

## Review Article

# A Comparative Study on the Mutual Stereotyping of Essential Democratic Institutions Between China and the United States

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**Abstract:** With the multi-polarization trend of the world, the cooperation and conflicts between the superpower the United States and rising China have been augmenting simultaneously, among which the mutual criticism upon democracy turns out to be one of the most remarkable controversies. Bilateral condemnations concentrate on the judgment that the democracy of the counterpart is superficial, insufficient or even autocracy at all, therefore the mutual understandings of democracy in both countries appears harsh and prejudicial. Through analyzing and comparing the essential democratic institutions of the United States and China, similarities and differences in political practices of both countries are to be analyzed. On the basis of comparison, assisted by the Radial Network Model of Stereotypes, the process of stereotyping and prejudice on democracy is to be studied to discover its origin as bilateral political antagonism and hostility between different ideologies. From the perspective of Majority and Minority Identities, the development divergence and interaction between the minority identity of China's democracy and majority identity of American democracy are examined, leading to the proposition of Identity-Empathy in democracy between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Stereotype, Minority and Majority Identities

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## 1. Introduction

Democracy, as a universal value and political concept, traces back to the era of ancient Greece, while now it is regarded universally as the fundamental principle in most societies of the world. As the superpowers of the world, China and America are not the exceptions in democratic institutions. Though differences and disparities are virtually present between the democracy in the two countries, the agreement of essential similarity has been reached by two nations that people master the country. Now the two countries have established stable democratic institutions and practices, however the mutual censures and prejudices on democracy are pervasive and heated in public media of both countries. Through analyzing the emergence of democratic prejudice, stereotypes caused and reinforced in radical network and the majority-minority identities interaction are the major

propeller of this democratic controversy. Therefore, as means for improvement in communication, to discard prejudice and to enhance the integration of disparate identities are expected to be the urgent and effective remediation.

## 2. Essential Democratic Institutions of China and America

### 2.1. Essential Democratic Institution of China

China has endured a long history of absolute monarchy in feudal society. After the Revolution of 1911, in which Qing Dynasty and monarchy have been overthrown, democratic consciousness has been pervading despite restless clashes between warlords, savage invasion of Japanese and intense civil war. Particularly the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, which adjusted the development to

socialistic direction, ensures the feasibility and success of democracy. The democratic institution generally consists of three establishments that make decisions according to delegates from different social backgrounds: the National People's Congress system, the system of Multi-Party Cooperation, Political Consultation and system of National Regional Autonomy.

The National People's Congress is the fundamental political system of China, which works as the "political formation for people's democratic dictatorship" [1]. This system possesses two subdivisions: National People's Congress and People's Congress at local levels, both generated by democratic elections, responsible to the people and subject to their supervision. National People's Congress functions as the legislature for the constitution and other fundamental laws. Besides, nomination for major ministers and officials, such as the president and prime minister, is also fulfilled by National People's Congress. It also plays the role of censor for national issues like national budget auditing. Quite similarly, People's Congress at local levels exercises authority in particular regions, by appointing governors or mayors, enacting regional bills, and supervising local government. In local congress, delegates are directly elected by voters. From the urban level, representatives are elected from the next lower level congress; for instance, the representatives of National People's Congress are elected from provincial congress respectively.

Considering the large population and its uneven quality, this indirectly democratic system guarantees people the master role of country, through electing their own delegates to exercise political power. "It is the best form for people to be the master of the country" [2]. "It is in line with the reality in China. If the policy and direction are correct, this system will be of great benefit, contributing to the prosperity of China, for it bypasses other interference" [3].

Multi-Party Cooperation is the principle for the interaction and communication between Communist Party of China and other eight non-communist parties. Led by Communist Party, non-communist parties participate in the management of state affairs, and Political Consultation is the concrete realization for this concept. Delegates from different parties, various social classes and overseas, assist in political consultation conference for political proposition and supervision, implementing democratic concept between different classes and parties.

Disparity in social background can't act as the obstacle to democracy, so does the ethnic identity. The system of National Regional Autonomy has been the policy in the provinces where minority ethnic groups inhabit; minority

nationalities exercise autonomy in self-government organizations. This system optimizes the inter-ethnics relationship; at the same time, it can "promote the social and economic development in minority nationality regions" [1].

The democratic institution of China has covered different dimensions, providing citizens of different ethnics, social classes and political stances with a forum for negotiation and cooperation.

## 2.2. Democratic Institution in America

Individualism, the core of American culture, is the profound national character. As French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville indicates Americans have the democratic freedom unprecedented in history. "Democracy is the most effective method to protect individual freedom; country is seen as the inevitable cost for a common and orderly life of people" [4]. In order to lower the price for democracy, the powers and functions of country must be strictly restricted and supervised, conceiving the separation of the legislative, executive and judicial powers.

According to the constitution, congress works as the legislature, which is further divided into two departments meeting in Capitol: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Both of representatives and senators are selected in direct election. Each state of America has 2 senators serving six-year terms, regardless of state population. However, 435 seats in the House of Representatives are apportioned among different states by their population; each representative serves two-year term. The House of Representatives and the Senator are equal in legislation that every law cannot be enacted without the consent of both chambers. Besides legislative authority, the congress also can vote on bills, declare war, amend constitution and impeach president. Congressmen are elected directly by people, so they have to represent the public interests.

Judicial branch is the Supreme Court, consisting of nine judges who are nominated by the president and approved by the Senate. The major functions of the Supreme Court consist of giving judicial interpretation, exerting jurisdiction and ruling that certain law is unconstitutional.

The president of America leads the executive branch by executing laws, commanding army, nominating officers and grant pardons and reprieves.

Though legislative, executive and judicial powers are separated, they are in the relationship of check-and-balance. This notion claims that one branch should limit another, preventing any branch from becoming supreme. Table 1 lists restrictive inter-relationship between three powers.

Table 1. Check and Balance.

Branches		Check and Balance	
Legislative Power	Congress	President	Supreme Court
		To reject legislation	To claim that certain law is unconstitutional
Executive Power	President	Congress	Supreme Court
		To audit budget and to impeach the president	To claim that certain bill or order is unconstitutional
Judicial Power	Supreme Court	Congress	President
		To approve the nomination of justices	To nominate justices

Since the system of check-and-balance paves the foundation to protect individual freedom and rights, the system of general election offers a touchable democratic measure to the public.

In America, people have the rights to voter for representatives and senators directly in every state. However the election of president is indirect: at first, both the Democratic Party and Republican Party have to select presidential candidates respectively in national conventions; then, after circuit campaigns, presidential candidates in both parties are confirmed. In the stage of general election, registered voters across the country are going to vote for president, vice president and 538 electors in Electoral College. Electors meet and officially vote for president and vice president, based on the public tallies in every state: at least the winner has to obtain 270 electoral votes. Finally the president and vice president take their oath and assume office. To conclude the presidential election system is an institution which runs with entrusted public power.

The election system in America ensures that public authorities can be conceived and rotated in a non-violent and orderly way, working as the institutional guarantee for democracy. "American democratic institution is the product of bourgeois revolution, exceeding feudal politics historically. It provides fresh blood for political civilization of human and foresees the socialized production" [5].

### **2.3. Comparison in Essential Democratic Institutions**

Though America and China are totally different countries with disparate histories, the democratic organizations are comparatively similar with some differences in certain fields. The significant similarities lie in the form of democratic realization and establishment of power authorities.

Representative system, implemented through elections, is the common form of democratic realization in China and America, with people required to elect their representatives for public powers. Chinese people enjoy the right to vote for delegates in People's Congress at local levels, so that their interests might be protected by local power authority. Similarly, People in America are also endowed with the electoral right, electing representatives, senators and electors directly. Therefore democratically elected congressmen have to put public well-being into consideration in legislation. The representative system is chosen as the common form of democratic realization by both countries; this phenomenon indicates that the universal democratic realization is to elect agents for the public, guaranteeing the rights of the people as the masters of the country. It's also worth noting that both countries adopt indirect election methods: representatives of National People's Congress are indirectly elected by the public; the residential election in America is the indirect Electoral College system. Indirect election principle is applied by both countries at crucial levels where president is elected and national policies are made. Thus direct election and the indirect one constitute the general realization of democracy, which pervades in both countries.

Meanwhile the establishment of power authorities in China resembles the American one, though differences exist in varying degrees. Aiming at the division and execution of powers, they both establish certain departments at central and local levels. The Capitol is in charge of legislation and supervision; the National People's Congress also functions as the supreme legislature and supervisor to administration. The supreme judicial power belongs to the Supreme People's Court and its counterpart in America is the Federal Supreme Judicial Court. The president is the head of administration in America, as the personification of administrative power; In China, the administrative power is also run by a unified organization—the State Council. The public powers are divided and conferred to different departments ensuring the efficiency and the limitation of power.

Common ground in democracy is obvious, so are differences. Although differences are visible, to certain degree, they rest at the micro scale: different constructionists for the explanation of the constitution and the distinct balance system. The Federal Supreme Judicial Court is the only department that can give concrete constitutional explanations and adjudge unconstitutional laws. While the Supreme People's Court in China is a typical judicial authority; the power to interpret the constitution belongs to the National People's Congress. In check-and-balance relationship, powers are divided and supervised equally by another in America, as Table 1 demonstrates. But the check-and-balance mechanism is simplified and modified that administration and judicial authority are assigned by National People's Congress; it works more than a legislator, in fact, as the ultimate supervisor and organ of supreme power.

## **3. Democratic Stereotyping Mechanism**

Now China and the superpower—the United States have more and more opportunities to interact in economic and cultural exchange, and the issue of democracy is not an exception. China and America have cooperated well in complementary economic structure; Cultural communication is also popular in both countries with numerous types like tourism, academic studies and cultural industry. However, the democratic communication is not as optimistic as economic and cultural exchanges; to the contrast, censures and criticism dominate mutual discourse.

### **3.1. Radical Mutual Censures and Prejudice**

In March 12<sup>th</sup>, People's Daily, the mainstream media in China, published an article asserting that: "the nature and advantages of National People's Congress System make the forceful response and counterattack to the false political trend and thoughts which deny National People's Congress, advocate westernized parliamentary democracy, or pursue rotating presidency. Westernized parliament is conceived as the political compromise between various parties, interest groups and social forces; Congressmen intrigue against and deceive each other for the interests of their own parties... The

Separation of the executive, legislative and judicial powers runs with disputes, at the cost of public interest” [6].

China’s dominant ideology depreciates westernized form of democracy, criticizing it publicly. This censure is far from unidirectional; actually the criticism emerges in interaction.

The New York Times, American influential print media, covered news on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010: “The Chinese system generally reinforces the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, which has governed the country in an authoritarian manner since 1949, when it won the civil war... In criticizing Western democracy, Mr. Li asserted that the Western system of elections simply benefited the wealthy and was warped by capitalism. Western-style elections, however, are a game for the rich. They are affected by the resources and funding that a candidate can utilize. Those who manage to win elections are easily in the shoes of their parties or sponsors and become spokespersons for the minority. As a socialist country, we cannot simply take the Western approach” [7].

This public criticism is more that isolated or separate events; similar censures pervade in print media, official comments and internet forums, highlighting mutual misunderstandings. In fact, this binary opposition may not be explained just by misapprehension.

### 3.2. Stereotyping Network of Democracy

Figure1 demonstrates the relationship between stereotypes and prejudice, developed by Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan in 1993. It can be applied to analyze the procedure in the transition between stereotypes and prejudice, for the explanation to the mutual criticism in democracy.

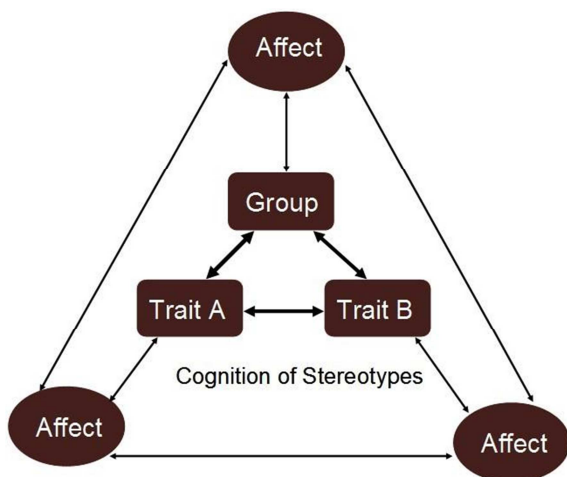


Figure 1. Radial Network Model of Stereotypes.

The whole system of cognition consists of group node, several trait nodes and affect nodes, which refers to feeling states that may range from strongly positive to strongly negative. “The strength of the links depends on the frequency and consistency with which they have been activated” [8]. When any node in this network gets activated, the activation is going to spread through the whole network, stimulating different nodes. If the affective response is strongly negative, the prejudice is conceived.

In the communication of democracy between China and America, prejudice emerges in this principle. From the viewpoint of Chinese, the Group Node—America are linked with various traits, such as capitalist country and westernized democracy and so on. Due to the ideological opposition, when the link between Group Node (America) and Trait-A Node (capitalist country) is activated in reality, the Affect Node will be negative (hostility or other negative responses). Meanwhile, the activation spreads through the whole network, so Trait-B Node (westernized democracy) is also activated. At the same time, the Affect Node (hostility) has already been activated, so it will be connected to Trait-B Node (westernized democracy) in activation. If this activation repeats constantly in communication, the link between “hostility” and “westernized democracy” is going to be strengthened. Therefore the prejudice appears so does the one towards China in the cognition of Americans. This mechanism is demonstrated in Figure 2.

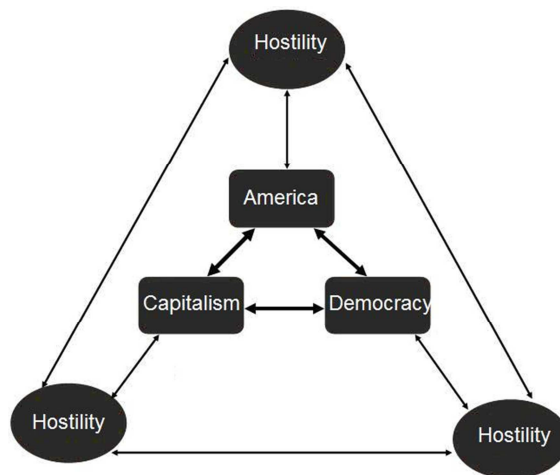


Figure 2. Particular Prejudice Production.

### 3.3. Identity Analysis on the Origin of Prejudice

In *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* by Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, the notion of “minority identities” and “majority identities” is cited to indicate the identity development. Though this conception mainly focuses on groups identified by gender, age, nationality or other labels, it may help to identify the origin for China-U.S. disputes in Democracy.

Majority identities mean the more privileged identities; “Some identities have a higher position on the social hierarchy” [9]. Minority identities are the less privileged ones. They “refer to the relative dominance or power of the identity position” [9]. In the issue of mutual criticism on democracy, Majority identity is occupied by America for its westernized model of democracy is pervasive and dominant globally. Therefore, China is rising with the minority identity of democracy due to its uniqueness in the world.

Majority and minority identities don’t remain still all the time, but they develop over a period of time. For the evolution of minority identity, it often experience 4 stages.

Stage 1—Unexamined Identity, characterized by the lack of

“exploration of identity” and “interest in the identity issue”; Stage 2—Conformity, the internalization of the values and norms of the dominant group and a strong desire to assimilate into dominant culture; Stage 3—Resistance and Separatism, representing “dissonance or a growing awareness that not all dominant group values are beneficial to minorities”; Stage 4—Integration, characterized by “a strong sense of their own group identity and an appreciation of other cultural groups” [9].

Similarly the majority identity also has several stages. Stage 1—Unexamined Identity, characterized by no understanding of identity; Stage 2—Acceptance, meaning the internalization and assumptions viewing “minority groups as being unduly sensitive and assume that if the minority members really wanted to change their lot in life they could”; Stage 3—Resistance, indicating naming and blaming their own dominant group as a source of problems; Stage 4—Redefinition, in which “people begin to refocus or redirect their energy toward redefining their identity in a way that recognizes their privilege and works to eliminate oppression and inequities”; Stage 5—Integration, in which people recognize their identity and “appreciate other groups” [9].

#### **3.4. Interaction Between Majority-Minority Identities**

The democratic identities of China and America also fall in line with this diachronic procedure of identities in which they develop “always through interaction with others” [9]. The different democracy identity stages of China and America are interacting on each other and this staged imparity of democracy identities finally leads to prejudice, conflicts and censures.

Due to its uniqueness in democratic institution and national ideology, the democracy identity of China is not recognized by every the country in the world, especially those ones who are holding different values, beliefs, ideology and national interest. Under such circumstance, the minority identity of China’s democracy is generated. Thus, the modern history attests the development of China’s minority identity in democracy. Before Opium War, which was provoked by English invaders from 1840 to 1842, feudal China had no idea about modern democracy because autocratic monarchy had been the dominant ideology. At that time, minority identity remained unknown, namely the Stage 1. After Opium War, when the Chinese people was striving for national independence and prosperity, western technologies and thoughts flowed into China and democracy is not an exception. Wu Hsu Reform in 1898 stated that Chinese intellectuals chose constitutional monarchy as the democratic realization. Revolution of 1911, led by Chinese bourgeois, expressed their desire to found a capitalist republic. Though all of these social movements were failed, this historic phenomenon that different Chinese classes adopted western forms of democracy shows that Chinese people have experienced Stage 2—Conformity, in which they tried to assimilate into dominant culture and drew lessons. After the foundation of new China in 1949, the minority identity has stepped into Stage 3—Resistance and Separatism, in which the national political awareness grows to suspect the benefit of dominant western culture for former disasters

brought by western imperialism. Socialism became the dominant ideology, therefore democracy of China developed in socialist orientation, contrasting westernized democratic institutions. Besides, after disintegration of the Soviet Union, socialism encountered severe setbacks, leaving China as one of 5 rare survivors. This plunge intensified the minority identity of democracy of China.

On the other hand, the majority identity of American democracy also develops through several stages. Now it rests in the Stage 2—Acceptance, representing the internalization of a biased ideology. America accepts the fact that China’s democracy and westernized one exist at the same time, but it discriminates the one of China, asserting its bias to the minority. In this stage, two positions are often taken to interact with the minority: “they avoid contact somewhat with minority group members”; “they adopt a patronizing stance toward them” [9]. Though American public media frequently criticizes China’s democracy, few correspondent or researcher has conducted a down-to-earth probe into the particular practice of China’s democratic institution. Contrarily American government takes a patronizing stance to China’s democracy, attacking its sufficiency with ignorance of China’s less developed condition, or just smearing it as autocracy. Unfortunately, when Chinese concerns at the level of Resistance and Separatism counter patronizing American critics, the emotion of hostility proliferates and brings countless offensive remarks. Thus numerous censures heat up bilateral rivalry in a vicious circle.

## **4. Empathy and Identity Dialectic**

Since the dilemma of democratic stereotyping and prejudice are present and their nature and mechanism are analyzed, the effective solutions to ease the bilateral tensity and the corresponding methodology are in need. In line with communication studies in general, the role of empathy in intercultural communication has been recognized early, being identified as an essential element of intercultural communication competency and a part of interpersonal sensitivity [10]. Therefore empathy turns out to be an possible and effective guideline for the solutions to China-U.S. censures in mutual democratic institutions.

### **4.1. Empathy**

The concept of empathy is generally understood as the capacity to understand feelings or attitudes of another, or taking the latter’s perspective [11] while at the same time also feeling in tune with the other although not becoming the other [12]. As an essential element of intercultural communication competence, empathy stresses the ability to sense and understand views, feelings and attitudes of another as well as convey that understanding by expressing acceptance and respect of what one senses of the other. To ease the democratic hostility between the two countries, empathy serves as the methodological guide to improve constructive and positive mutual understandings against democratic stereotyping and prejudice, for the bilateral democratic disputes mainly concern

about the conflicts of values and beliefs, rather than direct or concrete interests.

#### 4.2. Identity-Empathy Dialect

Apparently different from empathy, identity focuses on the self. "Carrying this into the current discussion, we may say that to emphasize one is to understand another, in the way the latter sees, feels, wants, and needs through the process of identification, the same process that produces cultural identity" [13]. With the different orientation of emphases, therefore a contradiction emerges as identity and empathy push and pull at the same time in a dialectic and communicative relationship. Identity and empathy are dialectic in the sense that both are necessary, indispensable and are needed at the same time, inevitably contradicting each other and giving rise to tension.

In this sense, during the interaction between different democratic practices of China and America, the solution--empathy through mutual understanding and the national democratic identity formation which contradict and influence each other, are also dependent on each other, so there is no empathy without the one independent of the other, while the premise of empathy lies in the identities, for the different democratic identities of both countries pave the precondition and the need for mutual negotiation, otherwise there will be no such need or conditions for bilateral dialogue. From the macro perspective, mutual empathy in democratic institutions is regarded as the solution to ease the tension in this white-heated issue; however, interestingly, it is worth noting that the major incentive for empathy lies in the differences of national identities on their own democracy which stimulates the mutual censures. Thus, China and the United States construct respective democratic identities through noting the difference or otherness from counterpart. When these differences are emphasized frequently enough, the disputes are inevitable, leading to prejudice which reinforced through stereotyping.

#### 4.3. Dialectic Empathy Practice

As Chen Ling indicates in his research [13], the need for an identity or for a cultural identity is one of the human immanent needs and desires. Luckily, there is the nature of things that just is, completely beyond human control, such as the fact that humans are capable of empathy and will empathize. Under such guideline, to ease the bilateral tense in democratic disputes, the inevitability of disputes in respective democratic identity construction is to be noted as the keynote of reality. Simultaneously, the possibility to ease the bilateral tense also should not be neglected, for the ability of empathizing is a common virtue of humans and the Chinese people and the American people are not the exceptions.

Baxter and Montgomery [14] suggest that the empathy-identity dialectic, or balancing of the self and the other speaks of the dialectic of autonomy versus connectedness, whereby the desire/need to connect with the other in empathy is countered by the need/desire for one to stand as an autonomous and unique individual with clear

identity. In this sense, the bilateral censures on democratic institutions between China and the United States are inevitable, as long as both countries need to construct respective identity; however, thanks to the globalization, both countries are tightly connected in economic, political, cultural, even demographic communications. Therefore, the connectedness between the two countries stands as a firm counter force against the autonomous identity construction in democratic institution. In this sense, to strengthen the connected relationship between the two countries emerges as a feasible solution to reconcile the autonomous desire.

Since identity refers to the concept and perception about self while empathy is about knowledge of others' thoughts and feelings, both are notions in the realm of cognition and would have something to do with information and the dialectic of openness versus closeness. This dialectic consists of the need to be open and share information versus the need to be private and independent. In this cognitive dialectic, information serves as the critical factor, and at the same time, information exchanging works as the concrete method in strengthening the bilateral relationship in China-U.S. democratic disputes. Luckily enough, China has made a significant move: during his visit in the United States in 2015, President Xi Jinping states that the foundation of China-U.S. Friendship has its roots in the people, and its future rests with the youth, announcing that China supports the initiative of sending a total of 50,000 Chinese and American students to study in each other's countries over the next three years and 2016 will be the China-U.S. Year of Tourism. Through mobility of personnel, the information exchange takes on a vivid, profound and long-lasting style, in the form of individual experience. During the study and the travel of China-U.S. Expatriates, they have the chance to experience each other's democratic practice directly and this experience is to be involved in their own identity formation and identity-empathy dialectic.

## 5. Conclusion

Democratic institutions of America and China are profiled and compared in this paper, contrasting their intensively mutual censures. Then the mechanism of the generation of prejudice is demonstrated and the clash between China-U.S. majority and minority identities of democracy is located as the origin of prejudice. In order to improve the interaction of majority and minority identities, the restless mutual criticizing has to be muted. Meanwhile, democratic institutions in both countries may offer opportunities to politicians and citizens for the experience and involvement in concrete practice of democracy. By this method, the integration of majority and minority identities can be achieved, bring better mutual understandings with empathy.

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