Writing Statement of Purpose for Graduate School Application: Political Science as a Case

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Congratulations! You have decided to apply for graduate school in political science. You will embark on a wonderful journey to explore interesting political phenomena around the world and use cutting-edge tools to understand why politics happens in certain places and at certain times. The first hurdle you need to overcome is to get into a graduate program. Unfortunately, by the time you decide to apply, most of the things that matter for your application are already out of your control: undergraduate GPA, GRE, and letters of recommendation. Fortunately, however, there is still one thing that you have total control, and it matters a lot for your application – your statement of purpose (SOP). Admissions committees take SOP very seriously and get to know what kind of scholar you are through reading your SOP. Here are some of the things that I think are important in preparing your SOP.

Focus on your research interests. While you must have interesting stories about your upbringing, hobbies, and journeys, they are irrelevant unless they are tied to your research interests. Graduate programs are looking for scholars who have some ideas

about what they want to study. Start the essay with your research interests. Then say something about why you are interested in a certain question. It could be a personal story, a course you took, or a book you read. Next, tell people how your previous training has prepared you to address this question. You can discuss the courses you have taken, professors you have assisted, or research projects you have participated in. Here, focus on what you have learned from these courses and projects. Have you discovered some patterns that defy the conventional wisdom? Have you had an "aha!" moment that makes you excited? Have you been trying to figure out something that keeps you up at night? Have you learned how to tackle a technological challenge by learning a new method? Then say something about how you want to pursue the topic if you are enrolled in graduate school. Here, avoid sounding like you have solved the problem. If you have solved the problem, you need not go to graduate school. Keep your curiosity and lay out a plan about how you plan to further our understanding of this question. This part is more like a mini research design: testable hypotheses, the methods you plan to use and why, potential challenges, and how you plan to tackle them. Lastly, say something about how a certain program can help you pursue this research agenda. Are there faculty who share your research interests? Does the department's theoretical and methodological strengths fit your research agenda? Check your interested faculty members' personal websites and see what they have done (which tells you what they are known for) and their work in progress (which tells you what they are up to).

Talk like a political scientist. SOP is the place where you can signal you have been professionalized and you can talk like a scholar. Do some readings before writing your SOP, including canon in the discipline, recent journal articles, and SOPs of successful applicants (which I provide at the end). Use the terminology that political scientists

use, but don't overdo it. For example, rather than saying "I am interested in office politics," say "I am interested in bureaucratic politics." Instead of studying "the fate of the Chinese Communist Party," you want to explain "the durability of authoritarian regimes." Don't say "I talked to my father's friends," say "I conducted semi-structured elite interviews." These are a few examples. You get the idea.

Show your passion. Admissions committees care about whether you have a clear idea about research. They are also looking for people who have the determination to carry out their research ideas. Doing research is tough and, sometimes, lonely. You need to be genuinely passionate about your research to enjoy being a scholar. Show your passion in your SOP. Why does this particular question interest you? What does addressing this question mean for you personally and for the people you care about? Political scientists cannot cure cancer, but we do what we do because we believe it can make the world better or at least make ourselves feel fulfilled.

Start early. Lastly, write and rewrite. Most programs have a December 15 deadline. Start writing the first draft of your SOP in the summer. Send it to your friends and professors for feedback. Revise relentlessly. Remember: this is the only element in your application package that you can still control at this point. Make it perfect.

Examples Enclosed please find eight SOP examples from my current or former graduate students who have successfully enrolled in top Ph.D. programs in the U.S. I hope their essays can serve as a template.

I am applying to the Ph.D. in XXX at XXX University to pursue my academic interest in comparative political economy. Specifically, my first line of interest is the political economy of corruption and good governance. My interest in this field was solidified through my graduate courses and research. My second line of research interest is the political economy of inequality and poverty, which derives from my undergraduate and graduate coursework. For both lines of interest, I strive to develop new arguments and test them with innovative empirical methods, building on the solid methodological training I received from several institutions. My current theoretical and empirical point of departure draws from the case of China, while I plan to generalize to other authoritarian countries and developing democracies. I also hope to discover new topics in the broad field of comparative political economy during my Ph.D. studies.

In the XXX program at XXX University, my research focuses on two questions regarding political economy of corruption and good governance. First, how does corruption influence political participation and what is the mechanism through which corruption exerts an impact? Conventional wisdom suggests that corruption decreases subjective political efficacy, which undermines engagement in politics. Utilizing hierarchical generalized linear models and mediation analysis, my empirical research, drawing on the XXX dataset, suggests a more complex relationship via decomposing the mechanism. First, citizen perceptions of and their experience with corruption decrease election turnout. Second, this negative correlation is moderated by low political trust in elections and democracy. Third, activities of electoral corruption increase turnout, arguably through vote buying. In sum, although corruption can directly "buy" votes, it may undermine voting overall by decreasing political trust in both the elections and the regime. My findings are expected to shed some light on the dual effect of corruption on elections in authoritarian regimes.

I plan to further develop this line of research with additional empirical studies. First, I propose to identify the causal effect of corruption on turnout in authoritarian China by comparing the XXX dataset with the XXX data. Specifically, I will use China's ongoing anti-corruption campaign to study how corruption reduction decreases turnout by practically eliminating vote buying. I also plan to supplement quantitative data analysis with in-depth fieldwork. Given that qualitative evidence of corruption and voting is sparse in China, I plan to do fieldwork in rural China to gauge how corruption exerts both direct and indirect influences on voting. In addition to elections, examining corruption's impact on petitions and protests will also contribute to studies on political participation. Finally, I plan to generalize my study on corruption's dual effects to other authoritarian regimes and developing democracies. Anti-corruption reforms in Brazil and India, for instance, can provide fertile grounds for testing my arguments. Since competitive elections are routinely held, evidence from these states can help me build a comparable theory of corruption and participation across countries.

Why do governments exert effort to reduce corruption? In my second research question, I ask how rule of law (RoL) influences investment and whether the impact varies by local circumstances. Conventional wisdom suggests a consistent positive effect of RoL on investment. Based on the cutting-edge interaction effect analysis developed by Hainmueller et al. (2019), my empirical study in China shows that municipal RoL has a conditional impact on foreign direct investment (FDI): for fast-growing regions, RoL promotes FDI, and vice versa. Therefore, RoL's influence on FDI varies across municipalities with different economic conditions. Slow-growing cities are more likely to suffer, rather than to benefit, from RoL reforms in FDI attraction.

This counter-intuitive relationship between RoL and investment leads to several questions I hope to further investigate. First, how do qualitative cases substantiate my arguments on conditional effects of RoL? Second, do corruption and RoL have similar impacts on domestic investment as on FDI? Finally, since subnational variation in RoL qualities is typical for most regimes, does a conditional effect of RoL apply to other authoritarian countries and developing democracies? These questions supplement our understandings of how the quality of governance influences economic development.

In addition to corruption and good governance, I am also interested in the political economy of inequality and poverty. This interest originated from my undergraduate studies of migrant workers in China. A directed reading course at XXX has further inspired me to investigate on origins of different aspects of inequality. Overall, I am fascinated by two unsettled questions regarding economic and political inequality. On the one hand, how does economic growth impact inequality levels? I am particularly interested in disaggregating inequality into within-nation and across-country trends. On the other hand, what is the level of underrepresentation for the poor or rural population in legislatures in authoritarian regimes and developing democracies? Does this underrepresentation influence the distribution of preference expression through bill sponsorships? Given that related studies mainly focus on developed countries, my further work on developing countries would shed some light on whether their legislatures, even for the "window-dressing" sorts, add to inequality of interest articulation.

I expect to advance my research on comparative political economy at XXX University given its renowned methodology training and resourceful faculties. In particular, I hope to work with Professors XXX. Professor XXX's expertise in rule of law, corruption, and state capacity would assist my fieldwork and empirical research on political participation, business-state relations, and governance in China. Professor XXX's knowledge of accountability, clientelism, and elections in Africa and Latin America would contribute to my studies of how corruption and political brokers impact turnout in authoritarian regimes and developing democracies. I can also learn about how good governance – e.g., provision of education and information – influences political participation. Finally, Professor XXX's broad interest in inequality, redistribution, and electoral institutions would facilitate my research on how political representation interacts with interest articulation and distributive policies. Therefore, with targeted and rigorous instruction from the faculty, I am confident that XXX will best prepare me to realize my academic pursuits on corruption, good governance, and inequality. It will also guide me along the path towards a well-trained scholar in the broad field of comparative political economy.

My passion for politics flows from witnessing two facets of the Chinese state. Growing up in an urban state-owned enterprise (SOE) compound in China, I enjoyed public education with low tuition and various benefits conferred by an SOE. The other facet, however, burdens my rural-origin parents as they strive to support our extended family in the countryside—a direct result of urban-biased redistribution. Living through these contrasts brought about a deep fascination with the tremendous impact of politics on individual welfare, especially with regard to how non-democratic regimes craft relationships with their people to maintain power. I hope to pursue a Ph.D. in Political Science to examine how redistribution underpins authoritarian rule, and to engage with the field of comparative politics that speaks to the core questions driving my inquiry.

My undergraduate and master's research projects lay the foundation for my interests in the infrastructural mechanisms of authoritarian rule that I will be addressing in my doctoral studies. My work initially focused on coercive capacity, studying how China's local states respond to labor protests. Through quantitative analyses of protest event data from 2013 to 2017, I find that the deployment of coercive force in China is not only selective and controlled, contingent upon the amount of social disruption, but also highly predictable from the timing of significant political events.

Despite the above findings on the credible threat of repression, one lingering question remains: How was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) able to build its powerful state apparatus? Inspired by the calls to probe historical sources of durable authoritarianism, my master's thesis asks why the CCP was able to control some localities, but not others, in its struggle against other major political forces during World War II. Analyzing a county-level longitudinal dataset I constructed, I argue that the CCP's mobilization and infiltration of local militias and its progressive tax reforms explain the birth of communist strongholds, measured by the survival of CCP county committees. A key conclusion is that redistribution during wartime—rather than pure extraction—facilitates authoritarian state-building. Building on its revolutionary success, the CCP bound the masses to the regime through institutions that made access to resources, services, and opportunities dependent on the state.

Having examined the CCP's redistribution efforts during World War II, I have become fascinated with the ways in which authoritarian regimes remold their redistributive infrastructure over time. During my Ph.D., I want to ask: What causes the varying degrees of welfare expansion at the subnational level in urban China? Who are included in welfare expansion, and why? To answer these questions, I will examine local revenue structures and the preferences of local interest groups.

Empirically, I will address these questions specifically in reference to the household registration (*hukou*) system in China, which ties residency registration with welfare coverage and public finance. As statist institutions and state-created group identities unravel, the *hukou* system has been undergoing reforms with considerable local discretion from the late 1990s to present. This allows me to adopt a subnational research design and use mixed methods for empirical analysis. To ex-

plain within- and cross-city variations, I will combine quantitative data from administrative, fiscal, and online sources for statistical analyses, and draw on interviews and archives for a comparative historical analysis of selected cases that are nested in the cross-city statistical analyses.

This research speaks to the current literature on redistribution under authoritarian regimes, which agrees on the importance of redistribution in sustaining authoritarian rule, but differs over redistributive patterns and the underlying mechanisms. The first line predicts selected redistribution or punishment based on political loyalty, the threat of instability, or societal demands. The second line explains broader redistribution aimed at improving performance legitimacy or cultivating dependence. My case presents new questions since the most substantial state-conferred benefits in urban China are granted based on depoliticalized and arguably meritocratic standards (credit-based *hukou* system), which can be influenced by revenue sources and the bargaining power of various enterprises, and induce political inaction on the part of ordinary citizens. This study aims to improve our understanding of how redistribution under authoritarian regimes can be driven by variables beyond concerns of direct political support or social stability, through an investigation of the subnational variation in the design of redistributive institutions.

I have substantially prepared for my doctoral study. (RA experience & quantitative training omitted.)

The Ph.D. program in Political Science at UMich will provide me with an ideal intellectual home to realize my academic ambitions, given its overall excellence, rigorous methodological training, and notable strength in comparative politics. My proposed project directly speaks to [Faculty A] and [Faculty B]'s interest in the relationship between economic development and political development in China. [Faculty A]'s research on Chinese labor has informed my inquiry into state responses to labor protest, and I will draw from her expertise in explaining how market-oriented interest groups influence welfare expansion in China. I could also borrow analytical insights from [Faculty B]'s dynamic framework for unpacking adaptive governance and state-market coevolution. [Faculty C]'s recent work on coercive distribution has helped me articulate my proposed project, and I hope to engage with his expertise in the relationship between state power and authoritarian rule. I look forward to working with [Faculty D], for her work on urban political economy; and [Faculty E], for his expertise in distributive politics. I would be thrilled at the opportunity of joining this community and look forward to pursuing questions that shed light on authoritarian countries and expand the debates of the discipline.

Statement of Purpose
Department of Government
Harvard University

How does new information technology reshape classic principal-agent relationships? The original principal-agent model is built on a premise of information asymmetry between the principal and the agent. However, modern technology has altered the quantity and quality of information flows within large organizations like bureaucracies. This forces us to rethink power relationships within bureaucracies: Does information technology reduce existing information asymmetries by making monitoring much easier for day-to-day governance? Will information technology create new demands for power delegation to collect and process vast quantities of information?

My interest in bureaucracy stems from working in three different agencies within the Chinese central government. The fluctuating balance of power I observed between central policymakers and subordinate officials was in tension with Max Weber's descriptions of power position within the bureaucracy. I found that bureaucratic power relies on control over information, not merely formal positions. At each level of government, information is interpreted into a narrative. After going through several levels of bureaucracy, there arises a "telephone game" effect in which details are lost and subjective information creeps in. This creates different nexuses of power due to information control. For example, while subordinate agents are better informed about detailed tax codes, their superiors are more able to synthesize a general pattern of industrial conditions. The divergent information nexus means subordinate agents have a greater say in policymaking for individual investment projects, while the principal retains greater power in initiating or vetoing bundles of policies over the long term.

My past research sought to understand the role of information in shaping bureaucratic politics. [redacted] I examined how information asymmetry shaped individual-level incentive structures, as well as institutional-level bureaucratic capacities, through the lens of political corruption. Leveraging an interrupted time-series design, my research showed that if prosecutors were well-informed of promotion criteria, they focused on increasing the quantity of corruption cases they pursued, not the quality. This strategic action adversely affected judicial integrity. [redacted] further explored information asymmetry between principal and agent during anti-corruption investigations. I found that inspection agents who better understood issue-specific bureaucratic norms were more capable of identifying local corruption than agents with general accounting and legal expertise. This finding speaks to the ongoing debate on endogenous versus exogenous foundations of bureaucratic expertise. My findings align with the endogenous explanation in showing that insider knowledge translates into monitoring capacity during corruption investigations. While proponents of endogenous explanations extensively focus on the policymaking aspect of bureaucratic expertise, my findings complement the literature by addressing the implementation aspect.

Going forward, I propose a research agenda at the intersection of information, technology, and bureaucracy in the digital era. Building on my past research on bureaucracy, I plan to incorporate the influence of information technology as a key variable. My central questions are: Theoretically, how does new technology affect information asymmetry, reshaping principal-agent relationships? Empirically, will

technical innovations make bureaucracies more centrally powerful? Or will subordinate bureaucrats still figure out ways to maintain autonomy and protect their turf?

To understand the governance angle of informatization, China provides an ideal case to study. Its "digital Leninism" has shaped principal-agent relations to an extent that has few parallels in other regimes. Existing research on technology and governance in China focuses narrowly on censorship and mass surveillance, eschewing the fact that big data collection has broader implications on the infrastructural power of the state. For my proposed research, I plan to focus on China's social policy process, particularly on its recent adoption of a series of modern information technologies. Aiming to establish a comprehensive "social credit system," the central government has begun collecting vast quantities of data on individual citizens—including migration and welfare information from residential committees, loans and tax data from financial institutions, and online activity logs from Internet giants Alibaba and Tencent. Four years after the first published blueprint of the social credit system, however, credit-related data is still stuck on "isolated islands," as local governments guard their information and undermine efforts to build a unified database. If new technology has facilitated the central bureaucracy's information collection by reducing the demand for manpower, why does data fragmentation still prevail in the digital age?

I have accumulated the skills and expertise to carry out this research. Drawing from [redacted], I hope to employ a mixed methods design for my project by combining quantitative text analysis with in-depth case studies [redacted] I have taken three graduate-level quantitative methods and formal theory courses [redacted] I have also developed archival and documentary research skills by taking a graduate-level research methods seminar [redacted] While working with [redacted] after finishing my graduate studies, I have been learning natural language processing, principal component analysis, and network analysis to study state-building reforms in China. As my study of the social credit system further develops, I am interested in extending my research to other policy domains and different political contexts beyond China.

I believe that Harvard University's Department of Government is the ideal place to pursue my proposed research. Not only have I been inspired by [redacted] work on guerrilla-style policymaking and adaptive governance, I am also fascinated by her recent study of convergent comparison on China and India. I also want to continue learning from [redacted] who has been a devoted mentor and whose research on state-building and bureaucratic capacity closely overlaps with my research interests. Beyond China, I aspire to work with [redacted] to expand my empirical horizons and situate my research of data governance under authoritarian rule in a broader scope of time and space. Furthermore, I aspire to learn from [redacted], whose in-depth knowledge of American bureaucracy would help me further develop my research on bureaucratic power delegation amid fluid technical innovations and societal changes.

The rigorous training at Harvard will not only help me as I pursue an academic career in political science, but it will also allow me to develop the capability to shed light on important questions facing both China and the world in the digital era.

Statement of Purpose

In my first year at XXX, I took a class on XXX politics. During the professor's first three lectures, he conveyed a single point: how critical, yet difficult, it is for Chinese political scientists to avoid writing only what the state wants. I felt awakened. Having been raised in a small, isolated city in China, I had only experienced pro-regime political socialization in school and at home and had never been exposed to the political views of liberal intellectuals. The professor helped me realize that the state's control of society can be problematized both politically and analytically. I decided to take more political science classes and gradually discovered my passion for using the tools of empirical political science to understand politics in nondemocracies. As an MA student at XXX, I enhanced my background in political science by focusing on comparative politics and quantitative methods for my coursework, reading extensively in the field, working with political science professors as a research assistant, and conducting independent research.

Having improved my mastery of the language of political science, I identified the core puzzle that had underpinned my motivation to study the subject and that will drive my future research: How can we explain the state capacity and regime durability of autocracies? While both autocracies and democracies project power into society by enforcing fiscal extraction and policy, a robust autocracy imposes tight control over society and maintains the compliance of its subjects for a sustained period. Why are some autocracies able to do so but not others? I am especially intrigued by the regime–mass nexus. I am interested in how autocracies such as the Chinese party-state can enjoy voluntary support from the masses while imposing tight political control and why the masses in autocracies throughout the world often remain compliant when they distrust their rulers. I aim to address autocratic state capacity and regime durability by empirically examining autocratic political control and mass political behavior.

My research to date has focused on China to explore both the dynamics of autocratic repression and expropriation and the determinants of citizens' political attitudes. For one project, I used a difference-in-differences design to estimate the impact of state repression on protest mobilization in China's Tibet region. The results suggested that repression stifled mobilization in the short term but intensified it in the long term. My MA thesis examined excessive fiscal extraction, a covert form of expropriation in China; by applying firm–year two-way fixed effects models to a large firm-level dataset, I demonstrated how local politicians' career competition may have led to excessive extraction. I am currently preparing to launch a survey experiment in China to examine how exposure to violent prodemocracy protesters affects bystanders' regime support and protest propensity. For this project, I have designed a list experiment to compensate for the likelihood of respondents falsifying their preferences due to China's sensitive political context and have validated my design in a recent pilot study.

These initial endeavors have helped me consider how to structure my future work on political control and behavior to extend current theoretical understandings of autocratic state capacity and regime stability. Theories of autocratic rule emphasize the role of elites—dictators, their ruling coalitions, and their challengers—in state building and regime survival. Most of these theories consider the masses relevant only insofar as dictators are seen to react to mass revolutionary threats through patronage and repression. In reality, dictators also actively boost mass compliance and support, and they may do so without using repression or patronage: Repression frequently backfires, and patronage rarely buys voluntary support.

Going forward, I aim first to complicate the conventional wisdom regarding autocratic political control. I will highlight indirect, informal, and innovative control strategies (e.g., infiltration, persuasion, and digital surveillance) rather than patronage and repression and explore the role of dictators' local political and bureaucratic agents operating outside the security apparatus. While examining these overlooked facets of political control, I will focus on two underlying issues: First, how do dictators and local agents overcome obstacles to controlling citizens, such

as insufficient information? Second, how do principal–agent problems between dictators and local agents affect the outcomes of control strategies? And how do dictators solve such problems? I also aim to use the tools of psychology to study mass political behavior in autocracies. While much is known about active dissent and passive compliance under authoritarian rule, we know little about voluntary pro-regime attitudes and actions, including support for repressive tactics of political control. How are these outcomes shaped by emotion, personality, identity, and information through psychological mechanisms? I believe that these empirical inquiries will enable me to complement elite-focused theories of autocratic rule by theorizing the mechanisms through which mass support and compliance facilitate state and regime strengthening.

My training has prepared me to address these questions through rigorous quantitative analysis. At XXX, I took various graduate methodology courses offered by different departments and schools, which covered econometrics and its intersections with machine learning and computational methods. My desire to hone my quantitative skills led me to my current position as a XXX supervised by economist XXX. For one project, I am working as part of a team to examine the political economy of African development using high-resolution satellite data. For another, I am responsible for implementing a meta-analysis of the effects of weather and climate change on political violence. The first project has equipped me with new skills in causal inference and GIS data processing, while the second has filled gaps in my knowledge of econometrics. As such, I am prepared to engage in PhD-level training, and the Harvard Government Department, with its leading methodologists, is an exciting environment in which to do so.

Harvard is also an ideal place to study political control and behavior in autocracies, especially in China. My interests in political control and behavior have been profoundly shaped by Dr. A's work on adaptive governance and citizens' political awareness and by Dr. B's work on regime support. Drs. X, Y, and Z's expertise in political psychology will greatly benefit my work on political behavior. I also look forward to collaborating with Harvard's methodologists to develop survey methodologies and causal inference techniques to overcome challenges in studying political behavior in autocracies, such as preference falsification and a lack of detailed data on protest participation.

As well as being an ideal place to pursue my current research agenda, Harvard is the best place for me to explore alternative thematic and empirical approaches to explaining state capacity and regime durability. Although I have considered state capacity and regime durability to be closely interrelated outcomes, I look forward to exploring their respective evolution and mutual interactions. Drs. B, C, and D have all challenged the conventional wisdom on the development of state and regime institutions. I am eager to work with Dr. B to examine state development in pre-communist China. Drs. B and D both combine quantitative analysis and long-term historical perspectives to produce theoretically meaningful work; this is the kind of research to which I aspire. The Harvard Government Department, with its leading methodologists, its commitment to historical analysis, and its strength in the study of state institutions, will allow me to pursue my core interests while maximizing my potential.

Statement of Purpose for Political Science Ph.D. Program
[Applicant Name]

State infrastructural power is "two-faced" when authoritarian governments are in control. Growing up in a state-owned company neighborhood, I benefitted from state welfare. At the same time, though, I can also testify to the state restrictions on the private sphere. Within seventy years of the young regimes' establishment, households were dragged into the public domain by authoritative rules: Cadres terminated unauthorized pregnancies without blinking. The neighborhood party branch sealed residential buildings to contain COVID-19. However, in my parents' lifetime, this same infiltration of society lifted children out of malnutrition. More recently, it controlled the spread of COVID. While the police and military may serve as a temporary aid, street-level bureaucrats are the key to routine policy implementation and, ultimately, the state's capacity to overcome the crisis. How can a state penetrate to the household level within decades of its establishment? What determines a state's infrastructural capacity? Intrigued by the state's power to legitimately impinge upon private lives and curious about its stability, I hope to pursue an academic career in political science.

My previous research provides a foundational understanding of the topic. For my master's thesis at Harvard University, I analyzed the state's infrastructural power in the public health sphere. Using the enforcement of the One Child Policy in rural northeastern China (1971–1989) as a case study, I sought to understand the causes of uneven policy efficacy in curbing fertility rates. I found that regional variation in China's fertility rates departed from the conventional wisdom of modernization: Impoverished counties had an earlier drop in their fertility rates while wealthier counties lagged. What enabled poorer counties to enforce the unwelcome One Child Policy more successfully than affluent counties? I hypothesized a self-reinforcing process of forming bureaucratic interests at the micro-level. When the initial payment package outweighs pressure from the bureaucrats' kin, the bureaucrats push hard for policy implementation and further alienate themselves from the villagers' interests. I then evaluated my hypothesis with a comparative case study of four counties and quantitative analysis using census data and original data. This evaluation confirms my theory. The research enriched my understanding of the state-society relationship by demonstrating how a state strengthens its social control power with its welfare expansion. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of authoritarian resilience, I argued that a regime's stability might predominantly come from providing social services instead of responding to occurrent challenges or becoming more tolerant of civic activities.

As I came to the end of my thesis project, I noticed that the civic organizations actively collaborated with the state and supported social penetration by being absorbed by the state apparatus in the One-Child Policy implementation. Therefore, the importance of local resource mobilization and various local villages' responses called for a re-examination of state penetration from the social capital and social organization pattern perspectives. How are social forces mobilized? How does social resistance interact with policy adaptation? These puzzles led to a joint working paper with a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard's History Department. We are examining the strategies whereby family-planning offices recruited workers from communes, particularly those who received limited financial support from higher government levels. From 1971 to 1989, rank-and-file bureaucrats enforced the highly unpopular One Child Policy in the same communities where they had long lived. We hope to understand the on-the-ground operation of the state-society negotiation process through our archival research into the recruitment process. We also hope to address what enables society's collaboration level when the state infringes private spheres, therefore avoiding social instability and undermining society's potential challenge for an authoritarian regime.

In addition to my own research, I have had the opportunity to explore temporal variations in infrastructural power from the broader perspective of the rulers and the ruled by working as a research assistant for Professor [Faculty A]. Delegated with the task critical to evaluating his theory on state capacity and elite networks, I gathered China's historical fiscal revenue data from the 8th to 20th century as a proxy to measure the state's extractive power over society. I pulled together data on fiscal revenues based on purchasing power parity with intensive archival research to facilitate comparative evaluation across a long-time span. The data

collection process was an excellent experience for studying economic history and allowed me to gain insight into the changing balances between rent extraction and social stability. The long temporal perspective helped me better understand the political elites' power-sharing process from the central-local fiscal capacity perspective, which speaks to regime resilience within the ruling class.

Moving forward, I would like to continue investigating subnational variation in infrastructural power, using modern China's history of epidemic management as a case. From tuberculosis in the early 1950s to the current coronavirus, China has dramatically improved its local medical care facilities and public health emergency infrastructure. The nature of epidemics calls for localities to obey national guidelines, provide timely medical treatment, and enforce regulations on non-compliant citizens to prevent major outbreaks. However, despite the central state's uniform directions, pandemic control has not been equally effective everywhere. I hope to focus on temporary mobilized, and routine forces, such as cities' public hospitals and temporary workers rallied against the epidemic. I will also address social factors by observing how local communities organize and the private sector interacts with regulations and state penetration. I intend to collect time-series data for national epidemics since 1949 via archival research.

This research will be especially significant when directed at populous developing countries like China, India, and so on. These countries also perfect cases for sub-national evaluations as there are plenty of variations and possible scenarios of pandemic coping given their uneven socio-economic conditions across the region. By unraveling the fast-expanding infrastructural power puzzle, I hope to uncover China's exceptional stability from both the rulers' and subjects' perspectives. The epidemics will serve as an ideal case for observing principal-agent issues within the bureaucratic system due to the pandemic's nature. Both passive social control and positive measures ensure the state employs social collaboration methods to cope with epidemics, which will answer authoritarian resilience from societal and bureaucratic perspectives.

I have prepared myself for a Ph.D. through courses and research experiences at Peking University and Harvard. I familiarized myself with statistical programming and methods such as likelihood estimation, causal inference, and formal models. My training in the geospatial analysis will also facilitate my research into local variations. Furthermore, the intensive training in archival research at Peking University and my collaboration with [Faculty A], [Scholar B] (Harvard Government Department), [Scholar C] (USC Political Science Department) and [Scholar D] (Peking University Government School) to research the China's Communist Party's organizational history have made me sensitive to systemic patterns. They have given me the ability to comprehend issues through comparative reading. The interdisciplinary training at Politics, Philosophy and Economics program and my reading of classical texts in philosophy, sociology, and political theory courses have provided me with a theoretical foundation.

Given New York University's world-class faculty and exceptional academic resources in related fields, I see no better place where my academic interests can flourish genuinely. I would love to work with Professor [Faculty E] for our shared interest in public policy and political science. I also hope to work with Professor [Faculty F] for his research in redistributive politics and Professor [Faculty G] for her expertise in bureaucratic politics. To bring my research into dialogue with post-communist countries, I hope to work with Professor [Faculty H] and Professor [Faculty I]. I plan to take advantage of the ample chances to co-author with faculties as well as the research assistant opportunities to develop my research skills, which will undoubtedly enrich my NYU experience and help me further pursue a career in academia.

As a researcher, I study when and how streamlining bureaucracy improves development. I argue that fiscal decentralization and managerial technology condition whether downsizing enhances service delivery and economic performance, and I test this using variation in administrative amalgamations and staffing adjustments across different institutional contexts.

My research interests stem from a year-long entrepreneurial venture in my hometown, where I sought support from the local industrial fund but was told that, lacking resources, only tax incentives were available. Curious why an investment fund had no money, I examined the county's fiscal report and found that in 2018 it raised only USD 45 million in revenue yet spent USD 138 million on staffing. I soon discovered this overspending is systemic across China: on average, counties devote about 60% of revenue and 30% of expenditures to staffing, with some even unable to cover personnel costs. This raises an important question: How to build administrative infrastructure while keeping related costs under control, without hindering development? More specifically, how does the government retain the ability to readjust to "administrative unit dynamics" after units have proliferated?

This experience inspired my undergraduate honors thesis, but it also showed me that the puzzle was not confined to China. Evidence from the World Bank's Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators (2019) demonstrates that personnel spending exceeds 1/3 of total government expenditures in many developing nations, revealing that excessive staffing is a widespread challenge globally rather than an isolated case. This recognition provided the foundation for my thesis, which examined the Chinese experience as one instance of a broader phenomenon.

Going into the PhD program, I aim to examine the conditions under which bureaucratic and administrative proliferation shifts from supporting to hindering development, and the mechanisms through which streamlining reverses these effects. My goal is to advance our understanding of these political phenomena across different institutional contexts. Prior to this, the dominant theory in this field argued that the proliferation of administrative units and bureaucracy would enhance the quality of public services, improve government accountability, and boost economic performance. Prior studies also examined the fiscal consequences of administrative amalgamations, yet they largely overlook the lag between restructuring at the administrative-unit level and the actual streamlining of bureaucracies. Building on my undergraduate thesis, I seek to address this gap by asking: at what point does the proliferation of bureaucracy shift from supporting to hindering development? How power dynamics in bureaucratic scale changes generate spillover effects for development. How do institutional reforms interact with bureaucratic downsizing? What financial, cultural, and public opinion consequences accompany efforts to streamline structures? And how do technological advancements enhance governance

capacity in ways that make reductions feasible? By engaging these questions, my research aims to uncover when and how downsizing and reform occur, and what their effects are on political and economic development.

In my past research, my thesis examined why efforts to streamline administrative units have repeatedly stalled. I argued that while streamlining eases local fiscal pressure, decentralization empowers grassroots bureaucrats, embedding them in policy implementation and creating rent-seeking opportunities that make them reluctant to relinquish positions, thereby reinforcing resistance to reform. To measure administrative unit proliferation and reduction, I built a database of 30,000+ entries tracking yearly changes in China's administrative units. Using two-way fixed effects model and elite interviews, I found that effective reform requires a moderate degree of fiscal centralization to overcome resistance. This thesis won the [Award Name] Award for Best Thesis in Political Science and the [Award Name] Award for Best Thesis in Social Science, which recognized the best thesis across Michigan's 23 social science programs. This paper has received peer review comments from ***Studies in Comparative International Development*** and is currently under revision, offering a solid and credible foundation for my future research agenda.

More broadly, I am interested in how reforms in a wider sense—such as the intellectualization of bureaucrats and the bureaucratization of academics—shape development. As modern governance demands have grown, authoritarian states increasingly feature "scholarly bureaucrats," often former professors. This phenomenon raises central questions: do academically trained officials govern more effectively and foster stronger local outcomes? Do academic bureaucrats who move from centralized institutions to local leadership achieve better growth performance? By pursuing these questions, I aim to assess how the professionalization of bureaucrats influences governance capacity and long-term development.

At the University of Michigan, I was a Stamps Research Fellow and collaborated with Professors [Faculty A] and [Faculty B] to construct a 2000-year database of human wars, leading me to ask how institutional shock affects long-run development. As a research assistant to Professor [Faculty C], I deepened my training in survey-based data and GIS by examining nation-building and ethnic salience. Leading the eighth wave of the World Values Survey in two Chinese cities further enabled me to work directly with grassroots governments and confront the tensions between administrative practice and citizen engagement. Together, these experiences provided me with methodological breadth—archival data construction, spatial analysis, and shaped my ability to study how bureaucratic reforms influence developmental outcomes. Motivated by this agenda, I completed PhD-level courses in Political Economy of Development (Polsci 688) and Political Science Methodology (Polsci 599). I now hope to pursue these questions in the

Department of Government at Harvard.

For the past two years, I have worked with Prof. [Faculty D] at Harvard to examine whether top Chinese social science journals have adopted more nationalist rhetoric under political pressure. I coded over 500 articles on ideology and refined large language model cue words through iterative relevance tests, enabling classification of more than 100,000 articles. In parallel, I am coauthoring with Dr. [Coauthor E] at SOAS to study the developmental impact of state-building education in pre-colonial Manchuria. Using a geographic regression discontinuity design, I linked educational data from 1910s–1945 to outcomes in 1980–2010, showing that state-led schooling had stronger effects on literacy and higher education than colonial programs. Together, these projects trained me in large-scale text analysis, quasi-experimental causal inference, and the integration of archival and contemporary data—skills that further anchor my research agenda.

With its rigorous curriculum and interdisciplinary faculty, Harvard's Department of Government is the ideal place to advance my research. Working with Professor [Faculty D], whose expertise in bureaucracy, political economy of development, and Chinese studies aligns with my agenda, would be central to my training. I also hope to learn from Professors [Faculty F], [Faculty G], and [Faculty H] on institutional and accountability perspectives, while Professor [Faculty I]'s work on causal inference would refine my quasi-experimental strategies for studying bureaucratic reform. My long-term goal is to examine the interplay between bureaucratic reform and development, contributing to theories of bureaucracy and helping policymakers enhance governance. Harvard provides the next step for me to produce scholarship that combines theoretical innovation with real-world impact.

Statement of Purpose

I am applying for the ▉ program in ▉▉ at ▉▉ to pursue my interest in comparative politics and formal theory. My research interest centers on authoritarian durability and state-society relations. Existing research has shown how intra-elite competition helps to sustain authoritarian rule. I aim to bring this idea into state-society relations to study how the state orchestrates competition for social actors and compels them to compete against each other, thereby reinforcing the regime's own stability. With the goal of applying this framework to various authoritarian countries, my current empirical focus revolves around contemporary China.

My master thesis explains why non-state social media practitioners in China become increasingly pro-regime and compliant with the Party. Based on fifty interviews and a six-month fieldwork, my qualitative work discusses how the Chinese government manipulates and co-opts social media practitioners. The government organizes publicity competitions to assess practitioners and rewards the most capable and loyal ones. Though only a limited number of participants receive official awards, many still adulate the government in hopes of recognition. This gives the regime greater leverage over the media and reduces the cost of co-optation. To substantiate this argument, I compiled a corpus of over 90,000 articles from social media accounts over a three-year period with relevant data. My quantitative research utilizes Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools and difference-in-differences methods, which shows that practitioners are willing to make a "sunk investment" and acclaim the government after being notified of the competition without realized rewards. At the same time, compliance and support for the regime can increase the likelihood of being rewarded by the government. This research sheds light on media control and co-optation by examining intricate state-society interactions.

The role of state-structured competitions in co-opting social media in China shares notable similarities with political competition in other authoritarian countries. First, competition creates an *incentive structure* that motivates participants to make investments despite substantial uncertainty about the outcomes, thereby increasing the authoritarian state's leverage over participants. Meanwhile, competition establishes an *information-gathering structure*, which helps the authoritarian state collect information regarding participants' capability and loyalty. It reduces monitoring costs for dictators and improves co-optation and repression strategies. Third, state-orchestrated competition motivates people to trade personal loyalty for government rewards. This fosters the development of vertical political connections between government cadres and social figures, weakens horizontal bonds among peers, and obstructs collective group formation.

The study of state-structured competition among social actors can contribute to the existing literature in four ways. First, it extends the study of competition in authoritarian countries from intra-elite dynamics to state-society interactions. Second, by focusing on how dictators splinter social actors, foster competitive instead of cooperative social relations, and increase the leverage of the state over society, it offers a new perspective to study authoritarian durability that moves beyond the traditional state-versus-society paradigm. Third, the idea provides a fresh explanation of the high political support in China, particularly among the competent upper and middle class. Fourth, from the perspective of the state, it delineates how dictators motivate social actors to prove their capability and loyalty, and how they identify and co-opt social actors with desirable qualities to form influential pro-regime groups at low cost. In this sense, the authoritarian state strategically engineers social relations to ensure its own stability.

Statement of Purpose

In my doctoral study, I intend to continue my research on authoritarian durability through the lens of state-society interactions. In the realm of game theory, my theoretical objectives are twofold. The first is to understand the interplay among surveillance, co-optation, and repression employed by dictators. How can co-optation and repression influence the effectiveness of surveillance, and in turn, how does surveillance affect the efficacy of co-optation and repression? With limited knowledge of social actors, how does a dictator decide whom to co-opt and whom to repress? How do they allocate resources to information collection, co-optation, and repression? Second, I intend to analyze how different methods of co-optation contribute to authoritarian stability. Which types of actors would dictators co-opt directly? In what situations can dictators organize a competition, mobilize social actors to participate and only co-opt the winners? How do these methods give the state different forms of leverage over society? And how do different co-optation approaches vary in potential risks of failure?

Empirically, I aim to extend my research on state-structured competitions and co-optation to other social arenas like business and academia. In China, private companies must demonstrate both capability and loyalty to outperform their peers to secure government contracts. While the capability of a firm is easily assessed, loyalty remains challenging to gauge. To showcase their loyalty, some private companies establish an embedded party branch. Using annual reports of publicly listed companies, I seek to analyze whether the establishment of a party branch assists private firms in securing government contracts. Private companies that establish a party branch but fail to obtain government contracts may experience a continuing sunk cost, losing their autonomy without returns. The same logic can be applied to diverse contexts where social actors are in competition for state rewards, such as scholars competing for National Social Science Fund of China, and film producers seeking limited performance permissions. My future research can offer fresh insights about authoritarian durability by incorporating state-society interactions.

I have substantially prepared for my doctoral study at [redacted] and [redacted] University. My undergraduate training in [redacted] has provided me with a solid knowledge of econometrics and formal theory. In the [redacted] at [redacted], I took two doctor-level courses on quantitative analysis and contributed to the development of an R package which has enhanced my coding skills. At [redacted], I completed two graduate-level courses on formal theory and developed a promising model, which explains the existence of free media and porous censorship in authoritarian countries. I also took another two graduate-level courses on statistical inference. Beyond methodological training, I have pursued substantive courses on the theories of political development and patterns of political change in different areas around the world. These courses have greatly enhanced the transferability of my future research.

[redacted] is the optimal place for my future study. Prof. [redacted] work on state mobilization and educated acquiescence has been a profound inspiration. I am also eager to continue working with [redacted], a dedicated advisor whose research on state capacity and social networks motivates me to delve into state-society relations. Additionally, I am keen to work with [redacted] and [redacted] to broaden my empirical horizons. [redacted] has consistently provided invaluable support in my exploration of formal theory. The rigorous and comprehensive training at [redacted] will thus equip me to address critical questions pertinent to China and beyond in these turbulent times.

I am applying for a PhD in xxx program at xxx University to pursue my academic interests in the political economy of development. Specifically, I am interested in how local agents—including party cadres, bureaucrats, and local elites—shape the uneven implementation of policies and coercive measures. Why are some local agents more compliant than others, and how do state leaders strategically deploy and manage local agents with varying social ties to achieve their goals? To address these questions, I plan to analyze the interactions between state leaders and local agents, as well as between local agents and the masses, in contemporary China and other developing countries.

In my master's thesis, I examine how local agents' social embeddedness affects the intensity of land reform during the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s early consolidation of power in the 1950s, following its victory over the Kuomintang (KMT). Drawing on xxx data, my empirical analysis reveals that in regions facing stronger military and popular threats to the regime—measured by the density of KMT members—party cadres with dense local ties anticipate greater distrust from the dictator and, as a result, implement more aggressive land expropriation than their centrally deployed counterparts to signal their loyalty. This finding challenges the conventional view that strong local ties lead local agents to shirk coercive tasks due to social costs. It also demonstrates that domestic threats elicit heterogeneous responses from state actors with varying local ties, contributing to the ongoing discussion on the relationship between legacies of violent conflict and authoritarian durability.

During my doctoral studies, I plan to further explore two key questions. First, how do state leaders screen, monitor, and discipline locally embedded agents to mitigate the risks of shirking while harnessing the benefits of their local knowledge and authority? Second, how do local agents with varying social ties respond to bottom-up pressures, such as protests and petitions? Empirically, I will focus on contemporary China while drawing comparisons with other developing countries such as India and Brazil.

In terms of state leader–local agent interactions, while much is known about top-down control strategies, less attention has been paid to how shifts in a state leader's policy goals and priorities over time and across regions influence the trade-off between the risks and benefits of agents' local ties. Although strong local ties pose risks of agents shirking coercive tasks, these ties also enable bureaucrats and party cadres to attract investments, protect property rights, and respond more effectively to popular demands. How do state leaders, in alignment with shifting regime goals, leverage the benefits of agents' embeddedness while minimizing its downsides? Do these strategies vary across regions and government branches? Empirically, China's cadre system offers a compelling case for examining these questions. As the CCP transitions from a revolutionary party to a ruling party, its primary objectives have oscillated between political control and economic development, influencing the management of local agents accordingly. To identify underlying patterns, I will analyze the changing configuration of prefecture- and county-level leaders, as well as department heads across various governmental organizations, while accounting for confounding factors such as factional and meritocratic influences. This contributes to the broader question of how state leaders strategically manage personnel within the state apparatus to achieve favorable governance outcomes.

In terms of local agent–mass interactions, I aim to explore how the types of social embeddedness among local agents explain their varied responses to bottom-up pressures—ranging from heavy-handed enforcement of policies that provoke popular backlash to collusion or even capture by local interests. While existing literature views embeddedness as a binary attribute, I move beyond this unidimensional perspective by analyzing how local agents acquire their embeddedness—whether through familial ties to local clans or through professional and patronage ties developed via work experience—and what social groups they are embedded in. Empirically, I plan to examine how local agents handle popular resistance during the CCP's urbanization project to convert counties into urban districts, which has unevenly impacted citizens' social welfare and local officials' career prospects across regions. Citizens disadvantaged by this policy have responded with mass petitions and protests, prompting heterogenous government responses ranging from repression and acquiescence to concession and even encouragement. How do local agents' types of embeddedness—whether as native-born individuals, outsiders with local work experience, or centrally deployed officials—along with their personal interests and the demands of interest groups, shape their bureaucratic behavior? By analyzing the nature of local ties while accounting for the selection bias inherent in appointment patterns, I aim to understand how local agents, as key intermediaries, mold state–society relations in developing countries.

I have thoroughly prepared myself for doctoral studies. I have received rigorous methodological training from the Statistics and Government Departments at xxx University, completing doctoral-level courses in causal inference and machine learning, along with additional training in causal inference at ICPSR. Coursework on Latin American and post-socialist politics have provided me with comparative insights into the role of local agents in political control, while doctoral seminars in political psychology and cultural sociology have deepened my understanding of behavioral dynamics. As a research assistant to Professor A, I contributed to a project investigating xxx. I also developed GIS, spatial econometrics, and causal inference skills for panel data analysis in a project on xxx, while honing supervised learning skills on text data in a project on xxx. These experiences have strengthened my ability to conduct doctoral research.

xxx program offers an ideal environment for me to pursue my research interests. I am particularly interested in Professor B's expertise in local government policies and mechanisms of accountability, and I hope to work with him to further explore the role of local officials and citizens in policy implementation. I am also inspired by Professor C's research on politics in post-Mao China and hope to draw on his expertise to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese politics. Furthermore, Professor D's work on the political development in Arabic-speaking and Muslim-majority countries could provide valuable comparative perspectives for my research. I am eager to join this academic community to advance my research in the political economy of development.