

POLLING IN CHINA: INTERVIEW WITH DU YAN



Public Perspective: Polling in China is largely unknown to American readers. Could you please, first of all, tell us the impact of China's political environment on polling?

Du Yan: Politically speaking, the government places no restriction on what you can or cannot poll. There is certain pressure on surveys concerning international issues. Here the government is concerned that survey findings may be regarded as China's official stand because the newspapers in which survey results are published are official. The government wants to be the only spokesman for China in international politics. We once conducted a survey on the Persian Gulf War, but the findings couldn't be released. As for polling on domestic issues, there is, in my opinion, virtually no government restriction—because survey organizations are given no responsibility for publishing releases. It is the media that are responsible since they are official. As far as conducting surveys, the problem is funding. What organizations are willing to fund social or political surveys? China's media have not attached enough attention to funding and publishing polls.

Above all, we care about our own business image. We are reluctant to give our clients an impression that we are overly concerned with political issues and negligent in economic and business issues.

Du Yan, founder and director of China Survey Research (CSR), was born in Hebei Province, China on October 5, 1953. He enrolled in Nankai University, Tianjin in 1978 majoring in sociology and economics. Upon graduation in 1982, he was assigned to teach in the Northern Communication University, but soon transferred to the National Academy of Social Sciences to work as a researcher. In January 1986, he left his job at the Academy and established China's first and now largest private survey organization.

In the past seven years, CSR has developed into an organization of over seventy full-time professionals. In addition to its headquarters in Beijing, it has branches in six other key cities. It has conducted more than 300 surveys: Among them, studies of "Public Attitudes Towards Reform and Development," "Urban Residents' Attitudes Towards the Adjusted Price of Farm Products and Non-staple Foods," and "The Living Conditions of Scientific and Technical Personnel." CSR also has an on-going series of mail-in surveys done in collaboration with the Central People's Radio Station. Owing to his contribution to the development of survey research in his country, Du Yan is sometimes called "China's Gallup."

The interview was conducted in Chinese and translated for *The Public Perspective*, by Ji-Qiang Rong, a native of Beijing, presently a doctoral candidate in political science at The University of Connecticut and a research associate of the Roper Center.

Before 1989, we did relatively more political polling, especially in 1986 and 1987 around the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Since 1989, we have done very little political polling, not because of government pressures but our own business policy. We don't want to be too noticeable in this respect.

PP: What can you tell our readers about how polls are used in China? Are they used extensively for market research?

DY: About 95% of the surveys we have conducted are marketing surveys, and the proportion is still growing. Last year our business income reached U.S.\$ 1 million. The other 5% encompasses social and political polls.

Only occasionally are poll findings used by the media. Some local newspapers make more frequent use of surveys than do the national papers. For instance, *Beijing Youth* publishes quite a bit of our poll results on social and political issues. Recently, they released a survey on readers' knowledge of the National People's Congress which convened several weeks ago. The uses by the *People's Daily*, the

official newspaper of the central government, are primarily related to economic issues.

It's difficult to ascertain how the government agencies make use of polls; no policy makers have ever made public whether or how they are influenced by the findings. I am quite certain when they commission us to conduct a survey, what they would want to see are the real facts, for they know that we won't release the results to anybody else but them directly. We always turn over the findings to the clients who paid for the surveys and let them decide what to do with them. It is totally their business. We won't release data to anybody else unless the clients make them public first. We stick to this principle as our business ethic. So, more often than not, we'll refer visitors who approach us for data to the clients. We apply the same rule to the surveys commissioned by government agencies. If some journalist tries to learn from us about a survey conducted for a government agency, we'll direct him to the agency. Though on the whole not many polls are published in China, those conducted for the media still stand a better chance to be made public. Our mail-in

surveys for a radio program named "Survey & Response," commissioned by the Central People's Radio Station, are released frequently, sometimes once every week.

PP: How are polls received in China? What is the reaction of the rank-and-file Chinese to surveys? What kind of refusal rate do you encounter?

DY: The Chinese people think positively of polling as a means of expressing themselves. They trust that the findings are reflective of their opinions and that the pollsters have no reason to manipulate them. But a substantial number of people doubt the use of surveys in government policy making. They are uncertain of the influence of surveys on Chinese leaders under the present administrative set-up. As I said, never has a leader expressed any opinion on any survey in China.

The typical refusal rate in China is lower than five percent. Since very few people have ever been sampled and interviewed, they are curious about polls and more willing to participate. The other reason lies in the fact rank-and-file Chinese have been offered few chances to express themselves and thus are more responsive to survey questions. Demographically speaking, entrepreneurs seldom accept interviews because they are very busy. Senior citizens waste a lot of your time, for they always talk about more than they have been asked. Education makes a difference in the speed people respond to questions: those with higher educational levels give much quicker answers than those with the lower ones.

PP: How is your firm organized and staffed? What are the other principal survey organizations?

DY: Our firm was established in January 1986, the first survey organization in China. Now, we have more than seventy full-time and over three thousand part-time employees, with offices in seven cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou (Canton), Tianjin, Qingdao, Haikou, and Beihai. These are either the key cities of China or the cities with brisk business activities. So far we have conducted more

than three hundred surveys. All our full-time employees are four-year college graduates. The three thousand part-time employees are hired to work as interviewers. Most of them are college graduates and the rest, college students.

There are three other substantial polling groups, all located in Guangzhou. They are SCMR (South China Market Research), GMR (Guangzhou Market Research), and SRG (Survey Research Group). The differences between our organization and the three mentioned here are that they are more regional organizations, conducting surveys only in Guangzhou, while we are more national. They concentrate entirely on market surveys but we also conduct some social and political polls. They were all set up after 1990. SRG, for instance, was established just this year. In addition, departments of sociology and journalism of many universities also conduct surveys for teaching purposes. So do advertising firms. The latter conduct polls on the effects of commercials. In my estimate, about a hundred firms of this type are capable of doing commercial surveys—though the number of the advertising firms in China is well over ten thousand. Since not everybody understands and masters the scientific methods of survey research, such as sampling and questionnaire design, many surveys conducted by the advertising firms produce biased results, and their clients don't have any idea that the findings are misleading. Furthermore, since professional survey organizations are few in number and cannot satisfy the demand of the society, many polls are done by people in small firms who have received neither college education nor any professional training in survey research.

The biggest problem we have is to find qualified personnel. Polling is not a lucrative profession in China. This is especially so when the country is filled with other opportunities for making big money. It's hard then, to attract the first-class professionals into our organization and maintain a stable team. We have to compete with two trends for competent people: the trend of transferring to other businesses to make big money and that of going to study abroad. If a person is doing

well in our organization, he is capable of making big money in other businesses, and qualified for studying abroad. Still, in comparison with other survey organizations our firm is relatively stable. We have taken every measure to keep a stable team.

PP: Tell us some technical aspects of polling in China. What type of sample do you usually use for a poll in Beijing? How do you sample? What interview methods do you usually use?

DY: The survey techniques we apply are similar to those used in the U.S. and other Western countries. This reflects my own education. I was enrolled in Nankai University in 1978, majoring in sociology and economics. Since sociology was resumed in China that year after its suspension in 1953, the professors for some specialized courses were from the U.S. and West Germany. I learned survey techniques from them.

For public surveys, in Beijing, we usually use three-stage sampling. First, since we have a complete sample frame of all the sub-district offices in the city, we draw a random sample from it. Then, we go to the sampled offices to obtain a complete list of all the neighborhood committees under them, and then draw a sample of the committees. From these neighborhood committees, we obtain a sample frame of all the residents living in these neighborhoods, and draw a random sample of the residents out of it.

As for interviewing, we use all three methods: in-person, telephone, and mail. The in-person home interview is most frequently employed. We also conduct fact-to-face interviews in public places, such as on streets or in stores. When conducting in-person interviews on streets, we have to inform either the local police bureau or the traffic police bureau first for their approval. The responses often depend on the individuals in charge there. Some will support and help you; others will regard polling as a problem and make some trouble. When we are pressed for time, we also conduct on-street interviews without informing the police. If problems arise in our doing so, we then find ways of

handling them. Most of our public-place polls are consumer polls conducted in large department stores. In that environment, we have to ask for approval from the heads of the stores beforehand. They are usually very supportive. For home interviews, we don't have to inform anybody.

So far as the phone interview is concerned, we divide families with telephones in China into two groups. One includes those living in residential complexes. Their phones only have extension numbers. This means that the telephones in each apartment are hooked up with the operator for the complex; there is only one telephone number to the outside callers for the whole complex. Inside, each phone has an extension number. Both incoming and out-going calls have to reach the operator first for him/her to connect the calls. Because of the low installation fee of this type of phone, we regard this group of families as the "public." Families having phones with direct-dialing numbers constitute the other group, which we treat as the "people of stronger purchasing power." They belong to China's top 10% in income and can thus afford the high cost of the installation fee.

The mail survey is conducted in two ways: one is the mail-in survey, the other, the two-way mail survey. For the mail-in survey, we first ask questions over radio stations and then request listeners to mail in their responses. For the two-way mail survey, we have to first advertise in newspapers seeking addresses of a certain special population. After receiving the addresses, we mail them the questionnaires. This is done when a special population is difficult to ascertain. If we plan to conduct a survey of refrigerator users, for instance, we have to adopt this method because we don't have any sampling frame of these users.

Demographic questions vary from one poll to another. But the common ones are gender, age, profession, education, income, and marital status. Race and religion are seldom included because 94% of all Chinese are of Han ethnicity and the overwhelming majority don't have a religion.

PP: Of all the surveys you have conducted, what proportion would you call national surveys and what proportion is limited to some particular city? Who funds these polls?

DY: If you regard a multi-city poll, such as one conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, as a national survey, then 80% of our polls are national. The other 20% are single-city polls. Real national surveys are very few in China, because the cost of polling in the countryside is staggering. In fact, very few clients have shown interest in the countryside and funding rural polls.

About 95% of our polls are funded by enterprises, of which over 80% are industrial enterprises, especially those which produce consumer goods. Foreign capital industry and joint-ventures occupy less than one third of these business clients.

On occasion, as I have said, we have looked at political questions. The most important poll we have ever conducted is the one on the 13th National Congress of CPC, which was convened in October 1987. In that poll, we sampled 42 cities and interviewed 5,000 respondents. Another interesting one is that on the world political leaders, which we did in 1986. It is the only survey which asked the public their attitudes towards Deng Xiaoping.

PP: Having polled in China for seven years, what do you think are the major

current issues of popular concern? What is the general mood of the people?

DY: Chinese people are much concerned with economic issues, though rural residents and their urban counterparts differ in the focal points of these issues. The rural residents are worried about whether they can still make ends meet in the market economy. They are also concerned with the extra taxes levied by the local governments. The city dwellers care more about the security of their employment and social welfare, such as health insurance, in the rapidly changing economy. Housing is also high on the list of their concerns. Many intellectuals are occupied with the choice of whether to quit their present jobs to become businessmen for more handsome incomes. It is not a question of the work itself; they have no problem with that. They want to transform their social and economic status which they don't think is compatible with their education. On the whole, people are concerned with economic issues, but not deeply worried about getting by—with, maybe, the exception of some farmers.

The general mood is, I think, fairly positive. People in the coastal areas are more upbeat than those in inland areas. The biggest source of dissatisfaction is the discrepancy between people's expectation and the reality. Their living conditions have been much improved, but expectations have risen even faster. A related matter here is relative satisfaction. Your life is better than before, but other people's conditions are improving even faster and higher, so you feel you aren't much better off. These two problems are the most prominent problems in China. The government reform policy is aimed at raising the living standard in general, but allowing a group to get rich faster. Everyone wants to be in this group.

