

# Democracy in China: Challenge or Opportunity?

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After the Cold War, scholars and politicians in both the East and West all believed, according to Francis Fukuyama, that Capitalism had won a final victory and history would end with a Western-style, liberal democratic system in every country. However, world history did not proceed as they expected.

Perhaps it was unexpected, but Western-style liberal democratic structures did not blossom into full-blown political systems in countries like the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, despite the breakdown of previous political systems. It is worth pointing out that the present political development in Russia has been significantly different from the so-called “liberal democracy” in the West and that even now some countries in Latin American and Asia, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, have also encountered many difficulties when attempting to promote liberal democratic reforms.

China’s reforms, however, are evolving very rapidly. Her unique political development model is not only distinct from the traditional Soviet Union Socialist model, but also diverges from the Western liberal democratic style. The Chinese political model challenges the classic liberal democratic theory in Western literature and raises questions such as: Is democracy a common value for all humankind? Does a non-liberal form of democracy really exist?

These concerns also attract the most heated debates about Chinese democratic reform within China itself since the founding of the nation in 1949. This political discourse in China is concentrated in questions like: What is the relationship between democracy and social modernization? Does western-style democracy also apply in China? Is there a Chinese model of democracy? Is democracy an opportunity or a challenge for China?

Next year will be the first centenary anniversary of establishing a democratic republic

and ending the feudal-autocracy rule in China. As a Chinese scholar, I want to express my syntheses and reflections of the democratic movement in China for the past 100 years, especially the last three decades of political development during the “reform and opening-up” period. I will also offer my answers to the above questions and concerns.

Chinese democratic pioneer Dr. Sun Yat-Sen considered democracy as an inevitable step in the advancement of civilization. He preached to Chinese people: “This world trend is vast and mighty. To follow its suit shall prosper, whereas to oppose it shall perish.”<sup>1</sup> As the founder of the Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang), he led the first democratic revolution in Chinese history, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty and the final Chinese emperor, establishing the original Republic of China (ROC). However, the democratic revolution that Sun strove for ultimately did not succeed.

Not long after the establishment of the ROC, China experienced a short period of restoration of the dethroned monarch, followed by a *de facto* dictatorship ruled by Sun’s Nationalist successors. They eventually lost support of the Chinese people and then were thrown out of the mainland by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In fact, the key reason that the CCP could defeat the Kuomintang during the last Civil War was because of democracy. The founding fathers and leaders of the CCP all stressed the importance of democracy, especially Chen Duxiu, who was one of the leaders of the famous democratic movement—“the May 4th Movement of 1919”—in modern Chinese history.

Chairman Mao Zedong was also a feverish advocator of Chinese democratic politics. In his masterpiece “On New Democracy,” he systematically illustrated the CCP’s guiding principle on Chinese development.<sup>2</sup> The CCP led by him founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, which was really a milestone in the history of Chinese democracy. Mao Zedong explicitly declared that only through democracy could a government survive from being overthrown and democracy could also bring about the Chinese national goal of “great rejuvenation”.

After 1949, the CCP made tremendous exploration into promoting democracy in

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Yat-Sen: *Essays on Democracy and Others (Sanmingzhuyi)*, see *All Works of Sun Yat-Sen*. Beijing: Zhong Hua Books Co., 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy” (Xingmingzhuzhuyi Lun), *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. Beijing: People’s Press, 1969, pp. 662-711.

China, which led to several outstanding achievements. Examples could be listed such as: abolishing feudalistic hierarchy and privilege, equalizing gender differences, and enabling poor workers and farmers to be involved in national administration. However, very soon after 1949, Chinese democracy regressed into a severely degraded situation. The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution, also led by Mao Zedong, completely destroyed the normal democratic mechanism and legal progress and culminated in absolute autarchy.

The reform and opening-up policy designed by Deng Xiaoping marked a new epoch in Chinese democracy. Undoubtedly, the reforms started in 1978 allowed the Chinese economy to boom at an extremely rapid speed, which created a miracle in modern world economic history. During the 30-year period from 1978 to 2008, Chinese GDP grew from 364.5 billion yuan (approximately 50.1 billion USD at 2010 exchange rate) to 30.067 trillion yuan (about 4.295 trillion USD). The average annual growth rate exceeded 9% and the GDP per capita also increased from 381 yuan (about 54.3 USD) to 22,600 yuan (approx. 3,228.57 USD).<sup>3</sup> The nation's comprehensive strength also leapt forward to third place in the world.

But many Western scholars believed that China's reform and opening-up policy only achieved great success concerning economic modernization, with no significant progress in political democratization. Some even went so far as to claim the reason for the successful Chinese economic modernization was precisely because China did not have any accompanying democratic reforms.<sup>4</sup> The example most often raised in this literature was the former Soviet Union, for which the pace of democratization reform exceeded the speed of economic modernization. These critical observations also overlooked the fact that Chinese reform and opening-up was dealing with more than a billion people. Unfamiliar changes to such a massive population, if too hasty or not carefully thought through, would cause unprecedented suffering to hundreds of millions, as well as negatively affect economies and trade partners both regionally and globally.

Chinese modernization is an integrated, multi-level social change process, which includes not only enormous economic progress, but also tremendous political and cultural improvement. The political impetus to economic prosperity was actually

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<sup>3</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, "Statistics Report of 2009".

<sup>4</sup> Susan Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*. Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1993.

more significant in China's reform than many Western countries. Mao Zedong, who deeply understood the Chinese social and historic traditions, clearly stated: "Politics is the commander, the soul, and the bloodline of all economic tasks."<sup>5</sup> If there were no political reform, China's modernization would have never succeeded. This point is already proven by the historical and record-setting progress made during the Chinese reform and opening-up era.

China's reform and opening-up process was initiated from significant political reform 30 years ago. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP (hereinafter "the Third Plenary Session") became the landmark for Chinese economic reform, which was actually also an historic venue of political reform by the CCP. The Third Plenary Session reorganized the CCP's power structure and redirected the Party's political principles and working emphases. Without this political reform, it would have been impossible to attain later achievement in economic structural change. Certain Western scholars use their democratic standards, such as a multi-party system, universal suffrage, and checks and balances, to evaluate Chinese political development in the reform era and conclude that Chinese reform is more economic than political. This is, of course, an unnecessary bias and misunderstanding, as I will further elaborate.

Concurrent with the fundamental change of economic structure, the Chinese political system also experiences a profound reform. The impact of political system to economic development is much more powerful in China than that in the Western countries. Without political structural reform, there would be no economic systematic change. This is a basic experience gained during the Chinese reform era. Deng Xiaoping, the designer and leader of Chinese reform, deeply understood this point. He articulated: "If we fail to do that [political reform], we shall be unable to preserve the gains we have made in the economic reform." "Without political reform, economic reform cannot succeed ... So in the final analysis, the success of all our other reforms depends on the success of the political reform."<sup>6</sup> As it turned out, the process of Chinese reform and opening-up is an integral and comprehensive process of social changes, including economic, political, and cultural dimensions in Chinese society.

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<sup>5</sup> See *Article Collections of Mao Zedong*, edited by Central Office of Document, Beijing: People's Press, 1996, p. 351.

<sup>6</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "Reform of the Leadership System of the Party and State", *Selections of Deng Xiaoping Volume II*, Beijing: People's Press, 1983, pp. 320-343.

Reform of political ideology is a crucial premise for political reform and democratic construction. Deng Xiaoping even considered the change of ideas as the fundamental premise for the entire Chinese reform effort. Thus, he identified “emancipating our minds” as the primary task for this reform movement. He further stated: “Our drive for the four modernizations will get nowhere unless rigid thinking is broken down and the minds of cadres and of the masses are completely emancipated.”<sup>7</sup> To simplify it, emancipation of minds refers to breaking loose from the bondage of old-fashioned dogmas and out-dated ideas, to develop new ideas and new theories that keep pace with social advancement and the times, and to guide social practices using these new ideas.

China’s reform over the past 30 years fully demonstrates that the change of ideas is closely related to socio-political development. In some sense, the process of Chinese reform is a consequence of clashes between ideas of old and new. It is a process of new ideas defeating old ones, which, in turn, promotes civil advancement and social well-being. From the macro-level perspective, since the beginning of reform and opening-up, the CCP’s largest theoretical innovation is the establishment of an ideological system of gradually building socialism with Chinese characteristics. This includes “Deng Xiaoping Theory”, important thoughts of “three represents,” and the “scientific outlook on development”.

From the perspective of political theory, “emancipating of thoughts” not only means the new ideas are in lieu of old ones, it also directly and profoundly influences the Chinese socio-political life after the reform and vigorously propels Chinese democratic advancement. These new ideas include: people-oriented government, human rights, private property, rule of law, civil society, harmonious society, government innovation, good governance, political civilization, and globalization. Most of these ideas are learned and borrowed from the Western developed countries, some of which had previously been criticized and even banned as the thoughts of the Capitalistic ideology prior to the reform era.<sup>8</sup>

The revolutionary changes in China’s ideology and economic system also lead to a

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<sup>7</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Emancipating Our Minds, Seeking Truth from Facts and Uniting as One in Looking to the Future”, *Selections of Deng Xiaoping* Volume II, Beijing: People’s Press, 1983, p 143.

<sup>8</sup> For details on this point, please refer to Yu Keping, *Emancipation of Mind and Political Progress*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2008.

great improvement of political development. In the past 60 years, the themes of Chinese politics have experienced tremendous alternations from revolution to reform, from struggle to harmony, from dictatorship to democracy, from rule by people to rule of law, and from state to society. It is especially in the 30 years after the reform and opening-up that we can see Chinese political development gradually moves in the direction of democratization. The CCP changes its role from a revolutionary party to a ruling party. The functions of the CCP and the state government start to separate and the Party's activities are restricted within the state legal system. A relatively independent civil society begins to evolve and gradually plays a more and more important role in decision-making processes. The principle of rule of law is formally established as an ultimate objective for CCP and the Chinese people to strive for. Comprehensive reform on legal system is also underway. Direct election as a basic political procedure is practiced in most rural villages. Human rights are formally protected by the country's Constitution.

However, Chinese political reform is largely a governance reform. The focus of the political reform is concentrated in ameliorating the state governance ability in the areas of creating a service-oriented government, improving the quality of public services, making decisions democratically and rationally, adopting public hearing systems, opening administrative procedures to public scrutiny, and promoting political transparency.

So, if the aforementioned advancements in China's political system are properly observed by foreign analysts, they would not come to such a conclusion that the political legitimacy of CCP and the Chinese government is only based on successful economic development and the accompanying improvements of people's livelihood. It is also unwise to ignore or forget that mere "democratic" governance has little or nothing to do with political legitimization and gaining people's trust. In addition, to consider China's successful reform and opening-up story as the model of Asian "enlightened despotism" is departing from the truth. On the contrary, both positive and negative sides and both values and lessons from Chinese modernization and reform all indicate that economic progress or improvement of people's livelihood by themselves can neither legalize a political regime, nor guarantee the public's support for the government.

Our survey data also shows that the biggest challenges faced by the Chinese government nowadays—or put another way, the most unsatisfactory issues that concern the public about their government—lie not in economic growth, but in social problems such as social inequality, the growing gap between the rich and poor, serious corruption among public officials, social instability, high crime rates, environmental degradation, and ignorance of citizens' human rights. To solve these problems, it is far from enough to merely rely on economic development: it is imperative to enhance democratic governance. This is the basic reason why Chinese President Hu Jintao stresses the importance of “scientific development.” The essence of “scientific development” lies in the coordinated, comprehensive, and sustainable development policies and practices among the political, economic, cultural, societal, and environmental arenas.<sup>9</sup> This is also the reason that Premier Wen Jiabao continually underscores that democracy and rule of law, as well as equality and justice, are the primary values of true Socialism.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, we must admit that the Chinese way of political development—especially the political democratization—is extremely different from the Western democratic tradition. Differences are natural, and not automatically antagonistic, given the different contexts and cultures from which Eastern and Western civilizations have arisen. Consequently, it is almost dead-end to explain the Chinese way of democratic politics through using existing Western democratic theories. Likewise, from the standards of Western democratic political values, it is hard to recognize that the Chinese political system is heading for democracy. Based on the Western theory of democracy, a multiparty system, universal suffrage, and the separation of legislative, executive, and judiciary powers are normally considered as the major standards for a democratic polity. Missing any one of these standards, a political system cannot be labeled as a “democracy.” According to such standards, China obviously neither belongs to the “democratic camp,” nor is a member of the “world democratic league.”

In its original meaning, democracy means “government by the people”. Thus, the fundamental criteria to judge whether one country is a “democracy” or not is government's responsiveness to its citizens rather the aforementioned three

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<sup>9</sup> Hu Jintao, “Holding High the Flag of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Striving for the New Victory of Constructing an Overall Xiaokang Society”, Speech on the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of CCP.

<sup>10</sup> Wen Jiabao, “Government Work Report to the Fifth Plenary Session of 10<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress”, March 5, 2007.

standards frequently waved by western scholars. In this sense, “democracy” is a continuum rather than a dichotomy. As long as one country has formal institutions to guarantee that government policies can effectively reflect the public’s opinions, that citizens can participate in political life, and the incumbent political regime has to respond to people’s interests, it can all be considered as democratic systems regardless of the particular party systems, election procedures, or power separation mechanisms. Therefore, Chinese leaders and mainstream scholars insist that China does not necessarily need to imitate or copy a Western democratic system, but we can and should create a democratic model with Chinese characteristics and therefore practice democracy which is suited to our culture and people’s needs.

What does Chinese-style democracy exactly mean? The CCP proposes four types of democracy in China: democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic supervision. But as far as democratic elections go, Chinese government seems to concentrate more on political deliberation. Thus, some scholars consider the Chinese way of democracy as “deliberative democracy”. China insists on practicing the CCP’s dominant rule and not necessarily a multiparty system or parliamentary politics. However, Chinese polity is not simply a single party politics, but the political system of “multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CCP.” China also does not implement a complete “checks and balances” to separate legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, but there is a relative independence among legislation, administration, and judiciary branches, which are divided into three separate systems.

Ideologically, Marxism doctrines still take chief position in the domain of political thinking in China, but other ideological genres can also survive in the Chinese society, all of which form a unique picture of coexistence between unitary political ideology and pluralistic social thoughts. As for the relationship between the military and politics, China always maintains a civilian government that controls the military. Military powers are excluded from influencing politics and the CCP firmly controls the armed forces. For the relationship between the state and the society, a relatively independent civil society is evolving and it will continue to become more embedded in people’s lives. However, similar to the government-led market economy in China, Chinese civil society is also government-led and most of them do not possess an independent status such as their Western counterparts enjoy.



Since the publication of my paper “Democracy is a Good Thing,” a heated debate about democracy took place among Chinese political theorists. The main themes of the debate include: Is democracy a “universal value”? Does democracy have common features? What are the relations between the universality and the uniqueness of democracy? I have frequently addressed these issues in papers and interviews by emphasizing that democratic politics is a universal value among human beings and has common features. However, because the realization of democracy needs certain economic, political, and cultural conditions and these conditions vary significantly across countries and time, democracy in different countries normally contains unique and respective features.

A democratic system is a marriage of universality and particularity. We cannot make arbitrary conclusions that democracy has only one model merely based on the assumption that democracy is a universal value and has common features. That is to say, we cannot deny the specialty of democracy simply with its universal features. On the other hand, we cannot exaggerate the particularity of democracy and totally ignore the existence of a universality of democracy only based on the evidence of diversified political and economic conditions in different countries. Therefore, we cannot deny the universality of democracy simply with its special features and consider that Chinese democracy has no similarities compared to other countries. The democracy that Chinese people are striving for also features public elections, power supervision, and citizens’ participation. But the election, supervision, and participation systems will have to be branded with unique Chinese characteristics.

The nature of democracy is government by the people or “people become their own masters”, which is reflected in a series of institutions and mechanisms that guarantee the citizens’ democratic rights. No matter which party system, checks and balance of power system, and election system a certain country adopts, as long as it can preserve the value of government of, by and for the people, it should be treated as a democratic system. The key here is whether people are really their “own masters;” in what degree do they “master;” and whether government behaviors and activities reflect people’s will and represent people’s basic interests. These should be the fundamental criteria to evaluate democratic politics and its development progress.

To conclude, from the past experiences of Chinese political development, I believe it is China's urgent need to not only review its traditional Socialist democratic theories, but also to rethink the popular Western democratic theories. The Chinese development model is not fixed yet and still facing many challenges. Therefore, I dare not say China's democratic model is completely mature or successful. But at least, I can claim that this model is distinctive from the traditional Soviet model as well as contemporary Western representative democracy. It is not only an outcome, but also a part of Chinese modernization. It basically fits into the process of modernization within Chinese society and is the endeavor of the Chinese people to maintain social stability, protect citizens' basic human rights, and promote China's belief in good governance. To China, democracy is a challenge, as well as an opportunity. But the opportunity far outweighs the challenge. Chinese democracy, growing out of Chinese tradition and society, will not only bring good fortune to the Chinese people, but also contribute greatly to the advancement of democratic theory and practice for all mankind.

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