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The Chinese Route toward Democracy- not on America's Terms

by Darren Ong

In a speech in Kyoto during a recent tour to the Far East, President Bush stirred up controversy by asserting the inevitability of political reform in China:

"As China reforms its economy, its leaders are finding that once the door to freedom is opened, even a crack, it cannot be closed: [they want] more freedom to express themselves, to worship without state control and to print Bibles and other sacred texts without fear of punishment."ⁱ

Bush echoed a common sentiment held by western political thinkers. Former President of the Republic of China, Lee Teng-hui arrived at the same conclusion. Lee compared developments in Taiwan in the recent past to the changes happening in the PRC in an interview for the *Wall Street Journal*:

“Vigorous economic development leads to independent thinking. People hope to be able to fully satisfy their free will and see their rights fully protected. And then demand ensues for political reform. . . . The model of our quiet revolution will eventually take hold on the Chinese mainland.”ⁱⁱ

Despite the optimism expressed by these leaders the Chinese government seems as resistant as ever towards change, maintaining a policy described as “*Perestroika* without *Glasnost*” and holding as firmly as ever to the reins of power. I will argue that the communist party will succeed in holding on to power without introducing major social reforms, with few exceptions and that *Perestroika* without *Glasnost* will remain the policy in place in China for a lot longer than some Western thinkers predict.

Why are these thinkers so certain that political reform must follow economic reform in China?

This is simply due to the fact that in the West, political liberalization and economic liberalization have

come hand in hand. Westerners thus see a simple parallel between the situation in China and the situation in Europe centuries ago.

As liberalism emerged as a vigorous revolutionary force in 18th century Europe, one aspect of the struggle for individual liberty in that time was the quest for economic liberty. Generally, the European liberals opposed mercantilism and advocated laissez faire. Two prominent liberal thinkers that advocated free market reforms were Bernard Mandeville through his *Fable of the Bees* published in 1714, and the more well-known Adam Smith, author of *the Wealth of Nations*. Through these efforts, the early liberal movement in Europe was predominantly associated with capitalist ideas, while the conservatives and reactionaries were the party that tended to favor restrictions on both social and economic freedoms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another precedent was set in the fall of the Iron curtain in the early 90's. As the former communist nations of Eastern Europe reformed their economy, they also instituted freer political systems and have prospered as a result. The transition from communism experienced by the nations of the former Soviet Union has not been as smooth, but political reform has taken place in these nations as well.^{iv}

It should not be taken for granted however that China will follow either of these precedents. Culturally and historically China differs greatly from Europe. Communism in China too, is not the same brand as Soviet communism. It is thus lazy and inaccurate analysis to simply conclude that China will follow the path of the Eastern European communist states due to a presumably “common ideology”.

In the 19th of October 2005, possibly in response to criticism about its human rights record, the Chinese Communist Party released a white paper entitled *the Building of Political Democracy in*

China.^v The 24-page document has this in the prologue:

Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics is being constantly improved and developed. Since China adopted the reform and opening-up policies at the end of the 1970s, while making efforts to steadily deepen the reform of its economic system, the country has unswervingly pushed forward reforms of its political system. China's democratic system has been continuously improved, and the forms of democracy are becoming more varied. The people are exercising fully their right to be masters of the state. The building of political democracy with Chinese characteristics is progressing with the times, exhibiting great vigor and vitality.

A key phrase here, obviously is “democracy with Chinese characteristics”. The Chinese Communist Party asserts that political reform is occurring in China along with its economic liberalization, but that this reform is taking a uniquely Chinese path, and should not be compared with similar developments in the West.

This sentiment is backed by an uncredited editorial in the *Asia Times*, a newsmagazine based in Hong Kong. The editorial asserts:

The specific political forms through which greater liberties are institutionalized in China will almost certainly not take the form of Western-style democracy. Look not just at China, but at the rest of East Asia. Even highly industrialized Japan remains stuck with, in essence, one-party rule. Democratic progress and implementation of the rule of law - whether in the commercial or political sphere - are slow and cumbersome elsewhere in the region.^{vi}

Asian intellectuals and politicians have argued that Asian culture and philosophy is simply not compatible with the individualistic conception of democracy prescribed by the West. David Wong, a philosophy professor from Duke University notes in an interview for the *Boston Globe* that “there is

more emphasis, in the moral and political traditions of Asia, on providing material security and good order. And civil rights are not as assured."^{vii}

This is precisely the reason why the CCP's strategy is so effective. As long as the Chinese public enjoys economic prosperity, there will be little pressure for the Communist party to expand political freedoms.

In fact, most of the pressure for reform has come from the older “Tiananmen Generation”, the people who were in their 20s during the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. This generation is the one that tends to be far less supportive of the PRC government. The younger students who were born after the start of the Deng Xiaoping reforms, growing up with little memory of Tiananmen and no memory of the Cultural Revolution have instead experienced an age where China has grown prosperous and influential in the world stage under the guidance of the CCP. This generation has also noted the difficulties that Russia has faced since the end of the Cold War, many Chinese no longer consider immediate political liberalization to be wise. As the “Tiananmen Generation” of their parents ages and loses its influence, calls for reform may become even more muted.^{viii}

Financial analyst Henry Blodget, in his article “China's biggest gamble”^{ix} published by Slate (an online newsmagazine owned by the *Washington Post*) notes the present trends among Chinese attitudes toward political freedom:

[Western theories] presume that free speech and elections are high on the average Chinese citizen's agenda, but, for now, a strong economy seems to take priority. ("The average guy wants to buy a car, eat vitamins, and get his kids into Berkeley," said one Beijing entrepreneur. "As long as the government doesn't screw that up, he's willing to play along.")

Blodget asserts however that the Chinese government is embracing certain kinds of reform. For

instance the communist party is making an effort to reduce corruption and ensuring property and legal rights, lest foreign investment be jeopardized. Blodget says that the government has also been promoting greater freedom of the press in the realms of business and finance, as a free press makes it easier for criminal and anti-competitive practices by the private sector to be exposed, and thus this lessens the party's regulatory burden.

Criticism of the government itself is strictly proscribed. Blodget's thesis is that the Chinese government will get away with restricting political freedom as long as the economy remains healthy. The real challenge faced by this “democracy with Chinese characteristics” is when the economy stagnates, with the inevitable bust following the boom. Blodget reckons that it is at this time that political reforms are most likely to be instituted, rather than, as is conventionally argued, when the economy is booming. Blodget ends his insightful piece by claiming “if China can survive that inevitable economic crisis without a political uprising, we will probably be able to conclude that a dynamic free-market economy need not, in fact, go hand in hand with democracy.”

Blodget's analysis is thorough and accurate, and I agree with him wholeheartedly. Moreover, I believe that it is not unthinkable China will be able to survive a moderate economic slowdown without having to undergo too radical a political revolution. It seems in fact reasonable to me that “democracy with Chinese characteristics” rather than anything approaching the western model will define politics in China for years to come.

- i qtd. by Daniel, Caroline. "Bush calls for more political freedom in China." *Financial Times Online*, November 16, 2005.
<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/10072396/>
- ii Teng-hui Lee, "Taiwan's Quiet Revolution." Interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 1996, A22.
- iii Ball, Terence and Dagger, Richard, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*, pages 61-63
- iv Hauss, Charles. *Comparative Politics* Chapter 8
- v The full text in English can be found in http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-10/19/content_486206.htm
- vi "China: From freer trade to greater freedom?" *Asia Times* May 30, 2000
<http://www.atimes.com/editor/BE30Ba01.html>
- vii qtd in Steinglass Matt, "Whose Asian values?" *Boston Globe*, November 20, 2005 par 10.
- viii "Tiananmen Square protests of 1989." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 8 Dec 2005, 03:38 UTC. 8 Dec 2005, 22:41
http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tiananmen_Square_protests_of_1989&oldid=30552874
- ix Blodget Henry. "China's Biggest Gamble." *Slate* 22 April 2005
<http://www.slate.com/id/2117169/>