

INTRODUCTION



Enhancing Research on Authoritarian Regimes through Detailed Comparisons of China and Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In exploring the role of factions, personalism, and legislative behavior in the two states, the three contributions in this issue dispense with the simplistic notion of a China or Vietnam “Model” of political economy, but instead explain the politics behind how leaders are chosen and how legislative decisions are made and implemented. As I argue in this essay, the insights of these three papers are important not only for broadening area studies expertise, but also contributing to the burgeoning literature on authoritarian regimes, which has insufficiently accounted for subtle institutional differences and variation in the policy preferences of elite actors.

Introduction

While no country can boast of having defeated Covid-19, some governments have managed the conjoined challenges of curbing the spread of the disease while simultaneously maintaining economic vitality better than others. China, where the disease first emerged, and Vietnam, among the first countries outside China to document infections, are on this list (Ainslie et al. 2020; Fforde 2020; Salzberger, Glück, and Ehrenstein 2020). What accounts for the track record of these two single-party, nominally communist regimes during the pandemic? Now, more than ever, it is critical to focus on variation within regime types, and ask detailed, comparative questions about how institutions in these countries work, how leaders in these regimes govern, and the relationship between state and citizen that shapes their respective policy choices. The three papers in this special section of *Problems of Post-Communism* were written before the pandemic of 2020, but they will be foundational for more deeply understanding politics in China and Vietnam. In exploring the role of factions, personalism, and legislative behavior in the two states, the authors in this issue dispense with the simplistic notion of a China or Vietnam “Model” of political economy, but instead explain the politics behind how leaders are chosen and how legislative decisions are made and implemented. Moreover, all three are explicitly comparative, documenting clear differences between the states and showing how these matter for explaining puzzles in critical political outcomes. As I argue in this essay, the insights of these three papers are important not only for broadening Asian area studies expertise, but also for their contribution to the burgeoning literature on authoritarian regimes, which has tended to black-box countries, insufficiently accounting for subtle institutional differences and variation in the policy preferences of elite actors.

At the beginning of October 2020, China with a population of 1.4 billion confirmed just 90,600 Covid-19 cases and 4,739

deaths. Vietnam’s record is even more impressive and less controversial; its 96 million citizens have suffered only 1,170 cases and 35 deaths from the disease. By way of comparison, Indonesia with a population of 270 million has experienced 318,000 cases and 13,411 deaths.¹ Despite the severe lockdown necessary to contain the virus, both countries are predicted to record positive economic growth in 2020 of about 1.9 percent in China and 1.6 percent in Vietnam, while Indonesia will suffer a 1.5 percent contraction (IMF 2020). Fierce debates have already started over how to explain these figures. Some analysts like Yuen Yuen Ang (2020) and Bill Hayton (2020) have focused on the advantages of some of the authoritarian features of the two polities. Certainly, the severely enforced lockdowns and aggressive contact-tracing they implemented would be less politically tenable in more liberal, democratic settings. But other non-democratic systems such as Russia and Iran failed miserably in containing the disease, while some democratic countries such as South Korea and Taiwan successfully enforced stringent policy measures (Cheng et al. 2020; Hale et al. 2020). Other analysts play up the countries’ governance, including bureaucratic competence and transparency about the spread of disease (Fforde 2020; Huynh, Tosun, and Yilmaz 2020). Still others ignore the specific policies and focus on a cultural heritage that engenders respect for authority and willingness to sacrifice for community goals (Shaw, Kim, and Hua 2020).

These debates harken back to historical disputes over the countries’ historical economic track records. Since they started their economic reforms in 1976 and 1986 respectively, China and Vietnam rank among the fastest growing countries in the world, lifting millions out of poverty, and rapidly reaching middle income status (Malesky and London 2014). In explaining these outcomes as well, authors have also searched for

explanations in benign authoritarianism, meritocracy, governance, and cultural phenomena (Halper 2010; Kennedy 2010; Woodside 1988; Xu 2011). The cultural arguments have been given a recent boost from a rethinking of the historical distinctions between Vietnam and China, with the argument that most people historically would not have thought of themselves as living in separate states but as part of a broader Confucian commonwealth that shared linguistic and cultural markers (Baldanza 2016; Taylor 2013). At the same time, economic historians have documented how Vietnamese localities infused with Confucian institutions under Thang Long rule outperform localities that were under the Khmer (Dell, Lane, and Querubin 2018).

What has received less attention in these discussions is that beyond the surface-level similarities, modern Vietnamese and Chinese political institutions are actually quite different. In broad strokes, China has invested more heavily in developing sophisticated tools for generating and motivating bureaucratic officials through quasi-meritocratic institutions, while Vietnam has more competitive representative institutions and a more fragmented elite power structure.

China's cadre evaluation system and bureaucratic management are more fine-tuned and developed than Vietnam's. The China Party Organization department has published clear standards and scoring systems for promotion that even differentiate between priority targets with veto power, hard targets, and ordinary targets (Bell 2016; Perry 2011; Whiting 2004). Scholars have demonstrated that achieving hard targets leads to more successful careers (Ong 2012), especially in regard to mobilization of tax revenue (Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018). These targets are updated regularly with new criteria included to promote the environment through blue sky days and avoidance of mass incidents (Fewsmith and Gao 2014; Ghanem and Zhang 2014; Li and Gore 2018). By contrast, the Vietnamese Communist Party is less involved in bureaucratic decision-making (Abrami, Malesky, and Zheng 2013). Vietnamese cadre evaluation is therefore looser with a large number of criteria, but less clear prioritization and scoring systems, allowing officials room to make cases for themselves based on the numbers that best favor them (Jensen and Malesky 2018; Le, Huyen, and Phan 2019, Ch.8). Relatedly, China has developed a complaint system for officials that plugs directly into promotion criteria (Pan and Chen 2018). Vietnam also has a complaint system, but it is rarely used and plays a limited role in bureaucratic promotion. China encourages rotation of officials, so that the top party and government leaders in each province and city are generally not natives (Eaton and Kostka 2014; Jiang and Mei 2020). By contrast, in Vietnam the majority of provincial officials and nearly all district officials originate from the locality they lead (Abrami, Malesky, and Zheng 2013; Jensen and Malesky 2018; Vasavakul 2019). Finally, below the high-profile jobs where promotion is an incentive, street-level bureaucrats in China are rewarded with performance bonuses for meeting carefully designed targets. Initiatives like this exist in Vietnam, but are less developed and far-reaching (Ang 2020).

By contrast, Vietnam's elite party and government institutions have tended toward higher levels of what China specialists call inner-party democracy (Rui-yan 2010). China has

a "fused troika" and clear hierarchy of executive power, with the general secretary of the party concurrently holding the state powers of the president and definitively superior to the premier. Vietnam, until 2018, had a split executive and a "diffused troika" (general secretary, president, and prime minister), with different people in each position and clear institutional responsibilities and patronage channels associated with each actor (Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng 2011). All signs indicate that it will retain this diffused troika after the 2021 Party Congress (Giang 2020). Within the party system itself, ultimate authority in Vietnam rests not with the party executive, the smaller Politburo or the Politburo Standing Committee, as in China, but with the much larger legislative institution known as the Central Committee, which has overruled politburo recommendations on multiple occasions (Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng 2011). Vietnam also lacks the strict party oversight over government functions that is characterized in China by leading groups and leading small groups (Abrami, Malesky, and Zheng 2013, 89; Phong and Beresford 1998). The Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA), the government legislature, is directly elected with multiple candidates per seat, and despite electioneering, central elites have failed to win election on numerous occasions (Malesky and Schuler 2011). By contrast, only China's people's congress members at the township and county levels are directly elected. Higher-level congresses up to the National People's Congress (NPC) are indirectly elected by members of the lower-level assemblies (Manion 2016; Truex 2016). Finally, the VNA meets regularly, holds query sessions to interrogate top leaders, hosts annual votes of confidence on the cabinet, and has overturned resolutions proposed by the prime minister (Malesky 2014; Schuler 2020). The Vietnamese party-state's deviations from the other existing systems are relatively recent phenomena. They were all enacted in a spate of reforms that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, culminating in the 1992 Constitution and Party Statutes (Stern 1997; Vasavakul 1997).

The puzzle for scholars comparing Vietnam and China is why Vietnam adopted the more institutionally constrained system, although the two countries began with virtually the same party template, and in fact, Vietnam even had Chinese and Soviet help in installing it (Duiker 1995, 88). A further question is whether these different institutional architectures produce different substantive outcomes or whether the differences are merely perfunctory. The three outstanding contributions in this special section each explore one of these two foundational puzzles. Each starts with a phenomenon that differs markedly between the two countries, but is not well explained by either of the two areas of reasonable scholarly consensus about the two countries—their historical and socio-cultural similarities and their institutional differences. The article by Trinh (2020, this issue) asks why analyses of Chinese and Vietnamese politics employ such radically divergent conceptualizations of factions. Gueorguiev and Schuler (2020, this issue) wonder why consolidation of personalist power and cultivation of individual charisma seem to be more likely in the Chinese system. And Wang and Truong (2020, this issue) ask on the surface what appears to be a simple question—why has China's NPC managed to pass an Assembly Law, while the VNA has thus far failed—but in fact turns out to be a far deeper question about different elite conceptualizations

of the rule of law in the two different countries. In all three articles, the answers the authors provide enrich our understanding of how institutions in the two countries work in practice. The detailed historical and institutional research they bring to bear in this effort are exceptional. Further, in this essay, I will argue that the contributions of their pieces are far more powerful than just answers to small areas studies questions; their controlled comparisons provide crucial nuance to the understanding of how authoritarian institutions work that has been overlooked and misunderstood by the general interest literature.

Factions

Scholars have assigned far different levels of salience to factional conflict in explaining political outcomes in China and Vietnam. In China, scholars have employed a factional lens to analyze economic choices like state investment and public transfers, institutional arrangements like fiscal decentralization, bureaucratic advancement and promotion, and elite targeting in purges and anti-corruption campaigns (Chung-Hon Shih 2008; Pye 1995; Shih 2008; Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012). By contrast, while factional discussions in Vietnam were important in historical treatments of party development and during the war with the United States (Nguyen 2012), they are far less common in explaining politics in Vietnam today (Gainsborough 2018; Vuving 2010). In an otherwise contentious debate in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* about how to study Vietnamese politics, both sides conceded that the common trope of reformers versus conservatives was ill suited for understanding the actual policy positions of elite Vietnamese actors (Gainsborough 2018; Malesky 2018), which instead correspond to more temporary policy coalitions (Vuving 2010).

Even more importantly, as Duy Trinh points out in his excellent article for this issue, the term “faction” implies very different collections of individuals and behaviors in the two countries (Trinh 2020, this issue). Scholars in China see factions as primarily clientelist organizations within the party that are united by shared career paths, homelands, or family histories (Shih 2008). Lucian Pye famously described factional architectures as hierarchical with linked networks of personal relationships that benefited from the support of particular elite leaders (Pye 1995). The Youth League, Shanghai Clique, and Princeling factions are common examples. When scholars of China describe the behavior of these groupings, they rely very little on ideology or policy alignment; rather they focus on their informal connections and patronage practices. Thus, factions in China are best characterized by a classic pyramidal structure of stacked patron–client relationships famously described by James C. Scott (1972). Trinh labels this type of factional behavior as “background sorting”

The discussion among Vietnam experts about factions (*phe phái*) inverts the Chinese discussions, as scholars emphasize ideological alignment and policy preferences over clientelist exchange. For example, the “North first” versus “South first” debate was primarily about whether to succeed at socialism in North Vietnam before unification with South Vietnam, or whether it was necessary to prosecute the southern war before central planning could commence fully (Asselin 2013; Nguyen 2012). The disputes in the 1980s and 1990s were between

politicians who saw state-owned enterprises (SOEs) as essential to economic development and those who favored unleashing the domestic non-state sector (Thayer 1995; Vasavakul 1997). Contemporary debates are about international alignment with the United States or China, or a triangularization strategy (Vuving 2010). Critically, as opposed to China, Vietnamese factional disputes are not fixed. Key elites can sometimes end up on different sides of critical debates and aligned with actors that they had previously opposed. Consequently, scholars have had a much harder time pinning specific political outcomes to factional alignments. It is even difficult to code which Vietnamese elite member is in a particular faction at any point in time. This is not to say that clientelism is not a feature of Vietnamese politics; it is simply that clientelist exchange has not crystallized into structured, permanent pyramidal groupings as in China. Vietnamese factions adhere more closely to the depiction of informal, nonpermanent political groups (Nicholas 1965). In Trinh’s typology, this behavior is defined “ideological sorting.”

Given that both countries are single-party regimes with similar historical origins, what explains the different role that factions play in the two polities? It is hard to connect the institutional differences noted above to the distinct roles of factions in the two countries. For instance, take Vietnam’s more competitive and pluralistic national and local legislative elections, which still are primarily competitions between party members in which programmatic campaigning is limited (Malesky and Schuler 2020; Schuler 2020). The comparative literature on clientelism would appear to indicate that this should be an ideal breeding ground for factional distinctions as a signal to voters and for assistance in winning elections (Carey and Shugart 1995). The same can be said of Vietnam’s more competitive selection process to the Central Committee. Clientelistic factions would be perfect vehicles for advancing compatriots and capturing control of these institutions. To complicate matters more, the “ideological sorting” in current Vietnamese discussions is a postwar phenomenon. Historical discussions of the country emphasize critical cleavages based on background, most prominently the strong divisions between the rival communist party organizations in the North and South of the country prior to independence.

Trinh (2020, this issue) argues that the key to the puzzle is the revolutionary and military experience that precipitated the regimes’ origins. In Vietnam, aggressive crackdowns by the French colonial regime, and later, the devastating war casualties among southern Vietnamese communists, eliminated the North–South distinctions among elite Vietnamese. At the same time, years of warfare flattened professional distinctions. Without the standard foundations for “background sorting,” inner-party competition shifted to policy and ideological grounds. Years later, Martin Gainsborough would observe this indirectly when he demonstrated how similar the backgrounds were between provincial leaders in North and South Vietnam (Gainsborough 2004). In China, however, critical cleavages between Soviet and native cadres and later between base and field army commanders remained at the end of the war. These cleavages became institutionalized into the clientelist factions of today, as Deng Xiaoping, China’s paramount leader during its initial economic opening, made concessions

to the disparate groups in extending administrative control over China's vast territory, and empowered provincial leaders with greater autonomy over investment activity and local state-owned enterprises. Such efforts provided opportunities for clientelistic exchange that solidified geographically oriented factional groupings.

Trinh's work not only helps answer the puzzle of elite political behavior in Vietnam, it contributes to more general discussions of authoritarian politics. Scholars working within the Svoblik (2012) framework of dictator versus elites rarely describe in detail who these other elites are and what their interests and goals are. Bargaining between dictator and elite is purely about power maximization, with little regard to the range of preferences in the regime and where different actors sit on this scale. As Trinh's article shows, understanding the different modes of factional competition provides greater insights into what different constellations of elites might do once they obtain power.

Trinh's distinction of factional sorting also informs an important literature on the origin of authoritarian institutions. Scholars have pointed out that the size of the seizure group determines the types of institutional arrangements that are possible, and that these in turn affect the longevity and resilience of the regime (Geddes et al. 2018). The concept of "seizure group" borrows conceptually from the winning coalition/selectorate logic, which suggested that decisions about economic redistribution could be gleaned from the size of the elites relative to the group in society with the power to choose them (De Mesquita et al. 2002). Trinh's discussion of factions, however, reminds us that it is not just the number of members in the seizure group and winning coalition that matter, but the range and distribution of their ideological preferences (Hanson 2012). Are Vietnam's institutions more competitive and pluralistic because they were forced to accommodate factions with ideological sorting, as opposed to clientelistic factions where side payments were enough to sustain group stability?

Personalism

The differences in political institutions also shed light on another key difference between the two current regimes. Xi Jinping has pursued a more personalistic approach to governing than Nguyen Phu Trong, his counterpart as general secretary in Vietnam.

According to Geddes et al. (2018), the defining feature of personalism is that the top leader ("the dictator") has discretion over the key tools of power in the regime, including appointment, control, and dismissal of officials in government agencies and offices. As a result, the top leader in a heavily personalist system is relatively unconstrained by the institutions around them. Consequently, in personalist systems, loyalty to the top leader trumps the performance of officials. Whereas competent leaders could potentially pose a challenge, less competent subnational officials owe their advancement to a single individual and are less likely to threaten or disobey the regime (Egorov and Sonin 2011), even when it may be in their voters' interests (Reuter and Robertson 2012). In a heavily personalist system, subnational officials will prioritize mobilizing public support for the top leadership, suppressing embarrassing displays of

dissent, and promoting the leader's authority, over economic growth. A flurry of recent work has demonstrated that personalist leaders, because they have effectively silenced domestic opposition and consolidated power (Svoblik 2012), behave dramatically differently in their interactions with other countries and international actors (Weeks 2012)

Magaloni, Chu, and Min (2013) and Gandhi and Sumner (2020) emphasize that personalism is inherent in all authoritarian regimes and should be coded as a supplementary measure rather than a separate regime type. Thus, a country like China can vary in its level of personalism—from highly personalized under Mao to minimally personalized under Hu Jintao—while never changing its status as a single-party regime. Geddes et al. (2018) allow for personalism to be combined with other types of regimes by coding hybrids, so that a country such as Indonesia under Suharto could exemplify both personalistic and party-based traits. Similarly, the Svoblik (2012) approach allows for the consolidation of leadership into an established dictator across all types of authoritarian regimes.

In their piece in this issue, Gueorguiev and Schuler (2020) also conceptualize personalism as a continuum. They build off an earlier article where they argued that the single-party regimes benefited from popular individuals who raised the profile and the legitimacy of the party, but at the same time were resistant to individuals whose public profile outstripped other high-ranking elites (Gueorguiev and Schuler 2016). The sweet spot from the perspective of the regime is what they call "collective charisma"—cultivating a collection of officials who elevate the appeal of the regime but do not upset elite cohesion at the top. They demonstrate this phenomenon by showing an inverted U-shape between public profile and promotion possibilities in both China and Vietnam: both unknown cadres and highly popular cadres were unlikely to receive promotion to higher office.

Given this curvilinear relationship, how was it possible for Xi Jinping to have developed such an out-sized public persona and consolidate control over many of the party-state's critical organs, and why have we not observed the same development in Vietnam, where Nguyen Phu Trong avoids the public spotlight and cultivates an image of austerity? Supplementing their previous work, in this special section, Gueorguiev and Schuler (2020, this issue) suggest the divergence lies precisely in the two major institutional differences identified above. China's more rigorous cadre evaluation system leads to the selection and advancement of talented officials in the lower and middle rungs of the bureaucracy, who have been able to steer subnational governments to better economic performance while minimizing local dissatisfaction and unrest. In promoting to elite positions, however, the Chinese system rewards loyalty to the regime. Vietnam's bureaucratic management system is less capable of identifying talented officials at the lower and middle bureaucratic levels, but is a much safer system for allowing charismatic officials to ascend to higher posts, because their powers are more constrained by pluralistic institutions, and other elites with similar powers possess the capability to check them.

At first blush, the institutional differences should encourage more personalism in Vietnam. Competition for higher office is more pronounced, generating incentives to mobilize a personalist

following, and the system is less likely to weed out individual charisma, because actors rely on the safeguard of institutional divisions neutering the power of charismatic individualists. Because demonstrating “nauseating displays of loyalty” is necessary for achieving high office in China (Chung-Hon Shih 2008), the system should tend toward selecting “cautious, colorless, organization men.”

But Gueorguiev and Schuler (2020, this issue) argue that this conclusion is simplistic and does not peer far enough down the game tree. Precisely because slavish loyalty is necessary to ascend to higher positions in China, officials have an incentive to misrepresent their true ambitions, and once in office are less hemmed in by elite institutional constraints. This created a perfect opportunity for Xi, a talented official with executive experience, but who was largely unknown outside the party when he was selected. By contrast, because executive ability matters less for entry and advancement in the Vietnamese bureaucracy, Trong was able to take office with less management experience, popular appeal, and deep clientelist networks. He is therefore less equipped for personalization even if the institutional checks in Vietnam were more permissive. The Gueorguiev and Schuler (2020, this issue) argument informs the wider literature on personalism in two ways. First, it illuminates that the bargaining model between the top leader and other elites is not always zero sum, as the regime as a whole can benefit from leaders who are able to generate popular appeal. Second, it illustrates how a more precise understanding of institutional incentives is necessary to predict when and where personalism will rise. In the Chinese case, the very institutions meant to thwart it contributed to its emergence.

Ideas and Legislative Outcomes

There are four primary arguments for why non-democratic governments would expend the resources and effort to host a parliament: (1) as a power-sharing institution that provides other regime elites to hold a dictator accountable (Svolik 2012); (2) for cooptation, by providing potential opposition members with opportunities for limited policy or rent-earning opportunities (Gandhi 2008; Wright 2008; Blaydes 2010); (3) for information gathering, through learning about the demands of citizens and lower-level officials before they spill into more dangerous popular movements (Truex 2016, 2014; Magaloni 2006); and (4) for signaling regime strength and generating legitimacy by communicating regime preferences and agenda-setting power to the citizenry (Schuler 2020).

The problem from the perspective of Wang and Truong (2020, this issue) is that these theories tell us very little about the amount, type, composition, and character of legislation that emerges from these bodies. In these theories, the legislative process is rendered subservient to the larger goals of regime resilience. Nevertheless, authoritarian parliaments produce highly intricate legislation on a range of topics that affects the everyday lives of citizens, in addition to inspiring thousands of implementing documents that require action by agencies and bureaucrats at all levels of government. How do we explain the variation in the quality and composition of legislation that we see across different countries? The existing theories in the larger literature are ill equipped for this purpose.

Wang and Truong (2020, this issue) focus on the particular puzzle of why China was able to implement an assembly law (the Law on Assembly, Processions, and Demonstrations) back in 1989, while Vietnam’s parliament has been unable to pass an assembly law (Law on Demonstration), despite two previous attempts in 2005 and 2011. As the authors point out, common explanations fail to account for the divergence. Both single-party regimes have constitutionally enshrined rights to assembly, both face threats of rising bottom-up protests, and both have publicly committed to law-based governance. Even more interestingly, the failure to pass an assembly law in Vietnam occurred when elites in the Politburo were united in support of such an initiative and signaled this through a party resolution, while in 2011, elites were divided and provided no concrete guidance to the legislature. Indeed, different political administrations in 2015 and 2016 also tried to push through an assembly law and failed. Consequently, it is hard to pin the divergent choices on Vietnam’s more fragmented and pluralistic institutional architecture.

In their detailed discursive analysis of the historical debates surrounding the choices, the authors make a strong case that “ideas” matter. The views that political actors held in the discourse over the role of law in society shaped the choices that were available. The critical difference was that in China, Deng Xiaoping, the driving force behind the legislation, saw law as a tool for maintaining social order. Debates about the law were primarily about making sure the assembly law was consistent with constitutional rights or with constitutional restrictions, such as the Four Cardinal Principles of upholding the socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought (Deng 1987). In Vietnam, the discourse was of a very different character. Some political actors saw an assembly law in the same manner as Deng, while other political actors saw an assembly law less as a tool of social control than as a guarantee of a human right to peaceably assemble. Guaranteeing such a right was considered to be threatening to regime stability, as actors could invoke the right as a means to challenge regime rule.

Wang and Truong’s article adds to a rich literature on authoritarian institutions in multiple ways. First, it takes seriously the content of legislative outputs. Second, it shows how the dominant discourse at the time can radically alter how elite actors interpret legislative texts. Third, it shows how institutions ameliorate political discourse. Deng’s interpretation of law as a tool of social control prevailed because of his relatively uncontested power in 1989. By contrast, Vietnam’s more fragmented structure has made it more difficult for consolidation around a dominant interpretation, and thus the law remains stuck. This finding is consistent with the work of Rory Truex (2020) on the underappreciated role of veto points in delaying legislative passage in authoritarian countries.

Final Thoughts

In lieu of a conclusion, I aim to be a bit provocative in tying these excellent articles together and pointing toward a new research

agenda on the comparative political institutions of China and Vietnam. To summarize the main themes of the articles: Vietnam and China, while similar in their cultures, histories, and broad institutional architectures, operate those institutions very differently, in ways that have observable effects on policy outcomes. Both single-party systems exhibit coalitions of elite actors within those parties, but in China these blocs take the form of more fixed, clientelistic factions, while Vietnam's are ephemeral and shifting, focused on short-term ideological and policy goals (Trinh 2020, this issue). China has a far more developed system of cadre evaluation and advancement and consequently boasts a more competent and capable bureaucracy. Ascendance to elite office, however, still prioritizes loyalty over talent, which can lead to misrepresentation of type by elite actors, and offers opportunities for personalism (Gueorguiev and Schuler 2020, this issue). Vietnam possesses a more fragmented, pluralist, and competitive set of political institutions, which engenders more programmatic policymaking and wards off personalism, but can also generate gridlock on issues where discourse is salient and mixed (Wang and Liu 2020, this issue). However, the authors in this special section diverge in important ways.

Trinh's factional explanation and Gueorguiev and Schuler's collective charisma story do not fully align. First, if clientelistic networks are so entrenched, to whom is the prospective candidate for ascendance misrepresenting her true type? Gueorguiev and Schuler indicate the misrepresentation occurs toward the regime as a whole. But if one's factional ties can be so easily identified by ascriptive characteristics, why would elites in other factions fall for the ruse. At the same time, one would imagine the more fluid factional setting in Vietnam would make misrepresentation easier. Second, Trinh's story of factional sorting could be enriched by Gueorguiev and Schuler's segmentation of the bureaucratic progression process from entry to advancement to ascendance. How do the different types of factional sorting operate at these clear stages in a bureaucrat's career? Future work could combine the perspectives quite fruitfully.

Wang and Truong's contribution, by contrast, operates independently of the factional and personalist incentives of the other authors. Ideas are most prominent in their articulation of the legislative process. Future research might want to take into account how ideas are channeled through institutional architectures and factions. It is striking that their discussion of China's assembly law ends in 1989. Since that tumultuous year, incidents and protests in China have become more common. Have Chinese political actors contemplated reforming the 1989 law. If not, why? One potential explanation is that actors may be peering ahead to the difficulties of pushing through such an initiative and anticipating the difficulty of navigating factional and institutional barriers. Given how stringent the 1989 document is, any reforms would require easing restrictions or scrapping the law entirely, which may not be political palatable at this time.

Finally, returning to our discussion of Covid-19 above, there remains a tremendous opportunity for what I would call a "politics of hard times" (Gourevitch 1986) in single-party systems that unites the three important pieces in this issue. How are ideas for crisis solutions transmitted through

bureaucratic and political channels when immediate responses are necessary? And what happens to these ideas when they threaten the clientelistic resources of China's factions or exacerbate the ideological disputes of Vietnam's elite divisions? Do political entrepreneurs see opportunities in crises that might raise their profile above the collective charisma of the regime? And if they do, how can the other actors in the regime utilize the institutional architecture to stop them? The final argument has yet to be written on why the Chinese and Vietnamese approaches were relatively more successful than other regimes in their response to the global pandemic. But certainly a key factor in the story must be that their institutional architectures were flexible enough to allow good ideas to percolate to the top of the regime, and yet strong enough to implement to implement those ideas when they emerged.

Note

1. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

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