

**Double Dissidents:  
Chinese Students Returning from the West**

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“Why were you defending an authoritarian regime?”

As we walked out of the seminar room, Tina, a friend from the class, raised the question. I was half shocked and half puzzled by this question. Recovering from my initial response, I soon realised that in the past two hours, we had been debating furiously on the “doomed future of democratization” and “crisis of liberal democracy”, and as usual, I was critical of mainstream political thought, especially regarding the definition of democracy itself.

Nonetheless, this critical perspective did not place me in the category of left-wing liberals contaminated by cynical postmodernism, as it would have done to my Euro-American counterparts. Another side of my identities tapped in: an international student who came to the “free world”, away from the “authoritarian regime” that once suppressed his or her rights of free speech. Following this logic, anything that I said against a liberal democratic regime must be a remnant from my “past life”, haunted by the fears and shadows of a police state and ideological propaganda. It was therefore not surprising that my “reflection on the western democracy” was thought to sound too much like my home country’s official cliché criticising the Western model.

As I dwelled longer on the question, I found myself restless. Was I defending the authoritarian regime unconsciously? Could I separate my national identity from my intellectual stance? And why didn’t I develop a stronger cognitive resonance with the “liberal world”? Almost immediately I realised that I was not alone. Years of conversations with my compatriots living abroad left me with a strikingly homogenous impression. Put simply, we are not enchanted. Why do years of lived experience in a liberal democracy fail to validate but rather largely shake our belief in it? I became a double dissident, both at home

and abroad, upholding the scepticism of China's regime, while the identity as a dissident of liberal democracy came unexpectedly.

Why is this so? I throw this uncomfortable question at myself, as well as to other expatriate groups whose homelands fall into the category of illiberal countries. This essay recognises such an emotional predicament while attempting to provide an answer. It firstly looks at the prevailing narratives that depoliticise the Chinese transnational individuals who have spent intensive time abroad, many of whom returning to China afterwards. The inquiry then draws its form from Czesław Miłosz's *Captive Mind*, which depicted the ideational transformations of Polish individuals who capitulated to the Communist regime. Here I follow the life stories of four individuals who are, under the predominant narratives, ideal candidates for becoming the "enlightened few", inspired by democratic values and opposing the authoritarian regime at home. However, among them, a critical attitude towards the West is as equally noted as in the minds of their compatriots. Instead of falling into the old binaries between good and evil, democratic and autocratic, internationalist and nationalist, their reflection and rebellion seem to imply a new form of dissent emerging out of global movements.

### **Depoliticising the Chinese Exodus**

Part of the reason for writing this essay comes from a dissatisfaction with the existing works on the political attitudes of Chinese transnational individuals. The attitudes of migrating individuals have long been considered as the sites for battling ideas. Joseph Nye associates the building of soft power with the interactions between international students and host countries, in which America can strategically export the liberal ideas into the minds of visitors, who, once returned to their countries, become or teach the elites who will hold power.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the home countries are alarmed by the influx of political remittances. They question the loyalty and patriotism of those individuals. The controversies around the recruitment of students by the Chinese embassy to monitor fellow Chinese in Australian universities, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Nye, Joseph S. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs, 2004. The period of Cold War witnessed the employment of educational exchanges as a Trojan-horse strategy to socialise the targeted audience into the ideologies of host countries.

political campaigns organised by Turkish politicians in the territories of European countries, demonstrate the growing concern about the ideational beliefs of the citizens abroad, accompanied by a mandate of extending the state control deep into another country.

Therefore, the possibility of altering the political attitudes of transnational individuals forms a strategic interest for both host and home countries. The usual assumption is that individuals are likely to be influenced by the norms and values of the host country; particularly in democratic contexts, this process is taken as natural, sensible and rational, where international visitors, through the lived exposure to liberal values and institutions, would develop a deeper understanding of democracy and bring it back home.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, empirical research suggests a nuanced if not entirely contrary story. Longitudinal studies of Chinese students abroad show little evidence of ideological change, while some of them developed an increased identification with China's political system.<sup>3</sup> Free access does not necessarily lead to acquisition of politically sensitive information or ideational changes. Zhang Weiwei, a political scientist advocating for China's model, summarised the phenomenon as "once you are abroad, you become patriotic".<sup>4</sup> In other words, far from being "democratisation migrants" or diffusors of values and ideas, the transnational individuals hold complicated feelings towards their host countries.<sup>5</sup> They are doubtful, critical, even prone to nationalistic sentiments, and their identifications with liberal democratic values are vague, fragile or at least conditional.

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<sup>2</sup>Williams, Ronald A. (2004) The Daily Work of Democracy. *International Educator* 13: 36. Han, D. and Zweig, D., 2010. Images of the world: Studying abroad and Chinese attitudes towards international affairs. *The China Quarterly*, 202, pp.290-306; Atkinson, C., 2010. Does soft power matter? A comparative analysis of student exchange programs 1980–2006. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 6(1), pp.1-22.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, I., 2016. Does International Mobility Change Chinese Students' Political Attitudes? A Longitudinal Approach. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 21(3), pp.321-337.

<sup>4</sup>Zhang, W., 2014. *China Surpasses*. Shanghai People Press. For Zhang, this provides a robust rejection of liberal democracy in China – a debate he was involved in with Francis Fukuyama. See in Fukuyama, F. and Weiwei, Z., 2011. The China model: A dialogue between Francis Fukuyama and Zhang Weiwei. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 28(4), pp.40-67.

<sup>5</sup> Rüländ, J., Kessler, C., & Rother, S. 2009. Democratization through International Migration? Explorative Thoughts on a Novel Research Agenda. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 8(2), 161–79.

Three explanatory narratives have emerged to account for this unexpected dissonance. First, the “isolation narrative” that portrays the Chinese communities as enclosed entities. Limited integration and exposure to the population and local institutions lessen the effect of socialisation.<sup>6</sup> The confinement of oneself to a circle of compatriots reduces the anxiety of marginalisation. Through the rosy retrospection of homeland, the feelings of nostalgia overshadow the courage to get to know the new world. Second, the “materialistic narrative” that often appears in media coverage on the extravagant lifestyles of Chinese overseas students.<sup>7</sup> The socialist country where this young generation grew up has opened its arms to market reform, and the outcome, when reflected among the youth abroad, is their devotion to luxurious and flamboyant pleasures rather than public affairs. This overly materialistic generation thus fails to engage with the cognitive transformation in a political sense. Third, the “stickiness narrative” that underlines the persistence of nationalist ideology and privileged socio-economic status. The reluctance to accept liberal values is deeply rooted in the ideological propaganda implanted in students’ formative years, and unlikely to be reversed in their time abroad<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the opportunities of moving transnationally still belong to the ruling class or commercial middle class, who are beneficiaries of the repressive regime at home, and therefore have no strong incentives against it.

Leaving aside the internal complexity within Chinese communities overseas, there exists a tendency to depoliticise the transnational individuals as if political questions are out of their lived experience abroad. Enclosed in the isolated or material-driven private life, or clinging to the ideological inheritance from their formative years, they are taken as blank in the public realm of host countries, without normative interest or critical reflection on their own worldviews. Their agency as a public subject is reduced and

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<sup>6</sup>Atkinson , 2010; Wilson, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Larmer, B., 2017 April. Alienation 101. *The Economist* 1843.

<sup>8</sup> See the patriotic education after 1989 in Zhao, S., 1998. A state-led nationalism: The patriotic education campaign in post-Tiananmen China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 31(3), pp.287-302.

minimalised to the extent that the resistance to liberal democracy is nothing more than an indication of personal marginalisation and intellectual ignorance, for which the subjects themselves should assume full responsibility. By discarding the dissent into the private realm, deeper questions are left unanswered: what lived experience of contemporary Western liberal democracy leads to the hesitation and rejection towards it? When does it cease to be appealing?

To explore some possible answers and test the three narratives above, I choose the least likely cases in which the individuals may develop dissonance with the liberal democratic system. 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. Here, I trace their lived experiences abroad and at home, and identify the events and moments that shaped such an attitude. Their names are made anonymous and replaced by their current professions: Banker, Functionary, Powerbroker and Journalist.<sup>9</sup> The selection hopes to illustrate the prevalence of ideological dissonance, while not intending to claim representativeness. Instead, their stories are being retold here to demonstrate a tendency – a tendency to reflect, rebel and reposition one's political attitude despite the regime that one lives in.

### 1. Banker

Banker transferred to a British university after one undergraduate year in China. His family prepared for sending him to the United States for high school, but he did not feel the urge to go abroad then. What changed his mind was his disappointment with China's higher education. Selfish careerists dominated his university. Banker recounted one occasion: most of his classmates queued for hours for a public lecture, but left immediately after

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<sup>9</sup> The style was inspired by Czesław Miłosz's work *The Captive Mind* (1953).

they signed in, simply because attendance was required and they came for the credits. Banker was deeply repelled, and felt the education system and Chinese society were rotten with this egocentric pragmatism. People were like “headless flies circulating around immediate gains”. He followed a teleological principle in seeking for the eventual purposes behind things; and if the outcomes deviated from the original purposes and functions (as in the public lecture case), he distanced himself from such inconsistencies.

Banker then started a foundation course in business and economics in the UK. Many international students were “naïve and simple-minded” in his first impressions, as they adopted the condescending tone of criticising China’s human rights records and political regime. At first, Banker maintained his neutral stance, but soon he started to argue with them, particularly by underlining the fact that most of them have never been to China. There was a world map in the classroom, and Banker and another Chinese student realised that Taiwan and Mainland China were marked in two different colours. They took it as evidence that this deep-rooted bias was long established.

After taking courses in politics and international relations, Banker’s political attitude shifted. He rarely read news from Chinese media. China existed as an economic power, without making a strong appearance in mainstream theories in politics studies. His lifestyle also changed during this time. He dressed like an English country gentleman, and became a frequent visitor to golf courses. Intellectually he embraced liberalism and the aspiration to individual freedom. He felt incompatible with the ideological orthodoxy and institutions back home, and hoped for rapid change in China.

Just as his political attitude was settling down, his move to the United States pursuing a postgraduate degree in Finance shook it. “Moving from Europe to the States was like moving from Europe to China. It was all different.” For Banker, America was an in-between state: it was modern, but as materialistic and socially divided as China. The city he lived in – Cleveland – was “conservative, orthodox and restrained”. America was not open, not trendy, not adapting to the new developments of technology. His holiday visit to

China opened a different picture, where society was rapidly introducing the digital economy that transformed everyday consumption and transportation. He was captured by this movable feast. The stagnant mind and unwillingness to adaptation among Americans, for him, were clear indicators of the country's decline. And his teleological way of thinking emerged again: if the democratic institutions were resistant to new changes and ideas, if they ceased to be open and effective, then why cling to them?

The second day after his graduation exam, Banker flew back to China and entered the land of opportunities. A year later, we renewed our friendship in Beijing over British craft beer. His lifestyle remained modestly European, and he refused to admit that his belief in liberalism was ever eroded. "I simply revolt against wherever I live". He described the shift of political preferences as a manifestation of his rebellious character rather than a result of the differences across countries. He acknowledged the differences but declined to assign any particular significance. He was always radical, adaptive and attracted to new things; "it was the same ideational framework filled with different contents throughout time". Now he was leaning towards the Right (in Chinese political terms, democratic liberalism) again simply because he was back in China.

"Human beings are essentially primates, and on that ground, there should not be any difference in terms of the institutions designed to regulate our basic needs and behaviour." When the conversation touched on the question of regime transition, however, he thought for a while, and by referring to Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-hand Time*, pointed out that after Gorbachev, not everyone believed things were better – instead, they developed a strange nostalgia for the Soviet era. Meanwhile, on his table, there lay a printed version of Václav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*.

## 2. Functionary

Functionary fulfilled her plan of becoming a civil servant in "a relatively important" Party department, shortly after her graduation from the LSE. She

had always wanted to be part of the system, ever since I knew her in high school. Yet this career ambition never stopped her from being critical of the regime. She ridiculed the state newspapers and the analyses of international events from officially endorsed experts. Even though she chose to share those views only among close friends, her intellectual disobedience against the state ideology was visible. Her silence in public Party events was a way of protesting.

For Functionary, not following or cheering for the official rhetoric and regime was already a strong statement – and one she felt comfortable committing to. She displayed admiration for the outspoken dissidents, for their courage and uncompromising stances. At the same time, she felt regret for them, as little change was triggered and the dissidents lost freedom in their best years. The condition for any substantial change, for her, was to be close to the decision-making core and reform the Party from within. In addition to this, she was deeply fascinated by politics itself, the history, the process, and the relationships involved. She read politics like a novel. Therefore, Functionary put herself in politics to better observe it. She treated it as a delicate subject of examination.

This contributed to Functionary's comparatively objective and sober attitude towards liberal democracy. She did not hold an unquestioning admiration – especially in her specialised area of diplomacy, states were all in a broader system of international relations, and the realist nature of politics was similar in its working mechanism. However, she did not reject liberal democracy as a future direction for China either. In fact, her belief in democracy as a better system in accountability and rule of law remained consistent throughout her time at home and abroad.

After graduating from a Chinese university known for its networks among the diplomats, she went to London and immensely enjoyed her stay there. She studied international history and settled into a life in Britain that she could have happily continued. What that experience consolidated, nonetheless, was not her commitment to democratic system. Rather, it was the conviction that the Western model could not be transplanted to China. "Western democracy is



good. But, the more you live there, the more you realise that it is a history, it is a constitutional tradition, that did not exist in China.” Functionary did not see the multiparty system as the defining character of democracy, as the factions within one Party demonstrated a resemblance to mutual checks and balances of power. What distinguished between political regimes was how Parties were positioned with respect to the Constitution in the West, political Parties performed under the Constitution, while in China, the Party was established above the law, with the final authority to interpret it. The relationship between Party and Constitution was historically varied, and thus the political bases diverged. “The real question is not about whether China is democratic, but concerns the non-applicability of the Western system”.

What made Functionary disillusioned was less liberal democracy itself than its universal implications. The West became irrelevant. To change the current political condition in China, one has to return to its history, its land and its political basis. Functionary submitted her application to the civil servant exam while in Britain, and decided to leave what she admitted was “a comfortable life and mentality”.

### 3. Powerbroker

Powerbroker is a political animal. It was clear from the beginning that he did not belong to the enclosed Chinese student community. Confident, persuasive and with a fine gift in social networking, he was drawn to political activities with an ambition to rise. Involved with Amnesty International and the Tibetan government-in-exile, he dared to confront issues with great political sensitivity. He freely talked about the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989 and human rights violations in China, and became known for his sharp and unfettered commentaries.

To some extent, this image of a liberal dissident was deliberately portrayed for the attention he desired. The results are successful. Powerbroker cast himself into the political elite circle. He met the Dalai Lama twice, participated in an APEC meeting, and was involved in presidential elections in Latin America

and the United States. These networks and resources enabled him to work as a lobbyist and political broker with frequent international travels. His Chinese peers envied him, at the same time distancing themselves from this “overly political figure”. Powerbroker was too political to be a citizen of his own country, as many would say, he was not a typical Chinese.

With such hyper-exposure to democratic politics, one would expect Powerbroker to uphold liberal values. Instead, his commitment to democracy was constantly fading. Powerbroker found the university advocacy activities of human rights bodies to have “more symbolic values than practical effects”. While running a politics organisation at university, he often complained about the “internal politics that was equally as ridiculous as the Chinese student association”. With the entrance into high-level social circles, he saw corruption, greed and struggle similar to that in China, and the grassroots being equally marginalised and disempowered in comparison. It seemed that among global political elites, there was no difference in their rationale and desire: they thirsted for power. The rhetoric of democracy, when coming from the mouths of these people, was a lip service rather than a normative preference. Thus through his own observation, Powerbroker endorsed a belief in power. “Democracy was so overrated,” he quoted from the TV series *House of Cards*, “we have finally waited for the Americans to admit this themselves”.

The belief in power also led to an opportunistic attitude in his work. What mattered was not the justness of the political system or the rhetorical commitments of a person, but the strategic methods to balance the power and interests of each party. Powerbroker continued to keep a close eye on political affairs, mainly for work purpose. His passion for a politician career vanished, after realising there was no substantial opportunity for an international political broker back home or for a first-generation minority migrant abroad. “Democracy still leaves room for imagination” – Powerbroker made this rare positive comment after hearing about an acquaintance’s decision to run for a political post in a multiparty system. But it was just imagination, with little chance of success without power.

#### 4. Journalist

Journalist was an idealist and still is. She owned the privileges to international education and the freedom of choosing her own path without financial concerns. One would expect a life of comfort out of her. Instead, Journalist led a life of struggle. There was always a sense of unfulfillment, dissatisfaction and unsettlement in relation to her situation. She was strong-headed and uncompromising, at the same time intensified and frustrated by the things she could not own. One of those things was a liberal and open society. With liberal values implanted early on during her international education, Journalist was angered by her home country: “nothing good seems to exist here”. This attitude even led to tension at personal level, as she could not tolerate the “cooperative behaviours” of family members towards the regime.

Journalist kept this form of radicalism throughout her studies in the UK. Graduating with a degree in politics, she did not return to China but went to Africa to pursue a long-wished-for career in international journalism. She changed jobs three times and was based in Kenya for three years. Journalist became a field reporter and appeared on China’s mainstream media. It was also during this time her political attitude took another shape. The politics in Kenya and neighbouring countries demonstrated some realistic pictures of newly democratised states, and how “tribal politics persisted under the masquerade of democracy”. In relation to her home country, Journalist felt there was equally a lack of foundation in China for the existing liberal democratic model, which might result in a similar condition of conflict and social inequality.

Underlying the change in political attitude was a deeper reflection on her personal condition, emerging from her transnational experience across three continents. Journalist met people from around the world and realised her anxiety somehow had unique Chinese characteristics. She termed it “the middle-class burden”, as we were educated from childhood to compete with each other, and expected to get top marks in everything. It implanted this mentality of competition and comparison. We applied this pattern of thinking

to politics, and felt our “middle-ranking country” was falling behind in many aspects and would like all the good things. We wanted economic growth, social equality and a democratic regime all at once, while sometimes it was just impossible to have them all. As a result, there was the constant anxiety of unfulfillment.

When I met Journalist in Beijing, she was no longer frustrated. She had made peace with herself. Even working in the private sector, she did not see it as a compromise of the career in journalism, and was filled with passion in looking for stories to write. Journalist believed she was too quick at judging the regime before, while failing to understand it. “I want to understand, and this is not a submission. We are essentially all liberals. Not fighting explicitly against the regime does not mean you accept it. Say you are a liberal in the U.S., it is not like that after Trump being elected, you would start a revolution straightway. Instead, you should try to figure out what is going on”. Journalist’s political attitude was entwined with her own personal life, as the growing tolerance at personal level largely shaped her reaction towards the regime. A constant anxiety of unfulfillment was replaced with an imperative to understand imperfections and learn to live with them.

## **Conclusion**

Towards the end of our conversation, Journalist recommended the work of Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who argued that people relied on moral intuitions instead of rational reasoning in political judgments.<sup>10</sup> While following this advice, I realised a central question that was equally highlighted in my inquiry and Haidt’s work: namely, there was a lack of direct link between openness to experience and liberal values. Inheriting a different disciplinary perspective, Haidt pointed out that liberals preferred specific moral foundations while undervaluing others, which made them as equally enclosed as other political groups. My cases above indicated another side of the picture, that when individuals were open to experience, they did not necessarily embrace liberal ideas. Transnational experience provoked their

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<sup>10</sup> Haidt, J., 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by religion and politics*. Pantheon, New York.

doubts on the universality of liberal democracy rather than reinforcing its legitimacy.

How to explain this unexpected dissidence? The rebellion against liberal democracy, as the experience of the four individuals demonstrated, did not fit into the prevalent narratives that portrayed the Chinese overseas students as isolated, materialistic and politically insensitive. Their critical reflections came from genuine transnational exposure. Does it mean that they turned more nationalist and supportive of China's regime? There is a further layer of complexity to the answer. Most of the returnees I talked to insisted on their liberal identities, agreeing on the fundamental ideas of an open and inclusive society. In other words, they believed there was still a political gap for China to fulfil, but not following a Western standard or model. This picture is perhaps troubling for both home countries and host countries, as those individuals aligned with no particular regime: they tended to minimise the differences across countries, while not submitting themselves to the repressive regime at home.

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.

A dilemma that I sensed over the conversations with the Chinese transnational individuals was their effort to craft a space for alternative views

against liberal democracy while not willing to be the proponents of political repression. In a way, this scenario reflected a similar dilemma faced by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Berlin's value pluralism supported the co-existence of multiple norms and values as appropriate, though sometimes they may come into conflict with each other. This idea of pluralism, however, came under criticism as being indistinguishable from relativism, which attached equal justifications to liberal and illiberal ideas. In response, Berlin referred to objectivism and moral rationalism, and proposed a "common human horizon" as the basic core value for judging values; but again, if this core value was not a monist principle, it could always be defined and varied by human experience. Berlin's intellectual dilemma, when manifested in the transnational experience, became what we saw: the individuals questioned a singular understanding of democracy and good politics, and while pronouncing such dissidence, they were on a dangerous slippery slope towards relativism.

The pluralism/relativism dynamic seems to explain the paradoxical struggles of the returnees, their urge for alternatives, their hesitance towards criticising the regime at home, while also not accepting it. Their transnational encounters led to openness towards pluralism, a perspective tolerant of multiple views and values, which were largely shaped by the lived experience in democratic regimes. Nonetheless, this pluralism is not necessarily compatible with liberalism or at least liberalism in a conventional sense.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary liberal democracy becomes the limit of political imagination rather than the inspiration of it.

Unfortunately, there is little space for this form of pluralism. In fact, such views are marginalised both in democratic and authoritarian countries. It goes beyond the authoritarian-democratic division and addresses political questions in a broader context of globalisation and transnationalism. Pluralism is an ideational escape from spatial entities and borders being

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<sup>11</sup> See in Gray, J., 1995, *Isaiah Berlin*, London: Harper Collins; Princeton, 1996: Princeton University Press.

defined in a spirit of political superiority. These individuals are often forced either into a relativist argument where they claim to be tolerant of anywhere, or into a realisation that they uphold rebellion against anywhere they live. They represent an image of nuanced dissidents in an age of globalisation. What appears to be lost is a belief in external modernisation: that a model or an idea from another country could be the saviour. What has yet to appear is any concrete space for the political imagination of transnational pluralism.