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Broken Promises

The Republican Failure

There can be no better antidote to pessimism about democratic prospects in China than to revisit the exhilarating political debates that resounded through the country in the first half of the twentieth century. From the late Qing dynasty until the communist takeover in 1949, China's intellectuals and politicians were abuzz with proposals to bring real democracy and freedom to their ancient land. The debate was usually open-minded, cosmopolitan, and fair, a reminder of the democratic potential that lies in China and has never left.

That China failed repeatedly in this period (and in the subsequent half century), to achieve a stable democracy is a testament to the historical chance and weakened society that allowed elites to make expedient decisions to stifle democracy. The twentieth century was a period of broken promises for Chinese democracy.

In the late nineteenth century, the first patently democratic reform proposals emerged. A proliferation of public protest and reformist writings espoused the public right to participate in state affairs. An indigenous political and civil rights discourse was born with pamphlets accusing the ruling Manchus of depriving the Chinese of their inalienable rights. A Hong Kong-educated medical doctor named Sun Yat-sen, later honored as the father of modern China, developed a broad political platform, the Three Principles of the People, that called for fully elected government and a separation of executive, judicial and legislative functions.

The late Qing rulers responded to the democratic urge with reforms that might have led to a constitutional monarchy, as in Japan. Confucian exams were abolished in favor of technocratic criteria for bureaucrats. A coherent economic development program—China's first election promise—was announced. Public submissions on policy were received. Yet a reluctance to embrace real democracy only stoked the forces of revolution, symbolized by

Sun's formation of the Revolutionary Alliance in 1905. A last-ditch effort by Qing officials to stave off overthrow by convening 26 provincial and one national representative assembly came too late. More than half of the provincial assemblies turned on their imperial patron after Sun's alliance began an insurrection in central China in October 1911. Four months later, 21 centuries of imperial rule ended with the birth of Republican China.

What followed was a noble attempt at democracy that fell to the schemes and devices of a series of authoritarian warlords. Sun Yat-sen's newly formed Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), swept to victory in the 1912–13 elections. Yet tensions persisted between parliament and various regional warlords who had led the uprising against the Qing. From 1912 to 1928 there were 43 cabinets in Beijing, about one every four months.

Despite the ultimate failure of democracy to congeal, the brave experiments and remarkable creativity of the period remains notable. Several studies show how quickly a supposedly deadened, unorganized, and deferent society suddenly burst into active engagement and organization at every level.[1] The May Fourth Movement of 1919—sparked by China's weakness in the face of Japanese demands after World War I—consciously asserted the need for liberal democracy in an outpouring of pamphlets and soap-box speeches. Thenceforth, intellectuals took democracy as the measure of China's progress from the depredations of imperial decline.

By 1928, Sun's successor as KMT head, General Chiang Kai-shek, had unified the country with a series of military campaigns and launched China into a decade-long flirtation with one-party fascism now known as the Nanjing Decade. This of course was not happening in isolation from world events since democracies worldwide were falling to radical movements of the right (Germany and Italy) and left (Russia and Portugal) in the interwar period. The crisis of faith in democracy was not unique to China.

The KMT's promotion of "tutelary democracy" was backed by liberal intellectuals who, as elsewhere in the world, were suddenly attracted to the allure of strong government. Yet the experiment with an alternative, as elsewhere, proved disastrous. The KMT appointed the government and sapped powers from the parliament. Strong-arm police tactics silenced domestic critics, while endemic corruption and economic mismanagement undermined other sources of legitimacy.

Popular resistance to the KMT dictatorship forced Chiang Kai-shek to convene a national assembly in 1938 to act as a pseudo-parliament and to map out plans for a return to democracy. Foreign diplomats hastened to the opening meeting in Hankou in July, attended by 167 delegates chosen from promi-

nent national, regional, and minority figures. Leaders across the political spectrum heralded the overture. But Chiang, while mouthing support for the assembly, had little intention of respecting its feeble writ. Circumstances gave him a perfect excuse: Japan—one of the many nations whose democratic transition had been reversed by military rule after World War I—launched an all-out invasion of China in 1937 and not for the first time China's leader would argue that genuine democracy was a threat to national strength and unity. The horrors inflicted on China by the Imperial Army would also stoke an enduring sense of victimhood that would prove yet another large stone for democratic forces to remove from the road to freedom.

The failures of the KMT led to a groundswell of support for a new political party that promised not only national strength and economic justice but also genuine democracy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921 and outlawed by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927, was an alternative agent for change. Its sporadic battles with the KMT, leading up to a final and conclusive civil war that lasted until 1949, reflected an underlying public debate about whether left-wing progressives or right-wing authoritarians were more likely to realize the ideals of the May Fourth movement.

From its birth, there was always a deep split between the letter and the spirit of the CCP. It was to the latter that China's people adhered, and have ever since. The letter of the CCP was Marx's view of a proletarian overthrow of capitalism, and Lenin's use of the Party as an instrument of state repression and terror. The CCP would duly appoint learned scholars of Marxism and sing the Internationale. But those things were always on the fringes of public perceptions of the CCP, which was viewed in more indigenous terms. The spirit of the CCP was a socially progressive, economically pragmatic, and politically democratic force. Many in China could, and did, ignore the fine print of the Party, attending instead to its grand spirit. Joining or supporting the CCP was intimately tied up with opposition to the KMT.

The CCP's first constitution, in the Jiangxi highlands where it carried out experiments in communal living, was nothing if not democratic. The dreamy Peking University librarian with the thick peasant inflection who soon led the Party, Mao Zedong, on several occasions in the late 1930s and early 1940s slammed the "fake democracy" under the KMT, calling for real multiparty democracy and guarantees of civil and political freedoms. What China needed, Mao averred, was neither the communist party dictatorship of the Soviet Union nor the business-dominated "bourgeois democracy" of the West but a "new democracy" where "there should be no monopoly of power by a single party, group, or class."[2] When, in 1945, the KMT argued that direct elections

were impossible because China's people were inexperienced with democracy, Mao retorted: "If you want to learn to swim, you have to jump into the water." Democracy theorists could not have put it better.

Mao's China

Riding a wave of public support as China's great social and political democratizer, Mao and his Party finally ousted the KMT from power in 1949. With the push of an electric toggle at a ceremony on October 1, a new flag rose over China, that of the People's Republic of China.

The mere restitution of political and social order in China after a tumultuous four-decade interregnum was a boon for democratic prospects. Indeed, democracy appeared to be close at hand. Like every one of his predecessors, Mao at first made a show of fulfilling his pledges of democracy. CCP members accounted for less than half of the first central committee of the provisional government formed in 1949, and bare majorities of the cabinet and vice premierships. The eight political parties that had sided with the CCP in the civil war were given prominent cabinet posts.

The first constitution of the PRC, passed into law in 1954, was a reasonable first move toward full democracy. China was a "people's democratic state" made up of "a broad people's democratic united front." Citizens were equal, had the right to vote and stand for office, and enjoyed freedoms of speech, press, assembly, belief, association, demonstration and protest, privacy, and movement. Supreme state power lay with a National People's Congress, or parliament, which would pass laws and appoint the State Council, or cabinet, and its premier. There were also three local levels of people's congresses. At first, only the lowest level congresses would be directly elected. Those legislators would then appoint members to the next highest level and so on up to the NPC itself. In the first round of elections, 278 million people (86 percent of the electorate) voted into office 5.6 million local parliamentarians.

Though it was conferred with "leadership" of the whole system, the CCP's overarching role in the political process could be seen as a sort of benign tutelage to replace the oppressive tutelage of the Nanjing Decade. It was, after all, a party that promised to make people "the master of their own house." Little surprise that this "new China," inspired hope. Boatloads of prominent overseas Chinese returned to the mainland aboard steamers from the U.S. and Europe. Hundreds of Western intellectuals made their own mental journeys to the side of the CCP, seeing in it the seeds of a progressive postcolonial order in Asia.

Lying buried in the CCP, however, were several signs that Mao, as those

before him, would ultimately renege on his promises. Of course, communism and communist parties, whatever their national variations, were founded on a basic rejection of power-sharing, no matter Mao's protestations about Soviet-style dictatorship. No lawyer, reading the fine print of the foundations of the PRC, would have advised their client to sign up for citizenship. No less important were the imperial and tyrannical pretensions of Mao. Against the advice of planners, he made the Forbidden City his home and hoisted his portrait onto the rostrum over Tiananmen Square. Whatever his avowals of support for democracy, they quickly proved expedient in the face of the autocratic temptation. Asked about the PRC constitution, which he helped to draft, Mao replied: "I don't remember a thing about it."[3]

Democrats made a last-gasp effort in 1956 to force the CCP to make good on its promises (as their counterparts were doing in Budapest). The so-called anti-Rightist movement launched by Mao in response signaled the beginning of a two-decade retreat from those promises. In the twenty years to 1976, China went through the most violent and deadly episode of dictatorship in human history as Mao paraded his cruelty, cheered on by sycophants inside the Party, especially Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. Chinese scholars estimate that one of every nine people in China—the equivalent of 70 million people in 1956—was killed or disabled as a result of the blood-letting against dissent and difference launched by Mao.[4] From the anti-rightist campaign to the Great Leap famine of 1959–61, and then the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, China was wrenched by the brutality of CCP rule. Alongside those national disasters were hundreds of regional ones associated with the fanaticism of Mao—like the suppression of a mass uprising in Tibet in 1959 or the collapse of two dams built for propaganda purposes in Henan province in 1975 that killed 300,000 people. Moderate Western estimates of the death toll up to 1976 range from 40 to 55 million, including the 30 to 40 million killed by the Great Leap famine.[5] Within a generation, a country full of hope became synonymous with unspeakable cruelty and fanaticism.

The vulnerability of the state, and society, to internal Party conflicts was most marked in the Cultural Revolution, where factions battling for supremacy created a vacuum of leadership at the top. Power was held by local military committees, while police took over the courts. The NPC failed to meet even once over the entire decade. The irony was that the CCP would later decry the era as a failure of democracy rather than dictatorship, using it as yet another excuse to postpone political liberalization.

Mao died in 1976 and was immediately entombed in Tiananmen Square, a symbol of China's failed democratic dream. He left a deep scar on China, one that arguably created a more insurmountable obstacle to democracy than

any of the alleged antidemocratic conditions that preceded his murderous reign. By 1976, 60 percent of the population was living in poverty and the average income was about 15 cents a day.[6] Society was forced into disinterest and selfishness. Debate and participation were pushed to the sidelines along with other basic freedoms. The CCP's deadly embrace of the state meant that the state failed to develop as a separate entity and govern with reasonable insulation from ruling-party conflicts. It also meant that the normal give-and-take interactions between society and state were recast as a battle for supremacy between society and Party. "The result," as two official scholars would write candidly, "was that China lost the whole basis for citizen's political participation. . . . That's the reason why China remains unable to systematize its democratic system."[7]

Still, there are some mitigating legacies from this period. First, it is important to see these years as aberrant rather than as a confirmation of China's tyrannical destiny. In a global context, this was the period in which many postcolonial "second wave" democracies, especially in Africa, were descending into similar tyranny. Reversals also occurred at this time in countries that later reclaimed their democratic path, such as Spain. It was also a period in which most communist countries descended into a freeze. Czechoslovakia underwent intense Stalinization and ideologicalization from 1957 onwards, a period that ended with the Prague Spring of 1968 and finally redemocratization in 1990. In that sense, Mao's horrors, though worse, were consistent with what was happening elsewhere.

In addition, the much-reviled mass campaigns of the era were, in one light, a basic form of political participation and included some of the ideals of democracy. The so-called "four bigs" encased in the 1975 constitution—the right to speak out freely, to air views fully, to hold great debates, and to post one's views on political posters—were consistent with democratic ideals, even if the whole notion was badly abused and directed by leaders. The right to strike was briefly made constitutional in this era.

Finally, one can see some parallels with the impact of the bloody religious wars of post-Reformation Europe that gave rise to liberal and tolerant ideals, and ultimately to democracy, there. The rural areas that suffered most under Mao later became the first to embrace economic reforms and the most enthusiastic organizers of village elections. As two Chinese researchers found in one county that had been devastated under Mao: "These people suffered the most from the dictatorship of the past so they cherish their democratic rights even more. They take an active interest in politics and make sure to elect the right person to lead them."[8] As one Western scholar noted of the legacy of tyranny: "Only when you have learned what life is like in a political order

where you are totally dependent on the whims of distant and unresponsive leaders will you acquire a visceral hunger for democracy."[9]

Post-Mao Reforms

The death of Mao marked the reversal of the dictatorship's high tide in China. After this period China resumes its post-1911 trajectory of seeking the foundations and forms of democracy. We can draw a direct connection between the story we left in the early 1950s and the post-Mao reform era. Control over society loosens, government is institutionalized, and power is decentralized.

By the mid-1970s, China, like other communist states, was suffering from stagnant growth and high repression. One or both had to be amended. Tens of thousands of Beijing citizens marched on Tiananmen Square in 1976 calling for an end to the Party's despotism. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, where an urban elite would not relinquish the perquisites of economic control, the solution to the regime crisis was less repression. Dissident authors and embryonic trade unions were allowed to emerge in an uneasy peace.[10] But China was different. Since it remained largely rural, it could launch significant economic reform merely by empowering farmers and local governments—bypassing any potential resistance in state industry and the central bureaucracy. That meant it could also keep a tight lid on dissent. In urban areas, meanwhile, economic reforms were launched through a massive giveaway of public resources. Cadres and government officials at every level were sanctioned to make use of their administrative and political powers to enrich themselves. This resulted in pervasive corruption. But it also ensured a strong urban constituency behind the economic reforms to match the rural one.

Thus the new "social contract," initiated at this time under Deng Xiaoping provided for wide economic and social freedoms in return for political fealty. The state freed society and decentralized power, retreating to the citadel of uncontested rule. Henceforth, the CCP's legitimacy would depend on its performance alone. These were new waters for any communist regime: to maintain power without controlling the economy. Beijng was empowering its people not with ballots but with money. The breakup of communes, the sanctioning of local revenue-raising by rural enterprises, and the end of state-guaranteed employment all weakened the Party's hold on society. Citizens needed real news in the media, laws to protect them, and looser migration and dossier controls to pursue jobs. GDP growth between 1979 and 2000 was 8 percent, double the average of the previous quarter century. The state-owned sector's share of national industrial output fell from 78 percent in 1978 to just 25 percent two decades later, bringing China to an era in which the state

sector was an archipelago of strategically controlled islands in a sea of private business.

Deng knew that economic reforms demanded changes in political techniques. The Party, he said, should "concern itself with major matters, not minor matters." The term "political system reform" (*zhengzhi tizhi gaige*) came into the Chinese lexicon in a speech given by Deng in 1980 warning about "bureaucracy, over-concentration of power, patriarchal methods, life tenure in leading posts, and privileges of various kinds" within the Party leadership. As part of these "political reforms," voting was reinstituted within the Party and there were new mandatory retirement ages for cadres at various levels. Courts were revived as semi-independent bodies, although Party committees continued to make the final decision on major cases. Citizens gained the right to sue government for misgovernance. Suits against the government jumped from 5,000 in 1987 to more than 100,000 a decade later. Military members of the governing Politburo fell from more than half in the Mao era to just 10 percent from the 1990s onward. The military ranks were trimmed from 4 million to 2.5 million.

Within the wider political system, the Party sought to revive the modest participatory schemes of the 1950s. The NPC resumed meetings in 1975, while a law passed in 1979 expanded the scope of direct elections up one level to include county legislatures (people's congresses). Village government also became dramatically more democratic with the passage of a law in 1987 allowing villages to elect their own leaders. Deng even promised that "general elections could be held in China half a century from now, sometime in the next century."[11]

What is abundantly clear, and became tragically so later, is that Deng had no intention of launching a process in which CCP would eventually have to compete for power with other parties, as the KMT did in Taiwan. The political reforms he envisaged were many things—institutionalization, liberalization, decompression, call it what you like. They were not democratization. The wily patriarch "pushed China into a political reform craze" noted one popular book published in China. "But unfortunately the results were not what people were hoping for."[12]

Under this new dispensation, the Party's "zone of indifference" widened. Only those representing a credible and imminent threat to CCP rule were now crushed. But crushed they were. First in 1978–79, then in 1985 and 1986, and finally on a huge scale in 1989, China's political scene was buffeted by mass demands for democratic political reforms. All of them were put down.

China was not unique in its renewed yearning for democracy. The "Third Wave" of world democratization began in southern Europe in the late 1970s.

Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, fell to a "people power" revolution in 1986 after 21 years in office, while Thailand's military relented and allowed the country's first general election in 1988. In 1986, the KMT in Taiwan, now under Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, agreed to begin a slow democratization that would culminate in its loss of power 14 years later. The growing strains in the communist regimes of Europe were symbolized by the negotiations in 1988 between the Solidarity trade union and the Polish communist leadership.

The failure of China's movements to bring about a democratic breakthrough is testament to historical contingency, political expediency, and the power of the state in the face of social demands. This was especially true in 1989. Like virtually all democratic revolutions, the 1989 protests began over issues of livelihood and misgovernance. Students sought an end to official corruption, a free press, more funding for education, less inflation, and greater social freedoms. It was rare to hear calls for the CCP to step down. Still, the main student group did demand that that whoever took over in the CCP "must have democracy as their starting point and must introduce political reform to make China democratic."[13] Party leaders were in no doubt of the implications of the movement:[14]

> Democracy is a worldwide trend, and there is an international countercurrent against communism and socialism that flies under the banner of democracy and human rights. If the Party does not hold up the banner of democracy in our country, someone else will, and we will lose out. I think we should grab the lead on this and not be pushed along grudgingly.—*Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang*

> We should grab the initiative by launching democratization now, while the leadership role of the Party is relatively strong.—*Party elder Bo Yibo*

While the movement was ultimately crushed by a well-armed military, many contingent factors could have swung fate in the other direction. Revolutions depend for their success on both an organized opposition movement and a disorganized leadership and both were plainly in evidence. The Beijing student movement was well organized and had strong sense of solidarity. The movement spread to 341 cities (three-quarters of China's total) and brought between 200,000 and 700,000 people onto the streets on peak days, encompassing an estimated 100 million people, a tenth of the population.[15] As "autonomous workers organizations" began to form in late May, the fiber of the protestors grew more stout. "Another major political mistake might cost us all of our remaining popular support," one top leader warned.[16]

Within the regime, the liberals had significant backing. A third of the standing committee of the NPC called for a convening of an emergency meeting, which might have led to a negotiated solution with the protestors. Indeed, Deng agreed in mid-May "to make clean government the centerpiece of our whole political reform and then to tie everything else—democracy, rule of law, openness, transparency, supervision by the masses—to that centerpiece."[17]

That the movement failed appears more and more a result of luck and happenstance. Among the protestors, student leaders failed to sideline radicals in their ranks, making a negotiated pact more difficult. As for the regime, the presence of a raft of long-lived Party elders made negotiations less likely, unlike Taiwan, Russia and Spain where the death of ageing strongmen had cleared the path toward democracy. Meanwhile, NPC chairman Wan Li had rashly left on a visit to the U.S. and Canada in mid-May and was detained in Shanghai on his return, unable to convene the body's standing committee.

All of which is to say that we need not take the Tiananmen failure as yet more evidence of the doomed democratic project in China. To quote Bao Tong, personal aide to the liberalizing Party chief Zhao Ziyang: "Tiananmen was a cry from the people long suppressed, a call to take hold of their own destiny. Without a broad and deep social basis, it would have been unthinkable."[18]

Tiananmen, then, was a prelude to a successful democratic breakthrough. It contained all the elements—nascent civil society, global linkages, livelihood issues that became politicized, spontaneous organization, negotiations between the regime and protestors—that elsewhere made for success. It was the latest instance of how historical chance, elite expediency, and a weakened society can undermine the democratic dream. But it came close and, in retrospect, probably signaled the end for the CCP. Like Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, and Warsaw in 1981, Tiananmen in 1989 was a failure that foretold later success.

The Last Days of Dictatorship

As in the Nanjing Decade, the failed transition to democracy in the 1980s was followed up a period of authoritarian reassertion in the 1990s and 2000s. In these decades, China's leaders, and not a few of its intellectuals, were tempted by the thought that the country's age-old crisis of governance could be solved by some exotic new form of authoritarianism.

This is an era in which the CCP is headed first by a cautious and uninspired engineer, Jiang Zemin, and then by a faceless puppet of Party factions,

Hu Jintao. Since it is the contention here that they were presiding over the last years of dictatorship in China, it is tempting in a brief narrative to skip over the period entirely. Yet there are developments in this period that will have important implications for the timing, nature, and results of China's move to democracy.

In its desperation to claw back unchallenged political power after 1989, the CCP accelerated the pace of social liberalization and state institutionalization. All but the largest state enterprises were put on the auction block, while the Party withdrew further from the media, education, and individual lives. The rule of law and the role of local people's congresses in policymaking gained ascendancy over Party fiat. Expanded tolerance for open protest—worker actions for back wages and pensions are a good example—became irrevocable. The military was professionalized, losing any political or economic clout. In short, the Party responded to the popular pressures of Tiananmen with an even less intrusive and less arbitrary state. In these respects, democracy was likely to be more durable once achieved.

In other respects, however, the foundations for democracy were weakened. Widened income inequalities, worsened ethnic tensions, and an enfeebled state treasury all spelled trouble for the future. Meanwhile, the spread of corruption to virtually every level of government—not just those in special positions as in the 1980s—meant a longer climb back to a trustworthy and efficient bureaucracy.

Achieving democracy was also going to be more painful. The CCP failed to grasp the nettle of political reform in an era of sustained economic growth and global stability. As a result, it would have less control over the future course of democracy compared to far-sighted authoritarian regimes like the KMT in Taiwan. China in the post-Tiananmen era has switched from being a country where democratization might have come through the planned and deliberate moves of those in power to one where it will likely result from a hasty and messy withdrawal in the face of crisis.

Thus in the post-Tiananmen era, China's quest for democracy was delayed, but not derailed. China entered into a sort of "tutelary democracy" like that proposed by Sun Yat-sen earlier in the century. Indeed, the parallels with the Nanjing Decade are strong. The CCP shifted from being a dictatorship of the left to a dictatorship of the right, a change symbolized most starkly by the decision in 2001 to invite leading capitalists into the Party. Through this and other shifts, the Party transformed from a revolutionary shock brigade of the working classes into a governing representative of the country's new elites. Democracy was now besmirched not as "bourgeoisie" (the left-wing Marxist jibe) but as "Western" (the right-wing ethnocentric one). Pro-democracy forces

were now attacked not for opposing Mao's "leadership" (the left-wing slight) but for embracing his "chaos" (the right-wing one). The flawed universalism of Marxism was replaced not with the compelling universalism of liberal democracy but with a new right-wing exceptionalism of China's "national conditions" (*guoqing*). While the 1980s can be seen as containing the seeds of this shift, the post-Tiananmen era sees it entrenched as official policy. CCP rule is no longer justified as the engine of history but as a source of instrumental payoffs: economic growth, social stability, and national greatness.

As in Franco's Spain or Bismarck's Germany, this is a period of "blood and iron" rather than "speeches and majority decisions." Democratic inklings are crushed in order to "save China" with development and unity. That matters because it suggests where the challenge to dictatorship will gain adherents, less from the cosmopolitan urban elites who prospered from the post-Tiananmen social compact, and more from the normal constituency of the left—peasants, workers, social activists, religious groups, the poor, and the remote. Unlike in the 1980s, when the CCP was besieged by urban elites for holding high the banner of an undemocratic left-wing ideology, from the 1990s it comes under pressure mainly from the vast unwashed for adhering to an authoritarian right-wing ideology. Within the Party itself, leaders who aligned themselves with the downtrodden become the main voices for democracy.

Even if China after Tiananmen looked more like Franco's Spain than Gorbachev's Russia, the regime was no more entrenched than its erstwhile colleagues in dictatorship. The same forces that had brought others down would do the same in China. Indeed, there is an irresistible historical parallel with the democratization of Russia. In both places, the initial break with the totalitarian past (Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin, Deng in 1981 on Mao) was followed by a period of political liberalization that came to an abrupt halt with a hardliner backlash (Russia in 1968, China in 1989). There followed a period of political stasis which in the Russian case culminated after two decades in a regime crisis and a democratic breakthrough. Can China be far behind? The answer seems obvious. In the next two chapters, we survey the reasons why.