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Public Opinion in a Rising Power: National and International Orientations among the Chinese Public

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Abstract

China's involvement in the world and its economic modernization are expected to lead to its democratization and adherence to the liberal international order. However, after several decades of development, the authoritarian system remains resilient, and China's foreign policy appears to be more assertive. The limited nature of scholarship on the public opinion in a rising power has prevented a better understanding of China's domestic changes and foreign policy. This study seeks to unveil the micro-foundations of the unexpected trajectory of China's rise by investigating the public's national and international orientations using nationwide representative survey data. The results show that international orientations had a very limited effect on Chinese popular attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations, while national orientations strengthened public support for the authoritarian system and China's assertive foreign policy. Intergenerational variations existed in public opinion in China, with the Xi generation showing a different pattern of political values than the preceding generations.

Keywords: China's rise; national and international orientations; attitudes toward democracy; political reform; political trust; the US influence

Introduction

Chinese citizens' attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations reflect the public support for China's role in the world. Many studies have analyzed China's rise, including its unfolding ambition and potential threat to the ruling power, at a macro-level (Cohen 2007; Johnston 1995, 2013; Shambaugh 2013). China's enhanced international presence creates concern among other countries. Thus, some studies have investigated how people around the world view China's rise (Lee and Hao 2018; Xie and Ji, 2022; Zhai 2015, 2019). Despite a boom in studies on threat perceptions from China, only a few studies have examined how the Chinese perceive the rise of their country (Pang, Pan, and Lin 2022; Zhai 2018a). These studies have provided a Chinese perspective on China's rise amidst increasing concern about China's threat

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among other countries. For example, Zhai (2018a) argued that the Chinese population also perceived threats and containment from other countries, and this perception induced them to rationalize and justify China's assertive foreign policy. Pang, Pan, and Lin (2022) examined Chinese perceptions of China's power asymmetry with respect to the US and Japan and challenged the argument that China's growing power fostered a hawkish younger generation. Undoubtedly, these studies have their merits, but they also suffer from flaws. Both Zhai (2018a) and Pang, Pan, and Lin (2022) used a convenience sample of college students, which limits the generalizability of their findings. Considering the relevance of political contexts and political socialization, it is necessary to examine intergenerational variations in public opinion within China (Inglehart 1997; Jennings 2007; Jin and Zhou 2021). Using a nationally representative sample, the present study builds on and extends the previous line of research by examining the national and international orientations among the Chinese public. The results shed light on the unexpected trajectory of China's development on a micro basis.

The public's national and international orientations reflect the links between individual Chinese and the state, and between individual Chinese and the world. China's involvement in the world and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) control of domestic politics are two competing forces in shaping the Chinese public's attitude toward democracy, China's current political system, the role of the US, and the existing international system. The attitude of the Chinese public provides an important lens for understanding why China is able to maintain its authoritarian political system and adopt an increasingly aggressive foreign policy. On the one hand, using the dimension of the attitude toward domestic politics, this study examines the public's trust in the government, evaluations of the country's democracy levels, and the willingness to support a reform of the political system. On the other hand, using the dimension of attitudes toward foreign relations, this study examines the public's perception of China's influence in Asia and the degree to which US influence in China and in Asia is negatively evaluated. Moreover, this study examines the intergenerational change and tests whether there are differences between the post-reform generations, as well as the impacts of such differences on the Chinese public's attitude toward domestic politics and foreign relations.

China's involvement in the world and international orientations

Since China adopted the reform and opening-up approach in 1978, the country has accelerated the process of its involvement in the world and economic modernization. China encouraged trade in commodities and sought to import new technologies. Foreign trade was used to promote domestic economic development (Kueh and Howe 1984). Compared to the Maoist era, both international trade and foreign direct investment in China increased rapidly, and China became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2001. The reform of the economic system and its opening up to the outside world helped China achieve rapid economic growth. China's real gross domestic product grew at an average annual rate of 9.7 percent between 1980 and 2009 (Huenemann 2013). The Chinese standard of living has been substantially improved. Researchers contend that economic modernization empowers ordinary

people and allows them to be less dependent on and attached to the state (Dalton and Shin 2006; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Meanwhile, globalization and regional integration mobilize people to engage in intercultural and trans-local spaces and facilitates the formation of an identity that is beyond the national entity. Some researchers state that global citizenship and international orientations will rise (Appiah 2006; Beck 2000; Fichler 2012). China's involvement in the world and economic modernization also brought about value change among the Chinese population (Zhai 2022).

China's integration into the world economy brings Chinese people into contact with foreign cultures and enables them to cultivate their international orientations. Cultural exchange exposes ordinary Chinese to other countries' dramas, movies, and songs, which is an indirect method for them to learn about other countries. In addition, Chinese people have had increased opportunity to travel and study abroad, which yields an opportunity for direct contact with foreign countries. Studies have found that exposure to foreign cultures promotes understanding of other countries, appreciation of diversity, and recognition of the importance of coexistence (Tulasiewicz 2015; Yamamura and Shin 2016). In the reform era, Chinese people pursued their interest in other countries, through learning foreign languages and following news from other countries, for instance. They may have gradually recognized the existence of other equally valid lifestyles and ways of thinking. They may embrace valuable elements of other countries' cultures and learn to admire them. China's involvement in the world may free the mind of its people; many people will no longer feel it reasonable to blindly defend Chinese traditions and justifiable to exclude foreign people or goods. In reality, some Chinese indeed choose to leave China and emigrate abroad. The aforementioned change indicates a rise in international orientations among the Chinese population.

Value change in China may affect Chinese popular attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. First, modernization theory states that economic development increases prevailing security levels and satisfies people's survival needs; accordingly, people become attached to secular and self-expression values (Inglehart 2018; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Steinhardt and Delhey (2020) found that economic modernization is associated with a high level of general trust in China. Additionally, economic modernization is linked to value change and its institutional consequences (Pavlović and Todosijević 2020). Researchers argue that this pervasive cultural shift has resulted in increased demand for political liberties and has eroded the legitimacy of authoritarian systems (Dalton and Shin 2006; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Ultimately, people challenge authority and seek a democratic political transition. The same value change may cause the Chinese public to pursue democratic rights and political liberalization eventually (Liu and Chen 2012). It reflected a diffusion of these universal principles in China (Dalton and Shin 2006; Foot 2000; Wang 2015). International orientations enabled the public to compare China's authoritarian political system to Western democracy, promoting their distrust of the government, pursuit of a high level of democracy, and demands for political reform.

Second, exposure to the outside world gives the Chinese population opportunities to objectively evaluate China's development level and foreign relations. Involvement

in the world makes the Chinese public aware of the influence of foreign countries and interdependence. It helps them form an idea of “China in the world” and dismiss the illusion of “the Celestial Empire.” Chinese people would embody the concepts of tolerance for diverse ideas, openness to the world, the rule of law, and the responsibility of world citizenship (Tammen and Kugler 2006). Cooperative internationalists in China would not pursue conflictual political and economic interests (Papayoanou and Kastner 1999). Regarding foreign relations, the Chinese public would support adherence to the existing international order, comply with international law, and seek a peaceful resolution of disputes rather than through military power. International orientations may help the Chinese people to form a global identity and pay attention to global issues such as climate change, peace and development, and environmental governance, which means that they do not view expansion of China’s military might as a top priority.

This study examines the association between international orientations and Chinese popular attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. If international orientations play their anticipated role, ordinary Chinese should pursue domestic democratic and political reform, on the one hand, and want to develop peaceful relationships with other countries on the other hand. As education is closely related to China’s involvement in the world and the impact of economic modernization, the present study also examines the interaction effect of education and international orientations.

China’s domestic political control and national orientations

The Chinese government’s control of its domestic politics may neutralize the effect of international orientations on public opinion. Opening up to the world and economic modernization make the Chinese population distrust their authoritarian government, favor a high level of democracy, and support political reform. Clearly, such outcomes would be a bane for the CCP leadership. Therefore, the Chinese government promotes the uneven opening of China; this means the relatively fast opening of the economy and society, but delayed opening of politics (Lai 2010). The leadership wants to take advantage of economic modernization to promote the expansion of China’s power, but at the same time prevents China’s political transformation and compliance with the US in foreign relations. The state-led patriotic campaigns are a widely recognized instrument that the Chinese authority has employed to strengthen its domestic control (Gries 2004; Zhao 1998).

Patriotic education campaigns serve to bolster national orientations, which may affect Chinese citizens’ attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. First, the CCP uses national orientations to assist in intensifying public trust in governments and public commitment to the current domestic political system. The authority intentionally blurs the line between the Party, the government, and the overall national community and mistakes these three concepts as one and the same. Most Chinese citizens are unable to distinguish them; national orientations motivate them not only to guard China (as a nation-state) against criticism but also to defend the CCP and the Chinese government. In patriotic education campaigns, people are indoctrinated into the superiority of the Chinese government

system and the legitimacy of CCP rule. The CCP contends that the current political system is the best one and the one most suitable for China and that the country cannot achieve remarkable progress without the leadership of the CCP. The public's attachment to China is transformed into trust in the government and the CCP. Defense of the country is equated with the necessity of defense of the government and the existing political system. People with high levels of national orientations view the system as perfect and resist the appeal for political reform. They accept the Party's rhetoric of Chinese socialist democracy and define the current political system as a democracy.

Second, the CCP employs national orientations to support the state's great power ambition, and to oppose the countries that violate China's core interests. National orientations work to justify the country's expansion of power. In patriotic education campaigns, the Chinese government highlights the history of national humiliation and Western colonization and teaches its people that power speaks in international relations (Callahan 2009; Gries 2004; Suzuki 2007). National orientations encourage people to support the country's pursuit of power in international politics, which can offset the humiliating past and achieve a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Agnew 2012; Wang 2014). Moreover, national orientations shape Chinese perceptions of threats from other countries and their hostile attitudes toward them (Gries and Sanders 2016; Zhou and Wang 2016). Patriotic education campaigns demonize the rival countries and stress their negative influence on China as well as worldwide. The US and Japan are often depreciated in China (Sinkkonen and Elovainio 2020; Song 2017). The US is described as imperialist, and Japan is labeled as militarist. The Chinese government propagandizes threats from other countries, and national orientations may cause negative views of these countries and prevent the Chinese population from developing trust in them (He 2007; Nakano 2016).

This study examines the association between national orientations and Chinese popular attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. If national orientations work as we predict, ordinary Chinese should overestimate China's international influence and evaluate rival countries unfavorably. As education is a primary tool of the state's political propaganda, we further examine the interaction effect of education and national orientations.

Political socialization and intergenerational variations

Political socialization refers to the underlying mechanism that explains how China's involvement in the world, its economic modernization, and the CCP's patriotic education campaigns affect the formation of ordinary people's attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. Political scientists define political socialization as a process whereby people acquire relatively stable orientations toward politics and their political system (Merelman 1986; Nieuwbeerta and Wittebrood 1995). It includes formal and informal political learning processes by which individuals learn about the norms and practices of politics and develop their own political identifications through interaction with parents, schoolteachers, peers, the media, and political institutions (Hahn 1998; Strother et al. 2021; Zhai 2017, 2018b). Although people's political preferences may undergo change later in life, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood

are primary stages of political socialization (Jennings 2007; Jennings and Zhang 2005; Sapiro 2004).

The public opinion in a rising power is not homogeneous, and the most significant differences exist in value orientations across generations. As political contexts shape the content and varieties of socialization, the change in the prevailing culture and value orientations takes place during an intergenerational shift (Inglehart 1997; Jennings 2007; Sears and Levy 2003). Little is known about whether intergenerational variations exist in Chinese citizens' attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations in the reform era. After the CCP took power in 1949, the Maoist era was characterized by a highly centralized planned economy, penetration of the state's power into society and people's private lives, and tighter ideological control and mass mobilization for political movements (MacFarquhar 1997; Weatherley 2006). Since 1978, China has shifted to a pragmatic approach by introducing a market-oriented economy and opening up to the outside world. Chinese people have become more individualistic and self-centered (Yan 2009). Compared to the pre-reform period, Chinese popular interest in politics and enthusiasm for political participation have declined. In addition, the information environment has totally changed from the Maoist era. Despite state censorship, the internet provides more diversified channels of information than the state-controlled mass media. Alternative information challenges the government's political propaganda in the domestic and international arenas. The significant contextual difference between the pre-reform and post-reform era may affect the political socialization of the Chinese population.

The political context in post-reform China is in continual flux, as China became more liberal in some periods and conservative at other times, which causes different political socialization effects. The primary focus of this study is on political socialization and intergenerational variations in the reform era. Researchers have suggested that studies of intergenerational variations in Chinese public opinion should classify generations according to the alternation of CCP leadership, which can better capture changing political contexts (Jin and Zhou 2021). Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping are the four major leaders of post-Mao China, even though they differed in the degree to which they concentrated their power. The Chinese political system allows top leaders of the CCP to exert great influence on the direction of the country's domestic politics and foreign policy, which shapes the political contexts in which the Chinese population is socialized.

During Deng's tenure (1978–1989), China experienced a short period of liberalization in the 1980s. Discussion of democracy and mild criticism of the country's political system were tolerated. The 1989 Tiananmen event changed power relations within the Party, and the conservatives gained the upper hand. During Jiang's tenure (1989–2002), the Chinese government launched a sophisticated series of patriotic campaigns to intensify individual attachment to the state through education (Zhao, 1998). The state's enhancement of national orientations seems to have been effective. Chinese nationalists are hostile toward the West (Gries and Sanders 2016; He 2007; Zhou and Wang 2016). They have been observed as actively participating in the previous massive anti-CNN protests and violent anti-Japanese protests, and have demonstrated vigorous boycotts of French products.

Following Jiang, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in succession. The Hu administration (2002–2012) had an “enlightened” image in the outside world. Hu attempted to reconcile conflicts and problems during economic development and build a harmonious society. People could discuss “civil society,” “intra-Party democracy,” and “universal values” (Zhao, 2016). His foreign policy sought to improve relations with the US, Japan, and other Western countries. Xi came to power in late 2012. He is cast in a different mold from his predecessors, Deng, Jiang, and Hu, but is more similar to Mao (Zhao 2016). Xi intensifies patriotic education campaigns and heightens authoritarian control of domestic politics (Creemers 2017; Jin and Zhou 2021; Zhao 2016, 2021). The internet has been subject to stricter surveillance and censorship, and ordinary people’s freedoms are further suppressed. Xi stresses the relevance of Chinese tradition and the peculiarity of China and advocates the Four Confidences: confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Regarding foreign relations, Xi more strongly aspires to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and elevate its international status. He counterposes the West with China and heightens propaganda about the negative influence of the West on China. In the past decade, China’s interactions with other countries have become more aggressive, in what is called “wolf warrior diplomacy” (Sullivan and Wang 2022; Martin 2021). Under Xi, Chinese nationalism is assertive in pursuit of great-power status (Zhao 2021).

As illustrated above, the political context differs under different top leaders of the CCP, and the political socialization effect on ordinary people should also vary. Some CCP statesmen tolerated dissent and wanted to push China to more intensively involve itself in the world, while others regulated domestic opposition with a heavy hand and pursued world-class military power. Their domestic and foreign policies shaped Chinese popular national and international orientations in different ways. Therefore, this study examines intergenerational differences in Chinese popular attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations.

Data and methods

Data

We use the Chinese dataset of the fourth round of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS). The survey was conducted by face-to-face interviews. The Census Yearbook from the National Statistics Bureau was used as the basic source to select the primary sampling units (PSUs). A representative sampling method of probability proportional to size (PPS) was applied to randomly select respondents. Residents aged 18 and above in the sampled community were recruited.¹ The response rate was 67.65 percent.

Measures

The Chinese public’s attitude toward domestic politics was measured by the three variables of trust in the government, evaluation of the country’s democratic levels, and attitudes toward political reform, which represent the major issues in China’s politics. Trust in the government was measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent of

their trust in the national government on a six-point scale from 1 (strongly distrust) to 6 (strongly trust). The higher scores indicated a greater level of public trust in the government. The evaluation of democratic levels was measured by asking the respondents to evaluate the democratic levels in China on a ten-point scale from 1 (completely undemocratic) to 10 (completely democratic). The higher scores indicated a greater level of democracy in China evaluated by the respondents. The attitude toward political reform was measured by the statement: "Compared with other political systems in the world, do you think our system of government needs to change?" The responses were coded on a four-point scale, with 1 "It works well and does not need to change"; 2 "It needs minor change"; 3 "It needs major change"; and 4 "It should be replaced." The higher scores indicated a greater level of support for political reform.

We considered three variables to investigate the public's attitude toward foreign relations: the evaluation of the most influential country in Asia, the evaluation of the US negative influence on China, and the evaluation of the US negative influence in Asia. The evaluation of the most influential country in Asia was measured by asking the respondents to indicate which country has the greatest influence. The response selecting China as the most influential country in Asia was coded as 1, while the responses reporting other countries were coded as 0. The evaluation of the US negative influence on China was measured by asking the respondents to evaluate the influence of the US on China. The responses were coded on a binary scale, where 0 indicated "positive influence," and 1 indicated "negative influence." The negative evaluation of the US influence in Asia was measured by asking the respondents to evaluate the US influence in Asia as positive or negative. The responses were coded on a four-point scale, which ranged from 1 "very positive" to 4 "very negative." The higher score indicated a more negative evaluation of the US influence in Asia.

National orientations were measured by four indicators regarding individual attitudes toward the nation. The respondents were asked for their opinion on the following four statements. "Even if there was a chance to become a citizen of another country, I would rather be Chinese." "If people in other countries think and behave in the same way as Chinese people do, the world would become better." "In general, China is better than other countries." "I am proud of being Chinese." The responses were coded on a four-point scale, which ranged from 1 "strongly disagree" to 4 "strongly agree." The large score indicated a high level of national orientations. These four indicators were organized into a single index for national orientations by principal component analysis (PCA).²

International orientations were measured by four indicators regarding individual attitudes toward foreign countries. First, the respondents were asked if they had a chance, would they be willing to go and live in another country. The responses were coded on a four-point scale, which ranged from 1 "not willing at all" to 4 "very willing." Second, they were asked the extent to which they follow major events in foreign countries. The responses were coded on a five-point scale, which ranged from 1 "not at all" to 5 "very closely." Last, they were asked their opinions on the following two statements: "Our country should defend our way of life instead of becoming more and more like other countries" and "We should protect our farmers and workers by limiting the import of foreign goods." The responses were coded on a

four-point scale, which ranged from 1 “strongly agree” to 4 “strongly disagree.” The large score indicated a high level of international orientations. These four indicators were organized into a single index for international orientations by principal component analysis (PCA).³

As childhood and adolescence is the most relevant period of political socialization, classification of generation often considers age 18 as a watershed (Harmel, Yeh, and Liu 2019). Generations can be defined in various ways, such as people born in the 1960s, 1970s, and so on. Harmel, Yeh, and Liu (2019) classified five generations of Chinese: pre-consolidation, consolidation, Cultural Revolution, social reform, and one-child generations. As key political turning points create generations with different experiences, this study defined generations according to the tenure of CCP leadership, which better captures the dynamics of Chinese politics. We adapted Jin and Zhou’s (2021) method of generation categorization. Jin and Zhou defined seven Chinese generations: the pre-PRC, socialist, Cultural Revolution, Deng, Jiang, Hu, and Xi generations. Each generation was defined based on the administration that was in power when people turned 18 years old. The present study combined the Cultural Revolution generation, the socialist generation, and the pre-PRC generation into the pre-reform generation, as its research aim was to examine how Chinese popular attitudes toward domestic political and foreign relations have changed since the era of reform and opening up.

Hence, the present study identified five generations. According to Jin and Zhou’s (2021) classification, the Xi generation included people who was born from 1994 to the present because Xi took office in 2012 when they were 18 years old. Hu’s tenure was from 2003 to 2012, and the Hu generation consisted of people born between 1985 and 1994. Jiang’s tenure was from 1989 to 2003, and the Jiang generation was people born between 1971 and 1985. Deng’s tenure was from 1978 to 1989, and the Deng generation was people born between 1960 and 1971. The pre-reform generation included people born before 1960. On the basis of Jin and Zhou’s (2021) method, each generation was coded on a dummy scale, so we included a series of binary variables for generation.

Our analysis controlled for exposure to media. The role of information exposure becomes more relevant in authoritarian regimes because government censorship is prevalent and this determines the information that is available to the people (Guo and Wang 2021; Yang 2013). The types of information sources used by individuals influence their attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. Based on previous studies, information access was measured by two different types of information sources: the Internet and mass media. Internet use evaluates how frequently respondents use the Internet. Responses were coded on a nine-point scale from 1 (never) to 9 (several hours a day). The variable of mass media was measured by asking respondents the frequency of their following mass media news on a six-point scale from 1 (never) to 6 (several times a day). A greater score indicates higher levels of media exposure.

The demographic variables were controlled in multivariate analyses. Age and education were two continuous variables. Education was measured in years of schooling. Gender was coded on a dummy scale, with 0 indicating male and 1 indicating female. Residence was measured by a rural-city binary variable (rural), with 0 indicating

living in the city and 1 indicating living in a rural area. Ethnicity was measured on a dummy scale, with 0 indicating ethnic minorities and 1 indicating Han ethnicity. Party membership was assessed by asking the respondents which party they belonged to. Affiliation with the CCP was coded as 1, and the rest were coded as 0.

Analytical strategy

If the dependent variables were dummy variables, we used a logit regression model to estimate parameters. Otherwise, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model was used. For OLS, if the independent variables highly correlated with one another, they could suppress one another, explaining some of the weak or absent effects in the regressions. This study tested the variance inflation factors to check multicollinearity. All indicators of models were below 3.05, which implied low multicollinearity.

Results

The association between national and international orientations and the public's attitude toward domestic politics in China

This section began by examining the association between national and international orientations and the Chinese public's attitudes toward domestic politics. Table 1 shows the results. Models 1, 2, and 3 examined three key issues in China's domestic politics: Trust in the government, evaluation of the country's democracy levels, and public attitudes toward political reform. The results show that national orientations were positively associated with trust in the government ($b = 0.325, p < .001$) and evaluation of the country's democracy levels ($b = 0.318, p < .001$), but negatively associated with support for political reform ($b = -0.166, p < .001$).

In contrast, international orientations were not significantly associated with the above political attitudes. The results indicate that national orientations contribute toward sustaining China's authoritarian system because the people who have high levels of national orientations tend to trust the government and evaluate the country's democracy levels highly, but are less supportive of a reform of the current political system. In addition, even though international orientations make the Chinese public more open to the world and welcome foreign products and culture, international orientations play few roles in affecting the public's attitude toward domestic politics in the public sphere. The expected effects of international orientations in terms of promoting the Chinese public to withdraw trust in the authoritarian government, pursue a liberal democracy, and demand political reform were not proved.

Table 1 also shows the intergenerational differences. Compared to the Deng generation, the Xi generation tended to have a more favorable evaluation of China's democratic level ($b = 0.127, p < .01$) and show less support for political reform ($b = -0.132, p < .01$). In addition, the pre-reform generation showed greater support for political reform than the Deng generation ($b = 0.086, p < .05$).

As both socioeconomic modernization and patriotic campaigns are linked to education, this study further examined the interaction effects of education and national and international orientations. The interaction item of education and national

Table 1. The association between national and international orientations and the public attitudes toward domestic politics in China

Dependent variables:	Trust in the government		Evaluations of democratic levels		Support for political reform	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
National orientations	0.325 (0.013)	***	0.318 (0.030)	***	-0.166 (0.013)	***
International orientations	0.004 (0.017)		-0.003 (0.039)		0.038 (0.106)	
<i>Generations (reference group: the Deng generation)</i>						
Xi	0.051 (0.135)		0.127 (0.307)	**	-0.132 (0.130)	**
Hu	-0.009 (0.104)		0.004 (0.236)		-0.060 (0.100)	
Jiang	0.013 (0.065)		0.027 (0.149)		-0.010 (0.062)	
Pre-reform	0.023 (0.075)		0.004 (0.173)		0.086 (0.074)	*
<i>Media exposure</i>						
Internet use	-0.100 (0.008)	***	-0.063 (0.017)	*	0.016 (0.007)	
Mass media	0.060 (0.011)	**	0.039 (0.025)		-0.036 (0.010)	
<i>Demographic attributes</i>						
Age	0.088 (0.004)		0.128 (0.009)		-0.228 (0.004)	**
Gender	-0.064 (0.035)	**	0.004 (0.079)		-0.001 (0.033)	
Education	0.033 (0.005)		-0.057 (0.012)	*	-0.096 (0.005)	**
Area of residence (Rural=1)	0.044 (0.043)	*	0.043 (0.097)	*	-0.016 (0.041)	
Ethnicity (Han=1)	-0.024 (0.063)		-0.035 (0.150)		0.029 (0.063)	
Party membership (Yes=1)	0.018 (0.055)		0.081 (0.124)	***	-0.028 (0.052)	
VIF	2.95		3.00		3.03	
R ²	0.187		0.197		0.058	
Adjusted R ²	0.182		0.192		0.052	
N	2385		2258		2174	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, two-tailed test

orientations was positively associated with trust in the government ($b = 0.062, p < .05$) but negatively associated with support of political reform ($b = -0.116, p < .001$). The interaction effects of education and international orientations on trust in the government, evaluations of China's democratic level, and support for political reform were not significant.

Figure 1 was plotted to visualize the interaction effects of education and national orientations on trust in the government. When national orientations were low, there was a great gap in the level of trust in the government between highly educated citizens and their poorly educated counterparts. Highly educated Chinese had much lower levels of trust in the government. However, with a rise of national orientations, trust in the government increased drastically among highly educated people, and the education gap in trust in the government shrank. When national orientations reached an extremely high level, highly educated people trusted the government more than their poorly educated counterparts. The results indicate that national orientations are particularly effective at fostering trust in the government among highly educated citizens.

Figure 2 shows the interaction effects of education and national orientations on support for political reform. In general, national orientations were negatively associated with support for political reform. When national orientations were low, highly educated people supported political reform more than did poorly educated people. However, with a rise of national orientations, support for political reform declined more drastically among highly educated people than among their poorly educated counterparts. Ultimately, the tendency to support political reform among highly

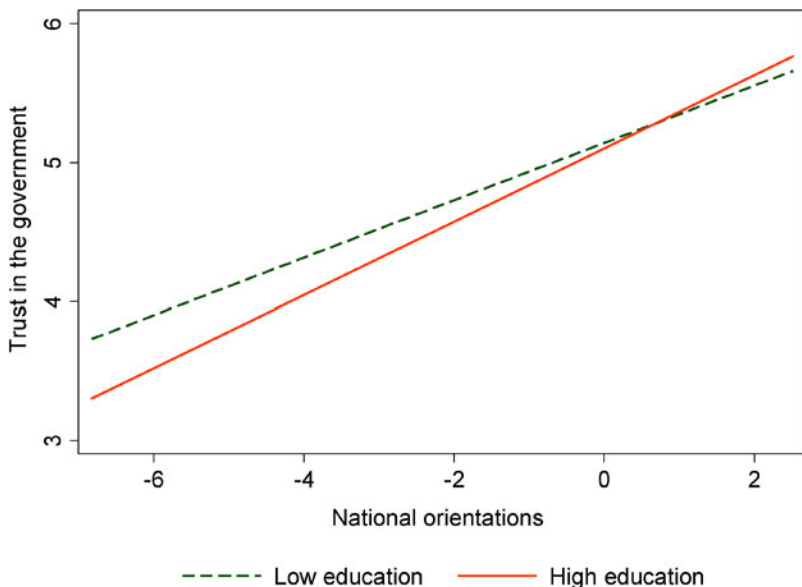


Figure 1. Interaction effects on trust in the government

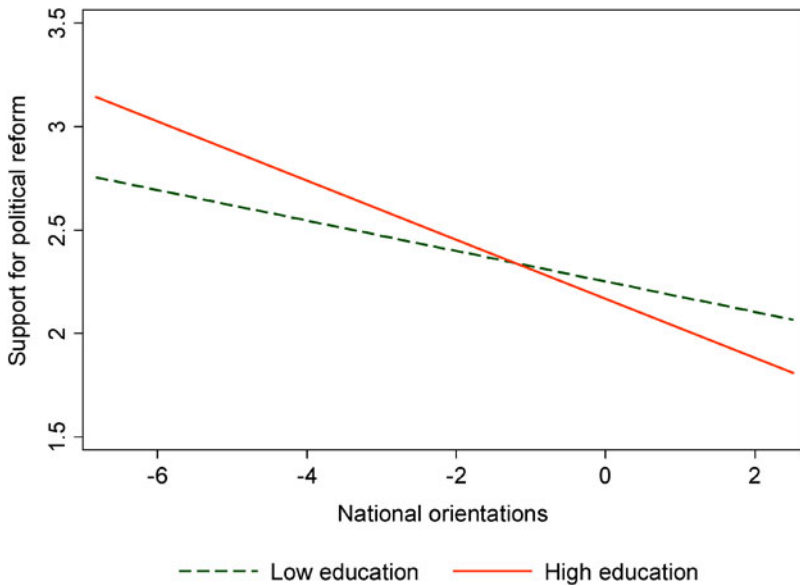


Figure 2. Interaction effects on support for political reform

educated people was lower than among poorly educated people. National orientations moderated the effect of education on attitudes toward political reform.

The association between national and international orientations and the public's attitudes toward foreign relations

We examined the association between national and international orientations and the Chinese public's attitude toward foreign relations by considering three relevant issues: perception of China as the most influential country in Asia, negative evaluations of the US influence on China, and negative evaluations of the US influence in Asia. Table 2 shows the results.

In models 4 and 5, national orientations were positively associated with perceptions of China as the most influential country in Asia ($\beta = 0.251, p < .001$) and with negative evaluations of the US influence on China ($\beta = 0.082, p < .05$). In models 5 and 6, international orientations were negatively associated with unfavorable evaluations of the US influence on China ($\beta = -0.111, p < .05$) but positively associated with negative evaluations of the US influence in Asia ($b = 0.123, p < .001$). Internationally oriented Chinese people were less inclined to negatively evaluate the US influence on China but looked unfavorably upon the US influence in Asia.

Table 2 also shows the intergenerational variations in the Chinese public's attitude toward foreign relations. Compared to the Deng generation, the Xi generation was inclined to view China as the most influential country in Asia ($\beta = 0.871, p < .05$) and evaluated the US influence in Asia negatively ($\beta = 0.095, p < .05$). The Jiang generation tended to view the US influence on China more unfavorably ($\beta = 0.400,$

Table 2. The association between national and international orientations and the public attitudes toward foreign relations

	Viewing China as the most influential country in Asia		Negative Evaluations of the US influence on China		Negative Evaluations of the US influence on Asia	
Dependent variables:	(4)		(5)		(6)	
National orientations	0.251 (0.041)	***	0.082 (0.036)	*	-0.042 (0.013)	
International orientations	0.041 (0.053)		-0.111 (0.046)	*	0.123 (0.017)	***
<i>Generations (reference group: Deng generation)</i>						
Xi	0.871 (0.437)	*	0.494 (0.382)		0.095 (0.131)	*
Hu	0.420 (0.334)		0.441 (0.292)		0.105 (0.102)	*
Jiang	0.219 (0.211)		0.400 (0.181)	*	0.019 (0.065)	
Pre-reform	-0.274 (0.244)		-0.134 (0.214)		0.025 (0.075)	
<i>Media exposure</i>						
Internet use	-0.0004 (0.024)		-0.057 (0.020)	**	0.031 (0.007)	
Mass media	0.083 (0.034)	*	0.023 (0.030)		-0.104 (0.011)	
<i>Demographic attributes</i>						
Age	0.019 (0.013)		0.031 (0.011)	**	0.001 (0.004)	
Gender	-0.284 (0.108)	**	-0.351 (0.095)	***	0.098 (0.034)	
Education	0.036 (0.017)	*	-0.010 (0.015)		-0.030 (0.005)	
Area of residence (Rural=1)	-0.335 (0.138)	*	0.061 (0.117)		-0.036 (0.041)	
Ethnicity (Han=1)	0.152 (0.202)		0.305 (0.183)		-0.038 (0.064)	
Party membership (Yes=1)	0.428 (0.192)	*	-0.199 (0.149)		-0.054 (0.051)	
Intercept	-0.256 (0.709)		-1.359 (0.620)	*		
LR χ^2	100.43		167.80			
Pseudo R ²	0.044		0.060			
VIF					3.05	

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued.)

	Viewing China as the most influential country in Asia	Negative Evaluations of the US influence on China	Negative Evaluations of the US influence on Asia
Dependent variables:	(4)	(5)	(6)
R ²			0.090
Adjusted R ²			0.084
N	2032	2030	1929

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed test.

$p < .05$). The Hu generation also tended to evaluate the US influence in Asia more negatively than the Deng generation ($\beta = 0.105$, $p < .05$). The results indicate that the Xi generation was more confident in China's influence in Asia. The three generations after the Deng generation took a more negative view of the US influence on China or in Asia.

This study further examined the interaction effects of education and national and international orientations on attitudes toward foreign relations. The interaction item of education and national orientations was positively correlated with perception of China as the most influential country in Asia ($\beta = 0.186$, $p < .05$). The interaction effects of education and international orientations were not significant in case of all three attitudes toward foreign relations.

Figure 3 was plotted to visualize the interaction effect of education and national orientations on the perception of China as the most influential country in Asia. In general, education was positively associated with perception of China as the most influential country in Asia. When national orientations were low, the gap in viewing China as "the most influential" country in Asia between highly educated people and their poorly educated counterparts was trivial. However, with a rise in education, viewing China as the most influential country in Asia increased drastically among highly educated people. The gap in the evaluations of China as the most influential country in Asia expanded significantly between people with different education levels. National orientations make educated people more arrogant about China's influence.

Discussion and conclusion

China's rapid economic development has expanded its military power and projection of influence in regional and international affairs, causing growing concern in the world. China's rise was predicted fifty years ago, but the route of its rise is profoundly uncertain and unknown (Friedberg 2005; Organski 1968). In 1978, China adopted its reform and opening-up policy, which replaced a planned economy with a market-oriented economy and promoted China's involvement in the world. Modernization theory predicts that economic development will bring about socio-political change. Nevertheless, with an increase in its economic and military strength, political

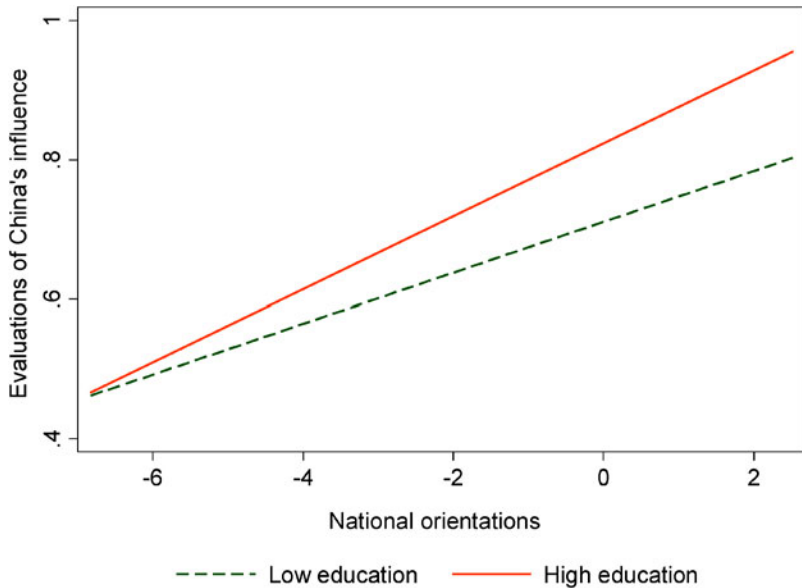


Figure 3. Interaction effects on evaluations of China's influence

liberalization and democratization did not occur, and the authoritarian regime remains strong with no signs of collapse (Nathan 2003; Tang 2018). Moreover, China is viewed as being more assertive and as challenging the existing international order (Ford 2014; Weiss and Wallace 2021; Mann 2016). China's development trajectory has exceeded the expectations of many international relations specialists and China-watchers. This is the result of relevant or unanticipated factors and the interplay of these factors.

With its economic development, China has been viewed as neither a liberal democracy nor a status-quo power in the liberal world order from the Western lens. Economic development and globalization sustain authoritarian politics and make China appear as an emerging status-quo challenger. The "Beijing Consensus" or "China Model" were proposed to justify China's developmental approach and replace the Western model of modernization (Ferchen, 2013; Zhao, 2010). The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the One Belt and One Road initiatives were viewed as placing China at the center of the region and as changing the economic and political landscape of Eurasia (Clover and Hornby 2015; Yu 2017). The "Made in China 2025" plan revealed China's ambition to take leadership and surpass the US within the high-tech sectors (Rice 2019). All these moves and initiatives describe China as an ambitious and assertive challenger to the status quo. Such an unexpected trajectory of China's rise intensifies concerns about the possibly negative influence of its rise. This study examined the micro-foundations of the unexpected trajectory of China's development. Specifically, we analyzed the public opinion of the sustaining authoritarian politics and aggressive foreign policy in the midst of China's growing might. The impact of national and international

orientations on the public's attitude toward domestic politics and foreign policy largely explain the micro-foundations of the unexpected trajectory of China's development.

In the dimension of domestic politics, the results indicate that national orientations contribute to increasing public trust in the governments and evaluation of China's democracy levels but undermine the willingness to support reforms of the political system. International orientations had little effect on the public's attitude toward domestic politics. International orientations are ideally expected to bring about dissatisfaction with authoritarian politics and a desire for a liberal democracy. However, international orientations neither undermine public trust in the government nor cause dissatisfaction with the current levels of democracy. International orientations did not promote the masses to be more supportive of reforms of the political system. Meanwhile, national orientations strengthen the public's attachment to the regime. As a result, the authoritarian political system is maintained, even though economic modernization has achieved a high level. Shambaugh asks American policymakers to face reality and recognize that the US government has limited direct influence over China (Shambaugh 2001). The present study provides additional evidence for this argument. Despite China's involvement in the world, international orientations do not have a spillover effect into political fields. A person who has high levels of international orientation does not necessarily oppose the authoritarian government and desire democratization. The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected ordinary Chinese citizens' political outlook. One result is a rise in nationalism and support for the CCP government (Ho 2022; Wu et al. 2021), as well as a decline in international orientations in the midst of foreign countries' criticism of China's "sketchy" handling of the virus outbreak in the early days of the pandemic (Weiss 2020).

With regard to the public's attitude toward foreign relations, national orientations promote the Chinese public's belief that China is the most influential country in Asia and their negative perception of the US influence on China. In particular, the Trump administration's policy toward China has reinforced Chinese people's feelings of nationalism (Lo 2020). During the China-US trade conflicts, nationalists claim that the influence of the US tariff sanctions on China was ignorable, and that China should fight against the US to the end. Even though political elites can breed and stir nationalism to strengthen their rule, such a dangerous strategy has unintended outcomes. Clearly, national orientations boost a diffusion of hardliner stands in the public and leave little space for statesmen to compromise in negotiations, which is indispensable for dispute resolution. China's involvement in the world has been expected to promote its acceptance of the prevailing norms and rules and adherence to the existing international order (Ikenberry 2008; Tammen and Kugler 2006). The impact of international orientations was not as great as it is supposed to be. International orientations did not affect the public view that China is the most influential country in Asia. Nevertheless, international orientations are not useless. The results show that international orientations suppressed negative evaluation of the US influence on China but increased negative evaluation of the US influence in Asia. Internationally oriented people recognize the favorable influence of the US on China, and they believe the US helps China's modernization. Meanwhile, their

international orientations led these people to oppose US wars. In the second half of the twentieth century, the US was involved in the Korean War and Vietnam War in East Asia. In the twenty-first century, the US was at war in Afghanistan and Iraq in West Asia. In China's dominant discourse, these wars were wars of US aggression against local people, and the US was the greatest destroyer of peace. Therefore, internationally oriented Chinese people tended to view the US influence in Asia more negatively.

This study also investigated the intergenerational variations in the public's national and international orientations. Since it adopted its reform and opening-up policy in 1978, China has experienced four primary periods based on the tenures of CCP leadership. We compared attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations among members of the Deng generation with those of the Xi, Hu, Jiang, and pre-reform generations. Regarding attitudes toward domestic politics, members of the Xi generation seem more conservative and are not unsatisfied with the current political situation. The results reveal that they favorably evaluate China's democratic level and do not support further political reform. Regarding attitudes toward foreign relations, members of the Xi generation have greater confidence in China's influence in Asia and view the US influence in Asia more negatively. Moreover, Chinese people after the Deng generation tended to look at the US with a cold eye. For example, the results reveal that the Hu generation evaluate the US influence in Asia more unfavorably, and the Jiang generation evaluate the US influence on China more unfavorably.

The characteristics of Chinese people's attitudes reflected the dynamics of China-US relationships in the past few decades. During Jiang's tenure (1989–2003), the US bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999, and a US Navy EP-3 intelligence aircraft collided with a Chinese fighter jet on April 1, 2001 (the Hainan Island incident). Three Chinese journalists died in the US bombing, and the Chinese pilot lost his life in the air collision. These two events sparked Chinese resentment toward the US. Chinese people took to the street and protested US big-power politics. Experiencing these events, the Jiang generation viewed the US influence on China more negatively. In addition, the more strongly unfavorable evaluation of the US influence in Asia among the Hu and Xi generations can be explained by the US policy shift toward increasing its presence in Asia. During Hu's tenure (2003–2012), then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at a conference of Southeast Asian nations in Bangkok on July 21, 2009, that the US was ready to re-engage with Asia. The US indeed put more resources and effort into strengthening relationships in Asia. During Xi's tenure (2012 to the present), the Obama administration vigorously promoted the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, broadening US activities, and deepening its partnerships in this region. Both the Trump and Biden administrations have continued to emphasize the great importance of Asia to US prosperity and security in an effort to boost US ties with nations in an expanded Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Chinese propaganda describes the US engagement in Asia as destructive to peace in the region. Hence, the Hu and Xi generations have viewed the US influence in Asia more negatively.

The findings of this study have several implications. First, the CCP-led ideological indoctrination campaign has been fairly successful. The CCP has strengthened patriotic education by stressing the greatness of the party, loyalty to the state, and negative

sentiments toward particular countries since the 1990s (Gries 2004; Gries and Sanders 2016). National orientations enhanced Chinese citizens' trust in the government and their evaluation of China's democracy levels and undermined their willingness to support reform of the political system. Moreover, international orientations are manipulated as a more positive form of expression of national pride and confidence. Commitment to international cooperation and economic integration reflects the Chinese desire for great-power status and national rejuvenation (Chen 2005). In addition, the CCP employs a paternalist political culture and skillfully manipulates political discourse. The hierarchical trust, the guardianship discourse on democracy, and the public's concern about chaos through ideological propaganda shape Chinese citizens' confidence in the current political system.

Second, the interplay of education and national orientations complicates the effect of modernization on empowering people. Education has a dual function: enlightening people and disciplining people. This study reveals that, in general, highly educated people are less trusting of the government and are more willing to support political reform. This is consistent with the prediction of modernization theory. However, when national orientations increase, educated Chinese show a higher level of trust in the government and lower support for political reform than their poorly educated counterparts; they also tend to overestimate China's influence in Asia much more than less-educated people. Knowledge is a double-edged sword. With knowledge, nationalists become more assertive and can always find reasons to justify their arguments. For example, some educated Chinese believe that China's zero-COVID policy has better outcomes than the public health policies of other countries, that the Chinese political system is more efficient than democracy with its endless fruitless discussions, and that state-led investment in infrastructure building and high-tech development is better than scattered private investments. Moreover, the results also show that differences in national orientations represent one fundamental social cleavage in China. Chinese society is often divided over various social and political issues such as the Russia–Ukraine war, the zero-COVID policy, and the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The social cleavage is not found among people with different education levels but among people with different levels of national orientations. As shown in [Figures 1, 2, and 3](#), among educated Chinese, the extent of disagreement between nationalists and non-nationalists is remarkable. This pattern of divergent opinions is applicable to debates over other social issues, and differences in people's national orientations can explain the polarization of opinion.

Third, more studies should be conducted to examine intergenerational variations in Chinese public opinion. In particular, the Xi generation reveals a different pattern of attitudes toward domestic politics and foreign relations. Studies have found that the Xi generation prioritized collective interests over individual rights and supported the government's control of freedom of speech (Jin and Zhou 2021). Our study examined other attitudes toward domestic politics and extended the analytical framework to attitudes toward foreign relations. The Xi generation indeed favorably evaluated China's democratic level and did not want political reform, while they also tended to overestimate China's economic and military power and evaluate the US influence in Asia more negatively. As the Xi administration intensified authoritarian control of

the country (Creemers 2017; Jin and Zhou 2021; Zhao 2016, 2021), political socialization induced the Xi generation to be more authoritarian than the preceding generations. This is one reason why China's assertive foreign policy and military build-up is supported by Chinese youth who also do not tolerate criticism of the Chinese government and the authoritarian regime. The results clearly contradict the prediction of modernization theory and indicate a non-linear change in political values of authoritarian countries.

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Conflict of Interest. The author declares none.

Notes

1. Table A1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample. Female respondents slightly outnumbered male respondents, and the sample was older on average than the overall population. According to the seventh national census (2020) released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the average age of the population was 38.8 years, and men and women accounted for 51.27 percent and 48.73 percent of the population, respectively. The educational level of the sample is basically representative of the national population (the number of citizens with college and postgraduate education accounts for 10.71 percent of the overall population).
2. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 2771.66$, $p < .000$, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) index for the matrix was .758. Two empirical indices regarding the sample's correlation matrix revealed that it was suitable for principal component analysis (PCA).
3. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 332.70$, $p < .000$, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) index for the matrix was .528. Two empirical indices regarding the sample's correlation matrix revealed that it was suitable for principal component analysis (PCA).

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Appendix

Table A1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age	48.273	16.306	18	94
Gender	0.511	0.500	0	1
Education	7.247	4.632	0	22
Area of residence	0.758	0.429	0	1
Ethnicity	0.916	0.278	0	1
Party membership	0.101	0.301	0	1

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