

**Cultivating Obedience: How Coordination Theory Explains COVID-19 Policy Compliance
Despite China's Authoritarian Regime**

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Why do Chinese citizens comply with laws and policies that were not implemented democratically? The lack of a democratic system should theoretically decrease the willingness of citizens to obey orders, yet the Chinese Communist Party has proven its ability to effectively stimulate compliance while maintaining high levels of support and trust. The case that best illustrates this occurrence is the public response to the COVID-19 policies contrived by Xi Jinping and other prominent party leaders. I argue that McAdam's (2015) coordination theory offers the most comprehensive understanding of Chinese compliance with government policy, both broadly and with respect to COVID-19, because it emphasizes the role of perceived obligation, propaganda, and individual risk tolerance. To demonstrate this contention, I will first discuss three scholarly theories that attempt to explain compliance: McAdam's coordination theory, Weber's (1978) coercive power theory, and Jackson et al.'s (2012) legitimacy theory. Then, I will highlight why coordination theory is most applicable to Chinese compliance and use McAdam's analytical framework to reveal why citizens have largely obeyed COVID-19 policies for nearly three years. Finally, I will propose a research design that could be employed to verify my argument.

Coordination theory, as proposed by McAdam, has been widely used—particularly in cases of authoritarian regimes—to explain how compliance is driven by individual obligation to conform to societal standards. The main argument is that laws are effective because people are incentivized to coordinate their behavior with the rest of society to preserve their own well-being and fit the dominant societal ideology (p. 18). Thus, compliance is fostered by a perceived moral obligation to act in accordance with the rest of society by obeying laws. Law and policy act as “focal points” to lead people away from conflict by “signaling information about risk or public

attitudes that causes people to update their behavior” (p. 52). For example, many laws have an expressive quality that indirectly communicates persuasive information, as is the case with anti-smoking policies. Smoking legislation signals the recognition of health risks as well as the public’s disapproval of smoking. Even the simple exposure to anti-smoking signs can cause individuals to alter their beliefs and behavior; people “take the beliefs of others as input into their own beliefs,” often consequently changing their own beliefs and behavior to match societal expectations (p. 55). Furthermore, coordination theory highlights the role of laws in creating expectations. People naturally strive for an orderly and safe society and complying with laws often yields a mutually shared benefit. For example, traffic signs coordinate behavior by creating an expectation for drivers that the other drivers will obey the regulations, which ultimately prevents collisions (p. 61). McAdam states that fear of punitive consequences is not enough to explain why people obey laws because it fails to recognize the notion of shared responsibility in society. Coordination theory is more complete since it acknowledges the tendency to seek order and make sacrifices to achieve a mutually beneficial society.

In contrast, through coercive power theory, Weber argues that the predominant reason that citizens comply with laws is because they want to avoid sanctions. Weber’s main argument is that the government threatens punishment—either directly or indirectly—as a form of deterrence to make people fear the response to noncompliance. Individuals are forced into compliance by fears of government retaliation, and laws are enforced through deterrence strategies that often involve violence or incarceration. The extent of compliance is contingent on the authorities’ ability to prove that they possess the means necessary for sanctioning unlawful behavior. Thus, a law will provide order if it is “guaranteed by probability...to bring about compliance or avenge violation” through a “coercive apparatus” (p. 117). For example, the

Weberian perspective would contend that traffic signs are effective because people fear the legal repercussions of being caught disobeying the law. However, if the government cannot prosecute or fine enough violations to maintain a high level of public fear, then the coercive power no longer holds enough weight to influence obedience. Overall, Weber's theory is that laws are only effective when they are backed by strong, regularly-utilized deterrence strategies.

Finally, Jackson et al. propose a theory that emphasizes the perceived legitimacy of an institution. The main argument is that individuals obey the laws established by authorities because they believe that the authorities act consistently with people's views of right and wrong. In essence, compliance is best explained by normative assessments. First, individuals experience a sense of obligation to obey authorities based on morality; second, they trust that laws reflect the opinions of the public and are implemented with good intentions; third, there is a historical precedent that assures the public that the authorities' power does not extend beyond the views of citizens (p. 1062). For example, Jackson et al. contend that civilians chiefly obey the police because they believe that "the institution acts according to a shared moral purpose with citizens" (p. 1051). The theory relies on an assumption that authorities are comparatively active while citizens engage in relative passivity, and consequently, individuals will accept the government's policies if the policies primarily reflect the will of the public.

In the context of China, McAdam's coordination theory best explains why Chinese citizens are highly compliant the Chinese Communist Party's COVID-19 policies. Setting aside the recent protests and policy developments, Chinese citizens have largely complied with lockdown orders, mask mandates, social distancing guidelines, and frequent testing for the better part of three years. During that time, the vast majority of countries similar in population, economic power, and global influence—including the United States, western European

countries, and southeast Asian countries—faced widespread noncompliance and anti-government sentiment due to strict COVID-19 policies. However, despite having the strictest policies outside of North Korea, China did not experience comparable discontent (Haddad, 2021). Citizens have been subjected to a two-pronged approach of prevention and containment that requires tremendous personal sacrifice in the form of constant testing, required lockdown where individuals are not allowed to leave their building for extended periods of time, and extensive government supervision of any public affairs such as travel (Che et al., 2022). Yet, compliance remained high.

McAdam's coordination theory provides the ideal framework for an analysis of Chinese compliance because it can incorporate the effects of propaganda and censorship, perceived obligation, and individual risk tolerance. China used propaganda to convince citizens that the zero-COVID policy was essential for long-term economic success and positive health outcomes. Likewise, the Great Firewall limited the potential for grievances to be disseminated and influence the opinions of others. Thus, in line with McAdam's contention that compliance is driven by a perceived moral obligation to act in accordance with the rest of society, citizens felt obligated to obey the policies since there was no indication that anyone was noncompliant. McAdam's would argue that this is an example of "taking the beliefs of others as input into their own beliefs" (McAdam, 2015, p. 55). Additionally, coordination theory establishes that policies signal risk to individuals (p. 56); in this case, the severity of the policies signaled the severity of COVID-19. By implementing drastic responses, citizens came to believe in the abundant risks of infection and subsequently chose to behave in ways that would limit that risk: masking, social distancing, avoiding gatherings, limiting travel, and isolating when sick. Furthermore, McAdam highlights the "mutually shared benefit" and "creation of expectations" that accompany laws,

which is reflected by the Chinese collectivist ideology: people selflessly make choices to avoid infecting others because they expect others to do the same (p. 61). Finally, elements of Jackson et al.'s legitimacy theory are also applicable in understanding the role of propaganda and distribution of blame to local officials because the theory contends that Chinese citizens believe that the central government is acting on behalf of public opinion. Essentially, if the government can strategically maintain a sense of legitimacy, people will be more likely to comply with their policies since they will assume that the policies are in the best interest of the public.

A 2020 study conducted by Cunningham et al. offers further evidence for my contention through their findings that Chinese citizens respond most to “real, measurable changes in individuals’ material well-being.” (p. 7). This empirical finding indicates that deterrence strategies and the threat of coercive power are not primary factors in compliance. Rather, Chinese citizens response to changes to their “material well-being,” which indicates that the COVID-19 policies were not initially severe enough to drive noncompliance. Additionally, the study finds that Chinese satisfaction with the government has been growing every year since the survey began in 2003, which stipulates that people may be willing to make significant sacrifices when it comes to COVID-19 since they trust that the government is prioritizing their health and safety (p. 11).

Furthermore, Lin et al. (2022) found that the vast majority of Chinese citizens complied with the initial zero-COVID policy, and there was a strong correlation between fear of infection and compliance (p. 59). Meaning, the government has compellingly articulated the severity of COVID-19 and created an environment in which individuals are obeying policies for the sake of their health and the health of people around them, rather than out of fear of government retaliation for noncompliance. Finally, a 2021 study by Su et al. found that trust in government

increased after lockdown policies were implemented. Su et al. conclude that the increased trust likely reveals that people not only obeyed the COVID-19 policies but willingly supported them due to a belief that it was best both individually and nationally (p. 109).

To verify the efficacy of my argument, I designed a theoretical research study that would help determine whether coordination theory offers the more comprehensive framework for understanding why Chinese citizens complied with COVID-19 policies. For the independent variable, I would measure the level of collectivist ideology. For the dependent variable, I would measure compliance with COVID-19 policies. Both variables would be measured by surveys. The level of collectivist ideology can be measured on a 100-point scale based on responses to a Collectivism Questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire would be to establish the extent to which an individual prioritizes the well-being of a group—whether it is their family, building, region, or China as a whole—over their own well-being. The compliance would need to be measured based on a self-reported survey. Although there would certainly be some level of dishonesty in the survey responses, there is not another effective way to measure collectivism or compliance since they are both individual experiences that cannot effectively be assessed without self-reporting. Following this procedure, I hypothesize that people who have a higher level of collectivist ideology would be more likely to comply with COVID-19 policies. In essence, I predict that the correlation would be positive: as collectivism grows, compliance would increase.

Given the protests that erupted globally not long after the implementation of restrictive COVID-19 policies, the lack of uprising in China for nearly three years has sparked questions about what sets China apart when it comes to policy compliance. However, the recent frustration in China over zero-COVID and the policy adaptations that are occurring in response present a new question: Will citizens continue to comply, or have the government restrictions gone too

far? If noncompliance steadily grows in this context, what will that mean for the next time the Chinese Communist Party attempts to apply a controversial policy? While I have argued that McAdam's coordination theory offers the best analytical framework for understanding the past three years of compliance in China, it is difficult to know whether McAdam's theory will remain the dominant understanding as the situation increases in complexity. Yet, it is apparent that China will rightly continue to be the focus of many studies, and the results will indicate the direction of China's future.

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