Conceptions of Chinese Democracy
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A writer in the *China Critic* raises the following conundrum: “Another interesting point is that it is stated that Dr. Sun’s teaching shall be the basic principles of our education, and it is also stated that the citizens shall have the freedom of conscience. Now if the conscience of some individual should revolt against Dr. Sun’s teachings or some of them . . . what shall be done to him?”

Sun Yat-sen developed his understanding of democracy as part of a larger attempt to resolve the problems of a weak China. While Sun put his understanding in its final form in the 1920s, his inspiration was the condition of China in the late Ch’ing (大清帝国) era and the disappointing developments that followed the establishment of the republic in 1911. These developments reinforced his thinking that a popular regime was necessary for China’s survival and success but also that unity and discipline were equally required.

Sun was a revolutionary opponent of the Ch’ing primarily for functional reasons. It is easy to see why he embraced a revolutionary stance on those grounds. China was losing control over its territories. Central control over the provinces was weakening, and outside powers were carving out economic zones of control. The Chinese population was increasingly impoverished, its traditional industries ravaged by imports. Between the late 1830s and the end of the nineteenth century, China had lost wars to England and Japan and had experienced a series of uprisings, the greatest of which, the struggle with the Tàipíng movement, had cost the state tens of millions in both money and lives. In an increasingly competitive world, China had fallen behind the great powers and was still losing ground. Its very existence as a political entity within the borders of the Ch’ing dynasty was in doubt. As Hunt usefully notes, an appreciation of this situation led to discussions among intellectuals around the turn of the century regarding the nature of patriotism, the importance of identifying a workable ideology, and schemes to revive the state, along with
conceptions of “the people,” political leaders, and the relationship of both to the state—all topics to be found in Sun’s treatment of democracy.¹

For Sun, China’s weakness stemmed from the state’s inability to maintain geographical unity and marshal the nation’s natural resources, especially its population. Sun conceptualized this situation in a contextual and evolutionary fashion. China was not congenitally weak and unable to hold its own among other nations, and it was not inevitable that China would be divided. China possessed the necessary resources of population, land, and culture. Yet China had lost its greatness and become prey to imperialist powers. The solution was to become modern. This position is not to be confused with later understandings of modernization, wherein nations were said to undergo a natural process of structural change. While he conceptualized modernity in mostly universalistic terms, Sun also portrays “becoming modern” as a series of choices. Nations, in his argument, consciously decide to change themselves (usually through revolutionary means) or to continue with the status quo. The first choice to be made on the road to modernization is to adopt the correct mindset. Once this first choice is made, subsequent choices become easier because the contexts they address are correctly understood, and the general nature of answers to problems is foreseen. As he would put in Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary, it is not action but attaining the correct understanding of things that is most difficult.

The Sān Mín Chù Yì doctrine, which he began developing in the early 1900s, is the framework Sun put forward as this first step on China’s road to modernization. That framework conceptualizes modernization in terms of political structures (democracy), national spirit (nationalism), and the development of human resources (people’s welfare). This framework generally treats the population as a resource whose will and sense of determination supply national strength. It holds that the form of the state that will allow China most effectively to draw upon this will and determination must be based on two concepts. The first is contextual. To compete in the modern world and unite itself in the face of external threats and internal tensions, China’s state must draw upon the active support of its entire population. Passive acquiescence is not enough, and resistance, intrigue, and rebellion are fatal. The only way of soliciting such support is to make the state a popular one; that is, China must create a state that draws its legitimacy from the fact that it is the instrument of the population as a whole.² The second concept is rooted in human nature. While sovereignty must be popular, administration cannot be,
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because ordinary people are not fit for the intellectual rigors of policy making. This differentiation characterizes all powerful and effective states, no matter their form or their temporal contexts. The right contemporary choice of constitutional forms and other large political structures must reserve administrative and policy-making powers to an educated elite.

Sun’s conception of democracy is part of this larger intellectual framework. For Sun, conceiving of the state correctly allows one to adopt the choices that
must be made if China is to transform itself from a disorganized mass of people into a disciplined country, from a premodern entity into a modern state, from a victim into a great power.

Views of Sun

Much of the literature on Sun seeks to locate the sources of his thought rather than to explore his philosophical positions. Many scholars reject him as an original theorist, with most Western researchers painting him as a practical revolutionary whose writings were infused with the intellectual influences of his environment. While extreme, there is some truth in the observations of one reviewer of Linebarger’s early discussion of Sun: “Actually, Sun was too much concerned with vital political problems to bother with logic, and when in the course of his wide reading he encountered ideas which he thought would contribute to the accomplishment of his ultimate aim . . . he did not hesitate to adopt them even though they might be mutually incompatible.”

Others do not go as far but still argue that there is no consistent “Sunist” doctrine. In this view, Sun was governed by his environment, as we find in Wilbur’s emphasis on Sun’s intellectual wanderings. Support for privileging environmental influences on Sun can be found in the fact that he revised the theoretical content of the Sān Mín Chǔ Yī lectures up to the time of his death.

Others see more consistent influences that contributed coherence to Sun’s work but differ greatly in their attribution of inspiration. For Tan, Sun was primarily influenced by Western writings on politics and democracy; these writings lend his views consistency, even if he often did not completely understand them.

Shotwell saw Sun’s democratic understandings as indebted to the West in ways that allowed Sun to harmonize the otherwise incompatible themes of nationalism, democracy, and socialism. Linebarger also traces significant influences to Western sources. Gordon and Chang do as well in terms of Sun’s understanding of democracy, though they hold he was most generally influenced by both Western and traditional Chinese philosophical sources.

In contrast are those who argue that the West had less to do with Sun’s thought than his Chinese environment. For example, Gregor and Chang argue that persistent scholarly attempts to link Sun to Italian fascist influences are mistaken. More important in their view are the influences of Confucian and neo-Confucian thought. Wang, in contrast, contends that Sun was not well versed in the Chinese classics. Instead, he holds that Sun borrowed from, was influenced by, and sometimes distorted or added to, fundamental
arguments first put forward by such popular contemporary intellectuals as Yan Fu (嚴復) and Liang Chi-chao (梁啟超). Thus, he holds that Sun’s doctrine was often derivative of modern, contemporaneous, and widely circulated Chinese arguments and understandings.\(^{10}\)

I see Sun drawing upon several sources in constructing his concept of democracy in ways that do not always contribute to coherence. As Wilbur notes in his biography, Sun was an eclectic thinker who attempted to synthesize ideas from a variety of traditions from both the East and West.\(^{11}\) From Chinese philosophy, Sun drew important ideas that cut across several traditions. Like the Daoists and Confucians, he emphasized context. Identifying the correct course of action and doing the right thing in those traditions does not entail reverting to a rigid principle or identifying an objective reality. Rather, it means identifying what is correct given a set of circumstances. Reality is not fixed; it is fluid and, therefore, what is right and correct is also fluid.\(^{12}\) Despite the translation of his Sān Mín Chù Yì (三民主義) doctrine as the three “principles” of the people, Sun does not adopt the Western, Kantian understanding of the role of principles as strict decision rules. Rather, “chù yì” (主義) is more akin to “doctrine,” the application of which should be contextually sensitive.

But Sun was also influenced by contemporary Western technocratic understandings of science and business. As had the Self-Strengtheners (洋務運動) before him, Sun importantly conceived of the modern era as dominated by science, technology, and industry. In this understanding, government is not a matter of setting correct examples, as the Confucians would have it, or of representation of interests (as in liberal theory), but of machinery. Sun argues that, just as the West has created machinery that increases the productivity of economic units, so China should construct a powerful, machinelike state. The institutions of government are portrayed as mechanical in his writings; that is, they are inanimate and impervious to context. It is the demos and the human elites who operate those institutions that inject subjectivity and sensitivity to context into them, and in this as well as other senses, there is a distance between the government as machinery and those who operate and control it. Sun’s position here resembles that of the Legalists (法家), who also argued that government is a matter of laws and technical judgments.\(^{13}\)

Sun also took from the West examples of the fundamental theory and historical practice of democracy. The experiences of France, England, and the United States are central to his understanding of the potential strength and
contemporary problems of democratic forms of government, and it is the West, not China, that gives him the material through which to reconceptualize and update democracy. Yet, while he was enamored of democracy as the new, modern, and potentially powerful way of running public affairs, he was not always captivated by the way democracies had been conceptualized or operated in the West. Earlier in his career, Sun was more willing to adopt Western concepts wholesale, but by the time of the Sān Mín Chǔ Yì lectures, he was distancing himself from the West and had become less liberal with regard to such topics as limitations on power and individual rights and freedoms, seeing those features as adaptations of democracy to the Western context rather than intrinsic aspects of democracy itself.14

**Sun on Democracy**

**Is Democracy Good and Is It Attainable?**

**Contextual Justifications**

Sun addresses the subject of the goodness and attainability of democracy in his first lecture on the Principle of Democracy (民權主義) in the Sān Mín Chǔ Yì lectures. For Sun, democracy is good, but not for the reasons many Western political theorists hold. Rather than describing it as intrinsically desirable or the political reflection of the innate equality of humans, Sun most importantly embraces democracy for contextual and instrumental reasons. Quite simply, democracy is in the spirit of modern times and, therefore, is the most effective way of transforming China from a disorganized and weak to a united and strong nation.

Sun argues that democracy is one of a series of types of government tied to the historical circumstances and development of humans. He denies that democracy is natural, explicitly rejecting Rousseau’s position that it is.15 In their natural state, he argues, humans are not equal, nor do they inevitably arrange themselves in an equal fashion once they leave the state of nature. This leads Sun to two conclusions. One is that democracy itself does not imply complete equality. In his understanding, humans are never equal in their abilities, and his conception of democracy does not attempt to level people in terms of control over policies. To do so would be an exceedingly dangerous way of constructing government in Sun’s view. People can only be equal in terms of their abstract relationship to the state; not everyone has the same claim to policy-making power.16
The second conclusion is that democracy as a form of government that spreads political power in general beyond a small circle of elites is not suited to all humans at all times. It is not at one with their nature because that nature is not stable, and government is responsive primarily to the way contexts mold the human condition. Instead of postulating a static human nature amenable to democracy, Sun substitutes an understanding of humans that features a deep-seated plasticity of political desires and needs. “Democracy,” he argues, “has not been Heaven-born but has been wrought out of the conditions of the times and the movement of events.” To put this in the context of classical Chinese philosophy, democracy for Sun does not participate in the natural, universal set of moral strictures that form The Way (tào), though he sometimes mentions tào in terms of political progress. Democracy, like all forms of government, is simply a tool that fits the requirements of particular circumstances.

Sun amplifies his contextual and instrumental privileging of democracy by surveying political history in a fashion that emphasizes the variety and fit of different types of government to a succession of historical contexts. A correct understanding of human history, he argues, demonstrates that governments vary in reflection of the needs of the time. Each type of government is functionally appropriate and therefore correct in its historical context. It would be wrong to condemn the ancient Chinese for not embracing a democratic form of the state. Such thinking, Sun holds, is not only deeply anachronistic but also politically wrong-headed. It would have been just as harmful for the ancients to have embraced democracy as it is for contemporaries to embrace autocracy. Now, things are different. Because democracy is currently the “tendency of the age,” just as theocracy and autocracy were earlier, democracy is the best form of government for China.

Democracy as the answer to contemporary problems. If there is a core to human nature in Sun’s philosophy, it is that humans react to and are politically defined by their contexts. These contexts are not to be understood by reference to the development of human potentialities, the stages of economic development, or the clash of classes. Sun’s understanding is more basic. Humans struggle to survive by overcoming increasingly sophisticated obstacles. These obstacles call forth different aspects of human character and require that humans interact with one another in particular ways.

This minimalist understanding leads Sun to an equally minimalist depiction of the origins and types of government. For Sun, it is not the need to create
order among humans that spurs the development of government, as it is for Machiavelli, Locke, and Hobbes but, rather, as for Plato, it is a variety of functional needs, each of which stimulates a different organizational form, including different forms of the state. Initially, humans lived anarchically. No state was needed when humans’ main problem was their competition with animals.\textsuperscript{23} When the human struggle shifted to nature as an adversary, the state came into being, in the form of theocracy. When struggles among humans erupted, rule by military leaders or autocrats resulted. Democracy only comes late on the world stage when, during the age of “war within states, citizens do battle with monarchs and against one another.”\textsuperscript{24} The epic challenges of regions fighting for autonomy and people struggling for power within and against the state indicate that China has entered that latest stage. Thus, by means of this historical excursion, Sun utilizes and contextualizes the traditional jiùwáng justification of democracy for China by placing the types of problems China encountered within the broader currents of human history.

Sun pushes this contextualized jiùwáng discussion to eventually reach democracy’s functions. He bluntly argues in his first democracy lecture that Chinese revolutionaries are “resolved that, if we wanted China to be strong and our revolution to be effective, we must espouse the cause of democracy.”\textsuperscript{25} Later, he argues that democracy is desirable “first, that we may be following the world current, and second, that we may reduce the period of civil war.” Democracy addresses the latter because it removes the struggle for the throne among men, to “prevent rivalry for imperial power.”\textsuperscript{26} Here again, Sun argues that democracy is topical and historically right because China confronts problems arising from modern contexts (unification, modernization, defense against other modern states). Important to this analysis is the judgment that only a strong state can address these problems, and democracy is the basis for a strong state in the modern context.

Note that the desirability of democracy is set in terms of functionality and contexts that are external to both humans and the state itself. The rightness of democracy and even of autocracy in previous forms of government depends on factors outside the state’s control and not tied to intrinsic human characteristics. Thus it is not that autocracy’s internal processes are inherently undesirable from a normative point of view that leads Sun to reject that form of government, nor does he paint the internal processes of democracy as innately good or suitable for humans in general or the Chinese in particular. Rather, autocracy is to be discarded because the state it creates is not sufficiently
strong to address modern problems or even to exist in the modern context. Democracy can create a strong state and survive both internal and external challenges; therefore, it is the appropriate form of the state for the current context.

Thinking about this aspect of Sun’s theory from a democratic-learning perspective yields the judgment that it is serviceable but weak. While such theorists as Smith argue that the least dangerous justifications of established liberal democracies are those that illustrate the practical benefits they bring, pragmatic justifications like Sun’s are open to a variety of damaging attacks. Simply put, if we posit a change in contexts, Sun’s justification for democracy within his system of thought disappears. When different types of problems arise, they will call for the features of a different type of state (or possibly no state at all). Democracy in this understanding is ostensibly not the final and most desirable form of human organization. It is good only in the context of the need for a strong modern state. That is why Sun explicitly admits that China’s former states were normatively good until the modern age arrived. They were fit for the times rather than normatively undesirable precursors to a timelessly good democratic entity.

An even more immediate and dangerous threat to the functional part of this justification comes in the form of a comparison of strength and effectiveness with other types of states. What if nondemocratic states provide evidence that they are strong and capable of good governance? If one were to show that democracies were less effective in dampening power struggles, unifying the nation, engaging in economic modernization, and overcoming external foes, then other forms of government that perform those function better must be judged more attractive. This problem is deepened by the nature of democracy as a form of the state. Structurally, democracy does not always lend itself to the creation of a strong state for the same reason it does not always produce good governance: the requirement that government be downwardly accountable can create significant problems. Regions may not want a strong centralized state. Citizens may wish to limit the power of officials and the reach of state organs. The need to garner approval and consult citizens’ voices may lead to slow decisions and ineffective policies. While arguments are made that, in the long run, the better information available to and self-correcting features of liberal democracies lead to better governance than nondemocracies, the evidence is not clear that such is the case in the short term. Authoritarian
governments have shown that they can create strong states and govern effectively despite their denial of popular sovereignty and incursions on individual freedoms. Singapore is a modern example.

While Sun’s contextual justifications are tied to the jiùwáng mode of understanding China’s political needs at the time, they are rather tepid when considered as materials for democratic learning both during Sun’s life and when read by later generations. Sun expends much effort justifying democracy, and while in the abstract this defense of democracy is important for identifying democracy as a legitimate modern government, his contextual, jiùwáng justifications do not travel well and lack critical bite as foundations for democratic learning. They can too easily be nullified by assuming different contextual conditions or through comparison with other state forms.

Democracy is the government of cultural maturity. If contextualism is important to Sun’s approval of democracy in that it presupposes conditions under which a strong state is necessary, that contextualism also plays itself out in Sun’s discussions of Chinese culture. While Sun does not provide a justification of democracy tied to human completeness or potential, it initially appears that Sun does tie democracy to an understanding of cultural development in a way that founds a moral claim to democracy.

At one point in the democracy lectures, Sun argues that while the ancient sages had an understanding of democracy, the concept was “utopian” in the ancient Chinese context because democracy is only truly feasible in an advanced civilization and only necessary in the face of the kinds of problems that such a civilization creates.29 Some of those problems are tied to cultural development. While Sun notes that the concept and practice of democracy originated in Greece, he holds that it had only become generally relevant within the preceding 150 years.30 It was during this period that the human struggle for survival moved from a focus on external enemies to a resistance to autocracy and a growing consciousness of inequities of power within states. Thus the field of struggle shifted to the grounds of morality, of “struggles between good and evil, between might and right” rather than struggles against animals or nature.31 This shift was created by the impact of higher culture on humans. The reason why there are struggles internal to states is that people are now “growing in intelligence and developing a new consciousness of self”; therefore, they are developmentally ready for democracy, just as humans as individuals are ready to “be independent when we grow up to manhood and seek
One can read this discussion to mean that the people of a culturally mature modern state can be politically autonomous in the same way they can be economically or socially autonomous. These forms of autonomy and the conflicts they generate, in turn, provide moral reasons for adopting democracy. While the need to defend the nation against enemies and maintain order and stability among citizens requires a strong state made possible by universal support, democratic control by the populace is also necessary to prevent the strong state from oppressing the populace and to provide a means by which culturally mature citizens can work out their differences.

Taken this way, this position reads as a moral argument justifying democracy in general and a liberal democratic model in particular. If one assumes that humans who have reached a level of cultural sophistication that connotes “maturity” have claims to the kinds of political participation and structures that are bound up with democracy, then it appears that the political regime suited to such humans must respect individual autonomy in the form of popular control of the state, a competitive political system that reflects the pluralist nature of modern humans, and a strictly enforced list of rights and safeguards against the abuse of state powers. Control over political affairs must parallel the control over one’s body that Sun appears to recognize as the moral right of modern adult individuals. This position would provide a strong lesson in favor of a constitutional liberal democracy as well as a general justification of democracy that is insulated from the weaknesses of Sun’s jiùwáng argument. But Sun’s reference to internal disorders and the need for unity in the face of external dangers aborts that line of thinking and short-circuits both the general democratic and the liberal democratic lesson. Individual autonomy is limited in Sun’s understanding, necessarily giving way to the need for internal order and externally directed strength. The analogy with individualism is misleading, for Sun is not a strong individualist or a subscriber to the concept of natural rights. There appears to be no moral claim on the part of citizens to enjoy liberal democracy or any type of democracy in his understanding. Rather, what he provides here is another contextual and functional argument in which he recognizes that popular sovereignty is the price to be paid for a culturally mature population’s active support for a strong state.

It is therefore important to recognize that, contrary to his language in these passages, what is really primary in Sun’s political understanding is not the individual but the nation and not morality but functionality. When he
describes democracy as a means of dealing with an environment characterized by struggle, the actors he conceives are collective. Democracy is the pragmatic means by which a people governs itself at a certain stage of development and by doing so achieves strength and unity. It is not necessarily a form of government that strongly protects individuals from the effects of collective decision-making or a morally mandatory arrangement that allows individuals to exercise political autonomy or to find room for pluralistic expression.34

Democracy Is Compatible with Chinese Culture

While Sun’s contextual justifications reference the abstract confrontation of internal struggles within states and the more concrete plight of China that he believes is redeemable only with the powerful state democracy brings, he is unwilling to relinquish a traditional and uniquely Chinese contribution to democratic development. He therefore also provides a mínbēn justification that references the criteria for judging government found in traditional sources. He does so, however, not as a primary justification or as a source of theoretical differentiation but as an argument that democracy is not alien to China.35

Sun argues that Confucius and Mencius both alluded approvingly to the principle that underlies democracy (people’s rights and people’s sovereignty) and commended the ancient emperors Yao and Shun because they “did not try to monopolize the empire. Although their government was autocratic in name, yet in reality they gave the people power.”36 Mencius, he further argues,

already saw that kings were not absolutely necessary and would not last forever, so he called those who brought happiness to the people holy monarchs, but those who were cruel and unprincipled he called individualists whom all should oppose. Thus China more than two millennia ago had already considered the idea of democracy, but at that time she could not put it into operation.37

This variation on the mínbēn philosophy of government is meant to root democracy in Chinese culture and history despite the absence of what are recognizably democratic regimes in China’s past. Its main focus, as with the mínbēn understanding in general, is the notion that good government means looking out for the interests of ordinary people taken as a whole, and insofar as democracy performs that function, it is compatible with traditional conceptions of good government.38
These passages bring out several important and interrelated points that serve Sun as justifications for democracy in the Chinese context. The first is the role of an enlightened elite in democracy and democratic transitions. The Chinese were historically and culturally aware of democracy, Sun argues. They understood its potential but were equally cognizant of its contextual nature. If governments in China were historically autocratic, this was inevitable given the circumstances China faced. Chinese autocracy could be, and often was, a good autocracy given those contexts and the availability of an elite who looked out for the interests of the general population rather than their own. Thus Sun implies that Chinese elites generally understand government and appreciate the criteria that distinguish good government from bad. Second is the character of that elite. Given that they are already educated in mínbēn philosophy, there is no need for changes in the general nature of the elite. Changing the form of government to give the populace sovereignty need not entail a wholesale purge of government officials or the mass reeducation of intellectuals. Also, given that they are unlike their Western counterparts in their dedication to the common good, the Chinese elite can be trusted with more power than the latter. Third, the presence of mínbēn philosophy means there is no cultural obstacle to changing China’s government to a democratic model because Chinese culture is not wedded to any particular type of government. There is no “Chinese” form of government or politics, only mínbēn philosophy and criteria that identify good governance. In this understanding, legitimate Chinese mínbēn government can be autocratic or democratic depending on the contexts. In the sense that mínbēn defines goodness by reference to the general population, there is a substantive link to democracy if the latter is viewed, as Sun viewed it, as government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Meanwhile, in a cultural sense, there is also no need for a fundamental reeducation of the population in preparation for democracy, though tutelage in the powers and responsibilities of democracy is required.

By establishing these three points of contact between China’s historical philosophy and democracy, this justification dissolves the problem of China’s nondemocratic past and overcomes the problem of origins. If China had no history that was relevant to democracy, then it would be difficult to find mechanisms by which China could become democratic other than by importing the concept wholesale. Not only is that solution not compatible with Sun’s emphasis on nationalism; it is also weak in itself. How could an alien import be expected to flourish on Chinese soil? With a mínbēn understanding, however,
democracy already has roots in China; it need not be imported and artificially planted. The transition need not be bloody or chaotic. Tutelage of ordinary citizens can take place easily with the same set of elites in charge. Democracy is not just a Western concept; it is a universal concept that China had already discovered.

Yet Sun's cultural justification is problematic for the very reasons it initially appears persuasive. If the universal concept of democracy is congenial to China's culture because mínběn criteria are agnostic regarding forms of the state, there is nothing special about democracy. There is no reason to favor it over other forms that equally meet the criteria of good governance and a strong state. Insofar as nondemocratic forms of government are congruent with contexts and challenges and conform to the mínběn criteria, they are equally legitimate. Thus, as material for democratic learning, Sun's cultural justification is powerful but limited. While it answers objections that democracy is alien and overcomes the problem with origins and transitions, it mirrors his contextual and jiùwáng justification by reinforcing their failure to delegitimize alternatives. In conceding the legitimacy of China's premodern autocracies by reference to mínběn criteria, he does not sufficiently differentiate democracy from those autocracies normatively or structurally. This is particularly important given his elitist conception of democracy. How are China's historical autocracies substantively different from democracy given (as we will see below) the ways Sun qualifies the latter's unique feature, government “by the people”? Not only are the former normatively equivalent to democracy in this analysis; they also appear to be quite similar.

**Attaining Democracy**

**China's Suitability for Democracy**

As we saw above, when Sun references the evolution of governmental forms, one of his conclusions is that democracy is government suited for humans who have reached their cultural maturity. For democracy to be suited for the Chinese context, China must have attained cultural maturity. But Sun does not consistently treat this criterion as a developmental necessity for democratization. It is a contextual argument, and context entails more than just cultural development. Equally important in his vocabulary is the Western and Chinese experience of revolution that is tied to his jiùwáng justification. Sun understands the struggle characteristic of the modern human experience as taking the form of revolution. Revolution, in turn, involves important nationalistic, economic,
and other dimensions that are tied to functionality in a wider world that is populated with other states and various types of domestic problems. Sun therefore moves back and forth between a purely developmental rooting of democracy and his revolutionary desire to adopt democracy for what he sees as its practical advantages in solving China's political, social, economic, diplomatic, and military problems. Democracy is necessary, he notes at one point, “if we expect our state to rule long and peacefully and our people to enjoy happiness.”

This ambivalence raises important questions about Sun’s understanding of China’s cultural progress and, therefore, China’s fitness for democracy. His movement from philosophical to practical political analysis glosses over the important contextual points he spends so much time explicating elsewhere and leads him to overlook the deterministic position he otherwise adopts. That position holds that if humans are characterized by struggle and experience stages of struggle that are produced by a particular stage of culture and produce particular kinds of problems, then China’s destiny is linked to this developmental model. Accordingly, if China is ripe for democracy, democracy will take hold. If China is not ripe, then the quest for democracy is utopian, practical and revolutionary considerations notwithstanding and decisions to adopt democracy aside. Democracy will be out of reach no matter his efforts and no matter what practical benefits democracy hypothetically might bring. Even if democracy could bring the strong state China needs, it will not come about if the relevant contexts are not present.

To accept this position, however, would turn Sun into a passive spectator of a deterministic history, a role he is unwilling to assume. Instead, he turns to various nuanced discussions of China’s readiness for democracy. At some points in the Sān Mín Chǔ Yì lectures, Sun suggests that China is positioned for democracy. Relying upon his understanding of traditional Chinese culture and history, he argues that, both politically and culturally, China is older than Europe. It has developmentally reached the age of democracy. Therefore, when he poses the question of autocracy versus democracy in general, he opts for the latter:

Which, autocracy or democracy, is really better suited to modern China? If we base our judgment upon the intelligence and the ability of the Chinese people, we come to the conclusion that the sovereignty of the people would be far more suitable for us.
But Sun does not always provide support for the position that China should immediately adopt democracy. This, it appears, is a separate question. While China should not submit to an autocracy and is more suited for democracy in terms of the Chinese people’s intelligence and ability, it is not clear that China is well prepared for democracy at the time, given the state of development of its citizens. That Sun doubts the cultural and political “maturity” of ordinary Chinese citizens is signaled in various other places. Previously, in Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary, he bluntly argued that the Chinese people in general were below the level of culture and cultivation that characterized America’s former slaves, and the latter had to be denied the vote when, upon emancipation, they proved to be illiterate. Ordinary Chinese people, he concluded, were like children in their level of political understanding. Though this was written some five years before the Sān Mǐn Chì Yì lectures, it is not likely, given Sun’s other references in those lectures, that he had fundamentally changed his mind on this point.

Sun is thus ambivalent regarding the readiness for democracy of ordinary Chinese or their place in his anthropological understanding of political evolution. His conclusion, it appears, is that while they are not unfit for democracy, they are not fully prepared for it either and that the problems China is experiencing are congruent with the kinds of human conflicts that generate democratic states. Given this conclusion, he explicitly calls first for a period of military rule to unite the country, then a period of xùn zhèng mín zhǔ (訓政民主), or “tutelary democracy,” to inculcate the correct political values and habits in the people before a third stage of constitutional democracy is reached. In Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary, Sun justifies this position by making several observations. First, he argues that democracy requires certain types of citizens, and therefore tutelage is a stage both normal and necessary for countries adopting democracy without prior practical experience. He elsewhere points to revolutionary France as an illustration of the problems of jumping directly into a democracy. Next, he references the low level of cultural and political development among the Chinese people in general. Third, he argues that the government’s actions during this period are not those of an autocratic government. Rather than seeking to perpetuate a situation in which the people do not exercise sovereignty, a tutelary democratic government trains the people in their duties as citizens, institutes local self-government, creates a provisional constitution, and, eventually, institutes full constitutional
government. All these activities, he argues, are necessary as interim steps that must be taken before China can enjoy a fully democratic government.\(^{42}\)

In describing this transition period, Sun is at ease with the cultural materials with which the government is to work. Part of this attitude stems from the fact that he generally holds that the experience of living under a democracy or tutelary government will bring citizens together into a “people.” But despite his stinging criticisms of Ch‘ing autocracy, his disparagement of the cultural and political acumen of ordinary citizens, and his insistence on tutelage, he looks favorably upon Chinese history, traditions, and values as useful building blocks of, and precursors to, the attainment of democracy. In this, Sun retains a bit of Confucian orthodoxy in holding up as exemplars ancient sages and kings in ways that go beyond the mǐnbēn understanding of good government (as will Chiang Kai-shek to a much greater degree). Some ancient emperors, he argues, had both ability and character in addition to the sovereignty they held. They were intellectually and morally fit to make public policy. Their exemplification of mercy, kindness, and love are important to the development of the virtues one demands of democratic leaders.\(^{43}\)

He also argues that incompetent rulers who held the throne were savvy enough to cede power to subordinates who were very competent. Where the first set of characters demonstrates that Chinese history has individuals whom leaders should emulate, the second character demonstrates something different—that Chinese history has examples of rulers whom the people should emulate. Being incapable of making the correct policy decisions, they should retain their sovereignty (as did the incompetent emperors) but cede decision-making power to those more competent than themselves.\(^{44}\) So even though China does not have the kind of democratic and individualistic cultural heritage that many liberal Westerners find crucial to the establishment of a democratic state, Sun is unmoved. Such a heritage is not necessary. China’s different heritage in this respect (though not in others, such as the tendency to identify with their localities rather than the nation) is beneficial rather than harmful to the democratic project and enhances the prospects of implementing his conception of democracy in China. Chinese culture and history in Sun’s understanding provide important lessons in democratic learning both for the adoption of important political virtues and for the correct understanding of the role of ordinary citizens. It is in part to administer and reinforce such democracy-friendly cultural lessons that a tutelary government should exist.
Sun’s lectures on nationalism in the Sān Mín Chǔ Yī also appear to link existing Chinese culture favorably with democracy. He argues there that while Chinese culture is still in a period of transformation to a more advanced level, the immediate future will not see a break with traditional Chinese values, and this period of cultural transformation will last for a considerable period of time. The Confucian constellation of virtues, he argues, must play a role in China’s way forward. China must throw away the bad in tradition but preserve the good. As part of this argument, Sun praises traditional Chinese political philosophy in the “Great Learning” (大學) and the importance of “personal culture” based on ancient virtues. While it is unclear whether his philosophical understanding of cultural evolution necessitates the complete eclipse of earlier cultural artifacts by later formulations, it is clear that Sun not only looks backward with approval but also believes that China can use its traditional values to build a mature political culture.

If Sun is content that China should create first a military regime and then a tutelary government, all the while postponing full democratization for a decade or more because of problems of unity and the lack of political preparedness on the part of most ordinary citizens, he also wishes to limit the reach of this point lest it damage the more general justification that China has the human materials necessary for democracy. He does so by emphasizing the difficulties the West faced in developing and stabilizing democratic regimes. If the West is the cradle of modern democracy, Sun argues that one cannot smugly point to developments there to denigrate the Chinese experience. In tracing democracy in the West from the English Civil War through the American and French Revolutions, he underscores the ambivalence of modern Westerners initially in the face of the democratization process, pointing to repeated failures, resistance, turmoil, bloodshed, and gravitation back to autocracy. The West did not find the creation of democracy easy and should not blame or denigrate China if it also flounders initially in its attempt at that task. Nor should the Chinese themselves lose heart or reject the necessity of tutelage.

We see from this discussion that there is some ambivalence in Sun’s conception of China’s culture and citizens with regard to their suitability for modern politics. Sun, I believe, is quite aware of this and attempts to paper over the inherent tensions in his use of democracy as a legitimating slogan. He attempts to finesse these difficulties by establishing the KMT as a revolutionary party whose goal is democracy and by pointing to the historical difficulties of attaining democracy, even while he simultaneously suggests that China
needs the powerful government democracy makes possible. Thus he argues that China needs democracy but must undergo tutelage before it can practice it and that only a powerful government can undertake the task of tutelage. Yet creating a powerful government capable of undertaking monumental tasks is one of Sun’s main justifications for democracy. By speaking of a party-led government whose goal is democratization, he allows for strong nondemocratic government because “the people” wholeheartedly support the government’s goal of democratization. If this is the case, why institute democracy at all?

As material for democratic learning, Sun’s legacy with regard to China’s readiness for democracy is mixed. His insistence that China can and should democratize is helpful. He removes arguments that there is something in China or Chinese culture that is innately hostile to democracy. He denies that “Asian values” make democracy impossible. He even paints traditional Chinese culture as important to the first stages of democratization, establishing again the compatibility of democracy with that culture. One can be a democrat and a good, faithful follower of Chinese cultural traditions.

Yet Sun’s insistence that China requires “tutelage” before it can practice democracy potentially undercuts important parts of that lesson. Why is such tutelage really necessary? If the tenets of Chinese culture are compatible with a democratic culture, why is practicing the latter so difficult that people require training? Implicit is Sun’s understanding of human plasticity. He appears to understand democracy as a modern form of government requiring a modern mentality. Traditional Chinese culture can participate in that mentality, but that culture cannot constitute the whole. It seems that something more—an active interest in politics and the capacity to oversee officials—is needed. These parts of a modern mentality must be artificially grafted onto people through training and practice, and it is ultimately the experience of democracy itself (in the form of local self-government) that will create the disciplined, nationalistic polis that will control his democratic government. Parts of this understanding, particularly the emphasis on the quick establishment of local self-government, are helpful to democratic learning. They reinforce the importance of democratic practice and the capacity of ordinary people to engage in democratic activities. And positing that people must be given training in democratic processes is not necessarily incompatible with other strains of democratic theory, one example being the inclusion of such provisions in discussions of deliberative democracy. Yet the general proposition of a state
devoted to tutelage as a consequence of a lack of preparedness on the part of the demos is otherwise problematic. It legitimizes the delegation to the state of large, unchecked powers to form individual character. Such powers are not congruent with the tenets of an understanding of democracy that sees the demos rather than the state as the source of subjective political understandings and leaves the way open to pseudodemocracy, authoritarianism, or worse.

**Finding the Best Model of Democracy**

Part of Sun’s position on the attainability of democracy implicates the search for the best model. Absent such a model, the Chinese cannot successfully adopt and practice democracy, not just because they are different, but because they require the full capacity and power of the state that democracy can bring. Sun argues that the West has yet to develop the best model because it has not yet fully grasped democracy’s theoretical nature and full potential. For example, he argues that while a model based on universal suffrage is good, the experiences of the United States show that “the common people did not possess the necessary intelligence and power to wield complete sovereignty.”

It appears that he thinks the United States allows too many people to vote and run for office for the sake of good democratic governance. Even more telling for Sun are the lessons France provides. While he is favorably disposed to the American Revolution, he is scathing in his assessment of the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. The problem, he argues, was the initial commitment of the French to a pure, or complete, democracy. This commitment, he holds, resulted in mob rule and, therefore, violence and disorder.

In the course of this discussion, Sun appears to distinguish among several models of democracy. These distinctions initially lead him into pessimistic territory. “Complete” democracy in his terminology is one in which the populace holds both sovereignty and administrative power; that is, power over policy as well as institutions is completely in the hands of all citizens. This is the kind of direct democracy that was practiced in the golden age in Athens and, by his description, in Paris after the French Revolution. In his mind, this arrangement inevitably results in the events associated with the French Reign of Terror, complete with disorder and mass violence as well as mistaken policies. Direct democracy rejects “natural leaders” and leaves the population bereft of their “good eyes and ears” that “distinguish who was right and who was wrong on any issue that arose.” Complete democracy is not the best model
because it does not contain the distributions of power necessary for the creation of correct policies and good governance. In other words, direct democracy is too democratic because, by providing everyone with policy-making and administrative power, it mistakenly levels the political field. The world, Sun holds, is not amenable to the understanding of all people either descriptively or morally. But this conception of the world is not readily apparent to the general population. They initially demand “complete democracy” and in the West only gradually realized its shortcomings.\(^{51}\)

Sun notes that the West has since moved to the concept of representative (or indirect) democracy. In this model, the populace elects leaders who carry out administrative tasks and make policy decisions. This procedure provides more discretion in terms of who exercises policy-making power in particular. If intellectually gifted individuals are elected, then good governance will follow. Yet this model, in the form of the liberal model of indirect democracy, is also not sufficient to realize democracy fully. Earlier we saw that Sun suggests that the US system does not sufficiently restrict the pool of those who should vote and hold office. Here he makes additional objections. As currently practiced, indirect democracy is not democratic enough; it is too weak, and it is not functionally correct.\(^{52}\) “The hope of foreigners that representative government will insure the stability and peace of the state is not to be trusted,” he argues.\(^{53}\) What is needed, he holds, is a model that empowers leaders to lead and to build a strong state but also allows people to hold sovereignty totally. In other words, what is needed is a strong, “responsible,” indirect democracy. The West has not put such a model into practice. Therefore, it has not yet attained and practiced the most perfect form of democracy, and thus China should not adopt fully any of the variations currently in use by Western states.

This state of affairs disappoints Sun. It would be comforting to know that an advanced democratic model has been fully worked out, successfully implemented elsewhere, and is ready to be taken over and implemented in China. Yet Sun does not wish to draw too bleak a picture. The forces of political evolution are still at work and are operating globally, not just in the West.\(^{54}\) Sun seeks to differentiate between the West’s prowess in technical and scientific matters and its efforts in political matters. Even if Chinese Westernizers were right that China should adopt Western science and technology in place of its traditional Confucian understanding of the natural world, they went too far in arguing for the automatic adoption of Western political forms. If “Western
social customs and sentiments are different from ours in innumerable points,” social differences are not the only reason for China to strike out on its own politically. More problematically, “Western nations have not fundamentally solved the problem of administering democracy.”

The core issue, he notes, is the need to create a powerful and stable state. States in the West, he observes, are externally powerful, having largely subordinated China. Liberal democracy is the most modern form of the Western state. But such states, while capable of engaging in imperialist endeavors and winning great wars, are internally weak because of the popular fear that a powerful state cannot be controlled. In his understanding, states in the West are either strong and run wild, oppressing citizens, executing leaders, and exercising power unaccountably (direct democracies in contemporary times, feudal autocracies previously), or they are shackled with checks and balances, limits on power, and elaborate systems for safeguarding the rights of individuals that render the state internally weak (liberal democracies). Liberal democrats hobble the state internally and water down the power of a united citizenry, fearing the effect of both the state and the masses on individual citizens. This fear is attributable in part to a liberal democratic distrust of government left over from the era of autocracies and in part to early experiences with the direct democracies of the French type. But giving in to that fear would mean creating a state too weak to unite China and forgoing the possibility of using the strength of a united Chinese people to engage in the gigantic tasks of unification, modernization, economic development, and liberation from imperial encroachment. Such a move is not acceptable.

Fortunately, Sun argues, he has created a more advanced democratic model by synthesizing observations of democratic developments on the ground with his theoretical appreciation of the modern role of democracy. He points to the fact that Switzerland and California have granted citizens four important rights (or powers): suffrage, recall, initiative, and referendum, the last three of which go beyond the powers normally associated with indirect democracy. These powers, he argues, are the key to keeping control over a powerful state. Combining political powers granted citizens by representative democracies with three additional powers should provide citizens the necessary leverage to keep control of a state that itself has more powers and fewer constitutional constraints and is more reliant upon the routine delegation of power to elites than the Western liberal model. This is the model of the democratic state China
should adopt, Sun argues, and it is derived by the logic of a Goldilocks argu-
ment: complete democracy is too democratic, and indirect democracy is not
democratic enough; Western autocratic states and direct democracies are too
strong internally, and Western liberal democracies and Chinese autocracies
are too weak internally. But an indirect democracy that combines a strong
state and an empowered class of officials with enhanced political powers in
the possession of ordinary citizens, in the form of suffrage, initiative, referen-
dum, and recall, is just right.

In putting forward this conception of democracy, Sun claims his place as a
theorist in possession of important theoretical and practical insights into the
nature of democracy. As material for democratic learning, this discussion is
useful and interesting. While Sun does not put his support behind a liberal
democratic model, he does legitimize democracy and delegitimize alternatives.
His discussion of various forms of democracy is also useful as a model of criti-
cal thinking. Democratic citizens should reflect on various types of democracy
rather than taking any particular form for granted. Whether his model would
work or is coherent, however, is open to question.

Sun’s Concept of Democracy: The Story of the Hired Car

As we have seen, Sun’s preferred conception of democracy is a mixture of
an indirect framework with important elements of direct and unitary under-
standings. Key to his approach to the problem of squaring good governance
and a strong state with popular political control is a distinction between “sov-
ereignty” and “administration.” “Sovereignty,” or political power (zhuchuán,
主權), is generally taken to mean that “the people” hold the ultimate power in
the state. The state is their property. Their goals are to be the goals of the state.
The state is to be run for their benefit. The people exercise the four important
political powers identified above (suffrage [選舉], initiative [創制], referendum
[複決], and recall [罷免]). These powers are to be used to force those who exer-
cise administrative power to be responsible to citizens and to follow the will of
the demos (i.e., downward responsibility). “Administration,” or the powers of
governance (zhichuán, 治權), is taken as the routine exercise of executive, leg-
islative, and judicial powers. While everyone holds sovereignty and exercises
the powers or rights that come from sovereignty, only those who possess highly
advanced knowledge and abilities are eligible to exercise the powers of admin-
istration. Here, Sun attempts to combine the populism of a “complete” democ-

played in the French Revolution and its aftermath) with the advantages of an indirect democracy (in terms of the choice of qualified people as policy makers) and perhaps a traditional Chinese meritocratic autocracy (with its promises of good judgment and virtuous behavior).

This combination does not add up to a liberal indirect democracy. Instead, it resembles a combination of a competitive elitist model with a unitary model. To illustrate and explain his advanced model of democracy, Sun moves away from his previous historical discussion to the realm of storytelling in Democracy Lecture 5 of the Sān Mín Chú Yì. Sun relates that when living in Shanghai, he once had to travel quickly to a meeting at some distance across town. He hired a car to take him there and informed the driver that he was due at his destination shortly. When the driver took a roundabout way to the meeting place, Sun was worried and angry. He thought this course would take too much time and wanted to order the driver to take the most direct route. But he kept silent, deferring to the driver’s expertise. In the end, everything turned out well, as Sun arrived in time for his appointment. Sun realized the driver was correct in his choice—the longer route had less traffic, so, as the driver explained, he was able to make better time than he would have if he had taken the more congested direct route. In this story, Sun was placed in a situation in which he had made a choice (to attend a meeting at a particular location) that implicated an activity (driving), the technical details of which were beyond his immediate understanding. In experiencing that activity, he came to realize that he needed to defer to and trust the expert in that activity (his driver) by giving the latter the freedom to take important technical decisions (the best route) as identified by the latter’s expert judgment. With the driver in charge, Sun achieved his goal.\(^{58}\)

In this story, Sun the passenger symbolizes the people (人民), the demos. He chooses a goal (a meeting to attend) and also freely chooses the venue of that meeting and thus his destination. He alone has the right to exercise these choices. The means by which Sun reaches that destination is a machine, a car. He does not operate this machine. Rather, another person with an identifiable occupation and expertise drives it. The driver symbolizes government officials. They understand how the machine operates: they know how to drive and maintain the machine in good operating order so that it functions efficiently when the people want it to function. They also know the routes (the policies) that lead to an identified destination and are able to use their training, experience, and intellectual gifts to pick the best route according to the
criteria the passenger supplies. The car is the state. It is a machine. It does not have a will of its own. It is powerful. It is used by the passenger for his ends and can only function when operated by the driver.\textsuperscript{59}

**The Demos as Passenger**

We start first with the character of the demos. In the story, the passenger is a single person. This characterization implies a cluster of characteristics: the demos is united and it has a single will, which, though subjective in origin, is expressed in a way that is understood objectively. Thus, Sun does not provide a pluralist theory of democracy. There is no allusion to interest groups or other manifestations of a population animated by a variety of motivations, desires, or goals that would be symbolized by a group of passengers debating their destination. Nor is there room for multiple political parties or for anyone who does not accept democracy and the republican revolution. As Sun puts it in a perhaps unconscious echo of Machiavelli and Rousseau, “Any unified and organized body of men is called a ‘people.’”\textsuperscript{60} In providing this description, he embraces an understanding of the general will that typifies the republican and Chinese unitary models of democracy. He also gestures toward the same understanding as did Machiavelli, Rousseau, and some of the American Founders who inclined toward civic republicanism: dissent from fundamental principles is treason, and interest groups and parties are to be treated as factions that weaken and distract from the common good and general will rather than as natural and acceptable entities.

Sun’s understanding of such a demos, however, was more normative than descriptive at this time. The Chinese should act in this way, but his lamentations in his lectures on nationalism over the lack of unity demonstrate that he did not think the Chinese possessed such characteristics in the 1920s. They had not become a “people,” a disciplined entity capable of exercising the ultimate powers of choosing collective goals.\textsuperscript{61} Their lack of unity was due to cultural, geographical, and historical reasons. Thus unity must be artificially constructed through participation in a democracy as well as through political training by officials during the time of tutelage. This latter point represents the first of several complicating factors in understanding the conception of democracy Sun means to convey, because this interaction between officials and ordinary citizens implies a different relationship than is provided by the story. To become a “people” in the context of tutelage, the passenger must be
taken under the control of the driver; in this story, the driver is under the orders of an already fully mature passenger.

Passengers in this metaphor do not drive the machinery of state. That task requires both specialized skill and intellectual gifts that are not available to all. A philosophical, political, and legal distinction must be made, Sun argues, between the demos and officials, which Sun claims is his crucial contribution to democratic theory. In making this distinction, he argues that democracy necessarily entails popular sovereignty. The state must be answerable and responsive to and ultimately controlled by the people. This is the essence of democracy for Sun: sovereignty possessed by the general populace and the state working for the “welfare and happiness” of the people, who in turn give the state their strength and energy. Sovereignty carries with it the right and power of all citizens collectively to make ultimate choices and hold officials accountable. Yet, he argues, this precept does not and cannot assume that people are equal in ability or equally fit for administrative and policy work. For a democracy (or any type of regime, for he levels the same critique at incompetent autocracies) to function, people must recognize that they have different levels of ability and must cede immediate administrative and policy-making control to those within the demos who have the highest levels of intelligence and administrative talent. Ordinary people must think of themselves in the same place and role as Ah Do (or Liu Shan, 劉禪), the incompetent ruler in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (三國演義). While they possess sovereignty, they must willingly yield policy-making and administrative power to competent persons, just as Ah Do originally delegated power to the scholar and strategist Chu-ko Liang (諸葛亮) to run his kingdom.

As the story of Ah Do illustrates, it is a mistake, Sun argues, to think that just anyone is administratively competent and should share direct administrative and policy-making powers. While Western democratic theory rightly recognizes the injustice and dysfunctionality of treating equals unequally and correctly condemns autocracies for the mistake of granting particular people political power on the basis only of their birth, he argues that Western democrats tend to make the mistake of insisting upon the equality of unequals in terms of administrative and policy-making talent, allowing incompetent people to wield administrative power either by permitting anyone who wishes to run for office in the case of indirect models or by granting everyone a role simultaneously through unconstrained direct democracy. Even though we should
recognize that everyone ought to have an equal share of sovereignty and all can equally employ the powers held generally by the demos, we must not allow those of lesser ability to engage in policy-making and executive work.

Sun is adamant that people are naturally unequal in terms of intellect and talent and that democratic theory must recognize this facet of human nature when it comes to political office. In Democracy Lecture 3, Sun provides us with a graph mapping the natural incremental gradation of people from “The Sage” to “The Inferior Man.” While he rejects what he calls the excessive and artificial political inequality of autocracy in the modern context, he argues that to insist that one category of person is the same as another in terms of ability is not only inaccurate but also leads to politically dysfunction: “If we pay no attention to each man’s intellectual endowments and capacities and push down those who rise to a high position in order to make all equal, the world will not progress and will retrocede.”

This statement at first glance appears to be an unexceptional reiteration of the concept of equal opportunity. Sun, it seems, is only arguing against a strict understanding of direct democracy and the institution of hereditary offices. This would not necessarily place him outside the liberal democratic model. But Sun in reality goes further. In rejecting direct democracy, he rejects not only Rousseau but also Jefferson. The latter, he argues, formed a party based on the proposition that people were endowed with natural rights and that if the people were given complete democratic power, they would be discriminating in the use of their freedom, would direct their power to the accomplishment of great tasks, and would make all the affairs of the nation progress to the fullest extent. Jefferson’s theory assumed that human nature is naturally good.

While Sun is setting Jefferson up as an exponent of populist democracy as opposed to a Hamiltonian emphasis on the power of experts and a strong central government, his position is more far reaching. Sun rejects not only direct democracy as a comprehensive model but also positions central to a liberal democratic theory that are necessary to the liberal notion of individuals as free and equal citizens. For Sun, humans are not endowed with natural rights—it is government rather than nature that defines and provides rights and freedoms. He also rejects the notion that the average citizen can use state power and individual freedom in a discriminating fashion. The average person is incapable of competently controlling governmental machinery. People
Sun argues that most people are politically inept and when given administrative or policy-making power will abuse it. Popular influence on government must be limited to setting only the broadest of goals and exercising the broadest of supervisory powers over government officials and should not include the right to exercise power directly as individuals or the right of an average person to have access to government offices. As Sun puts it elsewhere, the correct democratic idea entails putting only persons of ability in offices with responsibility for policies. If they fail, then the people can take that power back by ejecting them and putting in others or by collectively exercising their powers of initiative and referendum.

Sun’s understanding here appears complex or, less charitably, to present serious tensions for democratic learning. He rejects autocracy in the modern context and insists that the people must now have control of the state. This is a useful exercise in delegitimization and extends beyond the traditional mǐnbèn understanding of good government. As we have seen, he goes on to criticize the Western style of elective indirect democracy as insufficiently democratic and wishes at least to supplement it with the popular powers of initiative, recall, and referendum. However, he also uses his depiction of a natural human hierarchy to inject a stronger differentiation into the relationship between officials and ordinary people than does the usual understanding of indirect democracy or even an initial reading of the story of the car implies. His elitism here approaches that of autocratic theory.

To explore this tension, we first take up the additional powers Sun wishes people to exercise. The power of recall can be understood most generally as an additional aspect of representative democracy that participates in a delegative rather than trustee model of representation. Delegation assumes that representatives must automatically adopt the positions that ordinary voters take in the arenas of power. Officials do not take positions on any issue that is different from that held by the bulk of voters. This understanding does not accord well with Sun’s antipopulist understanding of officials as highly educated experts choosing the best policies. His view is closer to Burke’s conception of representatives as trustees—people who exercise their best judgment in public affairs no matter what the bulk of the population believes to be correct policies. In a trusteeship conception, recall would only be legitimate as a device for removing clearly incompetent officials. This represents a very low threshold of accountability. Yet Sun does not appear to furnish many grounds for
believing ordinary people even possess the ability to judge the competence of officials, much less to remove officials on other grounds.

Referendum and initiative are powers associated with direct democracy or with newer understandings of deliberative democracy. They presume the capacity of ordinary people collectively to make important judgments regarding policy either because policy matters are not so complex that they reside outside the competence of ordinary people exercising ordinary judgment (direct democracy models) or because ordinary people can be sufficiently trained to grasp enough normative and technical material that they can pass judgments on policy matters (deliberative democracy models). Sun clearly does not buy into the first scenario because he believes policy matters are complex.70 Does he, then, assume aspects of a deliberative democracy model? His references to tutelage are intriguing in this respect. He clearly believes that democracy requires training and popular engagement. The question, however, is what type of training for what type of engagement? Discussions of deliberative democracy speak of training people in critical thinking, data analysis, and structured conversations. In contrast, Sun’s discussion of training appears to entail making Chinese citizens “modern” both in a generic sense (i.e., comfortable with new ways of thinking, dedicated to the nation) and in a specific sense of accepting his understanding of correct politics. These are not sufficient for a deliberative model to function. Moreover, his understanding of the differences among humans appears essentialist, holding that the power to understand complex governmental matters is more innate than learned. Given therefore that Sun would accept justifications for these powers from neither direct nor deliberative democracy, and given that these powers are at the least associated with a delegative understanding of representation rather than the trusteeship conception he prefers, if not associated with direct democracy when Sun insists upon an elitist indirect conception, it appears that this aspect of Sun’s understanding is not coherent.

Other problems also attend Sun’s understanding of the place of ordinary citizens in his democratic conception. How is it that their voice will be heard in the corridors of power? Many of their claims, such as those associated with particular interests, would be disqualified in his understanding. Those claims associated with variant understandings of the popular will, in theory, would not be disqualified, but Sun seems to assume, as in his story of the car, that there would be agreement on the goals the state should pursue, including
among those with superior abilities. More complex would be a situation in which a more qualified person puts forward goals at odds with the will of the community, whereas an unqualified person embraces goals that the community approves. It is likely that Sun would dismiss these possibilities as purely theoretical or would argue that they would be rendered moot by holding that part of democratic tutelage would be training in identifying the most talented members of society, as well as the formation of the populace into a unified whole. Yet from a broader theoretical standpoint, such a possibility presents real problems for Sun’s theory. What if the demos is split in its understanding of national goals? Would the government then be rendered powerless, or would it on the contrary be empowered to remove any manifestation of pluralism? If the latter, then downward accountability need not be sensitive to differences of interests and understandings, because there should be none, or respect individuals as free and equal citizens, because they do not hold distinct identities; they are merely members of a corporate entity.71

A related issue is the assumption that government officials work to realize a common good that the populace identifies through the exercise of a general will. In identifying a popularly defined general will and common good as the object of government action, Sun ostensibly pushes beyond the mínbēn understanding of good government. It is not the driver but the passenger who sets the destination, and the passenger has certain broad veto powers over the actions of the driver. Yet thinking about democracy in these terms is beset with philosophical and practical problems. How do officials identify a general will or common good? Must agreement be unanimous, and if not, what is the threshold for deeming some degree of agreement as the general will?72 Sun says little about such problems. Moreover, even if we allow that a general will can be satisfactorily identified, what of the means for acting on this will? In accordance with Sun’s scheme of dividing sovereignty from administration, that task is delegated to officials, with the occasional intervention of the demos through the use of its powers. But, as Dahl notes, any particular conception of a common good or general will must be broad to command general assent. Such broadness also generates plural conceptions of how to implement any particular expression, conceptions that will often conflict to an extent that no specific policy can satisfy them all. Thus, to leave the choice of policy to officials is to delegate much more meaningful powers to them than is intimated by the story’s analogy of a driver’s choice of a route to a fixed destination. In
reality, the passenger can only identify a type of preferred destination, and the driver’s choice of the route will influence at which particular destination the driver and passenger will eventually arrive. The populace, it seems, would not really choose the state’s goals after all.73

These features turn the substance of this discussion into a mixed bag of materials for democratic learning. Sun’s assumption that it is the popular will that is to guide government does go far in legitimizing democracy and delegitimizing autocracy. However, it is difficult to accept a concept of democracy in terms of popular sovereignty, popular accountability, and active citizenship when the nature of inequality between ordinary citizens and those eligible to hold office is so markedly emphasized. His account also incoherently mixes elements of elitist and direct democracy models. Why should the people’s will control government if ordinary people lack comprehension? Why should ordinary citizens be allowed the rights of referendum and initiative when they are incompetent in policy making? Why should officials submit to downward accountability when citizens are incompetent and when a general will is necessarily broad?

Sun’s distinction between sovereignty and administration does not reach the core problem generated by his extreme elitism because, for that distinction to work, it must lead to a complete break between leaders and ordinary citizens and thus undercut the justification for democracy itself. As noted above, the tensions that Sun creates by his view of humans as radically unequal in ability are both with the concept of free and equal citizens and with accountability. With regard to the first, if the bulk of citizens will never have even the chance of exercising policy-making power as individuals (by being eligible to run for office, or even to voice particularistic interests), it is not clear how they can be regarded as equal with those who can hold such power. There really is no equal citizenship here. There is also a problem with suffrage. While it appears that Sun keeps the basic tenet of indirect democracy in which citizens choose their policymakers, this does not seem to be fully the case. The demos cannot choose someone outside the intellectual elite. Such circumscriptio of choice considerably reduces the power ordinary citizens exercise, particularly if those eligible to hold office are associated with a single party.

Second, how is downward accountability to be conceptualized and enforced? If policy making and strategic vision are beyond the ability of most citizens, how can they evaluate their leaders’ performance or articulate long-term goals with any kind of foresight or intelligence? If the gap between offi-
cials and citizens is as large as Sun paints it, why should the intellectual elite acquiesce to popular oversight and goal setting? If energy and manpower are the reason, these can be derived more easily by authoritarian mobilizational techniques than by ceding the four powers Sun grants ordinary citizens. Here again, the lack of more than instrumental justifications of democracy damages Sun’s argument. There appears to be no good reason for him to award ordinary citizens the powers he outlines if he is unwilling to grant that they could grasp the fundamentals of policy making, have the capacity to set strategic goals, or have some moral or other claim to democracy based on an understanding of human nature. Nor does he provide good reason for those who are intellectually or otherwise well equipped for power to accept such an arrangement when alternative forms of government are available. To articulate a coherent democratic conception, Sun must considerably lessen the distance between officials and ordinary citizens and blur the distinction between administration and sovereignty.

**Government Officials as Drivers**

In Sun’s narrative, the metaphor of a driver representing officials likewise implies a variety of characteristics. In the story, there is only one driver, so there is no dispute as to how the task of driving is to be carried out. There is to be unity in officialdom, implying again the role of a single party or other type of unified group of political figures that dominates the political arena. The choices the driver is allowed to make appear to be limited, being bounded by the destination, or goal. He cannot change the goal by disputing the importance of the meeting, the desirability of its location, or the rationality of the passenger in deciding to attend meetings. He must choose the best route to that destination. Moreover, his choice is limited by an important aspect of the route, namely, *timeliness*. In the story, then, the driver has freedom only in how to drive the car and the route to take.

One may interpret this aspect of the story in several ways. In one interpretation, it appears the people are firmly in charge, with officials merely following their orders as technically skilled minions. Their technical volition does not add up to much freedom, as is the case in Rousseau’s account of administrators. Sun glosses this argument when he asserts in Democracy Lecture 5, “We must not look upon these experts as stately and grand presidents and ministers, but simply as our chauffeurs, as guards at the gate, as cooks, physicians, carpenters, or tailors.” This reading is in keeping with Sun’s criticism
of Western elective democracies as failures, in that the people are empowered only “to elect and be elected.” They cannot affect policies directly, for “all measures of national importance must be passed upon by Parliament before they can be put into effect.” He questions this arrangement: “But does this form of government insure the perfect development of democracy?” In Sun’s analysis, the answer is no. He wants further popular control of government. Citizens should firmly direct the actions of officials, and officials should not filter the goals and desires of the people. Sun believes he makes such control possible by adding to suffrage the three additional political powers noted above.76

Yet the story of the car also invites alternate readings. Another interpretation holds that Sun is merely describing a Westminster-style parliamentary system in which governments are held to account by a national legislature and fall if they do not maintain majorities. Thus at another point Sun asserts:

When democracy is highly developed and methods of controlling government are perfected, the government will have great power, but the people will only have to make their opinions known in their national congress; if they attack the government, they may overthrow it, or if they laud the government they may strengthen it.77

This description implies something different than a group officials operating in the fashion Rousseau approves; instead, it appears to describe a powerful cabinet government that is responsible to a national legislative body. Officials in this understanding could have a free hand to craft policies and otherwise enjoy wide discretion in administrative matters but could be defeated by losing a confidence vote. In this understanding, Sun is not going beyond indirect Western models in the constitution of government except to add the three additional powers of recall, initiative, and referendum. Indeed, this looks somewhat like Held’s description of Weber’s competitive elitist model.78

In a third reading, buttressed by Sun’s insistence on inequalities of ability, what he is referring to is not a Westminster system but the empowerment of a much stronger set of officials who have the capacity to mold the nation and make strategic rather than tactical decisions and to make policies that shape the preferences and outlook of the population. In this reading, the equation of a government official with a chauffeur is not only inaccurate but misleading. The abilities of the “sage” and other higher-grade people significantly surpass
the technical skills of driving and maintaining a car and familiarizing oneself with traffic patterns. Hence, the reference to attacks and support in a national assembly must refer to much stronger manifestations of discontent than routine votes of no confidence. They suggest plebiscites, in the absence of which officials would continue to hold and exercise wide powers. Instead of showing the demos in charge, this description portrays citizens following in the wake of official expertise, intervening only in times of major discontent that would result from manifestations of gross incompetence. Given the wide differences of intelligence and ability in Sun’s understanding of natural hierarchy, anything else would be beyond the powers of the demos.79

While this latter interpretation of Sun’s understanding of government officials runs afoul of a surface reading of the passenger-driver relationship in his car story and of his criticism of Western elective democracies as insufficiently democratic, it appears to fit best his understanding of humans. Rather than reducing affairs of government to technical matters, this understanding elevates politics to the level of technical expertise. Supporting this reading are Sun’s further references to human types. Refining his earlier discussion, Sun argues in Democracy Lecture 5 that a correct understanding of humans differentiates among three fundamental groups (where earlier he had given eight categories): (1) those who can see, perceive, and have insight into the future; (2) those who can understand by learning through imitation only after something has been discovered; and (3) those who cannot perceive or understand at all but can be depended upon to act. While all are necessary to progress and valuable to the nation, as a matter of functionality and good sense it is only the first group and some members of the second who should be entrusted with governmental power because they are extraordinary in both their competence and, as his rejection of the Jeffersonian view of human nature and his identification of “sages” suggests, moral character.80 To create a workable democracy, people must recognize and accept these gradations just as they recognize differentiations, in another metaphor, in the building trade between those who plan the building, those who supervise the workers, and those who do the actual construction work.81

There is also much additional support for this reading in Sun’s discussion. He routinely argues that one must treat government officials like experts and defer to them, just as one defers to military or business experts, and that one should defer to them even if, or rather especially if, one does not understand
what the experts are doing. At other times, he likens officials to the managers of companies in whom stockholders vest administrative responsibility. Thus Sun says of officials in Democracy Lecture 5 that “if they are able men and loyal to the nation, we should be willing to give the sovereignty of the state into their hands. We must not limit their movements but give them freedom of action; then the state can progress and progress with rapid strides.”

Such passages put into question whether ordinary citizens should ever exercise their political powers in ways that would interfere with incumbent officials and suggest the possibility of a strong feedback loop, in which officials set forth goals that are ratified by the people; this, then, is conceptualized in terms of the demos setting forth the direction of the state. It would be as if, in the story, the driver were to set both the general and particular destination and, through his superior abilities, persuade the passenger that this action was really an exercise of the passenger’s will. Sun might describe his position more benignly by arguing that those to whom he attributes foresight partake of the general spirit of the community, and if that foresight differs from the popular understanding, they would persuade the demos of the correctness of the alternative set of goals. The demos could be mistaken in its identification of the general will or of the common good. But in either version, it is not clear that the demos really is setting the direction of the state. Such a condition seems to require both the capacity for, and reality of, independence that the demos does not possess in Sun’s depiction. It would appear to be dominated by its more intelligent members to the same degree as is the state, thus again problematizing officials’ downward accountability.

The ramifications of this understanding are significant. Most important, Sun appears to identify knowledge as the marker of eligibility for office. As in the Confucian tradition, knowledge commands respect and power apart from the choice of the demos. To put it radically, the demos in Sun’s understanding has a responsibility to recognize ability when putting officials into office. It appears that if a person not of higher intellectual rank were voted into office, he would not have a morally clear right to exercise power on democratic grounds. If the demos chooses an unqualified person, it has made a mistake in terms not just of functionality but also of democratic morality. Only those with clearly superior capacities may rightfully hold office, no matter what the demos wants. This understanding acts as a limit to democratic choice in much the same way as would constitutional principles. Further, it would provide jus-
tifications for barring individuals from the ballot and monopolizing political power through the institution of single-party government. It could also give officials justification for canceling elections, limiting the scope and frequency of elections, or ignoring the results of elections on the premise that no one besides incumbent officials is competent to hold office.

It could be that some of these difficulties could be explained by again positing that Sun supplies a version of a competitive elitist model of democracy. In Weber’s version of that model, there is in practice also a wide gulf between ordinary citizens and political leaders and the reservation to the latter of the power to formulate policy. Weber likewise argues that citizens are only capable of throwing out incompetent leaders through a plebiscitary process. The difference is that Weber thought of political leaders as the heads of parties that competed with one another in the context of a pluralistic demos. Sun did not appear to embrace either this pluralism or the understanding of parties as the connectors of particular citizens with leaders. Nor did Weber embrace the powers of recall, initiative, and referendum.

There is also some difficulty in attempting to classify Sun’s conception of the relationship between officials and citizens under some versions of the republican unitary model. Sun appears to occupy a position that is different from Rousseau’s. For Rousseau, government officials are only supposed to implement the will of the people. They are purely administrators. They are not, in theory, to interject their understandings of policy preferences into the deliberations that inform the general will. In his formulation, citizens lay aside their role as administrators when deliberating with the rest of the community. Rousseau, however, is able to sustain this understanding because he assumes that government officials really are ordinary citizens with particular jobs and thus no different than any other random citizen. Sun’s understanding of the difference between experts and others does not replicate this conception. It appears to recall instead Machiavelli’s praise of founders as extraordinary people who can grapple with fortuna.

Another way of understanding Sun’s conception of the role of officials, though it runs against his implication that natural human hierarchies involve moral knowledge, is through his analogy of policies as “routes.” This understanding accords with his conceptualization of the state as a machine (discussed below) and his tendency to drain politics of partisanship and particular interests. It implies that politics and policies reduce to technical matters.
Policies, like routes, are both amoral and the subject of specialized knowledge that allows them to be apprehended objectively. Ostensibly, if goals are specified, all leaders need do is create policies that achieve those goals most effectively within constraints that the demos sets. The story of the car implies that choices among routes are differentiated only by such constraints (speed, scenery, distance, etc.) that are assessable by technical means rather than by moral or otherwise normative values. Officials’ policy menus would be created by a technical understanding of the best ways of attaining the goals identified by the demos. Likewise, choices from those menus would be governed by technical and specialized knowledge.

However, insofar as we see Sun adopting this technical description of leaders and policies (and there is textual support for doing so), he not only continues to run into the problems of choice alluded to above in reference to Dahl’s discussion, but he also departs from any realist appreciation of institutions and politics. Drivers and machines, leaders and governments are here conceptually, practically, and politically separate. In the car story, Sun depicts leaders as tending to the machinery of state in an impersonal way. Drivers drive cars; leaders lead states. They can be trusted because they possess ability, only employ technical knowledge, and if they lose the trust of the people, their freedom of action can be further curbed or they can be fired. There is nothing in this description suggesting that operating the machinery of state creates an interest in retaining control of the state or that operating parts of the state creates different interests among officials. Nor does Sun acknowledge that such operations permit leaders to use instruments of control and coercion to resist attempts to curb their discretion or to fire them. For Sun, possessing the wheel of the vehicle of state does not confer either interests or power to resist the people’s sovereignty. Any thorough understanding of the nature of politics would make one skeptical of this picture. Leaders can burrow their way into states in ways that are not captured by the driver/car metaphor. Leaders also develop deep interests in maintaining the driver’s seat that are similarly neglected by the car story. In the story, if Sun fires the driver, the latter will acquiesce. There is nothing that allows the latter to keep Sun as the passenger against his will. This is not the case in the actual world of politics.

Sun’s lack of clarity and his refusal to recognize the dangers of state power weaken this discussion as a source of democratic learning. Sun’s insistence that officials are placed in office by the people is democratically useful, but his
reservation of office for a particular set of extraordinary people who appear to exercise almost complete control over policy making (save for instances in which citizens inexplicably exercise referenda and initiative powers) mitigates that democratic lesson. More broadly, the vagueness of his story’s depiction of the relationship between officials and the demos is also problematic. Who really sets goals? How much discretion should officials possess in interpreting their popular mandate to govern? How can the demos hold officials to account? Is this a Westminster system in which legislators routinely and regularly hold officials to account or something more like a plebiscitary democracy in which citizens hold occasional referenda on the government? Can and should officials attempt to mold the popular will? Are leaders of high moral standing or do they only possess superior technical knowledge? These ambiguities confuse the lesson Sun attempts to provide regarding the commanding position of the demos and weaken the proposition that democracy importantly entails popular sovereignty and downward accountability.

More fundamentally troubling is the fact that here and throughout his discussion of democracy, Sun embraces many of the arguments that Dahl has identified with the “guardianship” critique of democracy.\(^86\) This critique argues that policy making requires special abilities and special knowledge that is beyond the reach of ordinary people. Politics should be reserved for the intellectually skilled element of the population. Plato is the most famous of those who use this theory to reserve power to the few. Sun likewise posits that humans are vastly unequal in their talents and depicts the world as complex and difficult to understand. Where Dahl argues that such arguments logically lead to justifications of authoritarianism, Sun attempts to sidestep this problem with his distinction between sovereignty and administration. Nevertheless, there will always be an elitist character to Sun’s understanding that appears to go beyond the differentiation contained in various elitist democratic models and puts into question the very democratic nature of his scheme.

Given these criticisms, it is also important to note when Sun is writing. The early twentieth century was a time of fascination with experts, technology, and science (hence the May Fourth Movement’s advocacy of “Mr. Science” along with “Mr. Democracy”). The idea of ceding government to an intelligentsia who could decide policies rationally in imitation of technical experts was an appealing response to the increasingly complex nature of politics. Moreover, thinking of democracy in terms of competitive elitism and arguments
regarding the inevitability of government by an elite was also popular in the West. Michels’s skepticism regarding democracy, as well as Weber’s conception of democracy, depicted ordinary citizens as necessarily taking a passive role in government, in large part because of their relative disadvantage in terms of knowledge and understanding. In this comparative and contextual perspective, Sun’s views fare somewhat better.

The State as the Car

Sun’s conception of the state in this story is that it is a mechanism, though he also appears to move away from that view at one point. If the state is a machine, it is not made up of individual humans with particular interests and desires. Rather, it appears to be a kind of inhuman construct. It is an object without realist attributes. It does not resist steering; it lacks interests and direction of its own. It does not fight modifications and reforms. As a mechanical servant, it is the perfect instrument for attaining goals identified outside its field of decision making. 87

Sun uses this conceptualization of the state as a machine not only to deny that its citizens may possess separate interests and to emphasize its instrumentality but also to underline the importance of creating an increasingly powerful state in China. As noted above, Sun wishes to emphasize his disagreement with many contemporary Western understandings. The West, given its history of harsh autocracy and revolutionary direct democracies, has become distrustful of the state, Sun argues. Western theorists maintain that the state must be kept internally limited in order to protect the people. The rise in the West of checks and balances and the concept of natural, individual rights enforceable against the government through an independent judiciary and other tools to fight absolutism were spurred by the desire to weaken what was perceived to be a necessary but dangerous entity. China, he argues, both lacks that history and occupies a different international and domestic context. China’s autocracy historically was more benign and its governments weaker, with less reach into the affairs of ordinary people, than were autocracies in the West. For Sun, what threatens the people in China is not a strong but a feeble state. China can settle for no less than the “best” state in terms of good governance, and the best state is powerful. 88 Indeed, Lei goes so far as to argue that Sun advocated the creation of an all-powerful state with no practical limits. 89 So in thinking of the state as a machine, Sun attempts to
link its dangers to contexts rather than inherent characteristics. As an inanimate object and a tool, it is only as dangerous as those who wield its power.

However, having emphatically made this point regarding the machinelike character of the state in several places, Sun proceeds to muddy the waters conceptually by arguing that one cannot apply social science in the same manner as natural science and technology when speaking of politics. This argument undercuts his understanding of government as a machine and officials as technical experts, which points explicitly to technology and something like the Western understanding of natural science as the correct sources of knowledge. If the distinction between sovereignty and administration is to work as part of a democratic conception (and above we saw that this distinction is otherwise problematic) and if he is to distance the state as an entity from dangerous propensities, he must see administration and the nature of politics as involving knowledge that partakes of the epistemological objectivity of Western natural science. Otherwise, he must concede that the state itself is not an inert object but has independent agency. Yet Sun provides a different and perhaps more troubling conception, arguing that what China needs with regard to the state is not a technical attitude on the part of officials but a change of attitude on the part of the people, from an emphasis on liberty and equality to a properly modulated adherence to those values plus democracy. The result is a different attitude toward government—not of indifference (as in the past in China) or hostility (as in the West) but of acceptance and support. The key in his mind to the construction of a powerful state therefore is not structure—the character of institutions, the addition of particular powers—but psychology. The state can be powerful and controllable at the same time because it is part of a larger psychic being—the people. This understanding serves to link officials to the demos not by ties of accountability but through the bonds of nationalistic fervor.

Sun’s contribution to democratic learning here is hindered by significant normative and practical difficulties. Normatively, his understanding veers between attempting to make the government mechanical and attempting to make it an extension of the people. Insofar as his arguments favor government as machinery, they tend to shield it from the criticism of ordinary people. Policies are too technical for ordinary people to understand. Insofar as he paints the state as a nonmechanical extension of the people, he runs the risk of rendering such criticism illegitimate because treasonous and removing the
possibility that citizens can enjoy rights as limits on state power. As he sometimes notes, the people need no rights because they control the state. He runs the risk of justifying the type of revolutionary state that arose in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, a type of state he condemns because the identification of the populace with the state led to what he believed was a dangerous model of direct democracy. Practically, his understanding veers between a lack of a realist understanding of interests in his mechanical description of the state and a lack of appreciation of the structural inequalities of power that inevitably arise as a consequence of a state’s existence. The nationalist states he admires may appear to be populist but are often under the command of officials who do more to manipulate citizens than citizens do to control them.

In all, this part of his discussion provides only generally useful materials in that they emphasize the argument that government machinery should be subordinate to the will of the demos. Otherwise, this contradiction in his discussion serves more to confuse than to educate. In terms of different models, Sun draws little on liberal democratic conceptions; instead, he uses arguments more congenial to unitary versions of democracy—with their emphasis on the people’s will and neglect of the rights of minorities—and to elitist understandings.

Elections and Sources of Accountability

Sun’s understanding of political participation and downward accountability is conditioned by his simultaneous acceptance of human inequality and his uneasiness with elections as the primary way of incorporating the will of the demos into the state. He rejects the usual machinery of direct democracy (the routine participation of ordinary people in the policy-making process through large assemblies of citizens) on the grounds that such arrangements will necessarily lead to disorder because ordinary people are incapable of discharging such duties. But he also rejects the Western conception of indirect democracy as inadequately democratic. Democratic participation must extend beyond “the right to elect and to hold office.” This position leads Sun away from any emphasis on competitive, multiparty electoral systems. Downward accountability in the form of elections is not based on competition in which people compare policy platforms but on assessments of competency in which the demos passes judgment on officials in their pursuit of the goals upon which
the demos has internally agreed. Only if the demos as a whole makes an adverse determination based on that criterion will elites be rotated out of office either by election or recall. Otherwise, citizens defer to officials or collectively intervene through referendum and initiatives rather than by joining together in parties or other groups to oppose the government. Political activity, in this sense, is not individual, nor is it to lead to divergences of opinion or policy, given that, at bottom, differences of understanding and of interest do not eclipse the common will of the people. Elites participate politically as “officials” who use their expertise and their knowledge, and ordinary people participate collectively as “the people,” who set goals and assess whether officials are performing their jobs competently through the collective instruments of suffrage, recall, referendum, and initiative.

Several other pieces of evidence point to Sun’s rejection of multiparty electoral democracy and the possibility that he was not in favor of the Westminster-style system explored above. First, as we have seen, he conceives of the demos and officials in the car analogy as unified and undifferentiated entities. No division of interest or goals is attributable to citizens as a whole, and no differential understandings of driving characterize officials. Second, he only appears to refer to the KMT when discussing political officials. Third is his discussion of Western democracy. In parts of that discussion, Sun appears to reject the notion that political and intellectual pluralism is desirable. The West, he argues, has not attained the best form of democracy because revolutionaries allowed the division of the people into multiple political parties. For Sun, the most important thing about this division is that they represent not merely different interests but different intellectual positions, which leads to a fragmented understanding of politics unable to produce and sustain a powerful, centralized government. He traces the origins of that fragmentation to different understandings of human nature and illustrates this conclusion by exploring early American political history. For example, he posits that Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans were progressive exponents of populist democracy who favored the decentralization of power because they held an optimistic view of humans and wished to see them exercise their autonomy. In contrast, Hamilton and the Federalists saw humans as imperfect and thought that giving too much power to the populace was dangerous and could result in anarchy and the inability to attain justice, law, and order. Therefore, the Hamiltonians proposed a more centralized and powerful state structure.
While Sun definitely prefers the Hamiltonian Federalists to the Jeffersonian Republicans in terms of substantive politics, he more fundamentally regrets this division of thought into different camps. He strongly suggests that multiple political parties are dangerous to democracy because they espouse different understandings of the world, different policies, and different goals. They put forward competing understandings of the state, the people’s will and common good, and of people themselves.\(^9^3\)

This overall position again has important ramifications for understandings of accountability, in that it appears to emphasize democratic accountability mainly through referenda or plebiscites rather than the more generally accepted understanding of a choice among multiple candidates. For some democratic theorists, this shift is deeply problematic. For example, Shapiro notes that competition for office not only allows people with diverse interests to obtain power but acts as a mechanism for creating a watchful opposition that continually critiques governments and holds officials accountable in ways that are not available through other means.\(^9^4\) Sun’s account appears to remove this brand of oversight from his democratic conception. In Sun’s postpartisan democracy, the opportunity for institutionalizing a watchful opposition does not exist, as it would be viewed as divisive and destabilizing.

As noted above, Sun’s discussion here is often uneven with regard to democratic learning. From the viewpoint of liberal democratic theory, Sun’s rejection of competition and pluralism makes this weak material for democratic learning. Yet this is to hold that only competition provides accountability. One might argue that a vigorous use of plebiscites might allow a populace to hold officials to account without the need to hold over their head the possibility that they may be replaced en masse by a different group and without the need for constant critiques based on alternative policy proposals. This appears to have been Rousseau’s understanding of democratic accountability. Sun’s acceptance of suffrage (despite his criticisms of the inadequacy of elections) as well as the other three powers is clearly useful. His discussions establish the need for the demos to hold governments accountable and provide it with tools by which to do so. However, he does not clarify why ordinary people should exercise any further powers beyond suffrage if, in fact, the basis for his understanding of democracy is that ordinary people should not exercise administrative or policy-making powers. Yet this is precisely what he proposes. Having condemned direct democracy, he seeks to inject important elements of that model into his preferred form. That Sun so strongly argues for democ-
racy and its further development is laudable and abstractly useful to later proponents of democracy, but the specifics of his discussion, besides their vagueness and paucity, are as likely to confuse as to inform.

**Rights, the Rule of Law, and Checks and Balances**

Sun appears to stray considerably from the Liberal democratic model when it comes to checks on official power. While he is described by many Taiwanese scholars as a supporter of constitutional democracy,\(^95\) he was not a follower of the natural rights tradition and would look in askance upon Acton’s distrust of power. Sun’s justifications for this position were rooted in his contextualism and his confidence in perfecting the machinery of the democratic state. The result is an understanding of democracy that is not overtly friendly to the types of individual safeguards that characterize liberal democracy and are more congenial to the republican unitary and the Chinese unitary models of democracy.

First is the nature of Sun’s abstract conceptualization of democracy. As do many modern democratic theorists, he separates democracy from the liberal tradition and from any necessary connection with individual rights and freedoms, and individualism per se. What is good about democracy is its capacity to meet the needs of a people as a collective at a certain time. It is a particular type of tool that is best suited to the struggle to overcome the obstacles that peoples face.\(^96\) In this understanding, liberal democracy is not the most advanced form of democracy. The freedoms, checks, and safeguards that liberalism insists upon imposing on democratic structures results in a state that is not maximally strong and therefore does not push to its logical conclusion the concept of democracy as a powerful form of government meant to deal with conflicts among humans. Those features also create a community too loosely constructed to act as a unified whole and govern itself. Such a body cannot be autonomous because it cannot control itself sufficiently to generate a common will.

In thinking about the role and function of democracy contextually, Sun also situates China differently from Europe, identifying it as possessing a dissimilar political culture and a different political legacy. There was, he argues, much more equal opportunity in politics in traditional China than in autocratic Europe in the form of the examination system.\(^97\) It was the extreme political and economic inequality in Europe, he argues, that created “cruel and iniquitous” government that spurred ordinary people to rebel and led thinkers to
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speak of natural equality that founds equal rights as a way of eliminating the evils of autocracy. While autocracy in the West took natural inequality and pushed it “to an extreme,” Sun argues that this state of affairs should not mean that we construct an artificial political and legal rights regime in reaction. This is because Sun was not convinced that traditional Chinese government was characterized by abuses of power. In keeping with the antirealist, technical strand in his democratic conception, he sees the possession of power in China as historically benign. People were not arbitrarily imprisoned, enslaved, or killed by the government. What is most important in safeguarding and furthering the welfare of people as a demos and as individuals is that competent people occupy office and have ample power to set policies, while citizens in general exercise their four powers, and those in office are not burdened with other safeguards. Sun’s quarrel with the takeover of power by aristocratic families during the Ch’ing dynasty is not any contention that those families extended the power of the state so as to oppress the populace. Rather, he decries their incompetency, their failure to defend China from external enemies, their neglect of popular welfare, and their inability to correct course when the state failed to engage in good governance.

There is some controversy regarding the institutional structures Sun envisioned in terms of their relationship to dividing and checking power. Sun wanted a government that would consist of the usual three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) plus two more with roots in Chinese practice: the Examination Yuan (which would administer civil service examinations) and the Control Yuan (which would act as an inspectorate). Some scholars see Sun’s creation of this “five-power” scheme as building on the Western, liberal example of dividing power and providing the basis for checks and balances. These scholars point not only to his adoption of the classical scheme outlined by Montesquieu, which serves to break up governmental power among competing groups, but also to the importance of the Examination Yuan and Control Yuan in their capacity to control the quality of officials, especially the powers of the Control Yuan to investigate and impeach.

In contrast, others argue that Sun did not mean the five branches of government to be the foundation of a checks-and-balances system. In this understanding, the establishment of these institutions was not part of a project to divide, dilute, or regulate power. Rather, they were meant more as functional and administrative entities intended to better organize power.
former view is supported by references to Sun’s earlier work, particularly his *Fundamentals of National Reconstruction* (建國方略, ca. 1919), the latter view is supported by Sun’s discussions in the democracy lectures. There, Sun wants to entrust large powers to those who are competent. He founds this prescription on yet another modern analogy—shareholders giving authority to managers to run a company. Managers do not necessarily hold authority for fixed periods of time or divide it among themselves. They are given power over the whole enterprise and hold it as long as they effectively guide the enterprise. Sun also reverts here to his technical conceptualization, likening government officials to experts. We use experts in all other areas of life without demur, he argues, so we should be comfortable doing so with political affairs because political experts know things that ordinary people do not. Experts also do not differ in their understanding; therefore, there is no need to pit one against another.

It is also the case that Sun does not dwell upon the importance of constitutionally embedded rights and freedoms or term limits in his later works. Popular sovereignty is sufficient protection for the people from abuse by government. His preoccupation with who holds office rather than limits on the powers of office itself extends to his historical understanding of the broader effects of power on the population. He bases his position on two arguments that again relate to the Chinese context. He takes that context as more generalizable than the European experience. First, he argues that Chinese political history reveals that governors were concerned with the throne, not the affairs of the people. The Chinese state, in other words, generally was not internally oppressive in the sense that government did not seek to control people’s everyday lives through regulations and coercion. This situation locates China differently in terms of politics and political culture than Europe, and he implies that Europe is the outlier rather than the norm in this regard. This judgment leads to his second argument, that the Chinese state historically did not spur the growth of a popular political consciousness that put liberty as central to human existence. As opposed to the European autocracies, which “pressed directly down upon the shoulders of the common people,” Sun argues that “the dynasties and governments which followed the Ch’in adopted a much more liberal policy towards the people; apart from paying the regular grain taxes the people had almost no relation with the officials.” This means that ordinary Chinese people are not very concerned with individual autonomy
and lack a theoretical understanding of liberty, having taken negative freedom for granted for so long. Consequently, they do not long for the enjoyment of the individual freedoms that Westerners crave or obsess over their protection through a regime of rights and systems of checks and balances. It is only when the Chinese have developed further under a democratic regime that they will embrace liberty as a good to be valued rather than one that is only naturally experienced under their typical state and possibly desire such features in the state. But in the past decades, the Chinese state erred not in being too strict but in doing too little to discipline citizens by making them focus on the general good and national unity.\(^{107}\)

Thus, Sun displaces liberty by favoring unity. As a form of government responsive to context, Chinese democracy must put nationalist unity and a strong state at its center. This is because the tasks China faced in the 1920s were not those with which the West grappled (eliminating oppressive monarchs and aristocrats) but rather the geographical unification of the state and its defense against imperialist powers, as well as economic development.\(^{108}\)

For China, unity should come first both in government and the demos. Diversity is not desirable, even if some forms of pluralism are natural to China. To make the attainment of individual liberty that allows for the full expression of pluralism the primary goal in the Chinese context is to err in a variety of ways. It is to waste time and effort only to arrive at a problematic situation. It is to run the risk of recapitulating the abuses of liberty and equality manifested in the West.\(^{109}\) And it is to neglect the development of another necessary good—social discipline. The latter neglect is particularly dangerous, he asserts, because it is imperative to habituate individuals to act collectively and pool their strength to attain good governance.\(^{110}\) As even Lei (who argues that Sun does attend to individual rights and freedoms) argues, while Sun would grant citizens a full slate of political freedoms and rights, those would be limited by the needs of the nation for a disciplined citizenry.\(^{111}\)

This analysis may be more benign than it first appears. What Sun seems to be arguing is that the national unity (geographical and social) that Western states began to enjoy at the beginning of the early modern period is absent in China after the fall of the Ching, the debacle of Yuan Shih-kai’s (袁世凯) betrayal of the republic, and the rise of the warlords. This unity must be achieved before other matters, including individual liberty, can be attended to. At other times, individual liberty appears peripheral to his vision, not because that
good is unimportant to him, but because he believes the Chinese already enjoy that good. However, at still other times he appears to dismiss individual liberty as an overrated good that is not necessary for human flourishing (he never argues that the desire for liberty is innate) and is even antithetical to good governance in a modern democracy.

Sun seeks to soften this latter conclusion (or perhaps misunderstands the Western theory to which he alludes) by arguing that his subordination of freedom to other values is not so different from the approach taken by Western political theorists who have taken up the topic. John Stuart Mill, he argues, also held that individual liberty must be limited by the like liberty of all. The advocacy of absolute freedom brings “constant disorders and strikes.”

While it is true that Mill would agree that individuals, in exercising their autonomy within the sphere of freedom he designates through the Harm Principle and other means, should voluntarily refrain from abusing their freedoms and, in the spirit of both freedom and equality, find principled ways of adjudicating among competing freedom claims by means of the law, he was not speaking of the types of discipline needed to turn a nation of individuals into a disciplined demos with a unified will. Sun misunderstands (or misstates) Mill’s position, twisting it so that it would be compatible with his argument that China as a nation demands the forfeiture of the individualism Mill champions. For it is not the Harm Principle to which Sun refers but rather the maxim “To make the nation free, we must each sacrifice his personal freedom.”

Given his distaste for pluralism in the demos as well as his emphasis on unifying China, it is no surprise that Sun also rejects the avenues for expressing political and geographical diversity that Madison championed. In his discussion of the American system, he holds that even though the Federalists won the contest with the Democratic-Republicans and injected their strong state ideas into the Constitution, they did not, or could not, move all the way toward a unified, powerful state. The Federalists accepted a multibranch government “which divides clearly the legislative, judicial and executive powers of the government so that they do not encroach upon each other.” This is not at all to Sun’s liking, at least in this passage. He is not, as we saw above, averse to organizing power through branches but to their separation and to the way in which regions are able to have a say in the affairs of the national government. Nor does he accept federalism. The US Constitution was a matter
of compromise, and the division of power between central government and the states in that constitution was a particular result of compromise. This development, he argues, leads to an important deviation from his preferred form of democracy and thus to only limited popular sovereignty.\textsuperscript{115}

While Sun regrets this democratic imperfection, he otherwise accepts that the form of government the United States adopted was practically fit to its context. It was not a naturally united country and required the artificial politics of the Constitution to make a big state from smaller states. Federalism is, so to speak, a feature of democracy with American characteristics. But American-style federalism, he holds, is neither an intrinsic part of democracy nor suitable for China. It presupposes legitimate, self-governing territories with separate constitutions uniting to become a nation. China does not have such territories. After going to so much trouble militarily wresting control from rebellious regional warlords, it would be a foolish mistake to then establish semiautonomous regional governments in order to create a federal state. The basis for such a scheme would be mere imitation of the American model, not a close understanding of China’s context or an understanding of the core concept of democracy. China must not emphasize theory, mechanical imitation, or divisions; it must emphasize practicality, relevant contexts, and unity.\textsuperscript{116}

If Sun rejects (as I argue he does in the \textit{Sān Mín Chù Yì} lectures) the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalist features of liberal democracy, the final feature that might have supplied some limits on government power and official discretion is the rule of law. It is true that Sun emphasized the importance of a constitution as setting out the form of government and the political powers that the people are to enjoy. In embracing constitutionalism, he set the stage for constitutional law. However, he does not mention such law in his lectures, and it is unclear what powers the Judicial Yuan is to have (there is nothing regarding a concept like judicial review in his lectures) or how the Control Yuan is to operate. Indeed, he rarely mentions law at all except in the context of providing limits to individual behaviors. It is important for him that ordinary people not abuse their freedoms; thus those freedoms are bounded by law. But he does not discuss the subordination of officials to laws and, therefore, appears to adopt what Yu argues is the traditional understanding of “rule by law” (in which the ruler is above the law) rather than the “rule of law.”\textsuperscript{117} Officials are not held accountable horizontally by the application of laws. Nor are there references to how, or if, official discretion is
to be limited by legal principles and enforceable boundaries on the exercise of power. He appears to treat such legal boundaries in the same way he treats the boundaries created by rights—they are superfluous as long as “the people” control the state.\textsuperscript{118}

Therefore, while Sun is at pains to argue that his advanced form of democracy fits China’s needs, he is equally frank in arguing that this advanced form departs from the liberal democratic model. His privileging of elites in office, discomfort with multiple political parties, and refusal to emphasize either institutional checks on power or the establishment of individual rights fits more comfortably with the republican unitary and Chinese unitary models. His emphasis on the relative liberties traditionally enjoyed by the Chinese is technically correct yet, again, puzzling, coming as it does from a grizzled revolutionary. Was the only reason he rebelled against the Ch’ing really their incompetence? Is there really no connection between rights and freedoms and the welfare of citizens? Sun appears especially obtuse on these points. That other understandings of freedoms were available to him is sufficiently evidenced by his reading, and rejection, of liberal arguments regarding democracy in the West. Nor, as the work of scholars of Chinese conceptions of freedom and democracy demonstrate, can we argue that Sun was following or was trapped by a single Chinese understanding of those concepts that privileged the community over the individual.\textsuperscript{119} Sun consciously and comfortably discarded a liberal model that privileges rights and freedoms for individual citizens, as well as its emphasis on the rule of law and multiparty elections.

There are also problems in these discussions for democratic learning in general. As noted above, one understanding of his position is that Sun prefers to see political office as a technical position, to be filled by those with the requisite competence and knowledge. This understanding can elevate a political elite so far above ordinary people that it is unclear how the latter could practically exercise overall control over the state. But we can go further. First, to objectivize politics and policies in this manner is to delegitimize dissent and pluralism. If there is, objectively, one people’s will, there is no need for freedoms of association, speech, press, or other expressive liberties beyond that necessary for the entire community to gather and deliver its will. While that will is generated subjectively, it is reached collectively and apprehended objectively. Individuals need not voice their opinions on that will in other ways. It need not be detected through various means or interpreted. Nor is there
any need for a diversity of ways of thinking about policy matters. There is one correct policy choice, arrived at through technical means. The state in its downward accountability need not be sensitive to differences of interests or opinions and in identifying a general will or good through its own devices may come to reject such accountability altogether.

Second, deference to specialists and experts is also troubling for understandings of rights, freedom, and pluralism. In Sun’s time and in the Chinese context, such deference was seen as unproblematic. Not only did such deference follow in the path of the traditional Confucian elevation of knowledge; it was also rational to follow the lead of people whose technical expertise, derived from long hours of study and practice, allowed society to be more productive. But deference to experts has a long history of association with authoritarianism and suppressions of freedoms, not just in China but elsewhere, as Dahl argues in his discussion of the guardianship argument. Moreover, we lose important sources of autonomy when we cede policy-making power (or its equivalent) to experts. The type of reliance upon experts that Sun appears to advocate does not mean utilizing a technical tool that has no impact on the autonomy of the community that wields it; rather, it means turning over to that tool significant, perhaps even total, power over the community that thinks it wields the tool. As Foucault reminds us, the organization of knowledge is also a source of power.

**Sun’s Contributions to Democratic Learning and the Chinese Conversation on Democracy**

It is clear that Sun created and disseminated a conception of democracy. He considered himself a democrat. He believed democracy was a good form of government. He held that democracy was compatible with Chinese culture and not just an alien Western conception. He strongly urged that China become a democratic nation. His writings became a focal point for later official efforts by the ROC to claim a democratic heritage.

More specifically, Sun provides a contextual and instrumental justification of democracy. This approach soothed contemporary anxieties and insecurities. Any proposed form of government had to be drawn as powerful if it were to appeal to activists who favored a united China free from imperialist impositions. To argue that a democratic state would be a strong state provided a quick and simple answer to people who wanted to know how a democracy, which appeared to be a messy form of government, could solve China’s prob-
lems. Sun dealt with this issue by referring to the success of the Western democracies internationally while criticizing their domestic performance and arguing that his contributions would perfect democracy’s conceptualization.

By using a contextual analysis and references to historical mínbēn arguments, Sun was also able to finesse the problems of transitions and origins. How could China, with its history of authoritarianism and relative paucity of explicitly democratic thinking, move to a democratic government? By appealing to contexts, Sun could dismiss China’s authoritarian past as irrelevant to the present even while providing implicit approval of previous governments in general. By referencing mínbēn conceptions, Sun could argue that democratic expectations and conceptions, in the form of people-centered governments, were not alien to China. Despite his labeling it as revolutionary, the move to democracy in his conception was really a transition to a different form of traditional government rather than a radical break with the cultural and political past.120

However, Sun’s reliance upon utility and context comes at a cost. The first victim is his ability to delegitimize nondemocratic alternatives. By placing primary justification on good governance by a powerful state rather than the performance and products of such democratic processes as voice, downward accountability, and robust political choice, Sun’s justification can face stiff competition from authoritarian governmental forms. The second victim is his conception of democracy. That is, his jiùwáng justification mixed with contextual analysis significantly affects his understanding of democracy as a form of government. It is no mistake that he takes a car as his metaphor for democratic government. In his understanding, governments are tools to be used for various purposes, and like tools lack intrinsic human characteristics. The only intersections between human nature and democracy that he mentions are those aspects of humans that establish their inequality and their existential experiences of facing problems. From a larger philosophical viewpoint, such distance may be valuable. To regard government as a tool is potentially to create intellectual resources by which to resist the state’s encroachment on the individual. But in terms of democratic learning, Sun’s instrumental treatment of democracy makes that form of government disposable in the face of functionally superior alternatives, just as any government is disposable in Locke’s understanding if it does not perform the functions that remove the inconveniences of the state of nature. The difference is that the problems Sun wants democratic government to address are not necessarily
connected to the welfare of the individual as are Lockean functions. Neither do those tasks necessarily stand close to democracy’s inherent strengths.

In turn, Sun’s resort to mechanical metaphors also reveals important aspects of his democratic conception that stem in part from his jiùwáng justification and his understanding of human nature. Sun takes no pains to hide the fact that his conception is elitist and collectivist. Aside from his allusion to the four powers citizens generally hold, he displays little interest in the course of the Sān Mín Chū Yì lectures in the creation of the types of procedural safeguards on official power that had become the focus of much contemporary Western work on democracy. Sun wants an effective and powerful state, and for that reason he does not wish to shackle the Chinese state with what he sees as needless impediments to action or with naive requirements that give everyone a routine share of policy-making power. He understands political office as rightfully belonging to experts exercising independent professional judgment in pursuit of broad populist goals. He does not see government itself as an arena of interests or fear that government officeholders will pursue their own interests by means of governmental power. He perceives the demos as standardized and homogeneous, and insofar as he considers pluralism, he generally associates it with national fragmentation and a lack of personal discipline.

In Sun’s reasoning, it is the four political rights or powers with which he furnishes the demos that would effectively keep officials under control and would do so more efficiently than the Western systems of elections, strong rights, and checks and balances. The problems with Sun’s forays into these forms of accountability are threefold. First, his expert class of officials does not appear to be very amenable to downward accountability. His discussion of the power of experts leads to the real possibility that they would ignore the electorate or manipulate elections. Second, his unitary understanding of the demos can serve to delegitimize dissenting voices and even to the overturning of elections that are deemed not reflective of the people’s will. Third, his general discussion of downward accountability does not square with his elitist assumptions. It is not clear that ordinary citizens, given Sun’s account of humans, have the relevant knowledge and understanding to intervene fruitfully in the activities of officials through recall, initiative, and referendum. It is not even clear that they have the requisite abilities to pass judgment on government officials through elections.
To put his conception in the Western context, Sun promotes a governmental model that resembles neither the brash, egalitarian democracies that arose immediately after the American and French Revolutions nor the mature liberal democracies that had evolved in the West by the early twentieth century. Rather, he prefers the types of governments that sprang up as a result of reactions to the excesses of the eighteenth-century revolutions. These governments did not recapitulate the aristocratic pretensions of the ancien régime but combined the centralization of power to which those old forms of government pretended with the energy of the ordinary citizens who overthrew the old guard. Despite his differences with the former, it is Rousseau and Machiavelli, not Montesquieu or Madison, that Sun ultimately follows. What Sun really desires is not a version of the post-1787 American state, or the French First Republic but a modified form of the French Consulate—a populist, republican, unitary form of elitist democracy based on plebiscites plus recall, initiative, and referenda. That such a regime could be highly effective is supported by France’s experience. But the French experience also demonstrated its shortcomings, including its degeneration into full-blown Bonapartism. This danger, however, did not appear to trouble Sun.

One can make the case that Sun put forward an understanding of democracy that approaches a uniquely Chinese conception. He adopted in large part the Chinese unitary model, added the examination and control branches from Chinese historical practice, and argued that the design of democracy must be adapted to important facets of the Chinese context, including its political history and its existential challenges. In particular, he appears to reject many features of Western liberal democracies, such as federalism and a system of checks and balances, based on his reading of the Chinese context. Yet he also drew extensively upon modern Western history and adopted Western democratic practices, including the four political powers of the people that form a central part of his understanding. It is also the case that while he speaks of the Chinese context, he really did not market himself as a theorist of Chinese democracy. First, while he argues that democracy was discovered by both the Chinese and the Greeks, he agrees that democracy per se was not always suitable for the Chinese and that a period of tutelage is necessary for the inculcation of the political virtues necessary to practice that particular type of politics. Second, it is clear that he justified his conception of democracy as the next logical step in the advancement of democracy itself, not as a
variant of democracy that was only suited to the Chinese. He would conceivably argue that, as a perfected conception of democracy, it was just as applicable to the West as to China should the West wish to adopt a more advanced form. Third, he described the direct democracy model as inherently flawed from a democratic (not Chinese) point of view and portrayed the American model as idiosyncratic to the United States. So while it is clear that he did not position himself as a Westernizer, it is safer to say that he portrayed himself as a democratic theorist whose more advanced, generic, democratic model was best suited for China than to say he projected the image of someone who created a uniquely Chinese democratic model.