

A Turbulent Decade: The Changes in Chinese Popular Attitudes toward Democracy

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ABSTRACT

In light of the increasingly aggressive policies and rhetoric of the Chinese government, many came to believe that China may pose a severe threat to democracy and the international order. However, less attention has been paid to Chinese popular attitudes toward democracy and authoritarianism. How does the Chinese public think of democracy in the changing domestic and international environment? This paper uses a novel data set of Chinese social media posts generated between 2009 and 2017 and investigates the changes in popular attitudes toward democracy in the past decade. Results show that online discussion around democracy has decreased and voices questioning democracy have become pronounced since 2013. While tightened state control is a critical factor shaping popular attitudes, this paper demonstrates that people's increasing exposure to two types of foreign information has also played into this trend. These information lead to a perception of dissatisfying performance of other countries and an awareness of racial attitudes of the West. Lastly, increasing doubts about democracy are not necessarily translated into a strong authoritarian legitimacy. Instead, online discussion presents a sense of ambivalence toward the two models, and the Chinese regime has continued to face a predicament of legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

The world witnessed history in the making when we entered the 2020s, as the unprecedented COVID pandemic sparked virulent debate over which political system would be best suited to meet the challenges of the moment (Ghitis, 2020; Schmemmann, 2020; Diamond, 2020; Kleinfeld, 2020). While China appeared to emerge victorious from the crisis, the U.S. quickly became the global epicenter, leading many to believe that democracy now faces its most significant ideological threat in generations. Even though scholars like Fukuyama have stressed that regime type does not determine government performance, other intellectuals and citizens are concerned that the “China model” is winning the competition with the West and undermining democracy around the globe (Fukuyama, 2020; McFaul, 2019; CSIS, 2019).

Such concerns and anxieties are warranted following a decade of global setbacks for liberal democracy and recent indications that the strongman leader Xi Jinping is tightening his grip on power. Most discussions have focused on China’s changing official rhetoric, increasingly assertive domestic and international policies, and official ideological campaigns under Xi. In contrast, little attention has been paid to shifts in *unofficial* discourse around authoritarianism and democracy in China. In media reports and opinion pieces, the perspective of the Chinese people is monolithically portrayed as either a nationalistic force buttressing the authoritarian regime or a critical voice condemning the government. In academia, few empirical studies have systematically traced and analyzed the *changes* in popular attitudes toward democracy in the past decade.

This paper takes on the task of answering one fundamental question: How have popular attitudes toward democracy changed in the 2010s in China? The last decade represents a significant era for studying unofficial discourse in China. On the one hand, the past decade has seen a resurgence of anti-liberalism both domestically and internationally. While the Chinese leadership in the Reform era mainly focused on economic development, the current regime has ramped up censorship and increased propaganda campaigns, vowing to “win the ideological war” with Western-style

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democracy.¹ This domestic trend has coincided with a global wave of democratic setbacks. In 2020, Freedom House reported that globally, democracy has been in decline for 14 consecutive years (Repucci, 2020). Even the world’s largest democracies, including the United States and India, are experiencing a rise of populism and nationalism.

On the other hand, however, due to enhanced economic wellbeing and the rise of social media, the Chinese people today are more connected to the world than ever before. Statistics show that, for instance, the number of Chinese students studying in the U.S. has nearly quadrupled since 2010 (Statista, 2020). In 2018 alone, Chinese citizens made approximately 150 million trips overseas (China Travel Guide, 2018). Moreover, *WeChat* and *Weibo*, the two dominant social media platforms in China, have facilitated the circulation of information about life and politics in foreign countries. Empirical research suggest that increased knowledge about democratic countries could undermine official propaganda and facilitate the rise of pro-democracy attitudes (Spilimbergo, 2009; Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010). The development of a vibrant online public sphere has also enabled dynamic public discussion and could destabilize the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime (Yang, 2009; Lagerkvist, 2010).

Chinese public opinion has therefore been influenced by a variety of factors in the 2010s, including tightened political control, increased exposure to knowledge about democratic countries, and the rise of social media. How does this emerging sociopolitical structure shape the public’s attitude toward democracy?

To answer this question, this study focuses on political discussion as it unfolds on Chinese social media. I focus on the online discourse of opinion leaders, one of the most important actors both representing and shaping unofficial opinion in China. Combining qualitative readings and computational content analysis, I investigate an original data set of 1.3 million social media posts published by 239 opinion leaders between 2009 and 2017. Of this set, around 80 thousand posts were about democracy and politics, and more than 14 thousand posts specifically mentioned “democracy.” I then complement the analysis with close observations of public discussions on recent significant events, including the 2019 Hong Kong protests and the unfolding Covid19 pandemic.

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1. This effort was detailed in a classified document entitled, “Communiqué on the current state of the ideological sphere,” also known as “Document 9.” See <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

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This study finds that there have been decreasing discussions around but increasing questioning of democracy on Chinese social media. At the beginning of the 2010s, online discussion was dominated by liberal voices. Since 2013, however, this space has witnessed a pushback from anti-liberal forces. In recent years, even liberals have begun to express confusion and disillusionment with democracy. While tightened state control has contributed to this change, my findings show that exposure to unofficial information about foreign countries, such as foreign media coverage, foreign op-eds, and people's own first-hand experiences, has also played a vital role in this process.

Importantly, increased doubts about democracy have not translated into unilateral support for authoritarianism. Rather, people remain ambivalent, criticizing both democracy and authoritarianism, depending on the topic at hand. Instead of demonstrating a firm commitment to authoritarianism, increased support for the Chinese government primarily stems from satisfaction with China's economic and political performance and increasing dissatisfaction with the perceived performance of other countries. I call the latter dynamic passive performance legitimacy. I conclude this paper with reflections on the long-term dilemma of China's authoritarian legitimacy.

CHINA AND DEMOCRACY

A Historical Perspective

China's political leadership is well known for its open rejection of Western-style democracy. Grassroots voices expressing nationalistic and anti-democracy feelings were also found to be popular online. At the same time, however, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially includes "democracy" (*minzhu*, 民主) as one of the "24-word socialist core values" that they have promoted since 2012.² Chinese people, according to various surveys, consistently demonstrate high levels of support for democracy over time. This conflicting attitude towards democracy seems confusing to many.

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2. The "24-word socialist core values" was introduced at CCP's 18th National Congress, encompassing twelve moral principles and sociopolitical goals for China. Democracy is only second to "prosperity," followed by civility, harmony, freedom, and so on.

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In fact, China has witnessed a century-long pursuit of democracy that goes back to the late Qing period (Nathan, 1986; Ogden, 2002). Facing China's bitter failure in the first Sino-Japanese war and impressed by the national strength of Western countries, the celebrated reformist Liang Qichao introduced the concept of democracy as a model of development for modernization and national revival. Inheriting this thought, both the Kuomintang and the CCP saw democracy a way to salvage the nation from Japanese colonialism during the second Sino-Japanese war. The Kuomintang proposed the famous "Three Principles of the People,"—one of which was democracy.³ The CCP extolled American democracy and the liberal values embodied in the *Declaration of Independence*.⁴ Since then, democracy has been an unavoidable topic that political and social elites must consider when talking about China's political future.

Nonetheless, questioning and critiquing democracy, specifically Western-style democracy, took root in China during the same time. Ogden (2002) discusses several key historical reasons behind such questioning. For instance, the Great Depression and social inequalities in Western countries shook people's confidence in the effectiveness of democracy. Furthermore, it was Western countries that initiated the Opium Wars and other military conflicts with China and forced the Qing government into signing several unequal treaties. These dark episodes turned "the West" into an imperialist enemy that was perceived as trying to weaken China. Hence, many Chinese people view Western attempts to promote democracy as a secret agenda to destroy China.

This complex historical context explains what we now see as seemingly conflicting attitudes: In theory democracy is a positive model with the potential to modernize and empower the Chinese nation. Practically, however, Western-style democracy may not truly serve the interests of the people, and may even involve a Western agenda to exploit China. Mao classified Western-style democracy as a form of "Old Democracy" that manufactures the consent of the masses to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie. He urged China to take a distinct path towards realizing a genuine and just "New

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3. This is a political philosophy put forward by Sun Yat-sen, the then Kuomintang party leader.

4. On July 4, 1944, *Xinhua* published a column entitled "美国国庆日：自由民主的伟大斗争节日," which can be roughly translated to "American National Day: In memory of the great struggle of liberty and democracy." The author acclaimed "Long live July fourth, long live democratic America!" Similar articles were also published in 1945 and 1946.

Democracy” (Mao, 1940). Since then, the CCP has championed the idea of democracy as a political ideal but criticized the political practice of Western-style democracy.

Popular Opinions on Democracy in China

The coexistence of a general faith in democracy as a model of development with simultaneous distrust toward Western democracies has also set the tone for popular opinion in China.

Chinese people have expressed their support for democracy in both opinion polls and in real life. Historically, the desire for democracy and discontent with the government were translated into mass protests, as seen in the 1978 Democratic Wall Movement and the 1989 Students’ Movement (e.g., Nathan, 1986; Calhoun, 1989; Zhao, 2004). More recently, civil activism and public discussion has blossomed online, creating a contentious public sphere despite severe censorship (Yang, 2009; Wu, 2012; Negro, 2017; Lei, 2019). Surveys have consistently established the fact that many Chinese people are aware of the problems of the current political system (Peng, 1998; Wang, Wu and Han, 2015; Wei, 2019), and that the majority is in support of democracy (e.g., Wang, 2007; Chu and Huang, 2010; Lin, Sun and Yang, 2015).

At the same time, several studies indicate that while Chinese citizens show an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards democracy, they also demonstrate high levels of support for the Chinese government (Shi, 2008; Lu, 2013; Lu and Shi, 2015). Research shows that Chinese citizens are generally happy with the lifted living standards and the quality of governance under the current regime (Turiel et al., 2019). While many Chinese people recognize the abstract value of democracy, they generally prefer economic success over democratic development and choose social order over individual liberty (e.g. Chen and Zhong, 2000; Chen, 2002; Shin and Cho, 2010; Chen and Lu, 2011). While their values have been Westernized in many aspects, even members of the younger generation do not demonstrate a greater preference towards democracy (Shan and Chen, 2020a).

China’s rapid development is believed to have led to rising popular nationalism in China (Shen and Breslin, 2010; Zhao, 2013; Weiss, 2019). Scholars point out that grassroots voices have been attacking democratic countries and defending the Chinese government, appearing increasingly hawkish. Empirical studies indicate that

such anti-liberal discourse may not necessarily be sponsored by the state but may be a true representation of popular feelings (Han, 2018).

Given these mixed findings on public attitudes towards democracy, and given the criticism that China has become steadily more authoritarian and nationalistic under Xi, this study investigates the nuances of Chinese public opinion on democracy in the current climate and analyzes key changes over the past decade.

THE STUDY OF OPINION LEADERS

Social Media and Opinion Leaders

As of 2019, China has 854 million internet users (*netizens* hereafter), making up 61.2% of the population (CINIC, 2019). As one of China's largest social media platforms, Weibo reported 486 million monthly active users as of June 2019, making up more than half of the netizen population (Xinhua, 2019). Weibo resembles a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter and encourages users to post their thoughts online and interact via reposts, comments, and "likes." These effective features together with a massive user base have made Weibo the primary venue for public discussion in China.

This research focuses exclusively on influential users—Weibo opinion leaders—to explore popular opinions regarding democracy. Opinion leaders are major players in public discussions and not only represent the popular base behind them, but also actively shape unofficial opinion in China.

Research shows that as many as 95% of Weibo users rarely post original content online (Fu and Chau, 2013). This does not mean most users are *not* opinionated. Instead, they may "vote" on existing opinions of others by following, reposting, and "liking" the content that they agree with (Barbera et al., 2015). In this process, some users attract more "votes" than others, thus making them "opinion leaders." In this sense, opinion leader voices do represent the popular base behind them. Studying opinion leaders is thus a more effective way to investigate unofficial popular opinion than studying the silent majority or opinionated intellectuals who are disconnected from the masses.

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Moreover, opinion leaders are powerful shapers of public opinion compared to average netizens. Anyone can post content online, but opinion leader posts may appear on the timelines of several millions of other users, effectively making them a media presence that may rival official outlets. For instance, *People's Daily* claims to have a circulation of 3 million,⁵ while the opinion leaders in my study attracted 3.4 million followers on average. Popular posts of opinion leaders may also be circulated by other major internet portals and print media, extending their influence to an offline audience.

How representative are opinion leaders? To clarify, opinion leaders do not form a representative sample of typical Chinese netizens, and certainly do not represent the Chinese population.⁶ However these factors make them an ideal sample for this research. Being an opinion leader means they exert considerable influence on the agenda and popular opinions of the online public. Many opinion leaders in the virtual public sphere are often social elites who enjoy more social and cultural capital than average citizens (see Table 2). Therefore, their attitude toward democracy has significant implications for the future of China. If this group does not champion democracy and liberal values, then society at large is certainly unlikely to either.

Lastly, intensive censorship of the Chinese internet may also raise concerns. However, previous studies have established that netizens often creatively resist censorship with technology and code language, and political critique online is at least selectively tolerated by the government (Yang, 2009; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013; Lei, 2019; Huhe, Tang, and Chen, 2018). It is true that opinion leader posts may still be censored or self-censored, and that in some cases their accounts may be entirely removed. However, this methodological challenge also serves the purpose of the paper, which seeks to compare online posts at different times to gauge the impact of state censorship.

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5. See <http://en.people.cn/90827/90828/index.html>.

6. According to the 44th Report by China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), as of June 2019, 52.4% of the Chinese netizens are male, 73.7% are urban residents, more than 45% are under 30 years old, and only 20.2% of them have a college education or above.

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Weibo Opinion Leader Data

In this paper, opinion leaders are defined as those who 1) are *popular* and *influential* in public discussion, and 2) are *interested* in discussions about political and social issues. I combined user popularity (measured by follower counts), user influence (measured by the numbers of reposts, comments and likes received), and levels of interest in political discussion (measured by the number of posts containing political keywords). Using these parameters, I identified 239 opinion leaders from 170 million users on Weibo. I then collected all of the 1,300,406 original, publicly available posts produced by opinion leaders between August 2009, the time that Weibo was launched, and June 2017, the time my data collection ended.⁷ In this paper, my analysis is primarily based on the 14,166 original posts that contain the keyword “democracy” and the 79,664 original posts pertinent to democracy and politics in general. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the descriptive statistics of opinion leaders and their activities online.

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Table 1: Summaries of Opinion Leaders’ Weibo Behavior

	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Follower Count	3417321	6671146	24012	4.98e+07
Following Count	1243.08	876.36	0	3685
All Post Count*	17179.64	21132.86	48	155594
Original Post Count*	5671.87	6244.85	1	52499

*All post count is the total number of posts showed on user profiles.

*Original post count is the number of original posts between 2009 and 2017.

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7. Please refer to the Appendix for a detailed account of opinion leader identification and data collection.

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Table 2: Basic Demographics of Opinion Leaders

		Percent	Count
Sex	Male	89.95	215
	Female	10.04	24
Verification	Verified	93.72	224
	Not Verified	6.27	15
Region	Beijing	56.06	134
	Shanghai	6.28	15
	Guangdong	5.44	13
	Zhejiang/Jiangsu	3.77	9
	Other Inland Cities	10.46	25
	Overseas/Hong Kong/Taiwan	10.04	24
	Others	7.95	19
Industry	Cultural Industries	39.33	94
	Internet Personalities	18.83	45
	Academia	17.57	42
	Business/Commerce	11.29	27
	Professionals	7.53	18
	Government	4.18	10
	Grassroots	1.26	3
Total		100	239

DECREASING DISCUSSION OF DEMOCRACY

The Trajectory of Weibo

The debut of Weibo in 2009 marked the arrival of the social media age in China.⁸ By the end of 2012, Weibo had already accumulated more than 503 million registered users, reportedly the largest user base among all Chinese social media platforms at the time (Ong, 2013).⁹ Most opinion leaders in my study joined Weibo during this period.

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8. There were a few social networking sites launched before Weibo, e.g. [renren.com](http://www.renren.com), but none of them ever reached the same level of popularity, and most have already stopped services.

9. WeChat was launched slightly later and only had around 300 million users around this time. However, it caught up with and overtook Weibo after 2013 in terms of user size and popularity.

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As Weibo attracted unprecedented attention, it also created room for “public opinion incidents” where a large number of netizens demanded government accountability and transparency over hot button sociopolitical issues (Lei, 2019). Opinion leaders demonstrated their power in shaping public opinion and challenging official discourse during these incidents, a trend the government viewed as increasingly disturbing. Eventually the government launched a crackdown on opinion leaders’ online speech in September 2013 (Buckley, 2013). Facing tightened state control and intense competition from other platforms, Weibo saw a decline in active users and the overall quality of public discussion.

Weibo did not fade away, however, but has rather emerged more popular than ever since late 2016. This is partly because Weibo has remained the largest virtual public sphere in China for information acquisition and public discussion. Other platforms are either smaller, catering to a niche population, or do not support public discussions due to platform limitations. For instance, WeChat, Weibo’s top rival, is primarily a social networking app for friends and acquaintances. Users are not allowed to see the posts and comments of other users unless they are friends with each other. Many users thus returned to Weibo to participate in true “public” discussion.

Discussions about Democracy Wind Down

Discussions about democracy among opinion leaders shows a pattern that roughly corresponds to Weibo’s trajectory. As shown in Figure 1, following a slow start in 2009 and early 2010, opinion leaders demonstrated a keen interest in talking about democracy. Each month, posts mentioning “democracy” made up an average of 1% of opinion leaders’ original posts. This proportion is significantly high considering the immense volume of non-political content and the diversity of topics covered on social media. In fact, the term frequency of “democracy” (21,286 hits) is higher than that of “men” (16,243) and “women” (14,011) in opinion leaders’ total posts.

The contrast between before and after the crackdown is sharp. From late 2010 to mid-2013, the proportion of democracy-related posts was above average almost every month. In late 2011 and early 2012, Weibo saw an unprecedented peak in discussion about democracy—the proportion rose to 3%. However, after the internet crackdown in late 2013, discussion focusing on democracy dropped and the proportion

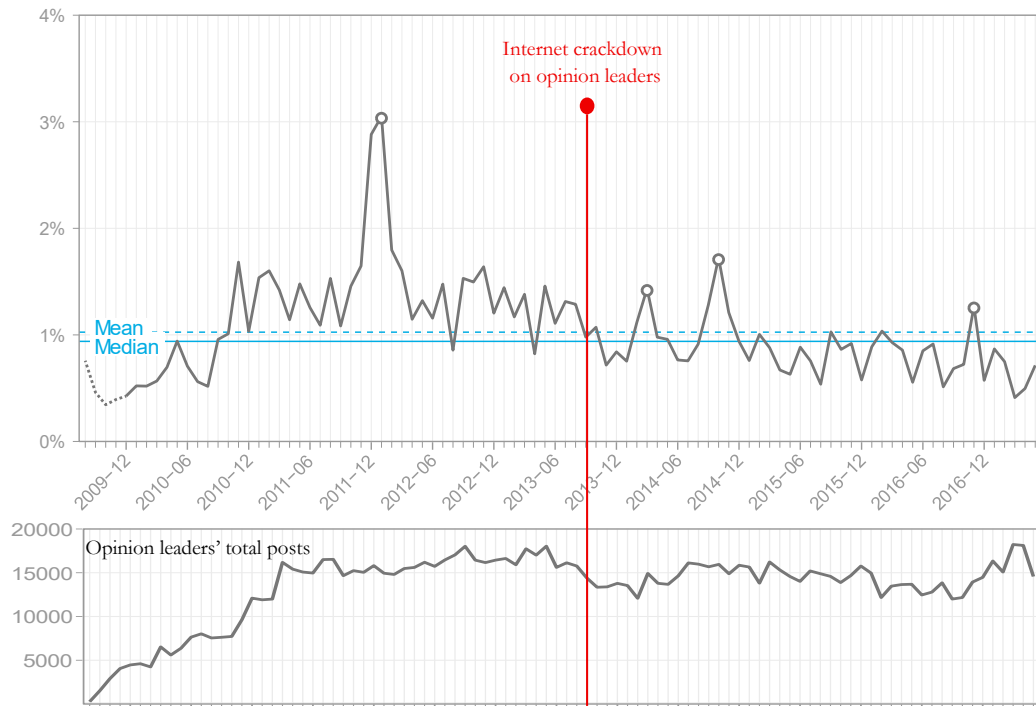
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of democracy-related posts remained below average, with the exception of a couple of conspicuous spikes. The first trend this research identifies from the past decade, therefore, is decreased online discussions around democracy in China.

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Figure 1. Proportions of Democracy-Related Posts to Total Original Posts, 2009–2017



Upper panel: the proportion of opinion leaders' posts containing the keyword "democracy" to the number of their total original posts in each month from August 2009 to June 2017. The blue lines denote the mean and the median of the democracy post proportion, which are 1.03% and 0.94% respectively. The red vertical line denotes the CCP's crackdown on opinion leaders in September 2013. Lower panel: the number of opinion leaders' total original posts in each month from August 2009 to June 2017.

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Between 2009 and 2017 there were four spikes in online discussion focusing on democracy. The first spike appeared in January 2012 when the Taiwanese presidential election drew wide attention in mainland China. In the post-crackdown period, two spikes appeared in 2014 following the outburst of street politics in different regions, including Ukraine, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The last spike appeared in November 2016 during the U.S. presidential election. The changes in the way that opinion leaders discussed these four incidents signal a shift in popular attitudes toward democracy.

INCREASING QUESTIONING OF DEMOCRACY

Before moving on to talk about people’s political attitudes, I need to clarify my usage of two concepts. Scholars often depict Chinese ideological cleavages as falling into either the liberal camp or into a loose coalition of nationalists and leftists.

I use “liberals” to refer to those who generally embrace Western values and hope to move China towards liberal democracy. I loosely use the term “nationalists” to refer to the opponents of liberals. However, this term encompasses a wide spectrum of political stances. Some may be socialists who are concerned about social inequality under capitalism. Some may be Maoists who hope to revert to the pre-Reform era. Some are proud of China’s history and culture and claim to be patriots rather than nationalists. Still others appear hawkish and chauvinistic when discussing diplomatic issues. Despite the differences, they are often seen as being sympathetic to the Chinese regime and skeptical of liberal democracy.

Note that liberals are not necessarily anti-government. Many recognize the development of China and hope to “work from within” to facilitate democratic reforms. Some hope to leverage democracy for national revival and, ironically, may be seen as nationalists. Likewise, not all nationalists necessarily support the regime, and they may harshly criticize the government when their expectations are not met. Some may even draw on liberal ideas when they voice this dissatisfaction. Zhang, Wen and Liu (2018) disaggregate the multiple layers of these two labels, demonstrating how the line between liberals and nationalists may be blurred. For convenience, here I still classify attitudes toward democracy as either “liberal” or “nationalist.” However, readers should be mindful of crucial within-group differences and subtleties.

Initial Liberal Dominance

As discussed, the idea of leveraging democracy to salvage and revive China has been a mainstream political idea since the late Qing dynasty. Even though pro-democracy voices were temporarily silenced after the CCP took power, liberalism and the belief in “science and democracy” soon reclaimed dominance among intellectuals and social elites after the death of Mao (Calhoun, 1990; Lin, Sun, and Yang, 2015). Around the same time, the “third wave” of democratization, a concept coined by Samuel

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Huntington, began in Southern Europe and swept across the globe, forming a democratic *Zeitgeist* that permeated the era. This global trend further strengthened the popular legitimacy of democracy in China. Since the late 1990s, the third wave has faded, and liberals have increasingly faced pushback from neo-leftists and nationalists due to a changing domestic and international environment. Yet, pro-democracy values have still been widely celebrated among Chinese intellectuals and elites (Xu, 2003; Cheng, 2008; Zhao, 2019).

When China entered the social media age in the early 2010s, online discussion still demonstrated lingering liberal dominance—although it was nearing its end. In January 2012, the unprecedented peak of online discussion around democracy coincided with the Taiwanese presidential election. Opinion leaders produced 456 original posts on democracy—three times more than usual—and more than one third of these posts spoke *directly* about Taiwan.

The electoral race was between the incumbent president Ma Ying-jeou of the Kuomintang which was traditionally friendlier towards mainland China, and Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that typically advocated for de-Sinicization (去中国化) and Taiwanese independence. The election was successfully and peacefully conducted, and Ma was re-elected.

Opinion leaders flooded Weibo with positive and passionate comments about the election and Taiwanese democracy. Most people extolled Taiwan for being a role model for mainland China, enthusiastically claiming that Taiwan “proved that the Chinese are not only capable of practicing democracy, but can practice it very well” (OL #67). Drawing comparisons to the violence and disorder involved in Taiwan’s political process in the past, opinion leaders expressed strong approval of the peace and order shown in the election, and urged mainland China to follow suit.

In retrospect, online speech at the time was especially frank and open. Opinion leaders aggressively asked for example: “when will the mainland elect its first president?” (OL #47). Some even went as far as to call for a return of the Kuomintang to the mainland. A post representing this stance was circulated nearly two thousand times on Weibo:

Taiwan [election] shows that the Chinese are fully capable of practicing Western style democracy. [...] The only regret is that this vital success of the Kuomintang

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was confined only in Taiwan. How to shower the entire China with liberty and democracy is the question that the Kuomintang should think about (OL #69).

By contrast, only a handful of posts coming from the same few opinion leaders revealed negative sentiments. They either ridiculed the scandals of political corruption in Taiwan or played the nationalist card to attack the presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen's Taiwanese independence agenda. Such posts, however, attracted little attention compared to liberal voices. While the most popular post celebrating the Taiwanese election obtained more than seven thousand reposts (OL #213), the most popular post attacking it merely garnered 204 reposts (OL #57).

Beyond the topic of Taiwan, the vast majority of posts unanimously expressed the desire for democracy, and they were also widely circulated. This overwhelming trend speaks to the dominance of liberal voices in the virtual public sphere in early 2010s.

Creeping Doubts about the Means Deployed to Pursue Democracy

The rise of liberal discourse in China was accompanied by the global "third wave" of democratization. However, it later turned out that many third-wave countries failed to consolidate democracy (Diamond, 1999) and ended up as "illiberal democracies" (Zakaria, 1997), "semi-authoritarian" (Ottaway, 2003), or "competitive authoritarian" according to different scholars (Levisky and Way, 2010). Though liberal values still prevailed, the Chinese people gradually lost their enthusiasm for democratization given growing evidence that democratic transitions did not prevent pervasive clientelism, populism, and could even lead to political breakdown in third-wave countries.

In late 2010, a wave of social-media-facilitated popular protests that first broke out in Tunisia brought new hope for pro-democracy people. The Tunisian Jasmine Revolution resulted in a thorough democratic reform in the country, spread into the Middle East and ignited what later was named the Arab Spring, and even inspired an attempted Chinese Jasmine Revolution.¹⁰ However, Tunisia was the first and last country to succeed in achieving a democratic transition. The rest of the Arab world saw disruptive civil wars, coups, insurgencies, and the rise of the Islamic State.

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10. Source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110306054517/http://topics.scmp.com/news/china-news-watch/article/Fresh-call-goes-out-for-Beijing-jasmine-rallies>.

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Witnessing the formidable death tolls and economic hardships during the Arab Spring, many Chinese experienced deepening introspection and doubt about the means deployed for pursuing democracy. A consensus emerged that street politics may not necessarily bring about democracy but instead might lead to socioeconomic destabilization.

Against this backdrop, when several mass movements broke out in 2014 in Eurasia, they were perceived negatively in Chinese unofficial discourse and faced harsh criticism from not only nationalists but also liberals. This includes the Ukraine revolution, the Taiwan Sunflower Student Movement, and the Hong Kong Occupy Central/Umbrella movements.

These incidents drew wide attention in China and precipitated two spikes in online discussion. First, in March, more than 35% of the 214 democracy-related posts were discussing Taiwan and Ukraine. Second, in October, more than 30% of the 275 democracy-related posts were about Hong Kong and Ukraine.

My analysis shows that unofficial exposure to two types of information led to the negative reactions. By unofficial, I mean the source of information was not the Chinese official media, but information from other sources including foreign media outlets, people's personal experiences, social media contents and so on.

The primary type of information is facts and statements that pertain to the disruptive nature of mass movements and the social disorder and economic setbacks that follow. With an eye on the Arab Spring, the negative impact of mass movements raised concerns and criticisms across the board, even though liberals and nationalists focused on different aspects of this view.

Many liberals supported the *cause* of these movements. They were primarily concerned about civic resistance as the *means* used to achieve it, arguing that violence and unrest may destroy the rule of law and dampen long-term prospects for democracy. Comments reflecting this stance were among the most circulated and most liked posts during this time. The most circulated post (1200+ reposts) on Hong Kong protests reads:

I feel relatable to Hong Kong people's political appeal. Hong Kong people may [express the appeal] by [legal] marches and demonstrations, but they should not surround the government and paralyze the society. This is legal illiteracy! Can the Americans surround the White House to paralyze the U.S. government? Freedom should not destruct the basic social order in any society. If these [protesters]

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dismiss the most fundamental principle of the rule of law, they are in no position to talk about democracy (OL #200).

Liberals also widely quoted op-eds in foreign journals such as *Foreign Policy* and *The Economist* to discuss the impact of populism and the dilemmas of civil revolutions. They frequently mentioned Fukuyama to highlight the importance of the rule of law, and referred to Tocqueville to reflect on the relationship between freedom and democracy. One such post reads: “nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is more difficult than learning how to use freedom” (OL #170).

Note that, while some of these opinions dovetailed with CCP propaganda that emphasized social order and stability, liberal voices were qualitatively different from the official rhetoric. They clearly expressed sympathy with the cause of the movements and supported the people’s right to protest, even while emphasizing the importance of orderly political participation.

Nationalists, by contrast, characterized these protests not as democratic but as radical populist movements and attacked both the *means* adopted and the *cause* itself. They spread the news about vandalism committed and the “illegal occupying” of public spaces during the protests in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Nationalists watched as protesters spray painted the slogan “[w]hen dictatorship becomes a fact, revolution becomes a duty” (Forsythe, 2014; Zheng, 2016). They compared this to the Cultural Revolution slogan “[r]evolution is no crime, rebellion is justified,” and lamented that the “little red guards would find their successors now” (OL #66).

In addition to the factual information about the protests *per se*, nationalists demonstrated a greater interest in the second type of information: the perceived “double standards” and “hypocrisy” of the West. For instance, during the Hong Kong Occupy movement, nationalists drew comparisons with the concurrent Occupy Democracy movement in the U.K. They complained that while the Hong Kong movement received in depth coverage from the Western media such as the BBC, the U.K. movement was quickly put down by the police, and barely covered despite being an analogue event taking place at home.¹¹ Highlighting this inconsistency, nationalists argued that the West was hypocritical and biased against China.

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11. To be fair, this complaint was not only shared by Chinese nationalists. Western scholars also criticized the different approach of Western media towards the two events (Graeber, 2014).

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These posts did not attract much attention at this time, and nationalistic voices were still overshadowed by liberal discourse in online discussions. Yet, the negative responses of both liberals and nationalists foreshadowed the intensity of Chinese reactions during the 2019 Hong Kong protests when conflicts escalated, and the methods of civil resistance became more radical.

The 2019 Hong Kong Protests

In many ways popular opinion during the 2019 Hong Kong protests was an amplification of feelings expressed during the 2014 Occupy movement. The same two forms of information elicited strong condemnation. First, we see disapproval of the violent means of civil resistance and the disruption of social order. This has remained the paramount reason mainlanders give for criticizing the protests. Images and video clips of extreme incidents, such as the death of an elderly and a man set on fire during clashes between protesters and counter-protesters, were widely circulated and sparked public outrage (Wright, 2019).

The second type of information is, again, related to the perceived biases and racist attitudes of both Hong Kong residents and Westerners. Public anger towards such information has accumulated since 2013/14 and has led to an explosive outburst in 2019. Many people shared their unpleasant encounters with Hong Kong locals who were accused of discrimination and racial hatred against mainlanders, referring to controversies such as that over the popular anti-mainlander song *Locust World* (Kuo, 2014). In light of these growing rifts between Hong Kong and Chinese identities, some mainlanders, including liberals, argued that the protests were not a democratic movement but rather nativist and populist.

The perceived double standards and hypocrisy of the West have also led to more intense reactions in 2019. While the international community condemned Beijing's distorted presentation of the protests, many mainlanders, including those live in Hong Kong and overseas, were highly critical of the Western media's selective presentation of the facts. They argued that foreign coverage failed to adequately report on the violence committed by protesters. It is in this context that netizens were quick to comment on the vandalism and looting during the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd in the U.S. (Fifield, 2020). Police brutality during the

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protests was taken as evidence of American hypocrisy, simultaneously justifying the responses of the Hong Kong police.

The increasingly radical nature of the confrontation between mainland China and the West/Hong Kong has diminished the space for rational voices to speak out. It is striking that the most circulated post in 2014 expressed sympathy and support for the protesters, while during the 2019 protests there has been little to no support from mainland China. Yet what has remained consistent between these two moments is rising concerns about the means used to pursue democracy—preventing populism and social disorder has become an increasingly important priority across the board.

Disillusionment with the Belief in Democracy

Even though the instability and social order experienced by third-wave countries dampened their enthusiasm for democracy, many Chinese citizens, especially liberals, still believed in the model of development established by the West. The problems encountered by non-Western countries during their democratic transition were perceived as problems of development, and it was believed that such problems would be solved by further development toward the Western model. Therefore, while liberals were concerned about the social unrest during the Sunflower movement in Taiwan, for instance, they still commented that “Taiwanese democracy is indeed a bit immature, but growing from immature to mature is a prolonged process. We don’t need to worry as long as the seed of democracy has been sown [...]” (OL #113).

This high expectation of the Western model was a product of liberal dominance in unofficial discourse in the past. As discussed, Weibo was overflowing with praise and admiration for Western democracies before 2013. The U.S. in particular was seen as the lighthouse of democracy and the most admired exemplar for many Chinese people (Fish, 2017; Guan et al., 2020). Even though there are other successful examples of democracy, American democracy was mentioned most often in online discussions—among the 14,166 posts on democracy, the term “America” appeared in 2,123 posts, second only to “China,” which was mentioned in 3,790 posts.

However, as one opinion leader later reflected, the romanticization of democratic countries may not necessarily be “beneficial for the development of [Chinese democracy]” (OL #169). While these “rosy” accounts would sometimes be used as a strategic

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rhetoric to stimulate political reform in China, they have also created an unrealistic image of democracy, prompting unreasonable expectations of what a successful democracy looks like. This may backfire on liberal actors when the public is exposed to foreign information that does not conform to these expectations.

This dynamic was confirmed in a survey experiment that found that Chinese people tend to overestimate the socioeconomic conditions of Western countries, to the extent that even exposure to neutral yet more accurate information about the West may ironically lead to increased support for the Chinese government (Huang, 2015).

The simple revelation of the complex reality in democratic nations, therefore, plays an important role in influencing attitudes toward democracy. For a long time, nationalists have leveraged this type of information to reveal “the dark side” of democracy, invalidating liberal accounts as naïve and ignorant at its best, and biased and ill-intentioned at its worst:

Those who see Western-style democracy as a panacea to all [social] problems either have an ulterior motive or are just stupid. As if India is free of corruption (OL #223).

Liberals used to dismiss the nationalist narrative as distorting information and deliberately misinterpreting facts. They argued that every society has its own fair share of social problems, but that this should not negate the value of democracy as the “least bad political institution” (OL #212). Yet, this belief in democracy was severely challenged by recent democratic setbacks in the West. The U.S. presidential election in November 2016 was one such significant event, sparking an unusual spike in online discussion in China. Over 64% of the 175 posts in that month focused on the presidential election and its ensuing impacts on democracy.

For nationalists, the election of Trump was simply another opportunity to bash the “ineffective” and “hypocritical” democratic system in America. Yet the event prompted an unprecedented outpouring of emotions among liberals. Opinion leaders could not “keep calm” (OL #190) and delved into op-eds in the Western media and exit poll data to make sense of the results. They lamented that poverty and inequality in America was breeding populism and undermining democracy.

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After this initial shock, however, liberals diverged in their interpretations of the implications of this historic event. For the majority, disbelief gradually gave way to acceptance. Many liberals emphasized that, no matter how unfavorable the results were, the successful conduct of the election and the peaceful transition of power represented nothing but the spirit of democracy (OL #200, #112, #15). The most popular post of the month represented this view and was shared more than 3,000 times.

#Democracy and the rule of law overpower selfishness and the craving for power#
Both sides of the U.S. election won almost equal shares of the [popular] vote. [...] If this were to happen in an authoritarian country, [the results] would be a bomb that leads to social unrest [...]. However, in the U.S., [...] we saw the persistence of democracy and the rule of law, the peaceful transition of power, and the recognition of the results of universal suffrage [...] (OL #185).

Another group of liberals stood sharply against this view. This group was smaller but consisted of a few celebrated intellectuals and long-time advocates for American democracy. An opinion leader argued that the successful conduct of democratic elections and the recognition of the results should not be taken as the victory of democracy, because “Hitler was also elected through democratic procedures, and he even abolished democratic constitutionalism through an universal referendum” (OL #113).

For those liberals, the election of Trump indicates that American democracy put more emphasis on procedural justice than substantive justice, including the democratic values such as liberalism and diversity. They believed that the latter should be given the same weight, if not more, for an effective democracy. Liberals came to the bitter conclusion that “democracy is undermining liberty” in the U.S. (OL #6).

This disillusionment has shaken liberals’ initial belief in democracy. From cheering on the 2012 Taiwanese election to the disappointment over the 2016 U.S. election, some liberals have gone through a subtle yet profound change. This is best illustrated by the juxtaposition of two posts. They were written by the same opinion leader in 2012 and 2016 respectively:

[Democracy] is probably not the best institution. It is not one hundred percent fair, not to mention ensuring economic development. But it gives every citizen an opportunity to avoid the worst outcomes (OL #30, January 2012).

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In light of the current situation, it seems that democracy does not necessarily produce the best outcomes. Sometimes [democracy] may not even manage to avoid the worst outcomes (OL #30, November 2016).

Even though this opinion leader went on to express their hope that the 2020 election and free media could function as a self-correction mechanism to salvage democracy, their reflections on and disillusion with democracy was shared by many.

Discussions around the 2016 U.S. election, therefore, signified an important change in popular attitudes towards democracy. In the past, the problems encountered by non-Western countries may have cooled enthusiasm for democratic movements, but they still saw liberal democracy as the best model of development. Now, witnessing democratic setbacks in the West, people are experiencing a growing sense of doubt about the model as whole. The age of liberal dominance when many Chinese people openly admired and believed in the supremacy of democracy—particularly as exemplified by the U.S.—is over.

Does Questioning Democracy Translate into Solid Support for Authoritarianism?

Does all this indicate that authoritarianism has solidified its hold over Chinese popular opinion? My analysis suggests that the answer is *no*. Rather, the loss of faith in democracy has given rise to a sense of ambivalence. For many, both democracy and authoritarianism may be flawed and have failed to solve the problems that plague China. In the short term, knowledge of problems in democratic nations may improve how the public evaluates the performance of the Chinese government, but it is less helpful in buttressing the legitimacy of authoritarianism in the long run.

Since the Reform era began, the Chinese political system has been perceived as an “interim arrangement” that requires thorough reform. A popular perception is that most social problems in China are fundamentally “the problems of the political system” (一定是体制问题).¹² Public discussion demonstrates ambivalence: when people are exposed to negative news about democratic countries, many may express disappointment and criticism of democracy. Yet, when they are exposed to negative news at

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12. This perception is so widespread that the CCP’s official journals have expressed concerns and discussed solutions. See, for instance, Sun’s (2016) article in the *Red Flag Manuscript* (红旗文稿).

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home, especially related to the intrinsic problems of the Chinese system such as the lack of transparency and the prevalence of unchecked political power, public outrage may attack the Chinese political system.

The four spikes in public discussion around democracy demonstrates this ambivalence. While we see increased questioning of democracy, the other side of the story simultaneously showcases growing unease with the current political system.

For instance, in October 2014, while the Hong Kong Occupy movement drew wide criticism from Chinese opinion leaders, many top circulated posts of the month in fact condemned the government over an official article that argued that “people’s democratic dictatorship should not be replaced by the rule of law.” The phrase “people’s democratic dictatorship” was coined by Mao and has been the ideological slogan propping up the CCP’s legitimacy. However, as this phrase became somewhat obsolete in the Reform era, the CCP’s attempt to defend this idea only triggered intense pushback and resulted in a public opinion incident.¹³ The top three most circulated posts of the month all refuted this article and emphasized that the rule of law was of paramount importance. Together, these posts garnered more than 13,500 reposts and more than 3,000 likes. Note that some opinion leaders simultaneously expressed concerns about the “illegal” civic resistance in Hong Kong, but such concerns did not overshadow their aversion to authoritarian ideology.

Likewise, in March 2014, while many opinion leaders criticized the Sunflower Movement and questioned the quality of democracy in Taiwan, they also bitterly ridiculed a National People’s Congress (NPC) delegate’s claim that “Western-style democracy is an inferior form of democracy, and China is going to build a superior one” (OL #70). In November 2016, the most “liked” post of the month was a subtle criticism of the civil rights situation in China. The same opinion leader, however, only criticized American democracy as hypocritical (OL #219).

This phenomenon of questioning both democracy and the Chinese system is not confined to the examples mentioned here. A keyword analysis of 14,166 posts on democracy by opinion leaders demonstrates that this is also a more general pattern, as seen in Figure 3.

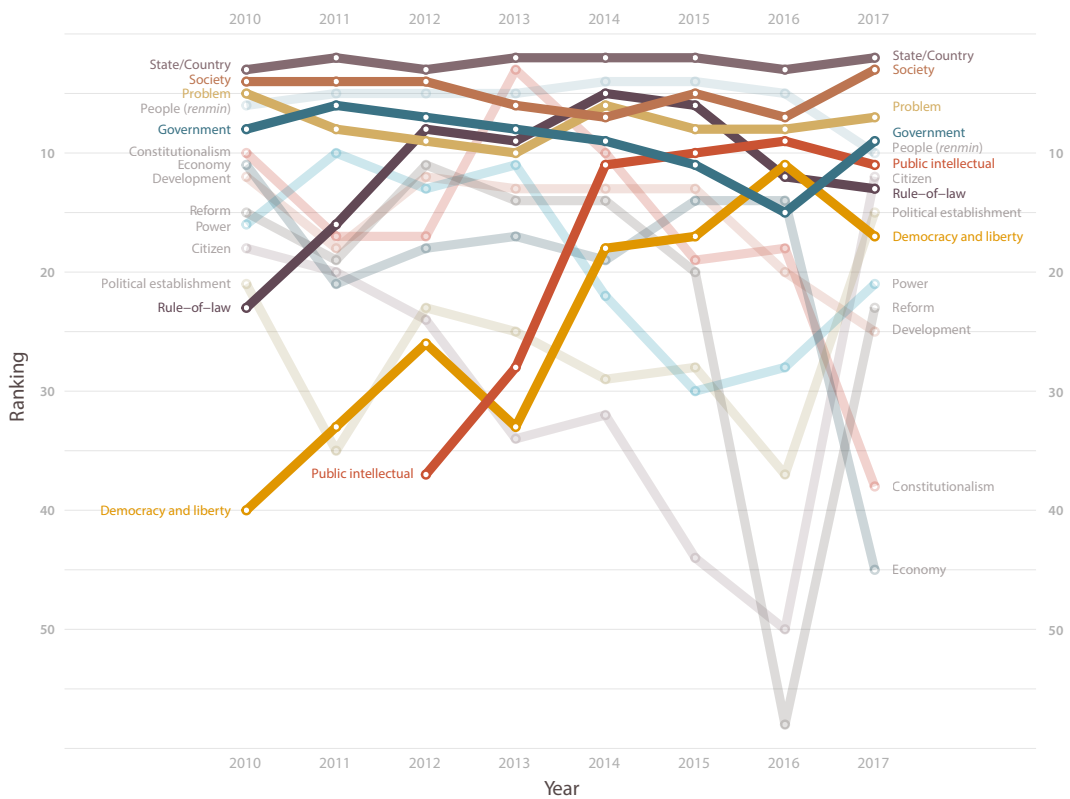
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13. *Global Times*, the most popular official market media in China, had to publish an op-ed to pacify the diffused angers towards this article (Global Times, 2014).

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Figure 2. Top 50 Keywords in Opinion Leaders’ Democracy-Related Posts, 2010–2017



The lines show changes in the rankings of 15 common keywords in opinion leaders’ democracy-related posts from 2010 to 2017. The year 2009 is excluded as the data points are too few to produce meaningful results. The ranking is based on TF-IDF statistics. More details can be found in the Appendix.

First, discussion online demonstrates a common thread over time. Among the top 50 keywords identified from each year, 25 words were reoccurring almost every year. Figure 3 presents 15 of them. Notably, five of these words always ranked in the top 10 keywords, including state/country (*guojia*, 国家), society, problems, people (*renmin*, 人民), and government.

A brief survey of the posts associated with such keywords indicates that they dealt with sociopolitical problems ranging from free speech to social inequality to gender issues. This reveals that online discussion was primarily concerned with different

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domestic “problems” and the “government” responsibilities towards the “people,” indicating that criticizing the government has remained a top priority for opinion leaders over time.

The rankings of other keywords fluctuated more. Importantly, we see the rise of “public intellectual” (*gongzhi*). It first appeared in 2012, in 38th place. Initially the term carried a more neutral connotation and it was not widely used. However, *gongzhi* has gradually become a derogatory internet slang, referring to liberals who have allegedly betrayed China and are accused of “blindly” supporting western democracies (Han, 2018). In online discussion, *gongzhi* surged to become the 9th and then 11th most used term in 2016 and 2017 respectively. The stigmatization of *gongzhi* and the rising incidence of the term has signaled increased skepticism of democracy and a growing discontent with liberal discourse.

In the meantime, the keyword “democracy and liberty” (*minzhu ziyou*, 民主自由) rose from the 40th place in 2010 to take 11th place in 2016 and 17th place in 2017. This phrase was used in a more polarizing way. While some posts expressed the desire to pursue democracy, others discussed the limitations of democracy. Lastly, the “rule of law” has also occupied an important position in online discussion since 2012. Posts associated with this term were ubiquitously pushing for political reforms to subject the CCP to an equal and fair constitution. My initial analysis suggests that the rule of law and constitutionalism, instead of free elections, have attracted considerable attention as a preferred alternative to both liberal democracy and the current political system. Further investigation of this hypothesis is warranted.

Taken together, my qualitative reading and keywords analysis demonstrate that the Chinese people hold ambivalent attitudes towards democracy and authoritarianism. Public opinion vacillates between critiquing democracy and authoritarianism, depending on the specific problem at hand. Evaluating public opinion based on only one side of this complex set of discourses may be misleading.

It is worth noting that the level of public dissatisfaction with the Chinese political system is likely underestimated. In recent years, people who voice political critique have faced tremendous pressure from the government while nationalistic voices have been encouraged by the state. However, public critique continues. This trend would have been even more pronounced in the absence of state intervention.

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A GENERAL TREND

From 2009 to 2017

The four spikes of online discussions discussed here demonstrate both increased questioning of democracy and persistent concerns about China’s sociopolitical problems. These spikes, in turn, mirrored major trends in popular attitudes that we see unfolding over the past decade. This general trend was revealed by a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic analysis applied to 79,664 opinion leader posts on more general topics about democracy and politics published between 2009 and 2017.¹⁴

Figure 3. Salient Topics in Opinion Leaders’ Political Discussions, 2009–2017



Each circle represents a salient topic identified by the LDA model. Circle size is proportional to topic size, i.e., the proportion of a given topic in the entire corpus.

14. I grouped the 80 thousand posts by opinion leader and by year, and employed LDA models to identify major topics of each year. Since there were very few posts in 2009, they were combined with posts from 2010. A detailed methodological note can be found in the Appendix. See Blei, Ng and Jordan (2003) for more details of LDA analysis.

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As shown in Figure 2, for most of the years, the LDA model detected two salient topics in opinion leader posts, and the upper topic of each year was always larger than the lower one.¹⁵ The red fonts within each topic were the top 2–5 most relevant and common keywords,¹⁶ meaning that they have a high frequency overall and may appear in other topics too. Such keywords were largely the same reoccurring terms like “China,” “politics,” “democracy,” and “reform.” This suggests that political reform toward democracy has consistently been at the heart of online political discussion. Reading samples from relevant posts confirms the earlier finding that the Chinese political system was deemed as a temporary arrangement, which needed to be further reformed, even though democracy may or may not be the right direction to move forward.

While the red fonts demonstrate a grand political reform agenda that persisted over time, the aqua fonts—the top 3–5 most relevant yet unique terms that often appeared in the given topic only—focus on the specific issues of different years and reforms in certain subfields.

The change in the aqua fonts reveals a structural change in public discussion. Before 2013, most keywords carried a neutral to positive undertone and did not signal obvious cleavages or disagreements. The unique keywords of the years show specific concerns of the time. For instance, in the larger topics, terms such as “Taiwan” and “Taiwanese election” appeared in 2011 and 2012. The smaller topics focused more on social issues and reforms in certain subfields, such as “*yigai*” (health-care reform, 医改) in 2009/10, the Arab Spring in 2011, and issues about the economy and trade in 2012.

In 2013, however, negative and disparaging terms started to appear in the smaller topic, suggesting a cleavage between those pushing for political reform and those playing the nationalist card to attack the reform agenda. While the red common keywords were reform-related keywords, such as “politics,” “democracy,” and “constitutionalism,” the aqua unique keywords of this topic were disparaging terms such as “running dogs” (*zougou*, 走狗), “[Chinese] traitor” (*maiguo zei*, 卖国贼), and significantly, “*gongzhi*.” These negative terms never appeared in the keywords before

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15. Three topics were identified in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Yet the third topic was too small, making up only 0.1% and 6.6% of the year’s corpus, and were thus omitted.

16. See the Appendix for more details.

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2013. Their debut in 2013 signals an emerging challenge to the liberal discourse that had previously been dominant.

Since 2014, the use of both positive and disparaging terms has become more pronounced, constantly appearing in the larger topic of each year. The pattern of these topics remains the same: the common keywords bear a positive, liberal undertone, mainly talking about “reform” and “democracy.” Yet, the unique keywords bear a negative, disparaging undertone: *gongzhi* was one of the most relevant terms, followed by “populism,” “street politics,” “Chinese traitors” and so on. In contrast, the smaller topics of these year only contained neutral to positive terms and were confined to specific reforms in certain subfields, such as *yigai*, *chegai* (restrictions of the use of government vehicles, 车改), and economic and market reforms.

The by-year LDA topic analysis indicates that opinion leaders have been consistent in their concern for China’s social problems and in the possibility of political reform. Yet starting 2013, online discussion demonstrates rising tensions between pro-reform pro-democracy voices and those attacking and stigmatizing such voices.

Both the LDA analysis as well as the case studies speak to the general trend that online discourse has changed from being dominated by pro-democracy voices to a space where plural and contested opinions coexist. Democracy has gradually lost its standing, and less people see it as the inevitable solution to China’s problems. However, the current political system has not been recognized as the inevitable solution either. Discussion and debate rages on, and the government continues to face scrutiny and criticism due to various social problems.

Recent Developments

My data only covers online discussion through June 2017, but the trends highlighted here signaling doubt and ambivalence has continued and become especially pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Though systematic analysis is still needed, I have formed impressions of Chinese public opinion on the pandemic based on close observations of WeChat and Weibo posts and media reports from China and the Chinese diaspora.

Chinese public opinion during the pandemic has been characterized by a striking reversal. In less than three months, China saw a dramatic swing from unprecedented

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public outrage over the government’s handling of the outbreak, to an outpouring of nationalistic support for the government. My observations suggest that this reversal was primarily provoked by increasing information about the outbreak in Western democracies and their reactions. Simple exposure to global events facilitated an otherwise failing government propaganda campaign.

Initially, the government’s mishandling of the outbreak evoked painful memories of the SARS crisis, leading to public outrage and demands for free speech, transparency, and accountability. Dissatisfaction was even extended toward the recent political repressions of the current regime (Yuan, 2020). It was widely believed that such a public health crisis would not occur in a democratic country.¹⁷

These sentiments dominated public discussion from late January to early March. During this time government propaganda was not truly effective even when the outbreak was perceived to be well contained. When the Chinese government published a book entitled “A Battle Against Epidemic” to claim victory in late February and argue for the “superiority of the socialist system” (Xinhua, 2020), angry netizens swamped the comment boards and attacked the “shamelessness” of the government.

The reversal in public opinion occurred in March when there was more news about the outbreak in other countries. The fact that Western countries were slow to respond and were perceived to have failed in containing the virus left many Chinese confused, as many expected that democratic nations would handle the crisis better. Many shocked netizens contended that they did not believe official propaganda at first but compared to the global response the government “seemed right.” This observation is consistent with the findings of Shan and Chen’s (2020b) pioneering study that shows that political dissatisfaction in China was high in January and February but gave way to rising domestic support for the Chinese government since March.

The growth of anti-Chinese xenophobia in the West provided the final impetus for an outburst in anti-West nationalist sentiment. As the pandemic has unfolded, the Chinese public has been deeply moved by stories of average citizens and everyday heroes making sacrifices to contain the virus. As domestic infections dropped, many

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^{17.} Opinion columns such as those in *The Guardian* and *The Atlantic* resonated with many Chinese at the time, particularly with liberals (McGregor, 2020; Berengaut, 2020).

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were proud of the “hard-earned achievements” and of the fact that China even began to send masks and experts to other countries to help. However, it later became clear that, in the political critiques of the West, the sacrifices and efforts of the Chinese people were being ignored, the “achievements” were questioned, and the kind gestures in their eyes were interpreted as a controversial “mask diplomacy” of China. Worse, several Western politicians filed lawsuits demanding compensation from China. In reaction, parallels were drawn with the unequal treaties imposed on the Qing government (Tan, 2020). Eventually, this simmering bitterness exploded into a veritable outburst of nationalistic sentiment. As China observers noted, the Chinese people have become highly defensive and the government has capitalized on this moment to bolster its own legitimacy (Gan, 2020).

Changes in public opinion during the pandemic mirror long-term trends in public opinion that have played out over the last decade. First, driven by dissatisfaction with domestic issues, the public expressed support for democracy, expecting that democratic countries were free of these problems, or at least could handle them better. This expectation was challenged with increased exposure to problems prevalent in democratic countries. The situation further deteriorated as information about biases and racist attacks against China and Chinese people spread. These external events therefore provoked a powerful nationalist response that has played into the hands of government propaganda efforts, bolstering the legitimacy of the regime.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Leveraging a novel data set consisting of Weibo posts by Chinese opinions leaders between 2009 and 2017, this study has combined qualitative and computational analysis to investigate online discussion around democracy over nine years. This main dataset was supplemented with observations of public opinion during recent events in 2019/20.

My analysis shows that, over the last decade, democracy was decreasingly discussed and increasingly questioned in the Chinese virtual public sphere. Before 2013,

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online political discussion was dominated by liberal voices that celebrated Western values, while nationalist-leftist voices were largely sidelined. After 2013, the CCP has taken bold measures to shut down online discussion and tightened its control in the ideological sphere. Since then, discussions on democracy overall have waned, and opinions on the effectiveness and legitimacy of democracy has become more contentious.

While tightened state control has played a critical role in this trend, this study shows that the very process of increasing exposure to events in democratic countries has also influenced Chinese attitudes toward democracy and concurrently, toward the Chinese government. Such information is primarily accessed through unofficial channels, and has the potential to either destabilize or reinforce official propaganda.

People’s Knowledge about Democratic Countries

Existing literature argues that exposure to democratic countries is arguably beneficial for democratic development within authoritarian countries. For instance, exposure to foreign media¹⁸ may facilitate the fall of authoritarian regimes (Parta, 2007). Increased immigration and the exchange of international students may also facilitate democratic diffusion from Western host countries to authoritarian states as migrants “remit” their experiences and knowledge about democracy (Spilimbergo, 2009; Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010).

These arguments are consistent with theories of democratization, particularly modernization theory, which assumes that as the economy develops citizens may develop a natural affinity for democracy. If they fail to demonstrate a preference toward democracy, this may be due to information distortion and opinion manipulation through authoritarian censorship and propaganda. Therefore, accessing information about democratic countries is a powerful means to counter authoritarian propaganda and cultivate a pro-democracy stance amongst the public.

Yet, in the case of China, this study finds that authoritarian propaganda alone may fail, and that people often react negatively to the CCP’s attempts at self-promotion. Previous research also shows that people are more skeptical of information perceived

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18. A counterargument states that foreign media exposure may stabilize authoritarian regimes, but it is mainly because foreign media offers entertainment and makes life bearable, and thus unexpectedly sustains authoritarian rule (Kern and Hainmueller, 2009).

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to come from official propaganda, and that official propaganda may ironically give rise to a negative attitude toward China’s political system (Huang, Wang, and Shao, 2018; Chen and Shi, 2001).

This study finds that for many Chinese citizens, knowledge about democratic countries obtained through unofficial channels such as foreign news reports, foreign op-eds, or personal experiences may lead to unfavorable attitudes toward democracy and unintendedly strengthens official propaganda. Even in the Chinese diaspora where people should be immune to official propaganda, observers have noticed a bizarre phenomenon—“those who go aboard often become patriotic” (“出国了才爱国”) (Lin, 2014). Some pioneering studies confirm that the experience of living under a democratic regime, such as studying abroad, could lead to increased support for the Chinese government (Zhang, 2019).

Why does exposure to democracy not necessarily lead to a pro-democracy stance? This study demonstrates that two types of information may play into this dynamic. The first type is factual information about foreign countries that does not meet the expectations of the people. In China, previous liberal dominance and insufficient foreign information has had the unintended consequence that people idealized democracy, tending to *overestimate* socioeconomic conditions in democratic countries. Therefore, negative or even neutral news about democracies and countries in democratic transition, such as reports of social disorder, crime rates, or governance failures may disillusion Chinese onlookers. China’s rapid development in recent decades further exacerbates this dissatisfaction. Such sentiments used to be popular among nationalists, but now they have even started creeping into the liberal camp as established democracies such as the U.S. and U.K. experienced democratic recessions in recent years.

The second type of information is about the perceived biases and the open display of anti-China racism of the part of Western politicians, media, and citizens. With more access to foreign media outlets than before, many people are sensitive to the “double standards” of the West when the media harshly criticizes China’s problems but downplays the same issues in the West. Moreover, critical political critique and populist rhetoric in the West sometimes blur the line between criticism and racism, such as the open call of American officials on preparing for a clash of civilizations with

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China whose people are “not Caucasian.”¹⁹ These narratives and actions were taken as racial discrimination and blunt injustice in international politics, leading to a growing sense of resentment in China and, ironically, increased support for the authoritarian regime and particularly its hardliners. Animosity between an established power and a rising power believing that it is facing racial discrimination could lead to a vicious war, as seen in the Japanese-American relations in early 20th century (Ward, 2017).

This finding points to an implication: domestic events and discourse of Western democracies bear great international significance, as they are closely watched not only by Western citizens but also those living in authoritarian countries—their observations of the West may motivate their pursuit of democracy sometimes, yet may also push them away from democracy at other times. In this sense, established democracies are also not exempt from the demand of strengthening liberal culture and further democratization.

The Dilemma of Chinese Authoritarian Legitimacy

My analysis also shows that questioning Western democracies may boost public satisfaction with the Chinese government, but only to a certain degree. Online discussion is polarized between critiques of democracy and critiques of the Chinese political system, but remains variable depending on the topic under discussion. For example, if the topic pertains to America’s hawkish policies toward China, American-style democracy would likely be condemned. If the topic relates to the government’s lack of transparency, the Chinese political system would likely be attacked. Many people are ambivalent to both models and attempt to find an alternative way for the political future.

One may wonder why the declining legitimacy of democracy is not strengthening the legitimacy of authoritarianism in the long run. To illustrate this point, we must first differentiate the different forms of legitimacy regimes can hold. Building on Weber’s tripartite classification of authority, Dingxin Zhao (2015) put forward three ideal types of state legitimacy, specifically ideological legitimacy, procedural legitimacy, and performance legitimacy. Western democracies primarily rule based on procedural and ideological legitimacy. This means that the mandate of the government is endorsed

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19. See the report from the Washington Examiner: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/state-department-preparing-for-clash-of-civilizations-with-china>.

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through widely accepted procedures such as universal suffrage, and is further strengthened by a core value system that is celebrated by its populace. The Chinese state by contrast, has seen the waning of its revolutionary legacy and communist ideology, and has shifted to relying primarily on performance legitimacy. This means that its citizens support the regime because it can provide sufficient public goods.

China's performance in the realms of governance and the economy has buttressed the legitimacy of the Chinese government for decades. Yet the challenge for authoritarian legitimacy is the lack of a solid ideological and value foundation that can help the regime weather times of poor performance. Keenly aware of this "Achilles' heel," the CCP has expended huge efforts to build up its ideological legitimacy. Drawing from diverse sources such as nationalism, traditional Chinese culture, and selected universal values, the government has launched various campaigns to promote, for instance, the 24-word Socialist Core Values and Eight Honors and Eight Shames.²⁰ However, these diverse sources do not cohere into a unified grand ideology, and they may even contradict one another. For instance, traditional Chinese culture may sometimes contradict the CCP's calls for science and modernization. So far, the Chinese government has not found a powerful discourse to undergird its ideological legitimacy, and thus must continue to rely on its performance legitimacy.

In recent years, the Chinese government has enjoyed increased support not only because of its own performance, but also from the perception that other countries are performing poorly—a passive form of performance legitimacy resulting from relative dissatisfaction with other countries. This passive performance legitimacy may boost people's confidence in the Chinese system in the short term. However, it reinforces the regime's reliance on performance legitimacy and urges the Chinese government to continue to overperform its democratic counterparts. In the long run, this positive feedback does little help to build up the ruling party's ideological legitimacy, but only puts tremendous pressure on the government to keep meeting the ever-rising expectations of the Chinese public.

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20. See a detailed discussion: <https://globalvoices.org/2006/05/15/china-new-political-campaign-shows-sarcasm-is-alive-and-well/>.

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Even if the Chinese government manages to continuously meet expectations and avoid the bankruptcy of its performance legitimacy, a significant dilemma remains. Zhao (2015) indicates that a political regime's strong reliance on performance legitimacy may encourage an instrumental mentality among its populace, such that rising expectations may expand from focusing on material public goods to including non-material public goods. Hence, with its own emphasis on good governance, the Chinese government can hardly justify the rejection of requests such as to disclose official financial statements and govern based on laws and regulations. Such requests may not be easily quelled especially during times of crisis, as evidenced by the public outcries at the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic.

In the short term, strong performance legitimacy is a blessing for the authoritarian regime. In the long run, unfortunately, it may turn into a curse unless the regime is granted a strong mandate—either by establishing a powerful ideological calling, or through popular perceptions of severe existential risks, such as wars.

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METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

1. *Opinion Leader Identification and Data Collection*

I identified 239 opinion leaders from 170 million users on Weibo and collected all their publicly available posts published between August 2009 and June 2017. The data were collected and processed in three steps.

First, I collaborated with the Big Data Analytics Lab at Renmin University in China. This lab collected publicly available Weibo posts in real time from December 31st, 2012 to November 21st, 2013 through a Weibo Application Programming Interface (API). They successfully compiled a database (hereafter *Renmin database*) of 2.7 billion Weibo posts and information about 170 million Weibo users.

Then I combined two sources of information to identify opinion leaders from this Weibo universe. By definition, opinion leaders are *popular* and *influential* users who are *interested* in political discussions on Weibo. These criteria were operationalized as following.

1. Popularity: similar to subscriptions to TV shows and newspapers, opinion leader's follower count is a key indicator of their popularity. I thus sorted the 170 million Weibo users by follower count and retained the top 5000 users.
2. Influence: to evaluate user influence, I used the Chinese Opinion Leader Ranking released by the *New Media*, a Chinese research institute focusing on social media. Their ranking uses a Micro-Blog Communication Index (BCI) to measure user influence. The BCI index is formulated as:

$$BCI = (20\% * W_1 + 80\% * W_2) * 160,$$

where W_1 is a measure of productivity based on the number of original posts a user produces:

$$W_1 = 30\% * \log(\text{post count} + 1) + 70\% * \log(\text{original post count} + 1);$$

and W_2 is a measure of popularity based on the feedback a user receives:

$$W_2 = 20\% * \log(\text{post count} + 1) + 20\% * \log(\text{comment count} + 1) + 25\% * \log(\text{original repost count} + 1) + 25\% * \log(\text{original comment count} + 1) + 10\% * \log(\text{like count} + 1)$$

New Media publicly issued 10 rankings. I combined the top 100 users of each issue and retained 311 non-repetitive names, most of which were already included in the top 5,000 list. Combining the two lists gave me a long list of Weibo users who enjoyed a great deal of popularity and influence.

3. Level of interest in political discussion: some users may be popular but rarely contributed to public discussion of political and social issues. Based on the long list, I further narrowed down to people keen on politics.

Using local knowledge, I selected 20 wide-acknowledged opinion leaders who often talk about politics, including both left-leaning and right-leaning influencers. Examples familiar to China scholars include, for example, liberal-leaning figures such as Sun Liping (孙立平), Wuyue Sanren (五岳散人), Zuoyeben (作业本), and nationalistic commentators such as Sima Nan (司马南), Hu Xijin (胡锡进), and Guyan Muchan(孤烟暮蝉).

I retrieved all of the 20 influencers' online posts from the Renmin database, identified the top 1,000 keywords, and selected 92 politically related terms as summarized in Appendix Table 1. I then used this dictionary to search for users who had at least five percent of their posts or 10 posts (whichever is less) containing any of these political terms. I also complemented this measure with my prior knowledge of Chinese opinion leaders. For instance, Han Han (韩寒), a Chinese culture figure and opinion leader who was named one of the most influential people in the world by *Times*, did not publicly post more than 3 politically related posts in 2013. But I still included him in the final list considering his huge influence in China. Eventually, I compiled a list of 239 opinion leaders who were popular, influential, and concerned about political and social issues.

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Appendix Table 1: Keywords Used to Identify Opinion Leaders

Chinese	English	Chinese	English
三中全会	Third Plenary Session	邓小平	Deng Xiaoping
军事	military	何兵	He Bing
军队	army	王立军	Wang Lijun
服贸	Taiwan–China service trade agreements	民主	democracy
美帝	Imperial America	宪政	constitutionalism
日本	Japan	社会主义	socialism
朝鲜	Korea	法治	the rule of law
香港	Hong Kong	爱国	patriotic
钓鱼岛	Diaoyu Islands	普世	universal values
台湾	Taiwan	人权	human rights
叙利亚	Syria	言论自由	freedom of speech
埃及	Egypt	禁言	banned post
中日	Sino-Japan	敏感	sensitive
苏联	Soviet Union	福利	welfare
习近平	Xi Jinping	民生	people’s livelihood
毛泽东	Mao Zedong	文革	Cultural Revolution
毛主席	Chairman Mao	维权	rights protection
周永康	Zhou Yongkang	上访	petition
金正恩	Kim Jong-un	司法独立	judicial independence
袁裕来	Yuan Yulai	城管	law-enforcement officer
马英九	Ma Ying-jeou	腐败	corruption
薄熙来	Bo Xilai	污染	pollution
柴静	Chai Jing	环保	environmental protection
反腐	anti-corruption	体制	political system
谣言	rumour	言论	speech
贪官	corrupt officials	大国	great country
强拆	demolitions	运动	social movement
劳教	re-education through labour	民意	public opinion
删帖	censorship	意识形态	ideology
食品安全	food safety	执政	ruling (party/ruler)
医改	medical reform	政权	political regime
贪污	corruption	货币	currency

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Chinese	English	Chinese	English
公知	public intellectuals	经济	economy
五毛	fifty-cents army	城镇化	urbanization
公民	citizen	夏俊峰	Xia Junfeng
国人	compatriot	薛蛮子	Xue Manzi
二代	second generation	吴虹飞	Wu Hongfei
汉奸	traitor	秦火火	Qin Huohuo
敌人	enemy	立二拆四	Li'er Chaisi
富人	the rich	张雪忠	Zhang Xuezhong
精英	elite	夏业良	Xia Yeliang
左派	leftists	许志永	Xu Zhiyong
宪法	constitution	陈永洲	Chen Yongzhou
冤案	injustice	王功权	Wang Gongquan
立案	file a case	斯诺登	Snowdon
政治	politics	曼德拉	Mandela

Lastly, after identifying the opinion leaders, I collected all of their 3.8 million publicly available posts that they ever published on Weibo. This data spans from August 2009 when Weibo was launched through June 2019 when I last accessed opinion leader accounts. It includes 1.3 million “original posts” that were produced by opinion leaders and 2.5 million “reposts” that they forwarded from other sources. Fourteen of opinion leader accounts were removed from Weibo before I accessed them. I thus only retrieved their 2013 posts from the Renmin database. In this paper, I limited my analysis to the 1.3 million original posts, particularly the approx. 80 thousand posts on democracy and politics.

In the main text, Table 2 shows the demographics of opinion leaders. According to their user profiles, the majority of opinion leaders are males, and are concentrated in top tier large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong.²¹

Most opinion leaders were “verified” by Weibo, meaning that their identity and profession information were verified as authentic. In practice, this verification is largely a privilege reserved for users who have a large number of followers. Weibo

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 21. However, self-reported information on social media sites should be treated with caution, since many users might not disclose or update their real physical residence online.

would invite these online celebrities for verification, and a gold “V” sign would be added to their profile pictures upon verification. Therefore, opinion leaders are usually called “big Vs” in China. In my data, only 6% of opinion leaders were not verified—not because they were not popular, but mainly because they declined such invitations. One opinion leader even made a Weibo post to clarify that they were not interested in the title of “big V.”

For each opinion leader’s occupational background, I used Weibo verification information and cross-checked other online sources. Many opinion leaders use their real names and abundant information are provided online. Others operate under avatars or pseudonyms, but their popularity has brought them great attention, such that their backgrounds and biographies can still be easily found. The largest group of opinion leaders come from cultural industry. They are famous cultural figures, such as TV anchors, journalists, and writers. Other groups include intellectuals such as scholars and professors; business leaders such as real estate or tech tycoons; professionals such as lawyers and doctors; and government employees such as local policemen. There are two other interesting groups. Internet personalities refer to online celebrities who have earned their reputation primarily through online activities. They tend to obscure their real identities online. Grassroots refer to those who suddenly became famous after a real-life incident. For instance, one of such grassroots opinion leaders was the wife of a victim of an alleged police brutality. These people used Weibo to air grievances and other political opinions and became opinion leaders later.

2. By-Year LDA Topic Analysis

I employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a topic modeling technique, to identify salient topics in opinion leaders’ political discussions of different years. LDA assumes that documents are probability distributions over topics, and topics are probability distributions over words. Both of the two probability distributions have a Dirichlet prior to control the sparsity of the distribution.²² Assuming that documents discussing similar topics would use a similar group of words, LDA discovers topics by identifying groups of words that frequently occur together within the documents.

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22. For more details of LDA, see Blei et al.’s (2003) seminal work *Latent Dirichlet Allocation*.

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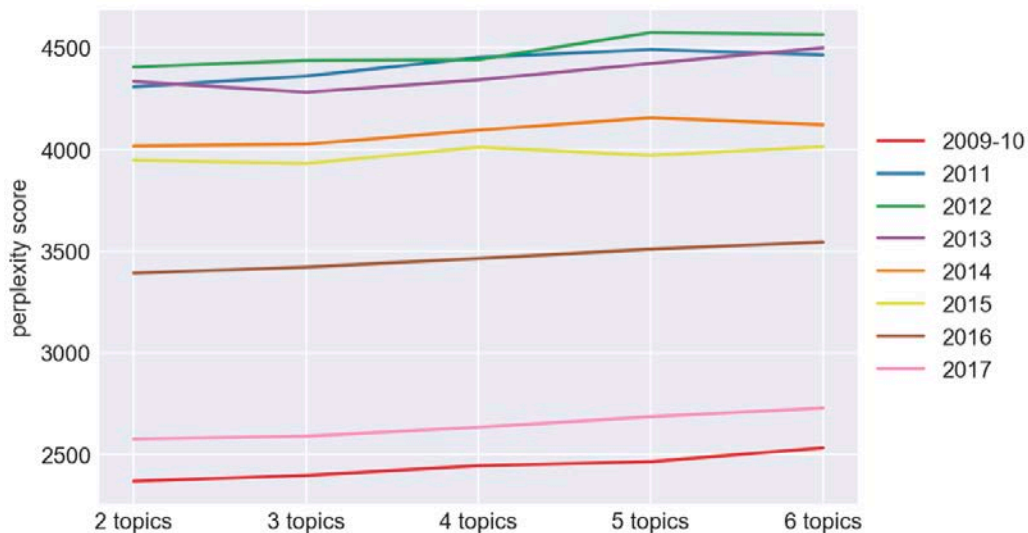
The Changes in Chinese Popular Attitudes toward Democracy

The LDA model takes a number of documents and it requires researchers to specify the number of topics they expect to find within these documents. In this study, I grouped the 80 thousand political posts into individual documents by person and by year, such that each document is a collection of each opinion leader's Weibo posts of one given year between 2009 and 2017. Since few posts were published in 2019 when Weibo was just launched, I combined each opinion leader's posts of 2019 and 2010 as one document. Hence, a total of 8 years were included in the by-year analysis.

After natural language processing, including segmentation and removal of stop words, I applied LDA analysis to the documents within each year, and tested different LDA models with 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 topics. For eight years, a total of 40 models were tested. Then I combined the perplexity score of each model and human judgements to identify the best model of each year.

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Appendix Figure 1: Perplexity Score of LDA Models with Varied Number of Topics



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Perplexity is a statistical measure that evaluates how well an LDA model predicts new samples. It is measured as the normalized log-likelihood of a held-out test set of the original data. The lower the perplexity score, the better the model performs. As shown in Appendix Figure 1, for all years except for 2013 and 2015, the perplexity

score was the lowest when LDA models were tested with 2 topics. Yet, models with a low perplexity score may not necessarily produce human interpretable topics. Using human judgements based on the keywords and topics given by different models, I still selected the models with 2 topics for the years of 2013 and 2015, as the third topics of both years were too small to produce meaningful results.

LDA model gives a list of the most probable terms for each topic, and the list is ranked according to term frequencies. Yet, as Sievert and Shirley (2014) noted, common, non-specific terms with high frequencies may reoccur at the top of the keyword lists for different topics, such that these topics may appear similar to one another. To better interpret the meaning of the topics, I leveraged the metric of *relevance* proposed by Sievert and Shirley²³ that ranks the most probable terms for a given topic based on both term frequency and each term's exclusivity to the topic. With this metric, I focused on both the most common and most unique keywords for each topic to differentiate and interpret topic meanings, as shown in Figure 2 in the main text.

3. TF-IDF Keyword Analysis

TF-IDF is an abbreviation of Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency. It is a statistic widely used in text mining and information retrieval, which combines two weightings to identify keywords of a document: the term frequency of a word in a document, and the inverse document frequency of this word in a corpus consisting of all documents. The latter helps to adjust for the fact that some words appear frequently in general but are less meaningful than other rarer words.

I grouped opinion leaders' democracy-related posts (N=14,166) by year. The posts in 2009 were too few (N=54) and were thus excluded. This gives us a total of 8 documents, each consisting of all opinion leaders' posts of one given year between 2010 to 2017. Then I applied TF-IDF statistic to identify the top 50 keywords of each year. Among them, 25 terms were shared by most years, as shown in Appendix Table 2. The term "democracy" always ranked the first place but was not counted in the 25 terms, because this term was used to identify the posts discussing democracy, and thus appeared at least once in each post.

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23. See Sievert, Carson and Kenneth E. Shirley. 2014. "LDAVis: A method for visualizing and interpreting topics." *Proceedings of the Workshop on Interactive Language Learning, Visualization, and Interfaces*: pages 63–70. <https://nlp.stanford.edu/events/illv2014/papers/sievert-illv2014.pdf>.

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A TURBULENT DECADE

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Appendix Table 2: Common Keywords in Democracy-Related Posts, 2010–2017

Chinese	English	2010 (rank)	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
民主	democracy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
国家	state/country	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	2
社会	society	4	4	4	6	7	5	7	3
政治	politics	2	3	2	4	3	3	4	4
媒体	media	31	32	34	26	23	26	10	5
总统	president	24	15	14	21	28	9	2	6
问题	problem	5	8	9	10	6	8	8	7
制度	institution	7	7	6	7	8	7	6	8
政府	government	8	6	7	8	9	11	15	9
人民	people	6	5	5	5	4	4	5	10
公民	citizen	18	20	24	34	32	44	50	12
世界	world	9	13	15	18	12	12	16	18
历史	history	13	11	10	15	16	15	17	20
权力	power	16	10	13	11	22	30	28	21
民众	the masses	14	14	19	32	27	46	23	24
发展	development	12	18	12	13	13	13	20	25
宪政	constitutionalism	10	17	17	3	10	19	18	38
文化	culture	26	24	45	37	35	41	47	43
经济	economy	11	21	18	17	19	14	14	45
领导	leadership	19	36	32	27	53	23	24	47
法治	rule of law	23	16	8	9	5	6	12	13
生活	life	41	39	30	20	15	24	33	14
体制	political system	21	35	23	25	29	28	37	15
民主自由	democracy and liberty	40	33	26	33	18	17	11	17
代表	representative	39	28	27	31	24	35	25	31
公知	<i>gongzhi</i> (public intellectuals)	n/a	n/a	37	28	11	10	9	11



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