**“Who Did What in the Roman Republic?”** By Vickie Chao

Democracy, by definition, means rule by people. Both the word and the concept itself came from Greece a long time ago. When the Romans revolted and expelled the Etruscan king, Tarquin the Proud, in approximately 510 B.C. they vowed never to be governed by emperors again. Thus, they borrowed the Greek idea of democracy and created the Roman Republic.

A republic is a representative democracy in which people voted for officials to represent them. In the Roman Republic, the main officials were two consuls, whose job it was to supervise armies and enforce the laws. Once a year, the Romans gathered together and elected two capable men to be their consuls. All Roman male citizens could vote, but only upper-class patrician men could be elected as consuls. Women, slaves, foreigners, and people born in provinces were not allowed to vote.

Though in theory consuls had a lot of say on state affairs, their actual authority was quite limited. There are several reasons for it. First, the term of consuls lasted only one year. The short serving period made it hard for any one person to gain enough influence. Second, before any action was taken, the two consuls must attempt to reach an agreement. If one opposed an idea, he could simply say "veto" ("I forbid") and have the matter dropped. Third, after their one-year stint as the top officials, consuls became members of the senate. Senators in the Roman Republic were not law-makers. They were consuls' advisors, and there were about 300 of them. They normally served for life. Because of this special "retirement benefit," consuls almost always did what the senate wanted them to do. After all, they would not want to anger their future co-workers by refusing to listen to them.

Of course, despite the enticement of being future senators, having two consuls agree on everything was impossible. To avoid one abusing his veto power, a Roman law gave the senate the right to choose a dictator in the event of an emergency, or in a time of war when quick decisions were needed. The law specified the term of a dictator to be six months.

Consuls were not the only publicly elected officers. As the Roman citizens voted for their ideal candidates for consuls, they also voted for other government positions, including judges, organizers of public games, treasurers, and censors. Censors served a term of 18 months. Their primary responsibilities were to remove any unworthy senators and to enroll the new ones. They were also in charge of assessing property tax, granting contracts for public works, and conducting census of citizens.

Under the Roman law, dictator, consuls, or judges had the right to exercise imperium. Imperium was the utmost form of power. It included the right to command armies, to interpret and carry out the law, and to give out death sentences. As a show of their status, dictator, consuls, or judges were permitted to wear purple-trimmed robes and sit on ivory folding chairs.

In the early days of the Roman Republic, only patricians could become senators or hold senior government posts. Patricians were nobles or people from affluent families. They represented the Roman society's upper class. Their tight grip on power made the commoners, or plebeians, very uneasy. After rounds of strikes and protests, plebeians set up their own assembly and elected tribunes to see to their welfare. Tribunes had the power to veto, or block, laws made by consuls that they thought would be harmful to the plebeian class. Their struggles paid off gradually. The first plebeian consul was appointed in 366 B.C. and the first plebian dictator 356 B.C. Later in history, plebeians' assembly consolidated legislative power from all other assemblies. The laws made by its 10 tribunes became the laws that all Roman citizens - no matter if they were patricians or plebeians - must follow. As impressive as those improvements appeared to be, plebeians never managed to outdo patricians. Therefore, their share of control in administration remained insubstantial.