

Local lobbying in single-party authoritarian systems: Do institutions matter?

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Abstract

Lobbying, and its role in the policy process, has been extensively studied in democratic states, but much less is known about similar practices in authoritarian political systems. Although a few studies have identified lobbying in China, most have focused on big businesses and national policy making, and some have argued that it is unaffected by differences in political institutions. Our paper challenges this portrayal of business lobbying in autocracies. Through a study of the lobbying activities of business associations based on documentary research and fieldwork in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin between 2011 and 2013, we show that although business associations have similar lobbying motivations to their counterparts in democracies, their specific practices are often shaped by authoritarian political institutions. While they are similar in seeking to build informal relationships with public officials, provide expertise to shape policies, and raise their profile through public relations activities and media engagement, they differ in focusing their relationship-building efforts on helping officials with routine work, helping Communist Party organizations establish cells in businesses, and brokering between businesses and government. Rather than donating to political campaigns like their counterparts in democracies, they become legislators

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themselves, hire retired officials, and seek positions on advisory bodies. Rigged elections, an unreliable legal system, and restrictions on media and freedom of movement are key authoritarian institutions that shape these distinctive lobbying practices.

KEYWORDS

business association, China, implementation, lobbying, local government, policy

INTRODUCTION

Lobbying is a means by which interest groups seek to influence policy and thus play a role in the policy process. The study of lobbying has been developed through research in democratic political systems whose fundamental characteristics are electoral competition, rule of law, and freedom of association, speech, and movement. It is understudied in autocracies because mainstream political science expects their elites to be all-powerful and societal actors to have little influence (e.g., Boix & Svulik, 2013). Although some researchers have begun to challenge this conventional wisdom, they have mostly sought to identify the presence of similar actors, relationships, or activities, rather than to consider how authoritarian political institutions shape lobbying practices (Han et al., 2014; Kennedy, 2005; Steinberg & Shih, 2012; Teets, 2018; Zhu, 2009). Some have implied, or even argued, that the lobbying behavior is unaffected by institutional context and dependent more on organizations' resources (Kennedy, 2005).

Our study challenges the argument that authoritarian institutions do not matter, and it breaks new ground by examining the efforts of grassroots private business associations in China to lobby and influence policy. Based on fieldwork and documentary research, we find that these business associations (we focus specifically on "non-local chambers of commerce," or NCCs) lobby for policy change at the local level. They do so using lobbying practices that have been observed in democratic contexts, for example, producing and distributing reports, organizing events to which they invite policy makers, and doing public relations work through the media. But they also adopt different practices, such as their leaders seeking to become local legislators and helping local Communist Party of China (CPC, Party) organizations establish cells in businesses.

We argue based on a study of these private business associations that although authoritarian institutions do not prevent lobbying, they do shape the forms it takes. Private business associations' lobbying activities are influenced by the presence of authoritarian political institutions, such as rigged and uncompetitive elections, the absence of reliable legal institutions through which to ensure a level playing field and defend their members' interests, and restrictions on freedom of speech and movement.

Lobbying and political institutions

How do businesses intervene in the policy process and seek to influence policy? A rich body of research developed predominantly from the study of the national politics of democracies in

North America and Western Europe has identified a wide range of practices often encompassed by the broad term “lobbying.” This research usually distinguishes “inside” and “outside” lobbying. Inside lobbying, sometimes called direct lobbying, is defined as “... close consultation with political and administrative leaders, relying mainly on financial resources, substantive expertise, and concentration within certain congressional constituencies as a basis for influence” (Gais & Walker, 1991: 103). It includes hiring lobbyists (specialist lobbying consultancies) or cultivating relationships with officials or legislators to influence them personally (Jenkins & Mulcahy, 2018); hiring people from government so as to gain access to policy-making networks (Bertrand et al., 2014; Blanes et al., 2012; Schmitter & Streeck, 1999); appearing before legislative committees or providing committees with research or other “expert” input (Jenkins & Mulcahy, 2018); and providing campaign donations to election candidates or political parties (Katzemich, 2018; Kessler, 2018).

Outside, or “indirect,” lobbying practices are aimed at influencing the views of the general public, with the goal of in turn affecting the preferences of legislators. These practices include forming associations with businesses with similar interests and collectively pursuing those shared interests (Transparency International, 2015); using public relations campaigns and media outlets to influence public opinion – for example to build support for their cause or to warn of the damaging effects of a proposed measure (Kollman, 1998; Nyberg, 2021; Thomas & Hrebenar, 2008, 2009); or engaging in protest and demonstrations (Kollman, 1998; Nicoll Victor, 2007).

Research on democracies suggests that interest group type is an important determinant of whether organizations adopt inside or outside lobbying practices (Binderkrantz, 2008; Dür & Mateo, 2013; Gais & Walker, 1991; Maloney et al., 1994). Groups representing diffuse interests in the wider population tend to practice outside lobbying (Binderkrantz, 2008; Gais & Walker, 1991), while specific interest groups tend to use inside approaches (Dür & Mateo, 2013; Lohmann, 1998). Thus, in democracies, at least, business associations, which have specific interests, are likely to adopt “inside” approaches.

Regime theories have portrayed autocracies as having a closed policy-making process that is dominated by a narrow range of elite actors whose policies provide private goods to those on whom they rely for power (Boix & Svulik, 2013; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). In this, autocracies are contrasted with the democracies, whose policies provide public goods to attract voters. Although some work has argued that autocracies based on larger coalitions of support may provide public goods (Bader, 2015; McGuire, 2013; Wurster, 2011), there has little attention in comparative political research to just how non-state actors shape policy processes for example through such practices as lobbying. Autocracies are portrayed simply as having closed processes dominated by leaders with little need to consider voters or other actors outside of the core elite or “selectorate.”

In research on policy making in individual autocracies, by contrast, the tendency has been to challenge their portrayal as simply insulated from societal pressure and to identify the influence of non-state actors and civil society. For China, the first work to argue that policy making was dominated by the (newly rebuilt post-Mao) state bureaucracy (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988) was challenged in 21st-century studies that found evidence of scope for businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to shape the process (e.g., Kennedy, 2005; Mertha, 2009). These studies did acknowledge, however, the still-dominant role of the state, and therefore the need of NGOs and businesses to get close to government if they want to effect change, or benefit from preferential policies.

Although research on lobbying in authoritarian political systems is scarce, for China there has been much attention to the relationship between private business and the state. These studies are

often based on surveys and rich fieldwork in specific localities, consider the activities that businesses or sectoral business associations engage in. They sometimes mention lobbying and discuss the way businesses can be co-opted by the Party-state or “embedded” in the CPC, the state, and official business associations, but they are usually concerned with the question of whether businesses have autonomy from the state, and whether they might want or be able to pose a political challenge to the authoritarian status quo and promote democratization (Chen & Dickson, 2010; Dickson, 2003; Foster, 2002; Nevitt, 1996; Pearson, 1994; Tsai, 2007; Unger, 1996). They therefore focus more on state co-optation rather than on business lobbying. While Tsai (2007) is a notable exception, her thorough study of the relationship between businesses and institutions examines how private businesses’ informal “coping strategies” have sometimes led to institutional change – for example in formal financial institutions – rather than how institutions shape businesses’ lobbying practices.

Research specifically on policy making in China, meanwhile, has been dominated by studies of the national level and has sought more to identify the presence of business interest influence than to analyze the effect of institutions on their activities. Steinberg and Shih (2012) showed how businesses shaped China’s exchange rate policies in the early 21st century. Hui and Chan (2016) explored the influence of overseas business associations on law-making in Guangdong province. Teets (2018) showed how civil society organizations created networks with government officials with the aim of changing environmental policy. Huang and Chen (2020) explored the rising policy influence of private businesses in national economic policy making. Most recently, Jiang and Zhou (2022) have shown how coalitions of state and civil society organizations lobbied on gender issues, while Li and Zhan (2023) have explored the differences among private enterprises lobbying under environmental crackdowns. This work all builds on Kennedy’s (2005) ground-breaking study of China almost two decades ago, which showed that large state enterprises and multinational corporations (MNCs) lobbied national policy makers in China much like their counterparts in democracies – a study in which Kennedy even went so far as to argue that lobbying was shaped by firms’ resources and particular markets, while political institutions were irrelevant. This echoes research in democracies that has sought to identify the extent of business influence in particular countries and policy sectors and has tended to focus on how businesses’ resources, lobbying targets, and policy issue determine lobbying success or failure (Hojnacki & Kimball, 1998, 1999).

Yet, even institutional differences within and between democracies have been shown to affect lobbying activities (Broscheid & Coen, 2003; Coen, 1998; Greenwood, 1997; Hanegraaff et al., 2017; Mahoney, 2008; Woll, 2012). Nicoll Victor’s (2007) study of the United States demonstrated that legislative differences between states affect interest groups’ lobbying tactics. Others have shown the effects of international variation in levels of electoral accountability and insulation (Bouwen, 2004; Coen, 1998; Grande, 1996) and rules concerning the introduction of policy proposals and levels of regulation of lobbying activities (Mahoney, 2007). Woll (2012) argues that as compared with the United States, in European states and the European Union, proportional representation, coalition governments, and multiparty systems stimulate consensual modes of policy making and lead to more consensus-oriented, constructive lobbying that is rooted in long-term relationships and trust among stakeholders. Similarly, Watts (2003) showed that in parliamentary systems like the UK, where the executive is more powerful than the legislature, lobbying tends to focus more on government officials than on legislators, which is not the case in presidential systems. Given the differences found between democracies, it seems unlikely that distinctly authoritarian institutions would have no influence on lobbying practices. And yet, there has been scant attention to the differences in lobbying behavior between democratic and authoritarian political systems.¹

Lobbying at subnational level

In addition to neglecting institutional influences on lobbying, previous research has focused primarily on the impact of lobbying stakeholders on national or supranational policies. This has left a gap in understanding how stakeholder lobbying impacts policies at the subnational level. Despite a substantial body of research on the discretionary power of “street-level bureaucrats” that grew out of Lipsky’s (1980) seminal study, there has been little research on the other side of the coin: how interest groups – and particularly businesses – lobby either subnational bureaucrats or local legislators. Those studies that do exist, moreover, examine democratic contexts and focus more on identifying lobbying than on examining its specific forms and influences. Carey (2017), for example, discusses how local press associations in the United States actively lobbied state legislatures.² Similarly, Givel and Glantz (2001), Goldstein and Bearman (1996), and Morley et al. (2002) reveal that the tobacco industry in the United States lobbied state legislatures. Sørensen (1998) showed local interest groups in Norway lobbying local governments. In a rare account of the nature and specific aims of local lobbying, Solé-Ollé and Viladecans-Marsal (2012) discuss how land developers in Spain lobbied local politicians for building licenses and (citing Hilber & Robert-Nicoud, 2013) for “more general reductions in regulatory stringency” by offering contributions for political campaigns.

Some might question whether it is worth researching local lobbying, particularly in autocratic systems where national governments have considerable power. In centralized political systems like China, there is a tendency to equate local policy processes with policy implementation and assume that there is little scope for lobbying. But in a state as large as the People’s Republic of China – where several of its 31 provinces have larger populations than Europe’s largest nation-state, Germany – single, nation-wide policies may not always be desirable or feasible. Thus, China’s “central” (national) level government formulates overarching national policies that are refined for implementation according to local circumstances at each level of the subnational (“local”) hierarchy below (those levels being province, prefecture, county, and township). Local legislatures and advisory bodies, simulating national-level processes, debate and decide on budgets and refine higher-level policies. Indeed, the central–local policy interactions can sometimes be highly complex (Heilmann, 2008a, 2008b). Leaders in local government and the CPC’s local Party committees can formulate, make decisions on, and implement, policies (Peters & Zhao, 2017), particularly when it comes to matters such as local planning, the local business environment, and the regulation of local communities and social organizations. They can change, retain, or abolish some policies based on policy evaluations.

Sources and methods

Our study focuses on an understudied type of business association, one that is organized by private businesses from outside of the city in which they operate and referred to in China as a “non-local chamber of commerce” (NCCs).³ Non-local businesses, because their owners are not locals, do not have the contacts with local elites that are more readily available to local businesses. Moreover, as we discuss below, they may be subject to discrimination because their leaders and employees are “outsiders” and so ineligible for some locally provided public goods.

We examine the lobbying activities of NCCs in the northern city of Tianjin. Tianjin is only one of four provincial-level municipalities in China, and it has almost 15 million residents. Its economy is dominated by state actors, and its private sector is less well developed than

in the south of the country.⁴ It is considered to have a conservative political and economic culture as compared with prosperous southern provinces and cities. Tianjin had 34 NCCs by 2017 (Tianjin Cooperation and Exchange Office Website, 2017), a small number compared for example with Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province, which had 62 in 2016, and Shanghai, which had 169 by 2020 (CNR News Zhejiang Channel, 2017; Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau Website, 2020).

This study is based on in-depth fieldwork, including interviews with the leaders and staff of business associations and participant observation by the lead author in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin. The lead author conducted three fieldwork trips to Tianjin, from June–July 2011, March–June 2012, and in July 2013, while in Tianjin, she conducted a total of 49 interviews with more than 50 interviewees over the three fieldwork trips. She also conducted participant observation in Tianjin Southland NCC for 2 weeks and Tianjin Northland NCC for 1 week in 2012.⁵ Her interviewees include officials in Tianjin Economic Cooperation Office, Tianjin Civil Affairs Bureau, Tianjin Commercial Committee, and in district-level government departments, officials working in the liaison office of Southland, Eastland, Westland, scholars in universities and research institutes, presidents and secretary-generals of NCCs as well as their NCC staff, the directors, and representatives of NCCs' member enterprises.

In addition to fieldwork, our study also draws extensively on analysis of the internal reports, work logs, associations' official websites, and newspaper, magazine, and online news reports. Using our definition of lobbying and list of exemplar practices derived from research on the study of democracies (both set out above), we analyzed these sources alongside interview transcripts and fieldwork to identify the range of lobbying behavior practiced by the business associations we studied. We tried to match these with a list of lobbying practices identified in lobbying research on democracies. Where we found either an absence of a particular practice, or the presence of practices not previously identified in democratic settings, we drew on research about Chinese political institutions to reflect on and theorize the institutional reasons for those differences.

Non-local chambers of commerce: An introduction

NCCs are a form of business association, established in a particular location, whose corporate members originate from a different part of China. For example, the “Wenzhou Chamber of Commerce in Tianjin” was established in Tianjin by entrepreneurs from Wenzhou, a prefecture-level city in Zhejiang province. NCCs are bottom-up initiatives of private-sector businesspeople who typically do not have strong connections to the local government in the place where their businesses are operating. By the end of 2016, more than 10,000 NCCs were registered across China (Wu & Zhang, 2021). Most of them represent the businesses of another province, but NCCs can also represent the private businesses of a particular prefecture (for example, the number of Wenzhou NCCs in China reached 245 by 2013) or even of a county.

NCCs' development in China can be attributed to the emergence of the private sector after China began market-oriented “reform and opening up” in late 1970s. Particularly from the late 1980s, when China's private economy began to grow rapidly, more and more private capital began to flow between regions, and rising numbers of businesspeople – referred to as “non-local businesspeople” – relocated outside their hometowns to do business. Then, from the mid-1990s, non-local businessmen began to set up their own organizations because, as the “non-local” label indicates, locality is an important identification for citizens in China, in large part because of the “household registration”

(*hukou* in Chinese) system, under which each person is registered. If a person has a *hukou* in the city where she lives, she will be identified as “local,” while she would be identified as “non-local” if she does not have it. The effects of *hukou* on non-local businesspeople are significant, as it affects their access to local business information and opportunities, local public services provision like medical care or schooling for their children, or even rights to purchase property.

NCCs differ significantly from many other business associations in their engagement with the Chinese political system because they are bottom-up, grassroots organizations. After “reform and opening up” began in late 1970s, Chinese society was gradually liberalized as strict state controls were relaxed, and business associations began to emerge. These business associations (for example, industrial associations and self-employed laborers’ associations) were normally sectorally and locally organized, and inextricably linked with the government in a top-down way. Indeed, some of them are best seen as government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). For example, industrial associations (such as Tianjin Communication Industry Association and Tianjin SME association) are linked with business-related government agencies that formally “supervise” them, and other business associations are closely connected to their local Industry and Commerce Federation (ICF).

In contrast, NCCs are doubly excluded from local politics because they are not only organized by place of (non-local) origin (rather than by sector) but are also genuinely “bottom-up” and so have no institutionalized channels to engage with the government (Yu, 2006). As Chen and Dickson (2010, 51) have pointed out, members of bottom-up associations are particularly disadvantaged as system outsiders (“*tizhiwai*”) compared with elite businesses that are members of official business associations. Yet, China’s rapid economic transition has brought many political and administrative uncertainties to businesses, especially to private businesses that until the 1980s had a pariah status in China’s communist political system (Guthrie, 1997). Thus, NCCs are strongly motivated to try and influence policies in line with the business interests of their corporate members, where they act like an interest group. At the same time, they come under pressure to pursue the interests of those corporate members’ non-local owners, families, and employees when it comes to social issues like social welfare, where they regard themselves as a vulnerable group fighting for the same treatment as local residents and so act like grassroots NGOs.⁶ NCCs thus have more diffuse interests than sectoral business associations.

How NCCs try to influence policies through local lobbying practices

NCCs’ efforts to influence local policies vary substantially (Wang, 2017), and they have adopted different lobbying strategies and tactics. Their lobbying includes both inside and outside practices, some of which resemble those that previous research has identified in democracies (see above), though often with some differences in the detail. The inside practices we identified were acquiring positions on local legislative bodies, providing expertise for local policy making, cultivating relations with local officials, and hiring retired officials. Outside practices we identified included forming associations with like-minded organizations, using media and profile-raising strategies, and acquiring positions on local advisory bodies and GONGOs. We also found some practices, which sit in between inside and outside lobbying: brokering deals between local governments and businesses.⁷ Below, we discuss these types of activity conducted by NCCs in Tianjin, relating it to the similarities and differences with their counterparts in democracies (for a summary, see Table 1).

TABLE 1 A summary of NCCs' lobbying activities.

Lobbying types	Lobbying activities
Inside practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquiring positions on local legislative bodies • providing expertise for local policy making • cultivating relations with local officials • hiring retired officials
Brokering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helping local governments and businesses to make investment deals
Outside practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forming associations with like-minded organizations • using media and profile-raising strategies • acquiring positions on local advisory bodies and GONGOs

Acquiring positions on local legislative bodies

Unlike in democracies, where businesses often lobby legislators, Tianjin NCC leaders and private entrepreneurs sought positions for themselves in their local legislature (called the local “People’s Congress,” hereafter PC) with the aims of improving their status, raising their profile, and getting opportunities to develop local official networks.⁸ For example, Eastland NCC’s entrepreneurs were active in acquiring the positions of deputies in Tianjin’s People’s Congress and even in the National People’s Congress (NPC). Eastland merchants had been the earliest non-local business group in Tianjin, having started to arrive in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and most of them had successful businesses by 2000. They then showed an interest in local politics and tried to acquire political status through their membership of the local PC. At the time of conducting fieldwork, the executive president and secretary-general of Eastland NCC served as members of the local PC. Although there are multi-candidate “elections” to provincial and prefecture-level PCs in China, representatives are not directly elected by citizens, but rather by the PC at the level below. For example, provincial PC deputies are elected by prefecture-level PCs, and prefecture PC deputies are elected by county PCs (The NPC Website, 2020).⁹ These elections do not involve competition among political parties and do not attract much public attention, and they are not transparent to the public. Leaders or entrepreneurs in NCCs can use their networks with businesses and local officials to get the necessary nominations¹⁰ for PC candidature and to get elected. Being a PC deputy, though not conventionally regarded as lobbying, is an effective way to get access to policymakers. As one NCC entrepreneur put it: “... I would not have the chance to sit beside the same table with key official figures and talk with them if I were not representative [of local PC] ...” (CMX, 20120517). Although the Chinese Party-state proactively uses these positions to co-opt private entrepreneurs (Dickson, 2000, 2007; Truex, 2016), they do create spaces for entrepreneurs to collectively or individually submit proposals to PC annual sessions, and they have been linked to significantly improving corporate performance (Truex, 2014).

Providing expertise for local policy making

Like business organizations in democracies, NCCs often provided expertise to local policy makers as a way of influencing policies. They provided this expertise based on their knowledge of business and economic policies and the conditions experienced by local private-sector businesses locally, in their place of origin, and nationally. They conducted surveys among member enterprises and provided survey data to local policy makers. In one case, Eastland NCC specifically

sought to influence evaluation of the so-called “Blue Seal Policy” relating to household registration rules, which had been in place since 1994 in Tianjin.¹¹ It conducted a survey among its members on this specific policy and submitted a research report that systematically analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of retaining this policy from the perspective of non-local investors and entrepreneurs. The research report was finally submitted to local bureaus like Land Resources and Housing Bureau, Public Security Bureau, Economic Cooperation Bureau, and Civil Affairs Bureau, in the name of “providing consulting information for future policy making” (Interview with ZL, Eastland NCC, 20120719).

Cultivating relations with local officials

NCCs cultivate relations with local officials, but in ways rather different from business organizations in democracies – by assisting a diffuse range of officials with a wide range of their work. Some NCCs even reported that most of their attention and work was invested in assisting local governments and Communist Party organizations with the aim of establishing close links with local officials. As one NCC leader articulated it:

... this organization had nothing – no money, no staff, and no office. But I knew, that to move this organization forward, I had to build a good relationship with local government and Party committees. How to achieve that? As with our member enterprises, we can only get trust if we tackle practical problems for them. This also works for the local officials. We needed to do something to get recognition from them. (Interview with ZSL, Northland NCC, 20110617)

NCCs reported that they helped local officials in two different ways. First, they focused on providing logistical support for the local government, such as assisting with the reception of higher-level officials' visits and helping local officials to organize meetings with private enterprise directors. For example, when the governors of Westland province officially visited Tianjin, Westland NCC was involved in reception work, providing transportation, catering, and helping to convene meetings between governors and local private-sector businesses.

In a second approach to cultivating relations, NCCs built up links with local officialdom through grassroots “Party-building” practices – that is helping to set up Communist Party organizations within member businesses and civil society organizations.¹² For example, Northland NCC worked closely with local Communist Party departments and promote grassroots Party building within NCCs and their membership enterprises, for which it was rewarded with national and municipal awards. As one interviewee explained:

We are the first NCC ever in China who has innovated the method of establishing Party cells in private enterprises, and we have already had more than 30 Party cells among our member enterprises. At the beginning, there were no rules to follow, but we created effective principles and rules... We were awarded the ‘excellent social organization’ title by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, [and] other NCCs have started to visit and learn from us. (Interview with GSP, Northland NCC, 20110612)

When we did our fieldwork in Tianjin, Party building in private businesses was in its early stages, so it was not yet an established channel of influence. But grassroots Party-building practices in

recent years have extended in scale and enhanced in intensity, and recent research indicates that Party building in NGOs has increased their levels of government funding (Wang & Wang, 2023), while the adaptive Party-building campaign within NGOs since 2012 enabled NGOs to use Party building as a tool for their own advantage and development (Nie & Wu, 2022; Xin & Huang, 2022). Though we do not have first-hand evidence of the outcomes, the recent literature does indicate that the Party-building practices in NCCs might create new opportunities and space for lobbying, just as it does create another channel for NCCs to use strategically.

Cultivating relations with public officials is a long-term strategy for NCCs. Rather than lobbying over a specific policy or influencing policy implementation, they aim to establish close relations with the local Party-state leadership, which may be used later to help win support on specific policies or issues. As this shows, some dimensions of the relationships between business associations and the local Party-state that may be both deep and hidden from view, making the local policy process opaque and difficult to observe or research. We have thus not been able to identify specifically the influence that these NCCs might exert as insiders, for example, via consultation or regular meetings with government and Party officials or agencies.

Hiring retired officials

Although we did not find the “revolving door” that exists in democratic contexts, we did find that some NCCs appointed retired government or GONGO officials to positions in their organizations to get access and build links with local officialdom. Northland NCC developed a strategy of hiring retired Tianjin officials to be its president. The first president for Northland NCC in 1997 was a previous member of Tianjin Municipal Party Standing Committee, and the second president was the former head of the Transportation and Industry Committee, with a very high official rank in the municipal Party committee. The third was the previous deputy chief of one of Tianjin's six urban districts and considered to have very good networks. He had been awarded the title of “national model worker” in 1980s and has been granted meetings with top leaders Deng Xiaoping (in 1986) and Jiang Zemin (in 1990). The NCCs with retired officials as presidents or secretary-general appeared to be more skillful in working with the local bureaucracy because they understood better the needs of the local state.

Brokering

“Brokering” is a lobbying practice particularly suited to NCCs due to their connections back to their localities of origin. In China, local officials are under great pressure to grow their local economy and attract investment. NCCs are well placed to help these officials secure investment by acting as brokers between them and businesses from their home locality. For example, Southland NCC brokered investment in Tianjin by Blue Electric Appliances Inc (BEA),¹³ a Chinese major appliance manufacturer headquartered in Southland province.¹⁴ In the process of choosing a new plant location in Tianjin, BEA wanted the best land use price deal and other preferential policies, but it had limited knowledge and limited contacts in Tianjin's district-level governments. BEA therefore delegated Tianjin Southland NCC to find a location for its production headquarter in North China. Southland NCC first held informal meetings with both BEA and officials in one Tianjin district government. It then liaised with the commerce departments in Southland Government and Southland government's liaison office in Tianjin and to get their support. After

these preliminary investigations, Southland NCC then shortlisted the best two choices for BEA. It subsequently accompanied the BEA decision-makers on field investigations and arranged formal meetings with district government departments. In the decision-making process, Southland NCC exerted substantial influence over the final deal between the enterprise and local government. Southland NCC's strong connections with businesses in Tianjin helped it gather information for the final negotiation process, while its independent status made it an effective negotiator, so that it was able to help BEA find a production location on very favorable terms, in part by getting local governments to waive policies on the charging of land use fees. It also helped negotiate reduced BEA employees' social insurance contributions and an increase in the district government's share of contributions, both of which were within the local government's discretionary power.

NCCs' brokering can be considered as a survival strategy in the local context of an authoritarian system. NCCs found a niche in meeting the needs of local governments and businesses with practices that sit between inside and outside lobbying. As one Southland NCC interviewee noted, "We want to be close to the government, but away from politics" (WJS, Southland NCC, 20120522). This indicated that he wanted to keep the good relationship with local government but avoid being involved in political propaganda, Party building or assisting government with their routine work, as other NCCs did in cultivating relations with local officials.

Forming associations with like-minded organizations

Like business organizations in democracies, NCCs formed local and national networks with like-minded and interest-sharing organizations. But the nature of their networks was strongly influenced by restrictions on freedom of movement created by the institutions of the *hukou* system. Locally, they formed a federation of NCCs in Tianjin, and nationally, they had a strong network with NCCs from the same original locality and a much smaller network with NCCs from other localities. These networks enabled NCCs to acquire up-to-date business information on economic policies, which became an invaluable asset in local lobbying practices. For example, when Eastland NCC tried to lobby for the "Blue Seal Policy," it sent the draft report to other NCCs in Tianjin to acquire support and endorsement. These NCCs are within its local network. Moreover, Eastland provincial government also organized biennial networking events for Eastland NCCs operating in different localities in and beyond China, where relationships based on hometown connections facilitate the exchange of business information and brokering.

Using media and profile-raising strategies

Tianjin NCCs also engaged in a vast range of social activities aimed at raising their profile – acting much the same as interest groups in democracies. Their activities spanned using the media, symbolic and educational events, and philanthropy. For example, when lobbying over the Blue Seal Policy, Eastland NCC organized a workshop among member enterprises to discuss the issues and invited local journalists to attend and report on the event. Its own public relations office also coordinated the media coverage (Interview with SWP, Eastland NCC, 20120627).

NCCs also developed good relationships with the media so as to raise their profiles and promote a positive image as part of their public relations strategies. NCC member enterprises frequently used local media to advertise their products, so they developed good relationships with local journalists and often invited them to write positive stories about their charitable activities and

that of their member enterprises. Some NCCs even edited and published their own semi-public journals to disseminate across their membership and other local business organizations. Tianjin Southland NCC had its own journal and used it to report on entrepreneurs in their organization. It also wrote cover stories for its president (a prominent entrepreneur in one of its membership enterprises) in popular business journals.

Symbolic anniversary celebration events were particularly useful opportunities for profile-raising and network development, because NCCs could invite prominent private entrepreneurs, local and non-local officials, and other NCCs in their local and national networks. When Southland NCC celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2012, it invited almost 500 guests from Tianjin and across the country. According to the secretary-general of Southland NCC, this celebration was brand-building for the organization, and he said that “we can save budgets on other things but not on this.”

Examples of educational and philanthropic activities include Southland NCC inviting prominent economists to hold public lectures and roundtable discussion on popular economic issues, and several NCCs assisting impoverished students, especially those from their original provinces. Half of the NCCs in Tianjin set up bursaries in universities. We also found evidence of similar practices by NCCs based in other major cities. In Beijing, some NCCs provided bursaries, internships, and jobs for university students (Annual report on the development of China's Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

Acquiring positions on local advisory bodies and GONGOS

NCC leaders also sought to raise their profile, extend their networks, and raise their political status through positions in advisory local “Political Consultative Conferences” (PCCs), the Communist Party's “United Front” departments and related bodies,¹⁵ and GONGOS like the ICF, the Communist Youth League, and other political parties (Interview with LLG, Eastland NCC, 20120628).¹⁶ The president of Eastland NCC held simultaneously the position of representative in national PCC and vice president of Tianjin ICF. Eastland NCC emphasized the political status of its leadership and encouraged prominent entrepreneurs to acquire positions in local advisory bodies. Among its leadership, one was a representative on the national PCC and three were representatives on the Tianjin PCC Standing Committee. The executive president of Eastland NCC served as the member of National Youth Committee and the vice president of Tianjin Youth Federation. Prior to this job, she held posts in several GONGOS. For example, she served as the member of National Youth Committee, as the vice president of Tianjin Youth Federation, and as a member of the Democratic National Construction Association in Tianjin.

Activities across our three categories vary in frequency. In our fieldwork, we found conventional direct lobbying to be a less frequent activity than the second and third types of lobbying. Indirect lobbying and brokering form part of NCCs' daily, routine work. Different NCCs do different things, so it is difficult to quantify comparably how often NCCs engage in different types of lobbying. But for example, Eastland's lobbying over the Blue Seal Policy was a unique activity for them, and more often they provided business and industry information for local policy making, helped with receiving visits of Eastland officials to Tianjin or vice versa, and organized regular meetings for local officials to meet enterprise representatives or participate in the meetings and workshops organized by the local ICF. Some NCCs conducted surveys of their member enterprises annually. Assisting with Party building and government work – such as official visiting – is part of their routine job and is integrated into their organizational tasks.

It is difficult to evaluate the success of NCCs' lobbying activities because it is by nature diffuse. For both lobbying and brokering, some NCCs liked to talk about their successes rather than their failures, some NCCs did not want to mention any cases they challenged the local Party-state; most of NCCs did not use the term "lobbying," but rather to emphasize their role in local governance and their "partnership" with governments in prospering local economy.

What did government officials think about the lobbying behavior of the NCCs? Early literature in China suggested that local governments facilitated the development of NCCs because it helped them pursue economic growth, which was a key performance indicator for them (Leng & Zhang, 2004; Zhou, 2021). Indeed, local government commerce departments in both host and native localities had a budget line to pay NCCs for their brokering activities. In interviews in 2011–2013, we still found local governments recognizing NCCs roles in contributing to economic growth, but we also noted a shift toward using them for social control. For example, an official in the Tianjin Economic Cooperation Office said: "NCCs in Tianjin have contributed a lot to local economic and social development through investment promotion, boosting the private economy, and helping non-local residents to integrate locally. Most importantly, they helped as bridge between the local government departments and private enterprises, helped to implement policies in private enterprises and brought the concerns of private enterprises up to relevant local departments" (ZJ, 20130710). During one local official's visit to Tianjin Northland NCC, he made a speech about the role of NCCs and their grassroots Party cells in resolving conflicts between employers and employees, thus "maintaining the stability" of the private sector (ZSL, 20110617). This indicates the tendency for the local Party-state to nurture NCCs as new vehicles for social management and control, for example, letting them intervene in labor disputes and build grassroots Party cells to organize and control Party members working across the private sector.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: HOW INSTITUTIONS MATTER FOR BUSINESS LOBBYING PRACTICES

NCCs' inside and outside lobbying in some ways resembles that of businesses and business interest groups in democracies: their inside lobbying includes providing officials and governments with research and expertise, and cultivating relationships with officials, while their outside lobbying involves trying to influence public opinion through public relations and media campaigns and reputation building through charitable work. Similarly, NCCs, as a specific type of (business) interest group, like business interest groups in democracies, engage more in inside than outside lobbying. But their non-local origins mean that they also represent their members over social as well as business issues, where they practice more outside lobbying.

Yet, NCCs' lobbying behavior, and particularly their inside practices, is different in some important ways that are clearly due to autocratic institutions, notably rigged, uncompetitive elections, and the absence of reliable legal institutions through which NCCs can defend their members' interests. First, they do not engage at all in some practices common to democratic political systems, such as donating to political campaigns, seeking to directly cultivate relations with legislators or hiring lobbyists. Since China does not hold competitive elections, political campaigns are non-existent and the practice of making donations to those campaigns or to political parties is absent. Since legislatures are weak as compared with the executive, local legislators lack significant influence, and NCCs target their lobbying at government officials. And because there is no legislation on lobbying in China, lobbying is not recognized as an activity in Chinese

civil and political life, independent lobby firms do not exist, and hiring lobbyists is not an established practice.

Second, some superficially similar practices differ in detail, again due to institutional differences. For example, in China there is no “revolving door,” with officials moving into interest group work and then back into government, because access to government jobs is highly controlled by the CPC and requires a long track record in office. But NCCs were able to appoint retired officials in a one-way rather than revolving door practice aimed at building relationships with government and acquiring knowledge about how government works.

NCCs’ media strategies were also different in the detail. In democracies, business organizations could make public endorsements of political candidates likely to favor them and try to get positive media reporting of their corporate social responsibility activities. But NCCs were able to work with local journalists and the media to create a positive image, showcasing their local contributions to economy and society while adopting a posture of loyalty vis-à-vis local authorities. This was facilitated by journalists and news media accustomed to censorship restrictions and hence to reporting positive stories about government and business rather than uncovering problems (Tang, 2012).

Finally, some practices are quite different. For example, acquiring positions in local legislatures is a very different approach from that of interest groups in democracies. Though occasionally NCCs’ local PC or PCC deputies individually or jointly made proposals in local PC or PCC meetings, their influence as legislators (or as advisors) was very restricted, and the influence they could exert was more through the relationships these roles helped develop with local officials. Acquiring positions as local or even national legislators is much easier in China’s relatively uncompetitive legislative elections and requires less investment of time, since the legislature sits only for about 2 weeks per year. These types of positions, like positions on advisory bodies and GONGOs and inside practices generally, are attractive because they enable NCCs to develop personal “*guanxi*” networks that work to provide security in the absence of a reliable legal system (Xin & Pearce, 2017). In part for this reason, we find that NCCs focus significant effort on their inside practices. In China’s one-Party political system, the CPC dominates most walks of political life, so NCCs make great effort to support it and implement the grassroots Party building within their groups and membership enterprises, showing their loyalty and reliability.

Among the lobbying practices mentioned above, there are some forms – notably brokering – that fall between the inside and outside lobbying identified in democracies. NCCs that adopted brokering practices were not so interested in building close relationships with local officials, but neither did they engage in outside strategies to exert public pressure. They were not aiming to change policies or shape policy decisions but focused their efforts on securing exemptions or preferential policies within the discretionary power of local governments on behalf of third-party businesses. This was a practical strategy to that would attract more members and increase membership revenues so as to have more resources for lobbying on other issues. But it was driven overall by a need to build knowledge and networks to reduce insecurity due to poor legal protections.

Our study thus makes a theoretical contribution by showing how authoritarian political institutions shape lobbying behavior, leading NCCs to focus more on inside lobbying and relationship building than in democracies, and to spend significant time and effort on these activities. Our study also makes an empirical contribution through its account of NCCs and their local lobbying

practices in China. But this is only a study of NCCs in one city in the northern city of Tianjin, so can our findings be generalized to other types of business associations and the rest of China, let alone to other authoritarian political systems?

First, we suggest that NCCs, as non-local associations, are more autonomous of host local governments than local, sectorally organized business associations, so that they need to spend more time and effort cultivating informal relationships with officials. Indeed, Huang and Chen (2020) have shown that local, sectoral business associations tend to use formal channels through the ICF to influence proposals to CPPCC rather than working informally. And as we have shown above, NCCs lobbying extended beyond business policies to wider social policies affecting their members' employees and families. This may lead NCCs to do more outside lobbying than local associations, and overall to do more inside and outside lobbying than local associations. The previous neglect of NCCs in research on business associations may therefore explain why local lobbying has not often been identified and studied at the local level in China.

Second, we expect that, given the same national political institutional context, NCC lobbying activities we identified in Tianjin are likely in other parts of China. However, Tianjin's relatively weak private business sector, and its strong, interventionist state, may make it more difficult for NCCs to operate independently of the state in Tianjin. They therefore may be more likely to adopt insider lobbying approaches than their counterparts elsewhere.¹⁷ However, this is only a matter of degree, and given the Party-state's tightening grip under Xi Jinping's leadership since 2012 (Pearson et al., 2022), the tendency to focus on insider practices is likely to have increased nation-wide.

Finally, can our findings on China be generalized to other authoritarian political systems? China's particular brand of one-Party rule by a Leninist political party, with highly controlled elections, a very weak legislature, and strong media controls is quite different from that of hybrid regimes or theocracies. Some of the lobbying practices we found there, such as helping with "Party-building" or overcoming *hukou*-type mobility restrictions, are therefore more likely in other communist one-party political systems than in other kinds of autocracies. But while the Chinese authorities' ability to control elections and the media, and to dominate economic activity, is greater than that of many other regimes, we expect that even in those where elections are more competitive, if the legal system is weak and government officials can powerfully regulate and control access to markets and economic opportunities, extensive insider lobbying of officials in the executive is similarly likely.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was financially supported by the University of Glasgow's School of Social and Political Sciences PhD fieldwork fund.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Although Jenkins and Mulcahy (2018), in a report published by Transparency International, suggest some differences, these are not based on empirical evidence.

² Carey cites Oliver (1990), Drope and Hanson (2009), and Walker and Rea (2014).

- ³ There has been a small number of studies of NCCs (in Chinese, “*yidi shanghui*”) published in Chinese (Chen et al., 2004; Jiang, 2008; Yu, 2004, 2006). These compare NCCs with other types of business associations in China rather than analyze their lobbying activities.
- ⁴ The private sector contributed 37% to GDP growth in Tianjin in 2022, significantly less than the 65% in Zhejiang Province and 55% in Guangdong Province (National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletin, 2022).
- ⁵ Note that “Southland”, “Northland” like “Eastland” and “Westland” discussed below, are all pseudonyms used to protect the identity of interviewees.
- ⁶ At the time of our research, NCCs, like other non-governmental associations, were regulated by the state under the “dual management system,” which means they needed to be officially sponsored by a professional management organization, normally the local Economic and Cooperation Office, and to register with the Civil Affairs department at the county level or above. NCCs’ registration is governed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which in 2003 issued “Opinions Concerning Problems Relating to the Registration of Non-local Chambers of Commerce” (Guanyu yidi shanghui dengji youguan wenti de yijian).
- ⁷ Some of these practices have been identified in previous studies of state and business relations and practices in China (e.g., Yang, 2002), but often from the perspective of how the state co-opts businesses into legislative positions, rather than how businesses – particularly “outsider” business associations like NCCs – seek to influence policy (see, e.g., Chen & Dickson, 2010; Tsai, 2007).
- ⁸ Although local PCs have long been dismissed as “rubber stamp” institutions that have no real decision-making power, recent research has shown a more complex picture (Chen & Dickson, 2010; Manion, 2014; Truex, 2014).
- ⁹ County and township PCs are directly elected by citizens who have rights to vote, though citizens have weak influence on candidate nominations.
- ¹⁰ Candidates for local PC elections are usually nominated by constituencies or electoral units. They can also be nominated by political parties (in China, there are eight political parties in addition to the CPC, though none of them competes for office), GONGOs, or a group of 10 citizens (but independent candidates nominated by citizens have very little chance to win PC elections).
- ¹¹ The “Blue Seal Policy” provided accelerated permanent residency to non-local entrepreneurs with significant investment in Tianjin, and people who purchased properties in certain districts of Tianjin (Interview with ZL, Eastland NCC). Blue Seal Household Registration holders could apply for the permanent residency in the city after 2 years, something that was otherwise very difficult to do.
- ¹² This practice responded to a “Party-building” campaign within business association and civil society organizations (see, e.g., Thornton, 2013).
- ¹³ This is a pseudonym.
- ¹⁴ In 2009, it was the world’s largest residential air-conditioner manufacturer, and in 2012, its revenues reached 100 billion RMB.
- ¹⁵ United Front Work Departments are agencies under the command of the CPC. Their main function is to manage relations with the non-Communist Party elite, including individuals and organizations with social, commercial, or academic influence, or who represent important interest groups, both inside and outside China. In so doing, these departments seek to ensure that these groups are supportive of and useful to Communist Party rule. United Front Work Departments are present at different levels in China’s multilevel governance hierarchy.
- ¹⁶ China has eight political parties in addition to the Communist Party, but they do not contest elections or challenge the leadership of the CPC.
- ¹⁷ The lead author conducted a small number of interviews with NCCs in Zhejiang. While not sufficient to be conclusive, they indicated that because the private sector dominated the local economy there, the local government there had created more formal institutional channels for NCCs to influence policy. They also indicated that NCCs there used outside lobbying practices more than in Tianjin. But practices in Zhejiang otherwise resembled those in Tianjin.

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How to cite this article: Wang, H., & Duckett, J. (2023). Local lobbying in single-party authoritarian systems: Do institutions matter? *Review of Policy Research*, 00, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12582>