

**SURVEYING PUBLIC OPINION IN TRANSITIONAL CHINA:  
AN EXAMINATION OF SURVEY RESPONSE**

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This study investigates the usefulness of public opinion survey in China for political research. Using data from the World Values Survey and from several Chinese public opinion surveys, my central inquiry consists of three separate but interrelated issues: are public opinion survey data from China truthful, meaningful, and comparable? I frame these questions in a comparative perspective and in the transitional contexts of China. By examining the issues of item-nonresponse, norm-seeking response, and cross-national comparability, I show that the validity of survey responses in Chinese opinion surveys is mainly influenced by the respondents' cognitive ability, political interest, media exposure, and cultural difference. Political control is present in the form of response effect and information control, but it should not be a serious concern about the use of Chinese survey data.

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## PREFACE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: CHARTING THE VOYAGE OF INQUIRY

A few months before the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, a Chinese communist party journal, *Outlook Weekly (Liaowang)*, published the results from a social survey that was conducted in August, 1988, by the Sociological Institute of the Chinese Social Science Association (Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan) in collaboration with the State Statistical Bureau. The study surveyed 12,000 workers in 16 large cities about their political and social lives. The results revealed the rising intensity of the social conflicts at that time. For example, when asked what the most urgent problems to be resolved were, about two thirds of the respondents chose corruption in the communist party and over half of the respondents chose degenerating social morals. Moreover, about 28% of the respondents thought elections were meaningless and should be reformed. When asked about the most serious problems in the legal system, the respondents again set fire on the corruption of government officials and the poor quality of law enforcement. In answering what were the possible sources of the new social conflicts, 64.1% of the respondents chose rising price and 35.3% chose income gap. These findings indicated with confidence that public discontent aroused by corruption and inflation had prevailed and it would possibly cause social instability (Zhu 1989).

While news reports and individual letters to government offices provided many anecdotal details of the public discontent, the survey reflected the overall intensity of public reaction to corruption and inflation and drew attention from high level government officials, including Deng

Xiaoping. When Deng met with the President of Uganda in late March, 1989, and talked about the achievements and difficulties of China's ten years of reform, he conceived that the biggest failure of the reform was political education. He stated that, "after sober consideration, we think the failure (in political education) is even more serious than inflation. Most importantly, we failed to tell the people, including the members of the Communist Party, that we should keep our good tradition of thrifty even though we had great economic development and improvement in people's living standard. Only by following that tradition could we curb corruption" (Deng 1993: 290).

In the meantime, another survey report on social reaction under the reform was sent to Zhao Ziyang, the then General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through the channel of internal publication. The report was based on a series of surveys that had been conducted since 1987 by the China Social Survey System (CSSS) under the direction of Zhao's think tank, the Economic System Reform Institute of China (ESRIC). It indicated a sharp rise in public dissatisfaction and in the belief that the pace of reform was too fast. Dissatisfaction with the CCP, social morals, and prices were particularly higher in late 1988 than they were in early 1987. While only 20 percent said reform was too fast in early 1987, over one third said it was too fast by 1988. Meanwhile, the people's desire for more consumer goods continued to rise. When their desire could not be satisfied or secured by the reform, more discontent arose. Based on the evidence, Yang Guansan, the director of the CSSS, predicted that social disturbance might happen in spring 1989.<sup>1</sup>

The two survey reports to a great degree accurately reflected the social situation of China in late 1980's and successfully provided the information to policy-makers. However, history

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<sup>1</sup> Personal interview with Yang Guansan, 12/20/2005. Yang was accused of plotting the turmoil and was put into jail because of the report.

demonstrates that the Chinese government did not take effective action to ease the people's discontent and eventually led to the June 4<sup>th</sup> tragedy. One may expect that the opinion surveys should have been muffled after 1989 since they disclose public disapproval of government policies, which violates the conformity of socialist ideology and reflects the failure of socialist education. Surprisingly, not only have most of the old survey institutions survived, new survey organizations have mushroomed together with China's further economic growth and market transition. Government offices, marketing firms, international organizations, and academic researchers are all busy at conducting opinion surveys. They, though with different purposes, have collected abundant survey data for studying a variety of topics in transitional China.

However, the quality of survey data from China is often questioned by researchers. Survey quality can vary greatly depending on the availability of resources, the advancement of technology, the training and background of survey practitioners, and the cooperation of respondents. While most methodological concerns are general for surveys everywhere, the problems related to the validity of survey responses draw particular attention in China's political, social, and cultural contexts. First, some researchers claimed that "legitimate public opinion polling is practically impossible to conduct under authoritarian and totalitarian governments" (Warren 2001: 258). China is not a democracy. People still have limited, though much more than before, freedom of speech; they may have concerns when expressing their opinions in public opinion surveys. Moreover, China is a propaganda state. Individual opinions are confined by government information control and inculcation of official doctrine. It is questionable whether the survey responses are meaningful in public opinion research. Third, China is a developing country. A great number of Chinese people are poorly educated. They are likely to be limited by cognitive ability and have difficulty to form substantive opinions when

confronting complex survey questions. Fourth, China has a unique history and culture. It is possible that the Chinese have a different understanding from people in other countries even though the same questions are asked. Comparative studies thus may be misled by the superficial meaning of survey responses. For example, statistically significant differences found in studies among different populations may not mean that they have different opinions but are possibly caused by the different understanding of the concept due to cultural differences.

It should also be noted that China is in a great transition due to the effect of liberalization, modernization, and internationalization. The state has gradually loosened its control over society, media commercialization has greatly weakened the power of propaganda, education has been improved significantly, and China has become more open to the world. Then to what extent have the problems of the validity of survey responses been alleviated? This dissertation is an attempt to shed light on this question. It first investigates the impact of China's transition in the development of public opinion surveys. Subsequently it examines three separate but interrelated issues: is public opinion survey data from China truthful, meaningful, and comparable? The implications of public opinion surveys in China are discussed in the conclusion part.

The introduction to the present dissertation delineates how the scope of the study can be narrowed down to the validity of survey responses. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I first give a brief account on the relationship between survey research and public opinion, and point out that public opinion surveys pave a way for studying public opinion in non-democratic states. Then, based on a review of relevant literature, I describe the state of public opinion surveys in China and the contribution of opinion surveys to studies of Chinese politics. Next, I raise the

research question as a result of the problems of public opinion surveys in China. At the end of this chapter, I introduce the data sources for this study and outline the remaining chapters.

## 1.1 PUBLIC OPINION AND SURVEY RESEARCH

“Survey research is systematic data collection in a natural setting for the purpose of answering questions about a specified population” (Manion 1994: 743). Some surveys are done to describe the preferences of a population, which we usually call opinion polls; others are more concerned with explaining how such preferences are formed and how they relate to other factors. In this study, I refer to both types as *public opinion surveys*.

Public opinion surveys originated from America in the 1930s. It came into public attention in 1936 when a young man named George Gallup successfully predicted the winner of the presidential election based on his survey findings. Contrasted with straw polls, which are conducted among self-selected population, Gallup’s opinion polls were called “scientific” in that he used a statistical approach called random sampling to select respondents with controls. This application allowed the survey findings of small samples to be generalized to the entire population from which the samples are drawn. In those early years, opinion surveys were very costly and time-consuming because face-to-face interview was required to get a representative sample of a population. With the rapid development of telecommunication, especially increased telephone ownership and the advance of the computer, opinion surveys have become far more efficient and cost-effective. Moreover, some academic survey research centers, such as the Institute of Social Science (ISR) at the University of Michigan and the National Opinion

Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, were established to greatly improve the validity of this method.

The application of survey research into public opinion study to a great degree changed the meaning of public opinion. Public opinion used to be regarded as a clash of group interests (Herbst 1998), a process (Price and Roberts 1987; Crespi 1997), or a consensus through continual and institutional communication (Splichal 1999). Now public opinion is commonly accepted as an aggregation of individual opinions. Proponents of opinion survey research fervently embrace this definition and argue that this definition can ensure the representativeness of public opinion and make it methodologically manageable. Today, public opinion and the results of public opinion polls are often treated as identical (Asher 2001). However, by reducing public opinion to a series of numbers, critics of opinion survey research argue that it deprives the holistic feature of public opinion as a process in which horizontal communication plays an important part. It also ignores the reality of group politics that actually works in today's democracies by treating each individual equally (Glynn 1999; Splichal 1999). Nevertheless, public opinion surveys have become one of the dominant tools of studying public opinion and they have quickly expanded to other parts of the world, not only in virtually every Western-style democracies, but also in many communist states and numerous Third World countries (Worcester 1987; Warren 2001).

In most democratic systems, opinion polling is commonly used in three areas: political elections, political campaigns, and public policy research.

Opinion polling shares many features with political elections. First, both treat all votes (individual opinions) as equally important and give them the same weight. Second, both accomplish the results by aggregating all votes (individual opinions) in a straightforward way.

The interpretation of the results is seemingly more objective. Third, both aim to reflect general opinion representatively, which serves as the basis for the democratic process. Therefore, opinion polling is often used to find out people's preferences over candidates in advance of election days or even predict election outcomes. The media is a major sponsor of such polls. Many newspapers and TV stations at both national and local levels conduct polls on an *ad hoc* basis covering presidential and local elections as well as other social and political issues. Media polling is widely publicized. Both voters and candidates can easily learn polling results through the media (Atkin and Gaudino 1984; Ismach 1984).

The power of opinion polling also attracts attention from political parties or other political groups. They recognize that opinion polling is a valuable tool to promote political campaigns or group interests. They conduct private opinion polls, which use essentially the same methodology as media polls, but often deal with different issues and are used in a different way from media polls. First, through polling, they want to know what people are most concerned about and what kind of issues will motivate them. Candidates and partisan groups thus identify pivotal issues and calibrate their strategies accordingly. Second, private polls are used to develop image profiles of candidates and opponents, which usually include questions such as the knowledge of a candidate, voters' perception of a candidate's personality, capability, experience, knowledge of issues, and inclination to favor one group over another. Private polls can also pinpoint a candidate's relative strengths and weaknesses among various voter groups, such as members of a certain religion, gender, income, ethnic background, union affiliation, or other relevant demographic or political characteristics. Third, private polling is also used to measure the effect of campaign activities. Campaign organizations of some major races usually set up voter monitoring systems to track voters' preferences and reactions continuously through a

campaign. By doing so, they can evaluate the effect of a candidate's television appearance, participation in a debate, the quality of campaign literature, speeches, tours, and other campaign activities. Therefore, private polling can provide voters' information to political parties or groups so that they may consciously choose campaign strategies (Cantrell 1992; Declercq 1978; Levy 1984; West 1991).

Political pollsters found that opinion polls greatly attracted public attention during the height of election campaigns; however, during other periods people were also interested in public policy issues. Effective governance requires sufficient social information as an input as well as a feedback in the process of policy-making (Deutsch 1963). As a result, government agencies and other institutions found it desirable to sponsor opinion polling for policy research purpose (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). Opinion polls for policy research can cover a variety of policy issues, such as racial equality, health care, educational reform, energy program, environmental legislation, foreign relations, and other issues concerning social security. Like polls used in market research, which help corporations stay informed about their customers, opinion polls for policy research aim to keep government agencies and other institutions sensitive to public needs and preferences.

In non-democratic countries, without genuine political elections, opinion polling is not so commonly used by the media to find out the people's preferences over candidates or by political parties to adjust their strategies of political campaigns as it is in democratic systems. Instead, opinion polls serve both as a control mechanism and a device to assure adequate performance within the system in communist states. For example, scholars found that in the Soviet Union "the distinctive characteristics of public opinion in the Stalinist system, were, aside from its careful control and manipulation, its almost exclusively supportive function and its instrumental use as

simultaneously a safety valve and a device for uncovering malfunctions within the system” (Gitelman 1977: 2). Polls were conducted in the Soviet Union in the 1980’s to monitor the quality of state services and the officials whose departments got bad reports and were thus fired (Smith 1990). In East Germany, opinion research was also justified as a “policy tool employed to ensure the efficient control of society by the party elite ..., used in decision-making, in the evaluation of already implemented policies or in the manipulation and mobilization of the citizens” (Sieger 1990: 324-325).

Moreover, in some non-democratic systems, especially those under liberalization, opinion polling has been gradually used for political consultation in order to improve effective governance. These polls usually deal with demographic characteristics and behavior and avoid attitude questions and controversial topics. As Crespi comments, “political authorities in nondemocratic states do not plan to expect opinion research to be used to make them responsive to their subjects. Their use of polls is not a sign that they have accepted the political legitimacy of public opinion. At most, in both authoritarian and totalitarian states polls might be used for administrative purposes, analogous to the use of marketing research to enhance a company’s business planning” (Crespi 1997:144-145).

No matter for what purposes, public opinion surveys have not been unique in democratic societies. They have become a universal tool for public opinion research in all countries.

## **1.2 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY IN CHINA**

It was not a coincidence that public opinion surveys emerged and have developed quickly in post-Mao China. As a means to study political change in reformed China, public opinion

surveys are also under the influence of changing political situations. Dong Li (1994), in his doctoral dissertation, described three phases in the development of Chinese public opinion surveys. The first phase was from 1979 to mid-1982, when China was in its initial stage of economic reform. In this period, public opinion surveys emerged as a response to the imperative needs of studying youth problems, which reflected young people's confusions caused by the interacting effects of the unfolding reforms and the residual influences of the Cultural Revolution. These surveys were mostly conducted by official research institutions, like the Youth Research Institutes of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the Youth Section of the Institute of Sociology, and the Psychology Institute of the Chinese Social Science Academy. The second phase was from mid-1983 to 1989, which was China's most liberalized period. It witnessed that Chinese public opinion surveys have experienced a quick growth in terms of numbers, scales and a scope of topics. In this period, youth studies were still dominant, but the public's attitudes toward the reforms were also called into attention. Survey institutions have also expanded drastically. Official and semi-official survey institutions had developed wide survey networks, such as the survey groups under the State Statistical Bureau and under the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. China Social Survey System (CSSS), which was under the Chinese Economic System Reform Research Institute (ESRIC), conducted a series of public opinion surveys and played an active role in uncovering the public's feelings toward market reform. Some private survey institutions, though few, also entered this field, such as the Opinion Research Center of China (ORCC). The third phase was from 1989 to 1994 (when his dissertation was finished). Public opinion surveys confronted a tight restriction on topic selection and publication of polling results. Many survey institutions discontinued polling activities immediately after the Tiananmen tragedy. ESRIC was dissolved and so was CSSS.

Fortunately, ESRIC reemerged in July 1991 under a new name: the Chinese Economic Management and System Research Institute (CEMSRI) and resumed conducting opinion surveys in September 1991 (Li 1994). Since the mid-1990's, China has witnessed a rapid revival of public opinion survey research. The public's attitudes are widely studied, though certain sensitive topics, like those about the Communist Party, are still restricted (Smith 2004). Numerous survey organizations emerged, including those attached to government and quasi-government, academic institutions, and commercial companies (Tang 2005).

Even though public opinion survey research was still at its infant stage, it had shown a great effectiveness to detect the public pulse accurately. For example, ESRIC had conducted 14 longitudinal social surveys by the end of 1986. Results from these surveys revealed three stages in the evolution of mass attitudes. The first stage lasted from October 1984 to early 1995. It was marked by nationwide enthusiasm as a response to the initiation of the urban reforms. The second stage witnessed an increasing dissatisfaction in 1985. At the third stage, after 1985, "pluralism" in both discontent and desire arose (Rosen 1989). These surveys results provide a good source for understanding the changing society under reforms (Tang and Parish 2000).

The impact of public opinion surveys on the government-public relationship in China has attracted a few scholars' attention in the late 1980's (Reynolds 1987; Crespi 1989; Rosen 1989). Since China is not a democratic state, political responsiveness is excluded from scholars' interest. They admit that opinion polling in China has a practical function of providing guidance in the formulation of government policy. However, their studies mainly focus on the ideological functions of opinion polls in political and normative education and socialization. Crespi states that, "the purpose of polling in China is to enable the still totalitarian government to pursue its

goals more effectively. We should not conclude that the use of polls presages a conversion of the People's Republic China into a Western-style democracy" (Crespi 1989: 44-45).

In contrast to these Western scholars, who are suspicious of the usefulness of Chinese public opinion polls, most domestic researchers have the confidence that opinion polls could play an important role in China's political process. Public opinion polling is regarded as "a tide of expressing public opinion" (Zhao et al 2005), and some suggested that it should be incorporated into the system of the National Congress (Shi 2004). It was also observed that opinion polls are influencing policy making (Liu 2005). The functions of opinion polls include (1) reflecting social evaluation, (2) assisting decision-making in public management, (3) alarming social problems, and (4) communicating mass opinions (Yuan and Zhou 2005).

Scholars had different prospects for the future of public opinion surveys in China. Rosen (1989) expected that a stage of "polling mania" would appear following the legitimization of public opinion surveys. However, this "polling mania" would cheapen the value of surveys and gradually lead to declining interest in opinion surveys. Warren (2001), based on his interview with Du Yan, a former director of the Institute of China Social Survey (ICSS) that was purged in 1987, concluded that the polling industry in China was on the decline. He gave evidence of a governmental regulation which was published in 1999. This regulation orders all overseas-funded survey institutions or domestic survey agencies employed by foreigners to receive approval from national or provincial statistical bureaus. It obviously limits foreign activities in collecting survey data in China. However, Tang (2005) argues that the purpose of this regulation may be beyond political consideration. As he states, "this measure has proven to be a double-edged sword. It strengthened the position of the State Statistical Bureau by giving it further administrative authority. On the other hand, by limiting the number of licensed survey firms, it

also provided further reassurance for the State Statistical Bureau's domination and profitability in a growing market of survey research" (p.40).

### **1.3 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS AND CHINESE POLITICAL STUDIES**

Studies of Chinese politics have long been dominated by qualitative research or case studies before the 1990's. Though China's political change since the reforms attracted many western scholars' interest, large scale survey research had been rarely conducted because of their inability to directly conduct research in China. Some scholars have designed and administered semi-structured questionnaires to émigré Chinese in Hong Kong to collect first-hand information about life in Chinese villages, cities, and factories (Parish and Whyte 1978; Whyte and Parish 1984; Walder 1986). However, this method is obviously subject to selection bias and inference problems. The situation has changed since 1990. In one case, in coordination with domestic research institutes, some western scholars have successfully conducted a series of scientific public opinion surveys in China, which provided rich data for many works on Chinese politics (e.g., Manion 1996; Jennings 1997, 1998; Shi 1997, 1999; Chen and Zhong 2002; Chen 2004; Tang 2001, 2005). In another case, certain survey data collected by domestic survey organizations, such as the Economic System Reform Institute of China (ESRIC), the State Statistical Bureau (SSB), and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, have become available to researchers. Some western scholars are able to get access to these data through personal connections. These data are precious in studying China's societal and political changes since some of them are even longitudinal (Tang 1993; Tang and Parish 2000).

Since an institutionalized linkage between public opinion and political policy is absent in non-democratic systems, most China studies based on survey data focus on political development and social changes. In 1993, the *American Journal of Political Science* published a pioneering study that mainly relies on survey data from China (Tang 1993). Drawing data from the 1986-1987 World Bank—Chinese Academy of Social Science joint survey, this study examines employee participation in management decision making in Chinese local industrial firms. This survey was “the single largest and the most comprehensive data set on Chinese local industries” at that time. In the early 1990’s, two large scale social surveys were conducted in China as an effort of successful coordination between western and domestic scholars. The first one was a joint research between the departments of political science at the University of Michigan (US) and at Peking University (China). The survey was conducted in four counties, which were selected from a list of approximately 30 counties according to “a combination of purposive and accidental/convenience criteria<sup>2</sup>.” The data provided valuable sources to a series of studies on political participation in the Chinese countryside, including two publications on the *American Political Science Review* (i.e., Manion 1996 and Kennings 1997), and one on the *Journal of Politics* (i.e., Jennings 1998). Another survey aimed to study political participation nationwide. This study was conducted by Tianjian Shi, who was still a PhD student at Columbia University. It was initially conducted in cooperation with the Opinion Research Center of China under the Beijing Social Economic Research Institute. However, it was interrupted by the Tiananmen Square protests right after the researchers finished their pilot study in Beijing. The

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<sup>2</sup> As Jennings (1997) explains, the four counties were “purposely chosen so that they would differ in terms of economic well-being and diversification, proximity to large urban centers, population size, and province. The accidental/convenience aspect of their selection rests on the fact that gaining access to the counties depended upon local cooperation, which hinged in large part on the presence of contacts and connections there” (Jennings 1997: 362).

project was reactivated in the winter of 1990, with a new partner—the Social Survey Research Center of the People’s University of China. Based on the survey data from both the pilot study in Beijing and the later nationwide study, Tianjian Shi enriched the literature on the empirical study of mass political culture and behavior, especially through survey techniques, which has been a weakness in Western scholarship of China (Shi 1997, 1999, 2001).

Tang and Parish’s study on Chinese urban life under reform was also a breakthrough on using existing survey data to study political and social changes in China (Tang and Parish 2000). They employ a series of surveys conducted by the Economic System Reform Institute of China (ESRIC), which was a government think tank designed to provide policy advice on economic reform. These surveys were conducted by well-trained survey research professionals and in the most liberal period since the reform. Analyses of these data provided a convincing picture and many intriguing findings on the Chinese reality on education, jobs, economic rewards, popular reactions, labor-management relations, and other important topics.

As survey research enjoys more freedom in China, scholars are encouraged to introduce China into the community of comparative studies. For example, the World Values Surveys (WVS) is a cross-national survey project coordinated by Ronald Inglehart, an American political scientist, in cooperation with numerous survey researchers and survey institutes throughout the world. The WVS began to include China from its second wave (1990) and subsequently cooperated with various survey research organizations ranging from governmental apparatuses, market firms, to academic research institutes.<sup>3</sup> All datasets have been published at the website of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of

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<sup>3</sup> The WVS was conducted by the National Statistical Information Center in 1990, the Gallup (China) in 1995, and the Research Center from Contemporary China at Peking University in 2000.

Michigan. These data are extremely precious for the study of Chinese politics from a global and comparative perspective (Tang 2005).

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION: THE VALIDITY OF SURVEY RESPONSES**

Though studies based on Chinese survey data have been accepted by most academic journals today, the quality of the survey data is often questioned by readers. Warren (2001) proposes two basic prerequisites of acceptable opinion survey research. First, the societies in which survey research is carried out should be “open and free, allowing their citizens to feel comfortable in giving honest answers to interviewers without fearing that their responses may be found out by the government and retaliatory steps taken against them for answers that governmental officials do not like”. Second, these societies should be “relatively affluent and technologically advanced, making it far easier for pollsters to conduct costly yet methodologically sophisticated polls”. As a developing country under communist control, China obviously cannot meet these conditions. Consequently, the validity of survey responses and the rigorousness of survey methodology in Chinese surveys are two major concerns when Chinese survey data are used in scholarly studies.

The quality of Chinese public opinion surveys is often inflicted by the practitioner’s lack of adequate training. “Bad” opinion surveys are pervasive. For example, non-probability samples are widely used, especially in surveys conducted by government organizations and some marketing research firms. Interviewer’s problems are also serious. It is not uncommon in China that interviewers select respondents by their own convenience and do not follow the instructions as supervision is loose (Li 1994). However, as the practice of survey research is becoming more

mature and regulated, these problems are expected to decrease though they may not be completely eliminated.

Survey researchers also dealt with sampling problems in Chinese surveys. For example, drawing representative national samples in China is uncommon due to China's large area and huge population and the usual limitations of budget for survey research. Thus, most Chinese public opinion surveys are based on local samples, that is, respondents within the localities are selected by probability model, yet localities are non-randomly selected. Aware of this problem, Manion (1994) distinguishes "benign biases", "manageable threats", and "fatal blows" in making inferences from studies of local samples. Both "benign biases" and "manageable threats" can be remedied through statistical techniques. Thus she concludes, "while data from local samples cannot be relied on for descriptions of a larger population along any single dimension, this unrepresentativeness does not necessarily affect generalizability of findings about relationships between variables" (Manion 1994: 764).

In recent years, a serious problem on the representativeness of survey samples arises with the growing number of migrant people in China. Traditional sampling methods of Chinese public opinion surveys rely on household registration, but such methods are unable to reach the migrants and thus cause serious coverage errors. Landry and Shen (2005) propose a new sampling method based on spatial sampling with the aid of global positioning system (GPS). The basic idea is to draw random samples from the block list which is generated by GPS technology. Surveyors use GPS receivers to determine the latitudinal and longitudinal boundaries of each block and enumerate the households residing within the boundaries. All households (or a fixed proportion of households to respondents) in the selected block are interviewed. This method significantly reduces coverage bias. However, it also incurred an

increase of cost and is only applicable in the areas that have perfect Geographical Information System (GIS).

In contrast to the attempts to solve the problem of sampling bias, very few studies have examined the problems of the validity of survey responses in Chinese surveys. Comparative analysis of Chinese survey data usually assumes three conditions. First, the respondents in the surveys are assumed to give truthful responses. They do not attempt to hide their true opinions by saying “don’t know” or giving norm-seeking responses. Second, survey responses are assumed to reflect respondents’ independent opinions. People can form their own opinions without or with minimal influence of political manipulation. This condition is especially critical to test theories in China’s context. Third, the concepts measured in Chinese public opinion surveys are assumed to be comparable with those from other countries’ surveys. These assumptions, however, should not be taken for granted. Instead, in China’s current situation, the conditions are rather variables that have impacts on the quality of survey data. This project provides insights into the circumstances under which public opinion surveys have emerged as a promising technique to study public opinion in China. More importantly, it investigates three survey response problems in the Chinese context: item non-response, norm-seeking response, and cross-cultural response.

Item non-response, or “don’t know (DK)” answers, happens when respondents fail to give answers to certain survey questions. In some scholarly works, “don’t know” respondents are typically excluded with an implicit assumption that they are identical to non-DK respondents, or to be placed at the mean of the variables, assuming that they really have opinions. Another approach is simply to take DK responses as non-attitude responses; i.e., to assume that these individuals, were they to respond, would respond randomly (Rapoport 1979; Rubin, Stern, and

Vehovar 1995). However, these assumptions may not be valid. In fact many scholars have shown DK responses are systematically related to respondent attributes (Faulkenberry and Mason 1978; Francis and Busch 1975; Sanchez and Morchio 1992; Berinsky and Tucker 2006) or to characteristics of the data-gathering procedure (Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber 1984; Harmon 2000; Sanchez and Morchio 1992; Smith 1997). Moreover, DKs may not only mean no opinion, it may also implies indecisive opinion (hard to choose), hidden opinion, uncertainty about the meaning of questions, and so on (Bogart 1967; Carnaghan 1996; Coombs and Coombs 1976-1977; Noelle-Neumann 1984; Shoemaker, Eichholz, and Skewes 2002; Sicinski 1970; Smith 1984). DK problems can also have adverse effects on the representativeness of survey findings and even lead to wrong policies as a consequence (Berinsky 2004).

The second problem is norm-seeking responses. A norm is “a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control and regulate proper and acceptable behavior” (*Webster’s Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary*: 790). Norms can influence the formation and expression of public opinion, and four situations may result based on a compliance-acceptance model (Nail 1986). The first situation is conversion. In this case, the individual has accepted the group norm as “correct” and is willing to agree with the group verbally. The second is compliance. The individual is resistant to the group norm but will express agreement publicly due to certain perceived pressures. In the third situation, anti-compliance, the individual accepts the group norm privately but denies them publicly. This situation is rare in reality. The last situation is independence, in which the individual does not care what others think and insists to express his/her own opinions publicly. Obviously, the second situation poses a problem on the validity of survey responses. This problem is usually called “social desirability.” It happens when respondents believe that there is a “right” answer to

the question which is shared by the majority or valued by society. If asked about their own opinion, they are inclined to pick this response. The individual tends to give norm-seeking responses when he/she perceives that the group has coercive power or the ability to reward; and such normative influence can be powerful if the reference group is very important to the individual (Hogg and Turner 1987). Norm-seeking responses are existent in opinion surveys in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Welsh 1981). They are also present at the mythological level of public opinion in states with moderate repression levels (Shlapentokh 1985, 1986).

Cross-cultural responses are often discussed in conjunction with comparability and equivalence (e.g., Warwick and Osherson 1973; Kohn 1989; Inkeles and Sasaki 1996). Equivalence is a key requirement for comparability. It is fathomed by scholars in various disciplines, with different emphases, using numerous terms in cross-cultural studies (see a thorough review in Johnson 1998). In these contributions, concept equivalence and measurement equivalence are critical to obtaining comparable survey responses. Concept equivalence depends on the extent to which different culture-based respondents *interpret* a concept in a similar manner. It originates from the problem of concept traveling, that is, whether concepts developed in one context carry the identical meaning in others (Sartori 1970). Concept traveling cannot be avoided in doing comparative research since almost all concepts are originally developed in some particular contexts (historically, geographically, or culturally) and may not be readily applied to other contexts. It is not surprising that words used in one country may have different meanings or even lose meanings in other countries. Though complete equivalence in concept interpretation may not be practical in cross-cultural studies, ignorance or mistreatment of this problem carries a high risk in leading to false conclusions and invalid generalizations.

Measurement equivalence refers to the situation where cross-cultural survey responses are measured in a similar manner. A common and simple practice of measurement equivalence is to ask the same question in different countries. It often requires a proper translation across language groups to ensure consistency of measurement. However, this method is easily subject to the concept traveling problem without regard to cultural differences. In light of this problem, Przeworski and Teune (1966-1967) propose an approach that combines cross-national identical indicators and nation-specific indicators. First of all, multiple indicators are preferred to measure complex concepts across nations. In addition to a few questions that use the similar wordings, some questions that are specific to nation's contexts should be also included. "According to the proposed procedure, measurement of similar variables in different countries are said to be identical if the same, interdependent indicators are used to assess the same phenomenon. In other words, the measurement is identical to the extent to which the operations furnish homogeneous indices for all countries. Measurements for specific countries are equivalent to the extent to which the specific measures are related to the identical measures." (p.568) Therefore, measurement equivalence is not limited by similarity of question wordings; it also relies on the similarity of interrelationship among multiple indicators of the same variable.

Studying these problems are of special significance not only because it is fundamental to justify empirical research of Chinese politics based on survey data but also because these problems themselves to some extent can reflect the situation of Chinese political and social development. In this sense, this project is a political study of survey quality rather than a pure methodological exploration.

## 1.5 DATA

When choosing survey data for this project, I have several considerations in mind. First, I wish that the data are from a survey that is designed and conducted by serious and professional survey practitioners. Since this study focuses on the validity of survey responses, I would use data that is least contaminated by technical problems in the process of survey research operation. Second, I wish that the survey includes some substantive political questions and the problems on survey responses to these questions are of academic interest to political researchers. Third, I wish that the data have counterparts from other countries so that I can study the problems in a comparative perspective. Fourth, I wish the data are from a study that is well-known and influential. Thus the findings from this project can to some extent enrich the existing research literature.

The World Values Survey (WVS) data stand out as an ideal source for this research purpose. The WVS originated from European Values Study (EVS) and extended to countries outside Europe in 1981, which constituted the first wave of the WVS. The surveys aim to be longitudinal as well as cross-cultural. The second wave of the WVS (1990) was conducted 10 years after the first and embraces 42 countries. The interval between the waves was shortened to 5 years for the third (1995), fourth (2000), and fifth (2005) waves, which includes 52 and 64 countries separately. In total, the WVS covers 81 societies containing 85 percent of the world's population.

The WVS was conducted by the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan (ISR) in collaboration with leading survey research organizations in each country. Professor Ronald Inglehart from the University of Michigan is the principal investigator in this project. The survey covers a variety of research topics, such as socio-cultural, moral, religious, and political values and attitudes. It employs detailed questionnaires and face-to-face interview

techniques in methodology. Representative samples were drawn from each country and the number varies from 1000 to 3500 per country. The WVS in China started from 1990 and continued in 1995, 2000, and 2005. Three survey research organizations participated in this project. They were the Information Center at the National Bureau of Statistics of China for 1990, Gallup-China for 1995, and the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University (RCCC) for 2000 and 2005.

I finally selected the data from the fourth wave of the WVS for this project. Other than that they included the largest number of countries among the five waves, they met other criteria in my mind. The Chinese survey in this wave was conducted by the RCCC, a research institute with a focus on social surveys since 1995. The director, Dr. Shen Mingming, is an alumnus of the University of Michigan. He was well trained in survey methodology and had participated in numerous survey projects in the ISR. Led by him, the RCCC has received substantive support from the ISR in terms of personnel training and methodological consultation. It has also collaborated with many noted scholars worldwide in recent years and conducted a series of surveys of high quality (see Chapter 2 for more details about the RCCC). Moreover, the RCCC is situated in China's most liberal university – Peking University. It enjoys relatively more freedom in research than governmental, commercial, and even some other academic survey research organizations. For example, the questions on the political system and democracy, which were previously excluded from the Chinese questionnaire in the World Values Survey, were successfully asked in the fourth wave. The responses to these questions constitute the main subjects of this study.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A part of the fifth wave data of the World Values Survey was newly released at the WVS website (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>) in October, 2008. The Chinese survey was also conducted by the RCCC. However, the data correspond to 53 countries, in which 44 countries carried the complete questionnaire and 9

In addition to the WVS, another representative national survey, “Chinese Value and Ethics Survey (CVES) 2004” (*Zhongguo Gongmin Sixiang Daode Guannian Zhuangkuang Diaocha*), serves as a complementary source for this project since it repeated many questions from the WVS, such as those on social norms and values, political attitudes, life satisfaction, and trust. CVES was also conducted by the RCCC. In this research a pioneer spatial sampling technique with the aid of GPS was first employed for large scale survey and it finally drew a random sample of 7714 respondents in 200 townships and districts from 100 counties and cities. This method was expected to better capture the floating population than traditional sampling method based on household registration, and thus, to a considerable extent, reduced coverage biases.

## 1.6 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

In chapter 2, I provided a detailed examination of the development of public opinion surveys in China. I first give a brief description about the great changes in China since the reforms, which mainly consist of three processes: liberalization, modernization, and internationalization. Based on this background discussion, I further analyze some particular contexts that are conducive to the growth of public opinion surveys in China. I stress that social context generates demands for scientific public opinion research, which was quickly adopted by the Chinese government. The revival of the social science discipline to a great extent creates the need for modern public opinion research. Subsequently I describe three types of opinion survey research organizations:

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countries carried the reduced version. So I still use the fourth wave data as the major data source for this project since it contains data from 70 countries and it is more familiar to scholars.

government opinion research apparatuses, academic opinion research institutes, and commercial opinion research firms. Some leading opinion research organizations of each kind are introduced. Lastly, I address some problems of public opinion surveys in China, such as reputation of the profession of opinion survey research, the political impacts on conducting survey in China, and the academic needs of data openness and data sharing.

The following three chapters examine three problems of survey responses in Chinese surveys respectively. These problems represent some general concerns in the mind of many western scholars towards Chinese opinion surveys. Chapter 3 is devoted to exploring the problem of item non-responses. Generally respondents have three reasons to give a “don’t know” answer: first, they truly do not know the answer; second, they do not care what the answer is; and third, they do not want to tell their true opinion. Empirical analysis of survey data provide evidence that support the first two reasons, whereas the third reason, though supported by response effect, does not create a serious concern for survey research on Chinese politics. These findings are further confirmed by a comparative analysis of China with India, South Korea, Vietnam, and the United States. My study suggests that modernization and culture play a more important role to cause item non-responses than does systemic effect or political fear.

Chapter 4 deals with a follow-up question of Chapter 3: even if Chinese respondents give answers to survey questions, do they really mean it? Taking survey responses on political support as an example, I examine regime type, culture, and rationality explanations for the high level of political support in China revealed by survey data. I first demonstrate that political support based on survey responses has two dimensions: institution-based and performance-based support. At the macro (country) level, I find that the undemocratic feature of Chinese political system appears to be a major contributor to political support in both dimensions. At the micro

(individual) level, the respondents may express more support for political institutions due to fear of political retribution or political desirability, but they do not have such concerns for regime performance related questions. Moreover, those who are conservative, have strong feelings of nationalism or positive assessment of subjective well-being are more likely to be the institution-based supporters, whereas the performance-based supporters are more likely to be acceptors of official information and beneficiaries of economic reforms.

The comparability of survey responses is the analytical focus of Chapter 5. Based on my reflection of the debates on the relationship of interpersonal trust and democracy, I conceive that comparative researchers should pay attention to two issues: measurement and inference. I first examine the measurement of interpersonal trust in Chinese surveys and find that Chinese people think of trust mostly in terms of relationships with acquaintances, though the purpose of the researchers is to identify interpersonal trust in general. Subsequently I propose a nonparametric approach to measuring democratic support based on the people's attitudes to four political systems including democratic systems. Cross-validation proves that this measurement of democratic support, when aggregated, has a stronger association with the Freedom House scores on civil and political rights than other measurements of democratic support based on a single question. Lastly I conduct a multilevel analysis to investigate the relationship of interpersonal trust and democratic support at both country and individual levels. The results show that interpersonal trust is not associated with levels of democratic support at the country level, and its effects at the individual level vary across countries. The variation to a certain degree is caused by different cultural contexts and institutional settings.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I recapitulate my early findings and highlight the contextual effects on public opinion surveys in China. I also discuss the implications of public opinion surveys for

Chinese political studies and suggest directions for future research in the relationship between public opinion surveys and policy making.

## 2. SURVEYING PUBLIC OPINION IN TRANSITIONAL CHINA

*“Until recently, U.S. scholars specializing in China paid episodic attention to Chinese mass sentiments. The concept of public opinion did not appear in the lexicon of contemporary U.S. sinology until the 1980s.” (Allan Liu 1996: 2)*

As public opinion entered the scope of China studies among western scholars, concerns rose over how to collect public opinion accurately in contemporary China. This chapter will study the development of public opinion surveys in the context of transitional China. Since the reforms, China has experienced great changes as a result of liberalization, modernization, and internationalization. These changes opened a door for modern public opinion survey research and led to a proliferation of various types of opinion survey organizations in China. After a brief examination of the changing process in China since the reforms, this chapter will address the following questions: why has public opinion survey, which has been an integral part of political life in most democracies, mushroomed in contemporary China? How have public opinion surveys grown in terms of organizations and research topics? And what are the problems of public opinion surveys in China?

## 2.1 CHINA UNDER TRANSITION

The communist China was founded in the wake of the defeat of the Japanese invasion and the expulsion of the Kuomintang to Taiwan Island. The Chinese Communist Party had obtained pervasive trust and support from the mass in the first several years (Fairbank 1987). It not only promised egalitarian and affluence by inculcating Marxism ideology in Chinese people but also carried out concrete measures to control inflation, curb corruption, improve health care, spread literacy, and so forth. Meanwhile, it established strong bureaucratic political system and central-planning economic system that put the society under the tight control of the state. This situation, however, has started to change since 1979. First, a series of radical campaigns since early 1950s, with a peak at the Cultural Revolution, to a great extent shook or even destroyed people's beliefs in communism as well as their confidences in the communist governments. The death of Premier Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976 further endangered the government's legitimacy which was mostly based on charisma. In the aftermath of the devastating mass movements, an urgent task for the Chinese Communist Party was to reestablish the social order. However, neither ideological nor repressive measures were as effective as before. At this critical point, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was held in late 1978. A group of more pragmatic party leaders regained dominant political power and started some new trials to direct political and economic development in the country.

Different from the early socialist reforms, the new reforms lacked a blueprint. Though reluctant to admit the failure of the socialist trials, the reformists, especially Deng Xiaoping, obviously gave up theoretical guidance of Marxism and Leninism to a considerable extent. On the one hand, they proposed a higher "doing" standard to test the "guiding" theories and claimed

that “practice is the sole criterion for testing truth.” On the other hand, they set up some new pragmatic guidelines for the reforms, which were reflected in Deng’s words such as “white cat or black cat, the cat that catches mice is a good cat,” and “wading across the river by finding stepping-stones.” With these thoughts in the mind of “the chief architect” for the reforms, it was hard to predict where China would go. In retrospect, China’s transition involved three processes of change: liberalization, modernization, and internationalization.

The process of liberalization started right after the Cultural Revolution. To fight with the extreme left thoughts among the people, especially among the government officials, the reformists initiated a series of discussion on “truth.” Playing a role of icebreaker, the discussion put the official ideologies under question and reexamination. While being consciously aware that their reform proposals could not fit in the frame of the official ideologies completely, the reformists could not deny the official ideologies which constitute the legitimacy base for the Chinese Communist Party. In a crafty way, they selectively adopted some arguments from Marxism, Leninism and Mao’s thoughts as theoretical support of their reform plans under the umbrella of Chinese characteristics. In addition, they purposefully collected Deng’s speeches since the reform and developed it as the theories of Deng Xiaoping to guide the reform process. While still claiming Marxism, Leninism and Mao’s thoughts as the official ideologies, the party had gradually adapted a pragmatic approach to replace the role of the Communist ideology.

Modernization had been a goal for Chinese reformists since the late Qing dynasty. In the reform agenda of the Chinese Communist Party, three aspects stood out. The first was education improvement. Elementary education was overly emphasized in China under Mao. The policy had significantly reduced the number of illiterate people, though at the cost of higher education. A relatively balanced education system had been gradually reestablished since the reform.

People had more opportunities to get higher education as a variety of colleges, universities, televised and night schools had been established to meet all kinds of educational needs. The policy of mandatory nine-year education also effectively kept young children in school. As a result, the average education level of Chinese had been improved greatly. The second aspect of modernization was technology advancement. The reformists gave up the populist approach to develop economy and turned to intellectuals' talents. Factories were enthusiastic to replace outdated equipments; technical inventions were highly encouraged; new technologies were quickly imported from abroad; many technicians or researchers were sent out abroad for better training. China had quickly caught up with some developed countries especially in communication and computerization technologies. The process of modernization also involved an increasing attention to scientific management. As market competition was integrated into China's economic system, factories and enterprises had to respond to market needs rather than plan their activities according to commands from higher ups. As a result, productivity and profit became major concerns of the entrepreneurs and successful management paradigms were in great demand. This tide also extended over to government administration management. Effective governance had been a focus of administration reforms, and it had attracted growing attentions in recent years.

Reform and open-up were two integral parts of China's transition. Accompanying the processes of liberalization and modernization, China had boarded a train for internationalization. The first sign was the influence of western culture. An immediate result following the initiation of liberalization was a booming market of publications. A great number of books and journals introducing western thoughts and cultures flooded into China. They exerted significant influence on intellectuals and young students. The second was the development of inter-dependent

markets. To achieve rapid modernization, China imported advanced technologies and equipments from overseas. Meanwhile, China also formed one of the largest export markets by selling cheap manufactures to the world. The third was the collaboration between domestic and foreign organizations. The reforms offered opportunities for foreign organizations to enter China. They usually collaborated with domestic partners in order to get more freedom and resources. This collaboration could be in various types and to various extents. It started from some joint projects between civil and economic organizations, and quickly extended to even political domains.

It is hard to describe the current state of Chinese political system. Some scholars tried to capsule it as “authoritarianism” with constraint of different adjectives, such as “consultative authoritarianism”, “fragmented authoritarianism” or “soft authoritarianism”. A consensus of these arguments is that China had grown out of its Leninist system of party-state governance and deviated from its totalitarian path. They, however, differ from one another in research perspectives by emphasizing different features of political changes in China.

“Consultative authoritarianism” was first discussed by Skilling (1970) based on his comparison of the characteristics of Communist systems from an approach of group conflict. He described that consultative authoritarianism was a period in which interest groups still had limitation in freedom of expression, but they were valued for their expertise and thus acquired an opportunity to articulate their interests. Harding (1987) argued that China has entered a period of “consultative authoritarianism” in the post-Mao era. He observed that China “increasingly recognizes the need to obtain information, advice, and support from key sectors of the population, but insists on suppressing dissent, cultivating its vision of public morality, and maintaining ultimate political power in the hands of the Party” (Harding 1987: 200). The

concept of “consultative authoritarianism” helps to understand the process of political liberalization during the Deng era. “Consultative” pinpoints the attempt of the Chinese Communist Party to seek effective governance and incorporate social groups within the party-state structure. “Authoritarianism” indicates the Party had the retention of ultimate authority over the society. It sheds light on the successive loosening and tightening of political controls, which may “reflect the uncertainty within the Party over the proper blend between consultation and authoritarianism, and over the proper boundaries between the permissible and the proscribed” (Harding 1987: 200). However, it makes the transitional process more volatile and less predictable.

Examining the relationship between central and local governments, Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988) found that the central government has lost its powerful control within the bureaucratic structure as a result of decentralization in the reformed China. They posit a new concept of “fragmented authoritarianism.” On the one hand, China was authoritarianism in nature. There was only one dominant party which strongly controlled the bureaucratic system and penetrated into the society. On the other hand, local governments had gained relatively more freedom in policy-making and thus had more leverage in bargaining with the central government. Moreover, without a powerful control from above or effective central coordination, local protectionism arose and led to a state of “fragmentation.” This concept captures the disorderly situation of the inception of administrative reform. However, it overstates the weakness of the central government, which still enjoyed great power in controlling the bureaucratic systems in a party-state.

“Soft authoritarianism” has gained scholars’ attention as an alternative of Western liberal democracy in Asia. It has two distinguishing characteristics. First, it emphasizes Confucian

culture in which people should conform to group interests over individual rights. Second, it combines a free market economy with “a kind of paternalistic authoritarianism that persuades rather than coerces” (Fukuyama 1992). Thus it results in a regime which is “economically liberal but politically quasi-authoritarian” (Roy 1994). Singapore is a typical example of “soft authoritarianism.” Its former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argues that good government is the real objective of a political system while democracy should be as a means rather than as the ends. The most important elements of good government are order and economic well-being. To a great degree his thoughts favor Chinese leaders, who are seeking prosperity through economic reforms while trying to prevent political reforms from threatening the one-party system. Soft authoritarianism, thus, legitimizes China’s pro-economics and anti-democracy reform plans.

In summary, China’s transition started in the aftermath of the political crisis of the Cultural Revolution. It involved three major processes of change: liberalization, modernization, and internationalization. Scholars commonly agree that China had stepped out of a totalitarian state and embraced many authoritarian features. Lacking a clear political scenario, however, China’s transition is more uncertain than predictable.

## **2.2 CONTEXTS FOR PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY RESEARCH**

When public opinion survey was introduced to China in early 1980s, it had become a conventional tool of collecting public opinion in many Western countries. Surprising to most China observers and western scholars, public opinion survey had developed so fast in China that today numerous survey research organizations have been established and survey data have been extensively used by governments, academia, and commercial companies. What are the driving

forces for this development? I will seek explanations in historical, political, social, and research contexts of China.

### **2.2.1 Historical context**

Traditional public opinion research in China differed in many ways from that in the Western world. It was guided by totally different theories of public opinion and evolved from some particular experiences.

The traditional political culture of China did not value participation and consultation with mass public opinion. The core of Confucianism is to educate people to behave in proper way and thus create a harmonious society, in which all members fulfill their social duties yet do not act beyond that. The rulers' duty is to rule the masses, while the masses' duty is to obey the rulers. Thus Confucianism rules out opportunities for the masses to participate in political process and cultivates a passive public. However, in Confucianism it is also believed that the ruler's power is mandated by Heaven, which is different from the Western divinity. If the ruler fails to fulfill his moral obligation, the ruled have the right to revolt and Heaven would pass the ruling power to another person with better virtue and benevolence. So governments are often under the evaluation of the mass in Chinese traditional culture. Lin found that "the Chinese are great critics of their rulers, perhaps even more so than western people. What makes the Chinese such great critics of their government is the fact that they are consistently and thoroughly cynical about most of their officials all the time – a fact which it often superficially ignored through the apparent quiet submission of the people to their oppressors" (Lin c1937: 136, quoted in Liu 1996: 1). In Chinese history, public opinion was often used in the context of advising the ruler to

comply with popular aspirations. The famous saying, “it is the river that carries and overturns boats,” depicts the relationship of the mass and the ruler in feudal China.

Therefore, in feudal China, the mass and the ruler were two opposite classes. Even though some rulers were peasant rebels and got support from the mass, once they came to power, they immediately betrayed the mass and perceived the mass as a big threat to their power. Emperors always had wishes to stay in power for as long as possible, thus they must pay attention to public opinion to avoid being “turned over.” The commonly used tool of learning public opinion is official reports from lower level government; that is, the local level officials reported certain social problems to the higher-level officials. However, this method was inefficient because of the huge bureaucratic structure. The reports could not reach the highest ruler (the emperor) within short time. Moreover, it is also very likely for the reporters to distort public opinion due to their self interests. The rulers were well aware of this distortion. So they also employed other tools as complementary ways of learning public opinion, such as establishing secret police, sending investigators, and even conducting field investigation by themselves.

In communist China under Mao, Marxism-Leninism was a dominant ideology that guided political practice. According to Marxism, there is a nearly perfect identification of opinion between the leaders and the masses and this congruence comes from their common ideological orientation (Gitelman 1977). The communist party is the vanguard of the proletariat, and also a party of the majority in the society. The party represents the interests of the masses and thus unify with the masses. On the basis of identification theory, there should be no need for the Party to probe mass opinion since it is much the same as that of the political decision makers. The characteristic of self-affirmation, however, can be neither practical in politics nor convincing

to the masses. Having recognized the limitations of Marxism, Lenin distinguishes between the party and the mass and admitted difference between the party opinion and public opinion. A major task of the party, however, is to narrow down the gap and manipulate a new identification. Rather than catering to public opinion as doing in democracies, the party has the responsibility to “drag” the masses along if the masses would not keep up with the vanguard. As Stalin put it, “The Party is no true party if it limits its activities to a mere registration of the suffering and thoughts of the proletarian masses...if it cannot rise superior to the transient interests of the proletariat.”<sup>5</sup>

Therefore the new identification theory aims to match up the party opinion and public opinion. Even though the leaders cannot disregard public opinion, they need not be influenced by public opinion. The latter action was contemptuously labeled by Lenin as “tailism,” that is, “political action should be determined above all by the masses who wishes the vanguard would be obliged to carry out” (Gitelman 1977: 2). The outcome of “manipulated identification,” called “Socialist public opinion” by Soviet theoretician A. K. Uledov, was “the result of a general agreement among all social classes and groups, and therefore, it was of a higher quality than the opinion of a simple majority” (quoted in Vreg 2001: 243).

The identification theory had also influenced public opinion research in China in two aspects. First, it resulted in the propaganda purpose of public opinion research. The reported public opinion should be positive and consistent with the official doctrine. Any public opinion research aiming to disclose social problems were discouraged and muffled. Second, the traditional channel of learning public opinion through bureaucratic structure was paralyzed. Only the opinions that favor the officials were reported in order to demonstrate the identification

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<sup>5</sup> “Foundation of Leninism,” quoted in Gitelman (1977), p. 2.

of public opinion with government guidance. In consequence, true public opinion became intangible both to the public and to the government.

Panel discussion became a dominant approach to study public opinion in communist China. Panel discussion was developed by Mao Zedong when he was engaging in guerilla warfares in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. He went to mountain villages in the heartland, talking with a wide variety of people there. On the basis of the interviews, Mao figured out the social structure of China, and in turn set up his revolutionary strategies and tactics. This eventually led to the success of the communist revolution. Panel discussion thus became a major method of studying the society in Mao-era. Following Mao's model, government officials or social scientists used to go to a handful of farms or factories to interview people on the spot. By doing so they claimed that they grasped the whole situation of the country.

The assumption underlying the method of panel discussion was that "a sparrow may be small but it has all the vital organs."<sup>6</sup> The method works well on the population that is homogeneous. However, the generalization is not safe when the society becomes heterogeneous. China was mainly a rural society in the early twenty century, when Mao conducted his research using the method of panel discussion. So he could successfully make generalizations from no more than a few cases at that time. When China was under the socialist transformation, it was impossible for the whole society to keep the same pace in the transition. As a result, this method gradually became inappropriate as China moved to a heterogeneous society.

Moreover, the method of panel discussion is likely to invite bias due to the researchers themselves. For example, both Mao Zedong and Peng Dehuai, a veteran Communist, carried out panel discussions in 1950s separately at their hometowns, Shaoshan and Wushi. While these

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<sup>6</sup> It is an old Chinese proverb, which means one can deduce general laws from a small but complete case.

cities are within miles of each other, they reached completely opposite conclusions. Mao was pleased by the scenery of harvest, but Peng was very upset by the waste and bad future. The reason was obvious. Mao, as the Chairman of China, was accompanied by many bodyguards and officials. He could not reach out to the villagers as he did in 1930s, and all the interviewees were carefully selected by local officials. Peng, in contrast, visited the village without notifying local officials in advance. So he had much freedom in conducting the interview and thus heard the true opinion from the people (Feng 1993).

Even though the problems of panel discussion were well known by the researchers, there was no alternative due to the political climate and limited academic resource. This situation did not change until the economic reform in 1979, when a great transition in China started.

### **2.2.2 Political context**

Seeking public support is a main reason why governments care about public opinion research. The more important public support is in the policy making process, the more useful opinion surveys are to governments. For example, opinion surveys are most decisive in the United States, where a key instrumental goal of the presidency is to maintain public support for policies (Denton and Woodward 1990). Presidents do not rely on party factions in Congress. Instead, they need to seek the support of the general public (Eisinger and Brown 1998). As a result, opinion surveys can influence presidents' political positions and policy choices directly. In contrast, polling of the public may not be so important in some other democratic systems. The Swiss governments, for instance, "seek first to gain support of, or to find a viable compromise among, the major parties and interest groups, rather than to demonstrate the support of the general public through opinion polling" (Rothmayr and Hardmeier 2001: 126). They use such

support to pass a project in parliament and avoid a possible referendum. They also rely on interest groups and parties to mobilize the voters through campaigning in the case of a popular vote.

The Chinese government, without pressure of direct election and free of party competition, seem to have no reason to care about maintaining or creating public support by opinion surveys. It would be a mistake, however, to focus undue attention on the institutional limitations and think that opinion surveys have no impact in the policy making process. In fact, the institutional limitations rather make opinion surveys important for the Chinese government in the political context.

Effectiveness and legitimacy are two key elements for political stability. Effectiveness, in Lipset's definition, is "the actual performance of a political system, the extent to which it satisfies the basic functions of government as defined by the expectations of most members of a society, and the expectations of powerful groups within it which might threaten the system, such as the armed forces." "Legitimacy involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society" (Lipset 1959: 86). On the basis of western democracies' experiences, Lipset argues that political stability usually results from the interaction of effectiveness and legitimacy. Economic crisis may not threaten an existing political system if the latter still enjoy high legitimacy among the public. On the other end, if the legitimacy of a system is low while its effectiveness is high, the system is in a transitional state. It may either move to a high stability by increasing its legitimacy or shift to the breakdown as its effectiveness declines.

Empirical studies on political stability have confirmed this argument. For example, Seligson and Muller (1987) use the case of Costa Rica to demonstrate that "democratic political

system can remain stable when undergoing crises of effectiveness as long as they enter those crises with the legitimacy of the system firmly established” (p. 322). On the other side, Park (1991) concludes from the experiences of the South Korea that authoritarian states could face political predicaments despite economic success.

There were mainly three sources of the legitimacy of Chinese political system before economic reforms. First, the legitimacy is based on the charisma of Mao and other revolutionists. Leading the poor peasants to fight against the rich and successfully defeat the Kuomintang and Japanese invaders, Mao and other revolutionists were regarded as heroes and even saviors in the Chinese people’s mind. Political propaganda further strengthened the impression. The mass worship of Mao culminated in the Cultural Revolution in which Mao easily aroused the masses against his political opponents. The second source of the legitimacy is from the communist ideology. Under the intensive socialist education, the masses had great confidence that a communist society would become true under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Third, the government legitimacy was also rooted in its socioeconomic performance. To be more specific, “This mode of legitimation is based upon the role of government in providing social and economic benefits for its citizens” (White 1986: 463). Thus an exchange relationship existed between the government and the masses as the socialist social contract (Cook 1993; Ludlam 1991; Tang and Parish 2000).

Before economic reforms, the government did not confront a crisis of legitimacy even though the government had made disastrous mistakes in economic policies. However, the Cultural Revolution and Mao’s death in 1976 greatly weakened the legitimacy of the Chinese governments. The following economic reform gradually broke the socialist social contract by adopting the market economy. It has been found in Russia that there is a significant link between

the mass support for democratic reform and the economic transition (Duch 1993). Democratic values and support for free markets are even mutually reinforcing. Therefore, the government in reformed China is under a tension of maintaining its authority and pushing forward economic reforms.

Effectiveness is not a big concern for the Chinese governments when its legitimacy is high among the public. However, as the reform changed China from central-planning economy to free-market economy, demands for effective governance increased. The Chinese governments recognize that information is essential to the proper functioning of a political system. There are two kinds of information flowing towards opposite directions: one is the information needed by the governors in order to control the governed; the other is the information needed by the governed in order to comply with the commands from the above. An effective political system is what is “equipped with adequate facilities for the collection of external and internal information as well as for its transmission to the points of decision-making, and reasonably well equipped for its screening and evaluation before the decisions are made” (Deutsch 1966: 161). High information systems have a problem of “overloading.” That is, the decision-makers may receive so much information that they have difficulty to formulate it and react to it. However, if information is low, external forces may be needed to enforce the governance. David Apter observes that “different polities employ different mixtures of coercion and information in trying to maintain authority, achieve stability, and increase efficiency” and posits “an inverse relationship between information and coercion in a system: that is, high coercion systems are low information systems” (Apter 1965: 40).

Under Mao, the Chinese system “was strongly geared toward transmission for orders downward, with much less sensitivity to the need for a good flow of data upward” (Lieberthal

1995: 178). As the reformed China gradually loosened its control over society, more information, especially that from the below, was demanded. However, the old information collecting system in China confronts two problems. On the one hand, its efficiency is often reduced by multiple layers of bureaucracy. Not only the transmittal incurs high transitional cost, the information, even if it reached the top through the existing institutional channels, was also subject to distortion and loss. On the other hand, the society is becoming increasingly informationalized due to the technological advance. The controlled media is no longer the only channel that the masses can obtain information from the above. Moreover, horizontal information exchange among the people increases remarkably, making the society more complex than before. The old information collecting system is incapable of “screening” and “evaluating” the heavy load of social information. Consequently government effectiveness was greatly limited under the current institutional framework.

Chinese political system would be in danger if both legitimacy and effectiveness are low. Under the circumstances, the Chinese governments have been alert to the possibility of social unrest. Opinion survey, as an effective tool of observing public mood, was quickly integrated into the information collecting system of the governments after it was introduced to China. At the beginning, the governments mainly entrust research institutes to conduct opinion surveys. Gradually they also create public opinion apparatus to commission opinion surveys themselves. A major function of the opinion surveys is to detect public pulse under the economic reform. They have also been used for administrative purpose to improve governments’ effectiveness.

### 2.2.3 Social context

The processes of liberalization, modernization and internationalization have transformed the society to a more diversified and dynamic one. In order to accommodate more pragmatic-oriented reform guidelines, the state has intentionally loosened its thought control over the society. This trend was accompanied by a significant weakening of the effectiveness of government propaganda caused by media commercialization. Therefore the Chinese people are released from the confinement of official doctrines to a great extent since the reform.

Meanwhile, as individual interest has been boosted by economic reforms, the Chinese people have become more rational and individualistic than before. Moreover, western thoughts have been flooding into China and gradually influenced the ideological bases of individual opinions. In an increasingly complex society, the Chinese people are more likely to form their opinions based on personal considerations and various philosophies rather than being shaped by the government propaganda.

The public sphere is also becoming more dynamic. The Chinese people usually talk about social and political issues among relatives, friends, and colleagues before. Now they not only have less concern to express their opinions in public, they are even enthusiasm to exchange their opinions with strangers through Internet which has been rapidly developed as a result of modernization. It seems that China has been evolving into a pluralistic society, in which different values and opinions are tolerated.

In this context, the efficacy of public opinion survey has been acknowledged by the public. According to a survey conducted in the urban area of Beijing in 1993, about 85% of the respondents think that public opinion surveys are necessary. Regarding the role of public opinion survey, about two thirds of the respondents believe that it can reflect mass opinions, 60%

of them think it can influence the society and 40% of them think it can be used for policy-making (Luo 1994).

#### **2.2.4 Research context**

China has experienced a boom in academic education and research since the reforms. The recovery of sociology in 1979 lent great support to public opinion survey in terms of methodology and personnel. Reviewing the twenty years of development of the research methods in sociology, Feng (2000) suggests three stages demonstrating a path of study-practice-improvement. On the first stage (1979-1985), the domestic scholars spent about six years in studying the advanced research methods abroad, especially survey methodology and social statistics. After that, from 1986 to 1992, many scholars attempted to employ the new methods to study social phenomena. This period was a heyday of public opinion survey in China. Among the 86 research projects published in a leading journal *Sociological Research* in 1986-1992, about half of them were based on survey research methods (see the appendix in Bian, Li and Cai 2004 for a detailed account). The third stage (1993-1999) witnessed a great improvement in methodology. A series of academic conferences were held to examine the problems of survey research in China and to explore solutions. Public opinion surveys were greatly benefited by the improvement of the research methods in sociology. Not only academic scholars served as consultants in various surveys, the department of sociology also trained many students in survey research who would become core figures in the industry of public opinion survey later.

Today the departments of social sciences in many universities have gradually shifted their emphasis from qualitative studies to quantitative oriented researches. Statistical courses, which were usually absent from the department curriculum, now have been strengthened at both

undergraduate and graduate levels. The School of Government at Peking University is the first academic institution in China to launch a PhD program in political quantitative research methods. Presently a majority of scholars in China share a belief that the arguments based on data analysis are more scientific.

Meanwhile, as China opened up to the west world, a considerable amount of research funding has flowed to China. In this milieu, many opinion surveys were well funded and conducted with international cooperation. Some examples are the survey projects on Chinese political culture and political participation (Shi 1997), on the local political and economic development (Jennings 1997, 1998), on political support (Chen 2004), on political attitudes (Tang 2005), and on social justice (Han and Whyte 2008). The cooperation not only provides a wealth of survey data to study China, it also plays a role of introducing advanced survey technologies and further internationalizing survey research in China.

To summarize, the emergence of public opinion surveys in China can be accounted by the collective role of historical, political, social and research contexts. In brief, the changing society generated more needs for public opinion researches, and these needs were quickly recognized by the government in order to maintain political stability. While traditional public opinion research methods encountered serious limitations to study the complex society, modern survey research was imported from abroad and started to exert extensive influence in public opinion research in China with substantial support from the development of academic research.

## **2.3 THE ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH OF PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY RESEARCH**

The first public opinion survey in Chinese history is commonly believed to be the one conducted by Zhang Yaoxiang in 1922, who obtained his PhD in psychology in the United States. Many hot topics were covered in the questionnaire such as presidential election, religious belief, public management, social culture, and so on. A similar survey was conducted in Peking University at her anniversary in 1923. However, public opinion survey had not got much attention until 1979 when China started to carry out the economic reform. In September 1979, a division of *Beijing Daily*, whose main task is to provide information to government through internal channels, conducted the first survey since 1949 in a local factory in Beijing. The survey was designed to find out the workers' attitudes to some important issues, such as modernization, the discussion about the truth, the urgent social problems, and so on (Yuan and Zhou: 5-6). Since then, public opinion surveys have mushroomed. Many survey organizations were established which were either attached to the government, belonged to universities and research institutes, or run by independent private firms. The results of public opinion surveys were widely published in internal publications, governmental newsletters, academic works, journals and newspapers. Public opinion survey was no longer a new term to Chinese people and it began to influence their lives.

### **2.3.1 Government opinion research apparatus**

As survey research was introduced to China in the early 1980s, it was quickly employed by the reformists to study mass attitudes towards the ongoing urban economic reform. The Economic

System Reform Institute of China (ESRIC) and the Beijing Young Economist Association (BYEA) had conducted 14 longitudinal social surveys by the end of 1986. These surveys revealed the public enthusiasm towards the reform. The reform policies were embraced by the public and most people had started to enjoy the benefits from the reform, such as improved standard of living and increased respects to consumers. Moreover, the people's capability of adapting to a commercial society had improved as well under the reform (Sun et al 1997). These findings played a positive role in pushing the reform agenda forward.

The surveys successfully provided social information and in-time support to the reformists. It was said that "the conservatives were especially afraid of the reformers' using and especially manipulating survey results to justify their policy proposals and to counter those proposed by conservative leaders" (Shi 1996: 217). The reformists thus were enthusiastic to integrate public opinion apparatus in the Chinese political system. The Institute of Chinese Social Survey (ICSS) was born in such a situation. It was a semi-official survey research institution under the ESRIC. Most staff members were from the Society Research Office and the Social Opinion Investigation Office of the ESRIC. The director of the ICSS, Du Yan, strived for independence from ESRIC, but he failed to accomplish it and was eventually ousted from the ICSS (Li 1994). The China Social Survey System (CSSS), headed by Bai Nansheng and Yang Guansan, replaced the ICSS, and conducted social surveys twice every year from 1987. However, as the findings from the surveys became mixed and even negative, the Chinese leadership was compelled to reassess the public's role in the reform process. As a result, the influence of the ESRIC started to decline. When the economic turmoil happened in 1988, the ESRIC was criticized to be part of the causes (Rosen 1989). The ESRIC was dissolved after June 4<sup>th</sup> in 1989 but reemerged in July 1991 under a new name the Chinese Economic

Management and System Research Institute (CEMSRI). The CSSS also resumed its opinion survey activities in September 1991 and its survey network was extended from 40 cities in 1987, 68 cities in 1992 to 108 cities in 1996 (Sun et al 1997). But the surveys were no longer a tool of political struggle. As reform became an irreversible national policy after Deng's visit in Shenzhen in 1992, the surveys were mainly used to detect the changes of social mood and the situation of public mentality under the reform so that the central government could adjust the reform speed accordingly.

Opinion surveys also attracted attentions of a few local governments. There were many uncertainties about the direction of China's development in the late 1980s. The price reform caused widespread panic among city dwellers. Corruption and inflation severely disturbed the people's life. Student democratic movements further threatened political and social stability. The situation was especially serious in Beijing, the place of the central government. It has many colleges including Peking University, which has a tradition of student movements. The Beijing Communist Party Commission (BJCPC) was quite bothered by the situation.<sup>7</sup> In order to better monitor the society, some officials from the propaganda department of the BJCPC were sent to establish the Beijing Research Institute of Social Mentality (BJRISM) under the BJCPC in 1988. The institute conducted a series of surveys on a variety of issues starting from 1989, such as the study on the social mentality of Beijing college students (1989), the study of mass attitudes to the Romania's political change (1990), the public's evaluation of the current social situation (1991), and so on.<sup>8</sup> It has also conducted an annual survey on the social mentality of Beijing residents since 1993. As a formal apparatus, the institute receives funding from the Beijing Municipal

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<sup>7</sup> Student demonstration often happened in weekends or holidays. The officials had to work all days without break during that period. They wish that they could prevent such events in advance instead of passive reaction. Interview with Huang Xun, the director of BJRISM, 06/02/2005.

<sup>8</sup> A complete list of the opinion polls conducted by the BJRISM can be found at <http://www.minyi.org.cn>.

Government to conduct the surveys. But they are relatively independent in choosing research topics. Most of the results were published on the internal publication *Public Opinion (Min Yi)*<sup>9</sup> and some were delivered directly to the BJCP. In fact, topic selection is critical for the institute. When a topic is important and the findings are new to the leaders, the institute can get positive evaluations from the leaders above.

Guangzhou Public Opinion Research Center (GZPORC) was also established in 1988. Similar to the BJRISM, the establishment was proposed by the Guangzhou Communist Party Commission (GZCPC). However, the research center is different from the BJRISM in three aspects. First, it was originally a semi-official polling organization. In April 1988, the GZCPC announced the establishment of the GZPORC. It was registered under the Policy Research Office of the GZCPC, but was sponsored by a local pharmaceutical factory. Some officials in the Policy Research Office had been in charge of the GZPORC until they were completely disengaged from the Policy Research Office in 1993. All other staffs were recruited from the job market. The pharmaceutical factory was assigned by the GZCPC to sponsor the center for three years. In the following years, GZPORC successfully established a council consisting several large companies in Guangzhou, such as the Guangzhou Development Cooperation, Guangzhou Telecom, the company of Procter & Gamble in China, and so on. Currently, the center conducts about 40 public opinion surveys every year. One third of them are sponsored by the governments. And the rest are mainly from the council's support. It also conducted commercial surveys occasionally for self-support.

Second, besides monitoring public mood under the reform, GZPORC was also directed to assist policy making and improve government performance from the beginning. As the market

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<sup>9</sup> *Public Opinion (Min Yi)* was first published as an internal publication by the BJRISM in 1993. It stopped in 1997 when the system of internal publication was normally cancelled.

economy developed very quickly in Guangzhou, the government put much effort in improving effectiveness of management. The GZPORC has conducted the annual survey on social mentality and mood in Guangzhou since 1989. These surveys revealed three shifts of mass foci. In the early 1990s, the urbanites were mainly concerned about price, public security, and housing reforms. The public's focus had shifted to city transportation, environmental protection and state-owned enterprise reforms by the end of 1990s. Since then, the urbanites have shown their concerns over employment, social security, medicare reform, and corruption.<sup>10</sup> In 1988 when it was first established, the center was involved in the housing reform in Guangzhou to collect public opinion towards the reform policy. It has also conducted opinion polls on the public image of the Guangzhou governments since 1995.<sup>11</sup> The center publishes two internal journals: *Public Opinion Reference (Min Yi Can Kao)* and *Public Opinion for Internal Reference (Min Yi Nei Can)*. The former is distributed among universities and academic research institutes, while the latter is directly delivered to the Guangzhou provincial governments.

Third, the center aims to be a bridge between the public and governments. It claims its purpose as “letting governments to understand the people, and letting the people to understand governments.” The center helps governments to collect information they need for making policy. It also provides a channel to reflect public opinion to governments. For example, a bill on increasing water fee was sent to the local people's congress for approval by the Guangzhou municipal government in December 2002. The center conducted an opinion poll on the mass attitude toward this bill immediately. It turned out that the public were strongly against it. The poll results were reported to the local people's congress and relevant agencies through internal

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<sup>10</sup> Chen, Shanzhe, “The seventeen years of Guangzhou Public Opinion Research Center.” *Twenty-first Century Economic Report (21 shiji jingji baodao)*, 01/26/2005.

<sup>11</sup> A complete list of the opinion polls conducted by the GZPORC can be found at <http://www.gzporc.com>.

channels. This eventually caused the bill to fail.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the center makes great use of the local media to publish poll results. Poll reports composed by the center can be easily found in some major newspaper in Guangzhou such as *Guangzhou Daily (Guangzhou Ribao)*, *South Daily (Nanfang Ribao)*, *South Metropolitan News (Nanfang Dushi Bao)*, *Yangcheng Evening News (Yangcheng Wanbao)*, and so on. The center has conducted a series of opinion polls on the mass satisfaction with government services since 2002. All results have been openly published. While some agencies that got bad ratings were compelled to solve the problems immediately, others instead came to the center and quarreled about the polls. The center has to deal with such pressures while trying to reflect public opinion impartially.

The CSSS, the BJRISM and the GZPORC were born when the direction of the development was ambiguous and the society was unstable under the influence of the reform. Though the government had made several attempts to streamline the bureaucratic structure since then, these apparatus were maintained and they even conducted more opinion surveys than before.

The second tide of establishing public opinion apparatus began in early 2000s. On the sixteenth Plenary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2002, Chairman Jiang Zemin addressed that “policy-making should deeply understand public opinion, adequately reflect public opinion...by establishing a mechanism of reflecting social situation and public opinion.” All provincial Communist Party Committees (CPCs) are required to send a report on local social situation and public opinion to the Central Committee in a quarterly basis. Some provincial CPCs entrust local institutes of social science research to collect relevant information; others started to establish governmental public opinion apparatus.

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<sup>12</sup> Chen, Shanzhe, “The seventeen years of Guangzhou Public Opinion Research Center.” *Twenty-first Century Economic Report (21 shiji jingji baodao)*, 01/26/2005.

The GDP per capita of China reached 1,000 dollars, and the GINI index hit 47 in 2004 (WDI 2004). It was widely alerted by domestic scholars that China had stepped over a threshold – the Chinese society would be more plural and more subject to potential turmoil due to big income gap. In the fourth meeting of the sixteenth Plenary of the CCP, Chairman Hu Jintao further emphasized to construct a harmonious society. In response to his address, the State Statistics Bureau decided to promote the establishment of public opinion apparatus under its Provincial branches and accelerate the use of Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system in these apparatus. By the end of 2004, public opinion apparatus had been established in over ten provinces. This trend was commented as “a moderate governmental adjustment instead of a political storm” by an official from the Hunan Public Opinion Research Center.<sup>13</sup>

These new public opinion apparatus, on the one hand, institutionalizes public opinion in policy-making process and grants opinion polling a legitimate role in collecting public opinion. Some local governments even regulated opinion polling as a routine and regular component of policy-making through legislature.<sup>14</sup> It was also suggested to incorporate opinion polls into the system of the people’s congresses (Shi 2004). During this period, mass attitudes toward particular policies have become a main theme of the polls. On the other hand, opinion polling is thus strictly controlled by the governments by installing public opinion apparatus under statistics bureaus. The statistics law is applicable to opinion polls and statistics bureaus have the jurisdictional power over all opinion polls conducted within China. Therefore, the content, the procedure and the publishing of opinion polls are all under the government’s review.

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<sup>13</sup> Liu Liu, “Public opinion gradually influences policy making?” *News Weekly of China (zhongguo xinwen zhoukan)*, 01/24/2005.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the Qiqihaer Municipal Government of Heilongjiang province regulated that the governments must carry out opinion polls when making important policy.

### **2.3.2 Academic survey research institutes**

Public opinion surveys have also received an enthusiastic welcome from academic institutions. These institutions either incorporate opinion survey research into their research activities or establish new institutes with special focus on social survey research. Compared with the government opinion research apparatus, academic survey research institutes have advantages in familiarity with survey research methodology and flexibility in topic selection. However, they often lack administrative and financial support that are necessary for conducting opinion survey research in China (Bian, Tu, and Su 2001). Therefore, most academic survey research institutes seek cooperation from governments or international organizations to accomplish their tasks. Two noted academic institutions who are active in conducting opinion surveys in China are the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University (RCCC).

CASS is an institution directly under the State Council and the highest academic research organization in the fields of philosophy and social sciences in China. It is also the most important think tank to the Chinese government. The research units in the CASS have started to employ opinion surveys for their research purpose for almost 30 years. The survey projects were usually well funded by government research grants. Moreover, CASS has affiliates in each province, which makes it capable to carry out large scale social surveys in China. For example, a research group led Lu Xueyi, a famous Chinese sociologist, launched a project to study the change of social structure in contemporary China in 1999. They conducted a probability national survey, in which 6000 respondents from 72 counties/districts of 12 provinces were interviewed. Using the level of the possession of organizational, economic and cultural resources as the criteria, they propose ten social classes to replace the traditional division of workers, peasants

and intellectuals. Their research report aroused strong social reactions not only because its framework of analysis, to some extent, deviated from orthodox Marxist class theory but also because it lists government officials, who claim to be people's servants, on the top rank and workers, who should be leaders and owners according to the socialist theories, to the rank near the bottom (Lu 2002).

The local affiliates of the CASS also actively conduct opinion surveys, and their studies are more policy-oriented. For example, in 1983 the Tianjin municipal government carried out several projects to improve the residents' living conditions. The government leaders were eager to know how the public thought of these projects. So they asked the Academy of Social Science (ASS) at Tianjin to conduct a survey to collect public opinions. This survey finally developed into an annual survey that provides valuable data for social and policy research (Wang 1995)

The Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University (RCCC) was established in 1988. Its original initiative is to promote interdisciplinary research, foster international academic links, and contribute to the progress of Chinese society. The RCCC has emphasized on survey research and quantitative data analysis since Dr. Shen Mingming, who received his PhD degree from the University of Michigan, joined the center in 1995 and was appointed the director in 1996.

While the RCCC is formally under the auspices of Peking University, it is to a great extent independent of the university's administration, enjoying substantial autonomy in making its own academic, personnel, and budgetary decisions. RCCC is completely self-financed, mainly through institutional academic grants from, e.g., the Ford Foundation, the Smith Richard Foundations, the Asia Foundation, the Japan Foundation, and international organizations like UNDP, WHO, etc., as well as from other domestic sources.

The RCCC normally conducts three types of opinion surveys. The first type of opinion surveys is the center's own projects, which are designed by the researchers in the RCCC independently and are funded through research grant applications. In order to obtain administrative support from government, the RCCC usually finds a government partner and carry out these projects as a collaborative effort. For example, in 1995 the RCCC launched its flagship project, the Beijing Area Study (BAS), an annual survey with a random sample of 1,200 Beijing urban residents. This project got support from the Beijing municipal government and has published its first ten-year data report (Yang 2007). Another milestone project of the RCCC is "Chinese Value and Ethics Survey (CVES)" conducted in 2004 in coordination with the Department of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. This survey project employed an innovative sampling method that combines the PPS sampling techniques and the GPS-aided spatial sampling method, which significantly improved the sample's representativeness by covering more migrant people.

The second type of opinion surveys is conducted on behalf of government agencies at the national or local levels. Research topics of these projects are usually policy relevant issues. For example, sponsored by the State Agency of Environment Protection and the Ministry of Education, the RCCC conducted a survey project of "Public Awareness on Environmental Protection in China" in 1998. It is a national survey on general public, with a random sample of the Chinese population on mainland and completing more than 9,000 interviews (Ren 2002).

The third type of opinion surveys is collaborated projects between the RCCC and foreign research organizations. These projects are numerous, such as "Political Participation in Beijing (1996),"<sup>15</sup> "Local Government and Local Development (1997),"<sup>16</sup> and "The World Mental

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<sup>15</sup> It is a subsequent project investigated by Tianjian Shi after his publication with the same title (Shi 1997).

Health Survey, China (1999-2000).” The RCCC is also the China partner of the World Values Survey which was responsible for conducting the national survey in China for both the 2000 and the 2005 waves.

In addition to conducting social surveys, the RCCC has also established a training program in social science methodology. The center regularly invites both domestic and international scholars to come to Peking University to share their experience and knowledge with respect to research methodology. The Beijing Area Study serves as a practical vehicle for teaching the various aspects of social survey research. Supported by the Ford Foundation, the center has also sponsored a Joint Training Program on Research Methodology with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan since 1997.

### **2.3.3 Commercial opinion research firms**

As the deepening of marketization, many private marketing firms gradually stepped into the industry of public opinion survey. Statistics shows that there were 750 registered survey organizations in 2000. This number rocketed to 4221 in 2002. Half of them cluster in the relatively developed areas in the east.<sup>17</sup> For example, established in 1992, *Horizon Research* has developed into one of the largest private survey organizations in China. It has conducted and published the results of over 600 surveys (Yuan and Zhou 2005). A variety of topics are covered in these surveys. Mainly they include: (1) policy issues such as price, unemployment, corruption, and some specific regulations; (2) evaluation of government; (3) life satisfaction; (4) attitudes to

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<sup>16</sup> It is a survey research project on local elites and masses in four Chinese counties, in collaboration with researchers from University of California at Santa Barbara, University of Michigan, and University of Rochester. It is a second wave (panel) of the survey conducted in 1990. Publications based on the first wave data are, for example, Manion (1996) and Jennings (1997)

<sup>17</sup> The statistics is from The Statistics Yearbook of Chinese Basic Units (2003, 2001).

current news, such as WTO, Olympic game, and the Middle East peace; (5) attitudes to social change and problems such as divorce, AIDs, SARS, and environmental problems. Some relatively sensitive topics such as religious belief and Taiwan issue are also included in the questionnaires.<sup>18</sup>

Public opinion survey also attracted the attention of the media. A new form of news report, “Precision Journalism,” which is mainly based on survey results, quickly developed in China. *Beijing Youth Daily* (BYD), a local newspaper in Beijing, started to report the results of public opinion survey from the early 1990s. Originally, a small column named “Public Emotion Barometer” was opened in the BYD of March 30, 1993. Two or three questions were posted in the column every two weeks and readers were encouraged to mail their answers to these questions. The results were also published in a two-week base followed by new polling questions. After about half of a year’s experiment, a weekly edition of “Public Survey” was formally published in January 1, 1994. It is the first attempt of reporting survey results in a special section of newspaper in China. BYD initially worked with colleges and academic research institutes to conduct street-corner polls and straw polls. Later a couple of private survey organizations became the partners of BYD and provided survey reports regularly for the special edition. So far 25 domestic newspapers have opened special editions to report the results of public opinion survey (Yuan and Zhou 2005).

In the meanwhile, foreign polling enterprises were seeking opportunities to enter Chinese market. Gallup China, for example, was established in 1991 as the first foreign survey research organization licensed to do business throughout China. Gallup had some initial difficulties in opening the branch because the Chinese government was concerned that sensitive political and

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<sup>18</sup> Source: [www.horizonkey.com](http://www.horizonkey.com).

social questions would be asked. Only after Gallup asked Henry Kissinger to lobby on its behalf did it finally obtain a 20-year license (Laris 1994). Now many well-established foreign polling organizations have opened their branches in China. Almost all of them are engaged in market research. Some of them have gotten permission to conduct foreign survey projects in China. But questions on political and social issues are often under deliberate review by the government.

## **2.4 PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY IN CHINA**

As public opinion survey proliferates in contemporary China, many people express their concerns over its role in collecting and studying public opinion.

Survey research practitioners are worried about the reputation of this profession. Public opinion is so hot in China so that all kinds of organizations are enthusiastic to conduct opinion surveys. However, very few people are well trained in survey methodology, particularly in governments and some private firms. They commonly design questionnaires by themselves and choose convenient sample to interview. Moreover, without sufficient skills on data analysis, they usually conduct very basic descriptive or cross-tabulate analyses in their reports or even publications. What's worse, some practitioners have little sense of work ethics in this profession. They either purposely design questions to solicit favorable responses or relax the standards for quality control to save costs. Non-professional practices severely endanger public confidence in public opinion surveys. Propelled by this situation, in 1998 about one hundred of marketing research firms convened the first meeting to regulate public opinion and marketing research activities. A formal organization, Chinese Marketing Research Association (CMRA), was established in 2000. CMRA regulated the work ethics of public opinion and marketing

research, which signifies the standardization of public opinion survey research in China. In 2006 a new job title, research analyst, was announced publicly by the State Bureau of Statistics and the Department of Labor. Research analysts refer to those who utilize qualitative or quantitative methods to collect information, analyze data and provide reports for consumers. They are certified by the State Bureau of Statistics through examinations. This new certification obviously benefits public opinion survey research in China by improving the quality of survey practitioners.

Domestic scholars raised another important problem of Chinese opinion surveys: data openness and sharing. Academic institutions in China usually conduct opinion surveys independently and hold survey data privately. These survey data are severely underused. Moreover, without effective communication among investigators, some projects are even overlapped in topics, which results in more waste in research resources. Another difficulty for data sharing is the lack of agreement on survey standards and coding formats. Even if some survey data are available to users via requests, researchers often encounter troubles when trying to compare the results. Some institutions have started to construct a common platform for data sharing. For example, to fulfill the requirements for participation of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the Department of Sociology of People's University of China launched Chinese Social Survey Open Database (CSSOD)<sup>19</sup> in 2005. The data of the Chinese General Social Surveys (2003-2006)<sup>20</sup> have been open to the public through this database. CSSOD also invites data input from other academic institutions. The responses they have

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<sup>19</sup> The official website of CSSOD is <http://www.cssod.org>.

<sup>20</sup> Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), a counterpart of General Social Survey (GSS) in China, is a collaborative project of the Department of Sociology at People's University of China and the Survey Research Center at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology.

received, however, are very few. So far only several datasets from their own department have been added to the database.

Western survey researchers are mainly concerned about the political impacts on public opinion surveys in China. First, certain sensitive topics are not allowed to be asked in opinion surveys. For example, when Pew Research Center conducted a global attitude survey in 2002, many questions concerning religion, politics, government/policy and corruption were screened out due to government regulation. Second, foreign enterprises and researchers cannot conduct surveys on political issues and even social issues in China according to a document of the State Bureau of Statistics of China publicized in 2002. But “where there is a need to conduct such surveys, they shall be conducted by domestic institutions with the qualification of conducting foreign-related social survey.”<sup>21</sup> It is important to choose domestic partners carefully to ensure good survey quality. Moreover, domestic survey research organizations usually enjoy more freedom than foreign commercial firms in conducting surveys on social problems. In contrast to the 2002 Pew survey in China, which was conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres (Guangzhou), the 2000 Chinese Values Survey, a collaboration between the RCCC at Peking University and the World Values Survey project, successfully asked many sensitive questions, including those about religion and democracy. Third, western scholars are also concerned about the validity of survey responses in the China’s political context. It is found that Chinese survey data often contain a considerable amount of item nonresponses. Analyses of these data also yield many “unbelievable” results in comparison with those from other countries. Since China is not a

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<sup>21</sup> In this document, it is stipulated that “organizations and individuals from outside the territory, subsidiaries of foreign enterprises and resident representative offices of foreign enterprises within the territory and resident institutions in China of other foreign organizations shall not, by their own, conduct social survey activities within the territory of China. Where there is a need to conduct such surveys, they shall be conducted by domestic institutions with the qualification of conducting foreign-related social survey. Institutions without such qualification shall not be commissioned for any survey.”

democracy, political fear and political manipulation are suspected to be major causes of these findings. These problems are crucial to the usefulness of Chinese survey data in academic research. In light of this, I launched this project to study these problems in terms of truthfulness, meaningfulness, and comparability, which will be addressed in the following chapters.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter examines the emergence and growth of public opinion surveys in the transitional context of China. It might be surprising to western researchers that public opinion survey, a conventional tool of collecting public opinion in democratic societies, has achieved such a rapid development in authoritarian China. It is even more counterintuitive to them that Chinese government organizations show such a great interest in it that from its inception, official organizations have been the major sponsors. This chapter provides a detailed account about this phenomenon.

First, when public opinion survey was introduced to China, China had just initiated a series of reform policies which had tremendous impacts on China's development. Three orientations underlying these policies are liberalization, modernization, and internationalization. Liberalization granted much freedom not only to the common people in forming and expressing opinions to social issues but also to researchers in collecting and studying public opinions. Modernization led to information explosion and mobility in Chinese societies by developing or importing advanced technologies especially in telecommunication. Facilities for opinion survey research, such as computerized data processing and interview techniques, were updated almost in the same breath of those in developed countries. Internationalization provided conditions for

liberalization and modernization and further strengthened their effects. In this process, Chinese public were gradually exposed to western thoughts and cultures. Many public opinion surveys were often conducted as collaborative effort between domestic and international organizations. Therefore, the emergence and development of public opinion surveys are closely related to the historical, political, social, and research context in transitional China.

This chapter also describes the organizational growth of public opinion surveys in China. After 30 years, public opinion survey has become a promising discipline with a proliferation of opinion survey research organizations. These organizations can be categorized into three types: governmental, academic, and commercial. Each type of organization has its own comparative advantages as well as shortages. Government opinion research apparatus are privileged in administrative resources to obtain sampling information and interviewee cooperation, whereas manipulation and response effect are always big concerns for the quality of such surveys. Academic survey research institutes have a wealth of well-trained survey researchers, yet they often confront insufficient research funding which greatly limits their capability to conduct large scale or high quality surveys. Commercial marketing research firms enjoy much freedom in topic selection, and driven by cost-benefit considerations in practice, they conduct surveys in a more efficient fashion. However, survey quality might be compromised due to the same consideration. The amount of opinion survey organizations is likely to keep increasing as opinion survey data is in a greater demand in China.

Some problems of public opinion survey in China are addressed lastly. These problems, which represent concerns from different people that are involved in opinion surveys, include the reputation of the profession of public opinion survey, the political impact, and academic needs for data openness and data sharing. Evidence show that survey practitioners have taken some

measures to deal with these problems, and opinion survey research is expected to become more mature and established in the foreseeable future.

### **3. DECIPHERING THE SILENCE: DON'T KNOW, DON'T CARE, OR DON'T WANT TO TELL**

The validity of survey responses in Chinese public opinion surveys is often speculated as a problem but rarely researched. One concern is about item nonresponse: do people fail to give substantive answers in Chinese surveys because they truly don't know, don't care, or don't want to tell? Based on the data from the World Values Surveys (1999-2004), this chapter investigates this question empirically and comparatively by analyzing "don't know" answers in surveys of China, India, Vietnam, South Korea, and the United States. Evidence show that item nonresponse in Chinese survey is highly related to difficulty of the topic, respondents' cognitive ability, and respondents' interest in politics and in the survey. Though third party presence may increase nonresponse, it is unclear whether social desirability or political fear is the major reason. In addition, education and political interest are found to have converging effects among the five countries, suggesting that the high rates of item nonresponse in Chinese public opinion surveys are mainly caused by poor education and political alienation.

#### **3.1 THE ISSUE: ITEM NONRESPONSE**

Survey research has been widely used in public opinion research in China (Tang 2005). While scholars in Chinese field or comparative studies are excited about data richness, they are also

worried about data quality. Among all such concerns, item nonresponse (or “don’t know” answers) has caught scholars’ special attention. For example, the World Values Survey (1999-2004) includes a battery of eight questions on democracy. Item nonresponse rates among Chinese respondents on average are as high as 33.6%, while the average is only about 3% for US respondents. Comparative studies are seriously plagued by this problem: it is obviously not appropriate to ignore it and discard all “don’t know” answers, but what should we do when confronting such a large amount of missing data while still purporting to draw valid inferences from the available data?

By definition, item nonresponse is “the failure to obtain information for a question within an interview or questionnaire” (de Leeuw 2001). It results in missing values to a particular question. However, it does not mean that item nonresponse fails to contain any information. Although the information is not self-evident, it can be revealed by further analysis of the missingness. In general, there are three types of missing data based on the analysis. The first type is missing-completely-at-random (MCAR). The missingness is not related to the unknown values of the question in case, neither is it related to the values of other questions. Possible causes for MCAR are interviewers’ careless omission of questions or illegible record of answers. The second type is missing-at-random (MAR). The missingness may be caused by some particular reasons that are irrelevant to the question in case. By analysis it will show that the missing data is related to the values of other observed data (e.g., age, education, etc.), but not to the value of the question itself. The third type of missing data is not-missing-at-random (NMAR). In this case, the missingness is related to the answer to the question itself. It usually occurs when respondents are asked on sensitive questions. For MCAR data, discarding the missing data will not affect the analyses since they are randomly distributed. For the MAR and

NMAR data, however, simply discarding the missing data will have adverse effect on the validity of conclusions. For instance, Berinsky (1999, 2004) found that some individuals who are against school integration are more likely to hide their socially undesirable opinions by giving a “don’t know” response. As a result, public opinion polls often overstate public support for government efforts to integrate schools. In another research, Berinsky also demonstrated that public opinion poll on social welfare controversies gives disproportionate weight to respondents who oppose expanding the government’s role in the economy. The supporters of the welfare state are mostly economically disadvantaged and those who support principles of political equality. However, they are less able to form “coherent and consistent opinions” on such policies and thus less likely to articulate opinions on surveys (Berinsky 2002, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to have a better understanding of “don’t know” answers before dealing with the missing data.

However, item nonresponse in Chinese surveys is often speculated as a problem but rarely researched. A big concern is about the validity of survey responses in China. Geer (2004) stated in *Public Opinion and Polling Around the World : A Historical Encyclopedia*, that “(Chinese) people expressed opinions in public—as well as in survey and market research and public opinion polls—that might not reflect their true opinions because they do not want to get into trouble with the government. Even without sampling problems, this should be a great concern for those who might wish to do polling on political issues in China” (p. 553). There may be more than just a few students in comparative studies who hold this opinion, and they usually consider two strategies that may be employed by the respondents to avoid the trouble: one is to tell a lie, another is to keep silence. Yet, relevant evidence from empirical research are rare. Tang (2005) finds that the percentage of “don’t know” increased 10-20 percent for the questions

related to satisfaction with the party, the government, and market reform after the 1989 crackdown. But whether the increase was caused by the particular political atmosphere at that time is still guesswork without any systematic examination. It is also suspected that the prevalence of MAR problems may also be caused by insufficient education resources in China. Ordinary Chinese people may lack cognitive abilities to form concrete opinions to certain survey questions due to their low education level. These suspicions give rise to the controversial role of Chinese surveys in public opinion research. Therefore, more and in-depth research to address these problems is in great need.

The aim of this chapter is to shed some light on understanding item nonresponse in China's surveys from a comparative perspective. I first provide brief theoretical background of existing research on item nonresponse. Cognitive interpretation and empirical findings are abundant in democratic contexts. In contrast, systematic examinations are few in the studies of non-democratic countries. I then proceed with methodological details, describing the data used, the cases selected, and the measures constructed in my analysis. In the following section, I test my hypotheses and present the empirical results in three parts. First, I examine topical effect on the distribution of "don't know" answers and compare them across five countries. Second, I identify factors that contribute to item nonresponse on a topic-by-topic basis in Chinese surveys. Finally, I focus on the politics-related questions and compare the effects across countries.

### **3.2 ITEM NONRESPONSE IN PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS**

Item nonresponse has drawn scholars' interest from the very beginning of the development of scientific public opinion polls (for a thorough review, see Krosnick, 2002). A school of scholars

believe that a simple “don’t know” response may reflect several possible mind states: no idea, no opinion, and refusal. Findings from empirical studies are consistent with their belief and confirm that the distinctions are evident in examination of the linkage of underlying attitude and opinion expression (e.g., Bogart 1967; Coombs and Coombs 1976-77; Faulkenberry and Mason 1978; Bishop et al 1980; Duncan and Stenbeck 1988; Gilljam and Granberg 1993).

From psychological approach, in order to understand formation of survey response, Krosnick (1991, 1999) describes the cognitive process when respondents answer questions. He claims that this process involves four steps. (1) Respondents must interpret the question and deduce its intent. (2) They must search their memories for relevant information. (3) They must integrate that information into a single judgment. (4) They must translate the judgment into a response by selecting one of the alternatives offered. On the one hand, a respondent’s effort, including ability and motivation, in performing the necessary cognitive tasks can determine whether they are optimizing or satisficing their answers. On the other hand, task difficulty may also influence their responses. Giving “don’t know” answers, in this sense, is one of the strategies in which respondents satisfice their answers.

While “no idea” and “no opinion” are direct output of the cognitive process, “refusal” usually occurs in the process of opinion expression. Berinsky (2004) argues that cost/benefit is the big consideration when respondents give response to questions. Respondents may fail to answer questions because of cognitive costs—they are short of the ability or motivation to form substantive answers. They are also likely to abstain from articulating their opinions due to contemplation of social costs. When respondents realize that certain social costs are associated with the free expression of opinion, they usually compare the costs with possible benefits to answering questions in a rational way. “Don’t know” response is a result of such comparison

when costs are greater than benefits. Respondents hide their opinions in silence in order to avoid certain loss—socially or politically.

Beatty and Herrmann (2002) synthesize a theoretical framework explaining the cognitive processes that lead to either substantive answers or item nonresponse. They introduce four cognitive states: *available* (“the requested information can be retrieved with minimal effort”), *accessible* (“the requested information can be retrieved with effort or prompts”), *generatable* (“the requested information is not exactly known, but may be estimated using other information in memory”), and *inestimable* (“the requested information is not known and there is virtually no basis for estimation”). Any of the four cognitive state may lead to either a substantive response or item nonresponse. For example, in the two extreme states—available and inestimable, respondents may choose not to answer questions even though they clearly have an answer in mind; they may also fabricate an answer rather than admitting ignorance. Their decisions of what to report can be explained by communicative intent, which could be influenced by a variety of factors, such as interest in survey content, complexity of the question, length of the instrument, and perceived risk in answering or not answering.

These arguments are confirmed by numerous findings from empirical studies of survey data. From the approach of cognitive ability, it is found that the propensity to give “don’t know” responses is related to formal education level, age, knowledge of the topic, and information exposure (e.g., Francis and Busch 1975; Converse 1976-77; Rapoport 1979). From the approach of motivation, interest in the topic or in the survey as a whole plays an important role to determine whether respondents optimize or satisfice their answers (e.g., Goyder 1986; Stocke 2006). Topical effect is demonstrated in two aspects: first, more sensitive questions get more refusals; and second, questions that require more cognitive effort to answer receive more “don’t

know” responses (Shoemaker, Eichholz and Skewes 2002). In addition, item nonresponse is also influenced by questionnaire design (Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber 1984; Harmon 2001; Schuman, Presser and Lubwig 1981), interview process, mode of data collection, and context of surveying (de Leeuw 2003; Kampen 2006). Respondents from different countries may have different response style. For example, based on data from a cross-national survey dealing with opinions about international relations, peace and war, and disarmament conducted in France, Norway, and Poland in 1964-65, Sicinski (1970) finds that the Norwegians are clearly much more inclined than the Frenchmen and the Poles to guess answers rather than admit ignorance when being asked questions on political knowledge. Cultural effects caught scholars’ attention, but cross-cultural comparative studies are still few at this point of time.

Almost all studies reviewed above are based on survey data from developed democratic countries. Relevant studies in under-developed or non-democratic countries are still at the primary stage and with controversies. In recent decade, with increasing availability of survey data from Russia or former Soviet Union, it becomes possible to test the hypothetical effects of political context/legacy on the validity of survey response. Carnaghan (1996) considers three factors that affect respondents’ motivation to give nonsubstantial responses: political alienation, political apathy, and ambivalence to questions. She finds that political fear does not play an important role in making Russians reluctant to answer survey questions although it is not possible to eliminate its effects completely. Instead, most Russians did not answer questions because they had little interest in or minimal information about the question. Berinsky and Tucker (2006) explore the interaction of non-response bias and attitudes towards economic policies in Russia in the period of the economic transformation. They find that Russians who

failed to answer survey questions are on average less economically liberal than their counterparts who answered such questions.

Table 1 An examination of item nonresponse in public opinion surveys

<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Underlying attitude</b>	<b>Influential factor</b>
Don't know	Ignorance Ambivalence Conflict	Gender Age Education
Don't care	Apathy Alienation	Interest in the topic Interest in the survey
Don't want to tell	Political fear Social desirability	Topic sensitivity Response effects

The existing research on item nonresponse is summarized in Table 1. In general, when respondents fail to answer a survey question, there are three possible meanings: *don't know*, *don't care*, or *don't want to tell*. *Don't know*, as an easy expression of no idea, no opinion, and hard to choose, is mainly because of ignorance, ambivalence, or idea conflicts. It can be regarded as truthful answers but limited by respondents' cognitive abilities. Influential factors include gender, age, and education. *Don't care* discloses to what extent a respondent makes efforts to formulate an answer to a survey question. For apathetic or alienated respondents, they are likely to lack the motivations to optimize their answers. In this case, respondents' interest in the question or in the survey as a whole may play a role in item nonresponse. Finally, *don't want to tell* is usually associated with political context and prevalent social norms. Respondents may fail to answer questions because of political fear or social desirability. Their responses may be influenced by topic sensitivity or certain response effect, such as trust in the interviewers or presence of third parties.

### 3.3 DATA, CASE SELECTION, AND MEASURES

This chapter investigates item nonresponse in Chinese surveys from a comparative perspective. I use the data from the 4th wave of World Values Surveys (WVS) project conducted in 1999-2004. In addition to China, the countries included in this study are the United States, South Korea, India, and Vietnam. I selected these countries with three considerations in mind: *political freedom, economic development, and cultural difference*. Specifically, first, both China and Vietnam are under political transition from communism to directions still unclear. They are at the same level of political freedom and economic development, and share a similar Confucian tradition. Due to these similarities, the two countries should produce similar results in item nonresponse. Second, India shares similar population size and economic development with China. But the two countries differ in the nature of political systems. Third, South Korea is close to China in culture, but differs from China in political freedom and economic development as a new democracy with a higher level of industrialization.<sup>22</sup> Cultural effect can be revealed by commonality of these two countries. Lastly, the United States is chosen as an affluent democracy, which meets the conditions for good opinion polls (Warren 2002). A typology of countries in the three dimensions is presented in Figure 1. Political freedom is indicated by the Freedom index of political rights and civil liberties<sup>23</sup>, and economic development is represented by GDP per capita (in dollars) of 1999. As expected, China and India are close to each other on the economic development dimension, Vietnam is almost on the same scale with China on the political freedom dimension, and China, Vietnam and South Korean share the same surface of Confucianism.

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<sup>22</sup> Taiwan would be a better candidate for the comparative study controlling cultural effects. Regrettably Taiwan was not included in this wave of WVS.

<sup>23</sup> The data is accessible at <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.

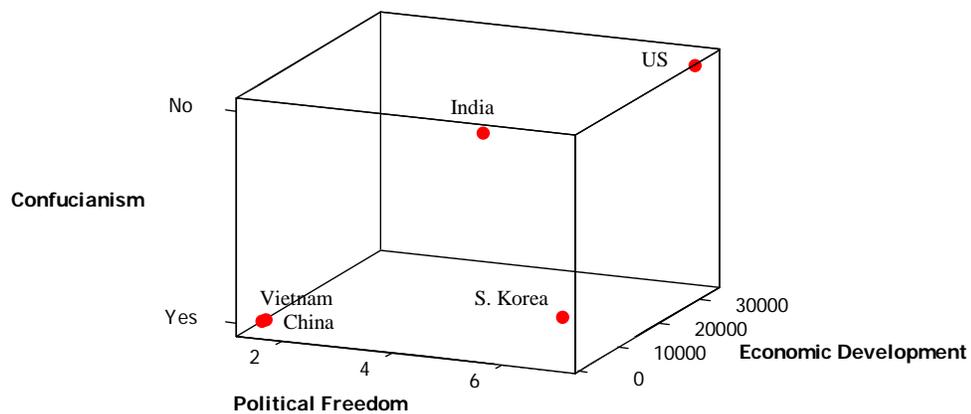


Figure 1 Countries for comparison

Notes: Political freedom is the average of indices of political right and civil liberty, scored (1) low to (7) high. Economic development is measured by GDP per capita in dollars (1999).

The dependent variable, noted as DKs, is used to count the number of questions to which a “don’t know” response is given by each individual in the sample. Three criteria were used for the exclusion of questions: (1) questions not common to all questionnaires in the five countries;<sup>24</sup> (2) questions contingent on a previous response; and (3) questions used by this study as an independent variable. A total of 109 questions are included in my analysis. Table 2 presents a summary of distribution of total DKs for each country. It indicates that the proportions of respondents who never gave “don’t know” answers are similar between China and India. Only

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<sup>24</sup> By this criterion, Russia was not included in the study because over 30 questions that are common to the questionnaires in other four countries are not asked in Russia, even though it would be a good case for comparison with China since they have similar political legacy.

about 12% of respondents in China and 15% of respondents in India gave substantial answers to all questions in case. In contrast, respondents who gave substantial answers to all questions amounted to one fourth in South Korea, more than a half in the US, and over one third in Vietnam. From the five-number summary of distributions of DKs for each country, we can see that the distributions are far from normal. The distributions of DKs in all five countries are highly skewed to the right. The five-number summary of distributions of DKs for each country reveals a far from normal picture: they are all highly skewed to the right. China and India seem to have similar feature with 50% (median) respondents who give “don’t know” answers to about 10 questions, while for the US, South Korea, and Vietnam the medians are only 2 or 3. Further analysis will be given in the next section.

Table 2 Distribution of total DKs by countries

<i>Country</i>	<i>Proportion of no DKs (%)</i>	<i>Distribution of DKs</i>					<i>N</i>
		<i>Minimum</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup> quartile</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>3<sup>rd</sup> quartile</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	
China	11.90	1	3	8	19	90	1000
India	15.73	1	3	10	32	109	2002
Vietnam	36.50	1	1	3	7	89	1000
S. Korea	26.33	1	2	3	6	84	1200
U.S.	52.42	1	1	2	4	37	1200

Notes: A total of 109 survey questions are included in this analysis. The distribution of DK answers is described by five-number summary, which consists of the minimum (smallest observation), the first quartile (which cuts off the lowest 25% of the data), the median (middle value), the third quartile (which cuts off the highest 25% of the data), and the maximum (largest observation).

Source: The World Values Survey

### 3.4 EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Scholars have proposed many factors that may lead to item nonresponse in public opinion surveys. What are the major factors that cause respondents to give “don’t know” answers in Chinese surveys? Do these factors work in similar ways as those that impact respondents from other countries? Are there any particular reasons that make Chinese respondents fail to answer survey questions? I will inquire into these questions with four factors in consideration: topical effect, cognitive ability, apathy, and fear of political retribution. The first three factors may be common for all countries, while the last factor may only have effects on respondents from countries with legacy of repressive rule. After identifying the topical effect based on the data, I analyze the effects of cognitive ability, apathy, or political fear with controlling topical effect.

#### *Topical effect*

Topical effect is demonstrated in public opinion surveys everywhere. It usually involves effects from two aspects: difficulty and sensitivity. Respondents are inclined to give “don’t know” answers to difficult questions due to limitation of cognitive ability, or to sensitive questions due to social desirability or political fear. The WVS covers a variety of topics so that it enables us to test topical effect on item nonresponse. I grouped the 109 questions into three categories: life-related, value-related, and politics-related (See Appendix A for more details about grouping). Life-related questions include those on attitudes to life, job, marriage, religion, and morality. A total of 58 questions are in this category. Value-related questions consist of those reflecting personal values on environment, country priority, future changes, and governance. There are 21 questions in this category. Finally, I assigned 30 questions into politics-related category, covering institutional trust, political system, and international politics. Politics-related questions

may be the most difficult to answer in terms of task difficulty while life-related questions are the easiest. However, questions in all three categories can be sensitive depending on social and political contexts. Therefore, I expect that in Chinese surveys politics-related questions are associated with most serious problems of item nonresponse, and life-related questions the least problematic. I also expect that this pattern would be similar among all countries.

### *Cognitive ability*

The core factors related to a person's cognitive ability are gender, age, and education. It is commonly believed that females, less-educated, or older people are associated with lower cognitive ability, and thus give more "don't know" answers in public opinion survey. In this study, education is adjusted to five levels in all five countries. Age may have a complex effect that not only involves cognitive ability but also relates to other effects. Therefore, I divided the respondents into three age groups: the first group includes people from 18 to 35 years old, the second from 36 to 50 years old, and the third older than 50 years. I expect that gender, education, and age have similar effects on Chinese respondents as on respondents from other countries. I also expect that the effects are most prominent on responses to politics-related questions. In particular, since China and India are almost at the same level of modernization, the effects may have smallest difference between the two countries.

### *Apathy*

Generally, apathy is also reflected in people with certain demographic characteristics. For example, females may focus more on life issues but have less interest in politics-related questions. Compared with young adults, the older generation may care more about social

policies and thus tend to express concrete opinions on politics-related questions. In China, respondents' apathetic attitude may be resulted from political alienation in the course of history. Tong (1995) argues that mass alienation was originally a reaction to the defects of the state socialist system. It increased during the period of ideological liberalization and marketization reform and was a result of the decline in public morality and widespread political corruption. Three questions are included in the survey to measure the degree of mass political interest.<sup>25</sup> They are combined into a one-dimension index based on separate factor analyses of the data from each country<sup>26</sup>. I expect those with higher degree of political interest tend to give more substantive answers to survey questions rather than ignoring them by saying "don't know." Moreover, the effect would be more notable on politics-related questions.

At the end of the survey interview, the interviewers were asked to record whether the respondent was very interested, somewhat interested, or not very interested during the interview.<sup>27</sup> Two dummy variables are generated to test whether those who are very interested or somewhat interested tend to give fewer "don't know" answers than those who are not very interested.

#### *Social desirability/Fear of political retribution*

Social desirability and fear of political retribution usually have similar effect on item nonresponse depending on perception of sensitivity. For the former, respondents believe that

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<sup>25</sup> The questions are:

1. How interested would you say that you are in politics?
2. How often do you follow politics in the news on television or on the radio or in the daily papers?
3. When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?

<sup>26</sup> The loadings of the factor are over .50 in all countries, and the reliability coefficients are 0.65 for China, 0.72 for the US, 0.68 for India, 0.60 for South Korea, and 0.68 for Vietnam. The index of political interest is generated by a linear combination of the values weighted by the loadings for each country.

<sup>27</sup> This question was not asked in the Korean survey.

there is a “right” answer to the question which is shared by the majority or valued by the society. It is widely discovered and discussed by survey researchers in democratic societies. For the latter, respondents believe that there is a “safe” answer to the question which does not violate official doctrine. It is the most suspicious reason for the high rate of item nonresponse in surveys from non-democratic settings (Welsh 1981; Shi 1997; Tang 2005).

Though China is at the transitional state of post-totalitarianism as the state has been gradually loosening its control over the society since the reforms, it is reasonable to assume that fear of political retribution from past experiences still works on people’s mind, and the respondents are likely to conceal their true opinions by giving “don’t know” answers. Two Chinese social surveys in 1992 and 1999 asked respondents directly whether they are afraid of being reported on by others if they criticize the government. It turns out that about half of the respondents still have the concern of being reported by others, indicating people may not give true answers in some circumstances. The WVS did not include such questions in the questionnaire. So I use several indirect measures to explore if people attempt to hide their opinions by giving “don’t know” responses.

The first measure is interpersonal trust, which is measured in the well-known dichotomy: “most people can be trusted” and “need to be very careful.” I expect that it is easier for the respondents who chose the former answer to establish a good rapport with the interviewers, thus feeling more comfortable to give substantive responses than those who chose the latter. This pattern is also expected to be most salient for the politics-related questions.

Another measure is the presence of third parties in the interview process. This information was recorded in the Chinese version of the World Values Survey. It is expected that

the respondents with other adults around would be more likely to conceal true opinion than those who are interviewed alone.

The effect of political fear can also be indirectly measured from individual's personal experience or education level. The three age groups correspond to life experiences in three different periods in China. The respondents aged 50 or above were socialized during the radical Socialist transformation and experienced the crucial political purges. They learned how to avoid political troubles by keeping silence or telling lies. Those in the second age group grew up in a society full of political attacks, betrayals, persecutions, and fears. They also experienced the early stages of the reforms after the Cultural Revolution and the most liberal period before the Tiananmen event. Such experiences may not only deviate them from official ideology but also prevent them from expressing their true opinions. As a result, they may be more concerned with revealing true opinions than younger generations would be. The respondents in the third age group live in a period with stable political environment and rapid economic development. Marketization weakened the communist control over the society, and as a result political fear gradually faded away. This group of people is expected to be more willing to express true opinions, though they are also more likely to give "don't know" answers to questions on political issues due to apathy. Therefore, I expect that respondents in the second group have the highest probabilities to give "don't know" responses, followed by the first group and the third group. It is also reasonable for well-educated people to be more sensitive to political contexts and contents of survey questions. The number of item nonresponse may in this sense be positively associated with education level (a statistical description of the explanatory variables for each country is presented in Appendix B).

### 3.5 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The distribution of DKs in each category is very similar to the distribution of total DKs—highly skewed to the right with excessive zeros. In this situation, means are not good measures of center since they are not resistant to outliers. So I computed medians for the DK rates in each category<sup>28</sup> and compare them across topics and countries (Figure 2).

As is expected, Figure 2 shows that politics-related category has the highest median of the DK rates while life-related category has the lowest in all countries but Vietnam. For China, a half of the questions in life-related category are with 5% or lower DK rates, and the medians for questions in value-related and politics-related categories are 12.7% and 24.3% respectively. Among them, the median for politics-related category has the largest variance. Based on Mood median test, the medians are significantly different from one another at .95 confidence level. Therefore, strong evidence supports the expectation that the item nonresponse rates in Chinese survey have a positive relationship with the difficulties of questions.

Median tests across countries on each category reveal that the difference of medians in China and India is mostly caused by chance—they are not statistically different. In contrast, item nonresponse rates in Vietnam, South Korea and the US have different patterns which are statistically significant from China and India. The results are consistent on all categories. It seems that, rather than political context or cultural difference, economic development seems to play an effective role on item nonresponse rates in public opinion surveys in China and India since the two countries are almost at the same level of economic development in spite of being different in other aspects. But this argument is far from conclusive based on the single evidence.

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<sup>28</sup> For each country, DK rates are computed as the number of DKs divided by the number of respondents in a question-by-question basis. Medians of DK rates are found separately for each category.

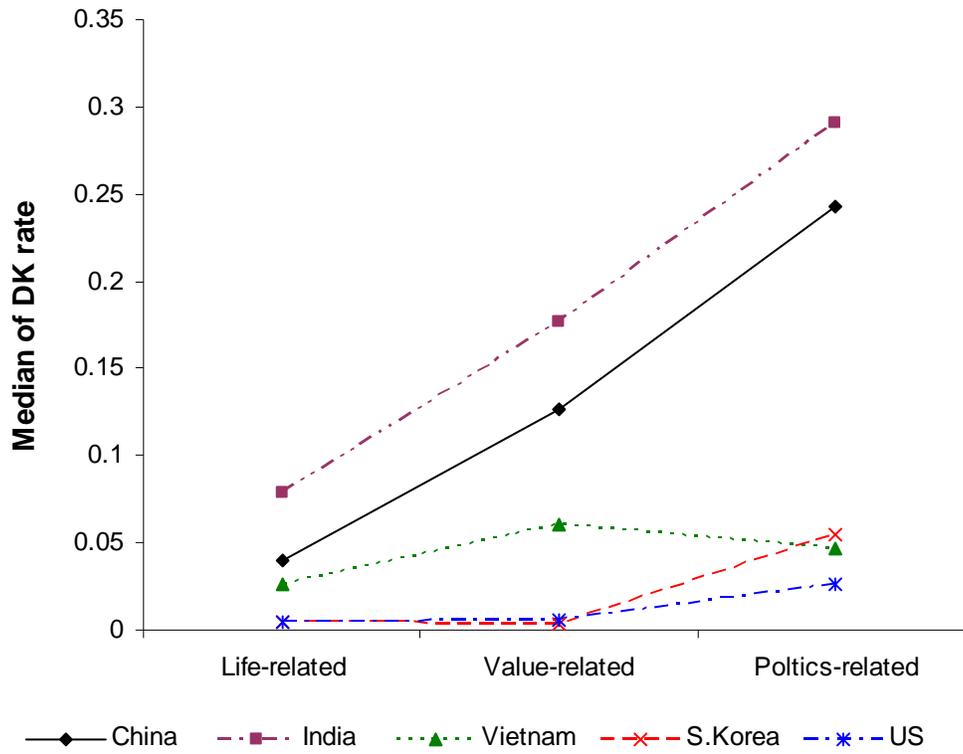


Figure 2 Median of DK rate by topics and countries

To control the effect of topical difficulty, I perform further analyses on each category separately. Before choosing an appropriate method to model the data, some descriptions of the dependent variables are desirable. First, the number of DKs is an event counting variable. It is found that the distribution of DKs in each category is highly skewed to the right. Normality assumption of ordinary least square regression analysis hence is violated. In this situation, Poisson regression analysis should be considered as an alternative approach. Second, it may not be appropriate to assume that the events of a respondent's "don't know" answers are independent from each other. Some questions are correlated, therefore DK answers to these questions are very likely to be correlated as well. Such a situation results in overdispersion, that is, the unique

property of Poisson distribution with equal mean and variance is not valid. Descriptive statistics of the data confirm that the variances of the variables are far greater than their means. Negative binomial (NB) regression is then suggested to deal with overdispersion in counting event data by adding an overdispersion parameter (alpha) to the model (Long 1997; King 1998; Pickery and Loosveldt 1998). By allowing the alpha term to vary systematically, NB regression can model the data with various dispersions. When alpha is zero, NB model reduces to Poisson regression. Third, it is also observed that the dependent variables contain a considerable proportion of zeros. It indicates that some respondents may be inclined to give “don’t know” answers, while some others may be resistant to item nonresponse for some reason. Zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) regression analysis can be of help for explaining situations like this (Long and Freese 2006).

The ZINB regression in this case involves two processes: one determines whether a respondent is likely to give DK answers, and the other determines the number of times that the respondent gives DK answers in a survey. The ZINB regression estimates the two processes separately. In other words, this method assumes that there are two latent groups: *Always Zero group* and *Not Always Zero group*. The dependent variable in the first process is a binary variable assigning 1 to *Always Zero group* (no DK at all) and 0 to *Not Always Zero group* (some DKs). A logistic model is specified to explore how likely a respondent gives substantive answers to all questions based on certain personal characteristics. For those who give “don’t know” answer, in the second process a NB regression is utilized to determine the probability of the DK counts on condition whether the respondents are designated to *Always Zero group* or *Not Always Zero group*.

### 3.5.1 The ZINB regression results of “don’t know” responses

The results of three ZINB regression analyses on life-related, value-related, and politics-related questions in China survey are shown in Table 3. Goodness of fit tests for all three models are highly significant. Vuong tests are significant for the models on value-related and politics-related questions, suggesting that the ZINB models are better than the corresponding standard NB models.

The logit model predicts the probability in which a respondent is likely to be put in the Always Zero group. The results show whether a respondent will give substantive answers to all questions is affected by his cognitive ability, indicated by gender and education, and his political interest. For the life-related questions, education plays a significant role to distinguish these two groups of respondents. Being educated with one additional level increase the odds of no DK answers by a factor of 3.50, holding other variables constant<sup>29</sup>. For the value-related questions, political interest can reduce the probability of giving DK answers. A standard deviation increase in the index of political interest increases the odds of never giving DK answers by a factor of 1.85, holding all other variables constant. For the politics-related questions, gender, education and political interest all have significant effects. Being a female respondent decreases the odds of never giving DK answers by a factor of 0.39 (or 61 percent), and an additional unit increase in education and political interest increases the odds by 80 percent and 36 percent respectively, holding all other variables constant.

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<sup>29</sup> The interpretations of the ZINB results in this chapter are based on the STATA output with command “listcoef.” In this case, the factor 3.50 =  $\exp(1.253)$ , where 1.253 is the coefficient of education in Table 3. The numbers in the following interpretations of Table 3 are calculated in the same way.

Table 3 ZINB results for “don’t know” responses in China, WVS 2000

	<i><u>Life-related</u></i>		<i><u>Value-related</u></i>		<i><u>Politics-related</u></i>	
	<i>Logit</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>Logit</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>Logit</i>	<i>NB</i>
Gender(female)	-0.356	0.100	-0.039	0.251	-0.935*	0.183**
Age						
> 50	-15.418	0.142	0.339	0.194	-0.101	-0.042
<= 35	1.214	-0.205*	0.519	-0.316*	0.726	-0.128*
36-50 (c.f.)						
Education(level)	1.253*	-0.357***	0.019	-0.562***	0.590**	-0.305***
Interpersonal trust	0.105	-0.130	0.198	-0.147	0.688	0.008
Presence of third parties	-3.189	0.056	-0.801	0.095	0.402	0.172**
Political interest	0.444	-0.134***	0.614*	-0.091*	0.306*	-0.141***
Interest in interview						
- very interested	-16.366	-1.387***	14.337	-0.937***	0.228	-0.712***
- somewhat interested	-1.529	-0.830***	13.538	-0.560**	-0.126	-0.346**
- not very interested (cf)						
Constant	-7.637***	3.245***	-17.740	3.032***	-6.060***	3.469***
Ln Alpha	-0.087		0.280		-0.580***	
N	935		935		935	
Log Likelihood	-1778.332		-1402.433		-2494.552	
LR chi-square	267.07***		167.68***		281.26***	
Vuong test	1.58		2.77**		2.76**	

\* Denotes significance at .05, two-tailed.  
 \*\* Denotes significance at .01, two-tailed.  
 \*\*\* Denotes significance at .001, two-tailed.

The hypotheses of cognitive ability and apathy are also supported by all the three counting models. Significant constants of the models suggest that if a respondent is likely to give DK responses, holding all other factors at zero, he/she would give about 11 (19%) DK

answers<sup>30</sup> to the 58 life-related questions, about 8 (38%) DK answers to the 21 value-related questions, and 24 (80%) DK answers to the 30 politics-related questions. Respondents with higher cognitive ability and more political interest can effectively reduce the number of DK answers. For example, for those who are likely to give DK responses, an additional level in education reduces the expected number of DK answers by 30.0 percent to life-related questions, by 43.0 percent to value-related questions, and by 26.3 percent to politics-related questions, holding all other variables constant. For the same group of respondents, a standard deviation increase in the index of political interest decreases the expected number of DK answers by 12.6 percent to life-related questions, by 8.7 percent for value-related questions, and by 13.1 percent to politics-related questions. Moreover, though respondents who are interested in the survey interview are not likely to give substantive responses to all questions, they do give less number of DK answers than those with no interest. Being a respondent who is very interested in the interview decreases the expected number of DK answers by 75.0 percent to life-related questions, by 60.8 percent to value-related questions, and by 50.9 to politics-related questions, holding all other variables constant. It is also found that the younger respondents gave less DK answers than the older respondents. Compared with the respondents in middle age, those who are less than 35 years old give about 18.5, 27.1, and 12.0 percent less DK answers to the three types of questions separately. Gender only has significant effect in the model for politics-related questions. Female respondents give about 20.1 percent more DK answers to politics-related questions on average than male respondents controlling effects of other variables.

The hypothesis of social desirability/fear of political retribution is only partially supported by the results. Interpersonal trust, which is expected to reduce fear and DKs, plays no

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<sup>30</sup> I use the derivative interpretation suggested by King (1998). The baseline is computed as the coefficient times the mean number of counts in the sample. For the case of China, it is equal to  $3.245 * 3.435 = 11.147$ .

role in all three models. Education is negatively related to the number of DK answers, showing no sign of political sensitivity for the educated. Though respondents in the age group of 35 or younger give significantly less number of DK answers to politics-related questions, it is reasonable to interpret it as part of cognitive ability effect, rather than because of personal experience, since similar age effects are also present in responses to life- or value- related questions. However, it is found that the presence of other adult people in the process of interview can influence respondents' answers to politics-related questions. The respondents tend to give 18.8% more DK answers in front of other adults when being interviewed. In contrast, the respondents have no such concerns when answering life- or value- related questions. It suggests that political control and social desirability still have lingering effects on the mentality of the Chinese respondents and they seem to be very cautious about answering politics-related questions. Some may give DK answers to hide their true opinions, while some others do so because they are afraid of giving "wrong" answers when they do not have clear opinions. The effect of third party presence is, nevertheless, weaker than that of education (supporting cognitive ability hypothesis) and political interest (supporting apathy hypothesis). The predicted number of DKs increases 0.77 when other adults presented in the interview, whereas the number decreases 3.33 and 1.33 for an additional unit increase in education level and political interest score (Appendix B).

Therefore, though we may not eliminate the possibility that Chinese respondents hide their true opinions by giving DK answers due to political fear, we have stronger evidence to demonstrate that the higher rates of DK answers to politics-related questions among the Chinese respondents are mainly due to task difficulty, low cognitive ability, and political apathy.

### 3.5.2 A comparison of “don’t know” responses to politics-related questions

With a particular intention to explore whether political fear affects survey responses in China, I perform the ZINB regression analyses of “don’t know” responses to politics-related questions for all five countries since this group of questions are assumed most difficult and politically sensitive.<sup>31</sup> The results are presented in Table 4.

In general, the ZINB model for the survey of China shares many similarities with the models for the surveys of other countries. The most influential factors are education and political interest. They not only determine the probability that a respondent would give DK answers to politics-related questions but also predict how many DK answers they would be likely to give. The effects of these two factors are in the same direction for all surveys, but with different magnitude.

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<sup>31</sup> There is no information about the presence of third parties during the interview from the surveys of other four counties. So this variable is not included into the comparative analysis.

Table 4 A comparison of “don’t know” responses to politics-related questions

	China		India		Vietnam		South Korea		US	
	Logit	NB	Logit	NB	Logit	NB	Logit	NB	Logit	NB
Gender(female)	-0.941*	0.180**	0.022	0.053	-0.661*	-0.100	-0.237	0.152	-4.710	0.331
Age										
> 50	-0.234	-0.053	0.016	-0.037	-0.102	0.142	-0.672	-0.065	-1.428	0.036
≤ 35	0.634	-0.147*	-0.074	-0.043	0.065	0.297*	-0.102	-0.211	-0.007	0.257
36-50 (c.f.)										
Education(level)	0.555**	-0.318***	0.374***	-0.167***	0.124	-0.346***	0.588**	-0.189**	-0.343	-0.043
Political interest	0.329*	-0.138***	0.519***	-0.220***	0.452***	-0.308***	0.460**	-0.252***	-0.006	-0.217***
Interpersonal trust	0.655	0.017	0.446*	0.095	0.239	-0.073	0.305	0.122	31.446	-0.140
Interest in interview										
- very interested	0.188	-0.705***	0.031	-0.311***	-0.814	-0.418			-18.442	-0.524
- somewhat interested	-0.208	-0.348**	-0.642	0.133	-0.142	-0.202			-18.418	-0.263
- not very interested										
(c.f.)										
Constant	-5.757***	3.563***	-4.826***	3.167	-2.335**	3.544***	-5.114***	2.589***	-10.890	1.132
Ln Alpha	-0.567***		-0.288***		-0.040		0.271		1.461***	
N	935		1808		966		1192		1192	
Log Likelihood	-2498.093		-4676.335		-1404.724		-2005.153		-1258.592	
LR chi-square	274.29***		489.85***		146.10***		53.07***		37.51***	
Vuong test	2.64**		6.02***		3.02**		2.84**		2.63**	

\* Denotes significance at .05, two-tailed.  
 \*\* Denotes significance at .01, two-tailed.  
 \*\*\* Denotes significance at .001, two-tailed.

I further computed the predicted number of DK answers based on various education levels (Figure 3). The results reveal three patterns. First, the predicted number of DK answers has different baselines for the five countries. At the lowest education level, it is predicted that on average Chinese respondents fail to answer 9.2 questions, Indian respondents give about 7.4 DK answers, respondents of South Korea and Vietnam give about 4.0 and 2.5 respectively, and the US respondents give the fewest DK answers (0.9). It seems that China is more similar to India than to Vietnam and South Korea. Then economic development may have some explanatory power. Second, significant education effects, though present in all models except that for the U.S., are different in magnitude. The connecting line representing China has the steepest slope among all lines. The Chinese respondents with medium level of education are expected to give about 4.5 less DK answers than those with lowest level of education. The expected number of DK answers decreases to 2.2 for those with the highest level. The lines indicating India, South Korea, and Vietnam have similar slopes, suggesting equally strong effect of education. Third, the five lines converge as education level increases. It helps to explain the big differences of DK answers to politics-related questions for the five countries. The mean level of education in China and India is much lower than that in South Korea and the US. Therefore, modernization that promotes education will play an important role in improving quality of survey data from China by reducing item nonresponse.

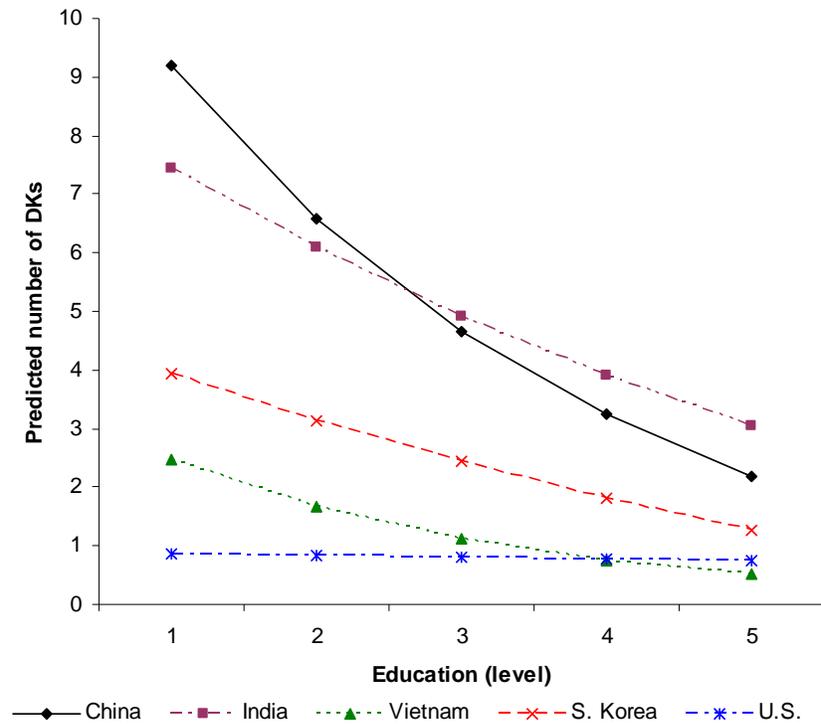


Figure 3 A comparison of education effect on number of DK answers

Political interest also shows significant effects on DK answers to politics-related questions. Because political interest is measured using three indicators and the respondents from different countries have different factor structures to construct the index, it is not appropriate to use units for comparison. Figure 4 presents a comparison of predicted number of DK answers based on the five-number summary statistics which consists of minimum, first quartile, median, third quartile, and maximum. Again, China is more similar to Indian than to other countries. While the lines of Vietnam, South Korea, and the US group together at the bottom, the lines of China and India stay at the top with an intersection at the median. For half of the respondents in the middle part of political interest distribution, the average predicted numbers of DK answers are almost equal for the two countries. However, with the steepest slope of the line, Indian

respondents are more influenced by political interest than Chinese respondents in giving DK answers to politics-related questions. At the point of the third quartile of political interest distribution, the predicted number of DK answers is 2.9 for India compared with 4.4 for China. It is also observed that the lines for China and South Korea, though have different starting points, have very similar pattern of slope changes. Both lines drop quickly from the minimum to the first quartile, and then gradually decrease to the lowest point at the maximum value of the index of political interest. There is almost equal distance between the two lines. It suggests that the derivative effects of political interest on item nonresponse are almost the same for the surveys of China and South Korea. Some common cultural features of the two countries may help to explain the similarity. Moreover, the lines also converge as the quantile increases but the process is slower than that of education effects.

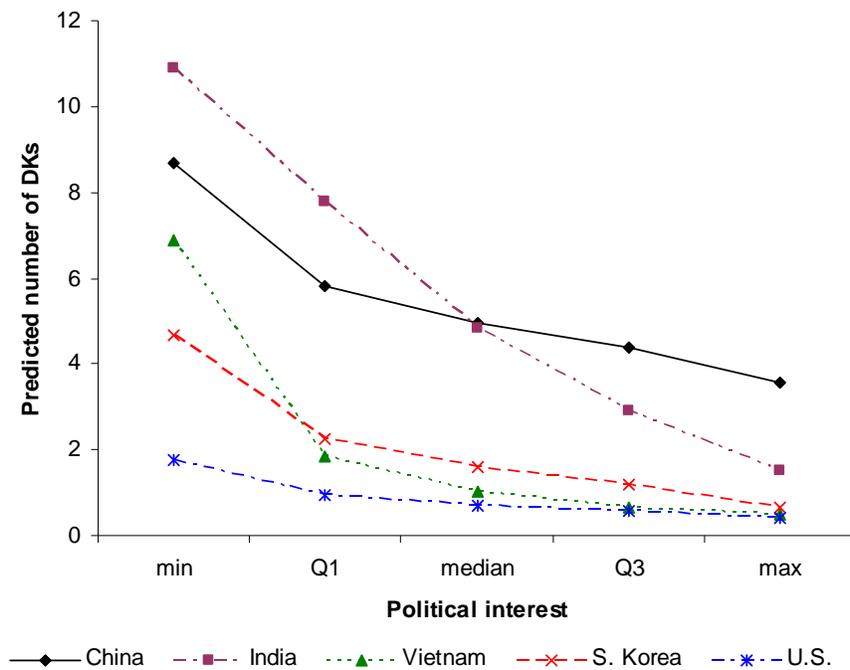


Figure 4 A comparison of political interest effect on number of DK answers

If fear of political retribution has impacts on survey responses through “don’t know” answers, we would expect that some variables have common effects in the models for China and Vietnam but work in different way for other countries since both China and Vietnam were under communist rule before reform and now are in a transition featuring political liberalization and marketization. However, the results are quite contradictory to our expectation. First, the number of “don’t know” answers to politics-related questions is unbelievably low among Vietnam respondents. About 50 percent of them give less than 2 DK answers to the 30 questions, but for Chinese respondents, this number is about 7. The baselines computed from the counting models are 7.4 DK answers for Vietnam and 24.3 DK answers for China. Second, while the age group effect in China survey is more likely to be associated with cognitive ability, this effect in Vietnam survey may be better explained by political apathy. Chinese respondents under 35 years old are expected to give about 13.7 percent less DK answers than those in the mid-age group, but the Vietnamese respondents in similar age group are expected to give about 34.6 percent more DK answers. Third, the number of DK answers in the surveys of both countries can be effectively reduced by higher education level and more political interest. Interpersonal trust fails to show significant effects to predict the number of DK answers in this analysis.

In a nutshell, from a comparative perspective, my analysis strongly supports the hypotheses of cognitive ability and political apathy. Lacking information on third party presence in surveys of other countries, we found moderate effect of third party presence on DKs, which seems to support the hypothesis of political fear and social desirability.

### 3.6 CONCLUSION

Based on extensive studies on item nonresponses in survey research, I summarize three meanings of “don’t know” answers: *don’t know*, *don’t care*, and *don’t want to tell*. I present four hypotheses—topical effect, cognitive ability, political apathy, and political fear—to explore the difference of the three meanings for item nonresponse in the survey of China.

First, I find strong support for the hypotheses on topical effect and cognitive ability, which are mostly associated with the first meaning of “don’t know” answers. For the respondents who are female, less educated, and at an older age, when they fail to answer some questions, it is likely because they truly do not know the answers or have difficulty to formulate concrete opinions. The phenomenon is especially evident in responses to questions with higher task difficulty since such questions usually require more cognitive ability to answer. The effect of cognitive ability on item nonresponse is common to surveys of all countries in this study. It results in more “don’t know” answers among respondents from developing countries (e.g., China and India) than those from modernized countries (e.g., South Korea and the U.S.) because education is not as developed in China and India as in South Korea and the U.S. In addition, education has a converging effect. As education level increases the gaps of the predicted number of “don’t know” response among the selected countries decrease rapidly.

Second, I also find evidence for the second meaning of “don’t know” answers—don’t care. For the respondents who lack interest in politics or the survey interview, they are more likely to say “don’t know.” The effect of political interest is the strongest for politics-related questions among the three categories. Like the effect of education, this political interest effect is not particular to China. It also causes a convergence, though not that drastically. It is worthwhile to note the similarity between China and South Korea in the derivative effect of

political interest. The gaps of the predicted number of “don’t know” answers are almost equal between the two countries at each of the 5 points of political interest distribution. It suggests that culture may play a role in influencing the magnitude of the effect.

Finally, item nonresponse due to “don’t want to tell” seems to play a modest role, though we cannot claim that fear of political retribution or social desirability has no effect in Chinese surveys based on the evidence. It is found that the Chinese respondents give more “don’t know” answers to politics-related questions if other adults are present during the interview. However, this effect of third party presence is weak, compared to other factors such as cognitive ability and political interest. Further, third party presence may produce similar effect in increasing nonresponse in any society, since social desirability exists in all countries, free or not free. Unless we can prove that third party presence does not increase nonresponse in other countries, we cannot conclude that nonresponse caused by social desirability or fear of political incorrectness is unique to China. Unfortunately, the World Values Surveys in other countries do not contain information on third party presence. Future improvements of the World Values Survey in including information on third party presence will enable researchers to address this question. Finally, the fact that Vietnam showed fewer nonresponses cast further doubt on the effect of fear, since both are under similar political control by communist regimes and both share low freedom ratings. The more damaging threats to the validity of survey response in China in terms of “don’t know” answers seem to be political apathy and the lack of education, rather than fear of political retribution.

#### **4. EXAMINING THE VOICED OPINIONS: THE MEANINGFULNESS OF POLITICAL SUPPORT**

The previous chapter explored whether there are true opinions hidden behind people's non-responses to survey questions. This chapter continues with a follow-up question: even if Chinese respondents give answers to survey questions, do they really mean it? Is it possible that they give false responses to hide their true opinions, or give easy answers derived from official propaganda? And what are the considerations when the respondents handle politically sensitive questions? Scholars in China studies are haunted by these questions when they incorporate Chinese survey data in their research. They usually devote several paragraphs or even an entire section to justify the validity of the data (e.g., Shi 1997; Chen 2004). Nonetheless, these justifications are unlikely to be convincing without support from systematic studies. It is the task of this chapter to shed light on these questions and to clarify readers' suspicions.

##### **4.1 THE ISSUE: POLITICAL SUPPORT**

In lieu of investigating all survey questions concerning this problem, which is impractical, we select questions on political support to illustrate this issue. Political support in China is of great interest to Chinese specialists because of both theoretical inquiry and political implications. A

large number of studies on political support are based on democratic contexts. In contrast, relevant studies are scarce in non-democratic polities including China<sup>32</sup>. People outside China often assume that the Chinese government lacks popular support since its legitimacy is not based on the people's consent. Once the ongoing reforms encounter serious problems, it will be difficult for the government to maintain sociopolitical stability in China.

However, evidence from survey research has demonstrated that the Chinese government in fact enjoys a rather high level of political support (Chen 2004). Rudimentary analyses of the WVS data reveal the same fact (Figure 5). A total of eight questions are included in this analysis.

'I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?'

- (1) The government (in your capital)
- (2) Parliament
- (3) Political parties
- (4) The police

(5) Democratic development - 'On the whole are you very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy is developing (in your country)?'

(6) Human rights - 'How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays (in your country)? Do you feel there is a lot of respect, some respect, not much respect or no respect at all?'

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<sup>32</sup> A few examples includes Lujan (1974), Geddes and Zaller (1989), Miller et al. (1994), Rose and Mishler (2002), and Chen (2004).

(7) People in national office - 'How satisfied are you with the way the people now in national office are handing the country's affairs? Would you say you are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, fairly dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?'

(8) Political system - 'People have different views about the system for governing this country. Here is the scale for rating how well things are going: 1 means very bad; 10 means very good. Where on this scale would you put the political system as it was (under communist regime/under the xxx regime/ten years ago)?'

These questions are chosen with the Eastonian conceptualization on support for the regime and political authorities, and six of them are in the dimension of regime performance in Klingemann's empirical studies (1999). I compute the percentages of the respondents who held positive opinions to these questions and summarize the results for China in comparison with the world average and the democracies<sup>33</sup> average in Figure 5. It shows that a majority of Chinese people gave positive answers to each question, thus drawing a striking picture of the high level of political support in China. Among all indicators, the government in Beijing, the Parliament, and political parties<sup>34</sup> invite a great proportion of the people to declare confidence in them (an average of 90%). In contrast, the average percentages of people with the same opinions in the democracies and in the world are far lower. The gaps of percentages between China and the democracies are from 15% in the question on the rating of political systems to 75% in the question on political parties.

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<sup>33</sup> Democracies refer to those who scored lower than 4 on the Freedom House Index (1999) of 1(free) – 7 (not free) scale.

<sup>34</sup> In the Chinese questionnaire the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was used in place of political parties.

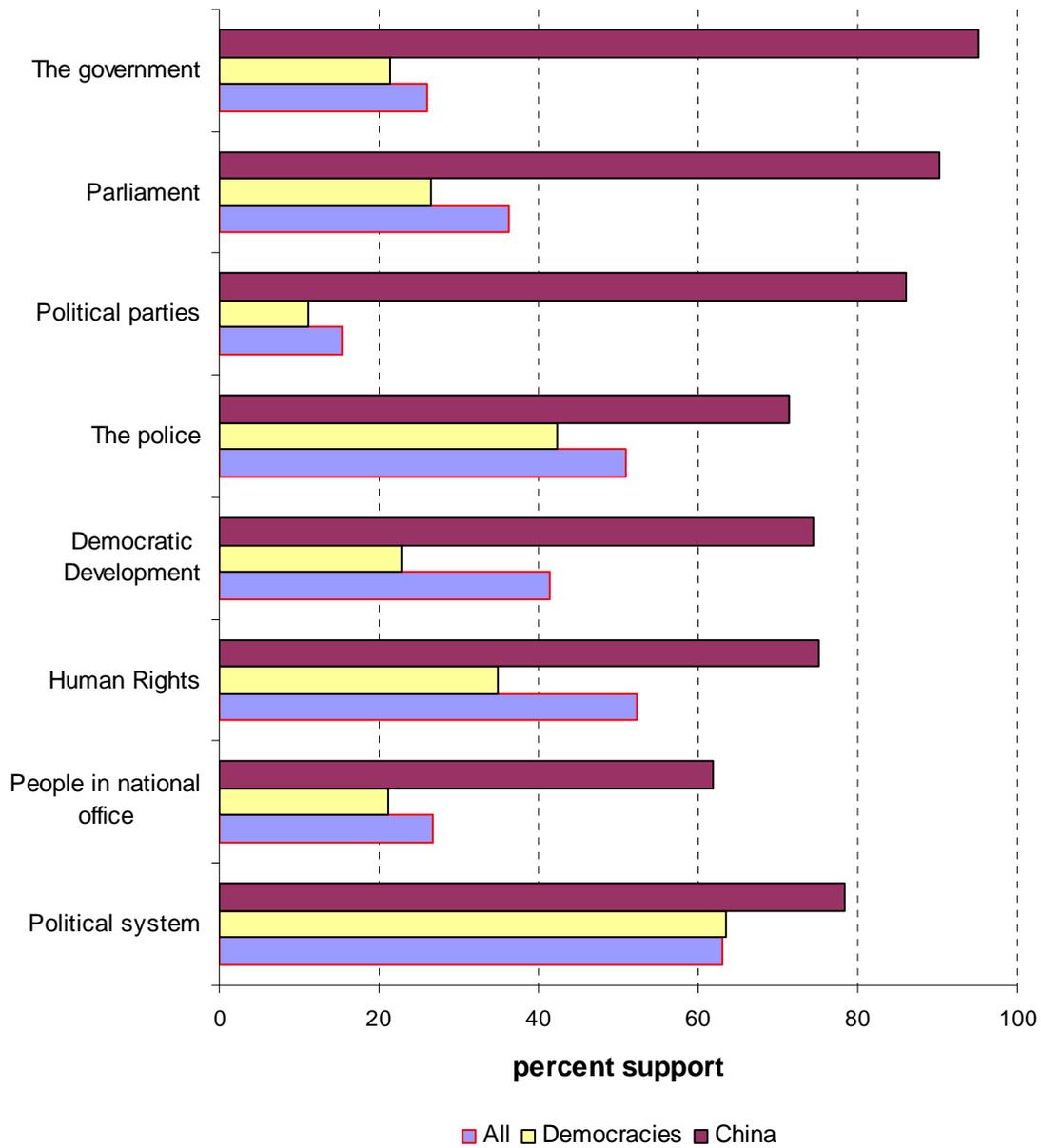


Figure 5 A comparison of political support

Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

What does the high level of political support mean in China? To what extent does it reflect supportive sentiments among the Chinese? Specifically, does it indicate the people’s satisfaction with the performance of the incumbent government, the people’s affective feelings

toward political objects, or is it just an illusion from artificial answers? With these concerns in mind, this chapter will examine the voiced political support in China. It will start to explicate the meaning of political support. After laying out possible explanations to the “unbelievably” high level of political support in China, this study will proceed to empirical analyses at both the country and the individual levels in order to examine the problem from a comparative perspective and provide an in-depth case study of China as well. Finally it will conclude that the higher level of political support revealed in the surveys is to a great degree a result of political contexts in China. Though people do not necessarily give false answers to hide true opinions, their responses are significantly influenced by the government’s propaganda and information control.

## **4.2 THE MEANING OF POLITICAL SUPPORT**

Political support is a key concept in political science. The commonly assumed relationship between political support and political stability has continually aroused attention from a great number of political researchers. Although there are some disagreements or complements to the definition of political support, Easton’s conceptualization (1965; 1975) has such far-reaching influence that scholars of today frequently refer to it as their major analytical framework in studying political support (e.g., Dalton 1999, 2004; Mishler and Rose 2000; Chen 2004). In his earlier work, Easton identifies three major objects toward which political support is directed: the political community, the regime and the authorities. The political community, in Easton’s words, is “a group of people who come together to draw up some kind of constitution to regulate their political relationship” (Easton 1965: 178). Their attachments to this group usually transcend

particular political settings and form strong sentiments of belonging. The regime commonly refers to the fundamental values, norms, and institutional arrangements. It provides a platform for political governing. The authorities include political figures that are currently in the position of political authority or denote political leadership in general. Among these three objects, the regime and the authorities are believed to be more critical to political stability and have prompted numerous empirical studies.

Having observed some unpredictable outcomes of the relationship between political dissatisfaction and acceptance of political arrangements, Easton argues that political support is not uni-dimensional. He distinguishes between two types of political support: specific support and diffuse support. Specific support is “object-specific” and a direct response to the political authorities. It varies with the people’s evaluation of the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities. When people perceive themselves as beneficiaries of concrete policies or the actions of government, their specific support can be significantly boosted. However, if they feel disappointed with government performance, such as big corruption being exposed, they may also be likely to cease their support. In contrast, diffuse support “refers to evaluation of what an object is or represents ... not of what it does” (Easton 1965: 444). Thus it is more “durable” and “basic” compared with specific support. Diffuse support can underlie all three objects mentioned above and varies in different ways depending on the objects to which it is directed. When directed to the political authorities and regime, diffuse support typically expresses itself in the forms of trust and legitimacy. Trust reflects the people’s confidence that the authorities can take care of the people’s interests even with little or no supervision. Legitimacy is a normative belief that the authorities or the regime will act in a right and proper fashion.

The meaning of political support is not only determined by the objects and the particular forms, it also involves reflections of supportive sentiments. For this reason Easton singles out compliance from the dimensions of diffuse support in that compliance is ambiguous in its connection with political support and requires context-based interpretation (Easton 1975: 453-455). The people's behaviors of conformity with authority rules may indicate their support but may also be caused by fear of persecution. Dalton (1999) also discusses two sentiments that orient political support: evaluative and affective feelings. He argues that while specific support is more rationally oriented based on evaluative calculations, diffuse support reflects more generalized and affective orientations.

In short, the meaning of political support is multi-faceted. It involves support directed to different objects, support in different forms, as well as support with different orientations. Diffuse support seems to be mostly directed to the political community and the regime, and specific support is usually directed to the political authorities; however, they may also be targeted on the same objects. In the same vein, affective feeling is not exclusively for diffuse support, and neither is evaluative calculation for specific support. Thus, which meaning can we derive from survey responses on political support? That is, when respondents answer questions related to political support, what are the major considerations that influence their responses? I will first use factor analyses to explore this question.

### 4.3 THE DIMENSIONALITY OF THE VOICED POLITICAL SUPPORT

The eight questions listed in the first section are in the dimension of regime performance according to Klingemann's study (1999)<sup>35</sup>. Theoretically, they may also be grouped under the categories of the regime and the political authorities, or alternatively under diffuse support or specific support. Two dimensions have emerged from the exploratory factor analyses of the World Values Survey data at three different levels: the individual level in China, the aggregate national level, and the pooled cross-national individual level (Table 5). The results are not completely identical with one another.

The findings from the pooled cross-national individual data are mostly consistent with our theoretical expectations. The first dimension indicates institutional trust, which consists of confidence in the government, the parliament, political parties, and the police. Thus it successfully captures elements of diffuse support among the respondents. The second dimension is from the perspective of regime performance, which includes ratings of the political system, satisfaction with democratic development, respect for individual human rights, and satisfaction with the people in national office. It is more relevant to specific support. The results provide a general view of political support among all the respondents. They cannot, however, be generalized to all the people of the countries surveyed in that the samples, when being pooled together, were not representative for the whole population. The findings thus run the risk of selection bias since the sample size varies from country to country especially when country context influences the people's responses.

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<sup>35</sup> Klingemann (1999) used six of these questions due to data availability. Two questions excluded from his analysis are confidence in the police and respect for individual human rights.

Table 5 Dimensions of political support

	Pooled cross-national individual level		Aggregate national level		Individual level in China	
	I	II	I	II	I	II
Confidence in the government	<b>0.832</b>	0.242	<b>0.962</b>	0.165	<b>0.868</b>	0.137
Confidence in the parliament	<b>0.871</b>	0.209	<b>0.864</b>	0.387	<b>0.856</b>	0.170
Confidence in political parties	<b>0.828</b>	0.142	<b>0.944</b>	0.257	<b>0.867</b>	0.087
Confidence in the police	<b>0.531</b>	0.317	0.248	<b>0.719</b>	0.258	<b>0.546</b>
Rating of the political system	0.077	<b>0.389</b>	0.283	<b>0.550</b>	0.112	<b>0.645</b>
Satisfaction with democratic development	0.238	<b>0.798</b>	0.359	<b>0.857</b>	0.265	<b>0.635</b>
Respect for individual human rights	0.228	<b>0.678</b>	0.292	<b>0.874</b>	0.115	<b>0.724</b>
Satisfaction with the people in national office	0.244	<b>0.804</b>	<b>0.690</b>	<b>0.510</b>	0.182	<b>0.683</b>
Eigenvalue	3.617	1.093	3.392	2.820	3.237	1.360
% Total variance	32.40	26.47	42.40	35.25	30.42	27.04

Method: Factor analysis with principal components factoring. Factor matrices are rotated and factors with eigenvalues larger than 1 are extracted.

Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

The second factor analysis (aggregate national level) is based on the percentages of respondents in each country who give positive answers to the questions. This analysis is expected to uncover countries' differences in the pattern of political support. An interesting finding is that the item of confidence in the police does not stand together with the same

questions about other political institutions, but has higher loadings in the second dimension. Moreover, the item of satisfaction with the people in national office has almost equal loadings in both dimensions. It implies that respondents from different countries may have different considerations to orient their responses. The first dimension appears to be oriented by affective feelings, and the second by evaluative calculations. As the core institutions of a political system, the government, the parliament, and political parties have more particular significance in the people's lives than the police do. For example, these institutions are not allowed to be challenged in some non-democratic countries ruled by a single party. In contrast, the police are not as politically sensitive as others, and thus people are more likely to view it from an evaluative perspective. In the same vein, the people in national office, representing the political authorities, may involve intertwined feelings from the respondents of different countries in that their legitimate role relies not only on their positions but also on their performances. While people may view their positions with affective feelings, they may also evaluate their performance in a rational way.

The factor analysis of the Chinese survey data shows a similar pattern of political support with that of the aggregate national level. The only difference is that the Chinese respondents' attitudes towards the people in national office are mainly based on their evaluation of those people's performances. Therefore, the Chinese respondents implicitly distinguish between items on core political institutions and regime performance when they voice their opinions towards political support.

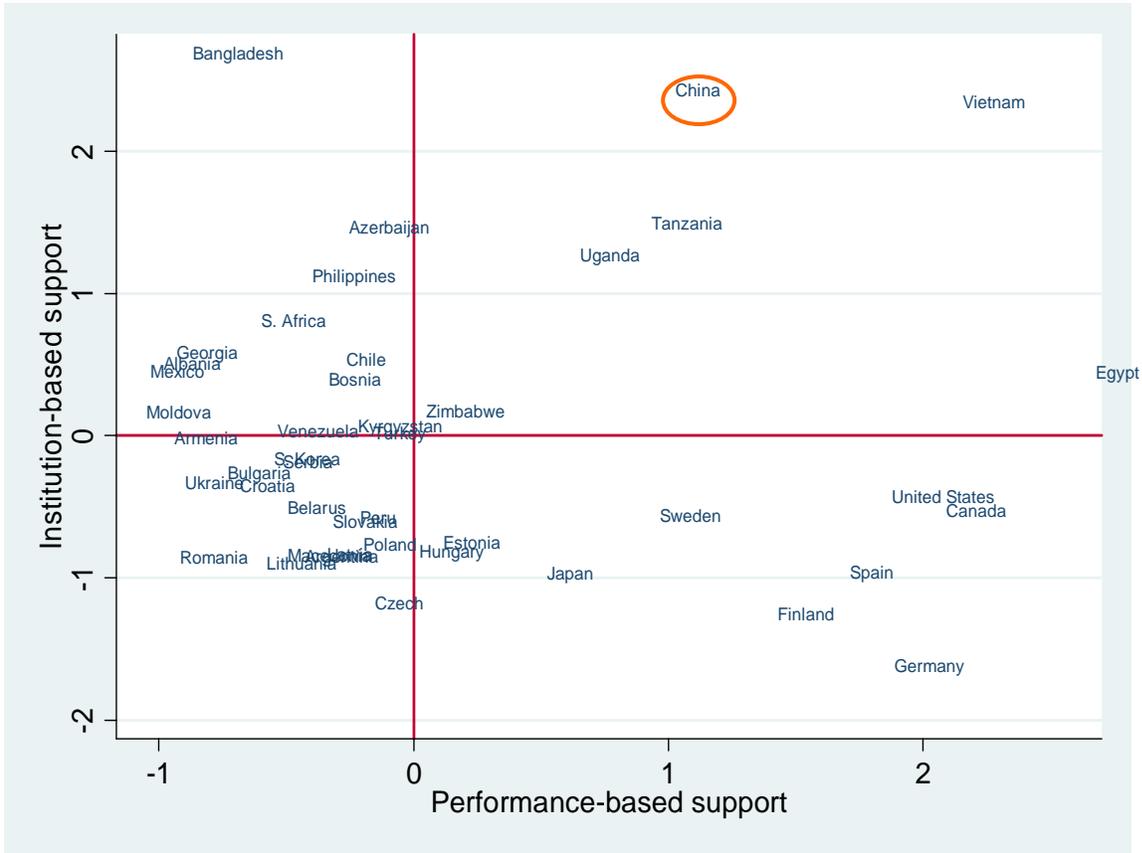


Figure 6 National scores on political support

Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

Based on the factor scores from the factor analysis of the aggregate national level data in Table 5, I use a scatterplot to compare the level of the voiced political support in China with that in other countries (Figure 6). It shows that political support in China is at a high level in both dimensions. It is striking that the Chinese support of the core political institutions is almost the highest among all countries. Their support in the dimension of regime performance is also far above that of the average value (0) among countries. The scatterplot also shows that China appears to fall in the category of other non-democratic or developing countries, such as Vietnam, Tanzania, and Uganda with high levels of political support in both dimensions. In contrast, some

old democratic and developed countries, such as the United States, Canada, Sweden, Spain, Finland, Germany, and Japan, shows very similar patterns of political support with a high level in the dimension of regime performance and a relatively low level in the dimension of political institutions.

The findings from the factor analyses raise two questions pertaining to the voiced political support in China. First, what are the factors that make the level of political support in China different from other countries? Second, what are the factors that account for the variation within the Chinese respondents in voicing political support in survey research? Several possible explanations will be laid out below followed by empirical tests at both the country level and the individual level within China.

#### **4.4 EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Past research suggests three approaches to explain the level of voiced political support in China. Briefly, they are regime, cultural, and rational arguments.

##### **4.4.1 Regime arguments**

Regime arguments cast doubt on the validity of the responses in non-democratic countries including China (Welsh 1981; Warren 2001). They claim that the responses are either false or manipulated. To their knowledge, the communist state penetrates every aspect of the people's lives using ideology or coercion to unify the people's thoughts. In doing so, it has to falsify reality and try to educate the people into believing in the falsification. In the post-totalitarian

system as depicted by Havel (1990), “individuals need not believe all these mystification, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them”. Havel illustrates a greengrocer who places in his window a slogan: “Workers of the World, United!” This behavior, however, is properly interpreted as: “I am afraid and therefore unquestionably obedient.” The greengrocer did not care about the content of the slogan, but he clearly knew he would be in trouble if he did not do it. Hence, people have to tell lies or keep silent in order to show harmony with the system. This mentality is named by Goldfarb as “post-totalitarian mind,” which is shaped by the experience of totalitarian system and by the cultural and political liberalization from this experience (Goldfarb 1989). This mentality was also captured by survey research in the Soviet Union. Vladimir Shlapentokh (1985) argues that when the repression level is low, the government loses its capability of enforcing the official values among the masses. While the legacy of the past could not die away immediately, there were two levels of public opinion in the mentalities of the masses: pragmatic and mythological levels. These two levels influence individuals’ decisions to different issues. “Whereas the pragmatic level reflects values and images which directly govern human ‘material behavior,’ the mythological level serves mostly verbal behavior and enables people to demonstrate collaboration with their social milieu and to maintain self-respect.” The discrepancy between the two levels is minimal both in both strong repressive regimes and in democratic societies, but reaches its peak in a society with relatively mild repression (Shlapentokh 1985).

China is under the transition of post-totalitarianism. Like most totalitarian states, the Chinese government used to proactively mobilize popular support through powerful propaganda on one hand, and ruthlessly punish dissenters with the aid of coercion on the other. However, in the past three decades, the power of both propaganda and coercion has been significantly

weakened as a consequence of marketization and liberalization. Chinese people have gradually started to enjoy more freedom in assimilating ideas and expressing opinions. Some of them may have formed private opinions on political support that deviate from official inculcation. Yet the post-totalitarianism mind is pervasively observed among the people. It is reasonable to assume that fear of political retribution from past experiences are still on the people's minds, and the respondents are likely to conceal their true opinions by giving norm-seeking or political-favored answers in surveys.

To identify if some responses are driven by a fear of political retribution, Tang (2005) suggests three strategies: (1) avoid asking politically sensitive questions; (2) deliberately asking politically sensitive questions; (3) asking people directly in the survey whether they are afraid of being reported on by others if they criticize the government. The third strategy was used in two Chinese social surveys in 1992 and 1999. It turns out that about a half of the respondents still have the concern of being reported by others, indicating people may not give true answers in some circumstances. Political fear is also found to exist in post-Communist countries although the reasons of such lingering fear are not clear (Rose 2007). However, no significant empirical evidence indicates that the fearful people answer differently from the others about political questions either in the post-Communist countries or in China (Shi 1996, 1997; Chen 2004; Rose 2007).

Manipulation by politicization is another concern in the regime arguments. The authoritarian governments try to publicize propaganda and discourage criticism through media control or political education. The state limits the public access to alternative sources of information and news, and holds political meetings regularly where people get together and study the latest central documents. Exposure to political communications promotes the popular

acceptance for the “mainstream political norms embedded in those communications” (Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979; Chan 1997; Patterson 1999). However, resistance factors are also found in Geddes and Zaller’s exposure-acceptance model (1989). They prove that in authoritarian states people who pay enough attention to government-dominated communications media but not sophisticated enough to resist the propaganda are typically most susceptible to government influence. The exposure-acceptance effect, in a different form, is also found in Stockmann’s studies (2007) on the effects of media commercialization on Chinese public opinion. By examining the attitudes of Chongqing residents toward the labor law and of Beijing residents toward the United States, she demonstrates that people are more resistant to positive news when they consume more official papers, but more susceptible to media messages when reading more reformed papers.

It is noteworthy that the effect of politicization is not the same as that of political fear. Political fear prevents respondents from expressing true opinions when their opinions are contradictory to what the authority promotes. Politicization persuades people to conform to the official viewpoints by the means of propaganda, social education, and control of information. Survey responses, in the latter situation, are manipulated; yet they may reflect respondents’ true opinion.

In light of the regime arguments, I propose the following hypotheses:

*H1a: The level of the voiced political support in survey research is likely to be higher in non-democratic states than in democratic states.*

*H1b: The Chinese respondents with fear of political retribution tend to express higher level of political support than others.*

*H1c: The Chinese respondents who are influenced by official media tend to express higher level of political support than others.*

#### **4.4.2 Cultural arguments**

Almond and Verba (1963) argue that cultures play an independent role on the formation of the people's attitudes, and thus people may react to the same stimuli differently because of different values they assign to events (Inglehart 1999; Shi 2001). Confucianism still has a deep impact in China. It emphasizes deference to authority and hierarchy, which is likely to promote political support among the Chinese people and also distinguishes China from other cultural entities. Moreover, empirical research reveals that respondents have different strategies in handling survey questions that they do not understand or cannot answer, such as acquiescence, satisficing, or randomly picking. Some strategies are common for all, but some are culture-based (Ross and Mirowsky 1984; Javeline 1999; Smith 2004). Therefore, we would expect that countries embracing the similar cultures will show a similar pattern in the level of political support.

Moreover, the distinction between support for the political community and for the regime and political authorities is blurred in both the Chinese traditional culture and the Communist social education. The idea that "loving China is equivalent to loving the government/the party" is very common among the Chinese people. Thus the spill-over effect from support for the political community to support for the regime and the political authorities is expected to be present in the voiced political support in China.

Two hypotheses derive from the above arguments:

*H2a: The level of the voiced political support is likely to be higher in Confucian countries than others.*

*H2b: The Chinese respondents who are more nationalistic tend to express higher level of political support than others.*

#### **4.4.3 Rationality arguments**

Rationality arguments stress the evaluative side of political support. Easton (1975) defines support in a general sense as “the way in which a person evaluatively orients himself to some object through either his attitudes or his behavior” (p.436). Specific support is relatively intuitive in this sense. As specific support is directed toward the political authorities and institutions, it hinges on perceived benefits or satisfaction and thus can fluctuate significantly. Diffuse support is also an evaluative sort; though different from specific support, “it refers to evaluation of what an object is or represents ... not of what it does” (p.444). Besides socialization, diffuse support can drive from the evaluation of past experiences in the long term. Some scholars employ the rational choice theory to interpret trust and consider trust as an evaluative reaction when one speculates how others’ interests relate to his/her own and to what extent they would behave as expected (Hardin 1998, 2002).

However, current studies on China haven’t provided strong evidence for the role of performance in shaping the people’s political support. A research based on survey data from 1995 and 1999 fails to find the effect of the individual satisfaction of one’s material and social life on the assessment of local policies (Chen 2004). Also, an important comparative study on the PRC and Taiwan finds that the bases of political trust in both places are still less legal-rational than traditional, especially in the PRC (Shi 2001).

Elements that may serve for evaluation of political performance include economic development and the corruption of countries, and the perceived benefits or satisfactions by individuals. The following hypotheses will be tested based on these arguments.

*H3a. The level of the voiced political support is likely to be higher in the more economically developed countries than others.*

*H3b. The level of the voiced political support is likely to be higher in the countries with less perceived corruption than others.*

*H3c: The Chinese respondents who perceive more benefits or satisfactions tend to express higher level of political support than others.*

I also expect that the factors discussed above will have different effects in the two dimensions of political support revealed by the factor analyses. Hence the hypotheses will be tested separately in these two dimensions in order to explore the motives or sentiments that underlie voiced opinions to political support.

#### **4.5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AT THE MACRO LEVEL**

Analysis at the macro level aims to discover the factors that distinguish China from other countries in the survey responses on political support. Four hypotheses (H1a, H2a, H3a, and H3b) will be tested in this section using multivariate regression analyses.

### 4.5.1 Measurement

Two variables are generated from the factor analysis of the aggregate national level data in the World Values Survey (see Table 5), and they will be used as the dependent variables which represent the two dimensions of voiced political support. The first dependent variable, named institution-based support, mainly consists of the items on the people's confidence in three core political institutions: the government, the parliament, and political parties. The second dependent variable, performance-based support, stresses the people's evaluation of the political system, democratic development, respect for human rights, and the people in national office in their respective countries. Both of these scores have means of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Regime type is measured by the Freedom House Indices in 1999.<sup>36</sup> Freedom House rates the degree of freedom in each state in two aspects: political rights and civil liberties. They are originally measured on a one-to-seven scale, with one representing the highest degree of freedom and seven the lowest. I reversed both indices, and the final score has a range of 0 (no freedom) to 14 (maximum freedom).

The cultural variable is categorical and consists of the four country groups in the World Values Survey: (1) the predominantly Confucian societies; (2) the predominantly Christian societies; (3) the predominantly Islamic societies; and (4) other countries. The predominantly Confucian societies, which include China, are used as the comparison group.

Economic development and corruption are used to test the rationality arguments. Economic development is measured by GDP per capita of each country in 1999, and corruption

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<sup>36</sup> The indices are accessible at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

is measured by the corruption perception indices developed by Transparency International.<sup>37</sup> The indices are reversed with 10 indicating “the least corrupted” and 0 indicating “the most corrupted.”

#### **4.5.2 Findings**

##### *Political support and regime type*

Exploratory studies of the relationship between political support and regime type reveal two different patterns in the two dimensions. First, in the dimension of political institutions, there appears a negative linear relationship between the degree of freedom and the confidence in political institutions (Figure 7). As the degree of political freedom increases, the confidence in political institutions tends to decrease. Vietnam and China are on one end with the highest scores in confidence of political institutions yet the lowest scores in the degree of political freedom, whereas several old democratic countries, such as the United States, Canada, Finland, and Germany, scatter at the other end with the lowest scores in the confidence in political institutions. Generally confidence in political institutions is regarded as elements of diffuse support. Thus it might be surprising to find that the levels of diffuse support are lower in those countries with more political freedom. Studies have shown that citizens in some democratic countries have been becoming more and more critical towards their political systems (Norris 1999). In contrast, authoritarian governments try to maintain popular support through powerful propaganda and strict information control. Moreover, in countries ruled by a single party, the power of the government, the parliament, political parties, and the incumbents are

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<sup>37</sup> The corruption perception indices are accessible at [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi)

unchallengeable by common people, and thus respondents may have concerns to express their true opinions. Therefore, the results suggest that respondents may have different orientations to answer the questions. While those in democratic countries may respond to the questions from an evaluative perspective, those in non-democratic countries may do it out of affective/fearful feelings.

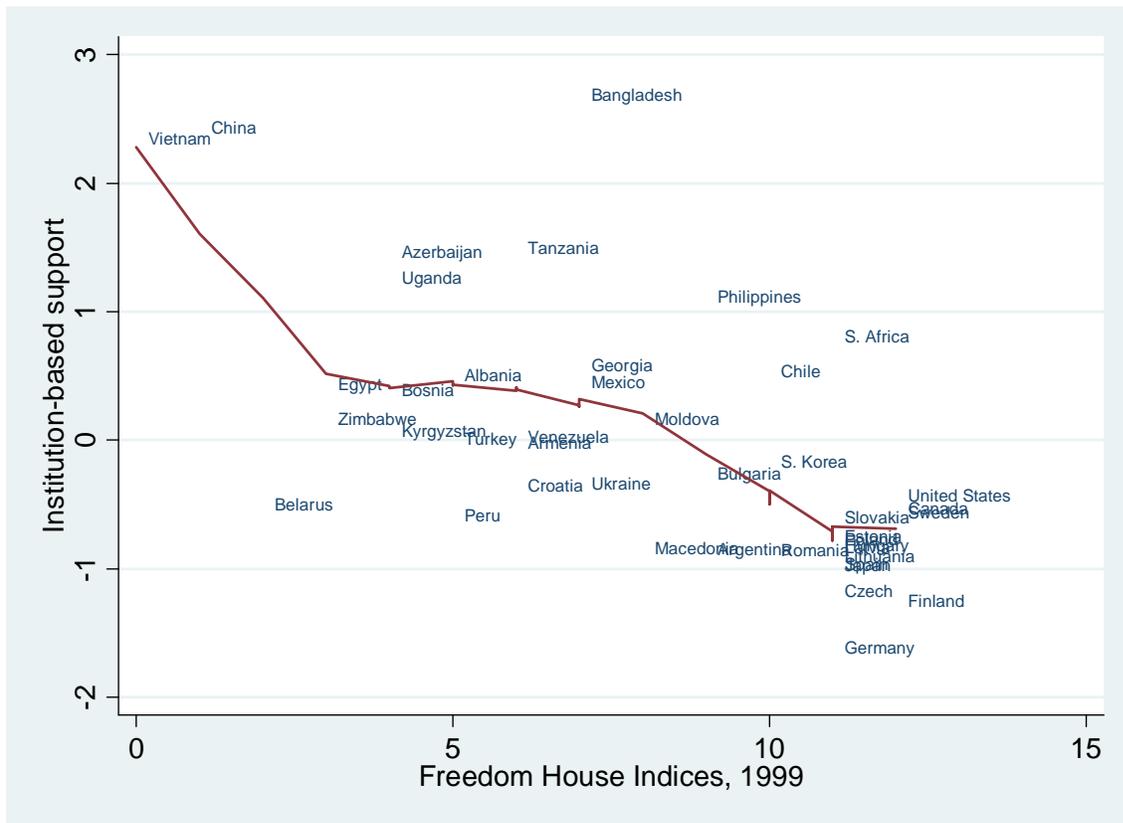


Figure 7 Regime type and national scores on institution-based support

Notes: Lowess smoothing with bandwidth (0.5)  
 Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

Second, Figure 8 shows a quadratic relationship between the degree of political freedom and performance-based support. Vietnam and China are almost at the same score level with the

old democratic countries in the dimension of evaluation of regime performance, whereas most new or incomplete democracies lie on the bottom of a quadratic curve based on the lowest smoothing technique. The results regarding the old and new democracies are consistent with some scholarly works, whereas the case of China (as well as Vietnam) again stands out to pose questions on the validity of the survey responses.

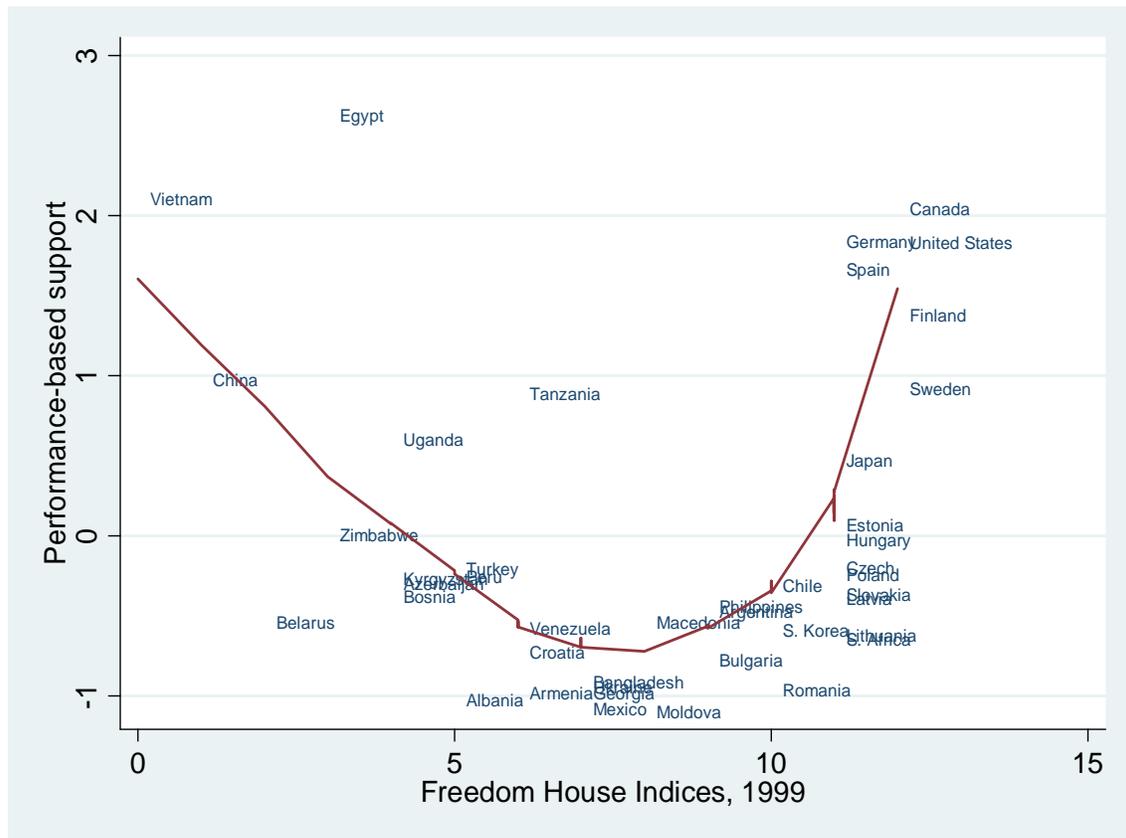


Figure 8 Regime type and national scores on performance-based support

Notes: Lowess smoothing with bandwidth (0.5)  
 Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

Hence, H1a is partially confirmed in this primary study. It appears that regime type does have a significant effect on the levels of political support, yet the effects have different patterns

in the two dimensions. Consistent with our expectation, the level of institution-based support is higher in non-democratic countries than in democratic ones. However, the relationship between the degree of political freedom and the level of performance-based support is curvilinear. These relationships will be explored further by controlling the effects of culture, economic development and corruption in the multivariate analyses below.

#### *Findings from OLS models*

Regime type, culture and rationality explanations are tested at the macro level using multivariate OLS regression analyses, and the results of the models in the two dimensions of political support are presented in Table 6.

First, the findings from the exploratory analysis of political support and regime type in Figures 7 and 8 are confirmed by the multivariate analyses. Regime type still has significant effects on the voiced opinions of political support after introducing the variables of economic development, corruption, and cultures into the models. Consistent with Hypothesis H1a, the level of institution-based support is negatively related to the degree of political freedom. People in the countries with more political freedom actually express less confidence in political institutions. However, the relationship is quadratic in the dimension of regime performance. People in both the least free and the most free countries give better evaluations than people in between.

Second, Confucian culture is not an important factor in influencing people's voiced opinions of political support. In the dimension of political institutions, people from the Confucian societies tend to express more confidence than those from Christian societies, whereas they have no significant difference from the people of other societies. For the performance-

based support, the cultural effects are negligible – there are no significant differences among the people from Confucian, Christian, or Islamic societies at all. Hence, Hypothesis H2a is not supported by the evidence.

Table 6 Regression analyses of political support

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Institution-based support</i>	<i>Performance-based support</i>
Freedom House indices, 99	-0.122 (0.055)*	-0.704 (0.108)***
Freedom House indices, 99 (squared)		0.042 (0.008)***
Corruption perception indices, 99	-0.123 (0.110)	-0.101 (0.066)
GDP per capita, 99 (in thousand)	-0.044 (0.036)	0.064 (0.017)**
Culture:		
Confucian (c.f.)		
Christian	-0.953 (0.457)*	0.365 (0.216)
Islamic	-0.721 (0.523)	1.062 (0.826)
Others	-0.111 (0.548)	0.682 (0.239)**
Constant	2.611 (1.318)	2.069 (0.712)**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.665	0.655
Observations	37	37

Notes: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001. (cf.) Comparison group

Source: The World Values Survey (China)

Lastly, the results show that people from affluent countries may not necessarily have more confidence in the political institutions of their countries, yet they do give significantly higher evaluations to the regime performance of their corresponding countries than others. In comparison, the effects of perceived corruption, with more variation than that of economic

development, are not significant in both dimensions of political support. Therefore, the hypotheses based on the rationality argument (H3a and H3b) are only partially confirmed by the analysis at the macro level.

### **4.5.3 Summary of macro analysis**

In summary, the two dimensions of political support at the macro level have different sources. First, regime type significantly affects the level of institution-based support. People from countries with more political freedom show a lower level of confidence in political institutions compared with those from less free countries. However, cultural or rational factors do not significantly account for the variation of the level of institution-based support across the countries.

In another dimension, both regime type and economic development play significant roles in predicting the level of performance-based support. The effect of regime type is an interesting quadratic relationship between the degree of political freedom and the score of the evaluation of regime performance. People from incomplete or new democracies are least likely to give high evaluations of regime performance. Meanwhile, the level of economic development has a positive linear relationship with the level of performance-based support, indicating that the country's economic condition is a major factor that can promote general political support. In contrast, a country's cultural contexts and the people's perception of corruption have no significant influence on the level of performance-based support.

Based on these findings, we will conclude that China's high level of voiced political support is to a great degree related to China's political system. Under a non-democratic regime, Chinese respondents not only expressed a high level of confidence in the core political

institutions, they also gave high evaluations to regime performance. The regime effect on the people's minds is so strong that it even cancels out the negative influence of China's economic development when they evaluate the regime performance. The macro analysis provides a grand explanation of China's high level of political support from a comparative perspective. However, it cannot explain what the mechanisms of China's regime to promote political support are. Neither can it account for the variation of political support among the Chinese people under such a regime. We will turn to a micro analysis to accomplish these tasks.

#### **4.6 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AT THE MICRO LEVEL**

The analyses at the macro level demonstrate that regime type is an important factor that contributes to the high level of political support in China. This section will further explore the variation of the voiced political support among the Chinese respondents and the factors that account for such variation.

##### **4.6.1 Measurement**

The factor analysis of the Chinese survey data on political support extracts two factors that are similar with those from the aggregate world data (Table 5). This makes it possible to further explore the sources of political support at the micro level in the same dimensions. Again, the factor scores of institution-based support and performance-based support are predicted using the principle component factoring method. They are standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Several independent variables are selected to test the hypotheses derived from the regime, culture, and rationality arguments. The first variable is age cohort, which indicates the effect of regime change. This study divides respondents in five age groups on the basis of critical political events: The first age group includes those who were 18 years old by 1966 (55 or older at the time point). Respondents in this group had been socialized during the radical Socialist transformation. They, on one hand, had the strongest ideological orientation and could be the firmest supporters of the communist government. On the other hand, they also experienced the crucial political purges and thus had the strongest political sensitivity. For both reasons, this group of respondents is expected to express the highest level of political support. The second age group includes those who were under 18 during the Cultural Revolution. They were around their forties at the survey time point. They grew up in a society full of political attacks, betrayals, persecutions, and fears. Such experiences might make them question the legitimacy of the communist ideology, but might also deter them from expressing their true opinions. They are expected to give moderate support to the political system. The third age group of respondents experienced the early stages of the reforms after the Cultural Revolution and also the most liberal period before the Tiananmen demonstration. They were open to western thoughts and became critical to the government performance. However, they were also under the influence of Tiananmen Square demonstration. As a result, they are expected to be more reluctant to express political support than the previous group. The respondents in the fourth group were between 25 and 32. They finished their socialization before Deng's death, which was a period with a stable political environment and rapid economic development. Marketization weakened the state control over the society and the legacy of the past gradually faded away. The youngest group of respondents grew up in post-Deng era. Communist political purges became historical stories to

them. They were under the least effects of political fear and enjoyed more freedom to express their true opinions. Moreover, they were most exposed to western democratic thoughts. Therefore I expect that the youngest group of people (the generation of the post-Deng era) to give the least political support and serves as the comparison group in the analysis.

The second variable that can reflect the legacy of the Communist rule in China is how much freedom of choice and control people feel they have over their lives (life independence). Those who are still living in the shadow of the past Communist rule would feel less freedom than those who are under less of an influence of the past. Thus their answers to questions on political support are expected to be more subject to regime effect. A scale of one to ten is used to measure respondent's feelings on this question, with 1 being "none at all" and 10 being "a great deal."

Two variables are used to test response effects on survey responses. One is the presence of adult parties during the interviews, and the other is interpersonal trust. Chinese respondents may have concerns over expressing opinions towards politically sensitive questions in front of other adult people due to fear of being reported. However, those who think most people can be trusted may have less such concerns in the interviews. Both variables are recoded to dummies.

The people's sophistication and their exposure to information are critical to politicization. Unfortunately the World Values Surveys did not ask questions about the use of media or other information sources. But there are questions on the people's confidence in the press and television. In China most the press and television are mouthpieces of the government. It is reasonable to assume that those who are confident in the press or television are more likely to be influenced by the official media, and thus more likely to express support for the government. The people's sophistication can be measured by their gender, education level and political

interest. Males are expected to be more sophisticated than females in handling political information. Those who are better educated are expected to be more critical of the government and regime, thus expressing less political support in the survey interviews. People who are interested in politics are not necessarily regime supporters. However, we expect those who are both interested in politics and confident in the press or television to be more likely to accept the official opinions and show support to the government or the regime. Thus interaction terms of political interest and confidence in the press or television will be considered in building the model. Gender, confidence in the press and television are recoded as dummy variables. Education and political interest are measured in the same manner as the previous chapter.

As discussed earlier, Chinese people usually do not differentiate between nation and government. We expect that those who are proud of being Chinese are more likely to express political support in the survey interviews. Nationalism is coded as a dummy variable.

Finally, two variables related to personal life are used to test the hypothesis derived from the rationality arguments. One variable is the people's satisfaction with their life as a whole or, in Inglehart's term, subjective well-being. Though it is regarded as a cultural variable in Inglehart's works, the linkage of subjective well-being and political support are reasonably believed to be based on rational consideration. That is, people who are more satisfied with their lives as a whole are more likely to show support for the government or the regime. Another variable is people's satisfaction with their household financial situation, which reflects their perception of economic benefits under the current political contexts. When people perceived more economic benefits, they are more likely to express political support in the survey interview. Both variables are measured on a 1 to 10 scale, with the larger number indicating more satisfaction.

## 4.6.2 Findings

Table 7 presents the results from the multivariate multiple OLS regression models to test the explanations derived from the regime, cultural, and rationality arguments. Several findings deserve emphasis when the effects of the independent variables are compared within and across the models of institution-based support and performance-based support.

Let's examine the regime effects first. In the model of institution-based support, significant regime effects involve socialization, response effects, and media influence. First, the oldest group of people, who completed their socialization during the Socialist transformation, tends to show higher level of support than those who grew up after the Deng era, whereas this difference is not significant among other groups of people. Second, respondents appear to be more supportive of the political institutions when there are other adults present during the survey interview. Third, traditional paper media has a significant influence on public support for political institutions. Holding all other variables constant, the score of the institution-based support for those who are confident in the press are in average 0.208 higher than those who lack the confidence. These findings suggest that the supporters of political institutions are relatively conservative people, who are old in age, and prefer an old media form (the press). These people were strongly under the influence of official propaganda in their early years and via the traditional propaganda tools. Though there are no systematic differences between the respondents who trust people in general and those who do not, and though people who feel less freedom of choice in their lives did not seem to give false responses by expressing higher political support than others, the respondents do appear to be vigilant when answering politically sensitive questions, especially in front of other adults.

Table 7 Multivariate multiple OLS regression analysis of political support in China

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Institution-based support</i>	<i>Performance-based support</i>
Age cohort:		
56 – 66 (generation of Socialism transformation)	0.393 (0.181) *	-0.115 (0.168)
44 – 55 (generation of the Cultural Revolution)	-0.013 (0.146)	-0.038 (0.136)
33 – 43 (generation of political liberalization)	0.161 (0.142)	-0.134 (0.132)
25 – 32 (generation of post-Tiananmen event)	0.015 (0.150)	0.053 (0.139)
18 – 24 (cf.) (generation of post-Deng era)		
Life independence	-0.003 (0.018)	0.0412 (0.017) *
Presence of third parties	0.194 (0.082) *	-0.097 (0.076)
Trust in general people	-0.092 (0.078)	0.087 (0.073)
Gender - Female	-0.077 (0.082)	0.135 (0.076)
Education (level)	-0.069 (0.043)	-0.071 (0.039)
Political interest (PI)	0.054 (0.082)	0.192 (0.076) *
Confidence in television (TV)	0.189 (0.105)	0.265 (0.098) **
Confidence in the press (PRE)	0.208 (0.098) *	0.434 (0.091) ***
Interaction of PI and TV	-0.105 (0.108)	-0.047 (0.101)
Interaction of PI and PRE	0.084 (0.103)	-0.101 (0.097)
Nationalism	0.334 (0.105) **	0.070 (0.098)
Satisfaction with life as a whole	0.052 (0.024) *	0.038 (0.022)
Satisfaction with financial situation	-0.049 (0.021) *	0.056 (0.019) **
Constant	-0.474 (0.260)	-1.280 (0.242) ***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.094	0.210
Observations	641	641

Notes: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001. (cf.) Comparison group

Source: The World Values Survey (China)

Things look very different in the model of performance-based support. People's socialization experiences have nothing to do with their evaluation of regime performance. There is also no evidence that the respondents' answers were influenced by the presence of other adults. In contrast, media influences play a significant role on the responses. When people are more interested in politics, or they have confidence in the press or television, they are more likely to express a higher level of performance-based support while holding other effects constant. We expected that an interaction between political interest and confidence in the press or television can help explain people's orientations to voice political support. However, it does not show that people who are more interested in politics and are also confident in the press or television appear more supportive than others. Gender and education also make no difference on the level of political support. It is noteworthy that life independence, a variable used to measure the legacy of Communist rule, plays a significant role as a cultural variable in influencing people's performance-based support. Those who feel more freedom of choice and control over their lives tend to give a higher evaluation on the regime performance.

Hence, the official media can significantly influence people's evaluations of regime performance unlike in their confidence of political institutions where there is no such effect, and thus H1c is partially confirmed. However, we cannot with confidence reject the hypothesis that political fear may prevent people from giving true responses (H1b).

Next, nationalism, as a cultural variable, is expected to have a spill-over effect from support for the political community. However, it does not work equally in the two dimensions of political support. Whereas patriotic people tend to express more confidence in political institutions, they are no different from others in evaluating regime performance

Lastly, based on the rationality arguments, satisfaction with life as a whole and satisfaction with financial situations are considered in the analysis. A striking finding is that the second variable, satisfaction with financial situation, has contradictory effects in the two dimensions of political support. On the one hand, people who are more satisfied with their financial situation appear to be supportive by giving a higher evaluation on the regime performance; on the other hand, they refrain themselves from expressing more confidence in political institutions. Meanwhile, respondents' satisfaction with their lives as a whole effectively promotes their institution-based support, yet it has no effect on their performance-based support. This indicates that people have learned to form opinions on a basis of certain rational considerations. Their satisfaction and perceived benefit play a significant role in predicting their level of political support.

#### **4.6.3 Summary of micro analysis**

In summary, institution-based support and performance-based support are not only two dimensions of political support in meaning, they are also different in terms of sources. As shown above, regime effect on institution-based support is mostly present in political socialization, influence of the traditional media, and, to some degree, response effect (third party presence); the official media plays a significant role in boosting the level of performance-based support. Moreover, nationalism and subjective well-being are important sources of institution-based support, while feelings of life independence and satisfaction with financial situations have significantly positive effects on performance-based support. It is also interesting to find that people who are more satisfied with their financial situation are more critical of the core political institutions.

These findings reveal that, to a great extent, both types of political support in the Chinese survey are government-led. The Chinese government has been devoting itself to propagandize nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum caused by economic reforms. It also tries to maintain its positive image to the public in the media, as both nationalism and confidence in the official media significantly promote political support among the Chinese people. Meanwhile, the economic achievements of the government during the market-oriented reforms have also successfully gained performance-based political support from some citizens, but at the risk of reducing institution-based support.

#### **4.7 CONCLUSION**

Political support is an ideal topic to study the meaningfulness of the voiced opinions in Chinese surveys, not only because it has an “unbelievably” high level in China compared with other countries, but also because it has a “suspicious” relationship with the regime (or the degree of political freedom) at the country level.

I use factor analyses to explore the meanings of the voiced political support among all the people in the countries where data is available, among all the countries in question, and among the Chinese respondents in particular. Similar to the results from the analysis at the country level, the voiced political support in China has two dimensions: confidence in political institutions and evaluation of regime performance. China shows high levels of both institution-based and performance-based support in the group of countries studied.

The high level of political support in China comes from different sources: regime type, culture, and rational consideration. At the macro (country) level, the undemocratic nature of the

Chinese political system appears to be a major contributor to both institution-based and performance-based support. At the micro (individual) level, the respondents expressed more support for political institutions, perhaps due to the fear of political retribution or political desirability, but they do not have such concerns for regime performance related questions. Moreover, those who are conservative, who have strong nationalistic sentiments, or who have positive feelings of subjective well-being are more likely to be institution-based supporters, whereas the greater performance-based supporters are more likely to be recipients of official information and beneficiaries of economic reforms.

These findings have at least three implications for studying survey responses on politically sensitive topics in China. First, the truthfulness of the survey responses should be justified at the researchers' discretion. It is possible that the Chinese respondents give norm-seeking answers to some questions on political institutions, but they do not always have the same concerns with other politically sensitive questions related to government performance. Second, individual opinions of the Chinese respondents may not be completely independent, but under the influence of political propaganda and the government's information control. This will pose a problem when testing theories using Chinese survey data. Some theories may not be validated since Chinese public opinion to a certain extent is manipulated. Third, Chinese survey data provides good opportunities to study the government's influence on public opinion in a transitional society. Political propaganda has been gradually weakened by media commercialization. Government control of information is also expected to erode with more convenient and flexible modern communication and transportation. Studies of longitudinal survey data from China would be capable of capturing this dynamic process and enrich the study of Chinese politics.

## **5. ENHANCING THE COMPARABILITY: INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY**

As availability of survey data from China makes it possible to compare China with other countries in a quantitative way, the problem of comparability also arises as a result. In some studies, extra comments have to be made on China because of “unbelievable” descriptive findings or “unusual” relationships between political variables. However, few in-depth explorations have been done to clarify why China is different from other countries. This chapter addresses these problems by examining the linkage between interpersonal trust and democracy. China has stood out with high levels of interpersonal trust and democratic support in comparative data. It has been treated as an outlier in the macro analysis of the relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy. Is that because China is incomparable? This chapter will show that though cultural difference may make China somewhat unique, the choice of research techniques is even more critical to tackle these problems of comparability. Therefore, measurement equivalence and level of inference, two important issues in comparative research, should receive more attention from comparative researchers.

## 5.1 THE ISSUE: INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY

Political scientists have dedicated their research efforts to finding out the social conditions for both democratization and stable democracy. Interpersonal trust, in this milieu, stands out as an important element of social capital for democracy. The relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy has been tested between/within some democratic countries (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993). Inglehart's research is the first global study of the theory based on survey data (Inglehart 1999). He demonstrates that a strong linear relationship exists between interpersonal trust and democracy (Inglehart 1999: 102). This finding leads to his conclusion that interpersonal trust is conducive to stable democracy. The scatterplot of interpersonal trust and levels of democracy also shows a striking outlier—China. As expected, being a Communist country undertaking a transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, China has a very low rating in civil liberties and political rights. However, surprisingly, over 50 percent of the Chinese respondents agree that most people can be trusted. China's status in the relationship of interpersonal trust and democracy again was confirmed by Seligson's study (Seligson 2002).<sup>38</sup> A ready response to this is whether the data are reliable, but this high level of interpersonal trust has been found repeatedly by the various waves of the World Values Surveys (Figure 9). The percentage from Chinese value surveys was 59.4 in 1990, 50.4 in 1995, and 52.5 in 2000. In contrast, the average interpersonal trust level calculated from the three waves is 20.6 for partly free countries and 31.5 for free countries.

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<sup>38</sup> A figure from Seligson's study is attached in Appendix D.

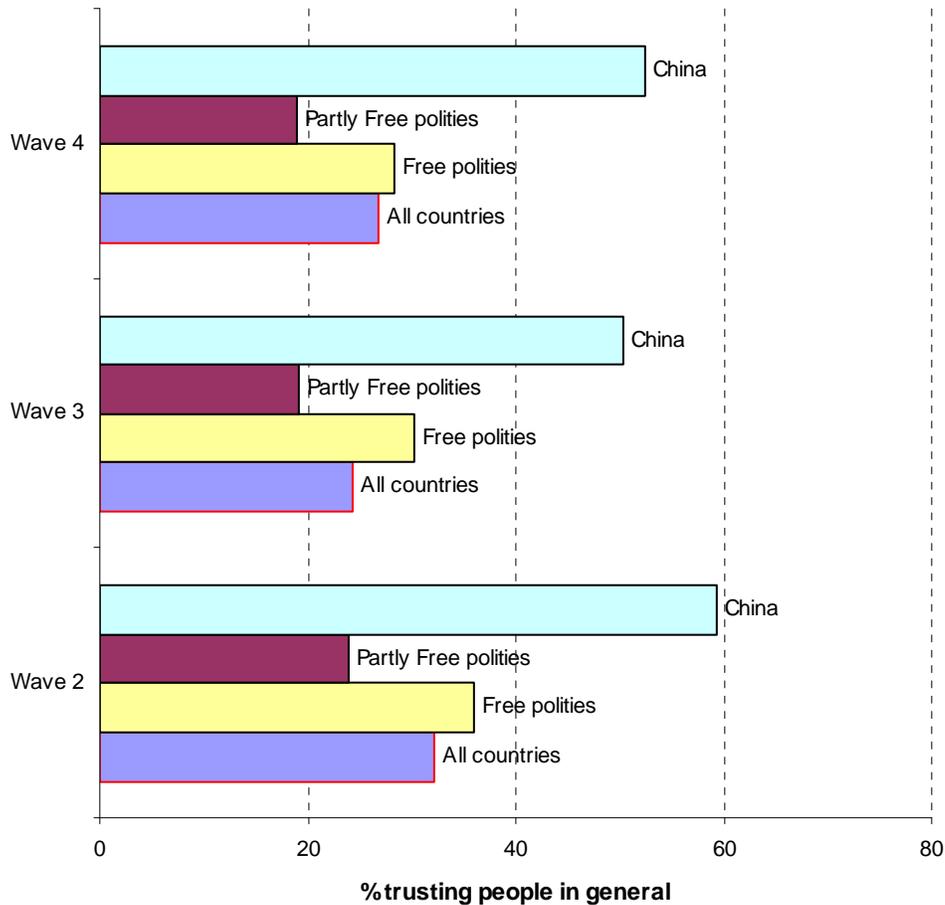


Figure 9 Most people can be trusted: a comparison

Notes: The World Values Surveys were conducted in 1989-1993 for wave 2, 1994-1999 for wave 3, and 1999-2004 for wave 4. The distinction between free and partly free countries is based on the Freedom Housing ratings in 1990, 1995, and 2000 respectively.

Sources: The World Values Survey

In another study by Inglehart (2003), he found that democracy has been widely accepted among the people in the world. When asked “would you say that having a democratic political system is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country (V167)”, most respondents in the surveys give positive answers to this question. The percentages of respondents saying that a democratic system is a good way of governing their countries range from 62% in Russia to 99% in Albania. Surprisingly even some non-democratic countries,

including those Islamic and Communist states, show higher percentages than many democratic countries. China, with 96% of respondents giving positive accounts, ranks 13th among the 77 countries in the list, whereas, for example, the percentage is 89% in the US, 85% in South Korea, 93% in India, and 95% in Vietnam.

Confronting these unexpected findings from Chinese survey data, Inglehart first attributes them to China's Confucian heritage and further generalizes that "Protestant and Confucian-influenced societies consistently show higher levels of interpersonal trust than do historically Roman Catholic or Islamic societies" (Inglehart 1999: 92). For the support for democracy, he claims that "almost everyone gives lip service to democracy" (Inglehart 2003: 52). It is also found that China is not an influential case and its removal does not alter the overall relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy at the country level. However, Peters (1998) reminds us that "... although comparative politics is primarily concerned with developing generalizations, it is also about identifying the exceptional cases. Careful understanding of the exceptional cases can themselves bear substantial theoretical fruit" (p.157-159).

This chapter aims to give a further account of these problems. After a brief review of current studies on interpersonal trust and democracy, it will call attention to the importance of measurement equivalence and level of inference in comparative research. Based on the survey data from the World Values Surveys and Chinese Value and Ethics Survey, it first points out a problem in the measurement of interpersonal trust in China. Next, it will propose a nonparametric measure of democratic support to enhance the comparability of concepts across countries. Lastly, multilevel modeling techniques will be used to explore the relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy at both country and individual levels.

## 5.2 STUDIES ON INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY

Since Almond and Verba (1963) in their pioneering studies claim that interpersonal trust is essential to effective participation via engagement of secondary associations, the linkages between interpersonal trust and democracy have become the subject of heated debate among political culturists. Putnam (1993) argues that interpersonal trust is an element of social capital, which helps to explain the difference in the performance of democratic institutions in southern and northern Italy. In Inglehart's (1988, 1990) analyses, interpersonal trust is part of an enduring cultural syndrome<sup>39</sup> that is conducive to stable democracy.

While Inglehart announced "the renaissance of political culture" in comparative research, his work confronts challenges from various perspectives. Muller and Seligson (1994) are concerned over the direction of the causal relationship. To be specific, is interpersonal trust a cause of stable democracy, or "a rational, learned response to the experience of living in a country that has a stable democratic regime" (p. 635)? Inglehart's dependent variable is the number of years of a country's continuous democracy since 1900, which is prior to the time of the measurement of the civic culture attitudes during 1981-86. It is easy to alert people that the reverse causal relationship might make more sense. By including six Central American states to extend Inglehart's data set, Muller and Seligson confirmed this possibility. They found that the variation in the percentages of trusting people in countries is unrelated to the change in the countries' levels of democracy. Instead, interpersonal trust appears to be an effect rather than a cause of democracy.

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<sup>39</sup> The other two components of this syndrome are life satisfaction and support for revolutionary change.

Scholars also cast doubts on the measurement of civic culture. Jackman and Miller (1996) find a modest size of bivariate correlations between the components of political culture, which indicates that a single enduring and distinctive cluster of cultural traits might not exist. The cultural syndrome is also not found at the micro level (Seligson 2002). Among the forty-three countries included in the 1990 World Values Survey, significant associations among all three variables were found in only three countries: Spain, Norway, and Czechoslovakia.

. As a result, Inglehart's finding at the macro level would face a serious problem of "ecological fallacy."<sup>40</sup>

Even though a cohesive syndrome of civic culture does not exist, we might also expect that there is a strong relationship between interpersonal trust, in particular, and democracy. Using the Freedom House scores of political rights and civil liberties as an indicator of democracy, Inglehart (1999) once again demonstrates this is still the case. The Pearson correlation coefficient of the two variables is .50 and highly statistically significant. However, Seligson (2002) points out that there is a selection bias inherent in Inglehart's analysis. Some highly advanced industrial societies of northern Europe and North America included in the study also have other characteristics in common, e.g. high GNPs. These cases contribute to the positive relationship between interpersonal trust and stable democracy to a significant degree. Eliminating these cases from the study, the positive relationship disappears or even shows a slightly negative trend. In another way, when a single control variable, namely national per capita income measured in Purchasing Power Parity terms in 1995, is introduced to the OLS

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<sup>40</sup> Seligson's argument is based on the axiom of Przeworski and Teune (1970), which states that ecological fallacy occurs when "within-system regressions do not differ from zero in all systems, but the total regression does differ from zero" (p. 73).

regression on levels of democracy, interpersonal trust loses its role as a significant predictor of democracy.

At the micro level, Seligson (2002) fails to find a consistent and significant relationship between interpersonal trust and support for the repression of civil liberties among the six Central American countries. His analyses even reveal a positive effect of interpersonal trust on support for repressive action in Honduras. Interpersonal trust also has little to do with attitudes toward democratic institutions and processes in Russia (Gibson 2001).

Inglehart and Welzel (2003) quickly responded to Seligson's query. They not only point out a misunderstanding of ecological fallacy in Seligson's argument, but also claim that democratic support based on survey questions is a poor indicator of democracy. They propose an improved measure of democracy—effective democracy, which is the score of freedom rights<sup>41</sup> weighted by elite integrity<sup>42</sup>. Again they show that self-expression values are strongly related to effective democracy.

The existing literature depicts a complex picture of the relationship between political culture and democracy. The role of interpersonal trust in promoting democracy is also controversial. The debate reveals that there are at least three problems that may undermine the findings. First, validity of conclusions is threatened by selection bias. Seligson (2002) points out that advanced industrial countries are overrepresented in the dataset. Meanwhile non-democratic countries or “fake” democracies are underrepresented. The findings on the basis of these cases may not be able to be generalized to a sound theory. The second is the problem of measurement. In the studies above, measurements of interpersonal trust are quite consistent.

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<sup>41</sup> The scores of freedom rights are calculated as the sum of political rights and civil liberties scores from the Freedom House indices.

<sup>42</sup> Elite integrity is measured by the corruption perception indices developed by Transparency International.

However, the dependent variable, democracy, is measured from various perspectives. At the country level, it emphasizes on overall performance of democracy or democratic institutions, e.g., years of continuous democracy since 1900 (Inglehar 1990), the Freedom House rating of civil liberties and political rights (Inglehart 1999), and effective democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2003). At the individual level, measures of democracy are often some kind of social reaction, such as support for the repression of civil liberties (Seligson 2002), and attitudes toward democratic institutions and processes (Gibson 2001). These differences in the measurement of democracy may cause inconsistencies in conclusions. The third problem is the confusion over the level of analysis. Inglehart's studies focus on covariations of political culture variables and democracy at the country level, whereas Seligson's results are from area studies at the individual level. As discussed later, their findings in fact cannot validate or invalidate each other.

The problem of selection bias is mainly caused by availability of survey data. It will become less serious as more countries are included in the studies. However, the problems of measurement and inference are two pitfalls of comparative studies.

The issue of measurement emerged as early as the rise of comparative research. It was first discussed as the "traveling problem" (Sartori 1970; Peters 1998). This problem usually happens at two levels. One is at the conceptual level, that is, whether concepts developed in one context are meaningful in others. Concept traveling problem is very common in doing comparative research since almost all concepts are originally developed in some particular context and may not apply in other contexts. A consequence of this problem is that the same words may have different meanings across cultures. For example, "Do you believe in God?" is a question with ambiguity. Affirmative answers to this question can be interpreted in many ways when responses are recorded cross-culturally (Przeworski and Teune 1966-67: 551). The second

level of the traveling problem is that of operationalization. Comparative researchers need to be very cautious in choosing instruments to measure concepts across different settings. Some instruments are culture/context-based. It is not unusual that certain questions which are asked in a straightforward manner in one setting have to be asked in an indirect way in other settings. It is also likely that a concept can be measured using one question in one setting but has to be clarified by several questions in other settings.

The traveling problem has given rise to tremendous studies on the equivalence of measurements in cross-cultural research and numerous techniques have been proposed to address this problem at each phase of survey research (for a thorough review, see Johnson 1998). Most comparative students, however, have to conduct their research based on available survey data. It is important for them to remain conscientious about the concepts in comparison and select measurements with caution.

Another pitfall of comparative research is cross-level inference. Generally, comparative studies can be conducted at three levels: macro-, meso- and micro- levels. A common malpractice of comparative researchers is to assume that relationships discovered at one particular level would occur in the same fashion at some other (higher or lower) level. The downward cross-level inference may lead to the “ecological fallacy,” that is, “the properties of a collectivity are assumed to characterize individuals within them” (Peters 1998: 44). As illustrated in Robinson’s classic studies on ecological fallacy, though the percentages of black people in political units have strong association with the percentages of illiterate people in those same units, it does not mean that black people are more illiterate on average (Robinson 1950).

The problem of cross-level inference can also work the other way. For example, in Almond and Verba’s pioneering studies on civil culture, they conclude that democracy would not

survive in West Germany, Mexico and Italy because in these countries people have vague attitudes towards democracy (Peters 1998). This type of mistake is called an “individualistic fallacy,” which comes about when “the collectivity is assumed to have the properties of the individuals that comprise it” (Peters 1998: 44).

The problems of measurement and inference have affected the research on interpersonal trust and democracy. They not only provoked controversies among scholars but also disguised the true relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy.

### **5.3 UNPACKING INTERPERSONAL TRUST IN CHINA**

Interpersonal trust refers to horizontal trust relations among persons. It is the belief of the trustee that a particular person, others around, or others in general, will act in such ways as expected or, at least, that will not be harmful for the well-being of the trustees or a relevant collectivity (Gambetta 1988; Offe 1999; Sztompka 1996; Uslaner 1999). Trust (as opposed to “naïve” or “blind trust”) is commonly believed to be a virtue of a person as well as of a community. “Virtuous citizens are helpful, respectful, and trustful toward one another, even when they differ on matters of substance” (Putnam 1993: 89). And the community consisting of such citizens is also “vibrant” and “virtuous” (Uslaner 1999: 122).

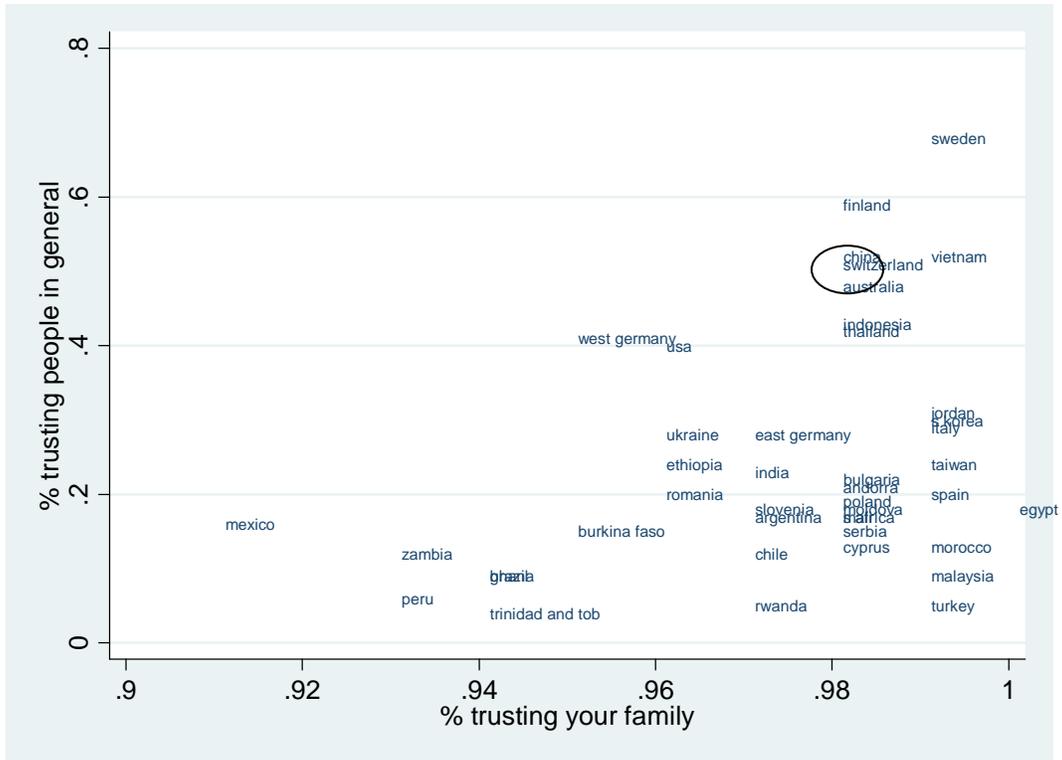
Survey research has discovered that interpersonal trust is pervasive among Chinese people. This finding is somehow counterintuitive to many comparative scholars since Chinese society is deeply penetrated by the Communist rule. Tang (2005) is the first to tackle this problem. He finds that formal group membership does not play a role in promoting interpersonal trust in China as it does in most other countries. While further exploring the sources of

interpersonal trust based on a domestic urban survey, he argues that trust is high in China because it is extended to a smaller and more informal circle around the individual. Therefore, such “parochial trust” is less likely to have any effects on the freedom ratings. Tang’s findings uncover a problem in the measurement of interpersonal trust. We normally use a simple question in the surveys to measure interpersonal trust—“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”—and trust is believed to be a simple concept to most people. However, interpersonal trust may not be that simple as it seems.

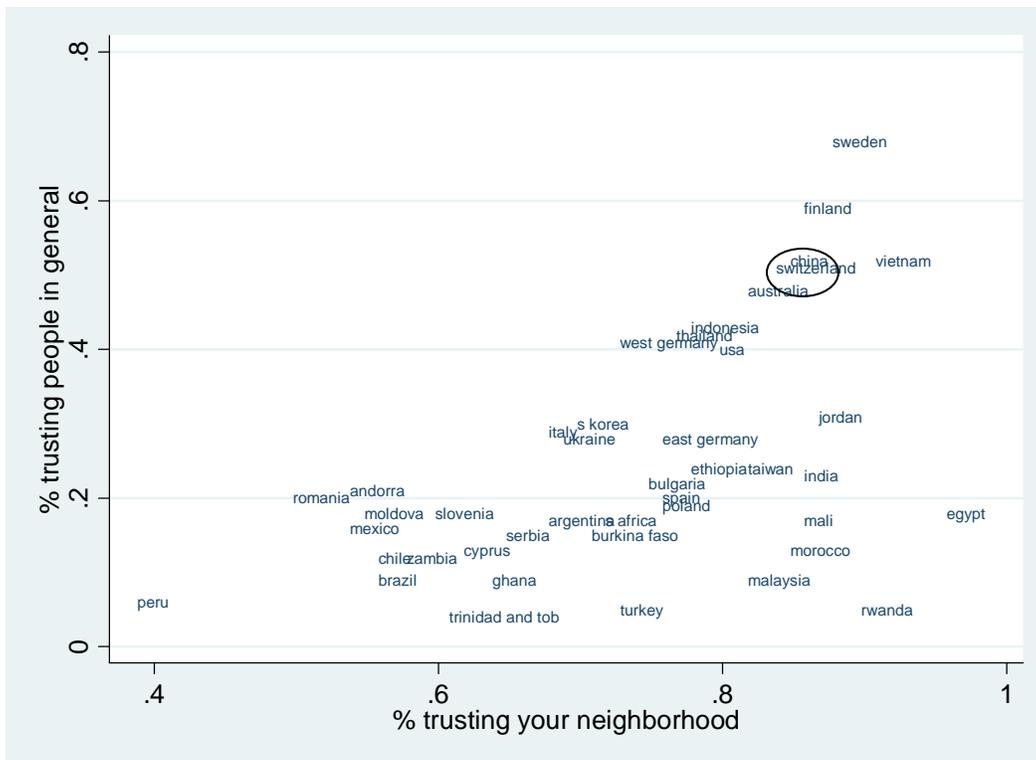
There are two kinds of trust in theory. One is particularized trust, which could be inimical to social capital. When persons only trust their relatives, friends, or some people they know, they may withdraw themselves from civic life and think of the world in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders”. Particularized trust could result in many vicious mind states or behaviors, e.g., zero-sum mentality, selfishness, corruption, short-term interests, low credibility, and disregarding law (Banfield 1958). The other is generalized trust, that is, to trust widely including strangers, which is an essential part of social capital. It could make people more willing to take part in their communities and to endorse moral commitments. Therefore, interpersonal trust has meanings in two dimensions. Though the purpose of researchers is to measure the generalized trust, people may give responses based on their own understandings of trust.

The past World Values Surveys measure interpersonal trust based on one single question, which makes it hard to determine what kind of trust is captured by the question. Fortunately the newly released fifth wave of World Values Survey includes questions about trusting family, neighborhood, people known personally (or acquaintances), or people met for the first time (or strangers). Figure 10 presents the relationships between trusting people in general and trusting a

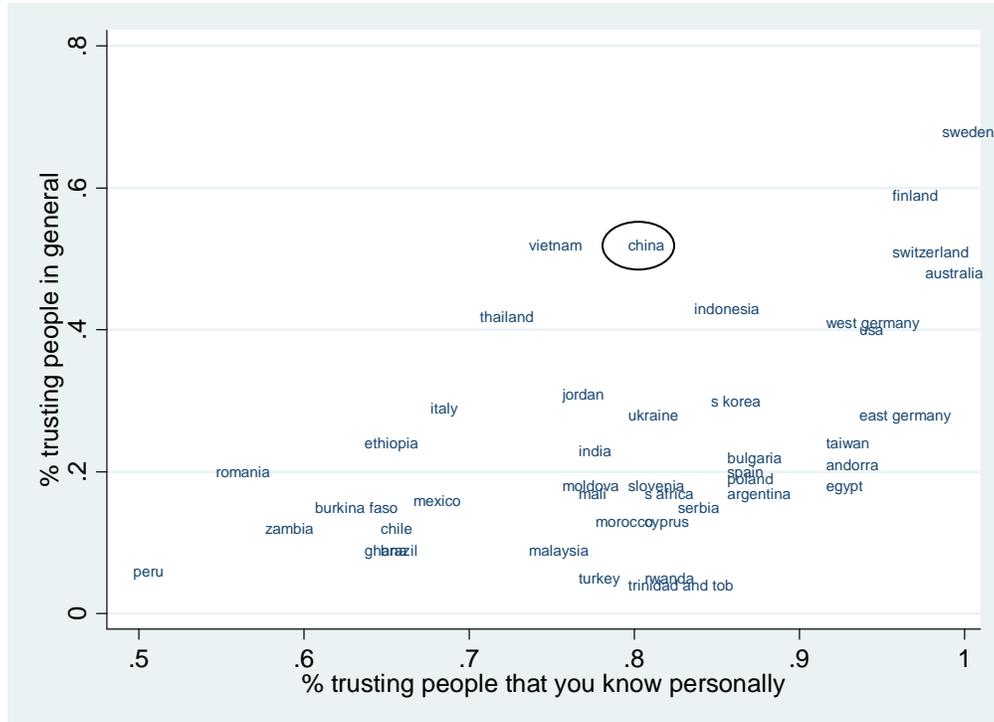
particular group of people at the country level. Good news is that interpersonal trust, as measured by the single question, is the least related to trusting family and the strongest related to trusting strangers. Therefore, this survey question successfully captures the generalized trust as the wish of the researchers. However, China appears to have different patterns of the relationships from other countries. In the figures of (a), (b) and (c), the data point of China clusters together with other data points, suggesting the similarity of China with other countries in the relationships. However, in Figure (d), China is clearly distinguished from other countries with high percentage of trusting people in general associated with low percentage of trusting strangers. Furthermore, when China is eliminated from the analysis, the correlation coefficients of these relationships change to various degrees and in different directions. Particularly, the relationship between trusting people in general and trusting strangers become much stronger as the correlation coefficient increases from .574 to .651. It is also interesting to find that trusting people in general becomes less associated with trusting family members or neighborhood, yet more associated with trusting acquaintances or strangers. The findings suggest that the survey question on interpersonal trust is likely to measure particularized trust instead of generalized trust in China.



(a)  $r = .334$ , sig. = .029 (without China:  $r = .329$ , sig. = .034)



(b)  $r = .499$ , sig. = .001 (without China:  $r = .482$ , sig. = .001)



(c)  $r = .522$ , sig. = .000 (without China:  $r = .538$ , sig. = .000)



(d)  $r = .574$ , sig. = .000 (without China:  $r = .651$ , sig. = .000)

Figure 10 The correlations of trusting in general and trusting different kinds of people  
Source: The World Values Survey, 2005-2007

To further confirm this possibility, I shift my research focus to the micro level. The Chinese Value and Ethics Survey (CVES) asks the question on interpersonal trust with the same wording as the World Values Surveys. Moreover, the survey contains a battery of questions about trusting some particular people. An exploratory factor analysis of the responses extracts three factors (Appendix E). Trust in neighbor, colleague, schoolmate, villager, and friend load higher on factor 1, forming an “acquaintances (*shuren*)” dimension. The second factor appears to be a “stranger (*moshenren*)” dimension, on which trust in businessman, out-of-towner, and stranger have higher loadings. Trust in family and relatives are closely related to each other, forming the “relatives (*qinren*)” dimension. These three dimensions comprise the whole meaning of trust relationship among people.

Table 8 Logistic regression analysis of interpersonal trust

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Odds Ratio (S.E.)</b>	<b>Marginal effect</b>
<b>Trust in acquaintances</b>	<b>1.299 (0.040)***</b>	<b>0.065</b>
<b>Trust in strangers</b>	<b>1.256 (0.039)***</b>	<b>0.057</b>
<b>Trust in relatives</b>	<b>1.088 (0.033)**</b>	<b>0.021</b>
Gender (female)	0.869 (0.052)*	-0.035
Age (year)	1.005 (0.003)	0.001
Education (year)	0.999 (0.003)	-0.000
Family Income (level)	0.952 (0.020)*	-0.012
Urban Residents	0.960 (0.074)	-0.010

Notes: N = 4683; Wald Chi-square = 150.63 (p = .000).  
Source: The Chinese Value and Ethics Survey, 2004

Then which meaning of interpersonal trust is captured by the single survey question on trust in general for the Chinese respondents? In this survey, about half of the respondents say that most people can be trusted. Controlling the effects of gender, age, education, family income and residence location, a logistic regression shows that all the factors have significant effects on interpersonal trust (Table 8)<sup>43</sup>. Among the three types of trust relationship, trust in acquaintances is most related to trust in general. For a standard deviation increase in the score of trust in acquaintances, the probability of trust in general increase by 6.5%, holding other variables constant, whereas the marginal effects of trust in strangers and relatives are 5.7% and 2.1% respectively. It suggests that when the Chinese respondents answer the question on trust in general, they are more likely to use their acquaintances as reference group. This finding confirms the observation at the macro-level analysis. Therefore, this survey question measures particularized trust rather than generalized trust among Chinese respondents. On the one hand, it explains why China has such a great percentage of people saying that most people can be trusted; on the other hand, it is also expected that such interpersonal trust may not have the expected effect on democracy.

#### **5.4 MEASURING DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT: A NONPARAMETRIC APPROACH**

Democracy can be measured from various perspectives. For example, the Freedom House scores come from expert ratings of democratic institutions, and an effective democracy emphasizes democratic practice. Both measures are at the country level. In contrast, democratic support

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<sup>43</sup> Factor scores obtained from factor analysis are used in the logistic regression analysis.

indicates pro-democratic attitudes among the public. It is a measurement at the individual level and the information can be aggregate to the country level. However, inappropriate measurement of democratic support would lead to false conclusions. As mentioned before, Inglehart (2003) found a majority of people in almost all countries agree that a democratic system is a good way of governing their countries. However, the percentages of people supportive of democracy across the countries are poorly related to the Freedom House indices. It may be because democracy has obtained moral support worldwide and such responses are socially desirable. It may be also a case that people have different understandings of democracy influenced by their background (Miller et al. 1997; Bratton and Mattes 2001). For either reason, it is necessary to find a measurement of democratic support with equivalent meanings to enhance comparability of concepts across countries.

The best way to learn about public support for democracy is through comparing it with plausible alternatives (Rose et al. 1998). In the WVS, respondents are also asked about their opinions on three other political systems: having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections (V164); having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country (V165); and having the army rule (V166).<sup>44</sup> Inspired by the method of anchoring vignettes<sup>45</sup> (King et al. 2004), I develop a simple nonparametric measurement of support for democracy using the three questions as anchoring references. To be specific, I first order these three questions from army rule to experts to a strong leader at a ladder

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<sup>44</sup> The text of the question is

“I am going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?”

<sup>45</sup> King et al. (2004) proposes an innovative method to measure complex concepts and enhance their comparability among respondents. In brief, they estimate a respondent’s unique attitudinal position on the levels of a concept (e.g., political efficacy) by using vignettes on an ordered scale.

according to the degree of dictatorship. Then, as illustrated in Figure 11, I assign “1” to a respondent if he/she said that having the army rule is better than having a democratic political system, “2” if he/she said that having the army rule and a democratic political system are equally good/bad, “3” if he/she said that having a democratic political system is better than having the army rule, but worse than having a strong leader, “4” if he/she said that having a strong leader and a democratic political system are equally good/bad, “5” if he/she said that having a democratic political system is better than having a strong leader, but worse than having experts, “6” if he/she said that having experts and a democratic political system are equally good/bad, and “7” if he/she said that having a democratic political system is the best among the four possibilities.<sup>46</sup>

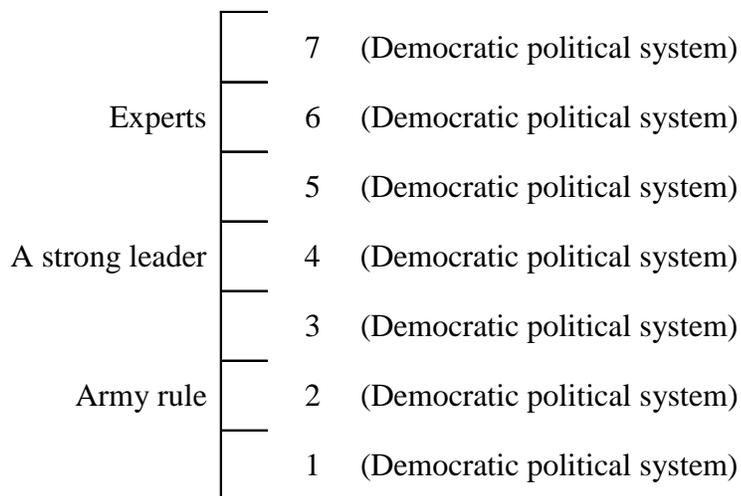


Figure 11 Measuring democratic support: a ladder of preference

<sup>46</sup> Missing values in these variables are treated as neutral attitudes and thus put in the middle position of the scale for each question.

Table 9 Comparison of measures for democratic support

Country	I <sup>a</sup>	II <sup>b</sup>	III <sup>c</sup>	Country	I	II	III
Greece	87.2	96.6	97.9	Peru	42.0	88.9	93.1
Denmark	78.0	94.0	98.0	Morocco	41.9	67.7	95.9
Iceland	77.8	96.5	97.9	Venezuela	41.7	92.2	93.5
Sweden	73.6	95.4	97.4	Estonia	41.4	70.7	86.8
Tanzania	73.4	90.7	92.9	Chile	39.9	78.9	84.9
Malta	70.0	90.1	93.6	Croatia	38.7	94.0	98.0
Netherlands	67.0	95.8	96.7	Zimbabwe	38.6	78.6	88.5
N. Ireland	64.8	80.5	92.7	<b>China</b>	<b>38.5</b>	<b>73.3</b>	<b>96.3</b>
Pakistan	64.1	79.3	88.1	Algeria	37.5	82.5	92.7
Italy	63.9	92.3	96.6	Serbia and Montenegro	36.5	84.0	94.3
Ireland	63.6	86.3	91.6	Bosnia and Herzegovina	36.1	83.3	92.0
Spain	63.1	84.1	94.8	Iraq	34.9	76.7	91.1
Puerto Rico	62.6	89.0	91.7	Slovenia	33.0	82.8	89.5
Austria	62.2	93.0	96.3	Bulgaria	31.5	70.9	87.0
United States	57.9	85.3	88.8	Lithuania	30.9	67.0	85.8
Canada	57.1	80.0	87.0	Turkey	28.2	84.6	91.8
Portugal	56.7	83.8	91.9	India	27.6	68.0	93.0
Singapore	56.6	86.2	88.9	Slovakia	27.0	75.2	84.1
Bangladesh	55.8	94.6	98.3	Latvia	27.0	75.6	88.3
Egypt	54.2	93.2	98.6	Mexico	26.6	73.0	86.6
Germany	54.0	88.5	93.8	Moldova	26.3	59.2	74.8
France	53.9	81.9	89.2	Kyrgyzstan	26.2	78.1	81.5
Czech	53.6	88.9	92.9	Hungary	24.8	79.2	87.4
Belgium	53.4	84.7	90.6	Ukraine	24.5	63.6	84.7
Uganda	52.5	89.4	93.8	Belarus	24.5	67.3	88.4
Great Britain	51.1	72.2	86.8	Philippines	24.0	81.4	82.2
Finland	50.1	83.3	88.3	Macedonia	22.2	82.3	91.3
Albania	49.7	91.7	97.6	Indonesia	20.6	89.1	95.9
Argentina	49.1	84.5	90.5	Russia	19.9	46.1	61.7
Japan	48.8	80.0	91.9	Poland	19.5	71.9	83.6
South Africa	46.4	81.4	89.3	Jordan	19.5	83.1	94.7
Luxembourg	44.8	77.8	92.1	Iran	16.3	55.2	85.6
South Korea	43.1	75.1	84.7	Romania	15.4	74.7	88.7
Nigeria	42.3	93.8	95.3	Vietnam	0.5	86.8	95.5

Notes:

- Measure I is the percentage saying that a democratic system is the best among the listed political systems in governing this country.
- Measure II is the percentage saying that a democratic system is a “very good” or “fairly good” way of governing this country.
- Measure III is the percentage saying that a democratic system is a “very good” or “fairly good” way of governing this country after eliminating all “don’t know” answers.

Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

It makes more sense when we examine the percentage of people who rate democratic system above all other alternatives (Table 9). As the birthplace of classic democratic theories, Greece ranks first with 87.2% of the people supporting democracy. It is followed by a block of old established democratic countries. Those on the bottom of this list are mainly either the post-Communist countries in which people were disappointed with the new political changes (Inglehart and Baker 2000), or Islamic countries in which people are not open to democratic thoughts. We will be misled if we only look at the percentage of people saying that a democratic system is a “very good” or “fairly good” way of governing a country, especially when significant number of people did not give responses. Take China as an example. Whereas there are over 70% of the respondents saying that a democratic system is a “very good” or “fairly good” way of governing a country, in fact only 38.5% of the respondents think a democratic system is the best way. If we simply treat “don’t know” answers as missing data and eliminate them from analysis, the percentage is as high as 96.3%. Inglehart (2003), unfortunately, used the last measure (Measure III), and thus got a different picture about democratic support all over the world.

Following Inglehart’s method, I also cross-validated the new measure by three separate criteria: the society’s level of democracy in 1999, the society’s level of democracy during the period from 1981 to 2000, and the score of the country’s effective democracy in 1999. It turns out that the correlations between the new measure and the three criteria are all statistically significant (Table 10). Also as expected, the correlations are higher when we use the indices of democracy in the longer period since support for democracy is more likely to be the fruit of a long term stable democracy rather than of a society’s level of democracy at any given point in time. In contrast, the two measures based on a single question on democratic support have poor validity. The measurement that ignores the “don’t know” answers in its analysis has no relations

with democracy at all. Therefore, the nonparametric approach produces a more accurate measurement of democratic support since it is based on multiple items. .

Table 10 A comparison of measurement validity

	<b>Correlations with:</b>		
	Society's score on 1999 Freedom House Indices	Society's average score on 1981-2000 Freedom House Indices	Effective Democracy 1999
Mean score of democratic support in country	.442 (.000)	.519 (.000)	.459 (.000)
Percentage saying that having a democratic system is the best way	.404 (.000)	.524 (.000)	.557 (.000)
Percentage saying that having a democratic system is good	.184 (.142)	.235 (.054)	.270 (.039)
Percentage saying that having a democratic system is good (eliminating missing data)	.003 (.981)	.065 (.600)	.156 (.238)

Notes: Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients with p-value in parenthesis.

## 5.5 INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY: A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS

Inglehart's studies focus on the relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy at the country level (Inglehart 1988, 1999; Inglehart and Welzel 2003). In his studies trust is used as a contextual variable, that is, the percentage of people with generalized trust in a country. He finds that such a cultural context is closely related to the level of country democracy from a global view. Though ecological fallacy occurs if we assume that the individuals with generalized trust

are pro-democracy based on the findings at the macro level, it is of great interest to find out whether interpersonal trust has effect at the micro level (Seligson 2002; Gibson 2001; Tang 2005). Unfortunately, findings from these studies are far from consistent.<sup>47</sup> This study will employ the multilevel technique to explore the effect of interpersonal trust on democracy.<sup>48</sup>

The WVS data are multilevel in nature. They were collected from a number of samples that were drawn independently from each surveyed country. Respondents within each sample (country) are reasonably more similar to one another than to respondents from other samples since they were exposed to the same political, cultural, and economic settings. When the data collected from different countries are pooled together, the data structure violates a basic assumption of the ordinary least square (OLS) regression that the individual errors should be independent (Luke 2004; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Moreover, it is problematic to assume, by ignoring country contexts, that the relationship between interpersonal trust and democratic support is the same for the respondents in all surveyed countries. Therefore, it is appropriate and necessary to employ multilevel modeling to improve the study of interpersonal trust and democracy.

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<sup>47</sup> As mentioned before, both Seligson (2002) and Gibson (2001) find minimal effects of interpersonal trust on people's democratic support or attitudes to democracy in some Central American countries and Russia. Tang (2005), however, provides evidence from China that interpersonal trust can significantly promote political participation and support for civil society.

<sup>48</sup> While Seligson (2002) suggested that research on the relationship between political culture and democracy could profit from multilevel analyses, the proposed study has not been seen yet.

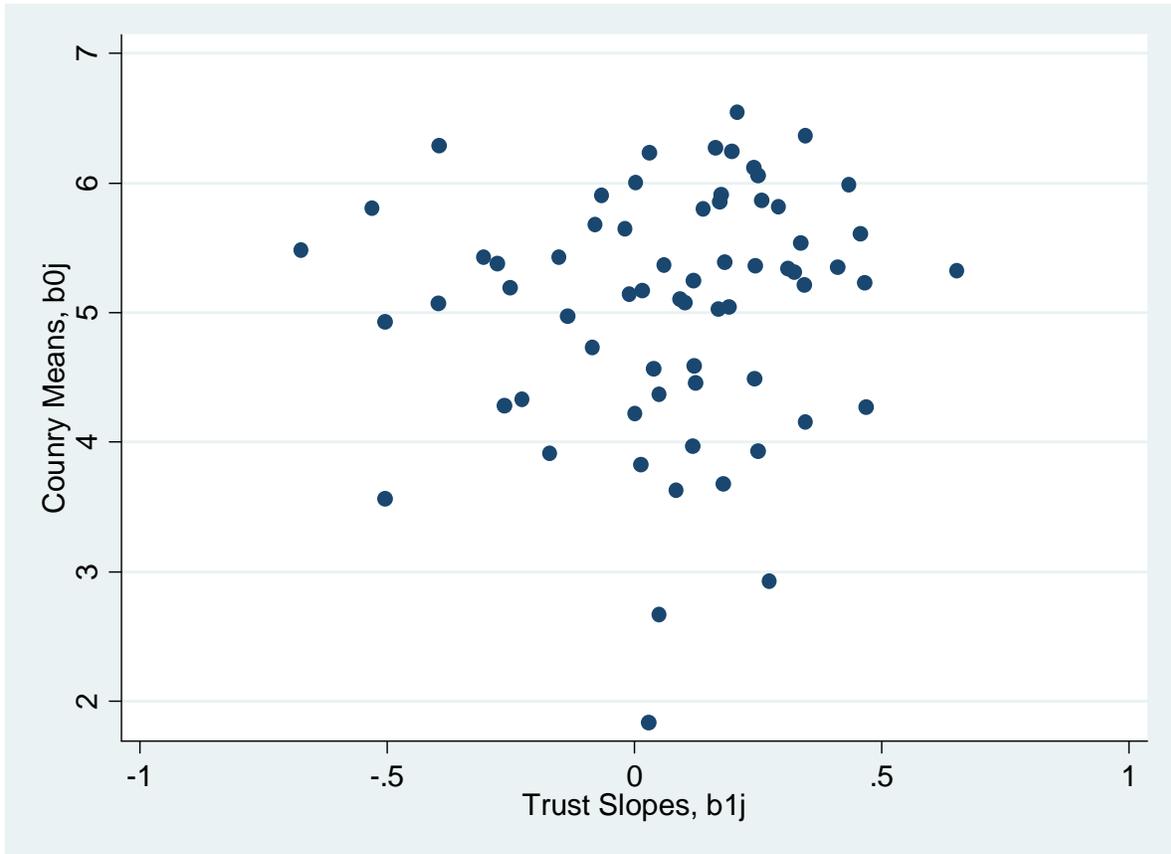


Figure 12 Scatterplot of country means of democratic support and trust slopes

Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

To justify the need for a multilevel model, I run regression analyses of interpersonal trust on democratic support for each country in the dataset while controlling the effects of gender, age and education.<sup>49</sup> Figure 12 provides a scatterplot of the relationship between country means of

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<sup>49</sup> The equation of the regression analysis for the  $j$  countries is:  

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}TRUST + \beta_{2j}GENDER + \beta_{3j}AGE + \beta_{4j}EDUCATION + r_{ij},$$
in which  $\beta_{0j}$  is country means on democratic support, and  $\beta_{1j}$  is the slope of trust.

democratic support (intercepts) and trust effects (slopes) across countries. First, it shows that there is considerable variability from country to country on the mean levels of public support for democracy. Mean support ranges from the lowest level of 1.84 in Vietnam to the highest level of 6.55 in Iceland (country names not shown in the figure). Moreover, the spread of dots along the X-axis suggests a strong country-to-country variability on the effect of interpersonal trust on democratic support. Especially the slopes are around zero for a large proportion of countries, indicating that interpersonal trust has no significant effect in these cases. The plot also shows little association between country means and trust slopes, thus a country's mean level of democratic support is not associated with the strength of trust effect. The evidence suggests that a two-level random-coefficient Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM), in which both intercepts and slopes are allowed to vary across countries, is appropriate for this analysis. .

Public support for democracy is the dependent variable in this analysis. It indicates to what extent a democratic system or democratic values are accepted by the public, thus crucial to the transition or consolidation of a democratic system (Linz and Stepan 1996). Measured in the way proposed in the previous section, support for democracy is a variable at the individual level. However, it can be easily aggregated by taking means to represent the level of democracy (in a populist view) at the country level.

The relationship of interpersonal trust and democratic support is examined at both levels. At the country level, interpersonal trust is measured as the percentage of trusting people and it is expected to be an element of pro-democratic culture by promoting the overall democratic support of countries. At the individual level interpersonal trust, measured by a binary variable, is a personal virtue that influences individual's support for democracy. Age, gender, and education are introduced to the model as control variables. For easy interpretation of the HLM model, the

trust dummy is centered around its group mean, and the control variables are centered around their population means.

In addition to the cultural context represented by the percentage of trusting people in each country, two other contextual variables are also considered in this analysis. One is the institutional context. People can “learn” to support democracy because they have become accustomed to using democratic institutions. Thus high levels of democratic support are expected to exist with stable democratic systems. The other is economic context. Economic development is considered to be a causal factor in democratization although some dispute its causality (Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994). In emerging democracies, levels of democratic support increase significantly when people perceive that new democratic systems can deliver positive economic output and improve their economic conditions (Bratton and Mattes 1999; Rose et al 1998). Since these contexts are enduring in nature, I used the average GDP per capita for the period of 1990-1999 as the indicator for the country’s economic context, and for institutional context I used average score on 1981-2000 Freedom House Indices. As alternative explanations to interpersonal trust, I expect that the countries which are more affluent and liberal are expected to have higher levels of democratic support.

Cultural, economic and institutional contexts can also have influence on the strength of association between interpersonal trust and democratic support at the individual level. They may work like a catalyst to boost or like an inhibitor to suppress the effect of interpersonal trust. Generally, I expect that interpersonal trust will have a stronger effect in trusting cultures, prosperous economies and stable democratic systems. The country level predictors are centered around their grand means.

Table 11 HLM model on democratic support

	<b>Model I</b>	<b>Model II</b>
<i>Fixed Effects:</i>		
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
Model for country means		
Intercept	4.044***	3.087***
Percentage of trusting people		-.858
Average score on 1981-2000 Freedom House Indices		.142**
Average GDP per capita 1990-1999 (in thousand)		.004
Model for trust slopes		
Intercept	.102**	-.321***
Percentage of trusting people		.654**
Average score on 1981-2000 Freedom House Indices		.024*
Average GDP per capita 1990-1999 (in thousand)		.005
Gender	-.132***	-.132***
Age (year)	.003***	.003***
Education (level)	.268***	.273***
<i>Random Effects:</i>		
	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Variance</i>
Country level	1.128***	.938***
Trust slope	.053***	.029***
Individual level	3.523***	3.500***

Source: The World Values Survey, 1999-2004 (4<sup>th</sup> wave)

The two-level random-coefficient model (Model I in Table 11) is specified in the following equations.

$$\text{Individual-level equation: } Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}X_{1j} + \beta_{2j}X_{2j} + \beta_{3j}X_{3j} + \beta_{4j}X_{4j} + r_{ij}$$

Country-level equations:  $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}$$

where  $X_1$  represents trust,  $X_2$  gender,  $X_3$  age, and  $X_4$  education.

The results from Model I confirm our findings from primary analyses. First, countries have significant differences in the mean level of democratic support. The mean level of democratic support across countries is 4.044 on average and the estimated variability is 1.128, thus we would expect that 95% of the country means to fall within the range of 1.96 to 6.13<sup>50</sup>. Second, the effect of interpersonal trust on democratic support is significantly different across countries. The strength of association is .102 on average, with the estimated variability of .053.

The significant variability suggests that county-level predictors should be included in the analysis (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). A two-level intercepts- and slopes-as-outcomes HLM model (Model II in Table 11) is further specified as below:

$$\text{Individual-level equation: } Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}X_{1j} + \beta_{2j}X_{2j} + \beta_{3j}X_{3j} + \beta_{4j}X_{4j} + r_{ij}$$

$$\text{Country-level equations: } \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}W_{1j} + \gamma_{02}W_{2j} + \gamma_{03}W_{3j} + u_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}W_{1j} + \gamma_{12}W_{2j} + \gamma_{13}W_{3j} + u_{1j}$$

where  $X_1$  denotes trust,  $X_2$  gender,  $X_3$  age,  $X_4$  education,  $W_1$  percentage of trusting people,  $W_2$  average score on 1981-2000 Freedom House Indices, and  $W_3$  average GDP per capita 1990-1999.

In the model for country means of democratic support (specified as the first country-level equation), the analysis shows that institutional context is the only factor that has an impact on democratic support at the country level. The countries with higher scores on the 1981-2000

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<sup>50</sup> The 95% confidence interval of the country means is  $(4.044 - 1.128 * 1.96, 4.044 + 1.128 * 1.96)$ , or (1.96, 6.13).

Freedom House ratings demonstrate higher levels of democratic support on average. This finding supports my hypothesis and suggests that it is possible for democratic support to be an outcome of “institutional learning” from the use of democratic institutions. The average GDP per capita (1990-1999) is significantly related to country means of democratic support in the bivariate analysis (the Pearson correlation coefficient is .48), but the effect disappears when controlling the Freedom House scores. It indicates that a prosperous economic environment is not a necessary condition on which people can become more pro-democratic. The spurious relationship in fact results from the covariation of economic development and democratic ratings<sup>51</sup>.

It is disappointing but not surprising to find that the percentage of trusting people (or average level of interpersonal trust) plays no role in shaping the level of democratic support of countries. However, as shown in the model for trust slopes (specified as the second country-level equation), the strength of association between interpersonal trust and democratic support at the individual level can be influenced by a country’s cultural context—the effect is stronger in countries with more percentage of trusting people. This finding is interesting but under-theorized. A possible explanation is that a “vibrant” and “virtuous” (Uslaner 1999: 122) community is likely to form in countries with pervasive trusting atmosphere. In such a community, mutual trust is valued and it is more easily perceived by those who trust others than those who do not. Mutual trust is necessary for democracy to work. Therefore, trust at the individual level is more likely to promote pro-democratic attitude only when it is embedded in a society where the average level of interpersonal trust is high.

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<sup>51</sup> The Pearson correlation coefficient for the indicators of economic development and democracy is .6766 and highly significant.

The model for trust slopes also shows that the relationship between interpersonal trust and democratic support is stronger in the institutional settings that are relatively more democratic than others, whereas economic context measured by GDP per capita has almost nothing to do with it. By controlling country context in the analysis, we see a substantial reduction in the variance of trust slopes. Specifically, whereas the unconditional variance of the trust slope had been .053, the residual variance is now .029. This means that about 45% of the parameter variation in the trust slope has been explained by the three country contexts.<sup>52</sup>

To sum up, the relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy is examined at both country and individual levels. Results from the HLMs show that more percentages of trusting people do not necessarily lead to higher level of democratic support across countries. However, people with general trust in countries of more trusting cultural settings or more democratic institutional settings are more likely to embrace democratic system than others.

## 5.6 CONCLUSION

Past research on the relationship between interpersonal trust and democracy has provoked controversies. Whereas a strong relationship has been claimed at the country level, the relationship is questionable at the individual level. This study suggests that the controversies are caused by two problems in comparative research: measurement and inference.

First, the measurement of interpersonal trust is subject to the problem of concept traveling. Though the purpose of researchers is to measure interpersonal trust in general, it turns

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<sup>52</sup> It is calculated as  $(0.053-0.029)/0.053 = 0.453$ .

out that responses to the question emphasize different dimensions of this concept. The results from a case study of China reveal that Chinese people think of trust mostly in terms of relationships with their acquaintances. Such particularized trust, in contrast to generalized trust, is in fact not a component of a pro-democratic culture because it may cause people to withdraw people from civic life.

Second, poor measurement of democracy can lead to false conclusions. People may have different understandings of democracy across countries, thus it is better to measure democratic support in the form of a comparison with plausible alternatives in order to correct the problem of incomparability. Following this line, I propose a nonparametric approach to measuring democratic support based on people's attitudes to democratic systems in comparison with the political systems ruled by experts, a strong leader and the army. It is a measurement at the individual level, but the information can be aggregated to the country level. Cross-validation proves that this aggregate measurement has a stronger association with the Freedom House scores on civil and political rights than other measurements of democratic support based on a single question.

Finally, comparative researchers easily run into fallacies at cross-level inferences when they inappropriately assume that relationships discovered at a particular level occur in the same fashion at other levels. Multilevel statistical techniques can avoid the fallacies and thus are used to investigate the relationship of interpersonal trust and democratic support at both country and individual levels. The results show that interpersonal trust, when measured as a cultural context, has no significant effect on the level of democratic support of countries. It can, however, significantly promote individual's pro-democratic attitude in countries which have higher percentages of trusting people and more democratic institutional settings.

Therefore, as a case study in comparative politics, China is distinctive but not a contradictory in testing the theories. The comparability of China with other countries can be significantly enhanced by conscientious selection of measurements and statistical methods.

## 6. CONCLUSION: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The suspicion of public opinion survey data as unreliable sources for scientific studies of Chinese politics and society is widely spread. The suspicion seems to originate mostly from the critic's belief that public opinion can hardly exist in non-democratic states. Even with the same survey techniques that prevail in democratic systems, it is still impossible to capture true, meaningful, and comparable survey responses in China. This study is inspired by these criticisms. It began by exploring the contextual factors that give rise to a proliferation of public opinion survey research in China. Following this contextual discussion, the subsequent chapters examined three issues that seemed to be the threats to the validity of survey responses in China. The first issue was *item-nonresponse*. Do respondents give "don't know" answers to survey questions because they truly do not know, do not care, or do not want to tell? The second issue was *norm-seeking response*. When respondents voice high level of political support in public opinion surveys, do they truly mean it or do they simply echo what they are told by government propaganda? The third issue was *cross-national comparability*. Do some surprising findings about China from cross-national studies suggest that China is an exceptional case in testing theories? In the remainder of the conclusion, I recapitulate my early findings concerning these questions and highlight the contextual effects on Chinese public opinion surveys. I also discuss the developmental trends of Chinese public opinion survey and its implications for Chinese

political studies. Lastly I suggest future research on the impact of public opinion survey on policy making.

## 6.1 CONTEXT MATTERS

This study stressed that the transitional context in contemporary China has significant impact on public opinion surveys. This context provides conditions for the emergence and development of public opinion surveys. It also affects the capability of survey research in collecting valid survey responses. Three contextual factors are presented in the analyses of the previous chapters.

### *Political context*

It is undeniable that the totalitarian nature of the Communist China in the Mao era has changed and people today enjoy more freedom than before. This political context is crucial to the practice of public opinion survey in China. On the one hand, the authorities take a new stance on the role of public opinion. Though they never give up the effort at manipulating public opinion by political education and propaganda, they have gradually recognized the needs of discovering true opinion among the public in order to ensure adequate public support for maintaining political stability. Public opinion survey, in a good timing, was introduced into China, and has thrived quickly in both quantity and quality (Chapter 2). On the other hand, the political context also has an impact on the formation and expression of individual opinions. A general concern is that people may not tell the truth in survey interview because of the lingering fear of political retribution from the past. The suspicious high rate of item nonresponse and the incredibly high level of political support in the Chinese surveys seem to confirm this concern. However, this

study fails to find strong evidence that respondents tell lies by giving politically desirable answers. Though people may be cautious about answering politically sensitive questions related to institutional support in front of other adults, they would give don't know answers instead of desirable positive answers and they did not seem to hesitate to give true answers to performance-based evaluation, even with the presence of other adults at the interview (Chapter 3 and 4). The impact of political context on shaping public opinion is not so much reflected in political fear, but it is more visible in the findings that political interest and exposure to government-controlled information can more effectively promote performance-based political support. The propaganda state plays a powerful role in shaping public opinion (Chapter 4).

#### *Developmental context*

In the past 30 years, China has experienced the most significant economic growth since the Opium War. Every facet of Chinese society is pushing toward modernization. Public opinion survey, in this context, becomes a desirable tool of collecting public opinion as a result of the government's pursuit of effectiveness and the diffusion of advanced telecommunication technologies (Chapter 2). Meanwhile, the improvement of education is expected to further improve survey responses. Findings from Chapter 3 show that education can effectively reduce the number of item nonresponses. Respondents with higher level of education give less "don't know" answers than the less educated. And the rates of "don't know" answers among respondents from developing countries (e.g., China and India) are significantly higher than those from developed countries (e.g., South Korea and the U.S.), since in the former countries people are usually less educated. Moreover, education has a converging effect. As education level increases the gaps of the predicted number of "don't know" response among the selected

countries decrease rapidly. Norm-seeking responses are also lower among educated respondents than others (Chapter 4). Moreover, the developmental context is likely to give rise to political apathy by shifting people's attention from political issues to individual lives. Political apathy is a potential cause of the increasing item nonresponses in the Chinese surveys (Chapter 3).

### *Cultural context*

Cultural context cannot be ignored especially for cross-national studies. In the case of China, cultural context involves Confucian tradition and Communist legacy. This poses particular challenge to concept measurements and data analysis. Chapter 5 raises the issue of cross-national comparability and presents three important findings. The first is that Chinese people perceive interpersonal trust differently from those in some other countries. They think of trust mostly in terms of relationships with their acquaintances rather than the general trust as expected by researchers on this topic. Second, Chinese people may confuse liberal democracy with socialist democracy promoted by the communist party itself by granting high support of a democratic system. When a new measure taking into consideration of people's attitudes to other political systems is used, democratic support among Chinese people is significantly reduced. Third, cultural context can influence the strength of the association of interpersonal trust and democracy at the individual level. Specifically, people who trust in general are more likely to have pro-democratic attitudes in countries where trusting culture is pervasive.

### *Limitations of this study*

It should be noted that the findings from my study may not be conclusive. They are subject to measurement errors as well as omitted variable bias. For example, political fear is not measured

directly and the information collected is far from adequate. Moreover, certain key independent or control variables have to be omitted from my analyses due to the problem of availability or comparability, such as third party presence in my comparative research (chapter 3) and income as an objective measure of better-off (chapter 4). These limitations to a great extent are due to the utilization of secondary data as my data sources. This study is expected to be improved by incorporate new survey design, such as experiments in surveys, which will be described more in the next section.

## **6.2 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY AND CHINESE POLITICAL RESEARCH**

Survey research makes great contributions to political science (Brady 2000). Unfortunately, political science data are often not easily available in the collections of the Census Bureau, Bureau of Statistics, or other sources. Political scientists studying individual attitudes and behavior have to collect data by themselves. Survey research, in this sense, like telescopes in astronomy and microscopes in biology, becomes an indispensable tool in political science and exerts critical influence in the quantitative trend of political research. Studies of Chinese politics can greatly benefit from this trend (Chapter 1). Public opinion survey research in China has flourished at a surprising speed. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, for China to catch up with the over 70 years of development in western countries within a short span of 30 years since public opinion survey emerged with the market reform in 1979. My findings from this study may ease some concerns of Chinese political researchers regarding the credibility of public opinion survey in China. Much work needs to be done in order to improve survey quality and provide more reliable data sources for Chinese political research.

First, though Chinese political studies are based on a single case, they are often constructed in a comparative perspective by fitting China into more general analytic frameworks and theoretic concerns. Such studies can be used to “expand the analytic knowledge of political science and to illuminate, and even test directly, theories commonly used in the discipline” (Peters 1998: 138). To make a single case study comparable, researchers in Chinese politics need to consider common theoretical framework and conceptual equivalence since historical and cultural milieu of the case may impede comparability. Though researchers normally rely on their personal knowledge and experience to justify the validity of measurements in a particular culture, now survey research with new design can provide more reliable information about the performance of measurements. One example of new designs is the method of “experiments embedded in surveys” (Fienberg and Tanur 1988, 1989). This design is applicable to comparing alternative aspects of survey methodology, such as questionnaires, training methods, collection methods, either in pilot surveys, in methods test panels, or in ongoing surveys. For the instance of testing conceptual equivalence in across-cultural studies, researchers may vary question wordings and designate the questions randomly to respondents. Statistical methods are employed to determine which wording/translation is the most suitable for measuring a concept in a cultural entity.

Second, an exciting feature of Chinese political studies is that the object of research—China—is experiencing great changes. Scholars expect to describe these changes accurately and capture the meaning of these changes over time. However, most Chinese opinion surveys are snapshot studies. These studies allow scholars to explore how public opinions vary among individuals with various characteristics, yet they are less helpful in systematically detecting the changes over time and their mechanisms. Some surveys provide trend data, such as the World

Values Surveys and the Beijing Area Studies. These surveys are repeated over time and collect information on the same variables from different samples of subjects in a general population. Comparison of the results of several different surveys can be useful for analyzing trends. In such studies, however, changes in patterns of response from one survey to the next in part from real shifts in opinions and in part from sampling variation. Panel study is another type of longitudinal designs. It is specially devised to minimize the effect of sampling error. It distinguishes itself from others in that it collects information on the same variables from the same group of respondents at selected intervals (Finkel 1995). The later responses of an individual, a group of people, or the sample as whole, can be directly compared to responses given at an earlier time. Thus panel study can produce highly reliable measures of change and allow dynamic inquiries of underlying mechanisms (Gray et al 2007). Panel studies are few in Chinese public opinion survey research. A main reason is the high mobility of people because of the unprecedented pace of housing development in urban area and the huge labor migration from the rural area. Very high data attrition could have occurred had panel studies been implemented. Nonetheless, a pioneer project of Chinese Family Panel Studies (CFPS) was launched in 2007 by the Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University (ISSS). CFPS is designed to collect data from 16,000 sample households in nation wide and at the levels of individuals, family, and community. The panel survey covers a wide range of social, economic, education, and health themes. Currently CFPS is at its pretest stage. The first wave of the project is expected to be conducted in 2009 and the data will be accessible at the official website of ISSS<sup>53</sup>. Promisingly, CFPS will make great contribution to the understanding of the social, political, and economic changes in contemporary China.

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<sup>53</sup> The official website of ISSS is <http://www.iss.edu.cn>. It is still under construction at this point of time.

Finally, the quality of Chinese public opinion surveys is also expected to improve through integrating new design ideas in survey research. For example, response effect, which often concern comparative researchers on the validity of survey responses in China, can be systematically studied by analyzing paradata of surveys. Paradata, in contrast to data about the data (i.e., metadata), is data about the process (Couper 2005). It is an informative research tool for understanding the behavior of survey respondents. In paper-based surveys, such as the World Values Surveys, interviewers are asked to answer several questions about their observations of the respondents immediately after completing their interviews. These paradata are valuable for assessing survey quality, but often ignored by researchers. Now as new technologies are applied to survey research, such as CATI (computer assisted telephone interviewing) in the 1970, CAPI (computer assisted person interviewing) in the late 1980s and Internet surveys in the 1990s, paradata are collected with more convenience and are widely used in quality control. The new technologies can significantly reduce the cost of opinion survey research and thus have been quickly employed in Chinese opinion surveys. The software that is developed in association with these new methods can generate paradata with ease. It is foreseeable that the quality of Chinese public opinion surveys can be assessed in a more scientific way, which is good news for Chinese political studies based on survey data.

### **6.3 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY AND POLICY MAKING**

The impact of public opinion survey on policy making is a challenging yet promising topic for studies of Chinese politics. There are usually two ways to study the relationship between opinion surveys and policy making in democratic systems. One is through the electoral process

to construct the link between election outcome and the policy position of the elected officials. The other approach is to examine the voting behavior of elected legislators in the legislative process and the public opinion in their constituencies. In China, such links are absent in the current institutional context, which makes it very difficult to study to what extent public opinion can influence policy-making. However, we cannot ignore or simply deny the existence of such influence. One possibility for future studies is to examine how opinion surveys have been used by Chinese government at three stages of policy making: agenda setting, decision making and policy implementation. Some of the main functions of public opinion survey during these stages are summarized in Table 12, followed by detailed explanations.

Table 12 Use of opinion surveys in the policy-making process

<b>Stage of Policy-making</b>	<b>Opinion Surveys</b>	
	<i>Function</i>	<i>Example</i>
Agenda setting	Observation: finding problems	Surveys on public mood and mentality
Decision making	Consultation: seeking solutions	Policy research surveys, Deliberative polls
Policy implementation	Evaluation: assessing effectiveness	Surveys on policy satisfactory and promises fulfillment

### *Agenda setting*

Policy issues are identified at the stage of agenda setting. There are several policy actors who can propose policy issues in China's political system. The first is high level government officials. The Chinese government was under a hierarchical power system. The central government used to have the paramount power, and all lower level governments must obey the orders from higher level governments. Accompanying the trend of decentralization during the

reform, higher level governments usually offer sketchy principles regarding a particular policy and leave much room to lower level governments to develop specific ideas. Moreover, speeches made by higher level governmental officials can often directly influence what are on the agenda of local governments. The second kind of policy actors are local government officials. In the official system of information collection, local governments are required to report certain information to higher level authorities regularly, such as social and economic statistics, a quarterly report on social situation and public opinion, and detailed work reports. Local government officials often offer suggestions to solve the reported problems. These suggestions may become the initiative of a policy. The third group of policy actors is the representatives in the People's Congresses and People's Political Consultative Conferences. They can raise policy questions directly to relevant government agencies and request quick responses. In the past 30 years, People's Congresses at various levels have gained more power, and become an effective channel to raise policy questions.

Opinion surveys used at the stage of agenda setting are usually *observational*. That is, they are conducted in order to provide information about certain problems. At this stage, policy actors can draw information from all kinds of opinion surveys, such as those commissioned or sponsored by the government for governance purposes, those conducted by academic organizations for research purposes, and those carried out by the media or commercial company for news effect. Survey results are accessible through internal publications, academic or specialized journals, and the media. Some polls provided valuable information for policy makers. For example, the All-China Federation of Trade Union has conducted a series of national surveys to find out the problems among workers under marketization. The surveys

provided very useful information for the government to formulate reform policies in State-owned Enterprises.<sup>54</sup>

Opinion surveys are also used for instrumental purpose to influence other actors' attitudes. For example, as mentioned above, the reformists often cited poll results in their struggle with hard liners in the late 1980's. In the debate of village self-government, the proponents also used poll results published in specialized journals to show the seriousness of rural lawlessness and strongly pushed the implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (Kelliher 1997).

### *Decision making*

Using opinion surveys at the stage of decision making is a highlight in recent administrative reform in China. The government attempted to change the old style of "quick decision making and slow policy implementation" to "slow decision making and quick policy implementation" and invited more public participation in the process. With the wide use of CATI system, opinion survey is regarded as a quick, accurate and scientific technique of collecting public opinion. Opinion surveys used at this stage are mainly commissioned or sponsored by the government for *consultation* purpose. Consultation is a process in which "governments define the issues for consultation, set the questions and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinion" (OECD 2001: 23). It is a two-way relationship that people obtain necessary information from the government regarding particular policy issues and give their feedback in return. Therefore, publicized information with low transitional cost is a prerequisite for meaningful public consultation. There are two ways of information provision. One is that

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Feng Tongqing, a professor in China Labor Institute, All-China Federation of Trade Union. He was one of the key members who designed the surveys. 05/13/2005.

the governments actively distribute relevant information through the powerful propaganda machine, such as TV, radio, print media, exhibitions, and brochures. The other way is that the public actively obtained relevant information through government websites and personal inquiries. The Chinese governments have been engaged in constructing government websites in recent years as a part of administrative reform in transparent public management. People can easily search government documents, track the development of a policy issue online, and post their opinions online.<sup>55</sup>

Using opinion surveys in public consultation is a trend in democratic governance (OECD 2001). Its adoption in China represents a significant change in governance even under authoritarian regime. The governments are taking concrete steps in engaging the public in policy-making through public opinion surveys. However, large scale opinion surveys often encounter two problems in public consultation: high cost and uninformed respondents. Deliberative polling was developed by Professor James Fishkin from Stanford University to overcome these problems while achieving representative opinions and political equality. The first deliberative poll in China was undertaken in Zeguo township of Wenling City by the government on April 9, 2005.<sup>56</sup> The working committee consists of party officials in Wenling City and Zeguo Township. Fishkin and Baogang He, a professor of international studies at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia, provided technical advice. The aim of Zeguo experiment was to help townspeople to deliberate about which infrastructure projects should be funded in the coming year. The township government listed thirty projects based on proposals

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<sup>55</sup> A good example of government website is the website of the State Environmental Protection Administration at [www.sepa.gov.cn](http://www.sepa.gov.cn). The documents are well classified and the news is quickly updated.

<sup>56</sup> Jakes, Susan, "Dabbling in Democracy: No one knew what to expect when a Chinese town tried listening to its people." *TIME Asia Magazine*, vol. 165, No. 16. (April 25, 2005). French, Howard W. "China's New Frontiers: Tests of Democracy and Dissent." *New York Times*, June 19, 2005. McCormick, Joel. "It's Their Call: Using a Stanford professor's polling technique, Chinese Communist Party officials are giving citizens a voice in decision making." *Stanford Magazine*, January/February 2006.

from the local people's congress and the local people's consultative conference. The projects in total would cost about RMB 137 million (\$17 million) according to the experts' estimation. However, the government only had a budget of RMB 40 million (\$5 million) for infrastructure construction. In light of budget constraint, the Zeguo town leadership decided to adopt deliberative polling technique to make the choices. Officials first selected 275 residents using random sampling to ensure accurate representation of the 120,000 townspeople. They sent to the representatives an introduction of the 30 projects prepared by twelve experts ten days before the meeting. For evaluation purpose, the representatives were asked to rank the priorities of the projects in a questionnaire after reading the introduction. On the meeting day, 257 participants who showed up were split into small groups. They discussed the pros and cons of the projects with the presence of twelve experts and all township government officials. At the end of the day, 235 participants completed the questionnaire regarding the 30 projects. A majority of the representatives gave top priority to environmental works, including sewage treatment plants and public parks. They rejected plans for another town square and several road-building projects. The final project list was submitted to the local people's congress and approved by 84 of its 92 deputies.

The Zeguo experiment attracted attention from above. A detailed description and discussion of the deliberative poll in Zeguo was published on *Study Time (Xuexi Shibao)*, a weekly newspaper of the Central Party School.<sup>57</sup> The experiment was described as "a fruitful exploration of developing local democracy."<sup>58</sup> Zeguo Party Secretary Jiang made the following

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<sup>57</sup> Jiang, Zhaoguo and He Baogang, "Democratic Earnest Deliberation: where people participated to discuss important city planning issues - the people of Wenling City, Zegou Township participated in a 2005 city planning, money allotment and project decisions." *Study Time (Xuexi Shibao)*, No. 308 (October 2005).

<sup>58</sup> "A Fruitful Exploration of Developing Local Democracy." *Study Time (Xuexi Shibao)*, No. 315 (December 2005).

comment in his email, “the idea of Zeguo’s democratic deliberalization was to conduct a democratic and scientific experiment for important public decisions ... This was an exploration within the existing political framework of China – it marked a transformation of the decision-making process.”<sup>59</sup>

### *Policy implementation*

There are two questions regarding the implementation process: (1) how effective is the governments in implementing the policy, and (2) what new problems emerge during the implementation. Therefore, policy implementation requires evaluation. Policy evaluation in the traditional policy-making process before the reform was mainly based on reports from local governments. However, driven by individual’s career interests, local government officials often cover problems and exaggerate achievements. The mechanism of policy evaluation was paralyzed.

In recent years, opinion surveys have been used at this stage of evaluation. Some surveys focus on governments’ effectiveness. For example, one opinion survey conducted by Hunan Public Opinion Research Center was about the eight promises made by the provincial government in 2004. It interviewed 843 respondents about their awareness and attitudes to the implementation of the eight promises. Guangzhou Public Opinion Research Center also conducted a series of surveys on public evaluation of the government in 2002. Some other surveys target particular policies. For example, before Beijing government decided to ban fireworks in the metropolitan area in 1993, it conducted an opinion survey which reported that 84.6% of the respondents supported for the ban. Firework is a traditional activity to celebrate

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<sup>59</sup> McCormick, Joel. “It’s Their Call: Using a Stanford professor’s polling technique, Chinese Communist Party officials are giving citizens a voice in decision making.” *Stanford Magazine*, January/February 2006.

New Year and Spring Festival in China. People started to miss it after several years since the ban. A couple of opinion surveys were conducted in 2005 about lifting the ban. It turned out that over two thirds of the respondents supported the lifting of the ban, and a revision of the regulation took effective in 2006.

Therefore, opinion surveys can be used by the Chinese governments at different stages in the policy-making process and for different purposes. While opinion surveys used at the stage of agenda setting are for observation, those used at the stages of decision making and policy implementation are for consultation and evaluation respectively. Opinion surveys have different impacts on the three stages of policy-making. While opinion surveys may play a growing role in decision making and policy implementation, they are still less effective in influencing agenda setting. Democracy, as represented by further improving the role of opinion surveys in decision making, is not an end but a means to promote China's political reform.

## APPENDIX A. QUESTIONS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF “DON’T KNOW” ANSWERS

Each question is indexed by two numbers. The first is the question number in the questionnaire, and the second is the variable name in the dataset. The total number of the questions is 119.

### Life-related questions (N = 58)

- On life (N=17):

- V 4 A001.- Family important in life
- V 5 A002.- Friends important in life
- V 6 A003.- Leisure time important in life
- V 7 A004.- Politics important in life
- V 8 A005.- Work important in life
- V 9 A006.- Religion important in life
- V 10 A007.- Service to others important in life
- V 12 A009.- State of health (subjective)
- V 27 A057.- Spend time with parents or other relatives
- V 28 A058.- Spend time with friends
- V 29 A059.- Spend time with colleagues from work
- V 30 A060.- Spend time with people at your church, mosque or synagogue
- V 31 A061.- Spend time with people at sport, culture, communal organization
- V 38 A169.- Good human relationships
- V 80 C006.- Satisfaction with financial situation of household
- V 81 A170.- Satisfaction with your life
- V 82 A173.- How much freedom of choice and control

- On jobs (N=14):

- V 78 C001.- Jobs scarce: Men should have more right to a job than women
- V79 C002.- Jobs scarce: Employers should give priority to (nation) people than immigrants
- V 83 C008.- Work compared with Leisure
- V 84 C009.- First choice, if looking for a job
- V 85 C010.- Second choice if looking for a job
- V 97 C036.- To develop talents you need to have a job
- V 98 C037.- Humiliating to receive money without having to work for it
- V 99 C038.- People who don't work turn lazy

V100 C039.- Work is a duty towards society  
V101 C040.- People should not have to work if they don't want to  
V102 C041.- Work should come first even if it means less spare time  
V103 C059.- Fairness: One secretary is paid more  
V104 C060.- How business and industry should be managed  
V105 C061.- Following instructions at work

- On marriage and gender (N=13):

V109 D018.- Child needs a home with father and mother  
V110 D019.- A woman has to have children to be fulfilled  
V111 D022.- Marriage is an out-dated institution  
V112 D023.- Woman as a single parent  
V113 D054.- One of main goals in life has been to make my parents proud  
V114 D055.- Make effort to live up to what my friends expect  
V115 D056.- Relationship working mother  
V116 D057.- Being a housewife just as fulfilling  
V117 D058.- Husband and wife should both contribute to income  
V118 D059.- Men make better political leaders than women do  
V119 D060.- University is more important for a boy than for a girl  
V 13 A025.- Respect and love for parents  
V 14 A026.- Parents responsibilities to their children

- On religion (N=5):

V182 F001.- Thinking about meaning and purpose of life  
V183 F022.- Statement: good and evil  
V184 F024.- Religious denomination  
V185 F028.- How often do you attend religious services  
V186 F034.- Religious person

- On morality (N=9):

V205 F115.- Justifiable: avoiding a fare on public transport  
V206 F116.- Justifiable: cheating on taxes  
V207 F117.- Justifiable: someone accepting a bribe  
V208 F118.- Justifiable: homosexuality  
V209 F119.- Justifiable: prostitution  
V210 F120.- Justifiable: abortion  
V211 F121.- Justifiable: divorce  
V212 F122.- Justifiable: euthanasia  
V213 F123.- Justifiable: suicide

Value-related questions (N=21)

- On environment (N=5):

V 33 B001.- Would give part of my income for the environment  
V 34 B002.- Increase in taxes if used to prevent environmental pollution  
V 35 B003.- Government should reduce environmental pollution  
V 36 B008.- Protecting environment vs. Economic growth  
V 37 B009.- Human & nature

- On country priority (N=6)

V120 E001.- Aims of country: first choice  
V121 E002.- Aims of country: second choice  
V122 E003.- Aims of respondent: first choice  
V123 E004.- Aims of respondent: second choice  
V124 E005.- Most important: first choice  
V125 E006.- Most important: second choice

- On future changes (N=6)

V127 E014.- Future changes: Less emphasis on money and material possessions  
V128 E015.- Future changes: Less importance placed on work  
V129 E016.- Future changes: More emphasis on technology  
V130 E018.- Future changes: Greater respect for authority  
V131 E019.- Future changes: More emphasis on family life  
V132 E022.- Opinion about scientific advances

- On governance (N=4)

V141 E035.- Income equality  
V142 E036.- Private vs state ownership of business  
V143 E037.- Government responsibility  
V144 E039.- Competition good or harmful

Politics-related questions (N=30)

- On institutional trust (N=13)

V148 E070.- Confidence: Armed Forces  
V149 E072.- Confidence: The Press  
V150 E078.- Confidence: Television  
V151 E073.- Confidence: Labour Unions  
V152 E074.- Confidence: The Police  
V153 E079.- Confidence: The Government  
V154 E080.- Confidence: The Political Parties  
V155 E075.- Confidence: Parliament  
V156 E076.- Confidence: The Civil Services  
V157 E081.- Confidence: Major Companies

V158 E082.- Confidence: The Environmental Protection Movement  
V159 E083.- Confidence: The Women's Movement  
V162 E088.- Confidence: The United Nations

- On political system (N=12)

V164 E114.- Political system: Having a strong leader  
V165 E115.- Political system: Having experts make decisions  
V166 E116.- Political system: Having the army rule  
V167 E117.- Political system: Having a democratic political system  
V168 E110.- Satisfaction with the way democracy develops  
V169 E120.- In democracy, the economic system runs badly  
V170 E121.- Democracies are indecisive and have too much squabbling  
V171 E122.- Democracies aren't good at maintaining order  
V172 E123.- Democracy may have problems but is better  
V173 E124.- Respect for individual human rights nowadays  
V174 E125.- Satisfaction with the people in national office  
V175 E128.- Country is run by big interest vs. for all people's benefit

- On international politics (N=5)

V177 E135.- Who should decide: international peacekeeping  
V178 E136.- Who should decide: protection of the environment  
V179 E137.- Who should decide: aid to developing countries  
V180 E138.- Who should decide: refugees  
V181 E139.- Who should decide: human rights

## APPENDIX B. A ZINB MODEL OF DK ANSWERS TO POLITICS-RELATED QUESTIONS

[STATA output]

```
. zinb dkpol ageg1 ageg3 3rdpar female edulev intpol trust respint1 respint2, inflate(ageg1
ageg3 preadu female edulev intpol trust respint1 respint2) vuong zip nolog
```

```
. prchange
```

zinb: Changes in Predicted Rate for dkpol

	min->max	0->1	+1/2	+sd/2
ageg1	-0.1817	-0.1817	-0.1829	-0.0727
ageg3	-0.8623	-0.8623	-0.8621	-0.4190
<b>3rdpar</b>	<b>0.7658</b>	<b><u>0.7658</u></b>	<b>0.7574</b>	<b>0.3670</b>
female	1.2096	1.2096	1.2092	0.6034
<b>edulev</b>	<b>-6.7927</b>	<b><u>-3.3254</u></b>	<b>-1.7288</b>	<b>-1.7450</b>
<b>intpol</b>	<b>-5.2092</b>	<b><u>-1.3292</u></b>	<b>-0.8061</b>	<b>-1.1929</b>
trust	-0.1567	-0.1567	-0.1607	-0.0792
respint1	-3.3204	-3.3204	-3.7666	-1.7360
respint2	-1.7885	-1.7885	-1.7294	-0.8447

```
exp(xb): 5.0862
```

base x values for count equation:

	ageg1	ageg3	preadu	female	edulev	intpol	trust	r
> espint1 respint2								
x=	.196791	.385027	.374332	.491979	2.74973	4.31926	.53262	
> .325134	.6							
sd(x)=	.397786	.486862	.484209	.500203	1.00929	1.47848	.499202	
> .468675	.49016							

base x values for binary equation:

	ageg1	ageg3	preadu	female	edulev	intpol	trust	r
> espint1 respint2								
x=	.196791	.385027	.374332	.491979	2.74973	4.31926	.53262	
> .325134	.6							
sd(x)=	.397786	.486862	.484209	.500203	1.00929	1.47848	.499202	
> .468675	.49016							

## APPENDIX C. DESCRIPTION OF VARIABLES IN TABLE 4

Table 13 Description of variables in Table 4

<i>Variable</i>		<u><i>China</i></u> <i>Mean</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>	<u><i>India</i></u> <i>Mean</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>	<u><i>Vietnam</i></u> <i>Mean</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>	<u><i>S. Korea</i></u> <i>Mean</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>	<u><i>U.S.</i></u> <i>Mean</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>
Gender(female)	dummy	0.506 (0.500)	0.432 (0.495)	0.508 (0.500)	0.497 (0.500)	0.577 (0.494)
Age > 50	dummy	0.214 (0.410)	0.222 (0.416)	0.288 (0.453)	0.194 (0.396)	0.296 (0.457)
36-50	dummy	0.409 (0.492)	0.315 (0.465)	0.365 (0.482)	0.379 (0.485)	0.331 (0.471)
<= 35	dummy	0.377 (0.485)	0.464 (0.499)	0.347 (0.476)	0.427 (0.495)	0.373 (0.484)
Education (level) <sup>a</sup>	scale	2.685 (1.034)	2.791 (1.690)	2.868 (1.129)	4.184 (0.825)	4.003 (1.178)
Political interest	scale	4.319 (1.478)	3.819 (1.861)	5.217 (1.373)	3.888 (1.096)	4.685 (1.697)
Interpersonal trust	dummy	0.525 (0.500)	0.389 (0.488)	0.387 (0.487)	0.273 (0.446)	0.359 (0.480)
Interest in interview - very interested	dummy	0.311 (0.463)	0.474 (0.499)	0.692 (0.462)		0.761 (0.427)
- somewhat interested	dummy	0.597 (0.491)	0.375 (0.484)	0.271 (0.445)		0.222 (0.416)
N		935	1808	966	1192	1192

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Education is measured in five levels: 1 "inadequately completed elementary education"; 2 "completed (compulsory) elementary education"; 3 "complete secondary school: technical/vocational type"; 4 "complete secondary: university-preparatory type"; 5 "university degree"

Source: World Values Survey, 4<sup>th</sup> wave

## APPENDIX D. DESCRIPTION OF VARIABLES IN TABLE 7

Table 14 Description of variables in Table 7

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Institution-based support	0	1	-4.81	1.93
Performance-based support	0	1	-4.16	2.77
Age cohort:				
56 – 66 (generation of Socialism transformation)	0.10	0.29	0	1
44 – 55 (generation of the Cultural Revolution)	0.20	0.40	0	1
33 – 43 (generation of political liberalization)	0.33	0.47	0	1
25 – 32 (generation of post-Tiananmen event)	0.28	0.45	0	1
18 – 24 (c.f.) (generation of post-Deng era)	0.10	0.29	0	1
Education (level)	2.90	0.99	1	5
Gender - Female	0.44	0.50	0	1
Trust in general people	0.55	0.50	0	1
Presence of third parties	0.36	0.48	0	1
Life independence	7.36	2.37	1	10
Political interest (PI)	0.17	0.96	-2.25	1.54
Confidence in television (TV)	0.74	0.44	0	1
Confidence in the press (PRE)	0.67	0.47	0	1
Interaction of PI and TV	0.15	0.82	-2.25	1.54
Interaction of PI and PRE	0.14	0.78	-2.25	1.54
Nationalism	0.83	0.38	0	1
Satisfaction with life as a whole	6.76	2.34	1	10
Satisfaction with financial situation	5.81	2.54	1	10

Source: World Values Survey, 4<sup>th</sup> wave

SD = standard deviation

N = 659

## APPENDIX E. FREEDOM BY INTERPERSONAL TRUST

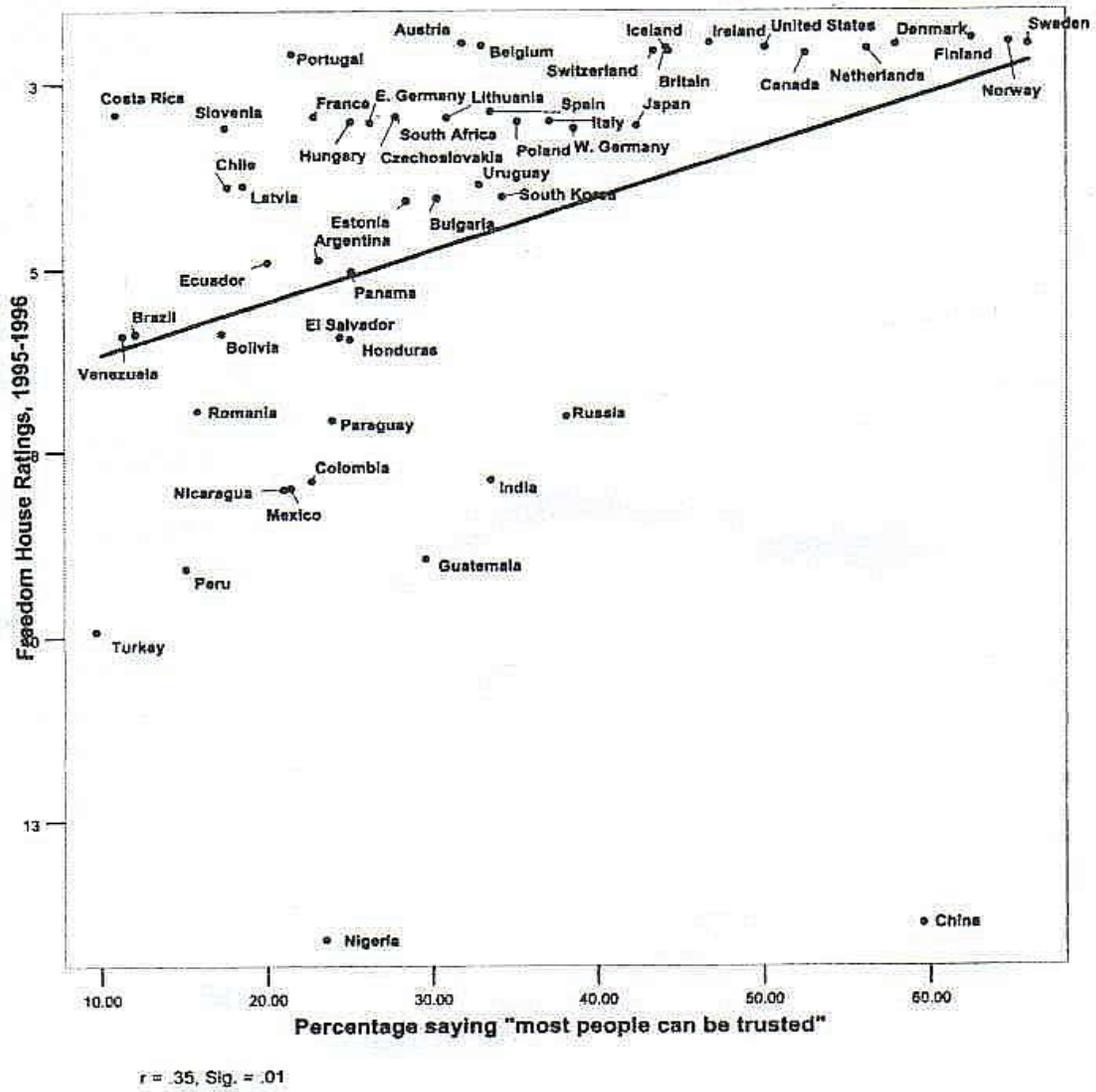


Figure 13 Freedom by interpersonal trust

Notes: Interpersonal trust is the average percentage who said “most people can be trusted” in each country in the 1990-1996 World Values Surveys.

Source: Seligson 2002, p. 278.

## APPENDIX F. DIMENSIONS OF INTERPERSONAL TRUST

Table 15 Dimensions of interpersonal trust

<i>Items</i>	<b>Factor 1 loading</b>	<b>Factor 2 loading</b>	<b>Factor 3 loading</b>
Family	0.032	-0.038	<b>0.885</b>
Relatives	0.420	0.078	<b>0.677</b>
Neighbor	<b>0.700</b>	0.115	0.355
Colleague	<b>0.806</b>	0.087	0.114
Schoolmate	<b>0.805</b>	0.034	0.031
Villager	<b>0.824</b>	0.095	0.077
Businessman	0.140	<b>0.753</b>	-0.013
Out-of-towner	0.072	<b>0.846</b>	0.015
Stranger	0.038	<b>0.793</b>	0.008
Eigenvalue	3.190	1.785	1.031
Proportion	0.355	0.198	0.115

Notes: Extraction Method: principal-component factors. Figures in this table are factor loadings from the varimax rotation matrix. N = 5475.

Source: The Chinese Value and Ethics Survey, 2004

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