



ASIA MARCANTONI
(edited by)

UNDERSTANDING
CHINESE POLITICS
IN THE 21ST
CENTURY

*Democracy, Society,
and Strategic Ambitions*



EDUCatt

Understanding Chinese Politics in the 21st Century

Democracy, Society, and Strategic Ambitions

EDITED BY
ASIA MARCANTONI



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POLIDEMOS

Centro per lo studio della democrazia
e dei mutamenti politici

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MATTEO PECCINI

Preface

DAMIANO PALANO

In 1940, at the height of resistance against the Japanese invasion, Mao Zedong distilled in “On New Democracy” the lineaments of what was to become a model of political organisation alternative both to bourgeois democracy and to the institutional arrangement of the Soviet Union. Drafted at a time when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controlled several “liberated areas” and needed a political doctrine capable of legitimizing its authority – while uniting peasants, workers, the urban petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie against imperialism and feudalism – the document presents “new democracy” as a response to the crisis of Western liberalism, to the fragmentation of post-imperial China, and to the need to adapt Marxism-Leninism to a predominantly rural and semi-colonial country (Meisner, 1999). More specifically, new democracy is conceived as a transitional stage between the anti-imperialist revolution and the socialist revolution: a multi-class political model, led by the CCP, in which democracy is “for the people” but not “of the bourgeoisie,” characterised by the combination of political democracy, a mixed economy, and a national culture. Clarifying the distinctive features of this arrangement, Mao insisted that it was a third model, different from capitalist democracy and from the Soviet Union, yet tailored to China’s economic and political specificity – one in which anti-imperialist unity brought together diverse social components:

This new-democratic republic will be different from the old European-American form of capitalist republic under bourgeois dictatorship, which is the old democratic form and already out of date. On the other hand, it will also be different from the socialist republic of the Soviet type under the dictatorship of the proletariat which is already flourishing in the U.S.S.R., and which, moreover, will be established in all the capitalist countries and will undoubtedly become the dominant form of state and governmental structure in all the industrially advanced countries. However, for a certain historical period, this form is not suitable for the revolutions in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. During this period, therefore, a third form of state must be adopted in the revolutions of all colonial and semi-colonial countries, namely, the new-democratic republic. This form suits a certain historical period and is therefore transitional; nevertheless, it is a form which is necessary and cannot be dispensed with. (Mao, 1940)

The image of “new democracy” sketched by the Great Helmsman was one episode within a crowded debate which, since the end of the First World War, had revolved around what was to be understood by democracy and what counted as “true” democracy. The French Revolution had shattered the geometric edifice of the *Ancien Régime* and – as Claude Lefort famously argued – transformed the “place of power” into an “empty place” (Lefort, 1988). Yet it was only after 1917 – and with the end of the global conflict – that the will of “the people” became, in the West, the sole source of political legitimacy, just as Woodrow Wilson had envisaged when he articulated the “American principles” for a new international order. Popular legitimation had already been necessary before then; after the First World War, however, the need to derive authority from the people became imperative both for victorious powers and for the nascent regimes born from the disintegration of the old empires.

Preface

From the ashes of Tsarist autocracy there soon emerged a new despotism, and many democratic experiments created after the collapse of the central empires proved frail – often short-lived – so that, two decades later, on the eve of a new conflagration, those European states that had fully preserved representative institutions were the exception. The “order” sealed at Versailles revealed itself far less stable than Wilson had anticipated, and even his own principles – advanced to justify America’s entry into the war – proved contradictory, unrealistic, and in many respects unworkable on the European continent. The very “sovereign people” helped stoke nationalist tensions and revanchist aspirations at the core of the “twenty-year crisis.” The political experiments launched after the war – almost all of which collided with liberal traditions and the rule-of-law state – are best understood if we recognise that the end of the First World War inaugurated a new kind of conflict: not merely competition among great powers, but a struggle over the very meaning of the “sovereign people.” Today we rightly deny any democratic credibility to the Soviet system of the 1920s or to fascist corporatism, since both suppressed the pluralism and fundamental rights without which no democratic order is conceivable. Yet our reading would be reductive if we failed to see that entry into the “democratic century” also opened an ideological and political battle over the definition of democracy itself – both in domestic organisation and in the international sphere. Mao’s 1940 banner of “new democracy” was precisely one episode in that long struggle, which the People’s Republic of China would continue to wage – later adopting further formulae.

In 1989, as the fall of the Berlin Wall ended the division between East and West, it seemed – as Francis Fukuyama’s famous slogan had it – that “History had ended” (Fukuyama, 1992). The end of the Cold War marked the victory of liberal

democracy over its twentieth-century adversaries – an ideological victory that cast Western liberal democracy as the sole conceivable and desirable horizon for humanity. Updating Hegel’s thesis that history culminated in 1806 at Jena, Fukuyama argued that, while events and conflicts would continue, a decisive ideological settlement had been reached. For Hegel, the end of history coincided with the liberal state; for Marx, it would arrive only with communism; and for Fukuyama, it arrived with the political and ideological defeat of the Soviet Union. This vision was simplistic, yet it shaped the West’s self-perception: “democracy” became synonymous with liberal democracy, and political science increasingly labelled as “false democracies” the regimes that, while calling themselves democratic, abandoned – or systematically violated – liberal principles. The traumas of the “short twentieth century,” the failure of “people’s democracies,” and the sinister imprint of “totalitarian democracy” encouraged us to conflate the democratic tradition with liberal institutions, underplaying illiberal, anti-pluralist, even totalising strands long present in projects for a “true democracy.” Hence the scepticism with which many scholars received the notion of “illiberal democracy,” warning that the term “democracy” cannot be meaningfully coupled with “illiberal” where fundamental pluralist guarantees are absent. The warning is theoretically sound; still, our current image of democracy – as competitive and liberal – is a relatively recent artefact of twentieth-century intellectual history and Cold War experience, a reinvention that stitches together heterogeneous elements as if they formed an unbroken lineage from Periclean Athens to the present.

Thirty years after 1989, the illusions of rapid, peaceful democratisation have faded. The “return of history” is sometimes framed – once again – as an ideological duel between democracy and non-democracy. Such framing reproduces a post-

historical imaginary that treats liberal democracy as humanity's ideological terminus. The genuine novelty lies elsewhere: in the erosion of the liberal international order, entangled with shifts in global power and with the turbulence within Western democracies themselves. Thinking about the future of democracy thus means envisaging a world less favourable to liberal democracy than the last three decades – not primarily because democratic ideals are discredited or besieged by avowedly anti-democratic ideologies, but paradoxically because of their triumph in a world where American centrality is receding, reopening conflict over the meaning of “democracy.”

As after the First World War, today's “populist syndrome” entwines two crises of legitimacy – one internal to democratic polities, the other international. The present crisis does not inaugurate a new Cold War between democracies and autocracies; rather, it renews the contestability of the very concept of democracy – always in a fraught relation with liberal rights and always bound up with the question “Who is the people?” During the Cold War, at least within the West, it was broadly agreed that without guarantees of fundamental liberties – freedom of association, opinion, and dissent – no genuine competition, and hence no democracy, could exist. Before 1989 the boundary between “democracy” and “non-democracy” was comparatively clear; afterwards it has blurred, not only because many non-competitive regimes adopted the appearance of elections, but also because lists of “fundamental” rights lengthened and no single, homogeneous view of them prevailed across democracies.

Compared with thirty years ago, matters are further complicated by the end of the unipolar moment and by the emergence of old and new challengers to the West. The waning of the liberal international order – above all a consequence of the United States' relative decline – re-poses the paradox of contemporary democracy: a clash among differing democratic

ethos. What had seemed universal at the “end of history” now appears more partial, even Eurocentric, while alternative ethos – rooted in specific national traditions – resurface.

It is for these reasons that we must look at China with different eyes. Although the PRC no longer pursues Mao’s “new democracy,” it continues to articulate its own view of what democracy ought to be. More than a decade into the “New Era” inaugurated by Xi Jinping in 2012, China occupies an ambiguous position in global discourse: omnipresent in politics and media, yet often subject to simplified, ideologically inflected depictions. This volume seeks to provide a more nuanced and critical reading of contemporary China – moving beyond both fascination with the “Chinese model” and Eurocentric suspicion – by offering tools to interpret the country’s principal political, economic, and social transformations. Xi’s leadership is presented as both continuity and rupture. Amid international tensions, demographic crisis, technological challenges, and internal inequalities, the CCP has forcefully reaffirmed its centrality, rooting legitimacy in nationalist rhetoric and socialist references. Power is also constructed through deliberate opacity, often encouraging external observers to oscillate between demonisation and idealisation. The “Chinese Dream” is emblematic: a polysemic device that has served domestic mobilisation and international projection alike.

Aimed at scholars yet accessible to non-specialists, the volume is organised into politics, economy, society, law, and international relations, mapping tensions between local specificity and global trends. In politics, Asia Marcantoni reconstructs the ideological making of the “New Era,” showing how *minzhu* (民主, democracy) has been redefined as a tool of central legitimation under Party leadership; Dario Di Conzo examines population ageing and labour-market transformation; Yuying Xia analyses the *hukou* system as a generator of urban–rural

inequality; Guidomaria De Cesare explores the uneasy balance between political primacy and rule-of-law needs; and Matteo Peccini's case study of the Montenegro highway within the Belt and Road Initiative illustrates the ambivalences of cooperation and dependence.

Marcantoni's opening chapter argues that Xi's rise in 2012 marked a paradigm shift: a renewed ideological assertiveness and re-centred Party primacy, combining Marxism with Confucian resources. In 2019 Xi introduced the formula of "Whole-Process People's Democracy" (*quan guocheng renmin minzhu*), subsequently incorporated into national legislation. Framed as "democracy that works," it is evaluated less by electoral criteria than by its capacity to improve material livelihoods. After China's exclusion from President Biden's 2021 Summit for Democracy, Beijing issued *China: Democracy That Works* and *The State of Democracy in the United States*, texts that contrast Chinese efficacy with crises of liberal democracies, projecting "Chinese democracy" as an alternative modernity – especially for the Global South. As Mao once offered an anti-imperialist revolutionary path, Xi presents the New Era as a sovereign, pragmatic route independent of liberal values.

As Marcantoni observes, the book thus invites us to "provincialize Europe," to borrow Chakrabarty's formula, and to interpret Chinese democracy without evolutionary or Eurocentric frameworks. China does not follow the trajectory that leads from capitalism to representative democracy; rather, it has developed an autonomous path of democratization in which participation is subordinated to social harmony and to the legitimation of the Party.

This does not mean denying the existence of internal tensions: lawyers, journalists, feminists, and intellectuals who advance alternative visions are repressed, and the very idea of democracy remains monopolized by the official discourse.

Nonetheless, debate persists within society and within the intellectual sphere, where the question of substantive participation and of the relationship between government and people continues to resurface. “Democracy with Chinese characteristics” thus presents itself as a hybrid of ideology and pragmatism – a form of governance that combines authority and consultation, meritocracy and control – and that today proposes itself as an alternative paradigm to liberal democracies in crisis. Chinese democracy, from Mao to Xi, is not merely a rhetorical artifice, but a mobile and strategic concept, employed to legitimize power, build consensus, and define national identity.

With Xi Jinping, it even becomes an exportable product – a political language through which the ideological confrontation between China and the West is conducted. Yet behind the rhetoric of a “democracy that works” lies a progressive centralization of power and a contraction of spaces for genuine participation. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether “whole-process people’s democracy” truly represents an original evolution of Chinese political thought, or whether it is yet another form of controlled democratization, aimed at maintaining the stability of the power pyramid in an increasingly multipolar world.

An answer to these questions can only arise from developments in the coming years and decades. The outcome will depend in part on emerging international equilibria and on the configuration toward which the redistribution of global power will turn. Although the final destination remains difficult to predict, it is highly likely that debate will continue for a long time to come, and that we will witness many further episodes in the cultural, ideological, and political struggle over what the form of the “new democracy” of the twenty-first century ought to be.

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More than a decade after Xi Jinping's rise to power, China remains central yet often misunderstood in global debates. Too frequently reduced to polarized narratives or Western conceptual frameworks, its complexity escapes simplified explanations. This volume brings together young scholars from different disciplines to explore the transformations reshaping China's political, economic, social, legal, and international landscape. Through analyses ranging from the redefinition of "democracy" under Xi Jinping to demographic challenges, social inequalities, legal reforms, and new international projections, the book provides fresh insights into the dynamics of power and change in today's China. In a world increasingly defined by interdependence, the essays collected here reject both fascination with the "Chinese model" and suspicion rooted in Eurocentrism, inviting readers to see China as a dynamic system marked by internal and external tensions, historical adaptation, and global interconnection. Combining academic rigor with accessibility, *Understanding Contemporary China* seeks to provide some tools for grasping how contemporary China is redefining itself and, as a result, influencing the global order. Knowing China – its ideas, institutions, and contradictions – is not merely an academic exercise, but a prerequisite for sustaining and cherishing meaningful dialogue and global cooperation.

Asia Marcantoni (1996) is a young scholar at the University of Urbino. She obtained her PhD in Global Studies: Economy, Society, and Law in March 2025 with a thesis on contemporary Chinese political thought, adopting a Conceptual History approach, entitled: *Understanding Democracy in Contemporary China: The "Whole-Process People's Democracy" of Xi Jinping* (Political Discourse, Debates, and New Challenges). She has attended several specialization schools on Chinese and Asian politics and political theory and has participated in various national and international conferences. Her research interests include Asian history and institutions, the history of political thought, global history, and anti-colonial thought. She has developed various studies of contemporary political thought and political philosophy on China and East Asia and has published several articles in Italian journals. She has been a visiting student at New York University, a visiting fellow at the Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School of Harvard University (academic year 2023-2024), and a visiting scholar at Beijing Normal University.

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