

A Longitudinal Inquiry into the Understanding of Democracy in China's Microblog-Based Public Sphere, 2009-2018¹

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I. Introduction: Why Did Social Media Fail to Bring Democratization to China?

Scholars interested in democracy have observed the growth of social media with much anticipation as they imagined it a potential source of free communication and democratization, particularly in authoritarian states. However, authoritarian regimes have proven themselves capable of maintaining their positions in the face of these new media technologies (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011; Lynch, 2011; MacKinnon, 2011; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). In many cases, authoritarian governments have used social media to *strengthen* their positions (Gayo-Avello, 2015; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). This research proposal examines how this has happened, focusing on China.

Research on politics and culture suggests two possible avenues by which authoritarian regimes might respond to the rise of social media. Scholars who emphasize the repressive actions of authoritarian states point to the ways by which governments can censor threatening ideas (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013, 2014) and punish those who express them. Yet, while this is clearly a resource for authoritarian governments, the existence of a repressive response cannot explain cases like China, in which opinions favoring authoritarian worldviews have strengthened. Furthermore, research on censorship in China has relied on short-term and case-based strategies; it has been unable to examine the extent to which repression produces resistance, rebellion, or critique at the level of public attitudes and beliefs (Chen, Zhang, &

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Wilson, 2013; Han, 2018; Roberts, 2018). For this reason, other scholars have focused on the hegemonic activities the state has pursued. These activities, mostly applied through non-coercive and constructive means, are designed to engage the public and change their beliefs about the nature of democracy (Gunitsky, 2015; Lewis, 2016). However, these scholars have also limited themselves to short-term analyses of specific cases, rather than a more longitudinal examination of the broader communication landscape.

By locating China's case in a global context, this project utilizes computer-assisted content analysis to explore the Chinese regime's appropriation of democratic values on social media. Data for this research comes from China's largest microblogging site, Weibo. All posts related to democracy from 2009 to 2018, sent by non-verified individual Weibo users and verified official Party and government Weibo accounts were collected. For comparison, I also included 1,000 Weibo posts on this topic which have been censored by Weibo. Time series analysis, topic modeling and semantic network analysis are applied to the collected data. The findings indicate that Chinese officials rely on more than just censorship in shaping the understanding of democracy on Weibo. This three-pronged approach consists of: 1) increasing the proportion, visibility, and impact level of official Party and government Weibo accounts so that authoritarian views are overrepresented; 2) censoring certain discussion topics pertaining to democracy (e.g., universal values, liberal democracy); 3) creating and promoting authoritarian discourse on democracy (e.g., the Core Socialist Values, nationalism and patriotism). This research shows how authoritarian regimes use constructive, non-coercive means to re-orient public attention in officially approved directions.

II. Authoritarian Resilience and the Ideological Battle in the Era of Social Media

1. Authoritarian Resilience: The Survival of Authoritarianism After the “Jasmine Revolution”

One of the most common criticisms of authoritarian countries is the lack of freedom of the press and freedom of speech, as “controlling information and public discourse has always been a cornerstone of authoritarian rule” (Kalathil, 2003). Most non-democratic countries have applied multiple means of information control, especially on issues related to politics and ideology. However, cracks have appeared. The spread of microblogging and other social media services has led to the proliferation of non-official news sources. This has bred an informal public sphere that challenges monopolistic voices in the public sphere (Jiang, Leeman, & Fu, 2016; Wang & Mark, 2016; G. Yang, 2009). Moreover, many cases have shown that microblogging sites can even serve as tools to facilitate democratization movements (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Papic & Noonan, 2011; Shirky, 2011). Many scholars have argued that the tight grips on authoritarian countries’ media landscapes will inevitably loosen, foretelling major political and social changes (G. Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2007). Or at least, they will allow for some degree of free public discussion (Jiang, 2010), or enable the public to hold the government accountable, either through supervision or collective resistance. (Noesselt, 2014). Indeed, in many authoritarian countries, social media did provide an avenue for government-citizen interaction, which has improved government transparency and civic engagement (Auer, Zhang, & Lee, 2014; Noesselt, 2014; Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014).

Yet, the promised political transformation at greater level has not occurred. Although more connections have been established at individual, community, national and international levels in the social media era, the citizens empowered by them have still failed to lead to any sustainable regime-level democratization (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). The recent scholarly literature on authoritarian resilience

continues to be driven by a conspicuous intellectual yearning to explain the failed political transformation after the “Jasmine Revolution.” Many cases show that certain authoritarian regimes have been stubbornly “resilient” in the face of the new challenges brought on by social media (Lewis, 2016; Shirky, 2011; Tufekci, 2017). In some cases, such as China, evidence has indicated that The CCP (CCP) has even strengthened, rather than undermined, its legitimacy and authoritarian regimes, by strategically using social media for ideological formation (Gunitsky, 2015; G. Yang, 2014). Social media may not necessarily serve as a democratization force, but as a resource that can be exploited by authoritarian regimes (Gayo-Avello, 2015; Han, 2018; Hassid, 2012; Hyun & Kim, 2015; Jiang, 2010).

2. China’s Ideological Battle and the Shaping of China’s Social-Media Based Public Sphere

Once microblogging was introduced to China in 2007, microblog-based public discussion started to threaten the party-state’s regime in many ways. The information gathered and circulated on microblogs was frequently cited by the public as challenging the authenticity of official media. At the same time, the discourse of the microblogging community began to confront the orthodox values defined by the authorities. Scholars have discovered that in the Chinese context, microblogs play a critical role in civic life, especially during major social and political events. In a series of mass incidents, microblogs have demonstrated their potential to challenge the regime and to mobilize civic engagement (J. Li & Rao, 2010; Qu, Huang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; H. Yang, 2010; Yu, Asur, & Huberman, 2011). Compared to the impairment of the monopoly of information, the Chinese authorities have become more concerned with another challenge brought by microblogs: the rise of liberal-leaning opinion leaders as a counter-hegemonic force in the online public sphere. The role of the opinion leaders is crucial in initiating public challenge to the authoritarian regime, as they frequently mobilize public discussions on significant social and political issues that trigger critique of authoritarian rule. The ideological position of the

opinion leaders can influence the opinions of their followers and shape public understanding of certain issues (Tong & Lei, 2013). Thus, the rise of liberal-leaning opinion leaders, who hold fundamentally different views on authoritarianism and dictatorship than do China's political regime, challenges the regime's legitimacy.

The CCP has extended its control over traditional media, which aims to secure the “ideological security,” of the social media sphere (Chan, 2003; Zhao, 2004; Hassid, 2008), yet the effectiveness of these methods in shaping social-media based discussion remains debated by scholars. Scholars who emphasize the *repressive actions* of the authoritarian state point to the ways that governments can censor threatening ideas and punish those who express these ideas. The large-scale information control action on Weibo was initiated by the application of the “real name policy” that mandates all microblog users register their real identities through a government-facilitated background check system. The following verification/classification system promoted by Weibo, which enables users to voluntarily show their registered identity to other users, divides users based on their verification status. These allow different management strategies to be applied²(Fu, Chan, & Chau, 2013). During the Xi administration, the authorities have declared an “ideological war”. At the institutional level, the first two years of the Xi administration witnessed a thorough reconfiguration of Internet governance, which aimed to establish a more efficient centralized institutional framework for information supervision and control (Creemers, 2017). For administrative strategies, the authorities strengthened the censorship to tighten control over the flow of information (King et al., 2014). Meanwhile, they have recruited a massive team of paid commentators, called the “fifty-cent army” (*wumao dang* 五毛党), to block, disturb or

² Usually, celebrities and intellectual and opinion leaders are more likely to verify themselves on Weibo than regular users. This is because it can benefit their personal branding. Meantime, those verified accounts with many followers are subject to stricter censorship and may be subject to additional surveillance by censors.

distract certain discussions (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017; Roberts, 2018). Microbloggers and opinion leaders who had previously criticized the regime and mobilized collective action are now facing a nationwide crackdown (Chin & Mozur, 2013). Yet, while this is clearly a resource that authoritarian governments use, the existence of a repressive response cannot explain cases like China, in which opinions favoring authoritarian worldviews have strengthened. Furthermore, the research on censorship in China has relied on short-term and case-based strategies, and they have been unable to examine the extent to which repression produces resistance, rebellion, or critique at the level of public attitudes and beliefs (Chen et al., 2013; Han, 2018; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015; Roberts, 2018). For this reason, other scholars have focused more on the *hegemonic activities* that the state has pursued. Many research noticed that officials have become increasingly present on Weibo in promoting authoritarian values (Ma, 2014; Sullivan, 2014). By incorporating and converting the existing opinion leaders (Lei, 2017; A. Li, 2013) and by producing their own official opinion leaders, the Communist Party can better defend the official ideology. These are designed to engage the public and change their beliefs about the nature of democracy (Gunitsky, 2015; Lewis, 2016). However, these scholars have also limited themselves to short-term analyses of specific cases, rather than a longitudinal examination of the broader communication landscape.

This research suggests taking a longitudinal, meaning-centric approach in evaluating the effectiveness and the impact of China's social media control. I argue that since discourse on democracy is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of China's authoritarian regime, the means of social media control, such as the information (facts, frames, opinions, discourses, and narratives) filtering and censorship, the repression of non-official opinion leaders and the promotion of official opinion leaders, each serve as leverage to maintain the authoritarian regime's legitimacy. The particular strategies may vary from one incident to another, and the

official institutions and regulations related to social media management may differ from one administration to another. However, underpinning these diverse efforts is a consistent aim to foster a powerful authoritarian ideology that will contribute to the legitimacy and stability of the communist party-state. By limiting the dimension of discussion of democracy through repressive means while providing alternative discourses on democracy via constructive means, the authoritarian regime shapes public understanding of the issue. In this way, they will still follow officials' constructive leads, mirroring official opinion, rather than developing the alternative views. This is despite the fact that Weibo users are aware of the party-state's repressive means (e.g., censorship). From this perspective, censorship should not be regarded as a retroactive means to block discussion, but a proactive effort to re-orient public discussion. In the same vein, the influence of the "occupy Weibo" strategy – to increase and overrepresent official Party and government Weibo users' opinions – should be examined based on its effectiveness in developing authoritarian discourse on democracy.

By taking this meaning-centric view, this research examines the effectiveness and influence of China's social media control strategies, both before and during the Xi administration. Specifically, this study compares the topics and discourses used by official Party and government Weibo accounts with those of individual Weibo users in discussing democracy. In doing so, it explores how are they different, and trends both before and after the "Jasmine Revolution" of 2011, and the declaration of "ideological war" during the Xi administration.

RQ 1: How has the pro-democracy wave initiated by the "Jasmine Revolution" and the Xi administration's "Declaration of Ideological War" impacted the topics and discourses used on Weibo in discussing democracy?

RQ 1.1 What topics and discourses were used most by non-verified individual Weibo users and official Party and government Weibo users in discussing democracy before

and after the pro-democracy wave initiated by the “Jasmine Revolution?” How have these topics and discourses changed during the Xi administration?

RQ 1.2 What topics and discourses have been most frequently censored in discussing democracy during the Xi administration?

RQ 2: Have the public discussion on democracy during the “Ideological War” been influenced by the official discourse that promoted by the CCP? If so, how?

III. Data and Method

By taking data mining and comparison on online discourses that approved/censored by the authority, this study is intended to explore the culture-producing process of the Sinicized ideas of democracy.

1. Data Collection

The data was gathered from two sources, Weibo and FreeWeibo. Weibo is China's largest microblogging website. FreeWeibo is a site that archives Weibo posts that have been censored and deleted by the Chinese authorities³. All available posts from these two sources with the keyword “democracy” were captured with an automated web scraper. The complete dataset consists of 1,335,781 microblog posts from Weibo, dated from 2009 to 2018, and 1,000 posts from FreeWeibo, from 2014 to 2018. For each Weibo post, I collected its content, the poster's user ID, the poster's identity information, date and time posted, number of comments under the post, number of reposts by other users, and number of “likes” from other

³ FreeWeibo gathers data both directly from Sina Weibo and from WeiboScope, a service launched by the University of Hong Kong to track censored posts on Sina Weibo. Although FreeWeibo only contains a tiny proportion of censored Weibo posts, it is still a useful resource for comparing officially-approved and censored discourse.

users. Similar information was also collected for the censored posts, with the exception of the number of comments, reposts and “likes”, which were not available in this dataset.

All text data were firstly cleaned and standardized by removing irrelevant symbols, extra spaces and special characters, then correcting spelling mistakes and reducing the repetitive characters. To compare the officially developed discourse and the public discourse on democracy before and during the Xi administration, the text data were separated into five groups. The data extracted from Weibo are classified into four groups, based on poster identity (official Party and government Weibo user or non-verified individual Weibo user), and the period the post was sent (during the Hu administration or the current Xi administration). The posts extracted from FreeWeibo were all sent after 2014, so they are kept as one group. After that, the following computer-assisted data mining are applied to compare the features of these five groups:

- 1) Weibo posts sent by official Party and government Weibo users during the Hu Administration (08/2011-03/2013);
- 2) Weibo posts sent by official Party and government Weibo users during the Xi administration (04/2013-04/2018);
- 3) Weibo posts sent by non-verified individual Weibo users during the Hu Administration (08/2011-03/2013);
- 4) Weibo posts sent by non-verified individual Weibo users during the Xi Administration (04/2013-04/2018);
- 5) Weibo posts that have been blocked by the microblogging site during the Xi Administration (10/2014-06/2018).

2. Data Analysis: Topic Modeling and Semantic Network with Probabilistic Latent Semantic Analysis

Self-created R and Python software are used for the computer-assisted content analysis. Unlike conventional content analysis approaches, computer-assisted text analysis makes it possible for researchers to explore a massive corpus of text in a short time. This is ideal for analyzing data collected from social media. Also, since all data are processed automatically under a customized program, the results are more objective than had they come from a manual coding process. Moreover, programs may discover topics that human researchers could have missed (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003; Quinn, Monroe, Colaresi, Crespin, & Radev, 2010; Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014).

Topic modeling is an efficient way to summarize large text files. It has been used widely to analyze media content (Hong & Davison, 2010; Mueller & Rauh, 2018; Zhao et al., 2011). I have developed a topic model tailored to summarizing the content of Weibo posts. It is based on the sender's identity – either sent by official Party and government account or non-verified individual user, and by the period it was sent – sent during either the Hu administration or the Xi administration. I utilize the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a probabilistic topic modeling strategy, for detecting topics in the target text (Blei et al., 2003) to generate quantitative summaries of the Weibo posts. The LDA algorithm assumes that the corpus of texts (the Weibo posts) consists of various topics. Topics are further structured by words. So if we can detect the pattern of word combinations through an algorithm, then we can then use it to reveal the underlying topic. For example, Weibo posts using a word combination including “Taiwan”, “voting”, “election”, “President”, “Tsai Ing-wen”, and “Unification” are likely related to the topic of “Taiwan politics”. If we can detect that a large proportion of Weibo posts are using this combination of words, we may conclude that this topic is salient. By summarizing the topics discussed during different periods, topic modeling

helps explore how the discussion themes evolve over time. It can also extrapolate how they have been influenced by certain social or political events. This enables me to contrast the themes emphasized by the officials with those of the individuals who have been censored. In this way, I can explore how each group engages in the discussion based on their background, and what topics are more likely to be censored.

The results of the topic modeling are explored through semantic network analysis. The technical premise of the semantic network is that when the corpus of texts (in this research, the Weibo posts) is decomposed into terms, we can use the terms as nodes to picture a graph structured by the co-occurrence and relationships between them (Griffiths, Steyvers, & Tenenbaum, 2007; van Atteveldt, 2008). Different from topic modeling which only reveals the topics within texts, a semantic network can provide a structured “distant reading” between terms, which may not only identify unexpected content for detailed review, but also help to explore the interrelationship between topics. By using semantic network analysis, this research can explore how each group develops their selected topics. It can also elucidate the relationships between these topics. A text mining software, PolyAnalyst, was used for the content analysis. Its computational technique is based on the probabilistic latent semantic analysis (PLSA), a machine learning text clustering algorithm for the analysis of co-occurrence data, which enables unsupervised topic modeling for large bodies of texts to discover the "hidden structure." Firstly, a key-word extraction function was used to generate a term-frequency list that based on three factors: significance, support, and frequency. The significance is calculated on a scale of 0.00 to 99.00. It represents how distinct a particular keyword is for all texts in the column being explored. Certain keywords stand out, not due to frequency, but because the word occurs more frequently in the given text than average. The greater the significance, the greater the chance that the concepts in the investigated data revolve around such a word. Support indicates the number of different records containing the

keyword. Frequency simply means the number of times the keyword appears in the data.

After that, I ran a term link function that using PLSA model on the resulting data and generated a diagram mapping the topic clusters that stand out in the given text document.

Compare to the traditional approach of content analysis, computer-assisted text analysis makes it possible for researchers to explore extremely large text corpuses in a relatively short time, which is ideal for analyzing big data collected from social media. Besides, since all data were processed automatically under a designed program, the result is more objective than that comes from the manual coding process. What's more, because programs are operated automatically, they may discover topics that human researchers may otherwise miss (Quinn et al. 2010; Riffe, Fico, and Lacy 2014).

IV. Findings

1. Officials' "Occupy Weibo" Strategy and the Shaping of the Microblog Posting Activity

A well-established civil society should enable citizens to develop and elaborate their political discussions in a steady and progressive way. The discussion on democracy has been facilitated by the popularity of social media, especially in China, where social media also serve as a platform for information that is less likely to be circulated on the strictly restricted traditional media. After the revolutionary wave of Democracy Spring in North Africa and the Middle East that began on December 2010, followed by a series of pro-democracy protests in China from February to March 2011, the number of discussions on democracy has rocketed. The primer effect of these pro-democracy activities continued as the number of Weibo posts that related to democracy remained at a high level thereafter. Before 2011, the monthly average of Weibo posts on democracy was 601.41. Yet between January 2011 to March

2013, which is the period right after the Arab Spring but before the current administration got elected, the monthly average increased to 14729.19, which is 24 times higher than that during its previous phase.

If consider the period between January 2011 to March 2013 as the second phase of political discussion on democracy, we can easily tell from Figure 1 that although the monthly average during this phase was pretty high, it fluctuated frequently during some certain months, especially between April to June and December in 2012. The significant drop of Weibo post numbers was not usual, as the discussion on democracy was remarkably stable during the rest of the months in this phase. The possible explanation for this unexpected variation was political intervention. Started from February to late July 2012, one of China's most prominent political scandal Bo Xilai Scandal⁴, as well as the political battles it involved, were in their full swings. All discussions on politically related topics were under strict censorship. Furthermore, from 31 March to 2 April 2012, the comment function of Sina Weibo was shut down for three days by the officials for the reason of “rumors and illegal, destructive information” control. The second drop of Weibo posts was seen in December 2012, which might be impacted by the informal announcement on Xi Jinping's election. On 15 November 2012, Xi Jinping was elected to the post of General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission by the 18th Central Committee of the CCP, which can be seen as an official indication for his top-leader position, but the message was conveyed in an informal way.

The third phase was started by Xi's formal election as the Chairman of the People's Republic of China on 14 March 2013, in a confirmation vote by the 12th National People's

⁴ Bo Xilai, the former Communist Party chief in Chongqing, who was once seen as a high-flyer tipped for top office, was ejected from the Communist Party and under prosecution. His wife was given a suspended death sentence for the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood last year.

Congress in Beijing. This election also signals the begin of the current administration in China. The new administration was more politically conservative. After Xi's term began, the Chinese authorities declared the "ideological way" by initiating the "occupy Weibo" strategy – increasing and overrepresenting official Party and government Weibo users' opinions. This was done to strengthen control over public opinion. With legal, administrative and repressive intervention, the monthly average on democracy start to decrease steadily over the following years, from 19,519 on April 2013 to 9,385 on March 2017. Overall, preliminary findings show that from 2009 to 2018, officials have become more engaged in public discussion on democracy. Meanwhile, although Weibo's total active user count continues to increase, Weibo posts on democracy have decreased and have remained low. This trend indicates that the officials' strategy has limited the scope of public discussion on democracy.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Weibo posts sent by official Party and government accounts receive more comments, get more reposts and receive more "likes" than posts sent by individual users. This indicates that although the officials hold fewer accounts than individual users, they receive more attention and trigger more interaction. Therefore, they are more likely to be opinion leaders in the microblogging sphere.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

2. The Creation and Promotion of the Authoritarian Discourses on Democracy

1) The Change of Discussion Topics on Democracy

The definition of democracy is subject to change and interpretation. By comparing the development of discussion topics on democracy during the Hu administration with that of the Xi administration through topic modeling, preliminary findings have revealed how the Chinese regime have appropriated democratic values and shaped public discussion of democracy. Figure 3 shows that, during the Xi Administration, the Chinese regime managed to shape the public discussion related to democracy through a comprehensive approach that combined repressive and hegemonic means.

Censoring certain discussion topics that beyond the official's track, including those pertaining to democracy (e.g., liberal democratic values), having the potential to mobilize civil movements (e.g., social events, citizen rights) and those may lead to political unrest (e.g., international democratizing movement, the role of the CCP, other political parties in China). As a result, after transiting to the Xi Administration, those topics can only be seen in censored Weibo posts. In Figure 3, those topics have been colored in blue.

Taking the “ideological battle position” on Weibo by dominating the discussion realms that are central to democracy and democratization, including the fundamental values and concepts of democracy (e.g., “values and concepts of democracy”, “Chinese society and history”) and the legitimacy and organization of political parties in China (e.g., “the CCP and other Political Parties”). These blocks are colored in orange in Figure 3. Within these realms, the authoritarian discourses (e.g., the Core Socialist Values, nationalism and patriotism) were widely promoted by the official Party and government Weibo accounts to re-orient the public understanding, so that opinions favoring authoritarian worldviews can be fostered. As a result, the allowed discussion topics in these realms started to mirror the official's tone. In Figure 3, those topics are colored in red.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

The overall topics on democracy discussed by individual users have been confined and narrowed during the Xi Administration. Moreover, as the discussion of certain topics, such as the values and concepts of democracy, has been dominated by the official mouthpiece (while opponents are excluded), individual Weibo users have begun adopting the authoritarian discourse, such as the “Core Socialist Values” in discussing democracy. This result indicates that the authorities’ ideological work has been successful. It shows that by limiting the dimensions of discussions on democracy through repressive means, while providing alternative discourses on democracy via constructive means, the authoritarian regime shapes public understanding of this concept. In this way, even though Weibo users are aware of the party-state’s repressive means (e.g., censorship), they will still mirror the officials. But still, this finding needs further examination via semantic network analysis and manual coding.

2) The Redefinition and Appropriation of the Discourses on Democracy

a. Discourse on Democracy During the Hu Administration

As discussed in the former literature, the global norm of democracy may threaten the govern of authoritarian countries by shaking its legitimacy. The authoritarian countries have to either persuade the public that current political system is better than the democratic one or defend themselves by describing their political system as a democratic one. In the Chinese case, the officials seem to prefer the latter one. In order to achieve the legitimacy through the appropriation of the ideas of democracy in the Chinese context, officials tried to repacking and incorporating the selective ideas of democracy with their current political discourse, such as socialism, Confucianism, and the Chinese characteristics. It requires the official to develop a comprehensive value system to execute such redefinition – appropriation design, which can be discovered in the following content analysis result.

Before the The Xi Administration, the very few official Party and government accounts on Weibo rarely engaged in the discussion on democracy. Among these posts, four major narrative clusters emerged from the calculation of the tension⁵ among terms:

- i. The democracy in other countries and regions, such as in the U.S., Korea and Burma;
- ii. Current social issues that are related to democracy, generally on culture, legal institutions and economics;
- iii. The history of China's modern democratic revolutionary.
- iv. Party building affairs, mostly focused on the establishment of equal and healthy relationship among the Party members;

The discussion on democracy was very vague, without giving a precise definition to China's democracy. The officials were trying to avoid detailed or in-depth deliberation on the application of democracy in contemporary China. See figure 4 for details.

During the same period, the discussion on democracy led by non-verified individual Weibo users was more diverse and comprehensive. Figure 5 shows the major narrative clusters used by such discussion. As it reveals, the point non-verified individual users focused include:

- i. The democracy in other countries and regions. It not only includes that in the U.S. and Burma, which also covered by official Party and government accounts, but also include the democratic politics in Taiwan, Japan and Libya. The discussion also compared the socialism and capitalism, aiming to explore the

⁵ In this research, term links that calculated through PLSA was used to generate narrative clusters. Tension is calculated as a logarithm of the probability value of a relation between two terms. A higher tension means that a relation is more significant.

feasibility of democratic politics in different political regimes all around the world.

- ii. Current social issues that are related to democracy. Still, the coverage of this topic led by uncertified individuals is more broad and diverse than that conducted by organizations. It discussed the relationship between democratic values and the Chinese characteristics, China's society, political regimes and legal institutions, economics, culture, government, nationality, citizenship, and dictatorship. Some of the contents are supposed to be blocked if published on traditional media platforms.
- iii. The history of China and the unsolved problems it left.
- iv. Knowledge, concepts and definitions that related to democracy, such as universal values, interest groups. People also discussed a famous book about democracy in the United States, titled *Details of Democracy*, authored by Liu Yu, who was a politics lecturer at the University of Cambridge in England at that time.

In general, the ordinary users were bolder in adopting the western concept of democracy, the discussions were more diverse and detailed than the official counterparts. The ordinary users were more likely to start a broader discussion on democracy in different political regimes, either in Eastern or Western, socialist or capitalist society. The problems they tried to figure out in the discussion are more empirical based.

b. Discourse on Democracy During the Xi Administration

For the discussion initiated by official Party and government accounts on Weibo, not only its total number but also its the level of diversity and sophistication have been largely

improved during the recent years. Figure 4 shows the narrative clusters that calculated based on the term links:

- i. The democracy in other countries and regions. It only included the case in the U.S., which means the discussion on this topic has been narrowed compare to that in the previous period.
- ii. Current social issues that are related to democracy. The focus on this issue has been expanded to more detailed administrative issues, including the administrative services at city and village level.
- iii. The history of China's democratic revolution. The former discourses under this topic has been incorporated into a large category that consisted of some newly developed genres. One of the biggest cultural project initiated by The Xi Administration from 2013 is the promotion of "the China Dream (中国梦)", a term within Chinese socialist thought that describes the "strong-nation dream of a great revival of the Chinese people". The democratic revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese characteristics and the governing of the CCP have been combined as the only way Chinese people should take in order to achieve the great revival.
- iv. Another value system that was newly developed during The Xi Administration that related to democracy was China's 'Core Socialist Values'. It consists with national goals of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; social goals of freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law; and individual values of patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. It was ordered by top officials that almost every sector of society, such as schools, all kinds of media platform, social organizations or even business communities, should promote such value

system. Here, ideas of democracy have been simplified and incorporated into a part of the CCP's administration, which supposed to lead the revival of China.

- v. The Party building was another prominent project led by The Xi Administration, where the officials are trying to redefine and appropriate the ideas of democracy in order to develop their own political discourse that can strengthen the legitimacy of governing. Here, democracy was explained as the vibrant relationship among the Party members and the strengthen of leadership among top Party leaders, which is also regarded as intra-party democracy.

While we can easily notice how the political transition shaped the development of discourses of democracy used by official organizations in recent years, it is relatively difficult to tell the difference of discourses used by non-verified individual users between the previous time period and the current period. Below are the topics that have been involved in the discussion on democracy given by ordinary users during the Xi Administration (See Figure 5):

- i. The democracy in other countries and regions. As that in the previous period, the discussion narratives used for this topic includes the democracy in the U.S., Taiwan, Japan. The only difference was the add of Iraq.
- ii. Current social issues that are related to democracy. Still, the coverage of this topic included the discussion on the relationship between democratic values and the Chinese characteristics, China's society, economics, culture, government, nationality, citizenship. Although most discussions were the same as that in last time period, the scope of discussion has been narrowed down as some politically sensitive key terms, such as political regimes, legal institutions and dictatorship, have been eliminated.

- iii. The discussion on the history of China and the unsolved problems it left has no longer existed. Instead, the non-verified individual users started to adopt the newly developed official tongue on democracy – the ‘Core Socialist Values’. Here, democracy has been connected with the CCP’s govern, associated with other values such as integrity, the rule of law and civility.
- iv. Knowledge, concepts and definitions that related to democracy, such as universal values, interest groups. People also discussed a famous book about democracy in the United States, titled *Details of Democracy*, authored by Liu Yu, who was a politics lecturer at the University of Cambridge in England at that time.
- v. The discourses of democracy related to the Party building. As a national major project, the Party building activities have been implemented at different social aspects, and therefore, individual’s life was inevitably influenced by such movement. The post sent by uncertified individuals discussing democracy also adopted some discourse from the Party building movement, include ‘the mass line’, a term described the campaign of "purification" of the Party.

By comparing the development of discourses on democracy over the two periods, 2009-2012 and 2013-2017, it is evident that the CCP has made a significant investment in developing a comprehensive, sophisticated value system that could redefine democracy and make it fit into the Chinese context. Here, democracy is no longer a concept from western society, but a value that being promoted and implemented by the Party. At the same time, the discourses used by the public has been confined and narrowed. The content analysis result of uncertified individuals' posts showed such newly developed discourse has already been adopted by the public when discussing democracy, which means such strategy has been succeeded.

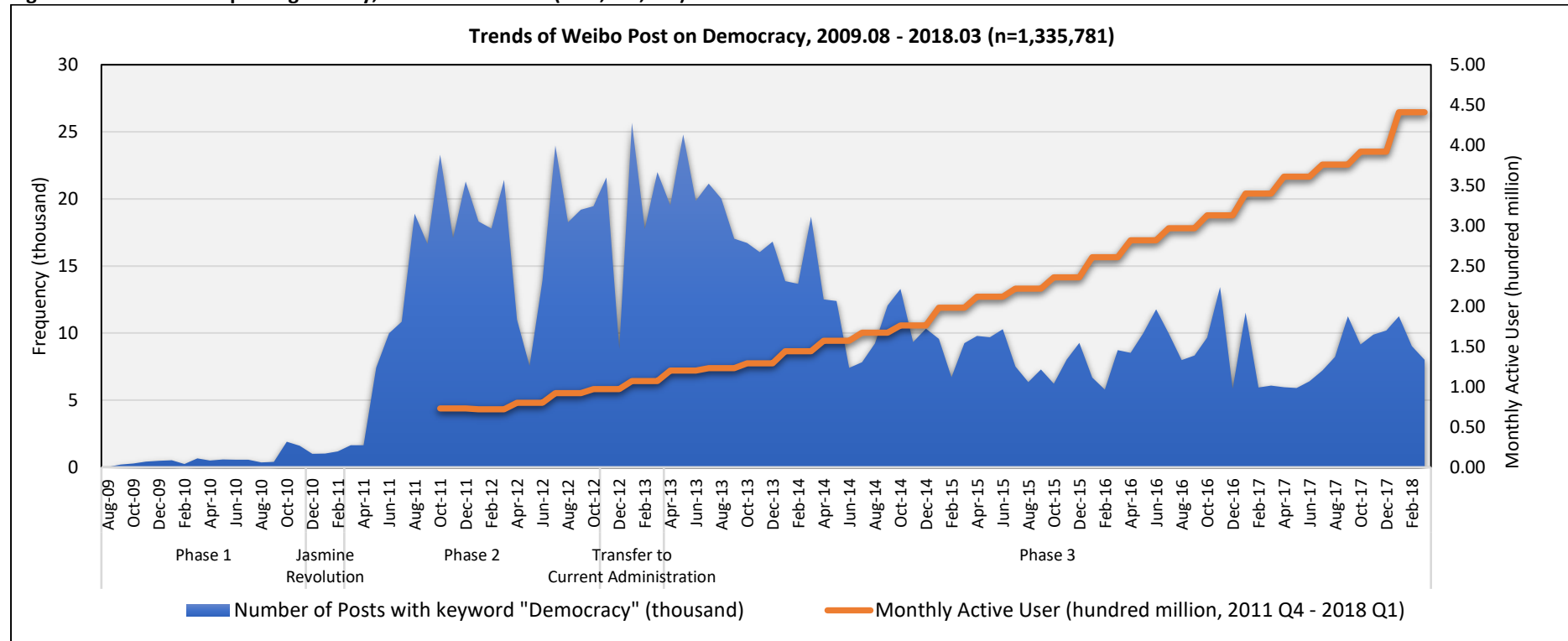
V. Conclusion

Scholars interested in democracy have observed the growth of social media with much anticipation as they imagined it a potential source of free communication and democratization, particularly in authoritarian states. However, in many cases, authoritarian governments were able to maintain or even used social media to strengthen their positions. This research proposal examines how this has happened, focusing on China, and try to reveal how the authoritarian regimes survived the ideological crisis in the social media era through the combination of repressive/coercive and hegemonic/non-coercive media control strategies. To be specific, I addressed two main questions: 1) How has the pro-democracy wave initiated by the “Jasmine Revolution” and the Xi administration’s “Declaration of Ideological War” impacted discussion on democracy in China’s microblog-based public sphere? 2) Who is winning the ideological battle between the officials and the public?

I address these questions by conducting a longitudinal analysis on all microblog posts with the keyword “democracy” from August 2009 to March 2018 (estimated $n=1,335,781$) and contents that have been censored (estimated $n=1,000$). Self-created R and Python software were used for topic modeling and semantic network analysis. The topic modeling and semantic network analysis enabled me to answer the first question by contrasting the themes emphasized by the officials with ordinary microbloggers and those of the individuals who have been censored. For the second question, I evaluated whether the individual user’s discussions on democracy has been influenced by the official discourse through the content similarity analysis. The preliminary finding indicates that the Chinese regime is successful in shaping the public understanding of democracy by providing the authoritarian discourses on democracy through hegemonic means. Even though Chinese microbloggers are aware of the party-state’s repressive means (e.g., censorship), they will still mirror the officials’ opinion.

Different from the common knowledge that emphasizes the importance of the repressive means in shaping authoritarian countries' public sphere, this research sheds light on the puzzle of authoritarian resilience by showing the potential for using non-coercive means to re-orient public attention in officially approved directions. Although focus on the Chinese case, this research could also contribute to the comparative media and institutional studies in other authoritarian regimes and Western contexts. From the methodological perspective, this research used an innovative longitudinal big-data analysis, rather than the commonly used short-termed, case-based analysis, to assess the effectiveness of China's overall social media control strategy. It may also provide a practical methodological tool for assessing the effects of authoritarian regime's information control on social media.

Figure 1: Time series of posting activity, 2009.08 - 2018.03 (n= 1,335,781)*



Phase 1: August 2009 to November 2010. Hu administration – pre - “Jasmine Revolution”

Phase 2: April 2011 to October 2012. Hu administration – post - “Jasmine Revolution”

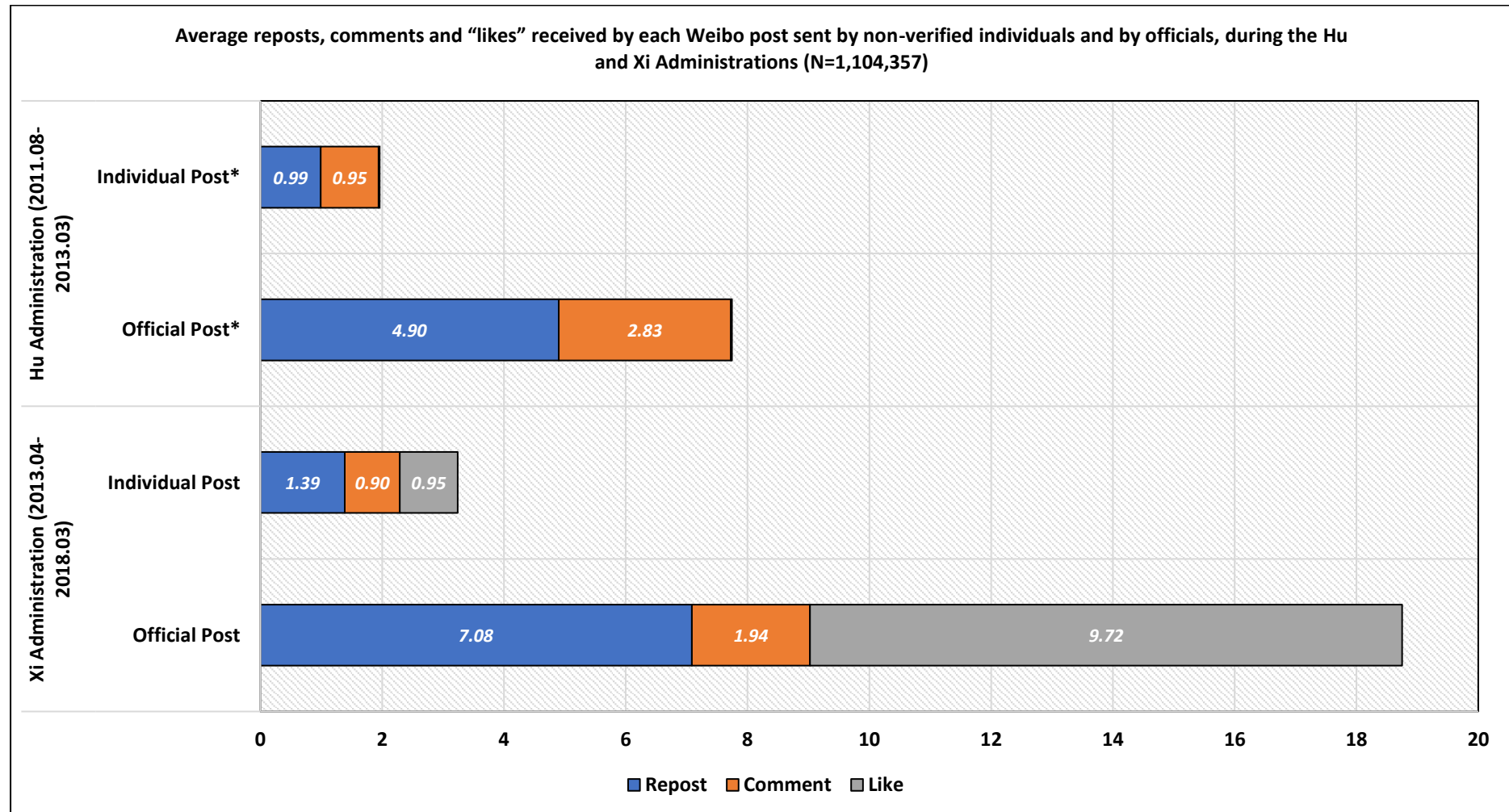
Phase 3: April 2013 to March 2018. Xi administration

* Possible explanations for the two drops during phase 2 and the transfer period:

The first drop occurred from April to May 2012 possibly because of China's biggest political crisis – the Bo Xilai Scandal – which erupted from March to October 2012. From March 31 to April 2, 2012, the comment function on Sina Weibo was disabled by officials because of “rumors and illegal, destructive information” control. Functionality resumed soon after this unexpected shutdown, but its impact continued and may have contributed to the ensuing decline in microblog posts.

The second drop in Weibo posts occurred in December 2012. It may have been related to the informal announcement of Xi Jinping's election. On November 15, 2012, Xi Jinping became the de facto leader of the state – he was elected to the post of General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission by the 18th Central Committee of the CCP. This can be seen as the official proclamation of his paramount leadership position. However, this message was conveyed informally.

Figure 2: Average reposts, comments and “likes” received by each Weibo post sent by non-verified individuals and by officials, during the Hu and Xi Administrations (N=1,104,357)

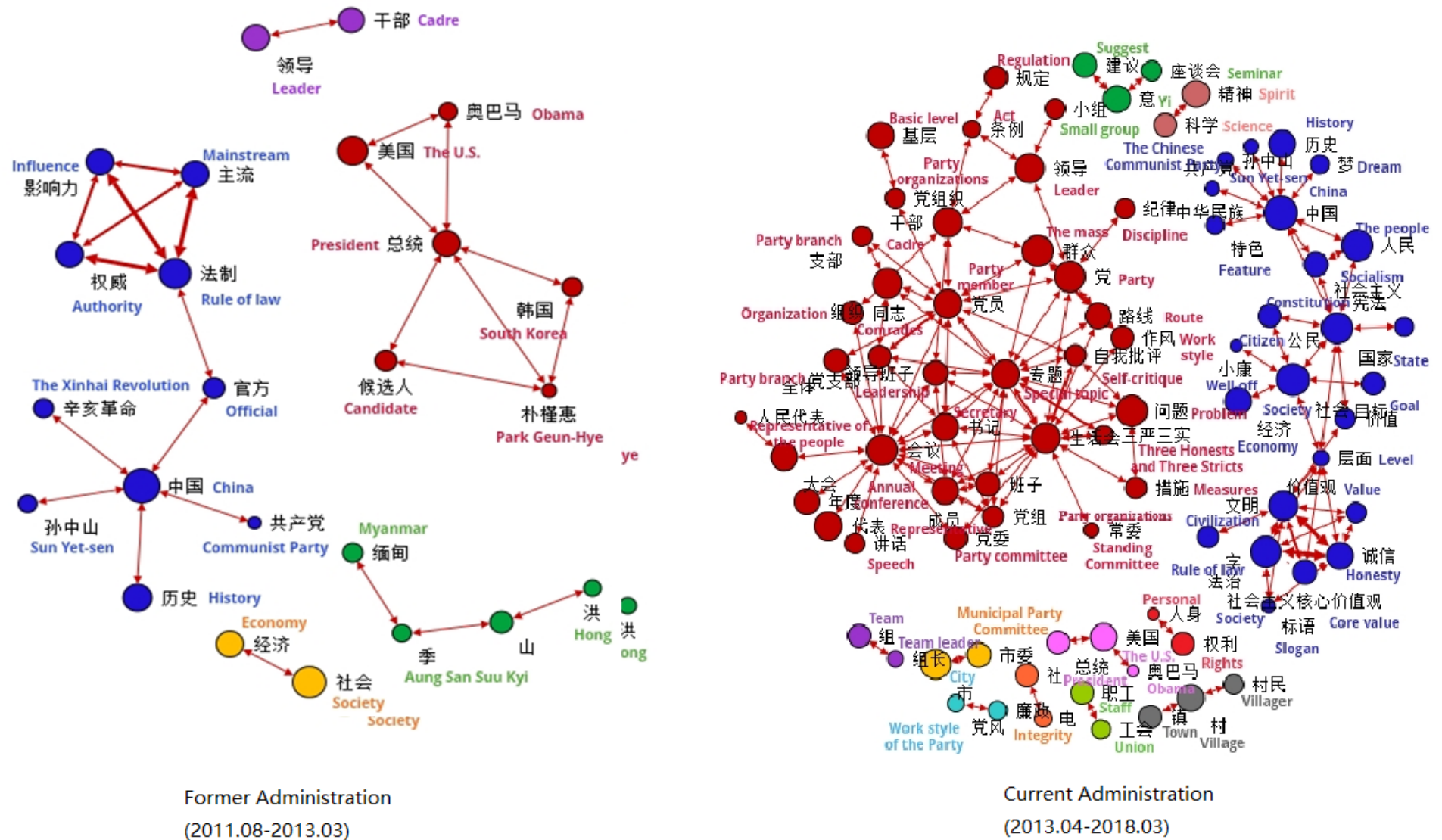


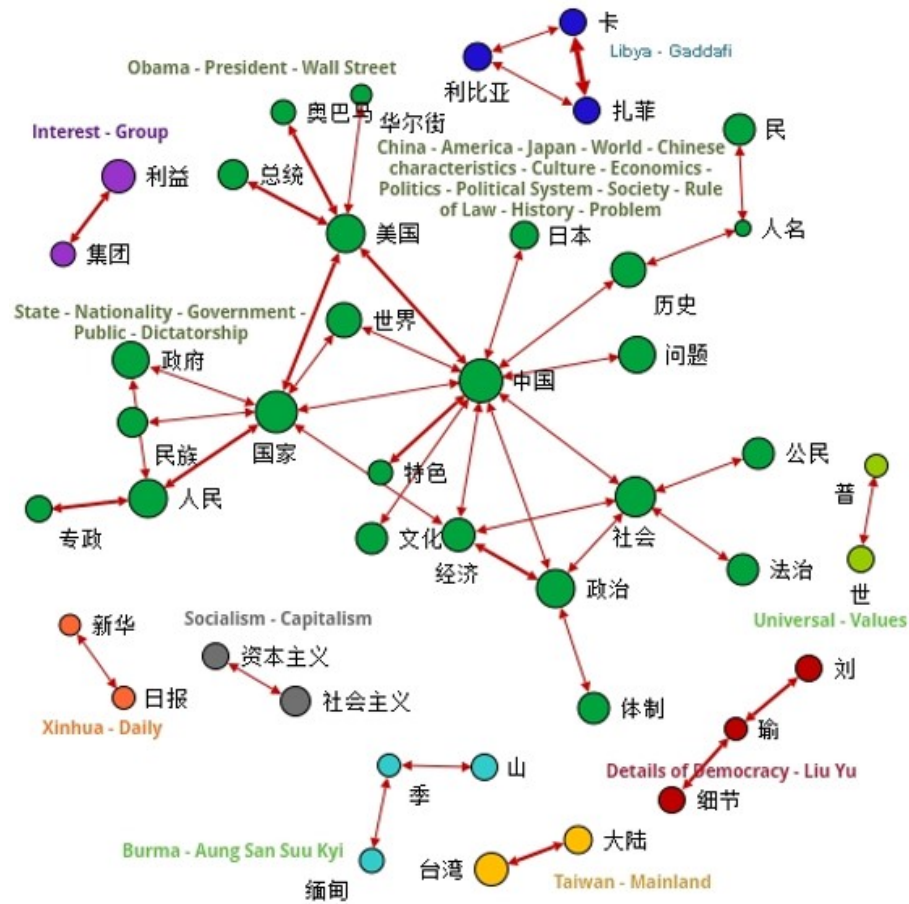
* The “Like” function was firstly introduced to Weibo in 2012, and therefore the average of “likes” received by official and individual post during the Hu Administration (before March 2013) were significantly lower than that during the Xi Administration.

Figure 3. Weibo-based discussion topics on democracy (generated from the Topic Modeling results), by sender identity and administration period

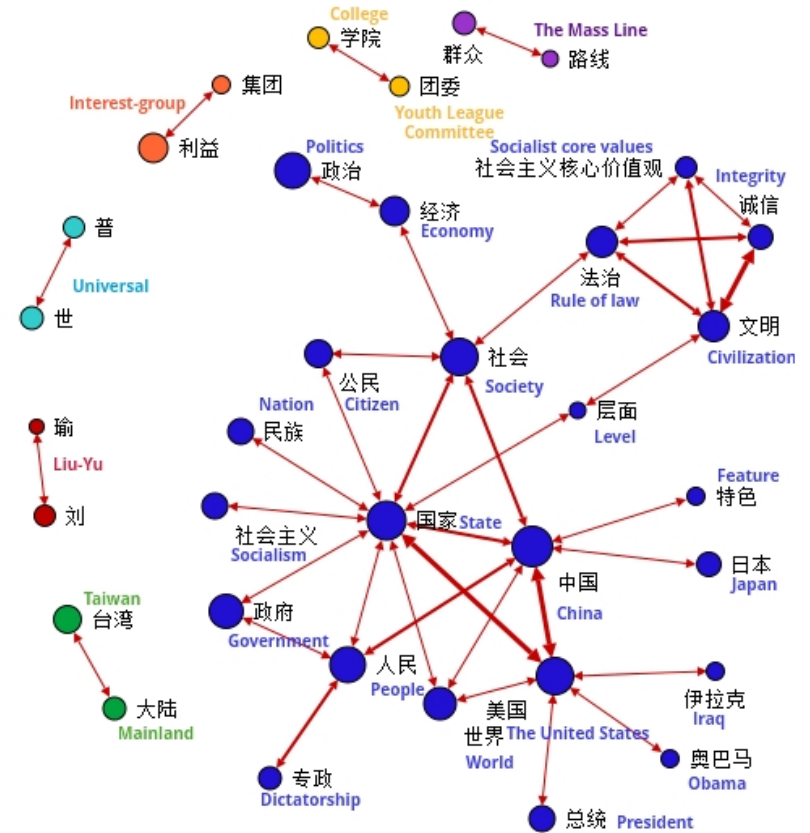
Identity & Time Discussion Realm of Democracy	Official		Individual		Censored
	Hu administration 08/2011-03/2013	Xi administration 04/2013-04/2018	Hu administration 08/2011-03/2013	Xi administration 04/2013-04/2018	Xi administration 10/2014-06/2018
1. Values and Concepts		Core Socialist Values	Liberal Democratic Value and Citizen Rights	Core Socialist Values	Liberal Democratic Value and Citizen Rights
2. Domestic Politics	Social System	Government Work and Service	Political System Politics in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China	Political System Government Service	Politics in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China
3. Chinese Society and History	Social Development The Chinese modern democratic revolution Nationalism and Patriotism	Social Development The Chinese modern democratic revolution Nationalism and Patriotism	Social Events	Social Development The Chinese modern democratic revolution Nationalism and Patriotism	Social Events
4. International Affairs		International Politics	International Politics International Democratizing Movement	International Politics	International Politics and Democratization
5. The CCP and Other Political Parties	Party's Routine Meeting China's Democratic Parties	Party's Routine Meeting Democratic Parties Intra-Party Discipline	Democratic Parties and the Role of The CCP		The Role and Legitimacy of The CCP
6. Community, family and Individual Life	Democratic Life in Local Community, School, Company and Family	Educational Activities at School and In the Family		Children's Education Movies, Feelings, Friendship, Spiritual Life	

Figure 4. Semantic Network of Weibo Posts Sent by the Official Weibo Account





Former Administration
(2011.08-2013.03)



Current Administration
(2013.04-2018.03)

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