

# Why China Will Democratize

Behind the political stagnation on the surface, signs abound that a fundamental political transformation is taking place in China. In the fall of 2011, an unusually large group of independent citizens launched very vocal campaigns to compete for seats in various local congresses. Around the same time, groups of “netizens” went to a small village in Shandong province to try to visit Chen Guangcheng, a human right activist under house arrest, despite repeated reports about visitors being beaten. In July 2011, a train crash near the city of Wenzhou caused a storm of criticism against the government on “weibo,” micro-blog sites in China that claim nearly 200 million readers. Although these are just three pieces of evidence, they represent a rising independent civil society and illustrate that China’s political regime is increasingly being challenged.

Over the last decade, terms typically used by Western academics to describe Chinese politics have included “authoritarian resilience,” “illiberal adaption,” and “rightful resistance,” indicating a pessimistic view of China’s democratic future.<sup>1</sup> However, reality sometimes changes faster than scholars can reckon. China is moving closer to vindicating classical modernization theory, which states that economic development eventually leads to democratization. We argue that there is good reason to be optimistic that China will become a democracy, and forecast that China will embark on democratization around 2020 or so, although how it will happen, how long the process will take, and even whether it is desirable are issues beyond the scope of this article. Our relative optimism stems from four interlinked mega-trends: economic development, cultural change, political leadership trends, and the global environment.

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 35:1 pp. 41–63  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.641918>

**A fundamental political transformation is taking place in China.**

## **Economic Development Trends**

The two economic factors that matter most for democratization are the levels of development and of inequality. In China's case, the country's economy is growing rapidly, and mainstream economists see little chance of it slowing down any time soon.<sup>2</sup> The issue is the political implications

of this economic growth. Two views prevail. The more commonly held view is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will be safe as long as the economy keeps growing, or what is known as "performance legitimacy." Some, however, predict that the CCP will be the victim of its own success. For example, Henry Rowen, a professor at Stanford University, foresees that China will become "partly free" by 2015 and "free" by 2025.<sup>3</sup> Diverging from the popular notion that the Chinese people have largely been co-opted by the regime, we also argue that there are several reasons to reconsider the mainstream performance legitimacy hypothesis.

### **The Performance Legitimacy Thesis**

First, international experience refutes performance legitimacy. Democratization has taken place in many economically successful countries including Brazil, Chile, Greece, South Korea, Spain, and Taiwan. Nations experiencing mid-level economic development seem particularly susceptible to democracy. In the late 20th century, in the so-called "third wave" of democratization, "twenty-seven out of thirty-one countries that liberalized or democratized were in the middle-income range."<sup>4</sup> The cases most comparable to China, the states which share a similar cultural or historical heritage, illustrate this point. In 1988, South Korea and Taiwan, both of which had embarked on democratization, had a PPP (purchasing power parity) per capita GDP (gross domestic product) of \$6,631 and \$7,913 (\$12,221 and \$14,584 in 2010 dollars), respectively. In 1989, the PPP per capita GDP of the Soviet Union (later Russia) and Hungary, also both on the journey toward democratization, was \$9,211 and \$6,108 (\$16,976 and \$11,257 in 2010 dollars), respectively.<sup>5</sup> China's PPP per capita GDP in 2010 was \$7,544.<sup>6</sup>

Those who argue for "Chinese exceptionalism" overlook the fact that it is too early to tell whether China has proved or disproved modernization theory. A moderate estimate of China's growth indicates that China, with an annual real growth rate of seven percent, could reach a PPP per capita GDP of \$12,000 (in 2010 dollars) in 2017, and \$15,000 in 2020. Only then could a fair judgment be made on whether China is an exception or follows the rule. It also should be noted that, compared to other authoritarian states, regimes in East Asia and the former

Soviet/Eastern Europe region tend to have higher economic thresholds to democratize. This, however, might not be a bad thing. Scholars may disagree on whether democratic *transition* correlates with economic level, but they generally agree that democratic *consolidation* correlates to economic level. In that sense, a “delayed” democratization might be good for democratic consolidation, or a smoother transition, when China does democratize.

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The second challenge to the performance legitimacy view is the increasing gap between people’s expectations and the means of government to co-opt society. It is true that the Chinese state is still very strong, with enormous fiscal, repressive, and even normative strength. But growing faster yet are the expectations of ordinary Chinese. With the memory of the Cultural Revolution fading, the benchmark of good performance is shifting. Younger Chinese are increasingly unlikely to compare their living standards with those of the revolutionary years. The opening up of China and the rapid rate of urbanization have created a new set of reference points, and people increasingly take a secure lifestyle for granted, seeing education, medical care, and decent housing as welfare entitlements.

Set against rising expectations is the limited means of the government. Theoretically, the government can meet increased welfare demand in three ways: print money, reduce waste, and/or raise taxes. The first option is convenient but can cause inflation, which has become a serious problem in recent years.<sup>7</sup> In an online survey of people’s perceptions of inflation conducted in November 2010, 94.93 percent of the 3,529 respondents chose the answer “I feel [the effects of inflation] strongly. The price of everything is rising.”<sup>8</sup> Reducing waste, the second option, is politically difficult among the elite because of the rent-seeking opportunities it could remove. One scholar estimated that in 2004, the expenditure on officials’ banquets, cars, and foreign trips was 900 billion RMB per year.<sup>9</sup> Although an official from the Ministry of Finance rebutted this with a much lower number, 120 billion, the conservative and muddy way he produces the number suggests that the truth probably lies in between.<sup>10</sup> For reference, the military expenses of China in 2004 was 220 billion RMB. Raising taxes is also problematic. China ranked second in the 2009 Tax Misery & Reform Index of *Forbes*.<sup>11</sup> Although *Forbes*’ method of calculation is disputable,<sup>12</sup> what’s indisputable is that the rate of government revenue has grown much faster in China than that of GDP in recent years. A

more recent illustration of this point is that from January to September 2011, tax revenue to the Chinese government grew more than twice as fast as GDP.<sup>13</sup> A greater tax burden could not only damage the business environment but also generate a political backlash. It is therefore hard to imagine how people's increasing welfare demands can be met without incurring inflation or significant political cost.

Third, performance legitimacy can be problematic when economic growth is not continuous. Rapid growth followed by a significant slowdown, or macroeconomic instability, may pose a greater threat to an authoritarian regime than steady stagnation, as illustrated by cases such as Indonesia and Poland. Due to various factors, China's economy could slow down or even experience shocks in the coming decades. Globalization has made national economies more vulnerable, as the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated. The greater danger, though, comes from China's model of economic growth, which relies disproportionately on government-related investment. Several consequences follow: first, such investment increasingly relies on bank loans, which plant the seeds of financial trouble. According to the Auditor-General's Office, local governments in China had debts of 10.7 trillion RMB by the end of 2010,<sup>14</sup> and many have expressed concerns about whether local governments have the capacity to repay those debts. Also, investment-driven development is not particularly pro-employment—yields are not shared as widely as they could be; and lastly, government-related investment is not sustainable unless it is balanced by proportionate consumption, and serious overcapacity in certain fields is already well known. Almost a decade ago, recognizing the imbalance, the Chinese government called for the “transformation of economic development from the investment-driven model to the consumption-driven model.” The magic transformation has yet to happen.

Politics is the problem. The investment-driven model of growth might not be best for the economy in the long run, but it offers rent-seeking opportunities and facilitates the promotion of officials; thus, interest groups and bureaucracies have incentives to perpetuate it. Macroeconomic stability is a public good from which local governments may benefit but to which they may not wish to contribute. Meanwhile, China's authoritarian regime generally tends to resist redistributive policies, organized labor, and progressive tax policies, elements necessary for boosting consumption-driven growth.

### **Inequality and the Pressure for Democratization**

The level of inequality in China also affects its prospects for democratization. The nation's Gini coefficient—the standard measure of inequality, where 0 means everyone has exactly the same amount of wealth and 1 means one person has all the wealth—reached 0.48 in 2010, one of the highest in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Even that value, according to Chinese scholar Wang Xiaolu, is a great underestimation, because “gray income”—unreported income often associated with corruption—is not included in the official data.<sup>16</sup>

In the early stage of China’s reform, increasing levels of inequality did not cause the CCP much trouble politically for two reasons. The first is the nature of China’s inequality. Due to various factors, the main source of inequality in China has traditionally been the urban–rural income gap; the intra-urban and intra-rural income gaps are not as great. In 2002, when the overall Gini coefficient reached 0.47, within both the city and the countryside the coefficient was still 0.37.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the wealth gap has not been as visible in China as it is in many other developing countries, where slums are located alongside gated communities. Such conditions have political consequences, because more visible inequality understandably fuels political discontent.

However, inequality has now become a major political issue. Abstract inequality is becoming more “real,” with increasing numbers of people from rural areas moving into cities where luxury shopping malls, apartment buildings, and restaurants are springing up, reminding the urban poor of what is beyond their reach. In a survey conducted in March 2010 by the Statistics Bureau of Shan’xi, 11,510 randomly selected Shan’xi residents were asked to express their “greatest wish” for the New Year.<sup>18</sup> “Narrowing the income gap” ranked first, with 38.59 percent of votes. Trailing behind at a distant second and third were, respectively, “stabilizing housing prices” (10.27 percent) and “creating employment opportunities” (10.19 percent).

The second reason is that, in the early decades of reform, ordinary people saw that even if the income gap was increasing, so was the opportunity for upward mobility. A survey conducted by Harvard University professor Martin Whyte shows that at least until 2004, people still perceived inequality to be the result of a meritocratic rather than an unfair system.<sup>19</sup> In another survey conducted just two years later, however, corruption had become the main reason identified for the alarming income gap.<sup>20</sup> Clear signs of resentment caused by inequality have emerged, with the phenomenon of “hating the rich” and “hating the cadres” (the two groups are often overlapping) sweeping China. Local incidents in which one individual is rich or privileged and the other is poor repeatedly cause national outrage. The mysterious death of a girl generated a riot in Weng’an in Guizhou province in 2008 when her family claimed that she was raped by the relatives of local officials. A hit-and-run accident in Hebei caused a storm in

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October 2010 because the driver, the son of a local official, protested when police found him, declaring: “My father is Li Gang.”

The dramatic rise in inequality is politically neutralizing Chinese society including members of the middle class, urban and rural laborers, and entrepreneurs. The expression “*yi zu*” (ant tribe) has emerged, first gaining wide currency in China in 2008. It describes a struggling, disillusioned new middle class—college graduates who can neither go back to their hometowns because there are few jobs, nor settle in big cities because housing prices are beyond their reach, and thus end up living in miserable conditions in the suburbs.

Side by side with the disillusionment of the “*yi zu*” is the powerlessness of the working class. Nothing expresses this sense better than the early 2010 serial suicides of manufacturing workers of Foxconn, which makes computer and electronic products for companies such as Apple, Dell, and Hewlett-Packard.<sup>21</sup> Like the members of the “ant tribe,” most laborers see their future neither in the countryside nor in urban China. What they face is a closed society in which doors are open only to the rich, the highly educated, and those with connections. As for the peasants, MIT Professor Yasheng Huang has argued that they were seriously marginalized after the mid-1990s when the government focused on urban growth.<sup>22</sup> The populist rural programs of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, such as the rural health care system, might have eased political tensions to some degree, but the real benefits have been very limited. The income gap between urban and rural residents rose embarrassingly from 3.1:1 in 2002 to 3.33:1 in 2008.<sup>23</sup>

Even entrepreneurs are increasingly politically neutralized. George Washington University professor Bruce Dickson argues that Chinese capitalists are “red” because the regime has successfully co-opted them.<sup>24</sup> This argument not only underestimates the vulnerability of such a coalition,<sup>25</sup> but also ignores another side of the story: over three decades of reform in China, the CCP has systematically discriminated against local private entrepreneurs in favor of large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and foreign corporations, as Yasheng Huang has documented. It is reasonable to suspect that such discrimination has developed some quiet grudges.

Several items under the Hu–Wen leadership have had an alienating effect on private companies: the Labor Contract Law of 2007, a new law restricting the freedom of employers to hire and fire workers, is seen as too pro-labor; the comeback of SOEs as monopolies in key sectors since the mid-2000s has bankrupted many private businesses; and the four trillion RMB of the stimulus package to address the financial crisis went almost exclusively into the state sector. The intense media criticism of “*guo jin min tui*” (the advance of the state and retreat of society) after 2008 signifies a completely new way of framing

issues. In the 1990s, the debate was whether the private sector should be tolerated. Now, the issue is whether private businesses should be treated the same as SOEs in terms of obtaining bank loans, tax breaks, and land.

To sum up, we do not argue that most ordinary Chinese are actively seeking democracy, but do suggest

that recent economic trends are politically neutralizing important social classes, creating a reservoir of forces available for political mobilization. We believe that further economic growth in China is a force of democratization, and see rising inequality in China as facilitating rather than obstructing democratization.

**Recent economic trends are creating a reservoir of forces available for political mobilization.**

## The Changing Political Culture

It is widely argued that China's unique culture makes democratization very difficult, if not undesirable. Such arguments have some empirical support, but it is a complex picture. While acknowledging that China has a cultural deficit in democracy, we maintain that economic and technological developments are changing the nation's cultural orientation.

Different surveys show that the CCP, despite its authoritarian nature, enjoys a very high level of political trust. The late Duke University professor Tianjian Shi, for example, finds that 92 percent of Chinese trust the national government.<sup>26</sup> Scholars have commented that the dramatic rise in protests in China has not seriously threatened the legitimacy of the regime because protestors tend to focus on socioeconomic rather than political issues and carefully distinguish the central government from local ones.<sup>27</sup> Is Chinese culture hampering China's democratization?

For starters, Chinese protestors do tend to make practical and local demands, but whether that reflects a cultural orientation or simply a short-term rational choice is not clear. Protestors seem perfectly capable of modifying their rhetoric in response to changes in the political environment. For example, many protesting against the arbitrary demolition of homes immediately picked up the discourse of property rights after the enactment of the Property Rights Law in 2007. And when the Open Information of the Government Act was enacted in 2008, it triggered a series of cases in which people used the "right to information" to make their claims. It is thus reasonable to suggest that institutions rather than cultural orientation have shaped the discourse of demonstrators.

More broadly, certain conservative views held by Chinese people may be variable and superficial, reflecting the success of political indoctrination more than a deep-rooted orientation. Of course, the understanding of democracy in China still has “Chinese characteristics.” For example, 62.9 percent of respondents in the 2005 Asian Barometer Survey thought that China was already more or less democratic.<sup>28</sup> However, it is possible that such views would alter rather quickly should the political environment change. It is not surprising that people value stability over liberty when they are surrounded by propaganda which sets the two against each other. It is also natural for people to understand democracy as guardianship when their national leaders are almost always portrayed by the media as benign protectors. It is in fact surprising that, despite all the propaganda, a significant proportion of Chinese still hold a liberal view of democracy, as shown by Tianjian Shi’s research.<sup>29</sup>

Culture evolves, in both China and the West. Nottingham University’s Wang Zhengxu notes a clear generational shift, with those Chinese born after 1980

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having significantly lower levels of trust in the government.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Tianjian Shi finds that “young people are more likely to endorse an understanding of democracy following the liberal democracy tradition.”<sup>31</sup> Statistics also capture, to some extent, the increasing liveliness of civil society in China. The number of “collective actions” jumped from

8,700 in 1993 to 90,000 in 2006, and then doubled to 180,000 in 2010.<sup>32</sup> The number of nongovernmental organizations rose from 6,000 in the early 1980s to 360,000 in 2006, although the real number might be as many as three million.<sup>33</sup> This could hardly happen in a culturally static society.

Ironically, what best underscores the growing restlessness of Chinese society is the increase in the spending of the government on “maintaining stability.” China’s budget for internal security in 2009 was 514 billion RMB, nearly the same as that for military spending.<sup>34</sup> At the CCP’s 17th Party Congress in 2007, to “maintain stability” in Beijing, Chinese Social Science Academy researcher Yu Jianrong estimates that about 100,000 people were sent by different local governments to Beijing to “jie fang” (stop the petitioners).<sup>35</sup>

The pro-democracy position of China’s many intellectuals presents another challenge to the notion that Chinese culture represents an obstacle to democratization. A large proportion of Chinese, possibly the majority, might yet be politically conservative or indifferent, but in terms of dynamics for democratization, the political attitude of intellectuals, college students, and the



emerging middle class probably matters more than that of the general public, based on the experience of other countries or China's own recent history.<sup>36</sup> In recent years, a group of liberal opinion leaders has emerged in China, shifting the political views of more and more young and educated people. Han Han, a young writer as well as race-car driver, is the unofficial representative of these opinion leaders. He uses his blog to criticize political censorship and injustice in China, and he is so popular that the blog, with more than 500 million hits by the summer of 2011, enjoys the largest readership in China.<sup>37</sup> Many mainstream celebrities are also becoming increasingly outspoken. This is worrying for the CCP because political liberalism is increasingly associated with glamorous figures, rather than marginalized political exiles or Falun Gong practitioners.

Such liberal voices are well-accepted. At the end of 2010, among the top 10 books listed on sina.com, arguably the most visited website in China, six were related to political subjects and five of them were pro-liberal. The feverishly nationalist book *China Is Not Happy* received an average grade of 5.2 out of 10 from about 4,000 readers of douban.com, the biggest book review website in China. In contrast, the book *Common Sense*, published in the same year but promulgating liberal views as hinted by its Thomas Paine-inspired title, received an average grade of 8.2 from its 13,000 readers.

Finally, the transformation of traditional media is contributing to democratization. In the 1990s, the weekly newspaper *Southern Weekend* was the symbol of liberal journalism. Today, it is only one of many such papers. Despite increasing censorship, more and more newspapers and magazines are exhibiting liberal inclinations including the *Southern Metropolis*, *Window for the Southern Wind*, *Liao Wang*, *Cai Jing*, *New Century*, and *Xiaoxiang Morning*.

The most revolutionary changes, however, have come through the internet. The estimated number of netizens in China reached a phenomenal 485 million by June 2011.<sup>38</sup> Of course, cultural change takes time, but more and more netizens are detaching themselves from the authoritarian regime. One indicator of such detachment is the growing political cynicism: "eight glories and eight shames," the moral principles advocated by the Hu-Wen leadership, have inspired more jokes than respect. Words like "democracy," "freedom," "fewman rights," or "harmony" have been coined to ridicule political conditions. Although it is true that the Chinese government has succeeded in repressing free speech online through its multilayered censorship mechanisms, it has so far failed to control online activity in at least four areas.

First, the government cannot completely block the flow of information, because many people have learned how to "climb over the Great Fire Wall" with special software. An interesting story is that of Feng Zhenghu. Seen as a political troublemaker by the Shanghai government, Feng was forbidden to return to China from Japan. From November 2009 to February 2010, he lived in Narita

International Airport in Japan, protesting his treatment. In the pre-internet era, his struggle would have caught little attention, but Feng used Twitter to update his daily activities. Although the Chinese Twitter community is a small one due to government restrictions, it was big enough to keep the story alive. Eventually, the Shanghai government was embarrassed into allowing Feng to return.

Second, there is much information available online in politically “gray” areas. In the past five years, the internet in China has become a political theater full of sensational dramas. The plight of Deng Yujiao, a Hubei girl who stabbed a local official to death when facing a rape threat in May 2009, generated enormous outrage when her story was published online, as did the 2009 “hide-and-seek” story in which a Yunnan police station attributed the mysterious death of a detainee to a hide-and-seek game, but many people found the story too ridiculous to believe. In 2010, when a Jiangxi family burned themselves to protest the demolition of their home, their relatives updated their sufferings online. Such stories are “gray” because local governments usually do not like them to be reported but have no discretion to control the information online. In addition, Chinese netizens have learned to invent “gray” language, or euphemisms, to deliver their messages about politically sensitive issues. For example, “eight square” signals a discussion of the June 4th movement, “being invited for a cup of tea” means being recently warned by the security police, and “being harmonized,” unsurprisingly, means being repressed. The top leaders sometimes get nicknames for the convenience of discussion. Such are the guerilla war skills to bypass online censorship.

Thirdly, the internet is becoming a tool for organizing political action. The Xiamen “walk” in 2006 and Guangzhou “walk” in 2009 for environmental causes were both partially organized through online communities. The Qian Yunhui case of 2010, in which the government and many netizens argued over the reason for a peasant’s death (the government said it resulted from a car accident while netizens attributed it to political retaliation since the peasant had been organizing fellow villagers for land rights), generated so much publicity that some netizens conducted independent investigations. It is true that such activists are still very few because of information control and political risk, but the phenomenon of coordinating action through the internet not only helps to maintain solidarity among activists but also provides a channel for political dissidents to connect with the grassroots, a dangerous coalition in the eyes of the CCP.

Fourth, the internet is fostering a general “social capital,” which may not have immediate political implications but can cultivate a democratic attitude in the long run. Despite government control, many reading, traveling, discussion, charity, and sports groups, among others, are thriving online. If Harvard professor Robert Putnam’s thesis<sup>39</sup> that pro-social networks are pro-democratic

has an element of truth, the explosion of social interaction and associations online can help to facilitate China's transition toward democracy.

In summary, we contend that Chinese culture is not obstructing democratization to the extent that some suggest. Cultural traits themselves are mixed. Many conservative tendencies are superficial, and the political culture is in flux. Intellectual leadership is moving toward liberalism, the traditional media are opening up, and the internet is becoming a cultural arena which the state is too clumsy to effectively conquer.

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### **Leadership Transition and its Consequences**

Any discussion of China's future democratization must involve how China's ruling elites understand and implement democracy, and what incentives would push them to accept or adopt democratic institutions. Although structural and cultural factors shape political trends, the leadership often plays a crucial role in deciding the timing of democratization, as demonstrated by "the Gorbachev factor" in the democratization of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe or the role of Chiang Ching-kuo in Taiwan. If Konstantin Chernenko had lived 20 more years, or if Deng Xiaoping had lived 10 fewer, the process and outcome of democratization in those countries might have been very different.

Three questions need to be addressed: First, do Chinese leaders embrace democracy in their discourse? Second, to what degree do they implement democratic practices or reforms with democratic characteristics? Third, how do faction politics affect the prospects of democratization, particularly how will the upcoming 18th Party Congress influence political reforms in the decades ahead? We also want to emphasize that political elites do not live in a political vacuum. The rise of an increasingly independent civil society will change both elites' incentives and values in China.

### **Democracy Discourse**

Despite China's stellar record of growth over the last 30 years, Chinese citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with the "growth first" model and are demanding more social justice and equality.<sup>40</sup> The CCP realizes this and its discourse on democracy has changed subtly in recent years.

Premier Wen Jiabao is perhaps the leader who has raised the most hope about China's political reform in recent times. In 2006, for example, he told a

delegation from the Brookings Institute in the United States, “We have to move to democracy. . . we know the direction in which we are going.” Wen mentioned three aspects of democracy: elections, judicial independence, and supervision based on checks and balances.<sup>41</sup> Although he did not offer specifics about how to implement democracy, his remarks do represent a gradual shift from the old discourse of socialist democracy. Since July 2010, Wen has promoted democracy on more than seven occasions, including a special interview with CNN on many sensitive issues related to China’s political reforms.<sup>42</sup> Most recently, in a meeting with entrepreneurs at the September 2011 World Economic Forum in Dalian, Wen again emphasized the importance of the rule of law, social equality, judicial independence, people’s democratic rights, and anti-corruption initiatives.<sup>43</sup>

Although different interpretations can be made of Wen’s recent remarks, there are other voices both within and outside the CCP also calling for faster and deeper political reform. The most notable Party theorist is Yu Keping, the deputy director of the Central Committee’s Compilation and Translation Bureau, who has put forward a theory of “incremental democracy,” which emphasizes the orderly expansion of citizen participation in politics. His article, “Democracy is a good thing,” published in 2006, created a huge debate within the Party about the merits of democracy.<sup>44</sup>

Despite such positive trends, one might wonder if all the talk about democracy has any real impact on political development in China. We say it does, for several reasons. First, even if the democratic discourse is just speechifying, it can provide a weapon for civil society to mobilize and hold the Party accountable. It is interesting that, when protesting the persecution of three netizens attacked because of their speech online, demonstrators held a banner quoting Premier Wen, “Justice Is More Brilliant than the Sun,” in front of a local court in Fujian. Second, there is good reason to believe that some Party members are genuinely interested in promoting democracy in China. This is because they understand that the Party’s legitimacy cannot stem from economic performance alone but must be based upon multiple sources, including political legitimacy.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, they probably understand that the Party will be able to hold on to power or protect its interests if it initiates the political reform and shapes the constitutional design rather than if it is driven out of power by others in a time of crisis. Of course, it is unrealistic to place hopes for democratization on mentions of democracy by Chinese political leaders, even if some are genuinely interested in promoting political reforms, as there is certainly strong opposition against democracy within the Party. Hence, even the much promoted proposal for intra-party democracy should be viewed with caution.

What’s equally important, if not more important, than the rhetorical incorporation of democracy into the Party’s discourse is, ironically, the CCP’s inability to come up with a coherent theoretical alternative to liberal democracy.

President Hu Jintao's attempt seems to be the concept of "Scientific Development,"<sup>46</sup> but the concept means so much that it actually means very little. The installment of a statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square in January 2011 raised suspicions that the CCP wanted to revive Confucianism as its official discourse, but the quiet and mysterious removal of it in April 2011 suggests that the Party knows that it would be too much of a stretch to go from Communism to Confucianism. The general secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, has attracted attention with his campaign of "Singing the Red and Cracking down on the Black" (singing the revolutionary songs and eliminating crimes), but the blend of this semi-Maoist campaign and the market economy does not amount to any coherent ideology. The current ideological disarray might force some political elites to gradually turn to liberal democracy at some point.

### **Actual Reforms?**

There is no convincing evidence that the Party is now engaging in meaningful reforms, although in some areas positive improvements have been made. One of the key themes of the ongoing discourse is that mechanisms must be developed to ensure intra-party democracy, with a system for the election, supervision, evaluation, and promotion of officials.

For example, the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Party Congress in September 2009 stressed the reform of the party electoral system. "Public recommendation, direct election" is being quietly promoted in several areas. Interestingly in 2009, for the first time in the history of the CCP, some district offices in Nanjing elected the secretary and deputy secretary of the Party Committee. In June 2010, Nanjing became the first city to complete the city-wide "public recommendation, direct election" of grassroots party officials.<sup>47</sup> Similar experiments have been conducted in other cities including Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Chengdu.

How are these elections conducted? First, candidates recommend themselves to ordinary party members; second, candidates give presentations before the final vote; and third, candidates answer questions put forward by other party members. Some party theorists believe that such a trend toward the direct election of party officials is an irreversible process, as more cities and regions are adopting this system. Although there is no sign that the CCP's top officials will be subjected to direct election anytime soon, it does show that the Party is gradually moving toward that ultimate goal.

In many other areas, however, political reform not only has not progressed, it has in fact backslid. Journalists complain that censorship has intensified rather than loosened in recent years. Many human rights activists and dissidents are frequently harassed, if not arrested.<sup>48</sup> As for the independents running for seats in local congresses in 2011, the Party has used all sorts of measures to prevent

them from being elected.<sup>49</sup> However, we argue that the increasing paranoia of the Party and its frequent resort to “naked power” is a sign of desperation rather than confidence. It shows that the state has less and less capacity to persuade and co-opt. The intensification of censorship and repression can alienate the society further, which will in turn add more pressure on the state to reform.

**Splits among the ruling elites into multiple factions can contribute to democratization.**

**Factional Politics: Democracy's Friend**

It should be noted that China's ruling elites and the CCP do not comprise a monolithic entity. Under certain circumstances, it is possible for the ruling elites to split into multiple factions or camps. Such divisions can contribute to democratization. Political scientists Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter have argued that the struggle between hard-liners and soft-liners has both

a direct and an indirect influence on democratic transitions.<sup>50</sup> According to this logic, authoritarian elites will form factions to compete for power and legitimacy when it is very hard to reach consensus on critical social and economic issues. Certain political liberalization measures will be taken, and the more liberal leaders will seek support from civil society to balance the more conservative leaders. Although democracy might not be the ultimate goal of either coalition, the process can be a slippery slope that eventually leads to an unintended outcome.

In the case of China, the power of factions was manifested in the politics of the 1980s: the Tiananmen movement of 1989 was in a way the showdown between conservatives and liberals within the Party, although the conservatives led by Deng Xiaoping eventually defeated the liberals led by Hu Yaobang and Zhao Zhiyang, who were advocating more political reforms. The results were tragic, but show how political factions served to spur political and social reform in China. The key question is: will the CCP split into opposing factions again? To answer this question, one must examine the interplay of the next generation of leaders.

China is no longer ruled by strongman politics. No Chinese leader enjoys the kind of authority and legitimacy once enjoyed by Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping.<sup>51</sup> The new leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, will face tremendous challenges to their authority for two reasons. First, over the last two decades, the trend has been to prevent individual leaders from accumulating too much power. This means that Xi and Li will have less authority than previous leaders have had. Second, the increasingly stagnant nature of the Party will weaken the authority of China's new leaders even further.

Since the Hu–Wen administration took over in 2002, the main social and economic policies have taken a more or less “left” turn.<sup>52</sup> The slogan “harmonious society” arguably represents a major shift from the “growth at all costs” theme of Jiang Zemin’s era. The point here is that each new administration must develop distinctive policies and slogans. The upcoming Xi–Li administration is no exception. What kind of catchphrases can they create to build upon Hu’s “harmonious society”? It is increasingly difficult for China’s top leadership to be innovative without addressing issues of political reform.

We already have clear evidence that other ambitious leaders are challenging the future authority of Xi and Li. Many of China’s new leaders have comparable CVs, without either undisputed authority or unchallengeable support. Pushing political reform might become a way for certain leaders to expand their support base. The party secretary of Chongqing city, Bo Xilai, as mentioned earlier, has revived elements of Maoism, and when he comes to Beijing after the 18th Party Congress next year, he might promote this model to all of China. As a response, other top leaders of the next generation will have to either come up with their own version of political innovations or fall behind Bo in terms of influence and reputation.

There are signs that other top leaders of the next generation are taking action as well. Wang Yang, the party secretary of Guangdong province, has also publicly made remarks about a different kind of campaign: “liberating thought” and other political reforms. Rumors have been circulating that he wants to ease censorship in Guangdong. Many observers believe that Bo and Wang are seriously competing for one of the slots in the next Standing Committee of the Politburo at the 18th Party Congress to be held in 2012. It is hard to say with confidence that this is the case, but one thing is clear: increasingly fierce competition for power and influence will take place among ambitious leaders in the coming years, and rivals might try different political experiments to achieve their goals.

Although it is impossible to predict the outcome of future power struggles, several general trends can be identified: there will be greater competition for power within the Party, mainly because no single individual leader has ultimate authority. The top leadership will thus become less stable, particularly as the competition for power becomes public. Such competition will inevitably push ambitious politicians to rely more on public opinion to gain political support, as evidenced by Bo’s recent efforts in Chongqing. That competition will likely open up space for new political experiments.

Last but not least, we want to emphasize that the pressure coming from the emerging civil society, which we discussed in the first two sections, will have its impact on elites. The CCP does not live in a vacuum. The rise of a contentious society will increase the cost of repression for China’s authoritarian rulers, and

when the cost of repression is too high, as MIT Professor Daron Acemoglu has argued, democratic reform probably becomes a rational choice for the elites to avoid a revolution.<sup>53</sup>

Also, the change of values in society might “trickle up.” University of Michigan Professor Ronald Inglehart argues that elites tend to be better educated, and education is positively correlated with liberal political views, which means elites are also affected by liberal views.<sup>54</sup> Their interests might point them in a conservative direction, but cognitive dissonance between self-interests and values can reach a breaking point. Right now, the social pressure in China is probably not big enough to change the incentives of political elites, and the cultural shift of Chinese society has yet to reach a tipping point. But as argued earlier, there are reasons to believe the momentum of change is building, and even if they do not want to be, the elites might be forced into reform.

In sum, although there are few signs that the CCP is actively seeking political reform right now, political elites can be forced to take a role in China’s democratization. The inability to ideologically innovate leaves liberal democracy as a more and more prominent option. The likely factional struggle among the next generation of leaders might make adopting liberal reform a strategy for some contenders who are competing for power. Even as the political elites are slow to change their minds, the rise of civil society will put more and more pressure on the state, forcing the regime to face people’s demands for rights of participation.

## **Globalization’s Effects**

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Most of the extant works on democratization in China tend to focus exclusively on internal factors, treating external factors as secondary or even marginal in shaping China’s political transitions. This view might seem self-evident given the strong ability of the Chinese government to resist external interference in China’s internal affairs. However, the role of international factors cannot be excluded altogether as ample evidence demonstrates that they do influence a nation’s prospects for democracy.

In the field of international relations, a number of scholars have identified various causal mechanisms to explain why and how non-democratic countries have embraced democratic norms and human rights values. External actors usually influence a country’s democratization process through pressure and persuasion. For example, one recent study examined the way in which the European Union played a significant role in the diffusion of democratic norms and institutions in Europe.<sup>55</sup> In the case of China, three external forces may



affect democratization: the contagion effect, the spread of liberal norms, and practical benefits.

The contagion effect is vividly demonstrated by the recent democratic uprisings in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Globally, democracy has become the dominant form of government, with 116 countries in 2009 qualifying as electoral democracies. Among all 194 countries, 89 are free and 58 are partly free, according to the Freedom of the World 2010 report.<sup>56</sup> Regionally, many Asian states have completed democratization in recent decades, including Indonesia, Taiwan, and South Korea, while countries such as Thailand and Vietnam are also moving toward constitutional democracy. India has often been criticized for lacking economic efficiency as a result of its democratic system, but in recent years, India's economy has been growing at a fast pace, thereby seriously weakening the argument that democracy will slow the rate of China's economic growth. Among the remaining non-democratic regimes in Asia, Myanmar held the country's first elections in two decades on November 7, 2010; a week later, Aung San Suu Kyi, the long-time promoter of democracy in Myanmar, was freed from house arrest. Other liberal moves since then by the government seem to suggest that Myanmar is finally moving, though slowly, toward a more democratic regime.<sup>57</sup>

Research shows that autocracies are more likely to become democracies when neighboring states make the transition to democracy.<sup>58</sup> Although it is unlikely that China will follow the model of the abovementioned Asian nations, their example will increase China's confidence in democratization, in part because they all share a traditional Asian or Chinese culture to varying degrees. Moreover, democratization has not halted economic growth in countries such as South Korea and Indonesia.

In addition, globalization facilitates the spread of liberal norms, either through structural factors (e.g., trade and investment, information technology) or the deliberate efforts of global actors (e.g., multinational corporations, nongovernmental and international organizations, individuals). Trade and investment promote democratization for various reasons. Trade liberalization, for example, tends to initially increase income inequality, which in turn facilitates

democratization by intensifying social discontent.<sup>59</sup> Elites also have incentives to pursue democratization. Authoritarian rulers interested in gaining access to international funds have a strong incentive to hold multiparty elections because donors generously reward dictators who hold elections.<sup>60</sup> Although China is not

**The road to democracy in China will not be an easy one.**

in desperate need of international funds, it does face a more hostile global business environment if it maintains its authoritarian system, as the increasing criticism China has encountered for its role in Africa reveals. For the sake of doing business, many countries would like to see a more liberal and transparent decisionmaking process in China. Capital mobility also means that China's wealthy can easily transfer mobile assets to foreign countries, thus reducing the need to worry about redistributive policies resulting from democratization.<sup>61</sup>

The efforts of global actors also have an impact on democracy efforts. University of Chicago Professor Jon Pevehouse argues convincingly that international organizations have helped the democratization of various countries.<sup>62</sup> Although it is almost impossible for a foreign power to impose democratization, socialization is a powerful mechanism that can change China's behavior. Polls show that its authoritarian regime is the primary reason for the negative view of China held by many countries.<sup>63</sup> Chinese leaders care about how they are viewed by the international community, and are working to reverse such a perception.

Scholars have found that a peaceful regional environment also contributes positively to democratic transitions.<sup>64</sup> Although much has been said and written about how such an environment has contributed to China's economic rise, little attention has been paid to how it can influence democratization in China. It can increase the level of economic, social, political, and cultural exchange between China and the outside world, which will facilitate the spread of democratic norms and values. Democratization in China's immediate neighborhood will also mitigate fears of chaos and instability in China, because democratization will be less likely to be seen as a conspiracy engineered by hostile Western forces.

Lastly, democratization will bring various international benefits to China. Recent empirical studies have demonstrated that democratization has promoted trade and financial liberalization globally.<sup>65</sup> According to this logic, coalitions within China which have benefited from such reforms since 1978 will have incentives to push for democracy, as it will bring about further liberalization. Also, it is unlikely that Taiwan will accept unification with mainland China if the latter

remains an authoritarian state. In an interview in October 2010, Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou stated that any negotiation of political union with mainland China would require China to become a democracy.<sup>66</sup>

**The momentum for democratization in China will accelerate in the not-too-distant future.**

## Clear Trends, Uncertain Outcomes

One hundred years ago, the Qing Dynasty was brought down by the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. One hundred years later, China is at another crossroads. Changing China through bloodshed is unlikely and unwelcome. A new kind of “revolution” will take place.

Although the mega-trends identified in our assessment point to a clear outcome—the democratization of China—we believe that the process is neither linear nor deterministic. Our forecast is only probabilistic, though the probability is high. Other factors beyond the four mega-trends are also likely to shape China’s democratization. Moreover, the road to democracy in China will not be an easy one, as those with vested interests will try hard to maintain their grip on power. Extreme events may delay or even reverse the process. However, evidence suggests that the momentum for democratization in China will accelerate in the not-too-distant future.

The form of democracy which China will ultimately take is uncertain. There is good reason to believe that the U.S. model of democracy will not be accepted by Chinese people for historical, cultural, and social reasons. Policymakers in Washington should be careful not to impose their own values and views on the Chinese, as doing so is likely to cause a domestic backlash within China and could ultimately delay or derail the democratization process. In general, a democratizing China will be gentler, kinder, and more confident and peaceful in domestic and international affairs. This is good news for China and the rest of the world, as a large body of empirical evidence suggests that democratic states rarely, if ever, go to war with one another.<sup>67</sup> It is in the mutual interests of the world and China, therefore, to see China entering the journey of democratization in the next two decades.

The U.S. model of democracy will not be accepted by Chinese people.

## Notes

1. Columbia University Professor Andrew Nathan invented the phrase “authoritarian resilience” to describe post-Deng China, suggesting that the Party state is resilient enough to adapt to changing circumstances. Claremont McKenna Professor Pei Minxin used the phrase “illiberal adaption” to make a similar observation. University of California at Berkeley Professor Kevin O’Brien and University of Hong Kong Professor Li Lianjiang used “rightful resistance” to describe the popular protests in China in which protestors resort to official discourse to make their case.
2. For example, see Dwight Perkins and Thomas Rawski, “Forecasting China’s Economic Growth to 2025,” in *China’s Great Economic Transformation*, eds. Loren Brandt and Thomas Rawski (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3. See Henry Rowen, "When Will the Chinese People Be Free?" *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3 (July 2007): p. 39.
4. Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 63. On the other hand, the concrete demarcation of the "middle zone" might require more careful studies.
5. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The 1990 CIA World Factbook*, 1990.
6. International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, September 2011.
7. Official inflation data are widely disbelieved because of the formula used to calculate them. However, even the official numbers are telling: the rise of the monthly Consumer Price Index accelerated in 2010, reaching 4.4 percent in October, the highest level in two years. Experts estimate that it will reach five percent throughout 2011. See "Liu Yuhui: Weiyou cipo zichan paomo caineng gengzhi tongzhang" (Liu Yuhui: Only piercing the bubble of assets can cure the inflation), <http://finance.ifeng.com/news/special/shuruxingtongzhang/20101130/2976687.shtml>.
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12. "Zhongguo shuifu shijie di'er shuofa bushi" (The statement that China's tax burden ranks second in the world is not true), *People's Daily*, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2011-09/19/c\\_122051304.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2011-09/19/c_122051304.htm).
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15. This is a quote from Justin Lin, the chief economist of the World Bank, in a talk he gave: <http://en.ccer.edu.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=6791>.
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18. "Shan'xi jumin shida yuanwang zuori gongbu" (Ten top wishes of the Shan'xi residents was published yesterday), [http://news.cnwest.com/content/2010-03/31/content\\_2915240.htm](http://news.cnwest.com/content/2010-03/31/content_2915240.htm).
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23. "Jinnian chengxiang shouru chaju yuji kuoda" (The income gap between urban and rural residents is expected to grow this year), <http://business.sohu.com/20100421/n271642438.shtml>.
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25. See Eva Bellin, "Contingent Democrats: Industrialists, Labor, and Democratization in Late-Developing Countries," *World Politics* 52, no. 2 (January 2000).
26. Yun-Han Chu et al., eds., *How East Asians View Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2008): p. 229.
27. As noted in the first endnote, Professor Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang argued that the protesters in China often seek to ally with the central government to fight against local governments. See Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
28. Yun-Han Chu et al., eds., *How East Asians View Democracy*, p. 219.
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45. Professor Wang Changjiang of the Central Party School is one strong supporter of this view. See [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2008-06/24/content\\_8428025.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2008-06/24/content_8428025.htm).
46. The official explanation of "scientific development" is very inclusive, ranging from political development to economic development to cultural development. It also means harmonious social relations, sustainable development, social equality, and institutional reform. The interpretation is so broad that it does not have a practical meaning anymore.
47. See <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/95111/13161148.html>.
48. Human rights lawyers and activists, such as Xu Zhiyong, Teng Biao, Ran Yunfei, Chen Guangcheng, Hu Jia, Ai Weiwei, and Tan Zuoren, have been under attack in recent years.
49. Different local governments use different methods to stop independent candidates from running. Some measures are relatively "polite," such as removing the posters of the candidate or disqualifying candidates by adding tailored specifications. Some, however, use direct threats, including beatings.
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56. Arch Puddington, "Freedom in the World 2010: Erosion of Freedom Intensifies," Freedom House, [http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/FIW\\_2010\\_Overview\\_Essay.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/FIW_2010_Overview_Essay.pdf). The Polity IV project, which uses different measures, classified 92 countries as democracies in 2009. See Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, "Global Report 2009: Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility," Center for Systemic Peace, December 7, 2009, p. 11, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/Global%20Report%202009.pdf>.
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65. Helen V. Milner and Bumba Mukherjee, "Democratization and Economic Globalization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): pp. 163–181.
66. "Transcript of President Ma's Associated Press interview," October 19, 2010, <http://english.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=491&itemid=22582&rmid=2355>.
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