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30 Years After Tiananmen

THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS

Bruce Gilley

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Seventy years after its revolutionary birth and thirty years since its near-death experience in Tiananmen Square, the People's Republic of China is seen by most specialists as an unalterable fact. Yet this assumption, like those made in 1987 when the Soviet Union marked the seventieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, is wrong. Communist China is ripe for a transition to democracy. That transition may fail, as happened in post-Soviet Russia. But the likelihood of an attempt is now as great as it was when the last major push toward democratization rocked the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in 1989, and the conditions for success are better than they were either in China during the Tiananmen Square protests or in the Soviet Union at the time of its collapse.

In 2004, I argued that a democratic transition would occur in China around 2020, and no later than 2030.¹ Since then, my divination has served as a useful rhetorical foil for China specialists whose arguments center on the regime's ability to deliver "X without democracy." Those who look at big datasets on democracy around the world argue that regime survival is still far likelier than democratic transition in China. They are right, and the math will not change anytime soon. But once democracy becomes mathematically more likely than regime survival, the question will no longer be interesting: To herald a transition at that point would be much like "predicting" in 1989 that democracy would come to Eastern Europe. The time to think about a tilt in the odds is before they shift. The regime itself is aware of the need to prevent such a tilt. In 2013, it banned all mention of seven "dangerous" subjects that threatened to inspire prodemocratic agitation: civil society, human rights, universal values, freedom of the press, judicial independence, China's new economic elites, and past blunders by the CCP.

The most important “X without democracy” claim is the argument that the CCP has engineered “elite stability without democracy” through a rules-governed succession process for its leading officials. Two practices—the identification of successors-in-waiting and a limit of two five-year terms for top leaders—were cited as evidence of this achievement. The term limit, wrote Zeng Jinghan in 2016, “has become highly institutionalized.”² A year later, CCP general secretary Xi Jinping swiftly reduced both “institutions” to shambles when he failed to install successors and then blasted from the constitution the two-term limit for China’s presidency and vice-presidency. Xi is now China’s de facto leader for life, and the elite succession process has devolved into a crony-based search for allies and yes-men.

Xi’s demolition of the succession system was his answer to perceived policy stagnation in the PRC. Whereas three decades earlier, Mikhail Gorbachev had responded to a similar state of affairs in the Soviet Union with a prescription for “more democracy,” Xi’s preferred remedy is instead “more autocracy.” His bet is that “governance without democracy” will be possible so long as Beijing offers guidance with a firm hand. Efficient and lawful implementation of policies that advance the public good, he believes, would be ensured if only everyone would swing into line and “act like a man” (as he once put it in remarks comparing his approach to that of Gorbachev).

Autocracy and Its Limits

This is the dictator’s fantasy. Its failure is evident in the steady worsening of China’s governance record relative to its income peers, a trend that has continued under Xi. When the World Bank began measuring governance in 1996, China’s per capita income was half that of the typical developing country. Today per capita income in China is half again as large as that of the typical developing country in purchasing-power terms, but China’s governance indicators remain at the same levels registered in 1996. Whole villages and towns in rural China are now criminal enterprises run by unruly men known as “biscuit uncles” (*bingshu*). Only 2 percent of the crime in China is reported in official statistics, according to a 2018 study based on a sample in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou.³ Rising risk premiums for Chinese bonds reflect the hazards of trying to govern an upper-middle-income economy with the authoritarian political system born in a low-income nation.

It may be that Xi has no intention of governing China, only ruling it. He may be a “lord of misrule,” as historian Jonathan Spence once described Mao, a conjuror who stays in power by upending the order and predictability on which political opposition is built.⁴ But misrule is at best a stopgap measure and at worst an accelerator of change. Recently, I was told by well-informed friends in China that the ancient idiom *ji gua er dai*

(rotate the guards when the melons ripen) has become code for elite dissatisfaction with Xi. Provincial elites, it seems, are floating this phrase as a rallying cry to force the general secretary's retirement when his second term comes to an end in 2022. The expression originates in a tale from a Chinese treatise dating to the third or fourth century B.C.E., in which an official promised to rotate the guard every year when the melons ripened. When he refused to follow through on this promise, he was overthrown. Elite demands for a *gua dai* (melon rotation) will grow as 2022 approaches, and with it a possible opening for democratic transition.

Growth, capitalism, and fiscal capacity “without democracy” are the economic accomplishments cited by those who insist that the CCP regime will endure. To be sure, no one could have predicted the regime's ability to manage capitalist growth so successfully. In this regard, China has turned out to resemble its capitalist Asian neighbors more than its erstwhile communist brothers. But as has happened elsewhere in Asia, the authoritarian growth model is sputtering. Productivity gains have steadily declined since the early post-1978 reform era, when an expanding pool of capital and labor yielded easy advances, and this figure may now be in negative territory. Capitalism is in crisis because no firm can reach scale without becoming an accessory to the Party—as technology giants Huawei and Tencent have learned. The regime's attempts to wean itself off value-added and corporate taxes, meanwhile, have floundered because it dare not levy the property and personal-income taxes that would reveal the ill-gotten gains of socialist comrades. As a result, China is now running a historically high annual deficit of 5 percent of GDP; according to the IMF, its public debt will reach 54 percent of GDP this year, just as the cost of borrowing from spooked savers is rising. Taxation has become politically toxic, and the CCP, relying on the modern equivalent of the opium and heroin sales that fueled its revolutionary victory in the 1940s, has chosen to defer the day of reckoning.

According to foreign-policy specialists, the Party supposedly has delivered “international integration without democracy,” reaping all the benefits of globalization while continuing to rely on a nationalist narrative that casts China as the victim and keeps the pro-Party blood boiling at home. Again, credit is due to the CCP for its success in partially opening China to the world. But, as with the authoritarian growth model, the plan has self-imposed limits. The Trump administration is not the only government that has said “Enough!” to Beijing's pursuit of self-interested policies under a false veneer of friendship. A more chastening rebuke has come from those neighboring states that have refused to accept the role of vassals in an updated Chinese version of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere (a bloc devised in the early 1940s by imperial Japan). In 2016, for instance, a case brought by an elected government in the Philippines succeeded in securing a ruling from an international

tribunal in the Hague against China's claims to the disputed Scarborough Shoal. Since Malaysia's 2018 democratic breakthrough, the new government in Putrajaya has criticized Chinese policies and announced the suspension of several major Chinese construction projects.

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The failure of the Party's political, economic, and international strategies for survival are irrelevant in the eyes of certain socially minded commentators, who view China's people as docile sheep ready to fall in line behind their shepherds. As with their ground-down and vodka-brined Russian counterparts, Chinese citizens are supposedly sozzled

with *baijiu* (a popular white liquor distilled from grain) and socialized by centuries of autocracy. This "middle class without democracy" argument is the most credible of the lot. Its proponents can point to evidence from the World Values Survey showing that, as in other Confucian societies, China's economic development has been accompanied by a surge in support for modern values (meritocracy, individualism, and efficiency) without a corresponding embrace of democratic values (civic rights, political participation). Such trends, these analysts might argue, are enabling the Party to retain legitimacy long past the point where, in other settings, support for authoritarian rule would likely have evaporated. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are democratic only because of U.S. pressures and domestic cleavages that China lacks. Without bottom-up pressure, the argument suggests, there will be no top-level melon rotation.

In his bestselling 2004 autobiographical novel *Lang Tuteng* (Wolf Totem), the retired Chinese academic Lü Jiamin (writing under the pseudonym Jiang Rong) complained that China's people had long lived under "a top-down philosophy, stressing seniority, unconditional obedience, eradicating competition through autocratic power." They had become sheep, herded by their rulers. "Since China doesn't have a competitive, scientific, and democratic system for selecting top talent, honest and frank people are denied a chance to be promoted," Lü opined in this memoir, which recounts his experience of being sent to Inner Mongolia during Mao's Cultural Revolution. The dust storms threatening Beijing due to the state-ordered cultivation of the Mongolian grasslands, he wrote, had arisen from "the yellow sand of our current system." After cultivators wiped out the wolves who once inhabited the steppe, decay set in and liquor sales doubled.⁵

A large revisionist literature now argues that the 1989 Tiananmen movement was mostly proregime, a dutiful remonstrance with naughty rulers rather than an attempt to remove them. Indeed, as Wang Dan ar-

gues in his essay in this issue, the students who took part did not intend to replace the Party. Still, as Wang notes, they *did* intend to push it onto a democratic trajectory. Such democratization by incumbent elites has been the dominant mode of transition in Asia, including in Indonesia, Taiwan, South Korea, and now Malaysia. The wolves who made their stand on Tiananmen Square—one of whom was Lü Jiamin—were well aware of this.

In *Lang Tuteng*, Lü sought to revive the wolflike strain in Chinese culture, which he traced to the Central Asian nomads who ruled China during the Mongol Yuan dynasty of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Those living “the big life,” as the narrator terms it, “cherish freedom and popular elections.” Lü’s work is in effect a call for replacing the fake Chinese nationalism of the CCP with a genuine Chinese nationalism centered on the people’s “sacred, inviolable freedom, their independence, and their dignity.”⁶

Enter the Wolves

Some of China’s people have taken Lü’s words to heart. If one’s view is limited to the major metropolitan centers—whose young residents often seem bedazzled by video games, smartphones, and variety shows—one might be tricked into thinking that the public has grown complacent. But the inhabitants of the Tier 1 cities are not representative of China’s youth as a whole. As in the Soviet Union, bottom-up pressures that could encourage a prodemocratic mutiny by elites are emerging in the hinterlands. In China, this means the dozens of teeming third-tier cities with ugly names like Baotou, Zibo, and Handan.

Those cities are full of restless youth. This year, there will be seventeen-million more men than women between the ages of twenty and forty in China. These unmoored and unmarried men are truck technicians, delivery boys, and fraudsters. They are the “deplorables” of Chinese political culture, who refer to themselves as *pimin* (“fart people” or “shitizens”) or simply *diaosi* (losers). They drive sports cars far more expensive than they can afford and, according to recent work, have been locked out of the channels for political participation that have kept others sufficiently placated to prevent unrest.⁷ They are more likely than members of other demographic groups to commit crimes, but the line between bandit, folk hero, and revolutionary in China has always been cleaver-thin.⁸ As Andrea den Boer writes: “Chinese history has numerous examples of ‘bare branch’ gangs coalescing into large armies of rebels that challenged authority.”⁹

The wolves of contemporary China are not a “class,” since their incomes and status vary widely. Rather, they are distinguished by having slipped the noose of Party control. Some find allies among local businessmen. For every wealthy business owner who is jailed or has

to flee, there are hundreds who have become mentors and *kaoshan* (“mountains to lean on”) for those ready to bring about a reconfiguration of power. Property tycoon Ren

The restless youth of China are not interested in hearing lectures by foreign experts about how the CCP has “lifted” millions out of poverty.

Zhiqiang was given only a light one-year gag order in 2017 after slamming Xi Jinping’s insistence that the media toe the Party’s line, comparing migration limits in China to those in North Korea, and predicting that Xi’s plan for government-directed development of an area outside Beijing would “inevitably fail.” A year later Lu Wei, the “internet czar” who had shut down Ren’s social-

media accounts, was sacked for being “arbitrary and tyrannical.” “Big Cannon Ren,” meanwhile, appeared on deck again to fire more political broadsides: “How can technical innovation take shape if free thinking is not allowed?” he asked at an elite forum in Beijing last year, pointing to U.S. entrepreneur Elon Musk’s rocketry division as a sort of Sputnik moment for China’s embattled economy. “How can innovation-driven growth be formed if there’s no equality in terms of human rights and property rights?”¹⁰

Ren, who counted more than 35 million followers on the Chinese social-media platform Weibo before being gagged, is an inspiration for the fearless wolves of China. Like him, they prefer to stir things up rather than chase the Party’s “social-credit” points for good behavior on their smartphones. The Party knows the wolves are on the move. The CCP has always claimed to be waging a war against “black and evil” forces in society. Under Xi, these forces have been accused of seeking to “seize political power” at every level of government, a raw-knuckled formulation last heard in the days of Mao. In recent years the regime has put greater emphasis on “social monitoring” and “social incentives”—as if wolves could be domesticated by China’s Confucian tradition. The restless youth of China are not interested in hearing lectures by foreign experts about how the CCP has “lifted” millions out of poverty. Nor are they likely to be persuaded that, in the name of proper “sequencing,” they should wait patiently for the Party to dole out democracy in tidbits while the people remain chained to a stake.

In *Wolf Totem*, the Confucians win as state-directed Chinese farmers populate the grasslands. Today, the contest is closer. These wolves want to tear apart the plans of Confucian elites, and, to mix metaphors, bring about a melon rotation. “The wolf means freedom, the mother of democracy, and China opposes freedom more than anything else,” Lü told the *New York Times* in 2005. “But the more wolves there are, the more interesting things become.”¹¹

NOTES

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