

# Cultural Values and Democracy in the People's Republic of China

Tianjian Shi

Are the values and attitudes of ordinary people in the People's Republic of China (PRC) compatible with behaviour necessary for a liberal democracy to evolve? Or are they likely to obstruct such evolution? Some surveys conducted in recent years within the PRC asked people of different backgrounds and residential areas if they were interested in politics and governance issues, if they conversed with others about their political interests, and if they believed they had some control over their political life. These and other related questions produced survey findings which are discussed and interpreted below to provide some conjectures about the questions posed above.

## *Political Culture and Democratization*

Some classic research works about political culture and the evolution of Western democracies offer insights for understanding how non-democratic countries have developed.<sup>1</sup> Almond and Verba, for example, tried to explain why some democratic societies avoided severe crises but others did not.<sup>2</sup> Their study found that for democracy to be vital, citizens obeyed their leaders and the law even as they questioned and challenged political authority in their everyday life.<sup>3</sup> They concluded that if democracy was to survive a severe crisis, citizens had to be involved in politics and seek relevant information and knowledge to improve their government's efficiency.<sup>4</sup>

1. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1958); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in Forty-three Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Alex Inkeles, "Making men modern: on the causes and consequences of individual change in six developing countries," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (1969), pp. 209–255; Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, *Becoming Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Larry Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

2. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, p. 19

3. See Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1980); Among the features of a "participant citizenship" as identified by Inkeles, that might be considered especially important for democracy are an active interest in public affairs, as validated by keeping informed and expressed through participants in civic actions, and an orientation towards modern forms of authority and objective rules rather than towards traditional and/or arbitrary forms of authority. See Inkeles, "Making men modern," pp. 208–255.

4. Lucian W. Pye and Sidney Verba, *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Leonard Binder *et al.*, *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Lucian W. Pye, *The*

Other studies found that as democracies evolved in the West, their leaders and elites learned they needed citizenry support because at election time other politicians could replace them. But to exercise their voting power, citizens had to evaluate their leaders intelligently, participate in direct elections and work continually to improve the government's performance.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between political culture and authoritarian regimes was different. Some studies argued that political culture was nothing more than the popular faith and trust of the people in their powerful leaders.<sup>6</sup> In the case of imperial China, citizens only connected to the state in a hierarchical relationship, different from the reciprocal relationship of people and their governments in Western democracies.<sup>7</sup> In China the people were expected to be obedient and respectful to their rulers, who in turn were expected by the people to use state power to protect and nourish them. In fact, imperial subjects had the moral right to use violence to replace their leaders if they failed in their duties to provide for the people. But they were never to question and challenge imperial authority. In ordinary life, they peacefully resolved their everyday difficulties and conferred maximum loyalty on authority figures such as parents, local officials and the emperor.<sup>8</sup> This behaviour was the opposite of citizens in a liberal democracy, who obeyed the law while asserting their rights and standing up for democratic institutions.<sup>9</sup> According to Lucian Pye, a very different political culture from that of Western democracies propped up authoritarian rule in East Asia over the centuries.

Citizens in a liberal democracy also believed in the benefits of a

---

*footnote continued*

*Dynamics of Chinese Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1981); Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Tai-chun Kuo and Ramon H. Myers, "The great transition: political change and the prospects for democracy in the Republic of China on Taiwan," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1988), pp. 115–133; Lucian W. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures*, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies, No. 59 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1988); David Myers and John Martz, "Political culture theory and the role of professionals: data from Venezuela," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (June 1997), pp. 331–355.

5. Sidney Hook, *Reason, Social Myth, and Democracy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1950) as cited in Kyong-Dong Kim, "The mixed role of intellectuals and higher education in building democratic political culture in the Republic of Korea," in Diamond, *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*, p. 12.

6. Alex Inkeles, "National character and modern political system," in Francis L.K. Hsu (ed.), *Psychological Anthropology: Approaches to Culture and Personality* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1961).

7. Lucian W. Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, New Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 93.

8. In Western culture consensus is supposed to be achieved through competition of different interests according to certain procedures. Almond argues that one of the most important cultural values conducive to democratic development is the belief in the possibility and desirability of political co-operation mixed with a belief in the legitimacy of conflict. However, consensus in traditional Chinese political culture is supposed to be achieved by individuals giving up their private interests for collective ones. Those who dare to give voice to particular interests are usually regarded as selfish. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre*, pp. 58–59.

9. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, p. 262.

capitalist market economy, which efficiently generated enormous wealth. Moreover, democratic governance was also compatible with the development of the capitalist market economy. Democracy made possible continuous political reform, so that capitalist economic development and the evolution of democracy naturally became intertwined.<sup>10</sup>

### *Understanding Chinese Political Culture*

If a society's political culture comprises different values, norms, attitudes and beliefs that influence political behaviour,<sup>11</sup> then the following four attitudes are judged to be compatible with those held by citizens in liberal democracies: popular attitudes towards politics, political efficacy, attitudes towards power and authority, and attitudes towards reform.

*Popular attitudes towards political and governmental affairs.* In a democracy, citizens must be interested in their government's decision-making process and monitor the performance of their leaders and representatives.<sup>12</sup> Citizenry interest in politics can be measured by examining how many people rely on newspapers, television and radio to acquire their political information. Another approach is to judge how well people understand political and governmental issues. These two approaches were used to survey a sample of ordinary Chinese people and determine if they cared about democracy and its practices.

Table 1 shows that many people in mainland China in 1993 were interested in political and governmental affairs. Note that around one-quarter of the Chinese interviewed reported reading newspapers at least once a week, a figure higher than that found in Italy in the 1960s. Because of the limited number of Chinese newspapers available (virtually all are controlled by the government), most news has a political content. But when people's access to the electronic media is considered, this reveals that a higher percentage of people acquire information about political and

10. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 16. Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 64 and Diamond, *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*, p. 71.

11. Recent research using this approach to Chinese political culture include Qi Min, *Zhongguo zhengzhi wenhua: minzhu zhengzhi nanchan de shehui xinli yinsu* (Chinese Political Culture: Elements of Social-Psychological Difficulties in Democratic Politics) (Yunan: Yunan People's Publishing House, 1989); Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural requisites for democracy in China: findings from a survey," *Daedalus*, Vol. 122, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 95–124; Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Left and right with Chinese characteristics: issues and alignments in Deng Xiaoping's China," *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (July 1996), pp. 522–550; Siu-Kai Lau and Hsin-Chi Kuan, *The ETHOS of the Hong Kong Chinese* (1988); Tianjian Shi, "Cultural impacts on political trust: a comparison of mainland China and Taiwan," *Comparative Politics* (forthcoming)

12. Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1972); Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Samuel H. Barnes *et al.*, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hill: Sage, 1979).

governmental affairs than in nearly every other society: more than 65 per cent of people reported that they followed accounts of politics and governmental affairs on radio and television at least once a week. In the 1990s, the PRC experienced extensive technological innovation, especially the spread of television.

Although media access is widely used by students of political culture to measure people's political interest, there are two problems about this information. First, the media function differently in democratic and communist societies. While mass media in the former provide people with independent information on politics and governmental affairs, in the latter the Communist Party controls all information to indoctrinate people in the official ideology.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the high level of media access in China may actually indicate the success of the regime in mobilizing its citizens rather than a high level of political interest in the society.

But while the government tries to monopolize political information, some citizens try to break out and gather independent information from unofficial channels.<sup>14</sup> To check the validity of these indicators, we asked our respondents to report whether they had tried to gather information through "grapevine rumours" about economic, social and political affairs. If a person sought information from independent sources, we know that the person is deeply interested in politics. Among all respondents, 27.6 per cent reported they tried to seek information from unofficial channels. This figure, nearly identical to the percentage of respondents who reported they read newspapers and listened to radios, suggest that one out of four is seriously committed to trying to obtain reliable information.

A second problem is that when people access the mass media, they do not necessarily ponder its content and meaning. Those not interested in politics and public affairs will surely not engage in public discussions. A better way to measure political interest is to show how frequently people talk to each other about political matters. Talking with others about politics is an active form of political participation, whereas accessing the media is relatively passive. Moreover, talking about politics implies a degree of self-assurance in order to speak out. Almond and Verba have pointed out, "talking politics means taking a chance; in totalitarian countries, a big chance."<sup>15</sup> Finally, political discourse is a necessary step before considering political action.<sup>16</sup> To examine these issues, we asked respondents whether they had engaged in political discussion with others, and Table 2 presents the findings.

13. Donald Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* (1977), Alex Inkeles, C. Montgomery Brodard and Zhongde Cao, "Causes and consequences of individual modernity in China," *China Journal*, No. 37 (January 1997), pp. 31–59.

14. Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing*.

15. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, p. 79.

16. Lester Milbrath and M. L. Goel, *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1977). Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, Verba, Nie and Kim, *Participation and Political Equality*; Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Table 1: Following Reports of Public Affairs in the Various Media by Nation

<i>Percentage who follow accounts</i>	<i>U.S.</i>	<i>U.K.</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Mexico</i>
In newspapers at least weekly	49	43	53	24	16	31
On radio or television at least weekly	58	36	52	65.4	20	28
Radio	—	—	—	26.3	—	—
TV	—	—	—	60	—	—
In magazines (ever)	57	21	45	—	26	25
Through the grapevine (last month)	—	—	—	26.7	—	—
Total number	970	963	955	3,296	995	1,007

*Note:*

Actual text of the questions in China are "Did you read the news in a newspaper last week?" "Did you have a chance to listen to news broadcast on a domestic radio station last week?" "Did you have a chance to listen to news broadcasts on foreign radio stations last week?" "Did you have a chance to watch TV news last week?" "Last month, did you hear anything through the 'grapevine' (*xiaodao xtaoxi*) concerning economics, politics, or society?"

*Sources:*

Data from China come from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation. Data from other countries come from Table II.5 in Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

Table 2: Frequency of Talking Politics with Other People, by Nation

<i>Percentage who report they</i>	<i>U.S.</i>	<i>U.K.</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Mexico</i>
Never talk politics	24	29	39	55.3	66	61
Sometimes talk politics	76	70	60	44.4	32	38
Others and don't know	0	–	1	0.3	2	–
Total percentage	100	99	100	99.9	100	99
Total number	970	963	955	3,296	995	1,007

*Note:*

Actual text of the questions in China are “Do you often, occasionally, sometimes or never talk about political issues and national affairs with other people?”

*Sources:*

Data from China come from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation. Data from other countries come from Table II.5 in Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

Again, the percentage of people in mainland China who talk about politics with others falls between the high level of Germany and the low levels registered for Italy and Mexico. Although open criticism of the government in the mass media is still not allowed in mainland China, this finding suggests that among people concerned with politics and governmental affairs, there exists considerable self-assurance that one can discuss political issues with family, friends, neighbours, work groups and colleagues. If one-quarter of the population in China is now deeply interested in political and governmental affairs, the proportion of people psychologically involved in discussing political matters is even higher than in Italy, a democratic society.

*Political efficacy.* Political efficacy refers to a feeling that one has some control over one's political environment. Without any political efficacy, there exists political apathy and withdrawal from political life, and strong feelings of efficacy tend to make people interested in political activities. Such feelings are necessary for a democracy to work. Political efficacy can be divided into internal and external efficacy. The former refers to one's competence to understand politics and to participate effectively in political life; the latter refers to beliefs regarding how responsive governmental authorities and organizations are to the demands of citizens.<sup>17</sup>

We asked eight questions to measure political efficacy and present their responses in Table 3. The distribution pattern suggests that the measure of external efficacy among ordinary Chinese exceeds that for internal efficacy. Except for one indicator measuring efficacious feelings regarding work-unit affairs, the percentage of respondents who gave positive responses to measures of internal efficacy ranged from 19.2 to 28.3. At the same time, the percentage of people who gave positive answers to measures of external efficacy ranged from 25.1 to 43.4. The right side of the table reports the exploratory factor analysis of these eight variables: four internal efficacy questions have rather high loadings on a single factor and the four external efficacy questions have reasonably high loadings on another factor.

Without comparable data, we do not know whether the efficacious feeling in China is low or high. Almond and Verba measured civic competence by asking respondents to imagine themselves in a government office and having a problem requiring official action. How did they think they would be treated? Those believing the government would treat

17. Robert A. Lane, *Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1959); George I. Balch, "Multiple indicators in survey research: the concept 'sense of political efficacy'," *Political Methodology*, No. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 1-43; Kenneth M. Coleman and Charles L. David, "The structural context of politics and dimensions of regime performance: their importance for the comparative study of political efficacy," *Comparative Political Studies*, No. 9 (1976), pp. 189-206; Stephen C. Craig, Richard G. Niemi and Glenn E. Silver, "Political efficacy and trust: a report on the NES pilot study items," *Political Behavior*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1990), pp. 289-314; Richard G. Niemi, Stephen C. Craig and Franco Mattei, "Measuring internal political efficacy in the 1988 national election study," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (1991), pp. 1407-13



Table 3: Internal and External Efficacy in Percentages of Chinese Population

<i>Percentage who are</i>	<i>Efficacious</i>	<i>Not efficacious</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Factor 1 loading</i>	<i>Factor 2 loading</i>
Understand politics/governmental affairs like others	28.2	56.1	16	0.77	–
Understand political issues facing the country	27.3	57.3	5.4	0.73	–
Understand village/work unit affairs	50.3	41.8	7.8	0.72	–
I am qualified to participate in politics	19.2	70.2	10.6	0.73	–
People like me have no say in the work unit/village	27.0	68.6	4.4	–	0.67
People like me have no say in politics	43.4	47.4	9.2	–	0.58
Work unit/village leaders don't care about people like me	34.9	56.3	8.9	–	0.75
Government officials don't care about people like me	25.1	60.4	14.4	–	0.63
N = 3,296					
Eigenvalues				2.30	1.44
% of variance explained				28.77	18.02

*Note:*

Actual text of the questions: "Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements?" "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country." "I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people." "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding issues concerning my work unit/village as most people." "I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics." "In our unit/village, people like me have no say in public affairs." "People like me have no say in politics and governmental affairs." "Leaders in my work unit/village don't care what people like me think." "Government officials don't care too much about what people like me think."

The answers to these questions are first recorded. Strongly agree and agree answers are combined to form one category and strongly disagree and disagree answers are combined to form another. In most cases, agreement with the statement is the more "efficacious" answer except for three questions in which the disagreement with the statement is the efficacious answer.

*Source:*

Data from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation.



them equally are supposed to have civic competence. We asked our respondents how they thought they would be treated by their government, and their answers are compared in Table 4 with data from Almond and Verba's study.

The pattern that emerges seems similar to that reported in Table 3. The distinction between the United States, Britain and Germany, and China, Italy and Mexico compares well for political efficacy. The level of civic competence in mainland China is higher than that in Italy and Mexico. Because Italy is a democratic society, China again passes the threshold for the minimal level of democratic behaviour to take place.<sup>18</sup>

*Attitudes toward power and authority.* In democratic societies, citizens elect their officials to make public policy. If the government fails to provide people with good policy and accountability, or if government officials are not "good men or women," citizens will replace them. For that to occur, citizens must view their relationship with the state as a reciprocal one, and they are willing to enter into conflict with others to advance their interests.

How do people in mainland China perceive their relationship with authority? Are they willing to enter into conflict with others to advance their interests? We designed six questions to measure people's attitudes, which are presented in Table 5. A majority of people perceive the relationship between the individual and the state to be hierarchical, and less than 15 per cent perceive their relationship with authority to be reciprocal.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, we found substantially more people willing to enter into conflict with others to promote their own interests.

Are the attitudes of Chinese people towards power and authority an impediment to democratization? Without comparative data, no concrete answer can be given. Because such a low percentage of the population sees its relationship with the authorities as reciprocal, few people want to replace their government even if it did not deliver what they want. This is not to say that a transition to democracy cannot occur in China. However, the finding suggests that such a transition, if it indeed happens, is more likely to be the product of endogenous change within the system.

*Attitudes towards political and economic reform.* Since the seminal work of Barrington Moore, political scientists have realized that democracy is associated with private property, capitalism and a bourgeoisie.<sup>20</sup> The ruling elites in communist societies always believed they must control the society, mobilize resources and suppress any opposition. Communist ideology dictated that the state control property, the means of

18. The finding that the level of external efficacy in mainland China is higher than that of the internal efficacy indicates some political stability. This is because those who are capable of participating in politics usually believe those in authority are responsive to their demands.

19. More people tell our interviewers that they believe children need not obey their parents unconditionally.

20. Barrington Moore, Jr, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

Table 4: Expectation of Treatment by Governmental Bureaucracy, by Nation

Percentage who say	U.S.	U.K.	Germany	China	Italy	Mexico
They expect equal treatment	83	85	65	51.7	53	42
They don't expect equal treatment	9	7	9	38.3	13	50
Depends	4	6	19	—	17	5
Other	—	—	—	1.1	6	—
Don't know	4	2	7	8.9	11	3
Total percentage	100	98	100	99.9	100	100
Total number	970	963	955	3,296	995	1,007

Note:

Actual text of the questions in China: "If there was a certain problem which you needed the help of a government official to resolve, do you think you would be given equal treatment? That is, do you think the government would treat you the same as others?"

Sources:

Data from China come from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation. Data from other countries come from Table 11.5 in Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

Table 5: Orientation Towards Power and Authority, in Percentages of Chinese Population

<i>Percentage who are</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Factor 1 loading</i>	<i>Factor 2 loading</i>
Individual is cog in machine	14.9	71.1	15.0	0.77	–
Government officials like family heads	18.2	73.3	8.5	0.74	–
Senior people resolve conflict	16.6	81.6	1.8	0.57	–
Children should obey parents	63.6	35.7	0.7	–	0.78
Wife should obey mother-in-law	41.8	66.6	1.6	–	0.74
Accommodate other people	34.0	61.6	4.4	–	0.61
	N = 3,296				
Eigenvalues				2.02	1.11
% of variance explained				33.74	18.57

*Note:*

Actual text of the questions: "Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements?"

"Top government officials are like the head of a big family. Their decisions on national issues should be followed by everyone." "The state is like a big machine and the individual is but a small cog, with no independent status." "Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask." "If conflict occurs, one should ask senior people to uphold justice." "When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother." "When one has a disagreement with someone, the best way to deal with it is to accommodate the other person."

The answers to these questions are first recoded. Strongly agree and agree answers are combined to form one category and strongly disagree and disagree answers are combined to form another.

*Source:*

Data from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation.

Table 6: Attitudes Towards Political and Economic Reform

<i>Percentage who say</i>	<i>Traditional reform position</i>	<i>Against (too fast)</i>	<i>DK &amp; NA</i>	<i>Factor 1 loading</i>	<i>Factor 2 loading</i>
Government restrictions on individual incomes	27.6	62.9	9.5	0.82	–
Government restriction on private enterprises	22.7	61.5	15.8	0.82	–
The country needs political reform	57.5	10.4	32.1	–	0.74
Pace of political reform	11.5	24.1	21.2	–	0.74
Eigenvalues	N = 3,296				
Percent of variance explained				1.35	1.09
				33.12	26.72

*Note:*

Actual text of the questions are: "Some people think that an individual's legal income should not be restricted no matter how much it is. Others believe that a certain limit needs to be set for a minority whose income is especially high. What is your opinion?" "Some people think private enterprise in our country has developed to the point where it has shaken the economic foundations of the public ownership system, and it should be restricted. There are also some who think that the development of private enterprise is good for the national economy, and should not be restricted. What is your opinion?" "Some people believe that the pace of political reform in our country in recent years has been too fast, others think it has been too slow, and still others think it has been just right. What is your opinion?" "Some people believe that our country not only needs to conduct economic reform, but also needs to speed up political reform. Others think that political reform will cause instability and should not be carried out now. What is your opinion?"

*Source:*

Data from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation.

production and production itself. Although in the last two centuries democratization was often accompanied by an enlarged role for the state to protect individual liberties and economic well-being, in the former socialist countries the state's role has diminished.<sup>21</sup> What are the attitudes of ordinary Chinese towards their economic and political system? What do they perceive to be the proper role of government in economic life? How many people want to reform their political system?

We asked respondents four questions, two of which examined attitudes about the state limiting individual income and private ownership, and two of which examined attitudes toward the pace of political reform. Table 6 shows that a majority of Chinese support reform of both the political and the economic systems. While more than 60 per cent of respondents support private ownership and oppose government restrictions on income inequality, a majority of respondents (57.5 per cent) also believe that China needs political reform. Less than 10 per cent believed the current reforms were moving too slowly and wanted more political change. At the same time, about 25 per cent believe the current pace of political reforms are moving too quickly and want them slowed down.

### *The Relationship of Social Cleavages, Elections and Political Culture in Mainland China*

How are citizen attitudes and preferences distributed throughout China's social strata? If we had some idea about this distribution pattern, we could offer some conjectures about the relationship between political culture and political development. Moreover, as the three marketplaces develop, different social groups will become wealthy, have access to power, gain education and acquire social status. These complex developments can strengthen or weaken those attitudes and value preferences favourable for promoting democracy. This section briefly examines how some recent changes in education, income, gender, political power, age, rural elections and influence correlate with popular attitudes and value preferences.

Considerable research suggests that improved education can change people's orientation towards political activity, make them become deeply involved in politics<sup>22</sup> and strengthen their convictions to participate in politics.<sup>23</sup> Our findings indicated that citizen education is only weakly

21. Ada W. Finifter and Ellen Mickiewicz, "Redefining the political system of the USSR: mass support for political change," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (December 1992), pp. 857–874; Arthur H. Miller, Vicki L. Hesli and William M. Reisinger, "Reassessing mass support for political and economic change in the former USSR," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 399–411; Ada W. Finifter, "Attitudes toward individual responsibility and political reform in the former Soviet Union," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 138–152.

22. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (1959), pp. 69–105; Karl W. Deutsch, "Social mobilization and political development," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (1961), pp. 493–514; Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*.

23. Neil Wollman and Robin Stouder, "Believed efficacy and political activity: a test of the specificity hypothesis," *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 131, No. 4, pp. 557–566; Norman H. Nie, Bingham G. Powell Jr. and Kenneth Prewitt, "Social structure and political

correlated with political efficacy, weakly supports political change, and negatively influences support for economic reform based on privatization and reducing government management of the economy. Other findings also indicated that more economic wealth in China does not necessarily make people become more politically efficacious. Income is only weakly associated with internal efficacy and has no effect on external efficacy. Income negatively influences attitudes towards economic reform that emphasizes privatization and does not influence attitudes towards political reform.

Why do our findings show that increasing economic wealth in China has no influence on popular attitudes to support economic reform?<sup>24</sup> One reason is that the lower strata are poor and want government policies that help them to alleviate their poverty. But unlike the urban people, the rural poor of China benefited from economic reform and *de facto* privatization. Their experiences primed them to expect that more privatization and less government intervention would bring them an even better life. Their attitudes differ from those of the lower strata in other societies, who prefer more government intervention in the economy.

The wealthy in China worry about preserving social stability so they can continue enjoying the benefits of economic reform. They also realize that economic reforms require a "safety net" for the needy population. Because the current reforms fail to provide any specific safety net, they favour state intervention in the economy to create one. This finding is consistent with conditions in the Soviet Union before it collapsed.<sup>25</sup> Most people in China are still peasants, so there exists solid popular support for economic reform.

In mainland China the regime tried very hard to mobilize women, but, as hard as the regime tried to transform political culture, Chinese women played only a small role in political life and feel more neglected than

---

footnote continued

participation: developmental relationships, part I," *American Political Science Review*, No. 63, No. 2 (1969), pp. 361–378; Norman H. Nie, Bingham G. Powell Jr. and Kenneth Prewitt, "Social structure and political participation: developmental relationships, part II," *American Political Science Review*, No. 63, No. 3 (1969), pp. 808–832; Balch, "Multiple indicators in survey research"; Albert Bandura, "Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (1977), pp. 191–215; Albert Bandura, "Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (February 1982), pp. 122–147; Philip H. Pollock III, "The participatory consequences of internal and external political efficacy: a research note," 36 (1983), pp. 400–409.

24. Among Soviet emigrés, the more highly educated are more likely to favour private/individual rights and solutions to problems over collective/state rights and solutions. See James R. Millar, *Politics, Work, and Daily Life in the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). More recently, Duch found that the correlation between education and endorsement of free-market culture variables is negative. See Duch, "Tolerating economic reform." The Iowa survey of the former Soviet Union found the correlation between education and the four-item locus of responsibility index is positive and significant (Pearson  $r = 0.19$  and  $0.15$  in 1991 and 1992 respectively). See Miller, Hesli and Reisinger, "Reassessing mass support for political and economic change in the former USSR," table 2.

25. See among others Finifter and Mickiewicz, "Redefining the political system of the USSR," Ada W. Finifter, "Attitudes toward individual responsibility and political reform in the former Soviet Union," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 138–152.

men. Men are more likely than women to be interested in politics and governmental affairs, they are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of understanding and participating in politics, and they are more confident of their ability to influence the decisions of government officials. Women were supposed to take care of domestic affairs and let men be responsible for activities outside the family. They usually bore the burden of handling domestic matters, so that men had more leisure time than women. Thus, women are less concerned about politics and participating in politics.

There is no gender gap in people's orientation towards power and authority, although Chinese men seem to pursue their interests more aggressively. Men and women equally support economic reform, but men are slightly more likely to support political reform than women. These findings are consistent with those in both the former Soviet Union and the West, which show that women usually have less political interest and less efficacy but are politically conservative and tend to support the status quo more than men.<sup>26</sup>

Because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dominates the political centre, its control over society affects the attitudes of Party members towards reform and has a significant influence on the future of China's political change.<sup>27</sup> If Party members favour reform more than non-Party members, future reform in Chinese society is a more likely prospect. But whether CCP membership will promote democratic values is unclear.<sup>28</sup>

26. M. Kent Jennings, Klaus R. Allerbeck and Leopold Rosenmayr, "Generation and families: general orientations," in Barnes *et al.*, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, pp. 449–486; M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *Generations and Politics: A Panel Study of Young Adults and Their Parents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); M. Kent Jennings, "Gender roles and inequalities in political participation: results from an eight-nation study," *Western Political Quarterly*, No. 36 (1983), pp. 364–385; Robert Y. Shapiro and Harpreet Mahajan, "Gender differences in policy preferences: a summary of trends from the 1960s to the 1980s," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, No. 50 (1986), pp. 43–61; M. Kent Jennings *et al.*, *Continuities in Political Action: A Longitudinal Study of Political Orientations in Three Western Democracies* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990); Ellen Carnagham and Donna Bahry, "Political attitudes and the gender gap in the USSR," *Comparative Politics*, July 1990, pp. 379–399; M. Kent Jennings, "Political participation in the Chinese countryside," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 361–372.

27. See Minxin Pei, "'Creeping democratization' in China," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (October 1995), pp. 65–79; Minxin Pei, "The fall and rise of democracy in East Asia," in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy in East Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 57–78; Tianjian Shi, "Village committee elections in China: institutionalist tactics for democracy," *World Politics*, No. 3 (April 1999), pp. 385–412. In fact, the introduction of semicompetitive elections in rural China has been characterized as endogenous by several students of Chinese politics. They argue that the success of the electoral reform depends on the efforts of local and incumbent party and officials. See Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing political reform in China's villages," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (July 1994), pp. 35–59; Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese debate over village self-government," *China Journal*, No. 37 (January 1997), pp. 63–86; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li article in this volume.

28. Barrett L. McCormick, *Political Reform in Post-Mao China: Democracy and Bureaucracy in a Leninist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Barrett L. McCormick, "Democracy or dictatorship? A response to Gordon White," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 31 (January 1994), pp. 95–110; Barrett L. McCormick, "China's Leninist parliament and public sphere: a comparative analysis," in Barrett L. McCormick and Jonathan Unger, *China After Socialism* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 29–53.



Our findings about the relationship between CCP membership and democratic orientations show that CCP members are interested in and knowledgeable about politics; they are more confident in their ability to understand and participate in politics; and they are more likely than other groups to perceive government officials as being responsive to people's demands. Members of the CCP are also more willing than non-members to engage in conflict with others to protect their own interests. However, we found no statistically significant difference between Party members and non-members in terms of their attitudes towards power and authority. Finally, Party members were not strongly supportive of privatization, but they aggressively supported political reform.

As for attitudes and preferences for different age groups, our empirical results show that age has only a moderate influence on political interests and on people's attitudes towards power and authority. The relationships between age and internal efficacy and between age and economic reform are very weak, and no significant relationship exists between age and external efficacy and support for political reform.

Turning to rural elections, have grassroots elections had any impact on people's value orientations? Do they produce a traumatic social change that can alter the political culture? Our analyses of grassroots elections and various aspects of political culture show that elections can hardly change political culture. Except for any psychological involvement in politics, grassroots elections are in no way associated with any of the other cultural attitudes and values examined above. They have had little impact so far on democratic sentiment – either because the rules of the political game at the grassroots level cannot induce cultural change in Chinese society, or because grassroots elections do not constitute a traumatic political event that can induce cultural change among the Chinese population.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, we can find no evidence of traumatic cultural discontinuity caused by grassroots elections.

In Table 7 there are six multiple regression equations (ordinary least squares) correlating different variables with five types of attitudes and orientations. These correlations indicate that the relationship between economic development and political culture is much more complicated than described by modernization theorists, who believe that increasing society's resources will change social attitudes and values.

Table 7 indicates that socio-economic resources can foster popular interest in politics and governmental affairs. For example, such things as education, income, gender, Party membership and grassroots elections explain 38 per cent of the variance of popular attitudes reflected in political life. Among those variables, education plays the most important role, followed by income and Party membership. The occurrence of grassroots elections also elevates people's interest in politics. In our bivariate analyses, age is negatively associated with psychological involvement in politics: the relationship between age and political interests disappeared. This finding should not be interpreted as indicating that age

29. Jun Liu and Lin Li, *Neauthoritarianism – the Debates on the Principle of Reform* (Beijing Economic Institute Press, date unknown), p. 32.

Table 7: Regression Equations for Democratic Values

Independent variables	Psychological involvement		Internal efficacy		External efficacy		Hierarchical orientation		Conflict avoidance	
	B	Beta	B	Beta	B	Beta	B	Beta	B	Beta
(Constant)	-0.88*** (0.10)		-0.77*** (0.16)		0.48** (0.16)		-0.08 (0.14)		0.51*** (0.14)	
Education by years	0.11*** (0.01)	0.42	0.04*** (0.01)	0.14	0.03*** (0.01)	0.1	0.06*** (0.01)	0.23	0.06*** (0.01)	0.22
Income	0*** 0	0.2	0 0	0	0 0	-0.03	0 0	0.13	0*** 0	0.12
Gender	0.17*** (0.03)	0.09	0.24*** (0.04)	0.12	0.15*** (0.04)	0.07	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01	0.01 (0.04)	0.01
Party membership	0.55*** (0.06)	0.14	0.34*** (0.08)	0.09	0.63*** (0.08)	0.17	0.1 (0.07)	0.03	0.25*** (0.07)	0.07
Age	0 (0.01)	-0.03	0.02 (0.01)	0.22	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.62	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.29	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.68
Age squares	0 0	0.02	0 0	-0.15	0*** 0	0.60	0* 0	0.26	0*** 0	0.55
Elections	0.14** (0.03)	0.04	0.02 (0.04)	0.01	0.11* (0.04)	0.05	0.04 (0.04)	0.02	0.07* (0.04)	0.04
R <sup>2</sup>	0.38		0.06		0.06		0.11		0.14	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.38		0.05		0.06		0.10		0.14	

Source:  
Data from 1993 nation-wide survey on political culture and political participation.

has no effect on political interests. It does. But younger people in China are more concerned about political and governmental affairs than older people because they are better educated and/or have higher incomes.<sup>30</sup>

While Table 7 shows that grassroots elections are significantly associated with political interests, it reveals little about the causal relationship between them. An alternative, competing explanation is to reverse the causal relationship between political interests and grassroots elections: rather than elections making people more interested in politics, those interested in politics are more likely to vote.<sup>31</sup> To determine the direction of causality in the relationship between grassroots elections and political interest, we replaced the variable “voting in elections” with the variable of “semicompetitive grassroots elections.” This new variable measures whether a village holds elections without regard to whether a particular respondent voted or not. People who fail to vote in grassroots elections can also report that semicompetitive elections are held at their residence. If the causal sign goes the other way – that is, greater psychological involvement in politics will cause people to vote in elections rather than elections making people become psychologically involved in politics – the new variable should have no independent (or a much weaker) effect on people’s psychological orientations, as compared with the variable used in the previous model. This analysis generated a similar result (not shown in the table). Thus, we conclude that grassroots elections can elevate people’s concern about politics and public affairs.

Socio-economic resources and elections are less successful in predicting people’s attitudes towards reform (the adjusted R-squares are 0.02 and 0.01). Education, age and grassroots elections also do not influence people’s attitudes towards reform. In fact, income is the only variable that has a significant impact on people’s attitudes towards economic reform. After one controls for effects of other variables, economic wealth is still negatively associated with support for economic reform. Finally, all the variance in support for political reform is derived from education. The higher the respondents’ education, the more likely they are to support political reform.

Higher levels of education and income play a significant role in making people transcend their traditional culture. People with higher education and income not only tend to perceive their relationship with authority as reciprocal but are also more willing to enter into conflict with others to assert their interests. The more traditional segments in Chinese society –

30. An alternative explanation is that the phenomenon is due to life-cycle effects. Without panel data, we could not rule out this important competing explanation; that is, young people are more concerned about politics because they are more energetic, but when they grow old, they leave public life and behave the same way as their predecessors. However, our findings suggest that this explanation is unlikely to be the case. Instead, generational effects better explain the relationship between age and political interests. Because the younger generation is better educated, they are more likely to be interested in politics.

31. In an analysis of 1990 survey data, the author found that political interests are closely associated with participation in semicompetitive grassroots elections, Tianjian Shi, “Voting and nonvoting in China: voting behavior in plebiscitary and limited choice elections,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (1999).

that is, people with less education and lower income – tend to perceive their relationship with authority as hierarchical and are more willing to forfeit pursuing their private interests for establishing social harmony. The relationship between age and any Confucian orientation appears to be a convex curve – the ageing process increases the likelihood for a respondent to hold Confucian orientations. The older the respondent, the more likely he will hold a traditional orientation towards power and authority. Grassroots elections cannot alter people's disposition towards power and authority, but they make people more assertive to articulate their interests.

Finally, our multivariate analyses show that education, gender and Party membership have positive effects on both internal and external efficacy. Education makes people see complexity, so the educated are more informed about their political system. Because they are more sophisticated, they know how to persuade or coerce local officials to comply with their demands. Age has no effect on internal efficacy. The relationship between age and external efficacy is again a convex curve. While middle-aged people tend to believe that government officials do respond to their demands, both younger and older people tend to think differently. Similarly, grassroots elections have no effects on internal efficacy, but they make people perceive government officials and village leaders as responding to their demands, even after we control for the effects of socio-economic status. The significant relationship between elections and external efficacy suggests that elections in China do make government officials at the grassroots level more responsive to people's demands than they would otherwise be.

### *Conclusion*

By comparing the distribution of certain attitudes and values in Chinese society with those of other societies that are compatible with democracy, it seems that some similarities exist. True, only 20 to 30 per cent of the population in China have attitudes favourable for democratic behaviour, but their share of the population exceeds that in some democratic societies.

Grassroots elections do not produce great change in people's orientations. People living where semicompetitive elections are held tend to be more interested in politics than people living in places without such elections. They also are more likely to believe government officials will respond to their demands, and they are more willing to enter into conflict with others to protect their interests. At the same time, grassroots elections have not yet changed people's attitudes towards power and authority nor made them support reform. These findings suggest that elections do have some influence on people's values but they are limited to specific popular values and preferences.

But it is China's elites who will play a crucial role in whether political change takes place in the near future. Whether they will initiate any political breakthrough like that in Taiwan when Chiang Kai-shek pro-

moted local elections and Chiang Ching-kuo initiated a democratic breakthrough remains to be seen. For such a breakthrough to occur on the Chinese mainland, remarkable elite mobilization will have to take place.