

Personal Political Characteristics and Trust in State Media: A Case Study of China

Xin Tong¹

Who, if anyone, is more influenced by state media in China? While scholars have discussed people's resilience and response to state apparatus under authoritarian systems, few studies have directly tested the relationship between personal political characteristics and trust in state media in China. Drawing data from the 2019 Asian Barometer Survey, I employ factor analysis and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the relationship between three personal political characteristics, i.e., political orientation, political awareness and perception of democracy, and individual trust in China's state-controlled media. Results consistently show that political awareness significantly and negatively influences trust in state media, challenging the prevailing view that those in the broad middle range of political awareness present the highest political trust within authoritarian regimes. Chinese respondents with lower political awareness tend to show higher trust in the state media, while pro-regime political orientation and perception of democracy from an authoritarian perspective are not significant characteristics of individual-level trust. These findings suggest that even though some people may be critical of the official media, those with low political awareness are not sophisticated enough to resist state media influence, which potentially threatens the democratic transition of Chinese society.

Keywords: state media, political trust, personal political characteristic, democratization, China

¹ Xin Tong is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Political Science, The University of Tennessee - Knoxville, USA. Email address: xtong5@vols.utk.edu.

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Introduction

Who is more influenced by state media in China? While scholars have studied people's resilience and response to state apparatus under authoritarian systems, few studies have directly tested the relationships between personal political characteristics and trust in state media in China. This research investigates how personal political characteristics affect trust in state media in China.² State-controlled official media plays a crucial role in shaping people's opinions and views on just about all aspects of life in China given the fact that non-official or non-supervised media is almost non-existent in China. However, it is up to individuals to believe or not to believe the official media's reports of events, especially in the age of social media which cannot be completely monitored by the governmental authorities in a timely fashion. Studying who is more likely to believe the state media has implications for assessing the effectiveness of official media propaganda and the democratic transition of Chinese society.

Studies have shown that personal political characteristics are closely related to support for authoritarian systems and lack of support for democratic change. Fromm (1957, pp. 3-4) noted that individuals with submissive and masochistic characters were fanatically attracted by authoritarian regimes such as Nazism and Stalinism because they sought to be led by the powerful to overcome their powerlessness. Those who irrationally and emotionally obeyed and submitted commands from the leader, party, or state were hindered from developing democratic values, commonly adherent to established authoritarian norms, and were more tolerant of repression and violence to sustain these norms (Fromm & Nadge, 1957). Scholars have found that individuals with right-conservative political orientation tended to show higher support for restrictions on civil liberties and human rights, repressive government measures, anti-democratic candidates, and lesser endorsement of democratic values and the democratic system compared to the liberal-lefts with pro-democratic tendencies (de Oliveira Santos & Jost, 2024).

The research conceptualizes personal political characteristics into three dimensions, including political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy for three reasons: First, it is incontrovertible that numerous personal political characteristics are to be explored, but valuing the efficiency of research is of equivalent importance. Concentration on representative variables helps eliminate redundancy in a larger process of inquiry and supports the reliability of this research; Second, these three personal political characteristics are found to be fundamentally involved in one's understanding of the political world based on the position in the political spectrum, the knowledge accumulation, and prioritization of value and be closely linked to political behaviors under authoritarianism. Neundorf et al. (2022) argued that Turkish citizens' normative support, i.e. the pro-regime political ideology, prevented voter defections during the economic crisis and helped stabilize Turkey's authoritarian rule. Reuter and Szakonyi (2013) noted that Russians who gained knowledge of electoral fraud which was politicized by elites from Twitter and Facebook rather than those

² "Trust" in this research refers to the perceived credibility of information instead of the innate truthfulness of news. I equal the levels of citizens' trustworthiness in state media to the levels of influence by state media as trust from the audience perspective directly impacts how the state news is personally interpreted and disseminated. Thus, citizens showing higher trust in state media indicates they are more influenced by it. See Wang and Mark, *Trust in Online News: Comparing Social Media and Official Media Use by Chinese Citizens*.

from Russia's domestic social platforms with monotonous perception of fraud showed higher awareness of government malfeasance and were more likely to make anti-regime mobilization. Zhai (2018) found that Chinese people who prioritized political rights over economic security as an essential component of democracy were more discouraged by the government's poor political performance with substantially reduced trust in it; Third, the three personal political characteristics are typically discussed when assessing a Chinese citizen's engagement with Chinese politics. Scholars have paid attention, more or less, to the dynamics of people's political spectrum, political consciousness, and understanding of essential democratic values interplaying with other variables when looking across Chinese society. Hung (2022) warned about the extremely pro-government stance in the political spectrum in exploring the possibility that China employed metaverse for malicious purposes in domestic politics and the international community from a national security perspective. Kuhn and Zhang (2014) discussed the growing environmental awareness that has entered the political debate in China when studied the crucial factors contributing to citizens' climate protection participation. Bin Amin (2018) argued that "the 21st century revered the word 'democracy' as the key companion of civilization and modernization" (p. 59) where the basic understanding of democratic values in authoritarian models was receiving high attention with a specific focus on China's people's democracy to pace up the development of civil society. The three dimensions, although interrelated, are not identical. Political orientation describes one's ideologically self-reported placement on a socially liberal-conservative and economically left-right continuum, characterizing their political positions with one another on a political spectrum (Alyukov, 2023; Dimdins et al., 2023). Political awareness refers to one's level of political knowledge and the extent to which they independently and critically process political information (Geddes & Zaller, 1989; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Perception of democracy examines how people define the concept of democracy (Zhai, 2022), highlighting essential characteristics of democracy among all desirable democratic elements from one's understanding.

The main contribution of this research is to extend the scholarship on the political implications of personal political characteristics to the Chinese context. While a burgeoning body of literature suggests that political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy are related to public trust in state apparatus, their influences on individual trust in state media have not been adequately examined. I directly explore the relationship between political orientation, political awareness, perception of democracy, and individual-level trust in state media in China. Using the 2019 ABS data, I find that political awareness significantly and negatively influences trust in state media in China, while pro-regime political orientation and perception of democracy from an authoritarian perspective are not significant predictors.

The research provides new insights into understanding the dynamics of Chinese public opinion on its official media, a realm governed by the Communist Party of China (hereafter CPC). The state-controlled media in China has been monopolistic in noticeably shaping and directing public opinion, contributing to the Chinese government's popular support and political legitimacy (Zhang & Xu, 2022). However, the lack of alternative information sources and voices may decimate citizens' self-determination and self-authorization of media information, darkening China's democratization prospects (Kirsch & Welzel, 2018). Evidence suggests that the Chinese government has made its state media with more loyal attitudes towards the Party, more quality content, advanced technologies, and funds to

maintain its credibility among citizens (Liu & Bai, 2013). It suggests that Chinese society should recognize and address citizens' immature personal political characteristics to gain emancipatory power of collaboration to liberate the media environment and step onto the democratic road.

Personal Political Characteristics and Their Political Implications

Personal political characteristic³ are an oft-discussed topic among contemporary philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists such as Erich Fromm, Theodor W. Adorno, Harold Lasswell, and Jeffery Mondak. Since the global rise of authoritarianism has become a significant concern over the past three decades, scholarly attention to the causes and implications of personal political characteristics on which authoritarian regimes rest has intensified (Berberoglu, 2020; Morgan, 2021). Scholars focus on how personal political characteristics may hinder or motivate individuals to develop certain political attitudes and behaviors in democracies. Fromm and Nadge (1957) highlighted the connection between personality maturity and support for democracies. People with rational authority (i.e., a consciousness of moral issues, a conviction in questions of intellect, and fidelity in emotional matters) are vigorous in creating fruitful cultures and solidifying the basis for political democracy, while those with authoritarian personalities rooted in irrational authority (i.e. to emotionally submit, obey, or to receive commands from the greater power such as the leader, party or state) do not reach the maturity of love nor make use of reason and therefore, are hindered from developing democratic values. Fromm and Nadge (1957, pp. 3-4) noted that authoritarian systems rested on the belittled individuals who sought to be led by the powerful to overcome their powerlessness, and only they became "mature enough" to perceive the world could this cult of irrational authority be removed and democracy be established. The Big Five personality traits,⁴ providing a fundamental framework for understanding the whole person from their social and political aspects, also play a predictive role in people's evaluation and response to the political world where more open, conscientious, and agreeable individuals have substantively higher support for democratic regime while more extraverted and neurotic ones show slightly lower support (Erhardt, 2023; Gerber et al., 2011). Scholars are also divided on whether the existence of illiberal personalities in politics poses severe social and political problems. Prior research in political psychology documents that individuals with right-conservative political orientation appeared to be more tolerant of repressive government measures on civil liberties and held lesser endorsement of democratic values compared to the liberal-lefts with pro-democratic tendencies (de Oliveira Santos & Jost, 2024). Based on an instrumental perspective, studies found that individuals with left-wing authoritarianism presented higher levels of antagonistic narcissism, leading them to

³ Personal political characteristics, also discussed as personalities in politics in the past literature, involve differences across individuals and the manifestation of those differences within individuals. Personal political characteristics refer to a pattern of relatively permanent personal traits, unique characteristics, or dispositions that are internal to the person and are reasonably consistent over time and across situations and that help to explain differences between individuals' attitudes and behaviors in the field of politics. See Julie Blais, Philip G. Chen, and Scott Pruyers, "Political Psychology: The Role of Personality in Politics," *Frontiers Political Science* 3 (July 20, 2021): 1–4.

⁴ The Big Five personality traits, including extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience, were identified by social psychologists in the 1990s and are considered as core personality traits that are highly stable and heritable through one's life cycle which shape how people respond to the vast array of situations they encounter in the world.

endorse or exercise violence against others to satisfy their ego-focused and even anti-social motives rather than altruistic motives and social justice commitment in political activism (Fowler & Kam, 2007; Krispenz & Bertrams, 2022). On the other hand, some scholars argued that a liberal democratic society could probably require more than just democratic liberal personalities to function satisfactorily because more than one personality was needed to launch political movements in that it resulted in broader mass participation and social change (Greenstein, 1965; Montague, 2024).

Studies have focused on the relationship between personal political characteristics and democratization. One significant theoretical advance in the democratization scholarship is the self-expression values proposed by Inglehart and Welzel (2005) in *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* to revise the modernization theory. The findings implied that when self-expression values emerged and developed in the post-industrial era, there were rising demands for political participation to integrate values such as tolerance for diversity and aspiration to liberty into government agenda-setting (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The pro-diversity and pro-liberty orientations, identified as more mature political personalities, are significant foundations of democracy (Inglehart & Welzel, 2009). Cho (2023) identified the positive relationship between pro-liberal citizens and the likelihood of democratic transition under authoritarian regimes. Cho (2023) argued that the pro-liberal Chinese were more active in their participation in civil society activities to make their voices heard and showed less support for the CPC. The underlying assumption is that more maturely developed personal political characteristics favor democratic transitions in an authoritarian state.

Less-matured personal political characteristics, exemplified by pro-regime orientation, lower political awareness, and perception of democracy from an authoritarian perspective, are often associated with higher trust in state apparatus. First, people with a pro-regime orientation hold higher trust in the state apparatus because they view themselves as in-group members of authoritarian regimes. An in-group is a social group to which a person is psychologically self-identified as a member. An out-group is a social group with which the person is not self-identified. People with a pro-regime orientation identify with their nation more favorably, seeing other nations, especially those with ideological clashes, as out-group enemies (Huntington, 2011). They demonstrate positive evaluations and high trust in state apparatus, such as state media, because they believe in its official authority and authenticity as an information source. Walker and Orttung (2014) noted that a majority of the state-television audience from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, and Vietnam, even behaving themselves as passive supporters of government policy, presented high trust in state-controlled media with the dominant pro-government political narrative. Moehler and Singh (2009) found that respondents in post-authoritarian African democracies who believed the state was doing its job well had more positive attitudes toward the state-owned news outlets and negative opinions of the emerging private media. Russian people with pro-regime political orientation preferred official news because they believed in its journalistic professionalism and governmental responsibilities for information credibility (Alyukov, 2023). Regime supporters in China trusted the state-controlled newspaper *People's Daily* because it allowed them to understand the government's latest policies and decisions quickly and comprehensively. They were also hostile to foreign media because of their biased anti-government and anti-party news to get China entangled in chaos (Truex, 2016). This orientation echoes the positive "us" (I and/or my allies) vs. the negative "them" (the opposing group and/or their allies) depiction that is commonly employed by political propaganda under authoritarian

regimes to build belonging and to legitimize the marginalization and repression of dissenting groups (Zhao, 2021, pp. 1-2).

Political Orientation Hypothesis: *People with a pro-regime orientation hold higher trust in state media in China.*

Second, people with lower political awareness hold higher trust in state apparatus because they have less capacity to scrutinize political communications under authoritarian regimes critically. Political awareness refers to one's attention, interest, knowledge, and engagement with politics and their sensitivity to comprehending and assessing power relationships, government agendas, or other hidden political messages (Moehler & Singh, 2009). People who are less politically aware are less sophisticated in assimilating the information they have gathered in a discerning fashion and forming independent political views than those more politically conscious (Goh, 2015; Luskin, 1990). Geddes and Zaller (1989) found that the less attentive to politics, the weaker one's capacity for critical scrutiny of ideas relating to politics. In a focus group examining to which extent were Russian viewers' attitudes in line with the Kremlin's official narrative of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a majority of participants who scored poorly on the political knowledge test, paid little attention to the detailed political information of recent major events, and had lower level of awareness of the current government reported higher trust in state-aligned media (Alyukov, 2022). A Chinese citizen who does not possess any knowledge of the current Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC), the frequency of general elections for the NPC, or the number of members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the PRC⁵ can hardly recognize their civic responsibilities for the country nor understanding of the political and social issues concerning the government. As these poorly informed people lack political knowledge accumulation, they are less capable of critically examining public affairs and the ideas to which they are exposed, and therefore, they find it hard to form their independent attitudes and are easily persuaded by state media (Geddes & Zaller, 1989; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011).

Political Awareness Hypothesis: *People with lower political awareness hold higher trust in state media in China.*

Third, people who perceive democracy from an authoritarian perspective hold higher trust in state apparatus because they are obsessed with authority under authoritarian regimes. As the spread of liberal democratic values may increase citizens' demand for transition to democratic institutions, authoritarian regimes have redefined democracy to maintain political legitimacy and stability (Ulbricht, 2018). The term "democracy" is refocused on national policy priorities alongside authoritarian-friendly perceptions, such as collectivism (i.e. the pursuit of collective interests at the cost of individual benefits), economic security, social stability and utility, and reciprocal relationships between the rulers and the followers (Ulbricht, 2018). The Western idealized version of the deliberative-procedural conception of democracy emphasizing citizen empowerment of votes, voice, and related rights is distorted into authoritarian deliberation in China where rulers have manipulated it as a means to

⁵ These items were taken as survey questions to measure university students' political knowledge in Guangzhou, China, in 2014. See Xueqing Li, Francis L.F. Lee, and Ying Li, "The Dual Impact of Social Media Under Networked Authoritarianism: Social Media Use, Civic Attitudes, and System Support in China," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (October 13, 2016): 21, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/research/view/5298>.

generate preferences and policies yet without institutionalized guarantee of democratic powers to those affected (He & Warren, 2011). For instance, since ancient times, deliberation in China has manifested itself in processes of political loyalty where emperors legitimized their governance as following the “Son of Heaven” to realize people’s will (He, 2013, p. 72). The CPC governs under the “political consultation (or deliberation) system under the leadership of the Party,” (He, 2013, p. 73) which is framed as a necessity for people’s democracy. The Chinese characters of deliberative authoritarianism, though to some extent allowing the public to orderly and reasonably remonstrate officials and examine policies, are inherently command, limited on open spaces of public discourse, and unfriendly to deliberative approaches to conflict (He & Warren, 2011). Originating from an authoritative source, it has made the ruled accept the state institutions through legitimized authority and entrenched political loyalty. Viewing democracy as a concept in conformity with the culturally rooted traditions and the national values of governance with hierarchical collectivism that can protect powerlessness and maintain a harmonious society, people demonstrate higher trust in state apparatus because they believe the powerful authority must be in their best interests. This situation is reflected in the findings by Wu (2013) that Chinese citizens who perceived good economic performance as an essential value of democracy showed higher trust in their criminal justice institutions than their Taiwanese counterparts.

Perception of Democracy Hypothesis: *People who perceive democracy from an authoritarian perspective hold higher trust in state media in China.*

This research contributes to the literature on political trust in authoritarian regimes from three aspects. First, it fills the research gap by casting more direct attention on people’s trust in state media. Literature on authoritarianism has conventionally revolved around miscellaneous factors influencing popular support for authoritarian regimes rather than trust in state-controlled media. As Schnelle et al. (2021) contended, a core debate in authoritarianism research was to explore the influencing factors of support for authoritarianism, including culture, critical life events, and lifelong socialization processes. Geddes and Zaller (1989) argued that Brazilian citizens’ level of political awareness, which interacted with the educationally conditioned exposure to the state news and information, was heavily associated with support for regime policies during Brazil’s authoritarian period in the 1970s. However, in a digital age where social media expedites information exchange promptly while authoritarian governments counteractively advance and tighten information control, it is vital to look over the level of trust in state-supervised media and its implications for the effectiveness of official media propaganda and China’s democratization.

It also establishes more sophisticated models that examine beyond the impact of demographics on trust in state media and challenges the prevailing argument that people in the brand middle ranges of political awareness, which was primarily contingent on the demographics, were typically most vulnerable to government-dominated communications media. Conventional literature highlighted the effects of four major socioeconomic factors, including age, income, education, and residence, on trust in state apparatus under authoritarian regimes where political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy have been simply treated as intermediaries mediating the impacts of access to alternative information sources and exposure to state news in certain circumstances (see Figure 1). Goh (2015) argued that under Singapore’s authoritarian press system, voters who were younger, more educated, and had higher household incomes had more economic

resources and better digital literacy skills to effectively use digital media to gain political knowledge, which helped decrease the state media influence on them. Zhu et al. (2012) and Li et al. (2016) argued that Chinese rural residents were less critical of state news because they had smaller amounts of social contacts that provided complementary information. Geddes and Zaller (1989) argued that Brazilian citizens with mid-level political awareness in the 1970s, which was conditioned by middle education (i.e., having approximately six school years) and further heavier exposure to state news, had less resistance to government-controlled media influence and greater support for official policies. Based on Geddes and Zaller’s exposure-acceptance model, Kennedy (2009) argued that Chinese citizens in middle levels education (i.e., completion of compulsory education), were politically aware of party propaganda yet displayed higher trust in official messages and political support for the government than those in lower and highest levels of political awareness. However, recent studies challenged Geddes and Zaller’s and Kennedy’s models by demonstrating that trust in state apparatus could be influenced beyond the scope of demographic factors (Liang & Li, 2023). This research contributes to this debate by contending that *in ceteris paribus*, there is a significantly negative association between political awareness and trust in state media rather than the well-recognized curvilinear one rooted in those demographics.

Lastly, the research explores how personal political characteristics influence trust in state media from an individual level in China. Previous studies have mainly focused on how public trust in state apparatus under authoritarian regimes is influenced from a national level. Pernia (2021) contended that authoritarian political values popular among Filipino citizens, including conforming, anti-political pluralism, and support for strong leaders, enhanced institutional trust in the political system. Wang (2005) found that the Chinese public reported higher levels of trust in government than those found in most advanced industrial societies because the gains of economic prosperity compensated for the regime-eroding effect of critical attitudes.

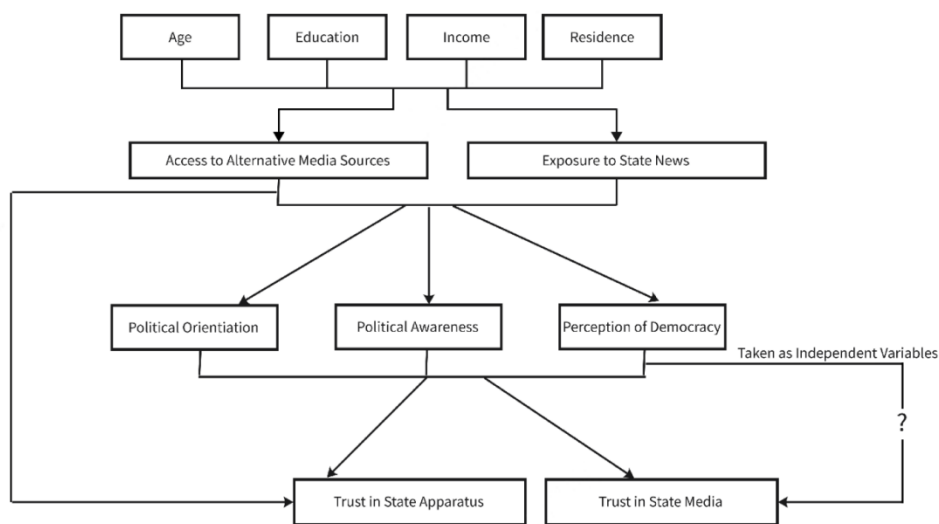


Figure 1. Relationship between Personal Political Characteristics and Trust in State Apparatus.

Data and Research Design

This research uses data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS). The ABS is a cross-national survey project that gathers public opinion data on various political and social issues from 18 Asian states and territories with randomly selected adult respondents. This research's ABS data on China were in the Fifth Wave 2019.⁶

Trust in state media in China is treated as a dependent variable measured by “1 (Trust Fully),” “2 (Trust A Lot),” “3 (Trust Somewhat),” “4 (Distrust Somewhat),” “5 (Distrust A Lot),” and “6 (Distrust Fully) respondents report based on the Chinese context in the two survey questions as follows: 1) How much trust do you have in television; 2) How much trust do you have in newspaper.⁷

As for the key independent variables, factor analysis is adopted to estimate political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy in China as three factors. Political orientation is measured by four survey questions, political awareness by four survey questions, and perception of democracy by three survey questions. The four questions on political orientation include “Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces,” “Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government,” “A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people’s support,” and “I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.” Respondents are asked to gauge the extent of their agreement with these statements by “1 (Strongly Agree),” “2 (Agree),” “3 (Disagree),” and “4 (Strongly Disagree).” Their answers are added up and rescale by 4 - 7 (high, coded as 1), 8- 12 (medium, coded as 2), and 13 - 16 (low, coded as 3). The four questions on political awareness include “When government leaders break the laws, there is nothing the court can do,” “How often do government officials withhold important information from the public,” “Where would you place China today on this scale?” and “Where would you place Japan today on this scale?” The first question asks the respondents to gauge the extent of their agreement with the statement by “1 (Strongly Agree),” “2 (Agree),” “3 (Disagree),” and “4 (Strongly Disagree).” The second question asks the respondent to gauge the frequency of information concealment from the Chinese government by “1 (Always),” “2 (Most of the time),” “3 (Sometimes),” and “4 (Rarely).” The last two questions ask the respondents to evaluate the extent of democracy in China and Japan⁸ by reporting which 1-to-10 integer scores, from “completely

⁶ For more details on the ABS, see <https://www.asianbarometer.org/>.

⁷ It is acknowledged that both state-owned media and commercial media exist in China. However, the media conglomerate, exemplified by CCTV as an authoritarian media entity managing consciousness of news and events in popular entertainment while commercial media advertisers eager to curry favor with state authorities has implicated a media environment in which the party-state maintains a dominant editorial hand. Moreover, studies have shown that television and newspaper are the number one forms taken by state-controlled media under authoritarian regimes and remain the major sources to which people turn for news and information. Thus, though the term “state” is not explicitly put in these questions, it is reasonable to argue that the “television” and “newspaper” which the Chinese citizens typically recognize, mostly get exposed to, and practically base their evaluations on refer to the state-controlled television and newspaper in China. See Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung, “Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January 2014): 71-85.

⁸ By taking the placement of Japan on the democratic evaluation spectrum, I test Chinese people’s mastery of political knowledge of a country with world influence and is in proximity and deep historical and cultural ties

undemocratic” to “completely democratic,” fit their perception. I recalculate the whole scores of political awareness by making Q130 deducted from the add-up of Q111, Q117, and Q128, and rescale the variable into three ordinal levels, i.e. -7 - 1 (high, coded as 1), 2 - 8 (medium, coded as 2), and 9 - 17 (low, coded as 3). The three questions on the perception of democracy include “People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations,” “Political leaders rule by following their own wisdom rather than people’s preferences to ensure a society’s collective welfare,” and “Rule by one party that represents the interests of all classes.”⁹ Respondents are asked to gauge the extent of their agreement with each statement by reporting a 1-to-10 integer score from “Definitely not an essential characteristic of democracy” to “Definitely an essential characteristic of democracy” for the three questions. I recalculate the whole scores of perception of democracy by making Q93 deducted from the add-up of Q95 and Q96 and rescale it into four ordinal levels, i.e., 13 - 19 (very high, coded as 1), 6 - 12 (high, coded as 2), -1 - 5 (low, coded as 3) and -8 - -2 (very low, coded as 4). I treat alternative media sources and four socio-demographic variables, namely gender, age, education, and residence, as control variables.

Missingness at random is assumed, and N/A responses, including “Do not understand the question,” “Cannot choose,” and “Decline to answer,” are excluded from all dependent and independent variables.

Analytical Findings

Table 1 depicts answers to the two survey questions used in the OLS regression about trust in state media.¹⁰ The overall trust in state media in China is fairly strong, though the percentages of people who report the highest level of “Trust Fully” in television or newspaper remain as low as 9.4 and 7.8 compared to 74 percent and 64.5 percent of those who show positive but lower levels of trust (“Trust A Lot” and “Trust Somewhat”), which account for the largest part of the respondents. Positive responses to trust in state media, though not at the highest level, still demonstrate the Chinese public’s positive attitudes towards the state news. Considering China’s tightened ideological control, such a high level of individual trust in state media is not unexpected. President Xi has also noted that the Chinese news media serves as a propaganda tool with its loyalty to the CPC to “tell China’s stories well” for the country’s remarkable achievements in key areas of society (Liu & Bai, 2013, p. 2). The levels of trust in state media reported in this survey remain high compared to those in previous research over ten years ago in China. A survey conducted by Tongji University of China during the late period of SARS after the government and the official media dealt with public criticism for their silence-keeping about the severe outbreak reported a recovery of trust in national news outlets as high as 83.3 percent (Zhang, 2006, p. 98).

with China. As discussed above, one’s level of political knowledge is a fundamental part of their political awareness. It is also worth noting that this question, though related to democracy, is situated in a different section from the part of the meaning of democracy in the survey where the former reports people’s regime evaluation while the latter reports the views of the essential characteristics of democratic values.

⁹ I recognize the controversy and complexity surrounding the definition of democracy, especially in the Chinese context. I intend to investigate whether a Chinese individual is inclined to perceive democracy from an authoritarian perspective or to perceive it in the universally recognized liberal democratic values. Thus, I select the relevant questions to roughly measure this inclination.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Survey Questions Measuring Trust in State Media (Unit: Percentage)

Survey Questions	Trust Fully	Trust A Lot	Trust Somewhat	Distrust Somewhat	Distrust A Lot	Distrust Fully	Missing	Total
How much trust do you have in television	9.4	38.4	35.6	9.2	1.1	0.4	6.0	100.0
How much trust do you have in newspaper	7.8	32.2	32.3	10.5	1.4	0.7	15.2	100.0

Note. Total number of respondents=4,941. The category of “Missing” data includes “Do not understand the question,” “Do not know,” and “Do not want to answer.”

As the key independent variables, political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy are measured separately and indicated by three factors generated by the factor analysis of the aforementioned eleven survey questions. The factor accounts for 71.1 percent of the total variance. The survey questions were also tested for reliability and validity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test works out to be 0.74. Bartlett’s test of sphericity has a chi-square value of 2,264, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). These test results indicate that the eleven survey questions provide reliable and valid measurements of political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy.

Figure 2 shows that Chinese citizens stand on different positions of the political spectrum: nearly one out of five (19.5 percent) hold a high pro-regime orientation, and about four out of five (80.3 percent) have a medium pro-regime orientation. In contrast, very few respondents (0.2 percent) have a low pro-regime attitude. Although the percentage of the respondents who are strongly supportive of China’s political regime is about four times less than that of the medium-level pro-regime orientation, the results still correspond to the popular argument that a majority of people in China do not hold strongly negative views towards the CPC regime (Chen et al., 1997; Chu, 2016).

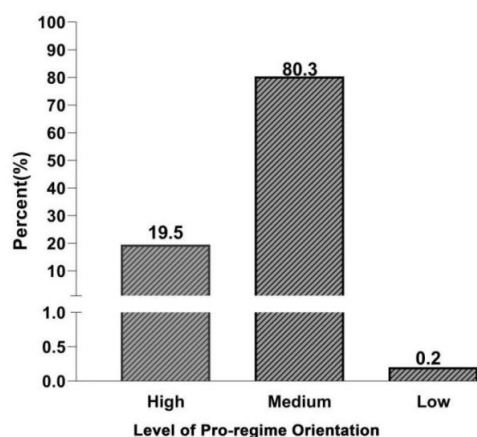


Figure 2. Citizens’ Political Orientation in China.

As shown in Figure 3, the respondents differ in their levels of political awareness. More than 70 percent have a medium-level political awareness in China, and nearly one out of four (24.1 percent) have a low-level political awareness. Only 3.7 percent report a high level of political awareness in China, much lower than that of medium- or low-level political awareness. These results partially align with the previous study that most Chinese peasants, with homogeneity in their socio-demographic characteristics, are politically ignorant (Yu, 2007). It presents a pessimistic view of the status quo of political awareness in China with the respondents from different socioeconomic backgrounds - A large majority of them (96.3 percent) do not have a high-level political awareness and, therefore, are less politically knowledgeable and less capable of perceiving political and social issues independently and critically.

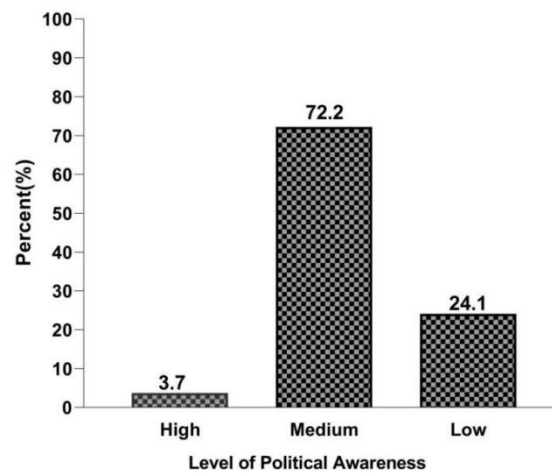


Figure 3. Citizens' Political Awareness in China.

Figure 4 shows that people have divided perceptions of democracy in China: 48.4 percent perceive democracy from a very high or high-level authoritarian perspective, while 51.7 percent think otherwise. The results differ from the prevailing view in that a majority of Chinese share a noticeable tendency for their understanding of democracy from an authoritarian view based on paternalistic meritocracy, exemplified by “democracy under centralized guidance” and “the people’s democratic dictatorship” (Zhai, 2022, p. 232) which requires the Party’s dominion, competent and virtuous rulers, and obedience of the masses to take care of people’s welfare and pursue collective socioeconomic gains (Lu & Shi, 2014; Yang et al., 2024). A comparison of Figures 2, 3, and 4 shows that political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy are not highly correlated. Although 99.8 percent report a strong pro-regime orientation in China, 96.3 percent show a weak political awareness, and only 48.4 percent firmly understand democracy from an authoritarian perspective. As discussed earlier, the weak correlations between the three variables (0.16, -0.08, -0.13) indicated by Spearman’s correlation not only corroborate the findings that the three personal political characteristics are distinct but also suggest that multicollinearity may not be a potential problem in the regression analysis.

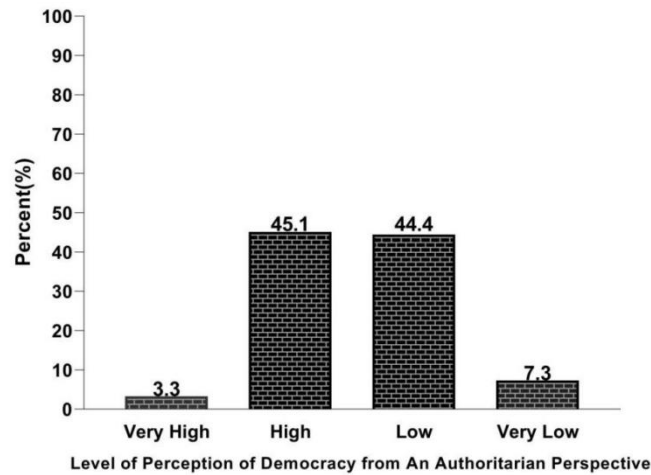


Figure 4. Citizens' Perception of Democracy in China.

I construct two control variables: access to alternative media sources and socio-demographics. I focus on one survey question that explicitly measures Chinese citizens' access to popular international social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, and Snapchat. The result indicates that a considerably high proportion of respondents (98.6 percent) used these alternative social media networks which are blocked in China. The socio-demographic statistics are as follows: 50.4 percent of the sample are male; the average age of respondents is 46.2 years; the average highest education level is incomplete secondary/high school; and the average level of residence within the country where the respondent lives is small city or town (less than 100,000 people).

Table 2 reports the main analytical findings of the statistical models. Regarding model specification, Model 1 contains only the three key independent variables that measure pro-regime orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy from an authoritarian perspective. Access to alternative media sources variable and individual-level socioeconomic variables are added to Models 2 and 3. Model 3 is theoretically more meaningful than the former Models since it contains all relevant factors.

All three models in Table 2 clearly show that political awareness has a robust and negative impact on trust in state media, which challenges the popular argument that Chinese people with middle-level political awareness show the highest support for the regime due to the government-funded nine-year compulsory education, which leads them to exposure to political news with official political values but a lack of capacity for critical scrutiny of those ideas. Pro-regime orientation significantly and positively impacts trust in state media at the medium level. However, this impact is not consistent or significant as levels shift and control variables are added to Models 2 and 3. Perception of democracy from an authoritarian perspective does not significantly impact trust in state media. These findings are partially in sync with the hypotheses.

Table 2

Regression Results of Trust in State Media

Trust in State Media		Trust in Television			Trust in Newspaper		
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Pro-Regime Orientation (“High” as Baseline)	Medium	0.289*** (0.052)	0.285*** (0.059)	0.300*** (0.060)	0.204*** (0.055)	0.246*** (0.063)	0.244*** (0.064)
	Low	0.296 (0.341)	0.564 (0.371)	0.584 (0.370)	0.816*** (0.359)	0.261 (0.390)	0.280 (0.390)
Political Awareness (“High” as Baseline)	Medium	-0.318** (0.120)	-0.354** (0.125)	-0.378** (0.128)	-0.378** (0.131)	-0.416** (0.134)	-0.451** (0.139)
	Low	-0.505*** (0.126)	-0.510*** (0.132)	-0.525*** (0.137)	-0.566*** (0.136)	-0.576*** (0.142)	-0.604*** (0.147)
Perception of Democracy from An Authoritarian Perspective (“Very High” as Baseline)	High	-0.072 (0.088)	-0.062 (0.091)	-0.081 (0.091)	0.041 (0.094)	0.027 (0.097)	-0.002 (0.098)
	Low	-0.086 (0.088)	-0.107 (0.091)	-0.146 (0.092)	0.065 (0.094)	0.044 (0.098)	-0.002 (0.099)
	Very	-0.177 (0.134)	-0.151 (0.155)	-0.228 (0.158)	0.096 (0.144)	0.126 (0.164)	0.044 (0.168)
	Low						
Access to Alternative Media Sources ^a		-	-0.048 (0.239)	-0.080 (0.240)	-	0.049 (0.251)	-0.050 (0.254)
Socio-demographic Characteristics	Gender ^b	-	-	-0.032 (0.048)	-	-	0.010 (0.051)
	Age	-	-	0.001 (0.002)	-	-	0.003 (0.002)
	Education Level ^c	-	-	-0.002 (0.004)	-	-	-0.002 (0.004)
	Residence ^d	-	-	0.004 (0.028)	-	-	0.001 (0.030)

Note. The total number of respondents in the survey was 4,941.

^a Access to alternative media sources is measured by the survey question “Do you currently use any of the following social media networks? (E.g., Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, Youtube, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, *etc.*)” “Yes” is coded as “1” and “No” as “2.”

^b Male is coded as “1” and female as “2.”

^c No formal education is coded as “01,” incomplete primary/elementary as “02,” complete primary/elementary as “03,” incomplete secondary/high school: technical/vocational type as “04,” complete secondary/high school: technical/vocational type as “05,” incomplete

secondary/high school as “06,” complete secondary/high school as “07,” some university education as “08,” university education completed as “09” and post-graduate degree as “10.”

^d Capital or Megacity (1 million population plus) is coded as “1,” regional center or other major cities (100,000 plus) as “2,” small city or town (less than 100,000 people) as “3,” and village or countryside as “4.”

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

A comparison of these models provides further details. Model 1 has shown that political awareness influences individuals’ susceptibility to state media. When control variables are considered in Models 2 and 3, the negative impact of political awareness on trust in state media remains statistically significant. Pro-regime orientation also causes an increasing trust in newspaper in Model 1. However, this statistical significance is lost across levels and when control variables are included in Models 2 and 3. Perception of democracy does not show a fixed direction of correlation with trust in state media. The insignificant impact of political orientation and perception of democracy on trust in state media implies that the Chinese government’s efforts to homogenize public discourse and neutralize the repercussions of ideological differences on the trust structure and co-opt democratic rhetoric as compatible with authoritarian governance have taken effect.

Model 3 in trust in television and newspapers shows that if individuals demonstrate low political awareness, their trust in state media in China tends to rise. Treating “high” political awareness as the baseline, individuals who report political awareness as a “medium” demonstrate increased trust in television by 0.378 units and in newspaper by 0.451 units. Rising individual trust in state media tends to become more pronounced for those ignorant of politics and government. For those who show political awareness as “low,” their trust in television increases by 0.525 units, and in newspaper, it increases by 0.604 units. Political awareness presents a greater statistical significance on trust in newspaper than television with higher coefficients.

Although trust in state media generally shows an upward trend when people’s access to alternative media sources decreases, it does not have a significant influence. Of the individual-level socio-demographics, different from previous studies that the older people with lower education levels and reside farther from capital or megacity have higher trust in state media, the results show that people from older-aged groups with lower education levels and live more distant from megacity show less trust in state media. This inconsistency may stem from the explosive growth of online media in China over the past few decades, which has made criticism more accessible and affected people’s media exposure patterns in a way that goes beyond the scope of socio-demographics (Liang & Li, 2023). However, the coefficients in all these three control variables are too small to present a predictive ability on trust in state media.

One major challenge to these findings is the likely two-way causal relationship between political awareness and trust in state media. Although the causal direction remains disputed, it is argued that these micro-level factors originally structured by some macro-level factors such as postmaterialism and government ownership are presumably earlier and more deeply rooted than audience trust in media, suggesting that the causal mechanism goes from the

former to the latter (Tsfati & Ariely, 2013). Another challenge is that citizens may present different levels of trust towards different types of news on state-controlled media. People critical of political news may not be as critical of non-political news. However, considering the survey asks respondents to think about China's government and economy in its introduction part, I assume that respondents are prone to report their levels of trust in political and social news. However, it is still desirable to employ causal identification techniques, explore trust in different types of news in state media, and examine how personal political characteristics across different subgroups may affect trust in state media under authoritarian systems in future work.

Conclusion and Discussion

After the crisis of the propaganda model in the mid-1980s and after the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, the guidance of public opinion (*yulun daoxiang*) through the state-controlled media became a primary concern of the party-state (Chan, 2007). In recent years, the state media in China has transformed its hard propaganda with heavy-handed slogans to soft propaganda with more flexible and subtle strategies to persuade the public. Under the context of increasingly tight control over all aspects of life and governance, I found that very few Chinese people hold considerably negative attitudes towards the regime or are highly aware of political issues in the society and nearly half perceive democracy as having worked at least moderately well in China. Does it imply that the widely-rooted immaturity of personality in politics makes the state apparatus safe to maintain its credibility and influence over Chinese society? Or is the collapse of trust in the state-controlled institutions waiting in the future?

To understand the political implications of the less-matured personalities in politics, I argue that political orientation, political awareness, and perception of democracy should be examined concerning individual trust in state media. It is consistently found that political awareness is significantly and negatively associated with individual trust in state media. In contrast, political orientation and perception of democracy have no particular impacts on trust in state media in China, indicating the state's effective efforts to neutralize the impact of ideological differences and conceptualize democracy as compatible with authoritarian governance. I also find that access to alternative media sources does not have a statistically significant impact on trust in state television or newspaper. In addition, the four socio-demographic factors have also lost predictive power with their considerably small coefficients. The findings suggest more direct attention to the political implications of personal political characteristics on trust in state media instead of making it an intervening variable based on socio-demographics.

This research indicates that one should focus on the development of Chinese citizens' political awareness to undercut the influence of state media. Civil society organizations in China, facing limits in sharing power throughout the policy life cycle yet continuing their growth in numbers, diversity, and activities to incorporate citizens into public administration, should strategically focus on increasing political awareness such as cultivating critical media literacy and constructing community trust networks with peer-to-peer dialogues. The low political awareness is detrimental to the democratic transition of Chinese society as the resulting high trust in state media may strengthen its ability to control what people think in authoritarian ways. In the years to come, Chinese society would face a battle between

propaganda techniques to sustain the legitimacy of the regime and cognitive efforts to raise political awareness.

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