Conclusion

China's embrace of democracy will be one of the defining moments of modern political history, no less significant than the Russian Revolution of 1917 or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In myriad ways, it will force a rethinking of history itself and of the assumptions that we make about human societies and global politics. Like the French Revolution, China's democratic breakthrough may remain a work in progress for many decades, thus making immediate verdicts on its significance difficult. But it is worthwhile to anticipate some of the issues that will be under consideration.

From the commanding heights of modern Chinese history, democratization should be seen as the culmination of centuries of development. China's imperial tradition fell on a crisis of legitimacy beginning with the commercial revolution of the late Ming dynasty in the mid-sixteenth century. The rag-tag posse of Manchurian soldiers that overran the country a century later were no better disposed to resolve that crisis. End-of-dynasty afflictions—like corruption, eunuch power, and local rebellion—were apparent almost immediately in their Qing dynasty. The bureaucracy gradually took control of the country for lack of a more legitimate authority.

The Qing collapse, signified by the first Opium War in 1839 and formally declared in 1911, gave China's society its first chance to run the state. That attempt failed. Society remained too weak in the face of political elites styling themselves the heirs of imperial rule. Pro-democracy forces asserted themselves throughout the republican and PRC eras but were consistently repressed by political elites. The regressive tyranny of Mao showed how costly that weakness could be in the modern era. The restoration of autocracy exacted a heavy price—taking the lives of perhaps 55 million people, roughly the population of present-day Italy—even if it left in place strong state institutions.

Mao's death marked a resumption of society's largely successful attempts to win control of the state. Economic and social freedoms expanded quickly, while political power was constrained. In 1989, citizens reminded their leaders, and the world, that popular sovereignty was the ultimate goal. Democratization will mark the final triumph of society's ascendancy. From the perspective of the ground already covered, that triumph will be only a small leap.

And it will be a largely predictable event that is consistent with five centuries of national development. Democracy will be a fulfillment of history rather than a break with it.

China's tortuous path to democracy raises questions about what factors are critical to the defeat of dictatorship. This book has adopted a broad approach to that question, looking at both needs and resources, and at their generation in economic, social, international, and political spheres. But to hazard a guess, it is likely that deep underlying social shifts resulting from economic reforms will be the critical factor. While there was a great deal of international pressure to democratize, China was too large, sheltered, and sure of its uniqueness for this to be determinative. While the polity was troubled, there was enough confidence in the leaderships after Tiananmen to hold it together. But as society grew more diverse, organized, and powerful as a result of economic reforms, the wiggle room for dictators ineluctably narrowed.

I would hesitate to say that this conclusion differs from current thinking on democratization for the simple reason that no scholars, even if they highlight immediate issues of regime defections, reform elites, or economic crisis, fail also to place those contingent changes against a background of longer-term social (and economic) change. The short-term dynamics of democratic breakthrough provide only the final link needed to achieve democracy. In that sense my conclusions are at one with both traditional modernization theories and modern bargaining theories of democratization.

Likewise, China's democratic consolidation will raise broader questions about what makes democracies succeed and fail (or at least regress). Again, we may find that the expected success of China's democracy leads us to pinpoint the long-term or structural factors that underlie the feat: the market economy, the emergent media, the global democratic backstop, and much else. That said, the decisions of political elites will be critical in turning that potential into reality. As in Russia, a no less unlikely site of a working democracy, the emergence of a simple "belief" among elites in making democracy work may be the ultimate cause of a successful consolidation in China. This echoes the importance of new ideas in society that lead to the transition itself—the belief in justice, the reimagined liberal identity, the search for historical truth, and much else. If anything, it is this "revolution in values," the one Hegel noted always precedes revolutions, that proves to be the most useful indicator of democratic breakthrough and consolidation alike. In this respect, I find myself more closely aligned with political scientists who argue that public normative values, not narrow self-interests and payoffs, are the driving force in modern political development.

If China was indeed heading for democracy, might it not have been better

had it embraced democracy as soon as the Maoist nightmare was over, just as Spain did when Franco died? A move toward democracy in the early 1980s could have culminated in full democratization by the turn of the century. It would have left a powerhouse economy and a global political giant. In the absence of this, China went the way of many a postcolonial order in Latin America and Africa, turning a worthy reform movement into an unholy scramble for individual gain. The lack of political reforms bred corruption, inequality, social malaise, and political cynicism.

Many have argued that "China got it right, Russia got it wrong," in comparing the paths from communism of the two countries. Russia moved toward political freedom quickly when the weight of totalitarian rule ended in 1985 after the deaths of Leonid Brezhnev and his two hoary successors. Without a doubt, as one scholar has argued, the "up front" transition costs toward democracy were higher in Russia, where the economy collapsed, political instability rose, and national conflict was rampant. By contrast, for more than 20 years after its totalitarian episode, China enjoyed widened freedoms and a growing economy as well as relative political stability.[1]

But the relevant metric of transition success is "total costs" rather than "up-front costs." These, of course, can be debated only after each country has attained a consolidated democracy. Russia certainly paid high up-front costs. Yet with a minimal, if still troubled, democratic polity and a growing economy by the early 2000s, it might well end up paying less heavily than China in overall terms. China is already paying a significant price for delaying political reform; the costs of its transition and consolidation processes have yet to be seen.

Indeed, it may be that China had the opportunity to pay far less than was even possible in Russia. China's economic and political systems suffered less complete and less enduring suffocation from totalitarianism. China's largely rural and agricultural entrepreneurs could embrace the market, while Russia's largely urban and industrial ones could only fear it. The figure to emerge from the totalitarian ordeal in China, Deng Xiaoping, also enjoyed greater legitimacy than Gorbachev, his counterpart in Russia. China, in other words, had a historic opportunity to make a quick and decisive leap to democracy that Russia was never afforded. To have paid as dearly as Russia appears needless. To have paid more, simply folly.

This question must remain an open one until China's democratic transition is complete. We can gauge the price that China is paying for delayed political reform now. But we cannot evaluate those costs until the country has constructed a democratic polity. If the transition and consolidation phases proceed with barely a hiccup, it might vindicate those who advocated the "politics last" model, at least for China. In a country with limited ethnic

divisions, a readily marketizable economy, and a high degree of social and political consensus, it may be argued, a lengthy period of benevolent authoritarianism was the ideal pathway to democracy. If, on the other hand, those phases are turbulent and protracted, it will raise retrospective doubts about the late PRC era. Is China a thankfully averted Yugoslavia or a needlessly stifled Poland? Only time will tell. Suffice it to say for now that it is both premature and ahistorical to assert that China's path from communism was a success.

If it has not already been brought into serious question by the continued spread of democracy to every corner of the world, Samuel Huntington's thesis of a world dominated by a "clash of civilizations" rent between a liberal and progressive West and a conservative and benighted "other" should be given a final burial by China's embrace of democracy. It will confirm that the real clash in our world remains a clash of just versus unjust political conceptions, between dictatorship and democracy or minimal democracy and full democracy, not between some imagined, essentialized, and monoistic "cultures." The very terms "East" and "West" will finally be exposed as so bereft of any cultural or social meaning as to be virtually useless in our modern world except as geographic shorthand.

Still, if democracy is merely the most efficient and fair mechanism for organizing a polity—any polity—then its meaning will continue to change as each finds new ways to improve that mechanism. While "history" as defined by the monumental struggle between the notion of the political equality of individuals and rival conceptions appears to have ended, it will go on being spun out in competing conceptions of democracy. Debates about issues like compulsory voting, fair electoral systems, money in politics, judicial review, and the like will be the dominant "historical" issues of our time. As an ongoing experiment in best-practice politics, democracy is sure to be influenced by its practice in China, which will come to the game with a rich tradition of indigenous innovation and, arguably, deeper cultural roots in the essential principles of democracy such as tolerance, compromise, and egalitarianism. How will democracy change as a result?

There has been much recent discussion in the West of a "democratic malaise" where the associational and norms-oriented life of a democracy is breaking down. Many scholars see the democratic waves of the past as having ended and the old democracies in a state of slow regression. Some countries are thought to be stuck in minimal democracies of dispersed power but not true equality. To some, the value of political power is unequal, some freedoms more cared for than others, and economic justice unachieved. If modern-day

social contractarians are right, a failure to achieve these things make a democracy's claim to goodness very thin indeed.

It is here that China's democratization may play a vital role. Most Chinese scholars harbor the hope that China will "surpass" traditional forms of democracy as practiced in the rest of the world—especially the imagined "Western model"—and introduce to the world a new system that will be "even better."[2] This is the so-called "surpass sentiment" (*chaoyue qingxu*) mentioned earlier. Of course, there is not a little bit of cultural chauvinism at work here, the desire for China to retake its rightful place as the dispenser of civilization to the world's benighted peoples, especially the stubbornly dynamic West. Even so, we should not rule out, nor rue, the possibility that China will pioneer a unique version of democracy. As one Western scholar notes: "It remains possible that some day the Asian, perhaps even the Chinese, vision of the best form of government will become the dominant vision."[3] If so, it would be a cause for celebration because everyone benefits when a more just system is available.

Many Chinese scholars conjure up a new form of political order that is both strongly democratic and strongly social-oriented. One talks of the emergence of a "creative ambiguity," in China which defies easy labels, in which a "mixed economy" with a state sector will exist alongside "mixed politics" with elements of both liberal democracy and social democracy.[4] Others seem to echo classical republican political theorists of the West with dreams of "deliberative democracy" (*shangyi minzhu*)[5] or "policy democracy" (*zhengce minzhu*) in which people's considered views on issues actually translate into outcomes.[6] Here, elections lose their pride of place as the hallmark of democracy, being replaced by other mechanisms for contesting state power and proposing interests and views of the good. One Chinese scholar anticipates a vast laboratory of democratic experimentation which, given the sheer size of the country, would create a whole new lexicon of democratic forms and theories: "There are actual opportunities for transcending historically known systems and they might be seized by a conscious people."[7]

There is much here that meshes with recent thinking on democracy in the West, which stresses issues like social capital, popular deliberation, equality of political opportunity, and more. In other words, the ongoing struggle to move from mere formal democracy to a substantive democracy of equal citizens will be helped by China. Its efforts at "real democracy" may inspire and push established democracies to "deepen" their own democratic experiences. One Indian author has said that "the future of Western political theory will be decided outside the West," noting, rightly, that India would loom large in

that experience.[8] One could not but add China. Indeed, given that it was never imprinted with colonialism and given its long isolation from Western theory, China's impact may be much greater. Notes one scholar: "The final destination of the search remains veiled, but China's preoccupation with local innovation and adaptation certainly goes beyond mere rhetoric."[9]

Even without any major innovations in the practice of democracy emanating from China, the mere adoption of this long-evolving and never-perfected system by the largest country in the world and one of its most ancient will have a profound effect on deepening democracy. Just as the fall of the Berlin Wall reinstated some confidence in liberal regimes, and just as the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Asia has undermined advocates of soft authoritarianism there, so too China's democracy may shore up the loss of interest in the West about democracy.

To return to a quotation cited earlier, China's democratization will probably transform global politics at every level. It will mean that roughly three quarters of the world's population lives in democratic states, creating "an historic opportunity to bring a truly democratic world into being," notes one scholar.[10] Relations among the world's peoples could for the first time be governed according to the same norms that apply to their domestic polities. Much of this had already begun in the post-cold war era as new democracies in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America forged alliances grounded in these norms. With China aligned with that global movement, the possibilities for positive change will be immense.