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The Spread of Democracy in China: Reflecting the Failure of Political Reform

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The spread of democratic ideas and economic growth in China, as proposed by modernization theory, has not led to political reform toward democracy in the country. Various literatures have attempted to explain this failure by emphasizing economic and social learning factors that clash with China's national interests, rather than focusing on the context of their dissemination. Generally, this article aims to explain China's failure to reform its politics toward democracy by focusing on the context in which democratic ideas have spread in China. Specifically, this article seeks to elucidate the relevance and continuity of the spread of democratic ideas during the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the Tiananmen Movement of 1989, and the Umbrella Movement of 2014, linking these events to the third, fourth, and fifth waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS). This article adopts a constructivist paradigm and the theory of constitutive localization to explain the failure of political reform in China. The findings suggest that local Chinese political ideas have influenced the spreading process of democratic ideas, contributing to China's failure to achieve political reform toward democracy.

Keywords: China, Democratization, Constitutive Localization

Since the 20th century, China's long history of engaging with democratic ideas reflects its people's enduring spirit in the struggle for democratization. During the May Fourth Movement period, Chinese intellectuals adopted democratic ideas—with the term "Mr. Democracy"—to escape from the dark ages (Schmalzer, 2022, p. 306). In the same century, during the Tiananmen Movement period, various elements of Chinese society gathered in Tiananmen Square to demand political reform toward democracy (Nathan, 2001, p. 3). Moreover, in the 21st century, more than one million Hong Kongers demanded universal suffrage, as reflected in the Umbrella Movement of 2014 (Hui, 2015, p. 111). However, the long history and rich experience of spreading democratic ideas in China have not met the expectations of people's spirit to reform its politics toward democracy.

Furthermore, according to Lipset's hypothesis, economic growth in a country should foster political reform toward democracy (Lipset, 1959, p. 75). However, this prerequisite has become the focus of debate in the study of global democratization.¹ Despite this, modernization theory—the relationship between economic growth and democratization—remains the primary framework for explaining democratization in a country. As highlighted in the seminal work "Democracy's Third Wave," economic growth was a leading factor in forming the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991, p. 22). Despite the ongoing debate, China experienced economic growth above five percent from 1991 to 2019, reaching a GDP per capita of \$10,144 in 2019 (The World Bank, 2024). However, as reported by Freedom House, China's political rights score was -1 out of 40 in 2019 (House, 2019).

Despite China's significant experience with democratic ideas and economic growth—factors often considered prerequisites for democratization—the country has not transitioned to political democracy, raising critical questions among scholars. There are arguments based on economic factors that China is not yet economically "rich" enough to become a democratic country (Rowen, 2007, p. 15). Moreover, from a social learning perspective, the promotion of democratic ideas by external actors, especially the United States, has been perceived as a threat by the Chinese, thus creating strategic distrust and becoming an obstacle to China's political reform (He, 2013, p. 42).

These explanations do not fully elucidate the influence of the process of spreading democratic ideas in China on its failure to reform its politics toward democracy. As Przeworski and Limongi have argued, democracy is not simply a product of economic growth (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 162). In other words, endogenous explanations are not the leading factor in a country's democratization. Moreover, the topic of spreading democratic ideas—the third-generation explanation—has shifted from intersubjective engagement or social learning to the context of how a country with a different history and political culture can adopt democratic ideas as a foreign concept (Chandler, 2013, p. 222). Therefore, this third-generation perspective needs more attention to explain China's failure to reform its politics, with emphasis on the process of spreading these ideas.

¹ Some intellectuals argue that there is no relationship between economic growth and democratization. Others, however, argue that there is a positive relationship between economic growth and democratization. See (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Przeworski et al., 2000; Wucherpfennig & Deutsch, 2009).

To address this, this article will implement the constructivist paradigm and constitutive localization theory as a framework for explaining the process of spreading democratic ideas in China. Moreover, this article argues that China's local political ideas—*tianming* and *min-ben*—have influenced this process, leading to China's failure to reform its politics toward democracy. This argument is based on survey results from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), which show the relevance and continuity of the acceptance and spread of democratic ideas during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the Tiananmen Movement in 1989, and the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

This article explains why China has failed to reform its politics toward democracy despite its experience with economic growth and the spread of democratic ideas. It first discusses how constructivism and constitutive localization are helpful in explaining the phenomenon of spreading democratic ideas. This is followed by an examination of the demand variable from constitutive localization theory in explaining the relevance and continuity of these three democratic movements in China to the results of the third, fourth, and fifth waves of the ABS survey.² Lastly, this article connects the understanding of democratic ideas spread across China from these three democratic movements to the survey results from ABS.

The Origin of Identity and Constitutive Localization

The spread of democratic ideas is a pivotal topic in International Relations studies that can be understood in the context of constructivism and constitutive localization. In the basic assumptions of constructivism, democratic ideas are viewed as shared knowledge—an idea, knowledge, or belief shared socially and adopted by some countries around the world (Wendt, 1999, p. 141). As shared knowledge, democratic ideas have been socially shared and adopted by some countries, reflected by the third wave of democratization that produced a political transition in 95 countries (Huntington, 1991, p. 3).

The definition of democracy has many nuances. According to Larry Diamond, David Collier, and Steven Levitsky, more than 550 types of democracy have been identified (Diamond, 1997, p. 2). However, this article will refer to Joseph Schumpeter's minimalist definition because it can identify and distinguish the identity of a country as either democratic or non-democratic. Schumpeter (1943, p. 269) explains, "The

² The third wave of ABS survey was conducted in 2011-2012 in China and 2012 in Hong Kong. The fourth wave was conducted in 2015 in China and 2016 in Hong Kong. Moreover, the fifth wave was conducted in 2019 in China and 2019-2021 in Hong Kong.

democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." In other words, the electoral aspect is essential in identifying a country's identity. The wave of democratization has also referred to this definition in explaining the adoption of a minimalist approach that resulted in a country's transition (Huntington, 1991, p. 16). Moreover, several scholars have used this minimalist definition to understand democratic ideas (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski et al., 2000). Therefore, this article will refer to a minimalist definition when explaining the spread of democratic ideas in China.

In relation to identity construction, spreading democratic ideas could transform a country's identity. This is based on the constructivist assumption that emphasizes the notion that the interest and identity of a country are influenced by intersubjective engagement (Chandler, 2013, p. 216). In other words, a country's identity is not permanent but can be changed. Moreover, identity as a democratic country can be classified as a type of identity that refers to the regime type (Wendt, 1999, p. 226). In the constructivist sense, there are two mechanisms for constructing a country's identity—imitation and social learning mechanisms (Wendt, 1999, p. 324). However, these mechanisms fail to fully explain the process through which democratic ideas spread and influence a country's identity.

In the imitation mechanism, a country will change its identity according to the identity of another country that it perceives as successful (Wendt, 1999, p. 325). However, the imitation mechanism only focuses on explanations related to demand, understanding why a country needs to change its identity. Moreover, in the social learning mechanisms, interaction between actors will produce a learning process for identity construction (Wendt, 1999, p. 327). However, in the historical context of spreading democratic ideas, engagement between actors in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq has taught us that domestic problems influence the acceptance of democratic ideas in a country (Chandler, 2013, p. 221). In other words, the success or failure of a country adopting democratic ideas cannot only be explained through the involvement of external actors; there are also domestic factors—historical experience or political culture—that influence the process of spreading democratic ideas.

To address this gap, this research will implement Amitav Acharya's constitutive localization theory to explain the spreading process of democratic ideas in China. Constitutive localization is a process of localizing or spreading foreign ideas in a country by local actors to construct the country's identity (Acharya, 2009, p. 19). During this

process, two variables contribute to adopting foreign ideas: demand and local ideas. The first is the demand variable, which is vital in understanding why local actors need to adopt or spread foreign ideas in their country (Acharya, 2004, p. 246). Second, the stronger the contradiction between local and foreign ideas, the greater the possibility of localization or rejection rather than full acceptance of foreign ideas in a country (Acharya, 2004, p. 248). In this research, these two variables will be instrumental in explaining the process of spreading democratic ideas in China that influence China's failure to reform its politics, which will be discussed in the next section.

China's Demands on Democracy

As a matter of genealogy, the spread of democratic ideas in China—reflected by the May Fourth Movement and the Tiananmen Movement—could have occurred based on intellectuals' demand to adopt democracy in order to modernize China or achieve economic growth, especially when the government was on the verge of losing its mandate from heaven (*tianming*). In China, democratic ideas have been viewed as instruments for national salvation and welfare (S. Zhao, 2000a, p. 48). In other words, the demand for these ideas did not arise when the Chinese people were economically prosperous but rather within the discourse of modernization.

During the May Fourth Movement period, one notion dominated: modernization could only be achieved if China adopted and implemented Western ideas, particularly democracy. In this period, Chinese intellectuals viewed democracy as a means to achieve national salvation, including China's unity, strength, and prosperity (Mitter, 2004, p. 119). Chen Duxiu—the prominent Chinese intellectual and one of the founders of the CCP—narrated that China needed Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science because only these "gentlemen" could save China from darkness (Gu, 2001, p. 589).

The political conditions during the May Fourth period influenced Chinese intellectuals' motivation to adopt democracy. Due to the government's inability to govern effectively, Chinese intellectuals viewed the political condition as inadequate for achieving modernization. After the 1912 Revolution, which had established a republic in China, there was a betrayal of republican spirit, exemplified by Yuan Shikai's attempt to restore the monarchy and the signing of the 21 Demands with Japan (Tse-tsung, 1960, p. 10). Moreover, the people's representatives were more responsive to Shikai's bribes than to the desires and needs of the populace (Eastman, 1974, p. 142). Therefore, Chinese intellectuals saw Mr. Democracy as the savior of China from its dark times.

Similarly, in the Tiananmen Movement period, the demand was rooted in the discourse of modernization and government performance. In February 1989, the Chinese people narrated that the government had lost its mandate of heaven (*tianming*)—legitimation based on performance (Schell, 1994, p. 33). Since Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy showed negative results in the 1980s—such as inflation and corruption—Chinese intellectuals and demonstrators viewed this as a consequence of the regime's reluctance to undertake political reform (Gungwu, 1990, p. 43). Fang Lizhi (1991, p. 51)—a prominent Chinese intellectual—said, "The problem has to do with the authoritarian political system in China. Therefore, without reforming China's political system, it would be impossible to bring about modernization. This is a basic reason why the Chinese people need democracy." Demonstrators also called back Mr. Democracy to the Tiananmen Movement, arguing that democracy was needed in China to achieve modernization ("May 4 Declaration: Let Our Cries Awaken Our Young Republic!", 1990, p. 16).

Some intellectuals, especially those from the neo-authoritarianism group, rejected democracy as the leading factor for modernizing and achieving economic growth in China. Wu Jiexiang—one of the intellectuals from Neo-authoritarianism—stated that a "new authoritarian regime" was needed in China because it could act as an "express train" to achieve democracy through market development (Jiexiang, 1990, p. 42). The underlying logic of the Neo-authoritarian group was that modernization is only possible through authoritarian rule (Petracca & Xiong, 1990, p. 1099). However, the discourse of democratization during the Tiananmen Movement period occurred when the regime demonstrated its inability to achieve modernization or economic growth. Moreover, Jiexiang's statement highlights that China's economic growth under its authoritarian regime did not lead to political reform toward democracy.

Despite criticism from Neo-authoritarian groups, from Chen Duxiu to Fang Lizhi, they have shown that the demand for democratic ideas was based on the people's spirit toward modernization. When the government failed at modernization and national salvation, Chinese intellectuals, without hesitation, adopted democracy to achieve modernization. Thus, the history of spreading democratic ideas in China contradicts the basic logic of modernization theory. On one hand, economic growth in a country should create a strong demand for democratization. On the other hand, the May Fourth Movement and the Tiananmen Movement periods have proven that democracy was adopted when the government shows its inability to achieve Chinese modernization, especially when it loses its mandate from heaven.

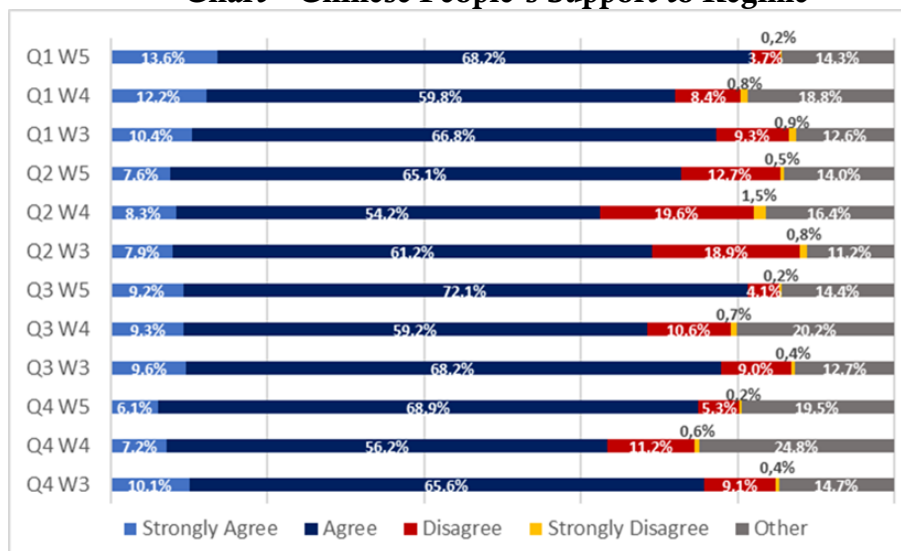
This contradiction can be understood by recognizing the influence of the Chinese local political concept, particularly the *tianming* (mandate of heaven) idea, which influenced the demand for democracy in China. In *tianming*, the government acquires the mandate (*ming*) from heaven (*tian*)—the legitimation to rule—if it demonstrates performance or the ability to govern its people (D. Zhao, 2009, p. 419). To maintain this mandate, the government must maintain public order, state security, and create welfare for its people (D. Zhao, 2009, p. 421). If the government shows its inability to govern, heaven will signal the creation of a rebellion from the people (Schell, 1994, p. 21). This was reflected during the Tiananmen Movement when the Chinese people viewed the regime's legitimacy based on morality and economic performance (D. Zhao, 2009, p. 423). Therefore, government performance is critical in maintaining people's support for the regime and its legitimacy from heaven.

Chinese history has shown that the demand for democratic ideas arises when the government shows its inability. By the same logic, when the government has the performance to achieve modernization or economic growth in China, it retains its mandate from heaven or the people's support. The relationship between the government's performance in achieving China's economic growth and the results of the three waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) can prove this statement.

In the chart below, three waves of ABS survey results occurred when China experienced economic growth, reaching a GDP per capita from \$6,152 in 2011 to \$10,155 in 2019 (The World Bank, 2024).³ The chart indicates that most Chinese people still support the regime's continuity. If we refer to the logic of modernization theory or endogenous explanation, economic growth in China should be a solid basis for creating popular demand for reforming Chinese politics toward democracy. However, the ABS survey results have proven that economic growth in China generates popular support for the regime, thus maintaining the mandate of heaven.

³ The number of GDP per capita of \$6,000 is often considered a benchmark for economic development related to democratic transition. However, China showed the relevance with Przeworski's argument, which a country reaches the level of \$6,000, transition to democracy become less likely. See (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997).

Chart—Chinese People’s Support to Regime



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Notes:

Q1: I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.

Q2: A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserve the people’s support.

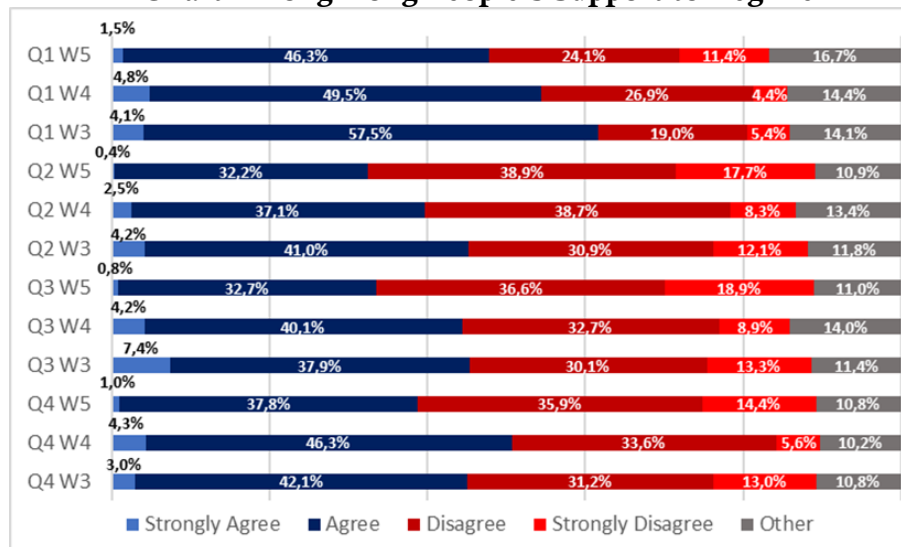
Q3: Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government.

Q4: Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.

The demand created by the Umbrella Movement of 2014 in Hong Kong could prove the importance of local political ideas in adopting democracy in China because Hong Kong has a historical experience and political culture that are quite different from those in mainland China. During the Umbrella Movement period, the demand for democratic ideas was not only about implementing universal suffrage in Hong Kong but also aimed to create public awareness of the importance of civil disobedience in Hong Kong's political culture, especially to sustain Hong Kong's core values. In Hong Kong's political culture, Benny Tai—one of Hong Kong's intellectuals—realized that Hong Kong's political system had always been imposed by its masters, whether by Britain or China (Tai, 2018, p. 152). Thus, Hong Kong intellectuals adopted and narrated democracy as a struggle to actualize Hong Kong's core values (Hui, 2015, p. 117).

The Umbrella Movement, however, failed to implement universal suffrage. Nevertheless, the motivation and objectives of Hong Kong intellectuals were achieved. Benny Tai stated that the Umbrella Movement succeeded in recreating Hong Kong's political culture—Hong Kong's core values—because the public has become much more receptive to civil disobedience as a means of democratization, and the seeds of democracy have been planted in Hong Kong (Tai, 2019, p. 68).

Chart—Hong Kong People’s Support to Regime



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Notes:

- Q1: I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.
- Q2: A system like ours, even if it runs into troubles, deserve the people’s support.
- Q3: Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government.
- Q4: Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.

There is a contradiction between the demand in Hong Kong and mainland China. During the Umbrella Movement period, the political idea of *tianming* did not apply in Hong Kong. Instead, intellectuals adopted democratic ideas as a struggle to actualize or realize Hong Kong's core values (Hui, 2015, p. 117). The results of the waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), which relate to the support of the Hong Kong people for the regime, can prove this contradiction.

In the chart above, most Hong Kong people do not support the regime's continuation, with responses of "disagree" and "strongly disagree." This is because Hong Kong's political ideas—Hong Kong's core values—are an essential aspect of its political discourse. The regime's legitimacy was not perceived by Hong Kong people based on *tianming*, but rather on general elections. Therefore, most people in Hong Kong rejected the regime's continuation, indicating a significant difference from the support seen in mainland China.

Thus, the difference in viewing government legitimacy affects the spread of democratic ideas in mainland China. The government's performance is an essential foundation for the legitimacy of the CCP regime. People have a solid reason to support the continuation of the CCP rather than readopting democratic ideas that could reform the Chinese political system. As Suisheng Zhao (2000b, p. 5) has said, "Democracy in

Chinese political and intellectual discourse has never been regarded as an end in itself, but only as a means to gain national power and wealth under a wise and enlightened ruler." Therefore, the achievements of economic growth in China have strengthened popular support for the regime, thus influencing the prospect of China's transition to democracy.

The Influence of Local Political Ideas on China's Understanding of Democracy

Democracy Idea in the May Fourth Movement of 1919

During the May Fourth Movement period, the spread of democratic ideas in China reflected a process of cultural selection, adopting aspects of democratic ideas that were in line with local political ideas or Confucian teachings. Although the May Fourth Movement period was known for Confucian iconoclasm, Chinese intellectuals had a Confucian background that encouraged the acceptance of democratic ideas in China (Yu, 2016). Therefore, Chinese intellectuals understood and conveyed popular sovereignty as a democratic idea in China because it was congruent with the local political idea of *min-ben*.

The political idea of *min-ben* contains two words: people (*min* or *minwei*) and roots (*ben* or *bangben*)—people as the root of the state (Shi & Lu, 2010, p. 125). In their relation to popular sovereignty, both ideas emphasize the importance of people as the country's highest political authority (Herr, 2019, p. 211). Additionally, the *min-ben* ideas emphasize the ruler's importance in producing prosperity for its people, and those in power should not betray the people (Wang & Titunik, 2000, p. 74). This understanding was reflected in the reinterpretation of democratic ideas by Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement period.

Edward X. Gu, in his research, explained that the understanding of Chinese intellectuals in the May Fourth period toward democracy was based on Rousseau's argument of popular sovereignty (Gu, 2001, p. 597). According to Gu (2001, p. 596), Chen Duxiu expressed, "The democratic state is the genuine state, in which the state is the public property for all the citizens, people are masters of the country, and the rulers are servants of the people. In a genuine state, some individual rights can be sacrificed in order to safeguard the rights of all the people." Moreover, Gao Yihan (Gu, 2001, p. 596), in the same vein, said, "The sovereignty of the state and people was integrated after Rousseau, and therefore the government is no more than a servant for the public to

impose the sovereignty of the state, that is, popular sovereignty. If the government fails to do so, people can substitute it by carrying out popular sovereignty as masters substitute their servants." In the *min-ben* ideas, rulers, based on Confucian teachings, are supposed to be public servants who serve their people to achieve the common good and represent the will of the people (Herr, 2019, p. 213). Therefore, both Duxiu and Yi Han comprehended democracy in the context of popular sovereignty, describing the government as a servant of the people and the people as the highest political authority.

Chinese intellectuals, however, did not advocate for the importance of democratic institutions in China. They only narrated democracy as far as *pingmin zhuyi* or *shumin zhuyi* (principle of the common people) (Gu, 2001, p. 597). Duxiu, when criticizing constitutionalism and political parties, quoted from Tse-tsung (1960, p. 232), "What is politics after all? Everybody must eat—that is important." In 1940, Duxiu realized that both capitalist and socialist systems require a parliamentary system, general elections, legal processes, protection of civil rights, and opposition parties (Yu, 2016). Therefore, the spread of democratic ideas was only focused on understanding the idea of popular sovereignty, which was compatible with the local political idea of *min-ben*.

Democracy Idea in the Tiananmen Movement of 1989

Likewise, during the Tiananmen Movement period, local Chinese political ideas influenced the understanding of democracy in China. On one hand, the political idea of *tianming* contradicts the aspect of general elections in democracy. Thus, the minimalist definition was not adopted by Chinese intellectuals. On the other hand, the adoption of democratic ideas was based on the local political idea of *min-ben*, which Chinese intellectuals believed could strengthen the practice of the *min-ben* idea in China by incorporating liberal aspects of democracy. In other words, there was a cultural selection process in China during the Tiananmen Movement period. Therefore, the understanding of democracy in China could not be classified as one of a democratic country.

The minimalist definition of democratic ideas—the electoral aspect—did not become dominant; it was even rejected during the Tiananmen Movement period because it negated the political idea of *tianming*. In Chinese political culture, there was a belief that heaven would grant its mandate to the ruler or the son of heaven (*tianzi*), who could perform well in governance (Schell, 1994, p. 21). Moreover, common people were not seen to have a right to participate in politics (Shi & Lu, 2010, p. 126). During the Tiananmen Movement period, Chinese society was more concerned with whether the

government was moral and could produce order and economic prosperity than with how it was formed (D. Zhao, 2000, p. 1618).

In democracy, political participation is a fundamental right of the people, whether to choose or be chosen in political contestation. Chinese intellectuals, however, did not attempt to adopt the electoral aspect to spread the idea of democracy. According to Christopher Buckley, Fang Lizhi stated that Chinese society was not ready or capable of being responsible for elections (Buckley, 1991). Another intellectual, Chen Yizi, expressed that democracy in China must exclude most people due to their economic and educational backwardness (Kelliher, 1993, p. 383). Additionally, Wu Jiaxiang explicitly stated that elections would only prevent the emergence of the desired leader to build the Chinese economy, namely a new authoritarian leader (Jiaxiang, 1990, p. 40). In these reinterpretations, intellectuals attempted to exclude the electoral aspect in China because it contradicted the political idea of *tianming*, which understood government legitimacy based on performance. Thus, according to them, general elections would only create the possibility of producing an incapable ruler in China.

In this period, intellectuals—who were perceived as the middle class in bringing democracy to a country—were hindered by the romanticism of local political ideas regarding authority, virtue, and status, thereby promoting a "false" democracy in China, which only fought for intellectuals' rights in politics. For intellectuals, other social classes lacked the capacity to participate in politics. Fang Lizhi (1988b, p. 76) argued, with much sentiment, "If we were to rank peasants, workers, and intellectuals, more and more evidence suggests that the intellectuals would certainly be ranked first... Obviously, the intellectuals today are the most advanced segment in our society, and therefore they should be the ones to be recruited (in politics) over the industrial workers." In this sense, intellectuals were perceived as the leading force guiding and pushing traditional society into modern society (Baikui, 1991, p. 78).

Instead of fighting for people's rights in the context of democracy, intellectuals were inclined to exclude other social classes, especially the rights of peasants and the working class in politics. Kelliher explained that there was tension based on the bias of intellectuals toward peasants and the working class during China's Tiananmen Movement of 1989, where intellectuals' attitudes toward peasants were antagonistic and toward the working class were ambivalent. Peasants, for intellectuals, were perceived as incompetent citizens for democracy, likely to use their voting rights indiscriminately. Considering the peasants' position in Chinese society, intellectuals saw them as close allies of the CCP, such as being recruited to suppress the Tiananmen protests (Kelliher,

1993, p. 388). Giving political rights to peasants was seen as potentially disastrous for China.

The working class, meanwhile, was not considered an ally in the struggle for democracy. Although they participated in the demonstrations with different demands and helped students prevent the military from entering Tiananmen Square, there was reluctance among intellectuals to include the working class in their democratic struggle. As reported by *The New York Times* (Wudunn, 1989), "Mr. Wang—leader of the students—says he believes that the movement is not ready for worker participation because the principles of democracy must first be absorbed by students and intellectuals before they can be spread to others." According to Kelliher (1993, p. 387), a worker told a student, "What you have said is fine, but you never said what we workers should do or how we can back you."

The elitism of Chinese intellectuals not only left a legacy of "false" democracy in China but also buried two potential paths for democratic transition in consideration of the domestic context. First, intellectuals had buried the electoral path before they even won the battle. As mentioned above, most intellectuals were reluctant to have elections in China, fearing they would produce an incapable ruler. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan explained that an uprising of civil society, which would overthrow the regime, tends to lead to the establishment of an interim government (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 71). At this crucial time, an election is the determinant factor in the transition, whether it would lead to a transition to a democratic regime or the establishment of a new non-democratic regime (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 58). This electoral path is vital in the transition, especially in the context of an interim government, because it will indicate the certainty of popular representation, the circulation of political elites, and the legitimacy of new democratic institutions (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 71). Unfortunately, intellectuals tend to evade this path.

Second, intellectual elitism buried the potential path of democratic transition through a pact. Excluding other social classes, especially peasants and the working class, affected the bargaining power of intellectuals to negotiate a pact with the elite party, thereby negating the condition identified by O'Donnell, Schmitter, Linz, and Stepan as pivotal for a pact. O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, p. 38) explained one condition for having a pact for the transition toward democracy: "It is a situation in which conflicting or competing groups are interdependent, in that they can neither do without each other nor unilaterally impose their preferred solution on each other if they are to satisfy their respective divergent interests." Thus, the opposition and intellectuals need a degree of

power to play their part in the negotiation pacts—for having bargaining power in negotiation or having a situation of interdependence (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 61). Intellectuals alone, thus, lacked the bargaining power needed for a pact for the transition toward democracy.

Defining democracy in terms of intellectual elitism diminished potential paths of democratic transition. However, democratic ideas during the Tiananmen Movement period were understood in the context of the liberal aspect. In distinguishing democratic centralism from Mao Zedong, Fang Lizhi stated, “My interpretation of democracy is different from that of Mao Zedong... Democracy is not simply a process of consultation but the realization of human rights” (Mok, 1998, p. 86). Furthermore, Lizhi said, “What democracy means is the basic rights of the people or human rights... Human rights include such basic issues as the right to live, to think, to receive education, to get married free of interference, and so on. (Lizhi, 1988a, p. 89)” The liberal understanding was also reflected in the demands of students during the movement, such as removing the ban on protests and allowing freedom of the press (Schell, 1994, p. 47). These demands, although not realized in China, are important to understand the reason for adopting liberal aspects considered democratic ideas during the Tiananmen Movement period.

Liberal aspects could be adopted in China to strengthen the practice of the political idea of *min-ben*. Acharya explained that when local ideas in a country are inadequate to overcome a problem, local actors will adopt foreign ideas to strengthen local ideas (Acharya, 2004, p. 247). In Chinese political culture, especially in the idea of *min-ben*, people can only participate in politics as an opposition when heaven gives a "signal" that the ruler has lost his mandate (Shi & Lu, 2010, p. 126). In other words, there is no alternative "channel" for the Chinese people to express their opinions or wills to political authorities (Wang & Titunik, 2000, p. 82). Therefore, Chinese intellectuals and demonstrators adopted liberal aspects, such as freedom of protest, thought, and press, to express their desires and wills to political authorities. This was also related to the spirit of modernization, where Chinese intellectuals needed intellectual freedom free from government control to achieve China's modernization (Lizhi, 1988a, p. 93). Additionally, the demonstrators demanded that the government recognize the movement as patriotic and democratic (Dan, 2019, p. 32).

Unlike mainland intellectuals who disregarded the election aspect, Hong Kong intellectuals have shown genuine concern for elections by adopting the idea of democracy. In 2013, three prominent Hong Kong intellectuals—Benny Tai, Chan Kin-man, and Chu Yiu-ming—formed the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement to convey the meaning and importance of universal suffrage (Tai, 2019, p. 67). Hong Kong intellectuals and demonstrators narrated universal suffrage or democracy by referring to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as a reference for their notion (Flowerdew, 2017, p. 12). During the movement, the demonstrators created the slogan, "I want genuine universal suffrage (Hui, 2015, p. 111)!"

Based on the theory of constitutive localization, the difference in understanding between Hong Kong and mainland China regarding democracy is caused by local political ideas. In his research, Stephen Ortmann stated that Hong Kong's core values strongly differentiate Hong Kong's political culture from that of mainland China. This is because Hong Kong's core values reflect Western values, such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, and the right to participate in politics (Ortmann, 2018, p. 125). These differences in political culture underpin the acceptance of Hong Kong intellectuals toward democracy.

Hong Kong's core values are an essential aspect of Hong Kong society in terms of viewing political life in Hong Kong. The importance of these values for Hong Kong society has been driven through a long historical process. The handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China did not change or eliminate Hong Kong's core values in society. On the contrary, the "one country, two systems" policy formulated by China is considered necessary for Hong Kong society to protect its core values. This is because, on one hand, Hong Kong society identifies itself as Chinese and believes in anti-colonialism as a struggle to achieve freedom from Britain (Ma, 2018, p. 36).

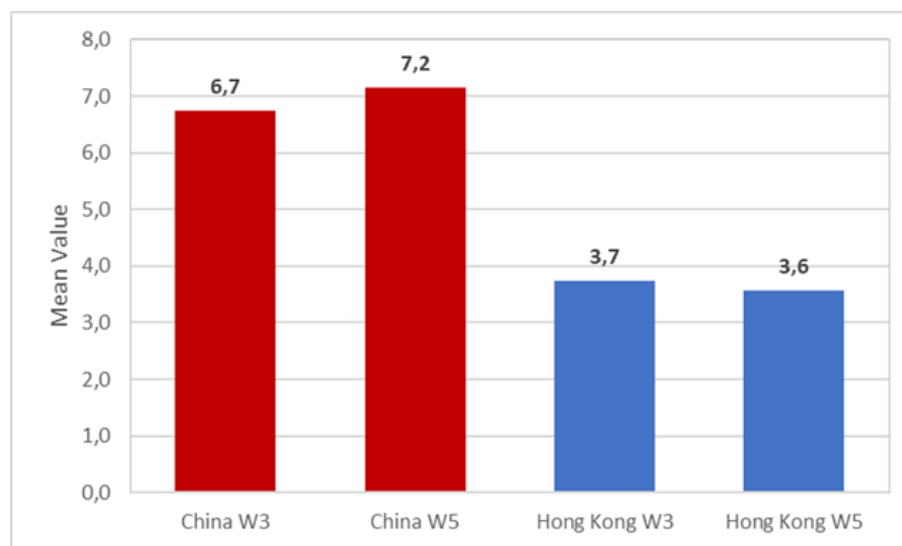
On the other hand, Hong Kong's society has lived under the influence of Western values and thus refuses to live under the CCP regime (Ma, 2018, p. 36). Benny Tai said that more than one million Hong Kong people participated in the Tiananmen Movement demonstrations, strengthening Hong Kong society's recognition of its core values (Tai, 2018, p. 154). Therefore, the struggle to achieve Hong Kong's democratization is essential to maintain its values.

During the Umbrella Movement period, the demonstrators believed that Hong Kong's core values, without a democratic system, would not function well because it would erode Hong Kong's core values in people's lives (Hui, 2015, p. 117). In the theory

of constitutive localization, the stronger the contradiction between local ideas and foreign ideas, the greater the possibility that the foreign idea will be localized rather than entirely accepted (Acharya, 2004, p. 248). Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, the demonstrators considered the idea of democracy to be able to support or protect Hong Kong's core values. This means there is no contradiction between Hong Kong's core values and the idea of democracy as a foreign concept. Therefore, Hong Kong's local political ideas support the acceptance of democratic ideas that align with the minimalist definition.

Relevance and Continuity on China's Understanding of Democracy

Chart—People's Assessment to Chinese Regime



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Notes:

1. *n* = China W3 (2800); China W5 (4137); Hong Kong W3 (1170); and Hong Kong W5 (1104).
2. The author did not include the fourth wave because of the missing data.

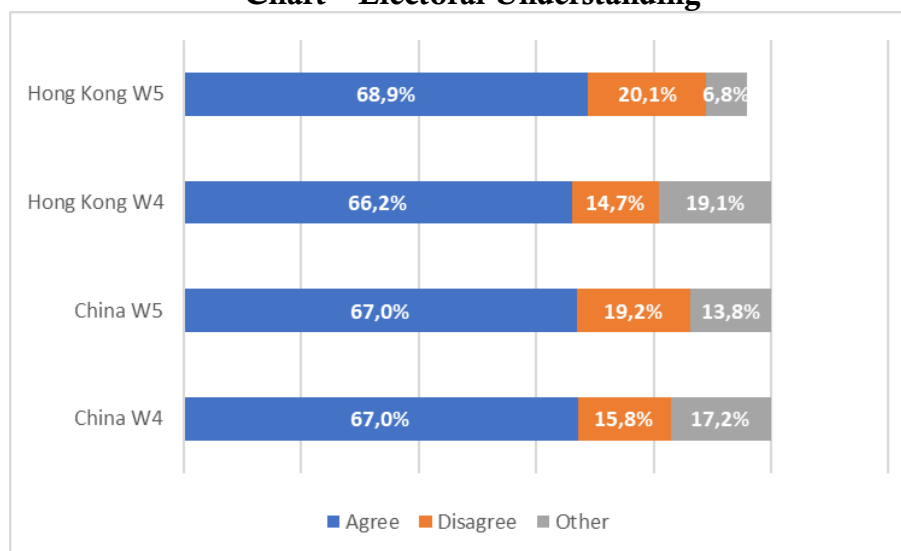
To explain the relevance and continuity of the understanding of democratic ideas in China, this article refers to the results of the ABS survey, which asked the following question: On a scale of 1 (completely undemocratic) to 10 (very democratic), where would you place China today on this scale? This question is vital to show the difference in understanding between the two societies.

The chart above shows a contradictory result, with mean values of 6.7 and 7.2 for China and 3.7 and 3.6 for Hong Kong. Based on Freedom House's reports, the political rights score for China was 7 (the least free) in 2011 and -1 out of 40 in 2019 (House, 2011, 2019). In other words, there is no democratic regime in China. However, in the chart, the mean value for mainland China is relatively high, which means Chinese people, despite living under an authoritarian regime, view their regime as quite

democratic. Meanwhile, Hong Kong has a relatively low mean value when assessing the Chinese regime. Therefore, the chart indicates the difference in understanding of democracy between Chinese and Hong Kong people, as seen in previous movements.

Historically, the spread of the idea of democracy in mainland China and Hong Kong was quite contradictory, especially in understanding the minimalist definition of democracy. In mainland China, Chinese intellectuals rejected the electoral aspect of democracy because it contradicted the local Chinese political idea of *tianming*. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, intellectuals and demonstrators adopted the minimalist definition of democracy to maintain Hong Kong's core values. The ABS asked about the understanding of minimalist democracy in both Hong Kong and Chinese people without using the word "democracy."

Chart—Electoral Understanding

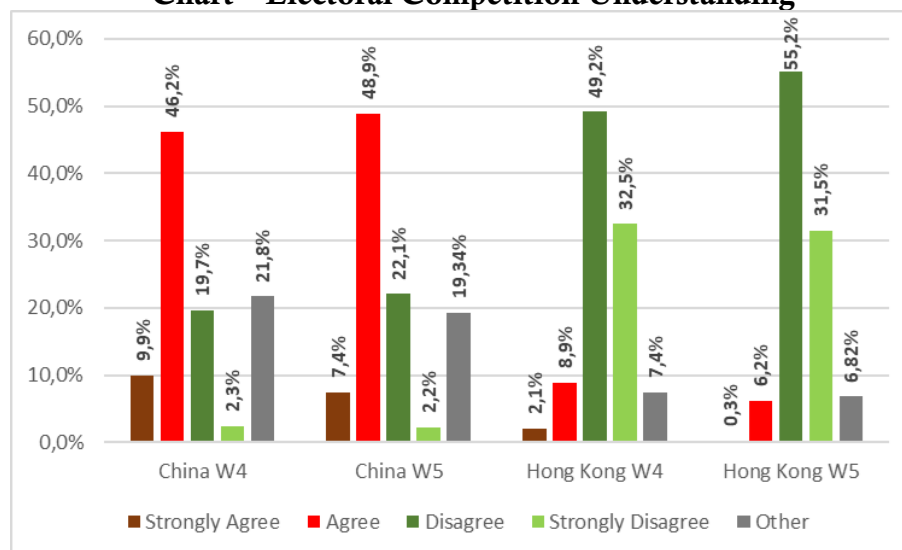


Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Notes: The chart above was derived from the following question: "Do you agree if political leader are chosen by the people through open and competitive elections?"

In the chart above, most Chinese and Hong Kong people show the same understanding—by answering "agree"—that political leaders should be elected through open and competitive elections. In Hong Kong, most people answered "agree" because the political discourse there has focused on the issue of universal suffrage, as was evident in the Umbrella Movement of 2014. In mainland China, however, the understanding of electoral democracy is relatively high, so most people believe political leaders should be elected through open and competitive elections. However, when the ABS posed another question regarding electoral understanding, the results showed the continuity and relevance of previous movements in China.

Chart—Electoral Competition Understanding



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Notes: The chart above was derived from the following question: "Do you agree that only one political party must be allowed to run for elections and hold positions?"

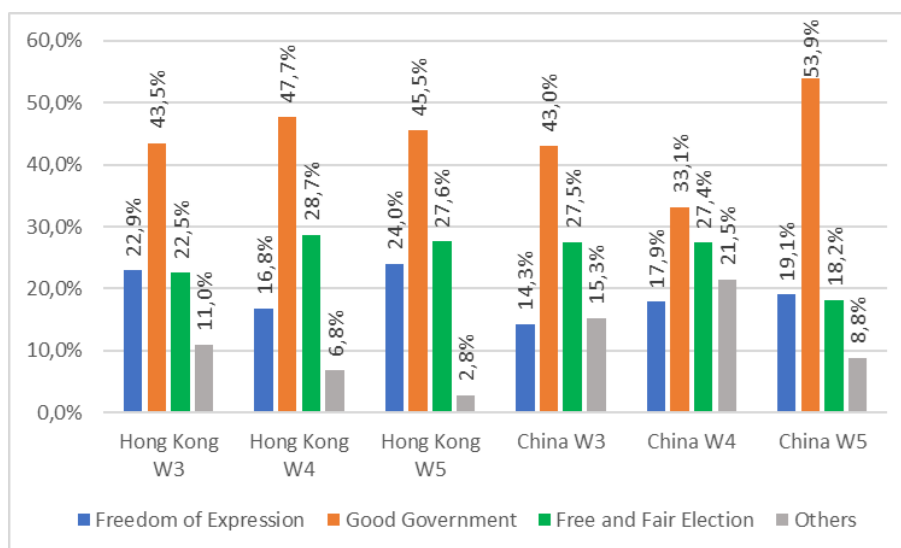
In the chart above, most Chinese people believe that competition in general elections and for political positions should come from a single party—indicated by the total "strongly agree" and "agree" answers, which scored 56.1% in China Wave 4 and 56.3% in China Wave 5. The majority of Hong Kong people, on the other hand, do not agree that general elections and political positions should come only from one party. Therefore, there is a contradiction in understanding general elections between mainland China and Hong Kong.

The understanding of electoral democracy in mainland China can be understood by recognizing the local political idea of *tianming*. This political idea reflects that rulers who perform well will receive a mandate from heaven to rule (Schell, 1994, p. 21). In China, legitimation based on performance is more dominant than legitimacy based on the electoral process. Therefore, electoral understanding has adapted to the local political idea of *tianming*. For example, this understanding is reflected in the term "Democracy with Chinese characteristics" in the NPCSC policy towards Hong Kong, known as the 318 decision. This notion echoes the perspective from Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement period that elections could potentially produce leaders without the performance to rule (Jiaxiang, 1990, p. 42). With the 318 decision, the Chinese political elite nominated candidates who could run in Hong Kong's election with Beijing's preference, based on performance (Bush, 2014). Thus, while most Chinese people believe that political leaders must be elected through general elections, the understanding of electoral democracy deviates from the minimalist definition.

The majority of Hong Kong people, however, understand that general elections must include more than one party to ensure a competitive election. In Hong Kong, the term "Democracy with Chinese characteristics" was rejected because it could erode Hong Kong's core values (Hui, 2015, p. 112). In other words, Hong Kong's core values, as reflected in the Umbrella Movement of 2014, remain dominant in comprehending democracy. Therefore, the difference in local political ideas between mainland China and Hong Kong influences the understanding of electoral democracy in these two distinct societies.

Moreover, to elucidate the relevance and continuity of the influence of the *min-ben* idea in the understanding of democracy in China, the ABS asked, "If you have to choose only one, which of the following do you think is the most essential element of democracy?"

Chart—Most Essential Element of Democracy



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Notes: The chart above was derived from the following question: "If you have to choose only one, which of the following you think is the most essential element of a democracy?" The answers include freedom of expression, free and fair elections, good government (government narrows the gaps between poor and rich, government provides basic necessities, government doesn't waste money, and clean and corruption-free politics. And others (can't choose, decline to answer, and do not understand the question)

The answers included four statements: freedom of expression, good government, free and fair elections, and others. Two of these four statements could be classified as reflecting *min-ben* democracy—freedom of expression and good government—due to their alignment with the understanding of democracy during the May Fourth Movement and Tiananmen Movement periods. Free and fair elections could be classified under the minimalist definition of democracy.

In the chart above, respondents in China and Hong Kong show diverse understandings of democracy when forced to choose among the four statements. The understanding of democracy in China aligns with expectations because the two democratic movements—the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and Tiananmen Movement of 1989—demonstrated that the notion of elections was not dominant in China. Similarly, in the results of the ABS survey, the understanding of electoral democracy in mainland China aligns with that in Hong Kong, but with the caveat that general elections can only be conducted by one political party or under "Democracy with Chinese characteristics."

Interestingly, there are similarities in the understanding of *min-ben* democracy in both societies. In mainland China, most people understand democratic ideas based on the *min-ben* idea, with scores reflecting both freedom of expression and good government. These scores show the relevance and continuity in line with the history of spreading democratic ideas in China, as reflected by the May Fourth Movement and Tiananmen Movement periods. Chinese intellectuals in those movements comprehended democratic ideas from a *min-ben* perspective, emphasizing government working for the welfare of the people, those in power should not betray the people, and freedom of expression as strengthening the practice of the *min-ben* idea in China. In Hong Kong, although the Umbrella Movement highlighted universal suffrage as the understanding of democracy, there is still a relatively dominant understanding of *min-ben* democracy. Hong Kong's core values could serve as a basis for accepting democratic ideas, whether in the minimalist definition or in a liberal context.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that democratic ideas as shared knowledge—minimalist democracy—did not spread in China because Chinese local political ideas influenced the spreading process. From the May Fourth Movement period to the three waves of ABS surveys, the understanding of democratic ideas that spread in China has been shaped by Chinese local political ideas—*tianming* and *min-ben*. Moreover, the demand for democratic ideas in China was based on the political idea of *tianming*, so economic growth in China has resulted in popular support for the authoritarian regime. In other words, modernization theory does not apply in China.

In the context of demand, the history of Chinese democratization has shown that the demand for democratic ideas stemmed from the political idea of *tianming* rather than

from modernization theory. Chinese intellectuals would adopt democratic ideas when the government was on the verge of losing its mandate from heaven (*tianming*)—the government had shown its incapability to achieve Chinese modernization and economic growth. Conversely, with the same logic, when the government demonstrates performance in achieving modernization and economic growth, it retains its legitimacy or mandate from heaven. Therefore, the massive economic growth in China has thwarted hopes for political reform toward democracy—reflected by the people's support for the authoritarian regime.

In the context of understanding democratic ideas, Chinese local political ideas—*tianming* and *min-ben*—have influenced the spread of democratic ideas in China. On one hand, democracy was understood and accepted based on the *min-ben* idea, and the May Fourth Movement and Tiananmen Movement periods reflected that democracy was comprehended only through popular sovereignty and liberal aspects, which align with the political idea of *min-ben*. This understanding was also evident in the results of the ABS surveys, showing that most Chinese people understood democratic ideas based on the political idea of *min-ben*. Thus, the understanding of democracy was limited to "the government for the people" without "the government by the people."

On the other hand, the minimalist definition of democracy was not adopted by Chinese intellectuals due to the contradiction between the electoral aspect and the political idea of *tianming*, which emphasizes legitimation based on performance. In the May Fourth Movement and Tiananmen Movement periods, Chinese intellectuals did not adopt, or even refused, minimalist democracy because general elections would only produce leaders without the performance to rule. The ABS survey shows that most Chinese people reject competitive elections—positing that general elections should be held by one party or under "Democracy with Chinese characteristics." Hong Kong, with its different history and political culture, could adopt minimalist democracy because Hong Kong's core values are congruent with this idea, leading most people in Hong Kong to demand universal suffrage. Therefore, there is a contradiction between the understanding of democratic ideas in China and the idea of democracy as shared knowledge.

Thus, the influence of Chinese local political ideas in spreading democratic ideas in China explains China's failure to reform its politics toward democracy or to change its identity to that of a democratic country.

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