PART 1

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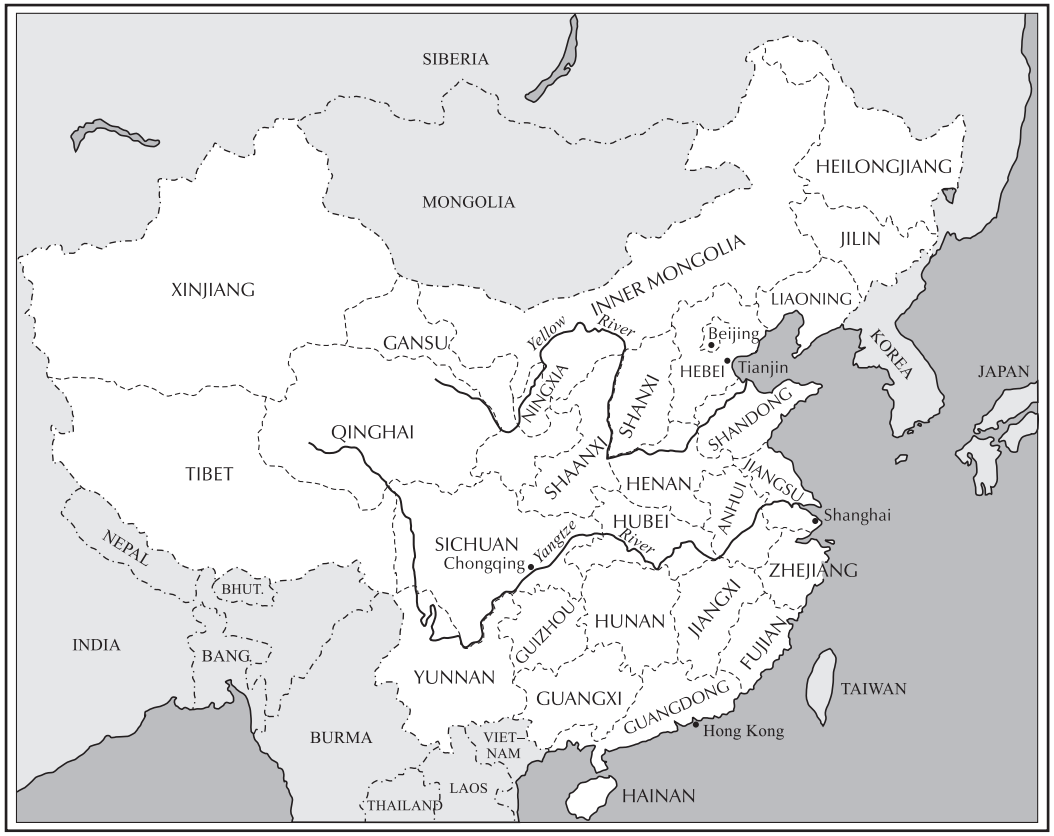
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Democracy and China

Democracy's Spread

In late 1912 and early 1913, a unique event occurred in China's history. A year after the abdication of the last emperor, about 20 million citizens walked, bicycled, or rickshawed their way to polling stations across the country to elect a national government.

The franchise was far from universal. It covered only one eighth of the adult population—males over 21 who paid tax, owned property, or held at least an elementary education. Opium-smokers, Buddhist monks, and policemen were among those barred from voting. The men who made it to the poll stations scattered at great distances throughout the vast and poor land represented about half of that select group. There was a vote-fixing controversy in Hunan province. One Shanghai newspaper moaned that parochial and party loyalties were dominating voting: "Just one in a hundred voters is making up their own mind!"[1] Still, the election was generally considered to be fair, free, and a surprising success. In the annals of Chinese history, it remains unique: the first and only popular election of a national government.[2]

China's first national polls did not take place in isolation from world events. By 1918, 33 countries, including the U.S., Britain, and France, had introduced some form of minimal democracy. China might have joined this "first wave" of democratizations, as did Japan. But within a few years, its fledgling democracy failed amidst corruption, violence, and warlordism.

The decades following the end of World War II witnessed a "second wave" of global democratization. These included new democracies in the ex-colonies of Africa and Asia, notably India, as well as a return to democracy by the three Axis powers, including Japan. In China, a spirited government led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control in 1949 with a liberal constitution and promises of democracy. Thousands of overseas Chinese returned home to build the "new China." Popular elections were held in 1954 for members of local legislatures.

But for a second time, the democratization wave washed past China. In the mid-1950s, having secured control over the country, the CCP's Jacobin leader Mao Zedong veered sharply toward dictatorship, plunging the country into a twenty-year nightmare that killed between 40 and 55 million people.

The third, and most powerful, global democracy wave began in Southern Europe in the 1970s, as the people of Spain, Greece, and Portugal regained the right to choose their leaders. By the 1980s it had swept into Latin America and Asia, carrying the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan to democracy. It crested in 1989 and 1991 when the 10 communist regimes of Eastern Europe and Central Asia collapsed, leaving behind 28 new democracies with 400 million newly-free people. Several more countries caught the end of this wave in the 1990s, including Peru, South Africa, Cambodia, and Indonesia.

Again, China made a valiant attempt to join. A massive anti-government uprising gripped the nation for six weeks in the Spring of 1989, spreading to an estimated 341 of China's 400-odd cities. Democracy was one of several demands made against an out-of-touch and corrupt CCP regime. But the pro-democracy forces inside the regime and on the streets proved too weak in the face of a military crackdown. The June Fourth Tiananmen Massacre stands as the last great testament to the frustrated democratic project in China.

In the early twenty-first century, China is increasingly in sparse company as a dictatorship. By 2001, 121 of the world's 192 governments were elected by universal direct votes in reasonably fair and free elections, representing 63 percent of all governments (up from 14 percent in 1950) and 58 percent of the global population. In Asia, 24 of 39 governments were elected.[3] By itself, China comprises about half of that portion of the world's population unable to choose its leaders.

As for the basic freedoms that usually accompany democracy, such as a free press and the right to organize political parties, China is even more at odds with the world community. These freedoms were wholly or partly available in 144 countries, three quarters of the total, accounting for 64 percent of the global population by 2001. China, then, represents about 60 percent of the world's population that continues to live without any guarantee of basic freedoms.

For those concerned about democracy and freedom in our world, there is no more important place than China. To the extent that these things are the best guarantor of a just and fulfilling life for each individual and each community, as well as a stable world order, the country's continued rule by dictatorship is both a tragedy and a threat. A decisive step by China onto the road of democracy would by itself—in population terms—be no less significant than each of the previous "waves" of global democratization. Indeed, it

might well bring many of the remaining dictatorships in the world through to democracy. A top aide to a former CCP leader notes that the impact of democratic breakthrough in China "cannot be overestimated. It will fundamentally change the balance between good and evil in our world."[4]

If the evidence of nearly two centuries of continuous global democratization is any indicator, China will indeed embrace democracy in the near future. This book attempts to show why and how that will happen.

The Struggle for Democracy

Democracy is a political system founded on an ideal. That ideal is the equality of individuals and their life goals. No democracy is perfect in realizing that ideal, but some are closer than others. Indeed, democracy is perhaps best understood as a process of striving to achieve it. Countries can be characterized by where they stand on the road. In Asia, highly democratic Japan and Taiwan compare to partly democratic India and Thailand and to barely democratic Singapore and Malaysia. Others, like North Korea and Burma, stand on the wrong side of an imaginary line that separates nomimal democracies from dictatorships. Along with them is China, the world's last great dictatorship.

While various experiments like benevolent kings or communitarian oligarchies have been tried throughout history to achieve equality, experience has shown that it is best achieved, and maintained, by democratic institutional arrangements. These fall broadly into two categories: elections and freedoms.

A democratic government is one in which both the legislature and the executive are fully elected by direct and universal suffrage on a regular basis. The elections must be free, such that voters are not coerced, campaigning is not subject to limits on speech, and parties can field candidates of their choice. They must also be fair, meaning they are administered by a neutral body, do not advantage incumbents unduly, and are not subject to wide corruption. Those elected must hold actual power, roughly reflect the interests of the community, and be subject to recall and scrutiny by the electorate.

The achievement of equality has also, in experience, been enhanced by the provision and protection of extensive freedoms for everyone. In theory, we could have equal but highly limited freedoms. But in practice this is impossible to achieve because it inevitably restricts the freedoms of some more than others. Certain freedoms have proven to be indispensable. They include freedom of expression, movement, association, and conscience. Equality also requires economic and social freedoms, both the freedoms associated with properly operating markets and the freedoms of equal opportunity and status.

Many countries have elections but not freedoms. In Asia, Singapore holds reasonably free and fair elections but imposes strict conditions on political and civil freedoms. Other places have freedoms but no elections. Hong Kong has a robust free press, a laudable judiciary, and extensive freedoms of association and protest. But its people cannot choose their leaders. A country can be undergoing a "quiet democratization" if freedoms are expanding, even if it does not hold elections, an argument that many have made for China. By the same token, a country can experience "democratic regression" if freedoms deteriorate, even as elections continue, something that commentators noted of Malaysia under strongman Mahathir Mohamad after 1981.

Since equality is the core concept of democracy, the institutions used to build it are constantly being revised and strengthened. The democracy of the nineteenth century was well short of today's democracy, which in turn will doubtless be seen in the coming century as hopelessly crude. Democracy may be described as the "current best practice" for achieving equality. It is a constantly evolving political technology which keeps changing in response to changing social needs, even when rulers and elites do not see the need for change. It is also a perpetual struggle to apply the technology fully and correctly, and to make sure that it is not replaced by an older one.

The American scholar Francis Fukuyama's famous endorsement of democracy as "the only coherent political aspiration that spans different regions and cultures around the globe"[5] is thus a statement of the obvious. While we cannot rule out the discovery of a better political technology in future—science fiction notwithstanding—Fukuyama remains, as it were, the final word. That is why more than 120 countries with mind-boggling differences of culture, history, and geography have embraced democracy.

Democracy produces more of the things that people want in order to pursue their life goals. The United Nations Development Program notes that democracy produces better government in terms of broad participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, efficiency, accountability, and strategic vision.[6] Policies are better thought out, more accepted and thus enforceable. The political system is more stable. Empirically, democracies weather crisis better than dictatorships because the response takes place within the political system, not by overthrowing it.[7] Political power, because it is dispersed and equally monitored, is also less susceptible to misuse. Political pluralism teaches tolerance and understanding. The act of voting makes citizens more engaged with their communities and countries, strengthening their sense of self-worth and making them bulwarks of the institutions of democracy.

Dictatorships often point to their superior efficiency and vision over de-

mocracies. But rarely do those claims stand up to scrutiny. China's vast $25 billion Three Gorges Dam project, a tribute to the vision and effectiveness of dictatorship, may have been one of the greatest policy mistakes of the twentieth century.

Internationally, democracies produce peace more than war for the same reasons that they resolve domestic conflicts better than dictatorship, an insight first described by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in a 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*. While Kant focused on popular aversion to the financial costs of war, the modern version of his "democratic peace" theory includes popular aversion to the human, moral, and political costs of war. Empirically, a democracy has never gone to war against another democracy.

Democracy does more than just allow freedoms. It also makes an economy more innovative, sustainable, and robust. It excels at allowing capital, ideas, and labor to be freely organized and reorganized as technology and entrepreneurship develop and interests change. Contracts are enforced, property is protected, and policymaking is fair and transparent. Democracy enhances optimal investments in education, alleviation of poverty, equality of opportunity, policy legitimacy, effective regulation, and rule of law. It controls corruption. Taxes are easier to collect and external shocks can be managed better. To quote the United Nations Development Program (UNDP): "Countries can promote human development for all only when they have governance systems that are fully accountable to all people—and when all people can participate in the debates and decisions that shape their lives."[8] Socially, democracy is popular because it ensures the freedoms—to vote, to rabble-rouse, to attend church, to achieve self-respect—that allow people to attain satisfaction. By creating an environment which recognizes the equal worth of each individual, democracy provides the system under which people can realize and express their individual worth. Through democracy "society liberates itself from traditional or feudal forms of domination to participate as an agency in its own self-definition."[9] In doing so, democracy generates its own support. A state that respects, even encourages, the diversity of its citizens gains their allegiance.

Democracy does not presuppose anything about a culture or society. Indeed, it is the most culturally sensitive system yet devised. To call it "Western," whatever that means, is to ignore its roots in universal principles of individual psychology and social organization. The West is neither uniquely nor necessarily democratic, nor are other parts of the world uniquely or necessarily authoritarian. Attempts to portray democracy as "ethnocentric" are undermined by the wide number of successful and devoted liberal democracies outside the West and by the frequent setbacks in the West itself. Aside from

its universal—universal because it has no coherent refutation—core value of individual equality, democracy is not "value-laden" at all.

Today, to take Asia, countries as distinct as Confucian Japan and South Korea, Buddhist Thailand and Mongolia, Chinese Taiwan, Hindu-dominated India, Catholic Philippines, and Islamic Indonesia are all functioning democracies. Liberal and tolerant Asians like the Thais—with their mainstream transvestite competitions—would be surprised to find themselves described as more "authoritarian" than the conservative and cautious Swiss. The potential for democracy or dictatorship lies amongst us all.

Democracy implies no undermining or discarding of the unique aspects of a country's culture, merely a better way to organize them fairly and productively. Indeed, democracy brings out and celebrates cultural distinctions. The identical architecture of Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang shows how dictatorship does the opposite. Says one scholar: "The evidence for this panhuman possibility has been educed so many times such as to put the factual claim about cultures lacking democratic potential to rest as a deadly error worth burying once and for all times."[10]

Democracy does not automatically make a country well-governed, peaceful, rich, and free. If that were the case, the Philippines and India would both look like Germany. Nor can it promise to create a "democratic society" of selfless individuals all striving to bring justice to others. What it can promise is to make a country better governed, more peaceful, richer, freer and more liberal than it would be under dictatorship. It takes each country's particular inheritance of social, geographic, and cultural traits and makes the most of them. It takes every country closer to the ideal of equality than would any other system.

Given the moral and practical attractions of democracy, why do so many dictatorships continue to survive? Certainly, the reason does not lie in popular desires. No people has ever chosen to install a dictator who promised to curtail basic freedoms. Nor has any people ever voluntarily relinquished their right to vote. Rather, the survival of dictatorship, in China as elsewhere, can be attributed to the same factors that made dictatorship the norm in human history until very recently: a vast disparity in resources of rulers over ruled.

The achievement of democracy depends on an unprecedented leveling of the playing field between leaders and their subjects. It usually results from economic and social change which broadly empowers society. Without it, human society has always tended toward dictatorship. When the leveling happens, rulers find they cannot govern except with the consent of others.

Democracy is rarely bestowed by idealistic rulers upon their people. Nor does it come about because of a sudden eruption of democratic behavior

within society. It results from a crisis of dictatorship. It is only after democracy begins that rulers and ruled alike begin to learn and accept the rules of democracy. An important adage which we will return to repeatedly puts it thus: democrats do not make democracy, democracy makes democrats.

That is why frequent hand-wringing about the undemocratic behavior of people in China is strictly speaking irrelevant. Democracy usually comes first as a result of a crisis of governance, idealism second as a result of a growing endorsement of the norms on which it is based. That will especially be the case in a society ruled by an ideal-destroying dictatorship for millennia.

Of course, the factors that create democracy can also tear it apart. Economic crisis, ethnic tensions, or external shocks can upset the leveling of society that makes democracy possible. A fragility of the institutions created to include and listen to diverse social groups can do the same. But short of complete social breakdown, democracy usually fails because elites step in to subvert the system, not because people waive their rights. More important, the problems of renewed dictatorship are almost always worse than those of imperfect democracy.

For those who dislike the messy and plebian nature of democracy, it is easy to slip into an intellectual searching for a more "ideal" conception. Nondemocratic systems appeal to those who, in the words of a former Canadian prime minister, "are disinclined to seek solution in temporal affairs through the mere counting of heads."[11] Indeed, it would surprise the millions of people living in countries which have fought, even risked their lives, for the right to choose their own rulers in recent decades that a "democracy malaise" has taken root in some long-established democracies. There, many have come to take their democratic rights for granted, or assumed they did not matter much. They in turn project those doubts upon others, questioning whether peoples in developing countries can, or should, be able to select their own leaders. They worry that democracy is rooted in "Western" culture, or would bring disorder to some nations, like China.[12] The supercilious disdain for televangelist politicians of the West leads to a comfort-seeking in the well-read dictators of the Third World, their "stability," "remarkable growth rates," and "modernizing vision."

For a start, all evidence points to the fact that democracy does quite the opposite, making countries more stable, more peaceful, and more able to grow. Had India been a dictatorship, it would have been a Middle East of conflict and poverty, a nuclear one at that. Instead, it is a unified and stable country that, having abandoned socialism only in the early 1990s, has grown quickly since then. Had China been a democracy since that ill-fated election of 1912–13, it might well be another Japan today.

In any case, those who advocate dictatorship, in China or elsewhere, have a burden to show that the people of these countries, if given a chance, would agree that it was a better system and endorse its continuation. Western business executives may laud the six-lane expressways slicing through rural China, but the peasants who stand fenced off from the fast lanes might, if given a chance, prefer other public spending, on hospitals and schools. Those who praise dictatorships find it hard to explain why people rise up time and again to overthrow them. To quote one Indian writer echoing Churchill: "It is not the finest product of the desiring human intellect. But it is certainly more practicable than other more promethean conceptions."[13]

At a deeper level, then, the struggle for democracy is a struggle against the authoritarian potential that resides darkly in every society and in every individual. It is the struggle against our desire to project our own moral conceptions upon society. It is the struggle against treating others worse than we would have them treat us. Democracy represents a break in every country with its prevailing political culture. It represents a universal drive toward one ideal against the universal prevalence of another. Every country, China included, needs to "break" from its past to achieve democracy, just as the United States needed to leave behind its slavery, colonial aristocracy, and anti-Indian genocides in order to achieve democracy. To say, then, that democracy is "incompatible" with any country's culture is then either a statement of the obvious (because it is incompatible with the prevailing culture of *every* undemocratic country) or patently false (because the world's 120 democracies have all overcome their authoritarian cultures and learned democratic ones). The same applies to China.

China's Democratic Potential

How is it that China, one of the world's most inventive and culturally rich human civilizations, remains in the grip of dictatorship? The question may seem trivial when we survey the long sweep of history a hundred years from now. It took democracy nearly a century to take root in France and the United States after their late-eighteenth-century popular revolutions. In the twentieth century, great nations like Russia and Japan fell under the temporary spell of dictatorship after early democratic breakthroughs before regaining their feet. In China too, democracy will probably be seen as delayed, but nothing more. People will talk of the aberration that was the People's Republic of China. Books will be written, indeed many are already appearing, about the deep cultural roots and decisive historical march of China's democracy.[14]

Keeping that notion in mind is important because it helps to focus atten-

tion on the events and actors that thwarted democracy in China in the twentieth century, rather than on maudlin laments about the country's "plight," as if it suffered from some unspeakable disease. China remains under dictatorship not because of deep-seated, unchangeable "factors" but because its leaders, its neighbors, and some bad luck conspired to suppress the democratic urge time and again. One need only recall the pessimistic tomes written in the 1970s about the Philippines—pointing to its resource-based economy, colonial history, conservative Catholic church, impossible geography, and entrenched business oligarchs—to be reminded of how things can change. Likewise for any number of Eastern European countries which today live in stable democracies after decades of communist rule.

Many excuses have been offered for dictatorship in China. Begin with China's 3,000-year-long imperial history, dating back to the Zhou dynasty. This was long a staple of the retarding legacies argument. A dominant and centralized dynasty run by a single emperor held power closely and treated society as mere subjects. Unlike ancient Rome, China's emperors did not appoint deputies or large senates to help them govern. Unlike feudal Europe, they did not decentralize power to provincial lords and burghers. The result was an inherited system that China found hard to shed.

This argument both overstates the strength of imperial China and understates the potential for change. The rule of emperors in China was under constant threat from rebellions, disobedience, and allegiance to rivals.[15] Emperors were denied patronage rights, the norm in feudal Europe, relying instead on a meritocratic examination system. There was no patrimonial lineage. Indeed, the very right to rule, the mandate of the gods, was revoked from those who governed poorly, prefiguring the contractarian tradition of modern Western liberalism. In addition, countries with far stronger imperial traditions, like Japan and Thailand, where the emperor was worshipped as a king, were able to escape that tradition and create thriving democracies quite easily when conditions changed. China is no more destined to suffer the rule of kings than any other country.

Social and cultural factors are more commonly advanced today, not least by frustrated Chinese democrats themselves. Many cite China's ancient Confucian social order. Within this order, the individual was imagined only as part of a larger group—the family, the clan, and the Chinese nation. Dissent was frowned upon. Elitism thrived. The problems with blaming Confucianism on China's democratic failure are both its interpretation and its modern-day relevance. Confucianism did not necessarily mitigate against democracy. The individual's duty in society was to seek a just or moral outcome, the bedrock of modern democracy. The moral rule of the emperor, meanwhile,

echoed the procedural justice of democracy. In addition, the emperor was charged with improving the welfare of the nation; his mandate of heaven would be on the line if he did not. Court advisors were tasked with remonstrating when he went wrong. Religious toleration, derived from the strongly liberal doctrines like Buddhism and Taoism, existed in China long before it developed in the West as the precursor of liberalism.[16] As one scholar wrote: "Confucianism stressed that all could be educated; Daoism focussed on freedom; the Legalist school of philosophy was making all, including the rulers, equal before the law; and Mohism was premised on egalitarianism and the yin-yang school on compromise."[17] From the vantage of the Middle Ages, smart money would be wagered on China, not Europe, as the future birthplace of modern democracy.

In modern times, Confucian culture has been successfully used to nurture democracy in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Just as Christianity has nurtured both terrible dictatorships and wonderful democracies throughout the world, so too Confucianism can be used, or abused, for opposing purposes. That Confucianism in China became a tool of dictatorship was more choice than inevitability. As one Chinese scholar wrote: "Liberalism is not an import. It's a basic value deeply embedded in China's traditional culture."[18]

In any case, other cultural and social influences play an equally important role in China today as inherited tradition. Delving into Song dynasty poetry for clues about modern-day China is like perusing Beowulf to comprehend modern-day Britain. The undemocratic attitudes that China's people display on many issues is entirely normal for those living under dictatorship. It is a result not a cause, as shown by cross-country survey data of how those attitudes change under democracy. Most surveys, as we shall see, reveal that by the end of the twentieth century. China's people already had a minimal degree of "democratic attitudes" needed to sustain democracy.

Another commonly cited explanation for China's democratic failure is underdevelopment. Mixed in here are several overlapping issues: poverty, illiteracy, peasants, and population. The common idea is that the incremental advances of economic and technological change kept the Chinese people poor, illiterate, scattered, and out-of-touch for most of the twentieth century. This "peasant mass" was not conducive to the growth of an empowered associational life in cities that could act as both the champion and bulwark of democracy. Even today, the argument goes, with a population of 1.3 billion, 70 percent of it in rural areas, 220 million people still living on less than a dollar a day, and 145 million illiterates, this great mass remains an insurmountable obstacle to democracy. In the words of one elitist Chinese scholar living in the West, talking about democracy in China today is like "playing

the piano to an ox. It is too sophisticated a concept for such an unsophisticated audience."[19]

Without a doubt, underdevelopment is a useful descriptive device because, as mentioned, democracy is closely tied up, historically if not by necessity, with a leveling of the playing field between rulers and ruled. But while it may describe the conditions that have allowed elites to subvert democracy, it is far from being an iron-clad explanation. Many large countries with human development levels close to that of China—including India, Bangladesh, Turkey, the Philippines, and Indonesia—have functioning democracies today. Poverty might trouble democracy. It certainly does not validate dictatorship.

The argument is also weakened by the fact that since the early 1990s, it is those same listless, ignorant, and parochial peasants in China who have been electing their village leaders and running their village affairs with great aplomb. The indifference or ignorance of many peasants about national issues is, again, a result, not a cause, of dictatorship. Were they to have a voice, they would be as informed and involved as their counterparts in India, perhaps democracy's most enthusiastic electorate. Today, telephones and televisions have spread to every corner of China and local elections have been carried out under the most deprived conditions. Some scholars in China are now prepared to dismiss the underdevelopment argument entirely. "In fact there is no necessary connection between democratic levels and economic and cultural and other levels," wrote two Shanghai scholars.[20]

Finally, nationalism is a force which has been used to bury democratic urges time and again in China, as in many countries. China was both the Greece and the Rome of ancient Asia. Yet its relative decline, which began in the fifteenth century and culminated in its extravagantly-named "century of humiliation" at the hands of the dominant West in the nineteenth century left a deep psychological impact. Rulers have been able to assert that democracy was a threat to the rebuilding of national greatness, diverting attention from the damage wrought by their own despotism. "When there is a conflict between democracy and nationalism in China, nationalism always wins," write two Chinese scholars.[21]

Yet perhaps more than any other legacy, China's legacy of modern nationalism has the potential to support democracy, just as it did in India and Taiwan. Since the May Fourth enlightenment movement of 1919 to the time of Tiananmen in 1989, nationalism inspired pro-democracy movements against corrupt and tyrannical rulers. Before seizing power in China, Mao Zedong appealed to nationalism as the reason for giving self-determination to China's minority peoples, arguing that liberation from tyranny was the benchmark of national greatness. Indeed, this same logic allowed liberals in China to urge

the introduction of democratic elections at the village level in the 1980s. Now, as we shall see, there is an emerging thread of nationalism in China that for the first time concedes the right of ethnic groups to self-determination and portrays nationalism in terms consonant with democratic ideals. Nationalism is increasingly linked to personal dignity, international responsibility, and internal freedom. This democratic national identity is growing strongly.

A country's legacies are for the most part contemporary social constructs that change with time. Some are more rooted in fact than others. None are permanent. China's rulers have successfully interpreted the country's inheritance in antidemocratic terms for more than a century. Their dictatorship has in turn produced the very behavior that further justifies this interpretation. Yet their ability to do so is weakening and the potential for reinterpretation is vast.

Thus, the direct and immediate explanation for China's failure to achieve democratic orbit since the last emperor was chased out of the Forbidden City in 1911 is the behavior of elites. Since then, six key figures—warlord Yuan Shikai, Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, Communist China's founder Mao Zedong, and his three successors as paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao—have chosen to subvert democracy. It was in their hands that the power lay and it was on their watch that democracy was postponed despite popular pressures.

That they were able to resist democratic reforms is a result of specific historical circumstances that played into their hands each time. It is important to keep in mind the contingency of those circumstances, how they might have been different in the past and how they might be different in the future. Throughout the twentieth century, China's rulers made decisions based on self-interest that made it politic to repress democracy. Society was too weak, international pressure too sporadic, or the incentives for regime reformers too unappealing. Assertions that the normal drive toward democracy was either absent or that it was doomed to failure, notes one scholar, on closer analysis prove to be "ridiculous rationalizations of readily comprehensible political defeats."[22] In the next chapter, we survey how those political defeats came about.