T088 | Has Ancient Chinese People-Centered Thought Already Amounted to Democracy?

Free China Movement

Version: as published 2026-11-22

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Canonical edition: https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-myths-t088-minben-thought-democracy/

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The question

China's ancient thinkers cared deeply about the people. Mencius declared, "民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻" — "The people are the most precious; the altars of soil and grain come next; the ruler is the least important" (*Mencius*, *Jin Xin II*). Officials remonstrated with emperors, dynasties rose and fell by the Mandate of Heaven, and the people's welfare was the stated measure of good rule for two thousand years. The 2021 white paper *China: Democracy That Works* draws a direct line from this tradition to the present, saying that the people-centered (*minben*) thought explored by the Chinese people over 5,000 years "蕴含着丰富的民主因素" — "contains rich democratic elements" — and embodies "中国人民对民主的朴素认知和不懈追求" ("the Chinese people's simple understanding of democracy and unremitting pursuit of it"). The companion white paper on the political party system likewise roots the current system in traditional culture, which it says advocates "天下为公、以民为本" ("the world belongs to all; the people are the root").

The claim is tempting, and it is worth stating in its strongest form before answering it: if democracy means rule in the interest of the people, and Chinese thought put the people first centuries before modern democratic theory, then China possessed democracy in its own form all along. This essay argues that the claim confuses three different things — ruling *for* the people, being *authorized by* the people, and holding power that the people can *revoke* — and that ancient *minben* thought satisfies only the first. That is not a small achievement. But it is not democracy, and

calling it democracy does a disservice to both traditions: it flatters the present and blunts the past.

The strongest version of the continuity claim

The continuity argument has three legs, and each deserves a fair hearing.

First, the classical texts really do place the people above the ruler. Mencius does not merely advise kindness; he ranks the people first and the ruler last, and he allows that a lord who endangers the state "则变置" — "shall be replaced." The doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven made the ruler's legitimacy conditional on the people's welfare: flood, famine, and rebellion were read as signs that Heaven had withdrawn its mandate.

Second, the tradition built institutions around this idea. Censors and remonstrating officials were charged with telling the emperor unwelcome truths, and local gentry, village compacts, and lineage organizations gave ordinary people channels to petition and complain.

Third, modern official documents present this as a living inheritance rather than a museum piece. The democracy white paper treats *minben* thought as the cultural soil from which whole-process people's democracy grows. On this view, democracy is not a Western import but a value with Chinese roots, expressed today in Chinese institutions.

None of this is invented, and none of it should be dismissed. The question is whether it adds up to democracy.

What *minben* actually claimed

Begin with what Mencius actually said, because the quotation cuts both ways. "The people are the most precious" is followed by "是故得乎丘民而为天子" — "therefore, one who wins the hearts of the multitudes becomes the Son of Heaven." Winning hearts is not winning votes. There is no procedure in the passage by which the multitudes choose, count their choice, or withdraw it on a schedule. The people are the *measure* of legitimacy, not its *authors*. They judge the ruler by his results — harvests, order, relief in famine — and Heaven, not the people, issues the verdict. When a dynasty fell, the people did not vote it out; they endured it, fled it, or rose against it at the cost of civil war.

That is the difference between revocability by rebellion and revocability by election. The Mandate of Heaven made power conditional, but the condition could only be enforced by catastrophe: rebellion, invasion, dynastic collapse. A mechanism that requires the state to break down before it can operate is not a democratic check. Democracy's defining achievement is that the people can remove rulers *without* breaking the state.

The remonstrance system illustrates the same limit from the other side. A censor could advise, warn, and even risk his life to tell the emperor he was wrong. What he could not do was overrule him, veto a policy, or appeal to a body with authority over the throne. Advice is not a check.

The white papers' own test

The strongest evidence against the equation comes from the very documents that propose it. The democracy white paper sets out its own criteria for judging whether a political system is democratic: "主要看国家领导层能否依法有序更替，全体人民能否依法管理国家事务和社会事务、管理经济和文化事业，人民群众能否畅通表达利益要求，社会各方面能否有效参与国家政治生活，国家决策能否实现科学化、民主化，各方面人才能否通过公平竞争进入国家领导和管理体系，执政党能否依照宪法法律规定实现对国家事务的领导，权力运用能否得到有效制约和监督" — in essence, whether the leadership can be replaced through lawful and orderly procedures, whether all the people can manage state affairs, whether the people can express their interests freely, and whether power is effectively checked and supervised. It adds the pointed warning that "民主不是装饰品，不是用来做摆设的" — "democracy is not a decoration, not for display" — and that what matters is "要看权力是否真正受到人民监督和制约," whether power is genuinely supervised and constrained by the people.

Apply that test to the institutions the white papers describe. The paper states plainly: "在中国，没有反对党，也没有在野党" — "In China, there is no opposition party, and there is no party out of power." The party-system white paper is equally explicit: the democratic parties "不是在野党、反对党" ("are not opposition parties or parties out of power") but "参政党" — parties participating in governance under the Communist Party's leadership. Their supervision of the ruling party, it says, "是通过提出意见、批评、建议的方式进行的政治监督，是一种协商式监督、合作性监督" — political supervision conducted by offering opinions, criticism, and suggestions, a consultative and cooperative form of supervision. Consultation is real participation, and the white papers document extensive consultation through the Chinese

People's Political Consultative Conference, people's congresses, village committees, and public comment on legislation. But consultation that the ruling party may accept or set aside is not the same as authorization that the ruling party must obtain, and supervision that takes the form of suggestions is not the power to remove. By the white paper's own criteria — orderly replacement of the leadership, genuine constraint of power — the system it describes does not pass the test it sets, and neither did the imperial system it claims as an ancestor.

The electoral arrangements described in the white paper confirm the point. Deputies to county and township people's congresses are directly elected, but deputies above the county level are chosen indirectly, and the leadership of state organs is elected by congresses, not by the public. Village committee elections have given millions of rural residents experience in choosing local leaders. But these are elections within a structure in which the top leadership is not subject to competitive choice, and in which no opposition may contest power. That is participation without authorization — the people may choose among approved candidates for subordinate posts, but they do not choose who governs them. Ancient *minben* thought, which also offered the people voice without choice, shares exactly this structure. The resemblance is real, but it is a resemblance in limitation, not in democratic character.

The comparative evidence: same roots, different institutions

If *minben* thought already amounted to democracy, then societies sharing that cultural inheritance should show similar political outcomes. They do not. The clearest counterexample is the Republic of China (Taiwan), which draws on the same classical tradition, the same language, and the same Confucian-inflected family and social ethics — yet after martial law was lifted in 1987, it built competitive elections, a free press, an independent judiciary, and alternation of governing parties: the Democratic Progressive Party first took the presidency in 2000, the Kuomintang returned in 2008, and the DPP returned in 2016. The same cultural soil produced a democracy there not because the culture changed, but because the institutions did. As the companion essay on culture and democracy in this project's CCE-100 series puts it, "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" — and, one might add, it does not establish that Chinese society already had it. Culture shapes what people value and how they argue; it does not fix what institutions they live under. Japan and South

Korea, also shaped by Confucian traditions, followed their own paths to competitive politics, while the People's Republic of China (Mainland China) retained single-party rule. Similar cultures, different institutions, different outcomes — the variable that explains the difference is institutional, not cultural.

What *minben* can still offer

None of this means *minben* thought is irrelevant to democracy. On the contrary, it offers democratic argument in China something that imported theory cannot: a native vocabulary of legitimacy. When Mencius ranks the people above the ruler, he gives Chinese democrats a classical authority for the proposition that rulers serve the people and not the reverse. When the Mandate of Heaven makes legitimacy conditional on welfare, it establishes the principle that no ruler rules by right alone. When the remonstrance tradition honors officials who speak unwelcome truth, it affirms that criticism of power is a virtue, not a crime. These are resources for democratic argument, and a democracy built in China would be stronger for drawing on them — just as Western democracies draw on their own pre-democratic traditions without claiming that medieval England was already democratic.

But resources are not equivalents. The honest statement of the relationship is this: ancient Chinese *minben* thought is a tradition *about* the people, not a tradition *of* rule by the people. It made the people's welfare the standard of legitimacy, gave the people a voice in petition and protest, and denied that any ruler was above judgment. It never gave the people the vote, the right to organize opposition, or a lawful procedure to remove a government. To call that democracy is to lower the meaning of the word until it covers any government that claims to care for its subjects. And it does the tradition itself an injustice: Mencius's standard is a demanding one, a sword held over rulers who fail their people. Turned into a certificate of democratic achievement, it becomes a shield for the very power it was meant to judge.

Conclusion

Ruling for the people, authorization by the people, and revocable power are three different things, and only the last two make a system democratic. Ancient Chinese *minben* thought achieved the first with remarkable moral force, and its insistence that the people matter more than the ruler remains one of the great political ideas

of the classical world. But it stopped there. It never built the institutions — competitive elections, lawful opposition, the orderly replacement of leaders — by which a people authorizes power and takes it back. The 2021 white papers are right to claim this tradition as part of China's political heritage, and right to set a demanding test for democracy. They are wrong to imply that the heritage already passes the test. The people were precious to Mencius. They were not yet sovereign. Democracy begins where *minben* thought ends: when the people do not merely matter to the ruler, but choose the ruler — and can choose another.

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