

# Rethinking Democracy in Contemporary China: from the Search for an Alternative Modernity to the “Democracy that works”

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## Abstract

Starting from China’s willingness to think democracy outside the Western conceptual framework, and in an attempt to distance ourselves from both the Eurocentric perspective and the one that supports Chinese exceptionalism, this essay offers a reflection on the meaning of the concept of democracy in China (*minzhu* 民主) adopting a conceptual history approach from a global viewpoint. The discourse on democracy has generally served the Chinese Communist Party to emphasize its leading role as representative of all social classes. Considering this evolution, the recent proliferation of discourse on democracy propagated by Xi Jinping should come as no surprise. Since the beginning of his first term, he has forged his own version of democracy, describing the Chinese democratic system as an intra-party consultative and deliberative process based on meritocracy. Xi Jinping defines the democratic model as changeable and adaptable to the peculiarities of each context, proposing for the first time in 2019, at the height of the clashes with Trump, the expression “Whole-process People’s democracy” (*quan guocheng minzhu* 全过程民主), defining it as a “democracy that works”<sup>1</sup>.

## Abstract (Italiano)

Partendo dalla volontà cinese di pensare la democrazia al di fuori del quadro concettuale occidentale, e nel tentativo di prendere le distanze sia dalla prospettiva eurocentrica che da quella che sostiene l’eccezionalità cinese, questo saggio offre una riflessione sul significato del concetto di democrazia in Cina (*minzhu* 民主) adottando un approccio storico-concettuale in ottica globale. Il discorso sulla democrazia è generalmente servito al Partito Comunista cinese per legittimare il suo ruolo di guida come rappresentante

<sup>1</sup> The content of this article will be published shortly as part of a book chapter in Asia Marcantoni (ed.), *Understanding Chinese Politics in the 20th Century: Democracy, Society, and Strategic Ambitions*. Polidemos (Center for the study of democracy and political change) of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

di tutte le classi sociali. Considerando questa evoluzione, la recente proliferazione dei discorsi sulla democrazia propagandati da Xi Jinping non dovrebbe sorprendere. Fin dall'inizio del suo primo mandato, egli ha forgiato la sua versione di democrazia, descrivendo il sistema democratico cinese come un processo consultivo e deliberativo intrapartitico che si poggia sulla meritocrazia. Xi Jinping definisce il modello democratico come mutevole e adattabile alle peculiarità di ogni contesto, proponendo per la prima volta nel 2019, al culmine degli scontri con Trump, l'espressione "democrazia popolare completa" (*quan guocheng minzhu* 全过程民主) definita come "la democrazia che funziona".

Keywords: *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought, CCP, Chinese Democracy, Chinese Political System, Xi Jinping*

## 1. Recasting the democratic idea: The Chinese Debate in the Early Twentieth Century

In order to correctly frame the historical and theoretical Chinese context in which the idea of Chinese democracy – i.e. the subject of the present contribution – took shape, it is first useful to recall that liberal representative democracy is neither the only form of democracy that has historically existed<sup>2</sup> (cf. Duso, 2004) nor the only one existing today (Crouch, 2005; Mudde 2013; Zakaria 1997). In this respect, the aim of this political section of the volume is not so much to delve into the specific conceptuality of Chinese political thought, but rather to recognize the need to constantly recalibrate the use of Western theoretical-political categories when dealing with the reception and original use of such categories by other peoples (Richter, 2005: 7-20). To this end, borrowing a term introduced by the Indian philosopher Dipesh Chakrabarty (2016), the attempt will be to "provincialize" the mental structures through which we

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<sup>2</sup> Until the end of the 18th century, the term "democracy" referred exclusively to direct democracy, which was reviled by almost all thinkers of the time. Even during the American and French revolutions, in fact-for example, in the reflections of Rousseau and Sieyès-representation and democracy were considered opposing political models. For a reconstruction of the evolution of the meaning of the concept of representative democracy in the West, understood as the logical outcome of modern thought and Western politics.

are used to interpreting not only “our” history, but also that of others. It should also be emphasized that the reference to democracy – or rather, to the absence of democracy – in contemporary China is often employed in our public debate more to affirm Western hegemony than to understand the characteristics of that country’s regime. Hence, the difficulty lies in discussing Xi Jinping’s perspective on democracy without running the risk of adopting a prejudicial, mostly negative, perspective toward current Chinese governance. Not because there are no reasons to hold a critical view of the present government, but because such a view should not be constituted *a priori* based on perceptions, therefore misleading, and simplistic narratives. From a broader perspective, addressing this issue proves necessary today, in an international context increasingly marked by the opposition between “us” and “they”; “the West” and the “Rest” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2024). Especially over the past decade, the relationship between the United States and China has shifted from competition to outright opposition. In this context, we are witnessing a radicalization of the general debate that pervades public discourse on China, with an ideological clash fueled by respective propaganda becoming crystallized. This is precisely the result of the consolidation of discursive models based on binary oppositions. Yet, in order to understand the current Chinese political regime, “democracy versus authoritarianism is neither a useful research topic, nor a fruitful political agenda” (Mobo Gao, 2018: 12). It is therefore necessary to move beyond such a dichotomous perception to fully grasp the specific features of the Chinese debate on democracy, recognizing both the influence that Western political thought has exerted in China since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the absolute originality with which that thought has been received and re-elaborated (Said, 1983; 2003). To delve into the issue, therefore, it is first necessary to clarify the general outlines of the debate on democracy in China in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having clearly in mind that only by recognizing the historical specificity of the discourses of that time – crucial in influencing Chinese politics and history – is it possible to identify the meaning they take on in their current revival by Xi Jinping. Before moving on to an analysis of the development of the idea of democracy following the birth of the PRC (People’s Republic of China) in 1949, it is useful to make a quick reference to

the theoretical context of the immediately preceding years to understand, albeit in broad terms, the peculiarities of the reception of the Western concept of democracy in 20th-century China.

Certain figures – particularly representative of the various schools of thought that developed in historical moments that were as close as they were different and crucial – can be helpful in this reconstruction. These are authors who, at the ridge of the collapse of the millennial Empire, reflected on what political form the new China should take, what political government was best suited to the needs of the Chinese social, historical, and cultural context, and what it meant for China to establish itself as a nation. These are authors such as Kang Youwei, the main promoter of the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 (*Wuxu bianfa* 戊戌變法) that was a radical reform of the system, launched under the aegis of Empress Cixi and aimed at modernizing the entire imperial apparatus, education, and the economy (Roberts, 2013: 260-268); Zhang Binglin or Zhang Taiyan, a prominent figure of revolutionary consciousness; Lu Xun – the father of vernacular literature, so-called *Baihua* -; Liang Qichao, disciple of Kang and father of modern Chinese political thought; and also thinkers such as Chen Duxiu – a central figure in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 (*Wusi yundong* 五四運動)<sup>3</sup> and co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921- and Sun Yat-Sen, founder of the Guomindang, the nationalist party (Schwartz, 2000: 406-444). Without going into a detailed analysis, what emerges from these thinkers, even though they belong to very different schools of thought that developed in a very short but eclectic period of time (Ge Zhaoguang, 2018; Zarrow and Karl, 2002: 76; Leibold, 2007: 32-33), is a dual approach to Western political thought: on one hand, there is the use of European knowledge to modernize the Chinese tradition of thought. This is the case of Chen Duxiu (1915), who, in his famous essay entitled *Warning the*

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<sup>3</sup> The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist student movement that emerged from the Chinese people's indignation with the conditions that the Treaty of Versailles would impose. It was part of a broader movement known as the "New Culture Movement" and differed from previous approaches – which proposed a gradual reform of the Chinese political system – in its radical approach, which aimed to sever ties with the imperial past and Confucian tradition completely.

*Youth*, argued that only the introduction of science – “Mr. Science” or *Sai Xiansheng* 赛先生 – and democracy – “Mr. Democracy” or *De Xiansheng* 德先生 – could cure the disease of Chinese politics, morality, and knowledge; or to update Confucianism through a series of theoretical elaborations and institutional reforms.

Another attempt to update Confucianism through a series of theoretical elaborations and institutional reforms was given by Kang Youwei’s reflections on the Confucian notion of *li* (ritual or ceremony 礼) or even on the ancient traditional concept of “great harmony” (*da tong* 大同) (Moore, 2023: 1-25). On the other hand, there was the intention to clearly distinguish themselves from Western culture, considered to be the origin of the imperialist politics of European nations. The ideas of Zhang Binglin – who inspired the May Fourth Movement- are paradigmatic of this position: Zhang’s criticism of the notion of representative democracy and his attempt to democratize local peasant structures, against any attempt at state centralization of power, should be read along these lines (Veg, 2016). Sun Yat-sen’s thinking, the founder of the Republic of China established in 1912 and based in Nanjing, was more articulated. For the theorization of the new Republic he drew inspiration from Montesquieu’s European theory of the separation of powers, which he adapted to the Chinese context as the “Five Yuan system” (*yuan* 院): the Legislative *yuan*, the Executive *yuan*, the Judicial *yuan*, the Control *yuan* – derived from the ancient Chinese censorate for the selection of officials – and the Examination *yuan* (Sun Yat-sen, 1976). In 1924, Sun presented the “Three Principles of the People” (*Sanminzhuyi* 三民主义) at a conference: nationalism, the well-being of the people, and democracy (although the most correct translation of the term used by Sun is not democracy, but “the rights of the people” (*Minquan zhuyi* 民权主义)). The latter, in particular, beyond references to the Western democratic-republican tradition, is defined as a political regime in which two powers are intertwined: that of the people over the government, namely the latter’s ability to control every government action; and the power of the government to direct the affairs of state. This division, Sun suggests, “will make the government the machinery and the people the engineer. The attitude of the people toward the government will then resemble the attitude of the engineer toward his machine” (Sun Yat-sen,

1976: 323). Without being able to explore in depth how for Sun, the people can intervene in the functioning of the “machine”, what is interesting is the very attempt to introduce a more “active” role for the people into the mechanism of constitutional democracy, based on the separation of powers. The people should not be limited to electing their representatives but should also act politically – especially through institutions that control those in power – even during the “normal” functioning of the country’s democratic life.

A first and partial conclusion is therefore to recognize a dual movement within the Chinese debate on democracy in the early decades of the 20th century: 1. An attentive reception of the categories of Western representative democracy, aimed at “rejuvenating” traditional structures of thought and institutions, or rather at modernizing Chinese culture and society; 2. An attempt to recast these categories in the direction of a more “substantial” democracy and the search for a constant connection between the people and their rulers (Mobo Gao: 141). This could lead to the idea that these authors were trying to develop an “alternative path to modernization” – what Cui Zhiyuan (1994) called the “second liberation of thought”<sup>4</sup> – as opposed to the Western model, which they saw as tainted by imperialism, and also to develop a new interpretation and application of the concept of democracy.

## 2. Democracy and modernization in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)

It was in the middle of the war of liberation from Japanese domination when Mao Zedong, the founder and first leader of the PRC, wondered, in his essay *On New Democracy*, about the possibility of introducing, at such a decisive moment, a reflection on what an independent China should become, not only from a socio-economic point of view, but also from a cultural one:

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<sup>4</sup> The first “liberation of thought” had already taken place in the 1920s when China embraced Marxism-Leninism during the May Fourth Movement to rid of the so-called “New Enlightenment” (*qinmeng*) school of thought.

Not only do we want to change a China that is politically oppressed and economically exploited into a China that is politically free and economically prosperous, we also want to change the China which is being kept ignorant and backwards under the sway of the old culture into an enlightened and progressive China under the sway of a new culture (Mao Tse-Tung-1940: 37-200).

It was a matter of liberating the Chinese people not only from Japan's material domination – thereby ending the “century of humiliation” – but also from the cultural hegemony of an old China responsible for its submission to foreign powers. Mao's reflection on democracy, therefore, does not only concern institutional aspects, but seeks a radical transformation of society: the goal of the Maoist project is the creation of a democratic society, and not (only) a democratic government. The society that Mao wants to destroy and replace is not (only) the feudal society that still existed in some regions of China, but above all the colonial or semi-colonial society created by a century of foreign domination. The democratic revolution must constitute the first phase of this transformation (the second will be the socialist one): for this reason, it must generate a “new democracy”, namely a substantial democracy, and not a purely formal one. The new “Chinese-style” democracy is part of a “new era in world history” marked by the Soviet Revolution in Russia, which has deprived the West of its monopoly on global modernization (Mao Tse-Tung-1940: 190). For this reasons, the democratic process cannot follow the stages of establishing a bourgeois and capitalist democracy, but must seek a new path, creating the conditions for the birth of socialism, becoming part of the “the world socialist revolution”, which is different, if not opposed, to the bourgeois revolutions (American and French) (Mao Tse-Tung-1940: 191). This is a very relevant statement, not only for its implications about Marxist theory – the so-called “Sinification of Marxism”<sup>5</sup> (Knight,

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<sup>5</sup> As it is known, Marx's approach to historical materialism, contemplating specific political and economic phases and predicting the spread of revolution in countries with a large working class (the revolutionary class of reference), did not consider -at least at the beginning- the possibility of a revolution conducted in a rural context, as in the case of China. Based on the reflections of thinkers such as Ai Siqi, Chinese Marxists soon realized that the realization of a communist revolution

2005; 1983: 17-33) but also for understanding Xi Jinping's revival of Maoist rhetoric, which is aimed both within the country and at the rest of the world – as will be analyzed – in particular at the former European colonies, the countries of the so-called Global South. In *On New Democracy*, from a political point of view, Mao advocates a system of universal and egalitarian suffrage, without distinction of sex, creed, property, or education within the “system of democratic centralism”, that is, a pyramidal system of people's assemblies (from local to national). The emphasis on egalitarianism is particularly pronounced in the economic sphere, where it is clearly distinct from liberal democracy, which is based on individual rights, primarily the property right:

China's economy must develop along the path of the 'regulation of capital' and the 'equalization of landownership', and must never be 'privately owned by the few'; we must never permit the few capitalists and landlords to 'dominate the livelihood of the people'; we must never establish a capitalist society of the European-American type or allow the old semi-feudal society to survive (Mao Tse-dung, 1940: 199).

The critic of the individualism (if not of the very concept of the individual, as forged by modern European thought) thus emerges as a fundamental element of the democratic society conceived by Mao: “The goal was to form in society a ‘*gong* (公)-oriented’ outlook (collective, public, and broad), in contrast with a ‘*si* (私)-oriented’ one (selfish, individual, and narrow)” (Xing Li, 2001). It is clear, therefore, that interpreting Maoist considerations on democracy based on a comparison with the historical and theoretical trajectory of Western representative democracy risks being misleading. In the conclusive pages of the essay, Mao dwells on the characteristics that the new democratic culture must have in its struggle against the

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in China could negate the truth of Marxism. The beginning of the process of Sinification of Marxism can be attributed to figures such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao and their translations of Marx into Chinese. The process of Sinification of Marxism ended in 1945 with the victory of the CCP and the elevation of “Mao Zedong Thought” -which made Chinese peasants the revolutionary subject- to the ideological guide of the Party.

reactionary cultures generated by imperialism and (semi)feudalism. Mao speaks of a “national culture” in which “communist ideology plays the guiding role” (Xing Li, 2001: 220), although it is not yet – and cannot be – an entirely socialist culture. Mao’s definition of the relationship between this new national democratic culture and the rest of the world is particularly interesting: “To nourish own culture China needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture, not enough of which was done in the past” (Xing Li, 2001: 221); and yet, he continues affirming that, to support a “wholesale westernization” was a mistake:

China has suffered a great deal from the mechanical absorption of foreign material. Similarly, in applying Marxism to China, Chinese communists must fully and properly integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution, or in other words, the universal truth of Marxism must be combined with specific national characteristics and acquire a definite national form if it is to be useful, and in no circumstances can it be applied subjectively as a mere formula (Xing Li, 2001: 222).

This rhetoric and belief were to become a lesson for subsequent leaders in developing the idea of “Chinese characteristics”, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, about culture, Mao wrote:

New-democratic culture belongs to the broad masses and is therefore democratic. It should serve the toiling masses of workers and peasants who make up more than 90 per cent of the nation’s population should gradually become their very own (Xing Li, 2001).

And thus, this culture would become: “A national, scientific and mass culture – such is the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal culture of the people, the culture of New Democracy, the new culture of the

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<sup>6</sup> In general, the expression “with Chinese characteristics” is accompanied by formulations that aim precisely to question the distinctive features of Western democracies, or to highlight the specificity of the development of concepts initially elaborated in the Western context when applied to the Chinese context. Consider the idea promoted by Deng Xiaoping of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, which was subsequently developed by Hu Jintao in 2005, also in relation to democracy: “democracy with Chinese characteristics”.

Chinese nation” (Xing Li, 2001: 223). In fact, it was precisely the revolutionary strategy of New Democracy – and therefore the common struggle against the Guomindang, and US imperialism, as well as the desire to destroy feudalism and to give China new political and economic structures – in the 1940s and early 1950s that allowed the unity of the people and intellectuals, until, at the end of the same decade, the aspirations it raised, especially among intellectuals, became grounds for social unrest (Rastrelli, 1988: 364-369). Starting from this intuition, Mao later developed the so-called “mass line” (*qunzhong luxian* 群众路线), which also formed the basis of what would be the concrete result of the revolution that led to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and to the development of the idea of “democratic dictatorship of the people” (*Renmin minzhu zhuanzheng* 人民民主专政). The people’s democratic dictatorship would be led by the working class and therefore by the Party – understood as its vanguard – and would be based on “four classes: the working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie, which had no ties to imperialism and had supported the liberation of the nation” (Mao Tse-tung, 1961: 414-424).

Referring at the *qunzhong luxian* principle, Mao argued that it was necessary to gather the ideas of the masses (fragmentary and unsystematic) to synthesize them (through study, transforming them into general and systematic ideas), then bring them back to the masses, and spread them by explaining their meaning until the masses had not only assimilated but adhered to them strongly, translating them into action. It was precisely in action that the correctness of these ideas would be verified (Mao Tse-tung, 1955: 367; Mao Tse-tung, 1943).

One of the main Maoist contributions – based on the principles of mass line and class struggle – was precisely the theory of “continuous revolution” which was essential in the construction of socialism and also the framework within which the Great Helmsman developed his democratic idea. In general, analyzing the Maoist thought and work, it can be seen how Mao conceived and promoted the idea of democracy in a way that was always functional to the class struggle, to restore a voice to the people, and how he always sought to establish a dialectical relationship between the masses and the party. Already during the revolutionary period – from the early 1920s to

1949 – these objectives and goals in fact emerged from the ideas of “New Democracy”, “Mass Line”, “Democratic Centralism”, and “United Front”. Even after 1949, the democratic idea, essential for establishing a new government in the form of a “democratic dictatorship of the people”, led during the years of the Cultural Revolution (*Wuchan jieji wenhuadageming* 无产阶级文化大革命) to the development of the idea of the need to “bomb the headquarters” in order to follow popular will and restore political power to the people. However, as is well known, it was precisely the Cultural Revolution launched by Mao in 1966 that marked the implosion and the crisis of this project of radical transformation of Chinese society and culture, leading to a long period of chaos that, even today, is considered by the Chinese leadership as a terrible threat to be avoided at all costs. The Cultural Revolution is a clear example of how Mao, after various attempts to give the people a voice, repeatedly returned to asserting the need for centralized party leadership. Dealing with the general chaos that had been created, the Great Helmsman returned in fact to the Leninist vision of the party in power, effectively betraying his previous words and committing, in some ways, the same mistakes he had criticized the Communist Party in the USSR for, accusing it of having replaced the dictatorship of the proletariat with a tsarist-style oligarchy (Marcantoni, 2025). Following Mao’s death in 1976, although it was Deng Xiaoping himself who encouraged the display of posters on the Democracy Wall, he never supported the demand for a “fifth modernization” – i.e. democracy<sup>7</sup> – to the point that, faced with the fear of the regime being overthrown by the Tiananmen Square protests of ’89, he decided to proceed with violent repression (Samarani, 2013: 253). The “Socialist democracy” (*Shehui zhuyi minzhu* 社会主义民主), now mentioned in all Party documents, appeared for the first time in the 1981 *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the PRC*, which aimed to recognize both Mao’s great historical and political contribution and the shortcomings and mistakes that followed the radical change of the late 1950s when, as previously noted,

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<sup>7</sup> This is a definition of political democracy credited to the dissident intellectual Wei Jinsheng who, during the Democracy Wall period, wrote the famous *Manifesto “Democracy: the fifth modernization”*.

the contradiction between democracy and centralism in Maoist theory reached the point of implosion (Deng Xiaoping, 1981). In this resolution, the lack of “democracy” (i.e. “democratic mechanisms”) in the socialist political system was considered by the subsequent leadership to be one of the causes of the disastrous Great Cultural Revolution. It is precisely from this point that the entire subsequent period of reform of the Chinese political system unfolded and can be understood. It was Deng Xiaoping who initiated the process of institutionalization of the Party (i.e. the formal shift from “Revolutionary party” to a “Ruling Party”), which led to the establishment of the “presidential limit” of two terms and to the “separation of roles between the State and the Party”, forming the basis of the current Chinese political system<sup>8</sup>. During the subsequent leaderships of Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) and Hu Jintao (2003-2013), since the period of reform and opening up inaugurated by Deng had changed profoundly Chinese society -being now composed of a plurality of new and different interests- the discourse on democracy generally served the Party to emphasize its leading role as representative of all social classes, alongside the well-known theory of the “Three Represents” and of the “Scientific development outlook”. During Jiang Zemin’s rule, there was considerable democratic experimentation in village elections. Under the rule of Hu Jintao, the CCP Central Committee’s Resolution on Strengthening the Party’s Governance Capabilities often used the expression “scientific and democratic governance in accordance with the law”. This meant, as the document stated, that the Party should continue to govern for the people by relying on them, to be the guarantor of their role as masters of the country, to improve the people’s democratic dictatorship and democratic centralism, and to develop the “inner-party democracy” (*dangnei minzhu* 党内民主), aimed at reforming the CCP’s power system and making decision-making processes more transparent. Moreover, the 2005 *White Paper* on Democracy, entitled *Building Political Democracy in China*, reaffirmed the idea that socialist democracy in China was closely related to the specific historical and cultural context of the country (Samarani, 2006).

### 3. The Rise of Xi Jinping (2012-) and the idea of the “Chinese democracy” as a democracy “that works”

The advent of Xi Jinping in 2012 brought further new connotations to the discourse on the characteristics of Chinese democracy and the mechanisms for its implementation. Recently, in fact, due to a series of internal issues – such as the weakening of the Party’s roots and credibility among part of the population following a series of problems, first and foremost corruption – and external issues – such as the conflictual international scenario starting with the trade war with the United States in 2016 – the debate on democracy has taken on new meanings and purposes. First of all, it should be clarified that Xi’s rise to power and the characteristics of his leadership are the result of a series of needs that emerged in the early 2010s (Marcantoni, 2023). Since 2012, there has in fact been a strengthening of his personal role compared to his predecessors, with a growing emphasis on ideology both within the Party and in society, corresponding to an increase of ideological and social control and a new assertiveness at the international level. For these reasons, on various occasions in recent years, the points of contact between Xi and Mao Zedong have been highlighted, starting with the vocabulary used by the leader, which echoes Maoist principles such as the “mass line”<sup>8</sup> and assumes prerogatives that were only seen with the Great Helmsman, such as the inclusion of the leader’s name in the CCP Constitution at short notice and while he is still alive. In recent years, however, academic debate has clarified that Xi Jinping should not be understood as “a new Mao”. The differences between the two, in addition to the profound diversity of the context in which Xi operates – thinking just to the fact that Mao’s China was an isolated country in a world divided by the Cold War – are visible starting with their doctrinal systems. Although Marxist ideology has returned to play a central role during Xi’s years of leadership, traditional Confucian principles – which Mao saw as an obstacle to modernization and wanted to eradicate to create a new culture – have gained central importance and, together

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the complex process of political reform that began in the 1980s and was inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping, cf. Miranda, 2022.

with other factors, are shaping a new democratic idea, profoundly different from that of the Father of the People's Republic.

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has described China's democratic system as an intra-party consultative and deliberative process based on meritocracy. In 2019, he promoted for the first time the formulation "Whole-process people's democracy" (*Quan guocheng minzhu* 全过程民主), lately incorporated into the *Organic Law of the People's Congresses and Governments*. This replaces the more typical criteria for measuring democracy, such as popular suffrage, with a holistic view of the material and substantial improvement of people's lives. The term "people's democracy" echoes the Marxist-Leninist and later Maoist principle of the democratic dictatorship of the people, while the addition of "whole-process" seems to constitute an attempt to develop a new way of describing the relationship between the people and the government under "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the *xin shidai* (new era 新时代) inaugurated by Xi (Marcantoni, 2025).

Moreover, following his exclusion from the Democracy Summit organized by Joe Biden in 2021, not only Xi defended the merits of the Chinese political system, defined as "*Democracy that works*" (i.e. *Guangfan zhenshi guanyong de minzhu* 广泛真实管用的民, meaning the broad, authentic, real genuine, and effective, popular), but he also contrasted it with Western representative democracy, which is in crisis from different perspectives (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China – SCIO (2021). On the current "crisis of democracy" there is already a vast body of literature to refer to (cf. Crouch, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Mair, 2013; Lippmann, 1989; Mastropaolo, 2005). What is relevant here, therefore, is to note how the discourse on democracy in China is significant not only in relation to the Chinese context, but also in relation to the contemporary debate that has been going on for years on the crisis of democracy, concerning it as in a game of mirrors. This crisis is in fact a crisis of a specific way of conceiving and practicing democratic sovereignty, which belongs to specific ethical-cultural identity, i.e. a crisis of liberal representative democracy, which established itself in the West during the 19th century. Consequently it is no coincidence that this crisis does not so much involve the emergence of other political models – even if there is a return of anti-democratic

pamphleteering (Brennan, 2018) – as rather a change in the adjective attached to “democracy.” – hence the talk of populist democracy (McCormick, 2017), plebiscitary democracy (Ferrajoli, 2003) – or even “illiberal” democracy (Zakaria, 1997).

Xi emphasizes that the concept of democracy is not static, criticizing the Western definition of democracy, which the Chinese leader opposes with a vision that considers the social and cultural conditions of each country. In this sense, Xi’s “whole process people’s democracy” is to be understood as the final product of a tradition of debate that draws not only on the recent past but also, and above all, on the Maoist concept of “people’s democratic dictatorship”. The latter, theorized in the months preceding the birth of the People’s Republic in the essay dated June 30, 1949, took the form of an update and adaptation of the theory of “New Democracy”, mentioned above, and as a “weapon” to defend the results of the victory of the people’s revolution.

Chinese democracy “that works”, understood as the product of Chinese history and specificities, can be declined alongside five main dimensions which, as has been repeated several times, including at the 20th Congress, must continue to be developed and improved (Xi Jinping, 2022a): the first is the so-called consultative democracy, which is developed in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a state body composed of minor parties and a-party figures, which supports the work of the National People’s Congress, the legislative body. This institution came from the historical experience – as well as the Maoist theory – of the “United Front” that the CPC experimented with on two occasions, first by allying itself with the Guomindang and minor parties in 1923 against imperialism and the Warlords, then from 1937 during the war against Japan. The second dimension is that of democratic centralism, which serves to manage relations between the people and the government, between a high office and its subordinates, and between the central and local governments. The third dimension is that of grassroots’ democracy. This was already arranged in 1987, when the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People’s Congress adopted the *Organic Law of Village Committees*, which provided for the direct election of their representatives. Jiang Zemin implemented it in multi-party elections in village committees and urban residential

committees, which are not formally considered administrative levels. The fourth is intra-party democracy (*Dangneiminzhu* 党内民主), thanks to which the various factions within the Party can see their prerogatives represented in the governing bodies. It was during the 16th Congress in November 2002 that – as a result of reflections in previous years on how to deal with the increase of pluralism in the society – the need to develop such a mechanism within the one-party system was emphasized, defined as “the life of the Party” that “plays an important exemplary and leading role in people’s democracy” (Jinag Zemin, 2002). Finally, there is the “deliberative” or “direct” aspect of Chinese democracy. Since 2012, the current General Secretary has promoted several Local Legislative Outreach Offices (LLOOs) for this purpose, as a “vivid example” of Whole-Process People’s Democracy and a “distinctive feature of contemporary Chinese democracy”. These offices are designed for the direct participation of the local population in national legislation and are planned at the national, provincial, and city levels. By April 2022, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee had already launched 22 offices in two-thirds of the country’s provinces, to broaden the democratic expression of public opinion and ensure that citizens’ needs are satisfied (Xi Jinping, 2022b: 17-18). It should also be pointed out that the word used to translate “consultative” into Chinese is the same as that used for “deliberative” (*xieshang minzhu* 协商民主), although they are often used to refer to distinct aspects. In fact, various Chinese political scientists refer to the same phenomenon using both words, which carry rather different meanings and implications, as is well known, even in the history of Western thought.

It should be noted, however, that Xi Jinping’s rise to power has effectively limited the willingness of the ruling class of the 1980s to develop democracy within and outside the Party. As regards the former, with the 20th Congress, Xi Jinping surrounded himself only with loyalist, silencing, at least in the Politburo Standing Committee, all those factions whose presence perpetuated the system of “democratic” representation of the various internal currents within the Party in the leadership apparatus. Furthermore, during the same occasion, the meritocratic principle, which is the basis of Chinese democracy, seems to have faded with the appointment to the Standing

Committee of the Political Bureau of figures loyal to Xi, such as Li Qiang, Ding Xuexiang, and Li Xi (Marcantoni and Strina, 2022). As for outside the party system, the 2019 reform of the grassroots democracy system requires, unlike the previous regulations, that every candidate in elections is a member of the CPC. Similarly, during Xi's leadership, the removal of the formal limit of two presidential terms – following the constitutional reform of March 18, 2018 – and the absence of any indication as to a possible successor were a strong indicator of the thinning of the separation between the roles of the State and the roles of the Party (*dang zheng fen kai* 党政分开) that Deng Xiaoping had sought to produce in the name of the administrative efficiency necessary to implement economic reforms. Furthermore, the position of Core Leader (*hexin lingdao ren* 核心领导人) assumed by Xi since 2016 ensures that, in case of an impasse in the decision-making process, he has the power to take decisions independently. Another change has also concerned the direction of the party's overall discourse on the concept of democracy. In fact, while until a few decades ago the debate on democracy in China was inward-oriented, serving to legitimize the Party, it is now also outward-oriented, and seems to have the potential to influence other countries, particularly the so-called Global South. A vivid example is the *White Paper* (SCIO, 2021) on democracy titled *Zhongguo de minzhu* in its Chinese edition and *China: democracy that works* in its English one. This was published preemptively by China in response to its exclusion from the aforementioned Democracy Summit organized by Joe Biden in December 9-10, 2021 aimed to create an alliance among democratic nations to strengthen declining democracies and combat authoritarianism<sup>9</sup>: “to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world” (Biden, 2020). Besides the *White Paper*, in response to its exclusion, Chinese leadership also published a report titled *The State of Democracy in the United States*, released on December 5th, 2021 (Xinhua, 2021). The document consists of unilateral criticisms aimed at delegitimizing American

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<sup>9</sup> Maoist principle according to which the Party should: serve the people with dedication, trust in the creativity of the masses, rely on the masses in all matters, trust in the ability of the masses to liberate themselves, and learn from the masses (Yuhuai He, 2001: 321).

democracy while highlighting, by contrast, the efficiency and functionality of the Chinese government. In general, the Chinese analysis of the state of democracy in America stresses the existence of structural problems underlying American democracy. From the Chinese leadership's point of view, American democracy has taken the form of a "monetary policy game", in which the principle of "one person, one vote" has effectively led to "rule by a minority" over the majority. China also points out that Western democracy, based on checks and balances, inevitably leads to a "vetocracy" that prevents governments from acting with the speed, effectiveness, and decisiveness required by the challenges a nation faces. With regards to the US, these challenges include both long-standing issues – such as racism and the growing gap between rich and poor – and unpredictable situations – such as the management of the COVID-19 pandemic – and this would lead to unstable governments and unsatisfied populations. Furthermore, in addition to this series of criticisms, the Chinese official documents provide a detailed list of the disasters caused by attempts to export the US democratic model, emphasizing how this process has threatened regional and national stability, caused humanitarian tragedies, and violated international law (Xinhua, 2021). By contrast, Chinese democracy is presented as efficient, "that work", capable of fully aligning the will of the state (i.e. the CCP) with that of the people. It is precisely this ideal connection that allows the Party to exercise its leadership strongly and cohesively, making optimal political decisions aimed at safeguarding collective interests, satisfying popular desires and improving common welfare (SCIO, 2021). Moreover, the uniqueness and unity of the CCP as a ruling party -understood as a guarantee of the stability of the government that benefits from popular support- would allow it to act efficiently and promptly in times of crisis. These same ideas have been promoted by China through various media and propaganda posters both abroad and within the country with the aim of strengthening China's discursive power globally, while promoting an alternative vision that calls for a review of Western democratic values. In doing so, thus, China is proposing a new concept of democracy, criticizing Western primacy on the term and taking advantage of the fact that Western political notions of democracy are in deep crisis. Just as Mao promised China would rise again after a century

of humiliation, Xi has given the country new strength by proposing the “Chinese dream of national rejuvenation”<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, just as Maoist theory of New Democracy was conceived for the liberation of peoples -first and foremost the Chinese people, with their specific characteristics – in all those Asian countries where capitalism had not yet fully developed, so also in Xi Jinping’s vision we can see the goal of pursuing an alternative form of modernity to that of the West (Marcantoni, 2025).

Already on October 18, 2017, during his opening speech at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi had spoken of the Chinese system as “a new option” for those countries eager to accelerate their development while maintaining their independence (Xi Jinping, 2017). Subsequently, he spoke not only of an alternative, but also of the very goodness of the Chinese democratic system (“democracy that works”; “true democracy”), pitting it against the Western system and its inefficiencies.

While it is true that the differences between China and the US are not as strong as those that existed during the Cold War between the USSR and the US, on the other hand, at the ideological level, also in relation to the issue of democracy, with Xi’s government they seem to be becoming more evident day by day.

One of the ideas promoted by Xi at the 20th Congress was that his thought – i.e., “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New era”, (*Xi Jinping xin shidai zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi sixiang* 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) inserted into the Party Statute like that of his predecessors – could be adopted by countries that do not share the moral values underlying liberal and democratic political philosophy. From this perspective and from the words of the General Secretary, it emerges that rather than a ready-made, off-the-shelf system, the much-discussed so-called “Chinese model” (Bell, 2015) the Chinese system presents itself as a country offering a series of intuitions and alternative visions that can be used and adapted to meet specific needs in various contexts and on different levels, from politics to society to economics. This approach is completely different from the way in which

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Biden’s introductory speech at the Democracy Summit, “Remarks by President Biden At The Summit For Democracy Opening Session” (Biden, 2021).

democratic hegemony has been successful in the past, although this does not mean that it is without pitfalls or that it does not raise new issues, such as the debt trap or the so-called new Chinese colonialism (Nian Peng and Ming Yu Cheng, 2024).

#### 4. Beyond Western Modernization (and Democracy): the Chinese alternative path

In conclusion, from the analyses conducted clearly emerge how, to address the complexity of Chinese democratic issue, it is necessary to distance ourselves from the Eurocentric and developmentalist approach that has characterized many of the analyses of Chinese democracy developed to date. Especially after the end of the Cold War, many scholars and political scientists in both the East and the West believed that capitalism had achieved a definitive victory and that history would end with the adoption of the Western-style liberal democratic system in every country. This became particularly prominent, especially in the years leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. In fact, behind studies on the Chinese democratization process – aimed at identifying the conditions and variables that would make this prediction possible – there was often a desire for China to democratize, and for this to happen by following specific steps, such as adopting a Western-style multiparty system or creating a civil society. The analysis of Chinese history, political discourse, and contemporary Chinese political thought shows that democracy, far from being a mere rhetorical concept in the People's Republic of China, plays a significant role in the country's political discourse and theory. In various ways, it has been widely practiced throughout the history of the People's Republic of China, albeit along different directions than in the West, and it is a topic that continues to animate the country's political life today, generating debates not only among Party leaders and intellectuals, but also within civil society. It is therefore necessary to further emphasize that this democratic trajectory should be understood and placed within the context of China's democratization process, in terms of its autonomy, legitimacy of existence, and unique development, without yielding to the tendency which aims to "measure" a

country's "level of democratization" by assessing the degree to which it applies the Western model of representative democracy. Only after recognizing this possibility of autonomous existence, it will be possible to pay attention to not assuming that it is a linear, forward-layered process of development. This would allow, in fact, to read the measures adopted in regard of democracy in the last decade as a sort of "de-democratization" not with respect to the Western one that has not developed – or has not done so completely – but with respect to a genuinely Chinese one. In fact, while on the one hand the debate on democracy in China is much more lively than the West recognizes, and there is a revival of themes and discussions that stem from the country's 20th-century history, on the other hand, theory does not seem to have many practical consequences, since Xi's regime has instead strengthened the power pyramid and centralized many government functions. Consider, for example, all the people (such as lawyers, intellectuals, feminists, independent journalists etc.) and movements within Chinese society that, until about ten years ago, had different visions of democracy than Xi Jinping's – some similar to the political reform ideas of previous CCP leaders, others completely opposed – and which have been brutally repressed. Chinese society itself, in fact, throughout the history of the PRC, has offered various visions that are independent from those proposed by the party, but no less "indigenous" or "Chinese" for that, and which the current leadership is now delegitimizing as such. As argued by the Chinese dissident artist Badiucaio in a recent interview, this strategy promoted by the CCP should be understood as part of a broader project aimed at transforming the global order, replacing the logic of coexistence and the grammar of democracy with mutually supportive authoritarian models. In his view, this project is being promoted by political leaders who, on the one hand, employ ideology as a technology of global power and, on the other, contribute to the erosion of the rule of law, the censorship of journalists and activists, and the suppression of civil society. For the dissident this process is carried out not only overtly by leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong-un, but also by figures within democratic systems – such as Donald Trump – who represent internal fractures within Western democracy itself (Atzori, 2025). To conclude, what the contemporary Chinese Communist Party seeks to promote is

a form of democracy capable of satisfying the needs, aspirations, and demands of the population, but that “consistently trump electoral conceptions” (Perry, 2005) a perspective that arises both from the “crisis of Western democracy” and from the various reflections and debates that have emerged in the Chinese intellectual sphere throughout history, as well as from the spread of the Party’s dominant ideology, which seems to reject not only “purely” Western forms of democracy, but also, especially with the advent of Xi, those of mass mobilization.

If we want to give credit to the vision of democracy promoted by Xi’s CCP, we must continue to question and investigate how the newly conceived practices will facilitate participation and discussion of ideas especially looking at the gap between theory and concrete practice in social reality. Therefore, bearing in mind this clear discrepancy, it is necessary to continue studying and trying to understand in which direction the debate may go, and whether, in the more or less distant future it may also produce significant innovations on a political level. It is precisely because today’s China continues to be swept by a growing desire for reforms -capable of responding to problems such as social injustice, corruption, unemployment, and slowing economic growth- that it is interesting and necessary to continue investigating the new prospects for the development of “Chinese democracy”.

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