5	2.3
	2	32.9	26.1	27.1	27.1	27.8	26.9	34.2	23.3
	3	38.1	45.8	47.0	49.8	54.2	52.9	47.0	57.4
	4	5.5	10.1	8.7	10.9	7.3	10.9	7.8	12.8
	Avg	2.32	2.57	2.6	2.65	2.65	2.71	2.54	2.8
	Dis.	51.6	38.4	36.4	26.0	35.1	33.1	43.7	25.6
	Sat.	43.6	55.9	55.7	60.7	61.5	63.8	54.8	70.2

Table 2: Public Perception of Local Government Officials (2003-2016)

Characteristics of Local Officials	2003	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011	2015	2016
Aloof and conceited	48.2	45.2	42.6	41.5	39.4	42.2	41.8	44.3
Eager to help people find solutions	30.9	31.9	38.7	47.3	46.8	47.3	54.9	48.7
Indifferent	38.9	37.9	32.1	26.7	28.7	26.4	24.3	21.3
Kind	39.1	37.2	47.2	62.4	60.1	61.1	74	74.1
Ignorant	21.5	21.7	14.4	16.7	9.2	15.4	23	15.3
Knowledgeable	50.8	47.5	59.6	69.3	74.8	69.4	74.2	75.7
Rhetoric [talk] only	51.2	43.1	42.6	46.3	37.4	42.5	42.5	36.4
Practical problem-solvers	26.3	31.3	37.2	43.4	45.6	47.1	54.1	55.3
Beholden to the interests of the wealthy	50.1	43.3	42.9	46.9	43.9	44.6	51.3	40
Concerned w/ the difficulties of ordinary people	28.1	31.5	37	43.8	44.2	44	45.5	51.7
Only concerned w/ pleasing supervisors	54	47.4	43.5	48.9	49.4	45.8	50.5	42.9
Receptive to public opinion	24.5	27.8	34.3	40.5	39.4	43	46	48
Impose illegal taxes and fees	41.3	30.6	23.5	30.3	17.6	31.6	32.8	22.9
Tax and collect fees according to the law	31.7	40.7	49.2	55.2	65.9	52.4	61.7	66.7
Only concerned about own interests	49.8	41.2	41.7	42.4	40.3	41.6	44	37.5
Serve the interests of the locality	23.7	27.2	34.2	44.1	45.6	42.5	51.2	51.1

Table 3: Public Impressions of Interactions with Local Government Officials (2004-2016)

Impressions of Interactions with Local Officials	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011	2015	2016
Not resolved at all	28.3	24.7	20.4	26.4	25.5	11.3	7.6
Partially resolved	43.4	34.6	37.1	29	24.1	40.4	33.1
Completely resolved	19.3	36	39.2	41.5	31.3	45.8	55.9
Dissatisfied with Eventual Outcome	64.2	46.6	40.7	43.7	41.9	29	23.3
Satisfied with Eventual Outcome	31.7	49.2	58.2	55.7	47.9	69.8	75.1

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Policy Area 1: Public Service Provision – Shifting from Economic to Social Policy

Current Chinese GDP per capita is 60 times greater than it was when the period of "Reform and Opening" (改革开放) began in 1978. Although forty years of rapid growth have helped to improve living standards and lift more than 800 million Chinese out of poverty, the gains of reform have not been distributed equally. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and later Jiang Zemin, the CCP made a conscious policy effort to "let some get rich first," encouraging an export-led growth model that primarily served to enrich urban ports along China's eastern seaboard. Residents in rural, inland regions were freed from the burdens of collectivized agriculture, but were otherwise left to fend for themselves. At the same time, the 1980s and 1990s saw the dismantling of the so-called "iron rice bowl," a Mao Zedong-era cradle-to-grave support system that provided citizens with state-sponsored jobs, housing, and basic healthcare. As this system was phased out, the task of providing public services shifted largely to individual county and township governments. Without adequate formal taxing measures and fiscal transfers from higher levels of government, towns and villages not fortunate enough to be located in high growth regions had difficulties meeting their expenditure obligations, often resorting to extra-budgetary taxes and fees to raise revenue.

By the early 2000s, trends created a China that was far wealthier, but also far more unequal, than it had been a quarter-century before. While some Chinese lived lives of newfound comfort; in poorer, largely rural areas of China, access to basic public services such as health insurance, social security, and unemployment relief was largely non-existent. This stark divide between China's "haves" and "have nots" led many observers to wonder whether the legitimacy of the CCP would soon be challenged by the resentment of those who had not ben-

efitted fully from the economic reforms. A significant group within the Chinese leadership shared these concerns, and after General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao ascended to power in 2003, they launched a series of policy measures designed to provide a basic social safety net for China's disadvantaged populations. While these policies remain far from complete and have suffered numerous setbacks and inefficiencies, their significance should not be underestimated. For example, between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of China's population covered by health insurance more than doubled, from 43% to 95%. Also, by 2011, the central government's expenditure on rural and agricultural issues had reached nearly three trillion yuan, ten times the same expenditure in 2004. Furthermore, under current President Xi Jinping, there is some evidence that urban-rural and coastal-inland inequalities have plateaued, and may have even begun to shrink.

One of the main goals of the Ash Center survey is to measure satisfaction with basic public service provision at the local level. The fact that the survey began precisely at the moment (summer 2003) when Hu and Wen began to implement their redistributive changes is a fortunate coincidence. The timing of the survey makes it possible to determine: 1) Whether Chinese citizens actually received greater access to and higher quality of public services such as healthcare, welfare, and education; and 2) Whether government satisfaction increased faster in the poorer, rural inland regions that were the target of these redistributive policies.

Table 4 shows that, between 2005 and 2011, survey respondents reported large increases in access to several different insurance and social welfare programs. These increases were particularly notable in small towns and rural villages, which in 2005 had far lower participation rates than large cities. For example, the proportion of rural villagers covered by basic medical insurance rose from 32% in 2005 to 82.8% in 2011, while the proportion with basic employee pension plans rose from 36.8% to 71.3%. Moreover, the number of villagers with no access to any of the six listed programs dropped from 58.3% in 2005 to just 13.2% in 2011.

One way to gauge whether this expansion of public service provisions actually led to increased government

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support is to divide the survey sample into "haves" and "have nots" and then compare relative rates of satisfaction increase between 2003 and 2016 (Table 5). Our analysis reveals two noteworthy trends. First, low-income residents (respondents who reported an annual household income below the sample median in a given year) showed much greater increases in satisfaction than high-income residents. Second, residents in inland regions showed much greater increases in satisfaction than residents living along China's eastern coastline. Both of these findings, which we term the "income effect" and "region effect" respectively, are far stronger at the local level, which makes sense because it is local governments that are primarily responsible for basic service provisions.

In addition to the income and region effects displayed in Table 5, regression analyses show that three key macro-scale economic variables (which serve as proxies for a given locality's level of public service provision) also exhibit a significant and positive relationship with government satisfaction. For example, all else equal, residents in localities that spend a higher percentage of the local budget on education, health, and welfare are more likely to report higher satisfaction rates. The same is true for residents in areas with better road infrastructure and lower ratios of urban-rural income inequality. Moreover, when these three macro-scale economic variables are controlled for, the income and region effects noted in Table 5 largely disappear, suggesting that much of the observed variation in relative satisfaction changes is due to measureable flows of government-provided goods and services.[2]

Thus, it is clear that, since 2003, increases in citizen satisfaction with government performance have been disproportionately concentrated amongst the more

Table 4: Levels of Public Participation in Selected Social Programs (2005-2011)

Insurance and Social Welfare Programs	City				Town				Village			
	2005	2007	2009	2011	2005	2007	2009	2011	2005	2007	2009	2011
Employee basic endowment insurance	55.3	65.7	75	79.4	29.6	30.5	49.9	67	36.8	53	63.6	77.3
Employee / resident basic medical insurance	53	65.4	74.1	85.7	28.9	31.2	56.9	70.2	32	53	66.4	82.8
Unemployment insurance	18.2	23	33.2	40	1.8	3.6	10.2	18.8	11.7	16	22.8	28.3
Work injury insurance	6.6	8.1	19.9	26.2	2.1	1.7	7	11	4.4	5.8	14.1	28
Maternity insurance	3.3	4.2	11.5	13.3	0.8	0.5	3.1	7.5	3.6	2.9	7.7	11.6
Housing fund	31.2	28.7	30	33	11.6	8.2	6.8	7.1	20.4	21.3	19.5	18.6
None of the above	30.8	24.1	16.9	11.1	61.1	59.7	27.8	22.4	58.3	37	21.8	13.2

Table 5: Mean Government Satisfaction Increase from 2003 to 2016 (By Income and Region)

	Urban				Rural			
	Central	Provincial	County	Town	Central	Provincial	County	Town
Low-Income	0.25	0.29	0.38	0.44	0.04	0.28	0.53	0.76
High-Income	0.23	0.29	0.24	0.36	0.09	0.29	0.39	0.42
Difference	0.02	0	0.14	0.08	-0.05	-0.01	0.14	0.34

	Urban				Rural			
	Central	Provincial	County	Town	Central	Provincial	County	Town
Periphery	0.24	0.34	0.39	0.43	0.07	0.35	0.56	0.78
Core	0.24	0.19	0.16	0.11	0	0.11	0.23	0.19
Difference	0	0.15	0.23	0.32	0.07	0.24	0.33	0.59

2 For a detailed explanation of the income and region effects, and of the regression analyses mentioned in this article, see Turiel, Cunningham, and Saich (2019).

marginalized populations targeted by Hu and Wen's redistributive policy reforms. These findings suggest that, far from representing a dangerous undercurrent of social and political resentment, China's poorer residents feel that government is increasingly effective at delivering basic healthcare, welfare, and other public services. Ultimately, while Chinese citizens still identify significant problems such as persistent income inequality and job insecurity, the majority believe that things are moving in a positive direction and credit the government for improvements in their material well-being.

Courtesy Tonyxy1992 via Wikimedia Commons

Policy Area 2: Corruption – Reactive Success

Corruption is frequently identified by Chinese citizens as one of the most serious problems that they face. Therefore, it is no surprise that, out of 20 local governance performance metrics included in the Ash Center survey, "punishing corruption" ranked dead last in average satisfaction between 2003 and 2011. On a four-point scale, average satisfaction with punishing corruption during this period was just 2.38 (compared to the next lowest metric, "creating jobs," at 2.52). Unlike satisfaction with local public service provision, the public's views of corruption showed no clear trends during the Hu-Wen era. Satisfaction with government handling of corruption remained low in 2003 and 2005, improved significantly in 2007 and 2009, but cratered again in 2011 (Table 6).

Table 6: Five Lowest-Rated Local Government Perfor-mance Metrics (2003-2011)

Issue Area	2003	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011	Avg.
Attracting Investment	2.53	2.31	2.73	2.76	2.74	2.76	2.64
Safety Net for Families Experi-encing Hardship	2.38	2.44	2.58	2.68	2.65	2.69	2.57
Unemployment Insurance	2.27	2.49	2.58	2.59	2.61	2.65	2.53
Creating Jobs	2.25	2.48	2.59	2.62	2.51	2.67	2.52
Punishing Cor-ruption	1.99	2.66	2.38	2.50	2.47	2.29	2.38

From 2007, the survey began asking more detailed questions about corruption and we notice a clear drop in satisfaction during the final years of the Hu-Wen administration. In 2007 and 2009, roughly equal proportions of respondents judged the government's efforts in fighting corruption as "good" and "poor" respectively. However, by 2011, the public's views had become predominantly negative, with only 35.5% rating government efforts as good and 58.1% rating them as poor. Similarly, between 2009 and 2011, the proportion of respondents who viewed Chinese officials as "clean" dropped from 42.7% to 35.4% (Table 7).

Table 7: Public Perceptions of the Integrity of Local Gov-ernment Officials (2007-2016)

Perception of Local Chinese Gov-ernment Officials	2007	2009	2011	2015	2016
Very unclean	5.2	6	8.4	8.8	4.4
Not so clean	41.6	42.8	46.8	44.7	24.9
Relatively clean	40.1	41.2	32.8	39.4	55.1
Very clean	1.2	1.5	2.6	4.8	10.2
Refused	0.9	0.8	0.6	0.3	0.4
DK	11.1	7.8	8.8	1.9	4.9
Total Unclean	46.8	48.8	55.2	53.5	29.3
Total Clean	41.3	42.7	35.4	44.2	65.3

Several events potentially contributed to this souring of public opinion. In July 2011, just two months before the Ash Center survey was administered, the Wenzhou train disaster sparked widespread, netizen outrage on social media with the Ministry of Transportation blamed for being rudderless and ill-prepared in the wake of sev-eral high-profile corruption incidents. In the summer of 2011, systemic corruption rings were exposed within the People's Bank of China and the Chinese Red Cross, attracting significant negative media attention. These scandals coincided with the emergence of social me-dia platforms such as Sina Weibo, which allowed in-formation about corruption incidents to spread rapidly through channels not fully controlled by the state. As a result, by the end of the Hu-Wen administration, public

attitudes with respect to corruption had grown decidedly negative.

Xi Jinping, on assuming the presidency (March 2013), unleashed the largest anti-corruption campaign of China's modern era, arresting more than 120 high-level party leaders and over 100,000 lower-level government officials. Observers debated whether Xi's efforts stemmed from a genuine desire to curb corruption or were a purely self-interested attempt to consolidate political power, or a combination of both. Nevertheless, according to the Ash Center survey, Chinese citizens were generally supportive of Xi's actions. While just 35.5% of respondents approved of government efforts to fight corruption in 2011, that figure had risen to 71.5% by 2016 (Table 6). Likewise, the proportion of citizens who viewed Chinese government officials as generally "clean" increased from 35.4% in 2011, to 44.2% in 2015, and 65.3% in 2016 (Table 7). Thus, while Chinese public may not have been clear about Xi's precise political motivations, by 2016 the majority of respondents felt that government efforts to control corruption were having an effect and that things were moving in the right direction.

The case of corruption shows that, even during periods of increasing overall satisfaction, citizen attitudes towards the government's handling of specific issues can deviate significantly. By the end of the Hu-Wen era, there was a general sense that, despite progress in spurring economic development and raising living standards, efforts to promote good governance had stalled, or even regressed. Only after the central government signaled its commitment in the form of a mass campaign with real consequences for powerful individuals did public opinion begin to shift in a more positive direction.

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Policy Area 3: The Environment - An Informed Citizenry Focused on Health

During the first three decades of reform, the CCP prioritized economic growth, largely at the expense of China's natural environment. Today, air pollution alone causes more than 1 million premature Chinese deaths per year, and in urban areas less than 1% of the population breathes air considered safe by European Union standards. In the countryside, more than 300 million citizens lack access to clean drinking water, and more than one-quarter of major rivers in China have been classified as "unsuitable for human contact." In addition to air and water pollution, China suffers from extensive soil contamination, deforestation, desertification, and habitat loss. Although the Chinese government has made real progress in recent years crafting policies to address these problems, environmental issues are still the number one cause of citizen complaints and mass protests in China.[3]

Our 2016 survey reveals that Chinese citizens are most concerned about air pollution, with 34% naming it as the most important environmental issue. This is followed in perceived importance by food safety (19%), climate change (16%), and water pollution (12%). Sorted by place of residency, urban dwellers are disproportionally likely to view climate change as the most serious environmental issue, while rural villagers are more likely to be concerned about water pollution (Table 8). Interestingly, 75% of all respondents believe that climate change is real and caused by human behavior, and nearly 70% support enacting a nation-wide emissions tax; far high-

3 Our survey did not begin to ask detailed questions about environmental issues until 2015. Also, in addition to the 2015 and 2016 iterations of the survey, which were administered in January and March respectively, the Ash Center sponsored a separate survey composed entirely of environmental questions, which was administered in June 2016. Although the June 2016 survey asked many of the same questions and was implemented by the same domestic polling agency, the survey locations chosen were different than those used in the 2003-2016 iterations of the survey. Therefore, this section focuses mainly on the results of the June 2016 environmental survey and avoids direct comparisons with the other Ash Center surveys.

er percentages than rates found in the United States.

When asked to compare their current local air quality to five years ago, 49% said it had worsened, 29% said it was roughly the same, while only 22% thought that it had improved. Chinese citizens are much more optimistic looking five years ahead- 43% expect their local air quality to get better, 31% expect it to stay the same, and only 26% expect it to get worse (Table 9).

Table 8: Public Perceptions of the Most Serious Environ-mental Issues (June 2016)

Environmental Issue Area	City	Town	Village	Total
Air Pollution	34.6	35	31.2	33.5
Food Safety	19.7	18.8	18.7	19.1
Climate Change	19.3	13.9	15.7	16.9
Water Pollution	9.8	10.9	16.6	12.4
Habitat Destruction / Loss of Land and Wildlife	2.9	3.2	3.4	3.2
All Are Equally Serious	13.5	17.6	13.6	14.4
None of the Above Are Serious	0.2	0.6	0.8	0.5

Overall, on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the highest), mean perceived local air quality was 6.28. However, with a standard deviation of 1.74, there was significant variation around this average. One of the main goals of the June 2016 survey was to test whether differences in perceived local air quality could be explained by fluctuations in actual, measured air quality at the local level. To do this, daily recorded AQI (air quality index) values from each city were matched with perceived air quality data using the exact date and location of each survey response. The results show a clear correlation between daily measured AQI and citizen perceptions of local air quality on that same day, indicating that subjective assessments of air pollution in China have a strong basis in reality (Figure 1). Measured AQI is also negatively correlated with reported life satisfaction, although in this instance deviations from average air quality are more important than absolute levels. In other words, Chinese citizens report increased life satisfaction on days when local air quality is better than annual averages and decreased life satisfaction on days when local air quality is worse than annual averages (Figure 2). This suggests that, although people in China are fairly accurate in gauging local air quality, they become habituated to pollution over time, only displaying an emotional response when measured air quality deviates significantly from typical levels.

Figure 1: The Effect of Observed Daily AQI on Perceived Local Air Quality

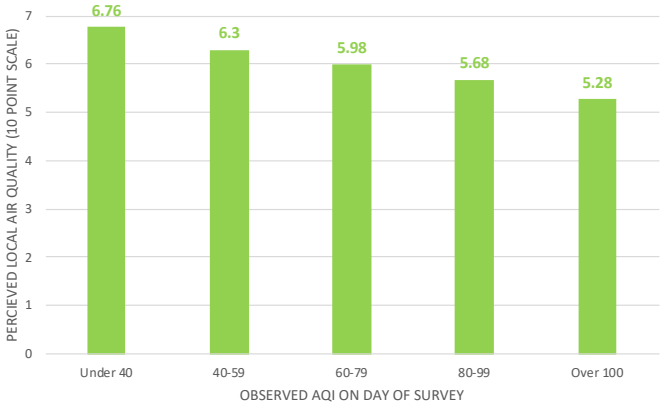
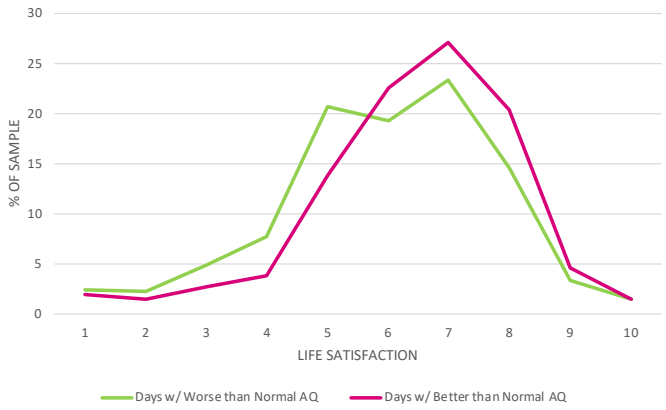


Table 9: Public Perceptions of Local Air Quality (June 2016)

		Compared to Five Years Ago			Expectations Five Years from Now		
Mean	SD	Better	Worse	Same	Better	Worse	Same
6.28	1.74	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Figure 2: The Effect of Air Pollution Deviations on Life Satisfaction



Respondents who had a negative view of local air quality were also more likely to give the government poor marks for its handling of environmental issues. OLS regression shows that, controlling for a wide range of other variables, a one point drop in perceived local air quality (measured on a 10 point scale) produces a 0.08 drop in satisfaction with local environmental governance (measured on a 4 point scale). This finding indicates that ordinary people in China attribute the problem of pollution (at least in part) to specific human factors, and do not simply view it as a random act of nature or the inevitable price of economic progress. Perceptions of local air quality are largely influenced by what residents see outside their own windows making it difficult for local officials to divert blame by engaging in political stunts or controlling access to information.

By itself, poor air quality itself does not necessarily lead to widespread citizen action. While air pollution is associated with negative perceptions of environmental governance, neither objective nor perceived measures of local air quality directly affect individuals' willingness to lodge environmental complaints or engage in protests. Table 10 shows that only around 10% of respondents had ever filed an official complaint or petition related to air pollution, and two-thirds of those surveyed stated they would consider participating in a hypothetical air pollution protest in their city (20% said they would "definitely participate," while another 47% said they would "likely consider" protesting). However, these rates were not directly affected by real or perceived air quality, and were instead more dependent on other, more individualized, personal opinion variables. In particular, respondents were much more likely to lodge complaints or protest if they felt that air pollution had negatively impacted their own health or the health of their immediate family members (approximately 30% of the sample). Reliance on internet news was likewise correlated with a higher willingness to protest, suggesting that tech-savvy individuals with more access to independent media sources are more likely to challenge the status quo.

Table 10: Determinants of the Willingness to Complain or Participate in Environmental Protests

		Overall	Health Impacts		Internet News	
			Yes	No	Yes	No
Lodged Complaint	Yes	10.7%	17.9%	6.3%	11.3%	8.7%
	No	89.3%	82.1%	93.7%	88.7%	91.3%
Willing to Protest	Definitely Yes	19.7%	31.2%	12.6%	21.2%	17.5%
	Likely Yes	46.8%	48.6%	45.7%	49.0%	44.4%
	Likely No	25.8%	16.5%	31.5%	23.4%	28.0%
	Definitely No	7.7%	3.7%	10.2%	6.4%	10.1%

Taken together, these results yield important information for local and central government officials hoping to maintain popular support in the face of extensive environmental degradation. On the one hand, Chinese citizens are able to gauge local-scale air pollution accu-

rately and tend to blame the government for declines in their overall life satisfaction. However, they also show that perceptions of poor air quality alone are not enough to cause Chinese citizens to complain or protest, and that such actions are primarily driven by individuals' perceptions of direct health threats to themselves or their immediate family members.

Conclusion: Continued Resilience through Earned Legitimacy

Although China is certainly not immune from severe social and economic challenges, there is little evidence to support the idea that the CCP is losing legitimacy in the eyes of its people. In fact, our survey shows that, across a wide variety of metrics, by 2016 the Chinese government was more popular than at any point during the previous two decades. On average, Chinese citizens reported that the government's provision of healthcare, welfare, and other essential public services was far better and more equitable than when the survey began in 2003. Also, in terms of corruption, the drop in satisfaction between 2009 and 2011 was completely erased, and the public appeared generally supportive of Xi Jinping's widely-publicized anti-corruption campaign. Even on the issue of the environment, where many citizens expressed dissatisfaction, the majority of respondents expected conditions to improve over the next several years. For each of these issues, China's poorer, non-coastal residents expressed equal (if not even greater) confidence in the actions of government than more privileged residents. As such, there was no real sign of burgeoning discontent among China's main demographic groups, casting doubt on the idea that the country was facing a crisis of political legitimacy.

With the onset of Covid-19 and the economic damage and social dislocation that it caused, the survey reveals that the CCP cannot take the political support of its people for granted. Although state censorship and propaganda are widespread, our survey reveals that citizen perceptions of governmental performance respond most to real, measurable changes in individuals' material well-being. Satisfaction and support must be consistently reinforced. For Chinese leaders at all levels, this is a double-edged sword. Citizens who have grown accustomed to increases in living standards and service provision will expect such improvements to continue, and citizens who praise government officials for effective policies may blame them when policy failures affect them or their family members directly. While our survey reinforces the narrative of CCP resilience, our data also point to specific areas in which citizen satisfaction could decline in today's era of slowing economic growth and continued environmental degradation.

Courtesy Dong Fang via Wikimedia Commons

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