CCE-002 | Culture and Democracy — Are Certain Cultural Traditions Incompatible with Democracy?

Free China Movement

Version: as published 2026-11-14

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Canonical edition:

https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-002-culture-and-democracy/

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Introduction: Does Democracy Have a Cultural Prerequisite?

A recurring political argument holds that democracy suits only certain civilizations, while other societies, because they value order, family ties, religion, or authority, are destined to be incapable of democracy. Although this claim appears to respect differences, it often compresses complex histories into judgments that are difficult to falsify: democratic success is attributed to cultural change, while failure is attributed to a culture's inherent nature. This essay argues that culture can influence political trust, attitudes toward authority,

and institutional performance, but there is insufficient evidence that any particular cultural tradition is permanently and necessarily incompatible with democracy.

1. Democracy Is First and Foremost a Set of Rules Governing Public Power

At a minimum, democracy requires broad and equal political participation, genuine competition, credible elections, and the possibility that a government can peacefully lose power. Liberal democracy also requires freedom of speech and association, judicial protections, checks and balances, and minority rights. Robert Dahl's discussion of effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, and control of the agenda offers principles for evaluating institutions. Democracy does not require people to share the same religion, family ethics, or holidays; it requires equal citizenship in relation to public power. Respect for elders does not entail obedience to an unaccountable national leader. Nor does a society's emphasis on harmony preclude resolving conflicts peacefully through open debate.

2. Three Errors of Cultural Determinism

First, equating family ethics directly with principles of state rule confuses distinct concepts. Second, treating historical experiences of autocracy as evidence that people freely chose autocracy ignores the conditions under which choices were made. Third, attributing corruption, conflict, or governance failures during transitions to national character bypasses observable variables such as the military, courts, elections, media, and fiscal institutions. Cultural determinism can readily become a device for absolving those in power: institutions that could be reformed are portrayed as an unchangeable destiny. Research must distinguish three different levels of claim: correlations between cultural values and democratic attitudes, causal mechanisms, and supposed necessary incompatibility.

3. Culture Is Not a Closed, Uniform, or Unchanging Entity

Labels such as Confucian, Islamic, or Western culture are broad categories containing substantial internal diversity. Generations, classes, regions, religious communities, and schools of thought differ in how they understand authority. The same classical texts may be interpreted as endorsing obedience or as supporting remonstrance, benevolent government, and restraints on abuses of power. Education, urbanization, migration, women's political participation, social movements, and communications environments can all change values. Institutions also shape culture in return: open competition can foster respect for rules, while prolonged suppression of dissent can alter how people express preferences. Observed silence therefore cannot automatically be interpreted as sincere support for autocracy.

4. East Asian Experience Challenges a Simple Dichotomy

Japan developed parliamentary democracy after the Second World War. South Korea advanced constitutional reform after its 1987 democratization movement. ROC (Taiwan) lifted martial law in 1987, subsequently expanded political competition, and achieved alternation of governing parties. All three were influenced, to varying degrees, by family ethics, hierarchical ideas, and Confucian thought, yet their political development followed different paths. If a culture necessarily excluded democracy, these experiences would be difficult to explain. At the same time, these cases do not prove that culture has no influence: war, international circumstances, economic change, civic organizations, negotiations among political elites, and institutional arrangements all belong in the comparison. Similar cultures can produce different institutional outcomes, demonstrating that culture is not a sufficient determining condition.

5. Europe and India: Democracy Is Not an Automatic Product of Culture

European history includes long periods of monarchy, religious wars, hierarchical privilege, and political exclusion of women and people without sufficient property. The expansion of democratic rights required struggle, organization-building, and legal reform; it did not

grow naturally from some eternal Western spirit. India shows that a society with extensive linguistic, religious, caste, and regional diversity can establish nationwide electoral competition. Yet challenges involving minority rights, social inequality, and expansion of executive power also remind us that holding elections and sustaining full liberal democracy are not the same thing. India should neither be idealized nor should its difficulties be blamed on cultural diversity itself.

6. The Real Boundary Between Religion and Democracy

The relationship between religion and democracy requires distinguishing personal faith, religious organizations, interpretations of doctrine, and state coercion. Within religious communities, ideas emphasizing authority may coexist with those emphasizing social justice or supporting political consultation. Conflict typically arises when the state grants an unquestionable legal privilege to one interpretation of doctrine or restricts citizens' rights to change their faith, hold office on equal terms, or express opposition publicly. Formally secular governments can also suppress freedom. The test must be consistent across traditions: whether authority invokes religion, nation, revolution, or history, it should never be exempt from citizens' scrutiny.

7. Contributions and Limits of Political Culture Research

Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's The Civic Culture emphasizes the relationship between political attitudes and democratic stability. Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel examine links among modernization, value change, and individual autonomy. These studies suggest that tolerance, trust, participation, and awareness of rights matter beyond the text of a constitution. Yet survey respondents who say they “support democracy” may envision different institutions; answers given under repression may also be affected by fear. More importantly, democratic experience can itself cultivate democratic attitudes, so correlation does not directly prove that culture determines institutions in a one-way process. Culture is a testable influence, not a historical law without exceptions.

8. Failed Democratic Transitions Cannot Be Blamed on Culture Alone

Transitions may falter because security agencies reject civilian control, elections are unfair, the judiciary lacks independence, media are monopolized, oligarchs control resources, corruption persists, or outside actors intervene. These problems cross cultural boundaries. A single election does not amount to democratic consolidation; without freedom for opposition parties, rights protections, and accountability, voting can become a ritual that merely confirms power. Democracy's value does not lie in guaranteeing that policies never fail, but in allowing failures to be exposed publicly, governments to change peacefully, and rules to be revised lawfully. Practical priorities for reform include independent election administration, a professional civil service, transparent public finances, judicial safeguards, local self-government, free media, and civic education—not waiting for an immeasurable degree of cultural maturity.

9. In the Chinese Context, Tradition Is Not a Perpetual License to Deny Rights

Chinese intellectual history contains resources that respect order and hierarchy, but also traditions of people-centered governance, remonstrance, resistance to tyranny, and modern explorations of constitutional government. Traditional concern for the people's welfare is not identical to modern popular sovereignty, but that distinction does not establish that Chinese society is incapable of democracy. Modern political experiments and setbacks should be analyzed in light of war, party-state structures, social organizations, and legal institutions. In particular, public political statements made without freedom of expression and meaningful competition cannot simply be interpreted as proof that citizens do not want the right to choose. If citizens cannot freely speak, associate, and compete, on what grounds can anyone declare on their behalf that they are unfit for democracy? Cultural identity can be part of democratic debate, but it cannot make political choices in place of citizens.

10. Universal Rights and Institutional Diversity Can Coexist

Democracies may adopt parliamentary or presidential systems, unitary or federal structures, and different electoral systems and forms of local self-government. Culture and history may shape institutional design, but they should not negate equal citizenship. Some customs genuinely conflict with rights—for example, prohibiting women from voting, excluding religious minorities from public office, or placing kinship groups above the law. Cultural relativism cannot excuse these practices from criticism. A reasonable principle is that communities are free to preserve traditions, while individuals are also entitled to question, leave, and reform them; the state must protect both within a framework of equal law.

11. How Should Claims of Cultural Incompatibility Be Tested?

First, ask which observable belief or practice the alleged culture refers to and whether the claim erases differences within society. Second, compare societies with similar cultures but different institutions, as well as societies with different cultures but similar institutions. Third, determine whether the evidence consists of survey data, historical records, or rulers' descriptions of themselves, and whether the analysis accounts for the economy, war, state capacity, and institutional design. Finally, require the claim to specify what evidence could disprove it. A proposition that offers no testable mechanism should not be treated as a scientific conclusion, much less as a justification for restricting political rights.

Conclusion: Democratic Habits Can Be Learned

There is no simple binary of natural compatibility or natural incompatibility between culture and democracy. Culture may help build social trust, but it may also preserve hierarchical prejudices that need to be overcome; it is not an inescapable destiny. Democracy depends on equal rights, genuine competition, the rule of law, and accountable power. These institutional conditions can be built gradually in different societies. The greatest danger is not any particular tradition, but anyone who invokes tradition to declare that citizens must forever be denied the right to decide who governs

them. Respect for cultural diversity and the defense of universal political equality are not contradictory.