

The Translated and Transformed Concept of Min Zhu (Democracy and Republic): A Political Cultural Influence on Translation

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Abstract—The term *min zhu* in modern Chinese is deemed to be the legitimate translation for “democracy” in English. Tracing its involvement in the Chinese context, however, some complications and doubts may be found. This paper intends to explore the issue mainly from the aspects of “the initial mistranslation and its continued evolution”, “the intricate relations with ‘republic’” and “the ‘equivalences’ have become even more inclusive”. Linguistically, for example, the classical Chinese term *min zhu* was transformed from *min zhi zhu* (people’s leader) to *min zhu zhi* (people to rule), so in a sense, *min zhu* was to convey only a partial meaning of “democracy” as the western idea was being shaped into a Chinese thinking mold. While the connotations of *min zhu* are not confined to “democracy”, the most closely related one has also been “republic”; in fact, for a period of time, *min zhu* was closer to the latter than the former. However, the term was employed by revolutionaries more as a political ideal than as a newly established moral standard.

Index Terms—Democracy, *min zhu*, politico-cultural influence, republic.

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern Chinese, *min zhu* (民主) seems to be the legitimate translation for English word “democracy”. However, few may know that initially it was a mistranslation and the transformation of the concept has been a rather lengthy and extensive process under profound political cultural influence. Having gone through a variety of turbulent political ideological evolutions, *min zhu* has finally become a special term for “democracy”, with transformed and more inclusive implications, particularly being incorporated harmoniously into Confucianism. Meanwhile, certain typical examples concerning *min zhu* with Chinese characteristics quoted from current Chinese documents will also be analyzed. By using historical and comparative approach, this paper is to explore the original connotations of *min zhu* and its translations in different historical and current contexts, so as to reveal some insights in the field.

II. THE INITIAL MISTRANSLATION AND THE CONTINUED EVOLVEMENT

Originally, the term “democracy” was derived from Greek *δημοκρατία* (*dēmokratía*), of which *δῆμος* (*dēmos*) means

“people” and *κράτος* (*kratos*) “power” or “rule”, to denote the political systems then existing in Greek city-states, notably Athens, the term was an antonym to *ἀριστοκρατία* (*aristokratía*) “rule of an elite.”

As forensic scholar Bryan points out: “This term, meaning literally ‘government by the people’, is often employed loosely, often tendentiously, often vaguely, and sometimes disingenuously (as when the post-World War II U.S.S.R. was referred to as a ‘democracy’). Originally a Greek term, *democracy* was understood by the Greeks in a very different sense from the current understanding: Greek democracy was a limited institution – limited to clan members, who were citizens; a huge population of slaves and other subordinated classes were disfranchised. The same, of course, might be said of the U.S. before the abolition of slavery and before women gained the right to vote” [1].

Over the past century, the Western idea has been constantly evolving into an established political concept, which mainly consists of three parts: a political system, people’s right to govern and the leader to be chosen by the people.

In Aristotle’s view, the essence of democracy is freedom since only in a democracy can citizens have a share in freedom as everyone is equal according to number but not merit, therefore the ruling and the being ruled classes are able to live as they please. By contrasting rule by the many (democracy) with rule by the few (aristocracy or oligarchy), he concluded that there was a good and a bad variant of each system.

Regarding its translation in Chinese, until the 1860s, there were no fixed terms in translating “democracy”, such as William Lobscheid once translated “democracy” as *min zheng*, “民政, 众人管辖, 百姓弄权” (*min zheng, zhong ren guan xia, bai xing nong quan*) (*Min zheng*, people govern and populace wield the right). (English and Chinese Dictionary: with the Puncti and Mandarin Pronunciation, 1866).

According to statistics, *min zhu*, with its modern connotation, firstly appeared in 1864 when W.A.P. Martin translated *Elements of International Law* written by Henry Wheaton. In his translation, “democracy”, “democratic character”, “democratic republic” and so on were all rendered as *min zhu* 18 times in total [2], and it had a lasting influence on the translation for different kinds of “democracy” over the next century.

For instance, “Since the French Revolution of 1830, various changes have taken place in the local constitutions of the different Cantons, tending to give them a more

democratic character” [3]. “一千八百三十年而后，各邦之内治有所变，而其民主之权有增焉 (yì qian ba bai san shi nian er hou, ge bang zhi nei zhi you suo bian, er qi min zhu zhi quan you zeng yan) (Martin, 1874:38). Of which, “democratic character” was translated as “min zhu zhi quan” (people’s rights).

In classical Chinese, *min zhu* (民主) (a homonym of “democracy”) in fact were used as two separate terms – *min* (民, people) and *zhu* (主, host, head, leader, chief) even if they appeared as a phrase, such as “天命文王, 使为民主”(tian min wen wang, shi wei min zhu) [“Lord Wen was destined by the Heaven to be *min zhu* (the chief of his people)”] (Shang Shu, 1985 Edition: 230); “天惟时求民主, 乃大降显休命于成汤”(tian wei shi qiu min zhu, nai da jiang xian xiu ming yu cheng tang) (Heaven was pursuing a chief of the people and then descended the status to Lord Cheng and Lord Tang)(Shang Shu, 1985 Edit.: 256); “民主者, 天子也”(min zhu zhe, tian zi ye) (What is so called “*min zhu*” is meant the son of heaven) [4].

Clearly, the original meaning of *min zhu* in Chinese specified as an emperor, which was quite opposite to “democracy”. The question is why Martin used this antonym to translate the term and it then was universally accepted.

Linguistically, it changed the structure from *min zhi zhu* (民之主)(people’s leader) to *min zhu zhi* (民主之) (people to rule). Socially speaking, however, since the Western idea of democracy (“people’s power” in Greek as stated above) was unrelated to anything in traditional Chinese culture; the most close one was *min zhi zhu*, even it was only in a linguistic sense.

In Confucianism, the Emperor was always on top of the hierarchical structure as the leader of his people, in democracy if the people as a whole were allowed to be on top and to rule the state, it would not only disturb the social structure but its traditional ideology as well. In a monarchical system, it is hard for people like Chinese to understand what is “rule by the people”, even harder to understand democracy as a political system. However, it is not hard for them to understand a leader that has been chosen by someone (such as Heaven).

In this sense, *min zhu* was used to convey the partial meaning of “democracy” – the leader to be selected by the people; in a way, the western idea was being put into Chinese thinking mold.

However, as an intellectual who contributed most in shaping the modern idea of *min zhu* credit should be given to the renowned Chinese writer Liang Qichao. After escaping to Japan following the government’s crack down on the reform led by him (and Kang Youwei), Liang translated and commented on the works of Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Hume, Bentham and many other western political thinkers by borrowing quite large vocabularies from Japanese *kan zi* characters, which were initially loaned from Chinese. Of these “democracy” (*min shu*, 民主 in Japanese) was one of

the key words being discussed. He published a series of essays to cater for an audience among Chinese intelligentsia who were eager to find an answer – why China, once a formidable empire had been defeated so miserably by foreign powers and where was the way out for China. In introducing Western democracy through the prism of Confucian tradition, Liang further characterized the ideas of *min zhu*, making it more suitable to China’s background along with its political cultural trend.

Statistically, the frequency of *min zhu* used in the media has fluctuated with the development of China’s political thought and movements. Most notably, during late 1917 and early 1918, when Zhang Xun’s coup attempted to restore the Qing, *min zhu* reached its first peak in the media. The second peak occurred during 1919 and 1922 when the post-war discussions on equity and democratic rights provoked and pluralized different kinds of democracy. During 1924 and 1926, when the journal of *New Youth*, run by the Communist Party, was widely published, where “德谟克拉西”(de mo ke la xi, the Chinese euphony of “democracy”) became a hot topic since the public was very disillusioned about the old style of reform and inclined to the new ideology of Marxism.

It was also argued that since *min zhu* was not an accurate translation for democracy, the best way is thus to transliterate it into Chinese. There were several transliterations: “德谟格拉时”(de mo ge la shi), “得谟克拉西”(de mo ge la xi), “德先生”(Mr. De) and so on.

In Liang Qichao’s writing, “There are three kinds of political systems in Europe: one is called *man na qi* (monarchy), meaning a system that is to dictate the people; the other is named as *wu li si tuo ge la shi* (aristocracy), that is to be ruled by the collective aristocracy; the other is entitled as *de mo ge la shi* (democracy), which gives people the right to reign” (“欧洲政制, 向分三种: 曰满那奔 (monarchy) 者, 一君治民之制也: 曰巫理斯托格拉时(aristocracy)者, 世族贵人共和之制也: 曰德谟格拉时 (democracy) 者, 国民为政之制也”). In these translated versions, Liang thought he was most faithful in introducing the Western concepts to the Chinese readers without disturbing their traditional beliefs.

“*Min zhu*” was being extolled to a high ground when the New Cultural Movement was in its way. As Chen Duxiu, the communist leader then wrote in *New Youth* in 1919: “We now truly believe that Mr. De and Mr. Sai (science) are two giants who can eradicate all the darkness in our politics, moralities, learning and thought” 我们现在认定只有 (德先生和赛先生) 这两位先生, 可以救治中国政治上、道德上、学术上、思想上一切的黑暗”). The political ambition and aspiration had surely endorsed the translated term and idea to be further accepted and pursued until it was finally settled in *min zhu* (民主) again in a new political context decades later.

Clearly, the “virtual equivalence” between “democracy” and “*min zhu*” was not established at once, rather it has

endured a lengthy and disturbing process under the influence of turbulent political thoughts and movements and the process is still going on.

During the ongoing process, someone had tried to translate it using *shu jian* (庶建) (populace's ruling), however, it did not survive the trial of time, and *min zhu* has always been a prominent term for rendering both "democracy" and "republic".

III. THE INTRICATE RELATIONS WITH "REPUBLIC"

From the very beginning, as mentioned above, the translated term *min zhu* also covered not only "democracy" but also "republic" (e.g. in Martin's translation for *the Elements of International Law*), which now is universally rendered as *gong he* (共和).

Etymologically, the word "republic" originated from Latin word *res publica*, which means "public affairs". Before the 17th century, it mainly referred to "state" or "commonwealth". In the following centuries, it was also used as "republicanism" to differential it from hereditary autocratic monarchy.

Similar to *min zhu*, there were also *gong he* in classical Chinese, such as in *the Chronological History* (《史记》): "Lord Zhao and Lord Zhou were both in office, which called *gong he* (republic)": ("召公、周公二相行政,号曰'共和'"). By searching its trace, it has found out that the term "*gong he*" initially translated from Japanese into Chinese in 1845, when Japanese scholar Dai Tsuki (大槻) translated the Dutch word "republiek" as *gong he* (共和). Then Chinese scholar Huang Zunxian (黄遵宪), who were at home in Japanese language and culture, in 1887 introduced the term into Chinese. For example, he pointed out, "The conservatives said that for a country with a history of two thousand years under one surname, if a *gong he* (republic) were to establish, where should we place our ancestors?" ("为守旧之说者曰:以国家二千余载一姓相承之统绪,苟创为共和,不知将置主上于何地?") [5] After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Yan Fu (严复) explained "republic" in his translated *Evolution* (《天演论》) as "数贤监国" (*shu xian jian guo*) ("several men of virtue in place of running the state"). In a way, he drew a distinctive line between monarchy, republic and democracy. Surely, his explanation was far from a comprehensive one, it nevertheless heralded the way for intellectuals to make a distinction between *min zhu* and *gong he* in terms of accurate definitions.

Concerning the essential nature of "republic", two prominent features may be pointed out: it values more citizens' moral standard than democracy; it distinguishes public affairs from private ones.

After a general introduction of Western democracy for several decades since the early twenty century, there was a tendency among Chinese intelligentsia to differentiate *gong he* (republic) from *min zhu* (democracy) which was no longer

a vague political object seemingly covering everything politically benign from the West.

Since the failure of the Reform Movement of 1898, however, the public opinion on *min zhu* appeared to be increasingly negative. As the essential meaning of *min zhu* is meant *zuo zhu zhi* (民主之, people to reign), it had certain contradictions with traditional Chinese ideas of reign by the elites, as there were doubts about "the people"—whether they were qualified to reign or not [6].

Since republicanism emphasized more political participants' moral standards, it intended to go elitism. In traditional Chinese political culture, politics is the extension of morality and it had always been the business of scholars and aristocrats.

In 1905, when the Russian-Japan war ended with Japan's victory, it seemed to have implied that the constitutional monarchy was more advantaged than the obsolete imperialism.

In realizing the urgency of reform, the Qing-government then sent a delegation of five-minister-mission to the West to inspect their political systems for references. Revolutionists, however, believed that they could achieve the goal of republic by overthrowing the monarchy and excluding Man minority.

Therefore, there was a period when *min zhu* was more popularly related to "republic" than to "democracy". However, the term was employed more as a political ideal for revolutionaries and more a newly established moral standard for political elites.

As the republican attempts failed to meet the public expectation, especially since 1919, as the New Cultural Movement commenced, *min zhu* took the other turn to democracy.

The vague concept of *min zhu*, had now to make further distinction between republic and democracy. Advocated by the intelligentsia who started to receive Marx-Leninism, which promoted a new type of democracy—proletarian democracy, the democracy-dominated term *min zhu* reached its peak. *Min zhu* as an "imported term" at this stage, had certainly been further transformed.

IV. THE "EQUIVALENCE" HAVE BECOME EVEN INCLUSIVE

As Bryan points out: "Notions of democracy change over time, mostly as notions of who are 'the people' change. Throughout history, the term has come gradually to be more and more inclusive" [7].

As stated above, *min zhu* as an initial equivalence in Chinese for "democracy" and "republic", and having gone through a variety of turbulent political ideological evolvments, finally became a special term for democracy, with transformed and more inclusive connotations.

The key element in this transformation is various notions of "the people", identified mostly by political advocators and scholars in different historical stages.

Based on its original, if it was correct to paraphrase the Creek word *demokratia* as "rule the society by all of its people" (*min zhu*), then "who are the people" would always be the problem.

Since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, "people" has been meant as everyone who is not an enemy of society led by the Communist Party. Still a question may be proposed: if all people are allowed to govern who then would be the people being governed? It seems to be a paradox.

In fact, even in ancient Greek society people with insufficient asset were not eligible to vote, and the ruling class of the privileged few were no more than 20% [8]. More accurately, the word *demokratia* may be translated as "the head of gang", or "the head of majority".

In China's political context, since the New Cultural Movement, the discourse was gradually dominated by young political activists inspired by Marxism. As Chen Duxiu, the first general secretary of Chinese Communist Party, advocated in *New Youth* (1924): the new democracy should be "proletarian democracy", "democratic *di ke wei duo*" (狄克维多, euphony of "dictatorship"), "*de mo ke la xi* (euphony of democracy)".

Along the line, there was a tendency to connect *min zhu* (democracy) with *zhuan zheng* (dictatorship), especially, after the 1930s, "democratic dictatorship" became part of Chinese communist party's vocabulary. As Mao Zedong said, "Several revolutionary classes should be united to dictate traitors and reactionaries that new nationalist constitution" [9].

Ever since the set up of the People's Republic of China in 1949, "socialist democracy" has become a dominant term in the political arena. In socialist thought, democracy has been transformed with new connotations and beliefs, such as social democracy, democratic socialism, dictatorship of the proletariat, socialist participatory democracy and workplace democracy combined with a representative democracy.

As part of the new democracy, the term "proletarian dictatorship" was derived directly from Leninism by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and infused it with new connotations. As a Chinese political science scholar explains: democracy is people's right, "governed by a majority", is a form of state, a systematic arrangement between the power of the state and the right of its citizens, it is closely related to its legal system, a unity of form and content, a manifestation of people's freewill, a culture, a spirit and idealism, realism and structuralism", and "consequently, there is no need for elected governments so we established the people's democratic dictatorship" [10].

"In a class society, democracy is above all a state system governed by its ruling class, it consists of both state system and form of government. It is a democracy for the ruling class and a dictatorship for the class being ruled. Democracy should also embrace democratic rights, democratic style, democratic tradition, democratic spirit and so on" [11].

In the officially proved *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, it defines *min zhu* as "the people's rights to participate in state affairs and to freely express their political views" (指人民有参与国事或对国事有自由发表意见的权利) (Dictionary Compiling Committee, 2009: 951). Generally speaking, in modern China's history, "democracy" has been translated more in the sense of political culture than as an ideal of

political system, therefore it has been heavily influenced by both its traditional political thought and imported communist thought.

In the West, the term "democracy" is usually employed as a synonym for liberal democracy, which may include elements such as political pluralism, the right to petition elected officials for redress of grievances, civil liberties, elements of civil society outside the government and so on, which are still considered at present stage to be incompatible with traditional Chinese political thoughts.

From time to time, specially before China's Reform and Opening-up, western society tends to criticize the CPC government for being arguably anti-democratic, to which the CPC often reciprocated by labeling them as so-called "phony-democracies" or "pseudo-democratic nations" run by imperialists and bourgeoisies under the Western corrupted ideologies.

According to Marxist orthodoxy, "liberal democracy" should be completely opposed because of its individualized nature characterized by the political elitism in capitalism. Nevertheless, certain universal democratic principles may be considered to be valued.

Theoretically speaking, a "normal democracy" requires following major principles, such as upward control, namely people at the lowest levels have the right to supervise people at the top level, political equality, equal right of voting for a political leader at certain levels and so on, which are partially acceptable as post-colonial political ideals to the CPC.

In one way or another, therefore, China followed the international trend of democracy by allowing village elections to take place since the 1980s. All higher levels of government are still indirectly elected with candidates appointed by the government, which is deemed to be a system of democratic election with Chinese characteristics.

In a narrow sense, democracy is a form of state, promising everyone has equal rights, the minority is subordinate to the majority, eliminating personal dictatorship. In a broad sense, everything opposing autocratism could be named as "democracy". Based on this principle, a series of related concepts have been derived, accepted and included as part of its political vocabulary with obvious objections, such as economic democracy, economist's democracy index, direct democracy, representative democracy, cosmopolitan democracy, participatory politics, protestant republics, constitutional democracy, socialist republics, hybrid democracy, military democracy, democratic management, democratic principle, democratic approach, democratic style and so on.

The followings are certain typical examples in relation to *min zhu* with Chinese characteristics quoted from current Chinese documents:

- 民主制度是创始于雅典吗? 但现代民主制度,特别是社会主义民主制度 应当有本质上的不同 (*Min zhu zhi du shi shi yu ya dian ma? Dan xian dai min zhu zhi du, te bie shi she hui zhu yi min zhu zhi du ying dang you ben zhi shang de bu tong*).

Did democracy originate from Athens? Nevertheless,

modern democracy, especially socialist democracy should have essential difference from the classic one.

- 至于各种适宜的民主形式怎么搞法,要看实际情况 (Zhi yu ge zhong shi yi de min zhu xing shi zen me gao fa, yao kan shi ji qing kuang).

As to how to put “suitable democracy” into practice in different forms, it depends on specific conditions.

- 关于民主,我们大陆讲社会主义民主,与港澳台及西方资产阶级民主的概念不同 (Guan yu min zhu, wo men da lu jiang she hui zhu yi min zhu, yu gang ao tai ji xi fang zi chan jie ji min zhu de gai nian bu tong).

Concerning democracy, what we are practicing on the Mainland is socialist democracy, which is different conceptually from the democracy practiced in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan as well as from bourgeois democracy in the West.

- 我们必须大力推进社会主义民主和社会主义法制建设 (Wo men bi xu da li tui jin she hui zhu yi min zhu he she hui zhu yi fa zhi jian she).

We should spare no efforts in promoting socialist democracy and socialist legal reconstruction.

- 我们的制度是人民代表大会制度,共产党领导下的人民民主制度,是适合中国具体国情的 (Wo men zhi du shi ren men dai biao da hui zhi du, gong chan dang ling dao xia de ren min min zhu zhi du, shi shi he zhong guo ju ti guo qing de).

Ours is the system of the people’s congress and the people’s democracy under the leadership of the Communist Party, which is suited to China’s specific conditions.

- 对于我们有中国特色的民主将会崩溃的预言,事实证明是荒谬的 (Dui yu wo men you zhong guo te se de min zhu jiang hui beng kui de yu yan, shi shi zheng ming shi huang miu de).

Prophets of the downfall of our democracy with Chinese characteristics have been proved to be ridiculous.

Clearly, these *min zhu*-related questions and narratives are satiated with political ideologies, most notably by the comparison between “Western democracies” and the “democracy with Chinese characteristics”.

In recent years, as China’s peaceful rise is gaining momentum, studies of classical Chinese culture have been rejuvenated. It is also believed that there is subtle and complex relation between Confucianism and modern democracy and it has become a topical issue in the process of political modernization in contemporary China.

V. CONCLUSION

Some believed that Confucianism in nature is opposed to modern democracy: “Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and supremacy of the collectivity over the individual, creates obstacles to democratization’ [12]”. Interestingly, views of this kind have coincided with the criticism of the Chinese Communist Party upon Confucianism, specially before the Reform and Opening-up.

On the other hand, more efforts have been made to probe into the link between the Confucian tradition and “a more communitarian form of democracy”, since “attempts to justify democracy in Chinese societies must indeed acknowledge its moral traditions; appeals to Western concepts of individualism are less likely to be successful” (O’Dwyer, 2003: 39). In particular, the Confucian idea of *min ben* (民本, “people as the root”) has been extensively explored in the academic field [13]-[15]

One of the most notable political ideas has been the “people’s will” advocated by Confucius, as the source of a legitimate political power, which is compatible with the modern political idea of democracy. The basic principle underlying Confucian political thought is not predetermined to support, much less to create monarchy [16].

As Mencius said: “The people are of supreme importance; the ‘*she ji*’ come next; last comes the ruler” [17]. The so-called “*she ji*”, originally meaning the altars to the gods of earth and grain, later became a symbol and synonym of “state” or “nation”. In that way, Mencius put the people’s position not only above the ruler but also above the nation or state. In other words, any political power is considered legitimate only when it has accountably come from the people.

Another prominent Confucian theory is “benignancy of human nature”, which implies equal potential good for everyone, that may be used in reasoning to the system of democracy. “Both the Confucian proposition that ‘human nature is good’ and the Western proposition of equality and liberty promise that every individual is sharing something in common with any other individual, no matter whether you call it “equality”, liberty”, “good nature”, or “four germs”. As Mencius reiterated, man and man are all the same in nature, there should be no innate discrimination among them. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to deduce from Mencius’ theory that every man has the equal right and equal potential quality to participate in social political affairs, so long as his original good quality has not been depraved and is well cultivated. Therefore the Confucian proposition that “Human nature is good”, like the Western idea of equality and liberty, can also serve as the precondition of democracy [18].

According to Confucian, “*zhong yong*” (中庸, doctrine of mean), specially the principle of “*he er bu tong*” (和而不同, “being harmony but not monotony”) means making the eclectic, balanced and most acceptable choice between the extremely opposite claims, in which, principles of majority decision, compromise making, tolerance towards minority and so on are all being embraced, are also compatible with certain values and principles of modern democracy.

During the investigation, certain culture-bond terms have also been revived or created, such as *min zhu zhi dao* (民主之道, the *Dao* of democracy), *min zhu zhi qi* (民主之器, the *Qi* of democracy), *xie shang min zhu* (协商民主, the deliberative democracy) and so on.

One of the hotly discussed concepts in the political arena has been “deliberative democracy with Chinese style”, which may be considered as a hybrid from Confucianism based-“harmony theory” and modern democracy, characterized by the combination of centralized decision-making with popular consultation, one party leadership with multi-social structure, collectivism with individualism, independent personality with the characters of responsibility, obligation and commitment and so on.

In short, the Chinese term *min zhu*, as the first equivalence in translating “democracy” and “republic”, has gone through a turbulent and extensive transformation, starting from the seemingly occasional match with vague meanings to a term that had been accentuated with different connotations by turns in different historical stages, and finally came down to “democracy” again with more inclusive associations. As China enters the stage of peaceful rejuvenation, political interest has been orientated into searching the interrelations between traditional Chinese culture and modern democracy, and certain convincing results have been found. Throughout the process, the translated terms concerning democracy have been evidently influenced and shaped by traditional Chinese political culture and ideologies, and it in turn has also enriched Chinese political thought and practice, and inspired more political thinkers and activists.

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