POLITICAL SELF-CENSORSHIP IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES:

THE SPATIAL-TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF TROUBLE

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Abstract

We theorize and measure a situational self-censorship that varies across spatial-temporal political contexts. Schelling's insight that distinctive times and places function as focal points has generated a literature explaining how activists coordinate for protest in authoritarian states. Our population of interest is not activists but ordinary citizens, who, we assume, are risk-averse and prefer to avoid trouble. Focal points rally activists for political expression. By contrast, we theorize, ordinary citizens exercise greater than usual political self-censorship at focal points, to avoid punishment as troublemakers. We test our theory by leveraging geotagged smartphone posts of Beijing netizens on Weibo, China's version of Twitter, to estimate precisely if, when, where, and how citizens engage in political talk. We use a difference-in-differences strategy that compares smartphone political talk at and away from focal places before and after focal times. We find netizens self-censor political talk significantly more at potentially troublesome spatial-temporal focal points.

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1. Introduction

Self-censorship is about the tradeoff between expression and avoiding trouble. An important argument in political science is that authoritarian states spawn a culture of political self-censorship: fearing punishment from the state for airing potentially objectionable views, citizens engage in preference falsification in their political talk or opt out of such talk altogether (Arendt 1973; Solzhenitsyn 1975; Havel 1985; Kuran 1995; Wedeen 1999). How does this model fare after 1989? In that year, disgruntled citizens in Soviet-bloc countries saw, in increasingly larger crowds, how large was the population of like-minded malcontents (Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994)—and ushered in regime collapse. We focus on China, a powerful authoritarian state that survived its challenge of large insistent crowds in 1989 and has so far adroitly managed the social media challenge that helped coordinate uprisings against authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010 and 2011.

We begin with Schelling's (1960) recognition that times and places can function as focal points, facilitating coordination without communication, an insight that has inspired numerous studies of collective action in authoritarian settings (e.g., Beissinger 2002; Javeline 2003; Tucker 2007), including China (e.g., Truex 2019; Carter and Carter 2020). In the literature, focal points are rallying points that coordinate activists, who show up, even as focal times and places reduce surprise and thereby raise the stakes for political expression (Carter and Carter 2020). Our population of interest is not activists but ordinary citizens who, we assume, are politically risk-averse. Given Beijing's social order obsession and preparedness to repress crowds, we assume they do what they can to *not* show up when and where the stakes

are high. As Beijing also prefers they not show up, it does what it can to cue them about when and where a crowd is a greater than usual concern.

We assume some amount of baseline self-censorship, even as Beijing now gives ordinary citizens substantial latitude for political expression. We theorize and measure the greater than usual amount of self-censorship by ordinary citizens at the intersection of focal times and places. Beijing's Tiananmen Square on the recent thirtieth anniversary of the June 4 crushing of protests is an example of an extremely sensitive and highly risky spatial-temporal intersection. At such times and places, ordinary citizens know the state is especially watchful for planned protests, spontaneous demonstrations, public activism, or a chance utterance that may "stir up" a crowd. They self-censor their political talk because they perceive a greater than usual risk of state punishment as participants in a crowd of troublemakers.

The situationally aware self-censorship we analyze here, which we call *focal-point self-censorship*, is intuitive and broadly relevant beyond the Chinese context, but as yet untheorized, much less measured. We measure it by leveraging geotagged smartphone posts of Beijing netizens on Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter.[1] We design our research to test whether netizens who find themselves at the intersection of politically focal times and places, where they anticipate the state is particularly alert to the threat of a crowd, self-censor their political talk more than at other times and places.

China's population of netizens numbers over 800 million, of whom 98 percent access

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[1] By netizens, we mean internet users who go online more than occasionally. The term dates from the mid-1990s. Geotagged posts are those posted on a device with software enabled to identify the location of the device at the time of posting.

the internet on smartphones (Russell 2018). They are relatively savvy (Lei 2011) and younger, better educated, and more urban than the Chinese population generally (Stockmann and Luo, 2019). In principle, we think our theory can apply to self-censorship of other forms of political communication in the broadest sense: face-to-face and telephone conversations, group messaging, even unfurled banners, for example.[2] We turn to social media because geotagged posts solve a difficult measurement problem, providing the leverage to test our theory. Posts that are geotagged place political talk in a highly precise spatial-temporal context. Chinese citizens engage in some amount of self-censorship, online and offline (Jiang and Yang 2016; Roberts 2018), but researchers do observe undisguised political talk, online and offline, including talk that expresses disapproval of the state to a potentially huge audience of strangers in cyberspace (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014). In normal circumstances, Roberts (2018) finds, the millions of ordinary netizens who engage in "off-limits discussion" pay little cost in state punishment.[3]

China is a good choice to study for several reasons. The state has invested in a high capacity for surveillance and repression (Wang and Minzner 2015; Liang et al. 2018), which it exercises to punish political expression its rulers view as threatening to stability. At the

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[2] It would not apply to encrypted messaging, such as Signal or Telegram, used recently by Hong Kong protesters, much to the frustration of the Chinese state.

[3] As with other channels of political expression, the Chinese state distinguishes between ordinary citizens and those it considers potential troublemakers. For example, celebrity microbloggers, with millions of followers, can be punished with three years in prison if netizens view their "false rumors" 5,000 times or forward them 500 times.

same time, protests in China are not so unfamiliar as to be beyond concern for ordinary

citizens who wish to avoid trouble. Most recently, for example, Zhang and Pan (2019)

identify over 100,000 "collective action events,"[4] distributed across 96 percent of China's

counties, occurring from 2010 to 2017. We choose Beijing because we are interested in

political talk. As Leibold (2011) and many others note, much Chinese online expression is for

entertainment. Political talk is a small proportion of online talk, but netizens in the political

capital are relatively politically attentive. They more closely follow political events and are

more attuned to the official climate for public expression.[5] Beijing is also the second highest-

density population of microbloggers in China (Fu and Chau 2013).

Our test allows us to estimate very precisely, in both time and space, if, when, where,

and how citizens make choices to engage in political talk. We retrieve the population of

geotagged smartphone posts that Beijing netizens posted on Sina Weibo over a 354-day

period in 2014–2015, focusing our main analysis on 847,564 of them posted 24 hours before

and 24 hours after 22 focal political events. We identify with high precision the impact of

time and place on self-censorship with a difference-in-differences analytical strategy that

compares smartphone political talk at and away from identified focal places before and after

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[4] This refers to any episodic, collective event among makers of claims and their targets

when: (1) targets are political or economic powerholders; (2) claims, if realized, affect the

interests of at least one of the claimants; and (3) claimant action is a contentious event with a

public physical presence involving three or more people (Zhang and Pan 2018, 8).

[5] For example, in an examination of Sina News online stories from late 2012 to mid-

2015, we find Beijing netizens comment more than do netizens from any other region.

the events.

Our findings support our theory of focal-point self-censorship. Independently, focal times and places can stimulate political talk—but at their intersections, ordinary citizens in Beijing self-censor their political expression significantly more than away from them. Their situational self-censorship is sophisticated. They self-censor more at the intersection of three choices: engagement in some forms of talk, at some times, in some places.

This study is the first, to our knowledge, to take seriously the idea that the degree to which individuals self-censor varies across temporal and spatial contexts. Contextualization returns the issue to the regime-spanning work of Kuran (1995), which theorizes self-censorship varies by circumstance, with each circumstance having its own nuance. For us, context is intersections of time and place that raise the stakes for trouble in a high-capacity authoritarian state. We show that ordinary Chinese pay attention to this context because the state anticipates others in society may pay attention, in ways that challenge order. In so doing, we contribute to the understanding of political participation, connecting activist mobilization with avoidance of activism by ordinary citizens. Secondly, our focus on ordinary citizens suggests an argument and yields findings different from the stringent self-censorship described in Link (2002) and Stern and Hassid (2012), for example. Accounts like theirs focus on the population of journalists, lawyers, and prominent intellectuals that the Chinese state has long targeted as potentially threatening. Self-censorship, we argue and find, is different for ordinary citizens, who are less constrained in political expression than are public opinion leaders. Lastly, we offer a method to test our theory of focal-point self-censorship: we analyze geotagged smartphone posts, which allows us to situate political talk accurately in time and

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space. More traditional approaches that analyze social media identify clusters of posts to analyze volume bursts, directing attention to points in time, or identify keywords, directing attention to communities distinguished by content. Our approach brings geography to the study of social media in a rigorous way that can easily be taken up by other researchers in other contexts to study other questions.

2. Political Expression and Social Order in China

In the classic model of self-censorship under authoritarianism (Arendt 1973; Solzhenitsyn 1975; Havel 1985; Kuran 1995; Wedeen 1999), citizens routinely falsify preferences or self-censor due to pervasive fear of state punishment.[6] In post-1989 China, the climate for sincere, even disapproving, political expression is less constraining. As we summarize below, Beijing encourages ordinary citizens to voice complaints, does not bluntly censor social media, and even tolerates some collective action. At present, it can afford to do so: existing literature documents strong regime performance legitimacy (Lu 2014; Dickson 2016) and high levels of trust in Beijing (Li 2004, 2008).

Beijing aims to extract accurate and timely "voluntarily provided information" (Dimitrov 2015) about everyday livelihood grievances and problems of local governance. Its

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[6] Situational self-censorship is a particular form of preference falsification when the cost of speaking up links to heightened fear of being associated with opposition to the state and inefficient information about how the state might choose its targets of punishment. As Kuran (1995) notes, the quantity of preference falsification varies by different situations at different levels. We explore how it varies when citizens perceive heightened risks imposed by troublemakers.

system of bureaucratic rewards incentivizes local state responsiveness to complaints that ordinary citizens express through new conduits, such as online petition platforms that go right to Beijing and electronic letters to mailboxes of local leaders.[7] The state also engages in online consultation campaigns that solicit public input, even disapproving input, on policy proposals (Truex 2014; Chen and Xu 2017; Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019). These channels reduce the information poverty (Wintrobe 1998; Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009) that is endemic to a state without electoral accountability or guaranteed press freedoms.

Similarly, the state relies on social media to provide valuable real-time intelligence about underlying sentiments of the mass public. Roberts (2018) finds that, among ordinary netizens, blunt censorship risks triggering pushback or excessive, cleverer self-censorship. This deprives the state of information. Consequently, despite its advanced technological capacity to monitor and punish expression on social media (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014), Beijing reserves its fear-based strategies for identifiable troublemakers. Public opinion leaders like journalists and rights lawyers are more likely to be punished than are ordinary netizens, even for online posts with identical content (Roberts 2018).

The same strategy is observed in responses to collective action incidents. Most protests are highly geographically concentrated, fairly short in duration, and target particular local officials or specific abuses of power (Cai 2010; Chen 2012; Qin, Stromberg, and Wu 2017). They can provide information about the performance of local state agents (Lorentzen

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[7] There is now a significant literature on this in political science. See, for example, Chen, Pan, and Xu (2016); Distelhorst and Hou (2017); Meng, Pan, and Yang (2017); Jiang, Meng, and Zhang (2019).

2013), and timely response can prevent minor disruptions from developing into broader

unrest. The most common drivers for protest are concrete, localized problems, like land

seizures, housing demolition, labor disputes, or environmental pollution (Ong and Han 2019).

However, the authoritarian Chinese state is obsessed with social order. A key goal of

the post-1989 strategy is to elicit intelligence about public sentiments to address localized

problems before unrest explodes or diffuses. The underlying social order priority is plainly

evident in propaganda, education, policing, and legal infrastructure. It is also reflected in

bureaucratic career incentives and budgetary allocations, although these are less evident to

ordinary citizens. In its propaganda, Beijing has for several decades described "social order"

or "social stability maintenance" as a top priority of itself, as well as essential to economic

growth. Indeed, after the largescale protests of 1989, which caught the regime by surprise,

social order was made an "imperative target" for local officials (Wang and Minzer 2015): this

means major episodes of social instability nullify good performance on all other dimensions

on which officials are assessed for career advancement. Budgetary allocations for social

stability maintenance were boosted after 1989 so that they have in some years exceeded the

national defense budget. Most obvious to ordinary citizens, Beijing tremendously augmented

the capacity of the domestic security force after 1989, so that it need not rely again on

wartime instruments—military forces with tanks and machine guns—to disperse a crowd.

Officers of the People's Armed Police are now prepared to deter and manage trouble. Beijing

now also often employs and widely publicizes new legal instruments to repress troublesome

crowds: for example, simply participating in "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" is an

offense in Chinese Criminal Law (1997, Article 290), punishable by up to five years

imprisonment. The state has used this offense, rather than objectionable political expression

per se, to punish scholars, rights lawyers, and even ordinary citizens.

In sum, there is space for political expression in post-1989 China, but also serious state punishment for it. We assume, therefore, that ordinary citizens normally exercise some amount of self-censorship when they express themselves politically in public. Also, a crowd mobilized along a dimension that is not obviously a concrete or localized grievance is, for Beijing, a social order threat. We assume Beijing generally prefers to prevent the formation of crowds, especially such crowds; we also assume its obsession with social order and preparedness to repress such crowds are now common knowledge.

3. Theory: Focal-Point Self-Censorship

Schelling's (1960) insight that particular times or places can function as focal points, facilitating coordination in settings where communication is difficult, provides context for understanding political activism in authoritarian states. For example, elections in electoral authoritarian regimes are temporal focal points that can ignite protests against electoral fraud (Beissinger 2002; Javeline 2003; Tucker 2007).[8] Centrally located public squares are focal places for protests: Tahir Square in Egypt's Arab Spring uprising in 2011 is an example. In China, Carter and Carter (2020) find the odds of protest activity on anniversaries of failed democracy movements are 30 percent higher than on a typical day and are twice as likely to be repressed compared to other protests. The protests often target symbols of state authority.

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[8] Similarly, Reese, Ruby, and Pape (2017) show that temporal focal points can coordinate activists to refrain from political violence. They find important Islamic holidays witness declines in violence by as much as 41 percent in Islamic societies and find no systematic evidence for surges of violence associated with any Islamic holiday.

Truex (2019) finds that local dates on the Chinese "dissident calendar" account for more than 20 percent of detentions from 1998 to 2014.

Focal points are rallying points that coordinate activists, who show up for political expression even as the contextual knowledge pointing to focal times and places reduces the benefit of surprise and thereby raises the stakes for expression (Carter and Carter 2020). Our population of interest is not activists but ordinary citizens, who, we assume, are politically risk-averse and mostly prefer to avoid trouble. Knowing the state's social order priority and readiness to repress crowds and troublemakers, they prefer to do what they can to *not* show up for political expression when the stakes are high. We theorize and measure the greater than usual amount of political self-censorship they exercise at the intersection of focal times and places, where the state is unusually alert to the threat of crowd formation. To avoid punishment for political expression, ordinary citizens prefer to know these intersections; similarly, to deter such expression, the authoritarian state prefers ordinary citizens to know them.[9] Simply put, where and when the state is unusually alert to the trouble of a crowd, ordinary citizens are unusually alert to do what they can to distinguish themselves from political troublemakers. We theorize they do this by practicing greater than usual self-censorship in political expression.

3.2. Focal Times and Places

We define *focal times* as events with the potential to coordinate public sentiments

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[9] We can think of an exception. The state may prefer not to publicize anniversaries of politically sensitive events not widely known among the mass public; this denies to ordinary citizens the knowledge to self-censor at focal places at such times.

against the state and bring crowds into the streets. The usual state vigilance against public assembly is intensified at such times. The existing literature focuses on anniversaries, which activists exploit to coordinate protests. For example, China's first major protest against the communist authorities occurred on April 6, 1976, the traditional day for ancestral tomb sweeping, when Beijing citizens took to the streets to mourn the newly deceased premier and denounce radical power holders. Best known now is June 4, 1989, China's most politically sensitive anniversary, marking the suppression of protests that brought the capital to a standstill for weeks. These are focal points in Schelling's (1960) sense of the term. They can coordinate action because they have shared contextual meaning and are known in advance. Quite apart from these events are unexpected incidents that can spark spontaneous unrest and bring into the open some broad public discontent on issues that are not concrete and localized. For example, Wallace and Weiss (2015) study explosions of Chinese nationalist protests in 2012, prompted by the Japanese government's decision to purchase Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands in the East China Sea. Citizens took to the streets more in cities that figured prominently in the history of Chinese wars against Japanese aggression.

We define *focal places* as the physical addresses of the authoritarian state, such as spaces that accommodate political monuments and government buildings. In China, political activists have staged the few major collective action events to directly challenge their leaders there. For example, in 1999, believers from the now-banned spiritual movement Falungong chose Xinhuamen in front of Zhongnanhai, the compound where China's top leaders live and work, to stage a protest-meditation. Tiananmen Square in Beijing was the main site of the April 6, 1976 protest as well as the epicenter of the 1989 protests. These places typically feature overhead cameras and armed forces, conspicuous reminders of state capacity for

surveillance and repression. At focal places, the state is especially sensitive to the presumed threat of any public assembly it has not itself organized. This is not only because some of these places have historically functioned as Schelling-type focal points to coordinate protests, but also because officials live, work, and meet there. The crowd is more of a threat when it assembles at the state's doorstep.

Our theory is about a particular form of situational self-censorship: greater than usual political self-censorship by ordinary citizens at the intersection of focal times and places. We theorize about these intersections because the authoritarian state social order priority has everything to do with crowd control—and crowds imply spatial-temporal intersections, even if not all crowds (e.g., shoppers in a mall on a usual Sunday) are necessarily threatening to the state. We theorize that ordinary citizens self-censor their political expression more than usually at these intersections because they know the state is more watchful than usual then and there for coordinated protests, spontaneous demonstrations, public activism, or a chance remark that may "stir up" a crowd. They self-censor more because they perceive a greater than usual risk of state punishment as part of a crowd of troublemakers. They self-censor as an overt protective mechanism, drawing a line to help the state distinguish them from troublemakers.[10]

We design our research to test the proposition that ordinary citizens self-censor

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[10] Psychological studies that model self-disclosure as a cognitive process motivated by subjective risk assessment (e.g., Omarzu 2000; Afifi, Olson, and Armstrong 2005; Afifi and Steuber 2009) find several types of protection motives involved, but self-protection is often the most risk-inducing motive for self-censorship.

political talk more than usually at focal spatial-temporal intersections. Specifically, we hypothesize, they are more likely to self-censor politically disapproving talk.[11] We turn to geotagged social media posts in our analysis not from a distinct interest in political expression on social media but because it solves a difficult measurement problem.

3.2 Hypotheses

The expected cost of being identified as part of a crowd of troublemakers can be high. For example, in 1999, Falungong used cellphones and the internet (Shirk 2011) to organize their protest-meditation. In the ensuing crackdown, the authorities punished non-believers who had had contact with Falungong practitioners, including landlords and hoteliers who had rented rooms to them (Human Rights Watch 1999, 2000). June 1989 provides a better-known example: tanks and army trucks moving along Beijing's broad boulevard toward Tiananmen Square used their fire in a way that did not distinguish protesters from mere bystanders. Even for citizens who may lack specific knowledge of examples of punishment by association, the expected cost is clear enough in publicity about detention and criminal punishment of individuals whose political expression "stirs up" a crowd. The state priority of social order is common knowledge—as is its capacity and willingness to punish any suspected connection

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[11] An observational equivalent, consistent with our theory, is that citizens who voice political disapproval are more likely to avoid focal places at focal times. We note that opting out is a strong form of online self-censorship. Most importantly, it differs from the playful phrasing, often employing homonyms, that Chinese netizens employ to evade state censorship by keyword blocking. For continuously updated examples, see the Berkeley-based China Digital Times at www.chinadigitaltimes.net/china/sensitive-words-series/.

with crowd action lacking a concrete localized target. We theorize that the understanding that this is punishable figures into citizen choices about when and where to exercise more than usual self-censorship.

H1: Ordinary citizens in authoritarian states self-censor their *political disapproval* more than usually at the intersection of politically focal times and politically focal places.

The Chinese state is on guard against talk that threatens social order, it seems, without distinction between disruptive crowds and unplanned shows of public support (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). We also test a stronger version of our main hypothesis, about talk that is political but *not* disapproving.

H2: Ordinary citizens in authoritarian states self-censor their *political talk* more than usually at the intersection of politically focal times and politically focal places.

We illustrate these theoretical expectations in Figure 1. As noted above, we assume ordinary citizens exercise some underlying amount of self-censorship in political expression, for fear of state punishment. This amount can vary situationally.[12] Independently, focal times or focal places can depress or stimulate political expression, but this does not imply the absence of self-censorship. We leave this baseline amount of self-censorship untheorized and unmeasured.[13] We measure and analyze a theorized depressing effect on political talk of focal

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[12] It can also vary systematically by individual characteristics, which we do not consider here. See Bar-Tal (2017).

[13] For example, one line of theory suggests displays of authoritarian power can

FIGURE 1. POLITICAL SELF-CENSORSHIP IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES

		Focal Time	
		Before	**After**
Focal Place	**Away From**	**baseline** classic self-censorship of some content	classic self-censorship + some untheorized event-channeling effect
	At	classic self-censorship + some untheorized place-priming effect	**H1, H2** all effects in other cells + focal-point self-censorship

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themselves inhibit political expression by inspiring fear or awe, even if the authoritarian icons are "so pervasive and ordinary" (Bush et al. 2016) that their audience does not process them consciously. Ethnographic (Wedeen 1999), survey (Huang 2015), and experimental (Bush et al. 2016) studies suggest the authoritarian investment in various sorts of iconography in fact fails to promote attitudes of support, but can produce behavioral compliance. We do not test this theory explicitly, but our findings do not lend support to it.

intersections.

3.3. Difference-in-Differences Strategy

Our difference-in-differences strategy is not the same as a difference-in differences comparison of group-level choices (Angrist and Pischke 2008, 227–233).[14] We distinguish empirically between focal-point self-censorship and some unmeasured amount of baseline classic self-censorship by directly comparing individual self-censorship of political talk in circumstances in which only baseline self-censorship at focal times *or* focal places applies with circumstances in which the focal-point self-censorship model must also be considered (i.e., the intersection of focal times and places). To the extent that focal-point self-censorship is pronounced, it should exert a conditional effect on the general trend of online talk immediately after focal times at focal places.

4. Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we want to compare self-censorship in political talk at and away from focal places at ordinary times and at times that ordinary citizens understand as politically sensitive.

4.1. Netizens on Sina Weibo

To observe political talk in different locations, we analyze posts on Sina Weibo,

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[14] The difference-in-differences design requires stronger identifying assumptions: in the absence of treatment, online talk under treatment and control circumstances should follow "parallel paths" (Abadie 2005; Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). We test this assumption in a placebo test, which confirms that pre-conditioned factors are not a concern.

China's version of Twitter, the ideal vehicle for netizens to exchange political views with a large audience. Its potential challenge to the state is more destabilizing than that posed by traditional social media like bulletin board systems or blogs. Unlike these media or the now nearly ubiquitous messaging system WeChat, access on Sina Weibo is not restricted to a defined audience. Anything expressed on it can be easily, rapidly, broadly—in short, virally—transmitted through reposting. For the same reasons, Sina Weibo is a good window for the Chinese state to access public opinion.

The posts in our dataset have already undergone whatever censorship Sina exercises. Sina integrates concerns of China's leaders into its business routines at the same time as it pursues user accounts to bring in more revenues from advertising. It employs its own labor force of censors (Epstein 14 May 2011) and operates its own fine-grained automated filtering software to rapidly delete posts with politically sensitive content (Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith 2012; Fu, Chan, and Chau 2013; Ng 2013; Zhu et al. 2013). Sina's censorship also discriminates across users. For example, it targets users who post frequently about politics (Fu, Chan, and Chao 2013; Zhu et al. 2013).

Overall, however, deletion of posts on the Sina Weibo platform is less than might be expected in an authoritarian state with an awesome censorship capacity. For example, the University of Hong Kong Weiboscope data reveal a censorship rate below 1 percent for the project's collection of Sina Weibo posts posted by some 350,000 popular microbloggers.[15]

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[15] We compute this from Weiboscope data at http://weiboscope.jmsc.hku.hk/datazip/. For geotagged posts in Weiboscope data, we find only dozens of posts get censored from millions of posts.

The rate is undoubtedly far lower for the ordinary citizens we study here.

4.2. Geotagged Posts

We retrieve and analyze geotagged Sina Weibo posts originating in Beijing for a 354-day period in 2014–2015. Geotagged posts are those posted from smartphones that can precisely identify the location of the citizen at the time of posting. Social scientists use them to study collective action (Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017) or political partisanship (Chen and Rohla 2018). Only geotagging permits us to identify whether or not posts originate from places that, we theorize, can inhibit political expression in an authoritarian state. The location we obtain from geotagged posts is from GPS on smartphones, thus highly precise. Its positional error is 2 to 25 meters (Zandbergen and Barbeau 2011), enabling us to pinpoint accurately the distribution of smartphone talk.

The focus on geotagged posts has other advantages too. First, revealed locations are authentic (not self-reported) and confirm that posts are in fact sent in Beijing. Chinese netizens posting from overseas often self-report a geographic origin within China; including these posts can seriously bias analysis of political talk in Chinese social media.[16] Second, paid online commentators are unlikely to be the source of geotagged posts. Mobile devices are a clumsy means to post batches of propaganda; moreover, high-volume repeated posts from the same location effectively identify paid commentators as such, defeating their purpose. Also,

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[16] We have no precise estimate for all China, but we note that among users in the University of Hong Kong Weiboscope 2012 database who actually geotag as overseas, only 29 percent self-report as overseas. This excludes self-reported Hong Kong netizens.

paid online commentators tend to focus more on traditional social media.[17] In the trove of paid commentator posts analyzed in King, Pan, and Roberts (2017) and Pan and Chen (2018), for example, there are no geotagged posts. Third, because of mobile device restrictions on reposting, geotagged posts are not reposts. In their representative national sample of Sina Weibo users, Fu and Chau (2013) find reposts (i.e., from non-mobile devices) account for 61 percent of posts. Finally, posts from mobile devices are from authentic users, not bots that now flood Chinese cyberspace with automated advertising messages.

4.3. Focal Times

We want to analyze choices by ordinary citizens to self-censor political talk at focal places because of the perceived sensitivity of particular times. We identify 22 events in our 354-day study period that, we argue, ordinary citizens can understand clearly as focal points: relatively politically sensitive events that can prompt planned or spontaneous protest. We choose high-level political meetings, major official political celebrations, and anniversaries that evoke anti-Japanese nationalism—all events that occur annually. In addition, we choose events that citizens consume in media as high-alert breaking news. We summarize these focal

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[17] Searching through 4.8 million netizen comments on Sina News online stories from late 2012 through mid-2015, we find 408 Sina Weibo users whose comments on Sina News suggest they are paid commentators: they adopt distinctive nicknames, never make comments that trigger Sina's censors, and make more than 100 positive comments each on stories that focus on sensitive issues of high politics. We find no posts from any of these users in our Sina Weibo database. This exercise and the reasons outlined above make us confident that paid commentators do not figure or figure hardly at all in our dataset.

times in Table 1.

Focal times 1–8 in Table 1 reflect Schelling's (1960) notion of focal points: because of shared context, they can coordinate action by relevant players without communication. The high-level political meetings of communist party and government leaders in Beijing's city center occur annually at around the same time. For Beijing residents especially, the logistical and security arrangements that accompany the arrival from all over China of the thousands of officials who participate in these meetings cannot escape notice. The four anniversaries of wartime incidents, all provocative to varying degrees, are known to any Chinese grade-school student. These can inspire nationalist political expression, which the state considers politically sensitive (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). To these, we add National Day, celebrating the founding of the People's Republic of China. We also include Constitution Day, which, in our period of study, Beijing inaugurated as a national celebration of its political legitimacy. The political sensitivity of these focal times is understood in advance. As described in Section 3, they are associated with protest activity.

By contrast, ordinary citizens cannot anticipate the occurrence of focal times 9–22 in Table 1: these events reach them as strictly controlled breaking news. Most are also unexpected by Beijing.[18] Focal-point self-censorship by ordinary citizens at these high-alert focal times is prompted by explicit state cues about their political sensitivity, reflected in the way news about them is managed. Specifically, the 14 events comprise every incident in our

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[18] The exception is anticorruption enforcement actions, for which Beijing controls the timing. Citizens who avidly consume political gossip may be unsurprised at the actions, but they cannot anticipate their timing.

TABLE 1: FOCAL TIMES AND PLACEBO TIMES

		Event	Time Zero
Focal Times	1	NPC and CPPCC Annual Plenary Sessions	3 March 2015, 00:00
	2	Communist Party Congress Annual Plenary Session	20 October 2014, 00:00
	3	National Day	1 October 2014, 00:00
	4	Inaugural Constitution Day	4 December 2014, 00:00
	5	1937: Lugou Bridge Incident	7 July 2014, 00:00
	6	1945: Victory over Japan	15 August 2014, 00:00
	7	1937: War of Resistance Against Japan	18 September 2014, 00:00
	8	1937: Nanjing Massacre (Inaugural Memorial Day)	13 December 2014, 00:00
	9	Xu Caihou expelled from communist party	30 June 2014, 18:00
	10	Zhou Yongkang placed under investigation	29 July 2014, 18:00
	11	Ling Jihua placed under investigation	22 December 2014, 20:00
	12	Su Rong removed from office	16 February 2015, 11:20
	13	Xu Caihou dies, a revelation of October 2014 arrest	16 March 2015, 00:00
	14	Zhou Yongkang sentenced to life imprisonment	11 June 2015, 18:00
	15	New Year's Eve stampede in Shanghai	1 January 2015, 01:37
	16	Police officer shoots and kills citizen in Qing'an	2 May 2015, 18:37
	17	Protest against railroad line bypassing Linshui	18 May 2015, 08:27
	18	Eastern Star cruise ship capsizes in storm	2 June 2015, 08:51
	19	Guo Meimei Red Cross donations scandal	10 July 2014, 17:06
	20	NPC decides against Hong Kong universal suffrage	31 August 2014, 16:40
	21	21st Century Net "red-envelope journalism" scandal	11 September 2014, 02:10
	22	Ilham Tohti sentenced to life imprisonment	23 September 2014, 13:52
Placebo Times	23	1989: Military Crackdown on Tiananmen Protesters	4 June 2015, 00:00
	24	1999: Falungong Protest-Meditation	25 June 2015, 00:00
	25	1978: Democracy Wall Movement	27 November 2014, 00:00
	26	2008: Charter 08 Petition	10 December 2014, 00:00
	27	1986: NPC Direct Election Movement	19 December 2014, 00:00

Time Zero is the date and time in our 354-day period of study that we use to categorize observations of political talk as either before or after focal and placebo times in our analyses. Events 1–22 are focal times, events 23–27 are placebo times.

study period for which Beijing instructs media to "strictly follow the [communist] party line" in reporting. We use China Digital Times, an independent media organization based in Berkeley, to identify them.[19] The cues about political sensitivity are clear, even if the event is not obviously political (e.g., the capsizing of a cruise ship, causing many fatalities): the state defines political sensitivity. High-alert breaking news items are managed like news of the death of a top leader. The synchronized message contrasts sharply with how Chinese media, especially commercial media, always in search of more consumers, treat other sorts of news items.

For example, focal times 9–14 are highly sensitive events of broad interest to ordinary citizens. These are anticorruption enforcement actions against some of China's most senior officials, big wins in the campaign Xi Jinping launched after he ascended to power in 2012. Given the seniority of the officials purged, news stories risk provoking public cynicism about elite venality and factional infighting. The news was announced at exactly the same time in

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[19] Beijing's instructions to the media are presented on the site's Directives from the Ministry of Truth. See https://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth/. In a less politically sensitive category than the one we use for our analyses are incidents for which Beijing issues "do not sensationalize" instructions. The behavioral implications for media of this cue are less obvious to media consumers. In yet another category are incidents (e.g., Aung San Suu Kyi's June 2015 visit) considered so politically sensitive that Beijing instructs all media to "delete any mention" of their occurrence. We exclude these because we cannot assume ordinary citizens know about incidents that Beijing has used its considerable media control to expunge.

exactly the same wording on all major media and social media sites, which confirms the party's coordination. The announcements were worded in a solemn official tone, strikingly different from the sensationalism of the almost daily reporting about corruption and anticorruption purges at lower levels.

We also conduct a placebo test, using placebo times 23–27 in Table 1. These are the pro-democracy protest anniversaries analyzed in Carter and Carter (2020). Although these anniversaries are familiar to pro-democracy activists, functioning to coordinate new protest efforts, we assume they are unfamiliar to most ordinary citizens.[20] More to the point, we assume most ordinary citizens are unaware of their political sensitivity. Certainly, Beijing avoids public mention of them. We do not expect to observe focal-point self-censorship at the intersection of these times and our focal places.

4.4. Focal Places

Our main tests compare political talk at focal times at and away from three sets of focal places. Our smallest set consists of the three most politically symbolic places in Beijing: Tiananmen Square, Xinhuamen (the south gate in front of Zhongnanhai, where leaders live and work), and the People's Congress Hall (between Tiananmen Square and Xinhuamen). Our second set is a larger set of politically focal places: it includes the addresses of the party-state apparatus. Specifically, to the first set of three focal places, it adds all buildings that house offices of any communist party or government agency or the military.[21]

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[20] The exception is June 4. We run our placebo tests with and without June 4.

[21] We use all the geographical areas where party and government offices under the State Council or Central Committee are located, listed at http://www.scopsr.gov.cn/zybw/, as

Our third set of places comprises a large collection of major public places where crowds normally gather for some non-political purpose—train stations and the airport, for example. The state distinguishes many of these places as politically sensitive in law and also signals their sensitivity by a heightened security presence.[22] For ordinary citizens, these are normally crowded places, but the crowd forms for non-political reasons.[23] That is, while heightened security may be visible, the political focality of these places may be otherwise unclear to ordinary citizens.

In sum, our focal places vary in their salience as politically sensitive places. Tiananmen Square, the Zhongnanhai South Gate, and the Great Hall of the People offer us strong research design integrity because their political sensitivity is unassailable. We test with additional sets of focal places for the following reasons. First, the political places in this first set are exceptional, offering a highly restrictive test of our theory, with overly narrow scope conditions. Expanding the set of political places to include addresses of the party-state

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well as the land used by governmental entities in Gong et al. (2020, 184).

[22] For example, Article 291 of the Chinese Criminal Law specifically focuses on disturbances to public order at railway stations, bus terminals, wharves, civil airports, marketplaces, parks, theaters, cinemas, exhibition halls, sports grounds, or other public places.

[23] We use the four train stations, the Capitol Airport, Peking University, CCTV headquarters, the Olympic stadium, and two major shopping areas (Xidan, Wangfujing); to these we add public transportation facilities (0402 Transportation Stations) as well as parks and greenspace (0505 Parks and Greenspace) in Gong et al. (2020, 184).

improves on the external validity of our test.[24] Second, to test our theory, we use geotagged Sina Weibo posts to compare political talk 24 hours before and after focal times, at and away from focal places. As is the case in social media everywhere, political posts make up a small proportion of all posts, disapproving political posts an even smaller proportion. Increasing the area of focal places increases the number of observations at intersections of theoretical interest. Finally, for our third set of focal places, where we measure spatial focality as public places at which crowds normally form for some non-political purpose, we test the boundaries of our theory: at and away from focal times, crowds can be found at these places; we assume the state is concerned about political expression in any crowd at focal times; we test whether ordinary citizens exercise greater than usual caution in expression as part of the experience of being in a crowd at focal times.

Our set of placebo places is private residences. We expect ordinary citizens to feel most comfortable in political expression at home. We do not expect to observe focal-point self-censorship at the intersection of residences and focal times. We proxy posts from private residences with posts that geotag from residential areas in our dataset.[25]

5. Data

We collect and store some 6.9 million geotagged Sina Weibo posts originating from

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[24] Of course, as some of these addresses may not actually be very sensitive, they introduce measurement error that will tend to attenuate estimated effects, biasing tests against support for our theory.

[25] These are "houses and apartment buildings—places where people live," area 0101 in Gong et al. (2020, 184).

some 1.4 million netizens in Beijing for the 354-day period from 26 June 2014 through 15 June 2015. The Sina Weibo Nearby Application Programing Interface (API) permits us, using a programming interface with customized parameters, realtime access to the Sina Weibo database that stores all such posts.[26] Given the spatial and temporal overlap in our method, described in Appendix A in Supplementary Materials, we are confident that we collected for our period of study all publicly observable geotagged posts in Beijing.

Geotagged posts present a possible threat to external validity: netizens can disable geotagging for any particular post or all posts, although this does not provide locational privacy from Sina or the Chinese state. We assess this threat with two empirical tests, each gauging whether the content of geotagged posts is less political or its political content less disapproving than is non-geotagged post content. First, we draw a random sample of Beijing netizens from Sina Weibo to compare the content of posts posted from those who use geotagging and those who do not use geotagging. We find that geotagged posts are more likely to include political content than are non-geotagged posts, but no more or less likely to include political disapproval. Secondly, we design a series of questions for inclusion in a 2015 probability sample survey of Beijing residents. We analyze political differences between netizens who report having disabled the geotagging function for some Sina Weibo posts and netizens who report never having done so. We find geotagging disabling is not significantly associated with more or less interest in politics or with views on the anticorruption campaign,

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[26] Sina closed the API on May 31, 2017. The feature that permits accessing nearby posts still exists in Weibo smartphone applications, which suggests that the data are accessible (e.g., to Sina), but no longer *publicly* accessible.

which is closely associated with China's top leader, Xi Jinping. These findings indicate geotagging does not threaten the external validity of our analysis. Details of the tests are in Appendix B in Supplementary Materials.

Our theory focuses on political posts, identified in several steps, detailed in Appendix C in Supplementary Materials. We began with semi-automatic content analysis, sorting our 6.9 million posts by applying a collection of 539 "political" Chinese character combinations, in a highly inclusive sense of the term. We then reduced all the character combinations on such lists into the hundreds of keywords that computers can accurately identify. For instance, if the keyword for "party" appears on our lists, then posts containing such expressions as "party member" or "party committee" are labeled political. Our research team then visually examined the content of the 69,881 posts identified in the semi-automatic coding process as political and manually classified them as political, not political, or unclear.[27] Automated content analysis identified about 1 percent of all posts as political. Visual examination by our research team removed about 60 percent of posts from the political category: it identified 31,292 political posts from 21,313 unique Sina Weibo account. These netizens, judging by their followings, are ordinary citizens, not celebrities.[28]

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[27] Our test using 10 percent of posts to verify coding rule reliability found 80 percent intercoder agreement across two coders, with an acceptable Cohen's kappa of 0.61.

[28] Only 4 percent have more than 10,000 followers, 33 percent have fewer than 100 followers, 50 percent have 100−1,000 followers, and 13 percent have 1,000−10,000 followers. For perspective, celebrity microblogger Ren Zhiqiang commanded over 37 million followers when the authorities shut down his account in 2016.

Our estimation approach, previewed in Section 3.3 above, adopts a difference-in-differences strategy. Rather than the familiar panel design, however, we compare populations of netizens located at (and away from) our identified places at two different times: the 24 hours before and after each of the 22 focal times reported in Table 1 above. We choose 24 hours as a news cycle period long enough to elicit enough netizen response for us to analyze and short enough to permit rough comparability broken by the disclosures. Our main analyses compare posts from populations of netizens at our three focal political places, expanded political places, and public places with posts from netizens at all other places.[29]

Netizens sent a total of 847,564 geotagged posts at some time over the 48-hour periods bracketing our 22 focal times. Of these, our research team coded 6,439 as *political posts*. A subset, 1,578 of these, are coded as *disapproving posts*. Posts are coded as disapproving only if they clearly attack the party or government or other political institutions, their leaders, or policies.[30] Political critics usually pull no punches, as illustrated in the posts below:

> [1] Everything about the past of Zhou [Yongkang] is exposed suddenly,
> overnight, he is guilty of unpardonable evil. What about party regulations and
> the law, there is evidence for [violation of] both. How can such an evil type

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[29] We separately run all models controlling for posts originating from party or government buildings in our dataset; results remain unchanged.

[30] For example, complaints about corruption following the anticorruption enforcement actions are insufficient to code posts as disapproving, because the regime has for decades acknowledged corruption as a major threat to its rule. By the same logic, posts that criticize the campaign *are* coded as disapproving.

rise to the Politburo Standing Committee? What a huge flaw in the system,

isn't it a disgrace?

[2] After arresting so many big tigers, are they purged of corruption? Why is

corruption within the party so serious? How did these tigers get promoted?

Who promoted them? Where is the law? Can the Constitution hold anyone

accountable?

6. Analysis

In this section, we present our estimation method and main results as well as results

from placebo tests.

6.1. Estimation Method

To analyze the effect of focal-point self-censorship, we employ an estimator that

shows the differential impact of our identified places on political self-censorship before and

after our 22 politically sensitive events. We analyze the posts Beijing netizens sent in the 48

hours bracketing Time Zero, reported in Table 1, for the 22 focal times. Whatever the effect

(if any) on online talk, the events are exogenous to the focality of places where, we theorize,

netizens fear their political disapproval will identify them as part of any trouble that may

erupt.

We test H1 by distinguishing *disapproving posts* from all other posts and H2 by

distinguishing *political posts* from all other posts, using these terms as defined above. At any

time or place, we can observe a mix of views in posts. The subset of political posts is fairly

small, the subset of disapproving posts smaller. However, the probability of observing

disapproving posts as distinct from other posts or political posts as distinct from other posts

should be continuous and confined in a random range. Under our specified conditions of time

and place, our estimator tests whether these odds ratios differ statistically. We use logistic

regression to estimate the log odds ratios of posts reflecting different opinions:

$$Opinion_i = f(\alpha * P_i + \beta * t_i + \gamma * P_i * t_i)$$

We estimate six models. In one set of models, the dependent variable $Opinion_i$ takes

the value of 1 for disapproving posts and 0 for all other posts; in another set of models, it

takes the value of 1 for political posts and 0 for all other posts. Posts sent 24 hours before

Time Zero are coded 0; posts sent 24 hours after the disclosures are coded 1. The variable t_i

captures time of posting. The variable P_i indicates netizen proximity at the time of posting to

our identified focal places. In the coding of time and place variables, 0 indicates baseline

conditions of pre-Time Zero times and non-focal places, whereas 1 indicates the treatment

conditions of post-Time Zero times and focal places.

We test whether log odds ratios change significantly after focal times or at and near

focal places. In particular, we interact focal places with focal times to produce coefficient γ,

which measures the effect of focal-point self-censorship: netizen concern about being in the

wrong place at the wrong time, which we hypothesize netizens experience at the intersection

of politically focal times and places (H1, H2).

6.2. Results

Summary statistics are in Appendix D in Supplementary Materials. Results are in

Table 2. We interpret them as strong support for our theoretical argument. If only the classic

self-censorship mechanism is operating, then we expect netizen talk, both disapproving talk

and political talk, to change in frequency over time regardless of place. Our empirical findings

indicate this mechanism alone does not capture self-censorship.

TABLE 2: IMPACT OF FOCAL POINTS ON POLITICAL SELF-CENSORSHIP

Models: logistic regression						
	Three Focal Political Places		Expanded Political Places		Public Places	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Disapproving	All Political	Disapproving	All Political	Disapproving	All Political
Focal Times	0.221‡	0.591‡	0.261‡	0.608‡	0.281‡	0.614‡
	(0.051)	(0.026)	(0.052)	(0.027)	(0.055)	(0.028)
Focal Places	1.918‡	2.125‡	0.745‡	0.759‡	0.202*	0.242‡
	(0.306)	(0.157)	(0.134)	(0.074)	(0.098)	(0.054)
Focal Times* Focal Places	−1.974*	−0.788‡	−0.959‡	−0.351‡	−0.519‡	−0.189†
	(0.772)	(0.230)	(0.232)	(0.099)	(0.147)	(0.069)
Intercept	−6.405‡	−5.215‡	−6.437‡	−5.245‡	−6.424‡	−5.238‡
	(0.038)	(0.021)	(0.039)	(0.022)	(0.041)	(0.023)
Log Likelihood	−11,476	−37,501	−11,474	−37,515	−11,481	−37,565
Akaike Information Criterion	22,960	75,010	22,957	75,038	22,970	75,138

Observations: 847,564 geotagged posts from Beijing netizens posted on Sina Weibo 24 hours before and after 22 focal times reported in Table 1

In models 1, 3, and 5, disapproving posts=1, all other posts =0. In models 2, 4, and 6, political posts=1, all other posts=0. Disapproving posts are a subset of political posts.

Focal places in models 1 and 2 are Tiananmen Square, the Zhongnanhai South Gate, and the Great Hall of the People. Focal places in models 3 and 4 are these three places plus all buildings that house communist party or government offices in Beijing. Places in models 5 and 6 are public places where crowds gather in Beijing, as described in Section 4.4.

* $p>.05$, † $p<.01$, ‡ $p<.001$, standard errors in parentheses

In all six models, our 22 focal events independently stimulate political talk, including disapproving talk.[31] This is unsurprising, especially as many of our events are breaking news.[32] In most models, netizens also engage more in political talk, including disapproving talk, at focal places than elsewhere. The effect of place is especially impactful at our set of three focal political places. These places, with their enhanced security presence, may remind onlookers of the repressive authoritarian state; even so, as iconic political places, they inspire political talk. For example, at Tiananmen Square, at non-focal times, netizens post comments like the following, both coded as political but not disapproving:

> [1] The weather is very cold and the police are very mean! So I don't know
> what there is to see here [on the square] when we can see it on television news.
> [2] When I pass [Tiananmen Square], there is such heavy smog looming over
> it. White headlights shine in the gloom, and I feel a chill at my back. But when
> I think of our great Chairman Mao, lying inside [the mausoleum], maybe I
> don't need to be afraid.
> Of theoretical interest are intersections of focal times and places, reflected in

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[31] These are non-linear models, but we also run the regressions without the interaction term and obtain similar findings for both focal times and focal places.

[32] This is not driven by one or a few events, although the six anticorruption enforcement events elicit a relatively high number of disapproving posts. Nor is there an obvious pattern. For example, the New Year's Eve stampede, which is not inherently political, elicits a relatively high number of disapproving posts, but the capsizing of the Eastern Star, also not inherently political, elicits relatively few disapproving posts.

the interaction terms in the shaded row. We estimate the change of netizen talk at focal times as conditioned by focal places and find statistically significant negatively-signed outcomes for disapproving talk (H1, models 1, 3, and 5) and political talk (H2, models 2, 4, and 6). Such outcomes indicate the average treatment effect of focal-point self-censorship. As theorized, focal-point intersections have a depressing effect on political expression: at focal times, netizens engage in significantly less political talk, including disapproving talk, at focal places than when located elsewhere. This shows that ordinary citizens strategically suppress their political expression at focal-point intersections, which we theorize are linked with perceived increased risk signaled by the state and associated with state concerns about political activism. We are reassured in our interpretation by the trend for politically focal times and places alone. We note that the depressing effect of focal-point intersections is less strong when focal places are measured as crowded public places, rather than political places.

6.3. Placebo Tests

We conduct two placebo tests, replacing focal points alternately with the places and times described in Sections 4.3 and 4.4. Results are in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 presents results with private residences, which we proxy with residential areas, replacing focal places. We assume netizens feel relatively comfortable about political expression posted from home; more to the point here, netizens posting from home need not fear being mistaken as part of a crowd of troublemakers the state is prepared to repress at focal places. As expected and as indicated in the interaction terms in the shaded row, the intersection of focal times and our placebo places has no significant effect on political expression. Table 4 presents results that substitute five pro-democracy protest anniversaries

TABLE 3: PLACEBO TEST 1, RESIDENCES

Models: logistical regression		
	1	2
	Disapproving	All Political
Focal Times	−0.174*	0.552‡
	(0.068)	(0.034)
Placebo Places	0.000	−0.105*
	(0.075)	(0.042)
Focal Times*Placebo Places	0.075	0.072
	(0.102)	(0.053)
Intercept	−6.392‡	−5.154‡
	(0.050)	(0.027)
Log Likelihood	−11,492	−37,571
Akaike Information Criterion	22,992	75,151

Observations: 847,564 geotagged posts from Beijing netizens posted on Sina Weibo 24 hours before and after 22 focal times reported in Table 1

In model 1, disapproving posts=1, all other posts =0. In model 2, political posts=1, all other posts=0. Disapproving posts are a subset of political posts.

Placebo places are residences in Beijing, proxied with residential areas, as described in Section 4.4.

* p<.05, † p<.01, ‡ p<.001, standard errors in parentheses

TABLE 4: PLACEBO TEST 2, PRO-DEMOCRACY PROTEST ANNIVERSARIES

Models: logistic regression	Three Focal Political Places		Expanded Political Places		Public Places	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Disapproving	All Political	Disapproving	All Political	Disapproving	All Political
Placebo Times	−0.176	0.006	−0.189	0.014	−0.187	0.036
	(0.105)	(0.078)	(0.107)	(0.081)	(0.112)	(0.085)
Focal Places	-11.461	0.576	−0.281	0.536*	−0.213	0.184
	(318.798)	(1.005)	(0.454)	(0.244)	(0.227)	(0.154)
Placebo Times*Focal Places	0.176	0.981	0.382	−0.052	0.085	−0.158
	(437.701)	(1.163)	(0.596)	(0.336)	(0.322)	(0.217)
Intercept	−6.105[†]	−5.607[†]	−6.098[†]	−5.630[†]	−6.079[†]	−5.633[†]
	(0.073)	(0.057)	(0.074)	(0.059)	(0.078)	(0.062)
Log Likelihood	−2,610	−4,341	−2,611	−4,339	−2,610	−4,343
Akaike Information Criterion	5,229	8,690	5,229	8,687	5,229	8,694

Observations: 178,454 geotagged posts from Beijing netizens posted on Sina Weibo 24 hours before and after 5 pro-democracy protest anniversaries, as reported in Table 1

In models 1, 3, and 5, disapproving posts=1, all other posts =0. In models 2, 4, and 6, political posts=1, all other posts=0. Disapproving posts are a subset of political posts.

Focal places in models 1 and 2 are Tiananmen Square, the Zhongnanhai South Gate, and the Great Hall of the People. Focal places in models 3 and 4 are these three places plus all buildings that house communist party or government offices in Beijing. Places in models 5 and 6 are public places where crowds gather in Beijing, as described in Section 4.4.

* p<.05, † p<.01, ‡ p<.001, standard errors in parentheses

for our 22 focal times. Carter and Carter (2020) find these anniversaries, familiar to pro-democracy activists, coordinate new protest efforts. Except for June 4, the most politically sensitive day in the Chinese calendar, we assume these anniversaries are unfamiliar to most ordinary citizens. Beijing does not publicize them. As predicted and shown in the interaction terms in the shaded row, we find no impact on political expression for the ordinary netizens in our sample.[33] In sum, we do not observe focal-point self-censorship for ordinary citizens who find themselves at home at focal times. Nor do netizens engage in focal-point self-censorship at focal places at times that they do not recognize as focal.

We also conduct robustness tests, controlling for day-of-week effects and clustering standard errors by netizen. These are presented in Table E.1 in Appendix E in Supplementary Materials. Findings are consistent with our main results.

7. Conclusion

We analyze *focal-point self-censorship* in China, a high-capacity authoritarian state. Following Kuran (1995), we theorize that individuals self-censor differently, depending on the situation. We study the situation of politically sensitive spatial-temporal intersections. A significant literature documents how focal points coordinate collective action by political activists in authoritarian states. Our interest is ordinary citizens, who, we assume, are risk-averse and mostly want to avoid trouble. Focal points are rallying points for activists. They raise the stakes for political expression because the state obsession with social order is

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[33] Results in Table 4 include the anniversary of June 4, 1989 to correspond with Carter and Carter (2020), but results are substantially the same when we estimate models excluding this anniversary.

especially acute then and there. Beijing views crowds that it has not itself organized as a distinct political stress. It is on high alert at focal places at focal times, whether these are Schelling-type (1960) focal moments known in advance or breaking news that can spontaneously ignite anti-regime crowds. We theorize that focal-point intersections depress political expression for ordinary citizens when they recognize their greater than usual political sensitivity. They self-censor more than usually to avoid punishment as the troublemakers Beijing is prepared to repress.

We identify for our analysis 22 focal times and three sets of focal places, all managed by Beijing as unusually politically sensitive. We use geotagged posts on Sina Weibo to test hypotheses that, at the intersection of these times and places, ordinary citizens exercise greater than usual self-censorship in political talk. We find support for our argument.

Our argument and analysis contribute most directly to the literature on political self-censorship in authoritarian states. We also link choices about political expression by activists and ordinary citizens and links online and offline political expression, mediated by cues from a powerful authoritarian state. We recognize the limitations of this study. First, our research design measures a particular form of situational self-censorship, associated with a perceived heightened risk of punishment in focal situations when citizens have incomplete information about the possibility of being implicated in political action and the severity of punishment for it. We leave other forms of self-censorship untheorized and unmeasured. Secondly, the mechanism we identify here stresses the mediating effects of focal places at focal times. It emphasizes a guardedness in public political expression that ordinary citizens adopt in certain situations. It does not eliminate the possibility that citizens may talk more at focal times and places, even with such a hurdle. Finally, our population of interest here is ordinary citizens. Our

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theory does not apply to activists, such as dissident scholars, human rights lawyers, or religious leaders, who challenge the authoritarian state. In so doing, they dare to court trouble, even as they know the state is prepared to employ a range of tools to punish troublemakers.

In the story of focal-point self-censorship we present, ordinary citizens acquiesce to the terms of the authoritarian state by keeping focal-point political expression within bounds that a minority of activists are willing to transgress. Activists are integral players in this configuration: because they are willing to show up and form a crowd, ordinary citizens take care *not* to show up and be mistaken as part of the crowd. Crucial underpinnings of this acquiescence of ordinary citizens are strong regime performance legitimacy and high levels of trust in Beijing. Even so, in the foreground is high state capacity—including advanced surveillance and coercive capacity. Also in the foreground are a state obsession with social order and state readiness to repress crowds and punish troublemakers. It is not a fragile equilibrium, but it may not always work this way. The bedrock of the widespread choice to "opt out" of political expression at focal intersections is the combination of political support, based on delivery of public services, and threat of repression. These circumstances will continue to make activists a lonely crowd. Should circumstances change and ordinary citizens cease to self-censor at focal intersections, we may see another crowd like June 1989. We can also, however, expect to see it dispersed in a less deadly and more efficient way by the forces the state has assembled in light of that experience.

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