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Chinese-style Democracy as a Political Project for Meaning-Construction: Old Wine in a New Bottle?

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Abstract

Drawn from the textual data in the online and printed media from mainland China and Hong Kong, this article aims to identify and feature how Chinese-style democracy is constructed by engaging in discourse analysis, arguing that China-style democracy is not a political experiment aiming to critically reflect upon the weaknesses of democracy in conceptual and procedural aspects, and not a creative project focusing on how the Chinese experiences can refresh and reframe the conventional wisdom. Instead, it is a meaning-construction project surrounding the following themes explored: (1) negative Western democracy versus positive Chinese-style democracy in terms of efficiency, (2) Western democracy as the symbol of political failure, such as street politics, domestic struggles, chaos, (3) positivity of Chinese-style democracy with China's rise brought by reform and opening-up since 1978, and (4) perverting the language of Western democracy to construct Chinese-style democracy, such as rule of law, human rights.

Specialty, uniqueness and adaption, in the main, are the common ground during the process of meaning reconstruction, with the intention to conduct the political performance for an undemocratic, illiberal and autocratic regime.

Keywords: *Chinese-style democracy, Western democracy, stability, efficiency, street politics, discourse analysis*

1. Introduction

In reflecting upon Hong Kong's return to China over the past two decades, one of the paramount topics is about how democracy, as a concept, as an institution, as a political process, as an ideology and as a practice, is approached, actualized and then practiced in Hong Kong. Democracy became a major battlefield between China and Hong Kong in formulating and articulating Hong Kong's future in the late 1980s before the promulgation of the Basic Law in 1990. In this context, democracy was simply understood in terms of direct election for the Legislature and for the Chief Executive under the administration of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, according to the Basic Law, and then as an instrument to resist the Communist influence and infiltration after 1997.

This article aims to identify and interpret how democracy is arbitrarily redefined and embedded in Chinese style, this means that democracy, according to the domestic contexts in China, is reframed, altered and reinterpreted in the dimension of language; in other words, it is a political project of meaning reconstruction. Second, a rhetoric approach is adopted in various ways so that the power of redefining and reinterpreting democracy can be operated accumulatively and sustainably.

Inspired by Neimeyer (2001), meaning reconstruction is proposed and featured as follows: (1) the deliberate alternation of the assumptions and presumptions in order to meet the definite requirements of the agent, (2) uniqueness and exceptionality as two core assertions in justifying the process of alternation, (3) the making of duality: between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the conservative and the progressive, and (4) inconsistencies and contradictions can be detached between the original and the revised definitions, with the possible aims to make confusion between both versions, to shape and even distort the original one. This meaning reconstruction project is salient to the regime, as it is a deliberate plan to alter the cognition of the concept that the people are supposed to acknowledge and understand. For example, when democracy is translated in Chinese as *minzhu*, *min* (民) is understood as people and *zhu* (主) as superiority and ruling, including leadership and governing. Therefore, *min* is the key aspect to be interpreted in a dominant manner, noting that who is and can represent *min*, and then who can exercise legitimately its rule. Following the subsequent interpretations, another related statement that remarks “*renmin dangjia zuozhu*” (人民當家作主 – people are the master of the family and ruler of their own) is another vivid description to see how democracy in the Chinese context is actualized. It can be understood why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as the one single ruling party of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), reiterates that it represents the people, and then the government was named to be “Central People’s Government” (CPG) since its establishment in 1949.

In approaching this issue, discourse analysis is adopted in this article instead of engaging in an institutional and empirical study, with the reasons below. First, Chinese-style democracy, as mentioned above, is a cultural and political project introduced and enforced by the Chinese authorities in order to justify its governance and political practices in a

sustainable and constructive manner, rather than a comprehensive and incremental project for institutionalization. Second, non-Chinese-style democracy, labeled to be Western democracy is made and then labeled to be negative, problematic and even destructive so that it is reasonable to be criticized, rejected and even refused. Third, this political-cultural meaning reconstruction is not aimed to discover and even derive the possible alternatives to enhance democracy in a creative, dynamic, sophisticated and vivid way, and to reflect analytically and critically upon the weaknesses and insufficiencies of the democratic practices at the current institutional and procedural levels. Instead, democracy is served to be a decorative tool being manipulated, distorted and even misinterpreted intentionally in order to wrap the illiberal, autocratic and undemocratic rule.

This article deploys the articles drawn from the media in Mainland China and the West sharing the common theme, with objectives to explore the possible approaches, languages and discourse in introducing, reporting and examining Chinese-style democracy and to explore the similarities and differences in framing the ideas, in responding to the possible challenges arising from its discursive production and to discern the untold and hidden aspects when unfolding this universal concept.

2. Reviewing Chinese-style Democracy from an Institutional Perspective

Before engaging further in exploring the cultural meanings of Chinese-style democracy, a critical review is made hereby in order to highlight the key arguments and interpretations arising from the empirical research, then pointing out some of the observations and reflections arising from those discussions. Tsai Wen-Hsuan (2011) adopts four elements, namely (1) the root concept: an appropriate definition, (2) the concept ladder: possessing abstract and specific attributes, (3) the

overarching concept: adding the more abstract meaning or context, and (4) the subtypes: certain components and specific models made for the concept, to study how Chinese-style democracy is accumulatively and consistently articulated. By reviewing what he has argued, Chinese-style democracy is, to a certain extent, a succession of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. In other words, such Chinese characteristics dominate the definition, values and practices of democracy. In this connection, “Development of Socialist Democracy” is introduced, noting that democracy should be in line with socialism and development and these two concepts, to a certain extent, are contradictory in terms of nature, as development is a hallmark of capitalism. In the discursive context, “development”, by definition, refers to economic development. Second, it is debatable whether it can be connected to Marxist concepts of class, historical concepts, or Chinese history or culture, given the fact that no logical and empirical substantiations are made in connection with these aspects and the concept may be shaped in a fragmented and scattered fashion which can provide ample space for official hegemony as a result. Third, while it is understandable that the concept is produced in the light of legitimatizing hybrid regime, consisting of the autocratic core and democratic outlook through political processes such as elections, under the presence of selective and constrained liberties and pseudo-competition during the course, such democratic practices are indeed being manipulated, distorted and perhaps misled in different ways in order to legitimatize and maintain its rule, not to make power sharing, civic engagement, fair and open competition, and pluralism possible.

Chinese-style democracy can also be understood as a concept aiming to explain the adoption of democratization process under the Chinese model. Jung Nam Lee (2010: 87) examines from a historical perspective and argues that it is “not an attempt to seek a new model of

democracy that can replace the Western model of democracy or the existing model of the people's democracy, but rather a change to the CCP-led governance structure that addresses socioeconomic changes that have occurred in the wake of reforms". However, the holding of a negative view of Western democracy characterized by separation of powers, a multiparty system and free elections of top leaders, thus resists the possibility of power sharing, accountability and power transfer through an institutionalized channel (Lee, 2010: 92). In this dimension, it is interesting to see whether Chinese-style democracy is the synonym of power centralization and administrative efficiency without altering the current power structure and distribution.

Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo (2017) deploys this concept and then examines the 2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive election. Again, using the institutional approach, he actually features Chinese-style democracy in the following manner: (1) a group of elites selecting the Chief Executive, (2) stemming of political power from the central authorities and leadership, (3) democratic centralism in intra-party operation, (4) the inclusion of factional politics, with the presence of pro-democratic and pro-Beijing factions during the electoral process, and (5) political rights of individuals being conferred by the Chinese side, (6) top-down mode of authoritarisation. As a conclusion, he argues that:

The third hallmark of the election was the expression of Chinese-style democracy. It was an election with clear Chinese characteristics: rights conferred by Beijing on the 1,200 members of the Election Committee to select their Chief Executive; a limited degree of pluralism in which candidates were allowed to participate in televised debates; a selective interpretation of public opinion surveys by pro-Beijing press on how ordinary citizens perceived and supported the Beijing-favoured candidate; and the institutionalised nature of how

the PRC Premier endorsed and appointed Lam (Cheng Yuet-ngor Carrie) as the next Chief Executive. All of these were significant features of Beijing's idea of democracy, with considerable implications for both Hong Kong and China in the long run.

(Lo, 2017: 116)

Based on his argumentation, democracy is only a form, an illusion, and even an instrument in order to fulfil the totalistic and autocratic practice in undergoing political process. In this connection, one interesting observation is that autocracy is the de facto and core aspect in practice whereas democracy is utilized and manipulated deliberately in order to redecorate autocracy by deploying the selective and demonstrative form of democratic practices, especially election and voting. By reviewing Lo's features, there are in a de facto sense no obvious differences between Chinese-style democracy and autocracy.

Of course, Chinese-style democracy can also be further decorated in the stunning manner by adding positive and gorgeous language. Mainland Chinese scholars Zongchao Peng, Ben Ma and Taoxiong Liu (2017) publishes a book entitled *Chinese cooperative-harmonious democracy*, which can be regarded to be the substantiation of this concept that is aimed to buttress the soft power in redefining democracy with Chinese characteristics. This book reiterates the argument that the current regime is intended to develop its own way and style in undertaking democracy without copying the Western model, as the following paragraph indicates:

Therefore, we believe that to see true ideological emancipation, the direction of China's democracy development is neither a simple continuation of the existing traditional socialist democracy (a democratic model with more emphasis on the development of

collective right and the concentration of power) nor a mechanical copy of the Western liberal democracy (a democratic model focusing more on individual freedom and decentralization), but a “cooperative-harmonious democracy” characterized by its own history, culture and social conditions. The focus of the model is to leverage Chinese intellectual heritage, such as “harmony and cooperation” thought, and “people-oriented” thought with the existing collective rights for development, to enhance the institutional advantage by keeping moderate concentration of powers, and to take into account a moderate expansion of personal freedom and rights as well as public power control mechanism in order to achieve the organic unity between the individual and the collective, democracy and centralism; by employing principles of modern cooperative game theory in relevant system design, to promote a maximized integration of interests, to resolve conflicts, to eliminate confrontation, and to achieve cooperation and harmonious development among social parties, even in the event of possible conflict. Its core value is not only to maximize the citizens’ freedom and rights, but also to realize the best collective interests through the centralized and institutionalized authority, so as to achieve harmonious coexistence between the individual rights and the collective rights as well as between major political parties.

(Peng, Ma and Liu, 2017)

Reviewing from a discursive perspective, the above remark highlights three features: (1) cooperative-harmonious democracy has been deliberately articulated in an idealistic manner in managing the problems arising from democracy, (2) relationships between cooperation and harmony and people’s thought amid democracy need to be delineated and connected concretely in deriving the theory; however, there is no

answer regarding how this can be operated under the suppression, dominance and hegemony of the Chinese authorities, and (3) the above description looks like a collection of all attractive and persuasive words, and then upholding the assertion that Chinese-style democracy is the flawless version of democracy.

By summing up the above review, they share in common regarding China-style democracy, including the institutional articulation within the authoritarian, dominant and repressive polity under the party-state dominance and the selection of democratic gestures to create an idealistic imagination. However, if democracy is not aimed virtually to undergo any changes of disengagement, maladministration, unaccountability and authoritarianism in the eyes of the authorities, then the only possible purpose is to create the imposed meanings for democracy according to its own political needs, and such meanings and interpretations, to a certain extent, can be inconsistent with and even contradictory to the nature of democracy. In the following section, discourse analysis will be conducted by deploying the texts drawn from Chinese and global media narrating and discussing Chinese-style democracy, focusing on how meanings are generated, circulated and interpreted.

Theme 1: Western-style versus Chinese-style democracy

In framing Chinese-style democracy, one common method used is to divide democracy according to the desired outcomes: positive and negative. As *Bloomberg News* quotes the Chinese official Xinhua News Agency:¹

Western style democracy used to be a recognized power in history to drive social development. But now it has reached its limits ... China doesn't have a better Communist system than it used to have, but the

global economic and political turmoil has undermined public confidence in western democracy.

(*Bloomberg News*, 23rd January 2017)²

The identical assertion has been made by state media in mentioning both Chinese- and Western-style democracy:³

The country's rapid development was projected as its ambition to compete with the Western world to prove that "China-style autocracy" is superior to "Western democracy". Such an ineradicable bias leads the skeptics to amplify some problems in China's development.

(*China Daily*, 5th February 2009)⁴

Next, the deliberate selection of negative language to describe Western democracy is followed, which is the vivid way to visualize how undesirable that it can be:⁵

[The outgoing head of China's legislature Wu Bangguo] said the party's leadership over the congress' legislative work was a fundamental requirement in keeping with China's rejection of the Western political concept of separation of powers. And he said the body upheld the uniqueness of China's system and "resolutely resisted the influence of all kinds of erroneous thought and theories."

(*Fox News*, 8th March 2013)⁶

China must beware the "trap" of Western-style democracy, the ruling Communist Party's flagship newspaper [*People's Daily*] said yesterday, five days after the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

(*The Australian*, 10th June 2014)⁷

The flagship newspaper of the Communist Party of China [*People's Daily*] carried a signed article yesterday, calling on people to guard against “the trap of Western-style democracy”.

(*The Herald*, 10th June 2014)⁸

Blindly copying Western-style democracy can only bring disaster, an influential mainland Communist Party journal [求是 / *Qiushi*] wrote in its latest edition, following more than a week of Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests.

(*South China Morning Post*, 7th October 2014)⁹

China's state media used Donald Trump's inauguration as U.S. president to warn about the perils of democracy ... Democracy has reached its limits, and deterioration is the inevitable future of capitalism, according to the People's Daily, the flagship paper of China's Communist Party. It devoted an entire page on Sunday to critiquing Western democracies, quoting former Chairman Mao Zedong's 1949 poem asking people to “range far your eyes over long vistas” and saying the ultimate defeat of capitalism would enable Communism to emerge victorious.

(*Bloomberg News*, 23rd January 2017)¹⁰

In contextualizing Western-style democracy mentioned above, perils, trap, disaster, limit, craze, deterioration, ultimate defeat and erroneous thought and theories are deployed. In positioning such keywords, all are indeed sharing the common premises: (1) Western-style democracy is the major source of the political troubles, chaos and disorder that the current leadership and authorities should prevent and resist, (2) the Western governments, such as the United States and

United Kingdom, practicing democracy seem to be acceptant and tolerant of such problematic and inferior conditions making disorder and instabilities possible, and (3) Western-style democracy lacks the determinative and constructive mentality to improve, leading to its decline. On the contrary, the Chinese-style democracy, based on the undesirable practice of the West, has shown its merits in terms of practices which will be discussed below, despite the fact that such practices are mentioned under party propaganda controlled by the state. The division of the Western- and Chinese-style democracy is one of the important aspects in meaning-making, with the objective of imposing an absolute judgment of being good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, superior and inferior as well as virtuous and evil (Rashidi and Souzandehfar, 2010). Of course, it is only the first step toward this project; delineation and substantiation of such division is followed sustainably in order to deepen and internalize such perception.

Theme 2: Western-style democracy as the symbol of political failure

The deployment of rhetorical approach to describe how bad Western-style democracy is seems to be so dramatic in creating textual impact. To buttress such impact, disorder, chaos, inefficiencies, corruption, dominance are chosen and stressed intentionally, as the following extracts demonstrate:¹¹

“Copying Western-style democracy would probably lead to disaster” and “street politics usually leads to domestic turmoil and even civil war”, according to the article by Mi Bohua [in the *People’s Daily* on 9th June 2014] ... For the United States and other Western countries, anything that accords with their interests and accepts their manipulation is democracy, while those that do not fit the norm are not, said the article ... Some countries in western Asia and northern

Africa have fallen into the craze for Western-style democracy, which has led to irretrievable secession and endless domestic struggles instead of happiness and stability, it said. Countries in western Asia and northern Africa, Ukraine and Thailand, which have experienced street protests and even armed conflicts, have been led astray to the wrong path of Western-style democracy, that is, “street politics”, according to the article. In most of the cases, the United States and some Western forces have been involved in the street politics in these countries, either on stage or behind the scenes, it said. These cases show that copying Western-style democracy with no respect for the actual situations and cultural differences of a certain country will mostly be unsuccessful ... “In many circumstances, the so-called ‘value of democracy’ has become a big stick for certain countries to practise hegemony and new interventionism,” it said.

*(The Herald, 10th June 2014)*¹²

If one examines how “democracy” is working in other nations across the globe then one can see its applications are by no means 100 per cent democratic as far as their respective electorates are concerned. The recent presidential election in the US, for example, has resulted in Donald Trump becoming president-elect by amassing 306 Electoral College votes, which is more than Hillary Clinton’s 232 votes. However, if one defines democracy as “one person, one vote” then Clinton’s popular vote of 64 million would have a 1.7 per cent margin over Trump’s 62 million - but in this case she is the loser. It demonstrates that universal suffrage is being practiced but in the end being defeated by a not-so-perfect voting process. If this can happen in a recognised democratic superpower like the US, what chances are there for “greater democracy and better government” for other countries like Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria - nations with

totally diverse backgrounds to the ideal democratic state that the US intends to promote?

(*The Straits Times*, 2nd December 2016)¹³

Earlier this week, Hong Kong's first chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, warned that a competitive election could trigger conflict between various groups, races or religion and lead to confrontation between the rich and the poor. He said clashes are inevitable in the absence of a shared conviction and sense of national identity. "We have no intention to deny the importance of democracy, but when we take competitive elections as a key part of, or even the only measurement for, democracy, the judgment itself will undoubtedly be an erroneous one." Tung told a forum organised by his Our Hong Kong Foundation.

(*EJ Insight*, 21st December 2016)¹⁴

In China's political system, the NPC is the supreme organ of state power. The central government, the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate answer to the NPC and are supervised by it. In the West, the parliament stands equally with the administration and justice arms, and the three balance and checks [sic] each another. This vertical design has the advantages of uniting different forces in governance and avoiding internal frictions ... There is certainly no need for China to copy the Western system, a move which will only lead to chaos and failure, as the experiences of certain countries have shown.

(Xinhua, 3rd March 2017)¹⁵

What distinguishes socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics from the West's largely money politics and power-for-money deals is its solid foundation of public opinion, which highlights the people's

interests and aspirations ... While many countries stagnate in state governance, China grows and stays stable. The answer lies in the people's congress system, multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC. It is quite different from the Western system of multiple bickering parties holding office in turn. It is fundamentally different from other systems under which candidates are often skilled in winning elections but have not enough practical experiences in governance. Just as the Economist reported, "Direct democracy is fine for things that do not matter, such as the Eurovision song contest. But it is no way to run a country."

(Xinhua, 10th March 2017)¹⁶

Unlike Western democracies, which seem increasingly obsessed with showmanship and short-term elections, China's leadership has a long-term target and is more inclined to plan for the next generation and beyond. Once the Chinese leadership makes a blueprint, it sees it through.

(*China Daily*, 17th March 2017)¹⁷

By synthesizing the above textual data which share the similarities in regard to Western-style democracy, they are indeed designing a consistent story by deploying the rhetorical approach, including: (1) the terrible outcomes and worse situations being designated for and connected with the practice of Western-style democracy, (2) the linguistic exhaustion of negative terms related to domestic unrest and instabilities, notably "chaos", "failure", "street politics", "domestic turmoil", "civil war", "irretrievable secession and endless domestic struggles", "armed conflicts", "led astray to the wrong path", (3) political process subjected also to devaluation and even distortion in such ways as "(anything) accords with their interests", "manipulation (of

democracy)", "the United States and some Western forces ... either on stage or behind the scenes", "hegemony", "interventionism", "money politics", "power-for-money deals", "multiple bickering parties", "winning elections but have not enough practical experiences in governance", "short-term election", "showmanship", "(democracy/election) as one person one vote", "trigger conflict between various groups", "internal frictions", (4) using the metaphors, such as using the Eurovision song contest as election, and (5) the deliberate selection of such "democratic" countries or regions mentioned above, namely Thailand, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Hong Kong, pointing out that political failure is prevalent because of following the Western-style democracy in order to substantiate its claims, even though accuracy and authenticity are not attended in constructing meanings.

The selective distortion of the Western-style democracy, to a certain extent, can be attributed to the mentality of totalistic dominance, a term borrowed from Wael B. Hallaq (2009: 446) referring to a status of which "the conquest of the mind and the conquest of the body" are possible. Adopting the contemporary Chinese context, such a conquest can be operationalized in the way of deliberate selection of a dominant aspect, then serving as a monopolistic version of world view. In responding to the alternative and critical views, specialty and uniqueness will be employed to achieve self-rationalization. When falling into logical and empirical fallacy, antagonism and rebuttal will be made. Of course, the positivity of the subject is made as well concurrently so that its negativity can be highlighted and profound. Overall, the entire rhetorical process is self-proclaimed and self-imagined with hostility and rejection.

Theme 3: Positivity of Chinese-style democracy with China's rise

While criticizing the Western-style democracy based on the established foundation of rejection and hostility mentioned above, it is equally

salient to show appreciation for the achievements, influence and contribution. Based on the following texts, textual and numeral data are deployed to substantiate what they assert:¹⁸

Compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese media, however, have mainly focused on positive coverage of other countries in the hope of gaining valuable experiences or lessons for China. Since the reform and opening up, Chinese leaders have reaffirmed on many occasions that the country is committed to absorbing and learning any useful experiences from other countries, including those from capitalists.

(*China Daily*, 5th February 2009)¹⁹

The most important criteria to assess whether political development accords with the Chinese people's fundamental interests is development and stability, said the article [by Mi Bohua in *People's Daily* on 9th June 2014].

(*The Herald*, 10th June 2014)²⁰

In most of these countries' street politics, whether openly or behind the scenes, American and Western forces have been involved. If we remain on guard against the trap of Western-style democracy, persist in reform and opening up, and continue on the path of political development with Chinese characteristics, no one can stop China's peaceful rise.

(*The Australian*, 10th June 2014, quoting a commentary in the *People's Daily* signed by senior editor Mi Bohua on 9th June 2014)²¹

[Hong Kong SAR's first chief executive] Tung [Chee-hwa] also criticised western-style democracy and efforts to promote Chinese-style consultative democracy. Under the current regime, top leaders foster public consensus via a system of consultative conferences. Tung said the Chinese government achieved more than other emerging economies that follow the western democracy model such as India.

(*EJ Insight*, 21st December 2016)²²

China's state media used Donald Trump's inauguration as U.S. president ... touting the relative stability of the Communist system as President Xi Jinping heads toward a twice-a-decade reshuffle of senior leadership posts.

(*Bloomberg News*, 23rd January 2017)²³

Unlike multi-party systems in the West, there are no majority party or minority parties in the NPC. The NPC upholds the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The proposition of the CPC becomes the will of the state upon the approval of the NPC. China's success story over the past decades has demonstrated that the system of people's congresses conforms to the conditions in China. In fact, the NPC has been a key part of that story.

(Xinhua, 3rd March 2017)²⁴

The system of people's congresses is designed to include people from various backgrounds and cover a good cross-section of society. Compared with legislators in the West who make politics their career and usually have a staff and campaign team, NPC deputies are part-time and many of them are ordinary citizens. A deputy to the NPC can

be the country's president or a farmer, a celebrated tycoon or a migrant worker, a lawyer or an official.

(Xinhua, 3rd March 2017)²⁵

In China, democracy means "the people are the masters of the country" ... People's democracy is the lifeblood of socialism, and the people as masters of the country is the essence and core of socialist democracy, President Xi Jinping has stressed ... The composition of NPC deputies and advisors to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee offers an illustration. Of the nearly 3,000 deputies to the 12th NPC, about 13 percent are workers and farmers, up 5.18 percentage points from that of the 11th NPC. The number of professionals also rose by 1.2 percentage points. Of the more than 2,000 political advisors to the 12th CPPCC National Committee, 39.9 percent are Communist Party of China (CPC) members and 60.1 percent are non-Communist members, and all 56 ethnic groups have their representative members ... In China, public matters are often settled through consultation involving all parties. Finding the best way to coordinate the aspirations and demands of the whole of society is the true meaning of people's democracy. This has been evident in Xi's schedule at the ongoing annual two sessions. Actually, other Chinese leaders have also listened to the opinions of legislators and political advisors in a face-to-face manner ... As Xi has noted, "democracy is not a decoration, but a means of solving problems."

(Xinhua, 10th March 2017)²⁶

Macao's experience also demonstrates that only by aligning democratic development with the resumption of sovereign rule by the motherland can we avoid escalating the inherent conflict between two

systems (capitalism and socialism) and provide systematic assurance for economic development and improving people's livelihoods.

*(China Daily, 10th May 2017)*²⁷

The above texts derive the following methods to vindicate empirically their claims: (1) positive outcomes arising from Chinese-style democracy: (economic) development, improving people's livelihoods, stability, people are the masters of the country, public consensus, opening-up, peaceful rise, solving problem, representativeness, and (2) means and mechanism to achieve the above outcomes: consultative conferences, consultation involving all parties, people's congresses, leadership of the CCP, accords with the Chinese people (and fundamental interests), listening to the opinions of legislators and political advisors in a face-to-face manner, inclusion of people from various backgrounds covering a good cross-section of society, absorbing and learning any useful experiences from capitalists (maybe the capitalist states in context). By simply connecting (1) and (2), it is at ease to associate with the desirable and idealistic scenarios. Instrumentalism and outcome-based mentality are prevailed in supporting its current governance. The above extracts are articulated in a full swing with regard to the achievements of Chinese-style democracy, fully averting attention from the dark side of its autocratic rule – such perennial aspects as the promotion of personal cult, repression of political dissidents like Liu Xiaobo, suppression of freedom of thought and expression, and power abuse and corruption are not touched. Of course, means and mechanisms mentioned above can be decorative and performative in order to buttress the textual impacts in promoting Chinese-style democracy.

Theme 4: Perverting the language of Western-style democracy to construct Chinese-style democracy

From a historical perspective, the selective copying of the West seems to be consistent in modern and contemporary Chinese history from “The Chinese learning for fundamental principles and the Western learning for practical uses” (中學為體，西學為用) in late Qing era (晚清, 1840-1912), “sinification of Marxism” advocated by Mao Zedong (毛澤東) during the Yan’an (延安) period of the Communist China (1937-45), to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” since the 1980s. Despite having the different concepts in ideological construction, they share in common in regard to how two divergent ideas are connected arbitrarily to rationalize the values and actions. In this context, it is not surprising that there is a formula, of which one Western concept plus one Chinese concept put together to form a “new” concept as mentioned above. Additionally, one Western concept is redefined in the divergent and perhaps the opposite way in order to intentionally claim its uniqueness and speciality. The notable examples are “human rights” and “rule of law”. The former is defined as “right of substance” (*shengcun quan* / 生存權) and the former is as “rule by law” (*yifai zhiguo* / 依法治國). Such rhetorical approach is aimed to pretend the people believing that the same thing is existing in reality; however, it is only the name without substance. The following extracts are the typical examples demonstrating how such an illusion is produced:²⁸

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China and its adoption of the reform and opening-up initiative in particular, the socialist democratic politics and rule of law have been continuously nurtured by Chinese people of all ethnic groups under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) ... The continuous development of

the socialist Constitutional system with Chinese characteristics is attributed to the compatibility between the nature and purpose of the ruling CPC and its ruling methods with the principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law contained in the country's Constitution. It is known that the CPC comes from the people and serves the people. All of its powers originate from and also work for the general public. The Party is always attached to the interest of the people at any time. This demonstrates the Party's quintessential core of democracy. Since its founding, the fundamental purpose of the ruling Party has been to serve the people whole-heartedly, with the interests of working class and ordinary people in its mind. It holds no special interests for itself. Such an unwavering aim has been compatible with the value of human rights ... With its actions in the past decades, the Party has fully proved itself to be the consistent protector and staunchest promoter of human rights for Chinese people. In the new historical period, the CPC has realized a transition from the previous rule of people and rule of policy to the rule of law. Administering according to laws has become the basic form of the Party's governance of the whole nation. President Hu Jintao and other top Party officials have stressed on many occasions the authority of the Constitution and other laws and have taken the lead in studying some of the country's important legal articles. It has become a common consensus among the whole Party to learn laws, abide by laws and work in accordance with laws. The agreement between the CPC's ruling ideology and the principle of the rule of law has greatly advanced the theory of the China-style socialist Constitution and its application.

*(China Daily, 9th February 2009)*²⁹

Rather than creating policy conundrums or delays -- as is often the case with parliaments in some Western nations when the ruling party or coalition does not hold a majority -- the people's congress system lends support to and supervises the government to achieve effective governance and rule of law ... With nearly 3,000 deputies, the NPC is different from the legislatures in Western political systems.

(Xinhua, 3rd March 2017)³⁰

He [Xi Jinping] emphasizes the rule of law and checks on power, as seen in his decision to create a national supervision commission.

Lawmakers are also compiling a civil code to better protect people's rights.

(*China Daily*, 17th March 2017)³¹

Human rights, based on the above texts, are not about the enjoyment and protection of civil and political rights, but come from the ruling party as it comes from the people and serves the people. The rhetorical paradox is founded as “party = people (*renmin* / 人民) = human (*ren* / 人)”, then “power comes from party = power comes from people”. Therefore, when the party rules and serves the people, the party exercises human rights. In addition, rule of law is defined in the Communist context as (1) the party utilizes laws and regulations to rule the country which coincides with the definition of law according to Legalism (*fajia* / 法家) advocated by Han Feizi (韩非子), (2) the studying and learning of laws according to party and leaders' line, and (3) the supervision of state by an unrepresentative and unaccountable legislative and supervisory body in order to create an impression that “the government is supervised” from an institutional perspective. Above all, the combination of the Western concept and the Chinese substance turns out to be effective to claim that China can be comparable to, and

even more competent than the Western democratic countries as the Chinese authorities have performed excellently, thereby producing the false consciousness.

3. Discussion and Conclusion: Constructing the New, or Old Wine in a New Bottle?

It should be reminded that by studying through discourse analysis, the main focus is not to verify or validate empirically the political discourse constructed and circulated by the Chinese authorities, but to explore and interpret the premises, features and possible impacts brought by state apparatus in creating and producing knowledge for political purposes, including the foundation of legitimacy, the maintenance of hegemony, and normalization and internalization of false consciousness. In interpretive methodology, the ambiguity and plasticity of meaning-making and of the systems of symbols, including language, used to express and communicate meaning to oneself and to others are understood as creating the possibility for multiple interpretations of acts, events, settings, and so forth (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Specialty, uniqueness and adaption are the common ground during the process of distorting, confusing and misleading the audience in this project of meaning reconstruction.

As discussed above, however, this project runs short of copying, rather than creating, the meanings anew to the existing concepts borrowed from the West that the previous historical experiences have been repeated. In other words, as mentioned in the introductory section, it is not a political experiment conducted by the Chinese authorities for reflecting upon and even improving democracy in terms of procedural practice. It is definitely not an attempt to provide the possible alternatives for the future of democracy based on the Chinese experience. As a result, the new meanings with institutional substances

come out. This project, in the main, is the political performance conducted by an undemocratic, illiberal and autocratic regime mainly relying upon economic achievements made by the reform and opening-up since 1978 to demonstrate its greatness and might. Therefore, promoting Chinese-style democracy is not based on the procedural, institutional and political experiences gained and accumulated in order to contribute to democracy, but on the might of the state and pro-Beijing media inside and outside of the mainland to undertake a political spinning, producing the image of China as a country of progress, development, richness, prospect and openness.

Notes

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