Butler University
Digital Commons @ Butler University

Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS | College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

1-1989

Public Opinion Reform in China

David S. Mason
Butler University, dmason@butler.edu

Ken Colburn
Butler University, kcolburn@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Mason, David S. and Colburn, Ken, "Public Opinion Reform in China" / (1989): -.
Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/29

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact fgaede@butler.edu.

Public Opinion and Reform in China

by David S. Mason and Ken Colburn, Butler University

As the People's Republic of China shifts toward a more market-oriented economic system, it has also begun exploring another Western institution: scientific public opinion polling. As Yang Guansan, one of China's leading pollsters, said recently in the *Beijing Review:* "Only five or six years ago, the public opinion poll was considered to be a 'bourgeois' or 'capitalist' method of social survey . . . Now the taboo has been swept away in the strong tide of reform, which is challenging all of China's traditions, stereotypes and prejudices."

In Beijing last May, we met with the Deputy Director, Yang Guansan, and Feng Chujun, Research Fellow, of the China Social Survey System (hereafter CSSS), the primary governmental agency responsible for national public opinion polls. The first and leading social survey organization in China, CSSS began conducting scientific polls in 1984 under the Economic System Reform Institute of China. In May 1987, CSSS came under the jurisdiction of the State Commission for Restructuring the Economic System. The CSSS has a staff of thirty researchers and has three survey "networks": (1) an urban citizen survey, conducted seven to eight times a year and based on a probability multi-stage cluster sampling of 2580 residents in forty cities; (2) a rural citizen survey conducted from 100 field sites; and (3) a news survey system which depends on reports from 100 mass media agencies. The urban citizen surveys include a biannual, periodical set of surveys since 1987. So far the CSSS has completed three of these and plans to conduct the fourth in October of this year.

The urban and rural surveys seem to be genuine probability samples, generated by scientific sampling procedures. Researchers from Beijing have consulted with sampling experts in the West, including the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, in an effort to develop reliable and valid procedures. One of the statistical oddities of sampling procedures is that a sample of 2500 in China is just as representative of its population as a similar size sample in a small county. Thus the CSSS does not have to resort to interviews with hundreds of thousands of respondents, as was done in the past. Interviewers are trained in Beijing before they go out into the field.

All of this is new ground for the Chinese pollsters. Young social scientists are being greatly influenced by survey research methods, yet until recently universities have offered very little formal coursework in the area of scientific polling. Now there are plans to establish an entire School for Public Opinion Research at the Chinese Peoples' University. A few Western textbooks on statistics and survey research techniques have been translated into Chinese.

The surveys done by CSSS fall into three categories. Some are general public opinion polls that reflect the attitudes of people toward important societal issues, including economic reforms. A second type of survey, usually commissioned by the government, asks about specific topics such as inflation, political reforms, or labor and personnel reforms. The third type is basic research into longer term questions of political culture, value change, and social trends, often done in collaboration with other research institutes. For example, CSSS is currently collaborating with the Nippon Research Center, Japan, on a comparative social survey of eleven nations (including the U.S.) concerning attitudes toward the family, society and justice.

According to Mr. Yang, there are no restrictions on the type of research they do, with the exception of questions concerning national defense or foreign affairs. Questionnaires do not have to be approved by anyone outside CSSS. There are some restrictions on the public dissemination of results; however, newspapers, for example, have sometimes censored the results of reports CSSS has sent them or presented in press conferences. Yet some poll results which may not be publicly available through party or government news media can appear in local media, academic journals, or Shanghai's *World Economic Herald* (the first private newspaper in China).

CSSS has asked about very sensitive political issues, including attitudes about communism and about price reforms. The last issue is a particularly difficult one, and linked closely to the whole economic reform process. The reform aims at bringing prices in line with costs, which means reducing government subsidies and consequent price increases. For urban families, the cost of food and basic consumer goods is climbing at about 20% a year, a pace far exceeding wage increases. Some Beijing residents told us that they spend 70% of their income on food which, even with subsidized housing, is a burden. In polls on sources of dissatisfaction, price increases are in first place. While most people favor economic reform, they are opposed to price increases. Presumably accurate information based on scientific polls concerning people's attitudes toward an aspect of reform will enable China's leaders to proceed with social and economic change at a pace which most segments of the population can accept.

Scientific polls serve two political functions: (1) they provide leaders with information about public perceptions and thus help to shape public policy; and (2) through dissemination in the mass media, polls raise the level of public consciousness and debate, fostering a political culture in which citizens can express and evaluate alternative viewpoints. In fostering such research, the regime hopes to establish another link with the population, and in doing so gives the population an additional influence on the government. However small, it is a step toward democratization. But democratization in this sphere, as in others, has the potential for destabilization as well. As China learns more about itself, and is given channels to express dissatisfaction, democratic reforms will have to follow the economic ones. □