

Sea Turtles Living in a Fishbowl:
Political Identities and the Returning Trend of Chinese International Students

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Abstract

While American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2016) claimed that “most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic” (pp. 10–11), more and more Chinese international students have followed an opposite trend recently, returning from democracies to China where political freedom is deteriorating. This project conceives the heterogeneous political identities of Chinese international students as an underlying cause, rather than a directly decisive factor, to understand the increasing proportion of Chinese “sea turtles”—the homonym of “returnees” in Mandarin. I use conceptual, reflective, and argumentative methods, proposing and exploring four different political identities of Chinese international students: party-statist, neoliberal, liberal, and double-dissident. I develop a metaphor of the “fishbowl” to depict Chinese political control and argue that the fishbowl plays a more decisive role than democratic education in constructing Chinese international students’ political identities to pull many of them back to China. My purpose is to provide new insights and critical hope for democratic education, illuminate the complex situation that Chinese international students face, and challenge the China–West binary in order to promote mutual understanding.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Two and half years ago, when I was waiting to study abroad after getting admission approval from my current program, the last company I worked for in China hired a few interns, who were Chinese international students studying abroad but had returned for the summer holiday to seek an internship. They were involved with an international project that I managed. In that role, I got the chance to interact with them frequently. When asked about future plans, they all showed a desire to return to China. Although this response was not surprising given their internships in China, I was still curious about the reason. After I became friends with one of them, through our daily communications, I noticed an implicit disdain towards liberal democracy from him when comparing life in the U.S. and China. This disdain reached a peak after the COVID-19 pandemic. One year later, he returned to China immediately after graduation without hesitation, despite his beloved girlfriend wanting to stay abroad. Although it was painful due to the separation, he would rather risk a possible breakup than leaving China again. Another year later, his girlfriend also returned to China after graduation, changing her mind and claiming China is the best.

The story of my intern reversed my previous assumption that most Chinese international students would prefer to stay abroad, and brought a series of questions to my mind before I came to Canada: Why would they prefer to live in an authoritarian country after experiencing democracy and liberty? Why did years of learning and living in a democratic country not facilitate their identification with liberal democracy? Is the story just an isolated incident or a representative phenomenon? From then my study began.

Research Background and Rationale

In China, anyone with a middle school education can recite Petőfi's *Liberty and Love*:

“liberty and love, these two I must have; For my love, I will sacrifice my life; For liberty, I will sacrifice my love” (as cited in Chen, 2021). While this poem sparked Chinese people to fight for national freedom decades ago (Chen, 2021), the patriotic call hid the focus on the concept of liberty. Contrary to the poem’s appeal, liberty in China is in poor shape. One example is the blocking of Google, Twitter, YouTube, and even Netflix—China is one of the only four countries in the world that blocks it (Netflix, n.d.). Statistics from Freedom House (2021) show that the internet freedom score in China keeps falling in recent years, confirming “the country’s status as the world’s worst abuser of internet freedom for the seventh consecutive year” (para. 1). Press freedom in China is also under attack. Reporters Without Borders (2021) ranked China 177 out of 180 countries in its 2021 index of press freedom, claiming “China continues to be the world’s biggest jailer of press freedom defenders” (para. 1). Since Mill (1859/2011) argued that freedom of media underpins freedom of thought, and freedom of thought underpins all the other happiness of human beings, I assumed that once people gained the chance to experience media freedom outside China, they would not be willing to come back to bear the restraints and oppression. Just like the famous philosopher in the United States, Martha Nussbaum (2016), once claimed: “most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic” (pp. 10–11). However, the returning trend of Chinese international students seems quite the opposite.

Statistics from the Chinese government show that over 4 million Chinese overseas students returned to China from 1987 to 2019, accounting for 86% of the total overseas graduates (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2020), while the return rate of 2007 was estimated as 57% by Chinese scholars (Miao & Cheng, 2010), or lower, as

30.6% by Western scholars (Zweig & Ge, 2018). The return rate of the earlier period was even lower. Data cited by *The Economist* shows that “in 2001 just 14% [of Chinese international students] went home” (“As Attitudes to the West Sour,” 2021, para. 2). As Zweig and Ge (2018) mentioned that the return rate of 1987 was only 5%, Orleans (1988) noted that “of about 80,000 students and visiting scholars who came to the US between 1979 and 1989, only about 26,000 returned, most of them before 1986” (as cited in Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 178). The statistics from the Canadian government also reflect this trend. Chinese international students’ cumulative transition rates to permanent residence in the 10 years following the receipt of the first study permit have continuously dropped in the recent 20 years from 61% to 43% (Choi et al., 2021; Lu & Hou, 2015). These statistics confirm that the story of my intern is not an isolated case but rather reflects a larger trend. While the absolute number of Chinese students studying abroad was rising, the number of immigrants did not increase proportionately, but the proportion of returnees did, especially in the 21st century.

Indeed, many factors impact Chinese international students’ willingness to return to China, such as culture, language, family, belonging, et cetera. However, while those 1980s predecessors who also suffered from the above factors developed critical inclinations in politics after studying abroad, research shows that many young international students today—although they appeal to individual freedom and wish to determine the constitution of a good life by themselves—are indifferent to liberal democracy that protects political freedom based on individual liberty (Astarita et al., 2019; X. Zhang, 2020). Norris (2011) argued that the political apathy of students in North America is a consequence of consumerism, and I noticed a similar correlation with Chinese international students. While

being indifferent to politics, the new generation of Chinese international students shows a huge passion for consumerism. Twigg (2019) mentioned that the incredible consuming power of Chinese international students has even fuelled an industry particularly aimed at marketing commodities and services to them. This wealthy group of Chinese international students enjoys city life and calls every place, except a few big cities such as London or New York, “countryside”—a word that entails poverty, boredom, and backwardness in the Chinese context. A prevailing saying from Chinese overseas students who live outside cities to describe their lives abroad is “pretty mountains, pretty lakes, pretty boring.” In contrast, life in China is more promising and thrilling due to the rapid development of the economy and technology, just like “living in the future.”

Meanwhile, a rising nationalism among Chinese international students is noticed (Dong, 2017; Jiang, 2021; Liu, 2008; Osnos, 2008; Zhao, 2019; Zimmerman, 2019), which creates countless conflicts regarding controversial issues, bringing tension between Chinese international students and their Western peers, professors, or even universities (Fish, 2018; Lin, 2015; Zimmerman, 2019). As one of the foremost education historians today warned,

Put simply, the Chinese students are exercising freedom to back a regime that is hostile to it [liberal democracy]. And that, in turn, reflects a failure of the schooling they are receiving here. Our entire system of liberal education is premised on the skills and habits of democratic life: reason, civility and the free exchange of ideas. If Chinese students spend several years in the United States and decide they don't like democracy, we must not be making a strong enough case for it. (Zimmerman, 2019, paras. 5–6)

Because Chinese international students are usually conceived as the bridge between

China and the West and the transformative power for Chinese democratization, their overseas experience is essential to democratic education and even international politics. Thus, my research focuses on Chinese international students, especially this increasing trend of returning to China after graduation. Specifically, my study is founded upon three questions:

1. Why are Chinese international students returning to China after studying in democratic nations?
2. What are the roles of the Chinese government and democratic education with regard to this trend?
3. What could democratic education do to reverse this trend?

Researcher Positionality

Before addressing the research questions, this section will give some contextual information about the researcher. As a Chinese international student, I am an insider on this topic. Hence, the research process is also a continuously reflecting process for me as both an international student and a researcher. Providing personal experiences here is not to dominate or “trump” any research statement but rather to shed light on the mental source of research initiatives and to expose potential biases. As the Chinese sociologist Biao Xiang stressed in the interview:

Personal experiences are not so much important but transferring personal experiences into questions is an important method. We [intellectuals] care about the world, not ourselves. Now the key is where we start to understand this world as well as ourselves better? From transferring personal experiences into questions, it is a definite beginning. (Xiang & Wu, 2020, p. 217; originally in Chinese, translation mine)

Hence, my research interest and questions are transferred from my personal experience as a

daughter and a student.

As a daughter, my early childhood was dominated by my father's authority, which led to my sensitivity towards authority, hegemony, and oppression, partly explaining why I strongly feel suppressed by the Chinese status quo. The experiences of interacting with my father from passive submission to emotional resistance until rational communication taught me that an effective way of changing the status quo is through equal dialogue with reason, patience, and compassion. Same with society. When the government has absolute power while the masses have no saying, an equal dialogue that leads to change would never happen. Liberal democracy, in this case, attracts me through its commitment to anti-hegemony, equality, rationality, and openness. However, can liberal democracy attract students with different background and experiences?

As a student, years of learning for examinations sowed the seed of skepticism before I realized it. Rather than putting me on a path to mainstream success—working for the government or big companies—my learning experience made me constantly doubt the meaning of education in China. However, it also prevented me from being a true rebel and completely giving up the orthodox path, as I found myself enjoying the glory and privilege of being a “good student” in Chinese standardized education. Living in such an interlocking system that limits multiple perspectives, I noticed the risk that my mind was becoming more and more solidified and rigid. In this case, studying abroad for a master's degree is both resistance and compromise. It is resistance because I perceived international education as a way for me to break through the limitations of my mind and get rid of the hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is a compromise because, among so many options, I still chose a relatively “elite” and common way to achieve that goal. Hence, I realize the powerful

influence of socialization and the difficulty of fighting it, breaking it, and transcending it.

Furthermore, a more immediate experience that fuelled this project was a reflection I had in my master's class. I describe myself as a supporter of liberal democracy and believed I was aware enough to reject any official indoctrination. However, when I discussed a controversial topic with my professor, I found myself trying to defend the Chinese government and strongly felt that the relationship with my country was somehow similar to the relationship with my father. I was in the emotional resistance stage, as I rejected any official rhetoric without thinking about whether it was reasonable or not. But when I put the matter into a larger context, I immediately noticed my support for liberal democracy was shaken when I tried to reason. Suddenly, I fell into a panic of uncertainty. Where is my position? Do I genuinely support liberal democracy merely because I am against the CCP's mechanisms of control? After reflecting for a long time, I realized that my reaction was partly influenced by the patriotic education in China and partly by the vigilance against Western hegemony. The concern about being assimilated by the West pushed me to support the CCP unconsciously. However, loving Chinese culture is not equal to supporting the CCP, just as the rejection of Western hegemony is not equal to the rejection of liberal democracy, as liberal democracy is not merely a Western product but could be shared and constructed by the collective wisdom of humankind.

It wasn't until then that I realized how rooted the China–West binary and the State–Party bond created by Chinese patriotic education was in my mind, which could also be the most challenging part for Chinese international students to develop a mature understanding of and stable identification with liberal democracy. Hence, this project further explores the profound influence of Chinese political control when Chinese international

students encounter liberal democracy through international education.

Research Methodology and Road Map

This paper uses conceptual, reflective, and argumentative methods to explore the increasing trend among Chinese international students to return to China after their studies. My purpose is to provide new insights for democratic education, illuminate the complex situation that Chinese international students face, and challenge the China–West binary in order to promote mutual understanding. I conceive political identity as the underlying cause to the returning trend, and argue that Chinese political control plays a more decisive role than democratic education in constructing Chinese international students’ political identities to pull many of them back to China.

This project encompasses five chapters, including this introductory chapter that introduces the research interest and importance. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of Chinese international student mobility and a theoretical framework to outline the analysis. I propose four political identities based on the literature review: party–statist, neoliberal, liberal, and double-dissident. Chapter 3 pays particular attention to political identities constructed in the Chinese context, especially party-statist and neoliberal identities. I describe the primary meanings of each identity and the hidden reasons contributing to it. The descriptions are designed to allow Western educators to understand Chinese international students by highlighting the role of the social environment and education and the heterogeneous features of the overseas Chinese student group. To better illustrate the influence of Chinese political control, I develop a metaphor of the “fishbowl” in order to shed light on the relationship between perspective and reality. In Chapter 4, I then discuss how the fishbowl extends into the Western context and undermines the role of democratic

education in reconstructing students' political identities into a liberal identity. Chapter 4 also discusses the dilemma of international education, which limits the effects of democratic education as well, leading to the discussion of hegemony that makes up the core concern of the double-dissident identity. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a summary, implications, and limitations, with the emphasis on the pedagogy of discomfort and critical hope proposed by Boler (1999, 2003), appealing for the acknowledgment of uncertainty, complexity, and openness that are fundamental to promote equal dialogue and mutual understanding, which I deem as the starting point of reconstructing political identity.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK— WHY POLITICAL IDENTITY IS CRUCIAL

This chapter has two purposes: (a) building a connection between political identity and the mobility of Chinese international graduates by reviewing relevant theories and concepts and, (b) further clarifying the research scope for the following chapters by highlighting the role of social environment and education in constructing political identity. The chapter will be divided into three parts. I first tease out several prominent factors influencing international student mobility through the classical “push-pull” theory, as outlined in existing research, to illuminate the factors that have changed over time, and further discuss why those factors could or no longer work as a pull force of the country to attract Chinese international graduates. I pinpoint the lack of focus on the political identities of Chinese international students in previous research when considering mobility, arguing that political identity is the underlying cause, not the directly decisive reason, of the increasing trend of Chinese international students.

What follows is a review of the concept of political identity. The review will point out that political identity is socially constructed and entangled with cognition and emotion, while drawing attention to the strength of political identity to test its stability. By introducing “coherence theories,” the third part will discuss the condition of reconstructing political identity under the international education context. The chapter will conclude by connecting political identity with the rising trend of Chinese returnees and extracting four political identities of Chinese international graduates—party-statist, neoliberal, liberal, and double-dissident—to provide research directions for the following chapters.

Push-Pull Theory: What Is the Key to Win A Tug-of-War?

To explain the mobility of international students, previous research adopted the classical “push-pull” model focusing on a range of external forces, mainly in economic, political, socio-cultural, and educational dimensions, that shape students’ decisions (Li & Bray, 2007). This model was presented by Altbach (1998) to examine the motivation of international students who decide to go abroad. “Push” factors were first defined as unfavourable conditions in international students’ home countries, which created a “generalized interest” in international education without a specific destination, while “pull” factors were defined as positive conditions of a particular host country that attract students (Davis, 1995). Since then, Li and Bray (2007) have further developed reverse push-pull factors that respectively represent negative forces abroad and positive forces at home, and some scholars have applied this model to examine Chinese international students’ motivation to return home as well (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Miao & Wang, 2017; Ruan, 2020; Singh, 2020; Zhai et al., 2019). Miao and Wang (2017) suggested in their research based on 499 valid questionnaires from Chinese returnees that the reasons for returning might not be dissatisfaction with Western countries but rather attraction to China. In other words, Chinese returnees are more driven by the pull factors than push factors, which makes the contest between China and the host country just like a tug-of-war. Some prominent “pull” forces of China include family ties, native language environment, familiar culture, increased job opportunities, prosperous economy, and a desire to “play a part” in China’s modernization (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Gill, 2010; Miao & Wang, 2017; Ruan, 2020; Singh, 2020; Zhai et al., 2019). On the other hand, some prominent “pull” forces of Western countries include open social atmosphere, academic freedom, value system including humanistic ideals and rule of

law, international working experiences, and a better educational system (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Miao & Wang, 2017; Ruan, 2020). It is obvious that the familiarity of culture that breeds belonging and the rapid development of economy that has reduced the gap between China and Western countries are becoming two significant pull factors of China, while the culture entailing individualist values and a better system of education for academic careers or future offspring are pull factors of Western countries.

Interestingly, the comparison of previous research studying push-pull factors shows a significant shift in politics over time, however there is a dearth of research corresponding to culture and economy. Deng (1990) indicated that political alienation is the most vital push force from China, while Western liberty is one of the most appealing pull factors of host countries. Decades ago, studying abroad was “a way of escape from China and its political and intellectual oppression” (Gittings, 2006, as cited in Gill, 2010, p. 360). However, recent research mentioned that political factors are no longer a strong pull factor of Western countries. A mixed-method study that investigated 90 Chinese international students learning in elite universities in the United States shows that although many participants appreciate the free political environment in the host country, the importance of political freedom only ranks sixth among eight reasons for staying in the United States (Cheung & Xu, 2015). In contrast, many Chinese returnees value China’s “stable political environment” and perceive it as a pull factor of home-country (Miao & Wang, 2017). Is it because China’s political environment has changed radically? Apparently not. Especially abolishing presidential term limits in 2018 is historically significant and seen as a big step backward regarding China’s liberal environment, enabling the status of China’s current President Xi to the level of Mao Zedong (“China’s Xi Allowed to Remain,” 2018; Kuhn, 2018). Yet, simply comparing the political

environment in China and Western countries is inadequate to understand the decision-making process because as Cheung and Xu (2015) indicated, push-pull forces are not static and separate but rather dynamic and interactive. For example, economic improvement in China has made Western countries less attractive to Chinese international graduates (Cheung & Xu, 2015). A key question, however, is how Chinese international graduates weigh different pull factors dynamically; specifically, for example, why is living with economic prosperity more important than living with a democratic community to those returnees who are driven by economy?

The question is complicated because we cannot weigh the pull factors of China and Western countries in an equal way. In addition to cognition (i.e., how Chinese international students perceive and value those pull factors), we should also consider emotion (i.e., what kind of feelings would emerge under those pull factors). China, as “motherland,” enforces a natural emotional bond to its international graduates, which would add more “pull” force to China in the tug-of-war. In other words, Western countries must have a much stronger attraction than China to pull Chinese overseas students to stay. However, many Westerners might be surprised that liberal democracy, as a previously strong pull factor and the biggest difference between China and Western countries, is losing its power to attract the Chinese over time (Zhai, 2020). In addition to Chinese international graduates perceiving a stable political environment as a pull factor of China mentioned previously, the world’s largest annual research on democracy shows that 71% of Chinese participants perceive China as a democratic country, with the same proportion of people satisfied with the current amount of democracy in China (Latana & Alliance of Democracies, 2021). In contrast, the same report shows that only 50% of American people and 60% of Canadian people perceive their

countries as democratic, while 45% of American people believe there is not enough democracy in the United States (Latana & Alliance of Democracies, 2021). A thorough discussion about different definitions of democracy is necessary but beyond the scope of this project. Instead, I will give a brief example about how Chinese people understand democracy differently from the Western perception in Chapter 3, which leads to a philosophical dilemma that I will discuss in Chapter 4.

Here, what I want to highlight is that the Latana and Alliance of Democracies (2021) report presented a spectrum of political identity that runs counter to the common perception that perceives Western countries as democratic and China as authoritarian. In other words, if Chinese international graduates perceive China as having the right amount of democracy, the previous question about why preferring economic prosperity rather than a democratic community would be a nonsensical question, because China could be seen as having both prosperity and democracy. With a political identity that supports China's current political system, the structural tension between living in a democratic country and living in the motherland with familiar culture and loved ones vanishes, so that students would be more inclined to return to China. However, if a student upholds a political identity different from that, the decision of staying or returning might become ambiguous due to the tension between motherland and democracies. Hence, the political identities of Chinese international graduates and the relationship between political identity and mobility deserve serious attention. However, compared to numerous studies of Chinese international students related to cultural identity (Gill, 2010; Imamura & Zhang, 2014; Leask & Carroll, 2011; Maeder-Qian, 2018; Ruan, 2020), social identity such as gender (Martin, 2014, 2017; Quach et al., 2013) and social class (Guo, 2010), or hybrid identity (Dimmock & Leong, 2010), research

specifically focusing on political identity is still insufficient.

Therefore, in order to understand the increasing trend of Chinese returnees, this paper will pay attention to the patterns and changing political identities of Chinese international students. In the following sections, I first review the concept of political identity to clarify its definition and characteristics and then discuss the condition of changing political identity under the international education context.

Political Identity: Socially Constructed Cognition and Emotion

To understand the concept of political identity it is necessary to first ask: What is identity? Fearon (1999) indicated that the simplest answer is how one defines who she or he is; however, the definition would change according to different contexts. For example, I perceive myself as “a daughter,” “a student,” or “Chinese” in different circumstances. Hence, an identity could first be seen as a social category that is socially constructed and “defined by membership rules and allegedly characteristic attributes or expected behaviors” (Fearon, 1999, p. 36). Nowadays, as many scholars have indicated, these social categories that constitute identities are more inclined to something “acquired by oneself” rather than “ascribed by others” (Fearon, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Shankar et al., 2009).

In the pre-modern period that lasts until the early 20th century, from the prior essentialist perspective, “one’s identity was fixed, solid, and stable” (Kellner, 1992, as cited in Shankar et al., 2009, p. 76) since it was perceived as a matter of predestination determined at birth based on one’s family, religion, and social classes (Easthope, 2009; Huddy, 2001). During the modern period, identity was no longer understood as fate but still based on social classes, which were acquired but still relatively stable (Bauman, 2001, as cited in Easthope, 2009). The perspective of stable identity also corresponds to traditional Chinese

Confucianism that claims people's identities are inherent, as Confucius perceives "the living human being differentiated by hierarchy, age, and gender as an irreducible reality" (Tu, 1998, p. 130). Every individual is assigned a social role in any given interpersonal relationship—for instance, husband–wife, father–son, emperor–subject—and harmony is achieved when everyone acting according to one's identity (Li & Biao, 2021). In my view, this tradition is essential to understand the political identities of Chinese international students that I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

In contrast, researchers now propose that, over the last 20 years or so, we have entered the postmodern era where identity is "fluid," since people have the ability to refashion, reforge, and reproduce their identities (Bauman, 2000; Davis et al., 2000). Especially for people who are experiencing international mobility, as an immigrant described, identity is dynamic because "everyone is always on the move and undergoing enormous changes, so they lose track of who they've been and have to keep tabs on who they're becoming" (Sarup, 1996, p. 5). The wish of "becoming" a particular type of person implies an explicit subjective faith and an implicit influence of social environment, that is, identity is also "situated" (Davis et al., 2000). Therefore, associating an identity with a socially constructed category is not wrong but inadequate in explaining the rich connotation of identity (Fearon, 1999). Fearon (1999) stressed that identity should also be viewed as "a socially distinguishing feature that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential" (p. 36), which implies "desires for dignity, honor, and self-respect" (p. 37). Therefore, identity is also the source of self-esteem, which helps to understand why "self-enhancement seeks to favor the in-group over the out-group on certain dimensions" (Tharenou, 2010, p. 107). For example, an international student "may identify

with the prototypical attributes of their national group but not identify with the attributes of their host country, and thus hold negative or stereotypical views of the host nationality” (Tharenou, 2010, p. 107), which may contribute to the decision of return to China. Hence, according to Tharenou (2010), there is a strong relationship between identity and international mobility.

Therefore, political identity involves understanding one’s identity in terms of politics. It contains the cognitive aspect, that is, “knowing and caring about a set of political issues, having a set of organized beliefs about the political system” (Gentry, 2017, p. 19). Political identity involves emotions as well, such as the sense of belonging, pride, and respect towards a particular political group and/or hatred towards another political group (Huddy, 2001). Moreover, it also includes action of “engaging in political behaviors that support particular beliefs” (Gentry, 2017, p. 19). To understand political identity, there are two angles: “identity development as a process or identity as a status” (Gentry, 2017, p. 19). Recently, a few studies began to explore the political identities of Chinese international students from those two angles. Dong (2017) and Li (2020) described, respectively, how Chinese international students become nationalists and gain democratic identity in the transnational context. Although Dong and Li explored the development of political identities and highlighted the role of social environment and democratic education in the process, both of their works merely focused on one particular identity. In contrast, Gao (2021) identified three different political identities of Chinese international students: Chinese nationalists who share similar political attitude with Western conservatism, supporters of liberal democracy, and transnational neoliberals who are apolitical and driven by economic consideration, arguing that the political identities of Chinese international students are heterogenous, changeable,

significantly influenced by socioeconomic status, and hinged on both China and the host countries. A Dahrendorf essay from Lu (2017) portrayed another emerging political identity of Chinese international students: double-dissidents who hold an alternative view against liberal democracy but are not the proponents of political repression of China. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive research about how Chinese international students developed different political identities constructed or reconstructed by social environment and international education, which is the gap this paper tries to fill.

Considering the development of political identity, Gentry (2017) indicated the difficulty of developing political identity is that aspects of politics are theoretical, such as what constitutes a good society and the government's role within it. While political science usually focuses on the product of identity, it is essential to explore how people develop their political identity, and part of the exploration process is to examine the development of political knowledge, political frameworks, and a belief that politics is crucial in one's life (Gentry, 2017). This corresponds to Huddy's (2001) main idea that it is vital to figuring out how political identities are acquired and how they develop from weak to strong. Huddy challenged the experimental outcome that social identities are considerably fluid; in contrast, Huddy proclaimed that political identity is relatively stable and advocated paying greater attention to the strength and meaning of political identity. In other words, compared to distinguishing whether one belongs to a social category, it is more critical to examine how one internalizes its values to form a solid political identity. In a fluid modern context, Huddy (2001) still captured the "substantial stability" across a range of political identities and proclaimed it is generated from sharing "a well-established group prototype [i.e., people who typically exemplify group membership and give it meaning], have a clear-cut enemy, and are

associated with values that are linked to definitive historical moments or cultural practices” (p. 150). On the contrary, weak identities are observed when group membership is not salient, and group boundary is permeable (Huddy, 2001). Huddy specifically mentioned that news is an effective way to locate the characteristics of group prototype, which is the key to understand the strength and meaning of a political identity, while subjective impressions of ingroup and outgroup members should be considered simultaneously.

Therefore, this project will explore the development of Chinese international students’ political identities. Specifically, the exploration of political identity development in my paper refers to how people internalize a particular political belief and connect their lives with it. Synthesizing from the work of Gao (2021) and Lu (2017), I propose four categories of political identity among Chinese international students: party-statist identity that accepts the legitimacy of the CCP, neoliberal identity that avoids political participation, liberalist identity that supports liberal democracy, and double-dissident identity that questions both Chinese authoritarianism and Western democracy. Considering the transnational experiences of Chinese international students, I will explore both Chinese and overseas contexts. By paying attention to nationalism, consumerism, digital media, and international education in Chapters 3 and 4, I will illuminate the role of social environment and education in constructing and reconstructing political identities. As Olssen (2004) argued, "We are not inherently democratic. This is a role that needs to be learned" (as cited in Biseth, 2009, pp. 245-246). As such, democratic education is essential in developing democratic identity. I will introduce “coherence theories” in the next section to outline the conditions of reconstructing political identity in order to explore the possibility of developing a liberal identity of Chinese international students in the transnational context and analyze the role of democratic

education in the process.

Coherence Theories: How to Reconstruct Political Identity?

Davis et al. (2000) demonstrated a range of theories that consider learners as agents embedded in a multi-layered and dynamic system, termed “coherence theories.”

Accordingly, “education” is a *trans-phenomenon* that not merely happens within a classroom but that also is affected by many intersecting and nested learning systems, from individual to social group to biosphere (Davis et al., 2000). Some prominent coherence theories embrace constructivism by highlighting the importance of personal interpretations that underpin one’s experiences in the learning process; social constructivism perceives cognition as generated and impacted by social context; and cultural and critical theories of learning focus on social constraints supported by deeply entrenched patterns (Davis et al., 2000). According to Davis et al. (2000), these coherence theories share a common ground of understanding “change” as a phenomenon which happens when the effort of maintaining one interpretation exceeds the effort of revising it. Hence, in order to promote learning, teachers must provide a “critical mass” in two steps: first to “interrupt entrenched patterns” and second to “present viable alternatives to existing habits” (Davis et al., 2000, pp. 108–109). In other words, the more entrenched previous patterns are, or the weaker alternatives are, the more challenging to interrupt and replace existing modes, the less possible “change” would happen accordingly.

This framework provides an approach for me to explore the development of the political identities of Chinese international students in the following chapters. Given that most Chinese international students have lived in China for more than 18 years, I will first analyze the meaning and strength of Chinese international students’ political identities before they study abroad. Then I will discuss whether the conditions provided by transnational

experiences interrupt or reinforce their existing political identities. Lastly, I will explore whether there is a possibility for Chinese international students to develop a new political identity as an alternative. By doing so, it would be easy to draw a conclusion about whether Western democratic education can provide an effective “critical mass” to reconstruct political identities. However, as mentioned previously, political identity is also the source of self-esteem, which brings a critical question: Should teachers challenge students’ political identities even if it would cause discomfort or even damage students’ self-esteem? Or, how could teachers challenge students’ political identities without destroying their self-esteem? A possible answer is from Boler (1999, 2003), who promoted a “pedagogy of discomfort” and advocated a “critical hope” approach with compassion when teaching students to see differently. In the last chapter of my paper, I want to discuss this pedagogy in order to address the paradox in democratic education that teachers might face when trying to reconstruct the political identities of Chinese international students.

CHAPTER THREE: LIVING IN A FISHBOWL—POLITICAL IDENTITIES CONSTRUCTED IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

This chapter aims to convey a picture of the unfree political environment in China and its influence on constructing political identities, highlighting the heterogeneous features of Chinese international students. I will explore how Chinese international students acquire different political identities before studying abroad, examine the meaning and strength of these political identities by portraying the prototypical values and attributes, and probe their motivation, expectation, or imagination of international education based on different political identities. I will begin by describing how my individual experiences reflect larger trends of political identities in the Chinese context.

Reflecting on my own personal history, the attitudes of my close friends and relatives when they received the news that I was going to study abroad, is interesting. Although most of them admired my courage to leave a decent job and pursue my dream, few perceived it as a wise decision. The reasons, which also bothered me before I finally made my decision, were prevalent in China: the degree has no connection with my previous career, so it is valueless; I might get a better chance to earn money in China's prosperous economic market; most overseas cities are boring compared to Beijing and Shanghai where I lived in China; my physical safety is at risk due to the increasing racism in Western countries; China is rising and has the ability to contend for the highest position in the international hierarchy. All these concerns imply mainstream views that life in China is at least as comfortable if not better than in Western countries.

For people who value freedom, this perception is puzzling, considering that the government in recent years has tightened social control and surveillance, leading to a less

liberal political environment in China (“A Giant Cage,” 2013; Bradsher, 2017; Jiang, 2020; Mo, 2013; Osnos, 2021; Wu, 2013). Chinese people living under strict social control that blocks, filters, and reinterprets messages from the rest of the world was usually likened to “living inside the wall.” *The Economist* used the metaphor of a “cage” to describe life under the government’s surveillance in China (“A Giant Cage,” 2013). However, I would argue that neither wall nor cage is accurate, since they are merely from the outsider’s view that focuses on the tension and conflicts between government and people but overlook insiders who have accepted official rhetoric and developed political identities compatible with it. When a wall cuts off people’s view, or when a cage limits people’s action, people would try to break it, topple it, and overturn it. Furthermore, the metaphor of wall or cage implies an inherent desire for freedom that once people get the chance to “escape” they will never return—which is clearly inadequate to explain the increasing Chinese returnees. For me, as I deem freedom—especially mental freedom—the headstone of well-being in general, this situation makes China less attractive and pushed me away to pursue international education, as an approach to facilitate thinking and seek other possibilities of life. However, students with different political identities from mine could gain a sense of security and belonging from Chinese circumstances, which might lead them to have a quite different motivation, expectation, or imagination of overseas study.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will propose a metaphor of a “fishbowl” (instead of wall or cage) to illustrate the complicated situation in China and focus on its influence on constructing political identities. Sparked by the categories proposed by Gao (2021), this chapter distinguishes three different political identities of Chinese international students developed in Chinese context: party-statist identity that supports the CCP’s legitimacy and leadership,

neoliberal identity that is indifferent to politics, and liberal identity that supports and pursues liberal democracy. This chapter will pay great attention to nationalism that contributes to party-statist identity and consumerism that contributes to neoliberal identity, exploring the meaning and strength of different political identities. Given that media is an effective source to explore the meaning of a political identity (Huddy, 2001), and China has a strict censorship of news media and online discourse, I will also consider the influence of digital media in the Chinese context. I would argue that in the fishbowl shaped by public education and digital censorship, there is a great chance for Chinese international students to develop a strong party-statist identity or neoliberal identity, while less likely to develop a strong liberal identity.

Party-Statist Identity Strengthened by a State-Led Nationalism

“What’s the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when the anthrax bombs are popping all around you?” (Huxley, 1932/2000, p. 276).

Academics and Western media have noticed a rising nationalism among Chinese overseas students in the last 15 years (Dong, 2017; Jiang, 2021; Liu, 2008; Osnos, 2008; Zhao, 2019; Zimmerman, 2019). In 2008, overseas Chinese students protested in Europe and America against Western countries that supported pro-Tibetan independence groups attempting to disrupt the Beijing Olympic torch relay of that year, which led to an anti-West backlash that shocked the West. This movement “marked the coming of a new era, in which the image of overseas Chinese students becomes associated with strong nationalist sentiments and distinct agency in making their voices heard” (Dong, 2017, p. 561).

From then on, a series of incidents reinforced the idea again and again. In 2017, a graduate of the University of Maryland delivered a commencement speech admiring the freedom of democracy in the U.S. by comparing it to the authoritarian context in China,

which invoked a strong aversion within Chinese overseas students and been disputed as “deceptions and lies” by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association of University of Maryland (Fish, 2018; Gracie, 2017). After Trump had been elected president of the United States in 2017, the nationalist attitude of Chinese international students became stronger, which reached a peak when it came to the controversial topic of the 2019 Hong Kong Protest. Zimmerman (2019), as one of the foremost education historians today, mentioned that his “in-box fills up with angry messages from Chinese students in the United States” (para. 1) after he had written several columns supporting protesters in Hong Kong. They mount a strong defense of the decisions made by Chinese government and hold a steadfast position of sovereignty (Zimmerman, 2019). Considering these Chinese international students were studying in the liberal West, Zimmerman concluded “we are not doing a very good job teaching them” (para. 2). Ironically, the same phenomenon might make the Chinese government declare proudly that “we did a very good job teaching them.” Those incidents implied that, after the well-known (to the people of the world except Chinese post-Tiananmen generation) 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement, the Chinese ruler has finally cultivated a new generation with a pro-government national identity through unremitting efforts such as patriotic education and severe speech censorship. Many scholars have noticed this rising trend of nationalism in China, especially after 2013 when President Xi Jinping assumed power, and paid attention to Chinese national identity shaped by it (J. Kim, 2020; Krishnan, 2013; Richardson, 2013; Wang & Qin, 2020; Zhao, 2020). But before diving deeply into Chinese nationalism and its political meaning, I want to clarify two matters in the next section in order to shed light on the meaning of the party-statist identity.

Nationalism and Party-Statist Identity in the Chinese Context

First, I agree with Cabestan (2005) that there are several forms of nationalism co-existing in China, and not all of them confirm the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In other words, a Chinese nationalist does not necessarily have a political identity that supports the CCP. However, people with a pro-government political identity indeed tend to show more nationalism or at least intense patriotism, as the CCP tries to claim the Party equals the country and ties national identity to supporting the legitimacy of the Party. Hence, although national identity is not the same as political identity, they are closely related since specific political values could be embedded in a national identity (Citrin et al., 1990). Citrin et al. (1990) found that American identity depends on accepting key democratic values such as equality and individualism. Given that China is a one-party system or party-state, Chinese national identity is essentially shaped by the CCP and inevitably related to the CCP's ideology. Hence, Chinese national identity could somehow represent a political identity constructed by the CCP that emphasizes territory sovereignty and party leadership. Rae and Wang (2016) explored and compared the civil, racial, and cultural origins in Chinese national identity, indicating the entangled connotation from these three aspects and the political efforts from the Chinese government in shaping the ethnic identity of *Hua* (华) that includes 56 ethnicities. The unified *Hua* (华) ethnic identity is strongly built on territorial integrity and covers up struggling towards identity ambiguity from ethnic minorities, such as Uyghur and Tibetan, since “Han [汉] are inheritors of the culture while minorities do not share the same cultural lineage” (Rae & Wang, 2016, p. 490). Rae and Wang's investigation involving 1,003 participants including students, faculty, and staff from 18 universities suggests that most Chinese people perceive their Chinese identity through political or civic

perspective rather than ethnic, as “some understood China more exclusively in terms of government and citizenship, occasionally linked to the Communist Party or socialist principles” (Rae & Wang, 2016, p. 479). *The Economist* observed that, nowadays, “increasingly youths do not question the regime’s claim that loving country and party are one and the same” (“Young Chinese,” 2021, para. 7). Hence, uncovering the characteristics and core values of official nationalism and national identity would contribute to understanding the strength and meaning of this political identity.

Second, although Western academics widely agree that the Chinese government is authoritarian, I tend not to use the term “authoritarian identity” because it cannot fully explain the political identification and perception of students with this political identity. On the one hand, “authoritarian identity” is incompatible with the CCP’s propaganda that China is a socialist country promoting democracy that is different from liberal democracy in the Western version. On the other hand, Krastev (2011) highlighted that “paradoxically, in order to understand the survival capacity of contemporary authoritarianism, we should be very careful in using the dichotomy of authoritarianism versus democracy” (pp. 11–12). Hence, the word “authoritarian” might twist or ignore some essential details in this political identity. Another perspective tends to describe this group as conservative (Gao, 2021; Osnos, 2008). Indeed, this description partly represents a relatively conservative group of Chinese nationalists who hold a similar hostility as Western conservatives do regarding some progressive values in general, such as feminism and immigration (Gao, 2021; C. Zhang, 2020). However, it does not reveal the core political attitude that expresses a “realistic authoritarian belief” (C. Zhang, 2020, p. 108), which should be distinguished from the Western conservatives. Furthermore, the term “conservative” also overlooks another group of

youths who are both patriotic and socially progressive but “do not intend to challenge the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party” (“Young Chinese,” 2021, para. 11). Students with a party-statist identity could also be socially progressive, sometimes even critical about the government, but with a deep belief that the CCP’s leadership is the only way for China’s development and should be upheld under the pragmatic framework.

Hence, I adopt the term “party-statist” instead of “authoritarian” or “conservative” to represent this political identity. The term is evolved from “statist” employed by Veg (2019) to demonstrate an emerging school of Chinese intellectuals who provide new thoughts to the post-Tiananmen evolution in Party ideology that is against liberalism. Veg (2019) indicated that a core theory of this ideology is “rule by law” (p. 34) which justifies “the supremacy of politics over law” (p. 36). Specifically, it highlights “the imperative to repoliticize governance under the aegis of the Party” (Veg, 2019, 45). Hence, “party-statist identity” in this paper implies loyal partisanship, which accepts the legitimacy of the CCP and internalizes national identity promoted by official rhetoric, whether they are conservative or progressive. This ideology has been thoroughly carried out in propaganda and education, especially the *patriotic education campaign* introduced by the CCP after 1989, through the following approaches and content, constructing the party-statist identity of some Chinese international students before they study abroad.

The Meaning and Strength of Party-Statist Identity

Historical Memory in Education: Never Forget National Century Humiliation

The underpinning of the party-statist identity is a historical perspective that construes China as the victim of the West and Japan, instilled through education. A survey from Fairbrother (2003b) found that “72 percent of Mainland students agreed that their secondary

schooling had an impact on their attitudes toward the nation” (p. 73). The focus of textbooks in Historical Education transferred from teaching the importance of class struggle to highlighting the Century of National Humiliation by portraying a sharp contrast of China: the millennium of long, glorious, great ancient civilization and the century of humiliating, oppressive, turbulent modern history (Wang, 2012). Wang (2012) stressed that the narrative of Chinese century humiliation played a significant role in constructing national identity. This narrative defines a set of crucial questions including “who are Chinese” and “who are our friends and enemies” to influence people’s thoughts and actions. Hence, after the CCP successfully achieved unification, a theme of contemporary Chinese national identity is maintaining its national stability to prevent any more colonizing ambitions, especially cultural colonization or so-called neo colonization from the West.

Compared to introducing democracy, how to save and defend China’s great culture is portrayed as being more crucial. The government’s speech control strengthens this ideology. Multiple media organizations exposed the news from anonymous university professors, uncovering seven educational taboos—including civil rights and press freedom—from the order of the party’s Central Committee, which reflects the idea that liberal values are threats from Western enemies (Buckley, 2013; Li, 2013). Research from Hao and Cherng (2020) aimed at textbooks of Chinese public Moral Education proved that official rhetoric tries to depict “the Other” as enemies. The consistent message of outgroup enemy would reinforce ingroup loyalty while conveying a China–West dichotomy that may influence students’ position when facing conflicts between these two dimensions. But more than that, a new role of “the Other” is also observed in the textbooks: as endorsing and admiring Chinese progress (Hao & Cherng, 2020). However, according to the study from Hao and Cherng (2020), these

foreign endorsers are all White people, which implies China still needs recognition from the West to gain legitimacy while continuously depicting and reinforcing the West and East binaries. Overall, public education instills some essential messages that constitute historical memory of Chinese people: (a) China is made up of great ancient, humiliating past, developing current, and promising future; (b) the West, as “the Other” and outgroup, is enemy, rival, and authority simultaneously; and (c) the stability and unification of the country achieved by the CCP makes China prosperous and strong.

Supporting the CCP’s leadership, emphasized through public education and official propaganda, is another core value of party-statist identity. Here, accepting the leadership of the CCP does not mean that students with a party-statist identity would have views that fully align with those of the CPP or never criticize the Chinese government. In contrast, many interviews from previous studies have shown that Chinese international students can be quite critical of their government while they have accepted its legitimacy as part of national identity (Dong, 2017; Fish, 2018; Gao, 2021; X. Zhang, 2020). In other words, they may hold different opinions in terms of Chinese policies by themselves but would defend the CCP when facing critiques from the outgroup. A typical attitude of party-statists is just like Fish (2018) mentioned in his article, from one of his interviewees: “I still believe that the Communist Party, even with all the bad things it’s done in the past, can give China a more prosperous future” (para. 17). Given that communist ideology—as the core source of the CCP’s legitimacy—has lost its power, some scholars argued that traditional culture, following economics and nationalism, is becoming a significant zone of legitimacy for the CCP (Brown, 2015; Kubat, 2018). Chinese traditional culture, mainly Confucianism, as “one relatively non-contentious source...outside the Party” (Brown, 2015, para. 9), provides the

crucial moral validation to justify the CCP representing Chinese people even though the Party is almost like “a morally autonomous zone” (Brown, 2015, para. 6). Therefore, even though party-statists might criticize the government, the political identity is holistic when facing “the Other,” which just as one Chinese international student said, “we don’t really differentiate the country, the culture, the people, the government. If you criticize one, you criticize all four” (Kwai, 2019, para. 23). This historical memory constitutes party-statists’ cognitive and emotional foundation, based on which they imagine a future where they find their positions and conceive international education.

Future Blueprint in Imagination: Chinese Dream and China Exception

To understand the meaning of party-statist identity, the imagination of future is another essential aspect. Students with a party-statist identity internalize not only a history of humiliation but also a future rise rooted in the unique culture and historical fate. The uniqueness comes from the belief that, as Fang (2020) mentioned in his book, “China is the only country in human history that continues the ancient civilization and experiences rise and fall and then great rejuvenation” (p. 192). Although some Western scholars questioned the idea of “the longest continuous civilization,” it is unchallengeable in Chinese standardized History Education and used by the government to fuel nationalism (Ross, 2014), further consolidating the China–West binary based on the superiority of Chinese civilization. China’s development in these decades has become the most significant evidence to prove the superiority of the Chinese culture and system, which provides an emotional bond mixed with self-esteem, pride, and duty for party-statists to strengthen their connection with the Party and country. As a result, they show a great desire for recognition and position: As a great civilization, China should have its own path rather than following the current world order

where the West is hegemonic.

China's successful control of the COVID-19 pandemic provides more ammunition to this open rebellion. Western democracy and a set of discourse generated from liberalism, such as human rights, are seen as a declining slogan, blindly arrogant, or the excuse of neo-colonization, becoming the target of this battle. This desire corresponds to the CCP's effort that redefines the meaning of democracy by distinguishing Chinese democracy and Western democracy. Lu and Shi (2015) proclaimed that the CCP's authoritarian nature had been covered by a guardianship discourse on democracy. Their research suggested that "the CCP's use of its education and media systems for propaganda and indoctrination, as well as China's lingering Confucian and Leninist traditions, contribute to the prevalence of this non-liberal democratic conception in contemporary China" (p. 23). Since Confucianism has become an essential source of the CCP's legitimacy, as mentioned previously, the CCP adopting this Chinese democratic version derived from Confucius's guardianship model of governance by morality is perceived as acceptable and compatible with the Chinese context. A large number of Chinese citizens believe that the practice of paternalistic meritocracy is a sign of "genuine democracy" (Lu & Shi, 2015). Hence, how the students understand democracy significantly affects their evaluations of the CCP regime (Lu & Shi, 2015), especially when Chinese democracy is associated with national pride. In a case study in New Zealand, X. Zhang (2020) displayed a speech from Zhang Weiwei, a professor from Fudan University (a top university in China), which resonated with Chinese international students: "China explores the substance of democracy, rather than Western democracy. And China is a civilized state; the Communist Party of China is a continuation of China's long tradition of a unified Confucian ruling entity" (p. 80). This mainstream rhetoric that echoes historical memory and

emotion shapes the party-statist identity that supports the Chinese current political system and seeks to contribute to China's revival.

Strength: High-Standard Membership and Well-Established Prototype

Although the strength of party-statist identity varies in terms of different individuals, understanding the connotations of group membership will help evaluate the strength in general. Since party-statist highly relates to national identity, it is affected by the qualification of Chinese citizenship. A prevalent saying on the internet emphasizes that China is one of the most difficult countries in the world to obtain citizenship (WanShiTongShuo, n.d.), which implies a relatively high standard of group membership and relatively fixed group boundary that both contribute to enhancing identity. Indeed, if Chinese identity may only strengthen the party-statist identity that one has already identified with, empirical research has proved that the membership of the CCP that one can choose to acquire would significantly help develop and enhance the ingroup identity that contributes to subjective well-being and the belief that the party members are superior (Lu et al., 2020; see also Pang & Thomas, 2017). In Zhang's (2020) case study, a Chinese international student, who is also a member of the CCP, articulated:

The reason why I joined the CCP is because joining the Communist Party of China is a very glorious thing and I can be part of the advance in China. Part of the CCP feeling is that we rise or fall as one nation, as one people. (p. 104)

These words also manifest that being part of the CCP would significantly enhance the holistic feeling I mentioned previously in the party-statist identity. Lu et al. (2020) further predicted that since admission into the CCP has become increasingly difficult after President Xi employed a stricter Party code, a greater "identity premium" that brings subjective well-

being and the sense of superiority would arise in the future. In my opinion, in addition to the influence towards ingroup, a hard-to-obtain Party membership also signals to the outgroup that members of the Party are elites, which associate party-statist identity with somehow higher social status, conveying attractive prototypical attributes.

A well-established group prototype also contributes to the strength and stability of the identity. The hero portrayed in *Wolf Warrior* could be seen as a successful group prototype that sparks strong ingroup identification. Shi and Liu (2020) analyzed the evolution of the Chinese national group prototype shaped by a series of mainstream movies. They conclude that the character of *Wolf Warrior II* “was articulated in the collective sense of national pride as a means of legitimizing the new nationalism of the Chinese Dream, which is aimed at establishing China's superior position in the world” (p. 343). Hu and Guan (2021) observed another prototypical attribute shaped by the *Wolf Warrior II*, which entails the mindset that “traditionally prioritizes collective interests over individual ones” (p. 9) from Confucianism to Communism. This prototypical attribute can also be found in another Chinese blockbuster film, *The Wandering Earth*. In the research of Gao (2021), a Chinese international student M, who coincides with party-statist identity, mentioned this film, demonstrating that individual sacrifice is necessary. From M’s perspective, the dissidents are troublemakers that need to be constrained, just like the mass should be censored in the view of another party-statist in the same research (Gao, 2021).

In a nutshell, the party-statist identity is closely tied to Chinese national identity constructed by the CCP’s official discourse. It highly fits Huddy’s (2001) description of a stable and strong political identity that (a) has “a well-established group prototype”; (b) has “a clear-cut enemy”; and (c) is “associated with values that are linked to definitive historical

moments or cultural practices” (p. 150). The high-standard group membership and heroic group prototype shape and enhance national identity, arouse national pride, call for national duty, legitimize authoritarian governance, and drive some students to think and act according to a party-statist identity. Therefore, the perception of international education would also be significantly affected by their political identities.

How Do Party-Statists Perceive International Education?

Although no empirical research has drawn a general conclusion about which Chinese international students might have a party-statist identity, some studies indicated a potential correlation between this political identity and family background. In the qualitative research of Gao (2021), a group of Chinese international students who are nationalists from well-off families correspond to the party-statists in this paper. An ethnography from Jiang (2021) depicted a group of Chinese international students who are immersed in pro-government ideology and Chinese nationalism. These students that fit my description of identifying with party-statist identity are again, unsurprisingly, from “either upper middle class or upper class,” although Jiang declared that she “did not intentionally limit recruitment to elite Chinese” (p. 40). The potential reason is that students from a well-off background are more likely to attribute their family’s wealth to the authoritarian governance that places efficiency above equality (Jiang, 2021), while less likely to locate themselves as part of the masses under authoritarian rule (Gao, 2021). In other words, the authoritarian regime makes it possible for them to possess wealth from efficiency and freedom from power simultaneously. Hence, they hold a solid party-statist identity with a highly skeptical position towards liberal pro-democracy discourse. Before these party-statists consider concrete country and major of the upcoming international education, they share a definite direction: studying transnationally

with a home destination (Jiang, 2021). To them, international education, as a means to seek job opportunities, financial returns, personal interests, and/or novel experiences, is merely a test paper waiting to be filled in with standard answers.

Neoliberal Identity Strengthened by a Global Consumerism

“Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can’t”
(Huxley, 1932/2000, p. 276).

In contrast to nationalists who adhere to partisanship, there is another image of Chinese international students immersed in a tremendous purchasing carnival. Compared to a cluster of studies on the nationalism of Chinese international students, this image is mainly captured by news reports and anecdotes. An article from *Forbes* dubbed them *cash heifers*, a sharp word borrowed from *cash cow*, implying these Chinese international students are the “second-generation rich” and still depend on their families (Shao, 2014). The article depicted a Chinese international student who spent US\$10,000 per year on average with rent excluded. Even so, she does not perceive herself as from a “wealthy” but a “middle-class” family by comparing to her friends “who burned \$6,000 one night on clubbing” (Shao, 2014, para. 3). Calculated by a London-based intelligence firm specializing in Chinese retail, the annual disposable income—spending on goods only—of Chinese students in the U.K. has reached £28,236 (around CA\$48,058, converted at the exchange rate of CA\$1=£0.59; Twigg, 2019). The incredible consuming power of Chinese international students has even fueled an industry particularly aimed at marketing commodities and services to them (Twigg, 2019). However, Xie et al. (2021) researched historical changes in the images of Chinese international students, indicating that Chinese overseas students were perceived as financially struggling before the image transformed drastically.

Merely after three decades since the period of Chinese economic reforming, the new generation of Chinese international students have been perceived as *nouveau riche* (Liu, 2015). Despite the stereotype, it is still clear that the dramatic shift of living conditions and consuming habits leads to changes in social identity significantly. Liu (2015) compared Chinese international students who boarded in America in the 2010s to those in the early 1980s, concluding that the new generation immersed in consumerism is more pragmatic, market-oriented, and less idealistic. Meanwhile, political apathy emerged hand in hand with commercial ardor among Chinese university students in the post-1989 era has been noticed (Xu, 2007). All these phenomena correspond to what Teo (2018) suggested the new human subjectivities that show increasing interest in self while decreasing interest in community building, which is the implication of neoliberalism. Hence, to understand the neoliberal identity of Chinese international students, it is vital to understand Chinese consumerism and its political influence.

Consumerism and Neoliberal Identity in the Chinese Context

After experiencing the 10-year devastation of the Cultural Revolution, China attempted to recover and develop its economy by employing economic reform and joining the global market. It was 1978. Within merely 40 years, the Chinese economy has grown incredibly. Chinese per capita GDP doubled within the first 9 years after the economic reform and kept doubling in the following 8, 9, and 7 years, respectively (Fang, 2020). Considering that the time needed for doubling per capita income for Britain was 58 years from 1780–1838, for the U.S. was 47 years from 1839–1886, for Japan was 34 years from 1885–1919, and for South Korea was 11 years from 1995–2004, the speed of Chinese economic growth is incredible (Fang, 2020). A rapid change in a short time has brought not

only the improvement of living standards but also a new understanding of identity to Chinese people.

The famous sociologist Paul Willis (2020) indicated in his book *Being Modern in China* that, differing from Britain that “stumbled into the future facing backwards” (p. 45) and where students were always critical about industrialization and urbanization of modernity, China strode towards the future with its head up and back straight. It worships the city as “an economic and cultural ideal” and perceives “the rural past is something to be escaped from—only dirt and mud, not a prism through which to view the future” (Willis, 2020, p. 48). From my understanding, the huge economic gap between urban and rural areas makes cities a carrier for consumption, which, in turn, makes consuming a sign for the city, a higher social status, and a new social identity that represents a progressive and promising future. As Willis (2020) observed, people in China consume not only the “materialist desire” but also the “glorification as something worthwhile in itself” (p. 59), and even the consumers themselves—consumption becomes self-marketing. I highlight the attitude towards the city and country and the passion for consumption here because it further influences how Chinese international students conceive of a good life and their experiences living in a foreign country. Knowing the connotation of “city life” would help understand why living in small Western cities has little attraction to many Chinese international students.

Willis (2020) stressed that driven by the huge enthusiasm of consuming dominated by a “marketing mentality,” China has leapfrogged modernism and arrived “all of a sudden” into post-modernity and its society of symbols, which even outpaced the West. Therefore, consuming in China is distinguished from buying or spending, becoming consumerism—“an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode

of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system” (Baudrillard, 1996/2005, pp. 260–261). The best example is Chinese luxury consumption. In 2017, Chinese consumers spent €105 billion (around CA\$151 billion, converted at the rate of CA\$1=€0.7) on the luxury market, far more than consumers in the U.S. (around CA\$103 billion) and Japan (around CA\$47 billion; Boston Consulting Group, 2018), while per capita income of China was merely 14.8% of the United States and 23.1% of Japan (The World Bank, n.d.). When consumers purchase a product, they are pursuing a “relationship” with the “sign” (Baudrillard, 1996/2005), which is driven by their identities rather than real demands (Norris, 2011). From my understanding, since “self” is indispensable in a relationship, the pursuit of a relationship is actually a form of self-concern. A new political identity, neoliberal identity, has emerged from this social background as a result. It was embryonic in capitalism from the beginning, attempting to challenge social control by opposing the government’s interventions. However, Teo (2018) argued that neoliberalism would impact humans subjectively, as it has dominated all “forms of life” (i.e., theoretic, economic, aesthetic, social, political, and religious; Spranger, 1921/1928), placing all relationships under the system that is driven by the market rationality (Arfken, 2018; Teo, 2018). Therefore, neoliberal identity is not merely a political identity but a whole new worldview that transforms human to human capital and places “myself” in a superior position. Considering the uniqueness of the Chinese context—it lacks a democratic context—the neoliberal identity in China has been proliferating with Chinese characteristics. I will elaborate on this in the following section in order to understand the worldview of students with neoliberal identity before they study abroad.

The Meaning and Strength of Neoliberal Identity

Sophisticated Egoists Fueled by Public Education

Liqun Qian, one of the most respected scholars in contemporary China, once wrote a heated article in 2015 criticizing a significant number of Chinese university students that he called “绝对的、精致的利己主义者” [the absolutely sophisticated egoists] (para. 8). Qian (2015) explained that the word *absolutely* means that the value of self-interest has become the one and only motivation of life, making helping others become an investment, while *sophisticated* implies that these students are utilitarian, with high intelligence to calculate losses and gains, and good at using strategies to achieve their personal goals. I found that the characteristics of this group of students highly correspond to the neoliberal identity that dominated by instrumental thinking, cost-benefit analysis, and utilitarianism, which transforms “self” into an entrepreneurial entity that integrates “Me” with the “Business Me” focusing on self-promotion (Norris, 2010), while eliminating the distinction between “self” and “ego” (Teo, 2018). Norris (2010) stressed that under the discourse of “Me, Inc.,” the purpose of education becomes pursuing Return on Investment instead of public good that is “both noninstrumental and more than economic” (p. 119). Hence, students with neoliberal identity become egoists who only care about individual profits with almost no noble belief, no social responsibility, and no concern for social justice. Qian (2015) attributed this phenomenon to the Chinese problematic education system, which has overlooked the cultivation of social responsibility, making students become “精神的资本家” [spirit capitalists] (para. 9) who please others merely for the sake of themselves but fail to develop open-minded, flexible, adaptable, and critical thinking ability and life-long learning willingness. From my perspective, the root cause is capitalism rather than the problematic

education system since neoliberal identity is not unique to China. However, public education in China indeed contributes to its development.

On the one hand, the focus on high scores covers up other vital social justice issues. A “good” student sometimes means having privileges. For example, reading extracurricular books is usually acceptable only when the student does well in examinations. Otherwise, it is perceived as a wasting of time or distraction. When freedom becomes a reward of obedience, a privilege of excellence, and a symbol of success, students would compete for it rather than understanding it as a natural quality or a shared right.

On the other hand, students are less aware and less critical of the profound influence of capitalism in China. Chinese education denies that China is capitalist while celebrating modernity and emphasizing socialism. People may argue that with Marxism—one of the most important theories that oppose capitalism—as the main course in Chinese education, students should be wary of capitalism or neoliberalism dominated by market rationality. However, Norris (2011) argued that Marx emphasized we are primarily economic creatures with an insatiability in human nature and perceived nature as “raw material,” which is consistent with consumerism. I still remember an idea of Marxism learned at school, that substance determines consciousness. Instead of learning it as a philosophical argument, the standardized education in China makes it a truth of the world. According to it, China’s “main constraint” is defined as the conflict between backward social productivity and people’s material and spiritual demands, which allows many Chinese people to borrow it to justify the pursuit of material. Hence, the standardized education in China provides the soil for neoliberal identity to grow, reinforcing the underpinning of neoliberal identity that portrays human beings as economic entities in a competitive market where “myself” is both the

entrepreneur that sells the commodity and the commodity that needs to be sold (Teo, 2018; Sugarman, 2015). As “self” or “ego” is fundamental to neoliberal identity, it brings a thoroughly new view of the relationship between individual and society, changing the understanding of politics, which is even more prominent in the Chinese context.

Political Indifference Exacerbated by Political Oppression

Teo (2018) stressed that the focus of “myself” pushes people with neoliberal identity to seek solutions to social issues only by themselves. By doing so, they cannot observe structures or systems but can merely feel the lack of privilege. Money then becomes the resource for gaining privilege. An example in China that mirrors this connotation is how neoliberalism deals with educational inequity. The solutions may include moving to big cities, paying an astronomical price to buy a house near the best educational resources, and seeking international education. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to earn more money, which “in turn provides legitimacy for a neoliberal competitive economy” (Teo, 2018, p. 593). Compared to individual efforts, politics plays an indifferent role towards well-being or only matters when it relates to the economy. Hence, politics becomes a matter of economy and efficiency instead of equality or diversity.

From my perspective, this attitude is somehow sparked by the Chinese government. Chinese university students were the most important force that supported socio-political idealism, which fermented the famous 1989 Tiananmen Movement, advocating for democracy in China. However, the Chinese government suppressed this movement by violence. After that, it imposed heavy political control, squeezing the space for political liberty completely. Meanwhile, the huge economic development made it possible for students to gain personal freedom and happiness through consumption. Thence, politics became a

sensitive, dangerous, and meaningless topic while pursuing economic profits following the current political rules is advisable, rewarded, and practical. By doing so, the Chinese government shifted the direction of students' interest from political liberty to personal liberty (Xu, 2007). Sugarman (2015) referred to Foucault's argument that "neoliberal governmentality harnesses individual choice and freedom as a form of power. It operates, not through coercion, but rather, inconspicuously through social practices" (p. 105). An interview of 38 university students in China from Liu (2012) proves the effect; most of the participants claimed that they are "not very concerned about politics," with someone giving the reason that "as long as I live well, I do not care who the president is" (p. 203). The attitude constitutes the political position of neoliberal identity; that is, seeking self-interests and happiness by adapting or taking advantage of the existing political environment, no matter what kind of politics it is.

Strength: Identity Internalized by Individual Choice

Obviously, emotion is a powerful force to bond group members together, reinforcing the strength of social identity. According to Teo (2018), feelings of neoliberals are blooming, as "the increasing complexity and differentiation of knowledge makes it difficult to establish competence, expertise, or trust in thinking" (p. 590). However, feelings in the neoliberal context are only the way to guide "myself" rather than some generalizable solutions, which means collective emotions—once worked as a source of collective engagement—are no longer considered (Teo, 2018). Hence, differing from the party-statists that show a high degree of ingroup loyalty, for neoliberals, "the community has no primacy" (Teo, 2018, p. 587). Hence, it is hard to understand the strength of neoliberal identity by considering it as a social or political identity, as it deconstructs community. In this case, there is no meaning to

explore the group prototype or boundary, whereas the focus should be on the degree of internalization. Huddy (2001) emphasized the importance of individual choice in internalizing an identity. In the case of neoliberal identity, personal choice also plays an essential role in internalization. However, Sugarman (2015) indicated that “it is hard to find someone who admits to being a neoliberal [because] neoliberalism has managed to make itself invisible by becoming common sense” (p. 103). Thus, distinguished from “choosing to admit neoliberal identity,” choosing to worship “choice” becomes the internalizing process itself, formulating the inherent value of neoliberal identity (Sugarman, 2015).

Because neoliberal identity depends on the “entrepreneurial self” that has already colonized all life forms, it is stable and consistent. The individual choice, in turn, can be seen as freedom, providing a sense of control and security for neoliberals. Hence, I would claim that neoliberal identity might be stronger than any other social identities since it is not necessarily based on a group but can merely rely on oneself by pretending to be the new common sense. Given that Chinese cultural tradition is collectivist, the idea of common sense based on an independent self seems irrational in the Chinese context. However, it could also be the conflict between neoliberal identity and collective tradition that reinforces the strength of neoliberal identity. Differing from the West with a long-evolving process from classical liberalism to neoliberalism, China leaps into the period dominated by neoliberalism from a collective and poor past. With exponential growth in wealth, people embraced neoliberalism before they had time to understand and reflect on it. On the one hand, acquiring neoliberal identity based on personal choice could be glorified as a progressive value corresponding to the worship of urbanization and modernization, distinguishing neoliberals from those who

are conservative, unsuccessful, and outdated. On the other hand, money becomes the access to happiness since, in the neoliberal context, “happiness is one-dimensionally quantifiable, autonomous, individualized, and often connected with monetary value” (Sugarman, 2018, p. 591). Hence, consuming personal, material, and symbolic happiness becomes the ultimate goal of neoliberal life.

Overall, the neoliberal identity came to China along with the global market but was manipulated by the Chinese government. It is aligned with the characteristics of a global neoliberal identity—an “entrepreneurial self” constitutes all the imaginations of “myself” and dominates all life forms, making arts, education, politics, and even religion all depend on the market (Teo, 2018). Meanwhile, it shows a strong city worship and political indifference in the Chinese context. Instead of an essential way to adjust the social structure to accomplish equality and diversity, politics is degraded to merely economic policies that for neoliberals to pursue self-interest and material happiness. Students with a neoliberal identity internalized market rationality by accepting it as common sense, strongly influencing their perception of international education.

How Do Neoliberals Perceive International Education?

Although some scholars challenged the idea that neoliberalism dominates in China and is embraced by the majority of Chinese people, they tend to agree that neoliberal ideology is identified among China’s urban elites (Duckett, 2020; Nonini, 2008). This group overlaps highly with families that are willing to send their children studying abroad (Cheng et al., 2020). Hence, neoliberal ideology would impact many Chinese international students perceiving international education to a great extent. According to Teo (2018), neoliberalism degrades intellectual education into a means of investment that is valuable only when it

contributes to one's career or economic success. This neoliberal turn is evident in international education according to many studies (Astarita & Patience, 2020; Astarita et al., 2019; Zhai et al., 2019). Zhai et al. (2019) reviewed 68 selected articles about the motivation of studying in Australia and concluded that a neoliberal calculation that seeks low costs (e.g., relatively low entry requirements) with high benefits (e.g., the high reputation of Australian universities and the positive career development) determines students' decisions when choosing the host country. Research by Astarita and Patience (2020) and Asterita et al. (2019) proves that the educational focus of many Chinese students in Australia is primarily utilitarian. These students prefer to choose degree courses that can enhance their competitiveness in the domestic labour market while paying less attention to historical and political issues.

However, Cheng et al. (2020) found that learning is the primary motivation for most students to study abroad after surveying 3,001 students at 18 high schools in three big cities of China. It is well acknowledged by students who plan to study abroad that the higher education system and academic environment in the West is better than in China (Cheng et al., 2020). Nevertheless, considering that the study did not further explore the purpose of learning, it is hard to exclude the possibility that pursuing economic success or increasing social status is the final goal, especially because Cheng et al. mentioned that only 22% of the participants do not care whether they will be able to recover the cost of studying overseas. The utilitarian purpose of learning is manifested in the stories reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which Fischer (2015) mentioned, "for many families, going abroad has been a fallback, a preferable alternative to attending a lesser-ranked Chinese university" (para. 55).

Thus, it is vital to consider the influence of a neoliberal identity on international education, as students who identify with it would perceive international education as mainly an investment to accumulate socioeconomic capital or a consumption to gain symbolic capital. Since the neoliberal elites in China bear the similarity with the background of Chinese international students, the influence might be even more profound. Instead of thinking and reflecting on political issues, the idea that international education is a symbol of self-branding, a pursuit of self-interest, and a product of self-choice guides these neoliberal students' journey into the world from the very beginning.

A Mental Fishbowl and the Barriers of Developing Liberal Identity

“One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them” (Huxley, 1932/2000, p. 284).

In the above two sections, I depicted two significant patterns of political identity constructed in the Chinese context that students might have before they study abroad: party-statist identity and neoliberal identity. It is worth highlighting that although I described them previously as two separate and relatively pure and idealized patterns in theory, these two identities might coexist in one person in practice. In this section, I claim that the unfree political climate of China creates the conditions whereby these two identities are likely to be intertwined while also impairing the possibility for students to form a mature and solid liberal identity.

Living in a Fishbowl: Soft Totalitarianism With Orwellian Boot?

In his *Brave New World*, Huxley (1932/2000) portrayed a fictional society where people are controlled by a totalitarian government. Unlike Orwell's totalitarianism that employs severe oppression, this government adopts a “soft” totalitarian governance: it

provides stability, prosperity, and entertainment, at the cost of the free mind and independent soul. It provides a drug *soma* for people to seek pleasure. People live in this brave new world not out of fear but out of a belief that they are living the most beautiful life on earth.

To some extent, China is moving into Huxley's brave new world. Although there is always an imminent threat of the Orwellian boot on the face for people who are suspicious of and trying to break the status quo, more indirect controlling strategies such as distraction have been adopted as effective ways to keep people conforming to the orthodox road. A cluster of research in recent years examined Chinese strict online censorship, concluding that this complicated system is more inclined to distract the public and change the subject from potential collective activities rather than adopting comprehensive and rigorous censorship to suppress private conversations criticizing the state or the party (King et al., 2013, 2014, 2017; Qin et al., 2017; Roberts, 2018). This subtler censorship creates an illusion of personal freedom to some students, as the column from *Made in China* indicated that many Chinese students disagree with the severe degree of CCP surveillance (Windsript, 2019). A common reason shown in the interview is that students believe only influential figures need to be cautious, while perceiving themselves as "just ordinary, unimportant little people [to the state]" (Windsript, 2019, p. 33). From my perspective, this ambiguous censorship is even more harmful because it transforms objective censorship into subjective feelings, tempting them to gain personal liberty by giving up collective power that focuses on structural matters. By tolerating private critiques but suppressing public discourse, it destroys the root of a potential civil society.

Furthermore, the strict censorship system does not mean that it is impossible to obtain information out of the Great Firewall, because people can still use Virtual Private Network

(VPN) to access websites that are blocked. Roberts (2018) argued that, instead of undermining its effects, this “incomplete” censorship could be used strategically to divide the public. I would further claim that this “hole” somehow enhances party-statist and neoliberal identities as it reduces the sensitivity towards censorship and the feeling of a lack of freedom but amplifies Western biases. As a Chinese international student defended:

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. (D. Kim, 2020, p. 38)

This genuine feeling is tied up with political identity. For students with party-statist identity who have internalized guardianship governance, this censorship system “is to a large degree the source of stability” (Gao, 2021, p. 3). A typical party-statist from Gao’s (2021) interview responded that “if thoughts are to be unified, when [the country] is gigantic, I think it is a very good method to let some people shut up” (p. 3), which suggests that not only does he not perceive himself as the part to be censored but also consider censorship as an elite privilege. For students with neoliberal identity, since they have little interest and commitment in political participation, censorship is not an issue in their lives, even they were to complain. In contrast, they could even strategically utilize VPN to escape from the censorship to gain information that others do not know. Extra information sometimes means extra opportunities to shape self-branding in this digital world. From a neoliberal perspective, censorship's porous nature leaves room for personal choice since, compared to engaging in activities against censorship, one can always find an escape from censorship if he or she wants to. To

people who have no intention of engaging in any dissident activities, censorship could merely be the shadow of the sun: something coexists with the brightest light.

For now, I have displayed an intersection of party-statist identity and neoliberal identity under the censorship system. I want to suggest further that the unfree political environment in China could facilitate a deeper combination of these two identities. Theoretically, there is a sharp contrast between party-statists with loyal partisanship and neoliberals with political indifference. However, as some scholars noticed that neoliberalism had been adopted to enhance authoritarian governance in some cases (Arsel et al., 2021; Duckett, 2020), party-statists and neoliberals could be mixed in the Chinese context. On the one hand, the Chinese government advocates developmentalism that “seeks to portray all societal problems as being resolvable by economic growth” (Arsel et al., 2021, p. 262), which combines with Marxism, implying an economic nature of human beings that makes party-statists more ready to accept neoliberal values. On the other hand, it is because students with a neoliberal identity are indifferent towards politics that they are more likely to be influenced by official rhetoric. They are immersed in a digital environment where negative information is hidden by massive distraction and diversion.

Roberts (2018) emphasized that the Chinese government has effectively instilled propaganda by “draw[ing] attention away from negative events toward more positive news or their own overarching narrative, or ... [creating] positive feelings about the government among citizens” (p. 222). This strategy is effective because it creates information flooding that is hard to detect. This type of flooding dilutes the information environment, de-prioritizes other perspectives, increases the cost for searching opposite opinions, and weakens the appeal of dissidents, inculcating the official perspective imperceptibly. In this

case, even though neoliberals would not develop loyalty towards the CCP, they may share the common biased lens with party-statists, based on the history and culture monopolized by the CCP. An article from *The Seattle Times* shows that many Chinese international students lack interest in seeking information on political matters while being more inclined to the government's position (Tang, 2014). Hence, political indifference should not be seen as political neutrality, as the lack of interest usually leads to unconscious bias that may be even more harmful than a distinct opposite position.

Therefore, political control in digital China is not merely a wall or cage that blocks people from receiving messages. The system, including censorship, propaganda, and education, builds a shared lens for people living inside, profoundly influencing reality. This reality would, in turn, construct and reinforce students' political identities. The famous physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow (2010) presented a thought-provoking example in *The Grand Design* to illustrate the influence of perspective on reality:

Keep a fish in a bowl with curved sides ... gazing out, the fish would have a distorted view of reality...The goldfish view is not the same as our own, but goldfish could still formulate scientific laws governing the motion of the objects they observe outside their bowl. For example, due to the distortion, a freely moving object that we would observe to move in a straight line would be observed by the goldfish to move along a curved path. Nevertheless, the goldfish could formulate scientific laws from their distorted frame of reference that would always hold true and that would enable them to make predictions about the future motion of objects outside the bowl. Their laws would be more complicated than the laws in our frame, but simplicity is a matter of taste. (chap. 3, para. 2)

Hence, Chinese students de facto live in a mental fishbowl that distorts the view of the West and democracy. A fishbowl implies the boundary of outer and inner is existing, while people may not feel it. It could be transparent, or, there might be some pretty paintings on the glass, which are so good-looking that people don't mind if the view is obscured. This metaphor is similar to Plato's *cave* but entails more details. The fishbowl could be warm, safe, and luxurious, representing diligent care from the master rather than heartless oppression. The only thing is, when people gaze outside from the enormous lens, they get a distorted version. Nevertheless, as Hawking and Mlodinow (2010) indicate, a formula could still be developed while deciding whether to use a simple or complex formula is merely a matter of taste. Therefore, there are three connotations in the metaphor of fishbowl; it (a) represents rigorous but relatively soft censorship, (b) provides a common perspective that imperceptibly shapes reality, and (c) implies that Western democracy is a "taste" rather than a universal truth.

Although people might argue that it is impossible for the CCP to conduct a complete brainwashing, as people could use VPN to access information outside China, the profound impact of the fishbowl on Chinese people's perspective should not be overlooked. An example is the debate about freedom of the press. Although most people would admit that China has no freedom of the press, they are likely convinced by the official rhetoric that freedom of the press does not exist in any country since there is no news from an unbiased perspective. They perceive the Western media as also brainwashing, neglecting the overarching structure that different opinions could be articulated in a democratic context. Living in this mental fishbowl, a prevalent position represented by one Chinese international student when he was interviewed by Osnos (2008) is: "if democracy can really give you the

good life, that's good. But, without democracy, if we can still have the good life why should we choose democracy?" (para. 63). Ironically, economic considerations, rather than social justice, take precedence in the entailment of this "good life," which reinforces that the meaning of democracy is fading towards Chinese international students while studying abroad is mainly driven by market rationality. However, party-statist identity and neoliberal identity cannot fully represent all the Chinese students. In the next section, I explore liberal identity developed under the Chinese context, and claim that the fishbowl undermines its development effectively.

Rejecting or Rebellious? Developing Liberal Identity in the Fishbowl

Since Chinese strict political control is not a secret, "many Chinese students do reject their political education without even leaving China" (Fish, 2018, para. 85). By doing so, they may tend to hold a liberal identity that supports democracy based on some key elements such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, rule of law, public election, and multi-party system. Students with a liberal identity usually display a strong desire to leave China by studying or even settling in a democratic country (Gao, 2021). However, among those claiming to be liberals, how many do so mainly to show the rejective attitude toward authority? How many are deliberate dissidents who have developed a strong political identity based on critical thinking with enough political information? Considering an emerging phenomenon that some Chinese international students shift from supporting liberalism to authoritarianism after studying abroad (Fan et al., 2020; Fish, 2018), I strongly suggest paying attention to the nuanced but essential divergence between rejection and rebellion. I would interpret rejection as a self-oriented attitude derived from feeling oppressed by the authority. Liberal democracy as a replacement of the current political system, in this case, is

accepted as an idealistic symbol to eliminate or escape from the sense of oppression.

However, rejection does not necessarily entail a deep concern of social justice and public good, nor a deep understanding of or commitment to liberal democracy. It even risks sinking into neoliberal ideology that merely cares about personal freedom.

In contrast, I conceive rebellion as driven by the concern of community, diversity, and equity. It is based on the acknowledgment of and identification with liberal democracy. Nevertheless, I am not claiming that these two attitudes are completely contrary. In contrast, rejecting hegemony could be the first step to developing a stable liberal identity. Surveys from Fairbrother (2003a, 2003b) show that, after being aware of the official indoctrination and political control, some Mainland students developed an opposite attitude towards the dominating perspective by adopting resistance. However, Fairbrother (2003a, 2003b) articulated that instead of rejecting blindly, students have to think critically based on skepticism, curiosity, and openness during the process. However, “for those us who grew up in a system where information control is all-encompassing, processing ideas contrary to what we were taught and believed all our lives is not easy,” as Wang (2019) asserted; “it takes an innate curiosity, constant reading of uncensored information and self-reflective thinking—none of which are encouraged in China” (para. 6). Hence, there are many barriers to developing a mature and strong liberal identity in the fishbowl.

It is hard to develop a mature understanding of liberal democracy in the Chinese context. First, there is a lack of systemic democratic education from which students can learn enough and diverse political information. Although people can search information related to democracy online, the intense exam-oriented education system and information flooding in the Chinese digital environment make accessing democratic information a high-cost task

both for time and money. Second, the strict control and oppression of collective activities undermines the possibility of practising democratic knowledge, hindering further understanding and reflection. Without enough information, discussion, practice, and reflection, it is hard to build a comprehensive understanding of democratic knowledge. Without thorough knowledge and deliberate thinking, the superficial rejection of political indoctrination might lead to an inclination of self-oriented neoliberal identity, which means the call for freedom is motivated by self-interest rather than public good. In this case, once they get another way to gain freedom (e.g., through high socioeconomic status), they would easily give up the advocate for liberal democracy. Hence, liberal identity contrasts both party-statist identity and neoliberal identity, requiring reflection toward nationalism and consumerism simultaneously. On the other hand, the fishbowl undermines the strength of liberal identity. The tight control of discussing “Western ideology” openly reduces the saliency of liberal identity. Many studies have shown that students with a liberal identity tend not to express their political positions explicitly out of fear of persecution (Gao, 2021; Zhang, 2020). Therefore, “this group is significantly underrepresented in public discourse” (Gao, 2021, p. 4), which would result in a relatively weak liberal identity that is unstable and might change easily.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored three patterns of political identity constructed in the Chinese context. The first one is the party-statist identity that is closely tied to the Chinese national identity constructed by the official rhetoric and supports the legitimacy of the CCP. The second is the neoliberal identity driven by market rationality, focusing on self-interest with little political commitment or engagement of collective activities. The third is the liberal

identity that values political freedom and concerns public good, appealing for liberal democracy.

By probing the meaning and strength of different political identities, I uncovered the influence of public education and digital media on shaping perspectives. To further illustrate this influence I developed the metaphor of a fishbowl, representing the non-free political environment in China. Through public education and digital media, the Chinese government has successfully built a public discourse against the West and liberal democracy. The effect of socialization from public education is supported by the study from Gries and Sanders (2016), who found that there is a positive correlation between the years of accepting education and the degree of distrust foreign countries, concluding that “the Chinese appear to be educated into greater awareness of the socially or politically acceptable consensus view on sensitive evaluative questions such as on how much to dis/trust foreign countries or how threatening America is” (p. 18). My conclusion is that party-statist and neoliberal identities are reinforced and entangled in the fishbowl, whereas liberal identity is undermined by it. Hence, it is more likely for Chinese students to develop a strong party-statist identity or neoliberal identity but less likely to hold a strong liberal identity due to the lack of democratic information, the lack of democratic practice, and the lack of open discussion.

Here I want to emphasize that, as I highlighted the significant role of political control from the Chinese government, my position is not to describe party-statists and neoliberals as people who don't think or are merely “brainwashed” by the CCP. The metaphor “fishbowl” is more complicated than implying people living inside it would accept a worldview blindly. I hold the same position as Denton (2014) that “whether living in autocratic or democratic states, most people accept prevailing narratives, not because they are unthinking or passive,

but because their personal identities, subjectivities, economic well-being, and, yes, dreams are intertwined with those narratives” (p. 267). Furthermore, the fishbowl corresponds to perspectivism that a so-called objective reality is merely shaped by the interpretation based on a common lens (Liu, 2021). To many Chinese international students who hold a party-statist or neoliberal identity, this common perspective is derived from the vigilance towards the Western colonization based on historical memory, the imagination of a glorious future based on unique Chinese culture, and the huge passion for developmentalism that entails market rationality, which is highlighted in the official discourse. Of course, in this digital era where people could always find access to opposite information, it is hard for the state to monopolize the perspective of history and future. However, even the Chinese government may not have such powerful hegemony over political, social, or cultural discourse like before; it still plays “a continuing critical role ... in shaping representations of the past and influencing historical memory” (Denton, 2014, p. 267). Hence, as Denton (2014) stressed, “we fail to understand China in its fullness if we neglect these official narratives and their power to persuade” (p. 267). The fishbowl metaphor is also vital to understanding the political identities of Chinese international students because of its consistent, widespread, but covert influence.

This chapter also paid attention to the strength of political identities influenced by the fishbowl because it relates to their stability and the chance of reconstruction. The party-statist identity and the neoliberal identity are strong, which means they might be stable in different contexts and even harder to be reconstructed. Since political identities impact how students perceive international education and even the relationship between the West and China, they would further influence how Chinese international students consider push and pull factors

and contribute to their decision to stay or return. Hence, reconstructing party-statist and neoliberal identities to liberal identity, or at least facilitating reflection on one's political identity, should be one of the educational goals in democratic education. To do so, the barriers of the fishbowl in developing the liberal identity call for serious consideration. However, can international education remove those barriers? Can international education interrupt those entrenched political patterns? In the next chapter, I will further analyze how this fishbowl impacts Chinese students when they study abroad and keeps these barriers existing even in the Western context.

CHAPTER FOUR: SEA TURTLES BACK TO THE FISHBOWL: HAS INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RECONSTRUCTED POLITICAL IDENTITIES?

Following the previous chapter that analyzed the “entrenched patterns” of political identities constructed by the fishbowl in China, this chapter will focus on the “viable alternatives”—reconstructing political identity—provided by international education.

Generally speaking, international experience is perceived as a transformative power promoting intercultural ability (Brown, 2009), individual identity transformation (Hansen, 2015), and cosmopolitanism that could reduce hostile nationalism (Lai, 2015). Democratic education, as the prevalent theme of education in the Western context, bears the goal of promoting democracy based on social justice (Davis, 2018; Sant, 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2003). The common themes of democratic education “include productive collective action, in part through vigilance towards hegemonic structures” (Davis, 2018, p. 196). From this perspective, even though Chinese international students return to China, becoming *sea turtles* (the homonym of “returnees” in Mandarin), they are supposed to be a radical force against nationalism, and “push” Chinese democratization. However, the increasing trend of Chinese returnees did not inspire an articulated collective demand for democratic freedom as in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement, which raises questions about to what extent international education can promote the identification of democracy for Chinese international students.

A doctoral dissertation from Li (2020) provides interviews from 12 Chinese international students from Canada and the United States, exploring how they engaged in democratic discourse and developed democratic identity. The result supports the notion that transnational experiences could effectively help Chinese international students develop a

liberal identity. However, all 12 participants recruited by Li (2020) are from two elite universities and mainly doctoral students (eight of 12), which implies they may have better critical thinking ability so that cannot fully represent the large and heterogeneous Chinese international student population. Despite that, Li's (2020) findings show that "participants' increased commitment to democracy derived mainly from their disciplinary studies in social sciences" (p. 201), whereas "a caveat should be given," as Li claimed, "most of the participants who did not study social sciences became more confused about democracy" (p. 199). Meanwhile, another voice should not be ignored: some Chinese international students claim to become more patriotic or pro-CCP after studying abroad (Fish, 2018; Huang & Qing, 2015; Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2020; Liu, 2017). Despite the cases presented on Chinese official media (e.g., Xinhuanet) that might be the CCP's propaganda, the existence of this phenomenon has been verified by various sources (e.g., Deutsche Welle, *Post Magazine*), including myself. When I worked in China, one of my interns who studied in the U.S. for nearly 6 years expressed deep disillusionment with American democracy and affirmation of the Chinese political system, being determined to return to China.

The above cases indicate that merely exposing in a democratic environment where Chinese international students can observe and compare different politics would not automatically enable them to gain a deep understanding of democracy or acquire liberal identity (Li, 2020). With the lack of social environment embedding democracy as a common sense or even belief, for Chinese international students, developing a mature liberal identity is an ongoing process of confrontation towards the previous identities shaped by a completely different rhetoric. As mentioned in the previous chapter, they must first be skeptical about what be taught as "truth," then move beyond blind rejection and critically

develop a relatively stable liberal identity based on comprehensive knowledge. This comprehensive knowledge about democracy must be learned through enough information, active practice, and continuous reflection. However, to complicate matters further, even if Chinese students acquire enough knowledge and a deep understanding of democracy based on their expertise in the social sciences, they may not necessarily become liberals. The essay from Lu (2017), who studied politics in a PhD program at Oxford University, reveals another branch of Chinese international students: double-dissident identity that is skeptical about China's system while also holding a critical perspective towards liberal democracy.

Before discussing this new political identity—double-dissidents—of Chinese international students, this chapter will analyze the emerging problems of developing a liberal identity. I will first explore how the fishbowl keeps affecting Chinese international students even when they are in a democratic context, then analyze how the dilemma of international education itself undermines cultivating identification of liberal democracy. It is noteworthy that my analysis focuses on the social environment, paying attention to the large trend and patterns rather than individual experiences and routes. That means, Chinese international students as individuals might be able to get rid of the barriers, but the obstacle on the general level is existing. I would argue that, overall, international education plays a limited role in reconstructing the political identities of Chinese international students due to the intervention of the fishbowl and the dilemma of democratic education itself.

The Barriers Generated From the Intervention of the Fishbowl

As mentioned previously, the Chinese unfree political environment forms a fishbowl that stresses the China–West dichotomy. It provides a common lens entailing nationalism and developmentalism, which enhances party-statist and neoliberal identities. To reconstruct

these two identities, international education must first provide the soil of skepticism to their meanings and then build new meaning of liberal identity. However, the strict political control and indoctrination from the Chinese government prevents students from acquiring a mature liberal identity because it is hard for them to acquire comprehensive knowledge about democracy. People might assume that once Chinese students go abroad, being immersed in a democratic context that protects freedom of speech and encourages collective activities would remove the barriers and help them develop a mature liberal identity. However, many observers warn that authoritarian censorship has utilized economic and technological changes to bring challenges to independent knowledge sectors of democracies, among which “Beijing’s global reach stands out” (Cook, 2013; Lim, 2015; Link, 2002, 2013; Tiffert, 2020). In other words, the stumbling blocks created by the fishbowl keep blocking the path of developing a mature liberal identity, even outside China.

The Barrier of Acquiring Comprehensive Information

The article titled “The Authoritarian Assault on knowledge” from Tiffert (2020) highlights how authoritarian regimes, especially China, negatively influence independent intellectual inquiry and further undermine democratic values in knowledge sectors. Public goods provided by independent inquiries, including “high-quality data, reliable and pluralistic feedback mechanisms, and creative insights into problems” (Tiffert, 2020, p. 29), are fundamental to acquiring information and building comprehensive knowledge. Tiffert (2020) explained that:

[independent inquiry] provides a channel through which individuals can express the diverse meanings they attach to their lives. By bringing unmet needs and marginal voices to the fore, forestalling ideological ossification, and facilitating the negotiation

of competing interests, free inquiry can enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy making. Conversely, the more obstacles there are standing in the way of such inquiry, the more difficult it will be to realize democracy's promise and to reverse growing popular discontent with democratic systems. (pp. 29–30)

Tiffert (2020) provided numerous cases to demonstrate how Western academics are under the “authoritarian attack” from the Chinese government. Some concerns are exaggerated, though. For instance, the examples of censorship of international publishers (e.g., Cambridge University Press, Springer Nature, and Taylor and Francis) are mainly aimed at versions in China. However, the indirect effect should not be ignored; that is, the double standard would undermine the credibility of these authoritative publishers who somehow represent democratic knowledge sectors. On the other hand, freedom of the press as an essential link to produce data and gather feedback is also under attack. Gamso (2021) analyzed data from 163 countries, concluding that China's rise along with its political influence leads to an uptick in censorship in the media of democratic countries, especially those who rely on the Chinese market. From the view of party-statists and neoliberals, such compromise could be seen as circumstantial evidence of China's revival and democracy's hypocrisy or reinforce the market rationality that perceives economic pursuit as the highest value. If democracy would choose self-censorship and cannot insist on freedom of speech in front of profits, how could it convince Chinese students it is better than authoritarianism?

But insisting on speaking freely to shed light on truth comes at an expense, and sometimes it is only a good wish. Some scholars and journalists find they are blacklisted or subject to intimidation due to the “wrong position” on controversial topics (Lim, 2015; Link, 2002, 2013). They face enormous psychological pressure on the one hand and risk not being

able to continue their research on the other. Even if they manage to overcome the pressure, the Chinese non-free environment bears difficulty getting high-quality data, which brings the challenge to gather feedback and gain insights. Just as Link (2002) described:

[the censorship] contributes to distortions both in Chinese perceptions of the West and in Western perceptions of China. When certain questions are avoided, or written up in less than fully candid ways, how much less well informed is the Western public? When a leading scholar chooses not to share what he knows on a topic, how much does the public lose by listening instead to second-best answers from other sources? (para. 21)

As China is an integral topic in understanding democracy for Chinese international students, the difficulty of conducting independent intellectual inquiries on political issues related to China results in inadequate information and incomplete knowledge. In this case, bias—both Chinese bias and the Western bias—due to the lack of understanding is inevitable. Ironically, the “Western bias” is a complaint from almost every Chinese international student. However, under the Chinese official rhetoric that the bias is the West trying to impede China’s development, the fact that the Chinese government itself also contributes to the bias is easily neglected. As a result, many Chinese international students reject using foreign media as alternative sources of information, which in turn makes them rely on Chinese media that could only provide censored and filtered information (Astarita et al., 2019). These Chinese international students do not understand that the “Western bias” they complain about should not be the reason they support the CCP but the reason they fight for democracy, since merely diverse perspectives protected by the freedom of speech could reduce biases to the most extent.

The Barrier of Open Discussion on Controversial Topics

If the challenge for Chinese international students to acquire comprehensive information about democracy is merely acutely perceived by those who study in the relevant field, the challenge of conducting an open discussion on controversial topics is more common. A large amount of research has revealed that Chinese international students tend to be self-censoring, compelled reticence, or avoiding discussion when involving sensitive topics (Gao, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; X. Zhang, 2020; Zhao, 2019). X. Zhang (2020) conducted a case study in New Zealand about citizenship; when asking about democracy, “some participants said that they did not understand what democracy was...and some even refused to talk about it” (p. 79). Gao (2021) also observed the similar reaction from Chinese international students in his interview: “one CIS [Chinese International Student] participates in my interview through text exchanges in order to avoid leaving his voiceprint; multiple participants use coded phrases, such as ‘you know why,’ to avoid expressing sensitive content” (p. 4). This distrustful and stressful climate is apparent almost throughout all relevant studies, manifested in Li’s (2020) doctoral research, which found that “the recruitment did not go well at the beginning mainly due to target participants’ concerns about their personal safety and security; it was extremely difficult for them to trust me as a person or as a researcher” (p. 92). This squeezed discussion space is a consequence of both the top-down control from the Chinese state and the bottom-up nationalism among overseas Chinese students.

On the one hand, the Chinese government expands its repression of Chinese citizens’ speech even on Western soil through both physical space (Li, 2020) and online space such as WeChat or even Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Mozur, 2018; Whalen, 2021). On the

other hand, the nationalist climate shaped by the fishbowl adds great peer pressure to students who support liberal democracy (Zhao, 2019). In this case, expressing opinions openly against the official position would probably lead to harassment, intimidation, or even arrest. In the report of Human Rights Watch (2021) from Australia, over half of 24 pro-democracy participants “reported direct harassment and intimidation from fellow classmates from China ... [including] threats of physical violence, threats of being reported to Chinese authorities back home, being doxed online or threatened with doxing” (p. 24). But more than that, the ramifications might even extend to the family. Human Rights Watch (2021) has “verified three cases of students whose family in China were visited or were requested to meet with police regarding the student’s activities in Australia” (p. 2). Unlike international students who might have access to the international social network, those family members who rely on Chinese social network may risk physical attacks or losing jobs.

Because of this, after knowing my research topic, my parents showed deep concern and requested me more than once not to express sensitive opinions towards Chinese politics, even though they appreciate my independent thinking ability. Although I insist on my initial position, driven by the belief that free speech and open discussion is the way to truth, fearing that my words would implicate my parents still makes me stressed and forces me to be cautious all the time. Whenever I think about the potential consequence, I am worried about my parents more than myself and feel sorry for them. I know they struggled between hoping their only daughter will be safe and wishing her to become an independent thinker, while I also struggle between expressing my true thoughts and being self-censoring. Imagining their security might be under threat because of their support and love makes me heartbroken, bringing moral pressure and continuous hesitation during my whole writing process.

It is conceivable that the risk of being targeted for harassment, being charged with a crime, being thrown into jail, or being prohibited from seeing family when returning to China forces Chinese international students, especially those who are pro-democracy, to be silent on controversial topics. Therefore, even Chinese international students live in democratic countries; they can only enjoy diluted freedom due to “enormous peer pressure and omnipresent surveillance” (Zhao, 2019, para. 12). The severe consequence of lacking open discussion has been shown in the period of the Hong Kong Protests:

This diluted freedom not only restrains overseas mainland Chinese who do not want to uncritically side with Beijing from expressing their opinions, but also prevents them from informing people in China of accounts of the mass protests in Hong Kong that differ from the official version. They also cannot engage in open and constructive conversations with mainland Chinese who ardently defend Beijing to help find common ground to defuse the tensions. (Zhao, 2019, para. 11)

Not only Chinese international students are influenced; the faculty of Western universities are also affected. As the report of Human Rights Watch (2021) shows, “more than half of faculty interviewed, selected because they are from or specialize in China studies, or teach a large number of PRC [People’s Republic of China] students, said they practiced regular self-censorship while talking about China” (p. 4). The lack of engagement in discussing controversial topics is by no means an insignificant harm to democratic education. It erases diverse perspectives on controversial topics that are fundamental to the Chinese official discourse. Such monopolized narrative would hinder students immersed in nationalist rhetoric from being skeptical about the only one “right” perspective taught as truth. In this case, it is hard to shatter the fishbowl and build a new perspective for party-

statists and neoliberals to think critically. However, the obstacle of reconstructing the political identities of Chinese international students is not confined to the fishbowl; the dilemma of international education itself also contributes to a great extent.

The Barriers Generated From the Dilemma of International Education

Since John Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* in 1916, the conception of democratic education that appeals to using education to foster democratic citizenship has been the center of educational discussion and practice in the Western context, especially after the mid-1900s (Davis, 2018; Sant, 2019). According to Dewey (1916/2016), democratic education is not aimed at one particular group, country, or culture but rather humanity itself. Hence, driving students to advance beyond parochial constraints drawn by nation-states and cultivating democratic identity should be a vital goal in international education in the West (Nussbaum, 2016). However, from my perspective, the dilemma of democratic education undermines its grand ambition to reconstruct Chinese international students into democratic adherents and practitioners. I will present four main barriers below, all of which would hinder Chinese international students from learning, understanding, and practicing democracy.

The Barrier From Neoliberalism: International Education as Commodity

Unlike public education, the expensive international education entails a “commodity” perspective with luxury symbol to most Chinese self-funded overseas students. This characteristic of international education highlights marketization while transforming international students into consumers. As a result, international education is “widely identified with neoliberal ideas and practices” (Bamberger et al., 2019). This neoliberal nature of international education deeply affects students and universities.

Western universities are influenced by neoliberal ideology, not merely in international education but the whole academic sector. Nussbaum (2016), one of today's foremost public intellectuals, alerted "a world-wide crisis in education" in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. This crisis, which Nussbaum associates with cancer—severe, long-term, but unnoticed—is the radical change in democracies: the humanities in education is devalued and replaced by "cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills" due to "the thirsty for national profit" (p. 2). Nussbaum warned:

Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, especially at this time of crisis, too few questions have been posed about the direction of education, and, with it, of the world's democratic societies. With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost. (p. 6)

In this case, education in the West is gradually losing its capacity to promote democratic values, while international education is the "critical ill patient" of this disease.

For Chinese international students, international education is mainly a commodity based on "the supremacy of the market, competition, rational choice, the global knowledge economy and the instrumental framing of education for individual economic gain" (Bamberger et al., 2019, p. 204). This neoliberal understanding would significantly influence how they choose majors, how they experience learning, and how they interact with people. Statistics of 2020 from the Australian government show that over 44% of Chinese international students majored in Management and Commerce, far more than any other majors, among which students in the field of society and culture merely made up 9% of the total amount (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Statistics from the

United States manifest a similar trend: From 2019 to 2020, 47.1% and 17.2% of Chinese international students were studying STEM and business, respectively, whereas the percentage of students majoring in social science, education, and humanities are merely 9%, 1.7%, and 1.1%, respectively (Institute of International Education, 2020). Thus, as mentioned previously, it is hard for Chinese international students who lack academic training in social science to develop a liberal identity (Li, 2020).

Therefore, the Western education sector must think about these questions seriously. If economic growth, not democratic values, becomes the driving force of international education, how could universities insist on academic freedom when facing the “authoritarian assault on knowledge” from a golden market? If universities choose self-censoring to please their biggest client group, how could international education challenge Chinese international students’ previous perception on controversial topics and facilitate deep understanding of democracy? If there are not enough opportunities for Chinese international students to learn humanity and social science due to the emphasis on applied skills, how could international education promote democratic values to facilitate them to reflect on current political identities? Before addressing these problems, an inevitable context must be considered: sandwiched between China and the West, the unstable status of Chinese international students makes them the most sensitive group who are vulnerable to geopolitical harm. I will elaborate on the influence of global politics in the following section.

The Barrier From Geopolitics: Nationalism and Racism

One essential goal of democratic education is to help students transcend the narrow attachment to one particular country and facilitate understanding between different cultures and religions (Dewey, 1916/2016; Nussbaum, 2016). Many scholars suggest that

international experience would promote cosmopolitanism to achieve this goal. However, it is dangerous to assume that cosmopolitanism develops automatically in the transnational context. When first getting into a strange foreign social environment, Chinese international students would feel their national identity become more salient as “they are often understood primarily in terms of their group membership as Chinese” (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015, p. 7). In this case, when facing the conflicts between China and other political entities, the strong sense of national identity would make Chinese international students defensive and further hinder them from thinking critically (Lai, 2015). One effective way for Chinese international students to reduce the tension is integration into local communities to erase the distinct boundary between “us” and “them” (Lai, 2015; Tannock, 2013). However, as Tannock (2013) indicated sharply after comparing two educational debates in the U.K., the current international education frame is “methodological nationalism” since democratic values are framed at the national level. As one of the essential democratic values in education, social justice merely applies to local students, while “international students fall outside the nationally defined realm of demands for educational equality” (Tannock, 2013, p. 450). Coupled with a strong clash of political ideology, the exclusive study environment would even make Chinese international students more attached to China. Hail (2015) demonstrated this phenomenon after interviewing 18 Chinese international students’ experiences on facing criticism about China from their American peers:

When they were still living China, it was easier to conceptually separate “the people” from “the government,” and some interviewees reported that they often criticized Chinese government before coming to the United States. While abroad, however, the concepts of “the people” and “the government” tended to blend together as national

identity became more salient. Sojourners realized that members of the host country saw them as foreigners and they would never be “totally accepted.” Feeling that China was the only place they could identify with and think of as home, it became more important for them to view China in a positive light. (p. 318)

Therefore, getting into a strange foreign environment and feeling excluded from democratic values might trigger nationalism and further promote party-statist identity instead of liberal identity. It is hard to reconstruct Chinese international students’ political identities when they could merely “watch” democracy from a distance without a deep and direct connection with it. In order to reverse this trend to achieve the goal of democratic education, international education must provide opportunities for Chinese international students to build a meaningful relationship with domestic peers or observe and participate in democratic activities (Hail, 2015; Lai, 2015; Li, 2020). In contrast, direct criticism might not help reconstruct Chinese international students’ political identities but rather push Chinese international students to identify with party-statist.

Unfortunately, with China’s development, the “China threat” discourse increased the tension between China and the West, exacerbating the feeling of being excluded. Especially after Trump became the president of the United States, a set of unfriendly policies and anti-China agenda and rhetoric fueled nationalism within overseas Chinese students. Furthermore, it also exacerbated racism. The empirical research from Fan et al. (2020) suggested that racism would significantly increase Chinese international students’ support for authoritarian values, especially those who supported liberal democracy previously. Conceivably, the circumstance seems likely to worsen after blaming China for the COVID-19 pandemic and waves of unsparing criticism of China’s human rights situation over these 2 years. Before the

relationship between China and the West becomes worse, democratic education must put more effort into cultivating the identification of democracy. However, the philosophical dilemma of liberal democracy adds another snag on this rumbly road.

The Barrier From a Philosophical Dilemma: Universal Liberalism or Cultural Relativism?

Is liberal democracy a universal value or a Western product? This is the core question that international education needs to address for Chinese international students before promoting democracy to them. The strongest indictment of Western democracy, instilled by the Chinese government currently, is that the promotion of democratic values is a means by which the West maintains its hegemony and promotes cultural colonization. Specifically, it is not the conception of democracy but “liberal” democracy that advocates liberalism the sign of Western hegemony. Hence, Chinese “substantial democracy,” as I mentioned in the section on party-statist identity, corresponds to Chinese culture and national circumstance, if not better than the Western democracy. This discourse ties democracy to culture, rejecting liberalism as a universal value but merely one option in diverse possibilities, which underpins the philosophy when Chinese international students try to understand democracy.

Unfortunately, international education does not entirely solve this philosophical dilemma for Chinese international students, especially party-statists. On the one hand, the constant emphasis on cultural diversity and the reflection on hegemony in international education risks drifting towards cultural relativism. To warn the risk, Cousin (2011) quoted an extreme example about how one teacher interprets avoiding Western chauvinism “as needing to sacrifice conversational exchange at the altar of a cultural relativism” (p. 589); the teacher expressed: “what right do I have to manipulate people in this way, what right do I

have to assert my middle-class western values” (Hyland et al., 2008, as cited in Cousin, 2011, p. 589). If democracy is perceived as a cultural product, the silence caused by cultural relativism would no doubt becomes implicit support for the Chinese current political status quo. Hence, clarifying the philosophy of liberal democracy is necessary. However, most educational content in the Western context is based on the pre-set democratic consensus. This consensus conceives liberal democracy as “the end of history”—the one and only ideal option—while China clearly has not reached this stage. This position has its historical context in the West, which is built on numerous debates over time. However, this process is absent to Chinese international students, making the pre-set democratic consensus seems like a hegemonic discourse separated from Chinese history. Speaking from my experience studying education in a program particularly for international students, I did not get a chance in class to learn and discuss why democracy is necessary and what is the essence of democracy. When the course material mentions that the educational goal of cultivating personal autonomy is for democracy, my first thought was “why”: why is education for democracy? Isn’t it somehow implying education serves a political purpose? If so, cultivating patriotism to maintain the Chinese political regime also seems reasonable, which undermines my critical attitude towards Chinese patriotic education. I present this example not to show my position towards patriotic education, of course, but to indicate that without democratic consensus, Chinese international students’ thinking of educational content could deviate from educators’ original objectives.

Pluralism could be another example. International education promotes it to achieve democratic values. However, from the party-statists’ perspective, it manifests the paradox and hypocrisy of democracy. Gao (2021) displayed an example of one Chinese international

student with this view who argues against the criticism that Chinese international students prefer to confine themselves within the Chinese cultural circle:

Doesn't multiculturalism respect the freedom of all cultures? If so, we Chinese wish to have our own culture and have a circle defined by that; isn't this our cultural freedom? If you are against such freedom of mine, you are against the multiculturalism you purport. (p. 3)

Thus, the emphasis on diversity and freedom could lead to an unexpected result against liberal democracy, as one Chinese international student interviewed by Gao (2021) articulated:

Liberal democracy has a major paradox: it does not allow the opposite of democracy and freedom. But some people would choose—I would choose—not to have freedom. This is my democracy. If you do not agree with me, that might be your democracy, but it actually contradicts your ideology. (p. 3)

If international education overlooks this philosophical dilemma and ignores building the philosophical foundation of democratic consensus for Chinese international students, the practice of democratic values could instead lead to their cognitive dissonance, which prevents them from identifying with liberal democracy. The neglect of this philosophical dilemma, coupled with simply associating the opposite opinions toward liberal democracy from Chinese international students as “brainwashed” by the CCP, is sometimes perceived as Western arrogance, and would even harm those who support liberal democracy from the beginning. This might be one reason why some Chinese international students developed a double-dissident identity after studying, thinking, and practicing democracy.

Double-Dissent Identity: Fight Against Hegemony?

Lu (2017), who studied politics in a doctoral program at St Antony's College, Oxford, describes a small group of Chinese international students in his essay. He named this group of students, including himself, "double dissidents"—that is, dissidents of China's system, while also having skepticism of liberal democracy. Lu (2017) chose "the least likely cases in which the individuals may develop dissonance with the liberal democratic system" (p. 5) in his interview and emphasized the characteristics of this identity:

They studied politics or social sciences abroad, with an enthusiasm for public affairs, and interacted comfortably with the local community. When returning to China, their family backgrounds or networks did not provide them with particularly privileged social positions. Following the narratives above, these individuals should be ideal candidates for converting to liberal values. Nonetheless, these individuals developed a similarly critical attitude towards liberal democracy. (p. 5)

Not surprisingly, all of these four double-dissidents chose to return to China, despite still supporting liberal values to some degree. Yet little research has paid particular attention to this group of students; the small sample of Lu's (2017) study is hard to generalize the correlation between this double-dissident identity and returning decision. Nevertheless, Lu's finding still corresponds to my analysis in Chapter 2, that is, the host country must have a very strong attraction to pull Chinese international students to stay while liberal democracy is losing this attraction. If liberal democracy cannot attract its most potential and ideal supporters, how could it win the hearts of other students, especially party-statist and neoliberals who are skeptical or indifferent to liberal democracy? If students choose to stay in a democratic country not because they support democratic values, isn't it a potential damage

to liberal democracy itself?

Hence, democratic education must attach more importance to this nuanced double-dissident attitude. The question presented by Lu (2017)—“why do years of lived experience in a liberal democracy fail to validate but rather largely shake our belief in it?” (p. 1)—is not merely his reflection but should also be the reflection of international education or even democratic societies. As Lu (2017) stressed:

Therefore, what they rebelled against was not the existence of a common value.

Rather, it was the sense of superiority, the idea that there was no alternative, the belief in liberal democracy as an orthodoxy, which they found frustrating in their transnational encounters. They were disillusioned with Western liberal democracy, because it did not live up to the promise of being a liberating force. Instead, it delimited the possibility of democracy to a particular spatial dimension, geographical distribution, institutional design and historical foundation, which denied the participation of other regions, population, institutions and memories. What their dissidence underlined is the eternal tension between cosmopolitan commitment of contemporary democratic values that reflect the universal state of human existence, and the parochial politics that excludes particular subjects from reclaiming the citizenship of a global community. (p. 13)

Thus, this dilemma that Chinese double-dissidents face is also generated from the limitation of international education that I discussed in the last section, especially the geopolitical influence that excludes Chinese international students from democratic values and the unchallengeable democratic consensus that might be seen as Western hegemony. If liberal democracy respects diverse opinions and critical thinking, then it should also welcome

the challenge directed towards itself. It must give up a China–West dichotomy that perceives any reflections on Western democracy from Chinese international students as a remnant from their past lives, “haunted by the fears and shadows of a police state and ideological propaganda” (Lu, 2017, p. 1). I still remember the concept of “genetic fallacy” learned in my master’s class, which addressed my confusion when I struggled between supporting democratic values and rejecting Western hegemony. I realized that I should not give up my position merely because these democratic values are generated from the Western history and promoted by the West. And vice versa, the reflections and opinions against liberal democracy should not be ignored or oppressed because they are from Chinese international students, even these opinions seem too similar to China’s official clichés criticizing the Western model.

Reflecting on my own experience, I have also noticed that I am often tempted to speak for or justify the current state of China, and reluctant to perceive the CCP as pure evil. This comes not from my support for the CCP but rather from my skepticism that my support for liberal democracy is because of insufficient knowledge and experience. Hence, when I explain the reason behind the status quo of China, I am eager to hear a logical and deliberated opposition that I could argue with to test and confirm my liberal position. It is all too easy to criticize the CCP, while building a mature and mutual understanding of both China and liberal democracies is hard. Chinese living experiences provide not merely bullets to shoot the CCP but also a lens to understand China, which many Western scholars cannot have. For those double-dissidents, it is the gap between an idealistic expectation of liberal democracy and the flawed implementation in Western countries that makes them skeptical (Lu, 2017). One of my professors once said that democracy in the West is not perfect, but that is a reason

to improve it rather than abandon it, which motivated me greatly. In this case, the opinions of double-dissidents should be heard and valued rather than marginalized and questioned as “defending an authoritarian regime.” If so, from an optimistic perspective, these double-dissidents who return to China might be a power to engage in Chinese political change in the future and enrich the connotation of liberal democracy, just like sea turtles that can adapt and utilize two different environments.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delved into the overseas context that provides the opportunity for Chinese international students to learn and live in a democratic country. Instead of perceiving exposure to democracy as an inevitable turning point for Chinese international students to reconstruct their political identities, I argued that it is hard for international education to facilitate them identifying with liberal democracy. I presented two main dimensions with five barriers in this chapter. These barriers hinder Chinese international students from absorbing diverse information and perspectives on controversial issues while keeping them skeptical of liberal democracy. Without enough democratic knowledge, practice, and consensus, it is less likely that international education reaches the “critical mass” to interrupt the entrenched patterns and provide variable alternatives to facilitate radical changes in political identities.

To further illuminate the difficulty of reconstructing political identity, I first analyzed obstacles created by the “fishbowl” of China. On the one hand, with digital technology, the Chinese government extends its political control even under the Western context. On the other hand, nationalism shaped by the fishbowl suppressed different opinions on controversial topics through peer pressure. The combination of the top-down and bottom-up

oppression hinders open discussion greatly, leading to self-censorship for both students and universities. Hence, as Human Rights Watch (2021) alerted, academic freedom in democracies is eroded not by outright repression from the CCP but rather self-censorship because “many colleges and universities around the world with ties to the Chinese government, or with large student populations from China, are unprepared to address threats to academic freedom in a systematic way” (p. 22).

This grim situation is aligned with the dilemma of international education itself that creates other barriers for international education to promote liberal identity. Unlike public education, the high cost of international education ensures its neoliberal nature is driven by self-interest rather than social justice: international students seek social capital, universities seek financial gain, and states seek national profit. Under the circumstance, international education cannot transcend geopolitics as its frame is methodological nationalism (Tannock, 2013). Democratic values in education are framed on the national level, whereas international students are excluded. The clear boundary between “us and them” would further trigger and amplify the salience of the national identity of Chinese international students, which makes them sensitive to the political conflicts between China and the West, especially to Western hegemony under the China rising context. In this context, liberal democracy has been located as the main conflict between China and the West. Instead of a universal value derived from humanity, the Chinese government has successfully portrayed liberal democracy as a Western product of Western culture and history, with limited use or value elsewhere. Unfortunately, international education did not address this problem adequately. By simply perceiving skepticism on liberal democracy from Chinese international students as “brainwashed” by the CCP or supporting authoritarianism, democratic education fails to help

Chinese international students separate their national identity and political identity but makes democratic consensus an orthodoxy that cannot be challenged. It is this arrogant attitude that disappoints those Chinese international students who identified with liberal democracy and makes them become double-dissidents (Lu, 2017).

At the end of this chapter, I paid great attention to this new political identity developed in international education: double-dissident identity. While these double-dissidents were seen as “ideal candidates” (Lu, 2017, p. 5) to convert to liberal values, years of democratic living experiences shake their liberal position and fail to attract them to stay in democracies. This phenomenon deserves serious attention if democratic education wants to foster the identification of liberal democracy for Chinese international students, as it warns the problems in practice. But there is no need to be too pessimistic; at least they have not fully given up liberal values, according to Lu’s (2017) interview. In this case, I optimistically believe that even if they return to China, they might be a transformative force on Chinese democratization—even though it might not be the way the West expects. But these double-dissidents’ deep understanding of both China and democracies may shed new light on liberal democracy as well.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION—THE PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT AND COMPASSION

“But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

(Huxley, 1932/2000, p. 290)

This final chapter includes three sections. I first provide a summary that synthesizes claims in the previous three chapters and connects my argument to the main research question. Reflecting on my personal experience as a Chinese international student, the summary leads to some implications that I would suggest for international education. The emphasis of these implications is a pedagogy of discomfort and compassion. A further reflection is given at the end of this chapter, providing additional context for the research process to uncover potential limitations in my study. Hopefully the limitations could also provide insights and directions for future research.

Summary

Why do more and more Chinese international students return to China—an authoritarian state without adequate freedom—after studying in a democratic country? This question was buried in my mind before I came to Canada. All of the course material during my Master’s program was based on the consensus that democracy is the best form of society and an ideal structure to achieve social justice, which further provoked my curiosity about this question. While Martha Nussbaum (2016) claimed that “most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic” (pp. 10-11), the returning trend

of Chinese international students, from what I heard and saw, seems quite the opposite. From recent studies exploring the motivation of returning, democracy is not a priority when many Chinese overseas students consider returning to China (Zhai et al., 2019), and it is not even a priority when they consider staying in the host country (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Yu, 2016). Cheung and Xu (2015) studied Chinese international students in elite American universities, indicating that for those who want to stay in the United States after graduation, gaining international experience is the most important reason, which orientates the Chinese market and implies that the decision of staying in the host country is temporary and merely another strategy of returning to China. As an overseas degree is no longer a golden ticket to entering the Chinese competitive job market, staying in a foreign country for several years to accumulate international working experiences becomes another way to improve competitiveness when returning in the future. However, I still noticed a subtle trend from my experience and other studies: the more Chinese international students identify with liberal democracy, the stronger their desire to stay abroad (Gao, 2021; Li, 2020), because they would be more sensitive and less satisfied in an unfree Chinese political environment.

Hence, I suggested that a subjective factor—political identity—should be considered when exploring student mobility, while the group of Chinese international students is heterogeneous because of different political identities. Borrowing the idea from Gao (2021) and Lu (2017), I proposed four patterns of political identity: party-statists who support the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), neoliberals who care more for self-interest than political environment, liberals who identify with liberal democracy, and double-dissidents who question the political system both in China and the West. I argued that one underlying factor contributing to the increasing trend of Chinese returnees is that it is hard

for democratic education to transform party-statists and neoliberals into liberals while some liberals develop double-dissident identity after studying abroad. Here, it is noteworthy to highlight two points.

First, although I described these identities as separate dimensions and mentioned that party-statist and neoliberal identities are relatively stable, I am not conceiving them as static states but dynamic processes. My descriptions of different political identities are idealized patterns. While the paper focused on larger trends with pure and salient patterns, it is likely for one Chinese international student to have nuanced inclinations or amalgamated patterns rather than one pure political identity. Especially, as neoliberal identity is conceived as a form of subjectivity that transcends a pure political identity (Teo, 2018), it might be compatible with other identities. However, since liberal identity bears the concern of public good and individual liberty instead of focusing on self-interest and collectivism, it is simultaneously incompatible with neoliberal and party-statist identities.

Second, my position is by no means perceiving political identities as the direct reason Chinese international students return to China but a vital factor that impacts how they weigh different push-pull factors in the decision-making process. Nor does my particular focus on political identity imply that other factors such as culture, language, and family ties are insignificant. My attention is driven by the variable factor in history, and the concern that politics, the equally crucial factor compared to others, lacks equal and comprehensive consideration as cultural and racial conflicts seem to cover ideological conflicts nowadays. However, in China, all those factors—culture, race, and political ideology—are intertwined. Hence, I paid great attention to describing different political identities to illuminate the influence of the continuously ideological indoctrination in China and warn of a potential

failure of democratic education.

In order to demonstrate this potential failure, I borrowed from coherence theory to evaluate the condition of reconstruction: only when education reaches a “critical mass” that interrupts the previous patterns and provides variable alternatives could reconstruction happen (Davis et al., 2020). To Chinese international students, the previous patterns are those political identities constructed in the Chinese context before going abroad, and one alternative is liberal identity promoted by democratic education. However, under the influence of the CCP’s political control, party-statist identity and neoliberal identity are entrenched and stable. Inspired by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow (2010), I developed a metaphor of a “fishbowl” to emphasize the influence of political control in China. A relatively “soft” but rigorous censorship employed through digital technology built a shared perspective that forms the reality when Chinese students observe the world, facilitating nationalism and neoliberalism. The metaphor of fishbowl bears the similar philosophy of Plato’s *cave* that emphasizes one’s reality might only be the shadow of the real world, and education is the process to pull people out of the cave and push them to see the truth. However, the *cave* implies a clear boundary between authentic reality and fake reality, whereas the *fishbowl* of Hawking and Mlodinow implies reality is built by perspectives without true or false nature—choosing which perspective is merely a matter of “taste.” My intention of adopting the concept of fishbowl to illustrate the situation of Chinese international students is to give up an outsider’s assumption that merely deems political control as something so constricted and oppressive that everyone in China would hate it and want to get rid of. In contrast, party-statists and neoliberals might have developed a set of meaning to endure, accept, adapt, or internalize the status quo, through which they “stitch”

themselves into the official rhetoric and the party-state. From this lens, supporting the legitimacy of the CCP or liberal democracy is conceived as a matter of “taste” derived from culture and history. If international education wants to reconstruct the party-statist and neoliberal identities, it must first breed skepticism to shake those meanings and then foster another taste—the preference for liberal democracy. In other words, reconstructing political identities means shattering the fishbowl and replacing it with another perspective.

However, on the one hand, the fishbowl is enhanced by digital technology. On the other hand, the dilemma of international education undermines its power to shatter the fishbowl. Moreover, even if international education has the power, is it ethical to shatter the fishbowl since it is not merely about thinking ability but emotion and self-esteem? As Denton (2014) indicated, “whether living in autocratic or democratic states, most people accept prevailing narratives, not because they are unthinking or passive, but because their personal identities, subjectivities, economic well-being, and, yes, dreams are intertwined with those narratives” (p. 267). But how can we ensure the reconstructing process stems from the good purpose of education rather than another “prevailing narrative” that manifests Western hegemony? The pedagogy of discomfort and critical hope advocated by Boler (1999, 2003) could be an effective way to address those questions, which gives the implications that I will discuss in the following section.

Implications

As my research progressed, the more interviews of Chinese international students I read from academic studies and news reports, the clearer an absence of equal and mutual understanding I noticed. On the one hand, the fishbowl created by the CCP compressed the whole world into a twisted lens, distorting communication between China and the West by

simplifying every conflict into a binary of good and evil or victim and bully.

On the other hand, discourse from the West is not much better. Under a binary of authoritarian and democratic, the CCP is portrayed as an evil political power, while Chinese international students who share similar opinions are perceived as “brainwashed” or “supporting authoritarianism” (Lu, 2017; Wang, 2019). Too many details, such as different political identities and intentions, are missed in this simplified process, which hinders mutual understanding to a great extent. However, the worst is not the lack of mutual understanding but the simplifying mind erasing the desire to understand before drawing a conclusion, which rejects the chance of change and even pushes some liberals to transform into double-dissidents and return to China. To break this dilemma, international education could change first, starting from one classroom, by putting effort into knowing China and Chinese international students from an equal position. All the meanings, perceptions, and emotions of different political identities I depicted in this paper are for this reason—to promote mutual understanding. Boler (1999) stressed:

The path of understanding, if it is not to “simplify,” must be tread gently. Yet if one believes in alternatives to the reductive binaries of good and evil, “purity and corruption,” one is challenged to invite the other, with compassion and fortitude, to learn to see things differently, no matter how perilous the course for all involved. (pp. 175-176)

This might not be a pleasant process, but with compassion, it might lead us to the world we want, a world where we could embrace more people freely outside of the fishbowl. During this process, a necessity is the pedagogy of discomfort aiming “to disrupt emotional habits and equilibrium in searching of reevaluating attachments to rigid notions of self and

world” (Boler, 2003, p. 120). From my understanding, this is also a pedagogy to avoid Western hegemony and evaluate ethics since discomfort is mutual rather than merely employed on students. Teachers are also prepared to be challenged and disrupted during the process to reconstruct themselves. Liberal identity, as the goal of reconstruction, is also reconstructed into openness, uncertainty, and infinite possibility based on the consensus of public good, which means humbly drawing wisdom from reflection and experience, even those derived from an authoritarian context. By reconstructing together, compassion and empathy would emerge. This is important because reconstruction—shattering the previous worldview—is a “grief” experience (Zaliwska & Boler, 2019), while “a precondition of productive discussion is that both parties believe each other to be benevolent” (Hail, 2015, p. 322). Compassion and empathy could build an inclusive climate to erase the boundary of “us and them,” cultivating “the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’ and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 7).

Reconstruction is an ongoing process. I know this well: returning to previous certainty is a huge attraction when struggling in uncertainty. Hence, a critical hope is always helpful. It is noteworthy that there is a radical difference between critical hope and naïve hope, which Boler (2003) distinguished clearly:

Naïve hope may be defined as those platitudes that directly serve the hegemonic interest of maintaining the status quo, particularly by espousing humanist rhetoric. ... In contrast to naïve hope, critical hope recognizes that we live within systems of inequality, in which privilege, such as white and male privilege, comes at the expense of the freedom of others. ... Critical hope entails a responsibility—a willingness to be

fully alive in the process of constant change and becoming. (p. 128)

In this case, both the hegemony of the West and the hegemony of the CCP need to be recognized. I conceive the advantage of liberal democracy is its openness to diversity, respect for marginal groups, receptivity to criticism, willingness to self-reflect, and courage to challenge the status quo, which may lead to the freedom and flourish of mind and soul. If there is no chance for Chinese international students to experience those, what is the difference from living in an authoritarian country?

It is the belief that the world we live in is complex, diverse, uncertain, and even unfair that leads us to abandon the obsession with arrogance derived from self-certainty, and it is because creating division is easy while mutual understanding is hard that leads us to abandon the obsession with simplification and to tolerant discomfort to come across consensus. Only from here can reconstruction really happen.

Limitations and Future directions

There are some limitations in this paper. First, as mentioned, my position is inclined towards liberals. During my writing process, I have been aware that even the research question starts from this perspective. It is because I have already assumed that living in a democratic country is better than living in China that I am intrigued by the increasing returning trend rather than perceiving it as normal. Hence, when describing other political identities, especially party-statist and neoliberal identities, biases are inevitable. Considering my intention is to promote mutual understanding, my position might hinder me from understanding them deeper, especially without a thorough interview. Moreover, if I use the same criteria in my paper to test my liberal identity, is it based on enough information, discussion, and practice? If my liberal identity is not mature enough, it is likely that I have

ignored some more rooted and nuanced divergences between different political identities. Especially as this paper was written during the COVID-19 pandemic, my friendship circle, my living experiences, and my ability to engage in democratic practice in Canada were limited to a great extent. As a result, it is hard for me to detect more details of Chinese international students' lives, nor can I be highly sensitive to their emotions. In order to deal with this problem, I read countless interviews of Chinese international students from other studies and news reports. It might be helpful to some degree. However, some contexts and information of those interviews, such as participants' personalities, emotions, and expressions, are still missing, which cannot eliminate the limitation. Thus, the nature of my paper is explorative instead of definitive, which could serve as a starting point for more systematic inquiries in the future.

Second, although I stressed that political identity is understood as a developmental process rather than merely a status, my paper did not explore how the interaction between these political identities and other factors affects the development. For example, how does social identity (e.g., gender, class, etc.) impact political identity? Would cross-cultural ability affect political identity? Since the transnational environment is complex, the development of political identity should not be understood as an isolated and separated process. However, my current project does not support me in conducting further research. Otherwise, the dynamic feature of the development of political identities could be more apparent. Exploring key elements and the turning point of the construction or reconstruction of political identity could provide more implications for democratic education, which could be a direction for future studies.

Closing Words

One night near the end of this project, I got a phone call from mainland China at around 2:00 a.m. It was from the local government to inform me to vote for selecting the National People's Congress deputies, which is surprising since the last time I got the chance to vote was still in my undergraduate school about 10 years ago. I told the staff, with a bit frustrated, that I could not vote since I was currently abroad. Immediately she answered: "Oh no worry, we can vote for you." I was shocked. How could they vote for me? What is the meaning of the election if they vote for me? Even more ironic, I did not get any information about the candidates. "What a hoax for show!" I thought. I responded immediately: "No thanks, I want to give up voting." This time, it was her that seemed surprised. She repeated my request to confirm again and finally said, "OK."

Thinking about it later, I began to doubt my first reaction. Did the staff mean that they would vote on my behalf while I could have my own decision? Why did I assume firmly, at that moment, that they would decide for me? When I immediately judged this surprising call as a performance, would a student with a party-statist identity perceive it as evidence of the improvement of the Chinese election system? If so, how different our world could be, and of course, how different our decisions to stay or return could be.

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