

How the Internet is Empowering Legal Pushback Against Authoritarians: A Big Data Approach in China

This is a preliminary draft, please do not circulate

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After the onset of the Arab Spring, commentators around the world remarked on how the Internet sped the downfall of autocratic regimes. Nasrin Alavi spoke for many, noting that “[c]yber-technology can diminish a dictator’s monopoly of ‘truth.’ The footage of senseless carnage disseminated online...makes clear that noble Arab governments’ (or caliphs’) talk of ‘justice, truth and equality’ is a sham. In this new age of higher conciseness, the cyberactive “third eye” also holds power accountable” Hayes, “The Arab Spring.” Zuckerman, “Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism.” On the other hand, some scholars have dismissed the Internet as merely a place to view videos of cats and share amusing images, not as a significant agent of change in autocracies.¹

Whether the Internet has been a game changer for those resisting autocrats continues to be debated. Yet, both the popular and scholarly discussion tends to have a relatively narrow focus, principally aimed at protest, the development of civil society, and elections. While these are some of the most important venues for contentious politics, in many regimes, especially more restrictive ones, other venues can be as or more important for challenging the state. Indeed, in the contemporary People’s Republic of China legal challenges to the state are such an important venue for challenging the state, that many of China’s most prominent rights’ lawyers have been among the most notable targets of state repression.²

Raising Consciousness

The idea that average Chinese are increasingly aware of rights, laws, and rules that prompt them to challenge authoritarian overreach has become a major theme in the study of Chinese politics and law over the last two decades. This overarching idea comes in several different theoretical versions and is used to describe a wide variety of empirical phenomenon.

At its broadest, the concept falls under the banner of rights consciousness, in which individuals are aware of laws and legal norms that they mobilize to contest any party, including the state, that may infringe on them.³ This is often contrasted with the narrower category of rule consciousness “in which savvy protesters frame their grievances in officially approved terms in order to negotiate a better bargain with the authoritarian state.”⁴ Located perhaps somewhere in-between is the concept of rightful resistance, which is defined as: “a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public.”⁵ Another iteration, perhaps most relevant here, is legal consciousness, a type of rights or rule consciousness that is more specifically focused on the law and legal institutions.⁶

What all these concepts have in common is the need for the citizens to have some knowledge of the rules, regulations, laws and rights on which their claims are based.

¹ Aouragh and Alexander, “The Arab Spring| The Egyptian Experience”; Zuckerman, “Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism”; Scheufele and Nisbet, “Being a Citizen Online New Opportunities and Dead Ends”; Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*.

² Avenue, York, and t 1.212.290.4700, “China.”

³ Wong, “Chinese Migrant Workers”; Lee, *Against the Law*; Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen*, 201–23.

⁴ Perry, “A New Rights Consciousness?,” 20.

⁵ O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, 2.

⁶ Gallagher, “Mobilizing the Law in China.”

Admittedly, their understanding of these rules need not always be particularly well founded. In certain type of rightful resistance, for example, protestors make claims on rules, laws, and rights that are more imagined than real.⁷ Nevertheless, the ability to consult laws, rules, and regulations, as well as to do further research into their meaning and application is closely linked to all the ideas described in this section. O'Brien and Li vividly illustrate the importance of being able to access information on laws and regulations:

"They [local officials] sometimes even block the local populace's access to official documents and regulations. When a county government, for instance, began distributing some pamphlets and books, township leaders ordered that no materials related to legal education be made available because 'as soon as ordinary people learn anything about the law then they become impossible to govern.'"⁸

In theory, the Internet should render impracticable these types of efforts to keep average Chinese from gaining access to basic information about laws, polices, and regulations, making nearly everyone “impossible to govern.” China’s most popular legal site, china.findlaw.cn, for example, provides free instant access to tens of thousands of laws and regulations (法规). These are organized by categories relevant to many of the most important fields of social, legal, political, and economic contention in the contemporary PRC; the site contains 643 laws and regulations on housing demolition and relocation, 868 on criminal defence, and 1,101 on labor, to name just a few. The laws themselves are just the tip of the iceberg, as the websites also features lawyer’s answers to questions, as well as cases, commentary, and explanations of laws. This makes an incredible wealth of legal information available to anyone with access to an online computer, data enabled smartphone, or Internet café. This information can also easily be printed and circulated in hard copy.

The Internet’s contribution to rights consciousness may go far beyond simple access to information and actually lead to an increase in overall levels of legal, rights, and/or rules consciousness. Individuals searching for basic legal information may be inspired to defend their rights more aggressively as they learn what more drastic steps are possible. Because people post questions and receive answers on legal websites, they are often encouraged by lawyers, or by reading about others who have successfully pursued grievances. What was true in the pre-online era, Ian Johnson tells of a single anti-tax suit in the late 1990s in Shanxi sparking similar efforts in nearby villages,⁹ should become much more prominent. Microblogs, videos-sharing sites, and social media are full of success stories of residents who manage to increase their compensation by refusing to leave a house that construction has left surrounded by a giant pit¹⁰ or in the middle of a

⁷ O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, 128.

⁸ O'Brien and Li, “Suing the Local State,” 78.

⁹ Johnson, *Wild Grass*, 21.

¹⁰ French, “In China, Fight Over Development Creates a Star.”

highway.¹¹ Other publicized instances have involved the use of homemade rocket launchers¹² or Kung Fu¹³ to fend off developer's thugs, not to mention more mundane tactics such as petitions and litigation. It would be surprising; therefore, if spreading access to the Internet was not also spreading the inspiration and information that would lead to contention.

Empowering Legal Representation

In 2010, I was interviewing a lawyer in the Chinese coastal city of Ningbo about his extensive experience suing the Chinese state. When I asked about how walk-in clients found him, he initially responded: "They find me on the internet." Yet, almost immediately, he thought better of his response: "They just see my sign."¹⁴

This lawyer was an experienced administrative litigator who had taken around 35 administrative cases in his career and had represented government departments and third parties, as well as plaintiffs who were suing the state. This experience made him extremely valuable to potential clients seeking representation in disputes against the state, especially considering that most Chinese lawyers have almost no knowledge of administrative cases and even less experience. Indeed, plaintiffs can find it difficult to find representation in such cases as most Chinese lawyers, lacking experience with administrative litigation, maintain an overly pessimistic opinion of administrative cases and are reluctant to take them on.¹⁵ This lawyer had clearly expected the Internet to empower his clients by connecting them to a vital resource, a litigator experienced in and willing to sue the Chinese state, and yet upon reflection he realized that it was not serving that function.

In 2009, over 80% of Chinese lawyers surveyed reported that they found few if any of their clients online.¹⁶ Yet over the last few years, it has become incredibly easy to find and consult legal professionals on the Internet in China. Lawtime.cn, one of China's most popular legal websites, claims to have registered over 175,000 of China's 200,000 or so registered lawyers. This is an impressive accomplishment, even though many of the lawyers are not active, some profiles are out of date, and the numbers are somewhat inflated. Even more impressively, the site claims to have connected over 15.8 million legal consultations.¹⁷ Close competitor 66Law.cn claims to have answered a further 10.8 million legal questions and "resolved" upwards of 4.5 million legal issues and findlaw.cn reports that it has already resolved over 21 million legal consultations.

Not all of these legal consultations are useful or meaningful. Lawyers' answers to legal queries tend to be curt; a recent question about salary arrears (Screenshot 1), a serious and ongoing problem in the PRC,¹⁸ elicited two answers on 66law.cn: "follow legal procedures (走法律程序)" and "apply for labor arbitration (申请劳动仲裁)".¹⁹ In

¹¹ Moore, "Chinese Home Surrounded by Highway Demolished."

¹² Zhang Han, "Wuhan Farmer Signs an Agreement"; "Wuhan Farmer Uses Homemade Cannon."

¹³ Moore, "Chinese Thugs Knocked out by Amateur Kung Fu Fans."

¹⁴ Interview: NB20-S.

¹⁵ Givens, "Sleeping with Dragons?"

¹⁶ Abbott, MacDonald, and Givens, "New Social Media and (Electronic) Democratization in East and Southeast Asia: China and Malaysia Compared," 126.

¹⁷ "法律快车 (Law Express)."

¹⁸ "Can't Pay, Won't Pay."

¹⁹ "拖欠工资两年,只有欠条复印件, 怎么走法律程序?欠款 4 万多-免费法律咨询-华律网(66law.cn)."

addition to providing little useful information, these answers failed to point out that the plaintiff's current evidence was likely insufficient, as they possessed only photocopied documentation of the salary arrears.²⁰

While these answers certainly lack detail, they may provide sufficient encouragement and information for the asker to take the next step, in this case contacting a lawyer or legal arbitration committee. Indeed, these lawyers provide free legal advice on these websites in the hope of attracting clients and their answers tend to encourage question askers to pursue legal action. In other instances, lawyers encourage clients to hold out against encroachments on their rights. For example, one lawyer on the legal advice site 9ask.cn recommended that a resident stay in their home despite local government pressure for them to relocate and intimidation from organized crime.²¹ This advice is given because people who move out of their home often find it quickly demolished and lose their leverage to negotiate for higher compensation. And since this advice is meant to be read by the public, not just the question-asker, it might encourage others to hold out against local governments attempts to intimidate residents into taking lower compensation. Nor does China's online legal community shy away from important and controversial issues. Along with mundane categories of cases, such as traffic accidents and divorces, links for housing demolition and relocation (拆迁), land requisition compensation (征地补偿), and criminal defence (刑事辩护) appear prominently on lawtime.cn's homepage. The remarkable presence of sensitive material is considered further in the section on censorship.

²⁰ Personal interaction with Mary Gallagher, 28 February 2015.

²¹ <http://www.9ask.cn/souask/q/q5319048.htm>

Screenshot 1: Lawyer's Provide Curt Answers to a Question about Salary Arrears

The screenshot shows a question and answer page from a Chinese legal website. The question at the top is: "拖欠工资两年,只有欠条复印件,怎么走法律程序?欠款4万多" (Owed wages for two years, only have a copy of the IOU, how to proceed with legal procedures? The amount is over 40,000 RMB). Below the question, there is a timestamp: "来源: 百度合作咨询 | 劳动纠纷 | 浏览78次 | 2015-02-16 21:17 投诉 收藏". A red button below the timestamp says "无需注册, 快速提问 全国专业在线律师快速为您解答!" (No registration required, quick question, national professional online lawyers will quickly answer you!). To the right of the timestamp are "投诉" (Complaint) and "收藏" (Bookmark) buttons. Below the question, there is a section for answers. It says "我来回答" (I will answer) and has a large text input area. Below the input area are "回答规范" (Answer norms) and a blue "提交答案" (Submit answer) button. Underneath this, it says "共有 2 位律师回答了该问题" (2 lawyers have answered this question). The first answer is by "董补民律师" (Dong Bu Min Lawyer) from Gansu-Daqing, with a phone number 13369377962 and an "在线免费咨询" (Free online consultation) button. The answer content is "走法律程序" (Follow legal procedures) and was posted on 2015-02-17 06:24. The second answer is by "李新安律师" (Li Xin'an Lawyer) from Shaanxi-Xi'an, with a phone number 13201463358 and an "在线免费咨询" (Free online consultation) button. The answer content is "申请劳动仲裁" (Apply for labor arbitration) and was posted on 2015-02-17 14:40.

Legal websites can also help find lawyers with the right experience for more politically sensitive cases. A simple search on China's most popular search engine, Baidu.com, for “administrative litigation lawyer (行政诉讼律师)” or for the more colloquial “lawyer for people suing officials (民告官律师)” immediately produces the name of China’s most prolific and successful administrative litigator. For around a decade, this lawyer and his assistants have taken hundreds of cases a year all over China. The price for being represented by such an experienced attorney is significant, 30,000 RMB for a case in his home city and 100,000 outside it. This means that his fees are generally only affordable for larger collective actions which most of his cases are.²² This lawyer is able to produce excellent results with many locally politically sensitive cases

²² Interview: AL01-L.

involving land, housing, and environmental compensation cases. In his words, “there are very few cases that are too sensitive.”²³ The case of this prolific litigator demonstrates that the Internet can be effective at connecting individuals with qualified and experienced legal representation, but also show that there are limits in terms of the cost of such representation and that some issues and cases are off limits for all but China’s most courageous (or fool-hardy) rights protection lawyers,²⁴ many of whom have been put out of action by government repression.

Networking Between Legal Professionals

Existing research has also suggested that the Internet helps legal professionals network with each other and provides them with a source of information and support other than the state. In China, lower court judges once “had little option but to consult higher courts”. Now, they “routinely consult the internet to assist them when they encounter new questions,” a phenomenon that seems to be particularly important “in less developed areas” where the judges have limited resources. Communication and networking between judges, much of it online, “may lead to more consistent application of the law”²⁵ and the development of a professional identity which can assist judges “as they seek to combat interference from both within and outside the courts.”²⁶ Since a lack of judicial independence is one of the most important deficits in the Chinese legal system, this could have a huge impact on people’s willingness to resort to its courts and lawyers’ and judges’ willingness to help them.

Censorship

The impressive extent to which the CCP has managed to censor China’s Internet has been well documented. With remarkable prescience, the CCP set up several state working groups to monitor and control the development of the Internet as early as 1996.²⁷ A prominent paper based on data collected from the Chinese internet shows that the PRC’s “censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content. Censorship is oriented toward attempting to forestall collective activities that are occurring now or may occur in the future.”²⁸ Yet these same restrictions do not seem to apply to legal activities.

²³ Interview: AL01-L.

²⁴ Pils, “Asking the Tiger for His Skin.”

²⁵ Liebman, “China’s Courts: Restricted Reform,” 631.

²⁶ Liebman.

²⁷ Mueller and Tan, *China in the Information Age*.

²⁸ King, Pan, and Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” 1.

Screenshot 2: A Question about Suing the State for a Forced Abortion Receives 2 Positive and One Negative Response

The screenshot shows a web page from a legal Q&A platform. At the top, a question is displayed: "未婚女性怀孕八月被计划生育强制拉去堕胎,是否可以起诉他们" (Unwed pregnant woman 8 months pregnant forced by family planning to undergo an abortion, can they sue?). Below the question, it says "法律快车推荐: 问题没有解决, 上'好律师在线'预约专业律师!" (Lawyer Fast Track recommends: Problem not solved, go to 'Good Lawyer Online' to book a professional lawyer!).

The main area contains three responses from lawyers:

- 冉令涛律师 [VIP]** (Ranoling Law Firm [VIP]): "不可以。本身你就是违法在前。" (No, you were illegal in the first place).
回复时间: 2010-04-24 16:13
检举 赞(0) 评论(0)
- 汪伦律师** (Wang伦 Law Firm): "当然可以。" (Of course, you can).
回复时间: 2010-04-24 16:45
检举 赞(0) 评论(0)
- 范华勇律师** (Fan Huayong Law Firm): "可以" (Yes).
回复时间: 2010-04-24 18:20
检举 赞(0) 评论(0)

China's one child policy, for example, is considered a moderately politically sensitive topic,²⁹ with abortions and sterilizations forced by overzealous family planning officials considered to be beyond the pale. Yet lawtime.cn, contains a page (Screenshot 2) where lawyers respond to a question asked from Guizhou (one of China's poorest provinces), “can a 8 months pregnant unmarried woman who was compelled to get an

²⁹ King, Pan, and Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression.”

abortion by family planning officials sue them (未婚女性怀孕八月被计划生育强制拉去堕胎,是否可以起诉他们)?" The page provides three responses from lawyers, one in the negative and two in the affirmative. Nor is this question unique, the site contains many questions and responses regarding forced abortions and sterilizations. Most of the cases are far less inflammatory, asking "is it legal for officials to force me to abort?" rather than claiming that they have already been forced to have an abortion. Additionally, questions about forced sterilizations are more common than forced abortions and these come in two varieties tubal ligation (结扎) and the much less permanent placement of an intrauterine device. Officials frequently refuse to provide recently born children with a resident's permit (户口) unless women submit to such procedures. As enforcement of family planning policies in China has grown laxer, these types of questions have waned, yet in rural areas they were still relatively common up through 2015. Additionally, some questions reveal that officials are still trying to impose penalties in 2017 for family planning violations that date back to before the relaxation on the policy. Another page asks about collective administrative cases (Screenshot 3), which raises the red flag of collective action aimed at the state, and received more detailed and positive answers from several lawyers. With the most sophisticated censorship regime in human history at its disposal, these types of questions, some dating as far back as 2009, would not still be online if the state was interested in censoring them.

Screenshot 3: A Collective Land Cases Receives a Detailed Answer

群体行政诉讼要到中院起诉吗
问题来自: 北京 - 北京 悬赏: 0分 咨询时间: 2014-09-25 18:04 咨询
法律快车推荐: 问题没有解决, 上“好律师在线”预约专业律师!

我来回答 您还可以输入5000字

请先登录, 再解答咨询!

温馨提示: 使用组合键Ctrl+Enter可快速提交! 发布问题、回复咨询, 更加方便、及时。

提交回答

法律快车 律师回复 共6条回复

徐卫东律师 [VIP]
北京-北京
电话: 1391005186
立即在线咨询

要具体分析, 详谈电话联系。
法律依据 中华人民共和国行政诉讼法
第三章 管 辖
第十三条 基层人民法院管辖第一审行政案件。
第十四条 中级人民法院管辖下列第一审行政案件:
(一)确认发明专利权的案件、海关处理的案件;
(二)对国务院各部门或者省、自治区、直辖市人民政府所作的具体行政行为提起诉讼的案件;
(三)本辖区内重大、复杂的案件。
第十五条 高级人民法院管辖本辖区内重大、复杂的第一审行政案件。
第十六条 最高人民法院管辖全国范围内重大、复杂的第
一审行政案件。
第十七条 行政案件由最初作出具体行政行为的行政机关所在地人民法院管辖。经复议的案件, 复议机关改变原具体行政行为的, 也可以由复议机关所在地人民法院管辖。
第十八条 对限制人身自由的行政强制措施不服提起的诉讼, 由被告所在地或者原告所在地人民法院管辖。
第十九条 因不动产提起的行政诉讼, 由不动产所在地人
民法院管辖。
第二十条 两个以上人民法院都有管辖权的案件, 原告可
以选择其中一个人人民法院提起诉讼。原告向两个以上有管辖权的人民法院提起诉讼的, 由最先收到起诉状的人民法院管辖。
第二十一条 人民法院发现受理的案件不属于自己管辖时,
应当移送有管辖权的人民法院。受移送的人民法院不得自行
移送。

回复时间: 2014-09-25 18:13

Some censoring of legal topics and websites probably does take place. Indeed, one of what was once one China's most popular legal websites, chinalawyer.org.cn, was shut down under unclear circumstances. The topic of legal censorship is ripe for further investigation. Nevertheless, as a rule, China's censors seem to allow for conversations about sensitive topics on legal advice websites.

A New Phenomenon?

A natural and appropriate response to the proceeding description of the Internet's impact is to ask whether this is truly a new phenomenon? After all, the Chinese state has

sometimes made considerable efforts to disseminate materials about laws and regulations, legal books are easily available in bookstores, and legal advice columns are not uncommon in newspapers.³⁰ For example, from 1989–98 Lawyer Bao provided answers to legal questions that reached hundreds of thousands of Chinese through his weekly column in the Beijing Evening News.³¹ Are online legal resources actually something new or are they simply the migration of similar content to a new medium?

Despite similarities with past printed legal materials, online legal resources are quantitatively and qualitatively different than their predecessors. First, online tools are on a scale that is an order of magnitude larger than printed materials. Whereas legal advice tools such as “Dear Lawyer Bao” answered thousands of questions and reached an audience of hundreds of thousands, legal advice websites answer tens of millions of questions and are accessible to hundreds of millions. Second, the interactivity of these sites gives everyone the chance to ask question and provides local lawyers with an opportunity to answer them directly. Third, the quantity and interactivity of the medium means that the substance of online legal advice tools is less carefully managed. Whereas Michelson found that Lawyer Bao tended to delegitimize grievances in “which state interests were at stake,”³² we have already seen that legal advice websites allow for questions on sensitive topics to be asked and for lawyers to provide answers that encourage people to challenge the state.

Types of Cases Investigated

In addition to the big data approach pursued below we continue to comb these legal advice websites carefully reading both typical and notable questions. In addition to cases related to forced abortion and sterilization, the following details a few of the types of cases we have been examining:

Forced Demolition Cases (强拆): It should come as no surprise to any China watcher that such cases are responsible for one of the largest category of questions on legal advice websites. In these cases, land to which residents or farmers have government granted use-rights are taken back by the state in return for compensation that averages around a 1/40 of the market value of the land. In such cases, questions frequently demonstrate a relatively poor understanding, especially by rural dwellers, of types of land and land use rights. But they also show complaints about illegal government tactics and collusion between local governments, businessmen, and gangsters. Our dataset should provide valuable insight into these kinds of questions by helping us track them as they move across time and space in China.

Ethnic Tension Cases: Questions related to, apparently rising, ethnic tensions between ethnic groups in a rapidly changing China. Typical of

³⁰ Liu, “With or without the Law.”

³¹ Michelson, “Dear Lawyer Bao.”

³² Michelson, 44.

such cases are the so-called Lanzhou or Longhua Raman (兰州拉面 or 隆化拉面) incidents. Such cases seem to represent concerns over Hui-Han civil conflicts (回汉冲突) in recent years and usually involve oral threats leveled again Han who open ramen restaurants that were traditionally regarded as the exclusive purview of the Hui.

Police Misconduct: These questions often revolve around beatings and other overzealous tactics of the hated *Chengguan* (urban management officers 城管) or other "auxiliary police" instead of formal police officers who receive more extensive training.

Political Cases: A fascinating category of questions on these sites deal with topics such as the criticism of leaders and voting rights, which would be bread and butter politics in much of the world, but are generally taboo in China. Most commonly, these cases take the form of electoral misconduct during village elections. Here, as in other sensitive areas many lawyers recommend litigation.

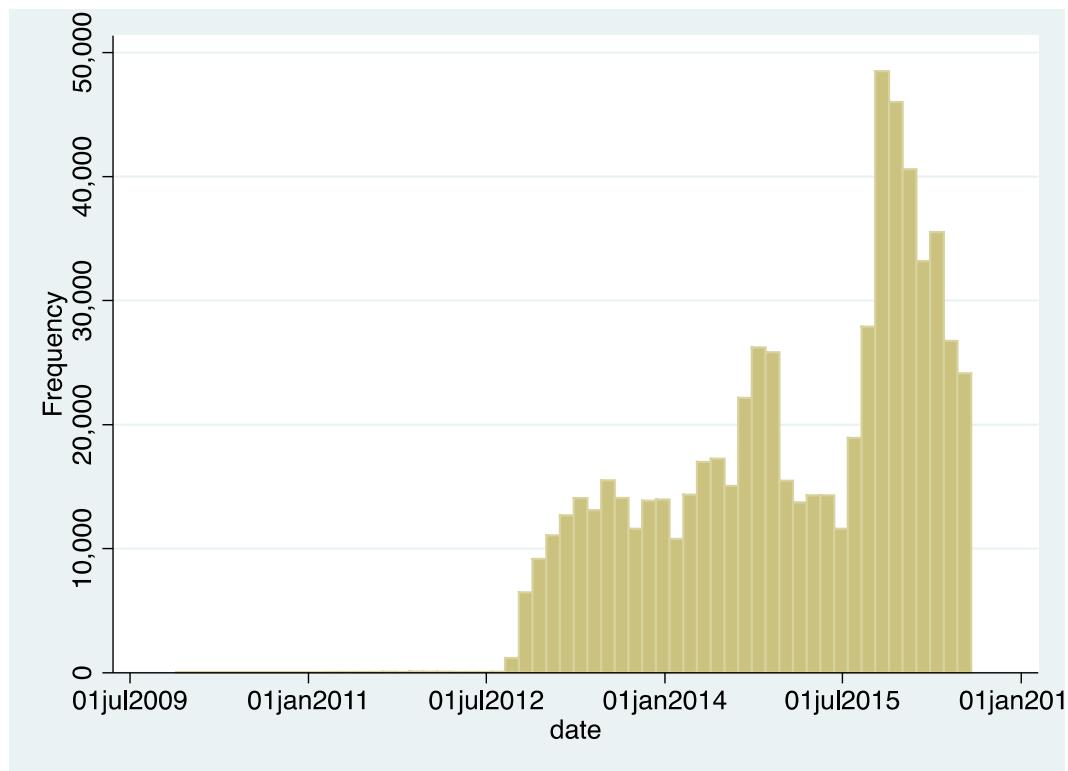
Data

Hard numerical data relating to rule of law is notoriously difficult to find. In the People's Republic of China this is doubly true. By collecting and using data from China's growing ecosystem of legal advice portals therefore, this project not only contributes to data about law online in China, but, to date, will be one of the biggest sources of data with which to examine the changing roll and interactions between law, politics, technology, and society in the contemporary PRC.

Specifically, we have already begun collecting data from China's most popular legal advice website, [findlaw.com](#). This was done by creating a Python script that automatically scrapes data from the site. First and foremost this data consists of questions posted on the website by average Chinese. We also collected lawyers' responses to questions posted as well as the original posters responses to the lawyers' responses. These responses, however, have yet to be analysed.

To date, we have only managed to scrape data for 5 provinces: Beijing, Jiangsu, Gansu, Guizhou, and Heilongjiang. The data produced begin with the first question on the site posted in 20 November 2009 and go up through the end of July 2016. While we plan to continue to scrape data for all the remaining provinces, and possibly other legal advice sites as well, the following section briefly examines what has been collected so far, a data subset. We do this in order to guide the future direction of the project.

Graph 1: Histogram, number of questions collected by date



This histogram represents the distribution of the questions we collected beginning with a single question posted on 20 November 2009 up through the end of July 2016. Few questions were posted to the site (or perhaps few questions remain) from before the Fall of 2012. Since that time, however, the number of cases has grown tremendously, from around 100 a day in October 2012, to peaks of over 1,000 a day in October 2015 and April 2016.

Chart 1: Categories of Cases Collected

Legal Topic	# of Questions
Marriage and Family	124,498
Other	95,831
Contract Dispute	75,189
Traffic Accident	72,016
Real estate disputes	69,971
Industrial Injury	48,987
Creditors Rights	24,544
Consumer Rights	20,991
Labor Contract	18,274
Criminal Defense	15,508
Violent Injury	8,912
Divorce	8,858

Civil Cases	8,407
Inheritance	7,662
Industrial and commercial tax	5,871
Banking	5,753
Hospital Accident	3,950
Insurance Claims	3,804
Company Legal Consultation	3,545
Agriculture, Forestry, animal husbandry, and fisheries	3,229
Maternal and child rights	3,106
Economic-dispute	2,474
Personal injury compensation	1,902
Slander	1,432
Economic-related	1,431
Land Dispute	1,280
Administrative Litigation	1,240
Other synthesis	1,160
Worker's Compensation	1,145
Demolition and Relocation	1,130
compensation for damages	1,051
Arbitration	1,008
share transfer	943
enterprise restructuring	821
Criminal Administrative	704
intellectual property rights	678
E-commerce	652

State Compensation	648
Franchise chain	569
social security	535
negotiable instruments	535
Product Quality	469
Trademark	422
Loan Collateral	419
Financial Securities	405
Notarization	387
bankruptcy	353
immigration	315
Copyright	297
Company specialization	293
public security penalties	291
Patent	286
Environmental Protection	276
Auction	272
construction engineering	270
tendering and bidding	233
Stocks	215
Company acquisition	214
elder care	191
foreign law	174
food safety	134
Venture Capital	128
Asset auction	122
International Trade	108
fiduciary	101
Advertising and News	90
marriage with foreigners	87
foreign investment	86
futures contracts	84

Anti Unfair Competition	82
Network infringement	67
Logistics Dispute	66
Maritime Commerce	65
Beijing Legal Consultation	38
anti-dumping	25
divorce with foreigners	24
Death Penalty Defense	21
Tourism disputes	19

As Chart 1 shows, cases run the gamut from popular and largely banal categories of questions such as Marriage and Family, Contract Disputes, Traffic Accidents, and Real Estate disputes to unusual cases such as anti-dumping, divorce with foreigners and death penalty defence. It also includes a good mix of cases with possible political and social repercussions such as Consumer Rights, Labor Contracts, Criminal Defence, Demolition and Relocation, Environmental protection, State Compensation, and Administrative Litigation.

Chart 2: Types of Selected Cases by Province

	Beijing	Jiangsu	Gansu	Guizhou	Heilongjiang	Total
Administrative Litigation	442	129	126	228	315	1,240
Criminal Defense	17,534	9,288	4,790	7,370	10,005	48,987
State Compensation	164	89	71	138	186	648
Land Dispute	237	110	149	317	467	1,280
Environmental Protection	80	35	32	31	98	276
Demolition and Relocation	306	197	104	303	220	1,130
Labor Contract	8,816	3,220	1,267	1,802	3,169	18,274
International Investment	54	5	7	13	7	86
Total	249,905	109,646	68,663	98,425	130,773	657,412

Another important consideration for our data is the regional variation in numbers, types, content of questions, and replies given by lawyers. The chart above demonstrates some of the variation in types of cases across different parts of China. Yet, the provincial level is a very coarse one and a tremendous advantage of our data is that it includes much more fine-grained geographic information. Specifically, our data includes question askers'

county-level location. A proper geographic analysis will ultimately require significant control variables on population, income, and Internet use, as well as integration with geographic information system (**GIS**) software. Yet the extreme variation is evident at a glance, the website only received 695 questions from the entire Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Gannan (甘南藏族自治州), but over 28,000 from the Central Beijing district of Chaoyang (朝阳区). Taking into account that Chaoyang is about five times as populous as Gannan, this represents approximately 40 times more question per capita.

Chart 3: Regression predicting the number of lawyer's replies by date, province, and legal topic

Variable	Coefficient	P Value
Date	0.0014675	0.00
Beijing	3.860565	0.00
Gansu	1.043918	0.00
Guizhou	-0.6699905	0.00
Heilongjiang	-0.1905395	0.00
patent	0.8207714	0.00
traffic	-0.1621872	0.00
other	-0.3791248	0.00
Forestry, Agriculture, Herds, and Fisheries	-0.8285447	0.00
criminal defense	1.368483	0.00
labor contract disputes	-0.3204371	0.00
industrial injury	-0.1138275	0.00
contract disputes	-0.1585088	0.00
state compensation	-0.7429723	0.00
land dispute	0.1255783	0.06
women and Children's rights	-0.3745129	0.00

family law	0.2412893	0.00
workers compensation	0.7867594	0.00
demolition and relocation	0.1389293	0.049
death penalty	0.3944508	0.44
environmental	-0.7709846	0.00
IP	0.2828341	0.00
social insurance	-0.390999	0.00
inheritance	0.8182567	0.00
administrative litigation	-0.5277554	0.00
food safety	-0.7362721	0.00

Another way to begin to examining this data is to look at which questions received more answers from lawyers. Chart 3 begins to do this by running a straightforward regression that predicts the number of replies by lawyers based on the date posted, province of the poster, and legal topic covered. With such large quantities of data, it is not surprising that almost every variable turned out significant and those with small coefficients could be considered to be the equivalent of zero, measured very precisely. Most of the findings conform with our expectations. The number of replies per question has increased over time. Questions asked in Gansu and Beijing receive more replies than the base province of Jiangsu. Those asked in Heilongjiang and Guizhou receive fewer answers. Lawyers tended to provide more answers to cases about patents, inheritance, IP, and family law. They also generally provided fewer answers to questions about sensitive topics such as administrative litigation, social insurance, food safety, state compensation environmental protection, and Women and Children's rights. This probably generally conforms with lawyers' expectations about how profitable and desirable these types of cases are.

On the other hand, some findings seem at least somewhat surprising. Lawyers provided the most answers to questions about criminal defense. They also proved more likely to answer questions about worker's compensation and demolition and relocation (though only by a slim margin).

Moving Forward

One necessary aspect of future research is to better understand how and why lawyers use these legal advice websites and to ask them about their experiences with them and the clients that come through them. To this end, we plan on conducting interviews with both prolific users of legal advice websites and randomly selected lawyers. Below is a draft list of questions we currently intend to ask such lawyers:

Use of Online Legal Services 关于使用 在线法律咨询服务的一些问题

1. Why do you use these 法律咨询 sites?
为什么您使用这些法律咨询网站?
2. How often do you use them? Hourly? Daily? Weekly? Monthly?
您使用频率是每小时，每天，每周，还是每月?
3. How much time per week is spent on responding?
每周花费多少时间回应这些网站上的咨询问题?
4. What percentage of your new clients come through these sites?
您的新客户中有百分之多少来自于这些网站?
5. What percentage of your new income comes through these sites?
您的新收入中有百分之多少来自于这些网站?
6. How do you decide which questions you respond to?
你如何决定回答哪些问题?
 - a) According to your specialty?
根据您的专业?
 - b) According to your experience?
根据你的经验?
 - c) According to potential profitability?
根据潜在的盈利能力?
 - d) Location of the inquirer?
根据查询者的位置? (根据咨询者的位置?)
7. How often are you contacted when you answer a question?
在您回答问题后，他们多久联系一次? (你们多久联系一次?)
8. Are you ever contacted with a follow-up question but do not get the client?
你有没有回答过一个后续的咨询问题，但没有得到这个客户?
9. Do you find any questions on the sites too sensitive to answer?
您有没有遇到过一些敏感的问题，觉得不太好回答的?
10. What is your strategy for making use of the website?
您使用这些法律咨询服务网站的策略是什么?
 - a) Reply to a lot of them?
回复很多的问题?
 - b) Be the first to reply?
成为第一个回复的人?
 - c) Provide a better or more thorough answer?
提供更好或更彻底的答案?
11. Who responds to the questions? You? An assistant?
谁回答这些问题呢? 您本人还是您的助理?
您有没有遇到过一些敏感的问题，觉得不太好回答的?
12. What is your strategy for making use of the website?
您使用这些法律咨询服务网站的策略是什么?
 - a) Reply to a lot of them?
回复很多的问题?
 - b) Be the first to reply?
成为第一个回复的人?
 - c) Provide a better or more thorough answer?
提供更好或更彻底的答案?

13. Who responds to the questions? You? An assistant?

谁回答这些问题呢？您本人还是您的助理？

Experiments

Once we have finished with data collection we plan to design additional experiments to test hypothesis generated from this data. These would likely involve posting similar or identical questions on these websites, with variation in key details such as ethnicity, gender, location, and sensitivity and judging differences in lawyers' responses.

Possible examples of experiments include: 1) asking nearly-identical questions (about issues such as pollution or land appropriation) but varying the target of potential litigation so that it is the state in some cases and a private party in others 2) varying the gender, age, or ethnicity of potential plaintiffs in a variety of cases to suss out lawyer's biases 3) Asking identical questions in different jurisdictions to see how lawyers' advice varies between different regions and levels of development. 4) Testing lawyers' knowledge by asking similar questions with important legal differences that "should" elicit different legal advice. 5) We will ask increasingly controversial questions to try to gauge the level of censorship across time and place. A matching strategy will be used so that different versions of the same question are being asked in sets of similar locations, which should help control for levels of development, minority populations, sizes of cities, and a wide variety of other factors.

Conclusion

What is presented here only begins to scratch the surface of the potential of Chinese legal advice websites. With this rough beginning we hope to spark conversation and solicit guidance from scholars with a wide variety of expertise. We aim to thereby steer our research towards fields that will be as useful as possible to scholars in a wide variety of disciplines.

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