

From “Republic” to “Democracy”: The Construction of Chinese Democratic Discourse in the 20th Century—Based on the Analysis of “Research on the History of Ideas”

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Abstract—From the development of the history of thought, the development of China’s concept of democracy has mainly gone through three stages, namely, the selective absorption stage, the learning stage and the reconstruction stage. In this process, democracy has completed the transformation from the traditional sense to the modern sense, forming the Chinese concept of democracy in the modern sense different from the Western modern sense.

Keywords—democratic concept, republic, construction

I. INTRODUCTION

As an important part of China’s modern political concept, democracy plays an important role in the process of China’s social transformation. However, the concept of democracy in the modern Chinese sense is constantly evolving, so explaining the ins and outs of the concept of democracy is of great value for deeply grasping the concept of contemporary democracy in China. At present, there are many research works on China’s concept of democracy, such as Zhang Hao, Jin Guantao, Liu Qingfeng, Tong Shijun, etc. In the book “Research on the History of Ideas: The Formation of Important Political Terms in Modern China”, Jin and Liu study modern and modern Chinese political terms such as “science”, “democracy”, “rights” and “society” based on the professional database of modern and modern Chinese intellectual history, and put forward a three-stage theory of the formation of political concepts in contemporary China [1]. It is on this basis that this paper explains the construction of contemporary democratic concepts in China, and tries to show the process of constructing modern democratic concepts in China.

II. THE ACTUAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL SOURCE OF THE TRANSITION FROM “REPUBLIC” TO “DEMOCRACY”

A. *The Realistic Background of the Turn from “Republic” to “Democracy”*

In the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, the victory of constitutional monarchy over imperial Russia had a significant impact on the weak Chinese government. After the Russo-Japanese War, there was a wave of voices in favor of constitutional reform from the imperial court to society, and at that time, “republic” was favored over “democracy” and had an overwhelming advantage. This is because in the original Western context, the republic paid more attention to the morality of citizens when participating in political affairs, and at the same time emphasized the difference between the public and private spheres, believing that politics is a public

affairs different from the activities of the private sphere. In China’s traditional political culture, political participants can only be the moral elite, so among intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen at that time, “republic” was obviously more marketable than “democracy”, and it was in this sense that the word “republic” was used far more than “democracy”. The provisional government of Nanjing, headed by Sun Yat-sen, lasted only three months before it was replaced by the Beiyang warlord government represented by Yuan Shikai [2]. With this as a flashpoint, a great debate erupted again over whether China should return to the imperial system or defend the republic, and regardless of the outcome of the final debate, the widespread acknowledgement of the failure of republican politics led to a reflection on republicanism. In the New Culture Movement, republicanism was abandoned and “democracy” arose, eventually replacing “republicanism”.

B. *The Source of the Ideas of “Democracy” and “Republic”*

In Chinese, although the word “democracy” has long existed and was used by philosophers, this word is not the concept we are familiar with today to refer to a political concept or social system, but to a person or person, that is, a monarch with popular feelings. The term or concept of “democracy” as we are familiar today as a term or concept of political science or sociology came from the West and originated in ancient Greece. As “democracy” in the modern political sense, in terms of etymology, the word “democracy” is derived from the ancient Greek demos (people) and kratia (rule or authority), and taken together, the literal meaning of “democracy” is that the people rule as subjects in a community. As a term, “democracy” is a subject-verb structure.

The subject is “the people” and the predicate is “rule”. As a political category, the connotation of “democracy” is constantly enriched. However, both in classical times and today, “majority rule” has always been a major connotation of democracy, and “minority obeys the majority” has become a democratic principle known to women and children. In fact, “democracy” existed in ancient China, but in fact, it is completely different from democracy in the modern sense. The original meaning of “democracy” in Chinese: the general name of the lord of the people, the emperor, in the word formation, belongs to the partial structure. Western democracy means that the people are masters, and the people dominate or rule, which belongs to the subject-verb structure. Here you can see that the two mean the opposite. “Republic”

is as old as “democracy” in China. For example, in the “Shiji Zhou Benji”, it is said: “The two phases of administration of the Duke of Zhao and the Duke of Zhou are called “republic” [3] and “the government affairs are acted by the public uncle and the agent” [1]. “Republican” refers to the rule of the upper aristocratic elite in the absence of an emperor, and this meaning was used in Chinese until the 19th century. We now believe that the earliest translation of republicanism in republic was Japan before the Meiji Restoration, and the Chinese translation of republicanism in republic was influenced by this. The Law of Nations translates republic and democracy by the word “democracy” and does not make a strict distinction between “democracy” and “republic.” But both words are in the West

The context represents two different political philosophies. Republicanism differs from the political concept of hereditary monarchy, which means that state affairs are liberated from the monarch’s family affairs and become public affairs, which include patriotism and morality in addition to autonomy, political freedom, and other meanings. Democracy means that the majority of the people rule. In contrast, Republicanism pays more attention to the morality of citizens in participating in political affairs, emphasizes the difference between the public and private spheres, and emphasizes the moral level of those involved in politics, so it is more likely to fall into the gravitational pull of elitism Field.

In traditional Chinese political culture, politics is an extension of morality, and participation in politics is the privilege of the moral elite—Confucianism and gentlemen; Guided by the ideology of Chinese and Western dualism, for intellectuals who were not baptized by the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century, “republic” was clearly more marketable than “democracy”. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the republican constitution advocated by the revolutionaries contains to some extent the demand for public participation in politics, such as Wang Jingwei said: “The meaning of republic and democracy is different, but the so-called republic of theorists refers to democracy.” At that time, revolutionaries knew that when they said “republic”, they were actually “democratic”, but the discussion was actually within the framework of republicanism, so they often used the word “republic”.

III. THE INTRODUCTION OF THE MODERN CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY AND THE FOUR MEANINGS OF “DEMOCRACY”

A. *The Introduction of Modern Democratic Concepts*

If after the First Sino-Japanese Festival, the focus of the restoration-constitutional movement Chinese litigation was “republic”, or whether to oppose the monarchy, then the chaos of republican politics in the early years of the Republic of China forced the intellectual class represented by Chen *et al.* to reflect on “republic” [1]. It was from this time that “democracy” began to make a grand appearance in the realm of consciousness as a result of this collective reflection. Although the concept of democracy has long existed in the history of the development of Western thought and has many genres, it is only in modern times that the concept of democracy has attracted the attention of Chinese and introduced into China. In the face of the flood of Western ideas, including the idea of democracy, modern Chinese not

only did not have the excitement of discovering the New World, but regarded these new ideas as “heretical doctrines.” However, in the face of the superior political, economic, scientific and technological, military and other cultures of the West, modern Chinese have personally felt the necessity of learning various Western cultures. It was in this context that a principle of accepting Western and even all foreign cultures was put forward, that is, “middle school for the body, western learning for use”. Under such a principle, we can see that the introduction of modern democratic concepts has also undergone a process from “use” to “body”, which is the process of introducing democratic theory, that is, the process of selective absorption, learning and reconstruction of democratic concepts.

B. *The Four Meanings of “Democracy”*

As a compound word, “democracy” can have two forms of words, one is a partial structure, translated as the master of the people; The other is the subject-verb structure, which translates to the people. In ancient documents, “democracy” is the meaning under the first word formation, that is, the lord of the people, and “democracy” is another name for emperors. In the West, it is the meaning under the second word formation, that is, the people are masters. In the 19th century, in addition to the two meanings of “democracy of the people” and “mastery of the people”, the third meaning derived from this meaning refers to the political system opposed to the hereditary monarchy, and the phrases “democratic country”, “democratic country” and “democratic party” are often used to express it. The fourth meaning is the elected supreme ruler. This usage is between “the lord of the people” and “the master of the people”, the word formation is a traditional partial structure, and the meaning is the modern “people are the master”. For example, there is such an example: “When the United States is changing democracy, American businessmen will publicly elect two presidents.” One master uses gold, one master uses gold and silver, and it is unknown who will have the power in his hands. “It’s a rather peculiar usage. Because the fourth usage is to incorporate the traditional Chinese concept of democracy into the traditional Chinese mode of thinking, it is Chinese easier to accept the use of “democracy” to refer to the supreme ruler obviously produced in the West, but if the people are understood mainly from the perspective of popular election, then this concept of democracy often ignores the representative system and constitution of democratic politics, and it is easy to reduce democratic republic or democracy to the democratically elected head of state. In other words, to realize the mastery of the people in the deep structure of Confucianism and nationalism can only be the election of the people by the people.

In the traditional Chinese mode of thinking of moral value monism, if the opposite of China’s traditional hereditary monarchy is imagined by value reversal, it is “the people are the masters”, so that Western democracy can also be imagined as the people electing the supreme ruler. Countries with this system of elected leaders were often called “democracies” in the 19th century. It is worth noting that due to the inaccurate understanding of Western concepts at this stage, the phenomenon that the term corresponds to multiple Western concepts of the same type often appears, and the value orientation used will also be different. Jin used the

database to count the number of times the four meanings of “democracy” were used in the New Culture Movement from the middle of the Qing Dynasty to the New Culture Movement, and the value orientation of the word in a certain sense [4]. Of course, at different stages, due to different domestic conditions, the various meanings of “democracy” and the value orientation in its use are different. For example, between 1896 and 1900, for example, Liang argued in 1896: “Western history is called the bureau of democracy, which began in Greece and Rome; Qi thought that his world was not democratic. If he is also a democracy, then we can also say that there was democracy in ancient China” [5]. In fact, understanding “democracy” as a system contrary to traditional Chinese politics is the main meaning of the term, and most of the words are used as neutral. Especially after the Sino-Japanese War, Confucian ethics were questioned, and Chinese began to look for a way out of new social organization, at which time the concept of democracy began to spread, and the use of “democracy” appeared for the first time. After the introduction of the Western system into China’s “New Deal” reform in 1900, the second meaning attracted widespread attention, the revolutionaries advocated the participation of the whole people in politics and upheld civil rights, and the constitutionalists opposed the participation of the whole people in politics, so the criticism and affirmation of “democracy” caused controversy, and the negative impact of “democracy” began to attract people’s attention. When Liang translated “On the State”, he believed that popular participation in politics would lead to democratic autocracy, and democracy would easily lead to the tyranny of the majority [1]. For the first fifteen years of the 20th century, negative evaluations of the second and fourth meanings of “democracy” persisted.

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA’S MODERN CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Through the research and analysis of multiple keywords, Jin and Liu proposed that almost all contemporary Chinese political concepts have gone through three stages [1]. The first phase was the period of the Western Affairs Movement after the mid-19th century, which was characterized by the selective absorption of the meaning of Western modern concepts with the original Chinese political and cultural concepts. The second stage, from the early afternoon to the twenty years before the New Culture Movement, was characterized by active learning from the West. The third stage is the period of the New Culture Movement, which is characterized by the digestion, integration and reconstruction of all foreign concepts, forming a modern concept unique to China.

A. *Selective Assimilation of Western Democratic Concepts*

According to historical records, the earliest translation of Democracy with “democracy” is the translation of “The Law of Nations” by Ding, according to Jin’s statistics, “democracy” is used 18 times in the “Law of Nations” [6], and the use of the Chinese character “democracy” to translate Democracy is influenced by certain history and culture. The translation of concepts such as “democracy” is related to the interpretation and dissemination of democratic ideas in China. During this period, “democracy” translated not only as “democracy” but

also as “republic.” In fact, as early as the 19th century, “democracy” was used to translate republic, and it was the most influential and far-reaching translation of it; Some scholars even believe that the later translation of “democracy” with “democracy” is a mistranslation, and although there is no lack of controversy, the relationship between republic and “democracy” continued until the Republican period. The most striking feature of China’s selective assimilation of Western democratic concepts is the use of the original words in the Chinese to refer to modern Western concepts. As mentioned above, although the word “democracy” has existed since ancient times, it is very different from democracy in the modern sense of the West, and the “democracy” in ancient documents is the meaning under the first word formation, that is, “the lord of the people”, “democracy” is another name for the emperor, in the hierarchy stipulated by Confucian ethics, the emperor is the lord of the people, and the mastery of the people is contrary to the normal hierarchy. In this way, it shows the unique mechanism of Chinese culture to understand the West, that is, from the very beginning, Western things, including modern political systems, are regarded as novelties that are completely opposite to traditional Chinese culture and systems, and “democracy” means the antithesis of “monarchy”.

B. *The Stage of Learning Western Democratic Concepts*

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the process of a large number of translations and introductions of modern Western political thought, people generally realized that if the use of Chinese terms that existed in ancient times to refer to Western concepts, it would inevitably project the original meaning of Chinese onto Western concepts, often bringing about the problem of meaning and meaning. Therefore, in the second stage, there is a phenomenon of translating the same Western modern concept with multiple Chinese words, or distinguishing the meaning of different levels of the concept, that is, multiple words to one meaning. For example, “democracy” and “republic” refer to the modern Western political system at the same time, and it was also during this period that intellectuals and scholars realized the difference between the two concepts of “democracy” and “republic”, and we can see that what is directly related to the general social action of scholars is “constitutional” and “republican”, which is closely related to the origin of the concept of “republic” we talked about earlier. Republicanism or republicanism meant that the affairs of the state were separated from the private affairs of the monarch’s family and became public affairs. In other words, “democracy” advocates the mastery of the people or the domination of the masses, while “republican” emphasizes the morality of the political participants and advocates the separation of the private and public spheres. In the dualist structure of the East-West dichotomy, the gentry class, as the moral elite, is not interested in the “democracy” of national participation in politics. In their view, the Qing court’s preparation for constitutionalism meant separating modern politics as a matter of the public sphere from the emperor’s private affairs, so that they could actively participate in the construction of a republican constitutional and representative system. It is understandable why the gentry generally rejected

“democracy” and favored “republicanism”. During this period, negative perceptions of “democracy” gradually increased. It is worth noting that in their criticism of “democracy”, a small number of far-sighted intellectuals saw that “democracy” would lead to “democratic dictatorship”, which was the first time Chinese intellectuals understood that populist politics could lead to the disaster of “democratic autocracy”.

C. *The Reconstruction of Western Democratic Concepts and the Establishment of China’s Contemporary Democratic Concepts*

The rejection of republicanism led to the replacement of republican demands for representative institutions by “democracy” that advocated popular political participation. From the point of view of the use of words, there has been a change in the key word referring to the modern Western political system in the New Culture Movement, that is, “democracy” has been highlighted and replaced by “republic”. Behind it is the reconstruction of Western democratic concepts Chinese corresponding to the period of the New Culture Movement. Since then, “democracy” and the Western concept of democracy have rapidly distanced themselves, and it is no longer necessarily associated with the constitution and representative system.

Around 1919, the concept of democracy in China began to transform. As we all know, the defining factor of the meaning of democracy is how to implement majority rule. Once representative politics is excluded, it is difficult to achieve majority rule based on respect for individual rights. There are only two logical possibilities, one is to use an ideological party to embody universal moral values and public will, and the dictatorship of the party embodies the rule of the majority; The second is to unfold a mass movement aimed at purifying moral ideology and realize the so-called great democracy of mass moral rule. In fact, this is precisely the understanding of the concept of democracy after the New Culture Movement in the minds of most Chinese. The use of the word “democracy” at that time was more commonly represented by Chen’s “Refuting Kang Youwei and Discussing Peace” [7]. The text uses the word “democracy” 55 times, 54 of which mean opposition to the monarchy and unequivocal opposition to the restoration of constitutional monarchy. The chaos brought about by republicanism has caused great introspection in academia about republicanism. Chen believes that if China wants to eradicate the imperial system, it must appeal to ethical consciousness, that is, it must distance itself from Confucianism, which is the basis of imperial ideology [8]. Why did the gentleman agree that the republic could honor Kong at the same time, but Chen believed that “Confucianism and the imperial system have causes that cannot be dispersed” [1]? The key is that the starting point is different, the gentleman believes in the dualism of Chinese and Western dichotomy, and Chen completely breaks through this dualist position that has prevailed for more than ten years and returns to the monism of moral values [9]. His so-called final enlightenment pointed out that Confucian ethics should not be regarded as private virtues unrelated to the public sphere, pointing directly to Confucianism as the ideological root of the imperial system, and it was supported and supported by the new intellectual

community, on the one hand, they pointed the spearhead of criticism at Confucian ethics, and on the other hand, strongly opposed the monopoly of politics by the gentry class. This critique of Confucian ethics and the breaking of its hierarchy became the main feature of the concept of democracy during the New Culture Movement. The reorientation of the concept of democracy is also the reconstruction of Western political thought. The concept of majority rule of the proletariat is realized through the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. By studying the value orientation of the authors of New Youth magazine when they use words related to “democracy”, it is found that before 1920, the use of “democracy” by the authors of “New Youth” magazine was almost without exception positive, but after 1920, negative evaluations of “democracy” began to appear. After the founding of the Communist Party of China, New Youth was an organ publication of the Communist Party of China, and the use of “democracy” was mostly used to criticize bourgeois democracy and social democratic parties. To deny bourgeois pseudo-democracy is to affirm the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is precisely the connotation of the meaning of “democracy” at the third peak. After June 1923, there were far more negative uses (620 times) than positive ones, which meant that the democratic dictatorship finally came to the fore in the multiple meanings of “democracy”. The democratic dictatorship is one of the important contents of the Chinese Communist Party’s concept of democracy. In 1925, “democracy” was mostly used to refer to bourgeois democratic systems and political parties, which represented the completion of the reconstruction of China’s democratic concepts. By analyzing the use of the word people, two new contents have been added to its meaning, namely, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of democracy. After 1930, “democracy” became the term used by the Chinese Communist Party—the official appearance of the democratic dictatorship.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The above research shows that China’s concept of democracy has undergone a process of continuous sinicization, forming a different view of Chinese democracy from the modern sense of the West. The first is the selective absorption phase. This phase is mainly the translation and introduction of “democracy” and “republic”. In the face of a large number of imported and translated Western political concepts, under the effect of value rebellion, China’s advanced intellectuals mainly use the original words in ancient texts to refer to Western concepts, so as to show the difference between the two. Second, under the guidance of the dichotomy ideology of China and the West, China’s advanced intellectuals and gentry naturally accepted the Western concept of “republicanism” and transformed it into republican political practice, but in the end it was declared a failure. Finally, the failure of republican politics caused great introspection on republicanism, and it was also during this period that “democracy” and “republicanism” were separated, and “democracy” began to be highlighted and reconstructed. Through research, we can find that whether from the perspective of social life or the changes in social thought, the European-American “democratic republic” has increasingly become a symbol of ideological enlightenment in China’s political practice, but it has also opened a broken prelude to

ideological enlightenment. Nevertheless, China's new intellectuals were unable to find a better alternative for a while, and the "European-American democratic republic" was not immediately abandoned. But the revolutionary era was an unpredictable one, and the efforts to create "new men" and then a "new republic" became anachronistic after the October Revolution. The First World War lifted the mask of "freedom, democracy, equality, and fraternity" in the West, and people began to rethink the value and significance of Western civilization to China. After experiencing the failure of Chinese diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference, the baptism of the May Fourth Movement, and the imprisonment of Chen Duxiu in 1919, China's new intellectuals turned their attention to the Soviets, and the magazine "New Youth" set up a column "Russian Studies" to introduce Russia's political, economic and social construction. After that, the "New Youth" was full of words such as "Soviet government", "Soviet republic", "labor and peasant government", "labor and peasant Russia", "proletariat" and so on.

Of course, the discussion and research on democracy have never stopped. On the one hand, the Western concept of democracy has been mixed since its birth, and in the later development process, people have different opinions. On the other hand, due to different positions and values, Chinese intellectuals not only have different concerns but also different understandings in the process of acceptance. Because of this, during the May Fourth period, not only the concept of revolutionary democracy, the concept of democracy of the common people, but also some other ideas of democracy, at that time the concept of liberal democracy was more prevalent, from the academic level, the foundation of democracy is freedom, but also "individual freedom", without everyone's freedom, there is no so-called democracy, when they advocate democracy, First of all, it is in line with the internal logic of democracy to advocate freedom and build the realization of democracy on the basis of freedom

protection. However, their advocacy of "liberal democracy" was not in line with the national conditions at that time, and the crisis that China faced after the May Fourth forced the Chinese people to suppress individualism as the cornerstone of democratic ideas, and support collectivism, that is, "national salvation over enlightenment". But in any case, these have had an important impact on the establishment of the Communist Party of China's democratic concept.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author states no conflict of interest.

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