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School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, China

ABSTRACT
By taking the official state ideology into consideration, this article seeks to contribute to the study of public opinion of democracy under non-democratic regimes by analysing both qualitative and quantitative evidence collected in China. An examination of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s discourse on democracy reveals that the CCP endorses popular sovereignty and political participation while denying political contestation. Meanwhile, the concept of democracy can have three distinctive meanings among ordinary Chinese: democracy as freedom, democracy as political participation to ensure government accountability, and democracy as good socio-economic performance. Survey data show that the majority of informed Chinese respondents treat democracy as political participation to ensure government accountability, which indicates that Chinese understanding of democracy has reached to a certain degree of consensus that is closer to universally-shared idea of democracy rather than being culturally distinctive.

After hearing the Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech to the Australian Parliament on a state visit in November 2014, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott praised President Xi for his historic commitment to democratize China by the middle of the twenty-first century. Critics of Abbott's praise were quick to note that what "democracy means in China is not what Abbott thinks", indicating that the Prime Minister praised the Chinese President for something that was never promised.[1] This diplomatic awkwardness illustrates how political concepts can be misunderstood due to cultural or ideological differences. In China, the meaning of democracy is a heated topic. Chinese scholars and public opinion leaders continue to extensively debate its meaning.[2] Some critics claim that there is widespread misunderstanding of democracy among ordinary Chinese citizens and it impedes the country's progress towards democracy.[3] Thus, it is worthwhile considering whether there is indeed a failure among ordinary Chinese to accurately comprehend the meaning of democracy.

This article adopts an innovative approach in exploring the popular understanding of democracy in contemporary China. I use the official state ideology of democracy as a benchmark to empirically assess the degree of congruence, or the lack thereof, between

the state's discourse and ordinary people's understanding of democracy. Official state discourse reveals an emphasis on popular sovereignty and political participation but denies political contestation. For ordinary Chinese, however, the concept of democracy has gained three types of meanings: notably, democracy as freedom, democracy as political participation to ensure government accountability, and democracy as good socio-economic performance. Employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, this article shows the three major types of understanding are real among the public. It further demonstrates that the majority of the informed Chinese view democracy as political participation to ensure government accountability. Thus, this article's major contribution to the literature is that it questions previous studies that suggest the Chinese public hold a culturally distinct understanding of democracy or hold one that is congruent with the official discourse of the party on democracy.[4] It concludes that Chinese understanding of democracy has reached to a certain degree of consensus that is closer to universally-shared idea of democracy rather than being culturally distinctive or over-determined by the party's conception.

Studying people's understanding of democracy

Democracy is a contested concept. It is open to competing interpretations that entail instrumental and normative valences. Political theorists provide various definitions of democracy.[5] Empirical researchers discuss how to measure it.[6] Several Australian scholars calculate that more than five hundred "theories" of democracy have appeared in academic papers or books.[7] Although democracy became a global currency of sorts following the Cold War, scholars were quick to suggest that the avowed preference for democracy in many places was rather insincere since there has been very little consensus on what constitutes the core elements of democracy.[8] In political reality, authoritarian leaders may articulate a new narrative about democracy and buttress popular support for autocratic rule in the name of it.[9] Putin in Russia, for example, frames a slogan of "sovereign democracy" that emphasizes the primacy of sovereignty over democracy and the development of a Russian democratic development that does not fit with western democratic norms.[10] Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl contend that "democracy is a word whose meaning we must discern if it is to be of any use in guiding political analysis and practice".[11] Studies of newly formed democracies or non-democratic regimes have started to pay attention to people's understanding of democracy, given that most of these countries lack a democratic tradition and instead draw on other historical, cultural and political legacies to legitimate their rule.[12] This study focuses on how ordinary Chinese understand democracy and the ways in which it differs from official state discourse. Researchers generally employ two types of methods to measure people's understanding of democracy. One is the use of surveys containing questions premised on universal values regarding democracy. The assumption is that these surveys are capable of eliciting consistent and coherent meanings cross-nationally. Close-ended questions are employed in cross-national surveys – such as the World Value Survey and Asian Barometer Survey – to measure respondents' cognitive orientation towards democracy.[13] Close-ended questions are easy for respondents to answer, however, given the contested nature of how democracy is defined, it is not evident that measurement equivalence is robustly established cross-nationally.[14] For example, round two of the Asian Barometer Survey offers the following four options as a definition for democracy:

"opportunity to change the government through elections"; "freedom to criticize those in power"; "a small income gap between rich and poor"; and "basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter, etc., for everyone".[15] In contrast, Zhang Minshu, a Chinese scholar, formulated in his survey just two options: "democracy means a system of periodic elections in which national leaders are chosen through competition between political parties" and "democracy means that the government and its leaders reflect people's interests, serve the people, and are subject to supervision by the people".[16] In providing different options as potential answers, surveys may end up with incomparable findings with divergent or even contradictory conclusions. This had led some researchers to abandon narrowing the scope of potential answers and instead relying on qualitative methods that allow for in-depth interviews and discourse analysis. Lei Guang, for instance, distinguishes six different understandings of democracy based on his analysis of Chinese student protestors' discourse in the 1980s.[17] Yali Peng adopted the Q method to analyse ordinary people's discourse and establishes four types of understanding.[18] Other scholars in Africa and East Asia are employing open-ended questions to examine people's understanding of democracy.[19] Open-ended questions ask respondents to answer in their own words. This allows for first-hand information that may tap into respondents' latent concerns which have not been noticed before.[20] A significant drawback with this method is that it is difficult for scholars to inductively establish reliable typologies in distinguishing the various responses. Thus, the typologies are often developed ex ante. Tianjian Shi set up three types of understanding in his earlier work, namely, socialist democracy, classical Confucian ideas of benevolent dictatorship, and liberal democracy.[21] He and his collaborator later proposed a binary typology of "liberal democracy" that emphasizes procedural justice and "guardianship democracy" that focuses on substantive justice.[22]

This article joins the discussion by making the following contributions. First, by adopting a state-society perspective, this study takes the national political context – specifically the official state ideology – into consideration. As the latter part of this article reveals, the socialist democracy discourse equates neither to the liberal democracy discourse nor to traditional Confucian thought. Making sense of the official discourse on democracy helps us contextualize the socio-political context in which ordinary Chinese citizens understanding of democracy is shaped. Second, instead of relying on a single method, be they interviews or survey, this study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore ordinary Chinese understanding of democracy. A cornerstone of this mixed methods approach is the use of intensive in-depth interviews undertaken by the author in China. The purpose of these explorative interviews is to provide the researcher with an opportunity to construct a new typology for analysing people's understanding of democracy. After that, responses from three open-ended national survey conducted in three surveys are tested to determine whether the new typology helps provide any explanatory traction on Chinese people's understanding of democracy.

The article is organized as follow: First, I examine the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) discourse on democracy. Then, the focus shifts to the conceptions of democracy among ordinary Chinese based on the in-depth interviews conducted by the author. Finally, the evidence from the three national surveys is matched with the qualitative interviews used in developing the aforementioned typology. The article concludes in highlighting the key findings in this study.

The CCP's discourse on democracy

China, as a socialist country, is guided by an "authoritarian discourse" that provides systematic narratives to regulate people's thoughts and legitimate the existing political arrangement.[23] This authoritarian discourse is propagated through education and media channels that are aimed at increasing citizen's ideological attachment and behavioural compliance.[24] Democracy, together with 11 other values, such as patriotism and equality, constitute the "core socialist values" (*shehuizhuyi hexinjiazhiguan*). The CCP has developed a systematic narrative about democracy to legitimate its rule. This narrative is so overarching that no study regarding ordinary Chinese citizens' understanding of democracy can ignore it.

Since its revolutionary beginnings, the CCP has labelled itself as a "democratic and progressive force" (*minzhu jinbu shili*) that fought against the Kuomintang's "dictatorial and reactionary rule" (*ducai fandong tongzhi*). According to the CCP, the goal of the Communist Revolution was to lead the Chinese people to emancipation and liberation. Near the end of the Sino-Japanese war in 1945, Mao Zedong, the CCP supreme leader, told a well-known democrat (*minzhu renshi*) Huang Yanpei that the CCP had found a way to escape the dynastic cycle that had plagued Chinese history: democracy (*minzhu*). As Huang recalled, Mao told him that "only when government is subject to people's supervision can it stop being irresponsible, only when everyone is participating in politics can the polity be sustained".[25] The use of democratic rhetoric helped the CCP attract many outside followers in mainland China.[26] According to the Marxism doctrine, democracy is regarded as a part of the socio-political superstructure that is determined by the economic base. A socialist economic base gives rise to a genuine democracy that differs greatly from its capitalist counterpart.[27] Specifically, socialist democracy means "people are the masters of the state" (*renmin dangjia zuozhu*). Li Tieying, a party leader who oversaw state education affairs and social science research, elaborates on this definition in his book *On Democracy(lun minzhu)*.

> Genuine democracy denotes the emancipation of all people. It is substantive democracy that extends the democratic principle to every corner of society, it transforms the state from a ruling apparatus to an equal actor with other social groups, it enables every member in the society to have the free and equal right to participate into the public affairs … the realization of people's will and popular sovereignty means people create and build state institutions, and use these institutions to govern their own affairs.[28]

The above definition illustrates two distinctive features of socialist democracy. One is the scope of democracy is so broad that it applies not only to the political arena but also to the economic and social relations. The other feature is that socialist democracy advocates direct democracy, in which people directly participate in public affairs and have the power to govern themselves. This concept of *people's democracy* (*renmin minzhu*) implies that China is not ruled by a particular class (such as the capitalist class) or any individual, but by the "broadest democracy that has ever existed in history".[29] The People's Congress system and the development of grassroots democracy are the specific embodiments of socialist democracy. Drawing on Karl Marx, CCP claims election is the most important political mechanism to ensure grassroots democracy and a genuine civil society.[30]

The CCP underscores in its discourse that socialist democracy strives to achieve a genuine and far-reaching system but it is not founded on the idea that every member in society can enjoy individualized democratic rights. A *people's democratic dictatorship*

(*renmin minzhu zhuanzheng*) combines democracy for the people and dictatorship for the *enemy*.[31] For a long time, the criterion for differentiating *people* from the *enemy* was a person's class status. Mao Zedong in his 1949 speech states that "*people* includes working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie; *enemy* then includes the landlord class and bureaucrat-bourgeoisie, the representatives of those classes, the Kuomintang reactionaries and their accomplices".[32] *People*, who are led by the working class and the Communist Party, unite to form their own state and elect their own government, whereas the *enemy* must be suppressed. Following the turbulent Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping redefined the definitions of the *people* and the *enemy*. Deng said that the "*people* are constituted by the working class, the peasantry, intellectuals, and other working people, *enemy* then contains counter-revolutionaries, enemy agents, and criminals and other bad elements of all kinds who undermine socialist public order."[33] Since Deng and his successors sought to institutionalize a socialist democracy in ways Mao had not, *people* and *enemy* gradually evolved from a class concept to a judicial one.[34] *Enemy* is now defined as the people who violate the law and are correspondingly punished through a judicial authority, as opposed to class struggle. In a 2005 White Paper "Building of Political Democracy in China", the Chinese government claims that the people who are not deprived of political rights enjoy full democratic rights in the country.[35]

A central feature of socialist democracy in China is that it cannot develop without the leadership of the party. The CCP is the pioneer of the *people* and the vanguard of the Chinese revolution and national rejuvenation. In its public discourse, party leaders emphasize that the maintenance of the party's rule is the basic requirement for the development of a socialist democracy.[36] CCP claims that it has no special interest of its own and that its sole aim to lead the people to becoming masters of the state.[37] The underlying implication is that no one, except the party, can handle the task of building democracy in China. Thus, the realization of socialist democratic ideal strengthens the rule of the party, not undermine it.[38] Deng Xiaoping warns that democratization without the party's leadership would breed anarchism that eventually damages the social order and topples the socialist modernization project.[39] Deng and his successors explicitly rejected the proposal of establishing a multi-party system, as well as a series of checks and balances on the government.[40]

The discourse of both liberal and socialist democracy endorses popular sovereignty and recognizes the necessity of elections and political participation in politics. Unlike liberal democracy which limits democratic practices to the political arena, socialist democracy envisions a broader and more substantive political engagement in which the democratic principles extend to every aspect of society. Contrary to liberal democracy's call for the contestation of political leadership, elections and political participation in China are realized under the leadership of a vanguard party. Although both socialist democracy and Confucianism underscore the importance of people and the obligation of government to take care of its subjects, they also have significant differences. Confucianism underpins a hierarchic structure whilst *minben* thought urges political rulers to pay attention to people's welfare; however, it denies people's access to policy making and as the masters of the state.[41] In contrast, the socialist democracy discourse endorses the notion that people are the masters of the state, in particular the ruling position of the Communist Party is granted from the people.[42] Socialist democracy therefore involves the coexistence of popular substantive participation and the

vanguard party's monopoly of political power. Employing Robert Dahl's terminology in *Polyarchy*, socialist democracy permits participation without contestation.[43]

Typology: three conceptions of democracy

To analyse people's understanding of democracy, intensive interviews have been conducted involving ordinary Chinese citizens in both rural villages in Hebei Province and large cities such as Beijing, Nanjing, and Shenzhen. The interviewees are all from various age ranges and educational backgrounds. Appendix A includes greater information on interviewee composition. In order to let interviewees express their ideas freely without concern for political sensitivity, the interviews were conducted under the following procedures: firstly, the author stayed in the village or community for several days and identify himself and his purpose prior to the interview, the transparency of information and intent help build mutual trust between interviewer and interviewee; secondly, the interview was conducted face to face, without the presence of others, particularly local government or community officials; thirdly, the interview questions were presented sequentially in order of difficulty, starting with easier questions relating to topics such as age, living conditions, life satisfaction, etc. Following this, progressively harder questions were asked, relating to core issues such as local elections, governance and the understanding of democracy. This method of interviewing was employed for the purpose of ensuring that interviewees felt comfortable and candid when answering questions. A typical interview normally lasted from around 30 minutes to one hour. Based on the answers obtained from these in-depth interviews, three understandings of democracy emerged that shall be henceforth elaborated upon.

Type 1: democracy as freedom

Democracy and freedom are supposed to be two different political concepts. However, for some Chinese, democracy is more or less synonymous with freedom. Isaiah Berlin identifies two types of freedom. *Negative freedom*, which means that a person can do whatever he/she wants to do without any interference or constraint by the state or any other individuals, and *positive freedom*, which permits a certain level of interference that serves to limit some freedoms in order to gain a more comprehensive freedom overall.[44] Some Chinese people treat democracy as negative freedom in which their daily lives are not constrained by an external authority and their independence is protected by the law.[45] Typical answers are "democracy means we can do whatever we want, you can go out to work if you want, you can stay at the home if you want".[46] On the other hand, there are those who view democracy as a part of comprehensive human development, which is closer to positive freedom. This understanding is reflected in expressed opinions such as "democracy means that people have their freedom to do their own things, and they have both materially and spiritually enriched lives".[47] Democracy can be understood as socioeconomic freedom, including, for example, the opportunity to choose their own occupation.[48] While others might associate it with politics and concerning issues such as freedom of speech or the existence of a diversity of opinions.[49] One interviewee boldly stated "we are standing here to discuss state affairs (*guojia dashi*), that is democracy, freedom of speech".[50]

The Chinese translation of democracy – *minzhu* – may convey meanings that differ from its original understanding, such as the impression that democracy is freedom. As

Lei Guang suggests, *minzhu* contains several possible meanings including "people as the masters of their own destiny".[51] People who regard democracy as personal freedom explicitly express the idea of being the masters of their own destiny. Considering that people's personal freedom and control of their own lives have failed to be guaranteed for a long time after the founding of the People's Republic of China, this type of understanding still has political significance.[52] After all, mastering one's own destiny is the foundation for both liberal democracy and socialist democracy.[53]

Type 2: democracy as political participation to ensure government accountability

The second type of understanding treats democracy as "political participation to ensure government accountability". People move away from demanding to be the masters of their own private affairs to be the masters of public affairs. Accountable government is the final goal that they desire from democracy, which is consistent with the definitions of democracy from scholars such as Robert Dahl and Philip Schmitter.[54] James Fearon defines accountability as "an understanding that A is obliged to act in some way on behalf of B, and then B is empowered by some formal institutional or perhaps informal rules to sanction or reward A for her activities or performance in this capacity".[55] One interviewee expresses a similar view.

> Democracy means equal opportunity to participate, and government decisions should consider the majority's opinion while at the same time protect the minority. Specifically, it means one person one vote, and only by this can government policy making reflect people's opinions and tackle problems in the end.[56]

From the above discussion, a democratic situation is one in which the government not only allows citizens' equal political participation but also substantively responds to their opinions and requests. When the state authority fails to meet this standard, people may refuse to call it democratic.[57] An Yuan Coal Company Workers, for example, endorsed a slogan to demand democracy and the rule of law based on the understanding that the right to protest is protected by the constitution and that the government should serve the people and strive to solve their problems.[58] How should the government be held accountable to its people? The interviewees mentioned both direct participation and indirect participation. Citizens' direct participation in politics is often regarded as democracy.[59] One civil servant labelled practices that allow city dwellers to evaluate the work of government agencies as "direct democracy".[60] One interviewee had a detailed elaboration as follows.

> National leaders should discuss the issues before making decisions, right? That's democracy. Either for the central government or grassroots village committee, discussion and deliberation are required. We (ordinary villagers) need to take charge. For example, my village discusses the issue about whether it's OK for elders who have no place to live to build their own houses on a land that is used to dump garbage. At the beginning, the village leaders decided that the elders should hand in 20,000 RMB in exchange for the land-use permission. The party members and village representatives informed us of this issue, and some party members suggested that the elders were too poor to afford that. In the end, the charge or fee was reduced to 15,000 RMB. You see, that's quite democratic. Democracy means we can discuss and influence public affairs.[61]

The answers indicate that the sense of democracy comes from the following: firstly, ordinary villagers have full access to village information and decision making process; secondly, they are allowed to discuss public affairs and submit their opinions

to village leaders freely; finally, the prevailing opinions should determine the final policy direction. Indirect participation may also be regarded as democratic, such as with the election of people's representatives. The representatives include government leaders, People's Congress deputies, and other individuals who hold political power. Elections and voting are democratic ways to produce representatives. Typical responses claimed that "democracy is that the village cadres are elected by us and work for us"[62] and "One person, one vote."[63] In light of the current political setting, some answers would be considered rather controversial, for example, the direct election of township, county and state leaders, which is also believed to be democratic in nature.[64] After electing representatives, a democratic system also requires that elected representatives listen to people's opinions and defend their interests.[65] People would call it "fake democracy" (*jia minzhu*) if elections were merely symbolic, without producing representatives who genuinely serve their constituencies.[66] When viewed with respect to the question at hand, certain public policy making procedures and principles are also regarded as democratic, such as "the right to express one's own opinions", "frank and open discussions", "majority rules", and "authority consults people's opinions before making decisions."[67] Direct participation and indirect participation are not contradictory. One interviewee said that:

> Democracy means ordinary folks (*laobaixing*) participate. If you can't participate, you should have a representative to do it for you … the important issues should be decided on by all village representatives and party members, if that is real, I think it's democratic.[68]

In the end, both direct participation and indirect participation aim to articulate citizens' opinions to the government and ensure political accountability. Returning to Fearon's definition of "accountability", this view accepts the notion that the government should work for the people, which means that the government is the "agent" of the people (as the "principle"). Furthermore, people demand various means of ensuring government accountability, such as participation in politics directly or the election of representatives to work for them.

Type 3: democracy as good socio-economic performance

The third type of understanding regards democracy as "good socio-economic performance", such as good public policies, the improvement of living standards and increases in income. Here, democracy (*minzhu*) is close to the meaning of good governance, with a special focus on people's livelihood (*minsheng*). Some people endorse the idea that good livelihoods constitute the core of a democracy.[69] Others consider state leaders merely caring about people's well-being and the attempt to formulate good policies as democratic.[70] The underlying belief is that democracy is the final outcome that a government delivers. Contrary to the previous studies which have concluded this type of understanding indicates the enduring influence of traditional Confucian thought, specifically *minben* thought[71], this article contends that there is insufficient evidence to make such assertion given that good socio-economic performance is also considered an indispensable component of both the CCP's socialist democracy discourse and liberal democracy discourse.[72]

Drawing on my in-depth interviews, I identified three conceptions of democracy. These understandings of democracy are derived from individuals' subjective stance towards politics and the relationship between the citizenry and the government.

Interestingly, the inductive typology I elicited from my empirical work echoes Almond and Verba's typology of political culture in their ground-breaking *The Civic Culture.* They specified three types: parochial political culture, subject political culture and participant political culture.[73] For the people who regard democracy as synonymous with personal freedom, this type of understanding is closer to the "parochial orientation" that has a relative lack of expectations from politics.[74] Regarding democracy as "good socio-economic performance" reflects respondents' inner psychology as subjects who focus on the outputs of politics.[75] Understanding democracy as "political participation to ensure government accountability" indicates a sense of becoming an active citizen who cares about both the political inputs and outputs.[76]

Of course, these three meanings are not mutually exclusive. In reality, an individual's understanding of democracy is likely multidimensional. For instance, democracy may be considered to simultaneously incorporate personal freedom, political participation, and good socio-economic performance.[77] Nevertheless, this typology still provides us with an analytical lens to differentiate various ways of understanding of democracy by providing two key criteria: *whether democracy is regarded as a political concept* and *whether political participation is essential to democracy.* A citizen with a clear understanding of democracy should easily identify the differences among the three types of understanding and emphasize that democracy is a political concept and that political participation is necessary to ensure government accountability. A veteran village leader, for example, clearly rejected the idea that the essence of democracy includes socioeconomic performance since democracy is a political concept, and he further argued that personal freedom and the election of government leaders are representatives of a democracy, as opposed to leaders simply being benevolent to the populace.[78]

Evidence from three national surveys

The qualitative interviews were useful in developing the previously discussed typology; however, the limited number of interviewees is insufficient to accurately gauge macro-level attitudes and conceptions of democracy. In order to gain relevant insight relation to the larger picture, this study made use of a single open-ended question that was commonly asked as part of three national surveys. These three national surveys are the 2008 and 2009 "Attitudes towards Citizenship in China" Survey (hereafter: 2008 and 2009 Citizenship Surveys) and the 2008 Wave 2 Asian Barometer Survey (hereafter: 2008 Wave 2 ABS). All three surveys have the same open-ended question that measures the respondents' understanding of democracy: "People are all talking about democracy. In your understanding, what's democracy?" The three surveys were conducted by reputable academic institutions and based on a stratified multi-stage probability sample of all Chinese adults. Appendix B provides more detailed information on these surveys. The 2008 and 2009 Citizenship Surveys achieved a valid response rate of less than 50%, whereas the 2008 Wave 2 ABS performed better with 56.46% of its respondents successfully provide an answer (see Table 1).

With respect to the large number of responses from these open-ended questions, the author was able to classify responses and calculate certain percentages by his own discretion. Within these responses, some answers contain more than one meaning, which is consistent with qualitative evidence that reveal people may have mixed interpretations of democracy. In the 2009 Citizenship Survey, for example, the answers from

Table 1. Answer rate of the three national surveys.

	2008 Citizenship Survey	2009 Citizenship Survey	2008 Wave 2 ABS
Total interviewees	4005	3858	5098
Valid answers	1784	1581	2880
Answer rate	44.50%	40.98%	56.49%

1418 respondents contain one single meaning, whereas the answers from the remaining 163 respondents include more than one meaning. I count these answers separately if there is more than one meaning. For example, answers such as "*equality and freedom*" (*pingdeng ziyou*) are counted as the two separate meanings of *equality* (*pingdeng*) and *freedom* (*ziyou*). In the end, we obtained 1792 valid meanings of democracy from the 2009 Citizenship Survey. Similarly, the 2008 Citizenship Survey obtained 2001 meanings, and the 2008 Wave 2 ABS provided 3583 meanings. In total, we obtained 7376 valid meanings from the three national surveys. For the analysis of the answers of the open-ended question, the coding rule is of utmost importance. In this case a two-step strategy was used to code these answers. First, I gathered together the answers with similar meanings and created eight categories of meaning that were based on the provided answers: "freedom", "rights", "equality and justice", "good socio-economic performance", "*people are the masters of the state*", "decision making method", "election and vote", and "policy participation". Table 2 illustrates the detailed answers that are included in each category. A further note is that "rights" and "equality and justice" are abstract concepts with various possible interpretations. If the answer

Table 2. Categories and the typical answers included.

Category	Major answers
Freedom	Freedom (*ziyou*); Individual freedom (*geren ziyou*); People are free (*renmin ziyou*); Self-determination (*ziyou zizhu*); Freedom of belief (*xinyang ziyou*); Freedom of speech (*yanlun ziyou*); People have the freedom to do the things they want (*renmin youziyou zuoziji de shiqing*); People can earn money to make a living (*ziji zhuanqian yanghuo ziji*); etc.
Rights	Rights (*quanli*); Civic rights (*gongmin quanli*); Rights of ordinary people (*laobaixing quanli*)
Equality and Justice	Everyone being equal (*renren pingdeng*), Equality (*pingdeng*), Justice (*gongzheng*)
Good socio-economic performance	Ordinary people have a good life (*laobaixing guo haorizi*); The decrease of the economic income gap (*pinfu chaju bianxiao*); People are wealthy (*renmin fuyu*); Society is good (*shehuihao*); Unity and stability (*tuanjie wending*); Good party policies (*dang de zhengcehao*); Government considers ordinary people (*zhengfu weilaobaixing zhuoxiang*); etc.
People are the masters of the state	The people are the master of the state (*renmin dangjia zuozhu*); Self as the master (*ziji dangjia zuozhu*); Peasants as the master (*nongmin zuozhu*); The mass (*renmin qunzhong*); The mass decides (*laobaixing shuolesuan*); People decide (*renmin shuolesuan*); etc.
Decision making method	Democratic centralism (*minzhu jizhongzhi*); All people get together to discuss (*dajia yiqi shangliang*); Openness (*gongkai*); The majority rules (*shaoshu fucong duoshu*); etc.
Election and vote	Votes (*toupiao*); Elections (*xuanju*); Universal suffrage (*puxuan*); Elect cadre (*xuanganbu*); Villages elect the village head (*cunmin xuancunzhang*); etc.
Policy participation	Ordinary people can provide their opinions to government (*laobaixing tiyijian*); The mass has the right to have a voice in policy making (*qunzhong you fayanquan*); Government consults ordinary people when making policies (*zhengfu zhengqiu qunzhong yijian*); Government listens to ordinary people (*zhengfu duoting baixing yijian*); Participate in politics (*canzheng yizheng*)
Others	Ideas (*sixiang*); Society (*shehui*); Motherland Country (*zhuguo*); etc.

Table 3. Percentage of each category.

	2008 Citizenship Survey		2009 Citizenship Survey		Wave 2 ABS Survey		Average (in %)
	Numbers	Percentage	Numbers	Percentage	Numbers	Percentage	
Freedom	508	25.39	434	24.22	518	14.46	21.36
Rights	158	7.90	105	5.86	165	4.61	6.12
Equality and justice	213	10.64	130	7.25	311	8.68	8.86
Good socio-economic performance	125	6.10	183	10.21	215	6.00	7.44
People are the masters of the state	368	18.39	376	20.98	625	17.44	18.94
Decision making method	122	6.19	129	7.20	398	11.11	8.17
Election and vote	106	5.30	133	7.42	436	12.17	8.30
Policy participation	242	12.09	178	9.93	715	19.96	13.99
Others	159	7.95	124	6.92	200	5.58	6.82
Sum	2001	100	1792	100	3485	100	100

was a specific right, for example, election rights (*xuanju quanli*), it is counted in the "election and vote" category. Election justice (*xuanju gongzheng*) was similarly considered a part of "elections and voting", as opposed to "equality and justice", since it relates more greatly to the former. The rest of the answers that are too difficult to label precisely are put into the category of "others". Table 3 illustrates the percentage of each category that occupies the valid collected meanings.

The first finding is that almost all the respondents associate democracy with some positive meaning, and less than 1% of the meanings are negative, which indicates that the majority of the informed Chinese people hold a positive impression of democracy. Second, among the total of 7376 meanings, "freedom" (21.36%), "*people are the masters of the state*" (18.94%), and "policy participation" (13.99%) are the three meanings that are most frequently employed by the respondents to refer to democracy, whereas "rights", "good socio-economic performance", and the "decision making method" are among the lowest average percentages in the three surveys at 6.12%, 7.44%, and 8.17%, respectively.

The second step of coding is to assemble similar meanings together under the guide of the three types of meanings that I established in the previous section. "Freedom" is itself already type 1 and "good socio-economic performance" is already type 3. "Equality and justice" are put into the "others" category since equality could mean both procedural equality and substantive equality. "*People are the masters of the state*" is understood as direct democracy and broad political participation.[79] The five categories of "rights", "*people are the masters of the state*", "decision making method", "election and vote", and "policy participation" thus all indicate that political participation is necessary to ensure government accountability, which should be ascribed to the type 2 understanding. Table 4 shows the percentage of the three types of understanding.

From the above table, Type 2 understanding occupies the majority of the valid meanings, with a percentage of 55.52%. In total, 21.36% of the respondents equate freedom with democracy, and only 7.44% of the responded meanings associate democracy with good socio-economic performance. Although we obtained diversified answers from the beginning, when narrowing in on their exact meanings, we find that more than one-half of the valid answers still treat democracy as "political participation to ensure government accountability". The answers obtained from national surveys suggest that a

Table 4. The percentages of the three types of understanding.

	Categories included	2008 Citizenship Survey (in %)	2009 Citizenship Survey (in %)	2008 Wave 2 ABS (in %)	Average (in %)
Type 1: Freedom	Freedom	25.39	24.22	14.46	21.36
Type 2: Political participation to ensure government accountability	Rights, *People are the masters of the state*, Decision making method, election and vote, policy participation	49.87	51.39	65.29	55.52
Type 3: Good Socio-economic performance	Good socio-economic performance	6.10	10.21	6.00	7.44
Others	Equality and justice, others	18.59	14.17	14.26	15.68

certain degree of consensus exists among ordinary Chinese regarding the meaning of democracy.

Concluding remarks

Although China has undergone tremendous economic development and social change over the past four decades, its one-party regime has remained unchanged and is considered to be resilient.[80] Some scholars suggest that people's understanding of democracy, influenced by the traditional Confucian norms, constitute one of the sources for regime support.[81] Others claim that democracy has been misunderstood as a means for achieving socioeconomic modernization, instead of being a goal in and of itself.[82] Utilizing in-depth interviews, this article laid out three types of understanding of democracy under the Chinese context. They are democracy as freedom, democracy as political participation to ensure government accountability, and democracy as good socio-economic performance. The main point of difference is whether democracy is considered a political issue, as well as whether political participation is essential or not. The empirical evidence suggests that democracy in contemporary China is widely understood as a value of self-determination both in private and public arena instead of a tool to achieve other social goals. Furthermore, the findings from the three national surveys demonstrate that the majority of informed Chinese people consider democracy to entail political participation in order to ensure government accountability. This indicates that there is more consensus around the popular understanding of democracy than had been previously thought.[83]

Instead of focusing on traditional Confucian norms, this study calls attention to the influences of national political context – specifically the state official ideology of democracy. In China, the ruling party continues to espouse a popular sovereignty notion of democracy, with an emphasis on managed political participation and the importance of the party's leadership. In this study, I was able to utilize the institutional and ideological continuity with regard to the discontinuity brought on by large socio-economic changes to explore how congruent the public's conception of democracy is with the party's official discourse.

The empirical evidence indicates the public understanding is affected by the official socialist democracy discourse but not over-determined by it. Interestingly, the interviews and the survey data show that a considerable proportion of ordinary people adopt the official discourse that the "*people are the masters of the state.*" Ironically,

the majority of informed Chinese citizens see democracy as political participation to ensure accountable government, which is similar to the universally-shared idea of democracy, rather than party driven or a more culturally distinctive one. The results indicate that the Chinese public has its own understanding of democracy that diverges in some important ways from that of the ruling party. In reality, the Chinese word for democracy "*minzhu*" has gained a rather positive meaning. The understanding of democracy among ordinary Chinese therefore does not appear to provide an obstacle for the building of a democratic system.

Notes

1. http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/what-democracy-means-in-china-is-not-what-australias-abbott-thinks/ (accessed: 20 November 2014)
2. See e.g. Cai, "Chonglun Minzhu huo Wei Minzhu Bianhu"; Yu, *Democracy is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China*; Gao, "Zhongguoshi Minzhu yeshi Haodongxi: you 'Minzhu shi ge Haodongxi' Yinfa de Jidian Sikao"; Tang, "Zhongguoshi Minzhu de Neihan Chonggou, Huayu Xushi yu Fazhan Fanglue: Jianyu Gao Minzheng, Jiang Dehai Jiaoshou Shangque"; Duan, "Minzhu de Hexin Yaosu shi Zhengzhi Canyu: Jianyu Tang Yalin Jiaoshou Shangque"; Joshi and Xu, "What do Chinese Really Think about Democracy and India".
3. See e.g. http://club.kdnet.net/dispbbs.asp?id=11040968&boardid=1 (accessed: 20 November 2016); http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-828-1331126-1.shtml (accessed: 18 November 2016); http://tieba.baidu.com/p/3621592995 (accessed: 18 November 2016).
4. See Shi and Lu "The Shadow of Confucianism"; Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*; Zhang, *Zhongguoren Xiangyao Shenmeyang de Minzhu*.
5. See e.g. Rousseau, *The Social Contract;* Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*; Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*; Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*; Sartori *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*; Schmitter and Carl, "What Democracy Is … and Is Not".
6. See e.g. Bollen, "Issues in the Comparative Measurement of Political Democracy"; Bollen, "Political Democracy"; Bollen, "Liberal Democracy"; Coppedge and Reinicke, "Measuring Polyarchy"; Alvarez et al. "Classifying Political Regimes"; Collier and Adcock, "Democracy and Dichotomies"; Munck and Verkuilen "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy"; Coppedge et al. "Two Persistent Dimensions of Democracy"; Cheibub et al. "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited".
7. Gagnon et al., "Democratic Theories Data Base".
8. Bratton, "Anchoring the 'D-World' in Africa"; Chu et al., *How East Asians View Democracy*.
9. Geddes and Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes".
10. See Petrov, "From Managed Democracy to Sovereign Democracy".
11. Schmitter and Carl, "What Democracy Is … and Is Not," 75.
12. See e.g. Miller et al., "Conceptions of Democracy among Mass and Elite in Post-Soviet Societies"; Rose et al., *Democracy and Its Alternatives*; Bratton et al., *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa*; Dalton and Shin edit., *Citizens, Democracy, and Markets around the Pacific Rim*; Camp edit, *Citizen Views of Democracy in Latin America*; Cho, "How Well Ordinary Citizens Understand Democracy".
13. See e.g. World Value Survey 2005–2006 Wave, V152-161; 2010-2012 Wave, V131-139; Asian Barometer Survey Round Three, Q85–Q88.
14. Alèman and Woods, "Value Orientations from the World Values Survey".
15. Asian Barometer Survey Round Two, Q92.
16. Zhang, *Zhongguoren Xiangyao Shenmeyang de Minzhu*.
17. Guang, "Elusive Democracy".
18. Peng, "Democracy and Chinese Political Discourses".
19. See e.g. AfroBarometer Survey Round Three, Q34, Q35; Asian Barometer Survey Round One, Q97; Asian Barometer Survey Round Two, Q91.
20. RePass, "Issue Salience and Party Choice"; Geer, "What Do Open-Ended Questions Measure?"
21. Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System".

22. Shi and Lu "The Shadow of Confucianism"; Lu and Shi, "The Battle of Ideas and Discourses before Democratic Transition"; Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*.
23. See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*; Perry, "The Populist Dream of Chinese Democracy".
24. See Kennedy, "Maintaining Popular Support for the Chinese Communist Party".
25. Huang, *Bashinian Lai*, 148–150.
26. See Xiao edit., *Lishi de Xiansheng: Bange Shiji qian de Zhuangyan Chengnuo*.
27. Li, *Lun Minzhu*.
28. Li, *Lun Minzhu*, 24–26.
29. *Dengxiaoping wenxuan Vol. 2*, 168.
30. Li, *Lun Minzhu*, 31.
31. See *Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. 4*, 418.
32. *Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. 4*, 417–418.
33. *Dengxiaoping wenxuan, Vol. 2*, 168–169.
34. See e.g. Jiang, "Political Report to the Sixteenth Party Congress"; Hu, "Political Report to the Seventeenth Party Congress", "Political Report to the Eighteenth Party Congress".
35. White Paper "Building of Political Democracy in China", see http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Oct/145718.htm (accessed: 6 June 2016).
36. See e.g. Li, *Lun Minzhu*, 13; White Paper "Building of Political Democracy in China", see http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Oct/145718.htm (accessed: 6 June 2016).
37. Li, *Lun Minzhu*, 77, 226–230.
38. *Jiangzemin wenxuan, Vol. 3*, 140, 235.
39. *Dengxiaoping wenxuan, Vol. 2*, 127.
40. See e.g. *Dengxiaoping wenxuan, Vol. 3*, 220; *Jiangzemin wenxuan, Vol. 3*, 88; Wu, "Report on the Work of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress".
41. See Hu, "Confucianism and Western Democracy"; Shi and Lu, "The Shadow of Confucianism"; Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*.
42. *Jiangzemin wenxuan, Vol. 3*, 420.
43. Dahl, *Polyarchy*.
44. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty". Here, freedom and liberty are interchangeable concepts.
45. Interviews 8, 9.
46. Interview 9.
47. Interview 7.
48. Interview 8.
49. Interviews 4, 19, 27.
50. Interview 3.
51. Guang, "Elusive Democracy".
52. Teiwes, "The Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime 1949–1957"; Xiao, *Guobu Jiannan: Zhongguo Shehuizhuyi lujing de Wuci Xuanze*.
53. See Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*; Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*; Li, *Lun Minzhu*.
54. See Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*; Schmitter and Carl, "What Democracy Is … and Is Not".
55. Fearon, "Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians," 55.
56. Interview 23.
57. Interviews 14, 15.
58. Yu, *Zhongguo gongren jieji zhuangkuang: Anyuan shilu*, 365–366.
59. Interview 17.
60. Interview 21.
61. Interview 10.
62. Interview 11.
63. Interview 25.
64. Interview 13.
65. Interview 24.
66. Interviews 4, 16, 24.
67. Interviews 5, 10, 14, 18, 23, 26.

68. Interview 8.
69. Interviews 2, 6, 8, 12, 16.
70. Interview 28.
71. See e.g. Shi and Lu, "The Shadow of Confucianism"; Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan.*
72. See *Dengxiaoping wenxuan, Vol. 3*, 223–225. Bratton and Mattes, "Support for Democracy in Africa"; Weitz-Shapiro, "The Local Connection".
73. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, 17–20.
74. Ibid., 17.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 18.
77. Interviews 6, 12, 16, 20.
78. Interview 5.
79. Interviews 14, 16, 26.
80. See Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience".
81. See Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System"; Wang, "Daibiaoxing minzhu yu daiyixing minzhu". Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan.*
82. Guang, "Elusive Democracy".
83. See e.g. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy*; Chen and Dickson, *Allies of the State.*

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Notes on contributor

Peng Hu (B.A. and M.A. from Peking University, Ph.D. from Chinese University of Hong Kong) is assistant professor in the department of political science, school of international relations and public affairs, Fudan University. His research interests include comparative political development, democracy and democratization, public opinion in China.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of interviewees

Interview	Occupation	Age	Other information
1	Villager	45	Hebei, June 2014
2	Villager	30	Hebei, June 2014
3	Villager	60	Hebei, June 2014
4	Villager	70	Hebei, June 2014
5	Villager	64	Hebei, June 2014
6	Villager	60	Hebei, June 2014
7	Villager	26	Hebei, June 2014
8	Villager	68	Hebei, June 2014
9	Villager	44	Hebei, June 2014
10	Villager	70	Hebei, June 2014
11	Villager	68	Hebei, June 2014
12	Villager	Approximately 50	Hebei, June 2014
13	Villager	Approximately 50	Hebei, June 2014
14	Villager	Approximately 60	Hebei, June 2014
15	Villager	Approximately 60	Hebei, June 2014
16	Villager	52	Hebei, June 2014
17	Financial employee		Beijing, June 2014
18	Financial employee	28	Jiangsu, December 2013
19	Mainland China student	27	Hong Kong, February 2014
20	Mainland China student	40	Hong Kong, February 2014
21	Civil servant	27	Jiangsu, March 2015
22	Worker	Approximately 50	Jiangsu, March 2015
23	Community activist	Approximately 50	Guangdong, February 2015
24	College student	21	Jiangsu, February 2016
25	College student	21	Jiangsu, February 2016
26	Retired SOE employee	59	Jiangsu, February 2016
27	College student	22	Jiangsu, February 2016
28	Private company employee	25	Jiangsu, February 2016

Appendix B: National surveys

The "Attitudes towards Citizenship in China Survey" contains two years of national surveys that attempt to understand China's civic culture. These national surveys are based on a stratified multi-stage probability sample of all Chinese adults, which was drawn by using GPS/GIS Assistant Area Sampling. The surveys were conducted by the Research Center for Contemporary China of Peking University. The 2008 Survey obtained 4005 valid questionnaires, and the 2009 Survey obtained 3858 valid questionnaires in the end.

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