Working Paper Series: No. 50

Generational Shift and Its Impacts on Regime Legitimacy in China

Zhengxu Wang

University of Nottingham

Asian Barometer

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

Working Paper Series

Jointly Published by

Globalbarometer

The Asian Barometer (ABS) is an applied research program on public opinion on political values, democracy, and governance around the region. The regional network encompasses research teams from thirteen East Asian political systems (Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and five South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal). Together, this regional survey network covers virtually all major political systems in the region, systems that have experienced different trajectories of regime evolution and are currently at different stages of political transition.

The ABS Working Paper Series is intended to make research result within the ABS network available to the academic community and other interested readers in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions for revision before final publication. Scholars in the ABS network also devote their work to the Series with the hope that a timely dissemination of the findings of their surveys to the general public as well as the policy makers would help illuminate the public discourse on democratic reform and good governance.

The topics covered in the Series range from country-specific assessment of values change and democratic development, region-wide comparative analysis of citizen participation, popular orientation toward democracy and evaluation of quality of governance, and discussion of survey methodology and data analysis strategies.

The ABS Working Paper Series supercedes the existing East Asia Barometer Working Paper Series as the network is expanding to cover more countries in East and South Asia. Maintaining the same high standard of research methodology, the new series both incorporates the existing papers in the old series and offers newly written papers with a broader scope and more penetrating analyses.

The ABS Working Paper Series is issued by the Asian Barometer Project Office, which is jointly sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences of National Taiwan University and the Institute of Political Science of Academia Sinica.

Generational Shift and Its Impacts on Regime Legitimacy in China

Zhengxu Wang, Ph.D.

Acting Director and Senior Research Fellow

China Policy Institute

School of Contemporary Chinese Studies

University of Nottingham

Zhengxu.wang@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract

In China, 30 years of rapid socioeconomic developments have resulted in a much more dynamic society with much more liberal in their political outlook. How Chinese citizens perceive the legitimacy of the Chinese political system becomes critical amidst the Party's effort to deliver good governance and sustain its rule. Based on recent survey data, this paper examines how Chinese citizens perceive government legitimacy in several dimensions: 1) citizens' trust in government institutions, such as the national government, the Party, the court, and the local government; and 2) citizens' perception of whether China's political system is the best for China.

The data presents significantly lower trust in the government and the Party among the post-reform citizens. A predominant majority of them, however, feel that the Chinese political system is still the best China can have, just like the majority of all Chinese citizens. After controlling for other factors, however, it becomes clear that post-reform citizens perceive significantly lower legitimacy in China's political system, raising important questions regarding the future trajectories of political development in China.

Generational Shift and Its Impacts on Regime Legitimacy in China

The legitimacy of the Chinese regime is of central concern for theorists and practitioners. In general, people wonder how much public support the regime still enjoys and whether such support is eroding. When empirical evidence points to a relatively high level of public support, observers ask where such high support come from. It is often taken for granted that authoritarian regimes *cannot* obtain popular support. If they do, the support is believed to have come from government indoctrination or intimidation.

Survey data continuously show high levels of public support for the Chinese government. This is despite widely visible public discontent and economic and social crises that often arise. The conventional pair of questions to ask in this regard are: Will the legitimacy level remain reasonably high; and will legitimacy decline in the future? The assumption is clear in that the high level of legitimacy of the regime must be temporary. If the level is to remain high for a while, that means the current political system will endure for some more time. Otherwise, if the legitimacy level is to decline soon, public demand for radical changes in the system will grow.

A very important perspective, however, seems to have been largely neglected. What if the system is legitimate in and by itself and is capable of regenerating its sources of legitimacy? If this is a valid perspective, one should not be asking whether there will be a legitimacy crisis soon, but whether China presents an alternative form of political organization that enjoys lasting and renewable legitimacy. Such a perspective, if proved valid, can fundamentally change the legitimacy debate.

By identifying generational shifts in the perception of regime legitimacy, this paper will shed important light on this intellectual puzzle. China's social and economic development has entered a post-Mao reform stage since the early 1980s, following Deng's shift of the country's direction in 1978. According to political psychologists, Chinese citizens brought up and socialized in this post-reform period should develop social and political outlooks that are different from those of their older compatriots. To be sure, a generational replacement has already taken place in China, as the post-1980ers reach their prime with

the oldest of them turning 30 in the year 2010. In another ten years, the majority of the Chinese population will be made up by those born after 1980.

Because they grew up in a much more affluent socioeconomic, and a more pluralistic and liberal sociopolitical environment, they should be more inclined towards democratic values and more critical towards the government. Hence, how these post-reform citizens view the legitimacy of the Chinese regime will have important implications for several theoretical questions, such as whether the Chinese regime is capable of renewing its legitimacy and how later generations will view the Chinese regime.

I will first discuss the concept of legitimacy, focusing on how it is generally understood in political science, how it is measured in political research, and how the discussion has related to the Chinese political system. The puzzle is, despite expectations to the contrary, the level of legitimacy as perceived by Chinese citizens appears to be high. I then look at how the post-reform cohort in China views the legitimacy of the regime. If this cohort sees the regime differently, that may offer us a glimpse of the nature of the apparent high level of public support in China and the future trend of this support.

Legitimacy and Political Support

Legitimacy can be understood from two separate perspectives (Weatherford, 1992). From a system-level view, legitimacy could be understood as a combination of the inclusiveness, fairness, responsiveness, and other attributes of the institutions of a political system. Weatherford (1992) identifies the four properties of legitimate systems as accountability, efficiency, procedural fairness, and distributive fairness. Contemporary efforts to measure the quality of governance hence design instruments and indicators that point to some or all of these ideal properties. The World Bank's six-dimension indicator of good governance, for example, measures voice and accountability, political stability and lack of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2008). Non-governmental

organizations like Transparency International and Freedom House, on the other hand, focus on more specific aspects of government legitimacy, cleanness, or elite integrity, and inclusiveness.

From this perspective, it is often assumed only a constitutional liberal democratic system can provide such properties. A one-party regime seriously lacks some or all of these attributes, hence cannot be legitimate. In fact, liberal democracy is deemed as the only legitimate form of government. All other forms of government need to make the "transition", or "democratize" into a liberal democratic system.

The second is a "view from the grass roots" (Weatherford, 1992). This approach essentially tries to understand the legitimacy of a political system through how citizens relate to and participate in politics. Here the notions of legitimacy, political support, and political trust often become interchangeable. From the early advancements of survey research in studying political attitudes and behaviors, political scientists have tried to measure the legitimacy of a system using an increasingly sophisticated set of survey questions. Easton (1965) first differentiates political support into support for the authorities, the regime, and for the political community. Later research operationalized this using time series and cross-national data, examining support for the incumbent office holders, for the government institutions, for democracy, and for the political community (Dalton, 2004; Klingemann, 1999).

Note that in those discussions and research, legitimacy is often replaced by or appears as "political support", which is easier to define and measure. In fact, in survey questions the word 'legitimacy' is never explicitly raised. The respondent is asked not whether how 'legitimate' he or she thinks the government or regime is, but rather whether she or he trusts the government offices and officials, and whether she or he believes the government is responsive, protecting citizens' interests, and clean from corruption.

In analyses, questions like these need to be aggregated back to the legitimacy concept. The issue is how. Gilley develops a three-fold measurement of legitimacy. That is, a system's level of legitimacy is measured by (1) the citizens' view of legality of the government; (2) the citizens' view of justification of the government; and (3)

citizens' acts of consent to the government (Bruce Gilley, 2006). Each of these three measurements is a composite index that includes results retuned from survey questions. The effort to derive a legitimacy score based on a small number of indices (three in this case) makes large-number cross-country comparisons possible (72 in this case).

On the other hand, the availability of a rich survey dataset makes it possible to develop a multi-dimensionally structured legitimacy indicator, although it may mean the structure can only be utilized on a small number of countries. Relying on an eight-nation survey that was carefully designed to include a large number of identical questions, a structured legitimacy measurement can include six dimensions: support for or recognition of a political community, support for core regime principles, support for political institutions, evaluation of regime performance, support for local government, and support for political actors or authorities (incumbents) (Booth & Seligson, 2009).

In a sense, the ability of survey research to operationalize the "systemic view" by gauging citizens' judgments of the attributes of their political system represents a great advancement for scientific inquiry. For example, the legitimacy of a system includes critical properties in its procedures and performance (Weatherford, 1992). In both dimensions, the survey method can gauge citizens' evaluation and perception, hence providing empirical or 'scientific' measurement of the level of legitimacy. If, for example, X percent of the sampled citizens believe government officials rightly represent the interests of the ordinary people, then one can present this as one empirical measurement of the representativeness of the system. The same can be done on other aspects of the procedural attributes of the system, and on various aspects of the performance dimension, such as the regime's performance in developing or managing the economy, protecting citizen rights, and wealth redistribution for fairness.

But a problem with this advancement is that measurements can turn around and determine concepts. That is, how survey questions7 are asked now can shape the way theoretical questions are adapted (Weatherford, 1992). The bi-directional effort to understand legitimacy, hence, needed to be re-asserted. The effort to get the concept right, before striving for measurement should be continued, especially now

with the rise of China it appears the sources of legitimacy may in fact be different. In fact, the debate centering on the legitimacy of the Chinese system should be able to inform a new round of empirical research that expands and revises the existing survey instruments.

The Chinese Regime

Given now that there is sufficiently strong empirical evidence to establish that the Chinese regime enjoys relatively high levels of public legitimacy, the effort focuses on what to make of it, i.e. how to explain this apparent high level of regime legitimacy. While few now believe that this legitimacy has been achieved through coercion or repression, two schools of thought have gradually emerged that aim to give an explanation. One believes the current public legitimacy is a product of the regime's successful economic performance. As such, this form of legitimacy has two problems. It is performance-based instead of procedure-based. Because it is not based on legitimate procedures such as multi-party elections, accountability, and responsiveness, the system is not legitimate despite the public still accepting its rule. That is, public support by opinion surveys does *not* equate with legitimacy in the normative, moral, and philosophical sense.

A second problem with legitimacy based on performance cannot sustain itself. On the one hand, the high rate of economic growth cannot last long. If China's economy enters an enduring period of economic stagnation, public confidence in the regime must decline. Even if the economy continues to boom, public expectations will change from socio-economic to political ones. With the rise in public demand for expression and political participation for example, the regime's ability in delivering economic goods will fail to legitimatize. Gilley (2009), for example, argues that a decline in legitimacy will lead to institutional changes. So far the institutional changes allowed or enabled by the regime have largely met public demands, but such changes have been contained within the one-party framework and hence may prove insufficient in the future. Nobody has depicted this "dilemma of performance" more sharply than Huntington. In his words (Huntington, 1968), "[t]he legitimacy of an authoritarian regime was also undermined if it did deliver on its promises. By achieving its purpose, it lost its purpose"(pp 54-55).

6

Hence, the majority of Western scholars, while recognizing the high level of public legitimacy in China, believe such a high level is either false, i.e. it is just a public perception instead of real legitimacy, or temporary, i.e. the Party or the state will lose its legitimacy in due course. Gradually, however, arguments are being made for the high level of public legitimacy in China to be taken seriously. Some argue the system may be capable of generating and delivering legitimacy, and may offer an alternative form of legitimate government, in contrast to Western-style liberal democracy. Yun-han Chu, who directs the Asian Barometer survey that tracks the development of democratic governance in East Asia, argues that the Chinese political system under a one-party rule has succeeded in delivering a "for the people" government. Because it lacks direct and competitive elections, according to Western norms this system fails the "by the people" and "of the people" criteria.[1] But nevertheless, as long as it maintains its "for the people" strength, the system can enjoy sustainable public7 support (Chu, 2009). Empirical research has established that the Chinese public judges the system's legitimacy according to their ideas of substantive democracy, instead of to procedures (Shi, 2009).[2]

Just as scholars such as Zhao Tingyang are starting to construct international relations (IR) theories and discourses from classical Chinese thoughts and concepts (Zhao, 2005), others are constructing discourses of regime legitimacy from Chinese concepts, experiences, and practices. Some Party theorists aim at "legitimizing" the Chinese political system using the concepts and terminologies of Western liberal democracy, for example, by pointing to the future expansion of elections within the system (Yu, 2008). A completely different approach, however, can be found in scholars such as Pan Wei. Pan's conception of regime legitimacy has both ideational and procedural dimensions. Ideationally, Pan argues that Chinese conception of legitimacy lies in the belief in *minxin*. Literarily translated as "people's heart", *minxin*

---

[1] Because of this, the system continues to be rated very low by agencies such as Freedom House in terms of political rights and civil liberties it is able to guarantee for its people.

2 That the regime sustains its legitimacy by presenting itself as a "for the people" government, and by delivering the "substance", can be seen as a variation of the performance-based legitimacy. Here, performance is not restricted to economic performance. The substance or results of performance are multi-dimensional, including making the right or acceptable policies in major areas that affect people's life—even in economic, social, judicial, political aspects. The substance is not just multi-dimensional, but is also evolving and up-to-date. The system is capable of identifying the needs of the people, and is effective in addressing those needs.

actually means much closer to a combination of people's heart, faith, support, allegiance, submission, and more (Pan, 2009).[3]

Minxin cannot be directly measured by opinion polls, because individual citizens are confined by their short-term and immediate interests. The sum of the atomized individuals is not the collectivity. *Minxin* needs to be understood by the intellectual and political elites, who take a broader, longer-term and more balanced perspective when assessing the people's needs and the interests of the whole political community. Any regime that accurately understands and responds to the people's needs and interests commands *minxin* and hence enjoys legitimacy.[4]

Hence, ideationally, Chinese or Confucian political philosophy legitimates a system by its results. So whether the regime performs *renzheng* (governance of compassion or humanity) for the people (*weimin*) can be judged by the level of "*minxin*" it is able to command. Pan Wei goes on to argue that procedurally, the institutional design of the Chinese system, which he calls *min zhengzhi* (people-based politics), also demonstrates legitimacy. In a nutshell, he argues that because "the people" is a collective body, it should be represented holistically. The Western way of organizing politics through competitions between parties and interest groups only succeed in dividing society and representing a fraction with the winner of any election representing only one portion, and sometimes a minority, of the citizens. [5]

Because electoral institutions based on a competing party system cannot represent the best interests of the people, Pan Wei argues that the legitimate way should be selecting the better-educated and more capable people with vision and personal integrity to run the government. In this regard the current CCP conception of the Party as the elite portion of the people (the term used is *xianfengdui*, or vanguard in English) mirrors nicely the Confucian conception, in which learned people naturally

---

3 Pan Wei seems to believe that in 300 year's time, a world order in line with classical Chinese conception of "Tianxia" will have been formed.

[4] The one who commands people's heart commands the world—*de minxin zhe de tianxia*—is the original saying. In a sense, *minxin* might be a better translation of the term legitimacy than other newly constructed terms such as *hefaxing* or *zhengdangxing*.

[5] When attending an election rally in Taiwan before the 2004 presidential election, on seeing that the Taiwan electorate was sharply divided along the sub-ethnical lines, sociologist Andrew Walder commented that elections were the best way to divide a society -- relayed by Dr. Litao Zhao in a personal communication.

become officials, whose obligation is to produce good governance for the *baixing* (people).

What to Make of Regime Legitimacy in China?

I believe it is time to take the sources of the high legitimacy in China seriously. By many accounts, it appears that the system is capable of delivering, not just in one aspect such as economic development, but in many if not all other important aspects such as distributive fairness, welfare, social and even judicial justice. It appears to deliver not just for a certain time period, but at new stages when public demands and expectations have changed. It can be argued that the Chinese people's needs have changed from a period of seeking national independence (1949-1970s), to a period of building national strength and consolidation (1949-1978) and to a period economic growth and rising living standards, or the *xiaokang* project from the 1980s to 2000s. At the current stage, the people seem to be shifting towards demands for more transparency, accountability, and fair governance (Wang, 2009).

If this is a fair assessment, then something must be right in the way the institutions and procedures of the political system are set up and run. Those institutions and procedures must harbor properties that can guarantee these results. Whether the institutions can meet the rising demands for participation, expression and ownership remains a question, but by far they seem to have evolved and adapted well. Gilley, for example, argues that the system has responded to public needs and as a result, it can command a high level of public legitimacy; where the problems of legitimacy are emerging, the system has introduced "constrained institutional changes", and as a result the system's legitimacy is renewed (Gilley, 2008).

Careful studies on government structures and processes seem to support such a proposition. For example, the central leadership is capable of rebuilding the regulatory and administrative arms of the government system, to deliver governances required by the society and the economy (Yang, 2004). Local state agencies tend to translate central policies to local programs in ways that feed popular needs, resulting in public support (Schubert & Ahlers, 2010). Local agencies also reforms structures and processes to allow for participation and the articulation

of interests in the formulation and implementation of policies as typified by the now famous Wenlin model.

Yet how long can this model of last? Studies seem to suggest that with socioeconomic modernization, public demands for more democratic forms of government institutions will continue to rise (Wang, 2007). Will such demands lead to an erosion of public support for the current system? The following analyses attempt to address this question from one angle.

The Post-Reform Citizens in China's Politics

Post-reform citizens are here defined as those born after the beginning of China's economic reform and its opening up to the outside world. As Deng Xiaoping shifted China's overall orientation starting in the late 1970s, China entered an era of rapid economic development and increasing social pluralism. According to the modernization or Postmaterialism theory in the study of value changes, socioeconomic development leads to economic affluence and material security, which enable human beings to discard survival-preoccupied value orientations but acquire value orientations emphasizing expression and participation (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This trend has been consistently observed across time and in many places, and among East Asian societies and has also been identified by an increasing body of research (Ike, 1973; Park, 1991; Wang, 2008).

In this paper I further this line of scholarship by looking at the perception of post-reform Chinese towards government legitimacy. My findings will address three critical issues:

1. Does the high-level of legitimacy perceived by Chinese also exist among the post-reform Chinese citizens?
2. If the post-reform citizens perceive lower levels of legitimacy in the Chinese government, does this represent a generational shift or just a temporary swing?
3. If the post-reform citizens perceive a lower legitimacy in the Chinese government, what implications can we draw for future political changes?

After describing my data and the definition of a key term, I will first present findings to the first issue. Answers to the second issue will come out of multivariate analyses, while the third issue will be addressed in the discussion section.

Post-reform citizens' perception of government legitimacy

Data used for this analysis came from the Asian Barometer Survey. The China portion of its second wave survey was conducted from December 2007 through mid-2008. The survey collected responses from a total of 3441 sampled citizens across China. Respondents included residents in 27 provincial units in China, with 66% living in a rural neighborhood and 34% in urban areas.

I define post-reform citizens as those born in 1980 or later: anyone with a birth-date on or after Jan 1 1980 is categorized as "post-reform", while the rest are categorized as "pre-reform" citizens.[6]

To look at the post-reform citizens' perception of government legitimacy, I will compare post-reform citizens vis-à-vis the rest of the Chinese population in terms of:

a) Trust in the central government, in the Party, and the local government;
b) General or diffused support for China's political system;

Concepts and measurements in (a) point to trust in "part of the political system", as one element in Easton's conception of political support, while those in (b) will point

---

[6] Other possible cut-points to differentiate pre- and post-reform citizens exist. For example, because officially "Reform" is recognized to have begun in 1978, so Jan 1 1978 could be a cutting point. It is also possible to define a generation not by the year of birth, but by the year in which they entered their formative age. For example, it can be argued that the most critical years for socialization are when an individual is between 10-20 years old. Taking this argument, post-reform citizens would include those born between 1970 and 1979 as well, who turned about 10 when the Reform started in 1978/1979. The difference between a 1980 vis-à-vis 1978 cutting point would be statistically insignificant. The difference between taking the birth-year vis-à-vis taking a certain "formative age" point would require some theoretical explanations, which this paper will refrain from getting into.

more directly to the "legitimacy" dimension in his conception of political support (Easton, 1975).

Trust in the Party-State

Figure 1 shows the levels of trust in the central government, the Party, and the local government. The blue colored bars represent the trust levels of the pre-reform citizens, while the red ones represent the trust levels of post-reform citizens.

[Figure 1 about here]

First of all, Figure 1 shows a very high level of trust in the Party and the state. Out of a 6-point scale, average trust levels in the central government and the Party are above 5 --around 5.5. A score of between "5, very trustworthy" (*xiangdang kexin*) and "6, completely trustworthy" must be very high, if compared with the level of trust that citizens in most other countries have in their governments (see also Gilley, 2008).

Second, trust in the Party and the central government is significantly higher than trust in the local government. This has already been registered by earlier studies (Wang, 2005; Li, 2005) which shows the citizen differentiating between the party-state and its central agencies. To the extent these differences do not affect our analyses of regime legitimacy in this paper, I will leave this issue for another paper to deal with.

Third, the post-reform citizens clearly have less trust in government institutions. In all three dimensions, the post-reform citizens' trust in government institutions is lower by 0.2 point. These between-group differences are t-tested to be statistically significant at lower than 0.001 level. Clearly this should be our main focus.

System Legitimacy

Besides questions measuring trust in political and public institutions, several other questions in the Survey measure various dimensions of diffused support for the political system (cf Easton, 1975). One question asks, for example, whether the

12

respondent is satisfied with the conditions of democracy in the country. In this case, if the respondent believes democracy is working well in China, his or her support for the system is high. Another question asks whether the respondent believes the political system is a democracy or not. In this case, if the respondent believes the system is a full democracy, or a democracy with minor problems, then his or her support for the system is high. On the other hand, if he or she believes the system is a democracy with major problems, or the system is not a democracy, then his or her support for the system is low. Whether China by international or scholarly definition is a democracy is not important here. What is important is that the public perceives it as one, and one that is functioning relatively well.

By both accounts, while the whole nation shows high support to the system, the post-reform citizens demonstrate much less support for, or allegiance to the system. Table 1 shows that, of the whole sample, 75% believe China is either a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems. and 86% is either rather satisfied or very satisfied with how democracy works in China.[7] For the post-reform citizens, on the other hand, these supporting rates are much lower. Only 67% believe China is either a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems, and only 79% are satisfied or very satisfied with how democracy works in China. Meanwhile, 33% of the post-reform citizens believe either China's democracy has many problems (31%), or that China is not a democracy (2%). Close to 20% of post-reform citizens are "rather dissatisfied" with how democracy works in China, and another 2% are "very dissatisfied".

[Table 1 about here]

From these two questions, it appears the post-reform citizens are much more critical towards the system, and less satisfied. But as we look at a stronger measurement of

---

[7] To highlight again the high level of political support in China, in Japan, these two figures are much lower, at about 58% and 50%, respectively. Furthermore, Chinese citizens show a very high level of confidence in government capacity. When asked how the government is likely to solve the most urgent problem the country faces in the next five years, 10% say "very likely", and 42% say "likely". In Japan, only about 8% chose these two options, while 66% say "not very likely" or "unlikely at all".

diffuse support for the system, there appears to be no such intergenerational difference.

[Figure 2 about here]

As presented in Figure 2, when it comes to the overall assessment of the system legitimacy, both pre- and post-reform citizens still perceive the Chinese political system as the best one that fits China. Close to 95% of the pre-reform citizens and 93% of the post-reform citizens believe China's political system is still the best for the country. In other words, they do not see any alternative forms of government as more preferable to the Chinese political system.

Nevertheless, a small difference exists between pre- and post-reform citizens here: compared to the pre-reform cohorts, fewer post-reform citizens chose "strongly agree" when responding to this question (7.9% comparing to 11.4%). Meanwhile, while very few people chose "strongly disagree", slightly more post-reform citizens chose the "disagree" than the pre-reform citizens (6.6% comparing to 4%). These differences prove statistically significant, in fact. If we give the answers a 1-4 score (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), the mean for pre-reform citizens is 3.07 and that for post-reform is 3.00. This mean difference is t-tested to be significant at below 0.001-level (see more in the regression analysis below).

Capturing the Intergenerational Differences

Hence, from descriptive statistics, it appears that the post-reform citizens in China harbor lower trust in the party state, and are less supportive of the political system. The key question now we need to ask is whether this represents a generational shift or not. In other words, if the difference remains after controlling factors that generally affect citizens' attitudes towards the government, then this post-reform generation must harbor certain characteristics different from earlier cohorts.

In this section I will try to insulate the inter-generational differences by controlling factors that affect the citizens' trust in government institutions and their perception of system legitimacy. Such factors can be identified from studies on political trust and political support, which work mainly around several key hypotheses.

14

Performance Hypothesis: Citizens' assessment of and trust in government is a function of government performance, such as in developing the economy, tackling unemployment and curbing corruption (Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997).

Cultural Shift-Critical Citizen Hypothesis: As economic development advances, citizens' priorities shift from materialistic ones to democratic and self-expressive ones. As a result, citizens' expectations rise and they become more critical towards government (Inglehart, 1990, 1997; Norris, 2002). Better educated and urban citizens with higher incomes are more critical towards government than less educated and rural citizens with lower incomes.

In the Chinese context, being "more critical towards the government" has two layers of meaning. First, it means the individual is likely to be less supportive of the government. Second, such individuals are more likely to be supportive of political changes towards a different form of government.

Civic Culture and Social Capital Hypothesis: Citizens' perception of government is a function of the individual's political knowledge, sense of political efficacy, participation in politics, and trust in fellow citizens, among others (Almond & Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1993).

Variables and Models

I examine the intergenerational differences in perceived regime legitimacy as measured by two dependent variables. The first is *Trust in the Party-State*, which is the average of an individual's trust in the Central government and in the Party. The second is *Diffuse Regime Support*, which is a 5-point scale measuring how much the individual believes the Chinese political system is the best for the country.

I use a dichotomous variable, *Post-Reform*, to differentiate those who were born in or after 1980 from the earlier generations. This will be the main independent variable: if it has significant impacts on the dependent variables, it means the post-reform citizens perceive the regime's legitimacy differently from the earlier cohorts.

The following are included as additional explanatory variables, in accordance with the various hypotheses of political support:

1) Regarding the Performance Hypothesis, I include the individual's perception of his or household economic condition (Personal Economic Conditions), national economic conditions (National Economic Conditions), and national political conditions (National Political Conditions).

2) Regarding Cultural Shift and Critical Citizen Hypothesis, I include an individual's educational level and urban residency. I hypothesize that more educated and metropolitan citizens are more critical towards the government. To measure the knowledge intensiveness of an individual's work and life, I include Internet Usage as an indicator. I hypothesize that people using more Internet in their work or life are more likely to be in knowledge-intensive jobs, and hence are more likely to have acquired post-materialistic outlooks and be more critical towards government.

3) Regarding the Civic Culture and Social Capital Hypothesis, I include an individual's Political Interest as an explanatory variable. This is a measurement of how much interest one has in political affairs in the news, and when having a conversation with family and friends.[8]

Findings

Tables 2 and 3 present the regression results. In both analyses, the first model clearly shows that post-reform citizens show significantly lower trust in the party-state and lower support for the political system. The inclusion of the controlling factors reduced the intergenerational differences regarding both dependent variables.

[Table 2 about here]

---

[8] I could include a variable measuring an individual's Interpersonal contacts i.e. the number of face-to-face interpersonal contacts each week. But this and several other potential variables in the dataset contains large amount of missing values, significantly reducing the size of the sample in the regression models.

[Table 3 about here]

Nevertheless, a robust message emerges from these analyses, and that is, a generational shift has taken placed in China regarding government legitimacy. The post-reform citizens clearly trust the party state less, and have less faith in the political system.

Other important findings include the key role played by performance. Citizens' satisfaction with the economic condition of the country contributes greatly to their trust in government institutions and support for the system. Similarly, their satisfaction with the country's political condition also matters greatly. At the moment, they appear to be rather satisfied with both the economic and political conditions of the country.

Discussion

For a while people have been talking about a possible crisis of legitimacy building up in China. Incidents of popular protests are rising, and urban groups are organizing themselves to defend their rights and express their demands. Within China, serious efforts are being made by the Party theorists to understand the concept and sources of legitimacy as well (Bruce Gilley, 2008). Earlier studies also show that political trust at the local level is relatively low (Li, 2004), and critical attitudes towards the government have been forming among certain sections of the society (Wang, 2005).

Data presented in this paper show that public trust in the national government and the Party is still high. In other words, an imminent crisis of legitimacy is out of the question. Nevertheless, a slight shift has taken place. Chinese citizens born after the reforms since the 1980s have shown significantly a lower level of political support. To them, the legitimacy of the Chinese political system has become less taken-for-granted. This confirms the cultural shift theory in the study of citizens' attitudes in modernizing societies, which postulates that in an economically modernizing society, citizens who have grown up in more affluent and diverse eras will be more critical towards the government. In China, whether this means they are more leaning

17

towards a democratic alternative should be a major topic for further research. Researches elsewhere indicate that this may just be the case (Wang, 2007).

If this is true, what does it tell us about the future political changes of China? It is almost cliché now to say that the evolution of Chinese political system will take its own path. A Chinese way of democracy will not be a clone or photocopy of the western liberal democracy. Andrew Walder, following a long period of carefully observing the mobility patterns of China's political elite, argues that the Party is likely to find its way in solving future challenges within its own system. In fact, contained institutional changes are already taking place as part of the government effort to renew its ability to deliver good governance, as well as to remain connected to the people (Fewsmith, 2005; Bruce Gilley, 2008).

What needs to be known is whether such changes within the current one-party framework will continue to work. At the moment no clear answer seems available. But what is clear from this paper is that the demand and pressure for institutional changes will continue to grow.

At the end of the day, legitimacy defined as public perception of the political system is largely constructed. The Party's ability to maintain a discourse in favor of its one-party system will be the key to its continuing hold onto power. To be sure, traditional Chinese Confucian political thoughts can serve as a source of inspiration for the Party in defining the relationship between the government and its people in a more hierarchical, patriarchal, and elitist manner. That way, people will continue to perceive the government as the protector and guider of the citizenry, and only those capable and competent can be part of the governing elite, instead of forming the belief that each citizen is entitled to the right to challenge the government. If such a political discourse continues, then the system's legitimacy may remain high even though discontent over certain policies or the government's local agencies may develop. After all, in Japan and in many other countries, satisfaction with government performance and trust in political institutions are already very low, but the whole system still remains.

The legitimacy of a political system is hence subject to discourse and global power politics. Internationally, there appears to be a consensus that one-party systems are

illegitimate. International pressure of this kind can foster the growth of system-challenging opinions at home, and build up domestic movements in quest for a regime change. Such external-internal mechanisms have (at least partially) contributed to political changes taking place in 1989 Eastern Europe and the "color revolutions" in more recent years. Yet for a big country like China, such an external-internal process may prove insufficient. If the Party can upgrade its ability in suppressing organized anti-regime movements on the one hand, and embrace innovations and changes in its government institutions on the other, the one-party system may well be prolonged. Within this, however, the Party's ability to renew its legitimacy discourse will prove crucial.

References

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Booth, J. A., & Seligson, M. A. (2009). *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Nations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Chu, Y.-h. (2009). Zhongguo Muoshi yu Quanqiu Chixu Chongzu [The China Model and the Reorganization of the World Order]. In W. Pan (Ed.), *China Model: A new develomental model from the sixty years of the People's Republic* (pp. 603-630). Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press.

Dalton, R. J. (2004). *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Easton, D. (1975). A re-assessment of the concept of political support. *British Journal of Political Science, 5*(4), 435-457.

Fewsmith, J. (2005). Hu Jintao's approach to governance. In J. Wong & H. Lai (Eds.), *China into the Hu-Wen Era: Policy initiatives and challenges* (pp. 91-118). Singapore: World Scientific.

Gilley, B. (2006). The meaning and measure of state legitimacy: Results for 72 countries. *European Journal of Political Research, 45*(3), 499 - 525.

Gilley, B. (2008). Legitimacy and Institutional Change:The Case of China. *Comparative Political Studies, 41*(3), 259-284.

Huntington, S. P. (1968). *Political order in changing societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ike, N. (1973). Economic Growth and Intergenerational Change in Japan. *The American Political Science Review, 67*(4), 1194-1203.

Inglehart, R. (1990). *Culture shift in advanced industrial society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., & Mastruzzi, M. (2008). Governance Matters VII: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators 1996-2007. *World Bank Institute Policy Research Working Paper* (4654).

Klingemann, H.-D. (1999). Mapping political support in the 1990s: A global analysis. In P. Norris (Ed.), *Critical citizens* (pp. 31-56). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Li, L. (2004). Political trust in rural China. *Modern China, 30*(2), 228-258.

Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic phoenix: Reinventing political activism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Nye, J. S., Zelikow, P., & King, D. C. (1997). *Why People Don't Trust Government*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pan, W. (2009). Dangdai Zhonghua Tizhi [Contempory Chinese Institutions: An economic, political, and social analysis of the China Model]. In W. Pan (Ed.), *China Model: A new develomental model from the sixty years of the People's Republic* (pp. 3-85). Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press.

Park, C.-M. (1991). Authoritarian rule in South Korea: Political Support and Governmental Performance. *Asian Survey 31*(8), 743-761.

Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Schubert, G., & Ahlers, A. L. (2010). ***Regime Legitimacy and System Persistence in the P.R. China: Towards a New Theoretical Framework***. Paper presented at the International Conference：Legitimacy and Governance.

Shi, T. (2009). Is there an Asian Value? Popular understanding of democracy in Asia. In D. Yang & L. Zhao (Eds.), *China's reforms at 30: Challenges and prospects*. Singapore: World Scientific.

Wang, Z. (2005). Before the emergence of critical citizens: Economic development and political trust in China. *International Review of Sociology, 15*(1), 155-171.

Wang, Z. (2007). Public support for democracy in China. *Journal of Contemporary China, 16*(53), 561-579.

Wang, Z. (2008). *Democratization in Confucian East Asia: Citizen Politics in China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam*. Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press.

Wang, Z. (2009). *Nation Building, State Building, and the Road to Democracy: Political Development in 60 Years of the People's Republic*. Nottingham: China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham.

Weatherford, M. S. (1992). Measuring Political Legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review, 86*(1), 149-166.

Yang, D. (2004). *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market transition and the politics of governance in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Yu, K. (2008). *Democracy is a good thing: Essays on politics, society, and culture in contemporary China*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Zhao, T. (2005). *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun [The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution]* Nanjing Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe.

Figure 1 Different levels of trust in government institutions between pre- and post-reform citizens
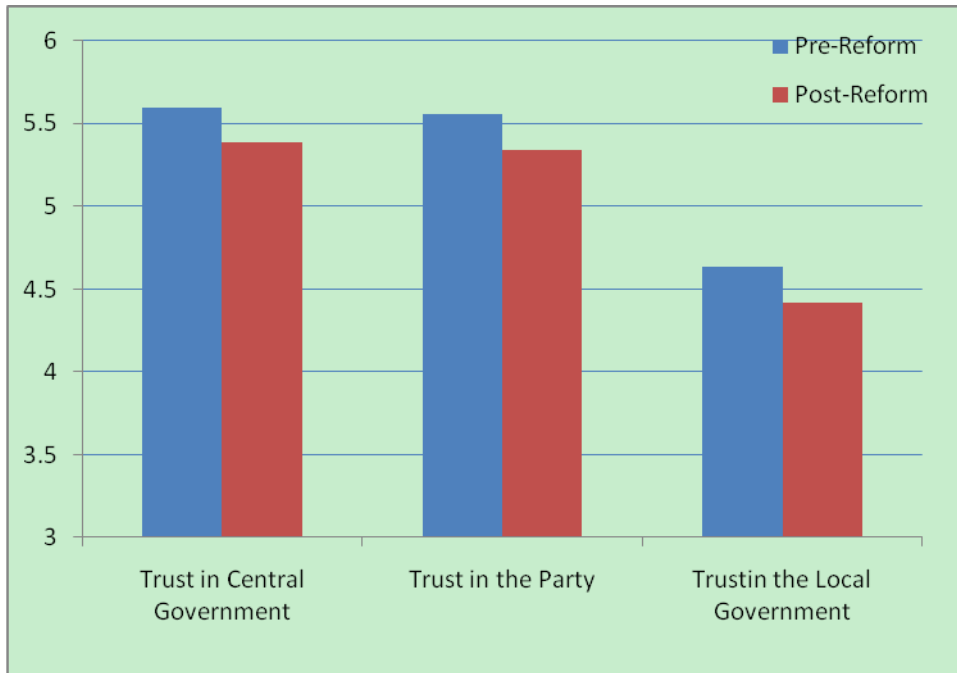
Source: Asian Barometer Wave II, China 2008
Responses to questions: How trustworthy are the following institutions? Would you say each of them is completely untrustworthy (1); very untrustworthy (2); somewhat untrustworthy (3); somewhat trustworthy (4); very trustworthy (5); or completely trustworthy (6)?
Valid N: for Pre-reform citizens, valid N ranges from 2536 to 2593; for Post-reform valid N ranges from 636 to 650)

Figure 2. Degrees of diffuse regime support among pre- and post-reform citizens
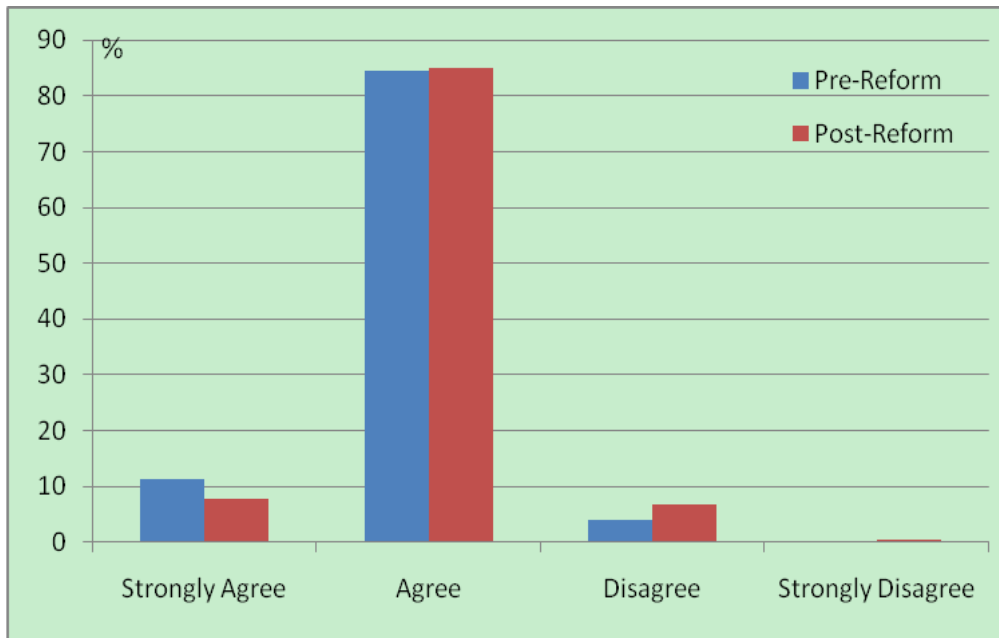
Source: Asian Barometer Wave II, China 2008
Responses to questions: Do you agree with the following statement: Although our
    political system has various kinds of problems, it is still the best that fits our
    national conditions (*guoqing*)?
Valid N: 2153 for Pre-reform citizens, 557 for Post-reform citizens

Table 1 Pre- and Post-reform citizens diffuse support of the political system.

	Pre-Reform	Post-Reform	All China
	%	%	%
China is a full democracy, or a democracy with minor problems	78	67	76
China is a democracy with many problems, or not a democracy	22	33	25
total	100	100	100
Very satisfied or rather satisfied with how democracy works in China	88	79	86
Not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with how democracy works in China	12	21	14
total	100	100	100

Source: Asian Barometer, China 2008

Table 2 Regression Models for Trust in the Party-State

	Dependent Variable: Trust in the Party-State					
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
(Constant)	5.586 (.015)***	5.572 (.020) ***	5.546 (.021) ***	5.228 (.028) ***	5.420 (.040) ***	5.409 (.041) ***
Post-Reform	-.219 (.031) ***	-.217 (.031) ***	-.225 (.031) ***	-.167 (.030) ***	-.091 (.032) **	-.086 (.032) **
Male		.026 (.026)	.030 (.026)	.000 (.025)	.010 (.024)	.005 (.025)
Personal economic conditions			.065 (.015)	.009 (.015)	.029 (.015)*	.028 (.015)
National Economic Conditions				.106 (.020) ***	.072 (.019) ***	.071 (.019) ***
National political conditions				.218 (.020) ***	.197 (.020) ***	.193 (.020) ***
Urban					-.137 (.030) ***	-.139 (.030) ***
Education in years					-.002 (.004)	-.003 (.004)
Internet usage					-.054 (.009) ***	-.055 (.009) ***
Political interest						.007 (.005)
Adjusted R-square	0.019	0.019	0.026	0.115	0.151	0.151

Source: Asian Barometer China, 2008.
N=2544
Dependent Variable:
Trust in the Party-State: An average of the two 6-point scales measuring how trustworthy the individual thinks the Party and the central government, respectively.
Independent Variables:
Post-reform: A dichotomous variable, valued at 1 if born in or after 1980, 0 if born before 1980.
Male: 0 for female and 1 for male.
Personal Economic Conditions: A 5-point scale measurement the individual's assessment of the economic condition of his or her household, ranging from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5).

National Economic Conditions: A 5-point scale measurement the individual's assessment of the economic conditions of the country, ranging from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5).

National Political Conditions: A 5-point scale measurement the individual's assessment of the political conditions of the country, ranging from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5).

Urban: 0 for rural residency and 1 for urban residency

Education: Level of education measured by the total number of years of formal schooling

Internet usage: A 5-point scale ranging from using no internet at all in one's daily life to using internet everyday.

Political Interest: An average 4-point scale measuring one's interest in politics from "no interest at all" to "a lot of interest".

Table 3 Regression Models for Diffuse Regime Support

	Dependent Variable: Diffuse Regime Support					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
(Constant)	3.075 (.009)***	3.067 (.013) ***	3.056 (.014) ***	2.949 (.019) ***	2.955 (.028) ***	2.957 (.029) ***
Post-Reform	-.076 (.020)***	-.075 (.020)***	-.078 (.020)***	-.059 (.020)* *	-.053 (.022)*	-.054 (.022)*
Male		.014 .017	.016 .017	.003 .017	.005 .017	.006 .017
Personal economic conditions			.026 .010	.006 .010	.006 .010	.006 .010
National economic conditions				.058 (.013)***	.058 (.013)***	.058 (.013)***
National political conditions				.055 (.014)***	.055 (.014)***	.056 (.014)***
Urban					.017 .020	.017 .020
Education in years					-.001 .003	-.001 .003
Internet usage					-.001 .006	-.001 .006
Political interest						-.001 .004
Adjusted R-square	0.006	0.006	0.008	0.036	0.035	0.035

Source: Asian Barometer China, 2008.
N=2337
Dependent Variable:
Trust in the Party-State: an average of the two 6-point scales measuring how trustworthy the individual thinks the Party and the central government, respectively.
Independent Variables:
Post-reform: a dichotomous variable, valued at 1 if born in or after 1980, 0 if born before 1980.
Male: 0 for female and 1 for male.
Personal Economic Conditions: A 5-point scale measurement the individual's assessment of the economic condition of his or her household, ranging from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5).

National Economic Conditions: A 5-point scale measurement the individual's assessment of the economic conditions of the country, ranging from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5).

National Political Conditions: A 5-point scale measurement the individual's assessment of the political conditions of the country, ranging from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5).

Urban: 0 for rural residency and 1 for urban residency

Education: Level of education measured by the total number of years of formal schooling

Internet usage: a 5-point scale ranging from using no internet at all in one's daily life to using internet everyday.

Political Interest: An average 4-point scale measuring one's interest in politics from "no interest at all" to "a lot of interest".