

**China's democratization and Chinese with experience abroad: A  
historical perspective**

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## **Introduction**

The world has witnessed a new wave of democratization since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Afghanistan and Iraq have been “democratized” through their military defeats by western countries in the name of “the war on terrorism”. Some former communist East European countries such as Georgia and Ukraine have also been democratized through “color” revolutions. The Arab Spring started to sweep many Muslim countries in the Middle East at the end of 2010. Now the dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have already been overthrown mainly by means of large-scale demonstrations and protests. In contrast, the scenario of democratization in China has been much less dramatic. Although there has been a surge in the number of protests in recent years, it is still hard to see in the near future the end of the authoritarian rule in this world’s most populous country and largest economy.

A simple yet fundamental question arises from the aforementioned stark contrast: how shall we make sense of and deal with China’s democratization at present and in the near future? In this paper I attempt to answer the question with recourse to history. I will demonstrate how China’s democratization was incubated in the milieu of its interactions with other countries in the late Qing period (1840 AD - 1911 AD), took shape in the Republican period (1912 AD - 1949 AD), and has entered a complicated stage in the Socialist period (1949 AD - Present). The highlight of this review will be the contributions of Chinese with experience abroad in China’s democratization process. Then I will draw some conclusions regarding China’s democratization and offer recommendations for research on the political dimension of Chinese people’s experience abroad.

## **History of China's Democratization**

### ***The Late Qing Period (1840 AD - 1911 AD)***

China's democratization was incubated in the milieu of education reforms triggered by the country's humiliating interactions with foreign powers in the late Qing period. Until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the Qing court and its elites had believed that China was supreme in the civilized world (Reynolds, 2001) while all foreign countries were barbarian ones. However, this strong sense of supremacy was gradually turned into deepening humiliation by China's consecutive military defeats, starting from China's first unequal treaty signed with the United Kingdom after its defeat in the Sino-British Opium War in 1842, and culminating in its crushing defeat by Japan – a country which had been traditionally dependent on China – in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. These defeats aroused a profound sense of national crisis among many government officials and elites. Their prescriptions for the survival of China mainly pertained to education reforms instead of political ones. Assuming that “western learning could bring China wealth and power in a modern world where China's Confucian heritage was of little value” (Pepper, 1996, p.519), the Qing government abruptly abolished the 1,200-year-old civil service examination in 1905. Based on the belief that “Japan has taken the West's excellence in education as its model in fostering talent, and the country's power has indeed risen greatly” (Borthwick, 1983, p.42), Chinese reformers replaced civil service exam with a three-tier modern school system of primary schools, secondary schools and colleges, a system modeled on the Westernized Japanese Meiji one.

Late Qing education reforms proved to be a catalyst for the end of China's last imperial dynasty. This is mainly because the abolition of civil service examination broke the long-lived “partnership” (Elman, 2000, p. xix.) between the Chinese imperial bureaucratic state and its local

elites. Civil service examination was initially instituted as an empire-wide education institution by China's imperial rulers in the Sui dynasty (581 AD – 618 AD), the original purpose of which was to limit alternative centers of power, mainly the landed aristocracy, and consolidate the newly established imperial state (Elman, 1991). In the Song dynasty (960 AD – 1279 AD), the landed aristocracy was permanently replaced by a new class of “scholar-officials” who were exclusively selected through civil service examination that tested examinees’ mastery of the Confucian classics. Most Chinese elites remained loyal servants of the imperial state by subjecting themselves to the state’s moral and political orthodoxy of Confucianism embedded in the content of the examination. The state, in turn, affirmed these elites’ belief system, and gave them social status, political influence, and the material means of securing landed and commercial wealth. Moreover, certain “nonhereditary values” (Pepper, 1996, p. 46) in Confucianism and the legitimacy of the examination as fair and impartial bureaucratic channels for official selection were also inculcated in commoners particularly by rare examination successes of a few sons of commoner families. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Qing Dynasty collapsed only 6 years after the abolition of civil service examination, a system that had interwoven the interests and aspirations of Chinese elites and commoners with those of the imperial state for 1,200 years.

One unintended result of education reforms in the late Qing period is that the declining confidence in Confucianism motivated many Chinese elites to learn from the West about democracy as a means of building China into a powerful modern state. The very concept of democracy was introduced to China almost single-handedly by an elite reformer Liang Qichao during his exile in Japan after the Qing court’s crackdown of the “Hundred Days of Reform” in 1898. Liang borrowed the Japanese term 民主 in his writing to signify democracy. Interestingly, this term was invented through recombining existing characters of the Japanese literary language

– a language very close to the classical Chinese – in new ways when western political texts were translated into Japanese in the late 19th century.

While exploring Western political thoughts in Japan, Liang was optimistic about democracy, which he viewed as a source of the power of Western democratic countries. Liang's conception of democracy was mainly that of "a means of communication between government and people" (Nathan, 1985, p.49), which could effectively unleash the power of popular participation to form the unity of will and effort of individuals and to promote collective welfare. In turn, this solidarity of the group would ultimately secure the survival of China in its fierce competition against other nations and races, a competition that was imposed upon China by Western imperialism.

However, Liang became pessimistic about democracy after his tour in the United States (the US) in 1903. This attitude shift was largely influenced by his experience with American politicians and the Chinese in America. Unimpressed by the talent of American politicians and deploring the inefficiency of constant elections, Liang was very disappointed with American democracy, particularly the republican form of democratic government. He also observed that despite the freedom and privileges the Chinese enjoyed in America, their participation in elections and organizations had always led to chaos and disorder. Reasoning that even Chinese in the US were incompetent of achieving unity of the group through democracy, Liang concluded

Freedom, constitutionalism, republicanism: these are but the general terms which describe majority rule. But China's majority, the great, the vast majority of Chinese, are as I have described them here. Were we now to resort to rule by this majority, it would be the same as committing national suicide. Freedom, constitutionalism, republicanism – this would be like

wearing summer garb in winter, or furs in summer: beautiful, to be sure, but unsuitable. No more am I dizzy with vain imaginings; no longer will I tell a tale of pretty dreams. In a word, the Chinese people must for now accept authoritarian rule; they cannot enjoy freedom... Those born in the thundering tempests of today, forged and molded by iron and fire – they will be my citizens, twenty or thirty, nay, fifty years hence. Then we will give them Rousseau to read, and speak to them of Washington. (Liang, 1904)

Based on the assumption that the survival of a state was identified with that of individuals within that state, Liang turned to constitutional monarchy as a more suitable form of democratic government for China and authoritarianism as a necessary means to build China into a modern state. In his post-American-tour essay “On enlightened despotism”, Liang further argued that “even if a governmental system deprives the people of much or all of their freedom, it is a good system so long as it is founded on a spirit of meeting the requirements of national defense.” (Liang, 1906)

In summary, China’s democratization was incubated in the late Qing period. The greater context was China’s humiliating interactions with foreign powers, in and through which China became a victim of Western imperialism. Democracy was introduced to China not as a goal but as a means to build the country into a powerful modern state. Noteworthy is the person who introduced democracy, Liang Qichao. As an elite reformer trained through civil service examination, Liang was enthusiastic and optimistic about democracy when interpreting it in light of ideas and values of Confucianism during his exile in Japan. However, his direct exposure to American democracy and experience with the Chinese in the US in 1903 had made him more pessimistic about democracy. A seemingly paradoxical but long lasting result is that the rationale

for the adoption of authoritarianism would be a recurring theme throughout China's democratization history.

### ***The Republican Period (1912 AD - 1949 AD)***

China's democratization took shape in the Republican period mainly on the theoretical foundations laid out by Sun Yat-sen. Noteworthy is the fact that Sun's theoretical contributions was a result of his experience in North America and Western Europe inquiring the political, social and economical developments in the western countries between 18th century and early 20th century. His conception of democracy is that of "sovereignty of the masses" (Sun, 1994, p. 225). On one hand, Sun regarded democracy as "the tide of political progress throughout the world" (p.228) that could not be resisted by any person or government. On the other hand, Sun advocated that democracy was indispensable for China for three reasons. First, a ruler had no room in China because the people were its foundation and they were equal with one another. Second, constitutional monarchy, the form of democratic government preferred by Liang Qichao, was ruled out in China since Han Chinese, the vast majority of the Chinese population, were extremely hostile to monarchy after being ruled heavy-handedly by the Manchus for 260 years in the Qing dynasty. Third, democracy could solve the political evil of prolonged chaos and confusion that had accompanied revolutions in the Chinese history. Sun reasoned that without a democratic system revolutionists would covet the power of an emperor, a threat that had already caused endless wars in China's past.

Sun's conception of democracy was closely related to nationalism and socialism. This is mainly due to his famous Three Principles of the People (*sanmin zhuyi*), which underpinned his revolution endeavor. These principles are that of Nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*), Democracy (*minquan zhuyi*), and People's Livelihood (*minsheng zhuyi*). The Principle of Nationalism served

as the foundation of the nationalist revolution for a twofold purpose: to end the rule of alien Manchus over Han Chinese, and to restore the lost Han Chinese nation and establish it as equal with other nations in the world. The Principle of Democracy was the foundation of the political revolution against monarchy, a revolution that, in Sun's opinion, must be concurrent with the nationalist revolution against Manchus. Sun envisaged this political revolution to create a constitutional, democratic system, which combined direct democracy at the county level and representative democracy at the national level. The Principle of the People's Livelihood was the foundation of the social revolution. Sun defined this principle as socialism, believing it could help the newly founded Republic of China, a latecomer in industrial and economic development, to avoid the unequal distribution of capitals and political powers among different demographics, particularly between the rich and poor, a social problem bitterly experienced by the Western capitalist countries in his time.

Sun (1994) also laid out a three-step road map to China's democratization: military administration, political tutelage, and constitutional period. In the first step, martial law would be in effect and the revolution army would not only destroy the Manchu dictatorship and official corruption, but also reform evil practices of the imperial era. This would be followed by the second step of three years of political tutelage. The aim of this transitional period were threefold: a provisional constitution would be in effect; local autonomy would be introduced and practiced; former subjects of the Qing dynasty would be instructed on their rights and obligations as citizens and the powers of the revolution government so that they would be ready for participation in direct democracy at the country level and indirect democracy at the national level. In the third step of constitutional period, each county having achieved complete local self-government would elect one delegate. A national congress consisting of the total number of the



elected delegates would then draft the constitution. After this the people would elect a president and parliamentary delegates to organize the central government. In the constitutional period the Chinese people would exercise their rights of suffrage, initiative, referendum and recall directly at the county level, and their delegates in the parliament would exercise all the aforementioned rights except suffrage at the national level.

Sun envisaged China's democratization as top-down process revolving around two axes: the political party and the people. To Sun (1994), the starting point of China's democratization was the establishment of a party whose members rallied around his Three Principles of the People. Then the party should educate the Chinese people about these Principles so that they could become capable of participating in China's democracy. Sun regarded the relationship between the party and the people as that of mother and child:

The people as masters of the Republic are like a newborn babe. Our Revolutionary party members are the mother who gave birth to this infant, and it is our duty to nurture and educate it, if we are to fulfill our revolutionary responsibility. The revolutionary program requires a period of political tutelage so that the master can be nurtured until adulthood, when power will be transferred back to him. (pp.209-210)

This indicates that education were also crucial for the realization of Sun's envisioned democratic China. He further devised a doctrine to guide his top-down approach to China's democratization: "to act is easy, to know is difficult" (p.199), which prioritized the acquisition of the knowledge of democracy over the actions relevant to achieving democracy.

In practice, Sun successfully ended the rule of the Manchu minority over the Han Chinese majority by overthrowing the Qing dynasty through the Revolution of 1911. He also became the provisional president of the Republic of China founded in 1912. However, the newly founded Republic soon disintegrated into a state of regional and local warlordism in 1915, which lasted until the National Government of the Republic of China reunified the country in 1928.

The failure of importing formal political institutions from the West triggered a quick cultural turn in China's democratization process. Many influential intellectuals concluded that China's real problem lay in its culture: "everything in old China was backward, dark, and weak" (Hayford, 1990, p.ix). Therefore, their solution was to create a new culture, or an entire new way of life. This cultural turn was expedited by the May Fourth Movement in 1919, whose formula for the new culture was introducing "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" from the West to China.

It can be argued that the New Culture Movement has been a creative force of China's democratization ever since. This is mainly because it made possible the heterogeneity in Chinese conceptions of democracy, and brought liberalism, Marxism, and neo-Confucianism into competitions in the arena of China's democratization until the end of the Republican period in 1949.

What is worth noting in this competition of the meanings of democracy is the contribution of the returned Chinese students, particularly those who had studied in North America and Western Europe. Many returnees such as Hu Shi, Tao Xingzhi, Jiang Menglin and Guo Bingwen are liberal intellectuals who conceptualized democracy as one that resembles Western liberal democracy, particularly in the sense that they advocated a free civil society in China. They argued that China's democratization was determined by the enlightened, well-educated elites who are capable of applying scientific inquiry methods and influencing China's established

centers of power (Schwartz, 1983). They conceived of the Chinese people as “new citizens”, who were “independent and active... in a social system in which the state was losing its traditional priority” (Borrevskaya, 2001, p. 35), and whose struggle for individual freedom also contributed to China’s struggle for national freedom and independence and its search for national wealth and power. Under the influence of these liberal intellectuals, the 1919 fifth annual conference of the National Education Association passed an unprecedented resolution proclaiming that government should not impose its ideology on education (Zheng, 2001). One of the intentions behind this policy was to create a favorable environment for the development of China’s free civil society.

Chinese with experience abroad also played an important role under the umbrella of “the third force” in the 1940s Chinese politics. They strived to bring reconciliation between the GMD and the CCP (the two major combatants in China’s politics then) through negotiation and compromise for the sake of the nation’s unity in its fight against Japan and for the sake of the avoidance of a civil war in China. Besides, they advocated constitutional and democratic reforms as a way for China to go forward, which competed against authoritarianism offered by both the GMD and the CCP (Fung, 2000). Although their cause failed in history, it is worth noting that the third force has created what Nathan (1992) terms as “a liberal tradition within, not external to, the Chinese past” (p. 325). It can be argued that those returned Chinese in the Republic Period are not only the predecessors of China’s present democrats, but also the shoulders of the giants on which present democrats stand in the sense that the issues pertaining to China’s democratization raised by the liberal intellectuals in the 1940s still remain largely unsolved today and continue to pose great intellectual and practical challenges in China’s present and prospective democratization.

To sum up, China's democratization took shape in the Republican period, but had rough going. On one hand, the Nationalist government of the Republic of China argued that the Chinese people were not sophisticated enough to practice either direct or representative democracy (Ogden, 2002). Therefore, political tutelage - the second step of Sun's road map to a democratic China - was in effect until the People's Republic of China replaced the Republic of China in 1949. On the other hand, priority in China's politics was never given to democratization, but the nation's independence from foreign aggressions and its domestic unification. This is mainly because the Nationalist government was caught in the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945 and the Chinese Civil War against the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP) from 1945-1949.

### ***The Socialist Period (1949 AD - Present)***

The foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 commenced the socialist period of the history of China's democratization. This period can be divided into two broad phases: one under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1949 AD - 1976 AD), and the other under post-Mao communist leaders (1976 AD - present).

The CCP put forward a different meaning of democracy: socialist democracy. Drawing on Marxism and Leninism, socialist democracy is claimed not only as a historical advancement of the democracy of Western capitalist countries but also a genuine one on the ground that the rule by the people is realized through the dictatorship of the proletariat (Hu, 2000).

The CCP's conception of socialist democracy also draws on Mao Zedong's ideas of "democratic centralism" and "mass line" (Hu, 2000). Firstly, democratic centralism means the ways in which the ruling classes - working class, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and national

bourgeoisie - organize political power in the democratic stage of the Chinese revolution, which is to be followed by the socialist stage. Democracy in this framework refers to the bottom-up approach to policy making in general and allowing the people to speak out during the policy-making process in particular. Centralism denotes the top-down approach to policy making particularly within the CCP, which demands “the minority is subordinate to the majority, the lower level to the higher level, the part to the whole, and the entire membership to the Central Committee” (Mao, 1942). As Hu (2000) argues, Mao seemed to “confuse democracy with unbridled freedom” (p. 99).

Secondly, “mass line” means not only that the origins of the CCP’s policies should be the ideas of the people, but also that these policies should gain the people’s support through their feedback. Mao seemed to treat mass line as a defining feature of socialist democracy and took leadership of the CCP for granted. History has shown that this conception of socialist democracy has led to the unbridled authority of the CCP.

Based on the assumption that economic base determines the superstructure, the Maoists believed that economic inequality was the root of “China’s traditional hierarchical social structure and authoritarian attitudes” (Ogden, 2002, p.70). Therefore, democratization in the Mao era was carried out by means of eliminating economic exploitation and expanding governing power from the classes who had the means of production to those who did not. The CCP introduced and practiced a planned economy, which was underpinned by the establishment of public ownership through redistributing the land of landlords to the peasants in rural areas, and the properties of the capitalists to the proletariat in urban areas. The private ownership in Chinese agriculture, handicraft, and capitalist industry and commerce was completely transformed to a state and public one in 1956 (Hu, 2000). Although the CCP claimed that the socialist democracy

was that of the democratic dictatorship of the Chinese proletariat, it proved to be more dictatorial than democratic in the sense that the Chinese socialist democracy sought equality not in freedom but in restraint. This finally led to the totalitarian rule in the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.

The Post-Mao era (1976 AD - Present) has once again witnessed the increasing impacts of Chinese with experience abroad on China's democratization. One good example is Deng Xiaoping, who was a returnee student from France after receiving some of his education through a work-study program in his early years. Deng played a leading role in the end of the Cultural Revolution and the initiation of China's economic reforms and open-door policies in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism in Britain and the United States.

It can be argued that an important legacy of Deng's reform is the neoliberal approach to China's democratization in the post-Mao era. This approach is based on the assumption that "the unconditional promotion of democracy will bring disastrous consequences to the nation and the people" (Yu, 2009, p. 4), which resonates with neoliberal stance on democracy that it is "a luxury, only possible under conditions of relative affluence coupled with a strong middle-class presence to guarantee political stability" (Harvey, 2005, p. 66). Therefore, China's democratization process after Mao is envisaged to start with the calculation of the price of democracy (*minzhu de daijia*) which mainly referred to political and social instability, and proceed with incremental democracy (*jianjin minzhu*), that is, incremental development of grassroots democracy overarched by the development of intra-party democracy (Yu, 2009). The main purpose of democratization in the post-Mao era is to achieve dynamic stability (*dongtai wending*), meaning the maintenance of political and social order by the authoritarian rule of the

CCP. Such goal is to be achieved mainly by two means: continued economic growth, and negotiation rather than repression in the CCP's dealing with sociopolitical tensions accumulated in China's economic reforms under the authoritarian government. This approach can explain why China is still under one-party rule despite its tremendous economic success.

Concurrent with the aforementioned political developments in the post-Mao era, the impacts of returnee Chinese on China's political landscape have emerged particularly since the late 1990s. For instance, returnee Chinese students are playing a dominant role in think tanks that affiliate with China's top universities. As Li (2005) observes, when China faces grave domestic and international challenges, China's top leadership usually turn to those think tanks for advice with transnational perspectives. Furthermore, some returned students are even getting higher ranks within the Communist Party. One good example is that the percentage of returnee students in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China – the highest authority within the CCP – has been rising since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Li, 2011). It is clear that these students have great potential for influencing China's present and prospective democratization through the ripple effect of their impacts on the center of China's political power with their knowledge and expertise accumulated from their education overseas.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The historical review above can lead to at least four conclusions regarding China's democratization. Firstly, China's democratization was originally oriented toward the salvation of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people from foreign aggressions and the rule of alien Manchus, mainly by means of modernizing China into a powerful and wealthy nation in the world. To a large extent, Chinese conceptions of democracy have been closely related to

equality, nationalism and modernization. Secondly, there have been fierce competitions among the discourses of nationalism, liberalism, socialism, Confucianism, and neoliberalism in China's democratization process, with shifts in the dominant discourse in different historical periods. Thirdly, one of the persistent problems in China's democratization is its lack of experiments in democratic practices largely due to the prolonged one-party rule. Therefore, China's present and prospective democratization entails a rethinking of the CCP's role in this process. Finally, education has been a fiercely contested and extremely significant realm in the history of China's democratization. Such contests has mainly revolved around Chinese intellectuals' and politicians' quest for the reconstructions of Chinese people's individual and collective identities by means of resisting, borrowing, or adapting the notion of democracy from the West.

Noteworthy in the history of China's democratization are the Chinese people with experience abroad, particularly those who studied and/or lived in the West. This is mainly because they have been one of the most important driving forces behind the development of theories, policies and practices with reference to Chinese democracy and China's democratization. Although it is attempting to focus on these people's impacts on China's democratic development after their return, the impacts are arguably a manifestation of the change in their political attitudes and behaviors through their experience overseas. Therefore, the political dimension of Chinese people's experience abroad should be regarded as an urgent yet under-researched field of inquiry in itself.

There are at least two areas of importance in this type of research. The first one is the meaning making of democracy of the Chinese people abroad. For those who grew up in China's authoritarian society yet are now studying and/or living in Western democratic societies, their dramatic transition from one political context to another can cause them to undertake an ongoing



conceptualization of democracy with a constant checking of their knowledge about limits of democracy in both China and the West. This critical work of thought on democracy fulfills what Foucault (2003) calls the two roles of philosophy: to “prevent reason from going beyond the limits of what is given in experience”, and to “keep watch over the excessive powers of political rationality” (p. 128). The review of China’s democratization history indicates that the concept of Chinese democracy has been closely related to other concepts such as modernity, equality and liberty. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how these concepts operate in the meaning making process of democracy, and what new discourses about Chinese democracy are generated subsequently.

Central to this meaning making process is the constructions of Chinese people’s collective identities (that is, who the Chinese people are and who they might be) in relation to four key questions regarding government: 1). who should govern them? 2). how should they be governed? 3). what should be governed? 4). to what ends should they be governed? However, it has to be borne in mind that, just as history has shown, the analysis of the two types of Chinese people may or may not lead to actions to pursue greater democratization in China.

The second area of research importance is how Chinese people abroad engagement with democratic practices. Unlike the Chinese people inside China, those abroad can have firsthand exposure to and experience of democratic institutions and practices particularly in western countries. If democracy is conceptualized not as a monolithic entity, but a multiplicity of differing practices in process, then the experiences of democracy can be located and captured within these Chinese people’s engagement with different democratic practices. The pluralities in and different layers of their experiences of democracy in turn are likely to contribute to the development of different democratic practices for China.

Noteworthy in such engagement is their use of Internet. Blurring the distinction between being physically “inside” and “outside” of China, Internet as a technology of instant communication not only provides a public sphere in which Chinese people abroad can circulate their experiences and ideas of democracy to the public-at-large in China almost instantly, but more importantly enables them to participate virtually in the events relevant to China’s democratization. In this sense the impacts of the Chinese people abroad on China’s democratization may be magnified beyond imagination.

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