

# Freedom and Democracy from a Chinese Perspective

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Among the core socialist values promoted in China are freedom and democracy. These values were initially proposed by the CPC Central Committee almost a decade ago (2013),<sup>1</sup> and have been a prominent feature of China's cultural and social landscape since then.<sup>2</sup> The question, however, is what the values of freedom and democracy mean for socialism.<sup>3</sup> Before answering this question in what follows, allow me a brief explication of the Chinese terms. The following begins with core definitions of the terms freedom and democracy, after which there is a treatment of the way China's modern democratic path began with the anti-colonial struggle for national liberation. In the third part, the question of freedom comes to the fore in terms of the common good. The fourth and fifth parts deal with the dialectic of consultative and electoral democracy, and then the important of democratic supervision by the working masses.

## Definitions

To begin with some definitions, which will have a bearing for later analysis. Freedom in Chinese is 自由 *ziyou*. The word combines two characters: 自 *zi* designates the self or oneself, while 由 *you* designates cause or reason. Thus, and arising from a long tradition, the word 自由 *ziyou* means owing to or "because of oneself" and not because of external causes. The crucial question here concerns the purpose of what arises because of oneself. The answer is happiness, or well-being (幸福 *xingfu*), and harmony (和谐 *hexie*). Further, virtue or morality (道德 *daode*) is inseparably connected with freedom. In a

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<sup>1</sup> Where possible, I cite English translations of Chinese works. But at times, I need to cite the Chinese original.

<sup>2</sup> The values are: prosperity and strength (富强 *fuqiang*); democracy (民主 *minzhu*); civilisation (文明 *wenming*); harmony (和谐 *hexie*); freedom (自由 *ziyou*); equality (平等 *pingdeng*); justice (公正 *gongzheng*); rule of law (法治 *fazhi*); love of country (爱国 *aiguo*); dedication to one's work or study (敬业 *jingye*); honesty and trustworthiness (诚信 *chengxin*); and friendship (友善 *youshan*). Many are the academic studies of these values in China, but for an English study, see Tao Delin (2014).

<sup>3</sup> The same question applies to some of the other core socialist values, such as justice, equality, rule of law, and harmony, but there is no space to address this question here.

society that stresses virtue, the outcome will be human beings who seek freedom and virtue and thus produce harmony, but in a society that does not emphasise virtue, human beings will seek freedom without virtue and produce a disharmonious society. It hardly needs to be said that the understanding of freedom has a distinct semantic field in China, in which the collective and indeed the common good is foremost. I will pick up this emphasis later.

Democracy (民主 *minzhu*) in Chinese literally means “the people as master” or host. As a relatively literal translation of the Greek *demokratia*, the word itself is a loan word from Western languages. It has, however, been reinterpreted in light of both the Chinese tradition and Marxism, especially in the term “people as masters of the country [*renmin dangjia zuozhu*].” Literally, this phrase indicates that the people (*renmin*) act as the master of (*zuozhu*), or take responsibility for, the affairs of the home (*dangjia*), with the “home [家 *jia*]” being the country as whole. This origins of this expression may be traced back loosely to the historian Sima Qian (c.145– c.86 BCE), who writes concerning the Qin Dynasty’s achievement in unifying China for the first time: “Today, it has been decreed, the law is issued, the common people manage the house as peasants and workers, and the scholars learn the laws and bans” (Sima 2014, Vol. 1, 325). The concept has, of course, become far more specific in light of the Marxist tradition and is now expressed as “according to the people as centre [*yi renmin wei zhongxin*],” or simply “people-centred” (Hu 2012, 639).<sup>4</sup> As we will see, socialist democracy in China has developed today to a relatively mature point so that its latent strength and indeed qualitative superiority to other forms of democracy is becoming apparent.

## Anti-Colonial Struggle for National Liberation

The modern history of China’s democratic path began with the anti-colonial struggle that began in China in 1840 (Fang 2015, 14–15). This was the year that the British Empire launched what is known as the “First Opium War,” seeking to force empire-wide drug trafficking on China under the euphemism of “opening” to trade. The century that followed, until liberation in 1949, is regarded as the “century of humiliation,” with hundreds of incursions by imperialist forces, occupation of significant parts of China, and a series of unequal “treaties.” But why is this known as the beginning of China’s modern democratic struggle?

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<sup>4</sup> This phrase in this form – although there were many earlier expressions – was first expressed by Hu Jintao at the CPC’s eighteenth national congress, when Hu had completed his tenure as general secretary and Xi Jinping was elected the new general secretary of the CPC.

A country that is subjugated, plundered, and colonised by another has no freedom and the people cannot exercise any democratic right. As the UN's *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* puts it, the “subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights” (UNGA 1960). This declaration was initially proposed by the Soviet Union in the 1950s, and was taken up by a coalition of Asian and African states in the growing non-aligned movement. Only after a number of newly liberated countries were admitted to the UN was the critical voting majority achieved and the declaration was adopted on 14 December, 1960.

In many respects, this declaration at the UN was the moment of global clarification of a new definition of sovereignty, which is anti-colonial or anti-hegemonic sovereignty. But it had already been developing for some time, such as at the Bandung – or Asian-African – Conference of 1955, of which the famous “Ten Points” stressed sovereignty, territorial integrity, mutual non-interference, world peace, and economic and cultural co-operation. Even earlier were Zhou Enlai's famous “five principles of peaceful coexistence,” as in “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence” (Zhou 1953). Notably, these principles move behind democratic practices within countries and identify how democracy should work between countries.

## The Common Good

In this section, I would like to pick up the definition of freedom (see above) in terms of the development of well-being and harmony in society because of oneself. We may now indicate the wider collective context for such an approach to freedom within what may be called the common good.

In a Chinese context, perhaps the best way to explain how the common good is understood is through the “two combinations [*liang ge jiehe*],” which are defined as “the basic principles of Marxism combined with China's concrete practice, and combined with China's fine traditional culture” (Xi 2021, 13; see also Zhang and Zhang 2021). While the first concerns concrete Marxism in light of the specific and practical characteristics of the local situation (Mao 1938, 658–59), the second addresses the relationship between Marxism and China's traditional culture. The process is envisaged in a dialectical manner, in which the traditional culture is sublated (扬弃 *yangqi*, the Chinese translation of *Aufhebung*) in the framework of Marxism, while Marxism itself is enriched.

Many are the concepts one could draw from the Chinese tradition, but let me focus on one, 仁 *ren*. Often translated as “benevolence,” a more literal and revealing translation is “two-person mindedness.” To explain, the two parts of the character contain the character for person, 人 *ren*, and the number two, 二 *er*. Thus, their combination produces the sense of two-person mindedness, and thus a primary concern for one’s fellow human beings (Sun 2014, 4). Given the ancient pedigree of the word, its semantic field is extraordinarily rich and is at the core of what it means to be human. Clearly, there is an inherent collective focus of the concept. As soon as one has a concern for another, one has a concern for many. But this is still to operate with the singular individual as the starting point: instead, the concept and practice of 仁 *ren* is that one begins with the social context, with the collective in which we exist. Only through such a collective can the free individual truly flourish.

It is a small step to the “common” within communism. I am less interested here in the belated effort to recover the Western sense of “the common” (precisely at a time when the last of these pre-capitalist commons are being appropriated) and more in the range of senses that “common” takes in Chinese. For example, 共赢 *gongying* is usually translated as “win-win,” but the 共 *gong* character has the senses of common, together, share, in company, and so on. It is precisely 共 *gong* that is found in 共产主义 *gongchanzhuyi*, communism, with the 共产 *gongchan* literally indicating the common ownership of property and thus of the means of production. We may continue: common prosperity (共同富裕 *gongtong fuyu*) unites 共 *gong* with 同 *tong* to indicate what is shared, held in common; 共同体 *gongtongti*, community, was coined to translate the German words *Gemeinschaft* and *Gemeinwesen* in Marx and Engels. In this case, a standard distinction in Chinese Marxism is between the “illusory community” of capitalism, in which human relations are mediated by things, and the “real community” of communism. Finally, a closely related character is 公 *gong*, with a different tone than 共 *gong* but with a cognate meaning in the realm of collective, public, and thus what is fair and just.

We may now define freedom further as the role of oneself in contributing to and promoting the common good.

## Dialectic of Electoral and Consultative Democracy

With anti-colonial struggle, anti-hegemonic sovereignty, and the common good as background, let us now address how an actual democratic system has developed in China after Liberation in 1949. There are two main components: consultative and electoral

democracy.<sup>5</sup> In light of China's long cultural development as it has been reshaped by Marxism, consultative and electoral democracy are not seen in terms of either-or, but as both-and. While the Chinese tradition may be encapsulated in a popular saying, "things that oppose each other also complement each other," the Marxist framework speaks of non-antagonistic contradictions in the context of socialist construction.

### *Consultative Democracy*

Consultative democracy may be traced back to practices in the Red Areas during the long revolutionary struggle of from the 1930s to the 1940s. In this context, the "mass line" was developed, which entailed "from the masses, to the masses," or in more detail:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses". This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge (Mao 1943, 899).

Much more could be said about the mass line and its deeply embedded reality in China today (Ma 2015; 2017), but my point here is that it enabled not merely the key to the Communist Party's success in the project of a mass movement for liberation, but also the foundations of consultative democracy, which is a constant process of consultation-based self-adjustment that seeks to ensure that government decisions and policies are based on mass participation.

Consultative democracy in China today is carried out in three main forms:

1. It is institutionalised in five levels of people's political consultative conferences, which represent all political parties (nine in total), mass organisations (24 in total), noteworthy political personages, all 55 minority nationalities, and religious groups.
2. Consultative democracy is practised in the hundreds of thousands of grassroots democratic assemblies across the country, which have grown significantly in the last 15 years and deal with all manner of local decision-making. The CPC's grassroots Party branch is integral to these.

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<sup>5</sup> That material that follows is drawn from two recent works, where one may find copious references to Chinese language sources (Boer 2021, 191–230; In press).

3. Since 2014, a new consultative process for legislative development has been established. The three-level system has national, provincial, and city levels, with a focus on grassroots contact points. At this very local level, we find hearings, panels, feasibility studies, and more, so as to nurture proposals for legislation from the ground up as well gain feedback for legislative drafts.

### *Electoral Democracy*

While elections are standard practice within the CPC,<sup>6</sup> electoral democracy is also practised country-wide with the people's congresses. While the highest legislative organ in China is the National People's Congress, there are five levels of people's congresses:

1. National People's Congress (first met in September 1954).
2. Congresses in provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly administered by the central government.
3. Congresses in sub-districts of larger cities and in autonomous prefectures.
4. Congresses of cities not sub-divided, municipal districts, counties, and autonomous counties.
5. Congresses in villages, minority nationality townships, and towns.

The pattern of meetings is that the people's congresses meet for a few weeks at a time (the NPC once per year) and that their standing committees deal with day-to-day legislative matters.

Most importantly, all delegates to the people's congresses are elected. In a little more detail: every citizen over the age of 18 has the right to vote, and when more than 50% of eligible voters in a district actually vote an election valid. The candidate with the majority of votes is elected. Further, any citizen may stand for election, with candidates nominated by all political parties and mass organisations, as well as by ten eligible voters in direct elections and by ten delegates in indirect elections. Multi-candidate elections are required by law, with the number of candidates in direct elections being 30%-100% more than the number of delegates elected, and in indirect elections the excess of candidates to delegates elected must be 20%-50%.<sup>7</sup>

Note carefully the distinction between direct and indirect elections. Direct elections are held for the lowest two levels of people's congresses, with eligible voters

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<sup>6</sup> The internal electoral processes have recently been enhanced, in the context of a comprehensive strengthening of Party building since 2012 (CPC Central Committee 2020b; 2020a; Jizhe 2021).

<sup>7</sup> These rules are carefully stipulated in the election law of the NPC (2015).

electing delegates from among the local population. Indirect elections characterise the next three levels of people's congresses, up to the National People's Congress, for which the term is five years. These elections are not a mystery: delegates for the higher levels of people's congresses are elected from the lower levels. Given the size of China's population, it is clear that by the time the 3,000 or so delegates of the NPC are elected, a comprehensive and detailed process of elections lies behind them.

A question remains: are candidates scrutinised and vetted before elections? As with any political system, candidates need to have a clean police record and must not have been engaged in any treasonous activities, such as secession, subversion, terrorism, or colluding with foreign forces to endanger the country.<sup>8</sup> In short, those who "love the country" should seek election. This concept brings us to further positive criteria for electoral candidates: experience, competence, and merit. To explain: in his marginal comments on Bakunin, Marx for the first time raises the question of depoliticised elections (Marx 1875, 635). For Marx, the economic foundation plays a crucial role, and the political parties and actors that emerge from a capitalist system will inevitably express the inherent antagonisms of capitalist economic relations. Antagonistic politics is the result, with the whole system geared towards confrontation, political point-scoring, and destroying one's opponent. This is the context in which a proletarian revolution gains traction, but what happens when we have a socialist economic system as the foundation? Given that non-antagonistic relations between classes is the default condition, elections cease to be politicised as manifestations of class struggle. In this context, elections are not antagonistic struggles with different political parties vying for office. Instead, competence for office is the main criterion for election.

### **Democratic Supervision with a "Spicy Flavour"**

A crucial feature of China's socialist democracy is democratic supervision. Such supervision concerns far more than rule of law and the associated legal system, internal CPC inspection, and so on, for it is vital to the very practices of consultative and electoral democracy at an everyday level. For example, at the level of grassroots Party branches, the branch secretary and Party members meet regularly with local citizens and are subjected to many questions and criticisms that have a "spicy flavour [辣味 *lawei*]" or "the redder the face, the more the sweat [红红脸, 出出汗 *honghong lian, chuchu han*]."

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<sup>8</sup> I have these drawn four categories from the recent Hong Kong National Security Law (NPC 2020), since they provide an excellent example of the crimes that would bar a candidate from running.

An excellent recent example concerns the Chinese dynamic zero policy for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Developed and refined since the initial lock down in Wuhan in late 2019 and early 2020, the policy has revealed a clear difference between countries that espouse a decaying Western liberal emphasis on the private individual and the approach in China. For many in the few Western countries of the world, the whole exercise of pandemic control – however halfhearted and ineffective it was in those countries – was seen as a profound infringement of the individual choice to do what he or she wanted, irrespective of others. By contrast, in socialist countries like China, the sense was always that my temporary discomfort and inconvenience is for the sake of the well-being of everyone else in the community. Many were the disruptions to daily life, work, schooling, and economic activity, but the overriding concern for communal well-being came first.

This approach includes very high expectations among the population for effective and efficient pandemic measures if a local outbreak occurs. For example, in Dalian city where I work, the small city of 7 million people was locked down for a few weeks in late 2021 after an outbreak. All manner of measures and logistics were enacted, including city-side testing on multiple occasions, safe measures for student dormitories, food supply, local management committees that knocked on each door to ensure people had what they needed, and so on. The result was that the outbreak was curtailed in a short time and, after two weeks with no new cases, the lock down was lifted. This example met the high expectations of the people.

The more recent example of Shanghai took place in a much larger city, where shortcomings emerged in the new “closed loop” system of dealing with an outbreak. Old and disabled people, for example, were not able to come downstairs to receive testing and food supplies, food supplies in some areas were not as efficient, and so on. Watching Wechat social media, I began to see many community-led efforts to overcome these shortfalls. There was also a good deal of “spicy flavoured” criticism of the initial lack of readiness in some parts of Shanghai. Further, some people asked whether the perceived mildness of the variant warranted such measures. Medical specialists also debated the now much-revised “loop” approach and regional lock downs depending on the severity of the outbreak. The eventual conclusion reached was that too much remained unknown about the virus’s long-term effects and it was noted that in some countries that had let the Omicron variant “rip,” rates of death were even higher than earlier variants. As for the “spicy” criticisms and complaints, the nature of these drew the attention of the CPC Central Committee, which happened to be in the final stages of promulgating the long-

prepared regulations on dealing efficiently with complaints. Soon after the outbreak in Shanghai had been brought under control (and also in Beijing, in time for the Dragon Boat Festival), the CPC Central Committee made the new regulations public and held many consultations concerning how the regulations should be applied. By now, the process of democratic supervision has begun to reach an even more effective level.

### **Conclusion: The Emerging Superiority of a Work in Progress**

In this relatively brief article, I have been able to address only some of the questions concerning freedom and democracy in Chinese socialism: basic definitions of freedom and democracy; democratic struggle from the time of anti-imperialist struggles for national liberation; the combination of “two-person mindedness” and the common good for a sense of the individual flourishing through the collective; consultative and electoral democracy; and democratic supervision. Much more could be written, but by way of conclusion let me emphasise that the projects of socialist freedom and democracy are always seen as works in progress and not as givens. A characteristic feature of all studies relating to these terms, their meanings, and their practices is that while many achievements have been made in the decades since Liberation in 1949, much work remains to be done. Shortfalls and inadequacies are identified and proposals for improvement made. Thus, while there is immense confidence in the socialist system and its form of governance in China, there is an even greater sense that much work remains to be done.

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