自由中国运动 · Free China Movement

T009｜Democracy Is a Foreign Concept — So Do the Chinese People Not Need It?

Myths T009 · v1.0 ｜ 2026-11-22

© 2026 Free China Movement

https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-myths-t009-democracy-is-a-foreign-concept-so-do-the-chinese-people-not-need-it/

contact@freechina.live

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

1. The argument, stated fairly

The claim runs like this. Democracy — the word, the idea, the institutions — came from the West. It grew out of Greek city-states, European parliaments, and Anglo-American constitutional history. It is not a Chinese invention, and it does not grow from Chinese soil. Therefore, the argument goes, it is not something the Chinese people need, and attempts to plant it in China are a form of cultural imposition: foreign in origin, alien in spirit, and bound to fail or to do harm.

This is not a frivolous argument. It draws on real history: China did import Western political forms in the early twentieth century, and those experiments did fail. The claim deserves a serious answer — and the serious answer turns out to cut against it.

The flaw in the argument is a confusion between two different questions: where an idea comes from, and whether it is valuable. The first is a matter of history. The second is a matter of judgment, and it can only be settled by the people who would live under the system in question. Origin does not decide value. And when we ask who gets to decide, the official Chinese position itself points in the same direction as the rebuttal.

2. Origin is not value

Almost nothing important in modern life is judged by its place of origin. Marxism arrived in China from abroad — the white paper itself records that the May Fourth Movement and "the spread of Marxism in China" helped awaken the Chinese people — yet no one in the official account treats Marxism as disqualified by its foreign birth. An idea's passport tells us where it was born, not whether it is true or useful.

What matters is what happens when an idea meets a new society: whether it is adapted, tested, and reshaped, or imposed unchanged. A concept can be foreign in origin and still answer a real, local need.

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

The white paper states this universalist half of the position plainly in its Preamble:

> *"Democracy is a common value of humanity and an ideal that has always been cherished by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese people."*

If democracy were merely a Western possession, it could not be described as a common value of humanity, nor as an ideal the Chinese people themselves have always cherished. The same document adds:

> *"Democracy is a concrete phenomenon that is constantly evolving. Rooted in history, culture and tradition, it takes diverse forms and develops along the paths chosen by different peoples based on their exploration and innovation."*

Diversity of form is the normal condition of democracy, not an exception granted to China alone. A concept that can take many forms cannot be owned by any one civilization.

3. The official position actually agrees — twice over

The white paper holds two thoughts at once, and the myth collapses them into one. It insists both that democracy is a universal human value *and* that China did not copy Western models. Section V puts the second half in these terms:

> *"China did not follow the established path of Western countries in its modernization drive. Similarly, China did not duplicate Western models of democracy, but created its own."*

And in Section V(2), "Following the Most Suitable Path to Democracy," it draws the line between learning and copying:

> *"China draws on each and every political achievement of other countries, but does not imitate any of their models of democracy."*

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

That distinction — draw on, do not imitate — is exactly the distinction this essay defends. The white paper's objection is to *duplication*, not to democracy. It objects to a particular model being imposed wholesale, and it defends a democracy "rooted in this vast land, nourished by the culture and traditions of the Chinese civilization, and draws on the achievements of human civilization." A Chinese democracy that draws on the achievements of human civilization is still democracy; the foreign origin of the concept is absorbed, not denied.

The same section gives the principle that decides between models:

> *"The model that suits best is always the most appropriate. Only democracy rooted in a country's unique social environment has proven to be reliable and effective, and can thrive and progress."*

"Suits best" is a test of fit, not of origin. A system is judged by whether it suits the country and works for its people — the same test any society would apply to any imported idea, from a farming technique to a legal code.

4. The failed imports prove less than the myth claims

The strongest historical evidence for the myth is the record of failure. The white paper itself recounts it:

> *"Following the Revolution of 1911, the Chinese people made numerous attempts to introduce the Western political systems, including the parliamentary system, multiparty system, and presidential system, all of which ended in failure."*

But what does this failure prove? It proves that those particular systems, transplanted wholesale into a country in the throes of warlordism, foreign invasion, and social collapse, did not take hold. It does not prove that the Chinese people rejected democracy as such. Indeed, the white paper frames the entire century from 1911 onward as a sustained pursuit

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

of democracy — "the Party has led the people in realizing people's democracy in China" — in which the failures were failures of *form*, not of aspiration.

There is a further point the myth must answer. If the claim is that Chinese people do not *want* democracy, that is an empirical claim about what 1.4 billion people want. How could it be tested? Only if people can speak freely, organize, publish, and vote in genuine competition — the very conditions whose absence the myth treats as evidence of contentment. Silence under conditions where dissent is costly is not consent. The companion CCE article on culture and democracy makes the same point: "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" (see CCE-002, § 9). The test the argument boundary requires — the Chinese people's own choice — cannot be run until the choice is genuinely available.

5. Who decides? The white paper's own answer

The decisive question is who gets to judge whether a country is democratic. The white paper answers it in the Preamble:

> *"Whether a country is democratic should be judged by its people, not dictated by a handful of outsiders."*

This is a strong principle, and it cuts both ways. It forbids outsiders from imposing their model on China — but it also forbids anyone from declaring, on the Chinese people's behalf and without asking them, that they do not need democracy at all. A judgment "by its people" must be a judgment the people themselves actually make, through institutions that let them express, revise, and act on their preferences.

The white paper's Conclusion states the same idea as a general rule for the world:

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

> *"All paths to democracy chosen by the peoples themselves deserve proper respect."*

The operative word is *chosen*. Paths deserve respect because peoples choose them — not because of where the idea of a path originated, and not because a government announces the choice on the people's behalf. Choice is the test. Origin is not.

6. Conclusion

"Democracy is foreign, so Chinese people don't need it" fails at each step. Its premise is true but irrelevant: the concept did arrive from abroad, as did many ideas China now treats as its own. Its inference is invalid: origin does not determine value, and the white paper itself calls democracy a common value of humanity while insisting only that China not duplicate Western models. Its evidence — the failed imports of 1911 and after — shows that wholesale transplantation failed, not that democratic aspiration is absent. And its conclusion contradicts its own standard: whether China needs democracy can only be settled by the Chinese people's own choice, made under conditions where that choice is real.

The honest version of the claim is narrower and worth keeping: no single foreign model should be imposed on China, and any democratic system in China must be built to suit Chinese conditions. That version is true — and it is a claim *about* democracy, not against it. The question is not whether the Chinese people need something foreign. It is whether they get to choose for themselves.

Sources and verification

Primary source D — State Council Information Office, *China: Democracy That Works* (《中国的民主》), released 4 December 2021. English full text consulted at the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202112/t20211204_10462468.ht

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

m (Xinhua release, updated 4 December 2021; page re-fetched 2026-11-21). Every quotation below was checked word-for-word against that text.

Quotations used (all verified):

1. Preamble: "Democracy is a common value of humanity and an ideal that has always been cherished by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese people."
2. Preamble: "Democracy is a concrete phenomenon that is constantly evolving. Rooted in history, culture and tradition, it takes diverse forms and develops along the paths chosen by different peoples based on their exploration and innovation."
3. Preamble: "Whether a country is democratic should be judged by its people, not dictated by a handful of outsiders."
4. Section I: "Following the Revolution of 1911, the Chinese people made numerous attempts to introduce the Western political systems, including the parliamentary system, multiparty system, and presidential system, all of which ended in failure."
5. Section I: "It is rooted in this vast land, nourished by the culture and traditions of the Chinese civilization, and draws on the achievements of human civilization."
6. Section V(1): "China did not follow the established path of Western countries in its modernization drive. Similarly, China did not duplicate Western models of democracy, but created its own."
7. Section V(2): "China draws on each and every political achievement of other countries, but does not imitate any of their models of democracy."
8. Section V(2): "The model that suits best is always the most appropriate. Only democracy rooted in a country's unique social environment has proven to be reliable and effective, and can thrive and progress."
9. Conclusion: "All paths to democracy chosen by the peoples themselves deserve proper respect."

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live

Paraphrased (not quoted) from source D: the May Fourth Movement and the spread of Marxism in China (Section I); the framing of 1911–1949 and after as a pursuit of people's democracy (Sections I and V).

CCE123 link-back: CCE-002, *Culture and Democracy — Are Certain Cultural Traditions Incompatible with Democracy?*, https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-002-culture-and-democracy/ — verified live 2026-11-21 (page fetched; § 9 quoted in paraphrase in § 4 above, cited not duplicated). CCE-002 is the directly overlapping CCE123 family for this topic (culture/origin as a ground for excluding democracy). No other overlapping CCE article was cited; the EN hub page itself could not be fetched in this session (fetch failed), so no further hub-derived links are claimed.

Gaps and limits:

- No claim is made here about survey evidence of what Chinese citizens want; the essay argues that such a claim would require conditions of free choice, which is a methodological point, not a factual finding.
- The essay's own analogy (an idea's "passport") is an argumentative illustration, not a factual claim.

© 2026 Free China Movement · https://freechina.live · contact@freechina.live