The Spatial Organisation of Coercive Institutions in Autocracy: Evidence from China

Large literature has tried to address how autocrats rule through elements including parties, legislatures, elections, responsive institutions and so forth. What is missing, however, is that most literature tended to focus on democratic-looking institutions while ignoring authoritarian ones. They seem to assume that the more authoritarian regimes look like democracy, the higher chances they will survive.

Dr Adam Liu Yao, assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, shifts the focus back to authoritarian regimes and seeks to answer how such regimes organise their coercive institutions over space with limited resources. Looking at the case of China, Dr Liu argues that autocrats maximise the utility of limited coercive resources by clustering them with perceived threats in society that are ideologically distant and have mobilisational potential.

In the study, religion was used as a proxy for identifying latent threat in Chinese society. Dr Liu tested his proposition through a novel spatial approach, using a dataset that covers the location of above ground/official religious sites and police stations in China in 2017. He supplemented it with data from the 2004 Economic Census which surveyed every religious institution in the country, providing attributes of religious sites prior to 2004.

Findings show that foreign religious sites are more likely to be located within a walking distance of 500 metres from police stations than other sites, even after controlling for estimated population size within one kilometre of each site. Among the five main religions in China, Catholic churches are most likely to fall within the 500-metre vicinity of police stations, following by Protestant churches, mosques, Buddhist temples and lastly Taoist temples. When Buddhist and Taoist sites are considered as local temples and Protestant and Catholic sites are considered as foreign churches, the foreign churches are twice as likely to fall inside the vicinity.

Results shown that the Chinese government views Christianity as the most threatening. Dr Liu explains that the fear of Christianity can be traced back to the religion’s impact that led to the collapse of other communist regimes and its capability to incite the mass. The finding that such perceived threats are more likely to be located near police stations implies that autocrats seek to increase their coercive capacity without increasing spending on their coercive institutions that could also threaten them, that is, without heightening their “security dilemma”.

This study reveals how modern states control people through their living and working spaces, suggesting that coercive capacity may matter more than economic performance for regime resilience.

This summary reflects the personal opinion(s) of the seminar speaker(s) and should in no way be attributed to the East Asian Institute.