

A PATH TO DEMOCRACY: IN SEARCH OF CHINA'S DEMOCRATIZATION MODEL*

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China's transition is drawing worldwide attention. China started market economic reforms in 1978 and is rapidly closing its economic gap with the developed world. The Chinese public and Chinese leaders have started to debate and explore where China should go politically and how to get there. After examining the merits and weaknesses of four prevailing theories of democratization—modernization, social mobilization, cultural/social capital, and negotiation-pact transition theory—we conclude with an appropriate model for China's political future. We argue that (1) the conflict between the reform and conservative groups inside the communist regime will shape the process of China's democratization; (2) the hope of China's political future lies in continued economic development, a mature civil society, and the building of democratic political culture in society; and (3) the current intra-party democracy promoted by Hu and Wen signals a positive trend for China's future democratization.

Key words: China, Democracy – East Asia, East Asian politics

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Introduction

China is experiencing a transition. The economic reforms since 1978 have narrowed the industrialization gap between China and the developed world. However, its communist political system is still lagging far behind the trend of democracy in the world. The demise of the Soviet Union and the democratic transitions of Eastern European countries in the 1990s enlightened the Chinese people as to *where* to go; however, *how* to get there is still a question. The chaotic and, in some cases, tragic transitions of the former communist countries have cautioned the Chinese people to the effect that an unsuccessful political transition may mean turmoil and instability in China, and even catastrophes for the region or the world.

This article explores possible paths for China's democratization theoretically and empirically. First, we focus on defining democracy as we answer these questions: What is democracy? What are the differences in Western and Chinese understandings of democracy? Second, we examine the merits and weaknesses of four prevailing democratization models. Then we suggest a complex model for China's democratization. In conclusion, we argue that Chinese and Western perceptual and empirical differences toward democracy may persist into the near future. Nevertheless, the factional differences between the reform and conservative groups inside the communist regime will shape the process of China's democratization. In the end, the democratic future of China lies in continued economic development, a mature civil society, and construction of a democratic political culture in society.

What is Democracy? China versus the West

Democracy means, literally, rule by the people.¹ However, how to rule and who are "the people" are two questions that have been intensely debated for centuries in the West. Simply

1. "Democracy" comes from the Greek word *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). See Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), ch. 2.

put, there are two popular definitions of democracy in the West. First, democracy is seen as a means of state building, especially for selecting political leadership. This definition is also called a minimalist conception of democracy suggested by Joseph Schumpeter. For Schumpeter, "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."² Schumpeter's conception of democracy is measured by the competitive, free, and multiparty election, which is named electoral democracy to differentiate it from liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is a broader definition of democracy. In addition to the electoral means of state building, liberal democracy also stresses the *end* of state building—constitutional liberalism in Fareed Zakaria's terms. It refers to the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the protection of individual liberties.³ While electoral democracy focuses on the *political* liberty of people, liberal democracy stresses the *civil* liberty of people—freedom of expression, assembly, religion, and property. Although some scholars, like Zakaria, suggest that constitutional liberalism should be separated from democracy, the popular view of liberal democracy is the combination of the two concepts. Compared with electoral democracy, liberal democracy is not only a political but also a specific social and economic system.

Therefore, democracy in the West means both political liberty and civil liberty. The former is the means for achieving the latter. A free and competitive election is the first step, or the most important indicator of democracy, although it is not the only criterion of democracy.

China's search for democracy may be traced back to the collapse of the last feudal empire—the Qing Dynasty in the early twentieth century. Facing Western aggression and the decline of the Chinese empire, Chinese political elites and intellectuals began to search for prescriptions from the West, including democracy. China experimented with almost all forms of demo-

2. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 260.

3. See Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, No. 6 (November/ December, 1997), pp. 22-42.

cratic institutions, including the presidential system, the parliamentary system, federalism, and constitutional monarchy.⁴ China also copied Western forms of legislature, such as the national assembly and people's congress.

However, these Western democratic institutions were misinterpreted, distorted, and even abolished in political practice. Andrew Nathan identifies several sets of causes for the misfortunes of China's democratic practice, such as ideology, political culture, and internal and external wars. However, Nathan suggests that the most important reason is that "Democracy . . . has not constituted the mainstream of modern Chinese political ideology. Almost every political movement has tried to cloak itself in the mystique of democracy, but what most had in mind as *democracy* was a mystical solidarity of state and people—in fact, a kind of authoritarianism."⁵

Suisheng Zhao echoes Nathan's argument when he points out that "democracy in the Chinese political and intellectual discourse was never regarded as an end, but merely a means for gaining national power and wealth under wise and enlightened rulers."⁶ In other words, democracy in the Chinese understanding was not only the means for leaders to accumulate power, but also the hope for the ordinary people to realize the dream of having a "rich and prosperous nation." Understandably, given the modern history of humiliation under Western aggression, the dream of a "strong country" was embedded in the minds of Chinese people.

While Western democracy aims at protecting individual political and/or civil liberties, the Chinese view democracy as a government structure conducive to accelerating economic and military development. Thus, for the Chinese, democracy is another name for a "strong state." When democracy could not deliver such a "strong and prosperous nation," the Chinese politi-

4. See Andrew Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986); and Lloyd E. Eastman, *Nationalist Era in China 1927-1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

5. Andrew Nathan, "Chinese Democracy—The Lesson of Failure," in Suisheng Zhao, ed. *Democracy and China* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 23. Emphasis is original.

6. Suisheng Zhao, "Introduction: China's Democratization Reconsidered," in Zhao, ed., *Democracy and China*, p. 5.

cal elites and intellectuals never hesitated to look for an alternative in Marxist communism. The success of the communist revolution in the Soviet Union in 1917 inspired the Chinese people, particularly political elites, to follow along. They founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 and established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

China's early search for democracy was misguided because the interests of the state were placed above individual liberties. However, along with the economic reforms led by Deng Xiaoping since 1978, the Chinese people, especially the intellectuals, started to reconsider democracy and democratic institutions for China. With decreasing external threats in the 1980s, the Chinese people turned their attention to state building and the relations between society and state. Although economic reforms brought rapid economic growth and improved living standards, they also produced many political and social problems, rooted mainly in the political system.

In the late 1980s, there were the "three-belief crises": the crisis of faith in socialism, the crisis of belief in Marxism, and the crisis of trust in the communist party (the CCP).⁷ Western-style democratic reforms, including multiparty competition, separation of powers, and freedom of press, were seen as the only remedy for the corruption and inefficiency of the communist regime. The 1989 "Tiananmen Event" reflected the most recent attempt of the Chinese people for pursuing democracy. Although the student demonstration led to a national tragedy, it encouraged the Chinese people in the pursuit of political and civil liberties. Democracy for the Chinese then no longer meant a "rich and prosperous nation" but the protection of individual political rights, properties, and freedom. Subsequently, the CCP had to carry out some social and political reforms to respond to pressures from the society regarding political openness and social freedom, though the extent of changes was still limited.

After Tiananmen, democratic ideas became more embedded in the minds of the Chinese people. But how to set up democratic institutions in China is still a debatable question. Some scholars support a general election; others argue that given China's huge population and complicated geographic situation, a general elec-

7. *Ibid.*, p.3.

tion would cause social chaos and disorder.⁸ As Harry Harding argues, "Even Chinese who advocate political reform may have a different definition of democracy than is common in the West. Many Chinese appear to favor a freer press, a more effective legal system, and a somewhat more active legislature, but are uncertain about the desirability of truly competitive elections and independent political organization, at least at China's present levels of educational attainment and economic development."⁹

Wei Pan, a leading Chinese intellectual who advocates political reform in Beijing, suggests that China should build a consultative rule-of-law regime to deal with mounting social-economic problems, such as corruption and abuse of power, rather than conduct Western-style democratization.¹⁰ As Suisheng Zhao points out, Pan's rule-of-law regime proposal is a representative work of a group of Chinese intellectuals who desire political freedom but not multi-party-based democratization.¹¹ Therefore, although Western democratic ideas were welcomed by the Chinese people, the Chinese preferred different understandings and approaches in practice.¹² Furthermore, realizing the different democratic models among major Western countries, especially European social democracy versus American-style liberal democracy, Chinese political elites seem to be more attracted to the social democratic model.¹³

8. For an excellent discussion on democratic ideas and intellectual trends in China, see Baogang He, *The Democratization of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

9. Harry Harding, "The Halting Advance of Pluralism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 9, No. 1 (1998), pp. 11-17.

10. Wei Pan, "Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 12, No. 34 (2003), pp. 3-43.

11. Suisheng Zhao, "Political Liberalization without Democratization: Pan Wei's Proposal for Political Reform," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 12, No. 35 (2003), pp. 333-55.

12. For other discussions on China's rule-of-law transition vs. liberal democracy, see Randall Peerenboom, *China's Long March Toward the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

13. Social democracy is a political ideology that emerged in the late 19th century out of the socialist movement. Modern social democracy supports the reform of capitalism democratically through state regulation in order to achieve social justice. Social democratic parties are active in European politics, for example in Sweden and Norway. On social democracy, see Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*

Despite the difference in preference in democratic models, it is clear that there is strong public support for democracy in China. As Zhenxu Wang's survey research suggests, 90 percent of Chinese citizens believe that having political freedom and other democratic rights is a good thing.¹⁴ The real question for the Chinese people is not whether but how and *when* to embrace democracy since economic development and social stability are treated as important as democracy in their eyes.

Democratization Theories and China's Case

Democratization is a major research topic in contemporary comparative politics. In examining the third wave of democratization in the late 1990s, Huntington listed twenty-seven variables influencing the political transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy.¹⁵ But there is no intellectual consensus on which variables or factors are most important for democratization. China presents a particular case here. Major democratization theories—modernization theory, social mobilization theory, cultural/social capital theory, and negotiation-pact transition theory—seem to exclude little in China's unique historical search for democracy, and no single theory seems adequate in explaining China's democratization. Therefore, we suggest a synthesized model to design a democratization path for China.

Modernization Theory

Modernization theory is an old economic model of democratization which predicts that economic development will eventually cause democratic transition. Economic development and wealth accumulation will always be accompanied by factors conducive to democracy: higher rates of literacy and education, urbanization, and the development of mass media.¹⁶ Seymour

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

14. Zhengxu Wang, "Public Support for Democracy in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 16, No. 53 (2007), pp. 561-79.

15. Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

16. Seymour Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York:

M. Lipset, one of the most famous proponents of modernization theory, clearly points out that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy.”¹⁷ Robert Dahl also argues that the higher the socioeconomic level of a country, the more likely that it would be a democracy.¹⁸

Modernization theory has been strongly criticized and challenged theoretically and empirically. Some scholars question the extent of “strong” causal relations between economic development and democracy. Through analyzing new quantitative data on democracy, Przeworski and Limongi point out that although the conventional endogenous theory—that development leads to democracy—fails, the exogenous theory of democratization—development helps consolidate established democracies—holds.¹⁹ In addition, many empirical anomalies seriously threaten the validity of modernization theory. For example, in his case study of Middle Eastern countries, Ross shows that economic development and wealth from oil do not cause, but rather hinder, the building of democracy.²⁰ Still other scholars further fault modernization theory for reversing the causal relations between economic development and democracy. As Diamond points out, democracy leads to development, not the other way around.²¹

Challenging the simple linear argument between economic development and democracy, many scholars have tried to rescue modernization theory by adding conditions. For example, Huntington argues for a “political transition zone,” in which the middle-income states are the most likely to transit to democracy.²² Challenging Przeworski and Limongi’s endogenous versus

Doubleday, 1960).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

18. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 65.

19. Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” *World Politics*, vol. 49, No. 2 (1997), pp. 155-83.

20. Michael Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics*, vol. 53, No. 3 (2001), pp. 325-61.

21. Larry Diamond, “Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 35, Nos. 4/5 (1992), pp. 450-99.

22. See Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” in Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

exogenous democratization arguments for selection bias, Boix and Stokes show that both endogenous and exogenous democratization theories hold, i.e., development both causes and sustains democracy, at least statistically. However, they failed to specify the causal mechanism between development and democracy in their argument.²³ A correlation between economic development and democracy does not necessarily indicate causation. Nevertheless, as Huntington argues, few relationships between social, economic, and political phenomena are stronger than that between the level of economic development and democracy.²⁴

Social Mobilization Theory

The social-force mobilization theory of democratization suggests that economic development cannot directly lead to democracy. Instead, a certain social force plays a mediating role between economic development and democracy. Economic development as the precursor of political liberalization strengthens the aspirations and capabilities of people to participate in decision-making processes, thus facilitating democratic transition. However, scholars in this school of thought disagree on which social group is a driving force of democracy. Some scholars suggest that the members of the middle class or bourgeoisie are the main societal proponents or the pioneers of democracy, as in Barrington Moore's famous finding of "no bourgeoisie, no democracy."²⁵ Accordingly, the middle class, motivated by their material interests during industrialization, created parliamentary institutions and democratic systems in Western Europe.

Other scholars contend that the working class is the agent of democracy.²⁶ For them, capitalists (the middle class) were primarily interested in establishing liberal forms of rule, not democracy. It is the working class that fought for universal suffrage in

23. See Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, "Endogenous Democratization," *World Politics*, vol. 55, No. 4 (2003), pp. 517-49.

24. See Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave."

25. See Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

26. See Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Stephens, and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Western Europe, which is the real sign of democracy in their view.²⁷ Despite differences over the early-industrializing western European democracies, both theories find empirical support from the late industrializing cases. For example, the working class theory holds in the Korea and Chile cases, while the middle class argument works in Brazil by the late 1980s and in Korea by the mid-1980s.²⁸

The major problem for the social-force mobilization theory is that if the role of social classes or forces in democratization is ambiguous and debatable, the generalizability of this social-class mobilization model becomes limited.²⁹ Moreover, we could even question whether social classes play a decisive role in democratization or not. Some scholars, such as O'Donnell and Bellin, suggest a contingent democratization model in which the attitudes of social classes towards democracy depend on the compatibility of class interests and democratic institutions.³⁰ To a certain extent, this modification sheds some light on how to apply this social class mobilization model to specific cases. Yet, it raises another risk for scholars: the ad hoc explanation trap. Therefore, the social force mobilization model is far from being a generalizable theory of democratization. The role of social classes in democratization should be studied case by case.

In the case of China, both modernization and social-force mobilization theories face difficulties in terms of explanation and prediction. China's historical search for democracy in the early twentieth century failed. Despite the economic successes since the late 1970s, political reforms have yet to come. Contrary to

27. Eva Bellin, "Contingent Democrats: Industrialists, Labor, and Democratization in Late-Developing Countries," *World Politics*, vol. 52, No. 2 (2000), pp. 175-205.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Ruth Collier, *Paths toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Thomas Ertman, "Democracy and Dictatorship in Interwar Western Europe Revisited," *World Politics*, vol. 50, No. 3 (1998), pp. 475-505.

30. See Guillermo O'Donnell, "Substantive or Procedural Consensus? Notes on the Latin American Bourgeoisie," in Douglas Chalmers, Maria de Souza, and Akko A. Boron, eds., *The Right and Democracy in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1992); and Bellin, "Contingent Democrats."

modernization theory, Nathan suggests that economic development does not bring any hope of democracy to China; instead, it strengthens the resilience of the Chinese authoritarian regime.³¹ According to Nathan and other scholars, China's Confucian political culture and collectivist understanding of democracy are the major obstacles to democratization.³²

Neither the middle class nor the working class version of social-force mobilization theory can fully explain the misfortune of China's democratization. With rapid economic growth and more people getting rich, it is reasonable to believe that a stronger middle class may emerge in China. But the Chinese middle class has inherent defects because of its roots in communist party rule. These middle class elites either benefit directly from their party membership and networks with party officials, or belong to the family of high-ranking officials (*gaogan zidi*, or *taizi dang*: princelings). One official news report shows that the grandchildren of eight PRC marshals reunited at the recent Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Another account of the wealth distribution in China indicates that *gaogan zidi* dominate 85 to 90 percent of major state-owned enterprises in the Chinese economy, including electricity, telecommunication, real estate, and natural resources. Among the 3,220 people who own over \$100 million worth of assets, 2,932 are family members of high-ranking officials. Thus, the Chinese middle class has interests directly connected to the ruling party and political elites. After examining a typical middle class resistance case in China, Cai Yongshun finds that China's middle class is largely moderate because of its intention to preserve communist rule.³³

China's working class faces a similar deficiency in leading political reform in China. According to communist ideology, the working class is the leading force in the society. In reality, the

31. See Andrew Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, No.1 (2003), pp. 6-17.

32. For the Confucian culture argument, see Lucian Pye, "Civility, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Three Powerful Concepts for Explaining Asia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 24, No. 4 (1999), pp. 763-82. For collective understanding of democracy in China, see Andrew Nathan, *Chinese Democracy*.

33. Yongshun Cai, "The Resistance of Chinese Laid-Off Workers in the Reform Period," *The China Quarterly*, No. 170 (2002), pp. 327-44.

working class becomes an economically disadvantageous social class under tight control of the CCP. It has been a victim of China's economic reform. Because of economic reconstruction, workers are the first to be laid off, the first to suffer skyrocketing prices and a collapsing social welfare system, and are sure to be first hit if the Chinese stock market falls. The working class is no longer a united force in society, moreover. The Labor Union is under the administration of the party and does not have an independent role in the state. The 400 million migrant workers do not have direct connection to the official labor union, and they do not have clear channels to express their voices or protect their rights. To a certain extent they are alienated from the working class and the whole society.³⁴

Cultural and Social Capital Theory

Cultural theory contends that values and beliefs often define the context and meaning of political action. There are two major cultural arguments in the study of democratization: Protestantism cultural theory and the social capital argument. According to Protestantism cultural theory, Protestantism supports democracy, whereas Catholicism, Confucianism, and Islam are inherently anti-democratic because they emphasize intolerance, hierarchy, and authority more than the former. The failure of democracy in Asia is the main footnote for this theory. After historically reviewing three elements of society—civility, social capital, and civil society in Asia—Lucian Pye concludes that Confucianism is inherently flawed and resistant to a universal pluralistic democracy. The problem lies in the weak civil societies that are grounded in Confucian culture, although they have pronounced norms of civility and respectable levels of social capital.³⁵

The social capital theory suggests that social capital, defined as the social norms and networks that enhance people's ability to collaborate on common endeavors, is the decisive factor in

34. "Chinese Migrant Workers Say They Are Alienated," *Reuters*, July 8, 2007; see www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSPEK1977320070709.

35. See Pye, "Civility, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Three Powerful Concepts For Explaining Asia."

"making democracy work."³⁶ As an intangible force, social capital impacts social mobilization capability, building civil society and democratic development through the binding sentiments of trust and reciprocity.

Protestantism and social capital theories also face some criticisms. Cultural arguments are criticized on the ground that the conceptualization of culture is debatable and "everyday life" culture is not the same as political culture. According to Francis Fukuyama, political culture is easy to change, whereas the culture of "everyday life" is almost constant. Therefore, he contends political Confucianism is indeed adaptable to democratic political institutions without causing the society to lose its essential coherence (the culture of "everyday life").³⁷ Moreover, culture in general is dynamic and not static. It is unfair to say that Confucian culture would never be compatible with democracy. Catholic culture in Latin America used to be anti-democratic; however, in the third democratic wave it became a positive force in standing against authoritarianism and the status quo. As Huntington clearly states, any culture (including Confucianism) has some elements that are compatible with democracy, just as Protestantism and Catholicism have elements that are clearly undemocratic.³⁸

The social capital argument is questioned regarding the validity of the measurement for this new concept. Most scholarly literature on social capital operationalizes the concept by focusing on civic associational membership. From both theoretical and methodological perspectives, Levi challenges this "romanticist" operationalization of social capital and suggests that the membership measurement of social capital is, at best, incomplete.³⁹ On the other hand, Berman takes Putnam's measurement of

36. Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

37. Francis Fukuyama, "Confucianism and Democracy," in Diamond and Plattner, eds., *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*.

38. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). For a similar positive view of culture, see Edward Friedman, *National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1995).

39. Margret Levi, "Social and Unsocial Capital: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*," *Politics & Society*, vol. 24, No. 1 (1996), pp. 45-55.

social capital as given and tests the validity in Weimar Germany's case. Her findings show that the membership-measured social capital did not support democracy; it ruined the democratic system of the Weimar Republic.⁴⁰ This indicates that either the membership measurement of social capital is problematic or factors other than social capital determine whether democracy works.

The two cultural arguments face some problems in the study of Chinese democracy. Taiwan shares a similar Confucian culture and tradition with the mainland. The successful democratic transition in 2000 refutes religion-based Protestantism, which argues that Confucian culture is an obstacle to democracy. Furthermore, the successful democracies of other countries in East Asia, such as Japan and South Korea, also prove that Confucian culture empirically can be suitable for democracy, or at least not be against democracy.

China lacks social capital and this may partially explain the failure of democracy there. The Chinese government's controls over organizations, organized activities, and religious practices constrain the civic activities and the development of social capital. Given a weak civil society and a lack of social networks and associations, Chinese society does not have an environment to cultivate the necessary social capital that might support a social trend of democratization. For example, the government authority's intervention hindered the residential committee's efforts to organize to protect consumer rights in Shenzhen. Such direct involvement and control by the government in civil activities will not contribute to the building of social capital in China. Regarding the lack of civil society, Baohui Zhang suggests that it stems from the communist ideology and political culture.⁴¹ In other words, the communist party treats civil society as an enemy rather than a foundation of the state.

40. Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics*, vol. 49, No. 3 (1997), pp. 401-29.

41. See Baohui Zhang, "Corporatism, Totalitarianism, and Transitions to Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 27, No. 1 (April, 1994), pp. 108-36.

Negotiation Pact Theory

Political leaders and elites are the most critical independent variables in the negotiation pact type of democratic transition. Under internal or external pressures, political leaders and elites in the incumbent authoritarian regime split into a liberal/reform group and a conservative/status quo group. During the political struggles, the liberal/reform group, with cooperation from social democratic forces, the middle class and labor unions, defeats the conservative/status quo group for political democratization. Given that context, this “negotiation pact” between liberal political leaders and social opposition forces constrains the extent and pace of democratization because the vital interests of political elites are protected by the “pact.” Therefore, this kind of democratization is “restricted democracy” as in the cases of Spain, Brazil, and Uruguay.⁴²

To a certain extent, the “negotiation pact” theory of democratization is the most direct and peaceful way of regime transition, because it is based on a voluntary understanding of political democracy between the authoritarian elites and democratic opposites. It may also avoid direct and drastic mass involvement. However, the “negotiation pact” transition is also the most problematic model. It may create an incomplete or even a disguised or fake democracy. To work out the negotiation pact, political elites of old regimes have to give up some of their political power and interests; the political transition will inevitably threaten some vital interests of political elites sooner or later. Elites can choose a complete transition, which may turn out to be painful and slow, or create an illiberal democracy where populist leaders can use democratic means like democratic elections to craft legitimacy while still having the choice to betray the promises of political democracy when necessary. According to Zakaria, the latter possibility is the most likely and also the most dangerous.⁴³ There are many cases of “negotiation pact” democratization in the “third wave.” In Eastern Europe and Russia, although democratic institutions were installed after 1989, former communist political leaders remained.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.”

Although democratization does not happen overnight, the “negotiation pact” transition demands even more time. The “negotiation pact” is just the beginning of democratization; the democratic consolidation process will depend to a large extent on the interactions between leaders and the civil society, with the latter’s role as the one that should be emphasized. Another problem of the “negotiation pact” is the political struggle among the old political elites. The success of the “negotiation pact” is determined by the balance of powers between the reform and conservative groups. The civil society may not directly get involved in the political struggles, but it significantly influences the results of the internal political balancing.

External support, mainly from the civil society, is the key for the reform group to defeat the conservatives. However, if the civil society lacks consolidation or democratic demands, the conservative group will be able to suppress the reform group and the attempt of democratization will fail. In China’s case, Tiananmen may be one example. Student demonstrations pulled intensified factional politics to the surface; however, civil society was not able to provide sufficient support to the reform group, as seen from the hesitant and weak responses of labor unions during the Tiananmen incident.

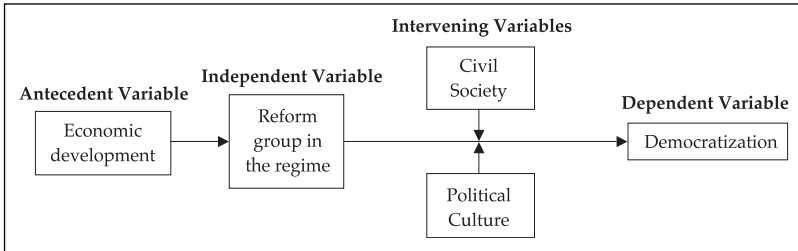
A Complex Democratization Model for China

The above theories suggest the important variables of political elites, economic development, social classes, and culture, but “no single factor can account for the contemporary surge toward democracy and each case involves a complex pattern of internal and external elements.”⁴⁴ We may need a more complex model that can specify the interactions of these various factors in different cases. *Figure 1* presents such a complex model that can prescribe a democratic transition path for China. This model is a theoretical framework indicating further research directions rather than a normative prediction.

In *Figure 1*, political elites are treated as the core independent

44. Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), p. 62.

Figure 1. China's Path to Democracy



variable that shapes the democratization process. Since Tiananmen, the CCP has experienced many internal adjustments. With continuous economic success, political reform is a more urgent social demand even within the Chinese Communist Party. The endorsement of the village self-government law and the increasing balancing role of the National People's Congress clearly show that the new generation in the CCP is more inclined toward political reform and openness. The recent party debate focuses on the political future between the party and the state. The lack of a checks-and-balances system in the political process has resulted in serious corruption and social injustice in Chinese society. Since the Chinese people have started to concern themselves with their political rights for equality and fairness, the CCP will face a political legitimacy crisis if it refuses to change.

At the 17th Party Congress in October 2007, the CCP experienced a power consolidation process with the fourth generation of leadership under the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao system and initiated a power transition process from the fourth to the fifth generation of Chinese leaders. The Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping eras, when political successors were cultivated and hand-picked by great leaders, are over. Without a political democratic transition, the new generation of political leaders will face a serious legitimacy crisis.

The Mao and Deng generations of leadership have maintained their power and legitimacy either by victory in Chinese revolution or through the triumph of economic reform. The newer generations of leaders will probably have to strengthen their political legitimacy by instituting a democratic process via open and fair elections. As the core leader of China's third gen-

eration, Jiang Zemin recognized the political legitimacy crisis and turned to the emerging entrepreneurial class, the new rich, for strengthening his political power and legitimacy. Under Jiang the capitalists were invited to join the CCP, prompting a serious debate over whether China is still socialist or not.

The aspiration for democracy does not stem from political elites' educational backgrounds and personal experiences, but rather from the necessity for political legitimacy. While Jiang tried to rebuild the CCP's legitimacy by turning to the new capitalist class and social elites, his successors, Hu and Wen, focused on finding a new foundation of legitimacy from society and the people. Their domestic policy focuses on addressing social inequality, unfair social welfare, education, unemployment, and above all, corruption at the top. Some progress is taking place gradually. Since Hu took office, several high-ranking officials have fallen from office over corruption. Despite the fact that the number of cases is still limited, they at least show Hu's and Wen's resolve in fighting corruption and addressing social grievances.

Political elites alone cannot shoulder regime change. Economically strong development is an antecedent variable in the model. Economic development can bring a strong middle class and social democratic forces to the fore. However, good economic performance may also help the current authoritarian regime sustain political control and legitimacy. A stagnant economy or crisis may lead to social chaos and disorder, which provides another excuse for tight authoritarian policies.⁴⁵ Therefore, we suggest that economic performance is not the driving force of democratization, but a condition that may lead a country in a democratic direction.

According to Fukuyama and Marwah's "Political Transition Zone" theory, regime transition or democratization usually occurs in middle-income authoritarian regimes whose per capita GDP ranges from \$5,000 to \$6,000. In this regard China does not

45. It should be noted that some scholars suggest that China's democratization may eventually take place after an economic or social crisis because the crisis can mobilize the society, divide the elites, and trigger the democratic transition. See Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Should Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). The authors acknowledge this prediction but suggest an alternative path for China's democratization.

qualify for democratization since China's per capita GDP in 2006 in nominal dollars is \$2,034.⁴⁶ Previous empirical studies, such as the comparison of Taiwan's and South Korea's successful democratization with the former Soviet Union and its republics' bitter experiences, suggest that sustained economic development seems essential for a smooth and healthy democratic transition. A radical, top-down approach can produce incomplete or illiberal democracies and can cause severe social and economic pains for the people, as happened in Eastern Europe and Russia.

For a successful and smooth democratic transition China needs to sustain its economic growth. However, wealth cannot lead to democracy by default. Civil society and political culture are introduced as intervening variables. The maturity of civil society is one of the key elements in shaping a healthy democracy. The autonomous balancing role of civil society, especially from the middle class in relation to the state, is the main support for reform-oriented political elites to pursue democratic reforms. Some scholars are pessimistic about the role of China's middle class in a future democratic transition either because China's moderate middle class lacks the intention and capability to challenge the CCP or because China's middle class is actually the beneficiary of the CCP regime.⁴⁷

These concerns over China's middle class are legitimate if we place our hope for democratization solely on the middle class. However, the middle-class-based civil society is only treated as an intervening or supporting variable in our complex model of democratization. In other words, the middle class cannot be the driving force of China's future democratization because of its inherent limitations of political and civic awareness under the CCP regime.⁴⁸ However, the supporting function of the middle

46. Francis Fukuyama and Sanjay Marwah, "Dimension of Development," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 11, No. 4 (2000), pp. 81-89. For China's per capita GDP, see World Bank data available at <http://devdata.worldbank.org>, accessed March 10, 2008.

47. See Yongshun Cai, "China's Moderate Middle Class: the Case of Homeowners' Resistance," *Asian Survey*, vol. 45, No. 5 (2005), pp. 777-99; and An Chen, "Capitalist Development, Entrepreneurial Class, and Democratization in China," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 117, No. 3 (2002), pp. 401-22.

48. Xin Wang, "Divergent Identities, Convergent Interests: The Rising Middle-

class in the success of democratization cannot be overlooked. The development of civil society and the expansion of the middle class not only offer societal support for the pro-reform elites, but also prepare the society for the moment of democratic transition.

Political culture is also important in facilitating the democratic transition. The Chinese communist leaders used to argue that political reform was delayed because "China is too uneducated and too poor."⁴⁹ However, the well-organized village elections across rural China show that the seed of democratic political culture has been planted, especially in the rural areas.⁵⁰ The problem is how to spread such political experiences and practices from the rural areas to urban areas. There are two positive signs of China's rural election practices. First, according to the Chinese authorities, "since the 1990s, village elections have been introduced to all 31 provinces and municipalities. . . . 90% of villagers participated in their village elections."⁵¹ Second, the Chi-

income Stratum in China and Its Civic Awareness" *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, No. 54 (2008), pp. 53-69.

49. As Zhu Rongji, the former premier, once said. Cited by Samuel Eldersveld and Mingming Shen, *Support for Economic and Political Change in the China Countryside* (New York: Lexington Books, 2001), p. 134.
50. Since 1987 the CCP has conducted village elections in rural areas under the "organic law of villager committees." The law stipulated that village government should be *directly* elected by the residents of the village. The purpose of such village elections was to solve the leadership problems in agricultural reforms since 1978, maintain stability in rural areas, and sustain the CCP's control over society. However, Tianjian Shi points out ("Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy," *World Politics*, vol. 51, No. 3 [1999], pp. 385-412) that such action is an institutional tactic for the reform group in the CCP to prepare for democratization. Despite the various speculations over the purpose of the CCP-conducted village elections, villagers in China have made good use of them to protect their individual rights. Regarding the functional influence of those village elections, see Eldersveld and Shen, *Support for Economic and Political Change*; Barrett L. McCormick, *Political Reform in Post-Mar China: Democracy and Bureaucracy in a Leninist State* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 29-53; Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," *China Journal*, vol. 37 (January, 1997), pp. 84-86; and Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
51. See "Law Aims to Ensure Fair Elections," *China Daily* (Beijing), August 14,

nese government started to experiment with direct township elections in Sichuan Province in 1998 after a decade of village elections nationwide.⁵² Although there are still numerous problems in the process of elections, it at least indicates a positive trend in China's future political reform.

The important factor of exogenous influence is not in the model and deserves some attention. In the third wave, external forces played an important role in terms of the "snowballing" of democratic transitions, especially in Eastern Europe, but they were not able to produce the necessary conditions for democratization.⁵³ Western influences on China may have some positive effect on the Chinese people's search for democracy, including building a system of checks and balances, the rule of law, and efficient and transparent governance. But when handled inappropriately, such influences may turn counterproductive. Given China's modern history of humiliation, the Chinese people have a strong national emotion in favor of independence against external pressures. Western influences may be treated as a new form of colonialism and ignite anti-foreign nationalism in China. The CCP would then have a way to consolidate its wobbly political legitimacy and delay the pace of democratization.

In summary, the complex democratization model suggests an elite-oriented, transitional path to China's democratization. Although the model includes economic development, political culture, and the middle class as either antecedent or intervening variables, the key to China's future democratization depends on political elites who can promote democratic reform in China. This complex democratic model suggests a top-down type of democratic transition and is a refined negotiation-pact transition model, also highlighting the important but secondary role of economic development, political culture, and the middle class in the process of democratic transition. We conclude below that the

2008.

52. See Dong Lisheng, "Direct Township Elections in China: Latest Developments and Prospects," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 15, No. 48 (2006), pp. 503-15; and Baogang He and Youxing Lang, "China's First Direct Election of the Township Head: A Case Study of Buyun," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol. 2 (2001), pp. 1-22.

53. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," pp. 6-8.

current pattern of political development in China supports cautious optimism about its future democracy.⁵⁴

What's Next? A New Generation, Improved Governance, and Intra-Party Democracy

China is at a critical moment in its development. Decades of economic reform have brought huge economic achievement nationally and individually. With this success, different social problems have emerged that threaten the legitimacy and rule of the CCP. Serious domestic problems may cause severe social unrest and the possibility of revolution if the problems are not appropriately and immediately addressed. Among those issues, the environment, employment, education, equality, rule of law, fairness, health care reform, anti-corruption, rising prices, social welfare, and wealth distribution are at the top.

When the young Chinese president Hu Jintao took control from his senior predecessor Jiang Zemin in 2004, he gradually carried out political reforms by improving governance and promoting intra-party democracy. First, Hu changed Deng's economy-oriented, reform model to a society-focused, development plan. Hu and his premier, Wen Jiabao, conducted various social welfare and economic assistance programs that touch on the lives of regions and peoples in terms of education, employment, housing, medicine and food safety, unequal distribution of wealth, and social justice. There have been some sincere efforts to clean up the government to address ordinary people's serious concerns about governance. However, as Hu and Wen slowly move ahead with the agenda, their agony due to resistance from opposing factions in the party can be felt even among the general public.

The lack of transparency and openness in decision making is the major reason for the bad governance and corruption in China. Consequently, Hu and Wen also began to promote intra-party democracy to intensify the monitoring mechanism in the

54. For a pessimistic view of China's democratic transition, see Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

CCP's decision-making process. There have been functional adjustments in the party's ways of electing representatives to the National People's Congress and to the party congress. In July 2008, the Central Committee of the CCP issued new rules to promote the party's internal democracy by expanding the role of party deputies.

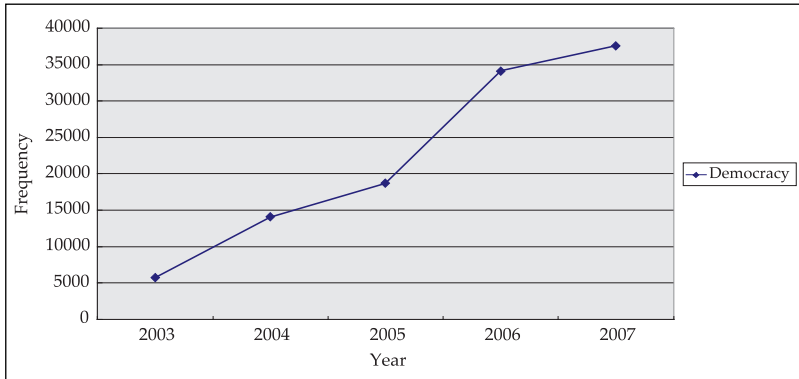
The new regulation, known as the Provisional Statute on the Tenure of Deputies to National and Local Congresses of the Communist Party of China, details the rights of party deputies to supervise activities of the party committee at the same level during the intervals between congresses. Previously, deputies only performed their duties by voting on major decision-making issues and leadership reshuffles during the convening of sessions.⁵⁵ As some analysts suggest, "the regulation is the latest step by the Party leadership to develop internal democracy as part of its efforts to promote democracy for the whole nation."⁵⁶

Since Hu came to power in 2004, democracy, intra-party democracy, and democratization have become popular words in official discourse. *Figure 2* shows the frequency of the word "democracy" (*minzhu*) in the *People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper in China. We can see a clear upward trend in references to democracy in the *People's Daily* from 2003 to 2007. In *Figure 3*, we see the frequency of "intra-party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu*) and "democratization" (*minzhuhua*) in the *People's Daily*. Intra-party democracy was not a popular phrase in the CCP discourse in 2003 when Jiang was still in power. However, the frequency of "intra-party democracy" increased dramatically after 2004 when Hu assumed power. The same trend also applies to use of "democratization" in China's official discourse as well, although there is a minor downward or flat period between 2006 and 2007. It should be noted that these frequency tests exclude *socialist democracy* and *international democratization*—two unique phrases that were invented by the CCP for policy purposes. In other words, the frequency tests reflect the plain usage of democracy, democratization, and intra-party democra-

55. See Xinhua, "CPC Issues New Rules to Promote Party's Internal Democracy," *People's Daily*, July 17, 2008, see <http://english.people.com.cn>.

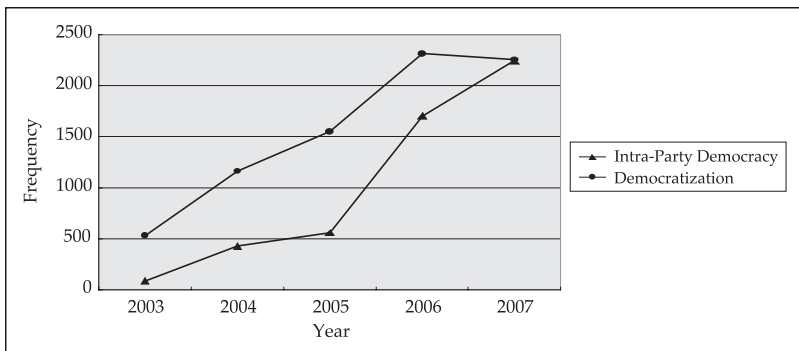
56. See "Deputies Get More Powers," *People's Daily*, July 18, 2008, at <http://english.people.com.cn>.

Figure 2. Frequency Test of “Democracy” in *People’s Daily* (2003-2007)



Note: The frequency test is based on *People’s Daily’s* online search engine, www.people.com.cn. The keyword search is performed in Chinese, i.e., *minzu* (democracy) by year. *People’s Daily* is the institutional newspaper of the CCP. It is seen as the “throat and tongue” of the CCP. The search excludes the two phrases “socialist democracy” (*shehui zhuyi minzhu*) and “international democracy” (*guoji guanxi minzhu*), since these two phrases are unique in the CCP discourse.

Figure 3. Frequency Test of “Democratization” and “Intra-Party Democracy” in *People’s Daily* (2003-2007)



Note: The frequency test is based on *People’s Daily’s* online search engine, www.people.com.cn. The keyword search is performed in Chinese, i.e., *Minzuhua* [democratization] and *Dangnei Minzhu* [Intra-party democracy] calculated by years. *People’s Daily* is the institutional newspaper of the CCP. It is seen as the “throat and tongue” of the CCP. The search excludes the two phrases “socialist democracy” (*shehui zhuyi minzhu*) and “international democracy” (*guoji ganxi minzhu*), since these two phrases are unique in the CCP discourse.

cy in the CCP discourse.

Besides the democracy-related discourse, Hu's and Wen's strong resolve for political reform is also shown through the government-oriented, intensive debates over democracy and political reforms in China. In late 2006, an article titled "Democracy is a Good Thing" that appeared in *Beijing Daily News* drew wide attention and heated debate.⁵⁷ The author, Yu Keping, is the deputy director of the Central Translation Bureau and is a member of the think tank for the Hu-Wen administration. Yu presented many new understandings of democracy that were close to Western interpretations:⁵⁸

- Democracy is a good thing. It is good for the whole nation, not necessarily for a particular individual or official.
- Democracy is a good thing, but that does not mean that everything about democracy is good. Democracy is definitely not 100 percent perfect; it has many internal inadequacies . . . democracy often involves repeated negotiations and discussions . . . democracy is the one with the least number of flaws . . . democracy is the best political system for humankind.
- Democracy is a good thing, but that does not mean that democracy can do everything and solve every problem . . . Democracy is not only a means to solve people's livelihood issues, but it is a goal of human development; it is not only a tool to achieve other goals, but it is in accord with human nature. Even if the best food and housing are available, the human character is incomplete without democratic rights.
- Democracy is not unconditional. Running it successfully takes delicate design and superb political skills.
- The essence of democracy is that people rule.

While interpreting what that all means to China, Yu indicated that China's democratization would have to be a slow process with Chinese characteristics:

We are presently building a modernized, strong socialist nation with unique Chinese characteristics. For us, democracy is all the more so a good thing, and it is all the more so essential. The classical authors of Marxism said: "There is no socialism without democracy." Recently, Chairman Hu Jintao pointed out further:

57. Translated excerpts available at http://zoniaeuropa.com/20070109_1.htm.

58. Ibid.

"There is no modernization without democracy." Of course, we are building a socialist democracy with unique Chinese characteristics. On one hand, we want to absorb all the excellent results from the political culture of all mankind, including all the excellent results of democratic politics; but on the other hand, we will not import an overseas political model. Our construction of political democracy must be closely integrated with the history, culture, tradition and existing social conditions in our nation. Only in this way can the people of China truly enjoy the sweet fruits of political democracy.

Indeed, Hu talked frequently about democracy on different occasions. He discussed the rule of law, reforming the political system and perfecting the democratic system, enriching democracy, and expanding citizen's political participation.⁵⁹ Hu Jintao, in his well-studied speech at the Party School of the CPC Central Committee on June 25, 2006, said: "To develop socialist democracy is the unswerving goal of the Party."⁶⁰ In 1998, before the Beijing Olympics, Hu promised that China would "continue to pursue comprehensive reforms, including reforms of the political system."⁶¹

The recent shuffles of leadership at central and local levels will facilitate Hu's and Wen's use of the next five years to realize some of their political goals. There is no doubt that Hu and Wen intend to improve the efficiency and good governance of the administrative system. In the meantime, Hu and Wen have had

59. See Hu's speech "Speech at the Report Meeting to Study Selected Works of Jiang Zemin" in August 2006. Cited in Joseph Fewsmith, "Democracy is a Good Thing," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 22 (Fall, 2007). Fewsmith also mentioned Hu's speech later at the 36th Collective Study Session of the CCP Central Political Bureau, which urged raising the level of socialist grassroots democracy building to ensure that the people directly exercise democratic rights. Besides Hu, Fewsmith also points out that Premier Wen also talked about democracy on different occasions.

60. See "Hu Jintao zai zhongyang dangxiao shengbuji ganbu jinxiuban fabiao zhongyao jianghua" (Hu Jintao makes an important talk to provincial and bureau level officials studying at the Central Party School). Cited *ibid.*

61. See Xinhua, "Hu Jintao Vows to Deepen Economic, Political Reform after Olympics," *People's Daily*, August 1, 2008, online edition at <http://english.people.com.cn>.

to promote intra-party democracy to cope with the internal resistance from other conservative members in the CCP. It is true that intra-party democracy is different from the multi-party democracy advocated by the West. However, there are two reasons to believe that the intra-party democracy is a positive sign for China's future democratization.

First, the success of intra-party democracy will inevitably encourage people to pursue more political freedom and individual liberty at the national level. Although the major purpose of Hu's intra-party democracy is to strengthen the one-party system instead of promoting Western-style multi-party democracy, an unintended consequence of intra-party democracy may be to cause ordinary people to question the political legitimacy of the one-party system. Intra-party democracy may save the one-party system for some time in China, but political competition and elections driven by intra-party democracy will offer Chinese people more political rights, freedom of speech, and participation as well as civil liberties. Japan's intra-party democracy model under the dominant Liberal Democratic Party may appear to China as an alternative path to Western multi-party democracy.

Second, village elections, township elections, and intra-party democracy are three early stages for China's future democratic transition. The success of village elections in China has proven that ordinary Chinese, even villagers, desire individual freedom and political participation.⁶² In 2008, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs completed its revision of the Organic Law of Village Committees, which clarifies a definition for all forms of vote-rigging and penalties for vote-lobbyists and bribe-receivers.⁶³ The revision of the village election law aims to protect villagers' political rights and ensure fair elections. As mentioned before, the Chinese government has started township elections in some areas based on the nationwide practices of village elections in the late 1990s. It is foreseeable that the village election experience will lead to political reform at other levels of governmental

62. See Jie Chen, "Popular Support for Village Self-Government in China: Intensity and Sources," *Asian Survey*, vol. 45, No. 6 (2006), pp. 865-85.

63. See "Law Aims to Ensure Fair Elections," *People's Daily*, August 4, 2008, online at <http://english.people.com.cn>.

administration in China, although difficulties and resistance will surely arise. If the linkage between village elections and township elections indicates an elite-oriented but bottom-up political reform, then intra-party democracy clearly shows an inside-out democratization path, in which the success of intra-party democracy will spread beyond the CCP's control.

Despite these optimistic assessments, it should be noted that China's democratic transition faces many uncertainties and challenges in the future as well. Given the current domestic situation, it is unlikely that the CCP will lose power or start a democratic transition through either a multi-party system or a full-range, competitive, intra-party mechanism in the next five years. Therefore, although Hu and Wen have endeavored to conduct their political reform in China, their successors may or may not continue their political pursuits. A power transition has not been fully institutionalized in the CCP system. "Who is after Hu?" is still a mystery although Xi Jinping is widely believed to be the next party secretary after the 17th Party Congress. In other words, the internal power struggles inside the CCP in the next five years will create more uncertainties for China's future democratic transition.

Conclusion: China's Unique Path to Democracy

If a "rich and prosperous nation" was the dream of the Chinese people in the early twentieth century, a *democratic* state is their aspiration for this century. Despite different understandings of democracy between the West and China based on historical, cultural, and social contexts, common ground is coming closer to realization. The Chinese people have changed their view of democracy from an instrument for producing a strong state to a necessary means for protecting individual liberties. Yet they maintain different views on the application of democratic institutions, such as multiparty competition and general elections. A basic converging point now is rule by the people and rule of law.

In the complex democratization model suggested in this article, sustained economic development will be most conducive to smooth democratization. However, it does not exclude the

possibility of a catalytic role for economic difficulties and crisis. The experience of the former Soviet Union shows that a radical transition triggered by economic crisis may be disastrous for the society. This is one of the reasons that the CCP now is working hard to obtain a soft landing for the heated economy, despite rapid development, and to control rocketing inflation, a volatile stock market, and overheated real estate. The major goal of these efforts is to calm down the restive public and to avoid major social turbulence.

The political struggle between the reform group and the conservative group in China will shape the process of democratization. However, whether the reform group can lead a “negotiation pact” transition is likely to be determined by the support of civil society and a democratic political culture. The maturity of civil society and a free, competitive political culture not only provide incentives and support for the reform group to pursue a democratic transition; they may also be a constraint to keep them on the track of consolidation of democracy.

China displays an increasingly mature civil society. Despite strong government control and censorship, there is an ever-increasing number of netizens, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Internet blogs in China. A freer media is more inclined to report and investigate sensitive cases and play a supervisory role. Moreover, the public is playing a more active role in overseeing the government and presenting different views on policy making, as seen in the “nail households” that stood their ground against government-backed land developers. The public also realizes that it has more channels to let its voices be heard domestically and internationally. The public awareness and willingness to take substantive actions reflect a changing attitude from previous times when “whatever leaders say is correct” was the dominant attitude.

Village elections are another good democratic experiment in cultivating a healthy civil society and a democratic political culture. Spreading governmental elections from the rural area to cities will be the most important step for successful democratization in China. In addition, the promotion of intra-party democracy by Hu and Wen also signals a positive trend in China’s elite-oriented, top-down, democratic transition in the future, although many uncertainties exist.

In China's case, and given people's sensitivity over external meddling in internal affairs, exogenous factors may not play a huge role in the search for democracy. The Chinese people and elites even in the liberal group, after considering thoroughly China's domestic situation, prefer a more gradual process for democratization. If democracy is a good thing, it may come when the time is right. The former Soviet experience does not stand out well in Chinese memory. Nationalism always runs rampant when improper external pressure provides the CCP conservative group with cause for maximizing its political legitimacy. In a word, according to the Chinese understanding, democracy is not given by external powers, but is to be taken by the Chinese people themselves at their own pace.

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