



EMANCIPATED PATRIOTS: WILL AUTHORITARIAN LEGITIMACY SURVIVE MODERNIZATION IN CHINA?

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Abstract

Modernization was expected to lead to cognitive mobilization through improved living standards and access to education in China. Authoritarian legitimacy would weaken as deferential and traditional values were replaced by emancipative and liberal democratic values, which was expected to lead to the democratization of Chinese society. The endurance of authoritarian legitimacy and popular government support despite rapid modernization has contradicted expectations. This study examined the role of national identification in reconciling the outcomes of modernization with the authoritarian regime. The operationalization followed the dyadic approach where audiences were defined by their levels of national identification. Analyses involved mixed effect linear regression models where national identification levels had random effects while emancipative values, level of education, income and other control variables had fixed effects. It was found that indicators of legitimacy perceptions including performance satisfaction, democracy evaluation and trust in state institutions are positively associated with the intensity of national identification independently from controls.

Keywords: Nationalism, Modernization, China, CCP, Political Legitimacy.

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Introduction

Authoritarian regimes are structurally impaired by their lack of legal institutional legitimacy, internal systems of checks and balances, and transparency (Gilley, 2004; Tsang and Cheung, 2022). Because democracies have relatively transparent and accessible politics, dissatisfaction is commonplace and rarely alters regime legitimacy perceptions. Poor performance is usually visible and gradually translates to growing pressure for change. Elected governments are subject to removal from office by citizens within the established legal institutional framework. If the regime is widely accepted to provide this function, opposition concentrates on the ruling government and not the regime itself. In comparison, authoritarian regimes have systematic limitations against resolving political contention. There are no institutionally binding mechanisms authorizing citizens to redistribute political power. In addition, bureaucratic and political functions of the state, the executive government and the regime as a whole are largely intertwined. Meaning, opposition against the government inherently translates to opposition against the regime. These traits substantiate the significance and consequentiality of political legitimacy for authoritarian regimes (W. Tang, 2016; Welzel, 2021; Welzel, Kruse and Brunkert, 2022).

Political legitimacy is a central and intensely debated concept in social science (Gilley, 2009; Levi, Sacks and Tyler, 2009; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018; Schoon, 2022). It pertains to normative attributes of power, its exercise and their consequences; thus, it is essential to the structure and operation of political organization (Gilley, 2006). Legitimacy generates voluntary compliance, non-specific support and effective governance, potentially resulting in a virtuous cycle where government performance and audience support mutually improve each other. Obedience to authorities perceived as illegitimate may be non-voluntary and conditioned on coercion. In such cases, order is fragile and authorities remain vulnerable to overthrowal.

Changes in the sociopolitical environment of successive cohorts leads to differential socialization. Given that no social context can remain entirely static, social change is practically inevitable. As much as it is possible that social change does not significantly alter legitimacy perceptions, it is also possible that it strengthens or weakens the relationship. Meaning that, the political socialization of upcoming cohorts may implicate future perceptions of legitimacy in a society. This compels political actors to pursue legitimation, the state practice of interference in political socialization to instill desired norms and values that bolster support. However, particularly in authoritarian regimes, novel factors increasingly take over the political socialization process. Modernization induced social change undermines authoritarian legitimacy and diffuse support (Welzel, 2006). Modernization culminates action resources, promotes emancipative values, civic entitlements and liberty aspirations through cognitive mobilization (Welzel, 2013). Cognitive mobilization enhances the desire and capacity of individuals to make their own decisions rather than conform to information and instructions provided by a higher authority (Welzel, 2021). This transformation has transcended the Western cultural sphere and emancipative values continue to spread globally. Modernization coupled with generational replacement are expected to increase the expression of democratic values around the world (Welzel, 2021; Welzel et al., 2022).

Studies show that unequal economic development has created profound ideological discrepancies across Chinese society. Younger, better educated, wealthier and urban Chinese citizens tend to express greater liberal democratic values and less nationalistic, deferential, and traditional values. Relatedly, diffuse support is comparatively lower in this group (Nathan, 2020a; Pan and Xu, 2018).

They are more detached from authoritarianism and tend to condition support on performance (Nathan, 2016; Zhengxu Wang and You, 2016; Zhang and Haemin, 2021). Nevertheless, the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China has endured and still receives broad public support (Cunningham, Saic and Turiel, 2020). Many factors have been considered including economic and political performance, propaganda, nationalism, and political culture in China to explain the resilience of authoritarian legitimacy (Nathan, 2020b). The CCP is aware of threats against its authoritarian legitimacy. Campaigns for Confucianist revival and patriotic education were attempts at slowing down the erosion of deferential values that encourage conformity to authoritarian rule. These measures may have worked to some extent in impeding the translation of cognitive mobilization into emancipative values. Still, given the dramatic rise in living conditions, some expect that the cultural infrastructure necessary for the establishment of democratic institutions in China will inevitably be realized (Welzel, 2021).

Despite the strong legitimacy perceptions enjoyed by the CCP, potential existential threats remain (Nathan, 2020b). Modernization induced social change reduces the prevalence of deferential and traditionalist values in Chinese political culture, undermining authoritarian legitimacy. The CCP's countermeasures involving hypersensitivity to dissent, information control, internet surveillance and policing, patriotic propaganda, and restrictions on independent civil organizations all signify its awareness of the implications of an increasingly modern and interconnected socialization context over its regime legitimacy (Nathan, 2020a). Although it is unclear whether liberal democratic values will ultimately prevail in Chinese society, values and norms incompatible with the autocratic rule of the CCP are evidently proliferating in congruence with socioeconomic progress. This poses structural challenges to the regime and threatens its reservoirs of loyalty. Censorship and discourse management enhance perceptions of competence, distort the perceived societal composition by magnifying regime support while isolating and shrinking the opposition. And the party has managed to maintain notable performance in recent years. However, there are benefits to minimizing reliance on unsustainable sources of legitimacy such as performance, coercion, and fear. To maintain non-circumstantial voluntary compliance, the party leans on patriotic propaganda, meant to promote national identification and regime adherence. This is not only devised to hinder the erosion of diffuse support among upcoming generations, but also to reconcile their values with the status quo. This study set out to examine the independent contribution of national identification in improving legitimacy perceptions in China using recent theoretical and methodological approaches and current data. It was found that national identification profoundly improved various indicators of legitimacy, including performance satisfaction, democracy evaluation and institutional trust, independently from emancipative values, education, income, internet usage, and other variables associated with authoritarian legitimacy perceptions.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Conceptualization

Weber (1946: 111–112) distinguished the state from other social organizations by its exclusive legitimacy and authority to use or permit the use of violence within its territory. States mainly obtain compliance through two routes (Jackson, 2018). Weber's definition refers to the first; states wield coercive power to prosecute non-compliance. However, coercive measures are costly and finite (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018). Therefore, regimes pursue legitimation and establish more dependable bonds between state and society. Legitimation earns citizens' voluntary compliance to authority by persuading them that it is just and worthy of deference and present obedience as strategically beneficial and ethically responsible.

Weber (1946) specified three historically observed justifications of deference to authority as traditional, charismatic, and legal “legitimations of dominations”. These justifications differ in content but they each exemplify forms of political legitimacy: “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574). Some of legitimacy’s commonly referenced features include an authority’s right to rule, its justification, and the arising sense of normative obligation to defer to its power (Gilley, 2006, 2009, 2012; Levi and Sacks, 2009; Tyler, 2006). In essence, empirical legitimacy entails normative, legal, and behavioral elements (Jackson, 2018). Citizens evaluate the ethicality of the regime and its general accordance with core norms as well as its appropriateness regarding laws and regulations. Depending on their evaluation, they are either motivated to obey and cooperate or reject the authority’s legitimacy and withhold compliance.

After conducting a comprehensive review of scholarship on legitimacy, Schoon (2022) identified three main approaches to measuring legitimacy that were conceptually similar but fundamentally differed in their units of analysis. Grounded on the definitional congruence between past conceptualizations, Schoon proposed a dyadic approach that equally incorporated three empirical elements of legitimacy: an audience, an object, and a set of expectations that define their relationship. A dyad is a social network unit defined as “an unordered pair of actors and the arcs that exist between the two actors in the pair” (Wasserman and Faust, 1994: 510). In this approach, legitimacy is conceptualized as a unitary entity comprised of two nodes – the object and the audience – and the link between them.

1.2. Functions of Legitimacy

The perceptual aspect of legitimacy provides the object leeway to exercise power discordantly from expectations to the extent that it is undetectable by the audience (Schoon, 2022). Notably, even if objects occasionally exercise power visibly in contradiction with expectations, compliance does not necessarily vanish. Perceptions of legitimacy heighten power relationships beyond a contractual exchange, enabling the audience to afford non-circumstantial compliance to the object. This is sanctioned by the non-specific function of legitimacy termed “diffuse support” (Easton, 1965). Diffuse support refers to the systemically pertinent aspect of legitimacy, based on moral and logical convictions that an authority is proper and worthy of deference independently from specific actions (Jackson, 2018; Levi and Sacks, 2009; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018; Tyler, 2006). It permits decision-makers to retain the audience’s compliance even if they neglect certain expectations. Diffuse support subdues the need to engage in moral and strategic assessments of specific political decisions to determine whether to accommodate or resist them, as long as they are broadly confined to socially acceptable boundaries.

Diffuse support is often illustrated as a reservoir of loyalty or non-specific compliance that warrants effective governance (Jackson, 2018; Tyler, 2006). When audiences ascribe legitimacy to institutions, they are more likely to comply and cooperate (Levi, 1988; Levi et al., 2009; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018). When resistance is small, the object can exercise power more efficiently and effectively. Increased effectiveness improves satisfaction. This in turn generates more support, creating a virtuous cycle (Levi and Sacks, 2009). On the other hand, the audience anticipates returns on its cooperation, creating a reservoir of expectations (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018). In the absence of diffuse support, the object depends on the perpetual gratification of audience expectations to derive compliance. However, administrative incompetence and government ineffectiveness may hinder the fulfillment of expectations and deplete reservoirs of loyalty.

This may initiate a vicious cycle where the inadequate provision of resources and services flounder legitimacy perceptions. This reduces compliance, further limiting the object's capability to satisfy expectations.

Low diffuse support may lead to excessive reliance on coercion and surveillance to maintain authority, leaving its continuation contingent on finite resources. Such measures escalate the transaction cost of power (Levi and Sacks, 2009; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018). Eventually, this may lead the authority to lose control of its coercive mechanisms and disintegrate (Schoon, 2022). Legitimacy compels individuals to voluntarily comply with authority through self-regulation and mitigates the necessity of coercion (Jackson, 2018; Levi, 1988; Levi et al., 2009). In this way, legitimacy may functionally substitute for coercive capacities as a comparatively cheaper, softer, and more efficient source of power.

1.3. Legitimation & Delegitimation

Hyman (1959: 25) described the process of socialization as an individual's "learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society". Socialization facilitates the emergence of distinct audiences. Through socialization, individuals internalize social norms and values in their environment, adapt to their roles and learn the behaviors expected from them. Political socialization more specifically refers to "the whole of the processes by, and the structures under the influence of which individuals acquire and develop their political orientations and behaviours" (Dekker et al., 2020: 56). Family, friends, education, media, and the sociopolitical environment may be considered agents of political socialization.

Individual political socialization is influenced by the broad sociopolitical environment. Shifting dynamics in the sociopolitical context may be reflected in the characteristics of consecutive generations. Generations or cohorts are collectives of individuals who join social life in temporal proximity and coexist within sociopolitical contexts that are unique to their lifetime (Mannheim, 1952). Cohorts are presumed to exhibit distinct attitudinal similarities because their political socialization takes place contemporaneously.

Participants perpetually join and leave social systems through birth and death, bringing about generational replacement. The concept of social change specifies the variation between the aggregate disposition of norms and attitudes of the same society between different points in time resulting from differential socialization and generational replacement (Ryder, 1965). Social change may have negative consequences on objects of legitimacy that are unable or unwilling to conform to novel expectations. The strategic value of legitimacy in maintaining compliance, social stability and government effectiveness compels its objects to ensure its maintenance. This either requires that the object adjusts itself to conform to new expectations or proactively steers social change in a way that inhibits unwanted deviations in audience expectations. The latter can partially be achieved through state legitimation, commonly utilized by states for this purpose (Darr, 2011; Easton, 1965; Easton, Dennis and Easton, 1969; Gries, 2004; Tyler, 2005). Legitimacy is often built on the belief in membership in a community with a "common interest" (Easton, 1965: 311–312). This encompassing shared goal creates the normative basis for legitimacy evaluation. Legitimation entails the systematic and institutional transmission of such norms to the audience that justify the object's authority and incentivize compliance, reducing its reliance on coercion and performance (Beetham, 1991; Downs and Saunders, 1998; Zhong, 1996).

Regimes may use mass media and public education to exert influence on individuals' political socialization process and create a sociopolitical context that instills norms intended to enhance perceptions of their legitimacy, maintain the alignment of audience expectations with their interests and preserve reservoirs of loyalty.

In cases where the object openly fails or rejects to conform, discrepancies may arise between the object and the audience that lead to a legitimacy deficit or illegitimacy, and eventually assent withdrawal. Illegitimacy is usually either defined simply as the absence of legitimacy or as an independent construct (Schoon, 2022). The literature discussed so far implies a paradoxically vicious cycle of legitimation for authoritarian regimes. Non-modernizing regimes are subject to delegitimation due to poor performance, government incompetence and inefficiency. They pursue economic development and modernization to enhance their performance legitimacy and national security. Modernization and expanded access to education decrease the prevalence of values that reinforce authoritarian legitimacy – traditional and deferential values. At the same time, the prevalence of liberal democratic values increases (Nathan, 2020b). The extent of regime performance linearly intensifies social change towards liberal-democratic values that inherently contradict authoritarian rule, implying that well-performing authoritarian regimes will accelerate social change that deepens legitimacy deficiency.

1.4. Modernization & Democracy

Emerging novel factors increasingly restrain state hegemony over the process of political socialization. The sociopolitical context is increasingly defined by modernization around the world which affects socialization and leads to social change. Modernization involves social transformations towards secularization, urbanization and industrialization of previously traditional, rural, and agrarian societies led by economic growth (Berman, 1988; Kumar, 2020). Socioeconomic development improves living standards, expands access to education, diversifies economic activity and labor specialization. Modernization multiplies opportunities, increases social mobility, and largely eliminates concerns for survival (Welzel, 2006). The link between socioeconomic modernization and democracy is theoretically and empirically well-established (Claassen, 2020; Easton, 1965; Lipset, 1959; Welzel, 2013, 2021; Welzel et al., 2022). Findings support the idea that changes in cultures and prevalent values of societies precede the establishment of stable democratic institutions (Inglehart and Welzel, 2001; Welzel and Inglehart, 2006; Wucherpfennig and Deutsch, 2009).

Researchers have proposed underlying psychological mechanisms to explain this link. Drawing on World Values Survey data (World Values Survey Association, 2020) spanning several decades, The Human Development body of work conveys substantial evidence that socioeconomic conditions significantly govern individuals' adoption of certain value systems (Carlson, 2010; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Inglehart and Welzel, 2001, 2010; Welzel, 2007, 2011, 2012; Welzel et al., 2003; Welzel and Inglehart, 2010). These value systems correspond to different strategies determined by psychological responses to the environment. Material scarcity leads to antagonistic social settings which prime individuals to trade off more power over to external agents to secure safety and access to resources. Agents socialized in such settings are inclined to adopt "survival" values which are associated with social conservatism, outgroup distrust, deference to authority, conformity with hierarchical and patriarchal social organization and preference for strong leadership. On the other hand, economic development and modernization expands access to resources, creating more benign societies.

The sequence thesis explains the endogenous facilitation of human empowerment, whereby growing action resources increase the objective value of freedom, in congruence with the transformation of social life from a source of threats to source of opportunities. This in turn increases the subjective value of freedom and generates desire for its legal assurance, encouraging the adoption of emancipative values (Welzel, 2013). Emancipative values, also referred to as “self-expression values”, emphasize freedom of choice, equality, and individual liberty. Those with emancipative values are more likely to adhere to liberal democratic principles and resist oppression (Welzel et al., 2022). Therefore, it is argued that indirectly, economic development and modernization promote values that are compatible with liberal democratic norms and incompatible with authoritarianism.

1.5. Resilience of Authoritarian Legitimacy in China

Cognitive mobilization and the proliferation of emancipative values are driven by socioeconomic development. Hence consecutive generations in developing societies are expected to express progressively more emancipative values. In recent years, authoritarian leaning actors have emerged victorious in elections around the world, which has been interpreted as a global democratic decline towards authoritarianism by analysts (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022). Globally, the trend of democratic value expression has been generally flat with cyclical fluctuations (Welzel et al., 2022). However, there is strong empirical evidence that emancipative values are gradually replacing authoritarian values around the world in congruence with socioeconomic modernization. This comprehensive and persistent global trend indicates a slow but steady decline in authoritarian legitimacy around the world.

Nevertheless, it is not guaranteed that emancipative values will always lead to democratization or culminate uninterruptedly. So far, the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes has shown resilience. Populist authoritarianism, exemplified by Russia and China, contends with liberal democracy as an alternative form of modernity (Welzel, 2021). In East and Southeast Asia, authoritarian regimes receive greater diffuse support and institutional trust than democracies. This contradicts the idea that authoritarian rules lack legitimacy thus depend on coercion, censorship, and maintained provision of public goods (Nathan, 2020b).

China presents a significant exception to the assumptions of modernization theory, where rapid development has been taking place for decades without the emergence of democratic institutions (Welzel, 2011). The changes involving socioeconomic modernization, globalization and the internet were expected to produce revolutionary consequences for China by empowering Chinese civil society, promoting critical thinking and democratic values while undermining authoritarian regime legitimacy (Hui, 1998; Lagerkvist, 2005; Zhengxu Wang and You, 2016). Access to information from non-state and foreign sources would weaken the regime’s centralized control over political socialization (Carlson, 2009, 2011; Xiaolin, 2017). Based on projections of educational attainment and income growth, China was modeled to become partly free in 2015 and free by 2025 (Rowen, 2007). The CCP has outlasted the expectations of many analysts. Instead, China has emerged as a global power that is wealthier, more globally influential, and militarily powerful than it has ever been (Blanchette and Medeiros, 2021). Against expectations of liberation and peaceful global integration, China has become more domestically repressive and externally aggressive (Pei, 2021; Tsang and Cheung, 2022). Moreover, research indicates that the CCP has retained popular legitimacy perceptions and substantial public support. Nationally representative surveys have demonstrated significant increase in satisfaction with all levels of government between 2003 and 2016 (Cunningham et al., 2020).

Recent improvements in regime support have been largely tied with government performance. Although state propaganda may heighten perceptions of performance, this is largely based in the daily reality of Chinese citizens (Nathan, 2020a). The party leadership's anti-corruption efforts have been an effective source of legitimacy, signaling competence, meritocracy, and moral commitment (Tsai, Trinh, and Liu, 2022). Others have echoed the role of performance in CCP's legitimation, attributed to its populist authoritarian institutions, hyper-responsivity to public opinion, exceptional adaptability, and effectively meritocratic political system (Bell, 2016; Blanchette and Medeiros, 2021; Dickson, 2016; W. Tang, 2016; Zhong and Chen, 2013). Additionally, support from more liberal Chinese may be linked with feelings of intellectual adjacency to the party, given that CCP members, especially those employed in government, express more modern and socially liberal values compared with the general public (Ji and Jiang, 2020).

Furthermore, the significant dependence of the recently emerging Chinese middle class on the state for employment, the deep intertwinement of state and society, the pervasiveness of state institutions in the economy particularly in strategic sectors such as finance, energy and telecommunications, and the profound restrictions against social organization outside state supervision around religious, economic, educational, or professional purposes all pose systemic barriers against the growth of opposition and concentration of power anywhere outside the party (Hancock, 2019; Nathan, 2016; Pei, 2021).

Internet usage in authoritarian regimes, including China, have been linked with distrust towards political institutions and increased demand for democracy (Nisbet, Stoycheff and Pearce, 2012; M. Tang and Huhe, 2020; You and Wang, 2020). The internet provides space for information exchange and public opinion deliberation, increases political awareness, and strengthens civil society (Ekström, Olsson and Shehata, 2014; Zheng and Wu, 2005). Authoritarian regimes utilize sophisticated information manipulation methods to combat negative implications on their legitimacy and strengthen popular support (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). Recently, China's domestic surveillance and national cyber defense capacities have been considered the most comprehensive in the world (Voo et al., 2020). Foreign access restrictions and domestic content censorship provide the main instruments of CCP's ideological control in Chinese cyberspace (Taneja and Wu, 2014). Online discourse is closely monitored and steered in desired directions especially regarding sensitive topics (Xiaolin, 2017). Citizens are kept largely unaware of CCP's shortcomings through censorship and assuaged through responsive deliberation mechanisms (Nathan, 2020b). Information that contradicts state narrative is highly inaccessible and the available information is heavily filtered through state propaganda. It has been found that government surveillance and censorship measures mediate the direct effects of the internet in lowering performance evaluation and instilling democratic norms, thus its indirect negative consequences on authoritarian regime legitimacy (Huhe, Tang, and Chen, 2018). In addition, it has been claimed that the state uses unofficial means to monitor and prosecute the expression and circulation of unorthodox opinions in public as well as private spheres (Lagerkvist, 2005; Song and Miao, 2014). Dissidence in China is surveilled, persecuted, and even predicted, using advanced technology involving artificial intelligence, facial recognition, and big-data analysis (Pei, 2021).

Nationalist rhetoric serves as a political instrument to preserve and consolidate the CCP's political authority in China. Chinese officials promote a discourse that explicitly opposes liberal modernity, emphasizes China's unique geopolitical destiny and its cultural incompatibilities with Western values (Welzel, 2021).

Analysts point to a heightened emphasis on nationalism in official rhetoric following the Tiananmen events, signifying a distinct deviation from previous legitimation approaches (Carlson, 2009; Downs and Saunders, 1998; Fairbrother, 2008; Sinkkonen, 2013; W. Tang and Darr, 2012; Xiaolin, 2017; Zhao, 1998, 2000). The Patriotic Education Campaign was an illustrious example of this strategic adjustment in pursuit of restoring the regime's depleted reservoirs of loyalty (Hoffmann and Lerner, 2013; Liu and Ma, 2018; Qian, Xu and Chen, 2016; Zheng Wang, 2008; Zhou and Wang, 2017). The campaign mostly entailed changes in curriculum, the distribution and broadcast of patriotic media as well as observation of rituals and participation in activities intended to inspire patriotic enthusiasm. It was explicitly devised to mitigate the potential effects of increased contact with the outside world in eroding national identification and obedience to the party, particularly among young people (Gries and Sanders, 2016; Jiang, 1991; Johnston, 2017; Zhao, 2000, 2005). More recent reforms in China have produced large and significant results in enhancing political institutional trust, as well as generating skepticism towards alternative systems (Cantoni, Chen, Yang, Yuchtman and Zhang, 2017). Today, China's economic progress, military advancement and ascending international status generates national pride and attachment among many Chinese (Nathan, 2020a).

Common narratives highlight CCP's central role in China's history of emancipation from imperialist forces and restoration of national pride (Downs and Saunders, 1998; Zhong, 1996). The future of the Chinese people, China's economic growth and social order are presented as inextricably tied with the CCP's continued rule and guardianship of national interests (Woods and Dickson, 2017). These ideas deliberately convolute state and society and characterize political dissidence to CCP as unpatriotic (Carlson, 2009; Zheng Wang, 2008; Zhao, 1998). They urge individuals to identify with the CCP and consider themselves part of a greater system (Nathan, 2020a). As a result, external criticisms of China may trigger defensive reactions and promote adherence to the party.

Through modernization and generational replacement, diffuse regime support may gradually diminish in Chinese society as preference for democratic regime characteristics spreads (Nathan, 2020b). However, not all regime opponents readily express preference for democratic institutions (Zhang and Haemin, 2021). In an original 2019 survey in China, 42% of all respondents were critical of the autocratic regime. Yet overall, only 25% of respondents simultaneously considered multi-party democracy their ideal choice, whereas 17% opposed both systems. Non-democratic critics were distinct from democrats in that they prioritized economic growth over individual freedoms and unlike regime supporters, they prioritized political inclusivity over social stability. Findings suggested that although economic development, access to education and foreign media exposure undermined views of the current regime in China, this was not necessarily accompanied by endorsement for democratic institutions (Zhang and Haemin, 2021). The ideological spectrum in China has been demonstrated to be multidimensional (Pan and Xu, 2018). Authoritarian and socially conservative values versus socially liberal and democratic values emerged as a distinct dimension. However, two more value sets are determinants of ideological alignment. One dimension involves preferences for state interventionism and traditionalism versus economic liberalism and non-traditionalism. Another involves nationalism, quantified by the importance ascribed to national sovereignty, territorial integrity, China's international status and views towards the West. Democratic values are positively associated with social and economic liberalism, and negatively associated with nationalism and traditionalism.

1.6. Research Question

It has been suggested that the CCP would intensify its reliance on nationalistic discourse for legitimation in response to its diminished hegemony over political socialization (Carlson, 2009, 2011; Xiaolin, 2017). Patriotic propaganda is meant to promote national adherence while reducing the proportion of those harder to satisfy in the aggregate reservoir of expectations and skew its composition in favor of the regime. It is held that patriotism will preserve authoritarian legitimacy, generate diffuse support, and maintain non-circumstantial compliance. As nationalism decreases, other expectations based on performance and democracy proliferated by modernization take over. These expectations are more difficult to satisfy, such as economic performance and equitability; or structurally unsuitable to authoritarian rule, such as individual freedoms and democratic participation. Dyads defined by these expectations involve more contractual and less reliable relationships with conditional compliance rather than diffuse support.

The strategic employment of patriotic propaganda for legitimation presumes that nationalism overrides or reduces the priority of other expectations and changes the basis of legitimacy evaluation. In other words, strong national identification reconciles the emancipatory outcomes of modernization with the status quo, thus maintains diffuse support, and generates compliance. This study sought empirical proof of these presumptions. Does national attachment among Chinese preserve legitimacy perceptions independently from the outcomes of modernization? It was hypothesized that audiences with higher levels of national identification will ascribe greater legitimacy, due to their set of expectations being relatively easier to fulfill. Relatedly, linear positive relationships between the level of national identification and legitimacy perceptions were expected to be observed when control variables that indicate modernization and cognitive empowerment were held fixed.

2. Methodology

2.1. Operationalization & Variables

The study of legitimacy lacks cross-national comparability, measurement consistency, analytical power, parsimony, and clarity (Gilley, 2006, 2012; Jackson, 2018; Levi and Sacks, 2009; Levi et al., 2009). Past studies have practiced “methodological nationalism” which involves national or cross-national analyses exclusively (U. Beck, 2002; U. Beck and Sznaider, 2010). This approach has failed to recognize that various political entities may be objects of legitimacy at supranational, national and subnational levels (C. J. Beck, 2014). Empirical legitimacy has been defined as social acceptance or “a given population’s sense of obligation or willingness to accept authority”, as a broader interpretation of Easton’s diffuse support that incorporates non-state actors (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018). The dyadic approach considers subsets of the population with varying expectations of reward distribution as distinct audiences (Schoon, 2022). Identifying dyads within a population and empirically inspecting their unique associations may enhance the understanding of how legitimacy may facilitate social change and indirectly alter the status quo. For this study, the unit of analysis was determined as the legitimacy dyad, with audiences distinguished by their varying expectations from the common object of legitimacy, the CCP administration.

The independent variable was national identification. All respondents were grouped under 7 categories with increasing expressions of national identification, operationalized as the sum of responses to two World Values Survey items “Q254 National pride” and “Q257 Feel close to your country”. This followed the assumption that an empirical relationship between level of national identification and the priority of nationalism over other expectations was latent, meaning audiences could be distinguished without identifying and measuring all expectations. Control variables were varyingly included in regression models, including importance of politics in life, interest in politics, sex, year of birth, urban/rural background, party membership, educational attainment, self-reported income, subjective social status, traditional media, alternative sources, national level GDP at age 18, and emancipative values. The variable traditional media was a composite of items asking respondents to specify their usage frequency of newspapers, TV news and radio news as information sources whereas alternative sources entailed the usage frequency of mobile phones, emails, internet, social media and colleagues or friends. The emancipative values variable was a composite index presented in the World Values Survey involving measures of several sub-indexes including attitudes on secularism, skepticism, freedom of choice, gender equality and autonomy, which indicate psychological propensity towards emancipation from religious, political, and social authority (Welzel, 2013). In addition, all individuals were assigned the national GDP value for the year they turned 18 to denote the socioeconomic development concurrent with their cohort.

The dependent variable was legitimacy. Schoon (2022) specifies three observable conditions that establish relationships between audiences and objects: expectations, assent, and conformity. Each condition is indispensable and only their concurrence empirically validates the latency of legitimacy. Expectations relate to the content of, and the meanings associated with the relationship. Where institutional structures are comprehensively acknowledged and durable, expectations may be deduced from the characteristics of the system. For the study, the analytically relevant relationship between each audience and the object was of the ruler and ruled, defined by the exchange of political power for obedience. The CCP holds central and unchallenged authority over all citizens and controls policymaking, thus power and resource distribution. The dyadic relationships are well-established through institutional structures. The object’s expectation is obedience and cooperation. The audience’s expectations vary by subset. Legitimacy was observed through several items related to conformity and assent based on these established expectations. Conformity is the observed or perceived alignment between the object and expectations. Empirical evidence of conformity requires indication that the object conforms to audience expectations. Assent relates to the audience’s agreement with, or approval of the relationship based on an evaluation of its value and appeal. These were measured in several singular as well as constructed composite variables constructed through arithmetic transformations of several related items. These procedures were theoretically and statistically substantiated. Cronbach’s alpha scores above 0.7 have been widely accepted as valid for index construction (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2010; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1967; Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). Some variables were further transformed to enhance scalability. Instead of aggregating the various variables constitutive of legitimacy, they were separately examined, given their individual implications and the sub-national scope of the analyses.

2.2. Data & Method

Individual level data was obtained from World Values Survey Round 7 conducted in 2018 in China available on the World Values Survey database (Inglehart et al., 2022). Responses from 3036 complete and valid interviews were available. Less than 1% of responses prior to variable construction were unavailable and the highest missingness for a single variable was around 1.5%. Case deletion is considered a viable method for variables with 5% or less missingness (Little and Rubin, 2002). However, cases with at least one missing response comprised more than 10% of the total in the used data. The data was mixed with complex relationships and distribution normality was not established, therefore missingness was addressed through imputation with random forest algorithm (Hong and Lynn, 2020; Stekhoven, 2013; Stekhoven and Buhlmann, 2012; F. Tang and Ishwaran, 2017). China's gross domestic product in current U.S. dollars divided by mid-year population was obtained from the World Bank database (World Bank, 2021). The entire data preparation and analysis processes are available in the online appendix. The analyses and visualizations utilized the R statistical language and the RStudio integrated development environment as well as several open-source R software packages (Allaire et al., 2021; Frederick and Knowles, 2020; R Core Team, 2022; RStudio Team, 2022; Wickham, 2016; Wickham, François, Henry and Müller, 2021; Xie, 2014, 2015, 2021; Xie, Allaire and Grolemond, 2018; Xie, Dervieux and Riederer, 2020).

The analyses involved restricted maximum likelihood estimated mixed effect linear regression models, where individuals were hierarchically grouped based on their level of national identification (Bates, Mächler, Bolker and Walker, 2015). The intercepts were allowed to vary between groups while control variables had fixed effects in each model to determine the effect of national identification on dependent variables. All models were optimized through backwards elimination based on the statistical significance and contribution of various control variables to predicting each dependent variable at 95% level of confidence (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff and Christensen, 2017). Models were used to predict the conditional means of dependent variables for unique subgroups with random effects, and control variables with fixed effects. The 95% confidence intervals of estimated group means were approximated through sampling distributions with residual variances excluded (Frederick and Knowles, 2020). Respondent weights, included in the World Values Survey data to improve the sample's sociodemographic representativeness of population properties regarding age, sex, education, and region were incorporated in the models.

3. Results

The coefficient of determination, notated as R^2 , denoting the effect size or the strength of relationship between the independent and predicted variables was reported for each model. Statistical significance is supplemented by effect size when reporting model fitness. The variance in the outcome explained by the model is calculated as 1 minus the residual variance (Falk and Miller, 1992).

The generalized linear mixed model coefficient of determination has been proposed to quantify effect size for mixed effect models similarly to linear regression models where marginal R² signifies the proportion of variance explained by only the fixed terms and the conditional R² corresponds to the proportion of variation explained by fixed and random terms combined (Nakagawa and Schielzeth, 2013). A common approach to the interpretation of effect size has been through Cohen's guidelines which considers proportions of explained variance below 2% as very weak, between 2-13% as weak, 13-26% as moderate and above 26% as substantial (Cohen, 2013). The following tables showed the variable coefficients and effect sizes for each model. Plots showed the mean estimated value for the dependent variable for each level of national identification. Lines above and below the points denoted the upper and lower limits of 95% confidence intervals of predictions, excluding residual variances. The categories with the lowest levels of national identification were too small which resulted in wider confidence intervals and unexpected results in some models.

3.1. Conformity

<i>Conformity</i>	<i>Human Rights</i>	<i>Democracy Evaluation</i>	<i>Corruption Perceptions</i>
<i>Model Intercept</i>	0.59***	0.57***	0.55***
<i>Emancipative Values</i>	-0.20***	-0.14***	0.06*
<i>Year of Birth</i>	-0.03***	-0.03***	—
<i>Education</i>	—	0.04	0.04*
<i>Income</i>	—	0.08**	-0.04*
<i>Social Class</i>	0.07***	0.06*	-0.10***
<i>Party Membership</i>	—	-0.03*	—
<i>Interest in Politics</i>	0.04**	0.05**	-0.04***
<i>Importance of Politics</i>	—	—	-0.03*
<i>Urban/Rural (Rural)</i>	—	—	-0.02***
<i>Sex (Female)</i>	0.02*	0.02*	-0.02***
<i>National GDP at 18</i>	0.03***	0.02***	-0.02***
<i>Traditional Media</i>	—	0.07**	-0.04**
<i>Alternative Sources</i>	—	-0.04*	0.07***
<i>Total R²</i>	0.56	0.30	0.12
<i>Marginal R²</i>	0.01	0.03	0.07

Table 1. Conformity coefficients and effect sizes. Significance codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05

The following variables were considered indicators of conformity and constitutive of legitimacy perceptions. These were distinguished from indicators of assent in that they did not necessarily account for the audience's personal agreement with the system, rather denoting the object's perceived conformity with broad societal norms. In all three models, national identification explained a greater proportion of variance compared to fixed variables.

3.1.1. Human Rights

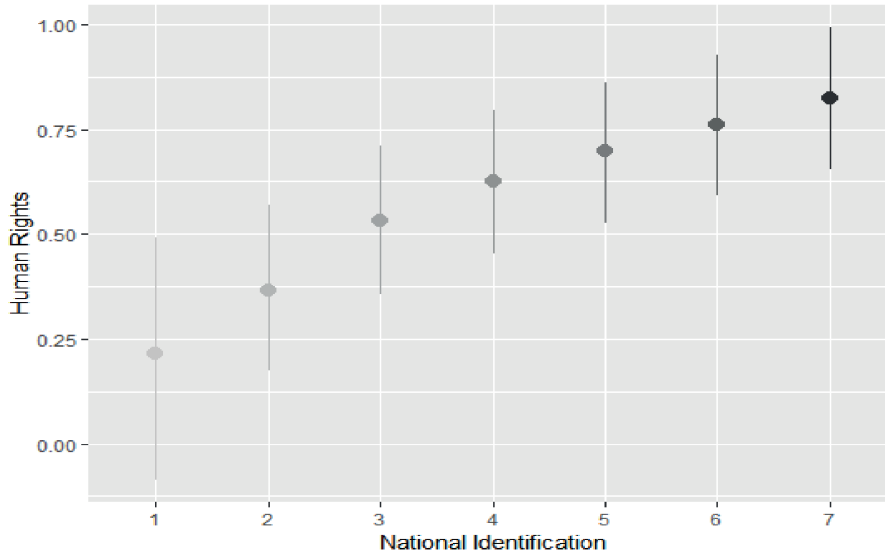


Figure 1. Predicted human rights perceptions by subgroup.

Q253 asked respondents to answer, “How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in this country?” on a 4-point Likert scale. Satisfaction with the treatment of human rights was taken as an indicator of perceived conformity. Increasing levels of national identification were linearly associated with more positive evaluations of the state's treatment of human rights when the effects of emancipative values, year of birth, national GDP at age 18, social class, sex and interest in politics were held fixed.

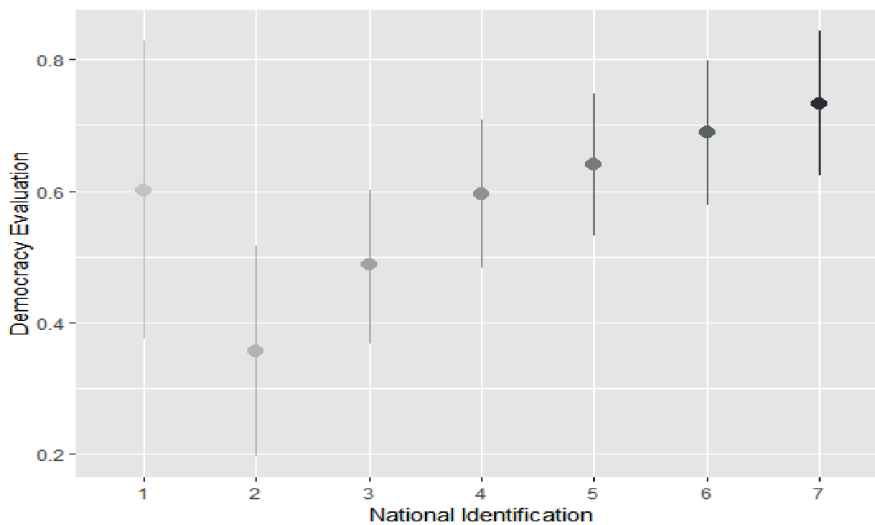


Figure 2. Predicted democracy evaluations by subgroup.

The item Q251 asked respondents to evaluate how democratically was their country being governed on a scale from 1 to 10, corresponding to “Not at all democratic” and “Completely democratic” respectively. Since CCP maintains that China is a democracy, lower responses indicate lower perceived conformity. Those with greater levels of national identification were more likely to perceive the state as more democratic at fixed levels of emancipative values, GDP at 18, income, interest in politics, social class, alternative and traditional media consumption, with the same birthyear, sex and party membership status.

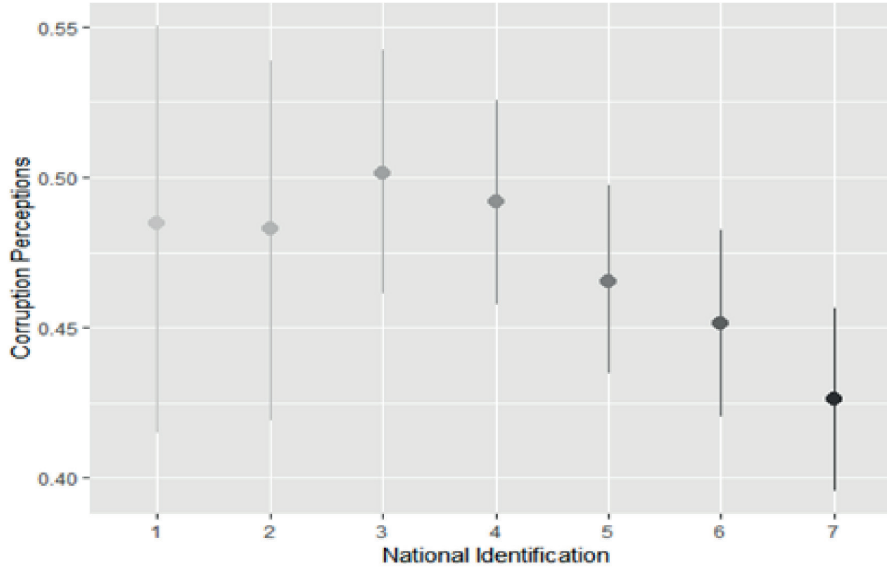


Figure 3. Predicted corruption perceptions by subgroup.

3.1.3. Corruption Perceptions

Corruption perceptions were considered to indicate beliefs that power was exercised illegally by the object of legitimacy. It was operationalized as a simple composite index of 5 related items with a standardized Cronbach’s alpha of 0.75. These were equally weighted and increasing values represented heightened perceptions of corruption. The model had a weaker conditional R² at 0.12.

The relationship between national identification and corruption perceptions was less linear compared to the previous two models. Nevertheless, more nationalistic subgroups perceived the state as less corrupt, regardless of emancipative values, GDP at 18, education, income, alternative and traditional information sources, interest in politics, importance of politics, sex, social class and urban/rural background.

3.2. Assent

Empirical evidence of assent requires empirical evidence of positive orientation, which distinguishes legitimacy from conditions of coercion or conditional tolerance (Schoon, 2022). Its measures must assess whether audiences agree with, approve of, or support their relationship with the object, as defined by their expectations. The explained variance in confidence in state institutions and performance satisfaction were substantial with conditional R² values at 0.28 and 0.40, respectively. National identification explained a greater proportion of variance in all models except for political action where its effects were insignificant.

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	<i>Assent</i>	<i>Confidence in State Institutions</i>	<i>Performance Satisfaction</i>	<i>Political Action</i>
<i>Model Intercept</i>		0.66***	0.64***	-0.02 (p = 0.093)
<i>Emancipative Values</i>		-0.15***	-0.20***	0.15***
<i>Year of Birth</i>		—	-0.03***	0.04***
<i>Education</i>		—	—	0.05*
<i>Income</i>		—	0.05*	—
<i>Social Class</i>		0.07***	0.08**	—
<i>Party Membership</i>		—	—	—
<i>Interest in Politics</i>		0.03**	0.05***	0.05***
<i>Importance of Politics</i>		0.07***	—	0.03**
<i>Urban/Rural (Rural)</i>		—	—	—
<i>Sex (Female)</i>		0.02**	—	—
<i>National GDP at 18</i>		9.76e-03***	0.02**	—
<i>Traditional Media</i>		0.05***	—	0.05**
<i>Alternative Sources</i>		-0.05***	—	0.13***
<i>Total R²</i>		0.28	0.40	0.23***

Table 2. Assent coefficients and effect sizes. Significance codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05

3.2.1. Political Action

Political actions signify desires to alter political outcomes and affect decision-making processes. This was considered an indication of lower assent in an authoritarian regime. The variable was a simple composite of 8 items asking respondents’ real and virtual participation in political activity with a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.84. This was the only model where national identification was backwards eliminated due to insignificant explanatory power, meaning that political action was more strongly related with emancipative values, year of birth, education etc.

3.2.2. Performance Satisfaction

Item Q252 asked respondents to score their satisfaction with the current political system performance from 1 to 10. This was considered an indicator of assent because it entailed a subjective evaluation of satisfaction which is associated with the value ascribed to the relationship with the object. A pronounced linear relationship between level of identification and performance satisfaction was observed.

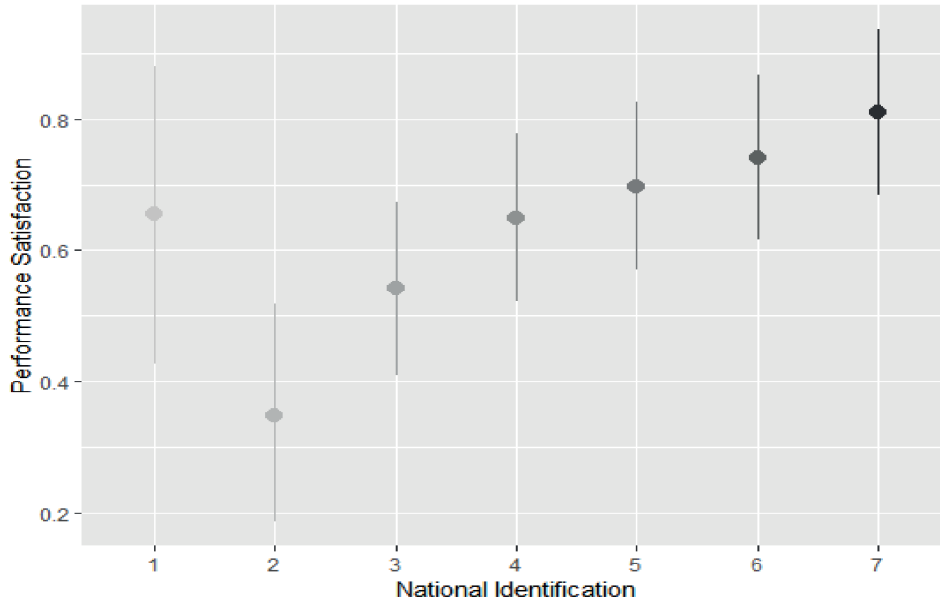


Figure 4. Predicted performance satisfaction by subgroup.

3.2.3. Confidence in State Institutions

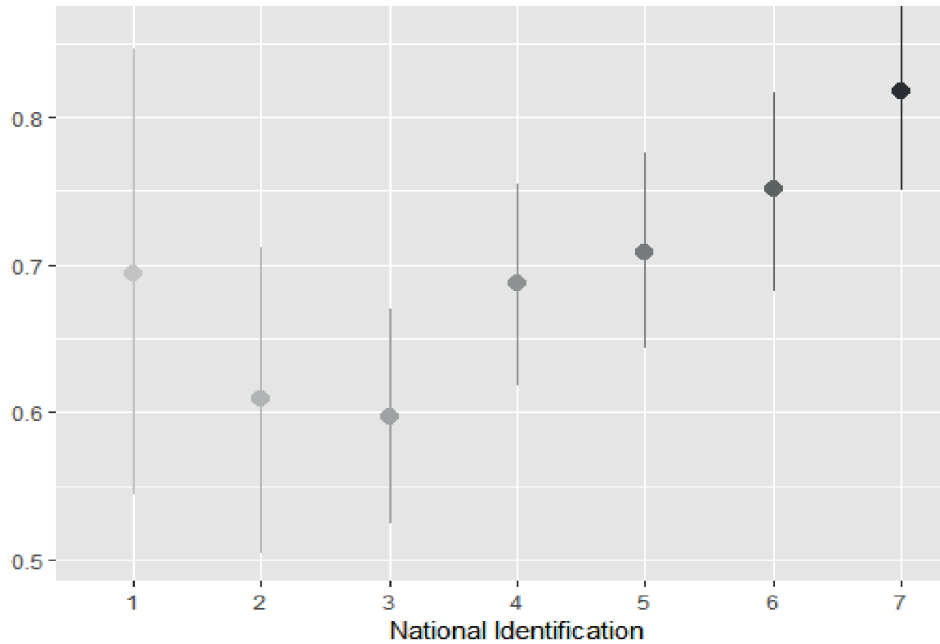


Figure 5. Predicted confidence in state institutions by subgroup.

Confidence in state institutions was considered an indicator of the audience's subjective approval of the object. It was constructed as a simple composite index of 7 items asking respondents to rate their confidence in several institutions. The items had a standardized Cronbach's alpha of 0.865. Trust linearly increased with national identification.

All findings supported the hypothesis except for the variable political action which was not significantly related with national identification. In other models, national identification showed the expected results. Emancipative values generally had the largest fixed effect however, its effects were largely superseded by national identification. At fixed levels of emancipative values, as well as other significant controls, those who identified more strongly with the nation were happier with the treatment of human rights, the operation of democracy and the state of corruption in China, signifying greater perceived conformity. They also expressed higher satisfaction with the political system performance and more institutional trust, signifying greater assent. The results supported the hypothesis showing that national identification overrides the cognitive mobilization effects of modernization and reconciles emancipative values with the status quo and contributes to positive legitimacy perceptions in China.

Conclusion

Modernization promotes emancipative values, which are empirically linked with liberal democratic norms. This implies that the legitimacy of the non-democratic CCP regime could gradually erode as rapid modernization takes place in Chinese society. The regime's pervasive efforts in consolidating Chinese national identification have been interpreted as signifying its awareness of the threats posed to its legitimacy by potential outcomes of modernization and social change.

It is predictable that a Chinese patriot will ascribe greater legitimacy to a regime that rhetorically aligns with patriotic values. However, this study set out to examine whether national identification preserves legitimacy against the emergence of values that inherently contradict authoritarian rule. The methodology was utilized in hopes of disentangling the influence of cognitive empowerment and sociodemographic variables from that of national identification in shaping legitimacy perceptions, and observing the unique, independent contribution of national identification in perpetuating authoritarian legitimacy in China.

The majority of the analyses produced results that supported the hypothesis. The expression of emancipative values was a significant determinant of perceived legitimacy in various models in the expected directions. However, it was found that those with the same level of emancipative values held differing views of the authoritarian regime related to their levels of national identification. Performance satisfaction, democracy evaluation, trust in state institutions, corruption perceptions and satisfaction with the treatment of human rights were all positively and significantly related with the intensity of national identification independently from controls. The findings demonstrated the utility of patriotic propaganda, indicating that it may have been an effective and sustainable legitimation strategy for the CCP. Even if greater expressions of emancipative values negatively impact legitimacy perceptions, national identification maintains conformity with the status quo, generates diffuse support and presumably voluntary compliance. In essence, national identification serves to negate the inherent contradictions between authoritarian rule and values arising from cognitive empowerment, effectively preserving authoritarian legitimacy against the social outcomes of modernization.

The implications may be significant. Findings suggest that the CCP could potentially maintain peaceful rule over a highly modernized and emancipated China. Although emancipative values may be spreading, national identification effectively counters its legitimacy eroding effects and maintains regime adherence. Accordingly, the CCP may avert serious potential structural challenges posed by cognitive mobilization.

But the success of China's nationalist legitimation strategy brings its own challenges. The increased patriotic fervor in official tone and in the public has drawn attention to the implications of China's growing power on regional and global stability (He, 2007; Johnston, 2017; Sinkkonen, 2013; Xiaolin, 2017; Zhao, 2005). It has been questioned whether Chinese decisionmakers would take on increasingly assertive foreign policy to appease nationalist factions. Nationalistic sentiment and uncontained securitization of national politics may grow to influence more decision-making, overtaking rationality and leading to growing diplomatic tensions (Blanchette and Medeiros, 2021). Many others contest the empirical foundations of these concerns (Carlson, 2009; Johnston and Stockmann, 2018; Qian et al., 2016; Sinkkonen, 2013; Woods and Dickson, 2017; Zhao, 2000).

Of course, there are unpredictable ways that regime legitimacy could rapidly deteriorate anywhere, at any time. Still, it would be unfounded to anticipate delegitimation to trigger anti-regime mobilization on its own. Many regimes have endured despite severely deteriorated perceptions of legitimacy (C. J. Beck, 2017). This may be explained in several ways. A regime's coercive capability poses structural limitations to the feasibility of anti-regime mobilization if the integrity and allegiance of enforcement mechanisms are upheld (Skocpol, 1979). If the regime maintains control over means of violence, regime change is less attainable. In addition, as long as the audience remains unaware of an alternative to the established regime, they are less likely to challenge the status quo (Kurzman, 2004). The emergence of an alternative object substantiates the strategic value and viability of anti-regime mobilization. Therefore, legitimacy perceptions of the political elite and other politically powerful subsets who may disrupt the regime's coercive capacity and pose an alternative to the status quo are more decisive in triggering collective action.

The perceived feasibility and strategic benefit of defection highly implicates collective decision making during antiregime mobilization (Kuran, 1987, 1991). Another reason that reinforces illegitimate regimes' hold on authority is that disagreements among regime opponents limit their ability to initiate collective action or form and sustain a coalition (Pan and Xu, 2018; Zhang and Haemin, 2021). Meaning that compliance under certain circumstances is highly contingent on the perception of viability, safety and strategic benefit of mobilizing (Nathan, 2020a). And although legitimacy does not directly account for social outcomes, it is empirically relevant and consequential through indirect routes (Schoon, 2022). Social change led by modernization does not necessarily set democratic transition in motion but makes it more likely for counterelites, regime-challenging alliances and popular movements demanding increased freedoms to emerge (Welzel, 2021). The attainment and sustainment of democracy remains heavily dependent on the power balance between political elites, which is also influenced by public opinion. The prevalence of emancipative values may drive support away from antidemocratic factions towards alternatives and sway the elite level power distribution in favor of democracy. Regime legitimacy or diffuse support may directly implicate civil order and indirectly implicate the future of regimes via elite coherence, security agency and military loyalties (Nathan, 2020b). In addition, the distinction between superficial expressions of democratic values and genuine, internalized commitment to democracy should be underlined. Those lacking emancipative values are not less likely to express support for democracy. But without underlying emancipative values, the comprehension of democracy is often misguided by authoritarian ideas (Kirsch and Welzel, 2019; Kruse, Ravlik and Welzel, 2019). The popularity of emancipative values among the population has much stronger empirical ties with the presence and health of democratic institutions than the percentage who simply express support for democracy (Welzel, 2021). In conclusion, despite the profound rectification of legitimacy nationalism has awarded the CCP, the possibilities of democratization or structural change through antiregime mobilization or collective elite action in China deserve consideration.

Future research may address various limitations that this study entailed. Although an empirical link between national identification and legitimacy perceptions was observed, evidence of direct causality between patriotic propaganda and legitimacy perceptions was outside the scope of this study. Future research may further investigate and potentially quantify the reciprocity between state action and social outcomes in this regard. This study used data from a single cross-sectional survey. Future studies may utilize repeated cross-sectional or longitudinal data and account for the temporal aspects of regime legitimacy in China. Furthermore, cluster analyses could supplement the identification of distinct audiences with various expectations, and the temporal dynamics of value expressions could inform predictive analyses. In addition, various subsets could be identified more precisely to empirically quantify reservoirs of expectations. Furthermore, future studies could focus on the utilization of national identification for of maintaining legitimacy through social change in other authoritarian regimes could unearth common patterns as well as disparities and provide a deeper understanding of said processes.

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