

Cognitive Psychology's Influence on Democracy

A Comparative Analysis of Democracy's Influence in Japan and Chinese politics, through a
Psychological Perspective.

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Abstract

International political history reveals trends in the nature of development and the constant evolution of governmental systems. Various factors impact the development of government such as geopolitical location, culture, population, economy and sphere of influence. However, one over-arching pattern that has been deduced by political scientists is the reoccurring shift towards democracy. There are the notable exceptions, such as China; however, in general, most countries have attempted, currently maintain or eventually will move towards becoming a democratic nation. Democracy signifies a deeper revelation within a country than simply political progression; it is an ideology that sprang out of citizens' fervent nationalism and the need for nation-wide autonomy, representation, and opportunity. Democracy is not only a form of government but also a concept that requires specific environmental and psychological characteristics in order to succeed. Cognitive psychology can be used to enhance political theories that have no quantifiable answers. In this case, psychology-based evidence can provide deeper insight into the rationalization behind government behavior, such as the formation of a democracy.

China and Japan are two of the oldest civilizations in history that share similar Confucian ideology. Japan has reached a point of coexistence between traditions and democratic political ideology; in contrast, China remains politically and mentally a communist nation. However, with a drastic change in politics and even larger shift in ideology, a form of democracy is bound to integrate itself in its debated future. By analyzing the history and political behavior of Japan and China, I intend to reveal how democracy unfolds itself not only at political level but a psychological level as well.

Fundamentals of Democracy

Democracy is formally described as “A government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation”¹. An efficient democracy entails the maintenance of multiple political factors. However, due to democracy autonomous nature, the political factors necessary to succeed rest on the will of the people, therefore they can only be maintained if specific psychological factors are simultaneously present. According to professor Fathali Moghaddams, the psychological characteristics of an actualized democracy can be broken down into two classes. I have employed his class trait theory; however, I have also substituted individual and collective factors that I believe are imperative to mention. The first group consists of individual psychological traits. Individuals must exemplify and develop these traits in order to be an ideal contributor to a democratic society thus, enabling its functions. Secondly, on a collective level, group psychological characteristics are essential for collaboration between leaders and citizens. These traits are essential for executing large-scale goals of a democracy.

Every individual in a democracy must develop a consciousness of involvement. A democracy can only be sustained if citizens are aware of their essential role, within the democratic political process. Involvement requires political participation such as exercising the right to vote, contributing to campaigns, and the right to question government behavior. Furthermore, a consciousness of involvement prevents political ignorance and apathy that

¹ *Definition of DEMOCRACY.* (2016). *Merriam-webster.com*. Retrieved 30 October 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>

degrades the goals of democracy. Ultimately, ignorance can potentially enable corruption and conflict within the separation of powers.

The overarching idea of trust is key to the efficiency of a democratic government. Trust reduces social opposition and increases citizen's content. In his book Democracy and Trust, Mark E. Warren reveals how "Liberal democracy emerged from the distrust of traditional political and clerical authorities²." Thus, politicians as well as consistent political actions can only achieve trust through genuine reassuring works. As humans, we gravitate towards consistency because it is a psychologically evolutionary sign of safety. Safety automatically promises us the most predictable outcome. Warren further states "a society that fosters robust relations of trust is probably also a society that can afford fewer regulation and greater freedoms,³" thus furthering goals of democracy by facilitating the political process within the branches of government. Ultimately, a citizen's interpersonal trust and trust in the country's leaders, creates common ground between nationalistic sentiment and governments behavior

In social psychology reciprocity is described as "A social rule that says people should repay, in kind, what another person has provided for them⁴". This innate sense of mutual support and respect permits efficient democratic leadership. Each individual within a society needs to have the sense that their personal investment in their government will provide them with security and opportunity. Furthermore, people want to ensure their needs

² Warren, M. (1999). *Democracy and trust* (pp. 1). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

³ Warren, M. (1999). *Democracy and trust* (pp. 2). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Cialdini, Robert (2006). *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Harper Business; Revised Edition. ISBN 006124189X.

will be acknowledged and that their support in elected leaders will favor their demands. This also enforces the other psychological characteristics of democracy, such as a consciousness of involvement.

A population of citizens with a strong understanding of their role in a democratic nation facilitates the collective requirements for a democracy to be established and maintained. A democracy with multi or two-party systems will inevitably lead to multiple views on the same policy and political topics. Therefore, a mutual political tolerance is imperative to the acceptance of opposing views without involving backlash or severe consequences. Vipoul Mehta emphasizes this concept, and explains how “robust democracies require citizens to tolerate others' efforts to participate in politics, even if they promote unpopular views. Research shows that citizens' political tolerance is influenced strongly by the depth of their commitment to democratic values...”⁵ People need to feel confident that their views won't put them in any danger. Along with political tolerance is interpersonal trust. Trust is particularly central to psychology because it influences actions and judgments involving political behavior. In this way, prompting interpersonal trust can serve as a mechanism to increase political participation and membership in voluntary association.

Nationalism is not only a driving factor in the establishment of a democracy, but also in the continuation of civic participation. Nationalism has a psychological dynamic that involves beliefs stemming from culture, individual experience, and modern society. In

⁵ Mehta, V. (2016). *What is the Relationship between Psychology and Political Science?*. *PublishYourArticles.net - Publish Your Articles Now*. Retrieved 3 November 2016, from

general, nationalism can psychologically be described as a cohesive group mentality revealed in pride and fervor for one's country. Due to the fact a democracy places power in the people, with an absence of nationalism, a sense of national identity will quickly diminish initiating a loss of consciousness involvement and the repercussions that loss entails.

The establishment of an overarching consensus on what ideology the nation will adhere to, is a driving factor in determining how conflict and decisions will be made. This consists of "A coherent and consistent set of beliefs about who ought to rule, what principles rulers ought to obey, and what policies rulers ought to pursue."⁶ Democratic ideology is expressed through an all-inclusive constitution that should be reciprocated by society. Within the establishment of coherent ideology, only then can each individual within a democratic nation begin to exercise his or her individual rights and build trust in government, ultimately contributing to the collective group behavior.

China and Japan's Political History and the Post WWII Context

The political history of China and Japan reveals the underpinnings of their current governments and potential future. Japan was the first Asian country to become a democratic nation, marking a radical political shift in Asia. Therefore, Japan's history serves as a

⁶ Jackson, B. (2016). *Public Opinion and Political Ideology - Text Notes and Discussion Questions*. *Socialstudieshelp.com*. Retrieved 5 November 2016, from http://www.socialstudieshelp.com/apgov_notes_weekfive.htm

fundamental basis to compare and contrast China's current political position in the modern world.

Japan's governmental history consisted of multiple shifts in power. The first major change was initiated by the Taikia Reforms based on Confucian philosophies, aimed to centralize power, creating a government modeled after China. However, Samurai easily overrode the weak government as it failed to offer Japanese citizens proper protection over property. With the emperor reaming as a ceremonial position, the Samurai established an authoritarian regime known as the Shogun. Shogun *Tokugawa Iemitsu* initiated a period of isolation in which he aimed to keep a homogenous population free of imperialist and religious intervention. However, with an increased interest in the world market, the United States pressured Japan to open its borders. This change in economic policy sparked internal political turmoil, resulting in the establishment of the Meji dynasty. The Meji constitution implemented a bicameral parliament, which represented citizens in a way that had not occurred before. This change allowed for limited economic and social change to take place, ultimately priming the Japanese for a future democratic system. At this point, Japanese citizens began to gain individual psychological characteristics necessary for democracy by developing their consciousness of involvement and reciprocity.

In 1941 Japan would officially enter World War Two resulting in defeat. In the spirit of containment, the US poured resources into Japan's hopeful shift to a democracy. General Douglas McArthur was the supreme commander, overseeing Japan's political development. He acknowledged that a shift in government structure alone is ineffective; in reality, the entire population has to make a conscious shift towards democracy in order for it to

succeed. He suspended Japanese laws restricting political, civil and religious liberties, thus increasing citizens' sense of involvement and political tolerance, a concept that did not exist before. Due to their previous lack of liberties, populations such as women and the lower class struggled to adopt individual psychological factors and develop an understanding of what direct representation and rights entail. In order to combat this bias, McArthur called for women's right to vote and encouraged labor unions. Furthermore, he focused on eradicating the authoritarian mentality of the population by reforming the education system and teaching the fundamentals of democracy. This change in education created an environment where individuals from a young age could adopt democratic ideals on a collective and unanimous basis.

Ideology had been deeply rooted into Japanese society that made it difficult for democracy to be accepted as a positive change. The classical mentality involved the belief of an Emperor's divine right to rule. McArthur aimed to change this by having Emperor Hirohito denounce his divinity. In the imperial rescript he stated, "The ties between us and our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection."⁷ He reveals how, despite the multiple shifts of power and the occupation of the US, the Japanese people have continuously placed trust in their leadership. This is an important key to psychological change, as it allowed individuals to trust the government's decision to become a democracy. In addition, when Emperor Hirohito publicly discredited an anti-democratic traditional ideology, he promoted a coherent change towards democratic ideology.

⁷ Lu, David J. *Japan A Documentary History*. 1st ed., London, England, M.E Sharpe, 1997,.

China's political behavior is heavily centered on Chinese ideology, notably the Confucian train of thought. In regards to politics, Confucian's goals were created to facilitate the role of government by avoiding conflict within the social classes. This highlights the overarching goal in that is still preserved in Chinese politics, to avoid anarchy and chaos.

In contrast to Japan, China's political history is defined in terms of a Dynastic system, which lasted from 150B.C to 1911. Similar to Japan, China believed in the Mandate of Heaven, which was used to justify each shift of power and the divine right of rulers. However, the Dynastic Empire began to crumble as European imperialism began to target Asia. The Opium Wars decentralized power from the emperor, shifting the way Chinese citizen's perceived their government. The victory of the British was a symbol that the Qing rulers had lost the Mandate of Heaven enabling the questioning of Chinese dogma. As a result, the Han Chinese no longer trusted the Qing rulers. However, in response to political unrest, the Chinese decisions where gravely different than the Japanese, this marked a significant point in political history where both Asian nations began to diverge drastically in political behavior. Through the Meji restorations, and eventually the implementation of democracy, Japanese leaders modernized the country in order to compete with western progression. However, the Chinese rulers rejected reform and purged the court of modernizers. This action highlighted a significant lack of political tolerance that is a reoccurring trait of Chinese politics.

In 1927, the Chinese civil war began between the Kuomintang and the Communist party, resulting in, Mao Zedong and his communist party's victory. Mao Zedong radically

changed the landscape of Chinese politics as he instilled communist ideas in his efforts for his Great Leap Forward and his re-instatement of power during the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong's rule sparked periods of Chaos by promoting war and uprising in China, however, he also gave Chinese a sense of involvement by working to change traditional Chinese policies. He offered citizens a vision of what China could be, by claiming to provide individual and equal rights. However, Mao Zedong communist's implementation simultaneously portrayed many characteristics of the traditional Chinese empires. He upheld the homogenous population, exercised unquestionable power, and eliminated opposing political ideas. Ultimately, the Chinese people only got a brief taste of what a republic could offer.

The history of China reveals a deeply rooted civilization that has been raised in an environment of no political tolerance, small sense of involvement and reciprocity. This was upheld as Mao Zedong failed to give the people the rights he promised. Although fading, China's Confucian ideology still lurks in society as it argues for people to act accordingly to their social status. The Communist Party of China (CPC) is still in power today and although its dynamic has drastically changed, in light of economic growth, the fundamentals of tradition and the government remain as the driving causes for the psychological barriers of democracy.

China's Prevailing Cognitive Psychological Barriers

Japan has been able to break down individual and collective psychological barriers in order to accept democracy and mold it to the benefit of their country. This has allowed for the preservation of classic traditions and simultaneous implementation of westernized politics and economic policy. In order for democracy to function after their defeat, Japanese leaders strategically instilled a sense of reciprocity and involvement in order to reinstate a renewed sense nationalism. Strategically, “Japan’s leaders sought to create a constitution that would define Japan as a capable, modern nation deserving of Western respect, while preserving their own power.”⁸ Through the establishment of their constitution, interpersonal trust and political tolerance were promoted. Despite the successful transition of government behavior Japan likewise compromised traditional ideology that went against democracy. However, Japan ultimately, preserved its most fundamental traditions while successfully entering the western economy and maintaining a long lasting democracy.

In the post-World War Two context, China took a step in an opposite direction by establishing a communist state. Under Russian influences, China became a country that physically and psychologically pushed for the disapproval of democracy.

Opposed to a western multi-ethnic immigration based model, the majority of Chinese people conceptualize themselves to be part of a civilization state. China has a strictly homogenous population of Han Chinese who currently make up “92% of the People’s Republic of China.”⁹ This predominantly Han Chinese population has been used to define the over all Chinese national identity as the *Han Identity*. In this context the Han

⁸ Pappas, Theodore. *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*. 1st ed., Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2003,.

⁹ "The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency". *Cia.Gov*, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>

Identity can be utilized to rationalize general social behavior. In terms of psychology, identity dictates individual's beliefs and the motivation behind behavior. In agreement with the Social Identity Theory¹⁰, the concept of social identity stems from the beliefs and status of a group that ultimately dictates their collective behavior. Concurrently, the Han identity has developed from nationalistic sentiment and a historical sense of ethnic superiority. Author of When China Rules the World, Martin Jacques claims, "The Han identity has served as the glue which has kept a geographically and demographically vast country together. Without that shared identity, China would long ago have fallen apart."¹¹ This identity has been central to the progression of China during the dynastic periods and currently as rising super power. However, it has also prevented citizens on a collective level to reject democratic values, as they are reluctant to integrate any kind of western ideology into their beliefs and practices. Accepting the implications of a democratic government conflicts with their conception of the Han identity therefore threatening all aspects of their identity dynamic.

China has maintained an overarching goal of avoiding chaos from entering their society. Although democracy does not directly equivocate to anarchy, the implications of democracy such as capitalism and other Lazzie fair behavior places it in light of anarchy from a Chinese perspective. Furthermore, a democracy grants people the power to question government policy, therefore increasing the risk for political and social chaos. The avoidance of chaos is so ingrained into Chinese beliefs that it builds a psychological barrier

¹⁰ The concept of social identity is used to explain and predict inter-group behavior based on the perceived group status and perceived legitimacy. Formulated and Researched by Henri Tajfel and John Turner

¹¹ "A Point Of View: How China Sees A Multicultural World - BBC News". *BBC News*, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20083309>.

of dogmatic cognitions preventing the acceptance of democracy as a positive concept. The Cognitive Dissonance Theory developed by Leon Festinger, describes the process through which individuals suppress a cognition that threatens their reality, ultimately favoring the cognition that agrees with their beliefs, regardless of its validity. Festinger revealed how, “people prefer consistency to inconsistency.”¹², and when they are presented with a set of conflicting cognitions, dissociation occurs. Although democracy could potentially seem appealing to Chinese citizens, its concept threatens their current notions of government so the idea is repressed. Ultimately, it is the limitation of cognitions that prevents progression toward changes. The process of cognitive dissonances is facilitated by the limitations of political rights and the large margin of impoverished Chinese citizens living unaware of the country’s political behavior. Furthermore, although China is technically a multi-party state, other political parties are never allowed to challenge CPC policy. This has prevented the sense of involvement and creates an environment with no political tolerance, which instills not only fear but also apathy to change, ultimately feeding into cognitive dissonance.

In terms of cognitive psychology, trust has the potential to dictate group behavior. Trust is currently a sensitive concern within Chinese politics as accusations of corruption and nepotism have increased. This threatens the trust between Chinese citizens and the government. Notably no democracy has a clean record in terms of trust between leaders and its citizens. However, in order to establish a democratic country, citizens must have a strong sense of trust and reciprocity within their leaders. This is one trait that facilitated Japan’s transition to a democratic state; the people placed trust in the radical transition and

¹² Higgins, E. Torry. “Cognitive Dissonance in Learning Theory World.” *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*. Vol. 1&2. N.p.: Sage, 2011. 378-79. Print.

complied with necessary measures. In contrast a diminishing trust between citizens and government lays a barrier in Chinese politics that will be difficult to mend if democracy ever becomes a considerable option.

China is currently encountering the negative side effects of rapid economic progression. The middle-income trap is one the many socio-economic issues that arise as a country's lower class population income begins to increase. This progression tends hit a plateau when previously poor demographics reach the middle-income average. Consequently, as wages escalate, countries such as China lose their competitive edge of cheap labor. This situation calls for innovative economic policy and an increase in human capital, both of which are problems for China's homogenous population. Socially, this middle-income trap has become a threat to the internal peace of China. A growing middle class increases urbanization and the demand for middle class commodities. Although China addressed this issue in their most recent 5-year plan, the growing middle class has lost their sense of reciprocity from the government, which is hindering their success and opportunity. As the middle class rises, the population will become more educated therefore increasing individual demands and modifying individual's perception of deserving privileges. These perceptions can be the driving factor for political change as the internal economic landscape of China is transforming. Yet, a barrier remains as Chinese leaders are struggling to accept an increase in individual freedoms in fear of its implications. Furthermore, with an increase in the middle class the division in social classes will uncontrollably grow within China, threatening the fundamentals of communist ideology.

Although China has become increasingly involved in global politics and the world economy, it has simultaneously kept its general society isolated from western influences. In effect, the strict homogenous population has facilitated the preservation of Chinese ideals and a general unquestioning of doctrine. One of the ways isolation has been upheld is through strict censorship of Chinese media and the Internet. In terms of psychology, nationwide censorship has profound implications on cognitive processes such as attention and perception. According to Kimball Young, “Psychologically, censorship has its counterpart in individual experience. We all censor or pass judgment of good or bad, like or dislike, on what we see and hear.” Humans pose an innate sense of censorship and judgment on what one determines to be right or wrong. However, when this individualistic process is placed at the hand of the government, it grants them the ability to control what information that is being paid attention to, and manipulate the way censored topics are being perceived. Phrases such as “Democratic” and the “Tiananmen Square Massacre” are filtered from search engines in China. In this way, the government avoids the justification of certain events by eliminating its existence in available information.

Kimball Young further explains how this process, “Depends naturally upon our temperament and upon our previous social-cultural conditions.” In the case of Chinese long lasting censorship, the social cultural conditions are heavily pressured upon the population and ultimately work by inhibiting people’s innate sense of good or bad. Through censorship, the government implements their biased parameters of what information is acceptable for citizens to process. Consequently, censorship prevents humans from dwelling on subjects that are socially disapproving. Referring to a previous proposition, China has a coherent ideology on how society should function through which the Social

Identity Theory works to maintain collective behavior and morale. Young theorizes that “morale is essential for group survival and anything which threatens to disintegrate morale is, for the group, extremely dangerous.”¹³ Consequently censorship works as a firm border in which moral and appropriate group behavior is contained. Ultimately, China uses the “Great Fire Wall¹⁴” to advance economic and political agenda while striving to maintain a unanimous population perspective and avoiding backlash.

China’s Rationale Behind Avoiding Democracy

The psychology behind democracy is not a quantifiable idea; it is a concept that can only be observed through collective patterns within a nation. China remains a communist nation, however, their current economic behavior and policy does not directly reflect a communist rule of law. China’s political comportment is not completely transparent to western political scientists; however, it is certain that their goals entail reaching global economic superiority and an increasing their influence over Asia. China has attributed their economic growth to the nature of their current communist government. Subsequently, maintaining the CPC has enables them to deal effectively and quickly with political conflict and in creating favorable policy. Opposed to the lengthy democratic process which could potentially hinder their desired rate of progression. Ultimately, Chinese’s leaders claim that a democracy would never function in China.

¹³ Censorship: The Negative Control of Opinion.” Chapter 26 in Social Psychology: Analysis of Social Behavior. New York: Alfred A. Knop (1930): 632-652

¹⁴ The Great Fire Wall: A term used to describe the internet censorship in China that the Chinese government enforces. Said to be the second Great Wall of China, because it a barrier to outside influence

China's central motive to maintain their current government is to avoid the potential disorder that a democratic government presents. Dr. Zang WeiWei represents this attitude towards democracy during an interview on Head to Head, stating that it is "Unimaginable that any Chinese will accept a multi-party democracy." He supports his claim by describing how, "A non-western country adopting a western political system usually ends up in two scenarios, in the euphoria to disperse or euphoria to anarchy."¹⁵ Wei Wei argues that China already has an efficient government and traditionally will never function under a democratic rule. In light of this philosophy, WeiWei points out how with a benevolent leader discipline will always work over democracy. He elaborates by stating that Japan's economic growth was only achievable due to its emperor ruling system, prior to democratization. WeiWei embodies the idea that Chinese citizens and leaders embrace their current government because it supports their goals and ideology. Furthermore, he highlights the ideological contrast between China and western democracy and how democracy is perceived to unquestionably result in anarchy. Ultimately, the rationale of Chinese leaders behind rejecting a democratic government is their determination to reach economic goals, desire for political efficiency and power.

China has recently shown signs of capitalism in economic policy, as they have recently allowed companies to privatize. Political scientists have termed their behavior as being a system of Authoritarian Capitalism. President Xi Jinping has currently stated, in light of China's future, that they are looking towards "A modern socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by the middle of the 21st

¹⁵ "https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F821fe2_Wbk", director. Head To Head, 2014,.

century”.¹⁶ Although he mentions the word democratic, it is important to understand that Chinese do not view democratic values in the same context western powers do. In contrast, democracy works through a democratic dictatorship in which power remains centralized, therefore enabling companies to privatize, thereby increasing the country’s wealth yet retaining the power to strictly regulate economic policy without opposition. Chinese leaders have attributed this model to their rapid economic growth and by contrasting their quick progress in comparison to other Asian democratic nations such as India. A democratic dictatorship in conjunction with Authoritarian Capitalism has allowed the Chinese government to respond to economic issues rapidly and effectively. Ultimately, Chinese’s leaders reject democracy as a positive form of government as it proposes setbacks that are not in line with the deadline and progression of their goals.

Chinas Obscure Future

The Chinese government has allowed for multiple psychological barriers to manifest ultimately morphing the concept of democracy to an extent that its success seems unimaginable. However, with their current economic state and social dilemmas, a Chinese democracy has become a subject of debate. The Dali Lama recently summed up many political scientist’s views stating, “China has to go along with world trends. That’s democracy, liberty, individual freedom. China sooner or later has to go that way. It cannot

¹⁶ "What China Means By “Democracy”". *The Economist*, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/11/economist-explains-21>.

go backward.”¹⁷ However, despite the rationality of this prediction, the psychological barriers that China upholds do not foreshadow democracy to be in the near future.

Though China’s political intolerance persists, it is important to note that there is a Democratic Party of China (DPC). Although the party is strictly regulated, its pure existence represents a controlled but present collective desire for change. If China eventually decides to adopt a democratic rule of all law, it will not be modeled like a western democracy. A democracy as large as China would require a radical shift in ideology eradicating anti-democratic concepts and misconceptions, which is a prolonged and conflicting process. The possibility of a Singaporean modeled government has also come into question. However, the large Chinese population raises complications for its efficiency. Perhaps creating a democracy such as Japan’s that allows for the co-existence of tradition and a democratic government as well as adopting some Singaporean socio-economic policies, could be a plausible solution.

Japan exemplifies the strategic implementation of democracy and highlights its potential for mass social and governmental change. However, China presents a unique situation as a rising power with an ironic and dynamic role between government and economics. Subsequently, China has remained the notable exception in the reoccurring shift towards democracy. The nature of the Communist Party of China facilitates the centralized power to pragmatically and quickly carry out the political process. It is only logical that the CPC’s nature is favorable to achieving China’s goals, therefore, remains in power.

¹⁷ Dalai Lama. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved December 15, 2016, from BrainyQuote.com Web site: <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/d/dalailama446764.html>

However, despite their political dogma, the psychological factors of democracy will unquestionably come into play. Ultimately the individual and collective psychological pressures of democracy may not yet reveal a physical government change, however, a mental shift in ideology could slowly be taking place.