Study Questions: Sun Yat-Sen's
“The Three Principles of the People

On March 6, 1921, Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, delivered a speech at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National People’s Party in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou (Canton). In this speech, titled “The Three Principles of the People” ("Sanmin zhuyi"), Sun elaborated on the three primary tenets of his political doctrine: the ethnic nation (minzu), the people’s rights (minquan), and the well-being of the people (minsheng). In English, these principles have often been translated as nationalism, democracy, and Socialism. In Chinese, each of these principles contains the character min, which means “people.” Sun likened his principles to U.S. president Abraham Lincoln’s ideals of government “of the people” (nationalism), “by the people” (democracy), and “for the people” (Socialism).

1. In conjunction with Articles Providing for the Favorable Treatment of the Great Ching Emperor after His Abdication, Mao Zedong’s “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” and the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, create a timeline of key events in modern Chinese history. Be prepared to explain why each entry in your time line is important and how each event paved the way for subsequent events.

2. Why is Sun Yat-sen “revered as the founder of modern China” both by the mainland Communists and the Nationalists on Taiwan—nations with deeply opposing political ideologies?

3. What forces made it difficult for Sun Yat-sen to unify China in the wake of the overthrowing of the Qing Dynasty?

4. Compare this document with the Meiji Constitution of Japan. What similarities—and differences—do the two documents have as Japan and China attempted to make the transition into the modern era? What similar cultural and economic factors played a role in this effort at modernization?

5. How do you think that U.S. president Abraham Lincoln would have reacted to Sun Yat-sen’s use of his words in his formulation of a political ideology? Do you think that Lincoln would have regarded this appeal to his words as accurate and as fair?