

Critical Issues Confronting China Series featuring Kellee Tsai, Evolutionary Governance, October 20, 2021.

- Good morning. Good evening to all our participants from around the world, the influx of participants has slowed. So I think we will get started. Welcome all to this edition of the Critical Issues Confronting China series, hosted by the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University. My name is Michael Szonyi and I have the honor of serving as the director of the Fairbank Center. And it's my great pleasure to host you today, albeit online. The Critical Issues Confronting China series, was as many of you probably know, established by our dear colleague and friend Ezra Vogel about eight years ago, with the support of Bill Overholt, who you see on the screen as well. And Bill Shao, two other colleagues at Harvard. And Ezra's goal was to bring informed analysis by scholars, policy makers, and other practitioners to bear on key issues confronting contemporary China to a broader audience, both here at Harvard and beyond. Ezra, of course, sadly passed away last year, but we have decided to continue the series both in his honor, but also because it is so important that people be aware of the challenges facing China, of China's policies and other efforts to deal with those challenges and the implications for the world we live in. Before introducing our speaker today, let me just make a couple of technical comments. First of all, much as I wish that we could all be gathered in person and catch up, of course, that is impossible. On the positive side, that allows us to draw on speakers from different parts of the world, which was not possible when we were meeting in person in Cambridge. We do occasionally have to adjust from our normal time of 12:30 PM East Coast time in order to accommodate our speakers. And so that's what we've done, of course, this time. We have a couple of other speakers situated in the Asia Pacific region coming up, and we will host all of those speakers either at 9:00 or 9:30 in the morning, Cambridge time. But that will be the exception. As far as possible, we will stick with our normal time and we will return to that normal time Wednesday next week, when we will hear from Bill Bikales on poverty alleviation efforts and the common prosperity campaign. So please register for that, join us for that. Today's talk is of course live, but also will be recorded and available in future on the Fairbank website. The format is fairly straightforward. Our speaker professor Kellee Tsai will speak for about 45 minutes, I believe. And then we'll open up for questions using the Q&A function. So we'll have moderated questions. The instructions have just gone up in the chat, as the instructions will indicate you are welcome to submit your questions anonymously or to identify yourself as you will. We will try to get through all of the questions, apologies in advance, if we don't. I should have cleared this with our speaker ahead of time. But if you have an urgent question that we don't get a chance to respond to, I'm guessing professor Tsai will respond to an email if need be. I think that's all the technical questions. So let's get right to the presentation.

Professor Kellee Tsai is Dean of the school of humanities and social science and chair professor of social sciences at Hong Kong University, sorry, at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. She, of course, is working in higher education administration in Hong Kong at a very challenging time. But that is not the focus of her remarks today, though. We'd certainly be interested hearing about that. Before joining HKUST, she was vice Dean for humanities and social sciences and professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University. Her current research concerns the political economy of remittances and ethnic foreign direct investment in China, India. But she's gonna talk today about another project, which recently produced the edited volume, "Evolutionary Governance in China, State-society Relations under Authoritarianism" with Szu-chien Hsu and Chun-chih Chang. So without further ado, Kellee thank you so much for joining us. And we look forward to hearing about evolutionary governance under authoritarianism, welcome.

- Thank you, thank you, Michael, for inviting me to speak in this Critical Issues lecture series. And to everyone out there for meeting earlier in the day to accommodate my timezone. I have the fondest memories of attending Fairbank Center seminars when I was a graduate student with luminaries sitting around the table, including Ezra, of course, Merle Goldman, Ben Schwartz, Lucy Empai, Joe Fewsmith, Liz Perry. It's such an honor to be back, virtually at least. Today, I'm gonna talk about an edited volume that was recently published by the Harvard Asia Center on evolutionary governance in China, which focuses on state-society interactions. And then for the second half of the talk, I'd like to tie it to some of my current research with a graduate student here at HKUST Huang Jingyang on surveillance and digital governance with more of a focus on intrastate relations. Szu-chien and Chun-chih and I started this project back in 2015. It's perhaps embarrassing how many years it took to bring this project to fruition. But in retrospect, that turned out to be quite helpful because we now have a better sense of the arc of governance and dynamics under Xi Jinping. And the overarching premise of the framework in the volume is that we can't understand the nature of state-society relations through a single snapshot or a single case study. There's ongoing interaction between state and societal actors, even in an authoritarian context. Yet much of the literature on state-society relations in China is based on case studies of particular groups in society or dynamics in specific localities. And what appears to be a definitive outcome at one point in time. So this project was motivated by an ambitious effort to understand the nature of state society relations in different issue areas. And the analytical lens is self-consciously dynamic and co-evolutionary. Rather than focusing on either state or societal strategies, our framework highlights the interaction between them and how state and societal actors respond to one another's strategies over time and quite a stretch of time. And we believe this stance provides more insight into the mechanisms of authoritarian governance than explanations that are dominant in the

study of comparative authoritarianism in political science. Elite-centric approaches to explaining authoritarian durability have tended to emphasize power sharing arrangements in formal institutions such as elections and legislatures. And this makes sense in political systems that allow for some degree of political competition, but that's not the case in non-competitive authoritarian regimes like China. About 15 to 20 years ago, there was an earlier debate about whether the pluralization of Chinese society, rapid economic growth and the emergence of a middle class would provide the basis for a transition to democracy. No one has been seriously debating the prospects for democracy in China for about a decade or so. Instead, there's been an overwhelming shift towards trying to understand the nature of authoritarianism in China, spawning a cottage industry of what I would call an authoritarianism with adjectives literature. When I was in graduate school in the late 1990s, Lieberthal and Oksenberg's fragmented authoritarianism was the main qualifier that we had in the field that distinguished the nature of authoritarianism in China, from authoritarianism in other parts of the world. Fragmented authoritarianism describes the tension between vertical bureaucracies and horizontal levels of government. And then the resulting gaps in China's policy making process. Harry Harding also coined the term consultative authoritarianism to describe how the revitalization of certain input channels represented what he called, "A significant departure from the totalitarianism of the recent past." And what Harry meant was that the post Mao leadership recognized the need to obtain information, advice, and support from key sectors of the population. It was during the Hu Jintao era that the authoritarian with adjectives literature really took off and social scientists gunning for tenure coined an additional 11 terms to modify the nature of authoritarianism in contemporary China. It's been described as resilient, plutocratic, decentralized, responsive, adaptive, deliberative, networked and so forth. This authoritarianism with adjectives trend in Chinese politics and sociology continued in the Xi Jinping era. But most of the research took place before that because it actually takes, you know, as many people in this audience know, it takes so many years to publish peer reviewed books and articles in our field that by the time these publications came out in the Xi Jinping era, much of the research had already been conducted several years prior. At least 20 different terms have now been coined to describe China's regime and different dimensions of state-society relations. The introduction to our volume goes into a lot more detail about the authoritarianism with adjectives literature. But in brief, they generally revolve around three modalities of governance. First, information flows between state and society. This refers to how the state communicates and collects information from society, and then the opportunities that society has for providing input to the regime. For example, the concept of deliberative authoritarianism derives from the observation that various top-down institutional innovations have increased the scope for political participation and political deliberation during the reform era. And these innovations include things like village

elections, public hearings, deliberative polls, administrative litigation, meaning the right of citizens to sue the state and greater use of people's congresses to discuss policy. Within the category of information flows, there've also been several studies that highlight the role of the media in understanding and shaping public opinion. Anne-Marie Brady uses the term popular authoritarianism to refer to a one-party regime that is highly attentive to public opinion and relies on mass persuasion, meaning propaganda to maintain its legitimacy. Others use the term network authoritarianism to describe the coexistence of online activism with party-state censorship, and then manipulation of digital content. In other words, the regime tolerates a certain degree of private expression, but it also possesses the institutional capacity to control information as needed. The second strand of literature tends to focus on mechanisms for holding local officials accountable. So these studies concern the paradoxical vibrancy of offline contentious politics in an otherwise repressive authoritarian context. The terms contentious authoritarianism and decentralized authoritarianism refer to the utility of petitions and protests for central leaders to assess the performance of local officials since social stability as a stability maintenance wave win is part of the cadre evaluation system. And then the third set of studies tend to focus on regime responses to the information received. And Liz Perry's notion of revolutionary authoritarianism points to the longstanding tradition of protest in PRC history. And she's observed that demonstrations are less politically destabilizing in China, precisely because protest is routine and officially circumscribed as she puts it. In what Wenfang Tang to calls populist authoritarianism, yes, there are a lot of things to be unhappy about and take to the streets about. But public opinion surveys show that there's actually a fairly high level of regime support. The notions of adaptive authoritarianism, responsive authoritarianism and pragmatic authoritarianism, all point to a flexible and practical approach towards governance. Taken together, all of these authoritarianism with adjectives contributions recognize that the Chinese Communist Party prioritizes regime survival above all else. And that allowing for consultation and participation within limits and demonstrating responsiveness and adaptability, all serve a legitimizing function and contribute to authoritarian resilience. My co-authors and I agree with these general observations and the existing authoritarianism with adjectives literature, rather than introducing yet another adjective to modify authoritarianism, in the volume, at least, our volume tries to pull it all together in a broader framework. Sometimes state-society relations are highly charged, contentious, conflictual. Other times, one side may be more assertive while the other one is more accommodating. And there are instances when state and society actually partner with one another in a collaborative form of co-governance. For heuristic purposes, our volume is organized around a two by two framework that recognizes that sometimes the state adapts a hard strategy of engagement, and sometimes it adapts a softer one, that's actually more conciliatory and flexible. The same could be said with

societal actors. But what are the circumstances under which the party state exerts its course of capacity versus engaging the more flexible responses or policy adaptations? This is the context for our framework of evolutionary governance under authoritarianism. Conceptually, the essence of authoritarianism is the exertion of political authority or what Michael Mann referred to as despotic power, including the suppression of dissent and political competition. Throughout the volume, we operationalize political power through four indicators. As you can see on this slide, these are all arenas in which the regime may exert its authority at the expense of societal actors. We also view political power as a zero-sum concept under authoritarianism. But governance is different. Unlike political power, governance entails a non-zero sum relationship between state and society. Governance involves sharing information and cooperation between public and private stakeholders. Engagement by both sides is not only mutually beneficial but necessary for effective management of public affairs. As Yongnian Zheng puts it, strong-state strong society mode of governance is a win-win situation. Operationally, we assess governance along four dimensions. Regime resilience is arguably augmented when these attributes are observed in the analysis of specific issues or incidents. So in our framework, authoritarianism refers to the degree of government to borrow Sam Huntington 1968, while governance refers to how the regime actually governs. The volume also attends to the policy outcome of state-society interactions as of 2020. Following repeated state-society engagement, does the relevant state policy change in a direction that responds favorably to societal demand or does the policy context, in which the initial issue emerged remain in place? To operationalize this framework more broadly, in chapter two Szu-chien and Chun-chih present findings from a quantitative case survey project that compiled 125 cases of state-society interactions that were published between 2005 and 2015 in the three leading English language, social science journals on China. So "China Quarterly", "China Journal" and "Journal of Contemporary China". They find that the state wields considerable political power when it chooses a strong strategy of engagement with societal actors. But societal actors are able to have impact on both governance and policy outcomes when they pursue strong strategies while the state adopts softer ones. And when both sides pursue soft strategies, there's also a greater likelihood for policy reform. This finding exposes a structural tension in the regime's pursuit of authoritarian resilience. On the one hand repressive strategies enable the state to maintain political power, that's authoritarianism. On the other hand, a quality of governance or resilience is enhanced when the state adopts softer modes of engagement with society. This dilemma lies at the core of evolutionary governance under authoritarianism. The 11 chapters, empirical chapters in the volume use the same framework to trace a particular case of state-society interaction by identifying different phases of interaction over time. And then tracing how state and societal strategies also responded to one another in a co-evolutionary manner. All of the chapters are based on in-depth field research in China. And

to top it off, we're honored that Liz Perry agreed to write a timely epilogue that engages our insights on evolutionary governance with her signature thoughts on China's enduring revolutionary tradition. So what did we find? Overall, political outcomes vary considerably across issue domains. Disputes over local community affairs are most likely to have an effect on political power and governance. In most of the studies on Beijing homeowners, state and societal actors eventually pursued soft strategies of engagement, which improved key aspects of governance. But it's important to point out that societal actors are... The ones that were effective, were urban middle class citizens who have the legal knowledge, the material resources, and the social networks to engage constructively with relevant state entities. They are privileged members of society. Unlike property owners, industrial workers are less empowered and there was a rise of workers' protests during the 1990s and 2000s. In response, the central government enacted the 2008 Labor Contract Law. But this law, which was meant to protect workers, had the unintended consequence of fueling an upsurge of strikes and labor disputes rather than promoting stability, introducing institutional channels for mediating labor conflicts has arguably contributed to regime fragility. In the other two chapters on state responses to labor issues, we see that the state used labor abuses by private and foreign capital as an opportunity to relocate pollution producing industry from the coastal south to inland provinces. This totally backfired with the unintended effect of leading Taiwanese investors to then move their... Just relocate their production to Southeast Asia. In rural and urbanizing areas, land disputes have been a major source of social instability since the 2000s. In Guangdong's sunshine village, the local government's land grab triggered a rights defense or way trend movement that went through protracted phases of repression, alliance with non-local rights activists, contention through institutional channels, electoral accommodation for a moment, and then defeat when leading rights activists were arrested. When it comes to more private forms of social issues, such as domestic violence it's women's groups that have taken the lead in policy advocacy. The eventual passage of the domestic violence law in 2015 was the outcome of an evolutionary process that started all the way back in the late eighties, and then had some agenda setting influence from around 1988 until 2000. And then political mobilization followed by governmental responsiveness and then actual policy change. In religious affairs, it's clear that the state retains control over deciding what constitutes desirable versus undesirable religions. Christianity, for example, falls into the undesirable category. And there's been a crackdown on unregistered churches since 2013. By contrast, over the course of three decades, a combination of local activism, creativity, and resourcefulness enabled residents of Meizhou and Fujian to reframe Mazu belief from being a superstitious local folk religion to a UNESCO certified intangible cultural heritage. One of the advantages of the evolutionary and dichronic stance of this volume is that it enables us to see how improvements in authoritarian governance are non-linear, hard one and

also reversible. In HIV aids governance, state–society interaction has gone from being conflictual with both state and society pursuing hard strategies to the state accepting international aid and a flourishing of grassroots NGOs. But since the state cracked down on autonomous domestic NGOs under Xi's rule, we've seen the retreat of international donor support. What does all of this mean during the ongoing reign of Xi? It's obvious that the state has shifted towards harder strategies and engagement with societal actors. But there's still pockets of space for interaction, when the interest of societal actors are framed in a manner that aligns with state discourse and interest. Areas of mutual alliance would be poverty alleviation. That's a state priority. Societal actors are concerned about that as well. Another area would be public health, where again, state and society are both concerned about public health. The party state is still collecting information from society to ensure its own survival and be responsive within key political limits. The 100 year old communist parties still needs to govern and be perceived as legitimate. So even though I think as a field, we may have gone overboard with the authoritarianism with adjectives literature, but nonetheless, additional terms have emerged in the context of China's increasing reliance on technology for governance. First there's digital authoritarianism, which has been a popular term among think tanks like Freedom House, Brookings, CSIS. Even though the great firewall has been in place for a long time, the latest cybersecurity law introduced in 2018 centralized all internet policy within the Cyberspace Administration of China, which reports to the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, headed by Xi Jinping. The cybersecurity law is vast and it continues to grow. It requires all network operators and social media companies to register users under their real names. The law bans content deemed to be harmful to national security or content that spreads rumors or disturbs the public order. Last year, the Cyberspace Administration launched a campaign to clean up illegal political and religious content and has already removed over 100 apps. And in April of this year, the Cyberspace Administration launched a hotline to report online comments that criticized the party. But what does all this mean for governance beyond what we already know about ongoing tightening, political repression and censorship by the party state over citizens? For the last few years, I've been working with a graduate student, Huang Jingyang on the political economy of surveillance. We just published a piece in studies and comparative international development on industrial upgrading in security industry. And this research on surveillance has expanded into the actual implications of digital surveillance on governance in China and led to, I'm embarrassed to say, the birth of another term, platform authoritarianism. I know it's a little risky to talk about research in progress that isn't fully developed. But digital governance has spread so quickly and indeed accelerated during COVID to the point that it's already having a substantive impact on not only state–society relations, but also intrastate relations. And I figured I'd take advantage of the fact that this is a Critical Issues seminar to try out some recent

material, as it were. Platform authoritarianism refers to digitally centralized governance, based on monitoring platforms that collect surveillance images and other data from multiple sources and aggregate them into a massive display screen in a command center that enables local governments and various agencies to monitor spaces, citizens, businesses, and street level bureaucrats in real time. The front end of these monitoring platforms involve various sensors and surveillance cameras. The cameras use the technologies of facial recognition, video structuring, AI algorithms, and other means to transform images, biological, physical, and chemical information to identify specific problems, such as exceeding pollution control standard, traffic accidents, mass gatherings, and so forth. Identified problems take the form of an early warning to the monitoring system. And once a warning is issued, the command center can mobilize grassroots law enforcement staff to deal with violators. In urban areas, this technological innovation is helping to solve two types of information collection problems that have plagued coordination and policy implementation in China's political system. The first is the challenge of information asymmetry between hierarchical levels in vertical bureaucracies, which is endemic to principal agent problems. Lower level agencies or administrative employees have a tendency to conceal and distort information to defend their own discretion against supervisory pressure from higher levels. This is manifested in day to day operations as seen by selective implementation of policies at the grassroots level. The second information gathering problem is horizontal and it occurs among bureaucratic entities at the same level of administration. Local bureaucratic departments are often very territorial and reluctant to share information with the local government, which makes it difficult for the local government to coordinate among different bureaucracies to accomplish administrative goals. This is pretty much the classic tiao-kuai problem that Lieberthal and Oksenberg described as fragmented authoritarianism. But the development of so called smart cities that are connected to big data monitoring platforms is meant to help governments solve both vertical and horizontal types of information collection challenges in a traditionally fragmented system. As a result, there are two main types of monitoring platforms. The first type is an intra-departmental monitoring platform that's customized for vertical regulatory or enforcement agencies. And these are commercially known as domain platforms, and used in a variety of digital public sector projects, including smart public security, smart environmental protection, smart city management, smart supervision, et cetera. For those of you who aren't already up to speed on this, it took me a while to figure out that smart just means digitally surveilled. That's what smart means. That's my translation, at least. The second category of monitoring platforms are developed for agencies that really need interdepartmental coordination at the horizontal level, such as political and legal committees, comprehensive governance offices, emergency management bureaus and local authorities at different administrative levels like street, townships, district governments.



And commercially, these are called integrated platforms or comprehensive brains, such as smart emergency management, smart comprehensive governance and smart communities also known as the brightness project or . How well do these platforms actually work? Well, as always there's variation in practice. To make this more concrete, I'm gonna talk about two examples of when the monitoring platform systems work, followed by situations where they're really more for show and therefore have failed when they're the most needed. Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of environmental governance in evaluating the performance of local cadres. And this has been backed up by central mandates that local governments meet very concrete targets to enhance environmental protection. During the heyday of export oriented manufacturing before the global financial crisis, factories used to just dump their industrial waste into rivers. I mean, it was horrific. Back then the local Environmental Protection Department, either colluded with local factories and looked the other way or lacked the authority to do anything about that. All of that has changed dramatically. In one of our field sites in Southern China, let's just call it factory city. The local government has developed an extensive data collection and monitoring platform to track pollution emissions within its jurisdiction and to control the behavior of businesses and Environmental Protection Department staff, EPD staff. Now the local EPD has unified all pollution related data into a digital platform that includes reporting on water quality from monitoring systems in all the townships, air quality data, air pollution emissions and sewage discharge data. With real time data showing performance on pollution indicators specified by higher levels, there's a lot more pressure on cadres and the local Environmental Protection Departments because everyone can see how other localities are doing at the same time. In factory city, every month, the townships that do poorly in environmental protection, they're notified and they're criticized. From the perspective of factory owners, there's less scope for bargaining with, or paying off the EPD to dump their industrial waste. Now factories have to install expensive environmental monitoring equipment. And they know their emissions and waste disposal. It's all being measured and reported to the EPD in real time. When sensors indicate that any pollution indicator has been exceeded or that an enterprise is engaging in illegal dumping, the system sounds a warning in the control center and sends a reminder to the person in charge of the area or to the enterprise itself. Since the environmental records of a company are now linked with their corporate social credit scores, enterprises in factory city are now motivated to do better in environmental protection. So overall the environmental monitoring platform has significantly enhanced state capacity to enforce pollution reduction targets, since frontline bureaucrats can no longer strike private deals with factories and engage in selective enforcement. And now the Central Environmental Protection Bureau in Beijing, they have sensors installed in the very same location as the provincial level Environmental Protection Departments and the lower level ones. So they

all have their own sensors and they're all cross checking the data to deal with this vertical tiao information collection problem. The second example is about the use of horizontal level monitoring for social management in an urban neighborhood, also in the coastal south that has a lot of migrant workers and street vendors. In the past, a district leader that was interviewed. He said he had a really hard time maintaining social order in this area because there were a lot of migrants, and just a lot of people coming in from all over the place. But since 2015, the security camera footage from both public surveillance outpost that are installed by the Public Security Bureau and privately installed cameras in residential buildings, that's all been integrated into a single monitoring platform for comprehensive social management. In practice, comprehensive social management means that managers in the control center can track the movements of people in the neighborhood throughout the day and see if there are any potential problems like crowds gathering, street fights, parking in non-designated areas, fire hazards, et cetera. The platform also collects information from Grid Patrol staff, the and other street level bureaucrats that carry devices with GPS positioning. In this digitalized comprehensive social management system, the command center knows where all frontline staff are at any given point in time. And they can immediately dispatch them to locations in need of attention. This is also a significant change from the pre-platform days when district managers said they actually didn't know where their frontline staff were half the time or what they were actually doing. Interviews with frontline grid inspectors, said that they feel a lot more pressure in their jobs now because they can never turn off their phones or venture beyond their particular area of spatial responsibility. At the same time, they also worry that they shouldn't stay still for too long, or it's gonna look like they aren't walking the streets and making inspection rounds. While most observers of contemporary China have been focusing on citizens being subject to surveillance, our research on platform authoritarianism shows that the staff of the state are also being surveilled. Frontline enforcement officers are always in a state of readiness because they might be mobilized through either human command or algorithmic deployment. This has not only reduced their autonomy in making judgment calls about how to handle particular incidents, but it's also given rise to what interviewees called the uberization or of their work. They feel like gig workers or food delivery drivers who are under time pressure to respond to orders through an app, take photos to prove that they've completed a task and their managers know where they are and what they're doing all the time. E-government service systems and public security monitoring platforms also come with a yellow and red warning system. Towards the end of a particular task, the staff member will get a yellow warning, and if he or she doesn't complete it on time, they'll get a red warning and be disciplined. All of this may sound dystopian and alienating, and from the perspective of some frontline stuff, it is. But many agencies and local departments are installing smart platforms just to keep up with the times. After Xi Jinping

praised the City Brain, the platform that Alibaba designed for Hangzhou in March, 2020, well that's when Xi Jinping visited. After that, many tech companies started citing chairman Xi to encourage local government agencies to procure their surveillance platform systems. So it turns out that installing state-of-the-art control centers looks really good for showing to higher level officials when they're visiting their offices. But many managers don't actually know how to make full use of the monitoring platforms due to their sophisticated technology. This resonates with what Iza Ding has called performative governance. Meaning, to quote her, "The theatrical deployment of language, symbols and gestures to foster an impression of good governance." Except in this case, it's ornamental deployment of fancy monitoring platforms. The more expensive, the better. For example, leaders in one neighborhood said that on a regular basis, they only use their fancy monitoring platform to deal with parking problems and minor car accidents, rather than using it for comprehensive social management. Sometimes these performative platforms can be activated when a city or agency is suddenly subject to inspections from above. So they have to figure out how to make it work or when there are citizen complaints, so that they could look into the system to try to troubleshoot what's happening or when other problems are brought to their attention. But ultimately, the effectiveness of these high tech monitoring platforms relies on the administrative capacity of the people that are actually working with them. A tragic illustration of this point was in July when over 300 people died during extreme flooding in Zhengzhou. Before the record breaking heavy rainfall, Zhengzhou's meteorological service had actually issued a series of emergency alerts. These red alerts should have triggered the closing of all but essential businesses and closing of schools. But the city never issued a weather lockdown order and subways continued to operate even after the flooding had already started. This is really hard to explain, given that eight months earlier, Zhengzhou had installed a realtime flood prevention system as one of its high profile, highly advertised smart city projects. And, you know, after this devastating flooding, social media posts on Weibo complained about Zhengzhou smart city projects as being a waste of money and completely useless. In summary, our edited volume shows why it's important to distinguish between authoritarianism and governance. Authoritarianism entails a zero-sum trade off in political power between state and societal actors. By contrast, governance can be a positive sum situation when it comes to society interactions. And attending to the quality of governance enhances regime legitimacy. The central government is certainly aware of this and building smart cities is intended to improve governance. Earlier in the talk, I categorized the authoritarianism with adjectives literature into three main types of governance issues that the terms address. Information flows between state and society, mechanisms for holding local officials accountable and regime responses to information received. Well, platform authoritarianism speaks to all three of these issues. In terms of the impact of platform monitoring systems on governance,

when the platforms function as intended by the party state, they are more responsive, but with less operational autonomy and less scope for state-society negotiation. The space for creative ambiguity and local innovation and governance that we saw during the pre-Xi era has been circumscribed by algorithms and constant surveillance. But going forward, I think a lot more research is needed on the impact of all of this on street level staff. These are the people that are supposed to be implementing the orders. And then also societal strategies in the digital age. And this really requires fieldwork. This requires talking to real people, informally. And it's unfortunate, fieldwork is much more difficult these days, and yet it's more essential than ever for understanding ground level dynamics from all stakeholders. A number of the things that I've discussed today, they came from fieldwork. You wouldn't be able to find this out through other means, as directly. I'd like to leave plenty of time to respond to your questions. Thank you for giving me the chance to share some published research, as well as fresh and evolving research. I look forward to chatting with you, thank you.

- Kellee, thanks so much for a fascinating, if frankly, somewhat alarming presentation. Let me, first of all just invite members of the audience to submit their questions in the Q&A function, either anonymously, or you can identify yourself. While we're waiting for questions to come in, let me segue from Kellee's very last point about the importance of fieldwork and the challenges of fieldwork to plug an upcoming Fairbank Center event, an interdisciplinary conversation, bringing together political scientists, historians, and anthropologists to talk about strategies for dealing with the changing research environment in China, both as a result of COVID, but in the longer term as well. This session will run on November 1st. If I get a moment's break, I'll post the information to audience members, but it's aimed primarily at graduate students and early career scholars. But we think it should be a very valuable, productive opportunity to share information for all of us who think that fieldwork is crucial. Alright, so that plug said, let me make two quick comments and then pose a question. The section on platform... Well, first of all, I've actually been in the market for an electric vehicle. And so I was actually looking at the smart car. And so learning Kellee from you, what the smart actually means, it's giving me pause. I might look at a Bolt instead. I can't say that I felt... Your discussion of platform authoritarianism was fascinating. I guess that what here is in the media, lots of, sort of disparate elements of this. But to see it all put together and to see how it fits into a governance strategy is, as you say, it is dystopian and a little bit terrifying. And frankly, not that reassuring that officials don't know how to use it well. I know that was what you were trying to persuade us, but I'm a little unpersuaded, anyways, onto my question. One of the things... So I wanna go back, I'm more interested in society than the state. And I was very struck by your earlier slide about the different patterns of strategies within different domains. One of the things that really

struck me from that discussion was that there are clearly very effective communications within domains about what are the strategies that are more effective? What are the strategies that are less effective? To give you just one example from my own experience, it's extraordinary to meet a 90 year old, semi literate, temple keepers who want to talk about the criteria for UNESCO recognition for intangible cultural heritage, right? And the reason is because they know that that's a strategy that is potentially effective in dealing with the state. But it strikes me that there seems to be, and your chart, actually, I think shows this. There is not effective communication across domains about what works and what doesn't work. So a two-part question, first of all, can you explain why that is, but secondly, would it not be actually advantageous for the state to share that? To find ways to see that that information is shared in the sense that local officials and higher level officials must surely want to see social behavior that inspires soft responses rather than hard responses. And if an awareness in different domains of what would generate a soft rather than a hard response is more widely shared that would actually serve the interest, both of social activists and of state officials. So I wonder if you could just comment on... I mean, to me, I've presented it as if it were a no brainer, but obviously it's not. So what are the issues in Chinese society and in the Chinese state that are impeding that learning between domains? Absent, of course, how the situation is changing in the new smart era. Sorry, and let me just... While Kellee is answering my long and convoluted question, which was actually long and convoluted for a reason, please enter your questions in the Q&A, thanks.

- Wow, it's a great question. It's complicated to answer, but I'm gonna try anyway. There's been longstanding difficulties in horizontal mobilization within China across regions. So while in certain sectors, and I could see how in folk religion or traditional religion, or even like, you know, among Christians or among workers in a particular factory, they might be able to share information. But horizontal exchange of information has traditionally been discouraged through various means. I mean, originally it was more through limits on population mobility. In the digital age, there is censorship when there are efforts to organize and maybe share too much information. And so I think it's really the challenge of knowing what in the... It takes a judgment call and it's being done algorithmically and not just by humans to decide what kind of information is constructive and could inspire these softer strategies. So that it's a win-win situation versus sharing information that the regime wants to deny and does not want to give any air to at all. So I think the challenges are endemic to the system of censorship. Without censorship, then there would be freer flows of information, but there are so many red lines and there's so much sensitivity that, I think, the decision is that it's safer not to share information than risk groups gathering and anytime a group gathers, yeah, they could just be talking peacefully or it could just be a seminar, it could be a birthday party. But then

there's always potential for it escalating. And there is just far less tolerance for that level of risk right now. I mean the party state is really in risk management mode, big time. So that's about as straightforward an answer as I can think of at the moment. Oh, I see Bill. Bill, thanks so much for joining. And I'm such a fan of your work. It's an honor that you're here with us. I see your hand up. I don't know if the rest of the audience can see your hand up. Should I take that question, Mike?

- I was actually gonna say, "Let's go to Bill next." So Bill floor is yours. Thanks Kellee for that answer. Am I the inventor of insecure authoritarianism?

- Oh, no. Don't do it-

- Probably not. Go ahead, Bill.

- Well, thanks for a marvelously insightful talk. One of the key innovations in the Xi Jinping era is giving the party secretaries and businesses in general, but especially private businesses, a key role in at least vetoing strategic business decisions. And I'm wondering how that's working. I'm told that in Beijing and a lot of the big companies, the agenda of the party secretary and the agenda of the CEO tend to be very different. And talking with business people there, they believe there's a severe decline in efficiency. I can imagine that in other areas and certain sectors that the party secretary would essentially be co-opted by the CEO. That's what traditionally happened in the businesses I visited in Guangdong. I wonder if you have an impression of overall patterns or the way variations occur.

- That's a great question too. And I must... Unfortunately, it's been a while since I had a chance to do my own fieldwork and interview, you know, businesses to get a better grip on this. The last time I had a chance to speak with many enterprises, I noticed a similar kind of regional difference. You know, coastal south, Guangdong, Zhanjiang the party secretaries tend to feel like they're more co-opted, they're aligned, not as much divergence. Whereas in Beijing, you know, maybe because the party secretaries are appointed in a more autonomous way, but that's anecdotal and this is dated. So I don't actually have any fresh insight into this issue right now.

- [Bill] Thanks.

- All right, well now the questions are pouring in Kellee. We have left... Or you have left about 25 minutes for conversation, which is terrific. I will try to organize them a little bit, but why don't we start with a question from Tom Remington. We know that issues differ by political sensitivity, according to the line that is set by leaders at a given time. How does the relative political sensitivity of an issue affect the degree to which there is broader engagement by

bureaucratic and popular interests in the policy making process?

- Thank you, Tom, for that question. We were colleagues for a year at Emory when I first started my career. So it's lovely to hear from him. Yeah, when our authors were doing the case studies and when we were going through the lit review, the quantitative case analysis review, there's definitely, I think it's precisely because the political sensitivity of certain issues changes over time, that you can see that while the window may be completely closed for an issue at one point, and is super sensitive, later on there's an opening. I mean, you look at the crackdown on feminists, for example, you know, that suddenly the term was banned, but there was still the passage of the domestic violence law. So I think during highly sensitive times, that's not the time to be pursuing soft or hard strategies from a societal perspective. It just, you know, laying really low because otherwise if it's politically sensitive, you know, it's a red line and people are charged with removing those sensitivities, basically. It's kind of that straightforward in terms of the fact that we are operating in an authoritarian setting here. So whether the window will open again, I mean, I think, you know, we know when major events are coming up like congresses, or if there's just been, you know, a devastating natural disaster or pandemic, or you can see also by the pattern of arrests, the types of people that are being detained, what's considered sensitive. Those are all signals that activity in those particular sectors are not going to be... You know, the regime isn't gonna be super responsive, let's put it that way, to those issues.

- So clearly people are paying attention because we've got a whole series of questions asking you to kind of parse the variation in various elements of the things you've described. So maybe I wonder if it makes sense to ask them all together, or if that'll just be confusing. Maybe I'll ask them in a kind of logical sequence. So let's start, so three questions on variation, which you can answer. Do you want me to ask them all at once and then you can answer them one by one?

- Sure, yeah, yeah.

- Okay. So my colleague Nara Dillon, writes, "The concept of platform authoritarianism is very interesting as well as the information overload you describe at the local level. Is there variation across these platforms in how much overload they produce?" So that's a question about variation in information overload. We've got two anonymous questions, "Some local governments do a better job at using digital platform to address challenges. Some others use it for more superficial purposes. Do you see any factors that explain why some local governments are more efficient than others?" So that's a question about variation in usage of the platform. And then a third anonymous question asks, "Would professor Tsai elaborate on the factors contributing to the sectoral variation in outcomes?" So three

different approaches to the question of variation. Why don't you take them together or separately as you wish?

- Okay, sure. I'll go in the order in which you read them. In terms of variation among platforms in information overload. Yeah, it's incredible. Every agency has a platform now. I mean, it's not just the Public Security Bureau, it's the Environmental Protection Bureau. It's traffic, it's the health department, education. I mean, you name, in every done way, practically has one. The major ones that you can think of. And I think we need to do a lot more research on it because the ones that we've looked at so far, have focused on... 'Cause I have a separate project on air pollution in the Greater Bay Area. So that's what brought us to look at the environment protection departments and the environmental monitoring platforms there. So we're very aware of that, but we haven't looked at... And then health, well, during the pandemic, we're aware of those. That seems to be pretty well coordinated within the provinces. But there's actually competition between the makers of these apps. So, you know the one done by Alibaba, Health Code, their health certificate doesn't compute with the one done by Tencent, for example. But let me see if I can try to schematically speculate really, the Public Security Bureau, of course, that's where we started our work and their surveillance... They struggled for years with lack of integration, even like within a particular province, or they had so many different systems at different levels. And now they're finally starting to get more integrated they're called systems integrators. So the Public Security Bureau, I would say is probably the most advanced. They've been using surveillance the longest. They started the initiative decades ago. And they're certainly the most sophisticated in managing their information. But I would say probably the newcomers, the Environmental Protection Department, seems to be doing pretty well too, because they've been empowered. They used to be a much weaker bureaucracy and now they're a priority. So it would be bureaus that, you know, where I haven't done research in a long time is rural China actually. So most of these monitoring platforms are in urban areas that they're smart cities now. Rural areas also have smart cities, but I'm going to wager that just based on my previous fieldwork experience, that counties that have these, you know, gorgeous marble county seeds, and now platforms like maybe some of the staff there are possibly less technologically sophisticated because you need training to know what to look for and how to operate it and how to maintain it. And a lot of times, you know, speaking with the vendors, the people who actually manufacture and produce this stuff, they're trying to create new markets. They're going on a road show, shopping these things around to local agencies and departments saying, "You really need this. And let me show you why." And these local officials, cadres, they don't really know. They're like, "Yeah, that looks pretty good. You mean, we really need this?" They're like, "Yeah, we just sold one to the county next door. You don't wanna be the county without it." And so they're kind of taken for a ride by these tech firms and they're very persuasive



because these tech firms, they have tech informational advantage over the local departments. But this is, I mean, this is just screaming out for more research to answer the questions of variation in platform usage and effectiveness. But we mainly know about public security and the Environmental Protection Department and a bit about health, but not the other areas so much. So graduate students. The next question concerns local variation and the use of platforms. Okay, so I touched upon that a little bit and well, Hangzhou, of course, was the first City Brain with Alibaba's design. And Shenzhen has always been a bit more advanced in all of this. So you're gonna see some... So Alibaba, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, I think first tier cities, they're going to be using it more, but then you've got, you know, Qingzhou had these two smart city projects, spent a lot of money on them and they weren't fully functional. So again, I think that's worth researching. Is there a difference between, you know, second and third tier cities? Is there an issue with use of different types of firms like Alibaba versus Tencent type products? I'm answering the question by suggesting research areas, basically. And then, but the sectoral... The last question about sectoral variation and outcomes, that I think I can talk to a little bit more, at least based on preexisting research. So what we found more than anything else, was when we're dealing with like community affairs, urban homeowners, middle class complaints, like not in my backyard incineration plants or legalizing legislative assemblies. Like over time, they're persistent, they're well educated, they're well networked. They're confident, you know, highly literate, they're middle to upper middle class. Like they find they're better able... And this is not like a real, you know, surprising finding. There's a class element to it, but then workers, labor disputes. Earlier on, during the early stages of privatization, when workers went on the streets, if they were in a wealthy area like Shanghai, they could be bought out. But generally speaking, the workers' demands are not being well... Those are more intractable. Those are much more difficult to manage. And when we come to rural land grabs, that is super sensitive. And so the rights activists there, as we all know, have not fared well, have been imprisoned. There's a crackdown on them. Religion, there's variation. As Mike mentioned earlier, intangible cultural heritage is the way to save your faith or your beliefs and your practices, your rituals, your traditions. That's the way to get like UN seal of approval, UNESCO seal of approval. It's a brilliant strategy because then how can you contest that? But, you know, Muslims, Christians are not... You know, those are more sensitive religions right now. The scope for NGOs operating, you know, like more autonomous NGOs or even some government operated NGOs, that space has shrunk dramatically, quite frankly, and certainly for foreign NGOs as well. So I think even in some of the areas where there's been some progress, it's much more challenging. But, you know, I just wanted to give one example of sometimes when an issue... It's all about reframing, right? Like with Mazu they reframed it from being a superstitious belief to being intangible cultural heritage. What a brilliant move. And then I think with HIV/AIDS education, at one

point, they reframed it in terms of public health, reproductive health, rather than it's association with homosexuality, right? And so then it seemed... So reframing can still be affected, but with things like labor and rights, certain type there... It's challenging to think of the way to reframe it where it's not really obvious what the intended outcome is. One can only be so creative, but there's still a lot of creativity out there, I must say. I mean, as dystopian and Orwellian, as all of this is I still hear on a very regular basis, clever ways to continue communicating online, you know, references to important people that are well disguised and going on.

- There was, of course, an attempt to reframe labor rights and workers' rights in terms of Marxism some years ago. And that was not such a success, that did not work out well for anyone.

- Oh, wait-

- Let's turn-

- Prosperity, you've got-

- That may be the key. Oh, let me actually just say one of... I mean, I say my current fieldwork site, but of course I haven't been there in a year and a half and I don't know when I'll next get there. But one of my current fieldwork sites is a county with smart villages and I spent quite a bit of time there I haven't seen anything smart about the villages. I'm sure they have the command center, but anyways, let's turn to a question from Tom Bruce, a PhD student at University of Toronto, my alma mater. "Do you have any sense for how popular some of these monitoring effects, particularly how you describe workers as feeling uberized are with small to large private companies and even with SEOs?"

- I'm trying to look at the question because I think I'm trying to understand how popular these monitoring-

- So I think the question is what's the...

- The frequency of usage.

- Yeah.

- Okay, yeah. Okay, so that sounds like more among businesses. So these days, consumer facing businesses, they pretty much all have apps and electronic payment systems and delivery. I mean, that trend accelerated during COVID to get the products to people and certainly Taobao revolutionized all of that. And given Taobao, Alibaba's dominance in the area, they've really led in that particular culture. And so if you think about the supply chain, right? I mean, there are the producers, there are the marketers, there are the distributors.

And then they're the people who actually like deliver. So the people who deliver, they have it the worst, the may fund drivers. I mean, that's the equivalent to the sense of uberization the people on the motorcycles and, you know, just going yeah, 10 hour shifts and things like that. And that's the most alienating and kind of difficult. But what's interesting is that... Oh, and then workers in SOEs, yeah, I mean, there's facial recognition, though with masks, that's harder. Right now, there's actually quite a variety of different types of apps that are out there to monitor workplace performance. So in the US I guess we have Slack, just yesterday, someone from University of Wisconsin's department of communications, Tom Shu talked about Ding Talk and how Ding Talk is used by companies to, you know, monitor like constantly send you messages. You have to, you know, smile on your way in, take a picture of yourself when you check in. And it's just like, there's no release from that. And so tech workers are very much monitored as well. And one thing that came up in our conversation with him is certainly, you know, there are different types of labor. There's the type of labor that's very repetitive, perhaps mindless, Fordist, Taylorist, the delivery, those repetitive tasks. I mean, that's just a grind, but then people who work in more creative industries, more intellectual work, you know, they're not necessarily monitored as much. Though there's this whole 996 culture too. And so there's some kind of social pressure, professional pressure associated with that. But I wanted to use your question too, to point to... Uh oh, it just disappeared. Where did it go?

- Sorry, I'm sorry. I just clicked that it was answered.

- Yeah, I think I wanted to mention too that on the public service side of things that right now, there are many different apps and they aren't fully integrated yet. And so it'll be interesting to follow that particular industry. 'Cause right now the government apps are basically modeled after the commercial apps, the ones used by Alibaba. So it's led to a commercial culture in the delivery of public services. So you might order a bunch of toys for your kid. That same business model has been transplanted into governmental responsiveness to let's say, you know, reporting on someone who parked in your parking spot or, you know, dumped their garbage in the wrong location. That's the only other comment I wanted to make.

- Okay, thank you. It's happening in universities too, but that's another story that transformation of the business model. So we've got a bunch of questions outstanding, and only about five minutes left. I feel like several of the questions have actually... You've answered in the course of answering other questions. So if you don't mind, I think we should end with a question that gestures back to history, which is Pat Geirsha's question at the very bottom. "What might this platform authoritarianism research reveal about changes in or continuities in party state assumptions about cadre discipline and devotion? If decentralization or local autonomy was greater at certain periods in

the past, does the smart approach to monitoring activity reveal that we are in a period of decreased confidence in Beijing's ability to maintain cadre discipline or is the greater monitoring that we've heard about in your presentation, simply a reflection of increased capacity through leveraging technology?"

- Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, I think, you know, principal Asian problems, cadre discipline have been endemic, started during the revolution, during the early years, there's always been a gap between, you know, what the grassroots cadres are doing and what higher levels are because there are, you know, the incentives aren't always aligned. And so I do think that there's a fair amount of distrust of the staff at the state. And this is seen in kind of ongoing corruption investigations. And, you know, it's tricky because so much of China's growth and so much was facilitated precisely by them bending the rules and looking the other way. And now the scope for that is so severely circumscribed that global cadres are nervous about being creative or looking the other way. I mean, it used to be that, you know, the street level staff, they might let go to whose side the sidewalk vendors set up when there's, you know, it's like a weekend, no one's around. Why not let them sell a few vegetables or pedal some wares? And now they know they can't do that because there's a CCTV camera there right now. And the , the vendors themselves, they understand too. It's not, you know, there's just... So that's really, I think, in some senses, unfortunate, probably cut down on corruption pretty significantly as well. So I think it's not just technology. I think, you know, there's... Of course it's a confluence of the arrival of technology during a climate of distrust and trying to clean up the party. I mean that's a real theme that's come back.

- Great and we have a couple more questions, but we are at time and it is the middle of the night for you. So I think we'll stop things there if that's alright. See Kellee, a true presenter is looking through the questions, looking for a last one to answer. No, no, no-

- You're welcome.

- It's okay, I just wanted to... Yeah, yeah, I'm just curious. I could screenshot.

- Yeah and I think we can send those to you. So thank you everyone for attending. A reminder that we will return to Critical Issues at the normal time of 12:30 next week, but a special thank you to professor Tsai from HKUST for a truly stimulating and informative presentation about something that I think we all encounter in kind of sporadic ways in our experiences in China, in our dealings with our Chinese friends and colleagues. But is actually part of a much broader story that I think you laid out really nicely for us today. So thank you so much for taking the time to share your most recent and your upcoming research with us.

- Thanks, I've really enjoyed the conversation. It's made me think and a lot more research is to be done.
- Wonderful. All right, thank you all. Be safe and healthy, bye-bye.
- Bye.
- [Bill Thanks Kellee.
- Thank you.