

## **When Huntington Meets China:**

### **Analysis of Chinese People's Desire for Political Participation**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the discussion of the potential for change in state-society relations in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, taking Chinese people's desire for political participation as an entry point. Employing a critical reading and analysis of Huntington's theory in the Chinese context; it finds that Chinese people's desire for political participation is high. and as Huntington's theory, Education level, as one factor that relates to socio-economic status that affects this, is the most influential. However, different from his theory, Income, as another factor, could not be used to explain differences in desire for political participation in this study. In the future, rising desire for political participation resulting from the predicted increase in higher education is a silent potential force capable of changing state-society relations.

**Keyword:** China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, desire for political participation, education, state-society relations.

## **Introduction**

There is a tendency in the literature to characterize China's state-society relations as “strong state, weak society.” For example, it has been argued that in the pre-reform era the state politically swallowed society, and that twenty years after the Reform and Opening Up the relationship between the two had become a symbiosis one. From this state, a situation of (resistive/defensive) reform from above and democratization from outside the system taking place alongside reform from within the system was expected to stimulate the progress of the former.<sup>1</sup> However, thirty years on from the Reform and Opening Up, what potential for future change or non-change can be observed? This paper questions “strong state, weak society” China as a formulaic impression and seeks to investigate the potential for future change or non-change from the side of society.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces and conceptualizes political participation as the entry point for observing state-society relations. The second section

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<sup>1</sup> Masaharu Hisida.(2000;87) “symbiosis relationship” refers to the vague boundary between the two, the mutual incursions of one into the other, and the relationship being different case-by-case.

builds on Huntington's theory for the research of political participation in developing countries, as well as Japanese research on political participation in China, to focus on Chinese people's desire for political participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and related factors. The third section analyzes the data on the connection between desire for political participation and each of the related factors. The fourth section uses the results of the data analysis and further examination to investigate the direction development in the future. Finally, this paper's conclusions are drawn and issues for future study raised.

## **I. State-society relations and political participation**

One way of looking at the relationship between state and society in the modern era is democratic relations. That is, society as the field where citizens' interests are expressed and collected, and the state as the field where the interests of participant citizens are adjusted. Therefore, a distinction is made between states open to citizens and those not, and societies where there a large number of citizens actively participating and those where there are not.<sup>2</sup>

Among this participation, this paper focuses on political participation. Political participation is defined as activities of ordinary citizens expected to exert an influence on the policy decisions of the government (Verba&Nie, 1972; Huntington, 1976).<sup>3</sup> Forms of political participation are usually divided into four modes: voting, other election activities (except voting), individual contact with officials and politicians, and local movements (political movements with the cooperation of others to resolve local issues, including citizen movements and resident movements, etc.) (Verba, 1971).<sup>4</sup> However, in political systems where the power of political participation is not widely distributed, there is also a fifth mode: violence (Huntington).

Building on the conceptual definitions of Huntington and Verba, this paper makes a further distinction between actions of political participation and the *desire* for political participation. "Political participation" is therefore taken to refer to both action and desire. Whereas "desire" is used to refer to an individual's will for political participation, "action" refers to an action that is actually taken. Furthermore, while participation can be divided into self-motivated and mobilized types, in this paper no strict distinction is made between the two.

As China does not have a democratic political system, it is possible to theoretically categorize the state as not open to citizen participation relatively, and society as having few citizens who actively participate. However, political participation in China can be observed to have changed over time.

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<sup>2</sup> Takashi Inoguchi. (1990;59)

<sup>3</sup> Ikuo Kabashima.(1997;3)

<sup>4</sup> Ikuo Kabashima.(1997;7)

- (1) One of the characteristics of the totalitarianism regime of the Mao Zedong era can be said to have been mass political movements. During the era of planned economy, over a long period of time the state maintained a position of absolute supremacy in the social power system. The populace and society were in a position of weakness, and political participation was realized through state mobilization.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, during the Mao era “the mass line” was the government's guiding principle. It called for policy to be “from the masses, to the masses”. Examples of “mass” policy are the creation of agricultural communes in the 1950s and the Great Cultural Revolution in the 1960s-1970s. These were mass movements aimed at “mass class struggle.”<sup>6</sup> Such policy processes were consistently mobilized political participation.
- (2) The post-Mao era saw a political shift to authoritarianism and an economic shift to a market economy. Chiefly in the 1980s, there was a period of relative liberalism, where self-motivated political movements took place. For example, actions of political participation such as discussions among intellectuals and student movements revolving around political reform were common<sup>7</sup>.
- (3) In response to this, from the 1990s the state is generally considered to have directed the eyes of the entire society towards economic development and away from politics.

However, what developments have there been from the 1990s until now, thirty years since the Reform and Opening Up began? If we consider the political discussions that have taken place on the internet in recent years, and the influence of public opinion voiced on the internet on government policy decisions, then it is impossible to deny there has been change. It is necessary that we give focus to Chinese people's political participation, and investigate the potential for change in state-society relations.

In sum, the first section introduced Political Participation as an entry point to research the relations between state and society, conceptualized Political Participation and distinguished between Desire for Political Participation and Action of Political Participation. In addition, it reviewed how political participation in China has changed over time. In the second section, a review of previous studies of political participation will be used to establish this study's methods and its position relative to existing research.

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<sup>5</sup> Jinhe Li, Feng Xu.(2009;46)

<sup>6</sup> Tomoyuki Kojima(1985;10,12). “From the masses,” refers to the party guiding the will of the masses, as expressed in the daily direct communication between the party and the masses. “To the masses,” refers to the announcement and explanation of the decisions reached through the aforementioned process, and the guidance by the party of the masses in subsequent policy implementation.

<sup>7</sup> Satoshi Amako(1989;206)

## **II. Huntington's theory and Japanese research on political participation**

The second section first reviews Huntington's research and defines what is meant by "Huntington's theory". Then Japanese scholars' research on Chinese people's political participation will be reviewed in order to demonstrate the dual necessity of applying "Huntington's theory" and focusing on Desire for Political Participation in the research of political participation in China.

### **1 Huntington's theory**

In considering political participation in a China experiencing social change as a result of rapid economic development, Huntington's research is of great relevance. With regard to micro-/individual level analysis, Huntington observes:

"The effects of economic development on political participation are entirely mediated through socio-economic status and organizational involvement... In more economically developed societies, more people have higher incomes, more wealth, better education, and more highly skilled occupations... Each factor tends to have an independent effect of varying strength on political participation. In general, income appears to be very strongly related to political participation and education even more strongly... Education and other status variables are, however, more clearly related to some forms of political participation than to others."<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, "Huntington's theory" refers to the proposition that in a society experiencing rapid economic development, socio-economic status – including education and income <sup>9</sup>– is an important contributing factor to individual political participation, and that education exerts the most obvious influence. Huntington's research, carried out in the 1970s, did not include China as a subject of study.

### **2 Japanese research on political participation**

The response of Japanese scholars to the absence of China in Huntington's research differs according to field. While in the field of political studies, the education factor is "ignored" and we see research void of Huntington's theory, these are dealt with in the field of sociology.

(1) Scholarship addressing political participation in China has seen a dramatic increase in recent years. The following is an outline of research in the fields of political studies and sociology. From the perspective of political studies scholarship, political participation, including grassroots elections, petitions, and demonstrations, can be divided into two frameworks: standard political participation decision-making (by state or society) and non-standard "event subject" (what sort of

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<sup>8</sup> Huntington.(1976;79-81)

<sup>9</sup> Huntington argues that occupation is also a factor, and distinguishes skilled and unskilled occupations. However, he does not define what constitutes "skilled" or "unskilled" occupations and does not include occupation in his analysis. As it is difficult to make this distinction, occupation is not included as a factor in this paper.

goal and properties)

(a) In the first, the process of grassroots elections is analyzed as an example of standard political participation. These are a case of a clear state-led process, in which the will of society is not well expressed. For example, although village-level elections take place, a 2002 official document called for village-level cadres and village committees to be united as one, with the result that the free decision of villagers is restricted (Tanaka 2005).

(b) Analysis of the expression of social intention looks at non-standard modes of political participation, including mass incidents (demonstrations) and petitions. These modes involve special groups assembled for a special purpose, and in quantitative terms do not constitute mass awareness. Subjects of research are characterized by economic goals and a disadvantaged position. For example, in the case of petitions, because “at all levels of government a variety of methods are used to reduce petitions,” petitioning “has no effect relative to its high cost” (Mouri 2012). “The majority of farmer petitions regarding land seek only satisfactory land guarantee. It only requires for the compensation question to be resolved for petitions to cease.” Resistance movements escalating from this type of petition are the issue at the grassroots level. (Ren 2012)

(2) In the field of sociology, the factor of education has been made a subject of research. For example:

One body of research describes for us changes in Chinese society and social values as seen in education (Makino 2006). In addition, in the recently popular study of the Chinese middle classes, there has been research using quantitative methods to investigate whether or not the middle classes can become the driving force behind a change in the system (Sonoda 2012). This research divides the middle classes into “old” and “new,” and suggests that a greater number of the “new” middle class can be observed to have a higher level of education. Furthermore, it argues that while this groups' political attitude displays a strong “dissatisfaction with corruption and democracy in China,” “political participation in the middle class is weak.”

However, if we consider these two lines of research, the first deals with the macro-level and not the micro, while the second looks at the individual level but does not test the correlation between education and political participation.

In light of this, Huntington's theory and Japanese research on political participation in China can be considered from the following perspectives.

Firstly, we must consider the independent variable of the education factor. As described above, there exists Japanese political studies research that omits “Huntington’s theory” that paid attention to the education factor, sociological research that includes the education factor but does not make a clear connection between it and politics, and Huntington's research which omits China.

This paper is an attempt to fill this gap, through a critical reading of Huntington's theory in the Chinese context.

Secondly, it is with regard to dependent variables. This paper focuses on desire for political participation as the dependent variable. This is because Huntington's theory and existing research on political participation in China both focus on the dependent variable of action of political participation. Research on action of political participation is important as research on existing political actors and channels for political participation. However, in a context where there does not exist a system allowing a broad scope for real political participation by citizens, focusing solely on action of political participation leads to the following two problems. Firstly, by focusing only on the difficulty people face in taking real and standard action of political participation, in as far as "the effectiveness of action is weak," it is easy to come to the same conclusion as before: of a "strong state, weak society" situation. Secondly, it is not possible to judge people's desire for political participation, making it very likely that the potential for political participation – the direction of development – will be overlooked. Given these two points, the focus of this paper on desire for political participation can be considered necessary.

This paper uses a critical reading of Huntington's theory and data from the Asia Barometer to make a broad examination of the relationship between the factors of education and income and desire for political participation in society. It further investigates the potential direction of development of state-society relations in China in the third and fourth section.

### **III. Analysis**

In the third section, the database used, the method of analysis, and variables are explained.

#### **1 Data for analysis**

This paper uses the Asia Barometer 2006 China survey database to analyze the desire for political participation of Chinese people.<sup>10</sup>

The 2006 China survey took the 2005 China Statistical Yearbook as its base, and 2000 adults chosen from 100 cities and prefectures across mainland China as its subjects. The 2006 data is chosen for possessing the greatest number of effective sampling, and relatively reliable results. A summary of the details of the sampling is given below.

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<sup>10</sup> Asia Barometer: <https://www.asiabarometer.org/en/profile>

Asia Barometer is supervised by the Japanese political studies scholar Takashi Inoguchi, and covers 32 countries and regions in Asia.

**Table 1: Overview of China sampling in the 2006 survey**

	Number	Percent
Gender	2000	100.0
Female	985	49.3
Male	1015	50.7
Age group	2000	100.0
20-29	416	20.8
30-39	584	29.2
40-49	457	22.9
50-59	350	17.5
60-69	193	9.7
Educational group	2000	100.0
Low	995	49.8
Mid	488	24.4
High	517	25.9
Household income group	1990	99.5
Low	1366	68.3
Mid	300	15.0
High	324	16.2

While this paper is concerned with China, in order to understand its characteristics, comparison is made with data for some other countries and regions. The scale of sampling for each of the subject countries in the 2006 survey is as follows: South Korea 1023, Japan 1003, Mainland China 2000, Hong Kong 1000, Taiwan 1009, Vietnam 1000, and Singapore 1038.

## **2 Method of analysis and variables**

Analysis is performed using multiple regressions, and the variables are as follows.

### **(1) Dependent variable**

As mentioned above, in this paper a distinction is made between the action of and desire for political participation. In the analysis, desire for political participation is used as dependent variable.

To evaluate desire for political participation, the question, “I’d like you to tell me whether you have actually done any of these political actions,” is used. From among the activities mentioned, “signing a petition to improve conditions,” “joining in boycotts” and “attending lawful demonstrations” are used. Of the answer options, “have done,” “might do,” and “would never do,” the second (1pt) and third (0pt) are regarded as indications of desire for political participation for the purposes of analysis.

### **(2) Independent variables**

The factors of individual education and income are taken as independent variables.

For education, the question, “What is the highest level of education you have completed?”, is used. While the answer options were, 1 “Primary school or below”, 2 “Junior high school/Middle school”, 3 “High school/Vocational school”, 4 “College school”, 5 “University”, 6 “Graduate school or above”, for the purpose of analysis answer values are re-grouped into three categories: Low (Primary or below, 1pt), Mid (High school or equiv., 2pt), and High (Technical college or above, 3pt).

For income, an objective indicator is used, in the form of the question, “What was the total gross annual income of your household last year? (Chinese Yuan).” Answers were selected from the options: 1 “Less than 20000”, 2 “20000 - 30000”, 3 “30000 - 40000”, 4 “40000 - 50000”, 5 “50000 - 60000”, 6 “60000 - 70000”, 7 “70000 - 80000”, 8 “80000 - 90000”, 9 “90000 - 100000”, 10 “100000 - 110000”, 11 “110000 - 120000”, 12 “120000 - 130000”, 13 “130000 - 140000”, 14 “140000 - 150000”, 15 “150000 - 160000”, 16 “160000 - 170000”, 17 “170000 - 180000”, 18 “180000 - 190000”, 19 “190000 - 200000”, 20 “200000 or more.” These are divided into three categories: Low (1pt), Mid (2pt), and High (3pt).

### **(3) Controlling variables**

Age, grouped into ten-year ranges and gender are used as controlling variables.

## **IV. Results analysis and investigation**

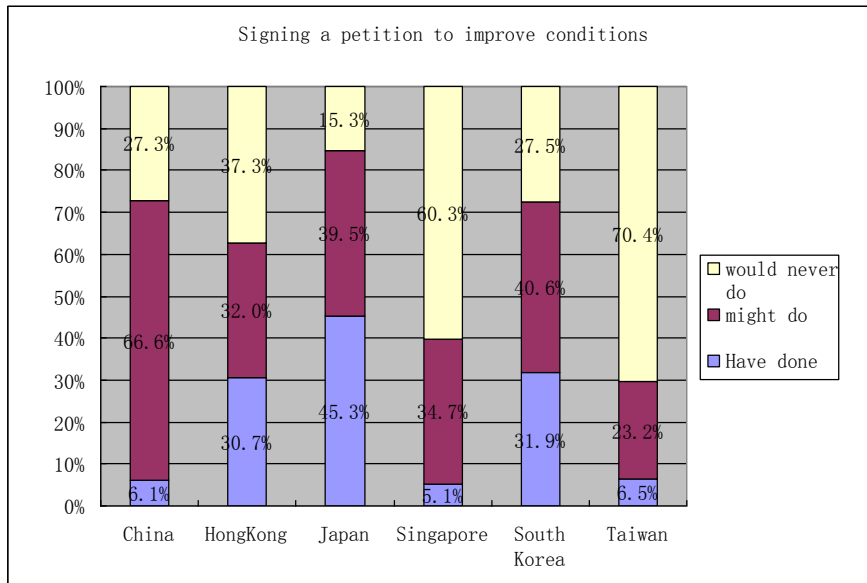
The fourth section analyzes the relationship between desire for political participation and related factor through analysis of the Asia Barometer on the level of individual and the micro. Then it forecasts the direction of change in education level in the future by investigating the Gross Enrolment Rate of Schools by level on the macro level. In this way, this section investigates potential change in state-society relations.

### **1 Micro-level analysis: Asia Barometer**

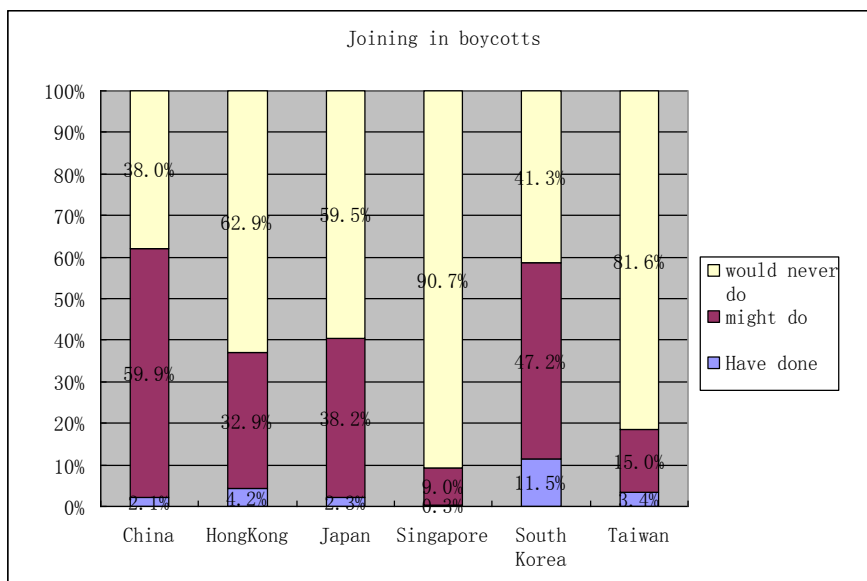
1. Firstly, let us look at some simple aggregate results concerning desire for political participation. The following graph shows the 2006 data for action and desire for each country and region.



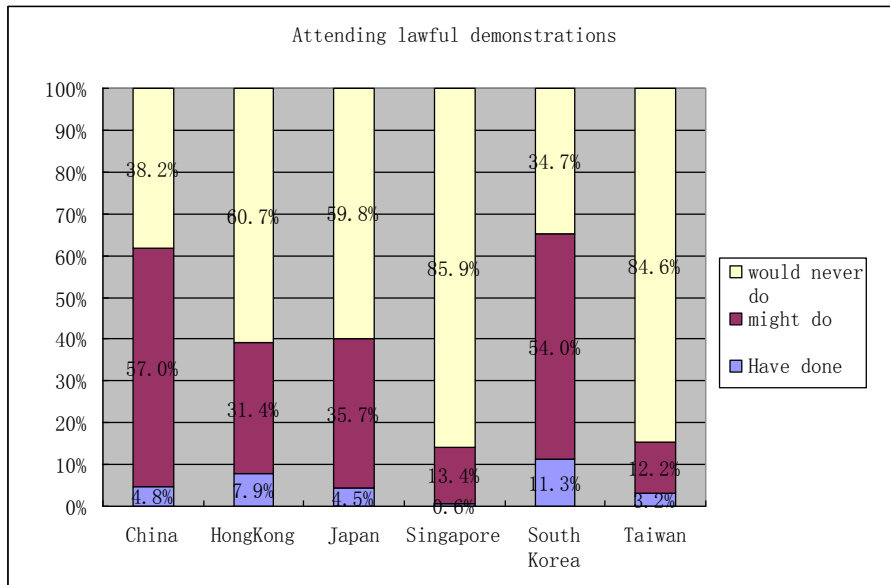
**Figure 1: Action and desire for political participation: Signing a petition**



**Figure 2: Action and desire for political participation: Joining in boycotts**



**Figure 3: Action and desire for political participation: Demonstrations**



From figures 1-3, we can deduce the following:

[1] Looking at actual experience of action of political participation, it is clear that China's results are overall low. However, the results for China are the same as those for other countries and regions in that the participatory rate is low for participatory modes where there is a system but where the individual has not been encouraged to take action. In other words, taken overall, the participation rates for boycotts and demonstrations are lower than those for signing petitions.

[2] In terms of desire for participation, China's results are quite high. That is to say, the value for “might do” is consistently higher than that for “would never do.” While in democratic countries/regions “have done” cannot be ignored as an expression of desire for participation, in authoritarian systems “might do” can be observed.<sup>11</sup>

If we pay attention only to action of political participation, then it is easy to draw the long-held “weak society” conclusion. However, we must pay attention to whether or not a high desire for political participation will maintain a weak society as it is.

In short, in China's current context, where there is not a system to allow for a broad action of political participation, despite such action being minimal, it is clear there is a high desire for participation.

2. Next, let us look at the connection between desire for political participation and the factors of education and income.

<sup>11</sup> There are a variety of categorizations for political systems, but this paper uses three categories, namely totalitarianism, authoritarian, and democratic systems.

As can be seen from Table 2, the factor of education holds a statistically significant positive correlation with the modes “sign a petition” and “boycott.” No such correlation can however be seen with “demonstration.” This shows that in the case of the first two modes, a higher level of education signifies a greater desire for political participation. In contrast, no statistically significant correlation can be seen between income and desire for political participation.

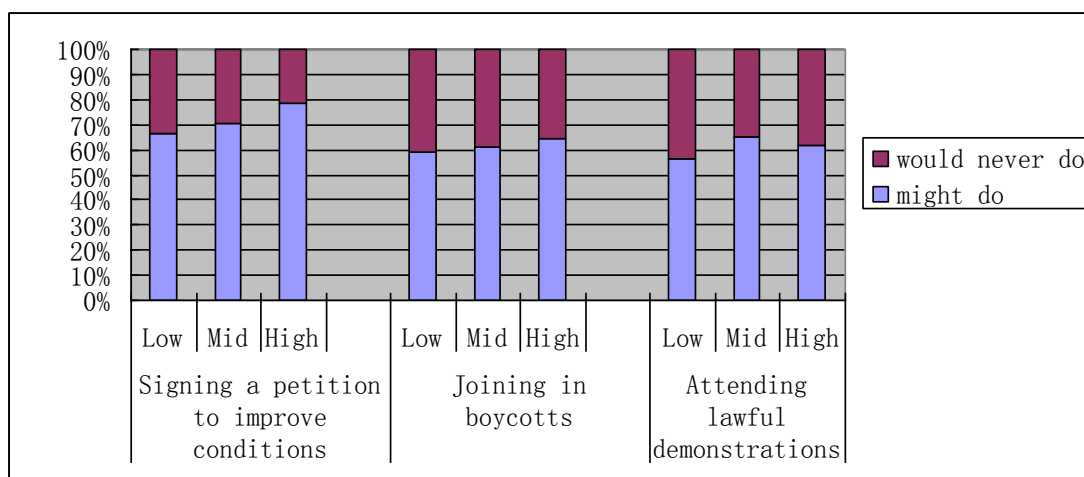
**Table 2: Multiple regressions of the desire for political participation**

	Signing in a petition		Joining a boycotts		Attending a demonstration	
	$\beta$	r	$\beta$	r	B	r
Education	.13***	.14***	.08**	.06**	-.02	.00
Household income	-.00	.05*	-.03	.00	.03	.03
Age	-.03	-.07**	.02	-.01	-.02	-.02
Gender	-.07	-.07**	-.01	-.01	-.02	-.02

$\beta$  : Standard partial regression coefficient      r: Pearson’s correlation coefficient  
 \*\*\*p<.001      \*\*p<.01      \*p<.05

3. Figure 4 shows desire for political participation by level of education. A consistent trend can be observed, whereby “participate” increases relative to “do not participate” with the rising level of education.

**Figure 4: Desire for political participation by level of education**



**Note:** This graph was created using the cross tabulation table. We found statistically significant correlation between Education Level and Petitions as well as between Education Level and Boycotts, while the correlation between Education Level and Demonstration was not significant in this survey.

In summary, we learn the following concerning desire for political participation and factors that influence it. Huntington pointed out that of the three indicators of socio-economic status that he defined, education displays the strongest correlation, but that whether that is a positive or

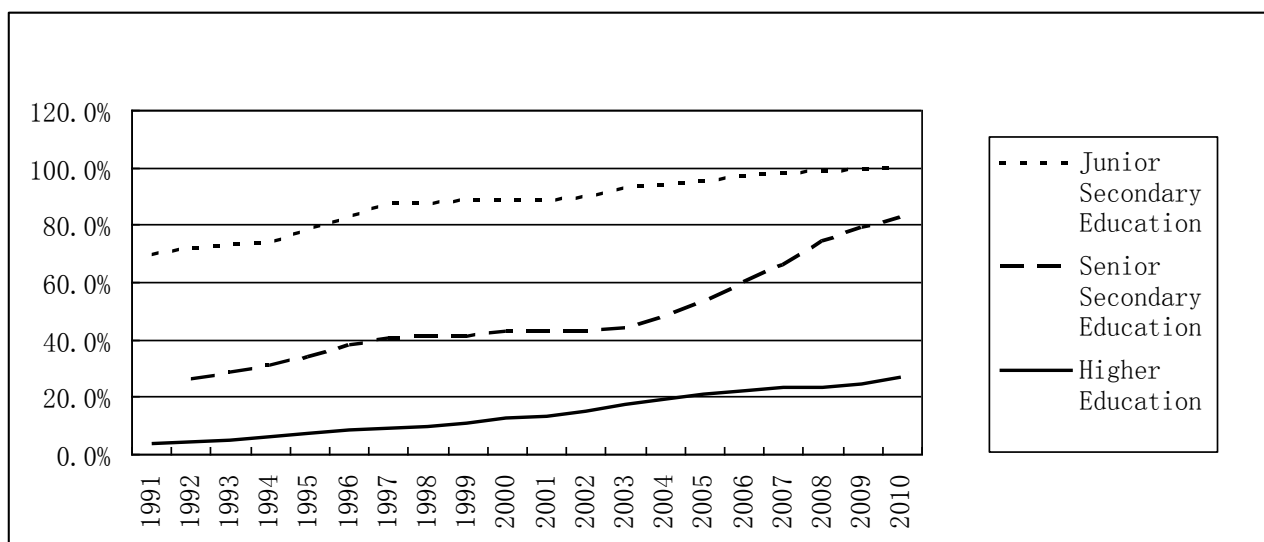
negative correlation may change according to the mode of participation, or even for the same mode may change with time. In the case of the data for China examined here, correlation with other factors could not be observed, but the correlation with education as being the strongest was consistent with Huntington's theory. Of the three participatory modes, two displayed a correlation whereby “the higher the level of education, the higher desire for political participation.”

## 2 Investigation using macro-level values

On the level of the individual, analysis of the Asia Barometer data showed a positive correlation between level of education and desire for political participation. The following are changes in relevant macro-level values over recent years.

Graph 1 shows the proportion of students progressing to each level of education for the years since 1991. Since 2003-4, there has been a rapid increase in progression to high school, and the number of students attending university has reached a very high level. Bearing in mind this macro-level trend, there is a possibility that the general increase in education level will precipitate an increase in desire for political participation. Such a trend has the potential to change the existing state-society relationship.

**Graph 1: Gross Enrolment Rate of Schools by level since 1991<sup>12</sup>**



## In conclusion

The above discussion represents a critical reading of Huntington's theory that in a society experiencing rapid economic development, education, as an aspect of socio-economic status, exerts a great influence on political participation, focusing on desire for political participation in

<sup>12</sup> The Department of Development and Planning of Ministry of Education. *The Education Statistics Yearbook of China for 2010*. People's Education Press, 2011. p15

authoritarian China after thirty years of high-speed economic growth.

## **1 Conclusions of this study**

Through the analysis of micro-level data from the Asia Barometer of 2006 and macro-level statistical data, the following results were reached.

Firstly, while the number of people with action of political participation is very limited, desire for said participation is extremely high. Secondly, in terms of socio-economic factors influencing this desire, education is more influential than income. Thirdly, given the macro-level trend of increasing higher education, desire for political participation can be expected to increase in the future. Finally, this potential for participation is one of the “probable forces for change”, holding the potential to become a force for society-initiated action changing state-society relations.

However, it is important to note that the desire for political participation affected by education discussed here is not necessarily a wish for direct democratization. Rather, through education the awareness of the whole of society is undergoing change.

## **2 Issues for further research**

This paper's conclusion leads to the question “can education change politics?”

While the conclusion reached above is that education exerts the greatest influence upon desire for political participation, the following issues remain. Firstly, desire for political participation was a dependent variable, but voting – the most standard of participatory modes – was not included as a part of political participation mode. Secondly, as for the independent variable of education, there is a need to consider in greater detail for who and what level of education influences desire for political participation. Thirdly, the mechanism by which education affects political participatory awareness was not considered. In terms of mechanism, Huntington argued that the education factor affects political attitudes, including sense of political effectiveness, and thereby influences political participation. However, it was not possible to observe such a mechanism through the data analyzed here. Fourthly, in terms of research technique, statistical methods need to be complemented with interview methods.

Social change begins with peoples' change in consciousness. Focusing on the expanding body of the highly educated allows us to observe not only change in mass awareness, but moreover change in society. For this reason, consideration of consciousness cannot be left out of analysis of Chinese politics henceforth.

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