

Active Subjects and an Illiberal Republic?

The Long Introduction of Democracy in China, from the Mid-Qing to 1920

Contemporary surveys strongly suggest that Chinese people have a unique conception of democracy, one which is based on economic performance, in which multiparty competition is undesirable, and elections are unnecessary.¹ Defining democracy differently may be the best way to explain why hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens currently view China as a democratic country.² Another explanation may be that survey-takers are most likely to compare their current national regimes within their own cultural past, rather than to an institutional standard such as the liberal form most familiar to Westerners, whose political scientists posit it as universal.³ Also relevant, though largely discredited: the past decades

1 See Chu et al., especially Tianjian Shi's Chapter on the PRC. Large surveys like the World Values Survey and East Asian Barometer, combined with the sensitivity of the subject, do not allow us to ascertain whether the majority of Chinese people conflate democracy with good governance in general, to the neglect of liberal institutions.

2 See Guo's chapter, "Institutional Accumulation and Gradual Substitution: The Dynamics of Developmental Democracy in China", pg. 173, in Huang (Ed.). China compares quite favorably with Japan, with almost twice as many people (10.1%) claiming that the PRC is a full democracy. If 77% of the PRC believes they live in a democratic state, that adds up to over a billion people who, in Doh Chul Shin's words, "misperceive" their regime type. This essay asserts that a different definition is both more likely and more respectful.

3 Many who universalize liberal democracy fail to note that early "democracies" up to the 1970's were far from liberal in terms of universal suffrage, equal rights, etc. This study must take care not to evaluate China's experiments with political liberalization solely by today's standards.

have seen the rise of an “Asian values” narrative, in which certain Confucian prescriptions are said either to challenge or even be incompatible with liberal democracy.⁴

Instead of this dubious conclusion, the historiographic evidence presented here will show that China's dynasties contained democratic elements well before the word was translated into Chinese or came to be seen as a different and desirable political system. As the concept became relatively well-known among Chinese elites, however, proposals and experiments with liberal institutions were not well received by cultural conservatives or much of the general public, and most importantly, failed to yield the good governance and strong state for which they were attempted.⁵ As Benjamin Schwartz, Andrew Nathan, and other scholars have pointed out, the intellectuals of the late-Qing who led calls for political liberalization did so in large part for instrumental reasons of strengthening a weak, even fluctuating Chinese state. Many scholars, especially strident liberals and orientalist of Asian or Western descent, wrongly criticized both China's interpretations of liberalism and

4 Contemporary evidence in Taiwan presented by Fetzer and Soper actually confirm the thesis somewhat in that those most committed to liberal democracy, such as women's rights advocates and those favoring mass political participation, largely reject Confucianism. Confucian elites in Taiwan today similarly express that they must “learn to live with” liberalism rather than fully embracing it. Shin's survey evidence, however, conclusively shows that political values believed to be associated with Confucianism, such as elite meritocracy and social hierarchy, are more widely held in non-Confucian societies like Indonesia and Malaysia than in China, Taiwan, and Japan (pg. 2012).

5 Joshua Hill's dissertation explicitly claims to be studying Chinese elections specifically rather than Chinese democracy generally, but the theme of disappointment with electoral processes and results is strong throughout his introduction.

motivations for liberalization as incorrect, rather than as ideological and cultural hybrids created to address national exigencies.⁶

In what the PRC has retrospectively called the “hundred years of humiliation” since the late Qing, national survival became a primary concern, and this required a strong Chinese state, whether recognizably democratic or under the rule of an enlightened dictator. Is China just on the wrong side of history, as our American leaders often claim, are its culture and vision of “rule by and for the people” completely unique, or are they even as different as Western liberals make them out to be? This essay will base its historiographic analysis on the central definition, shared at times by Liang Qichao and other thinkers from the late Qing to the beginning of the “Nanjing Decade” in 1927,⁷ that democracy can be assessed by the advocacy for and presence of institutions which solicit public opinion, respond to it substantively, while making the government more accountable to the majority of the population.⁸ Again, some of

6 Dunstan's article mentions some of these, Fung's 2005 article and really most of his work on Chinese intellectual thought of the early 20th century can be read as a defense of prevalent but apparently contradictory ideas like “liberal socialism” or “anti-capitalist liberalism”.

7 I had originally hoped to go into more detail about the 1920's, up to 1927, but the narrative gets unwieldy by the end and would benefit from contracting rather than expanding the timeframe.

8 Using these three components, democracy's linguistic roots as “government by and for the people” may be met in an institutionally flexible manner (i.e. opening up the possibility of democracy in a form other than the liberal one associated with Western modernity). This study will adhere to despotism as an antithesis, while terms like “authoritarianism, autocracy, and dictatorship” are all more recent and less purely oppositional. The latter three may refer to the means of

these basic elements were present in China well before they were united in a cohesive concept distinct from the traditional imperial system. Liang Qichao is an accessible point for Westerners to grasp Chinese elites' democratic views, but many other thinkers and institutions both preceded and influenced him, such as Huang Zongxi and the petition system.

By examining the era when the concept of democracy was first introduced to elite Chinese thinkers, when the meaning of the term truly was flexible and contested, we can better evaluate whether aforementioned contemporary claims are ahistorical, instrumental fabrications to perpetuate authoritarian rule in states like the PRC and Singapore. Looking deeper in the past than the late Qing, furthermore, we may evade the distasteful and discredited notion that all things “modern” came to China from the West. Democratic elements of popular consultation, responsiveness, and accountability may well have deep Chinese roots, not unlike Bin Wong's re-centering demystification of the market economy.

This essay begins with a search for liberal or otherwise democratic elements in China's dynastic past, pinpointing key linguistic and historical evidence in democracy's conceptual

selecting a leader, how policy decision are implemented, and may be preceded by modifiers like “benevolent,” “soft,” or “popular” to denote the presence of at least some democratic elements. For most of the time examined here, China is treated as an oligarchy rather than an absolute monarchy or a democracy.

evolution in the 19th century. The following section contextualizes the importance of democracy, as perceived by elite reformers and revolutionaries, in an era of state weakness. A third section will assess actual experiments with elections in China. The conclusion will consider the expansion of other forms of popular political participation and the failure of competitive elections to endure even as modernization continued. Throughout the essay, thoughts of key figures like Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Zhang Binglin, Sun Yatsen, Hu Shi, and others will be taken to represent what democracy means in China at a given time, a necessarily elite-focused approach, as the concept was “not a regular ingredient of Chinese vocabulary” for most of the population in the period of this study.⁹ By focusing on how the concept was introduced and interpreted in this era, an overall picture will emerge that China's elites preferred that China be governed *for* but also increasingly *by* the people, although the latter primarily meant popular participation in the form the regime defined.

How Despotic Were Chinese Dynasties? When considering democracy before the

late Qing, the role of political participation is the only appropriate lens, lest the analysis

9 See David Cheng Chang's chapter, pg. 213, in Cochran & Pickowicz's *China on the Margins* for the full quotation, referring to the difficulty (but not total incompatibility) of implementing nation-wide elections in the last years of the Qing. While acknowledging both the successes and failures of what most have overlooked, he finds the 1909 Provincial Assembly elections a “textbook case, underscoring two fundamental components of democracy: elections and freedom.” Unless modified to be “liberal”, this study does not share Chang's foundation.

become anachronistic and teleological. The hard distinction between passive subjects and active citizens also needs to be relaxed.¹⁰ While foundational to both modernization and political liberalization, group—if not mass--political activity was common well before the last decades of the Qing when conscious modernization began in earnest.¹¹ It is also worth emphasizing that some participatory practices and institutions are modern, containing democratic elements, but are hardly the key to *liberal* democracy. For example, as popular accountability is part of this essay's definition of democracy, riots and petitions are both means which Chinese people used in the past to hold the government accountable, yet they play a highly negative or muted role in liberal conceptions focusing on elections as the democratic institution *par excellence*. When modern forms of popular, political participation appear, it should be possible to discern whether political liberalization, democratization generally, or more immediate concerns of the participants are at stake. This goes doubly for agendas for political reform, proposed by concerned literati in the long dynastic era.

10 It could at least be said that the many imperial subjects who took part in various rebellions were hardly passive; one could, however, doubt their loyalty to the regime and the extent to which imperial institutions encouraged this kind of participation. Democracy fundamentally requires that popular participation be legitimate, therefore having a minimum level of loyalty among participants, and this means not simply being spontaneously reactive but expected and solicited by institutions the government has created. Elections, unlike protests or especially violent riots, have an obvious democratic advantage in this regard, but they are also a rather shallow level of participation.

11 And like democratization, the Qing dynasty evolved in ways that were recognizably modernizing without necessarily being so called by those who proposed and enacted reforms.

Depending on one's agenda, traditional China can be proud to have contained elements of modernity before they were "discovered" and applied in Western countries, and liberals in the West have long sought evidence of like-minded, "progressive" Chinese officials who challenged the emperor's absolute power. In a lonely Chinese chapter tucked away in a handbook of (Western) political theory, Helen Dunstan warns against "reading Western concepts into Chinese writings" but nonetheless notes a Western curiosity about Xunzi, a Warring States philosopher whose "ideas seem reminiscent of Hobbes and Locke."¹² Unconvinced, William Rowe finds no consideration of a social contract or notion of natural rights in traditional Chinese political thought, though other elements of civil society fare slightly better, without too much conceptual stretching.¹³

Other authors find inklings of liberalism in later dynasties, whose elite literati were both more prolific and less abstract.¹⁴ William Theodore de Bary's claim that the Song and Ming

¹² Gaus & Kukathas, pg. 322.

¹³ Rowe, pg. 149. On the role of public opinion in governance, he also unearths a 1736 quotation from Lu Kun which states that "if but one man in a population sees things correctly, it is his voice alone, rather than that of the multitude, that genuinely represents public opinion." (pg. 153) More evidence could also be found to show an elite-derived notion of an objective or "correct" public interest. Without this, if replaced by the simple majority rule of democracy, Philip Kuhn finds to be fears that the result would be a kind of "Chinese hell" (pg. 78-9), as still expressed by an official in the last decades of the Qing, when such proposals began to be aired openly and considered seriously.

¹⁴ This essay will endeavor to avoid Classical Chinese hermeneutics from now on.

dynasties had liberal elements is not given much credence by Edmund Fung in *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity*, but is worth considering.¹⁵ For de Bary, a prime example of a Chinese author who “rhetorically envisage[d] an autonomous political role for commoners” is the Ming Loyalist and despotic critic, Huang Zongxi (1610-95).¹⁶ Characteristically harking far into the past for models of virtue, Huang noted that in antiquity, “[people of the] empire had been recognized as the realm’s proprietors, and rulers were merely retainers.” Dunstan finds Huang’s placement atop a liberal pedestal quite premature, as the label “proto-democrat” should require more substantive proposals in addition to a critique.¹⁷ Joan Judge, by contrast, suggests that Huang did precisely that, advocating “the establishment of public or civil law (*tianxia gongfa*) as a means of limiting imperial authority.”¹⁸

Many scholars have also complicated the image of the emperor as completely

15 Fung, pg. 131, also notes Paul Cohen’s derision of de Bary for using an excessively broad, Western notion of liberalism. In discussion of a classically liberal state which “governs as little as possible,” however, Fung finds the traditional Chinese state to be “autocratic minimal” rather than intrusive. Duara (1988) notes that this was to the ultimate detriment of the late Qing, when the rise of nationalism and modernization projects necessitated a shift away from the “light government” noted by Schwartz and the “centralized minimalism” of Philip Huang. Fung makes these last comparisons on pg. 161-2.

16 Gaus & Kukathas, pg. 327.

17 She says that Huang’s writings should not be viewed as liberal or constitutional but rather as “a provocative attempt to rethink the design of China’s polity, including the military and the economy” (Gaus & Kukathas, pg. 327).

18 Judge, pg. 81. She also notes a specific proposal that special schools be set up as “the primary forum for the institutionalized expression of public opinion,” later picked up by Liang Qichao, who took much inspiration from Huang (pg. 82).

autocratic, at very least for his consistent reliance on advisors, officials, and regents for matters too big or small, emperors too old or young.¹⁹ Simply because the emperor had help doesn't mean the people ruled China, of course, but one must step away from the precipice of absolutism very carefully. Etienne Balazs' seminal *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy* offers the term "officialism" to describe Chinese governance consistently through 1912. The process of becoming an official, supported by the Confucian notion of cultivating or perfecting one's humanity, was open to the people, at least in theory. In terms of subjects' upward mobility and who could become an official, however, Balazs calls the democratic glimmer of the examination system "a mere legend fostered by the officials to conceal their monopoly."²⁰ A far more likely route to political influence by the masses was following elite mobilization in the form of a protest or statement to the censorate, "the institutional embodiment of

19 The danger of factions, seen generally as corruption by perfidious, insufficiently Confucian eunuchs in the Ming and fellow-Manchu favorites like Heshen in the Qing, is often given as a danger of delegating power outside of the body of the emperor, a rather odd but often used argument against democratization by officials in the late Qing. See Kuhn, pg. 11, for discussion of how anti-faction concerns shaped advisory discourse, pg. 12 for the observation that officials did indeed advise the emperor.

20 Pg. 7. Hartwell comes to similar conclusions, noting that the best and virtually only way to pass the imperial exams was to have family connections or the considerable financial means needed to study for them. Balazs curiously calls the "internal relations" among the scholar officials a "real enough" democracy without much explanation; perhaps the point is that an oligarchy which discusses imperial affairs is relatively democratic compared to an absolutely despotic monarchy.

remonstrance.”²¹ While Natascha Vittinghoff asserts that imperial China's political culture required the “upright official to speak up in public and criticize the ruler,” a combination of fear, genuine respect and decorum mostly meant that only “token gestures” flowed upward through the censorate toward the emperor.²² Ho-fung Hung's 2011 book, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics*, finds a welcome, modern middle ground between the image of passively submissive subjects too afraid and disempowered to air their grievances and the old Qing narrative of a weak dynasty tottering from one full-scale rebellion to the next. In short, the Qing government did not exactly welcome mass participation, but it did often tolerate and respond constructively to “filial” displays of pro-active state engagement.

Petitions and protests, according to Hung, were the primary means of “popular collective action” and “claim-making” in the mid-Qing. From 1740-54, while the Qing state was relatively powerful and not overly corrupt, elites organized the people to express their preferences in a submissive, loyal manner on matters such as official appointments, the equal

21 Gaus & Kukathas, pg. 326. Dunstan says that the people served as “junior members of remonstrance hierarchies,” while “the rulers' helpers (loyal critics) comprise the entire social order.”

22 Vittinghoff, pg. 447-8 for the “integral” part of imperial political culture; Dunstan deconstructs the censorate as a genuine instrument of consultation and accountability at length in Gaus & Kukathas, pg. 326.

disbursement of famine relief, and land disputes.²³ Coded as “only 30% violent,” Hung notes that women were especially useful in “filial” displays to make demands of officials because they were seen as non-threatening, and the expectation that popular concerns be considered was usually met.²⁴ The social hierarchy of the Qianlong reign is portrayed by Hung as familial, as between grandparents (the emperor) who entertained demands and complaints from grandchildren (the people) about their parents (lower officials). A harmonious “household” such as this required communication, and in the absence of other, more formally consultative institutions, peaceful protest occurred regularly and may even have been seen as a means to keep the emperor informed as to whether heaven approved of his rule.²⁵ By the 1820's this pattern changed to be more reactive, as violent protests and blackmail of local officials came to outnumber “humble petitions.”²⁶ As Jonathan Ocko notes, the idea of increasing communication and accountability with the people with petitions was noble and innovative, but

23 Hung, pg. 69, 99. He claims that a state with higher capacities in rich areas was more likely to respond positively to its subjects' demands, in turn creating higher expectations among them.

24 The only other time I've come across women in the era of this study regarding democratic practices is with David Strand's 2011 book on the early Republic, in which he follows the Chinese suffragette Tang Qunying's fruitless attempts to get Song Jiaoren and Sun Yatsen to follow through on promises that women would have the right to vote in the Republic (pg. 19-29).

25 One can only hope that the contemporary PRC's conflation of peaceful protests and violent riots as “mass incidents” grows to be so nuanced.

26 Hung, pg. 158, notes that the Qianlong model was in jeopardy by this time, that local incapacity made capital appeals a first and last resort (pg. 167) after the Jiaqing emperor “revived the center” to be more responsive to popular demands but could not fix administrative malfeasance.

the institution itself was buckling under a huge backlog of cases by this time.²⁷ This was a result of the emperor Jiaqing's undoing of Qianlong's filtration system, intended to keep out "the spurious and frivolous", while tasking lower officials (albeit unsuccessfully) with categorizing only the most important claims as worthy of the emperor's attention. Ocko also faults the magistrate for not being "attuned to popular feeling," thereby generating more complaints from a growing population and making a trip to Beijing more appealing than a three to ten-year wait to "adjudicate a simple case," most of which were land disputes and personal litigation.²⁸ Greater use of and frustration with the over-burdened petition system led to a pair of interesting conclusions, of great concern for democracy. Hung says that contentious politics became both more violent at the same time it was becoming more institutionalized, while Ocko ascribes the failure of these attempts to connect the government and the people to the population explosion of the 18th century.²⁹

While full popular accountability may not have been achievable in the Qing legal system,

27 Ocko, pg. 311, says that the Qing compared favorably with the exclusivity of the English and American legal systems of the time, but the system may have been left intentionally "slightly dysfunctional" so that only those with legitimate grievances would persist with appeals while the many opportunistic pettifoggers would be deterred by long waits and low success-rates.

28 Ocko, pg. 296.

29 Hung (2004), pg. 493, Ocko, pg. 310.

a more inclusive political process by the mid-Qing should be seen as structural and systematic, rather than anomalous. An underlying theme for Beatrice Bartlett's *Monarchs and Ministers* is the shift in power away from the Qing emperor himself toward institutions which were at least oligarchic. Since the formation of the Grand Council in 1733, the Qing Dynasty was able to govern its vast empire even as its 19th century emperors never approached the long and powerful reigns of Kangxi and Qianlong, nor the micro-managerial interest of Yongzheng. Dunstan even claims that after Yongzheng and including Qianlong, emperors “generally refrained” from exercising their autocratic powers in favor of something resembling “checks and balances...between ruler and ministers in the mature Qing system.”³⁰

Going further still, evidence can be found of actual deliberation, debate, and negotiation among interested parties in grain surplus management in the Qianlong era, a prominent topic in Dunstan's 2006 book.³¹ This could be read as evidence that a strong state clearly governing in the interests of the people, plus an expanded demographic base of legitimate political

30 Dunstan, pg. 83-4. She also suggests that administration was largely efficient and apolitical for a time.

31 Noting the young Qianlong's tendency to side with whoever last advised him, Dunstan concludes, pg. 98, that “Yongzheng led; Qianlong was led.” Interests in this debate spanned all sectors of society, from bureaucrats to merchants to the poor who would benefit from redistribution of the surplus (and not unlike the present, the “real” interests of the poor were subject to much interpretation and debate due to their less than solicited or effective participation in the process). Later in the article, pg. 102, she casts doubt on whether a “Western-style democracy” could have handled the matter better.

participation could add up to a minimalist and uniquely Chinese conception of democracy which still resonates today. Dunstan herself characterizes these events in the mid-Qing as “in no sense democratic, but far from being mere autocracy.” Judging by contemporary surveys, this could very much have been an example of a Chinese democratic process; all that may have been lacking was an explicit democratic motivation—no great flaw because there was no sense of such a unified concept. Again, however, skeptical voices seem to prevail in matters of finding early examples of people power or autonomous civil societies in China, a hot topic after 1989.³²

For Philip Kuhn, the end of Qianlong's reign in the 1790's was a domestic turning point at which issues of modernization were being discussed, well before the conventional catalyst of the Opium Wars.³³ The *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* to which he refers are almost entirely domestic, though with foreign influence looming, increasing the urgency of reforms. To address and, more importantly, prevent corrupt officials like Heshen from rising in

32 Wakeman finds claims of civil society in books by Rowe and Rankin positing, in the first case, autonomous guilds in

Hankou around the 1870's to be “dubious” because they were still dependent on state monopolies and no “informed and critical public opinion” existed (pg. 128). Nonetheless, he is quite amenable to the idea that by the end of the Qing a “public sphere” well short of the kind Habermas conceptualized did exist and “expand” (pg. 132).

33 Kuhn points to “three dilemmas” faced by the Qing state at the turn of the 19th century, as “accidental” problems became “systemic” and “local” ones became “national” (pg. 8-12).

government patronage networks, many officials felt a need for closer connections with the people, and there existed “a sizable stratum of educated men with at least a latent awareness of national affairs, but with no hope of participating in them.”³⁴ Kuhn points to Wei Yuan (d 1857) as one such figure considered to be progressive by dynastic political standards. By asking who should participate in politics and later proposing that the government's base should be broadened, Wei's ideas for reform don't seem far from democratic, but as a literate elite his concern was primarily to expand the influence of the small minority to which he belonged, extending no further than educated men who lacked only degrees and official positions.³⁵ Furthermore, the purpose of such reforms was not to empower individuals with rights or bring popular justice but to increase governmental effectiveness and enhance state power. As China entered an era of continual crisis in the mid-to-late 19th century, it was “not a time for weakening authoritarian rule but for strengthening it.”³⁶ As the remainder of this essay will explain, arguments about China's territorial integrity, stability, and strength have

34 Kuhn, pg. 17.

35 Hung (2011, pg. 182) found Wei's justification of the proposal to be simply that lower-ranked and unofficial literati could “present diverse views and aid in decisions.”

36 Kuhn, pg. 47-48. The earlier note of Wei's progressiveness is on pg. 31. Edmund Fung (2010) also cites the peripatetic official Lin Zexu's reformist writings in the mid-19th century as evidence of early Chinese liberal thought.

sustained a paternalistic conception of democracy from the Qing to the present.

Up to now, this essay has focused on China in isolation from the West, sharing Kuhn's goal to show changes in political ideas and forms of participation with clearly domestic origins. Part of the impetus for modernization, a second catalyst but not the only source, undoubtedly came from growing contact and conflicts with the West. Differing concepts of modernization, liberalism, and democracy can thereby be traced to these somewhat divergent origins, and just as today, China was never interested in what Young-tsu Wong repeatedly calls "slavish copying" of the West.³⁷ As China was a victim of Western imperialism, Chinese political modernization was associated less with pure liberalization than shifting away from a model of government based on spreading virtue from the top-down toward a Western statecraft whose goal was the maximization of national power. Chinese democracy, not unlike that of the modern West, had to satisfy the nation as it grew to encompass the entire population. Even if the means and objectives of modern change weren't entirely foreign, Western terms often gave cohesive shape to concepts differing from the Chinese historical experience, some of

³⁷ The phrase appears, quite negatively, no less than five times throughout his book, mostly regarding Zhang Binglin's views on how *not* to reform Chinese politics.

which came to be framed as national goals by reformers in the 19th century. To many in the last decades of the Qing, modernity required major *linguistic* innovation and reform before political change could even be conceptualized. Therefore, despite the previous domestic focus, the introduction of foreign terms deserves attention not only because they allowed Chinese elites to be legible to the West, but because many terms became elite shorthand for complex and comprehensive platforms of political restructuring.

The original Chinese translation of the term “democracy” dates from the middle of the 19th century.³⁸ As Rune Svarverud notes, the new notion of “rights” was made a homophone of the word for “power,” *quanli*, at about the same time by none other than Wei Yuan, who along with Lin Zexu had taken interest in Western legal systems.³⁹ Joshua Hill summarizes the 1840's to 1880's, the period leading up to his primary concern, the introduction of elections, as a time of linguistic challenges when eager translators had to “focus on devising Chinese

38 See Lackner et al. for the linguistic evolution of the word itself, as well as the origins of relevant Western terms like “liberty”, “president”, and “rights”. Interestingly, democracy was originally translated with negative connotations, went through several combinations of Chinese characters before settling on *minzhu* 民主, which used to refer to a single person who was a “lord of the people”. As a concept, the vagueness of a literal translation as “the people as masters” leaves the achievement of democracy wide open to any number of institutional interpretations. Arguably, some kind of popular political participation connected with good governance might suffice as *minzhu* enough for most Chinese people.

39 Lackner et al., pg. 128-30. At the opening of his chapter, Svarverud suggests that the two terms, power and rights, “may not be conceptually very different in Chinese, and certainly not as mutually incompatible as they are generally understood in Western languages.”

terms to explain the process of elections in foreign countries.” The post-Taiping era is also notable for the introduction of a commercial press in China, surprisingly free and challenging for being under the protection of the foreign concessions, especially in Shanghai.⁴⁰ The last decades of the 19th century were thereby marked by an increased national consciousness among those who could read, as in the 1870's-80's even Confucians began to frame their concerns in terms of an emerging Chinese nation.⁴¹ While such ideas held appeal to radical revolutionaries like Zou Rong, understanding and coming to appreciate the potential benefits of a democratic system did not necessarily mean that democracy was appropriate for China. Indeed, as Xiong Yuezhi notes, echoed by conservative officials noted by Kuhn, constitutional monarchy was generally seen as “the only good solution,” and the word “democracy” could not escape its association with disrespect, chaos, and even class warfare until “the revolutionary

40 Vittinghoff, pg. 448, seems largely in line with Anderson's thesis of the nationalizing of news by print capitalism, as newspapers provided more information to budding nationalists than had ever been possible. Ocko notes that the system of capital appeals had been greatly restricted by the 1880's, eventually being overturned entirely (pg. 298), a decidedly un-democratic change which preceded many others in the era most known for rapid, if fitful, modernization. Vittinghoff also notes that the Chinese press underwent an unfortunate and long process away from being a free and contentious news source under foreign protection, stimulating real public discussion and the formation of informed public opinion, to be captured by party politics in the Republican Era, becoming little more than a propagandistic tool of single-party rule by the mid-20th century for both the Nationalists and the CCP. In these examples, as well as rural areas discussed by Duara, modernization and democratization may have been antagonistic. Finally, if the democratic role of the press isn't mentioned elsewhere, David Cheng Chang (in Cochran & Pickowicz, pg. 201) also notes that newspapers aided the spread of knowledge of democratic processes, especially as election stories and results were shared between provinces in 1909.

41 Nathan, pg. 48.

tide began to rise after the turn of the century."⁴² Thus, even after democracy became relatively well-understood by a small segment of the population, its embrace came very slowly, and other more obviously Chinese alternatives may have been preferable among the majority of the elite well after 1911.

In sum, China's dynastic history contained democratic elements which could not have been called such, but foreign influence also had a role to play in naming ideas and making them appear the only way to modernize. It is too easy for casual observers who begin their interest in China with the Opium Wars or the Republican Revolution to conclude that the last years of the Qing marked, firstly, a triumph of the West, then of Western, liberal democracy. This section has challenged the first premise, and the next will address the second as even more dubious.

How Important Was Democracy to China from 1890 to 1928? Before beginning the analysis, we must consider what China's priorities were in this very fragile era. Failure to

42 Lackner et al., pg. 88. One of Xiong's most interesting citations is of a pair of Hong Kong literati who favored "people's rights" but not "democracy", not for the fearful, status-conscious reasons given previously but because they believed granting people rights could improve governance but leave the generational inheritance of China's "celestial" throne intact. By contrast, Peter Zarrow, pg. 201, notes that Confucians were especially threatened by "rights talk" and that a middle ground stopping short of popular selection of the leader would not have satisfied those most interested in "liberating" themselves from despotic oppression.

consider where democracy, however conceived, fit into the state's goals can lead many in the West, especially political scientists interested in a universal narrative of “political development,” to an over-reliance on the analytical lens of democratization. Arguably, this obscures more than it illuminates in China's case: both the Republican Revolution and the 1989 student protests were about much more than democratization. Furthermore, the only form of democratization which counts in much Western analysis is political liberalization—the introduction of elections and liberal rights and freedoms (of speech, association, etc.). Such a focus neglects China's past as a despotic, black box. It also blinds us to changes which may be both more effective and important for the governance of the state and the lives of citizens, namely general processes of modernization, differing concepts of “illiberal” democracy, and the wide variety of political participation inherent in both.

In the era beginning in the late Qing through the establishment of the Nationalist government in Nanjing, the Chinese state was extremely weak, a crucial fact which can be lost amidst the obligatory notation of multiple regime changes. In examining Chinese democracy, this essay proposes that the (re-)establishment of a strong state was China's ultimate goal

during this time. Prasenjit Duara's work on rural continuities from the Qing to the Japanese occupation suggests that the degree of state capacity to penetrate rural areas was weak throughout this era, yet a noticeable change in the extractive demands of the state for nation-building and modernization purposes took a heavy toll on the countryside.⁴³ Similarly, a general desire for a more democratic state existed among Chinese intellectuals, but this desire had to be moderated (or abandoned) due the realities of state instability and weakness.⁴⁴ Expanded political participation with electoral "self-government"⁴⁵ was a more concrete, achievable goal than any new abstraction like *minzhu*, and even the most liberal of Chinese thinkers largely saw democracy as a means to an end rather than a political end in itself.⁴⁶

Schematically, I would rank China's priorities as follows:

43 Comparison of "protective" versus "entrepreneurial" brokers and their extraction of resources, the often negative reception of modernizing changes like converting local temples into schools, suggest that the interests of rural Chinese people were being met *less* not more as the Chinese consciously implemented modernization programs. Even if state priorities lay in urban areas which were both easier (for being better educated already, more cognizant of the need, and thereby more receptive) and more urgent (to resist foreign powers, to lead the process nationally), if the financial burden fell disproportionately on rural citizens who were the vast majority of the country, this may be an immediate democratic disqualification.

44 Unlike the "state-engaging" protests of the mid-Qing, Perry (in Wakeman, Ed., pg. 265) notes that most forms of protest by the early 20th century were much less than helpful for connecting democratization (increased political participation) with political development. Rather, "we find in modern China a simultaneous growth of popular unrest and state-strengthening." In the same volume, Duara, pg. 316, says that "[w]e have not a strong state, but a statist ideology which found little use for civil society in the modernization project."

45 A term still used for the PRC's experiments with rural elections. That these were compatible with both the Qing and CCP's unchallenged rule is a crucial point which should be highlighted in conceptualizing Chinese democracy.

46 Liberals, with rare logical and linguistic consistency for a term with far too many meanings, generally claim that democracy is an end in itself because it empowers the individual, granting him (and later also her, other less WASP-y individuals) essential liberties which allow the full realization of human potential.

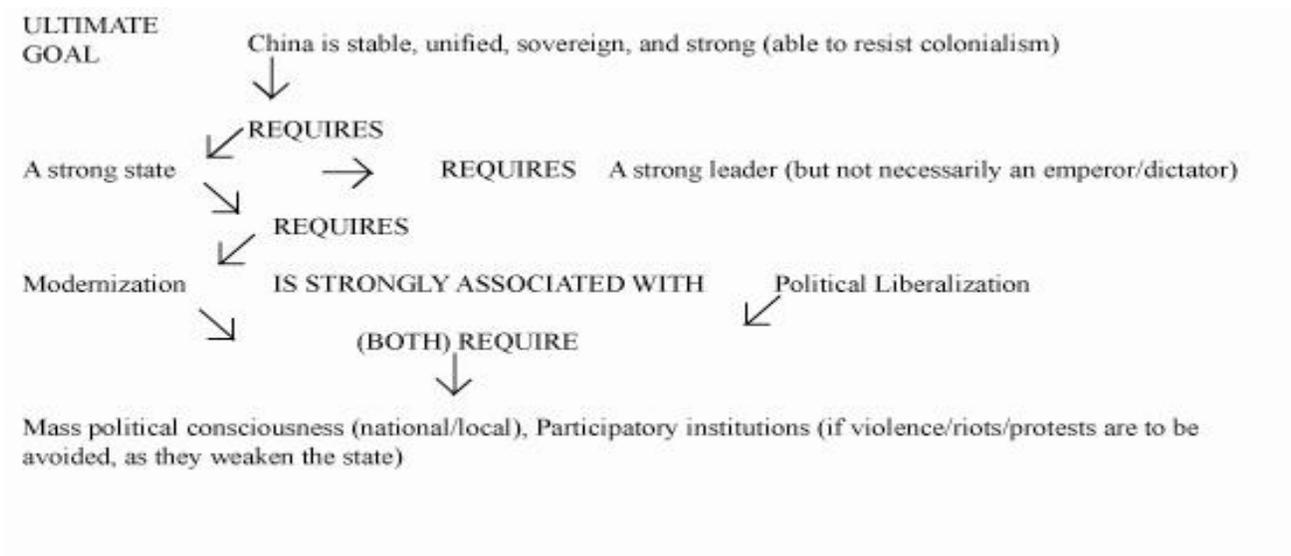


FIGURE 1: Chinese Priorities in the Late Qing to 1928, with Foundational Requirements. Note that “political liberalization” is synonymous with what liberal thinkers, both Chinese and Western, would consider democratization, based mainly on implementing “free and fair elections,” civil and political liberties for individual citizens. Obviously, the requirements listed (especially for something so contentious as modernization) are not exhaustive but simply those relevant to this essay.

This essay will claim that the extent to which Chinese democracy is associated with a weak state (or that democracy leads to chaos) depends partially on the extent to which the Republican Era is seen as democratic, or representative of democracy for Chinese people. That Chinese people's appraisal of democracy is in accordance with its universal, international popularity suggests that most find little democratic about the early Republic. Furthermore, if the chain of events leading to Yuan Shikai's imperial declaration and the “Warlord Period” are seen as the results of (failed) democratization in China, another attempt at liberal democracy on a national scale might justifiably be feared. Fundamentally, as the following sections will

show, late Qing literati found that the appeal of liberating the power of the individual lay in harnessing it to strengthen the state. Nonliberal advocates of democracy (conceptualized differently) largely bypassed the empowerment of the individual and aggregated “people power” for the state, as seen in the democratic rhetoric of both Nationalists and the CCP alike. Given their centrality in popular, Western conceptions of democracy, the next section considers the role of popular elections in the closing years of China's final dynasty and its Republican experiment.

Elections and Political Competition in Early 20th Century China. Modernity, broadly conceived, can include both the elections associated with liberal democracy and the mass campaigns of totalitarianism. For David Strand and Samuel Huntington, a fundamental assumption embedded in political modernity is that the people want to participate in politics as active citizens. The most important question, then, is how to provide institutions which channel popular participation into good government practices, preferably peaceful and viewed by the population as democratic. In the absence of a communist, revolutionary counter-example until 1917, China chose to adopt liberal democratic institutions such as elections and

competitive political parties, yielding mixed results and effectively truncating the experiment.

Who and what processes led to the large scale implementation of mass elections, a concept quite foreign to traditional Chinese political culture, and did non-Chinese roots or other factors eventually end their use as a decision-making institution?

Elections, as the procedural essence of liberal democracy, were a component of the larger concept of constitutionalism, which became the over-arching preference of reformers in the late Qing.⁴⁷ Echoing the somewhat contradictory condition today of local elections under an authoritarian regime, the “electoralism” which theorists now criticize as insufficient for democratic status⁴⁸ preceded the 1911 revolution by several years. With the imperial examination system abolished in 1905, Qing autocracy was found to be quite compatible with local, elective democracy to fill government posts, and it was implemented widely in the hope that it would yield officials who could save the dynasty by modernizing it.⁴⁹ More often, and

47 This is not to suggest that all constitutions outline popular elections in their democratic rights and procedures. Rather, as Hill notes, elections signified a government's legitimacy to modernizers both foreign and domestic. While Fung (2010, pg. 2-3) describes Republican thinkers caught in a triad of competition between Chinese cultural conservatism, liberalism, and socialism, Hill (pg. 10) asserts that all agreed on the need for elections, if not the details of suffrage, electoral procedures themselves, or what elected bodies should do.

48 See Schmitter & Karl. Their point regarding electoralism, made during the “Third Wave” of democratization in the early 1990's, is that equating democracy with the presence of elections reduces the concept to a proceduralist shell with an empty core where democratic values should be.

49 Fincher, pg. 251. Hill, pg. 4, explicitly calls elections a “successor” to the exam system for official appointment.

exclusively by the middle of the 20th century, elections were a means of *top-down*, rather than bottom-up communication, intended to give instruction to “the ruled” about exactly how they should participate in politics: in an orderly fashion and for the strengthening of the current regime.⁵⁰ While this understandably suggests an anti-democratic perversion of the electoral institution to Western liberals, the earliest Chinese elections were at least more ambivalent in their potential to empower the general populace.

In the 1969 volume, *Modern China's Search for a Political Form*, Mark Elvin declares that the Shanghai City Council of 1905 was “the first formally democratic political institution in China.”⁵¹ He also finds the Council Assembly to be the first Chinese political institution in which open political struggle is regarded as a “legitimate, normal activity.” It did not, however, allow for the formation of parties or “contrasting programs of action,” though the unanimity

Thompson, pg. 17-18, notes that deposed officials still had a good chance of being elected, though Western or Japanese-educated elites were now in favor.

50 Hill, pg. 5.

51 Gray, pg. 41. Not surprisingly, given a start at the city level, it seems that subnational and even quasi-governmental bodies offered the best arena for electoral procedures to endure. Strand (1989, pg. 105, 118) notes that the Beijing Chamber of Commerce “abided by its [democratic] charter” well after national and higher levels of politics, even in their constitutional form, gave way to the rise of militarism. Still, Strand does not portray the Chamber's elections, held more than every year from 1920-29, very favorably. Instead, the frequency of elections reflects frequent scandals and resignations. Contemporaneously, Mao Zedong was advocating “self-rule” in Hunan, based on elections at village, county and provincial levels as the second stage following “semi-self-rule” by the military, bureaucratic, and provincial leaders (Duara, 1995, pg. 190).

the body projected on matters of policy was a projected, “false image.”⁵² The intense electoral competition found in the last decade of the Qing, instead, was personal, reflecting traditional fears of factionalism.⁵³ Rather than a good thing which elections were implemented to promote, Joshua Hill portrays political competition as “an unintended consequence” of opening government appointments up to popular selection and approval.⁵⁴

As it turned out, most people liked to be consulted quite a lot, though convincing people that elections weren't just another scheme to extract more taxes from them occasionally had fatal consequences.⁵⁵ Preparing citizens for elections, not to mention administering them, proved to be very difficult, even at a minimal level of suffrage. While treated as an afterthought, given the momentous end of the dynastic period only two years later, Provincial Assembly elections in 1909 constituted a “democratic enlightenment” accompanied by “large-scale experimentation” with a free media to explain electoral procedures such as registration

52 Gray, pg. 54-5. Strand (2011, pg. 172) believes that “public opinion” in the first decade of the 20th century “favored unity to the point of unanimity,” even as reformers and revolutionaries debated the best path to modernization, and competitive elections were first introduced.

53 Hill, pg. 7, emphasizes that elections were not actually a Western import, but derived from the Chinese tradition of “public selection.” Nonetheless, he grounds the process as “a primary symbol,” though not a guarantor, of political democracy in his introduction.

54 Hill, pg. 5.

55 Cochran & Pickowicz, pg. 195, 204-5, notes that at least one election worker was murdered, others were driven out by “agitated” villagers, but “the most common attitudes” were “skepticism and enthusiasm.”

and campaigns to the masses.⁵⁶ Rather than dividing China into chaotic factions, the 1909 elections ceded this effect to revolution itself, though Strand points out that 1911 was “a turning point in history that quickly seemed to many no real departure at all.”⁵⁷ Post-revolution elections were, at least, more of a toss-up in terms of whether they led to democratic outcomes or were too divisive and weakened the state. It was clear, in any case, that they were primarily “intended to be meaningful for the government, not the citizens,” and the intended effect of selecting only those “universally acknowledged to be talented and virtuous” was shown to be a uniquely Chinese ideal based on a preference for social harmony.⁵⁸ In short, expecting elections to lead to consensus and universally improved governance was an naïve illusion of the kind often afflicting neophytes and literati out of their

56 See David Cheng Chang's chapter, pg. 196-7, in Cochran & Pickowicz's *China on the Margins* for full quotations, referring to the difficulty (but not total incompatibility) of implementing nation-wide elections in the last years of the Qing. While acknowledging both the successes and failures of what most have overlooked, he finds the 1909 Provincial Assembly elections a “textbook case, underscoring two fundamental components of democracy: elections and freedom.” Unless modified to be “liberal”, this study does not share Chang's foundation. He does acknowledge, as Yang Liqiang echoes later, that there was very little understanding of what elections (and later the Republic itself) were and what they meant, even less time and resources to educate the rural masses (Cochran & Picowicz, pg. 200-5, Wakeman, pg. 205).

57 Strand (2011, pg. 21-2) . Fung (2010, pg. 180) says that “Republican liberals were as paternalistic as the literati of old,” though not much different than Western thinkers like John Stuart Mill, who was also skeptical of democratic institutions. Elections were seen as a necessity, but they could easily become anti-democratic. Figures like Yan Fu and especially Zhang Binglin were seen as fundamentally against elections, though only because the newly empowered masses would “inevitably elect their current oppressors” (Wong, pg. 61). Zhang nonetheless opposed literacy and property requirements for suffrage and should be seen as an advocate for a uniquely Chinese republican political system, though this was never well-defined (pg. 62).

58 Hill, pg. 4, for the first quotation, pg. 7 for the second.

cultural comfort zones.⁵⁹

Elections might not have succeeded at such an impossible task, but what did they mean for the Chinese concept of democracy? Late Qing and Republican era elections can be used to buttress either side of the cultural compatibility debate, with those in favor noting the enthusiasm with which Chinese voters participated and those opposed noting their flawed implementation, general ineffectiveness, and even blaming them for the chaos and weakness of China at the time. Parallels can be drawn with China's present in that elections coexisted with an unelected state leader, and that they were a means that was supposed to lead to good (or improved) governance rather than to an abstract democratic end.⁶⁰ The initial appeals for and promotions of the procedural aspects of liberal democracy were generally not made in the name of democracy, however, but rather for "self-government", or *zi zhi* 自治.⁶¹ In the official language of the PRC today, rural elections are still referred to by this term, insuring that these

59 Or political scientists attempting detached, pre-modern historiography.

60 This is to say that democracy as a universally recognized goal, an worthy end in itself, is a contemporary product, and normative views of its superiority were not prevalent in this time or location.

61 For Mao in the 1920's, Duara (1995, pg. 191) describes self-government as more than just local elections. Additionally, it "referred to th enlarging the power of localities in relation to the center." This essay hasn't considered the problem of federalism, but suffice it to say that by the 1920's provincial autonomy came to be seen as of "greater importance than democracy." Even so Duara says on pg. 193 that "no other political body in China went further on the road to democracy than Hunan."

are just an alternative method of selecting officials rather than the essence of democracy.⁶²

What else did democracy entail in China? For answers, the next section invokes shining intellectual stars of the 1890's to 1920's.

Beyond Elections: Elites View Expanding Popular Participation as Both

Modernization and Democratization. If the centuries of dynastic rule are seen as absolutely despotic, having no connection to the people, almost any political form following the overthrow of the Qing could be seen as more democratic. Whether the warlords had as strong a grasp of the Confucian concept of *minben*, the people as foundation, should be doubted, however. Keeping in mind the hierarchy of state priorities in FIGURE 1, this concluding section finds that consultative relationships more deeply rooted in Chinese culture were seen to be just as useful to democracy as mass elections.

With nationalism taking hold of many elites by the last decades of the Qing, state power became the primary concern of educated Chinese, and constitutionalism was consistently

⁶² *Zi zhi* is also synonymous with autonomy, the quasi-provincial/special title given to territories outside of “China proper,” populated by “minority nationalities” and whose officially autonomous leaders are not elected by popular vote.

mentioned as an alternative to the absolute monarchies of dynastic rule.⁶³ Yet proposals for “reallocating power” or having lower officials elect higher ones were still considered radical and not well received. Conservative elites in the 1890's criticized such proposals for allowing “private interests” into public, objective appointment procedures, effectively *reducing* transparency and placing factional ties (on which votes would inevitably, invariably be cast) above merit.⁶⁴ Military defeat at the hands of Japan in 1895, however, effectively ended the perspective that all China needed was Western weaponry to strengthen itself; consensus slowly formed that some political institutions of the West would have to be adopted as well.⁶⁵ Even with the 1898 “Hundred Days” of reform, however, most Qing officials still believed that political reform would mean stronger factionalism, more corruption, possibly even chaos and

63 Nathan, pg. 46, portrays Kang Youwei's interpretation of constitutionalism differently, as the first step in a process which would not limit the powers of the leader but rather enhance them by mobilizing the people on the state's behalf.

64 Kuhn, pg. 58, 62, puts Feng Guifen (d 1874) at the forefront of reformists, as a leader of the “Self-Strengthening Movement”. Young-tsu Wong notes (pg. 19-21) that the reformist Kang Youwei (d 1927) first raised the idea of parliament with the Guangxu Emperor in 1895, then in 1897 argued for a national assembly and the formation of a modern nation-state, all bitter pills for an absolute monarch to swallow. Clearly the “objective” method of appointment was an ideal rather than a reality, but elites of the time clung to it reflexively and defensively, with no lack of self-interest.

65 Lu, pg. 34, claims that while the self-strengthening of 1860-93 “only saw the material aspect of the West” as important, after 1895 political reform was deemed necessary and urgent. Andrew Nathan's book gives 1895 as the beginning of the era of democratic politics in China. Among the most prominent conservatives, Kang Youwei generally maintained that all China needed was material progress to modernize and catch up to the West (Wong, pg. 114-5). While Kang himself “imagined subtle ideas of democracy, freedom, constitutionalism, and republicanism” as a means to create wealth and power for China, freedom without the rule of law was “madness” (pg. 116) and had to be preceded by “material learning.”

fragmentation of Chinese territory,⁶⁶ and for much of the early 20th century these conservative doubts were vindicated.

With China itself as an unstable concept and political unit, the meaning and desirability of democracy shifted wildly, evidenced in that many notable Chinese thinkers began as radicals but were seen as reactionaries by the time of their death. Most supported the idea of a Chinese republic and democracy in some form,⁶⁷ only to come slowly and painfully to the conclusion that China needed a strong leader to carry out state-strengthening agendas of modernization. Figures like Yan Fu (d 1921) and Liang Qichao (d 1929) prescribed modernization with popular political participation as the means to strengthen China against foreign imperialist incursions, but the idea of democracy was only being discussed and understood at an elite level, in an era when the world's leading examples were far from liberal, as understood in today's terms.⁶⁸

In the face of official skepticism and indifference, concerned Chinese elites formed

66 Kuhn, pg. 68, notes that such criticism was given by a Qing official who was actually pro-West.

67 Wong, for example, finds the explicitly anti-democratic views of Zhang Binglin (d 1936) to be instrumental and temporary.

He always favored revolution, unlike his "rival" Kang Youwei who intended to revive constitutional monarchy as late as 1917 (pg. 43), but he declared that if the uneducated Chinese people were given the power to elect their leaders, they would only choose (for reasons of ignorance and connivance) those who had been their oppressors.

68 Women's suffrage, for example, was still a radical idea in the West, and few elites thought that the massive illiterate population of China was ready for democratic responsibility.

“study societies” in the 1890's and published journals, often covertly, to discuss proposals for reform, including democratization.⁶⁹ While it is tempting to view these through a lens of inchoate, liberal democracy, such societies should not be mistaken for a Chinese analog of the American constitutional conventions. Instead, their liberalism extended only far enough “to strengthen China by finding public opinion and striving to attain 'popular rights'.”⁷⁰ Edmund Fung similarly claims that Yan Fu's liminal status as either a precursor or representative of Chinese liberalism stemmed from the fact that Chinese liberals were “revisionist and utilitarian from the onset.” Yan Fu and his contemporaries skipped the laissez-faire individualism of 18th century Europe and jumped straight to the modern, state liberalism of 19th and 20th England, where Yan Fu was first introduced to his liberal heroes.⁷¹

Returning to the components of my definition, Liang Qichao hoped that study societies would serve as consultative bodies which communicated with the government and “cultivated

⁶⁹ The fact that some leading figures were themselves government officials and the elite nature of these groups makes it questionable whether these were examples of civil society, but they certainly challenged the state directly by advocating political reform. Offering some support for the idea that these societies were themselves examples of Chinese democracy rather than forces for democratic change, Hill, pg. 4, notes that they were conceived largely to “give feedback” to the Qing government.

⁷⁰ See Duara in Wakeman's edited volume, pg. 318. He says that these groups were not overtly political and so “quintessentially a part of the public sphere.”

⁷¹ Fung, pg. 132, 134.

learning," fitting for the evolving role of people in Chinese politics. By Andrew Nathan's reading of Liang's essays from 1896-8, democracy was "chiefly...a means of communication between government and people."⁷² Such a conception presumes that existing institutions for communication either did not exist, had been severed, or were too weak to meet the needs of the people in a modernizing society. Like my own definition, notably, it is institutionally flexible, requiring neither elections nor even an end to traditionally authoritarian, dynastic rule. While both Yan and Liang openly expressed admiration for Western-style democracy, their preference for a constitutional monarchy under continued Qing rule placed them in the reformist camp, which eventually lost to the republican revolutionaries.⁷³ The revolutionaries were led by Sun Yatsen (d 1925), the "father" of the Chinese nation whose democratic ideas would shape the modern state fundamentally while ensuring the imperial lands and peoples remained a part of China.

72 Nathan, pg. 49, draws this definitive conclusion from the series "A Comprehensive Discussion of Reform", published in the journal *Chinese Progress*, which Liang also edited.

73 Schwartz, pg. 67-8, describes Yan Fu's commitment to democracy as "not immediate but ultimate" as the people were "incapable of ruling themselves", a position also held by Zhang Binglin. Instead of immediate democratization, the preconditions of self-government had to be prepared by an "enlightened elite" (pg.69) who presumably became so by reading his translations of liberal Western texts. Unfortunately, Fung notes that many consider Yan Fu's work to suffer from mistranslation, as when translating Mill's "On Liberty" Yan places the group above the individual. Liang Qichao is said to have abandoned his liberal democratic ideas after visiting Chinese communities in America in 1903, greatly disappointed that living in a democracy had failed to make active, liberal democratic citizens of his fellow expats (Duara, in Wakeman, ed. pg. 322)

Shelley Rigger and other scholars emphasize that democracy was not the Republic of China's only goal—or even its primary one. As a nationalist state, the first goal had to be the formation of the nation, still ongoing today, and President Sun Yatsen outlined several stages which had to precede full political liberalization.⁷⁴ Over the course of the 1910's, however, plans for China's future multiplied and diverged greatly. Following the establishment of the Republic, Edmund Fung finds elite thinkers divided between Chinese cultural conservatism, liberalism, and socialism, though with many overlapping, apparently contradictory tenets. For example, Fung casts Republican liberals who might have been expected to advocate Western-style democracy and the empowerment of the individual citizen as mostly “statists with socialist leanings.”⁷⁵ Du Yaquan (d 1933), a “scientifically trained” intellectual of the New Culture Movement of 1915-21, offered a noteworthy conceptualization which foreshadowed an Asian Values cultural dichotomy, arguing that the East was “*jing* (quiet)” while the West was “*dong* (active)” and thereby better suited to the political participation entailed in modern

74 Rigger, pg. 61.

75 Fung, pg. 2-3 for the ideological framework, pg. 23 for the illustration. Rejection of capitalism was also prevalent.

citizenship but also more prone to war-making.⁷⁶ After Yuan Shikai's ill-advised attempt at forming his own dynasty,⁷⁷ a second republic was declared and dissolved only five years later. John Fincher says the Second Republic of 1918-23 was doomed by "a shrinking electorate" caused by the loss of momentum behind representative democracy at the national level.⁷⁸

What had gone wrong?

Yang Liqiang, a historian from the PRC, has strongly implied that Chinese liberal democracy's failure lay not in Chinese culture⁷⁹ but in a failure to engage the masses genuinely in the limited democratic institutions which existed, primarily political parties and the elections in which they briefly competed. As "the idea of [liberal] democracy swept over the country like a storm," Yang counts 386 new parties and associations, of which 271 were political. Finding fault, he claims that not one of the parties represented the working class,

76 Fung, pg. 35. Du's views were published in a Shanghai journal in 1916 and represented a cultural conservatism.

77 Yuan's fiasco likely played some role in finally dissuading Kang Youwei from his intention, held as late as 1917, to revive constitutional monarchy (Wong, pg. 43). Zhang Binglin, by contrast, always favored revolution, though his vision for the product of change away from a dynastic form was unclear and often contradictory (pg. 62). He was, at least, adamant that elections were *not* a means to democracy, while at the same time opposing literacy and property requirements for suffrage.

78 Fincher, pg. 252.

79 Except to the extent that the scurrilous Yuan Shikai was a product of Chinese political culture. An "autocrat with thugs" (pg. 200), Yuan is said to have "used the bourgeois parties for his own rise to power, then outlawed them (pg. 207)." Lu (pg. 40-1) agrees that Yuan himself, for his imperial ambitions, was largely responsible for the failure of the first republic. Drawing on a Taiwanese history of the Republic, Lu notes that the GMD, Progressive Party, and Yuan Shikai each put itself ahead of China's wellbeing immediately after the fall of the Qing, with Yuan prevailing only to struggle against parliament to delay the constitution, then declare himself president for life in 1914 (pg. 42).

and by implication, government connection to the people could skim only the very top of Chinese society.⁸⁰ While greater than factions, for their “modern” competition, their number betrayed their impotent evanescence, and conflict among them did nothing to strengthen the state, still the over-arching nationalist goal. Instead, internecine quarrels opened spaces for competition of an even less democratic kind, among the warlords after whom the following era is named. But although the warlords “carried no concerns for democracy, the spirit of republicanism did not die.”⁸¹

With China tearing itself apart and few remaining institutional channels for popular participation, the May 4th Movement of 1919, consisting largely of nationalist street protests, should be seen as a major democratic data point. Until this event, mass movements in China had mostly taken the form of wholesale rebellions against the ruling dynasty.⁸² By this time, anti-Confucianism was rampant, and thinkers from the previous era like Kang Youwei and

80 See his chapter “Political Parties, Party Conflicts, and Society in Early Republican China” generally in Wakeman and pg. 192-4 for discussion of parties and the quotation opening the paragraph.

81 Lu, pg. 37. Unfortunately, Lu’s brief volume could not spare the pages to make the connection between republicanism and democracy more explicit, nor define either in isolation with any depth.

82 Though see the article and book by Ho-fung Hung on “contentious politics” and other popular demands on the Qing for a systematic challenge to this reading of mass politics before May 4th.

Zhang Binglin came to be seen as conservatives.⁸³ At the same time, new figures like CCP founder Li Dazhao emerged with proposals for substantive, as opposed to institutional and thus far ineffective, democratic change. His manifesto of 1919 called on the government to allocate funds for public welfare, health and education in particular, even in the midst of a fiscal crisis and very limited capacity. In short, while procedural democratic failures mounted, demands were being made by other means, anticipating what Samuel Huntington called praetorianism, the militaristic rule of the GMD under Chiang Kai-shek. As the 1920's progressed, even staunch republican supporters deemed greater central control necessary to re-unite China following the rule of warlords and make popular political participation more orderly and more directed toward state-strengthening.

Conclusion. This essay has attempted to disentangle the concepts of modernity and democracy, suggesting instead that a mass political consciousness, leading to greater popular demands to participate in politics, is a more ideologically neutral component of modernization. Similarly, leadership by an unelected head of state does not categorically exclude the

83 Wong, pg. 150, says that they didn't oppose the "New Culture" per se but were greatly offended by the "reckless ways and means demonstrated by the May 4th iconoclasts." If this was what democracy looked like, rivals Kang and Zhang could agree that they had no affinity for it.

possibility of democracy existing in a polity. Authoritarianism, especially one which is well connected to the population by institutions other than elections, is much less the antithesis of democracy than pure despotism, that canard of the orientalist history of yore.⁸⁴ It is more culturally sensitive to argue that China has its own concepts of democracy and liberalism, deeply rooted in the minds of its thinkers whose ties to China's cultural past add to both rather than adulterating them.

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⁸⁴ While examples certainly exist of leaders with virtually no interest in the wellbeing of those they governed, they are probably not the majority of China's emperors. By ancient standards, also, little consultation with the masses needed to happen for the government to know that the people desired the means to attain subsistence.

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