# T089 — Can the Failure of the Late Qing and Early Republic Prove That Chinese People Can Never Be Democratic?

**Free China Movement**

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## The claim, stated fairly

The argument runs like this. China tried democracy once, at the end of the Qing dynasty and in the first years of the Republic, and it failed. The 1911 Revolution overthrew the empire; a republic with a parliament, political parties, and a president was proclaimed; within a few years the experiment had collapsed into dictatorship, fragmentation, and warlord rule. If a people is given democracy and cannot keep it, the failure must reveal something permanent about that people — their culture, their habits, their political character. Therefore, the argument concludes, Chinese people cannot be democratic, and further attempts are futile.

The official version of this claim is stated in the State Council Information Office white paper *China's Democracy* (2021). Its first section records that after the 1911 Revolution, "中国模仿议会制、多党制、总统制等西方政治制度模式的各种尝试都以失败告终" — "the various attempts to imitate Western political models such as the parliamentary system, the multi-party system, and the presidential system all ended in failure." The white paper treats this failure as the starting point of a different story: that China had to find its own path. But the fatalist reading goes further, turning a historical failure into a permanent verdict on a people. That is the step this essay examines.

The fatalist argument deserves to be taken seriously, because the failure it points to was real. The early Republic did collapse. The question is what the collapse proves. A single failed attempt proves that something went wrong in that attempt; it does not, by itself, prove that success is impossible forever. To decide what the failure means, the causes have to be separated. Five explanations are usually tangled together — war, finance, organization, external force, and culture — and they do not carry the same weight. Only the last one, culture, could support a claim about "never." The first four are circumstances, and circumstances change.

## War: a republic born into armed conflict

The Republic of China was proclaimed in 1912 into a country that had just fought a revolution and was about to fight much more. Yuan Shikai, the Republic's first effective strongman, moved to concentrate power, attempted to restore the monarchy in 1915–16, and died in 1916; after his death, central authority broke apart and the country entered the warlord era, with regional military commanders controlling provinces and fighting one another. The Northern Expedition of 1926–28 eventually re-established a central government at Nanjing, but only after more than a decade in which no civilian institution had a secure monopoly on force.

This matters because democratic institutions need a minimum condition that is easy to overlook: the people who lose an election, a parliamentary vote, or a cabinet dispute must accept the result instead of reaching for a gun. Where armies answer to regional commanders rather than to a civilian government, a parliament can debate all it likes; its decisions are enforced only where the generals permit. The early Republic's parliaments were not defeated in argument. They were dissolved, intimidated, or ignored by men with troops. That is a failure of the monopoly on violence, not a failure of the Chinese capacity to vote. Any society — European, American, or Asian — would see its parliaments fail under the same condition. The test was not run under fair conditions, and an experiment run under impossible conditions proves nothing about the subjects.

## Finance: a state that could not pay for itself

A second, quieter cause was money. A democratic state needs revenue it controls, collected through institutions the government itself runs, sufficient to pay officials, soldiers, and judges without depending on the goodwill of creditors or foreign powers. The early Republic never had that. Its central government was chronically

short of funds, dependent on foreign loans, and unable to collect taxes reliably across provinces controlled by military men. The Maritime Customs, one of the largest sources of revenue, was administered under foreign supervision, and its receipts were pledged to service foreign debts. A government that cannot pay its own army cannot command it; a parliament that cannot fund its own decisions cannot govern.

The point is not that China was poor — poverty alone has never prevented democratic government — but that the fiscal machinery of the state was not in the state's own hands. A parliament without a treasury is a debating society. Again, this is a remediable institutional defect, not a cultural trait. Modern states of every kind, including the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC (Taiwan)) in its later decades, built fiscal capacity first and saw stable democratic competition follow; the sequence matters, and the early Republic never got to run it.

## Organization: parties without roots

A third cause was organizational. The political parties of the early Republic were, for the most part, small circles of educated men in a few cities, not mass organizations with branches, members, and local roots. Elections were held, but the electorate was narrow, the parties had little presence outside the treaty ports and provincial capitals, and political loyalty often followed personal networks rather than programs. When Yuan Shikai moved against the parliament, there was no nationwide organization capable of defending it in the streets, in the press, and in the provinces at once. The Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) later built such an organization — and used it, after 1928, to govern as a one-party state rather than to restore competition.

This, too, is a contingent fact about a particular moment. Political organization is a skill and an infrastructure, and it can be built. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 showed that new forms of organization — student associations, journals, labor unions, chambers of commerce — were already emerging. The fact that they were not yet strong enough in 1913 or 1916 says something about how young they were, not about whether Chinese people can organize. A generation later, the same society produced mass parties, trade unions, and civic associations of every kind.

## External force: a republic under foreign pressure

A fourth cause is the one most often left out of the fatalist story: foreign power. The early Republic operated under the unequal treaties, with foreign concessions, extraterritoriality, and foreign control of key revenues. In 1915 Japan presented the Twenty-One Demands, seeking to extend its control over China; in 1919 the Versailles settlement transferred Germany's rights in Shandong to Japan rather than returning them to China, triggering the May Fourth protests. Foreign powers armed rival warlords, lent money to whichever faction served their interests, and intervened whenever their privileges were threatened.

No fragile new democracy governs well while foreign governments are arming its rivals and dictating terms to its treasury. The external pressure did not create the Republic's weaknesses, but it exploited and deepened every one of them. To judge the experiment while ignoring the hands pressing on the scales is not history; it is a rigged trial. And again, the condition was temporary. The unequal treaties were eventually abolished, and the foreign concessions returned. Whatever the early Republic's failures were, they were failures under occupation of the state's sovereignty, not in its free exercise.

## Culture: the explanation that would have to do the work

That leaves the cultural explanation — the claim that Chinese culture, Confucian hierarchy, or a supposed preference for order over freedom made democracy impossible. This is the only explanation that could support the word "never," and it is the weakest of the five.

First, it is not an explanation of the events at all. Nothing in the record of 1912–1928 requires a cultural cause. War, bankruptcy, unorganized parties, and foreign intervention are each sufficient, together they are overwhelming, and they are all documented without any appeal to national character. A cultural explanation that adds nothing to what the material causes already explain is redundant.

Second, culture is not fixed. The same Confucian tradition that the fatalist invokes contains strong traditions of remonstrance against rulers, of the people's welfare as the measure of government, and of resistance to tyranny. Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing and early Republic — the reformers of 1898, the revolutionaries of 1911, the May Fourth generation — drew on both Chinese and foreign ideas to demand constitutional government. A culture that produces both the demand for

democracy and the institutions to pursue it cannot be described as inherently hostile to it.

Third, and decisively, the prediction has been tested since — and it failed. ROC (Taiwan) lifted martial law in 1987, held its first direct presidential election in 1996, and has since seen repeated peaceful alternations of the governing party. The people of Taiwan are Chinese in language, family structure, and cultural inheritance; their democratic practice is real, competitive, and durable. The same is true in the wider region: Japan built a parliamentary democracy after the Second World War, and South Korea democratized after its 1987 movement. If culture were destiny, none of this would have happened. The fatalist argument predicts that Chinese people cannot sustain democracy; the evidence of the last four decades shows that they can and do.

## What the failure does prove

The failure of the late Qing and early Republic proves something real, but narrower than the fatalist claims. It proves that importing the outward forms of democracy — a parliament, parties, a president — is not enough. Institutions need a state that can enforce its decisions, a treasury it controls, organizations rooted in society, and sovereignty free from foreign dictation. The early Republic had none of these in sufficient measure, and its parliaments collapsed under the weight of what they lacked.

That is a lesson about state-building, not about national character. It is also, notably, a lesson the white paper itself draws in its own way: its preface insists that democracy must be judged by whether the people genuinely govern — "要看人民有没有投票权，更要看人民有没有广泛参与权" ("look not only at whether the people have the right to vote, but also at whether they have broad rights of participation") — and that no single model fits all countries. The fatalist misreads the history by treating the failure of one model, under the worst conditions, as proof about a people. The history, read carefully, proves the opposite: the conditions that defeated the early Republic were remediable, they have in important respects been remedied, and where they have been remedied — most plainly in ROC (Taiwan) — Chinese people have built and sustained democratic government.

The late Qing and early Republic do not prove that Chinese people can never be democratic. They prove that democracy cannot be built on a battlefield, on an

empty treasury, and under foreign guns — and that when those conditions change, the verdict changes with them.

## Sources

- **Primary source (verified live 2026-11-19):** 国务院新闻办公室《中国的民主》, 2021-12-04. https://bb.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/202112/t20211207_10463217.htm — Section 一 passage quoted above ("辛亥革命后，中国模仿议会制、多党制、总统制等西方政治制度模式的各种尝试都以失败告终") verified verbatim against the fetched original; preface passage on judging democracy by genuine participation ("要看人民有没有投票权，更要看人民有没有广泛参与权") also verified verbatim. All other historical statements in this essay are general, well-established facts (1911 Revolution; Republic proclaimed 1912; Yuan Shikai's monarchical attempt 1915–16 and death 1916; warlord era; Northern Expedition 1926–28; May Fourth Movement 1919; Twenty-One Demands 1915; Versailles Shandong decision 1919; ROC (Taiwan) martial law lifted 1987 and first direct presidential election 1996; Japan's postwar parliamentary democracy; South Korea's 1987 democratization). No statistics, dates, or quotations beyond these were asserted.
- **CCE123 link-back:** none included. Final 46 (inventory draft CCE-042): no live URL could be verified on the EN hub or by search, and the CCE-042 YD verdict is of record as superseded by the published GPT1 master — omitted. Final 47 (inventory draft CCE-043): no live URL could be verified — omitted. Final 48 (inventory draft CCE-044): verified live at https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-044-demographic-structure-aging/ — but the article concerns demographic transition and aging, which does not overlap this topic, so no link is forced. The EN hub page itself (https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/) could not be fetched (upstream "not found" on 2026-11-19); the live status of finals 46/47 therefore remains unverified rather than confirmed absent.

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