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A Preliminary Analysis of Discourses about China and Democracy

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Abstract: Based on examination of expressed opinions and views, online or offline, this essay attends to talks or discussion about democracy. These talks are taken as discursive manifestation of sociocultural aspirations revealed in a sample of contemporary deliberative rhetoric in China. A selective, small survey of related discourses identifies three arguments for two positions about China and democracy. Historical events, analogy and comparison are shown to remain favored rhetorical strategies in such deliberation.

Keywords: Deliberative rhetoric, democracy, Chinese culture

Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is central to any discourses that aim at changing minds and winning hearts. Deliberative rhetoric specifically is used to make the point about a particular course of action under consideration that is relevant to the public sphere (Aristotle, 2007). Discussion of and discourse about democracy, a political system, are on a topic of public interest, with a direction and represent a case of deliberative rhetoric in practice. Rhetorical practice is expected to articulate culturally rooted thinking and be reflective of relevant ethos; these are keys for the persuasion to be effective. Talks about democracy in China are of interest here as reflections of general mindset of Chinese people in this respect. This paper sets to explore Chinese culture as expressed in opinions, views and discussion of social affairs in relation to democracy and communicated in public space online and offline, on both sides of the great firewall. It is motivated by observations during the student led occupy movement in Hong Kong, which took place in the fall of 2014 and have attracted broad condemnation and attack from mainland people as well as the government forming the social context of the event. For the purpose here, culture is approached as the “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1980), as culture to a large extent manifests specifically in cultures—a culture expresses the collective sentiment of its people. This project thus is to gain understanding of culture and ordinary (mainland) Chinese view of democracy as a sociocultural aspiration, or a possibility in life, even if it might not be part of their life. In relation, the related discourse is studied for deliberative and rhetorical strategies as one communicative aspect of the culture.

Rhetoric, Culture and Discourse on Democracy

That rhetoric is rooted in culture (e.g., Oliver, 1962) is now a received view; the two are also considered to be mutually constitutive (e.g., Strecker & Tyler, 2009). In the case of China, known as a culture with a strong past orientation, history is revered and historical lessons hold much importance as precedence. For centuries Chinese thinkers and writers have been relying on several types of reasoning with corresponding rhetorical means for gaining knowledge as well as for gaining others’ understanding in communication. While scholars have noted changes in rhetorical treatment in recent Chinese public communication (e.g., Zhang, 2008), a few rhetorical strategies used in ancient times are still very common today (e.g., Chen, 2005; Lu, 1998). In keeping with the long-held emphasis on the past, reasoning by historical examples along with reasoning by analogy are common ways of making argument. It has been noted that historical anecdotes are widespread in traditional Chinese argumentative texts (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 1995) as well as in contemporary persuasion. Often historical stories are employed in an analogy as one particular way of comparison to a current issue, making a stronger case (e.g., Chen, 2005) for a proposition. Historical events were taken as facts that could not be altered, or erased, and thus gained strength as a persuasive tool in deliberation. Additionally, taking a stand on base of knowledge of history and canonical sources, e.g., short accounts of events in history, may much enhance one’s appeal, add to one’s credibility (van Els, 2012), and make for more convincing persuasion. Such rhetorical tools in persuasion remain potent today, to be discussed in this essay.

Regarding deliberation about democracy, a recent highly-acclaimed book in China, *the China wave: Rise of a civilizational state* (Zhang & Müller-Kirsten, 2012) serves as an apt indication of an increasingly vocal crowd. Catching on the notion of civilizational state as an explanatory tool (e.g., Jacques, 2011), Zhang and Müller-Kirsten make the assertion that democracy is not for China. The statement appears to be at odds with the long-standing official directive from the ruling party and the government, which state otherwise, for example, in issuing the socialists core values (e.g., Renminwan, 2013). The view expressed, however, appears to have gained traction and received widespread acknowledgement if not outright support. It is apparently also in line with the articulation of Chinese Dream, a term said to be promoted by the current President in late 2012. In this sense, one may not be overstating that this view somehow meets official approval if not overt endorsement. The Chinese Dream presents a

vision of a China that is strong, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful. However, there is no mention of democracy in the Chinese Dream as officially publicized. The four parts of the Chinese Dream are presented and understood (e.g., Kuhnjune, 2013) to pertain to economic, political, diplomatic, scientific, and military aspects for equity and fairness with rich culture, high morals, amity among social classes as well as healthy environment. Although a democratic aspiration would be relevant to several of these domains, it is not included explicitly or specified but left for speculation.

Government lines aside, views of ordinary Chinese about democracy are worth looking into, especially for scholars interested in communication, culture and cultural change. The open assertion that democracy is not for China, which is advocated by Zhang (2013; also see Zhang & Müller-Kirsten, 2012)—Zhang has explained this claim in a television show (see Hasan, 2013)—along with supports from the masses, are seen as expression of the similar state of mind underlying the Chinese dream, although it is not directly about it. The topic is a good entry point to Chinese political communication for better understanding of the culture and communication.

Materials sampled. Zhang and Müller-Kirsten (2012) is part of a cursory purposive survey of the discourse about democracy and China. The materials used here are gathered in the survey, mostly done in 2015; a small proportion is from a follow-up search in 2016. The data collection is done by first following viral public discussions about current affairs, particularly those that have something to do with democracy, for example, discussions about Hong Kong (student) protests and about mainland civil unrest incidents. Relevant threads then were traced for other leads and talks, a few of which had gone back to decades ago on this broad topic, to be complemented with occasional participant observations (on public or private occasions) when chance presented itself. The sampling, search and observation, proceeded with the aim to broaden the scope and be inclusive of various views; special attention was paid to the arguments or positions conveyed so as to identify views with diversity in perspective. While it is rather limited, selective, and far from a thorough search and definitely not comprehensive, the survey turned out to be a decent overview of relevant communication and messages among Chinese in the mainland or some overseas of mainland origin and is considered to have covered most major viewpoints.

This approach necessitated a careful reading, repeated several times until relative saturation, of all materials to identify and understand the main points, underlying assumptions, and the suggested course of action, whether implied or advocated, that would follow as way to go. These included talks about (active) participation of the people in public affairs with their voices as well as comments on this practice. Presented views and opinions were compared, sorted, and combined into thematic patterns of argument lines that exhausted all materials gathered. The following section presents the findings along with discussion of each respectively and as a whole.

Positions and Reasoning

Among the materials gathered, I discern three lines of reasoning associated with two positions about democracy and what it is to China, directly or indirectly. These are described and interpreted below.

No democracy for China – it is the tradition. The first of the arguments, made from a cultural stance, claims that the current Chinese (political) system, with a strong ruler (on base of a version of elitism), is a unique and proven alternative to democracy (Li, 2013; also see Eng, 2013) and that it very much deserves proper global recognition still withheld. This is reasoned to be a system all of its own that cannot be exported nor denied, but is what Chinese culture traditionally is and what it (should) have had been. Much evidence, however selective and one-sided it might be, is provided in support of its legitimacy and viability. Notable, however, for the objective here is the absence, in this view of Chinese culture, of conceptual and perceptual distinction of the public and the private as two life domains, which itself is telling but is for another occasion and not to be discussed here. The emphasis here, rather, is on the distinction between the (absolute) power that is and the following masses—that the nature of this culture is described as despotism and unquestionable governance by one, which might be one person or an entity acting as one person. This tradition is said to have long been articulated in *the Classic of Poetry*: ““*jia tianxia*” (one-house reign); “*pu tian zhi xia, mo fei wang tu; shuai tu zhi bin, mo fei wang chen*”” (There is no land under the heaven not belong to the one emperor; no one on the land not bow as a subject to the one) (lixindai, 2015). These are quoted as ancient wisdom that has been proven to have contemporary value to be upheld. The merit of historic lesson, taken to be self-evident, is presented as a parallel to the state now to support the point for the tradition to be followed. The view is also a part of the continuous collectivism vs. individualism debate said to be underlying scholarly discussion on the legal and political reform in China (Shih, 1999), or that of traditional culture vs. thinking with western influence.

This very view is seen in many a WeChat or other online/social media posts in early September of 2014, in angry reaction to Hong Kong’s Umbrella movement demanding universal suffrage in the territory. One post (Jing, 2014) asked a rhetorical question used for its title, “Hong Kong, what motherland owes you.” The writer went on to recount eight great things that the mainland government had done for Hong Kong’s benefit, contrasting with eight

incidents in Hong Kong that took place against the central government (and, some by inference, mainlanders). Political viewpoints notwithstanding, the implied relationship between a government and people is unmistakable. This writer accused Hong Kong (people) of being ungrateful in this metaphorical mother-child (parallel to ruler-subject relationship in one of the five cardinal relationships in the Confucian tradition) relationship, evoking the traditional filial duty of obedience and obligation to feel as well as show gratitude. The post was endorsed and applauded by many, quickly going viral in online reposts. The essence of the post apparently resonates with popular sentiment expressed in numerous similar private remarks. While the substance of this matter is not a concern here, the clearly expressed, traditionally rooted, sense of hierarchy cannot be mistaken. The indignation and the outrage are due to perceived provocation by the double offenses of protesting Hongkongers, who are seen as not only being ungrateful for the many benefits bestowed on them but also being disrespectful of and challenging the unquestionable social order that has a taken-for-granted hierarchy with the ruler on the top. The upshot is clear and resounding: democracy has no place in a culture such as this.

This first argument and particularly the reasoning appear to have evolved from an earlier line and seem to better suit the current social context and current state of China that is widely seen among the domestic public as having ascended to near the top of nations. Zhang (2013) has summarized this view well, for to him China is doing fine without a liberal democracy, not now and not in its tradition as “the world’s longest continuous civilization associating with a huge modern state.” The current state of China is (implicitly) considered to have re-ascended to be among the top rank now, thus may no longer have much to learn from other systems, which was the view not so long ago especially about the mass, discussed next.

People not yet ready – due to the tradition. A second argument and related reasoning is a variation of and in alignment with the first; its use, however, appeared to have come earlier and has a longer history. The argument similarly rests on what is perceived to be a cultural tradition taken as the default and legitimate mode. Even though less absolute, this earlier reasoning holds a similar position as the first, but hedging on base of a precondition and expressing reservations. It starts with acknowledgement that Chinese people have not yet become good enough in quality (“*zhongguo renmin suzhi di*”) and, thus are not yet able to participate (in a democracy). This admission allegedly has originated from the country’s top leaders, first reportedly heard from Mr. Deng Xiaoping, then Chinese head of state, during his 1978 visit with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee (Kissinger, 2011). The same came up again from Mr. Jiang Zemin, then the President, in a 2000 U.S. television interview with Mike Wallace of 60 Minutes, the TV Magazine (X. Liu, 2015). The de facto claim, based on a historical assessment or such anecdotes later, is presented as a justification for the (autocratic) system in China without rejecting outright or denying the value of democratic system. By doing so, this view supports, in fact opts, to continue for some time and legitimizes the tradition of social hierarchy with recognition of/submission to the ruler by the rule. This position thus implicates democracy as alien to Chinese culture, albeit leaving it open for possible change and its adoption in the unspecified future.

The line of argument has been circulating and enjoying broad acceptance in all manner of ways since—it is evoked whenever China (or some Chinese people) is perceived to have come up short, in comparison with any other culture, in any aspects of the society. Its close association with democracy as a political system has also remained in the opposite way. For example, xiwudae (2009) posted an essay on a public forum, *tianya* (a popular online community with a large number of users and much active participation), criticizing officialdom worship. Copied from the *Prosecutors Daily (Jiancha Ribao)*, the essay cites as the source of corruption Chinese cultural tradition of looking up to mandarins as parents, placing them above people (with control yet without due concern and care). The numerous, overwhelmingly supporting, user responses suggest this being a received opinion, that the culprit is cultural tradition. It may not be desirable or even popular, it is received nevertheless. Koo (2014) makes the same point, albeit again critically, and goes further to suggest this to be characteristic of Chinese culture rooted in its nature, pointing to the phenomenon of the state in fact being part of personal business of the top leader in all important decisions and that there is no consultation not to mention any public involvement. More recently on March 24 of 2016, an article on *Peoples’ Daily* online forum provoked a flurry of comments, some seven thousand strong in less than 4 hours, responding to its premise of people nowadays being of low quality although many not without sarcasm (Fu, 2016). The same is seen in user responses to, as well as the post by, yinguonaxieshi (2016, June), which presents many varied immediate responses to British EU-exit referendum result as evidence of inevitable ignorance of populace and inadequacy of democracy. These comments suggest the extent to which the view of people-not-ready (and may-never -be) has become part of the social psyche, regardless of whether one agrees with/appreciates it or not.

In line with these two argument lines, two studies provide data-based understanding on people’s action and expressed opinion. One is by Taneja and Wu (2014) on reported Great Fire Wall scaling among netizens of the P. R. C. The authors suggest that cultural proximity rather than information blockage explains Chinese internet users’

preference of culturally (language & geographic location) defined website cluster, which is not much different from users of other regions in the world that do not experience systematic internet blockage. The conclusion is that Chinese people have exhibited cultural preference of available local contents and are largely content with the current state, getting heavily censored information. Another study is a recent Pew survey in P. R. C. of opinion on the state of the country. The survey includes the opinion on corruption in mainland, which is here taken as a measure of view on democracy with a direct association—acceptance of corruption would be a rejection of democracy even though not vice versa, with the understanding that it is somewhat simplistic and that the two clearly are not the same. The survey results show that “44% of Chinese surveyed agreeing corruption is a very big problem. Still, this is down 10 percentage points from 2014, when 54% cited corrupt officials as a top concern. Only about two-in-ten cite corrupt businesspeople, education, unemployment, traffic and working conditions as very big problems for China” (Wike & Parker, 2015). The survey results are similar to other polls, although some have explained the results as natural outcomes of all-out government control and not to be taken as a view of free-will without pressure (e.g., Chang, 2015). By and large, evidence such as these pieces point to a cultural tendency to accept the norm of a state without democracy or no public voice on public affairs. It indicates a tacit acceptance of hierarchy.

A logical extension of upholding social hierarchy is the legitimacy of power expectation by those of higher status. Observers of China (e.g., Li, 2015) point to, as proof, Chinese visitors abroad who forcefully demand public respect and reception to be in line with their status and expectations. Incidents are reported in the military parade in Beijing as part of the Anti-Fascist celebration in September 2015, when overseas celebrities were heavily criticized or flamed online for not displaying sufficient, the expected, interest in this important event. It is cited as illustration of a culture believing in the interest of the state over that of individuals (C. Liu, 2015). In other words, the interest of people as individuals is nonexistent, being subsumed by the state embodied in the power elite. A wave of web posts condemn a Taiwan-based actress, e.g., for being utterly "(i)nappropriate to show scenes from your personal life" during the national military parade (C. Liu, 2015), made a collective endorsement of the supremacy of the state and the government over any individuals. That being the case, democracy is simply useless by inference.

Diversity of views - also the tradition. In contrast, there is a third view with a contradicting position to the other two views. It points out the fact that historically speaking, besides the tradition—the powerful only in dominance with the dissent eliminated AND one party alone having the say, there is also the cultural tradition of being inclusive of all views with consultation and discussion of competing positions (Bao, 2015). This alternative state of matters was present thousands of years ago in the Warring States period. During that period the practice of disputation also thrived with different views being voiced and rivaling, ostensibly not unlike what one might expect in a democratic exercise. Both largely ceased with establishment of the Qin Dynasty, which had established a governing system and cultivated the imperial rule that contemporary China is yet to grow out of (Qin, 2015). It is commonly understood that this openness has since not been allowed to happen again in any significant way, although a most recent episode, brief as it was, is suggested taking place in the late 1980s not long after the economic reform and China’s re-opening to the world. The mainstream, of one that dominates, has been not only exhorted, advocated, but backed and pushed by the power that be, ever since, including the Republic following the Qing Dynasty not long afterwards.

The powerful that reigns, however, has never been able to totally eliminate the alternative voices and not for lack of trying. This very fact stands to contradict the position of two other arguments above; the cultural tradition indeed does not eliminate, nor does it preclude, diversity of views. A part of this alternative tradition continues even though it apparently remains on the margin, mostly in the learned circle and very much limited to intellectual discussion and exploration. Competing views and different opinions, obscure and suppressed as they are, have always been coming forth in different forms, including full-length books, essays, short comments, informal debates or formal presentations – even as this paper is in preparation. Chen (2016), for example, while concurring and accepting the received notion of below-par Chinese populace, lays the blame of this state of affairs squarely at the foot of the system that comes out of and has been associated with revolutionary movements in the past century, calling the current state undesirable and the revenge of the history. Chen makes the opposite point with contemporary historical events, which he suggests have deeply impacted and led to low humanity quality (*renwen suzhi*) and are beyond the matter of knowledge, talent, character and identity, etc. Zhang (e.g., 2015, 2016) also has written about democracy and multiplicity of views, attending especially to the role of free speech, directly addressing the matter of allowing for varied opinions and dissenting views, the hallmark of democracy. Xu (2013) goes further to name the very foundation of Chinese tradition (legalism, Confucianism and Zen Buddhism), that their combined influence is the root of disastrous state of the country in the moral front, while Zhao (2015) comments on never-before remarks by a current party leader about legitimacy of the ruling party. Zhang’s (2014) argument, that democracy with all its many flaws is still superior to autocracy, proceeds partly on the base of the history of the Republic of China. Zhang relates anecdote of its congressional operation as well as descriptions of

democracy in ancient Greek. In comparison he points to the ever-predictable outcome of the People's Congress (the national legislature of the P. R. C.) with no dissent and no difference in views expressed, listing pros and cons of both, to show which to be better for a society and the majority of people.

In daily life, evidence abounds of popular explosion of opinions now and again especially at time of incidents with high public concern, e.g., food safety, medicine fraud, financial scam, living environmental pollution, or disciplinary agency brutality, etc. Online posts and comments often emerge in thousands instantly, prompting the authority to quickly come up with an official edict in order, so that people may toe the line and public's criticizing voices be quieted down. A couple of testimonies pointing to official routine reactions to such occurrence: one comments on a book on sale for some time being retracted and then banned (binghechunhui, 2015), and the other is a report by the state-run Xinhua news agency, that in 2014 Chinese websites had deleted one billion posts in 2014, and "authorities closed down about 2,200 websites and 20 million online forums, blogs and social media accounts that had spread erotic and illegal content" (English News CN, 2015). That may be merely a drop in a bucket; yet shows that there are surely different opinions and views. Studies estimate that between 13 – 16% of posts disappear (Wertime, 2015), that is a considerable number of different voices. In such cases, the two parallel cultural traditions are in full display (although one has by far the upper hand hence the mainstream versus the alternative), and stand as evidence for the second position.

Rhetorical tools. With respect to the rhetorical practice in deliberation, several interrelated strategies can be identified, also seen from the examples above. First, consistent to findings of other studies (e.g., van Els, 2012), using history, past events and historical examples, as rhetorical tool is a common practice in the discourse examined. The persuasive power of history is perceived to be such that all three arguments employ it, despite that the three have much varied reasoning or argument for opposite positions. This rhetorical tool is directed toward highly receptive audience/readers/users in general and is effective in that sense. Interestingly, there are instances of *argumentum ad antiquitatem* (appeal to antiquity), which provide no explanations of the reason for ways of the past/in history to be followed, nor arguments made as to why those should be respected, yet not often refuted on this base. This is the case especially in online comments, which typically are short with no elaboration. The limit of social media as a channel for deliberation incidentally becomes clear in such cases, for it is not designed for that and does not accommodate well the needed argumentation. Further, as Chen (2005) suggested historical stories are often utilized in combination with comparison or as analogy, another common rhetorical tool in ancient times. This kind of comparison is also seen in the data here—it served to highlight the strengths of the advocated position (or weaknesses of the contrasting one), through the perceived historical facts/events (e.g., past successful strong-rulers), and thus bolster the argument they support.

Third, emotional appeal and, closely related to it, moral appeal, may also be seen in the rhetorical mix for the deliberative discourse studied here. As the tradition is specified as a de facto way to go, historical facts are associated with and taken as representing cultural tradition. In this way they also appeal to cultural identification, part of emotional core of individuals, and may sway the audience at the gut level especially in the understood world context—made clear by the reference to the Chinese characters (considered unique and unparalleled). In relation, the emotional appeal works from yet another angle, that of morality. Reverence of tradition of social hierarchy and filial piety, long being espoused as virtues, is to Chinese all but a moral appeal. Many have observed that moral appeals are important in Chinese persuasion (e.g., Garrett, 1993); emotions often have moral importance in its foundation—belief in deep feelings and emotions can be inseparable to that of moral virtues such as *ren* (kindness), *yi* (righteousness), *zhong* (loyalty), *xin* (faith), and *cheng* (sincerity) (e.g., Chen, 2005). All except the first (*ren*) listed here may be seen, in this sense, as part of cultural identification, what matters to being Chinese, and what works well in deliberation for all sides.

Final Words

The discussion above clearly points to the culture-specific, no-democracy to be the dominant view of the discourse examined, regardless how much it is reflective of Chinese culture or if Chinese culture is uniform as claimed. Two reasoning lines—that the traditional, strong-ruler system has worked best, and that due to this very tradition, people are not yet prepared nor qualified for other than the tradition—are in support of the position of no-democracy for China. The third reasoning takes a second position and points out that a cultural tradition is also available to allow diversity of views and opinions, by which it is implied that democracy is a feasible option in the cultural frame. The first position appears to represent the majority of views (but see King, Pan, & Roberts, 2016 about strategic fabrication of online posts), touting it to be the path with Chinese characteristics. On a different note, however, one commonality is discernable that tradition is to be respected, that history carries much weight in people's mind, and that culture is something set and given, even though interpretations of what it means differ.

On the other hand, the claim of a culture/society being unique is not new or particularly made in China alone. This claim implies and insists on culture-specificity, takes a strong relativist stand, and can better be understood by putting it in perspective. Several of the local strongmen in Asia (e.g., Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore) have long demanded no less, presenting Asian values (e.g., Bell, 2000; Shih, 1999) as a solid ground in resistance of Western powers and Western dominance, this stand practically rebutting the very culture-uniqueness notwithstanding. These strongmen have all been highly critical of the (media and culture) hegemonic power of the West in the international arena, only to turn around and do the same domestically. It is to note that the parties making such a claim share more than the similarity of their views—they all have a vision, it seems, that does not include democracy. Moreover, they have something else in common, i.e., their status internally and externally is a key point—all are in iron control internally, and aspired to be in control externally. Mere coincidence can hardly explain such similarity. While there is indeed very much a cultural tradition of social hierarchy of status and power differentials, one must not lose sight of how culture develops and can appreciate an observation by Bourdieu (1977) that culture takes shape largely after the dominant economic and political system of a society. In a culture of large power distance, the system often does not accommodate difference in views and stands where the course of action is concerned about the society as a whole. Thus, so forms the culture of mass' submission and conformity where there is little room for alternatives; thus, so culture is taken as given in political communication and persuasion, Chinese or otherwise.

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