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RESEARCH ARTICLE



‘Representation’ and *Dàibiǎo*: a comparative study of the notions of political representation in France and China

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ABSTRACT

By scrutinizing the semantics of words and going beyond a nominalist approach, this article compares the theoretical, linguistic and discursive evolution of the notion of representation in France and China, from its ancient origins to its contemporary interpretations. We argue that the word “*representation*” in English and “*dàibiǎo* 代表” in Chinese are not interchangeable synonymous, because “*representation*” includes a symbolic dimension that is absent in *dàibiǎo*, and because the latter is rarely used when informal representation is concerned. We also argue that both Chinese and Anglo-American political science research overemphasizes mandated representation and underestimates symbolic representation. Furthermore, our empirical research in three provinces of China and two regions of France demonstrates that in both countries, local officials and elected politicians serve a similar role of *political intermediaries*, who embody state power and respond to citizens’ demands simultaneously, thus enabling a *de-facto* representative loop. Such argument refutes the current understanding of representation as a “one-way authorization” that is supposed to come either from below (i.e. from the people) in the electoral democracies or from above (i.e. from the state authority) in authoritarian regimes and thus challenges the oversimplistic dichotomy of democratic and authoritarian regimes in representative studies.

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1. Introduction

The notion of representation has been central to the development of modern political theory. With the establishment of representative governments in Britain, the United States and France, and subsequently with the defeat of fascist regimes over the course of the 20th century, political representation has increasingly been equated with electoral representation and electoral democracy. Most scholars have shown little interest in discussing political regimes such as religious states, Leninist states and various forms of authoritarianism. Moreover, the conventional view of representation tends to focus on the representative claims politicians make with regard to their electoral

constituency. More recently, however, the ‘constructivist turn’¹ in Anglo-American political theory has rediscovered a broader definition of political representation which was central for German—and to a lesser extent French—political theory in the 20th century. In fact, the notion of representation should not be reduced to the description of a certain type of political regime but has a variety of meanings that can apply to a broad range of social relations and power dynamics.

Michael Saward² has made a significant contribution to this constructivist turn. His notion of ‘representative claims’ has the advantage of conceptualizing representation as an action, thus taking actors’ discourse seriously and extending the inquiry far beyond electoral politics. However, it has at least two disadvantages: without a serious reflexive discussion of the specific meaning of ‘representation’ and ‘claim’ in English, it can lead to an ethnocentric vision and a number of analytical shortcuts. In addition, it is not very useful when no explicit representative claims are made (in such cases, one must rely on the rather generic and somehow contradictory notion of ‘implicit representative claims’).

Consequently, the notion of representation is most often ignored when analyzing the Chinese political system, where representative claims are much less frequent than in Europe and where elections play a much weaker role. At best, some scholars like Fukuyama³ have argued that accountability in China comes essentially from above (i.e. from the Party leadership), whereas in the West it comes from below (i.e. from the people). This narrow definition of representation as a kind of ‘one-way authorization’, with electoral representation as the benchmark, raises three issues. (1) It excludes the main body of civil servants from the picture, as most of them do not take a representative stand in the way political parties and politicians do. (2) It presents a distorted and highly limited view of both the Chinese and the Western systems. (3) It fails to explain the fact that the representative relationship can often function in several directions. In China, most local-level politicians do not have a representative claim at all and, when they do, they mostly claim to represent the Party-State. However, their relationship with the people is not reducible to a mere application of top-down policies. In France, most local-level politicians claim to represent their constituency, their party, and when the party is in power, the state (either locally or nationally). In all cases, the executives of the state’s everyday governance understand their positionality in relation to the abstract idea of the state, the political parties in power and the interests or will of ordinary citizens.

Our paper shall address two gaps in current research. (1) First, while there are a number of studies looking at local politicians in both China and Western countries, very few comparative studies attempt to compare China with a European country, often on account of the clear-cut distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Our comparison shall not proceed from the assumption that France has reached a higher level of local governance, a standard according to which China should be evaluated (nor shall we do the opposite). Nor shall we propose a simple dichotomy opposing two national models. We shall rather develop a common conceptual framework in order to better understand the parallels and differences between both systems. (2) Second, we shall endeavor to better assess the ambivalence and complexity of political representation in both countries. As mentioned previously,

the mainstream view on political representation is that either politicians should be held accountable to their constituencies in democratic countries ('downward accountability'⁴), or to the Party-state leadership in an authoritarian country like China ('upward accountability'). We shall challenge such a unidirectional and dichotomic understanding.

This article combines the history of ideas and a political sociology of local cadres in China and local politicians in France to better understand political representation at the local level in the two countries. We shall ask the following questions in order to comprehend what kind of representation can be found to operate in local politics in France and China. (1) Are 'representation' and *dàibiāo* 代表 synonymous, and what lessons can be drawn from the similarities and differences between these two notions? (2) Is the dichotomic view of representation, where representatives are responsive to either a grassroots constituency or a superior authority, sustainable? Does representation have to be unidirectional? (3) To what extent is representation comparable in democratic and non-democratic contexts? Does representation depend on elections? To what extent do state bureaucracy and local politicians in a multi-party representative government and in a one-party system serve the purpose of representation similarly or differently? What are the challenges faced by individual politicians working at local level in both democratic and authoritarian regimes in terms of representation?

To attempt to provide answers to these questions, we shall proceed in three parts. The first part will pay attention to the various and not strictly overlapping meanings of 'representation' and *dàibiāo*. The second part will be based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with local government officials in three provinces of China and in two regions in France, which allowed for a holistic and detailed empirical depiction of local governance. In our conclusion, we shall draw some theoretical conclusions on political representation at the local level, in contexts of both representative government and a party-state regime.

2. The historical evolution of the concept of political representation in France and China

Although it seems reasonable to agree with Carlo Ginzburg⁵ that we must 'destroy our deceptive familiarity with words such as 'representation' that form part of our everyday language', English-speaking political theory of representation has largely been constructed on the basis of this 'deceptive familiarity'. In a seminal book that marked a divide in Anglo-American theoretical formulations, Hanna Pitkin⁶ argued that representation is not a 'vague and shifting' notion but a 'single, highly complex concept that has not changed much in its basic meaning since the seventeenth century'; that the etymology of re-presentation is 'to make present or manifest or to present again'; and that it is, therefore, possible to give it an all-encompassing definition. Yet her comprehensive definition was mostly based on the meaning of the word in English; it moreover focused primarily on the principal-agent relation, with a view to ultimately understanding elections. The recent turn in English-speaking political theory tends to conceptualize political representation beyond the principal-agent scheme as

well as elections, but nonetheless remains confined to a very Anglo-American paradigm.

2.1. The multi-faceted notion of 'representation' and its controversies in the West

Working in the vein of German conceptual history,⁷ the great German scholar Hasso Hofmann⁸ insisted on taking the shifting meaning of the word 'representation' seriously: 'First was the word, then the concept'. He criticized the reductionism and essentialism of both the Anglo-Saxon and the German traditions (the latter embodied by authors such as Carl Schmitt⁹ or Gerhard Leibholz¹⁰). Drawing upon his insights, we propose an interpretation of representation which provides an alternative to the mainstream Anglo-American perspective. In order to do so, we must differentiate the semantic contents associated with the word 'representation' in English, and more generally across Latin-derived languages. Chronologically, the word *repraesentatio* appears at the time of the Roman Empire; to date, it has been discussed in Western theology, philosophy, political theory, law, and aesthetics. Conceptually, it was originally a Christian theological notion associated with the figure of the Trinity (see Figure 1). In Christian theology, God is at the same time one and three: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of these metaphysical entities is specific, but they all form part of the deity. And each one represents the others, thus making representation a multidirectional relation.

Another feature has to be underlined: the word 'representation' encompasses two rather different semantic fields. The first refers to what Hasso Hofmann¹¹ calls the dialectic of the model and the image (*Urbild/Abbild*), and what, following Bourdieu,¹² we call 'cultural-symbolic representation', intending the generic meaning of the word 'symbolic': symbols, images, signs, and rituals that enable humans to construct meanings about social and natural beings. For instance, when a work of art such as a painting/photograph/piece of music depicts, portrays or embodies a certain figure or theme, it is considered to be a form of representation.

Medieval Latin ended up subsuming a second, quite different meaning, i.e. legal-political representation, under the same word as cultural-symbolic representation. By legal-political representation, we mainly refer to the fact that a person or group and their representatives are considered one and the same legal person, which allows the

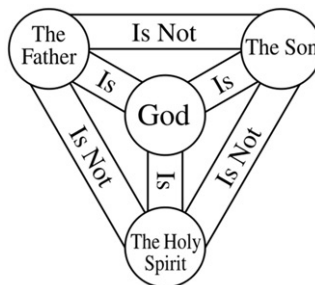


Figure 1. The holy trinity.

representative to speak and take decisions on behalf of the represented. In this second meaning, representation includes the action of representing both within state institutions (public law) and in non-state contexts (private law). This second meaning appeared in the Late Middle Ages. It was applied to both private and theological law. For example, during the Great Western Christian Schism (1378–1417) and its squabbles between rival popes, when the primacy of the religious Council over that of the pope was being bitterly debated, the Council was supposed to represent both the Church (downward) and the Holy Spirit (upward).¹³ The concept of representation was also crucial in public law, as it helped to stabilize the existence of guilds and communes. Later on, although with a signification that partly differed from its medieval and early modern meanings, this legal-political dimension of representation became crucial for the legitimacy of Western representative governments. Representation has also been extended to more informal and non-legally binding relations. Interestingly enough, although English and most Romance languages (see Table 1) still subsume the two different meanings of representation (cultural-symbolic and legal-political) in a single word, this is not the case for German, which gives a much narrower meaning to the word, focusing on the legal-political dimension (or at least a portion of it).

These pairings are rich in significations that go beyond the historical and linguistic context of Latin and post-Latin Europe: any form of political representation (*dàibiào* 代表) involves the production of images of the community being represented, and the performance of those in power before those who they claim to represent.¹⁴ Although political rituals were especially important for European absolutism before the age of modern revolutions,¹⁵ anthropology often presents symbolic representation as a structural feature of political power.¹⁶ The constructivist perspective views social groups not as natural facts but as ‘imagined communities’,¹⁷ underlining the active role of representatives in the construction of represented entities. This perspective has traditionally been important in German political theory and political history,¹⁸ and was also emphasized by Eric Voegelin,¹⁹ Frank Ankersmit,²⁰ Ernesto Laclau²¹ and Pierre Bourdieu,²² who wrote: ‘It is because the signifier exists, because it represents (through symbolic action), that the group is represented and symbolized exists and that in return, it causes its representative to exist as representative of a group’.

Nevertheless, making a non-reflexive use of this pairing in English (or in most Romance languages) presents two risks. The first is the risk of misunderstanding the complexity of the word and consequently taking a number of analytical shortcuts. Take Saward’s famous definition of representation: ‘A maker of representation (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) that is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A)’.²³ Without taking into account the two facets of

Table 1. The unification of symbolic and legal representation in European languages.

Language	Symbolic-cultural representation	Legal-political representation
English	representation	representation
Medieval Latin	<i>repraesentatio</i>	<i>repraesentatio</i>
French	<i>représentation</i>	<i>représentation</i>
Spanish	<i>representación</i>	<i>representación</i>
Portuguese	<i>representação</i>	<i>representação</i>
Italian	<i>rappresentazione</i>	<i>rappresentanza</i>
German	<i>Abbildung, Vorstellung, Darstellung, Inszenierung</i>	<i>Vertretung, Repräsentation</i>

representation (cultural-symbolic and legal-political), this definition is hardly useful—and most Anglo-American discussions of representative claims do not even attempt to distinguish these two sides. It is also very difficult to translate this definition into a language like Chinese, which uses multiple different words for the single English word ‘representation’. In addition, it is quite probable that in countries in which the local word for ‘representation’ has a narrower meaning, raising representative claims will happen much less frequently than in countries where the word has a much broader meaning.

Until recently, most Anglo-Saxon political theory had either ignored (or keenly underestimated, in Pitkin’s case) the symbolic side of ‘representation’. Relying on the principal-agent scheme and a liberal perspective, it generally postulated that the represented was constituted prior to its political representation. The dominant argument was that the representative must be formally authorized by, and accountable to, the represented. In the tradition of contract theory, civil society exists prior to the state, and it is only because of a contract that political representatives may legitimately take decisions for the people, elections being the device that ensures this function. Representative government, therefore, realizes the essence of (legitimate) political representation, and representative democracy becomes synonymous with democracy. From Pitkin to Urbinati,²⁴ the main subject of debate was therefore how to make electoral representatives ‘substantially’ accountable and responsible to their constituency beyond the mere formal process of authorization.

We have noticed that the panorama has significantly changed in the last two decades. A large swath of scholars including Jane Mansbridge,²⁵ Jeffrey Green²⁶ and Michael Saward²⁷ have begun to take symbolic representation seriously, recognizing that political representatives’ actions strongly help to shape the social fabric and therefore the construction of the groups the latter claim to represent. The constructivist turn represents an important step forward. It relativizes the opposition between Western regimes and countries like China, because in both cases, representatives contribute to the identity and the opinion of the represented.²⁸ Nevertheless, relying exclusively on the English polysemy of the word representation, studies in the constructivist turn have not focused enough on the difference between cultural-symbolic and legal-political forms of representation.

In addition, they have largely overlooked other traditions, and have remained focused on Western Europe and North America. This research has partly neglected another dichotomy lying within the concept legal-political representation, namely the

Table 2. Two categories and four subtypes of representation.

1. Symbolic-cultural representation	2. Legal-political representation
(1a) Re-present someone or something that is absent ⁷⁵ Depicting or describing through artistic, literary or other cultural means	(2a) Mandate-based Legally representing someone else (individual, group, people) in accordance with a mandate
(1b) Exhibition of presence Exhibiting a person or a thing in a performance; embodying a bigger group/phenomenon	(2b) Embodiment-based Identity-representation, when the representative is part of a bigger group or body and when s/he identifies with the group and the group identifies with him/her (can be legally binding or more informal)

difference between mandated- and embodiment-based representation (see Table 2), which has been crucial for German conceptual history and political theory.²⁹ Two basic representative claims can usually be raised in politics: the first uses expressions such as ‘I am *mandated*’, ‘I am a *delegate*’, ‘I have been *elected*’, expressions which are all evidently based on either election or delegation. The second one prefers instead ‘I *embody* the political community’, ‘I *am* the State’, ‘we (*are*) the people’. These two representative claims refer to different historical matrices in Western history.

The notion of mandated or delegated representation dates back to the Middle Ages, particularly to the writings of Bartolus de Saxoferrato (1313–1356). With the Latin expression *persona alicuius repraesentare*, the idea that it is possible to represent someone else by establishing fictitious juridical unity between the representative and the represented was developed in several domains, ranging from private law to diplomacy and politics.³⁰ Representation in this sense was generally associated with a form of authorization given by the represented (with some exceptions, the absence of consent characterizing the status of an adult acting as the legal representative of a minor). The second matrix, initially conceived as ‘identity-based representation’ (*repraesentatio identitatis*),³¹ was developed by Marsilius of Padua (1275–1342) and later elaborated by John of Segovia (1395–1473). It found its origin primarily in the law of guilds and communes but was also influenced by theological debates.

Similar to the concept of mandated representation, the objective of identity-based representation, or ‘embodiment-based representation’, was establishing fictitious juridical unity between the representative and the represented. However, the aim was to legally stabilize groups that needed to act over time by being represented by someone from among them (according to the *pars pro toto* scheme, where a part stands for the all). No explicit mandate had to be given. A number of later concepts derive at least partly from this matrix: ‘trustee representation’ (Burke), the ‘standing for’ kind of ‘symbolic representation’ (Pitkin), ‘surrogate representation’ (Mansbridge), ‘self-appointed representation’ (Montanaro), etc. Representative democracies are in fact a mix between these two different elements: political representatives are elected, but once elected, they do not have to hold their electoral promises or enact the will of the majority of the people, because they are supposed to *embody* the people, the nation or the political community.

2.2. ‘Representation’ in China: from *tiānmìng* 天命 to *dàibiǎo* 代表.

We shall now proceed to examine some concepts in Chinese history that could be compared to the Western notion of representation. Studied by Confucian scholars, the concept of *tiānmìng* 天命 (‘the mandate of Heaven’) was used to describe the relationship between the divine world, the ruling emperor and his people.

The notion of *tiānmìng* 天命 was forged during the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) and remained for centuries a crucial concept used to legitimize the Emperor’s rule. Yet its meaning and interpretation varied substantially depending on the period in question. During the Warring States Periods (475–403 BC), in Confucius’ classic *Analects*, the concept of Heaven mainly signified (1) an umbrella concept of nature; (2) an anthropomorphic deity (*Réngé shén* 人格神, similar to the Christian God); and (3) the

origin and embodiment of moral norms.³² During the Song dynasty (960–1279), Heaven was generally understood as a personal god, the supreme god *huángtiān shàngdì* 皇天上帝. However, during the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271–1368 and 1368–1644, respectively), mainstream Confucian scholars interpreted *tiānmìng* as a kind of destiny. In order to be legitimate, the Emperor had to embody moral virtues and to follow the cosmic order (to follow the way, the *dào* 道 in the Taoist tradition), which was manifested by symbolic signs (natural disasters, human uprisings), that could be understood through the feelings of the people ('Heaven sees as my people see, Heaven hears as my people hear', Mencius, Book 5, Part A, Chapter 5) or be interpreted by scholarly officials.

It is interesting to note that the Chinese *tiānmìng* 天命 was translated into English as 'the *mandate* of Heaven'. By reviewing the evolution of the meaning of *tiānmìng* 天命, it becomes clear that the idea that the *mandated* will of heaven was 'represented' by the emperor was not consistently present in traditional Chinese political thought. The Jesuits who came to China during the 16th and 17th centuries deliberately reformulated the Chinese classics according to a more Christian understanding of Heaven, interpreted as a god with a will that could be manifested. Accordingly, the Jesuits translated *mìng* 命 as 'mandate'. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) explains this:

The Lord of Heaven (*tiānzhu* 天主) creates all things and nourishes it... This is the Lord of Heaven, whom we call Deus in the West... Our Lord of Heaven is the Emperor on High (*shàngdì* 上帝) mentioned in the ancient classics... In spite of all their erudite scholars, perhaps there are still some things that the Chinese do not see: they worship Heaven instead of the Lord of Heaven, the way a foreigner comes to the imperial capital, and on seeing the magnificent palaces, kneels down in prostration, mistaking the buildings for the person of the Emperor. The Lord of Heaven [...] is the true father and mother of humankind, to whom we owe obedience and reverence. (Quoted in Hsia³³)

Such an interpretation was a blatant distortion of Christian theology, given that *tiānmìng* 天命, at that time in history, implied the imperative of harmony (*hé* 和) between the cosmic, political and natural orders, but that 天 was not a personified god with a manifest will. It was only later, during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, under the influence of both the Jesuits and a number of popular religions, that a revival of an older, more personal conception of Heaven took place within Confucian scholarly circles. This should remind us that the notion of *tiānmìng* should not be reductively understood as the emperor performing a form of *mandate-based representation* of the will of Heaven. In fact, *tiānmìng* illustrated a complicated relationship between Heaven, the monarch, the higher scholar-officials, and the people. Like 'representation' in the West, *tiānmìng* is a complex notion whose meaning has changed several times over the course of history.³⁴ A crucial moment in its development is discussed by Mencius (372–289 BC or 385–303 or 302 BC), who was widely quoted by later Confucian scholars. First of all, Mencius clearly establishes the priority between the ruler and ruled:

The people are of supreme importance; the altars of the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler. That is why he who gains the confidence of the multitudinous people will be Emperor... When a feudal lord endangers the altars of the gods of earth and grain, he should be replaced.... (Mencius, Book 7 Part B Chapter 14).³⁵

Second, Mencius also stresses that *tīānmìng* 天命 is a multi-directional relationship, as the sovereign rulers must behave according to heavenly rules as well as take care of the people.³⁶ When the ruler ignores and mistreats the welfare of the people, Heaven's 'mandate' will be withdrawn and the monarch may be rightfully overthrown.³⁷ Through these propositions, the notion of *tīānmìng*, on the one hand, bridges the divine and mythical source of the monarchy's legitimacy with the social and moral pillars of its rightful rule by pointing out the connection between 'the rules of Heaven' and the behavior of the people. On the other hand, Mencius' (and most Confucian scholars') interpretation of *tīānmìng* also radically differs from a limited one-way mandate-based form of representation between the elected and the electorate. His perspective involves quadrangulation between Heaven, the emperor, the scholar-officials, and the people.³⁸ Although these relationships are often interpreted as forms of 'representation', by both Chinese and by Western scholars, this can be true only in a very narrow sense of the word, one that is probably more similar to symbolic than to legal representation in the West.³⁹ As we have seen, the emperor does not have a 'mandate', strictly speaking. In addition, he is neither an embodiment of Heaven nor an embodiment of the people. He is the main entity who can make the cosmic order visible. The relationship between Heaven and the emperor on the one hand, and between the emperor and the people on the other, are best understood using the father-son metaphor, but the people are not solely the passive beneficiaries of the emperor's actions, as they have in fact a direct relationship with Heaven: 'Heaven sees through what the people see ...'. Last but not least, the ministers do receive a mandate from the emperor, but their actions never bind him and they do not form a common legal entity. They are described as a prolongation of the emperor's body, never as a *pars pro toto*. However, they also play a role in interpreting the *tīānmìng* and can in some crucial contexts help to question the legitimacy of an emperor who has, according to them, lost the way (*dào*).

The development of representation theories in modern China marks a break with the past but has also been dependent on the cultural history of the political legitimization of the nation's rulers. *Dàibiào* is not simply analogous to Western 'representation'. To understand the concept, one has to trace its convoluted etymology and follow its linguistic development. While the two kinds of legal-political representation (mandated and embodiment-based) and cultural-symbolic representation were subsumed into a single word in Latin, and then in English as in most Latin-derived languages, Chinese handled the question differently. The notion of representation as developed in Europe began to be imported into other languages during the 19th century on account of Western economic and political hegemony. As for other political concepts, Japan played a crucial role. The Japanese *daihyō* 代表, a translation for 'representation' created during the Meiji era, was adapted into Korean (*daepyo*) and Chinese (*dàibiào*) at the end of the 19th century.⁴⁰ But because it was an imported term, its Chinese usage remained largely confined to the meaning of legal-political representation within the state apparatus (public law), especially when elections took place in the first Republic of China. It is mostly *a posteriori* that scholars such as Qian⁴¹ have applied the concept to the Ming and Qing dynasties, and that the figure of the emperor has been described as a representative, akin to embodiment-based representation in the West.⁴²

Due to this foreign etymology, the emergence of the word *dàibiǎo* 代表 in a modernizing China has had two major consequences: (1) the recently imported word *dàibiǎo* became the dominant term used to describe a relationship of political representation; (2) the concept was largely confined to the realm of *legal-political representation* as enabled by *elections* or *mandates*. This means many other aspects and sub-categories of the concept of *representation* which we discussed above have increasingly been neglected in Chinese. For instance, *dàibiǎo* cannot really be used to describe the private relationship between a lawyer and her client. Another consequence of the restrained semantics of the word *dàibiǎo* 代表 is that it has led to major discrepancies in the connotations of representation between Chinese and Western contexts: in fact, the symbolic-cultural dimension of ‘representation’ is generally expressed by other words in contemporary Chinese. For instance, the symbolic-cultural sense of representing a theme or character in a work of art is expressed by words such as *yǎnyì* 演绎 (to perform) or *miáohuì* 描绘 (to depict). Specific words used to refer to the sense of representing or defending someone in court have also emerged. The only symbolic dimension which is expressed by *dàibiǎo* is when a specific person (or less frequently an object) *embodies* or *typifies* a more general reality⁴³ (see Table 3).

During China’s turbulent 20th century, the idea of representation has been applied and interpreted by various political actors based on their own, varying ideologies. During the Republic of China, the Chinese Nationalist Party adopted a political theory called the ‘Three Principles of the People’ (*sānmín zhǔyì* 三民主义), whose core ideas can be summarized as nationalism, democratic rights and ensuring the people’s livelihood. These principles were based on a hybrid of Western liberal democratic values and the Confucian theorization of prioritizing people’s needs. Again, we can observe that the use of this type of representative relationship was different from either sub-type of representation developed in Europe, but was evidently a continuation of Mencius’ illustration of the relationship between the monarch and the people, the difference being the ultimate source of the ruler’s legitimacy (Heaven for the monarch, the people of the nation for the Republic’s government). Furthermore, in the Republic of China, claims of *dàibiǎo* could be made either formally within legislative institutions based on an electoral mandate, or informally based on an *embodiment-based representation*. For instance, journalists then could claim to ‘represent’ (*dàibiǎo*) or to speak for the people,⁴⁴ just as members of the Republican Parliament could represent (via a *mandate*) their constituencies.

Table 3. The diverse expressions of symbolic and legal representation in Chinese.

Symbolic-cultural representation	Legal-political representation
<p>Re-present the absent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>yǎnyì</i> 演绎 (to perform) • <i>miáohuì</i> 描绘 (to depict literally or artistically) • <i>chóngxiàn</i> 重现 (to make something appear again in a novel/movie) <p>Symbolize the present:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>xiàngzhēng</i> 象征 (to symbolize) • <i>xiāngdāng yú</i> 相当于 (is equal to) • <i>tǐxiàn</i> 体现 (to demonstrate or reflect) • <i>huàshēn</i> 化身 (the incarnation of something often spiritual) • <i>dàibiǎo</i> 代表 (to embody a more general reality) 	<p>Mandate-based:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>dàibiǎo</i> 代表 (to represent someone through elections) • <i>wēipài</i> 委派 (to delegate or entrust someone to do something) • <i>tì... biànhù</i> 替... 辩护 (used to describe a lawyer representing a client) <p>Embodiment-based:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>dàibiǎo</i> 代表 (such as in the theory of Three Represents)

In the Chinese Communist Party's early revolutionary decrees, a specific mandated sense of *dàibiào* was adopted to illustrate the Party's mission to lead the proletarian dictatorship. In the first version of the *Manifesto of the Chinese Communist Party* published in 1920, it was stated that:

The meaning of proletarian dictatorship is no more than to say that state power has been obtained by the revolutionary proletariat, but it is absolutely not to say that the trails of capitalist forces, that oppose the revolutionary forces, have all been exterminated [...] the proletarian dictatorship is to continue to use brute force to battle the remaining capitalist forces on the one hand, on the other hand, it must use revolutionary methods to create many Communist construction methods, this sort of construction methods are formulated by the *representatives* chosen by the proletariat – the part of the proletariat with the strongest class consciousness and revolutionary spirit. (*Manifesto of the CCP 1920*)

In the absence of formal procedures to ensure authorization and accountability, this form of mandated representation could, arguably, easily be reduced to mere rhetoric. Nevertheless, in this early interpretation of the Party's identification as a part (albeit the most advanced part) of the larger proletariat revolution, a sense of *embodiment-based representation* can be detected. However, following the Leninist theory of the vanguard, this sense of embodiment for the CCP does not mean that the Party and the people become one. Rather, the Party comes from the masses, is informed by the masses, and is responsible for mobilizing, educating, and leading the masses.⁴⁵ This conception of the vanguard is continuously present in Mao's theory of the 'Mass Line', wherein he emphasizes that the Party should be 'from the masses and among the masses', working to collect and interpret the methods of the masses, with a view to improving them.

The Party's representative discourse came under severe attack during the last decade of Mao era. Thornton⁴⁶ points out that during the Cultural Revolution, the goal was to discover and overturn the 'representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, and all spheres of culture'.⁴⁷ This revolutionary slogan was mobilized by various fractions and eventually pointed to the crisis of representation of the Party as a whole, a crisis which has continued to the present day.

Interestingly, in the post-Mao era of reform, despite the general usage of *dàibiào* to refer to elected officials, the latest development of the Three Represents (*sāngè dàibiào* 三个代表) theory has revived the notion of embodiment-based representation with regard to the word's usage and hence expanded its connotations. In this theory, the CCP claims in its Constitution that: 'The Communist Party of China is the vanguard both of the Chinese working class and of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation. It is the core of leadership for the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics and represents⁴⁸ the development trend of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people'.⁴⁹ It is important to note that historically, the Three Represents emerged as a theory when the Communist Party made the decision to expand its membership base to individuals who could not be classically defined as 'proletarians', such as private entrepreneurs. The debate surrounding this decision in 2001 was undoubtedly a fierce one, prompting critical voices both within and outside

of the Party.⁵⁰ By emphasizing the Party's encompassing embodiment of all 'advanced elements' in Chinese society, the Three Represents theory circumvented the Party's initial identification as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

By examining the evolution of the notion of representation in China's political philosophy, we can observe that the traditional conceptualization of the relationship between the monarch, the people and Heaven is a conceptually rich but often neglected one, on account of the fact that the modern language of representation is limited by its etymological origins, or often misinterpreted because of a variety of Eurocentric conceptual prejudices. Despite its continual evolution, as we pointed out earlier, the word *dàibiǎo* does not embody the whole spectrum of representative discourse and practices (in the English meaning) that exist in Chinese governance. In the following section, we will move on to an empirical comparison of how the idea of representation has been localized in France and China.

3. Contemporary discourse: political representation in French and Chinese local states

Drawing on this historical inquiry, which focused mostly on the national and supra-national levels, in this second section we shall focus on the meaning and practices of political representation (in the English sense of the word) developed by local cadres in China and France in the second decade of the 21st century. Local politics is particularly interesting because it differs from both national politics, where the global political order is at stake, and from the micro-local level, where residents or community representatives can take part in the decision-making process through devices of participatory, deliberative or 'consultative democracy' (*xiéshāng mǐnzhǔ* 协商民主).⁵¹

This part of our research is based on fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2019 in local political institutions in three provinces in China (Shaanxi, Hunan, and Guangdong) and on fieldwork undertaken in the Ile-de-France and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté regions of France, work which spanned several years and concluded in 2019. As a case study should aim to provide a holistic picture and a contextualized analysis of a bounded phenomenon,⁵² we sought to include various administrative levels of local party branches, local states and other peripheral political organizations such as (party-led) mass organizations and associations in China, and various parties, unions and NGOs in France, ranging from the provincial/regional level to the municipal/county/departmental-level. The size and population of Chinese provinces are quite different from those of French regions, and are in fact more comparable to a

Table 4. Comparison of French and Chinese sub-national governments.

China	Number	France	Number
Provinces	34	Regions	18
Municipalities	333	<i>Départements</i>	98
Districts/counties	2,851	Federations of communes (<i>communauté d'agglomération, communauté de communes, communauté urbaine</i>)	1,263
Towns/townships/streets	39,888	Communes	34,979
Residential committees, village committees		Boroughs, neighborhoods	

European country: Shaanxi, Hunan, and Guangdong provinces have respectively 37.33, 67.37, and 106.44 million people, whereas the regions of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté and Île-de-France only have 2.79 and 12.21 million people respectively; the same comparison (see Table 4) can be made regarding Chinese municipalities and French *départements*, or Chinese districts/counties and French municipalities. While these differences of scale would render any kind of socio-economic comparison difficult, comparisons focusing on political representation remain legitimate as these intermediary state levels share a similar position of ranking in the national political hierarchy and possess strong legal autonomy but cannot operate as a real countervailing power to the national state.

In each country, we have chosen one province or region that is quite politically significant (Guangdong and Île-de-France, the region containing Paris), a more peripheral one (Shaanxi and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté), and for China, one intermediate case (Hunan). Our aim in this article is not to underline the internal differences within each country, but to present a broader comparison between the two countries. We have therefore chosen relatively typical sites rather than exceptional ones. Due to the lack of exchanges between France and China as far as local governments are concerned, we have opted for a classical comparison in this section,⁵³ rather than insisting on transfers⁵⁴ and connections.⁵⁵ A total of around 40 local party cadres and elected politicians were involved in the research process with regard to both the French and Chinese fieldwork. In this article, we have chosen to focus on the most influential political figures in both countries' local politics, i.e. Party cadres in China and elected politicians in France.

3.1. The various uses of 'representation' in Chinese local politics

Various words and expressions are used which correspond to the English meaning of 'representation' in China's contemporary political institutions.⁵⁶ Taking a closer look at the choice of words allows us to undertake a diversified discourse analysis that might help to deconstruct the English-centered approach.⁵⁷ As we observed above, the use of the word *dàibiào* is far less comprehensive in Chinese than the use of the word 'representation' in English. Another feature has to be emphasized: unlike in English or French, while the noun 'representative' (*représentant*) and the verb 'to represent' (*représenter*) are differentiated through a change in the suffix, *dàibiào* in Chinese refers both to representatives and to the act of representation, and can be used as both a noun and as a verb. However, *dàibiào* can rarely be directly used as an adjective, as 'representative' can be in English or French: it needs to be transformed into other idiomatic expressions.⁵⁸ While the use of the noun *dàibiào* in Chinese is still largely confined to the concept of mandated representation, the verb *dàibiào* can be used slightly more loosely (for instance, to include a sense of embodiment) because of the theoretical innovation of Three Represents theory (*sāngè dàibiào* 三个代表). In general, the language of political representation can refer both to a *status* and to an *activity* in both China and a number of Western countries. When the status is legally defined, the decisions of the representative are usually binding for the represented. However, it is interesting to note that in the Chinese case, as the language is involved in a way

that the *status* of representation is not accessible for most political actors, many of them chose to engage in the *activity* of representation without claiming the *status*.

Given a number of legal and semantic limitations, only election-enacted and mandate-based representatives can gain the official *status* of *dàibiāo* in China's formal political institutions. There are two occasions where individuals can be called *dàibiāo*: the first is for legislative representatives (*réndà dàibiāo* 人大代表), who are elected by citizens in each province/municipal/county and carry out the responsibility of drafting and evaluating legislative proposals in the national and local *People's Congress*. The second legally acknowledged occurrence of *dàibiāo* is when the local community chooses (or when the local authority designates) the members of the assembly of local autonomous organizations such as village committees (in rural areas), residential committees (in urban areas), and worker's unions. These elected assembly members can also be addressed as village committee representatives or workers' representatives (e.g. *cūnwēihù dàibiāo* 村委会代表). Although both are mandated representatives, community representatives most often remain restricted to grassroots affairs and hence hold considerably less power than legislative representatives, who can go up to the national level.

If only legislators can be formally termed as *dàibiāo*, how do local political actors such as Party cadres and government officials interpret their political role? In the local Party-state, neither Party cadres nor governmental officials are publicly elected, and they are not addressed as 'representatives' (*dàibiāo*) either legally or informally. This offers the most striking contrast with Western politicians: to a certain extent, the relationship China's local cadres have with the upper Party-state more closely resembles the relationship senior civil servants have with upper political authority in France—the difference being that the former openly defend the ideological position of the Communist Party. However, it would be misleading to consider that the position of Chinese cadres is a kind of representation directed only upwards. To project the image of an accountable, responsive and legitimate mass party engaged in good governance, various expressions are often used by local political figures that are somewhat akin to the representative claims directed towards citizens in the West.

First, as the Communist Revolution and Maoist movement were based on mass mobilization, the imaginary of the 'masses' and the 'people' is often used to implicate a relationship that could be called representative in other contexts. For instance, local cadres often claim that they try their best to *liánxì qúnzhòng* 联系群众 (to bridge, mediate for the masses), *wèi qúnzhòng zhuóxiǎng* 为群众着想/服务 (to think for the masses), or to *wéi rénmín fúwù* 为人民服务 (to serve the people). These expressions can be seen as weak echoes of the former famous Maoist *qúnzhòng lùxiàn* 群众路线 (Mass Line): 'In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily 'from the masses, to the masses'. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action'.⁵⁹ The 'Mass Line' can be viewed as a highly specific form of representation, with a high degree of *responsiveness* but no formal authorization, with the avant-garde claiming to *embody*

the best ideas and practices of the masses. Here, embodiment reinforces responsiveness: a good example is when we observed that the older generation of cadres (who were born and came of age professionally in the era of Mao) often genuinely describe their function as someone who is ‘from the masses’, and therefore ‘serves the masses’.

However, this meaning—where cadres embody the masses—is weakening due to China’s market reforms, and as revolutionary times fade into the past and cadre selection criteria have shifted from mere political loyalty to additional criteria such as being young, educated and professional (*niánqīng huà, zhīshì huà, zhuānyè huà*, 年轻化, 知识化, 专业化) in accordance with Deng’s market reforms.⁶⁰ The new generation of technocrats or professionalized local cadres tend to use the ‘Mass Line’, namely the linkage and attachment to the people, merely as a formal work method and a professional guideline, while their main identity remains as a professional that serves as either part of the state apparatus or a branch of Party leadership. They tend to indicate that in their everyday work, adhering to the Party’s leadership (*jiānchí dǎng de lǐngdǎo* 坚持党的领导) and governing on behalf of the state (*wèiguó zhízhèng* 为国执政) are their top priority and immediate objectives. When they are in the office, it is clear that the hierarchy of the Party-state forces their obedience to the upper branches of their specific department and bureau, but meanwhile, a good knowledge of and communication with the ‘masses’ is constantly emphasized. There is certainly a part of propaganda in this rhetoric, but the life stories we analyzed in our fieldwork illustrate that this propaganda is not necessarily more extensive than its equivalent in the West.

Finally, another important representative discourse is used by the local cadres of mass organizations (Party-led organizations that represent a specific group interest) who use the expression *dàibiǎo he wéihù ... quánì* 代表和维护 ... 权益 (to represent and protect collective rights and interests) when describing their mission (for a summary, see Table 5). For instance, the All-China Women’s Federation defines its purpose as, first of all, ‘further liberating and empowering women of all ethnicities and from all domains in China’; it claims to be ‘the bridge and bond for the Party and government to connect to the female masses’ as well as an ‘important societal pillar of state power’. In the latest mass organizational reforms launched by the Party’s central

Table 5. Various narratives and forms illustrating a broader understanding of ‘representation’ in Chinese local politics.

Legislative/community representatives	<i>dàibiǎo</i> 人大/村委会代表 (of the people/the village) (as a status and activity)	the mandated representative of the people; representing the people based on elections
Party cadre and government officials	<i>láizì qúnzhòng</i> 来自群众	coming from/being part of the masses
	<i>liánxì</i> 联系群众	bridging, mediating for the masses
	<i>wèi qúnzhòng zhuóxiǎng/fúwù</i> 为群众着想/服务	thinking for/serving the masses
	<i>wei ren min fúwù</i> 为人民服务	serving the people
	<i>jiānchí dǎng de lǐngdǎo</i> 坚持党的领导	adhering to the Party’s leadership
	<i>wèiguó zhízhèng</i> 为国执政	governing on behalf of the state
Party-led mass organizations	<i>dàibiǎo he wéihù ... quánì</i> 代表和维护 ... 权益 (as an activity, not a status)	representing and protecting the rights and interests of ...

committee since 2015, the ‘representativeness’ of these mass organizations has been openly contested and called to improve.⁶¹

3.2. *The ambivalence of representation in French local politics*

Comparatively, in France, the word *représentation* has a wide range of meanings that are nearly identical to the ones in English (with some additional cases: for example, a show in a theater, a concert venue or music hall is commonly referred to as a *représentation*). The word is prominent in the French Constitution, where it appears 13 times. Its usage is likewise more ambivalent than in Chinese. In the Constitution, representation has at least four meanings. First, it refers to the basic electoral principle of representative government: ‘National sovereignty shall vest in the people, who shall exercise it through their representatives and by means of referendum’ (art. 3, and in the 1789 Declaration of Human Rights, which is still part of the French Constitution);⁶² this electoral representation can be direct (when electing the president, members of the National and European parliaments, and local government officials) or indirect (the Senate is characterized as the representation of local governments, art. 24). Second, the highest agents of the State at regional level, who are senior civil servants, are termed its ‘representatives’ (art. 13, 71). Thirdly, in a neo-corporatist framing, professions also have representatives (their mode of selection is not defined in the Constitution—art. 23). Finally, ‘to represent’ as a verb is used for indicating proportions in the composition of commissions and public budgets (e.g. articles 13 and 72).

However, in France as in most Western countries, there is a growing legitimacy crisis of representative government. Elections are no longer sufficient to provide a sense of political legitimacy. In such a context, there is an increasing tendency for social movements to explicitly refuse political representation or elected representatives, or at least ones whose decisions are binding for the represented. In 2018–2019, the *Gilets jaunes* (‘Yellow Vests’) movement, the strongest plebeian protest in decades, was especially pronounced in peripheral areas, such as most of the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region and the more remote parts of the Île-de-France region. Mobilization and organization were informal, passing through social networks, especially Facebook groups. Most groups were local, but a few were national, possessing hundreds of thousand members. The *Gilets jaunes* protested against the national state and national politicians far more than against the local representatives. Nevertheless, the latter were also shaken by the movement. The *Gilets jaunes* were especially prominent in the region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté; in a small village of 250 inhabitants where we conducted interviews, 12 families had the movement’s symbol on their car or in front of their house. Interestingly enough, the comparison with China invites us to reflect on the difference between the noun ‘representative’ and the verb ‘to represent’. Radical social movements nearly always refuse to use the former, but sometimes nonetheless claim to represent the people. In a small city, one informal leader of the *Gilets jaunes* said in an interview: ‘We are here [occupying the roundabouts], it is the people, we represent the people. We, the small working-class people, we can’t live anymore, we can’t get to the end of the month [on our income]’. She added that she was ready to stay ‘as long as necessary, until Mr. Macron listens to us’. In reality, the informal leaders of the

Gilets jaunes can be understood as a kind of informal embodiment-based representation.⁶³

What has been the response of local representatives when confronted with such growing distrust? In this context, their use of the language of political representation is more ubiquitous at the local level than at the national level. Part of this is due to the fact that any ambitious politician must simultaneously be involved at various levels of local government, in sharp contrast with the ordinary practice of neighboring European countries. For example, one female politician we interviewed in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté was at once the deputy-mayor of a small town, a member of the board of the Federation of Communes that included this town, the deputy-president of the region, and a member of the Socialist Party leadership at the municipal and departmental levels. A male politician in the Île-de-France region was the deputy-mayor of a major city, a member of the board of the Federation of Communes that included it, and a member of the Communist Party leadership at the municipal level. Elected politicians in France tend to have several constituencies and be associated with the action of several authorities.

Another factor which matters is that most French local governments are coalition-based: it is quite difficult for a party to govern alone. The result is that on many occasions, local politicians have to be accountable to different levels, and the language of representation is in fact much broader than the understanding of mainstream political theorists. French local representatives tend to act not *solely* on behalf of their constituency. In different contexts, they may claim to represent their electorate, their entire constituency (including those individuals who did not vote for them), their party, different kinds of NGOs or interest groups if they come from civil society, the (local and/or national) government when their party forms part of the government, the nation, etc. The ubiquity of representative claims jars with the classical view of the representative relationship as being established by elections. Elected representatives and local politicians more broadly are accountable to several entities: before trying to get elected, they depend on their party and quite often on the party leadership and on their affiliations within the party to get selected as a candidate. One of the female politicians we interviewed, who was a former director of a local NGO active in the professional reinsertion of individuals who had suffered from long-term unemployment, was able to occupy a prominent position at the regional level for several years because she had the support of the president of the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region. However, she had to become very active in the Socialist Party when she wanted to run as a candidate in the legislative elections—a move that was necessary if she wanted to keep her position in the middle term.

Finally, local politicians in France also tend to behave as intermediaries between the upper and lower levels of government. On the one hand, they act as trustee representatives who know better than the citizens that they are supposed to represent what the common good is. On the other hand, they have to be responsive to citizen demands and complaints. In the past, when political parties had a strong organizational structure, mass membership and a real grassroots presence, their action was not that different from what Mao called the 'Mass Line' in China: they were successful when acting as sponges that enabled two-way communication between local communities and local

rulers.⁶⁴ With the vanishing of mass parties and the growing chasm between politicians and citizens, the multi-directional representative link relies more on the action of certain local civil servants. In a medium-sized town of the Seine-Saint-Denis region, north of Paris, the senior civil servant responsible for participatory democracy (a member of the Communist Party) described the role of his team as implementing the policies of the Communist-led local government; he had nonetheless also asked a junior civil servant active in one neighborhood to function as a 'letter box', thus enabling the community to send complaints and demands to local officials. Local civil servants do not have the status of representatives, and they usually do not claim to represent either the state or its citizens, but they do in fact have a dual-directional representative role.

It may seem strange that politicians do not see a problem with making quite different representative claims at the same time. After all, are the interests and values of the party, of the government and of the citizens in the constituency always the same? Is it not necessary to choose between a mandated and a trustee version of representation? Can the natural ease with which local representatives make these multi-directional representative claims be seen as a legacy of the ancient Christian concept of multi-directional representation? In any case, if they are to be successful, local politicians in France—as in China, albeit according to different procedures—must represent various objectives and constituencies and, together with local civil servants, must function like bridges or intermediaries between the upper and lower levels of government.

3.3. *The representative loop and its challenges*

Through a holistic analysis, we have found that an important feature of China's governance is that it has developed an interactive institutional toolkit of local governance to facilitate the practical realization of political representation. This diffusive toolkit is present at every level of local governance. The general function of local representation practice can be loosely grouped into three functions: (1) *selecting spokespersons* for local citizens (according to procedures tightly controlled by the CCP) through the People's Congress,⁶⁵ political consultative conferences, and other forms of consultative means such as public hearings in order to enrich the formulation of local policies that respond to citizen interests; (2) *implementing* these policies through a non-elected body of Party cadres and government officials who do not claim to represent but to *act for* the people; (3) *collecting* feedback and grievances from citizens through media, the Internet and petitioning channels, and helping the state to integrate these—or at least take them into account.⁶⁶ These three dimensions, often developed simultaneously, feed into a horizontal loop in China's local political system. In China, the local political ecology is therefore designed to function as a *de facto* representative loop as a whole—and a mediation of state and societal interests—rather than a unidirectional representative relationship. By selecting local spokespersons, following and implementing policy decisions from above and allowing some feedback from below, local interests and demands can be met and mediated in accordance with policy decisions from above. When the system functions well, in principle corruption is not too widespread, social tensions remain limited, and the system contains a meritocratic dimension. Such a representative loop, ideally, does not rely only on the accountability and efficiency

of individual 'representatives', but spreads the procedure of 'representing' out across several steps and several instructions; in the end, such a system also depends on citizens' evaluation of the loop's performance as a whole to maintain its legitimacy.⁶⁷ The problems with this kind of representative loop are numerous: it relies on a policy of self-monitoring and lacks the direct participation of citizens in defining the mechanisms that ensure authority and accountability.⁶⁸ Fearing the Party's disciplinary power, political actors such as representatives, cadres and officials could only achieve a 'representation within bounds'⁶⁹ on issues that the Party considers not threatening to its own. Moreover, due to a lack of public deliberation, the representative claims are to some extent monopolized by the Party-state instead of spread out among competing social groups, agents and movements. Also, as Thornton⁷⁰ has argued, the 'contradiction between the plural nature of mass representation in a heterogeneous socialist state, and the disciplined unity imposed by an elite revolutionary party' was not resolved during the last decade of the Mao era and hence continues to remain a critical issue hindering the construction of an effective system of representation in the reform era.

In France, far from only being accountable to the citizenry, local politicians also effectively form a multi-directional representative loop, although the polyvalence of local politicians' representative claims is becoming much harder to defend. Political distrust is at all-time high levels, and the overwhelming feeling among citizens is that the competitive multi-party system does not allow for true representation. In France, local representatives remain more legitimate in the eyes of lay citizens than representatives at the higher levels of government—which is the opposite of the Chinese situation. However, such representatives face a critical dilemma: as the legitimacy of their representative claim towards the masses is weakening, they must mitigate or even abandon their claims of representing the Party or State authority in order to resolve this dilemma in the public sphere, which in return contributes to the growing distrust of the political system among the public and systemically (if indirectly) weakens their chances of advancing politically. This is perhaps why politics at the local level faces an issue of recruitment: the best personalities tend to go in the private sector or in civil service, or they often do not remain very long in politics. The skills which are necessary to be a professional politician are increasingly dependent on one's ability to engender political conspiracies and coups. Local representatives are also held accountable by the upper levels of government, although their margin of action is far greater than in China. This kind of accountability often takes place behind closed doors but is nonetheless widely perceived by citizens. One of the participants of the *Grand débat* ('Great Debate') which took place in January 2019 declared: 'Members of parliament are supposed to be the citizens' representatives to the state, but I have the feeling that they are becoming representatives of the state instead.'⁷¹ This crisis, which exists in most Western countries as well, presents some parallels with the difficulties faced by local cadres in China, amidst a context where the CCP is no longer a revolutionary organization trying to defend the Mass Line and where local cadres have a more professional understanding of their work. In both countries, transformation to the nature of political parties has generated a crisis of representation,⁷² or at least a dramatic restructuring of its functioning.

4. Conclusion

In this study, the two comparative cases of France and China have been deliberately chosen to examine the conceptualization and practice of political representation across the authoritarianism/democracy dichotomy. By combining perspectives from history of ideas, political theory and political sociology, we have reached three main conclusions.

Our first conclusion reiterates the argument, defended by a number of scientific schools of thought,⁷³ that political theorists and social scientists should pay attention to the etymological evolution and linguistic variations of words, especially when a concept is imported into another culture or translated into another language. The concepts we use are deeply embedded in natural language, which carry specific traditions and connotations in their respective native contexts. Words are not neutral and their use should be reflexive. This is particularly important when one compares ‘representation’ and *dàibiào* 代表. It is imperative to pay attention to words if we want to avoid the conceptual over-simplifications. We have demonstrated that the Western notion of ‘representation’ has several contrasting meanings which are the product of its long evolution. It is especially important to notice that in English and in most Romance languages, political representative claims can rely both on a mandate or on an intention to embody the represented. Furthermore, in addition to its legal-political meaning, comparison with the Chinese language clarifies that the English notion of ‘representation’ has a cultural-symbolic dimension, which is taken for granted by most Anglo-American political theorists despite being absent from most non-European languages. This rich but ubiquitous concept has become the normative foundation of Western political systems. In China, the complex notion of *tiānmìng* 天命 as conceptualized during the imperial dynasties includes a relationship between Heaven, the monarch, scholar-officials, and the people, in a context that does not easily correspond to Western concepts of ‘representation’. It is mostly *a posteriori* that the notion of ‘representation’ can be applied to the kind of legitimacy embodied by such imperial systems. This is often overlooked by contemporary political theorists of representation in China who, like the Jesuits five centuries ago, tend to distort the Chinese notions to make them align with the Western ones. Influenced by Western hegemony, the concept of representation was translated as *dàibiào* in Chinese at the end of the 19th century, but with a much narrower meaning, mostly translating to the legal-political dimension. The noun ‘[a] representative’ could only be used for persons who have received a formal mandate. The rule of the revolutionary Communist Party with its unified discipline subsequently limited the proliferation of representative claims through mass participation. Our article is the first of its kind, as it systematically compares ‘representation’ and *dàibiào* 代表, ultimately demonstrating that these two terms are not exactly synonymous—a fact that will be important for future research. One should not equate representation with elections, nor with mandates, especially when looking for representative relationships and activities in China. Instead, one needs be aware of linguistic pitfalls to look beyond what is described by the word *dàibiào* in order to discover actors and activities that correspond to the multi-faceted notion of representation. The distinction mandate- vs. embodiment-based representation is of

particular importance when analyzing the nature of the representative relationship in non-electoral political systems.

Our second conclusion is a better understanding of the similar functions performed by the representative relationship in France and China. We employed a discursive analysis of the different narratives used by Chinese local cadres working in Party branches and local states and compared them to their counterparts in France. We do not defend a nominalist perspective, and we have used a broad notion of representation to examine practices which the actors do not necessarily recognize as such. Nevertheless, looking at the words used by the actors themselves is a good starting point to better understand them in the perspective of a comprehensive sociology.⁷⁴ Comparison, on the other hand, helps to go beyond ethnocentric analysis. A vocabulary of representation is present in China, and it is not *per se* illegitimate for the CCP to claim the 'Three Represents': an embodiment-based representative claim does not rest on elections, nor on any kind of formal mandate or authorization, and this is true for both the West and China. Nevertheless, the use of the word *dàibiǎo* is much less frequent in China than the use of 'representation' in Western countries. It is especially interesting to note that local cadres working in the Chinese Party-state do not claim to represent citizens directly—in sharp contrast to countries which have local representative governments. They primarily claim to govern on behalf of the state, acting as its local agents. Nevertheless, they also claim in various way to serve and respond to the people. In fact, their function seems explicitly to bridge the people and the state. Moving to the French case, and with the same approach, we underlined the proliferation of representative claims by local politicians, but also claims of misrepresentation, in a context where electoral representation is losing its legitimacy. Contrary to the mainstream interpretation of representation in Western political theory, local politicians can in fact simultaneously claim to represent their constituency, their party and the local government (among various possibilities). Interestingly enough, our comparison enables to better understand the role of local representatives in a Western country like France: although they make different explicit claims, politicians in France as in China attempt to mediate between different entities. In both countries, when the system functions well, local politicians' activity enables a representative loop. This is at odds with the classical liberal idea that representation implies a mandate, that it is a unidirectional relationship between a principal and an agent, and that democratic representatives are held accountable to their constituencies at the bottom level, while in authoritarian systems like China, local cadres are accountable to upper-level government authorities. This even goes beyond the systemic and the constructivist interpretations of representation, which criticize the principal-agent scheme but still conceive of representation as unidirectional: the representative loop implies that representation could take place at least on three levels (the upper state, local cadres and representatives, and the people), beyond elected legislative bodies and across various state institutions.

Admittedly, this does not mean that the kind of representative relationships that local politicians have with the masses or their constituencies and upper-level government authorities are the same, but this observation highlights the differences between China and France in a way that differs from mainstream interpretations. This is our

third conclusion. Most Western authors tend to present Western countries as democracies and oppose them to authoritarianism. Nevertheless, their definition of democracy rests on precarious foundations, both normatively and empirically. To equate democracy with free elections and the rule of law, and to claim that this liberal system ideally enables ‘the power of the people, by the people and for the people’ (to quote Abraham Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address, which is also incorporated into the French constitution), is far from self-evident. Schumpeterian theorists are more realistic when describing Western systems as a competition among elites for the votes of the people, putting aside any idea of self-government. Conversely, radical democrats drawing upon Rousseau’s ideas argue that representative governments should be understood as elective aristocracies rather than real democracies, as the actual participation and power of the people is largely reduced. This is precisely what a large majority of French citizens say when they claim that they are not represented and that local politicians represent the state more than them. It is beyond the scope of this article to scrutinize the various ways in which the representative loop (dis)functions in China and France, but we can at least defend the argument that the difference between the Chinese one-party system and the Western multiparty system cannot be reduced to top-down representation being the key feature of authoritarianism, and bottom-up representation being the key feature of democracy. In both cases, there are conflicts among the elites, and both systems are far from enabling the real power of the people, by the people. But in both cases as well, the political system has sought develop a set of institutional mechanisms to ensure the representative loop, with a view to remaining efficient and legitimate; the role of local cadres or elected politicians is crucial in this respect. What differs is the way in which this competition and the representative loop function. In French local politics, competitive party elections as well as the existence of a dynamic public sphere containing the media, social networks and social movements, has led to a proliferation of adversarial representative claims and of accusations of misrepresentation. In China, the one-party system and tight government control over the public sphere have strongly limited the rise of representative claims or of claims of misrepresentation, and the representative loop remains less openly adversarial than in the West. Words matter: because they frame the actions of individuals and groups, and because they reveal the structural logics at play. This is why our study of ‘representation’ and *dàibīào* in France and China will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western governance.

Notes

1. Urbinati and Warren, “The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory,” 387–412.
2. Saward, *The Representative Claim*.
3. Fukuyama, “Reflections on Chinese Governance,” 379–391.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Ginzburg, “Représentation: le Mot, L’idée, la Chose,” 1219.
6. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, 8–10.
7. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*.

8. Hofmann, *Repräsentation. Studien zur Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte von der Antike bis ins 19. Jahrhundert.*
9. Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory.*
10. Leibholz, Das Wesen der Repräsentation unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Repräsentativsystems. Ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Staats- und Verfassungslehre.
11. See note 8 above.
12. Bourdieu, "La Délégation et le Fétichisme Politique," 49–55.
13. Hofmann, "Der Spätmittelalterliche Rechtsbegriff der Repräsentation in Reich und Kirche."
14. Kolesch, *Theater der Emotionen: Ästhetik und Politik zur Zeit Ludwigs XIV.*
15. Marin, *Le portrait du roi*; Stollberg-Rilinger et al. *Spektakel der Macht: Rituale im Alten Europa 800–1800.*
16. Geertz, *Local Knowledge.*
17. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*
18. Diehl, *Das Symbolische, das Imaginäre und die Demokratie. Eine Theorie politischer Repräsentation.*
19. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction.*
20. Ankersmit, *Political Representation.*
21. Laclau, *On Populist Reason.*
22. See note 12 above, 260.
23. See note 2 above, 36.
24. Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy.*
25. Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation." 515–528.
26. Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship.*
27. See note 2 above.
28. Duan, "On Authoritarian Political Representation in Contemporary China."
29. Sintomer, "La représentation-incarnation: idéaltype et configurations historiques," 21–52.
30. See note 8 above; Podlech, "Repräsentation," 509–547.
31. See note 8 above.
32. Tian, "Representation Without Democracy: Evidence from Confucian Representation."
33. Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci, 1552–1610.*
34. Blitstein, "Mandat céleste, hiérarchie et représentation dans les institutions impériales chinoises (XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)."
35. "民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻。是故得乎丘民而为天子，得乎天子为诸侯，得乎诸侯为大夫。诸侯危社稷，则变置。牺牲既成，粢盛既洁，祭祖以时，然而旱干水溢，则变置社稷。"
36. See note 31 above; Glanville, "Retaining the Mandate of Heaven: Sovereign Accountability in Ancient China – Luke Glanville, 2010," 323.
37. Zhao, "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China," 416–433.
38. See note 31 above.
39. See note 33 above.
40. Hong and Kim, "Translating the Concept of Representation: Daigi (代議) and Daihyo (代表) in the Late Nineteenth-Century Japanese Constitutional and Political Thought."
41. Qian, *Zhongguo lidai zhengzhi deshi 中國歷代政治得失 [Advantages and Disadvantages of Chinese Governments Through History].*
42. Will, "Représentation politique et tradition chinoise."
43. Such as in the expression: the new engine represents a major breakthrough in car design, 这款新发动机代表了汽车设计的重大突破.
44. We would like to thank Nan Nigel Zhou for this information.
45. Frenkiel and Shpakovskaya, "The Evolution of Representative Claim-Making by the Chinese Communist Party: From Mao to Xi (1949–2019)."
46. Thornton, "The Cultural Revolution as a Crisis of Representation," 697–717.
47. "Tongzhi 通知" (Notification), *Renmin ribao 人民日报*, 17 May 1967, 1.
48. It is interesting to note that in the official French translation, the word which is used is "it embodies" (*il incarne*).

49. Constitution of Communist Party of China (2012). *China.org.cn*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27138030.htm.
50. Dickson, "Who Does the Party Represent?: From "Three Revolutionary Classes" to "Three Represents?," 75–96.
51. He and Thøgersen, "Giving the People a Voice?" 675–692.
52. Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?," 341–354; Small, "How Many Cases Do I Need? on Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research," 5–38.
53. Kocka, "Comparison and Beyond," 39–44.
54. Werner and Zimmermann, *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*.
55. Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories – Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia." 735–762.
56. Jacka and Sargeson, "Representing Women in Chinese Village Self-Government: A New Perspective on Gender, Representation, and Democracy," 477–494; Jacka and Wu, "Village Self-Government and Representation in Southwest China," 71–94.
57. We would like to thank Emilie Frenkiel, Jianyu He, Thomas Heberer, Rongxin Lee, Ge Li, Rebekka Åsnes Sagild, Anna Shpakovskaya, and Pu Yan for their insights on this issue.
58. Among the adjectives derived from the word *dàibǎo*, the most frequently used is *yǒu dàibǎoxìng de* 有代表性的, which refers to someone or something that possesses the quality of a bigger group, in a symbolic or statistical sense (but not in the legal-political sense). For instance, in the expressions *dàibǎo rénwù* 代表人物 or *dàibǎo zuòpǐn* 代表作品, *dàibǎo* 代表 is an abbreviation of *yǒu dàibǎoxìng de* 有代表性的 and carries the meaning of someone or something being "typical".
59. Mao, "Some Questions concerning Methods of Leadership (关于领导方法的若干问题 Guanyu Lingdao Fangfa de Ruogan Wenti)."
60. Lee, *From Revolutionary Cadres to Party Technocrats in Socialist China*.
61. Zhou, "Being a Good Daughter of the Party? a Neo-Institutional Analysis of the All-China Women's Federation Organisational Reforms in China's Xi Era," 17–28.
62. Please see the official website: <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/langues/welcome-to-the-english-website-of-the-french-national-assembly>.
63. Sintomer, "The Meanings of Political Representation: Uses and Misuses of a Notion," 13–34.
64. Fourcaut, Bobigny, banlieue rouge.
65. Manion, "Authoritarian Parochialism: Local Congressional Representation in China," 311–338; Manion, *Information for Autocrats: Representation in Chinese Local Congresses*.
66. Bernstein and Lü, Taxation Without Representation in Contemporary Rural China; O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*.
67. See note 36 above.
68. For instance, a public hearing organized by the local Administration of Commodity Prices (*wùjià jú* 物价局) in Jinan Municipality, Shandong Province, reached the decision in 2009 to raise the unit water price for civilian use. Mass complaints exploded online, claiming that the mechanisms used to select participants in the public hearings were problematic, and many residents felt that they had been "represented without active consent" or in their words, they have been "represented passively (*bèi dàibǎo* 被代表)".
69. Truex, *Making Autocracy Work*.
70. See note 45 above.
71. https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2019/02/02/sur-les-petites-routes-du-grand-debat_5418274_823448.html.
72. Wang, "The Crisis of Representativeness and Post-Party Politics," 214–239.
73. Such as the German school of the history of concepts, see note 7 above, the history of ideas in context (Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*), philosophy of translation (Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon*), connected history (see note 55 above).
74. Weber, *Economy and Society*.

75. Due to the length limit, this article does not elaborate on the differentiations within the cultural-symbolic representation. For a more detailed explanation of these two sub-categories, see note 61 above.

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