Contemporary Urban China

Modernisation and Social Attitudes
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For my parents and my son.
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CCP   Chinese Communist Party
GT    Grounded Theory
NGO   Non-governmental Organisation
PE    Private Enterprise
SOE   State-Owned Enterprise
1. The Puzzle: Modernisation in China

1.1 Modernisation and the Question of Cultural Convergence

In December 1978, leading CCP figures around Deng Xiaoping gave the starting signal for the economic reforms that were to determine China’s fate for the decades to come. Incrementally kicking in during the 1980s, the reform programme quickly transformed each and every facet of China’s society, entailing the state sector’s downsizing while approving private businesses and attracting foreign investment; drawing rural dwellers in droves into the cities and triggering off spatial reconstruction; replacing run-down residential buildings with all kinds of novel dwellings; raising general living standards rapidly and spawning a new middle class of professionals and small businessmen, while also generating a new upper class of super-rich citizens and a contrasting group of comparatively underprivileged poor people; introducing a variety of new leisure activities and expanding the nation’s higher education system tremendously. During the first twenty years of the reform era, new social groups like private entrepreneurs emerged, while existing groups like the manual labour force experienced major status changes. Said to be the vanguard of social progress in Maoist China, manual workers now find themselves at the bottom of society. And while feudal landlords used to be heavily criticised during the Mao era, China now has the second highest number of millionaires in the world.1 On the bright side, Chinese society’s quick changes entailed the significant pluralisation of life and working styles. Then again, China’s social cohesion is being seriously challenged by a soaring rift between highly modernised metropolises and underdeveloped villages; between rich coastal areas and the backward inland; and between the nouveau riche and the newly formed poor. How do individuals come to terms with such fundamental changes? Moreover, as numerous studies have demonstrated, structural changes were accompanied by shifting popular values. Compared with older generations, Chinese young people today ap-

1 Bcg.perspectives (2014).

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pear more aspiring, more self-centred and more materialistic. How do shifting values in the face of a changing society influence individuals’ perceptions of society?

China’s transformation has been unprecedented in the history of mankind in terms of its speed and extent. With regard to its political regime, China’s highly modernised and unequal society challenges established notions of how socio-economic development is linked to political change. In 2013, China’s Gini coefficient ranged between 0.47 and 0.61, according to different sources. Political sociologists in general view a Gini coefficient above 0.4 as a predictor of social unrest. In addition, Classical Modernisation Theory predicts that cultures converge in the course of economic development. Accordingly, China will inevitably become democratised in the long run, most prominently due to an increasingly confident and capable middle class and a better organised working class, who will fight for their own interests. However, China’s new emerging middle classes fail to function as precursors of democratisation. As various studies have pointed out, the Chinese middle classes embrace high internal variety and most likely lack a shared identity. Above all, they generally depend on and benefit from the current political system, thus tending to be rather supportive of the party state. And although collective labour action has seen a considerable increase during the last few decades, the vast majority of incidents are socioeconomically rather than politically motivated. Findings from various surveys frequently depict the Chinese general public as overall satisfied with the nation’s status quo. While some authors ascribe this general satisfaction to rising popular living standards, others argue that the Chinese are simply convinced they live in a meritocratic and thus fair society. Other explanations include the government’s skilful adaption to social challenges; its use of nationalist sentiments; and China’s social fragmentation. Overall, these studies follow Modernisation Theory’s basic

2 Rosen (1989); Sun, Jiaming and Wang, Xun (2010); Yan (2011). Footnotes usually only contain authors’ family names. Christian names are only included for surnames that are shared by more than one researcher quoted in this study. The order in which the surnames and forenames of Chinese authors is put in the running text follows their individual preferences and is therefore not uniform.


4 This notion implies the idea that national cultures and their political systems correspond.


6 Unger (2006); Chen, Jie (2013).

7 Friedman and Lee (2010).
assumptions that cultures converge as modernising countries ultimately become democratised, holding that obstacles to democratisation are most likely of a merely temporary nature.

In contrast, theories of cultural divergence argue that historically entrenched values and attitudes form different cultural grammars, which prevent cultures from converging. Correspondingly, some China scholars maintain that China’s unique version of modernity sets it apart from Western models. Usually, these scholars draw on cultural traditions to demonstrate the country’s alleged incompatibility with democracy. A prominent example is the Confucian notion of hierarchical human relations, where a paternal ruler governs his subjects in a loving yet authoritarian way. However, democracy still takes centre stage in these works in the sense that argumentation revolves around demonstrating why democracy does not suit China’s specific conditions.

While all these explanations provide very valuable insights into Chinese society or cultural heritage, they are commonly incapable of illuminating how the individuals at the centre of society perceive their social environment. Even opinion polls are circumscribed in their ability to grasp individual perceptions of society, since they can only measure pre-established values and attitudes but are, by design, unable to detect novel concepts. Against this background, this study deliberately adopts an open-ended approach to social actors’ social and political attitudes. Forgoing prefabricated assumptions about social change, it builds on a word-by-word analysis of two-and-a-half dozen semi-narrative in-depth interviews with Chinese citizens from all walks of life. In a first step, it inquires how social actors perceive both their shifting social environment and the social status change they underwent in their individual lives. In a second step, it subsequently ponders these perceptions’ impact on political attitudes, desires for civic participation, community spirit and efficacy, which are seen as the most important preconditions for civic participation—that is, conscious action aimed at inducing social change or otherwise contributing to the common good. Analysing social change on the micro level, this study shows how China’s breathtakingly fast transformation generated both genuinely unique as well as more common reactions within the population. This study therefore hopes to provide a partial, but focused picture of how China’s modernisation project deviates from or conforms to other nations’ cases, thus contributing some insight to the discussion on cultural convergence versus divergence.

8 See also Morrissey (2016).
1. The Puzzle: Modernisation in China

1.2 Content of the Study

The study proceeds as follows: The second chapter introduces Modernisation Theory’s general assumptions on economic development and political regime change and complements opposed notions of enduring cultural divergence. Thereupon, China specific research on social change and political transformation is presented. The large majority of studies are somewhat constricted by their close reference to Modernisation Theory’s basic assumptions. To overcome this confinement, several alternative notions of modernity are subsequently introduced. Shmuel Eisenstadt’s notion of *multiple modernities* especially allows for a more open-ended approach to China’s social transformation and is therefore chosen as the fundament of this study.

Chapter three introduces this research project’s methodological approach and data set in more detail. The study was part of the “Governance in China” research network sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. It builds on a body of 115 interviews conducted between 2009 and 2012 with a mixture of diverse interviewees in Beijing, Xi’an and Wenzhou. Following a research approach inspired by Grounded Theory, after a rough inspection, 30 of these 115 interviews were chosen for microlinguistic hermeneutic textual analysis. Applying positioning and agency analysis, I unearthed a set of interrelated core concepts, which lay the groundwork for social actors’ views of society and the political system. These concepts are presented throughout the rest of the study.

Chapters four to seven present my interviewees’ views on society’s transformation. Chapter four commences with an in-depth description of the various aspects in which society changed and allows the reader to grasp how social actors view their society’s new face. Presenting the most important areas of social change through my interviewees’ eyes, the chapter also lays the foundations for later chapters, which build on several of these aspects. Housing and general living conditions; work and education; leisure and consumption; intergenerational changes; and shifting gender roles are presented successively. Most importantly, the chapter shows how the social change’s comprehensiveness and high speed resulted in an underlying sense of insecurity, but also instilled many social actors with general optimism.

Chapter five shows how individuals assess the social changes described in chapter four. When describing contemporary China, interviewees frequently draw comparisons with the Mao era society. Therefore, the chapter first gives a short overview of social stratification during both the Mao era
and the reform period. In a nutshell, the Mao era society was comparatively equal, but upward social mobility was virtually impossible for individuals with the wrong class label. In contrast, reform-era China witnessed a weakening of class boundaries, while a steep social hierarchy emerged. Social mobility rates were especially high during the early reform era, but gradually decreased later. Crucially, some interviewees view this decrease as sign of social closure—that is, as an unfair exclusion of disadvantaged groups by a newly emerging elite—while others maintain that social mobility based on individual merit is possible for everyone. Above all, whether or not they deem individual social mobility possible predicts their satisfaction with the current social order. As John C. Turner pointed out in his Self-Categorisation Theory, social actors’ perceptions of social mobility impact heavily on their strategies for social ascent and, crucially, interpersonal relations. Interviewees who sense social closure believe they live in an unfairly divided society. These respondents most of all view themselves in terms of their affiliation with their social groups and frequently apply “us-against-them” rhetoric when talking about society. They are generally unhappy with social development and pessimistic about China’s future, often voicing concerns about moral decay. By comparison, a second group of interviewees is relatively enthusiastic about China’s development. They draw the picture of a functionalist—thus meritocratic—society, where each individual contributes to the common good by fulfilling the social role they suit best. Accordingly, individuals are, in principle, capable of reaching any position in society if they are willing to adapt to society’s needs and work hard and diligently. Correspondingly, unsuccessful individuals only have themselves to blame. Remarkably, both images of society—which I call the functionalist picture and the picture of a divided society—are spread among social climbers and less successful individuals alike. This observation demonstrates that “the simple-minded idea that you can deduce people’s attitudes by a simple self-interest calculation based on their current status attributes proves a very poor guide to respondent attitudes.”


Chapter six turns to social change’s impact on human relations. In the face of China’s steep new social hierarchy, decreasing upward mobility rates and general feelings of insecurity create heavy pressure. Those who believe that individual social mobility is possible especially feel pressured since they perceive themselves as losers if they fail to climb the social lad-
Pressure is further intensified by a state-sponsored discourse on overpopulation and a shortage of resources, which in essence states that China’s population exceeds the amount of available resources. In consequence, social actors find themselves in the midst of an intense competition. A fierce struggle for social status determines human relations and shapes many areas of individuals’ lives. Constantly competing for status, they often view others as mere competitors—an attitude with severe implications for senses of community spirit. In an atmosphere of insecurity and heavy competition, individuals tend to focus keenly on individual profit; sometimes literally stopping at nothing to secure resources for themselves. Therefore, reform-era China has witnessed the escalation of what some scholars have called a moral or trust crisis. Besides this, exposure to a high degree of status insecurity wakes desires for role guidelines that guarantee social recognition. Therefore, social actors are inclined to turn to publicly visible acts of status construction like conspicuous consumption or philanthropy to reassure others and themselves of their social status.

Chapter seven investigates how individuals cope with their experiences of social status change on a psychological level. Most importantly, the question of agency is addressed. (Aspiring) social climbers are highly receptive of discourses that promise assistance in becoming successful and facilitate senses of social belonging. The suzhi discourse in particular is very influential in sketching social actors’ forms of conduct, often effectively preventing them from deviating from state-approved behaviour. As regards individual status loss or unexpectedly low social status, I found six common reactions. Social actors may directly fight the causes of their status loss; actively engage in alternative actions; more passively change their perspective on what has happened; turn their attention towards something else; increasingly draw on close family members’ social positions to construct their own identity; or try to escape the whole situation. These measures are not mutually exclusive. In general, only interviewees with a functionalist view of society apply active and problem-focused coping strategies. In contrast, respondents who regard society as divided appear much more passive in their approach to dealing with unfavourable social conditions.

Chapter eight reviews the perceptions of social change presented throughout chapters four to seven in light of their implications for social actors’ predisposition towards civic participation. With regard to community spirit, increased social alienation becomes apparent alongside growing desires for belonging. While growing social alienation tends to prevent individuals from collective socio-political activism, their desire for social belonging discourages them from engaging in any officially discouraged be-
haviour. As far as social actors’ efficacy and attitudes towards the government and the political system are concerned, I detected two different, internally coherent patterns, closely linked to the two opposed views of society. The efficacy of social actors with a functionalist view of society is closely bound to their professional positions. They generally hold an elitist view of society and politics and may therefore not claim a voice in politics, unless they are high-ranking experts in certain policy areas. In general, they express firm trust in the government, while admitting that politicians are only human, too, and thus constricted by external threats and internal difficulties. Therefore, a strong state is needed to safeguard public interests. In contrast, individuals who think that society is divided believe that resources are not so much scarce but distributed highly unfair. In their opinion, the government consciously marginalises certain social groups to maintain the elite status of other groups. While these respondents hope for a change of the social system, if not the political system, they usually lack any sense of active agency. An analysis of survey data from various studies indicates that the majority of the population has a functionalist picture of society. However, evidence suggests that the image of a divided society is more widespread among highly educated individuals born after 1980.

Chapter nine further summarises this study’s most important findings and compares them to Classical Modernisation Theory’s expectations. In short, my qualitative research and the survey data analysed in chapter eight show that a substantial number of social actors in contemporary urban China do indeed have a picture of society that tends to support Eisenstadt’s notion of *multiple modernities*. Against Modernisation Theory’s assumptions, this functionalist picture of society does not speak in favour of democratisation. That said, social change’s breathtaking speed makes it hard to determine whether this picture constitutes a mere temporary by-product of China’s turning away from collectivism or will persist in the long run.
2. Theoretical Background: The Political Implications of Social Change

2.1 Introduction

Social modernisation denotes the evolution of simple and poor agrarian societies into complex, diversified and rich industrial societies, which are, to a certain degree, capable of controlling their interior as well as their exterior environment. Important societal changes that are commonly associated with modernisation include urbanisation, rising levels of education, bureaucratisation, economic development towards a market economy and integration with the global economy. While these processes gradually unfolded over a period of more than two hundred and fifty years in the West, China only took its first tentative steps towards modernity at the end of the nineteenth century and only made partial progress in its quest for modernisation until 1978 when Deng Xiaoping proclaimed significant economic reforms with the aim of establishing what later became generally known as the socialist market economy. Therefore, within a very short period of time, China has achieved remarkable progress in its attempt to catch up with the West. For example, urbanisation has increased expeditiously since rural-urban migration became possible during the 1980s, China’s higher education sector has expanded rapidly since the 1990s and China’s market reforms enabled the country to join the World Trade Organisation in 2001.

However, one further aspect of societal change that is usually linked to modernisation by political scientists remains unmet: democratisation. From the view of Classical Modernisation Theory, “the various aspects of economic development—industrialisation, urbanisation, wealth and education—are so closely interrelated as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy.” Democratisation is seen as an inevitable consequence of economic development and subsequent social modernisation. Following this rationale, many Western observers expected

11 Hong (2016), pp. 3–7. In the West, these processes started with the Industrial Revolution in mid18th-century England.
the Chinese public to demand more of a say in political realms in the course of increasing economic development. The democracy movement of the late 1980s, which sadly achieved fame after the crackdown at Tiananmen Square on June, 3rd in 1989, seemed to prove these assumptions true. But surprisingly, ever since, things have calmed down and popular claims for political participation have softened. Why is that? Some China scholars simply explain the Chinese regime’s longevity with its readiness to adopt coercive measures to repress any political dissent.13 However, evidence from various opinion polls suggests that matters are more complicated, as they indicate that the Chinese regime’s political legitimacy and public consent with the government are comparatively high.14

To fully grasp China’s situation, it is helpful to first become acquainted with Modernisation Theory’s basic assumptions for political transformation, since they highlight many important aspects of social change. At the same time, it is difficult to entirely explain the Chinese regime’s persistence in light of traditional models of modernisation. Additional information on China’s specific situation is needed to better understand its social and political conditions. As shown in the following sections, common explanations of the Chinese regime’s longevity stress political institutionalisation, social fragmentation, popular satisfaction with economic development and nationalist sentiments. While political institutionalisation and social fragmentation point to the macro structure of China’s political system and society respectively, nationalist sentiments are located at the micro level of the social, that is, within the individual. In a way, economically generated legitimacy sits somewhere in between, since it depends on individuals’ subjective interpretation of objective factors, which—again—is crucially informed by public discourses. While this study does acknowledge the importance of knowledge about society’s macro-structure, it argues that, in order to fully comprehend China’s current situation, grasping popular core beliefs about society, which are located at the individual level, is inevitable.

Besides this, while studies on China’s persisting regime provide very valuable insights, most of them continue to revolve around Modernisation Theory’s pre-assumptions, which they try to either verify or falsify. Given that Modernisation Theory has strong preconceptions about China’s future development, this theoretical angle facilitates overlooking other im-

14 E.g. Dickson (2016); Chu, Pan and Wu (2015); Whyte (2015), (2010a) and (2010b).
2.2 Social Change and Political Transformation

According to Classical Modernisation Theory, economic development promotes democratisation.\(^{16}\) Therefore, Classical Modernisation Theory supposes gradual cultural convergence that stands in clear opposition to cultural essentialist hypotheses of cultural divergence.\(^{17}\) In addition, some adjusted versions of Modernisation Theory concede path dependent develop-

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15 For an extensive introduction to studies on political transformation, see O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986); Pickel and Pickel (2006); Kollmorgen, Merkel and Wagen (2014).

16 While the term “Modernisation Theory” is a firmly established term in sociology and political science, this notion represents a broad paradigm rather than a coherent sociological or political theory.

17 Lipset (1960) is the earliest work that is usually subsumed under Classical Modernisation Theory, although the original text took—as we shall see later—a much more moderate stance on the question of cultural convergence. More recent and
ment—that is, the idea that while all cultures develop in the same direction, historically determined variations between different cultures persist. Proponents of path dependency hypotheses often argue taking the middle ground between crude cultural convergence and divergence arguments, thus somewhat softening Modernisation Theory’s claims. However, in the end they similarly subscribe to a logic of teleological development towards democratisation, thus assuming that political cultures ultimately converge.

In the following, I first give a brief, general overview of the most important explanations for Modernisation Theory’s democratisation hypothesis—namely structural arguments about either shifting social power relations or changing public values; more specific arguments about increased educational resources and the organisational capacities of the lower social strata; explanations of shifting interests informed by rational choice theory; arguments about the effects of globalisation; and actor-based approaches. I also present the opposing position of cultural divergence. Subsequently, the most influential contributions to the debate are introduced more specifically and applied to the Chinese case where appropriate.

Empirical research from several large, usually comparative cross-country studies has established Modernisation Theory’s most fundamental assumption that economic development induces democratisation. Explanations for this association are manifold. The most prominent argument relates to social structure and power: It links economic growth to urbanisation and the transformation of society’s class structure, which alter the balance of power between social classes, thus enabling middle and lower classes to push their interests more effectively. A closely related line of reasoning emphasises how increased organisational capacities within the lower social strata benefit these strata’s interest representation. Another structural argument stresses how changes in class structure and, subsequently, rising educational levels not only increase lower and middle class members’ power, but also contribute to shifts in popular values towards more democratic orientation. While power-centred approaches also take into account the working classes’ part in democratisation, value-centred explanations usually put a clear focus on the role of the middle class. Other scholars adopt rational choice theory to explore how the stance of elites towards democracy shifts as a result of economic growth. In comparison, actor-based ap-

18 The most prominent advocates of path dependency are probably Inglehart and Welzel (2005).
proaches often point to friction within the ruling class, which triggers democratisation. Further contributions to the debate have pointed to the role of globalisation and the importance of spillover effects from other countries. In practice, most scholars usually adopt a combination of these arguments.

In contrast, other theorists have proposed the opposing view that cultures are fundamentally different. They argue that objective conditions and institutions, and less tangible values and beliefs alike are important pre-conditions of or obstacles to democratisation. As these crucial elements of political development are historically determined and deeply entrenched in distinctive cultures, democratisation is by no means the ultimate logical result of political evolution in all political systems.

The extensive scholarly debate on democratisation is complicated by the fact that many contributions fail to distinguish between the transformation of previously non-democratic nations and the consolidation of newly established democracies. While this distinction was theoretically introduced as early as in 1970 by Dankwart Rustow, scholars continued to use the term “democratisation” to subsume both aspects for years to come.\(^\text{19}\)

For the sake of accuracy, only the transformation of political systems is referred to as “democratisation” in the following. However, some relevant findings on the consolidation of young democracies are added. All contributions to the debate are roughly put in chronological order—that is, culture convergence and divergence arguments are not separated into distinctive sub-chapters, but put in the context of the dialogue they emerged from.

In his seminal work, Seymour Martin Lipset was the first to empirically link economic development to democratisation in 1959. Others before him had written about this subject, but Lipset took the lead in statistically validating it. To this end, he grouped 28 European and non-European Anglophone countries into two categories denoted as “stable democracies” and “unstable democracies and dictatorships”. A comparison group contained 20 Latin American nations, which were classified as either “democracies and unstable dictatorships” or “stable dictatorships”. Subsequent calculations demonstrated a strong correlation between “the average wealth, degree of industrialization and urbanization, and level of education” on the one hand and democratisation on the other hand within both groups

of nations.\textsuperscript{20} In explaining his findings, Lipset particularly stressed the impact of education, which “presumably broadens men’s outlooks, enables them to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restrains them from adhering to extremist and monistic doctrines, and increases their capacity to make rational electoral choices.”\textsuperscript{21} Summing up findings from various value surveys, he deemed education “far more significant than income or occupation” in predicting individual “democratic norms of tolerance for opposition”, although he admitted that a high level of education alone is not a sufficient condition for a democratic turn.\textsuperscript{22} Lipset argued that democratisation crucially depends on the formation of a relatively well-off and well-educated middle class, which takes an intermediary position between the elites and the lower class. He reasoned that a “large middle class plays a mitigating role in moderating conflict since it is able to reward moderate and democratic parties and penalize extremist groups”.\textsuperscript{23} The rationale is that society’s general level of education rises along with growing economic prosperity. Better educated individuals will then increasingly move beyond mere material goals in life. In ways reminiscent of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, social actors will tend to shift their attention towards non-material goals after their desires for material security and consumption are met.\textsuperscript{24} According to Lipset, it is precisely this value change that is at the heart of democratisation. However, in reception by later contributions to the debate, Lipset has for the most part been reduced to the shortened argument that economic development leads to democratisation.\textsuperscript{25} Either way, when applied to China, Lipset’s observations suggest

\textsuperscript{20} Lipset (1959), pp. 74–5. Although the approach was later criticised for being methodologically flawed, Lipset’s work set the stage for later comparative surveys.

\textsuperscript{21} Lipset (1959), p. 79.

\textsuperscript{22} Lipset (1959), pp. 79–80.

\textsuperscript{23} Lipset (1959), p. 83.

\textsuperscript{24} According to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, basic physiological needs must be satisfied before individuals strive for higher level needs like safety, love and belonging, and esteem respectively. Finally, when all of these desires are satisfied, individuals ultimately start to crave for self-actualisation. While Maslow admitted that any of these needs may motivate individuals at any given time, he maintained that his pyramid scheme depicts the general pattern of human motivation. Maslow (1954).

\textsuperscript{25} Approaches to political transformation informed by Modernisation Theory in general have repeatedly been criticised for being too deterministic and simplistic. E.g. Pickel and Pickel (2006), pp. 9–10. However, many of the primary works were much more sophisticated than their later reception acknowledged.
good prospects for democratisation, since the last few decades have witnessed the formation of an expanding middle class, while “the average wealth, degree of industrialization and urbanization, and level of education” have all risen dramatically.

Despite giving a list of factors for democratisation, Lipset also pointed out that the “high correlations […] between democracy and other institutional characteristics of societies must not be overly stressed, since unique events may account for either the persistence or the failure of democracy in any particular society”.

Lipset here explicitly referred to Max Weber, who had emphasised the importance of distinctive historical experiences, which account for varying patterns of development in different countries, as early as forty years prior to Lipset. In fact, Weber had not only advocated the importance of historical events, but prominently investigated the impact of cultural factors on national development, though using the example of capitalism, not democracy. As Weber had argued, certain demographic, historical and geographic features of ancient China and India would have made it much more likely for them to develop modern capitalism before Europe did. Weber explained the puzzle of capitalism’s initial emergence in the West by analysing cultural and especially religious influences on economic development. Accordingly, different religious beliefs and values had promoted the development of “certain forms of practical rational lifestyles” in the West, which were necessities for the capitalism missing in the East. In its internal structure, this argument remains somewhat teleological in taking the European pathway to capitalism as the normal case as opposed to China and India, which are portrayed as deviant cases. Nevertheless, Weber’s cultural argument served as an important source of inspiration for later advocates of cultural divergence. Applied to China’s prospects for democratisation, it opened the doors for the possibility that China is indeed walking down a different lane. Of course, this line of thinking is firmly opposed by Modernisation Theory.

Weber’s considerations also inspired Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who conducted a comparative cross-national survey on democratisation and democratic consolidation in five democratic nations in 1963 to test political attitudes and values and first formulated the argument of cultural

prerequisites for democracy. Most importantly, they concluded that structural democracy is only sustainable if supported by a corresponding civic culture. They identified four different ways in which individuals relate to the political system: (1) general attitudes towards the structure of the political system, (2) the desire for opportunities for individual political participation, (3) the assessment of political output and (4) satisfaction with one’s own position within the state. Accordingly, while some individuals long for opportunities to actively contribute to political decision-making, others are perfectly content with their political system as long as they are satisfied by political results. This finding allows us to distinguish between input and output-based regime legitimacy. Moreover, as Almond’s and Verba’s study shows, the majority of people in any given country tend to adopt a somewhat similar stance with regard to the political system. Almond and Verba traced three different types of political culture that varied along these categories: the parochial, the subject and the participant culture. Among these three types only the participant culture was described as being favourable to democracy. In logically objectionable argumentation, the authors thus argued that this political culture was the reason why previously non-democratic states successfully transformed into democracies in the first place. Crucially, the attitudes and values that decided upon any nation’s placement within the typology were explained by historically entrenched values and national experiences rather than by anything else. Again, this cultural–historical argument supports the idea that China could indeed remain in a non-democratic state forever.

In 1966, Barrington Moore further challenged the idea that modernisation inevitably leads to democratisation in his comparative historical analysis of eight “modern” nations. Moore explained the emergence of political regimes with reference to socio-historical conditions like the organisa-

29 Almond and Verba (1963). The five selected countries were the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Mexico. Critics have pointed out that Mexico was an inappropriate choice, since it did not constitute a fully functioning democracy at that time. Almond and Verba (1980), p. 44.

30 This line of reasoning can be criticised since political cultures are indeed capable of changing after system transformation. For example, it is widely accepted that democratic values only became entrenched in the young Federal Republic of Germany after one to two decades of respectable economic growth. Barrington (2012), p. 76. Therefore, to draw conclusions about the past from findings from recent value surveys is logically invalid.

31 The study compared the cases of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, China and India. Moore (1966).
tion of agriculture. He determined three pathways to modernity, with democracy being only one of three possible outcomes of national modernisation alongside fascism and communism. Like Lipset, Moore promoted the structural argument that socioeconomic development leads to the growth of “the bourgeoisie,” which he likewise deemed a necessity of democratisation. Moore amplified this argument by highlighting that the bourgeoisie’ independence was a necessity of democracy. Otherwise, it’s strengthening might result in fascism like in Japan, where it was allied to powerful landowners, or communism as in China, where it embraced the peasantry. Though never using the term “middle class”, Moore did describe “the bourgeoisie” as equivalent to what other scholars usually call the middle class. Therefore, he is widely recognised and discussed with regard to his contribution to literature on the middle class. His study shows clearly that the mere emergence of a middle class in itself does not necessarily lead to democratisation or even a push for democracy from this new class. This finding is of particular interest for the Chinese case, since, as we will see later, various China scholars have shown that China’s emerging middle class is anything but independent of the party state.

In his 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington introduced a somewhat actor-based approach to the discussion. He stressed the importance of political parties as platforms for political mobilisation, without which political classes could not function effectively. In 1986, Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter added another aspect to this line of thinking when they studied the process of system transformation from authoritarianism to democracy in Turkey. Maybe most notably, they asserted “that there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence—direct or indirect—of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners.” O’Donnell and Schmitter were thus the first to promote an approach which treated the ruling elite in a more nuanced way. This perspective seems of special importance for China, where tensions within the ruling party became most visible in the aftermath of the 1989 student protests and in the summer of 2012 when aspiring Central Politburo member and party chief of Chongqing municipality Bo Xilai was removed from all his posts shortly before the upcoming succession of national leadership. However, despite all speculations to the

33 Huntington (1968).
contrary, the CCP has always been able to successfully overcome such internal tensions to date.

The actor-based approach introduced above was later supported by Samuel Huntington himself, who in 1991 agreed that “democracies are created not by causes but by causers”.\(^\text{35}\) In his widely cited work, Huntington coined the phrase of a “third wave of democratisation”, which had followed the first wave of democratisation in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century and a second wave in the middle of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century and resulted in the democratisation of roughly sixty nations across Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America after 1974. According to Huntington, the occurrence of democratisation processes in waves shows that national development is closely linked to global influences. Huntington identified a set of conditions for democratisation, whose composition varied during the separate waves. The conditions he deemed most important for the countries that became democratised during the third wave were (1) a general decrease in authoritarian regimes’ legitimacy due to prolonged poverty, (2) structural changes, such as urbanisation, rising levels of education and the growth of the middle class caused by a growing global economy,\(^\text{36}\) (3) increased emphasis on individual rights by the Vatican, (4) a “snowball” or “demonstration effect” after some countries were democratised first and (5) support for democratic factions by the United States and the European Union. Among all of these conditions, Huntington regarded structural changes in the course of economic development as the main causes of democratisation. At the same time, he particularly underlined the important role of globalisation in promoting the global spread of democracy.\(^\text{37}\) On the one hand, Huntington’s considerations on the Vatican or even demonstration effects may remain irrelevant to China, while the connection between regime legitimacy and economic development even works in favour of the Chinese regime. On the other hand, the structural argument and China’s increasing involvement in the international economy, as marked most visibly by China’s joining of the World Trade Organisation in 2001, support the idea that China will eventually become democratised at some point.


\(^{36}\) With regard to the middle class, Huntington argued that although in many nations members of the middle class are initially not fond of democracy, they change their attitudes over time. Therefore, in “virtually every country the most active supporters of democratisation came from the urban middle class”. Huntington (1991), pp. 66–7.

Huntington’s global outlook was shared by Francis Fukuyama, who in 1992 famously proclaimed the “end of history.” According to this idea, human history follows an evolutionary process, with liberal democracy constituting the final form of government. However, Fukuyama recognises the possibility of democracies sliding back into authoritarianism. Thus, his teleological denotation of democracy as a final form of government constitutes a normative judgement, rather than pointing to a chronological process. While his position has been frequently criticised, it has nevertheless remained very influential, as many important later contributions to the debate drew inspiration from Fukuyama’s work.

Another important piece of work published in 1992 is Rueschemeyer et al.’s comparative historical case study on democratisation in advanced industrial countries, Latin America and the Caribbean. Like others before them, Rueschemeyer et al. affirmed the importance of an emerging quasi-middle “capitalist class”, which they located in between the “feudal and absolutist social class” and the “subordinate classes”. According to their analysis the rise of this intermediate class is a necessity of a democratic turn. However, it is not a sufficient condition. Only if the “exclusionary class interests of the capitalist class” are balanced by “a counter-hegemony of subordinate classes and especially the working class”, can democratic change occur. Rueschemeyer et al. were the first to put great emphasis on the self-organisation capacity of the working class that gradually shifts the balance of power among social classes. Self-organisation facilitates the emerging of “civil society, defined as the ‘totality of social institutions and associations, both formal and informal that are not strictly production-related nor governmental or familial in character’”. As members of both the middle and the working class increasingly participate in civil society to fight for their own interests, power relations between the state and society slowly shift in favour of a democratic turn. In summary, Rueschemeyer et al.’s model of democratisation acknowledges the previously neglected importance of the formation of a self-organised working class.

China scholars are well aware of the working class’s importance for the stability of China’s political system. Therefore, they paid close attention when economic restructuring led to mass lay-offs of state workers during the late 1990s and early 2000s, which in turn caused large-scale workers’ protests throughout China. However, these protests remained singular and disconnected. As Karl Marx himself believed, workers of the world need to unite if they are to achieve anything. In contrast, several studies have portrayed the Chinese working class(es) as severely fragmented as well as circumscribed in their organisational capacity.\textsuperscript{43} This aspect is dealt with in more detail later.

The idea that an active civil society is conducive to democratisation was initially formulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in two volumes published in 1835 and 1840.

In \textit{Democracy in America}, Alexis de Tocqueville attributes the strength of democracy to America’s vibrant associational life, in which people voluntarily cooperate in order to advance their shared ideas and interests. Even if civic associations are not explicitly political, Tocqueville’s claim that they engender social norms conductive to democracy emerged as a hugely influential idea in the democratization literature.\textsuperscript{44}

De Tocqueville’s idea became popular among political scientists again throughout the 1960s and 70s, when social and political activism was viewed as helpful in strengthening Western democracies. It was further popularised during the 1980s, when civil activism clearly contributed to the democratisation of several former authoritarian regimes.\textsuperscript{45} The belief that a vigorous civil society is or may be crucial in promoting democratic transitions incidentally also caused state actors from the European Union and the United States to heavily subsidise civic organisations in non-democratic nations.\textsuperscript{46} In China, civil activism thrived greatly throughout the reform era, with an ever growing number of both individual activists and respective organisations. But civil activism in China takes place in a constantly changing legal environment. Since the 1980s, the government’s attitude towards civil organisations gradually has evolved from ignorance via mere toleration into attempts to purposefully utilise civic activists. At the same

\textsuperscript{43} E.g. Hurst (2009); Lee (2007a); Blecher (2002).
\textsuperscript{44} LeVan (2014), p. 101.
time, civic activism remains profoundly regulated in China. Moreover, especially since the start of the Xi-Li-Administration in 2012/13, the government has closely monitored civic activists and organisations with ties to international donor organisations. In addition, activists often actively seek deeper embedment in the state. Thus, the prospects of democratisation propelled by civil activism in China appear to be rather limited.

Civil society’s impact on democratisation was debated intensely throughout the 1990s. However, in 2000, Adam Przeworski et al.’s agenda-setting piece of work took a broader stance. As Przeworski remarked elsewhere,

whether we think that the key to the long-term transformations lies in economic evolution, cultural change, the rise of civil society, or what not, we should be analyzing these processes with the view toward their implications for the grip that the dictatorships can hold over the society and the associated benefits, material or symbolic. [...] [These processes] can be exogenous or endogenous, macro or micro.

Reclaiming Lipset’s most prominent statement about the link between economic growth and democratisation, Przeworski et al. picked up Rustow’s distinction between democratisation and democratic consolidation. Accordingly, they asked if economic growth genuinely prompts democratic turns in non-democratic regimes (they call this the “endogenous” type of democratisation) or merely helps to sustain established democracies (the “exogenous” type of democratisation). After analysing survey data from 135 nations collected between 1950 and 1990, Przeworski et al. concluded that while the “exogenous” hypothesis of democratisation holds true, the “endogenous” does not. In their view, democracies may emerge rather randomly at any given stage of economic development, but are more likely maintained in developed economies. Przeworski et al.’s work has received heavy criticism, with critics often using Przeworski et al.’s own data set for further analysis to disprove their findings about the “endogenous”

49 Przeworski and Limongi reintroduced Rustow’s distinction to the current debate in Przeworski and Limongi (1997). See Wucherpfennig and Deutsch (2009), p. 3.

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hypothesis of democratisation’s validity.\(^{51}\) In short, statistical evidence from a range of quantitative works “strongly suggests that both exogenous and endogenous democratisation are systematically associated with socio-economic development”.\(^{52}\) Therefore, once more, these findings strongly support the hypothesis that China is about to become democratised.

Przeworski et al. were frequently criticised for falling short of explaining their statistical findings theoretically. To facilitate more in-depth understanding, Charles Boix enriched the debate on democratisation in 2003 using a novel approach grounded in Game Theory. Boix’s work built on two sets of data: One set contained international survey data from 1950 to 1990, which he used to calculate the “yearly probability of democratic transition and democratic breakdown as a function of income distribution”. For a second panel, which contained national case studies “from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century”, Boix used the distribution of rural property and levels of human capital as indicators of inequality.\(^{53}\) Rooted in Game Theory and thus based on Rational Choice Theory, his approach focused on incentives for groups of political actors. As he argued, the lower classes oppose the ruling elite as they desire the redistribution of resources. The elite, however, is naturally interested in retaining as much power as possible. From an elite perspective both democratisation and suppression of the lower classes come with certain costs. But rising income equality and the creation of highly mobile assets make a democratic turn less cost intensive for the ruling elite, who thus gradually becomes more appreciative of democratic redistribution of power and wealth. According to Boix, wealth redistribution thus precedes democratisation in essence.

Political institutions liberalize with the growth of capital mobility in previously unequal societies. As both assets become more mobile and their distribution more equal, universal suffrage is introduced. Unless some exogenous shocks reverse the existing type and distribution of capital, democracy becomes a self-sustaining equilibrium: it fosters

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51 Among the more prominent critics were Charles Boix and Susan Stokes, who argued that Prezworski et al.’s sample suffered from selection problems, that their analysis was afflicted with omitted variable bias and that results were misinterpreted. Boix and Stokes (2003), p. 522.
52 Wucherpfennig and Deutsch (2009), p. 4.
higher levels of equality (through extensive education and redistribution) and it blocks the expropriatory temptations of policy makers.\textsuperscript{54} Boix concluded from his historical analysis that it is income equality, rather than rising absolute incomes, that fosters democracy.\textsuperscript{55} As Boix, together with Susan Stokes, reasons in a related article,

\[\text{income equality means that the redistributive scheme that would win democratic support (the one supported by the median voter) would deprive the rich of less income than the one the median voter would support if income distribution were highly unequal. Hence the rich find a democratic tax structure to be less expensive for them as their country gets wealthier, and they are more willing to countenance democratization. [...] [Economic] development reduces the incentives actors face to choose dictatorship, whether the status quo is dictatorship or democracy.}\textsuperscript{56}

If this observation is true, China is more than unlikely to develop into a democracy soon, since, according to different sources, it’s Gini coefficient ranged between 0.47 and 0.61 in 2013, making it one of the most unequal countries in the world.\textsuperscript{57} This interpretation is also supported by another important contribution to the debate that was published by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in 2005. Like Boix’s, their approach was based in Game Theory. Their work started from the puzzle that in nondemocracy, the elite get [sic!] the policies it wants; in democracy, the citizens have more power to get what they want. Because the elite loses under democracy, it naturally has an incentive to oppose or subvert it; yet, most democracies arise when they are created by the elite.\textsuperscript{58}

On the basis of this observation, Acemoglu and Robinson asked why elites often seem to rather opt for democratisation than for suppression. Acemoglu and Robinson proposed an economic model to measure at which point of economic development democracy appears. Like Boix, they found income equality more important than growing wealth. However, unlike Boix, they concluded from their analysis that there is “an inverse-U-shaped relationship between inequality and democracy, with democracy happen-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Boix (2003), p. 230.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Boix (2003), p. 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Boix and Stokes (2003), pp. 539–40.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Goodman (2014), pp. 45–7.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), p. xii.
\end{itemize}
ing at intermediate levels of inequality”.\textsuperscript{59} According to Acemoglu and Robinson’s interpretation, “democracy arises when inequality is sufficiently high that the disenfranchised want to contest power but not so high that the elites find it attractive to use repression”.\textsuperscript{60} Again, this estimation does anything but support the likeliness of China becoming democratised any time soon.

Boix as well as Acemoglu and Robinson were mostly concerned with how changes in social structure alter power relations between social groups. In contrast, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, in their very influential 2005 publication, brought up value change once more, which they integrated into a model with the cultural argument of the significance of national characteristics. Inglehart and Welzel analysed World Value Survey data in a large-scale cross-country comparison. They suggested that socio-political development constitutes a path-dependent, yet evolutionary process towards one common goal. Accordingly, while value orientations in different nations tend to develop in the same direction as economies thrive, their different starting points nevertheless remain important in shaping social actors’ values and thus societies’ development. Inglehart and Welzel asserted that

\begin{quote}
[\text{e}arlier versions of modernization theory were too simple. Socioeconomic development has a powerful impact on what people want and do, as Karl Marx argued, but a society’s cultural heritage continues to shape its prevailing beliefs and motivations, as Max Weber argued.}\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

Inglehart and Welzel advocated a moderate theory that takes the middle ground between convergence theories, which assume all societies gradually become equal in the course of history, and divergent cultural relativism theories, which preach unalterable unique national characteristics. Their model takes into account how value change mitigates political change. The idea of “a process of human development, in which socioeconomic development brings cultural changes that make individual autonomy, gender equality, and democracy increasingly likely”\textsuperscript{62} is somewhat reminiscent of Fukuyama’s evolutionary process of political systems. However, Inglehart

\textsuperscript{59} Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), p. 219.
\textsuperscript{60} Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), p. 218. Further explanatory variables listed are a strong civil society, the structure of both the national economy and political institutions, potential economic or political crises and the influence of globalisation.
\textsuperscript{61} Inglehart and Welzel (2005), p. 1.
\textsuperscript{62} Inglehart and Welzel (2005), p. 2.
and Welzel maintained that “a society’s historical cultural heritage continues to shape the values and behavior of its people. [...] [W]e are not moving toward a uniform global culture”.

That is to say that, for example, members of middle classes in general may hold more democratic values than members of the working classes or the elites, but differences in values between members of different social strata within one society are still considerably smaller than differences in values held by members of the same social stratum from different societies.

At the same time, however, Inglehart and Welzel nevertheless held the teleological view that development towards democratisation is part of a basic “human development sequence.” Accordingly, specific cultural traditions may impede this development, but in the long run are unable to ultimately prohibit it. As a result of their analysis, Inglehart and Welzel argue that effective democracy is very likely to emerge when more than 45 percent of a society’s public ranks high on self-expression values. This is a probabilistic relationship, not a deterministic one, but the statistical relationship is very strong. Economic development is conductive to cultural changes that make democracy increasingly probable.

Inglehart and Welzel explicitly opposed cultural relativism for posing the danger of legitimising the suppression of the weak. Instead, they deemed “the rise of democracy [...] inherent in high levels of human development”. Since their declared aim of rejecting cultural relativism is rooted in their deep belief in human equality, it may seem easy to reject their teleological model as being informed by a political agenda, and thus rather normative. However, figures from their survey data provide strong evidence for their argumentation. Or do they not?

63 Inglehart and Welzel (2005), p. 46.
64 Value change towards more autonomy and self-expression is not seen as the only form of possible cultural change that promotes democratisation. While Inglehart and Welzel regard it as the major driving force behind the third wave of democratisation, they argue that earlier democratic turns were heavily influenced by bureaucratisation and secularisation in the course of industrialisation. Inglehart and Welzel (2005), p. 46.
65 Then again, they argue that “[c]ultural modernization is not irreversible. It results from socioeconomic development and protracted economic collapse can reverse it”. Inglehart and Welzel (2005), p. 46.
An important line of criticism relates to the general value of standardised questionnaires for cross-cultural comparisons. Scepticism about the translatability of ideas and thoughts can be traced back to Prussian thinker Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) at least. The most extreme linguistic relativity stance proposes that “[n]o two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels”. But even without us adopting such an extreme stance, it is evident that some important theoretical ideas and concepts may be very hard or impossible to translate. Even if suitable translations exist, the same terms may come with entirely different connotations in different languages. For example, as Chu, Pan and Wen demonstrated, popular understanding of the term “democracy” varies considerably in different Asian nations. As they concluded from findings from the third wave of Asian Barometer Studies, Asians do have very different understandings of democracy from people in the Western world. Even for citizens in East Asian liberal democracies, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the procedural and liberty components are easily subordinate to good governance and social equity components.

This gives rise to the question of whether individuals from different national and cultural backgrounds do interpret similar questions (which, on top of everything, they are asked in different languages) similarly or rather differently from each other.

The methodological validity of cross-national comparative studies is not the only aspect critics of Modernisation Theory question. Another point of criticism relates to Modernisation Theory’s tendency to obscure the actual protagonists of social change and political transformation. Besides this, Modernisation Theory in general has been frequently criticised for displaying a deterministic belief in progress, which more often than not is accompanied by normative claims. Above all, Modernisation Theory has been excoriated for simply transferring Western nations’ historical experiences to

69 The third wave of Asian Barometer Studies consists of a cross-national survey on democritisation-related topics conducted in thirteen Asian countries between January 2010 and November 2012 by the Center of East Asia Democratic Studies at the National Taiwan University.
non-European nations in an allegedly Eurocentric—though actually usually American centric—way.\textsuperscript{71} In other words, the most fundamental question remains whether cultures do eventually converge or rather remain divergent. In order to gain a better understanding of the Chinese case, findings from more China specific studies are introduced in the next section. While many of these studies deviate considerably from Classical Modernisation Theory’s assumptions, it seems safe to say that they nevertheless still relate to it in one way or another.

\section*{2.3 Social Change and Political Transformation in China}

From Modernisation Theory’s point of view, China’s development after 1978 involved a set of different factors which indicated that China was soon to become democratised: (1) Most notably, as its economy thrived and gradually developed structures of a market economy, general living standards rose quickly. (2) Besides this, as the formerly stiff class-label system ceased to exist, levels of upward social mobility rose dramatically, with both the middle and upper classes emerging and expanding notably. (3) This development went hand in hand with an expansion of China’s higher education system and increased levels of education. (4) Meanwhile, a first wave of social organisations was set up during the 1980s—usually either student associations or government-organised non-governmental organisations.\textsuperscript{72} And although the democracy movement in spring 1989 resulted in a brief period of official restrictions for social organisations, Chinese civil society thrived more than ever after Deng Xiaoping’s famous tour to the south in 1992. Especially after the World Women’s Conference, which introduced the idea of NGO work to the Chinese public, was held in Beijing in 1995, the number of Chinese civic grassroots organisations exploded.\textsuperscript{73} (5) In addition, late 1990s’ extensive privatisation of state-owned enterprises entailed mass lay-offs, which caused unprecedented large-scale worker protests all over China and particularly in the traditional industrial provinces in China’s north-east.

According to Modernisation Theory, all these developments added up to the assumption that China was soon to become democratised. In consequence, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, prominent China watchers

\textsuperscript{71} Kollmorgen, Merkel and Wagener (2014), p. 15.
\textsuperscript{72} Watson (2008).
\textsuperscript{73} Ma (2005).
predicted the imminent downfall of the Chinese government due to either democratisation or regime collapse. Predictions were further fuelled by the dissolution of the USSR into several independent nations (1989 to 1991), the Eastern European colour revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) and, at least initially, the revolutions of the Arab Spring (2010 to 2012). Non-democratic states are particularly prone to political destabilisation during periods of power succession. Therefore, the leadership successions in 2002/03 and 2012/13 particularly caught the attention of China watchers. However, predictions of China either becoming democratised or collapsing have so far been proved wrong. Especially after the successful transferral of power from the third generation of leadership under the Jiang Zemin administration to the fourth generation of leadership headed by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in 2002/03, many China scholars turned towards researching explanations for the CCP’s prolonged rule, although some maintain that the Chinese system’s breakdown is only a matter of time. In the following, the most important positions in the current debate about China’s political future are introduced.

2.3.1 Political Legitimacy and Public Consent

One explanation for the CCP’s prolonged ruling capacity, which runs contrary to conventional wisdom about authoritarian regimes, is the notion that the incumbent government does indeed enjoy a relatively high degree of popular support. According to David Beetham, political power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that:

i) it conforms to established rules

ii) the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate, and

iii) there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation.

Building on this classical definition, Bruce Gilley quantitatively measured political legitimacy within 72 nations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Strikingly, he found that the Chinese state enjoyed particularly high legiti-
macy, ranking second in Asia, surpassed only by Taiwan.\textsuperscript{77} That is to say that the Chinese regime’s popular legitimacy even outmatched several established Asian democracies.

Using data from the 2002 Asian Barometer Survey and an analysis of the CCP’s mouthpiece \textit{People’s Daily}, Shi Tianjian and Lou Diqing have demonstrated that “ordinary people in China perceived significant improvements in civil liberties and political rights in China” during the reform period.\textsuperscript{78} Interpreting their findings, Shi and Lou have argued that the party state’s approach to controlling society has “changed from a totalitarian model to a selective targeting of ‘enemies of the state’” over the last three decades.\textsuperscript{79} Accordingly, they argue that the majority of the population no longer felt the danger of regime suppression, even though their assessment of the political climate may deviate from political reality.\textsuperscript{80} In contrast, Bruce Dickson has argued that while China lacks many of the civil rights and freedoms taken for granted in the West, a comparison to its own past indicates that it is indeed freer than ever before. Both lines of reasoning share an emphasis on the importance of subjective evaluations of social realities and everyday life experiences, which are, as Dickson argues, often only insufficiently captured in the Western literature on democratisation.\textsuperscript{81}

In a more extensive study, Martin King Whyte published findings from a nationwide representative quantitative survey of public attitudes towards distributive justice and equity in contemporary China in 2010. Interviews were conducted throughout the country in 2004 by local Chinese interviewers. The results indicated that the Chinese general public was overall satisfied with the nation’s political status quo. And while respondents voiced some anger about several specific issues like institutionalised discrimination against rural dwellers or mass lay-offs of state workers, a comparison with other post-communist states revealed an extraordinarily high acceptance of economic inequity. The least satisfied groups of society were not the poorest ones—farmers and the urban unemployed—but—in accordance with Modernisation Theory’s assumptions—educated urbanites. While no completely unsatisfied groups were identified, members of different social groups tended to be displeased with different aspects of the

\textsuperscript{77} Gilley (2006).
\textsuperscript{78} Shi and Lou (2010), p. 194.
\textsuperscript{79} Shi and Lou (2010), p. 197.
\textsuperscript{80} Shi and Lou (2010).
\textsuperscript{81} Dickson (2016), p. 320.
current state of the nation including their own situation. Thus the survey provided a fragmented outlook on Chinese society, thereby undermining the prospects for collective expressions of possible resentment.⁸² In conclusion, respondents were overly optimistic about both their individual and the national future. These findings go well with an international survey by the Pew Foundation from 2007, which found that 62% of all Chinese respondents said they were better off than five years earlier and that 86% thought that the next generation would have a better life than the respondents themselves. In comparison to other nations, the Chinese population was thus, in general, the most optimistic about its future.⁸³

A follow-up study by Whyte, which compared the 2004 data to similar data sets of 2009 and 2014 as well as to related surveys from Japan, Russia, the USA and seven European countries, reaffirmed Whyte’s earlier findings, though it showed that popular anger about power inequality and officials’ abuse of power had increased over the last decade. Crucially, Whyte detected a firm belief in the rewards of individual merit, which sustained popular consent with the system.⁸⁴ In their examination of China’s shift from the Mao era’s equity-oriented socialist contract to the more liberal reform era market social contract, Wenfang Tang and William Parish have asserted that one of the key factors that undermined public satisfaction with the social system prior to the economic reforms and during the early reform era was the general sense that individual merit was not rewarded.⁸⁵ Therefore, an increased belief in meritocracy seems strongly indicative of higher satisfaction with society in China.

Another possible explanation of popular consent could be what Albert Hirschman termed the “tunnel effect”. He compared financially disadvantaged groups in developing countries to drivers in a traffic jam. When, after a long time of total stagnation, cars in one lane start moving, everyone feels relieved—including the drivers who are still stuck in the other lane. Yet, after watching the cars in the other lane driving for a certain amount of time, the drivers in the stagnating lane will sooner or later become envious and angry. Thus, they are very likely to try to help themselves with drastic actions like illegal moves.⁸⁶ Applied to China, Hirschman’s metaphor would suggest that groups which have been left behind will

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⁸² Whyte (2010a), esp. chapter ten.
⁸⁶ Hirschman (1973), p. 29.
sooner or later engage in oppositional behaviour, which might even threaten the present social or political system. Therefore, it is important to examine the role of economic growth in regime support in China.

2.3.2 Economic Development and Nationalist Sentiments

The output-oriented argument that China’s breathtaking economic growth simply placates the public is probably the most widespread of all possible explanations for the CCP government’s comparatively high level of legitimacy. More than fifty years ago, Almond and Verba already pointed to the importance of the public’s assessment of political output. According to their Civic Culture Theory, some cultures are characterised by mere public interest in political output in the absence of any aspirations for opportunities for individual political participation. As Wenfang Tang has demonstrated, Chinese people express a comparatively strong belief in their government’s responsiveness, that is, they are relatively satisfied with political output, as they feel it corresponds to their needs. Tang assumes that citizens of authoritarian regimes may tend to overestimate their governments’ responsiveness since “they live in a political system where government responsiveness is supposedly not required”. However, Tang maintains, the Chinese government does indeed devote a huge amount of time and resources to “responding to public demands by policy adjustment”, thereby generating legitimacy.

Some scholars have argued that regime legitimacy is generally higher in thriving economies, regardless of the type of political regime. Jiwei Ci has claimed that the Chinese government deliberately “encouraged opportunities for the pursuit of wealth and pleasure” in the aftermath of the bloody end of late 1980s democracy movements. Ci even went so far as to suggest that these movements were caused by frustrated hedonism in the first place. As he argued, “the frustration of hedonism was a major cause of the growth of liberalism first into a popular sentiment and then,
in 1989, into the popular democracy movement”. In Ci’s opinion, the ruling party understood that the general population could be easily distracted from political liberalism if they had sufficient opportunities to escape into hedonism. “They were soon proved right. In proportion as people’s sensual needs were satisfied, their political demands weakened and lost their relevance.” Accordingly, the CCP government’s legitimacy is of a rather fragile nature, since it may dwindle away any time economic growth falls.

A second frequently discussed source of the CCP government’s legitimacy is nationalism. “China had one of the highest levels of popular nationalism in the world by the end of the first decade of this century, […] [which] had a strong positive effect on regime stability and legitimacy.” Among China scholars it is well established that the Communist Party has drawn on its role in uniting the country since the civil war for legitimacy. Education in general and history lessons in particular play an important role in teaching citizens gratefulness for the Communist Party’s achievements. During history classes children learn at great length about the “century of humiliation” (bainian guochi, 百年国耻) from the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1839 to the foundation of the People’s Republic in 1949, when China repeatedly suffered from imperial intrusion by Western nations and Japan. To date, this critical encounter with imperialism remains of utmost importance in China’s view of the international order. It also contributes to a strong sense of nationalism, which oscillates be-

94 Gries et al. (2011) have shown that while the term “patriotism” (aiguo zhuyi, 爱国主义) evokes pride in being Chinese without implying the vilification of other nations, the notion of “nationalism” (minzu zhuyi, 民族主义) carries more malign associations. Accordingly, the term patriotism is more widespread in official Chinese discourse. However, the same study also convincingly shows that contemporary Chinese national identity does indeed include nationalist sentiments. Thus, I refrain from distinguishing between both terms.
97 Alison Adcock Kaufman has identified three common views of China’s role and place within the international world order among Chinas’ elite. All of these views are tightly connected to the humiliating experience of the “Century of Shame” and start from the conviction that the world is still divided into powerful and weak states. The first view holds that the West still tries to suppress China, which therefore ought to gain national strength to defend itself. In contrast, a second view claims that China has already gained sufficient strength to consider itself among the strongest nations on earth. A third view maintains that, in view...
tween national pride and fears of being inferior to the West. As Kenneth Lieberthal has remarked, the “most likely way to maintain social peace in a system that basically serves the interests of a wealthy political and economic elite is to encourage nationalism”.

Over decades, the CCP has implemented nationalist myths in the collective memory which are easily mobilized in periods of external ruptures. The official narrative of the Chinese nation as a ‘victim’ weaves the imperialist aggression of Western powers in the nineteenth century, the cruelties inflicted upon China by Japanese ‘devils’ during the Sino-Japanese war, the chauvinism of a ‘relentless’ post-war Japan, and the condescension of Western countries vis-à-vis China’s emerging economic and political power into an endless chain of ‘humiliations’.

However, as David Shambaugh has claimed, while economic growth and nationalism are undoubtedly important sources of popular regime support, these “twin pillars” of CCP legitimacy are far from sufficient to explain the CCP’s prolonged ruling capacity. In an attempt to better fathom the significance of both nationalism and economic growth for regime legitimacy, Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley argued that economic success is not per se a source of regime legitimacy; instead, it has to be framed in ways conductive to positive subjective perceptions of the regime, so that the latter is seen as, for example, competent, efficient, fair committed to the realization of the common interest while avoiding publicly manifest partiality or bias, aware of social woes and arranging for compensation of the less affluent, capable of selectively embracing benefits of globalization while defending national interests on a complex international terrain, and so on. By the same logic, economic crises should not be regarded as an immediate threat to regime legitimacy, bringing down autocrats once the growth falls—again, the emergence of legitimacy deficits depends on how the crisis is framed by the incumbent regime.

of its experiences as a weaker nation, China should use its new found power to change the whole international system altogether. Kaufman (2010).

98 Zhao (2004).
102 Emphasis added by author.
In Holbig and Gilley’s view, ideology, collective social values and culturalism are important additional sources of CCP legitimacy. Accordingly, the party successfully engages in public discourses and utilises (inter)national events like the 2008 Olympics to portray itself as the rightful representative of China’s cultural legacy, and thus national identity.\footnote{Holbig and Gilley (2010), p. 20–3.} In addition, Holbig and Gilley point to increased institutionalism and the spread of consultative elements within the political system as further sources of the government’s legitimacy.\footnote{Holbig and Gilley (2010), p. 23–6.}

2.3.3 Authoritarian Resilience and Political Institutionalisation

In a 2003 special issue on China’s political future by the \textit{Journal of Democracy}, Andrew Nathan published an agenda-setting article on authoritarian resilience. Nathan defined resilience as either “behaviour that is constrained by formal and informal rules, or […] as consisting of the adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of state organizations”.\footnote{Nathan (2003), p. 6, with reference to Huntington (1968), pp. 12–24.} He then highlighted four aspects of the CCP government’s ongoing institutionalisation: (1) the increasingly rule-bound nature of leadership succession, (2) the increased importance of meritocratic criteria in promotional evaluations of political leaders, (3) the specialisation and functional differentiation of political institutions and (4) the establishment of public input institutions like village elections or popular petitioning.\footnote{More recently, the institutionalisation of consultative elements has been discussed under the heading of “deliberative democracy”. E.g. He, Baogang (2014); Ergenc (2014).} As Nathan argued, growing institutionalisation substantially increased the Chinese regime’s legitimacy, “defined as the public’s belief that the regime is lawful and should be obeyed”.\footnote{Nathan (2003), p. 13.}

However, Nathan’s optimistic outlook did not go unchallenged. For example, in the same special issue, Bruce Gilley argued that the successful Jiang/Hu leadership succession “had more to do with the powerful legacy of patriarch Deng Xiaoping than it did with institutionalisation”.\footnote{Gilley (2003), p. 20. However, as we shall see later, Gilley changed his opinion a few years later.} Gilley also maintained that personal connections remained much more influen-
tial in political promotions than individual merit. With regard to popular input institutions, he criticised that public elections were only conducted at the very lowest administrative level, while petitioning remained highly erratic and local parliaments lacked any real power.\footnote{Gilley (2003), pp. 21–22.}

Institutionalization does not consist merely in the absence of bedlam; it entails the positive presence of efficacy and normative coherence. The CCP has moved, then, from political tumult to an ad hoc peace; but it has gone no further. As a result, the problems traditionally associated with nondemocratic regimes—illegitimacy, misgovernment, corruption, and elite instability—remain legion in China.\footnote{Gilley (2003), p. 23.}

The way Nathan and Gilley looked at the same facts to come to diametrically opposed conclusions mapped the debate for the decade to come. Throughout the next ten years, a multitude of scholars investigated China’s institutionalisation and came to various assessments, ranging from predictions of inevitable regime failure, to scenarios of successful authoritarian persistence, to sometimes very optimistic estimations of China’s political relaxation and liberalisation. Notably, not all contributions to the ongoing debate about China’s political future confine their publications to descriptive analyses. In an at times quite emotional debate, rather normative stances are far from unusual.

On the pessimistic side, building on a series of earlier articles, American-based Minxin Pei published his controversial book on \textit{China’s Trapped Transition} in 2008, in which he argued that reform-era China gradually developed into a “predatory state” that feeds on society.\footnote{Pei, Minxin (2005), Shambaugh (2008), p. 29.} Pei’s basic argument is that the party state uses the resources earned from economic reforms effectively to shield its own power. Far from paving the way to democracy, economic growth, according to this rationale, actually strengthens a non-democratic system. In Pei’s view, the communist government protects the interests of (usually intertwined) economic and political elites at the expense of society’s suppressed majority. Matters are further worsened by the party state’s increasing decentralisation, with corruption and abuse of power growing especially rampant at the local level. Pei’s assessment partially resonates with arguments from prominent Chinese sociologists like Qinghua University professor Sun Liping or Renmin University professor Kang Xiaoguang, who agreed that China’s economic re-
forms only benefit a relatively small elite, while leaving out the vast majority of the population. As Sun wrote in 2004,

from its very beginning, China’s market development process lacked any full competition, but was rather brimming with monopolization. In this process, a ‘gaining class’ in possession of total capital [i.e. economic, cultural and political capital; author’s note] took shape. As to the present trend, this social stratum’s most important objectives are to preserve its scope and boundaries and to take an appropriate sealed off shape.114

Despite this somehow negative perspective, Sun maintained a more open attitude with regard to China’s future. By comparison, Pei did not leave much room for any democratic development to come soon, but predicted political stagnation. Other prominent China scholars quickly criticised Pei for overemphasising the predatory element and for failing to acknowledge that the Chinese party state does indeed function very well in many realms of the social, though noting that Pei’s attitude was rather typical of Chinese émigrés such as Wang Shaoguang or He Qinglian.115 As Joseph Fewsmith asserted,

the Chinese political system has developed mechanisms that make it surprisingly responsive to social and political problems. There is a very large apparatus, both in the state and society, which monitors social conditions and identifies problems. [...] It may be that such remedies come slowly and address issues incompletely, leaving substantial problems only partially addressed. But the responsiveness of the system has been substantial.116

In his 2008 book titled, China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaption, David Shambaugh argued that while the CCP does indeed exhibit “many classical symptoms of an atrophying and declining Leninist party, it is also showing itself capable of significant adaption and reform in a number of key areas”.117 As Shambaugh showed in his detailed analysis of the Chinese academic and political debate, the CCP systematically analysed the causes of Eastern European communist Parties’ collapses after the breakdown of

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113 Fewsmith (2007), pp. 2–3.
114 Sun, Liping (2004b), p. 3.
the Soviet Union. The declared aim of this thorough examination was to identify lessons for the CCP to learn from the Soviet Union’s failure. Subsequently, the CCP implemented a series of proactive political reforms targeted at the party, economy and wider society, which, according to Shambaugh, successfully enabled the party to consolidate its power. He summarised,

As a political institution, the party itself is also attempting to adapt to new challenges and circumstances by attempting to broaden its membership base, promoting a new generation of leaders, reformulating its ideological content, appealing to nationalist impulses in society, strengthening its organizational apparatus throughout the country, and opening the channels of discourse within the party and between the party state and society. [...] [The CCP] has learned the negative lessons of other failed communist party states, and is proactively attempting to reform and rebuild itself institutionally—thereby sustaining its political legitimacy and power.¹¹⁸

Shambaugh concluded that the CCP may well be capable of further consolidating its power. Likewise, Holbig and Gilley (2009) viewed institution building as the leading strategy to successfully maintain legitimacy.¹¹⁹

Looking more closely at some of the more recent political innovations at the grassroots level, Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert conducted an in-depth investigation on urban and rural governance at the local level, published in a two-volume double study in 2008 and 2009. Thoroughly analysing the newly established urban communities as well as rural elections, using three local case studies for each, they argued that these new institutions introduce processes of political learning, thus gradually enhancing the public’s political consciousness. However, Heberer and Schubert did not assume that this development automatically leads to either democratisation or system breakdown, but argued that it may enhance the government’s legitimacy at the grassroots level as well.¹²⁰

This stance was affirmed, though somewhat modified, by Joseph Fewsmith’s 2013 book The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China, in which he investigated the evolution of a number of political and economic reforms, which ebbed away despite promising beginnings. As Fewsmith illustrated using examples from rural Sichuan and urban Zhejiang, many

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¹¹⁹ Holbig and Gilley (2009).
¹²⁰ Heberer and Schubert (2008); Schubert and Heberer (2009).
auspicious reforms are initiated by aspiring local cadres, but die away soon after these cadres get promoted to another level. Therefore, Fewsmith argued that while the CCP government is perfectly capable of providing short-term solutions to ensure its power, there is little room for real government reforms.121

Against this background of decades-long debates about whether or not China was to become democratised, another group of scholars more recently turned to arguments about cultural divergence. Stressing China’s unique historical pathway, these researchers proposed a distinct “China Model”. In 2012, Fudan University professor Zhang Weiwei published his book *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*, which is highly popular in China and in which he declares China a civilizational state (*wenmingxing guojia*, 文明型国家), featuring an internationally new model of development, which operates according to its own political logic. Adopting a kind of pathos that may well explain the book’s popularity in China as well as why Western scholars find it difficult to engage with it, Zhang writes:

A civilizational state has exceedingly strong historical and cultural traditions. It does not easily imitate or follow other models, be they Western or otherwise. It has its own intrinsic logic of evolution and development. It is bound to encounter all kinds of challenges in the future, but its rise is seemingly unstoppable and irreversible. The civilizational state has a strong capability to draw on the strengths of other nations while maintaining its own identity. As an endogenous civilization capable of generating its own standards and values, it makes unique contributions to the world civilizations. A civilizational state can exist and evolve independently of the endorsement or acknowledgment from others. Its political and economic models are different from others in many aspects.122

In his 2016 follow up, *The China Horizon: Glory and Dream of a Civilized State*, Zhang argued that China needs to ultimately expand its political narratives and discourses to the West in order to increase its “unique political values” international acceptance.123

123 Zhang, Weiwei (2016).
In a less normative attempt to establish a unique “China Model”, Daniel Bell published his book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* in 2015. According to Bell, the Chinese political system’s uniqueness lies in its model of leadership promotion, namely an attempted combination of democratic elements at the bottom, political experiments at the mid-level and meritocracy at the top. While Bell acknowledged that, in reality, China’s political status quo suffers from multiple ills at each of these levels, he highlighted the potential of this unique model to even overcome some of democracy’s ills. What is essential in these considerations is the implication that the designers of the Chinese model do not aspire to introduce some sort of top-down implemented democracy into China.124

### 2.3.4 Class Formation versus Fragmentation

The scholars introduced above have, for the most part, investigated reasons for the Chinese regime’s legitimacy and its resources to adapt to newly emerging challenges to its sovereignty. A second (though closely intertwined) line of research has addressed the question of class formation, to explore whether there is any likelihood of a democratic turn occurring in China due to shifts in social power relations. Researchers have, in particular, studied China’s new entrepreneurs, the rising middle class in general and both the old urban working class as well as the rural-to-urban migrant workers that emerged during the reform period. In the following, their most important findings are summarised.

After Jiang Zemin introduced his theory of “the Three Represents” (sāngé dàibiǎo, 三个代表) and officially opened the CCP to entrepreneurs in 2002, China’s new communist capitalists naturally drew a lot of scholarly attention. In fact, the incorporation of entrepreneurs into the CCP had considerably predated Jiang’s official recognition, as Bruce Dickson showed in his 2003 book, *Red Capitalists in China*. Actually, entrepreneurs were allowed entrance to the party throughout the late 1980s until 1989, and further experimenting on the subnational level had been conducted from 1992 throughout the nineties.125 Dickson interpreted the CCP’s new recruitment strategy as an effort to “adapt” to society’s development. With regard to the entrepreneurs, he stressed that “[i]nstead of seeking officially

124 Bell (2015).
125 Dickson (2003), pp. 34–5.
recognised and protected autonomy, they seek to be embedded in the state”.126 In Dickson’s view, the CCP has successfully co-opted entrepreneurs to prevent political opposition. Therefore, he concluded, evidence is against the odds of entrepreneurs ever becoming agents of political change in China.127 Similarly, with reference to the entire “Chinese educated middle class”, Jonathan Unger has argued that it “has become a bulwark of the current regime”.128

In his analysis of the different protagonists that facilitated Taiwan’s democratisation, Gunter Schubert has convincingly shown that, at least in Taiwan, entrepreneurs and professionals did in fact not form one unitary political block, but split into different interest groups according to their institutional background.129 Schubert’s investigation of the motives and resources of specific strategic groups of actors demonstrated that Taiwan’s democratic transition was initially more introduced from above rather than fought for from below.130 Crucial causes of this were internal shifts of power within the government and exogenous factors like US influence.131 The study’s thorough analysis of various interest groups anticipated the influential work of Eva Bellin, who ruled out both cultural heritage and the level of economic development as sole explanatory factors for capitalist

126 Dickson (2003), pp. 84–5.
129 Carefully analysing the interests and resources of several actor groups, Schubert identified co-opted professionals and businessmen, military officers and technocrats to be the most important strategic groups in the regime coalition, while independent professionals, Taiwanese labour and social protest movements were the main strategic groups in the opposition. Schubert (1994).
130 The concept of strategic groups was introduced to sociology by Hans-Dieter Evers and Tilman Schiel. It refers to groups of actors with a shared identity who, unlike classes, do not intend to change the political system, but are primarily concerned with the enhancement of their personal chances of acquisition of both material and non-material resources. However, the possibility that they eventually evolve into political classes exists. Crucially, they possess a strategic orientation, which does not necessarily manifest itself in their united thinking and actions, but in their joining of organisations that represent their interest in realising common goals. Strategic groups use strategic knowledge to promote strategic plans. They have the political negotiating power to affect politics, the economy and society to achieve their goals. Evers and Schiel (1988) as in Heberer (2003), p. 70. As Heberer has argued, Chinese private entrepreneurs constitute a potential strategic elite with influence on the entire society. Heberer (2003).
and labour classes’ interest in democracy. Comparing various cases of late-developing countries, Bellin argued “that capital and labor are contingent democrats for the very reason that they are consistent defenders of their material interests”.\(^{132}\) As Bellin explained,

> [s]upport for democratization turns on whether capital and labor see their economic interests served by the authoritarian state. This, in turn, is shaped by two key factors for each social force. For capital, democratic enthusiasm hinges on its level of state dependence and fear of social unrest. For labor, democratic enthusiasm hinges on its level of state dependence and aristocratic position in society. The relationship is an inverse one, with higher values of dependency, fear, and aristocracy translating into reduced enthusiasm for democratic reform.\(^{133}\)

Bellin’s work may explain why certain social groups to date have not developed the political consciousness or democratic spirit Modernisation Theory predicts them to adopt.

Likewise, Kellee Tsai concluded from her in-depth study of China’s private entrepreneurs that this group is by and large perfectly content with the current political system. As she showed, most private entrepreneurs are too busy with their daily routines to care about politics altogether. Following a “microlevel relational approach”, Tsai analysed everyday informal interactions between entrepreneurs and officials at the grassroots level.\(^{134}\) She argued that these informal encounters are highly institutionalised and at least as important as formal institutions in shaping institutional change in China, since “adaptive informal institutions have the potential to link ordinary practices with larger institutional reforms”.\(^{135}\) Tsai described a cycle of mutual influencing and adapting between formal and informal institutions. Having said that, while she did not rule out the possibility of informal practices bringing about democratic change, she concluded that “these possibilities are unlikely to grow out of either direct demands from private entrepreneurs or their informal coping strategies”.\(^{136}\)

These findings were affirmed by Bruce Dickson and Chen Jie, who in 2010 published findings from a survey conducted in 2006–2007 with more than 2000 entrepreneurs from the five Chinese provinces with the most

\(^{135}\) Tsai (2007), p. 203.
thriving private economies, where 70% of all Chinese private enterprises are located: namely Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Shandong and Zhejiang. They portrayed private entrepreneurs to be highly politically embedded, with many of them being members of the CCP and national or local people’s congresses and political consultative committees as well as of business associations. However, Dickson and Chen also demonstrate that the institutional links between entrepreneurs and the party state do not impact on entrepreneurs’ political attitudes. Nevertheless, having come into existence only due to government initiatives in the first place, China’s private business people are generally very fond of the political status quo.\textsuperscript{137} However, since Dickson and Chen did not collect comparative data from the general population, it is hard to put their findings in context.

Another important contribution to the debate was provided by Teresa Wright with a 2010 study on state–society relations in contemporary China. Her monograph was based on an extensive review of literature on the political attitudes of private entrepreneurs, professionals, state and private sector workers and farmers. Wright found that the first two of these groups benefited from reform era politics the most, were courted by the state and often had close ties to several public actors. With regard to values, Wright assessed that “wealthy and even self-perceived ‘middle class’ individuals have had little sense of common interests or values with the poor and, indeed, in some cases have openly expressed disdain for them”.\textsuperscript{138} At the same time, as Wright argued, “most upwardly mobile citizens have believed that their material improvement has been facilitated by the ruling regime. In turn, these individuals have had no pressing motivation to agitate for systemic political transformation”.\textsuperscript{139} Moreover, since the Chinese state keeps controlling economic key resources, groups like private entrepreneurs and rank-and-file state sector workers materially rely on the government. While other groups, like farmers and private sector workers, had less reason to support their current government, Wright nevertheless found that “to the degree that the party state has provided these groups with a basic safety net in the form of land rights, they have not had a pressing material reason to push for regime change”.\textsuperscript{140} Crucially, Wright ar-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{137} Dickson and Chen (2010).
\item \textsuperscript{138} Wright (2010), p. 163.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Wright (2010), p. 162.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Wright (2010), p. 163.
\end{itemize}
gues that the regime’s increased responsiveness to popular demands contributed greatly to it retaining popular support.\textsuperscript{141}

In summary, various scholars have shown that China’s private entrepreneurs and middle class in general show little interest in playing the political role Classical Modernisation Theory predicts for them. Not only has the Chinese middle class benefited greatly from China’s reform period economic growth, but the majority of those who can be considered middle class by any definition are employed at party state institutions.\textsuperscript{142} Therefore, a regime change would directly threaten their material interests. Thus, if political transformation is neither to be introduced by the ruling elite nor to be pushed for by the rising middle classes, the only remaining social group who could eventually fight for democratisation is the working class.

However, the Chinese working class appears to be deeply fragmented into state and private sector workers as well as native urban residents and rural migrants.\textsuperscript{143} Workers are usually unaware of their common interests with workers from other factories; thus protests are usually restricted to single companies.\textsuperscript{144} Moreover, interest conflicts even appear between different sections of working units, with alliances and hostilities bridging hierarchical divisions.\textsuperscript{145} At the same time, workers resistance tends to suffer from a lack of leadership because the government punishes protest leaders severely but spares rank and file participants of protests. Multiple researchers attest to Chinese workers’ lack of class consciousness and assert that workers protests are usually only targeted at monetary improvements. “[L]abor protests are mostly interest-based, purposively induced to improve working conditions and oppositional against capital.”\textsuperscript{146} And while some scholars spot signs of increasing class consciousness in labour protests, such as a strike wave in 2010, which was characterised by unusual broad participation, others explicitly reject this idea, pointing out that, crucially, China’s workers build their claims on state law rather than attacking the state itself.\textsuperscript{147} In conclusion, it seems highly unlikely that China’s working masses will push for political change.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{141}{Wright (2010), p. 156.}
\footnotetext{142}{Chen, Jie (2013), p. 158.}
\footnotetext{143}{E.g. Lee (2007a) and (2007b); Lin, Kun-Chin (2009); Zipp and Blecher (2015).}
\footnotetext{144}{Cai (2006) and (2009).}
\footnotetext{145}{Lee (2007b).}
\footnotetext{146}{Chan and Pun (2009), p. 301.}
\footnotetext{147}{E.g. Leung and So (2012) and Chan and Siu (2012) respectively.}
\end{footnotes}
To sum up, neither the middle class nor the working class in China act in accordance with Modernisation Theory’s predictions. As Björn Alpermann argued with regard to Modernisation Theory’s assumptions on the political conduct of certain social groups,

[t]o use prefabricated social categories and expect that Chinese social actors somehow adhere to characteristics commonly associated with them in other contexts is disingenuous. It overlooks the simple fact that as the whole society is shaken up no coherent class or group identities have formed yet—and it is an empirically open question whether they ever will.148

Political attitudes reflect individual values and perceptions of society. If Modernisation Theory fails to predict the shape and extent of popular demands for democratisation in contemporary urban China, it seems most likely that the underlying reason is a false estimation of individual realities of life and perceptions of the changing social environment. In fact, in most of the studies presented above, the individual rather remains a “black box” —that is, a mere object of speculation. Modernisation Theory builds on strong assumptions about individual attitudes that it is, however, unable to validate. As we have seen, even quantitative value surveys can only measure and quantify pre-assumed concepts and attitudes. Therefore, it seems promising to adopt a more open-ended approach which avoids strong assumptions. In the following, several alternative notions of modernity are presented to lay the ground for this undertaking.

2.4 Alternative Notions of Modernity

The approaches informed by Modernisation Theory summarised above have revealed many valuable insights into contemporary China’s internal social and political development. However, while their specific assumptions and lines of reasoning vary along a wide range of issues, they share the common feature of referring to democratisation in one way or another. Even those who doubt that democracy will ever occur in China usually use the democratisation scenario as a starting point to disprove it later on, portraying China as an exception to what they nevertheless consider the rule. In contrast, various sociological works have criticised the teleological implications inherent in Modernisation Theory for a long time. Approaches

informed by Modernisation Theory always revolve around the idea that economic modernisation should normally propel democratisation and if it does not, the reasons for this reluctance are usually depicted as mere—most likely temporary—obstacles to the inevitable. In other words, social variations are merely conceptualised as deviants from the standard model. As Björn Alpermann has argued, such an approach has its limits, since it remains teleological and绝缘s its hypotheses from empirical testing. In essence, as long as Modernisation Theory’s assumptions are taken for granted, findings that speak against tendencies towards democratisation in increasingly developed economies can always “be discounted by saying that the circumstances have just not yet changed enough”.149

With these considerations in mind, a quick review of some important contributions to the debate on modernisation from political sociology seems worthwhile.150 For example, several influential sociologists have promoted the idea that modernity itself is not a fixed condition, but in a constant state of further development.151 Zygmunt Bauman coined the notion of “the liquid modern”. Bauman argued that “the traditional, modern securities and wisdoms all disappear in the intensified, liquid modernity that has been caused by the new social complexities and opaqueness brought on by market-driven globalisation”.152 In the view of Ulrich Beck, modernity has slowly evolved into a “second modernity.” Accordingly, “there has been no clear break with the basic principles of modernity but rather a transformation of basic institutions of modernity (for example, the nation-state and the nuclear family).”153 This shift towards second modernity is due to multidimensional globalisation, radicalised individualisation, a global environmental crisis, a gender revolution and what Beck calls the third industrial revolution—that is, “the rationalization processes brought on and made possible by advances in information technology, which has created new and flexible kinds of underemployment”.154 According to Anthony Giddens, these developments are caused by modernity’s tendency to become increasingly reflexive—that is, to reflect “on itself, using knowledge

150 For an extensive introduction to the most influential contributions to the sociological debate on diverse alternative notions of modernity, see Jäger and Weinzierl (2007).
154 Sørensen and Christiansen (2013), p. 32.
as its prime catalyst for development and growth.”\textsuperscript{155} While a closer comparison of the three concepts of \textit{liquid modernity}, \textit{second modernity} and \textit{reflexive modernity} reveals several fundamental differences, they still share an emphasis on modernity’s developing nature and thus open the possibility that modernisation does not necessarily always lead to the same political or social outcome.\textsuperscript{156}

Indeed, by now a variety of studies have convincingly shown that for several reasons latecomers in modernisation are incapable of merely copying pioneers’ modes of modernity. For instance, Jürgen Heideking has convincingly illustrated this using the example of the young United States of America, who in its own modernisation project overcame what were then considered to be essential attributes of modernity in Europe:

To a large degree, the modernization of the United States during the revolution was a reaction against and a deviation from the European trajectory or path to modernity. It seems that the United States became so quickly the most modern nation because the revolutionaries did not (or could not) exactly follow European recipes for modernization and European models of modernity. [...] It seems, therefore, that the now widely-admired modernity of the American project of civil society resulted—at least to some extent—from a resistance against structures, institutions, values and norms which in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe were considered as the essence of ‘modernity’.\textsuperscript{157}

The first to radically question Classical Modernisation Theory’s assumption that modernising societies around the globe increasingly converge to meet the demands of a modern economy was Shmuel Eisenstadt. In his 1963 book \textit{The Political System of Empires}, he was the first to introduce the idea to sociology that political development is path-dependent. In his study of more than 50 historical empires that combined elements of rational legal and so-called traditional modes of governance, Eisenstadt also questioned the dichotomy of tradition and modernity by pointing to the coexistence of traditional forms of legitimacy and modern organisational structures in several of his case studies.\textsuperscript{158} In his 1986 book \textit{The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations} he refined Weber’s notion of “axility” to draw an analogy between modernity and the ancient “axial age”, in which

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\textsuperscript{156} Sørensen and Christiansen (2013), p. 37.
\textsuperscript{157} Heideking (2002), p. 76, as in Schwinn (2009).
\textsuperscript{158} Eisenstadt (1963); Koenig (2005).
\end{flushright}
all modern world religions arose in an attempt to solve the then newly emergent awareness that this world deviates from the nether world and is thus imperfect. At the same time, these religions generated new cultural grammars, which remain highly influential to this day, even though the religions they originate from may have considerably changed or lost influence by now. According to Eisenstadt, just like the ancient civilisations of the axial age, modern societies face one common problem: the rational awareness that society is man-made and, at the same time, highly unfair. In accordance with their deeply entrenched cultural grammars, different societies find different answers to these challenges; therefore, multiple forms of modernity arise in different world regions. In fact, Eisenstadt even spotted a multitude of differing forms of modernity in the West, which give varying answers to the problems of modernity, while they continue to be influenced by local traditions.

In conclusion, sociology offers a range of open-ended conceptualisations of modernity that do not jump to conclusions about how modernisation processes link to socio-political development. They offer the opportunity to approach data open-mindedly and are therefore well-suited to developing an in-depth understanding of China’s current socio-political situation. This study thus follows Alpermann’s call to treat China’s socio-political development more as an open-ended question that does not inevitably revolve around Modernisation Theory’s implications for cultural convergence, but leaves the possibility of cultural divergence.

2.5 Research Questions and Design

In light of the extensive body of literature on the macro structures of China’s social and political system, this study deliberately adopts a micro perspective on social and political change. Individuals do not react to reality, but to their perceptions of reality. Therefore, while knowledge of the de facto structure of society is required, it is also crucial to understand how individuals perceive this structure. As Andrew Kipnis has argued, when one is explaining social development it is necessary to take the individual psyche seriously. Therefore, this research project aims at developing a

159 Eisenstadt (1986); Koenig (2005).
160 Eisenstadt (2003); Schwinn (2009).
162 Kipnis (2012).
better understanding of ordinary Chinese people’s perceptions of their social environment. Martin King Whyte, who detected a “core belief” in the value of individual merit among his survey’s respondents, explained that

[w]ithin any society, certain core or dominant beliefs are widely shared and accepted […]. At the same time other secondary or more specific inequality beliefs are not so widely shared, and social background factors are much more likely to be associated with and help to explain variations in them. It is not uncommon to find core beliefs and secondary attitudes about inequality that are apparently contradictory.163

Only if we are capable of identifying such core beliefs as well as the varieties Whyte denoted as “secondary beliefs” and their causes, can we adequately grasp social and political attitudes. Such core beliefs are to be found throughout the population. Thus, to detect them, qualitative in-depth research into a few cases (i.e. individual living realities) seems better suited than large quantitative studies. Again, large surveys on political attitudes have helped to illuminate general trends regarding the socio-political stances of the Chinese public. However, quantitative question-batteries can only measure and quantify concepts and attitudes the researcher is aware of already, but never generate genuinely new insights.164 Moreover, such surveys’ research designs often merely reflect the current social position of respondents without querying how they came to be in this position and what their expectations regarding their (or their families’) future trajectory of social mobility look like. Finally, they also fail to account for the psychological processes by which stratification experiences are translated into beliefs about one’s own social status and related changes in political values.165

Against this backdrop, it seems particularly important to capture an accurate representation of individual living realities to grasp the beliefs individuals share. Therefore, a qualitative approach is chosen here since it enables the researcher to thoroughly analyse a respondent’s beliefs and attitudes, rather than rashly squeezing them into predesigned categories. This study argues that it is essential to comprehend how individuals perceive the changing society they are part of in order to develop a sufficient under-

164 For more considerations on the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative versus quantitative research methods, see chapter three. See also Morrissey (2016).
standing of their political attitudes. In the case of the fast changing Chinese society, this entails the question of how individuals perceive their own (relative and absolute) changes within the social hierarchy. Thus, the following questions are investigated:

1. How do individuals perceive the (changing) society they are part of?
2. How do individuals perceive the (relative and absolute) changes to their own positions within society?
3. How do these perceptions influence their political attitudes?

This study aims at first gaining an insight into ordinary people’s daily lives and living worlds to later assess, in a second step, if or how these life experiences translate into political attitudes. In an attempt to approach all questions in the most open-ended way possible, the study chooses a research design inspired by Grounded Theory. In essence, a variety of highly differing individuals are selected to capture their subjective estimations of society and of their own positions within this system. Thereby, common beliefs and variations become apparent. In order to overcome pre-designed social categories and the expectations they come with, the study purposefully abstains from sampling according to socio-demographic criteria. Instead, case selection followed the approach of Theoretical Sampling, that is, cases were selected intentionally to further develop the emerging theoretical concepts.\footnote{For more information, see chapter three.} This seems particularly appropriate in China, where social groups have only recently emerged and are, for the most part, far from having developed a shared identity anyway.\footnote{Alpermann (2016).}

### 2.6 Theoretical Concepts

For the benefit of the reader, the most important theoretical concepts at the heart of this research undertaking are briefly outlined in the following.

#### 2.6.1 Social Attitudes

Important attitudes towards society include perceptions of China’s social structure and its fairness, the assessment of social equality, individuals’ own positions within society in relation to others and the question of per-
ceived social mobility.\textsuperscript{168} To elucidate social attitudes, this study draws on personal narratives, which make it possible to gain a better understanding of individuals’ assessments of China’s emerging new social order and their own position within it. Individual attitudes towards society are obviously heavily influenced by subjective perspectives on personal living environments. Therefore, this study aims to establish how respondents perceive their individual positions within society, how they view social change and how this change makes them feel. In accordance with Kipnis’ suggestion of taking the individual psyche seriously when explaining society, it explicitly aims at capturing emotional and affectionate aspects alike.

2.6.2 Political Attitudes

As regards individuals’ political attitudes, a distinction can be made between respondents’ assessments of the general structure of the political system, the actual political outcome and the political authorities who generate this outcome. Satisfaction with political performance (output) is obviously an important element of individual political attitudes. Besides this, attitudes towards the political system (regime) and actors (authorities) are determined by their perceived degrees of legitimacy and citizens’ trust in their ability to deliver desirable results.\textsuperscript{169} In addition, as Almond and Verba have argued, the desire for opportunities for individual political participation and individual satisfaction with one’s own position within the state are important constituents of political attitudes. The distinction between output- and input-oriented values seems especially promising when applied to China’s current political system, where—despite all institutional reforms—the general public’s opportunities for input remain constrained. Therefore, one focus of this study is on whether individuals express a desire to actively participate in the social and/or political realm.

\textsuperscript{168} Hereafter, “social attitudes” and “attitudes towards society” are used interchangeably.

\textsuperscript{169} Easton (1965) as in Pickel (2006).
2.6.3 Socio-political Participation

Social participation is understood here as a conscious action with the aim of bringing about a desired social change or otherwise of contributing to the common good. This notion of participation includes both “collaborative” engagement with state authorities and more confrontational action targeted against the government. Taking collective action and participating individually equally fall within this broad definition of participation. As Heberer and Schubert have argued, social and political participation, at least to a certain degree, function in equivalent ways. Social participation enhances individual knowledge and experiences, while also affecting attitudes towards society. At the same time, it may introduce individuals to rules and laws, organisations and sources of information. Social participation may thus trigger learning effects with regard to socio-political processes and opportunities for individual participation. In the long run, social participation may therefore enhance individuals’ political consciousness and even contribute to them approaching genuine political participation. In accordance with these considerations, social participation in this study is understood as a form of proto-political participation. Therefore, the terms “social and political participation”, “socio-political participation” and “civic participation” are used interchangeably wherever a closer distinction between social and political participation seems irrelevant. After all, this study’s primary research subject are not active forms of participation, but basic attitudes towards participation. Having said that, there is, of course, the implicit assumption that attitudes are to some degree associated with action.

One important question that arises with regard to the distinction between output- and input-oriented values is whether social actors are interested in individual participation at all. Do they feel a need or even a duty to contribute to the common good? If so, how do they approach this task and how do they comprehend the idea of civic participation? A related question refers to the perceived opportunity structure for socio-political participation. Do individuals think opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate socio-politically are sufficient? This question also points to the importance of “participatory knowledge” ("Partizipationswissen"), which is a further important precondition of active participation and can be defined as knowledge that influences or guides the political actions of indi-

Individuals or groups. In addition, two further important preconditions of civic participation are identified: community spirit and efficacy. They are introduced in the next sections.

2.6.4 Community Spirit

According to Easton, the political community constitutes a third object of political support, aside from the political regime and its authorities. Accordingly, a reference unit (e.g. the state) creates community spirit by instilling its members with a feeling of belonging and mutual loyalty. Embracing a sense of togetherness and solidarity with other members of society, community spirit is rooted in a certain degree of general interpersonal trust in other members of society. Community spirit is understood to be an important precondition for the evolution of a shared identity. It lays the foundation for social actors’ disposition to collaborate while also determining their willingness to take efforts for the collective good. It may either apply to society at large or certain social groups. First and foremost, the question of group formation has repeatedly been stressed by researchers as a crucial aspect of China’s new social order. Whether or not new strategically acting social groups or even classes emerge is apparently of great importance to China’s social and political future. If they appear, they might either support or, in contrast, oppose the current socio-political system. Such groups can only gain political significance if their members develop a sense of community spirit. Second, a certain amount of community spirit towards society at large or at least certain societal groups is also an important precondition for social actors’ individual readiness to participate socially or politically. Only if social actors do somewhat identify with other members of society, are they motivated to put any effort into contributing to their well-being.

173 For an overview of important sociological findings on the importance of trust, see Cook (2001).
174 E.g. So (2013); Whyte (2010a); Hurst (2009); Goodman (2008); Blecher (2002).
2.6.5 Efficacy

Self-efficacy points to the question of whether individuals believe in their own ability to make a difference. It is viewed here as an important constituent of actual civic participation. According to Campbell, Gurin and Miller, efficacy denotes

the feeling that individual political action does have or can have an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change.\textsuperscript{175}

With regard to the political, some scholars have further divided efficacy into internal efficacy, that is, “one’s competence to understand politics and to participate effectively in political life” and external efficacy, which “refers to beliefs regarding how responsive governmental authorities and organisations are to the demands of citizens”.\textsuperscript{176} While external efficacy constitutes an attitude towards the regime, internal efficacy points to feelings of personal agency. In this study, however, external efficacy is understood to be a dimension of political attitudes, namely the estimation of opportunities for individual political participation. Therefore, the terms “self-efficacy,” “efficacy” and “agency” are used interchangeably and in reference to internal efficacy only.

Since senses of self-efficacy are most likely to be detected on the verbal level, this study aims at capturing senses of individual social as well as political agency by closely analysing the agency constructions respondents apply in their narrations on the verbal level.

2.6.6 Discourse

During my analysis, it became clear that social actors’ perceptions of society are strongly influenced by several public discourses on society and the state. In social science, the term “discourse” is highly contested and applied variably. This study builds on one of the three meanings leading discourse analyst Michel Foucault gives to describe his own usage of the term dis-

course. It refers to “an individualizable group of statements”—that is, coherent groups of statements with a shared conceptualisation of reality and possibly a common intention.¹⁷⁷

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¹⁷⁷ Foucault (1972 [1969]), p. 80. The other two meanings of discourse in the Foucaultian sense are “the general domain of all statements” and “a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements”. However, these definitions are insignificant for this study.
3. Methodology and Data: A Qualitative Approach

3.1 Qualitative Research

Strikingly, ordinary Chinese people’s estimations of their society and political regime frequently contradict allegedly hard facts. For example, Doh Chull Shin asserted that large parts of the Chinese population “misperceive their existing regime as a democracy”.\footnote{Shin (2012), p. 243.} While this notion implies that only Western democracy deserves its name, Chinese official discourse promotes notions of “democracy with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色民主) or “democratic politics with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色民主政治).\footnote{E.g. Xiong (2015); Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (2015). These notions usually build on culturist arguments about an innate discrepancy between individualist values in the West and collective Asian values.} Against this background, this study aims to establish an in-depth understanding of ordinary citizens’ individual perceptions of their society. In order to provide as much room as possible for fresh insights, it approaches the research questions in an open-ended way, thus deliberately refuting assumptions informed by Modernisation Theory.

Quantitative studies determine the distribution probabilities of given properties and screen these variables for correlations. In other words, quantitative survey studies aim to test pre-formulated hypotheses, whereupon they certainly make significant contributions to academic knowledge. However, in a situation where the determining components of attitudes are in question or are themselves even completely unknown, quantitative surveys are obviously not the appropriate research instruments. Under the given circumstances, it rather makes sense to adopt an open research method that allows for the exploration of new concepts through the reconstruction of patterns of subjective meaning. On this basis, one may be able to find causal mechanisms and stipulate hypotheses for further testing in future research.

This research project aims to explore subjective evaluations of society, to understand how individuals position themselves within society and to learn how these assessments inform individual evaluations of politics and the Chinese polity. As these kinds of questions call for an open-minded ap-
proach, I have deliberately adopted the qualitative Grounded Theory (GT) approach. It is well-suited to exploring individual perspectives on subjective living environments. My most important source of data are semi-structured biographical interviews. The rationale is that from a close analysis of individual assessments of subjective living-realities, core beliefs about society and politics appear on the surface. Such core beliefs inform individual socio-political attitudes and are thus crucial to fully comprehend the Chinese case. Aside from core beliefs, less widespread secondary beliefs and the reasons for variations at this level also become evident from thoroughly analysing individual narrations. Social reorganisation and individual self-positioning within society are most likely to manifest themselves in people’s working lives. Thus, I have focused on the latter within the interviews.

In the following, I first present the GT approach in more detail. I then introduce the method of hermeneutic microlinguistic textual analysis as a useful tool with which to supplement qualitative research based on the principles of the GT approach. In both sections, some preliminary theoretical remarks are followed by more practical explanations of these approaches. I subsequently demonstrate their appropriateness for a Chinese-language context. At the end of the chapter, I introduce my data.

### 3.2 Grounded Theory

#### 3.2.1 Theoretical Background

When the GT approach was first introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 for the purpose of creating theories that were soundly grounded within data, the mere name of their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* suggested an entirely new research approach. Despite the novelty of Glaser’ and Strauss’ research programme, their approach naturally adopted some pre-existing philosophical views. The epistemolog-

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180 Sometimes confusions about the proper labelling of GT occurs. Such classification problems are due to the ambiguous usage of the term itself at times: occasionally, it points to the methodological tools that GT researchers employ to obtain their findings, but it also names the outcome of such research—that is, a theory that is indeed grounded in the data. To avoid such confusion, in the following the term “GT” is only used to indicate the results of a research process that is driven by what is here called the GT approach or GT methodology.

181 Glasser and Strauss (1967).
ical foundation of GT approaches consists of three crucial elements: American pragmatism, symbolic interactionism and the so-called Thomas-theorem.\textsuperscript{182}

The pragmatist Chicago school of philosophy originally built on the ideas of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey and later formed the base for the Chicago school of sociology which dominated sociology in the USA for the first four decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{183} In a nutshell, American pragmatism states that all human theory is extracted from practice as it arises from action: “Our intellectual progress is ordained not by independent reality but by our interactions with it.”\textsuperscript{184} Accordingly, the truth of terms, statements and opinions is determined by their practical consequences. Thus, American pragmatism has no correspondence theory of truth but rather a consensus theory, which states that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined by human consensus and not by its accordance with the world.\textsuperscript{185} From this it follows that different individuals may refer to different versions of truth, especially if they live in different environments. For the GT researcher, this implies the aim of understanding how people see the world they are part of rather than searching for any kind of “objective truth,” as the latter may have only a minor impact on people’s beliefs and attitudes.

The second important epistemological basis for the GT approach was the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, which had been developed by Mead’s student and interpreter Herbert Blumer. While the term “interactionism” points to the observation that human beings cannot be considered as isolated entities but are always embedded within a network of the correlating actions of different social agents, the notion “symbolic” refers to the belief that all kinds of human action depend on mediation through the medium of symbols.\textsuperscript{186} Accordingly, human action towards objects is predicated on the meanings people ascribe to these objects. Again, for the GT researcher this highlights the need to understand these subjective ascriptions of meaning. These meanings are ascribed to objects on the basis of the social interactions people have with others and with society. Thus, they are constantly being modified through an inter-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{182} Glasser and Strauss (1967). The term \textit{American pragmatism} refers to the so-called Chicago schools of philosophy and sociology.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Wenzel (2010), p. 48; Schubert (2010), p. 74.
\item \textsuperscript{185} James (1995) pp. 57–9.
\item \textsuperscript{186} Joas and Knöbl (2010), pp. 111–2.
\end{itemize}
pretative process as people are dealing with these objects. Therefore, a person’s self is always in flux and all types of action are bound to an ongoing process of interpretation—that is the future always remains undetermined and unpredictable. Thus, societies are based on interactions between people with varying relationships to each other and can therefore be conceptualised as networks of different world views and sets of experience rather than as homogenous sets of values.¹⁸⁷ This is also of interest for the GT researcher, especially in research on societies that are undergoing as rapid transitions as China.

The GT approach also builds on the so-called Thomas-theorem, which was formulated by yet two other scholars from the Chicago school of sociology, William and Dorothy Thomas. The theorem reads, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”¹⁸⁸ Again, this notion implies that social science scholars should primarily study their respondent’s own world views—that is, identify how they ascribe meaning to the world they live in. All of the three epistemological bases of the GT approach fit well with the research objective at hand, which is to analyse the meanings that individuals ascribe to their lives and social environments.

3.2.2 The Research Cycle

The GT approach is well suited to generate an object-related theory. Its objective is not statistical representativeness but rather the qualitative representation of maximal case variance.¹⁸⁹ While quantitative research methodologies aim to make clear statements about the probability distributions of given variables, qualitative research methodologies, such as the GT research approach, focus on the identification of new case types. Thus, they are very useful for analysing new fields of research where the individual variables that contribute to a given phenomenon are rather unclear or even completely unknown. Possible objectives of researchers who adopt GT methodology are to detect new, previously unidentified cases, to generate typologies, or even to arrive at an object-related theory.¹⁹⁰ Since GT researchers do not test hypotheses, the very starting point of their research differs significantly from that of quantitative research. GT research “does

¹⁸⁸ Thomas and Thomas (1928), p. 572.
¹⁸⁹ Jansen (2010), § 5–§ 7.
¹⁹⁰ Corbin and Strauss (2008), pp. 53–6.
not start with hypotheses or preconceived notions. Instead, in accordance with its inductive nature, it involves the researcher’s attempts to discover, understand, and interpret what is happening in the research context.”

Qualitative research does not entail making statements about relationships between a dependent variable and an independent variable, as is common in quantitative studies, because its purpose is not to test hypotheses. The research question in a qualitative study is a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. It tells the readers what the researcher specifically wants to know about this subject.

As an open process, the GT approach employs a research cycle to generate and validate “sensitising concepts,” as initially defined first by Blumer: Sensitising concepts give the researcher a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts [i.e. research hypotheses] provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. [...] They lack precise reference and have no benchmarks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content. Instead, they rest on a general sense of what is relevant.

Thus, instead of validating and falsifying research hypotheses, GT researchers use sensitising concepts, which may be further developed or dismissed. Even sensitising concepts that do not enter the emerging theory are useful, as they may guide the research to other fruitful lines of inquiry. Sensitising concepts are usually modified during the ongoing research process and thus lead to further, more appropriate sensitising concepts. In other words, sensitising concepts are very likely to change over time, though they don’t necessarily have to. During the research process concepts continue to resurface and, thus, confirm previous interpretations until the researcher arrives at the point of saturation, where no additional new findings occur and the further analysis of data is unnecessary. In the following I further explain the research process before describing in more detail the concrete procedure of analysis.
Like all qualitative researchers, GT researchers usually begin their research with the selection of positive cases, where the phenomenon under investigation occurs. Thus, careful sampling is of utmost importance for obtaining excellent data, which is in turn a precondition for solid research outcomes. The three most common sampling strategies for GT research are (1) convenience sampling, the selection of interviewees according to accessibility; (2) purposeful sampling, the selection of interviewees on the basis of initial data analysis; and (3) theoretical sampling, the purposeful selection of participants in order to develop the emerging concepts. These sampling methods can be and indeed usually are combined. For example, convenience sampling may be done at the beginning of a project to obtain an initial overview of the scope and the major elements of the field under study. This research project’s aim is to identify the concepts most crucial to understand how individuals perceive their environments. Because of its focus on concepts, the theoretical sampling approach is the best fit. In theoretical sampling, the collection of new data is based on concepts derived from the data that has already been collected.

What makes theoretical sampling different from conventional methods of sampling is that it is responsive to the data rather than established before the research begins. This responsive approach makes sampling open and flexible. Concepts are derived from data during analysis and questions about those concepts drive the next round of data collection. The research process feeds on itself. [...] Theoretical sampling is about discovering relevant concepts and their properties and dimensions.

The decision about possible objects of investigation is not specified in advance; rather, it always depends on the current sensitising concept(s). For example, a researcher studying vegetarianism could first do interviews with vegetarians. During this research he or she may find that this group is strongly influenced by animal rights issues. Thus the researcher may de-

197 Mahoney and Goertz (2006), p. 239.
198 Morse (2007), pp. 234–41. Morse names the use of theoretical group interviews as a fourth sampling strategy, in which interviewees are called back at a final stage of the research process to discuss preliminary findings in small groups. This gives the researchers a chance to modify their findings. However, since this technique does not influence who takes part in interviews but rather how participants’ narrations are interpreted, it may be better classified as a form of triangulation.
cide to do some research on animal rights. With regards to data analysis it’s important to note that

sampling does not stop at the level of participants but, in contrast to quantitative inquiry, does not treat all data equally. Within an interview, the researchers may disregard some text (as not helpful or irrelevant), use some portions of the text for verification of other interviews, use some of the text or stories in the data as adding to the description provided by other participants, or adding new data that is different and will start a new category. [...] This is not a bias – it is a fact that all data are not equal, and some will be favored over others.\(^{200}\)

For GT researchers, certain observations may serve as “smoking guns” that are essential for theory validation. This is a general feature of qualitative research, as this kind of investigation bears a resemblance to the work of criminal detectives: while some cases may contain more hints for the researcher, others may be less helpful. By the same logic, a single new case or issue can falsify a whole theory in qualitative research.\(^{201}\) Thus, for qualitative researchers, a theory is usually only one critical observation away from being falsified. And yet, researchers sometimes build enough evidence to feel quite confident that the theory is valid and that no falsifying evidence will ever be found.\(^{202}\)

When thinking about further possible data sources, GT researchers should always try to consider as many different aspects of a given concept as possible. One helpful tool for achieving this sort of variation within the data is the use of comparison.\(^{203}\) At first researchers may strive for maximal contrast by selecting highly diverse cases. Everett Hughes illustrates this technique by asking how a psychiatrist is like a prostitute.\(^{204}\) The question demonstrates strikingly how a comparison between two very different cases can help to identify attributes one would otherwise be unlikely to notice. A complementary technique is to find minimal contrasts between cases. This method is primarily used after one has developed quite a clear idea of the phenomenon under investigation.

\(^{204}\) Hughes (1971), p. 316.
Note that theoretical sampling does not mean sampling for people, but rather sampling for concepts.\textsuperscript{205}

[GT] researchers are not so much interested in how representative their participants are of the larger population. The concern is more about concepts and looking for incidents that shed light on them. And in regard to concepts, researchers are looking for variation, not sameness. Variation is especially important in theory building because it increases the breadth of concepts and scope of the theory.\textsuperscript{206}

Thus, the technique of comparing as many dimensions as possible is very important for completing and supporting the researcher’s findings. “Constant comparing saturates categories no matter what the data bias, nor how complete any one given interview is.”\textsuperscript{207}

The constant comparing of incident and incident to category and its properties is a must, to bring out what data\textsuperscript{208} is actually going on. The one incident concept commits to a version of the ecological fallacy. A particularistic (one person) source of a concept is generalized to a pattern applicable to many people. An impressionistically grounded concept leads to a grounded conjecture, not a grounded theory.\textsuperscript{209}

All kinds of data can be used to expand one’s knowledge of any sensitising concept—for instance, newspaper articles, videos, interviews, observations, or diaries.\textsuperscript{210} As Barney Glaser said in his famous statement that “all is data,” virtually everything can provide clues to the researcher: “What ever [sic] the source, whether interview, observations, documents. It is not just what is being, how it is being and the conditions of its being told, but all the data surrounding what is being told.”\textsuperscript{211} In this context it is important to stress once more that what the researcher is looking for is not truth or reality in the sense of philosophical realism,\textsuperscript{212} but the subjective beliefs of the people participating in the study. GT holds

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{205} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 144.
\item \textsuperscript{206} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 156.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Glaser (2007), p. 18.
\item \textsuperscript{208} I.e. “what kind of data is produced” or “how the data is produced.” For further information see below.
\item \textsuperscript{209} Glaser (2007), p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{210} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Glaser (2007), p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Philosophical realism entails a correspondence theory of truth as described above.
\end{itemize}
that, after all, socially structured, vested fictions run the world [...]. Thus data is what is occurring, it is socially produced and it is up to the GT researcher to figure it out, BECAUSE\textsuperscript{213} the participants are doing it, talking it, using it, think it, are it, respond to it, offer it and so forth.\textsuperscript{214}

That said, sampling for concepts is not just about collecting a list of categories; it also involves understanding the dimensions and properties of these concepts and the relations between them.\textsuperscript{215} Accordingly, theoretical sampling also allows the researcher to further develop his or her interview guideline in the course of the research. While standardised questionnaires in quantitative studies need to be identical for the whole sample population to guarantee comparability, in theoretical sampling questions may become more specific over time, as the researcher aspires to saturate categories.\textsuperscript{216}

As new analytic threads (concepts) arise during analysis, the researcher wants to be free to follow up on questions without concern of whether or not the same question was asked of previous participants. At the same time, consistency is not usually a problem because as persons tell their stories there is often much consistency between them. [...] Concepts that are relevant in data from one participant will almost always be found in data from other participants, though the form they take might be different.\textsuperscript{217}

An essential feature of theoretical sampling is that phases of data-collection alternate with phases of analysis. This circular process continues until “theoretical saturation” is achieved—that is, “[t]he point in analysis when all categories are well developed in terms of properties, dimensions, and variations. [At this point] further data gathering and analysis add little new to the conceptualization, though variations can always be discovered.”\textsuperscript{218} In fact, whether a concept is saturated, depends to some degree on the respective research objective. In principle it is always possible to further complement any given concept.\textsuperscript{219} Nevertheless, data saturation is essential for the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{213} Emphasis in original.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Glaser (2007), p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 148.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 146.
\item \textsuperscript{217} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 148.
\item \textsuperscript{218} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 263.
\item \textsuperscript{219} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 149.
\end{itemize}
validation of data. As concepts recur, they confirm and verify categories. Thus, categories are considered to be comprehensive and valid only after the point of saturation is reached.220

3.2.3 Analysis in Practice

But what does the search for concepts look like in practical terms? How should the researcher proceed? An important precondition for successful analysis based on the principles of GT methodology is to analyse only written texts. This may at first contradict the notion mentioned above that all kinds of data sources can be used for GT research. But this contradiction is only an apparent one. Technically, the biggest part of GT analysis is made up by memo writing—that is, the focusing of one’s thoughts on a certain set of data by writing. This is also done with field observations or videos. By writing memos, researchers not only record their central thoughts and develop codes and their properties and dimensions but also reflect on their own presuppositions. Memo writing also plays a prominent role in theory development and helps to make the process of theory formation transparent. 221

Memo writing is […] the222 fundamental process of researcher/data engagement that results in ‘grounded’ theory. Memo writing is the methodological link, the distillation process, through which the researcher transforms data into theory. In the memo writing process, the researcher analytically interprets data. Through sorting, analyzing, and coding ‘raw’ data in memos, the Grounded Theorist discovers emergent social patterns.223

As they mainly consist of reflections on concepts, memos are naturally of great importance for theoretical sampling, too. Memos enable researchers to reflect in depth on the data; to explain and develop concepts, with their properties and dimensions; and to classify categories. They allow researchers to gain analytical distance from their data, which is important for

221 Corbin and Strauss (2008), pp. 117–42.
222 Emphasis in original.
moving from mere description to the more abstract level of conceptualisation. Thus, memos facilitate theory building.\textsuperscript{224}

When doing GT analysis, it is important that the researcher collects several possible interpretations in order to check them for internal consistency. Only the continuous collection and examination of different interpretations can prevent researchers from rushing to conclusions. All statements have to be grounded in the data, which is analysed in sequences. As the analysis is carried out, the natural tendency to speed up needs to be controlled through the deliberate deceleration of the interpretation process. One good way of achieving this aim and simultaneously ensuring intersubjectivity is validation by communication. This tool allows for the collection of further interpretations as well as plausibility checks of interpretations. As different texts on GT stress, it is best to conduct research in a group of researchers, so that the researchers are regularly able to check one another’s interpretations.\textsuperscript{225} Fortunately, I was in the lucky position of conducting this study within a team of three researchers.

As the above remarks show, “[c]oding is the core process in classic grounded theory methodology.”\textsuperscript{226} The aim of memo writing is coding, and codes serve as the basis for theoretical sampling. Codes are the elements that any emerging theory is constructed of. Coding can be cut into three phases; open coding, axial coding and selective coding. During the open coding phase important concepts are detected in the data. Open codes are centred on the data and summarise what is being said. Since they are analytical in nature, they may initially be more concrete, but over time they naturally become increasingly abstract.\textsuperscript{227} During the second phase, axial coding, interrelationships between these codes or concepts are discovered.\textsuperscript{228} The aim is to identify the relationship between the codes and the phenomenon under study. The third phase, that of selective coding, completes the analytical process. The researcher focuses on one or more central categories and aims to achieve their theoretical saturation. Here the central phenomenon is determined and the research question is sharpened.\textsuperscript{229} This whole process is promoted by the theoretical sampling approach, which al-

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{224} Lempert (2007), p. 249.
\bibitem{226} Holton (2007), p. 265.
\bibitem{227} Holton (2007), p. 275–7.
\bibitem{228} Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 195.
\bibitem{229} Strauss and Corbin (1998), p. 211.
\end{thebibliography}
allows researchers to decide what to investigate next after they have completed the analysis of a given piece of data.

Having introduced an analytical approach that is based on the principles of GT, I now move on to describe the technique of microlinguistic hermeneutic text analysis, which has proven to be a useful instrument for supplementing the above analytical approach because it adds even more concrete guidelines for analysis.

3.3 Microlinguistic Hermeneutic Textual Analysis

3.3.1 Theoretical Background

This section begins with some preliminary epistemological remarks. I then introduce the techniques of positioning and agency analysis, as they have proven to be most suitable for this research project. At the end of the section, I reflect on the applicability of microlinguistic hermeneutic textual analysis to the Chinese language.

Every empirical research project within the social sciences faces the epistemological challenges of the hermeneutic cycle and the indexicality of language—that is, its context sensitivity. Therefore, it is very important that the researcher reflects on these unavoidable questions in order to determine which methodologies are appropriate. This applies in particular to reconstructive approaches such as hermeneutic text analysis, which are often accused by their detractors of being very subjective and heavily prone to unconscious manipulation by researchers through their own world view, attitudes and beliefs. Interestingly, the epistemological problems addressed below also apply to any other method of human knowledge production, though advocates of quantitative research methodologies usually do not delve into this subject. However, “the methodological advantage of qualitative in opposition to standardised approaches is its potential to turn the indexicality of human constructions of reality [and, along with it, the hermeneutic cycle] into the object of research.”

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The term hermeneutic cycle refers to the paradoxical situation that one can only understand a text if one understands its parts, but meanwhile the parts can only be understood with reference to the whole.\(^{232}\) The comprehension of texts is always facilitated by the reader’s previous knowledge. Taken to extremes, this means a reader only understands something new if he or she already understood it before. At the same time, it is somehow possible to indeed acquire new knowledge.\(^{233}\) As the notion of a hermeneutic cycle implies, this acquisition of new knowledge is not a straightforward act, but rather a cyclical process. At this point, the idea of a hermeneutic cycle also touches on the disparity between the background knowledge of a text’s author and of a text’s reader. Theoretically, a text’s reader needs to have exactly the same previous knowledge as its author in order to be able to grasp it in precisely the same way.\(^{234}\) In practical terms, this is almost impossible. Thus, the reader can only gradually approach the author’s understanding of a text in a process resembling a helical movement. As early as the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher assumed that it is possible to bridge the gap between the author’s and the reader’s previous knowledge—that is, to transcend the inevitable strangeness of texts—by means of hermeneutics.\(^{235}\) This belief is a crucial precondition for today’s hermeneutic text analysis techniques. Nevertheless, it is important that the researcher bears the problematic of the hermeneutic cycle in mind in order to avoid taking something as understood too early. In other words, the cautious researcher has to ensure that what he understands is what, for example, an interviewee actually wants to express, and not just what the researcher already knew or believed prior to the study. Otherwise an analyst runs the risk of constantly confirming his or her own preconceptions and expectations without ever learning anything new, let alone doing justice to the data.

The second epistemological consideration of importance for qualitative research in general and of special importance for hermeneutic text analysis in particular relates to the indexicality of human language. It is quite evident that “[w]ords can have different meanings from one language to an-

\(^{232}\) The notion of a hermeneutic cycle also applies to artworks or thoughts that are expressed orally. However, as written text is the natural object of investigation for hermeneutics, this passage deals only with texts in their written form. Nevertheless, everything said above may be transferred to these other fields as well.

\(^{233}\) This consideration was first introduced by Friedrich Ast in the early nineteenth century: Ast (1980 [1808]), § 75, pp. 178–81.


other and from one situation to another”. The meaning of terms depends on the concrete situations in which they are used. Additionally, terms are always embedded in semantic networks. For example, it makes a big difference if the word “fire” is embedded in a semantic network of campfire singing, romance and senses of community or placed in a context of destruction, danger, smoke poisoning and burns. According to Friedemann Schulz von Thun’s communication square, every message contains four aspects: its propositional content; a self-revealing aspect about the sender’s own personality; a relationship aspect which contains the sender’s relation with the message’s receiver; and an appealing aspect which comprises the intended effect of a message. Imagine a married couple having dinner after the husband has prepared the food. If the wife says, “You put too much salt into the soup again,” she could simply want to express that the soup tastes too salty today and that this is not the first time (propositional content). Then again, her intention could be to stress that she is indeed a better cook than her husband (self-revealing aspect). Or she could be trying to criticise her husband for being a worse cook than she is (relationship aspect). Finally, her statement could also indicate her willingness to cook next time (appealing aspect). As the communication square explicitly refers to language as a tool of communication, it also applies to interviews, especially if they are semi-structured or open. Accordingly, an interviewer should try to inquire more deeply into the indexical terms his interviewees use in order to clarify their meanings.

Hermeneutic text analysis, however, even exceeds the above observations in its preciseness, since it holds that there are further latent layers of meaning beyond the superficially identifiable meaning of texts. On the basis of Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, Ralf Bohnsack distinguishes between the immanent and the documentary meaning of texts. According to Bohnsack, every text always contains both layers of meaning: The immanent layer of meaning refers to the explicit, literal meanings of texts and also includes the narrator’s or author’s intentions and motives for making a statement; it thus refers to all four aspects of the communication square presented above. In contrast, the notion of documentary meaning views the situation presented as documenting an attitude, which structures the whole description; it thus refers to the world view the text expresses.

236 Corbin and Strauss (2008), p. 49.
237 Kruse (2009), § 4. At this point, Kruse also refers to Mannheim (1980).
239 E.g. Mannheim (1952).
3.3 Microlinguistic Hermeneutic Textual Analysis

The documentary meaning pertains to the question of how “reality is produced”. In the case of interviews or longer narrations, this world view or set of attitudes manifests itself in various sections, where it can be traced using appropriate analytical techniques. Both of the models above stress the complexity of human language and the texts it produces. Hermeneutic text analysis holds that the different layers of meaning of texts can be deciphered using microlinguistic analytical techniques. Over the last fifty years, scholars have developed a variety of techniques for this purpose. Examples include discourse analysis, the documentary method, metaphor analysis and conversation analysis, to name just a few. As I demonstrate in the following subsection, positioning and agency analysis are best suited to the research at hand.

3.3.2 Positioning Analysis

This study’s research objective is to determine (1) how individuals perceive the changing society they are part of; (2) how they perceive their own changes in social status; and (3) how these perceptions affect their sociopolitical attitudes. Positioning analysis works particularly well for investigating these questions, as it

is seen as an especially appropriate way of comprehending identities in narratives, because it allows for a reconstruction of discursive actions by which identities are accomplished, […] It can offer valuable insights into the relations and tensions between varying conceptions of identity within the different positional layers.

Positioning analysis holds that “it is the function of every speech act to assign positions”. Positioning is a discursive practice that allows narrators to present themselves and others, via linguistic interactions, as possessing certain attributes, characteristics or motives, which are of importance in their creation of their own identity. The notion of “positioning” evolved from the tradition of discursive psychology and was first promoted by Wendy Hollway and Rom Harré. Michael Bamberg was the first to apply it to narrations. He defined positioning as a three-levelled process of as-

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signing roles to elements of texts. He asked three questions to illustrate these three levels: “1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events? […] 2. How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience? […] 3. How do narrators position themselves to themselves? The third level can be understood as the question of how the narrating self positions itself in relation to what is narrated—that is, the former self. Positioning involves the ongoing establishment of a situational identity, previous identities and still-existent identities. Thus, positioning analysis is helpful in gaining a dynamic understanding of interviewees’ self-positioning within society. This is more useful than using socio-demographic data such as occupation or income to indirectly infer a respondent’s social position. Positioning also takes place at the level of morals and versions of narration. Positions may contain a speaker’s psychological attributes, moral claims and attitudes, and social identities as well as the rights and obligations associated with those roles. They often extend what has been explicitly stated. In many cases, they point to cultural conventions or patterns of interpretation. Additionally, they frequently refer to the speaker’s autobiographical experiences. Thus, they may enable the analyst to gain far-reaching insights into the speaker’s world view and normative orientation. As Lucius-Hoene writes, “narrating as an epistemic and linguistic-rhetorical accomplishment in a certain social situation provides many opportunities for her [the narrator] to describe the event in a way that renders it compatible with her self-esteem.” For example, one street hawker who dealt with illegal bootleg DVDs in the streets of Beijing vindicated his type of breadwinning by stating that this was his way to benefit the poor, by providing them with low-cost “intellectual nourishment” that they would otherwise not be able to afford.

245 While Bamberg writes exclusively about “characters”, his follower Neill Korobov expands the approach by also taking other “conversational units”, like events, topics or verb structures into account. Korobov (2002), § 34.
246 Korobov also adds that the audience a speaker positions himself or herself towards may also be imaginary. See Korobov (2002), § 34.
252 Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing.
Positioning analysis can be used at “the micro-linguistic level of construction types”\(^{253}\) and is thus perfectly suited to a prominent part of this research project—namely the question regarding the groups that individuals define themselves as belonging to and the characteristics they say these groups possess. Another research question that can be answered with positioning analysis is that regarding the individual’s views on society. These views can be reconstructed from how they locate themselves within the society as a whole and from the angle he or she adopts to describe society. At the same time, individual positioning is probably also very revealing of how individuals psychologically deal with experiences of social mobility.

### 3.3.3 Agency Analysis

Bamberg quotes from interviews with two siblings to illustrate how differently they position themselves and the respective other when talking about the same event. While the sister claims: “I stuck my fist out, and he ran into it and got a bloody nose,” her brother narrates: “I wanted to play a game, but she didn’t let me, and she slapped me across the face.”\(^{254}\) According to Bamberg, these different styles of constructing the self and the respective other are purposefully organised to serve different functions: While the sister wants to save face by assigning at least partial liability to her brother, who “ran into” her fist on his own, the brother tries to make the audience feel sorry for him and angry at his sister.\(^{255}\) On closer examination, the main difference between the two constructions of self in this example lies in the types of agency displayed. While the boy constructs himself as the passive victim of his sister’s active agency, she constructs him as adopting at least some degree of active agency. Thus, this instance illustrates how positioning analysis relates to the technique of agency analysis.

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\(^{253}\) Korobov (2002), § 36.
Human agency can be defined as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.256

This definition highlights three elements of agency: (1) The iterative elements, which point to the selective reactivation of previously used behavioural and mental schemes that have a stabilising effect on the existing social order. (2) The projective elements, which are of particular interest for agency analysis. They encompass the actor’s creativity, which allows him or her to imagine a somehow different future. (3) Finally, the practical, evaluative elements of agency, which point to the actor’s ability to morally judge possible alternatives for action. These three dimensions can be identified to varying degrees within concrete actions.257 Thus, analysing the agency constructions speakers use to describe themselves and others sheds light on their feelings of self-efficacy and about their ability to control certain situations. Agency constructions may reveal the psychological coping strategies with regard to individual experiences of social mobility and also show how people perceive and assess the social structures they are part of and if or how they would like to change the latter.258 Agency analysis therefore is particularly suited to research on whether individuals perceive themselves as capable of individual social ascent or as mere subjects to greater shifts in the social structure—that is, it is useful for identifying how self-determined individuals feel in their social environment. In narrative interviews, active or passive agency can be attributed to different actors, as Bamberg’s example above shows. Thus, analysing narration’s semantic elements sheds light on the speaker’s feelings of self-determination or powerlessness.259

As is evident from the above discussion, the availability of written interview transcripts is a vital condition for microlinguistic hermeneutic text analysis. Therefore, I audio recorded all interviews and had them transcribed word by word. My analysis was based on verbatim transcripts in

258 E.g. when interviewees talk about imaginary events or plans and hopes for their future.
the original Chinese language, since any translation always has its translator’s interpretation imprinted upon it. Especially in the case of spoken language, with its sometimes unfinished sentences, translation always requires some sort of interpretation.

3.3.4 Microlinguistic Hermeneutic Text Analysis in the Chinese Language

At this point, yet another question might come to the mind of the interested reader: Is this kind of research even possible in a foreign-language context? Are non-native speakers able to conduct this type of microlinguistic analysis? And is this overall approach appropriate for the Chinese language? Especially in spoken language, which often contains fragmentary sentences, inflections, indicators of grammatical numbers, tenses and cases are of significant importance to the success of micro-level analysis. Thus, is an isolating language, which is as short on grammar as Chinese, suitable for this type of analysis, which evolved within the Indo-European language area?

As regards the foreign-language context, non-native speakers admittedly find themselves in a disadvantaged situation. But leaving aside the efforts they need to make to master the respective foreign language, they may actually benefit from their greater distance from that language. In microlinguistic hermeneutic text analysis, it is very important that researchers question their own interpretations of any given source of text over and over again to avoid taking preliminary interpretations for granted too early. Arguably, native speakers are more likely to make hasty judgements regarding the data, while non-natives are naturally more likely to double-check their interpretations.

Additionally, a growing body of literature now allows the researcher to prepare herself or himself for the specific characteristics of the Chinese language, and thus to develop the necessary sensitivity. Basis his analysis on the Chinese terms for “ordinary people” (laobaixing, 老百姓) and “cadre” (ganbu, 干部), Stig Thøgersen distinguishes between “Baixingese” and “Ganbunese” to highlight the different styles of language used in different formal settings. While the use of Ganbunese shows knowledge of, if not

260 In the Chinese language, there are no inflections and indicators of gender, grammatical numbers, cases and tenses. Alpermann and Selcuk (2012), pp. 76–9.
261 E.g. Liang (1998); Alpermann and Selcuk (2012).
identification with, the party state, Baixingese can be used to demonstrate authenticity and sometimes indicates distance from the state’s apparatus. As Thøgersen shows using several examples from his own fieldwork in China, in daily life both language styles are purposefully combined to serve certain aims.262 “People choose their words with great skill and care, and the way they switch codes and manipulate terms from both Gan-bunese and Baixingese gives clues about how they think about and act in their society.”263 For Thøgersen, these findings call for the design of strategies by which the researcher can gain as much insight into his interviewees’ minds as possible by analysing their language.264 Though Thøgersen does not mention it, the technique of microlinguistic interview analysis serves this aim perfectly, since word-by-word analysis allows precisely this type of assessment of deeper layers of meaning within the texts. It also helps to circumvent the danger of missing an interview’s quintessence, which could potentially result from the significant differences in patterns of communication between Western researchers and Chinese natives.265 This danger is also minimised by the use of semi-narrative interviews, which are open in nature and thus give interviewees ample space to unfold their own mental world without being interrupted or misunderstood.266 In the end, if research is conducted carefully and diligently, it is entirely possible for foreign scholars to successfully conduct microlinguistic hermeneutic text analysis in the Chinese language.267

With regard to the applicability of microlinguistic analytical techniques to Chinese contexts, Björn Alpermann and Baris Selcuk demonstrated what a promising instrument agency analysis is for social science research on China. They compared examples from their own fieldwork to show how dissimilarly different interviewees indicate agency, despite their similar background. Thus, they falsified the notion that Chinese people, as members of a “collectivist society”, would not indicate their own agency in narrations. Though Alpermann and Selcuk admit that some of the specific grammatical features of the Chinese language cause additional difficulties for agency analysis, they nevertheless presented the latter as an effective tool for social scientists.268 They also provide helpful advice on conducting

263 Thøgersen (2006), p. 120.
264 Thøgersen (2006), p. 120.
265 Alpermann (2012a).
267 Alpermann (2012a).
268 Alpermann and Selcuk (2012).
successful agency analysis within a Chinese-language context, such as focusing on temporal adverbs, modal particles, intonation and speech pauses.\textsuperscript{269}

Additionally, as mentioned above, concepts are only valid for analysts if they are saturated. In other words, only interpretations that reoccur in different sections of a text are used for further consideration. Thus, it is not a problem if the meaning of some statements within an interview is not completely clear, as long as individual interpretations are not taken for granted too quickly, but rather after careful consideration of other possible interpretations.

3.4 Data

3.4.1 Field sites

China is a huge multifaceted nation, whose land masses stretch from the subarctic north to the tropical south, and from the flat fertile coastal line in the east to the high Tibet Plateau in the south-west and the hostile deserts of Gobi and Taklamakan in the north-west. Just like its landscape, the lifestyles and living conditions of China’s population are also diversified. In order to accommodate China’s internal variety, three field sites were purposefully chosen to capture as much variation as possible: A third of all interviews were conducted in the national capital Beijing (北京), which is located close to the east coast in the north of the country. As a first-tier city, financial centre and major industrial hub, it records a steady high influx of both national and international migrants. Apart from old SOEs, the city is home to a thriving private industry and has attracted high foreign direct investment. Its socio-economic climate is characterised by its closeness to the political centre. Due to its long history it is also a hotspot for national and international tourism and a major centre of higher education.

Another third of all interviews were conducted in Xi’an (西安), the capital of the western province of Shaanxi (陕西). After 2000, the city benefited greatly from the central government’s western development policy (西部大开发), which was initiated to further develop China’s comparatively poor western regions.\textsuperscript{270} From the early 2000s, Shaanxi’s provincial govern-

\textsuperscript{269} Alpermann and Selcuk (2012), pp. 93–5.
ment has made great efforts to turn the then rather backward city with its characteristically important state sector “into an ‘international metropolis’ and regional ‘growth pole’”. With the strong support of the central government in Beijing, the city has witnessed “explosive economic, physical, and population growth” ever since, and its GDP more than quintupled to 366 billion RMB in 2011.271 Like Beijing, Xi’an is also a major destination for national and international tourism, most famously because it is home to the ancient Terracotta Army.

The third field site was Wenzhou (温州), a coastal city located in the southern province of Zhejiang (浙江) famous for its thriving private industry. Wenzhou was the first city in China where private enterprises were set up after the economic reforms in 1978. During the 1990s, the “Wenzhou model” (温州模式) of family-owned enterprises became famous all over China. Most notably, Wenzhou “pioneered the development of chambers of commerce and other trade associations” in a way China scholars have frequently estimated as signs of a developing civil society in China.272 At the same time, Wenzhou also became infamous for its cheap and often fake brand products—a reputation the city has fought ever since. The city functions as a regional economic centre. Its main source of income are light industries like textiles, shoes and electrical equipment.

3.4.2 Field Access

This study builds on interview material from the research project on “Social Stratification and Political Culture in Contemporary Urban China”, which was part of the “Governance in China” research network that was sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research from 2010 to 2016. The total number of interviews from the project’s data pool amounts to 100. The first five interviews were conducted by the head of the research project, Björn Alpermann, during a pilot study in 2009 Beijing with DVD vendors. They provided the basis for the development of a flexible interview guideline, which was further modified after each round of fieldwork. The remaining 95 project interviews were conducted during three rounds of fieldwork from 2010 to 2012 by Chinese university students specifically trained by our research team. Interviewers and interviewees alike were accessed by our Chinese research partners, who have

271 Jaros (2013).
272 Fewsmith (2008).
chosen to remain anonymous. To control for the influence of the interviewer’s nationality on respondents as far as possible, I conducted fifteen additional interviews myself in Beijing and Xi’an during two rounds of fieldwork in 2011 and 2012.

The interviewees comprised an equal share of men and women. One fourth of all interviewees were SOE workers, laid-off (下岗) SOE workers, white-collar professionals from SOEs and white-collar professionals from private businesses respectively.273 The interviewees’ ages ranged from twenty-two to sixty-one. The interviews lasted between one and four hours, with two to two and a half hours being the average length. All the interviews were fully tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised. In an initial step, all the interviews were carefully listened through and their main content was noted down. On basis of these notes, twenty-eight interviews were selected for closer analysis. As described in chapter three, the selection of interviews followed the approach of theoretical sampling as far as possible—that is, the questions that arose from an interview’s analysis were crucial in determining which interview to analyse next. However, due to the distance to the field, interviews were conducted in only four rounds of fieldwork, that is, interview guidelines could only be modified three times.

273 Here, white collar worker refers to individuals with a post-secondary degree and a non-routine, non-manual occupation.
4. Society in Transformation: Earth-shaking Changes

4.1 Introduction

Much has been written about the tremendous changes Chinese society has witnessed over the last thirty years. From politics to economics to social life, from the macro to the very micro level of society, change seems to be virtually everywhere. In order to understand how individuals perceive these changes and how they assess their new social environment, it is necessary to first establish some basic knowledge of the ways in which society has changed. Therefore, this chapter gives a general overview of the aspects in which Chinese urbanites’ lives have been transformed over the course of the last three to four decades. The chapter aims to provide detailed insights into people’s perceptions of and feelings about these changes. Throughout the chapter, the realms that respondents highlighted as most important for their personal lives are in the spotlight. Since these happen to be the same issues that are generally discussed among China scholars, a range of literature is incorporated where appropriate.

According to my respondents’ narratives, the most prominent attributes of ongoing social transformations were—maybe unsurprisingly—comprehensiveness and their high speed. Most interviewees emphasised that social changes were extraordinarily fast, “earth-shaking” (翻天覆地),274 and provoked differences “like day and night” (日夜一个变化)—that is, drastic and far-reaching. Social change affected the material, behavioural and mental levels of life alike. General living conditions improved tremendously, new job opportunities emerged and lifestyles became increasingly diversified, allowing individuals a considerably higher degree of self-determination. While these trends generally tended to instil people with enthusiasm about social progress, there was also a more negative side to the quick and extensive social change. The high speed of China’s transition also generated feelings of uncertainty and the anxiety of falling behind—sentiments that, for their part, exerted great influence on individual assessments of and behaviour towards the emerging new social order.

274 Ms Feng, middle management of an SOE, 34 years old, from Beijing; Mr Hu, technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an.
275 Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an.
The following sections present different areas of social transformation through my interviewees’ eyes, thus depicting how social change’s comprehensiveness and high speed informed sentiments of insecurity as well as optimism. At the same time, a summary of the manifold ways in which Chinese society has changed over the last few decades lays the foundations for later chapters, which build on several of these aspects.

4.2 Housing and General Living Conditions

China’s transformation virtually affects all aspects of life. On the surface, as skyscrapers rose up to the sky and dirt roads made room for multi-lane city highways filled with ever growing numbers of private automobiles, cityscapes are only hardly recognisable. Concomitantly, living conditions shifted greatly over the years. At the fundamental level, especially among those who suffered from malnutrition in their childhood, strong narratives about the great variety and abundance of food they can choose from today were prevalent. Most of the older respondents recalled living in cramped premises, with insufficient sanitary facilities, under generally poor housing conditions during their childhood and youth. In contrast, even the poorest among the interviewees inhabited—and in most cases owned—a private family flat by the time of investigation. This reflects a general trend: While the average living space per capita in China’s urban areas amounted to only 3.6 square metres in 1978, it had grown to 32.9 square metres by 2012. Mr Ning, who was born in the early 1970s, gives a vivid account of the living conditions he grew up in:

About seven or eight families used to live in one courtyard. [...] Some families had one room, some had one and a half, and some had two rooms. [...] One courtyard had one public water pipe and one public toilet. But in those days the relationships between people were quite good. After school, at home everybody used to set up a higher and a lower stool to do their homework at the higher [and sit at the lower] stool. The children from all of the families sat in the courtyard and did

276 Admittedly, the situation looks quite different for rural migrant workers, who often live in temporary shelters, factory dormitories, basements or poorly built small single rooms. Wang and Wang (2009).
their homework. ‘Which delicious food did your family cook today?’ You gave me a bowl of it, gave me a little bit. ‘Which tasty food does my family have?’ I gave you a bowl of it. If a stranger came into the yard, some old women would ask: ‘Who are you looking for?’ This whole family environment was quite friendly. But back then, material life was comparatively deficient. I remember when I was very little, when I was in middle school, if my family was able to buy a roasted chicken, it was a very good thing. If guests visited and [we] bought a roasted chicken and served a few dishes it was [regarded as] a very good life. In those days, when I was little, public transportation was out of the question. My mother took me everywhere by bicycle. One [child] sat on the top tube and one in the back seat. That was the means of transportation. Life was quite arduous.279

(Mr Ning, director of private research institute, 37 years old, from Xi’an)

This colourful, nostalgic description of life in Mr Ning’s childhood stands in stark contrast to modern urban lifestyle. It thus reveals a glimpse of how the general rise in people’s standard of living was accompanied by a change in living habits. Compared to the 1980s, the general housing situation in urban China improved by leaps and bounds. Modern housing conditions led to enhanced sanitation and afforded more personal space and privacy to people, thus slackening the tight social control formerly exercised by the socialist work unit. On the other hand, modern housing conditions also tend to alienate neighbours from each other. While accommodation facilities in Chinese cities generally improved over the years, privatisation of the real estate market caused spatial reorganisation. In Maoist China, urban housing was provided by the government via the socialist work unit system, as part of the so-called iron rice bowl.280 Workers of all ranks lived in the same housing complexes, which were attached to their workplaces.281 Since the 1980s, a large proportion of public real estate was privatised in the course of urban housing reforms. Modern Chinese cities developed a variety of new functional districts that are characterised by a

279 For the benefit of the text’s readability, all quotes were slightly smoothened in the course of translation if necessary. However, the literal wording in Chinese is included at the end of the study.
280 In pre-reform China, SOE workers were generally granted lifelong employment and were provided with free housing and basic health security. Li (2012), p. 202.
strict separation between housing and working spaces in urban centres. Spatial restructuring created an alternative stage for status formation apart from the workplace. Thus, while Mr Ning mourned for the lost community spirit of his childhood, Li Zhang argued that members of the new emerging Chinese middle class consciously enjoy the newly discovered feeling of privacy that is offered by expensive urban housing compounds. Zhang described how residents deliberately avoid getting involved with their neighbours too closely. In line with other China scholars, she concluded that, against the background of the old socialist work unit (danwei, 单位) with its complete lack of privacy, anonymity is regarded as a slice of luxury among contemporary Chinese urbanites today.

Another aspect of spatial restructuring was the formation of residential patterns based on the income levels of their inhabitants. For members of China’s newly emerging middle classes especially, the choice of housing is of crucial importance in realising their identity. But while upscale gated communities emerged to cater to the new rich class’s desires, poor families have been left in old, run-down residential buildings or pushed to the fringes of urban areas. Especially during the late 1990s, great numbers of public housing complexes were sold to sitting tenants at highly subsidised prices. On the one hand, this policy improved the living conditions of the residents remarkably, frequently enabling them to ascend to the newly forming middle classes. On the other hand, the privatisation of the housing market also laid the foundations for urban poverty. Subsequently, commercial real estate developers became the main housing providers. With Chinese urbanites deprived of the entitlement to public housing, purchasing their own apartments became a major issue of concern for them. However, over the last few decades, real estate prices have reached

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282 Wang (2004), pp. 43–4. However, things look different at the outskirts of industrial cities, where the Chinese dormitory labour regime occurred.
283 Tomba (2010), p. 204.
284 Zhang (2010), p. 120; Osburg (2009), pp. 127–8. Yan (2003), pp. 135–66 argues that a certain degree of privacy has always been viewed as a privilege among China’s former rulers and elites.
288 As Huang (2012) showed, the Chinese government has put great effort into the provision of low-income housing in Chinese cities in recent years. However, due to a variety of factors, like its inability to set up a clear policy framework, policy enforcement problems on the local level and the systematic exclusion of migrants in the cities, these attempts have failed to bear fruit so far.
astronomic heights, making it increasingly difficult for common people to buy a private flat. In fact, complaints about surging high real estate prices were among the topics most prominent in my interviews. Ms Gu, a warehouse clerk in her early thirties, laments:

I think only after [you] reside peacefully are [you] able to work happily; only then can there be harmony. If you can’t even reside peacefully, how can you have harmony? [...] I have two relatives who don’t possess their own flat. You know, I really pity them. Look, [they] have no flat, have no home, have the feeling that [they] have no home. Home owners really don’t know the bitterness of homeless people. Ai! Moving from one home to another all the time. Each time they move house, they quarrel. Do you say that’s harmonious? It’s not harmonious. What is the reason for this disharmony? Isn’t it because they have no flat? If you didn’t need to move house, you wouldn’t quarrel, would you? [...] On the internet it says many of the generation born after 1980 are already divorced. Why is that? [They] have no flat; can they have harmony? How could they have harmony? (G#4)

(Ms Gu, SOE factory worker, 31 years old, from Xi’an)

While having a dig at the government’s declared aim of constructing a harmonious society (和谐社会), this quote perfectly illustrates a widespread feeling of insecurity. Accordingly, only purchasing private real estate saves individuals from a feeling of anchorless “floating” (飘着) in society and is thus essential for personal well-being. Residential property is seen as an anchor of stability in an environment perceived to be highly insecure. Correspondingly, for many young Chinese ready to get married, homeownership has even become a major concern when assessing a potential spouse. Given the high prices of urban apartments, housing is considered a huge burden among common Chinese people. Indeed, the private homeownership rate in urban China reached almost 90% in 2012, demonstrating the importance of possessing a private apartment to most Chi-

289 For example, in 2010 the average purchase price for property in Beijing was 20,039 RMB per square metre, while the average annual income amounted to 30,673 RMB in 2009. Orlik (2011), p. 85. These figures reflect the general situation of the real estate market in Chinese cities.

290 This phrasing is an allusion to the proverb “to live (literally: reside) and work in peace and contentment” (安居乐业).

nese. Like elsewhere, private flats in China are usually paid in instalments. Colloquial language uses the phrase of the “housing slaves” (房奴) to capture the feeling of many young Chinese homeowners of basically only living and working to pay back the mortgage on their apartments. The soaring urban real estate prices put heavy pressure on the younger generation and thus also on their parents, who usually view it as their duty to support their offspring with enough money to at least effect a down payment. As we shall see in chapter six, this heavy pressure plays an important role in shaping interpersonal relationships in contemporary China. Then again, successfully acquiring a private flat in an urban area means reaching a major cornerstone on the way towards individual social security. This is why private housing is generally viewed to be “the single most important investment for the emerging middle class, almost as a mooring for their social stability”.

In summary, the privatisation of the property market and the subsequent separation of living and working spaces gave China’s urbanites access to growing private spaces—both literally and figuratively speaking. In general, private housing functions as a major social stabiliser. Moreover, spacious newly built housing complexes allow those who can afford to inhabit them to live in unprecedented luxury. By and large, respondents assess the increasing living standards very favourably. However, the abolishment of public housing allocation was also crucial in the formation of urban poverty. In addition, it left many individuals with feelings of insecurity, which put heavy pressure on the younger generation in particular. Increasing social stratification and the feeling of pressure are examined in more detail in chapters five and six respectively. For better or worse, shifting housing conditions and extended living spaces clearly altered not only life’s surface, but also its spirit.

292 Chen, Nie (2016), p. 97. Admittedly, this high number may in part also result from a lack of other investment opportunities. However, the psychological aspect illustrated above undeniably plays a very important role in this. In comparison, in 2007, the aggregate homeownership rate amounted to 41 % in Germany and to 68.69 % in the USA. Andrews and Sánchez (2011), p. 212.

293 Anagnost (2008), p. 15.
4.3 Work and Education

In the course of the economic reforms, China witnessed a massive increase in its service sector as well as rapid mechanisation and resulting changes in working processes. The most remarkable change in the Chinese economy was surely the dismantling of the iron rice bowl and the pluralisation of business ownership types. The reform of China’s economic structure impacted heavily on urban resident’s income distribution. While the Gini coefficient of urban residents’ income was only 0.16 before the onset of the reforms in 1978, it skyrocketed to 0.38 in 2008.\footnote{Zhou and Qin (2012), pp. 48–9. According to Goodman (2014), pp. 45–7, the Gini coefficient for the whole of China was as low as 0.2 in 1981, while it ranged between 0.47 and even 0.61 in 2013, according to different sources. Social scientists in general assume that figures above 0.4 are indicators of social instability and unrest.}

Before the economic reforms, virtually the entire urban workforce worked in publicly owned undertakings—that is, either urban collectives or state-owned enterprises,\footnote{Naughton (2007), p. 181.} where overstaffing and underemployment were commonplace and thus idleness and even sleeping at the workplace were not uncommon.\footnote{Li (2010).}

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Chinese government took its first moderate steps towards a market economy. Most prominently, it promoted the decollectivisation of agriculture, opened the country to foreign investment and legalised private entrepreneurship during the 1980s.\footnote{Hsu (2006), p. 1.}

Until 1988, only small individually owned enterprises with fewer than eight workers were legally permitted. Especially after Deng Xiaoping’s famous journey to southern China in 1992, an increasing number of entrepreneurs set up their own private businesses, and from 2001 they were even allowed to join the Communist Party.\footnote{Dickson (2007), pp. 831–3.}

Starting their own business meant sailing unchartered waters—the Chinese call this adventurous attempt “jumping into the ocean” (下海). In the ocean of the private economy, they found themselves in a completely new working environment, characterised by the freedom and need to make many decisions on their own, but with comparatively little job security. Markets were just emerging and, in large parts, were badly served. For those who were either forced or willing to take the risk of trying out something completely new, there were thus good opportunities to make quick money, although—maybe for the first
time in their lives—failure was also possible. This increase in options contributed significantly to the formation of a big portion of my interviewees’ world views. We shall turn to this in more detail in chapter five.

While the income of private entrepreneurs was bound to their companies’ positions in the market, and thus naturally varied, income distribution among employed workers also increasingly drifted apart. In 1985, the wage system of SOEs was reformed to enhance factories’ competitive strengths within the emerging market economy. Henceforth, wages were bound to companies’ economic efficiency and the individual workers’ personal contributions, measured in hours or piece rates. In 1993, a second reform introduced wages based on the ranking of a post. In addition, five different wage systems were adopted for different institutions, “namely, grading wage system for academic and technical titles, rank and post wage system, structural wage system for arts, allowance and bonus wage system for sports, and worker’s wage system”.299 At the same time, contracted responsibility and leasing were put into force in SOEs, some of which even gave out partial stock rights to high-level managers. Subsequently a first group of highly paid executives appeared.300

Throughout the 1990s, and especially after 1997, the central government attempted to restructure various state-owned enterprises for higher efficiency.301 Ever since, China’s private sector has grown remarkably. While in 1978 there was no urban private sector at all,302 with 99.8 % of the total urban workforce working in the state and collective sectors,303 as much as 77.38 % of the total urban workforce worked in the private economy in 2009.304 Privatisation, the liberalisation of market prices and shifting norms among governing elites pushed enterprises to massively downsize their staff.305 Moreover, a large number of SOEs went bankrupt, causing mass lay-offs of workers. According to Li Yi, the number of state workers decreased from 72 to 29 million between 1996 and 2001.306 Even according to the probably rather conservative estimation provided by the All-China

299 Zhou and Qin (2012), p. 46.
304 Zhou and Qin (2012), p. 47.
305 Hurst (2009), p. 37. At the turn of the century, SOE managers and governmental officials were able to earn subsidies and claim political credit if they laid off substantial numbers of workers. Hurst (2009), p. 55.
306 Li, Yi (2005), p. 137.
Federation of Trade Unions, 22.5 million former state workers were laid off between 1998 and 2001 alone.  

Having previously enjoyed lifelong employment, the sudden loss of job security came as a big shock to most of the laid-off workers. Mr Rong is a former SOE worker who had spent all of his life in the same factory before it was eventually privatised and restructured in the course of the economic reforms. After learning that his department was going to be closed down, he applied to change to another department but was rejected and subsequently laid off. He recalls how losing his job made him feel “homeless” and unappreciated:

In the period after [factory X] was bought out and [I] was laid off, anyhow, [I] was certainly in a […] particularly bad mood. […] [I] always had the feeling of being homeless, because [I] had worked there for many years, er, [I felt like this] a little bit. And [I] also made a contribution to the factory for sure. […] The working unit’s workshop that I wanted to join [after the restructuring of the factory], they did not let me join that workshop. The technical workers in that workshop, their technical skills, on average were worse than mine, so they did not want me to join them. Because, as their then-time leader said: ‘Our temple is small, we cannot give tribute to this Buddha.’ (R#1)

(Mr Rong, technical worker in private enterprise, 56 years old, from Beijing)

After a comparatively short time of unemployment, Mr Rong eventually found work in a private enterprise. However, the vast majority of laid-off workers were less fortunate. In fact, although expanding significantly in the meantime, the private sector labour market failed to absorb the bulk of laid-off workers. Largely divided into a small highly skilled and a big unskilled segment, it excluded most of the averagely educated laid-off SOE workers. Confronted with the formerly completely unknown state of unemployment, many of these laid-off workers turned to self-employment. Those who were able to acquire sufficient funding through either family networks or loans from banks or governmental agencies eventually started their own business. However, family wealth networks largely depended on local economic conditions, and—although officially advised to favour laid-off SOE workers when granting loans—banks and government departments only provided credit to those with good connections or party mem-

bership.\textsuperscript{309} Most importantly, this was due to the fact that public re-employment service centres were plagued by underfinancing and administrative shortcomings.\textsuperscript{310} Subsequently, many of the newly unemployed ended up as street vendors, small-scale shop owners or doing odd jobs. A formerly unknown uncertainty about their future put heavy pressure on them while poverty spread—in the absence of a comprehensive health security system especially among those of bad health.\textsuperscript{311} In 1999, the central government acknowledged this problem by introducing a minimum livelihood guarantee programme (最低生活保障) in urban areas, which supports the urban poor with a guaranteed minimum wage.\textsuperscript{312} Nevertheless, public safety networks are not yet fully developed; a fact that certainly aggravates the fear of unemployment.

Then again, the economic restructuring also provided many opportunities for ambitious individuals. For one, private enterprises needed well-qualified workers. In addition, with China opening itself to the outside world, foreign corporations settled there and created new opportunities for Chinese employees. Thereby, they introduced completely new management styles to their staff. Ms Duanmu is a white-collar professional who was assigned to an SOE in Beijing after graduating from a prestigious university in southern China. Later, she worked in a Sino-Japanese joint venture for ten years, before she switched to a private Chinese enterprise. She compares her experience with the Chinese SOE to her work in the foreign Joint Venture:

The working intensity in foreign enterprises is quite high, but you are in a quite good, quite disciplined place. And the surrounding people work very hard, they simply work and everybody respects work very much. The whole environment is like this, so [I can] only say that the working intensity is quite heavy. The working pressure, that is, the work requirements or the working standards are relatively high. But that doesn’t mean that kind of psychological pressure [that exists in]

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{309} Cai (2006), pp. 20–6.
\bibitem{310} Hurst, Gold and Won (2009).
\bibitem{311} Cai (2006), pp. 20–6. Economic restructuring also included the privatisation of the formerly SOE-provided health security system. Since the mid-1980s, a wide range of social welfare provision programmes have been established and notably expanded, resulting in an incremental expansion of the social welfare provision to the non-state sector. Nevertheless, in comparison to its once universal coverage of the whole urban population, China’s social welfare provision is still fragmented. Huang (2012).
\end{thebibliography}
state-owned enterprises. Doesn’t everybody say: ‘After returning home today, well, after knocking off work, before they go to sleep, the people from state-owned enterprises always have to think about whether they said something wrong today.’ This kind of affairs. Human relations are quite complicated [in SOEs]. (E#2)

(Ms Duanmu, upper management of private enterprise, 40 years old, from Beijing)

Another interviewee takes quite a different stance towards the favourability of working for Chinese SOEs: After years in several foreign companies, Ms Feng deliberately moved to a Chinese SOE, since she had the feeling that, being a Chinese national, she would never be able to achieve professional advancement beyond a certain level in a foreign enterprise. However, like Ms Duanmu, she also notes differences in the business culture and management style of foreign versus state-owned enterprises:

After joining this company, there definitely were some big differences. That is, others didn’t understand what I said, and I also didn’t understand what they said. [...] I paid attention to the rules of the system, not to who [did something.] [...] This is the difference in the style of foreign and state-owned enterprises. (F#1)

(Ms Feng, middle management of SOE, 34 years old, from Beijing)

In the opinion of both interviewees, Chinese enterprises—both private and state-owned—were characterised by a management style that centred on interpersonal relations, while managers in foreign enterprises rather focused on the quality of individual working results. Expressed with some exaggeration, this means that workers who want to be successful should give priority to networking if working for a Chinese enterprise, but concentrate on the quality of work if employed at an international company. Aside from illustrating the pluralisation of approaches to work, the comparison of these two quotes may also serve as showcases for the differentiation between modern urban working biographies. While formerly taken for granted working ethics are confronted with entirely different approaches, the variety of possible career choices increased significantly. In the course of this development, the very meaning of work changed. Public discourses in reform-era China strongly encourage young adults to view work as the ultimate opportunity for individual fulfilment and self-develop-
ment.\textsuperscript{313} Thus, deliberate job-hopping as a means to accelerate one’s professional career has become common among members of the Chinese workforce from all walks of life.\textsuperscript{314} This development stands in striking contrast to the pre-reform era, where virtually no labour mobility existed at all.\textsuperscript{315} At the same time, however, in an atmosphere of uncertainty, candidate numbers for the civil service have been constantly rising, thus mirroring a counter trend that originates from increased popular desires for safety.\textsuperscript{316} The next chapters demonstrate how these seemingly contradictory trends interact.

To meet the increased demands of China’s highly skilled labour market, and partly in response to internal growth incentives, the higher education system expanded considerably during the reform era, and especially after 2000.\textsuperscript{317} After being completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the university system slowly recovered throughout the 1980s and 90s and has been scaled up substantially since 1999, when the government decided to rigorously expand the enrolment numbers in higher education.\textsuperscript{318} While the proportion of university students by age group still amounted to only 4\% in 1990, enrolment rates in higher education reached as much as 27\% in 2010.\textsuperscript{319} Being able to obtain higher education increased the career opportunities for many young people. Ms Kang, a woman in her fifties from Xi’an, was initially denied a higher education and started her working life as a railroad signal worker during the Cultural Revolution. Only after the onset of the reform era was she eventually able to access higher education and ultimately become a successful lawyer. She stated:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Hoffman (2006), p. 553.
  \item A vast body of foreign management literature on how to prevent Chinese employees from frequent job-hopping shows the extent of this phenomenon. E.g. Waldkirch (2015); Caroline Wang (2014).
  \item Naughton (2007), p. 181.
  \item In 2012, more than 1.5 million applicants registered for the civil service exam—more than 30 times the number of examinees that took the examinations a decade earlier. South China Morning Post (2012).
  \item Morgan and Wu (2011).
  \item See Marginson, Kaur and Sawir (2011), p. 4 and People’s Daily Online (2011) respectively.
\end{itemize}
Let’s assume there had been no reform and opening up, then everything would be work mobilisation, then I could not imagine..., then I might just be a retired signal worker now, wouldn’t I? And now I am still fighting in the front row of lawyers; of legal service. [...] All the time I didn’t fulfil my university dream. After all, it was the reform and opening up. Really, in fact, it was the reform and opening up.

(K#1)

(Ms Kang, lawyer in private law office, 56 years old, from Xi’an)

This passage shows how the reform era initially created new opportunities for ambitious individuals, thus instilling them with great enthusiasm about the reforms and their own future. As we shall see in chapter five, these feelings were of particular importance in determining many of my respondents’ views on politics. Over time, however, university student numbers skyrocketed. With the erosion of the iron rice bowl and a steady rise in numbers of university students, competition for good jobs got fiercer. Formal requirements for successful entry into the labour market increased along with rising numbers of competitors. After the first appearance of mass unemployment among former factory workers during the late nineties, unemployment is perceived as a problem especially among university graduates today. The mere idea of unemployment among university graduates came as a big shock for many Chinese. Despite his own permanent employment, Mr Ma, a young textile designer from Xi’an, describes:

[In the past] work was assigned [to university graduates by the government], [but] after we attended university [you] have to seek a job on your own. And nowadays many university students... The employment rate of Chinese university students is a big problem. That is, only very few university students can really find work after graduation. As far as the totality is concerned, probably only less than 50 per cent can really find a job. That means the remaining 50 per cent, once they graduate, they face the condition of unemployment. That is a pretty scary thing. (M#6)

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)
While these figures are probably slightly exaggerated, social scientists assume that in 2014 the employment rate among university graduates was below 70% at the time of graduation. The high degree of scholarly investigation and intense media coverage on this topic clearly shows that the spectre of unemployment among university graduates is indeed haunting Chinese society. In the past, the government demonstrated commitment to this issue several times. For example, in an attempt to facilitate degree programmes corresponding to market demands, it bound universities to report graduate employment ratios. Any faculties that fail to meet a fixed target ratio are threatened with closure. A different example are the government’s plans of promoting entrepreneurship as a means to create job opportunities for graduates, recently introduced at the third plenary session of the twelfth National People’s Congress in March 2015.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution with its hostile atmosphere towards intellectuals, conditions for the highly educated improved significantly in the early reform era. Initially, university graduates used to be assigned to relatively high-ranking positions upon graduation, but university places were comparatively scarce. College diplomas were rare and thus deemed a ticket to a good and secure career and stable income. If anybody was expected to unquestionably have a great future, it was university graduates. In contrast, from Mr Ma’s view, university graduates nowadays are even worse off than people with a lower formal education:

All of the time [my parents] told me: ‘Seriously attend school, attend school, attend school. Go and study, go and study. After you have received an education, in the future you will be [great and] whatnot. [...] On the whole, the people from my generation are all like this, they study. After continuously studying, they just find out that studying, actually, is also no real solution. That is, formerly [having studied] was the criterion, but now this society changed. Since that time some basic changes have taken place. I studied for so many years, and then, after graduating [from university] I realised that those schoolmates who didn’t study for such a long time, but started fighting in society [i.e. working] early on, are quite well off by now. Compared to us,

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320 People (2015).
321 Xu (2012).
323 For a detailed analysis of the metaphor of fighting, see chapter six.
who studied at school day after day, [they are] much better off. This is also one aspect of society’s change. (M#5)

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

In reality, the average income level for university degree holders in China is still considerably higher than for people with a lower education. However, representatives from the business world frequently complain about insufficient knowledge and the lacking practical expertise and operational capacities of university graduates. At the same time, the rapid growth in student numbers increased competition, thus inducing a gradual loss in value for academic credentials. These factors make finding work more difficult for university graduates. The possibility of unemployed university students has not only put great psychological pressure on students and their parents. What is more, seeing job security vanish, even for university graduates, further deprived the Chinese public of a sense of security that had just been re-established after the ten long years of the Cultural Revolution, proving once again that social change is breathtakingly fast.

Mr Ma’s quotes illustrate how the high speed of changes tends to instil people with feelings of insecurity. In quickly changing social environments, there is naturally a comparatively high degree of uncertainty as to whether today’s decisions may prove wise tomorrow. His parents’ estimation of Mr Ma’s future prospects had great influence on his choice to aim for a university education. However, social change was rapid, thus, in his opinion, rendering his parents’ assessment invalid. While he was still in the process of living up to the standards of a society where university graduates used to enjoy great benefits in the labour market, social change left his future aspirations unfulfilled. But while holding a university degree failed to get him ahead of his competitors in the labour market in the way he had imagined, interviewees without a university education often voiced even greater feelings of social inferiority. Mr Qiu is a street peddler of rural origin, who sold bootlegged DVDs in the streets of the capital. He regretfully talks about how the high speed of social transformation left him with the feeling that it was impossible to keep pace with progress:

Changes are just too fast, [I] could not keep pace. If [you] are only a little bit, you know what I mean, [you] cannot keep up. [If your level of] education or anything else differs... Changes are quite fast. (Q#1)

(Mr Qiu, street peddler, 37 years old, from Beijing)

Mr Qiu describes how he fell behind, while others moved onwards, which deprived him of feelings of social belonging. Like for Mr Ma, the mere speed of social change made it difficult for Mr Qiu to arrive at the social position he wished for. This once more demonstrates how the high speed of China’s social transformation is putting additional pressure on job seekers.

In pre-reform China, the socialist work unit was in charge of virtually all aspects of life, thereby creating great uniformity among individuals who were, accordingly, rather addressed as “the masses” (民众). Ever since, styles, the contents and the meaning of work have changed remarkably. The higher education system was strengthened and formal education gained more weight on the labour market. On the positive side, getting rich became possible for some, while career choices and lifestyle options increased significantly in general, instilling social actors with enthusiasm towards the reforms. However, the new freedom of choice came with a price: increasingly unequal income distribution and the emergence of unemployment resulted in widespread feelings of insecurity. Social progress was quick and at times unpredictable for individuals, who sometimes benefited but sometimes suffered from its consequences. How does society cope with the simultaneous emergence of a new elite of super rich people and one or even several separated new underclasses? What is the impact on community spirit? These questions are of utmost importance for China’s future. They are addressed in depth in chapters five and six.

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327 Li (2010), p. 17.
4.4 Leisure, Consumption and the Meaning of Life

Compared to the old days of Maoist society, individuals enjoy much greater freedom of choice in present-day China when it comes to shaping their individual lifestyles. In the course of economic marketisation, an increasing abundance of various consumer goods replaced the previous economy of scarcity. At the same time, the average disposable income rose, while absolute working time shrank. In an attempt to boost the local economy and—as some scholars argue—distract the population from political engagement, the Chinese state deliberately encouraged consumption from the early 1990s. From the mid-1990s, the government gradually provided the population with additional leisure time. The introduction of a five-day working week in May 1995 was explicitly aimed at increasing consumer spending. From then on, national holidays were extended step-by-step to a week in length. Over the years, urban employees’ average amount of available leisure time slowly surpassed their working time. This development impacted heavily on individual habits. The combination of a reduction in absolute working hours and increased amounts of leisure time and remuneration add up to the diminishing of work’s relative importance. Compared to the times before the onset of the economic reforms, the mere opportunity to enjoy leisure time activities liberated Chinese individuals from their formerly entirely work-focused lives. Ms Bo worked on the factory floor of a big SOE all of her life, before changing to a physically less demanding office job in the same company at the age of fifty. Contemplating on the importance of work in her life, she remarks:

Now it seems as if work is only one part of life. The meaning of life certainly broadened. [...] Life is more abundant, people’s whole standard of living rose a lot, the whole feeling. [I] feel that life’s contents became more abundant. Formerly, there was nothing but work. (B#1)

(Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing)

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While Ms Bo limits her observations to the scope of her own life, she is not the only one with similar feelings. Ms Liu, a white-collar professional in her forties, states:

It’s not my personal change, the whole society changed; thus [I] can feel one thing: People increasingly know how to live, know how to enjoy life. This is something unprecedented in my parents’ generation. All [you] could see in my parents’ lives was work, family and [caring for their] children. (L#4)

(Ms Liu, Chief Financial Officer in private enterprise, 42 years old, from Xi’an)

The combination of increasing incomes, expanding shopping malls and the establishment of leisure time facilities changed people’s lifestyles significantly. Where there was formerly “nothing but work”, today China’s urbanites can—at least in principle—choose from a variety of recreational activities. Naturally, not every member of society is able to participate equally in such activities due to constraints of time or money. Accordingly, affiliation to different social groups and strata is associated with different patterns of consumption. The emergence of a consumer culture thus not only reflects and contributes to a pluralisation of lifestyles, but more than anything else indicates and drives ongoing social stratification. In line with this thought, critics of consumerism argue that an increasingly capitalist economy uses the promises of individual liberation and satisfaction to trap individuals into just another treadmill with consumption as its ultimate goal.330 According to this view, the individual is forced to consume certain status symbols rather than be liberated. This line of thought is indeed an important aspect of consumerism. However, as we shall see in chapter six, it only illustrates one side of China’s emerging consumerism’s deeper social significance.

There is also a moral dimension to this development. If “consumption and acquisition rituals (e.g. shopping) are naturalised as sources of self-identity and meaning in life”,331 the possession of money gains great importance for individual fulfilment. Consistent with this rationale, several respondents lament about society’s increasing obsession with money, which they view as equivalent to moral decline. Mr Jiang, who has a particularly negative attitude towards society, complains:

330 E.g. Yan (2012).
Today’s China is a money society. Money is supreme. Here, money is more precious than anything else. It is the biggest thing of all. Money is supreme and society is [of] lower [importance]. The hearts of each and every [member of] the government, the legal system, and some [other] people are degenerated. (J#8)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

In another passage, he elaborates a little bit more on the moral deterioration he senses:

Now people, the whole people, that is, the whole society, slowly changed. Now you don’t even know whom you can trust. They could suddenly go back on their word, but also could suddenly act as if they helped you with a lot of things. Of course, you never know what is true. Now many people are like this. (J#4)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

Mr Jiang’s thoughts about a lack of popular interpersonal trust are in line with a recent debate on an emerging crisis of social confidence among Chinese social scientists. As some scholars have argued, China’s traditional moral value system was shaken to the ground in the process of the country’s modernisation, while the emergence of new, popularly acknowledged moral guidelines is still pending. Accordingly, in the face of growing social inequality and a not yet fully sufficient legal system, this loss of binding moral standards has resulted in a weakening of interpersonal trust.

While Mr Jiang held a thoroughly critical attitude towards society in general, even participants like Ms Bo, who had a quite positive outlook on Chinese society, voiced some concerns about shrinking altruism. In Ms Bo’s view, society seemed to lack a spirit of helping others:

332 E.g. Ci (1994). For an overview of more recent contributions to this debate, see Linggi (2011).
Formerly, in the Mao era, there was some kind of belief. You should, you should; actually it also made people do good deeds, doing you know. Today it seems there is not much of this kind of belief. (B#2)

(Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing)

Ms Bo’s concerns point to the gap left by the retreat of Maoist ideology, which preached to “serve the people” (为人民服务) and study idealised models of selfless behaviour, like the model soldier Lei Feng. In Ms Bo’s opinion, the diminishing of such sentiments during the reform era entailed a surge of selfishness. This alleged moral decline is potentially harmful to community spirit. Then again, as Yunxiang Yan has pointed out, “the faster a society changes, the more complaints there are about the alleged lost paradise. This line of argument started in China more than 2,500 years ago with Confucius, who lamented the lost values and proprieties of the golden era of Duke Zhou.”

Taking into consideration the breathtaking speed of China’s transition, a certain degree of nostalgia for the old days seems natural. In which ways and to what degree are moral standards actually shifting, and what are the effects on interpersonal relations? These questions are explored in chapter six.

To sum up, reform-era China witnessed the emergence of a new culture of leisure time activities and consumption. This development has added new sources of meaning to individuals’ lives and contributed to a pluralisation of lifestyles, while at the same time mirroring and even reinforcing social stratification. While individuals tend to welcome this trend in general, some of my respondents fear that rampant materialism is being accompanied by increased selfishness in society. With regard to the potentially severe impact on community spirit, consumerism and the alleged moral decline are thoroughly investigated in chapter six.

It seems reasonable to assume that changing values become especially apparent between different generations. The next sub-section therefore takes a closer look at differences between the generations born before the onset of China’s economic reforms and those born after it.

4.5 Intergenerational Changes

“The combined effects of a rapid increase in the ageing population and a decline in birth rates are producing fundamental changes in many societies.”

On an economic level, the contents of intergenerational contracts are transformed in line with demographic shifts, since fewer young people have to provide for more elderly people. At the same time, changing family structures alter relationships between family members and have a notable share in transforming popular values. These socio-economic effects are particularly prominent in China, where birth control policies caused a very abrupt and thorough fertility shift. Perceived as an important instrument of social engineering, state-controlled birth planning was institutionalised during the 1970s.

Under the ‘later-longer-fewer’ policy in effect from 1971 to 1979 (calling for later marriage, longer spacing, and fewer children), some combination of increasingly intense birth policy implementation and falling popular fertility aspirations reduced the average number of children per woman from six to three.

The Chinese government further tightened its birth planning policy in January 1979 in conjunction with economic reforms when it introduced what is usually referred to in the West as its ‘one-child policy’, since it initially restricted Chinese married couples to having only one single child. In absence of a binding national policy, the implementation and enforcement of this idea are subject to provincial level governments. Due to implementation problems, such restrictions were eased several times. For example, members of national minorities and parents whose first child had health problems were exempt from the one-child-per-couple policy and local variations regarding having a second child were allowed. Subsequently, six Chinese provinces and the rural regions of Tibet implemented a ‘two-child policy’, while 17 provinces allowed rural parents to have a second child if their first born was female. Only seven provinces and directly controlled municipalities implemented a strict one-child policy. In Decem-

337 Fong (2004), p. 3.
ber 2015, in the policy’s latest amendment, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress adopted a law permitting married couples to have two children.\textsuperscript{341}

The birth control policy’s initial main purpose was to reduce population growth in order to accelerate China’s drive towards modernisation. Limiting overpopulation was seen as a means to improve people’s lives by confining scarce resources to fewer people. Indeed, after the institutionalisation of state-controlled birth planning, the total fertility rate dropped from 5.8 births per woman in 1970 to 2.3 in 1980.\textsuperscript{342} In the early 2000s, the total fertility rate in big cities was close to one birth per woman. After initial violent enforcement of birth control policies by state agents, involuntary abortions and sterilisations became sparser over the years, while the use of contraceptives was spread and the population was educated on the negative socio-economic consequences of overpopulation.\textsuperscript{343} Chapter six shows how the legacy of a state-sponsored discourse on overpopulation and a shortage of resources to date still continue to shape social actors’ daily lives. Especially under the administration of Jiang Zemin (1993–2003), the government increasingly emphasised the policy’s potential to enable parents to devote more resources to the upbringing of their children, producing fewer children of “higher quality”.\textsuperscript{344} Viewed as the future of the nation, a new generation of such high quality individuals was raised to contribute to national strength and to “lead their country into the first World”.\textsuperscript{345} Henceforth, only children were propagated as being the vanguard of social modernisation.\textsuperscript{346} Aside from educating children and adolescents about desirable social norms, “quality education” (素质教育) at school aimed at instilling them with patriotism and a sense of individual responsibility for the future of the nation.\textsuperscript{347} Altering family structures significantly, birth policies have also greatly affected individual lives. To begin with, they altered the ways adults generally treat and educate their children considerably. This may be illustrated by comparisons between accounts of contemporary urban Chinese childhood and experiences from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{341} South China Morning Post (2015).
\item \textsuperscript{342} Fong (2004), p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{343} Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005).
\item \textsuperscript{344} Usually translated into English as “quality”, the meaning of the term suzhi (素质) oscillates between formal education, personal morals and having good manners. Fong (2007).
\item \textsuperscript{345} Fong (2004), pp. 2–3; Hoffman (2006).
\item \textsuperscript{346} Fong (2004), p. 79.
\item \textsuperscript{347} Hoffman (2006).
\end{itemize}
the 1960s and 1970s. Many older interviewees describe their own childhood as rather free and self-dependent. For example, Ms Liu, who was born in the late 1960s, pictures her childhood like this:

I think we grew up in the wilderness, like sheep out to feed. Nobody bothered about us. That was a carefree [way to] grow up, but I think it wasn’t bad either, it was also very promising. (L#3)

(Ms Liu, Chief Financial Officer in private enterprise, 42 years old, from Xi’an)

Notwithstanding the metaphors she uses, Ms Liu in fact grew up in an urban setting. While she seemingly enjoyed a quite light-hearted childhood, other interviewees had to work hard or took care of younger siblings, despite their own youth. Mr Ouyang, who is ten years older than Ms Liu, recalls:

When I was in grade seven or eight, every day before school, what did I do? I carried my youngest sister on my back to the nursery. […] Every day after school I picked [her] up again. After I picked her up, I prepared food. Several of my younger sisters attended that school, so I had to cook food. I had to rush back to cook food. No matter if it tasted good or bad, I had to cook food. In those days, there was no tap water like now. I had to go downstairs to dispose of waste water and carry up [clean] water. Besides this, I also had to study well. (O#1)

(Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an)

These rough living conditions stand in stark contrast to the upbringing many Chinese urban children experience today. Children are clearly benefiting from rising general living standards and improved housing, but most notably, being a singleton is crucial for the way their parents and grandparents treat them. In the absence of a sufficient pension scheme, Chinese children are widely expected to provide for their parents’ living expenses after retirement. Under the conditions of the one-child policy, this basically means that two spouses are obliged to support four elderly people and one child, a dilemma commonly referred to as “4–2–1 phenomenon” (421 现象) in Chinese. Holding that university degrees secure best job opportunities, the vast majority of Chinese parents pressure their children to study hard. Exempting children from housework to enable them to solely focus on studying is a widespread practice. Even after
school, many pupils spend most of their time engaging in extracurricular activities, like evening classes that are intended to improve their chances in university entrance examinations.\textsuperscript{348} “Daily lives of the whole family, especially that of the child, are much framed by how to reach the goal of entering a university, preferably a prestigious one.”\textsuperscript{349} Since school choice is bound to a student’s place of residence, some parents even go as far as to move homes in order to secure access to a “good” school for their child, thus hoping to improve their chances of getting into university one day.\textsuperscript{350} Needless to say, having their parents’ hopes pinned on their educational success to such a degree puts heavy pressure on children.

At the same time, however, only children are usually coddled with parental love and attention. A lot has been written about the so-called one-child-six-pockets structure of Chinese families, where one child is pampered and spoiled by four grandparents and two parents.\textsuperscript{351} The character traits, abilities and manners of the first generation of Chinese only children—in China usually referred to as “post 80s” (\textit{ba ling hou}, 八零后) since they were born in the 1980s—is widely discussed throughout Chinese society.\textsuperscript{352} On the one hand, members of the post-80s generation are portrayed as smart and highly adaptable to changing external circumstances. On the other hand, in accordance with popular stereotypes promoted in the Chinese media, interviewees described the generations born after 1980 as being selfish, unable to endure bitterness, rather idle and sometimes even as morally polluted (“职业道德有问题”; “价值观太少了”).\textsuperscript{353} These concerns go beyond mere complaints about moral decline among the youth. Mr Ouyang worries:

The post 80s are very intelligent, very intelligent for sure. Well, they study faster and have more ways to get to know things. Oh, [they are] very intelligent. [But] I am worried that they are too selfish. […] This generation’s creativity is very strong. With regard to its national strength, China definitely needs to strengthen the people’s creative

\textsuperscript{348} Fong (2004).
\textsuperscript{349} Liu (2008), p. 193.
\textsuperscript{351} E.g. Böcker and Simson (1989).
\textsuperscript{352} The term “post 80s” does not exclusively refer to only children. However, at least in urban settings, most of the members of this generation are only children, so respondents often use the term “post 80s” synonymously with “only children”.
\textsuperscript{353} Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an. Böcker and Simson (1989), pp. 94–117; Fong (2004), pp. 28–30.
mentality and capacity to be creative. But then again, on the other hand, I am worried. (O#3)

(Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an)

Mr Ouyang’s worries point directly to the future of the nation, which he sees as endangered by moral decline. In his view, the intergenerational value-change that is inevitably accompanying the reform period is profound enough to shake society to its very foundations. While he also sees the positive impact on the younger generations, the birth policy’s outcomes nevertheless also instil him with a fear of intergenerational moral deterioration.

Given the near universality and unprecedented abruptness of China’s fertility transition, and considering the high speed of overall social change, the apparent intergenerational lack of understanding comes little of a surprise. The living environment the “post 80s” and “post 90s” generations grew up in fundamentally differs from the circumstances their parents were brought up in. Deluged with parental love and resources, but at the same time burdened with high expectations, China’s reform period children and adolescents tend to be highly ambitious, competitive and focused on their individual development. While the emergence of such character traits has “accompanied the development of a modern economy in many societies worldwide, they were especially severe in Chinese cities because of the unusual rapidity and extremeness of the fertility decline hastened by the one-child policy”.354

4.6 Gender Roles

Around the world, female roles have been contested for a long time. As late as at the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese women still led an existence subordinate to men. Most infamously, their subordination was symbolised by the painful habit of foot binding, which heightened male control over females by limiting their physical mobility.355 The redefinition of female roles has thus been one of the most intriguing features of twentieth century China’s journey towards modernity.356 However, like

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elsewhere, assuming female identities still remains a contentious issue for women in contemporary China. Although never brought up by the interviewers, gender roles were one of the topics most frequently discussed during interviews with female respondents, while the subject hardly ever came up with male interviewees, who seemed to take traditional male gender roles as a given. Due to the great importance of their gender to half of the interviewees in my sample, the topic is thus included here. In other issue areas, interviewees often compared experiences from their childhood with today’s life. Narrations were less clearly contrasting when it came to gender roles. The way gender models appear in autobiographic narrations clearly reflects that the development of gender norms is not a unidirectional or unambiguous process. In reform-era China, various social trends have influenced perceptions of gender roles in different and, at times, contradictory ways. The transformation of images of womanhood thus takes place within a complex field full of contradictions.

During the Mao era women were portrayed as being “able to prop up half of the sky” (“妇女能顶半边天”) and “also capable of being heroes” (“妇女也能当英雄”).\textsuperscript{357} At the same time, gender equality was restricted to the working world and equated with gender uniformity, resulting in women being prohibited from wearing skirts, dresses or high heels, and putting on make-up. Against this backdrop, contemporary China has witnessed a surge in all kinds of consumer goods aimed at emphasising women’s femininity, from make-up, clothes and manicures even to plastic surgery.\textsuperscript{358}

After the launch of the one-child policy, many couples had to come to terms with the impossibility of having a son who could continue the traditionally patrilineal line of ancestry. In order to dampen resulting anger and to avoid social unrest, the government soon propagated slogans like “giving birth to a boy is the same as giving birth to a girl” (“生男女都一样”) throughout society. Indeed, official propaganda and the mere fact that many urban couples had no choice but to accept that they had a daughter has resulted in a significant rise in parental investment in their daughters’ formal education.\textsuperscript{359} In the course of the economic reforms, many Chinese women were thus able to take advantage of unprecedented business

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\textsuperscript{357} Croll (1978), p. 2.
\textsuperscript{358} Lu, Pierre Xiao (2008).
\textsuperscript{359} In 2013, female students amounted to 51.7 % and 55.28 % of undergraduate students in regular and adult higher education institutes respectively. 51.38 % of master’s and 36.9 % of doctoral students were female. National Bureau of Statistics of China (2013).
\end{flushright}
chances, hence working in professional positions of previously unseen heights. However, at the same time, birth policies also had the tendency to push female social roles back in a more traditional direction. The popularisation of “the quality single child, responsible for the future of family and nation” impacted on women in a twofold way: As “reproductive women, [they were] charged with reducing the fertility rate”, while as “the good mother, [they were] tasked with nurturing that quality child”. In this manner, female labour time was once again designated to their families as a consequence of the birth policies. Besides, even if they successfully pursue a professional career, highly educated women face new difficulties: Sticking to deeply entrenched patterns of mating, women often seek spouses of at least equal education, while men are more likely to marry women of lower educational levels. Thus, a substantial proportion of well-educated women in China remain single today. While some of these women may be perfectly happy with their situation, traditional cultural values in China still regard staying single as an act of selfishness and as lacking filial respect towards one’s ancestors, who are denied descendants. Therefore, women who have reached their late twenties unmarried are socially stigmatised by denotation as “left over women” (“剩女”)—a prospect that might discourage women from seeking postgraduate education.

Naturally, social roles shift only slowly and unevenly. As elsewhere, many women in contemporary urban China are torn between paid work and caring for their families. Traditional Chinese gender roles indicate that men handle the “external affairs”—that is, paid work—while women devote their time and energy to the “domestic affairs”—that is, their families (“男主外，女主内”), be it the well-being of their husbands or the upbringing of their children. Accordingly, as the idiom goes, in traditional Chinese reasoning, “women of virtue have no [professional] capabilities”

361 Eric Fish has supposed that the public discourse on “leftover women” was intentionally popularised by state actors to discourage women from seeking time-consuming post-graduate education. According to Fish’s rationale, this attempt does not intentionally serve the consolidation of discriminatory gender norms, but simply tries to counterbalance uneven marriage ratios by introducing as many young women to the marriage market as possible. After all, China’s gender ratio is severely unbalanced because female infanticide rates in rural areas soared after the introduction of the birth policies. The consequence is a huge number of young, badly educated men, who have no prospects of ever finding a woman for marriage—a fact that renders them a potential threat to social stability. Fish (2015), pp. 118–34.
(“女子无才便是德”). In stark contrast, the ideal of the modern working woman suggests that women should pursue their own careers. Pondering these two role models is not a one-time decision, but rather an ongoing process, which preoccupies the lives of many women in contemporary urban China.

Ms Gu from Xi’an is a typical example of the internal role-model conflicts many Chinese women struggle with. Possessing only humble educational credits, Ms Gu started her working life as a factory worker in an SOE in the middle of the 1990s. After a couple of years, she seized the opportunity and deliberately left her work unit for an occupation in the private economy, where she earned many times more than at her former workplace. She enjoyed this career very much and describes that her work was rich in variety, while she earned even more money than her husband to be. However, soon after marriage she went back to her old employer due to pressure from her mother-in-law:

I disliked the low salary. I decided to be laid off on my own accord. Later, I actually didn’t want to return [to my old work unit]. The crucial factor was my mother-in-law. [...] My mother-in-law didn’t let me, didn’t let me work outside [in the private economy]. She said: ‘It’s definitely better if you work in the work unit. Going to work at eight o’clock in the morning and leaving work at half past five in the afternoon, at least that’s regular. When the time comes you can care for your child, can’t you?’ She said: ‘After all, women should put their family first.’ (Laughs) ‘If you say you want to earn too much money, it’s also too hard and you can’t care well for your child.’ [...] Now my goal is to do my job [at the work unit] well, take good care of my child, that my child is healthy, cook my husband’s food properly, (laughs), that’s all (laughs). Apparently like all women. [...] Sometimes I feel I am very pitiable. I think as a female comrade you seem to live without a self, everything is for your child, for your husband. (G#1)

(Ms Gu, SOE factory worker, 31 years old, from Xi’an)

In times of conflicting ideological world views, individuals tend to offer a blend of apparently inconsistent opinions when narrating about their views on society. Such contradictions indicate the inner conflicts they are

362 This idiom was coined by Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) writer ZHANG Dai.
struggling with, as the individual becomes the battlefield of social change.\textsuperscript{363} For Ms Gu, gender is one of the most important topics that she goes back to again and again throughout the whole interview. On the one hand, she deliberately submits herself to the role of the caring mother and wife, and talks about how stable and convenient her work at the SOE is. On the other hand, she repeatedly mourns the loss of her job in the private economy and struggles with unhappiness and dissatisfaction about her current working and, even more so, living situation. However, during the entire interview she never openly argues for gender roles to change. As a woman with only a modest level of education, she seems to accept traditional gender roles as unchangeable fate, even though she is apparently quite unhappy about their design. Maybe not different from Western societies, especially among low-skilled and low-income Chinese, the “cultural models of the husband as breadwinner and the wife as the ‘virtuous wife and good mother’ who ha[s] [the] main responsibility for domestic work and childrearing”\textsuperscript{364} tend to result in different work preferences between wives and husbands.\textsuperscript{365} Ms Gu’s case is further twisted by the fact that the person who urged her to abolish her career in the private economy in favour of a more family-oriented work life was her mother-in-law—a woman who grew up in the era prior to the economic reforms—that is, in a time when women’s ability to contribute to the labour force was propagated throughout society. Gender role assumptions are deeply entrenched in society, as the example of lawyer Ms Kang shows. This interviewee successfully pursued a career as a private lawyer, but in doing so lost her husband, who, according to her interpretation, could not stand being surpassed by his wife professionally:

I think [if women work] it is also beneficial to the family. In this way, women are more decisive and have better judgement when it comes to solving family problems. But many Chinese men are unable to bear this. Many men think they need to dominate their family. […] If a woman is stronger than a man on the job, the man is very unhappy. He is very unhappy because of this, very unhappy because of this. It’s absolutely not because the woman doesn’t care for the family well or something like that. It’s absolutely the man himself whose mentality can’t tolerate [the woman’s strength]. […] When I talk about a strong

\textsuperscript{363} Schirmer (2005).
\textsuperscript{364} Kim et al. (2010), p. 959.
\textsuperscript{365} Kim et al. (2010).
woman, I mean a woman who is strong on the job, but not at all strong in her family. Because at work [many strong women] appeared —were generated! You can’t say ‘appeared’! Because of the market competition, many strong women were generated. […] Actually what I just said is that my husband was unable to bear [my strength]. (K#4)

(Ms Kang, lawyer in private law office, 56 years old, from Xi’an)

Despite her professional career, Ms Kang apparently was nevertheless the spouse in charge of managing family affairs. She even justified women’s need to pursue professional careers by reasoning that having a career was beneficial for a woman’s ability to take care of family matters. According to this rationale, running the family affairs is, after all, indisputably a—if not the—core female responsibility; thus, she did not explicitly strive for gender equality. Likewise, she repeatedly stressed that women should be soft with regard to their husbands. However, in her opinion, women should also pursue their own careers, an idea that—much to her regret—many Chinese men just cannot stand. After having worked as a lawyer for years, she eventually arrived at the conclusion that this is genuinely a problem of male chauvinism, while women’s skills are in principle equal to those of men. However, there was a time in Ms Kang’s life when she was not so sure about gender equality. She describes her work as the only female in a private firm of five lawyers like this:

When I started working as a lawyer (sigh), nobody thought well about me; even I myself didn’t think good about me. I thought: ‘Oh, I am very stupid, I completely lack this kind of diplomatic ability.’ […] Eventually I kept working. Nobody expected that I was not inferior to the others. Oh, that was unexpected. I myself also didn’t expect that. I thought: ‘[I am] surely not good. The others are men, they surely have abilities.’ But among the five of us, ha! I was not inferior! (laughs)

(K#3)

(Ms Kang, lawyer in private law office, 56 years old, from Xi’an)

In fact, her interview indicates that she outperformed her colleagues and was even decorated with several official professional awards. Her quote displays deep-rooted assumptions about women and men having fundamentally unequal skills and abilities. Empirical evidence from various studies shows that such sentiments persist among men and women of all educa-
These assumptions contribute to the maintenance of the invisible, yet almost always unbreakable “glass ceiling” that—just like in many industrial nations—keeps most qualified career-oriented women in China from moving into upper echelons.

In the face of such deeply entrenched stereotypes, yet another traditional female role model has made its comeback since the onset of the economic reforms. During the last few decades, China has witnessed the return of the millennia old custom of 包二奶; 小三; rich Chinese officials and businessmen having mistresses. In China, keeping a mistress is commonly understood as an exchange of material benefits like money or power for sex in the scope of a long-term relationship. Among high-ranking businessmen or cadres, pretty mistresses are increasingly seen as status symbols, whose beauty mirrors their lovers’ social status. For China’s new elite’s men, to have one or even several mistresses is thus more common than an exception. This development goes hand in hand with an increasing masculinisation of business. In contemporary urban China, banqueting and drinking in the company of beautiful hostesses and prostitutes is the main venue for business networking. Being unwilling or unable to participate in such activities on a regular basis can severely harm one’s recognition as a trustworthy business partner. However, since “honourable” women are not supposed to attend these gatherings, this social practice tends to exclude women from doing business.

In this environment, becoming a rich man’s mistress is sometimes even seen as a chance for women to gain back some power in a male-dominated society. As popular narratives and scholarly analyses alike stress, women’s rational exploitation of their “only resource in a competitive economic environment” can be seen as a “form of entrepreneurialism”. Empirical evidence shows that it’s not uncommon for unsatisfied mistresses to hold their lovers to ransom by informing the authorities of their legally prohibited behaviour. “In the complex interdependencies of mistresses and officials, women are not necessarily victims, but can be very much self-as-

366 E.g. Kim et al. (2010); Selcuk (2016), p. 93–121.
368 Chen (2008), p. 430.
369 Kipnis (2008); Osburg (2013).
assertive. They are learning to gain power, thereby controlling their own lives better.”372 There is yet another liberating dimension to being a mistress. As Ms Feng, the mistress of a high-ranking SOE manager from Beijing, told me, she will once be able to “have a child for herself” (“给自己生孩子”), while married women traditionally are bound to “give birth for their in-laws” (“给男方的家人生孩子”).373 From this perspective, the benefits of being a mistress transcend simple monetary advantages, since it somehow liberates women from traditional patriarchal family structures. Having said that, this perspective is probably restricted to the very rich, since giving birth to a child out of wedlock makes it difficult to obtain a birth certificate, unless one either pays a large sum of money or is equipped with good personal relations to government officials. It is also clear that only women of great beauty can become mistresses. Thus, the question arises of what happens when such a woman “gets older and can no longer solely rely on her appearance alone”.374

Apparently, living in a rather paternalistic society impacts heavily on female biographies. However, traditional notions of gender strongly affect men as well. While the pluralisation of female role models in principle allows Chinese women to choose between a variety of possible lifestyles, role expectations are much stiffer when it comes to men. Traditionally the family’s breadwinner and expected to buy a flat before even being considered for marriage, men face heavy social pressure. National statistics reveal that the fact that parents with sons usually feel compelled to save money to purchase an apartment have even enabled parents of singleton daughters to invest, on average, comparatively higher sums of money in their daughters’ education.375 As the popular idiom has it, “to be a human is difficult, to be a man is more difficult” (“做人难，做男人更难”). Traditionally enjoying many privileges, men in contemporary China face a difficulty that stems from the achievements they are expected to accomplish in order to justify these privileges. By comparison, while China’s aspiring women often face a “glass ceiling,” many scholars also agree that hypergamy provides a “glass floor” for females, preventing them “from sinking to the bottom of society, into poverty, crime, and unemployment”.376 By contrast, in the

372  Wu (2014), p. 64.
373 Informal conversation with Ms Feng, middle management of SOE, 34 years old, from Beijing.
374 Hooper (1998), p. 188.
face of an unbalanced gender ratio and polygamy among high status males, men of lower social standing frequently have severe difficulties finding a female partner and, moreover, “often fall to the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, struggling with poverty and crime”.  

Gender relations are intertwined and power allocation is complex. Apparently, female role models in contemporary China are highly contested, while male role models remain more rigid. While society tolerates little deviation from traditional male role models, Chinese women find themselves in a mélange of contradictory social tendencies. On the one hand, the Chinese economy provides them with unprecedented opportunities, while official propaganda tries to convince parents of the equality of sons and daughters. On the other hand, drawing on deeply entrenched conceptions of femaleness, the propagation of the quality-child in need of maternal care reinforces traditional images of womanhood, while an emerging business culture tends to reduce women to their sexuality. Women who deviate from entrenched stereotypes are still prone to discrimination, as exemplified by the popular discourse on “leftover women.” Social progress is slow, uneven and often inconsistent. Thus, for the time being, gender remains a contested field most if not all Chinese women are confronted with. However, contestation also implies a pluralisation of possible choices in pathways in life.

4.7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided an overview of the manifold ways in which lives in contemporary urban China have changed since the onset of the economic reforms. Comprehending the ways in which individual lifestyles were affected by social transformation allows us to grasp how social actors view their society’s new face. Aside from the remarkably increasing overall standard of living, one of the most notable features of reform-era China’s social transition has been the pluralisation of lifestyles. Compared to its uniformity during the Mao era, contemporary Chinese society is highly diversified when it comes to aspects like work, housing, spare time activities or popular conceptions of female gender roles. Thus, today’s social actors enjoy a far greater degree of self-determination. They are much more capable of shaping their lives according to their own wishes and desires. At the same time, the pluralisation of lifestyles means that individuals are no

377 Han (2008), p. 59.
longer able to conveniently follow pre-designed standard pathways in life, but are rather forced to actively engage in developing their own way of living, which also puts considerable pressure on them. “The perceived sense of insecurity living in today’s China […] lies to a great extent in the fact that living in such an era means one has to take it as one’s own responsibility to grasp opportunities and face challenges.” As we shall see throughout the next chapters, the double-edged sword of freedom of choice plays an important role in shaping social actors’ socio-political consciousness.

In their narrations, respondents particularly stress the high speed of society’s transformation. The feeling that social change is breathtakingly fast is not limited to interviewees who are old enough to remember the time before the economic reforms. Respondents from all ages and walks of life voice this impression and often assume that the speed will continue to be high or even rise further. While some view this development with enthusiasm for social and individual progress, many feel pressured to keep pace with society and, in some instances, even feel threatened by losing their very feeling of social belonging. Being very fast and extensive, China’s social transformation has generated widespread feelings of insecurity, since it always seems possible that yesterday’s assessment of what’s promising to pursue will not prove true tomorrow.

5. Assessing Societal Change: Two Competing Images of Society

5.1 Introduction

Chapter four showed how the high speed and comprehensiveness of China’s social transformation have resulted in a pluralisation of all aspects of life, while they also instilled individuals with feelings of insecurity. Against this background, this chapter looks more closely at how satisfied social actors are with the changing society they are part of. As this chapter demonstrates, the most important factor in predicting interviewees’ satisfaction with China’s current social order is their view on meritocratic social mobility—that is, the possibility of social ascent for any member of society contingent on their personal skills and determination. Therefore, this chapter first gives some theoretical introduction to the concept of social mobility. Afterwards, it briefly traces the prospects for individual social mobility in China from the Mao era to the present day, thus putting interviewees’ narratives into perspective. Mao-era society was characterised by relative distributive justice, but at the same time virtually insurmountable mobility barriers between different social classes. In contrast, contemporary China has witnessed the evolution of a steep social hierarchy along with at least gradual relaxations of class boundaries that entailed greater social mobility, especially during the initial stages of the reform period. In the face of this development, many of my interviewees have adopted a neoliberal stance towards society. Holding that in today’s China everybody is their own fortune’s architect, they assess society as fairly just. Others, however, focusing on the growing income gap and the recently decreasing social mobility rates, perceive society as once more divided into different classes, with boundaries increasingly impossible to surmount. Both images of society are presented in more detail in the last sections of this chapter.

5.2 Individual Social Mobility

As respondents talked about social restructuring during the reform era, two opposed images of society took shape. Their main difference lies in the interviewees’ assessment of the possibility of social mobility—not just for
themselves but for any member of society. Depending on this key determi-
nant, individuals display either positive or rather negative attitudes to-
wards society in general. This section contemplates individual social mo-
bility from a theoretical angle.

According to social psychologist John C. Turner’s “Self-Categorisation
Theory”, depending on their social environment, individuals may either
hold that individual social mobility can, in principle, be attained by any
member of society (Turner calls this opinion “belief in social mobility”), or
they feel that individual social advancement would only become possible if
the existing social hierarchy changed (in Turner’s terminology “belief in
social change”). In other words, while some believe in the possibility of in-
dividually leaving their original social group, others feel bound to this
group’s (their “in-group’s”) fate. Accordingly, individuals who wish to im-
prove their social status may either adopt individual strategies or rather
turn to more group-centred strategies. Those who believe in social mobili-
ty usually concentrate on their personal development in order to rise to
higher-ranking social groups. In contrast, those who feel that transcending
their own social group’s boundaries is impossible usually aim at re-evaluat-
ing their whole group if they are unsatisfied with their social position. To
this end, they may either try to creatively alter prevailing discourses on so-
cial status, or more directly attempt to challenge society’s existing order.
Correspondingly, individuals who believe in social mobility tend to regard
members of all social groups as distinctive individuals. In contrast, those
who believe in social change show a tendency to treat others in an undif-
fferentiated manner as mere members of their respective social groups. In
addition, these latter individuals are particularly prone to prominent fig-
ures in their social in-groups manipulating their actions. When it comes to
moral guidance, group membership and affiliated role models are thus of
comparatively great importance to this latter group. In general, they con-
ceptualise society in terms of “us” versus “them” rather than as a collection
of individual social actors.379 This brief introduction to some of the main
elements of Self-Categorisation Theory provides a sense of the socio-politi-
cal implications that notions of social mobility have. I will return to this in
later chapters.

Turner draws his findings from psychological experiments in the West.
However, they correspond closely to empirical evidence from contempo-
rary urban China. The possibility or impossibility of individual social mo-
bility is one of the most prominent motifs that run through my interviews.

Respondents frequently touch upon this topic—sometimes overtly, sometimes implicitly, or even unconsciously. Depending on their stance on this matter, interviewees do indeed fall into two broad categories of attitudes towards society. Self-Categorisation Theory says little about the determinants of believing in either social mobility or social change. As Turner notes, there are “many social-psychological conditions that may determine the transition in certain social groups from acceptance of stratification to [...] the creation of social movements aiming to change (or to preserve) the status quo”; thus, there is no “one-to-one relationship” between “the degree of objective stratification in a social system (however measured) and the social diffusion and intensity of the belief system of ‘social change’”. Strikingly, some of my own interviewees take equality of chances for social advancement for granted, even though they themselves failed to achieve social ascent despite great efforts. Others, in contrast, complain about the unequal distribution of career opportunities, despite having achieved quite notable careers themselves.

More than anything else, social actors’ opinions on the general possibility of individual social mobility predict their satisfaction with the current social order. Quantitative and qualitative studies alike find that individual satisfaction with society is highly contingent upon the perceived level of social justice. To most of my respondents, this is of even greater importance than their personal wealth or general social standing. Martin King Whyte’s large-scale survey on socio-political attitudes confirms that economic inequality is accepted by the majority of the Chinese population. What proves to be of much greater importance than distributive equality is the perceived degree of justice in the distribution of chances. In my sample, interviewees who believe that individual social mobility solely depends on individual skills, hard work and dedication are generally more content with society and more optimistic about its future. In contrast, interviewees who question social mobility tend to express massive criticism against China’s current social order. As Goodman notes,

[i]nequality is a universal social phenomenon. The issue for the analysis of any society is not whether there is inequality, but how inequality is conceptualized and managed in society and by the state, as well as the consequences. In particular, if there are relationships between dif-

ferent kinds of inequality leading to compound inequalities, and if those compound inequalities are institutionalized over time and have a social base, then there may be a strong basis for identifying classes and class structure. At the same time, though, this does not imply that the class structure has the same meaning for those living and working in the society as it does for the external analyst: that will depend on the degree of self-awareness and self-identity.\textsuperscript{383}

To put it bluntly, in determining social actors’ satisfaction with social structure, distribution of chances matters more than economic equality, and individual perceptions may deviate from reality. Consequently, this chapter examines popular notions of “belief in social mobility” versus “belief in social change”. However, to put findings into broader perspective, the next sections first provide some background information on social stratification mechanisms and social mobility during the Mao era and the reform period.

5.3 Social Stratification during the Mao Era

In their narrations about contemporary Chinese society, interviewees often turn to pre-reform China as a point of reference. Contemporary witnesses and members of younger generations alike use Mao-era China as a benchmark when evaluating contemporary China. This section thus takes a brief look at the general social structure in the Mao era.

Soon after the formation of the People’s Republic of China, the communist government assigned class labels to every household during the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{384} Based on individual political activities as well as family class background,\textsuperscript{385} and inherited through the male line,\textsuperscript{386} these class descriptors were to “become the main determinant of every aspect of an individual’s

\textsuperscript{384} The most favourable “red category” was composed of the so-called revolutionary classes—that is, revolutionary cadres, soldiers and martyrs—and proletarian classes—that is, poor and lower-middle-class peasants, workers and the urban poor. In contrast, middle-class peasants, white-collar staff, intellectuals, teachers and professionals belonged to the so-called “ordinary category”, while the exploitative and reactionary classes—which included capitalists, landlords, rich peasants and Nationalist Party members, officials or soldiers—were denoted as the “black category”. Walder (2015), p. 113.
\textsuperscript{386} Walder (2015), p. 112.
and their family’s life chances”. While young people of higher class origin continued to benefit from their parents’ advanced social positions until the early 1960s, government policies during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) effectively broke the chain of intergenerational elite social status reproduction. Subsequently, two different career paths were created by the communist government: Long-standing party membership was required to attain a higher leadership position in public institutions, industry or the government, while becoming a professional, such as an engineer, scientist or physician, was based entirely on academic credentials. However, like party membership, college admission was restricted to those who obtained favourable class labels. Since household categories were determined according to the male head of the household, it was possible for women to achieve upward social mobility through marriage. In contrast, it was virtually impossible for men to transcend prescribed class labels. Those who were labelled part of the exploitative classes were thus doomed to social hardship. Throughout the Mao era, female “marriage choice has continued to be structured by political and socio-economic status [and] is thus also a direct reflection of the degree to which government policies have been [un]able to equalise” society.

Observers from China and the West alike often stress the relative distributive justice that was characteristic of Mao-era society. For example, China’s low Gini coefficient at the beginning of the reform era is often mentioned to illustrate pre-reform-era China’s allegedly great equality. As shown later in this chapter, this narrative still plays an important role in criticism of contemporary Chinese society to date. However, while social distinctions failed to translate into noteworthy monetary differences, individual career advancement did indeed impact heavily on personal standards of living. The official cadre stratification system, which had been established in July 1955 and divided cadres into 30 different levels, also became the basis for the wage level stratification of professionals in 1956. While actual wage level differences were comparatively small, a series of benefits concerning aspects such as housing, furniture, access to vehicles or medical care were attached to different levels of the cadre rank system.

Within this system, social power, prestige and material benefits were highly consistent; thus it constituted the main hierarchical system of Chinese urban society.\(^{393}\) And—as Lynn White demonstrates in his in-depth study of Mao-era Shanghai—although high-ranking experts did not possess the means of production, “they controlled it exactly as if they owned it”.\(^{394}\) Pointing to similar examples from all over China, several scholars have thus argued that “a new privileged class composed of bureaucrats and communist party functionaries, who used political power to collectively control the means of production, emerged under state socialism”.\(^{395}\) As access to career opportunities was bound to the aforementioned class labels, achieving a favourable social position was virtually impossible for those born with a black class label. At the same time, spatial mobility grinded to a halt with the introduction of the household registration system (户口), which effectively bound urbanites to their work units (单位) and ruralists to the collective units they were organised into.\(^{396}\) Formally introduced in the summer of 1955, the system only came into effect after the end of the Great Leap Forward in 1961.\(^{397}\) Crucially, the rural population was unable to benefit from the so-called ‘iron rice bowl’ with its entitlement to housing, work and social services. This structural distinction was the most important source of inequality in Mao-era China.\(^{398}\) Stratification scholars have pointed out that during the Mao era, “inequalities among individuals were dominated by those among social categories to which individuals belonged”, that is, based on household registration, political class labels and cadre status.\(^{399}\)

In each category, resources and opportunities were distributed relatively equally. Under such a system, a person’s social status was more associated with his/her group membership than with what he/she was, and social mobility was oriented mainly towards the changes in group membership as designated by state polices.\(^{400}\)

\(^{393}\) Li, Qiang (2012), pp. 200–1.
\(^{395}\) Lin and Wu (2009), p. 85.
\(^{396}\) Li, Yi (2005), pp. 59–60.
\(^{397}\) Alpermann (2013).
\(^{399}\) Lin and Wu (2009), p. 90.
\(^{400}\) Lin and Wu (2009), p. 87.
However, since urbanites rarely ever left their working units, while the rural population was confined to their collectives, I would argue that social inequalities were less visible to the average commoner’s eye. In addition, Mao-era China’s social hierarchy existed under the terms of a communist ideological framework and in an economy of scarcity. Thus, while the material dimension of social differences may have been clearly visible to the people at that time, China was nevertheless unquestionably one of the most equal societies on earth in terms of distribution of goods.\textsuperscript{401}

5.4 Social Restructuring and Social Mobility during the Reform Era

This situation changed quickly after the launch of the economic reforms. Ever since, a “widening in the gap between rich and poor shows China’s transition from a relatively egalitarian society to one of the most unequal countries in the world”\textsuperscript{402}

In their study of China’s shifting social contract, Wenfang Tang and William Parish assert that the socialist social contract of the Mao era “promised an egalitarian, redistributionist order that provided job security, basic living standards, and special opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds”, but “demanded sacrifices in current consumption, a levelling of individual aspirations, and obedience to all-knowing party-distributors”.\textsuperscript{403} By comparison, the new, post-1978 market social contract makes a different set of demands and promises. In return for abandoning the ideal of communal egalitarianism and security of jobs and other benefits, the market contract promises that giving free reign to individualistic aspirations will produce better jobs and greater consumption. Freedom from communal dictates by all-knowing redistributionist party superiors will allow the economy to adapt to changing domestic and international markets. While some may be left behind, the growing economic pie means that the vast majority of people will benefit.\textsuperscript{404}

\textsuperscript{401} Buckley (1999), p. 214.  
\textsuperscript{402} Cevik and Correa-Caro (2015), p. 3.  
\textsuperscript{403} Tang and Parish (2000), p. 3.  
With the advent of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, constraints on social mobility were gradually removed as the government abandoned its policy of class discrimination. Small-scale individual entrepreneurship became possible during the 1980s. Until the early 1990s, the newly emerging private economy was almost entirely composed of either members of the “black classes” or former urban youths who had been dispatched to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, all of whom had nothing left to lose. Widely unaware of the opportunities provided by the nascent market transition, cadres and regular workers stuck with their working units during this early stage of the reform period. Especially during “the early 1980s, becoming a capitalist was generally seen as dangerous”. It was not until after 1992 that the occupational backgrounds and educational levels of those who entered the private economy gradually changed, as an increasing number of university graduates as well as state economic sector staff including cadres started to move into business. It is this second generation of entrepreneurs who constitute the biggest part of today’s economic elite. As numerous case studies show, privatisation was commonly introduced to SOEs through management buyouts, and often left room for favourable deals with friends or family as well as local officials. Restrained by continuing state bureaucracy, most members of this second generation of entrepreneurs benefited from the patronage of local cadres in charge of economic development, or were “yesterday’s cadres and professionals” themselves. Today’s economic elite mainly consists of people who either played active roles themselves in the party state before 1979, or have at least one parent who did. According to an internal CCP report from 2006, 90% of all Chinese millionaires are high-ranking officials’ children. It can therefore certainly not be said that opportunities are equal in contemporary urban China. In the words of Alvin So, a

411 Lin and Wu (2009), p. 84.
413 Dickson (2008), p. 23.
414 Inequality is further increased by continuing systematic discrimination against the rural population, including migrant workers who live in urban areas.
“cadre-capitalist class” has emerged, which monopolises “the political capital of the cadres, the economic capital of the capitalists, and the social/network capital embedded in local society”. In a nutshell, China’s present social elite is in big parts identical to its Mao-era elite. At the same time, today’s urban lower social strata are largely composed by rural migrants and laid-off workers who failed to find adequate employment after losing their former jobs. Both groups were created in the course of the economic restructuring of Mao-era socialist institutions like the working unit system and the household registration system. This demonstrates dramatically that structure does matter in predicting individual fates. Nevertheless, the existence of several famous self-made millionaires who came from humble family backgrounds demonstrates that—at least for urban residents—it is, in principle, possible to gain wealth through one’s own efforts.

While the emerging private economy certainly holds lots of lucrative career opportunities, the state sector still features some very attractive positions. In China, working for the party state is commonly called working “within the system” (“体制内”), as opposed to working “outside the system” (“体制外”).

The system refers to the Party-state, including the institutions of the state, the CCP and the government, as well as their associated administrations such as Party and Youth League organizations, CCP-controlled ‘mass organizations’, the ministries, the military, the police and civil defence forces, transport and communications, education and health services, state-sector economic enterprises, and enterprises owned and controlled by state-owned enterprises.

Due to China’s comprehensive danwei system, virtually all Chinese urbanites worked within the system, before the economic reforms were initiated. In the course of economic reforms, the private economy emerged. Besides this, a lot of SOEs were partly privatised, resulting in some of their employees belonging to the system and thus remaining on the state’s payroll, while others are in the less privileged position outside the system. Most of all, working within the system gives social actors access to greater social and cultural capital. “Those within the system have networks of influence, privileges and benefits that are not available to those outside. Not the least

415 So (2013), p. 63. All emphases in original source.
416 Lin and Wu (2009), p. 84.
418 Liu, Zhiqiang (2014).
of the benefits is a greater permanency of employment.” Further advantages include subsidised housing, education for children and health services.\textsuperscript{420}

According to figures from 2012, about 74 million people work within the system, amounting to almost 10\% of the total workforce.\textsuperscript{421} As shown later, the distinction between insiders and outsiders in the system plays an important role in the image of society pictured by one group of my interviewees.

In their autobiographical narrations, those among my interviewees who entered the labour market in the early stages of the reform period often expressed the feeling that back then everything seemed possible. Since universities had been shut down during the Cultural Revolution and college entrance examinations were only reintroduced in 1977,\textsuperscript{422} competition for university places was particularly fierce. However, working-class membership was still socially well respected—a fact that probably dampened the disappointment of failing university entrance exams. As we shall see later, by comparison, gaining a university place is perceived to be of much greater importance today. During the early stage of the reform period, the career prospects looked especially bright for the first generation of university graduates. For instance, Mr Ouyang, who graduated from university in 1982, recalled his placement in an SOE:

The objective of my struggles was to become that factory director.\textsuperscript{423} Well, did I have opportunities? I had very [good] opportunities, very [good] opportunities, very [good] opportunities. It was like this, at that time: After the restoration of the college entrance examinations we students of machinery in our factory—maybe they recruited four people—we were, well, [I] have to say, we were the best [qualified] in the [whole] factory. (O#2)

(Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an)

\textsuperscript{419} Goodman (2014), p. 52.  
\textsuperscript{420} Goodman (2014), p. 52.  
\textsuperscript{422} Fish (2015), p. 82.  
\textsuperscript{423} For the metaphorical use of “struggle”, see chapter six.
Indeed, Mr Ouyang climbed the career ladder extraordinarily quickly. At the age of only 26, he was promoted to an intermediate level cadre and two years later awarded the title of an engineer—in both cases, he was the youngest staff member to hold each respective position. Mr Ouyang’s example shows that doors were wide open for the highly educated in the early stages of the reform period. As mentioned above, university graduates usually moved into the state economy during the 1980s, and started “jumping into the sea” (“下海”) of the private economy only after 1992. With markets just emerging, university graduates were not the only ones to encounter significantly better career opportunities. An increasing number of usually barely educated members of the black political class and young people formerly relocated to the countryside opened small-scale private businesses in the cities throughout the 1980s. They frequently set up small restaurants and snack bars or worked as street vendors.\footnote{Cai (2006), pp. 25–6.} For them, these opportunities constituted a marked improvement. Especially in the beginning, when markets were in their infancy and competitors were sparse, the chances of making a profit were good, and countless self-employed entrepreneurs made quite a fortune with their work.\footnote{Hsu (2007), p. 135.}

Throughout the 1980s and—maybe even more so—after Deng Xiaoping himself gave his blessing to the private economy in 1992, a previously unknown sense of mobility was in the air. The general feeling was that opportunities for ambitious individuals from all walks of life were manifold as the market offered plenty of open spaces to be occupied. Ms Liu is a university graduate who worked for an SOE for four years, before moving into the private economy in the early 1990s. She compares the feeling of those days to what her parents’ generation encountered when they were young:

When we started working, the reform and opening had already started; job searches were self-dependent.\footnote{That is, employment was no longer assigned by the state.} It was completely different from the era of my parents, when the occupation for the rest of one’s life [was assigned] within a single day. So there was great room for choices, so for us to come out was not difficult at all, so we young people earnestly wished to come out, to rush. (L#1)

(Ms Liu, Chief Financial Officer in private enterprise, 42 years old, from Xi’an)

\footnote{Cai (2006), pp. 25–6.}
Ms Liu describes the 1990s as a time when career opportunities seemed infinite for aspiring young professionals, who had the chance to have a stellar career if only they worked hard enough. Over the years, however, markets became increasingly saturated and previously uncontested spaces gradually filled with competitors. With the advantage of experience being comparatively small in their field of activity, street vendors and small-scale traders were the first to feel the effects of increasing competition. Mr Cai, the street hawker who sold bootleg DVDs, complains:

If [you] want to struggle, it is not as easy as previously. [...] There are more competitors now; in each kind of profession there are more people than before; whatever you name, there are people who do it; the variety increased, [it is] not like previously when—let’s say you would sell pancakes in the streets—maybe there was only your stall, or a few vendors’ stalls. Now there are people who sell everything everywhere. It’s the same with us bootleg-DVD vendors, the streets are full of [us]. Wherever there are people, this is sold. It’s hopeless; the number of competitors in this profession just increased. (C#1)

(Mr Cai, street vendor, 30 years old, from Beijing)

The mass lay-offs of SOE workers during the late 1990s and early 2000s clearly contributed to the increase in competitors. While Mr Cai feels that, with increasing competition, it is getting ever harder to make a living from DVD sales, highly educated professionals who entered the labour market during the 1980s and 90s continue to benefit from their early entry into the market. However, as mentioned in chapter four, the latecomers—that is, today’s university graduates—face difficulties finding employment opportunities that provide them with the chance of noteworthy social advancement. Compared to older generations, the younger among my interviewees thus find themselves in a comparatively disadvantaged position, a fact that young interviewees and older ones alike acknowledge. With numbers of university graduates on the rise, good occupational positions are more and more restricted to graduates of elite universities.

427 That is, if you want to make money. See chapter six.
428 E.g. Mr Ouyang, 52 years old; Ms Liu, 42 years old; Mr Ning, 37 years old; Mr Ma, 26 years old.
In the early 1980s, nearly all urban high school and college graduates were assigned jobs. Most urban residents who had junior high school diplomas could get work, those with secondary education got respectable factory jobs, and those with just a few years of tertiary education—even if it was acquired through junior colleges, adult education, or college equivalency exams—got elite jobs. Even those who were barely literate could easily start their own small businesses, since unemployment was low, the economic reforms were just beginning, and the market was wide open. By the late 1990s, however, it was difficult for high school graduates to get steady, prestigious, well-compensated work, and nearly impossible for junior high school graduates. Even those with degrees from junior colleges, college equivalency exams, or adult education colleges often had to settle for jobs that would have gone to high school graduates just a decade earlier. Most desirable jobs were reserved for those with four-year degrees from prestigious colleges, and many elite jobs required postgraduate education, special skills, or experience abroad. No one could start a profitable business without considerable social and financial capital, since the market for small businesses was saturated with rural migrants and urban workers who had been laid off or given early retirement.\textsuperscript{429}

Today, the 155 universities included in either of the prestigious, massively funded projects “project 985” (“985 工程”) or “project 211” (“211 工程”) are regarded as being of elite standard. It is understood that only they “train leaders, managers and professionals (white-collar workers)”, while “[l]ower-level universities train staff, clerks, midlevel professionals, and technicians” and “[p]rivate universities, being at the bottom of this level, train grey-collar workers, defined as those who have more skills than blue-collar workers but who are narrowly trained in practical skills”\textsuperscript{430} With pathways to promising careers narrowing, competition for education is getting ever fiercer. At the same time, China’s higher education funding system was reformed through the 1990s, resulting in increasing financial burdens on students. Though student numbers are rising, due to the increased commercialisation of education, enrolment at elite universities is more and more determined by personal wealth.\textsuperscript{431} If educational credentials tend to be contingent upon family wealth, they increasingly function

\textsuperscript{429} Fong (2004), p. 88.  
\textsuperscript{430} Lin and Sun (2010), p. 226.  
\textsuperscript{431} Rosen (2004), p. 16. According to Fish (2015), p. 82, three quarters of all candidates successfully passed the university entrance examination in 2010.
as a means of social exclusion of the poor.\textsuperscript{432} Although higher education is no guarantee of elite status, it is an almost mandatory precondition.\textsuperscript{433} Accordingly, the prospects of rising to wealth and a high social status slowly worsened for young people from modest social backgrounds, who are often keenly aware of this trend.

Social research shows that compared to stable phases, social mobility is significantly higher in the initial stage of economic system transitions. For example, in the post-Soviet states, social mobility in occupational terms was two to three times higher during the first five to ten years of social upheavals, before it flattened out again.\textsuperscript{434} From this angle, decreasing vertical mobility rates in post-transitional China were to be expected. However, these findings do not necessarily reflect young Chinese job seekers’ views. While social science depicts the gradual closure of markets as a normal economic process, frustrated young individuals may rather blame the government for what they view as clearly worsening conditions. I turn to these questions later in this chapter.

In the transitional states of Eastern Europe, social mobility rates were distributed unevenly, with higher rates at the top and bottom of society, but greater stability in the intermediate strata. This seems to be a universal pattern, since people who have nothing to lose are generally more willing to take on risks, while individuals at the top of society especially are likely targets of social revolutions. In the Chinese case, however, social transition was introduced by economic reforms under the enduring leadership of the Communist Party. This is very different from Eastern Europe, where transformation was triggered by revolution-style disruptions that which affected the political systems and even the territorial arrangements of the states in question.\textsuperscript{435} This explains why elite continuity in China is comparatively higher than in the post-Soviet states with their commonly high degree of elite circulation, defined as the replacement of the elite with a new elite composed of former commoners. Beyond that, some scholars view China’s high elite continuity as evidence of an ongoing reproduction of the class structures formed during the Mao era.\textsuperscript{436}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Gross2008} Gross (2008), p. 156.
\bibitem{Wright2010} Wright (2010), pp. 65–6.
\bibitem{Kollmorgen2014a} Kollmorgen (2014), pp. 703–4.
\bibitem{Kollmorgen2014b} Kollmorgen (2014), pp. 703–4.
\bibitem{Li2006} Li, Lulu (2006).
\end{thebibliography}
When it comes to assessing reform-era China’s social structure, Chinese sociologists broadly fall into two groups. One group adopts the functionalist view that social status is by and large bound to professional positions. In their opinion, reform-era China is witnessing the steady growth of a middle social stratum. This growing middle stratum is thought to be slowly giving society the shape of an olive—with only small numbers of social actors at the top and bottom and the vast majority somewhere in between—and thus to be serving as an important social stabiliser.\(^{437}\) In contrast, a second group of Chinese sociologists maintains that reform-era Chinese society “broke apart” (“断裂”) into a small dominating elite on the one hand and a dominated broad majority of the population on the other.\(^{438}\) Scholars who support this theory stress that resources were distributed relatively freely during the initial stage of the reform period, while inter-elite relations were characterised by conflicting interests. However, since the early 1990s, elite groups have formed broad alliances and successfully monopolised the lion’s share of resources. At the same time, disadvantaged social groups like migrant workers or laid-off workers, who were systematically excluded from opportunities to prosper, emerged. In summary, according to this second group of researchers, contemporary Chinese society is characterised by intense conflicts, severely polarised and thus in danger of experiencing social instability.\(^{439}\) However, even in class societies, changes in a society’s occupational composition inevitably lead to a certain degree of structural mobility.\(^{440}\) Therefore, the fact that vertical mobility was comparatively high during the initial stage of the reform period is without controversy.

### 5.5 The Newly Emerging Social Hierarchy

In China, the gradual removal of mobility barriers and the subsequent reshuffling of society’s general structure triggered the emergence of a new multilevel social hierarchy. Society’s structure and texture changed due to the realignment of occupational groups. This trend is acknowledged by the

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\(^{437}\) The most prominent representative of this school of thought is certainly Lu, Xueyi (2002).

\(^{438}\) Sun, Liping (2009).

\(^{439}\) Prominent Chinese sociologists who share this view are, e.g. Sun, Liping (2004a) and (2009), Yang, Jisheng (2013). For a brief overview of the debate, see Li, Lulu (2006), pp. 5–7.

party state, who adopted a ten-stratum occupational model of society, developed by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in the place of its traditional ideological typology of two classes (workers and peasants) and one stratum (intellectuals).\footnote{Goodman (2014), p. 35.} According to the original ten-stratum model, society is shaped like an olive and can be divided into ten strata, which can also be summarised into an upper, an upper-middle, an intermediate-middle, a lower-middle and a lower class.\footnote{Lu, Xueyi (2002).} However, the notion of an “upper class” was removed soon after the model’s first publication, while increased emphasis was put on the stabilising function of a growing middle stratum.\footnote{Goodman (2014), p. 91.} The official support for this model illustrates that the government turned away from class-struggle rhetoric in favour of propagating social harmony and increasingly downplaying social polarisation.\footnote{Guo, Yingjie (2008), p. 38.}

When we take a closer look at society’s texture, it becomes apparent that while some groups, like successful entrepreneurs, experienced significant status advancement in the reform period, others had to sustain a loss in prestige. Once hailed as the vanguard of society, the manual labour force now finds itself close to the bottom of the newly emerging social hierarchy. With mass lay-offs in the course of the economic restructuring, and the steady influx of cheap labour from the countryside, manual labour quickly lost its attractiveness for the urban population. Concerned about recruitment difficulties, high-level factory manager Mr Ouyang criticises this development:

White-collars, white-collars, golden-collars are always propagated too excessively.\footnote{In the style of the common expressions “white-collar worker” and “blue-collar worker”, which refer to clerks and manual labourers respectively, the Chinese term “golden-collar” refers to super rich entrepreneurs or COEs.} [They] should propagate the social stratum of blue-collars, of skilled workers with a loud voice. […] It seems as if [only] white-collars were valuable, golden-collars were valuable. Your personal dignity is completely determined by your economic income level, isn’t it? […] People should enjoy their social status. They [i.e. manual workers] alike should have a sense of self-esteem. Only if they have social status, will large masses of people flow into this profession to be

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\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Lu2002} Lu, Xueyi (2002).
\end{thebibliography}
As he describes later in his interview, Mr Ouyang envisions a more egalitarian society with only smallish income differences among members of different social strata and professions, which, in his view, would benefit society as a whole. His criticism thus points to the emergence of an all too apparent social hierarchy during the reform period. The bottom of this hierarchy contains a large number of poorly paid and ill-reputed positions. Compared to the late pre-reform period, contemporary China’s social hierarchy is much steeper, with status differences gaining clear visibility as a range of status symbols are available for those able to buy them. Maybe even more strikingly, the attitude of those who find themselves in socially advanced positions towards the less privileged is increasingly one of haughtiness. At the bottom of society, social distinctions are thus felt particularly strongly. Mr Ying, a laid-off SOE worker who found work in a car repair shop, complains about his customers’ arrogance:

They just think, like: “you are working folks,” just serving them. So a little while ago I came across this incident: At that time, his car was broken, it was broken so he had it repaired. After repairing it, I dragged it out, [but] he looked at me sternly [i.e. ungrateful]. Yet I was very upset, so I nudged him. He didn’t do anything to me, but I felt like: “You are [just] a commoner, what do you want?” He just had this feeling. (I#3)

Mr Ying’s description of snobbish customers fits well with findings from an in-depth case study on the high-end retail sector in Harbin, where the (re)production of social distinctions through what Amy Hanser calls distinction work is even more pronounced. In her study, Hanser witnessed many cases of highly ritualised acts of class recognition embedded in service interactions. “[V]iewed as the legitimate and appropriate recipients of esteem, respect, and deference”, and in accordance with shop policies, wealthy customers were treated with a very submissive attitude by shop as-
sistants, no matter how obnoxious and disrespectful they acted. As Hanser points out, in some cases the assistants’ dignity was severely hurt, but unlike Mr Ying, they hardly ever spoke up to the customer. Such service interactions enable customers to experience and act out social distinction. They are “indicative as well as constitutive of [...] new class hierarchies and help [to] create a culture of differentiated privileges and entitlements in urban China.” This demonstrates that an emerging culture of inequality, as displayed by customer service interactions, has become deeply embedded in society in reform-era China.

Arguably, arrogance against those of lower social standing is hardly something new. After all, public treatment of members of the black classes during the Cultural Revolution was certainly much worse. However, during the Cultural Revolution, the “masses” may have tormented class enemies, but—with the exception of utterly worshipping Mao Zedong himself—were certainly not as much accustomed to kissing up to any superiors. Talking about masses, only a minority of approximately 3.4% of the urban population were labelled class enemies during pre-reform China, while as much as about 85% of today’s urban workforce are employed as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in the informal economy at the bottom of the new social hierarchy. Therefore, the increased visibility and tangibility of status distinctions negatively affects the majority of the population.

As Mr Ying makes explicitly clear in his statement, the customer he complains about by no means offended him verbally. However, Mr Ying hoped for a modicum of gratitude at least, since he helped the customer by repairing his car. According to social philosopher Axel Honneth, all human beings long for recognition by others as a necessary part of their identity formation process. Only if they feel acknowledged emotionally, morally and socially—that is, personally loved, legally protected and met with solidarity—can they successfully develop self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Social recognition refers to social (occupational) groups and depends on public appreciation of their contribution to society. Since contributing to society is a rather abstract concept, this third form of recognition is highly contingent upon a society’s value system. According to Hon-

Honneth’s model illuminates how deeply individuals are affected by the shift in what is deemed socially valuable, which China experienced over the last three decades. While political capital served as the main determinant of social status during the Mao era, economic and, to some degree, cultural capital are seen as most valuable in constructing social status in China today. Occupational groups like the manual labour force are commonly no longer viewed from a Marxist perspective that values them as major contributors to social progress. In line with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the transformability of capital, China’s elites have been able to successfully transform their political capital into cultural and economic capital in the course of the reform period. For members of lower social strata, in contrast, the shifting social value system may have much harsher consequences, in many cases depriving them of their self-esteem.

In the above, social status was implicitly equated with economic status. However, when determining the criteria usually used for constructing social status, we find that things are more complicated. While frequently mirrored in distinctive income differences, the boundaries of China’s newly differentiating social strata are usually articulated in terms of suzhi (素质; quality). State-sponsored discourses frequently equate suzhi with education, which they depict to be the main factor in deciding one’s career and course of life. Within the official discourse, the propagation of suzhi links the individual to national progress, economic growth and social order. People of high suzhi are considered to have culture and manners, be able to rule themselves and ultimately contribute to society’s advancement in China’s quest for modernisation. The concept thus comes close to cultural capital, although some scholars have argued that it is often used in a way that simply implies a person’s market value. Others, however, have pointed out that this is not the way ordinary people usually apply it in their daily lives. While having money and having suzhi often coincide, there are groups like university graduates, who are generally viewed as having high suzhi, no matter how little money they may actually pos-
Then again, the nouveau riche are often portrayed as vulgar and lacking suzhi.457

According to an in-depth study conducted during the 1990s in Harbin, ordinary people back then usually used suzhi rather than economic resources as their main criterion in the construction of social status.458 These findings are confirmed by some of my own interviewees, while others give clear priority to economic status when talking about social status in general.459 Most of them, however, refer to both forms of capital when talking about social status. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the social space is determined by economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. In Bourdieu’s terminology, social classes refer to the amount of capital their members possess. Bourdieu names the ruling class, middle class and underclass. Within these classes, class factions are defined by specific combinations of varying degrees of the four aforementioned types of capital. In this manner, the ruling class, for instance, is further divided into a “dominating faction” of very wealthy social actors with comparatively little cultural capital, and a “dominated faction”, characterised by a high degree of cultural capital but relatively little economic capital. Depending on their class and factional position within the social space, individuals not only possess varying combinations of the different types of capital, but also prioritise them differently.460 Applied to China, this explains why it is impossible to identify a single most important criterion for the construction of social status. Nevertheless, it is clearly apparent that the general patterns of valuing these criteria have changed.

In summary, China’s transition from a socialist planned economy with a relatively rigid social structure to a market economy with multiple strata has not only entailed higher social mobility, but has also shifted the criteria for the construction of social status. Political capital has lost importance, whereas economic and cultural capital have increased in value. At the same time, a steep hierarchy with highly visible social distinctions has emerged. Although elite circulation was relatively low during the transition of the economic system, the chances to climb the social ladder were comparatively good for those desperate or brave enough to try to do so

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459 For example, Mr Sun, a project-manager, 56 years old, from Beijing and Mr Jiang, a shopkeeper from Xi’an, 26 years old, emphasised the importance of suzhi, while Ms Gu, 31 years old, a factory worker from Xi’an, prioritised economic status.
5.6 Everybody is the Architect of Their Own Fortune: Belief in Social Mobility

during the 1980s and 90s. However, with markets increasingly saturated, obtaining social advancement has become harder. Some social actors nevertheless view the social hierarchy as principally capable of being climbed by anyone who is skilled and determined enough, while others feel that processes of social closure are increasingly dividing Chinese society into insuperable classes. The next sections explore both views in greater detail.

5.6 Everybody is the Architect of Their Own Fortune: Belief in Social Mobility

When speaking about society, my interviewees broadly fall into two categories. One group of respondents pictures a highly meritocratic society, where everybody’s social mobility is contingent upon their individual skills and efforts. They frequently describe society as an organic whole, thereby stressing how each and every social actor contributes to society by doing what they are best suited for. Even though mostly aware of a wide range of social ills, interviewees in this category tend to believe in social progress. In contrast, a second group of interviewees draws an image of a divided society. In their opinion, social status is by and large bound to the social stratum one is born into and thus unlikely to change unless society itself changes considerably. In the view of these respondents, most social problems result from—and thus prove the existence of—a fundamental rift within society. The most basic difference between individuals in both categories is their stance towards individual social mobility. All other variances in their images of society emerge from this core difference. The two categories resemble notions of the “belief in social mobility” and the “belief in social change” promoted by Turner’s Self-Categorisation Theory. However, both pictures of society constitute extreme poles with various perceptions between them. In the following, I first describe the image of society held by those who believe in social mobility, before turning to the image of a divided society.

Notions of social mobility are among the most prominent motifs throughout my interviews. Some interviewees only subtly touch upon the issue, while others talk about it very consciously, coming back to the topic over and over again. Ms Liu, who started from modest beginnings, but rose to be Chief Financial Officer in a foreign joint venture, puts it bluntly:
Now people can become executive directors. It all depends on individual struggle, on making great efforts. (L#2)

(Ms Liu, Chief Financial Officer in private enterprise, 42 years old, from Xi’an)

In Ms Liu’s view, everybody is the architect of their own fortune. She depicts social status as a reward for individual efforts and hard work. Correspondingly, respondents repeatedly stress that achieving social status requires sacrifices. At the same time, moving upwards is also seen in the context of personal development. Being successful requires broadening one’s horizons and acquiring practical skills—processes that also promise to be interesting and desirable in themselves. Ms Wang, an aspiring young entrepreneur from Beijing, gives an account of how self-development and promotion in the labour market go hand in hand:

If you are job seeking, if you only seek work at home, only squat at home, constantly thinking ‘who can introduce a job to me?’, it’s definitely impossible that suddenly somebody calls on you. You definitely need to, if you seek work you definitely need to go out. For example, you send CVs, you volunteer your services, you visit some companies that you like, you can visit to talk to them in person. […] If you don’t know in which ways this world changes, you can’t adapt to this world, to this world’s changes. In this manner, you seal off yourself and can’t develop yourself. And you need to learn some knowledge, learn something, take a look, exchange views with others, watch the outside world. In this manner, you obtain more knowledge and thus are better able to develop yourself. (V#1)

(Ms Wang, entrepreneur, 29 years old, from Beijing)

If personal talent and assertiveness are key in climbing the social ladder, achieving social status is primarily an individual task. This stance is reminiscent of what sociologist Ulrich Beck calls the individualisation of working biographies. According to Beck, social actors in late modern societies increasingly find themselves confronted with their removal from traditional social structures, a loss of guiding norms and an according loss of security. As it becomes increasingly impossible for individuals to simply follow predesigned traces of life, they are “condemned” to actively construct their
own biographies.\textsuperscript{461} This kind of life stands in stark contrast to the pre-reform era, where virtually every aspect of (not only working) biographies was determined by working units and the party state. “The pressure to remake the self in one way or another created not only an additional responsibility but also a new psychological burden for the Chinese individual.”\textsuperscript{462} After all, being the only one responsible for one’s career also means there is no one else to blame for possible failure.\textsuperscript{463} As findings from several studies indicate, many young Chinese adults “display a strong belief in self-efficacy, which is the main quality enjoined by the neoliberal norms of the autonomous, self-enterprising self. Such a belief reflects a highly individualized solution in which responsibility for success or failure is placed solely on the individual.”\textsuperscript{464} Even choices of schools or the decision to join the Communist Party are increasingly openly acknowledged as being made for instrumental, success-oriented reasons.\textsuperscript{465} These developments reflect a shift “toward a new, optional, and individualistic ethics of rights and self-development” in popular moral practice.\textsuperscript{466} As Leslie T. Chang showed in her empirical work on female rural migrants in South China’s labour regime, the idea of self-development as the central aim of work and even social life is by no means constrained to those of higher education. As Chang described most vividly, even most of these young women at the very bottom of society dream of and believe in the chance to have an urban career if only they try hard enough.\textsuperscript{467} They resonate with a widespread “version of individualism that emphasizes, and to a certain extent even idealizes, self-reliance, self-promotion, and the self-made individual”.\textsuperscript{468}

For Ms Wang, self-improvement is key in finding the most suitable position within China’s emerging social hierarchy. In her view, collecting experiences on the labour market promotes individual development, from which career advancement and subsequent social ascent seem to follow naturally. In line with this thinking, many of my younger respondents talk

\textsuperscript{461} Beck (1994); Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010).
\textsuperscript{462} Yan (2010), p. 505. For more details on the practical implications for individuals, see chapter six. For more information on the psychological aspects, see chapter seven.
\textsuperscript{463} Kipnis (2013), p. 119.
\textsuperscript{464} Liu (2008), p. 200.
\textsuperscript{466} Yan (2011), p. 38.
\textsuperscript{467} Chang (2008).
\textsuperscript{468} Hansen (2013).
about how job-hopping enables aspiring individuals to learn different skills and thus develop themselves further. As Ms Wang jokes, even she would like to engage in job-hopping, but unfortunately cannot since she is self-employed. Giving aspiring individuals access to various perspectives on society, job-hopping is seen as helpful in “adapting to this world”. Like Ms Wang, respondents frequently talk about how, aside from talent and determination, “adapting to society” (“适应社会”) is a further essential precondition for social advancement. In its most ordinary form, adapting to society means acquiring skills required by the labour market, since “opportunities are for those who have prepared themselves” (“机会是给有准备的人的”).

It is striking that interviewees refer to “society” or “world” rather than to the labour market, which they apparently understand to be a mere mirror of the former. When respondents talk about adapting to society, it becomes apparent that one facet of this idea is coming to terms with social reality. In her work on adolescent singletons, Vanessa Fong described that parents often interpret their children’s anger about frustrations on the labour market as a lack of children’s adaptiveness (“没有适应能力”).

The underlying rationale is to make the most of the given situation instead of complaining about its less favourable aspects. Mr Cai, who started his working life as a civil servant at the lower level of an administrative authority in rural Beijing, but after several twists and turns ended up as a street peddler in the capital, reasons in retrospect:

[I] definitely regret. If [I] could start over again, [I] definitely would change myself. Since one needs to adapt to this society, one definitely has to change oneself first. You can’t always complain, can you? First of all, you need to adapt your own condition to this society. There is no other way, society is just like this. (C#2)

(Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing)

469 Ms Wang was the only one in my sample who tended to use the term “adapting to this world”.
470 E.g. Mr Ouang, PE upper management, 52 years old, from Xi’an; Ms Tang, a clerk in an SOE, 35 years old, from Wenzhou; Ms Feng, SOE middle management, 34 years old, from Beijing; Mr Ma, a shoe designer, 26 years old, from Xi’an.
Mr Cai’s unwillingness to adapt to his former workplace’s conventions cost him his job. Far too late, he recognises adaption to society as an inevitable precondition of social success. Likewise, many occupationally successful respondents talk about adapting to society in reference to social conventions. The underlying rationale is clearly that one should try to fit in rather than attempt to change society.

Within my sample, individuals who believe in social mobility typically understand society as an organic whole. In this line of thinking, all members of society contribute to the functioning of society as a whole and thus depend upon one another. Mr Pan, who works as a civil servant in the Southern city of Wenzhou, puts it most graphically:

> Work is divided in society. Each and every society has its respective division of labour. Only then can society develop. Everybody should [use] their speciality... [to make] society develop. [Society] is similar to humans who have hands and feet that divide work. They have a nose and a mouth. Well... with society it’s the same. Every... there are various kinds of workers. Otherwise society would be chaotic. (P#1)

(Mr Pan, civil servant, 51 years old, from Wenzhou)

This view is widespread among interviewees within and outside government bureaucracy. According to this perspective, people in different social positions fulfil different functions for the benefit of society as a whole. Cultivating the self thus also means contributing to society’s development. However, contributions vary in extent and importance; therefore, rewards differ, too. Hence, it is also key to know one’s capacities. A technical worker, Mr Hu, sums this idea up as follows:

> You can’t have high aims but low abilities. You haven’t got the skills, but want to do something else. You’re obviously just an ordinary worker, but want to be a white-collar [worker] at all costs, that’s impossible, right? Besides this, you have to be willing to make an effort. Today’s society needs people everywhere, [but] if you want to harvest without labouring, it’s just impossible. (H#3)

(Mr Hu, technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an)
In this logic, society’s most important positions are thought to be filled with the most talented individuals. In Mr Hu’s view, social positions are roughly determined by one’s inherent skills and character traits, but can be further improved by individual efforts.

Contributing to society entitles individuals to feelings of being needed and thereby connects them to society. For example, Ms Kang is a successful lawyer who despite her age is not thinking of retiring and having a rest. On the contrary, in addition to performing her regular work, she has devoted time and energy to an orphanage for the last twenty years, while also serving as vice president of a provincial level businesswomen’s association. She recounts:

I am still useful for others, so I am valuable. I am not trash, am I? I definitely can’t be called that. But I think being useful to others, others need me, this is my value. I can do something for others… Many people say: ‘What are you now still busy with? Do you still not have enough to eat? Do you still not have enough to drink? Why are you still [working] so arduously?’ The thing is, I don’t think I am [working] arduously. On the contrary, I still think I am very happy. (K#5)

(Ms Kang, lawyer in private law office, 56 years old, from Xi’an)

Contributing to society imbues Ms Kang with feelings of usefulness and self-esteem. In her opinion, being useful makes her a valuable member of society. Several other interviewees express similar notions of what it means to be a “valuable person” (“有价值的人”), thus implicitly deeming those unable to contribute to society worthless. In line with Maoist notions of “serving the people” (“为人民服务”), making a contribution to society is of great importance for individuals’ self-esteem in this context. To some extent, this element balances the individualism inherent in the functionalist image of society by connecting the individual back to the social.

Not only do working positions by and large define social actors’ social status, but they also define spheres of competence, thus determining social actors’ ability to act and judge these spheres. For instance, when asked about their opinion on broader social issues, interviewees’ immediate answer is often that they are not experts in this field. Only after repeatedly being assured that the interviewer is nevertheless interested in their opinion, do they usually answer. Even then they frequently end their answers

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472 In urban China, most women retire at the age of 50.
by stressing that this is only the view of a commoner who lacks substantial understanding of the field. However, the very same individuals who are so reluctant to talk about issues outside their area of expertise commonly become very determined and authoritative when their spheres of competence are addressed.473 Clearly, they display a high degree of confidence within a narrow area defined by their social positions. Likewise, all kinds of social engagement are viewed as being contingent upon one’s social standing. Depending on their social positions, individuals are expected to carry out certain functions while refraining from others. Overstepping these boundaries is considered inappropriate (不合适). Thus, individual agency is strongly restricted by social positions. As fulfilling one’s working position properly is seen to contribute to society in the best possible way, there is usually no need to show any additional social commitment.

This attitude promotes a rather elitist view on social actors’ ability to assess societal issues and also has a very political dimension. In line with this logic, interviewees reason that judging socio-political questions, let alone solving them, is primarily restricted to politicians. After all, their social position seems to give them the best understanding of politics, since “guiding society” (“国家政策引导方向”)—and not “representing society”—is frequently described as being the government’s natural function.474 This reasoning stands in line with the traditional Confucian belief that “common people are motivated primarily by profit and self-interest”; thus “rulers must make decisions on behalf of the people (“为民作主”).”475 But while, according to this perception, social actors are logically subordinate to society as a whole, it is nevertheless open to an individually centred understanding as well as to a collective-centred reading. Individuals may either be claimed to altruistically contribute to the collective, or the collective—and thus the government—may conversely be expected to serve the individual.476

473 Thus, their reservation should not to be misinterpreted as mere politeness or even a Chinese language habit. As their straightforwardness does not stop short of criticizing several socio-political issues, fear of voicing all too critical opinions equally fails to explain their reservation.
474 E.g. Ms Duanmu, upper management of private enterprise, 40 years old, from Beijing; Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an.
476 See Mr Hu (technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an) for an example of the first version and Mr Ouyang (PE upper management, 52 years old, from Xi’an) for an example of the latter.
The image of society as outlined above is, in many ways, reminiscent of a functionalist view of society as described by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore in their sociological classic “Some Principles of Stratification”. Following the functionalist tradition of “treat[ing] society as an integrated whole, on the analogy of a biological system”, which can be traced back to Herbert Spencer,\textsuperscript{477} Davis and Moore introduced a neoliberal justification of social inequalities to structural functionalism. Their article argues that certain social—that is in essence, professional—positions are of superior importance for any society’s ability to function. However, only a limited number of social actors have the necessary abilities to fulfil these positions. In addition, functionally important positions require special, usually burdensome, training. That is why societies reward important positions with attractive remuneration that serves as an incentive to attract the most talented aspirants.

Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality.\textsuperscript{478}

While Davis and Moore’s theory remains highly controversial, it was very influential.\textsuperscript{479} Be it due to the theory’s genuine influence or the way it resonates with China’s indigene history of ideas, most of my interviewees—probably without ever having heard about it—buy into its central ideas. In their opinion, distributive inequality is necessary for society to function. The underlying rationale is that (1) social actors differ greatly in talent and (2) different social positions differ in importance for society’s ability to function. At the same time, they believe in social mobility; thus society seems fairly just to them. This image of society is found on all levels of society. For example, in its eleventh five-year plan (2006–2010), the Communist Party states its goal is to create a society “in which everybody does their best, every individual has their place and everybody lives together in harmony”. To this end, the “party […] promised to all members of society […] to create conditions under which every individual can develop accord-

\textsuperscript{477} Oxford Reference (2002).
\textsuperscript{478} Davis and Moore (1944), p. 243.
\textsuperscript{479} For a compilation of important contributions to this controversy, see Tumin (1970).
ing to their skills and dispositions and thus [...] contribute to ‘the creative
vitality of the entire society’. This statement is a striking verbalisation
of the functionalist image of society many of my respondents pictured. It
indicates that state propaganda has played an important role in popularis-
ing the image of a functionalist society. And indeed, over the last two
decades, the majority of Chinese social scientists have adopted a perspec-
tive that, at the same time, downplays the extent of social inequality, while
also justifying it in terms of its importance for societal functioning.

In this body of literature on social stratification, inequality is the ob-
ject of scientific investigation and, as such, speaks the seemingly de-
ideologized language of ‘objectivity,’ ostensibly divorced from politics
and morality. [...] By individualizing, depoliticizing and rationalizing
the patterns of inequality (Wang Hui 2003, 2006; Lee and Selden
2009), the strata paradigm is conditioned by, and lends further
strength to, the very ‘rich, multiple and supple’ and ‘ceaselessly invent-
ing’ (Barthes 1972) bourgeois language, which functions to preserve
and ‘eternalize’ the status quo of social inequality.

Transferring the responsibility for social failure to the level of the individu-
al, this functionalist image of society is very convenient for the govern-
ment. The flipside of this attitude implies blaming those at the bottom of
the social ladder for failing to climb it. Nevertheless, this view is even fre-
quently shared by individuals with less occupational success. Counter-intu-
itively, even some individuals who considerably lost social status during
the reform era share it. Mr Ying, the car repair shop worker who com-
plained about his customers’ arrogance quoted above, may serve as an ex-
ample. Born to a couple of SOE workers in 1964, he left school after junior
middle school and was assigned to his parents’ work unit straight away. He
kept working there until 1998, when he involuntarily joined the masses of
laid-off SOE workers. Afterwards, he made a living from odd jobs like taxi
driving for about two years before eventually starting to work at a private
car repair shop. Serving customers with not always grateful attitudes, he is
reminded of his social decline from time to time. While he nostalgically
refers to his youth as “our era”, he does not make a single attempt to blame
his misery on the state or — more specifically — the economic reforms that
caused the decline in status of the manual workforce. Instead, he holds

481 Sun, Wanning (2013), p. 36.
that the government was definitely right to launch the reforms (国家这个方面绝对做得对), but blames himself for not studying hard enough when he was young:

When I was a child, there was nothing special about me. I had no skills, I also didn’t study well. I didn’t study well and had no special abilities. (I#1)

(Mr Ying, laid-off SOE worker, motor car mechanic, 46 years old, from Xi’an)

Not once does he mention the fact that studying hard was absolutely not encouraged during his youth—which happened to take place during the Cultural Revolution. Marc Blecher observes a similar trend of laid-off SOE workers in Tianjin blaming either corporate management or themselves. Like Mr Ying, many of his respondents simply accused themselves for not having worked hard enough when they had the chance to do so, or criticised their former employers’ uneconomical management. Either way, they took market values—either their own or their factories’—for granted as a benchmark of individual social positioning. Thus, with reference to Italian philosopher’s Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Blecher concludes that workers tend to “accept market hegemony”—that is, they take market values for granted despite their socialist upbringing.\(^{483}\) In a neoliberal way of thinking, they justify economic inequalities as contingent upon unequal individual skills. The underlying rationale is clearly a strong belief in social mobility.

This general contentment with social justice goes hand in hand with an enthusiastic belief in society’s progress. Viewing society as generally improving, interviewees in this group tend to regard social problems as of only a temporary nature. Frequently, they even consider problems like environmental pollution to be inevitable if China is to develop further. However, they commonly believe that China would be able to solve these problems in the long run, since “every period in time has its own problems” (“各个时期有各个时期的问题”). In the words of Ms Liu, who was asked about the negative aspects of the economic reforms,

\(^{483}\) Blecher (2002). According to Gramsci, hegemony refers to the dominant class’s ability to convince the subordinate classes of its own moral, political and cultural values.
there are probably certain problems in any region of any country, so its unavoidable, its unavoidable that some [negative] factors exist.\textsuperscript{484} But when examining any problem, you need to look at its general orientation, look at its main trend. If you say negative aspects [of the economic reforms], you can only… develop them in a good direction; evade them. I'm bound to say that this is inevitable in today's life. (L\#5)

(Ms Liu,
Chief Financial Officer in private enterprise,
42 years old, from Xi’an)

Others even name a slew of concrete social problems, but nevertheless remain confident about the government’s ability to eventually solve them. Their optimism usually results from their overall positive assessment of China’s development during the reform period, which they readily project into the future.

In summary, interviewees who believe in social mobility consider professional positions highly contingent upon individual skills, determination and successful adaption to society. They tend to picture society as an organic whole, to whose functioning every social actor contributes to a different degree by fulfilling their professional position. Correspondingly, individual agency is by and large bound to actual social positions. Since rewards are described as corresponding to the impact of individual contributions, society is viewed as fairly just. According to findings from the National China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey collected in 2004, 2009 and 2014, the majority of Chinese continue to believe in social mobility.\textsuperscript{485} Applied to my own conclusions, these findings imply that the functionalist view of society described above is widespread in present China.

But while individuals who believe in social mobility are generally content with society, other respondents doubt the very possibility of individual social mobility and subsequently have a much less positive image of China in general. They are introduced in the next section.

\begin{itemize}
\item Please note that Ms Liu was interviewed by a Chinese student interviewer and unaware of the German involvement in the research project.
\item Whyte (2010b), p. 310; Whyte (2015), p. 19. For example, in 2004, 2009 and 2014 respectively, 60.7\%, 64.7\% and 63.6\% of all respondents believed that poverty is caused by a lack of ability. 54\%, 64.7\% and 62.1\% believed poverty is caused by low efforts, but only 21.9\%, 15.1\% and 23.8\% believed that poverty is caused by an unfair economic structure.
\end{itemize}
5.7 A Divided Society: Belief in Social Change

In contrast to interviewees who believe in social mobility, a second group of respondents describes an image of a divided society. In the face of various indicators of social closure, these individuals see a deep and insuperable rift running through society, limiting the scope of possible social mobility. In their view, social status is largely bound to family background and thus unlikely to change notably unless society itself changes. Accordingly, they perceive society as highly unfair. In the terminology of Turner’s Self-Categorisation Theory, this category of interviewees could be said to “believe in social change”. This does not mean that these interviewees actually believe that society is about to change. The denomination only implies that fundamental changes are seen as a necessary precondition for individual social ascent, but says nothing about how respondents estimate the likelihood of such changes occurring. In fact, respondents in this category tend to have rather pessimistic expectations of China’s future. In the following, I describe their view of society in more detail.

As discussed in section 6.4, the beginning of China’s reform era was marked by newly emerging markets full of career opportunities. However, as markets became increasingly saturated over time, personal connections regained significance in the acquisition of prestigious jobs. And while educational credits gained importance on the labour market, the privatisation and marketisation of the education system more and more favoured children of the well-off. Ms Duanmu is a high-ranking technical expert, who was born a farmer’s daughter but managed to attend one of China’s top universities and eventually gained permanent residence permission in Beijing. She states:

The people in our generation relied on their own efforts […]. [But] for today’s rural children this road seems rather impassable. The first thing is schooling. If you are able to enroll at a university, you may enroll, but if your family has no relations or channels, if you want to stay in Beijing, but your family has no noteworthy economic base, you definitely cannot afford a flat in Beijing […]. Social stratification is getting increasingly severe and it is getting harder and harder to rise to a higher stratum. For example, the children of manual workers or farmers may want to rise, [but] this channel is becoming more and more narrow. (E#4)

486 Buckley (1999), p. 211.
In Ms Duanmu’s view, society is steadily drifting apart, as lower status groups are increasingly being marginalised. Although not using this term, many respondents express feelings of experiencing social closure. Inspired by Max Weber, Frank Parkin defined social closure as a process of drawing boundaries, constructing identities and building communities in order to monopolise scarce resources for one’s own group, thereby excluding others from using them. Interviewees who portray China as a divided society have exactly this feeling of being systematically excluded from advanced social positions. A young shopkeeper from Xi’an, who displays a much more extreme view than Ms Duanmu, complains bitterly:

I really [feel] helpless. Everybody wants to turn into the finest person. Everybody wants to become the elite of some profession. Everybody wants to create a happy life with their own hands. But in China achieving these things is impossible for somebody who has no background at all. You can only waste away your talents forever, for one long, long life. (J#6)

In all his desperation, Mr Jiang exemplifies the extreme pole of a certain type of individual who feels that a deep rift within society prohibits people of humble descent from any noteworthy social advancement. In his view, social status is thus for the most part contingent upon one’s parents’ social positions. Mr Jiang’s extremely negative opinion of society is based on a series of personal experiences with the ugly face of state power. Most importantly, his family’s apartment was demolished due to a local government development plan when he was twelve years old. Inhabitants were assured they would receive a new flat in return within 18 months. However, two years later the families concerned were still waiting for their new homes while the officials responsible for the plan were nowhere to be found. In despair, he and some other residents participated in a sit-in in front of the local government. Thereby, they unfortunately fell victim to a current campaign against all sorts of public demonstrations triggered by the Bei-

jing Falun Gong incident in April 1999.\footnote{In the spring of 1999, 10,000 members of the Falun Gong sect protested against unfavourable media coverage in front of the Central Government’s compound in Beijing. Subsequently, Falun Gong was banned in mainland China.} In consequence, Mr Jiang was expelled from school and his academic records at the local department of education were deleted, effectively preventing him from continuing school unless he was willing to start again from grade one. He subsequently spent several years as a migrant worker in various industrial cities in southern China, where he witnessed multiple cases of corrupt local authorities supporting factory owners in breaching the labour law. Throughout his life, he experienced a steep division between the powerful and wealthy versus the “common people” over and over again. His anger about China’s current social system thus comes as of little surprise. However, as Ms Duanmu’s example shows, the feeling that society is increasingly divided is also shared by several other interviewees in much higher social positions.

While Ms Duanmu’s chief concern is the lingering discrimination against rural dwellers, several younger respondents from urban backgrounds envy children of the rich (富二代) and children of officials (管二代) for their advantaged social positions. For example, Mr Ma, a university degree holder working in the private economy, complains at length that he will never be able to pursue his dream of starting his own company, since he feels under pressure to pay back the mortgage on his flat. As he reasons, if business was unsuccessful, he would become unable to pay back the instalments for his apartment, eventually lose it and thus be unable to ever find or keep a spouse. As shown in chapter six, this kind of pressure is widespread in contemporary urban China. Caught in the rat race, Mr Ma is especially furious to see others prospering without ever lifting a finger:

> People from the same social stratum, people in the same age group, and one is continuously working, working, working to earn a living, to pay back money to the bank, and the other one is like: ‘I don’t need to worry about anything. If I need money, I just hold out my hand and receive it. And for amusement I just go wherever I want to.’ (M#4)

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

Over and over again Mr Ma expresses his anger and unhappiness. Crucially, unlike the above-mentioned laid-off workers who blame themselves for falling behind in the quest for social advancement, he does not view himself as inferior to the children of the rich with regard to his abilities. But despite being equally skilled and belonging to same age cohort, their lives...
seem to be just so much easier than his own. When he was younger, he thought gaining a university education would be his ticket to a breathtaking career. But reality lagged behind his expectations, so, despite indeed achieving some degree of social advancement, he increasingly feels that making a fortune in today’s China is first of all a question of social background. As Goodman notes, there is a widespread public discourse about a hereditary ruling class, commonly referred to as the “black collar stratum” (‘黑领阶层’), a term indicative of the lack of legitimacy attributed to those it describes.\footnote{Goodman (2014), pp. 65–6.}

Individuals like Mr Ma often wish for an alternative social—and in essence political—system. Typically, they are full of nostalgia for Mao-era society, which they deem much fairer than present China. Mr Jiang, who only knows about that era from hearsay, recalls:

In the period of Mao Zedong […] at least the people were flourishing. And [they] were equal. In that era, officials and the people were all equal; there was no [difference]. If you violated the law and deserved to be executed, you just were executed, unlike now. (J#3)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

This quote illustrates Mr Jiang’s extreme anger about a society he perceives to highly privilege officials and those working within the state bureaucracy. For him, the preferential treatment of the elite easily outweighs the reform era’s general improvement of living conditions—especially since he never experienced Mao-era life himself. He thus compares himself to the members of China’s economic elite rather than contrasting his current living standard with Mao-era standards. With its commonly acknowledged great general and even more so distributive equality, the Mao era is a suitable counter model for social or political criticism. For that matter, it is completely irrelevant whether the imagined state of Mao-era society actually corresponds to the reality of that time. As basis for socio-political criticism, there is a very real dimension to the glorification of the Mao era. Meanwhile, when airing their anger about China’s current social order, the very same respondents who mourn for the bygone Mao era also frequently express their admiration for Western democracy, which they regard as responsive to the common people’s interests. Therefore, it is very clear that counter-narratives of Mao-era socialism and Western democracy
alike do not so much arise from genuinely ideological concerns, but primarily serve as vehicles for criticising unfair distribution of chances.

Regarding society as having deteriorated over the last few decades usually also makes respondents sceptical about China’s future. Just like those who believe in social mobility, they often project their assessment of past developments into the future. Mr Wu is a university graduate from Beijing who is currently planning to relocate to a smaller city with his wife, where the pressure of life is less intense. When asked what China would probably look like in ten years, he responds:

In ten years, the situation might be even more hopeless than now. Because, I think [China] is moving in, now, is developing straight in a wrong direction. Just in a, maybe it’s not wrong, it’s just a direction that I don’t like. It makes me increasingly uncomfortable. So, in ten years, I express great pessimism. (U#3)

(Mr Wu, software engineer, 27 years old, from Beijing)

In its most extreme cases, this unease with the current direction of China’s development has even led to desires to leave the country or the hope of someone starting a revolution. That said, leaving the country and following revolutionary leaders have one thing in common: a profound lack of one’s own socio-political efficacy.

While social actors who believe in social mobility usually feel that confronting social problems is not in their area of expertise and thus none of their business, interviewees who believe their society is divided simply feel unable to do so. But while the former are usually quite comfortable, with their often very active efficacy being closely tied to their—usually occupational—positions, the latter often have low levels of efficacy altogether, but feel deeply uncomfortable about leaving society’s guidance to, in their view, highly exploitive elite groups. They perceive society as divided into those with power and wealth and those who more or less lack both attributes. Cynically, precisely those who believe that they can only do better if society changes feel the most unable to trigger any changes by themselves.

As indicated above, the distinction between belief in social mobility and belief in social change is not always perfectly clear-cut. While a considerable number of my interviewees clearly fall into either of both categories, there are also some respondents who hold intermediate positions. Depending on whether they rather lean towards social mobility or towards social change, they typically either hold that social mobility is in principle possi-
ble, while family resources are nevertheless very helpful indeed, or that social positions are, by and large, determined by birth but can still be adjusted to some extent by individual efforts. Microlinguistic analysis reveals that their stance on this question often correlates with the style of language they adopt when talking about society. While respondents who believe in social mobility generally describe society in terms of individuals, those who believe in social change rather describe society using group-based rhetoric, often contrasting “us” with “them”, and “the ordinary people” (“老百姓”) or “the masses” (“大众”) with the “second generation of rich people”, “officials” (“管”) or even the Communist Party. Hence, the form and content of their narrations about society usually match perfectly. This observation is consistent with John Turner’s prediction that social actors who believe in social change tend to view others in an undifferentiated manner as mere members of their respective social groups.

In summary, social actors who believe that society is divided in general have a negative outlook on society and are rather pessimistic about China’s future. Describing China as a two-class society in which social positions are by and large determined by birth, they regard the chances of social ascent to be distributed highly unequally. In their assessment of society, this perceived unfairness easily outweighs general improvements in living standards. In their view, contemporary society is dominated by an elite group of government officials and rich entrepreneurs, who often did not arrive at these positions due to individual merit, but rather because of their family backgrounds. This perception frequently leaves them angry and instills them with desires for an alternative social order, if not political system. However, regarding themselves unable to even leave the social group they belonged to, they typically completely lack efficacy when it comes to actively shaping society. Since not everybody in this category has a low social status according to objective criteria, it is hard to determine why somebody believes in either social mobility or rather social change. This question is addressed in the next section.

5.8 Discussion

To sum up, prior to the economic reforms Chinese society was characterised by comparatively low vertical mobility with a high degree of distributive equality at a quite low general economic level. In contrast, the common standard of living improved while class boundaries weakened during the early reform period. At the same time, the social set-up was
reshuffled as criteria for social status shifted to economic capital while a steep social hierarchy emerged. The initial stage of the reform period showed a relatively high degree of opportunities for upward mobility, but later stages were characterised by decreasing upward mobility rates. While parts of this decrease seem to be due to the ordinary course of development in transitional states, there is evidence that this trend was intensified by processes of social closure. There is an ongoing debate among China scholars about whether or not China is actually subject to processes of class formation. At the same time, the official state propaganda emphasises the discourse of a growing middle stratum to stabilise society. Against this backdrop, this chapter delivered insights into how Chinese citizens view China’s ongoing social transition. Two opposing images of society were found among interviewees. In short, individuals who have a functionalist image of society believe that fighting hard enough can, in principle, get them everywhere, while individuals who think of society as deeply divided feel that their chances of social advancement are tightly circumscribed, no matter how diligent or talented they might be.

When we compare both images of Chinese society, the question arises of why some social actors believe in social mobility, while others consider China a divided society. Li Lulu argued that with increasing social status, social actors tend to regard social conflicts as minor, while those closest to the bottom of society view conflicts as much more severe. However, as Martin King Whyte showed, the worst off are by no means the least satisfied. Accordingly, the simple conclusion that the image of society somebody has is contingent upon their social status proves to be wrong. Likewise, the perhaps intuitive assumption that social climbers believe in social mobility, while those facing social decline believe in social change, fails to correspond to empirical findings. Laid-off workers like Mr Ying who blame themselves for failing to climb the social ladder, and successful business people like Ms Duanmu, who denounces the increasing social exclusion of groups like the rural population, alike prove this intuitive assumption to be oversimplified. Whereas it is probably safe to say that individuals like Mr Jiang who have repeatedly fallen victim to various acts of discrimination throughout their lives necessarily consider Chinese society to be divided by insurmountable cleavages, it is much harder to explain why other respondents fall into one category or another.

491 For more details of Whyte findings, see chapter two.
While social actors from all walks of life can be found in the category “belief in social mobility”, all interviewees who believe that society is divided have in common that they are at least gradually affected by mobility boundaries, even if they have managed to gain a certain amount of upward mobility. For example, Ms Duanmu, who was the only one in my entire sample who vehemently complained about the social exclusion of rural dwellers, was of rural descent herself and still felt connected to the social group she originated from—a group that still contains almost half of China’s total population. For university degree holders like Mr Wu and Mr Ma, the key reason for them constantly comparing themselves to the better-off children of the rich is rather that their personal social ascent lags behind their expectations. Highly confident in their own abilities, they blame society for their failure to climb the social ladder. As Vanessa Fong showed in her in-depth study of Chinese only children, a whole generation of young individuals, commonly seen to be their parents’ only hope for old-age support, was educated and “socialized to become part of the elite”. As Fong notes, these children were commonly instilled with unrealistically high expectations, only to find themselves in an economic environment that still fails to provide enough elite job positions to accommodate all of them. Accordingly, “there are likely to be many singletons who will fall short of their parents’ and their own expectations. Even those who have ‘high quality talent’ are not likely to get jobs as prestigious and high paying as they believe they deserve.” According to a survey from 2010, 57% of unemployed university graduates blame their problems finding a job on social circumstances. Unable to join the elite despite their great endeavours, it seems likely that many of these young adults hold a grudge against the effortlessly prospering offspring of the new rich.

In summary, it is impossible to definitively determine why certain interviewees believe in either social mobility or social change. However, my findings indicate that only individuals who are at least to some degree personally affected are likely to share the image of a divided society. Accordingly, social actors from a rural background especially—who are largely excluded from my research on contemporary urban China by design—are very likely to fall into this category. Besides this, there is evidence that young college graduates with unrealistically high expectations in particular

495 For more information on the importance of personal affection, see chapter six.
are prone to believe in social change—especially in the face of widespread media coverage of rampant elite corruption. These considerations indicate that the image of a divided society is potentially highly relevant for big portions of Chinese society. However, the Chinese government is apparently aware of the most obvious social cleavages and working to fix them. For example, after years of local experimentation on migrant workers’ inclusion in urban social security systems, the CCP released a new plan on public security reform in February 2015, which aims to terminate the lingering discrimination against China’s rural to urban migrants. According to the plan, China’s cities are to finally abolish the system of temporary residence permits. Subsequently, migrants will be able to buy cars and apartments and will have access to public services depending on the duration of their residence.496 If this plan is implemented properly, it will certainly improve the rural population’s general social standing. With regard to rampant corruption among China’s political elite, soon after taking office, China’s new president Xi Jinping launched a nationwide corruption campaign in early 2013.497 However, several scholars have argued that corruption in China is caused by structural reasons and thus cannot be abolished entirely unless the political system itself changes.498 Others criticised president Xi’s ongoing anti-corruption campaign to be a mere excuse for getting rid of political competitors while putting the state’s bureaucracy on track.499 It thus remains to be seen how the general public takes this campaign. We shall turn to these findings’ implications on political attitudes in chapter eight.

496 Xinhua (2015).
498 E.g. Smith (2009).
6. The Interpersonal Dimension of Social Change: Struggling for Status

6.1 Introduction

Social stratification’s implications for community spirit—that is, feelings of belonging to a greater entity and mutual solidarity—are of particular interest when assessing society’s development. Most palpably, as stratification proceeds, social actors become increasingly reluctant to maintain friendships with members of other social strata, even if they once belonged to the same social group.\footnote{Rosen (2004), pp. 39–44.} But there are several other, less obvious ways China’s ongoing social change affects human relations and solidarity.

The last two chapters have explored how Chinese society changed during the reform era and how respondents assess society’s new face. In summary, the high speed and extensiveness of social changes led to a pluralisation of lifestyles but left interviewees with strong feelings of uncertainty. And while early reform-era China witnessed the weakening of mobility boundaries, upward mobility rates have decreased considerably during more recent years.\footnote{Lu, Xueyi (2004).} In this chapter, I demonstrate that these developments result in a climate of competition that is reflected by respondents’ ways of conceptualising society. It heavily affects human relations, thus promoting social alienation.

The next section shows how state-sponsored discourses on overpopulation and a lack of resources have added further fuel to the atmosphere of interpersonal rivalry. Subsequently, I introduce the concept of “struggling in society” in more detail. Thereby, it becomes apparent that social actors are increasingly focusing on maximising what benefits them individually. Thus, a set of trust-related problems is thereupon discussed. Afterwards, I turn to the different forms of status representation individuals apply to demonstrate social status to others, while also reassuring themselves of their social position. Lastly, the implications for community spirit are discussed. As demonstrated in chapter five, assessments of society depend strongly upon whether social actors either believe in social mobility or rather consider society to be severely divided. This distinction also impacts
on individual conceptualisations of struggle and demonstrations of social status and is thus addressed throughout this chapter.

6.2 Overpopulation and a Shortage of Resources

As described in chapter five, Mao-era society was characterised by relative distributive justice but, at the same time, virtually insurmountable mobility barriers between different social classes. In contrast, contemporary China has witnessed the evolution of a sharp social hierarchy. Opportunities for upward mobility were manifold during the initial stage of economic reforms, but became sparse as markets became gradually saturated over the course of the last twenty years. For example, as more and more young people entered the expanding system of higher education, competition for prestigious jobs among graduates became increasingly fierce. At the same time, the mass lay-offs of the late 1990s and early 2000s created a layer of urban unemployed people, who often set up small-scale businesses in despair or ended up as street vendors, thereby contributing to a sharp intensification of trade rivalry.

It is argued here that the resulting feeling of competition has been further intensified by a state-sponsored discourse on overpopulation. Interviewees frequently explain fierce competition on the labour market by stating that there are just “too many Chinese” (“中国人太多了”). This widely held belief most likely originates from official birth-planning propaganda, which accompanied the introduction of birth policies. China’s reform-era childbirth restrictions built on the conviction that the size of China’s population constituted “a crisis of modernization, in which excessively rapid population growth was sabotaging economic growth and ruining the environment, keeping China forever backward in the global order”.

China’s political leadership’s attempts to link birth planning to national survival can be traced back to Mao Zedong himself. Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin Winckler argue that deliberately depicting China’s population problem as a crisis enabled the government to justify the need for a strong and forceful regime that was even able to intrude into people’s most private

503 White (2006), p. 98. While being much more optimistic about China’s vast population than his successors, Mao was the first to introduce the idea of state-planned birth control in China. Ibid. p. 50.
area of life.\textsuperscript{504} It is hard to tell whether this dimension of the birth-planning programme was intended by the government or not. Regardless, the idea that drastically reducing China’s population growth was the only option if China was to catch up with industrial nations was hence propagated by extensive campaigns throughout China. Over time it “got embedded in the dominant discourse on population, it became part of everyday, commonsensical knowledge”.\textsuperscript{505}

Interviewees understand overpopulation to be menacing and generally approve of reducing population growth. The dense population in urban areas especially is perceived as genuinely threatening. One young interviewee from Xi’an describes:

The population is pouring into the cities. The whole population is accumulating in the cities. Now the people from any big city’s periphery are accumulating in the big cities as well. In this manner, if it is regularly like this, the pressure of life gets bigger and bigger. [...] In China, there are several cities with a population of over ten million people. [For example,] Beijing and Shanghai have a population of more than ten million people, [that’s] pretty frightening. (M\#7)

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

Overpopulation in urban areas is often thought to contribute to soaring housing prices, cause traffic jams and ultimately increase the number of competitors for attractive jobs. It thus generates severe “existential pressure” (“生存压力” or “生活压力”), a burden younger interviewees especially frequently complain about. Young interviewees—and male respondents in particular—feel pressured to find good employment, be able to buy an apartment and eventually find a suitable spouse for marriage—an issue which men often view as contingent upon success in the former two aspects. So heavily does this pressure weigh on their shoulders that some even think about relocating to smaller cities.\textsuperscript{506}

On the flipside of overpopulation is the notion of a shortage of resources. Several of my interviewees describe resources to be circumscribed:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{504} Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005), pp. 286–7.
\item \textsuperscript{505} Greenhalgh (2008), p. 302.
\item \textsuperscript{506} E.g. Mr Wu, office employee, 27 years old, from Beijing; Ms Wen, accountant, 26 years old, from Beijing.
\end{itemize}
In our country, the population is too big. Anyway, this is controlled now. [It’s] controlled, the population problem is controlled, the population problem is controlled. In addition, there is also [the problem of] natural resources. Actually, it is said that our country possesses a lot of natural resources, but it also hasn’t got that many [resources]. Now there is a resource problem. [You] can’t always waste [natural resources]. (C#5)

(Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing)

This issue is usually brought up in the same context as overpopulation. While the focus is either on the vast population or on the lack of resources, the bottom line is very similar: The existing resources are viewed as insufficient to guarantee a decent living for everybody. Either way, people have to compete for scarce resources to pursue a good life. While Mr Cai above has natural resources like water and oil in mind, other interviewees talk about more abstract cultural resources like “educational resources” (“教育资源”) or “medical resources” (“医疗资源”), which bring to the fore not just a lack of physical, but also human capital. This reading stands in line with a state-sponsored discourse on a lack of sushi, which hinders China in its quest for modernity. In contrast to the emphasis on lacking natural resources, it depicts overpopulation as a problem of quality, not just quantity. Spelled out as a lack of natural resources, the view that resources are scarce has much more final implications. In comparison, a lack of development-based human capital like medical staff or competent school teachers might be overcome in the process of economic development. However, for the time being, social actors feel that China’s population exceeds the amount of available resources either way. In the words of sociologist An Guoqi, “China, a country with a population of 1.3 billion, has a great surplus of human resources [i.e. workforce] but a comparative shortage of natural and economic resources per capita.”

This view is also echoed by Mr Cai, who originated from rural Beijing but now resides in urban Beijing. He states,

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507 Both quotes from Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an.
now the right to live is a bit deficient, because there are so many Chinese, there is too much competitive power in this society, [but there are too] few professional posts, aren’t there? Most importantly, you have to fight yourself; you can’t always point at the state. [The state] can’t always care for [you]. What I am saying is that you can’t rely on the state. Because the current situation of the state is that there are too many people, aren’t there? You have to fight. (C#6)

(Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing)

This quote displays how the notion of overpopulation potentially impacts on political attitudes. Mr Cai reasons that the state simply lacks the resources to care for everybody; thus people have to fight for themselves. On the one hand, this line of thought depicts the state as powerless to a certain extent. On the other hand, this rationale can also be read as justification of shortcomings in the state’s welfare system. Either way, in the view of the vast majority of my respondents, there is only one way to deal with this situation: Inevitably, social actors have to actively struggle for social status, thus further fuelling competition for resources, which therefore appear ever scarcer. The widespread feeling that overpopulation and a lack of resources cause heavy pressure in life casts a shadow on human relations. Consequently, other people are generally viewed as potential competitors in the first place.

6.3 Struggling in Society

6.3.1 Pressured to Struggle

When describing society, or, more specifically, the labour market, my interviewees constantly apply the metaphors of fighting and competition. My methodological approach is based on the fundamental assumption that specific choices of wording subconsciously reflect interviewees’ feelings, attitudes and opinions about the subject under discussion. Accordingly, these deeper layers of meaning can be traced by use of microlinguistic hermeneutic text analysis.

In the context of the labour market and social mobility, metaphors of fighting are thoroughly pervasive. For example, when talking about how young job seekers can seize career opportunities, Mr Ning, an intellectual from Xi’an, states:
Opportunities are for those who are prepared, aren’t they? [If] the gun is already polished and the bullets are already loaded, [you] can shoot instantly when it’s time to fight the battle. (N#2)

(Mr Ning, director of private research institute, 37 years old, from Xi’an)

What Mr Ning is actually talking about here is the importance of getting an education and acquiring working skills to be qualified to directly take on job opportunities that arise. His quote illustrates nicely how even processes related to the individual, like self-development, are often put into the context of fighting. At first glance, such rhetoric may seem reminiscent of Mao-era jargon. However, it is important to note that the target object in Mr Ning’s picture is a job opportunity that arises suddenly and not a human being. Pursuant to common rhetoric, today’s individuals do not struggle against others but for opportunities. Despite the choice of words, the logic is more one of competition with each other than of combat against each other. Xi’an-based technician Mr Hu’s starting line metaphor illustrates this point:

Now at a very, very young age, starting from the age of two or three years old, [parents] don’t want [their children] to tumble at the starting line; thus [they] are bound to concentrate on this aspect. Much [of this] is not based on children’s desires and interests, but on parents’ plans. (H#1)

(Mr Hu, technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an)

This quote shows how the intense pressure contemporary Chinese are confronted with fosters a sense of social competition. It also points to the impact this development has on even small children, who are, as Mr Hu bemoans later in the interview, in his view usually unable to truly enjoy their childhood due to heavy pressure from intense competition. In the same context, Mr Ning explains similarly:

509 The same expression is quoted in Yan (2012), which indicates that it is a common metaphor pertaining to a widespread way of thinking.
Competition is getting sharper and sharper. [...] Many parents’ hopes for their children are by no means particularly high. Actually, society forces them to [put so much pressure on their children].

(Mr Ning, director of private research institute, 37 years old, from Xi’an)

By blaming society, Mr Ning highlights how social actors’ actions are shaped by external forces. When we are explaining why interviewees feel condemned to compete with each other, it is important to keep in mind the high speed with which social stratification processes reshaped society during the reform era. The suddenness of society’s drifting apart certainly increased the perceived necessity to compete for status. Mr Ma, who believes society to be divided, tells me very frankly:

Both of us are equal; then one day you suddenly become really well off, particularly wealthy, particularly rich; then I will surely feel uncomfortable. [...] This will make me produce some, some bad things in my heart. I will be envious or jealous. (M#1)

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

In combination with declining upward mobility rates, the mere speed of stratification processes makes most of my respondents believe that the intensity of competition will increase even more in the future. Again, this estimation exerts further pressure on the younger generation.

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510 E.g. Mr Ning, director of research institute, 37 years old, from Xi’an; Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing. Hartmut Rosa adds a further explanation as to why pressure in modern societies is comparatively high in general. Accordingly, modern societies are characterised by a shortage of time and the subsequent acceleration of lives. While technological progress enables the individual to work and live more time-efficiently, the rapidly increased amount of all kinds of social processes makes time increasingly scarce, while social actors feel ever growing pressure. Rosa (2005), pp. 114–9.
6.3.2 The Linguistic Level

Although fighting is at the core of many of my respondents’ conceptualisations of society, contemporary notions of struggling appear much more moderate than those in pre-reform China, where people used to struggle against each other. During the Mao era, terms like “struggle” (douzheng, 斗争), “combat” (zhandou, 战斗) and “publicly criticise” (pidou, 批斗) were part of everyday language. All of these terms were closely linked to the notion of “class struggle” (jieji douzheng, 阶级斗争), which placed entire segments of the population in an antagonistic relationship.\(^{511}\) In essence, Mao-era ideas of struggling pointed to the, at times, very brutal fight of the majority of people—the “masses”—against the numerically inferior groups of so-called class enemies and counter-revolutionaries. Especially during the initial stage of the Cultural Revolution, virtually everybody at some point ran the risk of becoming a target of the era’s infamous struggle sessions. These notions of struggling thus seared into China’s collective memory as something highly violent and unpleasant. Accordingly, “[w]ords like ‘struggle’ [douzheng] were basically tossed out of our [i.e. China’s] political dictionary after the start of economic reforms in China. People gradually forgot these revolutionary-era terms.”\(^{512}\) To this date, the term “to struggle” (douzheng) evokes deeply negative feelings among Chinese people. This became very apparent during the late summer of 2013, when the Mao-era phrase “public opinion struggle” (yulun douzheng, 舆论斗争) was revitalised as a general principle of public opinion control by the CCP propaganda apparatus.\(^{513}\) Several public reactions from scholars and media commentators articulated clearly how this language evoked painful memories and scared the general public.\(^{514}\)

Compared to the highly ideological Mao-era terminology, today’s individuals apply notions of struggling in an entirely different context. While Mao-era rhetoric was about classes who were struggling against each other for ideological reasons, social actors today understand struggling as an individual act. In the words of a young factory worker from Wenzhou, in today’s society one has “to struggle [fendou] for one’s own ideals” (“为自己的...”

\(^{511}\) Several distinct Chinese terms in the semantic field of “struggle” all translate into English as “struggling.” To avoid misunderstandings, I thus always add the Chinese terms in pinyin—not only after the first time I mention them.

\(^{512}\) Cao (2013), quoted as in China Media Project (2013b).

\(^{513}\) China Media Project (2013a).

\(^{514}\) E.g. Chen (2013); Cao (2013); Qian (2013).
Today’s individuals struggle on their own, not against others, but for opportunities or ideals. Along with the context, the concrete wording for the description of social struggle has changed. Social actors today use different terms that evoke entirely different connotations—a change that directly reflects the reform era’s ideological shift. Interviewees often use terms like “struggling” (“奋斗”) or “fighting” (“打拼”) when they refer to their personal development on the labour market. Compared to Mao-era notions of struggling, which are obviously ideologically tinted, ideology seems much less prominent today. Of course, new notions of struggling are reflections of the currently predominant ideology as well. Today’s rivalry and interpersonal competition are largely confined to the labour market, which—at least according to the official discourse—replaced the ideological field as the main stage for social stratification. The phrases with which my interviewees often describe how they “prepare themselves” (“准备好自己”) in order to successfully “struggle in society” (“在社会奋斗”) are mostly reminiscent of a neoliberal ideology. In a nutshell, while during the Mao era “the masses” struggled against “class enemies”, in accordance with revolutionary ideology, today’s social actors struggle on their own for individual social ascent—thus again mirroring a predominant neoliberal ideology which amounts to social actors’ individualisation.

6.3 Struggling in Society

Admittedly, Mao Zedong himself also used the term “struggling” (fendou) in some of his work, e.g. in his famous poem “Struggling and self-encouragement” (奋斗自勉); thus the term can indeed be understood in a more socialist revolutionary way. However, the term appears to have been less prominent during the Mao era. In fact, the above-mentioned poem’s first line was even changed from “与天奋斗，其乐无穷；与地奋斗，其乐无穷；与人奋斗，其乐无穷” [“The joy of fighting with heaven is boundless; the joy of fighting with earth is boundless; the joy of fighting with people is boundless”] to “与天斗，其乐无穷；与地斗，其乐无穷；与人斗，其乐无穷” [“The joy of fighting against heaven is boundless; the joy of fighting against earth is boundless; the joy of fighting against people is boundless”] when the poem became a popular song in Mao-era China. By omitting one character, and thus forgoing the term “struggling” (fendou), the song’s meaning was changed in a way that made it more appropriate for the era’s common understanding of struggling. It was only during the reform era, that the CCP condemned the later popularised version of the song as a distortion of Mao Zedong’s allegedly originally peaceful poem. Li, Rui (1992).
As pointed out before, respondents often use the terms “society” or even “world” when actually referring to the labour market. Again, if it is correct that choices of wording reflect interviewees’ subconscious world views, this equation is greatly telling. Social actors’ conceptualisation of the labour market indicates that they comprehend society as operating according to (labour) market logic. In such a picture, the lines between labour and other fields of society become blurred, as all spheres of public life are dominated by the rules of the employment market. Accordingly, the pressure and pain associated with the continuous struggles and fights on the labour market are not restricted to the workplace either, but rather omnipresent throughout public life.

Upon researching individual experiences of social stratification, Björn Alpermann, Baris Selcuk and I have shown elsewhere how important spaces of social success are for personal motivation. Inspired by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, we demonstrated that the idea that there is a plateau on which life will become easier and that can be reached, can [... be powerful for those not yet there [...]. Whether this assumption is correct or not is irrelevant. The crucial thing here is that it can serve as an inspiration and motivation to keep going.\(^\text{518}\)

The conviction that fighting continuously is necessary to climb the career ladder to a place where pressure is less intense motivates social actors in their daily struggles. The very idea that such spaces exist and are realistically accessible proves to be of great importance for social actors’ general satisfaction. However, among my interviewees this idea is confined to those who believe in social mobility, while respondents who view society as divided usually begrudge others for being in such places, but do not see any possibility of ever escaping the permanent competition themselves. Again, this feeling is reflected by their choices of wording. Those who believe in social mobility tend to view “struggling” (fendou) as a necessary precondition for social ascent. For example, 52-year-old Mr Ouyang from Xi’an reasons about “young people’s process of struggling bitterly” (“年轻人的艰苦奋斗过程”) as a necessary precondition for a successful career. In contrast, the notion of “struggling” (fendou) as a precondition for self-development is strikingly absent from the interviews of respondents who view society as divided. While those who believe in social mobility usually hope they or at least their children will rise to a favourable social position if they work

hard enough, this imaginary resort is rather blocked for those who believe that society is deeply divided. In their opinion, prestigious and comfortable jobs are reserved for those with good connections. Thus, these interviewees generally feel much more helpless in the face of ubiquitous social competition.

6.3.3 Struggling and the State

Given the pervasiveness of social competition in contemporary Chinese lives, the question of the government’s role arises. As Borge Bakken has demonstrated, the PRC’s leaders understood very well that the economic transition would require and reinforce interpersonal rivalry and economic competition. According to teaching material for aspiring CCP members from the late 1990s, “party members should ‘strengthen the commodity economy and the concept of competition among people’” through their behaviour.\footnote{Bakken (2000), p. 172.} From an early stage of the reform era on, the party envisioned and actively promoted competitiveness, which was portrayed as “modern conduct” among the population. Accordingly, “modern persons” embody values such as striving forward, risktaking [sic], innovation, competition, and independence. As Bakken (2000) correctly notes, a streak of social Darwinism can be easily discerned running through the entire discourse on modern individual qualities. Competition is defined as the striving for superiority and the ability to exist according to the rule of the ‘survival of the fittest’.\footnote{Liu (2008), p. 197.}

At the same time, however, the government was also well aware of the dangers to community spirit. Party conservatives in particular were afraid the economic reforms would bring about a decrease in public moral values.\footnote{In contrast, leftist reformers within the party blamed the inhuman side of Maoism for moral decay. Moody (2007), p. 62.} Therefore, official propaganda maintained that “socialist spiritual civilisation” was equally as important as building a “socialist material civilisation”. Moral and ideological qualities should thus serve “as effective counter-means against the fast-spreading individualism, which together with the related self-value or self-realisation has been heavily condemned.
by the Party leaders as something evil and non-conducive to social integration".\footnote{Liu (2008), p. 197.} In order to further counterbalance all too visible social cleavages, the then President of the PRC Hu Jintao (re)introduced the ancient Confucian notion of a harmonious society (和谐社会) to Chinese politics in 2004.\footnote{The notion of a harmonious society was first mentioned in the resolution of the National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002, but only formalised in 2004. Holbig (2005).} According to this concept, the Chinese government is committed to the tripartite principle of harmony between state and society, harmonious interpersonal relationships and harmony between humanity and nature.\footnote{Noesselt (2010), pp. 183–210.} The concept promotes sincerity and fraternity among the population. It thus stands in stark contrast to the pervasive sense of fierce interpersonal competition I detected in interviews, which can rather be described as fuelling a dog-eat-dog mentality at odds with the functionalist ideal of contributing to the public good through individual development. Some among my interviewees indeed mention the notion of a harmonious society as a highly desirable social utopia.\footnote{E.g. Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing.} Others, however, condemn it as empty political talk far from reality.\footnote{E.g. Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an.} In a way, both opinions confirm the argument that there is indeed quite a gap between social actors’ actual living reality and the idea of social harmony.

6.4 Focusing Individual Profit

Hans van Ess has pointed out that Asian politicians’ appeals to traditional Confucian values like harmony and the sacrifice of self-interests for the sake of the common good probably reflect that, in fact, those values are actually rather unpopular.\footnote{Van Ess (2003), p. 13.} Indeed, the popular functionalist image of society I found so prominent among interviewees did advocate the pursuit of self-interest, albeit arguing that this would eventually serve the public good. However, promoting the common good by concentrating on individual progress only works if moral norms effectively limit individual profit seeking to a level not harmful to others.

\footnotesize{522 Liu (2008), p. 197.  
523 The notion of a harmonious society was first mentioned in the resolution of the National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002, but only formalised in 2004. Holbig (2005).  
525 E.g. Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing.  
526 E.g. Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an.  
527 Van Ess (2003), p. 13.}
China has a long history of religious teachings and practices full of ethical norms and moral guidelines. Traditionally, the popular folk religion and the “three teachings” (三教) Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were most influential, while Christianity, Islam and several ethnic minorities’ religions were also found in some parts of China. However, in line with Marx’s statement that religion is the opium of the people, the Chinese Communist Party strictly opposed any religion. “As early as 1927 Mao Zedong spoke of popular religion as one of the ‘four bonds’ enslaving China’s peasants. The Party’s atheism was as militant as its opposition to ‘local tyrants and evil gentry’.”

After taking power in 1949, the communist government was thus keen to educate the public in universal atheist ethics. Schoolchildren and grown-ups alike were taught “the essence of Maoism and communism: an ethic of selfless service to others (not to the particularistic circle of kin but to an abstracted people), [and] of heroism”. Official propaganda popularised model heroes and sought to substitute traditional popular ethics and values with a socialist morality of selfless servitude to the people for the end of achieving a Communist utopia. Nevertheless, religion was still tolerated during the early years after the foundation of the PRC. This situation changed in 1966, when religion was fought rigorously, with great quantities of religious writings being incinerated and many temples, monasteries, churches and mosques being destroyed. Highly anti-religious sentiments erupted frequently throughout the Cultural Revolution. Only after the death of Mao Zedong did the tensions abate. Places of prayers were reopened, religious associations were reinstated and religious freedom was even inscribed in the constitution in 1978, and China experienced a quick revival of religious activities. However, some scholars argue that the overall population had already been dis-embedded from traditional religious values by then.

At the same time, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution in combination with the gap between the promised socialist utopia and the reality of relative poverty left many individuals disillusioned and frustrated at social-

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ism and the moral values it preached. The consequence was “the breakdown of the Maoist moral order”.

The loss of such a unifying belief in the shared destination of reform during a period of rapid socio-economic change has led to an absence of faith, identity and sense of moral and spiritual vacuum, accentuated by the new importance attached to money during the reform period which has caused considerable government and media concern.

This disillusionment contributed greatly to the democracy movements of the 1980s. But after their bloody end, striving openly for Western liberalism was out of the question. As various Western and Chinese scholars have argued, when the government eventually started to actively promote consumerism during the 1990s, the remaining dearth of values that formed the legacy of the Mao period was increasingly filled by a materialist belief system, with self-centred values like status-representation and envy at its core. “In contemporary China, perhaps because politics had engulfed any alternative set of ideals, the retreat of politics sometimes seems to have left no value behind other than pleasure and the means to acquire pleasure, mostly, or most conveniently, by buying it.” Aware of the problematic aspects of this development, the Chinese government launched several campaigns throughout the reform era to advocate a “socialist spiritual civilisation” (“社会主义精神文明”). However, the steadily increasing competition on the labour market and the pressure on people to make money to participate in consumption, while at the same time often supporting elderly parents in the face of an insufficient pension system, and the moral unsettledness all added up to a stern concentration on individual profit observable in many of the interviews in my sample. According to Ci Jiwei’s judgement, within a few years after Mao Zedong’s death, the socialist

534 Zhao (2004), pp. 263–4. In this environment, different religious teachings have been experiencing an upsurge in growth of members. However, as of 2012, the overwhelming majority of 89.56% of Chinese identified themselves as atheist, while only 6.75% were Buddhist, 2.3% Christian, 0.46% Muslim, 0.54% Taoist and 0.4% believed in other religions. See Peking University Research Centre of Religious Culture Study Group (2014). Note that the survey excluded the autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet and Xinjiang as well as the provinces of Qinghai and Hainan and the Special Administrative Regions of Macao and Hong Kong.

canon of values “was swept away, and pure selfishness came back with a vengeance, undisciplined, knowing no scruples, no sense of fairness, often not even its own good”.\textsuperscript{539} Compared to this extreme assessment of contemporary China’s moral landscape, other scholars come to more moderate conclusions. After all, Chinese social actors are neither single nor uniform. Selfhood in contemporary China is torn apart between “a number of ‘dividers’, such as past versus present, public versus private, moral versus immoral, and so on”.\textsuperscript{540} Yunxiang Yan thus showed that apart from social actors who “violate basic moral principles and reap huge profits at the expense of the interests of others”, there are also individuals who stand up “to seek social justice, protect the weak, and cultivate the moral self”.\textsuperscript{541} Yan also pointed out that while officially preached ethics in pre-reform China stressed commitment to the common good, it is also true that radical Maoism bred brutality and suspicion among social actors. Therefore, “nearly all people feared being reported on by others, including their closest family members and best friends.”\textsuperscript{542} Despite these moderating factors, the assumption that public values in general increasingly advocate self-centredness in the reform era goes uncontested.

There are some interviewees like Mr Cai, who claims that he certainly had the ideal of serving the people when he started working as a lower rank public administrator. However, some problems with his superiors, which he leaves unspecified, prohibited him from doing so and made him eventually quit his job. Disillusioned he now asserts:

Society is like this. Some people—relationships—have to harmonise; that’s the situation. After all, when you have the ability, you can do good deeds that benefit the people; benefit the commoners, can’t you? Wait until you have the abilities before considering that.

(Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing)

Frustrated about his new situation he has retreated from his higher ideals and for the time being is concentrating on improving his own life. After all, he is lacking the means to effectively help others anyway. But while he at least thinks helping others is desirable, though beyond his capabilities, other interviewees do not bother much about aiding others altogether. For

\textsuperscript{539} Ci (1994), p. 102.
\textsuperscript{540} Kleinman et al. (2011), p. 5.
\textsuperscript{541} Yan (2011), p. 39.
\textsuperscript{542} Yan (2011), p. 49.
instance, warehouse worker Ms Gu even straightforwardly voices understanding for corrupt functionaries:

I think I can understand [corrupt behaviour], because this is a social phenomenon (laughs). Corrupt officials are countless. It doesn’t matter if the leaders are a bit corrupt. (G#2)

(Ms Gu, SOE-factory worker, 31 years old, from Xi’an)

In Ms Gu’s opinion, corrupt behaviour by government officials is alright as long as the economy develops well and the overall living conditions continue to improve. If she expresses any resentment towards corrupt officials at all, it is rather because she envies them for having opportunities to engage in corrupt behaviour, not out of moral convictions. It is this complete lack of ethical concerns, even among negatively affected parties, that strikes me most. It is in line with Stanley Rosen’s observation that in China, “individuals are now much more willing to acknowledge their selfish motivations, and even more the selfish motivations of others”.  

543 Some interviewees may in one moment lament about being negatively affected by certain social phenomena and literally seconds later regret that they are not on the side of those who profit from these very phenomena. For example, Mr Hu is a technical worker who has spent his whole life in the same department of a large Xi’an-based SOE and only recently changed to physically less demanding office work. For the last ten years, he and his wife have lived in a small apartment without any heating. Therefore, he is keen on moving into a bigger flat with better facilities one day. However, for the time being, surging real estate prices prevent him from realising his dream. When asked about the reasons for soaring real estate prices, he asserts:

These people who became rich very quickly have spare cash. They can speculate, can’t they? They can invest in real estate as fixed assets, can’t they? They aren’t about solving housing questions; they are about profit making. Since they have this ability, you can’t blame them, can you? (H#2)

(Mr Hu, technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an)

In Mr Hu’s opinion, his aspirations for a bigger and more comfortable flat are directly impeded by rich investors who knowingly and steadily heat up the real estate market. Whether this estimation is accurate or not is not the point here. Crucially, Mr Hu is not indignant about behaviour he views as very harmful to himself. For him, the simple fact that investors have the ability to invest in real estate to maximise their own profit legitimises their conduct despite all the social costs.

Ms Gu and Mr Hu both believe in individual social mobility and assess society as relatively fair. None of them draws on any ethical guidelines or sets of values to criticise a lack of moral consciousness among corrupt officials or real estate investors respectively. Accordingly, individual profit maximisation is highly desirable despite all the costs to society, thus impairing the functionalist core belief that individual development naturally benefits society. In contrast, interviewees like Mr Jiang, who believes that society is severely divided and highly unfair, criticise these issues heavily. For Mr Jiang, surging real estate prices are just one further example which illustrates how the upper classes enrich themselves at the expense of the oppressed poor. Needless to say, he also condemns corrupt officials, which he described as “worms” in the figurative “apple” of the Chinese state.544

The examples above clearly show the limits of the functionalist world view’s central idea that self-development and acquiring resources for oneself automatically benefit society. There is a fine line between merely focusing on individual profit and gaining advantages by knowingly condoning harm to others. Developing the common good by concentrating on personal progress can only function well if individual profit-seeking is indeed limited by moral norms. During recent years, an alleged lack of such values has come under discussion among the Chinese public after a series of scams and cases of public cold-heartedness became public.545 In one incident, maybe most infamously, a two-year-old girl in the southern city of Foshan was knocked down and run over by a car, whose driver failed to stop and aid the child. As was unveiled by surveillance tape, it took seven long minutes before an old cleaning lady eventually picked up the child and took her to a hospital, where she died a week later. Within these seven minutes at least eighteen pedestrians passed by the still clearly moving toddler, sometimes standing still for a moment and staring at her. Even worse, a second car also ran over her injured body without the driver helping the

544 Mr Jiang, 26 years old, shopkeeper from Xi’an.
545 For a good overview on the debate, see Kleinman et al. (2011) and Linggi (2011), pp. 145–62.
girl. This tragedy, which later became known as the “Wang Yue incident” ("王悦事件") in reference to the girl’s name, caused an uproar on China’s social media and in its official media. Naturally, commentators agreed that little Wang Yue’s fate was a shame. But for all that, in trying to make sense of what had happened, many netizens did have an explanation for why so many passers-by had failed to help the girl. What if, they frequently asked, someone had taken the toddler to hospital and no surveillance tape of the accident had turned up? Would the girl’s parents not have blamed the first-aider for causing the crash? Would the first-aider not have ended up imprisoned and condemned to pay all the arising medical costs? This line of thinking seems reasonable, since the media cover many similar incidents. Twenty-seven-year-old Mr Wu from Beijing tells me with an upset voice:

Two years ago, [...] a youngster saw how an elderly man ran into a car, so he helped. From an angle of ethics, we should help. But after he helped there were some unexpected affairs. Those old man’s family members falsely blamed him. They said it was this youngster who had run over the elderly man. Then there was an entire series of affairs. Later, a court sentenced that youngster to compensate the man with money. The reasoning was: ‘If it wasn’t you who ran him over, why did you help him?’ (U#1)

(Mr Wu, software engineer, 27 years old, from Beijing)

Tales of this kind are widespread in contemporary urban China. While their accuracy often remains unclear, there are indeed several cases in which subsequent examination of surveillance tapes has proved that the people accused of causing accidents were actually helpful bystanders. Such incidents have daunting effects on public ethics and moral courage. As Mr Wu continued,

It seems like my moral standards have lost their function; what I expect of myself [has lost its function]. If I encounter such a situation, I should help or something. I feel the biggest, biggest, biggest pressure now is to witness some incidents and think I should do something, but I’m not self-confident. I don’t know if I should or shouldn’t do this

thing. These things... I feel that these things... Alas! A kind of social
coldness and insensitivity, it really infuriates me! [...] In this situation,
people feel they may need to be extremely cautious in everything [they
do], so [they] feel very uncomfortable. (U#2)

(Mr Wu,
software engineer,
27 years old, from Beijing)

Mr Wu’s narration illustrates an intimidating feeling of dismal unsettled-
ness, which threatens social actors’ at the very level of identity. It shows
how even outspoken individuals who do have high moral standards are
muted by an overwhelming insecurity of whom to trust. Society’s develop-
ment leaves Mr Wu with “a feeling of uncertainty about what to do” (“无所适从的感觉”). During recent years, there has been an ongoing debate
among Chinese sociologists about a “crisis of trust” (“信任危机”). Aside
from blaming a post-socialist lack of values for inducing this crisis, they of-
ten point out that China is undergoing two transitions simultaneously—
the modernisation of a traditional society and the transition from a com-
munist to a market-oriented society. The fragmentariness of these transi-
tions is frequently mentioned as a factor in the lack of interpersonal trust.
Accordingly, traditional Chinese society constituted a “society of acquain-
tance” (“熟人社会”), where interpersonal trust was bound to social net-
works and interactions required personal attendance. In contrast, in to-
day’s market economy, all individuals are in theory equal, with the state
being the main guarantor of legal security. With the rule of law still not
being enforced comprehensively, problems of trust have arisen.

As a result, the moral dilemma described by Mr Wu testifies to a “deep
structural tension in China’s moral worlds and in the Chinese individu-
al”, which further intensifies the already prevailing feeling of distrust
and hostility. With confidence in others severely shaken by frequent media
reports on incidents of ruthless fraud and in the face of fierce competition
for social ascent, social actors are increasingly focusing on their own profit.

548 Guo (2006a) and Guo (2006b).
549 Linggi (2011), pp. 145–50. According to an additional argument, modern com-
munication devices enable individuals to interact without meeting in person,
thus making it even easier for them to wipe away any moral concerns during
online interactions with strangers. Practising immoral behaviour in the online
world subsequently contributes to falling moral standards in real-world interac-
tions.
Some interviewees, like former civil servant Mr Cai, still keep the ideal of serving the people, albeit thinking that they are just not (yet) in the position to do so—an idea that goes well with the functionalist view of society described in chapter five. Others like Mr Wu complain about moral deterioration making it increasingly hard for them to keep up with the ideal of helping others. And while naturally none of my respondents directly talks about how they have personally harmed others to gain profit, it seems very likely that the moral uncertainty Mr Wu laments about stems from an attitude of ruthless profit maximisation that also manifests itself in my interviewees. When it comes to gaining resources, many respondents do not express moral considerations at all, even if they are on the losing side. They seem to have perfectly internalised a predatory capitalist logic. In a social Darwinist manner, they believe in upward social mobility of the fittest. According to Xu Luo’s extensive analysis of cumulative data gathered through several large surveys by Chinese and foreign scholars, this attitude started running rampant from as early as the 1980s. Some among the older respondents of my sample equally voice concerns about what they view as increasing selfishness among younger people. Maybe ironically the only members of the younger generation in my sample who voice uneasiness about a pervasive sense of self-centredness and unethical conduct are those who view society as severely divided anyway.

6.5 Demonstrating Social Status

6.5.1 Consumption

Struggling is exhausting since it exposes social actors to a lot of hardship. Interviewees who believe in social mobility commonly believe that only those who work really hard can fight their way up the social ladder. For those who doubt the possibility of social mobility their daily struggle seems even more exhausting since it does not even open up the prospect of noteworthy upward mobility. Therefore, either way, individuals who do eventually rise to wealth are usually very keen on presenting their success as hard-earned. For example, Ms Zhou, who runs a successful business with her husband, states proudly that during the initial stage of her compa-

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552 E.g. Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an; Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing.
ny’s formation she once did not sleep a single minute for an entire week because she was so busy with work. While one may doubt the literal accuracy of this account, it is clear that she tries to present herself as hard-working and very diligent. This conduct is indicative of a broader social trend. Social actors in China in general “seek to demonstrate […] that they have earned their status through entrepreneurialism, hard work, or ingenuity. […] It is the potential for change, and not the appearance of inherited privilege, which elicits the most admiration in China”.

Michael B. Griffiths and Jesper Zeuthen found that a widespread discourse of “eating bitterness” (“吃苦”) increasingly pressures members of the urban middle classes to frame their life stories in terms of hard-earned accomplishments. In the face of the prevalent discourse on the decadent second generation of rich people, who have everything served on a silver platter, social actors are keen on demonstrating their diligence. This attitude stands in contrast to social practices in more traditionalist societies, where members of the upper class are traditionally proud of not needing to work at all, let alone engage in physical work. For example, in his study on late nineteenth-century America, Thorstein Veblen described the “gentleman of leisure” for whom ostentatious abstention from labour was “the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability”, since “a life of leisure is the readiest and most conclusive evidence of pecuniary strength, and therefore of superior force”.

While Veblen’s notion of “conspicuous leisure” obviously contradicts the aspiration to present wealth as hard-earned, which is so characteristic of contemporary China, the notion of conspicuousness has not lost its relevance. In Veblen’s own words, “in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.” Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe the social practice of ostentatious consumption for the means of social status production. This notion is frequently invoked in discussions of China, where, just

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553 Ms Zhou, co-founder of design company, 45 years old, from Wenzhou.
555 Griffiths and Zeuthen (2014).
557 Veblen (1899), p. 16.
like elsewhere in the world, evidence of social status is usually provided by the purchasing of expensive status symbols.\textsuperscript{558}

This practice was also mentioned during my interviews. For example, Ms Yin, a university educated young woman from Beijing, tells me frankly that she does not really like watching TV but thinks it is “unrealistic” ("不现实") not to buy a TV set, since everybody has one. On another occasion, she wonders whether she and her husband can be considered middle class. On the one hand, they own their own apartment, but on the other hand they have no private car.\textsuperscript{559} These considerations make it very clear that, for her, social status is closely bound to personal possessions. Accordingly, refraining from purchasing a TV is not an option at all in Ms Yin’s view.

Again, the underlying rationale is that individuals only possess social status if they are able to actually display it. This seems to be especially true in a quickly changing society like China, with its relatively new, not yet firmly consolidated social hierarchy. Parts of the new elites only rose to wealth and power during the 1990s, while some among the new poor “descended from elite families that lost everything during the Cultural Revolution, and never managed to gain anything back”.\textsuperscript{560} As explored in chapter five, not only has the social distribution of capital changed during the reform era, but so has the relative value of different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, political and symbolic capital). Therefore, social actors are confronted with a high degree of uncertainty when it comes to the question of social status, as is reflected in Ms Yin’s questioning of her and her husband’s middle-class affiliation. This uncertainty most likely further increases the pressure to acquire certain status symbols in order to display belonging to a specific group. In such an environment, status symbols not only demonstrate social status to others, but reassure their possessors of it as well. Some scholars thus go as far as arguing that in contemporary China, not only are senses of respect closely linked to the possession of status symbols, but so are those of self-worth.\textsuperscript{561}

In his study of the new rich in Beijing, Christopher Buckley coined the term “conspicuous conformity”, which he described as the “underlying impulse to demonstrate a person’s belonging to a certain status group, a new

\textsuperscript{558} E.g., Lu (2008), Tian and Dong (2010), Griffiths (2013), Osburg (2013), Yu (2014). Its prevalence around the world does not mean this form of conduct goes uncontested, as traditional protestant work ethics with their rejection of luxury may illustrate.

\textsuperscript{559} Ms Yang, wedding planner, 28 years old, from Beijing.

\textsuperscript{560} Fong (2004), p. 102.

moneymed elite, that is still unsure of its social boundaries and its relations with the rest of Chinese society”. Building on Buckley’s observations, John Osburg demonstrated that it is not sufficient to simply buy anything expensive to gain social status. He gives the example of a businessman who refrains from using a precious custom-made stingray skin purse he received from a foreign friend as a gift, since he feared that if he used it in front of his Chinese friends, they would think he had lost all his money. For him, “to use a wallet other than his Louis Vuitton would violate the symbolic order of his network”. Again, this stands in contrast to many Western nations, where old, established moneymed elites do their best to distinguish themselves clearly from the self-made nouveau riche with “a sort of ostentatious discretion, sobriety and understatement, a refusal of everything which is ‘showy’, ‘flashy’ and pretentious”. Osburg showed that in China, for the mighty in particular, transgressing “the recognized modes of elite status is to risk being illegible [sic] and viewed as outside the network of power”. With relationships being “fundamental to elite power” in China, this danger seems especially threatening to the country’s new rich elite.

However, “[g]iven the important role that interpersonal ties, in general, play in Chinese social life”, it can be expected that status symbols are also “unusually prominent and important” for members of other social strata. As illustrated by Ms Yin’s example, members of China’s newly forming middle strata are equally affected. As pointed out above, this trend may be reinforced by a prevailing sense of insecurity. Goodman has argued that in China the “middle class is more a discourse than a social structure”. He maintained that while its actual numbers are tightly circumscribed, the notion of a rising middle class is skilfully promoted by the Chinese government, which hopes to encourage domestic consumption and thus economic growth, while at the same time mediating social inequality. Accordingly, the middle class

is not so much of a uniform, unproblematic concept or an actual, homogeneous grouping as a hodgepodge of intermediate groups, an embodiment of desirable values, and a shorthand for new progressive actors, the mainstream of a harmonious well-off society, or new masters of the country in place of the working class.\textsuperscript{570}

Hence, the party state intentionally designed “middle class” as a very uncertain term that “has considerable mobilizing potential precisely because it is less precise and so more inclusive”.\textsuperscript{571} On the flipside, many social actors can never be completely sure whether they are actually part of the middle class or not.\textsuperscript{572} In this atmosphere of uncertainty, the acquisition of certain consumer goods serves as status assurance for buyers themselves and others alike. Status markers’ tremendous importance in not only symbolising, but essentially constituting social status becomes most evident from the example of homeownership—the ultimate \textit{conditio sine qua non} of middle-class affiliation in China. Thus, in line with what has been written above on desires for normality, “the case of China shows that lifestyles and consumption patterns function to define the class boundary of the Chinese new middle class”.\textsuperscript{573}

The pressure to enhance one’s social status by purchasing expensive status symbols is not confined to elites and those aspiring to belong to the newly emerging middle strata either. As Wanning Sun shows in her in-depth study of Chinese housemaids, rural migrants construct social status in a downscaled but, in essence, similar way. Unable to buy automobiles or urban real estate, they content themselves on buying the latest mobile phones instead.\textsuperscript{574} It thus seems safe to assume that the pattern of status construction via the acquisition of status symbols pertains to the majority, if not all, of Chinese individuals. “Consumption is the easiest indicator for the new class to represent its status, its wealth and its social reputation in post-reform China.”\textsuperscript{575} Not only do social actors need to invest great time and energy in fighting for good social positions, but they are also bound to

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{570} Guo (2008), p. 39.
\bibitem{571} Goodman (2014), p. 93.
\bibitem{572} China scholars have repeatedly shown the ambiguity and high status inconsistency of Chinese ‘middle-classness’. For example, depending on whether middle-class affiliation is measured by income, occupation or self-assessment, figures vary considerably. Li (2004). For a good overview, see Alpermann (2012b).
\bibitem{573} Tsang (2014), p. 175.
\bibitem{574} Sun (2009), pp. 109–22.
\bibitem{575} Tsang (2014), p. 15.
\end{thebibliography}
invest big portions of their resources in the acquisition of status symbols, since the ability to consume certain (luxury) products not only displays, but also generates and reassures people of their social status.

At the same time, scholars often stress that consumers in China—just like consumers in the West—draw on patterns of consumption to highlight their individuality. Consumption provides social actors with the power of choice, thereby offering them opportunities to cultivate the democratic practice of decision-making and thus even to politicise specific topics.\textsuperscript{576} However, politicising certain issues requires high numbers of participants to be efficient. One of the most prominent examples are occasional rejections of Western brands for patriotic reasons, like the massive boycotts of French supermarkets after pro-Tibetan protests in France in spring 2008.\textsuperscript{577} Michael Griffiths thus concludes that consumers in China are “particularly eager to be individuals, to assert themselves as such, to determine their own lives, adept at drawing symbolic boundaries, and so on, even when doing so might also be understood as articulating assimilation or collectivism”.\textsuperscript{578} While Griffith leans towards a rather uniform explanation of consumption patterns, another certainly important aspect in discussing this is the generational shift between those socialised during the Mao era and those during reform-era China. In her qualitative in-depth study of the Middle Class in Guangdong, Eileen Yuk-Ha Tsang portrays members of the older generation as rather pragmatic and business-oriented networkers, while younger cohorts are depicted as generally more hedonistic and individualistic.\textsuperscript{579} This development conforms to research on shifting values among Chinese youth.\textsuperscript{580}

In the course of the reform era, China’s new consumerism “replaced politics in determining identity”.\textsuperscript{581} Acquisition rituals are inevitably influenced by shifting values. Consumption always takes place in the tension-filled area between the desires for individuality and individual decision-making on the one hand, and the aspiration for a sense of belonging and social pressure to conform on the other. “Anthropologists have long recognized that the acquisition of goods is significant in acquiring new individual and\textsuperscript{582} collective identities and that shopping is an opportunity for defi-

\textsuperscript{577} Tian and Dong (2010), pp. 24–5.
\textsuperscript{578} Griffiths (2012), p. 201.
\textsuperscript{579} Tsang (2014), pp. 55–118.
\textsuperscript{580} E.g. Sun and Wang (2010); Yan (2011).
\textsuperscript{581} Moody (2007), p. 70.
\textsuperscript{582} Emphasis added by author.
nition and redefinition of the self, signifying new affiliations.”

Individu-
als demonstrate wealth, certain lifestyles, class affiliation or culture and suzhi through patterns of consumption. In the end, individual identities are always bound to group affiliations. It is the (seemingly) free choice between different status groups that enables individuals to show their individuality. Consumption thus empowers social actors in China to “construct social identities and relations out of a wider social environment. […] By consuming, each consumer can also find out his or her moral and social value, and discover his or her individual identity.”

This process is closely linked to the display of social status. Patterns of consumption equally show social actors’ horizontal as well as vertical positioning in society—that is, their social status and affiliation with certain social groups.

It goes without saying that the economic reforms also spawned more orientation towards consumption in the population. As pointed out above, the Chinese government had a particular interest in increasing domestic consumption to spur on the economy. From the mid-1990s, it thus gradually provided additional leisure time, with higher-income earners (skilled employees and party cadres) gaining the greatest number of free days.

With spare time on the rise, consumption increased rapidly. Most of my interviewees exhibit indicators of consumerism, defined as a belief and value system in which consumption and acquisition rituals (e.g., shopping) are naturalized as sources of self-identity and meaning in life, goods are avidly desired for nonutilitarian [sic] reasons such as envy provocation and status seeking [sic], and consuming replaces producing as a key determinant of social relations.

Basically, this focus on consumption when it comes to human relations and status-seeking, is shared by interviewees who believe in social mobility and those who think that society is divided. I will come back to this later.

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6.5.2 Philanthropy

Consumption is an important form of conspicuous status display and production. However, it is not the only way. For example, social status can also be attained by actively “contributing to society” ("为社会作出贡献"). Enterprises regularly utilise philanthropic engagement to increase their reputation. In China, engagement in public welfare also helps companies to improve social relationships with local authorities and thus often propels their business opportunities.\(^{588}\) During the last few decades, volunteering was thriving, while the numbers of private individuals who engaged in philanthropy were steadily increasing.\(^{589}\) This development might indicate that engaging in public charity may also raise individuals’ social status.\(^{590}\) After all, the widespread discourse on “valuable people”, that is, people who are useful for society, suggests that conspicuous contributions to society can significantly improve individuals’ social standing. And how could one possibly contribute more obviously than by donating to charity?

Individual commitment to society occupies a central position in most of my respondents’ view of society. While the functionalist world view puts emphasis on individual development, which it suggests to be beneficial to society as a whole, it is also clear that contributing to society is logically at its heart. After all, individual career-making is presented as a means to the end of benefiting society—that is, individualism is promoted for the sake of the collective.\(^{591}\) In comparison, interviewees with a divided image of society criticise the rich and powerful for not serving society as a whole, but only their own selfish interests, while it is virtually impossible for members of the lower classes to either arrive at a social position that allows for a noteworthy contribution to society or to get an appropriate reward for the contribution they actually make.

\(^{588}\) E.g. Cheung (2014); Wang, Liu, Nan, Zhao and Zhang (2015).
\(^{589}\) Feng and Kang (2013).
\(^{590}\) Again, this behaviour is not unique to contemporary China. See e.g. Coats (1973) on charity in Victorian England or Baltzell (2011) on early twentieth century Jewish communities in the US.
\(^{591}\) One might think that emphasising how individual career-making benefits society merely constitutes a discursive strategy of justifying selfishness. However, this interpretation for the most part does not correspond to the patterns of representation found in my interviews, where individual development was often mentioned in the context of making a contribution to society—and not the other way round. However, as the “moral crisis” described above indicates, individualism and collectivism do indeed somewhat clash within the functionalist picture of society.
Either way, it is clear that the ability and willingness to contribute to the public good can serve as yet another status marker. One respondent who aspires to making such a contribution is Ms Feng. Having what she described to be an only slightly above average family background, she rose to wealth within a relatively short time. Ms Feng obtained a university education and worked for foreign enterprises for several years before she moved into a huge Chinese dragon head SOE, where she was able to work her way up into middle management. There she eventually met her boyfriend, 30 years older than her and a top SOE manager worth several million dollars, whose wife and daughter live in Canada. He presented her with several high-end cars and a spacious apartment in the heart of Beijing’s Central Business District, where our interview took place. Suddenly coming into money not only completely changed her lifestyle, but also her priorities:

In these ten years I have experienced a lot; [now I] am deeper than before. I think the biggest [thing] in life is that I could enhance myself in this process. I think this kind of enhancement is a change of substance. That is, ten years ago, maybe I had just graduated from university, I was still job hunting, was still wondering: ‘What work should I do?’ And [I] was still saving money. Saving money to do what? [I] wanted to buy an apartment, so I saved money. […] Now, what is more important is the spiritual level. Because I already have an apartment. [After] having obtained a living residence, I also settled my parents’ life. I also have many cars, so now I can think about how to make my career more successful. To do something others are incapable of. Maybe I will open up a shelter for stray dogs. I could be a volunteer; unable to provide [physical] strength, I would provide money. I think these are all very good feelings. But what I want more is: ‘What can I do for this society?’ If my own business could satisfy the living demands of everybody, right? These are the answers I think about. Let your life be more valuable, and this value is not only of a material nature. (F#2)

(Ms Feng, middle management of SOE, 34 years old, from Beijing)

The first status symbols Ms Feng aspired to after graduating from university were of a material nature. Only after having obtained an apartment, and even several cars, did she then start thinking about doing something for society. Research on volunteering and philanthropy in contemporary China indicates that her development mirrors a broader social trend: Common motivations for volunteering may include joy in social gatherings and
identity-seeking, but most importantly raising one’s social status and embodying a “sense of ‘self-entrepreneurialism’—that is, acquiring experiences and skills that may enhance one’s career opportunities in a competitive job market”. In other words, individual development and self-enhancement take centre stage even when it comes to altruism.

Logically speaking, one can only donate to charity if one has the means to do so. Status symbols may demonstrate great wealth, but engaging in philanthropy shows one is even rich enough to give money away without difficulty. In addition, while status symbols like houses or cars not only serve as status markers, but are also of practical use for their possessors, making donations is of only symbolic value for ordinary citizens and thus only beneficial for the donor with respect to the resulting enhancement in prestige, or sometimes, as indicated above, for the personnel networks they facilitate. Ms Feng wants to make her contribution to society by doing “something others are incapable of”. This claim indicates that self-actualisation plays an important role in her desire to make a contribution. Her statement makes it very clear that her philanthropy is driven by the hope of both enhancing her social status, while also finding self-fulfilment.

6.5.3 The Currency of Social Success

Aside from illustrating how philanthropy can be utilised for status enhancement, Ms Feng’s narration also shows the importance of wealth in demonstrating social success: By spending money, she “settles” her parents’ lives. Investing money in the opening of a sanctuary or making charitable donations is her idea of social engagement. And even her ultimate goal of “satisfy[ing] the living demands of everybody”—thus doing something for society and thereby adding some non-materialistic value to her life and the lives of others—is framed as opening a business for profit. As she explains later during the interview, she is thinking about opening a spa resort, since, according to her experience, stressed-out business people increasingly value recreation; thus the market opportunities should be good. In summary, even when Ms Feng talks about how her ambitions in life have tran-

592 Jeffreys and Su (2016), p. 43. See also Cen (2017); Law (2014).
593 In contrast, business companies may attract customers by showing social commitment, and celebrities may benefit in an ultimately monetary way from media coverage as well.
scended her material aspirations, money still remains the currency of success.

As laid out earlier, respondents draw on different criteria when constructing social status. Apart from mere economic wealth, factors like education, suzhi or the ability to serve society are also frequently mentioned as components of social status. Accordingly, purposefully displaying each of them may be used to construct one’s status. However, money plays a prominent role in each of these elements when it comes to displaying them. For example, as I just demonstrated, contributions to society are often sought through donations to welfare. With regard to education and human quality, ambitious social actors commonly try to show their suzhi by demonstrating “good taste” (“品味”) through consumption. “Pinwei has thus become the outward marker of the internal quality of suzhi, manifesting itself […] in people’s consumption habits.”\textsuperscript{594} Once more, this demonstrates that consumption serves as the primary “domain of subject construction”.\textsuperscript{595} And—again—consumption requires money.

Throughout my interviews money is widely acknowledged to constitute the most basic element of social status. Even those interviewees who value cultural resources more than money often establish that they only arrived at this prioritisation after having obtained visible status symbols in the first place. This observation is to some extent reminiscent of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, according to which basic physiological needs must be satisfied before individuals strive for higher level needs like safety, love and belonging, and esteem respectively. Finally, when all of these desires are satisfied, individuals ultimately start to crave for self-actualisation. While Maslow admitted that any of these needs may motivate individuals at any given time, he maintained that his pyramid scheme depicts the general pattern of human motivation.\textsuperscript{596} Accordingly, Mr Ning, who emphasises that to him material prosperity is of minor importance, recognises that for poorer people materialistic interests have priority:

Perhaps that is because I stand on a different level. Since [my] material [life] is secured, I want more spiritual satisfaction, don’t I? (N\#4)

(Mr Ning, director of private research institute, 37 years old, from Xi’an)

\textsuperscript{594} Yu (2014), p. 102.
\textsuperscript{595} Anagnost (2008), p. 12.
\textsuperscript{596} Maslow (1954).
At the same time, however, he also uses material status markers by stressing that he and his wife own an apartment of more than 130 square metres and have two cars (one being a company car, but the other one privately owned). And while some of my respondents heavily criticise the surging materialism, sometimes contrasting today’s social practices with those of Mao-era society, the very same interviewees also wish to have more money themselves.⁵⁹⁷ Maybe this seeming contradiction can be explained by the fact that in a moneyed society where consumption is a precondition for identity-formation, those who are unable to afford participation in consumption remain socially invisible without any means to display or even find their own identity.⁵⁹⁸ As Li Zhang asserted, “[t]he shift toward a property-centered perspective of worth represents a deep rupture in the construction of [...] selfhood”.⁵⁹⁹ In today’s Chinese society, “‘value’, in a material sense, has become a key indicator of worth”.⁶⁰⁰

As Thomas Kron illustrated, moneyed societies—not only China—tend to suffer from a “modern dilemma of esteem” (“modernes Wertschätzungs-dilemma”)⁶⁰¹: Something can only serve as a foundation for social status and esteem if people have different amounts of it. Otherwise everybody would just be the same. Therefore, if social status and esteem are not awarded for inborn qualities or moral values but for hard earned money, competition spirals. Social actors are put in an antagonising relation to each other, which makes it very difficult to earn real esteem on a deeper level. The degree of respect individuals show for others in such societies tends to be contingent on their material wealth.⁶⁰² In line with these considerations, Xi’an-based shopkeeper Mr Jiang complains:

Many people suddenly become rich overnight. After they suddenly become rich their attitude is like: ‘I have money, I am God, I am everything.’ (J#1)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

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⁵⁹⁷ E.g. most prominently Mr Ma, a shoe designer in a private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an; Ms Gu, an SOE-factory worker, 31 years old, from Xi’an.
⁵⁹⁹ Zhang, Li (2010), p. 171.
6.6 Implications for Community Spirit

The combination of heavy pressure, a pervasive feeling of insecurity, seemingly inevitable intense social competition and moral unsettledness together heavily impact on community spirit. Most eye-catchingly, the sense of a ubiquitous social struggle has a deeply alienating effect on society. For one, the “neoliberal market ideology enforces atomization with all its political will”, since it deprives individuals of traditional safety nets and forces them to create their own biographies. In addition, the need to generate and represent social status by purchasing expensive status symbols pressures social actors into solely concentrating on making money. In answer to these circumstances, many social actors strictly focus on their individual profit.

While most interviewees feel uneasy about the pervasive sense of social competition at times, those who believe in social mobility at least see light at the end of the tunnel, which tends to motivate them to individually struggle towards it. In contrast, social actors who think that society is irreconcilably divided doubt that they or their children will ever be able to reach the source of that light, no matter how determined or talented they might be. Accordingly, the implications for community spirit differ slightly: Social actors who believe in social mobility view others as potential competitors. They thus eagerly concentrate on self-development to outdo others in the race to higher ranks of society. In the words of Ms Yin, “you can never be friends with a colleague, since work simply is not a place of friendship but of competition”. When applied to society as a whole, this attitude’s alienating effect becomes evident. A society composed of rivals seems likely to suffer from a lack of cooperativeness, as becomes evident from the current “trust crisis” several scholars have discussed. While this may be sufficient to cause societal problems, however, it seems rather un-

604 Ms Yang, wedding planner, 28 years old, from Beijing; informal conversation.
likely that social stability is threatened by collective actions in such an atmosphere of social alienation.605

In contrast, social competition’s alienating effect on individuals who see society as divided seems somewhat weaker. On the one hand, these social actors equally describe themselves as constantly struggling and fighting and, as such, in a rather tense relationship to others. On the other hand, however, their motivation for participating in the daily rat race is somewhat circumscribed by the impression that competition’s rewards are severely limited anyway. At the same time, these interviewees usually describe society in group-based “us against them” rhetoric. In their view, society is already divided into irreconcilable camps. From this perspective, they seem more likely to join in collective action against superiors. And, indeed, some of them even fantasise about a revolution, despite being unwilling to take the lead themselves.

According to Ulrich Beck’s individualisation thesis, people in late modern societies can no longer rely on traditional and communal sources for security and personal identity. Thus, they develop individual-centred strategies to cope with the tensions of life and are forced to concentrate on personal development.606

Standard biographies become elective biographies, ‘do-it-yourself biographies,’ risk biographies, broken or broken-down biographies. Even behind façades of security and prosperity, the possibilities of biographical slippage and collapse are ever present. Hence the clinging and the fear, even in the externally wealthy middle layers of society.607

Due to the individualisation of working biographies, social actors are increasingly left to their own devices. In the Chinese case, an aggravating factor is that public safety networks are not yet fully developed. “Even among those with stable incomes there is a sense of insecurity about managing the future in the face of rising unemployment, uncertain safety nets or support and the rising costs of public services for health care and education.”608

Moreover, China’s new social hierarchy is still relatively young and not yet well established. The lines between the only recently formed social strata are still blurry; thus social actors are frequently insecure about their own

605 Selcuk (2016) demonstrates convincingly how social alienation enhances the meaning of family as a safe harbour for the individual.
social standing. Under conditions of uncertainty, with senses of belonging and group identity highly endangered, social actors engage in status constructing rituals like conspicuous consumption or philanthropy to reassure themselves and others of their social position. Crucially, they are inclined to long for role models or guidelines. This seems to be especially true for those of humble background who aspire to climb the social ladder. Take for example Ms Duanmu, a private enterprise manager who has lived in Beijing for almost twenty years. Originally from rural Hebei, she was the only student from her village to successfully enrol in a regular university. In fact, she even managed to attend the prestigious Chongqing University—one of China’s key national universities. Keen on returning to northern China, she was assigned to an SOE in Beijing upon graduation. There she attained permanent residence permission for Beijing. After two years she moved into the private economy, where she established a stellar career. One of the most eye-catching themes running throughout her interview is her strong desire for normality, which is apparent even on the verbal level of the interview. For instance, she describes that her rural origin made qualifying for university more difficult than it was for urban children, which she denominates “ordinary people’s children” (“寻成人孩子”). But instead of showing pride in achieving a university place despite these difficulties, she seems rather embarrassed to talk about her rural background. As an outsider new to urban life, she concentrated on fitting in and being like everybody else in university. She maintained this attitude when moving as an out-of-towner to Beijing.609 In fact, her striving for normality is very much similar to the process of “adapting to society” described in chapter five, which respondents across the board deem so important for social and professional success. In both cases, social actors screen society for what is “normal” to subsequently adapt to this behaviour. Crucially, this readiness to adapt to commonly recognised behavioural patterns conflicts with proactively trying to shape society. Firstly, adapting to society is diametrically opposed to changing society. Secondly, publicly acknowledged forms of conduct do not include anything which could lead to political upheavals or the like.

609 Ms Duanmu, upper management of private enterprise, 40 years old, from Beijing.
6.7 Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, in the course of China’s quickly proceeding social stratification and in the face of declining upward mobility rates, social actors are heavily pressured to compete for social status. This feeling is further intensified by state-sponsored discourses on overpopulation and lacking resources. In consequence, individuals feel pushed to actively struggle for social status. The resulting pervasive sense of competition exerts especially heavy pressure on the younger generations. It stands in stark contrast to the state-sponsored discourse of a harmonious society, which scholars commonly view as a (rhetorical) tool with which to stabilise Chinese society in the face of increasing social cleavages. The social reality my respondents describe indeed seems to be far from harmonious. As is apparent from their interviews, human conduct is framed by several factors like

the fierce competition based on the ‘jungle law’, lack of social security, including old-age care of the parents, which constitutes emerging burdens especially for the only child (Liu 2006), credentialism, widespread corruption and consumerism. These all seem to teach people that it is oneself and one’s family that is the most reliable welfare agency for individual wellbeing.

In the absence of binding moral guidelines, social actors thus increasingly focus on their own profit and sometimes do not even bother about harming others. This feeling of an evil dog-eat-dog struggle has a highly alienating effect on society, especially with regard to those who believe in individual social mobility. In their opinion, struggling may be hard but in the long run worthwhile, since those determined enough will eventually be rewarded. In comparison, social actors who think society is divided are more likely to unite with other members of their own social stratum, since they doubt that their daily struggle is going anywhere.

Either way, individuals feel compelled to struggle their way through a society in which others tend to be viewed as mere competitors. Competition is sought through self-enhancement and self-development—that is, the attempt to gain professional skills and increase one’s suzhi. As Ann Anagnost observed, “[w]hereas the suzhi discourse encourages the individual to run faster, consumerism serves as a moving carrot hanging in front

of the running individual.” Accordingly, highly desirable consumer goods await those who succeed in climbing the social ladder. The consumption of luxury goods not only functions to show but also to establish social status. Given how fierce competition is, individuals proudly frame their wealth as hard and bitterly earned. Widely acknowledged consumer goods like houses, cars and branded high-tech devices serve as the most common status markers, which display and generate social status at the same time. Prestigious social positions need to be made visible in order to reassure their possessors and others alike. While the consumption of luxury products is the most common way of doing so, engaging in philanthropy is a further status marker of increasing popularity. In the final analysis, the forms of status production and display all boil down to money being the currency of success. In the end, conspicuous behaviour most of all expresses a fundamental desire to cement one’s belonging to a certain status group and the subsequent willingness to adapt to commonly recognised modes of conduct.

To sum up, social change in reform-era China most notably affects social actors’ interpersonal relations in two ways. On the one hand, the compulsion for social struggle alienates social actors from each other, pressuring them to strictly focus on self-development. On the other hand, high status insecurity facilitates social actors’ willingness to adapt to generally accepted behavioural patterns. While the first trend separates individuals from each other, the latter promotes assimilation. Despite their opposed direction, both tendencies do not cancel each other out, but rather concur to nurture a climate of political disinterest.

7. Psychological Responses: Coping with Social Change

7.1 Introduction

During the last chapters, we have seen how social change affects individual lives. Simultaneous individualisation processes and declining chances for social advancement force social actors to constantly struggle to muddle through and impact heavily on interpersonal relations in general. With individuals increasingly alienated from each other, their feelings of social belonging are endangered. Consumerism offers an opportunity to display affiliation to much-admired social groups, but at the same time contributes to soaring materialism, which further threatens the self-esteem of the less well-off. To make matters worse, China’s moral value system was shaken to its foundations in the course of reform-era transformations. Social actors are exposed to various sources of insecurity and uncertainty. How do they cope with the arising multidimensional, heavy pressure? Are social actors paralysed or are they rather prepared to fight back? To what extent do they try to actively resolve urgent social issues that hamper their own development? This chapter aims to answer these questions.

In an environment like China, where the whole society was turned upside down within a short time, it is safe to say that everybody has experienced some degree of social mobility. Social status change either takes the shape of absolute mobility in relation to one’s former social position or of relative social mobility, as compared to the fluctuating rest of society. Thus, social status change is literally everywhere. How do individuals come to terms with their experiences of social stratification processes? More specifically, do social actors’ experiences of social mobility impact on their sense of efficacy and on their readiness for civic participation? Does it make a difference whether they believe in individual social mobility or think that society is divided?

The next section summarises common responses to individual social ascent. Subsequently, six strategies of coping with individual social decline are presented in depth. Each of these strategies is discussed with regard to the underlying agency constructions, which hint at interviewees’ sense of self-efficacy. The question of belief in either individual social mobility or a divided society is addressed throughout the chapter. In conclusion, all the findings from this chapter are discussed in terms of their prospective po-
tential to empower social actors to actively speak or even stand up for their interests.

7.2 Reactions to Individual Social Ascent

As laid out in earlier chapters, interviewees who believe in social mobility engage in a mixture of adaption to and intentionally distinguishing themselves from society to achieve professional success. Knowing which skills are socially esteemed and observing society’s rules are seen as preconditions of self-development into an outstanding individual with prospects of rising to a position of social prestige. Sternly concentrating on their careers, individuals commonly limit their attention and, even more so, their actions to what benefits themselves. Highly individualised, social actors nevertheless often long for guidance. Quick social change entails feelings of disorientation and uncertainty. In the absence of established role patterns, individuals strive for conformity, as expressed through their consumer behaviour. But desires for belonging do not stop there.

As described in more detail in chapter six, private enterprise manager Ms Duanmu has lived in Beijing for almost twenty years. Originally an impoverished farmer’s daughter from the rural Hebei province, she graduated from one of China’s most prestigious universities and was assigned to an SOE in Beijing, where she obtained permanent residence permission. Later, she moved into the private economy and enjoyed a stellar career. Throughout her interview she displays a strong desire to be “normal”, which is a recurring theme throughout her life. When Ms Duanmu describes important changes in her life, she hardly ever mentions intrinsic personal reasons for her various decisions, but always hurries to stress that her behaviour complies with general social patterns. For example, when talking about changing her job several times, she emphasises:

Nowadays it’s very hard for people to… There are only comparatively few who are able to work in a company for several dozens of years. In general, being able to work for ten years is relatively long. I think normally, on average, [employees] just work for four or five years at a company. Today’s society is just like that. (E#1)

(Ms Duanmu, upper management of private enterprise, 40 years old, from Beijing)
Actually, Ms Duanmu was never axed. She initiated all her job changes for career reasons. Nevertheless, her quote invokes the impression that she had no other choice but to leave her former employers. Throughout her interview she is keen to depict herself as an ordinary person who just did what it took to be like everyone else. However, the notion of “being ordinary”, as she presents it, in essence excludes anybody below the ranks of the urban middle class. For her, striving for normality in essence means becoming part of the much-admired urban middle class—that is, climbing the social ladder and getting truly embedded up there. In her quest for a middle-class life, she shapes her self-presentation very much in accordance with what she thinks to be typical middle class. Given the huge difference between her background and current social position, it is no wonder that she is keen to avoid any mistakes that would endanger her social ascent.

Pierre Bourdieu introduced the notion of a social “habitus” to explain why the chances for social ascent were distributed unequally in 1970’s France. Accordingly, apart from determining diverging monetary investments in their children’s education, parents’ social status also instils their offspring with a milieu-specific habitus—that is, a mental structure that shapes individuals’ tastes, dispositions and ways of viewing society as well as their actual manners of social conduct. Crucially, habitus is ingrained deeply into individuals’ personalities in a way that makes it appear to be an innate quality. Habitus thus effectively functions as a means of distinction that separates members of different classes “naturally”. For example, members of the upper class may perceive members of the working class as vulgar and uncultivated, while the latter view the former as showy snobs incapable of “real work”—which for them in essence means physical labour. Therefore, members of both groups feel uncomfortable in each other’s company and “naturally” stick to those from their own group. Consequently, working-class children who aspire to climb the social ladder find it hard to negotiate their way through social events of classes whose conventions they are not accustomed to. In this respect, the habitus has a uniting function that endows members of the same class with a common language, thus excluding others from it.613 While Bourdieu emphasised how habitus separates social classes from one another and impedes upward mobility, I would like to stress its guiding function. Crucially, if aspiring social climbers are to succeed in their quest for social ascent, they need to consciously adapt to their destination class’s unconscious habitus—an exhausting but promising endeavour that most likely eventually changes

their own views of society, thus “naturalising” them into their new social stratum. But in contrast to Bourdieuan France with its old established social hierarchy, classes in contemporary China have only recently begun (re)shaping. Therefore, it is highly questionable that something like a unifying “middle-class habitus” has yet been fully established. In the absence of a guiding model, social actors are unsure how to behave and are thus prone to feelings of uncertainty with regard to their own social standing.

Psychological theory generally holds that uncertainty reduction is a basic human motive since “subjective uncertainty on an important (i.e., self-relevant) dimension […] is an aversive state which may be associated with feelings ranging from unease to fear.” Therefore, individuals strive for certainty in the aspects of life they regard to be most important. According to Turner’s Self Categorisation Theory, uncertainty reduction is chiefly sought through group affiliation.

Uncertainty arises when we discover that we disagree in our beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours with ‘similar’ others, where similar others can be defined as people whom we categorize as members of the same group as ourselves. Uncertainty is reduced when similar others agree with us, or when we can agree with similar others.

By seeking group affiliation, social actors attain certainty and, at the same time, generate positive feelings about themselves as well as their respective groups. Ms Duanmu’s example is therefore indicative of a broader social trend. Under the conditions of extraordinarily quick and extensive social change and in an atmosphere of insecurity, individuals long for role guidelines they can follow in their pursuit of social ascent to the newly emerging middle class.

In this mélange of desires for security and belonging in combination with the perceived need to be special in a way that grants competitive advantages on the labour market, the state-sponsored discourse on suzhi falls on fertile soil. Notions of moral and intellectual quality as determining factors of middle-class affiliation go well with the idea of individually earned social ascent.

Suzhi discourse assumes the centrality of the market as the natural domain of social activity and a privileged site of knowledge for, and in relation to, society and government. It also, through media and public cultural forms, provides pedagogic and practical advice to individuals, thus producing knowledge that helps citizen–subjects to survive market turbulences and cope with the destructive social impact of an ascending neoliberal economic order.\footnote{Sun, Wanning (2013), p. 33.}

Naturalised into common sense through a vast array of movies, newscasts and journal articles, suzhi discourse holds a clear set of guidelines on civilised individuals’ forms of conduct.\footnote{Sun, Wanning (2013), p. 34; Sun, Wanning (2009).} Suzhi discourse encourages social actors to strive for academic credentials, be disciplined and “serve the purpose of the state”.\footnote{Yu, Haiqing (2009), p. 139.} Crucially, mainstream conceptions of suzhi always stress the “quality individual’s” contribution to society as a whole in a way that resonates with functionalist views of society.\footnote{Sun, Wanning (2013), p. 36.} Therefore, voicing grievances about social issues in a cultivated, civilised way—and certainly not by taking collective action—is an integral element of this discourse.

With regard to political participation, suzhi discourse functions in two ways: On the one hand social actors in disfavour of collective action commonly accuse those in favour thereof of having low suzhi.\footnote{Tang (2013), p. 73.} On the other hand, there are examples of middle-class homeowners who instituted legal proceedings against development companies and even corrupt officials in charge of construction. Attempting to justify their actions, they usually highlight their commitment to the common good and portray themselves as “a ‘high-suzhi’ and responsible vanguard of modernisation and nation building”.\footnote{Tomba (2014), p. 57.} The prevailing suzhi discourse is open to empowering as well as disempowering interpretations. Either way, it at least seems to channel the airing of public grievances into publicly recognised modes. At the same time, the suzhi discourse fits with the elitist reading of the functionalist view of society in that it denies social actors of lower education the ability to participate in activities that shape society.

In summary, individuals react to general social change with a mixture of trying to distinguish themselves from society and adapting to society. In an insecure environment, social climbers from humble backgrounds especial-
ly are highly receptive to discourses that promise assistance and facilitate a sense of social belonging. The suzhi discourse in particular is very influential in sketching social actors’ modes of conduct.

7.3 Coping with Individual Status Loss or Unexpected Low Status

During my analyses, I found that interviewees’ individual positions in society are of the utmost importance to them. This is reflected by the fact that social status is one of the strongest sources of motivation for civic participation. The only issue of even greater importance to many of my interviewees is the social status and well-being of their children. However, as their narrations clearly show, they often interpret their children’s success as their own personal merit. The idea that their children could lose social status is among the greatest worries of many of my interviewees. According to psychological theorist Yang Kuo-Shu, Chinese individuals are characterised by a strong “familistic [sic] orientation” since it is typically “the family, rather than the individual, that is the basic structural and functional unit” of the self.624 This perception allows us to regard children’s social standing as an extended version of social actors’ own positions within society. If intergenerational social mobility is therefore defined as one aspect of personal social mobility, I would argue that a social actor’s social position is the strongest motive for civic participation. There may be individuals who participate for “weaker” causes, but if, conversely, not even an impending or actual loss in social status persuades individuals to take measures, it seems unlikely that they ever do so at all. Therefore, the next sections trace psychological responses to experiences of downward social mobility.

Accordingly, special focus is placed on interviewees’ accounts of personal agency, which enable us to draw conclusions about their sense of efficacy. Individuals with a high efficacy experience themselves as capable of producing a desired result. In contrast, people with a low efficacy may desire change, but feel unable to deliver the desired effect themselves. Potentially frustrating, this feeling admittedly might develop into a powder keg in the long run. Nevertheless, it is clear that the former group is, in general, more likely to participate socially in order to shape their environment.

Many of my interviewees have experienced some degree of factual loss in social status. Others had high aspirations, which remained unrealisable despite great efforts. Did these experiences turn them into furious activists, keen on social restructuring? How do ambitious individuals react to hierarchical stagnation in a society that promises social ascent to those who are competent and diligent? When looking for answers to these questions, I identified a total of six coping strategies social actors apply in response to declining social status. These strategies are not mutually exclusive. While some of them are apparently applied consciously, others most likely constitute subconscious or unconscious reactions. Thus, the terms ‘coping strategy’ and ‘coping mechanism’ are used interchangeably. I also do not claim this list to be complete. The aim is not to postulate a classification system of psychological coping mechanisms, but merely to examine how China’s societal change possibly impacts on desires for social or even political participation.

7.3.1 Problem-Solving: Doing Something about it

The most active and powerful reaction to individual status loss is unquestionably the direct attempt to change its cause. There is a vast range of literature on protest movements in contemporary China. Laid-off SOE workers and migrant workers who fight against dire terms of work under China’s dormitory labour regime especially are in the spotlight when it comes to organising unapproved protest rallies or strikes.625 Some scholars have speculated about these protests’ “potential for unintended and deliberative transformation […] into broad based, multi-unit protests against the same local officials”.626 However, empirical evidence shows that, for the time being, activism is for the most part clearly targeted at satisfying individual material claims rather than changing the system. As the labour force appears to be fragmented into various interest groups without a common class consciousness, protest remains cellular and often lacks leading figures. Again, a stern focus on individual interests is observable.

Nevertheless, some social actors do indeed fight to change society. In the following, two cases of interviewees from my own sample who aim at actively reshaping society by solving the problem that caused their loss in social status are presented. The cases were intentionally selected for their strong difference, since comparing highly diverging cases allows for identifying variations as well as general patterns in civic participation.

Ms Du is a journalist in her early forties who grew up in a rural area in southern Jiangxi province. Remarkably, she managed to attend Peking University—one of China’s leading universities, where she successfully graduated with a master’s degree. During her graduate studies, she married a fellow student and fell pregnant without previously obtaining permission for a child. In the early 1990s, married couples were still legally obligated to formally apply to have a baby. As she was soon to find out, her violation of the law was to have severe consequences for her future. Upon graduation she was assigned to the Central Party School in Beijing, where colleagues eventually found out that she had given birth to a child without permission. Subsequently, she was harassed at work in what she described as Cultural Revolution style and finally advised to quit her employment. Subsequently, she struggled to find employment at all for quite some time before she eventually found work at a public publishing house. Although the company was state-run and continued to hire new university graduates “within the system”, she was only given a less secure position “outside the system”. This discrimination infuriated her and she continued to seek a better job. Eventually she changed to another publisher, where she initially had good career prospects. However, due to some interpersonal problems with colleagues and her boss, she was later removed to a less important position, where she has remained ever since. In her view, her experiences of discrimination at the first publisher and the personal problems in the latter were both caused by the unfinished nature of economic reforms in the first place. For one, prior to the economic reforms, there was no distinction between inside and outside the system. Second, institutions now lack clear structures to determine explicit areas of responsibility for individual working posts. In Ms Du’s opinion this structural deficiency causes the constant conflicts between employees that she fell victim to. Being a journalist and belonging to the intellectual elite of China, she tried her best to change this situation. She conducted elaborate research on several social problems she sensed and wrote long articles on possible solutions. However, over the years she came to the conclusion that the current status quo benefits those in power, who are thus unwilling to change it. Disillusioned she states:
In order to change our current systematic corruption, the economic system needs fundamental reforms. Actually, everybody understands this issue very well. From the higher levels to the grassroots, everybody understands this very well. I also made a special report on corruption, thinking from a systematic angle. After finishing this special report on corruption, I never worked [on this topic] again, because I think that I fully expounded the problem, including fully expounding the way out for the system. If these issues are not solved, that is, if there is no fundamental reform of the system, if there is no fundamental political reform, then it is utterly impossible to ‘oppose corruption and advocate honesty’.

(Ms Du, journalist, 43 years old, from Beijing)

Her research also included work on other urgent problems she perceived—most importantly the lingering rural–urban divide. Coming from a village herself, she observes the discrimination against rural residents very closely. She carefully describes the fate of one of her nephews, whose parents left him with his elderly grandmother while working as labour migrants in the coastal cities. Unable to see his parents for years, he developed a mental condition that requires medical treatment. Unfortunately, his superstitious grandmother refuses to give him his medication, thus contributing to further compounding his illness. The bitter irony in this is that his parents only left the village to save money for his education and hopefully a brighter future in the first place. Ms Du narrates the systematic discrimination against the rural population at length. Unable to make money in the countryside, villagers can only move to the cities for work, which in turn means choosing between leaving their children with relatives, who are often unable to care for them adequately or take them to the cities where they are prohibited from attending upper middle school. Ms Du concludes that while she was lucky enough to have been born two decades earlier, rural children in today’s China have no real opportunity for social ascent at all.

Ms Du’s agency changed along with her view of society. Despite her extremely humble background, she was able to attend one of the nation’s top universities and she firmly believed in fair chances of individual social mo-

627 “Opposing corruption and advocating honesty” (fan fu chang lian, 反腐倡廉) is a slogan widely propagated by the CCP in its public anti-corruption campaigns.
bility for everybody when she was younger. As a journalist and member of China’s intellectual elite she felt obliged to contribute to the country’s improvement. Given her social position, this attitude was absolutely consistent with a functionalist view of society. However, in the face of her own experiences in the working world and in view of her rural relatives’ fate, her satisfaction with the very possibility of social mobility gradually decreased. Today, she views society as severely divided and plagued by all sorts of problems. And while she initially tried to actively contribute to solving urgent social issues by elaborating on practicable solutions, over time she increasingly came to think that those on top of society profit from society’s status quo and thus intentionally refuse to change it. Proven ineffective over and over again, her formerly active agency thus gradually turned into passivity. Over the years, continuous frustrations convinced her that society is divided and deprived her of her formerly strong sense of efficacy.

A second interviewee who tries to actively shape society is the 40-year-old paraplegic Mr Zhang. Only possessing a junior middle school education, on the surface he could not have been more different from the elite university graduate Ms Du, and indeed he was reluctant to show any commitment to society’s betterment initially. However, this situation changed after he was in a car accident that left him partly paralysed at the age of 27. His new situation makes him very uncomfortable, not only because he lost the ability to walk, but also because he feels strongly discriminated against:

If this society had compassion for you, these handicapped people wouldn’t mind going out. The only [difference] would be that previously they walked upright, and now they are sitting in a wheelchair. Now, when they go out, many of my friends say, when you go out others look at you as though you were a monkey. Therefore, when going out, [my friends] bend their heads and wear sunglasses. The outside world looks at you in a discriminatory way. (Z#3)

(Mr Zhang, operator of a hostel for the paraplegic, 36 years old, from Beijing)

It took Mr Zhang as many as two years to accept his fate to some degree. Originally from the western province of Ningxia, he then went to Beijing for rehab. After arriving in the capital city, he soon made the decision to stay in order to set up a barrier-free hostel for paraplegics, who usually face a lot of trouble when travelling in China with its not yet very well developed infrastructure for disabled people. By accumulating donations, he
has been able to offer low-priced accommodation of decent quality. He also organises a variety of joint activities and get-togethers for the guests at his hostel. His main aim is to provide a platform for exchange of thought and, crucially, identity formation of paraplegics. In his opinion, the disabled need to realise that they are not inferior to non-handicapped people. He also organises expert lectures, since he thinks that a sufficient knowledge on their disability is important to protect the handicapped from fraudulent quacksalvers. Besides this, he also gives public talks on the situation of disabled people in China, to raise public awareness and thus contribute to this group’s general social standing. In his work, he always emphasises that the paralysed are just ordinary people with a few additional special needs. He advocates paraplegics’ adaption to society, while also holding that they, at the same time, inevitably depend on society’s acceptance if they are to enhance their general social standing. Accordingly, his work aims at both sides.

My sample is divided between individuals who believe in individual social mobility and others who feel that their social status is inevitably bound to their social in-groups’ status. Usually varying views on this issue are products of different interpretations of a more or less identical social reality. In comparison, Mr Zhang’s case is special in that he can indeed not change his in-group. Bound to his wheelchair in a society that, according to his description, still heavily discriminates against the disabled, his only option for social ascent is to contribute to society’s revaluation of this group. However, apart from his own special situation, he believes that peo-

628 Mr Zhang’s case also raises the question of how to determine which of the various groups individuals are part of compulsively define their identity. In fact, this question has puzzled some of the finest thinkers since the Age of Enlightenment at least. For one, French philosopher Michel Foucault established that the subjective positions individuals may embrace in their search for identity are always constituted by “historically-specific discursive practices”. See Foucault (2003 [1970]); Hall (1996). However, Foucault does not answer why specific individuals invest in or oppose these positions. For Stuart Hall, individuals’ capacity to relate differently to subjective positions they are involuntarily roped into is evidence of the free human will—a statement obviously open to discussion. Secondly, thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau or Judith Butler have stressed that identities are always constructed in relation to a “constitutive outside”—that is, in “relation to what is not”. Derrida (1981); Laclau (1990); Butler (1990); Hall (1996). Building on these considerations and keeping my sample in mind, I would argue that social actors often first experience being predominately defined by others in regard to one specific feature of their physical appearance or social position before then starting to define themselves in light of this quality.
People are, in principle, able to accomplish anything they want, if only they are determined and self-confident (自信) enough:

Some people say: ‘My business is not successful, I have no opportunities.’ I say that is extricating oneself. I personally mainly rely on being energetic, rely on working hard. People should definitely not be knocked down by themselves. Foremost, [you] can’t be knocked down by yourself. Secondly, if not even you believe in yourself, who else can believe in you? (Z#1)

(Mr Zhang, operator of a hostel for the paraplegic, 40 years old, from Beijing)

With this attitude, Mr Zhang offers a unique blend of views from John C. Turner’s ideal types: “belief in social mobility” and “believe in social change.” In my own analyses, I found social actors in the former group to be generally self-enterprising and determined to achieve personal change, while individuals in the latter category often suffer from a relatively low sense of efficacy that prevents them from actively struggling for their group’s social standing, although people in this group sometimes indicate that they would follow a rebellious leader if one was to appear. Mr Zhang combines the active agency and self-enterprising spirit promoted by a functionalist view of society with the sobering understanding that his fate is indeed bound to the general situation of the paraplegic.

By contrasting examples of active problem-solving as different as Ms Du’s and Mr Zhang’s, some cornerstones of this coping strategy become apparent: Clearly, only individuals who possess a certain degree of efficacy try to actively change society. In a way, Mr Zhang views society as divided between disabled and non-disabled people. This is a distinction impossible to overcome; thus his reaction is to fight for better conditions for the disabled in general. In contrast, Ms Du’s belief in social mobility was gradually turned into its opposite as she experienced being unable to bring about any noteworthy social change despite great efforts. In essence, experiencing being ineffective made her slowly lose her efficacy and thus increasingly reluctant to keep working for society’s betterment. In comparison, Mr Zhang regularly encounters the gratitude of his home’s guests, who reassure him that he is able to make a difference. It seems safe to say that only social actors who see visible outcomes of their social commitment or experience some sort of recognition are likely to continue their work over extended periods. From my sample, I would also suggest that only individuals who are, to some degree, affected by a certain social issue actively start...
to work on it. But even when directly affected, not everybody has the courage or feels the need to try to change society as a whole. For most social actors, it seems much easier to confine themselves to striving for individual improvement—especially if they believe in individual social mobility.

7.3.2 New Field of Activity: Doing Something Else

Compared to trying to change society, the acquisition of a new field of activity seems to be a much more moderate way of coping with social decline. However, both patterns have in common that individuals actively take action to once more improve their lives. Thus, agency constructions are overtly active.

In chapter four, I introduced Ms Gu from Xi’an, who constantly struggles with pondering gender roles. After having left her state work unit for an alluring career in the private economy, she eventually returned to her old work unit under the pressure of her mother-in-law, who wanted to see her in a more stable and child-friendly working situation. She complied with her husband’s mother but complains heavily about the low salary, which in her eyes equates to a serious loss of social status. Nevertheless, Ms Gu also tries to compensate for this loss with increased commitment at her workplace, where she functions as a team leader and represents the interests of her co-workers:

In our team, I am a, ahem, I am also a little team leader of our small team. Everybody calls me ‘warehouse head’. I am the head of the warehouse, so everybody calls me ‘warehouse head’. Then, if there are any contradictions in our work unit, I always, always dissolve them to the best of my abilities. (G#3)

(Ms Gu, SOE-factory worker, 31 years old, from Xi’an)

Ms Gu emphasises that her voluntary engagement at her work unit increases her social status among her colleagues. Interestingly, she also describes several instances where she demonstrated a high degree of self-confidence and unwillingness to compromise in the face of her superiors. This behaviour stands in stark contrast to her descriptions of her position at home, where she deliberately takes up a subordinate role to her husband and mother-in-law, although it makes her uncomfortable at times. Her
new field of activity at work thus provides her with an alternative platform for status-seeking and being respected.

Ms Gu’s case is exemplary for several interviewees who are usually quite bothered by their status loss and find it sometimes hard to keep a positive attitude. Nevertheless, they all work at accepting their new situations and making the best of them, usually hurling themselves into their new jobs in an attempt to at least have a moderate career. In this active attempt to reshape their social positions in a more favourable way, they differ from another group of interviewees who apply merely discursive strategies in order to reshape their social positions. Evidence from experimental psychological research shows that individuals sometimes respond to problems by increasing their commitment to the domain in which they experience difficulties. However, as the next sections show, individuals may just as likely respond conversely by disengaging themselves from the issue in question. In a nutshell, they “may cope with negative experiences in an important or valued realm of experience by becoming reactively less or reactively more invested in that identity”.629

7.3.3 Changing one’s Perspective: Talking About it Differently

Another coping strategy I detected among my interviewees is putting one’s individual fate into a broader social context. Instead of actively doing something about their social status, these individuals rather adopt another perspective on what has happened. For example, laid-off workers often look at their own misfortune from their former employer’s angle. They stress the economic necessity of being laid-off, while also emphasising that many of their former colleagues have been laid off at the same time. Mr Tai is a 53-year-old pensioner from Xi’an. Laid off at the age of forty in the course of his former work unit’s privatisation, he eked out a living through occasional jobs until eventually entering the regular pension scheme at the age of fifty. Despite having faced great difficulties during his ten years of being laid off, he talks about his loss of work—which he calls being “internally retired” [“内退”]—from the perspective of his old working unit:

Internal retirement... How should I put it? That's just like reducing the company's burden, because you just provide for too many people, and can't find [enough] work. Like this, we just belonged to the bulk of internal retirees. (T#1)

(Mr Tai,
laid-off SOE worker,
53 years old, from Xi’an)

Mr Tai’s agency is extremely passive. Throughout his interview he evokes the impression that his life was never actively shaped by himself, but rather just happened to him. Crucially, all the major turning points in his life were part of larger socio-political processes. Therefore, he sees status change as something that happened to many people at the same time. This view seems to make coping with his loss of status easier. But while this interpretation of status loss as a collective process on the surface might appear as indicative of steep social divisions, Mr Tai nevertheless holds that individual social mobility is possible. While he sees himself as not skilled enough to prosper in China’s new economy, he hopes for his well-educated son to achieve social ascent. After all, Mr Tai is generally in favour of social changes. I shall later turn to hopes for intergenerational status change as a further coping strategy. For now it is enough to say that interviewees who believe in individual social mobility tend to view their individual loss in social status from a macro perspective. Besides this, experiencing individual downward mobility as part of a collective process in general dampens individual anger.

While interviewees who believe in social mobility often adopt more abstract perspectives to explain their individual fate, those who think society is divided similarly point to the socio-political environment as a cause of their own misery. Naturally, their evaluations of their own fate are much more unfriendly. In his studies on peasants in different parts of the world, James Scott coined the concept of “the weapons of the weak” to describe “everyday forms of symbolic resistance”, like ridicule, irony, petty acts of non-compliance and disbelief in elite worship. These behavioural patterns demonstrate that subordinates have not consented to dominance. Similarly, interviewees who view Chinese society as divided use irony to turn

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public discourses on those in power. Mr Ma, who directly blames society for the fact that his actual social status lags behind his expectations, states:

The Chinese Communist Party’s thought control is frightening. This includes the internet. When we surf the internet, if we publish something that is a tiny little bit unfavourable to the Communist Party, it will immediately... We say... Doesn’t China talk about social harmony all the time? We call it, we are in the habit of calling this ‘harmonising it’ [out of existence]. (M#3)

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

During the last few years, the spread of such political phrases or messages via social media has aroused attention among China scholars. In particular, the question of whether surging online criticism of the government will eventually translate into real-world based action has been raised.632 In Mr Ma’s view, the government tries to make citizens believe society is harmonious rather than creating real social harmony. The widespread phrase of ‘harmonising something out of existence’ is a perfect example of Scott’s weapons of the weak. It picks up the state-sponsored discourse of a harmonious society to turn it upside down in an attempt to show that society is actually not harmonious at all. Accordingly, individuals reject the popular belief that their misery is their own fault but rather blame it on the sociopolitical system. Scott believes these forms of criticism are the first steps in subordinate social groups’ development of political consciousness and are thus preconditions for factual activism, which is, however, mostly prevented by the pressure to ensure one’s daily existence and fear of those in power.633 Within my sample, those who view Chinese society as divided especially excel in voicing bitter cynicism against authorities. However, those who engage in ironic talk the most are usually exactly those with the lowest personal agency. In line with my argument, Lili Wang concludes from her in-depth study on Chinese microblogs that “a higher level in online expressive activities fails to translate into increased participation in real-world based individual and collective action with high transaction costs”.634

In summary, interviewees often adopt macro perspectives when explaining their individual loss of social status or unexpected inability to climb the social ladder. Nevertheless, some of them maintain that individual social mobility is possible. Therefore, they tend to view their own fate as justified by both their individual shortcomings and socio-political necessities which benefit society as a whole. They often obtain strength from perceiving themselves as part of a cohort of similarly fated peers. In comparison, individuals who believe that society is divided arrive at a very different conclusion when equally taking a higher perspective. They usually blame the state for their own misfortune and react with bitter cynicism.

7.3.4 Switching Status Dimension: Talking About Something Else

Analytical psychology stresses that adjusting one’s self-perception is one way of coping with changes in social standing. For example, in the face of “repeated failures on the job, individuals may self-protectively deemphasise the importance of work” for their individual self-esteem, thereby protecting themselves from psychological harm. I found a similar strategy among my interviewees. Most commonly they present their ability to make money or achieve certain academic credentials as chief constituents of their position within the social hierarchy. In comparison, some interviewees who have previously lost social status simply switch the dimension they draw on for the construction of social status. For example, 50-year-old SOE worker Mr Song, who once dreamed of attending university but just missed the university entrance exams’ minimum score, stresses that he successfully educated his daughter, who is now pursuing a favourable career:

I think I educated this child very successfully. That is, my little child is now 26 years old. After graduating from university she went to work for a company. She worked for four years, […] she is already a mid-level human resource manager; she is already a human resource ‘H’ manager, a ‘CMB’ manager with salary and benefits. I feel that she really gains me a lot of honour (laughs). Someone like me, of course… How should I say that? I am very grateful. Although some things I did not accomplish myself, but I gave my whole life’s love to [my] child. I educated [my] child very… on the one hand, sometimes I was very

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stern, of course being stern also has disadvantages. But on the whole, I think I educated my child quite successfully. (S#1)

(Mr Song, SOE worker, 50 years old, from Beijing)

Crucially, Mr Song did not actually change his behaviour in reaction to his own stagnation in the social hierarchy. It seems most likely that Mr Song’s daughter would have had her career anyway, that is, regardless of her father’s occupational advancement. However, while Mr Song has not taken action to find an alternative way of constructing his status, he does indeed present himself as an active agent in his daughter’s success, in which he takes great pride. In short, the rationale behind his self-depiction is that while his professional success is limited, he has been highly successful in educating his child, at least. By explaining his daughter’s success with his own educational skills, he claims active responsibility for her achievements. In my sample, this strategy is particularly widespread among women, who either claim they have successfully raised outstanding children or backed up their husbands, who otherwise have allegedly been unable to pursue their careers. Another variation in this strategy is exhibited by street vendor Mr Cai. Despite admitting to violating the law by selling bootlegged DVDs, he also stresses that what he does is nevertheless socially valuable:

In theory, it is a little bit wrong [...]. Actually, it also, to my understanding, it also benefits people, that is, in a spiritual respect. (C#4)

(Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing)

During his interview, Mr Cai indicates several times that the feeling of doing something illegal actually bothers him a lot. By stating how he nevertheless contributes to society, he switches the dimension of his status construction from legality to his usefulness to society. Just like Mr Song, who talks about being a successful father instead of talking about being an ordinary worker, he just adopts a different angle, but does not actually change what he is doing. However, at least he describes himself in an active way as somebody who has accomplished something prestigious.
7.3.5 Person-switching: Talking About Someone Else

In comparison, switching the personal position one draws on to construct social status displays even less active agency. For example, the above-mentioned Ms Gu emphasises her husband’s high status at their shared workplace several times, which happens to also be beneficial to herself. These descriptions completely lack active agency. Neither does she portray herself as contributing to his success, nor does she take pride in being able to conquer this remarkable husband. Her narrations at this point rather give the impression that his glory has rubbed off on her. Compared to the coping mechanisms presented above, position switching is a relatively weak strategy, since social actors’ self-esteem is entirely due to another person they happen to be related to.

One special type of position-switching is to hope for intergenerational status change that is yet to occur. Mr Ying is a middle-aged laid-off SOE worker from Xi’an, who is quite unsatisfied with his new occupation at a private car repair shop. Nevertheless, believing in individual social mobility, he talks regretfully about how he failed to be a better student in his youth, thus ending up in a badly managed company, which was eventually shut down. The death of his first wife twenty years ago had left him traumatised and it took him ten long years to consider getting married again. All in all, Mr Ying is rather negative about his own life, even crying during the interview, stating clearly that he has not much to look forward to. The only glimmer of hope in his interview is his five-year-old son, on whom he pins all his hopes:

I hope he studies well. Let’s see… Anyway, if he doesn’t study well… He’d best study well, [but] if he isn’t good at studying, he might as well develop a speciality. Look for a speciality and let him develop a speciality […]. I hope he becomes the future president of the nation (laughs); that’s my hope, isn’t it? I guess this won’t come true […]. This child quite likes to draw; let’s see how he develops in this regard. Educate him in painting or the like. Besides this, when my colleague saw him he immediately said my child’s fingers are particularly long.

Learning to play the piano, I don’t know if he has this talent, now that his fingers are so long. (I#2)

(Mr Ying, laid-off SOE worker, car mechanic, 46 years old, from Xi’an)

While not having much to say about his own life and future hopes, Mr Ying is full of aspirations for his little son. But—crucially—when describing them, he does not present himself in an entrepreneurial way like Mr Song, who portrays himself as responsible for his daughter’s successful career. In comparison, Mr Ying remains much more passive, even when presenting his hopes for his son’s future. One might feel tempted to argue that this comparatively weak expression is due to the merely hypothetical nature of his wishes. However, several other interviewees talk with great determination about how they plan to turn their children into successful individuals, thus following a strategy of status dimension switching.

7.3.6 Trying to Exit the Game: Quitting the Conversation

Actively planning to turn one’s children into high achievers and passively hoping for them to climb the social ladder have one fundamental belief in common: the conviction that individual social mobility is after all possible. In contrast, some social actors think society is divided. As Björn Alpermann showed in his in-depth study of recipients of China’s urban minimum livelihood assistance (低保), members of some marginal groups feel excluded to an extent where even their children are deprived of the chance of social advancement, since getting a decent education is unaffordable for them. Deprived of any hope, some individuals even openly talk about considering suicide to end their desperate situation.637 Since these social actors were often ill or even in need of care, the feeling of being a burden on others may have played an important role in them pondering ending their lives. Except from this distinctive feature, the suicidal tendencies described by Alpermann in a way have a lot in common with one further psychological reaction to status loss that I identified within my own sample: The hope to leave China—that is, to flee the situation, albeit staying alive.

As introduced in more detail in chapter five, Mr Jiang is a young man from Xi’an, who unfortunately had a series of extremely negative experiences with the authorities. It started when his brother, who is three years younger than he is, was born during the early phase of the birth policies. Thereafter, his parents lost their jobs and received high monetary penalties. His father, who saw no alternative but to do some private business, disappeared later after meeting some debtors. According to Mr Jiang, the police were reluctant to help his mother search for his father. And as if that were not bad enough, his family’s home was demolished later in the course of urban redevelopment. When he thus participated in a rally for compensation, the then eighth-grader was expelled from school. Unable to receive any further formal education, he eventually became a migrant worker in Southern China, where he had plenty of unpleasant experiences with police corruption before coming back to Xi’an and opening a small shop. Due to the course of his life, he thinks extremely ill of the Chinese government, which in his opinion oppresses society. Feeling completely helpless, he dreams of emigration:

[I] am a little citizen who has been slightly harmed by this state a little bit. And then, I personally don’t have much education, [I] also don’t have much money, or very high academic credentials. Regarding my personal future, I just think I won’t come back before this state becomes better. Whenever I’m able to go abroad, when the conditions are suitable, I will immediately leave the country without hesitation. Immediately leave the country, until, I hope I will live to see China’s democratisation, so that I can come back. […] My own motherland, I can’t, there is nothing I can do to save her, but I don’t want to watch how she slowly degenerates. I can only go abroad and not look at her until she one day becomes better. Because I just haven’t got the ability to change this state. I can’t change this state myself in any way. (J#5)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

Throughout his life, Mr Jiang found his family members or himself victimised by authorities time and again and thus felt gradually deprived of his personal agency. Incapable of achieving his individual goals multiple times, he slowly internalised being unable to achieve individual social ascent, let alone change society on the whole. Highly dissatisfied with his current situation but completely lacking any efficacy, he now sees no way out but hoping to leave the country—an undertaking that, again, is easier
said than done and also requires a certain degree of active agency. Regardless of whether his aspiration will come true or not, it clearly exhibits Mr Jiang’s desperation and feeling of helplessness.

Mr Jiang is not the only one who thinks about relocating to another country. The tendency to flee to a place of perceived better chances, greater safety or larger stability is not uncommon in contemporary China. Successful businesswoman Ms Duanmu, who has experienced a meteoric career from humble beginnings, but thinks that the chances for individual mobility have been deteriorating over the last few years, asserts:

To date, the development of Chinese society, this situation, I think it is not normal. Therefore many people consider leaving the country, don’t they? To emigrate or something. I think now, actually emigration is something very good. Amongst other things, the commodity prices in many countries are cheaper than in China. Making investments abroad or living there after retirement should be very good.

(E#3)

(Ms Duanmu, upper management of private enterprise, 40 years old, from Beijing)

These considerations indicate that not only some of the more desperate people think about leaving China to improve their lives. Many social actors ponder emigration for investment reasons or in order to improve their children’s educational chances. Leaving the country thus also constitutes one strategy to promote intergenerational upward mobility or prevent future social decline in the face of a high degree of perceived insecurity and looming instability. Huge private capital outflows from China underline this argument. In 2015, the nation’s total capital outflow reached as much as one trillion US dollars for the first time ever, indicating investors’ lack of confidence in domestic investment opportunities. According to a survey by Barclays Bank from September 2014, “47 per cent of Chinese high net worth individuals said they planned to move abroad within the next five years.”

China scholars commonly explain this trend with especially rich households’ fear of being exposed as having participated in often, at best, semi-legal businesses. Accordingly, most if not all of China’s new super-rich citizens only managed to become wealthy by engaging, at least to

639 Bloomberg News (2016).
640 South Chinese Morning Post (2014).
some degree, in corrupt if not outright criminal behaviour. In the course of the Xi administration’s anti-corruption campaign, these capitalists would now try to get out of harm’s way. At the same time, in the face of the widening gap between the rich and the poor, “capital-flight incentives may likely reflect the views of many Chinese that fair opportunities to invest at home are scarce and they are losing confidence in the system.”

Both explanations point to the high degree of insecurity, which instils social actors with a fear of losing their social status.

In summary, fleeing the country is one possible coping strategy to escape from conditions that severely hamper social actors’ social ascent or even cause a loss of social status. In fact, in an atmosphere of great insecurity social actors may even try to evade future threats to their wealth and social status by leaving the country. One of this strategy’s preconditions seems to be the idea that individual or even intergenerational social ascent is made impossible by insurmountable social structures—be it the divide between those in power and the civil population or the divide between the haves and the have-nots.

### 7.4 Discussion

In summary, the reactions to social status change I identified are for the most part not empowering. Individuals in contemporary China are confronted with a high degree of insecurity with regard to their social positions. Therefore, they are generally keen on confirming their social status and ready to adapt to socially esteemed practices that promise enhancing chances for upward mobility. The state-sponsored suzhi discourse especially is influential on their behaviour. Accordingly, individuals can get somewhere in today’s Chinese society if they make big investments in their own education and career. In addition, individuals of suzhi behave properly and adopt “civilised” modes of problem-solving. The suzhi discourse opens up opportunities for social participation for the educated within the framework of officially recognised modes. For example, they might volunteer in civil organisations—behaviour the party state has strongly encouraged ever since it started to purposefully utilise such organisations in order to solve social problems cost-efficiently. By guiding the directions of their actions, the suzhi discourse also prevents the newly forming middle classes

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642 Yang and Björn (2014).
from opposing the government. Meanwhile, it also reinforces an elitist functionalist world view, according to which it is the privilege of the educated to actively shape society.

At the same time, social actors who successfully climb the social ladder frequently experience their ability to make a difference in their professional areas. Experiencing themselves as capable of bringing about change in their own field of proficiency enhances their sense of professional efficacy. Under these conditions they will most likely limit their actions to their professional realms. Again, this tends to reinforce a functionalist view of society, according to which successfully conducting the work one is qualified for is the best possible way of contributing to society.

In the course of China’s massive social transformation many social actors from humble beginnings rose to higher social strata, while others lost their social status. I identified six coping mechanisms for loss of social status. According to analytical psychology, today’s humans’ reactions to mental stressors still widely resemble the physiological “fight-flee-freeze” response, according to which animals react to life-threatening situations by either fighting, taking flight or freezing, that is, feigning death. Due to human beings’ “capacity for higher intellectual thought, fight [, freeze] and flight can become abstract concepts, leading to responses that reflect analogies to the more basic concepts”. Applied to the coping strategies introduced above, “problem-solving” and “new field of activity” resemble fighting in the sense that the perceived threat of status loss is actively opposed. In comparison, “changing one’s perspective”, “switching status dimension” and “person-switching” are similar to freezing insofar as individuals rather sit the perceived threat out, instead of actively fighting it. Lastly, “trying to exit the game” in essence means that social actors resort to taking flight. Crucially, from an actor’s perspective, all three types of reaction offer the prospects of protection from harm, but at the same time also pose the risk of being injured. Fighting may entail social conflicts, freezing in the face of status loss will most likely not change one’s unfavourable social status and fleeing means taking the risk of relocating to an unfamiliar environment. In determining under which conditions individuals decide for one strategy or another, psychological theory has stressed the im-

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portance of social learning within families, at schools and within broader society.\textsuperscript{646} Accordingly, education and the societal mainstream play an important role in predicting the commonness of different coping strategies.

According to Turner’s Self-Categorisation Theory, social actors who believe that their own social status is inevitably bound to their group’s status try to actively improve this group’s status. However, in my sample I found that only individuals like Mr Zhang—who unchangeably belongs to the group of physically handicapped people—engage in such behaviour. In contrast, those who think that society’s division is one of socio-political nature are usually deprived of political agency to such a degree that they do indeed sometimes voice hopes for somebody to start a revolution, but are reluctant to even think about starting one on their own. By adopting irony and sometimes bitter sarcasm they show some degree of resistance to society’s unfavourable development though. Coining phrases that ridicule or openly contest the actual social–political setting may at least gradually contribute to the reshaping of public beliefs about society and thus enhance their own standing in the long run.

Interviewees’ personal efficacy appears to be another explanatory variable in determining their choice of coping strategies. Psychological theorists generally presume a “relationship between high self-esteem and the use of problem-focused coping strategies”\textsuperscript{647}. And indeed, all individuals in my sample who pursue an active fighting strategy share relatively high degrees of efficacy. They believe that their efforts can make a difference. Crucially, however, all but one of my interviewees who adopt active “fighting” strategies share a functionalist view of society and concentrate all of their efficacy on their social position, which is in essence their professional realm. The paraplegic Mr Zhang is the only one within my sample who actively fights for his group’s social position despite thinking that society is divided. However, the division he sees runs between the handicapped and the non-handicapped. Apart from this, he believes in social mobility within the framework of a functionalist society. In comparison, the journalist Ms Du firmly believed in social mobility when she tried to influence society in general by—again—doing what she viewed to be her job—that is, conducting investigative journalism to point out problems and show solutions. However, in finding her endeavours useless and her work unappreciated, she has lost her sense of self-efficacy over the years. Her and her relatives’ experiences with society made her gradually abandon her functional-

\textsuperscript{646} Mineka and Zinbarg (2006).
\textsuperscript{647} Thoits (1999), p. 360.
7. Psychological Responses: Coping with Social Change

The persistent image of society in favour of the picture of a divided society. Her development illustrates a spiralling effect: Social actors who repeatedly experience frustration slowly lose their sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, they increasingly refrain from active attempts at shaping their environment, thus further depriving themselves of chances to have encouraging experiences of self-efficacy. In essence, individuals who think that society is divided along socio-political fault lines often display a severe lack of efficacy. After all, it was their repeated experiences of helplessness despite ability that slowly convinced them that society is divided and highly unjust. Among those in my sample who have completely lost any hope of individual or intergenerational social mobility, “exiting the game” and cynically talking about society are the only coping strategies I found. While discursive strategies may constitute first steps towards social action, my findings suggest that, for the time being, social actors lack the efficacy to do so. This argument is bolstered by the trend that, in a state of social alienation, highly self-centred individuals are much more likely to participate in occasional rallies for their certain interest groups’ individual profit than trying to change society as a whole. As James Scott has pointed out, “the daily pressure of making a living and the risks of open defiance are usually enough” to distract the politically unsatisfied from taking action.⁶⁴⁸

In general, those who repeatedly experience frustration slowly lose faith in either their own capacities or social justice and individual social mobility. Crucially, there are also many interviewees who believe in social mobility despite their own failure to climb the social ladder. Instead of blaming society, these individuals rather blame themselves. However, during the reform period a whole generation of single children were raised in China’s cities as their parents’ only hope. As laid out earlier, the majority of these children were educated to be part of the elite and thus usually instilled with a high degree of self-confidence. Therefore, it seems likely that among the younger generation the number of those who blame themselves rather than society for their misery may decline.

8. Piecing the Puzzle Together: Implications for Civic Participation

8.1 Introduction

Throughout the last chapters, we have seen how social actors view and react to the tremendous changes Chinese society has undergone during the last three decades. In the face of a quickly emerging new social hierarchy, we have seen them struggling for social status. We have observed how individuals’ increasingly focus on personal benefit—a development that comes with the baggage of haunting moral uneasiness for some social actors. We have also become acquainted with reactions to individual status advancement and strategies for coping with status loss. Crucially, we have learned that witnessing others quickly becoming rich leads some individuals to believe in the general possibility of individual social ascent, while others see society divided by a deep rift that reserves economic opportunities for those of good family background with powerful connections, while excluding the majority of the population.

How does all of this affect social actors’ likelihood of engaging in socio-political participation? In chapter two, participation was defined as a deliberate and active commitment to the social good with the declared aim of bringing about positive social or political change. Taking collective action and participating individually equally fall within this broad definition. It was also noted that social and political participation often require the same resources and follow similar patterns. What is more, social participation can familiarise individuals with the idea of participation and therefore pave the way for more political forms of participation. As introduced in chapter two, three important preconditions of socio-political participation are community spirit, efficacy and the desire for participation: Community spirit is important in predicting social actors’ disposition to collaborate, while also determining their willingness to make efforts for the collective good. Self-efficacy points to the question of whether individuals believe in their own ability to make a difference. But even social actors with a strong sense of efficacy and community spirit remain passive if they feel that there is no need for individual participation.
Aside from these general aspects, which equally apply to social and political participation, there is one further important aspect when it comes to political participation: individuals’ attitudes towards the government. Compared to community spirit, efficacy and the desire for participation, the relationship between social actors’ attitudes towards the government and their likelihood of participating politically is less clear-cut. There should be a high level of correlation between the first three aspects’ levels of expression and individuals’ likelihood of participating socially. In contrast, attitudes towards the government do not compose a unidimensional continuum between two diametrically opposed poles. Instead, attitudes towards those in power may vary along a variety of different aspects, like the legitimacy of the current regime, the trust in political authority’s ability to deliver desirable results, satisfaction with regime performance or perceived social justice. Corresponding to the complexity of political attitudes, the implications for political participation vary greatly. For example, individuals who believe they live in a functioning democratic system may either want to become actively engaged in politics or, for that very reason, think that regularly participating in political elections is sufficient. Then again, those who believe they live in a dictatorship may either shy away from openly criticising the government or rather seek open or hidden political opposition to those in power. Attitudes towards the government may be somewhat complicated to conceptualise, but they are clearly of great importance in understanding why some social actors choose to engage in political participation, while others deliberately refrain from doing so.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss social actors’ predisposition to socio-political participation in the light of the findings presented throughout chapters four to seven. It builds on a combination of conclusions from earlier chapters and new material. The chapter begins by analysing interviewees’ attitudes towards the government. Afterwards, community spirit, efficacy and the desire for political participation are addressed successively. The importance of whether individuals believe in individual mobility or think that society is divided becomes apparent throughout these sections. Therefore, an additional subsection illuminates the influence of socio-demographic variables like age, education and gender on social actors’ predisposition for both socio-political participation and belief in versus doubt about social mobility. To further put the results into perspective, a range of findings from quantitative surveys is incorporated.
8.2 Attitudes towards the Government

Social actors’ attitudes towards the government vary according to their stance on social mobility versus social division. Accordingly, both types of attitudes are introduced separately in the following.

8.2.1 Belief in Social Mobility

Interviewees who believe in the possibility of individual social mobility frequently express sympathy and understanding for their government. Their general picture of the government fits well into their functionalist picture of society. In their view, officials are just ordinary people who happen to be talented and qualified for their post within the government. SOE worker Mr Hu explains:

[Political] leaders and the masses are the same; they are very amenable. You just didn’t go deep into this, so you don’t know. Especially, the bigger a leader is, [the more] we feel that he is high above. In reality, our nation’s leaders are all amiable and approachable. They are the same as the commoners, aren’t they? (H#4)

(Mr Hu, technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an)

Mr Hu believes that politicians are—despite their reputation—just ordinary people. Nevertheless, it is clear that they possess expert knowledge in politics, or more specifically in their respective fields of proficiency. Ms Weng is a well-travelled consultant from Beijing. Although she does criticise several social issues, she nevertheless expresses firm trust in the government:

I believe that the government has many people who discuss these things. […] When they formulate a political strategy, they won’t just come up with something today and [immediately] do it, that’s impossible. Because even when we now administrate our team [at work], we won’t just say what we think and then carry it out; it’s not [done] like that. Therefore, I believe that the government definitely has all kinds of reasons for [behaving] like this. (W#2)

(Ms Weng, consultant, 30 years old, from Beijing)
Ms Weng draws the picture of a government that responsibly elaborates how to handle a complex society. But circumstances are complicated; thus governing the nation is not an easy task. In the face of these difficulties, several interviewees express sympathy with the government, which they think is doing its best for the future of the whole nation. One interviewee remarks:

There are more than a billion people in China. In all honesty, the things the government has to do each day are really not just a few. (N#3)

(Mr Ning, director of private research institute, 37 years old, from Xi’an)

Mr Ning turns the sheer size of the population into a reason to sympathise with the government. Interviewees who believe in social mobility frequently portray a government that is certainly not almighty. Consisting of ordinary people, it is not immune to making mistakes. However, officials are the best qualified personalities the nation has to offer, who do their best for China’s future. If not even they can succeed in changing the nation’s fate for the better, then who else could? As laid out in chapter five, several interviewees indicate that certain social problems are unavoidable in the course of economic development. Nevertheless, they maintain that these issues are of a temporary nature only and express firm trust in the government’s ability to eventually solve them. Even corruption is deemed tolerable as long as officials deliver good policies.

When discussing the multiple difficulties the government faces, the interviewees mention two aspects most prominently: overpopulation and external threats. As pointed out in chapter six, overpopulation and a shortage of resources are considered direct threats to national progress. The aspect of excessive population also appears in the above quote from Mr Ning’s interview. Overall, limiting overpopulation is seen as an important means to improve the general standard of living by confining scarce resources to fewer people. Therefore, overpopulation legitimises state intrusion into even the most private parts of life—that is, reproduction. At the same time, overpopulation is also used to explain why the state can no longer care for everybody in the way the Maoist state attempted to do, unless the population is to remain in poverty. Therefore, the discourses on overpopulation and the scarcity of resources help to legitimise a strong state, while also pointing to the government’s inability to thoroughly care for all of its citizens.
Despite all difficulties, as several interviewees stress, the government has accomplished many impressive achievements. While many of my respondents talk about how their lives have improved during the reform era, some even go back as far as to the foundation of the People’s Republic to highlight the government’s success. For example, Mr Zhang from Beijing states:

The Communist Party’s policies are good. These years’ developments were really not easy; the population is so big. After the liberation the mainland did not have a single penny. Chiang Kaishek took all of China’s treasures and left an awful mess for the Communist Party. Developing this strongly and prospering for so many years was really not easy at all. (Z#2)

(Mr Zhang, operator of hostel for the paraplegic, 36 years old, from Beijing)

As detailed in chapter two, among China scholars it is well established that the Communist Party has drawn on its role of uniting the country since the civil war for legitimacy. School education teaches pupils about the “century of humiliation” and aims to instil them with gratefulness for the CCP government’s achievements. It perpetuates nationalist sentences, which oscillate between national pride and fears of being inferior to the West. Albeit never being addressed by interviewers, this topic comes up in many interviews. Retiree Ms An from Beijing brings up the topic to once more illustrate that governing China is not an easy task:

The state also makes great efforts, does this and that. Since the country is so big, that’s not easy. Internal and external affairs are not easy. We became strong, so others worry and create difficulties for you. [The state] has to manage external affairs properly and then create harmony in the interior. There are so many natural disasters. In all these aspects, [the nation] needs to develop further; that’s not easy. The national economy [also] has to develop; it can’t fall behind. (A#2)

(Ms An, retired technical designer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing)

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650 Zhao (2004).
651 This applies to all interviews, regardless of whether they were conducted by me or by Chinese interviewers.
Ms An expresses clearly that, in her opinion, other nations try to put obstacles in China’s path towards prosperity. Combined with interior difficulties like natural disasters, this further complicates ruling the country. In fact, several of my interviewees talk about how China needs to stand up to imperial forces. The issue is especially prominent in interviews conducted in summer 2012, when anti-Japanese protest marches all over China had broken out after the escalation of the long-lasting dispute over the Diaoyu islands.652 Some respondents express dissatisfaction with the then president Hu Jintao’s foreign policy being “too soft”, stating that they wish the government would take action against Japan with an iron fist. Their hopes for a more active nationalist foreign policy resonate with popular sentiments expressed throughout the Chinese media and some of the most influential books recently published.653 In China, nationalism is commonly referred to as a “double-edged sword” (shuang ren jian，双刃剑), “a weapon that can wound oneself as well as one’s opponent”.654 On the one hand it unites the people with their government against evil foreign powers, thus justifying a strong state and distracting people’s minds from internal social problems. On the other hand, all too fierce nationalism and militarism also pose the risk of social actors being dissatisfied if their government fails to live up to their nationalist expectations when dealing with issues like the Diaoyu island dispute. The current government is highly aware of such popular sentiments. Unlike his predecessor, China’s current president Xi Jinping brings a harsher tone to foreign politics. When visiting Mexico in early 2009—that is, even before taking office—he was widely lauded by Chinese writers for railing against “a few foreigners, with full bellies, who have nothing better to do than try to point fingers at our country”.655

In contrast to more militant interviewees, others are rather worried about a pending war with Japan, and sometimes even voice the fear of a possible war against the United States. Mr Hu from Xi’an notes as early as in 2010:

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652 The Diaoyu islands, known as Senkaku in Japanese, are a group of uninhabited islands located in the East China Sea north-east of Taiwan. The islands are claimed by Japan, the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China and have been the subject of dispute ever since Japan took control in 1895. Chen-Weiss (2014), pp. 189–218.
653 Christopher Hughes (2014).
For example now, Japan, the Diaoyu island issue, you can say that it aroused popular indignation. If our government was tough, or conducted an attack on Japan, or something like that, we would be bound to warfare. Warfare implies what? Destruction. In that way, would you still have your work unit? Would you still be in the state of mind of going to work? You would only think of what? Of defeating little Japan, wouldn’t you? Of attacking little Japan. It would be impossible for you to think about anything else, right? It would definitely affect your harmonious life and your working environment, right? (H#5)

(Mr Hu, technical SOE worker, 50 years old, from Xi’an)

Although adopting nationalist rhetoric by belittling the opponent as “little Japan”, Mr Hu first and foremost expresses genuine concern about a potential military conflict threatening China’s internal stability and commoners’ peaceful lives. This fear of instability is very prominent in the minds of many respondents, who repeatedly stress the importance of social stability. Street hawker Mr Cai describes vividly:

I hold that stability is good for me, for everybody, for the ordinary people, because you need to subsist. Once your living environment is chaotic, it is impossible for you to subsist. Once this society is chaotic, how can you subsist? Most importantly the population is huge. Once [the country] is chaotic, the food issue can’t be guaranteed, once society is unstable, right? The population is too huge. For example, Beijing has no noteworthy [farm]land. I reckon if [China] really turned chaotic, the first place to meet with disaster would be the national capital. You wouldn’t even have food to eat, not to mention any ideals or the like. You wouldn’t even have food to eat, definitely, would you? […] All of us, every commoner hopes society is stable; it has to be stable. (C#7)

(Mr Cai, street peddler, 30 years old, from Beijing)

Mr Cai’s reasoning expresses a deep-rooted fear of social unrest that is present in the narrations of many interviewees. This concern is echoed and thereby in turn reinforced by popular literature. Historically, it might

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date back to the hunger crises of the Mao era. It may also be explained by the chaotic situation during the civil war, which—in contrast to Mao-era famines—every school child is taught about over and over again during history classes. Many interviewees stress the government’s responsibility of maintaining social stability, which again can be used to justify a strong government.

To sum up, interviewees with a functionalist picture of society usually view the government as an association of skilled professionals who do their best to guarantee what laid the foundations of ordinary people’s happiness: social stability and economic development. Social actors generally trust the government, but hold that, despite its members’ talent, the government is not almighty. Therefore, a range of social problems remains to be solved. In the face of overpopulation, a lack of resources and hostile foreign forces, governing China is a complicated task, which requires a strong state. At the same time, social actors also need to take action and struggle for their individual happiness, since the government is just incapable of nurturing everybody the way the Maoist state did—at least if society is not to be stuck in the poverty characteristic of the Mao era. This is where the *suzhi* discourse with its promises of a good life for those with skills and diligence comes into play. Seemingly enabling individuals to climb the social ladder, the discourse on *suzhi* places responsibility for success and failure alike on the shoulders of the individual. As Borge Bakken noted, the “discourse on human quality is clearly disciplinary and regulatory. At the core lies a strong pedagogical intention.”

In conclusion, the three most influential discourses in determining the political attitudes of social actors who have a functionalist picture of society are all propagated extensively by the Chinese state: Nationalism is promoted at schools to legitimise the continuing rule of the Communist Party. Fear of social instability and the problem of overpopulation legitimise restrictive policies, and the *suzhi* discourse promotes a neoliberal mindset conducive to the economic restructuring in the course of China’s transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Therefore, social actors who believe in individual social mobility appear to be quite receptive of public discourses, if not state propaganda.

8.2.2 The Divided Society

Interviewees who think that society is severely divided almost by definition think very badly about the government. In their opinion, the division between those in power and commoners is not so much a question of skills and diligence but merely one of fate. Accordingly, wealth and power are in essence hereditary, as are useful personal connections. Correspondingly, interviewees with this stance think rather poorly of the Communist Party. As mentioned in chapter seven, one interviewee even calls party cadres worms who eat up China from within. In contrast to those who believe in social mobility and often elaborate on overpopulation and a shortage of resources, these interviewees primarily point out unequal resource allocation:

Chinese people also have money. Who is it that has money? The Communist Party has money; the party’s children have money. And what about us? We have nothing at all. (J#2)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

And while interviewees who believe in social mobility generally trust the government to do its best despite great difficulties, interviewees who think that society is divided unanimously express distrust in the current government. In their opinion, those in power deliberately suppress the weak in order to keep resources for themselves. Former Central Party school teacher Ms Du explains:

Urban governments’ kind of... towards different groups, including [these groups’] education, medical treatment and so on. [Urban governments] can’t provide and guarantee these most basic human rights. They implement discriminatory policies. And then, towards the media they practice this kind of pressured control. (D#1)

(Ms Du, journalist, 43 years old, from Beijing)

In fact, interviewees within this group often touch upon the topic of inalienable human rights. While interviewees who believe in social mobility tend to believe that the discourse on human rights is a mere discursive strategy of hostile foreign powers to destabilise China, social actors who view society as divided take this discourse to heart. They frequently com-
plain about the ruling elite from a moral standpoint. In a similar vein, they complain about moral decay. Admittedly, some respondents who believe in social mobility equally express worries about sinking popular morals. However, they rarely link moral issues to the government. Even if they do, they simply state that, in their opinion, the government should strengthen moral education. In contrast, interviewees who think society is divided frequently explain moral decay by blaming the government for giving a bad example of selfish and morally corrupt behaviour.

In the context of human rights, which she sees as violated by state authorities, Ms Du also addresses the government’s harsh control over the media. Her discomfort exemplifies frequent complaints about thought control by social actors who think that state propaganda most of all serves a brainwashing function to appease the weak and safeguard the government’s power. This criticism stands in stark contrast to attitudes commonly found among those who believe in social mobility. Mr Ouyang, who is very outspoken about his functionalist world view, shares his thoughts about public thought control:

Central authorities have a special propaganda department. The state controls what kind of news can be published and what kind of news can’t be published. Control is advantageous. It guarantees guidance of public opinion; it guarantees stability and unity; it guarantees a mainstream of guidance. To achieve long periods of peace and order in a nation, this is definitely, a state apparatus definitely needs this. […] The aspect of guidance of young people should be properly propagated in the media. (O#5)

(Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an)

Mr Ouyang also admits that state control over the media generates credibility problems. Nevertheless, he insists there is no better code of practice from a state perspective. Once more, his statement expresses firm trust in the government’s benevolence. In contrast, interviewees who believe society is divided criticise the government’s approach to the media heavily. For example, Mr Jiang directly criticises public endorsement of patriotic and nationalist sentiments for diverting people’s attention from what really matters:

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658 E.g. Mr Ouyang, upper management of private enterprise, 52 years old, from Xi’an; Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing.
China’s education is a complete mess now; actually it’s just a knavish education. Education should mean imparting knowledge and educating people, telling people how to be an upright person, shouldn’t it? And then it should spread knowledge; let you hold this useful knowledge to enhance yourself. Then your knowledge would grow and become abundant and you could make many more contributions. This is what education should be like. [But] in China education first of all is about loving the party and loving the nation. And then [they] educate you to never forget the [century of] national humiliation and tell you about the Nanjing massacre. Afterwards, if [they] have nothing to do, [they] stir up a bit of hatred between ethnic groups, tell [you] about how ethnic minorities massacred Han people in ancient times. Then they tell you about the party, about the historical hardships of founding the party. And then about how the party remained unyielding to forces under all kinds of persecution, and so on and so forth. (J#7)

(Mr Jiang, shopkeeper, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

This elaborate statement about public education brings together what many others in his group indicate. In a nutshell, social actors who believe that society is divided severely distrust the ruling elite, who they think deliberately oppress the weak to secure their own wealth and power. They think there is not so much of a problem of lacking resources as one of unequal distribution. With regard to nationalism, they sense diversionary tactics employed by a government who wants to distract commoners from state oppression. When talking about these issues, they often embrace a moral standpoint, pointing out social injustice and denouncing the moral corruption of those in power.

Their obvious dissatisfaction with the current state of society raises the question of if they are prepared to do anything about it. Are they prepared to engage in any kind of activism to change the current social order? The following sections address three key preconditions for civic engagement: community spirit, efficacy and the desire for participation.

8.3 Community Spirit

Community spirit, defined as the embracing of a sense of togetherness and solidarity with other members of society, is an important precondition of social or political participation. It may refer to either society at large or spe-
specific social groups. First and most obviously, individuals only unite for collective action if in possession of a certain degree of community spirit. Secondly, even with regard to individual participation, identification with society is indispensable. Only if individuals possess a certain degree of solidarity towards other members of society are they motivated to put real effort into contributing to their well-being.

When one is mapping social change in contemporary urban China, two broad trends appear with regard to community spirit which shape society: increased social alienation and a rising desire for belonging. As social actors become increasingly alienated from each other, they often strongly yearn for social belonging. When it comes to prospective civic participation, these two somewhat antipodal trends fit together very well. Social actors’ increased alienation often prevents them from collective socio-political activism, while the desire for social belonging discourages them from engaging in any unapproved conduct.

8.3.1 Social Alienation

The last chapters showed various elements of society’s increasing fragmentation in the reform period. At the structural level, changes in housing conditions have endowed urbanites with more personal space and privacy. Meanwhile, spatial reorganisation processes have divided the living spaces of the rich from those of the poor. Modern housing in multi-storey buildings detached from the workplace generates anonymity and provides an alternative stage for exhibiting status. Members of the newly emerging Chinese middle and upper social strata especially deliberately enjoy the privacy offered by expensive urban housing compounds.

At the same time, housing prices are soaring, creating a heavy burden on the younger generation—and on men in particular, since male homeownership is still commonly considered an obligatory precondition for marriage. Moreover, in the face of not yet fully developed pension and health insurance schemes, a generation of only children faces the prospect of having to support their parents after retirement. Meanwhile, society’s vertical structure was extensively reshuffled throughout the last few decades. Quick social stratification processes whet social actors’ appetites while also stoking fears of falling behind. In this atmosphere of material fears and general unsettledness about quick and, at times, unpredictable social change, many young individuals exclusively focus on their professional careers in an attempt to gain highly paid elite jobs. After all, the state-sponsored "suzhi"
discourse propagates merit-based social ascent. Many individuals thus view self-assertiveness and diligence as key determinants of social success. In accordance with Ulrich Beck’s notion of individualisation, social actors increasingly face the responsibility of taking risks in life on their own. Under the impression of overpopulation and a shortage of resources, individuals are struggling to create safe lives for themselves and their families. Arising social competition is fierce and further intensified by decreasing vertical mobility rates. In the absence of universally binding moral guidelines, a dog-eat-dog approach to social competition is spreading. In combination with a general disillusionment about Maoism in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, this development contributes to spreading moral intimidation and unsettledness. With general trust at a low level and in the face of the overwhelming pressure to compete for resources and life chances, social actors are increasingly focusing on maximising their individual profit. Combined with the resulting feeling of severe moral unsettledness, this development has a highly alienating effect on social actors.

To be sure, social actors’ alienation from each other does not equate to atomisation in absolute terms. During the reform era, a vast variety of clubs and associations has emerged that allow individuals to meet others with similar interests—be it informal online communities, or institutionalised associations. In his analysis of data collected in Beijing in 1994, Christopher Buckley points out that back then successful entrepreneurs crucially depended on the skills, resources and influence of others—especially access to bureaucratic influence and reliable information. [...] In large, bureaucratic cities like Beijing, navigating the shoals of success often required a combination of individual entrepreneurship and access to power and influence.659 Buckley acknowledged regional disparity and even conceded that the “interdependence of commercial success and political power may not be a permanent state of affairs”.660 Nevertheless, the spread of business networks like the Wenzhou Chambers of Commerce throughout the reform period clearly demonstrates that some degree of networking remains essential for social success.661 Such networks may indeed serve important roles in the formation of community spirit, which is essential for collective ac-

tion. At the same time, they usually serve the instrumental purposes of very specific groups, thus rather cementing their segregation from other parts of society.

8.3.2 Conforming to Society

Another criterion interviewees usually hold crucial for achieving professional success is the ability to adapt one’s capabilities and skills to society’s needs. The underlying rationale is that knowing society very well is fundamental to finding a niche within its existing framework. This approach is clearly one of accepting and adapting to social realities. It fits well with the state-sponsored and heavily popularised suzhi discourse, which proves to be particularly influential in contemporary China. Providing relatively clear guidelines, it is very appealing to individuals who are aspiring to climb the social ladder. In short, it promises social ascent to those with diligence and civilised manners. However, it naturally seems less reliable to social actors who view society as severely divided by insurmountable cleavages, since in their opinion social status is not bound to one’s skills or manners.

Increasingly isolated from each other and in view of their living environments’ breathtakingly fast changes, individuals often strongly yearn for a feeling of belonging at the same time. In view of an only recently forming new social hierarchy, social actors generally display high insecurity about their status. Once individuals come into money, they are thus keen on displaying their social status. Money constitutes the currency of success in this endeavour. Expensive consumer goods and the ability to donate to charity alike serve as status markers, which display and generate social status at the same time. Not only do they make social status visible to others, but they also reassure consumers and donors themselves of their social positions. In the end, conspicuous behaviour most of all expresses a fundamental desire to cement one’s belonging to a certain status group and the subsequent willingness to adapt to commonly recognised modes of conduct. After all, while notions of cultural capital or suzhi are also important in the construction of social status, economic capital can be displayed most easily.
8.4 Efficacy and the Desire for Civic Participation

China’s aspiring individuals are fighting for social status. In the midst of ongoing social stratification, they compete for a place in the emerging social hierarchy. This fight frequently completely absorbs social actors’ time and energy. As Andrew Kipnis notes, “though anything is potentially politicizable, it is not possible to politicise everything at the same time.”

Individuals’ resources in terms of time and energy are limited. Therefore, in a highly competitive and fast changing environment, they tend to focus on what promises direct rewards. In contrast, political commitment especially usually fails to bear immediate results. Elderly worker Mr Rong thinks aloud:

Nowadays people, I think they don’t care much about politics, because nowadays people also… don’t like, don’t like it too much to care about politics, because caring about politics, I think for ordinary people there’s no use in it […] I think nowadays people care about personal, they mostly care about personal profit. They think very little about things like the nation’s development. (R#2)

(Mr Rong, technical worker in private enterprise, 56 years old, from Beijing)

Mr Rong states clearly that, in his opinion, ordinary people are not interested in politics. However, when it comes to explaining this fact, his account leaves room for interpretation. One possible reading would be that social actors in general concentrate on their personal sphere rather than caring about broader social issues. From this follows a clear restriction to personal engagement that promises direct individual benefit. This focus prohibits individuals from looking beyond their own noses. Notably, it does not rule out the possibility of participating in (e.g. work-related) collective activities targeted at realising individual interests like strikes or public protests, which aim to rectify perceived unjust treatment by superiors or even officials. Another possible interpretation of Mr Rong’s quote is that social actors simply lack interest in politics because they sense that they have no say in it whatsoever.

It occurs to me that both interpretations would find support among several of my interviewees. While the first reading is more suitable for describing the behaviour of those who believe in social mobility, the second

one more accurately describes the feeling and subsequent behaviour of individuals who deem society divided.

8.4.1 Belief in Social Mobility

Individuals who believe in individual social mobility are particularly motivated to dedicate their scarce time and energy to the pursuit of their individual professional careers, which they view to be the quickest way of improving their personal social standing. Their image of society crucially embraces a functionalist element, according to which every member of society contributes best to society’s flourishing by taking on a position suited to their skills and abilities and by diligently fulfilling its respective tasks. Therefore, their otherwise sometimes seemingly selfish behaviour can always be regarded as beneficial to society as a whole. Obviously, this makes serving society a very convenient excuse for selfishness and a lack of real social commitment. Maybe, one may argue, in the transition from a socialist society with strong narratives about serving society, to a capitalist one, social actors simply cling to Maoist rhetoric while engaging in capitalist egoism. However, the mere fact that interviewees repeatedly bring up the topic shows its relevance—be it for reasons of innate convictions or due to social or even political desirability. Regardless of interviewees’ genuine motivations, it is clear that contributing to society is a very important concern of theirs. And while the majority among them most likely did not choose their professions because they enabled them to contribute to society in the first place, the ability to do so certainly enhances their self-esteem. It is apparently rewarded with high social recognition in contemporary China.

Interviewees’ functionalist belief also has striking implications for their sense of efficacy and willingness to participate politically. Individuals who believe in social mobility have their individual agency and efficacy bound to their social positions and—usually professional—expertise. Within the limits of their personal sphere of expertise, they often possess high degrees of efficacy. Besides this, those who view themselves as part of the elite frequently also display a degree of social commitment that often serves as a status indicator as well. The scope of participation envisioned or carried out by interviewees usually correlates with their social status. Interviewees of higher social standing have plans as expensive and demanding as opening an animal sanctuary or volunteering as consultants. In comparison, those of lower social standing often simply talk about participating in
neighbourly help or the like. Ms Bo, who spent several decades on the factory floor before more recently moving to a part-time office job, states:

Maybe what [everyone] needs to do themselves for [the construction] of a harmonious society is just to soundly fulfil their job assignment and do many things they think they ought to do. (B#4)

(Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing)

Of course, my sample also contains highly participatory individuals like the paraplegic Mr Zhang, who only graduated from middle school but actively committed himself to improving the situation of the disabled in China. Despite such exceptions, I maintain that the elitist element inherent in the functionalist view of society mildly encourages members of the elite to seek social contributions beyond work, while in general rather discouraging those at the bottom of society from doing so.

In accordance with this logic, political decision-making is limited to experienced and qualified politicians. That is, while social efficacy tends to increase with social actors’ general position in society, political efficacy remains restricted to politicians. Even though individuals may be dissatisfied with one or another aspect of the current state of the nation, in general they have no aspirations to deal with these issues, which they regard to be outside their remit. Ms Weng is a young professional from Beijing, who studied and worked in the UK for several years before coming back to Beijing, where she works in a consulting company. Although she complains about several social problems, she nevertheless sees no chance of doing anything about them herself:

I don’t know [what to do about these issues]; I am not a sociologist. […] Being a commoner, I just can’t say how it is; I don’t know, but I only hope the government can. (W#1)

(Ms Weng, consultant, 30 years old, from Beijing)

Ms Weng clearly rejects being able to make any contributions to solving societal problems. However, some of my interviewees are experts who wish to share their expert knowledge on certain policy areas. For example, the 52-year-old Mr Ouyang, who belongs to the upper management body of a privately owned company in Xi’an, plans to volunteer as a business consultant after retirement. Another example is maybe the most politically active
member of my sample. Ms Kang, a 56-year-old lawyer from Xi’an, has twice been selected as a delegate to the Political Consultative Conference of the province of Shaanxi and serves as the general secretary and vice president of a female entrepreneur’s association. While Mr Ouyang is a member of the Communist Party, Ms Kang is not. Nevertheless, their attitudes towards society and the government are quite similar: Both of them think that everybody is the masters of their own fortune. And while they both voice quite harsh criticisms of the government at times, they nevertheless view it as their own primary task to serve society by fulfilling their professional duties. Accordingly, their socio-political engagement is located within their areas of proficiency, where they have high degrees of efficacy.

Typically, individuals with a functionalist view of society have a rather elitist world view that denies any political participation to those of lower social standing and educational background. Surprisingly, this attitude is shared by highly and lesser educated supporters of the idea of individual mobility alike. Wang Zhengxu, who interpreted data from the second wave of the Asian Barometer Survey detected the widespread elitist stance that “only those capable and competent can be part of the governing elite”, which entailed opposition to “the belief that each citizen is entitled to the right to challenge the government” among respondents of all age groups.663 It is hard to determine whether this attitude derives from school education and state propaganda or not, but it is clearly widespread throughout society. Think tanks close to the government have repeatedly stressed that “Chinese societal conditions are not conducive to the implementation of large-scale democracy”, since the “uneducated” general population is inexperienced with democracy.664 Party theorists often point to China’s village elections, which were started by the government in 1988 and are, in many cases, plagued by the buying of votes or voter intimidation.665 In contrast, experiments with deliberative democracy in urban settings are generally less criticised—maybe reflecting the widely held belief that urbanites are of generally higher suzhi than ruralists.666 Therefore, Hu

663 Wang, Zhengxu (2010), p. 19. The survey was conducted from late 2007 through mid-2008 among 3441 respondents in 27 Chinese provinces with roughly one third living in urban areas. Ibid. p. 12.
666 Local township governments have experimented with elements of deliberative democracy such as public hearings or online suggestion boxes on issues like migrant worker affairs, refuse collection or school facilities since the early 2000s. He, Baogang (2014); Ergenc (2014).
Wei from Shanghai Jiaotong University, who is among the leading scholars in his field, has lately suggested that democratic experiments may be carried out [...] within limited circles of the social elite in order that a portion of the population may first provide a practical example of democracy for the rest of society. Elite democracy may then be expanded gradually to eventually include popular democracy.\textsuperscript{667}

Without speculating about whether this vision will become true or not, it exemplarily shows the ruling elites’ deep scepticism about the commoners’ mental capacity to participate in politics. In fact, this scepticism is deep-rooted in Chinese politics and can be traced back to the writings of Sun Yat-sen at least.\textsuperscript{668}

In conclusion, individuals who believe in social mobility have a comparatively high efficacy but a low desire for political participation. They tend to focus on their careers, whose success they also deem beneficial to society at large. With increasing professional skills their sense of self-efficacy grows. However, this efficacy is generally bound to their workplace or, more broadly, area of expertise. They hold a functionalist picture of a society, to which every individual contributes by simply fulfilling their professional position to the best of their abilities. As contributions vary in scope and value, so do (monetary) rewards—a fact that justifies a certain degree of social inequality. At the same time, it is clear that political decision-making is mostly restricted to politicians, who by definition qualify best for this endeavour. However, those individuals who become experts in their fields of proficiency might feel constrained to contribute their respective knowledge and opinions to political decision makers. Therefore, I would expect them rather than anybody of lower social standing to pursue greater political participatory rights, as Hu Wei did in his public call for elite democracy. However, in line with the orientation towards individual profit described above, social actors of lower social standing are likely to engage in occasional civic participation that promises immediate rewards. Rather than addressing broader social problems, such action is likely to simply target the problems of individual groups. As laid out earlier, China’s protesting workers frequently campaign for individual material improvements rather than for system changes. At the same time, there is a growing body of literature on NIMBY-protests in China, whose participa-

\textsuperscript{668} Lorenzo (2013), pp. 30–84.
tors are satisfied as long as their neighbourhoods remain untouched.\textsuperscript{669} Having said that, environmental and health issues like bad air quality or food safety—albeit not acknowledged by the general public—do in fact concern virtually everybody, wherever their backyard may be. This again indicates the importance of individual perceptions even of distinct facts, while also pointing to a potential free-rider problem.

8.4.2 The Divided Society

Not everybody in my sample sees individual mobility as a realistic option for personal improvement. Interviewees who think that society is severely divided feel excluded by design. They complain about social injustice, which disables them from achieving any noteworthy upward mobility, no matter how skilled and dedicated they might be. According to Turner’s Self Categorisation Theory, we would expect these individuals to be keen on participating in collective action campaigns that improve their status. However, as we have seen, in contemporary urban China this prediction only holds true if social actors see social divisions running along fault lines of a non-socio-political nature. The chances seem high that social actors like the paraplegic Mr Zhang engage in activism to improve their social group’s societal standing. Those, however, who feel excluded due to socio-political criteria like household registration, wealth or power tend to display a significant lack of personal agency. While they frequently demand the right to participate in political decision-making, they are reluctant to actively strive for this end. For example, Mr Ma contemplates:

\begin{quote}
We need nothing. We have everything. We only lack a Chen Sheng and a Wu Guang.\textsuperscript{670} […] If in China somebody like this really stood up now, society might really be different. (M\#2)
\end{quote}

(Mr Ma, shoe designer in private enterprise, 26 years old, from Xi’an)

\textsuperscript{669} NIMBY is an acronym for “not in my backyard” and denotes residents’ resistance to developmental projects, like the construction of waste incinerators in their communities. E.g. Bondes (2016).

\textsuperscript{670} Chen Sheng and Wu Guang were two ordinary farmers from today’s province of Henan, who eventually led 900 fellow peasants in the first uprising against the Qin dynasty in 209 BC to escape the collective death penalty. Hung (2011), pp. 21–3.
Research on popular protests has shown that China’s workers’ collective action campaigns tend to be organised anonymously and stay leaderless. This is due to the fact that while participants in unauthorised collective action campaigns usually get away with impunity, organisers of dissent are punished severely. Although it may be wise to distinguish between a mere lack of self-efficacy and real intimidation, the same logic may be applicable here to a certain degree. Either way, it is clear that social actors who think that society is divided hope for change but are reluctant to fight for it themselves. In short, individuals who believe in a divided society usually eagerly long for socio-political change, but lack the efficacy to actually do something to achieve this goal. Sometimes they even express their willingness to participate in collective action, but only as long as it is initiated by others. However, it is important to keep in mind that they often only arrive at their pessimistic outlook on society after repeatedly experiencing helplessness, which made them slowly lose confidence in social equality and justice.

8.5 The Influence of Socio-demographic Variables

As demonstrated above, social actors’ belief in either social mobility or society’s division is crucial in determining their predisposition for social or political participation. To further put these findings into perspective, this section estimates the influence of several prominent socio-demographic variables on both the likelihood of believing in either social change or division and their potential impact on determining desires for civic participation. My study primarily builds on a qualitative sample of only twenty-eight in-depth interviews. Therefore, it naturally cannot make any claims about statistical significances. However, some general patterns became visible during my analysis. They help to further define the emerging picture of Chinese urban society. Considerations about these patterns are complemented with findings from quantitative surveys where appropriate. Most

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672 I address age, education and gender, but leave out income, party membership and affiliation with the state system, since I have little to add to the existing literature with regard to these aspects. I also refrain from going into detail about regional variety, since I found all kinds of attitudes among interviewees at all three field sites and naturally have no insights into the statistical distribution of attitudes in different locations.
prominently, I incorporate findings from a survey on political values, which I helped to design and implement.673

8.5.1 Age and Generation

Social actors who grew up and were socialised in different historical periods are very likely to differ in their attitudes towards authorities and individual participation.674 Age reflects the combination of historical experiences and one’s current period of life. In interaction, these two aspects create similarities between peers and separate them from members of other age cohorts. By the time the interviews took place, the professional careers of older respondents had usually peaked. The better educated among them often profited from early entry into the then just emerging markets. And even laid-off workers—who clearly lost social status during the reform era—have usually reached statutory retirement age in the meantime, thus qualifying for a governmental old-age pension, which normally means a significant improvement in their living standards compared to those offered by meagre unemployment benefits. In addition, the greater amount of spare time enables them to engage in leisure activities like sports or tourism. Accordingly, older respondents in general seem more content with their lives and have more time and resources for socio-political participation. Many of them even explain that, in their opinion, civic participation is something older social actors are better suited to than younger respondents. Ms Kang, who, in addition to serving as the general secretary

673 Data was collected in early 2015 in the cities of Beijing, Xi’an and Wenzhou as part of the research project on “Social Stratification and Political Culture in Contemporary Urban China”, on which I worked as a research associate. Sample sizes were n=500 in Beijing, n=400 in Xi’an and n=300 in Wenzhou. Within these cities, quotas were set up to guarantee that blue and white-collar workers from within and outside the system were equally represented within the sample. In addition, both genders were equally represented, while the distribution of age groups reflected their distribution in the local population. Besides this, it was determined that occupation and income should vary substantially, although no exact ranges were specified. The resulting “qualitative quota sample” cannot claim statistical representativeness with regard to value distribution in these three cities. It is, however, able to illustrate basic relationships between our study variables and political attitudes. For information on the methodological approach, see Manion (1994). For more information on the research project and its findings, see Alpermann and Yang (2015).

674 Harmel and Yeh (2015).
and vice president of a female entrepreneur’s association, also does volunteer work at a local orphanage, stresses:

In retrospection, I really think life consists of three phases. The first phase is about subsisting, about subsistence… Maybe it’s just about how to subsist; to earn money; receive a salary; to have a stable occupation and a stable family. The second phase; I think it’s about career, about one’s own ideas. If unsatisfied with the current conditions, one needs to bring one’s own ideas to perfection. Oh, I think it’s about dedication to one’s own work; the second phase. Back then [I] had arrived at a certain degree, I had entered the lawyer’s profession. Because, after I had received all existing awards for lawyers in Shaanxi, I was a little lost; I just didn’t know what [else] to do. Once more adjusting, I thought about what society needs me to do: ‘What else can I do for others?’ I think that’s the third period of life: ‘What can I do for others? What else do others need me to do?’ (K#2)

(Ms Kang, lawyer in private law office, 56 years old, from Xi’an)

Ms Kang’s way of dividing life into three phases chimes with the descriptions of other older interviewees, who likewise think that old age is the time to share one’s life experiences with others to contribute to the common good. This conception of socio-political participation goes well with the functionalist image of society, according to which individuals of higher social status—which older people are certainly more likely to have than younger people—are better qualified for participation. Social actors who have had a successful career are likely to possess high degrees of efficacy in their fields of expertise. And at least after retirement their willingness to participate should rise along with their amount of spare time. Mrs Kang’s statement once more shows how helping others is usually not as much seen as an act of genuinely selfless behaviour, but has a clear dimension of self-actualisation and social status-seeking. In a similar vein, Ms Bo expresses her thoughts about individual contributions to society:

Doing many good deeds, doing many of these… At least I am able to help others; it demonstrates that I have this ability, right? If others always come to help me, maybe this society doesn’t need me any more, I don’t have this ability. Now, whatever I do for others, I feel that I still have this ability. This is a thing [that makes me] very happy. I think
doing something for others is a kind of pleasure, is a thing [that makes me] very happy. (B#3)

(Ms Bo, administrative officer in SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing)

From Ms Bo’s statement it becomes immediately understandable why civic participation seems particularly attractive to older people, whom it may serve as a further platform for experiencing social recognition and gaining self-worth after retirement. And indeed, apart from interviewees like journalist Ms Du and paraplegic hostel operator Mr Zhang, whose social commitment is also part of their occupations, most, if not all, the other individuals in my sample who opt for socio-political participation are close to retirement or have retired already. In comparison, younger interviewees frequently complain about difficulties finding adequate jobs and the pressure related to their everyday struggle. In the words of Ms Kang, this might reflect the fact that they are still situated in life’s ‘first phase’, where life is not yet settled. According to this logic, they can still grow into participating professionals once they are older.

However, apart from this difference, which could vanish over time, younger people also frequently complain about their generation’s perceived disadvantages. As shown in chapter five, with the expansion of China’s higher education system and the labour market increasingly saturated, academic credentials were gradually devaluated. At the same time, a generation of only children was raised by their parents to become part of the elite. With labour markets flooded with an infinite number of competitors, it seems likely that many of these young individuals’ former expectations of a great future will never be fulfilled. Graduates of third-tier and fourth-tier colleges especially face extreme difficulties in the labour market, which makes it likely that this group’s political and social frustration will grow. While all the actively participating older interviewees in my sample hold that social mobility is possible, it thus occurs to me that members of this ‘disadvantaged generation’ of university graduates are more likely to question the very premise of social mobility.

With regard to political attitudes, Robert Harmel and Yao-Yuan Yeh likewise point to the particularities of China’s “post-eighties” generation. Using data from the 2008 China Survey—a nationally representative survey with a sample size of n=3,989—Harmel and Yeh examined the differ-

ences in political attitudes and behaviour among five age cohorts: those who grew up in the Late Republican Period (1928–1949), during the PRC’s consolidation period (1950–1965), in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the social reform era (1977–1989) and the present “generation of single children” (born after 1979). While they found only minor differences between the former four cohorts, findings on the “one-child generation” differed remarkably. Most notably, the youngest generation stood out in terms of both willingness to criticise the government and willingness “to consider change from a one-party system or strong government”. Using data from the Asian Barometer Surveys, Wang Zhengxu arrived at the conclusion that the generation born after 1980 had statistically significantly lower trust in the party state and the political system than older generations. Out of a six-point scale, older respondents expressed average trust levels of around 5.5 points in both the central government and the Communist Party. In comparison, the “post-eighties” scored on average 0.2 points lower. However, ranging between “five—relatively trustworthy” and “six—completely trustworthy”, support was still high in absolute terms. Likewise, findings from Björn Alpermann’s and my own survey on political values in Beijing, Xi’an and Wenzhou showed that older respondents were significantly more supportive of the current regime and authority in general. However, age had no significant impact on social actors’ political efficacy.

679 We formed three indices to identify respondents’ attitudes toward the political regime, authoritarianism in general and political efficacy. The index for regime assessment was composed of the question “On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with China’s political system?” and the three statements: “Thinking in general, I am proud of our government.”, “A citizen should always remain loyal only to his country, no matter how imperfect it is or what wrong it has done” and “When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is ok for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation.” The index for attitudes towards authority in general was composed of the statements: “Being employee, one should not question the authority of their superior,” “In a group, we should avoid open quarrel to preserve the harmony of the group” and “Government leaders are like the head of a family: I should always follow their decisions.” The index for political efficacy was composed of the statements: “I think I have the personal ability to participate in politics,” “Under the current political system, I personally have almost no opportunities for political participation,” “Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that an ordinary person like me absolutely cannot understand what is going on” and
To summarise, it seems safe to assume that older individuals are more likely, willing and able to participate socio-politically, a fact that is genuinely driven by age itself. Secondly, China’s post-eighties generation appears to be more likely to believe in social division than older social actors are. This is due to a combination of age and the unique historical experiences of their age cohort.

8.5.2 Education

Modernisation Theory expects more highly educated people to be more critical towards the government. The argument is that with growing education, social actors gradually adopt post-materialist values, like the wish to actively participate in decision-making processes, rather than merely passively watching how others shape society.\textsuperscript{680} In contrast, China scholars have stressed that Chinese school education aims at forming “a neo-socialist individual that is submissive to party rule and accepts dominant behavioural norms”.\textsuperscript{681} Thus, one could presume that prolonged exposure to China’s education system tends to transform individuals into conformists. Moreover, it is precisely the highly educated new middle class who benefits most from the current socio-political system. Above all, the majority of China’s middle class either work for the government or depend on close ties with public authorities for business success.\textsuperscript{682} Therefore, in line with several other scholars, Jie Chen has concluded from his research that “the middle class is even less in favor of [...] democratic values and institutions than is the lower class [sic].”\textsuperscript{683} This line of reasoning conforms with Shi and Lou’s analysis of data from the 2002 Asian Barometer Survey, which “reveals that those with a better education and a higher income are more

\begin{quote}
“Even ordinary people like me have influence on what the government does.” Respondents could always choose from a four-point scale to absolutely agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or absolutely disagree. Alpermann and Yang (2015).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{680} E.g. Inglehart and Welzel (2005).
\textsuperscript{681} Hansen (2013) p. 18. Hansen has also pointed out that schools at the same time try to spur up innovative power among students—a somewhat contradicting goal.
\textsuperscript{682} According to Chen, Jie (2013), p. 158, about 60% of the middle class work directly for the party state.
likely to perceive positive changes in Chinese society”. In comparison, Tang and Parish’s evaluation of about a dozen national representative studies conducted during the 1990s depicts more educated individuals to be “less accepting of current reform conditions, of their work situations, and of the chances for political participation”. Therefore, Tang and Parish concluded “that education has the potential to produce proactive, participant citizens who make additional demands on modernising social systems”. This assessment was updated and confirmed by findings from Björn Alpermann’s and my own survey, which depicted the better educated as significantly more critical towards both the current regime and authority in general. When it comes to the performance of the political system, findings by Tony Saich are less clear-cut. Saich conducted and compared four nationwide surveys based on probability samples about political satisfaction and found that in urban areas those with the highest and lowest degrees of education had statistically relevant lower levels of satisfaction with government services at all levels.

Distinguishing individuals who believe in social mobility from those who think society is unfairly divided can help to make sense of these findings: Broadly speaking, more highly educated individuals are generally more likely to move up the social ladder. However, if they fail to do so, they may either blame themselves or start to doubt the very possibility of individual social mobility. While my analyses demonstrate clearly that some social actors indeed do blame themselves for professional failure, members of China’s post-eighties generations especially seem likely to ascribe such failures to an unfair social system. Socialised to be highly self-confident and have ambitious goals in life, they usually believe firmly in their own skills and dedication. As Mr Ma’s example shows, negative assessments of social mobility are even possible among individuals who rose in absolute terms but whose careers nevertheless remained behind their expectations. In comparison, those who fail in the education system ap-

688 Saich (2011), p. 209. The surveys were conducted from 2003 to 2005 and in 2009, with sample sizes ranging from 3110 to 4150 respondents.
689 To recall, Mr Ma is a 26-year-old shoe designer from Xi’an, who, despite having a decent job, complains heavily about his generation’s disadvantages. Most of all, he is frustrated that his university education failed to entitle him to the stellar career he had always believed it would. For more details, see chapter five.

8.5 The Influence of Socio-demographic Variables

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pear to be more likely to blame themselves for later failures in life, since they may parallel possible failures in the business world with their early experiences of defeat at school. Viewed from this angle, I would expect the number of unsatisfied individuals to be especially high among better educated members of the post-eighties generation.

For the sake of completeness, I would like to add the perhaps trivial fact that the impact of individual experiences with state power easily outweighs the influence of education. As mentioned above, Jie Chen showed that the “state-sector group” of China’s new middle class supports the party state due to their own close personal relations to and often dependence on authorities. Within my own sample, two of the most critical individuals are Mr Jiang, who was expelled from school before even finishing junior middle school, and Ms Du, who graduated from an elite university to work at the prestigious Central Party School, but later fell victim to the harsher sides of the system. Mr Jiang’s and Ms Du’s cases demonstrate that extremely negative attitudes towards the government are not confined to either those of high or low education. In their cases, the impact of education is easily outweighed by individual—here: negative—experiences with state power. Socio-demographic variables are sometimes good indicators with which to determine the biographical experiences individuals have probably had and thus allow us to draw certain conclusions about their beliefs and values without digging deeper into their biographies. However, their biographical experiences are what determines these beliefs and values in essence. Luckily for the individual but maybe less fortunately for the researcher, it is not always possible to trace back individual life experiences to simple socio-demographic variables.

8.5.3 Gender

Findings on the impact of gender on political attitudes in China are conflicting. In their study of attitudinal differences within the Cultural Revolution cohort, Harmel and Yeh demonstrate that urban women who had been sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution assessed the government’s structure and performance significantly more critically than men.\(^{690}\) Except from such very specific sub-groups, many surveys on political attitudes in (urban) China find that gender has no impact.
on levels of satisfaction with the government.\textsuperscript{691} Then again, Whyte’s national survey depicts women as significantly less critical than men.\textsuperscript{692}

With regard to areas of efficacy and desires for socio-political participation, as detailed in chapter four, traditional Chinese gender stereotypes urge women to primarily dedicate themselves to their families, while men are expected to handle “external” affairs, such as political issues. Indeed, findings from Alpermann’s and my study showed that women have a statistically significantly lower political efficacy than men.\textsuperscript{693} Correspondingly, Shi Tianjian concluded from his evaluation of several national surveys that

\begin{quote}
[men are more likely than women to be interested in politics and governmental affairs, they are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of understanding and participating in politics, and they are more confident of their ability to influence the decisions of government officials.\textsuperscript{694}
\end{quote}

And while during the Mao era women were assigned to work units and propagated as being capable of carrying half the sky, the reform era’s ideals of the quality single child raised by a dedicated mother and the increasing masculinisation of business practices have once more hampered women who aspire to have professional careers. Finding a successful spouse is still considered one main way for women to achieve upward social mobility. At the same time, the one-child policy also caused parents of urban singleton girls to invest in their daughters’ education, thus facilitating the creation of a generation of highly educated and aspiring women. Women in contemporary urban China therefore encounter a variety of highly diverse role patterns. In opposition to traditional male role models, from which Chinese society tolerates little deviation, Chinese women find themselves in a mélange of contradictory possibilities and expectations.

The very issue of gender identity is one of the topics most frequently discussed by female interviewees, regardless of whether they live the lives of housewives, mistresses or businesswomen. Despite the prominence of the gender motif, not a single woman in my sample ever puts it into a political context. Feminist notions of gender being socially constructed or ideas
about how the suppression of women serves the persistence of power relations in a patriarchal society are never voiced. The general assumption is that men’s and women’s characteristics and capabilities do indeed differ naturally. Therefore, female interviewees reflect on coming to terms with gender norms or ponder whether women seeking a career is beneficial to their families, rather than questioning the fairness of women’s unequal treatment. My impression is that women in contemporary (urban) China are constantly struggling with entrenched female stereotypes. No matter which possible way they choose with regard to their career or family life, they are frequently confronted with the way they missed out. Constantly vindicating oneself is an energy-consuming endeavour. Besides this, social research shows that even in families where both spouses are working, household chores are still predominantly carried out by women, leaving them on average two hours fewer a day. My tentative argument is that most women are just too busy on the two metaphorical battlefields of a family and a career to raise the additional issue of civic participation. These considerations stand in line with findings from various surveys, according to which women score much lower on political efficacy. As strong gender stereotypes persist, I would expect that female socio-political activists mainly engage in areas that are traditionally viewed as “female domains”, like social work with children, the disabled or the elderly.

695 In the 19th century, the suffrage movement in the USA started with the more radical notion that unequal treatment of men and women was genuinely unfair since men and women were equal. However, the movement failed to attract notable numbers of members and supporters until suffragists adopted the argument that women had gender-specific skills and qualities that could greatly benefit society if utilised properly. While women’s rights activists used the “injustice argument” when speaking in front of other suffragettes, they deliberately replaced it with the argument of gender-specific skills when advocating the female right to ballot in public. Building on deeply entrenched gender stereotypes, the latter argument was eventually able to win the suffragist movement growing support throughout society. McCammon, Hewitt and Smith (2004). The history of the suffragists’ movement illustrates that arguments for female empowerment may even empower women in the long term if, for the time being, they build on gender stereotypes. As Hewitt and McCammon note, the “frames with the greatest mobilizing capacity are those which maintain a balance between resonance with and opposition to existing cultural values”. Hewitt and McCammon (2004), p. 150.


Of course, there is a considerable number of female civic activists in contemporary urban China, who among other issues also fight for women’s rights.\textsuperscript{698} During my own research on youth and children NGOs in China, I found that the majority of non-profit organisations in this field were established by women.\textsuperscript{699} Interestingly, the founders of all but one of the eight NGOs I investigated did not see themselves as political but social activists.\textsuperscript{700} As Heberer and Schubert have pointed out, participation in China is commonly not motivated by a genuine desire for civic participation, but is aimed at solving urgent problems in social actors’ everyday lives.\textsuperscript{701} Besides this, in an authoritarian political system framing activism as mere social commitment may also serve the more political aim of keeping a low profile. At the same time, this example demonstrates that the boundaries between social and political participation are blurred, which is one of the reasons why I have chosen to study social and political participation together in the first place.

\section*{8.6 Conclusion}

To sum up, I found two typical pictures of society, which both entail a set of beliefs and attitudes. In essence, all the differences between these pictures emerge from converse estimations of equality of opportunities, which have severe implications for social actors’ satisfaction with the current socio-political system. As Goodman noted, “while the challenge to the regime from rising inequality should not be minimised, research in China and elsewhere suggests that inequality itself is less the problem than issues of procedural justice and expectation management.”\textsuperscript{702}

The first picture of society is characterised by a strong belief in individual mobility and firm trust in the government, which is believed to be composed of outstanding individuals. With an elitist view of society, these social actors tend to neglect the value of socio-political participation of less talented individuals. However, politics is believed to be made difficult by hostile foreign forces, overpopulation and a shortage of resources. There-

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{698} China Development Brief (2014).
\bibitem{699} Yang and Alpermann (2014).
\bibitem{700} Maybe tellingly, the one NGO-founder who perceived his work as primarily political was the only male NGO-founder in my sample.
\bibitem{701} Heberer and Schubert (2008), p. 22.
\end{thebibliography}
fore, temporary problems inevitably arise. These difficulties also make it impossible for the state to thoroughly provide for everybody. Individuals thus need to care for themselves—most crucially by adapting to society’s needs and by promoting and developing individual skills. At the same time, concentrating on their individual development is the best possible way for social actors to contribute to society. In the face of overpopulation, they are exposed to increasingly fierce competition for social status that alienates them from each other. Social competition also forces individuals to employ considerable time and energy to conform to obligatory codes of practice to demonstrate and thus produce social status and leaves few resources for civic participation. This is especially true for young adults and women, who are often further constrained by chores and family duties. However, this situation eventually changes as social actors enter old age. Individuals with a high social standing especially often feel tempted to utilise their professional skills and knowledge for the public good after retirement. But—in line with their functionalist view of society—these social actors generally restrict their aspirations to what they regard as their field of proficiency.

In comparison, individuals who think that society is divided by insurmountable cleavages are very keen on social change, but generally lack efficacy, which is often due to repeated experiences of individual lack of power. Accordingly, they perceive society to be highly unfair. Those among them who think social division runs along socio-political fault lines complain about a discriminatory and morally suspicious government. From their narrations it is clear that they are equally affected by the pervasive sense of social competition, which alienates individuals from each other. However, as the verbal level shows, they are more likely to develop a feeling of togetherness with other “socially excluded” individuals. Evidence indicates that this picture of society might be relatively widespread among members of China’s post-eighties generation. Brought up to become part of the elite, many members of this comparatively well-educated age cohort, which is commonly believed to have high self-confidence, will possibly not be able to catch up with their high ambitions in times of an economic slowdown.

Both pictures of society are ideal types intended to show two extreme versions of the social mainstream. Social living worlds and experiences are multifarious. Therefore, social research can never offer causal models that cover each and every single case of social conduct. However, it can map the major streets of the social landscape, thus illuminating why the majority of
individuals behave in certain ways. This begs the question, how are both
types distributed in Chinese society?

In Alpermann’s and my survey on political values, respondents were
asked to choose between two somewhat conflicting statements. While
56 % of all respondents agreed that society’s development is mostly or al-
tways the sum of personal development, only 44 % chose the statement that
individual interests sometimes or always need to be sacrificed for society’s
development. While the first statement clearly indicates a functionalist
view of society, the latter statement’s implications are less clear-cut. This
ambiguity is due to the fact that the notion of a functionalist society is also
open to more collectivist interpretations, where the figurative head of the
social body—that is, the government—is able to override specific social ac-
tors’ decisions at times, since it is capable of more far-sighted decisions. In
essence, the two statements may seem not quite as contradictory to social
actors like Mr Pan, who draws an analogy between the human body and
society to describe social division of labour and argues that everybody
should develop to contribute to society at their best, but also states:

Regarding criticism, well, there is always [criticism]. The person who
voices criticism is not necessarily right, that is, always correct. You
should primarily consider the interests of the nation. […] What the
government considers and talks about are definitely the interests of the
nation. [The government’s actions] also encounter hazards; they are
also not easy tasks. (P#2)

(Mr Pan,
civil servant,
51 years old, from Wenzhou)

Thus, while the figures from this question indicate that a functionalist
view of society is widespread, they are not quite as revealing when it comes
to the impression of social division. However, two related questions fur-
ther support the impression that belief in social mobility is comparatively
widespread. Again asked to choose between two statements, 60.3 % of all
the respondents agree that individuals’ success in contemporary China

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703 In detail, 54 %, 56 % and 52 % of the respondents agreed that society’s develop-
ment is the sum of personal developments in Beijing, Xi’an and Wenzhou re-
spectively, while 46 %, 44 % and 48 % of the respondents thought that individu-
ual interests need to be sacrificed for society’s development. Keep in mind that
our “qualitative quota sample” cannot claim statistical representativeness, but
only illustrates basic relationships between our study variables and political atti-
tudes.
mostly or only depends on individuals’ capabilities and efforts, while 39.7% think that success depends mostly or only on family background and social upbringing.\textsuperscript{704} When putting the determinants of success into a broader context, even as many as 69.1% of all the respondents think that success mostly or only depends on individuals’ capabilities and efforts, as opposed to 30.7% who believe that success mostly or completely depends on social environment.\textsuperscript{705}

Likewise, findings from Martin King Whyte show that belief in social mobility is far more widespread than anger about the unfair allocation of chances. Whyte conducted three national surveys on social justice and satisfaction in 2004, 2009 and 2014 and compared answers to similar surveys on other societies. Whyte’s findings show that the overwhelming majority of Chinese citizens firmly believe they live in a meritocracy: For example, while 81.5% of all the respondents thought that national income gaps were large or too large in 2014, 63.6% and 62.1% respectively nevertheless believed that poverty was caused by a lack of ability and too little effort. In comparison, only 23.8% explained poverty as the result of an unfair economic structure and only 20.7% believed the rich had gained their wealth in illegitimate ways. Compared to figures from other societies, these findings indicate unusually strong meritocratic beliefs in China, by far exceeding even figures from advanced capitalist societies like the US, the UK or Germany, where belief in meritocracy is also comparatively strong. And while the figures are generally slightly less supportive of meritocratic beliefs in 2014 as compared to 2009, meritocratic beliefs grew notably after 2004. As Whyte concludes, “[i]n general Chinese are more likely to perceive current inequalities as based on merit, and therefore as fair, than their counterparts elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{706} Maybe even more intriguingly, Whyte shows that the Chinese are much less likely to agree with the statement that “government officials do not care what common people like me think” than citizens from other nations: Only 52.5% of Chinese respondents agreed with this statement in 2014, compared to 64% in the United States, 66.5% in Great Britain, 65.9% in West Germany and even 74.7% in Japan.\textsuperscript{707} Given that

\textsuperscript{704} Figures vary slightly between the three field sites, with 57.5%, 60.4% and 64.7% of the respondents viewing skills as essential in Beijing, Xi’an and Wenzhou respectively.

\textsuperscript{705} The percentage of the respondents who view capabilities and efforts as crucial is 67.6%, 70.6% and 69.1% in Beijing, Xi’an and Wenzhou respectively.

\textsuperscript{706} Whyte (2015), p. 21.

\textsuperscript{707} Whyte (2015), p. 22. Note that the figures for the US, the UK, Germany and Japan date back to 1991.
these states have well-established democratic systems, where citizens are granted the right to express their opinions in regular elections and have guaranteed freedoms of association, assembly, expression et cetera, these figures are particularly striking. Whyte explains his findings by strongly emphasising both heavily popularised state policies aiding the poor, and the overall improvements in ordinary people’s standards of living, as indicated by fast rising numbers in terms of ownership of refrigerators, computers and automobiles, as well as increased ratings of individual health. Prioritising political output over opportunities for political input, Whyte’s interpretation thus supports Almond and Verba’s Civic Culture Theory, although without mentioning it. Another possible explanation for Whyte’s findings would be Wenfang Tang’s argument that “autocratic regimes [indeed do] respond to public demand more than democratic regimes” because “their legitimacy lies in the claim that they represent the interest of the majority”. Whyte detects great optimism among respondents, which “is rooted in their own recent experiences, as well as in what they see happening to their neighbours and friends”.

In my opinion, the above figures strongly support the notion that the majority of Chinese citizens do believe in individual social mobility and hold the associated beliefs and attitudes I described above. I would suggest that the high speed and extensiveness of China’s changes play an important role in explaining the emerging picture. As laid out in chapter four, social actors witnessed their whole living environment turned upside down. Seeing others—sometimes neighbours from just across the street—becoming rich quickly made everything seem possible and thus strengthened their belief that individual mobility is indeed feasible.

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9. Conclusion: Modernity in China

9.1 Summary: Empirical Findings

Classical Modernisation Theory holds the view that (political) cultures converge as economic development and social modernisation logically lead to democratisation. In contrast, advocates of cultural divergence theories maintain that historically entrenched attitudes, values and even the structure of language itself form different cultural grammars, which generate what Eisenstadt called *multiple modernities*. Against this background, this study set out to fathom how China’s social modernisation affects ordinary people’s social and political attitudes, community spirit and efficacy, which are understood to constitute their prospects for civic participation. Building on Classical Modernisation Theory’s assumptions, many observers of China have interpreted China’s comprehensive market reforms, rapid urbanisation and quickly expanding education sector as signs of either an upcoming regime breakdown or democratisation ever since the 1980s. However, China’s political development keeps proving these predictions wrong. Therefore, the academic community has sincerely investigated state-sponsored nationalist discourses, the regime’s ongoing institutionalisation and China’s social structure to explain the regime’s allegedly postponed democratisation—thus, never fully abolishing Modernisation Theory’s immanent teleological assumptions about the universality of human development towards democratisation. Most of these studies adopt a macro perspective on society, in which social actors’ political attitudes usually remain mere subjects to speculations that—again—are more often than not based on Western experiences. Despite constituting the very core of society, the individual in essence remains a “black box” in many of these studies. In this regard, even nationally representative opinion polls are limited by the non-explorative nature of their research design.

Against this backdrop, this study deliberately adopted an open-ended, micro-level approach to provide a close-up of living realities in contemporary urban China. Building on a word-by-word analysis of extensive semi-narrative interviews about individuals’ working biographies and social and political attitudes, it deconstructed interviewees’ predispositions for civic participation—that is, their readiness to consciously engage in any kind of action aimed at provoking social change or otherwise contributing to the
common good. Important preconditions under examination were social actors’ socio-political attitudes, their desire to participate, their political efficacy and community spirit—that is, the feeling of belonging to society and solidarity with their fellow citizens. To explore these aspects, this study researched how individuals perceive their changing social environment and their own change of status within society. In a second step, it inspected if or how these life experiences translate into preconditions for civic participation. In sum, I detected two competing images of society, that is, the functionalist society and the divided society. Both pictures differ significantly; in fact, they are diametrically opposed in their fundamental assessment of society. However, they share the tendency to discourage individuals from seeking active political participation.

9.1.1 Social Change

A close examination of social actors’ living environments reveals their perspectives on the most important aspects of social change during the reform period. Most notably, general living standards improved remarkably while a comprehensive pluralisation of all aspects of life from the physical to the spiritual unfolded. Manifold housing facilities emerged in the course of the property market’s privatisation, and the separation of living and working places endowed social actors with greater privacy. Institutions, and contents and styles of work diversified, while the average level of education rose dramatically. New cultures of leisure activities emerged along with an increase in overall spare time. In addition, pluralised female gender stereotypes offer a blend of contested role models from housewives and mothers to businesswomen to rich men’s mistresses, while male role models remain much stiffer. In the face of these developments, social actors in contemporary urban China seem much more capable of shaping their lives in accordance with their own desires and wishes. However, as Beck has argued, this greater freedom of choice came with the baggage of greater responsibility for shaping one’s own biography. Meanwhile, the extreme speed and comprehensiveness of society’s at times unpredictable changes have instilled individuals with strong feelings of insecurity.

When describing their lives, social actors frequently contrast contemporary China with Mao-era society. In essence, the Mao era was characterised by relatively high equality but virtually insurmountable class boundaries, while the weakening of class barriers during the reform era was accompanied by the emergence of a steep social hierarchy. In fact, vertical mobility
was particularly high during the early reform era, when markets were still young, but gradually decreased later. This tendency has culminated in an atmosphere of high pressure especially for younger individuals, who sense that trying to climb the social ladder is becoming increasingly difficult. With China’s new social hierarchy not yet well-established and lines between social strata still blurry, even social climbers are frequently insecure about their social position. Therefore, they are eager to engage in money-driven rituals that construct status, like conspicuous consumption or philanthropy, to reassure themselves and others of their social position. Peer pressure is especially severe where status insecurity is at its peak. Competition is further intensified by a state-sponsored discourse on overpopulation and a shortage of resources, which prohibits the state from effectively caring for all members of society in the way the Mao-era state attempted to.

On the interpersonal level, the overall insecurity about society’s quick and sometimes unforeseeable changes, the feeling that achieving upward mobility is becoming more and more difficult and the discourse on a lack of resources all add up to a strong sense of rivalry and competition, which is apparent at the very verbal level of interviewees’ narrations. Social actors constantly apply terms like “struggling” (“奋斗”) or “fighting” (“打拼”) when referring to society. However, these terms differ fundamentally from Mao-era notions about the masses’ class struggle against counterrevolutionaries and class enemies. In comparison, reform-era individuals do not struggle collectively against others, but individually for social ascent. Nevertheless, social actors primarily view each other in terms of competition, thus feeling increasingly alienated from society and ready to solely concentrate on their own benefit—sometimes even condoning harming others in order to secure resources for themselves. This hard-nosed focus on individual profit in combination with a general sense of insecurity and the feeling that the state cannot ultimately care for every single individual propelled what some Chinese sociologists have called a severe trust crisis. Further unsettling social actors, a set of trust-related problems tends to increase individuals’ yearning for a sense of belonging. In recent years, several incidents of non-assistance of people in danger or of merciless fraud have caused a public outcry about moral decay that mirrors concerns about increasing selfishness frequently voiced especially by older interviewees.

Comparisons with other transitional societies show that shrinking mobility rates are to be expected in the aftermath of economic restructuring. At the same time, however, evidence indicates that decreasing vertical mobility rates in China are intensified by processes of social closure—that is, elitist attempts at drawing boundaries, constructing identities and building
communities in order to monopolise scarce resources and thus exclude others from using them. Chinese sociologists and western China scholars alike fiercely debate the question of whether contemporary China is gradually developing into an olive-shaped society with a prominent middle class or is rather witnessing the comeback of a class society. Likewise, my interviewees fall into two camps: some feel that they live in a functionalist society where everyone is the master of their own fate, while others hold that society is deeply divided since social status by and large depends on inherited privileges.

9.1.2 The Functionalist Society

According to a model developed by a circle of Chinese scholars around Lu Xueyi at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, society is shaped like an olive and can broadly be divided into ten strata. This model was officially endorsed by the communist government. It emphasises the growth of the middle strata, which are seen to be well behaved, relatively well off and thus content with their lives, and are therefore ascribed an important stabilising function.

Correspondingly, social actors who believe they live in a functionalist society share the model’s assessment that society is fairly just and stable. Often having witnessed with their own eyes how their former peers made a fortune, they believe that individual social mobility is possible for the diligent and determined, if only they are ready to adapt to society’s needs. Accordingly, individual adaptation to society promises better success in the quest for social advancement than trying to shape society. Observing society closely gives individuals the chance to develop ideally and ultimately gain a suitable social position. In this regard, the state-sponsored *suzhi* discourse fulfils a guiding function, promising to increase individuals’ chances of upward mobility if they possess sufficient educational credits and exhibit proper manners and “civilised” behaviour. Accordingly, every individual can eventually earn the (usually professional) position in society where they fit best—that is, where they can tap into their full potential, thereby contributing to society at their best. Bound to this position are a strong active agency and strong feelings of efficacy.

However, these social actors view other realms of society as beyond their sphere of competence, thus often flinching from even forming an opinion about issues outside their remit. Since, in their view, individuals sufficiently contribute to society by pursuing successful careers, their agency is usu-
ally restricted to their professional areas. Spelled out in relation to the political, this entails an elitist stance on who is qualified to participate in politics. Participating in solving social problems is primarily restricted to politicians, although high-ranking experts may claim an advisory function to the government. The government in general is seen to be fairly responsive to public demands. It is widely trusted to be willing and capable of guiding society in the best possible way. But politicians too are only human. With China exposed to external threats and in the face of a lack of resources, governing its huge population is no easy task; thus social actors should meet the government with solidarity. Under these circumstances, society is in need of a strong state capable of even intruding into social actors’ most private spheres of life, such as—for example—reproduction. At the same time, however, the government is just unable to provide for every member of society in the way the Mao-era state attempted to. Accordingly, individuals are responsible for successful “self-development” (“发展自己”) in order to be able to provide for themselves. Therefore, social actors are not merely free to pursue their own lives and “create” their own biographies, but also bear the responsibility for possible failures. Generally approving of society, individuals who lost social status but cling to a functionalist view of society consequently blame themselves rather than social injustice for their individual fate. Therefore, their individual misfortune usually does not make them question society’s general development, with which they are quite satisfied, frequently pointing to the general rise in living standards. Their common reaction in the face of social hardship is to try to adapt better to society’s needs or to better prepare their own offspring for social reality. This behaviour can be explained with John Turner’s psychological Self Categorisation Theory, which stresses that people who believe that individual social mobility is possible naturally turn to individual problem-solving approaches.

Bearing in mind the necessity of making materially rewarding choices, individuals find themselves in the contested area between functionalism’s central idea that individual development automatically benefits society and the social harm caused by outright selfish behaviour. Contributing to the common good by solely focusing on self-development only works if either a set of shared internal moral norms or a strong external force—for example, the state—enforce mutual consideration. Thus, the trust-related problems discussed in Chinese sociological literature illustrate where the functionalist view of society deviates from reality. In fact, the tension between contributing to society through individual profit-maximisation and harming others through crude selfishness is discussed by several older re-
spondents, whose considerations demonstrate the internal variety of the functionalist picture of society. In essence, the notion of functionalism is open to both interpretations that stress its individualist aspect, and interpretations that claim individuals are subordinate to society. Maybe the co-existence of these conflicting attitudes most of all reflects China’s ideological and real-world transition from state socialism to neoliberal authoritarianism, where individualism is imposed on social actors in the economic realm, while authoritarianism prevails in the political.

Despite the high individualisation of life risks, social actors are nevertheless conceptualised as constituents of a bigger picture. Within the functionalist society, complete individual freedom neither seems desirable nor possible, since all members of society depend on each other. Interviewees who hold a functionalist view of society sometimes draw an analogy between society and the human body, where each part contributes to the functioning of the whole by fulfilling different tasks. Performing their respective functions instils social actors with feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Individuals’ value is not conceptualised as an innate human quality, but as contingent upon their usefulness for society. Accordingly, people who are unable to make any contribution to society are deemed valueless—sometimes only implicitly, but sometimes even by very explicit denominations such as “not needed by society” (“社会不需要”) or even as “trash” (“废物”).710 As contributions to society vary in importance and extent, so do rewards in social esteem and money. But since individual social mobility is possible, society is understood to be generally fair.

Correspondingly, interviewees see society in a quite positive light and usually display a firm belief in progress, albeit frequently naming all sorts of social problems from corruption to environmental damage. However, these problems are thought to be of only a temporary nature and sometimes even deemed inevitable by-products of social modernisation to be overcome in the long run. Thus, interviewees are generally optimistic about China’s future.

To sum up, social actors who believe they live in a functionalist society feel that everybody should concentrate on their individual development to contribute to the common good by fulfilling exactly the occupational position they are best suited to. These individuals usually display a comparatively high sense of efficacy, which is, however, limited to their profession-

710 Ms. Bo, administrative officer in an SOE, 56 years old, from Beijing; and Ms. Kang, lawyer in a private law office, 56 years old, from Xi’an respectively. For context, see quoted passages B#3 and K#5.
al realms. Accordingly, participating in political problem-solving is in essence seen to be restricted to some high-ranking professional experts and the government. Authorities are, in general, believed to be skilful and responsive to social actors’ demands, although constricted by overpopulation, a shortage of resources and external threats. As the individualisation of life risks puts heavy pressure on the individual, the idea of not having to deal with broader social issues on top of everything else is sometimes seen as a relief. In the face of rapidly unfolding social stratification and intense competition on the labour market, social actors are usually keen on fitting in socially, while standing out professionally. In this regard, the suzhi discourse has an important guiding function. While some interviewees with a more individual-centred interpretation of functionalism emphasise the government’s duty of serving the people, others cling to the more collectivist stance that individual social actors are subordinate to the will of the collective, as represented by the government; thus their interests may be overruled when necessary. Accordingly, respondents with this attitude often stress the government’s guiding function in the formation of popular opinion.

9.1.3 The Divided Society

David Goodman has argued that notions of China’s growing middle class are a discourse with a political agenda rather than a reflection of social reality. Likewise, Chinese sociologists like Sun Liping hold that society broke apart into a small dominating elite and the dominated broad majority of the people during the reform era. Accordingly, resources were distributed comparatively fairly during the initial stage of the reform period, while, starting from the 1990s, elite groups gradually managed to monopolise most resources. Meanwhile, systematically excluded social groups like laid-off urban workers and migrant rural workers emerged, further cementing reform-era society’s severe polarisation, thus propelling fundamental conflicts of interests, which endanger social stability.

In line with this view, some respondents in my sample believe they live in a class society. In their opinion, society is severely divided by almost insurmountable cleavages. Interviewees most prominently criticise either the social exclusion of migrant workers or the privileged position of the children of the rich and wealthy. In essence, they believe that social status is, for the most part, bound to social descent, and thus determined at birth. Accordingly, society is dominated by an elite group of government offi-
cials and rich entrepreneurs, who were usually propelled into these positions due to their family backgrounds. Therefore, society resembles anything but the meritocracy the government wants the people to think it is. In the face of social division, many social actors view government officials as representatives of an exploitative elite, which utilises school education and the media to spread nationalist and patriotic feelings with the ultimate goal of securing its political power. Correspondingly, these interviewees hardly ever raise the issue of overpopulation or a lack of resources, but rather criticise unequal and unfair resource allocation. Politicians are depicted as self-serving and corrupt egoists. Interviewees often take the moral high ground when they express this criticism, sometimes blaming the government for being a bad example and thus contributing significantly to what they describe as China’s increasing moral degeneration.

Obviously, social actors who evaluate society as being divided are uncomfortable with China’s reform-era development. Just like advocates of a functionalist society, their assessment of the past rubs off on their perspective on China’s future, which they tend to be rather pessimistic about. Longing for an alternative social order—if not political system—, they sometimes dream of either Western-style democracy or a return to Mao-era socialism. However, they usually lack any sense of socio-political efficacy—that is, the drive to do something for the sake of social change themselves. When one looks at their biographies, it becomes apparent that everybody within this group of interviewees is directly affected by some of the negative aspects of China’s reform-era development in one way or another. Some social actors were—sometimes even repeatedly—victimised by members of an overpowering elite, or witnessed close friends’ or relatives’ unstoppable social marginalisation. Others worked hard to climb the social ladder, but due to external reasons were unable to achieve the level of social status they had hoped for. In each case, social actors experienced their own powerlessness in the face of a steep social hierarchy full of cleavages and thus gradually lost their agency. Therefore, they do not seem ready to actively engage in political participation. In fact, the only active problem-solving strategy I detected within this group of interviewees was the plan to leave the country, which—again—is not targeted at generating socio-political change in China.

Evidence from several quantitative surveys indicates that the functionalist picture is comparatively widespread in contemporary Chinese society. However, varying findings indicate that at least one fifth of the population feel they live in a divided society. Therefore, those who believe that society is divided may be outnumbered, but their number is certainly not insignif-
icant. Moreover, I would argue that the picture of a divided society is especially prevalent among highly educated members of the post-eighties and post-nineties generations. After all, China’s tertiary education sector produces many more graduates than the nation’s increasingly saturated economy can absorb. Socialised to become part of the elite, today’s disappointed university graduates seem more likely to blame the state instead of themselves for their eventual failure to climb the social ladder.

9.1.4 A State Perspective

From a state perspective, it is clear that it is much more desirable for social actors to have a functionalist picture of society than to view society as divided. After all, the functionalist society depicts the government as skilled, yet constrained, thus demanding a strong government, while at the same time urging individuals to shoulder life’s risks on their own rather than hoping for state aid. Therefore, social actors are well advised to concentrate on their own careers instead of caring about politics. In addition, successfully advancing one’s individual career is seen as the best possible way of contributing to society, rendering further attempts at civic participation less important in idealistic terms. In a functionalist society, agency is closely bound to professionalism, and elitism is endorsed. Politicians are naturally seen to be the most qualified people to make decisions that shape society. In comparison, social actors who believe that society is divided portray the government as exploitative and morally corrupt. They often hope for regime change, albeit lacking the agency to try to do anything about this themselves. Therefore, it seems that, in general, neither group of social actors is very likely to engage in any form of civic participation. However, professional experts who believe in social functionalism may claim an advisory function to the government, while the general feeling of having to fight for one’s own interests may even activate lower-ranking social actors whenever they are directly affected by social problems. In comparison, individuals who believe in social division frequently seem ready to participate in protest movements or the like but only if a charismatic leader arises. In addition, I would like to stress that while this study intends to map the social mainstream, it is not able to capture each and every single case in society’s broad variety of individuals.
As several scholars have argued, the Chinese government gradually turned towards a rather neoliberal style of governing in the course of the reform period.\textsuperscript{711} Instead of being subject to blunt disciplinary measures, the urban population especially is increasingly encouraged to discipline themselves.\textsuperscript{712} Indeed, the functionalist society corresponds closely to state-sponsored discourses. However, instilling individuals with behavioural norms and beliefs is always a contested and highly interactive process that encompasses a mélange of contradictory elements. Therefore, some scholars rightly point out that policy discourses never translate directly into subject formation.\textsuperscript{713} Nevertheless, it seems to be a consensus view that the Chinese government increasingly adopts processes of governing that “work through individuated subjectivities by engaging the capacities for self-discipline in individual subjects”.\textsuperscript{714} Correspondingly, I would argue that it is no coincidence how much the functionalist picture of society resembles state-sponsored discourses, although I am not able to determine whether state actors genuinely believe in this picture themselves.

9.2 Theoretical Implications

Later reception used Classical Modernisation Theory to simplistically predict that social development inevitably leads to democratisation. While more sophisticated versions of Modernisation Theory have significantly modified this gross statement, they share its general assumption that social and especially economic development tend to propel democratisation in the long run. In contrast, advocates of cultural divergence maintain that unique, historically entrenched values and institutions prevent different cultures from ultimately converging. Research on China similarly falls within these two camps: Some scholars either explain in detail why China will become democratised or why democratisation is hampered—thus implicitly also assuming democratisation to be modernisation’s natural consequence. Other scholars, however, postulate that China is a special case and deviates from Western modernity, which in this sense is still somewhat constructed as the “normal”, albeit not only valid scenario.

\textsuperscript{711} Greenhalgh, Winckler (2005).
\textsuperscript{712} Sigley (2006); Bray (2006).
\textsuperscript{713} E.g. Liu, Fengshu (2008); Kipnis (2011).
\textsuperscript{714} Kipnis (2011).
Compared to Modernisation Theory, alternative notions of modernity stress modernity’s flexible nature. Eisenstadt’s notion of *multiple modernities* in particular emphasises how historically deeply entrenched values and attitudes define the development of different societies in the face of shared human problems. Accordingly, modernity arises from humanity’s emerging awareness that society is (1) man-made and (2) unfair. Democracy, market capitalism, socialism and a planned economy are all different answers to this common problem: Democracy tries to overcome man-made unfairness by empowering the people to participate in shaping society. Market capitalism seeks justice by rewarding individuals in accordance with their skills and diligence. Socialism promises a radically egalitarian distribution of resources, and a planned economy attempts to overcome the distinction between dominating capitalists and dominated workers. Usually, political systems are associated with corresponding economic systems. What links market capitalism to democracy so naturally is these systems’ innate individualism—that is, the collective’s logical subordination to the individual, whose well-being is under no circumstances to be sacrificed for the benefit of the collective. In comparison, it is a matter of course that socialism and a planned economy build on individuals’ subordination to the collective. Therefore, the idea of a socialist market economy (社会主义市场经济), as proposed by the Chinese government, is often met with scepticism. And indeed, analysts often stress that China’s present economic system with its heavily guarded state sector rather constitutes state capitalism. Embracing elements of both authoritarianism and neoliberalism, the contradictory official denomination of China’s economic system is, however, reflected on the level of individual conceptualisations of society.

Modernisation Theory assumes that with rising living standards social actors automatically develop more individualistic values. As educated professionals advocate their economic agenda, they gradually start to claim political rights to further promote their own interests against other interest groups’. In essence, individuals are believed to be the best champions of their own causes. In contrast, the functionalist view of society advances the elitist stance that not everybody is equally capable of understanding what is best for themselves and society at large. Therefore, it is in individuals’ self-interest to submit to the figurative head of the collective. In this regard, the functionalist image of society clearly promotes collectivism. However, it also embraces very prominent individualistic features at the same time, since it promotes a highly independent approach to life in all other fields of the social sphere. Meanwhile, individual career-seeking is
portrayed as the best possible way of contributing to the common good and is thus linked back to the collective on an ideological level. Quantitative value surveys often show that individualistic values in China are rising and therefore arrive at the conclusion that democratisation is increasingly likely. In contrast, my own findings suggest that individualistic and collectivistic values in contemporary China go hand in hand. The notion of a functionalist society illustrates how a collectivistic approach to the state and a highly individualistic approach to everyday life can be smoothly integrated into a relatively coherent world view. Of course, problems arise where the picture’s inherent contradictions surface—that is, when individual interests do indeed clash with the state’s will. In comparison, the picture of social division deems the functionalist society a mere illusion propagated by a self-serving elite. Some of its proponents doubt the very idea of a selfless collective that serves society, thus wishing for Western-style democracy where, in their opinion, every social actor can individually pursue their interests. Others, however, share the ideal of functionalism, but explain its failure exactly with individualism that has got out of hand, thus dreaming of a return to Mao-era socialism as a purer form of collectivism.

In summary, the functionalist picture of society inevitably embraces collectivistic and individualistic elements, but also leaves room for emphasising one of these in its understanding of the collective. The image of a divided society, on the other hand, may either express criticism of individualism or collectivism. Thus, both views of society grapple with the antipodes of collectivism and individualism. As Dominique Schirmer has argued, individuals tend to display a blend of contradictory opinions on their social environment in times of conflicting ideological world views. These contradictions are indicative of the inner conflicts social actors struggle with as they become the battlefield of social change.\footnote{715 Schirmer (2005).}

Given the high speed and extensiveness of social change in reform-era China, it is hard to establish whether both pictures of society presented above constitute mere temporary by-products of China’s economic transition or indeed represent conceptualisations of society that will remain distinctive in the long run. Cultural studies from China and the West offer a huge body of literature on how China’s cultural heritage impacts on Chinese social actors’ dispositions towards collectivism or individualism. In the end, it is difficult, if not impossible, to ultimately determine the cultural–historical origin of socio-political attitudes. At least this study has shown that some social actors in contemporary China do indeed have a picture of society
that differs from Modernisation Theory’s assumptions and makes democratisation highly unlikely, thus rather supporting Eisenstadt’s notion of *multiple modernities*. However, as sociology has it, in the end only history to-be can verify this assessment.

9.2 Theoretical Implications
## Appendix

### A. Sample Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Place of residence</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Ms An</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>vocational high school</td>
<td>retired technical designer, SOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Ms Bo</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>vocational high school</td>
<td>administrative officer, SOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Mr Cai</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Rural Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>vocational middle school</td>
<td>street peddler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Ms Du</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Rural Jiangxi</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>journalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Ms Duanmu</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Rural Hebei</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>upper management, PE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Ms Feng</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Tianjin</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>middle management, SOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G Ms Gu</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>vocational high school</td>
<td>SOE factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H Mr Hu</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>vocational middle school</td>
<td>technical SOE worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Mr Ying</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>middle school</td>
<td>laid-off SOE worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J Mr Jiang</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Nanchang</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>primary school</td>
<td>shopkeeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K Ms Kang</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>lawyer, private law office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L Ms Liu</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Chief Financial Officer, PE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Mr Ma</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>shoe designer, PE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Mr Ning</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>director, private research institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O Mr Ouyang</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Xining</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>upper management, PE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P Mr Pan</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Rural Wenzhou</td>
<td>Wenzhou</td>
<td>vocational high school</td>
<td>civil servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q Mr Qiu</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Rural Hebei</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>middle school</td>
<td>street peddler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R Mr Rong</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>vocational high school</td>
<td>technical worker, PE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S Mr Song</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>upper middle school</td>
<td>SOE worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ss Mr Sun</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>vocational middle school</td>
<td>project-manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

| T  | Mr Tai | 53  | Xi’an | Xi’an | middle school | laid-off SOE worker |
| Tt | Ms Tang | 35  | Wenzhou | Wenzhou | Bachelor’s degree | Clerk at SOE |
| U  | Mr Wu  | 27  | Zhengzhou | Beijing | Bachelor’s degree | software engineer |
| V  | Ms Wang | 29  | Qingdao | Beijing | Bachelor’s degree | entrepreneur |
| W  | Ms Weng | 30  | Beijing | Beijing | Master’s degree | consultant |
| Ww | Ms Wen  | 26  | Zhengzhou | Beijing | Bachelor’s degree | accountant |
| Xx | Ms Xu   | 33  | Rural Hubei | Wenzhou | middle school | assembly line worker |
| Y  | Ms Yang | 28  | Beijing | Beijing | Bachelor’s degree | wedding planner |
| Z  | Mr Zhang | 36  | Lanzhou | Beijing | Upper middle school | operator of hostel for the paraplegic |
| Zz | Ms Zhou | 45  | Wenzhou | Wenzhou | Bachelor’s degree | co-founder of design company |

B. Interview Guideline

Every interview started with a short introduction of the research project. It was based on the following text:

改革开放 30 多年来，中国经历了深刻的社会变迁。改革开放推动着中国经济的快速发展，使得人民生活水平显著提高，古老的中国发生了巨大的变化。中国的发展在快速改变自身经济社会面貌的同时，也为世界反贫困实践以及世界经济的发展做出了重大贡献。本课题旨在研究中国的社会变迁，通过社会学生活史的研究方法来研究中国在走向现代化过程中的社会变迁、社会发展以及老百姓在社会变迁的过程中的人生经历。

Translation: More than 30 years after the beginning of the reform and its opening-up, China has experienced a profound social transformation. The reform and opening-up promoted China’s economy’s breathtakingly fast development and improved people’s living standards tremendously. Ancient China changed greatly. While China’s development rapidly has transformed the face of its own economy, it has also made a major contribution to the global fight against poverty and the development of the world economy at the same time. Using a sociological, biographical research approach, my questions address the changes in Chinese society in order for me to study individual life experiences in the midst of the social changes and developments that occurred on China’s road to modernisation.
Subsequently, semi-narrative interviews were conducted, which were based on the following interview guideline tables:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>讲述鼓励 1:</th>
<th>补充问题</th>
<th>维持讲述和指导访谈的问题</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>请分享一下您的人生故事。</td>
<td>请谈谈您小时候的情况。</td>
<td>这些事情是怎么发生的？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>跟十年前比起来，您的生活发生了哪些变化？</td>
<td>请问您家庭的情况。</td>
<td>那时候您的感受怎样？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您对未来有什么样的期望？</td>
<td>请参加工作的时候您有哪些希望？</td>
<td>现在怎么看待那时的决定？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>口号 (给受访者看图片):</td>
<td>如果受访者有失业的经历:</td>
<td>还有呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>你怎么理解“抓住机遇，发展自己”这句话？</td>
<td>下岗后您与和亲戚/朋友/老同事/以前的</td>
<td>请多说一说。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>领导的交往有哪些变化？</td>
<td>请讲得具体一点儿。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>知道了要下岗的时候心情和反应如何？</td>
<td>后来呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>下岗以后您怎么办？</td>
<td>受访者提到有趣的概念或关键词:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>如果受访者是下岗职工:</td>
<td>您对...有什么理解？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您对您的工作有什么评价？</td>
<td>您怎么定义...？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您现在与下岗的同事们的关系如何？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>讲述鼓励 2: 改革开放与社会变迁</th>
<th>补充问题</th>
<th>维持讲述和指导访谈的问题</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>最近二十多年中国社会发生了很大变化，请从自己的角度来讲您对这种变化的理解和想法。</td>
<td>您觉得在这个城市/社区/单位都有哪些变化？</td>
<td>还有呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>口号 (给受访者看图片):</td>
<td>从现在看来，十年后中国会有怎样的变化？</td>
<td>请多说一说。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您怎么看待“反腐败”这句话？</td>
<td>您平时通过什么渠道来了解社会的情况？</td>
<td>请讲得具体一点儿。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您怎么看待目前的社会保障制度?</td>
<td>后来呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您对于中国未来的社会发展有什么样的期盼？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>改革开放以来中国社会发生了深刻的变化。您怎么理解这些变化?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>在整个社会变迁当中，您自己的情况有怎样的变化？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您对您孩子的发展有什么期望？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您觉得在社会什么算是成功？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您感觉整个社会的变迁过程中产生了哪些负面的现象？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您怎么看待中国媒体的作用？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>您觉得应该怎样进行反腐败斗争？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>讲述鼓励 3：社会发展</td>
<td>补充问题</td>
<td>维持讲述和指导访谈的问题</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中国正在着力建构和谐社会，您是如何看待社会和谐的？</td>
<td>您自己为建设和谐社会都会做什么？</td>
<td>还有呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>给受访者看图片：请描写图片上的情况。</td>
<td>您觉得中国现社会在哪些方面还要加一点和谐？</td>
<td>请多说一说。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您觉得图片上的人感觉如何？</td>
<td>如果社会不和谐，对您个人的生活会有何影响呢？</td>
<td>请讲得具体一点。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>还有呢？</td>
<td>您觉得如何能作好人？</td>
<td>后来呢？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>对您来说工产党代表的是什么？</td>
<td>您对慈善机构有什么看法？</td>
<td>请举一个例子。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您怎么看待入党？</td>
<td>您对义工有什么看法？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>若果受访者是党员的话：</td>
<td>您觉得国家应该通过什么样的方式制定决策？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>对您来说入党意味着什么？</td>
<td>您觉得政府在怎样保证人民的利益？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您觉得社会中存在很多不同的利益群体。</td>
<td>当前社会中存在很多不同的利益群体。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您觉得应该如何处理？</td>
<td>您怎样看待不同利益群体之间的矛盾？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>您怎么看待民工？</td>
<td>您怎么看待民工？</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Narrative Input 1: Personal Life

Please share the story of your life.
Compared to ten years ago, how has your life changed?
What hopes do you have for the future?

**Slogan (show print-out to interviewee):**
How do you understand “seizing an opportunity and developing oneself?”

### Complementary Questions

(only asked if the topics are not raised by the interviewee)

Please talk about your childhood.
Please discuss your family situation.
What is your work situation like?
How did you feel when you started working?
What hopes did you have when you started working?

*If the interviewee experienced unemployment:*
How did your relationship with your relatives / friends / old colleagues / former boss change after you were laid off?
What were your feelings and reaction when you learned you had been laid off?
What did you do after you were laid off?

*If the interviewee is currently working:*
How do you judge your work?
How is your relationship with your laid-off co-workers now?

### Supporting Questions

How did these affairs happen?
How did you feel back then?
What do you now think about the decision you made then?
Anything else?
Please tell me more.
Please tell me more concretely.
Please give me an example.
And afterwards?

*If the interviewee raises any interesting concepts or keywords:*
What is your understanding of…?
How do you define…?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Input 2: Reform and Opening up and Social Change</th>
<th>Complementary Questions (only asked if the topics are not raised by the interviewee)</th>
<th>Supporting Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During the last twenty years, Chinese society experienced many changes. Please discuss your understanding and opinion of this kind of changes from your own point of view. <strong>Slogan (show print-out to interviewer):</strong> How do you view the sentence “oppose corruption and advocate honesty?”</td>
<td>Which changes did you notice in this city / community / work unit? How will China change during the next ten years? Which channels do you usually use to learn about society’s situation? What is your opinion on the current social security system? After the onset of the reforms and the country opening up, China changed profoundly. What is your understanding of these changes? How did your own situation change in the midst of society’s general changes? What are your hopes for your child’s development? What does it mean to be successful in this society? In your opinion, which negative phenomena occurred in the midst of society’s changes? How do you view the function of the Chinese media? In your opinion, how should the fight against corruption be carried out?</td>
<td>Anything else? Please tell me more. Please tell me more concretely. Please give me an example. And afterwards?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Narrative Input 3: Society’s Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complementary Questions</th>
<th>Supporting Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Showing pictures to the interviewee:</strong>*</td>
<td>Anything else?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please describe the situation in this picture.</td>
<td>Please tell me more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think the situation in this picture occurred?</td>
<td>Please tell me more concretely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think the people in the picture feel?</td>
<td>Please give me an example.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If the interviewee is a CCP member:*

- What does joining the CCP mean to you?
- In your opinion, according to which methods should the government make decisions?
- How do you think the government guarantees the people’s interests?

In present society, there are many different interest groups. How do you think this should be dealt with?

How do you view the conflicts between different interest groups?

What is your opinion of civilian workers?
Appendix

* The following pictures were shown to the interviewees (due to copyright issues they are not reprinted, but only described here):

Picture 1: Drawing of a young woman who releases a white dove. The caption reads: “have ideals” (you lixiang, 有理想).

Picture 2: A young woman is pushing a wheelchair with an old woman in it over a public square in the company of an elderly man. A young man in front of them is pointing at something on the other side of the street and their gazes follow the direction of his gesture. A big red banner in the background reads: “socialist harmonious society” (shehui zhuyi hexie shehui, 社会主义和谐社会).

Picture 3: A boy and a girl are lying on a green lawn under a clear blue sky in front of a green forest and some skyscrapers and are watching a butterfly. The caption reads: “everybody participates in collectively forming a harmonious society” (renren canyu gongjian hexie shehui, 人人参与共建和谐社会).

Picture 4: Middle-aged men and women are gathering at a job fair.

Picture 5: A manager in a suit and tie is handing out red envelopes filled with money to happily smiling construction workers.

Picture 6: Assembly-line workers are manufacturing shoes for a famous Western brand.

Picture 7: Villagers are lining up to cast their ballot.

At the end of each interview, the following socio-economic data was collected:

- 年龄 (Age)
- 户口类别 (Type of household registration)
- 户籍所在地 (Registered place of residence)
- 出生地/何时来本地 (Place of birth / time of moving to current place of residence)
- 文化程度 (Level of education)
- 婚姻状况 (Marital status)
- 几个子女 / 子女之年龄与性别 (Number, age and gender of children)
- 子女之文化水平与工作境况 (Children’s level of education and work situation)
- 父母之工作与职业 (Parents’ work and profession)
- 党员还是群众 (CCP membership)
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