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Continuities and changes of media construction of citizenship rights in China: the case of the *People's Daily*, 1978–2012

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical discussions about the Chinese citizenship rights suggest four distinctive aspects: rural-urban inequality, state-granted rather than natural born, socioeconomic rights prior to political entitlement, and collectivism overriding individualism. From a longitudinal and comparative perspective, this study examines how the most authoritarian party newspaper – the *People's Daily* – has constructed the idea of citizenship rights and manifested the four characteristics between 1978 and 2012, covering the three administrations of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. Through content analysis and discourse analysis, we find that the official construction of citizenship rights enduringly employs instrumentalism to maintain the Party's authority. Nevertheless, in each leadership, there exists a dominant political rhetoric that fundamentally shapes the construction and function of citizenship rights: rights were constructed upon the socialist ideology and legal system in Deng's administration; under Jiang, the strong diplomatic strategy prioritized national sovereignty over rights and reinforced rule by law; in Hu's era, socioeconomic rights were emphasized and good governance highlighted. Political goals, the development of legal system and the style of political leadership have contributed to the periodical changes of the construction of citizenship rights.

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Introduction

The concept of citizenship rights is one of the cornerstones of the modern nation state, which has been constitutionalised and codified in many countries' legal systems. Regardless of the apparently similar usage of the term in formal official documents across different political contexts, the varying definitions, interpretations and connotations in social arena are of particular importance to our understanding of the process and practices of different political systems. Take China for example. Although citizenship rights bear clear Western democratic origins, they have long been written into the Chinese Constitution and national statutes. Given that there could be discrepancies between the Western and Chinese interpretations of the concept, an overarching question is: how does the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) construct citizenship rights in the

Chinese sociopolitical context? Moreover, has the construction of citizenship rights been subject to political changes or leadership succession, and how?

To tackle such questions, this study examines how the most authoritative party newspaper in China – the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) – has constructed citizenship rights between 1978 and 2012. The 35 years cover the three generations of leadership – Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Excluded was the current President Xi Jinping on the ground that he has just finished his first term and part of the data would be incomplete. It means Xi's presidency is prone to short-term fluctuations, which could lead to analytical problems when compared to those of the three other leaders. By using content analysis and discourse analysis, we attempt to investigate how the citizenship rights with the Chinese characteristics have been manifested in the CPC's political rhetoric via official media representation, with what periodical changes, and how the media construction of rights has corresponded to the varying political goals across different leaderships.

Citizenship rights: Western and Chinese ideas

According to Marshall (1950/2009), 'citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed' (pp. 149–150). Nevertheless, as Cammaerts and Audenhove (2005) observe, 'citizenship has always been a dynamic notion, subject to change and permanent struggle over its precise content and meaning' (p. 179). According to Janoski's (1998) typology of regime structure and citizenship, in liberal democratic societies, rights are given priority over obligations; in social or expansive democracy, rights and obligations are roughly equivalent; but in communitarian societies, rights are subordinate to social obligations. Similarly, Low (2016) suggests that 'liberalism sees citizenship as a matter of rights; republicanism views citizenship as practice; and communitarianism regards citizenship as identity' (p. 124). In the Chinese setting, it is well acknowledged that citizens' obligations have long been given priorities over their legal rights. Moreover, compared with the Western ideas of citizenship rights, four pairs of dichotomous juxtapositions stand out in China.

First, citizenship rights in most contemporary Western nations are set to be equal to all social members who are legally recognized as residents of a state, while in China, citizenship and rights are not created equal between urban and rural residents, mostly due to the *hukou* system (Chan, 2010; Zhao, 2017; Smart & Smart, 2001; Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2002). The *hukou* system was initially designed to support the government's industrialization strategy in cities by extracting agricultural surplus in rural areas since early 1950s (Chan, 2010). The fundamental purpose was to control population mobility, especially rural outflow to the cities (Pi & Zhang, 2016). Urban residents are given priorities on a wide variety of social welfare and state-sponsored benefits, such as medical care, qualified public education, employment, insurance and so on (Chan, 2008; Zhao, 2017; Woodman, 2016). The peasant migration flow to cities, along with the boom of market economy since the 1980s, has created 'a crucial systemic alteration' (Solinger, 1999, p. 3) to the previously stable *hukou* system. Since the early 2000s, regional reforms on the household registration system have started to consider conditions like educational background, property, investment, residential status, and employment, to include

migrants or newcomers into city management. These reform policies, however, are clearly inclined to skilled workers, educated people and rich groups who can afford houses in cities, which further deepens the inequality of citizenship rights between urban and rural citizens.

Second, contrasting with the Western conception of citizenship rights that springs from the dignity of natural person, citizenship rights in China are usually regarded as grants from the state or the Party (Goldman & Perry, 2002; Keane, 2001; Nathan, 1985). Nathan (1985) indicated that none of the constitutions since the late Qing dynasty concerned rights from the natural-born personhood, but instead they indicated political endowment from the state. The top-down entitlement of citizenship suggests a paternalistic style of governance towards people (Fairbrother & Zhao, 2016), in that the state had the power to expand or limit rights in any aspect based on its own purpose. More recently, as incorporated into the Party's political discourse, the concept of citizenship rights has been used in state building and national patriotic education (Fairbrother & Zhao, 2016; Goldman, 2007). A good example is the massive anti-Japanese demonstrations in 2005 and 2012 to object Japan being granted a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Citizens' rights to demonstration were permitted and even promoted by the state for its political and diplomatic strategies in 2005. However, when social riots erupted during similar demonstrations in 2012, these movements were downplayed by the government. It suggests that the extent to which citizenship rights can be executed and protected is subject to the state's political, social, and diplomatic needs as well as purposes they might serve.

Third, unlike the Western idea of citizenship rights as a political entitlement, rights in China are mostly framed as socioeconomic issues (Perry, 2008). 'In America, even fundamentally economic protests are framed as a question of civil rights' (Perry, 2008, p. 44). In China, however, the political rhetoric of the CPC since the Mao era has been concentrated on the economic development. Since Deng's open and reform policy in the late 1970s, the CPC has established its political legitimacy well on economic development and social stability in what Zhao called as *performance legitimacy* (Zhao, 2001). It suggests that, as long as the CPC promotes economic growth and directs social morality within its sovereignty, the public would tie their loyalty and obedience with the Party. As such, it is reasonable to observe that the Party emphasizes economic development and social stability as critical premises for the practice of citizenship rights (Liu & Chang, 2019).

Fourth, Chinese conceptions of citizenship rights concern more about collective membership than individual rights. The two notions of *people* (*renmin*) and *masses* (*qunzhong*) can best illustrate the point, which connote collective membership rather than individual rights vis-a-vis the state. In fact, Article 51 of the Chinese Constitution clearly states that 'PRC citizens in exercising their freedoms and rights, should not infringe upon the interests of the state, of society or of the collective, as well as other citizens' lawful freedoms and rights'. The Article institutionalizes and legalizes the priority of collective membership over individual rights, which in practice could restrict citizenship rights illimitably (Chin, 2012). The connotations of citizenship rights as an individual's inherent entitlement are still unfamiliar to the majority of Chinese people (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). The massive use of the term *citizen* (*gongmin*) in social arenas rose from discussions about socioeconomic rights in the process of property rights reform and the prevailing consumerism since the late 1990s (Keane, 2001), both of which were endowed and

considerably promoted by the state. As Perry (2008, p. 47) criticized, the recent rising consciousness of rights in China is better viewed as the consciousness of ‘rules’ set up by the authority.

Illuminated by the comparisons, the Chinese characteristics of citizenship rights can be summarized in four aspects: rural-urban inequality in terms of social membership, state-granted rather than natural born in terms of source of rights, socioeconomic rights prior to political entitlement in terms of allocation of resources, and collectivism overriding individualism in terms of the general ethos. The four characteristics of Chinese citizenship rights are the manifestations of instrumentalism implemented by the Party. Although scholars have conducted historical and contextual analyses in terms of the official manifestations of the instrumental conception of citizenship rights and the legal system (Perry, 2008; Wu, 2017), little is known about the media construction of citizenship rights, which in fact plays a crucial role in ‘constructing public knowledge of citizenship rights and shaping citizens’ cognitions and attitudes toward social and legal issues’ (Liu & Chang, 2019, p. 1574). This study seeks to fill in the gap in the literature.

Citizenship rights in the Chinese media

As Chang (2003) suggests, ‘the news media constitute a major public venue through which a given society’s particular vision of reality is narrated and conveyed to its members as a form of social knowledge’ (p. 120). Following the theory of sociology of news (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Park, 1940; Schudson, 2010; Swidler & Ardit, 1994), the way that citizenship rights are covered in the official Chinese media reveals not only the dominant political power that defines and interprets the concept, but also the social and collective understanding, and thus remembering, of the practice of rights in the long run. Official media in China have ‘provided the Chinese society and people with the baseline knowledge needed for the building of a forced consensus, the basis of Communist rule and legitimacy’ (Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1994, p. 52). In particular, with regard to contentious and sensitive issues like citizenship rights, the official construction of rights can legitimize and delegitimize people’s everyday grievances and legal problems (Michelson, 2008). To some extent, the baseline knowledge and consensus of rights can influence individual citizens’ practical pursuit of rights in real situations, because for the majority of ordinary citizens, media are their major source of legal information and most likely the guidelines for action (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Therefore, the official media construction of citizenship rights constitutes an indispensable part to the full understanding of rights appeals and practices in China. Without such knowledge, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine the form and content of citizenship rights in people’s everyday life.

Among the few empirical research about the relationship between media and citizenship rights in China, Chin (2012) examines the public service broadcasting policy and argues that it prioritizes the party-state interest and social order over individuals’ political and cultural rights. Similarly, Liu and Chang (2019) compare the party and market newspaper coverage about citizenship rights in China, and find that ‘the party newspaper incorporated citizenship rights into the political and economic arenas, conforming to the logic of performance legitimacy of the party-state’ (p. 1570). Michelson (2008) conducts a content analysis of a legal advice columns in the *Beijing Evening News*, indicating that the market newspaper was steered by the state power to help transmit legal knowledge

and construct legal boundaries on citizens' awareness of their lawful rights. Likewise, Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) report that the mass media in China helped the government conduct legal mobilization by educating people about the legal codes and convincing them that the law was an effective weapon of the weak.

The existing body of literature has generally acknowledged that the Chinese media are mostly selective when covering citizenship rights, in order to support the party-state's interests and legitimacy. Nevertheless, what has yet to be answered is whether and how the media construction of citizenship rights has changed in accordance with the party-state's political goals and the corresponding sociopolitical contexts in the longitudinal fashion. This study attempts to explore the question by examining the flagship party newspaper – the *People's Daily's* coverage of citizenship rights in the post-Mao era.

Methods

Through both quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, this study examines the ways the *People's Daily* constructed the idea of citizenship rights between 1978 and 2012. The *People's Daily* is the most authoritative party organ that sets the keynote or agenda for the rest of the media and represents the government's attitude toward various social issues (Luther & Zhou, 2005; Song, Lu, Chang, & Huang, 2016). By investigating how the texts about citizenship rights were unfolded and constructed, and how they were embedded in the larger sociopolitical context, we could better understand the intrinsic characters and rationalities of citizenship rights in an authoritarian regime that differ from those in Western democracies, and further explore how the Chinese ideas of citizenship rights became public and legitimate rhetoric in political and social arenas.

The *People's Daily* full-text database (1946 – present)¹ was used to search for the related stories from 1 January 1978 to 31 December 2012. By searching the two keywords citizen (*gongmin*) and rights (*quanli*), this study obtained 6,224 news stories that contained both keywords in an article. We used the constructed week sampling method to select two constructed weeks ($n = 14$ days) to represent a full-year content of the newspaper coverage (Peng & Tang, 2010; Song & Chang, 2012). For the purpose of this study, the preliminary research into the cycle of news content on citizenship rights showed no periodical fluctuations throughout a year; instead, related stories appeared relatively balanced across months and days. As to the sampling procedure, two Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays were randomly drawn from each year, and news stories on the respective days were collected as samples. In total, there were 234 stories published in the 70 constructed weeks ($n = 490$ days) from the 35 years. The unit of coding is a single paragraph containing any of the three keywords (citizen/ rights/citizenship rights) in the text. In total, 735 paragraphs from the 234 stories were coded and analyzed.

The coding scheme and respective definitions are partly adopted from previous studies (Chang, Wang, & Chen, 2002; Han, 2008; Hayakawa, 1941) and have been modified based on the purpose of this study. It consists of two parts: (1) basic information, such as publication date, type of content, and topic, and (2) categories about citizenship rights, such as type of rights, emphasis of topic, actors, context of discussion (see complete coding items in Table 1). Two independent coders were trained to code the stories. The pretest sample

Table 1. Statistics of the *People's Daily* coverage of citizenship rights, 1978–2012.

| Variable | Indicator | 1978– 1991 | 1992– 2001 | 2002– 2012 | Total | Chi-square test |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|---|
| Type of content, % | Opinions | 64.8 | 28.7 | 45.1 | 46.1 | $\chi^2 = 124.05$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | News | 29.0 | 45.7 | 15.0 | 23.1 | |
| | Law/regulation | 2.1 | 23.3 | 19.3 | 16.6 | |
| Topics, % | Government documents | 4.1 | 2.3 | 20.6 | 14.2 | $\chi^2 = 63.75$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | Law/regulation | 46.2 | 28.7 | 41.4 | 40.2 | |
| | Society/human interest | 17.9 | 11.6 | 25.6 | 21.6 | |
| | Politics/diplomacy | 18.6 | 19.4 | 18.2 | 18.5 | |
| | Foreign affairs | 11.1 | 17.1 | 3.9 | 7.6 | |
| | Education/arts/culture | 2.1 | 10.8 | 6.1 | 6.1 | |
| | Economy/trade | 4.1 | 12.4 | 4.4 | 5.7 | |
| | Entertainment | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.4 | 0.3 | |
| Keywords in title, % | No | 80.7 | 100.0 | 94.1 | 92.5 | $\chi^2 = 41.49$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | Yes | 19.3 | 0.0 | 5.9 | 7.5 | |
| Type of rights, % | General | 37.9 | 56.6 | 40.8 | 43.0 | $\chi^2 = 90.99$, $df = 16$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | Socioeconomic rights | 2.8 | 4.6 | 21.9 | 15.1 | |
| | Political rights and freedom | 14.5 | 13.9 | 10.9 | 12.1 | |
| | Mixed | 9.6 | 7.0 | 7.8 | 8.0 | |
| | Personal security and freedom | 15.9 | 0.8 | 5.0 | 6.4 | |
| | Right to equality | 10.3 | 4.7 | 4.6 | 5.7 | |
| | Rights to supervision and claims | 6.9 | 3.9 | 4.3 | 4.8 | |
| | Cultural and educational rights | 1.4 | 7.0 | 4.3 | 4.2 | |
| | Freedom of religious belief | 0.7 | 1.5 | 0.4 | 0.7 | |
| Emphasis, % | Discussion/debate | 66.9 | 43.4 | 47.5 | 50.6 | $\chi^2 = 29.81$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | Quotation of law/documents | 19.3 | 38.0 | 41.6 | 36.6 | |
| | Historical review/event description | 13.8 | 18.6 | 10.9 | 12.8 | |
| Essence, % | Protection | 60.0 | 47.3 | 57.3 | 56.1 | $\chi^2 = 12.62$, $df = 8$, $p = 0.126$ |
| | General description | 26.2 | 34.1 | 29.1 | 29.4 | |
| | Practice | 3.4 | 9.3 | 7.1 | 6.8 | |
| | Mixed | 7.6 | 6.2 | 5.6 | 6.1 | |
| Actors, % | Objection to rights abuses | 2.8 | 3.1 | 0.9 | 1.6 | $\chi^2 = 61.71$, $df = 16$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | Citizens | 37.9 | 24.8 | 39.3 | 36.5 | |
| | Chinese government | 24.8 | 31.8 | 25.2 | 26.3 | |
| | Other/unidentified | 22.8 | 16.3 | 23.0 | 21.8 | |
| | Professionals | 4.1 | 5.4 | 6.9 | 6.1 | |
| | Foreign governments | 8.3 | 10.9 | 2.4 | 5.0 | |
| | Legal institutions | 2.1 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.6 | |
| | International organizations | 0.0 | 6.2 | 0.9 | 1.6 | |
| | Media/journalists | 0.0 | 3.1 | 0.4 | 0.8 | |
| | Social groups | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.4 | 0.3 | |
| Context, % | National | 76.6 | 69.0 | 84.0 | 79.9 | $\chi^2 = 29.87$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$ |
| | International | 17.9 | 23.3 | 8.0 | 12.6 | |
| | Provincial | 3.4 | 6.2 | 3.9 | 4.2 | |
| | Municipal or lower | 2.1 | 1.5 | 4.1 | 3.3 | |
| Type of statement, % | Report | 48.3 | 68.2 | 62.9 | 61.0 | $\chi^2 = 13.39$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$ |
| | Judgment | 51.7 | 31.8 | 37.1 | 39.0 | |
| | Inference | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | |
| Total (N)* | | 145 | 129 | 461 | 735 | |

*Entries are the total number of paragraphs that contain the keyword(s) in the *People's Daily* in the three periods.

for calculating the intercoder reliability coefficients was different from the formal coding sample and was equivalent to 25% of the formal sample. The pretest included four waves of independent coding, calculating intercoder reliability coefficients, and discussing the disagreements. The Krippendorff's alpha coefficients reported here are from the last wave's results of pretest: *Type of content*, 1; *Topic*, 0.75; *Presence of keywords in title*,

0.87; *Type of rights*, 0.81; *Emphasis*, 0.62; *Essence*, 0.76; *Actor*, 0.83; *Context*, 0.94; and *Type of statement*, 0.78.

For the discourse analysis, we employ the ‘interpretive packages’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gamson & Stuart, 1992) to examine the general storyline and its sub-themes in a set of texts. The general framework organizes related ideas and constitutes ‘a conceptual scheme that threads the observable signification devices into a coherent whole’ (Pan, Lee, Chan, & So, 1999, p. 101). The interpretive packages include ‘framing devices that suggest how to think about the issue and reasoning devices that justify what should be done about it’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). Keywords, metaphors, catchphrases, thematic statements, causal analysis, and reasonings can all be used in the interpretive packages. This study mainly examines the keywords, thematic and typical statements in the newspaper coverage, as well as the logical focus and discursive function of these statements.

The longitudinal analysis of the *People’s Daily* coverage of citizenship rights is divided into three major time spans: 1978–1991, 1992–2001 and 2002–2012, roughly corresponding to the three administrations of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

Results

Results of content analysis

As shown in Table 1, eight of the nine variables display significant variations across the three administrations (except *Essence*). First, in terms of the type of content, opinion was the most common in Period I (64.8%), news dominated in Period II (45.7%), law/regulation prevailed in Period II as well (23.3%), and government documents were overwhelmingly in the majority in Period III (20.6%). Different types of content indicate varying scope of discursive space. Among the four types of content, opinion implies the most extensive and liberal discussion, while law/regulation stands on the opposite. The data suggest that citizenship rights were widely discussed and debated via opinions during the first period, they were mainly written into law and regulations in the second period, and the government largely incorporated rights issues in its routine governance in the third period.

Second, with respect to the major topics related to rights discussion, despite that law/regulation took the lead and politics/diplomacy distributed similarly across the three periods, society/human interest topics were largely evident in the third period (25.6%); foreign affairs (17.1%), education/arts/culture (10.8%) and economy/trade (12.4%) all reached the highest percentages in the second period, demonstrating a relatively balanced distribution of topics.

Third, the proportion of keywords in the titles can manifest the salience of rights in the newspaper coverage. It reached the highest percentage in Period I (19.3%), while in Period II, there was not a single news article with the keywords in the headlines. The comparison suggests that rights issues were the most salient during 1978 and 1991, and were the least prominent during 1992 and 2001.

Fourth, as to the specific types of rights, despite the prevalence of the general category of rights, the most widely discussed types of rights in each period were personal security and freedom (15.9%), political rights and freedom (13.9%), and socioeconomic rights (21.9%),

respectively, indicating distinguishing emphases about the types of rights under each leadership. In the first period, the proportions of political rights and freedom (14.5%), personal security and freedom (15.9%), right to equality (10.3%), rights to supervision and claims (6.9%) all reached the peak across the three periods. The second period saw the rising coverage of cultural and educational rights (7.0%) and freedom of religious belief (1.5%). The publication of the Education Act on 22 March 1995 contributed to the considerable proportion of cultural and educational rights. In the third period, socioeconomic rights were mostly highlighted (21.9%) and largely outnumbered those in the first two periods. The periodical changes in the types of rights, to a certain degree, echoed the changes in the topics described above.

Fifth, the emphasis on discussion can offer insights into the ways in which rights issues were represented. Rights were mostly represented in the form of discussion/debate in the first period (66.9%) but were least debated in the following Period II (43.4%). The third period showed a relatively neutral balance of subjective debates (47.5%) and objective quotations (41.6%), with the latter being at the peak across the three periods.

Finally, the pattern of the main actors in rights discussions can further explicate those playing the leading roles in rights discourse. The Chinese government and citizens took turns occupying the largest proportions across the three periods. The sum of the two types of actors was more than 57% of the total in all three periods. The concept of 'citizen', as defined in this study, refers to both individual citizens and collective citizens, including the Chinese people, *renmin*, and *qunzhong*. However, the clear identification of the individual citizen was infrequently mentioned in the texts. Thus, the term *citizen* was usually used to refer to a vague, collective national identity, which was further related to the state and the government. Therefore, wherever the concept of the citizen appears in the text, it suggests more of a governmental stance than an individual presence. In the second period, foreign governments (10.9%) and international organizations (6.2%) reached the highest proportion, suggesting an internationalized and politicized context of rights issues. The last period highlighted professionals (6.9%) and social groups (0.4%), implying a society-oriented official rhetoric.

To sum up, the periodical changes of the types of content, topics, presence of keywords in title, type of rights, emphasis, and actors of rights coverage demonstrated relatively consistent patterns across the three periods. In Deng's era, rights were mostly covered and discussed in subjective, liberal, and salient ways via forms of opinions across topics like laws/regulations and politics/diplomacy. Under Jiang, the official newspaper coverage of rights shifted to more conservative, indirect, and objective ways, and was contextualized more in political and diplomatic areas. The last period distinguishingly witnessed the rising emphases on society and socioeconomic rights, which rarely entered the official rhetoric in the previous periods. The following discourse analysis further investigates the specific discursive packages and the corresponding sociopolitical contexts in each of the three periods' official media construction of citizenship rights.

Results of discourse analysis

Deng Xiaoping (1978–1991): party-granted and ideology-based citizenship rights

The party newspaper's coverage of citizenship rights under Deng concentrated on constructing a socialist legal system. Against that general framework, the major theme in

this period was to link citizenship rights with the socialist ideology and to rationalize this linkage, in order to build an official definition toward rights to solidify the authority of the Party on rights issues. For example, the following statements indicated that Chinese people's rights were granted by the Party in the socialist political system:

History has proven that only socialism explored ways for the general public to fully enjoy rights to democracy and freedom. (15 December 1986, p. 5)

Women in our country were liberated from the abyss of misery in the old society. They have enjoyed equal rights with men, and have become 'half of the sky' of the socialist construction. All these changes have relied on what? They are dependent on the Party's lead and socialism. (7 March 1987, p. 4)

Linking the socialist ideology with citizenship rights legitimized the Party's authority and its supremacy, which also corresponded to the idea that citizenship rights were granted rather than natural born. A further means of elevating socialism over capitalism was shown in the following statement:

The establishment of public ownership of means of production provides material guarantee of the realization of legal rights of equality. Therefore, the constitutional regulation stating that 'citizens are equal before the law' in China is essentially different from the bourgeois constitution. (13 January 1983, p. 5)

By differentiating the Chinese citizenship rights from the Western ones, the Party tried to conditionalize rights in China in order to serve its political purposes, such as the following statement: 'Because our country's economy is underdeveloped and urban populations too large, it is completely right that the Constitution does not require that citizens have freedom to migrate' (4 December 1981, p. 5). Apparently, the implication was that whether or not to grant certain types of rights to citizens, especially those from rural areas, depended on the practical situation of the country. As such, the unequal citizenship rights between rural and urban residents were officially legitimized to serve the socialist construction in early reform periods.

Another example pointed out that the fundamental purpose of popularizing legal knowledge among citizens was to improve the socialist legal construction – a clear priority to collective ends rather than individual rights:

Massive cadres and ordinary people have learned some basic legal knowledge and their legal awareness has been enhanced to a certain degree. They have also increased their consciousness of executing rights and obligations, which have laid certain foundations for the advanced development of the socialist legal construction in our country. (3 March 1991, p. 1)

The general storyline of the *People's Daily* coverage under Deng was that citizenship rights were discussed in ideological and instrumental terms to serve the Party's socialist ideology and legal construction. On the one hand, this was attributed to the damage of the Cultural Revolution to the Party's authority and the nation's socialist moral atmosphere (Fairbrother & Zhao, 2016; Pan, 2008). On the other hand, as a consequence of this political damage, the society was revitalized by a wave of freethinking and open debate in the early 1980s. These changes further discredited the Party's legitimacy and increased social disorder. It is therefore understandable that the flagship party newspaper showed an urgent need to rebuild the socialist ideology and restore the Party's political authority and legitimacy (Chen, 1997). In the meanwhile, there was little discussion about rights

issues in the social arena. In sum, the official construction of citizenship rights in Deng's era was manifested by the reinforcement of the socialist ideology, the Party's top-down conferral of rights, and the priority of collective cause over individual rights.

Jiang Zemin (1992–2001): nation-granted and sovereignty-based citizenship rights

During Jiang's rule, the *People's Daily* coverage of citizenship rights tended to be conservative compared to that of the previous period. The two major themes of the newspaper discourse were to defend national sovereignty in external affairs and to rule the society by law in domestic affairs, which were mainly contextualized in the discussions of politics/diplomacy and legal documents respectively. With regard to politics/diplomacy, many of the rights issues were discussed with respect to human rights in international political contexts. The tone of discussion demonstrated a relationship of either alliance (e.g. Russia and Tajikistan) or hostility (e.g. United States) between China and these countries. For example, when covering the meeting of Chinese and Russian foreign ministers, it said, 'both sides expressed firm objections to phrases like "human rights beyond sovereignty" and "humanitarian intervention" and suggested that every country's right to select their own social system and road of development be respected' (1 March 2000, p. 6). Human rights as a concept is more abstract that goes beyond citizenship rights because it declares the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, regardless of their nationality and status of citizenship (United Nations, 1948). Nevertheless, the CPC downplayed the universality of human rights and bounded the concept to national sovereignty, which obviously pointed to a concrete physical boundary and people's nationality. The reverse decoding of human rights as an abstract and universal value suggests a divergent definition and instrumental construction of rights issues in the official rhetoric. In fact, it was in that international contentious or even counter discourses about human rights that China's official construction of rights in its own version started to take shape and expand (Shi-xu, 2014).

Another example regarding human rights in developing countries said that 'people from developing countries have deeply realized from their personal experiences that fighting for national independence and sovereignty is the foundation of protecting human rights' (5 June 1992, p. 5). It was clear that the CPC connected rights issues to national sovereignty. The emphasis on sovereignty was even clearer in the discussions of the human rights report published by the U.S government. The spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, 'obviously, it is only an excuse that the U.S. government is using, stating it has concerns about China's human rights, but intervention into China's internal affairs is the true intention' (2 February 1998, p. 2). In sum, the core statement of these political or diplomatic discussions was that China protected citizenship rights within its sovereignty and objected to any other country's attempts to intervene in Chinese domestic affairs in the name of human rights. The conclusion drawn from the party newspaper coverage was highly consistent with the official governmental rhetoric about human rights, which emphasized the 'collective, specifically, state sovereignty, rights of subsistence and development of the people as a whole' (Shi-xu, 2012, p. 101).

With regard to domestic affairs about citizenship rights, most of the discussions were manifested in legal documents and their interpretations, with the aim to reinforce the official definitions of rights and to popularize legal knowledge to serve the socialist legal construction and rule by law. For example, when describing the national plan of legal

education, it said that ‘Legal education is a fundamental effort in order to rule the country by law and construct a socialist legal nation’ (30 April 2001, p. 4); when talking about the Contract Law (Draft), it said that ‘The real value of this draft was to let every citizen know the formal law and use it to execute rights and implement obligations to promote the orderly and healthy development of the socialist market economy’ (15 March 1999, p. 2).

Such discussion suggests the CPC’s two major strategies to deal with citizenship rights in this period. Externally, the CPC employed a strong diplomatic stance to defend the Chinese construction and interpretation of rights against the attacks from the West and mostly incorporated rights into the domain of national sovereignty. Internally, the CPC largely implemented the idea of rule by law through a series of new enactments and administrative legal education, and citizenship rights were mostly emphasized in neutral terms in the formal legal system. Legal codes that were publicized and discussed included the Education Act, the Judges’ Law, the Prosecutors Act, the Regulations on Publication Administration, the Real Estate Administration Act (Draft), the Contract Law (Draft), and the Regulations on Administrative Penalties for Public Security and so on. Most of these legal codes dealt with the management of the market and society, indicating that the legal framework was further developed after its initial establishment in Deng’s administration.

In general, the *People’s Daily* emphasized two major themes in this period: to defend national sovereignty in external affairs and to rule the society by law in domestic affairs. After establishing the socialist legal framework under Deng, the context of discussing citizenship rights shifted from party ideology to national sovereignty and started to expand in the social arena. The manifestations of instrumentality in this period focused on the supremacy of national sovereignty and the conditioned legal education to reinforce the socialist legal system, which further clarified the priority of the state over citizens – an evident rationale of collectivism.

Hu Jintao (2002–2012): society-granted and governance-based citizenship rights

There were several distinguishing features about the *People’s Daily* coverage of citizenship rights during Hu’s era. The most remarkable one was that discussions of rights were largely society-oriented in terms of the widened content of topics and legal documents, linkage between rights and governance, and the softened discourse related to political issues, which were rarely traceable in the previous periods.

The two major themes in this period were to extend rights discussions to socio-economic areas and to promote citizenship rights via good governance. In the first aspect, Table 1 displays that socioeconomic rights were largely highlighted (22%), with the proportion four times more than it was under Jiang, and seven times more than that under Deng. Similarly, topics related to rights discussion largely lied in law/regulation (41%) and society/human interest (26%), the latter even being at its highest proportion across the three administrations. The data suggest that the majority of the official rhetoric was concentrated on socioeconomic rights and personal freedom. For the first time, the *People’s Daily* showed extensive discussions of social issues related to rights, with the majority of topics having barely been mentioned previously, such as Internet information protection, house relocation, charity legislation, workers’ rights to paid vacation leave and rest, criminal suspects’ rights to privacy before judgment, tax-payers’ lawful rights, and women’s equal rights to employment and so on.

Furthermore, rights discussions in this period suggest some adjustments to the previously legitimized characteristics of rights. For example, the following opinions challenged the unequal citizenship rights associated with certain occupations:

It is a pity that many places still apply an ironclad policy to recruit civil servants. Peasants and workers are rejected because of their 'identity'. It can be said that the sign of 'identity' is the sign of privilege, which is a deprivation of another aspect of citizens' lawful rights. (22 March 2005, p. 10).

Another topic related to unequal citizenship rights is the right to migration. An earlier example under Deng stated that it was completely justified to restrain people's right to migration because of the underdeveloped economy and overloaded urban population in early times of socialist construction (4 December 1981, p. 5). Twenty years later, when the open and reform policy attracted millions of peasant migrants to work and live in big cities, the right to migration and equal citizenship became ineluctable issues for social governance. At this time, the party newspaper published views questioning the existing policy: 'The household registration system has been implemented for over 40 years, and is like an invisible belt constraining people's free flow'; the article then stated that 'mutual mobility between rural and urban areas is the mark of freedom to migration' (14 August 2002, p. 10). The unequal citizenship rights between rural and urban residents was once legitimized to support the socialist construction, but later it was conceived as a constraint for social development. The changes indicated that the idea of citizenship rights functioned as an instrument to serving the changing sociopolitical goals of the CPC.

The second theme of promoting citizenship rights via good governance could be considered the landmark innovation of the Hu-Wen's leadership. For the first time since the post-Mao era, citizens carried some weight in public governance, and various manifestations and extensions of citizenship rights, such as government-citizen interaction, public hearing, civic participation, and public opinion, were widely concerned and discussed. For example, when talking about a public hearing on the regulation of tap water use in Beijing, a commentator said, 'Only guaranteeing citizens' proper participation in administrative management can create administrative authority recognized by both the government and citizens and can bring about a favorable administrative and social order' (11 November 2004, p. 10). The comment associated citizens' participation with the government's administrative authority, which theorized the interdependent relationship between citizenship rights and political legitimacy.

The efforts to socialize citizenship rights and connect them to good governance can be summarized in the key political slogan of the Hu-Wen government: construct the socialist harmonious society. The following statements were parts of the official rhetoric of the slogan:

Develop socialist democracy. Construct socialist legal structure. Guarantee people being the master of the country. Continue to practice democratic elections, policy making, management, and supervision according to law. Protect people's rights to know, participate, express, and supervise. Augment citizens' orderly political participation. Continue to maintain equality among ethnic groups and regional ethnic autonomy. Protect people's freedom of religious belief according to law. Fully respect and protect citizens' fundamental human rights and other lawful rights. (7 September 2011, p. 14)

Ideas like socialist democracy and citizens' political participation were new political concepts under Hu, suggesting a more open stance towards citizenship rights (Chin, 2018). Only in this period did the political elites' concerns about citizenship rights return back to specific rights per se, rather than being merely treated as footnotes of the grand narratives of socialist ideology and national sovereignty as in the previous periods. By bringing citizens back to the state's core political philosophy and concentrating on various socio-economic rights that directly influence individuals' everyday lives, the dominant ideology of collectivism was, to certain extent, weakened by the rise of individualism (Breslin, 2008).

With regard to external issues, the government's tone was softened compared with that under Jiang. The U.S. government's human rights report serves as one example. Under Jiang, the Chinese government demonstrated a strong and harsh attitude towards the report and condemned the U.S. government's intention to intervene into China's sovereignty and interior. The Hu-Wen government, however, framed the issue more from the perspective of social development than sovereignty. The following statements illustrate the softened diplomatic language:

They raise the banner of human rights but do not express concern about China's human rights development. They intend to use human rights issues to change China's social system and road of development, and further restrain China's development and power. (22 May 2004, p. 7)

By replacing 'sovereignty' with 'development', diplomacy was weakened and social governance strengthened. In that case, the connotation of collectivism and politicism derived from citizenship rights was undermined. As such, the official construction of citizenship rights in the Hu-Wen era mainly focused on the priority of socioeconomic rights over political entitlement, while the other three characteristics of citizenship rights were more or less downgraded and obscured.

In sum, the official discourse about citizenship rights in the *People's Daily* across the past three leaderships demonstrated both continuities and periodical changes. As to the continuities, all the leaderships conceived citizenship rights in instrumental and purpose-based ways, highlighting the enduring values of socialist ideology and rule by law. With regard to periodical changes, certain characteristics of citizenship rights were spotlighted in specific administrations. As discussed earlier, the distinguishing features between Chinese and Western ideas of citizenship rights lie mainly in four aspects: rural-urban inequality, state-granted rather than natural born, socioeconomic rights prior to political entitlement, and collectivism overriding individualism. When we shift the attention from the theoretical cross-cultural differences to the longitudinal intra-cultural changes, we could hardly say that those features were static and resistant to change. As Shi-xu (2016) suggests, discourse and communication are recognized as cultural in nature, which are diversified and divided in a site of power operation, including creation, legitimization and contestation and so on.

The unequal citizenship between rural and urban residents were once legitimized to serve the socialist construction under Deng, while in Hu's rule, the amplifying rural-urban inequalities alongside the tide of migrant workers' outflow were considered as sources of social conflicts and disorders, and were therefore adjusted in various ways to improve social governance. Besides, the idea of citizenship rights as state-granted was

Table 2. Discursive Packages of the *People's Daily* coverage of citizenship rights, 1978–2012.

| Discursive packages | Deng Xiaoping (1978–1991) | Jiang Zemin (1992–2001) | Hu Jintao (2002–2012) |
|--|--|---|--|
| General discourses | Rights are party-granted and ideology-based | Rights are nation-granted and sovereignty-based | Rights are society-granted and governance-based |
| Keywords | Socialist legal system | National sovereignty, rule by law | Socialist democracy, political participation, administrative authority |
| Logical focus | Socialist ideology | Sovereignty and legal education | Social governance |
| Reasoning | Socialism guarantees citizenship rights | China has the right to deal with citizenship rights | Good governance promotes citizenship rights |
| Function | Define rights in Chinese ideological context | Defend the official definition of rights | Extend rights in social sphere |
| Theoretical characteristics | | | |
| Rural-urban inequality | Necessary for socialist construction | Rarely discussed | Source of social conflict |
| State-granted vs. natural born | Party-granted | Nation-granted | Society-granted |
| Socioeconomic rights vs. political entitlement | Rarely discussed | Rarely discussed | Socioeconomic rights |
| Collectivism vs. individualism | Collectivism | Collectivism | Individualism |

particularly prominent in Deng's and Jiang's administrations, which were even conceived as party-granted in the dominant rhetoric of socialist ideology under Deng. Nevertheless, the state authority over rights was gradually abated and concealed with the rising respect of law-based governance when Hu was in charge (Chin, 2018). In terms of the priority between socioeconomic rights and political entitlements, the disparities became evident only under Hu's leadership, when various conflicts over socioeconomic rights erupted as a side effect of the open and reform policy (Kelly, 2006). With regard to collectivism and individualism, the Jiang era witnessed the supreme status of collectivism when dealing with rights issues in international and diplomatic contexts, while Hu's terms highlighted individualism resulted from property rights reform and rising consumerism (Breslin, 2008). That says, the definitions and interpretations of citizenship rights and its dominant features are subject to periodical changes in accordance with the respective political purposes. The discursive packages and the theoretical characteristics of citizenship rights in the three administrations were summarized in Table 2.

Conclusions and discussion

Through longitudinal and comparative analysis about the flagship party newspaper's coverage of citizenship rights between 1978 and 2012, we first identified the consistent employment of instrumentalism in constructing citizenship rights in China's official rhetoric across the past three leaderships. Second, we found that the manifestations of instrumentalism over citizenship rights demonstrated enduring values about socialism and rule by law, while at the same time, the specific aspects of the manifestations were subject to periodical political changes and administrative ends. The general conclusion is that the concept of citizenship rights in China was resiliently instrumentalized to adapt to the CPC's changing political goals, which ultimately aimed to reinforce the Party's political legitimacy and continuity in authority. The findings are in line with the existing scholarship arguing that Chinese conception of the rule of law and rights consciousness is historically and fundamentally governance-based rather than rights-based

(Chin, 2012; Perry, 2008; Wu, 2017). Beyond the continuity of instrumentalism, this study further reveals the changing manifestations of constructing citizenship rights in different generations of leadership, and explores three major factors that considerably contribute to the changes – political goals, the development of legal system and the style of political leadership.

During 1978–1991 when Deng was in power, the official construction of citizenship rights was evidently based on the socialist ideology and the Party's authority. At that time, the major task of the Party was to reconstruct the ideological, political, and economic basis of society that was badly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The era witnessed the relatively liberal and open discussion of the major political and social issues, such as the ideology of socialism and capitalism and the people's democracy, in which citizenship rights were widely referenced. It can be partly attributed to the legal vacuum that offered people considerable space in which to express their opinions regarding citizenship rights. Only until the mid-1980s did the major skeleton of the legal system start to be established, with only the fundamental laws, such as the Constitution and the Criminal Code, being enacted during this period. However, the ideology of socialism still dominates all social arenas. The lack of a systematic legal framework therefore called for the formal establishment of it. As such, that period saw the establishment of the socialist legal system and the instrumentalization of citizenship rights to serve for the socialist construction.

Furthermore, the open discussion of rights issues mirrored the relatively open political environment in the early 1980s, when the haze of the Cultural Revolution gradually disappeared and several liberal and pro-reform Party leaders were in charge. During the first decade of reform (1978–1989), a group of Chinese democratic elites emerged when 'the political atmosphere showed signs of warming' (Goldman, 1994, p. 1). One of the most influential liberal reformists, who was also the Chief Editor of the *People's Daily* – Hu Jiwei – supported free discussion and diverse opinions in the newspaper (Goldman, 1994). During his tenure at the *People's Daily*, many articles promoting economic reforms were published, including a series of editorials appealing for the reform of the collective economy. Even the then highest Party leader, Hu Yaobang, became the protector of democratic intellectuals (Goldman, 1994). The generally liberal political atmosphere during this period promoted the free discussions of citizenship rights.

However, the situation did not last long. The urgent need to stabilize the political system after 1989 justified Jiang Zemin's implementation of strong diplomatic policy over foreign affairs, as well as patriotic education and formal transmission of legal knowledge in domestic rule (Chen, 1997). The fundamental political concept that Jiang persisted was rule by law. In addition, the legal system was further advanced and completed by enacting statutes that were more specific and implementing legal education to popularize the idea of rule by law. Formalizing and popularizing legal knowledge was to strengthen the socialist legal system set up under Deng. The main theme of citizenship rights discussions therefore changed from ideological issues to political, diplomatic and legal topics, and the basis of rights discussion shifted from the Party's authority to sovereignty and the nation as a whole.

Under Hu's leadership, the news coverage saw a different picture from the previous two leaderships. The major focus of the rights discussions shifted from the political and legal aspects to the socioeconomic areas. Rights were widely discussed in various social issues, and were, for the first time, conceived as important components of good governance. On

the one hand, the Hu-Wen administration witnessed the emerging side effect of economic reform, as was shown in various social conflicts and mass grievances resulted from the unequal distribution of social interests (Kelly, 2006). Social administration and conflicts resolution thus became urgent, which rationalized the Hu-Wen government's pro-people style and emphasis on good governance and social policy (Breslin, 2008). On the other hand, due to the marketization and commercialization of party media system from the late 1990s onwards, the party newspaper started to employ market logic to respond to the readers' needs. The return of journalistic logic also contributed to the diversity of rights discussion.

In the meanwhile, after the major construction of the legal system in the previous two administrations, although the basic framework tended to be stable, certain side-effects of the legal system had begun to show. Some statutes appeared to be outdated, such as the legal restriction of people's migration freedom based on their *hukou* when a wave of urbanization and the following rural-urban migration started to expand since the 2000s. In addition, the pro-people style of the Hu-Wen leadership encouraged administrative and legal reforms. Certain legal reforms were even promoted by online public opinion and media supervision (Liebman, 2005). Therefore, adjustments and amendments to the existing laws and regulations entered the routine governmental agenda, which was further considered the achievements of good governance.

In sum, the structures of the legal system in China throughout the 35 years underwent the stages of establishment, accomplishment, and refinement. The CPC finished binding the legal framework with the socialist ideology, the fundamental statecraft of rule by law, and the performance legitimacy based on economic development and social stability. Apparently, the three political generations have shown divergent rhetoric and different emphases regarding the construction of citizenship rights. However, it is clear that the three sets of political rhetoric are successive, with later political rhetoric reemphasizing and incorporating the precedents, which forms the enduring values of the CPC's rhetoric in terms of the relationship between the socialist legal system and citizenship rights, with the latter being dominated by and surrendered to the former. From the institutional perspective, the enduring values represent the rational legal transition from a communist country to a modern state, which in effect reinforces the Party's political legitimacy (Chin, 2018).

The expanding public discussions of rights issues represented in the party newspaper imply greater confidence of the state to manage rights appeal in society. Simultaneously, the official use of the concept of rights or human rights in government documents or public speeches has become more frequent and prevailing, suggesting that the CPC is attempting to incorporate and reconstruct the ideas of citizenship rights in its routine governance, and is taking the lead in the symbolic contest over significant legal political concepts in public discourse. As long as the official definition and explanation of citizenship rights has been institutionalized in the legal system and widely acknowledged by the public, the state would obtain more political support to deal with rights conflicts in its preferred way. As such, the concept of citizenship rights has become a strategic political resource to legitimize and strengthen the CPC's rule.

As suggested by Yang (2009), of all aspects of citizens' activism since the 1990s, the struggle for citizenship rights has been in the forefront. The expansion of citizenship rights in society is one of the biggest achievements over the past four decades, which

means that people have become aware of their identity as citizens and their entitled legal rights in social life. If we attempt to understand citizenship rights in China, we must consider the periodical changes in political and legal systems directed by different styles of leaderships and the respective political aims. In each leadership, there exists a dominant political rhetoric that fundamentally shapes the definition and interpretation of citizenship rights. It not only regulates which types of rights were given priority in public policy and social governance, but also latently orients citizens about how to legitimize their rights appeals within the boundary of the political framework. In that sense, understanding the idea of citizenship rights is an indispensable premise to understanding the various practices of rights in China.

This study is among the few empirical endeavors to investigating the historical changes of the idea of citizenship rights along with political, legal and social transformations. Although limited in its scope, the findings demonstrate how the conceptualizations of citizenship rights and their characteristics have changed along with the changes of the socio-political contexts, which suggest a dynamic perspective to the study of critical legal and political concepts. Furthermore, the official construction of citizenship rights offers important points of references to examine both the alternative conceptual construction and the practice of rights in China. While not included in the present study, the enduring values on the macro-level and the changing characteristics on the micro-level of the CPC's construction of citizenship rights are still evidently observable in the current Xi Jinping's administration. By all accounts, Xi has put even heavier emphasis on the Party's authority and legitimacy to define and defend the socialism and rule by law. In future research, it is therefore important to include the data under Xi's leadership to investigate how he might have constructed his version of citizenship rights in China. A reasonable guess is that he is likely to stamp his own seal of approval on the issue as each of his predecessors has done before. So the conceptual and practical changes in citizenship rights may continue in ways that are beyond imagination.

Note

1. The *People's Daily* full-text database can be accessed at <http://www.oriprobe.com/peoplesdaily.html>.

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