

A Different Chinese Democracy: Alternatives to Regime “Misperception”

ABSTRACT: This essay presents four hypotheses to explain the confounding observation that a majority of citizens in the PRC view their regime as democratic. It departs from Doh Chull Shin's 2012 article stating that a “hierarchical culture” leads survey respondents to “go along with” non-democratic regimes which call themselves democratic. Calling such citizens “deferential authoritarians” neglects the empirical reality that China conceives of democracy differently, even among East Asian countries, and the CCP has made significant progress in democratizing in the 30+ years of the reform era. Although still lacking liberal institutions like national elections, many changes may be highlighted which have meant more consultation between the government and the population, better responsiveness to popular political participation, and greater accountability than in citizens' recent memories.

Introduction. Since the end of the Cold War vanquished the primary ideological challenge to capitalism, the People's Republic of China (PRC) of the post-Mao era has risen to offer a regionally attractive alternative to liberal democracy: popular authoritarianism. Yet it is clearly an empirical error to frame the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as merely a benevolent dictatorship. In the first place, dictatorship conjures an image of a single and all-powerful head of state, inimical to recent, institutionalized cycles of Chinese leadership, which center on multiple figures and positions of power. In the second, and more consequentially for prospects of political liberalization, a sizable majority of Chinese citizens view their country as a democracy already. In a 2012 companion article to his book, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*, Doh Chull Shin says that a majority of Chinese and a plurality of others throughout the largely non-democratic region “misperceive their regime as a well-functioning democracy” because they are “deferential authoritarians,” inclined to “go along with their leaders in calling their authoritarian system a democracy.”¹ If Shin sees a puzzle, it is resolved by considering the predominance of “hierarchical” values among East Asian citizens, leading both to compliant support and misperception of authoritarian regimes like the PRC. Contrarily, this essay takes the opinions of Chinese citizens offering “diffuse support” for their regime as a sign that they genuinely see democratization occurring in their country, in defiance of Freedom House, *The Economist*, and perhaps the whole of the West.

1 Shin, 2012 article, pg. 25.

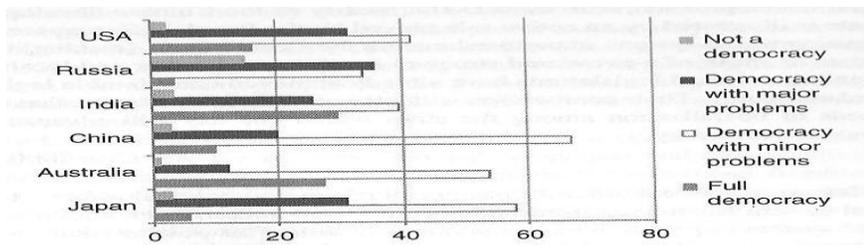


Fig. 1: Responses to Asian Barometer 2008 question 44: In your opinion how much of a democracy is your country today? Taken from Dingping Guo's chapter in Huang (Ed.), pg. 173.

Why do so many Chinese citizens “misperceive” the PRC's regime type, in Shin's words? The near unanimity of *non-*democratic perception of the PRC by Western scholars and casual “China-watchers” is confounded by the fact that less than five percent of Chinese citizens themselves share this view.² Few perceptual, empirical contrasts in contemporary politics are as stark and in need of explanation. This study offers four hypotheses, each of which will be supported by more country-specific evidence than a regional mass survey can consider.³ H1: Citizens are brainwashed by propaganda, afraid to answer honestly, or don't know what democracy really is. H2: Tenets of liberal democracy (i.e. “free and fair” elections, capitalism, rights and freedoms, etc.) may be rejected or dismissed without losing democratic status. H3: China has its own, different conception of democracy. H4: China is democratizing in ways our usual modes of inquiry and indicators fail to capture, namely with greater consultation of, responsiveness and accountability to the majority of the population.

The difficulty of studying Chinese democratization in depth, due to the topic's sensitivity, prevents testing these hypotheses formally, but the following sections will provide evidence for each hypothesis. Ultimately, in terms of plausibility, survey results suggest that China fits the regional pattern described by Shin, in which democratic regime performance, governing *for* the people, is valued by East Asian survey respondents more than democratic processes and procedures. The third and fourth hypotheses, in particular, offer an original theoretical contribution to democratic theory and studies of democratization. To be clear, the assertions and assumptions of the hypotheses are in graphic form, below.

2 Guo, pg. 173, in Huang (Ed.). China compares quite favorably with Japan, with almost twice as many people (10.1%) claiming that the PRC is a full democracy, and over ¾ of the Chinese sample, about a billion people if extrapolated to the population, falls into Shin's category of “deferential authoritarians” who (mis)perceive the PRC as a well-functioning democracy. If those who view the PRC as “a democracy with major problems” are added to the total, well over 90% of those expressing an opinion are accounted for.

3 Survey evidence and Shin's book are invaluable for broad conceptual themes and claims relating to the prevalence of beliefs in society and will be referenced frequently. Attributing survey results to something so broad as culture is a attractive for regional studies as his own, but problematic in detailed case studies, as this aspires to be.

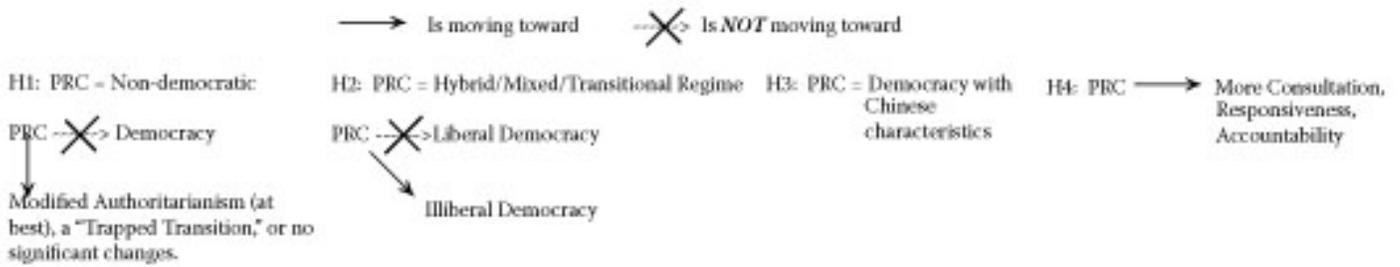


FIG. 2: What kind of regime do H1-H4 take the PRC to be, and what is the regime's trajectory?

Each section's evidence will begin by considering results from the World Values Survey and the East Asian Barometer to ground its plausibility empirically. Historical evidence will be offered as needed, especially regarding China's uneven embrace of Western political institutions, to clarify questions of conceptual origins and interpretations. Methodology for empirical evidence drawn from sources other than mass surveys will be explained in the sections citing it.

As this study is fundamentally about the contested meanings and interpretations of the word "democracy," it hesitates to define the term authoritatively. Much attention will be paid to the "background concept," which is taken to be non-controversial: rule by and for the people. After much discussion of how the PRC and its citizens conceive of *minzhu* (民主, literally "the people as masters") differently than Western scholarship, the fourth hypothesis systematizes the concept as an institutionally flexible combination of consultation, responsiveness, and accountability in governance, able to accommodate contradictions between standard (liberal) and Chinese concepts.⁴

H1: Citizens are brainwashed by propaganda, afraid to answer honestly, or don't know what democracy really is.

Western observers are likely to attribute the phenomenon of "deferential authoritarianism" to one of these three. Each will be addressed, in turn, by this section. H1 makes a fundamental ontological assumption, explicitly rejected by H2-H4, namely that there is only one true, valid, or correct form of democracy, and it is the liberal one approximated by polities in the West. Shin's conclusion that indirect cultural effects, favoring "hierarchism and egalitarianism," lead citizens to misperceive their regimes is a more sophisticated restatement of this hypothesis, but the equation of liberal democracy with a universal gold standard is intact.

⁴ Going from a background concept to a systematized one is the first step down in Adcock & Collier's Figure 1 (Conceptualization and Measurement: Levels and Tasks) on pg. 531. Through the conceptualization process, the primary research term is taken from a "broad constellation of meanings and understandings" to "a specific formulation of a concept...commonly involv[ing] an explicit definition." This is done "through reasoning about the background concept, in light of the goals of research."

A preference for hierarchy is itself no guarantee that an individual will perceive a regime structured in such a way to be democratic. At most, s/he may approve of such a regime, finding it legitimate and preferable to others, and a conflation of “good governance” with democracy itself would have to do the rest. I will return to the problem of conflating good government performance, as well as institutional congruence with a nation’s political culture, with democracy, but this section is primarily concerned with giving H1 empirical support. Departing from Shin, it is necessary to establish why most Western scholarship believes that the PRC is neither a democracy nor democratizing.

In short, it is a common disciplinary practice to equate democratization with liberalizing political institutions, and the PRC has, by most accounts, only liberalized to the barest extent necessary for the authoritarian CCP to remain in power. Minxin Pei uses the term “trapped transition” to describe the reality of Chinese political stagnation, asserting that the considerable economic reforms away from a state-owned command economy toward free markets can hardly go further without a major breakthrough in political liberalization. Such a breakthrough needs to be clearly in the direction of Robert Dahl’s polyarchy, a real approximation of the liberal democratic ideal.

From this standpoint, any reported view of the PRC regime as democratic, when it is in fact authoritarian, a term popularized by Samuel Huntington as antithetical, must be based on deception, fear, or ignorance. H1 is based on these three pillars, each suggesting Chinese citizens’ dubious empirical and normative understandings of the concept. While H2-H4 reject that, in Suzanne Ogden’s words, the liberal West “owns” democracy, the following paragraphs offer much empirical evidence that the CCP shapes citizens’ conceptualizations strategically, discouraging liberal interpretations, and is at ease with a large portion of the population who have a genuine lack of knowledge or opinions.

Perhaps the most important element the only nominally communist CCP retains from the Marxist dialectic is its belief in conceptual constructivism, in which elites can define politically important terms for the purpose of (re-)shaping the structure of society. By cultivating their own meanings among “the masses,” albeit in terms of the same (only oppositional) realist ontology, insular regimes can create state-dependent “social facts” which differ from those of other countries and the global or scholarly

community.⁵ Reforms away from communism have by no means ended this practice. Thus, Deng Xiaoping was able to coin the term “socialism with Chinese characteristics” to describe liberal economic reforms of the 1980's, continuing today, and to keep the meaning of the phrase flexible enough to describe with an ideological guise any economic policy decision made by the CCP. Watered down to basics, such changes consist mainly of marketization and reduction of the state-owned economic sector, perhaps even toward the goal of capitalism, so recently reviled and outlawed by the regime.

H1 argues that the same phenomenon, calling the regime its political opposite for the purpose of legitimization, is operative, though less well known by Westerners and apparently more internalized, judging by surveys since 2000.⁶ A state-guided media and propaganda system are instrumental to such a feat.⁷ Illustrated empirically, in the fall of 2010, I gathered global media data comparing words associated with democracy.⁸ With data from 583 news websites, I concluded that democracy is less associated with “freedom” in the PRC than in any other country's media. Overall, 29% of all news articles worldwide which contained the word “democracy” also contained the word “freedom”. For liberals, these concepts seem a natural pair, going hand in hand in both news reporting and rhetoric. Not surprisingly, the type of media whose articles contained both words at the highest rate, about half of all articles, were right-wing U.S. sites, with the Middle East coming in second. The 101 East Asian sites came in last place as a region, with 20.3% of articles mentioning both words, with the PRC and Singapore's media having the lowest percentages within that group. The figure below summarizes findings relevant to this study.

5 See Searle for a lengthy consideration of social facts, as opposed to “brute facts” which exist beyond human perception and do not depend on people to agree on definitions, parameters, or means of measurement. Money is a social fact; a mountain is a brute fact.

6 H2-H4 supporters might interject that democracy is a far broader and more contested term than capitalism, so claiming a universal meaning for the former is a much shakier assertion.

7 See generally the work of Yuezhi Zhao, who argues that despite a decrease in state control of mass media in the reform era, considerable editorial constraints remain, including the portrayal of the PRC as a democracy opposed to the “bourgeois,” “Western” form espoused by liberal regimes.

8 Methodology for this word association search was fairly complicated, originally conceived to compare the proportion of positive and negative words in articles mentioning democracy in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, and Arabic. The goal was to get an idea of how different countries' media portray democracy to their citizens: i.e. would it reduce violence in the political process?, was its promotion a cloak for Western imperialism?, would it give freedom to individuals and nations?

Polity	# of sites Sampled	# in Chinese	%Dem&Free
Hong Kong	15	8	29.90%
Macau	3	3	22.70%
PRC	51	47	14.10%
Singapore	3	0	18.40%
Taiwan	21	18	21.40%
USA	64	0	35.10%
All Sites	583	81	29%

FIG. 3: The percentage of media articles containing the word "democracy," searched on Google in fall 2010, which also contain the word "freedom" for selected countries.

Attributing "misperception" entirely to the media is disingenuous, of course, ascribing a power to them in line with the "hypodermic effects" model of a bygone era.⁹ By the same logic, however, liberals should not expect media exposure to the regime's oppressive acts, a compendium of the CCP's greatest disasters administered by loudspeaker or any other medium, to have instantaneous effects of reversing Chinese perceptions. The regime now relies more on positive accomplishments, however embellished, than deception and repression.

Fear of speaking freely must also explain some of the results, though this would be misreporting rather than misperception. Among China scholars, Edward Friedman's status among the first Westerners to do political field work in the PRC justifies his continued outspokenness on whether surveys and interviews can uncover what citizens of an authoritarian state "really" believe. When opinion questions have answers which are "right," "wrong," or sufficient to constitute a political crime implicating both interviewer and interviewee, there is reason to be skeptical of any responses regarding sensitive topics like democracy. Arguably, however, free speech may be the democratic demand most successfully met by the regime since the 1989 incident in Tiananmen, and most contemporary visitors to China find its citizens, taxi drivers and students in particular, to be very frank.

Many of the PRC's repressive practices remain geared toward the very small minority who are, in Shin's words, "authentic

9 Farnsworth & Lichter's book has a good summary of three theoretical positions on how influential the media are on popular opinions, ranging from the outdated hypodermic model just described, to the leading model of "agenda setting" (not telling people what to think but rather what to think *about*), and the still widely held belief in "minimal effects" whereby media don't persuade but merely reinforce consumers' predispositions. While it's generally conceded that the PRC uses media more propagandistically than liberal democracies, the extent to which such efforts are effective is only somewhat supported by my evidence.

liberal democracy conceiver” fully committed to democracy both as a regime type and a process.¹⁰ Keeping those who openly favor and advocate the adoption of “Western democracy” under wraps is undoubtedly part of the CCP’s strategy to ensure that “deferential authoritarians” continue to dominate in the population. In another, more heartening survey for liberals which casts further doubt on the extent of self-censorship, Cheng Li cites evidence from a seven-city poll in 2012 that some 63% “did not oppose adopting Western-style democracy in China.”¹¹ These urban data, judging by the tentatively worded answer with a majority that is less than overwhelming, may show less that citizens want democracy now than that China is a starkly divided country between urban and rural areas. Although the overall population balance has recently tipped in favor of cities, and is expected to continue this trend,¹² rural residents included in national samples are clearly not the only ones who “defer” to state authority on the regime type question.

Tianjian Shi’s chapter in 2008’s *How East Asians View Democracy* finds the high proportion of Chinese respondents who give “don’t know” answers to be due to actual cognitive deficiency rather than discomfort in sharing their real opinions. While the “don’t know” have diminished in subsequent rounds, they remain larger than for other countries. Interpreting survey results from 2002, Shi also finds democracy to be both “elastic” and successfully defined by the government, in that the “official view remains dominant.”¹³ Legacies of the revolutionary era and the well-publicized, state-fashioned idea of “socialist democracy” are not easily erased from the collective Chinese consciousness, and Shi spends much of his chapter trying to explain apparent contradictions and anomalies in the survey results, to be discussed shortly. This is not to say that no one calls the PRC a democracy because that’s what the regime wants its citizens to say. Obsequiousness certainly accounts for some of the positive assessments across all the questions. However, it is a mistake to assume that everyone is insincere, coerced by fear either to say they believe the

10 Shin, pg. 322. In his article, he notes that the “individualist” culture strongly correlated with liberal democratic conceptions is not very prevalent in the region generally, but especially low in the former communist states of China and Vietnam.

11 Li, pg. 601. The poll was conducted by the nationalist *Global Times* branch of the *People’s Daily*, given to about 1000 citizens. On the C-POL discussion board, Stanley Rosen similarly cites recent surveys of university students, available “internally” and not publicly available, showing a strong preference for liberal democracy. Rosen attributes Hu Jintao’s declarations at the 18th Party Congress that China must “resolutely not follow Western political systems” to being afraid of liberal college students losing faith in the Chinese system. Contrasting these surveys with the larger ones from the East Asian Barometer, it is difficult not to suggest that liberalism finds its strongest support in China, among the well-educated, while the majority believing PRC propaganda about current democratic status come from the countryside and lower social strata. This is hardly surprising and begs the reinsertion of the hackneyed term “bourgeois democracy” into official CCP critiques of the West.

12 See generally the work of Kam Wing Chan on China’s urbanization.

13 See Shi in Chu et. al., pg. 209, 216, 214 for each point.

regime is democratic or feign ignorance if they believe it's not. We can conclude that there is real confusion in China about what democracy means, and the regime's continued democratic assertions foster considerable cognitive dissonance among citizens who might otherwise be expected to conform to a liberal definition.

H2: Tenets of liberal democracy may be rejected or diminished without losing democratic status. This hypothesis claims that the PRC is currently a mixed regime, containing elements of *all three* basic regime types.¹⁴ It is moving not toward liberal democracy but the illiberal form, whose threshold is both far lower and less well established, only just democratic enough to rise above a din of liberal protests. This section argues that the PRC's inability to achieve even this lower status, for lacking necessary components like national elections, casts doubt on both the utility of the illiberal concept and a definitional focus solely on institutions.

If most political theorists accept and indeed thrive on democracy as a contested concept, empirical studies do not have the luxury of flexibility. Instead, like all important phenomena in political science, the term must be operationalized to enable precise measurement. Standard definitions of key terms are the foundation upon which empirical studies build and theories are tested, and ongoing disagreements about what the necessary and sufficient set of components are for democracy to attain may impede such linear progress. Scholars capable of sophisticated, large-N analysis can hardly be bothered to question the validity of a term so basic and powerful as democracy, and the diversity entailed in the concept is necessarily minimized to enable quantified measurements generally, such as movements toward one or another pole of a continuum.

By making the requirements of democracy less stringent, the status is more easily conferred, enabling an expansion of the population from which to sample for large-N studies. There is, however, a point beyond which a "stretched" concept applied to partial cases, distant from the original antecedent, ceases to describe anything substantial.¹⁵ By expanding the number of cases to which democracy may be applied, liberals understandably fear that their prized political term loses, at once, its meaning,

14 Far from the "intellectual surrender" Fewsmith says we commit by giving the PRC a mixed or hybrid label (2010, pg. 162), in combining totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic elements, the regime presents itself as idiographic rather than nomothetic.

15 Sartori's explicit warning not to quantify before verifying conceptual validity raises the stakes considerably, should the PRC be a fundamental and rising challenge, requiring countless democracy studies to insert "liberal" before using the term. For discussion of "conceptual stretching," see pg. 1034 and the classic APSR article generally. H3 in particular addresses his question of whether different contexts need their own concepts.

importance, and normative appeal. As a palliative, scholars have devised a smorgasbord of modifiers to describe the contemporary diversity of global political regimes, allowing pure paragons to stand alone atop conceptual pedestals, high above cases in modified and thereby diminished forms. This compromise greatly expands the spectrum of possible regime types to be more descriptive of individual cases, but if the original categories are not standardized, the potential is still high for blurred boundaries, as illustrated below.

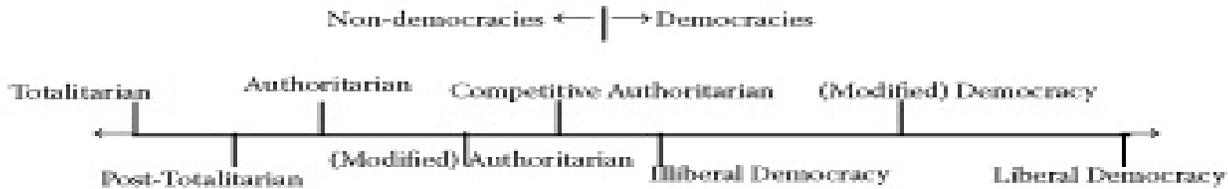


FIG. 4: Regime types on a continuum. As terms get refined and modifiers proliferate, the sets of defining characteristics get fuzzier, more subject to a particular author's chosen focus than a scholarly consensus.

Modified terms like competitive authoritarianism and illiberal democracy either suggest that there is something missing from a regime which prevents labeling it as a pure form of a larger category or that the regime contains elements of its opposite. For illiberal democracies, many of which are newly minted from the Third Wave or, perhaps one day, the Arab Spring, the charge against a regime is likely to be in the form of deficient rights or flaws in the electoral process. On the other end of what was once a neat dichotomy, many of today's autocracies are "softening," in partial response to a growing, global consensus that only democratic regimes have the legitimate "right to rule."¹⁶ Competitive authoritarian regimes like Singapore and Russia hold elections, but the likelihood of the ruling party being deposed by them is minuscule, and like illiberal democratic regimes just on the other side of the democratic dividing line, rights and liberties are in too short a supply.

Since the fall of the USSR, whose totalitarian voting was an obvious sham, elections alone are no longer enough to distinguish between democracies and non-democracies. Even "free and fair" ones going far beyond those in the states just mentioned only qualify a regime for the "electoralism" derided in Schmitter and Karl's indispensable article on the necessary

¹⁶ Bruce Gilley's 2009 book uses this as its title and definition of a regime's legitimacy. Notably, to illustrate that regime labels have consequences beyond pedantic scholarship, some current Just War theorists like Brian Orend are beginning to question whether non-democracies have sovereignty or the right to defend themselves in war.

conditions for democracy. Nevertheless, in the popular imagination, elections do have pride of place for being the most obvious and objectively present or absent democratic institution. Democracy's fullest expression, the liberal form, now requires a host of values and rights to exist in both constitutions and actuality, but elections remain foundational, perhaps the closest any single institution comes to being necessary for coveted democratic status.

Liberal democracy has been a moving target, as even the most "liberal" regimes of the 19th century would be considered repressive and exclusive by 20th century standards.¹⁷ But, of course, human progress impinges on all works of "social science," and even a unanimous consensus has a very limited shelf life. In a given year or decade, some combination of institutions, procedures, and values adds up to a maximal definition of democracy in its best, fullest form, and a global race is on among liberal states to be the closest to that ideal. But as many newly democratized states struggled to implement and cultivate an optimal set in the 1990's to the present, there has been as much debate about what the best form of democracy is as what the lowest threshold is to cross into recognizable rule by and for the people.¹⁸ Most theorists offering minimalist definitions of democracy hesitate to reduce the concept to a single, essential institution, but studies which have done so tend to focus on the institution of elections. For his particular focus on social choice, and possibly also for ease of measurement, William Riker's *Liberalism against Populism* states that voting is the "central act" of democracy, the necessary (but not sufficient) democratic institution in which the elements of participation, liberty, and equality fit together coherently.¹⁹ A polity without elections, by Riker's definition, could not possibly be democratic. Subsequent democratic theory since the 1990 has taken what John Dryzek calls a "deliberative turn" and become highly critical of liberal democracy's reliance on the electoral institution, but for most scholarly conceptions elections remain absolutely vital.²⁰

17 That vanguard liberal democracies have largely been the same, Western states throughout modern history, however, might be understandably frustrating for states which have improved democratically by leaps and bounds but can never seem to gain admission into the gentlemen's club of democratic core states, almost all in the West. Just as it is impossible to catch a receding horizon, chasing liberal democracy requires adapting to its expanding requirements.

18 Not sure how much space to spend outlining procedures like ("free and fair") elections, rule of law, majority rule, popular deliberation and participation; values including liberties, equality of individuals, government transparency, minority rights, etc. Presumably these are very familiar to the reader, and elections are what I want to focus on most here.

19 Riker, pg. 5, further states that "all democratic ideas are focused on the mechanism of voting", but many polities which have elections still fail to be democratic because the voting does not facilitate popular choice.

20 Gaus & Kukathas, pg. 145. If no other space presents itself for criticism of liberal democracy's use of elections... Elections alone, by the account of deliberative democracy theorists, produce a thin, almost superficial democracy which tends to be elitist and capitalist as a result of its minimal connection to the people. Kay Schlozman and her frequent collaborators, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady, in their 2012

The PRC presents a difficult challenge to regime categorizations based solely on political institutions. In the past decade, China's form of authoritarianism has been modified by scholars to toe the line between democracy and non-democracy, despite the absence of national elections for top leadership positions and ongoing single-party rule. In particular, several use the same terms this study employs to systematize the definition of democracy in the H4 section. "Adaptive," "consultative," "responsive," and "contentious" authoritarianism each suggest a greater flexibility and concern for participatory citizens than the pure form is theorized to allow.²¹ Few would disagree that there hasn't been a major shift in the proportion of the PRC population with real political power, but this in and of itself is greatly downplayed by those who deny that substantial democratization has occurred. For most scholars of political development, it is not enough to expand the base of government to include more of the population; such expansion must come in the form of specific rights and institutions to be worthy of being called democratization. H4 argues that the PRC is in fact experimenting with both familiar and uniquely Chinese examples of these, but for H2 the most basic, necessary identifying features of a democratic regime are still not present. To illustrate the earlier point that democratization in the modern era used to mean popular empowerment generally, movement away from kings, dictators, and other autocrats, a very simple figure follows.

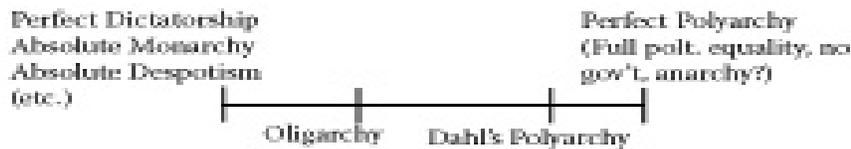


FIG. 5: How many people (what proportion of the population) govern the regime? To what extent do citizens have political equality within the regime?

It is doubtful whether any perfect autocracies have existed in history or the modern era, as even the most autocratic leaders, from kings and emperors to the fascist and communist dictators have always relied to an extent on trusted advisors to guide their despotism.²² The continuum above addresses the now often neglected fact, for being almost too obvious, that

book, *The Unheavenly Chorus*, concur with the critique that affluent people both vote and wield far more power in liberal democracy than the principle of majority rule implies.

21 In order, these modifiers are either coined or utilized by Heilmann & Perry, Fewsmith, Reilly, and Chen.

22 In China's case, this occurred in 1733 with the formation of the Grand Council. See Bartlett for a description of how emperors since the height of the Qing slowly ceded power to this institution, becoming more of an oligarchy. Historians give much credit to the delegated

democratization expands the number of people in the population who have political power in the system, as part of “normal politics.”

The number of people wielding power is mostly defined institutionally, as people have always circumvented non-democratic regimes in extreme circumstances to assert themselves when a regime fails to recognize them. This study takes most contemporary regimes to have converged around the middle between oligarchies and polyarchies, the latter which Dahl uses to approximate liberal democracy as it actually exists in today’s modern nation-states.

Until the idea of the PRC as a democracy gains minimal acceptance in the West, H2 is of little utility in explaining Chinese citizens' strange perceptions. Perhaps different combinations of rights and institutions may be allowed, but the absence of national elections remains an automatic democratic disqualification.²³ As H3 argues, it may be more productive to consider Chinese democracy in a culturally distinct light, not least because many “deferential authoritarians” still proclaim their own model to be a fully-formed rule “by and for” the people, and few of the illiberal forms described by H2 can stake claims to being a rising superpower.

H3: China has its own, different conception of democracy. This section considers the possibility that Chinese history and culture make its democracy special and that, once defined, popular perception is sufficient to achieve it. The importance of perception and different reasons for democratization must first be established, followed by empirical examples of how the Chinese concept of democracy and how China’s citizens perceive it differ from Western, individualist liberalism. With these points in mind, changes in how the PRC has treated political participation will be traced, as a bridge to H4, which argues that political reforms are headed in a democratic direction. This is the only section arguing that China *is currently* a democracy, because the regime meets its own definition and citizens are generally satisfied with it. H3 does not make a statement on the trajectory of political reforms, as they are defined by the CCP, as the leading and legitimate authority of the state.

If the two previous hypotheses have taken a more conventional approach to studying democracy in terms of its

powers of the Council, which allowed the dynasty to persist over a century beyond its last, great emperor, Qianlong.

23 This point renders the PRC unable, no matter how many other liberties and developmental benefits it provides to citizens, to become even a “competitive authoritarian” regime like contemporary Russia. And yet, no less an ardent liberal than Francis Fukuyama has acknowledged that “the quality of Chinese government is higher than Russia, Iran” despite both of the latter regimes holding elections. One then wonders if it is better to have no elections, accepting a more purely authoritarian label from a procedural perspective, than to hold limited ones.

institutions, H3 has a radically different focus which may reflect the regional priorities of East Asia as a whole. Institutional definitions tend to leave out regime performance and popular perceptions, and both are crucial when corrupt or otherwise flawed democratic institutions lead “the people” to doubt that the locus of power lies with them and to suspect that it might instead lie somewhere else.

Compared to institutions, survey evidence is very unstable, so basing democratic status solely on the vagaries of public opinion is not viable either, as any group considering itself to be “the people” might retract a democratic evaluation simply because the group does not like a particular leader or policy. A polity could be a democracy one day, a non-democracy the next, and this study assuredly agrees that there is far more to democracy than popularity. Given Doh Chul Shin's recent findings that an entire region of the world defines democracy in terms of performance, that is, substantively rather than procedurally, good governance and popular perception as such cry out for some kind of definitional inclusion. Bruce Gilley's *The Right to Rule* also finds politically liberal but poorly performing regimes in Eastern Europe to be uniformly at the bottom of global legitimacy rankings, while the PRC's legitimacy is comparable and sometimes higher than OECD democracies. Under a strictly institutional definition, a regime is still a democracy even when democracy doesn't work.²⁴

A consolidated but poorly performing democratic regime is not thought to be a serious problem for liberal societies because the fundamental goodness and fairness of the system are taken for granted. It is good because it frees and empowers the individual to a greater extent than any other regime; it is fair because citizens are politically equal before the law and the oft-stated oversimplification, “one person, one vote.” In a consolidated, liberal democracy which places great value on how politicians and the government gain power in the regime, outcomes become a secondary concern.

For the concept of “performance legitimacy,” there is only what Diamond and Morlino call “the quality of results.”²⁵ This is said to buoy a floundering, authoritarian CCP which has cast off the ideological life preserver which had similarly excused past,

24 A democracy might not “work” on a variety of levels. Most basically, institutions and processes may produce outcomes which a majority, or even a plurality, fails to find satisfactory. Liberals might accept such outcomes for a long time because they believe “the democratic process” (voting for representatives who make decisions for their constituencies) to be the fairest way to aggregate and choose between individual preferences. If a society has unorthodox expectations of democracy, like economic providence or the creation of a strong state, democracy doesn't “work” if it fails to accomplish these goals.

25 Most assessments of democracy evaluate institutions themselves, the “quality of content” for Diamond and Morlino, in the same article.

suboptimal outcomes like famine and disastrous political campaigns. Importantly for this study's puzzle, governance in

accordance with the priorities stated by public opinion is not just performance legitimacy but Chinese democracy itself.

Ideological and instrumental reasons for democratizing are thus very important to understand Chinese democracy's difference from the liberal form mistakenly given as universal. Even if democracy's truest realization would be as a bridge between the liberal and state socialist regimes, as described and largely forgotten by Mosca in the late 1930s, answers for "why democracy?" may be still more divided and fundamental.²⁶ With special attention to the end of the Qing dynasty and early Republican era in China, whose ill-fated dalliances with liberal democracy cannot be summarized here but are still vital to H3, the following chart summarizes how democracy is perceived based on the reasons it is pursued.

IDEOLOGY	END OR MEANS?	WHY INHERENTLY DESIRABLE? TOWARDS WHAT END?
Liberalism	End	Empowering individuals is a fundamental, universal good.
Legitimacy	Means	Dem. Broadens the base of gov't (i.e. away from autocracy & oligarchy), leads to better governance
Populism	End	Distrust in ability of elites & bureaucrats to be selfless, act in "the people's" interest, especially those who constitute the majority. Empowers "the people" over those w/ high socioeconomic status.
Paternalism	Means	For the benefit of a strong, stable state, people's interests must be the primary concern. Elites governing "for the people" is both democratic and better than liberalism b/c the people aren't "ready" to govern.
Chinese e.20 th C. Statism	Means	Democracy cultivates/frees the individual to contribute to the highest priorities: a strong state, national (race) survival. If strong state can be achieved w/out democracy, however, neither liberal nor populist dem. is worth social "disharmony." (Combines all of above)

FIG. 6: Why democracy? Different ideologies justify it differently, and these affect the form a polity will pursue, the strength of commitment to realizing it, and the extent to which suboptimal outcomes are tolerated before abandoning it for another political system.

A problem for an essay of this length is that significant portions of Chinese people of various classes, at various times, subscribed to

each of these ideologies. At much greater length, for example, Andrew Nathan's *Chinese Democracy* covers most of these

ideologies in the early Republic and immediate post-Mao reform eras, finding shifts in Chinese priorities even within these limited

periods.²⁷ Similar to Shin's findings about the influence of an individual's culture on the support for liberal democracy, ideological

26 Dandeker quotes Mosca's intermediate position to show democracy to be a higher concept than simply something that one regime type or another can achieve. What matters for Dandeker and his predecessors, Foucault and Weber, is the extent of bureaucratic dominance of society and whether it is rational/legalistic (modern) or more based on patronage (traditional).

27 China's preeminent thinker on political reform, Liang Qichao, is portrayed to waver among instrumental justifications, believing at first that liberal democratic institutions would help China (re-)build a strong state. Disillusioned in his later years, he eventually came to agree with the paternalist notion of "political tutelage," which would guard and cultivate an unripe population until such time that it became "ready" for liberal politics. Similarly, Deng is portrayed to support and use the "Democracy Wall" movement to aid his rise to power, then repress it when liberal

positions like those listed above are likely to shape one's definition of democracy and one's opinion as to whether any previous Chinese regime achieved it. Ideas like checks and balances to restrain the state, one of democracy's major functions for Fewsmith and liberals generally, would be alien to China's earliest democrats, who saw "the modern political form" (Western or liberal democracy) as a means to *strengthen*, not shackle, the moribund Qing state.

Another historical problem, considered in multiple books by Edmund Fung, is the incorporation of traditional Chinese expectations of economic prosperity into the definition of democracy. Fung finds that even China's most liberal thinkers rejected or were deeply conflicted by capitalism, and even before the communist era, most Chinese conceptions explicitly excluded profit maximization for capital accumulation from unique but nebulous ideas like "economic democracy."²⁸ Evidence of a distinctly Chinese conception of democracy, controlling for the presence of liberal political institutions, is provided in Shin's book, comparing countries throughout East Asia, as in the figure below.

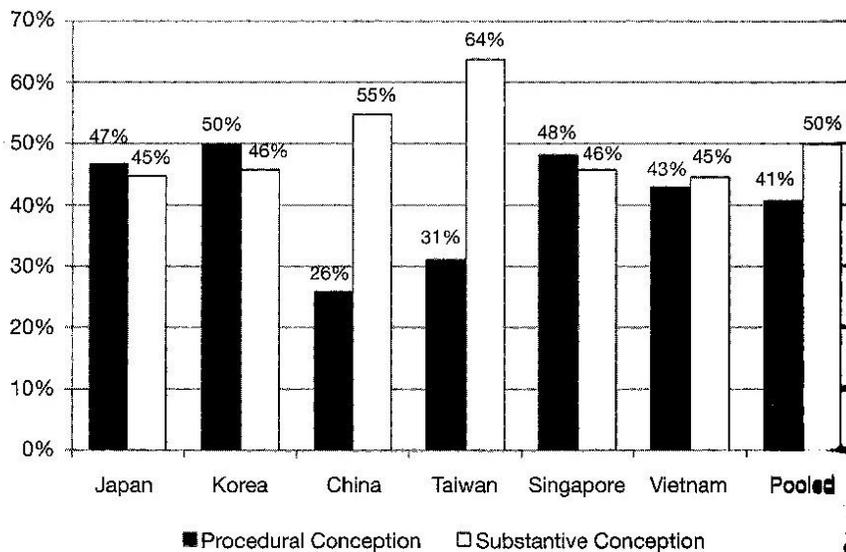


Fig. 7: Procedural and Substantive Conceptions of Democracy, according to the 2005-2008 Asian Barometer Surveys. Taken from Shin, pg. 242. Note that Taiwan is a liberal democracy yet remains, like the PRC, highly procedural in its conception.

While several other countries conceive of democracy slightly more in terms of its results than in "the democratic process," both

political participation no longer suited him.

28 See Fung's *Intellectual Foundations* for the late imperial and early Republican periods, *In Search of Chinese Democracy* for liberal democratic voices growing more faint amidst national weakness, wars, and the coming of communism.

China and Taiwan are the only two in the region which do so at more than *double* the rate. As both the components of the “substantive” conception are economic, in terms of security, we may extend Elizabeth Perry’s observation that “good” Chinese states provide the people’s rights to subsistence, above all.²⁹ By sinicized terms, then, democracy is very much about providing rights to the people.

Not only do Chinese consider democracy to be in the “substance” of governance, rather than the procedures, they are largely satisfied with what the CCP regime has provided, as shown below.

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Somewhat satisfied</i>	<i>Somewhat dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>
The right to vote	16.1	59.1	19.6	5.1
The right to participate	12.5	57.5	22.7	6.5
The right to gather	9.0	41.1	34.1	9.5
The right to be informed	6.5	46.1	35.5	10.6
Freedom of speech	14.1	54.2	25.3	5.7
The right to criticize	6.5	42.1	40.1	10.1

FIG. 8: Responses to 2008 Asian Barometer question 43: How satisfied are you with the current scope of the following rights in China? Taken from Dingping Guo’s chapter in Huang (Ed.), pg. 173.

Earlier data used in *How East Asians View Democracy* also demonstrate that, although nearly everyone prefers democracy over any other regime type, a majority of Chinese do not support multi-party competition.³⁰ While measures like those of Freedom House and other liberal foundations show a monolithically non-democratic, static PRC stuck in the doldrums of authoritarianism, Tianjian Shi instead brings to light Chinese people’s very different impressions of substantial democratization. One of the most surprising findings in entire book is that Chinese survey respondents believed the PRC to have democratized even more than did citizens of Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, all of the last three having instituted national elections fairly recently. What should further confound the liberal “China-watcher” is the finding that the population of the PRC finds more progress in democratization from the mid-1990’s to the current regime than in “policy performance,” despite that the latter is supposedly the source of the regime’s

29 Perry, pg. 10, notes that traditional China believes rights to be state-conferred, not “natural.” Mencius is portrayed as a radical for his time, advocating an active state (government) to establish a Confucian moral economy. This is notably opposed by Locke’s preference for a minimal state, which most Chinese states in the early modern era approximated better than Europe by taxing subjects at a far lower rate than the warring Europeans.

30 This non-competitive conception likely has as much to do with respect for the CCP, constitutionally-inscribed as not being subject to legitimate opposition, as fear of societal divisiveness and instability. The Party, of course, does much to stoke such fear, and these worries nicely complement the denigration of “Western-style” democracy on grounds of nationalism and more analytical observations of liberal, electoral pathologies. More on this later.

legitimacy and popularity.³¹

The current PRC is no socialist utopia, but activities of the “New Left” in the past decade suggest that plenty of people find the official ideology far less than bankrupt. Such true believers might accept what Baogang He has called the “paternalist model” of democracy, whereby the unelected CCP government equates the term with guardianship and good governance.³² These might ally themselves with apolitical residents, consisting of those parochially disinclined to follow or participate in politics and those who have unpleasant memories of totalitarian mass campaigns. Both groups might well be satisfied with government for the people which needs little or no popular input to function well. If functioning well means little more than facilitating economic subsistence and development, as the sizable section of the PRC favoring basic materialist values might be expected to believe, a non-participatory but highly regarded democracy could exist in the minds of those the regime has lifted out of abject poverty. Such residents with more of a positive “subject” than alienated “citizen” orientation to PRC’s political institutions, in Almond and Verba’s terms, could be expected to answer that the regime is quite democratic on a large survey full of questions not often considered by this section of the population. Taking Eckstein’s congruence theory seriously and to its limits, some “deferential authoritarians” are simply perceiving a democratic regime in line with their very limited or ideological expectations. It would take considerable mental gymnastics for a liberal democrat to follow such a tortured logic, leaving little recognizable in the term, but this is a lesser evil than calling so many millions of reasonable, intelligent people simply wrong and deluded.

This section may be concluded with one more piece of personally gathered evidence from interviews with 31 Chinese citizens on their perceived level of free choice, conducted in the summer of 2012. While a lack of sophistication, or liberal education, may prevent many from distinguishing between repressive authoritarian and liberal democratic regimes, any individual should be able to describe the extent to which s/he feels free to make decisions about his or her life. As choice is central to

31 Shi (pg. 219) attributes these odd findings both to differences in conceptualizing democracy and also to memories of the PRC’s turbulent, impoverished past (differing “baselines” of comparison). “Democratization” in this comparison includes freedoms, equality, “popular influence”, and an independent judiciary, which are perceived to have gone in a more democratic, preferred direction than corruption, law and order, and economic equality. Younger generations, not surprisingly, tend to be more in line with a liberal definition, so an argument can be made that a convergence of Chinese and liberal definitions of democracy is on the way.

32 Yuezhi Zhao’s chapter in Heilmann & Perry finds the internet to be the arena of choice for a conservative, left-wing resurgence. Hu Jintao’s first webchat, on pg. 201, for example, was hailed by neo-Maoists as an example of internet democracy, “a digital-age version of ‘mass democracy’” and “yesterday’s ‘big-character posters’.”

conceptions of democracy focused on elections, like Riker's, even citizens who "misperceive" their regime could still be expected to describe their level of choice as greatly constrained, against a universal preference for freedom. I found, not unexpectedly, that these citizens largely mirrored the optimism and satisfaction of the 2008 Pew survey,³³ seeing many improvements in the kinds of choices available to them, compared to past years and generations. That only a few mentioned politics at all, and only one in negative terms which were clearly based on liberalism, suggests that the larger surveys are valid on an individual level as well as a societal one.

As is likely apparent from the disjointed nature of this section, what detracts most from H3 is not a lack of evidence but no single, unified theory to tie each point of China's unique views together. Certainly, the sum of all these parts explains much of the whole "deferential authoritarian" phenomenon, but it would be foolhardy to suggest that there is only one Chinese conception of democracy, fully realized by the current regime. There will likely never be a nationwide PRC survey testing the extent to which citizens believe in official rhetoric about socialism³⁴ or a purely performance-based definition; major surveys can only tell us that those who conceive of democracy in the same way Western liberals do are a very small minority.

H4: China is democratizing in ways our usual modes of inquiry and indicators fail to capture, namely with greater consultation of, responsiveness and accountability to the majority of the population (C,R,A). If we withdraw to the highest level of abstraction for the background concept, given as "government by and for the people," significant evidence may be offered to show that the PRC of recent decades has been anything but stagnant. If Shi's earlier findings of more improvements in democratization than policy performance are valid, we should be able to find evidence of changes in the way the PRC is actually governed. Beyond the low baselines of comparison with the Mao era, where beyond subjective perceptions can democratic progress be seen in the past decade? Chinese political participation and institutions of popular political influence, both little understood in the West, hold the keys, but before unlocking the democratic jewels hidden in the hinterlands of the PRC, the novel

³³ China led the world in terms of satisfaction with the direction of the country in 2008, with 86% approving of China's direction in 2008, likely buoyed by the olympics but still far ahead of #2, Australia, at 69%, according to Pew.

³⁴ The CCP has seen more than its fair share of democratic modifiers, from those which move the concept into another arena, like "economic democracy," to "socialist," "people's," and "great" which are all deeply enmeshed in shifting Party ideologies and Mao's concept of the "mass line." Lin Chun's *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* is invaluable not only for explaining what these terms meant but also updating their use to the contemporary regime.

definition of democracy promised in the hypothesis will be briefly explained.

In the interest of bridging criteria focused on institutions or perceptions of government performance, each shown to be unsatisfactory in isolation by H3's section, a novel definition is needed to accommodate the PRC's differences with the scholarly standard, including its authoritarian contradictions. Democracy is systematically defined in this section as consisting of three necessary elements: consultation, responsiveness, and accountability (C,R,A henceforth). Each can be measured in terms of both what is promised in the polity's constitution and what the regime actually delivers. By "consultation" is meant asking the population what it wants, including any means to ascertain the will of the majority.³⁵ "Responsiveness" is simply acknowledging what the majority has requested by enacting policy or otherwise taking action in line with the request whenever possible, and in a timely fashion.³⁶ "Accountability" includes taking responsibility for implementation of policies, especially when they fail to achieve the intended results. An accountable government, including its individual members, accepts and faces consequences of failures and malfeasance according to what the majority deems appropriate.³⁷

Popular influence over any area or level of government can thereby be rendered very simply in terms of whether these democratic expectations are being met by the relevant political institutions. Structural changes and individualized policy efforts to be more consultative, responsive, and accountable could be seen to move a particular polity in democratic or non-democratic direction. Fewsmith's new book is generally unimpressed with the staying power of Chinese experiments in C,R,A, yet each

35 Consultation with the public does not mean that all policies originate from the people. The government can and is very likely to make either specific or general proposals to "get the ball rolling." Starting with the people might be a deeper form, but asking them what they think of a government policy is still consultative. For Weller, in Gilley & Diamond's comparative volume, the democratic importance is less a matter of explicit consultation than maintaining "the mechanisms that allow information to flow up the political hierarchy" (pg. 118).

36 The government can respond to public opinion in a number of ways. Negatively, it can be recorded and then suppressed, with punishment of leaders who expressed it. Recording but ignoring it would not count as a response. The government may acknowledge it (publicly) but downplay it in favor of a the government's agenda and preferences, as when a leader is prompted to give a speech or make a statement but do nothing else substantive. The bare minimum for democratic responsiveness would be for the government to explain why the people are wrong, why their proposals and preferences are impractical, unreasonable, or unaffordable. The most democratic response would be to draft formal policy proposals and statements based on public opinion or otherwise take actions requested by it. Advocating within government for public opinion to be heeded would also be a clearly democratic response.

37 Borowiak's 2011 book, *Accountability and Democracy*, offers the concept of "critical accountability" which prefers that the government be "answerable" to, rather than "punishable" by, the populus. The subtle difference in the third element accords with the nuance in the previous factor, responsiveness, whereby the government must at least acknowledge popular demands publicly. In both cases, rather than doing exactly as any group claiming to be "the people" demands (which could quickly approach mob rule and a tyrannous majority), any deviance from public opinion must simply be justified. Also notable in his book is that elections play only a minor role toward the goal of accountability, with other, deliberative and sanctioning institutions figuring more prominently. For Tsai, in Perry & Goldman (Eds.), pg. 129, accountability means that officials fulfill their "community obligations." Schmitter's chapter in Diamond & Morlino's edited volume, pg. 21, suggests that including accountability in the definition of democracy means that new democracies will be "perpetually catching up" with consolidated ones, but it's difficult to object to the concept's importance on theoretical grounds.

deserves to be noted for the effects they have on changing perceptions of the regime's trajectory, which may outlast rigid structures themselves in the maximally flexible, pragmatic "guerrilla policy style" described by Heilmann & Perry.³⁸ Yet another continuum is offered below, to measure the presence or absence of democratic performance, C,R,A, in political institutions.



FIG. 9: The direction of any political reform can be described as toward or away from democracy on the continuum above. The "background concept" of democracy is systematized to be institutionally flexible and consist of three elements: consultation, responsiveness, and accountability. Doing or having none of the three would render a regime fully non-democratic, while doing all three to a degree appreciated by the population would signify full democratic status.

The C,R,A model advanced by H4 rests on a foundation of political participation, having affinities with the Chinese concept of "democratic supervision," whereby citizens communicate and monitor their government officials at every stage of the political process.³⁹ Popular political participation is both one of the most important elements of democracy, and in the PRC's case, most measurable differences between the contemporary regime and that under Mao and Deng. By regime type, the theoretical expectations for political participation are schematically shown below.

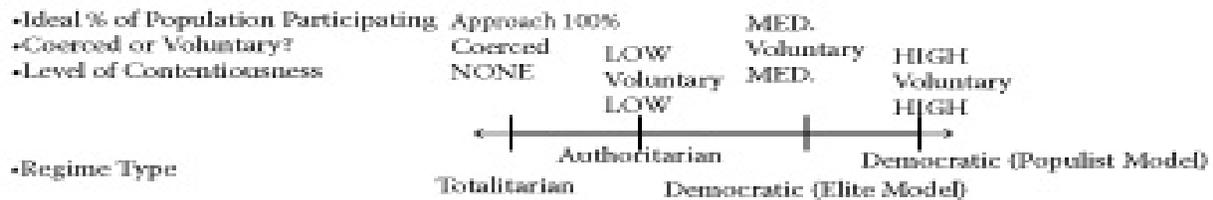


FIG. 10: Political participation expectations on a continuum of regime types. Note that democracies with mandatory voting laws challenge the expectation that participation be voluntary rather than coerced.

The basic expectations for how the masses are to contribute to the functioning of their political regime or influence policymaking and implementation are outlined by Linz and Stepan, the former having coined "authoritarianism."⁴⁰ To summarize

38 The authors even suggest on pg. 14 that, in this style, "political accountability is sacrificed to the goal of leadership flexibility."

39 Fewsmith's concerns for institutions lead him to highlight an application of the concept in Handan municipality, Hebei, called the "village accounting agency system" which keeps the village budget accounts at the township level to minimize misuse of funds. He claims, on pg. 38, that this system has spread throughout the country.

40 Only in the 2000 update to his *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* does Linz really address Asia directly, and China only very briefly. The concepts themselves may be inextricably tied to the regions in the title of Linz and Stepan's collaboration on democratic transitions.

the chart above, both totalitarian and democratic regimes rely on specific forms of popular political participation to function, with a majority of the population engaged.⁴¹ Authoritarianism, in contrast to both, would prefer to foster a “parochial” or “subject” political culture within the polity, rather than encouraging residents to become participatory citizens with an interest or duty to express their political preferences.⁴² A sizable portion of the population may be politically active under an authoritarian regime, but the types of acts and the extent to which they differ from official statements and policies are likely to be severely proscribed. In terms of mass participation, only democratic regimes are said to incorporate methods of C,R,A into the political process beyond token or symbolic acts.

China is an excellent case to study how changes in regime type affect political participation, or conversely, how changes in the regime's expectations of its citizens to take part in the political process can be an indicator of moves toward or away from democracy. In the 20th century, China arguably experienced every form of mass mobilization and demobilization. What might we look for, in terms of political participation, as evidence of democratization in the PRC?

41 Elitist theories of democracy question whether governance of the polity benefits as participation approaches 100% of the population. Too much participation from the unwashed masses would likely involve gridlock, a divided populace, or worse, violence. In a similar vein, liberal democracy would object to forcing those not interested in politics to participate, while elitists again suggest that doing so empowers those with low knowledge.

42 These “orientations” come from Almond & Verba’s classic, *The Civic Culture*, and should not be confused with normative evaluations of a regime’s political institutions ranging from congruence and approval to “alienation.” (A strong democrat under a non-democratic regime, for example, feels alienated by his/her polity’s political institutions.) Elite Chinese “reformers” like Yan Fu and Kang Youwei, of the early 20th century in addition to Lucian Pye in the latter half, saw traditional Chinese elitism as an obstacle to democratization because it was far more compatible with authoritarianism.

Regime Stance↓ Regime Type→	Totalitarian	Authoritarian	Democratic
Involuntary/Dictated	·Part. in “mass movement” political campaigns ·Voting		·Tolerance?
Encouraged/Expected	·Polt. enthusiasm/general support ·Cooperation with RCs & 单位	·Cooperation with RCs & 单位 ·General support of CCP or being apolitical	·Cooperation with RCs & 单位 ·Voting ·Signing Petitions ·Part. in NGOs ·Input & feedback on policy formation/implementation
Accepted/Tolerated (Carefully Managed by the State)	·Just “going through the motions” · “Contacting” for 关系 ·Part. in C.Rev. factions	· “Contacting” for 关系 ·Part. in GONGOs ·Criticism of policy ·Licensed street protest ·Signing petitions ·大字报	· “Contacting” for 关系 ·Street protest ·Worker strikes ·Volunteering for openly campaigning candidates
Discouraged	·Disunity & debate (Pluralism)	·Criticism of CCP, past leaders/policies/events ·Discussion of “sensitive topics” ·Suing the gov’t	· “Buying the vote” w/ bribes or large campaign contributions ·Non-CCP candidates
Banned/Persecuted (by Society)	·Criticism of official ideology, Mao	·Discussion of a few “very sensitive topics”	·Advocating a return to totalitarian regime? ·Hate speech?
Banned/Prosecuted (in Courts)	·Non-Participation ·General dissent	·Unlicensed street protest ·Threats to “social stability” ·Public calls for democratization ·Rioting	·Plotting to overthrow the regime or assassinate

FIG. 11: How have PRC regimes viewed individual acts of political participation? This is entirely speculative, has a few continuities, and plenty of gray areas left intentionally vague.

Changes in the regime's expectations and tolerance of different forms of popular political participation offer a much clearer trend toward democracy than institutional reforms, which show more continuity. In general, Xi Chen accounts for the gradual opening of the PRC regime to citizen input in its “Political Opportunity Structure,” away from a “closed” system. Several specific examples can be offered to illustrate this trend, including even the acceptance of local collective action to resist unpopular policies and make demands on politicians outside of constrained electoral means.⁴³ Xi Chen is probably the most vocal and convincing in illustrating that the regime's attitude toward “mass incidents” is turning a democratic corner away from draconian, authoritarian repression toward an acceptable political act for airing grievances, a normalized part of his “contentious authoritarianism.”

Accepting something so potentially disruptive as popular protest would be a major sign that the nature and activities of normal politics is undergoing a change in the PRC, and it would be highly significant if protesters showed not only resistance to unpopular policy implementation but also preemptively made demands of their local officials.

In Tianjian Shi's seminal *Political Participation in Beijing*, he identifies three stages of the titular term: agenda setting,

43 See Cai's book for detailed treatments of what factors determine whether rural protests achieve their goals. Cai is less convinced than Xi Chen that the regime tolerates these actions.

decision-making, and implementation, with the most popular influence being in the third stage by means of *guanxi* and attempts to “circumvent rather than influence bureaucratic decisions.”⁴⁴ With hardly any competitive elections at any level of the system in the late 1980’s, most meaningful political participation occurred within the *danwei* and residents’ committees (RCs).⁴⁵ More C,R,A directed at larger societal groups than official organizations at the grassroots level, as well as a shift toward the first two stages, would signal democratization in progress, and several recent works suggest that both are occurring.

Residents’ Committees (RCs above) are an institution deeply rooted in Chinese culture, present for each regime change and indeed preceding the PRC by centuries in the *baojia* monitoring system of the long dynastic era.⁴⁶ As the PRC democratizes, the functions of RCs can be expected to continue their trend away from the totalitarian practice of surveillance of neighbors and mobilizing for mass campaigns in which the people provide little substantive input. Even if the Party and some residents still see RCs as a mechanism of authoritarian state control, Read finds most complaints about them as intrusions of privacy rather than tools of oppression, coercion, or even mobilization. A convergence with their democratic cognate institutions in Taiwan may even be underway, toward the primary function of providing government services and a means for political messages to originate at grassroots levels and work their way up the hierarchy. Informal C,R,A at the lowest levels of government is likely to give the state a far gentler and more democratic image than in the past, a sense that the people will be better served by a government in tune with exactly what they people want.

In terms of soliciting people’s specific policy preferences, public opinion is not only increasingly sought by the government but also taken seriously, publicized by officials to legitimize policies with broad popular support.⁴⁷ The CCP of the 2000’s incorporates public opinion into more and more aspects of governance, now even including foreign affairs with Japan, which James Reilly connects directly with anti-Japanese demonstrations in the past decade. Academic journals offer other examples of real

44 Shi, pg. 9 for the stages, xi on circumvention.

45 As highlighted by Read and Xi Chen, economic reforms have decreased the prevalence and power of the former, while the latter remain highly relevant to politics on the ground level.

46 See Read, pg. 39-40, for a discussion of this system since the early Qing.

47 See Thornton’s chapter in Heilmann & Perry (Eds.), especially pg. 241, on the Party’s strategic use of polls to “domesticate” rather than measure public opinion.

consultation and responsiveness in abundance over the past few years, from a new, national health care program, deliberative polling now favored by Western democratic theorists, official provincial websites, and environmental topics.⁴⁸ One gets the feeling that our scholarship is only studying the tip of the consultative iceberg, with many examples passing under our radar. Larger experiments with forms theorized to be more deeply democratic than elections, cannot go unnoticed, but it remains to be seen how sincere the CCP is in letting C,R,A flourish.

Deliberative democracy offers another option for realizing a CRA model, and studies of Chinese policy deliberation, both ad hoc and institutional, are growing. The “Public Hearing Meetings” studied by Ning Zhang in various locations throughout China remain tied to what she calls the CCP’s “hegemonic discourse,” a decidedly top-down consultation which resembles more of an announcement of decisions than a solicitation of suggestions. However, even Fewsmith is able to find enduring institutions of real debate in the public consultation meetings held twice a month in Wenling, Zhejiang.⁴⁹

As Baogang Guo puts it, “In Chinese interpretation, electoral democracy focuses on building a good government; deliberative democracy focuses on good governance.”⁵⁰ Many of Guo’s hopes for the CCP realizing a deliberative democracy are pinned to the revival of the unwieldy CPPCC’s, Chinese People’s Political Consultation Conferences. He lists four types of consultation related to these conferences, based on the type of decision to be made, among policy, legislation, personnel, and (large) projects, noting that the number of proposals submitted to these has gradually increased in the past decade. While many improvements in the consultation system have been noted, he finds fault in that these conferences are still only advisory, lacking “teeth” and adequate resources in addition to the usual problems of bureaucratization and unelected appointment of CPPCC members.⁵¹

Portrayed as a dismally hopeless mess in Zhao Liang’s documentary, *Shangfang (Petition)*, the centuries-old tradition of

48 In order, see Kornreich et al., Landry et al., Jiang & Xu, Xie & Van Der Heijden. Several of these are in fairly obscure journals, and I’m inclined to think that many more cases could be documented than scholars could publish.

49 As the discussions remain structured from the top down and exclusive of the general public, he calls the system “consultative authoritarianism” for “intra-elite legitimacy” rather than democracy, pg. 168.

50 Guo, pg. 68. These are described as legislative bodies originally, replaced by the National People’s Congress, after which point they became strictly consultative. Suspended during the Cultural Revolution, Guo notes that they were quickly revived and numbered 3117 at “all levels” of government by the year 2000.

51 Guo, pg. 70-74.

traveling to Beijing in search of justice has received contradictory support and suppression in recent years.⁵² While entertaining formal complaints from citizens may seem to be retroactive consultation at best, more ambitious intentions suggest that if central leaders committed to more open communication, it would be of mutual benefit to both state and society. As Bradley-Storey notes, the practice of petitioning was revived by the CCP initially to connect the party to the people, to make suggestions for improving governance.⁵³ Such hopes were likely overwhelmed by the number of complaints which came pouring in from the provinces, some four million cases in 2004.⁵⁴ In the end, Zhu suggests that strengthening the National People's Congress would be the best route for government accountability and justice, as the legal system is too fraught with conflicting missions and inefficient practices.⁵⁵ One wonders whether the situation in the People's Congresses has changed since Tianjian Shi wrote that contacting through deputies is "used more for communication than conflict resolution." Such may "bring issues to officials' attention" and influence agenda setting and policy formation directly, but many citizens would undoubtedly prefer having a vote themselves to the occasional word in an unelected representative's ear.

At village levels of government and up to townships, the Organic Law of 1998, prescribes elections for the selection of local officials, considered "the weakest link in the structure of power."⁵⁶ Many of these are competitive without multiple parties, and many non-competitive ones may be sufficient for some survey respondents to view China as democratic, though the CCP carefully notes that representative voting leads only to 自治, *zizhi* (self-government). More negatively, many in the Party still find elections too divisive for wider implementation.⁵⁷ There is, thus, a precarious balance between guardianship or tutelage of low-*suzhi* (quality) peasants "not ready" for democracy, who are nonetheless given at least partial access to China's most liberal voting institutions, helpful but not integral to the Party's shifting concept of *minzhu*. Unfortunately, Lily Tsai's impressive findings

52 In 2005, a new law ended the ban on continuous or repeated petitioning while also supposedly making it illegal to intercept and harass petitioners. A survey found that 71% of petitioners found their treatment actually worsened after the law passed (Guo & Li, pg. 175). A 2009 law preventing petitioners from going to Beijing or any level higher than the provincial government could either be read as the Party giving up on the system (not benefitting enough from it) or the fact that most petitions are a result of "lower-level mistakes and errors" (pg. 176). Similarly, local unresponsiveness to such complaints is believed to be behind most local protests, so it would seem to be in the central government's interest to strengthen or at least streamline this process.

53 Guo & Li, pg. 161.

54 Guo & Hickey, pg. 111.

55 Guo & Hickey, pg. 116.

56 Lianjiang Li's chapter in Perry and Goldman, pg. 101.

57 Fewsmith (2013), pg. 106. Joshua Hill's dissertation also shows that early advocates and opponents of elections both expected the merits of the best candidate to be obvious to all, as neither were pleased by disorderly campaigns or political competition generally. For more entertaining propaganda intended to incite electoral skepticism, see the film "Please Vote for Me."

that villages with strong social capital are more accountable to the people, with or without elections, can hardly be applied to higher levels of government, as the bonds of “lineage groups and temple organizations” would be unlikely to extend beyond the township.⁵⁸ At most, villagers who evaluate their officials highly and equate the local and national regimes likely contribute to this study's central puzzle as the most traditionally deferential of authoritarians.⁵⁹

Each of the institutions mentioned here could be reformed to be more bottom-up than top-down, finding more use in popular guidance of governance than as a means of controlling the population. Such incremental reforms are clearly preferred by a CCP which is gradualist to a fault, especially the outgoing Hu and Wen administration. Western observers vigilant for any crack in the system, another Democracy Wall or 1989 mass movement, or the introduction of national elections are likely to miss the small signs of democratization which affect an arguably larger portion of the population. Optimists giving the CCP the benefit of the doubt can be heard to say that the reason for so much experimentation with expanded C,R,A at village and township levels of government is to establish what “best practices” might be implemented at higher, more consequential levels.

Discussion. Inevitably, each of the hypotheses contains elements of truth, and the difficulty of conducting research in the PRC on the topic reserves much space for speculation and the impossibility of rejecting any explanation entirely. It is a boon to empiricism that the PRC has allowed scholars to probe its impressionable citizens' views on sensitive topics in mass surveys, but until more open-ended questions and in-depth interviews can be conducted freely, we can only approximate people's true beliefs regarding China's democratic status and trajectory.

Much more needs to be said about the possibility of democracy, especially in the largely illiberal East Asian context, being conflated with good government performance. As the last years of the Qing Dynasty and the Chinese Republican era showed, attempts to incorporate “the people” into the governing process should absolutely be considered democratization by the three-part C,R,A definition in H4. However, the over-arching goal of these reforms was the realization of a strong state, almost antithetical to liberal democracy, and good governance was hardly possible precisely because the state had very little capacity to govern China's

58 See her chapter, “The Struggle for Village Public Goods Provision: Informal Institutions of Accountability in Rural China,” in Perry & Goldman (Eds.).

59 With more space, the “level of analysis” problem and geographic differences would be addressed in more detail.

vast and disintegrating frontier. Good governance should thereby be seen as necessary but not equivalent to the Chinese concept of democracy. This study shares the caveat of the elite, liberal model of democracy, that greater popular participation does not necessarily lead to improvements in state capacity or government performance. This is not to say that full participation is not normatively desirable, but there is ample reason to be cautious if, as for most in the CCP, democracy's values are instrumental rather than fundamentally good. Even now, "too much" participation, or more precisely, participation which is too contentious, is often seen to weaken the state, and that alone justifies cracking down on it.

The current PRC's lopsided state-society relationship is a product of many decades under the rule of a very powerful party-state, a continued mirror image of the first half of the 20th century. Recent accounts like Fewsmith's *The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China* take institutional constraints on the state and ruling party to be a primary indicator of democratization, but this ignores the possibility that most Chinese citizens would prefer their democracy to have a strong state which does "whatever is necessary" to further national goals and care more about what the government does than how it got there. Chinese history textbooks surely emphasize the national costs of a weak state when speaking of China's early 20th century experience, and therefore much of H1 and H3's appeal lies not in brainwashing but very real concerns of citizens.

While the PRC's freedom of speech has seen a marked improvement in the reform era, others liberties like assembly and the press remain tightly controlled by the regime, and it is probably impossible to defend such restrictions in democratic terms. Anyone who sees such freedoms as essential to rule by and for the people cannot but find little progress in China's democratization. The regime and much of the Chinese population, however, might not view the full expansion of such freedoms as the top priorities in democratization, focusing instead on what Diamond and Morlino call "the quality of results," mainly focused on government policy performance, especially focused on material and economic issues. Especially if democracy is a means to another end rather than the most important end of politics itself, desirable results of political reforms needn't be framed in terms closely connected to popular rule. Several examples follow in Fig. 12.



Fig. 12: Opposing concepts which focus on "the quality of results" as opposed to obviously democratic institutions. Survey evidence suggests that many or most Chinese citizens make no such distinction when assessing the quality of their democracy.

As shown in the simple figure above, being perceived by the concepts on the left would harm any regime, but a consolidated democracy is supposed to be more able to weather them. By some accounts, democracies should also, by means of a more engaged citizenry, be able to move to the right of the dichotomy more easily than a non-democratic regime. It's also worth noting that a concept like corruption is in purer opposition to the terms on the right than to democracy itself. The world contains plenty of regimes whose political institutions could only be described as liberal democratic, yet which a majority of the population would describe with the negative terms on the left rather than the positive ones on the right. How do these points matter to the puzzle of regime "misperception"?

To weave together the many continua in Figures 1-12 and make an empirical assertion about the goals of the CCP, teleology and self-interested stability take center stage. Most scholars frame the Party's experiments with new methods and institutions of governance as part of a strategy to maintain national stability and, above all, the CCP's own survival. Attempts to move to the right of Fig. 12 are thereby deemed authoritarian in nature, with no evident interest in democratization, unless democracy is defined in performance terms. Many but not all Chinese citizens conflate democracy with good governance, but there are still larger points than this to be made.

Given the problems that Chinese intellectuals have historically found, perhaps still find, with liberalism, we should not expect bold moves or calls for political liberalization from either the Party or large, grassroots groups. It is both teleological and unlikely for any political reforms to be framed in terms of seeking the liberal pole of Fig. 4. Instead, the government clearly *does* want to move to the right in the performance continuum, Fig. 12, and for many Chinese, the motives are irrelevant. The CCP is clearly willing to experiment with moving away from oligarchy (Fig. 5), towards more C,R,A (Fig. 9) to get there. At this point in time, however, there are few signs that technocrats are interested in institutionalizing the contentious political participation on the right sides of Figures 10 and 11, except for elites and forms which have no potential to become disorderly. Certainly,

improvements over previous regimes won't sustain a democratic perception forever, and the Modernization thesis of Inglehart and Welzel leads us to expect demands for a voice in the political process to grow louder with the economic development which most agree has done the most to sustain the current regime. Dangers and opportunities abound in reforming existing institutions to allow greater participation,⁶⁰ but if moves to the right in Figures 10 and 11 don't improve perceptions in Fig. 12, the CCP will see little reason to liberalize any further, effectively exposing themselves to greater scrutiny and criticism. As efforts to root out corruption remain largely internal matters to the Party, it's clear that transparency and critical feedback from citizens make the regime more than a little uncomfortable, despite strong theoretical and empirical support for openness aiding democracy and relatively clean governance.

Conclusions. Accepting new members into the democracy club would be rightfully predicated on playing by the same rules if all original members agreed on the rules. If elections are given as the only necessary institution of democracy, accusations of "electoralism" inevitably follow, while consensus on a fuzzy set of sufficient conditions is more likely to be built on precisely which cases are intended for inclusion or exclusion. By focusing on the extent to which a regime consults its population, responds to its solicited input, and is accountable to both groups and individuals, we could better assess whether the people rule without imposing liberal expectations on cultures which explicitly reject liberalism. A "consultative rule of law regime," suggested by Pan Wei, should be taken as a serious alternative to full political liberalization, especially as it could rely on reforming existing institutions, rather than the introduction of national elections.⁶¹

Methodologically, survey data are essential to dispel the notion of the inscrutable Chinese, but we should not make too much of the macro-level data until we have a better understanding of PRC's citizen's micro-level experiences in their subtly changing regime. While political scientists would prefer that concepts like democracy be measured in terms of citizens'

60 Fewsmith, pg. 106, lists the possibility of officials becoming more responsive to citizens at local levels than to the CCP would be an undesirable danger which elections unleash. This study doubts that elections alone could accomplish this or that this means top leaders don't want to improve local officials' C,R,A to their constituencies.

61 Peerenboom and other Western scholars express skepticism about whether the CCP would ever allow its power to be limited by law. Additionally, he notes that "the sustainability and normative appeal of a consultative rule of law" turns on the extent to which the new elite [in the consulting positions] can be held accountable." (in Zhao, pg. 74) In the closing section of Suisheng Zhao's edited volume on the rule of law as an alternative to political liberalization of the PRC, Pan Wei responds to his critics with this fulmination which leaps off the page: "*Democracy and authoritarian regime* have become the two most useless concepts in the academic research of our time." (pg. 254) This study finds the terms less useless than distracting and often of questionable reliability.

orientations toward their states' political institutions, these same citizens are more likely to frame their survey responses in a comparison of their own, current life experiences to those in the past. Concepts which political scientists define as institutionally distinct from each other, especially democracy, "good governance," "performance legitimacy," and popular legitimacy in general may be indistinguishable in the popular imagination and are unlikely to travel well across international borders.

Other than the third hypothesis, this essay has *not* argued that the PRC is currently a democracy. I'm not the least convinced that Chinese people rule their republic. Rather, there is a solid foundation of institutions in place which provide some degree of C,R,A which likely satisfies the desire of a majority of citizens for popular rule. This foundation can and will be expanded and deepened in coming years, but those expecting a major breakthrough in political liberalization will continue to wait in vain.

Additionally, to respect the views of reasonable, intelligent citizens of popular authoritarian regimes like the PRC, Singapore, and Vietnam, political reforms with the explicitly stated intent of moving toward liberal democracy should be called "political liberalization" and not equated with democratization. However dissonant Chinese political terms and opinions may sound to the liberal ear, the CCP is in firm semantic control over the PRC's political discourse. This means that what liberals consider democratization would be for most Chinese an unappealing Westernization of their morally superior state. Rather than expecting a liberal epiphany from those making two dollars a day, we would do well to try to understand how they and their government think about democracy and why a uniquely Chinese form might be preferable and not illusory.

While modernization may be leading, even in East Asia, toward post-materialist values of self-expression, it remains to be seen whether this will translate into a belief that only democracy's liberal form is valid. Judging from Shin's article, "individualist" values have a very long way to go before they dominate East Asian societies like China's, and these are what best predict support for liberal democracy. It is, however, facile to use culture as the monocausal factor behind a political puzzle shown here to be much larger than most liberals would readily acknowledge.

This essay has likely done more to present a puzzle than to solve it. However, it should serve as a scholarly

precaution for anyone who is certain “what democracy is...and is not.” We need to be cognizant of the fact that people conceive of democracy differently. Moreover, we need to consider the possibility that different “conceivers” do not simply “misperceive” the reality of their regimes; instead, their lived experiences allow them to perceive realities which scholars fail to notice or appreciate. We may only be able to disillusion “deferential authoritarians” one-at-a-time, but a CCP which relies more on consultation, responsiveness, and accountability to achieve its goals of improved governance would be better and more democratic for all of the many more involved.

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