Mass media, new technology, and ideology: An analysis of political trends in China

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Abstract
Based on a nationwide survey, this study examines the mediated constructions of political ideology and its antecedents in contemporary China. The empirical findings offer insights into China’s future by examining political beliefs in the country. Our study found that most of the respondents share an inclination toward Liberalism, indicating that the general public harbors expectations not only for expansion of market competition to ensure the country’s successful entry into the world economic system in the age of globalization, but also for deepening political reforms, increased supervision of political power, and growing access to democratic participation. The study also investigated the relationship between media use and political ideology, as the former, together with new technology, predicts the latter to varying degrees. In addition, social psychological factors such as the motivation to use the Internet and trust in media were found to play significant roles in these complex relationships. Individuals’ social interactions and their political cognitions also help to explain the complexity of political ideology in a transitional society.

Keywords
Media trust, media use, political cognition, political ideology, social interaction

Introduction
Where is China’s politics headed? One way to investigate this question is to view the country’s present political system and its central tenets by observing the distribution of political ideologies among the general public. Political ideology can be measured by its level of support in the population and by the degree to which people identify with the current political system. It is also important...
to view political ideology in its historical context to understand its influence on the choice of future political systems and trends. Many political scientists around the world believe that the multi-party electoral political system emerges from the existence of pluralistic values that form a continuum from liberalism to conservatism on the ideology spectrum; they also write that a monolithic political ideology that is fixated on the unity of one political party is a typical manifestation of an authoritarian polity (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1965; Inkeles, 1954; Linz, 2000; Neumann, 1964).

Three decades of economic reform have brought about profound transformations in China’s political and social life, resulting in the formation of new social strata (L. Li, 2003; Y. Li, 2005; X. Lu, 2002; L. Sun, 2003). Patterns of redistribution and change in social stratification have led to shifts in the meaning and direction of China’s social conditions, economic involvement, cultural values, and the practices of everyday life (C. Li, 2005; X. Lu, 2002; W. Zhang, Li, & Gao, 2004; Zhou, 2005). Following the disintegration of a unified political ideology promulgated in the Mao era, a new set of pluralistic political ideologies and value systems have grown and found strength in China (L. Sun, 2006). Scholars have attributed the transformation to decentralization of political power and the country’s transition from a planned to a market economy (Zhu, 2006). This pluralism in political ideology is observed in the structuring of a society that is both reliant on and detached from the state (Deng, 2009), and also indicated by the tensions between the state and society (Deng, 2008).

Underlying the move toward political pluralism in contemporary China is an intensifying schism among and between Liberalism, the New Left, and Cultural Conservatism, which are fighting on more or less equal footing (Xiao, 2007; Y. Xu, 2007). The online publication of the document titled Consensus on China’s Status: Now and in the Future signed by 28 renowned scholars on 4 September 2013 is a case in point. The 858-word-long text, commonly known as the “Oxford Consensus”, was the first public display of ideological views shared among scholars of diverse backgrounds to emerge in the past two decades. The document included scholars who represented Liberalism, the New Left, new Confucianism, and Christianity. Scrutiny of the “fermentation process” of this text reveals that differences continue to exist and confrontations remain acute among China’s intelligentsia in the face of the changing environment at home and abroad. Whether the issue at hand is the source of social problems in today’s China or the choice of alternative policy actions for future systemic and political development, crucial differences are apparent. This is true despite the fact that scholars located at different places on the spectrum of thought have come to some common ground agreements, as was revealed in the “Oxford Consensus” document.¹

The three major branches of political ideology are complex, ambiguous, and nebulous with fuzzy borders that cross academic fields and lead to incessant disputes (Gan, 2000; Y. Wang, 1999; Xi, 2011). Nonetheless, all three show some partial consistencies and overlap with the incumbent political party and centralized political order (Xiao, 2011). Each perspective represents an argument about a choice concerning the framework of modernization and thus the country’s future (Zheng, 2005). As such, an examination of the distribution and the antecedents of the three major political ideologies in Chinese society informs our understanding of the country’s trajectory of change, from a unified all-powerful state to one that has compromised with pluralistic ideologies (Y. Yang, 2008). Furthermore, it sheds light not only on China’s future political trends but also on related issues such as changes in economic efficiency (Lieber, 2013).

Guided by this perspective, this study is grounded in a mediated construction and understanding of political ideologies. It defines and discusses the ideological positions and the relationships among the three perspectives as well as the theoretical models accounting for the relationships. First, we analyze the relationship between media use (including mass media and adoption of new technology) and each of the three ideologies. Second, we study the impact of social interaction on
the formation and maintenance of these groups, and, third, we consider how these groups impact
the political cognitions of adherents. This research offers an audience-based explication of the
focal concepts related to the intriguing conditions of political ideology in transitional China as it
also highlights the uncertainties associated with the future of political development in the country.
Given the void in empirical studies of this and similar topics in China, we attempt to advance an
initial theoretical model connecting various determinants and political ideology so as to set the
stage for further analyses.

Concept explication

Political ideology

Political ideology is a concept with a complex internal structure and broad external meaning. In an
overview of the structure, function, and effects of political ideology, Erikson and Tedin (2003)
stated that ideology is a “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved”
(p. 64; see also Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Campbell, Converse,
Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Kerlinger, 1984). Denzau and North (2000) concurred with this view,
although they also highlighted the role of social groups or collectivities (see also Parsons, 1951),
stating that “ideologies are the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals pos-
sess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that envi-
ronment should be structured” (p. 24). Historically, Marx and Engels (1846/1970) defined political
ideology as having both neutral and derogatory connotations in their seminal work German
Ideology (see also Jost, 2006; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Subsequent studies have favored the
neutral definition, separating ideology into beliefs, attitudes, and values. As a way to reflect on
humans and societies, ideology so defined takes on organizational capabilities and institutional
characteristics and is shared by members within certain collectives (Adorno et al., 1950; Rokeach,
1968), showing relative stability and consistency in individuals’ psyches (Q. Liu, Sun, Shi, &
Chen, 2013). In other words, ideology refers indiscriminately to any belief system, that is, to any
“configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of
constraint or functional interdependence” (Converse, 1964, p. 206). Scholars who emphasize the
cognitive function of structuring political knowledge and expertise tend to treat ideology as a “rela-
tively benign organizing device” (Knight, 2006, p. 622).

As an essential tenet of ideology and a focus of research, political ideology is a set of inter-
related attitudes and value systems concerning legitimate social order and the way such orders
are established (Tedin, 1987). Political ideology is also a belief system with cognitive, affective,
and motivational components, capable of organizing values, mobilizing actions, and giving
meaning to actions (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2009; Q. Liu et al., 2013). Specifically, political
ideology is a cognitive model structuring one’s understanding of and interaction with the political
world (Jessee, 2012). Research into political ideology under the umbrella of larger political
science and social psychology paradigms mainly investigates variance among ordinary mem-
bers of society and mechanisms of influence. Within this broad scheme, the concept of political
ideology is decomposed into a unidimensional approach. A single left–right dimension
(Federico, 2007; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003b) with the two extreme positions
on the continuum representing (1) promotion of, or objection to, social change, and (2) rejec-
tion or acceptance of inequality (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b; Jost
et al., 2009; Q. Liu et al., 2013).2
Recent empirical work by Napier and Jost (2008) suggests that people who are low in socio-economic status are more likely to be drawn to right-wing ideology on largely social or cultural issues, whereas people who are high in socio-economic status are more likely to be drawn to right-wing ideology on their concern over economic issues (see also Lipset, 1960). There are also scholars who divide political ideology into symbolic and operational dimensions. For example, Ellis and Stimson (2012) label responses to the standard survey questions on ideological self-identification as “symbolic” and responses to common questions about current public policy issues as “operational”. Other scholars have done similar studies (e.g. Claassen, Tucker, & Smith, 2013; Jost et al., 2003b; Weber & Federico, 2007).

**Political ideology in China: contestation among liberalism, cultural conservatism, and the New Left**

This research adopts the single left–right dimensional view of political ideology mainly because of its discriminant ability as demonstrated in previous research (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Jost, 2006) and its suitability in describing the existence of pluralistic values and the contestations among them in China today. Chinese society has a long history of highly unified and politicized rule, and the drive toward modernization and systemic reform in the past three decades has given rise to a political worldview called “disintegrated post-authoritarianism” in academic research (L. Li & Zhong, 2015). From this vantage-point, China is moving toward liberalism along certain dimensions, but showing a “bounce back” toward post-authoritarianism along others (L. Li & Zhong, 2015). The intellectual origin underpinning the polarization in political ideology can be traced to two waves of disintegration of political thought among Chinese intellectuals since the inception of reforms, namely the battle between Liberalism and neo-authoritarianism in the late 1980s and the fight between Liberalism and the New Left in the late 1990s (Xiao, 2002). The two rounds of clashes led to the formation and consolidation of Liberalism, Cultural Conservatism, and the New Left, as three vastly different political camps were created following a series of major political issues that divided the public. The ideological splits were very real and separated people over fundamental issues including the potential choice of political systems and the goals for future development (Xiao, 2007). Although they have origins in Western academic research, the views and ideas expressed during these political battles all concerned the prominent social problems discussed in China since the 1990s (Gan, 2000; Ren, 1999; Xie, 2003), and they continue to be relevant to a basic assessment of the country’s current conditions and an understanding of the political trends in contemporary China (K. Yu, 2004). The contestations could be seen as deliberations and reflections on major practical issues of China’s social reforms (J. Yang, 2001), and the wider context of globalization and modernization (J. Xu, 2001). The grand polemics could be summarized as revolving around the following concerns: (1) market economy and social inequality: the New Left argues that market economy causes social inequality, and Liberalism considers that the root cause of social inequality is political control; (2) China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and globalization: Liberalism supports more international cooperation, but the New Left and Cultural Conservatism argues that China is involved in an unequal system of global capitalism; (3) how to evaluate the Cultural Revolution: the New Left considers the heritage of the Cultural Revolution to be positive, whereas Liberalism evaluates it negatively; (4) how to assess the May 4th New Cultural Movement and China’s modernization: Liberalism defends the Enlightenment of modernization since May 4th and emphasizes core values of freedom and
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democracy, but the New Left and Cultural Conservatism highlight the problems of modernization and predict that China will become a colony of the West; (5) the international issues: the New Left and Cultural Conservatism support extremist nationalism but Liberalism opposes it (H. Li, 2010; Y. Xu, 2006). In terms of the difference between the New Left and Cultural Conservatism, the former emphasizes the revitalization of Maoism, but the latter places higher value on Chinese traditional culture (see Chen, 2002; Z. Jiang, 2006; W. Li, 2008).

Most scholars in this arena are inclined toward Liberalism (e.g. Mao, 1996; Qin, 2000; Sheng, 2001; J. Xu, 2001; Y. Xu, 1997, 2005, 2006; Zhu, 1999) and tend to advocate for market-oriented reforms. They share the view that severe inequalities observed currently are the outcome of huge gains illegitimately appropriated by political power rather than a necessary outcome of normal practices of a market economy. The problem has to do both with the “baggage” of the long-cherished planned economy and a half-hearted implementation of market reforms. It is therefore a common view among liberal scholars that the remedy lies in the perfection of the rules and policies governing markets, reforms in the political system, tort and legal reforms, and checks on political elites to ensure the more equitable distribution of the fruits of economic reforms. These represent the major points of departure between Liberalism and the New Left (H. Li, 2010; Wei, 2011; J. Yang, 2001).

China’s New Left, which Gan (2000) labeled the “Liberal Left”, has undergone two phases of development since its inception in the 1990s. The first focused on domestic political economic processes, and the second on the China’s position and roles in the world system. Together, the two phases correspond with the country’s mainstream notions of “reform” and “opening up”. H. Wang (1998) argued that the problems in China are also the problems of the global capital markets, and that therefore, the Chinese economy ought to be subject to the control of the state and society to alleviate the social problems derived from capitalistic development (Cui, 2007; S. Wang, 2007). Xie (2003) seemed to agree, and argued that an overzealous marketization would worsen social inequality. It is thus evident that many advocates of New Left views continue to be influenced by the historical legacy of the revolutionary political discourse that shaped China since 1949 (S. Wang, 2006; J. Yang, 2001). These advocates have inherited Mao’s thoughts and are open only to cautious innovations (Gong, 2003; Mierzejewski, 2009). New Left scholars are even positive toward many of the basic ideas of the Cultural Revolution, and they challenge the now prevailing desire for entry into a globalized market economy (Xiao, 2007). Thus, in many respects, the New Left echoes the old Left (Ren, 1999), for instance, the positive evaluation of Mao and the Culture Revolution. The difference between the new left and old Left is their use of language. The old Left follows the revolutionary discourse. The New Left extensively uses the academic language as their theoretical resource, such as Western Marxism. While liberals offered only mild criticisms of the ongoing reforms, the New Left has been much more strident in its opposition, advocating that the reforms be abandoned (Y. Xu, 2006).

The “sinology craze” in the 1990s marked the revival of Cultural Conservatism (Huang, 2004; Y. Xu, 2006). The basic value of Cultural Conservatism, as “modern Neo-Confucianism”, means to reaffirm the Confucian value system under the conditions of modern society, to recover the dominant position of Confucian tradition, to recruit and integrate the Western thoughts, and to seek a way of the future for Chinese culture and society (Fang, 1997; Gao, 2015). In December 2004, the editorial board of “Yuan Dao” magazine hosted an academic conference on the theme “Common tradition: Confucianism in the Eyes of the New Left, Liberalism, and Conservatism”, to celebrate the magazine’s 10th anniversary. The conference offered an open platform for the discursive
clashes among the three contending ideologies. The major concerns of Cultural Conservatism revolve around ideas and culture as well as their construction of socio political reality (X. Jiang, 1999), which demonstrated a strong inclination toward cultural nationalism (L. Liu, 2001; S. Zhang, 2001). They attempted to re-assess China’s traditional cultural values in the face of global modernization (W. Li, 2008). In practice, subscribers of Cultural Conservatism have made serious efforts to restore traditional Chinese culture (Chen, 2002) by celebrating nationalism and rejecting Westernization (Z. Jiang, 2006). The New Left does not oppose Cultural Conservatism; however, Liberalism has much more complicated attitude. They support the revival of traditional culture but oppose using traditional culture to guide today’s political reforms (Y. Xu, 2006). These debates have not only attracted attention from establishment intellectuals and technocrats but also an increasing number of Chinese netizens (H. Li, 2010). Using the same database, our previous studies empirically examined the basic features and related conceptual relationships of the three political ideologies and general social opinions guided by these ideologies (Y. Lu, 2012). Considering the vastness of China’s territory and the sharp regional imbalance in terms of the economy, culture, and social development, this research seeks to answer the following question:

**RQ1.** How are the three political ideologies of Liberalism, Cultural Conservatism, and the New Left distributed among the public? Are there regional differences and/or differences in individuals’ socio economic status in the appeal of these alternative ideologies?

**Mass media, new technology, and political ideology**

The mass media exert profound influences on people’s ideology, values, and political attitudes. Different from the media in Western societies, almost all traditional media in China are state owned and are managed by the party’s propaganda system. Media reforms and market competition have caused a differentiation of content and ideological value orientations (Duan, 2006). New technology has directed public attention beyond the traditional media (Hu, 2016). In fact, the rise and spread of Liberalism, the New Left, and Cultural Conservatism in China were intimately connected with people’s daily practices with their use of mass media and new technologies. There are multiple venues in mass media for spreading different political ideologies (H. Li, 2010). On 28 November 1997, Zhu Xueqin put together a panel of articles in the *Southern Weekend* to commemorate the death of contemporary liberalism thinker Sir Isaiah Berlin. The move was widely seen as a clear and comprehensive public exposition of the central tenets of Liberalism by China’s intellectuals (Y. Xu, 2005). Public impact of the magnitude demonstrated by the ideological formation that constitutes Cultural Conservatism is also closely tied to the mass media and the Internet, which has opened up a new space for the exchange of ideas in China (W. Li, 2008). Meanwhile, the media also promote the social foundations of Cultural Conservatism: popular readings of ancient Chinese literature and history, TV dramas illustrating life in the ancient royal court, and news reports describing the development of a pseudo ancient architectural residential district named Palace Garden (Fang, 2010). The formulation of the New Left ideology, too, is a joint outcome of mass media promotion and intellectual endeavors (Chen, 2001). The translation of many Western Marxist works gained media attention and social media interactions (Chen, 2002). The rapid spread of the New Left was also a result of frequent media coverage of the theoretical debates among different ideologies and the exchange of ideas between scholars on the Internet both at home and abroad (Xiao, 2007). A survey on the influence of the New Left on college students shows that
respondents were supportive of most of the positions of the New Left which they became privy to through the Internet and broadcast media. Over half of the college students had been exposed to five or more New Left websites such as Utopia, Banner of Mao Zedong, and new Xiangjiang Review (Y. Sun, Chen, Li, & Fan, 2006). Scholars noted that the advancement of the Internet has led to the rapid spread of the intellectual debates among the general public, because sensitive topics are spread more easily and quickly online (H. Li, 2010).

This study focuses on the relationships among mass media, new technology, and political ideology across three dimensions. The first dimension is media use. American political scholars have found that use of different forms of media such as reading a newspaper or viewing television could result in qualitative differences in audience effects in terms of their political and public affairs cognition (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003; Iyengar, 1991; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Similar differences have also been found in studies that have analyzed political interest, political cognition, political attitudes, and political participation (Aart & Semetko, 2003; D. Kim & Johnson, 2006; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Kim, 2002; van der Brug, Semetko, & Valkenburg, 2007; Yao, 2008).

The second dimension is the adoption of new technology, which has brought about fundamental changes in media and social environments (Castells, 2006). Apart from traditional mass media, new technology has been given a central role in the new theories emerging to explain political attitudes, values, and the formation of ideologies (Bailey & Gayle, 2003; Foley, 2012; Kumlin, 2006; Mueller, 2010; Tkacheva, Schwartz, Libicki, Taylor, & Martini, 2013; Wiener & Richter, 2008). Studies on the relationship between new technology and collective political actions have found that the use of digital media changes the core dynamics of the social action shaping the contentious politics of the contemporary era (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In China, new technology has created a more elastic public opinion space than the traditional media (Hu, 2016), although the relationship between new technology and political ideology remains a less explored empirical question.

The third dimension is media trust. As a primary force for social integration (Simmel, 1950), trust is an essential ingredient of modern civic society (Putnam, 2000). Public trust in media is of great salience in civic society and the process of political democracy (Newton, 2001). Research has shown that media trust could positively reinforce the effects of message dissemination (Skipworth, 2011). Audience members who trust mainstream media are more likely to hold liberalist political attitudes (Gunther, 1988), whereas those who are skeptical of the mass media are less avid users of news and have less knowledge about current events (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005).

On the whole, past research on the relationships between contemporary Chinese ideologies and mass media and especially new technology is extremely limited. Using mass media and new technology as predicting variables would deepen our understanding of the mechanism of interplay between political ideology and communication and elaborate existing models of media effects. Therefore, this research raises its second research question:

**RQ2.** How are mass media and new technology associated with the three political ideologies of Liberalism, Cultural Conservatism, and the New Left?

**Social interaction and political ideology**

Individuals’ modes of social interaction can easily constitute a vast forest of concepts. Early effects studies have well documented that interpersonal resources complement rather than impede media
information dissemination (Chaffee, 1982). In the field of political communication, social interactions such as neighborhood relations, social networks, trust in a political system, and voting intention have remained viable constructs (J. Kim, 2005). Research done by the “Wisconsin school” indicates that social networks expose people to diverse political views where they are forced to reflect and define their own positions on social issues when confronted with different views during conversations regarding public affairs with others. The size and heterogeneity of our networks also tends to influence political cognition and political participation in general (McKuen, 1990; McLeod et al., 1999) with pluralistic social networks demonstrating significant positive influence in particular (Leighley, 1990; Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, & Nisbet, 2006). In terms of operationalization, these studies mainly measured the scope and heterogeneity of individuals’ social interactions and their cognitive outcomes. The findings converged on the conclusion that network heterogeneity and reflective integration have made especially positive contributions to pro-civic political participation (Leighley, 1990; Scheufele et al., 2006).

Although political communication research has tended to conceptually place social networking as antecedent to media use and political participation (Nisbet, Moy, & Scheufele, 2003; Scheufele, Nisbet, & Brossard, 2003), studies on political ideology, media use, and social interaction are skimpy at best. As a trial, this study tentatively treats the theoretical role of social interaction as being in the same analytical block with mass media and new technology. We propose our third research question as follows:

**RQ3.** What are the relationships between individuals’ modes of social interaction and their political ideology?

**Political cognition and political ideology**

Like political ideology, political cognition is also an umbrella concept whose internal structure is both broad and complex. Political cognition serves as the indispensable theoretical interface between the personal and the collective dimensions of politics and political discourse (Van Dijk, 2002). The relationship between cognition and political orientation is one of the most controversial tropics in the field (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 1999). Much has been said in political psychology research about how cognition affects socio political ideology, political attitudes, and even deviance (Sidanius, 1985; Sidanius & Lau, 1989; Smith, Oxley, Hibbing, Alford, & Hibbing, 2011). It was argued that extremists at both ends of the political spectrum would show lower cognitive complexity compared with moderates (Chirumbolo, 2002). Context theory predicts that extremists of both sides show greater cognitive sophistication because they tend to have more political knowledge and information to support their opinions (Sidanius, 1984, 1988). Other studies have also found a linear relationship amongst the need for closure, authoritarianism, and political orientation (Chirumbolo, 2002).

This study tests three aspects of political cognition: political interest, political efficacy, and cognitive complexity. These three aspects are considered to be closely connected with one’s political cognition and media literacy in the past (Guo, Zhou, & Lu, 2006). The first, political interest is the most significant predictor of media use. It is not only an unambiguous criterion capable of separating people into media users and non-users, but also a demarcation line between different patterns of media use (Patterson, 1994). Political interest is one of the focal variables in public opinion studies of political cognition and political attitude (Sidanius, 1984) both at
present and in earlier research (Glenn & Grimes, 1968; Shani, 2012). For instance, when discussing the implications of structural complexity, scholars have been eager to search for robust associations between measures of complexity and political interest (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). The second dimension is political efficacy. Research has found that people high in political efficacy expressed more trust in government and shared a stronger sense of citizen empowerment. Conversely, those who scored low on political efficacy tended to feel a sense of powerlessness and a low level of trust in government (Gilens, Glaser, & Mendelberg, 2001). Although both types of respondents could be avid users of mass media, the latter were more likely to use media as a channel to vent steam (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). The third dimension is cognitive complexity. A critical mind is a complex mind. It boasts a richer associative network than those who are less sophisticated. Cognitive complexity could be seen as having sub-dimensions. For example, we could measure complexity with a person’s ability to comprehend and reflect on political reality, to see through highly scripted media political texts, and to understand the process through which mass media frame social problems in favor of vested and dominant interests via institutional methods of deception (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Theoretical connections between the three dimensions of political cognition and political ideology are worthy of serious attention as well. Thus, we offer our fourth research questions

RQ4. How are the three dimensions of political cognition – political interest, political efficacy, and cognitive complexity – related to political ideology?

Method

Data

The data for this study came from a national survey project titled, “Chinese Audience in the New Communication Era” (Li, Pan, et al. 2010) housed at Fudan University. The survey covers both urban and rural respondents who are aged 18 years old or above from 31 provinces, directly governed municipalities, and autonomous regions. The execution of data collection was contracted out to CSM (CVSC-SOFRES Media), a leading television and radio audience research company. The survey followed a multi-stage stratified random sampling design. Within each of the 31 provinces in Mainland China, samples were chosen from municipalities/provincial capital city districts, prefecture level cities/city districts, and counties or county level cities, respectively.

A total of 37,279 nationally representative samples were interviewed via door-to-door interviews. The survey was fielded between 15 July and 23 October 2010. The response rates were 62% for provincial capital cities and 69% for other localities. On average, it took about an hour for the respondent to complete the questionnaire. To ensure survey quality, an independent committee revisited 20% of the respondents. Post-stratification weights were calculated based on age and gender so the data analysis would be more representative of the population.4

A number of demographic variables were included in the study, including gender (male = 49.8%), age (M = 43.38, standard deviation (SD) = 15.86), education (Median = middle school), personal monthly income (Median = 500–599 RMB), family monthly income (Median = 2000–2299), political party (Communist Party = 9.3%, Youth League = 34.0%), and residential area (27.5% reside in a city area).5
**Measurement**

**Political ideology.** Political ideology captures the public’s views toward the reform and open-up policies and the future development of China with three dimensions: Liberalism, Cultural Conservatism, and the New Left. Despite the plethora of political belief measures in the West, very few empirical measures of political ideology were tailored to the Chinese context. Based on our discussion of the three streams of political beliefs in China, we designed a group of 14 5-point Likert scale questions to measure the political ideologies of Chinese citizens (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). It is important to note that these measures are exploratory in nature but the data did suggest the existence of three clusters of measures. Exploratory factor analysis suggested three cross-loading items. The remaining 11 items formulated three distinct factors (see Table 1). Three indicators were formulated by averaging the scores of corresponding items nested under each factor.

Liberalism was measured by five items: “political reform in China needs grassroots participation”, “the press and the people should be better watchdogs of the government”, “Chinese economy

|                         | Liberalism | Cultural Conservatism | The New Left | Alpha  | Variance explained % |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------------|--------|----------------------|
| **Liberalism**          |            |                       |              | 0.78   | 25.66                |
| 1. Political reform in  | 0.79       | −0.02                 | 0.07         |        |                      |
| China needs grassroots  |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| participation.          |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 2. Chinese economy     | 0.77       | −0.03                 | −0.01        |        |                      |
| needs to further        |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| embrace the world       |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| economy.                |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 3. The press and the    | 0.77       | −0.00                 | −0.06        |        |                      |
| people should be        |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| better watchdogs of the |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| government.             |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 4. Economic reform      | 0.64       | 0.15                  | −0.05        |        |                      |
| requires further        |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| marketization.          |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 5. In general, the      | 0.62       | 0.26                  | −0.13        |        |                      |
| reform and open-up      |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| policy was a success.   |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| **Cultural Conservatism** |          |                       |              | 0.69   | 17.03                |
| 6. To protect Chinese   | −0.01      | 0.85                  | 0.18         |        |                      |
| culture, we should      |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| import fewer foreign    |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| cultural products.      |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 7. It is important to    | −0.03      | 0.79                  | 0.24         |        |                      |
| limit foreign products  |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| to protect our own      |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| economy.                |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 8. Chinese culture is   | 0.33       | 0.62                  | −0.00        |        |                      |
| superior to Western     |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| culture.                |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| **The New Left**        |            |                       |              | 0.63   | 16.25                |
| 9. The open and reform   | −0.01      | 0.21                  | 0.78         |        |                      |
| policy threw away the   |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| good revolutionary      |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| traditions.             |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 10. The open and reform  | 0.23       | 0.06                  | 0.77         |        |                      |
| policy created serious  |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| social inequality.      |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| 11. In general, the     | −0.27      | 0.12                  | 0.70         |        |                      |
| open and reform policy  |            |                       |              |        |                      |
| made our society worse. |            |                       |              |        |                      |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
*Rotation converged in five iterations.*
needs to further embrace the world economy”, “economic reform requires further marketization”, and “in general, the reform and open-up policy was a success” (M = 4.23, SD = 0.667, α = 0.78).

Cultural Conservatism contains three items: “to protect Chinese culture, we should import fewer foreign cultural products”, “Chinese culture is superior to Western culture”, and “it is important to limit foreign products to protect our own economy” (M = 3.37, SD = 1.00, α = 0.69).

The New Left was measured by three items: “the open and reform policy threw away the good revolutionary traditions”, “the open and reform policy created serious social inequality”, and “in general, the open and reform policy made our society worse” (M = 2.86, SD = 0.97, α = 0.63).

Media and new technology. A recent political science study by Chinese scholars tested a tentative structural model for the antecedents of political ideology. The study found personality traits and media exposure predicted political ideology with a high degree of explanatory power (Ma & Wang, 2015). We included both traditional and new media use as our predicting variables.

Traditional media use. Traditional media use was measured by four items: number of days watching television weekly (M = 6.29, SD = 1.75), number of days reading newspapers weekly (M = 1.06, SD = 2.22), number of days listening to the radio weekly (M = 0.77, SD = 1.99), and number of days reading magazines monthly (M = 1.07, SD = 3.67).

New media use. New media use was operationalized by five groups of items. First, we measured whether the respondents used mobile phones (72.5% of the respondents). Second, a total of nine dummy variables were used to measure different types of mobile phone use (0 = never, 1 = yes): placing and receiving phone calls, text messages, going online, receiving information, reading newspapers on phone, listening to radio on the phone, watching television on the phone, entertainment (e.g. photo, video, music, games), use of practical apps (e.g. location services, dictionary, calculator). The sum of the nine items formulates an indicator of mobile phone use diversity (M = 2.75, SD = 2.48).

Third, we measure the frequency of Internet use on a weekly basis (M = 1.48, SD = 2.68). Fourth, a total of 13 dummy items were used to capture detailed Internet use behavior (0 = never, 1 = yes), including email, news browsing, search engine, reading discussion forums or blogs, creating content on discussion forums or blogs, instant messenger, social media, Internet finance, online shopping, online gaming, online audio and video use, creating audio and video content online, and use of circumvention tools. The sum of the 13 items formulates an indicator of Internet use diversity (M = 7.93, SD = 3.23).

Finally, three motivations for Internet use were measured as well: social networking, alternative information seeking, and expression. Social networking was operationalized by three items on a 1- to 5-point scale: “to keep one’s social network”, “to get to know people of different backgrounds”, and “to expand one’s social network”. The arithmetic mean of the three items formulates an indicator of social networking motivation (M = 3.02, SD = 1.17, α = 0.82). Similarly, alternative information seeking was operationalized by three items: “to obtain information and opinions which are not available from newspapers, television, and radio”, “to obtain inside stories”, and “to obtain information from foreign sources”. The mean of the three items formulates an indicator of alternative information seeking motivation (M = 3.37, SD = 1.126, α = 0.80). Finally, opinion expression was operationalized by three items: “to express one’s opinions”, “to join discussion of social issues”, and “to say whatever I want to say”. The mean of the three items formulates an indicator of opinion expression motivation (M = 2.76, SD = 1.185, α = 0.81).
Media trust. Past research has suggested that people’s trust in media and their political beliefs are intertwined closely (G. Yu, Zhang, & Jin, 2007; Z. Pan, Zheng, Yan, & Jing, 2011). We adopted generic media trust measures asking people to indicate their level of their trust in different media sources on a scale of 1–10 where 1 indicates least trust and 10 means most trust. Media trust was measured by eight items: trust in newspapers (M = 6.62, SD = 2.32), trust in television (M = 7.50, SD = 2.14), trust in radio (M = 6.37, SD = 2.41), trust in magazines (M = 5.39, SD = 2.41), trust in the Internet (M = 5.47, SD = 2.55), trust in national level media (M = 8.16, SD = 1.96), trust in local media (M = 7.23, SD = 2.21), and trust in foreign media (M = 6.66, SD = 2.42).

Social interaction

Vertical social relationship. Vertical social relationship measures the frequency of interaction with people of different social backgrounds (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 5 = often). Exploratory factor analysis of 10 items suggested two factors (see Table 2). Lower-class social interaction was composed of three items: interaction with unemployed, interaction with agriculture workers, and interaction with factory workers. An indicator was formulated by the mean of the three items (M = 2.86, SD = 1.10, α = 0.50). Upper-class social interaction was composed of seven items, including interactions with managerial staff, clerical workers, entrepreneurs, professionals, commercial service providers, small business owners, and leaders in state owned company or government. An indicator was formulated by the mean of the seven items (M = 1.85, SD = 1.05, α = 0.84).

Social network homogeneity. Based on McLeod et al.’s (1999) work and our localized adjustment (Y. Lu & Guo, 2007), social network homogeneity contains six 5-point Likert scale questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree): “Most of my friends and I have a similar socio-economic background”, “Most of my friends and I have similar hobbies”, “Most of my friends and I have similar tastes in terms of lifestyle”, “My social network has people from all walks of life”, “My social network has people of different occupations”, “My friends have different types of hobbies”. Exploratory factor analysis revealed two distinct factors (see Table 3). According to the
results of the factor analysis, social network homogeneity index was created by averaging items 1–3 (M = 3.45, SD = 0.912, α = 0.74) and social network heterogeneity index was created by averaging items 4–6 (M = 3.15, SD = 1.052, α = 0.78).

**Political cognition**

**Political interest.** Three items measured political interest (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). They were “I am interested in politics and public affairs”, “I will often think about national politics”, and “I am very concerned about local government’s policy”. The average of the three items formulated the indicator of political interest (M = 2.99, SD = 1.11, α = 0.78).

**Political efficacy.** Following the work of Miller and Traugott (1989), with minor adjustment, we measured political efficacy with two dimensions: internal and external efficacy. Exploratory factor analysis suggested two clear factors, each with three indicators (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Internal efficacy asked about the following: “Every citizen including me can have an impact on government policy and behavior”, “I have a pretty clear understanding of the problems the government is facing”, “I am capable of proposing constructive suggestions for government policy”. The average of these indicators formulated an indicator (M = 2.81, SD = 0.979, α = 0.67). External efficacy asked about the following: “Government officials at all levels do not care about what the public thinks”, “Whatever the public is doing, it is very difficult to change government policy and behavior”, “Nowadays government officials at all levels only care about themselves, not about the public interest”. The average of these indicators formulated an indicator (M = 2.55, SD = 1.024, α = 0.80, see Table 4).

**Cognitive complexity.** Following Guo and his colleagues’ (2006) work, we operationalized cognitive complexity as the degree of cognitive effort one puts into processing news content. Six questions were asked about what the respondents usually do when watching or reading news (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*): “Carefully analyze the content of news coverage”, “Digging the meaning

Table 3. Do you agree with the following descriptions?

| Description                                                                 | Social network homogeneity | Social network heterogeneity | Alpha | Variance explained % |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|
| 1. Most of my friends and I have similar socio-economic background.         | 0.818                      | 0.027                        | 0.74  | 34.88                 |
| 2. Most of my friends and I have similar hobbies.                         | 0.830                      | 0.156                        | 0.78  | 33.10                 |
| 3. Most of my friends and I have similar tastes in terms of lifestyle.     | 0.754                      | 0.200                        | 0.78  |                       |
| 4. My social network has people from all walks of life.                    | 0.082                      | 0.793                        | 0.78  |                       |
| 5. My social network has people of different occupations.                  | 0.102                      | 0.874                        | 0.78  |                       |
| 6. My friends have different types of hobbies.                             | 0.203                      | 0.797                        | 0.78  |                       |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in three iterations.
between the lines in news reporting”, “Ruminating over whether the news is true or not”, “Discuss- 
ing news with others”, “Seeking alternative sources to double-check what is mentioned in news”, 
and “Comparing different media outlets for a single news event”. The average of these six items 
formulated the indicator (M = 2.87, SD = 1.05, α = 0.90).

Findings

Descriptive analysis

Distribution of political ideology. Our data showed that among the three types of political ideologies,
Liberalism appeared to be the dominant ideology (M = 4.23, SD = 0.67), whereas Cultural Con-
servatism (M = 3.37, SD = 0.10) and the New Left (M = 2.86, SD = 0.97) were less favored by Chi-
inese people by significant margins. A further look at the frequency distribution of the three 
indicators found a J-shaped pattern for Liberalism where most people choose 5 (strongly agree) 
and 4 (agree) for the Liberalism related items. In other words, a large percentage of the respond-
ents gave the answer 5 “strongly agree” to all five Liberalism questions. In contrast, for Cultural 
Conservatism and the New Left, normal distributions were observed – most respondents gave a 
neutral answer to questions from these two indicators (see Figures 1 to 3).

Geographic location difference. We examined geographical location distributions of different political ide-
ologies by both economic regions and by administrative levels. According to the definition of National 
Bureau of Statistics,7 we created three sub-groups of samples: Eastern China (41.9%), Central China 
(32.2%), and Western China (26.0%). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test suggested that the 
three economic regions differ significantly in terms of Liberalism (F(2, 18,057.23) = 50.161, p < 0.0005), 
CulturalConservatism(F(2, 18,484.86) = 70.294, p < 0.0005),andtheNewLeft(F(2, 19,355.98) = 165.008,

Table 4. Do you agree with the following questions?

|                          | Internal efficacy | External efficacy | Alpha  | Variance explained % |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------|----------------------|
| Internal efficacy        |                   |                   | 0.67   | 35.71                |
| 1. Every citizen including me can have an impact on government policy and behavior. | 0.686             | 0.145             |        |                      |
| 2. I have a pretty clear understanding of the problems the government is facing. | 0.792             | 0.196             |        |                      |
| 3. I am capable of proposing constructive suggestions for government policy. | 0.784             | 0.201             |        |                      |
| External efficacy        |                   |                   | 0.80   | 29.93                |
| 1. Government officials at all levels do not care about what the public thinks. | -0.161            | 0.834             |        |                      |
| 2. Whatever the public is doing, it is very difficult to change government policy and behavior. | -0.177            | 0.837             |        |                      |
| 3. Nowadays government officials at all levels only care about themselves, not about the public interest. | -0.162            | 0.804             |        |                      |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Figure 1. Frequency distribution of Liberalism.

Figure 2. Frequency distribution of Cultural Conservatism.
Overall, people from economically developed regions including Eastern and Middle China were more likely to identify with all three political ideologies (see Table 5). Similarly, we created four groups of samples according to administrative levels: municipal and provincial capital cities (11.9%), regional cities (22.4%), county (17.1%), and rural area (48.6%). A One-way ANOVA test found that the four administrative levels differed significantly in terms of Liberalism (F(3, 11,878.33) = 16.530, p < 0.0005), Cultural Conservatism (F(3, 12,210.45) = 55.789, p < 0.0005), and the New Left (F(3, 12,605.18) = 143.946, p < 0.0005) (also see Table 5). Post-hoc comparison revealed that people from rural areas were more likely to identify with Liberalism and Cultural Conservatism; and people from municipal and provincial capital cities were more likely to identify with the New Left (see Table 6). Such differences could be due to the unequal development between rural and urban areas. People from underdeveloped areas were more attracted to Liberalism.

**Table 5.** Geographical location difference.

| Economic regions | Liberalism (M ± SD) | Cultural Conservatism (M ± SD) | The New Left (M ± SD) |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Eastern          | 4.25 ± 0.65         | 3.40 ± 0.98                  | 2.97 ± 0.94          |
| Central          | 4.26 ± 0.65         | 3.41 ± 1.01                  | 2.78 ± 0.97          |
| Western          | 4.16 ± 0.71         | 3.25 ± 1.01                  | 2.77 ± 1.00          |
| Administrative levels |                   |                               |                      |
| Municipal and provincial capital | 4.18 ± 0.61 | 3.27 ± 0.93 | 3.06 ± 0.88 |
| Regional         | 4.22 ± 0.68         | 3.27 ± 1.00                  | 2.87 ± 0.96          |
| Country          | 4.22 ± 0.71         | 3.41 ± 1.00                  | 2.97 ± 0.93          |
| Rural            | 4.25 ± 0.66         | 3.42 ± 1.02                  | 2.76 ± 1.00          |

*p < 0.0005*.
Demographic difference. Based on mean difference comparison of independent-samples t-test, males ($M = 4.28, SD = 0.657$) were slightly more inclined toward Liberalism than females ($M = 4.18, SD = 0.673, t = 3.943, p < 0.001$). There were no gender differences in terms of Cultural Conservatism and the New Left.

We divided the respondents by age into three groups: 18–35 (youth, 35.7%), 36–60 (middle age, 46.4%), and 61 and above (senior age, 17.9%). The older the respondents were, the more likely they were to favor Cultural Conservatism. The middle age group favored the New Left more than the other two groups. Levels of Liberalism were about the same across three groups.

We divided respondents by education level into three groups: low education (primary school or below, 43.8%), middle education (high school, technical school, vocational school, etc., 48.3%), and high education group (college, university or above, 7.9%).

As for education, the better educated were less likely to identify with Cultural Conservatism and the New Left. In addition, the well educated seemed to show slightly more positive attitudes toward Liberalism than the less educated.

About 9.3% of the respondents were Communist Party members and 34% Youth League members. Communist Party members were more inclined toward Liberalism and less inclined to the New Left than non-Party members. Youth League members were more inclined toward Liberalism, and less inclined toward the other two ideologies (see Table 7).

Predicting political ideology: media use, new technology, social interaction, political cognition

Table 8 summarizes the findings from an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis predicting political ideology by media use, new technology use, social interaction, and political cognition. Overall, results concerning demographic variables were largely similar to the foregoing analysis.

Traditional media use and mobile phone use only explained a tiny portion of variance in all three models. Television use was positively linked to both Liberalism and Cultural Conservatism. Newspaper use was positively related to Liberalism and the New Left. Mobile phone ownership was positively related to all three ideologies, but mobile phone use diversity was only positively related to Liberalism.
Table 7. Demographic difference.

|                          | Liberalism | Cultural Conservatism | The New Left |
|--------------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Male vs. female          | 0.105*     | -0.023                | -0.009       |
| Youth (18–35) vs. middle age (36–60) | -0.042*     | -0.413*                | -0.119*      |
| Youth (18–35) vs. senior age (61 or above) | -0.024      | -0.636*                | -0.104*      |
| Middle age (36–60) vs. senior age (61 or above) | 0.018       | -0.222*                | 0.015        |
| Low education vs. middle education | -0.067*     | 0.308*                 | 0.033        |
| Low education vs. high education | -0.075*     | 0.579*                 | 0.075*       |
| Middle education vs. high education | -0.008      | 0.272*                 | 0.042        |
| Non-CCP vs. CCP members  | -0.187*    | -0.045                | 0.117*       |
| Non-Youth League vs. Youth League members | -0.145*    | 0.199*                 | 0.011*       |

All data in this table are mean difference from one-way ANOVA post-hoc group comparison, except three variable groups, gender, CCP (Chinese Communist Party) members, Youth League members, which are from independent-samples t-test. *p < .01.

Table 8. Predicting political ideology: ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis.

|                  | Liberalism (N = 30,976) | Cultural Conservatism (N = 31,323) | The New Left (N = 32,609) |
|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Demographics     |                          |                                   |                           |
| Gender (male = 1, female = 2) | -0.079** | 0.028 | 0.006 |
| Age              | 0.001**                 | 0.014**                          | 0.004**                   |
| Education        | 0.004                   | -0.036**                         | -0.007                    |
| Personal income  | 0.001                   | 0.002                            | 0.005**                   |
| Family income    | 0.001                   | -0.005**                         | 0.001                     |
| Party members (yes = 1) | 0.101** | 0.040 | -0.132** |
| Youth league members (yes = 1) | 0.130** | -0.034* | -0.063** |
| City (yes = 1)   | -0.080**                | -0.104**                         | 0.090**                   |
| ΔR² (%)          | 2.1**                   | 7.8**                            | 0.8**                     |
| Traditional media use | (N = 30,976) | (N = 31,322) | (N = 32,609) |
| Television       | 0.022**                 | 0.016**                          | 0.002                     |
| Newspaper        | 0.008**                 | 0.002                            | 0.011**                   |
| Radio            | 0.014**                 | 0.003                            | -0.001                    |
| Magazine         | 0.003**                 | -0.005**                         | -0.010**                  |
| ΔR² (%)          | 0.6**                   | 0.1**                            | 0.1**                     |
| Mobile phone use | (N = 30,903) | (N = 31,252) | (N = 32,532) |
| Own mobile (0 = no, 1 = yes) | 0.065** | 0.169** | 0.110** |
| Mobile phone use diversity | 0.015** | -0.047** | -0.030** |
| ΔR² (%)          | 0.4**                   | 0.6**                            | 0.2**                     |
| Internet use     | (N = 9307) | (N = 9353) | (N = 9336) |
| Frequency        | 0.003                   | -0.005                           | 0.012*                    |
| Internet use diversity | -0.003 | -0.004 | 0.006 |
| Social networking | 0.023** | 0.033** | 0.034* |
| Alternative information seeking | 0.086** | -0.014 | -0.006 |
| Opinion expression | -0.021* | 0.021 | 0.028* |
| ΔR² (%)          | 2.3**                   | 0.2**                            | 0.5**                     |

(Continued)
Internet use measures did not demonstrate strong prediction power explaining political ideology either. The social networking motivation of Internet use was a significant predictor for all three ideologies. The opinion expression motivation was positively associated with Liberalism, and negatively with the New Left.

Media trust explained a considerable portion of variance in the three models, in particular, the model predicting Liberalism. Liberalism was positively related to trust in television, trust in national media, and trust in foreign media; Cultural Conservatism was positively related to trust in television, magazines, local media, national media, but negatively related to trust in foreign media. The New Left was positively related to trust in magazines, Internet, foreign media, but negatively related to trust in radio and national media.

In terms of social relationships and interaction, upper-class social relations were positively related to the New Left, and negatively related to the other two ideologies. Lower-class social relationships were positively related to Liberalism and Cultural Conservatism. Social network homogeneity was a positive predictor of all three ideologies but heterogeneity only predicted Liberalism.

Political cognition is another robust predictor of ideology. Different political cognition indicators displayed distinct patterns. First, people who favored Liberalism were more likely to have...
stronger political interest, more cognitive complexity, but less political efficacy. Second, people who favored Cultural Conservatism were more likely to have stronger political interest, more cognitive complexity, higher internal efficacy, but lower external efficacy. Finally, people who favored the New Left were more likely to have more cognitive complexity, higher internal efficacy, but lower political interest and external efficacy.

**Discussion and conclusion**

As part of the first large-scale national survey in Chinese communication research, our study first outlined in broad sketches the general landscape of political ideology in China. We found that on the whole, respondents leaned toward liberal political ideology, suggesting that ordinary people in China not only hold positive attitudes toward social conditions resulting from three decades of reform and opening up, but more importantly harbor great expectations about the future of the country. These include, but are not limited to, expansion of market competition in the larger context of globalization, immersion into the world economic system, deepening of political system reforms, strengthening of the supervision of political power, and increased access to democratic participation. Our findings echo some of the popular polls. For instance, in February 2014, the People’s Forum announced their polling results of the “Top 10 Ideological Trends in 2013”. The ranks by popularity were new liberalism, historical nihilism, nationalism, innovative Marxism, universal value theory, constitutional democracy, populism, the New Left, new Confucianism, and pseudo-scientism. The debates were particularly acute with regard to reform issues. The fact that the new liberalism was ranked within the top five for four years in a row was suggestive of “how new liberalism impact on China, especially on China’s economic development”. A 2014 Internet survey conducted by the Chinese Political Compass (zhongguo zhengzhi zuobiaoxi ceshi: www.zuobiao.me) on a sample of 171,830 netizens mapped out the basic distributions of political ideologies among people in different provinces and municipalities in China. On the left of the scale was Conservatism, which is characterized by its support for authoritarianism, national unity and safety, socialist economic policies, and traditional cultural values. On the right was Liberalism whose advocates favored reform and opening up, market economy, political democracy, freedom of speech, modern science and technology, and union into the world community (J. Pan & Xu, 2015). Although it was impossible to conduct an in-depth analysis of these ideological differences given the limitations of this online database, the findings in Pan’s study are largely consistent with ours. The complexity of political ecology in transitional China necessitates a close scrutiny of the construct of political ideology. Any stereotypes about political ideology are inadequate in capturing the dynamics of Chinese reforms – past, present, and future (Lieber, 2013).

The tendency toward liberal political ideology among the respondents is also shown in the positive correlation between respondents’ political status (e.g. member of Communist Party or Communist Youth League) and choice of political ideology. In contrast, individuals’ political status is inversely related to the New Left ideology, leading to the inference that the Marxist and Maoist leftist political ideology as an individual political identity is experiencing a near breakdown due to the dualist opposition between Communist Party and Youth League members on the one side and the broad masses on the other. In addition, most of the respondents expressed ambivalent attitudes toward Cultural Conservatism and the New Left ideologies. The prevailing reluctance to openly object or support either of these two ideologies provides empirical evidence that the well documented contest among the three ideologies on more or less equal footing within intellectual circles
is clearly not the case when describing the population as a whole. Not only do the three ideologies not share an equal number of believers, the perceived distinctions among them are also not as sharp as expected. Our finding contradicts the observation by political scientists in an earlier study about Chinese netizens being torn to the right or left extremes of the ideology continuum. Ma and Wang’s (2015) study found a clear divide had emerged among Chinese netizens with regard to political, economic, social, and foreign affairs issues. The terms “left-wing” and “right-wing” have become the basic demarcation lines separating political stances (Ma & Wang, 2015). This, however, could be the result of the fact that netizens only made up about 30% of our sample. Other findings in our research, however, concur with one of the basic conclusions in the political science study: “left” and “right” in the Chinese political ideology have vastly different connotations from those in the West. The left-wing group in China manifests stronger authoritarian personality traits and is more conservative and exclusive than its right-wing counterpart (see Altemeyer, 2006). The right-wingers, instead, are more concerned with equality and supervision of power (Ma & Wang, 2015).

The three ideological tendencies are shown to be related to different social demographic groups. Men favor Liberalism more than women, suggesting that in a male-dominant society, men are the more likely beneficiaries of the ongoing reforms than are women. They are more ambitious and have greater expectations on further domestic reform and on the increased role of China abroad. Rural residents with poor education and low income are more likely to cling to Cultural Conservatism, which may partly be a result of their living conditions at the margins of society. Urban dwellers with high incomes lean toward the New Left ideology more than rural people perhaps because they have more direct exposure to corruption, and see the gap between rich and poor and social inequality.

On the whole, if one looks at the results by economic regions, then it is clear that people in the economically developed eastern-seaboard regions display higher identifications with all three ideologies than those in the underdeveloped western regions, demonstrating a clear pattern of ideological pluralism. If, however, we look at the results by administrative regions, a somewhat different pattern emerges where Liberalism and Cultural Conservatism have a larger constituency in rural rather than urban areas, revealing the mixed feelings of farmers who have high hopes for expansion of reforms while at the same time harbor certain wariness about the invasion of outside cultures. Support for the New Left is the highest in municipalities directly governed by the central government and provincial capital cities, a finding not entirely unrelated to urban residents’ personal experience of the widening gaps across social strata as a result of rapid economic development. Seen from another angle, an inference can be made about the challenge lodged by liberal ideology against the traditional mainstream view that social wealth and economic development are the cornerstones of political democracy. This is the case largely because the liberal ideology promotes universalism and commonality while the New Left strongly proselytizes a return to the revolutionary tradition. The significant positive correlation discovered by Lipset (1959, 1963) between social wealth and economic development on the one side and the pursuit of political democracy on the other was named the iron law of politics (Burkhart & Lewis-Beck, 1994). Huntington (1991) believed that the strongest support for the third wave of democracy came from the urban middle class. Similarly, scholars proposed the notion of post-materialism on the basis of several rounds of large-scale World Value Surveys, stating that one of the positive consequences of economic development is that authoritative power gives way to political democracy (Inglehart & Norris, 2009; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Our research found that scores in favor of all three ideologies are high in regions of high economic development, indicating the growth of an open and tolerant political
culture in a country under transition. Scholars and observers of East Asian societies and polities have generated similar findings whereby the urban middle class born out of economic development tends to demand law and order and reliance on powerful countries, thus taking on certain features of self-contradictory and conservative political personalities (Hsiao, 2006; Jones, 1998). Previous studies by domestic sociologists and political scientists also have results that indicate a positive relationship between economic development and political democracy (e.g. Y. Zhang, 2009). Other scholars have specified more elaborate and sophisticated paths of influence. For instance, C. Li (2011) found that as the largest group of beneficiaries of the reform, the new urban middle class holds conflicting political attitudes: possessing both political conservatism and political liberalism. Together with our own findings in this regard, these results lead to the conclusion that internal contradictions exist among the Chinese public in terms of positions, views, and opinions about the political future of the country. Different ideologies gain prominence with regard to different issues and it is entirely possible that the salience of one or another ideology moves and shifts at different times. Put differently, the ideological boundaries of the left and right camps are far from being clearly marked whether one divides China by economic or administrative criteria. The so-called “China of nine colors”9 is without doubt an oversimplification of the country’s existing political situation.

Other research questions raised in this article offer valuable answers. On the whole, heavy users of China’s two most widely adopted media, television (97.4%) and mobile phones (72.5%), are also committed ideologues. Mobile phone use diversity (the number of apps and functions) predicts inclination toward liberal ideology and the other end of the scale is positively related to Cultural Conservatism and the New Left tendencies. This result has an apparent upper hand as the mainstream ideology of Liberalism whose core values revolve around globalization, economic development, and political democracy, thus appeals more to people with lower levels of education and consistent with their patterns of media use. In terms of Internet use, motivation for social networking is positively related to all three ideologies, although people who are motivated to search for alternative information are passionate subscribers to liberal ideology. On the other hand, willingness to express opinions and Internet use positively predicted alliance with the New Left. This finding provides valuable supplements to political scientists’ conclusion that the official media (traditional media such as newspapers, television, etc.) tend to reinforce left-wing positions whereas non-official media (new media such as online websites) tend to stress right-wing stances (Ma & Wang, 2015). In our view, the official media discourse is a hybrid of different ideological inclinations, depending largely on topics of discussion. For instance, Liberalism always appears when the government discusses economic issues whereas the New Leftism is frequently heard when the media promotes the authoritarian rule of the Communist Party. Therefore, it is difficult to adopt a simple official–non-official versus left–right dualist view.

The complexity of political ideology and its development in China is also revealed in the data media trust. For different types of media, the more trust people have in television, the more likely they are to have liberal and cultural conservative ideologies. Trust in the Internet is positively related to the New Left beliefs. In terms of different media sources, trust in national media (central government media) and trust in overseas media both lead to Liberalism, but the former is inversely related to the New Left ideology and the latter is positively related to the New Left ideology. Unlike the resonance between trust in national and local (regional) media and Cultural Conservatism, the more trust one has in overseas media, the less likely one is to be oriented toward Cultural Conservatism, thus making the value confrontations between “opening up and pluralism” and
“conservatism and uniformity” even more prominent. In summary, compared with media use, motivation and trust appear to have a stronger relationship with political ideology. Consistent with the predictions made by political scientists, findings from this study support the claim that individual psychological factors such as trust in media and motivations of Internet use are related to political ideology (Ma & Wang, 2015).

At the level of social contact, homogeneity in a social network is strongly positively related to all three political ideologies, proving validity to the adage “birds of a feather flock together”. Like-mindedness in values and beliefs, worldview, and perceived reality makes it easy for individuals to form and cement their political ideology. Heterogeneity in social networks, however, only significantly predicts liberal ideology, which is congruent with its pluralist and open-minded value orientations. On the vertical line of social relations, the more people associate with others at the middle and higher strata, the more likely it is that they will feel warmly toward the New Left and less likely they will share the liberal and cultural conservative values. The latter two are positively related to interpersonal associations with people at the lower strata of society. Once again, this finding confirms the ambivalence in the mind of most of people at the bottom of the social ladder who at once wish for further reform and political democracy and yet feel leery about the adverse effects inflicted on traditional culture by outside cultures that have followed China’s entry into the world economic system.

With respect to political cognition, only the cognitive complexity measure is significantly related to all three ideologies, lending more evidence to the earlier claim that psychological factors produce more powerful influence on political ideology than social or external forces. Political interest did not perform as expected in its predictive structure. Rather than being positively correlated to all three ideologies, political interest demonstrated a degree of discriminant power. That is, those with higher political interest are more inclined toward Liberalism and Cultural Conservatism. In contrast, greater apathy is associated with a higher identification with the New Left ideology. This finding concurs with the proposal that the Chinese New Left is plagued by a sense of alienation from the country’s political reality (Xiao, 2016). It is worth noting that internal political efficacy predicts favorable attitudes toward Cultural Conservatism and the New Left, but unfavorable attitudes toward Liberalism, revealing an interesting contrast with the predictions of political interest. The left-wingers are uninterested in politics but are quite confident about their ability to influence political reality. On the flip side, the right-wingers are more eager to participate in political activities and more adamantly demand supervision of power, but they are uncertain about their ability to bring about real changes in political life. This finding is consistent with our everyday observations. Unlike internal political efficacy, external efficacy was positively related to all three types of political ideologies. In other words, stronger political beliefs seem to go hand in hand with one’s belief in political responsiveness.

To sum up, contentions and tensions between the liberal orientations as the mainstream public belief and the official policies constitute an invaluable perspective for observing China’s political trends, whether in terms of reforms to the economic system or more fundamentally the political system. At the same time, serious attention ought to be paid to the possibility that the New Left ideology is more a destructive force than a facilitating one in the process of social mobilization toward democracy in the country’s future political development. This is so largely because of the nostalgic and conservative political positions adhered to by the New Left followers as epitomized in their favorite sayings, “The reform has abandoned valuable revolutionary tradition” and “All things considered, the Chinese society today is worse off than it was before the reform and opening
up”. In the words of Xiao (2016), the New Left as a set of theoretical principles imposes restrictions on economic new liberalism. The rise of the New Left also reflects divergent movement of social civility; but in that sense, the New Left in China today relies on the Cultural Revolution as its major discursive resource, exaggerates abnormalities in the practice of the market economy, emphasizes the sense of alienation from existing social conditions, and enthrones the Cultural Revolution as a utopian ideal. The extremists in the New Left are natural populists or extreme nationalists, categorically negating reform and opening up, rule by law, and the legitimacy of the incumbent administration (Xiao, 2016). Our research findings are informative to members of each of the three ideological camps about the need for more reflection and retrospection on issues related either to China’s status quo or the country’s future political development.

It is important to point out that our study is not without limitations. First, conceptually, we highlighted three streams of political ideology that are popular among the scholarly community. However, thoughts and beliefs in the scholarly community do not necessarily map onto those of the public. This is why the New Left ideology receives low to moderate popular support but has an important position in academia. Second, not all people structure their beliefs in terms of ideology (Converse, 1964). Individuals’ preference could be highly influenced by practical concerns. For instance, for rural residents their support for Liberalism could be considered as their strong desire for economic well-being. But whether or not they are identified with the whole conceptual system attached to Liberalism such as free market and democracy remains unknown. Therefore, it should be noted that our measurement of political ideology is still exploratory and preliminary. Future studies need to refine such measures and more work needs to be done to validate the scale we propose. Third, political ideologies change across time. Our data only present a snapshot of Chinese people’s attitudes toward different social and political statements. In a rapidly changing society such as China, people’s thoughts about society and politics could vary from time to time. Therefore, longitudinal attitude tracking studies will present more information regarding not only how Chinese people think about politics but how they change as well.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Professor Steve Guo of Hong Kong Baptist University for his contribution to the English version of this article.

Funding

Data analyzed in this article were collected by the research project of “Social Change and Mass Media in Contemporary China” (Grant No. 211XK03), which is supported by Journalism School at Fudan University and Center of Information and Communication Studies at Fudan University (Li, Pan, et al., 2010).

Notes

1. See “The Birth of ‘Oxford Consensus’”. *Southern People Weekly*, 9 September 2013. Retrieved from http://www.nfpeople.com/story_view.php?id=4824 (in Chinese). English source: http://sinosphereblogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/full-text-of-the-oxford-consensus-2013/?_r=0
2. There are multi-dimensional models, such as the Dual-Process Motivational Model of Ideology that considers ideology not as a one-dimensional structure, but as a two-dimensional model that includes right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) (e.g. Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). A number of studies suggest that attitudes concerning social or cultural issues are factorially distinct from attitudes concerning economic issues (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Evans, Heath, & Lalljee, 1996; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Lipset, 1960; Saucier, 2000; Shafer & Claggett, 1995; Stenner,
But the single left-right dimension is considered as the dominant approach (Jost, 2006).

3. Neo-Confucianism is a muddy concept. It usually refers to Song-Ming neo-Confucianism (aka Song-Ming Li Xue), which is differentiated from the Confucianism in Pre-Qin Period (Gao, 2015). During the 1990s, Chinese scholars proposed the concept of Modern neo-Confucianism to overcome the shortcomings of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism, to reinstate Confucianism, and to envision the future of China by combining Confucius thoughts and Western scholarly work (Fang, 1997). Modern neo-Confucianism is the base of Culture Conservatism.

4. Data weighting was performed by CSM Media Research. A total of 88 sub-strata were contained in the sample. For each strata, respondents fall into 10 groups according to their gender and age. Age has five categories: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–59, and 60 and above. Supposing that in strata $i$, group $j$ has a sample size of $n_{ij}$, and government statistics shows that strata $i$ group $j$ has a population of $N_{ij}$, then the weighting for strata $i$ group $j$ is $w_{ij} = N_{ij} / n_{ij}$. After weighting, the new sample size becomes 986,163.44. To maintain the size of original sample, the weights were adjusted accordingly.

5. During the time of the survey, the vast majority of Chinese population was in a rural area.

6. Due to the unique political context of China, the voting related items in Miller & Traugott’s scale were adjusted to “understanding of the problems the government is facing”, and “the public has no role in changing government policy”, and so on.

7. Prior to 2011, the National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China divided economic regions into eastern, central and western regions. Eastern region includes Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, and Hainan. Central region includes Shanxi, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei, and Hunan. Western region includes Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, and Xinjiang. We followed the traditional three areas, eastern, central, and western, because our data were collected in 2010.

8. See People Forum: Top 10 Ideological Trends in 2013. 5 February 2014. Retrieved from http://www.21ccom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article_2014020599978.html (in Chinese).

9. See Chovance (2009).

10. The populism here is not only referring to populist notions of socialism and the political mobilization of all people’s participation, but also links with the mob politics, extreme nationalism, blind xenophobia, the collective unconscious, and irrational choice.

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