CHINA'S DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

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How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead

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Columbia University Press New York

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York, Chichester, West Sussex

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gilley, Bruce, 1966–
China's democratic future : how it will happen and where it will lead / Bruce Gilley.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-231-13084-8 (cloth. : alk. paper)
1. Democracy—China. 2. China—Politics and government—1976– I. Title.
JQ1516.G55 2004
320.951—dc22 2003061124

Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper
Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

References to Internet Web Sites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor Columbia University Press is responsible for Web sites that may have expired or changed since the articles were prepared

To the memory of John Rawls,
whose purity of heart inspired this book.

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Introduction

The derrick is positioned just below the rostrum of the Gate of Heavenly Peace in central Beijing. It is a brilliant autumn day. The hydraulic arm and the cables have been secured and checked by the 20-man crew. Crowds stand in awe in the vast Tiananmen Square below, as if they are about to witness a religious event.

At 10 AM sharp, the signal is given and, accompanied by the barking orders of a foreman, a one-ton, 21 foot by 16 foot glass fiber-reinforced plastic painting begins its descent from the rostrum face. It has been quite some years since Mao Zedong stood here before 300,000 people on October 1, 1949 and announced the founding of the People's Republic of China. Now his portrait, hung hastily just a few hours before the founding ceremony, is being removed. China's Communist Party has fallen from power and Mao's portrait is an anachronism.

Mao's face seems to wince with each jerk of the cables as the portrait descends. There is an apprehension in the crowd, as if the profanation of the sacred object might unleash violence from the heavens. But there are no earthquakes, no fireballs. With Mao's enigmatic smile secured in the back of a flatbed truck, the crowd disperses with little fanfare. In a few days time, Mao's tomb in the center of the square will be removed to a museum in his hometown far away in Hunan province. Another dynasty has come and gone.

It has been a month since a group of reformers in the senior ranks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized power and declared plans to introduce democratic elections, and events have been unfolding quickly. A national constitutional convention is planned for November where more than 5,000 delegates appointed by the interim leadership will attempt to point their country in the direction of a functioning democracy. The Great Hall of the People is buzzing with preparations for the meeting. Across the Avenue of Eternal Peace, the CCP's vacated Zhongnanhai leadership complex has been opened to the public, which throngs through its lakes and villas in fascination.

The end of communist rule and the embrace of democracy in China will be one of the most important events of the twenty-first century. It will mark for the world the virtual end of a remarkable yet tragic experiment in utopianism known as Marxist-Leninism. It will also represent for a fifth of mankind,

the largest part of that still not living under democracy, the beginning of the long road to freedom.

Since coming to power in 1949, the CCP has turned China from a poor and benighted nation into a moderately well-off and increasingly influential one. Yet the CCP has failed to keep pace with the changes that have overcome Chinese society since agreeing to step aside from its daily life in the late 1970s. It remains a singular fact that the world's biggest and one of its most dynamic and culturally rich societies continues to be ruled by a corrupt and repressive dictatorship. Yet the balance of power for and against the CCP has shifted. This shift will likely bring an end to its rule in the early decades of this century, and an end to Mao's vigil on the Gate of Heavenly Peace.

This book is an attempt to peer into the future of China's pending constitutional transition. It is not my intention here to make blithe assertions that all is well, or will be, with the democratic project in China. That project, although faultless in appeal, is beset with difficulties in practice. But it is my intention to show that in the early twenty-first century, after nearly a hundred years of frustrating and tragic attempts to create a workable political system following the overthrow of the last dynasty, the Qing, the prospects for the creation and maintenance of a democracy in China are now better than ever. We can already envision how it will happen and where it will lead.

This book, then, offers hope to a nation still reeling from trauma of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. It challenges the resignation and disillusion that have gripped public life in China, noting the objective conditions that now favor a democratic transition.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the crisis of the communist state. After a brief summary of thematic (ch. 1) and historical (ch. 2) issues, we turn to the conditions that, I believe, will lead to the replacement of the CCP regime by a democratic government. We look at the broad outlines of this long-term process, followed by a *tour d'horizon* of the demands for a new system (ch. 3) and the growing ability of Chinese society to bring one about (ch. 4).

I do not, in this forward-looking narrative, attempt to guess which long-term factors will prove singularly decisive. Most scholars writing on China point to the growing pluralization of social interests, political corruption, and international norms as critical. This is a reasonable view. But like all advance looks at history it will no doubt be challenged after the fact by revisionists who point to less well-known issues like historical memory, growing notions of justice, and regional fragmentation. To preempt those debates I adopt an all-inclusive approach here. I am less interested in staking my claim on why democratic transition will happen than on how.

In the second part, I deal with the short-term process of democratic transition, essentially how the CCP will be removed from power and the existing political system replaced by a broadly democratic one. I draw heavily here on comparisons with such transitions during the so-called Third Wave of democratization from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, which included southern and eastern Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia and, importantly, Taiwan and South Korea. I first examine (ch. 5) the short-term economic and political crisis that I believe will form the backdrop of transition in China. The dangers and implications of this period are considered. I then consider (ch. 6) how the CCP will fall, predicting an elite-led transformation rather than a popular-led overthrow. The key actors in this process and their calculations are examined in detail. Finally (ch. 7), I look at the immediate aftermath of a democratic breakthrough, the response of society and excluded elites, like the military, as well as interested parties such as Taiwan and Tibet.

It is impossible to hazard a guess as to the time when the long-awaited democratic breakthrough will occur in China. It could happen tomorrow or it could take a decade or more. History is replete with examples of nondemocratic regimes that survived well beyond the point where they lacked a minimal degree of legitimacy and where society was in a position to bring about change. The death-bed survival of such regimes owes mainly to contingent factors of happenstance, personality, sudden choices, grave uncertainty, and plain bad luck. In such situations, blithering attempts to allay or repress the forces of political change may appear as signs of the regime's health. Czarist Russia lived on for more than 60 years after its defeat in the Crimean War of 1855 despite having lost both legitimacy and strength. The same goes for the Qing dynasty after its setback in the first Opium War of 1839. Only in retrospect did it become clear how debased those regimes had become.

In our age, in which democratic norms are universally accepted and authoritarian regimes struggle unsuccessfully to disempower societies strengthened by globalization, the time span from delegitimization and disempowerment to replacement is typically shorter. South Africa's racist apartheid regime lasted only a decade from the onset of mass unrest and international economic sanctions in the early 1980s. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe survived only a few years after the withdrawal of Soviet backing in 1988.

In China, the successful military crushing of the Tiananmen Movement in 1989 led many to believe that the factors favoring a democratic transition were hopelessly weak. But the extreme contingency of that event counsels circumspection. Today, there is even less reason to doubt China's democratic potential. Not only has the regime's legitimacy declined, but also society is much stronger than it was in 1989. The balance has shifted decisively against

the regime's ability to survive. Even so, the lag between that change and the actual transition may be a decade or more. Large countries in particular—Czarist and then communist Russia, Suharto's Indonesia—have typically suffered longer under debilitated authoritarian regimes. It is entirely possible that the CCP will limp along through the first and even second decades of this century. But in the great sweep of history, that will matter little to its ultimate fate.

The third and final part of the book deals with the building of a workable democracy in China, often called the consolidation phase. Since the democratic project is never finished in any country, this must remain an open-ended analysis. I first (ch. 8) consider the central political issues of constitutional design, elections, the threats to democracy from illiberalism and authoritarianism, secession, and much else. The predictions here include not inconsiderable or infrequent violence, political instability, and violations of democratic norms. However, democratic failure is considered unlikely. I also discuss how democracy in China will be very "Chinese," even though it retains universal fundamental features, just as every democracy is deeply colored by the culture in which it operates.

I then (ch. 9) deal with the competing interests—regional, sectoral, and class—of China's economy and society under democracy, addressing the pressing concerns of world business about that day and considering the important issue of historical reconciliation. Finally (ch. 10), I deal with the range of diplomatic and international issues surrounding the new democracy, especially drawing attention to the implications for Asia and the role of the United States. While China will be able to integrate more fully into the community of nations as a democracy, it will continue to pursue a foreign policy that on important issues of global security, trade policy, and cultural protection will continue to irk many in the West.

I hope that each part of this book fills a useful role in the existing literature on democracy in China. While much has been written on various factors favoring (or discouraging) democracy in China, I intend the first part to serve as a more broad and organic survey than has been written. The second and third parts venture into less familiar terrain. While some broad-brush sketches have been attempted, few if any works present detailed expositions of the likely course of democratic transition and consolidation in China. Overall, I hope this book brings under one roof the various issues relevant to China's democratic future. My aim is to provoke as well as inform, so that my readers will not have to slash their way through dense thickets of statistics or scale daunting walls of theory.

The lack of serious treatment of regime change in China is puzzling given

the importance of the country and the evidence of such change elsewhere. One reason is that many scholars and observers simply believe that this scenario is unlikely, that China will be one of the great exceptions to the global trend of democratization. They favor predictions of a maintenance of the present system or a slow transition to some new form of political system. Those who share my belief in the likelihood of a bounded and decisive democratic transition, meanwhile, are understandably reluctant to engage in detailed prediction. For some, it is because such transitions are among the most contingent and therefore unpredictable events in politics. For others, self-censorship may play a role.

Yet this issue is too important to ignore. China is a huge physical, strategic, economic and demographic presence in the world. It will account for 20 percent of world GDP by 2020, and hold steady at a fifth of the world's population. It has 30 long-range nuclear missiles, an arsenal that will rise to 100 by 2015. The fall-out from a botched transition from CCP rule could be catastrophic—recalling former U.S. President Bill Clinton's warning of "a vast region of instability," in Asia caused by China's collapse. Diplomatic vitriol from Beijing and the narrow business and academic interests of those involved in China have exerted a strong influence in curtailing the debate. But doing so is irresponsible and risks leaving the world community unprepared to deal with this major event. It is hoped that by stimulating debate on China's pending transition now—asking the right questions if not providing the right answers—this book will help to ensure that this process is of benefit to the people of China and the world.

In the Great Debate about democracy and China, I find myself at odds with the essentializing drives of both the hostile Manicheans who see China as a hopelessly benighted feudal autocracy and the misty-eyed Orientalists who believe that some utopian synthesis of doctrines will emerge there in future. These are schools of thought which flourish both in China and abroad. China is first and foremost a country of people and a society much like every other. Like every society, and person, it contains the potential for terrible autocracy or wonderful tolerance. And like every society that undergoes a rapid leveling of the playing field between rulers and ruled, it is more and more likely to embrace democracy as the only workable and acceptable solution to a crisis of governance. The laws of social science grind away in China as they do elsewhere, whether people like it or not.

Democracy is not "Western," even if that term could be specified, as anyone who has seen its successful embrace in countries as diverse as India, Thailand, and Japan would admit. Once established, democracy in China will be very "Chinese" (again, whatever that means in light of the vast diversity

of Chinese peoples in China and globally) not because China is unique but because democracy is always heavily colored by the culture in which it operates. Like others, I try to walk the fine line between cultural sensitivity and cultural stereotyping, a line that challenges everyone studying China, Chinese included.

I believe that the Chinese are as capable and desirous of democracy as anyone. Orientalists and Manicheans notwithstanding, I do not believe China is cut off from the trends of human history, where the laws of social science are suspended like time in Shangri-La. I therefore take emergent signs of democratic consensus in China as indicative of a future democratic breakthrough.

I do not seek to present all views here, only my own. The hope is that these views are well-supported by evidence from history and the social sciences, as well as events in present-day China. Where useful, I have endeavored to show that the arguments are being made within China, even within the CCP. This may come as a surprise, but the forces of social change work away in China as elsewhere, and it is little surprise that those in positions of responsibility have thought about how to respond to them. I pay less attention to the extensive debates among Chinese intellectuals outside of China to the future ideal form of democracy. While these debates will no doubt color the creation and operation of democracy in China, they are, in light of democratizations elsewhere, only one of a many factors that will influence China's road to a functioning democracy. Social pressures, historical contingency, and political expedience will play an equal role.

I have attempted to retain a descriptive rather than prescriptive point of view throughout this book. My point is that democracy is coming to China and we need to begin thinking about and preparing for that day. This is not to say that I have no ethical bias in favor of democracy. I most assuredly do. But I have sought to keep that at bay here. Readers can judge if the attempt is successful. Still, I note at various points the wide scope for better outcomes in a prescriptive sense. Work begun in the late 1970s on possible future transitions from military rule in Latin America, for example, played an important role in accelerating and shaping those events. For the purposes of those foreign governments, civic groups, and individuals with a stake in democracy in China or wishing to support it, I have sought to draw out the policy implications throughout the narrative. If this book helps actors to accelerate and manage that process wisely, so much the better. My main concern, of course, is a humanistic one, not a strategic one. But the two need not be distinct; an ethical foreign policy should be defined in humanistic terms.

It is worth sounding an early note of humility about the predictions and

assertions to follow. By necessity, this book is bound to be "wrong," in many parts. History is at once both enraging and deeply satisfying because it manages to confound most of the people most of the time. No doubt, parts of this book stand a good chance of falling into that wrong-footed majority. Indeed, it may be wrong not just in the details but in the basic premises. As I will have occasion to note frequently, the CCP may survive through contingency, but it may also survive through a deep structure of political organization that I have simply not grasped, bound as I am by the circumstances of my time and unable to perceive the radical implications of the deep social forces that keep the CCP in power. Books about the future can often be wrong, as Marx and his followers famously discovered in 1989. At a certain point every theory of historical change must be open to falsification. If the CCP continues in office for several decades and democracy does not come to China, it must stand as a falsification of this book, not as more evidence of its veracity. If so, I stand merely in the judgement of my times.

So prudence suggests taking what is written on its pages as an informed set of program notes rather than an exact guide to the upcoming performance. Knowing the options, directions, and challenges of China's future may be as valuable as knowing how it will unfold.

For those who vigorously disagree with my augury of a democratic future for China, who see this book as "pure fantasy," I hope it will still retain some use. Obviously, my hope is to persuade them of the premises sketched here. But alternatively, I hope my arguments are sufficiently transparent and my facts sufficiently broad to strengthen their considered dissenting opinions. Whatever your views, the democratic lens is a powerful tool for surveying a nondemocratic state. Through it, light is refracted in surprising and stimulating ways. For China, often-ignored issues like political, economic, and social justice appear most starkly. Things like women's rights, regional identities, historical reconciliation, and the political underrepresentation of central provinces are brought into sudden focus. By contrast, issues like foreign investment, "important speeches" by leaders, great-power ambitions, and highbrow philosophical debates, which dominate much contemporary discussion of China, fade into near-irrelevance. Democracy reminds us of the centrality of the individual, and of the everyday.

Finally, while this book is mainly about China, and the belated arrival of "Mr. Democracy," as he was once called there, to this land, I have sought in the conclusion to suggest how China's transition will improve our understanding of democracy and political systems everywhere. While I broadly endorse the thesis of Francis Fukuyama that liberal democracy has become the only coherent model of political organization in our world—a simple statement of

democracy's universal and empirically proven attractions that has often been misrepresented as Western triumphalism—that theory left wide scope, as Fukuyama himself asserted, for diverse forms and modes of democracy, not to mention threats to the stability of democracy itself. It is my contention that China's embrace of democracy, a process that has already begun, will demonstrate the diversity possible within the democratic house. While basic institutions and norms are shared, China's unique democracy will provide the world with a wider understanding of that conception. For a West seeking solutions to a "democratic malaise," China's transition could provide a new source of invigoration.

My own optimism about democracy in China, if the sober conclusions here can be called such, is born of my contacts with China and its people over a decade of traveling in the country as a journalist and writer. It is perhaps no coincidence that, while living for brief spells in China between 1991 and 2002, I usually made by home in neighboring Hong Kong, a free society whose liberal and open Chinese national identity is so vital for democracy in China.

The research and writing for this project began in 1998, and I completed most of the final manuscript during a six-month interlude between the end of my journalism career in Asia and the beginning of my academic career in the United States in 2002. I was kept in bread for those months through the generous support of the International Security and Foreign Policy Program of the Smith Richardson Foundation, which I acknowledge with thanks.

BG
Princeton, New Jersey
July 2003

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