Introduction

天下為公。

Tianxia weigong.
"The world is for everyone."
Source: *Liji*

The republic is a factory: the President is the manager and the people are the stockholders.

The republic is an automobile: the people are the owners and the officials are the drivers.

Sun Yat-sen: Minzhu zhuyi (The principle of democracy)

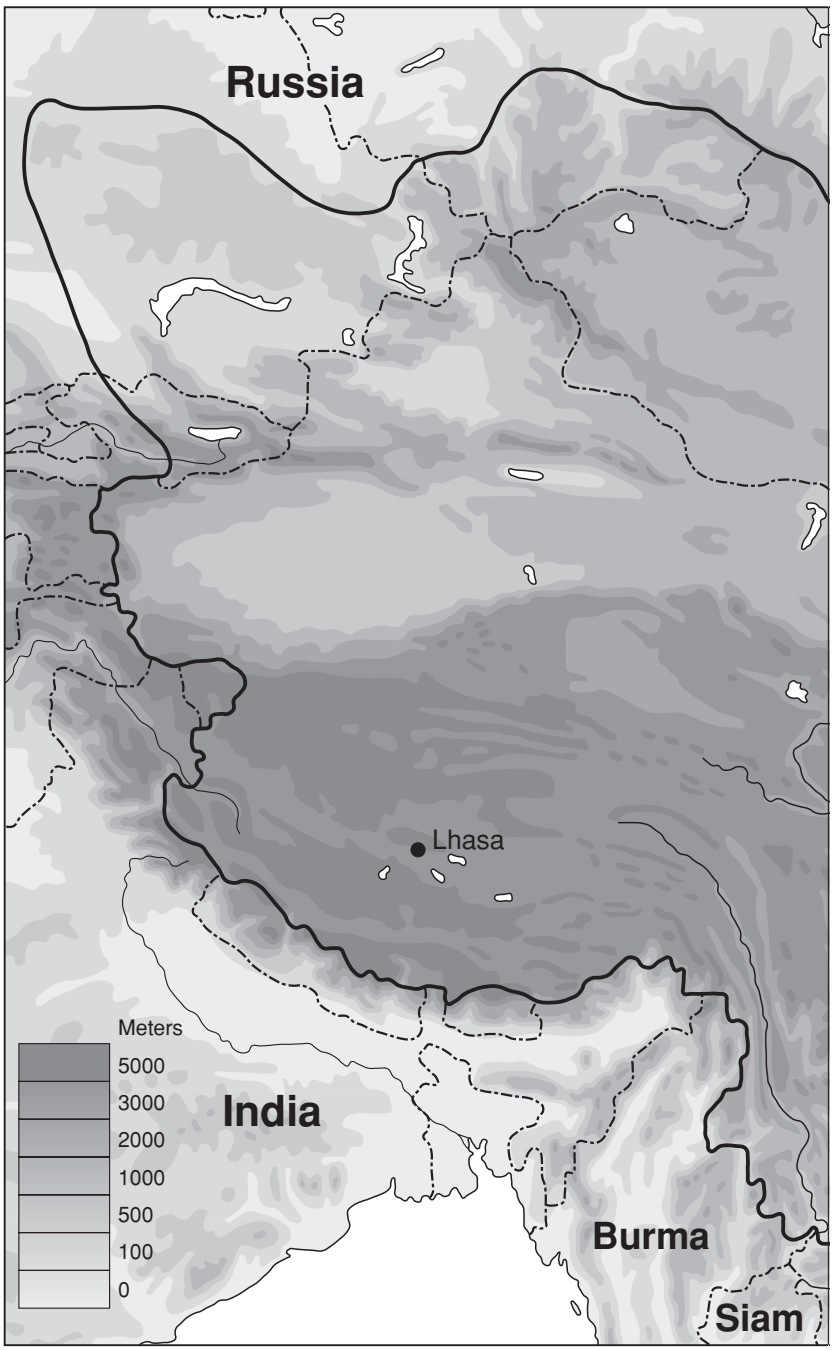
The Republican form of Government is the highest form of government; because of this it requires the highest type of human nature – a type at present nowhere existing.

Herbert Spencer: *The Americans*

On January 1, 1912, in Nanjing, the ancient southern capital of China, Sun Yat-sen took the oath as the first president of the Republic of China. After the ceremony he went to the tombs of the Ming emperors on the Purple Mountain outside the city, and announced to them that the foreign rulers of China, the Manchus, had been overthrown, and that China was once again under Chinese rule. Everything about his actions that day was unprecedented. He swore an oath of office. He swore it on New Year's Day in the Western calendar, a date that had no meaning in the Chinese calendar. He invoked Chinese nationalism in his message to the shades of the Ming emperors. He initiated a republic, and became its father (guofu), a title he still holds today. His Republic survives too, now in its ninety-fifth year.

The republican ideal

The republican dream has gleamed in the eyes of political reformers since the time of Plato, the ideal form of government, in which heredity is outlawed, laws and parliaments rule, and the affairs of the public (*res publicae*)



1 China

count above all else. The ideal is not alien to Chinese statecraft. The true Confucian state was a just and equitable administration that gave respect to people on the basis of their abilities, not their birth, a society in which each man had his proper place, and lived in harmony with those above and below him. This ideal is reflected in the ancient term "common harmony" (*gonghe* – the word used in modern Chinese for "republic"), first used in the ninth century BC, even before Plato, to describe a government in which able men "assisted," but actually controlled, the figurehead King Cheng of the Zhou dynasty.

A republic is a most difficult form of government to achieve. It must transcend powerful opposition: the desire of rulers for absolute power that they can bequeath as they choose; the tendency of those with power to use it corruptly for their own good; and the inclination of many people to accept autocracy. But the ideal of justice and equity built in to republicanism has animated political action; ever since the French and American Revolutions the vision of republicanism has driven political thinking and actions around the world.

China was the first of the great autocracies that survived into the twentieth century to have a republican revolution, with the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. The first stages of the Republic were exciting, anguished, and tragic, as China struggled to come to terms with her new polity, and deal with internal turmoil and foreign invasion. Whatever the stresses, there was no going back. There were two attempts to restore the imperial system, one by the second president, Yuan Shikai, which did not get off the ground, the second in the form of Japan's client state Manzhouguo, with the former emperor Pu Yi as its figurehead, which lasted from 1932 to 1945.

Sun Yat-sen remains the only modern Chinese leader respected by all Chinese, wherever they live, whatever their age. The future of his Republic is uncertain. For most Chinese the Republic lasted for only thirty-eight years; it ceased to exist on the Mainland in 1949, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established. But the Republic was not dead; it has lasted another fifty-seven years on the island of Taiwan, where it has continued to evolve – along a very different trajectory from that on the Mainland. It has achieved two of Sun Yat-sen's goals, democracy (*minzhu*) and economic prosperity (*minsheng*), but departed from the goal of unified nationalism (*minzu*).

The fragment of the Republic that survives on Taiwan faces two major threats to its existence. One is that it will return to the embrace of the motherland, and will be absorbed into the People's Republic. The other is that its own government will decide to wind it up in favor of an independent state of Taiwan, no longer with "China" in the name.

The name of the state

The official name of a country is a fundamental element of national identity. China has had several official names over its recent history. It was known until 1911 as the Great Qing (*Da Qing*), the last of the imperial dynasties that ruled the state from the unification in 221 BC. The people were subjects of the Qing, a few of them the ruling Manchus (*man*), most of the rest known only as "people" (*min*). After 1911 the state's name was the Chinese Republic (*Zhonghua minguo*), a name that incorporated an old term for the state ("central" [*zhong*] and "flowery" [*hua*]) with a neologism for republic (*minguo*, people's country). On the Mainland, the state was renamed in 1949 the People's Republic of China (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*), with the addition of a more socialist term for "people's" (*renmin*) and the ancient term for "republic" (*gongheguo*).

None of the successive official names for the state uses the word "China" (*Zhongguo*), the name by which Chinese call their country. The range of official names gives a suggestion of the complexity of Chinese national identity, and of the upheavals involved in China's transition from dynastic autocracy to republic.

Revolutions and transitions

The turmoil of transition has been a recurrent phenomenon in China's long history. Dynasties came and went, often divided by an interregnum, a period of contestation for power after the fall of one dynasty, before a new one was established. Was the Chinese Republic another interregnum, a period of conflict and confusion after which the *real* new rulers, the Communists, came to power? Or was it a more lasting state?

There were other models for the aftermath of dynastic collapse. Sometimes the state was divided, for decades or even centuries. From the beginning of the third to the end of the sixth centuries AD China was divided into several states. After the end of the Tang there was a division lasting seven decades. The Song dynasty signed away parts of northern China to the Liao, by the Chanyan Treaty of 1005. After more than a century of peace the Liao's successors, the Jin, forced the Song to retreat to southern China.

The thousandth anniversary of the Chanyan Peace found China divided again. China now is vastly different from how it was a millennium ago. Huge swathes of land have been incorporated in the last three centuries, including Manchuria, Tibet, Xinjiang – and Taiwan. But disunity is as much an issue as it ever was, one of the contradictions that go with being such a huge state.

Reunification or separation?

Taiwan has been cut off from the Mainland for all but four of the last 111 years. The Mainland is determined to regain the island, as it brought Hong Kong back in 1997. Taiwan itself is divided. The old ruling party, the Guomindang (GMD), is interested in closer relations with the no longer socialist Mainland, but it is out of power. The present ruling party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is no longer talking about independence, though this has been its *raison d'être* in the past.

The current situation underlines how complex and dynamic the Republic has been – and how much its history has influenced the People's Republic, which grew not out of the last dynasty but out of the four decades of change, upheaval, and warfare that characterized the Republic on the Mainland.

Three contradictions

Modern China has inherited three contradictions from the past: pride in having the largest population in the world versus the pressure of population on limited resources and the poverty that it creates; an ancient culture that admires the civilian and intellectual versus the dominance of the military; and the desire for unity versus the reality of division.

Poverty and prosperity Population growth is tormenting. While the size of China's population is the largest impediment to the alleviation of poverty, two modern leaders, Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong, gloried in the number of Chinese. Poverty is itself a stimulus to population growth; poor people have more children, in order to secure their own survival. The only sure way to restrict growth is to move people into the middle class. Other forms of population control (famine, warfare, forced sterilization, abortion) are tragedies or abuses against cultural tradition and human rights. Prosperity is finally in sight for many Chinese, but hundreds of millions are still poor.

Peace and war The civil/military clash, expressed in Chinese in the saying *zhongwen qingwu* ("emphasize the civil, downplay the military"), derives not from a description of Chinese history but from the longing for civil rule of a people who have suffered from warfare. This contradiction has never been more apparent than in modern history, much of which has been dominated by war, and the rule of the military.

Unity and division China has honored the concept of a unified state since 221 BC. The long periods of division have never led to the

creation of new, independent states. Instead, the Chinese state has grown larger over time. The larger the state, the more difficult it has been to govern. The system of bureaucracy was perfected to rule a vast state. It has been backed up by the threat or use of force. China has turned her face against the federalist systems that other large states use for their governance, and insists on a unitary state with tight central control – and has spent a disproportionate amount of effort and money on maintaining it.

China's leaders have been dealing with all three of these contradictions for a very long time. Each has become more acute in the modern period, the underlying issues overlaid with the newer issues of imperialism, colonialism, and revolution. They are the deep structural issues that every government must deal with.

The interpretation of history

Chinese culture has a profound respect for history. The traditional Chinese saying, *guwei jinyong* ("the past is to be used by the present"), sees the past as offering object lessons for the present and the future. This belief is still alive, but its survival is compromised. China is now too much part of the larger world to continue in an entirely self-referential mold. And China herself rejected much of her history, in the rewriting of history in the 1950s and 1960s. The Marxist interpretation of history discarded the Chinese past as feudal and repressive, and rejected scholars in favor of peasant rebels, high culture in favor of folk culture. The PRC showered contempt on its immediate predecessors, the Republic of China, and excoriated its leaders with terms such as "criminals for all the ages," and "running dogs of imperialism."

These excesses of interpretation are now past. Marxist history has been rejected, and another rewriting of history is under way. History excites people. Historical films and TV series are more popular than the rather dreary modern-day soaps. Bookstores are packed with historical texts and biographies. In the rewriting of history there is an enthusiasm for non-communists, and a desire to recognize the complexity and the sadness of modern history, to show how the recent past has shaped the present and will shape the future.

Major historical figures have emerged from disgrace into new respectability. Li Hongzhang, the Qing mandarin who had the dismal task of negotiating several of the most humiliating treaties between China and foreign countries, was once excoriated, but now he is honored. Hu Shi, the self-proclaimed originator of the modern Chinese language, has moved from demonization to hagiography. More distant historical figures have emerged in the context of contemporary disputes. The late Ming

figure Zheng Chenggong is cast as a patriotic unifier for Beijing, as a symbol of Taiwan independence in Taiwan, as a local hero in Minnan, and as a pirate in the West.

The past is very much alive, and influences not only the present but also the future. Perhaps the words of T. S. Eliot are more appropriate now than *guwei jinyong*:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future
> And time future contained in time past.
> *Burnt Norton*

The past for the present

For modern Chinese, remembering the recent past is a contradictory and often painful experience. There is a feeling of pride, that China's struggle against colonialism and foreign incursion is over. When the Union Jack was lowered for the last time in Hong Kong on July 1, 1997, all Chinese felt some triumph. There is pride too that China is achieving her rightful place in the global economy, and is emerging as a new superpower.

Pride in the recent past is connected to pride in the distant past, the 5,000 years of history[1] to which China's leaders often refer, and to pride in the traditional culture of China, the poetry, painting, calligraphy, and ceramics that are the hallmarks of her traditional culture. This pride is tempered with darker feelings, of regret and shame over the troubled and turbulent periods of Chinese history. The darker feelings start with conflicted views of Qin Shihuang, the first emperor. His brutality was legendary; he killed scholars, burned books and obliterated all humane feelings; every one of the recent films about him is drenched in blood. But without him there would have been no united China.[2] The fascination with Qin Shihuang, who ruled the empire only for eleven years (221–10 BC), is an almost morbid recognition that to be Chinese, and to accept Chinese history, brings both pride and sorrow.

The same uncomfortable blend of feelings is seen in attitudes toward another of China's great rulers, the eighteenth-century emperor Qianlong. It was during his sixty-year rule that China reached its greatest land extent. Many of China's contemporary territorial claims are based

[1] The 5,000-year theory is a current convention that is a mystery to most ancient historians, since this figure takes one back into prehistory, when history becomes myth and legend. It is possible, however, that archeologists will give validity to the theory, since their discoveries keep pushing back the frontiers of history, and showing that dynasties once believed to be mythical, such as the Xia dynasty, may have been real.

[2] These films include *The Emperor's Shadow* (1996), *The Emperor and the Assassin* (2000), and *Hero* (2003). Another blockbluster is in the works.

on Qianlong's expansionism. Pride in these achievements must ignore two uncomfortable facts: that the expansion was achieved by an emperor who was not Chinese but Manchu, and a ruler who ran ferocious witch-hunts against those whom he distrusted, notably intellectuals, mandarins, and religious groups.

These two hegemons (*bawang*) at least presided over periods of glory for China. This is not the case with the painful recent past, the decades of war and turmoil that have marked the last century. The blackest period started with the Japanese invasion in 1937 and ended in 1949 with the Communist victory – twelve years of continuous warfare, twice the length of the Second World War. The revolutionary leaders of modern China, republican and communist, dedicated their lives to eradicating China's national shame (*guochi*), which aroused feelings of fury, anguish, and remorse in politically conscious Chinese as they saw the weakness of China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In 1949 the Communist era started, on a note of high optimism. When Mao Zedong announced that "China has stood up," this rather banal phrase carried the message that China had put the shame and humiliation of the past behind her. The Mao era (1949–76) turned out to be an even greater disaster than the previous decades, marked by the terrible excesses of the Land Reform, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. The economy, the education system, the social system, the health system were all sacrificed to the wild visions of a megalomaniac.

Thirty years after Mao's death, China has a high standing amongst other nations. After twenty-five years of reform and economic growth China has achieved not the goals of socialist equality and class struggle, the ideas that dominated the Mao era, but the goals set by the leaders of the early and middle Republic: economic security, international recognition, freedom from the fear of invasion – and the restoration of national pride.

One major goal has still not been achieved: the establishment of democracy and, with it, the rule of law. Marxism has been consigned to the scrap heap of history, but the Communist Party still exercises absolute control over China, a control that has not been weakened by economic success. Only in the Republic on Taiwan has democracy been established, and only in Taiwan and Hong Kong is there rule of law.

The role of the "great man"

The revival of past leaders raises the question of the role of the "great man" in modern history. The Republic had no leader of the stature of Qin Shihuang, Qianlong, or Mao Zedong. Sun Yat-sen was a great man,

but he did not hold power long enough to count as a state leader. Chiang Kai-shek never established dominance over China or over his own party; his contributions were overshadowed by his constant need to shore up his own position.

The lack of an outstanding leader need not be a disaster. It counters the assumption that one man should control and manipulate a whole nation, the assumption that colors interpretations of the first three decades of the PRC, now known as the Mao era. Mao Zedong was once praised, and is now increasingly blamed, for everything that happened then.[3] This interpretation is as limiting and as misleading as the assumption that everything that happened in Nazi Germany can be blamed on Hitler. If all the disasters that happened in the Mao era are blamed on Mao himself, then it lets other Chinese, including the tens of millions who adored him, and the millions of cadres who carried out his policies, off the hook. In the case of the Republic, the overwhelming cause of its successes, failures, and disasters cannot be attributed to one man – but can be attributed to the impact of warfare and invasion.

Ideology and/or war

Much of the analysis of modern China has focused on ideology, on the impact of new ideas, the durability of old ideas, and the conflict between old and new thought systems, and between Chinese and Western ones. The focus on ideas has been extended to include social and economic structures. Since Marxism triumphed in China and is still the official state ideology, this focus seems reasonable.

But it overlooks the source of China's humiliation at foreign hands: not ideological weakness but a backwardness in military technology that permitted first the British attacks in the Opium War, then the Japanese victory in 1895. The Japanese assault on China in the 1930s owed almost everything to Japanese superiority in the air, at sea, and in mechanized land warfare.

The focus on ideas and on deep structures treats warfare as a transitory phenomenon, "utterly devastating but ultimately temporary."[4] It downplays the importance of the military and of warfare in modern Chinese history. For most of the duration of the Republic, warfare determined the course of events, first the rule of the warlords, then the GMD unification, then the Japanese invasion and occupation, and finally the Civil

[3] See Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).
[4] Prasanjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 249.