



# CONCEPTIONS *of* CHINESE DEMOCRACY

READING **SUN YAT-SEN,**  
**CHIANG KAI-SHEK, AND**  
**CHIANG CHING-KUO**

**DAVID J. LORENZO**

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*Reading Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek,  
and Chiang Ching-kuo*

David J. Lorenzo



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# Conceptions of Chinese Democracy

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# Discussions of Democracy in the Work of Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Chiang Ching-kuo

Even under the single-party authoritarianism of Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party . . . , the ideological justification for the Republic of China was its aspiration to be—or become—democratic. . . . Thus, the KMT-led government that took control of Taiwan when the Japanese colonial government withdrew in 1945 based its legitimacy on its democratic aspirations.

**O**n its surface, contemporary Taipei appears little different from Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Singapore. Strong reminders of traditional Chinese culture exist alongside skyscrapers and internationally famous shops. Sophisticated transportation networks, modern factories, and an affluent middle class are prominent. As in those other three cities, economic modernization and the wealth it brings appear to be the most important and generalizable characteristics of Taipei and Taiwan as a whole.

Below the surface are signs that Taiwan is different, including a lively political scene. Unlike those other locations, Taiwan (as the Republic of China, or ROC) is a democracy that draws many of the features of its political system from the West. Multiple parties contest elections for local and national offices. Political campaigns are spirited, politicians lionized and maligned. Political talk shows and comic political satires dot the airwaves. Political pollsters are active, and politicians run campaigns carefully calibrated to garner the largest possible number of votes. To a greater degree than in Western democracies, Taiwan's political discourse also emphasizes consensus.

What accounts for Taiwan's democracy? This question is the subject of both scholarly and popular interest. Taiwan feeds the hope that authoritarian regimes (such as the one that governed Taiwan until 1988) will transform themselves into free, open, and democratic governments and lays to rest the



The octagonal roof of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall symbolizes eight traditional virtues and a revival of the Chinese people, while the three sets of stairs represent ruling the nation by the Three Principles of the People. The eighty-nine steps on the two sets of white stairs recall Chiang Kai-shek's age at death. Courtesy of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan)

canard that Chinese culture represents an insuperable obstacle to democratization.<sup>1</sup> One aspect of this question is whether discussions of democracy provided by leaders of the ROC who based the legitimacy of their government on the oft-repeated premise that they were building a democratic country, help account for the transition. Might those discussions have furnished important justifications of democracy and delegitimized other forms of government in the same way that similar materials contributed to democratic transitions in other countries? And how are those discussions connected with Taiwan's contemporary democracy?

A related question concerns the place of these discussions in the larger Chinese community. How do the conceptions of democracy these leaders expounded fit into historical understandings and contemporary discussions of democracy within that community, including those conversations now taking place on the Chinese mainland?

### **A Study of the ROC's Leaders' Discussions of Democracy**

This book is a study of the discussions of democracy in the speeches and public writings of Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙), Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), and Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國). Its particular focus is on the conception of democracy found in Sun's *Sān Mǐn Chǔ Yì* (Three Principles of the People, 三民主義) lectures, which were published in the mid-1920s, and the published speeches and pronouncements of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo during their time on Taiwan. Its purpose is fourfold. (1) It documents and arranges into themes the various conceptions and justifications of democracy promulgated by these three leaders. (2) It compares, contrasts, and traces influences among those discussions. (3) It critiques those discussions in light of recent democratic theory. (4) It places those discussions in the context of Taiwan's current democracy and the larger Chinese community's conversation regarding democracy.

There are several reasons for discussing the materials in this fashion. First, while analyses of Sun's arguments are available in both English and Chinese, no one has examined in depth, in English, and in light of new scholarship in democratic theory and practice, Chiang Kai-shek's or Chiang Ching-kuo's discussions of democracy in ROC Government Information Office (GIO, 中華民國行政院新聞局) publications.<sup>2</sup> Thus there has been no sustained contemporary discussion in English of their thoughts, or Sun's, in relation to Taiwan's current democracy. Nor has anyone examined these leaders simultaneously, extensively, and critically in terms of democracy. At least on the surface, they are all of a piece in being "Sunists." But within this tradition, there are important differences as well as continuities. Exploring these differences and continuities provides insight into the workings of a particular Chinese political tradition over time.<sup>3</sup>

Second, examining these pronouncements helps us assess explanations for Taiwan's democratization. Given that both Chiangs spoke extensively about democracy while holding important positions of power and continually invoked and disseminated Sun's writings on democracy, a full consideration of explanations for Taiwan's transition requires that we examine this evidence

to see what role these discussions may have played in popularizing and legitimating particular conceptions of democracy and in delegitimizing nondemocratic forms of government. This evidence also provides us with material with which to think about explanations for the character of the ROC's current democratic regime.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, understanding these conceptions helps flesh out our understanding of Chinese conceptions of democracy. Scholars have explored such conceptions for the early Nationalist period and with regard to the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen Square democratization movements on the mainland.<sup>5</sup> But there has not been much work on the Chiangs' views on democracy in the context of the broader Chinese conversation on the subject, or on the possible contemporary uses of the particular models of democracy that Sun and the Chiangs, to greater and lesser degrees, drew upon. These leaders' discussions of democracy are inherently interesting as examples of twentieth-century, non-Western, Chinese contributions to democratic thought. Examining their discussions adds another facet to our understanding of the complex history of Chinese conceptions of democracy.<sup>6</sup>

### **Explanations for Taiwan's Democratization**

If the larger Chinese community is the overarching context of this discussion of concepts of democracy, an important part of that context is the democratic transition on Taiwan. Taiwan is where two of the three figures we examine were active, and the fact that Taiwan experienced a democratic transition is part of what makes these figures important to the larger community.

No scholar now seriously questions the judgment that prior to the late 1980s Taiwan experienced something other than full democratic governance. It is also taken for granted that the ROC on Taiwan today is a democracy and that it is, for the most part, a liberal democracy. However, the causes of Taiwan's transition are still the subject of vigorous debate. An important point of departure is differing explanations of the impetus for that transition. Was the transition driven by internal, indigenous sources, or was the transition and its outcomes primarily influenced by global contexts? For example, some scholars argue that the Cold War (which forced Taiwan to become more liberal and democratic in order to retain Western and particularly American support) or its waning (with the accompanying declining of security concerns) is the primary factor.<sup>7</sup> For others, the broader Third Wave of democratization is the cause for the transition, infecting Taiwan with a democratic contagion



A political training course of the KMT in progress (1953). Courtesy of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan)

that came from the People Power movement in the Philippines and South Korea's democratic transition.<sup>8</sup> In these explanations, external factors play the primary role in both the transition to democracy and the type of democracy Taiwan now experiences.

Other explanations look to internal causes. Some scholars point directly to the central role of the ruling Kuomintang Party (KMT, 國民黨), arguing that it was the KMT's intention to democratize and that the transition was the fruit of that intention.<sup>9</sup> The predominant paradigm for internal explanations of Taiwan's transition, however, is the politically oriented framework derived from O'Donnell and Schmitter's work, which is predicated on understanding relationships among elites inside and outside of power in the predemocratic state.<sup>10</sup> Scholars refer to one or more variations of the political democratization paths Huntington built upon the O'Donnell and Schmitter framework to account for the transition. Some hold that it was the result of complex interactions between the KMT and opposition groups.<sup>11</sup> Others hold that interactions among factions within the KMT and opposition groups, coupled with leadership and political norms, account for the transition.<sup>12</sup> These scholars

generally label Taiwan's move to democracy a transformational and political event in which the ruling KMT elite, though under some pressure, remained in power and ushered in democratic reforms under circumstances in which it could have resisted reform. In this explanation, the sources for the transition were internal and dominated by the KMT's hold on power and, presumably, understanding of democracy.

In contrast, another group of scholars argue that while the sources of Taiwan's democratization are internal, those sources are most closely associated with the democratic opposition movement alone. In this understanding, it was not the KMT elites in power whose attitudes, divisions, or actions were crucial but those of democratic activists who kept democratic aspirations alive in the face of the KMT's authoritarianism, winning elections at the local level despite unfair KMT practices and, in the late 1980s, ultimately forcing the KMT to adopt democratic reforms or face the prospect of massive civil disturbances.<sup>13</sup> In this view, democratization was a process in which an opposition wrested democratic reforms from a recalcitrant government dominated by a nondemocratic KMT. This opposition, animated by the forces that coalesced to form the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨), are generally said to have been influenced by Western understandings of democracy.

Departing from these purely political explanations, support for the proposition that the KMT contributed to a culture of democratic learning that was important to the transition and its aftermath is found among another group of scholars, especially Gold and Nathan and Ho. Gold holds that the KMT made commitments to democracy that were later used by the opposition to oppose the system it created. Thus, even if the KMT as a party was not an important actor in the democratization process in this explanation, its public pronouncements were important to a process of democratic learning and conceptualization.<sup>14</sup> Nathan and Ho likewise argue that the KMT's "constitutional and prodemocratic ideology" was a factor in the democratization process, and they place Chiang Ching-kuo at the center of the transition, even though they argue that democratization for Chiang was instrumental to the goals of legitimizing his regime and reviving the KMT rather than an end in itself.<sup>15</sup> There is also a place here for democratic learning linked to the conceptualizations of democracy we examine, even if such learning is understood to have been an unintended consequence of the government's and the party's actions.

Examining the democratic discussions of KMT leaders can help us evaluate these various explanations. If the leadership of the KMT did not speak of democracy in meaningful ways, then the impetus for democratic reform may more plausibly be placed outside the KMT, the process itself confined to the 1980s and 1990s, and the factors influencing Taiwan's current democracy identified as either coming directly from the West, indirectly through other countries, or from the understandings of oppositional groups alone. If that leadership did contribute democratic concepts, then the view of Taiwan's democratization as an extended process is reinforced, an important role for the KMT in the process cannot be ruled out, and the role of previous conceptions of democracy in shaping Taiwan's current democratic regime would be in play.<sup>16</sup> An existing culture of democracy might also plausibly be referenced as an influence on the democratic opposition itself. It is the foundations for these latter explanations, particularly those put forward by Gold and by Nathan and Ho, that we seek to explore here by determining whether the KMT's leadership did contribute meaningful discussions of democracy.

## **Understanding, Recognizing, and Assessing Democratic Conceptions**

### **DEFINITIONS OF DEMOCRACY**

Before considering the broader Chinese contexts of these discussions, we must first answer questions related to democratic theory and political thought in general. How do we recognize whether a political conception is "democratic"? How do we assess the justifications, conceptions, and overall quality of these leaders' contributions to discussions of democracy?

For such early systematic theorists of constitutions as Aristotle, democracy was a particular regime type that could emerge empirically in contextually different forms. Democracy generally entailed (1) the widespread granting of citizenship, (2) political equality among citizens, and (3) significant participation in the administration of political affairs by ordinary citizens. The way in which these features were embedded in a constitution importantly varied in different contexts. However, Aristotle also argued that the existence of such a regime inevitably meant that power would gravitate to the poor because they would be the most numerous portion of the citizenry and would therefore dictate terms to other groups by their ability to mobilize votes. In his understanding, democracy may involve different institutions and practices rooted in particular contexts, but it is ultimately and universally about numbers: is

citizenship extended widely (democracy) or more narrowly (other forms of government)?<sup>17</sup>

Later theorists in the civic republican tradition were less realist in their understanding of the internal components of communities, or perhaps they had a realist appreciation of particularistic interests and tried to find ways of avoiding what they saw as the deterioration of the community into rival factions. For Machiavelli and Rousseau, the formation of citizens into a unified demos was a crucial and necessary component. Through the actions of a founder and the embrace of civic virtues and a common culture, citizens would develop a common will and identify common interests and an overall common good that would be the objects of their political activities. Rousseau condemned intermediary groups that stand between the individual and the community as destructive of democracy because they distort the process of assessing the general will and shatter solidarity in the quest for the satisfaction of particularized interests. For these theorists, political pluralism within the demos is not desirable. Concomitantly, while neither Machiavelli nor Rousseau advocated the complete administration of political machinery by all ordinary citizens, both saw attention to political matters as a primary responsibility of citizens. For both, the essential marker of democracy is the responsiveness of the government to the will of the entire community. A government that is not responsive to the community as a whole, or is responsive to only a portion of the community, is not democratic because democracy is the means by which the community as a whole, and therefore each individual as part of the community, exercises autonomy.<sup>18</sup> Thus in their understanding, democracy is a universal conception that assumes a monist citizenry.

Modern theorists are split in their understandings of democracy. For those who seek to compare democracy across cultures and develop inventories of democracy, a simple, universal definition is adequate even if the particulars of democracy are different in different nations. A popular definition is Lipset's formulation that a regime is democratic if and only if it "supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office."<sup>19</sup> Note that this definition, while simple and allowing for variations, still argues for the universality in democracies of constitutionalism, indirect democracy, majoritarianism, downward accountability, and choice in the form of multiple candidates and, presumably, multiple parties.



Dahl, meanwhile, has put forward more extensive criteria that, while allowing for some latitude in the construction of a democratic regime, nonetheless narrowly prescribe the conditions necessary for a decision-making process to be deemed democratic in a modern setting. These criteria are effective participation by citizens, voting equality among citizens, enlightened understanding among citizens, control of the political agenda by citizens, and inclusion in the demos of all nontransient and mentally sound adults.<sup>20</sup> Within these criteria are such subsidiary elements as elections and the right to run for office, majority rule, liberal freedoms, access to information, and the right to form associations. These elements, which Dahl associates with a “second transformation” of democracy that took place in modern Europe, constitute what others identify as a liberal understanding of democracy and what Dahl terms “polyarchy.”<sup>21</sup>

I do not accept that all of Dahl’s criteria must be met for a conception to be deemed democratic. However, these criteria are useful in attempting to distinguish between democratic and nondemocratic elements. A theory that fails to meet these criteria must provide good reasons why it does not; failing to do so, the theory could be found deficient. Dahl, for example, provides a cogent overview of the problems associated with conceptualizing policy in terms of expressions of a common good rather than pluralism. Dahl’s conception is also important because Taiwan’s political system currently satisfies his criteria. I use this and other analyses to test, probe, and critique the conceptions of democracy we find in the examined discussions.

However, we need not adhere to such prescriptive definitions to think about democracy more generally in the context of democratic learning. Other theorists conceive of democracy somewhat more broadly and recognize that more than one type of democratic theory exists. Among these, Held’s work is perhaps the most prominent. In constructing a typology of democratic theories, Held provides us with a way of understanding and classifying different types of democratic theory and a way of understanding theories that does not take for granted the liberal model usually associated with the West.

In Held’s broader understanding, a theory is democratic if it maintains that state power can be exercised only with the consent (or voice) of citizens, who in turn must encompass a large majority of the state’s inhabitants. The institutionalization of consent generally includes identification of the ways in which people acquire public power, as well as the creation and use of particular procedures by which decisions are made, policies approved, and power