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China Case Study
The Me-Generation or Agent of
Political Change?
Democratic Citizenship and
Chinese Young Adults

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The Me-Generation or Agent of Political Change? Democratic Citizenship and Chinese Young Adults

Jie Lu

After their extensive and in-depth analysis of 40 blogs authored by young Chinese aged 18-23 in 2006, Sima and Pugsley suggest the rise of a Me-culture among the Chinese youth, characterized by their symbolic identity construction and self-presentation based on individualism and consumerism.¹ It is not a coincidence that, in his 2007 article published in the *Time* magazine, Simon Elegant presents the then youth generation (born after 1979) in mainland China as the Me-generation, who enjoys continuous economic prosperity, is obsessed with consumerism and new technologies, but shows little interest in politics and no enthusiasm for the social and political reforms that are necessary to ensure China's long-term prosperity and stability.² As he concludes the article, Elegant raises a serious question: How may this growing and increasingly powerful Me-generation shape China's future? For Elegant, the answer is highly contingent upon whether the Me-generation realizes that political reforms and democracy can help China.

Many dramatic events and incidents have happened in mainland China since 2007. Politically, the disturbances during China's Olympic torch relay in Europe and North America, as well as the later Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, mobilized unprecedented high nationalism among the Chinese, particularly the Chinese youth. More recently, some unresolved territorial disputes between China and its neighbors such as Japan, Vietnam, and Philippines are dramatically intensified and further contribute to this growing nationalism among the Chinese youth. Economically, the 2008 Financial Crisis stroke China hard and its ongoing repercussions pose significant challenges to China's continuous economic prosperity, despite the Chinese government's huge economic stimulus after the crisis. For many Chinese young adults, China's impeded economic growth not only makes it much more difficult for them to find or keep

¹ Yangzi Sima and Peter C. Pugsley, "The Rise of a 'Me Culture' in Postsocialist China: Youth Individualism and Identity Creation in the Chinese Blogosphere," *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2010), pp. 287-306.

² Simon Elegant, "China's Me Generation," *Time*, Vol. 170, No. 19 (2007).

descent jobs, but further exacerbates their financial burden given China's skyrocketing housing price. Technologically, micro-blogging has been enthusiastically embraced and adopted in mainland China, particularly by the Chinese youth with astonishing speed. This new technology provides a novel but extremely convenient platform for the young Chinese to voice their opinions, enables their participation in the cyberspace with consequential implications for Chinese politics in real life, and facilitates the emergence of liberal public opinion leaders. Therefore, given all the aforementioned political, economic, and technological transformations over the past a few years, it is obviously worthwhile to re-examine Chinese young adults' political attitudes and behavior. This exercise is of significant value for seriously engaging the possible role that the current youth generation may play in China's political development, as well as answering the question raised by Elegant in 2007: Are young Chinese still the Me-generation, or the potential agent of significant political changes in today's largest authoritarian society?

In this paper, using the most recent Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS) Mainland China Survey completed in 2011, I compare Chinese young adults' (aged 18-29) political attitudes, behavior, and values to those of their counterparts in other Asian societies, as well as those of their older cohort (aged 30 and above) in today's China. And I further explore the within-youth differences along the dimensions of gender, rural-urban division, and use of new information technologies. Overall, the survey data show that Chinese young adults are not significantly different from their Asian counterparts, in terms of their interest in politics, tolerating different political views, appreciating the intrinsic value of democracy, and holding liberal values. And they are also equally likely to participate in politics and tailor their participatory activities according to China's specific political institutional setting. However, comparatively speaking, Chinese young adults do show relatively lower political efficacy, voice less support for democracy as an alternative regime, and hold more positive views of their current regime. Meanwhile, contrary to the Me-culture or Me-generation argument, Chinese young adults are no less interested in politics, compared to their older cohort. And they are also on a par with their older cohort with respect to political efficacy, political tolerance, and supporting democracy as an alternative regime. Moreover, compared to their older cohort, Chinese young adults are actually more likely to appreciate the intrinsic value of democracy, internalize liberal values, and hold critical views of China's political system and government. Although Chinese young adults

show much less enthusiasm for China's electoral politics than their older cohort, they are equally able and willing to participate through appropriate channels to address their concerns. I also find significant stratification among Chinese young adults in their political attitudes, behavior, and values, along the dimensions of gender, rural-urban division, and use of new information technology.

Today's China: Economically Booming but Politically Stagnated

Mainland China has effectively sustained its economic growth over the past decades, since it launched the economic reforms in the late 1970s. Despite the 2008 Financial Crisis and the economic slowdown in Europe and North America, China still managed to secure a GDP growth rate of 9.2% in 2011. And, according to the IMF, the per capita GDP in mainland China was 5,414 USD in 2011 and ranked 89th globally. Moreover, if evaluated on a purchasing power parity basis, China's per capita GDP in 2011 was estimated to be about 8,400 USD, approaching the "transition area" that many students of democratic transition have identified.

Nevertheless, political development and reforms in contemporary China are seriously lacking and significantly lag behind its economic progress. For instance, despite years of promotion, a large number of village elections in rural China are still rigged, even evaluated against the procedures stipulated by China's Organic Law of Village Committees, primarily due to interventions and manipulation from upper-level governments.³ In urban areas, grassroots democracy is generally perceived a mandatory task issued by upper-level government that urban residential communities are obliged to implement, which, as expected, generates limited enthusiasm among their residents. Independent candidates in China's local congress elections are increasingly but still not widely observed; and, when they run campaigns, they usually face daunting obstacles.⁴

Instead of institutionalizing and expanding necessary political channels for its people to voice and participate, the Chinese government focuses more on effectively co-opting powerful economic elites and its increasing middle-class, as well as buying off its peasants through fiscal

³ J. Lu, "Varieties of Electoral Institutions in China's Grassroots Democracy: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Evidence from Rural China," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 210, (2012), pp. 482-93.

⁴ For related information, see the special report compiled by China Elections and Governance at <http://chinaelectionsblog.net/?tag=independent-candidates>

transfers, to nourish and secure their loyalty to the regime.⁵ Meanwhile, it resolutely oppresses some political dissidents such as LIU Xiaobo or even drives some of them such as CHEN Guangcheng into exile, to enforce their exit out of the system. The Chinese government also cautiously and constantly upgrades its strategies of media supervision, in addition to building the Great Firewall in its cyberspace, to strengthen its information control and cultivate self-censorship in its mass media.⁶ This lack of necessary political reforms and openings for effective political participation and competition actually exacerbates and contributes to its growing social unrest, in many cases as a consequence of China's economic growth, industrialization, and evolving marketization. According to SUN Liping, a sociologist at Tsinghua University, around 180,000 mass incidents broke out in China in 2010, more than four times the figure from a decade earlier. In addition, the outbreak of the BO Xilai scandal in early 2012, as well as the proliferation of rumors regarding the power transition in the fall of 2012, further confirms the lack of transparency and institutionalization in Chinese politics and conceivable damages that China's long existing elite factional politics could have done to its regime and society. It is no wonder that China's Premier WEN Jiabao publicly revealed his worries during a press conference in early 2012: The lack of necessary political reforms could endanger China's future economic growth, social stability, and even the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁷

Obviously, only having risk-taking politicians who have both political foresights and the capability of maneuvering and securing necessary political support from the elites is not sufficient to promote serious and significant political reforms in today's China. In addition, active participation from the mass who are interested in politics, appreciate the value of liberty, political rights, and democracy, and set more emphasis on self-expressive values rather than

⁵ Bruce J. Dickson, *Wealth into Power: The Communist Party's Embrace of China's Private Sector* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, "Democratization and the Middle Class in China: The Middle Class's Attitudes toward Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2011), pp. 705-19.

⁶ Jonathan Hassid, "Controlling the Chinese Media," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2008), pp. 414-30; Susan L. Shirk (ed.), *Changing Media, Changing China* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); Rachel E. Stern and K. J. O'Brien, "Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State," *Modern China*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2012), pp. 174-98.

⁷ <http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2012npc/GB/239293/17385323.html>

simply securing material benefits is critical and indispensable. In many societies, the youth generation has been expected to play a key role in leading and pushing for such political changes. And in some societies, they have indeed fulfilled the expectation. How about the current youth generation in China?

Chinese Young Adults: the Me-Generation or Agent of Political Change?

Young adults, born between 1993 and 1982, in contemporary China have quite distinct experiences of socialization. In addition to the Me-generation used by Elegant, there are another two popular terms used in today's China to characterize this group of young Chinese: Post-80s (*Balinghou*) and Post-90s (*Jiulinghou*).

Due to China's institutionalization of its one-child policy in 1979, a large majority of Chinese young adults are the only child in their family, particularly those in urban areas. And given China's cultural tradition that emphasizes the significance of securing offspring and the extension of family, many parents and grand-parents indulge the single-child in their family. It is on wonder that China's mass media refers to the over-indulged post-80s and post-90s in one-child families as "little emperors." And China's popular discourse also presents the post-80s and post-90s generations as primarily self-centered and individualistic.

Since they were born after China launched its economic reforms in the late 1970s, the young adults have witnessed China's stunning economic growth over the past decades. And they are also the chief beneficiaries of China's continuous economic prosperity: They had birthday parties at McDonald or KFC as kids; they watched Hollywood blockbusters as students; they drink Starbucks and use i-Phones at work; and they buy private cars and condos with mortgages. It is not surprising that both domestic and foreign media have highlighted the influence of the culture of consumerism on the post-80s and post-90s.

Today's Chinese young adults are also the primary users of new information technologies introduced into China after the 1990s, particularly the Internet. According to the most recent report on China's Internet, at the end of 2011, around 30% of China's Internet users were in the 20-29 cohort and 27% were in the 10-19 cohort. Moreover, more than 72% of the 20-29 cohort and 70% of the 10-19 cohort were Internet users, significantly outnumbering their older cohorts.⁸

⁸ CNNIC, *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center, 2012).

The proliferation of network technologies, not just via desktops and laptops but also digital devices like cellular phones and PDAs, provides a previously unavailable platform, i.e., the cyberspace, for Chinese young adults to follow news, voice their concerns, and even participate in various events, in addition to entertaining themselves with music, games, and videos.⁹ Though the Internet in China is constantly monitored and sensitive information is regularly censored, new network technologies make it much more difficult for information control and significantly ease the spread of information and coordination of behavior among the young adults, especially after the introduction of micro-blogging, i.e., the Chinese version of twitter.¹⁰

Compared to their older cohort, Chinese young adults have no live experiences of Chinese totalitarian politics before the 1970s. And their knowledge of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and Democracy Wall Movement (1978-1979) is also limited and, in most cases, castrated. When the Tiananmen Movement happened in mid-1989, most of them were very young, i.e., in elementary-schools or kindergartens, even lacking the cognitive capacity to understand what was going on and appreciate its significance for Chinese politics. When they were in high-schools or colleges, the then political socialization was dominated by the educational campaign of patriotism and citizenship, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and later the “Three Represents” Theory, which might have bored them with politics.¹¹ Moreover, the change in China’s higher education policies that deprives the young adults of guaranteed employment after college has further re-oriented them toward securing economic benefits and away from politics. It is not surprising that one of Elegant’s interviewees’ claimed that there was no point in talking about politics or getting involved.¹² And this interviewee’s comment resonates with some critics of the post-80s and post-90s generations as politically apathetic. Given the perceived influence of consumerism culture

⁹ According to the CNNIC report, instant messaging, search engine, and online music are the top three applications among Chinese Internet users. And online news is the fourth most popular application.

¹⁰ Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010); Fengshu Liu, *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

¹¹ Lionel M. Jensen, "Culture Industry, Power, and the Spectacle of China's 'Confucius Institutes'," in Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen (eds.), *China in and beyond the Headlines* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), pp. 271-99.

¹² Elegant, "China's Me Generation."

among individualistic Chinese young adults, it is understandable that China observers like Elegant are highly suspicious of the Me-generation's role in China's political reforms and possible democratization.

Nevertheless, a large number of Chinese young adults actually have been quite actively engaging China's domestic politics and foreign policies, particularly in the cyberspace. The technologically savvy "angry youth" (*fenqing*) have been very critical of various socioeconomic problems in China, such as income inequality and environmental pollution, as well as some of China's foreign policies that are perceived as too weak by its domestic audience.¹³ In real life, the Chinese young adults have also played the leading role in some protests against the US, Japan, and Philippines during various diplomatic incidents, as well as numerous demonstrations against some Chinese local governments' unreasonable policies. All these clearly demonstrate Chinese young adults' potential of serving as the agent of changes in Chinese politics.

Furthermore, as the modernization theory would suggest, abundant economic resources, better education, and increasingly diversified information access may have also prepared Chinese young adults for more effective participation in politics, higher internalization of expressive values, and more sensitivity against the infringement of their rights and liberty. Information exclusively based on some prominent blogs or interviews in metropolitan areas like Beijing or Shanghai may not effectively capture the big picture and even mislead our conclusions on Chinese young adults' possible role in China's political development.¹⁴ Therefore, it is necessary and also of significance to systematically examine the political attitudes, behavior, and values of China's current youth generation, with high-quality and representative empirical data. Hopefully, through more systematic empirical exercise, we can better understand whether today's Chinese young adults are still the Me-generation or the potential agent of significant political changes.

Chinese Young Adults and Their Asian Counterparts

¹³ Orion A. Lewis, "The Evolution of Chinese Authoritarianism: Lessons from the 'Arab Spring'," in Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen (eds.), *China in and beyond the Headlines* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), pp. 249-70., p. 262

¹⁴ Given uneven penetration rates of the Internet in rural and urban China, as well as some dramatic and systematic rural-urban divisions in contemporary China, national probability sampling survey (based on face-to-face interviews) provides much more accurate relevant information.

For a comprehensive and effective understanding of Chinese young adults' potential in leading or facilitating political changes in contemporary China, it is important to know where they stand relative to their Asian counterparts. Given the lingering influence of Confucianism and other political legacies, young adults from other Asian societies, rather than those from Western democracies such as the US, provide a much more meaningful benchmark to assess the potential of Chinese young adults in promoting democratic politics. Moreover, the varying political institutional settings across Asian societies, including both consolidated and new democracies and authoritarian regimes, also offer informative lens to interpret the empirical data collected from public opinion surveys.

Generally speaking, the young adults in today's China are not substantively different from their Asian counterparts, in terms of their substantial interest in politics, high political tolerance, and enthusiastic embracement of liberal values. For instance, more than 77% of Chinese young adults follow news about politics and government once or more each week, ranked 4th among the 12 surveyed Asian societies. In Japan and South Korea, the percentage is around 85%; while, in Indonesia and Singapore, it is about 61%. When approached for their perceived difficulty in having conversations with friends or co-workers holding different political views, around 65% of Chinese young adults find it "Not hard" or "Not hard at all," ranked 5/12. And the corresponding percentage is around 80% in Taiwan and Indonesia, while only about 30% in Cambodia. And the percentages of Chinese young adults who are normatively committed to the equality of political voices regardless of educational attainment, the society and individuals' autonomy in making decisions, or the independence of judiciary agencies are also ranked in the middle or above among the 12 surveyed Asian societies.

Despite their high interest in politics, self-reported citizen empowerment among the Chinese young adults is relatively lower: Only around 35% think they have sufficient ability to participate in politics, higher than that in Japan and Indonesia but ranked 10/12. About 26% show confidence in understanding politics and government issues, close to that in Taiwan and Vietnam and ranked 7/12. And around 41% think they have sufficient influence over the government's decisions and policies, higher than that in Japan and Taiwan and ranked 5/12.

Chinese young adults' participation in politics actually varies dramatically, depending on the specific channels under examination, as shown in Figure 1a-1d.

[Figure 1a-1d]

It is well-known that in today's China, except for some competitive democratic elections at the grassroots level, primarily in Chinese villages, electoral politics is not of any significance for most Chinese citizens. Therefore, as shown in Figure 1a and 1b, it is not surprising that only a small percentage of Chinese young adults vote in elections (35% and ranked 9/12), or attend campaign activities (24% and ranked 6/12). In other words, when compared to their Asian counterparts, Chinese young adults are neither more enthusiastic about nor more alienated by electoral politics. The same mediocre performance is found in the Chinese young adults' propensity in contacting elected officials or legislative representatives for various problems: As displayed in Figure 1c, only 8% of them have done this at least once, very close to that in Taiwan and ranked 7/12. This is also not surprising, given the limited role played by the People's Congress in Chinese politics. Nevertheless, when we examine their propensity in contacting officials at higher level for various problems, as shown in Figure 1d, the Chinese young adults significantly outperform their Asian counterparts: 37% report having done so at least once, ranked 1/10.¹⁵ This is fully compatible with the practice of political participation in China, given the negligible role of electoral politics but availability of other channels such as its petitioning system that allows and even encourages the Chinese people to appeal to officials at higher level to address their problems and concerns.¹⁶ Given the findings shown in Figure 1a-1d, it is fair to argue that the Chinese young adults, compared to their Asian counterparts, are at least equally likely to participate in politics. And they rationally tailor their participation following China's specific political institutional setting.

Similar to the young adults in other Asian societies, a large percentage of Chinese young adults believe that democracy is preferable over authoritarian government (49%, very close to that in Taiwan and ranked 9/12) or the best form of government (76%, ranked 10/12). Nevertheless but again like their Asian counterparts, the Chinese young adults are much less committed to democracy because of its intrinsic values: When confronted with the choice between democracy and other socioeconomic benefits, a much smaller percentage of them

¹⁵ This item was not asked in South Korea and Malaysia.

¹⁶ T. Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Lianjiang Li, et al., "Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003-2006," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 210, (2012), pp. 313-34.

choose democracy over securing economic development (29% and ranked 4/12), or reducing income inequality (32% and ranked 3/12).

The most salient feature of Chinese young adults, compared to their Asian counterparts, lies in their evaluations of the Chinese government and political system, as shown in Figure 2a-2d: They are much less critical. In other words, they show much higher support for their government and political system.

[Figure 2a-2d about here]

As illustrated in Figure 2a, about 25% of Chinese young adults think their elections have little or no influence at all on their government, only higher than that in Vietnam and ranked 11/12.¹⁷ As shown in Figure 2b, roughly the same percentage (25%) of the Chinese young adults believe that corruption and bribe-taking are quite serious in the national government, only higher than that in Singapore and ranked 11/12 again. Similar patterns are observed in their assessment of the government's response to what people want, as well as their perceived need for change in the political system. As displayed in Figure 2c, about 23% of the Chinese young adults think their government is not responsive to the Chinese people's needs, only higher than that in Vietnam and ranked 11/12.¹⁸ Meanwhile, as shown in Figure 2d, only slightly more than 26% believe that China's political system needs major changes or should be replaced, ranked 9/12. Overall, like the general Chinese population, Chinese young adults are quite supportive of their current regime and political system, despite its authoritarian nature and various problems.¹⁹ If negative sentiment or frustration is a critical pre-condition for effectively pushing for political changes²⁰ and given the Chinese young adults' largely positive evaluations of the socioeconomic and political performance of the Chinese government, they are unlikely to collectively and actively mobilize for changes that aim at replacing the CCP regime in the foreseeable future.

¹⁷ The non-response rate is 6.5% in mainland China but 22.4% in Vietnam.

¹⁸ The non-response rate is 3.6% in mainland China but 10.2% in Vietnam.

¹⁹ T. Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System," in Yun-han Chu, et al. (eds.), *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 209-31; Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

²⁰ James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1962), pp. 5-19.

Chinese Young Adults and Their Older Cohort

Having shown that Chinese young adults are not substantively different from their Asian counterparts in terms of most political attitudes, behavior, and values, except for their much less negative sentiment toward their government and political system, I can move onto some core questions of this paper: Compared to their older cohort, are the young adults less concerned about China's political situation and its future development? Do they hold more favorable attitudes toward democracy? Are they more likely to be the agent of political changes in China?

Despite the influence of consumerism culture and their keen interest in advancing their social status and financial well-being, Chinese young adults also show significant interest in politics: Around 47% are somewhat or very interested in politics; and more than 71% occasionally or frequently discuss political issues with their family members or friends. When I further separate those who are younger than 25 and compare their psychological involvement in politics to those aged 25-29, the average scores in political interest and frequency of following political news and discussing politics are almost identical between the two groups. Though a smaller percentage of Chinese young adults (about 26%) have strong confidence in their capability of understanding political issues in today's China, around 41% actually believe that they have sufficient influence over the government's decisions and policies. Compared to their older cohort, as shown in Figure 3, Chinese young adults are equally or more interested in politics and report a higher efficacy in understanding politics and influencing their government's decisions.

[Figure 3 about here]

This clearly contradicts previous findings that characterize the current youth generation in China as the Me-generation, i.e., politically apathetic and overwhelmed by individual material concerns. It might be true that Chinese young adults care a lot about their financial well-being and are significantly affected by the culture of consumerism; however, such socioeconomic concerns do not necessarily trump their interest in politics. Moreover, as the modernization theory suggests, better education, richer economic resources, and more diversified information exposure actually might have got the Chinese young adults better prepared for political participation. And their participation in the cyberspace, as well as in real life, could have boosted their political efficacy and further aroused their interest in politics.

The influence of continuous economic prosperity and new information technologies goes way beyond preparing and empowering Chinese young adults psychologically for engaging politics. They also leave a significant imprint on the values that the Chinese young adults internalize. A large number of Chinese young adults no longer believe in the virtue of citizens simply following the decisions of a paternalistic government like children (48%) or allowing the government to decide what should be discussed in the society (58%). Meanwhile, a large percentage of them also sincerely appreciate the value of rule of law, particularly the independence of judiciary agencies (48%), as well as the significance of having pluralistic views and opinions in the society (50%). Again, as illustrated in Figure 4, when compared to their old cohort, the Chinese young adults clearly outperform in showing a higher commitment to liberal democratic values, e.g., cherishing their political rights, autonomy, and liberty, and appreciating the value of rule of law and pluralism.

[Figure 4 about here]

Thus, this generational shift in liberal democratic values further confirms that the Chinese young adults are not just overwhelmed by their pursuing of individual financial well-being and material benefits. Their internal world has also been dramatically transformed, given their distinct experiences, in a way that actually prepares them to promote and even fight for some political ends that they cherish. It is important to remind our readers that like their Asian counterparts, a large majority of Chinese young adults believe that democracy is the best form of government (76%) and a significant number of them believe that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian government (49%).²¹ And there are no significant differences between those who are younger than 25 and those aged 25-29 in terms of their support for democracy.

Given Chinese young adults' significant interest in politics, higher political efficacy, and more liberal democratic orientations, it should not be surprising to find that they are more critical of the Chinese government and political system, compared to their older cohort, as shown in Figure 5.

[Figure 5 about here]

²¹ Chinese young adults are not substantively different from their older cohort on these two issues. And the respective percentages among the older Chinese adults are 75% and 53%.

Around 36% of Chinese young adults are not satisfied with the freedom of speech in today's China; and about 51% of them hold negative views of China's freedom of association. The difference between them and their older cohort, on average, regarding their assessment of China's freedom of speech or association, is substantively large, approximately 16%. Though the Chinese people in general hold relatively positive views of their government's socioeconomic and political performance, the young adults are significantly more critical: Among the Chinese young adults, 25% think that corruption and bribe-taking is a serious issue in the national government (15% for the older cohort). And 23% of them think the Chinese government is not sufficiently responsive to its people's needs (13% for the older cohort).

Unfortunately, Chinese young adults' comparative advantage in showing higher political efficacy and holding more liberal democratic values, as well as their more critical views of Chinese politics and the government, have not been effectively transmitted into a higher level of participation, as shown in Figure 6.

[Figure 6 about here]

On the contrary, Chinese young adults show significantly less enthusiasm in China's electoral politics: They are 19% less likely to vote in elections and 9% less likely to attend electoral campaign activities. Meanwhile, compared to their older cohort, they are roughly equally unlikely (8%) to contact elected officials or legislative representatives, and equally likely (37%) to contact officials at higher level to address various issues and problems.

In a summary, though Chinese young adults, like their older cohort, do not see an urgent need of major or overturning changes in China's political system,²² they do watch or discuss Chinese political issues closely. Thanks to their better cognitive capacity and more available resources, they feel equally or more capable in engaging politics, as compared to their old cohort. Though they show much less enthusiasm in China's electoral politics, they are equally able and willing to participate through appropriate channels to address their concerns like their older cohort. Basically, current Chinese young adults are no longer the Me-generation that shows little interest in politics or is exclusively keen on advancing individual financial well-being and social status. On the contrary, their more liberal democratic orientations toward political rights and

²² Only 26% of Chinese young adults believe that the Chinese political system needs major changes or should be replaced. The percentage among the colder cohorts is 23%.

autonomy, as well as their more critical views of the Chinese government's performance, could have prepared them as the potential agent of making meaningful and even significant changes in today's largest authoritarian society.

Stratification within Chinese Young Adults

In previous sections, I treat Chinese young adults as a homogenous group for comparative analysis. Nevertheless, there is actually significant variation within them regarding the aforementioned political attitudes, behavior, and values.²³

As the conventional wisdom on the impacts of socioeconomic status on political attitudes expects, among Chinese young adults, a higher educational attainment is significantly associated with more interest in politics, a higher level of political efficacy, a deeper commitment to liberal democratic values, and more critical views of the Chinese government. Meanwhile, a better family economic situation is also significantly associated with deeper appreciation of democracy as a preferable alternative form of government.²⁴ In addition to these widely recognized impacts of education and economic resources, this paper also finds a salient gender gap, some interesting rural-urban differentiation, and a significant role of the Internet in these regards.

It's nothing new to China observers that males play a dominant role in Chinese politics, for instance, all members of the Politburo Standing Committee are males. Though the CCP has been intentionally recruiting females into its various government agencies and popular organizations, China's political socialization process is still under the shadow of its Confucian tradition and tends to discriminate against females. Numerous widely but implicitly held and enforced social norms not only raise the hurdles for Chinese females' participation, but also seriously alienate them from politics, thus making them politically apathetic. And this gender gap is also clearly observed among Chinese young adults. Figure 7 shows the gender gap in Chinese young adults' psychological involvement in politics (Figure 7a), as well as their self-reported sense of citizen empowerment (Figure 7b)

²³ All following statements on significantly associations are based on multiple regression analyses, rather than bi-variate correlation analyses, thus controlling for all relevant factors like age, gender, education, residency, family income, and use of the Internet.

²⁴ It is worth noting that Chinese young adults in families with a better economic situation are significantly less critical of their government. This is compatible with existing findings on economic performance as a key foundation of the CCP regime's legitimacy.

[Figure 7a-7b about here]

As displayed in Figure 7a, as 56% of Chinese young male adults show at least somewhat interest in politics, only 40% of young female adults report so. When it comes to their habit of following political news or discussing political issues with their family members or friends, a significant gender gap appears again, which hovers around 10%. And, as shown in Figure 7b, the gender gap is also significant and of a similar magnitude when Chinese young adults' self-reported capability in participating politics (12%), capacity of understanding political issues (14%), and influence over the government (14%) are under examination. Though the male/female ratio among newborn infants in today's China is close to 1.18, indicating more boys, as the Chinese proverb claims, women still hold up half the sky. Thus, closing the gender gap in terms of political interest and efficacy might significantly boost Chinese young adults' potential in leading and pushing for political changes.

Rural-urban division in China is another salient feature, due to the government's intentional political and economic engineering. And this rural-urban division has serious implications for China's both political and economic landscapes. The conventional wisdom in comparative politics and Chinese politics suggests that rural residents, compared to their urban counterparts, are politically more conservative, thus being more loyal to the existing regime and prioritizing political stability over possible change. Previous survey research in mainland China also finds a significantly higher level of political trust among Chinese rural residents.²⁵ And this paper's analysis on the rural-urban division in Chinese young adults' critical views of their government confirms such arguments and findings. As illustrated in Figure 8a, the young adults living in rural China are much less critical of China's freedom of speech (15%), corruption and bribe-taking in the national government (11%), and the government's responsiveness to its people's needs. Nevertheless, the pattern is reversed when their political efficacy is under examination, as shown in Figure 8b: Rural young adults, on average, hold a higher confidence in their capability to participate in politics (by a margin of 10%), as well as reporting more influence over the government's policies and decisions (by a margin of 6%).

²⁵ Lianjiang Li, "Political Trust in Rural China," *Modern China*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004), pp. 228-58; T. Shi and J. Lu, "Continuity and Change in the Foundations of Political Trust in Mainland China, 1993-2002," in Tangbiao Xiao (ed.), *Studies on Social Stability: Between Urban and Rural China* (Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 2011), pp. 3-19.

[Figure 8a-8b about here]

Since socioeconomic status and use of the Internet are controlled for in the analysis, I tend to believe this higher level of political efficacy among Chinese rural young adults reflect distinct grassroots political dynamics in rural and urban China. Despite widely reported rigged elections, grassroots democracy in rural China does provide its residents some meaningful opportunities to observe or practice democratic politics, in addition to the always available petitioning system. Comparatively speaking, grassroots democracy in urban China is primarily for decoration purposes, generating little enthusiasm among Chinese urbanites. Moreover, the Chinese government imposes a more serious and effective control in its urban areas, which further constrains the opportunities for urban residents to participate. The positive feedback between participation and efficacy may help explain this unexpected rural-urban difference in Chinese young adults' political efficacy.

New information technologies are widely believed to have posed serious challenges to authoritarian leaders; and their impacts have been vividly demonstrated in some significant events like the Arab Spring. As discussed previously, the Internet and more recently micro-blogging provide very powerful tools for Chinese netizens to spread information, coordinate behavior, and mobilize support for various issues. Its political power is also clearly demonstrated, *inter alia*, in the "human-flesh-search" organized by Chinese netizens in discovering and publicizing the identity of corrupt government officials. And Chinese young adults are the largest group of netizens. Thanks to the Internet's widow-opening and mirror-holding functions,²⁶ using the Internet is expected to further empower Chinese young adults as the potential agent of political change.

The survey data do show that, among Chinese young adults, Internet users show more interest in politics, follow political news more often, and discuss political issues more frequently with their family members or friends. Chinese young netizens' exposure to more pluralistic views and values in the cyberspace also leaves a significant imprint on the values they internalize: They are significantly less likely to believe in the virtue of having a paternalistic government

²⁶ Catie Snow Bailard, "Testing the Internet's Effect on Democratic Satisfaction: A Multi-Methodological, Cross-National Approach," *Journal of Information and Technology & Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2012), pp. 185-204.

making decisions without consulting its people. And they are more likely to appreciate the independence of judicial agencies, as well as the benefits of having pluralistic views in the society. Thus, it is not surprising that, among the Chinese young adults, Internet users hold significantly more negative views of China's freedom of speech, freedom of association, corruption and bribe-taking in the government, as well as the government's responsiveness to its people's needs.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Despite its continuous economic prosperity over the past decades, political reforms are seriously lacking in mainland China. Chinese political leaders have realized the potential risk of continue its model of economic growth without necessary political reforms and have also publicly called for initiating such reforms. Nevertheless, meaningful political changes in today's China cannot be effectively promoted and secured without active participation from its citizens. The current youth generation in China, as the chief beneficiaries of its economic prosperity, are better educated, enjoy more economic resources, and have the access to new information technologies that significantly diversify their information environment, compared to their older cohort. It is natural for China observers to wonder whether the Chinese youth are likely to be the agent of leading and facilitating political changes in today's largest authoritarian society.

The post-80s and post-90s generations in China are frequently characterized as the Me-generation in both domestic and foreign media: They are presented as overwhelmed by the culture of consumerism, self-centered and individualistic (as a consequence of China's one-child policy), keen on advancing their financial well-being and social status, and showing little interest in politics. Nevertheless, given that the young Chinese have experienced some dramatic political events, economic crises, and technological advances over the past ten years, we cannot help but wonder: Are today's Chinese young adults still the Me-generation? Using the most recent wave of ABS III survey from mainland China, this paper re-examines the political attitudes, behavior, and values of Chinese young adults – aged between 18 and 29 in 2011. Moreover, in order to make meaningful interpretations of the data, this paper compares Chinese young adults with their Asian counterparts, as well as their older cohort in mainland China. It also explores the possible stratification within the Chinese young adults.

Compared to their Asian counterparts, the young adults in today's China are not substantively different in terms of their interest in politics, political efficacy, political tolerance, internalization of liberal democratic values, normative commitment to democracy, and appreciation of the intrinsic value of democracy. Though they are not quite active in China's electoral politics, they rationally allocate their attention and resources to the more meaningful and effective channels of political participation in contemporary China, i.e., contacting officials at higher level, and significantly outperform their Asian counterparts in this regard. The most salient difference between Chinese young adults and their Asian counterparts lies in their much less critical views of Chinese politics and the government. And this is compatible with the general trend of holding relatively positive views of their government among the Chinese people. Basically, Chinese young adults are not dramatically different from their Asian counterparts, despite the varying socioeconomic, political and cultural environments.

Compared to their older cohort, today's Chinese young adults are equally or more interested in politics and show a higher efficacy in understanding politics and influencing the government's decisions and policies. They also show a higher commitment to liberal democratic values, e.g., cherishing their political rights, autonomy, and liberty, and appreciating the value of rule of law and pluralism, as well as holding more critical assessment of China's political freedom and the government's performance. These findings clearly contradict the argument that Chinese young adults are politically apathetic. They do care a lot about their financial well-being and are significantly affected by the culture of consumerism; however, such socioeconomic concerns do not necessarily trump their interest in politics. Moreover, as the modernization theory suggests, better education, richer economic resources, and more diversified information exposure actually have got Chinese young adults better prepared for engaging politics, psychologically and normatively. In other words, Chinese young adults, compared to their older cohort, are more likely to be the potential agent of political change in contemporary China, despite some high hurdles to overcome.

Within Chinese young adults, there is significant stratification along dimensions like gender, rural-urban division, and access to the Internet. Young female adults, on average, show less interest in politics and report lower political efficacy. Young adults living rural areas are less critical of Chinese politics and the government's performance; however, they have stronger

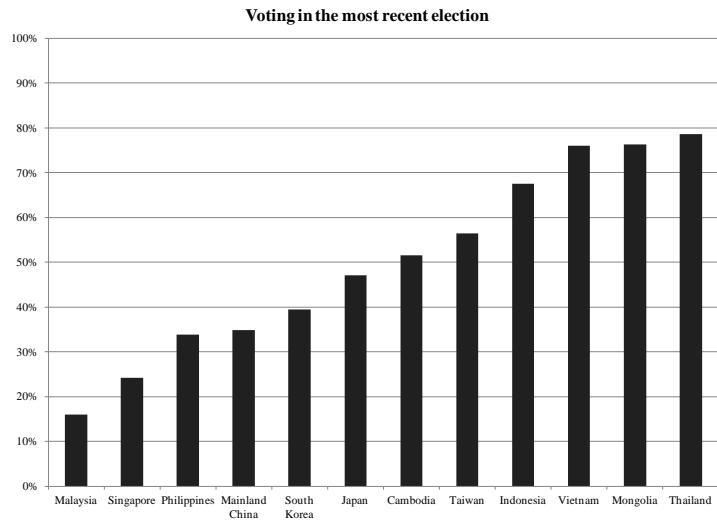
confidence in their ability to participate, as well as their influence over government decisions and policies. The Internet's influence is clearly demonstrated by Chinese young netizens' more interest in politics, higher commitment to liberal democratic values, and more critical views of Chinese politics and the government's performance.

Given the aforementioned findings, to effectively boost Chinese young adults' potential in leading and pushing for significant political changes in contemporary China, we recommend more resources and attention devoted to the following two areas:

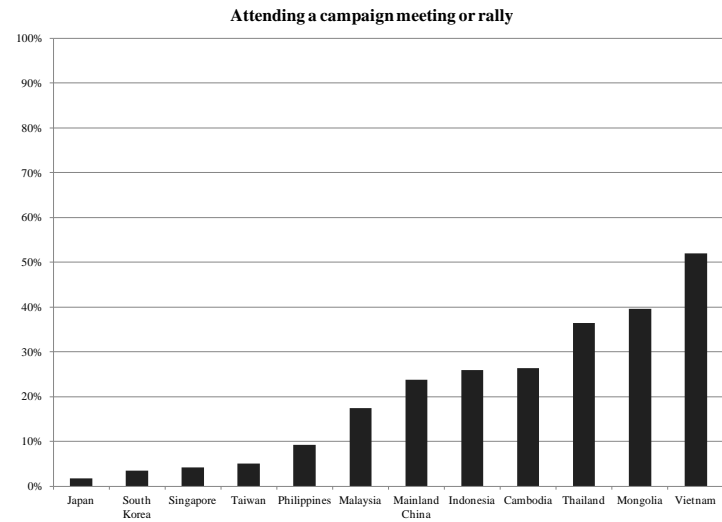
First, strengthening and promoting grassroots democracy in urban China. Though young adults living in urban China, on average, have better access to various resources including the Internet and other facilities, their rural counterparts actually report a higher level of political efficacy. As previously argued, this is very likely to be the result of the distinct political dynamics in rural and urban China, more specifically the lack of meaningful democratic politics and more serious political control in urban China. Providing more platforms and channels for Chinese urban young adults to experience and participate in various forms of democracy, not necessarily the urban residential community elections, may help improve their political efficacy. For instance, recruiting more urban young adults into NGOs with well established democratic procedures for operation and management should provide vivid and sufficient exposure to democratic practice for the young adults. Of course, if possible, promoting and improving China's grassroots democracy in general should also be of significance and value for preparing and empowering Chinese young adults, as well as the whole Chinese society, for possible political reforms.

Second, more resources and attention should be devoted to increasing Chinese young female adults' interest in politics and empower them for more political engagement. Since China's political socialization, under the shadow of its Confucian tradition, may have driven this gender gap significantly, the payoff of such devoted resources and attention is unlikely to be immediate. Nevertheless, the devoted resources and attention do have significant and long-term implications for China's political future. In the survey data, we do not find a significant gender gap in terms of support for democracy and commitment to liberal democratic values, which means that once the gender difference in political interest and efficacy is reduced and even eliminated, Chinese young female adults are equally likely to push for changes favoring democratic politics in

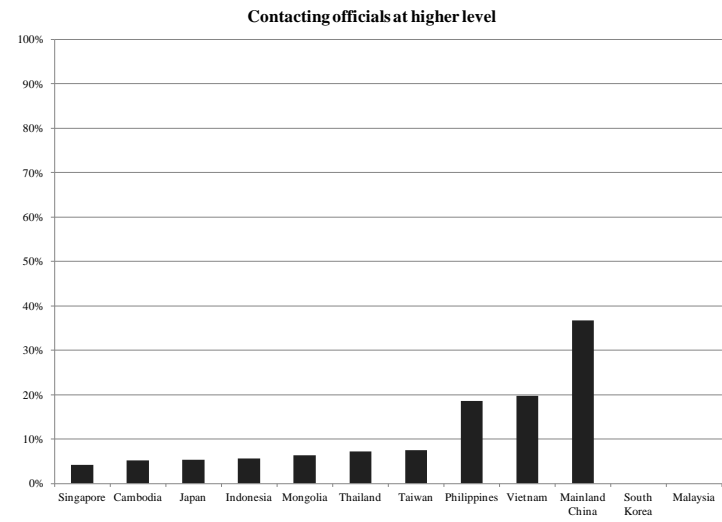
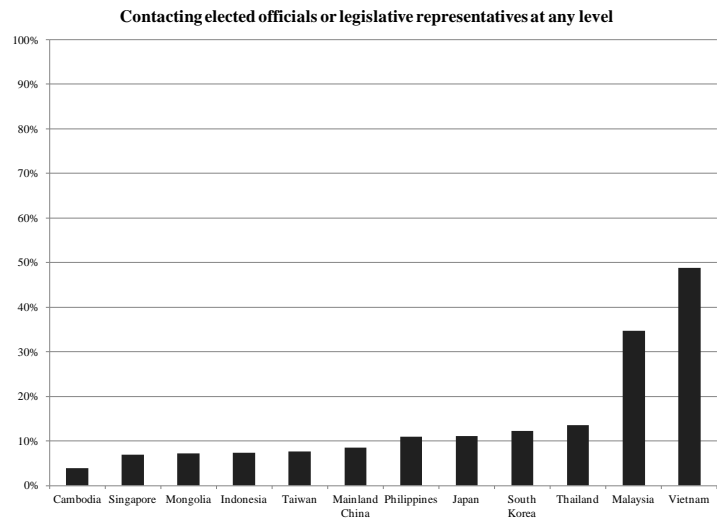
contemporary China. To achieve this goal, for instance, we can provide more assistance and resources to various women's civil associations in both rural and urban China. The growth and booming of women's civil associations can facilitate young females' involvement in public affairs, which, in turn, may translate into their more interest in public and political issues, as well as a higher level of political efficacy.



(A)



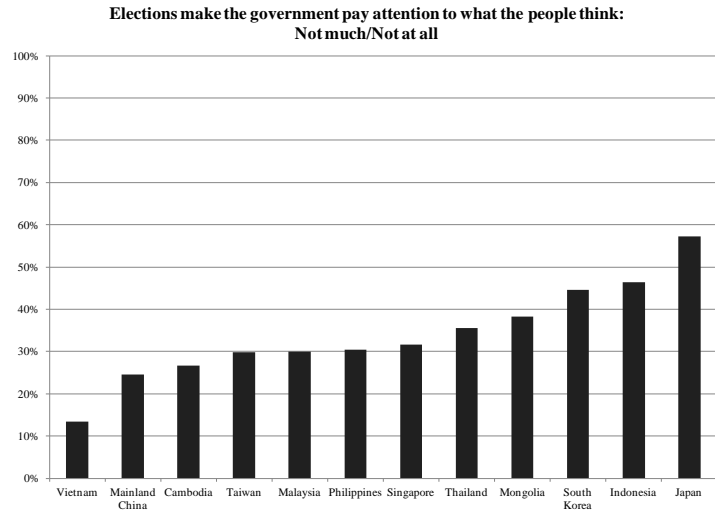
(B)



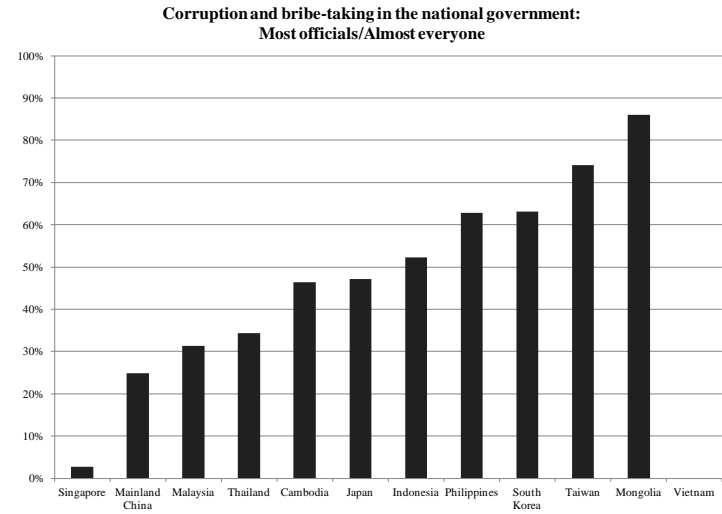
(C)

(D)

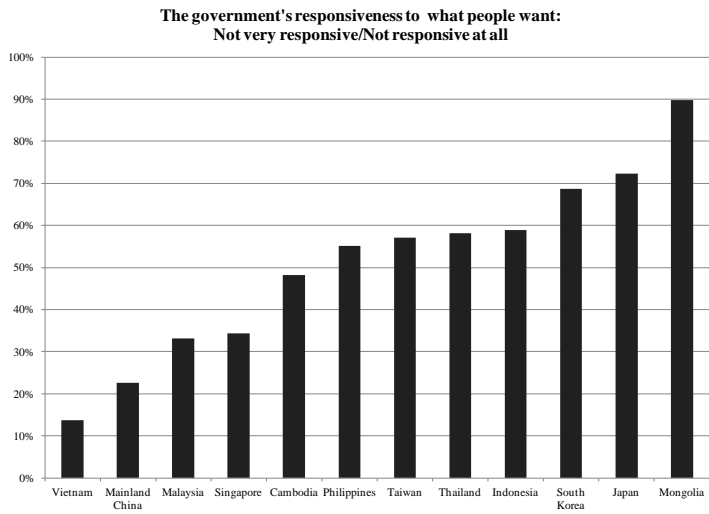
Figure 1. Asian Young Adults' Political Participation



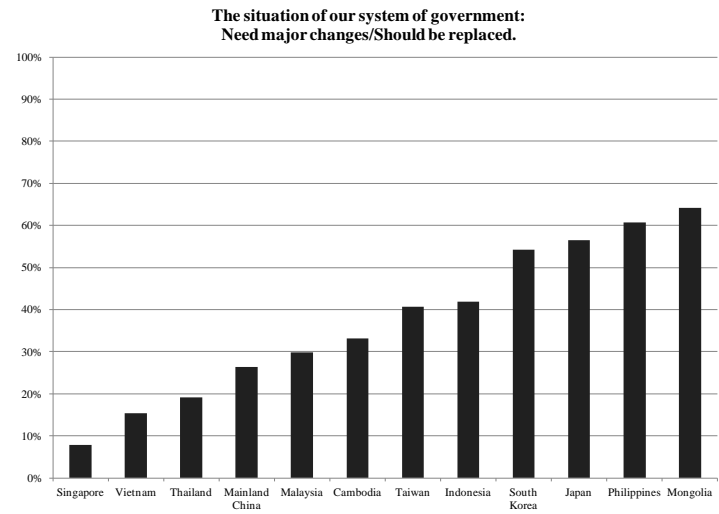
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Figure 2. Asian Young Adults' Evaluations of Their Government and Political System

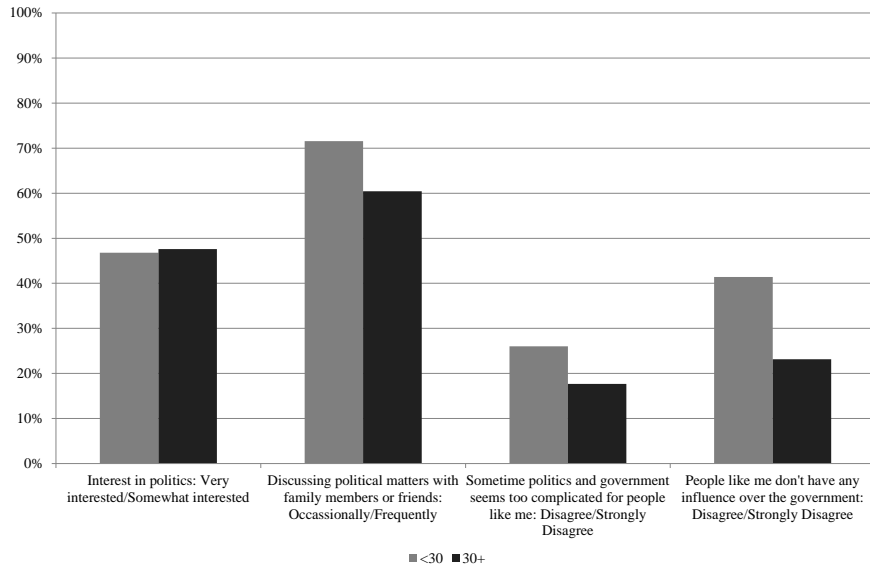


Figure 3. Generation Differences in Political Interest and Efficacy

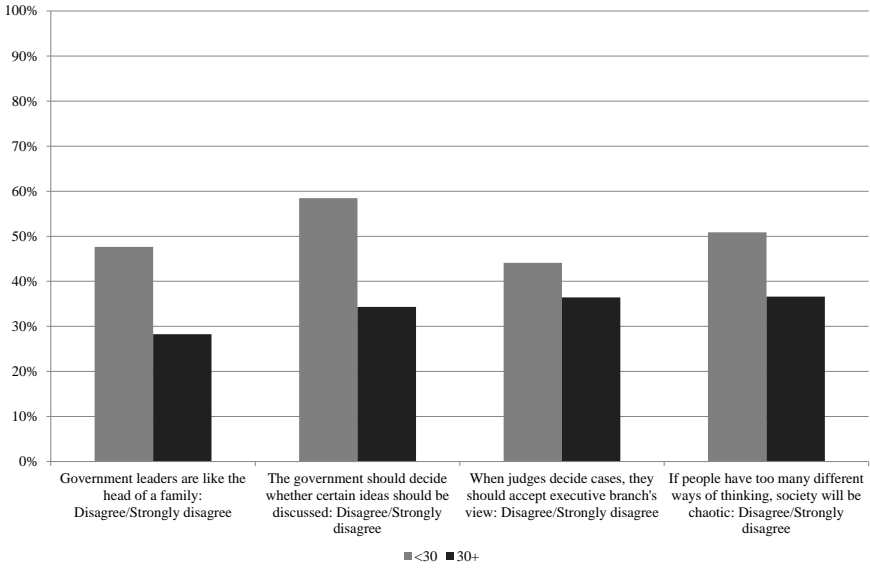


Figure 4. Generation Differences in Liberal Democratic Values

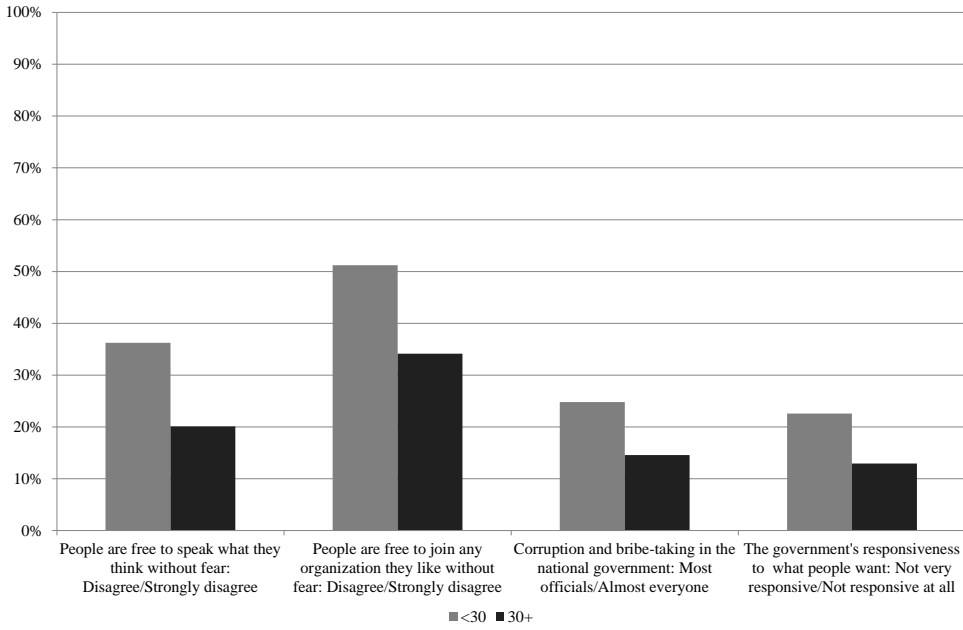


Figure 5. Generation Differences in Evaluations of Chinese Politics and Government

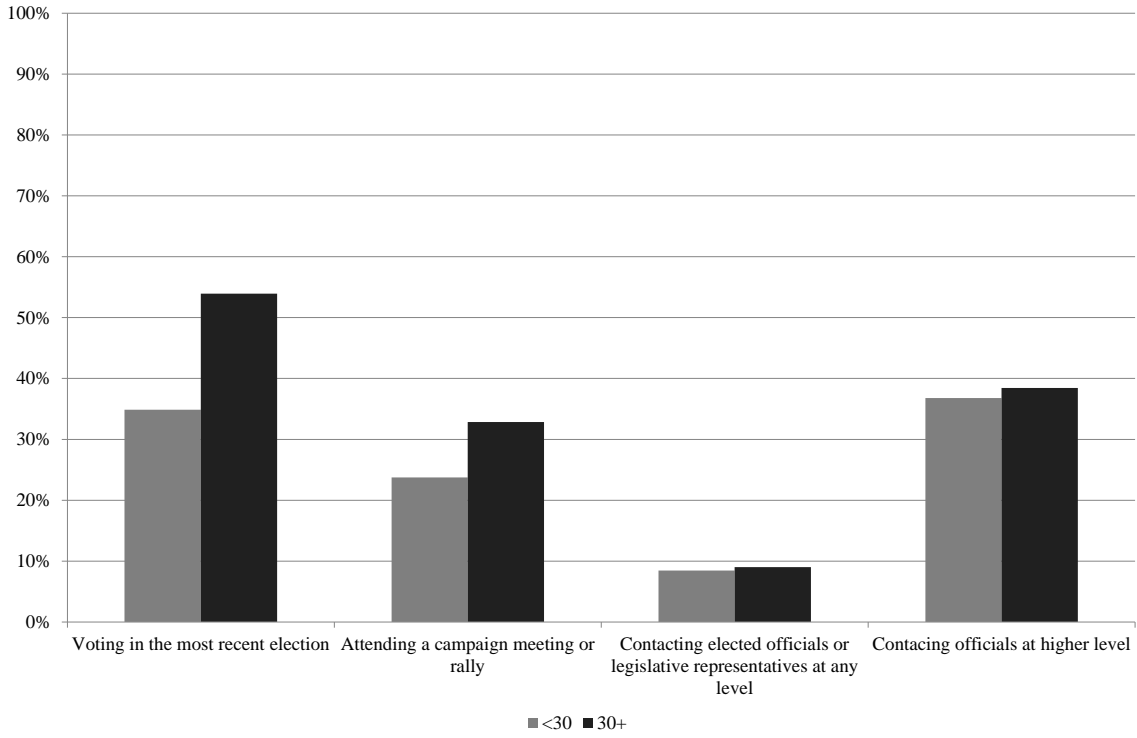
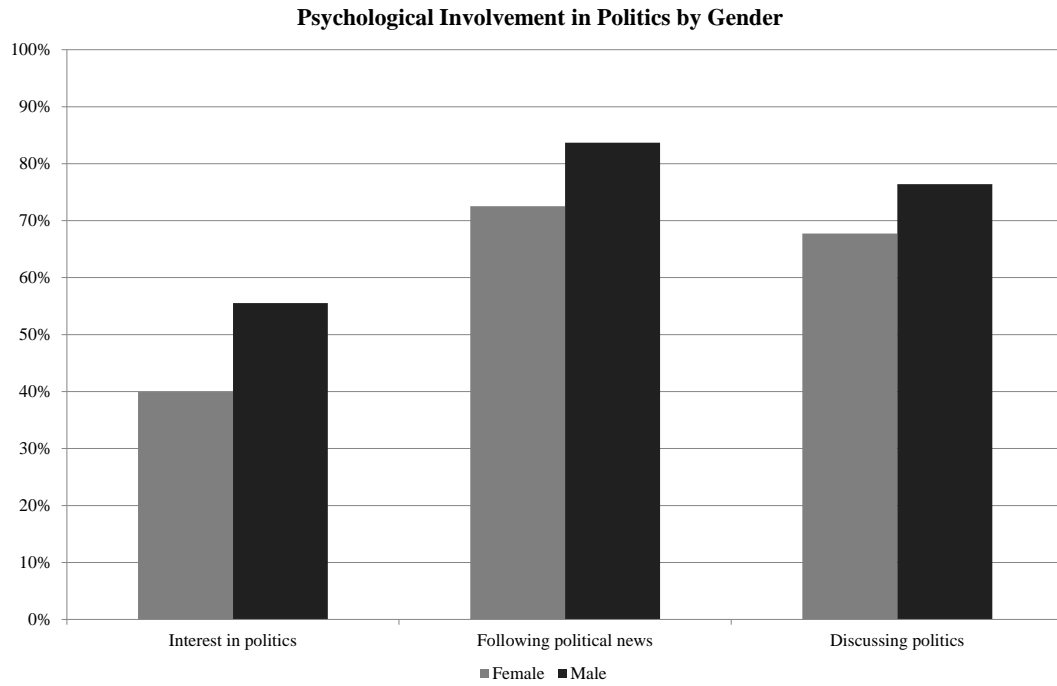
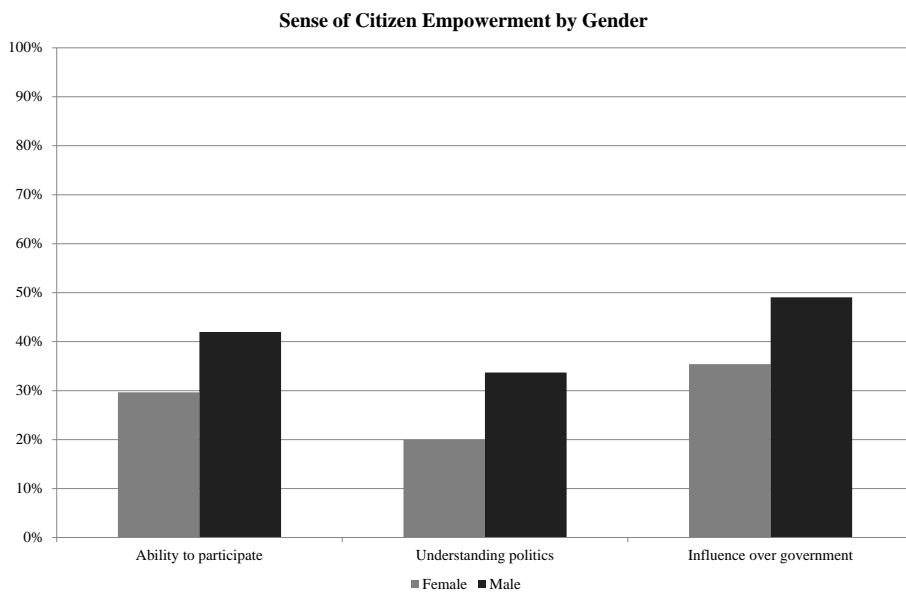


Figure 6. Generation Differences in Political Participation

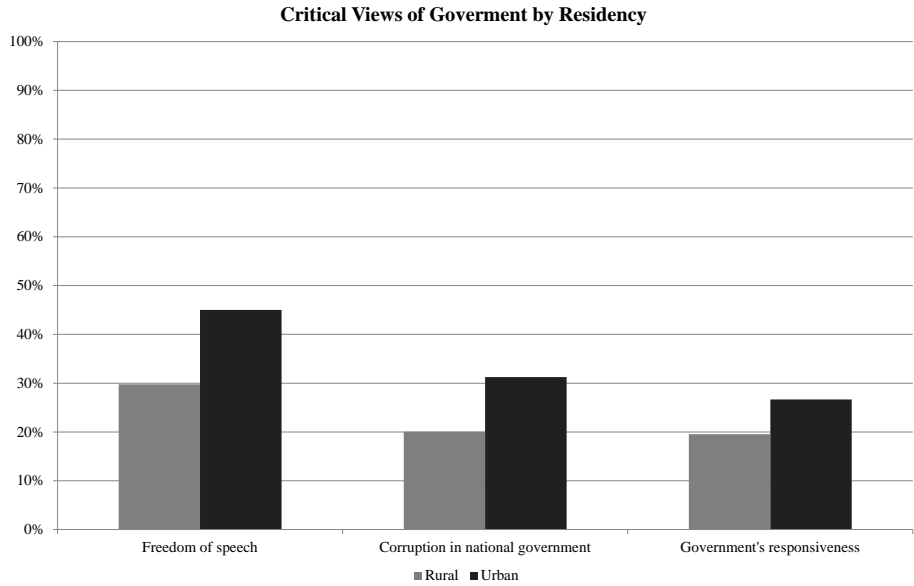


(A)

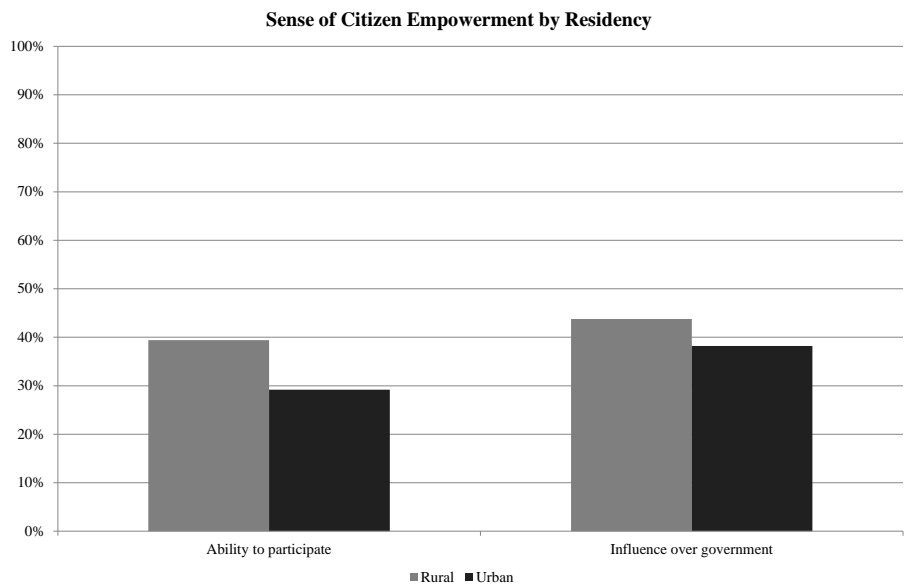


(B)

Figure 7. Gender Differences in Political Interest and Efficacy



(A)



(B)

Figure 8. Rural-Urban Differences in Government Assessment and Political Efficacy

