

Democratic Gradualism in China: Reflections of Xu Wenli

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On 24 December 2002 veteran Chinese dissident Xu Wenli was released on medical parole from a mainland prison after serving four years of a 13-year sentence. His sentencing stemmed from his organizing an oppositional political party, the China Democratic Party. Mr. Xu was arrested for the first time in 1979 during the Democracy Wall movement as an outspoken proponent of political freedoms. Charged with "illegally organizing a clique to overthrow the government," he began serving a 14-year prison sentence in 1981. After serving 12 years and 48 days, much of it in solitary confinement, he was paroled in May 1993.

Mr. Xu was arrested again in 1998 for founding the China Democracy Party, and, among other efforts, calling for independent labor unions. He was convicted on charges of endangering state security and sentenced to 13 years. His case received diplomatic and activist attention throughout his imprisonment.

Mr. Xu is currently in residence at Brown University's Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies as a Visiting Senior Fellow. He and his wife He Xintong currently reside in Providence, Rhode Island. The following is a translated text and conversation with Mr. Xu on his impressions of democracy in China.

OVER THE LAST CENTURY, GENERATIONS of Chinese ideological patriots have fought perseveringly for a democratic society in an ancient land where dictators have reigned for over two thousand years. Every time the Chinese see a glimpse of democracy, their hopes are quickly shattered. After so many setbacks and failures, we cannot help but ponder: is it that the Chinese are not in favor of democracy or that we are simply not endowed with the talent to establish one in China?

The early movement towards democracy in China can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty, when Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao pioneered the Reform Movement of 1898 and six reformers laid down their lives for it. Many reasons are attributed to

the failure, but the essential one was that the reformers sought results hastily. They attempted, in the "Hundred Days Reform," to thrust China abruptly into the model of Western constitutional monarchy.

Sun Yatsen and Huang Xing were not satisfied with a constitutional monarchy and approached democracy by means of a revolution, which was also the model followed by early Communists in China. Unfortunately, in the years that followed, China suffered twice under dictatorships within 100 years. Here we come to the questions: are there any prerequisites for building up a democratic system in China? If so, what are they? What are the most critical conditions?

A GROWING UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY

As time goes on my understanding of democracy has grown from a mere system of society. Democracy is a way of living. It is people's relationships that symbolize a democratic society: I give my opinion, you give your opinion, and we mutually respect each other's opinion.

In China, there have been dramatic changes in the financial system, mostly involving the change to a market economy, in which the producer and consumer both have the freedom to make decisions. In a competitive market, a factory cannot force people to buy its products. A democratic society can't force people to do what they do not want to do. That is to say, democracy is also a way of life.

Economic reform has produced a rise in living standards in China. This kind of economic development has made the young people in the cities want to buy cars. Those who can drive cars hate those who tell them how to drive, and prefer to choose their own way: the cars give them their own voice and their own power. These are two examples of how these economic changes affect daily life. I feel that the economic changes and developments bring forth the need to respect the right and freedom of an individual to choose, which is a kind of democracy.

Personally, I feel that economic changes have introduced elements of democracy in China. However, democracy is still not near. While China has had economic development, the average person in China still has no power in choosing his leaders. Journalists are still not free to express their own views and opinions. Voting freedom is still not allowed, and the Chinese Communist Party still retains full control over the government.

The party itself is controlled by one central figure and his views. This means that those who want to establish other political parties or to express political opinions that differ from those of the party are quite likely to be imprisoned. Institutional change on its own is not enough to bring greater democracy in China. Democracy in China will

work only when an institutional change is combined with a change in the way of living.

NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMICS IN CHINA

Neo-liberal policy has benefits. It brings more modernized management and technical skills into China. The U.S. State Department has told American companies based in China to put pressure on Chinese companies to follow human rights standards. This has had a good influence on Chinese society in regards to changes conducive to democracy. The interaction between foreign and domestic companies has had a positive influence on China.

There is, however, also a problem: businessmen are looking only for profit, so they may be hesitant to criticize the Chinese government. This may prevent the introduction of different views and ways of doing things. Also, because a lot of money and development is coming into Chinese society, the government is able to say that "our leadership is very good, there is no need to change." The largest problem is that the majority of funding comes from overseas, whether from Europe, America, or Japan, and the Chinese are not producing their own ideas, but rather acquiring foreign ideas and technical skills. Were these to be taken out of China, the Chinese economy would enter a huge depression.

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Simply put, it is a dependent relationship. Designs from corporations like Nike come from overseas to China to be mass produced, but the Chinese do not have the skills to make these designs themselves, only to produce them. So the Chinese economic situation is not independent, but completely dependent. Although the entrance of foreign investment and businessmen into China has benefits, it also has many problems.

DEMOCRATIC GRADUALISM

The implementation of a democratic system in China can happen too fast. Chinese reformers, like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, had a method that was to change China within 100 days, but this was too rushed and there was not enough time. After the revolution, future revolutionaries such as Sun Yatsen, Huang Xin, and communist ideologues, did not have a real chance of success. During these periods, China was moving towards constructing a democratic institution too quickly. Continuing these rushed and revolutionary tactics will not work; instead, a peaceful change should be pursued.

Certain conditions necessary for the implementation of a democratic system are

absent in China. The Communist Party will not allow any opposition within the party to implement political change. Earlier, some within the party pushed for democracy, but it has always failed. The Communist Party now employs force to prevent any opposition from forming. Thus, it is very difficult to develop any opposition from within the party. So now it is possible only for an entirely separate political force to enact change. In the opinion of the Communist Party controlled government, this is a quite problematic concept.

For democracy, two principles are fundamental: respect of individual rights (including the protection of private property) and individual and economic independence. The absence of these principles is at the base of dictatorship. In China, everyone, from professors to journalists, is paid by and receives housing from the government. As individuals can have no economic independence from the government, it is very difficult for them to speak out against it. That is part of the reason that there will be a slow and long process of regime change in China.

POLITICAL CONTESTATION

I have fought for democracy in China for over twenty years. When Chinese democracy activities first started, we tried to organize an opposition party. In 1980, I discussed the possibility for multiple parties in China with a few people. However, the Chinese government early on felt threatened by this situation and squashed the development of the opposition party. So in 1981, I was sentenced to fourteen years in jail and served twelve.

After twelve years in prison, I still had the goal of establishing a free opposition party. During the first three years after my release, I was on parole and not able to do much. I had also been virtually cut off from Chinese society for many years and was having problems with my wife, so I focused on making contacts with friends and making connections, planning on organizing the party later.

In 1997, I began to do more intense preparations, with others, for the establishment of an opposition party. Our primary modes of communication were faxes and the telephone, but, when the Internet was introduced into China in 1998, we began to use that. We started to call our project "virtual democracy wall." Although we didn't have a party, we had a network established throughout the entire nation. We began to do a lot of interviews, to write many articles, and, through these outlets, to influence Chinese society.

I knew that this was the just the beginning as far as the establishment of a party went, but if we had actually established a party the Chinese government would have banned all of our activities. So I thought that the existence of this network was more important than going forward at that point. Nevertheless, many young democracy

activists thought that it was not enough and that we should work to establish an actual party as soon as possible. At that time I knew that if we did I would go to jail.

Many of those young activists were not established, and their names were not of course as recognized as mine. So, many of them began to criticize our democracy activities. Of course, there were many voices in the movement against the establishment of an opposition party, but I feared that if I did not include them in the movement, even if a democracy party were established, it would simply disappear.

Many said that, while eighteen years ago I had spoken about multi-party democracy, I had not done much about it since. I felt that for one, China does need an opposition party, and secondly, if I stood up for it then, that the movement would be repressed and would have no influence on China. So, in September 1998, I established a democratic party later than some might have wished. Then, of course, I was arrested.

Since I had had international influence and reputation from my arrest, I received attention from the West. Despite this reputation, now that I have been released, the China Democratic Party is considered a poorly established party. It doesn't have organized leadership, many people in China do not know of its existence, and it receives most of its support from a few scholars. I haven't established sufficient structure within the party. Even if China were ready for a multi-party system, the China Democratic Party would still need much work.

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HU JINTAO AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHINA

Hu Jintao, although in the top level of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, previously acted more as a governor. He had been a governor in many of China's provinces far removed from the capital—Qinghai, Yunnan, Tibet, and Guizhou. While he was governing these provinces, he never demonstrated any skill in leadership. Later, acting as second chair on a committee, he again did not demonstrate any exceptional talent.

Significantly, Jiang Zemin was unwilling to retire from his military position: everyone knows that in China the president is not the first person in the party, that the head of the military is actually the leader—"whoever holds the gun holds the power." So under this kind of condition, I don't think that Hu Jintao can enact much change. If he wants to change the system, he will run into Jiang Zemin and have many conflicts.

It is hard to gauge the current feeling of the average Chinese towards Hu Jintao. If Hu Jintao has a very strong take on politics, he could easily assume control from Jiang Zemin, but now it is very hard to predict. The situation is not clear to the Chinese people, as there appear to be two centers of power.

After the 1949 takeover by the Communist Party, this kind of internal party struggle has arisen many times, and every time it causes domestic difficulty. Historically, we have seen Mao Zedong in Zhou Enlai's hat, Mao Zedong in Lin Biao's hat, Deng Xiaoping in Hu Yao Bang's hat, Deng Xiaoping in Zhao Ziyang's hat—as China has only one party, the internal conflicts within that party cause the greatest difficulties. I do not know now if Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin will be able to cooperate.

During the Cultural Revolution, Hu Jintao was in dire straights and lost his Chinese tunic suit and was not able to make his own decisions any longer. And yet again he does not have complete control. If Hu Jintao does not resign, he will definitely come into conflict with Jiang Zemin. These politicians aren't willing to act as the "second emperor;" they don't want to listen to others. The situation in China with Hu Jintao does not look promising.

Beyond the political power struggles, the Chinese government must also focus on the health of the country. The Chinese government is continually suppressing the realities of the expansive problem of SARS. In a democratic society, a free press is one of the most important tools for the people. China's situation is that it never has let the Chinese people be optimistic, let alone honest. I wish for democracy, for free press, but realize that democracy cannot come to China overnight. Nothing should happen suddenly, for a foundation needs to be built. I think the foundation lies in China's respect for individual human rights, in respecting individual thought and activities, and in respecting all legal legitimate rights. ❁