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What do Chinese Really Think about Democracy and India?

Devin K. Joshi & Yizhe Xu

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Abstract: There has been much speculation about whether China will democratize and avoid conflict with India in the twenty-first century. Yet, few studies have investigated how contemporary Chinese view India and its democracy. Addressing this gap in the literature, the authors examined Chinese media coverage of India's two-month long April–May 2014 parliamentary election, the largest election in world history, through systematic analysis of over 500 articles from ten major mass media outlets and over 27,000 messages transmitted on Sina Weibo social media. As might be expected, Chinese mass media generally portrayed India and its elections in a condescending fashion while avoiding discussion of 'democracy'. However, the authors found a much broader array of viewpoints on Chinese social media including considerable praise for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and extensive discussion about the intrinsic and instrumental merits of democracy both in India and in general.

What do Chinese really think about India and democracy? These are key questions at the heart of Asian politics and international relations, but most studies on Chinese views of India focus only on elite perceptions.¹ Meanwhile, assessments of Chinese demand for democracy are usually limited to Chinese perceptions of Western democratic nations.² Addressing a key gap in the literature, this article examines how Chinese netizens view India and what they think of the practice of democracy in a similarly highly populated developing country. It thereby offers new insight on Chinese demand for democratization, Chinese perceptions of India, and the future likelihood of China getting along peacefully with its large democratic neighbor to the South. For decades, India has played a powerful symbolic role for the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an alternative political and civilizational model.³ Ever since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, Chinese depictions of India and its political system have contributed to justifying and legitimating China's authoritarian regime. As Huang Jinxin argues, India's

¹ Shaun Randol, 'How to approach the elephant: Chinese perceptions of India in the twenty-first century', *Asian Affairs* 34(4), (2008), pp. 211–226; Jing-Dong Yuan, 'Sizing up the elephant: Beijing's perspectives on a rising India', *East Asian Policy* 1(4), (2009), pp. 25–32; Lora Saalman, 'Divergence, similarity and symmetry in Sino-Indian threat perceptions', *Journal of International Affairs* 64(2), (2011), pp. 169–194; Renaud Egreteau, 'Are we (really) brothers?' Contemporary India as observed by Chinese diplomats', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47(6), (2012), pp. 695–709; Toshi Yoshihara, 'Chinese views of India in the Indian Ocean: a geopolitical perspective', *Strategic Analysis* 36(3), (2012), pp. 489–500.

² Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Andrew Nathan, Larry Diamond, and Marc Plattner, eds., *Will China Democratize?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Émilie Frenkiel, *Conditional Democracy: The Contemporary Debate on Political Reform in Chinese Universities* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2015).

³ John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

slower pace of development and higher incidence of poverty have led many Chinese to perceive a trade-off between democracy and development which is important in shaping China's self-image.

Depictions of India as poor and unstable as a result of democracy always served as a stark contrast with a prosperous and orderly authoritarian regime... In a standard Chinese elementary school geography textbook, India and China are juxtaposed side-by-side in population, literacy, GDP per capita, export, and industrial output. India lags far behind China in almost every category of achievement. Such a presentation usually ends with plaudits to Chinese socialism (i.e. the CCP dictatorship) and economic reform policies... Considering that the Chinese discourse attributes a causal relationship between Indian stagnation and democracy, changing Chinese thinking about India may well reflect changing Chinese thinking about democracy.⁴

As illustrated here, Chinese perceptions of India matter. Not only do they impact Sino-Indian relations, but they influence the degree to which Chinese see democratization as desirable.

For the most part, inquiries into China's potential future democratization are fraught with uncertainty as studies of democratization identify multiple causal pathways.⁵ Yet, one of the most significant supporting factors appears to be public demand for democratization.⁶ In this regard, China seems divided with survey research in urban areas finding more support for democracy among women and the lower class than among men and the middle class.⁷ Likewise, Émilie Frenkiel's recent review of Chinese liberals', new leftists', and neo-conservatives' attitudes towards democracy finds Chinese intellectuals divided in their preferences, but she concludes that, 'if the Chinese regime eventually launches a veritable democratization, it will be in response to internal pressures rather than to pressures from the international community'.⁸ Aiming to shed new light on Chinese thinking about India and democracy, this study employs 'big data' to examine Chinese coverage of India's two-month long April–May 2014 parliamentary election via an analysis of over 500 articles from ten major mass media outlets and over 27,000 messages transmitted through social media. The article opens with a review of the literature on Chinese perceptions of India. It then explains the methodology of the study followed by detailed qualitative and quantitative content analysis of Chinese mass media articles and social media commentary.

As discussed below, this study came upon three major findings. First, Chinese mass media typically portrayed India in a neutral or condescending fashion while avoiding discussion of 'democracy'. Secondly, Chinese social media commentators frequently reposted messages concerning the intrinsic and instrumental merits of democracy both in India and in general. Thirdly, while many people support the idea that development is a higher priority for countries confronting poverty and corruption, quite a number expressed the view that democracy is desirable even in developing countries such as India (and China). The authors found close to half of Chinese netizens expressed a neutral view towards democracy,

⁴ Huang Jinxin, 'A new Chinese discourse of India', *Journal of Contemporary China* 14(45), (2005), p. 632.

⁵ Devin K. Joshi, Barry B. Hughes, and Timothy D. Sisk, 'Improving governance for the post-2015 sustainable development goals: scenario forecasting the next 50 years', *World Development* 70, (2015), pp. 286–302.

⁶ Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷ Chen Jie and Lu Chunlong, 'Democratization and the middle class in China: the middle class's attitudes toward democracy', *Political Research Quarterly* 64(3), (2011), pp. 705–719.

⁸ Émilie Frenkiel, *Conditional Democracy: The Contemporary Debate on Political Reform in Chinese Universities*, p. 211.

while roughly one fifth were positive and one third were negative. As discussed in the conclusion, the large discrepancy between the ‘line’ of CCP-controlled media and online commentary raises questions regarding the efficacy of the CCP’s ability to guide public opinion, and ultimately, perhaps, the legitimacy of the CCP regime.

Literature Review

As emerging powers, China and India are frequently portrayed at the forefront of a rising Asia that may challenge the dominance of the West in the twenty-first century.⁹ Yet, a major point of contrast between the world’s two most populated countries is their political regimes. On the one hand, India holds multi-party elections and has greater freedom of the press, civil liberties, and judicial independence compared with China.¹⁰ On the other hand, China has outpaced India on economic growth,¹¹ public health,¹² educational expansion,¹³ and many infrastructural and technological development indicators.¹⁴ Therefore, a common evaluation is that the Sino-Indian relationship is ‘asymmetrical’ with India more concerned about China than vice versa.¹⁵ For example, David Malone and Rohan Mukherjee argue ‘China does not appear to feel threatened in any serious way by India, while India at times displays tremendous insecurity in the face of Chinese economic success and military expansion’.¹⁶ Lora Saalman likewise notes, ‘While in India there has long been a tendency to include China in strategic doctrines and writings, similar writings from China have made scant reference to India’.¹⁷ Whereas most Chinese elites do not see India or its political model as a direct threat, they have expressed concern about India’s support for the Dalai Lama and its naval buildup in the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ Chinese strategists fear that increasing Indo-American, Indo-Japanese, and Indo-Vietnamese economic and defense cooperation may serve to

⁹ Daniel Drezner, ‘The new New World Order’, *Foreign Affairs* 86(2), (2007), pp. 34–46; Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

¹⁰ Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions* (London: Penguin, 2013).

¹¹ Pranab Bardhan, *Awakening Giants, Feet of Clay: Assessing the Economic Rise of China and India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹² Devin K. Joshi and Bin Yu, ‘Political determinants of public health investment in China and India’, *Asian Politics and Policy* 6(1), (2014), pp. 59–82.

¹³ William C. Smith and Devin K. Joshi, ‘Public vs. private schooling as a route to universal basic education: a comparison of China and India’, *International Journal of Educational Development* 46(1), (2016), pp. 153–165.

¹⁴ Devin Joshi, ‘How can India catch up to China? The importance of social investment’, *India Review* 14(2), (2015), pp. 238–267.

¹⁵ Susan Shirk, ‘One-sided rivalry: China’s perceptions and policies toward India’, in *The India-China Relationship: What the United States Needs to Know*, ed. Francine R. Frankel and Harry Harding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 75–100; Francine Frankel, ‘The breakout of China-India strategic rivalry in Asia and the Indian Ocean’, *Journal of International Affairs* 64(2), (2011), pp. 1–17.

¹⁶ David Malone and Rohan Mukherjee, ‘India and China: conflict and cooperation’, *Survival* 52(1), (2010), p. 137.

¹⁷ Lora Saalman, ‘Divergence, similarity and symmetry in Sino-Indian threat perceptions’, p. 172.

¹⁸ George J. Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham, *Chinese and Indian Strategic Behavior: Growing Power and Alarm* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

contain China's influence in the future.¹⁹ As India is rather unique among rapidly growing Asian economies for having a democratic political system,²⁰ Chinese scholars have followed India's economic growth with considerable interest. Yet, they typically see its heavy reliance on information technology (IT) and the service sector as contributing little to poverty alleviation while increasing rich-poor and urban-rural gaps. A common assessment is that 'the Indian style of democracy' reduces 'the efficiency of economic development'.²¹ Nevertheless, aside from occasional tensions at the border, as the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 becomes a more distant memory, Sino-Indian relations have become more cordial in the twenty-first century as evidenced by increased bilateral meetings, border discussions, confidence-building measures, trade, and cooperation in international forums.²²

Despite increasing bilateral cooperation, scholars typically characterize Chinese views of India as marked by 'ambivalence',²³ 'mutual suspicion'²⁴ and 'lack of mutual awareness, understanding and trust'.²⁵ An exception is Huang Jinxin's study of Chinese websites which concluded that 'Indian democracy is no longer presented as a negative'.²⁶ But others counter that 'public professions of friendship and cooperation stand in sharp contrast to more negative images of India held by large segments of Chinese society' and 'to the Chinese, Indian democracy is a form of democracy that is not worth emulating'.²⁷ Such sentiments also appear in public opinion surveys. As shown in Table 1, Chinese are more likely to view Sino-Indian relations as cooperative than hostile, but more likely to view India negatively than positively. As one analyst puts it, 'surveys demonstrate that the optimism of the political and economic elites has not completely trickled down'.²⁸ Moreover, scholarship on Sino-Pakistani relations suggests that Beijing's leadership pays little attention to public opinion when formulating foreign policy towards South Asia.²⁹

¹⁹ Selina Ho, 'Seeing the forest for the trees: China's shifting perceptions of India', in *Research Handbook on China and Developing Countries*, ed. Carla Freeman (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015), pp. 445–464.

²⁰ Devin Joshi, 'Multi-party democracies and rapid economic growth: a twenty-first century breakthrough?' *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 7(1), (2011), pp. 25–46.

²¹ Li Li, 'The Indian growth model: a Chinese perspective', in G.V.C. Naidu, Mumin Chen and Raviprasad Narayanan, eds, *India and China in the Emerging Dynamics of East Asia* (Delhi: Springer India, 2015), p. 66.

²² Jonathan Holslag, 'Progress, perceptions and peace in the Sino-Indian relationship', *East Asia* 26(1), (2009), pp. 41–56.

²³ Jonathan Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 116.

²⁴ Francine Frankel, 'The breakout of China-India strategic rivalry in Asia and the Indian Ocean', p. 1.

²⁵ Swaran Singh, 'India China relations: perception, problems, potential', *South Asian Survey* 15(1), (2008), p. 96.

²⁶ Huang Jinxin, 'A new Chinese discourse of India', p. 134.

²⁷ Selina Ho, 'Seeing the forest for the trees: China's shifting perceptions of India', pp. 452–453.

²⁸ Jonathan Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 105.

²⁹ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Table 1. Chinese Views of India and Sino-Indian Relations (from Public Opinion Surveys).^a

Polling organization	Views about	Year	Cooperative/positive	Hostile/negative
Pew ^b	Sino-Indian Relations	2008	25%	24%
Pew	Sino-Indian Relations	2010	53%	9%
Pew	Sino-Indian Relations	2012	39%	24%
Pew	India	2012	23%	62%
BBC	India	2013	23%	45%
BBC	India	2014	27%	35%
Huanqiu ^c	India	2015	7%	38%

Note: Table excludes 'neutral' views, non-responses, and 'don't know' responses.

^aData sources: (1) British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), BBC World Service Poll 3 June 2014, accessed 19 July 2015, <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/country-rating-poll.pdf>; (2) 环球, 调查: 印度对中国究竟是威胁还是伙伴? (Huanqiu Survey: Is India after all China's rival or partner?), accessed 19 July 2015, <http://survey.huanqiu.com/result.php?s=5FFzdXJ2ZXIlfNjM4Mw@5^1@@5^1@>; (3) Pew, Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and Trends, accessed 19 July 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org>.

^bNone of the Pew surveys listed here used a nationally based sample.

^cThis was a voluntary Internet-based survey with over 23,554 participants, most of whom (97%) were male.

Methodology

Following Jonathan Holslag's recommendation for scholars to systematically examine news media and Internet forums to better understand Chinese perceptions of India,³⁰ this article analyzes Chinese media coverage of India's 2014 parliamentary election, the largest election in world history. The authors examined both mass media and Internet-based social media as China had over 275 million microblogging users in June 2014 alongside a national Internet penetration rate of 46.9% and 632 million total Internet users.³¹ As China is known for its 'Great Firewall' which blocks Western social media including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube,³² the study included Sina Weibo ('Weibo' for short), the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, a microblog (微博客) service with 167 million monthly active users.³³ As Jason Ng asserts,

In recent years, Weibo has developed a number of features that Twitter doesn't have, including semi-threaded comments, events, polls, games, Facebook-like apps, instant messaging, and community portals. Aided by China's banning of Twitter and the addition of these attractive features, Sina Weibo has become the undisputed first source for real-time information in China.³⁴

Microblogs such as Weibo are widely recognized as a 'preferred platform' for popular Chinese online opinion leaders,³⁵ as they provide a highly accessible space for public interaction, political expression,

³⁰ Jonathan Holslag, 'Progress, perceptions and peace in the Sino-Indian relationship', p. 54.

³¹ China Internet Network Information Center, 'The 34th statistical survey on Internet development in China', (2015), accessed 19 April 2015, <http://goo.gl/4Xth5N> (see also www.cnnic.cn).

³² Xiao Qiang, 'The battle for the Chinese Internet', in Nathan, et al., *Will China Democratize?* pp. 234–248.

³³ Weibo, '2014 microblogging user development report', (2015), accessed 19 April 2015, <http://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=215>.

³⁴ Jason Q. Ng, *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (and Why)* (New York: The New Press, 2013), p. xiv.

³⁵ Lu Jia and Qiu Yunxi, 'Microblogging and social change in China', *Asian Perspective* 37(3), (2013), p. 312.

and competing viewpoints including those critical of the government.³⁶ Although the average Chinese Internet user is younger, more educated, more urban, and more male than the general population, microblogging appeals to multiple demographics. Therefore, public views expressed on microblog sites may be equally or more representative than public opinion surveys conducted only in urban areas or a small number of provinces.³⁷ As James Leibold argues, ‘weblogs represent the single largest, and most dynamic, communication platform on the Chinese internet, providing unprecedented opportunities for netizens to both engage in national-level debate and indulge their personal fetishes in isolated, interest-based enclaves’.³⁸ While discussions on Weibo are relatively free, political commentary on Weibo is still influenced by the party-state. First, there are official government contributors³⁹ and others who espouse the government’s viewpoint known colloquially as the ‘fifty cent party’ (*wu mao dang*).⁴⁰ Second, some content is prohibited. One search of 700,000 terms discovered roughly 500 blocked search terms, mostly names of prominent Communist Party members;

Users can post just about anything they want to the site. But many words subsequently yield no results when they are searched for, such as Wen Jiabao... At times, if a post contains a sensitive word, it might be rendered invisible to others even though you can see it on your own timeline. Finally, Weibo’s censors can also summarily delete inflammatory messages without any notice... Words that are only temporarily sensitive can be added to the blacklist of search terms one day and removed the next without having had to delete the underlying content.⁴¹

As a recent study argues, this form of censorship allows for government criticism while silencing collective expression.⁴² While some information is freely available, that which might hurt the party’s interests is carefully managed to avoid political instability and maintain a ‘harmonious society’.⁴³ However, citizens never know exactly where the ‘out-of-boundary markers’ are and ‘there is no officially

³⁶ Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, ‘Digital communication and political change in China’, *International Journal of Communication* 5(1), (2011), pp. 298–319; James Leibold, ‘Blogging alone: China, the Internet, and the democratic illusion?’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 70(4), (2011), pp. 1023–1041; Wilfred Yang Wang, ‘Weibo, framing, and media practices in China’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 18(4), (2013), pp. 375–388; Huang Ronggui and Sun Xiaoyi, ‘Weibo network, information diffusion and implications for collective action in China’, *Information, Communication & Society* 17(1), (2014), pp. 86–104.

³⁷ Xiao Qiang, ‘The battle for the Chinese Internet’; Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China*.

³⁸ James Leibold, ‘Blogging alone: China, the Internet, and the democratic illusion?’, p. 1024.

³⁹ According to Lu Jia and Qiu Yunxi, ‘Microblogging and social change in China’, p. 312, there were 9778 government agencies and 8354 officers with accounts on Weibo in 2011.

⁴⁰ They are supposedly paid fifty cents for each post they contribute. See Jason Q. Ng, *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China’s Version of Twitter (and Why)*.

⁴¹ Jason Q. Ng, *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China’s Version of Twitter (and Why)*, p. xix.

⁴² Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, ‘How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression’, *American Political Science Review* 107(2), (2013), pp. 326–343.

⁴³ Devin Joshi, ‘Does China’s recent “harmonious society” discourse reflect a shift towards human development?’ *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17(2), (2012), pp. 169–187.

published blacklist from the government'.⁴⁴ Despite these limitations, it is widely agreed that microblogging presents one of the most liberal spaces available in China for political expression.

Even with the censors' constant presence, the ephemeral, anonymous, and networked nature of Internet communications limits their impact... The government's pervasive and intrusive censorship has stirred resentment among Chinese netizens, sparking new forms of social resistance and demands for greater freedom of information and expression, often conveyed via coded language and metaphors adopted to avoid the most obvious forms of censorship. As a result, the Internet has become a quasi-public space where the CCP's dominance is exposed, ridiculed, and criticized, often by means of satire, jokes, songs, poems, and code words.⁴⁵

This study focuses on how Weibo participants have depicted India, its prime ministerial candidates, and the election process. It also examined whether democracy was portrayed as instrumentally or intrinsically desirable, and whether democracy was valued as an international norm. To do so, all Weibo posts related to the Indian election were captured real-time every day from 1 April 2014 to 23 May 2014 (including one week before it started on 7 April and one week after final results were announced on 15 May). The authors simultaneously analyzed Chinese mass media coverage of the election as social and mass media often interact with and inform each other.⁴⁶ Ten prominent online PRC mass media news sources were included: (1) CRI (China Radio International) Online (国际在线); (2) China Economic Weekly (中国经济周刊); (3) CNS (China News Service) (中国新闻社); (4) China Daily (中国日报网); (5) On-Line People's Daily (人民日报社); (6) Global Times (环球时报) which belongs to the People's Daily (人民日报); (7) Xinhua News Agency (新华通讯社); (8) Reference News (参考消息) which belongs to Xinhua; (9) International Herald Leader (国际先驱导报) which belongs to Reference News; and (10) Wenhui News (文汇报) which also belongs to Xinhua.

Mass Media Analysis

To identify Chinese media coverage of the Indian election, the authors collected all articles containing at least one of the five following search terms: 'Indian election', 'India voting', 'Indian democracy', '[Narendra] Modi' and 'Rahul [Gandhi]' (印度大选·印度选举·印度民主, 莫迪, 拉胡尔). In total, 1274 mass media articles were found from ten sources out of which 560 were unique as several articles appeared multiple times on different news sites. As shown in Table 2, almost half of these articles mentioned the terms 'election' or 'voting' (46.3%). The next most common areas of focus were Narendra Modi (36.4%), the Indian economy (35.4%), Sino-Indian relations (14.5%), terrorism (14.3%), Rahul Gandhi or his family (10.5%), boundary issues (10.4%), Muslims and ethnic minorities (9.8%),

⁴⁴ Ng, *Blocked on Weibo*, p. xxiv; Another type of party-state influence is self-censorship since users must use their real names to register for a Weibo account.

⁴⁵ Xiao Qiang, 'The battle for the Chinese Internet', p. 239.

⁴⁶ Lu Jia and Qiu Yunxi, 'Microblogging and social change in China', p. 314 reports that 1185 media outlets had opened official accounts on Weibo in 2010. See also Susan Shirk, ed., *Changing Media: Changing China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

government corruption (9.5%), Indo-Pakistan relations (8.9%), and train accidents (6.3%). Democracy (5.4%) was infrequently mentioned as were the terms ‘freedom’ (4.1%) and ‘human rights’ (0.7%).

Table 2. Thematic coverage of 2014 Indian election in Chinese news by % of articles.^a

Themes	Mass media (n=560)	Original tweets	Popular retweets
		(n = 6,720)	(n = 20,617)
Voting/Election	45.3	45.1	84.3
Narendra Modi	36.4	27.4	17.3
Economic Growth/Economy	35.1	18.9	42.6
China–India Relationship	14.5	1.7	0.5
Terrorism	14.3	7.1	11.9
Rahul Gandhi/Gandhi Family	10.5	6.9	5.2
Boundary Issues	10.4	2.0	1.3
Muslims & Ethnic Minorities	9.8	4.9	0.7
Government Corruption	9.5	3.1	9.1
India-Pakistan Relations	8.9	4.3	0.0
Train Accidents	6.3	2.0	36.2
Women/Female Harassment	5.7	1.1	4.3
‘Democracy’	5.4	16.5	58.9
‘Freedom’	4.1	2.1	1.9
‘Human Right’	0.7	0.4	1.3

Source: Authors’ dataset.

^aTopics were counted by using the following keywords: for voting/elections: ‘vote’(投票), ‘elect’(选举), ‘ballot’(选票), ‘candidate’(候选人), ‘voter’(选民), ‘new government’(新政府), ‘Prime Minister’(总理). For China–India relationship: ‘China’(中国, 中共, 天朝, 我国) and ‘India’(印度) or ‘China and India’(中印). For terrorism: ‘terror’(恐怖), ‘attack’(袭击), ‘violence’(暴力, 自焚), ‘threat’(威胁/恐吓). For economy: ‘economy’(经济), ‘development’(发展), ‘trade’(贸易), ‘export’(出口), ‘import’(进口), ‘supermarket’(超市), ‘highway’(高速路). For Rahul Gandhi/the Gandhi Family: ‘Gandhi’(甘地), ‘hereditary’(世袭), ‘family’(家族), ‘Brahman’(婆罗门), ‘high caste’(高种姓/洗牌). For boundary issues: ‘Border’(边境, 边界), ‘Territory’(领土/领地), ‘South of Tibet’(藏南), and ‘Dispute’(纠纷). For Muslims and minorities: ‘Muslim’(穆斯林), ‘ethnicity’(种族), ‘minority’(少数). For India-Pakistan relations: ‘Pakistan’(巴基斯坦) and ‘India’(印度), or ‘India-Pakistan’(印巴). For corruption: ‘corruption’(腐败/贪腐), ‘bribery’(贿赂/贿选), ‘pay-day’(发薪日), ‘anti-corruption’(反腐). For train accidents: ‘train’(列车/火车), ‘derail’(出轨/脱轨), ‘accident’(事故/车祸). For women/female: ‘female’(女性/妇女), ‘sexual harassment’(强奸/性侵). For Narendra Modi: ‘Modi’(莫迪/穆迪), ‘secret marriage’(隐婚), ‘tea’(茶). Democracy includes news mentioning ‘democracy’(民主), but excludes mentions of the ‘National Democratic Alliance’(国家民主联盟/全国民主联盟), ‘National Democratic Front of Bodoland’(波多民族民主阵线) and ‘Colonialism’(殖民主义). For freedom: ‘freedom’(自由). For human right: ‘human right’(人权).

Chinese mass media reporting on India’s election was generally neutral or negative. Common themes were: the election was unnecessarily long; India is a ‘fake democracy’; no one can make a ‘yes’ decision; people just vote to deny things; the central government lacks power; India is violent and plagued by terrorism; and democracy has not rid the country of caste, gender, and religious discrimination. Many of the mass media’s dominant frames about India were also unflattering, such as: rampant government corruption; the ruling dynasty’s domination of national politics; deadly train accidents; state terrorism against Muslims and ethnic minorities; war and conflict against Pakistan; rapes and harassment of women, and political leader Mayawati from the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh looking foolish. Visual representations in the mass media included silly-looking campaign photos and posters, index finger voting due to people’s illiteracy, threatening images of Indian Maoist rebels, and refugees fleeing from conflict hot-spots.

As the leading candidate from an opposition party, Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) received much mass media attention. His plans to improve the Indian economy, increase business ties with China, and build highways and high speed rail were covered positively as was his opposition towards Western retail giants such as Walmart and Carrefour. Many Modi stories also focused on his unusual marital situation involving a missing wife from an arranged marriage while other articles framed

him as a supporter of violence against Muslims.⁴⁷ Overall, Chinese media was generally more critical of Rahul Gandhi of the Indian National Congress Party (INC) who was portrayed as a tainted candidate from an elite political dynasty ('princeling' (太子党)) since his father, grandmother, and great grandfather were all prime ministers. India's election was also criticized for not taking place on a single day (in contrast to Indonesia and Brazil), and federalism was depicted as rendering India's central government impotent in making important decisions for the whole country thereby contributing to indecision, corruption, and economic uncertainty. While regional parties have played a prominent role in Indian elections in recent years,⁴⁸ they generally received little attention in the Chinese press. However, the outside candidacy of anti-corruption activist Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Admi (Common Man) Party received some positive coverage. One article proclaimed,

Arvind Kejriwal represents the power of the citizens. This is also what [Vaclav] Havel mentioned when he wrote about 'the power of the powerless man' and 'live under the framework of truth.' Kejriwal's growth in power stands opposite to traditional Indian politics. He emphasizes transparency and accountability. He also asks for decentralization of power from the top saying that 'Democracy is not merely an election once every five years. It means the government should operate according to people's will.' (Renmin Wang, 28 April 2014)

Although supportive, Kejriwal is framed in this article as an idealist. The story also fits into a larger media frame that India is behind China in many respects. As another article states more bluntly; 'It seems India has never stepped away from feudalism, caste-ism, religion, and gender discrimination'.⁴⁹ Although not offering strong praise, another article concedes that Indian democracy has not been without some merits; 'maybe nobody feels that India's democratic system is a poster child of success, but one also cannot deny that Indian democracy actually has accomplished significant achievements'.⁵⁰ But messages like this were rare. In total, 95% of mass media articles did not even mention the word 'democracy' (民主).⁵¹ Of the 30 articles that did: 19 were neutral and eight were negative about democracy. The only three articles to express a positive sentiment about democracy originally came from the Singaporean Nanyang Sin-Chew Lianhe Zaobao (联合早报) and then were later reposted on a PRC website. To sum up, there was heavy censorship/non-usage of the term 'democracy' by PRC mass media and in those rare cases where the mass media mentioned democracy it was either neutral or negative.

⁴⁷ He was nicknamed the '隐婚总理' (prime minister with a secret wife) since he was registered as married, but had not seen his wife for 45 years.

⁴⁸ Devin K. Joshi, 'The impact of India's regional parties on voter turnout and human development', *Journal of South Asian Development* 7(2), (2012), pp. 139–160.

⁴⁹ 王晓薇, '甘地王朝的颠覆者莫迪' (Modi – Adversary of the Gandhi Dynasty), *中国时报* (*China Times*), 14 May 2014, accessed 15 May 2014, <http://www.chinatimes.cc/article/42730.html>.

⁵⁰ 毛四维, '新加坡《联合早报》: 印度民主的成败得失' (Singaporean Lianhe Zaobao: Indian Democracy's Successes and Failures), *新华* (*Xinhua*), 13 May 2014, accessed 14 May 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-05/13/c_126494549.htm

⁵¹ The authors did not count articles where the characters for 'democracy' (民主) appear in the terms 'National Democratic Alliance', 'Colonialism', and 'Bodo Democratic Liberation Front Terrorist Group'.

Social Media Analysis

Using the same search phrases in social media, a large number (27,337) of Weibo ‘tweets’ (messages under 140 characters) were collected including both original tweets (6720) and retweets with comments (20,617). Among all tweets, the 40 most popular comprised 75% of retweets (see Appendix A). Out of all posted messages, 12,462 were fully available to registered users including 2039 original tweets and 10,423 retweets, while more than half (54.4%) of the total tweets were censored (hidden) by Weibo. Hidden tweets are those omitted from general keyword searches, but it is still possible for a user to access them.⁵² In total, two thirds of the original tweets (4681 of 6720) were hidden by Weibo as were about one half of retweets (10,194 of 20,617). In addition to public and hidden tweets, deleted tweets mentioning the word ‘India’ ($n = 62$) during the time frame of this study were collected from Weiboscope daily, a Hong Kong-based website that collects tweets summarily deleted from Weibo. Small in number, these messages were likely deleted for criticizing the Chinese government. For example, one attacks the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for hypocrisy about elections while another condemns the party’s birth control restrictions.

In fact, the larger the land and population, the more difficult it is to cheat in an election. So elections are really well suited to large and highly populated countries and are the only good way to solve problems of inequality and injustice. Relying on the ‘rule of men’ can never solve these issues. Instead, the country has had to resort to exorbitantly expensive ‘stabilization’ measures. That cost is higher than holding elections. ... What’s funny is that our Party actually conducted ‘bean elections’ (豆选) back in Yan’an. In 1948, our ancestors also conducted nation-wide elections. However, 70 years later, they now think our country is not suitable for elections because we are a low quality people (素质低). (7 April 2014 deleted)

The Celestial Empire [term mocking the Chinese Government] does not like democratic elections. The birth control committee gangsters even kill citizens who have multiple children. 5,000 years of civilization have been eroded by the violence of the one child policy. (10 May 2014 deleted)

To sum up, the discourse which appears to the general public is only the un-hidden, un-deleted tweets and the mass media, but this study included messages which were hidden and deleted to get a fuller picture of the actual range and frequency of Chinese people’s views.

As shown in Table 2, there was considerable discrepancy in emphases between mass media and social media commentary. On the latter, ‘democracy’ came up much more frequently (16.5% of original tweets) and was the second most popular theme communicated in retweeted messages (58.9%) after the election

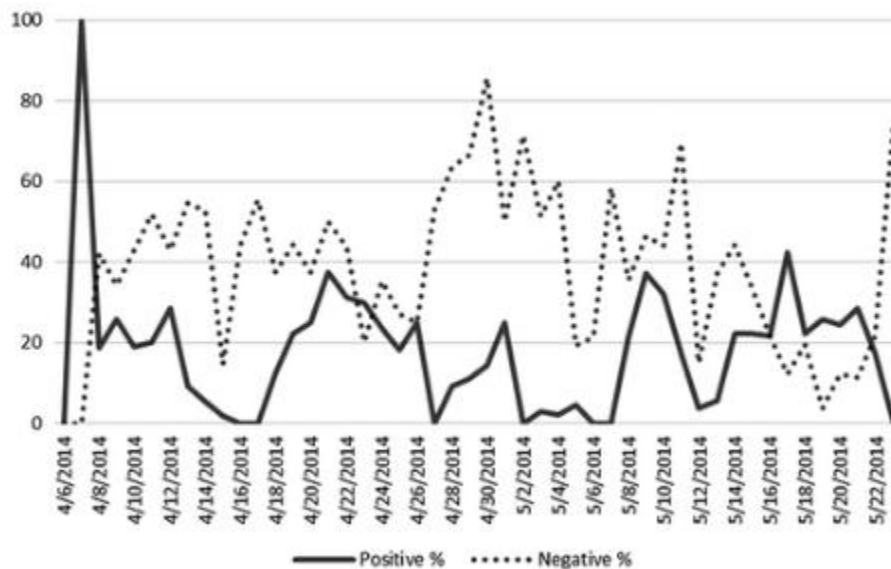
⁵² Hidden tweets are accessible by clicking a link that says: ‘为了提供多样性结果，我们省略了部分相似微博，您可以点击查看全部搜索结果’ (In order to provide a diversified search result, we have eliminated those tweets that are similar. You can click here to view the entire search results’). Hidden messages occur for several reasons. Some people’s messages are always censored – for example, some netizens who have strong opinions – but their followers/subscribers can still see their tweets. Other messages are eliminated because of blocked keywords. As a result, some people use special codes like ‘zf’ instead of ‘zhengfu’ (government) because ‘zhengfu’ is blocked. For ‘democracy’ sometimes people write 皿煮 (‘boiling plate’, a Chinese homophone for the word ‘democracy’) as this is not always censored.

itself (84.3%). As Table 3 illustrates, social media featured more discussion about election bribery and discriminatory racial slurs (e.g. ‘阿三’) against Indians.⁵³ There was quite a lot of commentary on a photo that appeared in the mass media of an Indian man who had 39 wives concerning familial influence on election outcomes, and people likened Narendra Modi to leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Lee Kuan Yew, and Adolf Hitler. Companies that bid on gold futures also talked about how the Indian election will impact future gold prices. However, many social media contributors echoed the same themes and frames reported in the mass media. On both platforms, contributors viewed Chinese economic and military power as superior to India. They also tended to see China and India as having a friendly political relationship but as military adversaries.

Table 3. Themes frequently appearing on social media but not on mass media.

Topics	Mass media mentions	Social media mentions
	(out of 560 articles)	(out of 6720 tweets)
Negative slurs about Indians (阿三)	0	45
The world's shortest female voter	0	13
'Democracy' (民主)	30	1126
Lee Kuan Yew-Narendra Modi comparison	1	24
Deng Xiaoping-Narendra Modi comparison	7	37
Indian dream (vs. Chinese dream)	1	16
Man with 39 wives	2	26
Election bribery	9	63
Adolf Hitler-Narendra Modi comparison	1	6

Figure 1. Social media attitudes towards democracy over time. Source: Authors' dataset.



The majority of social media participants were quite positive about India's newly elected Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Many people seemed to like the idea that a child (who was neither Brahmin nor from a

⁵³ The slur ‘阿三’ is only used to describe Indians. It comes from Shanghaiese dialect meaning ‘stupid #holes.’

political family) working as a tea-seller at a train station could later dislodge a powerful dynastic ruling family to govern a large country and change the political party in power. Although much applauded in Chinese social media, most tweets making arguments of this sort (66 out of 88) were hidden. As several representative posts commented:

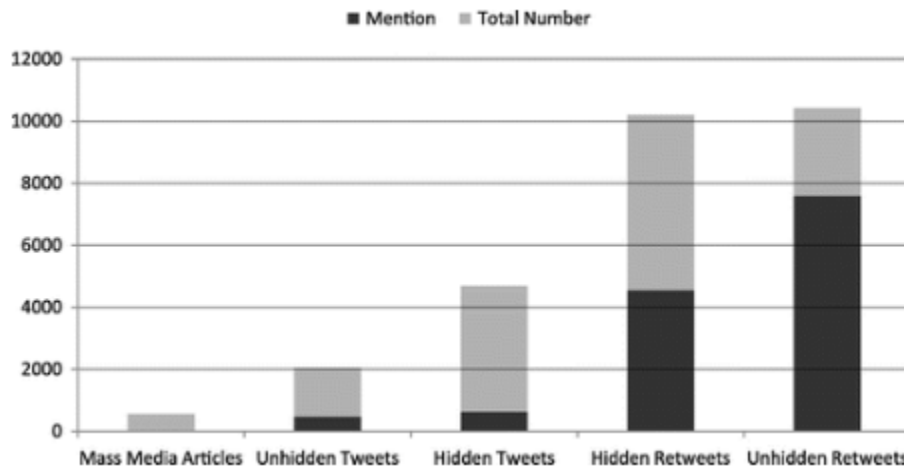
Indian election miracle: Poor tea boy becomes a Prime Minister of 1.2 billion. This is almost impossible in China. Even Mao was born higher than a poor tea boy. (17 May 2014 censored)

The new Indian Prime Minister worked his way up from a tea shop. This shows us the success of India's democratic system. (18 May 2014 censored)

We harped on Indian caste-ism, attacked India's hereditary system, laughed at Indians' poverty, and disdained their low education level. However, this same India with more than 1.15 billion population surprisingly successfully finished its election yesterday. The 'tea-shop low-born boy' Modi beats the 'hereditary elite' Rahul Gandhi. This is a slap on the face to those who think democracy doesn't work in countries with a high population of low quality and to those who support 'red' heredity. (19 May 2014 censored)

As discussed below, although most tweets were either neutral or took a critical view of democracy, positive attitudes towards democracy spiked when Modi's election victory was announced on 15 May 2014 (see Figure 1) with a number of commentators likening the economically rapidly growing Indian state of Gujarat (where Modi was chief minister the previous 13 years) to China's Guangdong province. Still others were critical of Modi due to his association with violence during the 2002 Gujarat riots.

Figure 2. 'Democracy' mentioned in Chinese media coverage of 2014 Indian election.



Discussion on Democracy

As shown in Figure 2, the theme of 'democracy' received significant attention in social media and it was mentioned frequently in the 40 most popular retweeted posts. As the following excerpts reveal, tweeted statements defending, supporting, doubting, or criticizing democracy usually addressed one the following six claims: (a) it is feasible for large countries to hold elections; (b) large, developing countries can instrumentally benefit from democracy; (c) there are intrinsic (procedural) benefits to democracy

regardless of outcomes; (d) democracy has been promoted as an international norm; (e) ‘democracy’ is conceptually vague, ambiguous, biased, or problematic; and (f) methodologically, the example of a single country does not make/break the case for/against democracy.

Most posts addressing the first claim supported the idea that it is logistically possible for China to conduct national elections. One of the most retweeted messages simply states that 800 million people were able to vote in India’s election implying that China can do the same. One of the only messages (fourth below) to offer a rebuttal concedes the viability of India’s election, but casts doubt on the ability of Asian countries to break free of nepotism:

Some people say big countries with large populations cannot conduct democratic elections because it will create disorder. Some also say that places such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore can hold democratic elections because they have small populations. In these past few days India has had 800 million people participate in its democratic elections in an orderly and harmonious [term mocks Chinese propaganda] fashion. Even if you are very poor, you still have equal human rights. (8 April 2014 censored)

India has maintained a democratic system for more than 50 years without experiencing national disruption/division or secession. (11 April 2014 uncensored)

If even India can pull off a democratic election with 800 million people, why can’t the Celestial Empire [mocking term referring to China] do it?! (12 April 2014 censored)

Modi wins the Indian election! But Korean President Park Geun-hye – her dad was president. Philippine President Benigno Aquino III – his mom was president. Singaporean Premier Lee Hsien Loong – his dad was premier. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe – his uncle was prime minister. Former Thai Premier Yingluck Shinawatra’s brother was premier. Luckily, this time the 1.3 billion people in India protected the democratic principle and didn’t elect someone because his/her relative was a president! (17 May 2014 uncensored)

Turning to instrumental arguments, various tweets associated democracy with favorable outcomes for India such as: (a) advantages in international economic competition; (b) consumer safety and health protections; and (c) avoiding domestic and international conflict. In some cases the comments are more ambiguous, but imply that China would be better off as a democracy:

Those Indian bastards (阿三) are catching up to China in steel production. Add to that their democratic system and the future of manufacturing will definitely be in India. Why can’t China be so enlightened? (8 April 2014 censored)

While India is holding its elections there has been an escalation in mockery and criticism. These people are idiots who do not understand India’s history and current situation. I just want to say that without a democratic system, India as a complicated, caste-ridden, multi-lingual, multi-faith country with great differences in customs and no dominant ethnicity would be even more economically backward, its masses even more impoverished, and it would have even more armed conflicts. A unified country would not continue to exist. (8 April 2014 censored)

After having lived abroad, why do I feel somewhat pissed off? I feel that Chinese society is riddled with gaping wounds from a) preserving the environment to b) social harmony, c) an inflated economy, d) weak government, e) the blind, naïve, clueless, low level ignorant masses, and f) the upper class squanderers who make money in China but then spend it abroad. I feel even

India is better than China. Here at least my heart is peaceful. The way out is either through democratization or following Russia's Putin. (9 April 2014 uncensored)

Are we still going to keep dissing on India? India has already achieved free medical care, free education, a democratic electoral system and rapid economic development. It does not have a 'develop first, clean up the environment later' model. It is also one of the world's five origins of civilization. None of its 40 richest people are engaged in real estate. Even though it has a population of about 1.2 billion it doesn't have a 'one child policy'. It has a completely democratic Constitution. Indian song, dance, and dramas are popular around the world and many of its trains are free. India is a democratic country! Pass it on [retweet this]! (9 May 2014 censored)

The article titled 'Modi's Victory Substantiates the Vitality of the Indian System,' does not show any evidence that India's democratic system has created any harm to its economic growth. Quite the contrary, India's democratic political system today, in spite of many shortcomings, has become freer, more transparent, and has better accountability compared to the 1960s and 1970s. (17 May 2014 censored)

As illustrated here, the idea of India instrumentally benefiting from elections is supported by multiple claims that democracy has produced certain positive social or economic outcomes. Another assertion is that due to India's unique character and/or complexity, Indian society requires democracy to keep the country together. Others argued that although it may not solve all problems, democracy is at least not harmful.

In total, however, there were more outcomes-based (instrumental) arguments in opposition to democracy than in favor. A frequently recurring theme was that living conditions are better in China than in India (in terms of food, clothing, housing, poverty, infant mortality, life expectancy, gender equality, public safety, and socio-economic mobility) and that these advances were somehow linked to the quality of China's government or its absence of democracy.

If I were to born poor, I would rather be in China where I consider myself to be lucky. Although it doesn't have democratic elections, compared to India here I have a greater chance of having food to eat, clothes to wear, and a house to live in. The most key point is that China gives me a greater opportunity for social and economic advancement/mobility. (8 April 2014 uncensored)

If being hungry is life under democracy then who is going to like democracy? Indian women have no social status. There are always rapes and sexual harassment. (8 April 2014 uncensored)

Can democracy improve a country's average life expectancy and decrease its infant mortality rate? Probably not. A lot of democratic countries have low life expectancy and high infant mortality rates. Can democracy resolve internal ethnic disputes? Probably not. Ukraine has split up. Can democracy improve equality? India has had democracy for several decades but still has a low caste population (Dalits). (9 April 2014 uncensored)

Women in that jacked up (阿三) country not only have the problem of gender inequality, but it seems that a 'one person, one vote' democracy has by no means solved the problem of women's suffering. (13 April 2014 deleted)

Based on 2013 data, China is at 76 years [of average life expectancy], six years more than the world average and close to that of the world's developed countries. The 'great democracy' of India's average life expectancy is 65 years... Average life expectancy is the indicator that most directly reflects the strength of a country. (2 May 2014 censored)

[This is India.] Free medical care while 72% pay out of pocket. Free education when 26% of adults are illiterate. It is against ‘develop first, protect the environment second’ yet has 4 cities ranked among the top 10 most polluted cities. Its richest people do not invest in real estate because they privately own the land. They are very democratic when a big family controls 3.2% of GDP. They have a high economic growth rate and hold 33% of the world’s poorest population. No birth control results in more than 40% of children being under-nourished. Its free trains kill hundreds and thousands of people every year. (10 May 2014 censored)

As the last excerpt illustrates, rebuttals of various arguments contest positive instrumental claims made by others.⁵⁴ Turning to the intrinsic nature of democracy, several contributors pitched universalistic normative claims. For example, one that references both Samuel Huntington’s *Political Order in a Changing Society* and Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* claims that bad governments abound, but ‘in this world there are two types of bad governments – one you can argue with and one you cannot argue with’ (20 May 2014 deleted). Aside from the right to free expression implied here, other posts brought up ideas of accountability, legitimacy, and democracy as a basic human right.

Democracy is not utilitarian/consequentialist. Democracy is just one of people’s rights... When it comes to democracy there is only one certainty: Pigs do not have democracy and they also do not seek to have it. (4 May 2014 censored)

India’s election, the largest in the world (800 million people directly voted) finally reaches its conclusion! India’s largest opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) finally gains victory in defeating the ruling party which has been in power for the last ten years. Gaining power in democratic countries depends on neither ‘the barrel of a gun,’ nor a ‘revolution.’ It relies on citizens’ support and accountability. It relies on trust and belief. This is the fundamental difference between democratic countries and authoritarian/dictatorial rule! (17 May 2014 censored)

In general, most intrinsic/procedurally-based arguments were supportive of democracy, but there were some exceptions. Several claimed India simply does not meet up to the procedural requirements of a democracy while others asserted democracy is a joke in the absence of equality and literacy. Some labeled India as a ‘fake democracy’ or ‘façade democracy’ asserting ‘democracy’ is merely a ‘discourse’ used by the Indian government and Western powers to confer legitimacy upon a thoroughly corrupted and unaccountable government. Another view was that the intrinsic nature of democracy inhibits good governance because elections water down the process of selecting leaders to a popularity contest as opposed to selecting on the basis of meritocracy or a commitment to the public good.

In China, when the economy grows the government gains legitimacy. But in India, however, the legitimacy of the ruling party’s prime minister comes from being elected by the people. Therefore, successfully implementing promises is not as important as winning elections. The legitimacy of the democratic system in many ways enables Indian governments to get away without realizing their promises. But Chinese leaders cannot afford this kind of luxury. So the Chinese government is more sensitive about the political and economic issues facing the country. (8 April 2014 censored)

⁵⁴ In a number of instances, the social media conversation turned adversarial with pro-CCP and anti-democracy comments met by rebuttals that the poster was a poser/paid contributor of the 五毛 (CCP Internet Brigade).

Democracy without equality is fake democracy. In a country where you have several hundred million illiterates you cannot talk about democracy. Do those illiterates have the (legal) right and opportunities to change their own fate? (8 April 2014 uncensored)

By having a ‘democratic’ (皿煮) facade, the Indian governments’ incapability, corruption, weakness, and laughableness doesn’t look so bad.’ [India is an example of a ‘fake democracy’] (8 April 2014 uncensored)

[Indian Election Day is pay day, ‘if you vote you can get a cow, sheep, or rice’] On Election Day, a poor rickshaw driver can get a big meal and extra income. (11 April 2014 uncensored)

India is thoroughly corrupt – a corrupted democracy. Under a dictatorship, if the person at the top is clean the system will not be corrupted because all who report to him will be worried about their lives. (14 April 2014 censored)

The idea of democracy as an international norm met even greater resistance. In most passages, no credibility was given to arguments that China should be a democracy because it is a norm promoted by international powers. A major outlier is the second excerpt below which expresses instrumental benefits to being democratic because it fosters better relations with great powers.

China’s democratic centralist system can become a model for world democracy. Ukraine, Syria, Egypt, Thailand, Brazil, and India have all had major democratic protests, not to mention Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan where there is the non-stop sound of bombs exploding. The people who see democracy as a cure for everything are now puzzled. Chinese democratic centralism can totally become something the whole world can follow. (10 April 2014 uncensored)

It is quite probable that in a war China would be defeated by international Great Powers just like what happened during the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. But because India acts like a democratic country, maintains friendly relationships with powerful countries and doesn’t prohibit the transit of weapons, India will have much more space to develop [over the long term]. (11 May 2014 censored)

Every time a public intellectual brags about how great India’s democratic system is I feel like vomiting. They say ‘India has the greatest democratic country. It is a government of poor people’ ... I just laugh. The great majority live in poverty accompanied by ignorance, crime, and stupidity. When poor people determine a country’s direction it is doomed. If you admire India just go immigrate there and take a bath in the Ganges river (干了这碗恒河水). (15 May 2014 censored)

As illustrated in this last passage, when people express that Indian democracy is good, they are frequently told by fellow tweeters to immigrate there and take a bath in the Ganga (Ganges) river.

By contrast, nuanced ideas of complexity, trade-offs, concept formation, and methodology also appear in some posts. One notion is that India’s economic or social ‘backwardness’ may not be due to democracy. Others concede democracy is intrinsically inclusive while noting this makes it hard to change things. Another theme is that constant repetition of something does not make it true.

Indian elections are related to the shortcomings of religion and the caste system. The degree of complexity and business can also surprise you. Although Indian elections do not have a very long

history, they can best be characterized as a strong masala curry and an Indian marathon. (April 9, 2014 uncensored)

Previously I conducted a little experiment creating an anger index of the ‘fifty cent’ (五毛) mob and their underlings. I discovered that their opinions on all issues bring up the Korean War, Indian democracy, Ukraine, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Then they would reach a conclusion about how great our country is. By over-simplifying, ignoring/blurring and making comedy/entertainment out of complex issues, it actually just leads to a lowering of people’s evaluations of the government and it leads more and more people to be influenced by Western influenced intellectuals. (24 April 2014 censored)

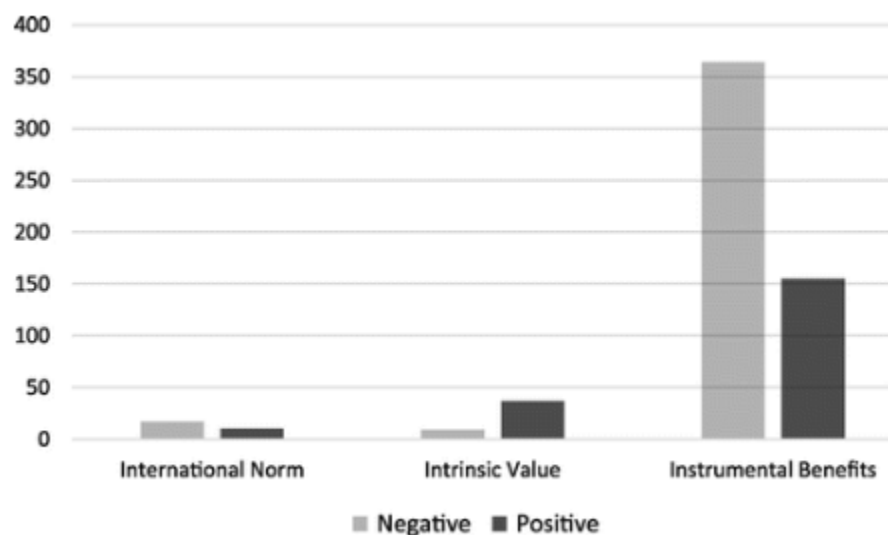
People think ‘one person, one vote; democracy and freedom’ is the solution to all social ills... These ‘democracy gangsters’ say the same thing over and over again. (26 April 2014 uncensored)

They are not only very poor, but also extremely democratic. Thinking about building a high-speed train? When building a rail line through a village even if only one person disagrees, it cannot be completed. For that reason until now they only have one stretch of highway. (30 April 2014 censored)

Taking a more nuanced approach towards the concept of ‘democracy, several people discuss different stages or degrees of democracy such as very well-functioning, decently functioning, and countries that claim to be democratic but are not so in practice, with India often depicted as being towards the middle to lower portion of this range. A few people also point out that India’s approach to liberal democracy represents only one variant among competing varieties of democracy.

To sum up, Chinese people made a wide range of arguments about democracy in India and in general. To quantitatively assess the frequency of these views, all 1126 original tweets mentioning the word ‘democracy’ were coded to see whether they portrayed democracy positively, negatively, or neutrally (see Appendix B for coding rules). The authors found that most held a neutral view (46.7%), but also discovered that negative views (35.1%) outnumbered positive ones (18.2%). The negative and positive tweets were then coded to assess what reasons were given for their opinions on democracy. The authors found those tweets discussing democracy promoted as an international norm by great powers were mostly negatively inclined towards democracy. By contrast, those focusing on intrinsic/procedural elements of democracy were mostly favorable to democracy. As shown in Figure 3, however, the greatest number of arguments about democracy focused on instrumental justifications (outcomes), and those seeing its outcomes as negative outnumbered those seeing it as positive by a ratio of about two to one.

Figure 3. Reasons for negative (opposing) or positive (supporting) attitudes towards ‘democracy’ in Chinese social media.



Conclusion

This study’s analysis of Chinese perceptions of democracy and India during the world’s largest election reveals several things. First, in the Chinese mass media there is massive censorship of ‘democracy’ as a topic. This leads us to believe, as previous studies have concluded, that elite voices are unanimous in seeking to block discussion of democracy.⁵⁵ Rather, Chinese mass media featured a considerable degree of sensationalism and entertainment-style coverage of the 2014 Indian general election focusing on stories such as Narendra Modi’s missing wife and Rahul Gandhi as a member of a political dynasty. Frequently discussed topics in social media were often similar to the mass media, suggesting that the latter influences the former more than vice versa.

In contrast to the mass media, however, there was a vibrant discussion about the merits of democracy among Chinese social media participants. It was observed that the public exchanges contained a fair number of pro-democracy voices, especially among those messages that were censored. Notably, a surprising number of contributors were favorable towards democracy even in India – a country that is large, poor, communally diverse, economically less developed, and which has faced challenges of corruption and violent conflicts. While ‘impoverished, dirty, chaotic India’ is one of the key narratives used by the CCP to propagandize against democracy, it is significant that many netizens dispute this.

In conclusion, popular input as observable from social media suggests that India’s current Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seen positively by many Chinese and that democracy’s value to the people of China appears to be largely dependent on what outcomes it can produce. It is not clear to what extent this is due to (pro-) government contributors, the dominant ideology, or what people actually think, but in both censored and uncensored tweets it was found that people’s attitude towards democracy is heavily shaped by outcomes, especially material outcomes. At the same time, there were others whose reasoning on

⁵⁵ See Émilie Frenkiel, *Conditional Democracy: The Contemporary Debate on Political Reform in Chinese Universities*.

democracy included considerations of political process. Although a minority, those people, for the most part, were strongly in favor of democracy. It is also worth reiterating that, in total, two thirds of Chinese netizens who commented on the Indian election exhibited either a neutral or positive impression towards Indian democracy. Thus, while geopolitical factors and economic rivalries may ultimately be the decisive factor in determining future Sino-Indian bilateral relations, it can be concluded that Chinese netizens for the most part do not see Indian democracy nearly as negatively as the Chinese mass media.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Most Popular Tweets

Forty most popular Weibo comments on the 2014 Indian election (those with 100 ± retweets)

Date (2014) (month/day)	Status	Retweets (No.)	Paraphrased content in brief
5/9	Hidden	4217	India is a democracy and has lots of good things including free medical care, free education, a democratic electoral system and rapid economic development. It does not have a 'develop first, clean up the environment later' model. It has a completely democratic Constitution. Pass it on!
4/8	Public	1300	800 million people voted in the Indian election.
4/13	Public	1000	Indian democracy is deeply respected by all nations.
5/17	Public	626	Democracy ensures diversity. Without democracy India would be a bigger threat to China.
4/8	Hidden	531	Modi supports the democratic Indian dream. What's going on with our Chinese dream?
4/9	Hidden	510	No riot or death in Indian election. Xinhua news agency is disappointed.
5/20	Hidden	493	Modi says government should work for the poor and low caste. India has more than 800 million people who live under \$2 per day.
4/19	Hidden	479	Secret video shows vice governor of Maharashtra threatening villagers to vote for his cousin or their water will be shut off.
4/10	Public	435	The only election violence was two soldiers killed and three hurt by Maoists.
5/16	Public	353	The BJP won 334 of 543 seats. The Congress party conceded the elections. Modi is the next prime minister.
4/11	Public	282	In a poor country like India, money/bribes are used to attract voters.
4/20	Hidden	240	Recap of international news this week includes Indian election still ongoing.
5/16	Hidden	233	Modi wants the twenty-first century to be India's century. He says it will take 10 years to achieve this.
5/12	Public	231	What do you think about when talking about our neighbor India?
5/16	Hidden	225	The US attitude towards Modi has changed. Before he was disliked, but now he is welcomed.
5/16	Hidden	203	When Modi was Gujarat Chief Minister he visited China many times, admired Chinese economic zones, and turned his state into an Indian Guangdong.
4/9	Public	202	Democracy doesn't necessarily improve national creativity, life expectancy, ethnic conflicts, or equality.
5/18	Hidden	179	63-yr old Modi who always appears as a bachelor admitted his arranged marriage.
5/16	Hidden	177	Nationalistic and business-oriented Modi will be the next Prime Minister.
4/12	Hidden	173	Two explosions occur. Maoists keep fighting and trying to interrupt election.

5/18	Public	170	Corruption is rampant in democratic countries of Asia and in the US. Privatization (which Western influenced intellectuals love) brings the most corruption.
4/9	Hidden	162	Donkeys were used to haul ballots in the Afghanistan election. India has 814 million people voting. This shows that neither bad transportation nor poverty is an obstacle to holding elections.
5/17	Hidden	155	The low born poor tea boy Modi defeats New Delhi's privileged 'little prince' Rahul Gandhi.
4/12	Hidden	149	Western-influenced Chinese intellectuals don't always know what they are talking about concerning developed countries.
5/7	Hidden	147	97-year old man who lives in the Himalayas walked several miles in the snow to vote in his 16th election.
5/17	Public	144	Under Modi, who was born in a lower caste, Gujarat's economy has grown fast and become the Guangdong of India.
5/15	Public	143	The opposition party has won. Will Modi apply the Gujarat model to all of India?
5/22	Hidden	136	Modi not only worked his way up from selling tea as a child. He also climbed a tree and saved a bird and saved alligators in the water. He is so perfect just like Kim Jung-un.
4/12	Hidden	132	In India, democracy is a right of citizens. Even the most remote villages have a polling station.
4/10	Hidden	132	India's failure proves democracy doesn't always work, but that is not a basis for dismissing democracy. The problem of not having democracy is you don't see what the problems are.
4/12	Hidden	126	Human rights should come first, living conditions second, and general economic development third.
5/15	Hidden	118	Indian journalist says India can learn from China: you not only need a leader to support reform, but the whole country must change its habits.
4/19	Hidden	113	You shouldn't be comparing India with China. Instead, you should be comparing it with Pakistan.
4/9	Hidden	111	The Indian election is really entertaining.
5/19	Public	107	Modi was married for 45 years, but they only lived together for 3 months!
5/19	Public	105	The Indian election will be good for world gold prices. It has gone up in the London market to \$1,304.90
4/10	Public	104	During the Indian elections, the BBC used a map showing the South of Tibet (labeled as Arunachal Pradesh) as Indian territory.
5/22	Public	104	Sri Lanka is a tropical island country just off of India.
5/5	Hidden	103	The Indian election has more people eligible to vote than the population of Europe. But people there do not really have equal rights.
5/16	Public	101	Modi's BJP party won the majority of seats and the market has responded positively. The Rupee is up as is the Indian stock index.

Appendix B. Coding of Tweets

All social media posts were coded by the authors for attitude expressed towards democracy. First, the authors coded whether a tweet as a whole articulated a positive, negative, or neutral view of democracy. Tweets not clearly depicting democracy as either good or bad or which talked about something other than democracy were coded as neutral. Non-neutral tweets were coded based on whether they depicted democracy as: (a) intrinsically good or bad (process), (b) instrumentally beneficial or not (outcome), or as (c) an internationally dominant norm.

A. Process. Tweets supporting democracy based on intrinsic process-based claims such as the following were coded as positive:

- China is politically backward for not adopting a democratic system.
- Participating in elections is a basic human right.
- Everyone has the right to vote and enjoy democracy.
- Democracy is (inherently) a good thing.
- Democracy/elections are morally right.
- We need to protect/have democracy (without any reason).
- The current Chinese system has to change/adopt democracy (without any reason).
- We should get more people to desire democracy.
- Democracy makes a country better.

By contrast, tweets making opposite process-claims were coded as negative towards democracy. In these instances, only process-based claims appeared and no tactical or instrumental reasons were additionally given to support or oppose democracy.

B. Outcomes. Positive tweets in this category made the argument that ‘democracy is good because...’ of reasons such as the following:

- Democracy gives a country peace.
- Democracy helps to prevent or eliminate corruption.
- Democracy helps build culture, improve equality.
- Democracy helps economic growth.
- Democracy helps a country have good foreign relations.
- Democracy is good for the rule of law.
- Democracy enables a change in government.

By contrast, negative tweets made the following types of arguments:

- Democracy does not give a country peace.
- Democracy does not prevent or eliminate corruption.
- Democracy does not improve equality.
- Democracy is bad for the economy.
- Democracy is inefficient.
- In democracies, only people from elite/famous families win elections.
- Democracy can give politicians an excuse for not performing well.
- Politicians just lie/bribe voters to win elections.

C. International norm. Tweets supporting democracy because it is an internationally dominant norm made claims such as the following:

- Democratic countries are mainstream countries.
- After growing economically, it's time to introduce democratic elections. This is the international trend.

By contrast, negative tweets made the following types of arguments:

- Other countries should learn from and adapt the Chinese political system.
- China should not blindly follow the political systems of other countries.