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Passive Political Legitimacy: How the Chinese Online Sphere Went from Challenging to Supporting the State within the Past Decade

Yinxian Zhang¹

Abstract

The Chinese government's rhetoric and policies have become increasingly assertive in recent years, leading some observers abroad to see China as a threat to democracy and the international order. However, less attention has been devoted to the attitudes that Chinese people themselves hold toward democracy. How does the Chinese public view democracy in light of transformations occurring in both the domestic and international environments? This paper examines a novel dataset of Chinese social media posts published between 2009 and 2021, in order to investigate changes in popular attitudes toward democracy. Results show that while China's online sphere was once dominated by liberal voices, expressions of doubt about liberal democracy have become more pronounced since 2013. While tightened state control over online speech has been an important factor in this outcome, people's exposure to unsatisfactory political realities in Western democracies has also played a significant role. Chinese people's idealized expectations *vis-à-vis* the promises of liberal democracy have been challenged by perceptions that democratic regimes have delivered subpar performances and engage in "double standards" when dealing with China. This disillusionment with democracy has translated into popular support for the Chinese government, bringing about what the paper identifies as the *passive political legitimacy* of the Chinese regime.

¹ Earlier work on this article was supported by the Ash Center at Harvard Kennedy School and benefited from Tony Saich, Edward Cunningham, and participants of the Asia Doctoral Fellows Workshop Series and the 2020 APSA Annual Meeting. Dingxin Zhao, Yuri Pines, Thomas Hale, Tami Groswald Ozery, Elizabeth Plantan, Di Zhou, Fangsheng Zhu, Tongyu Wu, Mishal Khan, Elaine Yuan, and Haitong Xu read earlier drafts and offered valuable suggestions and insights. I want to particularly thank the two anonymous reviewers and the journal editors for their constructive comments on research design.

The world witnessed history in the making in 2020 as Covid-19 spread across the globe. The pandemic sparked virulent debate over which political system was best suited to meet the challenges of the moment.² While China appeared to emerge victorious from the crisis by containing the outbreak in record time, the United States (U.S.) quickly reported striking death tolls. Some Western academics worried that democracy was facing its most significant ideological threat in generations,³ as the “China model” seemed to be winning out and undermining democracy around the globe.⁴

Such concerns are bolstered by recent trends within China. Many liberals abroad used to see conditions in China as ripe for democratization. Yet in recent years both media reports and academic research indicate that domestic support for the Chinese government has increased across the board.⁵ Earlier literature had attributed the resilience of the Chinese regime to its economic and political performance, in particular China’s high annual GDP growth, alleviation of public concerns like air pollution and corruption, and increased provision of public goods. The explanatory power of this literature has been weakened in recent years as China’s GDP growth has slowed and socio-economic problems such as income inequality have intensified.

In the current context, how do we make sense of growing domestic support for the Chinese government? While most explanations focus on Chinese censorship, propaganda, and government responsiveness,⁶ this study shifts attention to the unofficial discourse about democracy. Since democracy and authoritarianism are often pitted against each other as opposites on the ideological spectrum, the Chinese public’s changing attitudes toward democracy abroad may have shifted their views toward authoritarianism.

This study investigates these changes in Chinese popular opinion over the past decade. A few trends make this period significant. During it, the Chinese regime has ramped up its censorship and propaganda campaigns, vowing to “win the ideological war” against “Western-

²Rachel Kleinfeld, “Do Authoritarian or Democratic Countries Handle Pandemics Better?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 31, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>; “Public Health Does Not Require Tyranny,” *CNN*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/21/opinions/public-health-does-not-require-tyranny-ghitis/index.html>

³ “The Virus Comes for Democracy,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2020; Larry Diamond, “Democracy Versus the Pandemic: The Coronavirus is Emboldening Autocrats the World Over,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-13/democracy-versus-pandemic>

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The Thing That Determine a Country’s Resistance to the Coronavirus,” *The Atlantic*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>; Michael McFaul, “China is Winning the Ideological Battle with the U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2019; “Are the United States and China in an Ideological Competition?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/freeman-chair-blog/are-united-states-and-china-ideological-competition>

⁵ Jesse Turiel, Edward Cunningham, and Anthony Saich, “To Serve the People: Income, Region and Citizen Attitudes towards Governance in China (2003–2016),” *The China Quarterly* 240 (2019): 906–35.

⁶ See, e.g., Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43; Qinghua Wang and Gang Guo, “Yu Keping and Chinese Intellectual Discourse on Good Governance,” *The China Quarterly* 224 (2015): 985–1005; Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

style democracy,”⁷ but it has not been clear how effective the messages have been. This has coincided with a global wave of democratic setbacks not only in new democracies, but also in established democracies including the U.S.⁸ This paper addresses two related questions. First, in what specific ways has popular opinion about democracy changed during the past decade in China? Second, what roles did domestic censorship and the international environment play in this trend?

In this paper, popular opinion refers to the thoughts and attitudes articulated in public discussion by popular and influential actors, such as celebrities and public intellectuals. It is distinct from “public opinion” as an aggregation of individual opinions in polls. Herbert Blumer differentiated these two ways of measuring public sentiment and argued that the opinions of key actors are more visible and carry more weight in the eyes of the public and the government.⁹ In a similar vein, Katz and Lazarsfeld made a case that “opinion leaders” play a significant role in both shaping and reflecting mass opinion, as members of the public tend to form opinions under the influence of opinion leaders.¹⁰

Following this approach, this study focuses on political discussions among Chinese opinion leaders on social media platforms, the primary venue for public discussion in China. Opinion leaders’ online speech is a significant part of the *unofficial* information environment the Chinese public is embedded in. By unofficial, I mean sources of information that are *not* from official media but include, for example, foreign media outlets,¹¹ social media content, information from friends and acquaintances, personal experiences and so on.

Combining qualitative and computational methods, I have investigated an original dataset of 1.4 million social media posts generated by 239 opinion leaders between 2009 and 2021. The analysis focuses on observed changes over the past decade in their publicly available posts about democracy amid tightening censorship and a changing international environment.

This study finds that, at the end of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s, there was a robust online discourse around democracy, and the online sphere was dominated by liberal voices. Since late 2013, however, there has been a statistically significant decline in the volume of democracy-related discussion, and expressions of doubt about democracy have become pronounced. Even liberals have started to express disillusionment with democracy. As of 2021,

⁷ This effort was detailed in a 2013 classified document entitled “Communiqué on the current state of the ideological sphere,” also known as “Document 9.” See <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>

⁸ Sarah Repucci, “Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy,” *Freedom House*, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>

⁹ Herbert Blumer, “Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling,” *American Sociological Review* 13, no. 5 (1948): 542–49.

¹⁰ Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (New York: Free Press, 1955).

¹¹ Mainstream Western media outlets such as the BBC, CNN and journals like *Foreign Affairs* have been accessible in China (the BBC as of March 2021, and the other two as of January 2022) despite the Great Firewall. Technology-savvy netizens still manage to use VPN protocols to circumvent censorship. Overseas Chinese also tend to circulate outside information among their domestic networks.

the liberal dominance has come to an end amid the pandemic, and the Chinese online sphere has instead been dominated by nationalistic voices.

Intensified state control has played a decisive role in this trend. But the expressions of doubt and disillusionment with democracy are not completely state-sponsored. Rather, people's increased exposure to dissatisfying international political realities have also played into this trend. Such exposure poses a challenge to people's rosy perceptions of Western democracies. This, in turn, has motivated people to reevaluate political realities at home, resulting in relative satisfaction with the Chinese government.

I call this effect *passive political legitimacy*. A regime's political legitimacy not only depends on its domestic performance, but also depends on the public's perception of international realities. In other words, popular support for the political regime may be strengthened not only by overt actions taken by the government, but also by citizens drawing comparisons to the situation elsewhere. These international comparisons are crucial in shaping the public's relative (dis)satisfaction with their own government.

Note that passive legitimacy is different from passive support for the political regime. As Suchman explains, legitimacy can entail both active and passive support.¹² The former signifies affirmative support for the state, whereas the latter is mere acceptance of the *status quo* as inevitable. Passive political legitimacy can be a source of active and affirmative support when people are convinced that their home country is performing better than other countries. This paper concludes with reflections on the dilemma of passive political legitimacy in the long run.

CONTEXTUALIZING DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

Though a common term in daily conversation, the meanings of "democracy" remain ambiguous and contested. This term serves as an umbrella for a variety of political ideals and practices with the same claim for legitimacy: the state is governed by the "rule of the people."

In the West, democracy usually refers to liberal democracy, an ideology and a form of government characterized by elements such as universal suffrage, separation of powers, and a free market. This common understanding does not always align with Chinese perceptions of democracy. To understand what Chinese opinion leaders mean when they use this term, we need to first situate the concept in the Chinese context.

I begin by clarifying my usage of two terms: liberals (*ziyou zhuyizhe* 自由主义者/自由派) and nationalists (*minzu zhuyizhe* 民族主义者). China scholars often depict an ideological cleavage in China lying between the liberal camp and a loose coalition of nationalists and political leftists (*zuopai* 左派). Following this convention, I use "liberals" to refer to those who generally embrace values such as the rule of law and individual freedom. I loosely use the term "nationalists" to

¹² Mark C. Suchman, "Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571–610.

refer to those who tend to oppose liberals and are often seen as being sympathetic to the Chinese regime.

The Chinese terms “liberals” and “nationalists” feature contexts specific to China. For instance, while liberals are supportive of political liberalization, they vary in their stances on when, and even whether, China should adopt free elections. Some may advocate an electoral democracy, whereas the moderates among them may hope to “work from within” and pursue a political opening up without directly challenging the Party. Therefore, being a liberal is not equivalent to being keen on establishing an electoral system in China. Moreover, while liberals in the West tend to denounce populist politicians like Trump, some Chinese liberals are Trump supporters who expected the unorthodox leader to help “liberate” China.¹³

Likewise, the term “nationalists” encompasses a wide spectrum of political stances. Some may be socialists concerned about social inequality under market reforms. Some may be Maoists who aspire to return to some Mao-era practices. Some are proud of China’s history and culture and claim to be patriots rather than nationalists, while others flaunt their nationalism and are hawkish and chauvinistic when discussing questions around international diplomacy and ethnic minorities. Yet they are not necessarily pro-government. Some nationalists may even draw on liberal rhetoric to voice dissatisfaction and criticize the government.¹⁴ Readers should be mindful of crucial within-group differences.

The Legacy of Democratic Legitimacy in China

China’s political leadership is known for its open rejection of liberal democracy. At the same time, however, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially includes “democracy” (*minzhu* 民主) as one of the “24-word socialist core values” that has been promoted since 2012.¹⁵ The Party’s definition of democracy is different from the Western notion. As Elizabeth Perry points out, Chinese official discourses mainly interpret democracy as a populist call for serving the people rather than a set of electoral institutions.¹⁶ China describes its system as “socialist democracy,” a system that emphasizes good governance by the political elite.

Unless otherwise stated, “democracy” in this paper refers to liberal democracy or Western-style democracy (*xishi minzhu* 西式民主) – I use the two terms interchangeably. The introduction of the idea of democracy can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty. Reflecting on China’s bitter failure in the Opium Wars and the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894, and impressed by the national strength of Western countries, the celebrated scholar Liang Qichao introduced the

¹³ Chinese liberal supporters of Trump are not the focus of this paper. But pioneering studies find that they support Trump primarily because of his hawkishness towards China. See Yao Lin, “Beaconism and the Trumpian Metamorphosis of Chinese Liberal Intellectuals,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021): 85-110.

¹⁴ Yinxian Zhang, Ji-rong Wen, and Jiajun Liu, “Nationalism on Weibo: Towards a Multifaceted Understanding of Chinese Nationalism,” *The China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 758–83.

¹⁵ These socialist core values were introduced at the CCP’s 18th National Congress, encompassing twelve moral principles and sociopolitical goals for China. Democracy (民主) is only second to “prosperity (富强),” followed by civility (文明), harmony (和谐), freedom (自由), and so on.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Perry, “The Populist Dream of Chinese Democracy,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 4 (2015): 903-15.

concept of democracy to China in the 1910s as a model for development, modernization, and national revival. Hence, since the beginning, ‘democracy’ has been embraced as a *means* to achieve the material goals of national revival and prosperity.¹⁷

However, during the same period, skepticism and criticisms of democracy have also taken root in China as Western countries forced the Qing government to sign several unequal treaties. This led to lasting memories of national humiliation and distrust of the Western “imperialist enemies.” In line with Communist ideology, Mao and the CCP also cast doubts on the effectiveness of Western-style democracy, claiming that it only serves the interest of the bourgeoisie.

After the CCP took power, the liberal voices were largely silenced through several political campaigns. Yet, after the death of Mao, as the CCP attempted to reclaim its legitimacy by prioritizing economic growth and good governance, liberalism and the belief in “science and democracy” inched back and claimed supremacy among Chinese intellectuals and elites,¹⁸ with calls for transparency, rule of law, and separation of powers.

The liberal voices were *not* limited to the unofficial sphere. In the 2000s, it became a mainstream discourse as Party schools and government think tanks saw liberalism as a possible source of political legitimacy.¹⁹ Multiple surveys consistently established that many Chinese people were aware of the problems in the Chinese political system,²⁰ and many were in support of liberal reforms.²¹

Yet, despite this liberalizing domestic environment, China’s political reforms stagnated in more recent years. Meanwhile, popular support for the Chinese government²² and nationalism has been on the rise.²³ The scholarly literature attributes the resilience of Chinese authoritarianism to its economic and political performance – such as high economic growth²⁴,

¹⁷ Andrew Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (CA: University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Craig Calhoun, “The ideology of intellectuals and the Chinese Student Protest Movement of 1989,” *Praxis International* 10, no. 1/2 (1990): 131-60.

¹⁹ Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig, “The Debate on Party Legitimacy in China: a mixed quantitative-qualitative analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 59 (2009): 339-58.

²⁰ Yali Peng, “Democracy and Chinese Political Discourses,” *Modern China* 24, no. 4 (1998): 408-44; Gang Wang, Liyun Wu, and Rongbin Han, “College Education and Attitudes toward Democracy in China: An Empirical Study,” *Asia Pacific Education Review* 16, no. 3 (2015): 399-412; Zikui Wei, “China’s Little Pinks? Nationalism among Elite University Students in Hangzhou,” *Asian Survey* 59, no. 5 (2019): 822-43.

²¹ Zhengxu Wang, “Public Support for Democracy in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 53 (2007): 561-79; Fen Lin, Yanfei Sun, and Hongxing Yang, “How are Chinese Students Ideologically Divided? A Survey of Chinese College Students’ Political Self-identification,” *Pacific Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2015): 51-74.

²² Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, “The Battle of Ideas and Discourses before Democracy Transition: Different Democratic Conceptions in Authoritarian China,” *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 1 (2015): 20-41; Turiel et al., “To Serve the People.”

²³ Suisheng Zhao, “Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 82 (2013): 535–53; Jessica C. Weiss, “How Hawkish is the Chinese Public? Another Look at “Rising Nationalism” and Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (2019): 679-95.

²⁴ Dingxin Zhao, “The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 3 (2009): 416-33.

good governance,²⁵ government responsiveness²⁶ – as well as to political strategies such as continued censorship²⁷ and cooptation of civil society.²⁸

While these studies provide insights, most limit their focus to China's domestic environment. They are not successful in explaining rising popular support for the state during times of slowed economic growth, stagnant political reforms, and growing inequality. This study, by contrast, considers both domestic and international environments to explain shifts in public attitudes toward democracy.

Democratic Legitimacy in the Global Context

Democratization theory often emphasizes the role of a global *zeitgeist*, the “spirit of the time,” that exerts international pressure on nations to pursue democracy.²⁹ It has been noted, for instance, that exposure to foreign media may facilitate the fall of authoritarian regimes.³⁰ Immigrants abroad and international students may also facilitate the diffusion of democratic ideas because they may “remit” their experiences and knowledge about democracy back home.³¹

According to this literature, the enhanced interconnectivity between China and the world in the past decade should be conducive to Western-style democratic development. Statistics show that the number of Chinese students studying in the U.S. has nearly quadrupled since 2010.³² Chinese residents made about a billion trips overseas between 2009 and 2018.³³ As of 2019, 60% of the Chinese population have internet access.³⁴ Overseas Chinese frequently use WeChat and Weibo, the two social media giants in China, to “remit” back home information and personal stories about life and politics in other countries.

However, the past couple of decades have also witnessed a resurgence of anti-democratic sentiment and a wave of democratic setbacks across the globe. Many newly democratized countries failed to consolidate democratic institutions; some even experienced political breakdowns.³⁵ The outcomes of high-profile democratic movements such as the Color

²⁵ Wang and Guo, “Yu Keping and Chinese Intellectual Discourse.”

²⁶ Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work*.

²⁷ Margaret Roberts, *Censored* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁸ Daniel Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²⁹ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and post-communist Europe* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1996).

³⁰ Eugene R. Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2007).

³¹ Antonio Spilimbergo, “Democracy and Foreign Education,” *American Economic Review* 99, no. 1 (2009): 528-43; Clarisa Pérez-Armendáriz and David Crow, “Do Migrants Remit Democracy? International Migration, Political Beliefs, and Behavior in Mexico,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 1 (2010): 119-48.

³² “Number of College and University students from China in the United States for year 2008/09 to 2018/19,” Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/372900/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-in-the-us/>

³³ “China Focus: 70 years on, Chinese travel abroad more easily in much larger number,” *Xinhua*, September 28, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/28/c_138430646.htm

³⁴ “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” *China Internet Information Center*, 2019, <https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201911/P020191112539794960687.pdf>

³⁵ Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1999); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Revolutions and Arab Spring further dampened the enthusiasm of some democracy supporters in China. Beyond a couple of exceptions such as Tunisia, most countries ended up with disruptive civil wars, coups, and, in Iraq and Syria, the rise of the Islamic State. In the late 2010s, even the world's largest democracies, including the U.S. and India, have experienced democratic setbacks and rising tides of populism. In 2020, Freedom House reported that globally, democracy has been in decline for fourteen consecutive years.³⁶

In the meantime, China has promoted a case for itself, publicizing the cumulative growth of the Chinese economy (despite slowed growth, China surpassed the U.S. in terms of GDP (PPP) in 2014), increased public provision of healthcare, welfare, and other public services, and effective policies to alleviate high-profile problems such as corruption and air pollution.³⁷ Since 2020, the Chinese government has frequently drawn comparisons to other governments' slow responses to the pandemic, framing itself as an effective government serving the best interests of its people. Taken together, this study investigates how Chinese popular opinion shifted in light of the changes in both the domestic and international arenas.

THE STUDY OF OPINION LEADERS

This study focuses on opinion leaders on Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China. Due to strict state control over traditional media outlets, Chinese citizens tend to use the internet, particularly social media, for public discussion. Resembling a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter, Weibo has been the primary venue for Chinese internet users (*netizens* hereafter) to acquire real-time information and participate in public discussion. Other platforms are either smaller, catering to a niche audience, or do not support public discussion due to platform limitations.³⁸

Weibo opinion leaders are either prominent figures in real life or online celebrities. They tend to attract more comments, retweets, and likes than others. For instance, the opinion leaders in this study attracted 5 million followers on average (see Table 1). By contrast, *People's Daily* claims to have a circulation of 3 million.³⁹ The media presence of these Weibo opinion leaders thus effectively rivals that of mass media outlets. Moreover, their popular posts are often circulated by other major internet platforms and print media, extending their influence to an offline audience. As a result, these opinion leaders have become an essential part of the

³⁶ Freedom House, "A leaderless Struggle."

³⁷ Yueyi Feng, Miao Ning, Yu Lei, Yamei Sun, Wei Liu, and Jinnan Wang, "Defending blue sky in China: Effectiveness of the 'Air Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan' on air quality improvements from 2013 to 2017," *Journal of Environmental Management* 252 (2019): 109603

³⁸ WeChat, Weibo's top rival, is primarily a social networking app for friends and acquaintances. Users are not allowed to see the posts and comments of other users unless they befriend each other in the app. Articles published by WeChat "public accounts" do not allow commenting or only selectively display comments approved by account owners.

³⁹ See <http://en.people.cn/90827/90828/index.html>.

information environment that the Chinese public is exposed to. Acknowledging this vital role, a small but growing literature has begun to examine their online activity.⁴⁰

This paper examines opinion leaders who are, first, *popular* and *influential* in public discussion, and, second, *interested* in political and social issues. I combined measures of user popularity (measured by follower counts), user influence (measured by the numbers of retweets, comments and “likes” received), and levels of interest in political discussion (measured by the number of posts containing political keywords), and I have identified 239 opinion leaders from 170 million users on Weibo.⁴¹

I collected data in two phases. First, in 2017, I collected more than 1.25 million original and publicly available posts generated by opinion leaders between August 2009, the time that Weibo was launched, and May 2017. Then I supplemented this data with more than 158,000 original opinion leader posts collected on a biweekly basis in 2021.⁴² Altogether, my data consists of 1.4 million original posts published by opinion leaders from 2009 to 2017 and in 2021. My analysis primarily focuses on a subset of 15,306 original posts containing the keyword “democracy.”

Table 1: The 239 Opinion Leaders’ Posts: Weibo Statistics

	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Follower Count	5,031k	7,491k	62k	51,488k
All Post Count	26,858	34,996	1	285,655
Original Post Count*	6,303	7,117	1	57,758

*Note: All post count is the total number of posts, original and retweeted, showing on user profiles. Original post count is the number of original posts collected by this study as of December 2021.

To again clarify, opinion leaders do not form a representative sample of typical Chinese netizens, and certainly do not represent the Chinese population. However, they are important actors in the public sphere, their content is highly visible, and their opinions play a significant role in the shaping the unofficial narratives the public is exposed to. Many of them are elites in real life who have considerable social and cultural capital. My sample includes renowned scholars, culture figures, business tycoons, and professionals like lawyers and doctors who have national reputations. Their political attitudes thus bear important implications.

⁴⁰ Ya-Wen Lei, *The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019); Zhang et al., “Nationalism on Weibo.”

⁴¹ A detailed account of opinion leader identification and data collection methods are documented in the Online Appendix.

⁴² Data between 2018 and 2020 is not included in this study due to data accessibility issues. See the Online Appendix for more details.

Table 2: Basic Demographics of Opinion Leaders

	Percent	Count
Sex		
Male	89.95	215
Female	10.04	24
Region		
Beijing	56.06	134
Shanghai	6.28	15
Guangdong	5.44	13
Zhejiang / Jiangsu	3.77	9
Other Inland Cities	10.46	25
Overseas/Hong Kong/Taiwan	10.04	24
Others	7.95	19
Background		
Cultural Industries	39.33	94
Internet Personalities	18.83	45
Academia	17.57	42
Business/Commerce	11.29	27
Professionals	7.53	18
Government	4.18	10
Grassroots	1.26	3
Total	100	239

*See Online Appendix for a detailed introduction of opinion leader backgrounds.

OVERALL TRENDS IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

The Impact of State Control

Previous studies showed that netizens are adept at resisting state control through technology and coded language. Moreover, online political critiques are at least selectively tolerated by the Chinese government.⁴³ These preconditions allow Weibo opinion leaders to instigate public debate around hot button sociopolitical issues in China.

However, censorship of virtual content has played an important role in shaping the Chinese public sphere.⁴⁴ Neither this study nor the Chinese public have access to censored online content. To investigate the impact of state control on popular discourses, in this section of the paper I focus on long-term changes in the scale and the content of political discussions that remain accessible despite censorship. In later sections, I also will compare the discourses of domestic opinion leaders to those who went abroad as a way of gauging popular opinions without state control.

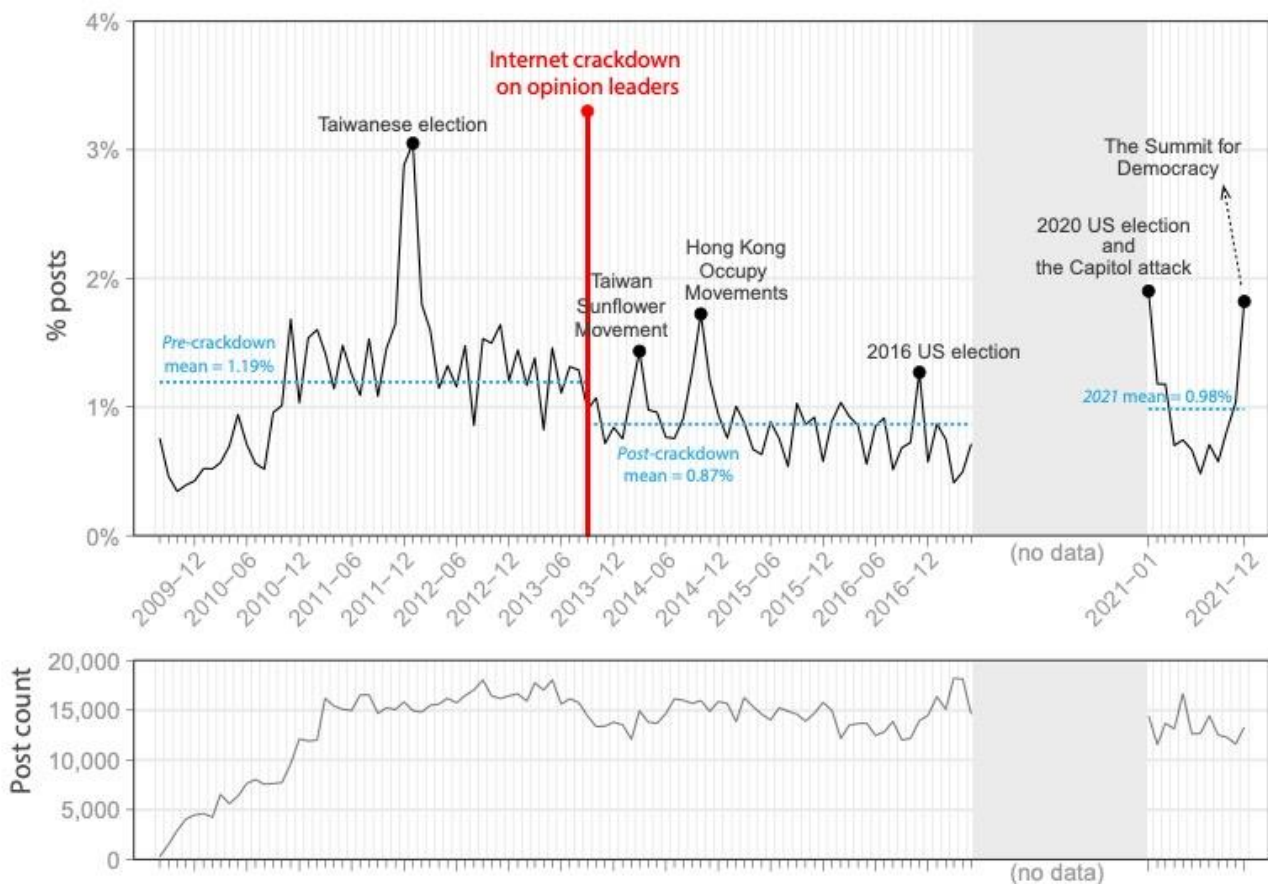
My evidence shows that, over time, Chinese state control has effectively reduced the volume of democracy-related discussions and silenced vociferous liberals. As shown in Figure 1,

⁴³ King et al., "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism"; Narisong Huhe, Min Tang, and Jie Chen, "Creating Democratic Citizens: Political Effects of the Internet in China," *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2018): 757-71.

⁴⁴ Margaret Roberts, *Censored*.

following a slow start in 2009 when Weibo had just been launched, opinion leaders demonstrated a keen interest in discussing topics related to democracy. Between 2009 and 2021, posts mentioning “democracy” made up an average of 1.03% of opinion leaders’ original posts. This proportion is significantly high considering the immense volume of non-political content and the wide diversity of topics that are discussed on social media. In fact, the term “democracy” (found in 15,306 posts) was mentioned more frequently by opinion leaders than common terms such as “men” (11,217 posts) or “women” (9,938 posts).

Figure 1 Proportions of Democracy-related Posts to Total Original Posts, 2009-2021



Upper panel: the proportion of opinion leaders’ posts containing the keyword “democracy” to their total original posts in each month from August 2009 to December 2021. The dotted lines denote the mean of the democracy post proportion at different periods. The vertical line denotes the government crackdown on online speech in 2013. Lower panel: the number of opinion leaders’ total original posts in each month. Data between June 2017 and December 2020 is not available.

Earlier scholarship demonstrated that in the early 2010s, opinion leaders played a significant role in “public opinion incidents” where a large number of netizens demanded government accountability and transparency over specific issues.⁴⁵ However, this prompted the

⁴⁵ Ya-Wen Lei, *The Contentious Public Sphere*.

government to react to dampen opinion leader influence. The government launched a crackdown in September 2013 to shut down some of their online activities.⁴⁶

In my sample, fourteen Weibo accounts of opinion leaders were banned and removed over the nine years between 2009 and 2017. Censorship was ramped up in recent years, and 23 accounts were removed over the four years between 2018 and 2021. These banned opinion leaders came from different backgrounds. Yet, except for one account, all of them were liberal leaning figures whose rhetoric openly deviated from or challenged the party line. Some of the banned opinion leaders “reincarnated” themselves by signing up for new Weibo accounts, and a few migrated to overseas platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, but most of them remained silent on Chinese social media platforms. The chilling effect of tightened control resulted in a dozen additional opinion leaders remaining silent throughout 2021.

The censorship measures had a significant impact on the proportion of discussions mentioning democracy. From August 2009 to August 2013, before the internet crackdown of September 2013, there were on average 1.2% democracy-related posts per month. In January 2012 around the time of the Taiwanese election, there was an unprecedented surge in democracy-related discussions, and the proportion rose to 3%. However, after the internet crackdown, the average proportion of democracy-related posts dropped to 0.87% per month. This lower proportion has held fairly steady. In 2021, the proportion of democracy-related posts averaged 0.98% per month. This average number was boosted by two unusual spikes: in January 2021, the month the U.S Capitol was attacked by a mob, and in December 2021, when Biden hosted the Summit for Democracy, and the proportions in other months were much lower.

The Strong Presence of Foreign News

In online discussions around democracy, much of the content mentioned countries and regions outside of mainland China. A keyword analysis shows that between 2009 and 2021, 22 countries and regions appeared at least once in the annual top 100 keywords identified from the 15,306 original posts in which opinion leaders mentioned democracy.

In particular, “U.S.” (美国) has been one of the top 5 keywords *every year*, consistently ranked higher than common terms such as “society” (*shehui* 社会), “government” (*zhengfu* 政府), and, in later years, even “China” (中国). In fact, the U.S. has always been the primary reference point when the Chinese talk about democracy.⁴⁷ Even though there are other successful models of democracy and even though Chinese nationalists persistently deem the U.S. as China’s main rival, average citizens tend to see the U.S. as the global “lighthouse” and the benchmark of democracy.

⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, “Crackdown on Bloggers is Mounted by China,” September 11, 2013.

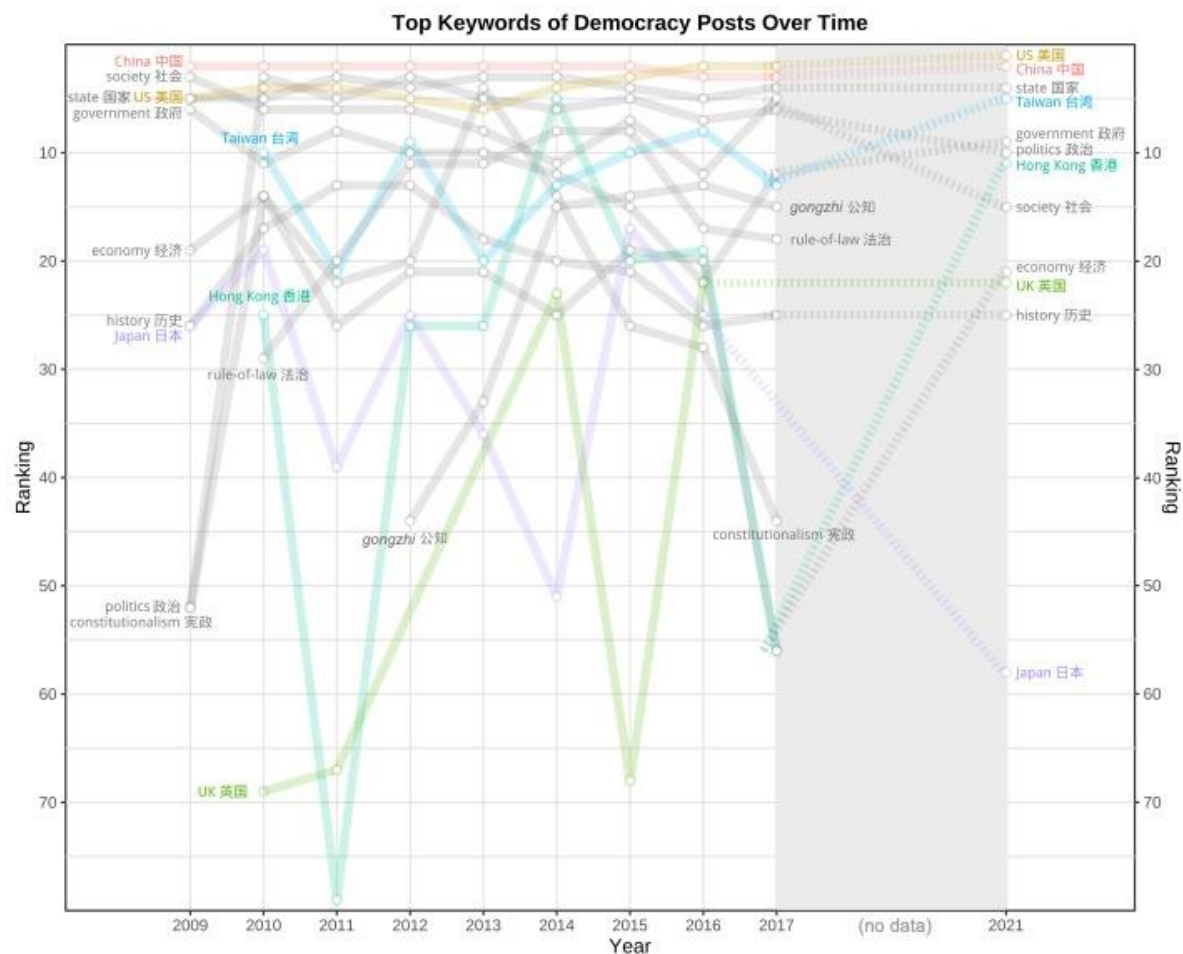
⁴⁷ Yichen Guan, Dustin Tingley, David Romney, Amaney Jamal, and Robert Keohane, “Chinese Views of the United States: Evidence from Weibo,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 20, no. 1 (2020): 1-30

In addition to the U.S., “Taiwan” (台湾), “Hong Kong” (香港), and “Japan” (日本) remained among the top keywords in most years, constantly higher than common terms such as “opinion” (*yijian* 意见) and “rights” (*quanli* 权利). The U.K., India, Russia, North Korea, and Myanmar are also frequently mentioned.

Moreover, all of the surges of democracy-related discussions were triggered by news from outside of the mainland. As shown in Figure 1, the first spike of democracy-related discussions appeared in January 2012 during the Taiwanese election. The second and third spikes occurred following the outburst of street protests across Taiwan in March 2014 and Hong Kong in October 2014. The last three spikes were all triggered by news from the U.S., including the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, and the 2021 Summit for Democracy.

Figure 2 presents a selection of the top annual keywords in opinion leader posts. The persistent presence of countries and regions in the keywords suggests a profound impact of international affairs on online discussion around democracy.

Figure 2 Top Keywords in Democracy-related Posts, 2009-2021



The lines show changes in the rankings of 15 common keywords in democracy-related posts by opinion leaders

between 2009 and 2021. These rankings are based on TF-IDF statistics. A full list of the top keywords can be found in the Online Appendix.

THE TRENDS IN DEMOCRACY-RELATED DISCUSSIONS

Increased state control over online speech directly suppressed discussions about democracy, especially by the liberal voices among them. Data analysis also shows that opinion leaders paid a lot of attention to other countries and regions when they talked about democracy. The following sections delve into opinion leader posts at different times in order to explore the role of state control, international exposure, and their interplay in shaping trends in opinion leaders' favorable and unfavorable perceptions of democracy.

Liberal Dominance and Baseline Perceptions of Political Reality

In the 1990s and early 2000s, liberal voices dominated unofficial discourses and heavily influenced official discussions on political reforms. In contrast, official propaganda was limited in its influence. Earlier research showed that people tended to be unconvinced by statements that were perceived to be official propaganda.⁴⁸ Therefore, even though the Chinese media has often focused on negative news about foreign countries, praise and admiration of Western countries such as the U.S. were commonplace across unofficial platforms. In such an environment, Chinese people's baseline perception of political realities in Western countries was overwhelmingly positive, and the U.S. was the most popular of all foreign nations in the public eye.⁴⁹

When China entered the social media age in the early 2010s, online discussion reflected the lingering liberal dominance. A typical example could be seen following the 2012 Taiwanese presidential election when incumbent president Ma Ying-jeou of the Kuomintang was re-elected to power. There was an unprecedented surge in democracy-related discussions on Weibo in January 2012, and the internet was flooded with an outpouring of praise and admiration for Taiwan's democratic system.

Inspired by this political event, Weibo opinion leaders generated 456 original posts about democracy during that month – three times more than usual. Popular opinion was one-sided: most posts praised Taiwan for being a role model for mainland China to push for democratic reforms. By contrast, only a handful of posts were critical of democracy and/or the Taiwanese election. While the most popular post celebrating the Taiwanese democracy obtained more than 7000 retweets, the most popular post attacking the election was retweeted merely 204 times.

⁴⁸ He Huang, Fangfei Wang, Li Shao, "How Propaganda Moderates the Influence of Opinion Leaders on Social Media in China," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 2599-621

⁴⁹ Eric Fish, "China's Youth Admire America Far More than We Knew," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/09/chinas-youth-admire-america-far-more-than-we-knew-surprising-survey-results-ideological-university-crackdown/>

Compared with today, online speech at this time was much more open. A popular opinion leader explicitly asked, for example: “When will the mainland elect its first president?” Some went as far as to call for a return of the Kuomintang to the mainland. A post representing this stance was circulated nearly 2000 times on Weibo:

Taiwan shows that the Chinese are fully capable of practicing Western-style democracy. ... The only regret is that this vital success of the Kuomintang was confined only to Taiwan. How to shower the entire China with liberty and democracy is the question that the Kuomintang should think about.

This outpouring of support for democracy during the Taiwanese election was not an exception. Between 2009 and 2013, among the top 20 most “liked” posts in my sample, 14 clearly acknowledged the strengths of democracy and openly advocated democratic reforms in China. Some claimed that democratic rulers may face criticisms but never attract hatred from the people (this was the second most “liked” post, 2009-2013), and that democratic countries can run well even without a ruler (the tenth most “liked” post, 2009-2013). For some opinion leaders, the eagerness to pursue democracy was linked to frustrations over their own culture and compatriots. One such post compared Chinese people to pigs, asserting that “just like a pig,” Chinese people only care about material wellbeing instead of democracy and freedom (the fourth most “liked” post, 2009-2013).

Popular posts celebrating this idealized image of democracy showed little tolerance for any imperfections and setbacks in democratic development. For instance, during the 2012 Taiwanese election, many opinion leaders commented that a democratic election “free of gun shots, personal attacks, and unrest” was a sign that Taiwanese democracy had matured, and only a mature democracy qualified as an exemplar for China:

An unstable, fluctuating kind of Taiwanese democracy⁵⁰ is unlikely to have a positive influence [on mainland China.] Only an institutionalized democracy is valuable for the mainland to learn from.

To summarize, popular Weibo posts before the 2013 crackdown demonstrated the lingering dominance of liberal voices and pitted a “backward” and “problematic” China against an “advanced,” “ideal” Western-style democracy. Opinion leaders believed that “the trend towards democracy and the rule of law is irresistible” and that “China will have no future unless it becomes a democracy.” The popular imagination about Western-style democracy was often overly rosy, foreshadowing the political and social backlash that was to come.

Challenges and Changes to Idealized Perceptions

After the early 2010s, democratic setbacks around the globe gradually challenged the Chinese public’s baseline perceptions of Western-style democracy. This shift in popular discourse can be seen from the three spikes of democracy-related discussions between 2013 and 2017.

⁵⁰ This refers to violence and chaos occurred during previous Taiwanese elections and parliamentary sessions.

The two spikes in 2014 were mainly motivated by news about mass movements in non-Western regions, including the Taiwan Sunflower Movement and the Hong Kong Occupy movements. Unlike the outpouring of praise following the 2012 Taiwanese election, opinion leaders reacted to the 2014 Taiwan and Hong Kong movements critically. Liberals were especially “puzzled” by the “illegal” mass protests in Taiwan. One well-known liberal opinion leader pointed out that it was “a paradox that revolutions took place in a democratic regime.” In their eyes, a democratic government should be able to effectively address public concerns and preempt such unrest, and the chaotic scenes in Taiwan challenged the popular perception that democracy guarantees social order and political stability. Viewed similarly, the Hong Kong Occupy movement was widely denounced as destructive to the rule of law.

These critiques of democratic movements were qualitatively different from the arguments and logic found in official rhetoric. While opinion leaders disapproved of the *means* deployed by these movements, many of them explicitly supported the underlying *causes* of the movements – a stance that challenged the party line. The most circulated post about the 2014 Hong Kong protests reads:

I can relate to the Hong Kong people’s political appeals. Hong Kong people may [express their wishes] by marches and demonstrations, but they should not surround government buildings and paralyze society. This is legal illiteracy! (1,285 retweets)

It is notable that during this period, criticisms of mass movements and rising doubts about democracy focused on non-Western regions. In these discussions, Western democracies, especially the U.S., were still considered a benchmark of democracy and an exemplar for other countries. In the above post, the opinion leader continued with the comment:

Would the Americans surround the White House to paralyze the U.S. government? Freedom should not destroy social order in any society. If these [protesters] dismiss the most fundamental principle of the rule of law, they are in no position to talk about democracy.

In light of the 2021 U.S. Capitol attack, this opinion leader’s statement was striking. His Weibo account was removed in early 2019 due to charges of “disseminating harmful information about political affairs.” After the Capitol attack, he published a blog elsewhere lamenting that “freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction” even in established democracies.

To many opinion leaders who once looked up to the U.S. and deemed it as the model of democracy, the democratic setbacks in the U.S. were more disillusioning than the problems in other regions. The belief in American democracy has experienced a strong backlash since the election of Trump.

In November 2016, the U.S. presidential election sparked an unusual surge in online discussion, with over 64% of posts in that month avidly discussing the election results and the impacts on global democracy. Some opinion leaders, both nationalists and liberals⁵¹, were happy

⁵¹ See footnote 12.

to see the election of Trump, but for some other liberals, the once firm belief that democracy was the “least bad political institution” was shaken. Their disillusionment is illustrated by two posts written by the same opinion leader, in 2012 and 2016 respectively:

[Democracy] is probably not the best institution. It is not one hundred percent fair, not to mention does not ensure economic development. But it gives every citizen an opportunity to avoid the worst outcomes (January 2012 after the Taiwanese election).

In light of the current situation, it seems that democracy does not necessarily guarantee the best outcomes. Sometimes it even cannot avoid the worst outcomes (November 2016 after the U.S. election).

While between 2009 and 2013, 14 out of the top 20 most liked posts had openly advocated democracy, this number dropped to five between the 2013 crackdown and May 2017. The vast majority of the top 20 most liked posts during this period expressed an ambivalent attitude towards democracy. Four were even clearly nationalistic or anti-democracy -- there had been only one such post in the pre-2013 period.

Reevaluations and the End of Liberal Dominance

As the U.S. and the West have experienced growing political turbulence, doubts and questions about liberal democracy finally peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic. The direct comparison between the West, especially the U.S., and China vis-à-vis government responses to the pandemic was taken as “a moment of truth.” The Chinese state seized this moment to ramp up propaganda campaigns about the advantages of China’s system. All this has led to a reevaluation of political realities in China in the online sphere. The attack on the Capitol Building, and the U.S. and Chinese governments’ responses during the pandemic have been points of critique in the online discussions around democracy. The top three most “liked” posts in 2021 received an average of 32,173 “likes” on Weibo and all came from the same opinion leader criticizing the U.S. The most popular post claimed that:

“The US and the West are not people-centered. They’re ruled by financial capital. ... So many people have died there in the pandemic. How can this be justified? They have abundant resources, but did they leverage these resources to stop covid infections and deaths? This pandemic became a moment of truth, I think.” (36,953 “likes”)

Most of the top 20 popular posts in 2021 similarly criticized sociopolitical issues in the U.S., its deep political divisions, and the corruption of big money.

In turn, the problems of American democracy have been perceived as justifications for China’s system. The last spike in discussion (with the proportion of democracy-related posts rose to 1.8%) was specifically centered around comparisons of the two systems and the strengths of China’s system. In December 2021, when the U.S. hosted the Summit for Democracy, the State Council of China published a white paper titled “China: The Democracy That Works.”⁵² The Chinese government took the opportunity to denounce Western-style democracy and promote

⁵² A full text of the white paper can be found here: http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/202112/t20211204_10462468.htm

‘socialist democracy.’ This was *not* the first time the government proclaimed the superiority of socialist democracy. However, such rhetoric had been held up as an object of ridicule in the past and popular posts never ceased to deride it. By contrast, such statements are now well-received in the online sphere:

The release of the white paper challenges the American and Western monopoly on the definition of democracy. ... After 200 years of exploitation, Western-style democracy exemplified by the U.S. has become ineffective. It cannot solve any of the most pronounced problems in the U.S. today. ... In China, the government directly serves the people and [its policies] are people-centered. ... Our democracy can solve real-world problems such as poverty, air pollution, and the pandemic. (the 8th most “liked” post, 2021)

Despite prevalent nationalist sentiments, some liberal leaders have insisted on voicing criticisms of the Chinese government. But such posts have drawn far less attention and are often challenged by Weibo readers. For instance, when the U.S. Capitol attack took place, one opinion leader called for less attention on “American problems” and more attention on Chinese issues triggered by draconian quarantine measures in China (335 likes). Weibo users satirized this in response:

[1] “Do you mean that our problems are more severe than American problems, and that China is more dangerous than America?”

[2] “The American people have the freedom to attack the Capitol, but Chinese citizens have to quarantine. How horrible!”

In this climate, liberals have increasingly been marginalized, struggling to attract public attention. Some have become more cynical and elliptically sarcastic about the Chinese regime, and many of these liberal dissidents have retreated into relatively closed-off chat rooms among themselves, almost invisible to public notice.⁵³

As a result, among the top 100 most liked posts in 2021, only two posts were by liberal opinion leaders. This is the opposite of what the online public sphere looked like in the early 2010s. One of the most popular nationalistic leaders of today reflected on the past decade:

Ten years ago, I was only one of the many voices on Weibo and was unnoticeable. ... Back then, liberals were powerful online. A couple of liberal opinion leaders’ posts would directly determine public opinion of the time. ... Today, China’s public opinion has been reversed. I see this as a sign that Chinese society has matured and progressed. (Feb 2021, 11,948 “likes”)

The initial public perception of a backwards, ill China versus an advanced, idealized West has largely dissipated. Increased access to information about the West and comparisons

⁵³ Shen Yang and Fengshi Wu, “[From Online Mass Incidents to Defiant Enclaves: Political Dissent on China’s Internet](#),” *The China Journal*, no. 87 (January 2022): 20-39.

during the pandemic have led to a strong consensus that “China is doing a better job.” All the Weibo statistics point to a conclusion that the domestic evaluation of China’s political realities has shifted very noticeably and liberal dominance in the Chinese online sphere has come to an end.

“The West’s Double Standards” and the Rise of Nationalism

As liberal voices have waned, nationalistic discourse has gone into overdrive. To clarify, nationalistic voices have coexisted alongside liberal voices from the beginning. Although overshadowed by liberals in the early 2010s, nationalists have drawn on an abundance of information and disinformation from foreign sources to build a narrative about the “double standards” and “hypocrisy” of the West.

Many nationalistic intellectuals have demonstrated up-to-date knowledge of high-profile foreign media outlets. For instance, during the 2014 Hong Kong Occupy Movement, nationalists drew comparisons with the concurrent Occupy Democracy movement in the U.K. They complained that while the Hong Kong movement received in-depth coverage from the BBC, the U.K. movement was quickly put down by the police and barely received any coverage.⁵⁴ More often, nationalists shared screenshots of Twitter and Facebook pages about police brutality, mass shootings, and other negative issues in Western countries and sometimes use these to criticize the negative coverage about China in the Western media.

Accounts of the West’s double standards have been especially popular during the Covid pandemic, with a steady flow of foreign news and foreign social media content widely circulated on Weibo. When the pandemic first broke out, unprecedented public outrage and demands for transparency and free speech exploded in China.⁵⁵ Many opinion leaders condemned the Chinese government for covering up the outbreak. However, popular opinion reversed when people heard news about the cover-ups or slow responses in democratic countries. For instance, an Australian columnist’s opinion piece went viral on Weibo about the UK government’s delayed acknowledgment of a new variant of Covid. The Australian columnist noted that while this “went largely unremarked upon by much of the West,” “had this happened in China, Western media outlets would have been quick to allege a ‘cover-up’.”⁵⁶ Similarly, news about a massive cover-up of the death toll in New York nursing homes were widely circulated, and elicited accusations of American/Western double standards.

Additionally, nationalistic discourses in Weibo have leveraged contradictions in foreign information to make a case for the hypocrisy of the U.S.-led international community. They charge that the U.S. and the West attack China solely for the sake of geopolitical interests rather

⁵⁴ This complaint was not only shared by Chinese netizens. Western scholars also criticized the Western media’s approach towards the two events, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/27/occupy-democracy-london-parliament-square>

⁵⁵ Wei Shan and Juan Chen, “The Covid-19 Pandemic and Political (Dis)Satisfaction: Tracing Public Opinions in China Using Social Media Data,” in EAI Background Brief No. 1529, *National University of Singapore*, 2020, https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/EAI-BB-No.-1529-COVID-19_Weibo-2.pdf

⁵⁶ See the original article: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3117563/coronavirus-has-exposed-australias-double-standards-quasi>

than the claimed pursuit of democracy. For instance, the *New York Times*, citing WHO experts, reported that “China refused to hand over important data” during the WHO investigation.⁵⁷ The *Times* article was denounced as inaccurate and misleading by two experts on Twitter,⁵⁸ and screenshots of such tweets were circulated on Weibo as examples of science being distorted and politicized to attack China. A post of this story received over 16,000 likes, making it one of the top 20 democracy-related posts in 2021.

In short, the U.S. and the West are depicted as amoral powers driven by geopolitical interests rather than democratic values, and the legitimacy of liberal democracy consequently has been undermined to the extent that it is interpreted as a Trojan horse for geopolitical interests.

The shift towards a more negative and pessimistic view of democracy is further confirmed by a word embedding model applied to all of the 118,543 opinion leader posts generated during peak times of political discussions online. Results are presented in the Online Appendix.

THE RISE OF PASSIVE PERFORMANCE LEGITIMACY

The Chinese online public sphere has demonstrated a deteriorating approval of liberal democracy, which has contributed to a reevaluation of political realities at home. In this information environment, even when the government falls short of past performance metrics, popular support for the government still rises inasmuch as other countries seem to be doing worse than China. Popular perceptions of the West’s double standards further insulate the government from international accusations against China’s domestic and international policies. I call this the *passive political legitimacy* of the Chinese regime.⁵⁹

Such attitudinal shifts are not confined to opinion leaders online. Haifeng Huang has conducted research into the relations between international exposure and domestic support.⁶⁰ Through survey experiments, he finds that Chinese people tend to overestimate the socioeconomic conditions of Western countries and that people’s exposure to foreign media content, even when this content is neutral or mildly positive, may ironically lead to increased support for the Chinese government. This effect still holds after controlling for individuals’ self-selection of media exposure. Huang’s research echoes the findings of the present study: when people’s rosy expectations of Western democracies are challenged by exposure to dissatisfying

⁵⁷ See the news report here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/world/asia/china-world-health-organization-coronavirus.html>

⁵⁸ See, for instance, <https://twitter.com/PeterDaszak/status/1360551108565999619>.

⁵⁹ To clarify, the Chinese state certainly enjoys active political legitimacy stemming from its economic and political performance, such as its cumulated economic growth, expanded provision of public goods, and poverty alleviation. Passive and active political legitimacy can complement each other to undergird domestic support.

⁶⁰ Haifeng Huang, “International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015): 613–34; Haifeng Huang and Yao-Yuan Yeh, “Information from Abroad: Foreign Media, Selective Exposure and Political Support in China,” *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2019): 611–36.

political realities, their disillusionment may turn into a source of passive political legitimacy for the government.

More directly, this effect of perceived Western discrimination in boosting the legitimacy of the Chinese government is also verified in other empirical studies. For instance, Yingjie Fan and colleagues carried out an experiment on Chinese international students in the U.S.⁶¹ They found that while these students were more supportive of liberal democracy than their domestic peers, their exposure to anti-Chinese discrimination in the U.S. made them more likely to retreat to their ethnic identity, reduced their belief in democracy, and increased their support for authoritarian rule. Notably, the effect of racial discrimination is most pronounced among students who originally tended to reject Chinese nationalism. Other research and media reports similarly document how Chinese international students and immigrants used to see Western democracies as “heaven” (*tiantang* 天堂) before they went abroad but developed increasingly positive perceptions of China after leaving home.⁶²

This phenomenon of passive political legitimacy also has been found among citizens from other nations. In Russia, Sokolov and colleagues’ research indicates that the recent rise of anti-American sentiments is partly due to Russian liberal elites’ disappointment with the romanticized economic and political order in the U.S., which has translated into nationalistic support for the Russian state.⁶³ A similar dynamic is seen in democratic countries. As an emerging literature shows, voters in democratic countries tend to evaluate domestic economic performance against an international comparison, and punish or reward their own nation’s political incumbents for their relative performance.⁶⁴

In sum, in an interconnected world, citizens’ political attitudes and domestic evaluations are influenced not only by political realities at home, but also by their exposure to information about other countries. China is a salient example, but not unique.

THE ROLE OF STATE CONTROL

⁶¹ Yingjie Fan, Jennifer Pan, Zijie Shao, and Yiqing Xu, “How Discrimination Increases Chinese Overseas Students’ Support for Authoritarian Rule,” *21st Century China Center Research Paper No. 2020-05*, 2020, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3637710>

⁶² Vanessa Fong, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (California: Stanford University Press, 2011); Center on Religion and Chinese Society, “Purdue Survey of Chinese Students and Scholars in the United States: A General Report,” *Purdue University*, 2018, <https://www.globaleast.org/publications/survey-reports/>; “To Many Chinese, America Was Like ‘Heaven.’ Now They’re Not So Sure,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2019; Eyck Freymann, “Young People in China are Losing Faith in the West,” *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/22/racist-attack-asian-americans-china-lost-faith-west/>

⁶³ Boris Sokolov, Ronald F. Inglehart, Eduard Ponarin, Irina Vartanova, and William Zimmerman, “Disillusionment and Anti-Americanism in Russia: From Pro-American to Anti-American Attitudes, 1993–2009,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2018): 534–47.

⁶⁴ Mark Kayser and Michael Peress, “Benchmarking across Borders: Electoral Accountability and the Necessity of Comparison,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (2012): 661–84; Selim E. Aytaç, “Do Voters Respond to Relative Economic Performance? Evidence from Survey Experiments,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2020): 493–507.

The effects of state control and international exposure are closely intertwined: state control can make negative messages about other countries more salient, while exposure to dissatisfying realities of foreign countries can make official propaganda more effective. Hence, my study *cannot* answer the question of how much of this trend is owed to one or the other. This raises a question: how do we know that the observed trend is not solely a manifestation of sophisticated censorship and propaganda?

To reiterate, government propaganda is not the only source of information for Chinese people. Citizens learn about international realities through unofficial channels such as personal experience, foreign media (including social media) content, and information “remitted” by friends and acquaintances living abroad.⁶⁵ These unofficial sources of information may either confirm and strengthen, or contradict and undermine official propaganda.

This effect of international exposure can be verified by looking at Chinese liberals who have left China but became more supportive of the Chinese regime. To clarify, Chinese living overseas may not be completely free from Chinese state control, but it is reasonable to assume that state censorship over them is limited. Moreover, many liberals left China due to their dissatisfaction with domestic politics, and some were even labeled as dissidents before they left. Hence, they ought to be less susceptible to Chinese propaganda compared to the average Chinese citizens. However, after immigrating to democratic countries, some Chinese liberals’ Twitter activity demonstrates similar attitudinal changes to those of their domestic peers.

The experience of one liberal opinion leader in my sample exemplifies this shift. He was a famous investigative journalist known for exposing crime and corruption among Chinese government officials. He and his family emigrated to the U.S. in 2014 after the government crackdown on online speech. His Weibo account was banned and permanently removed in late 2017.

After moving to the U.S., his tweets began to demonstrate disillusionment with America and American democracy. He repeatedly commented how the American dream was dead for his family as they encountered racial discrimination and unfair treatment, and witnessed severe social problems in the U.S. He had formerly harshly criticized China’s sociopolitical problems, such as corruption, the abuse of power, and police brutality. Now, his tweets have reversed:

“Is America free of corruption? No. Corruption is legal [referring to lobbying and political donations]. ... Is America free of the abuse of power? No. They are good at abusing power using legalized means. Is America free of police brutality? No. Bullets are flying all around.”

His tweets also express anger towards the West’s double standards. Commenting on a recent media article about China’s “terrifying zero-covid policy,” he wrote:

⁶⁵ Chinese people have made about 1 billion trips overseas between 2009 and 2018. There are about 10 million Chinese immigrants (first-generation only) living overseas, according to statistics from the U.S. Census: https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2019/demo/Chinese_Diaspora.pdf

“Is China’s zero-covid policy more terrifying than the West’s failure to curb the pandemic that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths? The Western media never altered their tactics of slandering China.”

Although his tweets sometimes read like the nationalistic posts on Weibo, he is torn between criticizing the U.S. and criticizing China. On the one hand, he is disillusioned with the U.S. On the other hand, he has kept up with the news about China and continues to express outrage on Twitter about, for instance, government suppression of freedom of the press.

This opinion leader is *not* an outlier. A few other renowned liberals, such as the dissenting academic Qiao Mu,⁶⁶ have also appeared more “nationalistic” after moving to the U.S. That is, they not only started to criticize problems in the U.S. but also defend China against presumably inaccurate or biased accusations. Their disillusionment with American democracy and their grievances against anti-Chinese racism echo what we see in the popular discourse on Weibo.

In other words, while state control has played an indispensable role in shaping popular discourse in China, the impact of exposure to unsatisfactory realities in democratic countries is also salient. The interplay between the two has rendered the effect more pronounced. In fact, the shift in attitudes among the above liberal figures were quickly picked up by Chinese nationalists and propaganda organs to support their claims of a decaying West.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

How is it that despite stagnant political reforms and harsh international criticisms, the Chinese government today is experiencing increased domestic support? This study argues that, in addition to tightened state control, the Chinese regime has benefited from *passive political legitimacy* stemming from a popular perception that Western countries are performing poorly and experiencing crises, and that political realities at home are relatively satisfactory. The increase in anti-China rhetoric in foreign nations, especially during the pandemic, have cast further doubts within China about the moral authority of the West.

However, this finding does not indicate that authoritarianism has solidified its hold over the Chinese population. Opinion leaders are *not* representative of the population. But since they are an important source of unofficial information and opinions, the finding bears implications for the information environment that the Chinese public is embedded in. More importantly, although international comparisons strengthen citizen confidence in the Chinese political system, this is only to a certain degree. In the long run, international exposure may become a double-edged sword.

Particularly, passive political legitimacy reinforces the regime’s reliance on performance and places pressure on the Chinese government to continue to outperform its democratic counterparts. This feedback loop puts tremendous pressure on Beijing to keep meeting the

⁶⁶ An introduction of Qiao Mu can be found here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/14/qiao-mu-dissenting-academic-leaves-china-for-us>

expectations of the Chinese public. This partly explains why the Chinese government had to stick with the “zero-tolerance covid policy” (*dongtai qinglin* 动态清零) as of early 2022 even though doing so was extremely costly and it had been abandoned by virtually all other governments.

When government performance falls short of people’s expectations, or when popular perceptions of domestic realities prove to be overly rosy, international exposure may work the other way around. New research suggests that netizens tended to overestimate China’s global image during the pandemic.⁶⁷ Corrections to such misconceptions, unsurprisingly, lead to lowered domestic evaluations.

Moreover, when government performance fails, the suppression of criticisms may lead to a strong backlash. Citizens’ grievances during times of good performance may be suppressed but accumulate as well. When political trust is endangered by unpopular policies, outbursts of public dissatisfaction could emerge. This can be seen from the unprecedented public outcries at the beginning of the pandemic,⁶⁸ as well as the widespread uproar during the 2022 Winter Olympics over a woman chained in a shack.⁶⁹

These findings also have implications for the policies of Western democracies. The *passive political legitimacy* of China is facilitated by the interconnectivity of the information age where Western democracies, especially the U.S., are in the international spotlight. The domestic affairs and popular discourses in the U.S. may motivate people in other places to either pursue or turn away from democracy. Given this backdrop, calling the pandemic the “China virus” and creating widespread distrust and hostility toward the Chinese people does everything but rebuild their faith in liberal democracy. In this sense, as Larry Diamond argues, even established democracies are not exempt from the sustained requirement of defending liberal culture and consolidating democracy.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Haifeng Huang, “From “the moon is rounder abroad” to “bravo, my country”: how China misperceives the world,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56, no. 1 (2021): 112-30.

⁶⁸ “Widespread Outcry in China Over Death of Coronavirus Doctor,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2020.

⁶⁹ “Video of Woman Chained to Wall in Shack Causes Outcry in China,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/video-woman-chained-wall-shack-outcry-china-mental-illness>

⁷⁰ Larry Diamond, “Developing Democracy.”