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ONLINE OPINION AND THE NATURE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN CHINA

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To my mother.

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ABBREVIATIONS

API: Application Programming Interface

CA: Correspondence Analysis

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CPCS: Chinese Political Compass Survey

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies

KMT: Kuomintang / Chinese Nationalist Party

LDA: Latent Dirichlet Allocation

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation investigates public opinion and the nature of the public sphere in China by studying online discourse between 2009 and 2017. I ask what consensuses and cleavages have characterized the Chinese public sphere since the late 2000s, and what the structure of China's ideological spectrum is.

What sets this dissertation apart from previous studies about public opinion and ideology is three-fold. First, I study public opinion through the lens of opinion leaders. I argue that opinion leaders are the most important actors in the public sphere as they play a crucial role in leading and shaping public opinion, especially in an authoritarian context. Second, I combine large-scale social network data and textual data to investigate online opinion and to identify the structure of an ideological spectrum that captures these opinions. To start with, I estimate a left-right ideological axis based on social network data. Then I add other dimensions of the ideological spectrum by delving into the variations in online discourses. Eventually, I revisit the dimensionality of ideology and propose a new framework for understanding ideology. Third, I disaggregate public opinion into different topic domains. In particular, I investigate people's opinions on nationalistic topics, their understandings of democracy and visions for an ideal political system, and their expectations for the socioeconomic system. By combining different aspects of public opinion and juxtaposing people's voices across issues, I am able to uncover the multiplicity of public discourse in China. This investigation is based on online discourse produced on a daily basis between 2009 and 2017.

Through a multi-faceted long-term analysis drawing on large-scale data, I find that the Chinese public sphere is not dominated by pro-government nationalist discourse, but instead presents a consensus for economic and political reforms. However, underneath this consensus,

there are a full range of political discourses that represent combinations of different, even seemingly conflicting opinions. For instance, nationalists may draw on liberal discourse to criticize the government for domestic social problems. Supporters of democracy may express pro-regime opinions when they talk about issues pertinent to social stability and economic prosperity.

Such multiplicity and complexities of Chinese public opinion highlight an important finding of this dissertation: the common assumption that Chinese public opinion is polarized between pro-regime nationalism and anti-regime activism is not supported by empirical data. Instead, public opinion demonstrates cross-cutting consensus and cleavages. While a majority of opinion leaders deem political reforms necessary, they envision the future of China in fundamentally different ways and have a different order of priorities. This ironically prevents citizens from mobilizing and forging a united effort pushing for one clear agenda. Implications for the nature of ideological preferences and the nature of the public sphere in China are discussed at the end of the dissertation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What are Chinese values? This question is often raised when the relationship between China and "the West," namely Western democracies, is strained due to disputes over diplomacy, trade, territories, or other issues. Politicians and the media outside of China increasingly attribute these tensions and conflicts to "differences in values," claiming that those disputes can be best explained by a clash of civilizations and ideologies.[1] However, when interrogated, the concept of "Chinese values" or "Chinese ideology" is loaded with ambiguity.

The question of Chinese values is also relevant for academic discussion on public opinion and the public sphere in authoritarian states. There are three common frameworks that scholars and the media tend to employ, intentionally or not, to understand the nature of the public sphere, particularly in an authoritarian context.

The first is a Habermasian framework. Since Jürgen Habermas published his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (English translation) in 1989, the study of the public sphere and its role in politics has long been a field of interest for sociologists and social scientists in general. Theorists may differ in how they define the boundaries of the public sphere, but they share a consensus that the public sphere is *independent* of the state. They do agree that it is where autonomous and capable agents carry out public discussion and debates and form public opinion on social and political issues (e.g., Dewey, 1954; Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992; Arendt, 2013).

[1] A typical column of this kind is Zhang Lin, "US-China Trade War is really a Clash of Civilisations and Ideologies," *South China Morning Post,* accessed May 18, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/2168492/us-china-trade-war-really-clash-civilisations-and-ideologies.

In what follows, two important assumptions about this theoretical position should be highlighted: On the one hand, theorists conceptualize public opinion as political discourse and expression in a discursive sphere rather than aggregated opinions collected from a (representative) sample of the population. My dissertation follows this tradition to assess public opinion by investigating political discourse in public discussion.

On the other hand, and more importantly, the Habermasian school stresses that the public sphere is supported by an autonomous civil society. In political participation literature, civil society and the public sphere are the two most common modes of civic participation—citizens may participate in public life by joining civic associations and activities, namely civil society (Tocqueville, 2004; Putnam, 1993; Skocpol, 1997, 2004), or they can participate by engaging in reasoned dialogue and deliberation, namely in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Eley, 1996; Arendt, 2013). Even though the definitions of the two concepts still remain contested, they are both defined as a space *outside* of the state.

In particular, based on the experiences of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Habermas theorized the development of the bourgeoisie public sphere as an unintended consequence of the socioeconomic transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe. During this process, absolutist societies gradually changed into trade-driven capitalist states, giving rise to a social sphere where social elites and the bourgeoisie came together in theaters, coffee shops, clubs, and so on, to chat and form public opinion through informed and rational communication. Eventually, the public sphere flourished and made authority subject to public scrutiny under the law. Note that during the initial formation of the public sphere, Habermas assumed a weak, noninterventionist state that was not interested in regulating this private sphere

(Habermas, 1989; Eley, 1992) Therefore, according to this literature, a non-interventionist state is an important premise for the rise of the public sphere (Lei, 2013).

Moreover, this literature also suggests that the development of the public sphere is contingent on the development of a healthy civil society. As Alexis de Tocqueville (2004) articulated in *Democracy in America,* participation in civic associations (i.e., associationalism) helps citizens achieve civic integration and solidarity as well as cultivate an orientation towards participating in politics. The act of participating in turn promotes rationality and the ability to make rational-critical arguments about the general interests of society. The public sphere, therefore, arises from a flourishing civil society (Habermas 1989; Calhoun 1993).

China is often cast as a foil for the European experience in that it has a vastly different domestic environment for public participation based on the second framework—I name it an "authoritarian framework"—which calls into question the existence of an autonomous public sphere in China. This framework assumes that a repressive authoritarian state suppressing civil society and censoring citizens would inevitably undermine the development of the public sphere. This authoritarian framework deems China's weak civil society and extensive state censorship as a destructive force obstructing the development of the Chinese public sphere.

At times, scholars see China's distinctive political and cultural conditions as an indication that the concept of the public sphere is not necessarily applicable to China (Calhoun, 1993; Wakeman Jr, 1993). A vast literature on censorship emphasizes the role of state propaganda in manipulating public opinion (Human Rights Watch, 2006; Shambaugh, 2007; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2017). This authoritarian framework is most often loosely used by mass media outside of China. A number of mainstream media platforms, such as CNN, Bloomberg, and the *Wall Street Journal*, extensively discuss censorship in China and describe a disciplined citizenry and a

manipulated public sphere where people's voices are by and large controlled by the government.[2] Even when censorship is not the topic of interest, much media coverage on Chinese values tends to pay the most attention to the values and ideological utterances promulgated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Unofficial discourse and public opinion tend to receive little attention. For instance, in light of growing tensions between the US and China in 2019, *The New York Times* published an opinion column showing uncharacteristic support for President Trump, claiming that "China Deserves Donald Trump" and his hardline policies because "values matter, and differences in values matter."[3] In this column, the author conflates the Chinese government's political agenda with the values of the Chinese people. In short, the authoritarian framework assumes that the Chinese public sphere is little more than an arena where the state can distribute propaganda and manufacture public consent. According to this view, public opinion in China is simply a reflection of official discourses.

In more recent years, the authoritarian framework has been significantly challenged by a number of empirical studies. A well-established literature discusses the political effects of digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), arguing that the media and the Internet have empowered and amplified voices from everyday citizens. As a result, a "cyber" public sphere is flourishing in China where public discussion and debate are taking place, and criticisms

[2] There are numerous reports on this topic. A few examples include Kristy Lu Stout, "China's Great Firewall: Fortune at the Expense of Freedom?" *CNN*, accessed June 20, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2015/03/25/asia/china-internet-censorship-kristie-lu-stout/index.html; Bloomberg News, "The Great Firewall of China, accessed June 20, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/great-firewall-of-china; and Nicholas Bequelin, "China's New Propaganda Machine," *Wall Street Journal,* accessed June 20, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123326012456829891.

[3] Thomas L. Friedman, May 21, 2019, "China Deserves Donald Trump," *New York Times,* accessed May 22, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/21/opinion/china-trump-trade.html

of the government are at least selectively tolerated (Yang, 2009; Qian and Bandurski, 2010; Lei, 2011; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014; Lei, 2019; Huhe, Tang, and Chen, 2018; Han, 2018).

This literature lays a foundation for what we would call a Gramscian framework, the third framework in understanding public opinion in an authoritarian context. The Gramscian framework *does* recognize the existence of the public sphere in authoritarian countries. However, this perspective highlights the tensions and antagonism between two contending bodies in the public sphere. It presents public opinion as a dichotomy between a pro-government, nationalistic, and statist stance on the one hand, and anti-government, liberal, and pro-market values on the other. I label it "Gramscian" in line with the idea put forward by the Italian Marxist philosopher. Gramsci perceives that discussions in the public sphere are essentially a war of positions between the cultural hegemony of the ruling class and counter-hegemonic forces formed by the ruled.

While few theorists engage directly with Gramsci, their understandings of the public sphere in authoritarian countries echo the Gramscian framework. For instance, Diamond (1999) predicted that when a regime represses and dominates its citizens rather than engaging in discussion and negotiation with them, social forces against the regime may begin to defy all symbols of political authority. In the same vein, Linz and Stepan (1996) warn that post-totalitarian states may breed cynicism, indiscipline, and alienation in society, impeding the development of social consensus and the collective interest.

Multiple empirical studies also resonate with the Gramscian framework. For instance, Lei (2011, 2013, 2019) accounts for the rise of a nationwide counterpublic sphere in China where citizens use the law and the media to challenge the state and hold political authority accountable. Studying numerous incidents in which an informed citizenry actively participated in online discussion and demanded government accountability and transparency, Lei makes a case for a

"contentious" public sphere where public discussion functions as a "tug-of-war" between the state and the people (Lei 2013: 9; Lei, 2019). Other studies also demonstrate the presence of a vibrant online activism, indicating that with extensive state censorship, citizens enthusiastically partake in public discussion and creatively bypass, resist, and challenge state control (Yang, 2009; Qiang, 2011; Marolt, 2011; Pu and Scanlan, 2012; Zhang, Liu, and Wen, 2018).

Another variant of this literature questions the liberalizing effect of the Internet, arguing that the Chinese Internet has also empowered nationalist forces that are hostile to democracy and are actively countering liberal discourse in the online public sphere (Weatherley, 2014; Shen and Breslin, 2010; Han, 2018). Nonetheless, this literature also follows the Gramscian framework to characterize the nature of the public sphere as a struggle between liberal voices undermining authoritarian rule and nationalistic discourse defending the government.

Thus far, scholars have not reached an agreement on what constitutes the dominant values in the Chinese public sphere. Nevertheless, most of them explicitly or implicitly present public opinion as a binary choice between a combination of authoritarianism, nationalism, and state interventionism—namely a "China Model"—and a combination of democratic liberalism and free market—namely a "Western Path" (Mulvad, 2018). This dichotomy resonates strongly with and is reinforced by academic and non-academic discussions within and outside of China.

Note that this dichotomy assumes that there are only two options for China's development: either following the Western path of modernization to install both liberal democracy *and* a free market in China, or insisting on the "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that defends the rule of the CCP and emphasizes state intervention. This assumption is powered by modernization and democratization theories that in turn assume a linear development of history and see liberal democracy as the end goal of modernization (for

instance, Lipset, 1959; Fukuyama, 1992; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Diamond, 1999; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Many scholars have noticed that a number of countries have failed to make the predicted transition to democracy (Rakner and Svåsand, 2005), and they have focused on classifying these regime types. For instance, they posit the idea of "a hybrid regime" (Diamond, 2002), "semi-democracy" (Smith, 2005), "semi-authoritarianism" (Ottaway, 2003), "semi-dictatorship" (Brooker, 2000), "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2010), and "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler, 2006). These "hybrids" are seen as products of an incomplete or failed transition from authoritarianism to democracy rather than real-life alternatives to the ideal-typical authoritarianism/democracy schism.

Can Chinese public discourse be characterized by this schism? Do the Chinese people envision alternatives to this binary? So far, little scholarly effort has been made to investigate this question in an empirical setting. Mulvad's (2018) study is one of the few pioneering studies that problematizes the Gramscian framework and deconstructs the authoritarianism-democracy dichotomy. Through interviews with twenty-eight elite Chinese intellectuals, Mulvad uncovers two understudied variants of political discourse. First, he finds that a preference for Confucian politics can in fact go hand in hand with a preference for free markets. Second, support for socialism can be associated with approval of democracy. While these studies are informative, how can we conceptualize Chinese ideological debate in the public sphere beyond the ideas of elite intellectuals? This study picks up where Mulvad left off and expands from focusing on a small group of intellectuals to investigating large-scale online discourse across multiple topics in order to explore popular values and important cleavages in the Chinese public.

Reflecting on the existing conceptual frameworks and the bourgeoning literature on the ideological spectrum of China, my dissertation joins scholarly efforts to characterize the

pluralistic nature of the public sphere in an authoritarian state by investigating Chinese public opinion and conceptualizing ideological cleavages in China.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The theoretical ambition of this dissertation is to explore the nature of the Chinese public sphere. I ask what kind of public sphere exists in China. Is the public sphere a homogeneous space reinforcing official discourse, a contentious public resisting the authoritarian state, or other kind of public sphere? To answer this question, I consider a few empirical questions: Given the existence of vibrant online discussion in China, what mainstream consensuses and values, if any, dominate unofficial discourse? What are the major points of debate and contention? How do we conceptualize the ideological cleavages in online public discussion?

In light of the main arguments about the Chinese public sphere in existing studies, I further disaggregate these questions into three aspects:

1. Nationalism.

The authoritarian framework assumes that public opinion in China is in alignment with official discourse. Further, scholars argue that nationalism has been employed as an instrument by the CCP to compensate for the waning communist ideology in post-Mao China, and the government promotes nationalism as a way to signal its resolve in diplomatic disputes and/or to deflect criticism of domestic affairs (Zhao; 2004; Weatherley, 2014). This view is reinforced by the fact that the CCP usually plays the nationalist card in its official discourse. For example, *People's Daily*, the leading state media outlet, published 143 articles using the phrase "hurting

the feelings of the Chinese people" (伤害了中国人民的感情)[4] between 1946 and 2015. Along these lines, one may speculate that pro-government nationalist values are dominant in the Chinese public sphere.

To test the empirical validity of this commonly held view, I investigate online discussion in relation to several key nationalistic topics. I seek to answer the following questions: In the larger context of public discussion, to what extent do nationalist sentiments dominate online discourse? Within the nationalist camp, what are people's main views and do they reproduce or deviate from the official discourse?

2. Liberal democracy.

The Gramscian framework highlights the presence of a flourishing online activism in the Chinese public sphere. According to this account, this liberalizing force is powered by an anti-government, liberal-leaning ideology that holds the potential to move China towards democracy. However, before we evaluate the potential role this force could play in China's political development, we need to clarify: How do the Chinese people understand the concept of "democracy" in the first place? What are their visions for an ideal political system in China? Even amonst the anti-government camp, can we assume that they desire Western-style parliamentary democracy? To shed light on these questions, I investigate online discussion to see whether there is a polarization of public opinion between pro-government nationalism and anti-government liberalism, as assumed in the Gramscian model. I further scrutinize people's understandings of and attitudes towards liberal democracy.

[4] This phrase appears repeatedly in CCP diplomatic statements and is typically used to accuse those whose acts damage the relationship between China and the party. Japan was on the receiving end of these accusations most often, fifty-one times in total. The US and Taiwan took second and third places, accused thirty-five and twenty-eight times respectively. See David Bandurski's (2016) "A History of Hurt Feelings," accessed May 21, 2019, https://medium.com/china-media-project/a-history-of-hurt-feelings-ef717dea055d

3. Economic reforms.

Lastly, the Western model of modernization assumes an affinity between parliamentary democracy and a free market. However, the CCP actively promotes "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that features both economic liberalization *and* the authoritarian rule of the CCP. The Chinese regime simultaneously upholds some elements of the Western Path and some elements of Chinese authoritarianism, disentangling the assumed affinity between political and economic institutions. This also raises a series of important questions:

For people who champion the Western Path, how do they evaluate economic reforms in post-Mao China? Do China's economic achievements during the reform era influence their evaluation of the political regime? Similarly, how do the people who support the Chinese state evaluate "Westernization" in the economic sphere? As such, I will investigate online discussion about China's economic reforms and economic success in the post-Mao era and assess people's expectations for the socioeconomic system.

Significance of the Research

I disaggregate unofficial political discourse into three aspects. First, I investigate people's views on several key nationalistic topics; second, I examine their perceptions of democracy and visions for an ideal political system in China; finally, I look at their expectations for economic reforms and the socioeconomic system in China. Putting ethese together by applying a sociological analysis to public opinion studies, this dissertation sees the nature of the Chinese public sphere as multi-dimensional rather than assuming a consistent ideological stance across different topics. It also abandons the assumption of a teleological development of the public

sphere and revisits the relation between the public sphere and the democratic prospects of a country. This research is both empirically and theoretically important for a few reasons.

First, in light of the concerns of "differences in values" and even "a clash of civilizations" between China and the West, a systematic investigation of the dominant opinion in the Chinese public sphere is necessary to unravel the vague concept of "Chinese values" and will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the conflicts and tensions between the two civilizations.

Second, studying ideological consensus and cleavages in the public sphere also helps us to understand the state-society relation in China and authoritarian countries in general. Ideology plays a significant role in the rule of a regime. It constitutes a collective identity for a nation (Smith, 2015), provides legitimacy to a regime (Zhao, 2017), and essentially functions as a rational argument for authoritative decisions and the conduct of public action (Goulder, 1976). The alignment and differences between the dominant opinions in the Chinese public sphere and the official discourses promoted by the CCP bear important implications for state-society relations in authoritarian countries.

Last but not least, examining public opinon in China speaks to the literature on democratization and its relationship with the public sphere. Witnessing pervasive clientelism, populism, and even democratic breakdowns in new democracies, scholars of democratization are increasingly aware that the values that dominate the public sphere play an important role in a country's political development (O'Donnell, 1993, 1996; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Diamond, 1999). Scholars contend that a durable democracy is dependent on the support of a public sphere that genuinely believes in democracy and its grand, long-term civic ends (Diamond, 1999). However, social scientists still pay more attention to mass mobilization and the overthrowing of

dictators in the process of democratic transition. Rarely do researchers study public opinion and the public sphere in an authoritarian state outside of times of regime change and upheaval.

More fundamentally, the democratization literature tends to assume that liberal democracy is the only possible alternative to authoritarianism, placing regimes along an authoritarian-democracy spectrum. This one-dimensional classification scheme limits our ability to capture the variety of possible futures envisioned by the citizenry of nondemocratic countries. Clarifying how people understand and evaluate the concept of liberal democracy and the manner in which they discuss alternatives is the very first step to assessing the probability of a transition to democracy. My dissertation contributes to this task by focusing on an authoritarian country that has thus far remained authoritarian despite the influence of the third wave of democratization.

Analytical Strategies of the Research

This dissertation is methodologically different from previous studies of Chinese public opinion and the public sphere in key aspects. First of all, previous studies have focused on specific delimited groups to explore the public sphere in China, be they netizens committed to fighting liberals (e.g., Han, 2018), university students mobilized in social movements (e.g., Zhao 2002, 2003), or activists organized to defend their own rights (e.g., Lei, 2019). In the same vein, existing research tends to study public opinion by focusing on one or two topics, such as popular nationalism, mass mobilizations during a certain crisis, or online activism. These studies provide important insight into specific groups or issues, but they have limited capacity to present "the big picture" where different opinions coexist and compete for dominance within the public sphere. By contrast, my dissertation investigates online discourse in a large, open, online platform where

universal access is by and large guaranteed and a multiplicity of voices coexist. This way I can evaluate main opinions and disagreements by surveying a larger context. Moreover, I disaggregate public opinion into three important topics and investigate and juxtapose political discourse across these topics. This form of comparison and juxtaposition allows me to uncover important patterns of public opinion as well as cross-cutting cleavages in the public sphere.

In addition, most research on public opinion collects data over a relatively short time period, typically focusing on opinions and discourse produced during moments of heightened public mobilization (e.g., Strand, 1990; Liu, 2006; Shen, 2007; Zhao, 2013; Weiss, 2014; Weatherley, 2014). These studies shed light on the patterns and mechanisms of mass mobilization and social movements. However, tensions and conflicts in the heat of the moment may not fully reflect the landscape of a comprehensive set of opinions and values in the public sphere. Therefore, my dissertation collects large-scale online discourse produced on a daily basis between 2009 and 2017. This universe of online opinions provides me analytical leverage to establish a big-picture view of the public sphere.

Finally, most studies investigate Chinese public opinion by surveying or interviewing average citizens in a representative or convenient snowball sample. The underlying assumption is that every person is equally influential in the public sphere, and their opinions can be simply aggregated to form "public opinion." However, as Blumer (1948) argues, even though the public sphere is characterized by universal access, not all citizens are politically opinionated nor inclined to participate in public discussion. Even when people contribute to public discussion, not all opinions are equally visible and influential in the public sphere. This is especially true for online discussion where numerous participants produce a great many posts, but only a tiny

proportion of these posts can be seen; these posts are usually labeled "popular" or "most read/agreed" and may be further distributed to a larger audience.

Following this logic, I assume that individuals vary in their capacity to shape public opinion. There are certain influential participants who have much more power in shaping public opinion than others. These participants are called "opinion leaders." I focus on opinion leaders to explore popular opinions and values in the public sphere.

THE STUDY OF OPINION LEADERS

In this dissertation, opinion leaders are defined as those who 1) are popular and influential in the public sphere, and 2) frequently air opinions about political and social issues. Before I go into the operationalization of this definition and the methods to identify opinion leaders, I will first discuss *why* I focus on opinion leaders to study China's public opinion. Opinion leadership is not a new concept in social science research. Since the 1950s, scholars have long discussed the relevance of opinion leadership for public communication (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1968; Rogers and Cartano, 1962; Chen and Misra, 1990; Burt, 1999; Valente and Davis, 1999; Nisbet and Kotcher, 2009). In their seminal work *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) proposed the classic two-step flow model arguing that public opinion is formed under the direct influence of opinion leaders. According to this model, news and ideas first flow from the media to opinion leaders, who interpret media messages and form their own opinions. Then they distribute these news *and* opinions, as opposed to the original media content alone, to a wider population through their personal influence. Therefore, opinion leaders occupy a central position

in public communication, such that they are able to set agendas and lead public opinion by distributing information and opinions amongst a large population.

However, early empirical studies encountered difficulties when they tried to identify opinion leaders in real life. Scholars searched for opinion leaders by asking respondents where they went to seek advice on political issues (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1968). Since this social network method proved to be highly labor intensive, some scholars later resorted to asking people to reflect on their own leadership abilities and their influence on shaping others' opinions (Katz, 1957; Neolle-Neumann, 1985; Shah and Scheufele, 2006). This self-identification method, however, is subject to personal biases.

More recently, thanks to the rise of social media platforms, the social network method has been revived. Researchers tend to identify opinion leaders by observing users' social network ties and behaviors on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. These studies indicate that online opinion leaders have played a more critical role in political communication than ever before as the Internet has greatly enhanced their visibility and influence among average people (Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Rune, 2015; Turcotte et al., 2015).

In China, the nascent field of opinion leader research has typically focused on developing algorithms to identify opinion leaders on social media platforms, or on discussing opinion leaders' role in marketing and media communication (Huang, Yu, and Karimi, 2014; Ma and Liu, 2014; Zhang, Zhao, and Xu, 2015). Few studies have explored Chinese opinion leaders' participation in public discussion, and most of them do not systematically investigate the political views of opinion leaders and their values across different topic domains (Nip and Fu, 2016; Lei, 2019; Zhang, Liu, and Wen, 2018).

I argue that opinion leaders provide critical analytical leverage to understanding the public sphere in China. The reasons are twofold. On the one hand, opinion leaders are relatively autonomous in comparison to media and other organizations, and they form an indispensable source of information to study the Chinese public sphere. On the other hand, opinion leaders are immensely powerful in setting public agendas and shaping public opinion compared to average people. The authority and popularity of opinion leaders make them major players in the public sphere.

The Autonomy of Chinese Opinion Leaders

I argue that opinion leaders have greater autonomy than other actors in the Chinese public sphere. With respect to political censorship, opinion leaders have more power and autonomy to fence off state control than media outlets and other organizational actors, including schools, professional organizations, and NGOs. For organizational actors, any statements they make represent the values and stance of the entire organization and are therefore constrained to act in favor of the organization's best interest. Most Chinese organizations are cautious and have established internal review systems to control the content they present to the public. This control is further strengthened by the fact that virtually all non-governmental organizations are required to register with a government office that supervises their daily activities. To avoid crossing the "red line" of the state, organizations tend to censor themselves before they publish any content. Therefore, organizations are subject to intensive internal censorship in addition to external censorship.

By contrast, opinion leaders are controlled neither by any government body nor any internal censorship system. Moreover, some opinion leaders enjoy nationwide and sometimes

international fame, and they are powerful in their own fields. This reputation and prestige empowers them to be more vocal than ordinary Chinese citizens and significantly increases the cost of government control. Even though they still face intensive censorship and occasionally self-censorship, the latter is much less likely to be systematic and always less penetrative or complete than censorship faced by organizations. Opinion leaders thus tend to have more leeway than most organizational actors, including media outlets.

Opinion leaders are also less affected by market forces than for-profit media and celebrities who have strong economic incentives to brand and market themselves. By definition, opinion leaders are actively engaged in political discussion in the public sphere, a characteristic that is risky in the eyes of market-oriented actors in China. Therefore, Chinese opinion leaders have less commercial value than other kinds of celebrities. Admittedly, some opinion leaders are writers, TV anchors, or other cultural or media figures that may potentially have the incentive to promote themselves online. However, their business depends less on online marketing compared to other social media accounts that make a profit solely by attracting hits or selling products online. In addition, many opinion leaders are cultural figures or business tycoons who are economically better off, giving them the economic freedom to be more autonomous than the average actor in the public sphere.

In sum, even though different actors may take part in public discussion in China, it is reasonable to assume that opinion leaders are less constrained by state control and market forces than organizational actors.

The Power of Chinese Opinion Leaders

In addition to autonomy, opinion leaders also enjoy great authority and power, making them the most important players in Chinese public discussion. Opinion leaders are members in the public sphere who have garnered a formidable follower base. A recent study shows that as many as 95 percent of social media users in China rarely post original content online (Fu and Chau, 2013). Other studies show that most users tend to "vote" on the existing opinions of others by following, reposting, and "liking" those who have similar views (Barbera et al., 2015). It is only a small group of users who actively make opinions on social and political issues. Some of these personalities successfully attract more followers and attention than others, thus making them "opinion leaders." Therefore, studying opinion leaders is a more effective way to investigate public discussion than studying the silent majority, and opinion leader voices can also be taken to measure and reflect the popular base behind them.

To clarify, opinion leaders do not form a representative sample of the Chinese population. But, if the opinion leaders we select are indeed "opinion leaders," they should, to some extent, reflect popular opinion in the public sphere. The opinion leaders in my study have attracted on average 3.42 million followers on Weibo, one of China's largest social media platforms that resembles a Facebook-Twitter hybrid. This means any posts produced by opinion leaders will appear on the Weibo timelines of, on average, more than 3 million users. This follower base rivals the readership of the most widely circulated newspaper in China: Reference News (*Cankao xiaoxi)*, which has a readership of 3 million. Popular posts of opinion leaders are also circulated by other major Internet portals and print media, extending their influence to an offline audience.

In addition to their formidable follower base, the power of opinion leaders is further strengthened in the Chinese context due to the peculiar nature of the state's legitimacy and political trust. According to Dingxin Zhao's (2015) theory about sources of state legitimacy, ideology was the primary source of legitimacy for the Chinese state in the Mao era. Even without state coercion, communism was widely accepted and supported by the Chinese people. However, Chinese society was deeply traumatized during the Cultural Revolution, the disastrous results of which disillusioned many faithful believers in communism. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and after the death of Mao, communist ideology waned in China and the CCP found it increasingly difficult to mainly rule on ideological legitimacy.[5]

After Deng Xiaoping took power, the Chinese state was reoriented to be primarily concerned with economic development. Since then, the CCP has gradually shifted to drawing its legitimacy from government performance and has loosened its control in the ideological sphere until recently. As a result, even after setbacks like the June 4th Movement, a public sphere was irresistibly opened up for different ideologies and a plurality of discourses to take place.

Moreover, as Dingxin Zhao (2001, 2006) argues, the fact that the legitimacy of China's political system cannot be separated from the performance of its ruling party causes the Chinese political regime to be particularly susceptible even to friendly criticism. Under this condition, a political crisis is easily escalated to a legitimacy crisis. This is because when people criticize the wrongdoings of the government, these criticisms would inevitably extend to, or are perceived as, criticism of the entire political system. By contrast, when Western democracies face widespread

[5] Some may argue that the CCP has used nationalism as a substitute for communism to mobilize people. In the post-Mao era, the CCP has re-defined itself as the sole representative and defender of China's national interests against foreign cultural imperialism and a hidden Western agenda to curb China's development (Weatherley, 2014). However, nationalism is a double-edged sword that may face backlash when the state's diplomatic policies do not meet the demands of nationalists (Weiss, 2014). Therefore, the CCP cannot fully rely on nationalism to rule the country. See Zhang, Liu and Wen (2018) for a more detailed discussion.

dissatisfaction among the people, such a political crisis can be solved, or at least de-escalated, by reelecting the government.

In order to maintain political stability, the Chinese government employs extensive censorship to control the mass media. While the state media is known as a CCP mouthpiece rather than the watchdogs of society, non-state media outlets are also subject to heavy-handed state censorship as they are directly monitored by government offices. However, people's awareness of state control has led to a low level of political trust, especially when it comes to critical political news coverage around sensitive issues. Researchers find that audience exposure to CCP propaganda actually gives rise to readers' negative attitudes towards China's political institutions (Chen and Shi, 2001). Several nationally representative surveys and qualitative interviews also confirm that the credibility of official media has been declining and consistently ranks lower than unofficial sources of information (Lei, 2019; Xie and Zhao, 2014; Stockmann, 2013).

The fact that the Chinese mass media suffers from low levels of trust renders the voices of opinion leaders even more crucial as they take on the role that the media would play in a democratic setting. Opinion leaders can circumvent censorship to transmit information and opinions that are not publishable by other agents, including both official and privatized media outlets.[6] Moreover, opinion leaders are able to construct public opinion in China in the same way the mainstream media does in the US. In recent years, political scandals (e.g., the alleged coup of the high-profile CCP official Bo Xilai) and negative public incidents (e.g., the casualties in the July 2012 Beijing flood) were usually exposed or brought to the public's attention by Weibo

[6] Due to strict censorship, both official and unofficial media outlets are supervised by the CCP apparatus and have to stick to the "official line" of news reporting, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics.

opinion leaders. Therefore, opinion leaders have served as indispensable sources of information that at times have been perceived as more credible than mass media.

Note that this does not negate intensive online censorship. Opinion leaders' speech can be censored soon after they are published. When an opinion leader is deemed a "troublemaker," his or her account may be permanently removed from social media platforms. Yet many of these opinion leaders would be "reincarnated," in their own words, by signing up to a new social media account. All this contributes to a Chinese spectacle: if official media outlets claim something is "fake news" or if an online post is censored, many citizens would see this as bolstering the credibility of the censored news or post. Therefore, a typical popular post is usually titled "Hurry! Read it before censors get it!" It is in this particular environment that opinion leaders become an irreplaceable and credible source of information for ordinary citizens.

Taken together, opinion leaders' formidable follower base and autonomy as well as their capacity to construct public opinion make them the major actors in online public discussion. They are thus especially relevant for the study of the Chinese public sphere.

DATA AND METHODS

I focus on opinion leaders who are active on Weibo, one of China's largest social media sites and the primary venue for public discussion. Weibo has more than 500 million registered users and around 376 million monthly active users as of 2017, making up a substantial proportion of the 751 million Chinese Internet users (netizens, hereafter).[7]

[7] Data comes from *2017 Weibo Annual Report* (in Chinese), accessed September 19, 2019, https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=404

There are many smaller or more exclusive online forums and social media platforms in China. However, small online forums tend to be tailored to specific audiences, which would introduce systematic bias into the analysis. For instance, some platforms already present a clear ideological profile, such as the liberal-leaning Kednet forum (*kaidi shequ*, 凯迪社区) and the famous nationalist Strong Nation forum (*qiangguo luntan*, 强国论坛). Compared to these platforms, Weibo is less likely to be biased towards a particular population and is a reasonably good representation of a "public sphere." Several other social media platforms, such as WeChat (*weixin*, 微信), have grown rapidly and outcompeted Weibo in terms of numbers of users in recent years. However, WeChat is primarily a social networking mobile app designed for friends and acquaintances who then form an intimate and private "friends' circle." Users are not allowed to see the posts and comments of other users unless they are friends with each other. This design prevents a true "public" discussion from taking place as users only engage in discussion with people they know.

Due to these reasons, a few pioneering studies on Chinese opinion leaders all choose Weibo as the platform to investigate opinion leaders' political discussion. For instance, Nip and Fu (2016) examine online discussion for about twenty-nine corruption cases on Weibo and explore the role of opinion leaders in agenda setting and information diffusion. Lei (2019: 122–25) articulates the influence of opinion leaders in shaping public opinion and argues that political liberals, defined as those who agree with constitutionalism and universal values on Weibo, constitute the dominant group among opinion leaders on Weibo. Similarly, Zhang, Liu, and Wen's (2018) study investigates the views of Weibo opinion leaders on topics related to nationalism and conclude that anti-regime sentiment rather than nationalistic sentiment

dominates the online public sphere. These pioneering studies make a case for the importance of Chinese opinion leaders in political communication.

Nonetheless, due to the limits of the data analyzed, these studies are also constrained in scope and depth. They only examine opinion leaders' views on one single topic, such as corruption, constitutionalism, or nationalism. In addition, these studies only analyze a small number of opinion leaders' posts on their chosen topic. With limited data, researchers can hardly discover the richness and subtleties of the political views held by opinion leaders, let alone reveal the big picture of their ideologies.

In order to systematically study a full range of online discourse, I identified 239 opinion leaders from 170 million users on Weibo. Then I compiled a large textual dataset consisting of 3.76 million posts produced by opinion leaders between 2009, the year that Weibo was launched, and 2017, the end of my data collection period.

My data were collected and processed in three steps. First, I collaborated with a university lab that purchased a Weibo Application Programming Interface (API) that collected all publicly available Weibo posts on a daily basis from December 31, 2012, to November 21, 2013. The collection was in real time so that any posts later deleted were still included in the dataset. The lab successfully collected 2.7 billion Weibo posts produced by 170 million users as well as their social network information, i.e., who follows whom on Weibo.

Second, I combined two sources of information to identify opinion leaders from this Weibo universe. By definition, opinion leaders are *popular* and *influential* users who have an *interest* in political discussions on Weibo. I operationalized this definition by the following criteria. 1) Popularity: Similar to the telecast ratings of TV shows and newspaper readership, opinion leaders' follower counts indicate their popularity in the public sphere. I therefore sorted

the 170 million Weibo users by follower count and retained the top 5,000 users. 2) Influence: To measure influence, I used the Chinese Opinion Leader Ranking,[8] which evaluates the influence (measured by the number of reposts, "likes," and comments a user has received on Weibo) and the productivity of a given user (measured by the number of original posts a user has produced). Collecting the top 100 users in all ten issues of this ranking gave me 311 non-repetitive names. 3) Interest in political discussion: Many celebrities enjoy a great deal of popularity and influence, but they rarely speak about politics. We needed to narrow down to those who are primarily engaged in political discussion. Therefore, I used a dictionary of political terms to remove users who rarely talked about social and political issues.[9] Weibo robots, commercial brands, marketing accounts, and other sources of noise were also removed in this process. Ultimately, I arrived at a list of 239 Weibo opinion leaders.

Third, after identifying the opinion leaders, I compiled two databases for my dissertation: 1) A Chinese opinion leader network database (2017) that includes all social network ties of opinion leaders on Weibo (i.e., who follows them) that were collected in 2017; and 2) a Chinese opinion leader online speech database (2009–17). I documented 3.76 million Weibo posts from 225 opinion leaders between 2009 and 2017. Among them, 1.28 million posts were "original posts" that were produced by opinion leaders, whereas 2.48 million posts were "retweeted posts" that opinion leaders forwarded from other sources. The Weibo accounts of the remaining fourteen leaders were removed before I accessed them.

[8] This ranking was released by *New Media*, a leading research institute studying social media in China. It uses a Micro-Blog Communication Index (BCI) to identify opinion leaders. They released a total of ten issues of this ranking.

[9] I selected twenty widely acknowledged opinion leaders who often talk about politics, identified the most used 92 political terms in their online posts, then used this dictionary to search for users who had at least five percent of his or her posts or ten posts containing these political terms. To minimize biases, these twenty people include both liberal- and conservative-leaning opinion leaders. See Appendix for more details.

I then limited my analysis to the social networks of the 239 opinion leaders and the 3.76 million posts published by the 225 opinion leaders. This large textual corpus together with the Chinese opinion leader network database form the primary dataset used in my research. Tables 1-1 and 1-2 summarize the descriptive statistics of the opinion leaders.

Table 1-1 shows that opinion leaders are mainly males with elite backgrounds. The vast majority of opinion leaders are "verified" by Weibo, meaning that their identity and profession information are verified as authentic. In practice, this verification is a privilege by and large reserved for Weibo celebrities who have a large number of followers. Weibo invites these celebrities for verification, and a gold "V" sign is added to their profile pictures upon verification. Therefore, opinion leaders are usually called "big Vs" in China. In my data, only 6 percent of opinion leaders are not verified—not because they are not popular enough, but mainly because they declined such invitations. One opinion leader even made a Weibo post to clarify that he was not interested in the title of "big V" at all.

According to opinion leaders' user profiles, most of them are concentrated in top tier large cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong. However, self-reported information on social media sites should be treated with caution since many users might not disclose or update their real physical residence online.

Table 1-1: The Basic Demographics of Opinion Leaders

		Percent	Count
Sex			
	Male	89.95	215
	Female	10.04	24
Verification			
	Verified	93.72	224
	Not Verified	6.27	15
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
Industry			
	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

Source: Yinxian Zhang, Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017

In terms of opinion leaders' occupational background, I used Weibo verification information and also cross-checked the background information of each opinion leader myself. Some opinion leaders operate under avatars or pseudonyms, but their popularity has brought them great attention, such that their backgrounds and biographies can be easily found online.

The largest group of opinion leaders come from the cultural industry. They are famous cultural figures, such as TV anchors, journalists, and writers. Other groups include intellectuals such as scholars and professors; business leaders such as real estate tycoon; professionals such as lawyers; and government employees such as local policemen. There are two other interesting

groups. Internet personalities are those online celebrities who have earned their reputation primarily through their online speech and behavior. They tend to obscure or hide their real identities online. Grassroots opinion leaders refer to those who suddenly became famous after a real-life incident. For instance, one such grassroots opinion leader was the wife of a victim of an act of alleged police brutality. These people used Weibo to air grievances and other political opinions that turned them into opinion leaders.

Table 1-2 summarizes a few key Weibo statistics concerning opinion leaders. It shows that opinion leaders have an average of 3.42 million followers and have produced on average more than 17,000 posts each over the course of nine years. These statistics confirm that opinion leaders are indeed popular and actively engaging in online discussion.

Table 1-2: Summaries of Opinion Leaders' Weibo Behavior

	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Follower Count	3417321	6671146	24012	4.98e+07
Following Count	1243.08	876.36	0	3685
All Post Count*	17179.64	21132.86	48	155594
Original Post Count*	5671.87	6244.85	1	52499

*All post count is the total number of posts showed on user profiles.
*Original post count is the number of original posts between 2009 and 2017

Source: Yinxian Zhang, Chinese Opinion Leader Network Database, 2017; Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017

I applied multiple methods to explore opinion leaders' political opinions and values. I started with a parsimonious assumption that the ideologies of opinion leaders can be characterized by a one-dimensional spectrum. Accordingly, I employed correspondence analysis to opinion leaders' network ties to estimate a one-dimensional ideological spectrum of opinion leaders. This relational method is solely based on social network ties.

Informed by this initial and rough estimation of opinion leaders' ideological stances, I combined computational methods and qualitative readings to explore their specific political views and revisited the assumptions about the dimensionality of ideology. In particular, I used topic modeling, word embedding techniques, and multiple natural language processing methods to analyze millions of online posts produced by opinion leaders. Findings of these computational methods further allowed me to closely read and qualitatively analyze samples of opinion leader posts. With the results of content analysis, I enriched my understanding of opinion leaders' views and values and reflected on the one-dimensional ideological spectrum estimated through social network ties. Building on all this, I proposed a multi-dimensional, more dynamic framework to characterize opinion leaders' ideological leanings and to understand the nature of the Chinese public sphere.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Censorship

State interference and censorship is one of the primary concerns of most Internet research in China. A well-established literature has documented the many ways that Chinese government censors and manipulates public opinion (e.g., Diamond and Plattner, 2012; Shirky, 2011; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014). In fact, a leaked CCP document entitled "Communiqué on the current state of the ideological sphere" claims that online speech has become a severe challenge to the CCP's rule, and the government launched a harsh crackdown on Weibo opinion leaders in 2013.These efforts have had a negative impact on Weibo, making it an unfriendly environment for political discussion, particularly when these discussions are perceived to have the potential to incite real-life protests.

To address the concern of censorship, I cross-checked another dataset released by the *WeiboScope* project, which collected the posts (including censored ones) of more than 350,000 Weibo users (Fu, Chan, and Chau, 2013). I analyzed a random sample of the censored Weibo posts on topics related to nationalism, liberal democracy, and economic reforms. Results show that both liberal and nationalistic posts were censored, and the censored posts were not qualitatively different from uncensored ones in terms of *ideologies and values*. Rather, echoing the findings of King and his colleagues (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014), the censored posts often included sensitive information related to specific social or political incidents and were possibly perceived as "inciting offline protests or events" by censors.

In general, censorship does not change the results of my analysis. There are four reasons for this. First, I primarily relied on Weibo network ties to estimate opinion leaders' ideological stances. This network data was virtually intact and uncensored. Weibo posts were used to validate and enrich the findings based on network ties. Secondly, I collected all available posts of opinion leaders from 2009 to 2017, nine years in total. While it is true that the tightened state control after 2013 discouraged some opinion leaders from participating in public discussions, their previous speeches are still documented in my dataset. This large dataset provides enough information to analyze leaders' opinions and values. Thirdly, when I analyzed the contents of Weibo posts, my unit of analysis was the *entire collection* of posts produced by individual opinion leaders rather than each *post* itself. In other words, I relied on a large number of posts to determine the views and values of a given opinion leader. Censors may remove a few radical posts that have crossed the CCP's line, and opinion leaders might appear less radical after being censored. But this practice would hardly change our judgement of the overall value orientation of a person. For instance, pro-democracy opinion leaders are very unlikely to be misclassified as

anti-democracy just because some of their posts are missing. Fourth, I also relied on the popular bases of opinion leaders to gauge the popularity of certain values. Censorship may intimidate some speakers, but it cannot stop people from following opinion leaders on Weibo. Censorship may even incite users to be more rebellious and dedicated to spreading censored information (Roberts, 2014). This is why, in my data, many liberal-leaning critics were censored more heavily, yet still attracted many more followers than most nationalists.

Lastly, while state censorship on Weibo has been strengthened in recent years, all other channels for public discussion have also experienced the same tightened control. Weibo remains the most inclusive online platform for public discussion in China and thus remains the best available source of data for studying public discussion.

Sample biases

Ever since academic research started examining Internet data, there has been ongoing skepticism about the generalizability of findings based off Internet data. After all, Internet users are known to be a biased sample that typically involves younger and more educated citizens. My opinion leader sample is even more biased: they are social elites who are followed by hundreds of millions of average Internet users. However, online discussion is a good source of data for the study of public opinion in China for three reasons.

First, as discussed before, public opinion is not necessarily a representation of the aggregated opiniona of the entire population. It also originates from public discussion in the public sphere. In China, online platforms are the primary, if not only, venue for public discussion. Other outlets, such as the press and television, are not easily accessible to average citizens to make their voices heard. They are also more tightly controlled by the Chinese

government. As Dafoe and Weiss (2018: 14) argue, "Chinese internet users represent an important segment of the public whose reactions the Chinese government is particularly concerned about …. [T]he Internet is the biggest variable that the Chinese Communist Party faces in managing public opinion."

Moreover, some ideological camps in public discussion are exclusively the product of the Internet era. For instance, *wumao* (五毛), literally translated as "50-cent party," is one of the most important groups in the conservative camp. This term originally referred to those Internet commentators who many people believe were hired by the Chinese government to manipulate public opinion by posting social media posts/comments in favor of the Chinese authorities. These commentators are called "50-cent/*wumao*" because it was said that they were paid RMB 50 cents for each post.[10] Now, *wumao* has become a popular derogatory term referring to anyone with *perceived* pro-regime/pro-government opinions. I will discuss this camp in more depth in the next chapter.

Last but not least, the world is waiting to see if China will move towards political openness. Focusing on opinion leaders will give us significant insight into China's democratic prospects. Furthermore, the specific nature of the public discussion generated in China will also give us a sense of what democracy might look like in China, if there were a democratic transition. Opinion leaders represent young, urban, educated, middle-class citizens who, according to modernization theories (Lipset, 1959; Welzel and Inglehart, 2005), are most likely to support democracy. If this group turns out to lack support for democratic values, the Chinese public at large is highly likely to follow suit.

[10] The existence of paid online commentators is still debatable. A recent study by Gary King and his colleagues (2017) shows that some government employees were asked to post pro-government posts online. But this job was seen as a part of their duties, and these employees were not really paid for making those posts.

CENTRAL ARGUMENTS AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

The central argument of this dissertation is that the Chinese public sphere is neither a homogeneous sphere dominated by nationalist discourse nor a polarized public characterized by an authoritarianism/democracy schism. Instead, the Chinese public sphere presents combinations of opinions that are potentially destabilizing rather than reinforcing the official discourse of the CCP. Meanwhile, it also demonstrates a high level of heterogeneity and multiplicity that cannot be captured by a pro- or anti-government dichotomy.

In the Chinese public sphere, the consensus for a majority of participants, if any, is support for economic reforms and some kind of political reform towards democracy. Underlying this seeming consensus, however, there are a few important cleavages. Supporters of democracy have different perceptions of and contradictory expectations for democracy. They have different understandings of the end goal of a democratic system, and they envision the path to democracy in different ways. Some opinion leaders champion democracy as an effective means to address material concerns, such as sustaining economic growth or lowering inequality. Others pursue democracy as an end in itself, and they downplay the importance of material wealth in their online speech.

Some opinion leaders tend to defend the rule of the CCP and denounce the agenda of democratization in China, but they have different reasons for their position. Nationalists, for instance, deem democracy a hindrance to sustaining economic development and achieving the great Chinese rejuvenation. In contrast, Maoists do not care as much about economic achievement and national prosperity and want to return to the socialist China when people were less well-off but more equal.

More importantly, the ideological cleavages in the Chinese public sphere are cross-cutting in nature. For example, it is commonly assumed that nationalists typically take a pro-regime stance. But this dissertation shows that nationalist discourse can be combined with anti-regime opinion to jointly criticize the government for domestic social problems. Similarly, some typically liberal discourses, such as support for rule of law, can go hand in hand with pro-government opinions. Taken together, I call for a more dynamic framework to understand Chinese public opinion and to conceptualize ideological cleavages in the public sphere.

The rest of my dissertation proceeds as follows:

In Chapter 2, I use correspondence analysis to place opinion leaders on a one-dimensional ideological spectrum based on the network data of who follows these opinion leaders on Weibo. Results show that most opinion leaders were concentrated towards the center of the ideological spectrum, while a few outliers were on the far right. I then conduct two additional analyses using other sources of data to cross-check the results, including a topic model based on the online posts of opinion leaders and a social network analysis based on leaders' retweeting network (i.e., the network where an opinion leader forwarded the posts of other opinion leaders). Both analyses have confirmed the validity of the results of the correspondence analysis.

In Chapter 3, informed by the relative positions of opinion leaders on the one-dimensional ideological spectrum, I investigate opinion leaders' views towards three countries/regions that are frequently targeted by Chinese nationalists: the US, Japan, and Taiwan. Results show that nationalistic sentiments were strong only when specific topics were discussed, such as China's territorial disputes with Japan. However, if these discussions are placed within the larger context of online discussion, nationalistic sentiments did not dominate online

discussion about *any* of the three countries/regions. Moreover, deviating from the stereotype of regime defenders, nationalists also tended to engage with liberal thought to criticize the government.

In Chapter 4, I analyze opinion leaders' perceptions of democracy and their ideas of what constitutes an ideal political system. Data show that opinion leaders tended to associate democracy more with constitutionalism than with, for instance, free elections or self-governance. Some of them proposed a few variants of democracy, such as socialist constitutionalism and Confucian constitutionalism, as different possibilities for China's future development. In addition, even though the vast majority of opinion leaders showed support for democracy, they expressed different expectations for the democratic system, which led to important cleavages in the public sphere.

In Chapter 5, I explore opinion leaders' evaluations of economic reforms in post-Mao China. I arrive at the conclusion that a majority of opinion leaders, both nationalists and democrats, were in support of economic reforms, but they had different, sometimes contradictory agendas. The rest of the opinion leaders, both left- and right-leaning, shared a view that economic reforms do more harm than good for China and should be stopped or even corrected. Note that this cleavage crosscuts the traditionally defined leftist and rightist camps, falling somewhere between the pursuit of material benefits and the pursuit of nonmaterial public goods.

Finally, Chapter 6 revisits the dimensionality of ideology and concludes the dissertation with a discussion on the nature of the Chinese public sphere.

CHAPTER 2

MEASURING IDEOLOGIES

This dissertation starts with the parsimonious assumption that the configuration of ideology is a one-dimensional spectrum. Ideological spectrums of the US and many European countries are typically characterized as one-dimensional. Though the definitions of different camps along ideological spectrums are usually vague and surrounded by much controversy, the political "left" (often referred to as "liberals") is generally characterized by ideas such as liberty, equality, and fraternity, whereas the political "right" (often known as "conservatives") is generally characterized by ideas such as authority, efficiency, and patriarchy.

This paradigm of ideological divergences between "leftists/liberals" and "rightest/conservatives" is widely recognized and influences the political and ideological discourses of many countries, democratic or not. In China, most scholars and media outlets also tend to characterize Chinese ideological debates as a battle between left- and right-leaning forces. However, in opposite to the common perceptions of the "left" and "right" in Western countries, the label of leftist is often associated with pro-regime conservative forces in China, whereas the rightists are usually seen as anti-regime and liberal leaning. This is mainly because the Chinese ruling party, the CCP, is a leftist and socialist party. Accordingly, pro-regime forces become leftists and their opponents are labeled as rightists.

Following the well-acknowledged paradigm of a left-versus-right, one-dimensional spectrum, I first measure opinion leaders' ideologies and map them onto a left-right spectrum. The fundamental assumption is that opinion leaders have heterogeneous opinions that can be arrayed along one dimension. As discussed in Chapter 1, a rich literature documents contending opinions in the public sphere where some people tend to defend the Chinese regime while others

are critical of the government (see, for instance, Lei, 2019; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014; Yang, 2009). Recent studies (e.g., Pan and Xu, 2018; Zhang, Liu, and Wen, 2018) bring into question the common knowledge that public opinion mainly diverges between a pro- and an anti-regime stance, but they still suggest that public opinion can be roughly divided into a liberal and a conservative camp, the connotations of which are still debated in academia. Following previous studies and common knowledge, I assume that heterogeneous opinions can be reasonably ordered along a one-dimensional spectrum, and the goal of this chapter is to establish this baseline spectrum before we delve into the variations and points of divergence in public opinion.

In the rest of the chapter, I first introduce the landscape of Chinese ideological debates, demonstrating the heterogeneity in public opinion. Then I estimate the baseline ideological spectrum through a correspondence analysis of opinion leaders' social network ties, i.e., the ties between opinion leaders and their followers on Weibo. Next, to validate and calibrate the estimate of the correspondence analysis, I conduct a semantic analysis of opinion leaders' online speech and a social network analysis of their retweeting behaviors on Weibo. Combining the results of the three analyses, I describe a baseline ideological distribution of opinion leaders and arrive at a basic understanding of the divergence of their opinions. Informed by this baseline model, the rest of this dissertation scrutinizes the variations within and across different clusters of opinion leaders, *deconstructs* the one-dimensional paradigm, and finally, revisits assumptions about the dimensionality of ideology.

THE CHINESE IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

In the Chinese context, the ideological profile of the CCP, a leftist/communist party, serves as the reference point of people's ideologies. Therefore, left-leaning forces in China refer

to those who, to some extent, express approval of many of the CCP's policies and/or are relatively sympathetic to the ruling party for different reasons. They include but are not limited to the 50-cent party (*wumao dang,* 五毛党),[1] the voluntary 50-cent party (*ziganwu,* 自干五),[2] nationalists, Maoists, and fundamental Marxists.

Because of their strategic or ideological alignment with the CCP, this camp is usually seen as pro-regime. However, a close examination indicates that members of this camp are diverse in terms of their economic and political profiles. They advocate for different agendas and are critical of the government under certain circumstances.

For example, according to media coverage and common knowledge,[3] a majority of Maoists typically come from the older generation who gained benefits during the Mao era but are worse off following the economic reforms of the post-Mao era. Therefore, they advocate for social equality and are against market economy and neoliberalism, hoping to revert back to the socialist/communist China.

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[1] The 50-cent party (*wumao dang,* 五毛党) originally referred to Internet commentators allegedly hired by the Chinese government to manipulate public opinion by posting social media posts/comments favorable to Chinese authorities. These commentators are called "50-cent/*wumao*" because of allegations that they were paid RMB 50 cents for each post. King, Pan, and Roberts' (2017) research lends some empirical support to the existence of hired commentators. Yet, according to this study, those commentators were actually government employees/civil servants who were probably not paid but were just required to do so as part of their job. Now, "50-cent party" has become a popular derogatory term referring to anyone with *perceived* pro-regime/pro-government opinions.

[2] The voluntary 50-cent party (*ziganwu*, 自干五) was created to counter common online insults towards *wumao.* People with perceived pro-regime views are usually disparaged as *wumao*, suggesting that they are sponsored by the government and their pro-regime opinions are not genuine. As a response, some people claimed to be *ziganwu*, meaning that they have no connections with the government but voluntarily and genuinely defend China and/or the Chinese government. In other words, while *wumao* are state-sponsored voices, *ziganwu* claim to truly represent the grassroots.

[3] For a helpful introduction of the origins and different variants of Maoists, see Ziming Chen (陈子明), "Shixi Jinri Zhongguo de Mao Pai Guangpu (试析今日中国的毛派光谱)," *21ccom.net* (共识网), accessed May 21, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20160305011640/http://www.21ccom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article_2013090391205.html (in Chinese).

By contrast, nationalist forces have started to recruit young people, a majority of whom are known as *little pinks* (*xiaofenhong*, 小粉红).[4] These young nationalists were mostly born after the 1990s, are avid for social media, and have grown up in a China that is more prosperous and stronger than ever before in modern history. They do not care much for social inequality, but instead are proud of China's national power and hope to revive a great China.

However, young nationalists would also furiously criticize the government when state interference and online censorship cause inconveniences for online entertainment, an important part of young people's daily life. For instance, in 2018, as part of a nationwide push for more Party-approved material across media, music, and entertainment, the government launched a crackdown on popular social media accounts specializing in entertainment news and celebrity gossip and censored and banned a great number of movies, video clips, and short films on several famous video-sharing websites. This hardline move heavily impacted people's daily entertainment, particularly those of young people, including *little pinks*. As a backlash, *little pinks* turned to attack the CCP for the lack of speech freedom in China.[5] Nonetheless, this whole range of different agendas and stances are subsumed under the umbrella of pro-regime leftists.

[4] The name "little pinks" is associated with the latest wave of Chinese cyber nationalism against Taiwan's pro-independence election in 2016. Compared to the traditionally masculine nationalists, little pinks are said to be female-led and/or more feminine as they tend to use funny Internet memes and soft emotional discourse instead of hawkish statements in online protests. Even though the origins and the gender composition of this group remain debatable, the rise of young, untraditional nationalists active in Chinese social media platforms is more of a consensus among China observers (see a detailed analysis in Fang and Repnikova [2018]).

[5] There was much news coverage and a number of columns on this incident. For instance, see Sandra Severdia, "Xiao Fenhong de Fantan (小粉红的反弹)," C*hina Digital Times* (中国数字时代), accessed May 24, 2019, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2017/06/%E3%80%90%E7%AB%8B%E6%AD%A4%E5%AD%98%E7%85 %A7%E3%80%91%E5%B0%8F%E7%B2%89%E7%BA%A2%E7%9A%84%E5%8F%8D%E5%BC%B9/ and Zhimin Su (苏智敏), "Wei le Shijiuda, Zhengsu Yule Rang Xiao Fenhong ye Aihao (为了十九大，整肃娱乐让小粉红也哀嚎)," *botanwang.com* (博谈网), accessed May 24, 2019, https://botanwang.com/articles/201707/%E4%B8%BA%E4%BA%86%E5%8D%81%E4%B9%9D%E5%A4%A7%E3%80%80%E6%95%B4%E8%82%83%E5%A8%B1%E4%B9%90%E8%AE%A9%E5%B0%8F%E7%B2%89%E7%BA%A2%E4%B9%9F%E5%93%80%E5%9A%8E.html

Chinese right-leaning forces, by contrast, loosely refer to those who are suspicious of state power and generally prefer a democratic regime over authoritarianism. In their eyes, pro-democracy values are progressive and emancipatory while authoritarianism is regressive. Therefore, they are often critical of the CCP's authoritarian policies and stances and are labeled or self-identify as "liberals" or "rightists" in opposition to the leftist party CCP.

Note, however, that Chinese liberals are different from their Western counterparts in many important ways. For instance, my analysis in later chapters shows that while constitutionalism takes a central position in both Western and Chinese liberal thought, some Chinese liberals try to marry constitutionalism with socialism or Confucianism, creating "constitutionalism with Chinese characteristics." Therefore, similar to identifying left-leaning forces as pro-regime, oversimplifying right-leaning forces as anti-regime is also inaccurate and at times misleading. Liberals' pursuit of constitutionalism and democracy does not necessarily indicate they want to overthrow the rule of the CCP. We will discuss this more in Chapter 4.

In short, the Chinese ideological landscape demonstrates substantial heterogeneity in public opinion. In light of the existence of different ideological camps, this chapter seeks to estimate a one-dimensional ideological spectrum of opinion leaders and explore whether or not this spectrum diverges between pro- versus anti-regime stances.

MEASURING IDEOLOGIES OF OPINION LEADERS

Different Ways to Measure Ideologies

In democratic countries, researchers leverage political election records, usually using campaign contribution records of voters (Bonica, 2013), opinion polls and surveys (Lax and Phillips, 2012), and roll-call votes of politicians (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007) to measure ideologies of citizens and politicians. However, most of these methods are not applicable in China since there is only one ruling party, and universal suffrage does not exist.

To measure the ideology of Chinese people, some scholars loosely draw on modern Chinese literature and the Communist Party's publications (Feuerwerker, 1998; Su, 2011) to discuss people's political values. Some conduct participant observations and interviews in online forums with a small number of internet users (Liu, 2006; Han, 2015). Still others use data from large nationally representative surveys such as World Value Surveys (Wang, 2005) or carry out small-scale surveys (Tang and Darr, 2012). These important studies have certainly furthered our understanding of Chinese people's political values. However, these methods can hardly be extended to study online public opinion due to the scale of online data and the censorship on formal surveys in China.

As an alternative, anonymous online surveys are less vulnerable to state censorship, and respondents may be more open about their political opinions. One typical online survey was the Chinese Political Compass Survey (CPCS). Using this dataset, a couple of pioneering studies (Wu, 2013; Pan and Xu, 2018) explore the ideological landscape of the Chinese public. However, due to the explorative nature of this study, I do not make assumptions about what issues opinion leaders would discuss and how opinions should be configured. Therefore, a structured survey is not applicable.

In comparison, observational approaches appear to be more feasible to measure opinion leaders' ideologies. In recent years, multiple studies use social media data to infer users' ideologies in Western countries (Yardi and Boyd, 2010; Conover et al., 2012; Gruzd and Roy, 2014; Barbera et al., 2015). Building on homophily theories (for instance, Mcpherson et al., 2001), which posit that actors in adjacent social networks are more likely to share similar preferences, scholars measure ideologies by observing social network ties. Particularly, Barbera and his colleagues (2015) applied correspondence analysis (CA) to Twitter network data to accurately estimate the ideological positions of American politicians. They showed that the correlation coefficient between Twitter- and roll-call-based estimates was higher than 0.9, demonstrating that the results of network-based estimates were almost identical to those of conventional methods.

Using Weibo Network Data to Measure Opinion Leader Ideologies

Following Barbera's approach, I apply CA to opinion leaders' social network ties to measure their political stances. In order to validate and calibrate the results, I also apply mixed-method content analysis to examine opinion leaders' online speeches. This approach is tailored to explore political values and public discussions in the Chinese context since social network ties and social media posts tend to occur naturally in the public sphere and are more difficult to be controlled by the state.

The CA method is powered by the key assumption that given a group of people with a strong interest in politics, the unobserved political preferences of individuals can be inferred by whom they follow on social media sites (Barbera et al., 2015). Suppose that each social media user *i* is presented with a choice between following or not following an opinion leader *j*. It is

assumed that such a decision is a function of d_{ij}, the distance of the political stances between *i* and *j*, while mediated by the baseline probability of *i* and *j* being connected. This probability is, in turn, measured by two parameters: α_i is the "out degree" of user *i* in his or her social network (i.e., how many opinion leaders he or she follows), and it indicates the extent to which the user is interested in opinion leaders. β_j is the "in degree" of opinion leader *j* (i.e., how many people follow him or her), and it measures the level of popularity of the opinion leader.

Using the network ties between 239 opinion leaders and their 4 million followers, I mapped people onto a large $N \times M$ adjacency matrix Y, where the user *i* in each of the rows followed one or more opinion leader *j* in each of the columns. Then, to accurately identify people's political stances, I limited my research to the 165,431 average users who followed at least twenty out of the 239 opinion leaders; this means they were highly interested in opinion leaders and presumably also politics. Accordingly, they are more likely to have a clear political preference, and their following decisions convey more accurate information about the political stances of opinion leaders.

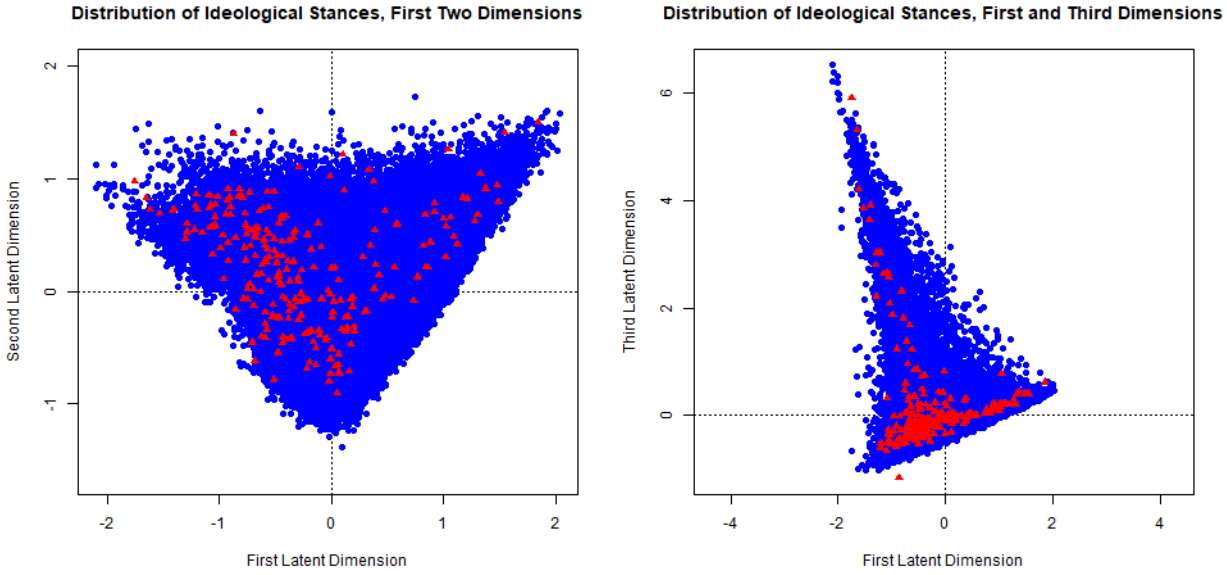
Essentially, CA is a dimension reduction technique that is somewhat similar to principal component analysis (PCA). It assumes that social media users are connected in a multidimensional latent space for various reasons. Then it reduces the multiple dimensions to several "principal dimensions" that can best account for the following decisions made by users. In this process, CA takes into consideration the row sums (i.e., the out degrees of the average users) and the column sums (i.e., the in degrees of opinion leaders) of the matrix Y, which is equal to including the effect of the parameter α_i and β_j.

This way, CA converts the high dimensional space to a lower dimensional latent space. I limited my analysis to the first three dimensions since they contribute the most to explaining

users' following decisions.[6] Every opinion leader has a coordinate on each of the three dimensions, which captures some aspects of their latent qualities. I assumed that their followers were attracted by these latent qualities, and because these followers were highly interested in politics, at least one of these dimensions should describe the ideological stance of opinion leaders. The main purpose of this chapter is to identify a single one dimension that best characterizes ideological differences.

Figure 2-1 shows the first three latent dimensions given by CA. Red dots denote opinion leaders and blue dots are followers.

Figure 2-1: Distribution of Ideology Estimates, First Three Dimensions



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Network Database, 2017.

[6] The singular values of the first three dimensions are 0.24, 0.17, and 0.14 respectively. In total, they explain 10 percent of the variances in people's decisions to follow an opinion leader or not. The rest of the latent dimensions each fall behind 0.1 in terms of their singular values.

The first three dimensions explain about 4.2 percent, 3.1 percent, and 2.6 percent of the total variances in the following decisions of the selected Weibo users, respectively. Considering that following a person or not is a private decision motivated by numerous reasons, the level of variances explained by the three dimensions is substantial.

However, a common shortcoming of dimension reduction techniques is that the latent dimensions are not immediately interpretable. Based on my prior knowledge, my initial examination of opinion leaders arrayed along each of the dimensions suggests that the third dimension characterizes people's ideological stances and could be taken as the ideological spectrum. Meanwhile, the first dimension indicates the level of people's interest in political topics, and the second dimension indicates the level of people's interest in financial topics. Nevertheless, these observations need to be validated.

Cross-Validating the Ideological Dimension: Semantic Analysis

First, I investigated the online speech of opinion leaders to identify the main topics they were talking about on Weibo. The assumption is that people with opposing ideological stances tend to discuss different topics on social media sites. I thus identified the main topics among opinion leaders and examined whether their preferences of certain topics were in accordance with their positions on the ideological dimension.

I employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA),[7] a topic modeling technique, to identify ten main topics from the 1.28 million original posts produced by opinion leaders. LDA takes a number of documents (*note*: in this study, each document is a collection of each opinion leader's

[7] LDA assumes that documents are probability distributions over topics, and topics are probability distributions over words. Both of the two probability distributions have a Dirichlet prior to control the sparsity of the distribution. For more details of LDA, see Blei et al.'s (2003) seminal work *Latent Dirichlet Allocation*.

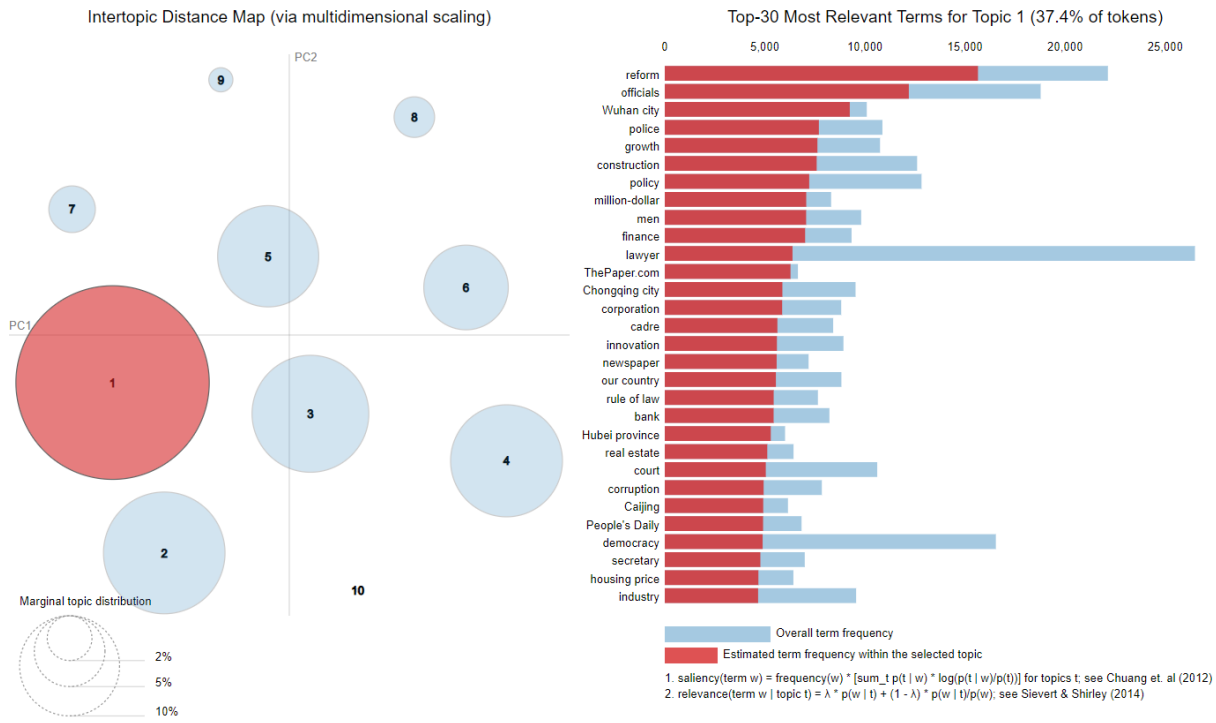
online posts), and it requires researchers to specify the number of topics they expect to find within these documents. Assuming that documents discussing similar topics would use a similar group of words, LDA discovers topics by identifying groups of words that frequently occur together within the documents.

After natural language processing, including segmentation and removal of stop words, I tested several LDA models with 8, 10, 12, and 15 topics. Examining the key words in each topic, I found that the LDA model with ten topics gives the clearest and most distinct topics. In addition, all ten topics identified by the LDA model mainly consisted of terms related to politics and the economy. This verified that the identified opinion leaders did in fact talk a great deal about political and economic issues on Weibo.

In this process, I obtained each opinion leader's weights on each of the ten topics. Technically, these weights can be understood as the proportion of each topic in an opinion leader's posts. I checked the correlation between opinion leaders' topic weights and their coordinates on the ideological dimension; then I applied a qualitative reading approach to further validate the results.

Figure 2-2 shows a visual representation of the LDA topic model. The left panel demonstrates the marginal distribution (corresponding to the circle size) of each of the ten topics to the entire textual dataset. As shown, Topic 1 is the largest, most prevalent topic in the data. The right panel gives the top thirty most relevant words for each topic. For instance, the most relevant terms for Topic 1 include: reform, officials, police, policy, and many other politically-related terms. The top five topics already cover 88.5 percent of the terms in opinion leaders' online speech, while the rest of the topics contribute little to the corpus.

Figure 2-2: Ten Topics in Opinion Leader Speech



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Combining the marginal topic distribution and the top relevant words, I selected topics 1-3 and Topic 5 for further analysis. On the one hand, these four topics were highly relevant for political discussion. On the other, these topics in total contribute to 76 percent of the terms in opinion leaders' online speech. I skipped Topic 4 and other topics either because they were too small in size or they had more to do with financial issues than with political discussion. After analyzing the key words in each topic, I gave different labels to the four topics, as summarized in Figure 2-3.

Figure 2-3: Four Major Topics in Opinion Leader Speech*

*Note: Circle size represents the size of the topic.
Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

The most relevant term for Topic 1 is "reform." This topic includes many political terms, such as "policy," "rule of law," and "democracy." After reading a sample of posts on Topic 1, I found that this most prevalent topic has a liberal undertone in that the main issues of discussion were pertinent to political reforms towards a democratic system building upon the principle of rule of law. The theme of law was more salient in Topic 3, where legal terms were more prevalent, ranging from "defendant" and "judge" to "court" and "legal evidence." In fact, in the Chinese context, law and legal terms are closely associated with constitutionalism and the principle of rule of law—the pillar of liberal democracy—and are usually seen as a challenge to the authoritarian rule of the CCP. Topic 3 also has a liberal undertone in this sense. I labeled Topic 2 and Topic 3 as "reformism" and "legalism," respectively.

Topic 2 and 5, by contrast, include keywords with a conservative undertone. Typical terms of Topic 2 include "public intellectuals" (*gongzhi*), a disparaging term referring to liberals who allegedly betray China by "blindly" supporting Western democracies. It also includes "Mao

Zedong," "socialism," and "cultural revolution," which are often mentioned in the conversations of conservatives and Maoists who desire to return to the Mao era. I thus labeled this topic "Conservativism." Topic 5 covers military terms and countries or regions that have been involved in warfare and/or diplomatic disputes, e.g., Syria and the South China Sea. These key words are prevalent among nationalists who pay particular attention to military, wars, and diplomacy. I thus labeled it "nationalism."

Topic 4 was skipped because it was mainly about financial and economic issues, including key words such like "stock market," "real estate," and "currency." Topics 6–10 are also relevant to politics, but they contribute too little to the entire dataset and were not significant.

Taken together, the LDA model reveals that opinion leaders mainly talked about reforms, laws, socialist and Maoist thought, and diplomacy/military matters on Weibo. It also suggests that there was a potential split between topics with a liberal undertone and topics with a conservative undertone. Recall that I assumed opinion leaders with opposing ideologies would discuss different, if not opposing, topics in social media. I turned to test the assumption by checking the correlation between opinion leaders' positions on the ideological dimension (the third CA dimension) and their probabilities of talking about certain topics. Table 2-1 summarizes the pair-wise correlation coefficients between the two measures.

Table 2-1: Correlations between Opinion Leaders' Ideologies and Topic Preferences

	LDA Topics			
	Nationalism	Conservatism	Reformism	Legalism
Ideological Dimension (CA Third Dimension)	0.35***	0.20***	-0.13**	-0.14**

*** p values < 0.001, ** p values < 0.01

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Network Database, 2017; Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

The correlations between the two measures verify that the third CA dimension indeed differentiates opinion leaders' topic preferences and, presumably, their ideological stances. Opinion leaders' coordinates on the ideological dimension are positively and significantly correlated with conservative and nationalistic topics (Pearson's r: 0.35 and 0.20, respectively), whereas they are negatively and significantly correlated with topics pertinent to democratic thoughts (r: -0.13 and -0.14). Accordingly, along the third dimension, opinion leaders on the one end were more likely to discuss political reforms towards liberal democracy, while leaders on the other end were more likely to talk about the socialist system and China's diplomacy.

Reading a sample of opinion leaders' Weibo posts and my prior knowledge of these particular leaders both confirm this finding: well-known intellectuals and lawyers committed to democracy are clustered on the left side of this dimension, constituting the political "left." At the same time, famous nationalists and Maoists appear on the right side of the dimension, constituting the political "right." This dimension is therefore the ideological spectrum that the rest of the analysis will focus on.

Except for this ideological dimension, correlations between results of the LDA topic model and the CA output also show that the first CA dimension corresponds to opinion leaders' level of interest in politics. This dimension is equally negatively associated with all four political

topics. Opinion leaders who were highly committed to political discussion are clustered on one end of this dimension. Opinion leaders more focused on their personal life and non-political interests are clustered on the other end.

The second CA dimension demonstrates the opinion leaders' level of interest in the economy and financial issues. This dimension is most strongly associated with Topic 4, "Finance and Economy" (r: -0.30). Many business tycoons and economists fall on one end of this dimension. They talked a great deal about the stock market, investments, the real estate market, and so on. Opinion leaders on the other end were much less interested in topics related to financial and economic issues.

Together, the LDA topic model, my prior knowledge, and my qualitative reading of opinion leader posts jointly validate the CA results. This finding is somewhat different from Barbera and his colleagues' (2015) conclusions. In their study, the first CA dimension already indicates the ideological leanings of the politicians studied. This is expected, as Barbera's research was concerned with political figures in the US, including former and current presidents, senators, and influential party members. These political figures very clearly profile their political values. By contrast, as a state ruled by one party, China does not have multiple competing parties. Opinion leaders in China are not politicians. Therefore, an average user's decision to follow an opinion leader does not completely depend on the leader's ideological stances. The LDA topic model also shows a wide variety of topics, both political and non-political, that the opinion leaders were interested in. Hence, it is reasonable that the first dimension only refers to the individual's level of interest in politics, whereas the third dimension reflects the ideological stances of opinion leaders.

Cross-Validating the Ideological Dimension: Network Analysis

The semantic analysis of opinion leaders' original posts verifies the validity of the network-based estimates of their ideological leanings. This network was formed by opinion leaders, their followers, and the network ties between them. To further confirm that the two measures are reasonably accurate, I introduce the third measure: the clustering of opinion leaders in their retweeting network on Weibo.

In this network, each node is an opinion leader, and each tie denotes that an opinion leader forwarded a post (i.e., a retweet) of another opinion leader once. I first examined the structure of this retweeting network to detect opinion leader communities; then I juxtaposed the division of these communities with leaders' positions along the ideological dimension. The assumption is that opinion leaders tended to interact more with those sharing similar views and opinions, and thus they would form different communities in accordance with their ideological stances.

Unlike only following each other on social media platforms, retweeting requires the effort to read and forward another person's posts, sometimes with one's own responses to the original posts. This process better engages social media users and measures social interactions on the Internet.

I analyzed the 2.48 million retweeted posts produced by opinion leaders between 2009 and 2017. Suppose that each opinion leader is a node in the retweeting network. The act of leader A retweeting leader B composes a directed tie from A to B. There are 223 nodes and 17,310 directed ties in total. The number of repetitive ties between any two of the leaders are treated as the weight of this tie. The rest of the sixteen opinion leaders did not retweet any posts publically and were not recorded in my dataset.

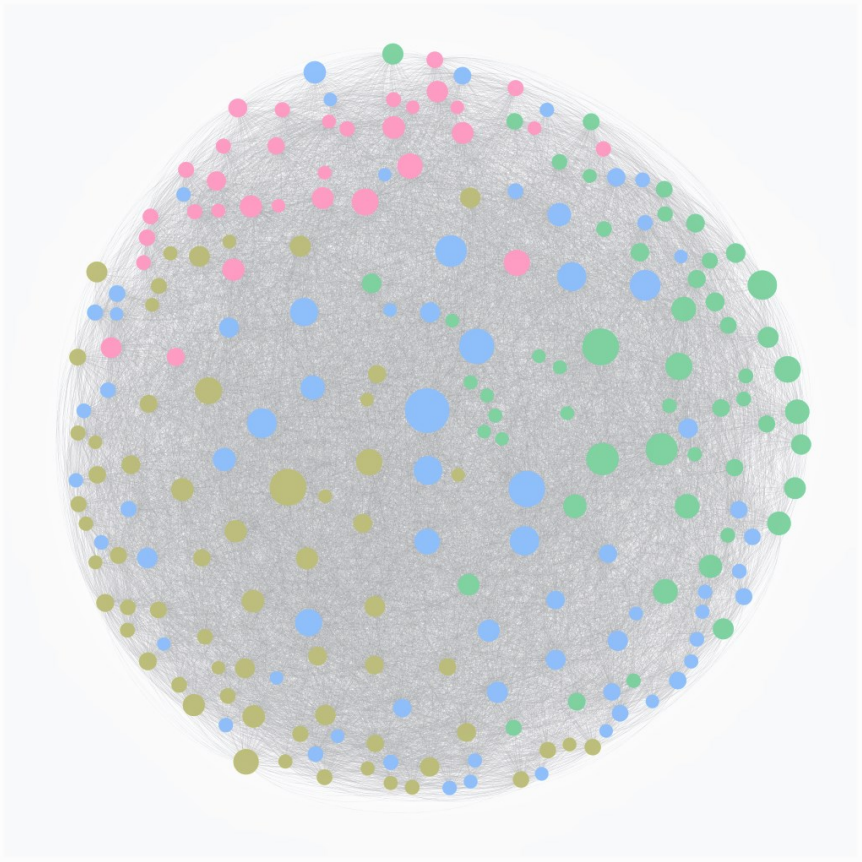
Table 2-2: Statistical Description of Opinion Leaders' Retweeting Network

Basics
Nodes: 223
Edges (directed): 17310
Attributes
Avg. Degree: 76.724
Network Density: 0.349
Modularity: 0.316
Avg. Clustering Coefficient: 0.512
Avg. Path Length: 1.702
random graphs avg.density: 0.025
random graphs avg.modularity: 0.257
(random graphs were generated with 223 nodes; wiring probability: 0.01 [regular lattices])

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Table 2-2 summarizes the statistics of the retweeting network. It shows that the density of the network (0.316) is significantly high, meaning that opinion leaders' interactions were prevalent and frequent. Moreover, the modularity of this network, a measure to detect communities, is also high, meaning that this retweeting network can be divided to several communities, each having denser connections within itself but sparser connections to other communities. The modularity algorithms implemented in *Gephi* found four communities within opinion leaders' retweeting network, as shown in Figure 2-4.

Figure 2-4: Retweeting Network of Opinion Leaders (N=223)

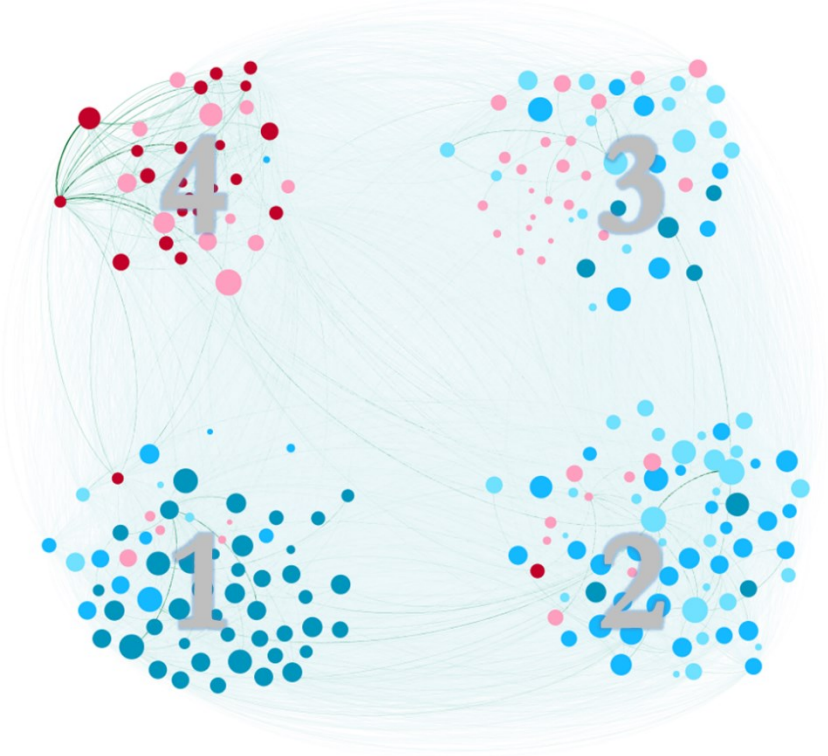


Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Each of the red, blue, green, and yellow colors denotes one community detected by the algorithm. The size of the circle corresponds to the in-degree of an opinion leader, which is the number of opinion leaders who ever retweeted this person on Weibo. The larger the circle, the more popular this focal leader is. The grey curved lines denote the retweeting ties among opinion leaders. The massive number of grey lines indicate that this retweeting network has very dense connections.

Recall that the CA method estimated the positions of opinion leaders along the ideological dimension, and I assumed that opinion leaders close to each other on the ideological dimension would be more likely to stay in the same community within the retweeting network. Now I group opinion leaders into four quartiles along ideological dimension from the left end to the right end, so that we can observe a variation in ideological stances across these quartiles. I then juxtapose the four quartiles with the four communities identified by the modularity algorithm. Figure 2-5 visualizes the juxtaposition of the two measures.

Figure 2-5: Network Clusters and Ideological Positions of Opinion Leaders



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

The four sub-networks labeled from one to four are the four communities detected by the modularity algorithms embedded in *Gephi*. Community 1 and 2 are the largest communities,

each including 28.31 percent and 31.96 percent of opinion leaders. Community 3 contains 24.66 percent and community 4 is the smallest one, covering only 15.07 percent of opinion leaders. The thickness of the curved line denotes the weight of a retweet tie between two leaders, i.e., the frequency of their interactions.

The four colors—deep blue, light blue, light red, and deep red—denote the four quartiles from the left to the right along the ideological dimension. Deep blue denotes the political "left." Light blue denotes "center-left." Light red denotes "center-right" and deep red denotes the political "right." Again, the circle size corresponds to the in-degrees of each opinion leaders.

There are two main findings: First, the division of the four communities is roughly in line with opinion leaders' ideological stances. Community 1 mainly consists of deep blue circles, meaning that a majority of this community are on the political "left" and were more concerned about democratic reforms and rule of law. Community 4 exclusively contains red circles, meaning that it is composed of people on the political "right" who talked more about Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and nationalist topics. Community 2 and 3 mainly consist of light red and light blue circles, meaning that most of the members are moderates. But community 2 is more leaning towards the left because there are more blue circles, while community 3 is more leaning towards the right as more red circles are present. Again, the network structure of opinion leaders and their ideological stances mutually correspond to each other, such that the two independent measures reach a similar grouping of opinion leaders.

Second, the network analysis suggests that the red cluster, i.e., people on the political "right," seemed to form the smallest but densest community because this community takes up only 15 percent of opinion leaders, but their ties are thicker than other communities. Moreover, within the retweeting network, dark and light red circles are significantly smaller than their blue

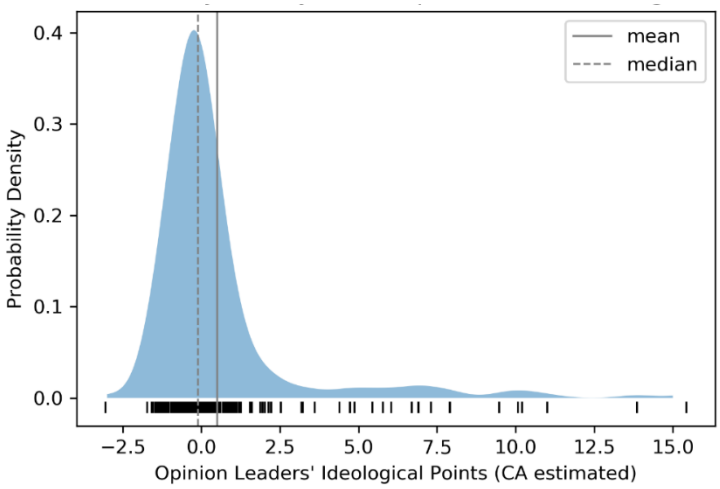
counterparts, meaning that people on the right were less popular on Weibo, while people on the left attracted more retweets from other leaders. All this suggests that conservative and nationalist ideologies are not that popular in China, at least among opinion leaders in the public sphere.

So far, I have used three independent measures to explore and estimate opinion leaders' ideologies. I first used the CA method to estimate their ideological positions based on leaders' following relationships on Weibo. Then I validated and calibrated this measure by applying semantic analysis to identify the major topics of different opinion leaders and by applying network analysis to detect the major communities based on their retweeting behaviors. Putting it all together, the three measures mutually verify one another, and the rest of my analysis will be primarily based on the CA estimated ideological spectrum.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter began with an overview of the ideological landscape in China. Then I estimated the ideological positions of opinion leaders using three independent measures. Figure 2-6 shows the triple-verified ideological spectrum of opinion leaders.

Figure 2-6: The Ideology Spectrum of Opinion Leaders



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Network Database, 2017.

The x-axis denotes different positions on the ideological dimension, and the y-axis denotes the probability density of opinion leaders. Most opinion leaders fall within one standard deviation from the mean, indicating that there was limited polarization between the political "left" and "right" among the majority of opinion leaders. Slightly more than half of the opinion leaders received a negative score on the x-axis, meaning that they lean more to the "left" relative to their fellow opinion leaders. Meanwhile, the few opinion leaders on the far right reminds us of the small exclusive community in the retweeting network, most of whose members come from the right end of the ideological dimension. This group of strongly conservative opinion leaders skews the ideological spectrum, but they might not be as influential as they appear to be. On the one hand, this group is small in size; on the other, network analysis shows that they had a low in-degree on average, meaning that they were not receiving much attention on Weibo.

Note that the substantive meaning of the political "left" and "right" is still not clear at this stage in that we know little about the specific views and values of these opinion leaders. Moreover, in this chapter, I assumed that the ideological spectrum is one-dimensional without considering the variances within each ideological camp. Therefore, to understand the specific views of the political "left" and "right" in the Chinese context and the associated variances and nuances is the main goal of the rest of this dissertation.

Informed by the rough positions of opinion leaders on the one-dimensional ideological spectrum, I will scrutinize opinion leaders' online speech in the next three chapters in order to explore their perceptions of liberal democracy, their views on nationalistic topics, and their expectations on China's socioeconomic reforms.

CHAPTER 3

DEBATING NATIONALISM

In Chapter 2, I estimated the one-dimensional ideological spectrum of opinion leaders. It shows that a majority of opinion leaders are leaning towards the left while a few outliers are on the far right. However, what specifically does the political "left" and "right" mean in the Chinese context? Do opinions split between a pro- and an anti-regime/CCP stance, as previous studies and common knowledge suggest? In this chapter, I start to examine how opinion leaders at different ideological positions are qualitatively different from one another, particularly when they discuss nationalistic topics. The theoretical ambition of this chapter is to demonstrate the heterogeneity in public opinion and deconstruct the dichotomy between a pro- and an anti-regime stance in Chinese ideological debates.

The reason to focus on nationalism is two-fold. Nationalism was one of the four major topics discussed by opinion leaders on Weibo. Although this topic is smaller than other topics in terms of the volume of posts it involves, Chinese nationalism continues to be a significant and important topic that has drawn a great deal of diplomatic and scholarly attention from the world. Many China scholars owe the increasing assertiveness in China's diplomatic policies to a rising Chinese nationalism, characterizing the Chinese Internet as a space overflowing with nationalistic sentiments (for instance, see Zhao, 2004 and 2013).

More importantly, in academic discussion and media coverage, Chinese nationalism is typically associated with zealous support for the CCP/government—that is, nationalists are presumably pro-regime, or at least they would turn a blind eye to domestic political conditions. Therefore, online discussion should reinforce the rule of the CCP because pro-regime stances

and nationalism go hand in hand and constitute a dominant online discourse (see, for instance, Shen and Breslin, 2010).

Counter to these accounts, after applying computational methods and qualitative analysis to a sample of 99,178 opinion leader posts related to nationalism, I found that nationalism was *not* a dominant discourse in public discussion, and nationalist opinions were highly heterogeneous and *not* necessarily associated with support for the political regime. On the contrary, nationalists criticized the government for domestic social and political problems just the same as liberals. Even though there was a split between nationalistic and non-nationalistic opinions, online discourses represent some destabilizing combinations of political sentiments, and the dichotomy between a pro- and an anti-regime stance is not supported by empirical data.

In the rest of the chapter, I first discuss the significance of nationalism for the study of ideology in China. Then I disaggregate nationalism-related discussions into three sub-topics, investigating opinion leaders' views on Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. For each of the topics, I gauge the level of nationalist sentiments among opinion leaders and the specifics of their opinions. Lastly, to investigate the relationship between nationalism and regime support, I focus on nationalistic expressions and assess whether and how nationalists evaluated the regime.

REFLECTIONS ON CHINESE NATIONALISM

Chinese nationalism has long been of interest to China scholars. Such interest has increased in recent decades, especially since President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2013 and increasingly demonstrated diplomatic assertiveness.[1] However, for many China scholars, the

[1] For an example of such media coverage, see John Richard Cookson, 2015. "The Real Threat of Chinese Nationalism," *The National Interest,* accessed August 28, 2019, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-real-threat-chinese-nationalism-13729.

central question remains controversial: does nationalism really dominate the public sphere in contemporary China?

Some scholars believe that Chinese nationalism is running high in China. Witnessing large-scale nationalist protests incited by, for instance, the 1999 United States (US) bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade or the allegedly biased Western media reports on China during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, many China observers argue that nationalist ideology is flourishing. They say the Chinese Internet is being used to agitate for a tougher government in international affairs and diplomatic disputes, which may dampen China's democratic prospects (Shen and Breslin, 2010; Weatherley, 2014).

Challenging this view, however, several recent studies question the notion of a flourishing Chinese nationalism. For instance, Dingxin Zhao (2002) surveyed Chinese student protesters after the 1999 embassy bombing and concluded that the demonstrations were a momentary outrage and that anti-US nationalism would not flourish. Andrew Chubb (2014) surveyed 1,000 Chinese citizens in 2013 and found that the majority of them supported compromise when facing international disputes. Most recently, Alastair Johnston (2017) investigated longitudinal survey data extending back to 1998 and concluded that, contrary to the theory of a rising Chinese nationalism, most indicators show a decline in levels of nationalism since around 2009. Even when we narrow down the research to netizens, online activism scholars argue that netizens are more likely to be supportive of democracy and critical of political conditions in China (Yang, 2009; Lei, 2011).

Faced with these contradicting accounts, an empirical investigation of the popularity and the nature of Chinese nationalism is important and highly relevant for the study of popular ideologies in China.

OPINION LEADERS AND THE STUDY OF NATIONALISM

In contrast to existing studies, an analysis of opinion leaders provides unique leverage for a systematic study of Chinese nationalism. First, most empirical research relies heavily on case studies to explore nationalism. Some scholars investigate high-profile nationalistic publications (Gries, 2004), some study nationalist movements in the heat of the moment (e.g., Cairns and Carlson's 2016 study of the 2012 anti-Japan online protests), and still others participate in nationalist forums to observe how nationalists perceive diplomatic relations (e.g., Liu's 2006 study on the "Strong Nation" forum [*qiangguo luntan*]). While these studies give us valuable particulars about each specific group of nationalists, they provide less information about how the nationalists compete with other voices in a broader context. By contrast, I study nationalism by observing opinion leaders in an inclusive social media platform where different opinions coexist and compete. This way, I can better estimate the popularity of nationalism in the general public.

Second, most of the previous studies tend to explore Chinese nationalism by investigating a single issue, such as the issue of Taiwanese independence or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute (*Diaoyu* hereafter).[2] The hidden assumption is that nationalistic sentiments towards one topic can be generalized to a full picture of nationalist opinion. However, important heterogeneity in public opinion may be dismissed under such an assumption, as nationalists' attitudes may differ according to the particular topic at hand. To capture this variation, I juxtapose opinion leaders' attitudes towards three main countries/regions that often provoke Chinese nationalistic sentiments, including Taiwan, the US, and Japan. This way, I am able to discern heterogeneity in nationalist discourse across topics.

[2] The Senkaku/Diaoyu are offshore islands in the East China Sea whose sovereignty is claimed by both China and Japan. I use the name "Diaoyu," emic in Chinese online discussions.

Finally, existing literature assumes that liberal values and nationalistic opinions are incompatible or a contradiction in terms. Although some scholars recognize that liberalism and nationalism once worked hand in hand in early twentieth-century China for the sake of national salvation (Zhao, 2004), many primarily characterize nationalists in modern China as a pro-regime group without really evaluating their attitude towards the regime (Shen and Breslin, 2010). Others warn that fervent nationalism may backfire on the regime, but this anger is mostly provoked by the government's weakness in diplomatic disputes (Shirk, 2007; Weiss, 2014). Different from the findings of previous research, Cairns and Carlson's (2016) study of online nationalism during the 2012 Diaoyu crisis found that anti-regime sentiment was unexpectedly pervasive in nationalist discourse. More interesting, this sentiment was not inflamed solely by diplomatic issues but also driven by bad political conditions at home. I pick up where Cairns and Carlson left off, directly exploring whether nationalistic opinion leaders are also strong regime supporters.

DISAGGREGATING NATIONALISM

The term "nationalism" (*minzu zhuyi*, 民族主义) was first introduced to China by Qichao Liang (梁启超), a leader of the Hundred Days Reform, after China accepted defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. In light of the national crisis, the Chinese government and social elites leveraged nationalist sentiment, calling for the unification of all Chinese people to salvage China. Since then, Chinese nationalism has played an important role in the geopolitics of China and other countries or regions. To examine the heterogeneity (or lack thereof) in public opinion, I disaggregate Chinese nationalism into three sub-topics, investigating online discussion about the US, Japan, and Taiwan.

The Selection of the Three Topics

It is commonly believed that the US, Japan, and Taiwan are the three most important sources of topics and issues that at times fan strong nationalist feeling among the mainland Chinese. Other countries, such as Russia, may also have territorial disputes or even short-term military confrontations with China. However, due to complicated ideological and/or diplomatic reasons, the Chinese government tends to downplay disputes with allies like Russia, and such news usually does not create as big a splash as a potential story like "the Japanese prime minister went to Yasukuni Shrine."[3]

Japan has long been the focal point of nationalistic debate in China. Owing to the national humiliation and atrocities that were created by the Sino-Japanese Wars between 1894 and 1985 and the full-scale Japanese invasion of China between 1937 and 1945, the Chinese have harbored more animosity towards Japan than any other nation. Memories of national suffering and indignity in, for instance, the Nanjing Massacre, have haunted the Chinese for decades. Moreover, the unequal treaties signed with Japan after military defeats made China cede to Japan full sovereignty over several lands and properties, including the Diaoyu Islands. These territorial disputes and memories of wartime suffering have strained Sino-Japanese relations and rendered anti-Japan nationalism a moral imperative in China.

The United States is another source that often triggers nationalistic sentiments in China. The US and China do not have territorial disputes or memories of war. The tensions between the

[3] Yasukuni Shrine is a Japanese *Shinto* shrine to worship the souls of the soldiers who served *the Emperor of Japan* during wars from 1867–1951. However, some individuals in the Shrine were claimed to be war criminals by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, including fourteen Class A ("crime against peace") war criminals. Therefore, many East Asian countries, including China, South Korea, and North Korea, have called the Yasukuni Shrine a manifestation of Japan's unapologetic attitudes towards its crimes during World War II. Therefore, Japanese leaders going to the Yasukuni Shrine is always seen by many Chinese as a bold provocation of Japan and usually incite public denunciations and protests in China.

two countries mainly stem from geopolitical struggles and ideological disputes. The US is currently the sole superpower in the world, and China is a rising power perceived as a potential rival of the US. The two states also represent two opposing political systems and ideologies: the US exemplifies a mature Western democracy, whereas China is an authoritarian state. The political struggles between the two states are thus deeply entangled with ideological and ethical debates. In the eyes of Chinese nationalists, the US has been promoting a hidden agenda of containing and even overturning China in the name of democratization. Therefore, supporters of the US are labeled "traitors" (*hanjian* 汉奸) to the Chinese nation by Chinese nationalists.

Taiwan represents an even trickier case of Chinese nationalism. Ever since the Kuomintang (KMT) was defeated by the CCP and fled to Taiwan in 1949, China and Taiwan have long disputed the prospect of political reunification versus Taiwanese independence. Because of the same cultural and historical origins between mainland China and Taiwan, there seems to be a consensus among most Chinese that Taiwanese people used to be—and will continue to be—family members of Chinese citizens. Therefore, there is a strong desire for a "family reunion" powered by traditional Chinese culture. Against this background, any claims related to Taiwanese independence would certainly put Chinese people on edge and lead to nationalist outcries.

Dovetailing with the above accounts, the LDA topic model in the previous chapter indicates that the three countries/regions are central to the topic of nationalism. Specifically, the top thirty most relevant keywords for the topic of nationalism include, for instance, "Obama," "Trump," "Diaoyu Island," "Shinzo Abe," "Chiang Kai-shek" (the leader of KMT and the Republic of China in mainland China until 1949, and then in Taiwan until his death in 1975), and

"Kuomingtang/KMT." Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, I will investigate and juxtapose opinion leaders' views on the US, Japan, and Taiwan.

Data and Method

To explore opinion leaders' views on the three focal countries/regions, I selected any posts that contained at least one of the keywords listed in Table 3-1. These keywords include 1) the official name of the country or region, e.g., "*mei guo*/美国" for the US; 2) the unofficial name that is commonly used in Chinese online discussion, e.g., "*Nihon*/霓虹" for Japan; and 3) the term for the bilateral relationship between China and the focal country or region, e.g., "*liangan*/两岸" for cross-strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan. As a result, 99,178 posts were selected from the 1.28 million posts produced by opinion leaders between 2009 and 2017, taking up a little less than 1 percent of the universe of opinion leader posts. Note that a few opinion leaders never mentioned any keywords that I am interested in and are thus excluded from the analysis. Also note that the selected posts are supposed to demonstrate the full spectrum of online posts about the three countries/regions, with or without nationalist sentiments, because the purpose here is to evaluate the popularity of nationalism within the broader context of relevant online discussion.

Table 3-1: Keywords Used to Select Nationalism-related Posts

Topics	**US 美国**	**Taiwan 台湾**	**Japan 日本**	**TOTAL**
Keywords	美国 *mei guo* America 美帝 *mei di* Imperial America 中美 *zhong mei* China-US	台湾 *tai wan* Taiwan 湾湾 *wan wan* Wanwan 两岸 *liang an* cross strait	日本 *ri ben* Japan 霓虹 *ni hong* Nippon/Nihon 中日 *zhong ri* Sino-Japan	
Number of Posts	58,391	13,500	27,287	99,178
Number of Opinion Leaders	215	215	217	
Percentage	58.87%	13.61%	27.51%	100%

Notes: Terms such as "imperial America" and "wanwan" are commonly used as tongue-in-cheek references to the focal place on the Chinese Internet, and they usually do not indicate ideological preference.

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

As shown in Table 3-1, the US seems to attract the most attention of Chinese opinion leaders as more than half of the selected posts were about America. Japan was mentioned in more than a quarter of the posts, while Taiwan was relatively marginalized in online discussions, taking up a little more than 10 percent of the selected posts.

The methods in this chapter remain consistent with those used in Chapter 2. First, I employed LDA topic modeling to identify the main topics in opinion leader posts about each of the three countries/regions. I tested LDA models with 2, 3, 4, and 5 topics and determined the

best LDA models for the discussions. Next, I obtained the weights on each of the given topics from each opinion leader (i.e., the proportion of each topic in individual posts) and examined the correlation between their topic weights and their ideological positions estimated in Chapter 2. Lastly, I applied a qualitative reading approach to grasp the nuances of opinion leader views. Now I turn to the analyses of opinion leaders' views on each of the three places.

Japan

Main Topics of Japan-related Discussions

The LDA topic model suggests that there are three distinct topics in Japan-related discussions. Topic 1 appears to be the largest and most dominant topic of the discussion about Japan. It takes up 64.6 percent of the terms used in opinion leader posts, while Topic 2 and 3 only cover 29.1 percent and 6.5 percent of all the terms, respectively. Based on the keywords of each topic (summarized in Table 3-2), I found that Topic 1 is most likely a nationalistic topic, of which the top relevant words are associated with territory disputes and historical problems between China and Japan. These words include, for instance, "Diaoyu islands," "Shinzo Abe" (a Japanese nationalist leader who is strongly disfavored by many Chinese people), "historical problem," and "territory and sovereignty." In addition, opinion leaders' weights on this topic are positively and strongly associated with their ideological positions (r: 0.40), meaning that the more likely opinion leaders talked about the nationalistic topic, the more they lean towards the political "right."

Topics 2 and 3, by contrast, are more neutral, if not positive, towards Japan. Topic 2 is interested in Japan's economy and society. Opinion leaders talked about "earthquakes" and the "economy," "culture," and the "real estate" of Japan, while they also mentioned a few touristic

cities such as “Tokyo” and “Kyoto.” Furthermore, opinion leaders’ weights on Topic 2 are negatively and strongly associated with their ideological positions (r: -0.35), meaning that the more likely opinion leaders talked about the non-nationalistic topics, the more they lean towards the political “left.”

Topic 3 is even more lighthearted. It refers to Japan as “neon,” a less serious nickname for Japan that pronounces the same as *Nihon* in Chinese. It also includes terms such as “kitty,” “kawaii” (“cute” in Japanese), “monsters,” “plum wine,” “fiction,” and “movies.” It is thus reasonable to speculate that Topic 3 is associated with Japanese culture, such as *manga* (Japanese comics or graphical novels), food, and lifestyle in general. As a non-political topic, Topic 3 is not associated with opinion leaders’ ideological positions at all.

Table 3-2: Keywords in Japan-related Posts

(% of tokens)	Label	Key Words		
Topic 1 (64.6%):	Nationalistic	Diaoyu islands	Shinzo Abe	historical problem
		territory and sovereignty	World War II	Sino-Japanese
Topic 2 (29.1%):	Non-nationalistic	earthquakes	economy	culture
		real estate	Tokyo	Kyoto
Topic 3 (6.5%):	Non-nationalistic	Nihon/neon	kitty	Kawaii
		monsters	plum wine	fiction

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

At face value, the LDA analysis indicates that while non-nationalistic topics, such as Japanese culture and society, were popular on Weibo, the largest topic in Japan-related discussion was loaded with nationalistic sentiments. However, the size of each topic is determined by the number of terms this topic includes, while the sheer number of terms in a certain topic does not necessarily indicate topic popularity. Some topics could be discussed by a

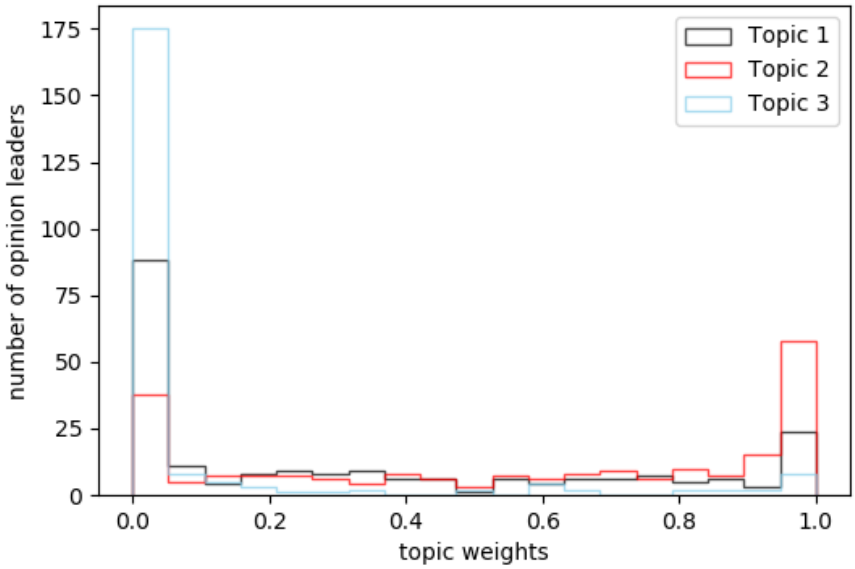
small number of people but appear as large topics only because the small dedicated group produces too many posts.

The Popularity of the Nationalistic Topic

In order to evaluate the popularity of each topic among opinion leaders, it is necessary to learn how many opinion leaders really talked about these topics. A truly popular topic is supposed to be widely discussed by a majority of opinion leaders. This question can be addressed by examining individual opinion leaders' weights on each of the topics, i.e., the probability of talking about the focal topic.

Figure 3-1 depicts the distribution of the topic weights of 217 opinion leaders who ever talked about Japan. Essentially, topic weights can be understood as the proportion that each topic takes up in an opinion leader's posts, and in total they add up to 1. As shown below, topic weights range from 0 (did not talk about this topic at all) to 1 (almost exclusively talked about this topic), and each leader has three different weights on the three topics, denoting the possibilities of him or her talking about each of the three topics.

Figure 3-1: Distribution of Opinion Leaders' Topic Weights (N=217)
– Japan-related Discussions



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

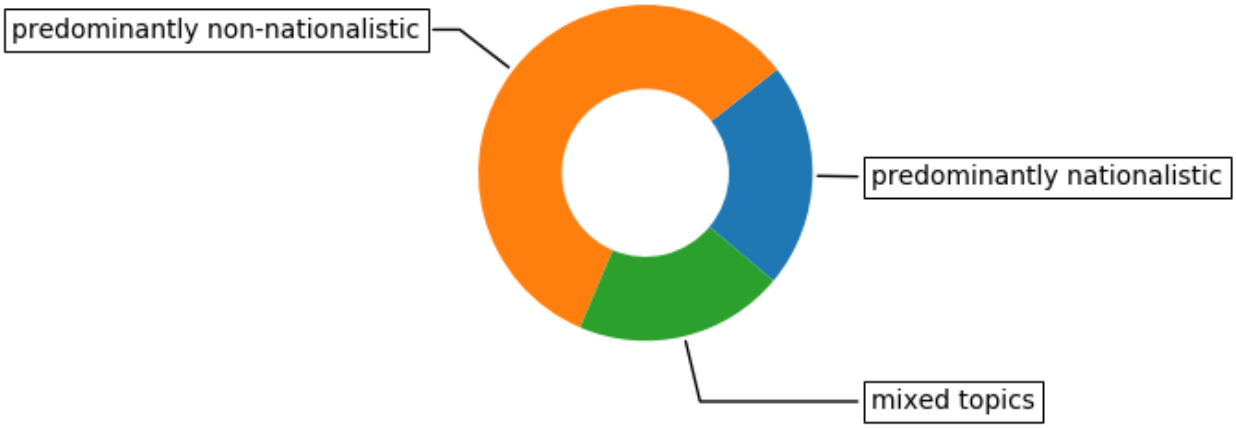
Interestingly, Figure 3-1 indicates that more than 80 opinion leaders—that is, nearly 39 percent of opinion leaders—had a topic weight less than 0.1 for Topic 1, meaning they rarely engaged in the nationalistic topic. By contrast, significantly more opinion leaders had higher topic weights (over 0.5) on Topic 2, the neutral topic about Japan's economy and society. In other words, Topic 2 is more popular than Topic 1 in the sense that there were more opinion leaders talking a great deal about Topic 2 on Weibo.

In addition, Figure 3-1 also indicates that the majority of opinion leaders rarely engaged in discussions about Topic 3, which is Japanese lifestyle, such as *manga* and food. This is expected, as opinion leaders are defined as those primarily interested in political topics.

To clearly juxtapose the level of strength of nationalistic sentiments of opinion leaders according to their commitments to different topics, I grouped leaders based on the proportion of different topics in their posts. Specifically, if a given opinion leader has a topic weight larger than 0.7 on Topic 1, meaning that over 70 percent of posts were devoted to discussing the

nationalistic topic, I labeled the leader "predominantly nationalistic." Likewise, if a given opinion leader has a topic weight less than 0.3 on Topic 1, I labeled him or her "predominantly non-nationalistic." Lastly, if an opinion leader had a relatively balanced combination of different topics, i.e., a topic weight between 0.3 and 0.7 on Topic 1 and, accordingly, topic weights between 0.7 and 0.3 on Topics 2 and 3, I used the label "mixed topics." Figure 3-2 summarizes the distribution of the three groups of opinion leaders.

Figure 3-2: Distribution of Levels of Nationalistic Sentiments (N=217)
— *Japan-related Discussions*



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Counterintuitively, Figure 3-2 shows that the vast majority (58.06 percent) of opinion leaders were predominantly non-nationalistic, meaning that their topic weights on Topic 1, the nationalistic topic, are lower than 0.3. Only 21.66 percent of opinion leaders are predominantly nationalistic with a topic weight higher than 0.7 on Topic 1. Around 20.28 percent of opinion leaders talked about a mixture of nationalistic and non-nationalistic topics.

Figures 3-1 and 3-2 jointly show that the nationalistic topic engaged significantly less opinion leaders than the non-nationalistic topics on Weibo. The nationalistic topic is the largest

topic only to the extent that it involves a large number of terms, suggesting that a small group of opinion leaders were highly committed to persistently talking about nationalistic issues when it came to Japan.

This challenges the previous studies that indicate nationalism, particularly anti-Japan nationalism, is prevalent in China (for instance, see Liu, 2006; Reilly, 2014). It could be true that Japan incites the strongest nationalistic sentiments among Chinese people, but nationalistic topics are not necessarily as popular as expected when we put it within the larger context of online discussions.

Anti-Japan Nationalism: Anti-Regime Discourse amid Nationalistic Sentiments

After classifying opinion leaders into three groups based on the level of strength of their nationalistic sentiments, I then employed qualitative analysis to investigate a sample of opinion leaders in each group. I found that among nationalistic sentiments, anti-CCP discourse was pervasive in opinion leader discussions on Japan, either with or without nationalistic motives. Specifically, there are three types of anti-regime sentiments in Japan-related discussions.

Firstly, anti-regime views can be driven by purely nationalistic reasons. Among those predominantly nationalistic opinion leaders, typical nationalist declarations such as “We don’t forgive Japan!” and “Diaoyu is China’s territory!” were commonplace. However, occasionally, some nationalists were also anti-regime because they were riled by the perceived ineffectiveness of the government’s international diplomacy. For instance, some opinion leaders complained:

> Chairman Mao said imperialism is a paper tiger. But I think China is the biggest paper tiger. Facing the atrocities committed by the Japanese devils, China has been so cowardly and weak. Why?! (OL #237)

More often in the data, however, anti-regime views were simultaneously associated with both nationalistic *and* liberal concerns and frequently referred to domestic problems when talking about Japan. For instance:

> [1] We should definitely defend Diaoyu! But someday if the Chinese government really controls this island, we will no longer be able to log on to Facebook there. To defend or not, this is a tough choice! (OL #167)

> [2] Isn't *chengguan* (城管)[4] the best army in the world? If you can rule China easily with *chengguan*, then why not send *chengguan* to recover Diaoyu? This is the easiest way to defend our territory! (OL #8)

These nuanced views challenge public understanding of nationalists. These commentators can be seen as nationalists in that they call for the Diaoyu Islands to be recovered; however, at the same time, they mock the government not only for its diplomatic softness but out of concern for issues such as freedom of speech and police brutality. This indicates that nationalist views and liberal concerns can be compatible, and that "liberal nationalist" voices tend to question rather than defend the legitimacy of the Chinese regime.

Finally, many non-nationalistic opinion leaders expressed anti-regime sentiment for purely liberal reasons. Leaders directly called attention to domestic problems rather than international conflicts, or posted sarcastic slurs about nationalism:

> The priority of citizens is to fight for human rights and freedom. Nationalism is a panacea for deflecting criticisms of domestic conflicts. Stay vigilant to populism and radicalism. (OL #119)

Despite the fact that these are all examples of anti-regime attitudes, the sources of such sentiments are distinct. Showing the coexistence of liberal and nationalistic concerns, this finding poses a significant departure from existing literature. Nationalists are not only concerned about

[4] *Chengguan* refers to the local urban management enforcement bureau, which has been criticized for its brutality and abuse of power.

national strength but are equally, if not more so, concerned about political conditions at home. Overlooking this anti-regime sentiment, many journalistic accounts suggest that the Chinese people are overly nationalistic and put pressure on the government to wage war against Japan. But, in my data, more than 58 percent of opinion leaders were predominantly non-nationalistic, and many of them claimed that economic development and social stability were the highest priority.

This finding echoes the study of Cairns and Carlson (2016) with respect to the online discussion of the 2012 Diaoyu crisis, where anti-regime sentiments were also found to be prevalent. This finding also supports the conclusions of Chubb's (2014) survey research in which the author shows that there is no evidence that China's population pushes its leaders towards war against Japan. An opinion leader with 35 million followers represented this opinion:

> China and Japan should look toward the future and let go of the Diaoyu dispute for the sake of common development. (OL #11)

To summarize, Sino-Japanese relations indeed provoke strong nationalist reactions. However, anti-regime sentiment was pervasive in the discussion, and in many cases, this sentiment was derived more from liberal than from nationalistic concerns.

The United States

Main Topics of America-related Discussions

Among online discussions about the three countries/regions, the US was the most popular topic and attracted the most attention from opinion leaders. The number of posts associated with the US is more than twice the number of posts about Japan and nearly five times the number of posts about Taiwan.

The LDA model suggests that there are four distinct topics in America-related discussions. Topic 1 is the largest topic (58.6 percent), and it is mainly concerned with America's economy

and society. Most of the keywords appear neutral without nationalistic undertones. For instance, it includes names of American leaders such as "Trump" and "Obama," social institutions such as "economy" and "media," and many commerce terms such as "e-commerce," "Amazon," and "enterprises." Topic 2, by contrast, is smaller (38.6 percent) and clearly more nationalistic, including many terms about military and diplomacy, such as "Iran," "South China Sea," "US Army," "combat ship," and "national defense." Topic 3 is small (2.7 percent) and focuses on non-political lifestyle topics in the US, including terms about music and movies, such as the famous band "The Beatles," "rock music," "pop band," the world-class director "Quentin Tarantino," "movie," and "director." Topic 4 does not demonstrate a clear theme and is too small in size, taking up only 0.2 percent of the terms in the posts. I thus excluded it from the analysis. Table 3-3 summarizes the keywords of the rest of the topics.

Table 3-3: Keywords in US-related Posts

(% of tokens)	Label	Key Words		
Topic 1 (58.6%):	Non-nationalistic	economy	media	Trump
		e-commerce	Amazon	Obama
Topic 2 (38.6%):	Nationalistic	Iran	South China Sea	combat ship
		war	national defense	national interest
Topic 3 (2.7%):	Non-nationalistic	The Beatles	rock music	pop band
		Quentin Tarantino	movie	movie director

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

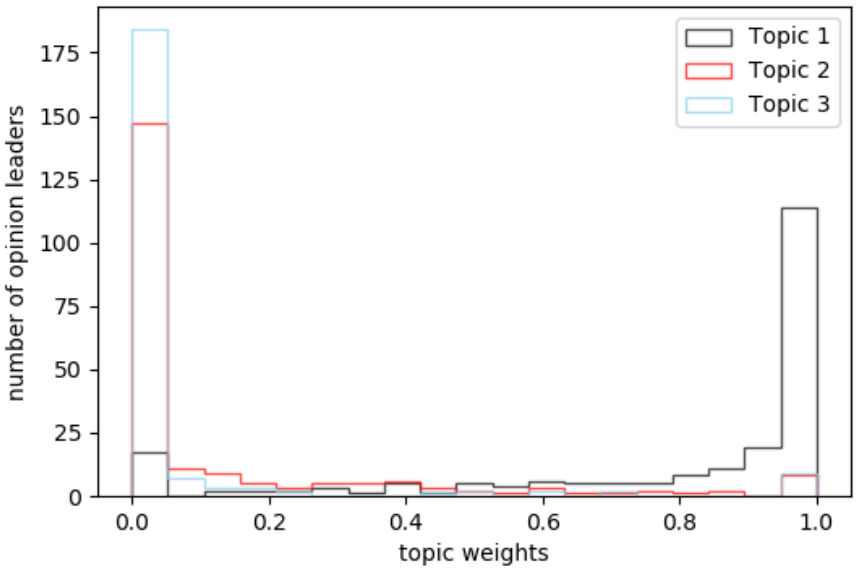
Put together, the LDA model suggests that there is one nationalistic topic, Topic 2, in America-related discussions, while other topics are relatively neutral and more interested in the American economy, society, and lifestyle. In addition, opinion leaders' topic weights on Topic 1 are negatively and strongly associated with their ideological positions ($r = -0.31$), meaning that the more likely leaders were to talk about the non-nationalistic topic, the more they lean towards

the political "left." By contrast, leaders' topic weights on Topic 2, the nationalistic topic, are positively and strongly associated with their ideological positions (r = 0.42), meaning that the more likely leaders were to talk about the nationalistic topic, the more they lean towards the political "right."

The Popularity of the Nationalistic Topic

It is notable that the nationalistic topic (Topic 2) is significantly smaller than the non-nationalistic topic (Topic 1), suggesting that America-related discussions were more neutral than Japan-related discussions, whose largest topic is nationalistic. The distribution of topic weights also shows that Topic 1 was more popular than Topic 2 among opinion leaders, as shown in Figure 3-3.

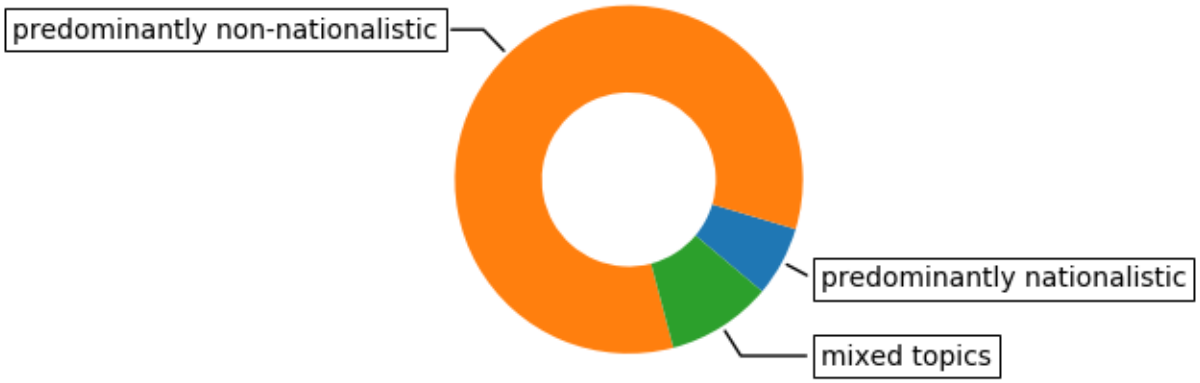
Figure 3-3: Distribution of Opinion Leaders' Topic Weights (N=215)
— *America-related Discussions*



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Figure 3-3 indicates that more than 100 of the opinion leaders have a nearly 100 percent topic weight on Topic 1, indicating that about half of the opinion leaders mainly exclusively talked about non-nationalistic topics. The nationalistic Topic 2 was much less popular, as only dozens of opinion leaders were actively engaging in this topic on Weibo. Following the same classification of nationalistic sentiments in Japan-related discussions, Figure 3-4 further clarifies the level of strength of opinion leaders' nationalistic sentiments in America-related discussions.

Figure 3-4: Distribution of Levels of Nationalistic Sentiment (N=215)
– America-related Discussions



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Together, Figures 3-3 and 3-4 demonstrate that nationalistic topics are not only smaller in size, but also much less popular than the non-nationalistic topics in America-related discussions. However, what did opinion leaders say about the US on the ground? Now I turn to analyze the main views of Chinese opinion leaders on the US.

Anti-US Nationalism: Romanticization and "Face-slapping"

Opinions about the US seem to fall into roughly two dichotomous camps. On the one hand, Weibo was full of rosy tales about the US. Posts about such stories mainly belong to the non-

nationalistic topic (Topic 1). In fact, these stories were overflowing on the Chinese Internet, such that Western media surprisingly found that "China's youth admire America far more than we know."[5] In academia, Haifeng Huang (2015) surveyed a representative sample of Chinese citizens and found that nearly half of them overestimated the socio-economic conditions of America.

On the other hand, Huang's research also shows that more accurate information about the US might ironically lead citizens to be less idealistic about the US and more sympathetic towards China. In the same vein, Rongbin Han's (2018) participant observation of online communities indicate that a marginal yet assertive group of angry netizens were committed to counteracting this type of "flawed" information that romanticized the US.

I find the same pattern in my data. Opinion leaders were split into two camps: "America-admirers" and "face-slappers." The former group mainly consisted of renowned scholars and intellectuals who were usually labeled "public intellectuals" in China. These people frequently praised the US for its democratic system and national power while criticizing China for representing a pathetic inverse:

> American officials fear citizens; Chinese citizens fear officials. The American government is poor but people are rich; the Chinese government is rich but people are poor. American citizens are encouraged to criticize the government; Chinese citizens are encouraged to extoll the government. (OL #29)

Extreme America-admirers sided with the US even if this meant going against China when the two countries were in dispute. For instance, when Edward Snowden exposed the US global surveillance program, one opinion leader wrote:

> To those who laughed at America: do you think your emails and phones are not monitored in China? [...] The US surveils its citizens for the sake of national interests. What is your

[5] See Eric Fish, 2017. "China's Youth Admire America Far More Than We Knew," *Foreign Policy*, accessed September 19, 2019, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/09/chinas-youth-admire-america-far-more-than-we-knew-surprising-survey-results-ideological-university-crackdown/.

> country doing this for? Someone who is fatally ill is in no position to laugh at other people with mild diarrhea. (OL #123)

Likewise, in response to the anger that flared up when a child on the US TV show *Jimmy Kimmel Live* suggested that "killing everyone in China" could be a solution to America's debts, one opinion leader posted:

> America's so-called "debt to China" is *not* something that America begged China to purchase. On the contrary, China begged America for the opportunity to buy its government debt because the US debt has the best credibility and a high return. If China does not like it, please lend money to North Korea, Cuba, or Syria. (OL #186)

In contrast, the "face-slappers" group mainly consisted of famous nationalists and *ziganwu*, the opposite of "public intellectual" in the Chinese context. Face-slappers tended to be infuriated by the "partiality" of America-admirers/public intellectuals, blaming them for blindly supporting America and acting as "traitors" to China. Face-slappers, like Han's angry netizens, wanted to "slap" these America-admirers in the face with what they saw as black and white facts:

> When vice-president Biden visited China and spent RMB 79 on a dinner in Beijing, Chinese people extolled the probity of American officials. Then, another day in Paris, Biden's hotel bill for a one-night stay was a whopping $58,000, slapping the sycophants hard in the face. (OL #77)

The source of this nationalist sentiment merits special attention. As suggested by Huang's research, this sentiment was not attributable to netizens' ignorance or to state propaganda. On the contrary, nationalist sentiment arose as the dominant pro-US narrative was called into question by netizens' greater exposure to more information. Some netizens claimed they were "forced to become patriotic" when they learned the "biases" of pro-America discourses. One opinion leader wrote:

> When American police used pepper spray and truncheons to attack protesters who caused a disturbance, she [a famous pro-America journalist] praised this as professional and efficient; when Chinese police expelled street vendors who disrupted public order, she called this police brutality. (OL #134)

It is amid such growing distrust and tension that the term "public intellectual" has gradually become a disparaging term used against pro-democracy or pro-America leading figures in China.

To summarize, discussions about the US could be characterized as a contest between America-admirers and "face-slappers." My data show that pro-America opinions were more prevalent and popular than nationalist discourse. However, because this dominant view could be too idealistic, increasing knowledge about the US was unintentionally provoking a nationalist reaction, ironically diminishing disaffection with the Chinese regime.

Taiwan

Main Topics of Taiwan-related Discussion

Discussion on Taiwan is the smallest topic among all three topics. The LDA model suggests that there were three distinct topics in Taiwan-related discussions. The largest topic, Topic 1, takes up a whopping 87.6 percent of all terms appearing in discussions. While most terms in this topic are obviously political terms, it is not very clear whether this topic is nationalistic in nature or not. The most relevant terms for this topic include politically neutral terms, such as "Kuomingtang," "politics," and "cross-strait relations," but there are also politically opposing terms, such as "peace" and "development" versus "*Taidu*" (台独)[6] and "unification," the latter suggesting a nationalist proposal of reunifying Taiwan.

Topic 2 takes up only 8.2 percent of the terms in discussion. This topic is more about history. The top relevant terms include, for instance, "history," "Republic of China," "Chiang Kai-

[6] *Taidu* is a somewhat critical/disparaging term for "Taiwanese independence" in mainland China.

shek," "Mao," "Sun Yat-sen," and "revolution." Clearly, this topic refers to the history prior to the CCP's taking control of China. It also includes key terms such as "unification" and "*Taidu.*" But still, this topic was not explicitly nationalistic. Topic 3, by contrast, is clearly *non-nationalistic*, as this topic is centered around Taiwanese fiction, movies, and music. Its top relevant words include Taiwanese cultural celebrities such as "Jin Yong"[7] and "Stan Lai,"[8] as well as relevant industry terms such as "director," "actors," and "songs," etc. This topic composed 4.2 percent of all terms in the discussions. Table 3-4 summarizes the keywords of the three topics.

Table 3-4: Keywords in Taiwan-related Posts

(% of tokens)	Label	Key Words		
Topic 1 (87.6%):	ambivalent/political	Kuomingtang	politics	cross-strait relation
		Taidu	unification	peace
Topic 2 (8.2%):	ambivalent/historic	history	Republic of China	Chiang Kai-shek
		Mao Zedong	Sun Yat-sen	revolution
Topic 3 (4.2%):	Non-nationalistic	Jin Yong	Stan Lai	movie director
		songs	movie actor	hometown

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Unlike opinion leaders' clear attitudes towards Japan and the US, sentiments toward Taiwan in online discussion seemed to be less straightforward. While discussions on the other two states had at least one topic explicitly embodying Chinese nationalism, I could not identify any nationalistic topic in Taiwan-related discussion simply based on topic keywords. Therefore, I turn to investigate the posts of a sample of opinion leaders who have large weights on Topic 1 and 2, respectively.

[7] Jinyong is one of the most famous fiction writers who specialized in *Wuxia*, a genre of Chinese fiction concerning the adventures of martial artists in ancient China.
[8] Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan) is an award-winning playwright and theatre director in Taiwan.

Nationalism in Taiwan-related Discussion

My qualitative reading shows that there was an overwhelming consensus on one topic from almost every opinion leader in Taiwan-related discussion—that is, Taiwan and mainland China are brothers that belong to the same family in a cultural sense. Cross-strait unification, therefore, is a shared dream of all ethnic Chinese, according to opinion leaders. As a result, opinion leaders were more friendly with Taiwan in comparison to Japan or the US, such that typical nationalistic language rarely appeared in relevant discussions, including military terms and passive verbs such as "ban" or "denounce."

With this premise that Taiwan and China are brothers, Topics 1 and 2 put emphasis on different historical periods of Taiwan. Topic 1 is mainly concerned with political and social issues in today's Taiwan. For instance, opinion leaders discussed Taiwanese elections, cross-strait relations, and, more interestingly, the collaboration between the mainland and Taiwan in defending the Diaoyu Island. Opinion leaders were full of praise for the effort that the Taiwanese government and people took to defend Diaoyu. Such effort was seen as proof that the Taiwanese and Chinese belong to the same family.

By contrast, Topic 2 mainly speaks about the history of the Republic of China (ROC) when the CCP and Kuomingtang worked together in resisting Japanese aggression and the ensuing history of civil war between the two. Sun Yet-sen's political ideas, Chiang Kai-shek's anecdotes, and the exciting stories of spies and agents during the civil war were among the major topics.

This topic, however, was relatively loaded with more tension. Some opinion leaders seemed to actively engage in a war of positions with "*guofen*" (果粉), a disparaging term that literally means "fans of the ROC" who admire China's cultural achievements during the ROC period and criticize the CCP for eradicating traditional Chinese culture through class struggles and

mass movements. Similar to the face-slappers in the American case, some opinion leaders took a great deal of effort to find historical evidence to "slap" *guofen* on the face. For instance, a leader wrote:

> During the ROC period, there were over 2 million Chinese starved to death in the mainland! Infant mortality rate was 170 to 200 deaths for every 1000 live births. Life expectancy was merely 35 years. *Guofen* would not trust these statistics if they were provided by the mainland, so [I] present these evidences found from Wikipedia Taiwan version to shock the fanboys of Chiang Kai-shek. (OL #43)

As such, Topic 2 seems to be more nationalistic than Topic 1. However, the expressions of nationalism were involved with various complexities as the rhetoric of "blood brother" imposes double-sided constraints on public discussion. On the one hand, nationalistic voices were curbed because Taiwan is a "brother" rather than an enemy of mainland China. Nationalists did not act as hawkish as they did in Japan- or America-related discussions. Instead, they were especially amiable and expressed warm approval whenever the Taiwanese government, celebrities, or normal citizens made any claims or moves that were friendly and "for the common interest of the Chinese nation," as evidenced in the defending of the Diaoyu case. This partly explains the lack of evident nationalist keywords in the outputs of previous topic analyses.

On the other hand, Taiwan as a "blood brother" indicates that the idea of Taiwanese independence is not conceivable for most Chinese. Recall that America-admirers can go as far as siding with the US during US-China disputes. By contrast, not a single opinion leader—not even the most zealous pro-democracy leaders—would publicly support Taiwanese independence in the name of pushing for democratization in China. In this context, "family reunification" of Taiwan and China was a strong consensus that transcends political stances and ideological differences, making even the least nationalistic opinion leaders sound somewhat nationalistic.

In line with these analyses, opinion leaders' ideological positions were not associated with their weights on Topics 1 and 3 and were weakly yet positively associated (r: 0.11) with their weights on the slightly more nationalistic Topic 2. Now I turn to analyze the subtleties of nationalism in Taiwan-related discussions.

Anti-Taiwan Nationalism: Family Reunification and the Yearning for Democracy

As discussed above, most opinion leaders and average netizens did support cross-strait unification and thus might be seen as nationalistic. But their opinions are not necessarily in line with the political ambition of the CCP. In fact, many opinion leaders leveraged the "call for unification" to make a case not only for condemning Taiwanese independence, but also for criticizing the CCP.

Most commonly, the nationalist language of unification was rhetorically deployed by opinion leaders for the purpose of criticizing the regime and calling for democracy. Opinion leaders delivered a subtle message that even though unification is desirable, mainland China, currently standing as an authoritarian regime, was not "qualified" to undertake unification with a democratic Taiwan. Posts of this nature frequently cited the official narrative of the brotherhood with Taiwan to push for political reform. For instance, one opinion leader wrote:

> Thanks to our Taiwanese brother, otherwise we might believe that democracy is not suitable for China. Thanks to our Taiwanese brother, otherwise we might think that regime change in China only leads to bloody deaths and chaos […] Thanks to our Taiwanese brother, we can see hope in China! (OL #29)

Some opinion leaders went so far as to use the CCP slogans of "territorial integrity and state sovereignty" to attack the CCP regime itself:

> Taiwan's leaders once remarked that if "One China" is inevitable, Taiwan would [...] demand parliamentary democracy. In this case, guess who is the culprit hindering national unification and undermining the territorial integrity of China? (OL #9)

These commentaries indicate that many opinion leaders saw Taiwan as an exemplary democracy and a symbol of hope for change on the mainland. While people supported national reunification, this nationalistic stance was actually used to urge political reform at home. Again, similar to the liberal nationalist voices in the Japan case, this nationalistic stance was associated with pro-democracy views, reworking the "unification" rhetoric into a call for democracy and liberalism.

In addition to these liberal nationalist claims, conservative nationalists were still vocal in prioritizing reunification. However, these voices were outflanked by the anti-regime and pro-democracy trend. As a result, their rhetoric was often agitated and defensive:

> Why can Taiwan people support Taiwanese independence, but we cannot freely support Chinese reunification? (OL #139)

It is also commonly held that mainland Chinese people tend to advocate for the use of force to reunite with Taiwan. My data, however, shows that only *four* out of 215 opinion leaders publicly called for forced reunification with Taiwan. They were all on the far-right end of the ideological spectrum and have fewer followers than average opinion leaders. These hawkish leaders were under harsh and constant attack on Weibo as well.

By contrast, other leaders were trying to maintain the peace between the mainland and Taiwan, arguing that "as long as Chinese citizens are still friendly towards Taiwan, the CCP would be hesitant to make any hardline moves." (OL #230) In an environment where many people regard Taiwan as the hope for a democratic China, forced reunification is simply seen as "illegitimate." A popular post represents this view:

> I am very happy to see that nowadays […] fewer people hate America while more people want to hold the government accountable; fewer people call for forced unification with Taiwan while more people are pursuing democracy […] Thanks to the Internet and free speech, China has been dramatically changed. I am still optimistic about China's future. (OL #3)

However, note that in a couple of more recent posts in 2017, some opinion leaders pessimistically predicted that the interference of the Trump administration could lead to a regional war between Taiwan and mainland China. They worried that the perceived threat of America's anti-China policies would marginalize pro-America, pro-democracy discourses in China while legitimizing and empowering Chinese nationalists, giving rise to equally—if not more—nationalistic sentiment in China. In this context, if the US interferes and supports Taiwanese independence, the disputes between Taiwan and mainland China will be escalated to political struggles between the US and China, providing nationalists the leverage to call for the use of force to recover Taiwan.

Nonetheless, these speculations were based on predicting the potential moves of the US government. Under current conditions, the dominant voices among opinion leaders still clearly favored Taiwan. More importantly, nationalist discourse in many cases turned out to be complemented by liberal voices, linking the dream of family reunification to a yearning for democracy.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

By examining nearly 100,000 posts of over 200 opinion leaders regarding their views on Japan, the US, and Taiwan, this chapter arrives at several conclusions. Firstly, even though the three countries/regions represent the major source of topics and issues that incite Chinese nationalism for different reasons, my analysis shows that nationalist sentiment did not dominate opinion leaders' online discussions on relevant topics. Instead, non-nationalistic/neutral topics regarding the culture, economy, and society of each country/region were more popular in all three cases, even in the case of Japan. This finding challenges the account that nationalism is running

high and dominating pubic discussion in China. Putting nationalistic topics within the larger context where various topics coexist, this chapter demonstrates that the estimation of the popularity of nationalism would be biased if researchers only look at nationalist forums or nationalistic events.

Secondly, narrowing down to nationalist expressions in these discussions, this chapter finds that nationalist sentiment was relatively strong and prevalent in Japan-related discussions but not so strong in US-related discussions, and it was even weaker in Taiwan-related discussions. The largest (yet not the most popular) topic in Japan-related discussions has a strong nationalistic undertone. But nationalistic topics are neither large nor popular among all the US- or Taiwan-related topics. In Taiwan-related discussions, nationalistic expressions were even not as explicit and straightforward as they were in other discussions.

Thirdly, disaggregating nationalism into three different topics and looking into the nuances of related online discussions, I argue that public opinion on nationalistic topics is heterogeneous and plural rather than reproducing and reinforcing official discourse. On the one hand, nationalists are not necessarily pro-regime. In many cases, nationalists were as critical of domestic political conditions as other netizens would be. On the other hand, nationalist discourse is not necessarily incompatible with pro-democracy views. Many opinion leaders leveraged nationalist appeals to criticize the regime and call for democracy. The dichotomy between pro-regime nationalism and anti-regime liberal voices is thus not supported, and the irreducible plurality of nationalist discourse is worth more scholarly attention.

Note, however, I am not suggesting that nationalists' marginal status will remain constant. Nationalism is a powerful ideology for any state with a strong nationalist mandate in times of national crisis. Even moderately nationalistic sentiments are susceptible to radicalization when conflicts escalate. In addition, even minority opinions can play a role. Sometimes strident

nationalist sentiment dovetails with the state's foreign policy agenda, allowing the state to play the nationalist card abroad. Even though nationalists might not represent the general opinion, the regime can still promote the nationalists' concerns to serve its own strategic ends.

My research also suggests that nationalist sentiment may experience a resurgence when the liberal narrative is too biased in the eyes of an increasingly aware population (as evidenced in the US case), causing a disillusioned public to revert back to supporting the Chinese regime. But this backlash is primarily a response to the liberal dominance rather than rooted in a strong identification with the CCP regime.

The most important point, however, is to note that it is dangerous to assume that public opinion is aligned with state policies in China and that Chinese people are hawkish as a whole. While there are people calling for hardline policies, there is a more pervasive anti-regime and pro-democracy voice in the public sphere. Attributing state policies to public opinion may alienate potential democracy supporters in China.

CHAPTER 4

ENVISIONING DEMOCRACY

In Chapter 3, I investigated opinion leaders' stances on a few nationalistic topics. This chapter focuses on another piece of the big picture of the Chinese ideological landscape: opinion leaders' perceptions of democracy and their reasons for supporting or disapproving political reforms towards democracy.

In Chapter 1, The LDA topic modeling of opinion leaders' online speech indicated that political reforms and constitutionalism are two of the four major topics discussed by Chinese opinion leaders on Weibo. The term "democracy" (*minzhu* 民主) is one of the top relevant words for *both* topics. According to my qualitative reading, democracy turns out to be the overarching theme throughout the two topics, such that opinion leaders tended to associate constitutionalism with democracy and debated about whether democratic constitutionalism should be the goal of Chinese reforms.

In this chapter, I investigate opinion leaders' views of democracy. I seek to answer two questions: 1) What does the term "democracy" mean for Chinese opinion leaders? And 2) in opinion leaders' eyes, what are the goals of an ideal political system? This chapter begins with an overview on how the concept of democracy is constructed and contested in Western and Chinese contexts. Then I combine computational methods and qualitative analysis to reveal the nuances of opinion leaders' perceptions of democracy. Finally, this chapter summarizes five kinds of opinion leaders according to their views on democracy and advances public understanding of Chinese ideological debates.

THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

For most democracy and democratization studies, democracy almost exclusively refers to the liberal or representative democracy prevalent in Western Europe and the United States. However, this taken-for-granted consensus is quite new in history. The term "democracy" originally comes from the political systems of Greek city states. It simply means "rule of the people" in contrast to "rule of an elite" as in an absolute monarchy, oligarchy, or dictatorship. Theoretically, this form of government can be coupled with different ideologies as long as the power is held, or claimed to be held, by the people through voting or other means.

Therefore, before World War II, there were several competing ideologies, each claiming to be a better variant of democracy. Liberal democracy was just one of them. Even the definitions of liberal democracy remain ambiguous and sometimes contested. But it is commonly held that liberal democracy is an ideology and a form of government that is characterized by elements such as universal suffrage, a separation of powers, rule of law, a free market, and a protection of private property.

However, liberal democracy was not the only candidate for the term "democracy." Other alternatives included the fascist and communist variants of democracy. These two ideologies claim to be a "democracy" on the grounds that they rule on the basis of representing "the people" (as opposed to representing, for instance, a deity or emperor). Here, democracy is deemed a legitimacy claim rather than a set of institutions (Riley, 2010). Fascist and communist ideologies both claim that liberal institutions, such as universal suffrage and parliaments, are not an ideal way to ensure that the political regime truly represents its people. Instead, they encourage people's direct participation in political life through a complete and thorough mobilization of society under a totalitarian state. Despite this, communism and fascism are different in many

important ways. For instance, Fascism celebrates nationalism and racism (Nazism), while Communism is internationalism by nature and believes in the equality of all people.

Later, the collapse of the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union greatly weakened fascist and communist ideologies. Finally, the "third wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1993) swept through the world, ended ideological disputes, and according to some scholars (say, Fukuyama, 1992), announced the triumph of liberal democracy.

As ideological and ethical disputes were settled, the connotations of liberal democracy gradually changed. Some scholars tend not to discuss the liberal aspect of democracy when they operationalize this complicated concept. Instead, they tend to see democracy as a set of political practices, i.e., a particular form of government and a specified practice in selecting and regulating officials. For instance, Schumpeter's (1976) minimalist definition of democracy intentionally reduces democracy to open competitions between political elites. Dahl (1989) operationalizes democracy as "polyarchy,"[1] which also emphasizes free and fair elections between competing parties. For a majority of existing studies, the most important elements that distinguish democracies from other forms of government are free elections and the associated principle of one-man, one-vote (Diamond,1999).

In China, a socialist authoritarian country, the connotations of democracy are more complicated. Before the CCP took power, its leaders saw Western-style parliamentary democracy as a means to salvage the Chinese nation from Japanese imperialism and colonialism. On July 4, 1944, the Party's then official publication, *Xinhua Daily*, extolled American democracy and the universal values embodied in the *Declaration of Independence*. However, in

[1] Dahl was fully aware of the gap between the practices of existing democracies and the real "democracy" as a political ideal. This ideal may be unattainable under current conditions, but Dahl reminded us that democrats should remember that "polyarchy is insufficiently democratic and should be made more so." (Dahl, 1989: 222)

Mao's famous piece *On New Democracy* (1940), he classified representative democracy and parliamentarianism as "Old Democracy" and argued that this form of democracy was a tool to manufacture consent to support the dictatorship of the bourgeoisies. Mao argued that China should take a distinct path to realize "New Democracy." This political ideal features a "democratic dictatorship" of the proletariat against reactionary forces. However, unlike traditional socialist movements that attempt to overthrow the bourgeoisies, and also different from the communist variant of democracy that aims to eliminate social classes, New Democracy encouraged a coalition of classes to consider that the then-major "enemy" of China was feudalism and colonialism rather than capitalism. Therefore, four revolutionary classes are allowed to participate in political life, including peasants, proletariat, intelligentsia, and the petit bourgeoisie. The CCP represents and acts on behalf of the coalition of classes, and it possesses and may use powers against reactionary forces. Through a mass mobilization and a coalition of classes, New Democracy empowers the revolutionary classes to fight the old ruling order. Note that a thorough and complete mobilization of society was emphasized under this political framework. To this end, Mao later launched the Cultural Revolution to create a New Culture to facilitate New Democracy.

In the post-Mao era, even though the Cultural Revolution has been officially declared a man-made disaster, the CCP still champions the idea that Western democracy is not an ideal way to truly empower people, and China should take a distinct path to achieve modernization, namely the "China Model" or "socialism with Chinese characteristics." This model abandons mass mobilization, but it combines economic liberalization and state interventionism and defends the rule of the CCP. On the one hand, the CCP still supports democracy as the principle of "rule of

the people." On the other hand, however, the CCP continues to criticize Western democracy as a tool of the wealthy class to manufacture consent.

Beyond political discourses of the CCP, few existing studies have systematically explored normal Chinese citizens' perceptions of democracy. Scholars have well documented the grassroots appeal for liberty and democracy during the 1989 Movement (e.g., Zhao, 2001; Calhoun, 1989; Yang, 2000; Zhang and Spence, 1990), whereas other scholars argue that nationalism has outcompeted pro-democracy thoughts in the public after the Reform and Opening up (e.g., Zhao, 2004).[2]

However, rarely do scholars clarify what the term "democracy" means for Chinese people. Among the few studies that touch on this issue, Calhoun (1989) interviews Beijing students during the 1989 Movement and concludes that for most Chinese people, the concept of democracy was nebulous and vague. Students emphasized freedom of speech and the freedom of association, but they rarely mentioned free elections. More recently, Mulvad (2018) unpacks Chinese ideological debates and reveals that, at least for Chinese intellectuals, there are a few variants of an ideal democracy, including not only a well-researched "liberal variant" that supports both parliamentary democracy and a privatized market economy, but also a less studied variant that combines Chinese socialism with universal suffrage.

Following this line, this chapter goes beyond students in a movement and elite intellectuals who usually do not speak to the public, and turns to systematically explore the public's perceptions of democracy and their variations by investigating opinion leaders' online speech.

[2] Reform and Opening up refers to the Chinese economic reforms that started in December, 1978 under the rule of Deng Xiaoping. See chapter 5 for more discussion.

WHAT OPINION LEADERS SAY WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT DEMOCRACY

To approach opinion leaders' basic understandings of democracy, I first used word2vec, an unsupervised neural network model, to identify words that are semantically related to the term "democracy" in opinion leaders' online speech. A word2vec model represents each word in a corpus (in this case, the entire collection of all opinion leaders' posts) as a numeric vector. This model takes *N* context words of the target word, i.e., the *N* nearby words that appear right before and after the target word, to understand word co-occurrences. For each word in the corpus, the word2vec model scans its context words and identifies the co-occurrence relationships among all words. Finally, the model represents each word as an M-dimension vector, such that semantically related words will be close to one another in the M-dimensional space. These M dimensions can be understood to be latent "factors" that capture the semantic meanings of the corpus. Note that being semantically *related* does not necessarily mean being semantically *similar*. For instance, popcorn and movies often appear together, and thus would be close to each other in the M-dimensional space identified by a word2vec model, but this does not indicate that "popcorn" is a synonym to "movies."

I trained a word2vec model with all 1.28 million original posts produced by opinion leaders. I specified this model with N=5 context words and M=200 latent dimensions so that for each word in the dataset, the model scans the five words before and after this given word to establish word co-occurrence relationships. Then this model "projects" each word in the dataset into a 200-dimensional space where I can see what words are close to democracy. Those words can be understood as terms that were frequently mentioned by opinion leaders when they mentioned the term democracy. Table 4-1 shows the top thirty closest words to democracy.

Table 4-1: Top Thirty Closest Words to “Democracy”

Rank	Closest Words to "Democracy"			
1-4	constitutionalism	liberty	multi-party system	democratization
5-8	western style	rule of law	republicanism	parliamentarism
9-12	separation of powers	legal institutions	low quality	politics
13-16	autocracy	representative system	one-party system	populism
17-20	rule of party	freedom of the press	democracy fighter	dictatorship
21-24	constitutional reform	universal values	plutocrat	universal suffrage
25-28	judiciary independence	elected by the people	political consultation	elections
29-30	socialism	American style		

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

According to Table 4-1, at least on the surface, the Chinese perception of “democracy” does not seem to vary much from the typical understanding of *liberal democracy* in Western countries. In fact, the word2vec model indicates that Western-style liberal democracy provides a conceptual framework for Chinese opinion leaders to understand and discuss democracy. Wherever they mentioned democracy, they oftentimes also mentioned the slogan “democracy and liberty” (the second closest word to democracy), “multi-party system” (the third closest word), and “Western style” (the fifth closest word). Beyond these top words, typical terms describing liberal democracy, such as “republicanism,” “parliamentarism,” “separation of powers,” “democratic elections,” “American style,” and “elected by people” were also frequently mentioned when opinion leaders discussed democracy.

In other words, when opinion leaders used the term “democracy,” most likely they were referring to the American/Western-style political regime, i.e., multi-party/parliamentary democracy. Rarely would opinion leaders mention “socialist democracy” or “New Democracy,” the two alternatives that the CCP had promoted before it took power in 1949. This speaks to the fact that liberal democracy has been the dominant political discourse since the third wave of democratization. Whether speaking of democratic or nondemocratic countries, democracy is by

default associated with liberalism rather than alternative ideologies. Therefore, in this chapter and beyond, democracy alone refers to "liberal democracy" unless specified otherwise.

Nonetheless, equating democracy with liberal democracy does not mean that opinion leaders perceive democracy in the same way the American people do. The most important difference lies in opinion leaders' emphasis on *constitutionalism* (*xianzheng*, 宪政). Constitutionalism is the closest word to democracy in opinion leaders' posts. There are also a few law-related terms: rule of law, legal institutions, constitutional reform, judicial independence, and jury system. This implies that when opinion leaders discussed democracy, they most often associated it with constitutionalism and legal systems. By comparison, the common definition of democracy in Western countries highlights free elections and accountability, as indicated by Calhoun (1989). When people in Western democracies are asked what democracy is, they often associate it with universal suffrage and separation of powers. Consistent with Calhoun's findings in 1989, Chinese opinion leaders tended to talk less about free elections. Instead, they emphasized the principle of rule of law and constitutionalism when they talked about democracy. This finding also echoes the LDA topic model in Chapter 1, which identified constitutionalism as the third largest topic among opinion leaders.

Constitutionalism and Democracy

Given that the term constitutionalism occupies a central position in opinion leaders' discussions of democracy, how do they understand the relationship between constitutionalism and democracy? My qualitative reading of opinion leaders' posts suggests that there are at least two variants of understandings. Some opinion leaders tightly associated constitutionalism with democracy. They sometimes used the two terms interchangeably, sometimes regarding

constitutionalism as a larger, more comprehensive political framework that embodies liberal democracy (or the other way around). By contrast, other opinion leaders explicitly differentiated constitutionalism from democracy as two independent concepts, and some tended to argue that constitutionalism was a better choice than liberal democracy (i.e., elective democracy in this context) for China, at least for now.

For the first variant of opinion, constitutionalism appears to be a euphemism for democracy. The connotations of the two terms are *not* really distinguishable in opinion leaders' posts, but they tried to avoid the term "democracy" because it may invoke some negative stereotypes, such as political protests and social disorder. Moreover, in the eyes of the CCP and its supporters, democracy is a Western political discourse with the secret agenda of overturning China. In response to the negative views on democracy, an opinion leader clarified:

> #Democracy is not only taking it to the streets. # Democracy is an entire set of institutions that embody constitutionalism, including separation of powers, democratic elections, local self-governance, civil society, the freedom of the press, the freedom of religion, and so on. Democracy is definitely not equal to "one man, one vote," not to mention populism and the tyranny of the majority. It is regretful that many people try to associate democracy with protests and social disorder; or they equate democracy to one-man, one-vote and argue that democracy does not fit China because Chinese people have not been well educated enough (to vote). (OL #64)

In this context, constitutionalism appears to be more innocuous and can be accepted by both the public and the government, since people could trace its origins back to traditional Confucian and legalist thoughts.[3] Many opinion leaders sweepingly used "democratic constitutionalism" (*minzhu xianzheng,* 民主宪政) or "constitutional democracy" (*xianzheng minzhu,* 宪政民主) or constitutionalism alone in their online posts. To some extent,

[3] However, since 2013 when the CCP launched a campaign to "purify" public communication and the ideological sphere, constitutionalism has also been criticized by official media as a disguise of the secret Western agenda.

constitutionalism and democracy are interchangeable in opinion leaders' online discourses, both of which are vaguely defined as a basket of liberal-leaning values, including freedom, rule of law, and human rights. Hence, Calhoun's (1989) observation still holds true in today's China in the sense that the concepts of democracy and constitutionalism are by and large vague among many people.

On the other hand, some intellectuals tended to disentangle constitutionalism from democracy to make a case for their own agenda. Following Dahl's operational definition of polyarchy, these opinion leaders saw democracy merely as a political procedure, i.e., elections based on the principle of one-man, one-vote. By contrast, constitutionalism is pertinent to constitution and law, and it is independent of democracy. Some leaders clearly stated that "the origin of constitutionalism has little to do with democracy and equality" (OL #146). What is important is the idea that there is a constitution, i.e., a set of rules and principles that cannot be modified at the whim of those in power, as well as an independent and impartial judiciary to interpret and apply those rules and principles.

This variant of opinion is particularly popular among lawyers and legal scholars. These opinion leaders believe that the rule of law (as opposed to free elections) is essential and critical to good governance. Facing the firmness and assertiveness of the CCP's stance in maintaining the one-party system, these opinion leaders tended not to challenge the CCP but tried to pursue constitutionalism under the current political framework. This is referred to as "socialist constitutionalism" (*shexian pai*, 社宪派) or "constitutional socialism." A law school professor argued:

> Constitutionalism barely relies on democracy. It is more feasible and is easier to be accepted [in China]. Moreover, implementing constitutionalism would not cause too much social disorder. Therefore, it'd be better if China's political reforms adopt

> constitutionalism first. And the very first step of constructing constitutionalism is to have institutional guarantees of judiciary independence. (OL #194)

Note that the discussion of constitutionalism was somewhat substance-free. Even though constitutionalism is explicitly defined as the establishment of rules and principles that everyone should abide by and an independent judiciary, opinion leaders rarely discussed the substantive content of those rules and principles. They simply highlighted the importance of "rule of law" as a better alternative to "rule by the CCP." An intellectual (OL #94) commented that the main reason for people to champion socialist constitutionalism was that they wanted to leverage this concept to constrain the autocratic rule of the CCP and, ideally, have the CCP subject to constitution and laws. This legalist view does not directly challenge the ruling party and the one-party system, but demands that constitution and law should enjoy superiority in political life.

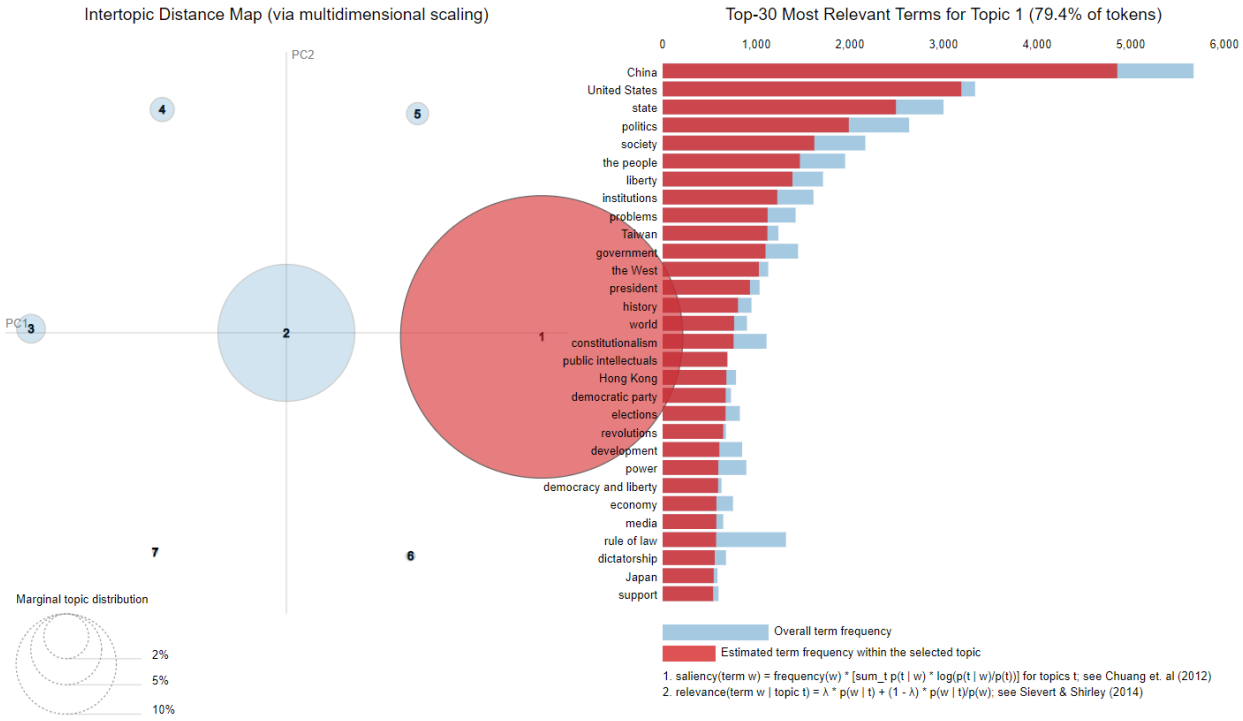
Following the line that constitutionalism and democracy are independent of each other, a small group of opinion leaders also proposed a couple of alternatives in addition to socialist constitutionalism, the most famous of which is "Confucian constitutionalism" (*rujia xianzheng* 儒家宪政). These leaders criticized Western democracy as encouraging selfish material desires and narrow interests due to its dependence on popular opinion, and they contended that China should not follow suit. Since the origin of constitutionalism can be traced back to traditional Chinese culture, these leaders sought to combine Confucian doctrines and constitutionalism to encourage the practice of moral self-rectification by the ruler and external rectification of the ruler by wise and virtuous scholars (Son, 2016). However, these leaders were minorities on Weibo and can hardly draw serious attention from the public.

Main Topics of Democracy-related Discussion

After learning the top semantically close terms to the word democracy in opinion leaders' online discussion, I conducted a topic analysis to identify the specific main topics discussed by opinion leaders when they mentioned democracy. I only selected the posts containing the key word "democracy." This gave me 14,029 posts out of the 1.28 million original posts.

As in previous chapters, I applied LDA topic modeling to identify the main topics and their relative prevalence in opinion leaders' posts. I tested the LDA model with 3, 5, 7, and 9 topics, respectively. The model with seven topics gave me the clearest and most unique topics. Figure 4-1 visualizes this topic model. Again, the left panel demonstrates the proportions of each of the seven topics (relative to circle size) taken up in the corpus of democracy-related posts. The right panel gives the top thirty most relevant words for each topic.

Figure 4-1: Seven Topics in Democracy-related Posts



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

The above visualization shows that opinion leaders' democracy-related discussion was mainly dominated by Topic 1, which covers as many as 79.4 percent of the terms in the data. It is worth noting that the "United States" (*meiguo*, 美国) is the second most relevant word for this topic, while "China" is expectedly the most relevant word. In addition to the US, "Taiwan," "Hong Kong," and "Japan" are also included in the top thirty most relevant words. It seems that these countries and regions were not only the most important subjects when opinion leaders engaged in nationalistic topics, but also the main reference points when they talked about democracy. Table 4-2 summarizes the keywords of the topics.

Table 4-2: Keywords in Democracy-related Posts

(% of tokens)	Key Words			
Topic 1 (79.4%):	China revolutions	United States constitutionalism	liberty development	the West dictatorship
Topic 2 (18.7%):	constitution people's congress	rule of law professionalization	reform supervision	transparency accountability
Topic 3 (0.8%):	Taiwan black gold	Kuomingtang incident	Mingjingtang populism	elections politicians
Topic 4 (0.6%):	Hong Kong elections	politics university	institutions future	equality development
Topic 5 (0.5%):	Democratic party Republican party	Israel Hillary	Obama Iran	ISIS military
Topic 6 & 7 (0.1%):	(negligible)			

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

After examining the most relevant terms for Topic 1, it becomes clear that this topic is mainly a debate over *whether democracy is good for China*. While positive terms such as "liberty," "constitutionalism," "development," "rule of law," and the verb "support*"* are commonplace in this topic, negative or even derogatory and pejorative terms also have a high visibility. Examples include "public intellectuals," "traitor" (*hanjian*, 汉奸), "liar," "hegemony,"

"chaos and disorder," and "Ao-hei" (奥黑), a derogative term used by a small group of Chinese netizens to refer to former US President Barack Obama.[4]

The coexistence of both positive and negative terms suggests a cleavage between people who are supportive of democracy and those who disapprove of the Western agenda of democratization. However, note that most of those negative words exclusively appear in Topic 1 and generally have a low frequency (below 200), meaning that they were *not* popular in opinion leaders' online posts. A typical post of opinion leaders who actively engaged in Topic 1 reads as below. They remind us of the nationalists/face-slappers in Chapter 2.

> I am actually strongly in support of democracy and liberty. But I am so fed up with those public intellectuals and *yangnu* (洋奴)[5] on Weibo. Therefore, I made a lot of criticisms on democracy and liberty. Now I have to clarify: I do not oppose the continuous development of democracy and liberty of China and of all humankind. But I am against the scheme of the West and Chinese traitors to try to overturn China in the name of such concepts [democracy and liberty]. (OL #106)

Topic 2 is significantly smaller than Topic 1, covering only 18.7 percent of the terms in democracy-related posts. In addition, unlike Topic 1, Topic 2 does not demonstrate tension between opposing opinions. Rather, this topic consistently contains terms about *how to achieve democracy*. Most terms in Topic 2 carry a clear undertone of urging democratic development in China, e.g., "reform," "transparency," "rule of law," "professionalization," and "public supervision."

Moreover, instead of talking about other countries and regions, this topic is exclusively concerned about the Chinese government, mentioning many government departments and

[4] Chinese media typically pronounces Obama as "Ao-Ba-Ma." Netizens combine "Ao" as in Ao-Ba-Ma and his race "black" (pronounced "hei" in Chinese) to create Ao-hei. Such netizens are widely recognized as nationalistic, Islamophobic, and racist in China.

[5] *Yangnu* literally means "slaves to their foreign masters." This pejorative term is used by anti-West people to criticize their pro-West fellows.

bureaus such as the "supreme court," "people's congress," "standing committee," "political consultation conference," and the like. This topic also contains more verbs than other topics, such as "push for," "serve the people," "hold accountable," "guarantee," and "construct."

The most salient feature of this topic, however, is its emphasis on law. The most common *and* relevant words for Topic 2 include "rule of law," "constitution," "judiciary," "lawyer," "legal institutions," and more. Reading the posts of opinion leaders who have a higher weight in this topic indicates that they are the same group of people who were concerned about constitutionalism, as discussed before. Topic 2, therefore, is mainly attractive to opinion leaders who were concerned about democratic development, and many of them actively promoted constitutionalism as the most favorable way of realizing democracy.

Topic 3, 4, and 5 are nearly equally sized, respectively covering 0.8 percent, 0.6 percent, and 0.5 percent of the terms in opinion leaders' democracy-related posts. These very small topics shift to focus on the domestic politics of other countries and regions, whereas Topic 1 and 2 are ultimately concerned about China itself regardless of whether the topic refers to other countries or not.

Topic 3 talks about Taiwanese politics. Its keywords include "Kuomintang" (the Nationalist Party), "Minjingtang" (the Democratic Progressive Party), and "elections." It also includes some unique terms pertinent to the dark side of Taiwanese democracy—for instance, "black gold" (*heijin*, 黑金), a term referring to political corruption in connection to gangsters and underground societies in Taiwan. Moreover, many terms in this topic were written in traditional Chinese characters as opposed to simplified Chinese.[6] It turns out that many opinion leaders

[6] Traditional Chinese is the official language of Hong Kong and Taiwan, whereas mainland China mostly uses simplified Chinese.

attentive to this topic are either Taiwanese or used to live or work in Taiwan; therefore, they were highly interested in political issues and events in Taiwan. Note that this topic is different from Topic 1, which mentions Taiwan as a reference point to talk about China's own issues. Topic 3 mainly focuses on Taiwan itself without drawing comparison to mainland China.

Topic 4 speaks about Hong Kong politics, and many terms were, again, written in traditional Chinese characters. Topic 4 is similar to Topic 3 in that the relevant posts for this topic mainly concerned political issues in Hong Kong, including the timeline to realize universal suffrage and the sensitive topic of Hong Kong independence, while they paid less attention to China's own problems.[7]

Topic 5 is about politics in the United States. Opinion leaders talked about a wide range of topics, including military expenses and actions, diplomatic relations (with countries that had disputes with the US over the years,[8] such as Iran, Syria, Israel, and Turkey), and presidential elections in the US. Similar to Topics 3 and 4, these posts were interested in American politics itself without referring to China. However, while many leaders engaging in Topics 3 and 4 were citizens in those regions, opinion leaders obsessed with US issues were not American citizens but just voluntarily broadcasted US news to Chinese audiences on Weibo. Combining the fact that the US is also the second most relevant term for Topic 1, the largest topic of democracy-related discussion, it suggests that Chinese opinion leaders cared a lot about the US, not only in its bilateral relationship with China, but also its politics, economy, and society.

[7] The Chinese central government had promised to allow Hong Kong the right to universal suffrage. Yet the central government postponed the date of universal suffrage multiple times. Currently the two sides cannot reach an agreement on a possible date. This became one of the main grievances of Hong Kong citizens.
[8] Note that the data spans nine years from 2009 to 2017. The results thus include a broad range of topics.

Taken together, the results of the word2vec model, LDA topic model, and my qualitative reading of opinion leader posts, it shows that when Chinese opinion leaders talked about democracy, they mainly referred to the political system of liberal democracy prevalent in Western countries, but they attached much more importance to constitutionalism and tended to downplay free elections. They devoted a lot of time discussing and debating whether democracy was good for China and how to achieve democracy. For many leaders, constitutionalism seemed to be a preferable way to achieve, or substitute, democracy in China.

VARIATIONS IN OPINIONS ON DEMOCRACY

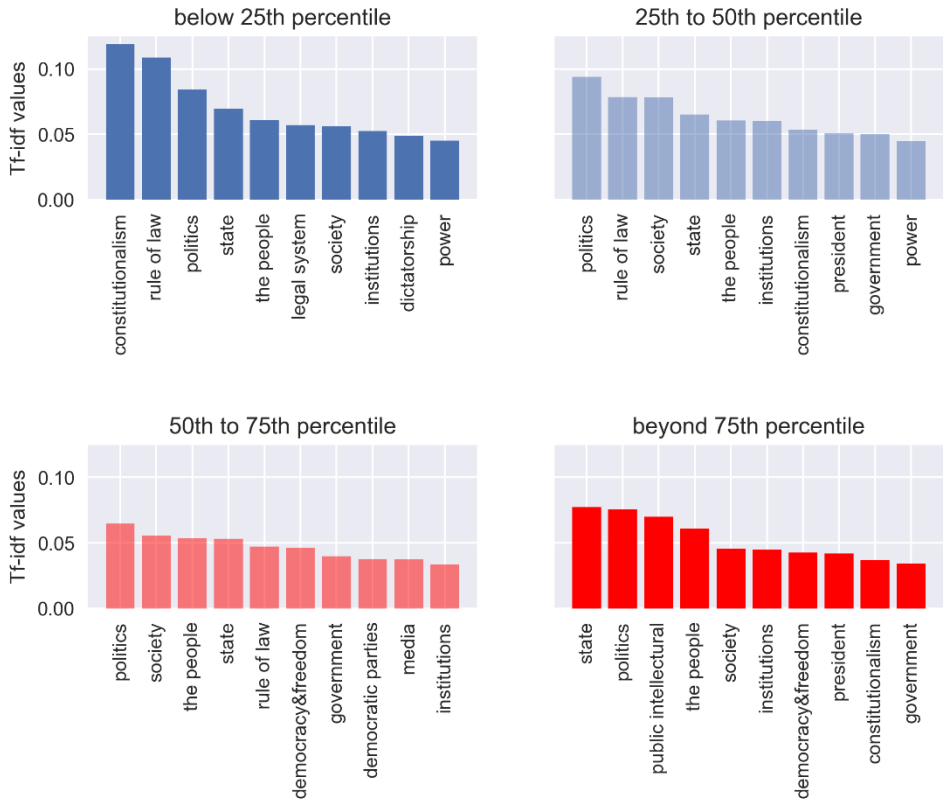
So far, we have learned about the basic understandings of democracy and the main topics of opinion leaders' discussions about democracy. Given that opinion leaders had different political and ideological preferences, I turn to explore the variations in their opinions regarding democracy.

Recall that in Chapter 1, I estimated the positions of opinion leaders along a one-dimensional ideological spectrum, and I grouped opinion leaders into four equal quartiles along the ideological dimension so as to observe variations across quartiles. In this chapter, I use the same grouping and employ tf-idf,[9] the weighted word frequency, to identify top keywords used by different groups of opinion leaders in their democracy-related posts. Figure 4-2 includes four panels that show the top ten keywords used by left-leaning opinion leaders (below the 25th percentile on the ideological dimension), the center-left opinion leaders (between the 25th to the

[9] Tf-Idf is short for "term frequency – inverse document frequency." Essentially, this is a statistic of the importance of a word to a document. It weighs term frequencies in a document with its ubiquitousness in a collection of many documents. This way, it removes frequent but unimportant words, including stop-words like "we" "and" or "this" and other ubiquitous yet less significant words such as "China" in the corpus I studied as most opinion leaders mentioned China frequently. This word alone conveys little information about people's specific views.

50th percentile), the center-right opinion leaders (between the 50th to the 75th percentile), and the right-leaning opinion leaders (above the 75th percentile).

Figure 4-2: Keywords in Democracy-related Posts, by Opinion Leader Quartiles



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

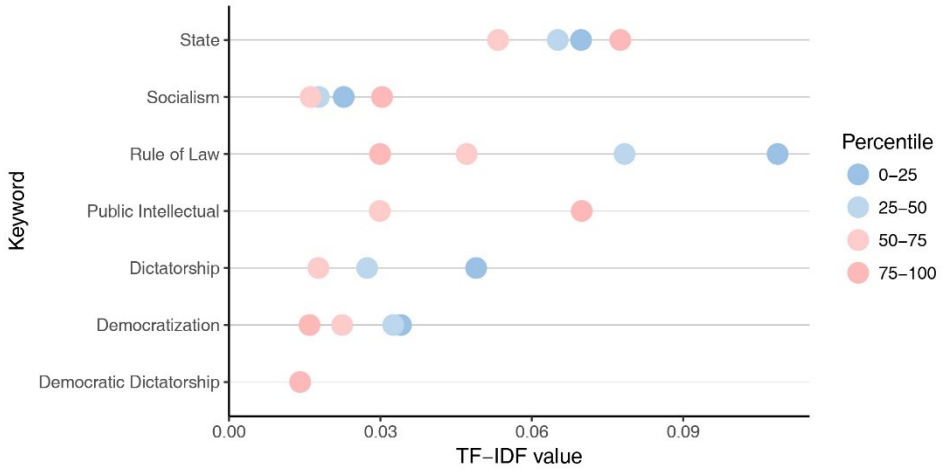
Figure 4-2 suggests that there were not many differences in the keywords mentioned by opinion leaders within the first three quartiles, while the fourth quartile was qualitatively different from other groups. In fact, many politically neutral words, e.g., "politics," "state," "the people," "society," and "institutions" were top keywords for all quartiles. However, opinion leaders appeared to put emphasis on different things.

The first quartile was primarily concerned about "constitutionalism" and "rule of law," while the importance of constitutionalism tended to be decreasing for each of the other quartiles.

Meanwhile, the second and third quartiles showed increasing interest in talking about "society" and "the people." Finally, the fourth quartile did not mention "rule of law" anymore. Instead, it emphasized "state" the most, and the pejorative term "public intellectual" made it to one of the top three keywords of this group. Again, the changes in the keywords indicate a transition from a more liberal stance to a more conservative stance.

To further illustrate the different emphases of opinion leaders, I juxtaposed the tf-idf values of a few commonly mentioned keywords across opinion leader quartiles in Figure 4-3. The y axis consists of seven keywords in opinion leaders' democracy-related posts, and the x axis denotes the tf-idf values of each term in different quartiles. From the political left to the right, each quartile is denoted in each of the colors from dark blue to dark red.

Figure 4-3: Frequency Variations in Opinion Leaders' Use of the Same Terms



Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

Figure 4-3 shows that even when opinion leaders mentioned the same keywords, they actually put different levels of attention into the same topics. For instance, the terms "state" and "socialism" were top keywords for all quartiles, but after comparing their tf-idf values, it

becomes clear that the fourth group put the most attention on these two terms; therefore, their weighted frequencies were the highest among all four groups. By contrast, the tf-idf values of the terms "rule of law" and "democratization" were the highest for the first quartile, indicating that the left-leaning group spend the most time discussing related topics. Note also that "public intellectuals" only appeared in the third and fourth quartiles, signaling their criticisms of liberal-leaning fellows, while "democratic dictatorship" only appeared in the fourth quartile, signaling their affinity for Mao's doctrines about New Democracy, as mentioned before.

Based on the results of the keyword analysis, I further apply qualitative readings to a sample of opinion leader posts to learn how they understand democracy and what kind of political goals should be pursued in an ideal political system. Now I summarize the different stances of opinion leaders across quartiles as follows.

The First Quartile: Fundamentalist Democrats

As indicated by the keywords analysis, opinion leaders in the first quartile talked a great deal about law and constitutionalism. These leaders also frequently mentioned terms like "citizens," "rights," "values," "elections," and "votes." It turns out that many members of this group were lawyers and legal scholars who, as aforementioned, have been advocating for democratic or socialist constitutionalism.

A close examination of their posts reveals that pushing for political reforms towards constitutionalism and democracy was regarded as the primary political goal of China by this group of opinion leaders. On Weibo, they were committed to expounding on what was "real democracy" and why it was superior to other political systems. The great mission of the Chinese people, according to many opinion leaders, is to pursue constitutional democracy.

Moreover, these opinion leaders regarded democracy as a political ideal, *an end in and of itself*. Almost identical to what Diamond (1999) describes, they were committed to the broader civic ends of democracy rather than its narrow interests. As such, these opinion leaders tended to prefer democracy over other material public goods, including economic development. Often times in their posts, they compared China to other countries and derogated the value of China's economic achievements in the absence of democracy:

> I said democracy is a desirable goal for China. But people told me that Russia is still weak after democratization; Philippines is still poor after democratization; Thailand is still in chaos after democratization …. It is unbelievable that Chinese people are so indifferent about liberal thoughts. Think this way: if China is democratized, it would be genuinely and enthusiastically accepted and welcomed by the entire world. (OL #69)

Such posts reveal that the most salient characteristic of this group is the value rationality they attached to (constitutional) democracy, which is recognized as an end that is legitimate in itself and nonnegotiable. This kind of value rationality transcends the desire for material goods and narrowly defined economic interests. These opinion leaders were not willing to compromise on the pursuit of liberal democracy for the sake of economic development or personal gain. I thus labeled the first quartile of the opinion leaders "fundamentalist democrats."

The Second Quartile: Instrumentalist Democrats

Opinion leaders in the second quartile championed democracy and constitutionalism no less than their fellows in the first quartile. Similar law- and democracy-related keywords were commonplace in their posts. However, while leaders in the first quartile were more interested in "enlightening" people about the value of democracy, second quartile leaders looked closer at various social problems on the ground and associated the merits of democracy with its capability to solve these problems. Many leaders harshly criticized government's abuse of power. Posts

about police brutality, official corruption, and wealth inequality were thus commonplace. Therefore, except for terms such as "rule of law," this group also frequently used key words such as "problems," "officials," "injustice," and "government." A typical sarcastic comment follows:

> The most disgusting things in China: hear immoral cadres talk about morals; hear corrupted officials talk about honesty and purity; hear dictators talk about democracy, and hear real estate tycoons talk about containing housing prices. (OL #67)

A significant difference exists between the first and second quartile. While the first group was willing to sacrifice material goods and narrow interests to pursue democracy, the second group seemed to care more for these public goods and interests.

A scrutiny of their posts reveals the instrumental rationality underlying these leaders' views: democracy is primarily recognized as an efficient means to solve social, economic, and political problems in China. It is *not* an end in itself. This is the defining characteristic that differentiates the second quartile from the first group. While second quartile leaders actively called for political reforms to change the nondemocratic system, their ultimate political goal is to solve various social problems. Many opinion leaders expressed high expectations for democracy:

> China is suffering from corruption, inequality and many other problems. It is impossible to sustain a rapid economic development under this circumstance. The only way to solve these problems is to promote political reform and construct a democratic China. (OL #68)

Therefore, I concluded that the second quartile of opinion leaders shared the same goal with the first quartile, which was to push for political reforms towards democracy. But in their eyes, the ultimate goal of a political system is to provide public good and benefits, such as wealth, social equality, and freedom, and they tended to see democracy as a solution to the various social problems plaguing China. Democracy was not an end in itself, but a means to achieving other goals. I thus labeled the second quartile as "instrumentalist democrats."

The Third Quartile: Materialistic Democrats

If the Chinese ideological spectrum diverged symmetrically between pro- and anti-democracy camps, the third quartile should have consisted of nationalist and anti-democracy opinion leaders. In fact, however, opinion leaders in the third quartile still shared the idea that democracy was a desirable goal for and an inevitable trend in China. More interesting, they still actively called for political reforms towards democracy and more political participation from civil society.

What distinguishes this group from the first two is the priority the third quartile opinion leaders placed on social stability and economic development—the stakes were so high that they were willing to tolerate a nondemocratic regime, at least for now, so that China can still have a stable society and a prosperous economy. Admitting that democracy was a desirable public good, these opinion leaders were primarily concerned about how to promote democracy *without* causing social unrest or hindering economic development.

> We now have two consensuses: One, as China has gotten a lot better in terms of economic achievement and social welfare, we should embrace political participation and democratic reform; two, all social problems and conflicts should only be solved via progressive reforms rather than social unrest and revolution. (OL #22)

After examining the profiles of members in the third quartile, I found that many of them are intellectuals who still carry painful memories of the poverty, hunger, and social unrest in the pre-reform era. Since they or their family members suffered from the disasters caused by autocratic regimes, they supported democratic reforms. But they also witnessed the destructive power of the masses during the Cultural Revolution, and thus they held reservations about any "radical" paths of political reform, not to mention revolutions.

This group of opinion leaders tended to criticize the more zealous democracy supporters from the first two quartiles for being overly idealistic and not rational. The term "rationality" is a

unique keyword only used by members of this group. For them, pushing for democracy is a highly sophisticated endeavor that requires a great deal of caution. They accused some opinion leaders of employing irrational and nondemocratic rhetoric and practices to promote democracy. The post that follows represents this stance:

> Some people claimed that they pursue liberty and democracy. But they wouldn't even spend time and effort to participate in rational debates and figure out the common grounds and disagreements with other people. Instead, they wanted to defeat people by stigmatization and demonization. Their goals are democratic, but the means and process are not democratic. Their theories are democratic, but their practices are not democratic [….] Citizens' desire for liberty and democracy is irresistible. But some intellectuals capitalize on such desire and try to incite mass movement. This is cruel and irresponsible. (OL #169)

I labeled the third quartile "materialistic democrats" because while they still supported democracy and called for political reforms, they were primarily concerned about material public goods, i.e., social stability and economic development. They were afraid of radical mass unrest and advocated for progressive reforms in order to sustain the stability and prosperity of China. This goal is of paramount, more important than pursuing democracy. For the third quartile opinion leaders, a stable and decent life is ultimately more important than pursuing democracy.

The Fourth Quartile: Anti-democracy Nationalists

Finally, opinion leaders in the fourth quartile are fundamentally distinct from other groups in their ideological outlook. Members of this group no longer talked about constitutionalism and rule of law. Instead, they frequently mentioned, for instance, "public intellectuals," "socialism," and "power." Another keyword unique to this group is "Westernization," an allegedly hidden agenda of public intellectuals and *yangnu* who support political reforms. The fourth group criticized these people for betraying Chinese culture and China's national interest by trying to "Westernize" China.

My readings of the posts in the fourth group confirm that many of them are well-known nationalists. As discussed in Chapter 2, this group stood out because of the tensions revealed in their posts—they were in constant "warfare" with other opinion leaders, or at least they were engaging in a one-sided attack directed towards pro-democracy opinion leaders. Many nationalists closely followed the online posts of democrats. They were committed to finding fault with these posts, particularly "rumors" that painted a romanticized picture of the West or that juxtaposed China to the West in an "unfair" way. The primary mission of the fourth group, therefore, was to debunk rumors and refute unfair statements one by one. A typical post reads as follows:

> A fact: India is way more corrupt than China. Some stupid intellectuals declared that democracy is a good way to constrain corruption. This fact is just a slap to their face. (OL #57)

While the first three groups by and large reached the consensus that some types of political reforms towards democracy are generally good for China, the fourth group was explicitly against this idea. In their view, at its best, democracy does little to aid the economic development of China, and at its worst, democracy can be actively harmful. Here, the image of democracy was often associated with social unrest, the tyranny of the majority, and other social problems that are seen in immature democracies. Therefore, these leaders tended to denigrate democracy:

> I don't trust democracy. After witnessing the chaos in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the civil wars in [the] Middle East and Ukraine, and the military coup in Thailand, a normal person would reflect on the legitimacy of elective democracy. (OL #85)

For the fourth group, the nation's ultimate goal should be the "great rejuvenation of China." The Chinese dream is to build a strong economy and a strong state. Material public

goods and national interests finally substitute democracy to become the ultimate goal, and the end in itself.

I labeled the fourth quartile "anti-democracy nationalists" because their main goal was to achieve the Chinese dream of building a strong state, and they saw democracy as little more than a barrier for realizing this dream. However, it is worth noting that being a nationalist does not necessarily mean people are pro-regime on all counts. Chapter 2 has shown that even nationalists can be highly critical of the regime under various circumstances.

Outliers: Maoists

Recall that a few opinion leaders in the fourth quartile fall above two standard deviations from the mean on the ideological dimension. These outliers are so distant from a majority of opinion leaders that it is reasonable to suspect that they may be even qualitatively different from other members of the fourth quartile.

It turns out that these outlier opinion leaders are avid supporters of socialist and Maoist ideology. Except for the common keywords used by members of the four quartile, such as "public intellectuals," these outlier leaders frequently talked about "Mao," "democratic dictatorship," and the "Cultural Revolution." Vastly different from a majority of nationalists, they expressed disapproval of the current Chinese regime, strong support for orthodox socialism, and a nostalgia for the Mao era. Some of them even went so far as to whitewash the Cultural Revolution.

> The Cultural Revolution is a form of thorough and comprehensive democracy. First, during the Cultural Revolution, people directly participated in politics to rule this country. Second, people can effectively supervise government officials. (OL #4)

These leaders advocated for socialism and condemned democracy as a shameless heresy and a betrayal of socialist doctrines. They appeared to be less attracted to material public goods, such as economic development or social stability. Other opinion leaders, including nationalists, tended to approve the achievements of China's economic reforms over the past thirty years. Maoists, however, tended to be critical of the economic reforms, mourning the loss of income and wealth equality of the Mao era. In other words, these outliers were not only against political reforms towards democracy, but also against economic reforms in the post-Mao era.

There are three main findings coming out of the above analyses. First, contrary to the conventional wisdom that Chinese ideological debates are mainly carried out between anti-CCP and pro-CCP camps, I show that opinion leaders' political stances actually diverge in their attitudes towards political and economic reforms. Pro-democracy opinion leaders support liberal democracy and call for further political reform in China, whereas nationalists and Maoists reject the political reform agenda, although for their own distinct set of reasons. Nationalists prioritize economic prosperity and strengthening state power, whereas the Maoists criticize most of the economic reform measures of the post-Mao era, hoping instead to return to a socialist China. In other words, ideology in China tends to diverge between those who welcome further economic and political reforms and those who disapprove of political and even economic reforms. This finding echoes Pan and Xu's (2018) study using large scale online survey data.

Second, echoing findings in Chapter 3 that nationalism was not as popular as previous studies suggest, this chapter finds that three of the four quartiles of opinion leaders were critical of the authoritarian regime and supported some types of democratic reform. Only one quartile of opinion leaders appeared to embrace nationalist ideology. Also note that nationalists and Maoists

are the least popular groups on Weibo—their number of followers was the smallest among all opinion leaders. The amount of time and effort that the fourth quartile opinion leaders took to refute pro-democracy opinion leaders also indicates that they were engaging in counter-hegemonic struggles with liberal dominance in the public sphere.

Lastly and most importantly, opinion leaders' attitudes towards democracy embody a choice between material public goods or moral/ideological pursuits. For fundamentalist democrats and Maoists, pursuing material public goods was second to the noble goal of achieving democracy or socialism. However, for instrumentalist and materialistic democrats and nationalists, material public goods were the primary concern, and democracy was merely the means (or a hindrance, for nationalists) to achieve these public goods. Therefore, even under the broad heading of "democracy supporter" (or "democracy opponents"), people may still have different priorities and agendas.

Material or ideological pursuit, which is more important? This question indicates another cleavage among opinion leaders. It is also an important point of debate in the Chinese public sphere. Some netizens criticize liberals in Western countries for having lost a "sense of reality," meaning that liberals do not care for the material public goods that matter the most for the vast majority of people, such as public infrastructures, public services, employment rate, social security, economic prosperity, and so on. An anonymous netizen left a popular comment online that represents this view:

> What are white leftists (*baizuo,* 白左)? White leftists are those who only care about immigrants, minorities, LGBT, and environmental problems; i.e., those who do not see the real problems in the real world. To further clarify: they are hypocritical humanitarians who champion peace and equality only to satisfy a sense of moral superiority. They are so obsessed with political correctness that they would tolerate some regressive Islamic values in the name of diversity. They believe in the welfare state but the welfare state

only benefits layabouts and free riders. They are arrogant and ignorant Westerners who pity the rest of the world and see themselves as the Savior.

Given that the concerns for material public goods play such a critical role in political discussion, I will turn to study opinion leaders' expectations for social and economic reforms in the next chapter.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Through computational and qualitative analysis of opinion leaders' more than 14,000 Weibo posts on democracy, this chapter offers four insights that advance public understanding of the nature of public opinion in China.

First of all, the models of democracy prevalent in Western countries greatly influence public perceptions of democracy in China. Opinion leaders by default reference the term democracy to mean liberal democracy, and on Weibo they often talked about democratic institutions that typically exist in Western democracies, such as parliamentarism and free elections.

However, the Chinese perception of democracy is distinct in that people more closely associate democracy with constitutionalism than with free elections. Particularly for opinion leaders who support political reforms, constitutionalism serves as a gateway to democracy, or even as a better and more realistic substitute for democracy. Leveraging constitutionalism to pursue democracy is a popular argument in public discussion. This proposed path is essentially different from the common democratization route in the "third-wave" countries where free elections were introduced at first and less attention was put towards constitutions.

Secondly, the specific path to realize democracy, whether through constitutionalism or not, was a much smaller topic on Weibo (albeit the second largest one) among opinion leaders.

The largest topic discusses whether democracy is good for China. The US was the most often referred to country when opinion leaders talked about democracy. Leaders tended to use the achievements or problems of the US to make a case for supporting or opposing the agenda of democratic reforms. A small number of opinion leaders were also interested in domestic politics in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the US without drawing comparisons to China.

Thirdly, in the debate about the merits of democracy, a majority of Chinese opinion leaders have the consensus that some forms of democratic reforms are necessary and desirable, although they can hardly reach an agreement on either the timeline nor the specific path to realizing democracy in China.

It is important to point out that these findings do *not* indicate that Chinese people want a democratic government. Instead, it only demonstrates that in the public sphere at least, pro-democracy opinion leaders did play a dominant role and were much more popular and influential than nationalistic opinion leaders. Their pro-reform views often occupied the moral high ground. The aggressive nature of nationalists' responses demonstrates that nationalists had to fight hard to legitimize their positions. In short, the pro-democracy and pro-reform ideology is seen as justified and moral in the Chinese public sphere, whereas the nationalist ideology is faced with criticism.

Lastly, there are two important cleavages in Chinese ideological debates. On the one hand, opinion leaders diverged between pro-reform and anti-reform stances. While fundamentalist and instrumentalist democrats wholeheartedly supported political reforms, materialist democrats and nationalists held an ambivalent to hostile attitude towards political reforms, but they strongly supported economic reforms. Maoists disapproved of both political

and economic reforms under a liberalism framework because socialism with a planned economy is the goal for them.

This finding suggests that the support for economic reforms towards a market economy does not necessarily predict the support of political reforms towards a democratic government, and vice versa. Therefore, a thorough investigation of opinion leaders' views on economic reforms is crucial for our understanding of Chinese public opinion and is the focus of the next chapter.

On the other hand, opinion leaders' online discussion demonstrates that there is another underlying division between giving priority on ideological pursuits or on material pursuits. This cleavage has been long ignored in scholarly work on ideology and democratization. Even though modernization theories assume that material needs would be eventually satisfied with economic development and people would naturally move on to pursue nonmaterial goals, material public goods are still of great importance for most people in most countries in the world.

How do people weigh ideological pursuits against material pursuits? This perspective may fundamentally challenge our understanding of Chinese ideological debates. For instance, instrumentalist democrats, materialist democrats, and nationalists all share the same priority of pursuing material public goods, be they reducing the wealth gap, constraining corruption, or sustaining economic prosperity and social stability. By contrast, fundamentalist democrats and Maoists share the same priority of realizing the ideal political system, be it democracy or socialism.

This finding holds implications for democratization theories. For people who champion democracy but only as a means to achieving material public goods, they might become disillusioned when democracy turns out to be incompetent in providing desired public goods. For

instance, corruption and gender discrimination in democratic India are used as a strong counter-argument to the claim that China should adopt democracy to contain corruption and protect women's rights. Gun shootings in the US also dampen many people's enthusiasm for democracy and strengthen the legitimacy of authoritarian systems like China and Singapore, as many people value public security more than the right to vote.

As such, understanding the priorities of people is the key to predicting political development in a country. For new democracies, the risks of an unstable democracy may not only come from those who overtly voice their disapproval of democracy, but may also come from those who might at first support democracy, but only for so long as it serves other interests. A democratic regime's promises to constrain corruption, strengthen the economy, and to provide good public services can easily backfire once the government does not meet people's expectations.

CHAPTER 5

EXPECTATIONS OF ECONOMIC REFORMS

In Chapter 4, I analyzed opinion leaders' perceptions of democracy and democratic reforms in China. I found that socioeconomic issues were frequently mentioned in online discussions and that attitudes towards economic reforms represented a point of divergence in public opinion. In addition, people tend to give different priorities to material goods and nonmaterial pursuits. Informed by these findings, I proceed to investigate opinion leaders' specific views on China's economic reforms in this chapter.

My analyses show that competing opinions exist both *within* and *across* different clusters of opinion leaders, confirming again the high level of heterogeneity in public opinion. In particular, variations in people's socioeconomic visions were to some extent independent of their political and ideological stances. For example, even though the market economy is typically associated with democratic institutions according to Western experiences, the support for privatization in China is not necessarily associated with the support for multi-party democracy.

To fully capture the nature and nuances of public opinion on socioeconomic systems, I propose a two-dimensional model revolving around two questions: First, do people mainly pursue socialist or capitalist values in socioeconomic activities? Second, do people prioritize material pursuits or nonmaterial pursuits as the end goal of the socioeconomic system? Accordingly, four ideal types of opinions on China's economic reforms are juxtaposed and analyzed. I concluded that a majority of opinion leaders were in support of economic reforms, but they had distinctive and sometimes conflicting agendas. Some supported economic reforms as a means to strengthen national power and to revive a great China. Some pushed for economic

reforms with the belief that marketization will facilitate political reforms towards democracy. Still others objected to economic reforms in post-Mao China because they prioritized the pursuit of equality and justice. But under the broad heading of equality and justice, opinion leaders still diverged between a pursuit of material benefits and a pursuit of nonmaterial public goods.

In the rest of the chapter, I will first introduce the background of "Reform and Opening-up" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), a series of economic reforms in post-Mao China. Then I combine computational and qualitative methods to analyze opinion leaders' views on reforms. In particular, I identify the three main topics and two central points of debate in online discussion about economic reforms. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on the two-dimensional model of socioeconomic opinions.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC REFORMS

Initiated in 1978 by then CCP leader Deng Xiaoping, Reform and Opening-up refers to a series of economic reforms that introduced a market economy to China and opened the country to foreign investment. When the CCP took power in 1949, a planned economy along with a set of socialist political institutions were installed in China. However, the economy was soon riddled with inefficiency, resource shortages, and poor economic performance (Gong, 2012). After Mao's death, a series of economic reforms began in 1978 and gradually changed China's planned economy to a "socialist market economy." With this bold reform of the socialist system, Deng coined the term "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Brandt and Rawski, 2008).

The central idea of China's economic reforms is privatization and the loosening of state control. As the first step, the CCP led the de-collectivization of agriculture and had peasants in charge of their own share of the land. Once the agriculture sector set a precedent for

privatization, reforms continued to push for the privatization of most state-owned enterprises and the lifting of price controls and protectionist policies, although a few core sectors (e.g., banking, telecommunications, and petroleum) continued to be state monopolized. After Deng's death in 1997, Zhu Rongji, one of Deng's handpicked successors, played a central role in the large-scale privatization of state enterprises, during which the number of state-owned enterprises decreased by 48 percent (Brandt and Rawski, 2008). During the Zhu administration, China also abolished much of the social welfare system installed by Mao, such as free health care and welfare housing.[1]

Privatization and marketization have come a long way and brought about dramatic changes in China. On the one hand, these reforms successfully boosted unprecedented economic growth, drastically reduced poverty and lifted living standards for Chinese citizens, and made China the rising superpower we see today. On the other hand, controversies and concerns have been raised about many negative consequences of reforms, such as uncurbed income inequality, prevalent corruption, and the disappearance of the welfare state in China. Large-scale privatization also resulted in grievances and discontent from certain social groups, particularly laid-off employees from former state enterprises.

Against this backdrop, economic reform has continued to be a central point of debate in academic and public discussion. A rich literature (see, for instance, Mulvad, 2018; Wang and Lu, 2012; Wong, 2006; Zhang, 2001; Qian and Wong, 2000; Nee, 1991) documents competing opinions between people who criticize the negative outcomes of market reforms (especially increasing inequality and the loss of state assets during privatization), and people who advocate

[1] During the Mao era, houses were publicly owned and not commercialized. They were distributed to employees for free. Employees had no ownership and needed to pay monthly rent at a low price.

for continued and deepened market reforms and a full privatization of the few remaining state-monopolized sectors.

Mulvad (2018) indicated that these competing opinions are essentially disagreements over ownership of the means of production of a country: should ownership be in public or private hands? However, while it is true that Chinese intellectuals and scholars may be concerned about the means of production in China, does it also apply to opinion leaders engaging in online discussions where most audiences are not intellectuals? In addition, is there only a dichotomy between full support for and an objection to economic reforms? This chapter investigates public opinion on economic reforms in post-Mao China and scrutinizes the variations in people's ideas about what defines a successful socioeconomic system.

TALKING ABOUT REFORMS ON WEIBO

Following the previous chapters, this chapter uses opinion leaders' Weibo posts to investigate popular opinions on economic reforms. In Chapter 2, I showed that "reform" is the most relevant keyword for the largest topic in online discussion. To situate people's opinions on economic reforms in a larger context, this chapter first analyzes a total of 18,642 posts produced by 199 opinion leaders that contained the keyword "reform" (*gaige* 改革). Then I narrowed this down to people's opinions on the economy and economic reforms in post-Mao China. Similar to the methods used in previous chapters, I apply both computational methods and qualitative readings to analyze these reform-related posts.

Three Topics about Reform

Since the Reform and Opening-up, the term "reform" has been a buzz word in Chinese society. From economic reforms to political reforms, and from educational reforms to healthcare reforms, different types of reforms have taken place or are expected to take place in almost every aspect of people's life. I used LDA models to identify the main topics under the broad heading of reform. After testing several LDA models with different numbers of topics ranging from 3 to 11, I found that there are three major topics in opinion leaders' discussions about reforms, and debates on economic reforms constitute the largest, most prevalent topic.

Table 5-1: Keywords in Reform-related Posts

(% of tokens)	Labels	Keywords
Topic 1 (84.90%)	Economic reforms	economy, development, market, Reform and Opening-up, state-owned enterprises, finance, growth, land, political system, state
Topic 2 (13.40%)	Judicial/political reforms	judicature, politics, lawyer, political system, political reform, constitution, democracy, constitutionalism, rule of law, judicial independence
Topic 3 (1.60%)	International affairs	military, America, Iran, currency, Japan, national defense, Euros, Iraq, crisis, Obama

Source: Chinese Opinion Leader Online Speech Database, 2009-2017.

As shown in Table 5-1, the largest topic related to reform is economic reforms. A whopping 84.9 percent of all terms in opinion leaders' posts are associated with this topic, making it the most-discussed socioeconomic issue in today's China. This includes the topics of land reform and state-owned enterprises reform. Note that this topic also features a number of terms pertinent to political reforms, such as "political system" and "state." A close reading of opinion leaders' posts indicates that economic reforms were tightly connected to political

reforms in many opinion leaders' eyes, and they believed that the two should proceed together and facilitate each other.

The second topic is exclusive to judicial and political reform, focusing on constitutionalism and judicial independence, which appeal mainly to many liberal-leaning opinion leader. This is consistent with the findings of Chapter 4, where I scrutinized opinion leaders' views on the political system and found that many of them deemed constitutionalism a defining character of democracy and attempted to install constitutional democracy in China.

The last distinctive topic is about international affairs rather than domestic issues. Opinion leaders talked about various social and political reforms in other countries such as the US, Japan, and the European Union, particularly when it came to military or currency reforms in these countries. This topic is very small, contributing to only 1.6 percent of the entire corpus and only six out of 199 opinion leaders had a substantial probability (larger than 15 percent) of talking about it.

Two Major Points of Debates

Narrowing the discussions to the topic of economic reforms, I applied qualitative readings to the posts of a sample of opinion leaders randomly selected from different quartiles along the ideological dimension. I found that two topics constantly appeared in opinion leaders' online discussions: 1) privatization and 2) the top-down versus bottom-up approach to reform.

Privatization

Dovetailing with previous accounts of the central position of privatization in economic reforms, privatization was a major point of debate among opinion leaders. However, while

existing studies and conventional wisdom typically associate the disapproval of privatization with a preference for socialism and associate the support for privatization with the support for market economy and liberal democracy, data show that competing opinions on privatization to some extent exist independent of people's political and ideological stances.

On the one hand, for opinion leaders who fall in the first two quartiles on the ideological spectrum—meaning that they generally supported and prioritized democratic reforms as the main goal of China's political agenda—the mainstream opinion was in support of privatization. An opinion leader citing a renowned economist expressed a typical view on this topic:

> Public-owned enterprises are hotbeds of crony capitalism. It will be very difficult for the Chinese economy to succeed if we do not dismantle the privileges of state-owned monopolies. According to global experiences, successful countries all celebrate private ownership, whereas countries dominated by public ownership all failed. The success of Chinese reforms was also owed to the adoption of private ownership rather than insisting on public ownership. (OL #220)

Opinion leaders holding similar views also tended to push for full privatization of the remaining public resources that have been exclusively controlled by the government, including land. Opinion leaders tended to associate the public ownership of land with the unchecked power of the Chinese government, linking issues of the economic system to faults within the authoritarian political system:

> Private ownership of land is the most basic principle of constitutionalism and is a basic problem that economic reforms cannot get around. The core of constitutionalism is to limit the power of the government so that the government is not able to do whatever it wants. If the land of a country is not privately owned, it means that the power of the government is already too strong to be checked. When the constitution does not protect private ownership of land, the government is only held in check voluntarily by itself. (OL #200)

These posts indicate that some opinion leaders generally supported a Western model of political development that features market economy and private ownership (as the socioeconomic system) and liberal democratic institutions (as the political system.)

However, beyond this typical view, a less popular but pronounced view of pro-democracy opinion leaders appeared to disentangle privatization from democracy. These opinion leaders also advocated for democratic reforms and constitutionalism, but they were critical of privatization, especially the privatization of public services. One opinion leader (OL #113) commented:

> [1] China must learn from the lessons of Eastern Germany. Reforms in socialist countries are supposed to pursue more democracy rather than more privatization. Especially, public service is absolutely not supposed to be privatized.
> [2] In the 80s and 90s, Chinese reforms had a choice between democracy and privatization. Our choice was privatization at last. When Zhu Rongji retired, the privatization of China was almost completed. Nowadays, a major portion of the profits of state-owned enterprises does not go to the state, but go to a few individuals. We have also paid a heavy price for the privatization of education and healthcare.

Notably, experiences of economic and political reforms in former socialist countries, such as Eastern Europe and Russia, were taken as important lessons by these opinion leaders. It is held that privatization resulted in social injustice and increasing inequality as certain individuals were allowed to buy public assets at a low price. Therefore, opinion leaders who emphasized justice and social welfare tended to be critical of privatization even though they supported democratic reforms.

In other words, while agreeing on the premise that democracy is better than authoritarianism, opinion leaders still diverged on their perspectives. The neoliberal perspective holds that the free market is the most effective and efficient mechanism to distribute goods and services, while a social democratic perspective calls for state interventions for the sake of social equality and justice.

On the other hand, for opinion leaders who fall in the last two quartiles on the ideological dimension—meaning that they either did not support democracy or at least did not prioritize democratization over other goals, such as social stability and economic prosperity—the dominant view was in support of economic reforms and privatization for the sake of the wealth and prosperity they have brought to China. Opinion leaders cited Deng Xiaoping in defending "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that feature both a market economy and socialist institutions:

> Thirty years ago when Deng launched the Reform and Opening-up, people mainly debated on whether we needed reforms. Today, we are mainly discussing about how to continue and deepen reforms…. Someone fear that we are no longer a socialist country under the influence of capitalism. Deng said that the only criterion for judging [whether some policies are good or not] is to see whether the policy is beneficial to developing the productive power of socialism, to strengthening the national power of socialist countries, and to lifting the living standards of citizens. (OL #230)

By contrast, opinion leaders on the far right railed against privatization in order to defend the "real" socialism. They were mostly concerned with the nature of the Chinese political system, and they tended to stick with the orthodox socialism that prioritizes the public sector of the economy.

> [1] Economic systems must be consistent with political systems. It is necessary to have our economic system come back to the socialist road in order to secure a positive development of China. (OL #106)

> [2] The radical full privatization of Russia overturned its socialist system. The disastrous results warned us that state-owned enterprises are the common wealth of Chinese people and the backbone of our country. Reforms of state-owned enterprises should aim at improving the management capacities of these enterprises rather than changing their public ownership. (OL #56)

It is worth noting that these far-right opinion leaders share the concern of those left-leaning opinion leaders with a social democratic view; both groups were concerned about the injustice and corruption involved in the process of privatization. But the left-leaning leaders

criticized privatization while they advocated for political reforms towards democracy, whereas the far-right leaders questioned the legitimacy of privatization with an attempt to defend orthodox socialism. The below post from an opinion leader (#72) represents this view:

> [1] It is terrifying. What is the nature of Chinese political system? Why can public wealth accumulated by all Chinese people be privatized and divided by a few individuals? Where is the legitimacy of privatization?
>
> [2] In the name of reform, some people took advantage of the system for their own benefits. When privatizing the public sector of the economy, they turned a huge amount of public assets accumulated by numerous diligent Chinese people over the past decades to the private wealth of a few individuals, contributing to the development of crony capitalism in China. This is a brutal betrayal to socialism and a brutal betrayal to all Chinese people.

As such, opinion leaders debated the necessity and legitimacy of privatization, and their views are not necessarily associated with their political stances on whether China should push for some kinds of reforms towards democracy.

The Approach to Reforms

Besides privatization, another less-studied yet often discussed topic was about the approach to economic reforms. Competing opinions were seen between a support for a top-down approach, which contends that economic reforms should be designed and carried out by elites, and a preference for a bottom-up approach that highlights the importance of mass participation.

Disagreements over this issue show an interesting pattern: opinion leaders on the two ends of the ideological dimension shared the same opinion that mass participation is critical for successful reforms and that a bottom-up approach should be adopted. The rest of the opinion leaders—regardless of their ideological profiles—tended to believe that a good "top-level design" lies at the heart of successful economic reforms. Originated from systems engineering,

the term “top-level design” refers to the blueprint of economic and political reforms that is supposed to be carefully designed by CCP leaders.

For opinion leaders on the two ends, the “top” means the powerful and the rich who have formed vested interests. These opinion leaders claimed that vested interests would not genuinely push for reforms at the cost of losing their own benefits. Regardless of their political views, opinion leaders on both ends used similar language to criticize the injustice of excluding the masses from the decision-making process.

> [1] Top-level design is a dead end. The key question of top-level design is “who is the top”? The nature of top-level design is to sustain rather than to challenge the status quo. In Chinese history, virtually all kinds of reforms in all dynasties were designed by the top [people in power]. If this approach really works, we would not have seen the deaths of that many regimes and dynasties. (OL #47, left leaning)
>
> [2] It is always the elites that initiate and control the process of reforms. But elites will certainly only push for the reforms that strengthen their powers and increase their benefits. The outcomes of reforms are likely only beneficial for elites but are detrimental for people at the bottom. Vulnerable groups will be the sacrificial lamb to reforms. (OL #56, right leaning)

As such, both ends converged with the same emphasis on mass participation. People on the left end distrusted reforms under the existing political framework and hoped to overturn the authoritarian regime by mass participation and revolution. For instance, an opinion leader (#42) citing famous Chinese modern writer Lu Xun (鲁迅) commented: “If you want to open a window in a room, they [people in power] will stop you. But if you demand to completely remove the roof of the room, they will be willing to negotiate with you. That is why we need radical demands rather than mild reforms.”

People on the right hoped to roll back to Mao’s epoch of “big democracy” as seen in the Cultural Revolution, where virtually every citizen was mobilized and mass participation dominated people’s political life. All this, again, speaks to people’s perceptions of what

constitutes an ideal democracy. This was discussed in Chapter 4, and we will talk more about this in later sections.

Unlike their radical fellows on the left and right end of the spectrum, the majority of opinion leaders eagerly looked forward to a good, top-level design made by the CCP. Even though opinion leaders had different expectations for economic reforms, there was a consensus that it is primarily the responsibility of the government and the CCP to sustain and deepen reforms in China.

Note that these opinion leaders talked about this top-down approach in contrast to the trial-and-error approach in the Deng Xiaoping era rather than the bottom-up approach advocated by their fellows. A famous quote of Deng Xiaoping describes the process of Chinese economic reforms as being like a person crossing a river by feeling his way over the stones (*mozhe shitou guohe,* 摸着石头过河.) However, many negative consequences emerged as reforms unfolded, and therefore, more and more voices within and beyond the CCP suggested that Deng's explorative approach was no longer suitable for today's China. Instead, they advocated that a well-designed blueprint is needed for the continued success of Chinese reforms.

> [1] The shortcomings of the "crossing-a-river-by-feeling-the-stones" approach are three-fold: First, there is no clear outlook on reforms; second, reforms are not systematic and comprehensive; and third, when facing difficult problems, our common strategy is to postpone it to a later time. This approach is no longer applicable for today's reforms. The government should develop a clear program to guide future reforms. A top-level design is much needed at this critical time. (OL #199, left leaning)
>
> [2] In the next round of reforms in China, we should no longer cross the river by feeling our way over the stones. Because the "water" is already too deep for us to feel any "stones". What we need is to adopt a top-down approach and a good top-level design. (OL #230, right-leaning)

As noted, despite the differences in their ideological stances, the majority of opinion leaders used the same language to call for a good, top-level design and continued reforms led by

the government. Similar to their colleagues on the two ends of the ideological spectrum, these opinion leaders also recognized that vested interests were the largest barrier for continued reforms. However, they did not see mass participation as a solution and turned to rely on a benign and open-minded top-level leadership to solve problems.

> [1] It is an urgent task to continue economic reforms in China. But interest groups have spared no effort to obstruct further reforms. Facing these problems, the most critical task of today's reforms is to make a top-level design. (OL #200, left-leaning)
>
> [2] We have to learn to identify the progressive reformists within the system and to seize the opportunities in the political structure. Particularly for intellectuals and scholars who thrive for social transformation, we need to be good at understanding and amplifying the progressive and open-minded voices within the system. (OL #169, right-leaning)

To sum up, privatization and the approach to reforms were the two major points of debate among opinion leaders. Their debates also reveal an important fact: people sharing a similar ideological profile may not necessarily have similar expectations of socioeconomic development, and people coming from different ideological positions may sometimes make the same demands regardless of their different agendas.

These cross-cutting consensuses and within-group disagreements indicate the necessity to re-classify public opinions on socioeconomic issues regardless of people's ideological profiles. In the next section, I focus on classifying opinion leaders according to their attitudes towards economic reforms in post-Mao China and their perceptions of the desired outcomes of a successful socioeconomic system.

CLASSIFYING COMPETING OPINIONS ON ECONOMIC REFORMS

Informed by qualitative readings of opinion leaders' posts, I propose a two-dimensional model to classify popular opinions on the socioeconomic system and its reforms in China. On the one axis, people have different preferences between socioeconomic policies that primarily pursue

goals usually associated with socialism (e.g., equality and justice), and policies that primarily pursue goals usually perceived as the outcomes of capitalism (e.g., efficiency and economic growth). On the other axis, as indicated by the findings of the previous chapter, people have different priorities between addressing material concerns, such as creating greater profit or alleviating poverty, and addressing nonmaterial concerns, such as defending orthodox socialism or protecting individual liberty. In reality, people can have both material and nonmaterial needs and demands, but some people tend to stress more material pursuits, whereas others pay more attention to nonmaterial goals.

The differentiation between socialist and capitalist goals is based on Chinese people's perceptions of the two contending socioeconomic institutions. For example, people associate efficiency and prosperity with capitalism, as free market and free competition are believed to be the most efficient mechanism to make full use of resources and to boost economic growth. People also associate equality and justice (particularly substantive or outcome justice) with socialism, as the socialist agenda emphasizes income equality and prosperity for all.

Note, however, that some common perceptions are not necessarily consistent with real-life experiences or academic views. For instance, resources could be wasted in a capitalist economy, and socialist theories do not really advocate for equal outcomes in income distribution.[2] Likewise, socialism may not resist prosperity,[3] and capitalism also claims to pursue justice. Despite this, in online discussions, people tend to follow the common perceptions of the

[2] The principle of distribution in socialism is "to each according to his contribution," whereby individuals receive compensation according to the amount of labor they contribute. This principle, by definition, precludes equality of outcomes.

[3] Deng Xiaoping once made a famous remark to clarify the relationship between socialism and the pursuit of prosperity. He commented: "Poverty is not socialism." (贫穷不是社会主义) He also reportedly remarked that "to be rich is glorious." (致富光荣) See Deng Xiaoping. 1993. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume III, 1982-1992.* Beijing: People's Publishing House.

two institutions to express their opinions. I thus classify their preferences along the socialism-capitalism spectrum.

In addition, people's support for certain socialist or capitalist values in the socioeconomic sphere should *not* be taken to be identical to the support for specific political regimes that claim to champion these values. For example, as discussed before, some opinion leaders deemed income equality as the most important goal for China, but they also railed against the Chinese socialist regime and hoped to install a constitutional democracy in China. Hence, pursuing socialist values is not equal to supporting socialist regimes. The same applies to the support for capitalist values.

The other axis between material and nonmaterial concerns is often neglected in academic discussion on people's socioeconomic preferences. It is typically assumed that divergences of public opinion exist between a preference of more equality and that of more growth, both of which are material in nature. Income equality calls for a more equal distribution of income that benefits lower and middle classes, and the call for economic growth mainly encourages greater profits. However, at times, people's concerns transcend material wealth to care more about nonmaterial public good. They refer to ideological pursuits when they try to justify their support for or objection to certain socioeconomic policies. For example, some opinion leaders denounced China's economic reforms primarily because they believed that this was a betrayal to socialism and to Chairman Mao. We will talk more about this material versus nonmaterial dimension in the following section.

Combining opinion leaders' preferences between socialist and capitalist goals and their priorities over material or nonmaterial concerns, I summarize four categories of opinions on

China's economic reforms and people's expectations of a well-functioning socioeconomic system, as shown in Table 5-2.

Table 5-2: Classifications of the Competing Goals of a Socioeconomic System

	Material	Nonmaterial
Socialism	Equality	Justice
Capitalism	Growth	Democracy

It should be clarified that this classification provides four ideal types of people's preferences. The lines between different categories may be blurred in real life, and sometimes a person's opinion could include some combinations of the four. However, the four ideal typical goals reflect the points of debate in online discussion and reveal the conflicts and tensions underlying people's different pursuits. In the rest of the chapter, I will discuss concrete cases of opinion leaders' views that fall into each of the four categories.

In Pursuit of Equality

Equality, defined as a more equal distribution of income and wealth within society, lies at the heart of many socialist appeals. Economic reforms have brought immense wealth to China, but it is widely recognized that the distribution of wealth has been strikingly unequal since reforms began. The trends in Gini coefficient (a statistical measure of income distribution and an indicator of economic inequality) for family income in China show that the coefficient ranged between 0.2 and 0.3 before 1978, but it has soared to around 0.55 in the 2010s, a number that indicates an alarming level of income inequality. Some scholars even estimated a Gini coefficient of above 0.6 for today's China (Xie and Zhou, 2014).

Accordingly, income inequality is believed to be one of the most worrying consequences of Chinese economic reforms, and therefore, the primary reason for some opinion leaders to denounce and oppose economic reforms:

> [1] The most obvious sign of Chinese economic reforms going wrong is the inequality of wealth distribution. Among Chinese people, many workers were laid off. Many peasants lost their land. Many immigrant workers were not paid properly. And still many people do not have a minimum level of social security benefits. The entire generation is suffering from these negative consequences. (OL #175)
>
> [2] China's economic reforms should not have made citizens unable to afford housing, education, and healthcare. Redistribution only makes inequality worse. Mistakes should not be concealed by another larger mistake. This is the most basic demand. (OL #186)

With a concern about social inequality, opinion leaders advocated for the provision of material benefits as a solution. They resisted the current reform agenda and attempted to encourage more government intervention in the redistribution process:

> [1] Since the Reform and Opening up, cost of living has been soaring in China. The reason we can no longer stand with [reforms] is that citizens are receiving less and less government benefits. (OL #205)
>
> [2] I want to make a plea to the richest government [Chinese government] in the world: please cut taxes for all citizens, and please send cash *hongbao*[4] to every lower-income citizens or everyone. (OL #202)

I label this category of opinion as "socialist and material" because such voices tended to bring up a socialist concern (income equality) and propose a materialist solution (more material benefits). Both left- and right-leaning opinion leaders are seen in this category, particularly those on the two ends of the ideological spectrum, and they generally disapproved of economic reforms. Note that this stance was not mainstream among opinion leaders, as reformists still enjoyed great legitimacy and authority because of the sheer improvement of people's livelihood in China.

[4] *Hongbao* literally means red packets. People put money in red envelopes and send to others as monetary gifts. This practice is prevalent in China and East Asia at large.

In Pursuit of Justice

Another type of opinion shared the socialist concern about social inequality and the sufferings of vulnerable groups. However, what sets them apart from the first group is that they tended to downplay the importance of material wealth while focussing on the lack of justice in China. According to this group, injustice is a problem triggered or at least exacerbated by government policies that only prioritized economic development since reforms began.

In other words, the first group generally appreciated the material wealth accumulated during economic reforms but found the distribution of wealth unjust. The second group, by contrast, denounced economic reforms not (only) because of the unjust distribution of wealth, but because of the neglect of nonmaterial public goods, such as citizen rights and social justice. The dismissive stance on material wealth makes the second category of opinions stand out:

> [1] There is not a single political regime that fell into crisis because of poverty. The most fundamental crisis of political regimes lies in injustice rather than in poverty…. Deng Xiaoping said "development is the absolute principle." (发展才是硬道理) This is wrong. Justice is the absolute principle. (OL #36)

> [2] Because of the lack of citizen rights, workers and peasants have become vulnerable groups. There is also a myriad of injustices in law. The Chinese dream is not only to pursue prosperity, but also to protect citizen rights, to make citizens not vulnerable, and to make government officials the real servants to people. (OL #164)

As such, justice is the top keyword for the second category of opinions. But what is justice? And how to achieve justice? Opinion leaders with different ideological profiles gave different answers. Right-leaning opinion leaders, particularly Maoists, saw justice in the political system of orthodox socialism and/or Maoism. Therefore, they denounced the unjust economic reforms mainly because it is a betrayal to socialism, and the solution is to roll back to socialism and the Mao era. This view is consistent with the anti-privatization voices of the Maoists that we

discussed in the previous section. The below posts of an opinion leader (#154) represent this view:

> [1] Economic reforms originally mean to get rid of the shortcomings of the old system, and to make socialist economy grow better. However, reforms are not to change socialism into capitalism! This is not reform! This is a betrayal to socialism! This is crony capitalism!
>
> [2] The public sector of the economy is no longer a dominant sector. The nature of the economic system in China has changed. Is this reform? No! This is rebelling against socialism!

By sharp contrast, left-leaning opinion leaders saw no justice in socialism. They denounced both economic reforms *and* the Chinese socialist regime. In their eyes, neither material wealth nor government performance justifies the rule of the CCP. Instead, constitutional democracy is the real justice. Accordingly, political reforms towards constitutionalism was the solution to various socioeconomic problems.

> [1] Since economic reforms, China has been only pursuing good government performance and economic performance. This road is guided by the principle that "economic development is the central task" and "development is the absolute principle." But this road is dangerous. Without constitutionalism, the pursuit of performance will only lead Chinese society into a huge crisis. (OL #47)
>
> [2] Economic problems in China are caused by the delay of political reforms. People do not have effective measures to check and balance the power of the government, such that social wealth is at the government's disposal. This is a vicious circle. Hence, the stalled political reforms are the most important problem in China. (OL #50)
>
> [3] Don't talk about reforms if you do not abide by the Constitution. [Chinese government] has not abided by the Constitution for many decades. Not abiding by the Constitution is the root cause of all kinds of problems in China. (OL #158)

Such opinions were mainly voiced by opinion leaders in the first quartile of the ideological spectrum. The analysis of their opinions on economic reforms confirms the findings of Chapter 4: the first quartile was primarily concerned about constitutionalism rather than material wealth.

Despite the differences between Maoists and constitutionalists, I label the second category of opinions as "socialist and nonmaterial" because of their common denunciation of capitalist reforms and the emphasis on "justice" as a nonmaterial public good.

In Pursuit of Growth

The third type of opinion no longer resonates with previous socialist views. The most pronounced difference lies in their enthusiastic support for China's economic reforms. The rationale for the support is straightforward: economic reforms have greatly lifted the living standards of Chinese people and have made China rich and strong.

> China has to continue to reform and open up if China wants to maintain and lift the level of prosperity. We need to continue to push for marketization. This is the only way to make China a high-income country. (OL #190)

Being rich and strong, a very material goal, is of paramount importance according to this view. Along these lines, many posts put an emphasis on economic growth and national wealth, carrying a somewhat nationalist undertone.

In fact, many nationalist opinion leaders fall into this category. They typically defended the status quo and objected to political reforms in the direction of Western democracy, but they were enthusiastic supporters of economic reforms in hopes of rejuvenating the Chinese nation and realize the Chinese dream.

> [1] The past 30 years of Reform and Opening Up has made China's coastal cities reach the income level of middle-income countries. If we continue to reform for another 20 years, the Chinese dream of being a strong nation will come true! (OL #3)
>
> [2] The most important goal and the core interest of China in the next 20 years is to focus on deepening economic reforms and avoiding the middle income trap. Everything, including diplomacy, should serve this end goal. (OL #151)

Note that, however, celebrating economic growth is not exclusive to nationalists. Ever since the start of economic reforms when Deng Xiaoping made the remark that "to be rich is glorious,"[5] pursuing material wealth has become a dominant aspiration of the public at large. A majority of opinion leaders, whether left or right leaning, shared the same goal of pushing for continued economic reforms and greater and more sustainable economic performance.

While some opinion leaders pursue the goals of equality or justice, opinion leaders prioritizing wealth deemed social problems, such as income inequality and corruption, as inevitable side effects of rapid economic growth. In their eyes, these problems are growing pains, and the price that every country has to pay when its economy is ramping upwards. The solution to these problems is *not* to stop reforms *nor* call for government interventions. Instead, the best solution is to continue and deepen reforms.

> [1] People who are anti-reform always make use of nationalism and populism to try to obstruct economic reforms. Many citizens are often fooled by them. For instance, corruption is not a consequence of marketization. It is a consequence of not pushing for thorough and comprehensive reforms. But many people are fooled, and they blame economic reforms for the prevalence of corruption. (OL #200)
>
> [2] It is a dangerous idea to owe all problems, such as income inequality, prevalent corruption, and soaring prices to market economy and economic reforms. In fact, the root cause for all these problems is that reforms are not completed and opening-up is not thorough. (OL #68)

I label this category of opinions as "capitalist and material" because of its emphasis on economic growth and material wealth. It highly recognizes the achievements of economic reforms and hopes to continue to deepen these reforms. Whenever people were distressed by social problems allegedly resulting from reforms, this typical view admitted that social problems

[5] Deng reportedly made this remark, and it became one of the most famous slogans of Chinese economic reforms. However, the source of this remark is not clear. The earliest available reference to this remark is found in Orville Schell's book, *To Get Rich is Glorious: China in the Eighties* (New York: Signet Book, 1986).

were the side effects of development, but these problems would eventually be solved by further development. Both left-leaning opinion leaders and right-leaning nationalists were seen in this category, but nationalists had a stronger presence.

In Pursuit of Democracy

The last category of opinions also champions the capitalist pursuits of efficiency and economic growth, but ultimately it is concerned about a nonmaterial, ideological pursuit: the democratization of China.

According to this view, the Western model of modernization that combines a market economy and a multi-party democratic system is a textbook path for development that China should follow. Hence, opinion leaders' support for a market economy is grounded in the belief that a market economy is a part of the modernization project, and it can facilitate and complement the political system of democracy. Together, market economy and democracy constitute the best (or the least bad) system in the world.

> People can find fault with virtually all kinds of systems. The goal of reforms is not to find the best system, but to install the least bad system—for politics, it is a multi-party democracy; for the economy, it is a market economy. The political process of democratic institutions may be very slow, but it can avoid many mistakes. A market economy may lead to wealth inequality but it is the most efficient mechanism to maximize utilities. Democratic politics and a market economy should be combined to complete and improve each other. (OL #65)

The distinctive characteristic of this type of opinion, therefore, is its support for not only economic reforms towards a market economy, but also political reforms towards liberal democracy. This sets them apart from nationalists who only push for economic reforms with the goal of making China strong.

For some opinion leaders, political reforms are even more important and urgent than economic reforms for today's China because a just and well-functioning political system is perceived to be a premise and a guarantee for the success of economic reforms. Capitalizing on the government's eagerness in pursuing economic success, opinion leaders and intellectuals sought to resonate with reformists within the political system, such as the former prime minister Wen Jiabao, to make a case for political reforms.

> [1] I extoled prime minister Wen Jiabao's resolution to reform the political system. Without political reforms, there is no way to push for economic reforms. [Economic reforms] will face a dead end. (OL #112)
>
> [2] Wen Jiabao remarked that it is a critical moment for reforms. I agreed. Without the success of political reforms, economic reforms will not succeed. We might even lose the fruits gained from previous economic reforms. Social problems will also not be solved thoroughly. (OL #230)

Most opinion leaders in this category arrived at the conclusion that political reforms were important. But what kinds of political reforms did they pursue? Echoing the findings of Chapter 4, even though opinion leaders had different yet vague agendas for China's political development, constitutionalism and rule of law appeared to be a consensus for most people in this category, regardless how this term was defined.

> If our country does not firmly push for reforms towards a modern country that celebrates constitutionalism, our country will not be able to avoid the middle-income trap and realize modernization. Our nation will fall into a deep abyss. (OL #183)

Finally, witnessing prevalent social problems such as inequality and corruption, this category of opinions also placed justice and equality prominently on their agendas. The solution they proposed in order to solve social problems, however, was neither reverting nor continuing economic reforms. Instead, political reforms towards constitutionalism was the only right way in their eyes.

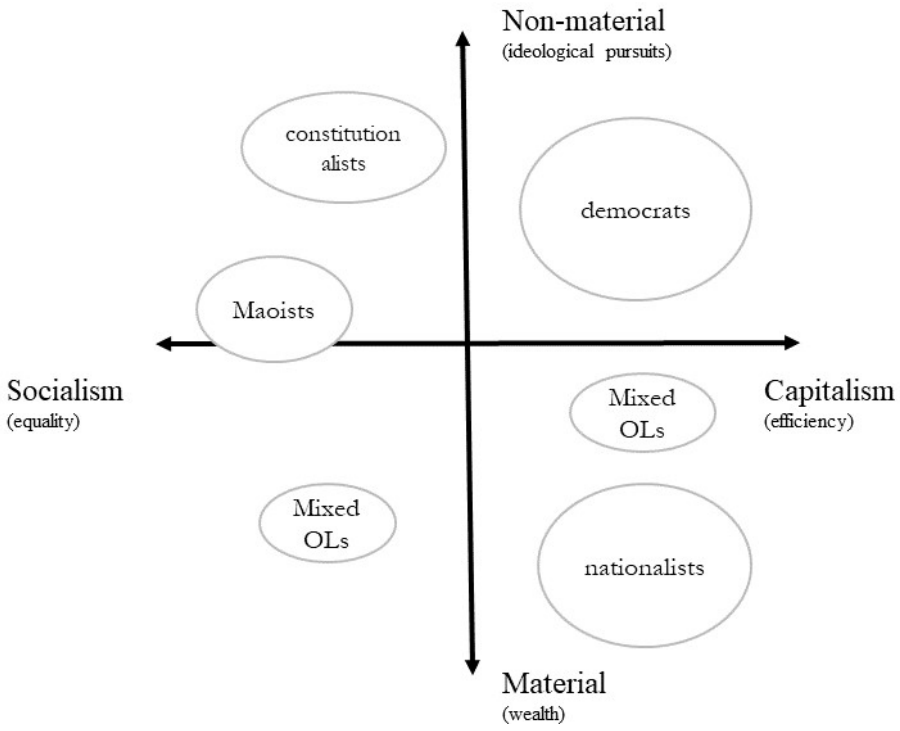
> As long as the private sector of the economy exists, polarization in wealth is inevitable. But this is not a terrifying problem. Bill Gates is the richest guy in the world, and American people do not see this as a problem. As long as we have a just legal system and abide by the principle of rule of law and people can hold the government accountable, then wealth disparity is not a terrifying problem at all. (OL #113)

I label this category of opinions as "capitalist and nonmaterial" because the ultimate goal of China, according to this view, is to complete the task of modernization by adopting the Western model that combines market economy and democracy. Therefore, most opinion leaders in this category were left-leaning leaders in support of both political and economic reforms. Particularly, their support for a market economy and economic reforms was strategically used to make a case for the larger project of democratization, a nonmaterial end in itself.

CONCLUSIONS: A MODEL OF OPINIONS ON THE SOCIOECONOMIC SYSTEM

Putting this all together, in order to classify people's expectations for socioeconomic systems, I propose an ideal-typical model, as illustrated in Figure 5-1, that disentangles people's preference for economic institutions from their priorities on the end goals of that economic institution.

Figure 5-1: A Two-dimensional Model of Opinions on the Socioeconomic System



The majority of opinion leaders were on the capitalism side. They generally supported economic reforms towards a market economy and created an overwhelming "consensus for reform" in public discussion. Within this group, some were primarily interested in pursuing greater wealth, including nationalists who advocated for the rejuvenation of China, as well as a mix of left- and right-leaning opinion leaders who saw merit in the improvement of people's livelihoods. Others mainly capitalized on the consensus for economic reforms to make a case for pursuing political reforms towards democracy. Most of them were left-leaning opinion leaders in the first and second quartiles. I thus label them "democrats."

Less people stood on the socialism side to denounce market reforms and privatization. Their opinions were sometimes seen as "radical" because they wanted to stop or even reverse the reforms of post-Mao China. Within this group, some were primarily concerned about the

distribution of wealth, and they called for government interventions to defend social equality. This idea was shared by a mix of left- and right-leaning opinion leaders. Others dismissed the importance of wealth but focused on pursuing distinctive ideological goals: Maoists on the right end of the ideological spectrum hoped to defend orthodox socialism, and constitutional democrats on the left end aimed at installing constitutionalism in China.

In real life, the lines between different categories could be blurred. Yet, the theoretical ambition of this ideal typical construct is to highlight patterns of cross-cutting consensuses and within-group cleavages that may be disregarded in existing studies. For example, both nationalists and democrats tended to push for economic reforms, while Maoists and social and constitutional democrats came together to denounce reforms.

This echoes the findings of Chapter 4 where I differentiated opinion leaders who saw material pursuits as an end from those who saw ideological/political pursuits as an end. The two chapters mutually complement each other and bring attention to the plurality of public opinion in China. There was a great deal of heterogeneity in public opinion, and such heterogeneity cannot be fully captured by a one-dimensional anti-/pro-regime or left/right spectrum. In the last chapter, I will revisit the assumption of a one-dimensional spectrum and advance a new model to understand the nature of public opinion in China.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation intervenes in the long-standing debate that considers Chinese public opinion as either manipulated by the government or antagonized and polarized between pro-government conservatives and anti-government liberals. These accounts have left the multiplicity of voices within China understudied and have neglected the pluralistic visions for China's political future advocating and contesting in the public sphere.

My research uncovers the heterogeneity in Chinese public opinion by disaggregating opinion leaders' discourses into three topic domains: their attitudes towards a few nationalistic topics, their perceptions of democracy and visions for the political development of China, and their expectations for China's economic reforms. I first assumed and estimated a one-dimensional ideological spectrum of opinion leaders based on their social network ties. Then I investigated opinion leaders' online speech across topics and ideological stances and demonstrated the irreducible plurality of public opinion that cannot be incorporated in a one-dimensional spectrum. The sociological motivation of this dissertation is to assess the nature of the public sphere in an authoritarian state and to identify the structure of the ideological spectrum that can characterize the plurality of and variations in public opinion.

To briefly summarize, Chinese online discussion is not dominated by nationalist discourses. Instead, there is a consensus in the public sphere for deepening economic reforms and pushing for some form of political reform in China. However, there are a few important cleavages underlying this consensus. For instance, people cannot reach agreement on the specific agenda and timeline of potential political reforms. Even recognizing that democracy is good for China, opinions still diverge between giving priority to material concerns, such as sustaining

economic growth or alleviating poverty, and giving priority to nonmaterial/ideological goals, such as installing constitutionalism in China.

In addition, some patterns of Chinese public opinion challenge the stereotypes of certain ideologies. For example, nationalism is not necessarily associated with a pro-government stance. Nationalist discourses may go hand in hand with anti-regime opinions that criticize the government for domestic social and political problems. Similarly, some liberal stances, such as support for constitutionalism and democracy, may peacefully coexist with pro-government opinions when opinion leaders value social stability and prosperity more than the pursuit of political ideals. Opinion leaders' views on economic reforms further confirm the cross-cutting cleavages across different groups; Maoist and constitutionalists may come together to denounce economic reforms, while nationalists and some democrats jointly celebrate the idea of pushing for further economic reforms.

THE NATURE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

My dissertation bears important implications for understanding the nature of the public sphere and the role it plays in political development, particularly in an authoritarian context. Prominent scholars from different backgrounds tend to attach importance to the function of the public sphere as it lies at the heart of democracy and democratization (Dewey, 1954; Mills, 1956; Habermas, 1989; Arendt, 2013; Linz and Stepan, 1996; O'Donnell, 1996; Diamond, 1999). However, scholars rarely pursue this topic in an authoritarian context. In Chapter 1, I discuss three perspectives that potentially lead to the neglect of the inner-workings of the public sphere in authoritarian states.

The Habermasian framework stresses the public sphere's independence from the state. This framework considers an autonomous organized citizenry as a necessary premise for the rise of the public sphere. As Habermas (1989) indicates, the public sphere depends on the support of a vibrant civil society to develop rational-critical discourses and to discipline political authority.

Along this line, the authoritarian framework calls into question the existence of a public sphere in authoritarian states because of the lack of an autonomous civil society and the presence of intensive state censorship. Public opinion in an authoritarian country is believed to be a manifestation of state propaganda and a representation of official discourses. Accordingly, the ideology and political agenda of the Chinese government are inadvertently taken to be identical to the Chinese people's values and opinions by media and scholars outside of China, contributing to a rising concern of a potential "civilization clash" between China and the West.

However, my empirical research on Chinese public opinion challenges this authoritarian framework. My findings indicate that Chinese public opinion is nowhere near a homogeneous voice that only reproduces official discourses of the authoritarian government. Instead, this dissertation establishes the existence of a vibrant public sphere where discourses often deviate from the party line, destabilizing rather than reinforcing the ideological utterance of the state.

My research echoes multiple existing studies on Chinese public opinion that demonstrate the development of a flourishing public sphere in the absence of a strong civil society (see Yang, 2009; Lei, 2011, 2013, 2019; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014). However, while this rich literature recognizes the existence of the public sphere in an authoritarian setting, it unintentionally reduces the public sphere into a simplistic polarization, which I label the Gramscian framework.

Counter to the Habermasian framework, the Gramscian framework does not assume a non-interventionist state for the development of the public sphere. Instead, it mainly focuses on the struggles between a repressive state that tends to dominate and discipline its citizens and an antagonized public that attempts to resist and challenge the state. I draw on the political theories of Gramsci (1992) to label this variant of perspective because Gramsci emphasizes power struggles and the "war of positions" between the cultural hegemony of the ruling class and a counter-hegemonic culture of the ruled.

Existing studies of Chinese public opinion strongly resonate with this framework by focusing on a "counterpublic sphere" as proposed by Lei (2013, 2019), where citizens take advantage of the language of laws and rights and the advancement of information technology to resist and challenge the state. This literature presents public opinion as a war between official discourses and anti-government voices and suggests that grieved citizens may potentially coalesce into a liberalizing force that pushes for democratic reforms in China.

My dissertation challenges this Gramscian account of public opinion by uncovering different combinations of opinions and cross-cutting cleavages in the public sphere. First of all, Chinese people do *not* split into two polarized groups pivoting on the tension between a pro-government, statist, nationalistic, and authoritarian position versus an anti-government, pro-market, liberal, and democratic stance. Instead, echoing Mulvad's (2018) interviews with elite intellectuals, my research finds that the Chinese public deconstructs this dichotomy between parliamentary democracy and statist authoritarianism. Opinion leaders actively draw on political theories both from the West and from traditional China to reinterpret and rework the concept of democracy into different alternatives of liberal democracy for China's future development. For instance, constitutional democrats hope to install constitutionalism and rule of law in China but

have less interest in adopting universal suffrage. Social democrats pursue democratic reforms but denounce privatization.

In addition, there are indeed divergences in public opinion between nationalist and non-nationalist claims, pro- and anti-regime stances, socialist and capitalist pursuits, and many other pairs of contending views. However, there are multiple cross-cutting cleavages that prevent people from forging a collective identity that pursues the same goal. For instance, some nationalists may express anti-regime sentiments and certain democracy supporters may support statist approaches.

Even with a consensus for democratic reforms, people may diverge between prioritizing material benefits and pursuing nonmaterial goals. Some citizens see democracy as an end in itself, forming an ideal citizenry as in the eyes of Diamond (1999), who emphasizes that civil society should be organized not only for the narrow material benefits of democracy, but also for broad, civic ends. However, for other citizens, even though democracy is an ideal that is worth pursuing, if the pursuit of democracy would lead to state instability and economic recession, they would postpone the plan for the sake of the (material) well-being of society.

In a democratic setting, a pluralist society with cross-cutting cleavages is seen as beneficial for sustaining political stability (e.g., Kornhauser, 1959; Skocpol, 1997, 2004; Welzel, Inglehart, and Deutsch, 2005). When people bring different issues and interests as they participate in civic life, they would cultivate a "taste for political life," as argued by Tocqueville (2004), by learning to negotiate and compromise. Schattschneider (1960) also argued that cross-cutting cleavages in the US worked against the emergence of class-based political mobilization and helped sustain a durable democracy.

But what about authoritarian states? What are the consequences of cross-cutting cleavages for the trajectory of China's political development? This dissertation demonstrates the plurality of public discourses in China and the difficulty faced by people in reaching a consensus on the agenda of political reforms. Following the theories of scholars such as Schattschneider, it is reasonable to speculate that the cross-cutting cleavages and the intensive state control may work together to prevent people from forging a collective force and demanding specific political reform.

The patterns of Chinese public discussion partly confirm this speculation. People of different backgrounds tend to come together and recognize the severity of many social problems in China, such as corruption, pollution, and inequality, and they actively engage in online discussion to vent dissatisfaction. But after coming together and intensely criticizing a given problem, people soon fall apart without reaching a consensus on how to solve the problem, sometimes even without discussing potential solutions. For instance, inequality is widely recognized as a severe social problem in China. However, some opinion leaders use it to make a case for full privatization and continued economic reforms; some use it to make a case against privatization and even hope to revert back to the socialist era. Still others make criticisms only, and the hidden message is that it is useless to think hard about solutions because people's voices are not really incorporated into the process of policy making.

Therefore, due to the lack of a collective interest and a general consensus, despite the fact that a vibrant public sphere exists in China and criticisms of the government are commonplace, people are actually difficult to mobilize into a united force that pushes for the same goal, be it defending the CCP or democratizing China. As Schattschneider would predict, the cross-cutting cleavages to some extent contribute to the social stability of China.

The patterns of Chinese public discussion also speak to the importance of the quality of public discussion. As existing literature argues, an ideal public discussion should bring people together and cultivate their capacities to discuss social problems, provide constructive opinions, negotiate and compromise, and, ideally, reach a consensus. This way, people coalesce into a powerful voice that monitors and disciplines political authority. Nonetheless, my data suggest that the way opinion leaders participate in public discussion largely deviates from the Habermasian style of public communication. Chinese online discussion is loaded more with criticisms, satires, jokes, and dissatisfaction than with rational-critical conversations that are constructive, consensus-oriented, and intended for political participation. This specific nature of public discussion is closely related to the way the state manages and controls the public.

Following this dissertation, my next project will systematically assess the nature of the Chinese public sphere in terms of the quality of public discussion: Do people tend to negotiate and compromise to eventually reach a consensus, or do they tend to fight against each other and fall apart? Are people really engaging in a discussion with solid arguments or do they tend to vent emotions only? Under what conditions can people carry out high-quality discussions? How does the authoritarian state affect people's capacity to carry out public discussion? I will pick up where this dissertation left off and explore the communicative patterns of public discussion in an authoritarian setting. Given that a healthy public sphere is essential for a functioning democracy, the quality of public discussion bears important implications for the quality of political participation, which would, in turn, influence the political development of a country.

To clarify, my dissertation does *not* indicate that mass mobilization is always impossible in China in the light of cross-cutting cleavages in the public sphere. Recall that the largest (if not only) consensus in the public sphere is about people's enthusiasm to pursue economic

development. Most people agree that economic reforms have brought immense wealth to China and drastically improved people's living standard, and they are eager to continue economic reforms to create greater wealth. The stakes for economic prosperity are so high that many opinion leaders would like to postpone the pursuit of democracy given that the current government has sustained a high level of economic performance. However, if the economy continues to go down to a point that most people no longer enjoy the living standards they are used to, the performance legitimacy of the government would be greatly undermined. This may create room for agitated citizens to form a broad alliance based on common economic interests.

More importantly, cross-cutting cleavages work against the formation of a united force only under the condition that people have the freedom to express pluralistic opinions and get the opportunity to learn about other people's concerns and objections. It is true that currently the Chinese public sphere is not organized as a united force to rebel against the state. But this status quo relies on the discursive sphere opened up after the state loosened its control in post-Mao China. If the state interferes by eliminating the room to air different views and begins to aggressively impose its preferences and ideologies onto everyone, this may ironically create a common grievance in the public sphere that potentially gives rise to a cross-cutting alliance.

As a matter of fact, the Chinese public sphere has undergone important structural changes in the past few years. Before the end of 2013, the public sphere was unprecedentedly vigorous, witnessing a few large-scale debates between liberals and *ziganwu*. People actively participated in online discussions and deliberated on their own agendas. Since 2014, while the state has tightened control over online speech and censored *both* liberals and *ziganwu*, left and right voices have gradually come together and obtained broad attention and support. In fall 2018 when the US-China trade war became heated, the masses vented their frustration against Hu Angang

(胡鞍钢), a professor at Tsing-hua University who advocated for the rejuvenation of China and claimed that China has completely surpassed America in terms of national power. People blamed Hu for misleading the government into the trade war and petitioned Tsing-hua to fire him. This was one of the most heated discussions in 2018. Participants, not only liberals but also *ziganwu* and ordinary citizens, were united in criticizing Hu's strong state theory. Later, in winter 2018, the government launched a crackdown on leftist students and workers engaged in an attempt to unionize Jasic Technology, a factory in Shenzhen. This crackdown provoked wide outrage and condemnation from Marxists and nationalists, as well as liberals and sympathetic citizens. So far, relations between the state and social elites, both leftists and rightists, have deteriorated. People with different ideologies have become gradually united.

In light of these incidents, a longitudinal analysis of public opinion is called for to address the dynamics between state control and the function of the public sphere. My future work will study how state intervention changes the structure and the nature of the public sphere by investigating online discussion across a long period.

THE DIMENSIONALITY OF IDEOLOGY

Another theoretical implication of this dissertation is the structure of the ideological spectrum. Since the heterogeneity and multiplicity of public opinion calls into question the validity of a one-dimensional ideological spectrum, this dissertation seeks to revisit the assumptions about the dimensionality of ideology. In particular, the findings of Chapter 4 (on liberal democracy) and five (on economic reforms) complement each other and jointly lead to a crucial insight: even when people manage to reach a consensus on *both* socioeconomic *and*

ideological goals, there is still an underlying cleavage between prioritizing socioeconomic/material concerns over pursuing ideological/nonmaterial goals.

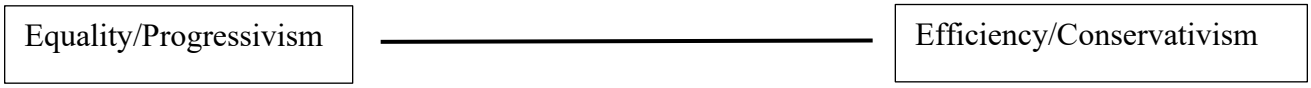
Some may draw on modernization theories to argue that this material/nonmaterial cleavage will disappear after economic growth satisfies people's material needs, and they will turn to pursue liberal values afterwards. However, even in developed countries, the recent changes in public opinion and the resurgence of conservatism and nationalism have posed a severe challenge to liberal values, as manifested by the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom and the flare-up of group divisions fanned by Trumpism in the United States. In other words, in most countries that still experience economic ups and downs, material needs still play and will continue to play a role in politics in the foreseeable future.

More importantly, the existence of this material/nonmaterial cleavage raises a long-ignored question for studying ideology: Given a few dimensions in the ideological model, is there a hierarchy or order of different dimensions? If people have a set of concerns and goals, which concern comes first and which goal matters more?

The common understanding of political ideologies prevalent in Western democracies often assumes a one-dimensional spectrum; that is, people are identified (or self-identify) as adherent to positions along a spectrum as leftists/liberals, centrists/moderates, or rightists/conservatives. The political left generally embrace values such as civil liberties, social progressivism, more government intervention in the economy, and social life (such as education and health care) with a goal of achieving equality. The political right commonly advocate for more traditional stands on social issues and less government intervention in the economy with a pursuit of higher efficiency and greater profits. In short, the point of divergence in ideology mainly lies in people's expectations for social and economic policies.

This one-dimensional spectrum can be illustrated in Figure 6-1.

Figure 6-1: A One-dimensional Model of Ideology



However, a hidden premise of this one-dimensional ideological spectrum is the existence of a universal consensus for the legitimacy of the political system, i.e., multi-party democracy in Western countries. In mature democracies, politicians and citizens mainly debate on specific socioeconomic goals and policies, but they rarely discuss alternatives to the current political system because people tend to recognize that democracy is "the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

Unlike Western democracies, a major concern of public discussion in China is the legitimacy of the political system; opinion leaders constantly debate the problems of the current system and ask what would be an ideal political system for China. This reminds us of a less-discussed ideological dimension in Western democracies—that is, people's ideas of what constitutes an ideal political system.

There are many ways to classify political systems. For example, political systems can diverge between rule by the majority and rule by elites, between democracy and autocracy, and between mainly pursuing procedural justice or substantive justice.

Let us take the example of procedural versus substantive justice. Procedural justice seeks fairness in the processes of decision making. It is believed that if the processes and rules are transparent and recognized by most people, people should abide by and respect the decisions and

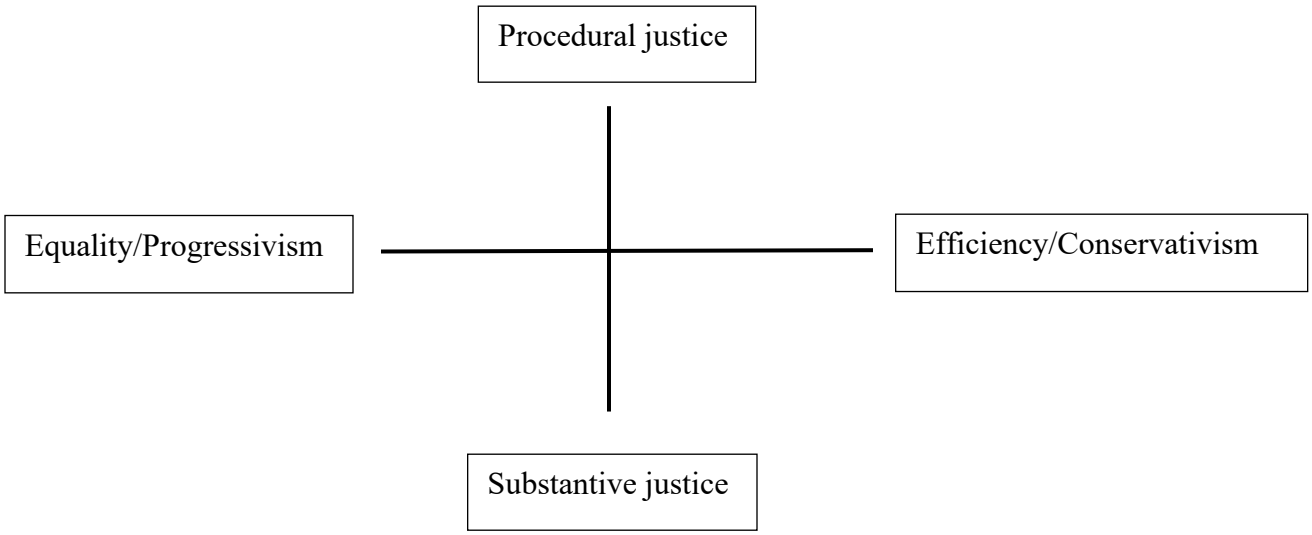
outcomes of these processes. Principles such as “rule of law” and “one-man, one-vote” are examples of procedural justice. Multi-party democracy is thus a political system that mainly pursues procedural justice.

Substantive justice seeks fairness in the outcomes of decision making such that the allocation of benefits/burdens and the resolution of conflicts should be substantively just in people’s eyes. In real life, outcomes being just and reasonable or not is mainly a judgement subject to personal experiences and interest; hence, the fairness of decisions can be justified by the legitimacy of the decision maker and the ruler. Socialism and communism are known as ideologies that pursue substantive justice.

In the case of China, constitutionalists argue that constitutionalism and rule of law is the only correct direction for China’s political development. They thus generally champion procedural justice. Others are more concerned about solving specific social problems in China and/or have a low level of faith in laws and procedures. They referred to famous criminal trials, such as the OJ Simpson murder case, to criticize the pursuit of procedural justice. Maoists, for instance, value substantive justice more. They demand absolute loyalty to socialism and the CCP, which guarantee justice in their eyes.

Accordingly, a two-dimensional ideological spectrum can be seen in Figure 6-2.

Figure 6-2: A Two-dimensional Model of Ideology



As such, public opinion can diverge along a socioeconomic dimension concerning the expected outcomes of socioeconomic policies (e.g., more equality or efficiency) and a political dimension concerning the nature of the political system (e.g., rule of law or rule by the CCP).

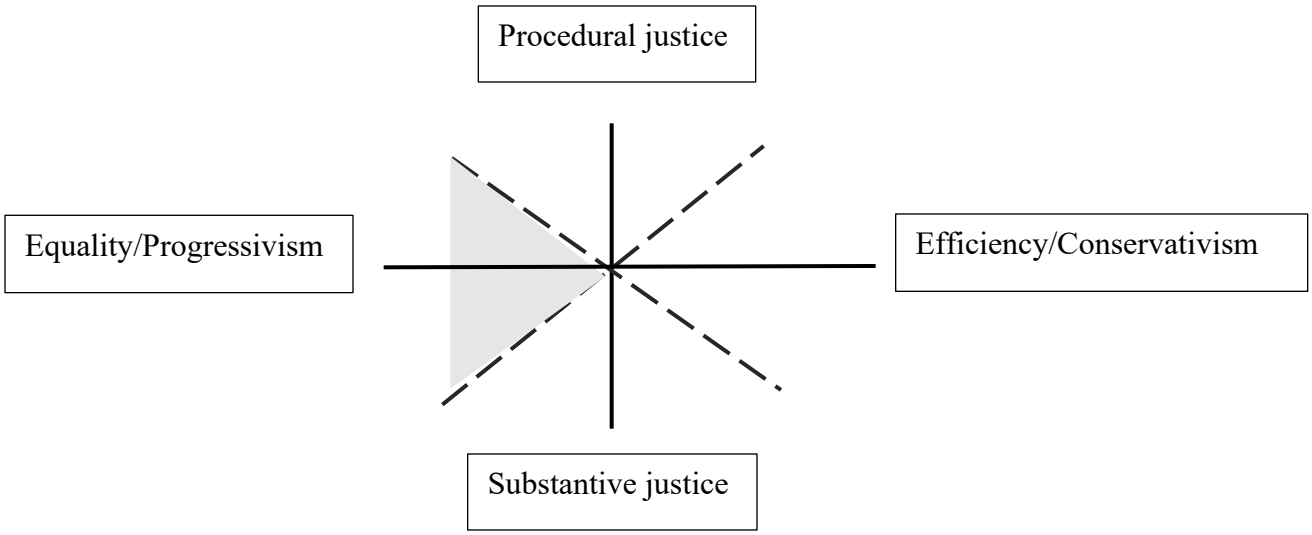
Note that this is just one of many possible classifications of ideology. Scholars tend to develop different models to characterize various opinions, and these models are justified as long as they are fit for specific research. No matter which dimensions are included, however, most scholars treat these dimensions as equally weighted. In other words, the assumption is that two or more dimensions are equally important for everyone.

However, people have different priorities in real life. We have seen, for instance, that constitutionalists in China discussed economic reforms and economic issues significantly less but spent most of their time advocating for constitutionalism. In their eyes, the root cause of all social problems was the lack of rule of law. Even among people who had the same preferences

on both socioeconomic policies and political systems, some thought that achieving socioeconomic goals was more important than pursuing a political ideal. Others deemed ideological pursuits a more fundamental and critical goal.

This scenario speaks to the existence of a hierarchy of different dimensions within the ideological model. This perspective brings attention to a long-neglected question: when people have various preferences along two or more ideological dimensions, which dimension matters the most for different people? This perspective urges us to revisit the common grouping of people based on a fixed belief system.

Figure 6-3: A Dynamic Model of Ideology



For instance, democracy supporters (particularly social democrats) and socialists are two distinct groups in China. They have contending opinions on what constitutes an ideal political system. However, the line between the two camps may become blurred if, for instance, some members of both groups see social equality as an ultimate goal to pursue and an end in itself, while different political systems are simply a means to achieve this socioeconomic goal. The

socioeconomic dimension thus matters more for these people, and, from a certain perspective, they may belong to the same ideological group, as shown in the gray area in Figure 6-3.

In the same vein, among democracy supporters in China, some may regard democracy as a means to solve social problems (e.g., instrumentalist democrats), while others may pursue democracy as an end in itself (e.g., fundamentalist democrats). This means-end cleavage is underlying the consensus for pursuing democracy. The broad heading of "democracy supporter" may subsume these important differences in people's political opinions.

As such, if we consider not only the specific dimensions of an ideological system but also the order/hierarchy of these dimensions, we may arrive at different conclusions for how to classify various opinions and how people cluster in the ideological sphere.

All this reminds us that a phenomenological perspective, an ideological model, or a belief system is not a rigid categorization that has unchanged ontological meanings. Rather, it is an ideal-typical construct that is embedded in specific historical contexts. Researchers should recognize the subjectivity of people and the variations in people's list of priorities. This way, we can truly grasp the plurality of public opinion and the ideological landscape of the public sphere.

APPENDIX

IDENTIFYING OPINION LEADERS

I first retained the top 5,000 users in the dataset sorted by follower count. Then I selected opinion leaders using the Chinese Opinion Leader Ranking released by *New Media,* a Chinese research institute studying social media. This ranking uses a Micro-Blog Communication Index (BCI) to measure both user productivity and popularity. The BCI index is formulated as:

$$BCI = (20\% * W1 + 80\% * W2) * 160,$$

where W1 is a measure of user productivity based on the number of original tweets the user produces:

$$W1 = 30\% * \log(\text{tweet count} + 1) + 70\% * \log(\text{original tweet count} + 1);$$

and W2 is a measure of user popularity based on the feedback the user receives:

$$W2 = 20\% * \log(\text{retweet count} + 1) + 20\% * \log(\text{comment count} + 1) + 25\% * \log(\text{original retweet count} + 1) + 25\% * \log(\text{original comment count} + 1) + 10\% * \log(\text{like count} + 1)$$

New Media issued ten publically accessible rankings in total. I combined the top 100 users of each issue and retained 311 non-repetitive names, most of which were already included in the top 5,000 list. However, most users in this long list (many are celebrities, marketing accounts, and brands) do not contribute to public discussions of political and social issues. I thus applied automated text analysis to look for people keen on politics. First, I selected twenty widely-acknowledged opinion leaders who often talk about politics, combined *all* their posts in 2013 as a document, and applied the TF-IDF statistic to identify the top 1,000 keywords of their speeches. TF-IDF is an abbreviation of Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency. It is a statistic widely used in text mining and information retrieval that combines two weightings: the

term frequency of a word in a document, and the inverse document frequency of this word. The latter helps to adjust for the fact that some words appear frequently in general but are less important than other rarer words.

Note that I included both left-leaning and right-leaning users who are famous political or social commentators according to my prior knowledge. Examples familiar to China scholars include, for example, liberal-leaning figures such as Ren Zhiqiang (任志强), Sun Liping (孙立平), Wuyue Sanren (五岳散人), Zuoyeben (作业本), and nationalistic commentators such as Sima Nan (司马南), Hu Xijin (胡锡进), Dai Xu (戴旭), and Cai Xiaoxin (蔡小心).

From the top 1,000 keywords of these key opinion leaders, I finally selected ninety-two politically related terms, as summarized in Table A-1. Then I matched the posts of all users in the long list with the ninety-two political words. For each user, I calculated the ratio of posts containing any of the political words to his or her total post count. Then, I selected users whoever had at least ten posts or 5 percent of all posts (whichever is less) containing any of these political words. I also complemented this measure with my local knowledge of Chinese opinion leaders. For instance, Han Han (*韩寒*), a Chinese cultural figure and opinion leader who was named one of the most influential people in the world by *Times*, did not post more than three politically related posts in 2013. But I still included him in the final list because he has been famous for being vocal on political and social issues, and he has a huge influence in China. Eventually, I compiled a list of 239 opinion leaders who were, in general, concerned about political and social issues.

Table A-1: Key Words Used to Identify Opinion Leaders

Chinese	English	Chinese	English
三中全会	Third Plenary Session	邓小平	Deng Xiaoping
军事	military	何兵	He Bing
军队	army	王立军	Wang Lijun
服贸	Taiwan–China service trade agreements	民主	democracy
美帝	Imperial America	宪政	constitutionalism
日本	Japan	社会主义	socialism
朝鲜	Korea	法治	the rule of law
香港	Hong Kong	爱国	patriotic
钓鱼岛	Diaoyu Islands	普世	universal values
台湾	Taiwan	人权	human rights
叙利亚	Syria	言论自由	freedom of speech
埃及	Egypt	禁言	banned post
中日	Sino-Japan	敏感	sensitive
苏联	Soviet Union	福利	welfare
习近平	Xi Jinping	民生	people's livelihood
毛泽东	Mao Zedong	文革	Cultural Revolution
毛主席	Chairman Mao	维权	rights protection
周永康	Zhou Yongkang	上访	petition
金正恩	Kim Jong-un	司法独立	judicial independence
袁裕来	Yuan Yulai	城管	law-enforcement officer
马英九	Ma Ying-jeou	腐败	corruption
薄熙来	Bo Xilai	污染	pollution
柴静	Chai Jing	环保	environmental protection
反腐	anti-corruption	体制	political system
谣言	rumour	言论	speech
贪官	corrupt officials	大国	great country
强拆	demolitions	运动	social movement
劳教	re-education through labour	民意	public opinion
删帖	censorship	意识形态	ideology
食品安全	food safety	执政	ruling (party/ruler)
医改	medical reform	政权	regime
贪污	corruption	货币	currency
公知	public intellectuals	经济	economy
五毛	Fifty-cents army	城镇化	urbanization

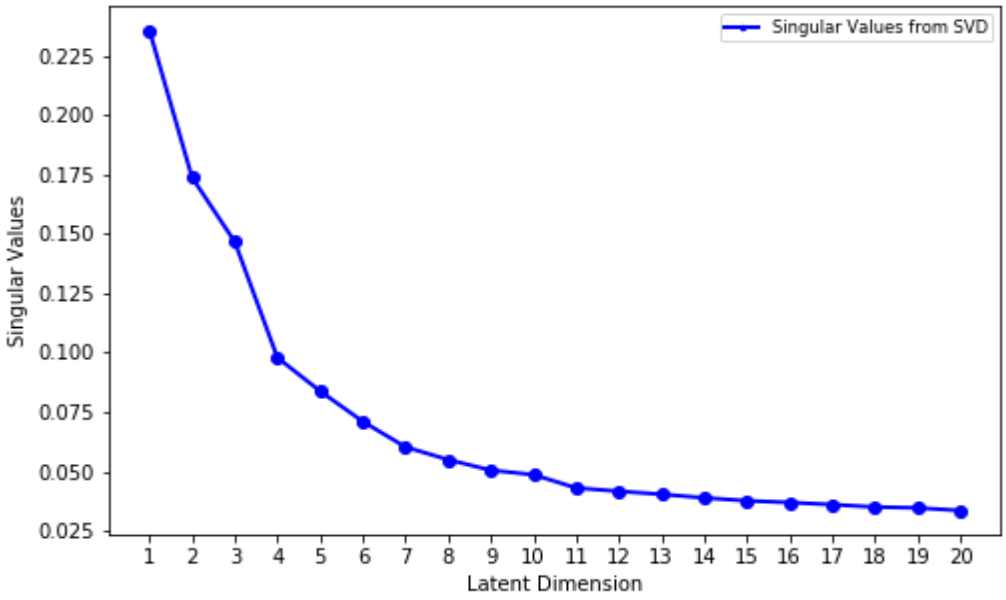
Table A-1: Key Words Used to Identify Opinion Leaders (continued)

Chinese	English	Chinese	English
二代	second generation	吴虹飞	Wu Hongfei
汉奸	traitor	秦火火	Qin Huohuo
敌人	enemy	立二拆四	Li'er Chaisi
富人	the rich	张雪忠	Zhang Xuezhong
精英	elite	夏业良	Xia Yeliang
左派	left wing	许志永	Xu Zhiyong
宪法	constitution	陈永洲	Chen Yongzhou
冤案	injustice	王功权	Wang Gongquan
立案	file a case	斯诺登	Snowdon
政治	politics	曼德拉	Mandela
公民	citizen	夏俊峰	Xia Junfeng
国人	compatriot	薛蛮子	Xue Manzi

CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS

I applied correspondence analysis (CA) to the adjacency matrix of the following ties between 239 opinion leaders and their 165,431 followers who followed at least twenty of the opinion leaders. I then focused on the first three dimensions as they are the most important dimensions accounting for the variance in the data. The scree plot below shows the eigenvalues of the latent dimensions identified by the CA method.

Figure A-1: Scree Plot—Importance of Each Dimension



It is worth noting that the CA method estimates the ideological stances of not only opinion leaders but also their followers. This estimate therefore can be easily scaled up to a larger population. After identifying the political stances of a seed population (i.e., opinion leaders and their loyal followers), we can infer more users' political values via their social networks with the seed population. This way, opinion leaders with diverging ideological profiles can serve as a good benchmark to measure the political values of other citizens even in the absence of party competition.

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