The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China: bridging the wide gulf between Western and Chinese scholarship

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This article identifies continuities, new trends and shifts in emphasis in the Chinese elite debate about political legitimacy by analysing 125 Chinese articles concerning legitimacy published between 2008 and 2012. It reveals a remarkable cleavage between the international perceptions of the Chinese state and the pessimistic views among Chinese intellectuals about the party’s ruling. It finds that Chinese scholars often look at Western theories when dealing with the legitimacy conundrum, and rarely look at Chinese philosophy. They focus on ideology much more than Western scholars, and they are more pessimistic about performance legitimacy than the latter. Moreover, this study finds that the legitimacy concerns and policy suggestions of scholars vary significantly depending upon their research locations, institutions and funding sources. This study also finds a distinct rising appeal of social autonomy that runs counter to the dominant official line. Nowadays, value changes, socioeconomic inequality and corruption are considered to be the most perceived threats to legitimacy; ideology, social justice and governance are the leading prescriptions for the party-state. This result is vastly different from the previous study, suggesting a fundamental shift in the legitimacy debate driven by the worsening socioeconomic problems in China.

I. Introduction

Market reforms launched by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership have fostered remarkable economic growth over the past three decades without triggering a democratic breakthrough. Various survey studies, including the World Values Survey and the Asian Barometer, have found that the Chinese government enjoys...
strong political support.\(^1\) Conventional wisdom argues that performance legitimacy—economic performance in particular—is a principal (if not the sole) pillar of legitimacy in China.\(^2\) Yet, various problems—socioeconomic inequalities in particular—caused by rapid economic growth have posed an unprecedented challenge to the CCP’s monopoly on power. Now more than ever before, the party-state has been concerned that economic performance might not be enough to provide sufficient legitimacy as this article will reveal.

In the meantime, China’s economic prosperity has prompted rising schools of thought surrounding the ‘China Model’ and ‘Chinese exceptionalism’. Their proponents argue that China has carved out its own path to modernization without following the West. One of their key theoretical foundations is that China’s unique cultural heritage makes it possible for the state to acquire legitimacy without liberal democracy.\(^3\) Many empirical studies have lent strong support to this kind of claim, positioning China as in some way exceptional and built upon different philosophies from those of Western states.\(^4\)


Beyond the above views, party intellectuals within China may have valuable insights unavailable to those outside and perhaps better understand how China is ruled. As Thomas argues in this special section, elites are crucial in determining regime legitimacy, thus, the views of party intellectual about the party’s ruling—the ‘intra-elite’ legitimacy—is particularly important. No systematic study, however, has been conducted which links party intellectuals’ opinions with the English literature—except for Gilley and Holbig’s work. Building on the pioneering work of Gilley and Holbig, this study identifies continuities, new trends and shifts in emphasis in the Chinese elite debate about political legitimacy by analysing 125 Chinese articles with ‘legitimacy’ in the title published between 2008 and 2012. It reveals a remarkable cleavage between the international perceptions of the Chinese state and the pessimistic views among Chinese intellectuals about the party’s ruling.

This study departs from the previous research in several important ways. First, this study comprehensively analyses the influence of both Western theories and traditional Chinese philosophies in the Chinese discourse of legitimacy. To date, there has been no systematic attempt to study this issue. This issue is important because it is closely related to the theoretical foundations of the ‘China Model’ and ‘Chinese exceptionalism’. Whilst many observers outside China are increasingly focusing on the search for Chinese philosophies to underpin a new polity, this study finds that Chinese intellectuals are looking to the West instead. In addition, in order to understand better the debate and distinct patterns in the Chinese literature, I have also conducted email interviews with key contributors to this debate.

Second, instead of focusing on the debate alone, this study also examines how the party intellectuals’ views are shaped by their backgrounds. As this article reveals, institutions, research locations and funding sources have differentiated Chinese intellectuals’ legitimacy concerns and policy suggestions.

Third, as this study covers a more recent period of time, it is able to include critical events such as the 2008 financial crisis. As the world has frequently pointed out the success of the Chinese response to the financial crisis, it would be interesting to hear the perspective of insiders. After the crisis, China’s unique developmental model received greater recognition, lending strong support to the existence of the ‘China Model’. This study, however, finds that the anxieties about the economy and ‘performance dilemma’ largely increased in China after the financial crisis, suggesting that Chinese intellectuals seem to have become more pessimistic.

5. Thomas, ‘How do you solve a problem like legitimacy?’.
6. Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig, ‘The debate on party legitimacy in China: a mixed quantitative/qualitative analysis’, Journal of Contemporary China 18(59), (2009). In this article, ‘the previous study’ refers to the study by Gilley and Holbig.
In addition, China’s leadership transition in 2012 has turned a new page. Maintaining the CCP’s power in the second largest world economy and the most populous country in the world is the first and foremost task for the new leaders. This article provides a guide to understanding what policy options are available and what critical opinions are heard by the new leadership.

Moreover, this study juxtaposes the Chinese literature with the English literature on this subject. It reveals a remarkable cleavage between the international perceptions of the Chinese state and the pessimistic views among Chinese intellectuals about the party’s ruling. This study demonstrates how different perspectives of observation on China lead to vastly different perceptions about regime legitimacy in China.

Most importantly, this study reveals a fundamental shift in emphasis around political legitimacy. The top perceived legitimacy threats five years ago—changing interests and the exhaustion of revolutionary-historical legitimacy—have now been replaced by socioeconomic inequality, corruption and incapability of bureaucratic systems, while changing values remains a leading item in both of this study and the previous study. Accordingly, proposed strategies are largely varied. The improvement of bureaucracy, propaganda, rule of law and promotion of equality are the most frequently mentioned strategies in maintaining legitimacy in the debate now compared with the rule of law, economic growth, propaganda and building better party organizations, which were the main strategies five years ago. By using a principle component factor analysis to identify the clusters of strategies, this study finds that social justice and governance have become much more important than before, while ideological change still remains a leading strategy. In addition, this study also finds a distinct rising appeal of social autonomy that runs counter to the dominant official line.

II. Background

II.1. Methodology

In order to understand the legitimacy debate in China, this study developed a coding manual and coded 125 Chinese articles on legitimacy. The coding manual is redesigned from Gilley and Holbig’s work, which studies a similar legitimacy debate between 2002 and 2007. The coding of each article starts with the following questions.

• How does the author evaluate political legitimacy in China?
• What are the perceived threats to legitimacy?
• What are the suggested strategies for maintaining legitimacy?
• Whose studies have they cited?

The 125 articles were selected from the China Academic Journals Full-text Database—the largest academic journal full-text database in the world.
Its humanities and social science database covers 3,300 official social and humanities journals, papers from 9,964 significant conferences, and 515 important newspapers. All articles with ‘legitimacy’ (合法性) in the title and which include discussions about the legitimacy of the Chinese state and the CCP (published between 2008 and 2012) in this database have been selected.

II.2. Limitations of this study

Owing to the nature of the database and the limitations on what is published in Chinese journals, the selection does not include the opinions of dissidents or confidential discussions about the state. In addition, the database does not include books; however, no cutting-edge Chinese book on state legitimacy was published in the period, and what has been published is typically discussed in articles and thus captured by this analysis (albeit in a secondary manner).

While proposing the dissolution of CCP rule or the move to a competitive multi-party democracy remains taboo, this analysis reveals a remarkably open and plural debate. If the focus is on how to maintain and strengthen CCP rule (rather than replace it), then the debate over legitimacy is an open and public one. This includes ideas that run counter to the dominant official line.

Notably, policies do not always originate from academic debate in China; it can be the other way around, in that academic discussions are sometimes used to test and promote the preferred policies of individual leaders. Either way, this debate about political legitimacy is closely related to the survival strategies of the party-state under the watch of new leaders.

II.3. Composition of the selected articles and the authors

Among the selected articles, 17% are based on government-funded projects. This study finds that those funded projects prefer to advocate improvement in public welfare provision \( X^2 (1, N = 125) = 6.395, p < 0.05 \). This preference mirrors the way that the regime has shifted its emphasis towards improving people’s livelihood.

Interestingly, this study also finds correlations between authors’ research locations and their arguments. I would like to thank Shaun Breslin for suggesting that I study this relationship. The independent variable is coded according to the GDP per capita of the province where the authors’ institutions were located in 2009. The reasons why I did not use ‘province-year’ as the unit and panel data are explained in the online-appendix. \( N = 123 \) because two articles are filtered: one is anonymous and the other is translated from English articles. In cases where there are two authors, the first author has priority.
worry about socioeconomic inequality \( r = -0.345, n = 123, p = 0.000 \), the sustainability of China’s economy \( r = -0.245, n = 123, p = 0.006 \), corruption \( r = -0.200, n = 123, p = 0.027 \) and inadequate political participation \( r = -0.213, n = 123, p = 0.018 \). One possible reason for this is that richer regions have benefited more from China’s economic growth than poorer regions; therefore, they are more capable of solving problems caused by economic growth.

Authors based in poorer regions showed a significant inclination towards suggesting that the government should increase bureaucratic efficiency and transparency \( r = -0.179, n = 123, p = 0.047 \), increase citizen participation \( r = -0.228, n = 123, p = 0.011 \), and encourage the development of civil society \( r = -0.194, n = 123, p = 0.031 \). Those in richer regions are more likely to propose that the government should improve its ability to guide public opinion \( r = 0.255, n = 123, p = 0.004 \). These findings indicate very diverse demands and interests among Chinese provinces.

In this debate, the 17 authors are from different party schools, including the Central Party School in Beijing and various provincial and municipal party schools. It is notable that the party school system is the key think tank and the ‘incubator of reform ideas and polices’ of the CCP. \(^{18}\) The authors from the party school system and the government were more interested in party democracy \( X^2 (1, N = 125) = 7.995, p < 0.01 \).

Selected articles are written by university professors/researchers (81.7%), party school professors/researchers (13.4%), government officials (2.4%) and military officers (1.6%). Some authors hold positions in both universities and party schools. This needs to be noted, as there is no clear line between officials and scholars in China. For instance, Yu Keping, an author in this debate and one of the most influential party intellectuals, is both the deputy director of the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau and a professor at Peking University.

III. Quantitative results

III.1. Citation rates of scholars

The results of the reference rates are shown in Figure 1.\(^ {19}\) Only 2% of articles in the debate considered Chinese philosophies concerning legitimacy compared with 19% of articles which mentioned the ancient Western philosopher Aristotle. This is interesting because it seems to go against the grain of thinking of China as in some way exceptional and built on different philosophies to Western states. On the one hand, many Chinese officials and scholars have frequently reminded the Western scholars about the uniqueness of China and the move towards the concept of ‘harmony’ built on China’s specific historical traditions. Indeed, the criticism that

\(^{17}\) They are more likely to mention regional inequality.


\(^{19}\) Instead of importing the bibliography into Endnote as the previous study did, this study manually coded the citation and provides specific rates for comparison. This is because sometimes when those Chinese authors simply mention the names of the scholars or their books in the text, this is not reflected in the bibliography. In addition, problems can easily be caused by different Chinese translations of scholars’ names.
Western scholars failed to pay enough attention to Chinese culture and misused Western theories in their study of China rose in the very early stages of China Studies. As mentioned, nowadays, many analysts outside China have been increasingly interested in using China’s past to explain the present. On the other hand, the Chinese debate is much more influenced by Western theories than traditional Chinese philosophies.

This finding indicates that the advocates of the ‘China Model’ have not convinced party intellectuals yet. Indeed, Western theories currently dominate the Chinese literature of modern politics. A major reason for this is that traditional Chinese political philosophies have not been sufficiently adapted into modern civilization. Although great efforts are made to modernize Chinese philosophies, they have not yet reproduced a more convincing system to compete with the well-established Western theories. To a certain point, it is true to say that Western theories cannot necessarily easily explain China, and that Western analysts cannot understand China because of its unique historical and cultural traditions, but the alternatives offered (if there are any) tend to be worse. In the words of Ma Deyong, an influential author in the legitimacy debate:

Currently, none of the Chinese scholars can create a widely accepted academic system. All we can do is to develop new concepts and theories based on the current academic system in order to explain the present.

As indicated in Figure 1, Western scholars dominate not only in ancient but also in modern and contemporary Chinese discourses of legitimacy. The most popular

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22. Email interview with Ma Deyong, 2 November 2012.
scholars in the debate are all from the West: Max Weber (49%), Jurgen Habermas (40%), Samuel P. Huntington (39%) and Seymour M. Lipset (39%). Interestingly, Karl Marx, the founder of communist ideology, has only been mentioned in 33% of articles—not many in comparison with other Western thinkers.

In the debate, the empirical school of legitimacy is more influential than the critical school and the normative school. This is not only because of the higher reference rate of the empiricists such as Weber and Lipset, but also owing to the fact that the empirical school has been adopted more frequently to approach the issue of legitimacy in a practical way. Weber’s framework of legitimacy in particular and the subsequent modified versions are widely endorsed in the debate.

During the coding, I found that almost no author in the debate directly challenged or responded to others although all of them were discussing the same topic and presenting different opinions. A similar pattern was also found in the previous study, in which Chinese elites do not only rarely give a direct response but also avoid citing others.23 Gilley and Holbig argue that this might be because of ‘a latent fear among scholars of being grouped with each other, categories as holding as a partisan view and ending up as representing the “wrong line”’.24 However, there seems to be less fear now than before. Yu Keping, one of the key authors and also the most cited Chinese scholar in the debate, has been cited by 16% of articles. Yu’s ‘good governance’ (善治) is one of the most popular terms used in this debate.

Indeed, it is a common phenomenon that Chinese literature of political studies has relatively short reviews of other Chinese colleagues’ work. This is partly because of the current Chinese academic norms and standards.25 Chinese intellectuals are reluctant to judge others’ articles, especially in terms of giving critical comments, because of ‘(their) academic culture’.26

III.2. Evaluations of political legitimacy

As mentioned, most intellectuals outside China argue that the party-state has enjoyed high popular support or political trust and this view is strongly supported by various cross-national surveys, including the Asian barometer and the World Values Survey. This is a ‘consensus’ of ‘scholars familiar with the field’.27 Chinese elites, however, seem to be much more pessimistic than this ‘consensus’.

As indicated in Figure 2, only two articles argue that regime legitimacy is high or relatively high. Nearly 20% of authors argue that the regime was experiencing a legitimacy crisis (合法性危机) and 21% of authors, including Yu Keping, hold that the party-state is facing some form of challenge or threat to its legitimacy (巨大挑战, 严峻挑战, 威胁, 合法性匮乏, etc.). Possible interpretations of the pessimistic view

23. Gilley and Holbig, ‘The debate on party legitimacy in China’.
24. Ibid., p. 342.
25. Email contact with Ma Deyong, 2 November 2012; Huang Jianrong, 3 November 2012, 4 November 2012 and 7 November 2012; and Yu Keping, 4 November 2012.
26. Email interview with Yu Keping, 4 November 2012.
held by Chinese intellectuals are: party intellectuals have insights unavailable to the outside; those whose job it is to look for challenges to legitimacy tend to see problems everywhere; or, most persuasively, both of the above.

### III.3. Legitimacy threats

Various domestic (mainly social and political) factors rather than international factors are considered to be the main source of perceived threats in the debate. Only 14% of authors mentioned globalization as a reason why legitimacy has declined and 5% blamed this on the West—the so-called ‘foreign or Western hostile forces’. Moreover, 13% of authors expressed their concern that the current pace of economic growth is unsustainable, while 21% were concerned about the on-going or imminent ‘performance dilemma’ (政绩困局).

As indicated in Figure 3, anxieties about the economy and performance dilemma largely increased after 2008. It suggests that the 2008 financial crisis led to serious concerns about China’s economy, although many in the West have looked to China’s success in responding to the crisis.28

28. For example, see Barry Naughton, ‘China’s emergence from economic crisis’, *China Leadership Monitor* 29, (2009); John Ross, ‘China’s economic success set an example the world should follow’, *The Guardian*, (2012); Heike...
As indicated in Table 1, almost half of the authors consider socioeconomic inequality (49%) and changing values (49%) to be the major threats to legitimacy, followed by corruption (43%) and bureaucracy (39%). This finding is strikingly concordant with the insights of Chinese leading cadres who considered inequality and corruption to be the most serious social problems, according to a report of the Chinese Social Science Academy. Whyte’s survey study is worth mentioning to make some interesting comparisons here. Whyte finds that most Chinese are not bothered by socioeconomic inequality and consider the current system fair. These two seemingly contradictory findings present an interesting phenomenon—that Chinese leaders believe the masses to be worrying about an issue when, in fact, they are not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic inequality</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>e.g. the gap between the rich and the poor, social inequality, regional inequality, the gap between the rural and urban areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing values</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>e.g. weakening of communist ideology, increasing civic awareness and promoting Western political values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>e.g. corruption (钱权交易, 腐败)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy (threat)</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>e.g. inefficiency, opacity, incapability of bureaucracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate political participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>e.g. inadequate political participation of citizens or NGOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>e.g. conflicting interests of different social groups, classes, or interest groups (e.g. 社会阶层, 利益团体, 利益集团, 利益主体)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental degradation</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>e.g. environmental pollution, pressures of large population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate public provision of welfare</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>e.g. health, education, social security, housing, and pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate rule of law</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>e.g. poor legislative quality and inadequate judiciary, and implementation of law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of technology</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>e.g. Internet, new mass media, social network</td>
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Source: The author’s own database.

Footnote 28 continued


Regarding the issue of corruption, two contradictory opinions exist in the Chinese mass media. Many argue that the government should immediately promote strong reforms and democratic development to curb corruption. Others hold that corruption will decline in line with socioeconomic development, because the widespread corruption is an issue associated with the modernization of developing countries. Thus, removing corruption from the system is a long process and China should guard against undue haste. Ramirez’s optimistic study about corruption in China is worth mentioning here. By comparing China’s level of corruption with that of the US at a similar state of development, Ramirez argues that corruption levels in China will gradually decline with further modernization, as was the case with the USA. However, no article provides an in-depth analysis of the latter view in the legitimacy debate, although corruption is frequently mentioned. It indicates that Chinese intellectuals have not examined this issue comparatively and so perhaps miss the ‘normalcy’ of the Chinese situation.

The finding about technology development is notable. While many contend that the development of the Internet, in particular social networks, has tremendously changed China in many aspects, only 5% of authors mentioned it in the legitimacy debate. Most authors do not perceive the development of technology to be a direct threat to legitimacy. Rather, the Internet is regarded as an intermediary that would enlarge various socioeconomic problems. The authors either argue that strict control over the Internet is not feasible in the long run, or they tend to emphasize solving the root problems over increasing Internet censorship.

**III.4. Policy options for maintaining legitimacy**

While China watchers tend to explain political legitimacy in terms of economic prosperity, Chinese intellectuals have already realized that economic growth alone will not guarantee the CCP’s ruling position. As mentioned, a number of intellectuals expressed anxieties about economic and ‘performance dilemma’. Moreover, in the legitimacy debate between 2002 and 2007, 50% of intellectuals suggested promoting better, faster and more sustainable economic growth to maintain legitimacy, but only 21% still insist on doing so now. Many articles continuously warned about the fleeting nature of performance legitimacy and the necessity of establishing more solid legitimacy foundations, especially rational-legal legitimacy. Arguably, in China, it is a near consensus that the state should find sources of legitimacy other than economic performance.

31. Lin Cao, ‘舍制度和民主之外，反腐无解’ ['There is no solution to curb corruption other than institutional building and democracy'], 中国青年报 [China Youth Newspaper], (2012).
32. ‘社评：反腐败是中国社会发展的攻坚战’ ['The editorial: anti-corruption is a battle of Chinese social development'], 环球时报 [Global Times], (2012).
33. Carlos Ramirez, Is Corruption in China 'Out of Control'? A Comparison with the US in Historical Perspective, Department of Economics, George Mason University, 2012.
In order to address the threats to legitimacy mentioned above, public intellectuals have suggested a set of diverse solutions. In the debate between 2008 and 2012, the most frequently mentioned strategies are: the improvement of bureaucracy (46%, 25% in the previous study), propaganda (38%), citizen participation (37%) and civil society (27%, 10% previously) compared with rule of law (64%), economic growth (50%), democracy (50%) and propaganda (48%) in the debate between 2003 and 2007.

Among those legitimacy strategies, some might serve as competing alternatives to one another, whilst others—such as citizen participation and civil society—might work to complement each other. To understand better how those strategies knit together and identify specific forms of strategies, I performed a principal component factor analysis on the 29 variables in my coding book. This study labels the top components as ideology, social justice and governance, as indicated in Figure 4. The dispersion of all variables along with ideology (component 1) and governance (component 3) are shown in Figure 5.

As indicated in Figures 4 and 5, bureaucracy, citizen participation and civil society are more likely to be proposed together as ways to address threats to legitimacy. Therefore, they are not only some of the most frequently mentioned strategies, but also more united in their prescriptions for the party-state, which indicates a clear rising appeal of social autonomy. The next section examines proposed strategies through a qualitative analysis.

Figure 4. Three dimensions of proposed strategies for maintaining legitimacy (factor correlations $r$).

Note: No author in the debate advises the separation of the party and the government and the promotion of Maoism; therefore, those two variables are filtered. For more information, please see the online appendix.

35. It generally refers to creation of a more responsive, transparent and predictable bureaucratic structure that is efficient and effective.
IV. Qualitative results

IV.1. Ideology

The issue of ideology has been widely neglected in the English literature of contemporary China studies as many considered it obsolete. Chinese leaders and intellectuals, however, have always taken it seriously. In China, ideological changes involve a special meaning of power assertion. It is an attempt to place the new leaders’ stamp on the party and history because newly adapted ideologies are clearly identified with specific leaders. When new ideological reform is launched, previous ideologies have been ‘discarded’ to a certain extent. Mao Zedong’s Thought, the bible of China’s rising New Leftists (新左派), is completely discarded in the debate, although many observed similar problems—socioeconomic inequality in particular—with the New Leftists. In addition, only three articles mentioned Deng Xiaoping’s Theories compared with four articles on Jiang Zemin’s Three Represents. Almost all relevant articles symbolically mentioned those previous ideologies by name without giving any detail. This result is completely different from the debate

36. Although many studies have been focused on nationalism, this article does not consider them as political ideology. As Breslin argues, Chinese nationalism ‘lack(s) sufficient coherence and guiding principles to be counted as an ideology as such—it is not a “science of ideas”’. Shaun Breslin, ‘Democratizing one-party rule in China’, in Peter Burnell and Richard Youngs, eds, New Challenges to Democratization (London: Routledge, 2009).

five years ago, in which all major ideologies were mentioned: Marxism (34%), Mao’s Thoughts (13%), Deng’s Theories (24%), Jiang’s Three Represents (39%) and Hu’s Harmonious Society (18%).

Now, the new fashionable proposition is the Socialist Core Values System. This system is proposed in the new rounds of ideological adaptation in order to strengthen the attractiveness and cohesiveness of socialist ideology. Much of the relevant discourse in the debate is about this adaptation. As proposed in a party report that has been frequently cited in the debate, the construction of a Socialist Core Values System is the foundation of the harmonious culture. This system consists of Marxism (its guiding ideology), socialism with Chinese characteristics, patriotism and the ‘Socialist Concept of Honour and Disgrace’. As Chang Sumei put it, ‘the diversification and differentiation of values have increased the disorder of social values and have thus reduced party legitimacy’. Thus, some suggest that the state should use the Socialist Core Values System to integrate various social values and form an ideological structure—in which Marxism is the leading ideology coexisting with other diversified thoughts.

IV.1.1. Marxism. Marxism (16%) is proposed as a guiding ideology of the Socialist Core Values System in the debate, Communist ideology in China was established as a distinctive Chinese form of socialism, separate from the Soviet Union and orthodox Marxism. Marxism in the Chinese context refers to Marxism with Chinese characteristics, adapted to China’s situation, or the ‘Sinification of Marxism’. The CCP has been keen to integrate Marxism with practices in China. This is perhaps because the party might attempt to claim the legitimacy of an independent China as not part of the Soviet Union and to undermine the attacks from culturalists who considered communist ideology to be alien.

Many authors used the party reports and Hu Jintao’s report on the 17th Party Congress to highlight the significance of Marxism. For example, Sun Yong and Liu Qingfeng argue that ‘the Socialist Core Values System is the very foundation of China’s common ideals, which is the premise underlying the party-state. The party-state might be at risk of splitting and collapsing without this foundation’.

Marxism has an irreplaceable role in the past, present and the future of the CCP’s ruling according to many in the debate. For instance, Xu Jialing, the visiting scholar of the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau, argues that ‘Marxism has been a key legitimacy pillar of the CCP, revolution, and reforms in the past decades, and


39. Ibid.


only Marxism, rather than any other theory, can provide the legitimacy to combine socialism with Chinese characteristics’. 42

IV.1.2. Patriotism and nationalism. Nationalism has been discussed in 12% of articles in the debate compared with 15% in the previous study. Similar to the previous study, nationalist positions distributed evenly over the legitimacy debate analysed here. In the debate, nationalism is discussed as a part of the Socialist Core Values System. It is generally considered as a helpful tool to increase Chinese people’s national identity. Whilst most relevant articles actually refer to patriotism (爱国主义) rather than nationalism (民族主义), there are two articles published in the Guangxi Journal of Ethnology which do refer to nationalism. Zhang Wenjing and Du Jun argue that nationalism is a double-edged sword that can split China because nationalism helps to provide legitimacy and effective political mobilization on the one hand, and promotes separatism and intensifies the contradiction between Han and ethnic minorities on the other hand.43 They suggested launching patriotic education campaigns and suggested highlighting the fact that China is a united political entity in order to improve ethnic minorities’ national identity. It is very important to prevent the ideological infiltration and political propaganda of dissenters from overseas, so they argue that information control is necessary. In another article, they argue that the government should reduce ethnic consciousness and construct a common Chinese culture.44

Another article argues that the demonstration of military power can enhance legitimacy by increasing national pride. Wang Haizhou contends that China’s National Day Military Parade has enhanced legitimacy by serving as a political ceremony.45

IV.2. Governance

Further market reform and rapid economic growth have created many problems in China, which are shaking the legitimacy of the party-state. As mentioned, various social problems—inequality in particular—are the top threats nowadays. Various plans regarding social reforms and the improvement of the bureaucratic system are proposed to help the party-state.

IV.2.1. Citizen participation. As Li Liang warns, if people’s desire for political participation cannot be satisfied, they will be easily disappointed with the political system, which will further shake the legitimacy.46 The problems with citizen

participation in China are analysed in the debate in two ways: excessive informal participation and inadequate channels of formal participation. Informal participation refers to illegal and inappropriate ways—such as popular protests and bribes—to influence policy making, and formal participation refers to the institutionalized ways to influence policy making—such as public hearings. Increased informal participation causes either corruption or social instability, both of which are destructive to political legitimacy. Some in the debate consider the inadequate institutionalized channels of citizen participation to be an important factor in the increasing popular protests in China.47

The benefits expected from citizen participation are numerous. Liu Dongjie argues that citizen participation in policy making will help to make better policies and strengthen the supervision over policy implementations and evaluations.48 Xia Jingmei argues that citizen participation will help to maintain stability by ‘solving conflicting interests of different social classes, protecting people’s rights, increasing bureaucratic efficiency, and enhancing national identity’.49 Notably, citizen participation is considered by some as a way to unite social forces and to restrict state power. For example, Wang and Li argue that ‘dispersed citizens cannot confront the strong administrative power’ and thus citizen participation is necessary to help citizens to balance state power.50

In order to promote more orderly citizen participation, many urge the state to play a role in nurturing civic spirits. As Yang Xuedong, an associate researcher of the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau pointed out, the government should cultivate the public spirit of participation rather than ‘buying citizens’ compliances’.51 Yao Jingjing argues that traditional civic awareness is ‘too passive’ and the state should cultivate people’s willingness to participate through education and official propaganda.52

IV.2.2. Civil society, limited government and social autonomy. Civil society (27%) has been much more frequently proposed in the legitimacy debate now compared with five years ago (10%). Modern theories of public administration—limited government and citizen participation in particular—are frequently cited to support relevant arguments. Reasons for supporting civil society and social autonomy in this

debate are manifold: the changing values, the rise of the third sector, the inability of the traditional bureaucracy and corruption.

Consequently, many in the debate suggest a new governance model that is co-managed by the society, the state and the market. For instance, Huang Jianrong argues that ‘the current management model of the state has becomes a barrier to political and economic developments’, and the state should ‘face the fact that both social and public affairs cannot be well managed by the government alone’. In Huang’s opinion, civil society and NGOs are the main forces to harness in order to supervise and restrict state power, which eventually can prevent and reduce corruption. Civil society is also suggested in order to consolidate the CCP’s ruling in ethnic minority areas. Deng Mei argues that civil organizations will increase interactive communications between the political system and the citizens, strengthen the uptake rate of social resources, and maintain social order.

The rising recognition of civil society is partly because of civil organizations’ constructive roles in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Various NGOs have helped the government through the entire process of disaster relief and reconstruction. They have been considered by many as a helping hand rather than a threat. For instance, Chun Yumiaoling and Liang Xiao argue that the government should promote the development of NGOs as complementary to the state in order to maintain legitimacy and to overcome future crisis.

IV.2.2.1. Pitfall of civil society (公民社会陷阱) vs. cooperated governance.
Clearly, the government might be reluctant to share power with the social forces. According to Xue Tao, ‘some party cadres regarded civil society as alien to resisting or confronting the state power; some even argued that the development of civil society would reduce the party’s capability of leading and managing society’.

The ‘pitfall of civil society’ is a notable and controversial idea which serves to resist the development of civil society; it is proposed by the Secretary-General of the Central Commission for Politics and Law (中央政法委) and the deputy director of the Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Security (中央社会治安综合治理委员会), Zhou Benshun. Considering its significance, it is necessary to introduce briefly the cleavage over civil society, although it is not a part of the legitimacy debate. Zhou argued that the current mode of social management is an ‘advantage’; thus, the regime should not promote civil society—‘a pitfall designed by some Western countries’—to govern the society.

57. Benshun Zhou, ‘防止落入所谓公民社会陷阱’ [‘Preventing falling into the so-called pitfall of civil society’], 求是 [Seeking Truth], (17 May 2011).
that the state and party committees should ‘put social management and public services in place rather than let society be in charge’.

Partly because of Zhou’s official capacity, this article, published in the party’s primary mouthpiece Seeking Truth (求是), reflected the official position of civil society to a certain extent and thus received wide attentions. However, no author in the legitimacy debate openly endorses this position. All relevant articles mentioning civil society endorse the development of civil society.

IV.2.2.2. Limited government (有限政府).

‘Limited government’ is another popular term in the debate. Some 20% of authors suggested that the government should retreat from social areas and return power to society. For example, Yu argues that the state withdrawal/retreat can help to avoid bureaucratic inefficiency and thus can help to increase the effectiveness of governance.58 According to Yu, state withdrawal/retreat is an important step towards good governance. Jian Zhang argues that the rising civil society and the ideas of limited government are ‘historical tendencies’ that are unavoidable in a market economy; for this reason, the state should follow those tendencies.59

Many argue that traditional political totalism and the ‘big government, small society’ mode should be abandoned in order to face up to the legitimacy crisis.60 Some argue that corruption will be reduced if the state restricts its field of activities.61 The state is offered as an option that can allow the market to provide more public services.62

IV.2.2.3. ‘Strong state and weak society’ (大政府，小社会) vs. ‘weak state and strong society’ (小政府，大社会) = ‘strong state and strong society’ (大政府，大社会)?

In the debate, some criticized the state’s strict control over social affairs and the ‘strong state and weak society’ model. For example, Xu Chengyu argues that the state’s monopoly on power and information has made its relationship with citizens more intense.63 In addition, it also leads to inefficient resource allocation and unfair competition.

Even though Chinese intellectuals recognized the problems of the ‘strong state and weak society’, none openly advised a ‘weak state and strong society’ model in the debate. Zhou Benshun’s ‘pitfall of civil society’ article partly explains why. Zhou was directly critical of those ‘who do not understand the social management model in foreign countries’ and argues that ‘not all the developed countries adopt the “weak government and strong society” model’ and many of them have ‘strong states; many social organizations have government backgrounds and are under the control of their governments’.64 In Zhou’s opinions, China must tighten its control over social

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64. Zhou, ‘防止落入所谓公民社会陷阱’ [‘Preventing falling into the so-called pitfall of civil society’].
organizations and prevent the multiplication of those organizations with ‘ulterior motives’.

Interestingly, ‘strong society and strong state’ is proposed as an alternative in order to balance ‘strong state and weak society’ and ‘weak state and strong society’. Ma Xiaoni and Cheng Weijie, for example, argue that only ‘big society and big government’ can help the state to win more support. It seems that this alternative could solve the problems of ‘weak society’ by promoting a ‘strong society’ and avoid conflicting with the state by maintaining a ‘strong state’.

IV.2.3. Bureaucracy (solution). Under the guidance of the Scientific Outlook of Development, the idea of People-Oriented (以人为本) has been promoted as a basic value of the entire state. It attempts to change the ruling philosophies and functions of the state from growth-oriented to public service-oriented. In this special section, Schneider and Hwang examine this official discourse of ‘people-oriented’—which they translate as ‘putting people first’—in the management of disaster. In the legitimacy debate, this idea is frequently used to highlight the importance of rebuilding bureaucracy. Many argue that the state should change its main priority from economic growth to social management in order to build a public service-oriented government and to strengthen the provision of public service.

Chinese intellectuals propose both external and internal ways to restrict state power and officials. Externally, they suggest public supervision and transparency. For instance, Chen Bohui argues that public overseeing is the most effective way to restrict state power. According to Chen, ‘Chinese mass media does not dare and is not willing to investigate corruption because of the government interventions’; therefore, China should enact laws to protect mass media. The establishment of internal institutions and regulations are also advised for the purposes of preventing corruption and increasing performance.

Promoting transparency of information is considered to be a way to maintain stability and legitimacy. For example, Li Chuxue and Luo Zhang argue that the development of the Internet and mass media provide channels for rumours and inaccurate information. Therefore, local governments should objectively publicize

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66. Schneider and Hwang, ‘The Sichuan earthquake and the heavenly mandate’.
69. For example, Wang and Li, ‘巩固和加强政府合法性基础的路径选择’ ['Ways of consolidating and strengthening political legitimacy'].
70. Chuxue Li and Zhang Luo, ‘预防群体性事件与完善基层政治合法性基础探究’ ['Exploration on prevention of popular protests and increase legitimacy of local governments'], 领导视角 [Science of Management], (July 2012).
rather than attempt to hide the relevant information. In Yu’s ‘good governance’, transparency is a basic component of modern states and is popular with supporters of ‘good governance’.  

The rapidly changing circumstances have led to concern about the state’s decision-making capabilities. By listing past problematic policies, Huang Jianrong argues that the government should strengthen its decision-making ability by changing its ruling philosophies from economic efficiency-oriented to people-oriented. 

Ren Hongjie, a professor at the People’s University of Public Security, warns that the information explosion led by the Internet’s development has made it more difficult for the state to make scientific decisions: ‘Once the inappropriate policies and their consequences were exposed on the Internet, legitimacy would be significantly reduced’. Therefore, Ren suggests that the government should ‘establish special mechanisms to collect and filter Internet information for decision-making, build channels to communicate with the public about important policies, and increase the leaders’ decision-making abilities by providing sufficient training’.

Moral education is also suggested as complementary to bureaucratic rebuilding. For example, Xia Lei argues that ‘the entire moral image of the party-state is reflected in each civil servant or party cadre’; as such, strengthening moral education for civil servants is essential. In addition, Shen Jingchen and Zhang Dawei argue that ‘the political education of civil servants should move from general, ideological education to a more specific education of administrative accountability’.

IV.3. Social justice

The promotion of social justice is the most direct way to respond to rising legitimacy concerns with regard to social problems. Inadequate social justice is considered both a direct and an indirect threat to party legitimacy: it leads to decreased support from disadvantaged groups and the poor, and also shakes social stability. As Yang Songlu warns, if the state fails to improve people’s livelihood, ‘it will not only slow down economic growth and damage social stability, but also threaten the regime’s legitimacy’. Peng Hua, writing in the in-house journal of the Beijing Youth Politics College, finds that social inequality and inadequate public provision of welfare have led to low political identities of the rural youth—a dangerous sign of social instability. Peng further argues that market reform in China has led to many

71. Yu, '善治：政治合法性主要来源' ['Good governance: the main source of political legitimacy'].
72. Huang, ‘论现代政府合法性递减’ ['Discussion on the decreasing legitimacy of modern governments'].
75. Shen and Zhang, ‘当代中国政府合法性危机分析’ ['Analysis of the legitimacy crisis in contemporary China'].
76. Songlu Yang, ‘试论社会转型期面临的合法性挑战及政策选择’ ['Discussion on the legitimacy challenge and policy options at the transformation stage'], 内蒙古农业大学学报 [Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University (Social Sciences)] 12(1), (2010).
socioeconomic problems and the government should take responsibility to improve people’s livelihood and promote equality.

**IV.3.1. People’s livelihood (民生).** With widening social inequality, focusing on people’s livelihood is very critical to winning support from the poor. Jing Haixin argues that the issue of people’s livelihood has become the root cause of social conflict in China. Notably, the term ‘people’s livelihood’ is not new to China as it used to be a part of Sun Yat-sen’s ‘Three Principles of the People’. The exact definition of ‘people’s livelihood’ is never settled because Sun never clearly or fully explains it, but the equal ownership of land is fairly clear as it is based on Henry George’s Georgism. In the current context, people’s livelihood represents a much broader spectrum. Both the ideas of ‘people-oriented’ and people’s livelihood imply a similar message: that economic means alone cannot sustain the CCP’s ruling, but being ‘people-oriented’ focuses more on ideological values and the latter is more like a direct policy responding to the inadequate provision of public welfare.

Nowadays, an improvement in people’s livelihood is regarded by many as the new source of legitimacy in China. Based on two influential government-funded survey projects in 2012, some even argue that the provision of public goods has replaced economic performance to become the most important legitimacy source. Ma Deyong and Wang Zhengxu, for example, argue that the public provision of welfare and the fairness of institutional arrangements are the keys for local governments to overcome a legitimacy crisis. In another survey, Peking University’s Meng Tianguan and Yang Ming found that ‘economic growth can no longer help to maintain political trust, yet the increasing provision of public services—such as reducing the unemployment rate and Gini coefficient—and public welfare expenditure are still effective’.

**IV.3.2. Equality.** As mentioned above, socioeconomic inequality has become the top legitimacy threat. Recognizing the widening of social inequality, the Scientific Outlook of Development intended to move the state’s priority from efficiency-oriented to a more balanced position of equity and efficiency.

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82. Interestingly, their articles specifically point out that effective provision of welfare, rather than elections and citizen participation, is the main source of legitimacy in contemporary China. They also mention that this finding has confirmed the previous studies published in another legitimacy article in 2007. As mentioned, most articles did not directly challenge or respond to other competing views; however, this is the only exception. This is also the only article that mentioned citizen participation and elections but did not support them. See Tianguang Meng and Ming Yang, ‘转型期中国县级政府的客观治理绩效于政治信任—从经济合法性到公共产品合法性’ [‘Performance and political trust of China’s town-level governments at the transformation stage—from economic growth legitimacy to public goods legitimacy’], 经济与社会体制比较 [Comparative Economic & Social Systems] 162(4), (2012).
In the debate, some argue that the government should play a role in compensating for market deficiencies and promoting equality. For example, Qu Wanhong argues that the government should compensate for market deficiencies, provide fairer competition in the market and promote social justice—in particular regional equality.\(^{83}\) Specific economic policies to reduce inequality are also proposed. For example, Fu Jingtao and Li Ming suggest adjusting the structures of income tax and financial expenditure.\(^{84}\)

IV.3.3. Grassroots democracy/basic level democracy (基层民主). As noted above, intellectuals have been looking for more solid legitimacy sources other than economic performance; democracy is clearly a key way of establishing Weber’s rational-legal legitimacy. In Hu Jintao’s speech at the 17th Party Congress, socialist democracy—grassroots democracy in particular—was proposed as a way to promote social justice. In the debate, grassroots democracy is considered by 13% of the articles as an effective way of promoting social justice and satisfying people’s rising demands to participate in the political process.

Grassroots democracy is also considered an effective way of increasing the political legitimacy of local governments. For example, Ma and Wang’s study finds that the effective implementation of direct elections in villages and towns can enhance the legitimacy of the local states.\(^{85}\) Therefore, they suggest that the implementation of electoral democracy at local levels is worth trying.

Interestingly, the debate seems to be systematically refraining from any conceptualization of the term ‘grassroots democracy’. Although it is mentioned frequently in the debate, no author has an interest in defining what ‘basic’ (基层) is. Also, no author mentions what should follow after the success of basic democracy. Li Meiling argues that ‘democratic development has to be gradual because of the inadequate democratic traditions and values in Chinese history’ and emphasizes that both high-level democracy and grassroots democracy are important.\(^{86}\) However, Li does not explain this so-called ‘high-level’ in detail.

Elections are, of course, an essential component of grassroots democracy. In the debate, only an article written by a senior colonel of the Chinese military openly opposes electoral democracy. It argues that the benefits of electoral democracy—such as increased political identity and stability—cannot compensate for the cost—such as decreased national identity, increased ethnic separatism and low efficiency.\(^{87}\) According to this article, ‘the West attempts to use electoral democracy

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85. Ma and Wang, ‘民主，公正还是绩效？’ [‘Democracy, justice or performance?’].
86. Meiling Li, ‘民主是党的执政合法性的动力和源泉’ [‘Democracies are the driving forces and sources of the party’s legitimacy’], 中共山西省委党校学报 [Journal of Shanxi Provincial Committee Party School of CPC] 32(2), (2009).
to bring disorder and chaos to China under the guise of protecting human rights’. The article considers party democracy as an alternative to electoral democracy.

Elections are also suggested in order to strengthen the party’s ruling capabilities and subsequently its legitimacy. The Central Party School’s Zhao Yao argues that the party’s personnel system should make efforts to increase elections and gradually reduce appointments from the top.\(^8\) Zhao considers the electoral system to be a revolution of the appointment system and advises the implementation of gradual reforms, although he clearly recognizes that the electoral system might have risks associated.

V. Concluding remarks

This article studies the legitimacy debate in China between 2008 and 2012. Several findings can be highlighted. First, while many overseas China observers are focusing on the search for Chinese philosophies to underpin a new polity, the Chinese intellectuals are looking to the West instead. It suggests that those who thought concertedly of China as in some way exceptional and built on different philosophies from Western states have not yet fully convinced their peers within China.

Second, most China watchers emphasized performance legitimacy and paid almost no attention to ideology; however, the analysts within China still consider ideology to be crucial and express serious concern about performance legitimacy. Continuous efforts towards ideological adaptation indicate party leaders’ increasing concerns about the CCP’s declining ideological legitimacy at the transformation stage. The party has realized the gap between social reality and ideology, and thus many modern political values have been absorbed so as to make a successful adaptation. Nowadays, democracy and rule of law have been considered as the only solid ground for Weber’s rational-legal legitimacy. As Li Meiling put it, ‘party legitimacy can only be gained from democracy’.\(^9\) Whether or not China should be more democratic is no longer the question; the focus is on which forms of democracy China should embrace.

Third, there is a distinct rising appeal of social autonomy that runs counter to the dominant official line in this debate. The increased recognition of social autonomy has indicated the growing power of social forces; this tendency might shape China’s political development. Although there is still some resistance, the findings of this study indicate that Chinese intellectuals have increasingly realized the fact that social autonomy is an unavoidable tendency and advised the party-state to promote rather than to repress it. However, it should not be interpreted as a sign of moving toward a more liberal and electoral democratic system. Rather, those suggestions are designed to strengthen the one-party system. Whether the development of civil society will achieve their expected outcomes or whether it will threaten the party’s control as some have warned still needs further investigation.

Fourth, this study finds a correlation between authors’ backgrounds (institutions, research locations and funding sources) and their dominant arguments about

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\(^9\) Li, ‘民主是党的执政合法性的动力和源泉’ ['Democracies are the driving forces and sources of the party’s legitimacy'].

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legitimacy. Chinese intellectuals based in more affluent areas are less concerned with inequality, the sustainability of China’s economy, corruption and inadequate political participation. Those based in poorer regions prefer to suggest the improvement of bureaucracy, increase citizen participation and encourage the development of civil society; those in affluent regions are more interested in suggesting that the regime should improve its capability to guide public opinion. In addition, government-funded projects are more likely to endorse the improvement of public welfare and intellectuals based in the party school prefer party democracy. Those differentiated legitimacy concerns and strategies deserve further study.

Moreover, while the world has pointed out the successes of the Chinese response to the financial crisis, Chinese intellectuals seem to have become more pessimistic. This again indicates that Chinese intellectuals are concerned that economic performance alone cannot sustain the CCP’s ruling.

Most importantly, this study finds a fundamental shift in the legitimacy debate in China. It is driven by various worsening problems caused by economic growth—socioeconomic inequality in particular. As this study reveals, it is clearly recognized that simply relying on economics is not sufficient—even if the economy continues to do well (and of course, there is a clear understanding that bad economic performance will harm legitimacy).

Indeed, economic growth is not a direct source of legitimacy; the regime gains legitimacy only if economic performance is transformed into actual material benefit which is delivered to its citizens. In the modern ‘social contract’, provision of public welfare is the key to the communist states being able to trade economic benefits with the civil rights of citizens. Nowadays, the party-state has been increasingly urged to put more effort into providing public welfare. Some recent surveys in this debate even find that the provision of welfare has already replaced economic growth to become the principal pillar of legitimacy of local governments.

Schubert’s new research agenda that is debated in this special section shed lights on how to better catch this changing dynamics of legitimacy of local governments.

All in all, this study reveals a remarkable cleavage between the international perceptions of the Chinese state and the pessimistic views among Chinese intellectuals about political legitimacy. The cleavage between the Western and the Chinese literature over this issue is perhaps owing to different perspectives: party intellectuals have more insights which are unavailable to the outside, and analysts outside China are looking comparatively and so perhaps better understand the ‘normalcy’ of the Chinese situation. This might reflect a general pattern of area studies. Outsiders and insiders are observing the research object from different angles, and they therefore might reach different observational results.

92. Ma and Wang, ‘民主，公正还是绩效？’ [‘Democracy, justice or performance?’]; Meng and Yang, ‘转型期中国县级政府的客观治理绩效于政治信任’ [‘Performance and political trust of China’s town-level governments at the transformation stage’].

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