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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## 'Know Who' may be better than 'Know How': political connections and reactions in administrative disputes in China

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### ABSTRACT

How do disputants in China solve conflicts involving state actors in their daily life? We analyze the above questions using a representative national dataset and argue that it depends on either 'Know Who' or 'Know How'. We further categorized three potential strategies in solving administrative dispute: *Rule-bending*, *Rule-bound*, and *Rule-breaking*. We find that while elites tend to approach the legal and bureaucratic system, encouraged by political connections, non-elites have to appeal outside the official justice system through petition. The findings herein suggest that China is pursuing regime stability through elite co-optation, which is in line with the theory of political survival.

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## Introduction

Regime stability has become a topic of growing interest in the study of both authoritarian politics and Chinese politics in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Within an authoritarian regime, which is characterized as a despotic and exclusive political system, the persistence of an institutional setting inevitably affects the problem of dispute resolution between the state and society because people cannot vote out unpopular leaders through elections or resist undesirable policies through political participation. When social grievances reach their peak, outbreaks occur in the form of revolution. A recent example is the Arab Spring; the harsh social grievances triggered a nationwide protest that eventually led to the breakdown of the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> Though no large scale anti-regime movement has occurred since the 1989 'Tiananmen Incident', social grievances exist widely in China, and many of them are related to administrative disputes that involve local government officials.<sup>3</sup> Resolution of administrative disputes is fundamental to understanding what makes China a durable authoritarian regime, the findings of previous studies, however, are partial and incomplete. This paper aims to fill the gap in the existing studies by examining how disputants respond to administrative disputes through a national representative sample and to further discuss the

significance of the mechanisms that drive disputants to different reactions affecting China's regime stability.

Administrative disputes are largely a by-product of China's rapid economic growth in the past decades and are caused by factors such as local official misconduct, the demolition of housing, land expropriation, layoffs resulting from reforms to state-owned enterprises (SOE), and environmental pollution.<sup>4</sup> To defend their interests, disputants inevitably need to bargain with the state. In addition to affecting daily political life in Chinese society, the occurrence of administrative disputes is also directly related to the issue of regime stability, as the state must cope with these grievances in an appropriate manner. The Communist Party of China (CCP) thus takes administrative disputes seriously in its governance. In the 2010 State Council Report, former prime minister Wen Jiabao once emphasized that the '(government) needs to adapt to the rapidly changing society, reform and innovate governance structure, balance the interests of different social sectors ... and maintain national security and social stability'.<sup>5</sup> Growing administrative disputes since the 1990s have also received considerable attention from academia.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the theoretical concerns and research methods vary from one discipline to another; they are focused only on either a single solution mode (e.g. numerous studies on contentious politics concern only the use of collective petitions or demonstrations, whereas legal studies mainly concern issues such as administrative litigation) or strategies used by specific social groups (e.g. laid-off workers), seldom coping with circumstances entailing multi-solution modes with a national representative population as the sample. As the typology below illustrates, the threat and opportunity in a specific reaction vary to a considerable extent. The type of reactions used, therefore, is not merely a choice but is directly related to the likelihood of receiving a remedy and state repression. Why disputants react to administrative disputes in one manner but not another remains without a logical explanation in the existing literature.

Before giving an answer to the aforementioned research question, we should note that reactions to administrative disputes in China are not fully autonomous but rather are more or less shaped by the authoritarian setting. A well-established coercive system has been set up to constrain disputants to appeal through forms of protest or demonstrations, which are conventional in democracies but are considered a threat to social stability in China.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it is difficult to hold local government officials responsible and accountable through institutional channels such as voting or legislative member constituency service because they are either absent or ornamental.<sup>8</sup> Even though formal legal procedures are available, they frequently bend under state intervention.<sup>9</sup> Ideally, the most efficient method should be negotiated with the authority who possesses the power to make decisions through political connections; this indeed has become a very common practice within government-business relationships.<sup>10</sup> With a more rigorous theoretical benchmark, the deductions above build on an essential assumption of authoritarian politics—political inequality is common in autocracies. Because of the uneven distribution of political connections in the population, small groups of privileged social elites have the most access to state authority.<sup>11</sup> Our argument, therefore, is that disputants with political connections, who can be described as 'Know Who', prefer to seek assistance directly from government officials whenever a

dispute involves state actors. For the rest of society, we assume that they must ‘Know How’, that is they must have knowledge about the rules and make use of that knowledge to pursue remedies through lawsuits or petitions, which provide less access to the state apparatus and involve higher threat remedies. We believe that a general pattern in the strategies used in solving administrative dispute can be worked out under the theory of political survival; these findings would contribute to our understandings on the micro-foundations of China’s regime stability. Moreover, because the general theory has been applied, the case of China now becomes comparable to other durable authoritarian regimes like Singapore and Vietnamese.

In the following sections, we first provide a typology to reclassify all solution modes listed on the Chinese General Social Survey 2005 (CGSS 2005) into a unified framework. We then construct testable hypotheses to examine how the ‘Know Who’ and ‘Know How’ mechanisms influence the reactions in administrative disputes. The last two sections conclude with the empirical findings and a discussion of their implications for China’s regime stability.

### A typology of reactions in administrative disputes

The dataset subjected to analysis was drawn from CGSS 2005. Respondents in a survey were asked two questions relevant to the issue of administrative disputes. The first was ‘Have you been involved in any conflict or dispute with an administrative agency in the past four years?’ and the second was ‘What solution modes did you choose?’ Due to the limitations in question design, it is infeasible to identify the exact dispute type the respondents encountered; what we can confirm from the survey is that the dispute involved local government departments or officials. Although CGSS 2005 was conducted a decade ago, as far as we know it remains the only source open to the public that contains information related to administrative disputes. For the purpose of this paper, it remains a suitable dataset.

As the introduction mentioned, the solution modes in Table 1 have seldom been simultaneously compared in previous research. A typology is needed to capture each solution mode’s features and reclassify them into a unified conceptual framework. Inspired by Goldstone and Tilly’s seminal work, we also focus on the following two features: threat and opportunity.<sup>12</sup> The former refers to the unpredictable repercussions from the state, such as the possibility of repression or the appeal being either rejected or ignored by the judiciary for political reasons. In contrast, the latter describes the likelihood that a particular appeal is accepted and processed by related

**Table 1.** Solution modes in administrative disputes.

Solution modes	%
Lawsuit	27.6
Approaching leaders of the administration	19.5
Approaching upper-level officials	26.8
Collective petition	13.4
No action	26.1
Other	8.4
Total	261

Some respondents report the use of two or more solution modes; ‘Other’ includes the use of violence, no answer, refusal to answer, not remembering, and so on.

authorities. Taking these two features into account, solution modes are reclassified into three types of reactions: *Rule-bending*, *Rule-bound*, and *Rule-breaking*.

*Rule-bending* contains two kinds of solution modes: approaching the head of an administrative agency and approaching an upper-level official.<sup>13</sup> Under *Rule-bending*, disputants bypass the formal institutional settings (e.g. administrative litigation or petition) set up by the state and pursue remedies through political connections with local officials. While it is nothing new to note that resource distribution in China is influenced by political connections even under the planned economy, recent studies suggest that political connections remain valuable today. For example, in a survey of 2300 private entrepreneurs conducted by Chen and Dickson in five coastal provinces between 2006 and 2007, approximately 70% of the sample obtained a desirable outcome from the local government in conflicts related to policy issues after appealing to political connections.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that political connections are particularly helpful in resolving disputes involving state actors.

*Rule-bound* refers to the initiation of a lawsuit. Legal action in administrative disputes is authorized by the Administrative Litigation Law (ALL) implemented in 1989.<sup>15</sup> According to Pei, disputants in an administrative litigation enjoyed a considerable probability of obtaining a remedy, that was as high as approximately 40% in the early 1990s.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that the ALL more or less has substantial power to rectify official misconduct. However, a lawsuit is not always a feasible choice in administrative disputes given that the legal system lacks independence. Local courts in China are part of the bureaucratic system and serve the state goal of maintaining social stability. For political reasons, local courts are unable to resist state intervention and may avoid accepting cases related to social unrest or involving highly controversial issues, which Liebman described as the 'Law-Stability Paradox'.<sup>17</sup>

The petition system, which can be defined as 'going past basic-level institutions to reach higher-level bodies, express problems and request their resolution' provides an alternative institutional channel for disputants to complain in addition to administrative litigation.<sup>18</sup> Although the Regulations on Letters and Visits provide the legal basis for petitions; the implementation in practice is tricky. Theoretically, petition may either be individual or collective, but in both circumstances, the number of petitioners should not exceed five in appeals; otherwise, it is illegal.<sup>19</sup> The probability of obtaining a remedy as a result of a petition was reported to be less than 0.2% in the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup> The recent fieldwork of He and Feng also concluded that individual petitions are usually meaningless because 'government officials' concern is social stability maintenance not solution of the dispute'.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, *Rule-breaking* is not uncommon and can increase the responsiveness of the local government through collective petitions by either exceeding the 'five people' threshold or playing the game of 'boundary-spanning'.<sup>22</sup> The rationality behind *Rule-breaking* is that the bargaining power of a collective petition depends on its potential to disrupt the social order. A larger number of participants in a collective petition is associated with greater potential force and a higher likelihood that the local government will make a concession.<sup>23</sup> As a result, *Rule-breaking* involves the highest threat among all the others. This is because, on one hand, government response depends on the petition scope, but on the other hand, under the pressure of facing sanctions from higher levels of government, local

government officials may apply all necessary means to prevent administrative disputes from spilling over at the grassroots level.<sup>24</sup> Given the widespread use of petitions in China, such direct confrontations between petitioners and local government may threaten regime stability.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the category of 'other' was excluded from the analysis because it provided little information of concern in this paper, and the inclusion of these respondents in the statistical analysis would generate a biased estimate.

In summary, reactions to administrative disputes are a combination of threat and opportunity. *Rule-bending* is essentially a reciprocal relationship between political connection holders and local government officials. Because institutional barriers generated by an authoritarian setting are largely eliminated, the opportunity must be high, and the threat in the appeal should be low. *Rule-breaking* is on the other side of the scale. Its access to the government is relatively low and highly conditional on the scope of the petition. This in turn leads disputants using *Rule-breaking* to the threat of state repression. Finally, *Rule-bound* ensures that disputants can at least access the legal system, as this is encompassed by the ALL. However, as mentioned above, the legal system in China is governed by the state; the use of the *Rule-bound* strategy cannot rule out uncertainties such as the rejection of politically sensitive cases or disingenuous adjudication. Threat and opportunity should be conceptually in the median.

## Political connections and reactions in administrative disputes: theory and hypotheses

Sociologists Miller and Sarat first provided a classic model called the 'Dispute Pyramid' in the 1980s to describe disputants' reactions toward grievances.<sup>26</sup> A profound finding in the 'Dispute Pyramid' is that only a very few disputants will seek a remedy by lawsuit. Lawsuits are considered as a last resort in dispute resolution because they are formal, expensive, and time consuming. Adopting the social context of China, Michelson posed another model with 'Dispute Pagoda'.<sup>27</sup> Similar to the findings of Miller and Sarat, lawsuits remain the minority choice; but one unique feature in the case of China is the close relation between the use of law and the use of political connections. The ratio of those approaching the legal system from households with connections to village leaders and higher-level cadre is ten times larger than that for households with no connections. Ang and Jia, in a study of private firm owners' court use, described the legal mobilization mechanisms in China as 'Know Who' versus 'Know How'.<sup>28</sup> Their findings suggested that even in regions where 'Legal Service Capacity' is high, firm owners with political connections remain more likely to use the court than firm owners without political connections.<sup>29</sup> Though the above studies are concentrated on civil disputes, the same mechanisms can be extended to the case of administrative disputes as disputants' reactions must be restricted by the same set of resources. However, we treat the above two mechanisms as parallel, not competitive, because in this paper disputants are allowed to select more than one reaction. Some of them (e.g. *Rule-breaking*) clearly do not depend on political connections. We expect reactions to be determined by different mechanisms.

Let us begin with the discussion of 'Know Who'. In general, political connections can be obtained by two channels. The first channel is being a member of state institutions such as the People's Congress (PC) or People's Political Consultative Committee (PPCC). These institutions are venues for the CCP to conduct elite cooptation. A widely used study example is private entrepreneurs. As the newly rising social sector in China's economic reform, it is not difficult to understand why the CCP had to absorb private entrepreneurs into the party organs; their resources and support are essential for regime survival. Private entrepreneurs, in contrast, have an incentive to establish political connections to receive business-related benefits, such as obtaining bank loans or being protected from unpredictable fluxes in state policy.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Tsai found that private entrepreneurs who are members of state institutions are more inclined to express their opinions directly to political leaders when encountering disputes.<sup>31</sup> It is thus reasonable to expect that political connections lead disputants to prefer the use of *Rule-bending*. Unfortunately, CGSS 2005 does not inquire whether respondents are PC or PPCC members. The hypothesis must be tested through the second channel—being a party member or state cadre. In a study of organizational involvement and political participation, Guo found that party membership is not only positively correlated with 'direct contact or complaining through the bureaucracy, People's Congress or newspapers' but also simultaneously increases the possibility of 'carrying out a work slowdown, organizing colleagues to resist, or harassing the leader at his or her home'.<sup>32</sup> If a party member is considered to be a political insider, then the above findings become somewhat difficult to explain as to why some party members have to appeal through unconventional means. A likely reason is that the heterogeneity within the party organization is omitted. As Walder reminded, 'Party members are "elite" only in the sense that they have a special relationship with the Party hierarchy and are the group from which future state cadres and eventually the political elite will be chosen. The great majority of Party members have ordinary occupations that involve no real authority'.<sup>33</sup> He suggested setting 'county/division chief and above' (*chu*) as the threshold. In other words, party members do not have obvious superiority compared to ordinary people in opportunity if they are not a state cadre. Only when a state cadre reaches a certain administrative rank can he make use of the benefits of political connections. Thus, we assume the following: *all things being equal, disputants who hold an administrative rank of 'county/division chief and above' are more likely than others to apply the Rule-bending strategy in administrative disputes (H1).*

In addition to *Rule-bending*, disputants may pursue remedies through *Rule-bound* or *Rule-breaking*. Similar to democratic settings, disputants have to 'Know How', that is, they need to have at least some knowledge about the rules of game if they intend to do something to defend themselves in administrative dispute. Studies of collective petitions and legal mobilization in China revealed that the media is one of the most important sources from which citizens acquire relevant legal knowledge. In addition, the media may in return shape people's perceptions of the legal system. Gallagher and Yang expressed their surprise that the Chinese government 'uses its impressive media and propaganda system to propagate legal awareness and rights consciousness'.<sup>34</sup> This may explain why a survey in Beijing and rural China in the early 2000s found that Chinese residents had an incredibly positive impression of courts, even

though a majority in the sample had no experience with a lawsuit.<sup>35</sup> We formulate the following hypothesis: *all things being equal, the better the legal knowledge the disputant has, the more likely he will use the Rule-bound strategy in administrative disputes* (H2).

Lastly, we consider a unique subtype of 'Know How' that is seldom mentioned—petition experience. In contrast to lawsuits, collective petitions do not require disputants to possess legal knowledge prior to taking action. He, Wang, and Su demonstrated the possibility of achieving prompt dispute resolution from local government if collective petitions are able to generate enough pressure.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it remains unclear why disputants choose to petition, given its low opportunity and high threat. Li suggests that the use of petitions is correlated with prior petition experience.<sup>37</sup> Disputants are more likely to use petitioning if they feel that their goals were achieved with previous petitions. Since few people in China have experience in dealing with conflicts with state actors, previous experience with collective petitions offers the opportunity for disputants to learn how to bargain with the state. This leads us to the third hypothesis. *All things being equal, disputants who have previous experience with collective petitions are more likely than others to use the Rule-breaking strategy in administrative disputes* (H3).

## Data and measurement

### Date

CGSS 2005 is a national survey that was conducted by Renmin University and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology using a multistage stratified random sampling method. The first-level sampling unit was a county or county-level district, and the second-level sampling unit was a street or street-level district. Respondents were individuals aged 18 years or older who were randomly selected from households in residential areas or villages. The total number of respondents was 10,372, with 6098 drawn from urban areas and 4274 from rural areas. The aggrieved samples are 261. One may concern about the problem of selection bias not because the aggrieved samples are only a small fraction within the whole sample, but it is possible that disputants who "know who" may use political connection to avoid conflict escalate into dispute. According to some previous studies which also used CGSS 2005 to study administrative dispute,<sup>38</sup> no evidence suggested that involving in administrative dispute depends on one's demographic features. We also conducted extra examination (see [Appendix](#)), still no significant correlation found between administrative level and administrative dispute. We, therefore, consider that selection bias is less likely a severe problem.

### Dependent variable

Reactions to administrative disputes are coded as 1 = *Rule-bound*, 2 = *Rule-bending*, 3 = *Rule-breaking* and 4 = *No action*.



### Key independent variables

Legal knowledge is measured by the question ‘Do you have an interest in following the news on TV, in the newspaper, or on the internet?’ because media exposure is regarded as the most common source from which citizens acquire legal knowledge in China. It is coded as 1 to 5, from ‘not at all interested’ to ‘very interested’. Administrative level serves a proxy of political connection which is coded as 1 = no rank; 2 = a rank below division chief and 3 = county/division chief or above. Finally, experience with petitions is coded as 1 if yes and 0 if no.

### Empirical results

Table 3 presents the multinomial logit model estimation of the use of dispute resolution strategies. One concern of the model estimation is that the sample size used in the analysis is relatively small. Although it is a common knowledge that consistency improves as the sample sizes increases, in the case of logit model, there is no consensus on a suitable threshold. According to Hosmer, Lemeshow and Sturdivant, ‘however, the performance of model-based estimated more by the number of events rather than the total sample size’.<sup>39</sup> They suggested 5–9 events per parameter as generally acceptable given the minimal occurrence numbers of the event. In other words, the minimal occurrence number according to Table 1 is 29, which indicates that the model should include no more than 6 parameters. Then, we have the following findings.

First, as predicted by H1, administrative rank, which is the proxy for political connection, is positively correlated with the use of *Rule-bending*. Possessing a rank of county/division chief or above has a log likelihood of 13.780, which is an incredibly high probability. Interestingly, a rank of county/division chief or above also leads disputants to be more likely to use *Rule-bound*. There are two potential explanations. First, China’s political system is described as ‘fragmented authoritarianism’, where bureaucracies are divided by vertical lines of functional authority from the ministry to the grassroots and a horizontal local government corresponds to each administrative level.<sup>40</sup> Lawsuits are thus inevitable under some circumstances since the patron may not be able to reach out to the counterpart in the disputes at different administrative levels that are beyond his power boundary. Second, as Ang and Jia explained, ‘exercising political influence through courts is more covert, allowing any intervention to be shielded behind a legal apparatus in which judicial personnel are subordinated to the government’.<sup>41</sup>

Second, contradictory to H2, we do not find evidence to support the hypothesis that legal knowledge results in a preference for *Rule-bound*. Rather, the negative and significant coefficient (−0.892) suggests that as legal knowledge increases by one unit, the likelihood of the use of *Rule-bound* decreases by approximately 60%. A natural explanation lies in the uniqueness and sensitivity of administrative disputes in local governance. As noted earlier, local courts may choose to refuse severely confrontational cases involving local administrative agencies. Even if the judgment is in favor of the disputant, local courts alone lack sufficient authority to enforce a verdict because they are subordinate to the corresponding level of government.<sup>42</sup> It is possible that

stronger legal knowledge, ironically, discourages the use of legal channels as the disputant knows that adjudication is likely to be unjust.

Third, petition experience significantly increases the probability of using *Rule-breaking* in comparison to either *Rule-bound* or *Rule-bending*; thus, H3 is confirmed.

Finally, the model estimations may suffer from the problem of omitting variable bias, as the number of parameters is restricted by the sample size. We reexamine the model estimations by including a series of control variables such as sex, education level, and annual income and find that the results are very similar. The model estimations above are stable and robust.

## Discussion

What are the implications of the above findings for China's regime stability? A core assumption in the study of authoritarian politics is that all authoritarian regimes pursue political survival. Abundant empirical studies have shown that similar to leaders in democracies—even dictator needs to gain support from whom they governed. What distinguishes authoritarianism and democracy is the composition of the power base. In a democracy, which has universal suffrage, the preferences of each citizen should theoretically be considered. Authoritarian regimes, in contrast, rely only on the support of a small group of elites. To receive loyalty from elites, authoritarian leaders have to share the decision-making power and redistribute personal benefits, such as tax revenues, to members in their ruling coalition. It is infeasible to directly test the theory above in CGSS 2005 due to the limitations of the dataset, but if the CCP follows a similar logic, political inequality should be prevalent throughout the whole population. Because political inequality is mainly consolidated by political connections in China, given that the statistical model results have already demonstrated that it influences the reactions in administrative disputes. If we are able to observe from CGSS 2005 that political connections are unequally distributed and there is variance in reactions to administrative disputes between elites and non-elites, then the theory of political survival can be supported in an indirect manner.

The definition of social status is adopted from Wu and Cheng.<sup>43</sup> Defining social status in current Chinese society remains a matter of debate, the principles underlying the notion of stratification are generally based on an individual's occupation, affiliation, or resource possession.<sup>44</sup> Two reasons guide us to follow Wu and Cheng's definition. First, they also used CGSS 2005 to discuss the influence of social status on the use of lawsuits for addressing civil and administrative disputes. Given that we apply the same dataset to a relatively similar research question, it is rational to follow their definition for the reason of external validity. Second, in the view of theory of political survival, the main differences between elite and non-elite is the former hold the key to access the regime in the political process while the latter not. As the literature we mentioned in the introduction has pointed out, an individual has the "key" or not can be measured by political connection given the exclusive nature in the political system in autocracy. Because position in government and the related administrative level is a main channel for one to "getting close to the regime" in the case of China, Wu and Cheng's definition in social class based on the above two variables is a suitable

measurement in operating the relationship between social status and political connection. Table 5 clearly illustrates the uneven distribution of political connections within different social statuses. Among elites, who account for only 5.4% of the whole population, nearly half have an administrative rank. In contrast, the other social statuses have almost nothing. Another key difference between elites and non-elites is that the former exclusively hold the rank of county/division chief or above, which is the main factor in determining the use of *Rule-bound* and *Rule-bending*. Thus, we should not feel surprised at the frequency distribution of the use of *Rule-bending* and *Rule-bound*; elites are approximately 12% and 9% more than non-elites and use *Rule-breaking* 6% less than non-elites according to Table 6. Combined with all the information from Figure 1, Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6, the pattern becomes clear. The authoritarian setting determines those who “Know Who” and those who know no one; which in return causes elites and non-elites to react differently in administrative disputes as a result of

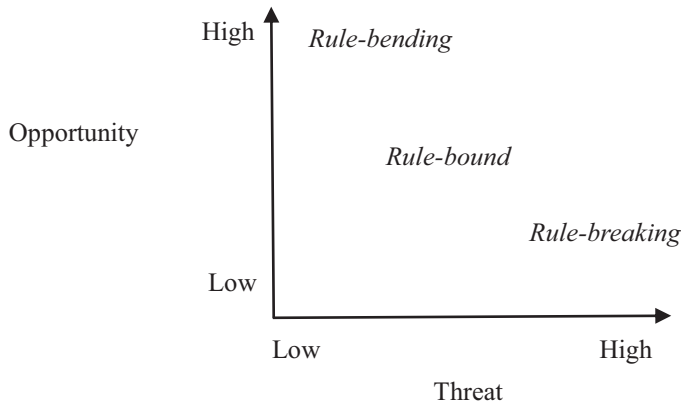


Figure 1. Reactions in administrative disputes.

Table 2. Descriptive statistic of the aggrieved sample.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Administrative dispute strategies	2.355	1.163	1	4	245
Administrative rank	1.138	0.442	1	3	159
Legal knowledge	3.800	1.073	1	5	261
Experience with petitions	0.122	0.328	0	1	261

Table 3. Multinomial logit model for administrative dispute resolution.

	<i>Rule-bound vs. Rule-breaking</i>	<i>Rule-bending vs. Rule-breaking</i>
Know Who		
Rank below county/division chief	0.277 (1.022)	0.567 (0.817)
Rank county/division chief or above	13.818 (0.845)***	13.780 (0.991)***
Know How		
Legal knowledge	-0.892 (0.448)*	-0.877 (0.461)
Petition experience	-3.229 (0.895)***	-3.267 (0.724)***
Constant	5.917 (1.887)	6.160 (1.928)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.096	0.096
Observations	151	151

The reference group is *Rule-breaking*. Data are weighted. Robust standard error in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** Definition of social status.

Social status	Work unit sector		Occupation	Rank/Title		
				Administrative	Professional	
Elite	Public		Leading member in the state apparatus or head of enterprise (0–50)	Deputy department chief or above	–	
			Professional or technical staff (101–299)	–	High	
	Old	Public	Professional or technical staff (101–299)	–	Middle or lower	
			Office worker/administrative staff (301–399)	Below deputy department chief	–	
			Middle-level manager in commerce/service (401)	–	–	
			Middle-level manager in enterprise (601)	–	–	
			Team leader, floor manager (602)	–	–	
			Military officer/soldier (997)	–	–	
			Rural village leader (518)	–	–	
			Head of enterprise (50)	–	–	
Middle class	New	Farming Private (Owners/Managers)	Professional or technical staff (101–299)	–	–	
			Office worker/administrative staff (301–399)	–	–	
			Middle-level manager in commerce/service (401)	–	–	
			Middle-level manager in enterprise (601)	–	–	
			Team leader, floor manager (602)	–	–	
		Private (Self-employed)	Workers/Farmers	Self-employed (60)	–	–
				Commercial or service worker (402–499)	–	–
				Operator of production and transportation equipment or related worker (603–999, except 997)	–	–
				Worker in farming, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery or water resources (501–599, except 518)	–	–
					–	–
Working class						

Occupation codes in the 2000 census appear in parentheses.

observational variances within the two social groups in approaching the legal, bureaucratic and petition systems. In other words, besides monetary bribes and opening the policy-making process, the extra advantages in approaching state apparatus to pursue a remedy in an administrative dispute may be regarded as a unique method of elite co-optation.

Elite co-optation is rational for the purpose of maintaining regime stability. However, this strategy may also trigger grievances from lower-status groups for which there is no hope of receiving justice. Our worry is the same as that of Michelson, that ‘The local government officials who are popularly perceived to be the cause of many everyday grievances, are the very actors who enjoy and facilitate privileged access to

**Table 5.** Administrative rank according to social status.

	Elite (%)	Old middle class (%)	New middle class (%)	Self-employed (%)	Worker (%)	Farmer (%)
County/division or above	10	0	0	0	0	0
Below county/division	40.1	10.9	3.5	0	1.3	4.9
No administrative rank	49.8	89	96.4	99.7	98.6	95
Total	560	957	199	1423	2687	303

**Table 6.** Administrative dispute resolution strategies according to social status.

	Elite (%)	Non-elite (%)
<i>Rule-bending</i>	40	28.6
<i>Rule-bound</i>	40	31.7
<i>Rule-breaking</i>	6.7	12.6
No action	13.3	27.3
Total	15	230

All social statuses excluding elite are merged into non-elite.

official solutions. If access to the official justice system for the have-nots is not improved, and more importantly, if this inequality becomes widely perceived by the have-nots as a sign that the official justice system serves the interests of the local political elite and their relatives, an unintended and paradoxical consequence of legal reform may be popular disillusionment with higher authorities, the aggravation of rural discontent, and the encouragement of its popular expression outside the official justice system.<sup>45</sup> Fortunately, the target of social grievances is usually the local government; no signs indicate the central government is facing a crisis of legitimacy.<sup>46</sup> In recent years, the CCP has also attempted to alleviate the antagonism between the state and society by means such as amending the ALL, re-emphasizing the use of mediation in preventing social conflicts at the grassroots level and social policy reform.<sup>47</sup> Time is needed to observe how well these approaches consolidate regime stability.

## Conclusion

How do disputants in China solve conflicts involving state actors in their daily lives? And how are the reactions influenced by the authoritarian political setting? The above questions are generally omitted in the discussions of political survival in the authoritarian politics literature as they assume that only large-scale collective action such as revolution is important for regime stability; daily social grievances are considered trivial until they break out. Nevertheless, this is not the current situation in China, where social grievances are rampant but anti-regime activities are rare. If we intend to explain China's regime resilience and compare China's experience with other authoritarian regimes, we must answer how these administrative disputes are resolved and try to understand the pattern with the general theory of authoritarian politics as a benchmark. From this perspective, this paper has two contributions. First, although recent studies' attention on China's regime resilience begins to move from the macro level (e.g. formal political institution reform/party adaptivity) to the micro level such as daily politics,<sup>48</sup> a logical explanation for disputants' various reactions in administrative

disputes remains absent; multi-solution mode comparisons are seldom conducted. In contrast, with previous studies, which usually treat reactions in administrative disputes as homogeneous and interchangeable, this paper treats them as heterogeneous and demonstrates that they can be considered to be a combination of opportunity and threat. Statistical analysis further confirms that reactions to administrative disputes are driven by different mechanisms. Whereas the 'Know Who' mechanism leads disputants to appeal through *Rule-bending* or *Rule-bound*, the 'Know How' mechanism facilitates the use of *Rule-breaking*. Through this analysis, we are able to provide a general pattern for China's administrative dispute resolution that was only partially revealed before. Second, we interpret our findings through the theory of political survival and demonstrate that the distribution of political connections is uneven within the population. From this point of view, China's success in maintaining regime stability arises because it follows the guidance in the theory of political survival in conducting elite co-option, which has already been extensively verified by other authoritarian regimes.

Finally, we admit the potential limitations in this paper. First, because information about the exact outcomes in administrative disputes is unavailable in CGSS 2005, a rigorous estimation of the influence of social status on remedy rate is infeasible.<sup>49</sup> Given that we only know which door the disputants have knocked upon, the best we are able to do is to qualitatively not quantitatively conceptualize which type of reaction is more likely to receive a remedy based on prior knowledge provided by the existing literature. As a result, the theory of political survival cannot be fully verified by our findings even if they are in line with the theoretical expectations; rather, they should be regarded as preliminary evidence. Second, and more importantly, the political consequences of administrative disputes remain a 'black box'. While there is evidence to suggest that undesirable outcomes undermine disputants' political trust in the state, some scholars argue that collective petitions can sometimes be 'constructive', not 'disruptive' to regime stability.<sup>50</sup> Further studies are needed to systematically examine the influences of administrative disputes on regime stability.

## Notes

1. Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*; Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," 6–17; Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Wang, *Tying the Autocrat's Hands*.
2. Ansani and Daniele, "About a Revolution," 1–24.
3. According to Sun Ligping, a well-known sociologist at Tsinghua University, the number of incidents (qunti shijian) rose five times from 1993 to 2003 and the total number of cases is believed to exceed 180,000 in 2010, "Shehui shixu shi dangxia di yanjun tiaozhan" (Social disorder is the biggest challenge in Contemporary China), see [http://www.eeo.com.cn/eobserve/Politics/by\\_region/2011/02/28/194539.shtml](http://www.eeo.com.cn/eobserve/Politics/by_region/2011/02/28/194539.shtml).
4. Bernstein and Lu, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China*; Cai, *State and Laid-Off Workers in Reform China*; Ho and Edmonds, eds. *China's Embedded Activism*; O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*; Perry and Selden, eds. *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*.
5. 'Wen jia bao: nuli jianshe renmin manyi de fuwuxing zhengfu' (Wen Jiabao: Our Goal Is To Be a Government Which Services Peoples' Interests), see [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-03/05/content\\_13102634.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-03/05/content_13102634.htm).

6. For example, Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*; He, "Maintaining Stability by Law," 849–873; Lee and Zhang, "The Power of Instability," 1475–1508; Minzner, "Xinfang," 103–179.
7. Wang and Minzner, "The Rise of the Chinese Security State," 339–359; Zhou and Yan, "The Quest for Stability," 3–17.
8. Almen, "Only the Party Manages Cadres," 237–254; Zhang, "Reexamining the Electoral Connection in Authoritarian China," 1–27.
9. Liebman, "Legal Reform," 96–109; O'Brien and Li, "Suing the Local State," 75–96.
10. Chen and Dickson, *Allies of the State*; Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy*; Wank, *Commodifying Communism*.
11. Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*; Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.
12. Goldstone and Tilly, "Threat (and Opportunity)," 179–194.
13. We have a different opinion than Cai that approaching an upper level official should not be viewed as a form of 'petition', see Cai, "Social Conflicts and Modes of Action in China," 89–109. As this paper indicates, such a classification would yield the result that a petition is the most common solution mode, even among elites, which is contradictory to the empirical observations. Several other national surveys in China, such as the Asian Barometer 2008 (ABS 2008) and the Institutionalization of Legal Reforms in China (ILRC) also found that protests or demonstrations are not commonly used in state–citizen dispute resolution. In ABS 2008, the ratio was 52 out of 5098 cases, whereas in ILRC, it was 21 out of 524.
14. Chen and Dickson, *Allies of the State*, 115–121; 126–127.
15. The 1989 version of the ALL is applicable in the following circumstances: (1) citizens' refusal to accept administrative sanctions, such as property confiscation, the rescinding of a license or permit, or the suspension of production or business; (2) citizens' refusal to accept compulsory administrative measures, such as the seizure of property or restrictions on personal freedom; (3) state infringement on an individual's business franchise; (4) the refusal of an administrative agency to respond to or issue a license to an eligible applicant; (5) the failure of an administrative agency to respond to or fulfill a legal obligation to protect individual or property rights; (6) the failure of an administrative agency to issue a pension as required by law; (7) the ordering of an invalid obligation by an administrative agency; and (8) an administrative agency's violation of personal or property rights in any other manner, see Finder. In 2015, a new version of the ALL became effective. Subjects of a suit are now included with open information, social security, and educational rights.
16. Pei, "Citizens V. Mandarins," 832–862; it is also worth mentioned that when we use the same method as Pei to calculate the remedy chance, it falls below 30% in the 2000s and now it is below 10% since 2010.
17. Liebman, "Legal Reform," 96–109; Also see Whiting and Shao, "Courts and Political Stability," 222–247.
18. Minzner, "Xinfang," 103–179.
19. Article 18 in Regulations on Letters and Visits, [http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2009-11/24/c\\_133327663.htm](http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2009-11/24/c_133327663.htm).
20. Zhao, "Guonei shoufen xinfang baogao huo gaoceng zhongshi" (Top Leaders Pay Attention to the First Report on Collective Petition)."
21. He and Feng, "Mismatched Discourses in the Petition Offices of Chinese Courts," 212–241.
22. O'Brien, "Neither Transgressive nor Contained," 51–64.
23. Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*.
24. Social stability maintenance is the so called 'one vote veto' item in the performance evaluation of local officials. Failure by a local official to meet this criterion typically results in a sanction or demotion, even if other items are fulfilled. For a discussion of this issue,

see Heberer and Trappel, "Evaluation Process, Local Cadres' Behavior and Local Development Process," 1048–1066; Cai and Zhu, "Disciplining Local Officials in China," 98–119.

25. Goebel, "Social Unrest in China: A Bird's Eye Perspective."
26. Miller and Sarat, "Grievances, Claims, and Disputes," 525–566.
27. Michelson, "Climbing the Dispute Pagoda," 459–485.
28. Ang and Jia, "Perverse Complementarity," 318–332.
29. The dataset used by Ang and Jia does not directly measure firm owners' legal knowledge or consciousness. Alternatively, they constructed an indicator to measure the availability of legal professionals and the efficiency of courts in processing cases in one province called 'Legal Service Capacity'. In other words, in a province where 'Legal Service Capacity' is high, the legal knowledge gap between firms should be smaller.
30. Wank, *Commodifying Communism*.
31. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy*.
32. Guo, "Organizational Involvement and Political Participation in China," 457–482.
33. Walder, "The Party Elite and China's Trajectory of Change," 189–209.
34. Gallagher and Yang, "Getting Schooled: Legal Mobilization as an Educative Process," 163–194; Also see Michelson, "Dear Lawyer Bao," 43–71.
35. Michelson and Read, "Public Attitudes toward Official Justice in Beijing and Rural China," 169–203.
36. He, Wang and Su, "Above the Roof, beneath the Law," 703–738.
37. Li, "Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside," 209–226.
38. Cheung, "Institutional Options for Administrative Disputes in China—From the Perspective of the Needs of the Public," 144–160.
39. Hosmer, Lemeshow, and Sturdivant, *Applied Logistic Regression*, 408.
40. Lieberthal and Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China*.
41. See note 28 above.
42. Whiting and Shao, "Courts and Political Stability," 222–247.
43. Wu and Cheng, "The Emerging New Middle Class and the Rule of Law in China," 43–70.
44. Bian, "Chinese Social Stratification and Social Mobility," 91–116; Lin and Wu, "The Transformation of the Chinese Class Structure, 1978–2005," 81–112.
45. See note 27 above.
46. A commonly used indicator of regime support or legitimacy is political trust, which is defined as people's evaluation of how well the government produced outcomes consistent with their expectations. See Hetherington, "The Political Relevance of Political Trust". Numerous studies have found that China's central government has continuously enjoyed incredibly high political trust facilitated by economic performance since the 1990s, for example see Li, "Trust in Rural China," 228–258; Wang, "Explaining Regime Strength in China," 217–237; Yang and Tang, "Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China," 415–436.
47. Chen and Li, "Explaining Comparative Administrative Law," 87–131; Jeong, "The Development of Grand Mediation and Its Implications for China's Regime Resilience," 95–119; Lu, "Social Policy and Regime Legitimacy," 423–437
48. For example, see Lee and Zhang, "The Power of Instability," 1475–1508 and Tomba, *The Government Next Door: Neighborhood Politics in Urban China*.
49. As far as we know, no existing dataset covers such information.
50. Li, "Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside," 209–226; Tsai, "Constructive Noncompliance," 253–279; Lorentzen, "Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime," 127–158; Lorentzen, "Designing Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China," 1–35.



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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Demographic features and involving in administrative dispute.

	Involving in administrative dispute
Education	-0.037 (0.108)
Annual income (2004)	0.000 (0.000)
Male	0.236 (0.208)
Party member	-0.015 (0.272)
Age	0.005 (0.006)
Urban resident	-0.431 (0.255)
Administrative level	0.355 (0.350)
Constant	-3.473 (0.47)***
Pseudo $R^2$	0.008
Observations	5897

Standard error in parentheses; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .