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Importing Civic Education into Authoritarian China

Taiyi Sun

Christopher Newport University

While teaching civic engagement is intrinsically suitable to democratic regimes and their norms, similar curricula could face tremendous obstacles when taught in authoritarian countries. How could we teach civic engagement in authoritarian states? This chapter discusses the "imported model" by analyzing the experiences of importing civic education pedagogy into mainland China. The case study of SEED for Social Innovation, an NGO the author cofounded in 2012 that first brought Chinese trainees to the US and then subsequently took the curricula to China, is utilized to capture the importing process. Quasi-experimental data comparing the effects of teaching the curriculum in the US and China measuring trust, norms of reciprocity, and willingness for civic engagement are analyzed. This chapter argues that when faced with institutional constraints in authoritarian countries, one could still successfully teach civic engagement by training individuals grounded in their own cultures and who are willing to travel to study civic educations and the pedagogies in democratic cultures. Using these individuals as anchors and turning the trainees into trainers, successful pedagogical models of civic engagement could be grounded even within an authoritarian context. Framing "teaching civic engagement" as academic activities while collaborating with prestigious educational institutions would provide legitimacy and reduce political risk. Collaborating with domestic foundations and philanthropists could make the imported model more sustainable economically. And assembling local civic engagement best practices could further localize the foreign experiences. The experimental data assessing participants' willingness to civically engage also reveal that the interventions impact the workshops conducted in China as much as those in the US.

Introduction

Teaching civic engagement can cultivate informed citizens and strengthen democracies.[1] Civic engagement education pedagogy and research has largely been focused on democratic societies. With the democratic consensus of the post-Cold War order deteriorating and the assertive re-emergence of authoritarianism in the world, teaching and studying civic engagement under authoritarian settings may be more urgent than

ever, not only because of the sheer number of people living in non-democracies (about 44.2% of the global population), but also due to the strengthened counter forces that compel people to follow authority and ignore the pursuit of civil and political rights.[2] Major authoritarian countries such as Russia and China continue to consolidate their authoritarian control of their societies, while large democracies like the United States (US), India, and Brazil, infused by waves of nationalism, have faced unprecedented challenges to their people's levels of freedom and democratic values.[3] A notable example of this challenge was the 2020 US presidential election, where some two months after the election one-third of Americans believed that voter fraud led to the victory of President Joe Biden.[4]

While teaching civic engagement is intrinsically suitable to democratic regimes and their norms, similar curricula could face tremendous obstacles when taught in authoritarian countries. Progressive educators, academics, journalists, and community activists have been jailed and removed from their positions in Turkey, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoting civic education and democracy have been determined "undesirable" in Russia and were forced to shut down, textbooks and even an entire library that aims to promote civic education have been banned in China, and civic engagement activities face challenges in many countries such as Zimbabwe, Egypt, and Ethiopia.[5] Outside of general education classrooms, a civil society that could serve as fertile soil for civic education may not exist in those authoritarian countries, as the authoritarian state could use NGOs and private entities to channel its control of the society, directly challenging the plural, non-repressive, voluntary, and competitive environment that could foster civic engagement.[6] Even worse, a totalitarian government may penetrate into every corner of the society and private spheres, leaving no room for civic activities.[7] Thus, teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries may appear to be an oxymoron, even though it is essential for people there to experience such curricula.

In recent decades, we have seen scholars and practitioners putting more emphasis on understanding civic activities of young people globally when teaching and researching civic engagement. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) conducted a survey in 1994 on fourteen-year-olds' understanding of democratic institutions and processes in 28 countries, and in 2002, a similar survey was conducted in Europe.[8] Such surveys later became routine and the IEA has done its 2009 and 2016 "International Civic and Citizenship Education Study" and plans to do the next round in 2022.[9] Teachers' beliefs regarding the aims of civic education have also been surveyed and studied.[10] However, those surveys do not inform us about the key factors causing the variations in civic activities and beliefs about civic engagement across countries. A few studies have investigated the conditions and causes of increased civic participation and competence. Notable contributions to the field include participating in religious organizations, partaking in educational institutions, increasing migration and the confluence of diverse groups, growing school-to-work linkages, evolving the role of traditional and new media, amplifying family conversations, and adjusting teachers' practices and school characteristics.[11]

Although such literature has laid the groundwork for teaching civic engagement globally, some major shortcomings still exist. First, the majority of work has been focused on developed western democracies, albeit studies occasionally distinguish between old and newer democracies.[12] Second, survey studies mostly reflect just the current state of civic engagement, which can change rapidly, and inferential studies often stop short at reviewing existing literature.[13] Third, for those rare studies that use empirical evidence to capture causal mechanisms and provide major theoretical contributions, the tools used for interventions are typically not made available, thus reducing the replicability of successful practices.[14] There are also problems of endogeneity when using independent variables that are quite similar to the dependent variables. For example, if the independent variable is commonly used as a definition or operationalization of the dependent variable, there is not much value in observed correlation of variables, let alone having meaningful causal relationships.[15] Challenges are even more apparent when studying civic engagement pedagogy in authoritarian countries. Political and logistical risks for educators, practitioners, and students involved have deterred the growth of detailed, in-depth analyses and the systematic collection of

evidence for the effectiveness of civic engagement pedagogy in authoritarian countries.[16]

Building on these studies, a new model of importing civic education with a unique pedagogical approach that targets populations living under an authoritarian/autocratic state is introduced. The argument advanced in this chapter is that when faced with institutional constraints in authoritarian countries, it is still possible to successfully teach civic engagement by training individuals grounded in their own cultures and willing to travel to study civic education and participate in pedagogies in democratic cultures. Using these individuals as anchors and turning trainees into trainers, successful pedagogical models of civic engagement could be grounded and localized even within an authoritarian context.

According to Roser, four-fifths of the world's population that live in autocratic regimes are Chinese, so China is an ideal case for this study.[17] Scholars have debated whether there is a "civil society" in China because there is minimal space between the state and the private sphere.[18] Civil society can be assessed in terms of social capital as the two terms are closely related and sometimes used interchangeably. Social capital, defined as the norms, trust, and networks embedded in communities, improves the efficiency of civic lives by facilitating coordinated actions and therefore can be an indicator of civil society.[19] It is thus considered a foundation of civil society and could indicate the quality of a nascent civil society in an authoritarian country like China. Therefore, it is useful to assess experimental data on participants' trust of each other, norms of reciprocity, and willingness to partake in civic engagement activities. The results reveal the increase of social capital within the newly created student networks and suggest that the fabric of a robust civil society and democracy could still be woven under authoritarian settings even when civil society activities are constantly challenged by the state and curricula are tightly controlled. By filling this gap in existing literature, this study not only provides a plausible causal mechanism in promoting civic engagement and civil society activities in an authoritarian country, but also the process and tools can be replicated by other scholars and practitioners hoping to teach civic engagement in authoritarian countries.

In terms of structure, the chapter proceeds as follows. First, it provides a brief discussion on the challenges and opportunities of teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries in general. Second, the methods and research design are discussed. Third, SEED for social innovation, an NGO originating from civic engagement workshops in the US, and its interactions with the Chinese state are used as a case to demonstrate constraints and challenges which civil societies in such countries face and how an "imported-model" could still achieve partial success in creating social capital and teaching civic engagement. Last, a quasi-experiment is set up to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching civic engagement under such authoritarian constraints in comparison to the same workshop taught in the US, followed by a discussion of the significance and implications of the "imported-model."

The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Civic Engagement in Authoritarian States

Due to specific state-society conditions, it is more challenging to promote civic engagement in some countries than others. Strong states with weak mediating institutions prevent systematic inclusion of societal actors, thus making it difficult for citizens to be engaged in politics.[20] History and institutional legacy also sometimes play a key role in shaping a country's civic education. The authoritarian institutional and cultural practices could exclude large sectors of the population from civic education in countries like the Dominican Republic, which is partly due to its colonial heritage and history of political dictatorship and social inequality.[21] Civic engagement in liberal democracies often leads to the subjects' participation in elections and other political activities, yet in non-democracies, it is often not clear where civic engagement education is leading to, given the lack of opportunities for the exercise of civic and political rights.[22] Even in new democracies that had an authoritarian past, the legacy of the authoritarian curriculum could challenge the teaching of civic engagement due to inertia and the slow pace of adapting to change in educational policy, and new spheres like the internet could be found unsuitable for civic activities because

they are seen as outside of state parameters and thus perceived as more threatening by the state.[23] Furthermore, empirical evidence has shown that education in authoritarian regimes (including electoral authoritarian regimes) could decrease political participation.[24]

While the challenges to teaching civic engagement in different countries in the world vary, the pressures which Chinese civil society faces from the state are especially dire, and the room for teaching civic engagement is limited. In the period since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, the trend of collective leadership under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao during the previous two decades has been reversed. Among his sweeping transformations of Chinese political institutions, the crackdown on grassroots civil society has been well documented. Scholars have paid attention to the impact that this particular crackdown has had on villagers, labor activists, lawyers, feminists, journalists, environmental activists, entrepreneurs, and religious groups.[25] In sum, since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, the space for civil society and social activism in China has been diminishing.[26] Thus, there are high stakes for practitioners who teach civic engagement that does not strictly follow the state's official narrative.

Given the role that university students could play in civic engagement, the Chinese government has targeted students as a key group for authoritarian political control, and the state has deployed structures and measures to nurture political compliance and consolidate its domination of university campuses.[27] Even as China is more and more integrated into the global economy with Chinese individuals having increased access to global cultural and information flows, the government still effectively uses its education system to promote itself relative to global political alternatives.[28] Such an approach is apparent in Hong Kong as a significant politicization of curricula was implemented since a deal was made between London and Beijing for Hong Kong to return to China in 1997.[29] Such moves are not surprising since higher education could create a large pool of potential opposition leaders and generate rivals to the incumbent government who pose an existential threat to authoritarian rule.[30]

In the face of such challenges and constraints, many attempts have been made to promote civic engagement globally, including in authoritarian countries. Some approaches focus on a certain group of people. For example, targeting youth groups and youth-led initiatives when there is a lack of state-led citizenship education could create new civic spaces, and other citizens could be empowered as a result.[31] Similarly, since knowledge "is created through a process of new information interacting with the prior knowledge and experiences of learners," it is beneficial to focus on the learners and generate civic engagement through interactions and constructing new experiences.[32] The learners, of course, could become future trainers, as the "train the trainer" method, which turns trainees into trainers to disseminate information and methodology, has been proven to empower and prepare another specific group—ethnic minorities—to take leadership roles in the future.[33] In non-English speaking communities, implementing a university-affiliated community tutoring program that incorporates service and civic engagement with classroom language learning could be effective.[34]

Despite the major challenges of teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries, there are occasional opportunities, especially with the rise of the World Wide Web and the increased incidences of disruptions to the political order and activities in the past. The online remix and meme culture, which combines or edits existing materials to produce new creative works or products, could be used by citizens to express and debate sentiments on issues of sensitive social and political relevance in the social commons and thus empower those interested in civic engagement.[35] Internet platforms and applications such as Twitter, when used weekly, could also improve students' political knowledge and political engagement.[36] Even major disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic could be windows of opportunities for new interventions to promote global civic engagement because, when organizing activities are forced to be moved online, many students may be more willing to engage in actions to solve global challenges.[37]

Research Design

One potential way to teach civic engagement in authoritarian countries is to import relevant pedagogy from other countries. External factors have played a direct and causal role in constraining some dimensions of autocratic power and enhancing the opposition's power; for example, external ideas and financial resources are crucial to exposing fraud.[38] These external actors can influence democratization, not only through democratic pressures from countries in the West and linkages to democracies, but also by enabling elite agency.[39] Governments promoting democratic practices could use external influences to cultivate civic engagement—although they are often accused of importing values—while International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) could also tackle an acceptable domain such as environmental protection.[40] However, the external actors' influence in civic engagement and democratization could be shaped by geopolitics and could be easily jeopardized due to low levels of freedom domestically, harsh legal environments, and limited domestic support for civil rights movements.[41] Thus, more conscious handling of trade-offs, conceptual precision, and a dynamic conflict analysis could be crucial when imported civic engagement confronts pitfalls.[42]

To capture the process of the "imported civic engagement" model and identify crucial phases, challenges, and the pedagogical interventions of the model discussed, this chapter first utilizes a case study of "SEED for Social Innovation" (referred to as SEED from now on)—an NGO that the author cofounded in 2012—which first brought Chinese trainees to the US and then subsequently took its core curricula to China. To fully reflect on the interactions between different stakeholders such as the Chinese state, other NGOs, and participants of the SEED camps, participant observation and process tracing were used in case analysis to demonstrate the overall approach of "train-the-trainers" and "importing civic engagement" to authoritarian states.

Then, a quasi-experiment was conducted using the "story of self" component, a workshop from the SEED core curriculum as the pedagogical treatment, which was taught in both China (two cities: Shanghai and Zhengzhou) and the US (Newport News, Virginia) by the same instructor at different times to compare the effectiveness of the intervention. For the China workshops, the participants were young adults recruited by partners in China. For the US workshop, participants were undergraduate students of the instructor.[43] Even though the participants' selection process was not completely random, a t-test of gender composition of participants from the US and China reveals that the difference is not statistically significant, providing a basis for the assumption of balanced samples.

A pre-treatment, anonymous survey created by the author was filled out by participants to establish initial conditions. After the workshop was taught and participants told their "stories of self" to their randomly created small groups members (about 3–4 people in each small group), another post-treatment anonymous survey was conducted to assess change in civic engagement attitudes as reflected in replies to three key questions from the surveys to measure trust, norms of reciprocity, and potential participation in a civic discussion on public issues respectively:[44]

- If you have $100 right now, a member of your team wants to borrow money from you (without telling you the purpose), how much would you be willing to lend to your teammate? (Please write down a number between 0-100: _____)

- If it is YOU who hopes to borrow from your teammate, how much do you think your teammate will lend you? (Please write down a number between 0-100: _____)

- If someone from your team asks you to participate in a one-day discussion on public issues (suppose you don't have very important things to do that day), will you participate?

  a) Certainly not b) not that likely c) in between d) maybe will e) will certainly go

The assumption in the first question is that if people trust their small group teammates more, they will be more likely to lend out a larger amount of their money. The second question enquires about the participants' assessments of the team dynamic, particularly if norms of reciprocity are believed to have been established. The third question investigates whether they are willing to give up time (with no schedule conflicts) to take part in civic engagement behavior. The three measurements are annotated as "trust," "reciprocity," and "civic engagement" in the analysis and discussion in this chapter.

The Shanghai workshop had 69 participants while both the Zhengzhou and Newport News workshops had 17 participants each. The Shanghai workshop surveys only included the first two of the three key questions (due to logistical errors, an older version of the survey was printed leaving out the third question) while both the Zhengzhou and Newport News workshop surveys included all three key questions. It is, therefore, logical to assume that the Zhengzhou and Newport News workshops are the most comparable. The workshop in Shanghai, given the larger N, is a robustness test, especially because in all of the actual exercises, participants were randomly divided into small groups of three or four, and the impacts were assessed under the small group settings. All results are presented by cities in this chapter, although state-level comparisons generated similar outcomes.

Case Study: SEED for Social Innovation
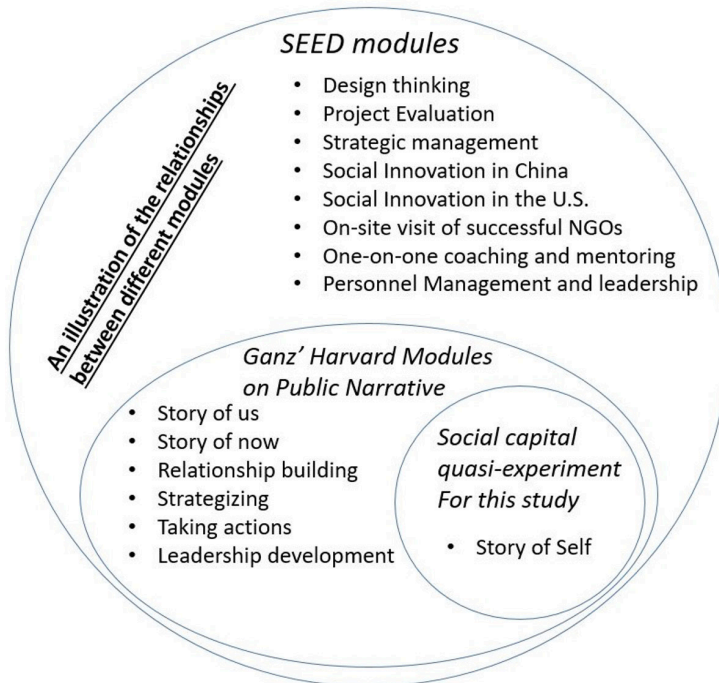
The Evolution of SEED

SEED for Social Innovation was founded by a group of Chinese students in the greater Boston area as a student organization at Harvard University in 2012 and later became an NGO in the US with special programs under the ADream Foundation (真爱梦想基金会) in China—due to challenges associated with direct registration. SEED is short for *social responsibility, empathy, empowerment*, and *dedication*—four key values democratically selected by the original founders through a ballot. The founders of SEED had a vision to empower civil society activities in China through teaching civic engagement to practitioners working in the third sector (not the public sector nor the private sector). Even though SEED programs could take place inside or outside of university campuses, the NGO-run workshops are different from traditional university classes.

The core curriculum of SEED is put together based on the availability of educators and practitioners, many of whom are from the greater Boston area and some are directly flown from China. The volunteer organizing committee fundraised both inside and outside of China to pay the workshop faculty members. Those educators and practitioners from China typically have successfully organized campaigns such as girls' empowerment and workers' rights protection and would share their first-hand experiences, tactics, and strategies with participants of the SEED camp. The implications for teaching civic engagement globally from this arrangement are that readily available resources where classes take place (in this case, educational resources in the greater Boston area) as well as resources from countries or communities that are targets of the imported model, can be utilized to combine best practices with the most relevant lessons.

As illustrated in figure 1, in a typical year, the core curriculum could include modules such as "Social Innovations in the US," "Social Innovations in China," "Personnel Management and Leadership," "Project Evaluation," "Design thinking," "Strategic management," "One-on-one coaching and mentoring," "On-site visit of successful NGOs," and "Public Narrative and Leadership." The modules are updated and adjusted yearly based on participants' feedback and internal assessments. The "Public Narrative and Leadership" module by Dr. Marshall Ganz from the Harvard Kennedy School is the only module that has been included every year and remains the highest-rated module throughout the years.

From 2012 to 2019, SEED trained 285 China-based fellows through its workshops and created a community of social entrepreneurs with about 500 people, generating social impact in at least 60 cities in eight countries, mainly in China, the US, and Thailand. Members of the SEED com-

Figure 1. The Relationships Between Different Modules Discussed in This Study

An illustration of the relationships between different modules

SEED modules

- Design thinking
- Project Evaluation
- Strategic management
- Social Innovation in China
- Social Innovation in the U.S.
- On-site visit of successful NGOs
- One-on-one coaching and mentoring
- Personnel Management and leadership

Ganz' Harvard Modules on Public Narrative

- Story of us
- Story of now
- Relationship building
- Strategizing
- Taking actions
- Leadership development

Social capital quasi-experiment For this study

- Story of Self

munity reported at least 70,000 hours of community services, and the organization's social media account had more than 100,000 viewers in 2019 alone.[45] SEED is now one of the most influential organizations promoting civic engagement and social innovation in China, winning major awards from the NGO sector including China's "Top 10 Projects" of Action League 2019 Charity Ceremony despite the tightening grip on the society by the authoritarian state.[46] How did SEED achieve such successes?

From the very beginning, SEED aimed to empower everyone involved through practicing what they preach within the organization. Decision-making involved extensive deliberation and voting which engaged the entire organization. The initial core program included a week-long camp at Harvard on civic engagement, bringing young Chinese scholars and civil society practitioners (SEED fellows) to the camp, and then they taught or practiced what they learned back in China. The cofounders were mostly students from the greater Boston area. Given Harvard's reputation, the group decided to register as a student organization at Harvard, even though students from Boston University, Northeastern University, Boston College, and Brandeis University made up most of the team. This intentional decision was rewarding as the Harvard brand was effective in attracting donors, motivating high-quality scholars and practitioners to teach the modules at the SEED camp, and recruiting competent candidates to apply, even during its initial year. When teaching civic engagement globally, it might be beneficial to search for partners and allies from reputable institutions in a city or a country, even if the core team may not directly come from those institutions. Yet, the high-profile activity also drew the attention and scrutiny of the Chinese government, even though the program was conducted completely outside of China. While Harvard is a highly respected academic institution, even by Chinese government officials—President Xi Jinping of China and many other high-level officials sent their children to Harvard—the Chinese government was concerned about the potential for a "color revolution" in China that could challenge the legitimacy of the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Key phrases such as "civic engagement" and "civil society" in SEED's promotional materials made officials in Beijing uneasy. While the first workshop was

underway in 2012, a special investigation was set up by the Chinese government to monitor what SEED was doing. The frequency and the intensity of such monitoring of civic engagement activities is unique to authoritarian countries because an active citizenry has the potential to defend democracy against threats to its survival while challenging the rule of authoritarian leaders.[47] What is even more peculiar in this case is the "interdependence sovereignty" which the Chinese state exercised and directly reached outside its borders. Key organizers were contacted and pressured to shut down the program, and individuals associated with SEED were interviewed by Chinese authorities after returning to China. Thus, it is important to keep in mind when importing teaching civic engagement that the target authoritarian country's state apparatus can pose challenges, even outside its boundaries.

The experiences of SEED suggest that authoritarian states not only penetrate through the public sphere and directly interfere in individuals' lives within its given territory, but they also can extend their reach outside their domains. At the core of an authoritarian state, which concentrates political power in an authority not responsible to the people, is the tendency to use strong central power to preserve the political status quo and reject political plurality. Any alternative discourses fostered by its citizens, whether domestic or abroad, could be seen as a threat. This is a manifestation of "interdependence sovereignty"—one of the alternatives to "Westphalian sovereignty"—which deals exclusively with control, especially over trans-border movements.[48] Thus, civic engagement activities that promote or even tolerate the creation of authentic alternative discourses could be assessed as risks and often lead to active suppression from the state. This is a major challenge of teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries.

Although promoting civic engagement and empowering Chinese citizens with more skills, capacities, and agencies for their rights (through the modules taught) are at the center of SEED's mission, initiating a revolution or overthrowing the government was never part of the goal. On the other hand, the Chinese state is also aware of a common problem faced by authoritarian states wherein too much control of society could contradict its interest of furthering economic development and maintaining regime stability because many civic engagement activities promoted by the third sector (and occasionally the private sector) could facilitate economic growth and contribute to political stability at the local level when the state strategically and deliberately differentiate between regime-challenging and regime-supporting activities.[49] The state could outsource responsibilities for low risk but potentially controversial tasks to civil society organizations (formal or informal) so that it can take the credit when there are no problems and let the civil society organizations take the blame if there were any.

Therefore, when faced with the risks of being terminated while assuming there would be room for maneuver, SEED decided to operate within authoritarian institutional constraints while continuing to teach civic engagement. An essential yet mostly symbolic move was changing the original name of the organization from "SEED for civic and social innovation" to "SEED for social innovation" in 2013 while continuing to teach the same core curriculum. If the state's agents care more about the symbolic aspect of activities and a symbolic action taken by practitioners sends a signal of cooperation, the state's agents may be satisfied with such changes on the surface and the practitioners' mission of teaching civic engagement may be preserved. Practitioners teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries quite often will need to make compromises such as adjusting curricula for political compliance, but those compromises can be made strategically and partially so that local bureaucrats are satisfied without jeopardizing the whole endeavor.[50]

To reduce political sensitivity, SEED leveraged its successful Harvard camp in 2012 and drew attention from Tsinghua University (equivalent to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology of China) in 2013. SEED ran the curriculum both in Tsinghua and Harvard, each for about a week, teaching the theoretical modules in China and teaching the more practical modules in the US, including the public narrative module studied in this chapter. This move not only reduced tensions with the Chinese government at various levels from the central level to local bureaucrats (the activities are now framed as "academic trainings"), but also allowed SEED, as an organization, to gain an initial foothold inside China and become associated with a reputable university. Even though

some of the programs were either openly or clandestinely observed by Chinese government officials, they did not immediately call off the program.

While tensions between the Chinese government and SEED were lowered when trainings were tolerated, the authoritarian state nevertheless continued to pay close attention to its activities to see whether the academic trainings would spill over to anti-government activities. This indicated that the challenges to teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries not only exist upon entry of the importing organization, but the organization would have to deal with constant pressures and scrutiny from the state. Government agents conducted routine interviews with active members and attended workshops run by SEED. High levels of monitoring could be a threat to civil society organizations operating in authoritarian countries, but also could be utilized as an opportunity since government officials could be targets of civic engagement training. Around 2014, SEED started to organize grassroots demo youth workshops in major cities to provide a shortened version of the full SEED experience. Local authorities in these major cities pressed government officials to monitor the workshops, a common situation for organizing civic engagement activities independently in China. SEED welcomed the suggestion. Thus, it was a common scene when SEED was organizing its camps in a classroom, that some officials were sitting in the back taking notes. At least one official gently spoke to a SEED event organizer after monitoring a grassroots civic engagement event and asked if it was possible to get his son, who was in China, to participate in the upcoming Harvard workshop. His identity as a father was obviously prioritized over his identity as a local government official, and practitioners teaching civic engagement under authoritarian rule could utilize the multi-dimensional nature of officials' identities to sustain their projects.

Importing Western civic education into China was relatively less challenging once the initial challenge from the government was moderated. However, many foreign experiences may not be directly transferable within the Chinese cultural context, especially when individualistic approaches are met with collective, family- and community-oriented social structures. Chinese people at the grassroots level might also be skeptical about civil society organizations which they had never before encountered, due to the lack of legitimacy, resources, and credibility.[51] Thus, SEED started to organize public academic forums to discuss key issues relevant to the third sector as well as organize fieldwork to collect and integrate local successful cases of civic education in 2015. SEED fellows not only taught civic engagement but started to localize the curriculum using Chinese experiences. It was also essential that SEED no longer depended on funding outside of China, as collaborations with philanthropists and charitable foundations inside China were initiated to further SEED's domestic integration with the third sector in 2016. This was also a moment when academic exercises started to transition into practical trainings of civil society practitioners to best achieve SEED's missions and goals. Those pedagogies took root on a larger scale as local partners (especially organizations run by SEED fellows) began to teach civic engagement to their own constituents. It was much less sensitive politically when domestic organizations were teaching the curriculum rather than a foreign organization from Cambridge, Massachusetts, because domestic organizations have typically interacted with local authorities. This meant both building on existing experiences of dealing with potential risks but also that the trust of key government officials had been earned. Quite often, a trusted liaison at the locality could make sure that the local government was not jeopardizing the curriculum. Thus, the collaborations with the third sector actors inside China not only provided financial stability for SEED's operations in China, but also further reduced political risk under an authoritarian state.

Teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries may face uncertainties and challenges due to a lack of legitimacy, thus having an official status is desirable. However, the Chinese Foreign NGO Law requires any foreign NGO to find a Professional Supervisory Unit (PSU) as a sponsor, usually a government agency in a similar field, and then register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.[52] This particular stipulation made it impossible for SEED to get registered since no government agency was willing to take the potential risk and serve as SEED's PSU. After consulting with legal experts and allies in the third sector, SEED decided to anchor at the ADream Foundation in Shanghai and officially registered as a special program of the foundation in 2017 to acquire legal status in

China. Even though the institutional environment for teaching civic engagement in authoritarian countries may not be ideal, practitioners could still look for allies within society for help.

Since 2019, SEED has provided training and non-profit consulting for individuals and organizations in China and held training camps in new locations (such as Thailand in 2019) to diversify the sources of best practices in civic engagement. The public narrative module was also taught and exercised by SEED fellows not only in China, but also in the US and Japan, empowering local communities in various countries with their community building, literacy promotion, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation projects.[53] Even during COVID-19, SEED utilized its network and resources in academia, and the third sector, both domestic and foreign, and put together a handbook for diverse social forces to participate and engage in the fight against the negative social and economic impacts and effects of the pandemic. This handbook captured topics ranging from promoting media transparency, to differentiating scientific methods and data from rumors, to self-organizing grassroots civic actions and collaborating with the private sector, and was widely circulated among civil society practitioners in China.[54]

In reflecting on these points, it is important to point out the limitations of this case study and the inherent bias which the author's relationship with SEED could generate.[55] Being able to utilize resources from Harvard and Tsinghua Universities meant that many opportunities were made possible due to elite-level collaborations. Many practitioners who teach civic engagement may not have access to such resources. However, such experiences still point out the importance of using reputable brands and forming alliances when teaching civic engagement in authoritarian states. The brand or ally could be a successful local entrepreneur, a supportive local official, a deep-rooted civil society organization, or whomever possesses sufficient social capital to connect the practitioner to financial, political, and social resources.

Assessment of importing civic engagement by SEED

It was clear that importing the SEED civic education workshops into China would face challenges from multiple dimensions: political, economic, and cultural. The experiences indicate that framing the camp as "academic activity," collaborating with a major Chinese university to further legitimize such academic practices and later seeking opportunities to expand both horizontally (into multiple regions) and vertically (into different age groups), proved to be a sound tactic. The approach to "train the trainers" initially followed by the tactic of partnering with domestic organizations to teach civic engagement also prevented the importing process from being directly targeted as "foreign intervention in Chinese politics and society." Economically, the Harvard brand was able to kick start SEED, successfully encourage domestic philanthropists and foundations to value the curriculum (annual budgets went from about $50,000 initially to about $165,000 in just a few years), and as a result, made the organization more sustainable. The fieldwork that assembled local civic engagement best practices further helped to localize the foreign experiences. Also, SEED was able to evolve and improve after each training in China as feedback from participants was constantly incorporated into the next round of curriculum designs.

There are, of course, problematic actions taken by SEED that merit further discussion in terms of its implications for teaching civic engagement globally. Initial compromises made with the authoritarian state could potentially derail the mission of the organization. To some extent, the outcomes of SEED and SEED fellows' workshops and projects, especially those providing support to minority and poor populations, may have strengthened the regime stability of China, providing authoritarian resilience. However, if the aim is not regime change, the goal of teaching civic engagement effectively and empowering individuals with the resources, mindsets, and emotional capacities necessary to be active and engaging citizens, could still be achieved.

Some specific strategies and tactics from this case are generalizable for teaching civic engagement globally, especially in other authoritarian countries. First, the initial brand building was important. Getting started as a student organization at Harvard effectively attracted high quality collaborators and participants, and fundraising was more effective as a result. Second, framing civic education as academic exercises, as opposed to organizing and mobilizing activities, and forg-

ing collaborations between Harvard University and Tsinghua University, a domestically reputable institution in China, reduced tensions between the authoritarian state and SEED. Third, while the suspicion and pressure from the state did not go away, focusing on youth from major cosmopolitan areas as a breakthrough point, and placing more emphasis on promoting social and civil rights (especially minority rights) than political rights, initially created breathing room to localize SEED, with the opportunity to scale up afterward. Fourth, instead of arbitrarily dumping the foreign curricula onto the Chinese participants, SEED organizers conducted their own fieldwork and modified the workshops based on local experiences and cultures, and the workshop modules continue to evolve for best fit with the domestic settings. Fifth, as it matured and was grounded, SEED gradually moved from pure academic exercises to practical programs and overcame legal hurdles by partnering with domestic NGOs for its projects. Such partnerships not only gave SEED more legal and institutional protection, but also created channels for SEED to promote and replicate its pedagogies and norms. SEED, thus, was able to take root inside an authoritarian country and bring its programs to the general public. Lastly, SEED has adhered to the democratic norms, evidence-based thinking, and strong attention to public issues used in its own agenda setting and decision-making process to demonstrate to new participants and observers civic engagement in action. Some of the above takeaways may be valuable for other practitioners and organizations importing civic education into other authoritarian countries.

The "public narrative" pedagogical treatment

As discussed above, the core curriculum involved in the quasi-experiment originates from Dr. Ganz's Harvard Kennedy School class on organizing and civic engagement. This method utilizes storytelling to help individuals find their purposes and shared values and turn those values into purposeful actions by creating agency from emotions.[56] Such an approach cultivates participants' emotional capacities and motivates actions through values realized from their constructed public narratives. Instead of telling people what to do and why they should do it, this approach asks participants to find their own values and motivations through the major choices that they made in their lives when faced with challenges, and thus their actions could be more spontaneous and sustainable. Within the context of authoritarian countries, instructing people to take actions to promote their civil and political rights will not only face pressures from the state, but the individuals could also find the external pressures foreign and arbitrary. Getting individuals to search within, find public issues that they care about, and then equip them with resources and strategies to take action, could be more viable for both the individuals and the political environment. It is worth noting that such a process not only provides a path to civic engagement for the specific issue explored during the workshop, but the methodology could also be replicated by the participants when they encounter future opportunities for civic engagement.

In those workshops, participants are asked to tell a "story of self" to reflect upon the challenges they had faced in their lives and the choices that they made to overcome the challenges, which reflects their values. Then, a second "story of us" is constructed to find the choices that the group as a whole made when faced with challenges to cultivate individual group members' shared values. Finally, the participants are asked to create a "story of now" to clarify their own goals (for example, a better environment or improved minority rights, etc.) and contrast the "dream of action" with the "nightmare of inaction" so urgency is created and collective actions are initiated.[57] For the Harvard Kennedy School classes and the workshops organized by "SEED for Social Innovation," additional tools such as relationship building, strategizing, taking actions, and leadership development are included. For the quasi-experiments in this study, only the "story of self" component from the Ganz' workshop was utilized due to the limited time allowed. The full module could take up to 20–30 hours plus the time that teams spent on accumulating shared experiences while working on a civic engagement project together.

The public narrative approach is significantly different from typical curricula taught in China. In a typical Chinese curriculum, any subjects that have political implications should promote patriotism, collectivism, and the love of socialism, and the proposed 2021 compulsory education

curriculum plan and curriculum standard further emphasized the implementation of Chinese president Xi Jinping's thoughts on creating a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.[58] Thus, a specific narrative is decided, and alternative narratives and practices are almost impossible to include. In the Ganz approach, the narrative is generated innately and is pluralistic by design without having to adhere to a single political discourse.

Based on a post-training online survey in 2017, SEED participants gave an average of 4.53 points on a 5-point Likert scale for the public narrative module, the highest among nine different modules taught that year. Six months after the camp, the public narrative module was still rated the highest with 4.41 points out of 5, and even three years after the camp, about half of the participants (48.2%) still believed that it was their most impressive memory at Harvard among a list of well-planned activities in the greater Boston area.[59] When asked whether they continue to use the practices learned at the camps, 76% of the 2018 fellows responded that they either always or frequently use the public narrative module, while 24% said they occasionally use it. No one said they never used it.[60] Fellows thought that the module was applicable, practical, and relevant to Chinese civic engagement, for it not only created a community of practitioners that could continue to empower each other, but also provided resources and solutions to members of this community when faced with challenges in the process of civic activities. They often mentioned that the public narrative module experience completely changed their way of thinking, and they consequently became more motivated in civic activities. SEED fellows have used the public narrative practice in vocational training, poverty alleviation, rural education, sex education, LGBTQ empowerment, women and ethnic minority empowerment, environmental protection, and peasant empowerment, among many projects, and continue to teach civic engagement globally, especially in China. Some of those topics may occasionally face resistance from the local society or governments, but SEED fellows have found the skills, capacities, and agencies they acquired from the camps useful in preparing them to overcome these challenges and achieve meaningful results.

Results and Analysis of the Quasi-Experiment

To measure the actual impact of the workshops done in authoritarian China and to compare the effectiveness between countries/regimes, a quasi-experiment was set up. Social capital in terms of trust and norms of reciprocity as well as civic engagement in terms of willingness to participate in public discussions were investigated to assess the effectiveness of the "story of self" component of the public narrative module. The 95% confidence intervals are presented by cities, depicting the changes of trust, norms of reciprocity, and willingness for civic engagement among the participants. Figure 2 shows that on the "trust" question, all three cities had an increased mean, indicating that participants were more willing to lend money to their small group members after just a few hours of intervention—telling their stories of self to each other in a structured way. The changes within
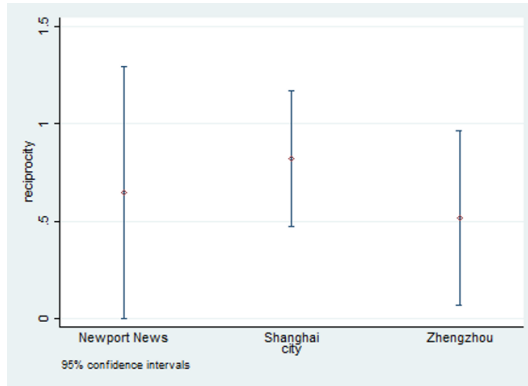
Figure 2. Changes in Trust
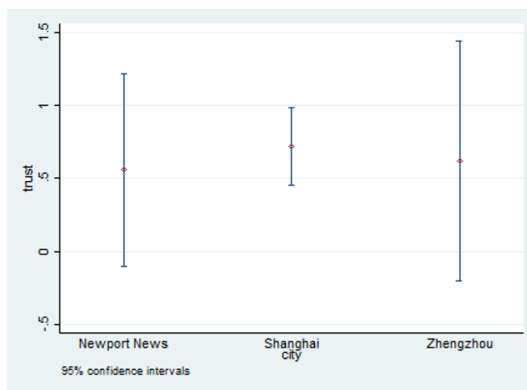
the Shanghai group were statistically significant, indicating that sharing intimate and meaningful personal experiences created new bonding between participants within the same small groups. The graph is collapsed into a 1~5 scale to be comparable across questions, so each unit change represents an additional $20 participants are willing to lend out.

On the question of norms of reciprocity, in which participants were asked how much they expect their teammates would lend them, participants from all three cities also had positive changes

Figure 3. Changes in Norms of Reciprocity

95% confidence intervals

(illustrated in figure 3). The changes in both Chinese cities were statistically significant and the changes in Newport News, had a P value of 0.0502. This indicates that norms of reciprocity were created as participants not only trusted that teammates would return money lent, but also that they expected teammates would be more willing to lend them money.

For the civic engagement question, both students in China and the US had positive changes in their willingness to participate, although the results are not statistically significant as the P-values are both above 0.05. Figure 4 shows the 95% confidence interval of participants' change in their willingness to participate in public discussions. In hindsight, it would be more effective to recruit

Figure 4. Changes in Civic Engagement


95% confidence intervals
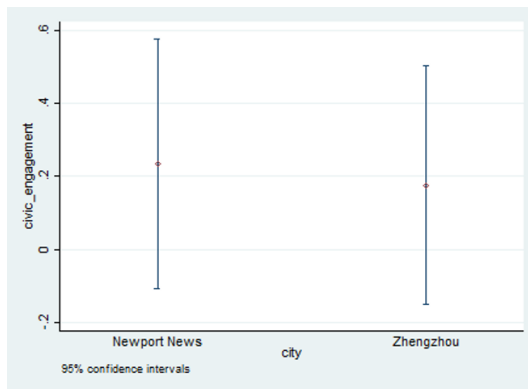
more participants in each of the two cities that answered this question since the question was not asked in Shanghai, which had the most participants. This question could also be framed differently to reflect the number of hours which participants were willing to commit, rather than simply asking them to commit to a one-day event.

The public narrative workshop uses emotional power to motivate individuals to find their own values and their shared values and propel actions and social impacts. It is, therefore, essential

to investigate whether the female subgroup would react differently to the interventions as it has been suggested they instill more emotional empathy, which could encourage continued civic engagement.[61]

Figure 5. Changes in Trust for Female Participants

95% confidence intervals
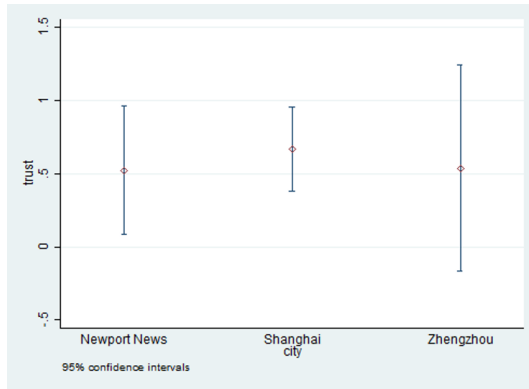
As indicated by figure 5, for the first question on trust, female participants from all cities increased the amount of money they were willing to lend to their teammates. The changes for the students from the Newport News group were statistically significant, while the changes for students from Shanghai remained statistically significant.

For the second question, figure 6 shows that not only did female participants from all three cities increase their norm of reciprocity, the positive changes were statistically significant across cities. Figure 7 indicates that the results for the civic engagement question from the female participants resembled that for the entire group, with positive changes, but not statistically significant.

Overall, trust, norms of reciprocity, and willingness for civic engagement increased after the public narrative intervention in all cities. The impact was more noticeable among female than male participants. In line with Corcoran's research, this could be due to the emotional nature of the "story of self" module. The intervention was less than two hours and only utilized the "story of self" component out of the three stories told in a typical public narrative workshop organized by

Figure 6. Changes in Norms of Reciprocity for Female Participants
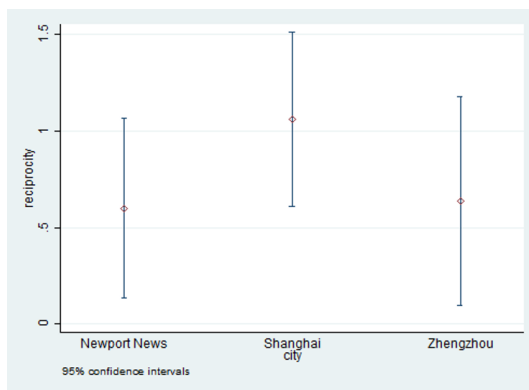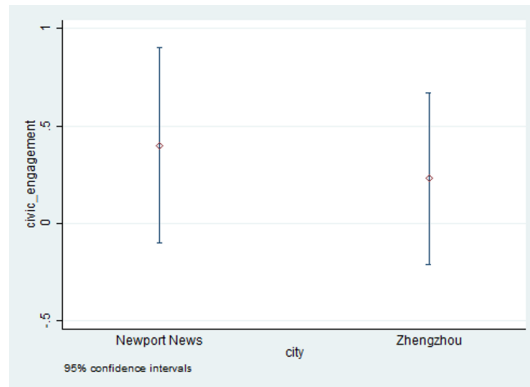

95% confidence intervals

Figure 7. Changes in Civic Engagement for Female Participants

SEED. It is likely that with the whole package, taught repeatedly within Chinese communities for nine years, the impacts could be much larger. The quasi-experimental data assessing participants' social capital creation and willingness of civic engagement also reveal that the interventions have as much impact in the workshops conducted in China as those in the US.

Conclusion

This chapter has used a case study to demonstrate the major challenges that someone teaching civic engagement could encounter in an authoritarian country. The SEED experiences in China revealed that, through using these individuals as anchors and turning trainees into trainers, successful pedagogical models of civic engagement could be grounded even within an authoritarian context—although their effectiveness may be a subject of investigation by future researchers. A further potential constraint—the legitimacy of a foreign entity teaching civic engagement—can be established by collaborating with established domestic partners, especially prestigious academic institutions. In the meantime, foreign experiences could also be localized by incorporating locally-developed best practices. Another tactic worth noting is to start with the most open-minded subgroup of the population and then expand horizontally across different communities while cultivating vertically among different age groups. At the right moment, this tactic proved to be effective so that foreign experiences not only took root but blossomed. Furthermore, the continued diversification of sources of importing civic engagement and the replication of best practices both inside and outside of China made the organization sustainable and adaptive. The imported SEED has now grown into a forest of active participants in Chinese civil society.[62]

Lessons from this Chinese experience could be replicable in attempts to teach civic engagement in other authoritarian societies or even democratic societies. Best practices could be shared in a safe space in a society that is supportive and resourceful for teaching civic engagement. Individuals who are open-minded but well-grounded in their own local societies could be targeted as future trainers and provided with teaching plans and methodologies so that they could absorb the principles of civic engagement and successfully apply them under new conditions, as constraints in different countries may vary. Being able to utilize elite institutions for brand-building greatly increased the chances of success in this case, but the external generalizability is not only limited to practitioners who have access to elite institutions—it is essential to identify resources and allies within a community even when such resources and allies are not initially obvious. It is also worth noting that repression has costs, but not all governments will shut down all civic engagement activities, even in authoritarian countries. Thus, it is important to maintain faith and be strategic when importing civic engagement into authoritarian countries. This study also provided empirical evidence of the successes in creating new social capital and increasing willingness for civic engage-

ment among participants when one specific module from the workshops was tested. It is quite possible that when other modules are tested and taught under different political and institutional environments, additional positive outcomes and challenges could be brought to light. Such explorations are warranted and could be valuable for future researchers as they seek to strengthen civil societies around the world.

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62. Due to the authoritarian nature of the state, the current positions of these trainees cannot be revealed.