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The construction of China's national interest: between top-down rule and societal ideas

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Citation

Mokry, S. (2023, November 14). *The construction of China's national interest: between top-down rule and societal ideas*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3656754>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

3 Theoretical argument

Researchers have long drawn upon domestic factors to explain China's foreign policy. Tsang (2020) even argues that the "centrality of domestic politics" is a key feature of China's foreign policy and distinguishes China from other great powers (2020, 306). The literature contains long lists of domestic factors that could influence China's foreign policy. Zhang Jian (2014), for example, lists "increasing domestic stress" triggered by the unequal distribution of wealth, growing concerns about food safety, environmental pollution, corruption, and faltering economic growth (2014, 390ff). Similarly, Nathan (2016) argues that threats to society's survival, regime survival, territorial integrity, and economic prosperity drive Chinese foreign policy (2016, 158). While the importance of these domestic factors for China's foreign policy is intuitive, knowledge about *how* domestic factors influence China's foreign policy remains sporadic. Focusing on structural variables that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest, this dissertation narrows down the long list of domestic factors that can influence China's foreign policy to one specific group of domestic actors, societal actors. By examining the conditions of their influence, the dissertation offers a peak into how domestic factors influence China's foreign policy.

In this chapter, I construe the conditions under which societal actors influence the construction of China's national interest. Drawing on the existing literature, I define and conceptualize the dissertation's dependent variable, the official construction of the national interest, its independent variable, societal constructions of the national interest, and the structural variables that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest, that is, societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input. In the chapter's last section, I illustrate the theoretical argument with a metaphor and deduce hypotheses from the argument that will guide the study's empirical analysis.

3.1 The dissertation's argument

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that statist approaches fail to adequately explain the changes in the official construction of China's national interest observed under Xi Jinping. Through an examination of the patterns of relative salience of the different components of the official construction of China's national interest in official foreign policy statements, I refuted explanations deduced from statist approaches. The existing literature suggests that societal approaches, especially those focusing on experts, could hold more explanatory power. However, my empirical analysis reveals that the official and societal constructions of China's national interest do not match perfectly. In some areas, they attribute the same overall weight to the different components of the construction of the national interest, in other areas, overlaps in policy shifts appear. Nevertheless, upon closer look, critical differences between official and societal constructions of China's national interest appear (see Chapter 5). Hence, there is no simple transmission belt between societal ideas and the official construction of the national interest. Instead, there are complex links between the two. Existing explanations do not capture under what conditions societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest because they overlook the importance of domestic structures that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest.

To fill this gap, this dissertation draws attention to two domestic structural variables that condition the relationship between the official and societal constructions of the national interest, societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input. Both variables are affected by domestic structures. Domestic structures describe "the nature of the political institutions (the "state"), basic features of the society, and the institutional and organizational arrangements linking state and society and channeling societal demands into the political system" (Risse-Kappen 1991, 484). The nature of political institutions mainly manifests itself in the degree of centralization of the political system, that is, how concentrated executive power is. Society's basic features relate to polarization, the strength of social organization, and the degree to which

societal pressure can be mobilized. Lastly, according to Risse (1991), links between the state and society can be either dominated by the state or society (1991, 486).

In this dissertation, I argue that societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input facilitate and constrain societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest in authoritarian regimes. When societal actors are close to the state, and the state is open to societal input, societal actors will have the most influence on the official construction of the national interest. When societal actors are distant from the state and the state is not open to societal input, societal actors will have the least influence on the official construction of the national interest. Finally, when societal actors are close to the state and when the state is not open to societal input, and when societal actors are distant from the state and the state is open to societal input, societal actors will somewhat influence the official construction of the national interest.

Changes in domestic structures affect the state's openness to societal input. The state can be open or closed to societal input at different times. When the state is open to societal input, it encourages societal actors to provide evidence for policy-making, for instance. In contrast, when the state is not open to societal input, it might crack down on societal debate. Societal actors' proximity to the state is less prone to shift. A societal actor can be close to or distant from the state. Over time, an actor's positioning vis à vis the state can change. For example, scholars can become closer to the state throughout their careers. Similarly, a think tank could change its positioning vis à vis the state due to a change in leadership or its funding model. However, such changes unfold rather slowly. Hence, during this project's relatively short time frame, I assume societal actors' proximity to the state to be fixed.

3.1 sketches the four possible constellations of the two variables, the state's openness to societal input and societal actors' proximity to the state, and how they facilitate and constrain societal influence on the official construction of the national interest. Hence, Table 3.1 outlines the

conditions under which societal actors can influence the official construction of the national interest.

Table 3.1: Conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest

		Societal actors' proximity to the state	
		close	distant
The state's openness to societal input	open	Most influence	Some influence
	closed	Some influence	Least influence

In the following two sections, I conceptualize the dissertation's dependent variable, the official construction of the national interest, and its independent variable, the societal constructions of the national interest.

3.2 The official construction of the national interest

While IR scholars disagree about how a state's national interest is formed, many emphasize its importance for explaining state action. Most realists would argue that all states share the same national interest, specifically increasing their power relative to other states. In contrast, constructivists understand the national interest to result from a process of interpretation (Garrison 2007). Building on the assumption that ideas construct identities and interests, constructivists hold that "national interests are intersubjective, rather than derived objectively from the distribution of material capabilities" (Klotz 1995, 454). The national interest is thus a social construction that emerges "out of situation descriptions and problem definitions through which state officials and others make sense of the world around them" (Weldes 1996, 280). Despite these disagreements regarding the formation of the national interest, many scholars are convinced that the national interest is key to explaining state action. Morin and Paquin (2018), for example, observe that national interest is "omnipresent in leaders' rhetoric around the world (...)" (2018, 23). In addition,

Weldes (1999) argues that policy-makers use the concept to grasp the goals pursued by a state's foreign policy. As a result, national interest forms the basis for state action in practice. She concludes that there is no way around national interest for IR scholars "simply because it is the language of state action" (1999, 3).

Understanding the national interest as constructed allows us to trace changes over time. Since constructions of the national interest can be identified in official foreign policy statements and in societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates, understanding the national interest as constructed further allows me to uncover the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest. Constructivists agree that before a state can pursue its national interest, it needs to be defined but disagree about the level at which this happens. For Finnemore (1996), socialization occurs at the international level. She describes states as "embedded in dense networks of transnational and international social relations that shape their perceptions of the world and their role in the world" (1996, 2). As a result, the international system, specifically International Organizations, changes what states want. Internationally held norms about what is good and appropriate influence decision-makers' behavior and the mass publics who constrain them (Finnemore 1996, 2ff.). In contrast, Weldes (1999) holds that the national interest is constructed within the state. She argues that "before state officials can act for the state, they engage in the process of interpretation to understand both what situation the state faces and how they should respond to it" (1999, 4). Given the dissertation's explanatory focus, I side with Weldes' claim, in this project, at least, and examine how the national interest is constructed within the state. To back up this claim, I combine it with neo-classical realists' premise that domestic actors define it.⁸

Neo-classical realists show how groups within the state shape the national interest: Trubowitz (1998) argues that the national interest is "defined by those societal interests who have

⁸ Liberalism, of course, also draws attention to different groups within the state and how their preferences affect the state's international posture (Moravcsik 1997). However, the fact that liberal approaches tend not to be concerned with the national interest, makes it more difficult to apply them to this project.

the power to work within the political system (...) to translate their preferences into policy” (1998, 4). Snyder (1991) finds that economic sectors and state bureaucracies “logrolled their various imperialist or military interests, using arguments about security through expansion to justify their self-serving policies in terms of broader interests in national survival” before politicians picked up these justification strategies and incorporated them into their statements (1991, 2). In this dissertation, I build on the idea that domestic actors shape the national interest and that official foreign policy statements, subsequently, reflect domestic actors’ arguments. While research on the construction of the national interest by domestic actors has focused on liberal democracies (for an excellent example, see: Rathbun 2004), I show that similar processes also occur within highly centralized authoritarian states such as the PRC.

In many ways, my conceptualization of the official construction of the national interest draws from existing conceptualizations. I build on Morgenthau’s thinking by understanding the national interest as dependent on the political and cultural context in which the state’s foreign policy is formulated (Morgenthau 1960, 8f.). From Krasner’s and Katzenstein’s conceptualizations, I take the idea that the national interest is defined and can be inductively traced in policy-makers’ statements. Krasner (1978) defines the national interest as “the goals that are sought by the state” (1978, 12). Since he conceives of the state as an autonomous actor, its interests are “separate and distinct from the interests of any particular societal group” (1978, 10) and can, hence be deduced from decision-makers’ preferences if two criteria are met: Leaders’ actions need to relate to general objectives instead of the preferences of particular groups, and there needs to be consistency in ordering preferences across time (1978, 35). Katzenstein (1978) introduces „policy objectives” to replace “the old concept of the national interest”, which he criticizes as too normative for empirical research (1978, 298). Katzenstein suggests tracing these policy objectives “inductively by closely observing several areas of foreign economic policy” instead of postulating policy objectives deductively under broad categories such as “national security” or “national welfare” (ibid). Like constructivist scholars, I do not conceive of the national interest as “out there”, waiting to be

discovered, but as constructed through discourse (Humphreys 2015). Paving the way for constructivist research, Kratochvil (1982) takes issue with “conventional attempts to define the true meaning of the national interest by delineating a common core of underlying phenomena” because doing so presumes that “the notion of interest functions as a descriptive term (label) within the political discourse” (1982, 3). In contrast, he argues that its use in specific contexts discloses the term's meaning.

In several ways, my conceptualization of the official construction of the national interest goes beyond existing conceptualizations. Morgenthau, for instance, does not specify how one can grasp the substantive content of national interest but merely equates it with “national security”. The substantive content of national interest remains equally abstract in Krasner’s conceptualization as he depicts it as “associated either with general material objectives or with ambitious ideological goals related to beliefs about how societies should be ordered” (Krasner 1978, 10). While these goals are easy to identify in official documents, establishing the correct ordering of preferences is more difficult because, from public documents, one can only get unranked objectives, according to him. To fill this gap, Nuechterlein’s conception of the national interest allows for bringing in the substantive content of a state’s national interest.

I understand the substantive content of the official construction of the national interest to consist of several components. Over time, there is variation in how prominent these components feature in the official construction of the national interest. Examining this variation allows us to capture changes in the official construction of a country’s national interest. To identify these components of the official construction of a country’s national interest in official foreign policy statements, I link the basic needs Nuechterlein describes in his conception of the national interest to more recent empirical accounts of national interests in the IR literature. First, it is in a country’s interest to *defend its territory, political system, and citizens*. Nuechterlein (1976) describes defence interests as “the protection of the nation-state and its citizens against the threat of physical violence directed from another state and/or externally inspired threat to its system of government” (1976, 248).

Second, it is in a country's interest to *expand its external economic relations*. Nuechterlein (1976) describes economic interests as “the enhancement of the nation-state's well-being in relations with other states” (ibid). Economic interests feature prominently in the empirical literature on national interest: In the context of Great Britain's national interest, Roberts (2014) points to promoting trade (2014). Similarly, Kitaokao (2016) refers to the people's prosperity and identifies free trade as a precondition for upholding Japan's national interest (2016, 36). Third, it is in a state's interest to *lead global governance* (Gov). Under “world order”, Nuechterlein (1976) discusses the “maintenance of a political and economic system in which the nation-state may feel secure and in which its citizens and commerce may operate peacefully outside its borders” (1976, 248). Fourth, it is in a country's interest to *promote its values*. For Nuechterlein, ideological interests refer to “the protection and furtherance of a set of values which the people of a nation-state share and believe to be universally good” (ibid). Reviews of the empirical literature on states' national interest suggest that Nuechterlein overlooks states' role in the region in which they are situated and the importance of providing global public goods. Hence, I identify two additional components of the official construction of the national interest: Fifth, it is in a country's interest to *control the region* it is situated in. Six, it is in a country's interest to *offer global public goods*. At first view, it is difficult to disentangle the *lead global governance* from *offer global public goods*. While there might be overlaps in practice, conceptually, I distinguish between expressed ambitions for global leadership in international politics, including international institutions, captured in *lead global governance* and the more tangible benefits offered to other countries, described as the provision of global public goods. For details on how I operationalize these six components of the official construction of the national interest, see Chapter 4.

3.3 Societal constructions of the national interest

Even in authoritarian regimes, there can be vibrant debates among societal actors on foreign policy issues (Barbashin and Graef 2019; Barras and Inkster 2018; H. Feng, He, and Yan 2019; Foot 2014;

Garrett 2001; Xu 2016; Zeng, Xiao, and Breslin 2015; Zheng 2016). In this dissertation, I understand societal actors as individuals, groups of individuals, or organizations operating under the jurisdiction of the country under study, contributing to the official construction of said country's national interest by participating in foreign policy debates. This definition builds on the conceptualization of social actors developed in research on European Union (EU) foreign policy. Kaiser and Meyer (2013), for instance, define societal actors as "groups of individuals or collective bodies representing certain collective preferences that can arise from their normative commitments and/or material or other interests" (2013, 4f). According to Aarstad (2015), this definition captures a wide range of actors outside the state apparatus that cooperate formally and informally with public bodies, for example, public opinion, news media, interest groups, businesses, think tanks, and intellectuals (2015). In authoritarian systems, societal actors are not entirely "outside the state apparatus." Instead, relations between the state and societal actors are multifaceted. Before detailing the complexity of state-society relations under authoritarian rule, it is worth establishing that under authoritarian rule, societal actors are not fully autonomous from the state but enjoy more autonomy than government actors.

Most authors working on state-society relations under authoritarian rule agree that state and society are interlinked. In his review of academic debates on state-society relations since World War II, Wang Yuhua (2021) distinguishes the society-centered perspective, which, according to him, conceives of the state as an arena in which different social groups compete for power from the state-centered perspective, which sees the state as completely independent and autonomous from society (2021, 175). However, today, most scholars agree that state and society are interlinked, especially under authoritarian rule. Wang Yuhua (2021), for example, brings in the "state-in-society" perspective, where the state is not autonomous from society but where state and society compete for dominance. Building on this literature, he introduces a new perspective, "state-in-society 2.0," drawing attention to linkages between the state and society. He argues that elite social networks shape the strength and form of the state (2021, 175ff.). Analyzing ideological struggles between the

state and civil society in Vietnam, Vu and Le (2022) call for understanding the “complexity of evolving state-society relations rather than simply continuing to push the cliched rhetoric that “civic space is shrinking” (2022, 2). Similarly, Sun Taiyin (2017) argues that a dynamic model is necessary for understanding state and society relations in China (Sun 2017). These conceptual and empirical insights show that one needs to examine how state and society are interlinked in a particular context. While these considerations inform the dissertation, the mere existence of societal actors does not suffice. Given its explanatory focus, there needs to be societal debate about foreign policy issues.

Despite limits in freedom of expression, public debates can unfold under authoritarian rule. Schlaufer et al. (2021) identify three commonalities of public debates in non-democracies: first, while space for debate is restricted, public policy debates exist. Second, in authoritarian regimes, governmental actors drive public debates by deciding which issues are debated. Third, the internet has become an increasingly important space for public debate (2021, 3). Autocrats’ incentives to allow public debate depend on the degree to which the autocrat has delegated authority to government actors other than themselves. Recent examples of public debates under authoritarian regimes include debates about waste management, public transport, and housing in Russia (Schlaufer et al. 2021), discussions about the cultivation and use of genetically modified crops (Y. Jin et al. 2022) and coal (Jeffreys and Xu 2018). There are, however, clear limits to societal debate under authoritarian rule. As Stockmann, Luo, and Shen (2020) put it: “the boundaries of political expression are manipulated and controlled by the Chinese state” (2020:248). The Chinese government, in particular, established “an extensive system for internet manipulation and surveillance” (ibid). Some parts of the manipulation and control system limit how users can access the internet (Boas 2006), and other components limit what users can access, for example, through censorship (Gallagher and Miller 2021; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014) or through hiring online commentators to spread propaganda (Han 2015) and fabricating social media posts (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017).

3.4 Societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input

As demonstrated in the previous section, societal actors and the state are linked in various ways under authoritarian rule. Wischermann (2017), for example, argues that in authoritarian regimes, civil society and the state are not opposites but influence one another and depend on one another (2017, 350). Hence, interactions between the state and societal actors are frequent and important. Building on these insights, I argue that a societal actor's proximity to the state depends on the quantity and quality of formal ties and interactions with state institutions. Formal ties to state institutions provide the setting for institutionalized interactions between societal actors and the state. In addition, societal actors can interact with state institutions at different levels in less structured ways.

Formal ties between societal actors and state institutions manifest through administrative oversight, governmental recognition, research funding awarded by the government, and membership in advisory committees. Societal actors can be directly affiliated with state institutions or the ruling party. In addition, common practices that link societal actors to state institutes are the so-called revolving door, when people alternate between working for the government and working at a think tank, forming advisory councils, or the government commissioning research projects (Xue, Zhu, and Han 2018). Societal actors can also interact with state institutions more informally. Seminars and organizations that foster dialogue between policy-makers and experts create opportunities for interaction between societal actors and state institutions.

Autocrats' constant worry about political survival opens up inroads for societal actors' input. Threats to authoritarian rule can emerge from within the ruling elite or wider society (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). To counter the former, authoritarian rulers use narrow institutions such as consultative councils, juntas, and political bureaus as a "first institutional trench" (De Mesquita et al. 2004; Gallagher and Hanson 2015; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). To pre-empt threats from outside the inner circle, authoritarian rulers need to solicit input from societal actors. However, soliciting input from societal actors is difficult. Wintrobe (1998)

describes the dilemma dictators face: Opening up space for citizens to overcome their fear of repression and voice their true opinions can give way to social disorder, which could ultimately lead to authoritarian collapse (1998). Thus, authoritarian rulers must walk a fine line between allowing social space to emerge and controlling the resulting tensions (Stockmann 2013; Teets 2013). When autocrats succeed, input institutions such as the National People's Congress (Truex 2017) and local congresses (Manion 2008), village elections, the petitioning system, public deliberative meetings and legislative hearings, social organizations, and marketized media (Stockmann 2013, 6) allow authoritarian states to respond to societal forces in ways that facilitate the continuation of their rule (Nathan 2003).

The literature refers more commonly to the state's responsiveness to society than to the state's openness to societal input. While the two concepts overlap, the former is more expansive than the latter. In my understanding, the state's responsiveness captures not only the state's openness to societal input but also the capacity to act upon it. For instance, Chen, Pan, and Xu (2016) define responsiveness as "the extent to which officials in the regime adhere to the demands of societal actors" (2016, 384). For this project, however, the state's openness to societal input is sufficient because this affects the political opportunity structures (for details on this concept, see below) that societal actors face. While one could expect that societal actors would be even more encouraged to participate in foreign policy debates if they knew that the state would act upon their proposals, they do not need to be certain about this to voice their suggestions.

The state's openness to societal input is contingent upon the configuration of domestic structures. If one assumes state and society to be interlinked, as the discussion of state-society relations in authoritarian states above suggests, the state's openness to consider societal input is tied to societal actors' ability and willingness to provide such input. Political opportunity structures incentivize societal actors to participate in foreign policy debates and provide societal input that the state can consider. Developed in social movements and collective action research, political opportunity structures are "consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of

the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure" (Tarrow 1998, 76f.). The concept focuses on the perceived nature of opportunities and primarily involves mobilizing resources external to the group (Tarrow 1998, 77). Dellmuth and Bloodgood (2019) point out that "opportunity structures refer to specific institutional arrangements, resource configuration, and policy environments" (2019, 260).

Changes in domestic structures affect the political opportunity structures that societal actors face. Political opportunity structures give societal actors incentives to contribute to foreign policy debates by affecting their expectations regarding the costs of political mobilization and the likelihood of influence. For instance, centralizing political power by the authoritarian ruler would likely diminish societal actors' expectations for influence, giving them fewer incentives to participate in foreign policy debates. As for society's basic features, limits on societal actors' abilities to express themselves and to come together would increase their costs of political mobilization, which would also provide them with fewer incentives for voicing suggestions. The establishment of new channels through which input from societal actors can reach authoritarian leaders, however, would tell societal actors that they are more likely to exert influence, giving them more incentives to participate in foreign policy debates. The concept of political opportunity structures points to areas where such changes could occur. As stated above, Dellmuth and Bloodgood draw attention to institutional arrangements, resource configurations, and policy environments. Applied to this project, institutional arrangements include rules, norms, and procedures that enable expert involvement in policy-making. Resource configurations refer to resources available to think-tankers and scholars to do their work. Changes in the government's funding for universities and think tanks could lead to changes in resource configurations, for example. Lastly, policy environments describe the overall atmosphere in which foreign policy debates unfold in the country, including signals regarding how the government envisions its relationship with societal actors. In the next chapter, I will operationalize these concepts and apply them to the Chinese context.

In this section, I conceptualized the two structural variables that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest. Societal actors' proximity to the state depends on formal ties and interactions with state institutions. The state's openness to societal input is contingent upon the configuration of domestic structures that are prone to change. In the next section, I will deduce hypotheses from the dissertation's theoretical argument that integrates these two structural variables.

3.5 Hypotheses

In this dissertation, I argue that societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input facilitate and constrain societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest in authoritarian regimes. When societal actors are close to the state, and the state is open to societal input, societal actors have the most influence on the official construction of the national interest. When societal actors are distant from the state and the state is not open to societal input, societal actors have the least influence on the official construction of the national interest. Finally, when societal actors are close to the state and when the state is not open to societal input, and when societal actors are distant from the state and the state is open to societal input, societal actors still somewhat influence the official construction of the national interest.

To illustrate the four conditions under which societal actors can influence the official construction of the national interest, introduced in section 3.1, I illustrate them by drawing on the metaphor of a family road trip. First, I describe how the different components of the theoretical argument are represented in the metaphor. Imagine a family of four embarking on a trip. In this metaphor, the national interest is the family road trip. The construction of the national interest equals the practices of driving the car and planning the route. The specific configuration of domestic structures is represented by the car. The state appears as the surroundings in which the road trip takes place. Most importantly, this covers the number of roads from which one can choose to get to the destination and the opportunities for taking a break along the way. The

metaphorical equivalent of societal actors' proximity to the state is the ability to operate the vehicle and decide where to go and when to stop. The ability to decide on where to go and when to stop depends on how familiar one is with the surroundings. The state's openness to societal input is represented in the metaphor as societal actors' abilities to make use of the surroundings during their trip, for example through using certain roads instead of others or stopping at certain rest stops and not others. During the road trip, four positions can be taken in the car: Family members can sit in the driver's seat, in the co-driver's seat, in the back seat, and the trunk.

I now demonstrate how the metaphor illustrates the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest. Each position in the metaphor relates to one of the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest. First, when the state is open to societal input and when the societal actor is close to the state, the societal actor has the most influence on the official construction of the national interest. The person in the driver's seat has an excellent view of the surroundings and is highly capable of acting upon it because they are operating the car and can just decide which roads to take or where to rest. As a result, the person in the driver's seat has the most influence over the family road trip. Second, when the state is not open to societal input and the societal actor is close to the state, the societal actor can somewhat influence the official construction of national interest. This applies to the person in the co-driver's seat. In our metaphor, the person next to the driver has a good view of the surroundings but has fewer opportunities to act upon it. Hence, the person in the co-driver's seat has only some influence over the road trip. Third, when the state is open to societal input and the societal actor is distant from the state, it can also somewhat influence the official construction of the national interest. In our metaphor, this would apply to the people in the back. From their seats, they do not see much of the surroundings. However, their ability to make their voices heard, for example, regarding when to take a break are high. Fourth, when the state is not open to societal input and the societal actor is distant from the state, the societal actor's influence on the official construction of the national interest is smallest. This would apply to someone in the car's trunk.

They do not see much and are not able to operate the vehicle or make suggestions on the route. Hence, they have only little influence over the road trip.

It is critical to remember that we are talking about positions or conditions. This means a societal actor can move from one condition to another like family members can switch seats during their trip. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the conditions under which societal actors can influence the official construction of national interest with illustrations of the metaphor.

Table 3.2: Illustration of conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest

		Societal actors' proximity to the state	
		close	distant
The state's openness to societal input	open	<i>In the driver's seat</i> Most influence	<i>In the backseat</i> Some influence
	closed	<i>In the co-driver's seat</i> Some influence	<i>In the trunk</i> Least influence

From the theoretical argument that describes the conditions under which societal actors can influence the official construction of the national interest, I deduce four hypotheses to be applied to the Chinese context.

H1: When the state is open to societal input, and when the societal actors are close to the state, societal actors exert the most influence on the official construction of the national interest (*in the driver's seat*).

H2: When the state is open to societal input, and when the societal actors are distant from the state, the societal actors somewhat influence the official construction of the national interest (*in the back seat*).

H3: When the state is not open to societal input, and when the societal actors are close to the state, the societal actors somewhat influence the official construction of the national interest (*in the co-driver's seat*).

H4: When the state is not open to societal input, and when the societal actors are not close to the state, the societal actors exert the least influence on the official construction of the national interest (*in the trunk*).

In the remainder of this dissertation, I examine under what conditions Chinese university scholars and analysts at Chinese think tanks influence the official construction of China's national interest. In other words, I show in which positions university scholars and think tank analysts sit during the family road trip and discuss possible changes of positions. The hypotheses spelled out here will guide the empirical analysis.

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter first introduced the dissertation's explanatory objective: under what conditions do societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest and the dissertation's theoretical argument. In the following three sections, I elaborated on the conceptualization of the argument's main components, that is, the official construction of the national interest (the study's dependent variable), societal constructions of the national interest (the study's independent variable), and the two structural variables that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest, societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input based on the existing literature. In the last section, I deduced hypotheses describing the four conditions under which Chinese societal actors can influence the official construction of China's national interest from the theoretical argument and illustrated it with the family road trip metaphor. The hypotheses will guide the subsequent empirical analysis.

In the next chapter, I describe five analytical challenges that must be overcome to uncover the conditions under which Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's

national interest. These five analytical challenges are: figuring out how to map changes in the official construction of China's national interest, measuring societal actors' proximity to the state, identifying societal constructions of the national interest, assessing the fit between the official and societal constructions of the national interest, and measuring the state's openness to societal input. When detailing how I tackle these analytical challenges, I introduce the data this dissertation draws upon and describe how I analyze it.