Afterword

One of the risks of writing a book about the future is being wrong. The other risk is being right too soon. Although I long ago accepted the former possibility, the latter also loomed several times during the five years that it took to research and write this book. Authoritarian regimes like the Chinese Communist Party are vulnerable to crisis and China has faced several in recent years. First the Asian financial crash, then the insurgency of the mystical Falun Gong religious sect, an international war against terror-sponsoring nations, a bumpy leadership succession, a plague-like virus known by its acronym SARS, and then a political crisis in Hong Kong—all these events at one time or another might have brought systematic political change to China.

Weak and illegitimate regimes are vulnerable to crisis, but the details of transition are always a surprise. End-of-regime watchers like myself are used to the unexpected. Contingency and oddity are the leitmotifs of political ruptures and China is sure to be no exception. All of these crises emerged in unexpected ways from unexpected quarters, quickly enveloped the political system, and led to often-daring acts of imagination by political and social elites struggling to resolve the centuries-old impasse between state and society in China.

Democracy has been the theme of this book, and each of these crises has provided an ideal tram in which to tour the theme park. From the windows, we saw all of the manifestations of dictatorship that make political liberalization so pressing in the minds of the Chinese today, as well as all the assorted means by which this change will be brought about. They powerfully highlight the forces that are moving China toward a democratic future.

The crisis over severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which swept across the country in late 2002 and early 2003, was perhaps the best example. The crisis began because of bad government. A virulent strain of virus detected in southern China in late 2002 was allowed to spread unchecked because of censored information, unresponsive officials, an unaccountable public healthcare system, and elite political imperatives. Laws on disclosure passed a decade earlier to prevent just such a crisis proved ineffective in the absence of external constraints on power. One southern newspaper charged that inadequate decentralization and the repression of civil society groups had further delayed the political response.[1] Another commentator said that SARS could as well stand for a larger problem: "sclerotic authoritarian regime syndrome."[2]

The virus killed 350 people in China and sickened more than 5,000. At least a full percentage point was sliced off GDP growth for the year as hotels emptied and tourists stayed away. Villages erected feudal-like physical barriers at their gates. China's international reputation, under closer scrutiny as the 2008 Beijing Olympics neared, was sullied. If it needed any more reasons to be wary of union with China, Taiwan was given a clarion reminder. The official *China Youth Daily* warned that the crisis was "seriously affecting government credibility."[3] Others in China made dark predictions of the con-

sequences: "Those who lie in order to run the country," wrote one commentator, "will ultimately face revenge."[4]

The means of revenge, if that is the best way to describe how an authoritarian regime is ousted for being unjust and incompetent, were in plain view as well. Despite official cover-ups, China's wealthier and better-connected urban citizens soon exposed the lie. Mobile phones and text message devices circumvented state controls on information. Media that have grown and diversified beyond measure since Mao's death in 1976 showed a capacity for autonomy that few could have guessed. Prominent business leaders with both the means and the needs to speak out in protection of a growing middle class called for democratic reforms. "China must adopt a more democratic administrative model that represents the interests of all people," said one trade lawyer.[5]

Within the wider public, open protests erupted over everything from official misinformation to the mismanagement of quarantines. Prominent social elites, from intellectuals to doctors, came forward to blow the whistle on government incompetence and demand liberalizing reforms. The same pressures came from the international community, whose demands for reforms are aligned closely with those of Chinese society. Within the CCP, a pluralism of views and a drive for change was also in evidence. Regime advisors who have remonstrated with the leadership to embrace political reforms found a new platform for their views. One senior Party policymaker called for a new system based on "an interactive relationship among government, citizens and the media."[6]

Similar vistas of the growing needs and means for democratization had been seen in previous crises, and of course on several occasions during the entire history of the People's Republic of China. As yet, there has been no democratic breakthrough. We know from comparative international experience, however, that such a breakthrough is a common result and how it usually unfolds. The SARS crisis provided several insights into its course in China.

I have argued in this book that China's democracy will be brought about by the CCP itself, or more specifically by an elite-led extrication sparked by reformists in its ranks. The role of a crisis in such transitions is to unlock the potential of regime reformers. It strengthens their hand over conservatives, allowing them to gain support for reforms that they believe offer the best hope for preserving the regime's power.

Evidence of this was seen when premier Wen Jiabao visited Qinghua University in Beijing on the anniversary of China's pro-democracy May 4 movement of 1919. In a secret speech later disseminated widely through liberal newspapers, internal Party documents, and the Internet, Wen said that "our first step should be to open the flow of information. Only then can we enable the public to supervise the government and prevent social instability."[7] This was precisely the tone of Gorbachev's appeal for *glasnost* in the wake of Chernobyl.

Meanwhile, the regime split that almost always foreshadows a breakthrough was suggested by the sacking of two senior government officials, the Minister of Health and the Mayor of Beijing, for their roles in the initial cover-up. In place of the former came Wu Yi, the lone woman in the Politburo and a person with exactly the type of moral authority and pragmatic vision to support systemic changes. In place of the latter came a similar figure, Wang Qishan, who in a remarkable echo of the revolutions in Eastern Europe and Russia shifted from the impersonal rhetoric of the communist

state to the personal rhetoric of democratic leaders, frequently using the phrase "since I took office," in his reports on the crisis in the capital.

Of course for some observers, SARS proved that democracy was not in the offing, that the system was strong and change almost unthinkable. Through the levers of dictatorship, infected people were quickly identified and isolated without legal quibbles; propaganda organs mobilized people and prevented unnecessary panic; social movements were banned; and public political recriminations were kept to a minimum. Local governments used the crisis to reassert control over migrant populations, while Beijing used it to establish the omnipotent political authority of the new leadership. For some, the crisis showed that the CCP remains deeply entrenched, dominant over society, and remarkably agile in the face of threats.

Since most of this book has been a dialogue with these arguments, I will not repeat them here. In general, however, I have claimed two main bodies of evidence in support of the idea of a democratic future. One is that the argument in favor of democracy is the mainstream argument in China itself. Putting government into the hands of society is not a "Western" or "foreign" idea but one deeply resonant in today's China, as the bulk of commentary and opinion on SARS and on more mundane issues of governance demonstrate. Second, even without an overwhelming consensus for change, dictatorships like the CCP have proven to be unsustainable precisely because of their inability to respond to crises like SARS that arise on the back of accumulated misgovernance.

Many more crises will raise the specter of democracy over China in coming years. Democratic development in the rest of Asia—from Taiwan and Hong Kong to remaining dictatorships like Burma and North Korea—could provide an external impetus. At home, elite political struggles, surging urban unrest, or system-shaking economic shocks await the telling. Authoritarian regimes live from crisis to crisis and there will be many more to come in China.

There is simply no compelling argument that China will be a great exception to the nearly-worldwide movement of social emancipation from "sclerotic authoritarianism" that we now call democratization. The specific nature of the crisis through which it will be delivered to popular rule cannot be predicted or perhaps even imagined. The inevitability of such a transition, however, seems plain.