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The Meanings of Democracy

THE SHADOW OF CONFUCIANISM

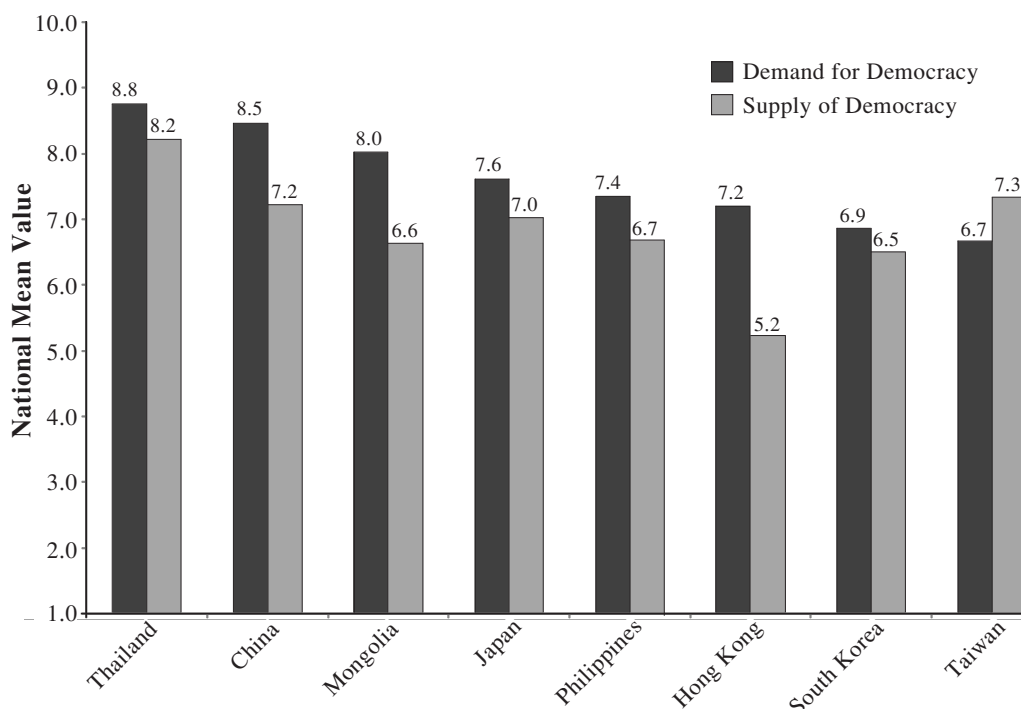
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A number of countries in East Asia have successfully made the transition to democracy, and surveys reveal strong popular support for liberal democracy across the region.¹ People express this support in spite of the disputed electoral outcomes, incessant political strife, partisan gridlock, and recurring political scandals that have plagued most East Asian democracies. Stranger still, some East Asian states have effectively resisted the powerful “third wave” of global democratization altogether, despite three decades of sustained economic growth—a striking contradiction of modernization theory. The resilience of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is especially puzzling, as surveys in China have yielded contradictory results: Majorities in China claim strong support for democracy and, at the same time, a high level of satisfaction with the country’s authoritarian regime.² What explains such contrary sentiments? The answer lies in the survey methods themselves and in defining a Confucian concept of democracy.

There are two main strategies used to measure popular support for democracy. The first approach probes citizens’ levels of satisfaction with democracy in their own countries. The second seeks individuals’ evaluations of various democratic principles.³ Cross-national survey research using these two strategies has yielded mixed results: When democracy is defined as a general principle, people in most countries support it; when it is measured by different principles, the situation becomes less clear.

In order to refine survey instruments, Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and E. Gyimah-Boadi developed a new approach for measur-

FIGURE—DEMAND AND SUPPLY OF DEMOCRACY IN ABS II

Note: These figures were derived from responses to the following questions: For demand, “If 1 indicates entirely unsuitable, and 10 indicates entirely suitable, please tell us how suitable you think democracy is for your country?”; and for supply, “If 1 means entirely undemocratic, and 10 means entirely democratic, please tell us how democratic you believe your country is under the current regime.”

ing people’s democratic aspirations. Borrowing concepts from political economy, these scholars measured people’s democratic aspirations by the gap between the popular demand for democracy and the institutional supply of democracy.⁴ Demand is measured by the aggregate perception of democracy’s suitability for respondents’ own countries, and supply is measured by the perceived level of democracy that respondents enjoy under their current regime.

The Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS) adopted this approach but found results that raised even more questions. Using a ten-point scale, the Figure above compares the demand for democracy with its perceived supply in seven East Asian countries and Hong Kong, and shows that an overwhelming majority of Asians are committed to democracy. Notably, survey participants in China were second only to those in Thailand in their expressed desire for democracy. By contrast, Korea and Taiwan, both fairly recently democratized countries, scored lowest in this category. Looking at the supply side does not provide any more insight. In this case, Thailand (a country whose democracy is precarious) scored the highest in East Asia. Here again, the most surprising finding is the mean score (7.2) for China—the only authoritarian society included in the survey—which is higher than all but those of Thailand and Taiwan. Are mainlanders really committed to democracy? How can the perceived supply of democracy in an authoritarian country be so high?

Is the Chinese understanding of democracy the same as that generally held by citizens of established democracies?

In the West, democracy is typically defined as a set of institutional arrangements created to reach decisions on public issues and to ensure good governance. At the heart of these arrangements lie open and competitive elections. The system must also allow the free flow of information so that people can make informed decisions. In such political systems, participation is a basic right of ordinary citizens, who are allowed not only to press officials regarding policy concerns but also to replace those leaders with different ones through established procedures.

This procedural conception of democracy is not uncontested, however. Robert A. Dahl writes that “a perennial alternative to democracy is government by guardians,” a concept that has historically appealed to a great variety of political leaders around the world.⁵ According to Dahl:

If Plato provides the most familiar example [of viewing governance as guardianship], the practical ideal of Confucius, who was born more than a century before Plato, has had far more profound influence over many more people and persists to the present day, deeply embedded in the cultures of several countries, including China.⁶

Can societies with different cultural and political traditions end up cultivating different understandings of democracy? It seems reasonable to suppose so.

Here we will focus on the Confucian tradition—specifically, the Chinese theory of government by guardians built on the doctrine of *minben*, which requires the government to treat the welfare of the common people as the foundation of its wealth and power. This idea is reflected in the classic Chinese maxim, *minwei bangben* (the people alone are the basis of the state), and in the injunction of the ancient Confucian philosopher Mencius that “most important are the people; next come the land and grain; and last the princes.” *Minben* is a decidedly paternalistic idea. It promotes the welfare of the people in order to keep the rulers in power, not to extend autonomy or participation in government to the common man. Although there are various and nuanced connotations associated with the *minben* doctrine, there is some consensus among scholars that it offers a distinct understanding of democracy.

Minben and liberal democracy both ideally seek to promote the public welfare, but they differ in many other critical respects. First, although both insist that government should work for the people, *minben* and liberal democracy specify different means for delivering good governance—via appropriate procedural arrangements in a liberal democracy and under the steady hand of elites according to Confucianism, which holds (like all “guardian” concepts of governance) that “rulership should be entrusted to a minority of persons who are specially qualified to govern by reason of their superior knowledge and virtue.”⁷

Second, the two theories assess governmental legitimacy differently. In the liberal-democratic tradition, a government acquires legitimacy primarily through fair elections. Following the *minben* doctrine, however, a government's legitimacy is essentially defined by the substance and outcomes of its policies. Thus, for the latter, what a government does—how well it performs and cares for its people—is more important than how it came to be.

The third difference lies in the role that each philosophy assigns to popular political participation. In a liberal democracy, participation is a basic right guaranteed by the social contract between citizens and their government. The *minben* doctrine, however, limits the scope of ordinary citizens' political participation mainly to conveying their concerns to political leaders. Ordinary citizens have the right to oppose their government only under extreme conditions—that is, if a ruler loses the “Mandate of Heaven.” This gives political leaders greater freedom to deviate from public opinion when making policy. While the *minben* doctrine neither prevents people from expressing their opinions to leaders nor allows rulers to ignore popular demands,⁸ ordinary citizens are regarded as shortsighted and incapable of making decisions on major issues. In brief, political leaders are expected to make decisions based on their own judgments about what will best serve the collective interest, although consulting public opinion may help these leaders to make better decisions.

A number of scholars have called attention to such differences between the two traditions. According to Andrew Nathan, many political figures in China have bravely expressed their opinions to the authorities but rarely considered overthrowing their government. In a more recent study of deputies to China's legislature, the National People's Congress, Kevin O'Brien observes the same pattern of behavior.⁹ Moreover, in the *minben* tradition, the CCP's “Democratic Centralism,” “Three Represents,” and “Harmonious Society” campaigns all have either implicitly or explicitly presented the CCP regime as what a good government should be.

The differences between the liberal-democratic and *minben* traditions are sometimes subtle and difficult to discern. Both require the government to work “for the people,” but call for different ways of selecting government officials. Both encourage people to share their opinions, but the nature of political expression is fundamentally different according to each doctrine. We suspect that for many people living within the ambit of the Confucian tradition, the two philosophies tend to blur together, giving rise to a unique understanding of democracy according to the *minben* doctrine.

How Do People Understand Democracy?

To find out exactly how people in East Asia understand democracy, the ABS asked the open-ended question: “What does democracy mean to

you?” This question required respondents to define democracy in their own words. Interviewers were instructed to probe respondents two more times after hearing the first answer. Given our concern about the impact of Confucian cultural and political traditions on people’s understanding of democracy, we focused our analysis on China and Taiwan.¹⁰ Since both societies share a Confucian cultural inheritance but have followed divergent political paths since the late 1980s, with Taiwan adopting a democratic system and China remaining authoritarian, we began with the expectation that the popular understanding of democracy in the two countries would be more different than similar.

Survey participants provided an array of responses when asked for their definitions of democracy. Some answers showed that respondents’ understanding of democracy clearly followed either the liberal or *minben* tradition, whereas many others were extremely ambiguous. Moreover, a large percentage of our respondents could not provide any substantively meaningful answers. To facilitate a systematic comparison, we divided all responses into four major categories: 1) procedural understanding—“elections,” “checks and balances,” “division of power among different branches of the government,” and “government follows people’s opinions when making decisions”; 2) *minben* understanding—“government takes people’s interests into consideration when making decisions,” “government brings tangible benefits to people,” “government takes care of people’s interests,” and “government allows people to tell their opinions”; 3) other understandings—“I can do whatever I want to,” “equality,” “democratic centralism,” and “chaos”; and 4) don’t know (DK).

We then created a five-category typology using the corresponding weighted percentages and raw frequencies shown in the Table on page 128. To be classified as “procedural understanding,” all answers provided by a respondent needed to include at least one that was coded as procedural understanding and none coded as *minben* understanding. To be classified as “*minben* understanding,” all answers provided by a respondent needed to have at least one coded as *minben* understanding and none coded as procedural understanding. Respondents who gave some answers coded as procedural understanding and others coded as *minben* understanding were classified as “mixed understanding.” Those whose answers were coded as neither procedural understanding nor *minben* understanding were classified as “others.” The key factor in our typology was the coherence of a respondent’s understandings of democracy. Thus only those who provided consistent answers were classified as having either a “procedural” or a “*minben*” understanding of this form of government.

As the Table shows, the distribution of various understandings of democracy is markedly different between the two societies. Large shares of survey participants in both countries—roughly 22 percent in

TABLE—DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF DEMOCRACY

	Taiwan		PRC	
	Weighted Percentage	Raw Frequency	Weighted Percentage	Raw Frequency
Procedural	29.7	(466)	24.6	(819)
<i>Minben</i>	6.7	(96)	14.1	(541)
Mixed	1.8	(26)	4.6	(174)
Others	39.8	(550)	14.7	(536)
DK	22.1	(277)	42.0	(1,113)

Source: ABS II (n = 3,183 for the PRC; n = 1,415 for Taiwan)

Taiwan and 42 percent in China—had no idea what democracy means. Not only is this an alarming result for Taiwan, a country that claims democracy as a core value, but it also suggests that a democratic transition in China is unlikely to happen in the near future. Still, the percentage of respondents with no clear understanding of democracy in China dwarfs that of Taiwanese participants, indicating the importance of actual experience with democracy in increasing people's knowledge of democracy.

The differences between China and Taiwan in the other categories seem to confirm our expectations of the impact of different cultural traditions on the popular understanding of democracy. For example, around 30 percent of Taiwanese understand democracy in a way that follows the liberal tradition (a procedural understanding). Although the corresponding percentage is smaller among mainlanders, around 25 percent, it seems that the global wave of democracy has significantly attenuated the shadow of the Confucian tradition and won significant support in both Taiwan and China.

Yet it is also clear that the influence of the *minben* tradition is not negligible in either country, although it has a much stronger hold in China. Around 6.7 percent of Taiwanese are still wholly under the influence of Confucian culture. The percentage is more than twice that in China, where the legacy of the *minben* tradition has not been challenged by direct experience with democratic politics. It is important to note here that this does not necessarily mean that Confucian culture has been better maintained in China, only that the *minben* definition of government has been better maintained for various socioeconomic and political reasons that merit further exploration.

Not surprisingly, there is a small percentage of people in both societies with incoherent understandings of democracy. Equally intriguing, in both China and Taiwan a sizable share of people have only ambiguous understandings of democracy, showing no clear influence from either the liberal or *minben* tradition. This figure is relatively modest in China, around 14.7 percent, but unexpectedly significant in Taiwan, at roughly 40 percent. These percentages would seem to indicate that the socioeco-

conomic and political transitions in these societies have failed to inculcate a universal or near-universal understanding of or belief in liberal democracy. In other words, the transitions have failed to do what both modernization theory and institutional theory expect them to do.

Political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors all go into shaping how people define democracy. In Taiwan and China, where the lingering shadow of Confucianism still shapes people's political attitudes, we found some individuals who defined democracy according to the *minben* tradition. They regarded politicians as guardians of their interests and believed that in a true democracy the leaders will safeguard the people's well-being by using superior wisdom to secure public benefits. The ranks of people following the *minben* tradition have shrunk, however. In fact, far more people now endorse the liberal tradition, one that prizes the use of institutions and procedure to secure good governance. In each country, this group represents roughly a quarter or more of the total population. Unfortunately, there is still a significant share of people in both societies who lack any idea of what democracy is or who harbor highly incoherent or ambiguous ideas about it.

The aforementioned similarities and differences between Taiwan and China suggest that cultural traditions have an unavoidable influence on popular understandings of democracy. Thus valid and functionally equivalent instruments for cross-regional comparative research should be sensitive to cultural traditions and, if possible, contextualized. For this purpose, researchers should study carefully the once-dominant political and religious philosophies of their target countries. Our comparison of liberal-democratic theory with *minben* guardianship theory shows that although the goals defined by the two doctrines are identical, they each designate different means for promoting the public good, assign a different function to popular political participation, and use different standards for evaluating governmental legitimacy. The contrast between the procedural legitimacy emphasized by liberal-democratic doctrines and the substantive legitimacy emphasized by *minben* may be a good starting point for studying how people in different cultures understand the meaning of democracy.

NOTES

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1. Russel J. Dalton and Doh Chull Shin, eds., *Citizens, Democracy, and Markets Around the Pacific Rim: Congruence Theory and Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

2. Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Impacts on Political Trust: A Comparison of Mainland China and Taiwan," *Comparative Politics* 33 (July 2001): 401–19; Jie Chen, *Popular Political*

Support in Urban China (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004); and Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

3. “This methodology involves devising a set of survey questions that reflect certain democratic principles . . . and asking the survey respondents to indicate a positive or negative evaluation of each principle.” Arthur H. Miller, Vicki L. Hesli, and William M. Reisinger, “Reassessing Mass Support for Political and Economic Change in the Former USSR,” *American Political Science Review* 88 (June 1994): 399–411.

4. Michael Bratton, Robert B. Mattes, and E. Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

5. Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 52.

6. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 53.

7. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 52.

8. In the Confucian tradition, societal harmony cannot be achieved by preventing people from expressing their opinions. In the *Analects*, Confucius says that a ruler who finds pleasure in everyone agreeing with him will ruin the state (*Analects*, 13.15). Mencius argued that “to take one’s prince to task is respect; to discourse on the good to keep out heresies is reverence” (Mencius 7.1/36/8).

9. Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1985); Kevin J. O’Brien, “Agents and Remonstrators: Role Accumulation by Chinese People’s Congress Deputies,” *China Quarterly* 138 (June 1994): 359–79. This notion of limited popular political participation has characterized other societies as well. In his study of Soviet political culture, Archie Brown makes a clear distinction between remonstrations and opposition, arguing that although remonstrations existed widely in the former Soviet Union, few had any intention of actually opposing the government; see Archie Brown, *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1984).

10. Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, eds., *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 12.