Social Justice, Nationalism and The Chinese Middle Class

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Introduction

Politicians and scholars alike have long debated the relationship between nationalism and social justice. Are the two values mutually exclusive? Synergistic? Before the First World War, European socialists, for instance, clearly viewed nationalism as a dangerous diversion, urging continued class struggle instead of interstate rivalry—only to back their governments when conflict erupted. Liberal American politicians, in contrast, have frequently sought to convey a picture of synergy between these values in their rhetoric. For example, during his 2008 re-election campaign, President Obama released a brochure entitled “The New Economic Patriotism: A Plan for Jobs & Middle-Class Security.” Using a large-N, cross-national analysis of opinion polls and income indicators, Shayo (2009, 147) has found that “in most economically advanced democracies, national pride is associated with reduced support for redistribution and…democracies with less national pride actually redistribute more.” Shayo’s explanation for this correlation focuses on disadvantaged groups’ identification with the ideals of their social superiors. His argument points to an underlying concern of the European socialists and American politicians noted above, as well as of the leaders of post-colonial states (see, for example, Anderson 1983): does nationalism serve as a social glue? And, if so, for what domestic purpose?

This paper explores whether nationalist and social justice commitments are positively or negatively correlated among one particular group, the middle class, in one of the authoritarian countries not included in Shayo’s dataset, the People’s Republic of China. The growing economic and cultural clout of China’s professionals and students suggest that they will play an important role in determining the character of their
country’s politics going forward. Their social sympathies and blind spots therefore deserve study. Using the results of two separate surveys conducted in 2007 and 2008, I argue that, contrary to Shayo’s findings in the context of advanced democracies, nationalism and a concern for inequality actually reinforce rather than undermine each other in Chinese middle class consciousness. Based on a case study of the August-September 2012 anti-Japanese protests that occurred in many Chinese cities, I furthermore posit: given that even under closely controlled circumstances nationalist protesters raise domestic social claims, this synergy should have worrying implications for Beijing. There are clear limits to middle class sympathies, however, as illustrated by popular attitudes toward the Tibetans and others on the periphery of the Chinese state. I address these limits in the paper’s conclusion.

The Chinese Middle Class

The “middle class,” while central to many seminal political science texts, is a difficult group to define. In this paper, I am concerned with people who are not wage laborers, on the one hand, or the owners of the means of production (or even the petite bourgeoisie who manage shops and other small ventures and employ small numbers of laborers), on the other hand. Instead, I focus on students, as well as supervisory employees of the sort described by Marx (1990, 450) when he wrote, “An industrial army of workers under the command of a capitalist requires, like a real army, officers (managers) and N.C.O.s (foremen, overseers), who command during the labor process in the name of capital.” Of course, as Braverman (1998) warns us, office jobs can quickly be simplified and degraded, making them little different from manual labor. However,
my interest here is in the *sympathies between* social groups in society at large, not the similarities of their different labor processes. As such, white-collar workers stand out as a group apart from both heads of businesses and workers. In China, education is often the most salient cultural dividing line between white- and blue-collar employees (Woronov 2011; Wright 2010), while lucrative official connections distinguish capitalists from lower-level managers. Accordingly, in my use of survey data below, I code as “middle class” those respondents with at least a year of college education. However, the literature often uses income to capture the same group.

Variously measured, the Chinese middle class is an increasingly powerful player—economically and culturally. According to one estimate, people belonging to households earning between $10,000 and $60,000 USD per year make up a quarter of China’s population (Censky 2012); categorized by occupation type (“brainwork,” professional qualification certificates needed, etc.), the middle class compromised 16 percent of Chinese citizens a decade ago, in 2001 (Research Group for Social Structure in Contemporary China 2005). The now-technocratic Communist Party recruits heavily from this group (Wright 2010). While workers and farmers account for most protests, riots, and strikes in China, the middle class sporadically takes to the streets over housing issues, environmental pollution and other urban quality of living concerns (Chen 2009; Wedeman 2009; Zhang 2004). More importantly, it is vocal online. According to 2007 data from the China Internet Network Information Center, a majority of Chinese internet users have a college diploma or above and 36.7 percent of internet users are students, while 25.3 percent are “enterprise staff” (Herold 2012). Online political speech sometimes echoes the epic tone of social movements from China’s past, when “protesters
expressed soaring aspirations and death-defying resoluteness to attain noble ideals,” but it is more often typified by “prosaic and playful elements” that can be no less devastating for their targets: corrupt politicians and the well-connected rich (Yang 2009, 84). Given its size, contribution to the economy, and willingness to speak out, how the middle class relates to less privileged groups and how it envisions its country’s role in the world may help determine the sort of regime into which China evolves.

**Middle Class Concern for Social Justice**

Unger (2006) flatly declares, “The educated [Chinese] middle class is elitist” and “most intellectuals tend to accept and approve of the status quo and see the straitened circumstances of China’s peasants and workers as the necessary price to be paid for China’s modernization.” Yet, much has changed since he made this observation. At a time of deepening globalization, population surges to the coast and then to the interior, a property bubble, recurrent spikes of inflation, and concern over educational quality—and even food quality and building quality—the middle class (as I have defined it) may be entering a period of “Knightian uncertainty” wherein its conception of its interests in relation to those of other groups is unclear and open to suggestion (Blyth 2002; Woll 2006). A number of factors point to the possibility of increased solidarity between students and professionals, on the one hand, and workers and other “disadvantaged groups” (*ruoshi qunti*), on the other.

First, China’s middle class is relatively free of entanglements with authorities. The Communist Party has long catered to the needs of successful big capitalists, first by creating “adaptive informal institutions” to accommodate them, such as by allowing
entrepreneurs to wear the “red hats” of collective enterprises even as they operated as private businesses, then by gradually formalizing these arrangements, such as by allowing prominent businesspeople into the Party itself (Tsai 2006). With a few exceptions, the newly rich therefore support the status quo (Dickson 2003). By contrast, professionals, despite being the targets of Party recruitment, are relatively self-reliant vis a vis the state: lawyers are no longer public employees (though their legal licenses must constantly be renewed) and intellectuals, for better or worse, look to the market as much as the state for vindication of their ideas (Wright 2010). The student population has increased dramatically over the past two decades and the government no longer assigns college graduates jobs. Seeking bureaucratic “connections” (guanxi) for opportunities and to cut red tape draws the middle class closer to the state: many students cite job prospects as their reason for joining the Party (Ibid.). However, the fact that better-connected big businesspeople can usually trump the interests of middle class citizens—wrecking modest homes and small businesses for development projects, building polluting factories in crowded urban neighborhoods, etc.—may ultimately lend China's age-old process of currying favor a bitter taste.

Second, while the cultivation of a new bourgeois lifestyle leads some middle class citizens to show “disdain for the 'unrefined' occupants of the lower level of China's socio-economic structure” (Wright 2010, 68), the material needs of students and professionals do not clash in any obvious way with those of workers. In Europe, a division has arisen between segments of the working class with “secure employment,” who desire continued job protection but resist higher taxes, on the one hand, and insecure “outsiders,” including students, who desire flexibility and more active labor market policies (and therefore

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higher taxes), on the other (Rueda 2005). However, Chinese migrant workers are yet more insecure than students and professionals. State-owned enterprise employees, though sometimes criticized in the press for their alleged sense of entitlement, are in such obviously dire straits that they are treated more as an object of pity than as a threat (the same does not apply to SOE bosses). As Chinese college graduates find it increasingly difficult to land good jobs, gathering in “ant colonies” of cheap apartment blocks on the outskirts of major cities, they may, to some degree, begin to identify with their working class contemporaries.

Mounting survey and anecdotal evidence suggests that many middle class Chinese are, in fact, increasingly frustrated with the existing social order and sympathetic to the less privileged. Drawing on a 2004 survey, Whyte (2010), for example, finds that while Chinese citizens overall are no more concerned about inequality than their counterparts in industrialized West and less so than their counterparts in post-communist Eastern Europe, highly educated Chinese (along with urban workers) are a notable exception. A 2008 Pew poll of mostly urban Chinese found that respondents rated social inequality the second most important problem facing their country (the number one problem was inflation, an especially severe concern that year; see Pew Research Center 2008). In 2009, “netizens” and student protesters at elite Peking University rallied to the cause of Deng Yujiao, a young Hubei woman working in a hotel spa who killed an official trying to rape her (Branigan 2009). Stories of hit-and-runs involving owners of luxury vehicles have frequently spurred outrage online; when a driver in Hebei in 2010 tried to get off the hook by dropping the name of his powerful father, Li Gang, this started a sarcastic internet meme still popular today: “my dad is Li Gang” (China Digital Times 2011).
Episodes involving migrant workers kneeling to beg for unpaid wages, of street vendors abused by city management officials (*chengguan*), and of employees who kill their bosses in anger over withheld salaries, to cite just a few more examples, have all similarly drawn middle class sympathy. Increasingly, students are volunteering at non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including labor NGOs. Following a series of suicides by workers at Foxconn, a supplier to global electronics firms like Apple, Chinese student activists went undercover at the factory and wrote a report on its abuses (“‘Gaoxiao fushikang diaoyan zong baogao’ quanwen gongbu” 2010). Students have also infiltrated Coca-Cola's bottling plants and organized campus lectures on the working conditions of temporary Coke employees (China Labor News Translations 2009). This sort of daring is rare but intriguing.

**Nationalism**

Another commitment vies for middle class hearts and minds, though. This is nationalism. Anderson (1983, 6) defines the “nation” as an “imagined community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” In line with Anderson, Gellner (1983, 1) describes “nationalism” as “a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” and describes “nationalist sentiment” as “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment.” China originally saw itself as the center of the civilized world, with its borders blurred by tributary relationships (as opposed to state-to-state relations) with neighboring peoples. Only when its position came under sustained attack

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1 The author witnessed this first-hand in his previous work with Chinese labor NGOs.
2 The Asian Barometer Project (2005-2008) was co-directed by Professors Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu and received major funding support from Taiwan’s Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica and National Taiwan University. The Asian Barometer Project Office ([www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org)) is solely responsible for the data distribution. The author appreciates the assistance in providing data by the institutes and individuals aforementioned. The views expressed herein are the author’s own.
3 The China Survey is a project of the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University, in collaboration
in the nineteenth century did a true Chinese (or Han) nationalism develop. This nationalism formed in opposition to both the ruling (Manchu) Qing Dynasty and the incursions of European and, later, Japanese imperialists, starting with the Opium War. The sentiment reached its peak in the early twentieth century. For decades after the 1949 revolution, though, nationalism was subsumed by Mao's broader socialist project. It only took its current following the Tiananmen Square massacre and, ironically, China's reemergence as a leading power on the world stage (Gries 2004; Z. Wang 2012). Post-Tiananmen, leaders launched a campaign of guoqing jiaoyu (education on the national condition), which “unambiguously held that China's guoqing (national condition) was unique, not ready to adopt Western-style democracy, and for that reason, the current one-party rule should continue in order to maintain political stability, a precondition for rapid economic development” (Z. Wang 2012; Zhao 2004, 9). The country's “century of national humiliation” by foreigners was drilled into students through textbooks, field trips, and speeches (Z. Wang 2012). Propaganda also began to focus on the richness of Chinese traditional culture, as evidenced by an abortive move to place a Confucius statue near Tiananmen Square and state promotion of a big-budget movie on the sage’s life. Alongside this top-down indoctrination, a grassroots nationalism has also flourished in recent years, spurred on by the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the 2001 death of a Chinese fighter pilot in a collision with an America spy plane, new Japanese textbooks that whitewashed World War II crimes in 2005, and foreign human rights protests against the Beijing Olympics in 2008 (Gries 2004; Z. Wang 2012). Together, these forces have coalesced into a nationalism with three principle legs: the country’s glorious past, its humiliation by outsiders, and the Party’s essential role in
national rejuvenation. Each leg has the potential to undermine calls for greater social justice: thorough-going change can be portrayed as being at variance with the country’s traditions, as aiding and abetting foreign enemies, and as undermining Party rule.

It is unclear whether middle class Chinese are more nationalistic than other groups. In an experiment conducted in Ningbo, Hoffmann and Larner (2013, 198) asked participants to divide 10 RMB between two charities, further informing a “treatment” group of participants that one charity was foreign and one Chinese. All demographic categories (old / young, urban / rural, etc.) showed a swing toward the Chinese charity relative to the control group, but the swing among middle class participants was particularly dramatic: 13.9 percent for “white-collar” workers (versus 7 percent for “blue-collar” workers) and 13.3 percent for university-educated participants (versus 7.1 percent for the non-university educated). However, based on a series of Beijing area surveys conducted from the mid-1990s to early 2000s, Johnston and Stockmann (2007, 193) find, “Those who are wealthier, better educated, better traveled, and interested in information about the outside world have tended to like the United States more than poorer and not as well educated Chinese, and they have tended to perceive lower identity differences as well.” The contradiction between these findings is intriguing. Our interest, though, is more on the middle class nationalism on its own terms, rather than whether it is stronger or weaker than the nationalism of workers or farmers or big businesspeople.

Middle class Chinese, especially “netizens,” have been vocal in their outrage over the international incidents noted above. Patriotic hackers attacked American government websites after the NATO bombing (Yang 2009, 76), while students boycotted McDonald’s franchises (Johnston and Stockmann 2007). Following the release of
revisionist textbooks in Japan, blood-curdling comments about Japanese people appeared on Internet bulletin boards of Chinese universities in 2005 and the net has filled with these comments (and with street protests) with each flare-up in Sino-Japanese relations since. Chinese who expressed understanding for Tibetan grievances in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Games were pilloried; for example, netizens tracked down and vandalized the family home of a Chinese student at Duke who tried to mediate an argument between overseas Tibetans and Chinese (Dewan 2008). Protests erupted outside the French retailer Carrefour’s outlets, a middle class shopping destination, following President Sarkozy’s public contemplation of not attending the Olympic Games and allegations that the retailer had financially supported the Tibetan cause (Z. Wang 2012). A poorly-planned Amnesty International ad campaign about torture in China during the Olympics was attacked by Chinese activists who proposed a boycott of Amnesty's advertising agency by young designers (Spencer 2008). Are nationalism and a concern for greater fairness in society among professionals and students perhaps strong but mutually exclusive sentiments?

**Conflict or Synergy?**

This paper hypothesizes that social justice is actually compatible with nationalism in the Chinese middle class context, though there are clear limits to this synthesis. In the early post-Tiananmen era, intellectuals of widely different ideological orientations like Wang Shan and Fan Liqin called for the cultivation of nationalism among a new “enlightened urbanized elite” oriented toward stability (Hughes 2006, 92–96). This implied the consolidation of the middle class as a separate group, concerned about the
“nation,” not the domestic struggles of the past. Yet, China has a long tradition of blending calls for reform with a passion for ending national humiliation on the global stage. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 started when students gathered in Beijing to protest the handover of Shandong Province to Japan. The movement expanded to include the advocacy of Enlightenment values of science and democracy and a thoroughgoing critique of Chinese “feudalism.” Crucially, it also led to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party and the dispersal of students into factories to organize the country's first trade unions. Patriotic youth and workers subsequently challenged Japanese textile bosses and British colonial police, bringing Shanghai to a complete halt with strikes in 1925 and 1927 (Perry 1993). Since Deng Xiaoping’s market reforms and, as noted, especially since Tiananmen, the Party has highlighted its nationalist credentials over its previous emphasis on class struggle, but the two commitments continue to overlap in the public mind in two forms: New Left nationalism and Liberal nationalism.

Drawing on post-colonial theories and post-modernism, China’s New Left challenges the primacy of “the Western model of modernization,” both in terms of parliamentary democracy / individual rights and, importantly, marketization (Gao 2004). Globalization, in particular, comes in for scrutiny (Hughes 2006). Though some of the movement’s websites, such as the (now-closed) Utopia, are constantly on guard against “race traitors” (hanjian), not all thinkers associated with this movement are xenophobic. Most importantly, criticism of the government is hardly verboten. The Chinese state is pilloried by New Leftists for both abandoning SOE workers and farmers, on the one hand, and for being too deferential to foreigners over territorial issues and for abandoning old allies like North Korea, on the other—much the same criticism as May Fourth
students leveled several generations earlier.

In contrast, China’s Liberals are “critical of the Chinese communist regime for violating their individual rights and, at the same time, critical of the Western powers, most of which [are] democratic, for violating China's national rights” (Zhao 2004, emphasis added). Unlike New Leftists, Liberal nationalists view the free market as an unambiguously positive force, one which can both empower China on the world stage and, if allowed to flourish more than it is now, wipe away the privileges embedded in the corrupt state sector—and even improve the lot of workers. Interviews and articles by former journalist Dai Qing and former Tiananmen student leader Wang Dan are typical of this school of thought: China is criticized by these dissidents as a “crony capitalist” country, and Milton Friedman shares the stage alongside Jefferson among their heroes (see, for example, C. Wang 2003). Though Liberals and the New Left offer sharply different prescriptions for their country’s future, they overlap in their hopes regarding China’s place in the international community and their concern for those left behind by the economic growth of recent decades.

Methodology

To test my hypothesis that Chinese middle class nationalism and concern for social justice are synergistic, I employ mixed methods. First, I use a simple ordinary least squares regression to examine the convergence or divergence of these two values across two separate surveys conducted by separate researchers in China (more details on the data are provided below). My purpose is not to determine whether nationalism causes a commitment to social justice or, for that matter, the reverse. After all, outside of
“survey experiments,” in which respondents are randomly assigned different questions, inferring causal relationships from survey data alone is difficult (Gaines and Kuklinski 2007). Instead, my interest is in whether a significant correlation between the two values exists and, if so, whether that correlation is positive or negative. My expectation is that they are positively correlated. Second, I use a single case study, the 2012 anti-Japanese protests that occurred in several Chinese cities, to illustrate how a social justice-nationalist synthesis can play out in the streets. This case is a “crucial” one (Gerring 2008) in the sense that it represents the least likely circumstances for nationalist sentiment to spread to social objectives: anti-Japanese protests (and anti-American protests) have traditionally been tightly controlled by authorities. While it is rare that a single case can prove or disprove a relationship, if a synthesis between nationalism and social justice appears even in my “crucial” case, we should have more confidence in my quantitative survey results.

Testing the Social Justice-Nationalist Synergy with Surveys

Data

As noted, this paper employs two datasets. Specifically, it uses the second wave of the Asian Barometer survey, which includes interviews with 5,098 Chinese citizens conducted between November 2007 and December 2008 in 67 counties, and The China

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2 The Asian Barometer Project (2005-2008) was co-directed by Professors Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu and received major funding support from Taiwan’s Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica and National Taiwan University. The Asian Barometer Project Office (www.asianbarometer.org) is solely responsible for the data distribution. The author appreciates the assistance in providing data by the institutes and individuals aforementioned. The views expressed herein are the author's own.
Survey, which includes interviews with 3,989 citizens conducted in 2008 in 75 counties. These can test the correlation between nationalism and social justice in middle class opinion (Hypothesis 1) and the Leftist tone of any social justice-nationalist synthesis that exists (Hypothesis 2). Both surveys are stratified, probability samples, with weights included for strata, age (10 years), and gender, in the case of The China Survey, and gender, age, area and agrarian or non-agrarian population, in the case of the Asian Barometer. The China survey has 16 strata, with counties as the primary sampling units (PSUs); the Asian Barometer has four strata, with counties again the PSUs.

The two datasets have important strengths, as well as weaknesses. Few surveys cover as many topics as these. The year in which they were conducted, 2008, proved to be fortuitous. It witnessed a massive nationalist mobilization in China around the Olympics, as noted above, as well around the Sichuan earthquake, with patriotic middle class young people volunteering in high numbers to help with disaster relief (Z. Wang 2012). The year was also marked by extraordinarily high rates of labor unrest, putting social injustices into the spotlight. A strength and a limitation of both surveys is that they were administered in collaboration with Chinese institutions (including the All China Women’s Federation in the case of the Asian Barometer survey). These partnerships doubtless provided crucial expertise on the Chinese environment. However, the words of popular China blogger Charles Custer regarding surveys conducted by foreigners rings doubly true for surveys administered in whole or part by Chinese institutions: “Why would anyone choose to go out on a limb and tell a stranger they disapprove of the

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3 The China Survey is a project of the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University, in collaboration with the Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University.
4 Manion (2010) notes the “dearth of publicly available datasets” from surveys conducted in China: only three out of the 32 surveys she includes in her review have been publicly archived.
central government? They gain nothing whatsoever from such an action, and the risks, while minimal, are not nonexistent” (Custer 2012). I have tried to choose questions from these surveys, though, that do not lend themselves easily to politically correct answers. A more serious difficulty is choosing fitting operationalizations of complex concepts like “nationalism” and “social justice” from among the questions available. My use of two surveys with slightly different (but overlapping) questions mitigates but does not fully resolve this problem.

Measures

Before determining the relationship between nationalism and social justice in Chinese middle class opinion, I have to define what “middle class” means in the context of each of the surveys used. As noted in Footnote 1, educational attainment is often the dividing line between the middle class and the working class in China. In her descriptive statistics, Wright (2010) operationalizes Chinese “professionals” as citizens with college degrees; Woronov (2011), meanwhile, notes that many working class young people, including the children of migrant workers, cannot even sit for college entrance exams because they have attended vocational schools, not college-track high schools. For The China Survey, I therefore define “middle class” as anyone with at least a year of college education. Similarly, for the Asian Barometer survey, I define “middle class” as anyone with at least “some university education.” This definition risks including several ultra- rich respondents, but the risk is minimal. I also assume that restricting the two surveys’ data in these ways does not significantly affect the weights used.

Next, I choose questions that best capture the concepts “nationalism” and “concern for social justice.” As a measure of “nationalism,” I choose the question “Do
you agree or disagree with the following statement: A citizen should always remain loyal only to his country, no matter how imperfect?” from the Asian Barometer survey and “People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong” from The China Survey. The wordings of these questions capture the issue of loyalty and betrayal inherent in nationalist mobilizations around the Tibet issue, etc. Answers to both these questions are scored on a four point scale, with a response of “1” indicating strong agreement and “4” indicating disagreement. “Social justice,” is measured by the degree to which respondents agree (or disagree) with the statement “In order to preserve social justice, the government should prevent the gap between rich and poor from growing any larger” from the Asian Barometer survey (on a four-point scale, again, with “1” indicating strong agreement) and “On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating this is not a problem at all in China and 10 indicating this is an extremely serious problem, how serious do you think these problems are in China today?” from The China Survey, in which one of the “problem” options is “Inequality.” Of the operationalizations available, these two capture social justice per se the best (as opposed to concern about poverty, charity, etc.). The correlations between responses to all the other questions relating to nationalism and social justice in The China Survey are displayed in Appendices 1 and 2, respectively. Responses are roughly correlated.

Finally, I choose several important controls. For both The China Survey and the Asian Barometer survey, I included controls for the age of the respondent (Age) and gender (Gender), as some journalistic accounts have cited angry young men, in particular, as the most potent force behind Chinese nationalism (Osnos 2008), while Hoffmann and Larner's (2013) experiment finds women more nationalistic than men; if young men or
young women are also especially concerned with social justice, then my results might end up being merely a reflection of that group’s ideas, not the middle class in general. I also included a variable measuring respondents’ professed interest in politics (Interest_Politics) to account for the possibility that some politically engaged respondents might simply show a strong concern for each and every issue of national import mentioned by the surveyors and thereby bias results. For The China Survey, which has more China-specific questions, I additionally include controls for Communist Party membership (Party_Member) and ethnicity (Ethnicity, counted as Han, other or “don’t know” or “no answer”) to account for the possibility that Party training or being the member of an ethnic minority (or of the Han majority) might affect both respondents’ feelings of nationalism and their concern for social justice.

Results

Table 1 displays the outputs of four ordinary least squares regressions with concern for inequality (Inequality_Seriousness) as the dependent variable and loyalty to country (Loyalty) as the chief independent variable. For each of the two surveys, Model 1 shows the relationship between Pride and Inequality_Seriousness without controls, while Model 2 includes all the controls. In line with my hypothesis, the attitude of “China right or wrong” is positively correlated with the belief among middle class respondents that inequality is a serious national problem in all the models at either a one percent or five percent level of significance. With the exception of Ethnicity in The China Survey, none of the other variables is significant. It is not a powerful correlation, however. The China Survey’s regression (with controls) only accounts for 2.74 percent of variation; the Asian
Barometer’s, 7.55 percent. Another, fuzzier operationalization of nationalism, a simple 1-4 score measuring respondents’ “pride” in their country (with “1” signifying a high degree of pride), results in a similar correlation for the Asian Barometer but a negative correlation for The China Survey. This suggests that despite its surface incongruity with feelings of sympathy, a “my country, right or wrong” attitude—the harder-edged nationalism captured the anecdotes used in this paper—is more strongly tied to concern for the less well-off than generic patriotism.

[Insert Table 1 here]

A Case Study: The 2012 Anti-Japanese Protests

The survey results above show that a synthesis between nationalism and social justice exists in middle class opinion, but what does this mean practically? The Chinese government presumably prefers that issues liable to activate popular energies be kept separate. Thus, if the two values that are the focus of this paper crop up together even in situations of heightened state control, then we should have greater confidence in the salience of this synergy—and we should wonder what it means for state-society relations going forward. Chinese protests against foreign countries represent a situation of particularly tight state control. In 1999, after NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, The Washington Post reported on the protests in Chinese cities: “In many cases, participants were bused to the demonstration site. They also were provided with bullhorns and a list of government-approved slogans” (Pomfret 1999). During the anti-Japanese student protests of 2005, “police herded protesters into tight groups, let them take turns throwing rocks, then told them they had ‘vented their anger’
long enough and bused them back to campus” (Kahn 2005). Meyer and Whittier (1994) argue that social movements can “spill over” into each other via movement organizations, communities, and personnel, as well as through policy processes and mainstream culture at large. China’s nationalist protests lack well-established organizations and personnel and are carefully monitored. If “spillover” can occur in even such settings, then the Chinese government has cause for alarm.

**Background**

The 2012 anti-Japanese protests were a response to a series of blowups in the long-running dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands, a chain of uninhabited outcroppings that were captured by Japan in 1895 and, unlike other territories like Taiwan, not returned to China following the Second World War. In April 2012, Tokyo’s right-wing mayor provocatively announced plans for the municipality to purchase the islands from their private holders. Then, in July, Japan’s prime minister suggested having the national government purchase the Diaoyu / Senkaku instead, a move that was framed as an attempt to defuse tensions with China but (if that was indeed the intention) backfired. Hong Kong-based activists attempting to swim to the islands were detained by the Japanese coastguard, and in August protesters hit the streets in dozens of Chinese cities. As previously, young people dominated. Violence broke out in several locations, including the burning of Japanese cars and car dealerships, the trashing of Japanese restaurants and department stores, the siege of a group of Japanese guests at a hotel in Xi’an, and the damaging of two Panasonic factories. However, following the

5 The opposite process identified by Hadden and Tarrow (2007), namely “spillout,” whereby a movement is diluted by commitments to successive causes, is less relevant here.
pattern of past nationalist demonstrations, the principle mobilizations were carefully controlled. The New York Times reported, “Municipal workers in Beijing who normally guard local neighborhoods were called by their superiors at 4 a.m. on the day of one of the protests, directed to board buses that took them to the protest site outside the Japanese Embassy and provided with box lunches, one of the workers said. Their job was to provide security, alongside the police” (Perlez 2012). According to The Los Angeles Times, “Although there has been no evidence that police officers participated in the violence, in many cities they directed the public on where to protest and cleared streets to allow tens of thousands to mass. Many protesters interviewed Tuesday said they had been given the day off by employers to demonstrate…. ‘I need to lead the crowd and guide them to march in an orderly fashion,’ wrote a police officer in Jiangxi province in a microblog posting that was later removed” (Demick and Makinen 2012). Blogging from the scene of the Beijing protests, The New Yorker’s Evan Osnos wrote, “The police had organized the demonstrators into bunches, allowing them to stream by the front of the Embassy for a moment to throw water bottles at the granite and steel gate, before they were ushered on to make way for the next group. Separating them from the gate were rows of riot troops in camouflage” (Osnos 2012). In other words, strict order prevailed amid apparent disorder.

Spillover

Despite this control, unexpected linkages to other causes appeared. During a march through downtown Shenzhen, democracy advocates carried a banner with the words “Freedom, Democracy, Human Rights, Constitutional Government” (ziyou, minzhu, renquan, xianzheng) in big characters and “Protect Diaoyu” (bao diao) in small
characters tacked on at the end (Lam 2012). The activists were picked out and arrested by police, but not before their daring banner had been photographed and the images uploaded online. In Beijing, several protesters raised placards in support of the recently deposed populist party secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, who had earned praise from Leftists for cracking down on the mafia, building affordable rental housing, and launching programs to help migrant workers settle into the city. The placards, which read “Diaoyu belongs to China, Bo belongs to the people,” were “quietly removed from the hands of the protesters by plainclothes security men stationed around the crowd” (Perlez 2012). The same slogan appeared on banners in Chengdu (Demick and Makinen 2012). Workers at a Panasonic plant downed their tools, ostensibly in support for the nationalist mobilizations but likely with other, economic motives, as well (Voigt 2012). And most significantly in relation to the argument of this paper, The Associated Press reported, “Protesters held up signs that touched on broader social issues such as corruption, food safety and the widening gap between poor and rich. Some protesters even joked that urban code enforcers—resented by the Chinese public for their brutality against unlicensed street peddlers—should be sent to fight the Japanese military” (Tang 2012). Television cameras caught a participant in the Shenzhen mobilization shouting, “Down with the Communism!” (Perlez 2012). In mid-September, authorities had had enough and the demonstrations were suppressed.

Clearly, these instances of “spillover” showed an element of calculation. Liberal democracy advocates and Leftist supporters of Bo Xilai alike saw a “political opportunity” (Tarrow 1998) in the form of state-approved protests and inserted their own causes, in much the same way that O’Brien and Li (2006) have shown rural Chinese use
central government slogans to fight local corruption. Yet, it is interesting that the advocates’ fellow protesters did not seem to have objected to their placards and banners. Instead, it was left to police to enforce message discipline. Scholars like Gries (2004) have argued that Chinese popular nationalism poses problems for the government’s ability to manage foreign policy as it sees fit. In the above case study of the 2012 anti-Japanese protests above, we see that the synergy of nationalism and a commitment to social justice among young protesters presents potential domestic challenges to the Party domestically, as well. Shirk (2007, 7) writes, “The worst nightmare of China’s leaders is a national protest movement of discontentsed groups—unemployed workers, hard-pressed farmers, and students—united against the regime by the shared fervor of nationalism.” Protests like those discussed here give a hint of what such a movement would look like.

**Discussion**

The focus of this paper has been on middle class opinion. However, its underlying interest is in the ability of different classes in Chinese society to find common cause amidst changing conceptions of fairness and national interest. Classic studies of comparative economic and political development have described cross-class alliances as agents of both change and stasis. The petite bourgeoisie and / or middle peasants allied with the working class are frequently cited as one of the most important forces driving democratization and the growth of the welfare state in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Esping-Andersen 1990; Luebbert 1987; Rueschemeyer, E. Stephens, and J. Stephens 1992; Thompson 1966). Research on Latin America (R. B. Collier and
D. Collier 1991; O'Donnell 1973) and Southeast Asia (Slater 2010) in the post-WWII era, however, suggests that a strong labor movement can unify frightened elites (including the bureaucratic elements of the middle class) in an authoritarian counter-movement. In Poland, middle class activists were important participants in the Solidarity trade union movement that overthrew Communism (Ost 1990). The experience of the Soviet Union suggests a more mixed possibility: democratization brought by an alliance of liberal market intellectuals and workers, but the capture of labor within resilient Communist-era institutions and the growth of an embittered nationalism (Crowley 1997)—a cautionary tale for China.

Scholars have tended to portray Chinese classes as both divided from each other and relatively fixed in their relationships (or, rather, non-relationships). In the analysis of (Wright 2010), up and down the hierarchy, from the bosses of SOEs to farmers, groups exist in a state of constant competition with each other, on the one hand, and dependence on state for a modicum of protection from the market, on the other—though Wright notes that “professionals” and migrant workers are more independent of the state than other groups (75, 129). Perry (2008, 209) sees in today's divisions the legacy of older Maoist institutions that “divided the populace by work unit, class label, residential category, record of political activism, and the like,” spurring each group to mobilize “at times of political ferment,” but always in isolation, “with students and teachers generally remaining on their campuses and workers in their own factories.”

This paper assumes a more dynamic situation, one in which classes are still in the process of being “made” and in which it is an open question whether or not the divisions noted above can persist into the future. As Thompson (1966, 8) writes, “class happens
when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.” Cultural and political currents, not just relationships of production, are an important ingredient in this process. In Thompson's case, that of the English working class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cultural influences included Methodism and the example of the French revolution, among other things. In today's China, nationalism and the Internet may play similar roles. Antagonisms of the sort that “make” classes could both define the Chinese middle class and working class in opposition to one another or on the same side of a divide that separates the two groups from others, such as entrepreneurs or state officials. It appears from the findings of this paper that the latter sort of definition is taking place.

Finally, it is also important to explore the complexities of the political values discussed here. Research on the emerging Indian middle class finds a group less engaged in direct political action (disruptive protests, political parties) than workers or farmers, but intensely involved in NGOs of a charitable or “problem solving” nature (Harris 2008). It also finds social climbers absorbed, at least in some quarters, by a commitment to Hindutva, the Hindu nationalist project that has antagonized Muslims and other minorities (Fernandes and Heller 2008). Authoritarian Chinese society lacks India's breadth of civil society outlets for middle class activism, but NGOs are growing rapidly in the People's Republic. Moreover, as nationalist examples of mobilization against criticisms of China’s policies in Tibet suggest, certain groups fall well outside middle class sympathies. As in India, these groups are often defined by their ethnicity and religion, with “Han supremacism” emerging as a disturbing phenomenon (Leibold 2010).
As the country’s civil society develops and nationalists have an even stronger platform for pushing their ideas, a populism that scorns the rich and calls for national empowerment but shows little pity for the claims of ethnic groups on the colonial fringes of the state may not yield a progressive China. Berman's (1997) analysis of Weimar Germany offers caution: right-wing populism, too, benefits from a dense civil society and middle class discontent, especially in a situation of weak state institutions. We needn’t consider an extreme, Weimar-like collapse in China’s future in order to feel some concern about the dynamics described in this paper.

Conclusion

This paper's findings suggest that nationalism and a commitment to social justice are not mutually exclusive for the Chinese middle class. A commitment to one value is correlated with a commitment to the other. The “social conscience” under discussion here is, however, clearly selective. Defining the limits of middle class commitments will require in-depth, qualitative study. Nonetheless, I have hopefully opened up a new angle on Chinese popular opinion, one of use to social movement scholars but also students of international relations. Whereas previous analyses of nationalism in China have tended to take a “second image” approach, focusing on nationalism's impact on Chinese foreign policy, this paper suggests that patriots' power may be equally important at home—and may yield unexpected results.
### Tables and Figures

#### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>The China Survey</th>
<th>Asian Barometer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Model 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Model 2</strong></td>
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<td>.1736776**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0853244)</td>
<td>(.0874799)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.0019984</td>
<td>-.0450266</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.2299641)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.1214105)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party_Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>6.439127***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.2850979)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.0075</td>
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<tr>
<td>R² (adjusted)</td>
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<td>0.0177</td>
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</table>

Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.  * p < 0.10  ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01
Appendices

Appendix 1: Questions Relating to Nationalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rather-China</th>
<th>China-Shame</th>
<th>More_Count-a</th>
<th>China_Prov-e</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
<th>China_-s</th>
<th>Pride</th>
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Included are questions regarding: whether respondents would prefer to live in China over anywhere else in the world (Rather_China), whether they identify with their province first or China first (China_Province), whether the world would be improved if more countries were like China (More_Countries_China), whether citizens should support China right or wrong (Loyalty), whether respondents feel pride in China’s sports victories (China_Sports), and whether the feel pride in China more generally (Pride). Note that all the responses are positively correlated, except China_Shame (with all the other questions) and, strangely, China_Sports and Loyalty. It is natural that feelings of shame are negatively correlated with feelings of pride, etc.

Appendix 2: Questions Relating to Social Justice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help_Worse-Off</th>
<th>Govern-t</th>
<th>Poverty_Se-s</th>
<th>Inequa-s</th>
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<td>Inequa-s</td>
<td>0.0353</td>
<td>-0.0457</td>
<td>0.4968</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Included are questions regarding: whether a good citizen helps those who are worse off (Help_Worse_Off), whether the government should actively support the poor (Government_Support), the seriousness of poverty (Poverty_Seriousness), and the seriousness of inequality (Inequality_Seriousness). Correlations here are less consistent, perhaps owing to the different policies implied.
Works Cited


