

THE RISE AND FALL OF "REFORMIST" POLLING IN CHINA

By J.H. Zhu

How far and how deep can public opinion polling go in the Communist world? Zvi Gitelman suggested four determining factors: (1) whether political control in the country moves toward relaxation, (2) the top leadership is in favor of a "populist" or consultative style, (3) the public is politically sophisticated, and (4) there was a social sciences research tradition in the pre-Communist era.¹ This model has described the rise, fall, and revival of opinion surveying in the USSR, Poland, and other East European countries. My reading of the fate of Chinese polling also fits.

Origins

Public opinion polling began in China in the early 1980s. Three factors are particularly responsible for this development: the political thaw in the post-Mao era, the rise of reformers within the Communist leadership, and the renewal of Chinese social sciences. First, after the death of Mao Zedong, the new leaders aborted the catastrophic Cultural Revolution, and adopted economic reform and an open-door policy to the outside world. This led to a demand for softening political control, a prerequisite for the existence of opinion polling.

Second, the reformist camp within the Party, led by two (now former) General Secretaries, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, wanted to bring public input into the policy processes. Hu often paid close attention to public complaints. One case in point: He is said to have read 8,000 letters from the masses during a four-year span. Zhao was personally involved in creating the government's polling apparatus, which spurred the "Chinese polling mania" of the mid 80s. This close connection with the reform-minded politicians, however, led to a quick collapse of the Chinese polling establishment when reform leaders lost power.

Third, frustrated with Mao's approach, Chinese social scientists turned to the West for new methodology. Mao once used panel discussions to gauge mass opinion while waging guerrilla warfare,² and the party continued to employ this means long after it seized power. Two biases were evident: (1) the panelists were often selected by their immediate Party bosses for political loyalty; and (2) under pressure, discussion was usually more

a creation of pseudo consensus than a revelation of public opinion. Shortly after Mao's death, Chinese social scientists abandoned the panel approach and imported the random sample survey from the West to study social issues.

Methods

In China, where less than one percent of households own a telephone, polling has relied on self-administered questionnaires. And because of a high illiteracy rate in the countryside, most polls have been done in cities. A variety of sampling approaches were tried. In the beginning, pollsters simply distributed questionnaires on the streets, and in libraries and other public places. This often produced "samples" overrepresenting young, male, well-educated respondents.³ Pollsters then adopted a two-stage occupation-stratified procedure, which first selected certain work places in proportion to census data, and then drew individuals within these units. This worked better, but it gave officials in the work places a chance to influence respondents. Some researchers finally began conducting face-to-face interviews in homes — but this practice was limited, because it was too costly.

Polling Groups

A variety of organizations got involved in polling. Universities and news media were among the pioneers. The most influential facilities were government think-tanks set up by Zhao, among them the Chinese Economic System Reform Research Institute (CESRRI). To help the State Cabinet formulate economic reform, it conducted 14 national surveys in 1985 and 1986. One observer commented that "the CESRRI surveys demonstrated how the power of social science and the power of the masses could be jointly harnessed to serve the reform program."⁴

Chinese pollsters are a pretty homogeneous lot: young, well-educated, and pro-reform. Most of them are only in their thirties. Many graduated from elite universities in Beijing, Shanghai, and a few other central cities. They had some methodological training, but obtained much of their knowledge from field experience. Finally, they were enthusiastic about reforms, and many were tied to Zhao Ziyang's camp. Shlapentokh once distinguished two types of Soviet pollsters: professionals and ideologues.⁵ This doesn't work for China, where old-style ideologues have been rare, as have objective professionals. Chinese pollsters were more committed to reform than to professional standards.

Uses

Though closely tied to the reform agenda, the poll results were not often effectively translated into decision making. This is due largely to the country's power structure, where for more than a decade almost all the crucial decisions have been settled by Deng Xiaoping and several other party veterans who hardly bother to care about public opinion. The fate of surveys on student demonstrations and on price reform clearly illustrate this point. In late 1986 and early 1987, thousands of students took to the streets demanding more freedom. The party propaganda apparatus commissioned a survey of about 2,000 college students right after the event. It revealed that the media had played an unexpected role. Initially the media did not cover the demonstrations at all, and later portrayed protesters in a negative light -- pushing the students into an adversarial posture.⁶ Hu Qili, a reformer in charge of ideological affairs, ordered this survey report circulated among senior media officials, with a note instructing them, in the future, to quickly report such events and try not to offend the young people. In Spring 1989, while the study was still fresh in the editors' minds, and while Hu was still the "media Czar," students staged large-scale demonstrations. Under Deng's direct intervention, however, the media repeated its old practices. It first blocked the news, and then attacked the students as "rioters," which really triggered the ultimate uprising. Hu tried to change things, but he was soon purged along with Zhao.

The survey findings on price reform were similarly ignored. Price reform aims at withdrawing government subsidies for consumer goods and determining price by market mechanisms — which could cause inflation to skyrocket. Concerned about public reactions, CESRRI conducted a series of polls between November 1986 and May 1988. It found discontent with inflation on the rise, and the intensity of the grievances already beyond the safety threshold. These warning signals apparently did not influence Deng, however. He announced an effort to speed price reform. The public responded with bank runs and panic purchases. A month later, price reform was put off indefinitely.

Collapse

The demise of reformist polling came in June 1989—though some argue it really began a year earlier when Li Peng became premier. A group of pollsters at CESRRI released to the news media their ten "most likely" predictions for 1989.

Among them: a nationwide student movement. But their message did not get through, because censors feared it would spur students to action.

During April and May 1989, many pollsters explicitly supported the protests. The day after martial law was declared, CESRRI and several other reformist think-tank organizations denounced Li Peng's actions -- probably the first instance in the 40 years of Communist rule in China that government-affiliated institutions openly opposed the top leadership. Shortly after the June 4 massacre, two survey directors at CESRRI were reportedly detained. Two other leading pollsters were put on the "most wanted" list and later arrested.

Does public opinion have a place in China? A year ago, it seemed an open question.⁷ Now, we may be more certain that genuine public opinion polling cannot survive so long as the coercive state survives. It is still too early to tell, however, whether the authoritarian leaders will completely ban polling. As the events in Czechoslovakia after 1968 and in Poland after 1981 have suggested, the China's hardliners may take over polling and use it in their efforts to reshape public thinking.

Endnotes

¹See Walter Conner and Zvi Gitelman (eds.), *Public Opinion in European Socialist Systems*, (Praeger, 1977), p. 4.

²For detailed discussion on Mao's panel method, see J.H. Zhu, "Public Opinion Polling in China: A Descriptive Review," *Gazette*, 41(1988).

³J.H. Zhu, *On Chinese Audience Survey Research Methods*, unpublished master's thesis, (Fudan University, 1985).

⁴Stanley Rosen, "Public Opinion and Reform in the People's Republic of China," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 22(1989), p. 160.

⁵Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Public Opinion and Ideology: Mythology and Pragmatism in Interaction*, (Praeger, 1986).

⁶J.H. Zhu, "Origins of Chinese Student Unrest," *The Indianapolis Star*, (May 9, 1989).

⁷Rosen, *op. cit.*