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# A Discourse on Democracy in China Daily

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## **Abstract**

'Democracy' has been frequently praised by the Chinese political leadership, while liberal democratic institutions have remained conspicuously absent under CPC one-party rule. This study explores the discourse on democracy in the newspaper China Daily between the years 2007 and 2017 to determine how the concept is articulated in a Chinese presumably alternate discourse on democracy. Fifty articles published between 2007 and 2017 are sampled, and a discourse analysis is performed to identify prominent themes featured in these articles concerning democracy. The sample is then further divided in two subsamples with a cutoff in 2012, to investigate whether there has been a qualitative shift in the discourse since the accession to power of Xi Jinping. The analysis shows that - and how - the discourse treats China largely as a particular democracy, frequently contrasted with 'Western-style democracy', and downplays certain democratic principles and institutions in favor of alternative ones. It also shows that an overall shift in tone seems to have occurred since the accession of Xi, from optimistic and progressive to a more negative one.

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## INTRODUCTION

“In addition to securing sufficient material resources and coercive capacity, how do authoritarian leaders compete with the opposition over political discourses and ideas to facilitate their rule? How is public opinion in these societies shaped by such competing political discourses and ideas? What are the consequences of the battle of ideas and discourses for these societies’ political development? Answers to such questions have important implications for research on authoritarian politics, democratic transitions and consolidation, and comparative public opinion.”<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation is extracted from the introduction of another academic paper authored by Jie Lu and Tianjin Shi and published in the *International Political Science Review*. But it serves perfectly to highlight the relevance also of my thesis, as in the bigger picture, it is the answers to these same overarching questions that my study is concerned with, and will attempt to contribute to. While Lu and Shi concentrate primarily on the second question in the above quote, my thesis will tie closer to the first one. Lu and Shi used survey methods to investigate the conceptions of democracy among the Chinese people. I wish in my turn to investigate the conceptions that are being disseminated through news media, and that presumably influence the conceptions among Chinese people that Lu and Shi studied.

In 2011, then premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, Wen Jiabao, promised that “tomorrow’s China will be a country that fully achieves democracy, the rule of law, fairness and justice. Without freedom, there is no real democracy. Without guarantee of economic and political rights, there is no real freedom.”<sup>2</sup> One year later, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which saw the election of the party’s 18th Central Committee - its top leadership - further saw the definition and promotion of a new set of twelve ‘core socialist values’, included among which was “democracy” (民主 *mínzhǔ* in Chinese). Xi Jinping, who was elected new General Secretary of the Party at the congress has since spoken warmly of democracy, calling it a common value of all mankind at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly<sup>3</sup>. Yet, despite such grand praise for democracy, China has long since consistently found itself near the bottom of various democracy indices and rankings. In fact, China is consistently criticized for not fulfilling even such presumed basic criteria for democratic politics as multiparty elections, and freedom of the press and -speech. Moreover, although many observers seem to have initially harbored a measure of optimism regarding Xi’s takeover with regards to democratization, most would likely agree today that he has thus far been moving China away from a path toward democratic development<sup>4 5</sup>, some going as far as to compare his regime to that of Mao Zedong’s. This puzzle is also evident from the contradictory results of surveys in China, revealing that a majority of people claim strong support for democracy and at the same time a high level of satisfaction with the country’s regime<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Lu. and T. Shi, ‘The battle of ideas and discourses before democratic transition: Different democratic conceptions in authoritarian China’, *International Political Science Review*, vol. 36, 2014, p. 20–41.

<sup>2</sup> Y. Huang, ‘Democratize or Die: Why China’s communists face reform or revolution’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, 2013, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Du, ‘24-word core socialist values engraved on people’s mind’, *People’s Daily*, 2 March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> M. Gow, ‘The Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Dream: towards a Chinese integral state’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2017, p. 92-116.

<sup>5</sup> K. McGuire, ‘Xi is leading China away from democracy’, *Newsweek*, 3 June 2015.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lu and T. Shi, ‘The Shadow of Confucianism’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2010, p. 123-130

This presents us with a conundrum of apparent inconsistencies. Whatever the democracy being promoted in the above instances, it appears not to align with the (otherwise) common conceptions of it. So what does “democracy” really mean in contexts like Xi Jinping’s speeches and the twelve socialist core values? What is the nature of China’s relationship with democracy, or more precisely, its relationship with the *term* “democracy”? And, where is this relationship heading?

Regarding the first problem, how do we account for this inconsistency of Chinese politicians’ swooning over a political concept that it appears reluctant to put in practice? This question might seem all too easy to answer: democracy simply has a nice ring to it. You might call it the greatest political buzzword of our time, as does *The Why*<sup>7</sup>, or “*the* appraisive political concept *par excellence*”, as does W.B. Gallie<sup>8</sup>. Surely authoritarian leaders have not failed to pick up on the fashionable quality of it either. In other words, there’s nothing inconsistent at all about an authoritarian state paying lip service to democracy. Who would not want to call themselves democratic? By all means such an observation would be, I deem, correct. A more interesting rearticulation of the question would in fact be: how are these inconsistencies reconciled? Whereas the CCP may praise democracy, surely they wouldn’t speak with the same fondness of elections and other institutions that make up democracy as we know it? Given that the term “democracy” is being promulgated as a core value of the Chinese nation, while some of its core characteristics are shunned, the Chinese discourse on democracy might reasonably be expected to significantly distinguish itself from the liberal democratic discourse preeminent in the West, forming another *alternate discourse* on democracy. This is the starting point and -assumption of the thesis. But *how* does it distinguish itself? It is precisely this - the distinctly *Chinese discourse on democracy* - that is the object of examination in this study.

These questions are complex and can be examined in a multitude of ways, and in fact, I would say, couldn’t be given a complete answer unless examined in a multitude of ways. In this paper I have to restrict myself to one of these multiple ways, and instead of presuming to map out a complete discourse on democracy in the Chinese context, I hope to contribute a piece of the puzzle. I have thus chosen to focus on how this discourse is expressed in the online edition of one Chinese newspaper, the *China Daily*, and if, and in that case *how*, the discourse has evolved since Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as the commander-in-chief of the CPC. To this end I will perform a discourse analysis on a sample of news articles published before and after the accession of the current General Secretary of the CPC and President of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping.

The goal of this study is twofold. The first aim is to examine and *provide a description* of the quality or nature of a presumably *alternate discourse on democracy in Chinese news media*, represented here by *China Daily*. Secondly, it will try to determine whether there has been a change in the quality of discourse since the installation of Xi Jinping as the head of the fifth generation Chinese Party leadership. The problem statements/goals are summarized below:

- (1) *provide a description of the Chinese discourse on democracy in China Daily*
- (2) *analyze whether there has been a change in the discourse since the installation of Xi Jinping as head of the Chinese party leadership*

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<sup>7</sup> The Why. ‘Why Democracy’, <http://thewhy.dk/whydemocracy/>, (accessed 21 September 2017)

<sup>8</sup> W.B. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. New Series*, vol. 56, 1955-1956, p. 167-198.

## THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

### DISCOURSE THEORY

Discourse theory builds upon the notion that “social phenomena” are never total, suggesting their meaning can never be conclusively fixated. This opens for a continuing battle of definitions and ideas, which in turn produces consequences for society. The process of definition is called *articulation* in the language of Laclau & Mouffe<sup>9</sup>. Articulation is, more precisely, the process in which meaning and identity is attached to *signifiers*. The term *signifier* is taken from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and while Laclau and Mouffe have different names for these signifiers depending on their status in the discourse, I think the term “signifier” should adequately serve the purpose of this paper. Signifiers according to Saussure are the expressions, like words (sound-images is another name for them<sup>10</sup>), that we use to refer to something. The *signified* is the concept they denote, or their *identity*. This is comparable to other similar theoretical conceptualizations, like that of Ogden’s triangle of reference. To employ a trivial example, the word “chair” would be the signifier for *something inanimate with four legs that you use to sit upon*, which is the signified. The identity of signifiers is determined in relation to other signifiers in what has been imagined as a fishing net, where each knot is placed in relation to the other knots. Laclau and Mouffe expanded this theory by arguing that these meanings aren’t fixed but rather constantly floating, an important assumption that this paper rests upon. The assignment of identity to these signifiers, according to Laclau & Mouffe, should be seen as a process rather than something static. The identity or meaning is determined in relation to other signs through their *differential positions*, but is not fixed. The process and contest of assigning meaning to the signifiers is, again, called *articulation*. Laclau further divided signifiers into *elements* and *moments*<sup>11</sup> depending on their status in the articulation process. *Elements* are signs that are “floating”, i.e. they haven’t been conclusively given an identity, and the articulation process is the process of turning these elements into *moments*, which is the state a sign is in when given a fixed meaning, called *closure*. This closure is always temporary and perhaps never complete. The sum of the signifiers and their significance in relation to each other is what can be called a *discourse*.<sup>12</sup> All this has important implications for the “battle of ideas” that I argue is taking place revolving around the term *democracy*. Democracy has probably been assigned a high degree of closure in a western liberal sense - in fact some would argue that the notion of democracy is intimately tied to western identity<sup>13</sup> - but on a more global scale, democracy may be more favorably thought of as an element, a floating signifier.

Discourses center around “privileged” signs called *nodal points*. *Democracy* or different types thereof would be the nodal point(s) of the particular political discourse that will

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<sup>9</sup> M. Winther Jørgensen and L. Phillips, *Diskursanalys som teori och metod*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> A.A. Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> These will not be used further in the thesis, but serve here to illustrate what happens to signifiers in the process of *articulation*.

<sup>12</sup> M. Winther Jørgensen. Although the concept of a discourse is more complex, and given wider significance in some theory building.

<sup>13</sup> S. Sayyid, ‘Mirror, mirror: Western democrats, oriental despots?’, *Ethnicities*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 30-50.

be the subject of this paper. What the paper will aim to determine is what democracy or, again, different types of “democracies” in an alternate discourse are identified as and what they are identified as *not*. This is done through establishing so called *chains of equivalence* and *chains of difference*. This is the way in which signs are related to one another. “Liberal democracy”, for instance, only gets its meaning when associated (or equated<sup>14</sup>) with other signifiers like “freedom of the press” and “free elections”<sup>15</sup>. So, in a liberal democracy discourse, democracy may serve as the nodal point of the discourse, and through chains of equivalence may be associated with the signs “freedom of expression” and “free elections”.

## DISCOURSE OR DISCOURSES?

A persistent problem in the field of discourse analysis is the problem of definition and delineation of “a discourse”. Firstly, the word “discourse” has itself been used in a variety of ways, for instance as an uncountable whole, as in simply “*discourse*”, or as a countable with an article, as in “*a discourse*” or “*many discourses*”. I choose to treat the object of study in my paper as one discourse, namely the *discourse on democracy in China Daily*, as broadly representative of *discourse on democracy in Chinese news media* overall. This in turn is a part of the broader “discourse on democracy and China”, as you may choose to call it, which is quite arguably an important problem in the discourse on democracy at large.

## DEMOCRACY THEORY

Before proceeding with the study, let us first devote a few paragraphs to the definition of democracy and to take a look at what theories academia has produced regarding discourse on democracy in China thus far.

## LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Upon revision of the literature one is soon reminded that defining a “western” notion of democracy can be as hard a task as making sense of a Chinese one. Definitions range from Schumpeter’s minimal definition of electoral democracy<sup>16</sup> to Robert A. Dahl’s maximal ideal type definition of democracy<sup>17</sup>. But to be able to evaluate the Chinese conceptualization of democracy we should first try to make clear what we mean by democracy. Ideas of democracy have evolved and developed a lot throughout history in terms of ideas and practice and we are not going to go through it all.

The word comes from the Ancient Greek δῆμος (dêmos, “common people”, “assembly of the people”) + -κρατία (-kratía, “power”, “rule”). The principle is thus the “rule of the people”. Larry Diamond highlights, I think, four key elements of democracy that reoccur throughout the literature: (a) A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; (b) The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; (c) Protection of the human rights of all citizens, and (d) A rule of law, in which the

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<sup>14</sup> my translation from Winther Jørgensen. These two words will be used interchangeably in the text. While “associated” makes it more intuitive, “equated” reminds of the association with “chains of equivalence”.

<sup>15</sup> M. Winther Jørgensen, s. 58

<sup>16</sup> J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Harper Perennial, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> R. A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, Yale University Press, 1991.

laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens<sup>18</sup>. Schumpeter is content with the first key element of elections. Robert A. Dahl on the other hand idealizes democracy in his definition to the extent of opening the question whether any democracies can really be said to exist at all, and replaces the term democracy as we commonly apply them to real world political entities with the term *polyarchy*<sup>19</sup>. One can thus argue that there is no universally agreed upon precise definition of democracy in the literature. However, it is reasonable to suggest that any (western) idea of democracy would encompass institutions such as free and fair elections and the principles of equality and certain human rights, like freedom of speech and the freedom of press.

## CHINESE DEMOCRACY - MINZHU

I could start here by reiterating that making sense of the Chinese discourse on democracy requires studying it in multiple ways, and perhaps constructing a complete and coherent picture of it is impossible. The same could be said of the liberal democratic discourse, but I would argue that the western liberal idea of democracy has gained more maturity in people's collective minds (as well as academia) than it has in a Chinese context, where the discourse was imported from the West not much more than a 100 years ago. This would perhaps lend some absolution for any incoherence in the Chinese discourse. As Lei Guang says: "Conceptually, democracy in its Chinese incarnation is a mixture of many elements inherited from Chinese history and lifted out of the Western democratic discourse"<sup>20</sup>. Essentially then, the discourse on democracy can be said to have been lifted out of the West - some 100 years ago as suggested above - but interpreted through the lense of Chinese culture, history and tradition. This is not unreasonable to suggest, and what is perhaps even more important is that it has had to be interpreted through the medium of Chinese language. It is impossible to understand "Chinese democracy" without recognizing this problem. Luckily, Lei Guang discusses this in his article, and even provides us with a matrix of possible definitions of the Chinese translation of democracy: *minzhǔ* (民主), a modified version of which is reproduced further below.

Minzhu comprises two characters in the Chinese language, *mín* 民 and *zhǔ* 主. Roughly, it is a direct translation of the English (or Greek) word, but referents of each of these "signs", while not conceptually alien to Western language, can be said to be historically and contextually contingent. This is where the Chinese "lense" enters the picture. Let us look to what Lei Guang has to say about it. *Mín*, as he explains, has been used to denote "the governed", "the public" or "the common people", in contrast to officialdom, in Chinese tradition<sup>21</sup>. However, in the communist parlance of the Mao era, *mín* took on the meaning of class, in which its meaning of "the people" was instead contrasted with class enemies. In these meanings, he goes on to explain, *mín* lacks any connotation of individualism, but rather "refers to what Sun Yat-sen called 'any unified and organized body of men'"<sup>22</sup>. It did not acquire the individualistic sense until the dawning of the human rights discourse in China in the 1970's. This perfectly illustrates the discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe in practice, as the meaning of *mín* "floats" like that of an *element* within the discourse, guided by socio-

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<sup>18</sup> L. Diamond, *In Search of Democracy*, London: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> R. A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, 1972.

<sup>20</sup> L. Guang, 'Elusive Democracy: Conceptual Change and the Chinese Democracy Movement', *Modern China*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1996, p. 417-447.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 419

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 420



historical circumstances, taking on different relationships of meaning (*chains of equivalence*) with different signifiers.

We thus have two interpretations of *mín*, one in a collective sense, and one in the individual sense. The other character, *zhǔ* 主, can be used variously as meaning “master” as opposed to “servant”, or “primary” as opposed to “secondary”. In this way *mínzhǔ* (民主) can be variously interpreted as “the people as masters” or “the people first”. The second one is sometimes translated as *minben*. These three meanings of *mín* and two meanings of *zhǔ* combine for six possible interpretations of democracy in the Chinese context. Following is the revised version of Lei’s table:

<i>zhǔ</i> ↓ <i>mín</i> →	“common people” (in contrast with officialdom)	“the people” (in contrast with class enemies)	“individual citizens”
“primary”	1. common people as the basis, as someone whose welfare is of <i>primary</i> importance.  <i>minben</i>	3. Communist conception of <i>mínzhǔ</i> ; the formerly exploited people as the basis or as someone whose welfare is of primary importance	5. Weak libertarian conception of <i>mínzhǔ</i> ; individual citizens bearing <i>important</i> welfare claims against collectives or state.
“master”	2. common people as masters of their own destiny.	4. Marxist conception of <i>mínzhǔ</i> ; the formerly exploited people becoming <i>masters</i> of their own destiny.	6. <i>mínzhǔ</i> as individual rights (resembling liberal notion of democracy).

### AN ALTERNATE DISCOURSE?

Lu and Shi suggest, much like Gallie, that after the Third Wave of democratisation in the 1990’s, “democracy became the only legitimate game in political discourse”<sup>23</sup>. Thus authoritarian regimes with strong incentives to cultivate desirable public opinion and to generate legitimacy, can profit from creating and disseminating alternate discourses on democracy, with which to indoctrinate their people and presumably to acquire some kind of legitimacy on the international scene. An important medium through which to disseminate these alternate discourses would be the news media. In fact, it would serve as a good answer to the first question in that excerpt borrowed from Lu & Shi’s paper: Authoritarian leaders compete with the opposition over political discourses and ideas to facilitate their rule *through news media!* Lu and Shi identify the Chinese democracy discourse as a version of a *guardianship discourse*, while lamenting the rudimentary nature of existing research on the subject, which they say primarily tends to adopt a ‘residual category-approach’ which only

<sup>23</sup> J. Lu and T. Shi, ‘The battle of ideas and discourses before democratic transition’, p. 21.

distinguishes a liberal discourse from non-liberal discourses<sup>24</sup>. There is also, they conclude, a lack of theorizing on the nature of the alternate discourses<sup>25</sup>. I intend to expand this research with my paper, by means of examining, identifying and describing the presumably 'alternate' discourse on democracy that is being disseminated through news outlets in China. Alternate discourses may exhibit differences and similarities between news media outlets in different regions and states over the world. Similar studies could be performed on these in order to find common themes on these alternate discourses and create a more coherent and comprehensive picture of alternate discourses on democracy in authoritarian states.

Another researcher who studied Chinese democracy discourse is Ling Chen of the Hong Kong Baptist University. She identifies different rhetorical arguments for and against democracy circulating in Chinese social media<sup>26</sup>. Some of the material in this study might contain arguments usefully comparable to the ones identified in that paper. According to Chen, arguments about the role of democracy circulating in Chinese social media often invoke tradition and history, and can be divided into three categories of arguments, two against democracy, and one for. Arguments for democracy accentuate an old but suppressed Chinese tradition of diversity of views. Arguments against usually maintain either that democracy is not for China, or that China is not ready for democracy yet.

One of the presumptions of discourse theory is that discursive patterns are maintained but also changed in discursive practice<sup>27</sup>. This is where the battle of ideas takes place. If that is held true, alternate discursive ideas on democracy, different from the liberal democratic ideas, may still not be so likely to exert a lot of influence on the perceptions of democracy in "mature democracies" of the West. But alternate discourses on democracy - perhaps especially Chinese ones - may pose serious challenges to liberal democratic discourses and gain traction in regions of the world where democracy is not as stable a part of the political culture, such as parts of Africa, where Chinese influence has after all increased in the form of dealings with other authoritarian states<sup>28</sup>. It may also serve to highlight "weak spots" in the liberal democratic discourse. Even if one did not accept arguments against liberal western democracy as valid, it stands to reason that rhetorical strategies being employed in alternate discourses for the purpose of what I would call *appropriation and disappropriation* of the term "democracy", should be the ones employed precisely because they are perceived as the most effective in challenging for legitimacy. Through this reasoning one can expect to be able to identify some (at least perceived) especially poignant arguments against liberal democracy. An alternate discourse on democracy thus should not be seen as simply rhetorical racket, but as potentially valuable insights for reflection upon issues inherent in "our democratic societies". Isn't liberal democracy all about the battle of ideas after all?

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 21

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* s. 23

<sup>26</sup> L. Chen, 'A Preliminary Analysis of Discourses about China and Democracy', *China Media Research*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2017, p. 46-53

<sup>27</sup> Winther Jørgensen, p. 18

<sup>28</sup> J. Lagerkvist, 'Chinese Eyes on Africa: Authoritarian flexibility versus democratic governance', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 27, nr. 2, 2009, p. 119-134

## METHODOLOGY & MATERIAL

The paper seeks to identify and describe the nature of the discourse on democracy in Chinese news media. Since obviously a full examination of Chinese media texts can not be performed, the online version of the newspaper *China Daily* is chosen to represent Chinese news media. There were several good reasons for this choice. Firstly, as Chen explains, China Daily is China's leading mainstream English-language newspaper<sup>29</sup>. As such it has a wide circulation, and, as stated on its very own website, is often called the "voice of China" or "window to China"<sup>30</sup>. In another paper, Chen states that effectively, "the China Daily serves as a mouthpiece for the Party in its efforts to communicate with the wider world"<sup>31</sup>, which makes it at once fairly representative of Chinese mainstream, government-owned news outlets at large, and can be expected not to deviate far from the Party line, and therefore, I argue, appropriate for analyzing the input into the wider global democratic discourse of a Chinese authoritarian position, which is the target of this paper. An English language news source, besides, was necessary due to the simple fact that the Chinese language skills of this author himself are, unfortunately, not yet sufficiently polished for carrying out a study on Chinese language news material. This further made China Daily a suitable candidate for this study.

In order to describe a democracy discourse based on the interpretations of the sampled material, it is useful to employ some questions to pose to the text. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I choose these open and broad questions to keep in mind: **Who is a democracy?** and **What is a democracy?** Considering the first question, I was expecting the news material to be defensive of the Chinese political system, but *how* I was not so sure. Would the Chinese political system be portrayed as democratic, or as a legitimate alternative system to democracy? And if China was portrayed as a democracy, would the democratic quality of other political systems - the ones that are traditionally considered democratic, most importantly - be downplayed or otherwise questioned? This ties to the hypothesis of the *battle of ideas*, in which I conjectured that a discursive battle might be taking place where a contested concept, such as democracy in this case, would be subject to *appropriation* and *disappropriation*, essentially meaning that different sides "wrestle" for the concept in order to make it theirs (appropriation), and making it "not the others" (disappropriation). Saying "we are a democracy" would be the most rudimentary example of appropriation, and "you are not a democracy", of disappropriation. Alternatively, China might be treated as a legitimate democratic system among and on par with other democratic systems? From the point of view of liberal democratic tradition, this would effectively be a broadening of the term to create space for allowing legitimacy of a "chinese democracy". I would choose to call this a case of *particularism*, meaning China is treated as a particular kind of democracy among other (perhaps themselves particular) kinds of democracies.

As for the second question, if China is treated as a democracy in news articles of China Daily, what could we expect this democracy to consist of, or be associated with? It is, for instance, hard to imagine a text that talks about "chinese democracy", and meanwhile accentuates the importance for democracy of multi-party elections - which is obviously not a

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<sup>29</sup>L. Chen, 'Reporting news in China: Evaluation as an indicator of change in the China Daily', *China Information*, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 309

<sup>30</sup>'China Daily' <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/static/aboutchinadaily.html> (accessed 3 April 2018)

<sup>31</sup>L. Chen, 'Evaluation in Media Texts: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Investigation', *Language in Society*, Vol. 33, No. 5, 2004, p. 700.

feature of the Chinese political system. Instead it might be imagined that perceived strengths in the Chinese system and weaknesses in other systems be highlighted. We will attempt to identify *what* exactly is being discussed in discussing democracy in the texts.

These two questions above should intertwine in fact. My aspiration would be to find out whether the Chinese political system is defined as a democracy or as an alternative to democracy, and what are the specific defining, as well as *non*-defining qualities of this system. This is the “what is a democracy”-question. Unless the Chinese political system was consistently contrasted with *hypothetical-other*-alternatives, it appears plausible that it should be identified in opposition to other *real* political systems. This brings us back to the first question: “who is a democracy?”. In other words, who would be the *representatives* of the systems to which the Chinese one could be compared?

Another question that needs to be posed is whether we should expect the discourse on democracy in China Daily to be uniform and coherent. Do the articles amount to a coherent view of democracy and its status in the Chinese context? A coherent view could be taken as an indication that the democracy discourse in China has reached a current state of *closure*, as described in the theory section. But it is also imaginable that the meaning and significance of democracy is a matter of contention - that democracy is undergoing the process of articulation. This would be reflected in that the material exhibits a lot of contradictory viewpoints on democracy. Contentious matters in the material could also relate to various questions. Is China for instance described variously as a democracy or something else in the material? Or are different features or institutions variously portrayed as good or bad, vital or unimportant?

The method consists of identifying *discourse fragments*, which may be keywords or -sentences, that are contextually linked to democracy in the text. This is done with what Mayring calls ‘evolutionary coding’<sup>32</sup>. This means starting out with a set of categories for discourse fragments based on preconceptions, and progressively modifying categories by expanding and replacing them during the reading of the material. This is done through several rounds of reading. In reading the sample texts we thus try to determine what is associated with and what is *not* associated (or *dissociated* if you will) with democracy. These discursive associations and dissociations between democracy and other concepts are made through what Laclau & Mouffe call *chains of equivalence* and *chains of difference*<sup>33</sup>. This is the process of determining how meaning is assigned to democracy, which is the nodal point of our discourse. Places in the text - discourse fragments - are identified in which democracy is mentioned in relation to other ideas and concepts, which give the signifier “democracy” its meaning. Some of these terms will serve to tell us what democracy is defined as, creating a *chain of equivalence*, whereas some will tell us what democracy is different from, creating instead a *chain of difference*. It is also important to assess the *tone* of the message carried in the discourse fragments. In other words, we will attempt to determine whether terms or discourse fragments are *positively* or *negatively* associated or dissociated with democracy. Simply put, if hypothetically a western democracy is associated with multi-party elections, is that a good or a bad thing? This can usually be done just by looking at the headers of the articles. Seeing as one of the criteria for the material to be included in the sample was that the word “democracy” featured in the header (see further below), it is often easy to see whether the message about democracy has an overall positive or negative tone. It should be

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<sup>32</sup>P. Mayring, *Einführung in die Qualitative Sozialforschung – Eine Anleitung zu qualitativem Denken (Introduction to Qualitative Social Science Research – Instruction Manual to Qualitative Thinking)*. 5th ed., Basel: Beltz Verlag, 2002, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup>Winther Jörgensen, p. 57-58

said that this sort of judgement is, however, not always clear-cut, but as far as it is possible or appropriate, it is an important part of the study.

To facilitate the structuring of the analysis and the presentation of the results, related discourse fragments will be grouped together to form a set of *prominent themes* or topics around which the discussion of the results will revolve. The most prominent, and thus relevant ones, will be discussed in the analysis section. Prominence is operationalized simply as *reoccurring*, that is it suffices that the theme is featured in more than 1 article in the sample material for it to be counted as prominent (enough). Nevertheless, due to limits of space in the paper, only the most prominent themes will be regarded. If discourse fragments contradictory to these themes also appear in the material, these will be discussed in relation to the relevant topics. Related themes and topics can also be grouped together if they are readily discussed in relation to each other. This grouping together is part of the evolutionary coding process. In extension, the prominence criterion also means that articles with no themes that reoccur in the rest of the material will be disregarded altogether, and thus be discarded from the sample. If it is viable to talk about different democracies based on the interpretation of the material, this will be a topic of the analysis.

Due to the wide horizon of possible results that may be expected, it is hard to choose a ready-made framework to fit the analysis into. Instead the creation of a framework for the discourse will be part of the evolutionary coding process. However, it may still be useful to compare the results to the couple of frameworks introduced in the theory section.

After finishing an overall description of the chinese democracy discourse, the second part of the analysis will be to compare the two samples to judge whether there has been a change in the nature of the discourse since the accession of Xi Jinping to power. This change could consist of a change in the quality of the discourse, that is democracy and its role in the Chinese context might be treated and evaluated differently in one half of the sample as compared to the other. Another possible indication of change in the discourse would be the distribution of the material between *before* and *since* samples. As an illustration, let's assume hypothetically that all 50 articles would happen to end up in the *before* sample. This was not the case - since that would have made it impossible for me to perform my study, I would have had to abandon the ideas and begin looking for an alternative approach. However, that would already tell me a lot about change in the discourse: it would have appeared to have disappeared altogether. But I imagine that even a difference in density of material between the samples - if sufficiently big - might tell me something about a change in the discourse, namely the thinning of it, indicating a stronger reluctance to engage in the discourse altogether. Avoiding it could be a strategy in itself<sup>34</sup>.

Sampling was done by performing a search on Factiva for articles in the Chinese newspaper *China Daily*, excluding the special editions (these include US-, Africa-, Europe- and Hong Kong editions), containing the word "democracy" in the title. The special editions were excluded in order to target a discourse as closely tied to China as possible. In order to make the comparative analysis, the sample would have to be divided in two, with a suitable cut-off approximately when Xi Jinping was elected into the leadership of the CPC. Xi Jinping assumed the office of General Secretary on the 15th of November 2012 and of President on the 14th March 2013. As sampling yielded a conspicuous gap of more than a full year without a single article containing the word 'democracy' in its header, and starting from just about a week before Xi assumed the former office, the issue of choosing an exact cut-off, which would inevitably have been a matter of judgement, more or less solved itself. To

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<sup>34</sup>M. Schröter, *Silence and Concealment in Political Discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing, 2013.

ensure a large enough sample, a date range was decided upon, stretching from the inception of the 17th National Congress of the CPC held in October 2007 - that is the congress preceding the one in which Xi was elected - until “today”, which was of course the month the sampling was done, which was July of 2017. Admittedly, the choice of cut-offs meant that the time period of the before-Xi-sample was slightly longer than that of the after-Xi-sample. This caused a skew between the two samples, as 29 articles ended up in the after-sample and 21 in the before-sample. However, since the study is qualitative, this skew would effectively only mean more material for analysis, and pose no real problem for the comparison.

The search yielded 54 articles, of which 4 were excluded in the evolutionary coding process. The judgement of exclusion was based on lack of relevance for the study, i.e. that the article contained the word “democracy” in the header, but despite this really contained very little useful material for analysis. An obvious example was a short article concerning the Greek political party “New Democracy” seeking a bailout coalition. The word “democracy” only featured in the header of the article, and only as part of the name of a political party, making the call to exclude it easy. Other articles were not subject to exclusion until later rounds of reading. Common to the articles excluded was that they either (1) didn’t expressly concern China, (2) that they didn’t really concern democracy, and therefore scarcely provided material for analysis, or (3) that they featured no *prominent* themes as operationalized in this method section. However, it should be said that drawing a distinct line between relevant and irrelevant material involved careful consideration, meaning on the one hand that it was carefully done, but on the other hand also that it was not always an “open-and-shut case”. For the sake of transparency, all 54 articles first retrieved with the Factiva search are included in the appendix, with the four excluded ones marked with a star and an explanatory text so as to distinguish them from those finally used in the analysis.

Fifty articles thus became the material for the analysis to be performed on. The sample was divided in two categories, providing the the basis for carrying out the comparison. Let’s call them the *before-* (*the accession of Xi Jinping*) and *after-* (*the accession of Xi Jinping*) samples henceforth. The sample is intended as a representation of the discourse on democracy in the China Daily during the period. I am aware, however, that this way of sampling is problematic, and could well be accused of being crude - perhaps more suitable for a quantitative analysis. Normally the selection of text material for a qualitative analysis would be conducted carefully to ensure relevance and validity. This sample risks precluding material that could potentially have been useful in the analysis. It is not guaranteed that articles containing the word “democracy” in its title would provide me with *all* the relevant material, neither that it would provide me with the *best* material. However, the search provided relative assurance that the material would be relevant for my study, i.e. that it would be sufficiently pertinent to the topic of democracy to tell me something about the discourse. News headlines have after all with good reason been termed *relevance optimizers*<sup>35</sup>. It also gave me a useful starting point for performing the analysis, since a cursory glance at the headers already gave me an insight into the overall message of the articles. In most cases, you could easily tell what the ‘tone’ of the article - especially with regards to democracy - would be like. The headers, besides, are arguably the single most important discourse strands of any news article, e.g. since they have the potential to convey meaning to and influence even those readers who don’t even bother to read the whole piece.

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<sup>35</sup>D. Dor, ‘On newspaper headlines as relevance optimizers’. *Journal of Pragmatics*. vol. 35 no. 5, 2003, p. 695-721

One other thing to keep in mind is that we are examining English language news. Even though we are examining a Chinese newspaper it is ultimately questionable whether we are accessing the same material that is read by a Chinese audience. It can thus not be automatically assumed that this discourse will exert influence on a Chinese readership, as Chinese and English news may be tailored to their respective audiences. In calling it a Chinese democracy discourse, we can not infer that a mainland Chinese audience partakes in the consumption of the exact same discourse. This is important to keep in mind while reading this paper. In fact, it might be quite interesting in itself to see a similar study performed on an equivalent Chinese language newspaper in the same time period and have the results compared with the ones produced by this study.

Another useful thing to keep in mind lies in the way the sample was collected. All the articles collected had “democracy” in the headline, possibly precluding articles referring to China as, for example, a meritocracy rather than a democracy. While this paper focuses exclusively on the term “democracy”, it is useful to consider that articles potentially referring to China’s political system with different terminology will *not* appear in the sample if the word democracy is not present in it(s header). If China is largely described as a democracy in the material it might be tempting to conclude that China *is* a democracy according to a larger Chinese political discourse in China Daily. But it is in fact impossible to tell from this study whether a larger sample, that doesn’t exclusively discuss democracy but political systems or -ideas more largely, would yield a similar picture or whether the Chinese political system would be otherwise described. It is in other words useful to remember that, strictly speaking, it is the question of a Chinese *democracy* discourse, and not a larger Chinese *political* discourse.

# ANALYSIS

## PRIMARY FEATURES

I will begin the analysis by providing the coherent description of the democracy discourse as it presents itself in China Daily. This description is the result of the puzzling together of the prominent themes and discourse strands identified in the coding procedure of my analysis. Following this description of the overall discourse, which tells us what is common to the discourse as a whole, disregarding the time period, I will perform the comparison, addressing any discernible changes in the discourse since the accession of Xi Jinping. The table below presents a short summary of the discourse.

<i>particular democracies</i>	<i>characteristics</i>
<b>Western(-style) democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● multi-party national elections<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ social division</li><li>○ immoral electoral games</li><li>○ money politics</li></ul></li><li>● non-universally applicable</li></ul>
<b>Chinese (ideal) democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● primary-level and limited elections</li><li>● guiding principles of participation and substance/efficiency</li><li>● suited to national past and context</li></ul>

As a first step in the analysis, we shall revisit the questions posed to the texts. **Who is a democracy**, and **what is a democracy?** Especially interesting, of course, is to ask whether China is a democracy or not. It should be reminded that the answers to these questions in this study is sought exclusively in the material. We are not asking whether China should be considered a democracy in the traditional/liberal sense. I dare say that according to any conventional measurements and standards, this is not the case. What we are instead interested in is whether China is a democracy in the context of the texts that make up the sample material.

So is China portrayed as a democracy or not? While the material does contain some seemingly contradictory elements, the overall answer to this question is *yes*. We can thus talk about a *Chinese democracy* in the analysis. The confusion arises among the vast array of terms used to describe this Chinese democracy. A selection of examples is, *people's democracy, socialist democracy, grassroots democracy, intra-party democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy*, not to mention such complex compounds as *socialist deliberative democracy system*. Sometimes China is reservedly called just the "Chinese political system". This web of terminology testifies to a degree of incoherence in the discourse as to the meaning of democracy in a Chinese context, and even whether China is a democracy or not. Talk of a Chinese democracy is sufficiently prominent in the material in any case for us to talk about a Chinese democracy in the analysis. The plurality of epithets



for Chinese democracy also testifies to the first theme that we will bring up in this section, namely what I choose to call *particularism*.

**Particularism** answers the question of who is a democracy, for generally, China is treated as a *particular* democracy among other democracies in the sample texts. While it can be said that democracy as a concept is broadened, as compared to any traditional liberal definitions, in the context of the China Daily articles, effectively *appropriated* in China's favor, *disappropriation* did not occur to an equal degree. Rather, democracy can be divided into two rough categories: **Chinese democracy**, and **Western** (or **Western-style Democracy**)<sup>36</sup>. These will be the umbrella terms throughout the analysis for what Chinese democracy is associated with through chains of equivalence, and what it is dissociated from through chains of difference.

As may be evident from these terms, Chinese democracy is obviously represented by China, although occasionally Singapore and Russia enter the picture as representatives of a "good" democracy - that is to say that their democracies feature in discourse strands with a *positive* contextual message. Representatives of the "Western-style" democracies, that are normally mentioned in *negative* contextual messages, are the usual suspects of the US and EU, although with a quite heavy skew toward the US. While the 'EU' or 'Europe', is featured 29 times in 7 different articles<sup>37</sup> in the sample material, the 'US' or 'United States' features 78 times in as many as 17 different articles<sup>38</sup>. It certainly seems that the US is the prime representative of the *other* to the "Chinese-style" democracy. India is also *prominent*, as defined in the method section, featuring 10 times in 4 different articles<sup>39</sup>. Hong Kong also serves as a special case, in that it reoccurs as the topic of as many as 8 of the sampled articles<sup>40</sup> - that is just shy of 1 in 6 articles in the sample - as an arena for the battle of ideas between Western-style and Chinese democracy, and for the discussion of containment of elections, further discussed ahead. Interesting to note is the fact that HK only features in the *after*-sample. The reasons should probably be regarded as contextual, and the cause is ultimately beyond this study.

What particularism as a recurring theme tells us about the discourse is that China is largely acknowledged as a democracy among others. One might call it, as some indeed do, a Democracy with Chinese characteristics. The theme consists of a group of overlapping sub-themes, that explain and argue for this particularity. The subthemes can be summarized by a few discursive statements based on the ideas of particularism expressed in the texts:

- A political system must **suit** the **real** local/national **context** and **conditions**.
- A political system depends on the local/national **traditions** and **historic** path.
- A political system is not **universally** applicable.

These three statements express ideas that together amount to what I call *particularism* in this paper. Keywords, and derivations thereof, in the discourse fragments coded into this category include *context*, *suit(-able)*, *reality*, *history*, *tradition* and *universal*. These keywords

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<sup>36</sup> "Western-style" democracy may sound a tad comical, but it features in the material no less than 15 times in 7 separate articles.

<sup>37</sup> articles #5, 12, 20, 24, 27, 29, 38

<sup>38</sup> articles #2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 18, 20, 24, 27, 29, 30, 38, 41, 44

<sup>39</sup> articles #7, 9, 12, 35

<sup>40</sup> articles #8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 54

can be used to highlight discourse fragments relevant for this section. Let us look at some examples of this discourse strand. From article #1 in the sample:

the CPPCC features consultative democracy, rather than the confrontational democratic systems witnessed in many other countries. This democratic system, **born out of China's culture and tradition, suits China's reality.**

The bold text indicates the part of the discourse fragment conveying the idea of particularism. Here we can see how a chain of equivalence is formed between *democratic system; China; and culture, tradition and reality*. The chain of equivalence is positive, which is evident from the contrast between the Chinese consultative system and the “confrontational” character “witnessed in many other countries”, which in this fragment is the vague representative of *the other*. Here then we have examples of how both *culture* and *realism* serve as arguments for particularism.

From article #20 in the sample:

This is a profound summary of China's historical and practical experience in the search for a development path **that suits its national conditions**. People's democracy is the life of socialism, and developing socialist democracy is the unswerving goal of the nation and the Communist Party of China.

Here we see, again, *suitability*, but also *conditions*, expressing the idea of particularism. These two keywords are equated with *development path*, which is in turn, in the next sentence, equated with *socialist democracy*, which is the “goal of the nation and the Communist Party of China”. These examples illustrate how chains of equivalence function to create associations between China, democracy and normative ideas about democracy. The following two examples illustrate the third discursive statement:

the Western-style democracy does not have universality (from article #20)

Western form of democracy not a universal choice (header from article #18)

No explanation is needed for these examples. Here it is evident, although from a different perspective, that democracy has to suit particular conditions.

As evident from the examples, particularism is expressed with the suitability of special, or particular, democracy for the Chinese context, whether it be its culture, its past or other social conditions, and also through the expressed non-universality of the *Western-style democracy*. In sum, this creates the impression of China as a particular democracy among other types of particular democracies. We will now continue with the presentation of themes that shall provide us with a more specific definition and explanation of the respective characteristics of Chinese democracy and its main counterpart, Western-style democracy.

**Elections** are perhaps the most important theme in the discourse, and the role of and attitude towards them in the discourse is multi-faceted. They are at once criticized as a part of Western-style democracy, and promoted as a part of Chinese democracy. These two distinctions can be summarized by two sub-themes, the first one being **multi-party electoral democracy** - the criticized version - and what I choose to call **contained electoral democracy** - the favored version.

Let's start out with **multi-party electoral democracy**, which is associated with the West, to a large extent represented by the US. While western-style elections usually feature in negative chains of equivalence, they are not normally made illegitimate. Rather their importance for democracy is variously either downplayed, problematized or otherwise questioned. This is done through negatively linking western-style multi-party electoral democracy to key sub-themes such as **money politics**, **immoral electoral games**, and **social division**. Another example of a manner in which the importance of elections is diminished is by highlighting low-voter turnouts at national elections, but we shall stick to the most prominent themes in the discussion below.

One common way of downplaying the role of elections in democracy is by invoking the concept of money politics, variously displayed with keywords such as *money politics*, -*power* or *corporocracy* (my favorite), or by accusing western democracy of primarily *servicing the interests of capital*. It features in these various shapes in 6 of the articles<sup>41</sup>, but the rather lengthy discourse fragment below should serve as a summary of the argument:

Money politics is another issue in this election. After the Watergate scandal, the US imposed a number of restrictions on political contributions to limit the spread of black money, fixing the ceiling at \$123,200.

But on April 2, 2014, the US Supreme Court ruled there would be no ceiling on political campaign contributions. After the limit was removed, American democracy tilted toward money power.

So even if any US citizen can run for presidency in principle, only the rich or the politicians supported by large monetary contributions can be nominated. (article #3)

Money politics thus creates unequal opportunities in the possibility to participate in elections as a candidate. Simultaneously it is criticized for simply being a big waste of money.

in the world's two largest democracies, the United States and India, contesting an election is a highly expensive affair. In a majority of cases, a candidate has to spend millions of dollars to have any chance of success. (article #7)

Money politics is thus seen as an undemocratic influence on Western democracy:

The basic form of Western democracy, one that runs on a system of open and competitive election, is not immune to undemocratic influences, most noticeably the influence of money. (article #19)

Immoral electoral games feature in several articles mainly concerned with the recent American election campaigns, and are thus admittedly highly contextual. Below is an example of the subtheme of **immoral electoral games**:

The poorly contrived tactics employed by the two parties for the nomination of their respective candidates, as well as the slurs used by Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and Republican candidate Donald Trump against each other in their debates have exposed the "nasty aspects" of US democracy. (article #2)

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<sup>41</sup> articles #3, 4, 7, 18, 29, 41

Here the “poorly contrived tactics employed by the two parties” are equated with “nasty aspects” of US democracy, and as a weak spot of multi-party elections. Immoral electoral games are also exemplified by the possible manipulation of election results, lowering the stance of elections as a defective way of providing representation for the people. Shortsightedness is also highlighted as problematic, in that the election race promotes irresponsible politics:

Politicians make irresponsible promises for the sake of votes, and break their word after they are elected. (article #4)

Populism is another way of defining the problem of immoral electoral games. Western-style elections are described as a “race to the bottom” negatively linked to personal gain as the foremost concern of voters.

The basic characteristic of "democracy" is "one man, one vote". Demographics of most countries show that the majority of votes are concentrated at the bottom of society. And to get those votes, politicians literally enter a race to the bottom, where the foremost concern of voters is personal gain. What's good for society and the future, even if understood, often becomes irrelevant. In opinion polls and at voting booths, only voters' self-perceived interests count. (article #11)

These election races thus produce not only irresponsible politicians, but also an irresponsible populace, envisioned especially as voters at the bottom section of the socio-economic ladder.

Lastly, social division is perhaps the most prominent subtheme condemning multi-party politics. Social division is variously represented by keywords and -phrases like *polarization*, *widening rift in society*, *grassroots versus the elite* and *racial conflict*. This is not only in the locality of the US, but also Thailand and Kenya in other articles<sup>42</sup>. These articles also raise the question of compatibility of western democracy with societies that are presented as culturally or socio-economically dissimilar to them.

**Contained electoral democracy** is a summary conceptual term for a grouping together in the coding process of several recurring sub-themes of *positive contextual message* discourse fragments. These subthemes are those of **intra-party democracy**, **grassroots democracy** and **democracy subordinate to law**. What brings these subthemes together to form the summary term, is the common concept of a limited, or contained<sup>43</sup>, form of elections, that distinguish it from multi-party national elections of western democracies.

Intra-party democracy limits elections to within the framework of the Chinese Communist Party. It is, as is shown through chains of equivalence in certain parts of the material, a sort of *internal democracy*. Intra-party democracy features 33 times in 7 separate articles<sup>44</sup> in the material. The nature of intra-party democracy is probably more complex than revealed in the articles, where the specifics of this sort of democracy is rather obscure. It is, however, equated with keywords such as *democratic discussion and supervision*, and, importantly for this section, *direct elections*. It is also the object of keywords such as *greater*

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<sup>42</sup>articles #37, 50.

<sup>43</sup>My first intention was to term it “limited electoral democracy”, until I realized that this will open up for confusion with democracy limited by a constitution.

<sup>44</sup>articles #20, 25, 36, 42, 43, 45, 52.

and *increased*, suggesting that it is something promoted as part of a progressive democratization (more on this later).

A direct election was carried out in one neighborhood in 2004 in Nanjing, the city chosen to pioneer intra-Party democracy, with direct elections as one of its forms of implementation. (article #43)

This excerpt from sample article #43 illustrates the chain of equivalence associating Intra-Party democracy with elections.

Intra-Party democracy is also tightly related to the theme of **grassroots democracy**, as suggested by the following example:

Yu said democratic policies would be developed through intra-Party democracy in China. Democratization, meanwhile, will develop from the grassroots. (article #52)

'Grassroots democracy' features 18 times in 9 different articles<sup>45</sup>, and is thus both more and less prominent than Intra-party democracy depending on how you choose to count. It is featured as well in multiple headers, indicating its importance in the discourse. Grassroots democracy usually features village elections and is also "contained" in that it is practiced at the "grassroots level", or "primary-level" (it is occasionally termed "primary-level democracy") in rural areas. Both these types of institutions appear experimental in nature, as chains of equivalence link grassroots democracy to *exploration* and *innovative measures* and similar keywords, and figure in a context of democratic progress expressed in these parts of the discourse. The example below shows how it is related to elections through chains of equivalence.

Expansion of primary-level democracy was highlighted in the 17th National Congress of the CPC in 2007. A series of innovative measures have been taken to improve *grassroots democracy*, including the *trial direct election* of town-level Party chiefs in some Chinese cities. (article #23)

Elections is thus described as a cog in the institution of grassroots democracy. The phrase "trial direct election" reveals again its role in a context of experimentative progress (again, discussed further ahead).

The last type of democracy is almost exclusively confined to the "arena" of Hong Kong. Hong Kong features no less than 119 times, and is the topic (i.e. features in the header) of 9 articles<sup>46</sup>, which makes it a major theme - or representative if we want to keep those separated - in the discourse. Many of these articles concern the implementation of "universal suffrage" in Hong Kong. The implementation of universal suffrage in Hong Kong form, somewhat surprisingly at first, a positive chain of equivalence. There is a subtle caveat however, which again, just like grassroots- and intra-party democracy, limits, or *contains*, elections within a limiting framework. In this case universal suffrage, it is argued, must be subordinate to the law. The institution of the law is then interestingly depicted as conflicting with elections, as a binding constraint on them. More specifically (and simply) put the candidates of an election will need to be approved by the central government in mainland China.

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<sup>45</sup> articles #(20 - doesn't feature the exact term, but expresses the same idea), 22, 23, 32, 33, 34, 35, 39, 46, 52

<sup>46</sup> articles #8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 54

A few people have also questioned the stipulation that all the (two or three) candidates have to receive more than half of the NC's votes. In doing so, however, they forget what Article 45 of Hong Kong's Basic Law says: "The ultimate aim is the selection of the CE by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures. (article #14)

Although the central authorities have time and again reiterated its promise of introducing universal suffrage in Hong Kong, some people are still skeptical, ignoring even the efforts it has made under the legal framework for the development of democracy in Hong Kong. (article #19)

The Basic Law's aim is to select the CE through universal suffrage after nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures. And its ultimate aim is to elect members of the Legislative Council through universal suffrage, making the political system democratic and scientific. (article #19)

The above examples illustrate this form of constraint. In the first excerpt it is suggested that critics of government approval of candidates "forget" that the Basic Law stipulates it. The law, a national law of the People's Republic of China, is thus made to be an independent obstacle to unrestricted candidacy in elections. In the second passage as well, the central authorities' efforts themselves are portrayed as limited by the stipulations of the Basic Law. The third passage equates elections with democratic legitimacy, which is an interesting element in the discourse, as the legitimizing potency of elections is questioned in other parts. Again, this idea is almost exclusively expressed in the context of HK, although a discourse fragment concerning the politics of Russia states the following:

Another requirement of modern democracy is its strict submission to the law (article #27)

Elections are therefore positively associated with Chinese democracy, but contained and limited variously by three different constricting frameworks: (1) the party, (2) the grassroots, and (3) the law.

With regards to elections, the difference in the Chinese ideal democracy in the discourse as opposed to the liberal democratic ideal, could be summarized by acknowledging that there is no liberal definition of democracy that questions elections as part of a minimal definition of democracy. In the discourse examined here, elections could be said to be demoted from this status as defining for democracy, to the importance of lesser criteria, such as active participation of the demos.

## OTHER FEATURES

Other than the differential attitude toward multi-party- and contained elections, what else characterizes and defines Chinese democracy? And seeing as the importance of elections for democracy is downplayed, what are more important aspects of democratic legitimacy? The most important themes in this residual category that will be discussed are three: **participation, substance and gradualism.**

Therefore it is misleading to pin democracy on free elections. More importance, instead, should be attached to a popular form of democracy - participatory democracy featuring public

participation. Without full and democratic public participation, free election can be superficial and showy. (article #41)

The fragment above illustrates the favoring of participation as a higher principle than elections in the democracy discourse of the material. In favor of elections, **participation** is commonly featured as a more important factor for the legitimacy of democracy. This is evident from a few of the names assigned to the particular chinese-style democracy, such as **deliberative** and **participatory democracy**. Now this is not a strange idea to western democracy theorists either, some of whom greatly stress the importance of active participation of the demos for full democracy. This shows us that, even though ideas expressed in material such as the one studied in the scope of this paper could not be deemed to be democratic in any liberal traditional sense, some of the ideals are (at least ostentatiously) similar.

Deliberative democracy is featured in two of the articles<sup>47</sup> in the sample, while related terms such as *deliberation* features in three<sup>48</sup>. Participatory democracy features in one article<sup>49</sup>, but the related term *participation* features in as many as eleven<sup>50</sup>. Another term conceptually linked with these is that of **(political) consultation**. These instances together highlight participation as an important legitimizing factor of democracy.

As an important component of comprehensive reform, political restructuring has been deepening in China along with economic and social development, and wider participation of people in politics. (article #20)

This fragment is taken from an article titled “China’s democracy to prosperity” and is an example of a piece of discourse that states that political reform should promote wider participation of people in politics.

The introduction of political consultation into the decision-making process reflects the country’s endeavor to perfect the socialist deliberative democracy system. Holding extensive consultations over political, economic, cultural and social issues makes it more convenient to reflect on social problems and solicit people’s opinions in order to reach a consensus and enhance cohesion. (article #22)

The fragment above features the keyword *political consultation* as reflecting part of the endeavor to perfect socialist deliberative democracy. This passage also reveals the notion that elections can be replaced by deliberation and consultation that solicits people’s opinions. In effect the discourse treats elections and deliberation as alternative ways of channeling the will of the people. This is instantiated further in the below fragment:

modern democracy can be defined as a form of government, which reflects the interests of a nation. It is not the election itself, but political stability, which proves this. A nation can choose its leadership in ways different from elections, but the feature people consider the most important is its efficiency. (article #24)

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<sup>47</sup> articles #15, 22

<sup>48</sup> articles #17, 35, 48

<sup>49</sup> article #41

<sup>50</sup> articles #19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 30, 37, 41, 42, 49, 52

Here is a clear example of how Western democracy (here described as “modern democracy”) is presented as one way of choosing leadership, different from the mechanisms of the Chinese political system, which is described as “non the worse democratic” in the paragraph immediately preceding it:

if a ruling party readily responds to all the changes in society, there appears to be no need for a two- or multi-party system, as the mechanism under one-party leadership can be non the worse democratic. (article #24)

This fragment is also important in highlighting the next theme to be discussed, namely that of substance.

Participation is also an important feature in the “innovative measures” of grassroots democracy and intra-party democracy discussed earlier. Remember that elections were one feature of democratization in these projects. Of perhaps greater importance (as measured by prominence) in some of the relevant articles was participation.

The theme of **substance** is perhaps even more multi-layered than participation. This theme tries to capture the essence of several similar arguments prominent in the discourse, all emphasizing democracy as a means instead of an end. This argument is indeed not unfamiliar to the western democracy discourse either. In the Chinese discourse, the position is firmly taken that democracy should be judged (or even defined) by its efficiency in providing *welfare of the people, stability and economic progress*. This can be discussed in the light of the concept of *minben* introduced in the theory section on chinese democracy. This translation of the concept of democracy interprets it as putting the people first, which is an ancient idea of legitimacy in chinese political theory, going all the way back to Confucius (if not further) and the mandate of heaven. Lei Guang, and Lu & Shi in their respective articles relate Chinese (*minzhu*) democracy with the idea of *minben*. The doctrine advocates “treating the welfare of the common people as the basis of the wealth and power of the polity”, which “presupposes a distinction between the ruler and the ruled, and exhorts the ruler to put the common people's interest above everything else to secure the kingdom”<sup>51</sup>.

In opinion polls and at voting booths, only voters' self-perceived interests count”. (article #11)

The paternalism inherent in this idea is evident from the separation of individual and collective interest in parts of the discourse, of which the latter is best determined by the leadership, and not by people themselves, as illustrated in the above quote.

democracy has a strict criterion, which in this case is efficiency of public administration for the majority of the people. If we neglect efficiency, then our values will turn into a religious myth and will forever be blind to reality (article #24)

This somewhat obscure passage nevertheless clearly expresses the idea of that democracy must provide efficiency to claim legitimacy. Some articles feature this idea as the very topic, such as article #38 in the sample, titled “Democracy is not an end in itself”. This article points to the failure of democracy to guarantee what is called certain basic human rights, such as healthcare and employment. It concludes that democracy must bring benefit to the people, and that only then will it gain the people's support. Another article puts it thus:

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<sup>51</sup> Guang, p. 421



Democracy is not an objective in itself but merely the means toward a better life. Therefore, each country needs to ensure that the political model it adopts is one that will ensure economic progress and societal mobility. In the case of China, and that includes Hong Kong, what is incontestable is that the political system has generated economic growth on a scale never seen before. (article #12)

These articles also bring to light some of the incoherence in the discourse, owing to the ambiguity of China's status of democracy in them. China is widely treated as a democracy, but not exclusively. What exacerbates the confusion is the interchangeability of "western democracy" and plainly "democracy" in these texts.

To provide more examples of the kind of efficiency that democracy needs to be able to offer for legitimacy we reintroduce a previous fragment:

This democratic system, born out of China's culture and tradition, suits China's reality, and has proven effective in guiding the country on its fast track of economic and social development and remarkable improvement in people's livelihoods. (article #1)

This presents three types of efficiency: in providing economic and social development and improvement in people's livelihoods. The arrangement of the Hong Kong "democratic procedures" is also explained in terms of superordinate priorities:

It is intended to help maintain the SAR's social stability and prosperity by ensuring that it is run only by patriots. (article #8)

Social stability and prosperity is thus held as valuable beyond the freedom of choice favored in liberal democracy.

**Gradualism** denotes a common attitude in the discourse that suggests caution and gradual progress in general and towards democracy in particular, in order not to sacrifice stability. This ties to one of the arguments identified by Ling Chen in her paper on Chinese democracy discourse, namely the "people not yet ready" argument against democracy. This kind of argument suggests that people "have not yet become good enough in quality" and "thus are not yet able to participate (in a democracy)"<sup>52</sup>. In the China Daily discourse this is expressed in the same kind of reservation, that the people need to be "ready" for democracy, and also that any process of democratization needs to be gradual and steady, as is made explicit in headers like, "HK has to get full democracy in 'gradual and steady' way" and "Slow but steady road to grassroots democracy".

This theme is embedded in the grassroots- and intra-party democracy themes, as the overall message of these articles, as discussed earlier, is that China is on the path towards democracy, in where it is gradually introduced from the bottom-up. The following discourse fragment highlights the role of grassroots democracy in developing a democratic political culture, exemplified by the potential of "practicing democracy":

The high rate of direct election is definitely a sign for Shenzhen's leading position across the country in fostering democracy. Beyond that, it could offer a perspective for practicing democracy more extensively across China (article #46)

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<sup>52</sup>L. Chen, 'A Preliminary Analysis of Discourses about China and Democracy'. *China Media Research*, vol. 13 no. 2, 2017, p. 46-53

Other instances of gradualism emphasizing the necessary “readiness” for democracy is the proposed need for a middle-class to sustain democracy, as suggested by this apocalyptic vision of a failure to meet these conditions:

Since the middle class is sandwiched between the rich and the poor, it acts as the buffer between the two extreme strata of society. If the middle class is not strong enough, the rich could give fairness and justice a silent burial or the poor could rise in revolt. In either case, chaos will descend on society... without a mature market economy neither can China complete its political democratization nor can the middle class perform its role. (article #40)

## COMPARISON

Now to address the second question posed by this paper, namely whether any change in the nature of the discourse is detectable in the material. The material, it turns out, reveals two interesting changes that shall be discussed in this section.

The first one is not so much a change as a *shift* in the content and its distribution. The distribution of articles between the *before*- and *after*-samples was somewhat skewed, with 29 of them landing in the former category and 21 in the latter. Of these, the ones in the *before*-sample turned out to be more heavily loaded with positive and optimistic messages about democracy: of the 29 articles, 21 were judged to carry a predominantly positive message about democracy, and 8 to conveying a predominantly negative one, giving us a 21/8-ratio. In comparison, only 9 out of the 21 articles in the *after*-sample were judged to be mostly positive, and 12 mostly negative, for a ratio of 9/12. Certainly, the message classification of some of the articles was less than clear-cut, but the differences are still obvious. This might indicate a shift in focus from the virtues of “Chinese democracy” to the vices of “Western democracy”. A comparison of the prevalence of keywords and themes between the samples, make the results increasingly interesting.

Recall the themes of *grassroots democracy* and *intra-party democracy*. When searching the samples for the keyword “grassroots”, 9 results can be found in the after-sample altogether, of which 7 pertain to China, 6 belong to the same one article, and only in one instance does it combine with “democracy” to form “grassroots democracy”<sup>53</sup>. In the before sample we find 32 instances, all pertaining to China, and 13 of which combine with “democracy”<sup>54</sup>. Added to this is the fact that the one instance of “grassroots democracy” in the after-sample occurs in the earliest article of the sample, that is the one closest to the before-sample in time. Intra-party democracy was featured once in one article in the after-sample and 32 times in the before-sample across 7 articles<sup>55</sup>. “Grassroots democracy” and “intra-party democracy” were thus major themes in the before-sample but didn’t even qualify as prominent in the after-sample. We can conclude that two changes in the discourse are the relatively large proportion of positive contextual messages in the before-sample as compared to the after-sample, and the major change of the virtual abandonment of two major themes prominent in the before-sample: *grassroots democracy* and *intra-party*

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<sup>53</sup> article #20 does express the idea of grassroots democracy; only article #22 makes mention of the exact term on the other hand.

<sup>54</sup> articles #23, (25,) 32, 33, 34, 35, 39, (42, 43, 44,) 46, (49,) 52, (53)\*

\*articles within parentheses contain ‘grassroots’; articles without contain ‘grassroots democracy’<sup>55</sup> article #20 in the *after*-sample; articles #25, 36, 42, 43, 45, 52, 53

*democracy*. In fact, the consequences are deeper than that. Dropping these two themes from the discourse effectively meant abandoning the theme of elections in a mainland Chinese context altogether. Elections, when they are discussed in the after-sample, consist of negative messages about Western-style elections, primarily focused on the event of the recent US elections, and on the conflict surrounding the implementation of (contained) universal suffrage in HK. The topic of elections in mainland China has all but vanished, and has effectively vanished if we were to take the earliest article in the after-sample and move it to the before-sample. Considering that elections are discussed in a mainland Chinese context in more than a third of the articles in the before-sample, this is quite conspicuous. Taken together these changes can imply a change in the attitude towards elections, especially in the context of mainland China, or a change in actual practice of elections in China, or both. It can also be a premonition of the direction in which China is heading in relation to democracy, specifically electoral democracy, which would be away from it.

Another clue about this is embedded within the themes of grassroots- and intra-party democracy, one which has been touched upon earlier in the analysis. This clue is the overall message of a China aspiring towards the ultimate goal of democracy. Grassroots democracy and Intra-party democracy were being “boosted”, “deepened” and “promoted”, portrayed as a school for democratic culture, and steps in gradually and steadily expanding democracy. Evidence of this to be found in the discourse can be shown in example fragments:

China's political reform should focus on the development of grassroots democracy. It should first be tried at the grassroots level and then pushed upward, an influential Party scholar has said. (article #52)

The expansion of the primary-level democracy has laid a firm foundation and prepared talented people for overall democracy in China (article #23)

Grassroots democracy is in other words informed with messages of progression and optimism, represented also by headlines such as “*Slow but steady road to grassroots democracy*”, “*Call for grassroots democracy*”, and “*Supervisory committees closed gap in grassroots democracy*”. Frequently the content of the articles are dry descriptions of the procedures, but in them grassroots democracy is frequently linked with the themes of *political culture* and *gradualism*. It is expressed as a goal of grassroots democracy. Grassroots democracy is depicted as a school for cultivating citizens into democratic citizens, as evidenced by the following discourse fragment from article #46 with the headline “Slow but steady road to grassroots democracy”:

the best and the most formal means for us to practice democracy is direct election. In the process of direct election, people feel the essence of democracy, realize the benefits of democracy, learn the techniques of democratic practices and grow into modern citizens with a clear idea about democracy in a modern society.

This, and other texts suggest that grassroots democracy is (or was) a step on the way on a democracy path, highlighting the more prevalent optimist message on democracy in the before-sample.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine a sample of articles from the newspaper China Daily on the topic of democracy, ranging from approximately five years before to five years after the accession of Xi Jinping to power in 2012, and provide a description of the democracy discourse contained in the material. A comparison would then be made to conclude whether a change in the discourse had taken place after this change of the Chinese top leadership. Important questions posed to the texts in the material was whether China was treated as a democracy and what in that case was distinctive of the Chinese democracy. China was indeed treated as a particular form of democracy among and on par with other democracies in terms of legitimacy. The Chinese democracy was contrasted to a Western(-style) democracy. Chinese ideals of democracy distinguished themselves in the downplaying of the role of nation-wide elections, which were deemed *divisive, negatively influenced by money power, and conducive of immoral behavior on the part of both politicians and electorate*, but not necessarily as illegitimate. Limited elections subordinate to law and/or constrained in scope were favored, but of secondary importance overall. *Participation and substantial results* in the form of *efficiency* and the *welfare of the people* were accentuated in favor of elections in providing democratic legitimacy.

Discernible changes in the discourse between the two compared samples could be identified. This consisted of a tonal shift, and the abandonment of previously prominent themes in the discourse, mainly and most importantly of elections in the mainland Chinese context.

The patterns that were found in this study are based solely on news articles gathered from the newspaper China Daily, excluding the special editions. One should therefore be careful in applying the results of this study to Chinese news media at large, and in drawing broader conclusions about the Chinese democracy discourse. However, making an exhaustive analysis on Chinese news media outlets was beyond the scope of this (and perhaps any) paper, and several factors made China Daily a suitable source material. Its wide circulation, its role as a mouthpiece for the party, especially in communicating with the wider world, made it a fair representative of democracy discourse in official mainstream Chinese news media.

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## APPENDIX<sup>56</sup>:

### Article #1

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### Article #2

Democracy the loser in US vote. *China Daily*. 2016-11-09

### Article #3

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### Article #7

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<sup>56</sup>The name of the author is not always available, but will be included when it is. The articles are referenced along with their respective article number (#), with which they were referenced in the example discourse fragments presented in the analysis.

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