Value Priority and Human Rights Policy: A Comparison between China and Western Nations

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What is This?
Values Priority and Human Rights Policy: A Comparison between China and Western Nations

HONG XIAO

At the centre of controversy over human rights policy in China is the disagreement on the relationship between two sets of human rights: civil and political rights on the one hand, and social and economic rights on the other. Much of the debate, however, has been undertaken on theoretical and normative levels. Empirical evidence is needed to advance this debate. Drawing data from a multination survey, this research explores whether Chinese and Westerners differ in their human rights policy preferences. The findings suggest that while social and economic rights have a much broader support base in China than in Western nations, political and civil rights are also important concerns to the Chinese public. Sources and implications of the findings are also discussed.

Introduction

In the past two decades much of the literature on human rights has fallen into two antagonistic camps. The first takes the universalistic approach and argues for the absolute nature of human rights. Its proponents claim that the principles of human rights are basic moral codes for human-kind, and they are meaningful and applicable in different cultures and societies (Donnelly 1989; Fukuyama 1995). They emphasize the prescriptive character of human rights and take the International Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as proof of the existence of a worldwide consensus. The other camp takes the relativistic approach and stresses the contingent nature of human rights. Advocates of this approach challenge the universality of rights norms (Emmerson 1995; Huntington 1991; Mauzy 1997). They argue that standards of morality are culture-bound and differ between societies. The two sides have been engaged extensively in the international discourse on rights issues. For example, in the ‘Asian value’ debate, supporters of human rights have taken the universalistic approach (Donnelly 1999; Englehart 2000),
whereas defenders of ‘Asian values’ have mostly taken the relativistic approach (Kausikan 1993; Mahbubani 1998).

At the centre of the debate is the disagreement on the relationship between the two sets of human rights—civil and political rights on the one hand, and social and economic rights on the other. In the universalist’s view, these two sets are mutually complementary and equally important. They go hand in hand and reinforce one another; political freedom facilitates and sustains economic development (Donnelly 1999; Sen 1999). The relativists, however, take the opposite stand. They claim that different rights emphasize different aspects of human dignity and social welfare. Political rights and economic rights cannot be implemented simultaneously in all circumstances, because too much political liberalism fosters fractional opposition that hinders economic development (Mahbubani 1998). Some Asian governments, including China, have challenged the universal importance of different rights in different cultures. They argue that imbedded in rights concepts are a cluster of values and these values are culture based. At a Bangkok conference in March 1993, Asian governments, although reaffirming a universal consensus on rights such as freedom from arbitrary killings, torture, slavery and genocide, at the same time stressed that human rights must be considered in the context of various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Controversy over human rights policy in China highlights the substantial differences between the two camps. Critics of China’s human rights policy assert that both political freedom and economic development are universal values. If the Chinese government wants economic growth, it must also promote democracy. They perceive the argument of cultural difference as nothing more than a cloak for authoritarian leaders to hang on to a monopoly of power (Fang 1992; Nathan 1993). Others, on the other hand, claim that different social and economic circumstances justify different prioritization of human rights policy. They disapprove of the Chinese government’s suppression of freedom of speech and imprisonment of political dissidents, but defend that Chinese are confronted with different social issues that call for a somewhat different policy on human rights (Chan 1999). Chinese officials in particular claim that in China economic prosperity is the major concern of the people and an emphasis on social order versus individual freedom is good for economic growth.

This debate, however, has been undertaken mostly on the theoretical and normative level. For either side to be convincing, empirical study is needed. The core issue is what human rights policy that the Chinese public favours most. This article uses data from a multination survey to explore whether Chinese and Westerners differ in their policy preferences in the areas of social security versus individual autonomy, social equality versus personal freedom, respect for authority versus individual development, and the power of the state versus the choice of the individual.

Theoretically, nearly everyone cherishes both social order and individual autonomy, or social equality and personal freedom. Realistically, however, these values can rarely be promoted equally in all circumstances and, as a result, they often come into conflict. Important social and political policies come precisely when one must decide which of the rights must be given priority over others. Because democratic acceptance and local support are fundamental for the promotion of human rights norms, how citizens in different parts of the world prioritize various rights is a significant question in the human rights debate.
Human Rights Norms and Chinese Cultural Context

Human rights norms originate from the West and centre on the conception of the individual, the state and the relationship between them. It is derived from the Lockean liberal Anglo tradition and is based on the social contract theory. This theory holds that individuals create the state and grant it minimal power. The idea of individual rights is associated with the idea of natural rights—rights that come with being a human being. It reflects a view of human beings as natural, autonomous and private beings. John Locke built his social contract theory, which largely serves as the basis of liberal democracy today, on the assumption that, prior to the formation of the nation-state, individuals enjoyed all kinds of freedom and lived in a paradise-like state of nature. The nation-state and government emerged as societies became larger and more complex. Accordingly, government and state were seen as forces restricting individuals’ freedom. From this perspective, valuing individual autonomy became paramount in Western culture.

Much has been written on the influence of cultural values on human rights policy and on the differences between Chinese and Western value systems (for example, Bauer and Bell 1999). Discussions of Chinese cultural tradition suggest that the concepts of rights in China differ very much from that of the West. Traditional Chinese culture, scholars argue, values state power and group cohesiveness (Chan 1999; de Bary 1983, 1998). These values are much influenced by Confucianism, which is primarily concerned with stability and social harmony. In the Confucian view, human beings are born into society and exist in relation to one another. The Chinese see individuals as part of the collective. In case of conflict, members of a society should behave selflessly, even to the point of self-sacrifice (Hsu 1981). The foremost purpose of Confucian teaching is to achieve social order and harmony. In fact, social order is one of the most treasured social values (Tu 1990). In addition, members of a society should be equal. Strong and unified countries are built upon social equality.

During the past 100 years, however, the social and cultural contexts in China, especially in urban areas, have changed significantly. Since the early years of the twentieth century, the influence of Confucianism and traditional culture in urban China has been declining. This is due partially to the impact of several campaigns attacking Confucian doctrines, and partially as a result of China’s social and economic transformation. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Confucian teachings have been further rejected. The communist government denounced Confucianism for providing the ethical rationale for a system of feudalism and patriarchy. Since 1949 the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) has been the only ruling party in China. The country has been governed according to Chinese communist/socialist ideology. Such ideology permeates every sector of human functioning, including dictating desirable values and attitudes for its citizens.

It should also be noted, however, that Confucianism and Chinese communist ideology are not totally at odds with each other. In fact, the latter is much influenced by the former. The affinity between the two can be seen in the CCP’s reaffirmation of Confucian values in the 1990s (de Bary and Tu 1999). In the ruling ideology of the CCP, society is viewed as a large family, the maintenance of which depends on each member’s contribution. Each member has the social responsibility of serving and cooperating with other members towards shared goals. At the same time,
the CCP is unambiguous on the importance of hierarchy. The basic rule of Party discipline holds that the individual is subordinate to the group and the lower level is subordinate to the higher level in the organization structure (Pye 1984). Examinations of school textbooks show that the nation is seen as a big family, with the state as its head and people as its members. The state needs to have power and authority to take care of its members (Solomon 1965).

Hence, discussions of Western and Chinese cultural traditions suggest three distinct patterns of policy preferences. First, in the valuation of social order/economic growth versus personal freedom/quality of life, the Chinese are more likely to emphasize the former, whereas Westerners are more likely to desire the latter. Second, Chinese and Westerners are sharply divided on their preference of social equality versus individual freedom. While social equality is more appealing to the Chinese, personal freedom is more attractive to Westerners. Third, with respect to the relationship between the individual and the state, Chinese are more likely to emphasize the power and responsibility of the state, whereas Westerners are more likely to value the individual’s ability to control one’s own life. The following section will empirically test these three hypotheses.

Another related question is whether there are value differences among sub-groups of the Chinese population. No society is monolithic. Factors such as education and age influence value orientations. Thus, preference of human rights policy may vary among individual citizens. Previous research on Chinese public opinions, with one exception (Nathan and Shi 1997), rarely examined political orientations of Chinese at the individual level. Knowledge of sub-groups’ policy preferences helps us formulate more effective strategies in promoting human rights in China. To this end, the study will also examine human rights orientations of Chinese respondents by age and education.

**Data and Measures**

Data for this research comes from the second wave of the World Values Survey (hereafter WVS) that was carried out in 1990–93. A total of 43 countries participated. The principal investigator was the World Values Study Group (1994), with fieldwork supported by sources within the participating countries in most cases. The data of the second wave of the WVS was based on face-to-face interviews, with samples consisting of all adults, aged 18 and older. It is one of the best available sources for research on human rights policies because it was explicitly designed to enable cross-national comparison of values and norms in a wide range of areas. The survey contains information on the kinds of issues that people prioritize for their countries. These issues range from freedom of speech and shared governance to economic security and fight against crime.

I analyse the responses from four countries—China, Britain, the United States and Sweden. I choose China and the United States for obvious reasons; they are at the centre of the human rights debate. I also include Britain and Sweden in my analysis because they are considered less extreme forms of liberal democracies. Representative national samples were interviewed in all cases except for China, in which the sample was based on the urban population.

In research using surveys such as this one, it is crucial that data comes from representative samples. To evaluate the representativeness of the Chinese sample, I compared two key demographic variables—gender and mean age—of the survey sample and the Chinese urban population. In terms of gender composition, there are 60 per cent men and 40 per cent of women in the sample.
In the Chinese general population of persons 18 years or older in urban areas, 52 per cent are men and 48 per cent women (China’s Population Census Office and State Statistical Bureau 1993). Clearly, men are overrepresented in the survey sample. The average age of the sample is 39 years while the mean age of the general population of 18 years or older in urban China is 38. Hence, with respect to age, the survey sample and the urban population are quite similar.

There is clearly a difference in the sampling frame between the Chinese and the other three samples. Although the Chinese urban population is, in a sense, analogous to the civic populations of the three Western countries, one must remain aware of this difference throughout the study. Due to the fact that the Chinese sample was drawn from the urban population, I do not assume that the responses in the survey are representative of the entire Chinese population. I do believe, however, that my findings can be useful as indicators of the value priorities of Chinese urban residents. In general, urban Chinese are more exposed to modern ideas and Western influence than the rural population, and arguably more receptive to values of democracy and human rights.

Response biases pose another limitation of the data. Like other surveys, the WVS data is subject to possible self-reporting biases, including the effect of social desirability of responses. Chinese data is more prone to this problem than the other three countries. The Chinese survey was conducted in 1990, one year after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. It was a politically conservative period, in which directly expressing one’s opinions on political and/or social issues could be a sensitive exercise. For fear of getting themselves in political trouble, some respondents may have disguised their real preferences. However, the effect of social desirability on responses is limited, because the survey guaranteed respondents’ anonymity.

Despite these limitations, the WVS is still one of the best cross-national survey data available. It provides a rare opportunity for cross-country comparisons of value priorities and patterns of belief. The findings of the research can help us better understand how and where cultural values converge and diverge. A better understanding of cultural similarities and differences will also facilitate consensus building in the international discourse on human rights.

The main purpose of the WVS was to collect data on general values and orientations, rather than on concepts of human rights. With respect to values and norms, the WVS asked about an array of citizen concerns. To test my hypotheses, I selected those questionnaire items that are closely related to human rights policy. Among them are people’s opinions about the most important goals for the country in the next 10 years, their assessment of the importance of equality versus freedom, their attitudes towards human rights movement, and their valuations of government power and responsibility. All of the questionnaire items came from close-ended questions. Sometimes respondents were asked to choose one answer from a list of statements. Sometimes, they were given a range of answers to select from. And other times they were instructed to rate a statement on a 10-point scale. Because of the complexity of the measures used in the questionnaires, it is difficult to construct a common measure for all of them. Thus, I present my analysis results in the original questionnaire format.

Findings

Social Security Versus Individual Autonomy

Do Chinese and Westerners prefer different human rights policies? To answer this question, I first compared the respondents’ opinions on the
country’s long-term goals. In the WVS, respondents were asked to decide on the most important development goal for their country in the next 10 years. Survey respondents were presented with three cards, each containing four statements. They were asked to choose one statement from each card as the most important goal for the country. Table 1 presents a summary of the responses by country. What is striking about Table 1 is how consistent the differences are between the responses of Chinese and Westerners. Among the statements on the first card, economic growth is clearly the main concern. However, the Chinese are much more likely than others to emphasize it. While about two-thirds of the Chinese considered it a priority, the proportions in the other three countries ranged from less than half (Britain) to just a little over a half (United States and Sweden). In terms of giving people more room for decision making, the gap is even wider. In China it was the least endorsed policy—less than 3 per cent. In other countries it was the second most supported item. The percentages ranged from 27 per cent (in the United States) to 40 per cent (in Britain).

On the second card social order was the primary concern in China. Chinese respondents (67 per cent) were twice as likely as those in Britain (24 per cent) and the United States (28 per cent) to consider it a top goal for the country. Although social order was the most cherished goal for Sweden (38 per cent), the proportion of the Swedish valuing it was almost 30 per cent lower than the Chinese. However, respondents in the Western nations were much more likely than the Chinese to endorse people’s input in government decision and freedom of speech.

When we move to the third card, cross-country differences became even more pronounced. More than 82 per cent of the Chinese desire a stable economy over other goals for the country. This figure is twice as much as that for Britain (41 per cent) and Sweden (39 per cent). In the United States, half the respondents considered it the most important goal for the country.

On these three cards, all statements deal with social policies on enduring concerns. They are set in a long-term time frame that refers to national priorities for the next 10 years. Items such as economic growth, social order and stable economy deal with economic security and emphasize sustenance needs. They are closely related to policy on social and economic rights. Items such as freedom of speech, people’s input in government decisions and humane society deal with issues of self-expression and emphasize democratic governing. They address civil and political rights policy.

Findings from Table 1 suggest that, compared with citizens in Western nations, the Chinese are more concerned with social and economic rights; they value social order and economic development more than Westerners do. At the same time, the Chinese are much less concerned with political and civil rights; they value individual choice and freedom of speech much less. The value patterns observed here are largely consistent with those of others (Emmerson 1995; Nathan and Shi 1997). They suggest that Chinese people give higher priority to social policies that promote physiological survival than political policies that advance individual liberty.

**Social Equality, Personal Freedom and Support for Human Rights**

In the WVS respondents were asked to indicate their preference for personal freedom versus equality by selecting one from the following two statements:

1. I find that both freedom and equality are important. But if I were to choose one or the
other. I would consider personal freedom more important, that is, everyone can live in freedom and develop without hindrance.

2. Certainly both freedom and equality are important. But if I were to choose one or the other, I would consider equality more important, that is, that nobody is underprivileged.

Table 2 presents proportions of the population selecting either of the two statements in the four countries. As expected, Chinese and Westerners have very different opinions on the issue. While less than a quarter (21 per cent) of the Chinese desire individual freedom, majority of the respondents in the other three countries chose it (the proportions ranging from 64 per cent to 71 per cent). With regard social equality, almost two-thirds of the Chinese (65 per cent) cherish it, but the value appeals to a much smaller proportion of Western respondents. The supporters of the idea are 24 per cent in the United States, 28 per cent in Sweden and 34 per cent in Great Britain. Additionally, a good number of Chinese respondents (14 per cent) did not give a preference. For them, the choice may be too difficult to make. These patterns clearly suggest that the Chinese value social equality more and individual freedom less than the Westerners.

One questionnaire item in the WVS directly assesses people’s attitude towards human rights policy. The question asks respondents whether they ‘strongly approve’, ‘approve’, ‘disapprove’ or ‘strongly disapprove’ the human rights movement at home or abroad. Table 3 displays the percentage distribution of the responses. The attitude patterns show both similarity and difference
between Chinese and Western respondents. A great majority of both Chinese and Westerners are supportive of the movement. However, the support level among the Chinese is lower. While 27 per cent Chinese expressed strong support for the movement, 42 to 60 per cent of the Westerners did so. The disapproval rate among Chinese is also much higher than that in the other three countries. The combination of ‘disapprove’ and ‘strongly disapprove’ categories brought the disapproval rate to over 26 per cent.

Respect for Authority Versus Individual Development: State Versus the Individual

Closely related to the attitude towards the human rights movement is the view on the relationship between individual and authority. Conventional stereotype suggests that Chinese and Westerners do not think along the same continuum on the issue; Chinese tend to respect authority, whereas Westerners tend to value the individual. Is there any empirical support for the hypothesis?

In the WVS respondents’ opinions on the issue were measured by their responses to two items: (a) greater emphasis on the development of the individual; and (b) greater respect for authority. Table 4 summarizes the responses of the four countries. Consistent with existing literature, attitude disparity appears between Chinese and Westerners. For the measure of individual development, an overwhelming majority of Westerners said it is a good thing—78 to 88 per cent in the three countries. In China the support base was much smaller—only 40 per cent. Furthermore, one-fifth of the Chinese believed that individual development was a bad thing. This percentage was more than four and a half times as high as those in the three Western countries. A quite large number of Chinese (40 per cent) did not care either way.

respect authority versus individual development: state versus the individual

For the measure of respect for authority, cross-country differences are also significant. The conventional belief is that authority receives more respect in China than in Western societies. But in my analysis the cross-country differences are opposite to the common conventions. The Chinese do not attribute much respect to authority. The contrast between the Chinese responses on the one hand and American and English responses on the other is especially surprising.
While three quarters of Americans and English value the idea, less than one quarter of Chinese do so. Additionally, 35 per cent of the Chinese considered respect for authority a bad thing. There is, then, no evidence to support the claim that Chinese culture values respect for authority.

The conception of the relationship between the state and the individual is crucial to understanding human rights policy. Two questionnaire items in the WVS tap support for individual autonomy versus state power. Unlike traditional surveys in which respondents are asked to either rate or rank certain items/statements, in the WVS each measure of respondents’ support is made of two statements. Two statements that make up the first measure are, ‘Individual ownership of business and industry should be increased’; and ‘Government ownership of business and industry should be increased’. The pair of statements that make up the second measure are, ‘Individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves’; and ‘The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for’. Each pair of statements is considered opposite in nature and placed at the two ends of a 10-point scale. They represent the two poles of a single-value dimension. Together, these two measures assess people’s support for government power and responsibility versus individual autonomy.

Table 5 presents mean scores of the two measures by country. Conventional wisdom suggests a significant gap between Chinese and Westerners. In keeping with common assumptions, the Chinese were, indeed, more likely than Westerners to support greater government control. Their mean score was 6.92, significantly higher than the mean scores of Americans (3.20), Swedish (4.25) and British (4.82). But the measure of support for state responsibility shows mixed results. On the one hand, the Chinese (mean = 5.10) showed greater support for increasing state welfare responsibility than did the Americans (mean = 3.44) and Swedish (mean = 3.29). On the other hand, the British were just as likely as the Chinese to support growing government responsibility, but unwilling to give the state as much power as the Chinese.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>6.92</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1,763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1,418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increasing government responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1,461</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scores range from 0 to 10.

Theoretical Explanations

These empirical findings suggest clear and consistent policy differences between Chinese and Westerners. How can we explain and understand these differences? Confucianism, theory of collectivism and individualism, and modernization theory offer three competing answers.

Many China scholars argue that the emphasis on social order over individual freedom is due to the fact that traditional Chinese culture has put the harmony of society before the interest of the individual (Chan 1999; de Bary 1998). Confucianism, one of the most influential forces that provided the foundation for most Chinese people’s value orientations and belief systems, is basically oriented to system stability, conformity, order and harmony in society. A good individual is one who fulfils one’s social role in order to promote social harmony. Confucius specifically
advocated overcoming individuals’ selves in order to maintain social order. Individual freedom, if there is such a thing, must be kept within the boundaries of the larger social good. The value of the individual’s life can only be realized in the form of social good. The ‘liberal tradition’ in ancient China, characterized by de Bary (1983), has never exerted much influence. Following the traditional way of thinking, people tend to view economic growth as social good for all, whereas individual liberty as merely for the interest of a small number of ‘outliers’ who want to break the social order. Certainly, individual liberty is understood as a good thing for everyone, but people tend to see tension instead of affinity between individual autonomy and social order, and when given a choice of only one, they tend to choose the latter.

Chinese respondents’ greater emphasis on government power also reflects a Chinese tradition. This traditional view of the state is radically different from the modern social contract theory in the West. The social contract theory sees individuals as the primary elements that make up society. According to this theory, individuals exist naturally and do not need to justify their existence. The state, as a social artifact, needs to justify its existence and this justification can only be founded on the interests of individuals. The state as a powerful Leviathan, to borrow Thomas Hobbes’ word, is seen primarily as a potential threat to individuals and has to be guarded against.

In Chinese tradition, individuals and the state are not seen as opposing forces. The state has been seen as representing the nation, with individuals as its members. As a matter of fact, the term ‘state’ has not been a part of the Chinese vocabulary. The Chinese near-equivalent of ‘state’, ‘Guo jia’, stands for ‘nation-family’. In the traditional view, the nation is like a big family, with the state as its head and people as its members. The state needs to have power in order to take care of its members. In this regard, more state power and more state responsibility go hand in hand. A powerless state is useless. Virtually all periods in Chinese history when the nation was strong (for example, the high eras of the Han and the Tang dynasties), it had a strong central government. And when the central government was weak, the nation fell apart (for example, the Three Kingdoms and the Five Dynasties). Chinese people tend to identify the state with the nation and want to see a strong state representing a strong nation. A strong nation or country is seen to be in the best interests of the people because individuals need the society to survive and prosper. Therefore, individuals are not much concerned with limiting the power of the state. On the contrary, it is believed that only a strong central government brings about a strong state. In order to maintain a strong state, people tend to let the ruler create any laws deemed necessary for strengthening it. Similarly, the purpose of supporting state power was to serve the needs of the state/society, not to protect one’s self-interest against the state.

Theory on collectivism and individualism offers a somewhat different explanation. In cross-cultural studies Chinese culture is often considered a collectivism-oriented culture, in contrast with cultures in the United States and other Western countries, which emphasize individualism. The contrasting characteristics of collectivism and individualism have been elaborated extensively. Hofstede (1980) described collectivism as a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives, clan or other in-group members to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty, and individualism as a preference for a loosely knit social framework in society wherein individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. From a psychological perspective, Triandis (1995) suggested that a sharp
distinction between the ‘in’ group and the ‘out’ group is an important feature of collectivism. In collective cultures individuals are willing to subordinate their personal goals to the goals of the various ‘in’ groups, such as, the family, tribe and work group. By contrast, in individualistic cultures it is considered acceptable to place personal goals ahead of the group’s goals. According to this theory, Chinese culture is not unique. The policy differences between China and the West are the differences between collective and individualistic cultures.

Finally, modernization theory emphasizes the characteristics associated with different development stages in a society. As a macro-level theory, it is very complex and highly controversial. In a simplistic version, it claims that modernization is an evolution process that most of the societies will go through. The core process of modernization is industrialization. On its way to industrialization, a society travels through several stages. In the pre-industrial stage a society is poor and tends to be group or community oriented. The survival needs of the group demand its members to suppress individual interests and adhere to the group’s goals. When a society starts to industrialize, economic growth becomes the dominant societal goal, and achievement motivation becomes the dominant individual goal. In an advanced industrial stage a society is characterized by high degrees of urbanization, mass education, occupational specialization and high levels of material well-being. Most importantly, economic development and industrialization are accompanied by stable democracy and increasing valuation of individual liberty (Diamond 1992; Inglehart 1997; Lipset 1959).

In essence, the theory asserts that different policy preferences are characteristics of the modernization process, and economic growth is the driving force of modernization. Once modernized, there will be convergence of policy preferences among societies. Critics of the theory claim that it articulates an ethnocentric notion of social development (Huntington 1991; Pye 1990).

These three explanations have different focuses and lead to different conclusions. In the Confucian perspective Chinese emphasis on order and social equality is unique, a characteristic of Chinese culture. In the other two perspectives a valuation of group cohesiveness and economic growth is a common feature of societies that are either strongly oriented towards group/community or in the early stage of modernization. Thus, Chinese endorsement of order and security is not culture specific. Although all three explanations are plausible, testing the validity of these theories is beyond the scope of the present analysis. The primary purpose of this project is to compare human rights policy preferences between Chinese and Westerners, and the data does not prove or disapprove any of these theories.

**Value Priorities among Chinese Sub-groups**

Do Chinese people uniformly value economic growth and social order over individual freedom? The answer to this shall tell us whether it is legitimate to talk about Chinese culture in general. For this, I next examined responses of the Chinese sample by age and education. The results are summarized in Tables 6 and 7.

Data in these two tables embellish my earlier findings. Concepts related to social and economic rights such as economic development and social order were heavily emphasized in every age and education group, while issues connected with civil and political rights such as making one’s own decision and freedom of speech were least prioritized for the entire urban population.

There are, however, noticeable age disparities on some items. For example, young and middle-aged respondents are twice as likely as others to
### Table 6
**Percentage Distribution of Country Goals Selections by Age: China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country goals</th>
<th>18–24</th>
<th>25–44</th>
<th>45–64</th>
<th>65 and older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Card 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Maintaining a high rate of economic growth</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Making sure that this country has strong national defence</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seeing that the people have more say in how things get decided at work and in their communities</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Maintaining order in the nation</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Giving people more to say in important government decisions</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fighting rising prices</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Protecting freedom of speech</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A stable economy</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Progress toward a less impersonal and more humane society</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Progress toward a society in which ideas count more important than money</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The fight against crime</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding off.

### Table 7
**Percentage Distribution of Country Goals Selections by Education: China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country goals</th>
<th>Less than High school</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>More than High school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Card 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Maintaining a high rate of economic growth</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>76.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Making sure that this country has strong national defence</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seeing that the people have more say in how things get decided at work and in their communities</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Maintaining order in the nation</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Giving people more to say in important government decisions</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fighting rising prices</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Protecting freedom of speech</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A stable economy</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Progress toward a less impersonal and more humane society</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Progress toward a society in which ideas count more important than money</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The fight against crime</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Percentage may not add up to 100 due to rounding off.
value people’s input in government decision, a more humane society, and a society where ideas count more than money. These issues are linked to individual autonomy and shared governance, and less congruent with traditional Chinese thinking. Age differences in these issues may be indicative of a cohort effect. In China, as in most societies, younger generations tend to embrace new ideas and do away with traditions more than older generations do. At the aggregate level emphasis on traditional values such as conformity is stronger in older adults than in younger adults (Xiao 2000).

Policy preferences also vary by education level. For instance, well-educated Chinese are more likely than others to endorse a more humane society and people’s say in government decision making. As far as these issues are concerned, the pattern seems to be that the more schooling one has, the more one values people’s voice in governance as well as a society that cherishes tolerance. There are a couple of possible interpretations of the differences that education makes in shaping value orientations. One of the major functions of education is to expose people with different ideas and teach people to think for themselves. Higher levels of schooling increase one’s intellectual flexibility. The further one goes in school, the more likely one is to think independently and to have different ideas. Thus, educated individuals, having been taught to think for themselves, desire a more humane and tolerant society. Education also prepares one for social participation. It is a common observation that the more education one has, the more one gets involved in social and political functions. People’s orientations toward the country’s goals are reflections of other acquired orientations and dispositions. Social participation gives people a sense of ownership and reward. Hence, they come to value shared governance.

These patterns of policy priority indicate that as population changes predominant values in the society will also change. As the population becomes more educated, the trend to increasingly value shared governance will continue, which in turn will be more conducive to the acceptance of individual civil and political rights. Literature on political development in China also suggests that as the country industrializes and modernizes, human rights concepts will become more acceptable.

However, I must stress one point: even among the well-educated urban Chinese, those who value individual civil rights over order and economic development are a small minority—less than a quarter of the population. Moreover, well-educated respondents are not more likely than others to support the two items that are closely tied to individual freedom (giving people more say at work and in their communities, and freedom of speech). These two items received the lowest support among all three education groups. The low percentages suggest potential obstacles to the pursuit of political and civil rights in China. It is a common observation that significant urban–rural differences exist in educational attainment, general value orientations, as well as political tolerance. Rural residents are more likely than urban residents to be poorly educated and traditional in their value orientations (Nathan and Shi 1997). If ideas of individual freedom receive such limited support from urban residents, its support base in rural China would be even smaller.

**Conclusion**

This research demonstrates consistent and important cross-cultural differences in policy preferences. For the Chinese, their concerns with social order and economic growth clearly over-ride other development goals for the country. For Westerners, although economic growth is an important issue, their concern with shared governance is as important as social order. Compared
with citizens in Western nations, the Chinese are much more likely to emphasize policies related to economic development and sustenance needs, and much less likely to stress policies related to individual freedom and autonomy. These policy preferences suggest that the Chinese tend to support governmental policies that emphasize economic development. Political rights, which are closely related individual freedom, receive less support than economic rights. If there are conflicts between economic development and political freedom, the majority of the Chinese tend to choose the former.

However, some stereotypes about Chinese culture are not supported in my analysis. One common assumption is that concepts of human rights, especially those of civil and political rights, have no place in Chinese culture. Contrary to this claim, ideas pertinent to shared governing and individual autonomy are not totally foreign to the Chinese. They understand the concepts and are able to evaluate them, though they predominantly consider these concepts less important than issues related to social order and economic development. Another conventional wisdom claims that deference to authority is a characteristic of Chinese culture. Findings in my research suggest the opposite. Chinese display a much lower respect for authority than Americans and English. If respect for authority was ever valued in China, there has certainly been a change over time. This also suggests a low level of trust and confidence in government.

Finally, while urban Chinese overwhelmingly value economic development and social order over other issues, some variations in value priorities do exist. Valuations of some issues differ by age and education. Younger people are more likely than older people to desire more people’s voice in government decision making as well as a more humane society. These ideas are also valued more by the better-educated citizens.

Taken together, policy preferences of Chinese urban residents are more complex than we had previously presumed. The arguments of both relativists and universalists are partially supported. On the one hand important differences on policy preference do exist between China and Western nations. The cross-country disparity suggests the existence of cross-cultural differences and these differences are consistent for the most part. Both cultural traditions and political/economic forces shape policy preferences. Influenced by a cultural tradition that values order and harmony, and confronted with urgent sustenance needs such as low standards of living and disappearance of secure jobs, the Chinese urban population should value economic growth more than Westerners. Indeed, it would be surprising if Chinese did not value order and economic development more, particularly when they have to compare these concerns with issues related to individual freedom.

On the other hand the empirical evidence does not support the view that in Chinese culture there is no place for ideas related to individual autonomy and freedom, but rather that these ideas are considered less important than concerns for collective flourishing and well-being.

Equally important, however, are the low levels of deference to authority and variations of value preferences among the Chinese. These findings point to possibilities of change. As the country becomes more economically developed and more Chinese become educated and affluent, concepts of shared governance and individual autonomy will likely become more important in China. Thus, promotion of civil and political rights will gain growing popular support. The social changes brought by globalization are also likely to increase the sense of self-determination among Chinese citizens. In fact, demands for more political and religious freedom have been very strong. The democratic movement of 1989 and the ongoing
Falun Gong religious movement are two such examples. Local grassroots movements supportive of human rights are also picking up the momentum. If the Chinese government wants to sustain economic growth and stays in power, it must pursue policies that bear a proper balance between freedom and order, or between political and economic rights. Ultimately, the Chinese people are the driving force of the democratization movement in China.

NOTES

1. I did the calculation based on data from China’s Population Census Office and State Statistical Bureau (1990: pp. 18–21, Table 4-5).

2. Ibid.

REFERENCES


Kausikan, Bilahari (1993), ‘Asia’s Different Standard’, *Foreign Policy*, (Fall); 24–41.