

# DEMOCRACY TALKS: HOW THE CONCEPT OF MINZHU ZHUYI IS DISCUSSED IN OFFICIAL AND ONLINE FORA IN MAINLAND CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

*Associating the words “China” and “democracy” can be a risky business. Discourses in liberal democratic countries about Chinese democracy are notorious for falling into the domain of opposites, either viewing China as the next democratic powerhouse or as an irredeemable “bastion of authoritarianism”. This polarization is certainly nothing new, and in general not surprising: passions and contradictions constitute a norm in discussions about democracy, regardless of where such discussions are taking place. However, that does not mean that we should simply reject peoples’ attempts at discussing democracy in China. Rather, it points out that everything – from linguistic styles to political implications – depends on who is doing the talking. It is in this spirit that I shed light onto how the current CCP leadership, together with young online users on the Twitter-like Weibo, elaborate the concept of minzhu zhuyi (民主主义) in Mainland China. This has been achieved by analyzing the general attitudes and discourse of Xi Jinping towards minzhu as part of his official ideology, and by applying thematic analysis to a sample of more than ten thousand Weibo comments on the subject. The result of my analysis shows that Xi’s rendition of minzhu and the way this concept is framed on Weibo both share similarities and have fundamental discrepancies. Similarities are evident in how: they frequently rely upon historical references, criticize the voting system in liberal democracies as conducive to “token democracy”, and juxtapose liberal democracy with a truer democracy that favours the general population. Crucial differences between relate instead to the form of support by Chinese internet users towards protesters in foreign countries and a more critical stance towards China’s current situation vis-à-vis minzhu.*

**KEYWORDS:** democracy, discourse analysis, social media

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: *MINZHU* AND CHINA

Democracy is a concept that is often taken to be a form of governance and politics that originates solely from the people, the demos. This broadly implies a set of institutional arrangements and a political culture in which the general population has the right to determine the government they deem most suitable for their respective nation-state. Yet, to think that such a concept is viewed and employed the same way worldwide is far from our contemporary reality. In the People's Republic of China, where despite frequent criticisms of a lack of democracy, the word "democracy" is part of the Communist Party's political vocabulary. Notably, "democracy" is an often-discussed topic on both official and "unofficial" discussion platforms in the PRC, is and means for them and for the country's present, as well as its future.

Scholars often attempt to outline China's future prospects based on their assessment of its present. Broadly speaking this form of "futurology" presents two perspectives in relation to the political direction where China is currently heading. China is seen as either the next democratic powerhouse (see Callahan 2013, 1), or as an irredeemable "bastion of authoritarianism" (see Perry 2015, 904). Yet rather than focusing on such two polarizing perspectives, this work deals with a rather simple question that is often ignored by academic discussions on democracy in China: what do people in the PRC think about the development of democracy in the PRC? This, I believe, is a very valuable perspective, as it allows us to examine more closely the relationship between the various discourses on democracy within the socio-political borders of the PRC, and its results. Accordingly, due to this focus on democracy *in* China, I have mostly discarded the use of the word "democracy", favouring instead its Chinese translation: *minzhu zhuyi* 民主主义.

In summary, this research aims at bridging the gap between the current CCP's take on Chinese-style democracy and Weibo users' debates on *minzhu zhuyi*, showing how the two are ultimately intertwined. This constitutes the core theme of the article: how have Chinese political elites shaped the concept of *minzhu zhuyi* in their discursive practices? How have online users on the Twitter-like Weibo expressed *minzhu zhuyi* in their blogposts? Finally, how do these blogposts relate to the discursive practices of the Communist Party?

To engage in this analysis of discourses on *minzhu* in the PRC, I have examined the official rendition of the concept by the current CCP leadership on *minzhu* and compared it to how users express and discuss democracy on

Weibo, a Twitter-like platform where a significant number of users engage in discussions on topics related to the country's politics and society. That is why, the platform can be considered as a "(limited) public sphere in China" (Bolsover 2018, 454). The relevance of Weibo is underscored by the tendency of users who acquire and exchange information online with others to be more supportive of democratic principles – which include, political rights, individual freedom, and electoral democracy (Wang 2014). As blogs favour such exchange of information, Weibo becomes a platform where discourses on democracy are worth analyzing, creating what some would call an "online school of political participation" (Wang & Shi 2017, 528). Huang et al. (2019) further build upon this idea and examine the "ideological landscape" (832) of Weibo's blogposts. Posts and comments there go beyond the left-right political spectrum and are instead informed by the "underlying political thoughts" that function as "intellectual resources for online ideational contestation" (845). This principle is indeed relevant to my analysis, as I have avoided the use of the left-right spectrum, focusing instead the contextual influences and widely shared political thoughts that serve as intellectual resources to the posts that will follow below. None of these sources, however, delve deeper on the relationship between the Party's policies and statements in relation to *minzhu zhuyi* and online debates on the subject. Yet, even more striking is the fact that the studies on Weibo's function as a platform for political participation stop short of analyzing users' discussions of *minzhu zhuyi*.

To understand how these users relate to and discuss *minzhu zhuyi*, I have applied a thematic analysis approach to a sample of more than ten thousand comments on the subject. This has allowed me to present the trends dominating debates on *minzhu*. More specifically, I follow Wu and Fitzgerald's (2020) choice to zero in on a series of instances that better exemplify how users tend to be critical of the government. Similar to their approach, I have first gathered posts according to common themes and the number of reposts and likes received. Then, I have picked those which ranked higher in popularity in the different clusters and that articulated more clearly the given main theme. Key events in contemporary politics have been equally fundamental to my work, with the posts surveyed being organized according to common themes, namely: the U.S.-China democratic dichotomy, commentaries on foreign affairs, and Chinese-style democracy. Finally, it is worth pointing out that the comments examined below deal with individual users, rather than organizations or other public entities, unless specified otherwise. Even when presented with voices coming from sources institutionally closer

to the government, the scope of this research does not change. On the contrary, my concern here is to introduce the various contents of public discourse in relation to *minzhu*, regardless of who produces it.

To clearly outline the comparison between official and online discourses, the present article is structured as follows: first is an introduction to Xi Jinping's approach towards *minzhu* as part of his ideological machine, followed by a section focusing on comments on *minzhu* by users on Weibo and how they relate to the official narrative. The conclusion sums up again the findings and argues for what developments this research will need and where it can lead scholarship on democracy in China.

When confronting the CCP's general attitude and discourse around *minzhu* with the posts examined below, we find a discrete series of patterns and elements common to both the official and online sides. These include relying upon historical references, the criticism of the voting system in liberal democracies, a juxtaposition between the nature of liberal democracy and a supposedly truer democracy that favours the population *in toto* – a stress on the *demo* of *demokratia*. Instances that conform less, if at all, to the Party's agenda on democracy were also found, such as the support directed towards protesters in foreign countries and a more critical stance towards the current state of *minzhu* in China. Having introduced the key findings of my article, let us now turn to the first section of this analysis of Chinese democracy: how the CCP frames it today.

## 2. J.XIISM AND DEMOCRACY

The core principles behind Xi Jinping's, and, by extension, the Party's current leadership's approach towards *minzhu* consist in the maintaining of tradition and the increased assertiveness of the Chinese political system due to its alleged exceptional status.

Tradition in his speeches is kept alive and fundamental to their relevant arguments by frequently referencing to old Chinese sayings<sup>2</sup>, and to

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2 While there are many instances of this, the speech titled "Confidence in the Political System of Chinese Socialism", delivered at the meeting marking the 60th anniversary of the National People's Congress in 2014, alone included three proverbs in the space of 250 characters ("To the south of the Huaihe River grow oranges, while to the north grow bitter oranges", which highlights how a country's environment is a fundamental factor in the development of its politics and society; "In attempting to walk like a swan, the crow loses its own gait" in reference to how you should never blindly copy the others, otherwise you will "turn the tiger you are trying to draw into a dog", thus failing in creating political institutions that are suitable to one's country).

Chinese historical progress (Mulvad 2019). In relation to Chinese history, the CCP portrays itself as both a “critical or essential part” (Lams 2018, 403) and the deliverer of China’s fate (Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). It is the Party’s duty to “keep to the long-established track of historical heritage [...] rather than breaking with history” (Xi 2014). This is obviously not the first time the Party attempts to locate itself within the historical continuum: as Weatherley and Magee (2018) suggest, history has been fundamental to the legitimacy of the CCP since its inception. However, when compared to his predecessors, Xi seems to have parted ways with the post-Maoist tradition of stressing economic matters. He instead favours the return of the ideological superstructure<sup>3</sup> as key to maintaining dominance (Gow 2016). Mulvad (2019) similarly agrees with Gow, but takes this argument one step further by claiming that Xi has, in fact, elevated once more a “Mass-line party-building” (Mulvad 2019, 451) to renew the Party’s “hegemonic appeal” (Mulvad 2019, 454).

In relation to this focus on the ideological, the twelve so-called “Core Socialist Values”<sup>4</sup> best illustrate Xi’s return to the superstructure. Lin and Trevaskes (2019) define these values as an attempt at unification of thought by who believe that morality’s codification into law functions as a nexus between the will of the people and the capacity of the Party to govern (Lin & Trevaskes 2019; Gow 2016). Denisov further argues that the Core Socialist Values are born out of the ideological confrontation with the West. In this sense, the twelve values constitute a rework of supposedly universal Western values into a ready set of moral precepts that allow for an ideological path towards modernization – with Chinese characteristics, that is (Denisov 2015). Perry (2015) views Xi’s promotion of *minzhu* among the prescribed national values as “something quite different from what American social scientists generally have in mind [...] for China’s democratization” (905). Indeed, *minzhu* has its roots in Chinese tradition, and its use in Chinese political discourse aims at making enlightenment values compatible with illiberal politics (Perry 2015).

Besides promoting *minzhu* as one of the core values of the “New China” (新中国) envisioned by Xi, he stressed that “democracy is defined not

3 The term here refers to Marxist definition of the superstructure, that is “the ideologies that dominate a particular era.” (Definition: Superstructure, 2002)

4 The twelve values are organized as such: prosperity (富强), democracy (民主), civility (文明), and harmony (和谐) as national values; freedom (自由), equality (平等), justice (公正), and rule of law (法治) as societal values; patriotism (爱国), dedication (敬业), integrity (诚信), and friendship (友善) as individual values (Gow 2016).

only by people's right to vote in an election but also the right to participate in political affairs on a daily basis" (Global Times 2014). What, then, is the kind of democracy envisioned by Xi? As he puts it, the answer lies solely on the strengths of "consultative democracy" (*xieshang minzhu* 协商民主<sup>5</sup> (Xi 2012). Xi has often criticized election-based democracies, where people "merely have the right to vote but no right of extensive participation, in other words [...] this is token democracy" (Xi 2014). He maintains that consultative democracy is instead the right path for China: not merely because it is a direct product of Chinese political culture, but especially on the grounds that "extensive deliberation under the leadership of the CPC [...] embodies the unity of democracy and centralism". In addition to how Chinese "socialist democracy" finds its true form in deliberation, its fundamental status lies in the alleged ability to overcome the limits of Western "token democracy". How so? By combining elections – mostly small-scale, rural elections – with deliberation in a system of complementarities, rather than contradictions (Xi 2014). It is this amalgamation that, Xi argues, constitutes the true strength of Chinese socialist democracy (Xi 2014).

### 3. MINZHU ON WEIBO

Below, I will discuss the unofficial discourse regarding *minzhu zhuyi* on the social media platform Weibo. The posts are organized according to a number of common themes, namely: the U.S.-China democratic dichotomy, commentaries on foreign affairs, and Chinese-style democracy. The "Hot" section<sup>6</sup> that appears in every search has been particularly helpful to the analytical effort, as it displays the posts users have interacted with the most – whether in the form of reposts, comments, or likes. I have focused on the initiating post in each threaded discussion, as it tends to influence how people comment and engage with the post and with other users on the same thread (Sui & Pingree, 2016).

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5 协商民主 (*xieshang minzhu*) can be translated as either "consultative democracy" or "deliberative democracy", with "consultative democracy" being preferred in the English version of state-run media articles.

6 The section refers to the top trending posts under the same topic or hashtag.

### 3.1 AMERICAN DEMOCRACY VS. CHINESE MINZHU, OR “DEMOCRACY IS NOT COCA-COLA”

Wang Yi, current Foreign Minister and State Councilor of the PRC uttered the above “Democracy is not Coca-Cola” during a video conference with the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations held on April 23rd, 2021 (Xinhua.Net). As noted previously, the use of proverbs and metaphors generally constitutes a common practice in Chinese political language. However, the main implication of such statement is that while Coca-Cola is renown and enjoyed for its unchanging taste all over the world, at least according to Wang Yi, democracy cannot be understood in the same way. The U.S., and every other country for that matter, should therefore respect the path undertaken by China, for it brings together all the ingredients best suited to Chinese political and societal standards. This is a narrative that finds plenty of fertile ground in China and it is often supported by frequent referencing to the U.S.



Figure 1: Democracy as the safeguard of civilization  
(Posted by: Xixifusi on January 8, 2021. Accessed on May 7, 2021.)

*Translation: The first picture shows the security guards of Congress<sup>7</sup> pointing their guns, the second picture shows the veteran that broke into Congress and was shot dead. We can clearly see that the shots were fired at a very close distance. Even a barely trained shooter can easily fire a headshot at this kind of distance. Even so, the security guard aimed at the veteran's neck, leaving her lying on the ground dead with such indecency. What makes democracy so appealing is that it safeguards the basis of civilization and keeps humans away from barbarism. #Democracy# #American Elections#*

7 The user here refers to the United States Capitol Police.



Figure 1 testifies to the popularity and power of this narrative. In the post above, one can see the leitmotiv of much discussion concerned with American democracy: the inherent contradictions in American society. When juxtaposed with how the U.S. still markets itself both at home and abroad as a beacon of democracy, the political and social issues typical of American society become an easy target for criticism. Such criticism finds its way into Weibo via the posts of its users who tend to point out the serious deficiencies of American democracy.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, proved to many Chinese yet again that the political system of the United States was, and still is, far from maturity. Weibo users saw this incident, and the gruesome images that resulted from it, and were reminded once again that China should keep its distance from the violence which time and time again shakes the stability of the American system. As argued in Figure 1, what is the point of even having democracy, if it cannot maintain peace and stability within the country? The call for peace and stability is a recurring sub-theme of U.S. related posts. Here, what is emphasized is the allegedly irreconcilable difference between what is perceived as pivotal to the realization of democracy in the U.S. and in China. While the fight for freedom is inherent even in *minzhu*, Americans – and all those who live in liberal democracies around the world – crown it as the central driving force that has informed all the U.S. history so far. This contrasts to how most users frame the case of China: stability represents both the foundation upon which China is based, and the driver of “rejuvenation” (Xi, 2012).

### 3.2 FOREIGN COMMENTARIES

This sub-section originates from how foreign news and events are perceived and absorbed in China vis-à-vis *minzhu*. This time, however, the posts collected provide a commentary of the sociopolitical affairs of other countries – thus outside the U.S.-China dichotomy. Here, I argue that the desire to show the complexities and deficiencies of other political systems is motivated by an implicit need to comprehend what democracy truly is. This is achieved by comparing the Chinese and foreign experiences.

Figure 2 refers to the series of protests that have been occurring in Myanmar since the first half of 2021. The relevant threads tell stories that diverge significantly to the kind of narratives concerned with protesters in





Hong Kong, who are, instead, deemed as “rioters”. What emerges here is, in fact, first and foremost a sense of solidarity towards the protesters, as their actions in the name of democracy are not seen as an obstacle to stability. Rather, judging from the many posts related to foreign protests, users tend to take the side of the oppressed. This is particularly fascinating: while protests in China do find visibility and support in Chinese social media (see Yang 2016; Qin et al. 2017; Qin et al. 2019), I find here a genuine concern towards the political and social well-being of other populations. Even more interestingly, such well-being seems to be linked to the realization of democracy. Therefore, these users seem to value democracy as essential to a stable society, rather than exclusive to particular political contexts.

### 3.3 CHINESE-STYLE DEMOCRACY?

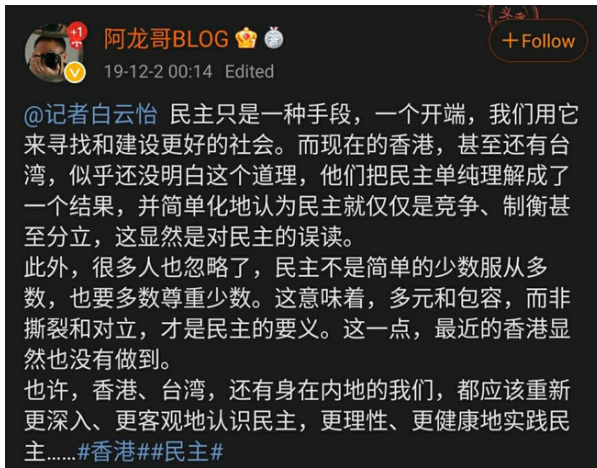


Figure 3: Democracy is a means, not an achievement  
(Posted by: A-longge BLOG on December 2, 2019. Accessed on May 11, 2021.)

*Translation: Democracy is only a means, a beginning, and we use it to explore and build a better society. Now Hong Kong, and even Taiwan, do not seem to understand this truth. They simply see democracy as a result, and naively believe that it is all only about competition, checks and balances, and even the separation of powers. This is clearly a misunderstanding of democracy.*

*In addition, many people have misinterpreted democracy, it is not simply about the minority obeying the majority, but about the majority respecting the minority as well. This means that pluralism and tolerance, rather than splitting and opposition, are the essence of democracy. Obviously, Hong Kong has just recently failed to achieve this result.*

*Perhaps, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and us in the Mainland should deepen our understanding of democracy and be more objective about it, we should also practice democracy more rationally and healthily...*

*#HongKong# #Democracy#*

In the same fashion that the United States plays a comparative role in defining the nature and boundaries of democracy in general, and of democracy in China in particular, figure 3 shows how Taiwan and Hong Kong serve as a reminder that a form of Chinese democracy outside the Mainland does indeed exist already. In this sense, due to the historical and political context of China in the last seventy years, both territories' looming presence force debates around *minzhu* to confront the reality of things: how does the Mainland's *minzhu* fare in comparison with Hong Kong's and Taiwan's *minzhu*?

Unsurprisingly, given the strained relations between Mainland China and the two territories, comments by Chinese users on their political system and society tend to lean towards criticism, though of a different kind from that reserved to the U.S. There appears to be a shift of tone when it comes to Hong Kong and Taiwan: the definition of Chinese democracy in relation to the two regions is much less assertive than is the case with the U.S. As a matter of fact, mentions of Taiwan and Hong Kong are sometimes enough to warrant a softer narrative – perhaps due to the closer connection felt by Chinese towards their Hong Kongese and Taiwanese “compatriots”. Chinese users' idea of “Greater China” indeed informs their concern with *minzhu* in all its territories. Chinese democracy, to these users, equally hinges on developments both in the Mainland and in Greater China: rather than an us versus them, what emerges more clearly here is a “we” (我们).

#### 4. CONCLUSION: *MINZHU* TODAY, *MINZHU* TOMORROW

In this study I have analyzed how the current leadership in the CCP has shaped the concept of *minzhu zhuyi* in their discourse, and its relationship with *minzhu* as expressed by online users on Weibo.

The main rationale behind the above questions lies in the attempt to bridge the existing literature on the CCP's rendition of *minzhu zhuyi* and on the role of the internet in China as a school of political participation. In this sense, the emphasis placed on *minzhu* on Weibo has been instrumental in showing that *minzhu* is a popular topic on the platform, one that takes on various connotations which resemble what I have termed earlier as the official side of the debate. This is most evident when debates around *minzhu* relate to U.S.-China relations and to depictions of what “Chinese-style democracy” should entail. When confronting the CCP's general attitude and discourse around *minzhu* with the posts examined above, we find that both sides: 1)

frequently rely upon historical references; 2) criticize the voting system in liberal democracies as conducive to “token democracy” (Xi 2014) and 3) juxtapose liberal democracy with frequent references to a truer democracy that favours the population in toto. However, there are discrepancies between official political narratives and online discourse in the form of support by Chinese internet users towards protesters in foreign countries and a more critical stance towards China’s current situation vis-à-vis *minzhu*.

This study represents a first step in understanding the relationship between official narratives and discourses online. There remain several areas that require a deeper analysis. Future research could focus more on whether the CCP benefits from how *minzhu* is expressed online in general, and on Weibo in particular. Another path that the research on this topic could take is to examine how the CCP frames democracy when it is directed towards foreign audiences and compare it to the discursive practices adopted domestically. After all, *minzhu* is an issue that branches out into several narratives which do not necessarily coincide in terms of content and end-goal. These trends, I believe, are key to understanding the true state of democracy in China. Beyond any supposedly objective rendition, research on this matter should strive for an accurate representation of the matter rather than universal applicability.

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