

Bruce Gilley

Elite-led democratization in China

Prospects, perils, and policy implications

A wide consensus among scholars of China holds that if democratization comes about, it will be through an elite-led process of change. In this scenario, popular pressures from below are a spur to action at the top but by no means take its place. The evidence in support of this scenario in China is found in both the organizational capacity of the ruling Chinese Communist party (CCP) and in the relative weakness of civil society and class pressures in present-day China. Such a transition would have profound implications for the style of democracy that follows, and thus implies the need for a distinctive form of forward-planning by states and other international actors.

In this article, I will set out the empirical case for elite-led democratization in China and show why it may also have normative appeal. Following a look at the background conditions that make democracy likely, I will outline the notion of an elite-led transition and consider the likely timing and sequencing of such a transition. Finally, I will consider the implications of such a transition and the policy advice that follows.

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THE BACKGROUND TO DEMOCRATIZATION

Anytime we are in the realm of prediction, politics, and China, we are dealing with a triple dose of high uncertainty. It is no surprise that many scholars of China have responded to this by imagining multiple scenarios for the country's political future, or by claiming that all prediction is futile. For others, it is precisely the magnitude of the socioeconomic shifts underway in China, and the instability of that country's constitutional structure, that make clear predictions so imperative. Without them, we leave ourselves entirely exposed to the high uncertainty of China's political future.

Among clear predictions of China's political future, we can discern four broad types: no major changes, an evolution towards right-wing neo-authoritarianism, a descent into chaos, and a transition to democracy. The "no change" school is often a default position for those who fear prediction altogether. But it can also be a serious predictive school. As in the case of the Soviet Union of the 1990s, post-Tiananmen China is seen by this school as led by a strong, repressive state that is able to effectively crush pressures for change. This view of China places emphasis on the lack of fundamental institutional change—the persistence of a Leninist dictatorship and the claims (if not the efforts) to totalizing social control—and on the reputed anti-democratic tendencies of the population as a whole. It brings together "cold warrior" analysts in the west such as Samuel Huntington and "cultural pessimists" from China like Ju Yanan.¹ This prediction has the intuitive appeal of "linearity," i.e. more of the same. But it is often hard to square with the premises of its own analysis, which simultaneously espies great underlying socioeconomic transformations in China.

Another school predicts the evolution to a form of right-wing authoritarian state. Despite the failure of this model after several decades in Latin America and the rest of Asia, it is believed to be durable for today's China.² In this scenario, the CCP continues to shed its communist pretensions and emerges as an authoritarian regime that coopts most of the population with rapid development and national greatness. The regime, in this view, will

1 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986); Ju Yanan, *Understanding China: Center Stage of the Fourth Power* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

2 Pan Wei, "Toward a consultative rule of law regime in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 34 (2003): 3-43; Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian resilience," *Journal of Democracy* (January 2003): 6-17

successfully institutionalize itself as a modernized non-electoral regime along the lines of UMNO-ruled Malaysia or PRI-ruled Mexico. The virtues of this theory are its accuracy so far. Since 1989, despite predictions of CCP collapse, the CCP has moved towards this model with significant changes in its governance and ideology—allowing business owners into the party, selling off public enterprises, repressing worker and peasant movements, encouraging a new ethnocentric nationalism, and even planning a Berlin-style Olympic Games for Beijing in 2008.

Chaos theorists are a wider church and include those who write about a crisis of governability, a collapse of the state, and an involution of the party in China. This school can also claim some accuracy with post-1989 events, although it is forever living on evidence of increased risks of collapse rather than actual collapse. Worsened income inequalities, rising ethnic tensions, and unreformed authoritarian rule have won China a place on the University of Maryland's fragile states model.³

Finally, predictions of democratic transition in China have been common since the eruption of the first pro-democracy movements in China in the late 1950s. The argument for a democratic future in China can be substantiated by an analysis of present trends in the country—economic, social, and political. Given probabilistic trends, this school places the burden of proof on those who argue that China will *not* become a democracy in the near-future. However, the democratic school has the least to show for the post-1989 period aside from some scattershot renegade elections at the township and county levels as well as changes to make human rights, the rule of law, and legislative oversight more institutionalized within the state.

To a large extent, the democratic prediction relies less on detailed parsing of data from China as on global trends in regime types as income levels grow and on the idea of democracy as a universal value. The spread of democracy was the most important political development of the 20th century. In roughly three “waves”—before World War I, after World War II, and from the mid-1970s to mid-1990s, the proportion of the world's states that were democratic went from less than 10 percent to 61 percent. According to Diamond, only 21 of the 150 states (or 14 percent) with a population of more than one million (among them China) can today be

³ Katrin Bennhold, “U.S. aide sees ‘internal strains’ tugging at China,” *International Herald Tribune*, 3 March 2005.

described as “politically closed.”⁴ The other 86 percent of states have some form of electoral competition for government offices, although only 49 percent can be considered electoral democracies. The well-known “transition paradigm” that predicts a more-or-less linear movement of states from politically closed to liberal democratic regime-types remains intact. While the 1990s have made us aware of the many mid-points along the way, as well as the possibility of regress, the overall direction of the most of world’s states away from closed political systems towards open political systems remains true. In the last few years alone, political developments in Lebanon, Ukraine, Georgia, Egypt, Kyrgyzstan, and Saudi Arabia have reminded us of the probabilistic validity of the transition paradigm. The existence of midpoints along the transitional route does not refute the endpoints themselves (no more than twilight disproves night and day). For every Russia there are a half a dozen Ukraines.

Every country that is now a democracy was at some point described by scholars as unsuited to democracy. Easton warned in 1965 that “the underlying values of authoritarian Spain and democratic Britain could not be confused in any important way,”⁵ but 11 years later Spain’s democratic “underlying values” came to the surface when premier Adolfo Suárez González’s political reform law was passed by popular referendum. Most observers in the 1980s dismissed out of hand the possibility that communist regimes could democratize from within. Countries in Asia that are today thriving or developing democracies—South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh, to name a few—have throughout history been dismissed as unsuited to democracy. Thus to hear similar arguments being made about China has a certain quaintness to it. For those who point to Confucianism, there are the examples of Japan and South Korea, arguably the only two genuine Confucian societies left in the world. Poverty and large rural populations, meanwhile, have not proven to be obstacles to democracy in India, the Philippines, Mali, Ghana, or Mongolia—to name just a few successful poor democracies. An official with China’s own Ministry of Civil Affairs described as “lazy man’s logic” the claim that the poor cannot sustain

4 Larry Diamond, “Thinking about hybrid regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 21-35.

5 David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 198.

democracy since, as he noted, peasants in China have shown themselves in village elections to be astute and responsible voters.⁶

Claims that China's rich middle classes do not want democracy are question-begging: even if we had a reliable survey to go by, it would show nothing more than what we always see: a conservative group whose opinions shift "out of nowhere," to use Timur Kuran's phrase,⁷ once the conditions for change are evident. Pro-democracy opinion creation in authoritarian states is not linear but cumulative: it builds until a threshold is reached and the proverbial greengrocer of Havel's famous essay, "The power of the powerless," removes the pro-party sign from his window and joins in the democratic revolution. Survey results reporting high levels of regime support in China are always accompanied by embarrassed footnotes about the censorship of sensitive questions and the high levels of fear of state retribution among respondents.

The reason that democracy has spread is that it is morally valued by most global citizens in most places. It has an instrumental role in producing morally valued goods—sustained and healthy economic development, social harmony, reduced political violence, cultural dynamism, international respect, and effective and popular public policies—and it is valued as an expressive good that signifies to citizens their equal status in the political community. Citizens throughout history have repeatedly rejected authoritarian states that provided economic growth (South Korea, Brazil), political stability (South Africa, Indonesia), or national greatness (the Soviet Union) on the simple grounds that their political systems did not express an equality of citizens. As Gill noted, "[i]f the [democratic] transitions literature does not recognize this normative aspect of democracy, it cannot explain the appeal of this form of government."⁸

Zhou Tianyong, a deputy director of research at the Central Party School in Beijing, predicts a democratic transition will begin in China

6 Zhan Chengfu of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, quoted in Qiu Feng, "The government's responsibility in regard to the development of grassroots democracy," *Southern Weekend* [*Nanfang Zhoumou* in Chinese], 3 February 2005.

7 Timur Kuran, "Now out of never: The element of surprise in the east European revolution," N. Bermeo, ed., *Liberalization and Democratization: Change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 7-48.

8 Graeme Gill, *The Dynamics of Democratization: Elites, Civil Society, and the Transition Process* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 88.

around 2020 fuelled by growing demands for rights and political participation.⁹ If he is right, then it is imperative to begin thinking now what the implications of a democratization in China would be.

TRANSITION SCENARIOS

To say that an authoritarian regime will become democratic in the near or medium-term future may not be to say much. Even if we assume that a democratic transition is likely, that still leaves open multiple transition scenarios. The timing and nature of the transition may be as important as the fact of the transition itself, and may determine how quickly or slowly a new democracy consolidates.

The literature on democratic transitions has tended to examine the structural preconditions of an authoritarian regime in order to explain the type of transition that results. In this view, it is the relative strength of state over society that determines the sort of transition that results. *Strong states* tend to repress social forces until intra-elite feuds or simply loss of faith leads to the introduction of gradual democratization: Taiwan is the classic case. *Weak states*, by contrast, face running battles with pro-democracy forces and are eventually toppled by popular movements: the Philippines and Indonesia are good examples. *Middling states*, by contrast, live in an in-between area in which they undertake incremental political reforms to assuage popular demands and are eventually extricated from power by elites when faced with the potential of a wider pro-democracy movement: South Korea and Thailand would fall into this category.

Certainly there are many scholars who write in the tradition of popular overthrow, expecting that democracy will come to China through a sharp conflict between a rising civil society and an unreformed communist state. Those who warn of rising class conflict or looming social conflict reflect a kind of romantic view of democratizations grounded in the enduring memory of the French Revolution.

However, the popular overthrow scenario depends on a dramatically weakened state that on most accounts does not exist. As Guo Xiaojin shows, a host of economic, intellectual, ideological, social, and institutional structures ensure that the state remains dominant over society in China.¹⁰

9 Zhou Tianyong, *Zhongguo zhengzhi tizhi gaige* [Political Reform in China] (Beijing: China Shuli Shuidian Press, 2004).

10 Guo Xiaojin, *State and Society in China's Democratic Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

There is a broad scholarship that comes to roughly equal conclusions, in particular concerning business, institutions, and social attitudes. As Yan Sun, a scholar-activist for the state-led approach to political change argues, “[e]xperience suggests that drastic political change may worsen rather than alleviate corruption. So far, incremental change has proved a workable strategy for China. It appears to be what most Chinese want, and they likely will continue to rely on the state as the engine of change.”¹¹

If she is right, that leaves us instead with two other transition scenarios: gradualism and elite-led extrication. Gradualism is perhaps the most widely hoped for and studied democratic transition scenario for China. The recent wave of writings and conferences on “constitutionalism” or “the rule of law” reflect a hope and/or belief that democratic opening can arrive through the back door of legality. However, constitutionalism is an ambiguous tool in the hands of dictators. It served to entrench dictatorship more firmly in Chile under Pinochet and in the Philippines under Marcos, and has done so under Russian president Vladimir Putin’s “dictatorship of law.” Its virtue lies only in its unintended consequences—creating expectations of rule-abidingness that take on a life of their own (as the protests over the China’s three interventions in Hong Kong’s constitutional affairs since 1997 have shown). Yet the unintended consequences may not overcome the intended ones. Since 1989, gradualist political openings at the village level have been halted in China. Expansion to town and city level democracy, although promoted by former party general secretary Jiang Zemin in his speech to the 15th party congress of 1997, has been put on hold. A white paper on democratization issued in 2005 confirmed that there were no further plans to expand direct elections. In short, gradual democratization is a script without a cast.

Gradual democratization is also a script without a stage. A gradual democratization requires a strong state that can manage the process of political opening. Yet China’s state capacity is at best middling, the crucial “rational” reason why gradual openings have been put on hold. Elites recognize that the party-state lacks the necessary capacity to manage a phased introduction of democratic elections—what has been called “democracy on the installment plan.” In the 1980s, the CCP was both willing and able to begin gradual democratization and thus it passed the 1987 village elections

¹¹ Yan Sun, “Corruption, growth and reform: The Chinese enigma,” *Current History* (September 2005): 257-63, 261-62.

law. But after 1989, it rejected this option and since then the conditions for its fulfillment have been lost. The stiff repression of political dissent launched by new party chief Hu Jintao immediately upon coming to power in 2003 signalled the hollowness of the gradualist dream. The CCP cannot institutionalize political competition even if it can institutionalize other aspects of the state. Indeed, since the mid-1990s there has been a distinct regression of political contestation at the national level in China, an “end of politics” syndrome that reflects the state’s inability to manage political openness without inducing instability.

A state that is able to crush popular discontent but is unable to respond effectively to it through phased political change faces a daily drizzle of emergencies. Industrial accidents, corruption scandals, village jacqueries, health scares, and historical memory eruptions are the “everyday forms of crisis” that constitute the daily life of a pinioned regime. The reports on the desk of former party general secretary Jiang Zemin, as described by his wife, offer a neat summary: “Explosions here, rioting there. Murders, corruption, terrorism—little that was nice.”¹²

What is to be done? The question has crossed the minds of dozens of dictatorships who have lost their gait. The answer is extrication, a hasty yet regime-led move towards democratic opening. This approach has been widely overlooked by students of democracy in China although it has historically been the most common form of democratic transition. I estimate that 29 of 41 democratic transitions from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s were of this type. In this scenario, authoritarian elites under pressure of a mobilized society exploit their declining supremacy by introducing democratic reforms. Runnymede may have been the first authoritarian extrication. Most modern dictatorships fall neither by evolution nor by revolution but by crisis. Russia, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, and Thailand are a few examples. Given the structural relationship between state and society in China, the best prediction is of an elite-led democratization in that country as well.

TIMING AND SEQUENCING

The nature of a democratic transition is highly contingent. Therefore in sketching in advance some of the key issues of a transition, one is forced to

¹² Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Man Who Changed China: The Life of Jiang Zemin* (New York: Crown, 2004), 266.

look mainly at structural and comparative evidence. This is not to downplay the importance of agency, merely to say that it does not admit of easy *ex ante* analysis.

The extrication scenario I envisage has seven distinct phases: crisis, popular mobilization, elite split, democratic decision, anti-democratic reaction, transitional regime, and first constitution and election.

The need for a crisis of some sort to begin the democratization process is not a strict necessity but it has been a most likely beginning. Party leaders who rationally calculate that they do not have the capacity to manage a gradual democratization need to be nudged in the direction of change. There are exceptions of course: South Africa and Spain are examples of extrications that took place as a result of attempted gradual transitions by weakened authoritarian states. But such cases are rare: “Why risk the ‘achievements of the regime’ for the sake of the fuzzy long-term advantages advocated by the soft liners?”¹³

What sort of crisis might begin the process in China? The killing of between 10 and 20 protestors by armed police in the Guangdong village of Dongzhou in December 2005 in a dispute over land confiscations is a good example, just as a small incident over public housing corruption in Sakhalin province in 1988 touched off the pro-democracy movement in Russia. Pro-democracy agitation in Hong Kong and the regime’s fading attempts to discredit democracy in Taiwan provide further close-at-hand flashpoints. Border effects—the colour revolutions of Georgia and the Ukraine, the demonstration effects of electoral democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, or pro-democracy shifts in Malaysia, Burma, or North Korea—will continue to provide potential touchstones for intellectual movements, just as Polish and Filipino democratizations inspired protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

China’s rapid economic development increases the potential number of domestic crisis points as well. Corruption, land grabs, environmental and resource degradation, governance and health problems, rising inequalities, and fiscal-financial instability provide a rich array of potential problem points. The \$550 million in losses made by state trading company China Aviation Oil in 2004 or the chemical factory explosion that threw 100 tons

13 Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 16.

of carcinogens into the Songhua River in 2005 are both examples of the sorts of crises that, mishandled by an unaccountable and secretive regime, have led to panic and protest. As deputy environment minister Pan Yue told Germany's *Der Spiegel* in early 2005:

We are convinced that a prospering economy automatically goes hand in hand with political stability. And I think that's a major blunder. The faster the economy grows, the more quickly we will run the risk of a political crisis if the political reforms cannot keep pace. If the gap between the poor and the rich widens, then regions within China and the society as a whole will become unstable. If our democracy and our legal system lag behind the overall economic development, various groups in the population won't be able to protect their own interests. And there's yet another mistake in this thinking. It's the assumption that the economic growth will give us the financial resources to cope with the crises surrounding the environment, raw materials, and population growth. There won't be enough money, and we are simply running out of time. Developed countries with a per capita gross national product of \$8,000 to \$10,000 can afford that, but we cannot. Before we reach \$4,000 per person, different crises in all shapes and forms will hit us. Economically we won't be strong enough to overcome them.¹⁴

It is not necessary for popular mobilization to be even close to the scale of 1989 for it to have an effect on political change. Indeed the scale of popular mobilization in most of the eastern European cases as well as Russia was quite limited. Nonetheless, protests empower reformers within the elite to take action. To quote Fan Shuo on the role of the 1976 Tiananmen protests in empowering the overthrow of the Gang of Four:

[The Tiananmen protests] produced highly favorable circumstances for the arrest of the Gang of Four, acting as a general mobilization and dress rehearsal. Without it, the Gang of Four would not have been arrested. Because of the protests, Ye Jianying and other Party veterans were able to hear the voice of the people and

¹⁴ "The Chinese miracle will end soon: An interview with China's deputy minister of the environment," *Der Spiegel*, 7 March 2005.

survey the size and strength of China's robust society. The fall of the Gang of Four would not have been as decisive or quick otherwise. The people took things into their own hands and made history.¹⁵

The first result of popular protest is an elite split. This is the necessary prelude to any democratic initiative, the reason why the party's most serious charge against general secretary Zhao Ziyang in 1989 was "splitting the party." Within the current Politburo standing committee appointed in 2002, we can see four main groups: the pragmatic (Wen Jiabao, Wu Guanzheng, Li Changchun), the Leninist romantic (Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo), the politically ambitious (Zeng Qinghong, Huang Ju, Jia Qinglin), and the hardline (Luo Gan). Within this group, only the hardliner Luo Gan is *not* likely to initiate change. The others might all launch democratic change consistent with their particular viewpoints about political change—that it would improve governance (the pragmatists), that it would allow the CCP to show its true virtues (the Leninist romantics), or that it would preserve the perquisites of power (the politically ambitious).

It is often the case, especially in large polities like China, that reformist elites come from outside the handful of core ruling elites. Elites outside of the dozen or so top members at the central or provincial levels often vault to prominence as change begins. In addition, the military has been a tacit supporter of democratic reforms in most extrications, seeing its corporate interests to lie in the cause of change. China's military has undergone a sea-change of "de-partyization" in the last decade and may now view its corporate interests as lying squarely with a stable polity that requires political reforms. According to Alfred Chan, deputy air force political commissar Liu Yazhou has argued that "the strategic threat to national security...comes from within rather than from without. To strengthen the country, it is imperative that China's leaders introduce political reform, especially when the dynamism of economic growth begins to slow."¹⁶

A democratic opening can be announced in many ways. A reformist leadership in Beijing could announce plans for an extension of elections to township and city levels, or plans to make the people's congress system more open and participatory. Premier Wen Jiabao's comment at a press

¹⁵ Fan Shuo, *Ye Jianying zai 1976* [Ye Jianying in 1976], revised edition (Beijing: Central Party School Press, 1995), 132–33.

¹⁶ Alfred Chan, "A Young Turk in China's establishment: The military writings of Liu Yazhou," *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, 13 September 2005, 3–5.

conference in 2005 that “[i]f the Chinese people can manage a village, I believe in several years they can manage a township” prefigured the sort of sudden announcement that would herald change.

Typically, democratic openings begin as limited concessions only. There may be hidden pacts made with hardliners that constrain action. Yet it is also the case that typically within weeks or months, the attempt at limited democratic opening falls to the very structural conditions that made gradualism a non-option in the first place: once the state gives an inch, society is in a position to take a mile. Indirect presidential elections in South Korea and an appointed senate in Thailand were anti-democratic provisions that unravelled rapidly as democratizations gained steam in those countries.

Every democratization usually faces some countermovement in which remnant hardliners and neo-authoritarians seek to derail the slide to change. Within China we know that certain provinces (Shaanxi, Henan) and certain influential hardliners (Li Peng, Luo Gan) might stand in the way of changes, not to mention virtually the entire internal security and propaganda systems. If, as in 1989, these forces are strong enough to cobble together the ruling elite again and repress the reformers, then China could face another political defeat for liberals and a return to another period of political regress. However, given evidence of the disappearance of almost every party elder of universal stature (those who fought in the civil war against the KMT), the limited role of hardliners within the current politburo, and the stronger capacity of society to maintain pressures for change, it seems unlikely that the next democratic opening will fail.

The immediate result of a democratic opening that survives is the conversion of the existing regime into a transitional regime. Elite-led democratizations have the great advantage that the transitional regime enjoys both “forward legitimacy” (it is the body that will bring about positive political changes) as well as “backward legitimacy” (it is the bearer of the institutions and laws of the former regime that will be used as the basis of the new one). Its main task is the convening of a constitutional convention. China’s constitutional conventions in 1938 and then again leading up to the 1954 constitution provide a template for how this could be done—broadly representative bodies that are selected and that pass constitutions without referendum. The system that results is hard to predict. Some scholars foresee a strong presidential system. My own prediction is of a fairly recognizable system with a weak president and a strong legislature based on the existing national people’s congress system.

The final stage in the democratic transition is the holding of the first national election. An election in China would involve some 900 million eligible voters, making it the biggest single event in world history. India's 2004 national election (where 368 million people, or 55 percent, of the 670 million eligible voters voted) showed the benefits that China will derive as a late-comer. India employed electronic voting for the election which passed off virtually without electoral fraud, defects, and minimal violence. There is today also a vast resource of international groups that help with the administering of elections on which China could draw. Having elected a first government into office, the democratic transition is over and the long and tortuous road of democratic consolidation begins.

IMPLICATIONS

Democracy in China will probably survive because most democracies these days do survive. That was not the case in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the moral and socioeconomic conditions in support of democracy were much weaker. Today, unlikely countries from Bangladesh to Mali are stable democracies. Predictions of democratic collapse in the Ukraine by Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington or in Albania by journalist and author Robert Kaplan have proven unfounded. The peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq may also foil demeaning predictions of their inability to build democracies.

Survival, however, is not flourishing. China faces a host of difficult issues, from redistribution and welfare rebuilding to ethnic tensions and historical reconciliation. Moreover, the impact of an elite-led transition on resolving these legacies of authoritarianism is unclear. It is widely assumed, for instance, that such transitions favour elite interests and thus create pressures for a "second revolution" to "complete" the democratization. A recent Freedom House study finds that elite-led democratic transitions, while preferable to popular overthrows, are less preferable than nonviolent civic-led transitions since the reformed elites are often able to subvert democracy for longer.¹⁷ Thus an elite-led transition in China would likely mean a continuation of the perquisites of China's corrupt officialdom and clientelistic middle class—the restrictions on urban migration, the state control of key economic sectors, the ineffective taxation system, etc. This may be a

¹⁷ Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman, "How freedom is won: From civic resistance to durable democracy," Freedom House, 2005.

price for the transition to a democracy whose survival will do more to redress the claims of the poor and the marginalized than any other system.

Nonetheless, China's new democratic elites would be under tremendous pressures to lessen income gaps, help the rural poor, alleviate welfare holes, and stamp out official corruption, this time with the sanctions of a free press and electoral accountability to ensure action. If they balked at such pressures, a "second revolution" that involved greater popular violence might occur. The "myth of moderation" as Bermeo calls it, is to assume that all that is moderate and gradual is necessarily good for democratic transition.¹⁸ This may not be the case.

A China under democracy will continue to grow economically. But democracy will make China less of a threat to the rest of the world. Few will speak of the "China century," but business will continue its shift to China. Democracy makes countries turn their efforts to domestic affairs, and makes talk of "great power" status fade in the memory as a scorned relic of authoritarian legitimacy-seeking. A democratic China will of course be a very different place to do business than the current one. Companies will have to have much closer contacts with local officials. They will have to deal with labour organizations and an activated media. And they will have to deal with higher taxes and tighter environmental standards. They will, in other words, have to operate more like they do at home.

Finally, given China's rising power, having a major new hegemon be a democracy as opposed to an authoritarian power would have major implications for world order. A rising and democratic China would provide a much-needed fillip to the cause of international human rights, eliminating a shelter for regimes from Burma to Zimbabwe, and improving prospects for a truly effective United Nations system, thus serving the widely-sought aim of reducing US hegemony. In all, a democratic China that survives and consolidates will be a welcome addition to a largely-democratic world.

POLICY ADVICE

In the October 2005 issue of Hong Kong's *Kaifang* (Open Magazine), a leading journal of liberal thought in the Chinese world, the former party policy advisor Ruan Ming, one of the architects of political reform plans in

¹⁸ Nancy Bermeo, "Myths of moderation: Confrontation and conflict during democratic transitions," in Lisa Anderson, ed., *Transitions to Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 120–40.

the 1980s who was exiled after Tiananmen, wrote that western governments should share the blame for the repression of dissent under Hu Jintao. Rather than using the Hu ascendancy as an opportunity to establish a new relationship with China that encouraged democratic change, Ruan writes, western governments used it as an opportunity to compete for more goodwill from Beijing. Accompanying the article was a photo of Hu and his wife being taken by horse-drawn carriage with an RCMP honour guard to a state dinner in Ottawa in September 2005.

Ruan and the Chinese people, who seek a more just and more durable political system for their country, could do without such foreign “friends” as today’s Canada. Ottawa used Hu’s visit to declare a “strategic partnership” with China’s authoritarian rulers, abandoning the high ground that it so often claims in international affairs for the sake of commercial gain. In its current form, in which human rights concerns are segmented off as a discrete “issue-area,” Canada’s “strategic partnership” will encourage repression and sustain an illegitimate regime in China. Dalton McGuinty, premier of Ontario, told law students at Tsinghua University in November 2005 that protecting human rights and improving democracy should be as important in China as it is in Canada. But he was preaching to the converted. The day before, in an address to the Canada-China Business Council the words rights and democracy never crossed his lips. This segmenting off of the most central issue in our relations with China makes little sense. Norman Bethune, who went to Spain to fight to preserve democracy in 1936 prior to going to China, could not have approved, however much officials on both sides invoke his name in support of their assignation.

The strategic partnership may also be bad policy from the standpoint of Canada’s own narrowly-defined “national interests.” If democracy is the most likely future for China, then it implies the need for a forward-looking policy of engagement with and support for the domestic civil society and democratic institutions in that country. At present, most western states, Canada included, have invested far too little in forward-planning for a democratic China and far too much for a continued neo-authoritarian China. We are, in other words, dangerously misplaced to deal with what Merle Goldman of Harvard University says “may become one of the major political events of the twenty-first century.”¹⁹

19 Merle Goldman, “What’s in store for China,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 1 (2005): 168-71, 171.

There is much work that could be done now in advance to help make the challenges of democratization less acute for China. "Ethical engagement" means denying high honours to China's dictators, and reaching out instead to the Chinese people, and to the many leaders of civil society, academia, and business who for the time-being represent the only legitimate voices of that country. It means making Canada's entire strategy with China centred on the advancement of the same democratic norms that it accords the highest ranking in its own domestic affairs. And it means working with European and Asian allies to ensure they act likewise.

At present, Canada's engagement with China faces far too little democratic scrutiny. Take an example. Since 1989 the International Development Research Center has been funding research into water resource development and conservation in Xinjiang. This is a region that has been targeted by Beijing for expanded farming and population transfers. The reason for this, as a Human Rights in China/ Human Rights Watch report notes, is that it is part of a policy of forced assimilation and religious repression. Beijing organized a massive influx of a million poor Han Chinese settlers into the region in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the strains on water resources. "This influx has considerably heightened the competition between Han and local ethnic minorities for land and water resources in rural areas," the groups note in a report.²⁰ It is unclear how it can be possible for Canada to work in support of water resources in Xinjiang without being complicit in the terror against Uighur culture being waged by China's state.

An action-plan in support of democratization in China will seek to constrain the authoritarian state as well as build the foundations for a durable democracy. Constraining China dictators should include strict controls on the activities of the families of high-ranking cadres (education, travel, business) in Canada, especially in their interactions with Canada's elected leaders. Ottawa should also hold frequent and open meetings with pro-democracy and repressed groups from China, including representatives from the Tibetan, Uighur, Falun Gong, and pro-democracy communities. There should be a strong corporate code for Canadian companies operating in China that outlines how their activities will promote internationally-recognized human rights in the country.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Human rights concerns in Xinjiang," *Human Rights Watch Backgrounder*, October 2001. See also HRW/HRIC, "Devastating blows: Religious repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang," April 2005.

Canada should also help China to prepare for the day of self-rule. There is much thinking to go on beforehand about matters of constitutional design, ethnic relations, and socioeconomic policies where Canada could help. The issues are many: constitutions, emergency powers, legislative structure, electoral laws, secession, federalism, presidential powers, and more. Beyond that, every democratic transition faces massive socioeconomic challenges such as historical justice, economic liberalization, and ethnic and regional fragmentation—all of which will require well-thought-out responses. Given that any democratic transition is sure to be a tense and hurried affair, this absence of serious thinking about the democratic future of China risks leading to worse outcomes since it will be implausible to simply develop this policy research overnight. Ottawa should also make it clear now that it would support a popular democratic movement in China.

Mark Palmer, former US ambassador to Hungary, believes that in matters of democracy promotion “a truly massive opening campaign is warranted for China, and will achieve massively valuable results.”²¹ He believes western embassies in countries like China should become sources of democratic activism. When the Chinese government banned an academic conference on democracy planned for Beijing in May 2004, the Dutch embassy boldly offered its premises for the event. I see no evidence that the Canadian embassy in Beijing is doing likewise, promoting Canada’s great democratic tradition in China. Its website has links to information only about Canada’s economy, society, technology, and environment. How is it possible for a democratic nation to project an image of itself that leaves out its central institutional feature?

Democracy promotion also means earmarking additional funding for the Mandarin language services of Radio Canada International. At present that service is sporadic and skimpy. A beefed-up service should have a mission to disseminate otherwise-unavailable information to listeners in China about the shortcomings of its dictatorship and the virtues of democracy. Radio Canada should be designed to stimulate China’s best and brightest to build a great democratic nation at home, not to emigrate to Canada. The astounding success of Radio Free Asia’s caller phone-in programs (which I highly recommend for anyone who doubts the democratic yearnings of China’s people) could easily be replicated and built upon.

²¹ Mark Palmer, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World’s Last Dictators* by 2025 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 248.

The longer that democratic change is delayed in China, the more difficult it will be for democracy to consolidate quickly in the country because inequalities will worsen and because the violence needed to overthrow one-party rule will be more severe. China had an opportunity in 1989 for a relatively smooth transition to democracy. It lost that chance. A transition today would be fraught, but would still almost certainly succeed. With each passing year, however, those challenges mount. If a democratic transition in China is difficult, we will have only ourselves to blame because we never took seriously the possibility or the responsibility for this momentous event.

We should look forward to the day when a democratically elected Chinese leader is welcomed in Ottawa with full honours and respect. Until that day, we serve China best, and we honour our nation most, by working to build the foundations of democracy in China.