

10 Concluding Summary

The question that framed this study was:

Is there ideological diversity amidst Beijing's emerging middle class? If so, what is its variety and content, and what does it say for the legitimacy of the Party-state, the political role of the emerging middle class and for politics in China generally?

It is, admittedly, more than one question, and part of my task here has been to show how the latter questions follow from the first. Is there ideological diversity amidst Beijing's emerging middle class? The answer is yes, and I have offered a unique map, both conceptual and visual, to describe its variety and content. The map is defined by two main boundary discourses:

Liberal Idealism, which (at the cost of much of the nuance I have found) may be summarized as an affinity for a more rule-based political system that puts higher priority upon respecting and encouraging individuality; and Social Welfarism, which wants to see a more effective state and greater emphasis by both state and society upon welfare concerns. They are not opposing, but rather orthogonal, discourses, and most research participants are confounded, to varying degrees, between them. Those whose ideological affinities step outside these boundaries appear to do so due to differences in whether or not they deem the debate taking place within them to be worthwhile. Traditional notions of an ideological spectrum ranging from 'Left' to 'Right' are misleading in the contemporary Chinese case; 'Deliver, 'Demand, 'Reconstruct' and 'Deconstruct' would be a more accurate spectrum of subjective ideological views, albeit limited to the question of political reform.

What does this picture of the ideological discourse space say for the legitimacy of the Party-state? Again I have taken a unique approach to answering this question, by making it possible to evaluate the similarities and differences between the beliefs which dominant (represented by Official Ideology) and subordinate (represented by the illuminated discourse space) hold

regarding their power relationship. The discourse-by-discourse results of this comparison are broadly positive for the Party-state. At the Social Welfarist boundary, several core beliefs of Official Ideology are strongly supported. At the Liberal Idealist boundary, although several beliefs challenge important aspects of Official Ideology, a statement-level analysis betrays an ambivalence about acting upon those beliefs and an acceptance of the Party-state's legitimacy claims.

The overall shape of the middle class discourse space is likewise positive for the legitimacy of the present regime. That shape is best summarized as 'bounded difference', and the boundaries of emerging middle class beliefs are what permit the Party-state to coherently claim to represent the shared, fundamental interests of its members. Although an analysis of the legitimation activities by which the Party-state shapes those boundaries was outside the scope of this study, it can be inferred from the overall picture my research respondents painted, as well as from the discourses that have *not* been found, that such activities are effective.

It follows that the emerging middle class can, at present, be expected to behave in a manner closer to the Party-state's conception of its role as a 'force for stability, good governance, and economic progress' than as the force for regime change predicted by modernization theory. However, that inference needs to be carefully qualified. The diversity of the discourse, and more importantly the dynamic toward Liberal Idealism (which needs to be verified by larger-scale quantitative work), suggests that the emerging middle class could nonetheless become a strong voice pushing reform—toward a more effective welfare state and/or toward a more rule-based polity that values individuality more highly. Put another way, nothing I have found suggests that stasis is a viable option for the present Party-state. Hannah Arendt observed that

the sort of ambivalence toward political action that characterizes Liberal Idealism is common. That does not necessarily diminish the latent revolutionary potential of the discourse.

‘Freedom, which only seldom—in times of crisis or revolution—becomes a direct aim of political action, is actually the reason that men lived together in political organization at all’ (Arendt 2006, p. 145). The Party-state will have to work continually to renew its legitimacy amidst such potentialities.

Finally, what do my findings on the ideological diversity of China’s emerging middle class contribute to political studies more broadly? First, I demonstrate the feasibility and value of researching a question like legitimacy from society’s point of view. Second, I make a case for the importance of ideology as a facet of political analysis. Ideology helps us to understand not only how the Party-state thinks, but how the public thinks as well, and it helps us to articulate the possibility and validity of authoritarian, democratic, and other political futures, from both sides of the power equation.

Along the way to answering these questions, I have attempted to make two more general contributions. The first is to political theory, by offering a fresh analysis of contemporary ideological programs in mainland China. My attempt to do so here is, so far as I can tell, the first to apply Freedom’s method of ideology analysis to mainland Chinese political discourse. While necessarily abbreviated and incomplete, it is also more specific and systematic than many previous summations.⁶⁵ By planting some stakes in the sand, I hope this attempt can

⁶⁵ The closest recent comparison is Frenkiel’s effort to compare New Left and Liberalism. See: Frenkiel, Emilie (2013). “Parler Politique: Les Différents Courants Intellectuels En Chine.” *Le Banquet* **31**(February).

catalyse debates and refinements that take our understanding of China's professional ideological discourses forward.

I have also attempted to make a contribution to research methods. Q Methodology is a powerful tool for uncovering subjective variety. It seems especially well-suited to a generative mode of research, where the principal aim is to discover new types and categories, versus confirmatory research that seeks mainly to test hypotheses. In a rapidly changing environment like China, there are endless situations where the former mode is fruitful. It is therefore surprising that published applications of the method in Chinese politics research are so scarce.

One barrier, it seems, is that some specifics of how data should be handled and analysed in a Q Methodology study are poorly understood and actively debated, even by regular practitioners. At the risk of being rather plodding at times, I have therefore tried to make each step in the process clear and to make explicit where my own judgment was needed and what principles I followed in exercising it. The result is, I hope, a fully transparent and repeatable Q study that can also serve as a how-to manual of sorts for other researchers. I hope it helps to bring Q Methodology more fully into the mainstream toolkit of politics research.



Research objectives and contributions aside, this whole work is an expression of my own belief that to try to understand ideological diversity is an inherently worthwhile thing to do. A single ideology, be it the Official Ideology of the Party, or the Liberalism of J.S. Mill, has as its goal to end debate over the question of what the guiding values and principles of the polity should be. It is to declare the contest, the game, finished, and anoint one's favourite fundamentals the victor. But this ending is artificial. To endorse it, we must veil ourselves

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from the reality of other possibilities. Concepts like ‘order’ or ‘freedom’ do not submit to any one definition. Their meanings change over time, as the means and values of society change. In a world of increasingly intensive global connectivity, to understand one another better we must constantly work to unfix our understanding of the terms that lie at the core of our own ideological affinities. We must not silence the voices we can’t accept. We must actively recruit them into the conversation. We must actively deny the illusion of final outcomes. To understand one another better, we must see politics not as a finite ideological contest to be won, but as an infinite game wherein the purpose is to prevent the conclusion of play.