Reassessing China’s Democratic Potential: Emerging Middle Class, Political Consciousness and Social Unrest

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I have said on many occasions and I will say again the Arab Spring is coming to China as well.

– Sen. John McCain (4 February 2012)

I have so far found no evidence to support the multiple analyses over several decades now that China was on the verge of breaking up, or its rising middle class was about to bring about a Chinese version of the Arab Spring and with it the collapse of Communist Party rule.

– Kevin Rudd, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister (January 15, 2012)

Introduction

Against the backdrop of three decades of sustained economic growth, the prospects of the political logic of economic reform (Shirk, 1993) (centered around the four modernizations) gradually paving the way for a social logic of a fifth modernization (i.e. political reform) have been the subject of enduring scholarly controversy. On one end of the debate are “democracy optimists” who, in the spirit of Seymour Martin Lipset (1960), advocate the inevitability of democratization. Sustained economic development will inevitably produce an emerging middle class with rising social aspirations, a gradual shift in political value changes, and growing rights consciousness. The combined effect of these evolving trends will be a gradual re-pressurization of the political sphere. Further underscoring the apparent prospects of sweeping political liberalization in China is the speed and scope of the mass extinction of Leninist regimes in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of a crisis of Marxist-Leninist ideology (Chriot, 1991; Jowitt, 1992). For their part, “democracy
pessimists” seek to confound predictions of China’s democratic future by pointing to the perceived intransigence on the part of leading officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In a speech to the National People’s Congress (NPC), Wu Bangguo, Chairman and Party Secretary of the NPC Standing Committee, declared that “China’s system of political parties is a system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, not a Western-style multiparty system…we will never simply copy the system of Western countries or introduce a system of multiple parties holding office in rotation, a system with the separation of the three powers or a bicameral system.” In their eyes, expectations of substantive political reform and liberalization merely perpetuate a naïve “China Fantasy” (Mann, 2007) and appear to purposely dismiss the effect of authoritarian upgrading and official powers of repression. Moreover, the view of global resurgence of democracy is no longer an unquestionable fact. As Larry Diamond acknowledges, “…celebrations of democracy’s triumph are premature. In a few short years, the democratic wave has been slowed by a powerful authoritarian undertow, and the world has slipped into a democratic recession” (Diamond, 2008, p. 36). Ultimately, both the optimistic and pessimistic perspectives on China’s democratic future entail a high degree of analytical and ideological rigidity. Neither is engaged in a substantive effort at disaggregating Chinese society to the point where detailed contextual analysis would inform their views on the likely prospects of democratization.

A third group, which I call “democracy pragmatists”, are much more reserved, cautious and careful in examining the contemporary evidence. Where “democracy pessimists” do not see any overt inklings of democracy, they note that “endogenous and incremental changes in the political institutions of the authoritarian regime are gradually forming subtle but important checks and balances against the ruling party’s monopoly of power, strengthening the rule of law, and cultivating self-government at the grassroots level” (Pei, 1995, p. 66). Furthermore, more predictable policymaking, evolving strategies of governance, gradual establishment of legal structures and rule of law (though still open to substantive charges of inconsistent and arbitrary application), may merely suggest a directional trend towards greater social (and to a lesser extent, political) liberalization, rather than a wholesale and irresistible democratization of the Chinese polity. Some even counsel against unconstrained pressure and/or desire for rapid and irresponsible push for democracy. In their view, too rapid an approach to democratization could lead to “societal disintegration and the collapse of Chinese Communist Party rule and even to the fragmentation of China into several competing polities” (Ogden, 2002, p. 7).

The forces of globalization have undoubtedly acted as a fundamental catalyst for state transformation in China (Zheng, 2004). Notwithstanding the positive effects on China’s economic development and growth rates, globalization also poses significant challenges to the Leninist Party-State structure in China. It is the globalization challenge that has seen many pundits jump rather expeditiously on the democratization bandwagon, armed first and foremost with the argument that democratization is a byproduct of modernization and economic development, which in turn are heavily influenced and defined by globalization. The revolutionary fervor of the Arab Spring that has been spreading in the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region since December 2010 has breathed new life into the prospects of China’s authoritarian regime and the forces that ousted Arab regimes whose authoritarian upgrading eventually proved unable to stand the test of time in the face of comprehensive popular demands for political change (Heydemann, 2007).

The prospect of the Chinese polity transforming into a liberal democratic system on the heels of sustained economic modernization and growth is by no means a foregone conclusion. Studying the nature of the relationship between economic reform and democratization, Valerie Bunce concludes that it is shaped significantly by the timing of democratization, the agenda of transformation, and variations in political institutions. She mobilizes the role of the starting point in explaining variation in the timing of democratization, noting that Ogden has sought to establish the starting point of democratization not limited to one moment in time.

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and variations in governing mandates (Bunce, 2001). If the search for value changes that may mobilize the reformist elements of the CCP and the citizenry to take the path towards democracy is conducted exclusively through the lens of modernization theory, predictions of a successful transition to, and eventually consolidation of, democracy may prove rather untenable. Rather, the formulation of “a full explanatory account of the steady growth of democratic orientation” (Chu, Chang, & Huang, 2004) in China will prove more compelling if it combines modernization theory, institutionalism, rationalism, and political culture.

In this paper, I attempt to provide a contextual analysis of the prospects and progress of political reform in China that bridges the gap between “democracy optimists” and “democracy pessimists”. First, I contend that the relationship between economic development and democratization has been overemphasized in China, and is likely to play out in a very different way, shape, form and timing than many proponents of Chinese democratization would have it. While I do not dismiss outright the likelihood of deepening political liberalization in China in the future, I do contend that talk of an impending Chinese democratic future, hastened by the Arab Spring demonstration effect is premature at best, and at worst fails to take into account the historical, social, economic and political realities and changes in post-Mao China. Secondly, the highly pragmatic Chinese leadership has (thus far) managed to avoid a characteristic trend of authoritarian regimes, in times of acute crisis, devolving into entropy and obsolescence due to the rigidities of their founding ideologies and purposes. Deliberate yet cautious pragmatism that has come to be seen as a hallmark of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the course of three decades of economic reform and restructuring is also reflected to a significant degree in the CCP’s efforts to build “political democracy” (State Council, 2005). Thirdly, the historical legacies of the Maoist era and the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident have channeled the energies and commitments of both the political elite and the population at large to enhancing and expanding marketization in China. The result has been a genuine depoliticization of social life, depressurization of the political sphere, and general marginalization of political mobilization (Gore, 2000). Thus, “building socialism with Chinese characteristics” (jian she you zhong guo teshe de she hui zhuyi) may in the context of democratization transpire into “building democracy with Chinese characteristics” (jian she you zhong guo teshe de min zhu).

Prior to substantiating the arguments outlined above, I deem it important to briefly comment on the dominant theoretical approaches to democratization, and to an all-too-pervasive deterministic motivation transcending both its process and overall advocacy. Next, I will contextualize my discussion of China through a comparative note on reform efforts in Marxist-Leninist systems. In addition to offering a brief comparison of reform efforts in China and the former Soviet Union, I will also point to the flawed analytical logic of using the Arab Spring as a predictive indicator of a “Beijing Spring”. The remainder of the paper will assess and evaluate the pressures for political reform in China that bridges the gap between modernization approach, institutionalism, rationality, and political culture.

Democratization, Determinism, and Processes

A whole range of contemporary views, analyses by democracy pundits, and yes, even a significant bookshelf space in the academic literature have, for whatever reason – be it ignorance of facts and/or context; strongly-held idealistic or ideological views, etc. – fallen into the analysis trap that Ogden has so aptly and succinctly outlined. In assessing the potential for democracy in China, the starting point and analytical processes used ought to be as value-free as possible and certainly not limited to one theoretical approach alone.

In fact, democratization literature encompasses three main theoretical approaches. The "modernization approach" advocates economic determinism, while dismissing the importance...
of historical contextualization. The reductionist analytical leanings and causal simplicity of this approach are counterbalanced by the "historical sociology" approach, which emphasizes historical processes. The primary utility of such a structural approach lies in facilitating a well-grounded and highly explanatory and meaningful comparison. Finally, the "transition studies" (or agency) approach stresses the presence of committed actors, translating into a political process of democratization.

As the abundance of scholarly literature on democratization suggests, it is rather easy to become wrapped up in a desire to make new, arguably ground-breaking contributions to an already complex volume of competing theories and causal arguments, types of determinism, and paths of democratization (Larsen, 2000). A "modified crises and sequences model" of political transition, holds significant promise to explain China's democratization potential (or the lack thereof) (Wu, 1994). According to Wu, traditional modernization theories have limited utility in that they do not account for timing, process, or the complex roots of revolutionary changes. In a similar vein, the political transition literature's near-exclusive process orientation leaves comparatively little room for substantive integration of relevant wider contextual variables.

To date, much of the democracy-centered aspect of the China discourse represents an idealism-infused misinterpretation and ill-informed analysis of the prospects for democratization in China, fueled to some extent by "inapt comparisons between the fate of socialist regimes in Europe and China" (Young, 1995, p. 652), and glaring unawareness of the scope and implications of economic and social changes that have come to and continue to define post-Tiananmen China.

**From Arab Spring to Beijing Spring?**

It is certainly no exaggeration to claim that the spotlight of the democratization debate has been pointed at China in recent years. Considering that the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, and the repressive reaction of the CCP thereto, symbolized the first mass pressures for political change in the socialist bloc (even preceding the tumultuous events that would mark the beginning of the end of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe a few months later), the fact that China's socialist state structure has thus far proved immune to the Eastern European contagion effect makes exploring the reasons behind this outcome especially worthwhile from a comparative political perspective. Indeed, it begets a range of provocative and intellectually stimulating questions and research avenues, including: Is post-Mao China a possible viable alternative to Western liberal capitalism? Could it be that democracy is merely delayed in China?

With the adoption of a substantive Reform and Open Door policy, beginning in the late 1970s, China's political leadership de-emphasized the Maoist-era "politics in command" approach in favor of an "economics in command" commitment. With this policy shift, the government appeared to signal its commitment to addressing people's physiological and safety needs in the wake of the widespread political, economic and social upheaval resulting from the Cultural Revolution. In the near-to-medium-term, self-actualization would not appear synonymous with clamoring for political freedom and democracy but rather in sowing the seeds of economic well-being and reaping the benefits of modernization and industrialization.

A sustained post-Mao economic boom has allowed China to emerge as the world's second-largest economy by 2011 and paved the way for a burgeoning middle class that has come to represent a powerful economic constituency. Beyond that, the revolutionary fervor spreading through much of the MENA region appears to have rekindled hopes that China's emerging middle class could in due course draw inspiration and hope from the relative success of the Arab Spring in mounting a credible challenge to the political legitimacy of longstanding regional autocrats and transform itself into a credible sociopolitical force advocating for a heretofore elusive fifth modernization in China – extensive political modernization and democratization (Li, 2010).

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Despite the intensifying assertiveness of China’s working classes, as evinced by an emerging rights consciousness and a spectacular uptake in “mass incidents” — they have increased roughly ten-fold since 1993 to reach 87,000 in 2005 — it would be misguided to interpret these dynamics as evidence of an emerging legitimacy crisis that will pose an existential challenge to a “decentralized predatory state” (Pei, 2008, p. 138) and will pave the way to political liberalization and democratization. Rather, they reflect a general sense of frustration over unfulfilled or delayed economic gratification and/or anger against widespread corruption, lack of accountability and usurpation of power by local and regional government officials. As Elizabeth Perry has aptly remarked, the temptation to depict the rising incidence of popular protests as “indicative of an emergent ‘civil society’ posing a growing challenge to the authority of the Chinese Communist state should probably be resisted” (Perry, 2010, p. 16). Framing these “mass incidents” as catalysts of an eventual “Beijing Spring” is a conceptually and contextually flawed comparative logic.

Using the Arab Spring as a predictive indicator of the likelihood for political change in China raises a methodological concern about equivalence and the importance of “contextualized analysis” in comparative politics. Specifically, it is important to recognize that there is a clear distinction between cross-national comparative analysis and longitudinal analysis. When engaging in the former, it is imperative to ensure issue or process equivalence. Even so, to avoid issue or process equivalence being arbitrarily assigned, the strategy of “contextualized comparison”, including emphasis on starting and sticking points should be adopted. In assessing the prospects of a popular uprising weakening, if not eradicating the state’s political legitimacy and opening the door to political democratization, the adoption of a contextualized comparative approach would alert the analyst to the fact that seemingly common trends in MENA and China — that is, political legitimacy concerns — “have been refracted into very different conflicts, centering on divergent substantive issues in alternative national contexts” (Locke & Thelen, 1998, p. 11). Adopting a longitudinal perspective, it also becomes clear that whereas, despite similar efforts at authoritarian upgrading, the Chinese leadership has not suffered from autocratic myopia of the sort that has doomed non-democratic regimes in MENA in recent months. In fact, the CCP has committed itself to a political adaptation strategy over time to retain political legitimacy without paying more than lip-service to the notion of political democracy.

Even so, the Chinese Party-State is manifestly in the midst of a transition period, in which the CCP is actively searching for a new formula to guarantee its hold on power. The apparent futility of more or less maintaining current levels of monopolistic political control lies in the fundamental incompatibility, as some scholars see it, “between the CCP’s goal of perpetuating its political monopoly and its means of doing so through market-oriented economic reform...” (Pei, 2002, p. 1). The countervailing forces and stabilizing trends that usually offset pressures exerted on social and political fabrics are gradually emerging in China, though they are still rather weak and tentative at present (Pei, 2000). Given the right catalyst, the current weak basis of these countervailing forces may well crumble and let loose a new torrent of popular dissent. Some scholars have for years pointed to three main trends that could be potential triggers of increasing levels of socio-political instability, and could potentially even condemn the Chinese Party-State, in its traditional Leninist structure, to the dustbin of history. These trends include a visible rise of independent social forces; rising levels of inequality, corruption, and inflation; and the clear loosening of political control over the population, and of the subordination of local governments to the center (Walder, 1997).

Is the CCP well positioned to insist on preserving a socialist “superstructure” on top of a capitalistic “infrastructure”? China’s capitalist market reforms have raised the specter of a post-communist personality following the demise of the Communist moral order of the Maoist era, and the overall ideological bankruptcy of the Party. If “the post-communist personality is not part of the Communist Party’s design” and the moral and ideological disjunction in post-Mao China has all the imprints of the confusion and chaos that define the contradictions within the CCP’s “proto-capitalist reform program” (Wang, 2002), it becomes easily apparent that the question of continued
legitimacy and maintenance of power has assumed a new level of urgency among the Party elite.

Will the Party-State, as Suzanne Ogden argues, "continue to act in a very pragmatic, rational, cost-benefit way that is neither threatening to social order nor threatening to the CCP staying in power" (Ogden, 2004)? Or is Ross Terrill on target with his observation that "Beijing's unfailling instinct to put the maintenance of Communist autocratic power at the center of its calculations will eventually be its undoing" (Terrill, 2003)?

Pressures for Political Reform

Present-day legitimacy of the CCP may rest on two crucial pillars – economic growth and national greatness – but the core base of Chinese Communist legitimacy is to be found in the Party’s revolutionary tradition. The organizational features that proved instrumental to the CCP as a revolutionary organization – (1) revolutionary ideology (the CCP as a “vanguard party”); (2) democratic centralism; and (3) mobilization and mass campaigns – have gradually lost relevance in the changing political context of post-1949 China. As China made the transition from waging revolution to building a state, the CCP was forced to acknowledge an inevitable shift from legitimacy based on revolutionary tradition to legitimacy based on policy performance (Deng & Guo, 2011; Guo, 2010; Sandby-Thomas, 2011; Zhu, 2011).

In recent years, the Chinese Party-State has exhibited numerous structural and institutional weaknesses. Though not necessarily commensurate with exaggerated pessimistic predictions about the coming political collapse of Communist Party rule (Goldstone, 1995), these purported weaknesses have immeasurably contributed to a growing sense of unease in top political circles about potentially significant Party vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities include (1) a shrinking, and increasingly volatile social support base; (2) declining credibility of official organizations; (3) lack of credible institutions that can serve as mediums for interest articulation and state-society conflict resolution; and (4) lack of functioning institutional channels for resolution of intra-state conflicts. However, partially offsetting these structural and institutional Party-State weaknesses, Pei argues, is the small relative comfort zone still offered by (1) prevailing weakness and lack of organization of opposition movements, and (2) continued unity and cohesion of elite circles. In other words, the CCP still has more than adequate breathing space to restructure and reposition itself, with a focus on pre-empting the emergence of movements and factions that may take aim at party pragmatism and hope to shake the very foundations of party legitimacy with the aim of making political democratization a necessity rather than a calculated, progressive and structured choice that may unfold gradually and in ever-so-carefully measured doses (Pei, 1999).

Moreover, as a result of China's gradual economic transformation, a moral gap has emerged with the demise of the Communist moral order of the Maoist era. A fundamental challenge to the Party lies in developing a political formula that allows for a successful combination of Leninist Party structure and capitalist market economy fundamentals. Accentuating the inherent contradictions in such a formula, the Party’s call in late 2004 for political reform, based increasingly on rule of law seems rather incompatible with the insistence on continued one-party dominance.

In their analysis of the evolution and eventual disintegration of Communist Party-States, Maria Csanádi and Lai Hairong advance the concept of the Interactive Party-State (IPS) model (Csanádi & Lai, 2003). They suggest that the demise of Party-States is not simply associated with the breakdown of the party but with the gradual erosion of “linkage principles” that had sustained the Party-State structure for a long time. The transformation of the Chinese Party-State appears to be following a so-called self-withdrawing transformation and reproduction pattern (Csanádi & Lai, 2003). In support of their proposition, the authors point to (a) the fast growing share in employment, and production contribution of non-state enterprises; (b) the large amount of foreign and domestic private capital infiltrating the Party-State network and increasing the market field

China’s Democracy

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Steps that ought to be considered include legislative and legal reforms, expansion of elections and empowerment of civil society. Viewed from the traditional Leninist Party structure, the embrace of such bottom-up measures is tantamount to intentional undermining of political legitimacy. Ironically though, it is just such a drastic measure that may prove crucial in extending the CCP’s political legitimacy in the absence of core ideological values. Better to embrace such measures at a time when organized political opposition is still largely non-existent and when surviving of the political transition process is still, comparatively speaking, easier to ensure in China at present, provided that a certain weakening of power and control will become an acceptable proposition to the ruling elite.

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China’s Democratic Potential

China has not yet been confronted by nationally-coordinated mass pressures and grassroots democracy movements as emerged during the period of decline of Communism in Eastern Europe. This lack of overt challenge to the CCP legitimacy has at least partially been attributed to the rather more sophisticated control and coercion mechanisms at the disposal of the Chinese government. An alternative, and more commonly accepted explanation, stresses the social effect of sustained economic growth, reform and transformation since 1979. In fact, it is tempting to argue that China’s democratic future has been – at least temporarily – “Guangdonged” or rendered unattractive by virtue of being eclipsed by economic decentralization and a gradual increase in local autonomy. Democracy, as Shaohua Hu puts it, “has not been a necessity, but a luxury to the legitimacy without resorting to traditional Leninist Party approaches. The death of ideology leaves the Party with nothing but economic deliverables as the basis of legitimacy. All the while, an inevitable side-effect of ideological bankruptcy – opportunism and corruption – is further chipping away at even this last layer of legitimacy. Thus, the only way to stave off loss of legitimacy is a more comprehensive opening up of the political process and expansion of the social support base.

Steps that ought to be considered include legislative and legal reforms, expansion of elections and empowerment of civil society. Viewed from the traditional Leninist Party structure, the embrace of such bottom-up measures is tantamount to intentional undermining of political legitimacy. Ironically though, it is just such a drastic measure that may prove crucial in extending the CCP’s political legitimacy in the absence of core ideological values. Better to embrace such measures at a time when organized political opposition is still largely non-existent and when surviving of the political transition process is still, comparatively speaking, easier to ensure in China at present, provided that a certain weakening of power and control will become an acceptable proposition to the ruling elite.
...or neo-authoritarian, so long as it delivers unity, stability, national wealth and continues to improve its responsiveness to people's demands and concerns.

A third, and least commonly articulated, explanation emphasizes the importance of incorporating "eventful temporalities" for generating meaningful analysis. As Detlef Pollack states in his study of the structural transition of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), transition "is a result of a unique historical constellation of events and factors...." (Pollack, 2002, p. 306). It could well be argued that the bitter and painful legacies of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the CCP's reaction to the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations may be real enough to have contributed to a subdued enthusiasm, aversion, and non-commitment to political pluralism, as the resulting social chaos would unduly put at risk the economic gains that China's population has been able to accumulate over three decades of economic reform.

The CCP has also proactive steps to coopt societal elements that (at least theoretically) could emerge as likely advocates of far-reaching democratization and effectively turn them into allies of the state by crafting a symbiotic relationship between the economic and political elites in China (Chen & Dickson, 2010; Dickson, 2003, 2008; Tsai, 2007). This was accomplished with the adoption of san ge dai biao ("Three Represents") theory at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002, and its subsequent incorporation into the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Constitution, was a major attempt on the part of the CCP to project itself as “a faithful representative of the requirements in the development of advanced productive forces in China, the orientation of the advanced culture in China, and the fundamental interests of the broadest masses of the people in China.” The controversial invitation extended to "advanced productive forces in China" (private entrepreneurs and capitalists) to join the Party is a shrewd attempt on behalf of the Party to ease into political liberalization "under conditions that would maximize their chances for exercising close and enduring control over the transition" (O'Donnell et al., 1986).

The prospects of China's democratic future will remain a source of vigorous debate, not least because of the range of divergent opinions as to the potential, the speed, and scope of such a transition. However, the question of democracy in China should not simply be reduced to "Is China Ready for Democracy?" or to unrestrained optimism that the Arab Spring will be coming to China as well. The more important question concerns the definition of democracy in the Chinese context. A black and white stereotyping of the democracy debate – either democracy or no democracy – is counterproductive. In order to assess the current conditions and potential for democracy in China, the first casualty ought to be the Western ideological understanding of the term. In fact, the orthodox Chinese understanding of democracy differs in fundamental ways from the conventional definition that prevails in the West (Ding, 2001, pp. 4-9). As such, the prospects for democracy in China center on very different conceptions of what democratization is or ought to be.

Judging from recent government pronouncements, China is certainly adopting the rhetoric of democracy. In a government white paper published in 2005, the Chinese leadership stated its commitment to building political democracy in China. But it is a political democracy with Chinese characteristics, shaped ever so gradually through a careful process of incremental institutional changes. The CCP is extremely mindful to shield this process from exogenous pressures. Lest these forces be selectively allowed to affect the transition, instability could well jeopardize the entire democratization process and undermine the legitimacy of the CCP.

A country's socio-political fabric is invariably exposed to significant levels of strain during transition periods. China is certainly no exception. Just as political and social cohesiveness appear to be declining, however, exogenous pressures calling for an acceleration of democratization have handed the Chinese government credible tools to generate countervailing forces that may not only prevent a slipping off the ballot.
promoting political system (youxu zhengzhi "continuing has in fact expanded significantly in recent participation call for p. 334). Western democratic idealism has similarly 2003, -disconnect between economic development and democratic October 2000 "experimental villages" Law of Village Committees, which contrary to initial predictions that 2006) - three disconnects 15 The need for the maintenance of domestic order, stability and national unity have relegated Political reform in the Chinese context differs markedly from the Western understanding On where Bruce Gilley sees the signs for China's democratic future, other scholars have concluded that an overall lack of institutionalization and the reality of a monistic political culture have thus far deprived China from essential elements and conditions that may spur efforts at democratization. China, they argue, is lacking a political structure of networks and factions that would be crucial for the quest of democratization. Additionally, significant obstacles and sources of resistance to imminent democratization in China include powerful vested interests, a stability of the inhibited center, limited potential at the present time for both social and intellectual mobilization, and a glaring absence of the requisite conditions that facilitated democratization in Taiwan (Metzger, 1998).

On the whole, the case of China's democratic future is premised on several main propositions that, upon closer scrutiny, suggest a rather myopic analytical perspective. ATTRIButing the lack of democracy to nothing more than apparent bad choices by political elites amounts to reducing comparative analysis to the lowest possible common denominator for the sole purpose of offering compelling arguments for the Chinese context. The problem with such reductionist logic is that it ignores significant progress in China's political reform effort (Harding, 1998).

Political reform in the Chinese context differs markedly from the Western understanding of the term. Failure to make this crucial differentiation is at the heart of much of contemporary misrepresentation of the Chinese polity, indeed of the very demonizing of the regime from ardent proponents of democracy in China. Political reform in China is not so much aimed at democratization of the polity but at raising the level of efficiency and accountability of the CCP and strengthening its legal base (Zhao, 2003, p. 334). Western democratic idealism has similarly thwarted a sense of appreciation for the progress made by China in recent years on the political reform front. Not only did the official statement following the conclusion of Fifth Plenum of the CCP 15th Central Committee in October 2000 call for "continuing promoting political system reform, strengthening democratic legal construction, promoting scientific and democratic decision-making, and expanding citizens' orderly political participation (youxu zhengzhi canyu)" (Zhao, 2003, p. 333) but local elections have increasingly been introduced in rural China. They may not meet the strict criteria of democratic elections in the Western sense, but they nonetheless suggest a substantive progress towards political reform. These incremental steps towards political reform, of which the Chinese government has indeed taken quite a few – the most notable one being the 1987 adoption of the Organic Law of Village Committees, which contrary to initial predictions that it would remain contained to "experimental villages" has in fact expanded significantly in recent years – should not be dismissed as insignificant. Rural elections may thus far well have taken place in the context of "three disconnects" – disconnect between economic development and democratic elections, the disconnect between democratic elections and democratic consciousness, and the disconnect between direct local elections in the rural areas and the higher level elections in urban regions (Hong, 2006) – but it has in no way diminished its reformist potential.

The need for the maintenance of domestic order, stability and national unity have relegated the issue of political democracy to a level of secondary importance for the foreseeable future. To critics positioning political freedom and democracy as important prerequisites for peace and stability, Beijing's answer is simply to point at the situation of many of the former Soviet republics, notably Russia, to highlight the need for effective, forceful and CCP-centered state guidance. Having said that, it is of course undeniable that the CCP is engaged in a very delicate balancing act. Finding a level playing field for continued one-party rule and increased socioeconomic pluralism would be no mean feat indeed. Yet, even if divergences and discontinuities from the current situation materialize

Prevent a slipping into disorganization and chaos, but actually contribute to new social and political cohesiveness. In other words, consistent and unrelenting external pressure has the perverse effect of strengthening the basis of the very political forces it aims to undermine. The result may well be a transition from Leninist Party-State structure to authoritarian pluralism rather than democracy (Scalapino, 1998).

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(and to some extent they inevitably will), the ramifications thereof, as Brzezinski has so eloquently captured are “likely to be dulled by relatively successful and continuing economic progress” (Brzezinski, 1998, p. 4). In comparative terms, China’s strategic decision to opt for a phased, incremental process of policy implementation (Shi, 2006) rather than to advocate fair and free elections in the Western sense at the outset, has allowed the CCP to maneuver the stormy waters of reforms much more skillfully than the Soviet Union ever did.

Conclusion

Milton Friedman and others are certainly right in asserting that political freedom cannot remain bottled up forever. Despite significant short-term successes by China’s vaunted Internet police, even the Chinese leadership is resigned to the fact (albeit not necessarily publicly) that efforts at censoring Internet content and restricting access to information will ultimately be futile.4 Yet, the observation that China “is headed for a series of Tiananmen Squares” (Friedman, 2006, p. 40) is more indicative of a fatalistic resignation to the fact that, unless China democratizes along Western ideals and expectations, the authoritarian regime’s lease on life will expire in the short-term. At the most basic level, it assumes an ideological conviction of democracy’s universal appeal that may never come to fruition.

Even so, a substantial increase in popular protests in recent years raises the question of evolutionary change in the political sphere. The government has grown keenly aware of the urgent need to address rising social imbalances and regional wealth disparities that have emerged as unwelcome by-products of economic growth and which, if left unaddressed, would carry sweeping socio-political repercussions, not least pointing to the insufficiency of relying on economic “performance legitimacy” alone. Beijing may find short-term comfort in the fact that these popular protests are by and large expressions of popular anger and frustration over abuses of power and corruption by local-level officials rather than overt challenges of the central government. A prominent slogan displayed during a wave of massive popular protests in the small fishing village of Wukan in Guangdong province, which helped to renew international speculation about impending democratic prospects in China, was reminder that protesters have in the past and will likely continue to “demonstrate their loyalty to central policies and leaders” (Perry, 2010, p. 13). Its message – “Without the central government, we cannot solve anything!” (meiyou zhongyang, women jiejue buliao renhe shi!) – was telling in that regard.

The Chinese government is well aware the need to adapt to the changing economic and social environment that has emerged as a result of nearly three decades of reforms. Is the current challenge stretching the pragmatism of the CCP to its limits? Bruce Dickson points to the emerging trends of cooptation and corporatism as indicators that could possibly be a harbinger of hope that “economic reform will eventually lead to gradual political change, allowing China’s transition from communism to be more like Hungary or Poland (or even Taiwan) and thereby avoid the turmoil that accompanied political change in the rest of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union” (Dickson, 2000, p. 517).

4. On this debate, an argument that ought not to be dismissed off-hand, however, is that advances in modern technologies have actually handed the leadership an array of tools to disrupt critics. In the words of one expert, China has used technology to “create both low-tech Leninism – seizures, arrests, informers – and an environment of self-censorship and self-deterrence so they don’t have to actively enforce.” See “A Safety Net for China’s Rulers,” Washington Post, April 16, 2006, B03 for elaboration of that argument. For an analysis of political use of the Internet by Chinese dissidents, see Michael S. Chase and James C. Mulvenon, You’ve Got Dissent! Chinese dissident use of the Internet and Beijing’s counter-strategies (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002).
When asked about the possibility of restrictions on freedom of speech and political expressions fueling the fires of unrest and the potentially negative impact on economic growth during an appearance at Yale University in April 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao did not dismiss the notion of democracy outright. Yet, his eloquent reply ought well be noticed by democracy ideologues that relish every opportunity to project their Western idealism as democratic values that ought to have universal appeal without qualification. He said: “On one hand, we are ready and willing to draw on the useful experience of foreign countries into political involvement...On the other hand, we will not simply copy the political models of other countries.”

Recognizing that greater political pluralization is inevitable, the Chinese leadership remains determined to implement this political change in characteristically pragmatic and incremental fashion. It is not unfeasible that in the long-term relative democratization at the local level will be allowed to extend to higher levels and thus gradually usher political change at the national level. At the same time, Beijing’s political elite is concerned that political reform, if unrestrained and unchecked, could adversely affect domestic stability and likely put at risk much of the substantive economic development and growth that China has been able to nurture over the past three decades.

Once unleashed, it will be difficult to put the genie of political democracy back into the bottle. Even if feasible, any attempt to do so would not only result in international condemnation but also meet determined resistance domestically. For the moment, the Chinese government may take consolation in the fact that its citizens are more occupied with the idea of how to take advantage of mass consumerism and the improved lifestyle than on challenging the Party’s legitimacy. Indeed, China’s new authoritarianism is less likely to be questioned by contemporary youth. Not only do the current youth have different priorities than those of the 1980s that helped trigger Tiananmen Square (Chang, 1998, p. 85) but the newly emerging “special case of authoritarianism” has introduced a governance structure with “an outstanding historical record for stability and popular acceptance” (Metzger & Myers, 1998, p. 23).

In light of the obvious potential challenges of a Chinese economy that is showing increasing signs of impending economic and political reform, China is faced with the current question of whether the emerging stage of hope that the reform process will amount to a transition from closed to open society and the turmoil that is inherent to that transition” (Dickson, 2006).

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