Rethinking Comparison

Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry

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Problems and Possibilities of Comparison across Regime Types

Examples Involving China

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"The unconscious thinker does not ask himself why he is comparing; and this neglect goes to explain why so much comparative work provides extensions of knowledge, but hardly a strategy for acquiring and validating new knowledge." So alleged Giovanni Sartori (1970, 1035) in his oft-cited article on concepts in comparative politics. He was certainly right that the question of why we compare bears conscious consideration and discussion, because the rationales are "not intuitively evident," at least not necessarily so. This is particularly true when it comes to comparisons between fundamentally dissimilar political systems, especially across contrasting regime types. The purpose of this chapter is to reconsider such comparisons, the very type of comparison that Sartori criticized as prone to conceptual stretching and other offenses.

The brunt of the critique from Sartori and like-minded scholars fell on efforts to compare democracies and communist systems, particularly the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Much has changed in the fifty-odd years since those writings (not least the practice of using male pronouns to refer to thinkers in general). Today it is China, led by an ideologically retooled Communist Party and powered by a dynamic engine of economic growth, that has assumed the mantle of the world's most significant nondemocratic regime model. Thus, it seems appropriate to focus on recent comparisons involving China. Much research on the politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC) – like mainstream research on American politics – stays within the country's geographic borders. In such work, very reasonably, comparison to other

places and regions is more implicit, or the reference point is general theories of authoritarian politics.[1]

And yet, over the years, scholars of politics and other social scientists have pursued many comparisons between China and other political systems, as Mark Frazier (2018) thoroughly surveyed in a recent overview. Frazier and William Hurst (2017) as well, vigorously advocate for more such research, and, indeed, a burst of energy and initiative is driving a wave of cross-national comparisons involving China. So, it is to our advantage to revisit some of the questions that such comparisons pose – focusing here on the seemingly problematic subcategory of cross-regime-type studies. Specifically, when is it reasonable to pursue such comparisons, and what is their purpose? Why, indeed, are we comparing in this way?

As Sartori's invocation of "new knowledge" suggests, this is an epistemological question. For him, the purpose of comparison – of comparative politics as an enterprise – was "a systematic testing, against as many cases as possible, of sets of hypotheses, generalizations and laws of the 'if … then' type" (1970, 1035). Without discounting these goals, the fruits of cross-regime-type comparisons are by no means limited to the generation and testing of hypotheses and laws, as other chapters in this volume also attest. Further, while we might guess that such comparisons take the form of most-different-systems designs (Mill's Method of Agreement) – that is, positing two cases that have nothing in common save a shared X linked to a shared Y – the examples reviewed here rarely and only partially follow that pattern. Many of their contributions take other forms entirely.

The main themes of this chapter are as follows: Sartori usefully cautioned against comparing unlike entities, yet his advice was overly confining. Meaningful studies can be set up in ways that do not pose problems of conceptual stretching. In the past ten or fifteen years, scholars have productively compared a wide-ranging selection of phenomena in authoritarian China, from welfare policy to social movements to local political economy, with their counterparts in democratic regimes. Indeed, often gaps or disjunctures between substantially dissimilar political systems provide opportunities for innovation, even if they complicate Mill-style comparison or require quite different modes of analysis.

Producing such a study requires two distinctive analytical steps. The researcher first must *set up the comparison*, providing an overview of the two or more country-level cases that accounts for all the relevant ways in which they differ while also building an argument for shared features that make it meaningful to examine the two in relation to each other. Second, the researcher must *establish a specific focus of comparison*, which is not

[1] It should go without saying that the PRC's complexity, distinctiveness, and importance provide ample justification for such China-centered inquiry and, as scholars have long argued and as Lily Tsai (2017) has elaborated in detail, such work can contribute to general social science theory building in many ways.

necessarily a dependent variable but a feature manifested across the cases that the research will examine closely. I give examples of two kinds of foci: a comparable institution and a comparable process, issue, or conundrum.

I assert that such projects can generate intellectual payoffs in at least four ways. In the first instance, and most obviously, they generate findings about the specific *substantive phenomenon* under study by investigating it in widely varying political circumstances. Second, they provide insights on *the broader political regimes themselves*, the context in which the empirical subject is embedded, often highlighting ways in which these regimes behave that run contrary to what we might expect. Third, such studies provide opportunities for *conceptual development* by elaborating on and exploring the phenomena that are shared across contrasting political systems, explaining how they follow divergent or surprisingly parallel tracks. Finally, such comparisons make innovative contributions by *framing* a topic of study, specifying its universe of cases, and scrutinizing the gains and problems of bringing material from disparate contexts into a common category. I argue that these, not merely logics of control, are among the most important benefits of cross-regime comparative research that employs in-depth, qualitative analysis.[2]

Such comparisons are not always feasible or useful; I do not believe that "anything goes." There are such things as phenomena that are only superficially related to one another, that cannot be treated as comparable without willfully ignoring essential facts. When appropriately posed, however, cross-regime studies hold the promise of new thought-provoking theoretical and conceptual departures. These kinds of benefits may not be foreseeable in advance; rather, they may emerge only through the process of comparison itself.

COMPARISON ACROSS DISSIMILAR POLITICAL SYSTEMS

I start by acknowledging that cross-regime-type studies are not the most common subtype of cross-national comparison. As political scientists, we often compare among cases that fit more or less comfortably within a category, precisely to achieve controlled comparison through a most-similar-systems design. Thus, a study might be framed as "in modernizing agrarian bureaucracies" or "in transitional democracies" or "in late industrializers." China has been the subject of many studies involving controlled comparisons in the most-similar-systems mode. These follow a particular pattern and, as the following two sets of examples show, have typically had a very specific payoff: explaining notable divergences between China and counterparts.

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[2] Here I am not considering research in which quantitative data points from China are combined with those from other countries. Such studies raise all the same questions, but qualitative research tends to delve more deeply into issues and problems of comparison and thus lends itself more readily to the discussion at hand.

First, given that the PRC borrowed institutions that were pioneered by the Soviet Union and emulated from Poland to Vietnam, one line of research has explored comparisons with other state socialist regimes. In these most-similar-systems comparisons, the point has often been to understand why China diverged from its peers, for instance, by pursuing a Maoist ideological variant (Schwartz 1951) or undertaking sweeping market reforms (Walder 2016). For the past three decades, the biggest question has been why, unlike many counterparts, China's ruling party avoided collapse in 1989–1991 and instead resiliently rebuilt its control, with scholars weighing the roles of structural conditions, institutions, and leadership choices (Pei 1994; Walder 1995; Bernstein 2013; Dimitrov 2013).

Second, a somewhat parallel line of most-similar-systems comparison pairs China with Taiwan – in other words, with the Republic of China (ROC) state. The ROC preceded the PRC in governing much of the Chinese mainland before its 1949 defeat in the civil war. At that point, it retreated to Taiwan, an island it had only acquired after the end of World War II. Taiwan is hardly the mirror image of China, given disparities such as its relatively small size, legacies of Japan's fifty-year colonial rule, and the gulf that separates 1940s-era arrivals from the mainland (and their descendants) from those whose ancestral connection to China dates back centuries. Still, a number of studies have considered the two an "experimentally ideal" pairing (Gilley 2008, 1) or close to it. They base this on the Chinese cultural and linguistic heritage shared by most of Taiwan's population, as well as resemblances between China's ruling party and Taiwan's Kuomintang, particularly prior to the latter's relinquishing authoritarian control and accepting democracy in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Most-similar-systems studies in this vein have addressed many topics, including regime consolidation (Strauss 2019) and rural development (Looney 2020) but have trained special attention on the question of why Taiwan democratized while the mainland did not. In so doing, they have explored contrasts in the ruling parties (Dickson 1997; Wong 2008), business groups (Solinger 2008), critical episodes of protest (Wright 2001), and elections (Cheng and Lin 2008).[3]

All these studies fit more or less comfortably into the pattern of most-similar-systems research designs. What kinds of problems might a researcher encounter when stepping outside this common template and comparing dissimilar political systems? Some readily apparent stumbling blocks include the possibility that data is unavailable or incommensurate in one or more of the cases to be compared. Another is that inquiry across highly dissimilar systems might merely confirm the obvious rather than turning up anything interesting.

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[3] I consider such comparisons in "China-Taiwan Comparisons: Still Promising Though Not 'Ideal,'" Workshop on Chinese Politics, Harvard University, revised February 23, 2018. https://benread.net/publications/ReadBenjaminL_2018_China-Taiwan_Comparisons.pdf

A subtler set of problems could be called "concept incompatibility," bringing us to Sartori. In his classic article, as Schaffer (Chapter 3, this volume) also points out in discussing juxtapositional comparisons, Sartori cautioned against comparing systems that are fundamentally dissimilar. Things that one would compare must belong "to the same genus, species, or sub-species – in short to the same class," he wrote (1970, 1036). He linked this to his conception of the very purpose of comparative politics, which he saw as "a method of control" in testing hypotheses.[4] Going beyond such "taxonomical requisites of comparability" is precisely what he says leads to "conceptual stretching," which generations of political scientists came to recognize as a cardinal sin. Sartori went on to criticize examples of such hyper-elongation, including what he considered flawed applications of the terms "pluralism" and "participation," rooted in Western democracies to non-Western, nondemocratic polities. So too, concepts like "mobilization" "originate from a totalitarian context," and applying them to the West presents a fallacy of "reversed extrapolation" (1970, 1035, 1036, 1050–52).

Sartori's article, as well as related critiques in the same era (e.g., LaPalombara 1975), reacted against a tendency in structural-functionalist theorizing to paper over deep differences in an effort to apply universal political abstractions. They inveighed against equating practices or institutions that have superficial similarities yet actually work in profoundly different ways.

Sartori's taxonomical metaphor, with its injunction against comparing across genera, may have seemed like a prudent corrective to problematic scholarly trends in 1970, yet it appears too confining today. We now confront a world all the more replete with complexity, including hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding; some countries shift regime types repeatedly.[5] More generally, his skepticism that *any* category might travel effectively from the West to Africa or South-East Asia now seems excessive, even essentializing. Both Sartori and LaPalombara questioned whether political participation could happen in communist regimes, yet certain forms of participation, including grassroots protests, are frequent in today's China. While Sartori objected to using the term "mobilization" in democracies, it is now well accepted that individuals do not always engage in democratic political action purely on their own initiative; rather, they are driven to act by friends, organizations, inspiring leaders, and so forth.[6] One can simultaneously note this and also bear in mind a vital distinction in kind between this and the type of ruling party

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[4] We should assess hypotheses and other generalizations against "all cases," Sartori wrote, but those should be all cases within the relevant taxonomical class.

[5] I thank Juan Diego Prieto for suggesting this point.

[6] Among many works that come to mind, consider Disch (2011), García Bedolla and Michelson (2012), and Han (2014) on mobilization in democracies and Fu (2018) on civil society groups mobilizing within China despite state repression.

orchestration that, in autocracies, compels people to cast ballots in sham elections and the like.

The key point here is that we can investigate related phenomena across contrasting political systems without losing sight of nuances, frictions, and the possibility that they have radically different meanings. Taking conceptual fit and context seriously will not necessarily lead us to conclude that any comparison of dissimilar regime types is ill conceived. On the contrary, these strengths of qualitative work are precisely what enable us to learn from cross-regime-type comparisons. By assessing conceptual fit with care and attention to context, we guard against thoughtlessly and misleadingly assimilating unlike things, a danger that Sartori was right to warn against.

SETTING UP THE COMPARISON

If the aim is to set up a comparison across highly different systems in such a conscious and sensitive fashion, how does one proceed? Making the case for some degree of comparability despite stark contrasts is a crucial part of an investigator's task in such research. Usually, this begins with (in one form or another) a sketch of the broad contrasts as well as similarities between the political contexts that are to be juxtaposed. This acknowledges the gap between the systems, the distance that the analysis to follow will span, while also anchoring that analysis in an overall frame of reference that contains some shared landmarks.

The introductory chapter to Duara and Perry's (2018b) edited volume on China and India provides a well-elaborated and apt example. The coeditors begin by acknowledging that their project is "fraught with methodological challenges," noting that the two countries "not only have vastly different political systems; their social systems are also markedly divergent" (2018a, 1). They observe that social fault lines between the two do not exactly line up, centering as they do on caste, language, and religion in India and more on factors like class and the coastal/inland divide in China. They write: "The divergent foundational events of the two states – a massive social and political revolution in China and a more gradual transition from colonialism in India, along with the very different political institutions to which these events gave rise – have generated strikingly different trajectories over the last 65 years" (1–2).

From there, they pivot to compiling a broad case why the two "Asian giants" nonetheless deserve much more side-by-side comparison than they have previously received. Both saw uprisings in the mid-nineteenth century in response to disruptions wrought by British imperialism. Both saw moderate reform movements give way in the early twentieth century to more radical nationalists, who ultimately sparked mass movements (under Gandhi and Mao respectively) that generated the Republic of India and the PRC in close succession. The two states' ideological tenets differed substantially, yet they

faced similar developmental challenges: "Both states inherited societies where over 80 percent of the population was rural, agricultural, and largely illiterate" (6). Both sought industrial development and pursued import substitution strategies while borrowing in various ways from the Soviet model of planning and state control. Later, first China and then India substantially liberalized and embraced new strategies for development that gave wider play to market forces, and thereafter they experienced parallel pressures from globalization. Meanwhile, each saw a rise in popular movements based on rights claims. In this way, convergent developments that each state experienced in its own way established a framework of parallel temporalities, from nation building to neoliberalism.

The authors establish this framework not to advance any particular argument but to make the general case for comparability – and a new mode of study, "convergent comparison" – within which the book's eight chapters stake out more specific lines of inquiry. (I discuss later examples from these chapters and from related China-India comparisons.) It shows, for instance, that some of what can appear as unbridgeable incompatibilities are actually similar processes happening in somewhat different ways, or at different points in time. And it suggests that regime differences – the kind that Sartori took as specifying absolute typological boundaries – in some ways mask broader parallels. The point is to establish rationales for juxtaposing the two country cases and to specify broad patterns of disjuncture and affinity in light of which particular connections can be examined. All such comparisons must include such a rationale, even if not always articulated at such length and with such historical sweep.

ESTABLISHING A SPECIFIC FOCUS OF COMPARISON

Having laid out broad relationships among the regime-level systems, a further step is to argue for a focal point for the comparison, to single out one particular thing shared by two dissimilar political systems on which an analytic lens will be trained. Scholars identify, somewhere within these messy, complex entities, some particular dimension or aspect or arena of politics. This is common in many forms of comparative study, where attention focuses on particular processes or units (Tilly 1984, chap. 4). In cross-regime comparisons, this likely entails an explicit or implicit argument that the thing in question follows its own distinct rules and patterns in ways that make sense across the disparate cases. Next, I consider two broad kinds of foci.

A Comparable Institution

Institutions that exist in some clearly identifiable form in both cases provide one viable focus for cross-regime-type comparison. Nara Dillon (2018) took the welfare states of China and India as the object of comparison – specifically, one

component thereof: cash transfers to the elderly. In Kellee Tsai's (2016) research, also on China and India, it is the developmental aspects of local governments and their relationships with internationally mobile, entrepreneurial diasporas. Weller et al. (2017) studied religious organizations engaged in charitable activity in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. More specifically, their book examines the operations and political interactions of the Tzu Chi Foundation as a primary case but also activities of other Buddhist as well as Christian, Daoist, and other groups.[7] We can see in each of these cases a quite tangible institutional referent underpinning the comparison.

William Hurst's (2018) study of China and Indonesia takes as its subject the "legal regime," that is, "a system or framework of rules governing some physical territory or discrete realm of action that is at least in principle rooted in some sort of law" (21). A legal regime defines "how easy or difficult it is for social groups or individual or organized interests to gain political influence or power and how readily and in what manner nonjudicial state institutions or empowered actors intervene in legal institutions' handling of specific cases" (14). Somewhat more abstract than other subjects considered here, this directs attention to questions of whether and how state officials and others outside the legal system itself interfere with the workings of legal institutions.

A project of my own focused on government-structured neighborhood organizations across China and Taiwan (Read 2012). In the former, my subject was the Residents' Committees (RCs; *jumin weiyuanhui*) that the Chinese state has maintained since the early 1950s.[8] In the latter, it was the state-sponsored neighborhood offices (*li bangongchu*) that date to the Kuomintang's arrival in the mid-1940s. The two institutions have a number of things in common. Both are part of a nationwide network that covers all urban space.[9] While organizational details vary somewhat by locality, they are mandated in national law and correspond to a unified template. A neighborhood has no choice about having such an office. In both countries, the offices handle a wide range of responsibilities. They serve as what might be called all-purpose contact points for state agencies at the community level, for instance, helping the welfare bureaucracy determine households' eligibility for assistance programs by drawing on their local knowledge of residents' circumstances. They also field a seemingly endless variety of queries and demands from their constituents. That both organizations are highly structured by official policies and practices and organizationally connected to

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[7] While the authors of this study are anthropologists, unlike most of the other authors referenced in this chapter, their book's sustained focus on regime context and political relationships, among other qualities, makes it relevant for comparative politics.

[8] The project involved comparisons at multiple levels: among residents within a neighborhood, among neighborhoods (with different kinds of leaders, housing, and demographics), and among cities. Here I focus on the cross-national dimension.

[9] In China and Taiwan alike, these organizations have rural counterparts.

the state facilitates the comparison. Comparisons to more pluralistic settings are harder.[10]

Taiwan's institutions certainly had significant differences from China's. Taiwan's neighborhoods have but a single leader, a warden (*lizhang*), who is partnered with a civil servant (*liganshi*). China's RCs, as their name indicates, are larger committees of three to seven people and have become parts of even larger community (*shequ*) organizations. The two variants differ dramatically in how their leaders are chosen. Taiwan's wardens are selected in open, fair, and usually competitive elections every four years, whereas triennial elections for China's RCs are heavily stage-managed. Also, while neighborhood bodies in both places cooperate closely with the police, in China the police do not merely fight crime but also tamp down and root out dissent. In Taiwan, much more than in China, residents are free to organize independent community groups of their choice. Moreover, while neighborhood Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committees embody China's firm insistence on the CCP's monopoly of political organization, in Taiwan, neighborhood leaders can affiliate with any political party (or run as independents, as many do).

A Comparable Process, Issue, or Conundrum

In other studies, the focus centers not on a shared institution but on a comparable sociopolitical process, issue, or conundrum. Zhang's (2013) analysis of the politics of urban preservation provides a good example. Her book examines a problem faced by Beijing, Chicago, and Paris: which old buildings to protect in the name of historical preservation and which to bulldoze in the name of progress and urban revitalization. The specific topics of controversy vary – in Beijing, ancient city gates and neighborhoods once occupied by the Manchu elite; in Chicago, houses, businesses, and churches in immigrant and African American communities; in Paris, safeguarded sectors, the historic market of Les Halles, and thousands of heritage buildings – but the dilemma itself is very much the same in each case. Later work by Zhang examines another distinct urban issue, slum redevelopment and governance, in Beijing, Mumbai, and São Paulo (Zhang 2020).

Mark Frazier's (2019) comparison of Shanghai and Mumbai spotlights protest and claim making. Differences between these cities notwithstanding, he writes, "one can find observable similarities in . . . contentious claims over the distribution of urban resources and calls for recognition" (10). Both experienced remarkably parallel episodes of strikes, social movements, and rebellion in 1919, the interwar period, and 1966, for example. With contention as the outcome, Frazier also draws parallels between causal factors

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[10] One article compares Shanghai's RCs to Los Angeles's neighborhood councils. This results in some astute observations but mainly a catalog of structural contrasts (Chen, Cooper, and Sun 2009).

that span these two coastal centers of textile manufacturing: specifically, "the civic spaces, commercial districts, courtrooms, factories, roads, and even housing types that are the settings in which urban residents experience abstractions such as imperialism, capitalism, gentrification, or neoliberalism" (6). Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li's (1996, 2006) influential work on "rightful resistance," a concept derived from rural China, also looks outside of China for comparative examples, including democratic Norway and the United States as well as apartheid-era South Africa. Manjusha Nair (2018), in turn, finds the concept of "rightful resistance" useful in explaining protest in rural India as well as rural China. In both contexts, whether or not the overall political regime is democratic, members of the village population, despite deep subordination, engage in contention and make claims based on a sense of what the state justly owes them.

In the subfield of international relations, some scholars, such as structural realists, entirely discount regime types and all other features of domestic politics. Others take domestic politics more seriously and identify parallel political processes or dynamics that span different political systems and affect states' behavior in the international realm. An example is Thomas J. Christensen's *Useful Adversaries* (1996), which remarkably compares the United States and China from 1947 to 1958. He argues that in both countries, leaders stoked low-level conflicts to rally the public for long-term security strategies, and that such frictions can spiral into unwanted wars, such as the Korean War.

Another study concerning the domestic politics of foreign policy is Dorothy Solinger's *States' Gains, Labor's Losses* (2009). This book examines France, Mexico, and China, three countries that "would normally not be analyzed together," as she writes, given that they were "a democracy with its multiparty system; a regime that was authoritarian with an overarching, dominant party during the time when the pivotal events unfolded, a regime that later became 'semi-authoritarian' and finally democratizing; and a post-totalitarian government yet ruled by a communist party" (9). What brings them under a common tent in her study, first, is the choice that each made to engage with international trade agreements, triggering job losses, despite long-standing pro-labor commitments. A second focus is the extent to which labor subsequently won compensation in each.

Selecting and Defending Focal Points for Comparison

Do these studies commit taxonomical errors, in Sartori's terms? While I do not claim that any of them is beyond reproach, least of all my own, I argue that the general answer is no. Whether the focus of comparison is labor unions, or urban preservation, or protest, the objects of these studies hold up as having a meaningful coherence even across very different political contexts. To be worthy of comparison, the institutions or processes in question need not be

exactly alike but must support conversation across the cases from which defensible new insights and perspectives can be gleaned. This is not happenstance or automatically true of any comparison. Rather, in making decisions about how to approach the points of focus that connect the cases, authors must avoid conceptual incompatibility as well as stating the trivially obvious. To blithely take Beijing's neighborhood elections at face value, for example, would indeed conflate categories and risk stretching concepts beyond meaning. Or, to give another example, comparing China's and Taiwan's community institutions in terms of their relationship with political parties might well produce little or no new insight; they differ just as we would expect of organizations in a single-party authoritarian regime and a pluralized democracy. It is when we think of them in terms of the role that they play in ordinary people's lives as intermediaries between state and society that a more productive comparison emerges.

As we have seen, in cross-regime-type studies, the focus of comparison may be somewhat isolated from other aspects of the political system, or at least not wholly reducible to it. It is likely to stand at some remove from the very things that define regime-level variation, such as elections or other processes through which key state officials obtain their positions. While not impossible, comparisons along such lines would run higher risks of simply describing obvious contrasts or violating Sartori's prohibition against assimilating fundamentally unlike things. Happily, many aspects of politics remain available for viable comparison. As this brief review has suggested, at minimum these can include a broad spectrum of public policy issues, state-society relationships, political processes within and around particular institutions (such as judiciaries), and outside institutional channels (such as protests). The workings of both national-level states and perhaps particularly subnational states and local governments hold comparative potential.

PURPOSES AND BENEFITS OF COMPARISON

Explaining Substantive Phenomena and Their Implications

The most obvious purpose of comparison across regime type is to learn new things about the substantive phenomenon at hand. The key questions from this perspective are whether, how, and why it varies in considerably different contexts. Outcomes can be of interest if they turn out not to differ across the cases or if they do, especially for unexpected reasons. The research explains the patterns observed, which may take the form of a puzzle to be solved. The outcome or dependent variable may be important for its intrinsic significance or for implications that follow from it, things on which it sheds light.

Zhang's (2013) book is a good example of a study that places most emphasis on the substantive outcome that it explains – patterns of urban preservation and

obstacles to preservation in three large cities located in three very different countries. Her comparative study yields the principal findings that "fragmentation" characterizes the politics of urban preservation in each city, and that this fragmentation takes different forms in Beijing, Chicago, and Paris. In Beijing, it is "the functional segmentation among various municipal agencies"; in Chicago, "landmark designation and zoning [are] controlled by aldermen and [are] territorially fragmented along ward boundaries"; and in Paris, "urban preservation is increasingly subject to the intergovernmental fragmentation between the national government and the Paris municipality" (148). The fact that two of the cities fall under democratic regimes, seemingly in stark contrast to Beijing, turns out to matter relatively little in Zhang's account. Preservation has its own particular dynamics, forces, and trade-offs, and the point of the comparison is to explicate these. The book reaches findings of practical importance; for instance, preservation is "more likely to be implemented if it is within the boundaries of single jurisdictions and less likely so if it crosses multiple jurisdictions" (148). Zhang also finds that intergovernmental fragmentation, the pattern seen in Paris where the national government and municipal government jostle over jurisdiction, hampers preservation less than the other forms of fragmentation (149).

In Solinger's (2008) comparative study of China, France, and Mexico, the intrinsic importance of workers' fate under globalization – the question of whether labor retains any power in its relationships with states and international economic forces – motivates the project. Her two-stage study first explains the three states' decisions to join the World Trade Organization, the European Union, and the North American Free Trade Agreement, respectively. It then looks at the extent to which workers won state compensation for the disruptions of employment relations that ensued. Paradoxically, Mexico and France had stronger labor unions, yet this strength ended up merely leading to deeper labor repression in the former and disillusionment and passivity in the face of fragmentation and competitive squabbling in the latter. By contrast, the very weakness of the CCP-controlled official union left workers free to engage in widespread protests, which ultimately wrung new forms of welfare programs from the state. As Solinger notes, this provides perspective on the nature of unions' connections – their "terms of attachment" – to states and to their members.

In my research on state-backed neighborhood organizations in China and Taiwan, I might have expected that their facilitation of administrative and policing work would be strongly and universally disliked in China, in particular, given the repressive nature of that state. This was not the case, providing one aspect of a puzzle. Thus, I undertook the task of explaining variation in residents' opinions of and interactions with these organizations in both Beijing and Taipei. Surprisingly, residents of Beijing and Taipei had many similar patterns of opinions and perceptions of their neighborhood leaders. Those who did not like them or found them unimportant or

irrelevant did so for the same types of reasons. For instance, young, childless professionals whose lives had little connection with the neighborhood often felt this way. On the other hand, those with more favorable views (often, for instance, elderly residents or those with businesses in the community) looked to neighborhood leaders for help with similar kinds of problems and often appreciated their keeping an eye on the locality. I traced this to, first, the similar webs of interpersonal networks that linked people with their community chiefs through various kinds of social structures, activities, and services and, second, to a shared and widely prevalent vision of the state's appropriate role as being closely and intimately cooperative. People's perceptions of these liaisons to the government serve as a window on patterns of state-society relationships.

Up to a point, these comparisons could be thought of as applying a logic of control, partialing out regime-level differences. But to say that these studies control for regime type would oversimplify and miss much about how they work. The significance of the overall political system is more complex than a democracy/autocracy binary – as seen, for instance, in the complicated state-union relationships Solinger (2009) examines, or the nested municipal-national relationships seen in Zhang's accounts of Beijing and Paris. As well, the overall political system is not neatly accounted for and removed from the analysis. The broader environment conditions every aspect of the research. And sometimes it does so in ways that are surprising with respect to general expectations for regime types, as in Solinger's study, where it is in the most authoritarian case, China, that workers end up having not the least but the most latitude for protest and thus win the greatest concessions. This brings us to the next point.

Insights on Political Regimes

Even if the primary purpose of a given cross-regime-type comparison is to study some quite specific substantive phenomenon, rather than the broader political system in which this phenomenon is embedded, such comparisons typically provide insights into the overall regimes in question. We learn about democracy through studying authoritarian regimes, and vice versa. Often what stands out are counterintuitive findings that depart from what is expected for a given regime type.

In Duara and Perry (2018b), the themes of India manifesting tendencies other than what might be associated with democracy and China not acting like a stereotypical autocracy come through loud and clear. Indeed, the book's title, *Beyond Regimes*, signals the central point that "distinctions in regime type ('democracy' versus 'dictatorship') alone offer little insight into critical differences and similarities between the Asian giants in terms of either policies or performance" (ix). Thus, a chapter on education finds that China's university system boasts substantial autonomy, innovation, and openness to international partnerships (among other features), while India's fares poorly on these scores

and others (Kapur and Perry 2018). In terms of their educational systems in general, the countries confound any expectation that a universal franchise ought to lead to universal education, or that autocracies cater to a narrow elite (Kapur and Perry 2018, 213).[11] Selina Ho's comparison of public goods provision in China and India similarly takes China's superior performance in delivering drinking water to urban residents as grounds for reflection on their respective political regimes and the social contracts on which, in her telling, they rest (Ho 2019). Investigating the state's dispossession of rural land, Lynette Ong (2020) is struck as much by similarities as by differences between India and China; though poor farmers are better able to mobilize in the former, they do not necessarily prevail against dominant social groups that support land acquisition policies. In short, contrasting outcomes are not necessarily the result of regime differences and do not necessarily follow patterns predicted by common theories. As well, many similarities crosscut the seeming opposites, a result of responses to similar pressures, imperatives, and forces.

Weller et al. (2017) also point out instances where the countries in their study play contrary to type. They note that despite the CCP's atheism, the Taiwan-based Buddhist charity Tzu Chi was able to build a large headquarters, including a medical building, on the Chinese city of Suzhou's "most expensive piece of land, a generous gift from the municipal government" (55) and received other forms of welcome as well. This parallels the way in which Tzu Chi received state assistance in Taiwan, most notably when, during the island's authoritarian period, President Chiang Ching-kuo helped the group acquire land for its first hospital (54). While observing that China imposes political constraints on the group's work, Weller et al. (2017) conclude, "democracies do not necessarily provide more support for NGOs than authoritarian regimes" (57).

As pointed out earlier, comparisons of the kind discussed here do not focus on the very things that define regime-level differences. It is by investigating other phenomena that they provide valuable comparative perspectives on the regimes themselves. There is, perhaps, some danger in such work of overemphasizing the counterintuitive, spotlighting the "man bites dog" story and not the stories of all the dogs that unremarkably sink teeth into people. Still, it provides a useful corrective: it complicates our understanding of the world. It ensures that we do not become overly fixated on the idea that everything that we study follows patterns defined by regime categories.

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[11] In fairness, the authors also acknowledge facts that are more in keeping with prevalent ideas about regime categories, such as the CCP's close control over appointments to university leadership and the tightening of political strictures under President Xi Jinping (Kapur and Perry 2018, 232–33).

Concept Development

By their nature, comparisons among highly dissimilar political systems practically require the researcher to confront deep conceptual issues – and qualitative research has an important role to play in so doing. If, as Gary Goertz (2006) writes, "a concept involves a theoretical and empirical analysis of the object or phenomenon referred to by the word" (4), it is natural that those working at and around conceptual boundaries will carry out much analytical work. As Schaffer (2015) illustrates, to fix the meaning of a given concept within even one society, let alone multiple contexts, can be fraught with problems of one-sidedness and universalism and implicated in power relationships. Whether one adopts the former's necessary and sufficient condition approach, or the latter's bottom-up elucidation, or some other method, the need for careful attention to concepts in such research is clear.

Comparison across dissimilar systems often provides opportunities for conceptual innovation and development even as it poses risks of "stretching." Far-reaching comparisons can, of course, draw on existing conceptual definitions, but I argue that they are relatively more likely to create opportunities for new departures. This need not, and should not, take the form of haphazardly extending concepts to places where they do not fit. Rather, it can mean defining or discovering categories of empirical phenomena that differ from what is already known and accepted – whether or not they are so novel as to constitute "unidentified political objects" (Jourde 2009, 201). These might be tangible, such as a particular type of organizational structure, or intangible, such as a kind of dynamic within a social movement.

Kellee Tsai (2016) gives special emphasis to the conceptual fruits of her research, spanning China and India, on the developmental role of local states and entrepreneurial diasporas. She extends the usually domestic-centered concept of "state-society relations" to encompass transnational migrants and diasporic communities, the actors who drive cross-border informal finance in Wenzhou and Surat and tech-sector start-ups in Zhongguancun and Bangalore. She also enriches Albert Hirschman's (1970) "exit, voice, and loyalty" typology, noting: "Migration (exit) may not be permanent, but even when it is, remaining abroad does not preclude deep-rooted identity (local and/or national loyalty), or meaningful impact on homeland affairs (voice)" (Tsai 2016, 336).[12] The result of her study is a conception of "cosmopolitan capitalism," in which local rather than national developmental states join with globally mobile populations to pursue distinctive and dynamic patterns of growth.

Weller et al.'s (2017) comparison of the charitable role of religious organizations across three political settings and regimes generates numerous

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[12] Jonathan Fox (2007, chap. 10) separately makes related points in research involving comparison across the United States-Mexico border.

memorable concepts. Rather than employing the established but Western-centric term "faith-based organizations," they find that "engaged religion" better suits specifically Chinese groups, which do not necessarily take NGO-like forms and for whom faith per se is not central (17). In their relationships with host governments of various persuasions, these groups take part in a process of "political merit-making," from which they obtain space to operate and perhaps influence, while the state receives legitimation (59). The lay volunteers who participate in their projects do so in a process of "civic selving," constituting themselves as "a generous and loving self, resonating with cosmopolitan ideas about a universal and unbounded good" (14). The enterprise as a whole, pioneered by Tzu Chi and emulated by other Buddhist groups, constitutes "industrialized philanthropy," a term that captures its massive scale and systematized processes of accounting and media publicity, among other dimensions (2).

In my China-Taiwan study, the very process of working across systemic differences rooted in parallel but divergent histories forced me to re-confront the conceptual question, "What is this a case *of*?" Originally, I thought of the RCs as mass organizations, common in all communist systems. What became clear through the process of reframing, however, was that, in fact, this topic was one of broader relevance found not merely in the cases of China and Taiwan but also in a diverse set of political systems. I conceptualized the state-backed neighborhood organizations that I studied as instances of a phenomenon I called "administrative grassroots engagement," institutions "in which states create, sponsor, and manage networks of organizations at the most local of levels that facilitate governance and policing by building personal relationships with members of society" (Read 2012, 3–4). This category emerged from an extended process of research: conducting more than twenty months of immersive fieldwork in China and Taiwan, reading widely, working with other scholars, making a field research trip to a third country, and ultimately coediting a book on related cases (Read and Pekkanen 2009).

Such possibilities for innovation should be recognized as an important part of what cross-system comparison accomplishes. (The reader will note a kinship with the casing process discussed by Soss, Chapter 5, this volume, and with the points on conceptual development in Htun and Jensenius, Chapter 10, this volume.)

Scoping and Framing the Comparison

Particularly when considering widely varying political systems, decisions about the scope and framing of the comparison can require substantial research and be consequential contributions in themselves. In the course of designing a cross-national comparative project (not necessarily at the beginning), the researcher establishes a universe of relevant cases – which may constitute a novel and

unfamiliar set. Much methodological advice (e.g., Seawright and Gerring 2008) addresses the question of how to select cases once that universe has been defined, but the prior step may be more a matter of creative perceptiveness than of following rules and prescriptions. In Zhang's book, for example, the mere juxtaposition of Beijing with, say, Chicago is itself a startling and intellectually disruptive act for readers accustomed to thinking of these places in completely different theoretical contexts. As with framing processes more generally, these decisions create an "interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions" (Snow and Benford 1992, 135). Having done this, the researcher scrutinizes the crucial attributes that include certain cases in a common set and exclude others. These characteristics, on which so much hinges, require ongoing evaluation in relation to the purpose and justification for the comparison.

As discussed earlier, Duara and Perry (2018b) began their edited volume on China and India with a coauthored chapter that drew out common themes in the two countries' development over the past century and a half. Looked at one way, this provided justification for the comparisons laid out in the respective chapters that followed. But the end result is more than this. One could easily see China and India as simply belonging to incommensurate categories, the gulf between them too wide to provide for much dialogue beyond tale-of-the-tape measures like annual growth in population or GDP. But their volume, including the introduction as well as the framing mechanisms in each of the eight substantive chapters, stands to change the way we look upon these two ancient states. Whether at the level of city pairs such as Shanghai and Bombay, or developments in social policy, or social movements, the book makes a strong and novel argument that each deserves to be looked at in light of the other. Though these chapters' individual findings might of course be rebutted or contradicted, the broader act of putting the two countries within a common spotlight seems likely to have lasting consequences for future research agendas. Something similar could be said about Hurst's (2018) comparison of China and Indonesia, two countries that generally figure in different kinds of scholarly conversations, divergent as they are not just in current regime type but in colonial history, demographics, religion, and other respects. Indeed, Hurst writes that his is "the first side-by-side comparison" of the two (249). The book's act of reframing truly encourages us to think about these countries in novel ways.

In the course of studying the form of state-society engagement that I found in the neighborhoods of China and Taiwan, I became aware that what I was studying could be found in other countries as well, including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. These contexts span a range from autocracies to democracies: regime type seems less important than having a certain kind of statist and corporatist orientation in which the state proactively structures and draws upon grassroots institutions. Exploring the

boundaries and background of this conceptual category brought into focus the historical connections that link certain key cases. Some are fairly well known among specialists, such as imperial China's *bao-jia*, an institution that organized households into clusters and large groups, each with a designated leader, mainly for purposes of security. At the same time, not all variants can be traced to direct historical predecessors, nor is the phenomenon entirely confined to East and Southeast Asia. Framing the comparison in a new way enabled different and deeper forms of conceptual work than would have been possible in a single-country study. For example, while administrative grassroots institutions are always distinct from autonomous civil society groups, they pursue related activities and, in some ways, mimic the functions, activities, and rewards of voluntary groups. So, too, while the organizations in question overlap and have some commonalities with Gregory Kasza's (1995) administered mass organizations, they also buck this categorization in various ways, from the voluntary nature of citizens' participation to their persistence in political systems that have transitioned from authoritarian to democratic regimes. They thus hold a number of conceptual surprises.

The point here is to emphasize the important aspects of comparison that involve framing the cases and defining the subject under study. Bringing together a set of units across unfamiliar lines, the researcher makes a contribution by encouraging readers to look at the political universe in new ways, very much as in the perspectival comparisons that Schaffer (Chapter 3, this volume) eloquently discusses. This cuts across boundaries that Sartori sought to harden rather than relax.

Innovations through framing and concept development are separate things and need not co-occur in the same project, yet the two are related. As we shift focus away from the familiar and toward less-similar cases, our attention is drawn to conceptual aspects of the cases that went unnoticed or seemed unimportant in other perspectives. ("Unlike the other cases, Indonesia never had A and instead had B, yet it is similar to the others in terms of C, and I wonder if that operates through the same mechanism.") At the same time, spotlighting different features of the concepts may catalyze efforts to find related, heretofore unexamined, cases that share those features. ("I wonder if Malaysia has something like that.")

CONCLUSION

It is no accident that a new wave of cross-regime-type research involving China is emerging; the reasons for it are many. China's political system, whatever its future fate, has diverged enough from its state-socialist brethren to demand study from new perspectives, not merely as a variety of communism. It has shown enough staying power and dynamism to be considered as a fairly stable comparative referent in itself, not merely as an ephemeral case of transition. And its very distinctiveness provides important opportunities to observe

political phenomena in a different context from what is found elsewhere. As seen by the various case pairings and comparative foci in the works reviewed here, many different aspects of Chinese politics shed light on counterparts elsewhere (and vice versa), from protests to urban preservation, from state-society relations to legal regimes. With China not merely embracing but also pioneering new technologies from social media to digital surveillance and globalizing rapidly through flows of people, goods, capital, and knowledge, such opportunities will no doubt continue to increase.[13]

The methodological lessons here are not, I am sure, confined to research involving China but have more general applicability. Comparing things that are embedded within fundamentally different political systems is hard. In addition to the ordinary challenges of cross-national comparison – possible language differences, spreading one's time and effort across different locales, asymmetries in the researcher's degree of expertise and extent of local contacts, and so on – such studies confront special issues that are very much related to the pitfalls Sartori identified. The point is not that all comparisons are equally valid or illuminating. There is indeed such a thing as conceptual stretching.

Still, comparison across regime types presents far more constructive possibilities than Sartori acknowledged. His critique should not deter us from considering ambitious and creative juxtapositions. Comparison across dissimilar systems does not necessarily mean committing errors of conceptual incompatibility or blurring categories to the point of meaninglessness. The key to avoiding trouble is not to confine oneself only to comparing political systems of the same species. Rather, it lies in remaining aware of the full meanings and contextual dependencies of concepts one is working with, staying alive to the danger that the comparison is putting square pegs in round holes. It requires a combination of thoughtful caution and initiative.[14]

Though it is of course not possible to spell out all the things that one might learn through comparative projects of the sort considered here, I have tried to categorize some major kinds of contributions that they can make. While comparing across systems that are quite unlike each other in many respects, such studies only sometimes and partially take the form of classical Millian most-different-systems analyses, which isolate common causal factors that explain a shared outcome.[15] My China-Taiwan study could in part be read this way, as could Christensen's China-US comparison. In other cases like

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[13] I thank Elizabeth Perry for suggesting this point.

[14] Boswell, Corbett, and Rhodes's (2019) stimulating book also makes an argument for unortho-dox comparisons, including those across "species," though along somewhat different lines from those of this chapter. For example, by privileging "decentered explanations" based on "the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals" in varied social settings, it downplays the import-ance of context a priori in ways I would not (1, 4).

[15] Among a sample of journal articles examined by Koivu and Hinze (2017), about 10 percent invoked a "least similar systems" logic (1025).

Zhang's or Kapur and Perry's, however, difference is what is explained. And often the value comes from things other than explaining convergence or divergence. More commonly, comparison between unlike political contexts generates new conceptual departures and striking reflections about the very regime types that we commonly take as defining features. And often, a large part of the payoff comes from creating new juxtapositions, from capturing aspects of politics within a novel kind of framework.

Finding novelty while avoiding stretching is facilitated by up-close, in-the-field analysis. It is no accident that almost all of the examples discussed earlier involved substantial field research by the authors.[16] Immersion, whether in textual evidence or in field sites, gives researchers continual opportunities to sharpen their sense of how best to conceptualize the political world (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 20–26). Without it, identifying the common basis for comparison might be far from obvious, much less justifying it. A comparison framed around widely differing places could ring hollow unless supported by deep understanding of the respective locales. The sparks of insight upon which novel concepts are built or the reflections on how comparison sheds light on a country's overall political regime are likely to draw upon the kind of nuanced understanding that more or less requires experience on the ground. One needs this kind of understanding to navigate between the errors of a taxonomical stay-in-your-lane rigidity on the one hand and pell-mell conceptual conflation on the other.

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[16] The exception is Christensen's book, which is based on deep immersion in historical documents and archives.

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