“Democracy” is a sensitive word that many people hesitate to use outright—or worse, they use it broadly and incorrectly. People like American President George Bush equate “democratic values” and “democratic allies” and, when discussing this term, say whatever strikes their fancy.

This American usage is not surprising. The concept and system of democracy were originally produced by the West, from the pastoral age extending all the way through industrialization and the age of information. In the West democracy for a while came packaged with the ancient practice of slavery, and for a time merged with modern colonialism; its negative side effects are generally dispersed outside of the democratic world, among the powerless classes (such as slaves) and weak nations (such as colonized peoples). Within the democratic world many people do not feel these effects strongly. Even though they have experienced pain, crisis, and resistance, they find that the outer wall of the democratic world is reinforced as the inner one is damaged, and benefits harvested from the outside can help mitigate internal damage. Generally speaking, people within the democratic world are impressed by honest and talented bureaucrats, freedom of expression, social stability, and economic development, and thus have ample reason to be proud of democracy. I once read a report that stated the ten nation-states with the cleanest governments, nine are democratic. This fact alone is enough to make democracy the ultimate belief, and even cause for war, for many people—indeed, since the swords of the crusaders went into storage, the bombs of the democratic militia have come down in volleys on the outside world.

Late-developing countries seem slightly different. Their transplanted democracies lack both the backing of tradition and the use of slavery and colonies as external sources of income to create room to maneuver; when they come into conflict their only options are negotiation or a fight to the death (死磕 sike). If their legal system, moral customs, financial support, educational foundation, and other conditions are not in order, then
attempts at a great leap forward to democracy will likely serve only to exacerbate conflicts. In these places we often see many small tyrants arising in place of the former tyrant, in addition to continuing massacres of clans, separatist warlord regimes, fierce struggles between political parties, dissolution of the state, and collapse of government management. At present, the vast majority of “democratic transition” states of the twentieth century remain locked in a continuing struggle between democratic elections and military rule, unable to find a compromise between stability and democracy, and their futures remain uncertain. Countries such as Russia and Singapore, who consider themselves democracies, do not meet the legal standards of the Western world. Their elections are repeatedly condemned for not being authentically democratic. The Hamas government of Palestine, elected through direct democracy, is considered terrorist (by the American government). China’s democracy from 1911 to 1913 incited a long period of chaos and division; the country regained stability and unity only through many years of bloody wars. The Red Democracy of 1966–68 also caused disaster, and ultimately only thorough military rule and repeated rectifications could fix the situation. Undoubtedly, many people who lived through these periods retain anxieties and secretly harbor doubts regarding the price/performance ratio of democratization. Although the promoters of democracy are hard in speech and on the platform, they are often at a loss for what actions to actually take. The United States has supported many dictators, including Pinochet (Chile), Suharto (Indonesia), Marcos (the Philippines), Franco (Spain), and Somoza (Nicaragua). I remember reading a recent International Herald Tribune report that, facing sporadic bombings in Iraq, think tank members of the New York University Center for Global Affairs immediately suggested to the government that it establish a dictator in Iraq.

Most of the late-developing countries seem to have been bad students, those held back in the class of democracy. Is it because the autocratic powers in these places are too strong and stubborn? Is it because these places lack sufficient material resources and outstanding democratic leaders? Or is it because, as barbarians, they have never had the cultural heritage or the genetics for democracy? These issues have all been raised before and warrant discussion, but another reason may be the misunderstanding of democracy.

This misunderstanding arises from ignorance and too little experience. Many people only gaze toward the dream they see in cinema, newspapers, and textbooks, and are quite isolated from concrete praxis. People thus misunderstanding democracy are the most likely to see democracy as a