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## Comment

# CHINA'S LONG MARCH TO FREEDOM

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A little over a decade ago, Henry Rowen published his essay, “The Short March: China’s Road to Democracy,” and predicted that China would become a democracy around the year 2015.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, Rowen noted that China’s economic growth was accompanied by positive changes which were enabling freedom to expand. He predicted the further deepening, expansion, and maturation of grassroots democracy (especially village elections); substantial progress toward the rule of law; and greater freedom for the mass media. Such developments would prepare the ground for China to follow in the footsteps of many democratized countries.

Rowen has now taken renewed stock of China’s ongoing transformation, as well as advances in the study of democratization. He has returned with essentially the same argument, though more nuanced. China has already enjoyed remarkable economic growth, and if it can reasonably sustain this robust growth, the country will become more free. Rather than simply predicting that democracy will take hold in China by 2015, however, Rowen’s forecast is now more modulated: In the framework of the Freedom House rankings, China will likely be Partly Free by 2015 and Free by 2025.

Rowen’s forecast rests on a simple but powerful statistical observation: Non-oil-dominated countries that reach a certain level of Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDPpc)—namely, a level of \$8,000 per annum, as converted to 2005 U.S. dollars at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exchange rates—have invariably become freer and are rated at least Partly Free. China, Rowen suggests, will be no exception. The

country's GDPpc was estimated at \$7,600 in 2006, in PPP terms.<sup>2</sup> Thus it will not be long before Rowen's forecast can be empirically tested.

Is Rowen's forecast realistic? After I was asked to comment on Rowen's paper, I assigned the paper to a graduate seminar. To my surprise, every graduate student who wrote on it criticized Rowen for being overly optimistic and even Panglossian. Other commentators (aside from my students) contend that the sort of forecast made by Rowen and others is part of a "China fantasy." Such critics dismiss the relationship between development and democracy as "bogus axioms of political development."<sup>3</sup> For them, those who predict eventual political liberalization and democracy in China are providing political cover for U.S. and other Western businesses to trade and invest in a country ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). These commentators warn us that "trade with China is merely helping its autocratic regime to become richer and more powerful."<sup>4</sup> In this view, China will continue to grow, but it will likely be an exception to the development-democracy relationship. Even if the Chinese party-state were to reform the political system, it would do so "only slowly and on terms dictated mainly by Chinese culture and bureaucratic history—not on Western, and particularly not on Anglo-American lines."<sup>5</sup>

Other analysts find that the nature of the Chinese system drives them to pessimism about China's prospects. Gordon Chang, for example, has predicted China's collapse.<sup>6</sup> For Minxin Pei, China's rapid growth has so far merely provided the ruling elite with greater resources to preserve the status quo. Pei believes, however, that the Chinese state has evolved into a decentralized predatory state. The "unrestrained predation" erodes state capacity and puts sustainable economic development at risk, thereby dooming China to stagnation.<sup>7</sup> After all, most authoritarian governments in the developing world have failed to achieve sustained growth, though some of China's neighbors have been major exceptions. If Pei is correct and China is doomed to stagnation, then Rowen's forecast will remain at best a forlorn dream. For Pei, China needs first to adopt fundamental political reforms before it can continue to grow well economically.

For now, as China's leaders worry more about economic overheating than about stagnation, the Pei thesis remains an urgent call for political reform. At the same time, those who seek to answer the question of whether China is the exception to the relationship between development and democracy can point to certain aspects of Chinese development to show that this relationship is weak. Grassroots elections have spread to the villages, but not much beyond the villages. China has made some progress toward the rule of law, but the CCP still looms large. Even with the introduction of more competition and the Internet, censorship remains a fact of life. Indeed, the Chinese government has led the world in taming the Web. More than a quarter-century of robust growth has furnished the ruling elite with a reservoir of performance

legitimacy upon which to draw in dealing with the painful restructuring of the state sector, as well as in coping with adverse events such as the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. Skeptics of China's democratic prospects also have a point in that the CCP elite have shown no inclination to share power with competitors.

Various opinion surveys also suggest that a majority of the Chinese people support the existing system. In the 2006 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey of global attitudes, Chinese respondents were asked (Q160): "When it comes to economic development do you think the way that the Chinese government manages its economy and its political system is more of an advantage or more of a disadvantage for China?" Of the respondents, 78 percent chose "more of an advantage."<sup>8</sup> Studies of China's emerging middle class and entrepreneurs suggest that these potential social forces are keener to protect their narrow economic interests with more legal rules than to rock the boat of single-party rule.<sup>9</sup> Some Chinese scholars have asserted that China would do well to pursue liberalization, especially the rule of law, but without the democratization component.<sup>10</sup> Others have suggested that, as China's power grows, the CCP may seek to restructure global culture in favor of authoritarianism by "inspiring actors in other Asian countries to uphold or restore authoritarian rule."<sup>11</sup>

### **The Promise and Limits of Theory**

Despite the signs suggesting the durability of China's nondemocratic rule, even the casual visitor to China would quickly note how much more freedom the Chinese enjoy today compared with the early years of economic reforms, let alone in the Maoist era. Once the land of blue Mao suits, today's China is a country of tremendous diversity. Despite the presence of CCP censors, Web logs are full of sensational revelations which compete for the attention of an Internet-using audience that already numbers more than 140 million. People can move around, change jobs, go to karaoke lounges, chase pop stars, and even undergo sex-change operations. In the coming years, the Chinese economy will continue to grow to support improvements in living standards and educational levels; the rule of law will likely become more firmly established (the latest development is the enactment of a March 2007 law that protects private-property rights); and village elections will probably spread to urban neighborhoods, while other experiments in governance will go forward. Thus I find it hard to avoid agreeing with Rowen that China will move into the Partly Free category sometime in the not-too-distant future.

Unless skeptics of theory think that the people in the People's Republic of China are of a different species, the doubters cannot simply dismiss the development-democracy relationship as embodied in the Rowen thesis as "bogus axioms of political development." The onus is

on these skeptics to prove that China will be the exception to the general pattern, for studies of political regimes show that development breeds democracy.<sup>12</sup> Dictatorships do eventually die with economic development, although they may die in many different ways.

To be sure, given that China is only one case, theorists of regime transition may be able to provide a rough indication of when China might enter a zone of transition, but will not be able to pinpoint exactly when the transition to democracy will occur without allowing for a wide margin of error. China's large geographic area, significant regional disparities, rising levels of income inequality, and legacy of communist rule may present challenges for governance and thus delay China's democratic transition.<sup>13</sup> The actual transition will undoubtedly be a politically contingent process.

Yet there are some significant factors that augur well for the expansion of civil and political liberties in China. To begin with, while in practice the Chinese ruling elite has been slow to adopt political reforms, its discourse has undergone a profound transformation in the past decade. In the years following the 1989 crackdown on demonstrations around Beijing's Tiananmen Square, China's leaders studiously avoided favorable references to political reforms and sought to resist external pressures for greater human rights safeguards. Today, China's leaders are clearly in dialogue with the West on issues of democratization and human rights, and have repeatedly talked about the importance of political reforms. During his 2006 tour of the United States, President Hu Jintao said that China will continue to promote political-system reforms and socialist democracy, which includes broadening citizens' political participation, as well as enhancing democratic elections, decision making, management, and supervision.<sup>14</sup> According to Hu, there is no modernization without democracy.

More recently, at his annual press conference following the closing session of the National People's Congress in March 2007, Premier Wen Jiabao blamed rampant corruption on the excessive concentration of power and prescribed political reforms to curb such power. Most interestingly, Wen discussed democracy in terms of universal values. According to Wen, "Democracy, law, freedom, human rights, equality, and fraternity are not characteristics unique to capitalism. They are the shared fruits of civilization that have come into being in the history of the whole world and are among the values that mankind has collectively pursued." For Wen, the promotion of a market-oriented economic system ought to be accompanied by the development of democratic politics through political-system reforms, so as to "guarantee people's rights to democratic elections, democratic decision making, democratic management, and democratic supervision."<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, Wen qualified his statement by saying that China will walk its own path to democracy in light of its own social and historical

development. Yet from a historical perspective, the emergence of a large number of democracies—including some in East Asia—makes it less likely for China's elite to think that the full panoply of liberal-democratic self-government is out of bounds. If democratic India's growing economy starts to overtake China's, as some authors have suggested it may,<sup>16</sup> China's leaders will likely feel a great sense of urgency to reform the Chinese system so as not to fall behind. Likewise, developments in Hong Kong and Taiwan will have meaningful implications for political reforms on the mainland.

### China's Aspirations

A review of recent speeches by Hu and Wen leaves little doubt that China's ruling elite has no alternative to the global discourse on liberty and democracy. It is hard to imagine that they would want to champion active hostility to democracy or seek to spread authoritarianism in the region. China's aspirations to be a responsible large power in an international system in which the leading powers are democracies may also help to socialize the Chinese elite to the norms of democracy. Until recently, China was on the receiving end of unequal treaties, imperialist invasions, and foreign embargos, and Chinese foreign policy was animated by a strong sense of resentment toward the international system. Following its 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization, however, China has finally become a member of virtually all leading international organizations and thus a major player in the existing system. Previously, national salvation and national dignity trumped demands for individual dignity and individual rights. But with the country's national identity now secure, it appears that the pursuit of individual dignity and human rights will increasingly come to the fore.<sup>17</sup>

In a fundamental sense, China's national dignity will remain incomplete without greater respect for individual dignity and human rights. Scholars working from the U.S. perspective have already noted a growing awareness of rights on the part of different Chinese groups.<sup>18</sup> On matters large and small—ranging from home ownership to the collection of royalty fees on music sung at karaoke bars and the use of firecrackers during the Chinese spring festival—the play of interests and their articulation has been apparent and has helped to shape and reshape relevant laws and public policies. In line with Rowen's prediction, the recently introduced and massive expansion of tertiary education, coupled with demographic changes, means that China's younger generations will be better educated and more capable of articulating their interests in pursuit of individual dignity.

Ultimately, China's political transformation will not be determined by the top elite alone, but will be subject to negotiation and contestation among diverse interests in state and society.<sup>19</sup> Chinese leaders cannot sim-

ply dictate but must also learn to lead and even to accommodate an increasingly educated and well-informed populace, with its rising expectations in matters of liberty, political participation, and democratic governance.

In the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, it became fashionable to argue that China had no democratic tradition.<sup>20</sup> This view conveniently ignores how China, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), became one of the first Asian countries to experiment with representative government and competitive elections—an experiment cut short by the 1913 assassination in Shanghai of premier-elect Song Jiaoren of the Nationalist Party. Nonetheless, “the possibility of a liberal-democratic alternative in modern China” persevered during the Republican era (1911–49) under the most inhospitable domestic and international circumstances, until it was finally consumed by the conflagration of communist takeover.<sup>21</sup>

In fundamental ways, contemporary Chinese have started to revive the liberal-democratic alternative in a strong and more prosperous China. On various measures—such as economic growth, governance, and rule of law—they have made a decent start.<sup>22</sup> The international context for this liberal-democratic alternative also cannot be better. While liberals in the Republican era had to labor in the long, dark shadows cast by fascism and communism, both have since suffered defeat or imploded. Today, most societies in East Asia are already free and democratic. Having endured the throes of dynastic decay, international aggression, multiple civil wars, and much self-inflicted domestic turmoil, the Chinese may feel content to enjoy their newfound prosperity and avoid rocking the boat—for now. Yet rising wealth is bound, sooner or later, to bring rising expectations for greater civil and political liberties.

## NOTES

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2. CIA World Factbook, at [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/ch.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/ch.html). Needless to say, such estimates are fraught with difficulties and are thus subject to debate.

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