The battle of ideas and discourses before democratic transition: Different democratic conceptions in authoritarian China

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we propose a theoretical framework to examine popular democratic conceptions in societies with limited experiences of democratic politics. Second, following this framework, we use new survey instruments to investigate the origins and consequences of popular democratic conceptions in mainland China, with particular emphasis on how the Chinese government indoctrinates its people with a guardianship discourse on democracy to disguise its authoritarian nature. Using national survey data, this paper demonstrates that the Chinese government has effectively taken advantage of its regulated education and media systems, as well as its lingering Confucian and Leninist traditions, to promote and indoctrinate its people with the guardianship discourse. A majority of Chinese citizens indeed understand democracy following this particular discourse and, thus, perceive the Chinese government as more or less a democracy.

Keywords

Political discourse, democratic conceptions, authoritarian China, survey data

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

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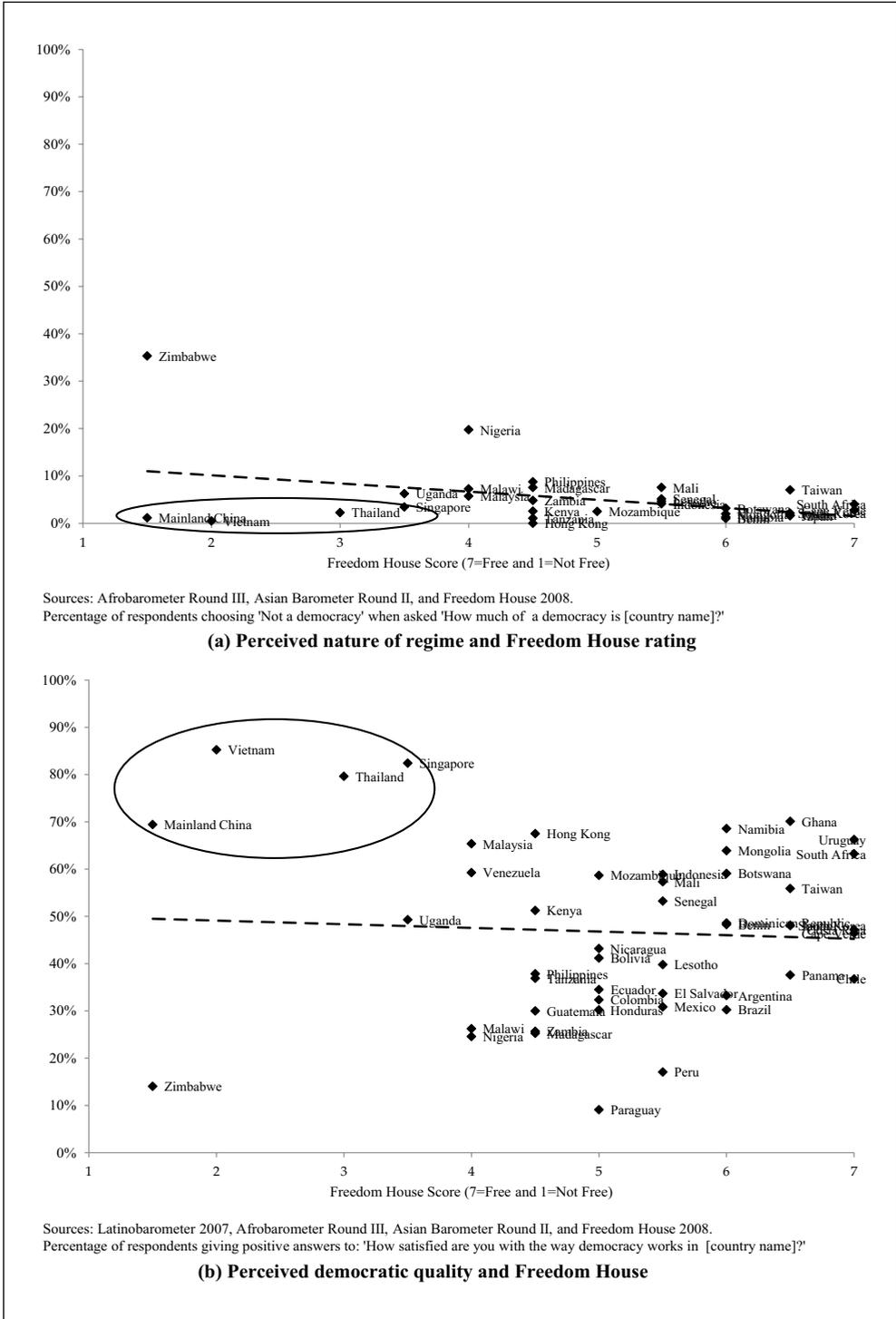Email: jlu@american.edu

are the consequences of the battle of ideas and discourses for these societies' political develop-ment? Answers to such questions have important implications for research on authoritarian poli-tics, democratic transitions and consolidation, and comparative public opinion.

Given political elites' interest in cultivating desirable public opinion, as well as the salience of framing and priming in shaping public opinion (e.g. Chong and Druckman, 2007; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004), the significance of distinct meanings associated with critical concepts like democ-racy cannot be overemphasised. In many cases, such varying meanings are presented via compet-ing political discourses and ideas. In fact, some puzzles in the literature of comparative public opinion cannot be solved without recognising that different people may attach various meanings to the same concept. For instance, if people around the world understood democracy in a similar way – for example, by emphasising liberty, protection of rights, and competitive elections – then dis-tinct empirical measures (expert surveys as well as public opinion polls) should have generated similar judgements regarding the democratic quality of any polities. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 1, findings from recent comparative survey projects suggest a different picture.

Figure 1 shows two scatter-plots of countries and regions covered by the most recent wave of surveys from Latinobarometer, Afrobarometer and the Asian Barometer Survey.[1] The horizontal axes give the Freedom House ratings. The vertical axis in Figure 1a shows the percentage of respondents choosing 'Not a democracy' when asked about the nature of their governments, while the vertical axis in Figure 1b shows the percentage of respondents reporting their satisfaction with the performance of democracy in their respective societies. If a similar democratic conception were widely shared, a strong negative relationship in Figure 1a and a strong positive relationship in Figure 1b should be present. However, only a weak negative relationship is found in Figure 1a, with outliers like mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore.[2] Meanwhile, Figure 1b shows a practically null relationship, with mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore again as outliers.[3] Such empirical findings suggest that there are distinct conceptions associated with the same D-word in some societies.[4]

After the Third Wave of democratisation in the 1990s, democracy became the only legitimate game in political discourse; thus, the western liberal hegemony creates strong incentives for most authoritarian regimes to claim themselves to be some kind of 'genuine democracy'. Authoritarian regimes can also indoctrinate their people with alternate discourses on democracy, misleading some citizens to perceive their governments as truly democratic. Such alternate discourses do more than simply disguise the authoritarian nature of these regimes: they actually provide the authoritar-ian leaders with powerful discursive leverage, helping them win over people's hearts and minds and possibly lowering the pressure for democratic transition. As Diamond (2006) argues, a critical stage of democratic transitions is citizens' learning democratic concepts and critiques of non-dem-ocratic practices. Thus, to comprehensively understand democratic transitions and consolidation, contemporary research should look beyond institutional and structural factors and study the politi-cal competition over the ideas and discourses that shape citizens' attitudes about concepts like democracy. An important first step in this process involves systematically examining the alternate discourses on democracy cultivated by authoritarian leaders, including their origins, prevalence, and possible impacts.

Despite the numerous typologies and measures developed over the past decades, empirical research on popular democratic conceptions and their influence over people's political attitudes and behaviour is still rudimentary.[5] This is particularly the case with relevant research on authori-tarian societies, which primarily adopts a 'residual-category approach' that only distinguishes the liberal democracy discourse from anything other than the liberal one. This literature does not effec-tively theorise and capture the distinct nature of alternate discourses on democracy in these socie-ties, or their possible effects on democratic transitions and consolidation. To extend this line of

Sources: Afrobarometer Round III, Asian Barometer Round II, and Freedom House 2008.
Percentage of respondents choosing 'Not a democracy' when asked 'How much of a democracy is [country name]?'

(a) Perceived nature of regime and Freedom House rating

Sources: Latinobarometer 2007, Afrobarometer Round III, Asian Barometer Round II, and Freedom House 2008.
Percentage of respondents giving positive answers to: 'How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country name]?'

(b) Perceived democratic quality and Freedom House

Figure 1. Perceived democracy and Freedom House rating.

research, we theorise the key features of competing discourses on democracy in authoritarian societies in general, and distinguish one alternate discourse – the guardianship discourse on democracy – for detailed analysis.

The guardianship discourse is derived from the guardianship model of governance proposed by thinkers like Plato and Confucius. This model of governance was later followed implicitly or explicitly by authoritarian politicians like Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Lee Kuan Yew, and was further re-packaged and promoted as an alternate discourse on democracy. This discourse's primary difference from the liberal democracy discourse is that it promotes paternalistic meritocracy in the name of democracy. We measure this guardianship discourse with new survey instruments, test their validity using a national survey from mainland China, and explore this discourse's pervasiveness and impact. We find that (a) a significant number of Chinese indeed understand democracy following the guardianship discourse; (b) this particular democratic conception leads Chinese citizens to perceive their government to be more or less a democracy; and (c) the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) use of its education and media systems for propaganda and indoctrination, as well as China's lingering Confucian and Leninist traditions, contribute to the prevalence of this non-liberal democratic conception in contemporary China.

Alternate discourses on democracy in societies with limited experiences of democratic politics

Democracy is an oft-debated concept. People in different countries attach various meanings to this word (Canache, 2012; Dalton et al., 2007; Mattes and Bratton, 2007). Even within the same country, this 'fuzzy-democracy syndrome' affects average citizens as well as political elites (Crow, 2010; Miller et al., 1997). Thanks to the booming survey industry, students of comparative public opinion have accumulated rich data on the various attributes people associate with the D-word. Nevertheless, when it comes to the political implications of varying democratic conceptions, conclusions diverge. Some scholars argue that how individuals understand democracy has shaped their demand for and satisfaction with the performance of democracy (Crow, 2010; Mattes and Bratton, 2007), as well as their attitudes toward participatory activities (Canache, 2012). Other scholars deny that the different meanings attached to democracy can have any significance in comparative public opinion research, particularly any research involving societies with limited experiences of democratic politics (Anderson, 2002).

We believe that the conflicting conclusions can be attributed to two issues in existing research. First, there is a lack of theorisation on the distinct nature of alternate discourses on democracy in societies with different experiences of democratic politics. Second, due to this dearth of theorisation, there also is a lack of theoretically informed empirical strategies to effectively capture competing discourses on democracy that may have shaped people's political attitudes and behaviour, and even delayed democratic transitions.

Theoretically, we expect that the battle of ideas and discourses on democracy in mature/consolidating democracies has distinct emphases compared to that in authoritarian societies. Given continuous and longer experiences of democratic politics, the legitimacy of some fundamental values and institutions such as political rights and competitive elections has already been widely embraced in mature/consolidating democracies. Hence, varying discourses on democracy in these societies tend to emphasise the relative significance of different aspects of democracy. For instance, American adolescents have distinct thoughts on whether individual rights or equality should be emphasised more (Flanagan et al., 2005). Likewise, in Latin American and African democracies, people differ in their democratic conceptions regarding whether more weight should be associated with protection of political rights, or sound socioeconomic performance (Canache, 2012; Mattes

and Bratton, 2007). In his relevant research on Mexico, Crow (2010: 48) explicitly argues that 'Concepts of democracy are a question of emphasis'.

The whole dynamic changes in societies with limited to no experience with democratic politics, wherein the distributional implications of democratic versus non-democratic political institutions are still the centre of political struggle. We argue that in these societies, democratic conceptions are no longer a question of emphasis, but are instead reflections of fierce contests over the institutional settings in practice. For example, Lee Kuan Yew, the then-premier of Singapore, claimed that the 'western concept' of democracy did not work in Asia (Zakaria, 1994). From Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, generations of Chinese leaders have urged the differentiation of Chinese democracy from 'western democracy' (Nathan, 1985).[6] Though political leaders in these societies rarely challenge the normative legitimacy of democracy, they have and will continue to (a) cultivate alternate discourses on democracy that both deprive the D-word of constraints on their power and enhance the likelihood of their political survival; and (b) indoctrinate their citizens with such emasculated discourses on democracy through various channels like effectively controlled education and media systems. Unfortunately, this significant distinction regarding the nature of alternate discourses on democracy in societies with different experiences of democratic politics has rarely been used to structure contemporary research on popular democratic conceptions, particularly those in authoritarian societies.

Methodologically, a different empirical strategy other than the residual-category approach should be used to examine democratic conceptions in societies with limited experiences of democratic politics. Given some consensus on the fundamental values and institutional settings in societies with sufficient experience of democratic politics, the residual-category approach can effectively study how varying emphases on different aspects of democracy may affect these societies' domestic politics. However, when applied to societies with limited experiences of democratic politics, this approach reveals little regarding the nature of alternate discourses on democracy, making it very tricky to interpret the collected results. For instance, when some citizens of an authoritarian society report that they believe continuous economic growth is the most important feature of democracy, should this be interpreted as a belief that to be a democracy, continuous economic growth should be secured in addition to institutionalised political competition and protection of rights? Or should it be interpreted to be the belief that any regime that can continuously deliver economic growth is a democracy? Clearly, authoritarian leaders would be keen on indoctrinating their citizens with the latter understanding, since it offers them an appealing veneer of democracy as well as an effective discursive weapon against possible pressure for democratic transition. Unfortunately, the existing residual-category approach cannot differentiate between the two interpretations.

Thus, to effectively study democratic conceptions in societies with limited experiences of democratic politics, we need new instruments tailored to the key features of the deliberately cultivated alternate discourses on democracy. Ideally, all competing discourses in such societies should be included for analysis. However, this demands profound regional expertise and familiarity with distinct political traditions that are far beyond our capability. This article focuses on the guardianship discourse, which not only resonates with the political traditions of the outliers in Figure 1 but has also been recognised by prominent theorists of democracy as a meaningful alternative to liberal democracy.

Dahl (1989: 52) states that a 'perennial alternative to democracy is government by guardians'. The guardianship model of governance has appealed to numerous political thinkers around the world and been systematically practised by authoritarian leaders over a long period of time (both Confucianism and Leninism are classical examples of the guardianship model). It is very likely that authoritarian leaders in societies with a rich history of the practice of the guardianship model in governance, like mainland China, Vietnam, and Singapore, might have intentionally capitalised

upon this tradition – repackaging it into an alternate discourse on democracy to disguise their authoritarian nature and indoctrinating this guardianship discourse through propaganda. It is not surprising that both Singapore's 'democracy embedded in Asian values' and China's 'democracy with Chinese characteristics' echo the idea of 'government by guardians'.

Systematic comparison between the guardianship discourse and the liberal democracy discourse suggests that they agree on the legitimacy of democratic governance and its desirable outcomes: a stable environment for socioeconomic and political activities and increased (if not maximised) collective benefits for the whole society.[7] Nevertheless, when it comes to how democratic governance should be practised (i.e. specific institutional settings to achieve these desirable goals), they suggest diverging routes.

The liberal democracy discourse accentuates the use of institutional arrangements to reach collective decisions on public issues and ensure good governance. At the heart of these arrangements lie competitive elections as well as institutionalised protection of political rights. The system not only allows people to press political leaders over policy concerns, but also grants them the right to replace the government through established procedures. In essence, within this discourse, democracy is presented at the very least as a government organised on the basis of a set of institutions that guarantee some basic freedoms and ensure people's rights to participate, choose their leaders, and collectively make decisions for their society.

Conversely, given its more pessimistic views on the average person's ability to pursue long-term and collective interests, the guardianship discourse emphasises that the key to quality governance lies in the breeding and selection of morally competent rulers to act as guardians of a society. With their superior knowledge and virtue, the guardians can be trusted to effectively serve the public interest. This discourse requires that the guardians be endowed with the discretional power and authority that is necessary to make decisions on public issues – with limited constraints from the citizenry. Democracy is presented as a government led by competent and virtuous politicians with substantial discretionary power who are willing to listen to people's opinions, sincere in taking care of people's interests, and capable of identifying the best policies for their society. Essentially, the guardianship discourse tries to promote paternalistic meritocracy in the name of democracy.

The aforementioned differences between the two discourses have important implications for how people assess the nature of their government. Within the liberal democracy discourse, given its unambiguous emphasis on institutions and procedures, the democratic nature of a regime can be primarily determined by whether there are competitive elections, whether the government's decisions are made according to established procedures, as well as whether people's rights are ensured with institutionalised protection. On the contrary, the guardianship discourse's intentional downplaying of institutions/procedures and emphasis on having virtuous and competent political leaders means that the democratic nature of a regime is essentially assessed by the substance of government policies, especially whether these policies can bring tangible benefits to its people and promote the public interest in the long term. Clearly, if authoritarian leaders can successfully indoctrinate their citizens with the guardianship discourse, they – with some satisfying performance in sustaining economic growth, political order, and public security – can deceive some of their people in regards to the regime's nature. Furthermore, once misled, the people's response to opposition forces' mobilisation for political changes may be depressed, thereby providing the authoritarian leaders with a shield against potential pressure for democratic transition.[8]

Empirically, given the distinctions between the two discourses, corresponding studies of democratic conceptions should focus on people's views of how their government should be organised and run. Conventional typologies like procedural versus substantive democracy (Bratton et al., 2005; Shin, 2011), or the differentiation between liberty and equality (Canache, 2012; Dalton et al., 2007),

cannot effectively capture such distinctions. In the rest of this paper, we use some new survey instruments in a national survey from mainland China to examine (a) the effectiveness of the CCP regime in indoctrinating its citizens with this guardianship discourse; (b) the influence of the guardianship discourse on the Chinese people's assessment of their regime nature; and (c) the resources and channels that the CCP has used for the promotion of this alternate discourse on democracy.

Democratic conceptions in contemporary China: historical background and new survey instruments

Mainland China was chosen for three reasons. First of all, as Dahl (1989) recognises, Confucius created a philosophy of guardianship which dominated the state craftsmanship in China for nearly two millennia. China also has recently experienced state-endorsed Leninism, another form of the guardianship model of governance. Despite some significant differences between Confucianism and Leninism, they both (a) emphasise elitism, (b) assume a natural harmony of social interests, and (c) prioritise socioeconomic welfare rights over political rights (Munro, 2000; Nathan, 1985; Perry, 2008).[9] These political traditions facilitate the CCP's cultivation and promotion of the guardianship discourse on democracy.[10] Since the late 1940s, the CCP has been deliberately indoctrinating the Chinese people with the guardianship discourse in various forms – democratic centralism, democracy with Chinese characteristics, 'Three Represents', and 'Harmonious Society'. Methodologically, mainland China provides the most-likely case. If our arguments and empirical instruments cannot pass the test in mainland China, their validity should be seriously questioned.

Secondly, the battle of ideas and discourses regarding how China's authoritarian system should be reformed has been ongoing since the 1980s. Liberal democracy has been promoted by some Chinese intellectuals as the only viable alternative for China's political future (Cheng, 2008; Feng, 2010). Meanwhile, others emphasise the importance of China's meritocratic traditions, rather than 'total westernization', for its successful political future (Bell, 2006; Jiang, 2012). Such intellectual debates have also generated some resonance within the CCP (Dallmayr and Zhao, 2012). Not surprisingly, the CCP shows significantly more hostility toward the former camp in its propaganda. This provides a valuable setting for examining how the Chinese public responds to such competing ideas and discourses when forming their democratic conceptions.

Thirdly, mainland China is a puzzling outlier in comparative public opinion research. Surveys conducted by western scholars consistently demonstrate that the majority of Chinese citizens express enthusiasm for democracy and high trust in the CCP regime simultaneously (Tang, 2005). One explanation might be that the Chinese people hide their true feelings. However, rigorous statistical tests show that such findings cannot simply be attributed to political wariness (Manion, 2010).[11] This leaves another, more plausible conjecture: democracy in the minds of ordinary Chinese does not necessarily match the liberal democracy discourse; rather, it is much closer to the guardianship discourse. After analysing China's popular discourses on democracy in the mid-1990s, Peng (1998) concludes that all discourses value meritocracy and accept, to some extent, benevolent rule without popular consent. Such features clearly resonate with the guardianship discourse examined in this paper.

The quintessence of the guardianship discourse is embodied in the *minben* (people-as-the-basis) doctrine of Confucianism. Most scholars agree that the *minben* doctrine requires competent and virtuous rulers to work for their people's welfare, prescribes the rulers to take care of people's interests and pursue the collective benefit, and necessitates that rulers listen to people's opinions. Meanwhile, this doctrine gives the rulers discretionary power in policy making and confines the role of citizen participation to communication. Clearly, the *minben* doctrine identifies paternalistic meritocracy as the ideal form of government.

When Chinese intellectuals and elites were initially exposed to western democracy in the late 1800s and early 1900s, their views of democracy were heavily coloured by the *minben* doctrine. Both Liang Qichao and Mao Zedong, as Nathan (1985) demonstrates, held a strong faith in the natural harmony of social interests and the tutelary role of political leaders in serving as the trustees of the higher interests of the people. Not surprisingly, their views of democracy closely resemble the guardianship discourse. Lorenzo's (2013) in-depth analysis of Sun Yat-sen's political ideas also reveals a democratic conception that incorporates *minben* justification, emphasises elitism, downplays the civic virtue of participation, and conceptualises the demos in terms of unity rather than pluralism. These views of democracy not only survived the transition from Confucianism to Leninism in mainland China, but also shaped the CCP's discourses on and practice of democracy from Mao to Deng (Guang, 1996; Nathan, 1985).

Nowadays, although Chinese intellectuals' and elites' exposure to and experiences of democracy have been significantly enriched, the guardianship discourse's influence is far from vanished. Jiang's (2012) Confucian constitutionalism and Bell's (2006) democracy with Confucian characteristics seriously challenge liberal democracy's ability to address China's legitimacy crisis and serve the Chinese people's long-term interests. Additionally, they both emphasise the value of elitism and meritocracy. Li Junru, the CCP's leading theorist, makes a strong case for promoting professional competence and ethics among Chinese officials and intentionally downplays the significance of elections for Chinese-style democracy (Shambaugh, 2008). The CCP also forcefully emphasises that moral character and capability should be prioritised over popular votes when selecting, evaluating, and promoting its cadres.[12] Obviously, the Chinese-style democracy advocated by the CCP grows out of the guardianship discourse.[13]

To find out whether the guardianship discourse does constitute a meaningful and competitive alternative to the liberal democracy discourse and shapes the Chinese people's democratic conceptions, we developed some new survey instruments focusing on people's views of how their government should be organised and run, and included them in a 2008 national survey.[14] As previously discussed, the liberal democracy discourse features an unambiguous emphasis on establishing institutions and procedures that ensure participation, competition and some basic freedoms. Conversely, the guardianship discourse promotes paternalistic meritocracy characterised by the selection of virtuous and competent political leaders who are willing to listen to people's opinions, sincerely care about people's interests, and are capable of identifying the best policies. Therefore, our question reads: 'In your opinion, which of the following statements should be more important to democratic politics?'[15] Five contrasting pairs were presented one after another, and respondents were instructed to choose one statement in each of the five pairings: (1) 'Public, fair, regular and competitive elections to choose government leaders' or 'Government takes people's interest into consideration when making decisions'; (2) 'People enjoy the freedom of speech when criticising government' or 'Government pays close attention to people's opinions'; (3) 'Majority rule through popular vote' or 'Government takes the majority's interest into consideration when making decisions'; (4) 'More than one political organisation exists in society to compete for power' or 'Government pays attention to other political organisations' suggestions and opinions'; and (5) 'Selecting political leaders strictly following electoral procedures and based on the number of votes' or 'Appointing political leaders according to candidates' capability and characters'. Theoretically, believing that the first statement in each pair should be more important for democratic politics indicates a propensity to understand democracy following the liberal democracy discourse, while choosing the second statement suggests a tendency to understand democracy following the guardianship discourse. Table 1 shows the weighted frequencies of the respondents' answers.

Table 1 confirms that a majority of Chinese are inclined to understand democracy following the guardianship discourse: a government that pays attention to their opinions and those of

Table 1. Popular democratic conceptions: liberal democracy vs. guardianship discourses.

Public, fair, regular and competitive elections to choose government leaders (D11)	36.59%
Government takes people's interest into consideration when making decisions (D12)	46.18%
Don't know	17.23%
People enjoy the freedom of speech when criticising government (D21)	11.19%
Government pays close attention to people's opinions (D22)	72.83%
Don't know	15.98%
Majority rule through popular vote (D31)	9.72%
Government takes the majority's interest into consideration when making decisions (D32)	71.88%
Don't know	18.40%
More than one political organisation exists in the society to compete for power (D41)	10.51%
Government pays attention to other political organisations' suggestions and opinions (D42)	59.33%
Don't know	30.16%
Selecting political leaders strictly following electoral procedures and based on the number of votes (D51)	37.98%
Appointing political leaders according to candidates' capability and characters (D52)	38.81%
Don't know	23.21%

Source: ABS II Mainland China (*N* = 5098).
Notes: Weighted frequencies.
Question IDs in parentheses.
12.96% of the respondents answered 'Don't know' to all five pairs.

other political organisations (72.8% and 59.3% respectively) and a government that takes majority people's interests into consideration when making decisions (71.9%), rather than institutionalised arrangements to ensure competition and constrain political power. Regarding the selection of government leaders and elections, 46.2% focused more on the reflection of their interest in government policies versus holding regular and competitive elections; 38.8% preferred having capable candidates with good characters appointed as political leaders, rather than selecting political leaders using competitive elections.

Before examining the prevalence of this guardianship discourse on democracy or its political implications, we want to make sure that the new measures indeed capture some unique features of popular democratic conceptions that have been overlooked in previous research. First, we use a widely used instrument to cross-validate our new instruments: 'People have different opinions on the essential characteristics of democracy. Among the following characteristics, which one do you think is the most important for democracy?' The upper section of Table 2 shows weighted frequencies of the respondents' answers to this question, and the lower section displays the associations between this instrument[16] and our new measures, i.e. D12–D52.

As displayed in Table 2, 55.5% of Chinese citizens believe that possessing a small income disparity or access to basic necessities is more important for democracy than the political rights to replace the government through elections or criticise government leaders. Nevertheless, the relationship between our new measures and this conventional instrument (i.e. the relative significance of socioeconomic performance versus political rights in defining democracy) is persistently weak. This weak relationship suggests that the democratic conception following the guardianship discourse, captured by our new measures, is not equivalent to the democratic conception that assigns more importance to socioeconomic performance. Thus, our new measures appear to have captured some critical features of popular democratic conceptions in mainland China, a society with limited experiences of democratic politics.

Table 2. Correlations between new measures and a conventional measure on popular democratic conceptions.

People have different opinions on the essential characteristics of democracy. Among the following characteristics, which one do you think is the most important for democracy?[a]	
People have the opportunity of replacing their government through elections	23.83%
Everyone has the freedom to criticise government leaders	4.10%
The income difference between rich and poor is not too much	25.33%
Everyone has access to basic necessities, like shelter, food, and clothes	30.16%
Don't know	16.58%

	Socioeconomic outcomes vs. political procedures[b]		
	Tau-*b*	Cramer's *V*	Chi-square
D12	0.27	0.27	288.03***
D22	0.19	0.19	141.60***
D32	0.14	0.14	78.99***
D42	0.09	0.09	24.82***
D52	0.15	0.15	80.85***

Source: ABS II Mainland China ($N = 5098$). Notes: [a] Weighted frequencies in the upper section.
[b] Respondents choosing socioeconomic outcomes as the most important feature of democracy are coded as 1, otherwise coded as 0.
*$p<0.1$ ** $p<0.05$ *** $p<0.01$.

Second, to further examine the validity and reliability of the new measures, we adopt an Item Response Theory (IRT) measurement model to check if all five indicators tap the same latent construct.[17] To cross-examine our results, we present parameterisations based on the IRT model and the conventional confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with categorical indicators respectively in Table 3.[18]

Above all, the five-item one-dimensional measurement model fits the data well, as demonstrated by listed comparative fit indexes: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tukcer-Lewis Index (TLI) both are larger than 0.9 and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is less than 0.08 (Bentler, 1990; Browne and Cudeck, 1993). In the IRT model, except for the fifth item (with relatively lower difficulty and discriminatory power), the other four items perform effectively. Significant loadings in the CFA parameterisation tell the same story: except for the last item, the standardised loadings of the other four items all are larger than 0.5.[19] To ensure that the fifth item does not jeopardise the validity of the measures, we drop it, re-run the measurement model, and present the results in the lower section of Table 3.[20] Statistically, the new instruments do perform effectively and reliably in tapping varying democratic conceptions over a continuous latent spectrum following alternate discourses, ranging from the liberal democracy discourse (at the lowest end) to the guardianship discourse (at the highest end).[21]

Origins and consequences of different democratic conceptions

Having demonstrated that the new instruments indeed capture a particular democratic conception among the majority of Chinese, some questions naturally arise. Does this guardianship discourse really help the CCP disguise its authoritarian nature? How does the CCP indoctrinate a majority of its citizens with this discourse?

Table 3. Results of measurement models.

	IRT parameterisation		CFA parameterisation	
	Discrimination	Item difficulty	Standardised loading	Standardised threshold
D12	0.678	0.302	0.561	0.169
D22	1.241	1.431	0.779	1.114
D32	1.166	1.541	0.759	1.169
D42	0.730	1.811	0.590	1.068
D52	0.337	0.137	0.319	0.044
Goodness of model fit ($N = 4272$)				
CFI	0.953			
TLI	0.924			
RMSEA	0.055			
D12	0.615	0.323	0.524	0.169
D22	1.337	1.392	0.801	1.114
D32	1.211	1.516	0.771	1.169
D42	0.727	1.817	0.588	1.068
Goodness of model fit ($N = 4256$)				
CFI	0.975			
TLI	0.938			
RMSEA	0.06			

Source: ABS II Mainland China ($N = 5098$).
Estimated with *M*-plus 6.12.
IRT: Item Response Theory; CFA: Confirmatory Factor Analysis; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

When asked to evaluate the nature of the CCP regime, only 1.3% of the respondents believed that China was not a democracy; 18.2% thought China was a full democracy; and 59.7% regarded China as a democracy with minor or major problems.[22] When asked to assess the level of democracy in China on a 10-point scale ranging from '1 Dictatorship' to '10 Full Democracy', 67.3% of the respondents placed China at 6 or above.[23] Given these results and those in Table 1, it seems that a majority of Chinese citizens are indeed led to understand democracy following the CCP's deliberately cultivated guardianship discourse. Because of this, a large percentage of them perceive the CCP regime with satisfying performance as somewhat democratic. We test the following hypothesis regarding the consequences of different democratic conceptions.

H1: A higher propensity to understand democracy following the guardianship discourse, *ceteris paribus*, leads to a more positive view of the CCP regime's democratic quality.

Specifically, we examine the influence of the Chinese people's democratic conceptions on their evaluations of the CCP regime's democratic quality (measured by the 10-point scale).[24] The ambiguous term – democracy – was intentionally selected for the 10-point scale. In this way, we can document the Chinese people's assessment of the CCP regime's democratic quality following their own democratic conceptions (i.e. measured by our new instruments). Then we can examine whether different democratic conceptions affect such assessment; that is, the consequences of democratic conceptions.

The next question is: what are the channels through which the CCP effectively indoctrinates its people with this guardianship discourse? We argue that one part of the answer lies in China's deep-rooted Confucian tradition and its more recent Leninist political legacies; and the other part lies in the CCP's well-regulated education and media systems.

Cultural and political traditions

As previously discussed, the time-honoured *minben* doctrine of Confucianism, as well as Leninism's emphasis on elitism, collectivism, and meritocracy, ease the CCP's cultivation and promotion of the guardianship discourse on democracy. Though it is tricky to measure the influence of Confucianism and Leninism at the individual level, we approximate it in two ways: respondents' generations and collectivistic orientation. Respondents' generations are a rough proxy of the characteristics of their early socialisation environment.[25] We assume that those born in mainland China in the 1950s or 1960s were most significantly affected by the Leninist tradition in their early socialisation, while those born in the 1940s or earlier were more heavily affected by the Confucian tradition. Comparatively speaking, those born in the 1980s or later were more exposed to pluralistic political values and views in their early socialisation, and those born in the 1970s more vividly experienced China's transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism.[26] As previously discussed, the normative prescription that individuals should serve the larger community (shared by both Confucianism and Leninism) has significantly shaped Chinese political discourses on democracy (Lorenzo, 2013; Nathan, 1985). Thus, respondents' collectivistic orientation is used to tap the extent to which collectivism has been internalized.[27] Accordingly, we test the following hypotheses regarding the origins of different democratic conceptions:

H2: Chinese citizens born in the 1960s or earlier are more likely to understand democracy following the guardianship discourse.
H3: The more collectivistically oriented Chinese citizens are more inclined to embrace the guardianship discourse.

Education and media systems

There is extensive research on how China's education and media systems have contributed to the CCP's governance and political control (e.g. Kennedy, 2009; Shirk, 2011). Since the Han Dynasty, the Chinese educational system has been systematically used to indoctrinate its people with Confucian principles, and later, with the CCP's official ideologies. As previously shown, many Chinese intellectuals and politicians have interpreted democracy explicitly or implicitly following the guardianship discourse. Thus, respondents' educational attainment is used to capture the impact of cultural and political indoctrination through China's education system.[28] Similar to its education system, China's media system provides another critical channel for the CCP's propaganda. Despite its decentralisation and marketisation since the early 1990s, many of China's scholars believe that China's semi-commercialised mass media is still effectively regulated by the CCP. The regime has also successfully staged public opinion to the benefit of its domestic and foreign policies (Shirk, 2011). Therefore, respondents' frequency of consuming political news from the mass media is used to capture the impact of cultural and political propaganda through China's media system.[29] Besides the guardianship discourse on democracy, the CCP also promotes politically preferred values and norms (such as collectivism) through its education and media systems. Thus, we test the following hypotheses regarding the origins of different democratic conceptions:

H4: More frequent exposure to political news through China's mass media leads to a higher propensity to embrace the guardianship discourse on democracy directly and/or indirectly via cultivating a higher level of collectivism.

H5: A higher level of education leads to a higher propensity to understand democracy following the guardianship discourse directly and/or indirectly via cultivating a higher level of collectivism.

The IRT score of democratic conceptions will be used for our analysis on their origins (**H2**–**H5**).[30] To more effectively examine the origins of different democratic conceptions, we include the following controls: respondents' gender,[31] place of residency,[32] economic status,[33] affiliation with the CCP,[34] and interest in politics.[35]

We decide to use the structural equation modelling (SEM) technique for three reasons. (a) We need to examine the consequences and origins of popular democratic conceptions simultaneously, by estimating multiple equations. (b) We can use IRT models (embedded in the SEM) to recover the latent constructs of people's democratic conceptions following the guardianship discourse, as well as their collectivistic orientation, thus minimising the influence of measurement errors. (c) The CCP's propaganda and indoctrination through its education and media systems may shape Chinese citizens' democratic conceptions and their evaluations of the CCP regime, directly and/or indirectly. Path analyses embedded in the SEM can detect both direct and indirect effects. The SEM results are reported in Table 4. [36]

Above all, both SEMs perform quite well, as judged by listed comparative fit indexes at the bottom of Table 4: CFIs and TLIs both are larger than 0.9 and RMSEAs are less than 0.08. The two IRT measurement models also perform satisfactorily.[37] Moreover, as shown in Table 4, no matter how the Chinese people's evaluations of the CCP regime's democratic quality are measured (continuous or ordinal),[38] the estimated signs and significance levels of all variables do not change. Basically, our empirical results are robust against model specification. To facilitate readers' interpretation of the SEM results, we provide the corresponding path diagram in Figure 2, showing only statistically significant paths.

Consequences of different democratic conceptions

As illustrated in Figure 2, those who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse give significantly more positive evaluations of the CCP's democratic quality. In other words, the CCP's efforts in presenting itself as a democracy are significantly less likely to deceive citizens who have embraced the liberal democracy discourse. This confirms our conjecture (**H1**) that the guardianship discourse, once accepted by the Chinese people, could assist the CCP in disguising its authoritarian nature.

Besides the guardianship discourse (as displayed in Figure 2), China's deep-rooted Confucian tradition also provides the CCP with a favourable cultural environment for manipulating public opinion. Chinese citizens born in the 1940s or earlier assess the CCP regime as significantly more democratic. Additionally, those Chinese who have better internalised collectivism view their government as significantly more democratic. Although cognitive sophistication – thanks to better education – makes it considerably easier for some Chinese people to see the CCP's authoritarian nature, education's influence on Chinese citizens' assessment of the CCP regime is much more nuanced, once its indirect effects are considered (as subsequently discussed).

Origins of different democratic conceptions

Besides directly shaping the Chinese people's assessment of their government's democratic quality, the lingering Confucian and Leninist traditions also provide fertile ground for the CCP's

Table 4. Consequences and origins of popular democratic conceptions.

	SEM I			SEM II		
	(Democratic quality measured as a continuous variable)			(Democratic quality measured as an ordinal variable)		
	Democratic quality of the CCP regime[a]	Understanding of democracy following the guardianship discourse	Collectivism	Democratic quality of the CCP regime[b]	Understanding of democracy following the guardianship discourse	Collectivism
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Measurement models						
D12		1.000[c]			1.000[c]	
D22		1.866 (0.181)***			1.878 (0.184)***	
D32		2.280 (0.250)***			2.274 (0.251)***	
D42		1.775 (0.193)***			1.772 (0.191)***	
CLT1			1.000[c]			1.000[c]
CLT2			0.995 (0.111)***			1.008 (0.112)***
CLT3			1.059 (0.104)***			1.063 (0.191)***
Structural models						
Born in the 1940s or earlier	0.286 (0.111)**	0.112 (0.042)***	0.453 (0.083)***	0.226 (0.076)***	0.112 (0.042)***	0.451 (0.082)***
Born in the 1950s or 1960s	0.132 (0.109)	0.058 (0.035)*	0.305 (0.068)***	0.107 (0.075)	0.058 (0.035)*	0.303 (0.068)***
Born in the 1970s	0.119 (0.103)	−0.019 (0.039)	0.143 (0.071)**	0.087 (0.073)	−0.019 (0.039)	0.143 (0.071)**
Education	−0.044 (0.026)*	0.014 (0.008)*	−0.004 (0.016)	−0.029 (0.018)*	0.014 (0.008)*	−0.004 (0.016)
Male	−0.090 (0.067)	−0.064 (0.022)***	−0.017 (0.041)	−0.081 (0.046)*	−0.064 (0.022)***	−0.017 (0.041)
Rural area	0.169 (0.071)**	−0.020 (0.027)	0.362 (0.054)***	0.117 (0.050)**	−0.020 (0.027)	0.360 (0.054)***
Economic status	0.082 (0.038)**	−0.011 (0.016)	0.077 (0.029)***	0.049 (0.026)*	−0.011 (0.016)	0.077 (0.029)***
CCP affiliation	0.141 (0.096)	−0.010 (0.031)	−0.031 (0.062)	0.084 (0.065)	−0.010 (0.031)	−0.031 (0.062)
Media exposure	0.040 (0.026)	−0.016 (0.011)		0.022 (0.018)	−0.016 (0.011)	
Political interest	0.103 (0.044)**	−0.014 (0.016)	0.030 (0.018)*	0.090 (0.030)***	−0.014 (0.016)	0.030 (0.018)*

Table 4. (Continued)

	SEM I			SEM II		
	(Democratic quality measured as a continuous variable)			(Democratic quality measured as an ordinal variable)		
	Democratic quality of the CCP regime[a]	Understanding of democracy following the guardianship discourse	Collectivism	Democratic quality of the CCP regime[b]	Understanding of democracy following the guardianship discourse	Collectivism
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Collectivism	0.613 (0.083)***			0.431 (0.059)***		
Understanding of democracy following the guardianship discourse	0.534 (0.140)***	0.065 (0.030)**		0.354 (0.102)***	0.066 (0.030)**	
Model fit statistics						
CFI	0.942, STD = 0.003, MI = 5			0.942, STD = 0.003, MI = 5		
TLI	0.906, STD = 0.005, MI = 5			0.906, STD = 0.004, MI = 5		
RMSEA	0.018, STD = 0.001, MI = 5			0.018, STD = 0.001, MI = 5		

Source: ABS II Mainland China (*N* = 5098).

Notes: [a] A continuous variable ranging from 1 to 10. [b] An ordinal variable ranging from 1 to 6.
[c]For identification purposes, this parameter has been fixed to 1. Averaged coefficients in cells.
Averaged standard errors, corrected for the design effect of complex sampling, in parentheses. Estimated with *M-plus* 6.12, with five data sets imputed through the imputation-by-chained-equations procedure in STATA 11. * *p*<0.1 ** *p*<0.05 *** *p*<0.01.
SEM: Structural Equation Model; CCP: Chinese Communist Party; STD: Standard Deviation; MI: Multiple Imputation; D12-D42: Indicators of popular democratic conceptions; CLT1-CLT3: Indicators of collectivism.
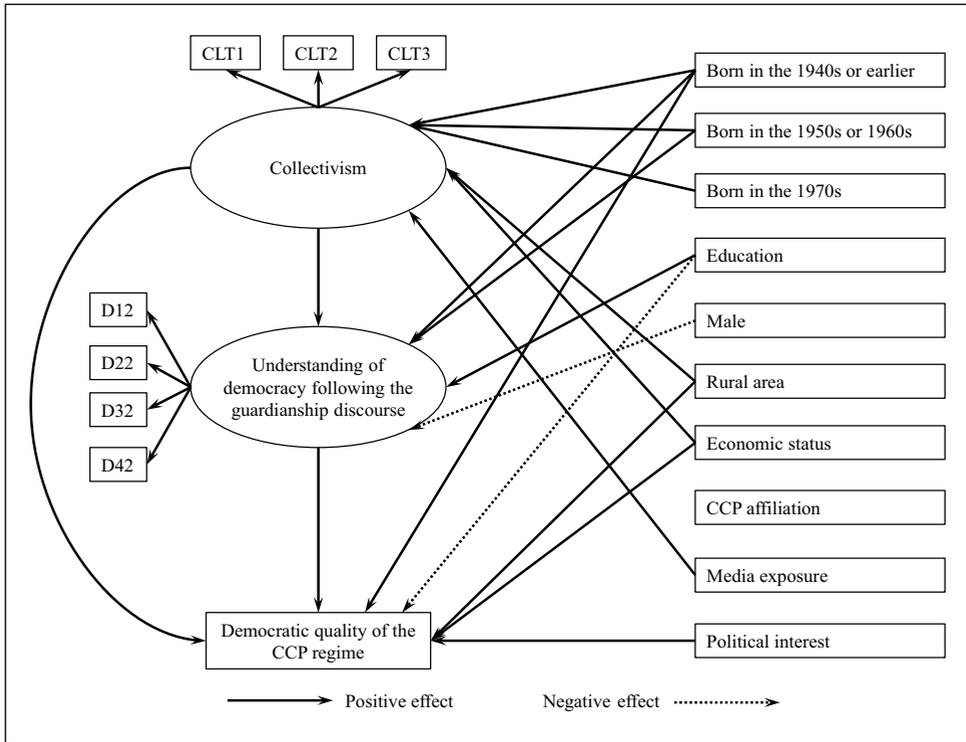
Figure 2. Structural equation model path diagram with statistically significant relationships.
CCP: Chinese Communist Party; D12-D42: Indicators of popular democratic conceptions; CLT1-CLT3: Indicators of collectivism.

cultivation of the guardianship discourse. As illustrated in Figure 2, Chinese citizens born in the 1960s or earlier (**H2**), as well as those who have better internalised collectivism (**H3**), are significantly more inclined to embrace the guardianship discourse. Furthermore, the Chinese people's early socialisation experiences indirectly shape their democratic conceptions by indoctrinating them with collectivistic norms: those born in the 1970s or earlier show a significantly higher level of internalized collectivism.

As displayed in Figure 2, although more frequent consumption of political news from China's controlled media may not directly change the Chinese people's democratic conceptions, it works indirectly via instilling collectivistic norms. In other words, more frequent exposure to China's mass media leads to a significantly higher level of internalized collectivism, which in turn generates a higher propensity to embrace the guardianship discourse (**H4**). As expected, the CCP's indoctrination of the guardianship discourse is greatly furthered by China's well-regulated education system. As presented in Figure 2, the better-educated are significantly more likely to embrace the guardianship discourse (**H5**).[39] It seems that even with globalisation increasing citizens' access to diverse political discourses and ideas, the CCP is still effectively utilising its education and media systems to indoctrinate some of its citizens with the guardianship discourse, thus facilitating its authoritarian rule under the guise of democracy.

To summarise: the way in which the Chinese people understand democracy significantly influences their evaluations of the CCP regime. While people who understand democracy following the liberal democracy discourse are more likely to see the CCP's authoritarian nature, those who have

embraced the guardianship discourse indeed perceive the CCP regime as more or less a democracy. China's Confucian and Leninist traditions not only contribute to a more favourable view of the CCP's democratic quality, but also facilitate citizens' acceptance of the guardianship discourse. The CCP has also effectively employed its well-regulated education and media systems to indoctrinate some of its citizens with this discourse. Generally, the CCP seems to have successfully secured the upper hand in this critical battle of ideas and discourses, thus disguising its authoritarian nature and effectively shielding itself from possible pressure for democratic transition.[40]

Conclusions and suggestions

Previous research on popular democratic conceptions does not pay sufficient attention to the distinct nature of alternate discourses on democracy in societies with varying experiences of democratic politics. The conventional 'residual-category approach' is more effective for examining democratic conceptions in mature and consolidating democracies, where pertinent discourses focus on the relative significance of different aspects of democracy. The whole dynamic changes in societies with limited experiences of democratic politics, where alternate discourses focus more on the fundamental values and institutional settings in practice. Authoritarian leaders in these societies have every incentive to promote alternate discourses on democracy to sell a whole different package of institutions. They are also keen on indoctrinating their people with such alternate discourses to disguise their non-democratic nature and better defend themselves against possible pressure for democratic transition. Thus, the battle of ideas and discourses on democracy in societies with limited experiences of democratic politics is no longer a question of emphasis, but has life-and-death implications for authoritarian regimes, immense consequences for their people, and significant value for contemporary research on comparative public opinion and democratic transitions. Unfortunately, the existing residual-category approach cannot effectively capture this critical dynamic.

To fruitfully examine alternate discourses on democracy, as well as their impacts on regime change and democratic transitions, it is critical to integrate rich regional expertise and general theories of democracy. Given the limitations of our knowledge and resources, we focus on the guardianship discourse on democracy. We argue that the guardianship discourse may be deliberately cultivated and promoted by authoritarian leaders in some societies to shape people's democratic conceptions, disguise the regime's authoritarian nature, and lower the pressure for democratic transition. Although the liberal democracy and the guardianship discourses seem to agree on the legitimacy and desirable outcomes of democratic governance, they diverge on how a government should be organised and run. The liberal democracy discourse emphasises the indispensability of political institutions that guarantee some basic freedoms and ensure people's rights to participate, choose their leaders, and collectively determine the best policies for their society. On the contrary, the guardianship discourse emphasises the indispensability of having virtuous and competent political leaders; it intentionally downplays the role of institutions/procedures, particularly those that may constrain the discretionary power of the political leaders to follow their vision for advancing the public interest. Essentially, it promotes paternalistic meritocracy in the name of democracy. This guardianship discourse is definitely not the only competitor alongside liberal democracy in the battle of ideas and discourses, but we believe this specific alternate discourse can help us better understand the meaning of democracy in people's minds – particularly those people living in the shadow of Confucian and/or Leninist traditions.

Guided by this framework, we use new survey instruments to measure people's democratic conceptions following distinct discourses, focusing on how people believe a government should be organised and run. Our survey data from mainland China show that these new instruments do capture a critical and unique feature of popular democratic conceptions that has been overlooked in

previous research. The data show that a large percentage of Chinese still interpret democracy through the lens of the guardianship discourse, although some have already accepted the liberal democracy discourse. Moreover, people with different democratic conceptions assess the nature of the CCP regime in fundamentally different ways. Those who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse are more likely to perceive the CCP regime as more or less a democracy, while those who have accepted the liberal democracy discourse are much more likely to see its true authoritarian nature. As we further examine the prevalence of the guardianship discourse, it is revealed that the CCP has successfully utilised its well-regulated education and media systems to indoctrinate some of its people with this specific discourse. China's lingering Confucian and Leninist traditions that emphasise collectivism, elitism, and meritocracy also contribute to the success of the CCP's propaganda. It seems that the CCP's triumph in the battle of ideas and discourses, together with its stunning economic performance, has effectively shielded it from pressure for democratic transition and prolonged its authoritarian rule.

The cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow an effective examination of how the Chinese people's democratic conceptions evolve. To document such dynamics, longitudinal surveys using similar instruments are needed. Although this paper establishes the CCP's effectiveness at indoctrinating many of its citizens with the guardianship discourse, the CCP clearly faces an uphill battle as competing ideas and discourses proliferate via new information and communication technologies. Meanwhile, the gradual process of modernization and individualization in China further challenges the CCP's cultural advantage (e.g. collectivism) in this battle of ideas and discourses.

Dahl (1971: 182) criticises social scientists for turning away from 'the historical movement of ideas'. In this paper, we bring the study of ideas and discourses on democracy to the forefront of the study of comparative public opinion, political development, and democratic transitions. Our findings suggest that the way people understand democracy may have significant impacts on the political process in authoritarian societies like mainland China. Moreover, the prevalent popular democratic conception in such societies may be heavily influenced by these societies' political and cultural traditions. This sends a clear and important message to students of comparative public opinion: to fully understand the battle of ideas and discourses before democratic transitions, as well as the range of mobilisation and indoctrination tactics available to authoritarian leaders in this battle, genuine comparative research that aims to establish generalisable theories without compromising sensitivity to varying political and cultural contexts is seriously needed.

Notes

1. For related information, visit www.latinobarometro.org, www.afrobarometer.org, and www.asianbarometer.org.
2. Dropping the outliers changes the correlation coefficient from −0.38 to −0.69.
3. Dropping the outliers changes the correlation coefficient from −0.06 to 0.38.

4. Political wariness is another plausible explanation. Survey researchers in some authoritarian countries like mainland China have not detected the significant effect of political wariness (Manion, 2010).

5. For a recent review of related research, see a symposium (2010) The Meanings of Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 24 (4).

6. For Xi's views on Chinese democracy, see http://news.sohu.com/20130320/n369501347.shtml.

7. Here we focus on the two discourses per se, rather than their empirical practice.

8. For the discursive shield to work, authoritarian leaders need to perform. This is compatible with existing research's conclusion on the salience of performance-based legitimacy for authoritarian regimes.

9. We thank two anonymous reviewers for this point.

10. The CCP has been pragmatically using ideological components from both Confucianism and Leninism in its political persuasion and mobilisation since the 1920s (Perry, 2012). After surveying contemporary China's political discourses, Metzger (1996: 17) explicitly argues that 'it has become almost cliché to view Maoism and the Confucian tradition as a single if evolving amalgam'.

11. We have run similar analyses but cannot find any robust evidence. Related results are attached to the appendix as Table A1 (available at http://ips.sagepub.com/).

12. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/china/2011-11/04/content_14038358.htm.

13. Due to space limitations, we cannot document how the guardianship discourse has evolved in contemporary China. It is worth noting that the emphasis on paternalistic meritocracy has been effectively maintained.

14. Information about the 2008 mainland China survey is attached to the appendix (available at http://ips.sagepub.com/).

15. Forcing people to choose between some of the pairs may generate cognitive difficulty and, thus, measurement errors. To minimise such influence, we rely on multiple indicators and use the latent construct for analysis.

16. Answers to this question are coded into a dummy: 0 for those choosing election or freedom of speech, and 1 for those choosing small income disparity or access to basic necessities.

17. On IRT models, see Treier and Jackman (2008).

18. We use full information maximum likelihood estimation to address missing values here. Only 12.9% of the total sample has missing values on all five indicators, no more serious than most large-scale surveys.

19. All loading factors are significant at the 0.01 level.

20. In subsequent analyses, we use these four items as indicators of people's democratic conceptions. Our findings hold when using all five indicators. Related results are available upon request.

21. We code the indicators in a way that generates a larger value in the latent construct when respondents were more inclined to embrace the guardianship discourse.

22. Q1: 'Generally speaking, how much of a democracy is China?'

23. Q2: 'How democratic do you think China is now?' These results are compatible with other survey researchers' findings (Tang, 2005). We cannot rule out the influence of political wariness or preference falsification. To examine their potential influence, we run some analyses on who were more likely to avoid the two questions by answering 'Don't know/NA'. The results (attached to the appendix as Table A1, available at http://ips.sagepub.com/) confirm the salience of cognitive deficiency and show little evidence for the influence of political wariness.

24. To check the robustness of our findings, a similar analysis is run for the other measure (Q1). Key findings hold and related results are attached to the appendix as Table A2 (available at http://ips.sagepub.com/).

25. We thank one anonymous reviewer for suggesting this measure.

26. Using respondents born in the 1980s or later as the baseline category, three dichotomous variables are created: 'Born in the 1940s or earlier', 'Born in the 1950s or 1960s', and 'Born in the 1970s'.

27. Respondents were asked for their agreement/disagreement with the following statements: (a) 'Generally speaking, individual interest should be secondary to collective interest'; (b) 'The state is like a big machine and the individual is but a small cog, with no independent status'; and (c) 'For the sake of national interest, individual interest should be sacrificed'. The 4-point Likert scale is collapsed into a dummy. Respondents' latent collectivistic orientation is recovered using an IRT model with the three dichotomous indicators.

28. This is a 7-point ordinal variable, ranging from '0 Illiteracy' to '6 Post-graduate'.
29. his is a 5-point ordinal variable, ranging from 'Less than once a week' to 'Several times a day'. New information technologies could be relevant here; however, traditional media still dominate China's political communication (Lu, 2013). Chinese netizens are predominantly urban residents. In national surveys like ours (dominated by the rural population), the power of detecting the influence of new information technologies is limited.
30. We are only interested in the commonality of the binary indicators (captured by the IRT score). It is methodologically inappropriate to use the binary indicators directly for analysis. Except for those who are highly committed to either the liberal democracy discourse (i.e. always choosing the first statement) or the guardianship discourse (i.e. always choosing the second statement), most respondents had mixed choices. Were we to analyse the binary indicators separately, most respondents' democratic conceptions would flip-flop depending on the specific indicator examined. Then we would have no idea how the results could have been contaminated by measurement errors.
31. This is a dummy with 1 indicating 'Male'.
32. This is a dummy with 1 indicating rural residency.
33. This is a 3-point ordinal variable: '1 Our income cannot cover all expenses and we have difficulty in making ends meet'; '2 Our income can just cover all expenses without difficulty'; and '3 Our income can cover all expenses and we can also save some money'.
34. This is a dummy with 1 indicating political affiliation with the CCP.
35. This is a 3-point ordinal variable measuring how frequently the respondents discussed politics with their families or friends, ranging from 'Never' to 'Frequently'.
36. The multiple-imputation technique is used to address missing cases (King et al., 2001).
37. Model 2 and Model 5 are IRT models for democratic conceptions. Model 3 and Model 6 are IRT models for collectivism.
38. To check the robustness of our findings, two identical models are specified, wherein the 10-point scale is estimated as a continuous and ordinal variable respectively. The continuous measure is negatively skewed (std = 1.485, skewness = −0.411) and used in SEM I. Since only around 2% placed the CCP regime below 5 on the 10-point scale, the original continuous measure is rescaled into a 6-point ordinal measure (std = 1.387, skewness = −0.003) and used in SEM II.
39. This might have been driven by the material benefits that the better-educated received from the CCP. However, we control for respondents' economic status. Thus, the indoctrination story makes more sense. The quadratic term of educational attainment is also tried, but statistically insignificant.
40. We by no means argue that this guardianship discourse is the only or the most important tool of the CCP for sustaining its political legitimacy and prolonging its political survival. Similar to related research, our analysis shows that the CCP's economic success also plays a critical role (see Figure 2 and Table 4).

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