SECURITIZING HUMAN RIGHTS:
ANALYZING CHINA'S HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY
UNDER XI JINPING

Titus C. Chen, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Institute of Political Science
National Sun Yat-sen University
Kaohsiung, Taiwan
chentitus@gmail.com

Chia-hao Hsu, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow
Institute of China & Asia-Pacific Studies
National Sun Yat-sen University
Kaohsiung, Taiwan
hsuchiahao21@gmail.com
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Abstract

What does human rights mean to the Chinese government after the Tiananmen Suppression in June 1989? Has the way by which the Chinese government conceptualizes human rights changed over time? What policies and practices has Beijing’s human rights conception privileged or delegitimized? This paper takes on these intriguing questions by analyzing human rights stories of People’s Daily, the authoritative news outlet of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). We apply the methods of text analytics and discourse analysis to shed light on the party-state’s discursive effort that grafted the idea of human rights onto the CCP governmental structure to its own advantage. Our research finds that, since 1989, the Chinese government has developed two major conceptions of human rights. Throughout the 1990s, human rights had been understood mainly as a source of regime threat and insecurity, hence requiring containment and rejection. Beginning in the early 2000s, an alternative argument was constructed that conceptualizes human rights as ruling capacity of the party-state in domestic and global governance, hence deserving reception and acclamation. However, the rights-as-capacity argument has developed side by side with the rights-as-threat conception, resulting in an illiberal and dualistic rights regime in Chinese politics.

Keywords: China, human rights politics, securitization, state capacity, discourse analysis, text analytics
Introduction

Since the Tiananmen Suppression in June 1989, human rights has been an abiding issue of concern in People’s Republic of China’s foreign relations. Communicating the liberal idea of human rights to PRC officials is frustrating; assuming compatibility between Beijing’s human rights conception and liberal notion of human dignity has proved to be an untenable proposition. A universal conception of human rights remains out of sight. It is imperative—for both scholarly and policy purposes—to ascertain what the expression of human rights means to the Chinese government, when the term 人权 (renquan, the linguistic equivalent of human rights in Mandarin Chinese) is invoked in the post-Tiananmen China. Also, has the official Chinese conception of human rights changed over time? If so, which elements of the official human rights conception have stayed on, which ones have petered out, and which ones have not appeared until recently? What policies and practices has Beijing’s human rights conception privileged or delegitimized? This paper takes on these intriguing-yet-underexplored questions by analyzing news stories of People’s Daily, the authoritative news outlet of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

We argue that China’s official human rights discourse and its underlying conception, as exemplified in People’s Daily human rights stories, have undergone substantial changes over the post-Tiananmen years. We apply emerging methods of text analytics to identify discursive patterns and conceptual changes. Rather than taking narrative changes as a sign of the party-state’s embrace of liberal political values, our findings suggest that discursive changes and their underlying conceptual shifts mark Beijing’s effort of incorporating—while simultaneously reformulating—the previously castigated idea of human rights to its own advantage. Conceptual
developments of human rights in the post-Tiananmen Chinese politics is a tale of strategic absorption by the party-state.

More importantly, our research finds that, since 1989, the Chinese government has developed two major conceptions of human rights. Throughout the 1990s, human rights had been understood mainly as a source of regime threat and insecurity, hence requiring containment and rejection. Beginning in the early 2000s, an alternative argument was constructed that conceptualizes human rights as ruling capacity of the party-state in domestic and global governance, hence deserving reception and acclamation. Each conception is represented in a group of inter-related topics that shape the content of People’s Daily human rights stories. However, the rights-as-capacity argument has not completely replaced, and has instead developed side by side with, the rights-as-threat conception, resulting in an illiberal and dualistic rights regime in Chinese politics. The timing of conceptual shifts in Beijing’s human rights propaganda suggests that it followed closely major changes in the central leadership’s political priority.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We begin with a brief review of the existing literature that studied China’s official human rights conception and discourse. We take human rights discourse as the primary object of inquiry, and set out to examine the constructed meanings of China’s official human rights conception. The second section discusses the methods of text analytics that we apply to People’s Daily human rights stories to extract textual data about major topics of China’s human rights propaganda, topic distribution, and distributional changes over the post-Tiananmen years. From the third to fifth section we present empirical findings on the state-constructed meanings of human rights in Chinese politics and their longitudinal
changes. We find that the Chinese government conceptualized human rights firstly as humanitarian crises following international armed conflicts in foreign countries. Over time, however, the discursive significance of such understanding had receded. Instead, a predominant semantic tendency has since June 1989 emerged that addressed Chinese human rights in reference to the party leadership’s fear of losing political security and international legitimacy. Meanings of human rights have therefore undergone substantial changes. The fear-based conception, we argue, has culminated in the securitization of human rights in Chinese politics.

Human rights as a political conception is not static but evolves over time. The official Chinese human rights discourse has since 2003—the inception of Hu Jintao’s presidency—developed the other tendency that emphasizes the party-state’s capacity in improving people’s material conditions. Human rights has been increasingly conceptualized as the government’s capacity in regulating market order, providing for social equity, delivering legal justice, and maintain regional and international stability. Such conceptualization of human rights is logically and practically consistent with the party-state’s pursuit of the neoliberal model of socio-economic development. Consequently, meanings of human rights in Chinese politics have once again undergone qualitative transformation. From the nearly three decades of conceptual development emerges an illiberal and dualistic political framework in which the rights-as-threat approach co-inheres and overlaps with the rights-as-capacity approach, forming the ideational bastion of what we refer to as neoliberal authoritarianism in Chinese politics.
State of understanding on political conceptions of human rights in contemporary China

The existing research on the Chinese conception of human rights and freedoms is mainly of the qualitative nature. In addition to normative and historical-descriptive approaches, scholars have employed discourse analysis. The existing literature on Chinese human rights has made valuable observations. Firstly, it is found that the CCP government, following Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, has for long refuted the liberal conception of inalienable rights. The CCP leadership has held the conviction that rights in a socialist society shall not be human rights as inherited by birth (hence inalienable), but citizens’ rights as granted (hence revocable) by the state. Rights in the socialist rule would always be positive rights, not natural ones. Furthermore, the socialist government grants positive rights only to the politically legitimate classes (the “people”, referring to the proletariat and their allied classes).

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3 Svensson, 2002, 221.


Secondly, the existing literature of Chinese human rights points out that the hostility of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the liberal conception of rights and freedoms has resulted in Chinese ruling elites’ ignorance of human rights. Up until 1989, the concept of human rights enjoyed no institutional support in the party-state’s ruling system. Sporadically, state leaders declared that the government respected human rights. Haphazard endorsements of human rights, however, were not translated into concrete policy measures for rights protection. On the other hand, Chinese leaders did not mind instrumentalizing human rights rhetoric for political gains in external relations. Beijing has continually employed human rights language in her foreign affairs to discredit adversaries, such as the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and the United States.

Thirdly, the existing literature demonstrates that in the wake of post-Tiananmen international pressure, the Chinese government undertook to examine and reformulate the liberal norms of human rights to serve its Leninist principle of rule, leading to the development of what Svensson calls “human rights with Chinese characteristics.” Instead of succumbing to external normative pressure, Deng Xiaoping and like-minded CCP leaders were adamant about upholding the Leninist elements in Chinese politics. They framed international human rights pressure as a pitched fight between a

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9 Svensson, 2002, 271. On human rights and CCP’s Leninist principle of rule, see *People’s Daily*, “Quandang bixu jiaqiang xuanchuan he sixiang gongzuo zhenzheng rang shehuizhuyi sixiang zhanling zhendi” ([The Party must reinforce propaganda and thought work, make sure the socialist thought take the ground], 全党必须加强宣传和思想工作 真正让社会主义思想占领阵地), July 21, 1989, page 1.
self-defensive China and the triumphalist West, a battle in which China’s state security and national dignity were at stake. Conservative leaders alerted domestic society of the portentous scenario of regime change by external anti-China (fanhua, 反华) forces. A nationalistic ethos was evoked, summoning uncritical patriotism from society and portraying international human rights “struggle” as a conflict of incompatible identities.10

Informed by historical materialism and nationalism, the CCP government has persistently promoted a relativistic understanding of human rights, arguing that a society’s human rights is significantly determined by its historical, cultural, and most importantly economic conditions. Also, Beijing has emphasized a collectivistic notion of human rights that prioritizes the rights of collectivities (nations in particular) over those of individuals.11 In particular, the Chinese government has since 1991 advocated the right to subsistence and the right to development.

The existing research on Chinese human rights conception is not without deficiencies. For research investigating the official Chinese human rights conception and policy, the primary object of analysis is the staggeringly large body of relevant political texts that keeps piling up on a daily basis. Researchers can only conduct discourse/content analysis on parts—but not the whole—of official human rights discourse. However, the existing literature of Chinese human rights politics has inadequately addressed the methodological issues of selection bias, misrepresentation, or over-representation.

Furthermore, the existing literature of Chinese human rights politics demonstrates an overly static understanding of CCP human rights discourse, presuming the constancy of official human rights conception. Even when scholars claimed that in the long run, the Chinese party-state changed her attitude and approach to international human rights norms, they failed to specify—not to mention analyze and explain—the evolutionary trajectory of conceptual and policy changes. As Vivian Schmidt has pointed out in her essay about discursive institutionalism, it is imperative to develop research methods that are capable of “considering the process by which … ideas go from thought to word to deed, that is, how ideas are conveyed, adopted, and adapted, …”\textsuperscript{12}

Addressing the conceptual and methodological issues outlined above requires that we take political discourse and its underlying conceptions seriously. Political actors construct and articulate discourse as a purposive framing strategy to enhance the appeal of a particular conception, shape the formation of national interests, and generate favorable conditions for the making of certain policy decisions.\textsuperscript{13} Analyzing political discourse, according to Crawford, is to “understand the underlying logic of the social and political organization of a particular arena and to recognize that this arrangement and the structures of power and meaning underpinning it are not natural, but socially constructed.”\textsuperscript{14}

When applied to political studies, discourse analysis is meant to identify the meanings—such as political identities, ideological convictions, normative expectations, cultural values, or particular worldviews—constructed and embedded in the political statements under review, and to examine and compare the genealogical processes of meaning construction and contestation. Discourse analysts examine also the degree of resilience of a particular political conviction over time. Conducting discourse analysis in political studies hence is tantamount to examining how political reality is constructed, maintained, or contested by wielders of discursive power.

Discourse analysis thus understood and employed is understandably “qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist.” Nevertheless, discourse analysts may benefit substantially from the computer-assisted, automated/semi-automated text analytics, which promises to uncover and cogently present the empirical evidence of constructed meanings—lexical structures, semantic patterns, and constituting ideas—of texts under review, evidence which is not readily observable by conventional approaches. More crucially, text analytics may help to identify and present valid evidence of semantic changes in the constructed meanings of political discourse over time. Still, coding and programming alone cannot interpret research findings from computational analysis. Rather, it takes socially-sensitive, professionally-trained human intelligence to deduce meanings from results of text analytics. When properly integrated, computational techniques and domain knowledge do not exclude but reinforce each other.

When applied to study Chinese human rights politics, text analytics is expected to scrutinize the contemporary understanding of what the Chinese government means by human rights, as identified in the existing literature. Text-mining efforts are meant to answer the following questions: How much influence has the communist principles of rule—Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism—exerted on the official human rights conception in the post-1989 China? To what extent has Beijing instrumentalized human rights narrative, hence sustaining a nationalistic, patriotic human rights discourse? Has the materialist orientation and developmentalism persistently shaped the party-state’s human rights propaganda and policy? More importantly, text analytics is expected to overcome the methodological issues of selection bias and over-static understanding of China’s human rights conception.
Measuring topic distribution and discursive changes of *People’s Daily* human rights stories

For scholars of text analytics, China’s official human rights conception may be understood as general or issue-specific topics that substantiate political discourse. To comprehend the meaning of a discourse is hence to shed light on its constituent topics, topic distribution and topical changes over time. We use the Stanford Topic Modeling Toolbox (TMT), which adopts Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), to extract the topic model—the patterns and changes of topic distribution—of *People’s Daily* human rights stories in the post-Tiananmen era (1989-2015) and make observations.¹⁹

Various approaches of text analytics—including topic modeling—have gained traction in the empirical work of political science and China Studies.²⁰ Latent Dirichlet Allocation is a statistical algorithm for topic modeling, designed to generate a probabilistic model of latent topic distribution in unstructured textual data.²¹ The

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¹⁹ Softwares, tutorials, and manuals of the Stanford TMT are available on its website at [https://nlp.stanford.edu/software/tmt/tmt-0.4/](https://nlp.stanford.edu/software/tmt/tmt-0.4/).


mixed-membership algorithm presumes that a linguistic corpus is generated by, and hence composed of, a set of distinct topics. Each topic is represented as a distinct cluster of words, and each observed document is understood as a distinct configuration of topics. As an unsupervised method, LDA infers posteriorly latent topics and their probabilistic distribution. LDA is hence effective in controlling for selection bias by reducing arbitrary interventions of the researcher. Applying the LDA program to analyze *People’s Daily* human rights stories would enable researchers to better demonstrate and interpret the constituent topics and topic distribution—the meanings—of official Chinese human rights discourse and their evolution over time.

[enter Figure 1 here]

The operation of LDA, as illustrated in Figure 1, begins with pre-processing the observed corpus into a term-document matrix. We first identify and collect *People’s Daily* stories that contain the term 人权 (human rights) in the text body. We are able to retrieve and download 9,308 news stories from the online database of *People’s Daily* (1989-2015) that satisfies the search criterion. We then apply the Jieba tokenizer and the Stanford Part-of-Speech Tagger on *People’s Daily* human rights stories for word segmentation and tagging. We continue to apply Stanford TMT, first training the LDA program to identify and pick any nouns with at least two characters as the input, and collect their frequency counts. We filter out nouns that occur too infrequently (terms/phrases that occurred in less than 35 corpus documents) or too frequently (the 30 most common terms/phrases, as stop words). Each *People’s Daily* human rights

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story is represented as an unordered vector of frequency counts of each distinct noun. We then form a term-document matrix of People’s Daily human rights stories by stacking these vectors together.23

The next step is to decide on the number of word clusters—namely, topics—of People’s Daily human rights stories; we do so based on the perplexity scores to which each number of word clusters corresponds. The Stanford TMT generates the lowest perplexity scores (717.04) when People’s Daily human rights stories are grouped into 20 topics (as shown in Appendix 1, available on the authors’ personal website). Accordingly, we choose the model specification of 20 topics, and run the trained LDA program for 1,000 iterations.24 The first output of the LDA operation is a summary of the estimated topic model. Under each topic is a list of words of the highest probabilistic contribution to the composition of that topic.25 The other output is a topic-document matrix that displays the probabilistic contribution of each identified topic to each People’s Daily human rights story (as shown in Appendix 2, available on the authors’ personal website).

The LDA program identifies topics but does not ascertain the logic of each topic. Still it takes the researcher who owns domain knowledge to infer the logic of the identified topics and assign a thematic label to each topic. For that task, we adopt the in-depth qualitative method employed by Catalinac (2012) and Roberts, Stewart, and Airoldi (2016). To label an identified topic, we begin by reviewing the top constituent

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24 Lower perplexity scores indicate a fitter model of cluster estimation for the observed corpus, hence inferring a better performance of model generalization. See Blei, Ng, and Jordan, 2003, p. 1008.
25 Words shown in Table 1 are those that make up at least 1% of the overall word instances of an identified cluster.
words or phrases that contribute the most to the composition of the topic. We then review the 10 *People’s Daily* human rights stories with the highest probabilistic contribution by the topic, as shown in the topic-document matrix. Table 1 presents the results of both the quantitative topic modeling operation and the qualitative topic labeling process. Furthermore, Table 1 shows the yearly average of probabilistic proportion of each topic and its trend line, hence demonstrating topic distribution—the meanings—of China’s official human rights discourse.
Human rights implications of regional insecurity

The LDA operation not only identifies ephemeral topics whose political significance waxed and waned quickly, but also picks up long-term topical trends and discursive evolutions. Results of the LDA operation hence shed light on the state-constructed meanings of human rights in China and their longitudinal changes. Accordingly, the output of my research presents not just static attributes but also dynamic trends of Chinese human rights politics.

One major long-term trend that the LDA identifies is a proportional decrease of *People’s Daily* coverage of international human rights news, namely, human rights issues in foreign countries or regions that did not directly implicate PRC interests. Two topical clusters represent the trend: the topic that highlights armed conflicts and humanitarian crises in the Middle East and the Balkans (as shown in Topic No. 10), and the one that covers political relations of the West with developing countries in Latin America and Central-Eastern Europe (Topic No. 11). When combined, the two topics accounted for 31.7% of *People’s Daily* human rights stories in the year of 1990. Human rights issues featured prominently in the Chinese state media’s coverage of the contentious Arab-Israeli relations. Likewise, Chinese propagandists highlighted human rights considerations in Western powers’ political relations with former socialist countries in Central-Eastern Europe and newly democratized states in Latin America during the early years of the post-Cold War era.

Over time, however, both topics have tapered off in terms of their annual proportion in China’s official human rights discourse. The party-state’s propaganda system had shifted attention to other human rights topics that either closely involved or
directly implicated China’s authoritarian rule. The end of the Cold War, the liberal resettlement of the European regional order, and the unfolding of peace process in the Middle East during the early 1990s contributed as well to both topics’ further withdrawal from the spotlight of People’s Daily human rights coverage. By 1996, the two topics accounted for 15.8% of People’s Daily human rights stories, which was already less than half of the statistics in 1990. In 2001, it further dropped to 11.3%, eventually reaching the all-time low at 7.8% in 2008 (as shown in Figure 2).

[enter Figure 2 here]

The eruption of major incidents—especially the destructive ones generating humanitarian disasters—indeed pushed up the annual proportion of the respective topics in particular years. For instance, People’s Daily, while covering the flare-up of the Syrian civil war during 2011-2012, made extensive mention of large-scale human rights abuses as perpetrated by warring parties. The annual proportion of Topic No. 10 went up during that time period. However, the upsurge rarely lasted for more than two years, and flattened out as soon as the isolated incident was over or the CCP leadership’s attention moved elsewhere.

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26 For research in the CCP propaganda system, read Anne-Marie Brady (2008), Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield); Anne-Marie Brady (2012), ed., China’s Thought Management (London: Routledge).
Human rights as the reason of regime insecurity

The other post-Tiananmen trend that the LDA approach clearly identifies in topic distribution is the outburst of *People’s Daily* human rights stories that bear on the party leadership’s threat perception. A strong semantic tendency has since June 1989 emerged in state media that addressed Chinese human rights in reference to the CCP regime’s deep-seated fear of losing her political security and international legitimacy. Accordingly, Beijing has incorporated, reformulated, and re-framed the idea of human rights to push back the “naming and shaming” campaigns imposed by Western powers and like-minded governments. The PRC government has since 1989 reinforced the effort of instrumentalizing human rights narrative to her own advantage. Consequently, state media has since June 1989 shifted the focus of human rights news reports from armed conflicts and humanitarian contingencies in foreign countries, to issues/incidents whose explanation or justification was imperative to the CCP government’s survivability and legitimacy. Meanings of human rights—as autocratically dictated by the fearful and introversive party leadership—have undergone substantial changes.

The LDA operation picks up changing meanings of human rights and tracks the course of semantic changes, by identifying emerging topics and specifying their year-by-year proportional fluctuations. Topic distribution of official human rights discourse has experienced significant changes. Topics that have featured prominently in the post-Tiananmen era have attributed regime insecurity to international pressure imposed by liberal human rights advocacy. Discussion of human rights in China’s official news outlets has unfolded almost always in a larger semantic context that condemned what party propagandists claimed to be subversive acts of hostile, anti-PRC forces.
Resisting international human rights pressure

*People’s Daily* human rights stories that emphasize Topic No. 13 represent clearly the PRC government’s principled defiance to liberal international norms of human rights following the Tiananmen Suppression. Key terms assembling the topical cluster include the United Nations (联合国), principle (原则), Convention (公约), sovereignty (主权), Declaration (宣言), international society (国际社会), Charter (宪章), assembly (大会), domestic affairs (内政), and resolution (决议). The terms signify the party-state’s insistence on sustaining the classical notion of state sovereignty over the liberal norms of human rights in international politics. In addition, *People’s Daily* stories falling under this topic have contended persistently that human rights cannot be realized without active intervention and material provision by the state. Respect for, and protection of, human rights were hence a matter of state sovereignty. This topic may be construed as an indicator of China’s unyielding confrontation to the universalist notion of liberal human rights. Accordingly, the yearly proportion of the topic in the human rights corpus rose consecutively and dramatically, from 13.3% in 1989 to 24.1% in 1993, a discursive outburst indicative of tenacity of ideational clash between China’s nationalist conception of human dignity and the liberal international human rights norms during the early 1990s.

Emphasizing the South-South cooperation

*People’s Daily* stories featuring Topic No. 1 represents yet another effort for enhancing regime security and legitimacy. Major terms that substantiate this topic are President/Chairperson (主席), Prime Minister (总理), Li Peng (李鹏), President (总统), field (领域), Jiang Zemin (江泽民), Beijing (北京), Xinhua News Agency (新华社), economy and trade (经贸), etc. The topic highlights what the PRC leadership has referred to as the South-South cooperation: solidarity and collaboration among Third
World countries in their foreign and development policies. Judging from Chinese propaganda materials, one major area of South-South cooperation was to detest and weaken liberal human rights pressure. Leading and promoting the South-South cooperation, particularly in the field of international human rights “struggle”, would enhance China’s international prestige and security.  

As Beijing came under mounting pressure from Western governments in the early 1990s, the Chinese government began to solicit political support from like-minded countries. The intensification of South-South cooperation on the matter of international human rights contestation manifests in the annual proportion of Topic No. 1, which had since the early 1990s spiked drastically until the early 2000s: the proportion started from a negligible 4.5% in 1989, to an impressive 26.4% in 1997, then swelled even more, peaking eventually in 2002 at a staggering 28.5%.

Exposing Western abuses

By the same logic, People’s Daily human rights stories dedicated to Topic No. 7 represent Beijing’s propaganda effort for enhancing the CCP regime’s political security and international legitimacy. Major terms constituting the topic include report (报告), the Black (黑人), race (种族), incident (事件), prison (监狱), news (新闻), South Africa (南非), the White (白人), the media (媒体), etc. This topic exposes human rights abuses allegedly perpetrated by Western powers, the United States in particular. People’s Daily news stories dedicated to this topic took the offensive by denouncing China’s liberal adversaries of gross and systematic abuses. Such active disclosure of

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Western violations of human rights was a counterbalancing move, a speech-act employed strategically to cancel out negative impact of liberal normative pressure. Except for the period of 1999-2003, the annual proportion of this topic has largely stayed above 5%, and surged higher in particular years when major abuses or rights-related scandals in the West went public, such as the prison torture scandal in Iraq in 2004 and the Edward Snowden debacle in 2013.

**Condemning regime enemies and adversaries**

News stories dedicated to Topic No. 2 frame the idea of human rights in close reference to three sources of political threats: mobilized domestic opposition in 1989, Western powers (the United States in particular), and Japan. This topic highlights Beijing’s deep-seated conviction that hostile forces—both domestic and external—utilized the liberal idea of human rights to damage and humiliate PRC’s sovereignty. Major terms constituting the topic are Japan (日本), history (历史), Beijing (北京), student (学生), university (大学), and war (战争). From Beijing’s perspective, pro-democracy activists of the 1989 Tiananmen Movement embodied a brazen challenge to the party-state’s internal sovereignty because they clashed head-on with the central authorities. More pointedly, the Chinese government held the view that Tiananmen Movement activists invoked the liberal idea of human rights to excuse their subversive acts. Having been associated irrevocably with regime change and state subversion, the liberal idea of human rights became an unwelcome idea in China’s official circles.

The incident of the United States bombing the PRC embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 triggered patriotic protests and demonstrations among the youth in China. As tensions in the PRC-US relations flared up, Chinese propaganda machine rolled out vengeful narratives, accusing the United States government as a hypocritical hegemon.
Not only was the bombing a deliberate infringement of China’s external sovereignty and national dignity, state media declared, but the incident was taken as a manifest violation of Chinese people’s fundamental human rights. As a result, the annual proportion of this topic climbed from 4.2% in 1998 to nearly 8% in 1999.

The third source of regime threat specified in Topic No. 2 concerns the intractable disputes plaguing the PRC-Japan relations: the controversial narrative of Japanese history textbooks about wartime atrocities inflicted by the Japanese military, Tokyo’s denialist policy to the aging Comfort Women during WWII, and Japanese politicians paying homage to the Yasukuni Shrine. Beijing has consistently raised concerns with—at times, even sharply criticized—Tokyo over the unresolved issues about wartime memories. Beijing has persistently lodged protests against Japanese politicians over these issues on the grounds of human rights: Japanese politicians’ ignorant and denialist attitude constituted a gross and intentional violation of Chinese people’s fundamental human rights.

The Japan-related human rights stories by *People’s Daily* increased in 2001 and 2005 respectively, reflecting the strained PRC-Japan relations over unsettled wartime controversies. Recently the human rights news stories and commentaries targeting Japan have once again increased in state media: the annual proportion of Topic No. 2 has gone above 5% for three consecutive years (8.5% in 2013, 7.8% in 2014, and 6.4% in 2015). An absolute majority of *People’s Daily* human rights stories contributing to this topic during 2013-2015 strongly rebuked Japan over the historical controversies outlined above, a discursive phenomenon indicating the deteriorating bilateral relations.
Controlling Tibet and Xinjiang

The same discursive pattern applies to the topic portraying Beijing’s policies to religions and ethnic minorities, Tibet and Xinjiang/Uighur in particular. Topic No. 6, as identified by LDA, is composed of words and phrases such as serf (农奴), Xinjiang (新疆), religion (宗教), history (历史), Tibetan people (藏族), Tibetan autonomy (西藏自治), central government (中央政府), region (区域), Lhasa (拉萨), Lama (喇嘛), and clique (集团). It is fairly clear that the topic addresses human rights controversies in Tibet and Xinjiang. The topic’s proportion went up for two consecutive years in 1991 (6.3%) and 1992 (7.7%), then subsided for a period of 15 years. During 2008-2009, ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang flared up; violent, deadly riots erupted and harsh crackdowns followed. As a result, the topic’s annual proportion spiked. It rose to 7.4% in 2008 (the year witnessing the Tibetan Unrest), and went even higher to 13.4% in 2009 (the year in which deadly ethnic violence left hundreds of casualties in Xinjiang). Party propagandists mobilized this cluster of news reports to discredit international criticisms of PRC’s religious and minorities policy, by prioritizing and disseminating what the party mouthpiece claimed to be the “authentic” or “truthful”—i.e., party-approved—accounts of religious development and ethnic harmony in China. News stories falling under this topic argued that it was the party-state, not Western powers nor domestic opposition, that has striven to improve human rights conditions of religious groups and ethnic minorities in China.

Reclaiming Hong Kong

Likewise, the Chinese propaganda machine in 1995 and 1997 strengthened the conceptual linkage between the issue of Hong Kong (as represented by Topic No. 19) and the official understanding of human rights. In both years the PRC government and her local agents in Hong Kong challenged the legality and legitimacy of the British-
legislated Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance, declaring that the legislation violated the Basic Law and lambasting what Beijing referred to as Western powers’ “hegemonic mindset” on the matter of Hong Kong.

**Repressing the Falun Gong**

Similarly, the way by which *People’s Daily* human rights stories have covered the Chinese government’s policy on what Beijing claimed to be religious cults (as represented by Topic No. 4) brings home Beijing’s constant fear of political threats from autonomous groups. Words that contribute the most to Topic No. 4 are Falun (法轮), cult (邪教), religion (宗教), Li Hongzhi (李洪志), influence (势力), element (份子), incident (事件), mass (群众), and danger (危害). This topic refers to the Chinese government’s hostile perception and coercive policy to the Falun Gong, the outlawed qigong sect. Beginning in June 1999, Beijing disbanded its organization, harshly repressed practitioners, and conducted waves of propaganda campaign that delegitimized the Falun Gong as a vicious cult. Beijing’s smear campaigns not only targeted domestic audiences but also reached out to the international society, claiming that the group had been committed massive human rights violations. As a result, in two years’ time (1999-2001) the topic’s annual proportion more than quadrupled. The propaganda campaign quickly climaxed in 2001, wherein nearly 17% of *People’s Daily* human rights stories involved discrediting the Falun Gong as a rights-abusing organization.

**Theorizing the PRC model of human rights**

Another important dimension that the LDA program picks up is Beijing’s effort to theorize the Chinese model of human rights. Topics No. 16 and 17 show an impressive collection of essential components of what CCP theorists referred to as the Chinese
theory of human rights. Topic No.16 lays down the Marxist understanding of historical/scientific materialism. Major terms forming Topic No.16 include history (历史), values (价值), civilization (文明), Marx (马克思), theory (理论), capital (资本), bourgeoisie (资产阶级), science/scientific (科学), path (道路), etc. This cluster of terms represents essential components of the Marxist notion of historical materialism or “scientific socialism,” which holds the conviction that the history of human rights is one of class struggle, and contends that the ownership of the means of production must be firmly under the people’s control (represented by the CCP) to ensure the livelihood and welfare of the people. The Chinese model of human rights, as informed by the Marxist notion of historical materialism/scientific socialism, is meant to uphold and guarantee the principal human rights—the right to physical subsistence and the right to material development. Protection of individual rights is subordinated to the imperatives of collective interests.

Moreover, major terms constituting Topic No. 17 are leadership (领导), the mass (群众), the Chinese Communist Party (中国共产党), cadre (干部), “theory” (理论), mission (任务), guidance (指导), etc. News stories dedicated to this topic emphasized the CCP’s leadership role in developing the Chinese human rights “theory” and realizing collective rights of the proletariat people.

Securitization of human rights in China

Confronting international human rights pressure was no mean feat, when one government refuses to liberalize the domestic political system. Illiberal resistance is costly and risky, and the result is far from certain. Nevertheless, the CCP leadership chose to brace the impact of liberal normative pressure following the Tiananmen Suppression. The LDA operation helps identify the Chinese propaganda machine’s
discursive strategy that frames liberal human rights as a source of ideological predicament and political threat. The findings suggest that the propaganda machine has linked up human rights with just about every major issue of concern that could conceivably endanger the party-state’s survival and legitimacy.

Thus far, results of the LDA operation are mostly compatible with, hence corroborate, the contemporary understanding of China’s official human rights conception. Throughout the 1990s Beijing has extensively utilized human rights rhetoric as a discursive instrument to detest the liberal international normative order, undermine the moral suasion of Western human rights demands, and uphold the South-South cooperation on resisting liberal human rights pressure. Traces of uncritical nationalism—pro-regime patriotic narratives that deplored perceived external challenges and justified the regime’s repressive acts—are palpable in human rights propaganda. More intriguingly, topics highlighting the Communist principles of human rights (the Chinese “theory” of human rights) have not only remained side-by-side with the nationalist topics, but, since 2004, have become even more prominent than the previous 13 years.

Disaggregating the official Chinese human rights discourse take us to this proposition: a large part of China’s official human rights statements is not about human rights per se; instead, it is about securitizing human rights, representing liberal human rights as an existential threat endangering the Chinese party-state’s security. The discursive practice of securitization, as the Copenhagen School in International Relations Theory suggests, is a purposive, self-referential strategy of coercive
persuasion, deployed by political actors through subtle and tactful speech-acts. State leadership securitizes a public policy issue by framing it as a matter of national security or state emergency. This is a generative speech-act that justifies, urges, and facilitates extraordinary measures imposed by ruling elites to restrict social access to public affairs and augment executive prerogatives on the issue concerned. Securitizing a public policy issue through discursive mobilization empowers state agents to circumvent normal administrative rules, dodge routine accountability mechanisms, and maximize discretionary power on policy prescription and implementation.

A securitized human rights discourse in China has generated, justified, and reproduced an account of human dignity that is dictated nearly exclusively by the central leadership of the party-state. A securitized idea of human rights—a persistent portrayal of the negative relationship between liberal human rights and the party-state’s political security—has been expected to not only sustain the party regime’s autocratic power, but also construct and evoke a patriotic identity urging Chinese citizens—even PRC compatriots and ethnic Chinese population abroad—to align (if not necessarily ally) with the party-state on the matter of resisting external human rights pressure. Through propaganda deployment and formative education, the PRC government has fed the domestic society with this securitized conception of human dignity that

30 Buzan, Weaver, and Wilde, p. 26.
32 Buzan, Weaver, and Wilde, p. 27.
shrewdly confuses the notion of individual liberties with that of state sovereignty, even subsuming the former into the latter. The drive of securitization has been carried out in a pursuit of *illiberal* state sovereignty that uncritically justifies the augmentation—instead of restriction—of state power vis-à-vis international normative demands and domestic social forces.

Figure 3 presents the annual proportion of the nine topics that emphasize regime security in *People’s Daily* human rights stories. It is noted that during the period of 1989-2002 (that is, the leadership of Jiang Zemin), regime (in)security topics had dominated the official human rights discourse, constituting more than half of its content. Securitization has been wrought into Beijing’s human rights narrative, producing and reproducing a culture of insecurity that justifies PRC’s domestic and international human rights policies. Throughout the 1990s, the party-state leadership had undertaken to incorporate the once-marginalized idea of human rights into the ruling system. Nevertheless, state incorporation of human rights entailed an ominous metamorphosis of the very notion of human rights. The formal incorporation and subtle reformulation of human rights have culminated in the shedding of its liberal kernel and the injection of nationalist and Leninist characters.

[enter Figure 3 here]

Most tellingly, the figure shows that the annual proportion of securitization topics, after three years of relative hiatus (2010-2012), has since 2013—the beginning of Xi

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Jinping’s rule—been re-enacted for three consecutive years. The mild increase is attributed to growing discussion of the topic that berates Japan as a regime adversary (Topic No. 2), the topic that promotes the Chinese model of human rights to the international community (Topic No. 13), and the one championing the neo-conservative ideology (Topic No. 16).
Human rights as state capabilities

In addition to the topics relating liberal human rights with threats and insecurity, the LDA operation picks up the other major semantic trend that, since the early 2000s, has significantly reconfigured topic distribution of Beijing’s human rights propaganda. The official Chinese human rights discourse has since 2003—the inception of Hu Jintao’s presidency—developed a tendency that defines human rights in terms of the party-state’s governing capabilities, which refers less to the state’s ability to monopolize legitimate violence, contain political opposition, extract financial/human resources, or engineer industrialization.  

Rather, governing capabilities in China’s human rights propaganda refers more to three dimensions of government function that are of great value for the CCP leadership’s pursuit of legitimacy in the early 2000s: (1) state provision of basic welfare and entitlements; (2) state commitment to authoritarian legality; and (3) state capacity in shaping global governance.  

More specifically, human rights has been increasingly understood as Beijing’s executive capabilities to

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regulate market order, facilitate social equity, deliver legal justice, and maintain regional and international stability.\textsuperscript{36} Human rights has been increasingly equated with the notion of good governance, and rights protection has been tightly associated with government effort in capacity building. Such conceptualization of human rights is consonant with, and supportive of, the party-state’s pursuit of the neoliberal economic liberalization. Consequently, meanings of human rights—as autocratically dictated by the CCP leadership—have once again undergone qualitative transformation in Chinese politics. Having been partially de-securitized, human rights in the official discourse has not only referred to the CCP government’s fear of political insecurity, but also alluded to the quality of the party-state’s rule.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{State provision of basic welfare and entitlements}

Conceptual shift in China’s human rights propaganda is first corroborated by a significant increase in annual proportion of topics that highlight the party-state’s institutionalized capabilities to provide basic social services and public goods for the betterment of people’s livelihood—the party regime’s governing capacity in retaining social unity for its political legitimacy. To begin with, \textit{People’s Daily} human rights stories have since 2003 emphasized the PRC government’s financial provision and administrative support for social insurance programs, pension funds, basic health care, and affordable education. Concurrently, \textit{People’s Daily} human rights stories begun to boast the party-state’s advocacy for raising social awareness of rights and interests of persons with disabilities. Yet another relevant topic addressed issues bearing on gender equality, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination.

\textsuperscript{36} Joseph Fewsmith (2008), \textit{China since Tiananmen}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Chapter 8.

When combined, the annual proportion of the three welfare and entitlements topics had grown remarkably during the period of 2003-2008 (the first term of the Hu Jintao presidency). This discursive phenomenon corresponds well to a consensus among China specialists that the PRC government under Hu Jintao began to redress the growing socio-economic inequalities that came about as vicious effects of breakneck neoliberal economic reform that gave rise to exponential growth in labor disputes, mass protests and social disturbances. The CCP propaganda machine has thenceforth framed the government’s capabilities to provide basic social welfare as a major indicator of substantial improvement in people’s economic, social, and cultural rights (i.e., positive rights whose fulfillment require active intervention by a capable, autonomous government).

State commitment to authoritarian legality

Nevertheless, it is the rising of authoritarian legality topics—instead of social welfare ones—that has more potently accounted for the conceptual change in China’s human rights propaganda after 2003. While the annual proportion of social welfare topics has downturned after 2008, the proportional weight of authoritarian legality topics has increased unabatedly (see Figure 3). Framing human rights as the party-state’s capacity to dictate and enforce formal laws has since 2003 become a definitive character of Chinese human rights discourse.

One distinguishable topic under the rubric of authoritarian legality emphasizes state capability to administer procedural justice as an essential precondition for rights protection. Key terms that constitute the topic include 司法 (judiciary), 案件 (legal case), 机关 (agency/organ), 法院 (courthouse), 人民法院 (people’s court), 人员 (staff), 公安 (public security), 群众 (mass), 证据 (evidence), 程序 (procedure), 规定 (regulation), 法官 (judge), 办案 (handling a case), and 最高人民法院 (Supreme People’s Court). In other words, People’s Daily human rights stories have since 2003 highlighted state-initiated institutional reforms that purported to enhance professionalism, accessibility and efficiency of law enforcement authorities and the judiciary. These news stories publicized the central government’s professed commitment to legal-procedural justice through self-regulation and self-monitoring. The procedural justice topic’s annual proportion rose to 8.6% in 2003, more than tripling its share in 2002 (2.6%). The topic’s discursive significance has thenceforth steadily grown, and the rate of growth has even accelerated during the first three years of Xi Jinping’s presidency. Apparently, the propaganda machine has been told to fan into flame the conceptual association between state commitment to procedural justice and rights protection.

The rising profile of authoritarian legality in the content of human rights propaganda indicates the consolidation of neoliberal economic reform in CCP governance.39 Professional, impartial, and efficient legal-judicial institutions are said to be essential for smooth operations of market-based economy, for the law and judiciary as such are the authoritative arbiter, capable of regulating market competition, adjudicating on socio-economic conflicts, and mediating the state-society

relationship.\textsuperscript{40} In an increasingly neoliberal socio-economic environment wherein substantive-distributive justice—one major source of CCP’s legitimacy in the past—is increasingly untenable, the party-state garners political legitimacy mainly by delivering economic opportunities—rather than economic security—to individual citizens. However, the government’s neoliberal economic performance greatly depends on its simultaneous provision of procedural justice through layers of legal-judicial institutions.\textsuperscript{41} It was for this larger policy imperative that state media began in 2003 to substantiate the official discourse of rights protection with legality-related narratives, arguing that the professionalized legal-judicial sectors can provide for adequate protection of lawful entitlements, property rights and private interests.

The other legality-related topic that has gained traction since 2003 stresses state pursuit of law-based governance. Major terms shaping this topic are 法治 (rule of law), 依法 (according to the law), 行政 (administration), 治国 (administering the country), 体系 (system), 全面 (comprehensive), 权力 (power), 体制 (institution), 司法 (judiciary), 公民 (citizen), etc. This topic has grown significantly in its annual proportion, climaxing during Xi Jinping’s era (2014-2015). News stories foregrounding this topic were populated with CCP’s legality catchphrases, such as “governing the country according to the law” (yifa zhiguo) and “socialist rule of law” (shehui zhuyi fazhi). The expressions reflect the party leadership’s pursuit of rule-based authoritarianism, i.e., public administration informed and constrained by formalized regulations, which were legislated by lawmakers or the executive branch, all under the


CCP’s guidance and supervision. Successive party leaderships have invoked these expressions and have endorsed their underlying conception of authoritarian legality.

Chinese law specialists hold the view that at best, the party-state’s promotion of law-based governance amounted to a “thin” conception of rule of law, i.e., limited self-restraint of government power without an institutionalized checks-and-balances system. The propaganda machine has since 2003 intensified the discursive linkage between the notion of yifa zhiguo and rights protection, claiming that law-based governance would create a favorable policy environment for the protection of individual citizens’ economic interests and lawful entitlements.

The third legality-related topic accentuates the practical linkage between corporate governance and protection of stakeholders’ socio-economic interests. Key terms contributing to this topic include enterprise (企业), corporation (公司), regulate/regulation (规定), authorities/agency (机构), legal aid (法律援助), property (财产), credit/claim (债权), obligation (责任), and market (市场), indicating state capabilities to legislate and enforce market regulations that would presumably protect property rights and commercial-industrial interests of private sectors. This regulatory capability is considered a crucial component of market-based economy. In 2007 the topic’s annual proportion rose to nearly 5%, because the Property Law, after 13 years

of drafting and deliberation, was adopted by the National People’s Congress in March 2007 and went into effect in October. The Law substantiates the constitutional guarantee of state protection of lawful private properties, as enshrined in Article 13 of the PRC Constitution.

The last legality-related topic is constituted mainly by terms such as 宪法 (Constitution), 规定 (regulation), 公民 (citizen), 大会 (Congress), 人民代表 (People’s Delegate), 草案 (draft bill), etc. This topic highlights the legislative prerogatives of National People’s Congress, and emphasizes the PRC Constitution’s supreme mandate of upholding citizens’ basic civil and political rights. In 2004 and 2005 the topic’s annual proportion went beyond 5%, which reflected the feat of a constitutional amendment by the NPC in 2004 that added a paragraph pronouncing “The State respects and preserves human rights” into Article 33 of the PRC Constitution. After 6 years of near irrelevance, the topic’s annual proportion once again exceeded the threshold of 5% (reaching 5.4%) in 2012. The proportional increase was a direct result of Xi Jinping’s Fourth of December speech, in which he honored the 30th anniversary of the PRC Constitution (which was adopted in 1982) and urged the nation to uphold the spirit of the Constitution. Xi’s televised speech portrayed a reformist leader endorsing constitutionalism. However, the optimistic mood lasted only momentarily, and the topic highlighting the association of legislature, constitution, and rights protection has once again fell off into near oblivion after 2012. The finding indicates that the Xi Jinping administration is meant to pursue an authoritarian form of good governance.

*State capacity in shaping global governance*
Lastly, the post-2003 change in the narrative pattern of China’s official human rights discourse manifests in the proportional increase of a topic that boasts China’s leadership role in global governance. Major words and phrases shaping the topic include 非洲 (Africa), 领域 (field), 中美 (PRC-US), 战略 (strategic), 交流 (exchanges), 外交 (diplomacy/foreign relations), 领导人 (leader), 中欧 (PRC-EU), 政策 (policy), 全球 (global), etc. This is a topic that emphasizes the party-state’s great power status and its bulging capabilities of shaping global affairs. During the period of 2004-2015, the annual proportion of the topic has consistently stayed above 8%, even climbing over 10%. The topic’s rising significance reflects an increasingly confident PRC ready to tackle a wide range of issues of global/regional concern, including human rights. Emphasizing the centrality of PRC in the making of international political decisions enables the propaganda machine to promote the impression of an ambitious China whose leadership is capable of not only passively pushing back, but also actively reformatting, international normative order.

*Rise of illiberal human rights norms*

After 2003, meanings of human rights have experienced a profound semantic change in China. The relative weight of security-related subjects such as regime instability, ideological retrenchment, or uncritical patriotism has declined. In their stead emerged articulations that have increasingly conceptualized human rights as a support system for Beijing’s pursuit of neoliberal developmentalism, an ambitious quest for material prosperity and great power status whose prospects, according to propaganda, is contingent on the party-state’s parallel capacity in regulating market dynamics, co-opting social forces, and constraining arbitrary power. Eventually, state provision of social welfare and state commitment to authoritarian legality, as the official propaganda
materials have revealed, become the defining attributes of the Chinese model of rights protection.

What is missing from the content of Chinese human rights propaganda is as much informative as what is prominent in it. Expressions that represent autonomous social/individual pursuit of human dignity are nearly absent from state media’s human rights coverage. Terms that represent the liberal understanding of human rights—such as democracy (民主), freedom (自由), election (选举), voting (投票), demonstration (示威), protest (抗议), accountability (问责), etc.—are nowhere to be found in major topics of People’s Daily human rights stories. While state media may have sporadically invoked these terms in news reports, their glaring absence in topical clusters suggests the marginalization and irrelevance of liberalism in the leitmotif of CCP’s human rights conception.46

By the mid-2010s an illiberal human rights establishment (人权事业) has been firmly grounded in Chinese politics, a notion that prioritizes and legitimizes the party-state’s capabilities in regulation, cooptation, and adjudication, all the while discouraging—even disparaging—autonomous social participation in political processes. Such a patrimonial model of rights protection magnifies the party-state’s authoritarian leadership role in advancing human rights—positive, revocable, and materialist rights. Nevertheless, the CCP model of rights protection evades disclosure and accountability of the party-state’s repressive measures against political opposition, rights activists or the socially downtrodden. Consequently, the authoritarian discourse rationalizes and buttresses what Flora Sapio refers to as the “zone of exception” in China’s human

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46 For a recent debate on the prospects of liberal democratic institutions in China, see a special issue of Journal of Chinese Governance, Vol. 1, Issue 3.
rights politics: an elastic sphere of political power in which law cannot constrain, but is made to serve authoritarian imperatives as dictated by the ruling sovereign. It then comes as no surprise that the conceptual change in the meaning of human rights has unfolded alongside the parallel development of stability maintenance (weiwen) machine. The adaptive authoritarian rule calls for the instituting of both patronizing and coercive measures at the same time.

Lastly, the rise of capacity-related topics since the early 2000s has developed side by side with the continuation—if declining proportion—of security-related topics. Subjects reflecting the party-state’s perception of insecurity and existential threat have remained in the official discourse, but the overarching theme has shifted from a negative account of resisting human rights pressure to an assertive pursuit of redefining human rights norms (see Figure 4). Furthermore, the first three years of the Xi Jinping administration (2013-2015) have witnessed the parallel proportional increase of both security topics and capacity ones in human rights propaganda, an unprecedented discursive development that corresponds to his administration’s top priority agenda, namely, building comprehensive national security in domestic politics. It is likely that the peculiar development in propaganda discourse portends yet another wave of profound changes in Beijing’s human rights conception.

[enter Figure 4 here]

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Conclusion: double-speaking human rights to China and the world

In this article we apply text analytics and discourse analysis to examine the state-ascribed meanings of human rights in Chinese politics. Our analysis on the content of *People’s Daily* human rights stories unveils the dynamic *mindscape* of PRC ruling elites, as manifested in the changing topic distribution of the party-state’s human rights propaganda since Tiananmen. We identify an *illiberal* human rights regime consisting of two major conceptions of human rights whose political significance have fluctuated.

Throughout the 1990s human rights had been conceptualized predominantly as a potent source of existential threat to the CCP government’s moral legitimacy and political survival. Consequently, efforts had been made by the party leadership and its thought management bureaucracy to securitize human rights by delegitimizing and removing its liberal elements, all the while adding nationalist and materialist ingredients. A securitized and reformulated conception of human dignity has thenceforth abounded in state media to endorse the party-state’s authoritarian—and, when needed, repressive—political order.

In 2003 the other major trend was introduced that conceptualizes human rights as the party-state’s ruling capacity in regulating market order, providing social security and public services, instituting legal-procedural justice, and leading global governance. The idea of human rights as the state’s ruling capacity is consonant with, and plausibly conducive to, the party-state’s pursuit of the neoliberal mode of national development. The rights-as-threat conception and the rights-as-capacity proposition have co-existed with each other, forming a dualistic bastion of ideational support for authoritarian rule in China.
In sum, Beijing’s human rights conception has indeed evolved, only not toward the liberal trajectory that aims to constrain and oversee state power. Authoritarian resilience is attained via strategic policy adaptation and discursive innovation. Instead, sovereigntism and neoliberalism carry the day, and CCP ruling elites have adroitly grafted the expression of human rights onto the unfinished mission of state building. Xi Jinping’s nationalist leadership style—in particular, his rhetorical arousal of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”—has consolidated such dualistic vision of human dignity, only to the detriment of liberal human rights in People’s Republic.49

Figure 1 Procedure of topic modeling

1. Data retrieval, downloading, and storage
2. Word segmentation and part-of-speech tagging
3. Training the LDA program
4. Determining topic numbers
5. Operating the trained LDA program
6. Generating the topic model and the topic-document matrix
7. Interpreting topics and assigning topic labels
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Figure 2 Annual proportion of international human rights topics
Figure 3 Annual proportion of regime security topics
Figure 4 Annual proportion of international topics, security topics, and capacity topics