

China's Democracy Path

By Fang Ning

Translated by Wu Yisheng & Liu Aiyun



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Introduction: Democracy Takes Root in China

Since the advent of the industrial era, democracy has become the universal trend of political development. China is now in a historical process towards industrialization and modernization. Democratic politics is the inevitable product of the development of industrialization and modernization in China and is needed by the contemporary Chinese society. It will provide political guarantee for the development of industrialization and modernization to explore and establish democratic politics meeting the needs of the times, suitable for Chinese conditions and meeting the requirements of the development in China.

There are similarities and differences between Chinese democracy and those of other countries. Chinese democracy is gradually formed in the long-term struggle and exploration for pursuing national independence, national prosperity and social progress. The historical and cultural traditions and basic national conditions have a profound impact on contemporary Chinese democracy. In the long-term and repeated exploration, Chinese democratic construction has gained its own significant experience and formed a democratic system reflecting fundamental values and universal principles of democracy, and the system also has Chinese characteristics. We call such democratic system with both universality and

particularity: China's democracy path.

The Construction and Development of Chinese Democratic Politics

The construction and development of Chinese democratic politics takes root in in the Chinese history and reality. Historical context and current conditions provide a starting point and foundation for construction and development of contemporary Chinese democratic politics; it is the decisive factor of promoting and building contemporary Chinese democracy to meet the requirements of contemporary Chinese industrialization and modernization.

On the surface, democracy seems to be a “universal value”; it seems that “All roads lead to Rome”. The political systems adopted by most countries in the world today are similar in form and are called democratic politics. But, in fact, the historical reasons for the implementation of democratic politics in different countries are different. The roles of democratic politics in modern and contemporary historical development of countries are also different. In the case of the United Kingdom, the birthplace of modern democratic politics, the British democratic politics originated in the political struggle within the ruling group, therefore, it became the starting point and focus of British democracy to protect rights. French democratic politics originated in contradictions between internal classes and strata of French society and appeared as a result of revolutionary struggle of the lower classes against the upper classes. Therefore, the struggle for freedom has become the theme and distinctive characteristics of French-style democracy for a long time. American democracy originated in the war of independence against foreign oppression. Due to historical and geographical conditions and other special reasons, compared with European countries, the United States enjoyed more freedom in choosing and building its political system after it gained independence and was

founded, so that many democratic ideas and political principles originating in Europe had better performance on the new continent than that on the old one. At the beginning of the establishment of American democratic system, civil rights and state power became inseparably interconnected, and this was the gift to the United States from the history. Thereafter, for any newly-established country, rights and powers are rarely combined in an integral way, because they do not possess the same historical and geographical conditions as those in the United States.

“All roads lead to Rome”; all roads are different. The reasons for leading countries to the road of democratic politics were concrete and different. The beginning is usually purposeful; historical starting points and historical tasks were different, which profoundly affected democratic political path in different countries. The starting point of Chinese democratic politics was the crisis of national survival caused by the invasion of foreign colonialism. It was the historical starting point and logical origin of all modern political construction to save the nation from subjugation and ensure survival in China. In the struggle for saving the nation from crisis and fighting for national independence, the democratic political aspirations were produced and initial democratic practice appeared. After the founding of New China, it has become the new historical task to seek rapid industrialization of our country and establish a new prosperous country. Democratic politics becomes the political mechanism mobilizing enthusiasm and initiative of people for building our country and achieving modernization. Thus the theme of Chinese democratic political construction changed from salvation to the building of a strong socialist country. The historical starting point and theme have profoundly influenced the historical track and realistic way of development of democracy in China.

Enormous changes have taken place since the reform and opening up in China, but an important characteristic of Chinese conditions has not changed. In

1935, Hu Huanyong, a population geographer, proposed an economic geographical boundary “Aihui-Tengchong Line (Hu Line)” which reflects unbalanced population and resource distribution in China. Nearly 80 years later, China has fundamentally changed due to the reform and opening up for more than 30 years, but “Aihui-Tengchong Line (Hu Line)” has not yet disappeared. Resource endowment is an important material basis for the economic and social development of a country. China has four resources at the forefront of the global market: human resources, market resources, water resources and coal resources. Regardless of human and market resources, water resources in China rank first in the world; the production of coal ranks first and reserves rank third in the world. China boasts these four resources, but they are inversely distributed. Most population and market resources are located to the east of the “Aihui-Tengchong Line”, while most water and coal resources are located to the west of the “Aihui-Tengchong Line”. The large-scale deployment of resources has therefore become the important characteristics of economic and social activities in China; and regardless of the specific situation, Chinese modern political system is bound to meet the basic national conditions. Chinese modern political system must have the ability to effectively deploy resources on a large scale and govern the vast territory, large population and extreme imbalance of resource distribution.

Democratic politics is the people's choice, but the choice is not arbitrary. people can only select in the possible space set by objective factors such as historical tasks and national conditions. Chinese history and basic conditions profoundly determine and influence contemporary Chinese political system. The fundamental task that contemporary China faces is to achieve national industrialization and modernization; Chinese basic conditions require that the political system and institution in the phase of industrialization and modernization

must be able to mobilize and give full play to people's enthusiasm, initiative and creativity for building the country and pursuing a happy life, meanwhile it can concentrate the resources and wisdom of the people for rational and effective allocation of resources across the country; it also should defend national security and protect social stability and unity. Only the basic needs of both national and social development are met, can the contemporary Chinese political system be selectable and viable and be really needed by Chinese people; thus it is a truly democratic system.

Democratic Political Path Adapting to Chinese Conditions

After exploration for a long time, China has found a democratic political path adapting to Chinese conditions, reflecting the universal values of democracy and complying with the requirements of Chinese social development in achieving rapid industrialization and modernization finally. Compared with the democratic systems of other countries, the contemporary Chinese democracy path shows four distinctive characteristics.

Firstly, we need to strike a balance between safeguarding the rights of the people and centralizing state power during the process of economic and social development.

From a global perspective, the earliest democratic politics since modern times can be traced back to 1215 when the British Great Charter was signed. The British Great Charter is the starting point of modern western democracy. The core content of the Great Charter is the protection of rights. The rights of nobility are protected by setting the laws and institutions. The political practice created by the Great Charter has become the modern western constitutional system and parliamentary

democracy after evolution for hundreds of years. The value of protecting rights is to establish general norms of social behavior in the form of system, and further form the economic activity expectation so as to motivate enthusiasm and initiative of the people for the production and creative activities. From European and American industrialization era in the 18th century to Meiji Restoration in Japan in the 19th century, and until the reform and opening up in China in the 20th century, the practical experiences of democratic politics in human industrialization era have proved that protecting the people's rights can bring tremendous impetus to the development of social economy.

The reform and opening up has brought unprecedented economic and social freedom to Chinese people. Openness and protection of rights stimulated the enthusiasm, initiative and creativity of hundreds of millions of Chinese people for production. Under the conditions that resource endowment has not fundamentally changed, because of people's great enthusiasm for production, The economy has developed at a remarkable rate. This is the result of great social driving force of Chinese democratic politics. Since the reform and opening up, China has gained huge economic success and innumerable famous success stories have appeared. This is the most convincing footnotes of political reforms taking the opening of rights as the direction.

However, the protection of the rights is only one aspect of Chinese reform and opening up and democracy building. If right protection can be deemed universal in all democracies and is not peculiar to China, then the centralization of state power, the other aspect of China's democracy building, will be a unique characteristic of contemporary Chinese democracy. China is a developing country. Chinese nation has glorious history and cultural memory. Therefore, the industrialization and modernization of China should not only change their

backwardness but also catch up with the international advanced level. “Chinese Dream” is not the country melody, but a great national ambition of standing on top of the world. “Because of the reform of the old system, dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou were able to establish a new dynasty; and five hegemonies were able to dominate also because of the implementation of the country’s legal system different from other princes” . If China would like to be the later comer to surpass the former, she’d better not follow the footsteps of western countries. She must go her own way. From the perspective of democratic politics, another characteristic of Chinese path is the centralization of state power. The ruling position of the Communist Party of China (CPC), namely the leadership of the CPC, is the manifestation of a system of centralized state power.

The Chinese model is described as “authoritarianism” by Western public opinions. The so-called “authoritarianism” is defined as the combination of economic freedom with political dictatorship. Although many people in the West and even in China understand China in this way, it is not true. The system and institution of China are fundamentally different from the so-called “authoritarian”; the fundamental difference lies in that: China’s current political system is not an arbitrary system for a person, a party or a Group’s interests; instead, the system strives to achieve industrialization and modernization through the concentration of resources and overall arrangement. In China, the centralization of rights is a phenomenon; the purpose of rights is the essence. The highly centralized political power and system in China is used for the strategic development of the country and ensures that China achieves more efficient intensive development. This is another essential factor of Chinese model and is equally important as the protection of people’s democracy rights.

Secondly, we need to identify consultative democracy as the key focus and main direction of our efforts to develop democracy during the process of the country's industrialization.

Democratic politics is divided into "Electoral Democracy" and "Consultative Democracy" in the form. It is largely a Chinese-style classification method. In the academic circle of some western countries, in view of defects and problems caused by competitive elections commonly implemented in the West, someone suggests to supplement and adjust western political system by means of Consultative Democracy or democratic consultation. But these discussions are largely ideological and theoretical, and are debated by non-mainstream scholars at the Salon. It is different in China; Consultative Democracy has been widely implemented for a long time and has become an important form of Chinese democracy.

Industrialization is not only a stage at which social productive forces gain rapid development, but also a period when profound changes and transition take place in the social structure. The process of industrialization has brought a lot of social mobility, identity changes of social members and wealth increase, which also causes a lot of social conflicts. Therefore, the stage of industrialization is a period when more social contradictions may occur easily, and is often accompanied by social conflicts and political instability. The selection of political system has a profound impact on the process of industrialization and the society in the process of industrialization. Experiences in many western countries and developing countries have shown that competitive elections and opening of rights channels for social participation at the stage of industrialization may lead to "distributive participation", namely, the social benefit groups gain political power through political activity; they change or impact the rules and patterns of benefit distribution through political power. Distributive participation intensifies struggles

between different classes and groups, in turn leading to social conflicts and turbulence.

Focusing on the development of consultative democracy during the process of industrialization is one of China's major experiences. In the process of industrialization, focusing on the development of consultative democracy is, to a certain extent, able to avoid the problems and conflicts aroused by electoral democracy and reduce the "distributive participation". At the current stage, this approach boasts a number of merits:

Firstly, it can help reduce social contradiction and expand social consensus. Competitive democracy may cause benefit exclusion due to the effect of strengthened differences and "winner-take-all". The essence of consultation is to seek the intersection of benefits, seek maximum "common divisor", take care of the benefits of all parties and promote compromise and the formation of common benefits. This is the only method easing social conflicts and promoting social harmony in the period of industrialization transition.

Secondly, it can help improve the quality of democracy. Consultative Democracy, Electoral Democracy and Democratic Institution with the decision made by the majority are not opposed and contradictory; Consultative Democracy allows various opinions to be fully expressed. Through discussions and exchange, various opinions can complement one another to avoid one-sidedness, and should be as consistent as possible; it also can help unify the "subordinate to the majority" and "respect the minority".

Thirdly, it can help improve the decision-making efficiency and reduce political costs. The premise of competitive democracy, ballot democracy and electoral democracy is the open competition and debate; this form of democracy has its own advantages, but it also has obvious weaknesses, which is the