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**Master's Thesis of International Studies**

**Political Perception of Chinese  
Students Attending SNU**

**서울대학교에 재학중인  
중국인 유학생들의 정치인식 조사**

**February 2020**

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## Abstract

According to Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China<sup>1</sup>, China has become the largest source of international students in the world for higher education in 2010. As a result, Chinese students make up the largest proportion of the number of international students in many countries, including South Korea. These Chinese students studying in South Korea are deemed special than other international students because they are arguably exposed to a drastically different environment politically and entering and settling into a new society is bound to entail various changes on a personal level. They will likely to learn or witness how the students in South Korea have contributed to making almost every major milestone in modern Korean history throughout their university life; from demanding for a direct presidential election in 1987, and peacefully removing democratically elected president followed by *Candlelight Revolution* in 2016. This study thus seeks to understand political perception of those Chinese students by investigating some of the Chinese students studying now at Seoul National University. The findings suggest that these Chinese students admitted that they do experience some change in their political perceptions, however they still favored the status-quo, a form of quasi-democracy, over full democracy in China mainly because they believe that not only it will significantly disrupt the country's social stability and its overall development, but also it does not fit too well with China's *context* (国情).

**Keyword:** Chinese students, Political perception, Democracy, Authoritarianism, Democracy with Chinese characteristics, Context (国情)

**Student Number:** 2015-25027

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press\\_releases/201804/t20180404\\_332354.html](http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/201804/t20180404_332354.html)

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# I. INTRODUCTION

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## *1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND*

The breakout of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown ignited a heated debate among experts whether or not democratization would emerge in China (Rowen, 2007); when Chinese students shocked the world with their unprecedented protests asking for democracy and liberty all over China. Given that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) firmly held its ground for over 30 years ever since the incident, however, the answer to that debate appears to be fairly clear by now. Moreover, the CCP is approaching an age that will be one of the oldest one party country among other former single-party regimes. The Soviet Union lasted a little more than 70 years and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (IRP) in Mexico has been in power for 71 years. The CCP, on the other hand, would have been in power for 71 years in 2020. Despite the façade of impregnability of the CCP, is there a good reason to believe that they, too, will fall in the 70 years trap? Or, will the CCP achieve an unprecedented achievement for a modern autocracy? We must be very cautious in forecasting the fate of the CCP as the future is inherently unpredictable.

On the other hand, Student movements have been increasingly drawing attention in some parts of the world as political and social forces and their significance is seemingly not unique to a particular country. Students around the world have played a crucial role in compelling governments not only to increase its people's effective participation in the policy-making process, but also precipitating a political crisis or sometimes even causing a government to fall. They have often been the vanguard of political struggles because not only they are usually the first groups to learn about the modern ideas, but also freer of societal constraints than most of the groups in the population. Furthermore, the culture of a nation and its

political condition can also be the important mechanism stimulating a student movement.

Ever since the opening and reform in China, it is no longer an exclusive choice for a particular class to send their children to a foreign country to pursue their studies. The number of Chinese students studying in South Korea began to increase slowly from 1,182 in 1992 to 1,714 in 2000 and exploded from 2003 following China's entry into the WTO in 2001, reaching 67,133 in 2017 (대외경제정책연구원, 2018). As the number of Chinese students studying in a liberal country like South Korea increases, it will become important to investigate orientations of these students toward politics since they will be spending most of their twenties where the concept of democracy is at the base of life. It would be no exception to assume that some of those students can return China with some democratic values or subversive ideas that could potentially disrupt the status quo in China. Nonetheless, there is insufficient research on political perception or orientation toward democracy of these Chinese students in South Korea or in any other liberal countries. Against this background, this study attempts to shed some light on this issue by addressing five core questions that seek democratic perception of the Chinese students attending Seoul National University (SNU): What do Chinese students think of freedom of expression? What do they think about individual human rights? What do they think about electoral democracy? Do they support political democratization? Is there a change in their values and beliefs after coming to South Korea? These questions have to do with investigating how much do these students in South Korea actually support democratic values and on the contrary how do they perceive the current political circumstances in China.

This paper will first begin by briefly distinguishing some of the characteristics of democracy and authoritarianism in order to unequivocally place China into one of the two regimes for the purpose of this study. Then, I will briefly point out some of the differences between China and South Korea with reference to Freedom House Index. Next, I will go over some previous research done on political perception and orientation of ordinary citizens of China; and Subsequently, I will draw insights from cases of student movements from Chile, Taiwan and South Korea which greatly generated favorable conditions for increasing government responsiveness or political reform to show how significant students can actually be against governments; thereby providing justifications for exploring political perceptions of Chinese students at SNU. Finally, I will conduct a series of in-depth interviews with Chinese students at SNU in regards to the aforementioned five core questions. The answers that this paper seeks have a lot to do with predicting the role of overseas Chinese students can take in future political culture of China. I hope the result of this study will induce more scholars to also consider investigating overseas Chinese student as one of the dimensions when exploring transition studies of China.

## ***2. DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIANISM***

Some say there is not a simple dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism because the term democracy does not necessarily describe the state of a country but rather in its quality (Sørensen, 2008). In other words, is there an existence of enough tools that lead to better the life of majority of ordinary people in a given country? Subsequently, the meaning of democracy can become very complex as such logic only makes the differences with authoritarianism more

obscure. Since different people have diverse interpretations of what a democracy or authoritarianism is, it is important first to distinguish some of the characteristics between the two for the purpose of this study.

In order to make the matter simple, criterions such as “freedom of speech and information”, “policy-making process” and “election” are going to be mainly used to distinguish the two regimes. Note that the purpose of this paper is not to suggest which regime functions better over the other. Instead, this section is to merely categorizing China into one of the two regimes for this study’s analytical purpose. Accordingly, we can begin to explicitly judge, I hope, whether or not the political orientation of Chinese students, at Seoul National University, is in fact in favor of traits of democracy or authoritarianism. After all, the main goal of this study is to identify the political perception of Chinese students at SNU.

By the definition from textbooks, democracy is a form of government in which the people rule (Potter et al., 1997). In other words, the system is described as more democratic as more of its people are involved in influencing policy-making process. For instance, competitive elections offer citizens with the opportunity to indirectly participate in policy-making process through their selection and rejection of candidates. Therefore, the government tends to treat all citizens equally by relying on majority rule. On the other hand, Citizens preferences are often ignored in recruiting key policymakers in an authoritarian regime. Instead, they seek to direct society rather than trying to build electoral support.

Secondly, democratic governments are characterized by some customary limitation on the exercise of power. Powers of various branches of government

units are limited by a written constitution in democracies. For instance, the courts not only protect the rights of citizens but also check and balance other parts of the government to make sure that their powers are not abused. In authoritarian systems, however, policymakers usually tend to not let the courts to limit the use of their power. A handful of leaders in authoritarian regimes at the very top still usually monopolize substantial political resources.

Thirdly, all adults are given the right to replace their elected officials at elections in democratic countries. Moreover, citizens usually have many routes available to express their political interests apart from voting in an election under democratic system. Those routes include people working with others in their community to address common needs, or pressuring policymakers by expressing concern for political issues online or even by participating in a public protest. On the other hand, these routes are generally very limited under an authoritarian regime; including the right to vote and protest. Under an authoritarian regime, there is rarely a competitive election and a government that is accountable to its citizens. Furthermore, they do not tolerate formation or development of independent organizations, including independent political parties or interest groups, which can become critical of the government.

Lastly, Citizens have the right to freely express themselves on political matters including criticisms of the government, ideology, regime, officials and so on without the fear of being punished by the government from such acts under a democratic regime. Moreover, they are not confined to specific sources of information and have the right to seek out alternatives and these are protected by laws. In contrast, there are severe restrictions on individual's rights to freedom of expression and access to alternative information under an authoritarian regime. Not

only the citizens are typically denied the right to criticize the government, they are also to face punishment if they do. Also, the information available to its citizens is usually very limited and they are carefully monitored by the government before and after being publicly available.

If anything, China is often portrayed by the Western media as a communist nation whose citizens enjoy little to zero freedom (Pei, 2007). The fundamental question of this paper has departed from the curiosity of how the Chinese students in South Korea would feel about this perception and how they view their own government accordingly. In particular, they are exposed to the environment of a liberal democratic country, South Korea, which attracted attention of the world with the “Candle light Revolution” in 2016. While these Chinese students make an effort to settle into the life in South Korea, they are likely to experience a very different atmosphere to China whether politically, socially and economically. Some of the major differences between the two countries are illustrated below with reference to country reports from the Freedom House. The index itself already depicts the drastic different environment in both countries. China scored 11 out of 100, while 100 being the most free. South Korea, on the other hand, scored 83 in 2019.

According to the reports from the Freedom House, the clearest differences between the two countries can be represented by their political rights and system. As for the political sphere, Chinese leaders appear to strongly oppose the idea of political pluralism. China is a communist party-state and has promoted very limited liberalization. While economic market is in place, the regime tolerates no open challenge to Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) monopoly on its political power. Instead, the notion of ‘Guardianship’ best describes the relationship between the

CCP and the society (Almond et al., 2008). The CCP believes that ordinary citizens do not understand their own real interests and society is better off when the country is led by a group of elites with superior understandings of “true interests” of all people. In China, therefore, the citizens have no true opportunity to really articulate their interests and choosing between party alternatives. In South Korea, on the other hand, allows regular rotations of power and robust political pluralism. Multiple numbers of parties in South Korea develop their own policy proposals and compete against each other in order to gain citizenry support to become the ruling party. Therefore, the shift in citizenry voting choice can bring a new party into the political scene committed to new policies. Citizens thus can significantly influence policymaking process through their role as an electorate. In a nutshell, while parties in South Korea try to build citizen support by engaging with the society, the communist party in China seeks to direct society.

Furthermore, the mass media also exists in a very contrary environment in both countries. According to the China Internet Network Information Center, China now has a whopping 800 million active internet users<sup>2</sup>. The mobile technology has become an indispensable facet of everyday life and one may claim that the flow of information cannot be controlled anymore as in Maoist years. Chinese citizens today do enjoy comparatively more freedom of information flow as a result of this and “opening up” to the outside world. However, not all messages in the digital realm are seemingly acceptable to Chinese leaders when the subject of content is considered to be inappropriate or politically sensitive. In particular, the contents in regard to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, Uyghur or any major political events that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://equalocean.com/high-tech/20190915-cnnic-publishes-the-44th-china-internet-development-report>

could potentially disrupt the social stability of China tend to undergo heavy censorship from the authorities. To illustrate, Xinjiang independence activists posted footages, photos, and writings on a social network platform “Facebook” to raise the awareness when the 2009 Urumqi riots broke out and this has caught the attention of the international community. Coincidentally, the access to Facebook was prohibited by the government followed by the postings on Facebook. It is suspected that the issue has gone too far in the eyes of some Chinese leaders and they have decided to permanently restrict the access to Facebook (Rayila, 2011). According to the Freedom House, there are about 10,000 websites which are blocked in China under the country’s Internet censorship policy and it led countless internet users to resort to “Proxy software” to gain access to those websites. Today, the CCP maintains strict control over news reporting via direct ownership. South Korea, on the other hand, generally respects personal freedoms and their freedom of speech. The news media are generally free and competitive, reporting relentlessly on government policies and wrongdoing of officials and corporates. Although the recent ban on pro-North Korean activity has led some to be concerned about South Korea’s deterioration of media freedom in recent years, it is still much closer to “free” in comparison to that of China. Chinese students in South Korea are well aware of this drastic difference between the two countries and Chinese authorities will not be able to effectively monitor their usage of internet when they are outside of China.

In addition to media freedom, citizens in South Korea are also well known for openly expressing their interests and needs, usually in the form of protest activity. The South Korean government generally respects freedom of assembly. Protest activities are fairly visible throughout the streets of the capital city, Seoul, where majority of Chinese students are residing. The protests cover various

subjects ranging from protecting the environment to even impeaching the democratically elected president. Moreover, protests are visible in almost all of the Universities which often their students or faculty members trying to resolve their common concerns. In 2016, Students at Ewha Womans University protested against the administration over illegitimately admitting a student who is the daughter of Choi Soon-sil; which later unraveled the web of corruption of politicians and economic power in the country and eventually gave rise to the “Candle light revolution” in 2017. The consequence of the student protest was something out of the ordinary, however, protests like that occur on a regular bases in and out of the school and throughout South Korea. In contrast, these types of protests are rarely seen or heard in China. According to the Freedom House Report, however, estimated number of annual protests in China in 2010 has exceeded 180,000 including the subject of ethnic, pro-democracy, rural area and et cetera. China’s constitution protects the right of citizens to protest, but in reality people rarely obtain approval and risk punishment for assembling without permission. Therefore spontaneous form of demonstrations has become the only path to protest in China. On the other hand, the Chinese media have the tendency to capture and highlight pro nationalist demonstrations, where citizens boycotting against foreign goods or companies, and occasionally foreign embassies as well. Therefore some cases of protests in South Korea can somewhat come as unusual or even absurd to some of the Chinese students who have just arrived. As if it were a proof of this, sometimes South Korea is framed as “the most difficult place in the world to be a president” by some of the Chinese media<sup>3</sup>

In a nutshell, the key differences between the two countries can be clearly distinguished by their political structure and freedom of speech and assembly. By

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.360doc.com/content/17/0730/10/6052571\\_675294935.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/17/0730/10/6052571_675294935.shtml)

relying on aforementioned reasons, I think we can all safely put China under the category of an authoritarian country with the presence of CCP.

### ***3. CHINA'S MIDDLE CLASS AND DEMOCRACY***

Ever since the introduction of the “reform and opening” (改革开放), China witnessed an aggressive increase in the middle class group. As a result, there has been expansion of researches in regard to the political orientation of these ordinary Chinese in recent years. Most research attempts to answer the question of whether or not the expansion of the middle-class group in China would eventually engender preference for democratization and predict whether a transition to democracy would then follow. The divided opinions usually stem from the modernization theory and or qualitative research that entail interviews and sample survey. However, there exist not many literatures on the same question for overseas Chinese students.

With reference to Tocqueville’s statement “The middle-class individuals hold a set of pro-democratic values which is conducive to the establishment and consolidation of democracy”, Henry S. Rowen argued that the democratization is not too distant future in China. He backed his argument by mainly applying the modernization theory by Seymour Martin Lipset, which states that countries with a certain level of accumulated human, social, and physical capital can bring about stable democracy, to the case of China. In addition, between 1999 and 2005 in China, people with higher degrees almost tripled, reaching twenty million during the latter year. Also, China’s per-capita growth over the last decade has averaged a highly impressive 8.5% annually. In light of this, Rowen boldly predicted that China will likely become a free nation by 2025 if similar trend of growth in

economy and the educational attainments continues.

On the other hand, according to Samuel P. Huntington, the correlation between wealth and democracy implies that transition to democracy is likely to occur when it is in so called “Transition zone”. In comparison to the average of a group of countries’ GDP per capita when they have undergone political transitions, or the “Transition zone”, China’s GDP per capita has already far exceeded it in 2014. On top of this, Robert J. Barro suggests that there are usually significant time lags between the appearance of a preference for electoral rights or its expression in politics and the growth of people’s income; usually for two decades. This is why, he explains, why a rapidly growing country like China has much lower level of freedom than its current income would predict. He suggested that growing countries like China may be able to delay democratization from happening, but not ultimately stop it from rising. Needless to say, a better educated population and a more complex economy will demand the rise of improved legal institutions. As a result, the CCP has chosen to let go and pull back its dominance in several dimensions of the society since the reform and opening. It has granted certain degree of autonomy to local parties, private actors and media outlets. Note that the CCP’s decision can, however, still heavily influence the final outcomes in most of these fields, but they tend to ration their power nowadays (Pei, 2016). In addition, the CCP’s attempt to censoring and limiting information is becoming increasingly difficult as access to information and the ease of communication are both rapidly on the rise even before freedom of speech is yet to be properly recognized. This shift in CCP’s ideology, though subtle, is helping to expand personal liberties and may have the potential to transform Chinese society. All in all, the modernization approach seems to be suggesting that once the middle class becomes the majority

of the population, democratization would then naturally follow. However, this approach is supported by evidence drawn mainly from studies from Western societies and the story can be very different in a different setting such as in Asia. In other words, apart from their economic and educational indicator, this approach can suffer from too much generalization as different countries are inherently different from each other either structurally or institutionally. Most importantly, it does not take into account what the people in China actually have in mind about this topic.

There seems to be no consensus in regard to political orientation of China's emerging middle class toward politics as of yet. Scholars such as Jie Chen and Bruce Dickson contend that the new middle class in China generally support the nature of their authoritarian regime because majority of those individuals have a dependent relationship with the state. Unlike other countries, China is very effective in controlling the society and thus shaping the ideas of their people, including the middle class. Note that the middle class in China are one of the biggest beneficiaries from the state-led reforms and has had a close and cooperative relationship with the state. Findings from Jie Chen suggest that social order is more important for Chinese middle class over democracy as it might compromise their material interests. Moreover, David Goodman points out that the career opportunities for some in China are influenced by the state as certain occupations allow them to intervene in some socioeconomic sphere. For instance, the access to certain positions in the public sector is subject to loyalty to the state. Therefore, the middle class in China are generally in close proximity with the state.

In addition, the CCP has actively recruited large numbers of private entrepreneurs into the party, who are also known as "Red capitalists" (Chen, 2011). Since the reform and opening, the CCP has co-opted those who can make great

contribution to economic modernization. In other words, enemies to the party in the past have become part of the party because they can help them to accomplish their new policy agenda, which is to boost the economy. While the controversy surrounding admitting entrepreneurs into the party still remains among the party members, local officials are especially prone to cooperate with private entrepreneurs because not only they provide the resources the local party needs, but they also help them to achieve higher economic growth which is the key indicator of performance they are often evaluated by the CCP. Conversely, private entrepreneurs seek to become part of the CCP because of easier access to material resources, acquiring loans, licenses and permits, protection from competition and simply anything else you can imagine under a planned economy. According to regular surveys of the private sector by the CCP's United Front Work Department, the ACFIC, and related organizations, 13.1% of private entrepreneurs were CCP members in 1993, 17.1% in 1995, 19.8% in 2000, 30.2% in 2002, and by 2006 the number had grown to 32.2%. As such, it is not too surprising to hear Jack Ma, China's arguably the richest man, now belongs to the communist party. The integration of wealth and power continues to take place in China today. In sum, these findings suggest that the middle class or above in China are not likely to be in favor of democratization in general; and it is seemingly unlikely that they will serve as an agent of democratization as of today. This is due to the fact that China's middle class relies heavily on the authoritarian state for its survival and prosperity which makes this class currently "Undemocratic." Following the same reasoning, however, the middle class may become enthusiastic about democracy and democratization if this class's dependence on the state becomes significantly weakened.

On the other hand, students are not tied to the state like the people from middle income group are and they are usually freer of social constraints than rest of the population. As the number of Chinese students in South Korea has risen, it has caught attention of scholars from various fields. Some examples of the research include an investigation on Chinese student's stress and adaptation to university life, cultural adaptation, and how to systematically improve quality of their life in South Korea. All in all, these researches usually revolve around a survey on the state of Chinese student's university life or their life in general for the purpose of improving the quality of their experience in South Korea; as they are arguably the group which will have the greatest influence in delivering information about South Korea to China in the future. Since they received education in South Korea, they can have the reliability or authority of their words in China as far as South Korea is concerned. However, there is almost none or insufficient investigation on the political perception of these Chinese students in South Korea; who are arguably from a country with a political regime that is in stark contrast to South Korea's. My hypothesis is that there bounds to be some change in values or beliefs when a student is settling into a new society; including the political one. Therefore, Chinese students in South Korea should undergo very different experiences when in China and South Korea and it would not be an exaggeration to assume that they will appreciate democratic values more than the Chinese citizens from China. Nonetheless, the question of whether or not the Chinese students in South Korea, or at SNU specifically, hold the same or a contrary view about their political systems with that of ordinary middle-class groups in China still remains very much unknown to this date. It is this very question that this paper is going to seek and tackle and I will try to verify this very statement in the latter part of this study through a series of interviews.

To wrap up, the historical record shows that the most durable one-party autocracy to date, the USSR, lasted for 74 years. If the CCP manages to hang on until 2030, it will have been in power for 81 years, an unprecedented achievement for a modern autocracy. Among scholars, however, there seems to be no clear consensus on whether or not it is likely that a political transform would take place in China. In addition, there exists very little research on the political orientation of overseas Chinese students, who are exposed to very different atmosphere both politically and socially. To help fill this gap, this paper attempts to examine the case of Chinese students in Seoul National University, South Korea.

#### ***4. SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS***

While there are many types of social movements, student movements are increasingly receiving wide attention as they have been active political and social forces to promote democracy in many nations. A social movement can be considered to be driving democratization when their claims are compelling government to allow citizens more participation in the policy-making process. Students have been in the frontline of political struggles in many nations because they are usually among the first groups to learn about the modern ideas and freer from social constraints; they do not bear any responsibilities other than themselves. For instance, majority of them do not need to work full-time for a living, have no families, and have not much to lose in general compared to other groups in the population. Also, vast majority of them live close to each other and this allow them to communicate efficiently with one another on a regular basis. These traits of university students not only allow them to be mobilized easily but also actively express more about what is on their minds.

The students in China were no exception in 1989. It captured the attention of the world news media and, consequently, of the world. The so called “Tiananmen Protest” demanding for political reforms and liberation was one of the major political protests in China’s history since Mao. In particular, many students got together and organized their own political party sort to represent people from various backgrounds and articulate their interests and demands in the public to the government. They made posters, poetries and journals about politics in China on “Democracy wall” close to Tiananmen Square and actively discussed about them. Nonetheless, when the movement slowly gained its momentum and scaled in its size, the CCP has violently and decisively shattered the movement with tanks and machine guns in order to eradicate any “Organizational challenge” in their eyes. On the fourth of June, 1989, the “Tiananmen Protest” ended with violent deaths and imprisonment for hundreds, and what was the first ever official reform movement in China has completely lost its momentum and proponents throughout the country and vanished into the history.

Of course, aforementioned variable traits of students do not necessarily explain the occurrence of all the student movements around the world. However, it is fairly clear that students in many nations have shown strong presence both socially and politically. In particular, the student movement in Chile in 2006 and 2011, the sunflower movement in Taiwan in 2014 and anti-government activities of students in South Korea throughout the 1980s has shown what students are really capable of. These events saw students as promoting democracy or causing political crisis with its ability to organize and mobilize the public. Even though these cases are randomly selected from across the globe under different circumstances, they still provide good insights into what students are capable of and the kinds of role

they can play in making the government more responsive and democratic and most importantly, students in China can be the same. As such, I wish to argue that the importance of political perception of Chinese students in South Korea or in other liberal democratic countries should therefore not be overlooked in the field of China's transition studies.

### **Student movement in Chile (2006, 2011)**

University students in Chile have led the two most significant protests in its history in 2006 and 2011 since the democracy was reinstated in 1990. The protests were a reaction to the remains of the military regime (1973~1989) in the post-transition era. Students actively challenged the government demanding various reforms. When democracy was officially introduced in 1990, it was mostly on the surface. The legacy that was left behind by the military regime has put considerable restrictions on the policy-making process. The constitution that was enacted by the military regime in the 1980s was still in place in the post-transition era as a result of elite-led transition to democracy. It not only limited the number of political parties in parliament, General Pinochet was able to be a senator for his lifetime. Students' discontent in the education model that was designed during the military regime, however, was what stirred up the movement and students were able to bring the issue to a national debate and successfully took part in series of policy-making process afterwards.

The controversial education model in Chile was introduced in the military regime, notably known as the "education voucher". The voucher simply refers to subsidies provided to both public and private schools from the government. In other respect, the government spearheaded privatization of the education market by

promoting establishment of private schools. Accordingly, the schools in Chile are now categorized into three types. Government subsidized public schools, government subsidized private schools and private schools with no subsidies. As a result, this gave more room for private schools to grow and its number has increased dramatically across the country. While the subsidy may have improved the quality of the education and overall rate of student enrolment, it had an adverse impact on public education. Public schools experienced steep decline in student enrolment. Chile witnessed gradual expansion of private schools in the education market and began to receive more students than public schools did. This divide gave a clear distinction of students' family background attending public and private schools. While the poorest families attend the public school, students from middle class background were split between public and subsidized private schools and private schools that are completely private were mostly attended by students with upper-middle or upper income groups. Not surprisingly, this socioeconomic status of the students was translated into sharp contrasts in educational achievements. In addition, the government later decided to reduce the amount of "Voucher" given to public universities and allowed more room for private universities to grow and expand. Needless to say, this has resulted in sharp increase in tuition fees for both public and private schools. Nonetheless, only 20% of the population was able to afford the fees without significantly affecting their family's financial circumstance. The fees have increased about 60% between 1999 and 2011 and this has placed Chile as one of the most expensive tuition fees for tertiary education in the world. This has naturally expanded the market of student loans and private bank loans. This phenomenon began to slowly fuel the discontent among majority of students; especially students from the most deprived economic groups of the population. Nonetheless, the reform in education system was deemed almost impossible

because not only it was never a part of the political agenda, there was a fear that it would engender severe political crisis that could potentially hurt many people's material interests.

In late April 2006, the "Penguin Movement" broke out as a response to problems associated with the aforementioned education system. The name was given with its reference to the black and white of the clothes students wore during the protests. The movement was first initiated by some secondary school students in Santiago, and gained huge momentum from participation of several student organizations from universities. The movement gathered around 4,000 students on streets and demanded reform of the education system left by the military regime; mostly agendas in regard to equality in education in general including the quality and the financial aspects of the education. The movement continued and it was followed by sporadic protests and occupation of secondary schools and universities throughout the country. On May 30, the largest protests in Chile's history took place since 1990 with nearly a million people marching on streets across the country. The movement was successful in directing the attention of the society towards the inherent problems of its education system. Most of the secondary schools lost its ability to function properly and the discontents felt by the students were spread to other groups of the population; about 87% of the entire Chileans population openly supported the movement. The approval rate for the president Bachelet fell from 60% to 44% during the time of the protests as a response to the government's poor management of the protests. Subsequently, the government finally decided to give in to the public and established a presidential advisory body on education reform. The commission was special in that it included the participants of the movement, including the student representatives. After that,

President Bachelet has put together a team to interact with the commission to draft a set of new education bills. Many bills were introduced from thereafter to enhance the equality in education for all. After all, it is not an exaggeration that it was the students who have led the creation of such system, which has advanced more effective participation in the policy-making process.

Nevertheless, the parliament failed to reach a consensus with the commission on many agendas. Most of the bills that were designed to enhance the position of public schools and not private schools were often rejected in the parliament. As a result, another round of student movement emerged in 2011 because the outcomes of the previous movement left many students dissatisfied. The student movements initially unfolded in relation to persisting problems within the education system along with a call for more subsidies to higher education. Later on, the movement illuminated another problem, the student loan. The interest rate of the student loans at the time was staggering 6%. In 2010, about 23% of the university students in the country were funding their education using student loans. Students called for major reform to the education system and argued that the banks should not take advantage and make profit out of students' efforts to acquire a university degree. Students, again, were successful in gathering support from the public and the number of people who considered education as the most prominent problem of the country at the time to solve peaked in 2011.

In response, the government agreed to lower the interest rate from 6% to 2%. In the following years, the government undertook piecemeal reform, but seemingly has not responded to other major demands made by the students. Nevertheless, the student's voice was echoed again by new party coalition, Nueva Mayoría, during the 2013 electoral campaign. Michelle Bachelet, running

for the second term in the office, has framed her campaign with phrases like “fight against inequality” or “empowered citizens” to garner support throughout the country. She acknowledged the importance of students in winning the election and heavily promoted policies inspired by the student demands. After winning the election in 2014, the Nueva Mayoría first launched tax reform to fund the costly education reform. As I am writing this paper, the party is still trying its best to fulfill what they promised to the students. What was deemed unlikely to change a decade ago is finally undergoing a set of reforms; and few would leave out the critical role played by the student in this and expanding participation in the policy-making process of its citizens.

### **The Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (2014)**

On March 18, 2014, several hundreds of protesters led by university students stormed through the police force into the assembly hall of Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan. They escorted out the few officers on duty and barricaded the entrance to the building with seats. The occupation which lasted for 24 days, later known as the Sunflower Movement, was the biggest protest in Taiwan’s history.

The protest was triggered by Taiwan’s ruling party, Kuomintang (KMT), in its attempt to push a large trade deal with China through the assembly on its own. In fact, there was nothing wrong with the agenda but rather the process of it. The KMT promised the opposition party that they will thoroughly go through each items of the deal, also known as the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA), together with the opposition party, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), before they submit the bill to the legislature. However, the KMT unilaterally declared that the bill to be submitted on March 21, 2014 without reviewing the

contents of the deal with DPP. The CSSTA has already stirred up a controversy in Taiwan the year before because its terms and items were first negotiated under the table behind closed doors in Shanghai. The aim of the CSSTA was to liberalize trade in service sector between China and Taiwan. But Taiwanese who were against the CSSTA also saw it as a threat to their sovereignty and democracy as they pointed out that it could imperil not only on their small and medium sized firms, but also their freedom of speech and expression due to Chinese investment in Taiwanese news media. Moreover, the fact that KMT was trying to finalize the deal quickly when President Ma Ying-jeou, also the head of the KMT, only had about 9% of approval rate at the time seemed very ominous by the public.

Protests were held on a regular basis outside the assembly after the KMT's announcement. The participants gathered at the protest came from various backgrounds including lawyers, nongovernmental organization leaders and university students. They agreed that merely protesting outside the assembly will not be sufficient and called for more aggressive action; but entering and occupying the building was not part of the plan initially. On the night of March 18, students from various universities have gathered and surveyed the best route into the building that avoids the police force as much as possible. After the scout was complete, students shared the route to their peers through word of mouth and messaging on their smartphones. It caught some of the protesters unaware of the plan when students finally decided to march into the building. Some people were just there to show support but were swept along with the crowd to the building. Student leaders spearheaded the crowd and cleared the path into the building. While entering the building, students kept reminding everyone not to vandalize and keep property damage to the minimum. Few police officers inside the assembly

were escorted out of the building by the students before they barricaded the building with chairs and rope. The movement quickly gained support from people across the country and some of them even joined the occupation later. Immediately after the occupation has taken place, Premier Jiang Yi-huan has ordered riot police to suppress the protest and take occupants out of the building. This attempt, however, came to nothing as it was dismissed by Wang Jin-pyng, the long-serving speaker of the assembly. Wang and President Ma were the most powerful politicians in the KMT but there was a strong tension between the two. Long story short, Ma once attempted to evict Wang out of the party by accusing him of abuse of power. Wang, who still had the control over the assembly, has promised the students and other participants that they will not be removed by force.

Occupation of a key government building is difficult to imagine in most countries. While there were people criticizing the movement as anti-globalization, streets outside the assembly were quickly filled with civilians showing their support to the movement. Protesters pointed out that the movement is not necessarily against globalization, but more against agreements advanced by the KMT without a proper consultation with the DPP. The supporters of the movement donated food, blankets, sleeping bags, tents, clothes, mobile phone recharger and even Wi-Fi access into the assembly to contribute what they can to the movement. After a local florist donated sunflowers around the assembly, the movement found its symbol. The assembly, or the Legislative Yuan, was occupied for 24 days thereafter.

The first few days inside the assembly were fairly hectic with little organization throughout the room. However, the space was quickly regularized. Students and other participants have come together and nominated teams with

specific tasks such as an information team responsible for day-to-day activities of the hall, a security team to oversee each entrances of the assembly, a medical team to monitor conditions of the participants, a media team to spread the news in various languages via social network platforms, an art team designing flyers and posters to display in and out of the assembly, and even a team for waste management to follow Taiwan's strict recycling standards. Many days have gone by since the first day of the occupation but the Ma administration still refused to respond to the movement. When the occupation came close to two weeks mark, students and other participants came to an agreement that a more radical action needs to be implemented.

Accordingly, student leaders have organized a major rally on March 30. As reported by The Wall Street Journal's count, around 500,000 protesters have showed up in front of the Presidential Office with speeches, songs that remind principles of democracy and a called for the president and the KMT to listen to demands of the students. At the same time, similar movements were held with images of sunflowers around the world in cities like Los Angeles, Tokyo, Paris, and Berlin thanks to the efforts made by the student media team in the assembly. The media team distributed videos of protests through live feeds on social network platforms such as Facebook for the whole world to see. The contents shared by the team was translated into Arabic, English, Spanish, Japanese, Korean and 9 other languages by students sited within the hall and outside of Taiwan.

On April 6, the impasse was finally broken when the CSSTA deal was finally put on ice. The political message from the protest was finally accepted by Ma administration. Students got the promise from Ma administration that the CSSTA deal would not be passed without a proper review and due process. Though

some students still did not want to give up their occupation, the decision was made to evacuate the assembly on April 10. Students cleaned up the space and invited appraisers to estimate the costs for broken properties. Some students were left disaffected as they thought the occupation was effectively their only bargaining chip with the government. Quite a few splinter groups were henceforth formed but eventually they all slowly went back to their normal lives. The CSSTA, signed in June 2013 behind closed doors in Shanghai, still remains unratified by the Taiwanese legislature until today. The movement, peaking at more than 500,000 people, is now remembered as the largest student-led protest in Taiwan's history.

### **The Student Movement in South Korea in the 1980s**

Throughout the 1980s, activities of university students in South Korea mobilized thousands of people into street to protest, sometimes radical, that eventually put an end to turbulent years of military dictatorship under Chun Doo-hwan. Under the oppressive political situation at the time, organizing efforts of Korean students displayed very creative and strong mentality to get their political messages across throughout the country. There was a brief moment of democracy when Park Chung-hee, another dictator before Chun-Doo-hwan, was assassinated in 1979. This hope for democracy, however, was quickly overridden by a military coup under General Chun Doo-hwan's command. They abused their physical power to silence or even crush any opposition who dare to stand in front of them. In May 1980, Chun Doo-hwan has deployed combat forces in Gwangju and massacred hundreds of innocent civilians who only had been protesting against his act and presence. Chun then made himself the president of South Korea and the hope for democracy seemingly came to an end.

Due to the lack of legal channels for open political opposition, students have come up with creative ways to mobilize the masses and the working class. To illustrate, students concealed their academic background and voluntarily became blue collar workers. They had to disguise their education background because one with some degree of education achievement was not allowed to acquire a blue-collar job at the time. Students from a number of universities began to voluntarily work for farmers in the countryside. They discussed issues which concerns farmers the most such as the low rice price policy, lack of agricultural labor and et cetera. Other students went to work for factories. They taught workers how to legally set up a union and as well as leading a few strikes with them. Also, students helped urban poor to organize protests against government policies who suddenly became homeless or lost income as a result of Chun administration's decision to eliminate slums and unregistered street vendors in prior to Olympic games. Furthermore, students organized night school activities. While the school provided secondary education for free for anyone who sought to continue their secondary education, the focus was on educating people about their legal rights and promoting solidarity with people from various different backgrounds.

Students were also active in recruiting more student activists. This was usually carried out through reading groups where students utilized it as a site for political education; though it came with a risk as some reading groups were accused of pro-communist activity and several students got arrested. Moreover, Students went around the lecture rooms to promote their movement to their peers before professors arrived. They also displayed anti-government posters throughout the campus. These posters would be taken down whenever it was spotted by school staffs, but students would simply put them back up the very next morning. As time

went on, student activists became bold and tried to engage as much audience as they can out in the public. They would secretly put posters exposing problems with the government on top of a bus just before they took off and these posters would scatter all over the street as the bus started to drive. Also, they would secretly distribute posters and flyers in busy streets or movie theatres or just anywhere where a lot of people were gathered. Sometimes they would even hand deliver these posters in the mailbox of random households.

Student activists slowly started to make use of the networks they established in almost every dimension of the society to organize the masses. With that, students began to lead a series of sudden street protests throughout the 1980s. Sudden Street protests is which 50 to a few hundred members would suddenly appear on streets and make speeches, chant slogans and distribute flyers with government satire cartoons. This movement was so mobile that students would have moved on to a different location or vanished when the police arrive at the scene. Sometimes these protests were held simultaneously in different locations and proved to be very effective in expanding their audience beyond what they could reach before. While it was very difficult for the police to keep up with the highly mobile street protests, sometimes students had to make use of violence to protect themselves and their peers from getting arrested. The government criticized these movements and labeled them as “Professional terrorists”. Students responded, without given the possibility of holding a peaceful political discourse and expressing their opinions in public, it was just a measure of self-defense.

Fast forward to 13 April, 1987, Chun announced the “13 April measure” to allow indirect election of the president by electoral colleges under the military regime. This enraged not only the students but people from all over the country

including professors, artists, and religious people and et cetera. Over a million people including students from different cities came out to the streets and protest against Chun administration and called for a constitutional change that involved a direct presidential election. These protests got only escalated as days went by and on 29 June, 1987, the Chun administration finally surrendered to the public. Subsequently, the government announced “June 29 declaration” which referred to a speedy constitutional revision that leads to direct presidential elections, guaranteeing for human rights and freedom of the press. Finally the process of democratization has slowly, but definitely, begun to take root in South Korea.

No one in South Korea will doubt that the students of the 1980s pursuit of democratization played a vital role in bringing democracy to South Korean society. Under severe state suppression, Student activists did not give up and have come up with creative ways to mobilize people from all dimensions of the society. They were in factories, farms, and slum areas to equip workers, farmers, and urban poor with necessary knowledge to defend their rights such as ways to establish independent trade unions or to organize a legal protest against the government. In sum, there has always been an unwavering effort from no other groups but students to change the South Korea for the better in the face of continuous suppression.

## ***Conclusion***

In this section, I sought to show the vital role that students can play in democratization by reviewing cases from three different countries. Cases analyzed in this paper show that regardless of where students are from, differences in social and political circumstances, students were often the one not only to persuade public opinion, but also to increase political awareness of the people and create political

alliances to expand the political opportunities. An expanded political opportunity provides students with more political resources and greater chances for success in achieving their goal. This allows students to create more room for others to participate in the policy-making process and increase governments' responsiveness even further. From organizing massive protests to mobilizing supports from public, it is difficult to ignore the potential role the students can play in fostering such political reform. This is all possible because university students are usually the first group to learn about modern ideas and freer of social constraints in general in comparison to other groups of the population as they do not have much responsibilities to bear than other themselves. In addition, as they settle into a new society, such as South Korea, there bounds to be various changes on each individual. Therefore, students tend to be more active on expressing about what is on their minds publicly. Accordingly, it is not an exaggeration that when someone says it is critically important to pay a close attention to the political perception of overseas Chinese students, though small in number as of yet, in the transition studies of China.

## **II. POLITICAL PERCEPTION OF CHINESE STUDENTS IN SOUTH KOREA**

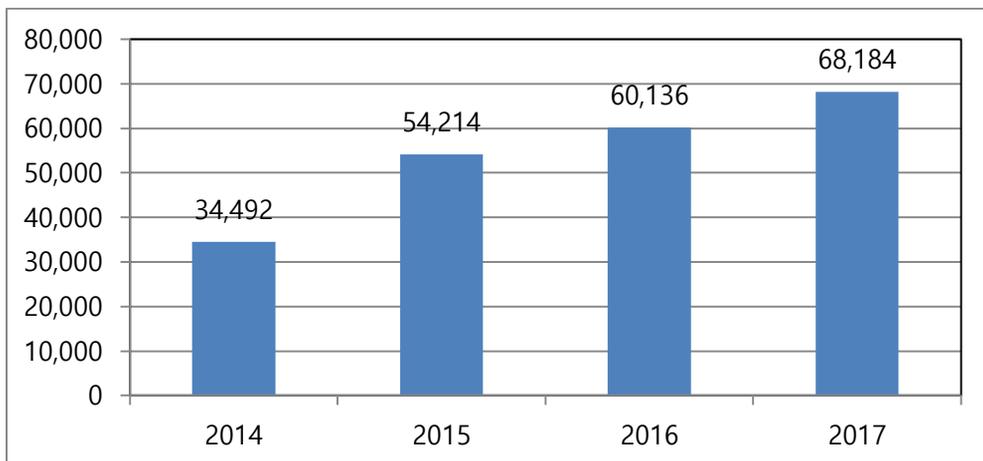
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### ***1. CHINESE STUDENTS IN SOUTH KOREA***

The number of Chinese students studying in South Korea has steadily been growing as Chinese society has become increasingly modernized in the past decades. According to Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, China has become the largest source of international students in the world for higher education in 2017. Moreover, Chinese students make up the largest

proportion of the number of international students in South Korea. (Approximately 55% of the entire international students in South Korea) Today, there are about 70,000 Chinese students studying in higher education in South Korea. This trend of increasing inflow of Chinese students into South Korea is showing no signs of slowing down as of yet due to its geographical proximity and cheaper tuition fees than some of other destinations to study abroad. These Chinese students in South Korea are special because entering and settling into a new society is bound to entail various changes on a personal level. Not only they are exposed to the new environment, they will also learn or witness the fact that how the students in South Korea have contributed to making almost every milestone in modern Korean history throughout their university life or just simply by living in South Korea; from demanding for a direct presidential election in 1987, and peacefully removing democratically elected president followed by Candlelight Revolution in 2016.

**Table 1.** Number of Chinese students in South Korea



More and more of these students going to South Korea to pursue their degree are going to encounter a set of new value. The main rationale behind this is because various aspects of everyday life in South Korean society are arguably very

different from those of what Chinese students experienced in China. As they settle into the new environment, some of these students might discover alternative ways, tools or methods that can be used in running an organization or a country. On top of this, the statistics show that vast majority of Chinese students plan to return to their country upon graduation (대외경제정책연구원, 2018). Therefore it will be even more critical to find out whether or not studying and residing in South Korea or in any other liberal democratic countries do bring any influence to their political values and beliefs. This process is critical as these students are the people who will be forming the mainstream society in China in 10, 20 or even 30 years' time and it is no exaggeration to assume that their potential for implications in political culture in the future China will be immense. While it will be difficult to generalize and apply the findings in this paper to overseas Chinese students in entirety, it will be, however, important to understand the political perception of these students to explain and possibly shed some light on the future path of political direction in China. This study will offer an opportunity to understand the political perception of some Chinese students attending SNU and I hope it will be the foundation stone for exploring political perception of Chinese students in other countries as well.

## ***2. RESEARCH QUESTION***

The purpose of this paper is to find out whether or not values and beliefs of Chinese students at SNU support a set of democratic values. If they do support, how do they view democracy? What do they think of different sociopolitical circumstances in South Korea and in China? Why do or do not these students support democracy and democratization? Is there a change in their values and beliefs after coming to South Korea? Or, are they just happy about where China is

now even after seeing both sides of the world and do not care about it at all? In this context, this study established 5 research questions in an attempt to address the aforementioned questions.

**(1) What do Chinese students think about free and independent media?**

**(2) What do Chinese students think about public political demonstrations?**

**(3) How do they view China's electoral system? Do they think they have the right to vote?**

These questions have to do with whether or not these Chinese students stand for freedom and individual human rights.

**(4) What are your thoughts on politics in China?**

**(5) Do you think the experience of studying abroad has affected your views on politics or democracy?**

These questions are designed to investigate what do these students think of current political atmosphere in China and if they experience any change in their values by studying in South Korea. These two questions are important in this study because it will help verify my hypothesis whether or not Chinese student's political orientation does get influenced in a relatively more liberal country, or South Korea.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Seoul National University (SNU) is chosen as the research background in this study for several reasons. First, as a public school, SNU charges a relatively lower tuition fees than other private schools in the city. Therefore, there is a greater

chance to draw opinions from students with ordinary income background. Secondly, Chinese students at SNU only accounts for 1% of the entire Chinese students in South Korea. Hence, the results can be meaningful as they are arguably the brightest students in South Korea. Lastly, as a graduate student at Graduate School of International Studies, SNU, I have the privilege of access to anywhere in the campus and to all the Chinese students at the school. My exposure to such surroundings marks a substantial advantage in conducting this empirical study at SNU.

To explore the political perceptions of Chinese students at SNU, this paper will incorporate the method of in-depth interviews along with purposive and snowball sampling. Qualitative research method is appropriate for this study as the topic for this study has not yet been sufficiently explored and it is important to understand the student's raw thoughts from their experiences in South Korea. The survey will also concern whether or not residing in South Korea has indeed affected their political orientation and their perception of current regime in China. Lastly, the structure of the interview is semi-conducted with open endings in order to gain more in-depth response.

In the selection of interviewees, I devised a few criteria regarding the interviewees to ensure every individual I pick are as unique as they can be and thus I can draw more diverse responses. The criteria are where they are from, ethnicity, major field of study, age, gender, education level, the country they received their bachelor's degree, work experience (if there is any), Korean skills, and period of time they spent in South Korea. Korean skills will be measured with participant's grade from Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) as it is one of the requirements for foreign students to acquire upon entering SNU. For the interview, I first reached

out to Chinese students who I personally know who share little in common in regard to the aforementioned criteria. Then I used purposive and snowball sampling to reach more Chinese students with various backgrounds through the help of those students and Chinese Students Association at SNU. After the preliminary screening, 20 Chinese students were carefully chosen and consented to participate in this study as interviewees. The interviews were conducted in semi-structured style with open endings; creating room for more flexibility so that the responses are not necessarily confined to the questions I present to them. The questions in the interview were asked orally in Mandarin and mainly requested students to share their personal experiences in South Korea and discuss their thoughts and opinions on the sociopolitical differences that exist between South Korea and China. Each interview usually lasted for an hour and was conducted at a place and a time which the participants felt comfortable with. Sometimes interviews were conducted in a group of two or three. Additional interviews were conducted with some of the participants when it was necessary to draw more in-depth response. Lastly, the names for the participants in this study are given fictitious names to ensure anonymity.

Making questions for the interview was done very cautiously. This is because I did not want the participants to get the wrong impression from the survey that I am trying to promote a particular political regime over the other. For instance, “Democracy is better than Chinese socialism”. The goal of this research is nothing more than a mere inquiry into political perception and orientation of Chinese students at SNU. To reduce this risk of involving any of my prejudices or subjective views as much as possible, I consulted my Chinese friends before and after in making the questions for the interviews. In addition, the participants were

informed that they have the right to withdraw the participation at any time during the interview if they experience discomfort or refuse to answer any questions that they wish not to and still remain in the study. Note that the questions made for the interviews were used only as a guideline to conduct interviews; the interviews were conducted without any specific restrictions but with an open ending. Also, interviewees were notified that any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify the participants will remain confidential to elicit a deeper responses from the participants.

In order to find out the political perception and orientation of these students, I have characterized the questions in five broad topics. They are, (1) What do Chinese students think about free and independent media? (2) What do Chinese students think about public political demonstrations? (3) How do you view China's electoral system? Do you think you have the right to vote? (4) What is the political orientation of Chinese students attending SNU? (5) Do you think the experience of studying abroad has affected your views on politics or democracy? The details of the questions under each topic that were used as a guideline to conduct the interview are attached in the appendix section.

For the purpose of raising the quality of outcome of the study, Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview was transcribed in Chinese first and then translated in English for this study. The interview was mostly conducted in Chinese and some Korean. The result of the analysis was then shared with the participants to confirm whether if there is anything that they wish to add, remove or revise. Despite the small sample size of the research, I hope the result of this study will be helpful in anyway in future exploration of China's transition studies.

#### 4. THE INTERVIEWS

This study has used the method of purposive sampling and snowball sampling against a few criteria to conduct in-depth interviews to explore the political perception and orientation of Chinese students attending SNU. The interviews were recorded and conducted in accordance with the guide questions in the question sheet. Some details of the respondents are listed below, but the details of ethnicity, major field of study and hometown are omitted because it is judged that these can directly lead to who the respondents are since there are not many Chinese students at SNU. There were total of 8 females and 12 males, 14 students from liberal arts major and 6 from natural science. After the table are some of the highlights of responses from those students that represents well.

**Table 2.** List of Participants of the Interview

NAME	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	TOPIK	TIME SPENT IN KOREA	INTERVIEW DATE	MAJOR
A	Female	22	Undergrad	6	3 years	1 <sup>st</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
B	Female	23	Undergrad	6	2 years	1 <sup>st</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
C	Female	22	Undergrad	6	2 years	1 <sup>st</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
D	Male	31	PhD	6	6 Years	4 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	NATURAL SCIENCE
E	Male	25	Masters	6	3 Years	8 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	NATURAL SCIENCE
F	Male	27	PhD	6	2 Years	11 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
G	Male	24	Masters	5	2 Years	13 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
H	Female	26	Masters	6	1 year	20 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
I	Female	29	PhD	6	5 years	20 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
J	Male	23	Undergrad	6	2 years	25 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS

K	Female	24	Undergrad	6	3 years	26 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
L	Female	25	Masters	4	2 Years	30 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	NATURAL SCIENCE
M	Male	29	PhD	6	8 Years	1 <sup>st</sup> June 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
N	Male	32	Masters	6	7 Years	3 <sup>rd</sup> June 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
O	Female	23	Masters	6	2 Years	10 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
P	Male	23	Masters	6	4 Years	10 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	LIBERAL ARTS
Q	Male	24	Masters	6	4 Years	14 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	NATURAL SCIENCE
R	Male	25	PhD	6	5 Years	15 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	NATURAL SCIENCE
S	Male	24	Masters	6	3 Years	15 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	NATURAL SCIENCE
T	Female	23	Masters	6	3 Years	17 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	LIBERAL ARTS

***What do Chinese students think about free and independent media?***

According to Standard Chartered Bank, China is projected to overtake the U.S. as world's number one economy by 2020. But the reality is; China, as a country, is still very much unknown to the outside world. If anything, it is often portrayed by the Western media as a communist nation whose citizens enjoys very little or zero democracy. In addition, some foreigners believe China's media censorship is too strict and it needs to be more open. According to A, there indeed exist a certain degree of restrictions in China, but it is not to an extent where people in China do not have any freedom at all. A thinks the western media sometimes exaggerate and tries to create prejudices against China whenever there is a chance to just because China is a socialist country.

*“I think sometimes it is too exaggerated how western media portrays Chinese people do not have any freedom at all. There are certain degrees of restrictions in our society and sometimes we need to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to gain access to certain websites but we are not that restricted to the point where we do not have any freedom at all.”*

There is a lot of debate in the west about the free-flow of information on the Internet. But in China, there is no debate. F explained that the government maintains tight control on what people inside the country can and cannot see, making the World Wide Web not so wide. F has joked that the Chinese internet is more like an “intranet” and explained that China runs the world’s most complicated censorship machine. It’s a complex internet filtering system that China uses to block foreign websites; anything that questions or threatens the ruling Communist party of China, including any political, religious, and cultural information. F said,

*“I do not remember exactly when but I know a lot of people started using Proxy software to gain access to foreign websites even before I came to South Korea. In fact, I think almost everyone uses VPN in China. You will be surprised because there are actually many progressive thinkers in China that find ways to get information.”*

R explained majority of the people in China know that a Big Brother is watching closely and has been doing so for a long time. R also added that the people in the

West oftentimes have no clue whether or not they are being censored to the truth whereas the people in China are well aware that they are being censored. As if it were a proof of this, it was interesting to see many students putting away their phone during the interview. Nonetheless, R explained that the censorship sometimes can have more positives than negatives depending on the situations and therefore China's media censorship is strict for a reason. R explained that censorship that exists among government entities, private companies, and even some of those in South Korea are the same. R gave an example of how cigarettes, tattoos and knives are not allowed to be shown on TV in South Korea to protect teenager viewers and China needs such censorship to ban out certain contents that deems inappropriate for China's development and social stability. R said,

*"I wish China would allow more freedom of access in the future but I think it is necessary as of right now because it protects our society. Social media has a large negative impact and the impact can be severe. If the information is not filtered out, our society would be more chaotic because many people in China are still not able to tell right from wrong and they would be easily affected. You see, China has over 1.4 billion of people and not everyone is on the same level in terms of education, wealth, and values and et cetera. And that can be very inconvenient for China's development. This is definitely something that China needs to work on in the future, but not right now."*

G explained that China has come up with homemade alternatives for Western social media platforms that have been blocked. But these too are tightly controlled. China

censors the internet by passing laws and rules that flat out ban certain content that the government deems illegal or inappropriate. According to G, the government actually requires Chinese internet companies to employ armies of human censors to police user generated content on their platforms. On the other hand, A shared an interesting experience of being censored by those armies. A only tried to be funny by posting a content about Trump not being able to use twitter for the first time for so long while he was visiting China. But A soon discovered that her content was removed.

*“Once my post on Weibo was censored and removed. You know how the US president Trump is well known for his twitter account. But when Trump visited China, he did not post anything at all on his twitter account for days. And I once posted a post saying that Trump must be struggling to get a VPN in China because he has not twitted for days. Later Weibo told me that my post was considered ‘inappropriate’ and deleted my post.”*

A was not happy with the incident and showed concerns that such censorships are getting out of control. While A feels that the freedom of the press in the West or in any other liberal democratic countries are actually also not really as free as one might think and the censorship is not a unique case to China, A believes that current censorship in China is unconvincingly strict. All in all, A agreed that censorships to a certain extent is needed for community good, but she is sometimes puzzled how the current reckless use of censorship can help to serve the people and

government's interest. C was also at the interview and reacted to A's statement by saying,

*"You can be restrictive for good reasons, but the suppression seems to be intensifying in China. Many websites from the West are very useful in searching for vast amount of information and keeping in touch with your friends around the world. But now you can't even access major publications or social platforms in China. You can use VPN to get around it, but it is very slow and inconvenient. Personally there are times I do not wish to return to China because of this."*

According to G, the freedom of press and expression in China are increasingly being suppressed. G explained that the content that gets censored is not merely confined to unflattering information about the CCP, but literally anything that they find inappropriate for some reason. G said it is impossible to even look up some of the politician's name on internet in China. Even though censorship can be useful in protecting the society, G said that the scope of censorship is currently becoming too wide in China. G believes there are actually many rooms to liberate without hurting CCP's interest. When Q was asked of his thought on this statement, he agreed with G's statement and said,

*"Perhaps it is unrealistic to ask for complete freedom of press and expression in China right now because of CCP, but they often over censor a lot of stuffs online and this is totally unacceptable. A lot of my friends agree that the current level of*

*ensorship in China must be worse than those in 80s and 90s. If CCP is confident in its grip in power, they should tolerate more freedom in press and expression. I think this is just a sign that CCP is not that confident about it after all”*

All in all, Majority of students knew that they are being censored and they thought that some degree of such measurement is needed to protect the society and also for the development of the country. They reasoned that the most people in China still have low education achievement and political knowledge and these people can be easily affected. Nonetheless, these students were increasingly getting upset at CCP intensifying its censorship level. Almost all of the participants were not happy with the current trend and have hoped that there will be some change in the future as more and more people will rely on the internet to connect with each other, gain knowledge and information, and the continued development of the China will need open access to the World Wide Web, not just a ‘China Wide Web’.

*What do Chinese students think about public political demonstrations?*

According to the students and some researches done on Chinese search engines to verify this, the Candle Light revolution and the process of impeachment of then-President Park Geun-hye in 2017 were reported in China without any filtrations and variations to the story. The entire story of how the students triggered the Candle Light rally was not censored and ultimately the impeachment made the headlines of Chinese press at the time. D said,

*“I was in Korea when this happened and I was very shocked at how these stories were being told in China without being filtered at all. I think this must have had a big influence on not just us, but also some of the readers in China.”*

According to D, demonstrations are also in fact allowed in China. One in China would need to be granted a permit to hold a demonstration just like in South Korea and elsewhere, but it is just that these permits are always almost impossible to acquire unless it is pro-nationalistic. D said,

*“I think all Chinese citizens should be given the passage and rights to voice their opinion and mind through demonstrations like in South Korea. It is almost impossible to hold any demonstrations legally on a provincial level so these people will carry their problems straight to Beijing or what is also known as Shang Fang(上访). At the same time, the provincial governments will do its best to stop these people from going to Beijing; otherwise these people will bring about negative points on them when evaluated by CCP at the end of the year”*

Other students were also familiar with this phenomenon called *Shang Fang(上访)*.

According to D, the people who are being stopped from going to Beijing are rumored to be locked up, beaten or even getting killed sometimes. D said,

*“Beijing alone cannot solve problems of all the people in China and therefore I strongly believe the provincial governments must not pursue economic development only and ignore their people.”*

D said the problem with provincial governments is that they do not represent their people because they are not directly elected by its people. D argued that provincial governments are more worried about the economic development than their people's rights and welfare as it plays a large part when being evaluated by CCP. Chinese voters can only elect delegates to township and county people's congresses only. D said,

*“In turn, this also means that the legitimacy of CCP does not come from the people and is oftentimes irresponsible to us. China is like that”*

Nonetheless, many students actually did not support the idea of holding a public demonstration like the Candle Light revolution in China due to various reasons. E said,

*“I was really touched by the Candle Light revolution but I am afraid such demonstrations in China can carry away a lot of people who cannot tell right from wrong and cause a chaos. Little do outsiders know about the severity of the great disparity in China”*

E explained that vast majority of the population in China still receives very low quality of education and these people could easily get affected by a movement or a demonstration. This can potentially give some ill-minded people the opportunity to abuse demonstrations for their own interests. Moreover, D was also against the idea of holding a demonstration like the Candle Light revolution in China but for a different reason. He feared that a demonstration like the Candle Revolution in China would engender a very different outcome; just like that of Tiananmen incident since CCP has significant control over the military in China. Majority of students was actually in the same line as D that there is a problem in China with regards to demonstrations, but they also acknowledged that the problem will sustain as long as CCP is in power. M said,

*“In fact, there are a lot of demonstrations already being held in China either legally or illegally, including student movements; but they are just not being reported on the news. Even if they were reported, people do not even recall them from happening because they will be quickly censored everywhere in China and you can never find out what actually happened then. Also, a demonstration like Candle Light revolution does not seem plausible at the moment in China as long as CCP is in charge. But I wish we had more opportunities to hold any, whether it is trivial or not, demonstration out in public like how it is done in South Korea soon.”*

In the eyes of many students including D and M, demonstrations are practically banned in China and the rights to protest seems to exist only ostensibly because the

government would not allow any of it if they consider it inappropriate. M explained that a demonstration does not always have to be a big-scale revolution and it can be as small as farmers asking for help during the drought season. While M and many other students agreed that public demonstrations should not be encouraged in the short term, these students hoped that there will be more opportunities for the people to hold various demonstrations to express themselves in the near future like how it is carried out in South Korea.

On the other hand, there were also few students who did not agree that the people's right to hold a demonstration in China is violated by the government. Since the passage for protests is already in place, these participants felt that what their people need is just an appropriate education for them to organize one legally. It was interesting to hear a completely contrasting response about demonstrations from these students because it felt like as if they were describing a different country when we were all talking about China.

***In consideration of electoral process for SNUCSA or the government of South Korea, How do you view China's electoral system? Do you think you have the right to vote?***

According to the Chinese Constitution, "All citizens, aged over 18, enjoy the right to vote and to stand". However, all of the students have said that they never practiced their voting rights before because they were never taught how to cast their votes. While these students acknowledged that they do not have the rights to elect top government leaders and some of these participants were confused as to why they were given the rights to vote in the first place, F said that the electoral process for SNUCSA and the government of South Korea still did not really

influence him on how he views China's current electoral system. F was not necessarily supporting a certain regime over this issue, but he thinks that the significant portion of Chinese students in China or overseas are not politically engaged because of their busy lives and they will not likely take the time to figure out who they will vote for even if they were given the chance to vote. F explained that even though he does not have the western version of voting rights, China has its own democracy with Chinese characteristics and electoral democracy at the top level could just wreck the advantages of it.

*“I know that I do not have the right to vote for top leaders in China but China has its own democracy. China has a pyramidal election system starting from the bottom. All party leadership starts at local level and gradually escalates to the top, so the case of Obama or Trump is impossible in the Chinese system. In China, one must have proven to be competent at the lower level first before aspiring for the top leadership“*

Others also had similar opinions to F's response as to why they were skeptical of implementing electoral democracy in China. H said,

*“I think I read somewhere that the voter turnout is fairly low among young generations in South Korea because they are more worried about what are they going to do to make a living and they are not that interested in politics. Also, I heard many people from democratic countries, including South Korea, actually*

*vote without really knowing much about the candidate. Having said that, I think it is okay to leave it to the experts to figure it out.”*

H continued and said that he understands why other countries allow electoral democracy, but he was still skeptical of implementing it in China. He mentioned that many dimensions of disparities in China could make the principle of “One person, one vote” very inefficient for China. H argued that a nation’s context (国情) must be thoroughly considered prior to granting voting rights to all of its citizens.

*“There is also a risk that people will select leaders who seek to undermine commitment to freedom and individual human rights under democratic regime and I think the chances are greater in China because majority of the population are still farmers and not well-educated. These people will easily exceed a billion in number and I think it will be too much of a risk for all of us to take.”*

In fact, majority of students endorsed Chinese democracy or what is also known as “Political meritocracy”. They were well aware that corruption and lack of checks against abuses of power are obvious threats to this political meritocracy, but president Xi’s recent anti-corruption campaign has gave them some confidence that China can reduce the gap between the idea and reality. These students endorsed such political meritocracy because, unlike totalitarianism, not only it is compatible with most liberal values such as freedom of expression and individual human rights

just like how it is in Singapore, and it is arguably best suited for current Chinese contexts.

In contrast, there were also students like M who felt that the term liberty and one-party system are two conflicting concepts. He explained that the fatal disadvantage of the one-party system is that CCP does not serve the best interests of the people but themselves; and thus the people of China are coerced to have only one solution to all the problems in the country. M strongly argued that China should encourage multiple political parties to run for national election in the future. Quote M,

*“Prime example of this would be that all of China uses Beijing Time regardless of their geographical location. For instance, 5 hours west of Beijing uses the same time zone as Beijing and I think this is very illogical. Sun rises around 9~10 am in the morning in some cities in the West side of the country during winter season.”*

On top of this, D said that having no voting rights to the top leader is a problem because when things are good, China is good; but when things are bad, it is unclear who to blame. Even though electoral democracy in China is what D and M hope for, they acknowledged that their thought is currently far too ideal; not because of the great economic or education disparities throughout the country, but because no transition to democracy in the world was ever acquired without a ‘cost’. Quote D,

*“If there is one party which could declare a martial-law in China, it would be CCP and CCP only because China is a one-party system. In turn, if somebody challenges CCP and tries to put multi-party system forward, it would mean a civil war.”*

D also mentioned Mao Zedong’s quote “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” and said this principle was exhibited multiple times throughout the history of CCP’s rule of China; including the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen incident. Even though China has given the villagers the chance to vote for their local congresses for decades and many people from those township and county tried to stand as independent candidates across China, L explained that it is the CCP which oftentimes decides who gets on the ballot. Very few, if any, actually make it onto the ballot and the winners from these polls choose representatives at the next level of government, and so on all the way to the Chinese parliament which appoints the president. L thinks that the party is merely tricking people into believe there is some electoral democracy in China. L said,

*“I do not see a competitive election being implemented in China anytime soon because there is no such thing as civil society in China. On top of this, any independent candidates who get nominated will inevitably dilute a proportion of members who are from the CCP; and this could lead to CCP being unable to appoint or dismiss the people in significant positions. Thus CCP won’t let someone like me to be a candidate.”*

L believed that there will be fewer mistakes under democratic regime because a decision is made based on majority vote. Not only the people will have greater access to information, they will also have each other to assist themselves viewing things as objectively as possible. Therefore if a decision is made with majority rule and it turns out wrong, it merely represents the value that a country holds at a certain time. Even if a decision turns out to be a mistake, L said it should be able to reverse and corrected the same way with voting. For instance, if the government's performance is poor in South Korea, they will probably lose in the next election; and also the UK can hold another referendum, in theory, if Brexit is deemed to be inappropriate. This is almost impossible under an authoritarian regime because they do not represent its people. L explained,

*“I think South Korea is a great example of this. Park Geun-hye was elected as a president in 2012 with majority vote but was impeached in 2016. Currently, I do not think it will work like that in China.”*

However, students like M, D and L were the only students who supported the idea that China should also tolerate South Korea-like free and fair election. Majority of students still supported the current system of “Indirect vote”, “Political meritocracy” or “Democracy with Chinese characteristics”. They reasoned that the direct election can work against China's development since China has a very high population and suffers from great disparities across the country. F explained,

*“I feel that the people of China need to first achieve a certain level of standard first or electoral democracy could potentially ruin China.”*

F was unsure of the threshold to safely say when a society is finally ready for direct election, but he was certain that China will not be ready for many years to come. F explained that the population for the top ten cities in China only accounts for 65 million out of the entire population, and even those people are not all well-educated. He argued that “One person, one vote” would only just throw the country into disorder and confusion. Moreover, he explained that just because it is democracy, it does not always make the right decisions.

*“No one expected the vote for Brexit would go thorough and Donald Trump would be elected as president of the United States. It is quite shocking to see some of the reasons behind why those people have voted the way they vote.”*

T’s opinion was in line with F’s and felt that some of the reasons why working class people in Britain have voted to leave the EU were ridiculous such as “All the foreigners are taking our jobs”, and also the same for some of the people in the United States who have voted for Trump, “Because Hillary was his opponent”. T thinks that vast majority of people who intend to vote usually have no idea what they are voting for. If an advanced country like the United Kingdom or the United States also makes those “mistakes”, T and other students believe it will be much worse for China. T also added,

*“I saw there are countries where deadly protests break out over an election result. I believe something much worse can happen in China for the same cause.”*

Most of students emphasized the importance of contexts behind a nation and endorsed meritocratic elements in present China’s political system. Moreover, many students said that they separate CCP from China and its political system. They had strong faith in democracy with Chinese characteristics but blamed CCP for increasingly undermining its own democracy with intensifying repression and recent removal of presidential term limit. In other words, they believed in the system, but not the party. Accordingly, only few students actually have shown support for CCP, but majority of students have said that they do not believe in current leaderships from CCP anymore.

***What are your thoughts on politics in China?***

I have defined democracy to the students as a system with multi-party system, competitive election and freedom of press and expression, but majority of the participants were already well familiar with these concepts of democracy. When they were asked whether China is too big of a country for democracy, many students argued that China should also be able to achieve democracy if other countries can. But the real question is do they really want it? Among these students, D said,

*“Benjamin Franklin once said ‘where liberty dwells, there is my country’. As long as it can raise the quality of my life, which I think it will, I will support concepts of democracy.”*

D explained that CCP must provide a clear and plausible explanation to the people of China if they wish to be the only party to continue and rule China. In other words, CCP must be able to convince everyone the rationale behind them managing everything in the country otherwise there will be a serious legitimacy issue. D said,

*“Last decades of economic development have helped legitimizing CCP’s rule, but I don’t think CCP can keep the same pace of economic growth. The economy can go either way in the future but what’s for sure to happen is that the pace will eventually slow down. And when that happens, CCP must be fully prepared because they are the only one out there for people to blame.”*

When K was asked about her thought on D’s statement, she said that the economy in China is reportedly the envy of the developing world and has much more potential to grow. On top of this, GDP per capita in cities like Shanghai or Shenzhen in China are reportedly coming close or have surpassed to that of South Korea. However, when L was asked of her thought on this statement, she thinks that the economy in China is somewhat exaggerated and weak.

*“I do not believe in statistics from China. I think they are all fakes. How can I trust those numbers when there is no mutual trust between the people and CCP? Even if those numbers are true, those cities are only few out of hundreds of other cities. In reality, ordinary Chinese don't have that much money. Don't get me wrong, I love my country but it's just that I have always separated CCP from China.”*

L was inspired by the way how politicians are evaluated based on the performance of their policies they introduce in South Korea. L said not only do ordinary people in China have no space to influence policy-making process, it is unclear who to blame for if a policy turns out to be ‘not so great’ for the people. This is the reason why L thinks the one-party system in China will not last forever.

*“Only time will tell exactly what will happen in the future but if the rate of growth slows down, people will start pointing fingers. And the only place they can point their fingers at, is at the CCP. Where else they can point their fingers at?”*

A also thinks that the stability of CCP in the future is not as rosy as one might think. According to the latest data from the Chinese government, China's internet population has now grown beyond 800 million. The number of internet users in China is now more than the combined populations of Japan, Russia, Mexico and the United States. A says this trend will only work against the CCP in the future.

*“I think this will only work against CCP as more and more people are connected to the outside world, it will become impossible to monitor all of their activities and they will learn about how closed China’s society is and realize that accepting criticisms is not part of CCP’s job. As more Chinese citizen feels the weight of the government censorship, there will be growing complaints about the government; in other words, towards CCP and CCP only”*

Likewise, M thinks it is unwise for CCP to impose strict restrictions on all dimensions of the society because it only shows CCP’s lack of confidence in running the country; but it seems like CCP has no choice but to restrict more because they know removing those blockages could work against them. M feels that this lack of mutual trust between the people and the government has engendering a sense of dissatisfaction toward government among the people. M said,

*“Perhaps it would be unwise to trigger something like a multi-party system through social movement or any external forces right now because CCP would not suppress this gently. This type of transition would entail a great cost because CCP has control over the military. I think it’s best for us to just wait and see. Only time will be able to tell if CCP can sustain”*

On the other hand, students like E endorsed some concepts of democracy, but he feels that overall it is not suitable for China right now. These students desired more

freedom in China to what it is like at this moment, they felt that the public opinion in China can sometimes be illogical because of the disparities in many dimensions throughout the country and this can severely slowdown China's development. Therefore E and others argued that a political transition can wait for greater good; E said,

*"I am not denying the advantages of the concepts of democracy such as a multi-party system but you need to thoroughly assess context of a country (国情) before deciding which regime should be more desirable. I think the current condition in China is not suitable for democracy. It will be almost impossible to achieve unity in China due to high level of regional differences."*

Overall, most of the students were critical about CCP and selectively supported concepts of democracy. While they agreed that some aspects of the society are currently too restrict in China, they were actually quite optimistic about China's future as they believed certain features of democracy are deemed to be improved naturally as China develops further. These students have shown strong belief in its current political system because they felt that it is also compatible with most western democratic values and practices such as freedom of expression and individual human rights. In addition, they believed democracy with Chinese characteristics is possible since there are roughly 100 million members in CCP and it would be almost impossible for a small group of people or a single person from the party to dictate everything. Nonetheless, they felt that leaderships from CCP is

recently leading the country against the trend and is responsible for China becoming increasingly repressive. It was ironic how these students endorsed the current political system in China, but not the party which established the system in the first place. However, many students believed that it will just be a matter of time before China becomes more democratic in its own way and were optimistic of China's future politics.

On the other hand, K explained that China has drastic different environment than any other countries in the West and thus if any political change was to rise in the future would not necessarily follow Western-style democratization. K gave an example to illustrate that it will just be like how companies from the West are not always successful in a foreign country; e.g. China. K explained that countries must consider contexts of a nation (国情) and argued that currently Chinese-style democracy seemingly fits China the best for both development and maintaining social order. Regardless of the type of the system that China would pursue in the future, K said that he would be happy with the new system as long as it presents more liberties; especially the freedom of expression.

In conclusion, whether or not a student was critical or favorable about the current regime in China, they all agreed that China should maintain its status-quo for realistic reasons such as disparities or CCP. However, majority of students were hopeful that there will be more freedom in the near future with its own democracy. These students believed that some concepts of democracy are to be born naturally when overall people's standards are raised. On the other hand, not a single student was convinced of recent change to China's presidential term limits. They were all strongly against Xi serving as president for the third term. Even the students who

previously said they were against the idea of holding a demonstration like the Candle light revolution in China said that they will do everything they can to stop that from happening. Unlike how One-party system is usually depicted as dictatorships in the West, P explained,

*“I support status-quo now for realistic reasons but this does not mean that I support dictatorship. The term democracy with Chinese characteristics would lose its legitimacy if Xi serves as president for the third term.”*

Most of students had similar response when I asked what would happen if Xi decides to continue to serve, R said

*“I will not allow and I will protest with a candle in my hand.”*

*Do you think the experience of studying abroad has affected your views on politics or democracy?*

G explained that Chinese students coming to South Korea will inevitably undergo some change in values because of the drastic different sociopolitical atmosphere between the two countries and this opinion was shared with all of the students. Not to mention the freedom of press and expression, G said it is not that difficult to encounter activities of civil society organizations throughout South Korea advocating public's rights and wishes of the people. G said there are civil society

organizations too in China but they are almost like non-existent because they are under strict surveillance by the government. G said,

*“I put my phone away during our interview because I fear somebody might be listening to our conversations. What do you think will be like for civil society organizations in China?”*

Previously, D frequently used VPN to gain access to foreign websites when he was in China and received his degree from a prestigious university in China but still did not have any idea about Tiananmen incident before coming to South Korea. D said he was very shocked and felt deceived by the country when he found out about the incident through friends and lectures in South Korea. D advised me to also ask about other student’s first encounter with Tiananmen incident.

*“I bet majority of those young generations in early 20s or some even in 30s in China still do not know that this even happened. It is scary how such an event can be completely wiped out to the point that barely no Chinese citizens are aware about this incident even happened in China. Not to mention the young generations in China, if you ask about this issue to those who just arrived in South Korea, I bet majority of them would have no idea what you are talking about. There is literally no way to find out about the incident in China.”*

N also said her first encounter with Tiananmen incident was when a memorial service for *Liu Xiaobo* was held by Korean students in front of the central library at SNU in 2017. She was surprised to learn about this person even existed and explained that not many would know about him even for many overseas Chinese students. He mentioned experiences like that have given him more perspectives in viewing China.

*“China has never experienced any alternative regimes before and no one has tried to challenge the country’s power in the past 100 years. So I think sometimes it is very difficult for people in China to comprehend some of the flaws within the society. But being in South Korea and being able to view China in a third person view has definitely helped me to clarify this problem better.”*

On the other hand, According to G, politicians in China do not have any social network accounts and do not directly communicate with its citizens. G was surprised when she found out that politicians in South Korea communicate with its citizens online through their social network account. Moreover, you could easily find out about their contacts online including their phone numbers, e-mails and home address. She thought it was a very efficient way to improve the level of mutual trust between the people and the government. But when she realized that this is also common in other countries, she was not convinced why the politicians in China are not doing the same. Under this circumstance, Candle Light revolution came as an extraordinary experience to G and many other students; when millions

of Korean citizens took to the streets in dozens of cities across the country for “Candle Light rallies”.

D cross-checked the media between South Korea and China only to find out how much of it is being actually reported in China; only to find out the entire process of how Koreans worked a democratic miracle was reported without any modifications; from student movements at Ewha Women’s University to the impeachment of then-President Park Geun-hye. D has heard from his friends that a series of student demonstrations were held in Beijing after the time of Candle Light revolution; though it is impossible to confirm whether or not the Candle Light revolution did affect and trigger those movements. D told me that the movement must have influenced not only the Chinese students in South Korea, but also the ordinary people all over China.

*“The event was told in very detail to the point where I got confused if the censorship has stopped working. I was even worried that it might provoke something in China.”*

Majority of the Chinese students that I have interviewed were in South Korea when the Candle Light revolution took place. In fact, many of them even took part in the movement and saw the entire process with their own eyes. All of them said that they were touched and moved by the event and some of them even said that they got excited too like as if it were their own matter and supported the movement. While some of the respondents hoped CCP would tolerate more freedom of

expression, when asked whether or not they think this type of movement is possible in China, L said,

*“The result can turn out to be very different to that of South Korea if the same movement was to be carried out straightaway in China today.”*

Just like how the Candle Light revolution was the culmination of a sustained protest movement throughout the tenure of then-President Park, L and others argued that little steps must be taken first in China such as creating more space for freedom of expression and civil society organizations in order for similar social movements to be able to take place. L said that the demonstrations does not always have to be about political transformation or impeachment, it can be as small as ordinary people asking for help with their everyday life and hoped that there will be more opportunities to speak up about those problems in China in the near future. L continued and said coming to South Korea also had some impact on her other values; the Taiwan issue.

*“I was strongly against Taiwanese claiming that they are a separate country before coming to South Korea. But I started to appreciate more of their position after meeting students from Taiwan here and getting to know about their position. I would not say I fully admit to their argument now because I also have to consider our position, but I think there are plenty of rooms to discuss with them about the issue and perhaps even come to an agreement.”*

L was not the only one of this opinion about Taiwan. Q also shared his experience with discussing this matter with his Taiwanese friends.

*“Not many could provide a logical idea or argument to back their position as to why they are a separate country but because that’s what they were told and grew up with. But this goes the same with the Chinese students.”*

The issue between Taiwan and China is a subject for another research, but what is important here is the fact that regardless of their age, gender, time spent in South Korea and their political orientation, every respondents have agreed that being outside of China have given them more perspectives and made them become more open-minded in viewing things by seeing and hearing more. L said new experiences and interactions can quite literally change one’s perspective or value, and overseas Chinese students are open to moments like those every single day. To quote L,

*“You would be lying if you say if it doesn’t influence you at all. Either consciously or unconsciously, you will be influenced one way or the other”*

Even though residing in South Korea did bring about more perspectives, P said this still has not changed his perspective that democracy from the West will not be

suitable for China. He said studying in Korea did provide him the opportunity to learn about what democracy is like, but the more he learnt about the system the more he felt that it will not likely work for China the same way it does in South Korea or in other liberal countries. Majority of the students had similar opinions that even though they were able to view China from a third person view, they still felt that the current One-party system is the most ideal for China's development and social order. These students claimed that they have witnessed both the good and the bad sides of democracy being in South Korea, but they believed that bad sides of it will be much more prominent if it was implemented in China due to all levels of disparities that exist throughout China.

On the other hand, students who favored the current one-party system were divided into two; one that favors CCP and one that does not. The mainstream opinion, however, did not show support for CCP but have said that currently there is no other alternative but to settle with them for now for the sake of China's stability and future development. While they admitted that being in South Korea has definitely influenced some of their values, H said that people of China's overall education level must be first raised substantially before deepening democracy values in China. All in all, these students placed more importance on development and social stability over anything and felt that Western-style democracy could potentially disturb those goals; at least for now. To quote H,

*“Free speech is the backbone of democracy with the best ideas ascendant. This takes an educated and motivated population, one that knows and understands what is in its best interests and not those who would rule rather than govern. So I think*

*democracy is the most difficult form of governance to maintain and to prosper; especially for China right now. “*

Overall, vast majority of the students have shown liberal values and they were actually optimistic about China’s future politics. They believed that it is just a matter of course for some features of democracy to be improved as the society becomes more modernized. However, they felt that currently any political change in China is not a realistic idea as it could be too costly. While these students hoped that China’s government would tolerate greater access to information and increase its responsiveness in the near future, but they were not sure whether or not the Western-style democracy is going to be suitable for China due to drastic differences of its contexts from those of the West; e.g. size, population, many dimensions of disparities and et cetera. To quote D,

*“I like the freedom it offers but I think democracy is just a means. The goal should be a good government.”*

### **III. RESEARCH SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### ***1. SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEWS***

##### ***What do Chinese students think about freedom of expressions?***

When Chinese students were asked about the degree of censorship in China, majority of the students said that China’s current level of censorship is becoming unconvincingly strict. Nonetheless, these students explained that China needs

certain degree of censorship to protect its citizen as some people in China may be easily affected and this can potentially disrupt the society. Therefore one needs to bear the inconvenience in order to maintain the social stability and order. However, majority of them still felt that the current censorship in China is getting too much for one to accept to the point where some of these students even said that they sometimes hesitate to go back to China. Majority of the students blamed this phenomenon on CCP and claimed that it is the biggest cause of distrust in CCP. These students were not convinced of its tightening control over the media and online speech and they were worried that it will become more repressive in the future. They argued that CCP is currently undermining China's indigenous democratic system and hoped that they will be granted a greater freedom in the near future.

### ***What do Chinese students think about Individual human rights?***

“The Candle Light revolution”, a series of demonstration against then-President Park Geun-hye, has come as an extraordinary experience to all of the participants. However, when asked whether or not similar protests can or should be carried out in China, many students have opposed the idea for various reasons. First of all, some of them believed that China still suffers from low level of education achievement and these people can easily get affected by a demonstration or a movement. This can in turn lead some people in the community to abuse social movements for their own interests. Not only can this be inconvenient for China's development but also cause unnecessary confusion in the society. Hence protests should be strictly controlled and not be encouraged for some time. Secondly, a few participants mentioned Tiananmen incident and explained that similar aftermath

can unfold if a protest like the Candle Light revolution takes place in China as long as CCP holds majority influence over the country. Thirdly, there were also few opinions that majority of the people in China are not properly educated to carry out an effective demonstration. As a result, demonstrations in China are oftentimes illegal and not efficient. They argued that there will be more voices heard if the education standard of those people is raised. Just like what they felt about the freedom of expression in China, however, these students felt that people in China need to bear the inconvenience as of right now in order to maintain the social order. Despite all this, almost all of the students hoped that China would also become a country where freedom of speech and individual human rights are well respected in the near future.

### ***How do Chinese students view electoral democracy?***

Majority of the students looked favorably on liberty values from Western-style democracy such as freedom of expression and individual human rights, but many students were not fond of the principle of “One person, one vote” in China as a way of selecting political leaders at higher levels of government for various reasons. These students were not denying the advantages of voting, but they felt that it would be very inefficient for China. They explained that China’s vast territory, high population with severe disparities in income can significantly disrupt China’s society and slowdown its development. Furthermore, their encounter with some of the voting result such as Brexit and President Trump winning the election made these students even more skeptical of voting and believed that outcome of an election in China can be much worse. Of course, there were also students who felt that China needs more political pluralism and thus voting, though they were few in

number. However, these students also explained that their idea is currently too dangerous as it can bring about a devastating consequence given that CCP has significant control over the military. All in all, although almost all of the students were aware of the advantages of voting and why they are being practiced overseas, very few were convinced that it would be as efficient in China as it is in other countries. Majority of students placed prominence on social order and development and believed that voting will work against China until the standard of everyone is raised to a certain degree. Even then, a lot of students still expressed skepticism whether or not it should be desirable in China.

### ***What do Chinese students think about politics in China?***

There were many students with liberal values and only a few actually favored CCP. Nonetheless, most of students favored the current political system and claimed that the democracy from the West is likely to be inefficient in China due to high level of disparities between urban and rural areas. These students emphasized the importance of looking into a nation's context (国情) or contexts of a nation before deciding whether or not a political regime should be implemented. However, this did not necessarily mean that they support CCP. Many students did not identify the current China's One-party system with CCP and were optimistic about its own future democracy. In fact, majority of students actually hoped CCP is the one which should undergo some change in the near future so that it will bring more liberties to them. However, these students believed that the future democracy in China is not necessarily going to resemble the democracy from the West due to China's unique contexts to rest of the world. On the other hand, all of the students

were strongly against the idea Xi serving as president for the third term. They perceived it as a potential dictatorship and it would severely undermine their very own democracy with Chinese characteristics.

***Does the experience of studying abroad affects student's views on politics or democracy?***

All of the students said coming to South Korea did bring them with more perspectives and they were able to view things more objectively. Some of these students learnt about an event that was unknown to them before, and some of them became familiar with what democracy is and began to endorse some democratic values only after coming to South Korea. While these elements have deepened distrusts toward CCP for some students, they still believed that democracy from the West will not be suitable for China under present Chinese contexts and the current One-party system would still be better for realistic reasons. In conclusion, these students believed that the degree of liberties will be naturally deepened in the future but majority of them felt that the outcome will not necessarily be the Western-style democracy.

***2. IMPLICATIONS***

The purpose of this paper was to find out what do Chinese students think about democracy and the political circumstances in China in comparison to South Korea as I believed they would hold a set of contrary values to their country's because they are constantly exposed to the new sociopolitical circumstances. The findings in this study suggest that these students do hold a degree of democratic values and experience a change in how they view politics. Nonetheless, most of the students

still favored and felt that it is necessary to maintain the current One-party system in China for its stability and future development.

The students who participated in this study had various backgrounds and not everyone in this study were closely allied with CCP, but the bigger picture of their responses did not differ much; that they do not necessarily support CCP but they consider present one-party system with Chinese characteristics is seemingly the most appropriate system so far in consideration of the situational contexts behind China. What these students meant by Chinese characteristics is best understood as a form of quasi-democracy; simply political meritocracy with freedom of expression and individual human rights to a certain extent. Moreover, none of the students equated the One-party system in China with the term “dictatorship” and they had a firm belief in their very own style of democracy. On the other hand, as if to match the term “democracy with Chinese characteristics”, they were all strongly against the idea Xi serving as president for the third term because that would then be considered as a dictatorship. Nonetheless, many students were quite optimistic about China’s democracy in the future because they believed that some democratic values are going to be naturally deepened as China develops further.

Unlike how democracy is depicted as a norm in the West, majority of these students were not viewing Western-style democracy as a hopeful vision. They supported some concepts of democracy, like freedom of expression and human rights, but they were skeptical of other concepts like voting. They explained that China is under very different contexts compared to most of the countries around the globe such as its vast territory and high population with severe disparities in many dimensions, thus the practice of voting can turn out to be very inefficient for China.

It sort of makes sense if you imagine that the population of China exceeds the population of Europe and its territory is almost as big as Europe. On top of this, most young generations in China arguably have not experienced any democracy values since birth; therefore, it is even unlikely that they will think of democracy from the West as a value that has to be followed. In short, they felt that there is no guarantee that democracy from the West will work for China and they were not viewing it as a necessary value. Therefore, even if the current regime goes to extremes or faces a crisis, they felt that China will only selectively adopt democratic values to fit its context and there seems to be no guarantee that the outcome of this will necessarily be Western notions of political democracy.

All of the participants showed some level of political awareness and knowledge of democracy during the interview. However, these students placed top priority on social order and development, and they feared that these will be disrupted if the principle of “One person, one vote” or any other principles of democracy was fully introduced in China. They explained that the current level of disparities in China was the main reason why the Western-style democracy could be problematic for China. In addition, it was interesting how this opinion was shared by majority of the participants regardless of their background, how much time they have spent in South Korea, what they are majoring in, their age, gender and et cetera. However, it is difficult to judge whether or not the mainstream opinion from this study will also be shared by students from different schools hence we should not be too quick to jump to conclusions about this topic as well as generalize.

I believe the prediction of rise or fall of CCP is a long-term story, like climate. It is going to be awfully difficult to tell what is going to be the long-term

trend and what the "weather" is going to be like for them, just like the world-wide recession, individual wars, and revolutionary movements like the Arab spring. According to the result of this study, however, students have shown their support for One-party system in China but ironically very few students actually had their faith in CCP. In fact, majority of the students separated CCP from China and its One-party system. They were growing dissatisfied with CCP intensifying China's freedom of speech repression and recently removing presidential term limits. Therefore, if CCP continues to tighten its control over media and Xi decides to carry on as their leader of China in 2023, I believe it would be no exception to assume that a protest similar to the Candle light revolution could take place in China. Only time will tell the future of CCP but judging from the responses from this study, I guess it is fair to say that while the current weather for the system is clear and bright, but it is rather a bit foggy for the party at the moment.

### **3. *LIMITATIONS***

While this study attempted to draw political perceptions of Chinese students attending SNU, there are many limitations to this study. This is mainly because of the fact that this study solely relied on qualitative research with small sample size in one location. In addition, the number of Chinese students attending SNU only accounts for roughly 1% of the entire Chinese students in higher education in South Korea. This means that the result of this study could have turned out very differently with different participants and location. Therefore, it will be inappropriate to generalize or apply the result of this study to all the Chinese students in South Korea or elsewhere. In order to make the result of this study more meaningful, subsequent research will need to explore Chinese students

not only from other universities in South Korea, but as well as from other regions for the purpose of comparison. Despite the weaknesses behind this study, it offered an opportunity to take a glimpse of what the political perception of some Chinese students attending SNU is like.

## IV. APPENDIX

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INTERVIEW RECORD	
NAME:	AGE:
GENDER:	ETHNICITY:
HOMETOWN:	MAJOR FIELD OF STUDY:
EDUCATION LEVEL:	TOPIK:
TIME SPENT IN KOREA:	

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

*Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. At any point during the interview, you may refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer and still remain in the study or discontinue the participation.*

Name of Participant:	Signature of Participant:
Date:	

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - ENG**

**I. What do Chinese students think about free and independent media?**

- (i) A lot of western countries think since China is a socialist country, it does not have democracy. As a Chinese citizen, what are your thoughts on this and were you aware about this perception before you came to South Korea?
- (ii) In China, you need to use VPN software to visit certain foreign websites. Have you seen anybody using VPN around you? Foreign media often report that China's media censorship is too strict. Do you think that's true?
- (iii) In China, it may be censored or deleted if anyone posts a sensitive comment on the government in social media. What do you think of this as a student studying abroad?

**II. What do Chinese students think about political demonstrations in South Korea?**

- (i) South Korea is well known for its public demonstrations and citizens openly criticizing the government or its policies. Once they even removed a democratically elected president through 'Candle Light Revolution'. What is your thought on this? Do you think China should also tolerate something like this?

**III. How do you view China's electoral system? Do you think you have the right to vote?**

- (i) In consideration of electoral process for SNUCSA president or for the government in South Korea, how do you view China's electoral system? Do you think you have the right to vote?

**IV. What are your thoughts on politics in China?**

- (i) Some say that China is too big of a country, too many problems and too high population for democracy. What is your thought on this?
- (ii) What do you think of China's one-party system?
- (iii) What do you think about China's abolishment of presidential term limits?
- (iv) What is "Democracy with Chinese characteristics"?
- (v) If the Chinese political system needs to change or make adjustments, what kind of changes would you say is the most urgent?

**V. Do you think the experience of studying abroad has affected your views on politics or democracy?**

## 中文问卷参考

### I. 你如何看待自由和独立媒体？

- (I) 很多西方的国家觉得因为中国是一个社会主义的国家所以中国人没有民主而中国人是被被政府所控制。你对这个观点有什么看法？
- (II) 在国内的时候，你或者你周围的亲戚朋友同学等之中有没有“翻墙”浏览国外网站的人？外国的媒体报道说中国媒体的管控，审查制度上非常严格，你觉得这个是事实吗？
- (III) 在社交媒体发表或评论国家领导人，以及其他一些敏感词汇，可能会被删除或屏蔽。你怎么看待这件事？

### II. 你对韩国的政治示威有何看法？

- (I) 韩国人经常在街头搞一些示威游行等，网络和媒体等也有各种各样的批评政府或者领导人或者政府政策的声音，你对这些现象有什么看法？觉得中国也应该这样吗？

### III. 你如何看待中国的选举制度？你认为你有权投票吗？

- (I) 考虑到首中联或者韩国政府的选举方式，你觉得你有选举权吗？你怎么看待中国的选举制度？

### IV. 你对现在中国的政治有什么想法？

- (I) 有人说中国太大、问题太多，人太多，不适合搞民主，你认同这样的说法吗？说说你的理由。
- (II) 你对中国的一党执政有什么看法？
- (III) 你怎么看待最近中国删除国家主席任期限制？
- (IV) 你可以描述一下中国特色民主是什么吗？
- (V) 如果中国政治体系需要改变或者作出调整以适应新形势和变化或者世界潮流人心所向，你觉得最当务之急是需要哪些改变呢？

### V. 你认为出国留学的经验对于你对政治或民主的看法有什么改变吗？

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## VI. 국문 초록

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### 서울대학교에 재학중인 중국인 유학생들의 정치인식 조사

중화인민공화국 교육부는 2010년으로부터 중국이 세계 고등교육 ‘유학생 최대 수출국’이 되었음을 발표하였다. 이미 많은 나라에서 중국인 유학생들이 국제 학생 수 중 가장 많은 비중을 차지하고 있는데, 한국도 예외는 아니다. 이러한 추세 속에서 한국에 유학하러 온 중국 유학생들은 다른 유학생들과는 달리 다소 특별하다고 볼 수 있다. 왜냐하면 그들은 한국이라는 중국의 전반적인 사회적 분위기와는 완전히 다른 환경에 노출되어 있고, 새로운 사회에 진입하고 정착함과 동시에 그들은 한국에서 유학하는 동안 한국의 학생들이 어떻게 1987년 대통령 직선제 요구부터 2016년 촛불시위까지 한국 현대사의 거의 모든 주요 이정표를 만드는 데 기여했는지에 대한 사실에 대해 배우거나 직접 목격하고 경험하게 되면서 개인적인 차원에서 다양한 변화를 수반할 수밖에 없을 것이기 때문이다. 따라서 본 연구는 현재 서울대학교에서 공부하고 있는 중국인 유학생 중 20명을 대상으로 심층 인터뷰를 진행함으로써 그들의 정치적 인식을 조금이나마 이해해보고자 한다. 연구 결과에 따르면 중국 학생들은 현실적인 이유 때문에 여전히 민주주의보다는 현재의 중국식 엘리트주의를 유지할 것을 더 선호하였다. 그 이유는 현재 중국에서의 민주주의는 사회 불안정과 경제 발전의 퇴보를 야기할 수 있을 뿐만 아니라, 중국의 국정(國情)과도 잘 부합하지 않으리라 생각하였기 때문이다.

**주요어:** 중국인 유학생, 정치적 인식, 민주주의, 권위주의, 중국특색 민주주의, 국정(國情)

**학번:** 2015-252027