

Exploring Overseas Chinese Middle Class's Democratic Orientations amid China's Modernization

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ABSTRACT

China's impressive socioeconomic development amid its modernization over the past decades has not been paralleled with political liberalization as modernization theory assumed. State-led development gave rise to a more-educated middle class, and yet previous studies have controversies over whether the middle class can be a harbinger of the country's democratization. There has been a research gap concerning overseas middle-class Chinese's democratic orientations. This thesis aims to fill in this gap using primary data from qualitative interviews in light of previous research findings. Informed by the Gerschenkronian hypothesis of a late modernizer and contemporary state-centered paradigm as well as a neo-Weberian approach—Hofstede's theory of national culture dimensions, this thesis traces what and why overseas middle-class Chinese's attitudes are to Western democratic values, political activism, and their perceived desirability and feasibility of China's democratization. The findings suggest that despite their Western education a significant proportion of the interviewees are skeptical about Western democratic values, and a predominant proportion deem it infeasible for China to embrace Western democracy, due to not only the middle class's state dependency but more importantly cultural values. China's COVID policies have exerted limited impact on their attitudes.

Keywords: Overseas Chinese; middle class; democratic orientations; Chinese modernization

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I. INTRODUCTION

I. i. Background

Ever since its Reform and Opening up in late 1978, China has witnessed extraordinary socioeconomic changes. The country shifted its priority from ideology and class struggle to economic development, embracing and prioritizing the Four Modernizations: the development of the four areas of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology. Nominally still a “communist” country notwithstanding, China’s economic reforms have gradually embarked on a road of partially marketization, and the Chinese economy is increasingly embedded in global trade and value chain (Wright, 2018, p. 383), especially since the introduction of socialist market economy in 1992 and the country’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001.

According to Cai (2015, p. 1), the “most prominent manifestations” of China’s development achievements since Reform and Opening up are the “general improvement” of people’s livelihoods. People’s standard of living is commonly measured by GDP per capita (or GNP per capita if income from overseas is added) (Thirlwall, 2014, p. 61). Before indicators of economic development evolved from GDP to “broader critiques of growth” (Schmelzer, 2023, p. 448), development tended to be equated with economic development, which was mainly equated with economic growth. Between 1978 and 2018, China saw an average annual real GDP growth rate of 9.3%, much higher than that of the global economy of about 2.91% in the same period (Liu, 2019). China’s GDP per capita grew continuously and exponentially from US\$306.98 in 1980 to US\$12,640 in 2022, with only a slight fall to US\$12,510 in 2023; in terms of Purchasing Power Parity, US\$306.74 in 1980 to US\$23,330 in 2023 (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

In terms of industrialization, China has built a complete, independent modern industrial system, and the scale of its industrial economy ranks first in the world (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). The country’s urbanization rate skyrocketed to 65.2% in 2022 from 17.92% in 1978 (Qiu, 2023).

The past two decades or so has witnessed more development indicators than GDP, including the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Human Poverty Index (Northover, 2014, p. 73; Pieterse, 1998, p. 344). When examined in terms of the HDI and poverty alleviation, China has also made impressive progress over the past four decades. China has lifted more than 770 million of its rural population out of poverty (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021, p. 58), and is among the only a handful of countries that have ascended from low to high on the HDI (UNDP, 2023).

China’s development over the past decades has been “breathtaking in scale and scope”, and its rise as a global economic power brings the “ most profound change” in the 2000s (Dodds, 2014, p. 41), to the extent that the ascent of China and other emerging economies in the South poses a challenge to the West’s monopoly on “what it means to be modern and developed” (Schech, 2014, p. 88). The state, led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), has played a dominant role in the spectacular socioeconomic transformation over the past several decades, which has spawn and shaped new social classes, including a burgeoning middle class (J. Chen, 2013, p. 11). The rapid emergence and exponential growth of the middle class will be one of the most significant forces to shape China’s development course (Li, 2010, p. 3).

Many scholars, following the arguments of modernization theory, have predicted that as China grows richer and the middle class develops, there would be more pressure for the country’s liberalization. In fact, the US-led West’s engagement with China has been partly justified on the anticipation that the engagement will create favorable economic conditions for democracy and a middle class with prodemocracy leanings (Nathan, 2016, p. 7). For instance, Larry Diamond (2012, p. 12) pointed out a dilemma facing the CPC: the Party must continue to deliver development gains to hold on to power and win the people’s support, but the success in facilitating development will create the “very forces—an educated, demanding middle class and a stubbornly independent civil society” that will ask for democracy and the end of the CPC’s rule.

In 2012, Diamond (Ibid.) predicted that the CPC's rule would "quite possibly" end within the next decade, and yet this has not happened.

A Freedom House article (Puddington, 2015, p. n.p.) admitted that China is a "special case" because it has *resisted* "a well-established pattern whereby societies that grow more prosperous, more urban, more educated, and more middle class also become more democratic". Despite the development achievements, China is still under one-party rule. In fact, many have observed a shrinking space for democracy in China over the past decade or so (Yu, 2020, p. 16).

I. ii. Research Question and Road Map

In light of this background, this thesis aims to tentatively explore whether and why (not) the Chinese middle class support the idea of Western democracy in China. The research question will be further narrowed down after a preliminary literature review, with more refined sub-questions put forward later.

To answer the research question, the rest of thesis is structured as follows. It first tries to define "democracy" and the Chinese middle class, and then places the research question in the frameworks of modernization theory and its critiques—the Gerschenkronian hypothesis of a late modernizer, the state dependency theory and a neo-Weberian approach, as these theories are relevant to understanding the research question, and vice versa: data collected to analyze the Chinese middle class's orientations toward Western democracy can be used to test the theories, and thus either confirm and bolster, or challenge and weaken those theories, and can even contribute to the formulation of a new theory.

After theoretical discussions, the thesis then presents a literature review of previous studies on the research topic, to re-examine the extant knowledge through effective analysis and synthesis to seek a new development. The literature review looks at what has been done and already known about the topic, what research gaps need to be filled, what research methods and theoretical models have been applied, who the

major contributors are, what the key issues and questions are and what controversies and inconsistencies exist, so that I am more aware of what sub-questions need to be answered concerning the Chinese middle class's democratic orientations. The literature review acts as background as well as justification for my investigation.

The literature review also helps determine methods for data collection and analysis. In the methodology section that follows the literature review, I justify my selection of research methods, while also touching upon epistemology and ontology, as well as ethical considerations. Then I present the research findings and results and the interpretation of the findings in light of previous research work, in an effort to provide a fresh insight into the research questions concerning the Chinese middle class's orientations toward Western democracy.

I. ii. i. Defining Democracy

“Democracy”, literally meaning “rule by the people”, is derived from the ancient Greek *dēmokratia* coined from *dēmos* (meaning “people”) and *kratos* (meaning “rule”) (Dahl, 1989, p. 106; Hague et al., 2016, p. 38; Shapiro et al., 2023). Despite the absence of a “universally agreed definition” of democracy (Hague et al., 2016, p. 37), it is believed, at least among Western scholarship, that Robert A. Dahl put forward “the most widely accepted criteria” for deciding whether or not a political system is a democracy (Schedler, 1998, p. 91). According to Dahl (2005, pp. 188–189), a large-scale democracy requires a minimum of such a set of political institutions: “elected officials”; “free, fair, and frequent elections”; “freedom of expression”; “access to alternative sources of information”; “associational autonomy”; “inclusive citizenship”.

The Chinese government clarifies that “democracy is a common value of humanity and an ideal that has always been cherished by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese people”, elaborating on the “whole-process people’s democracy” of China as a “true democracy that works” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021, p. 1). China does have elections, but the elections at

almost all levels are controlled and dominated by the CPC while eight democratic parties have played consultative roles under the system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC (中国共产党领导的多党合作和政治协商制度). Since the country is still largely controlled by the CPC as the sole ruling party without fully competitive election of government leaders, China is considered as an authoritarian state rather than a democracy in the lens of Western democracy (J. Chen, 2013, p. 11;74; Hague et al., 2016, p. 16).

In this thesis, I use phrases like “Western democracy” or “Western-style democracy” to refer to the democracy that meets the requirements proposed by Dahl (2005, pp. 188–189). Representative democracy—“a system of government in which members of a community elect people to represent their interests and to make decisions affecting the community”(Hague et al., 2016, p. 42), and liberal democracy—“a form of indirect democracy in which the scope of democracy is limited by constitutional protection of individual rights” (Ibid., p. 44), both fall into this category.

I. ii. ii. Defining the Chinese Middle Class

To put it simple, the middle class is a social group between the upper class and the working class (Hasík, 2021, p. 103). In the case of contemporary China, the middle class analogous to the Western counterpart began to emerge in the late 1980s, following China’s Reform and Opening up (J. Chen, 2013, p. 33). The CPC-led state has played a central role in the extraordinary socioeconomic development over the past several decades that gave rise to a burgeoning middle class (Ibid., p. 170).

It is noteworthy that in China’s official documents and the majority of Chinese scholars’ research, to mean the same thing, they use words like the “middle-income group” (中等收入群体, *zhongdeng shouru qunti*) or the “middle-income stratum” (中产阶层, *zhongchan jieceng*) instead of the “middle class” (中产阶级, *zhongchan jieji*). This is because the word “class” (阶级, *jieji*) indicates Marxist notions of class struggle

and exploitation, which are supposed to have been eliminated in today's China (Nathan, 2016, pp. 8–9).

In the first two decades following Reform and Opening up, Chinese leadership avoided class analysis, deliberately departing from the Mao era characterized by class struggle (Li, 2010, p. 10). Li (Ibid.) argued that a turning point occurred in the year 2000 when the then CPC General Secretary Jiang Zemin's theory of Three Represents implied that the CPC should "broaden its base of power to include entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and technocrats"—who usually would fall into the category of the middle-income stratum. At the 16th CPC National Congress in 2002, the CPC leadership proposed to "enlarge the size of the middle-income group" (Jiang, 2002), regarding the middle class as "an asset and political ally rather than a threat" (Li, 2010, p. 11). To "substantially grow the middle-income group as a share of the total population" has also been listed among China's development objectives for the year 2035 proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping (2022).

The standards of what constitutes the middle class vary. According to David Daokui Li (2020), China's National Bureau of Statistics adopts a different standard for middle-income groups than most commonly known international methods, but is in line with China's reality: a typical three-person household with an annual income between RMB 100,000 and RMB 500,000 (approximately US\$14,000 to US\$70,000 in 2024) is defined as a middle-income family in China. Following this standard, China's middle-income group exceeded 400 million among China's total population of nearly 1.4 billion in 2017 (Ibid.).

There have been two approaches to conceptualizing the middle class: the objective approach, whereby the middle class is identified by key objective socioeconomic factors like education, occupation and income; and the subjective approach, whereby the middle class is determined by one's perception or consciousness that one belongs to a society's middle stratum (J. Chen, 2013, pp. 30–31; Hasík, 2021, pp. 103–104). In this thesis, I adopt the objective approach over the subjective approach, for two reasons.

First, China's middle class arose from the aforementioned socioeconomic background that entails an objective approach; second, their class consciousness is still in the process of formation (J. Chen, 2013, p. 33).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

II. i. Modernization Theory: Middle Class Linking Development and Democracy

The links between democracy and development have been explored by academics for decades (Lekvall, 2013, p. 27). Lekvall (Ibid.) summed up three major schools in this field: the “democratic governance camp”, the “developmental state camp” and the “multiple path camp”. The democratic governance camp advocates that neoliberal democratic governance model is vital for stimulating and sustaining development. The developmental state camp believes that development comes before democracy as they observed how rapid growth has been achieved through centralized state power in developmental states. According to the multiple path camp, the best development path varies with contexts although politics plays an important role.

Despite the inconclusiveness, many seem to be inclined to the idea that there is a causal, linear connection between economic development and democracy. It is believed that a liberal democracy blooms in *modern* conditions that feature “a state with an industrial or post-industrial economy, affluence, specialized occupations, social mobility, and an urban and educated population” (Hague et al., 2016, p. 48). The process of “acquiring the attributes of a modern society, or one reflecting contemporary ideas, institutions, and norms” is defined as modernization (Ibid.).

The relationship between economic development and democracy has often been discussed in a bigger frame of modernization theory. Originated from European social theorists in late 19th century, modernization theory reached its pinnacle in the 1950s and early 1960s: the Americanized version of modernization theory, arguably “the most ambitious American attempt to create an integrated, empirical theory of human social change”, assumed that “economic growth, social mobilization, political institutions,

and cultural values” will all change for the better simultaneously in “a seamless and mutually supportive process” (Fukuyama, 2011, p. n.p.).

Fundamentalists of modernization theory, based on Western societies’ historicity and experiences, believe that all societies, with their economic development, will sooner or later embrace democracy, which is considered a “fundamental feature of modernity” (Escobar, 1992, p. 23). In other words, they claim a linear and sequential link between economic development and democracy. Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) considered economic development as a “social requisite to democracy”, and suggested that development promotes education which then nurtures a political culture that fertilizes democracy, and that economic development will enlarge a middle class that would prefer democracy. He posited that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (Ibid, p.75).

In a broad literature, the middle class has long been viewed as an essential variable that links economic development and democracy (M. Tang, 2011, p. 373). Modernist theorists perceive that development will create an educated middle class who will be a catalyst for both growth and democratic transition, as “increasingly empowered citizens” will expect not only socioeconomic benefits but also more political liberty (Lekvall, 2013, p. 28;113). The middle class’s “prodemocracy leanings” are due to not only their need to have their materialistic gains and individual rights protected by the rule of law, but also the education they have received that cultivates their beliefs in democracy as an ideology and support for a democratic system (Lipset, 1959, p. 72; Nathan, 2016, pp. 6–7).

Partially agreeing with modernization theory, Dahl (1998, p. 168) noted that the large-scale middle class created by market-capitalism, who “typically seek education, autonomy, personal freedom, property rights, the rule of law, and participation in government”, are the “natural allies” of democratic beliefs and institutions. Huntington (1991, p. 13) observed that one of the most significant factors that contributed to the

third wave of democratization was that the rapid economic growth enhanced people's living standards, promoted education, and vastly expanded the middle class.

II. ii. Critiques of Modernization Theory

The linear and sequential effect of economic development on democracy assumed by modernization theory has been criticized both on theoretical and empirical grounds (Fukuyama, 2011; Ivlevs, 2023, p. 64). Some critics have warned against the tendency to assume, due to ignorance of history, that non-Western societies were, are, or will be in the development stages similar to the West, as they cautiously pointed out the need to go beyond the “imaginary of development” (Escobar, 1992, p. 21; Frank, 1966). In his chef d’oeuvre *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington (2011, pp. 70–72) wrote that it is a “totally false identification” to equal Western civilization with modern civilization and to assume modern society must approximate the Western type.

Critics of modernization theory have put forward alternative theories. Prominently, the Gerschenkronian hypothesis of a late modernizer and the contemporary state-centered approach have elaborated on the significant role of the state in facilitating development in the case of a late developer; a neo-Weberian approach has recognized the vital role of culture in shaping democratization.

II. ii. i. The Special Case of a Late Modernizer

The Gerschenkronian notion of a late developer disputes the modernization theory. According to Alexander Gerschenkron (1962), countries that were industrialized earlier tended to be based on decentralized, gradual accumulation of capital, which would produce a free-market economy and democratic government. Late-comers, however, would often have to rely on centralized state power to mobilize and concentrate resources, technologies and investments, which can be facilitated even in the absence of strong rule-based institutions and representative government. This approach,

especially in the initial stage, typically depended on “authoritarian or single-party politics” (Snyder, 2017, p. 81).

Huntington’s 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies* suggested that the modernization process does not automatically give rise to political order; rather, political order is essential for economic and social development, and when social mobilization and the increases in political participation outpace political organization and institutionalization, political instability and disorder arise (Fukuyama, 2011; Huntington, 2006). Fukuyama (2011, p. n.p.) noted that Huntington’s observations paved the way for a development strategy of “authoritarian transition”, whereby “political order, a rule of law, and the conditions for successful economic and social development” are provided by a “modernizing dictatorship”. It is believed that when these aspects are in place, other elements of modernity, such as democracy and civic participation, can be realized: which is to say state-building comes before democratization and expansion of political participation (Ibid.).

Contemporary state-centered approach highlights the role of the state in shaping economic, political and social processes (Evans et al., 1985; Leftwich, 1995). Leftwich (1995, pp. 405–407) argued that the cases of rapid growth in certain Third World economies need to be explained as “developmental states” characterized by a “weak and subordinated” civil society and yet a “powerful, competent and insulated economic bureaucracy” with “authoritative and pivotal influence” in development policy-making. It has a combination of repression of civil rights, “wide measures” of legitimacy and sustained performance in “delivering developmental goods” in general (Leftwich, 1995, p. 405;418).

In the case of China, Naughton (1994, p. 471) noted that the “relative political stability” facilitated by the authoritarian rule deserves “part of the credit” for the country’s economic success, as the “authoritarian growth machine” was effective in resource mobilization and growth maximization during a phase of “miracle growth” when “demographic, structural, and international factors all came together to raise

growth rates”, but Naughton (2017, p. 21) later argued that this is coming to an end.

As opposed to the democratic governance theory, China was able to achieve the miraculous development without Western democratic institutions. However, many would view the “modernizing dictatorship” or “authoritarian transition” as only a temporary “detour”, and suggest that democracy will still come, even if later than expected. Would Western democracy follow economic development as the developmental state camp suggests? To be more relative to the research question, will the existence of the middle class in China make Western-style democracy inevitable? Leventoğlu (2014) developed a theory that when the middle class feel secure of keeping their socioeconomic status, there will be no pressure for political transitions whether it be in a democratic or an authoritarian regime.

II. ii. ii. A Neo-Weberian Approach

Virtually all scholars who reflected on democratization recognized the significant role of political culture, although it is controversial what specific cultural elements would more easily foster the development of democracy (Gibson et al., 1992, pp. 331–332). While Huntington (1991) acknowledged that the middle class facilitated by rapid economic growth was an important contributing factor to the third wave of democratization, he also noted that market-capitalism in itself is not enough to create political democratization: cultural, historical and situational conditions matter (Fukuyama, 2011; Hasík, 2021, p. 105). In spite of viewing the middle class as a natural ally of democracy, Dahl (1998, p. 147) also noted that a modern market and economy only constitutes a “favorable” condition, while democratic beliefs and political culture constitute an “essential” condition for democracy.

The third wave of democratization did not manifest all-encompassing modernization process, but rather “strong correlation between Western Christianity and democracy”: in other words, the wave of democracy took root in cultural values associated with Western Christianity, and rested on “the power and prestige of the

United States and other culturally Christian societies”, rather than democracy’s universal appeal or a linear correlation between development and democracy assumed by modernization theory (Fukuyama, 2011, p. n.p.; Huntington, 1993). Even Diamond (1999, p. 76; 87) acknowledged that favorable economic circumstances do not provide a “magic carpet ride” into stable democracy: the greater a society’s “cultural predisposition” to “value democracy intrinsically”, the less successful policies will “need to be” in facilitating economic growth and easing “major social problems”.

These observations partially agree with the classical Weberian take that focuses on the link between religion (which is a proxy for culture) and economic development (Tubadji et al., 2023, p. 1). Although religion and culture have been widely documented and recognized as an element that underpins economic development in the Western context, there has been a dearth of systematic analysis of the Chinese case (Ibid.). Considering China’s long history and rich cultural legacy, the neo-Weberian approach, rooted in Max Weber’s work on religion and economic development and focusing on “the role that culture and cultural attitudes play for social, economic, political, and institutional outcomes” (Ivlevs, 2023, p. 63), has much potential in understanding China’s development and democratization.

Contemporary Chinese cultural values are largely inherited from Confucianism, which was the state orthodoxy in China for about two millennia. Emphasizing “the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights” (Huntington, 1991, p. 24), Confucianism has intrinsic “antidemocratic tendencies” that have been “tied to, and driven by, authoritarian politics” (Yu, 2020, pp. 19–20). Confucian values have exerted enduring effect on contemporary China, despite the fierce attacks it received from the progressive New Culture Movement of the 1910s and 1920s and Mao Zedong’s anti-Confucianism endeavors that culminated in the “Anti-Confucianism Campaign” in the 1970s (Gregor & Chang, 1979, p. 1073). Pioneers of the New Culture Movement, such as Hu Shih, Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun and Li Dazhao, among others, were ardent critics of traditional Chinese culture centered

around Confucianism. They viewed Confucianism as the biggest obstacle for China to embrace science and democracy. Mao tried to wipe out Confucianism, which was regarded as the antithesis of modernization, but his rule demonstrated strong Confucian elements (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 80). Despite the anti-Confucianism efforts and the seeming triumph of modernity almost all across the country, one still sees the entrenchment of cultural values inherited from Confucianism in a myriad of aspects in contemporary China, including interpersonal relations, politics, state-citizen relations, corporate governance...(Bell, 2015; Tu, 1998; Yu, 2020).

Hofstede(2011)'s theory of national culture dimensions—power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, femininity vs. masculinity, short-term vs. long-term orientation, indulgence vs. restraint—sheds light on how a society's culture can affect its members' values and behaviors. Hofstede analyzed China in the lens of the national culture dimensions, and attributed some to the country's Confucian legacy.

Power distance indicates a society's less privileged members' willingness to accept human inequality: the larger the power distance, the stronger endorsement of inequality. In a large-power-distance society, hierarchy means “existential inequality” rather than inequality of social roles; the subordinates expect to be told by authorities what to do rather than to be consulted (Ibid. p. 9). China scores high on Hofstede et al.(2010, p. 57) Power Distance Index for 76 countries and regions.

One essential anti-democratic Confucian heritage is the concept of social hierarchy. Although the idea of “hierarchy” was not solely invented by Confucianism, Confucianism has been vital for the institutionalization of hierarchy: it developed a complex and comprehensive hierarchical system to regulate politics and daily life, which was followed as the state orthodoxy for about two millennia in China. As such, democracy was something unimaginable to Chinese, who believed that what has maintained social stability and peace for thousands of years is exactly “hierarchy” (Liang, 2006, p. 41). Liang (Ibid.) further pointed out the difference between Chinese

and Western values: Chinese culture values hierarchy—which comes into being by separating the ruler from the ruled, while its Western counterpart respects equality—which denies the separation of the ruler and the ruled; essentially it is a difference of opinion over whether individuals should have equal rights.

Confucianism posited that unequal relationships laid the foundation for the stability of society (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 80). For instance, *wu-lun*(五伦), the five ethically important Confucian relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, friend-friend, remain relevant in contemporary China. The Confucian maxim of *san-gang* (三纲), the “Three Guiding Principles” or the “Three Bonds”, stipulates the “authority of the ruler over the minister, the father over the son, and the husband over the wife” (Tu, 1998, p. 122). Highly politicized as an oppressive system of symbolic control, *san-gang* represents the state orthodoxy emphasis on the “legitimized and unquestioned authority in hierarchical relationships that demanded obedience and conformity”, and completely “undermines the weak, the young, and the female”(Chan, 2011, p. 251; Tu, 1998, p. 129).

At the core, Confucianism denied that all individuals have equal political rights. However, the existence of political equality is considered a “fundamental premise of democracy” (Dahl, 2006). Instead of democracy, political meritocracy—the idea that “political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue” (Bell, 2015, p. 6)—has been developed out of Confucian beliefs. Bell (Ibid., P4) noted that Chinese-style political meritocracy is an alternative that poses a challenge to Western-style democracy.

Uncertainty avoidance indicates a society’s tolerance for unstructured situations: a society with strong uncertainty avoidance is not comfortable with chaos and sees “deviant” opinions and persons as a danger (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10). Surprising as it may seem, China ranks low on Hofstede et al.(2010, p. 194) Uncertainty Avoidance Index for 76 countries and regions.

The collectivism/individualism dimension refers to the degree to which a society's people are integrated into groups. An individualist society expects one to speak one's mind and advocates the one-person-one-vote principle, while a collectivist society focuses on maintaining harmony, with "opinions and votes predetermined by in-group"(Hofstede, 2011, p. 11). China scores low among the 76 countries and regions listed in Hofstede et al.(2010, p. 97) Individualism Index, meaning that collectivism prevails in China.

The Confucian tradition that values consensus and social harmony makes "the herd mentality" and "the pressure to conform" key features of East Asian political culture (Howe & Oh, 2015, p. 76; B. Tang et al., 2018, p. 802). When analyzing even democracies in East Asia, Huntington (1993, p. 27) still noted the Confucian heritage: dominant-party systems in East Asia represent "an adaptation of Western democratic practices to serve not Western values of competition and change, but Asian values of consensus and stability".

The masculinity/femininity dimension stands for the distribution of values between males and females. A feminine society shows sympathy toward the weak, while a masculine society shows admiration for the strong. Fewer women are elected in political positions in a masculine society (Hofstede, 2011, p. 12). China ranks high on Hofstede et al.(2010, p. 141) Masculinity Index. As mentioned above, Confucian values undermine females and reinforce male chauvinism.

A short-term oriented society believes in "universal guideline about what is good and evil", while a long-term oriented one tends to believe "what is good and evil depends upon the circumstances" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15). Long-term orientation is found in countries with a Confucian heritage today (Ibid. p. 13). Countries with a long-term orientation show a salient feature of adaptiveness. As Weber (1968, p. 248) observed, "Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world; Puritan rationalism meant rational mastery of the world". China scores very high on the Long-Term Orientation Index for 93 countries and regions (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 255).

The indulgence/restraint dimension is about the degree to which a society appreciates the control of basic human desires of enjoying life (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15) . In a pro-restraint society, maintaining order is given a high priority, and freedom of speech is not deemed as important as it is in a pro-indulgence society. China scores close to the pole of restraint in the Indulgence Versus Restraint Index for 93 countries and regions (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 284). Confucianism advocates self-cultivation and self-enlightenment to shoulder responsibility and avoid self-indulgence.

Adopting Hofstede's six dimensions, Ivlevs (2023) found strong correlation between a society's culture and its middle class's democratic orientation. For instance, bigger power distance values in a country are associated with its middle class's less support for the army rule, while more prominent uncertainty avoidance values are associated with the middle class's more support for the army rule and less support for democratic governance (Ibid. p. 75). More pronounced individualist values make a country's middle class more supportive of democracy and also less supportive of a strong leader that does not bother with elections and parliament; in a country with more pronounced masculinity, however, its middle class has greater acceptance of such a strong leader and less acceptance of democratic governance (Ibid. p. 75). Long-term orientation values make a country's middle class more supportive of such a strong leader and the army rule, while in a country with higher scores near the indulgence pole, its middle class shows less support for a strong leader as well as democratic governance (Ibid. p. 75).

Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 80) believed that Confucian ideas have “survived as guidelines for proper behavior for Chinese people to this day”, despite attacks on Confucianism in modern and contemporary China. Since the Confucian cultural predisposition is inherently against democracy, it is all the more necessary for policies to deliver development achievements and mitigate major social problems, as Diamond (1999) noted. This links the cultural explanation with the state dependency explanation for the middle class's attitudes toward Western democracy.

Deeply-trenched Confucian values can still influence today's Chinese middle class, perhaps even those who have received Western education. It is then interesting to explore whether Chinese middle-class members who are well-educated—by this I mean who have been exposed to both Confucian values and Western democratic values—prefer Western democratic values.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

I am both informed by modernization theory of development and democracy as well as the Gerschenkronian hypothesis of a late developer and the contemporary state-centered paradigm, therefore aware of China's possible particularity as a late modernizer. The circumstances of China as a late modernizer necessitate a strong, even authoritarian state to foster rapid development, which in turn leads to a booming middle class. In addition, the neo-Weberian approach also has theoretical significance for understanding contemporary Chinese society. Cultural values inherited from Confucianism can still affect contemporary China, including the middle class.

As mentioned in the Introduction section, contemporary Chinese middle class began to take shape in the late 1980s. However, it was not until the turn of the millennium that China's intellectual mainstream began to research on the Chinese middle class, and there has been a dearth of Western scholarship on this matter “with a few notable exceptions” (Li, 2010, pp. 6–7).

In this literature review section, I first have a look at the research question in a bigger picture of modernity in China, since a prodemocracy middle class is considered to be a vital piece in the puzzle of modernization. Then I zoom in on specific researches concerning the Chinese middle class's attitudes toward Western democracy and explanations of their orientations.

III. i. A China Model of Modernization

As mentioned at the outset, China has witnessed phenomenal socioeconomic

development over the past four decades in the absence of Western democratic institutions. Such enormous achievements have given salience to discussions of a China Model to modernization among the “competing models of a post-Eurocentric global modernity” (Dirlik, 2012, p. 284). The official term “*zhongguoshi xiandaihua xindaolu*(中国式现代化新道路)” was proposed by Xi Jinping, translated into English as “a new and uniquely Chinese path to modernization” (Xi, 2021), and Xi (2022) elaborated more on “*zhongguoshi xiandaihua* (中国式现代化)”, translated into “Chinese modernization”, in his report to the 20th CPC National Congress.

There have been competing theories and explanations concerning how China was able to facilitate impressive large-scale economic growth without neoliberal political institutions, with especially pronounced debate in the state-economy interaction (H. Chen & Rithmire, 2020, p. 258). Scholars have contemplated on the China Model since its Reform and Opening up and tried to grasp its main features, with terms like “developmental state”, “state capitalism”, “entrepreneurial state”, “regulatory state”, “shareholding state” and “investor state”, to name just a few (H. Chen & Rithmire, 2020; Duckett, 1998; Pearson et al., 2021; Y. Wang, 2015; Xia, 2019; Yang, 2006).

III. ii. Chinese Middle Class’s Value-Action Paradox ?

Previous studies on the Chinese middle class’s democratic orientations, even quantitative researches (J. Chen, 2013; J. Chen & Lu, 2011; Ivlevs, 2023; Qin, 2021; Wu et al., 2017), have demonstrated paradoxical attitudes, and come to different conclusions about the possibility of the Chinese middle class serving as an agent for democratization.

Scholars have different findings concerning whether the Chinese middle class register higher support for democracy than the lower class and upper class. Ivlevs (2023)’s analysis, based on two rounds of the World Values Survey (2005–2009 and 2010–2014), found a positive correlation between the Chinese middle class’s status and their preference for democracy. Wu et al. (2017), after analyzing the data of Asian

Barometer Survey (ABS) conducted in 2011 in China, found that the country's middle class are more supportive of features of liberal democracy than the lower- and upper-class. Qin (2021) also came to a similar conclusion, using data from the 2015 Chinese General Social Survey. In contrast, based on the data collected from a probability-sample survey and in-depth interviews in three big Chinese cities of Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi'an, J. Chen (2013) found that the Chinese middle class—especially those employed in the state apparatus—tend to have more support for the current political system and less support for democratic transitions that may directly threaten the regime, compared to the lower class that has benefitted less from the state-led reforms and development over the past decades.

When examined further, a paradox is found among the Chinese middle class's attitudes toward Western democracy. There is high civic awareness but low civic association, and although they are supportive of certain democratic values, they are indifferent to China's democratic transition. Ivlevs (2023) found that the middle class in China are reported to be less likely to participate in strikes and demonstrations than their counterparts in other authoritarian states included in the World Values Survey. According to the 2008 ABS China survey, China's middle class do not have an associational life as Lipset's middle class, although they are more supportive of "abstractly stated liberal-democratic values", compared to non-middle-class respondents (Nathan, 2016, pp. 11–13). Miao (2016)'s field work in the City of Ningbo also demonstrated such value-action paradox.

One survey after another suggested that the Chinese middle-class has registered a high support for the Chinese political system and the central government (Nathan, 2016, p. 7). Miao (2016) found that the middle-class respondents show little to zero desire for democratic changes, which are considered to be destabilizing. J. Chen (2013) reported that the majority of the middle class, in spite of their support for individual rights, are indifferent toward political freedom or competitive elections: due to their high

dependence on state patronage and state-led development, the middle class tend to be more in favor of the CPC's rule and policies.

III. iii. Tentative Explanations: State Dependency and Cultural Legacy

A preliminary literature review seems to suggest that the Chinese middle class has presented a puzzle. While middle-class Chinese have registered awareness of and support for Western democratic values in many surveys, such as the World Values Survey, the Asian Barometer Survey, the 2015 Chinese General Social Survey (Ivlevs, 2023; Qin, 2021; Wu et al., 2017), on the other hand, numerous surveys have demonstrated middle-class participants' high degrees of support for China's current political system (J. Chen, 2013; Miao, 2016; Nathan, 2016).

To explain the puzzle of the Chinese middle class's democratic orientations, previous studies have mainly focused on two major explanations: the middle class's dependency on the state, and the durability of the country's cultural tradition.

One important explanation is that the Chinese middle class is highly dependent on the state and they support the state because of its performance legitimacy. The experiences of many Asian countries have shown that legitimacy can be based on the regime's capacity of delivering developmental goods in general (Lekvall, 2013, p. 104). Huntington (1993, p. 27) noted that authoritarian systems are more dependent on performance legitimacy than Western democratic systems, because in a Western democracy the incumbents rather than the system will be held accountable for failure, and ousting and replacing the incumbents can help revive the system.

In the case of China, remarkable state-driven development achievements have rendered the CPC a high level of performance legitimacy (Dickson, 2016, p. 302). It is only a little exaggeration to say that the public's dependence on the state plus the government's co-optation give them a zero-sum choice between either economic stability and prosperity or the possible instability caused by political pluralism. As the new middle class in China has been created and shaped by the state-led development,

some would argue that this can mean the middle class is dependent on the state, to the extent that they can share the same values as the state, and support rather than challenge the regime (J. Chen, 2013, p. 11; M. Tang, 2011). Dependence on the state can reduce the middle class's demand for democracy (Rosenfeld, 2021), and Nathan (2016), J. Chen (2013) and Wu et al. (2017) all found evidence for that. The middle class's support for democracy is contingent on socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions, such as the state's role in stimulating the growth of the middle class as well as the class's "ideational and institutional connection" with the government (J. Chen, 2013). This is in line with Leventoğlu (2014)'s theory.

However, some have also warned that it would be to "oversimplify" if one should assume a "simple, one-dimensional co-optation" relationship between the state and the middle class: the Chinese middle class, as a mosaic of individuals, at least consists of those who are the clients of state patronage and those who do not work for the state apparatus or self-made people (Li, 2010; Qin, 2021; Z. Wang & Sun, 2022). Some scholars (Qin, 2021; Z. Wang & Sun, 2022) noted obvious divisions among different sub-groups in the middle class, with the non-state middle class registering higher democratic support than state middle class.

Nonetheless, Z. Wang and Sun (2022) observed that both subgroups in the Chinese middle class, whether they are employed in the state apparatus or not, have unforthcoming attitudes toward liberal democracy in China, probably due to their preference for social order and stability. Their findings have much in common with the 2008 ABS China survey, and the findings of J. Chen (2013) and Miao (2016). These all suggest a neo-Weberian explanation for the Chinese middle class's skeptical and even negative attitudes to Western democracy.

In addition, the neo-Weberian approach is manifested in the Chinese middle class's so-called "elitist complex". The majority of the previous research work seems to suggest that although they might register lower support for political activism or the scenario of China turning into a Western democracy, middle-class Chinese are at least

much more supportive of abstract Western democratic values. However, this might also be called into question. Arguably, due to not only economic stratification but also the idea of hierarchy and political meritocracy, there is an “elitist complex” among the Chinese middle class, which “poses a psychological obstacle to their acceptance of political equality based on the one-citizen-one-vote principle”, and rejects the idea that everyone’s voice is equally important (A. Chen, 2002, p. 417). They might even identify themselves more with the privileged upper class rather than the working class beneath them (Z. Wang & Sun, 2022, pp. 199–200). This could mean that the so-called value-action paradox is a myth: the Chinese middle-class might not even wholeheartedly embrace abstract Western democratic values, given their “elitist complex”.

Ivlevs (2023) compared the middle class’s propensity for pro-democratic views in China with those in other countries with authoritarian tendencies, Eastern European countries that have become EU members and Eastern European countries that have not joined the EU, and came to the conclusion that there seems to be a close correlation between a country’s underlying cultural values and its middle class’s political preferences as well as political activism, which is consistent with the neo-Weberian approach. Ivlevs (2023, p. 76) showed particular concern with the finding that the Chinese middle-class respondents are “not less supportive of strong leaders who do not have to bother with parliament and elections” than the lower class.

A literature review shows that it has been controversial whether the Chinese middle class can be a harbinger for democratization. M. Tang (2011) believed that the Chinese middle class are not ready to be a catalyst for democratic transition in action, despite their democratic attitudes in mind. J. Chen (2013) was more pessimistic, concluding that the middle class in China are unlikely to fertilize democratization, “either immediately or in the very near future”. However, Qin (2021) believed that the non-state middle class register the most liberal tendencies and therefore constitute a potential source for political change in China, although the middle class as a whole

would not necessarily stabilize or subvert the current political system due to their heterogeneous nature under the influence of both markets and institutions. Wu et al.(2017) , on the other hand, concluded that the middle class on the whole has the potential to foster democratization in China if the state fails to continuously meet the middle class's demands for economic well-being and protect their property rights.

III. iv. Research Gap and Sub-Questions

A preliminary literature review has presented a rather complicated picture of the Chinese middle class's attitudes toward Western democracy. From the previous research work on this matter, one can see that the Chinese middle class have different degrees of support for different democratic institutions, and their support for democracy seems to be correlated to how they are connected to the state and how their own interests are protected by the state. In addition to their degree of dependence on the state, cultural values have also influenced their attitudes toward China's democratization.

The literature review also reveals a research gap concerning the Chinese middle-class's orientations toward Western democracy. The majority of extant studies have mainly looked into domestic middle class, with insufficient research on overseas middle-class Chinese's democratic tendencies. There were only a few examining the trajectory, trends and characteristics of overseas Chinese democracy movement as China's "only open political opposition" (J. Chen, 2014, 2019), and how Chinese immigrant activists assess social movements in their residence countries of liberal democracies (Zhao, 2021).

Overseas middle-class Chinese, especially who have experiences of living and receiving education in China, have intricate connections back home, and their orientations toward Western democracy can be of significance and worthy of further examination. It is worth exploring whether the middle-class Chinese who have lived both in China and at least a Western democracy support institutions of Western

democracy and whether they think it is necessary and/or possible for China to transition into a Western democracy.

To fill in the research gap, the thesis then narrows down the research question to focus on overseas middle-class Chinese's attitudes toward Western democracy. In light of the inconsistencies found in previous studies on overall middle-class Chinese's democratic orientations, the thesis looks into such sub-questions:

a) whether and why (not) overseas middle-class Chinese support democratic values, for instance, freedom of expression, associational autonomy, freedom of media and inclusive citizenship, and particularly, political equality;

b) whether and why (not) overseas middle-class Chinese are willing to associate and participate in socio-political events, for example, demonstrations and strikes;

c) whether and why (not) overseas middle-class Chinese support the idea of China transitioning into a Western democracy.

IV. METHODOLOGY

IV. i. Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to explore whether and why (not) overseas Chinese middle class support the idea of Western democracy in China. The reason is that a qualitative approach offers a better chance of capturing the nuances and subtleties of people's attitudes that cannot be simply demonstrated by quantitative research, which often sacrifices "in-depth knowledge of each individual case" (Bryman, 2016; Ragin & Amoroso, 2011, p. 164).

This thesis collects primary data through semi-structured interviews with both open and closed questions, and also compares them with some background knowledge, some of which is quantitative in nature. This is an effort to make up for the shortcomings of qualitative research to enhance credibility (Bryman, 2016).

In terms of epistemology and ontology, the thesis takes a constructivist and interpretivist view that knowledge and the reality is shaped by people's subjective perceptions and interpretations (Bryman, 2016), as I analyze people's attitudes and interpret their implications.

Purposive sampling has been adopted for the interviews. The target interviewees are middle-class Chinese who have experiences of living and receiving education both in China and at least one Western democracy, with a Bachelor's degree and above. As mentioned in the Introduction section, the thesis chooses the objective approach, rather than the subjective approach to middle-class identification: education, profession and income are important indicators when targeting participants. Some findings suggest a positive correlation between one's education level and one's support for democracy (Ivlevs, 2023, p. 70).

The target interviewees have exposure to both daily-life experiences and formal education in at least one Western democracy, with a higher level than most of their domestic counterpart. By comparing those interviewees' democratic orientations with those of the domestic participants in previous studies, it can help find out whether exposure to Western education and life would significantly increase middle-class Chinese's support for Western democracy. In terms of profession, the target interviewees are either graduate students from a middle-class Chinese family, or white-collar Chinese workers. As I have been based in Sweden, I decided to do field work mostly with participants in Sweden. To enhance the empirical research's credibility, I decided to increase sample diversity by reaching out to target interviewees in the United States and the United Kingdom as well, since online interviews can be conducted even if I am based in Sweden.

In terms of data analysis, I chose to cut the collected primary data down into themes through coding and condensing the codes with the aid of NVivo, before finally describing the data in a discussion, with figures and tables (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). The empirical data is compared with the background information to see if they would

confirm or challenge the previous findings, and if they would offer a fresh perspective.

A qualitative interview, although not generalizable and limited in reliability and replicability, can help understand the complexities of the research issue. What is more important, such qualitative research may help understand the process of democratization. I also decided to explore whether and how China's COVID policies have changed the interviewees' attitudes toward Western democracy to examine the most recent trend.

IV. ii. Ethical Considerations and Self-Reflexivity

Western democracy/democratization is a highly sensitive topic in China. As such, I have made sure to obtain informed consent and ensure the interviewees' voluntary participation and freedom to opt out at any point throughout the process, and ensured anonymity and confidentiality. I have complied with the Swedish Research Council (2017)'s guidelines on good research conducts. Collected data have been be securely stored and I use pseudonyms and present depersonalizing answers to protect the participants.

I have been aware that participants might have some reservations especially when it comes to sensitive questions. The questions about the participants' stance on electoral politics in China as well as China's COVID policies are especially sensitive, and I anticipated that some participants might not be willing to speak their minds. I let all of my interviewees know that they would never be forced to give any answer when and if they did not want to.

In addition, I have been aware of the limitations of the small-scale interviews for primary data collection. The sampling is too small to be representative of the entire overseas Chinese middle class, and even less so of the entire middle class in China. However, I try to make up for the limitation by placing the primary data in comparison with previous findings (mostly quantitative, but also some qualitative in nature) about the overall Chinese middle class, and I believe this can help understand the nuances and

complexities of overseas middle-class Chinese's democratic orientations as well as the democratization process.

IV. iii. Primary Data Collection

To collect primary data to answer the aforementioned sub-questions concerning overseas Chinese middle class's orientations toward the idea of Western democracy in China, I carried out semi-structured interviews with ten target participants between February and March in 2024, with each lasting approximately 35 minutes. I managed to interview four participants based in Sweden, three in the United States and three in the United Kingdom. All of the interviewees have received education both in China and at least one Western country, with at least a Bachelor's degree and above. The interviewees were either postgraduate students or white-collar workers in Sweden, the US, or the UK. Six are female and four are male, aged between 23 and 42.

Every interview follows an outline with some flexibility, but all with the major questions listed below:

1. What do you think are the most important values or major features of Western democracy? Do you support them? Why (not)?
2. Do you support political equality? Why (not)?
3. Are you willing to participate in social movements such as strikes and demonstrations? Why (not)?
4. Do you think Western-style democracy is applicable to China? Do you think China should turn into a Western-style democracy (such as having multiparty competition in elections)? Why (not)?
5. Have China's COVID policies affected your views concerning Western democracy and the current Chinese political system?

Questions listed under 1. and 2. are designed to shed light on sub-question a): whether and why (not) overseas middle-class Chinese support democratic values, particularly political equality. Questions listed under 3. are asked to answer sub-

question b): whether and why (not) overseas middle-class Chinese are willing to associate and participate in socio-political events, and also to see if there is a value-action paradox among overseas middle-class Chinese. Questions listed under 4. aim to explore on sub-question c): whether and why (not) overseas middle-class Chinese support the idea of China transitioning into a Western democracy. Question 5. is related to all the three sub-questions, and might also help observe the most recent development of overseas middle-class Chinese's democratic orientations.

At the interviewees' request, and also considering technical factors like geographical distances, I ended up with three face-to-face interviews, three audio interviews, two video interviews and two textual interviews. As only one interviewee said it is fine to have the interview recorded, I did not record any interview, and merely took notes throughout the interviews. Although this would make verbatim transcription highly impossible, this way of data collection can be justified. First of all, I need to follow research ethics and respect the interviewees' requests. In addition, my ten-year work experience as a journalist has trained me to take notes in an interview without missing important information. The experience also tells me that the interviewee would feel much more relaxed and more willing to open up when the interview is *not* recorded. In terms of methodology, although the verbatim transcription method can ensure that no information is missing and show rigor, it might also limit the researcher's access to what can actually count as valuable data, and therefore make data reduction and analysis less efficient (Loubere, 2017). As such, in my field work I utilized selective verbatim transcription: when taking notes during the interviews, I simultaneously identified key quotations *in situ* and wrote them down word for word.

All the interviews were carried out in Mandarin Chinese, and some participants occasionally used some English words. When taking notes, I mostly wrote in the Chinese language, but also wrote down the occasional English words used by some interviewees. I then organized the collected data into readable texts after each interview. For the two textual interviews, although they were already in a text, I had a close reading

of the answers and then arranged follow-up interviews with the participants for more sufficient data.

Since the qualitative interviews are designed to find out the participants' attitudes toward the idea of Western democracy in China, I identified three kinds of attitudes: positive, negative and ambiguous when coding the texts. For the influence of China's COVID policies, I identified four kinds of answers from the participants: no impact, somewhat big impact, very big impact, and no comment.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, to shed light on middle-class Chinese's attitudes toward the idea of Western democracy in China, I present the primary qualitative data I collected through the interviews and make comparisons with the data from previous research work on the overall Chinese middle class. This is an effort to help make up for the limitations of the small-scale qualitative data. Although the qualitative interview is not generalizable, it can help gain more in-depth knowledge of the research questions when compared with the existing data for review and analysis.

The section presents the interviewees' orientations toward Western democracy and the reasons they provided, compares them with previous studies, and interprets the implications of the empirical findings. To be more specific, these main areas of analysis are touched: the interviewees' attitudes toward abstract Western democratic values, in particular, political equality; their attitudes toward political activism; their orientations toward the desirability and feasibility of Western democracy in China; the impact of China's COVID policies on the interviewees' attitudes.

V. i. The Interviewees' Attitudes to Western Democracy

The table below presents a brief summary of the interviewees' attitudes toward Western democratic values, civic and political activism, and the desirability and feasibility of having Western democracy in China:

Participant	Country of Residence	Attitude to Western Democratic Values	Attitude to Political Equality	Attitude to Political Activism	Desirability of Western Democracy in China	Feasibility of Western Democracy in China
A.	UK	Ambiguous	Ambiguous	Negative	Negative	Negative
B.	Sweden	Ambiguous	Ambiguous	Positive	Ambiguous	Negative
C.	US	Positive	Positive	Positive	Ambiguous	Ambiguous
D.	Sweden	Ambiguous	Positive	Negative	Negative	Negative
E.	UK	Positive	Ambiguous	Negative	Negative	Negative
F.	UK	Positive	Positive	Positive	Ambiguous	Negative
G.	Sweden	Positive	Ambiguous	Positive	Negative	Negative
H.	US	Positive	Positive	Positive	Ambiguous	Negative
J.	Sweden	Ambiguous	Ambiguous	Negative	Ambiguous	Negative
K.	US	Positive	Positive	Ambiguous	Ambiguous	Negative

Table 1 The interviewees' attitudes to Western democracy

V. i. i. Attitudes to Western Democratic Values

Western democracy advocates a set of institutions and requisite rights, as proposed by Dahl (2005, pp. 188–189). As aforementioned, according to some previous findings, the Chinese middle class are more likely to support abstract Western democratic values, but they are more reluctant to take actions.

I started every interview with questions concerning the interviewee's understanding of Western democratic values: to begin with I asked what they consider as the most important features of Western democracy, then about their attitudes toward these values.

“Freedom/liberty”(自由, *zi-you*) was the most frequently mentioned word by the interviewees when discussing the most important values advocated by Western democracy: two participants simply used the word “freedom/liberty” alone, five

specifically mentioned or implied freedom of speech, two mentioned freedom of thought, one mentioned political freedom, one mentioned freedom of demonstration, and one mentioned freedom of the press. Four interviewees mentioned or implied “individualism/individual rights”, putting them in the second place of frequency. In the third place is “equality”, mentioned by three participants. In the fourth place is “vote”, with two mentioning the “right to vote” and “one person one vote”. “Information transparency”, “bottom-up democratic practice”, “fairness” and “diversity” were each mentioned by one interviewee.

When it comes to their attitudes toward core values of Western democracy, six out of the ten interviewees said they agree with/support those values, although two of the six participants also pointed out Western democracy’s problems. For example, K. said:

Because everyone has different ideas, there are still some oppositions to the consensus formed by different voices in the United States, resulting in great differences in the political landscape, and even obvious conflicts and tensions in society.

H. pointed out the “lack of discipline due to liberalism”, but commented that “overall, (Western democracy’s) advantages outweigh its disadvantages”.

Four interviewees said that they cannot say whether they agree with or support Western democratic values, as they each stressed the disadvantages/problems with Western democracy. B. and D. both mentioned the problem of populism in Western democracies. D. also mentioned that “the majority’s decisions may not necessarily be in the national interest” and that “(under Western democracy) political parties spend a lot of their resources attacking their political opponents, which is a waste”. A. and J. compared briefly between Western democracy and the Chinese political system, and commented that each has its merits. A. said:

I can’t say which I agree with more between Western democracy and China’s collective democracy. The West and China have different historical and cultural

traditions. Western-style democracy and Chinese-style democracy both have significance and value in specific contexts.

J. believed that under Chinese collectivism, individuals can be tolerated and taken care of in the team. In contrast, G. accused China of being too collectivist with little respect for individual wishes and rights.

V. i. ii. Attitudes Toward Political Equality

As aforementioned, some scholars observed an “elitist complex” among the Chinese middle class, which challenges political equality, a principle that posits all citizens are supposed to be treated as political equals. By extension, the elitist complex can also challenge majority rule, a principle that is consistent with the assumption of political equality (Dahl, 2006, p. 15).

While he admitted that political inequality exists in all human societies, including in democratic ones, Dahl (1989, pp. 271–272, 1998, pp. 65; 76) posited that it is important to uphold the moral judgment of intrinsic equality to treat all people equally, and to believe in civic competence, the belief that “except...in rare circumstances, ...every adult subject to the laws of the state should be considered to be sufficiently well qualified to participate in the democratic process of governing that state”.

However, only half of the interviewees said that they support the idea of political equality. Even of these five, one interviewee, D., still mentioned a “but”, questioning the effect of majority rule and also mentioning that many citizens can get emotional easily. Of the five who did not show direct support for political equality, E., advocated a principle of “parity of rights and responsibilities”, believing that one should not be given political rights if one does not want to participate in political life and shoulder responsibilities.

Showing even deeper doubts than D., A., B., G. and J. all questioned civic competence. A. said: “Some people are ignorant. If you listen to these people’s opinions, it will not be conducive to the development of the country and the nation.” G. also mentioned that some people can be “ignorant” and “uneducated”. B. directly challenged the one-person-one-vote principle: “Not everyone has the same knowledge, and yet one person one vote means that elites and experts are not entitled with more rights to have more of a say”. The opinions of A., B., G. and J. are in line with China’s meritocracy thought, or the idea of “guardianship”, advocates of which believe that experts would be superior than ordinary people in “their *knowledge* of the general good and the best means to achieve it” (Dahl, 1998, pp. 69–70). B., G. and J. all mentioned that people should be capable of judging the validity of information. G. said:

I do not deny the right of one person one vote, but voting should not be cast blindly. Voters should be educated and trained before voting to ensure that they have the basic ability to discern information.

C. replied “I assume that information channels are important”, but C. supported political equality, giving an example:

Although my grandma in the countryside may not know as much about current political affairs as I do, her opinions are important to the construction of the countryside, so a good [political] institution cannot but give her political influence.

V. i. iii. Attitudes Toward Political Activism

As aforementioned, some previous findings suggest a value-action paradox among the Chinese middle class: there is high support for democratic values but a lower level of political activism. However, at first glance the interviewees’ answers could depict a somewhat different picture. Six/five out of the ten participants were positive toward abstract Western democratic values/political equality, and five out of the ten participants said that they are willing to participate in social movements like strikes and demonstrations. Four said “no” to social movements, and one was not sure whether to

participate. Among the ten, three participants are positive to all the three fronts of Western democratic values, political equality and political activism.

Does this mean the empirical findings challenge the value-action paradox? When I designed the general question for political activism, I did not specially indicate where to participate in social movements, in China or their residence country of US, UK or Sweden. Most of the participants, understandably, described their will to participate in socio-political events in their residence country. To check whether and to what extent the location matters to the interviewees' will to engage in political activism, I then asked follow-up questions when necessary: "Are you willing to engage in social movements in China? Why(not)?" Then even the five who were positive toward political activism changed their attitudes: four of the five said they will not participate in social movements in China, and only one was not sure whether to participate. In addition, K., the one participant who was not sure whether to participate in general, also said no to such activities in China. These together with the other four participants who were negative toward social movements, means that *none* of the interviewees were positive toward involvement in civic and political activism in China.

As it turns out, the location does matter. These data actually confirm the previous findings about the Chinese middle class's low level of civic and political participation. As previous findings mostly targeted domestic middle-class members, one can easily infer that when the domestic middle-class Chinese said that they are not willing to take action, they mostly mean in China. The interviews with their overseas counterpart thus add some knowledge to this issue. Among those five interviewees who are willing to participate in socio-political events, two said they already did so in their residence countries, but not in China. When asked why not in China, they shared a common concern with personal security, with comments like "after all it is too dangerous", "it is not safe enough" and "I do not want to take the risk". One replied: "I am not quite sure about (my) consequences (下场, *xia-chang*)". The use of the word "下场" indicated that the interviewee was concerned that things would not end well for participants in strikes or demonstrations in China. One answered:

Hypothetically if I worked for the public sector in China, I would definitely not participate [in any social movement], because the [workplace's] top leader would have very strict control and my involvement [in any social movement] would have many consequences for my job. If I worked in the private sector, the circumstances could be a little better though.

Another interviewee mentioned that the consequences can be very serious for a participant in a social movement in China, especially since facial recognition technology and other technological means have made it easier for participants to be identified and tracked.

This means that if some middle-class members are willing to take action to have their political demands met, they need to do it under circumstances where they feel secure enough. When looking at the overall reasons given by the participants concerning why they would not participate in social movements like strikes and demonstrations, personal security concern stands out as the biggest reason, mentioned by five participants. The second biggest reason is that those social movements might disrupt public order and harm the public's interests, mentioned by three interviewees. A., for instance, answered:

I will not participate in protests, strikes, etc. because these are too violent...in a populous country like China, if there were protests and demonstrations going on every day, it would cause social disorder, and the ordinary people (百姓, *bai-xing*) would have no peace or stability.

B., although supportive of political activism in general, still said that "Some jobs involve public services and have externalities. Strikes in these sections may harm public interests."

Three participants also mentioned that those social movements might harm other people's interests. D. said while a strike's original purpose is to have an impact and attract others' attention, it may lead to others' rejection if it disrupts the rhythm and

order of others' lives. K., who had an ambiguous attitude, said frankly:

If some participate in a social movement and expresses demands that are consistent with my own interests, I would think these people are brave. However, if some people's demands are very different and harm my own interests and affect my life, I would find them annoying.

In comparison, less mentioned reasons include: time cost; some protests' appeals and demands are too broad and vague; not sure about a social movement's effectiveness. Each was mentioned by one participant.

Seven out of the ten interviewees suggested that political activism should proceed in a moderate, peaceful, orderly and lawful manner, with reasonable demands. This indicates the vast majority of the interviewees put social order ahead of individual political liberty. Two participants especially mentioned that they would not easily engage in political activism unless their own interests are seriously violated. When talking about the negative sides of political activism, two interviewees used the example of the anti-Japan protests in China of 2012. Both criticized some behaviors amid the protests, with both condemning those who vandalized Japanese vehicles and hurt the car owners, and one commenting that "they were not rational enough, and simply giving vent to their emotions".

V. i. iv. Attitudes to China's Democratic Transition

The potential role of the Chinese middle class in facilitating the country's democratic change has been controversial. According to World Values Survey, China's middle class are more likely to prefer democratic governance (Ivlevs, 2023). J. Chen (2013, p. 74)'s research, however, showed that only a quarter of the middle class members supported multiparty competition. Miao (2016, p. 178)'s field research indicated that the middle class would be not be instigators of change but stabilizers of society.

When seeking an answer to whether the overseas Chinese middle class would support the idea of having Western democracy in the country, it is necessary to distinguish between its desirability and feasibility. It is one thing to want to have Western democracy in China, but it is another thing whether it is possible or deemed possible. As such, I presented both desirability and feasibility conceived by the interviewees in Table 1.

In terms of desirability, no participant was positive: six of the interviewees showed ambiguous attitudes while four gave a clear no.

The six interviewees who showed an ambiguous attitude mostly said they were not sure whether Western democracy represents the best choice for China's political system. On the one hand, they wanted more democratic elements in China: allowing more of the different voices to be heard, having more alternative sources of information, more political participation, and the spread of Western democratic values in China. On the other hand, they did not think China should mechanically copy Western democracy. Some commented that the form of democracy varies in each country, including in Western democracies. Some believed that despite its problems China's current political system has certain rationality, and the country's Constitution lays a foundation for elections. B. said:

If China wants to develop healthily in the future, it needs reforms and more democratic participation, more political participation, but it does not necessarily need to implement universal suffrage.

C. replied that "Western-style democracy ... is not necessarily good. However, we should be open-minded and willing to learn and compare." J. said that "The idea that China will embark on the path of Western-style democracy is idealistic and one-sided".

The four who said they did not want to have Western democracy each gave a main reason: Western democracy will create social upheavals and instability; multiparty competition has its flaws, including a waste of resources; it is unimaginable how to

practice Western democracy in China; the masses in China are not ready for Western democracy and are prone to be manipulated and fooled.

These are also mentioned by participants who have a negative attitude toward the feasibility of having Western democracy in China. Overall, nine participants have an unforthcoming attitude toward practicing Western democracy in China. Only one interviewee, C., was not sure whether Western democracy is applicable to China, and called for further research into this.

Differences in culture and history are the most frequently mentioned reasons when the participants explained the infeasibility of having Western democracy in China, mentioned by seven participants. A., D., E., J., and K. all mentioned cultural differences and A., E., F., G., K. all mentioned the difference in historical trajectories. A. said:

China's collectivist culture and social organization form, as well as its advocate for deference to authority, are a consensus formed throughout history and inherited from one generation to another. Those born and brought up in Western countries who have no inheritance of such concepts or much understanding of the history and culture of China's previous generations, and who have not received Chinese-style education, may identify more with Western-style democracy. However, for those who have grown up in China like their ancestors and have sufficient family education and identity, their deep-rooted Chinese culture will not be altered even if they later receive Western education and learn about Western culture, civilization, history, and common sense.

In addition to collectivism and deference to authority, other cultural elements mentioned by the participants include: the Confucian ethics of *san-gang* and *wu-lun*, the lack of Christian culture in China, the lack of the sense of individual rights, and China's political culture featured with top-down governance.

Five participants compared China's history with the experiences of Western democracies and commented that the birth of Western democracy was situational. They

looked at how Western democratic societies evolved from the political form of ancient Greece and Christian culture, and recognized Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment as milestones for the development of modern Western democracy. E. commented:

Outside such a historical and cultural context and without going through the process of the liberation of human nature, it would be very difficult for democracy to emerge. In practice, even if they use the same word of ‘democracy’, countries have presented completely different pictures. China does not have such a foundation as the West, and what it practices will not be Western-style democracy.

In comparison, the participants reflected on the legacy of China’s over-two-millennia autocratic monarchy and top-down governance model. K. said that due to this “even today Chinese people still have a high degree of recognition of centralization and even dictators, and they respect powerful leaders.” Unlike K. who criticized admirers of powerful leaders, both A. and D. said that China needs capable, influential, strong and powerful leaders. B., on a related note, pointed out the legitimacy of the Chinese government is largely provided by the authority established in the early days of the PRC’s founding and the impressive economic development after Reform and Opening up. However, B. commented that reliance on charismatic leaders and rapid economic growth is unsustainable: neither’s legitimacy is sustainable.

That being said, B. said that the CPC has received high support from the people, and a sudden shift to multiparty competition would create chaos. H. warned that multiparty competition has been creating more and more extreme ideas and intensifying polarization and social divisions in the West. A. was even more critical of Western democracy, positing that elections in Western democracies largely involve strategic interactions among conglomerates, and the so-called democracy may just be a formality. A. then showed preference for the “Chinese-style democracy”, and was optimistic about the CPC:

What do ordinary people want? We just need a stable political order and a stable economy for the better. Numerous outstanding CPC members have devoted to the long-term development of society and the country.

In a similar vein, J. praised China's institutional advantage in uniting individuals and concentrating efforts.

In addition to the cultural and historical reasons, the next biggest reason given by the participants is that the Chinese people are not ready for Western democracy, with three participants questioning civic competence. They noted that most people in China have no awareness of elections or have political apathy. The interviewees believed that people need to be enlightened and receive education of democracy, otherwise they would be easily manipulated. Two interviewees mentioned that in today's China many people equate the country with the government, and equate the people with the country, and therefore cannot accept criticism of the government. Under such circumstances, the three participants believed that hastily implementing Western-style democracy will only provide opportunities for political speculators. B. reflected on this and commented "In a way, this is also a paradox. That is to say, if we don't try, when will China be ready for a change for the better?" However, B. just wanted more reform rather than turning China into a Western democracy.

Neck to neck with the doubts of civic competence is the "institutional inertia" since 1949, mentioned also by three interviewees. They believed that the form of political power and grassroots management under the CPC's leadership makes it difficult to transition into a multiparty system. The government will not accept anything that might shake its political foundation.

With the exception of only one interviewee who was not sure whether Western democracy is applicable to China, nine out of the ten interviewees had a consensus that parachuting Western-style democracy to China is not feasible, and will cause problems. E. used a metaphor to describe this: "To establish Western-style democracy in China is

equivalent to having a castle in the air with no foundation.” Some other interviewees used another metaphor, indicating that different cultural, historical and situational circumstances are vital, just like how different soils produce different fruits. As such, Western democracy transplanted to the soil of China will not work properly. One interviewee believed that if Western democracy is transplanted to China, then it is very likely that whoever gives financial bribes to people will get their votes.

Then what future do the interviewees see for China’s political landscape? Two said they were not sure or cannot imagine, while eight indicated, in one way or another, that they were anticipating an improved version based on the current system, accommodating for Chinese culture while having more legitimacy and more recognized Western democratic features. Two interviewees believed the most possible picture is factions within the CPC competing to check and balance each other, with elections conducted in accordance with legal procedures and supervised by substantive laws. One of them also expressed the hope for the central government to delegate more power to subnational governments.

V. i. v. Impact of China’s COVID Policies

China’s “Zero COVID” policy and the accompanying draconian anti-COVID measures and restrictions eventually led to some people’s open protests in late 2022, which came to be called the “White Paper Movement” and received some support from some overseas Chinese people. Have China’s COVID policies changed overseas Chinese middle-class’s attitudes to Western democracy and China’s political system?

When asked about this, half of the interviewees said those policies had no impact on their attitudes, three said they exerted some impact, one said they had great influence on them, while one refused to comment on this matter. Table 2. sums this up as follows:

Impact	Very Big	Somewhat Big	No Impact	No Comment
Interviewee	C.	D., F., K.	A., B., E., G., H.	J.

Table 2 Impact of China's COVID policies on the interviewees' democratic orientations

Two out of the ten interviewees replied that China's COVID policies and measures have made them more pessimistic about China's future, although the two reported different degrees of pessimism. A third interviewee replied that this made the interviewee like Western democracy more.

That being said, a total of seven out of the ten interviewees mentioned that they understood why stricter anti-COVID measures were taken in China than in the West. Their attitudes to the policies and measures were nuanced and fell into three categories: four interviewees said their attitudes changed over the different stages of anti-COVID measures in China; one sympathized with the government's decisions; two had a more negative attitude to China's decision-making and anti-COVID policies.

The four believed that the strict measures taken in China at the outbreak of COVID was understandable and effective, but they all believed that it was unwise to continue to adopt the draconian measures at a later stage when the pandemic was no longer such a big threat to people's health and lives. They accused the policies at the later stage as "not scientifically sound" or even "crazy", and criticized those policies for compromising the economy and people's wellbeing.

The most tolerant interviewee, A., said that people's will at different stages may vary but it takes time for their voices to be heard by the leadership. This view was resonated by J., who believed that the CPC's intentions were good, and the results were not something that the Party had expected, although J. refused to tell how those policies and their consequences influenced J's personal attitudes to China's political system.

The two interviewees who were more on the critical side said that although they understood China's institutional arrangement, they did not like the way it works.

Six of the ten interviewees took a cultural approach to explain the difference in COVID policies between China and a Western democracy. For one thing, they pointed out that under China's tradition of collectivism and deference to authority, Chinese people are more tolerant of national policies, and most people chose to follow China's

anti-COVID measures, including willingly wearing a face mask in public places. One interviewee, H., believed that in Western democracies freedom was abused to an extent, when some people “would not even follow anti-COVID advice from authoritative institutions”. D. said that Western democracy would probably not have been helpful in solving the pandemic issue in China.

For another, they mentioned that the view of life and death in Chinese culture is different from that in the West, especially that China has a tradition of respecting the elderly. As such, more strict measures were taken in China to protect the elderly as a more vulnerable group regardless of the negative effects on the economy. In addition, they mentioned that China is more densely populated than Western countries, which means that the spread of the virus would have been more lethal in China but for the strict anti-COVID restrictions.

V. ii. Explanations: Cultural Elements Heavily Underscored

As discussed previously, a vast majority of studies explained middle-class Chinese’s attitudes to Western democracy in the lens of the state dependency theory and the neo-Weberian approach. One explanation is that the middle class’s political values and attitudes to political transitions are largely influenced by their relationship to the state and their perception of their own socioeconomic interests under the current political system. The other explanation is that fundamental cultural values in China, especially a lingering cultural penchant against democracy, can impact the Chinese middle class’s orientations toward Western democracy.

According to the primary data I collected, cultural elements were mentioned much more frequently than issues concerning state dependency, probably because the interviewees were based overseas and therefore were less reliant on the state than their domestic counterparts in general. Nevertheless, there were still a few hints about how state dependency can shape their attitudes to Western democracy. The most obvious ones were found in the answers of A., B., H. and J.. As shown above, A. hinted that the people rely on the state for economic prosperity and a stable political order. J.

underlined the importance for individuals to rely on the collective for benefits, as well as China's advantage in centralizing resources and concentrating efforts in major endeavors. H. clearly pointed out that those who work for the state/public section would be less politically active than those in the private sector. B. actually also had some reflections on this matter and said that the state can win over domestic middle class if the current system benefits the middle class in terms of resources and income distribution and meets their socio-economic demands. These empirical findings confirm the state dependency theory and Leventoglu's theory of political transition.

Cultural factors were predominantly considered by the interviewees, consciously or subconsciously. Now I will look at this in Hofstede's national culture dimensions.

The empirical findings still display the influence of a culture of large power distance, even on a large proportion of those ten interviewees who have received Western education. In a society with large power distance, its members are more tolerant of inequality, older people are respected and feared, and people have expectation of being told what to do rather than being consulted by authorities (Hofstede, 2011, p. 9). Only four out of the ten interviewees subscribed to both general Western democratic values and political equality. A half of the interviewees challenged political equality by questioning civic competence, and another one overtly doubted the effect of majority rule. This means at least a half of the interviewees were more supportive of meritocracy or a guardianship in which the elite determines what is the best for all. In addition, over a half of the interviewees were aware that the majority of Chinese people expect the state authorities and elites to inform the public what to do, and some of them also believed that the public should and/ or are willing to listen to the expertise and obey the authorities, for instance, in the case of the COVID pandemic. Some interviewees also mentioned that China's tradition of respecting the elderly contributed to the decision-making of anti-COVID policies. These all indicate the strong influence of large power distance. In addition, in political life, if "citizens feel and are seen as incompetent towards authorities", that indicates a society with strong uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10).

The fact that a half of the interviewees had doubts about the one-person-one-vote

principle also indicates the strong impact of collectivism. Two participants overtly talked about the merits of China's collectivist culture. The possible threat to public order and social stability were listed by some interviewees as an important reason why they would not support strikes and demonstrations, or not find Western democracy desirable in China. A collectivist society advocates for harmony, and a society with strong uncertainty avoidance is not comfortable with chaos. A penchant for stability and harmony can be in conflict with Western democracy, which is assumed to require "citizenries committed to liberty even when there is a prospect for disorder" (Gibson et al., 1992, p. 341). However, over a half of the interviewees talked disparagingly about social disorder, interruption of public interests or others' lives and interests. Seven out of the ten preferred moderate and orderly civic association and social movement. These findings indicate the impact of collectivism and strong uncertainty avoidance. In addition, these also indicate the prevailing culture of restraint in China, which features control of individual desires and prioritizes maintaining order (Hofstede, 2011, p. 16).

According to the World Values Survey, middle-class Chinese register the same level of preference for a "strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" as their non-middle-class counterparts (Ivlevs, 2023, p. 72). This is an indicator of a society where masculinity prevails, where the strong is admired. My empirical findings show that half the interviewees were aware of this, consciously or subconsciously, but they had different attitudes to this. For instance, A. showed support for having a strong leader in China. D. believed that Chinese leaders, especially at the top level, are strong and capable. However, D. also pointed out that due to the legacy of millennia-long patriarchal culture, political leaders are mostly males and they find it very difficult to accept dissent. K. mentioned that the millennia-long top-down governance model and Confucian principles strengthened recognition of centralization and even dictatorship, and respect for powerful leaders, and K. showed dislike for this. B. further pointed out the legitimacy of relying on charismatic political leaders is not sustainable.

In terms of the short-term/ long-term orientation dimension, my empirical findings show strong evidence of one important feature of China as a long-term oriented society:

adaptiveness, which does *not* believe in universal guidelines on the good and the evil (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15). Four/five of the ten interviewees showed an ambiguous attitude to Western democratic values/political equality respectively. When comparing the COVID policies in China and in Western democracies, six of the ten interviewees mentioned that due to cultural divergence and different circumstances, COVID policies in China and Western democracies could be both justifiable to a certain extent.

Stronger evidence for a penchant for adaptiveness is found in their attitudes toward the idea of having Western democracy in China. Six out the ten had an ambiguous attitude to the desirability of Western democracy, and the rest four opposed the idea. When they thought about the feasibility of having Western democracy in China, nine out of the ten had a negative attitude, and the remaining one merely had an ambiguous attitude. When looking to the future, none of them envisioned China developing into a Western democracy, and the majority of them pictured a political landscape with mixed features from both indigenous Chinese culture and Western democratic values. This means that an overwhelming majority of the interviewees do *not* believe in the universal application of Western democracy.

VI. CONCLUSION

China's impressive socio-economic transformation over the past more than four decades are not paralleled politically and institutionally as fundamentalists of modernization theory posited: favorable economic conditions and a burgeoning middle class have not fostered Western democracy in China. My empirical findings as well as some previous studies confirm that the rising Chinese middle class do not have a forthcoming attitude toward China developing into a Western democracy, despite their better education attainment and increased awareness of individual rights.

Scholars have come to realize that economic circumstances are not sufficient to nourishing Western democracy: rather, cultural, historical and situational conditions do play a key role. My empirical data collected from qualitative interviews with ten overseas middle-class Chinese confirms this, with cultural factors heavily stressed by

the interviewees when they explained their reflections on Western democracy and China's political system. In comparison, the state dependency approach did not get as much evidence, with only four of them taking this perspective, probably because these interviewees were based overseas and therefore were less dependent on state patronage than their domestic counterpart.

When asked about their understanding of and take on Western democratic values, the majority of the interviewees pointed out both the merits and flaws of Western democracy, in comparison with China's political system. Only four out of the ten interviewees registered positive attitudes on both fronts of general Western democratic values and political equality. Half the interviewees had a positive attitude toward political activism in general, but none of them would like to take part in a social movement in China. This means the so-called value-action paradox is situational. A more significant finding is that seven out of the ten interviewees believed that political activism should proceed in a moderate, peaceful and orderly way, regardless of the location. This indicates the majority of them prioritize social order over individual political liberty.

The interviewees' support for practicing Western democracy were even lower than their support for abstract Western democratic values. None of the ten interviewees showed a positive attitude to having Western democracy in China. Its desirability was denied by four and the other six all showed ambiguous attitudes. An overwhelmingly large number, nine out of the ten participants, deemed it infeasible to have Western democracy in China and the remaining one interviewee was not sure. This confirms some previous findings that the Chinese middle class are not an agent for democratic transition, and indicates exposure to Western education has made no significant change.

China's COVID policies have merely exerted limited impact on the interviewees' orientations. A half of the interviewees said China's COVID policies and measures have no impact on their views of China's political system or Western democracy, and six interviewees showed their understanding of the difference in COVID policies between China and Western democracies from a cultural perspective.

Throughout the interviews, one of the most frequently mentioned metaphors by the participants was how different soils would nourish different fruits and that Western democracy, even if transplanted to the soil of China, would not work properly. This reminds me of a Chinese idiom “南橘北枳(*nan ju bei zhi*)”, which says that the orange grown in the south would become trifoliate orange if it is grown in the north: despite their similar leaves, they taste different because of the water and land. This is similar to Lee Kuan Yew’s implication that Western democracy will not work properly in the context of Asian values (Zakaria & Lee, 1994).

Although the empirical findings through the interviews are not generalizable due to its limited scale, it still brings to light some nuances that were neglected by previous quantitative research. For instance, although an interviewee may say she or he supported Western democratic values at first, as more detailed follow-up questions were asked, a fuller picture was revealed, especially when they later challenged the fundamental Western democratic values of political equality, one person one vote and majority rule.

The empirical findings bolster Huntington’s observations of the durability of cultural values. Amid the currents of modernity, the top of a country might change quickly, but the deep note of its culture might not change as fast. China’s path to modernization has presented continuity with change. That being said, the thesis does not aim to take a cultural determinist approach, but to present the complexities and subtleties of the process of democratization. The findings challenge the linear and sequential connection between economic development and democracy assumed by modernization theory, confirming the significance of cultural, historical and situational circumstances.

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