

Democratization and the Middle Class in China: The Middle Class's Attitudes toward Democracy

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Abstract

Do the middle classes in authoritarian, late-developing countries support democratization? Among scholars, there seems no clear consensus on this question. To fill this gap, this article examines the case of the middle class in China, based on data collected from a probability-sample survey. The findings from this study indicate (1) the middle class does not necessarily support democratization in authoritarian developing countries, (2) there is a negative correlation between the middle class's dependence on the state and its support for democracy, and (3) the middle class's perceived social and economic well-being is also negatively associated with its democratic support.

Keywords

Chinese middle class, democratic attitudes, public opinion survey

As Chinese society has become increasingly modernized in the past three decades, the new *middle class*¹ in China has steadily emerged as a salient socioeconomic and sociopolitical force. Facing such phenomenal emergence and expansion of the middle classes in China and other developing countries, political scientists and policy leaders have constantly pondered at least two important questions: Do the middle classes in developing countries support political democratization, when the political systems sanctioned by the states in these countries are nondemocratic? And why do or do not these social classes support democracy and democratization? These questions have a lot to do with predicting the role of the middle class in political change in the developing world as well as with understanding the dynamic relationship between economic modernization and political democratization in developing countries.

Among scholars of the middle class and democratization, however, there seems no clear consensus over these questions. Furthermore, almost none of the early studies on these issues are based on systematic probability samples of middle-class individuals in authoritarian, developing countries, samples that could provide more robust and conclusive findings on the attitudes of the middle class toward democracy and democratization in those countries. To help fill this gap in and contribute to the ongoing exploration of the role of the middle class in the developing world, this article examines the case of

the middle class in the most populous developing country, China. Specifically, it attempts to shed some new light on both the level and sources of the middle class's democratic support, based on data collected from a probability sample survey conducted in three Chinese cities in late 2006 and early 2007 (see Survey and Sample, Supplemental Materials at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental>). It is hoped that this study will not only help to illuminate the orientation of the middle class toward democratization in China but also examine some key propositions from earlier studies of the middle class's role in democratization in other developing countries.

Theories of Middle Class's Democratic Support

There is a large body of literature on the orientation of the middle class toward democracy and democratization (see, also, Literature on Democratization and the Role of

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the Middle Class in Democratization, Supplemental Materials). Within this general literature, there seem to be two distinct approaches. One can be considered a “unilinear” approach that draws on some aspects of modernization theory.² This approach emphasizes the relationship between economic modernization and political democratization. It contends that as modernization unfolds in a society, the levels of the individual’s income, education, socioeconomic mobility, and freedom valuation markedly increase. All these attributes in turn promote democratization in a nondemocratic society and strengthen the democratic institutions in a democratic society. According to this approach, more importantly, “the rising middle class universally embodies these [attributes]” and serves as the “main thrust of the democratization movement” (Hattori, Funatsu, and Torii 2003, 129-30). Such an approach suggests a set of unilinear causal relationships: socioeconomic modernization gives rise to the middle class, which in turn spearheads democratization in a nondemocratic society. In other words, this approach suggests that the middle class usually serves as the strong supporter of democratization and democracy.

Proponents of this approach also argue that unlike individuals in the upper class who have abundant economic resources and close clientelist ties with political elites, those in the middle class have limited economic resources and lack connections with powerful patrons in the government. Out of self-interest, therefore, the middle class supports a democratic system in which their individual rights and private (though moderate) properties may best be protected from potential encroachment by the government and the upper class (Glassman 1995, 1997). In addition, some of these scholars contend from the sociobehavioral perspective that middle-class individuals tend to favor democracy because, compared to the lower class, they have adequate education and leisure time, which enable them to understand and participate in public affairs effectively (Mills 1953; Lane 1959).

This approach has been supported by evidence from studies on the role of the middle classes in the transition toward or maintenance of democracy *mainly* in the West (e.g., Eulau 1956a, 1956b; Lipset 1959, 1981; Nie, Powell, and Prewitt 1969; Dahl 1971; Milbrath 1977; Glassman 1995, 1997; Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004).³ These studies find that middle-class individuals usually support democratic principles and take action in support of the rise and/or maintenance of a democratic system and against a nondemocratic system.

The other approach may be referred to as a “contingent” approach (Johnson 1985; Stephens 1989; Luebbert 1991; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Bertrand 1998; Jones 1998; Englehart 2003; Hsiao and Koo 1997; Koo 1991; Brown and Jones 1995; Bell 1998;

Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Bellin 2000; Hattori and Funatsu 2003; Thompson 2004). Unlike the unilinear approach that is based on the premise of the unilinear causality between modernization and democracy, the contingent approach in general assumes that the relationship between economic development and democratization can be best characterized as dynamic. As Bruce Dickson (2003, 12) argues, “Democratization is not a natural result of economic growth, it is a political process fraught with conflict, negotiations, and occasionally setbacks.” In addition, while the unilinear approach strongly implies the almost *inevitable* prodemocracy stance of the middle class as the causal effect of modernization, the contingent approach suggests that the orientation of the middle class toward democracy is *contingent* upon some salient sociopolitical and socioeconomic conditions. These conditions vary with the political contexts of different countries and with economic-development stages within each country. Such conditions or factors include, but are not limited to, the middle class’s dependence (or independence) on the state, its perceived socioeconomic well-being, its political alliance with other classes (e.g., upper or working classes), its own class cohesiveness (or fragmentation), and its fear of political instability. In a nutshell, proponents of the contingent approach contend that the middle class does not necessarily support democratization, especially *when* it is heavily dependent upon or closely associated with the authoritarian state, socially/materially well off or satisfied, fragmented as a class, and/or worried about political instability (Johnson 1985; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Bertrand 1998; Jones 1998; Englehart 2003; Sundhaussen 1991). In other words, as all or some of these conditions change, the middle class in a certain society will shift its orientation toward democratization and democracy accordingly. As Hagen Koo (1991, 506) argues, therefore, “It would not make much sense . . . to characterize [the middle class] as progressive or conservative” in a permanent sense.

Unlike the unilinear approach, the contingent approach has been supported by the evidence from the studies of the middle class mainly in developing countries, especially those that undergo rapid economic transformations (e.g., Koo 1991; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Brown and Jones 1995; Rodan 1993; Johnson 1985; Bell 1998; Jones 1998; Lam 1999; Torii 2003; Englehart 2003). Most of these studies find that the middle classes take different stances toward democratization, and the variation in the stances result from the middle classes’ relationships with the state, evaluations of social and economic life, and fear of sociopolitical instability. In addition, some of them discover that various subgroups of the middle classes may acquire different attitudes toward

democracy, as they are variably affected by socioeconomic conditions in a certain society.

Which of these two approaches seems to be more pertinent to the middle classes in nondemocratic, late-developing countries, especially those in the process of profound economic transformation such as China? A brief survey of the middle classes in these countries indicates quite a variation of orientations toward democracy. For example, the middle classes in Latin America (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, chaps. 4-5) and in East/Southeast Asia (Koo 1991; Brown and Jones 1995; Jones 1998; Bertrand 1998; Englehart 2003; Kimura 2003; So 2004) have at times and in some countries supported democratization and democracy but at other times and in other countries backed authoritarian regimes (or rulers). Such a wide variation apparently is contingent on various socioeconomic and political factors, as mentioned above. As a result, the contingent approach seems to be the more relevant and suitable framework to explain the middle class's stances toward democracy in developing countries, such as China. On the other hand, this general survey in turn suggests that the unilinear approach claiming that "a growing middle class creates pressure for democracy is tenuous at best" (Bertrand 1998, 356). Consequently, based on the contingent approach, we expect that China's middle class does not necessarily support democratization, and its attitudes toward democracy are contingent upon various socioeconomic and political factors unique to contemporary China.

Does China's Middle Class Support Democracy and Democratization?

Drawing on studies of both Chinese and non-Chinese settings (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Dahl 1971; Huntington 1991; Gibson 1995; J. Chen and Zhong 2000), we operationalize support for democracy as positive attitudes toward a set of democratic norms and institutions. The democratic supporter, according to James Gibson's (1995, 55-56) synthesis of writings on democratic support, is "the one who believes in individual liberty and who is politically tolerant, who holds a certain amount of distrust of political authority but at the same time is trustful of fellow citizens, who is obedient but nonetheless willing to assert rights against the state, who views the state as constrained by legality, and who supports basic democratic institutions and processes." In this study, we measure this kind of support among our respondents by tapping into their attitudes toward three democratic norms—rights consciousness, valuation of political liberty, and popular participation—and one fundamental democratic institution, the popular and competitive election of political leaders. While these norms and institutions do not exhaust

all the democratic principles, we believe they do serve as the core of democracy and hence as a good test of democratic support within the middle class in China.

The results from our survey show that within the urban population in the three cities, about 23 percent (739) of our respondents belonged to the objectively conceptualized middle class.⁴ This group of the middle-class respondents will be used in the analysis of the political orientation toward democracy and democratization that follows. Furthermore, we will compare the middle class's and the lower class's⁵ democratic support. While this study focuses on the middle class's democratic support, such a comparison may help us gauge the level of the middle class's support in China's contemporary sociopolitical context.

Rights Consciousness

Rights consciousness is the degree to which citizens are willing to assert individual rights for themselves. According to Gibson, Duch, and Tedin (1992, 343), "to the extent that citizens are vigilant about their rights, democracy tends to flourish." Moreover, in China, belief in individual rights is an especially important and sensible indicator of democratic values, since China's traditional culture is said to work against this democratic norm. In Chinese traditional culture, individuals should not be in a position to claim their own rights, because this culture emphasizes collective (or group) interests and government authority over individual rights (e.g., Pye 1992).

To detect the strength of rights consciousness within the middle class relative to that in the lower class, we asked our respondents to indicate whether a series of rights (seven items) ought always to be protected, or whether protection depends on the circumstances (see items (1)-(7) in question 1, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials). The responses of the Chinese middle class to these seven items are shown alongside those of the lower-class urban residents in Table 1.

Like the lower-class respondents, more than 90 percent of middle-class respondents believed that such individual rights as guarantees of the rights to work, to education, to free information, to privacy of personal correspondence, and to travel abroad should always be protected. Moreover, more than 80 percent of our respondents thought that such individual rights as the right to reside anywhere in the country and the right to worship freely ought to be protected. These findings suggest that like the lower class, the Chinese middle class is very eager to protect its own individual rights.

Also presented in Table 1 are the loadings from a common factor analysis of the responses given by both

Table 1. Rights Consciousness

	Supportive response by the middle class (%)	Supportive response by the lower class (%)	Factor loading
Right to work	94.0	93.6	.707
Right to education and training	94.6	94.5	.688
Freedom of information	93.1	94.2	.730
Right to privacy of personal correspondence, telephone conversations, and so on	93.2	94.2	.729
Right to travel abroad	91.1	90.2	.727
Right to reside anywhere in the country	81.9	82.9	.638
Religious liberty and freedom of conscience	85.9	85.8	.702

Entries are the percentage of respondents asserting that right ought to always be respected. Approximate *N* of the middle-class respondents is 739, whereas the *N* of the lower-class respondents is 2,170.

middle- and lower-class respondents to the seven questions. As reported in the table, each of the seven items loaded fairly strongly on the single factor that emerged from the factor analysis. The factor scores from this analysis will serve as the index of rights consciousness in the analysis that follows.⁶

Valuation of Political Liberty (versus Order)

There are at least two distinct propositions on the valuation of political freedom by the citizens in transitional societies, such as the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. On one hand, a group of scholars who studied such valuation in the former Soviet Union (Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992, 341) assume that "democracies require citizenries committed to liberty even when there is a prospect for disorder." When designing instruments to measure the level of mass support for democracy in the former Soviet Union, therefore, they hypothesize that respondents who support democracy as a set of political institutions and principles should choose liberty over order. Moreover, Gibson and his associates suggest that even within a political culture (i.e., the Soviet political culture) that has a "penchant for order" (Gibson 1995, 80), democratic supporters should be more likely to choose liberty over order (see Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992; Gibson and Duch 1993; Gibson 1995). In short, their theoretical approach seems to suggest that the preference for political liberty over order is almost unconditionally, positively related to support for democratic institutions and principles.

On the other hand, with emphasis on the uniqueness of Chinese political culture, some China analysts suggest that the Chinese conceptualize and prioritize certain democratic principles quite differently than their counterparts in some other societies, especially the West (e.g., Nathan 1990, 1997; Scalapino 1998). Specifically in term of the relationship between social order and democracy, as

Nathan (1997, 204) has pointed out, Chinese political culture tends to assume that "democracy should be conducive to social harmony [or order]." Moreover, Chinese political culture emphasizes social order and collective interests over individual rights and liberty. As Pye (1992, 123) has pointed out, most Chinese "accept completely the need for order." Some findings from earlier survey studies of urban China also support this proposition (J. Chen and Zhong 2000). In addition to the cultural factor, material interests could also prompt the Chinese middle class to favor social order over democratization or democracy. This is because these interests—such as professional mobility, employment stability, and moderate private property—could be harmed by social disorder in a society where the majority of the population remains in the social strata below the middle classes (see Xiao 2003).

To explore these two propositions, we fashioned questions that postulated a conflict between political freedom and social order (see items (1)-(2) in question 2, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials). Table 2 reports the responses of the Chinese middle class, along with those of the lower-class people, in three cities to these questions.

Overall, the evidence in this table shows that the support for political freedom among the Chinese middle class is not very strong in either absolute or relative term. Only about 23 percent of the middle-class respondents supported the idea that a public demonstration as an expression of political freedom should be allowed even though it could turn disorderly and disruptive, whereas about 36 percent of the lower-class respondents were in favor of this idea. Similarly, only 24 percent of middle-class respondents thought that citizens should be able to form their own organizations outside the government even if the harmony of the community were disrupted,⁷ while a higher percentage (37 percent) of the lower-class people shared such a thought. These findings suggest that, even though the Chinese middle class has become vigilant

Table 2. Valuation of Political Liberty (versus Order)

	Supportive response by the middle class (%)	Supportive response by the lower class (%)	Factor loading
In general demonstrations should not be allowed because they frequently become disorderly and disruptive. (Disagree)	22.9	35.6 ^a	.860
The harmony of the community will be disrupted if people form their organizations outside the government. (Disagree)	23.5	37.4 ^a	.860

The nature of the “pro-political liberty” response to these items is shown in the parentheses. Approximate *N* of the middle-class respondents is 739, whereas the *N* of the lower-class respondents is 2,170. The one-tailed *t*-test scores are 2.126 and 2.750 for the first and second items, respectively.

^aThe one-tailed *t*-test indicates that the lower class is more democratic than the middle class, and this difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 3. Support for Participatory Norm

	Supportive response by the middle class (%)	Supportive response by the lower class (%)	Factor loading
Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions and don't need to participate in government decision making. (Disagree)	24.9	33.7 ^a	.817
Measures to promote political reform should be initiated by the party and government, not by ordinary people (<i>laobaixing</i>) like me. (Disagree)	28.1	40.1 ^a	.817

The nature of the “pro-participatory norm” response to these items is shown in the parentheses. Approximate *N* of the middle-class respondents is 739, whereas the *N* of the lower-class respondents is 2,170. The one-tailed *t*-test scores are 1.804 and 1.907 for the first and second items, respectively.

^aThe one-tailed *t*-test indicates that the lower class is more democratic than the middle class, and this difference is significant at the .05 level.

about its own rights, it still favors social order over political freedom. These findings apparently support one of the two propositions mentioned above: that is, when political freedom is pitted against potential social order, the Chinese middle class decisively chooses the latter. We ran a factor analysis of the responses given by both middle- and lower-class respondents to the two questions. The results show that both items were strongly loaded on the single factor. Thus, the factor scores will be used as the collective indicator of support for political liberty.

Support for Participatory Norm

Another important dimension of democratic values is popular participation (see Almond and Verba 1963). As many democracy scholars point out, democracy is a system wherein the people of a society control the government. In a democratic society, political power originates from the people living in this society and is delegated by the people to the government (Dahl 1971; Locke 1967; Macridis 1992, chap. 2). Thus, those who support democracy must be willing to participate in politics to exercise such popular power. In China, support for the

participatory norm is an extremely critical indicator of democratic values, because there is said to be no tradition in China of popular influence on the government. It has been suggested that the political culture of China is rooted in Confucianism, which emphasizes deference to authority and grants a sage with the “mandate of heaven” to rule the country (Pye 1992).

In our survey, we include two items to measure support for this participatory norm (see items (3)-(4) in question 2, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials). While one relates to citizens' participation in government decision making in general, the other is about their role in initiating major political change. The frequency distribution of the two items is reported in Table 3.

The results clearly indicate that support for the participatory norm was quite weak among our middle-class respondents in both absolute and relative senses. Only one-fourth of middle-class respondents (25 percent) were in favor of participation in the government decision-making process, and less than one-third (28 percent) believed that ordinary people had any role in initiating political reform. On the other hand, the lower-class respondents scored

Table 4. Support for Competitive Election

	Supportive response by the middle class (%)	Supportive response by the lower class (%)	Factor loading
Government officials at various levels should be selected by multi-candidate elections. (Agree)	69.9	71.2	.603
Competition among several parties in election of government leaders should not be allowed. (Disagree)	24.9	38.7 ^a	.623

The nature of the “pro-competitive election” response to these items is shown in the parentheses. Approximate *N* of the middle-class respondents is 739, whereas the *N* of the lower-class respondents is 2,170. The one-tailed *t*-test scores are 0.395 and 2.460 for the first and second items, respectively.

^aThe one-tailed *t*-test indicates that the lower class is more democratic than the middle class, and this difference is significant at the .05 level.

higher than middle-class respondents on both questions (see Table 3). These findings suggest that the Chinese middle class does not seem to be supportive of this participatory norm, which is considered one of the most important democratic principles. We ran a factor analysis of the responses given by both middle- and lower-class respondents to the two questions. The results showed that the two items loaded strongly on the single dominant factor. Consequently, the factor score will be used as the indicator of support for the participatory norm in the analysis that follows.

Support for Competitive Election

Most scholars of democracy consider competitive, multi-candidacy elections among independent political organizations to be imperative for a functioning democratic system (e.g., Schumpeter 1947; Dahl 1971; Huntington 1991). They believe that only through such an institutionalized process can a government be established that is based on popular sovereignty and that serves the common good. As Schumpeter (1947, 269) points out, democracy is an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” Therefore, the belief in competitive elections has been considered an essential component of democratic values, which democratic supporters must acquire in a transition from a nondemocratic regime to a democratic system (Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992).

The support for competitive elections is of particular interest in Chinese society. This is because the *fully* competitive election (i.e., multicandidate *and* multiparty election) of government leaders has never happened in mainland China, at least since 1949. Furthermore, as some China analysts (J. Chen and Zhong 1998, 32) point out, “it is even more relevant to tap into the level of support for competitive elections in China, since Chinese political culture has been deemed inherently non-democratic.”

To measure support for competitive election, we employed two items in the three-city survey (see items (5)-(6) in question 2, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials). One refers to the multicandidate election of government leaders at various levels (*geji*) in general, while the other relates to competition among political parties in elections. The results from the two items are reported in Table 4.

About the same percentages (70 percent) of the respondents in both the middle class and the lower class supported multicandidate elections of government leaders. But respondents from the middle class had a lower level (25 percent) of support for multiparty competition in such elections than did those from the lower class (39 percent). These findings from the two items together apparently suggest that most of the middle-class respondents support competitive, multicandidate elections of leaders with the condition that such elections are not “among several parties.” Since in reality the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always dominated and controlled elections at almost all levels, and several so-called “democratic” parties have served at best consultative roles in politics, rejection of multiparty competition in elections seems to imply a consent to the current one-party-dominance election system (with the multicandidate competition within this system). A factor analysis was conducted of the responses to these two questions by both classes. From the analysis, a single dominant factor emerged. The factor score will be used as the collective indicator of support for competitive elections.

The Interrelatedness of Democratic Subdimensions

Thus far, we have implicitly argued that these four subdimensions of attitudes toward democratic values and institutions are part of a more general belief system. We therefore expect that the scales we have created for these subdimensions are themselves intercorrelated. If so, it is

useful to think of a more general attitude toward democratic values, one that contributed to the responses to the four subdimensions of attitudes we have conceptualized earlier. We sought to confirm this expectation by conducting a factor analysis of the factor scores (extracted as indicated in Tables 1-4) of the four subdimensions for respondents of both classes. The results from this confirmatory factor analysis (see Factor Analysis of Democratic Subdimensions, Supplemental Materials) showed that the four subdimensions loaded on the single dominant factor, which accounted for about 57 percent of the original variance.

Based on these findings from the factor analysis, we may conclude that there is a reasonable amount of coherence among the attitudes of our respondents (in both the middle class and the lower class) toward these subdimensions of democratic values and institutions. In other words, those who support one democratic subdimension tend to support other democratic subdimensions. Given such a degree of coherence among these subdimensions of democratic support among the respondents, the factor score from this confirmatory factor analysis will be used as the general index of democratic support in the analysis that follows.

Summary

How supportive is the middle class in urban China of basic democratic values and institutions? The answer to this question according to our analysis is twofold. On the one hand, like most of the lower-class people, most members of the Chinese middle class are vigilant about the individual rights that are closely related to their own interests. On the other hand, however, most members of this class are not willing to claim their political rights (such as engaging in public demonstration and forming their own organizations) if such rights could *possibly* disrupt social order; they are not disposed to have a say in government affairs and to play a role in initiating a political change; they seem to support competitive elections only within the current one-party-dominated and -controlled electoral system. From a comparative perspective, it has also been found that the middle class as a whole is even less supportive of democratic principles and institutions in these areas than is the lower class.⁸

These findings seem to support the arguments from some earlier studies of the middle class in contemporary China that while the middle class may “expect a system of checks and balances that could effectively constrain party power” (A. Chen 2002, 416) to infringe on their own economic and social interests, they are not ready to support and participate in political changes favoring democracy (Goodman 1999; A. Chen 2002; Xiao 2003; Zhang 2005). In addition, these findings echo some early observations

of the middle classes in the Pacific Asian region. For example, in Singapore, a majority of the middle class accept the undemocratic government as long as the authoritarian regime continues to satisfy their material needs (Lam 1999; Rodan 1993). In Malaysia, the burgeoning middle class, especially ethnic Malays, has either actively supported an increasingly authoritarian state or remained politically apathetic (Bell 1998; Jones 1998; Torii 2003). In Indonesia, the new middle class stood firmly on the side of the status quo (Bell 1998; Jones 1998). Even though Taiwan and South Korea became successful democracies, the role of the middle class in supporting democratization has been questioned in a few studies. These studies suggest that in both South Korea and Taiwan, the new middle classes did little to stimulate democracy, and their class interests were tied to the developmental state (Brown and Jones 1995; Jones 1998).

Explaining Democratic Support within the Middle Class

What factors influence the orientation of the middle class toward democracy in such a late-developing country as China? Following the logic of the contingent approach discussed above, we focus on two major socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors, which we believe have significantly affected the middle class's democratic support. These factors include the middle class's relationship with the incumbent authoritarian state and evaluations of social and economic well-being. While these two categories of factors by no means exhaust all the causes of the middle class's democratic support, they do provide a good test of some key propositions from previous studies of the middle classes in developing countries, and the results of the test can help us better understand the middle class's democratic support in China. The hypothesized impact of each of these two categories, as independent variables in this study, are explained as follows.

The Dependence on the State

Alexander Gerschenkron (1962) argues that in a late-developing country,⁹ the state normally plays a more important role than in an early industrialized country in the process of socioeconomic development. This is mainly because, Gerschenkron points out, late-developing countries need a strong state to compensate for the inadequate supplies of capital, entrepreneurship, and technological capacity encountered in economic development.

Consistent with this notion of the role of the state in late-developing countries, some analysts argue that the state in a late-developing country also plays a decisive role in creating social classes, such as the new middle classes,

and hence in shaping their socioeconomic and political traits (Bell 1998; Johnson 1985; Jones 1998; Shin 1999). Consequently, “the state [also] became important in shaping the political articulation of newly emerging social forces” (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 223). Following this theoretical line, particularly, some scholars argue that the new middle class in a late-developing country not only is dependent upon the state for its rise and growth but also shares common interests with the state (e.g., Sundhaussen 1991; Brown and Jones 1995; Bell 1998). In a late-developing country, therefore, the middle class is most likely to support the state and the political system that is sanctioned by the state and in which the state operates. As a result, if the political system is undemocratic in that country, the middle class tends to turn its back on democratization to avoid antagonizing the state.

As has been the case in other late-developing countries, China’s new middle class has a dependent relationship with the state. Yet the state in China is even more effective than other late-developing countries in controlling the society and creating/shaping the new social classes, including the middle class as well as private entrepreneurs (or “capitalists”).¹⁰ This is because the state still has two unique, powerful ruling pillars that other late-developing countries do not usually have: the dominance of a single Leninist party—the CCP—and the prerogative of the government to intervene in any socioeconomic sphere (Walder 1995b). With these two pillars, the party-state effectively facilitated the emergence and growth of a new middle class in the private and public sectors. As a result, this class is more dependent on the party-state. As David G. Goodman (1999, 260-61) argues, the Chinese middle class, in general, is “far from being alienated from the party-state or seeking their own political voice, and appears to be operating in close proximity and through close cooperation” with the party-state.

In general, therefore, we expect that the middle class’s dependence on China’s incumbent authoritarian state is negatively associated with its attitudes toward democracy and democratization. In other words, the relative low level of democratic support (presented earlier in this article) among the middle-class respondents may be mainly caused by a high level of their dependence on the state; moreover, dependence on the state may play a more important role within the middle class than among the lower class in lowering support for democratization that threatens the current party-state, since the former has benefited more from such dependence than the latter. Drawing on data from our three-city survey, we explore this proposition about the correlations between the middle class’s democratic support, on the one hand, and its value congruence with, and employment/career dependence on,

the state, on the other hand. These correlations are further specified as follows.

Impact of value congruence. We use a multi-item variable in the survey as an important indicator of the value congruence of the middle class and the state, at least in terms of their fundamental values and interests. This variable is the diffuse support for the current party-state. Diffuse support represents a person’s value conviction that the existence and functioning of the current political regime conform to his or her value or ethical principles about what is right in the political sphere. It is believed that citizens are linked to the regime by diffuse support, which stems from their assessment of the fundamental values, norms, and institutions of the government (see Easton 1965, 1976). Therefore, we believe that diffuse support indicates the congruence between citizens and the regime in terms of the fundamental values, norms, and institutions of the government. Furthermore, we believe that this value congruence serves as the foundation of the tie between the current party-state and the middle class in China. To measure diffuse support, we use seven items in our survey (see items (1)-(7) in question 5, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials). We ran a factor analysis of these seven items in the responses of both classes. The results indicated that only a single dominant factor emerged among these seven items, accounting for 78 percent of the original variance. Given such a degree of coherence among these seven items, the factor score will be used as the collective indicator of diffuse support in the multivariate analysis that follows.¹¹

There seems to be a consensus in field observations by China scholars (Nathan 1990, 1997; Ogden 2002) suggesting that since the onset of the post-Mao reforms, the party-state has to a large extent relaxed its control over citizens’ private lives. But the consensus also maintains that this post-Mao regime has been far from democratic, because it has by no means given up one-party rule nor ceased its harsh repression of political dissidents (e.g., J. Chen 2004; Nathan 1990, 1997; Ogden 2002). Overall, the current Chinese regime’s norms and practices have thus far worked against most democratic norms and principles investigated in this study, such as the rights to demonstrate and assemble, to mass participation in government affairs, and to competitive elections with multiparty competition. Thus, we hypothesize that those middle-class respondents who support the current regime are less likely to support democratic norms and institutions.

Impact of employment/career dependence. As mentioned earlier, the state in China has played an even more preponderant role in influencing the career and life opportunities of the newly rising middle class than have the states in noncommunist late-developing countries. Using its unchallengeable (or almost absolute) political power and

pervasive institutions, the party-state has not only created the general socioeconomic environment that is conducive to the emergence and growth of this social class as a whole but has also provided it with jobs and career opportunities within the state apparatus. In our survey, for example, a majority (about 60 percent) of middle-class respondents were employed in the state apparatus.

More importantly, the access to these positions and opportunities is subject to party membership and/or political loyalty to the party-state (e.g., Lu 2002, 2004; Zhang 2005; Zheng and Li 2004). As a result, the state can directly and effectively influence the political attitudes of the middle class through the provision of employment and career opportunities. As Andrew Walder (1995a, 309) argues, the party-state's power "to offer career opportunities has long been recognized as a central pillar of Communist rule, either as a system of social control (rewards for loyalty) or as a means of fostering anticipatory socialization and (at least outward) ideological conformity." Thus, we expect that those of this class who are employed in the *state apparatus* (including government and party agencies, state-owned enterprises, and public organizations) are more likely to identify themselves with the party-state and, hence, less likely to support democracy and democratization.

Impact of the Perceived Social and Economic Well-Being

Many studies of the middle classes in developing countries point out that the attitudes of the social groups toward democratization and democracy are also contingent upon their perception of their own social and economic conditions under the incumbent regimes (Koo 1991; Sundhaussen 1991; Hadiz 2004; A. Chen 2002; Englehart 2003; Thompson 2004). Perhaps such perceived socioeconomic well-being has a significant and "near-universal" (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 60) impact on the middle classes' support for democracy in *both* earlier industrialized and late-developing countries. As Ulf Sundhaussen (1991, 112) argues, the middle class "would, obviously, not have backed moves towards democracy if this would have meant losing their wealth and privileges." In other words, in both the earlier-industrialized and late-developing societies, the middle classes would judge democratization, at least in large part, based on their perceived consequences of such political change for their own social and economic well-being.

More pertinent to our study, many analysts of the middle classes' democratic support in late-developing countries have found that these classes in general are less likely to initiate or support democratization under authoritarian regimes when they are satisfied with their own social and

economic status. For example, some of these analysts found that in East/Southeast Asian developing countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia, as long as the new middle classes remained clear "beneficiaries" of the state-led economic development, they were not motivated to initiate or support political change toward democracy; however, once their socioeconomic gains were perceived to be fading, the middle classes might agitate for or participate in political movements challenging the regimes (Jones 1998; Shwarz 1994; Tamura 2003; Torii 2003).

More importantly, some China scholars have also found that the middle class in that country seemed to link their views of democracy to their perceived socioeconomic interests (Goodman 1999; A. Chen 2002; Xiao 2003; Zheng and Li 2004; Zhang 2005). As one of the renowned China-based social scientists observes, "The stake that these [middle-class] people held in the booming economy hardly made them adventurous political reformists; on the contrary, they worried that too much political change too fast could . . . endanger their material interests" (Xiao 2003, 62). Based on all these observations in authoritarian, late-developing societies including China, therefore, we expect that those in the middle class who are satisfied with their current social and economic statuses are even less likely to support political shakeups for democracy than are those in the lower class.

To measure the Chinese middle class's satisfaction with social and economic status, we asked respondents two items (see questions 3 and 4, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials). A factor analysis was conducted of these two items in the responses of both classes. Only one dominant factor emerged, which explained 65 percent of the original variance. The factor scores will be used as the collective indicator of satisfaction with social and economic status in the regression analysis that follows.

Control Variables

Do the middle class's dependence on the state, measured by value congruence and employment/career dependence, and its perception of socioeconomic well being influence the middle class's support for democratization and democracy *independently* of some other factors that may also have an effect on such democratic support? To answer this question, we include in this analysis two categories of factors as control variables: (1) key sociodemographic attributes and (2) local socioeconomic conditions.

Sociodemographic attributes. A large body of the literature on democratic values in both Chinese and non-Chinese settings suggests that some key sociodemographic attributes may influence middle-class individuals' attitudes

toward democracy (e.g., Glassman 1991, 1995, 1997; Lipset 1981). This is mainly because these sociodemographic attributes may play a significant role in shaping the processes of political socialization, which in turn may affect middle-class people's attitudes toward democracy. Drawing upon these earlier studies, therefore, we include key sociodemographic attributes as control variables such as sex, age, education, Communist Party membership, and income. We suspect that along with the three independent variables specified earlier, these sociodemographic attributes may also impact middle-class people's support for democratization and democracy.

Local socioeconomic conditions. In our survey study, we selected three major cities, Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi'an, to represent approximately three levels of economic development in urban China (see Survey and Sample, Supplemental Materials). While Beijing represents the cities with high per capita GDP, Chengdu and Xi'an are indicative of those with medium and low per capita GDP, respectively. According to modernization theory, the middle class in a more advanced economy is more likely than that in a less advanced economy to support democratization and democracy, because the middle class in a more advanced economy is more likely to become a sizeable social group and thus is less likely to feel threatened by the lower class and more likely to feel confident about its political role in a democratic political system (e.g., Fukuyama 1993; Glassman 1995, 1997; Lipset 1959, 1981). Consequently, we suspect that the difference among the three cities in their economic development could influence support for democracy among the middle classes. Specifically, the middle-class respondents in Beijing could have the highest level of democratic support, while those in Xi'an might have the lowest level of such support.

Results of the Multivariate Analyses

To test the key hypotheses that have been discussed above, we run a multiple regression model (ordinary least squares) based on the entire sample of our survey,¹² which encompasses both the middle-class and lower-class respondents. In this model, particularly, we included a dummy variable for the membership in the middle class to confirm the impact of such a membership on democratic support in general and the interactive terms between middle-class membership and the key explanatory variables (i.e., the middle class's relationship with the state and its perceived socioeconomic well-being) in order to test the hypothesized relationships (or interactions) between the explanatory variables and the middle class membership. Table 5 presents the results of this multiple regression model. Overall, the results are consistent with our expectations: even independently of some key sociodemographic

Table 5. Multivariate Regression of Support for Democratic Values and Institutions among Middle-Class Respondents: Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi'an

	Support for democratic values and institutions ^a		
	<i>b</i>	SE	beta
Class indicator			
Middle-class membership ^b	-.538**	.231	-.149
Relationship with the state			
Diffuse support ^c	-.923**	.117	-.145
Diffuse Support × Middle-Class Membership (interactive term)	-.177*	.081	-.066
Employment in the state apparatus ^d	-1.232**	.275	-.113
Employment in the State Apparatus × Middle-Class Membership (interactive term)	-.520*	.298	-.046
Socioeconomic well-being			
Satisfaction with social and economic status ^e	-.452**	.098	-.086
Satisfaction with Social and Economic Status × Middle-Class Membership (interactive term)	-.778*	.312	-.033
Control variables			
Sex ^f	-.339**	.169	-.034
Age	-.001	.008	-.002
Education ^g	.927**	.125	.163
Household gross income ^h	.541**	.162	.073
Party membership ⁱ	-.370	.278	-.019
Location ^j			
Beijing	.387	.536	.028
Chengdu	-.924	.721	-.021
Constant	41.421**	1.733	
<i>R</i> -squared = .294			
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared = .278			
<i>N</i> = 2,810			

b = unstandardized coefficient; beta = standardized coefficient.

^aThe value of support for democratic values and institutions is the factor score of the four subdimensions (see Factor Analysis of Democratic Subdimensions, Supplemental Materials).

^bThe lower class = 0; middle class = 1.

^cThe value of diffuse support is the factor score of the seven items (see items (1)-(7) in question 5, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials).

^dThe state apparatus here included government and party agencies, state-owned enterprises, and public organizations. Employment in the state apparatus = 1; employment outside of the state apparatus = 0.

^eThe value of satisfaction with social and economic status is the factor score of the two items (see questions 3 and 4, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials).

^fMale = 0; female = 1.

^gMiddle school and below = 1; high school = 2; postsecondary professional training = 3; four-year university education = 4; graduate level = 5.

^hThe original value of household gross income was transformed to the base-e logarithm value.

ⁱWe asked respondents to answer the following question: "Are you a member of the Communist Party? Non-Party member = 0; Party member = 1."

^jXi'an is set as a reference group.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

attributes and local socioeconomic conditions, (1) the middle-class membership influences democratic support in the entire sample, and (2) the middle class's relationship with the state and its satisfaction with personal social and economic statuses affect the middle class's own orientation toward democracy.

First of all, as expected earlier and indicated in the bivariate analysis above, the results presented in Table 5 confirmed that the membership in the middle class did significantly, negatively affect respondents' attitudes toward democracy in our sample. In other words, those who belonged to the middle class were much less likely than those who were in the lower class to support democracy and democratization in China.

In terms of the effects of value congruence, as we expected, not only did diffuse support have a significant, negative effect on the orientation toward democratic principles and institutions within the general population, but, more importantly, such a negative effect was more pronounced among members of the middle class.¹³ These results suggest that the middle-class respondents scoring higher in diffuse support for the current party-state were less supportive of democratic principles and institutions than were those lower-class respondents who also expressed high diffuse support.

As for the impact of the employment/career dependence, the results in Table 5 indicated that there was a significant, negative correlation between employment in the state apparatus and support for democracy and democratization within the general population. In other words, those who were employed by the state sector (government and party agencies, state-owned enterprises, and public organizations) were less likely to support democracy than those who worked outside of the state sector. More importantly, the results also showed that negative effect of employment in the state apparatus on democratic support was much stronger among members of the middle class than among members of the lower class.¹⁴ Thus, it can be said that those middle-class individuals who were employed by the state sector were less likely to support democracy than were the set of respondents who were the lower-class members working in the state apparatus, who were middle-class members but not employed in the state apparatus, and who were neither employed in the state sector nor middle-class members. These findings are in accordance with our earlier expectation: the middle-class identity and the state-employment status together have a greater effect than just the middle-class identity or state-employment status alone.

With respect to the impact of the perceived social and economic well-being, the results in Table 5 indicated that in general, there was a significant, negative correlation between satisfaction with social and economic status and

support for democracy within the general population. This suggests that the more satisfied people are with their social and economic conditions, the less supportive they are of democratic change. Furthermore, like the impacts of the other two independent variables mentioned above, the negative effect of satisfaction on democratic support is stronger among members of the middle class than among those of the lower class.¹⁵ It can be said, therefore, that those middle-class individuals who were satisfied with their own social and economic status were much less likely to support democracy and democratization in China than were those lower-class citizens who were also satisfied.

Based on the findings mentioned above, we may conclude that diffuse support for the regime, employment in the state apparatus, and satisfaction with social and economic status play a more important role within the middle class than among the lower class in lowering support for democratization. Because the middle class has benefited more from the current regime and has been more dependent upon the regime than the lower class, the middle class is less likely to support democratization than the lower class.

Finally, among the control variables, education, household gross income, and party membership have a significant effect on democratic support. Specifically, both the middle-class and lower-class respondents who were female, who had higher education, and who possessed higher household income tended to be more supportive of democratic values. It is worth noting that the difference among local socioeconomic conditions (Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi'an) did not have a significant impact on the attitudes toward democracy. This finding is not consistent with modernization theory, which stresses a significant, positive relationship between the level of economic development and support for democracy. The possible reason for this inconsistency certainly deserves a separate and more thorough study, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Discussion and Conclusion

How much does China's new middle class, relative to the lower class, support a potential political transition toward a democracy in China? Why does or does not this social class support such a political change? Our findings presented throughout this article have attempted to address these two questions. We have found that while most members of this new middle class are in favor of the individual rights that typically are hailed and protected in the democratic system, they shun political liberties—such as the freedom to demonstrate and to form organizations—and are not interested in democratic institutions, such as the fully competitive election of leaders without restriction

on political parties, nor enthusiastic about participating in government affairs and politics. Moreover, the middle class is less in favor of the democratic values and institutions tackled in this study than the lower class. We also found that the low level of the middle class's democratic support correlates with the three important variables investigated in this study: two for the middle class's dependence on the state (i.e., diffuse support for the regime and employment/career dependence) and one for the middle class's assessment of its own economic and social statuses under the current party-state system. From these findings, it can be inferred that most members of the middle class do not appear to support democratization and democracy in China in major part due to their close and dependent relationship with the current party-state as well as their satisfaction with their own social and economic conditions under the current regime.

What are the political and theoretical implications of our findings? In terms of political implications, the new middle class in China *now* is unlikely to serve as an agent or supporter of fundamental political change toward democracy. This is not only because most of the class does not seem to support most of the democratic norms and institutions investigated in this study but also because the middle class as a whole seems to be even less democratically oriented than the lower class. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the value and material bonds between the middle class and the state significantly affect the orientation of the middle class toward democratic change. As long as the ruling elite of the state remains determined to maintain the current authoritarian, one-party system, therefore, the middle class is likely to continue to be indifferent to democracy. Yet given the causal relationship established above between the middle class's value and material dependence on the party-state and its perceived socioeconomic conditions on the one hand and this class's democratic support on the other, the middle class may become enthusiastic about democratization and democracy *if* such dependence is significantly weakened and socioeconomic conditions deteriorate. Thus, it can be said that among other factors, the state's enduring failure of delivering economic growth, maintaining social stability, and increasing or maintaining employment/career opportunities and living standards for the middle class may help cause the middle class's support for political change toward democracy.

As for theoretical implications, compared to the existing studies mentioned earlier (almost none of which was based on probability samples of middle-class individuals in late-developing authoritarian countries), this study has provided more robust and conclusive findings based on the data collected from a probability sample of middle-class individuals in China, who have undergone a fundamental

economic transformation in the past two decades. Specifically, our findings show that in a late-developing authoritarian country such as China, (1) there is a negative correlation between the middle class's dependence on the state and its support for democracy, and (2) the middle class's perceived social and economic well-being is also negatively associated with its democratic support. Furthermore, these findings have at least indirectly challenged the unilinear approach, which argues that economic development inevitably leads to—among other modern sociopolitical phenomena—the emergence of a new middle class, and the creation of this social class in turn promotes democratization. The evidence from our study, however, indicates that the middle class is *not* necessarily enthusiastic about democratization and democracy in an authoritarian, late-developing country due to its dependence on the state and its concern over socioeconomic well-being.

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Notes

1. In this study, we distinguish the middle class, which is the focus of this article, from "private entrepreneurs" (or "capitalists" and "bourgeoisie")—particularly those who own large and medium-sized firms—in China. The definition and identification of the middle class in this study is based on the theoretical framework of class studies mainly in sociology (e.g., Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Glassman 1995, 1997; Wright 1997), which will be explained in detail later.
2. What Hattori and Funatsu (2003, 140) called the "unilinear hypothesis," which is related to modernization theory, assumes that economic development gives rise to a middle class that aspires to democracy; they attribute the hypothesis to Lipset (1959); Lipset and Bendix (1959); Nie, Powell, and Prewitt (1969); Dahl (1971); Huntington (1991); and Glassman (1997).
3. As exceptions, there were only a very few studies of the middle classes in the developing world that fully or partially

- support this approach (see, e.g., Glassman 1991; Hsiao and Koo 1997; So and Kwitko 1990).
4. Our figure is higher than Xueyi Lu and his associates' result (15 percent) (see Lu 2004, 5). There are two important reasons for such a difference. One is that our result is based on three major cities (Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi'an), which tend to have more middle-class individuals than rural areas. Yet Xueyi Lu and his associates' result is based on the national survey that includes both rural and urban areas. The other reason is the time difference between Xueyi Lu and his associates' and our surveys: their survey was conducted in 2001, while ours was conducted in 2006 and 2007. The size of the middle class might have increased between 2001 and 2006. For the rationale of the identification of the middle class in our study, see Identification of the Middle Class in Contemporary China, Supplemental Materials.
 5. In this study, we pooled the rest of our sample together—excluding the upper class that includes private entrepreneurs of midsize and large-size firms and ranking government officials, who account for only about 3 percent of our sample—to form a category of the lower class. This category of the lower class (relative to the middle class) accounted for 73 percent of our sample, which included blue-collar industrial workers (skilled and nonskilled) in state-owned, collectively owned, and privately owned enterprises; blue-collar employees in all types of service sectors; the self-employed (e.g., *getihu*) with very little capital; the unemployed, underemployed, and retirees; and college students. We conducted a series of one-tailed *t*-tests to compare the levels of the democratic support in all items used in this study (see items (1)-(7) in question 1 and items (1)-(6) in question 2, Survey Questions Used in This Article, Supplemental Materials) between the middle class and the upper class. The results of these tests indicate that there is virtually no difference in the levels of democratic support between these two categories.
 6. The common factor analysis explained 49.5 percent of the item variance, and the eigenvalue of the factor was 3.46.
 7. A similar question was also asked in the East Asian Barometer (EAB) survey conducted in China. The result of the question from that survey is identical with the result from our survey. For the EAB survey, see for example Nathan (2007).
 8. This finding has been substantiated by the results from the bivariate analyses (*compare means*) shown in Tables 3 to 5.
 9. According to Gerschenkron (1962), the "late developers" (or late-developing countries) are those countries that joined the global tide of development when it was already in rapid motion. As a result, the developing countries, such as China, and newly industrialized countries can be considered later-developers, since they commenced their processes of economic development when economic development was already in rapid motion or reached maturity in Western Europe and North America.
 10. For detailed discussion on the role of the state in creating/shaping private entrepreneurs (or capitalists) as well as the latter's attitudes toward democracy in China, see, for example, the studies by Pearson (1997), Dickson (2003), Tsai (2005, 2006), and J. Chen and Dickson (2010).
 11. The reliability analysis for these seven items shows that the interitem correlations are strong, ranging from .67 to .89. This set of seven items yields a reliability coefficient (alpha) of .91.
 12. A multiple regression model (ordinary least squares [OLS]) is often used to analyze cross-section survey data of this sort. Nonetheless, an OLS model may suffer from underestimation of coefficient variances and standard errors, due to a high degree of heteroscedasticity of data. To address this concern, therefore, we conducted White's test to detect heteroscedasticity. The results from the test indicated that there was not a serious heteroscedasticity in our data set. As a result, OLS can be considered suitable for the analysis of our data.
 13. The coefficient of the interaction term between diffuse support and middle-class membership is negative and statistically significant. The total effect of diffuse support within the middle class, measured by the unstandardized coefficient, is -1.1. It was the sum of -0.923 for diffuse support *without* the interaction term of the middle class and -0.177 for diffuse support *with* the interaction term of the middle class.
 14. The coefficient of the interaction term between employment in the state apparatus and middle-class membership is negative and statistically significant. The total effect of employment in the state apparatus on democratic support within the middle class, measured by the unstandardized coefficient, is -1.752. It was the sum of -1.232 for employment in the state apparatus *without* the interaction term of the middle class and -0.520 for employment in the state apparatus *with* the interaction term of the middle class.
 15. The coefficient of the interaction term between satisfaction with social and economic status and middle-class membership is negative and statistically significant. The total effect of satisfaction with social and economic status within the middle class, measured by the unstandardized coefficient, is -1.23. It was the sum of -0.452 for satisfaction *without* the interaction term of the middle class and -0.778 for satisfaction *with* the interaction term of the middle class.

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